

Paper: 'Poetic articulation of the political in art: the possible role of Ecology'

PROF. GARY GENOSKO

Associate Professor of Sociology at Lakehead
University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada

Author of *Félix Guattari: An Aberrant Introduction*
and *The Uncollected Baudrillard*, Canada Research
Chair in Technoculture Studies

Prospects for a Transdisciplinary Ecology

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

Q Thank you, David Hailey, Ecological Artist and Research Fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University, I was intrigued with not only the presentation that we just heard that was very erudite and I was also very impressed last night with the historic occasion, the announcement of art and ecology coming together. However I'm a little disappointed so far that the ecology that we're asked to look at still seems to be exclusively anthropocentric and certainly hasn't actually touched on perhaps the difference that Arne Ness would have looked for in Deep Ecology and I would actually rather look at perhaps the work of Lakoff and Johnson, particularly in their work *Philosophy in the Flesh*, when they look at the embodied mind and I would suggest that they also move onto an embodied ecology and perhaps the way in which we may move towards an eco-centric culture. To that end I'd also like to ask that today we actually look at the way in which the Royal Society and the Arts Council might actually reflect upon the Government's own policies in securing the future and the way in which this gathering might actually come to some kind of gathered opinion on a strategy for sustainability as a part of the Arts Council's work, thank you.

Declan: Thank you, well I mean just in terms of a response to that I think the idea is that this event is the beginning of a process and that momentum I think almost inevitably will start to look at policy issues both on the part of funding parties and then obviously at a governmental level, I think inevitably that will happen. Today is really constructed around the perspective from the visual arts but we take your point I think.

Gary: I'll just add a comment, I'm glad you raised the name of Arne Ness, I always get into quite a bit of trouble if I mention him for my philosophical colleagues so I'm glad someone else raised the name. There seems to be a kind of two generations or two conceptions of Ecosophy. One is the Ness version which we sort of inherited from his work in the 1970's which quickly became kind of Californianised I guess you could call it into a kind of new age philosophy and then the Guattari Ecosophy which hasn't really broken on a massive scale, the way that Ness's ideas were popularised and to speak of, Ness went in a completely different direction from Guattari. Ness was you know, inspired by Eastern philosophy and religion despite the fact he was an analytical philosopher by training and he sought a kind of unity of vision in an eco-centric universe, Guattari thinks in terms of fragmented mixtures and assemblages of components that aren't always slightly unstable and always moving so he didn't have a kind of unifying vision in the same way Ness had. So those are two, the whole and the part between Ness and Guattari you have two different, two disparate conceptions of Ecosophy but those are the main ones. It's the quick common on sustainability. Sustainability is no different I think than technocratic solutions proffered in other contexts. If there is no will to see sustainability in terms of fundamental program changes or processes of everyday habits and activities, then it will simply end up in the same place as a typical technocratic solutions do, making the, you know, very modest impact.

Declan: Any more questions, anybody else? We've got a question right down here, second row...

Q Marjorie Althorpe–Guyton, Arts Council England, I was delighted to listen to your sort of exegesis of the work of Guattari because for me it seems so much more rigorous than so much other theoretical work in this field. Do you think that we, and I think his relationship to realities in terms of the heterogeneousness, the complexities of current situation, which you did articulate, do you think these are understood, do you think we've moved beyond what I would call, the more, I have to say half-baked and softer positions of for example Suzi Gablik's Re-Enchantment of Art, that kind of level of literature? Do you think we are at a stronger and more robust point in understanding the kind of interventions that a cultural and artistic process can make?

Gary: Well I would be foolish to say no to that. As I was suggesting in the talk, I mean this level of abstruseness that sometimes it's difficult to explicate without oneself becoming completely Byzantine or lost in this labyrinth of jargon, it doesn't translate well on the hustings, I mean when Guattari ran for office under the mantle of the Green Party, or one of the green parties in France, he lost, but you can imagine him telling his constituents or potential constituents about the benefits of subjectification. This exactly translates particularly well in that context but on the other hand, the level of sophistication of the analysis in this very slim three ecologies, which has finally found, a couple of years ago, English translation, I think far surpass, although this is my opinion, far surpass what we've seen in terms of ecosophical thought up until this point.

Now whether or not that means a kind of potential for massification, potential for sort of fundamental change and how we can textualise the problem itself, remember, what he's saying is that we model radical changes in subjectivity itself on artistic practices. But that doesn't mean that every artistic practice contributes to the radicalisation of subjectivity, there's no parallel, there's no easy parallel, there are no guarantees in Guattari's work. One of the things I've admired about his work is its candidness, absolutely candid; it is not offering a completely formulated alternative. He is struggling to express in a processual manner all of those differences and breakdowns. This is why he puts so much emphasis on the refrain where there are so many opportunities to get stuck, there are more opportunities to get stuck than there are to change in a fundamental way. So that's what I find admirable, and that's what I find also very strong in his thought as well.

