Wild New Territories

(Essay for the Exhibition Catalogue)

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Fig. 1 Alma Tischler Wood's 'Golden Bird Home' / Fig. 2 Close-up / Fig. 3 Boy with bird home

Introduction

We are into the second decade of the 21st century and our society still has no vision of a post-carbon future. Is this because we are in denial, or because we lack imagination? Perhaps we have a dream, but do not know how to share it with others. Many discussions about the environment are misleading because they use language that is either insufficiently complex, or that is inappropriate to the task. What is welcome about this exhibition is that it steps back and offers a bigger context for these questions. By inviting artists to re-think the boundaries between the tamed and the wild, city and countryside, technology and 'nature', Ron den Daas and Kathy Kenny are hoping to catch a preview of the next paradigm. While this may seem over-ambitious they have, at least, raised some very timely, poignant and difficult questions concerning our collective purpose and destiny. This is not to claim that the exhibition is a summative statement about Nature and Art. Rather, it is more of a tentative step in a long and uncertain journey of discovery. Will it become a catalyst for radical change, or just another worthy signpost? That is largely up to you and me. Let us see it as an invitation to explore the nature of nature in a way that will make our lives saner and safer.

Fig. 4 - Drawing of a 'weed' by Michael Landy (etching) 2002

Fig. 5 - names of some powerful companies who poison 'weeds'

The Aesthetics of Alienation

For a species that is smart enough to send rockets to Mars, the human race is surprisingly ignorant of the complex ecosystem on Earth. We still hear stories about inner-city children who have never seen an egg before, or who don't know where fried chicken comes from. Even more shocking is the fact that scientists have classified or identified only about twelve per cent of all species. Karl Marx noted four types of alienation, including the state of being alienated from Nature as a whole. This means being dangerously disconnected from just about

everything that feeds and protects us. At present, only two per cent of the population work as farmers, and our emerging technologies are increasingly drawing our attention to events that are far away from our immediate personal spaces. Could art, rather than science, make us less alienated? While facts and data are important, human beings survive by engaging with things in a sensory, emotional way. Where scientists tend to whittle down their truth claims until they cannot be disproved, artists are able to make complex, ambiguous propositions that, nevertheless, feel to be 'true'. This poetic aspect of art is important, because aesthetics can link us to, or remind us of, what is good for us. However, unless our aesthetic tastes and values are refreshed and brought up to date, they can mislead us. Hence, popular resistance to rural wind farms in the UK may reflect a reactionary faith in the aesthetics of the picturesque, rather than an up-to-date grasp of climate change issues. If we expect art to encourage the emergence of a new ecological society we will need to make it fit for purpose. This may mean emphasising the ecological context of art and learning how to learn from it.

Pictures of wellbeing

If scientific consensus is correct, the foreseeable future will be characterised by mass extinctions and extreme weather conditions. This means that our children's lives will be blighted by hunger and economic collapse. One way to help the next generations to prepare for this is to imagine more appropriate ways to live. But changing the paradigm is a massive, fundamental step. We need a creative democracy because politics must include nature and this makes it more complex. We cannot expect 'market forces' to solve the problem, say, by selling us 'greener' cars and putting solar panels on the roof. Stopping corporations from penetrating the democratic basis of governance will mean asking more citizens to think deeply about the long-term viability of profit-driven 'science'. For all of us, it means asking ourselves how we think and feel, and challenging everything that currently seems 'normal'. However, challenging the wisdom of 'experts' should not become a moral crusade. Indeed, we should not waste time criticising the status quo. Nonetheless, if food becomes scarcer, we should all know how to differentiate between 'flowers' and 'weeds', and between 'livestock' and 'pests'. Not so long ago, these distinctions seemed obvious. They were beyond dispute. Indeed, in the northern hemisphere, at least, weeding and pest control was a worthy routine for every good citizen. With only gloves, brooms, spades or scythes, he, or she, could exercise the puritanical values of modesty, cleanliness and tidiness. Today, these humble tasks are made easier with a quick spray of powerful, high-tech poisons that will kill any green shoot that dares to show itself in the cracks in concrete or tarmac. In the future, we will look back at this kind of behaviour and see it as eccentric, if not crazy. Instead of poisoning our food chain and reducing the planet's biological diversity, why didn't we eat more 'pests' and 'weeds'?

