

Critique – Ecology and Art practice

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The artist Michael Pinsky, when asked at a Q&A session why he focused his creative art practice on being an activist for the climate movement, replied that if he was an accountant he would have equally chosen to address the challenge of climate chaos. Just published is a contemporary report by Systemiq, in partnership with Exeter University, among others. They argue that we are at a critical point, the fulcrum of change, where multiple tipping points of climate catastrophe are set against tipping points of a sustainable cultural shift.¹ The catastrophe scenario is a well-trod path – Greenland Ice cap melt, the demise of a key current in the Atlantic, our overheating weather systems – and each tipping point crossed raises the chance of accumulated chaos.

Interestingly, the report also includes the notion of cultural tipping points for positive change: the switch from fossil-fuelled to electric cars, agricultural practice involving the production of fossil fuel burning nitrates and ammonias being replaced by green fertilisers, and alternative proteins beating animal-based proteins on cost. Each technological shift cascades into an avalanche towards a sustainable global society. Ensuring that this cultural shift is manifest is obviously critical for humanity's survival and addresses the urgent need to repair our damaged ecology. It is clear we have the green technology available, and when delivered at scale it again beats fossil burning for energy on price.² What is missing is the societal agreement to act, urgently.

The exciting bit is that we are on the cusp of a major human upheaval, the cultural challenge identified in the Systemiq report and the possibility of cascading non-carbon activity. There isn't an alternative. Our current trajectory is just not sustainable – 8 billion people cannot continue abusing the natural systems³ that govern our planet without dire consequences. Humanity's

¹- SYSTEMIQ, UNIVERSITY OF EXETER, BEZOS EARTH FUND, THE BREAKTHROUGH EFFECT: HOW TO TRIGGER A CASCADE OF TIPPING POINTS TO ACCELERATE THE NET ZERO TRANSITION, JANUARY 2023

²- TOM RAND, "KICK THE FOSSIL FUEL HABIT: 10 CLEAN TECHNOLOGIES TO SAVE OUR WORLD, (TORONTO: ECO TEN PUBLISHING, 2010)

³- KATE RAWORTH, DOUGHNUT ECONOMICS: SEVEN WAYS TO THINK LIKE A 21ST-CENTURY ECONOMIST, (RANDOM HOUSE BUSINESS, 2018)

shift towards a sustainable society is fuel for artist enquiry on a massive scale : how to comprehend what is happening, how to give meaning and how to envision what is possible.

History has told us that artists gravitate towards the salient issues of their time, but where does this new quest of ecological art practice sit and how can it be critiqued? Why are some artworks more resonant and fit for purpose? How do we narrate the celebration of an artwork that moves us beyond reason, its power so unquantifiable, its qualitative edge so resonant.

This is a new territory of critique that deserves interrogation, a sharing of thinking and evolution of practice. Cape Farewell is already proposing its own workshop of critical minds at our Dorset HQ: an artist - led enquiry tempered by our ecological surroundings of organic farm practice and physical wilding. This needs to be just one of many such workshops that have to take place in our cities and within our urban lives.

An old adage: science gives us truth and reasoned facts that clarify why something just is , but art gives meaning. Ecological art practice takes on the scientific truths and weaves them into our human psyche to give meaning to our collective human endeavour. It questions our embedded notion of human superiority over animals, natural systems and the magic of the oceans that surround us.

Art now manifests itself in so many new forms. How does one critique the art generated in this age of social media where we perhaps want to be in the artwork rather than frustratingly relegated to passive observers. Is the artist's role to be provocative, the orchestrator of shared events?

Where is the idea? What is a relevant idea? To create beauty, to create change, to con and manipulate, to provoke, to celebrate? Is the idea strong, does it have resonance, is it unique, dangerous and, by qualitative reasoning, more powerful? And the point is? The point can be just to have beauty, just to notice how awesome our ecological home is, a light human footprint that celebrates our notion of care. Or, as in Pinsky's Pollution Pods, where the point is to make us fully take on board how polluted air damages humans and fragile natural systems, both the consequence of digging up and burning fossil fuels. Or a projected Ice Texts: an eminent scientist informed me that he

had a postcard of my glacial ice projection 'Sadness Melts' in his shower. Every morning an unfathomable but accurate thought.

Part of the artists practice is to ensure that their offering has an audience, a public forum. Museums like Tate Modern are now public spaces inviting their audience to be not just observers and consumers, but practitioners of its cultural activity. I am excited just to enter this space, a buzz of humans gathering in a shared cultural quest. Art of ecology is trying to find its place, not to preach, but to assume its rightful place. The challenge to the artist is to entertain and earn their audience.

It is no wonder that so many artists have made ecological care and the threat of a possible climate Armageddon their focus of inquiry. This is a growing trend, and young artists have fully absorbed the climate scientific proof. However, a blinkered critical denial still prevails in the old truths of modernism, postmodernism, romanticism and impressionism; these 'isms' fall under capitalism, a cult dependent on the manufacture of a cultural object to interrogate

how society functions and the capital invested in it. Kate Raworth and others are proposing an economy in balance with natural systems. If it damages these systems (and us), it has negative value and if it nurtures them its value increases. As an artist I am trying to figure this out on a human scale. What does shopping mean? How to get food, how to have fun, how to fund being an artist – it's a mind-boggling exercise on the same scale as trying to make sense of the science behind climate chaos.

From the get-go, the Cape Farewell project was born with the realisation that only a collective of creative minds would be of a scale sufficient to address what Sir David King calls 'humanity's greatest challenge'. It is now clear, twenty years later, that we need a fundamental cultural shift where artists and the creative estate are functioning at the core of a changing society.

These words are a provocation: the notion of critique is central to democracy and climate chaos is democracy's greatest challenge.