Declan: Thank you, anybody else? Just here?

Q Hi, my name's Simeon Nelson; I'm an artist and also attempt to be an educator. My question is now split into two questions because of the complexity of the preceding ideas. I've read a fair amount of Guattari and I read him in the context of earlier attempts at process philosophy, people like A. N. Whitehead who's, bits on process and reality that I've read suggest that to think truly ecologically, a new way of thinking, is needed on a sort of cognitive, individual level. I said I was an attempted educator because when I talk to my design students about ecological issues, they really want the Arne Ness approach, they want the singular idea which they can attach themselves to like a new religion and when I try and sort of delve into the complexity and the subjectivity and the endless unfolding of observer and observed, you've lost them. Any suggestions for strategies?

Gary: I mean that's one of the great problems that we face within the sort of educational institutions to try to convince people that the easiest road is not the

best one. One of the things that I suggest to my students, at least is to try to form their own kind of experimental association amongst themselves, and to try to create a set of rules that require a kind of non-hierarchical relationship of rotating responsibilities and tasks towards some kind of specific goal. This kind of experimentation in organisation is I think a valuable lesson in terms of ecological thought and the possibilities for eco-praxis, that's really the only sort of concrete example I can think of. Try to form a group, try to make the group work, try to make it functionally heterogeneous with a participatory organisation that is sort of enriching itself...

Q. Self-organising?

Gary: Yeah it's self-organising, that is self-positing but can also, you know, integrate information from the outside and from the inside simultaneously. That kind of process I find to be useful.

Q My name is ((?)) I'm an author, art critic and writer. My question would be where is the urgency behind the position that you're proposing? I think the urgency of a single issue position translates itself very well; it's about making one topic central. Where is the urgency behind claiming the position of this sort of multi-voiced complex concept of ecology? Why is it not just a polite acknowledgement of the fact that today as urban individuals we're constantly asked to accommodate different lives, different concerns in our subjectivity? So what is the trajectory, where are you driving at and what is driving you?

Gary: Urgency, I'm not sure precisely how to understand that other than in terms of a kind of pressure exerted for the representation of a thought in a kind of forum, a daily, weekly forum that you would find in the newspapers or on the other media. The urgency is a kind of artificial fabrication that pushes you towards some form of representation with regard to a specific sort of splintered audience. So not feeling that urgency is probably essential first of all to understanding the possibilities of the multi-polar perspective.

Urgency I think in the recent Guattari sense can drive you towards, sure you feel urgency with regard to single issues but urgency with regard to constituting a full-bodied, a fully-formed solution creates an artificial environment, creates an artificial solution for someone else's purposes. If I feel an urgency to represent this thought in a kind of total, totalising polished package that allows me to reduce it to a series of clever aphorisms I can't possibly do justice to the thought, but I can do justice to the urgency that is imposed upon me by say my publisher. Do you see what I'm getting at? It's a kind of response urgency depending on where that urgency is emanating from. Where's the force coming from? Where is the force coming from, and it all depends where it's originating from I think in that sense.

Declan: OK, we are slightly behind time and I think we've time really for two more questions just and there's one here, and the person in the centre had his hand up first hi, so it's this one and then in the centre OK.

Q I'm Shelly Sacks; I'm an artist and some kind of an educator too. It seems to me that there's quite a dangerous polarisation between fragmentary as a strategy and the potential for a kind of joined-up ecological thinking. In a way your response to this previous question seems to reinforce that and it seems that what's happening is a kind of conflation of an opposition between simple and complex, simplistic theory's maybe Suzi Gablik, maybe Arne Ness and Guattari but actually what's being lost in

that kind of conflation seems to me to be the question of strategies. Can fragmentariness, the kind of methodologies that Guattari's proposing, do they not need to co-exist with a kind of joined-up thinking that then responds to the urgency? The kind of joined-up thinking that policy makers all over the world together with philosophers, people like David Abraham who's not a Mickey Mouse philosopher, who are actually saying we need to engage in another way, we need to be able to perceive in another way so are we not in danger in this kind of, almost in a way over-simplifying what you're doing by saying that's complex and the other stuff is over-simplified. Losing this urgency of joined-up thinking together with the kind of techniques even Brecht was talking about. We need to disrupt consciousness, we need to engage, to shove people's consciousness in other ways, but how can we separate these two things and still be talking about ecological engagement?