Fig. 6 - Foreign Investment's ‘Sky Mile' public performance (painting of the sky’ in 3 cities)

Fig. 7 - Hand painted sky ‘shares’, issued by Foreign Investment

Creative Democracy

Art offers a useful model for how a creative democracy might operate, in future. In contrast with the corporate world, most artists conduct their business without the expectation of payment or acclaim. Nevertheless, their inner sense of purpose can reveal things that are unpopular, unpalatable, or unnoticed by others. As WNT artist Gordon Cheung puts it, "Artists try and face what might be seen as monstrous aspects of civilisation. Only by facing these things can change be affected." This is not how ballot box democracy works. Unlike politicians, designers or managers, artists seldom start by identifying a 'problem', brief, creed or plan. For this reason, their conclusions may require a level of sensory and emotional immersion that is beyond the rational. Scientific data is important, but our aesthetic sensibilities are no less important because they guide how we become aware of things, where we choose to live, how we like to travel, and what we eat. Hence without an aesthetic dimension in our lives, we can easily lose our place in the world. While scientists may warn us about the dangers of species extinction, how many of us have actually noticed the reductions in birdsong, or the recent dearth of flies, bees and wasps? By the same token, how many art historians know whether their favourite landscape paintings represent a healthy diversity of indigenous species, or a frail ecosystem that is dominated by a few exotic creatures?

Fig. 8 - Henry/ Bragg's 'Surrey Hills' installation, 2012

Fig. 9 - Kathy Kenny & Ron den Daas, 'Howe Str. meets Camley Str'., video still, 2012

Beyond the Logic of Quantity

Can aesthetics inspire a better world? Yes, but not in a familiar, managerial way. Behavioural change usually lags behind new artistic insights and forms. In the 18th and 19th centuries landowners decimated the forests and put fences around pastures. These probably looked beautiful to wealthy travellers who had encountered forests as ugly, dangerous places. Several centuries later, we still understand the afterglow of the pastoral aesthetic. It has conditioned us to see fields of yellow rape, corn or wheat as 'natural' biblical idylls, rather than as precarious monocultures that are managed for maximum profit. We do not see them as the triumphant outcome of collaboration between physicists, chemists, biologists, lawyers and accountants who are making us dependent on a dwindling number of crop species. One effect of this is that some rural areas are now less diverse, ecologically speaking, than the greener cities. Moreover, the 'green revolution' of factory farming requires endless supplies of cheap energy, and a science of pesticides and GMOs that will keep us a step ahead of Nature. This seems foolhardy, to say the least. One of the oldest lessons in the bible is that no complex ecological system will perform as predictably as an accountant's abacus. After seven years of good harvests, (Genesis, chapter 41, verse 55) Joseph's crops failed, for a variety of reasons. We appear to have learned little from this parable, especially with regard to the desperate problem of soil erosion. A safer way to feed the world would be by localising production, cultivating a greater diversity of species and learning to harvest them (and their pests) as food. This would begin to happen if governments would stop protecting large, inefficient corporations and withdraw their huge fossil fuel subsidies.

Fig. 10 - The Grass Lawn in front of the Reichstag building, Berlin

Fig. 11 - Golf course

Artifice and Conceit

In a sense, attuning ourselves to wild new territories means re-defining the 'natural' in a practical, unsentimental way. The next step would be to get artists to work closely with technocrats and politicians. Paradigms seldom change peacefully unless a reasonable cross-

section of society is involved in a massive shift of perception. We will need to integrate 'top down' and 'bottom up' approaches, because the vested interests of corporations are entangled in the aesthetic conservatism of the general public. Both forces can be discerned in the business of gardening, where there is enormous potential for change. In many countries, gardeners seem willing to spend much more time and money on a lawn, than on a visit to a wilderness. It is hard to find practical reasons for this. After all, sustaining a single species of grass requires regular motorised mowing and applications of pesticides and chemical fertilisers. Why do we like flat, uniform, empty gardens, when nature will do the job cheaper, and in a more interesting and useful way? One reason for the enduring popularity of the lawn is its place in the history of landscape as a symbol of power and status. While the political balance may have shifted, the well-manicured grasslands around a heritage building, golf course or a large private garden still acts as visible proof that its keepers do not see the need to grow food on it. Ironically, the word 'lawn' emerged in the 16th century, referring to an enclosed area of wild pasture. We might, therefore, think of it as an area of biological diversity that was set-aside as a kind of community-owned food bank.

Fig. 12 - Max Kimber, 'Foundling', photograph, 2012

Fig. 13 - Ron den Daas, 'Native Plant Series', installation, 2012

Re-imagining the Garden

Art history has brought nostalgia to some of these political, aesthetic and ethical issues. Perhaps we want to imagine Nature 'as it always was', but forget that it has never stopped changing. We like to see it as 'out there', when it is also 'in here'. To re-imagine the future

more realistically, we will need to create new concepts. To make these concepts thinkable we will need new pictures and words. Over the last few hundred years, it was possible to make a caricature of politics as a moral struggle between 'left' and 'right'. This no longer applies in the 21st century. What could be expressed as a 'rights' based axis of ideology now needs to be defined in a more complex and systemic way. What metaphors would explicate the collective folly of climate change, or the risky and needless experiments of genetic engineering? How can we trust our myths, or our common sense, when their terms of reference make our everyday reality seem alien or counter-intuitive? In tales of war, villainy was always defeated and the righteous prevailed. But, in real ecosystems the extinction of a predator can trigger the extinction of its prey. Similarly, where politicians tell us that 'competition' is essential for prosperity, nature shows it to be the more painful and expensive option. A closer reading of evolutionary theory may even make it useful to revise our assumptions regarding 'indigenous' and 'exotic' species. In the Neolithic era, when sheep moved from southern to northern Europe, their grazing habits were too harsh for the local vegetation; and it has yet to build its natural defences adequately. As a result, sheep farming has done more damage to the biodiversity of the UK than wolves and big cats. Yet, we protect sheep and slay their predators without eating them. If, as some experts believe, European trees evolved when elephants roamed the countryside, perhaps they could be re-introduced without unwarranted damage to the ecosystem.