Gary: The point is very well taken and a very important point in fact. The idea of getting beyond a sort of tired dichotomies and distinctions is extremely significant for Guattari and extremely significant I think for the relationship between art and ecology. It is enormously difficult, it is a huge task. I don't think we can look for you know, a single solution to that issue, that really requires a fundamental change in how we think and that's what I think Guattari was suggesting when he said, there is a real need for subjective change in radically new existential situations and one of them is overcoming this tendency towards this dichotomisation, this dichotomania that grips thought in spite of itself and you're absolutely right in pointing that out.

Declan: OK, just, the last question was here.

Q Hi, my name is Dominic Willsdon. Actually Declan at the beginning talked about the example of advertising as something that demonstrated the way that I guess images can change consciousness in, although I suppose within a set up that's stating the same. If forms of art practice are offering alternative sorts of ways of being in the world, is there some aspect to art's function in this which is to do with compelling us to want that kind of change in a way that's drawing in some of that more basic levels of desire and pleasure and, you know, desire for sensory gratification, that kind of thing, that's in advertising, on top of proposing models that motivate us on the basis of indignation or ethical principle or something like that? It is for Gary actually; Gary, within these ideas of new subjectivity and that kind of thing I suppose, how does desire figure in that and how might art practice lock into that I guess?

Declan: Well you seem to be asking why does the devil have all the best tunes? You know in the sense of the seduction for other views.

Q: I guess there is a sort of a classic, modern idea of the role of the aesthetic and of art within a radical agenda, which is to somehow give a glimpse of some actually more pleasurable life that would, you know, that we could inhabit if all the world was like this work of art. But I wondered if there was something sort of similar, you know in what you've been talking about?

Gary: Well there is that sort of Utopian hope attached to the idea of a kind of dissident subjectivity that becomes, ecologically expressive and attentive and that that is tied to sort of expressing desire. Self-positing, self-unfolding, auto-poetic subject that's different from advertising, it's different from those seductions of consumerism. That is a sort of Utopian hope and that is where the re-channelling of desire takes place in those terms. But along the way, and this is Homeric almost in

it's dimensions, there are so many seductions and ports of call, especially in consumerism and design and advertising and diversionary events that all those refrains that we become accustomed to, habituated to, the morning paper, the evening news, all of those refrains that curl up, you know like hedgehogs, Guattari said they are like little hedgehogs and you get stuck on them and that's where your desire goes instead of going towards the exploration of the potentialities that we see in certain artistic forms.

I've written about Helen Chadwick for instance and I was trying to reject, on writing about Chadwick, I was trying to reject the sort of prevailing psychoanalytic interpretation of her work. I was suggesting that someone like Chadwick was very important because she allowed, she mapped out these sorts of cartographies of co-reality through these very peculiar substances and a whole range of different substances, animal carcasses and chocolate and flowers and so forth. That instead of representing a territory was positing a territory in the very act of that cartography. And I thought that this was very significant kind of change.

The other example I wanted to give was from a photographer Jeff Wall, a Canadian photographer whose work is well known and there was a piece called 'The Drain' which I showed right at the end. The prevailing interpretation of a Jeff Wall piece is fairly banal, we're asked to look at it and not to look at it and not to see the two young girls for the drain and typical interpretation will tell us this is a Cézanne painting, the Bridge in Maincy. All of the features are there from that Cézanne and yet there is such a violence done in that interpretation to the work itself that we have no idea what happens to the youth and children in the work of Jeff Wall if we're asked to pursue that kind of interpretation. And that's the kind of refrain you can get stuck on.

You can get stuck on doing the kind of interpretive violence to a work or an artistic process that precludes and exploration, any possible exploration of it's sort of potential for fundamental change. I think those are the examples that you know getting stuck on that psycho analytic interpretation of Chadwick or getting stuck on the art-historical interpretation of Geoff Wall is a kind of you know, photographic version of Cézanne. Those are I think for me important examples that allow you to go forward and beyond backwards looking, sticky interpretations that allow you to kind of do nothing more than twist in the wind in a way.

Declan: OK, I think we are now out of time. Thank you very much Gary for a fascinating presentation and responses to the questions. Thank you. Those of you with an earlier version of the timetable will have seen that Vaseev Corton's ((Sp?)) name was on the list of speakers today but he is unwell unfortunately and won't be joining us today. I want to now move on to ask Clare Cumberland the Director of General Public Agency to speak. She is the curator of Visionary Thurrock; a series of cross-disciplinary investigations involving visual artists, architects and theorists in the Thames Gateway.