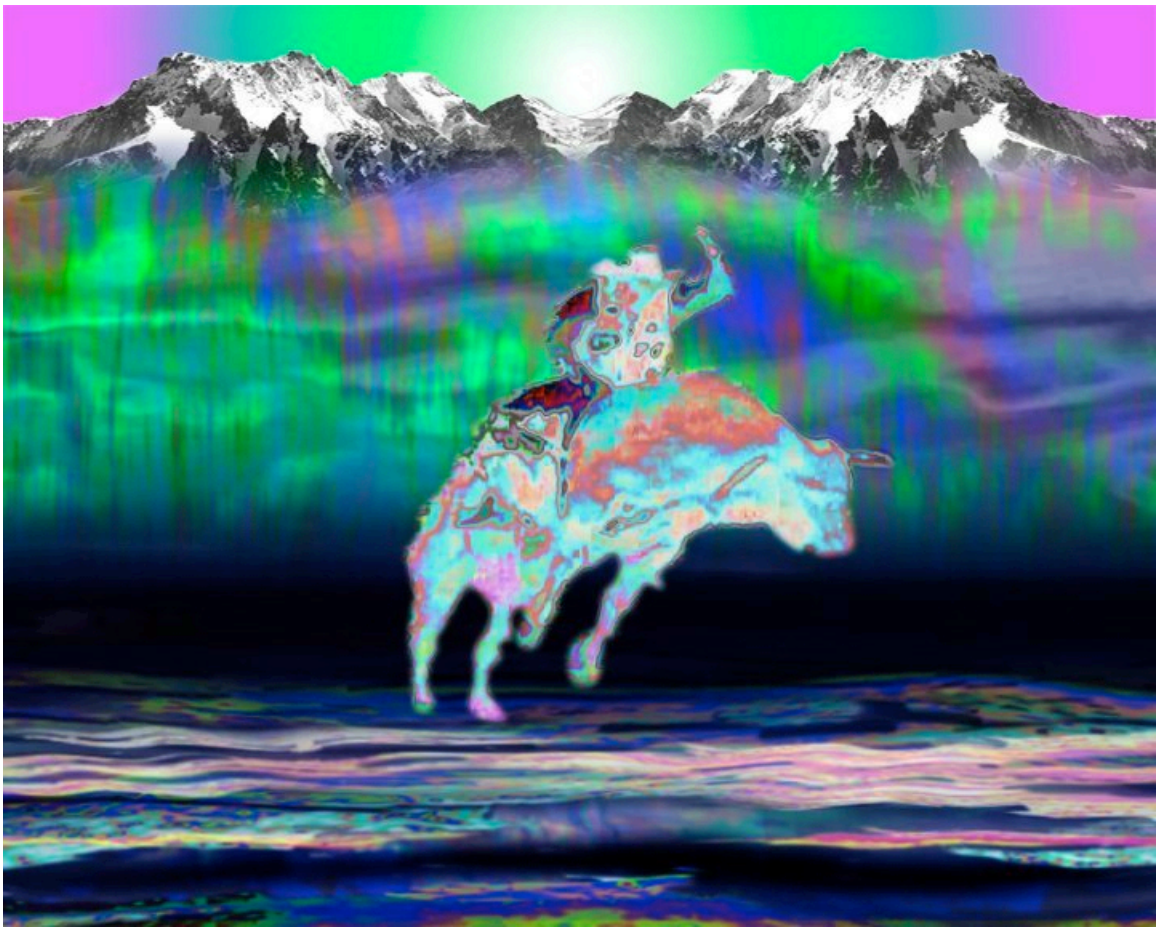

Fig. 14 - Gordon Cheung 'Four Horsemen', video still, 2012

Fig. 15 - Gordon Cheung, 'The Guardians', oil painting, 2009

From the Unthinkable to the Possible

We know we must learn co-exist better with nature, but this means learning to see uncertainty as a source of opportunities. Here, the purpose of creativity is to enable us to become more responsive to the unexpected. As artworks, Alma Tischler Wood's 'Bird Homes' and Gordon Cheung's 'Bull's Skull with Bees' pieces are unorthodox, because they are designed to be as legible to wildlife as they are to humans, albeit in very different ways. Just as the new inhabitants of one of Tischler Wood's bird homes will fail to grasp the symbolic significance of its golden exterior, so an art-lover will be ignorant of how the birds see it, or regard it. Likewise, Gordon Cheung's sculpture consists of a beehive, a bull's skull and a swarm of wild honeybees. For Cheung, the skull represents the stock market; the bees represent society. Over the course of the exhibition the bees will colonise the skull, building their honeycomb around and over the bone. In the future, this kind of 'double-meaning' is likely to be an important element in artworks that cater for both humans and non-humans.

Fig. 16 - Edgar Heap of Birds, 'Red Indian Genocide, Population Control?' banner, 2012

Back to the Future

One of the lessons we can learn from nature is that the resilience of ecosystems is based on the maintenance of a diversity of possibilities. But this has proved difficult to emulate in an industrial context, where the logic of mass production (e.g. farming based on monoculture) encouraged companies to work towards 'economies-of-scale'. However, what the living world shows us is that, without a requisite level of diversity, there will be instability and collapse. At present, the word 'diversity' is normally applied in only one or two ways, such as the differences we may find in an ecological, a racial, or a cultural context. However, the logic works just as well in other contexts, such as business, society or science. By cultivating a multitude of diversities we will eventually find ourselves in a rich 'diversity-of-diversities'. This is why we need artists who are willing to surprise us by challenging our assumptions, and to tease out new ideas, forms and relations. This will help us to 'unthink' what may be familiar, but which is no longer appropriate. It will also help us to stumble upon new entities that are 'unthinkable' to the rest of us. Once we begin to share the experiences of these forms, we will find that - as if by magic - the 'unthinkable' will transform itself into the 'possible'.

Fig. 17 - Gordon Cheung, 'Beehive', installation, 2012

Fig. 18 - 'Beehive', installation detail, 2012

Creativity & Sexual Reproduction

In seeking to cultivate diversity, it is useful to reflect on the way that this occurs in nature, where new combinations of existing organisms are derived from a 'sexual reproduction', or 'recombination' of existing genes. This may remind us of 'creative innovation' and the way that artists derive new ideas from thinking about the world in a special way. Arthur Koestler has claimed that all 'creative' acts are based on a combinatorial process, whether this takes place within an artist's mind, in a conversation between several people, or in a zygote within a fertilised egg. In each case, two parent factors combine to create a new outcome that differs from each. Whether in sexual recombination, or in 'creative innovation', success depends on the appropriate alignment of a huge number of complex factors that are usually hidden, or unknown. We can no longer expect to predict how things would work out without giving things a chance to evolve in their own way. This would have profound consequences on the way we all live. It may mean that more citizens will be employed as artists and gardeners, rather than as engineers and administrators. We might, for example, envisage future politicians attending university courses in 'farm un-management', to help them become 'emergence cultivators'. A logical conclusion of this profound shift of thinking is that we might look forward to the successful 'design' (or cultivation of) miracles (i.e. at the probabilistic level).

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