



# **Arts & Ecology Programme: Ecology and Artistic Practice Symposium**

**Themes: Can artists make a difference?  
Is it the task of art to point  
out solutions to ecological  
problems?  
What are artists working  
around these issues doing?**

**Date:** Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2005

**Venue:** RSA, London

## **NB**

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**DECLAN MCGONAGLE:** I feel as if I should sing a song or something after an introduction like that. But as Michaela said, today is really built around a series of presentations about practice and there are three specific questions I think referred to in the information you've got. Can artists make a difference? Should artists be coming up with specific solutions? And what are artists doing? We are already working in this area and those of you who were here last night, I think like me, would have been fascinated I think by both the nature of the information which Sir David King presented, that terrifying perspective on the future but also the implications of that information not really for some distant future time but for this generation.

The implications are going to be much more immediate I think than certainly I had had a sense of before. We need that information certainly but we also need new ways of approaching that information; of using that information in order to translate understanding into actions and advertisers will tell you that it is possible to change people's behaviour, they do it all the time. They persuade us to buy products all the time, but it's only possible to change people's behaviour on the basis of new information and I was struck by the way last night, the way in which Alfredo's projects always moved from the initial invitation to make an art intervention in a specific place. That Alfredo's negotiation went way beyond the initial invitation and became involved in very detailed negotiations to come up with entirely new propositions for what that intervention could be and the nature of his art in a specific place. The project in Canada emerged after a fifth visit, and that sort of commitment is what's involved in this process of a negotiable practice and those propositions provided new information in those situations I think, as they grew and were developed in specific contexts.

And yet specific though they were they, Alfredo's practice also touched all of the broader issues that we're dealing with the definition and role of the artist in relation to environmental and social space, the nature in place of community, the value of collaboration and participation and what negotiation around those ideas actually means, through which behaviour maybe changed. And I think he provided very telling models of practice intervention and engagement that move from if you like the general macro information that Sir David King provided right through to the particularities of place and context and we will hear more of that today obviously.

But to pick up on some of the points from last night and look forward to today's presentations, I think for me the word ecology immediately summons up ideas of negotiable relations, the idea of responsibilities as well as rights and the idea of participation and the idea of citizenship on a local and global scale. And in the context of today's discussions, I think it's interesting just to note how in the recent past there have been increasing challenges to the idea of the artist as an individual but alienated emotional genius in some way. A sort of existential model of the artist as a sort of ultimate role-model for those people who aspire to be artists and I think that idea is deeply embedded in our third level education process and whatever is addressed in the context outside the education process, I don't think will fully take until it is also addressed coherently and with conviction within the third level education. Because this is a model of the artist as essentially separate and disconnected from social space. As if the value of art only comes from the uniqueness rather than the commonality of the artists experience whereas I think the notion of art and ecology or the three ecologies as Gary will be dealing with and

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Alfredo referred to last night, the idea of art and ecologies interacting presumes thinking differently, presumes other models and we know that thinking differently is not only possible but absolutely essential if human society is to face into the challenges productively that are coming up.

And in doing this as Michaela has already done, I think we have to acknowledge, as we acknowledge our research, we have to acknowledge the work that has already been done in this area by individuals and organisations, some of whom are here and represented today, working over many years in some ways and mostly unsung in some senses by mainstream art activity. What I would say is emerging and will have to be repeatedly validated in this era is the idea of the artist as negotiator.

We have a model of the artist as the artisan, we have the model and it's a very powerful model of the artist as the individual genius producer and I'm not suggesting the idea of the artist as negotiator should replace those models but it should be sustained alongside in co-existence with those inherited models. The model where with others by definition, the artist participates in negotiations in social space, the outcomes of which are not pre-determined until the negotiations have taken place and I think that openness, that open ended-ness is crucial and in that sense it becomes a sort of viral process rather than a glacial process. We have an inherited model I think of the individual genius is based on the linear progressive model of quality and the idea that over a very long period, and that's what I mean by glacial, over a very long period we will recognise somehow the worth of art and only great art will survive over a very long period.

But I'm talking about something much more present and a sort of a viral process where the art process is seen almost as an infection within the social space and in relation to a number of settings, be the economic, political community, ecological or scientific. So what we should begin to articulate, with force it seems to me, is what I would describe as a fourth dimensional model of the art process. So if the one-dimensional model is the idea of the artist as a separated genius, a disconnected genius working in the studio, the existential model and the two-dimensional model is the artist coming out of the studio and showing his or her work within the distribution system for art, the gallery system, the museum system in order to address the non-artist, and if the three-dimensional model then which has happened more recently and latterly in our practice to a great degree where the artist moves out of the gallery into public space with the sort of public resourcing and so forth. But often that negotiation in the public space, physically in the public space takes place with people who control public space and not always with people who use the public space.

And I think that's one of the problems that what is described as public art has over the last 20 years and why I believe most public art projects actually fail because the negotiation has represented a change of location but not necessarily of ideology. So what I'm recommending then is a step further into a sort of fourth dimensional process, which doesn't preclude the other three or doesn't diminish or devalue the other three where, it simply creates a field of negotiation, or acknowledges a field of negotiation but places the other models and adds values to them within and in negotiation with social space, and by definition, that will include social, political, ecological, scientific and aesthetic settings for the art process to be enacted.

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And it's only that sort of shift to a process of negotiation rather than the inherited model of the producer and consumer and it's only from that shift that the new thinking and new forms we need in this period are going to emerge. New forms not only of production of course but of post-production, the systems of distribution and there are huge implications for our inherited patterns of distributing and for art to find or construct its audience. Because it's in that space I would argue that the meaning and value of art is actually generated, it's where the meaning resides and it's in that sense I think that Joseph Beuys referred, made his famous, notorious comment that everyone is an artist. I think it's in that sense he meant that everyone is an artist, not in the sense of manufacture of the artefact, but participating in the art process by bringing, if you like, baggage to the experience in a way which completes the meaning and value of the artwork. And in that sense everyone is an artist and I think that's a sense in which Boise was using that and the sense which is useful to think about and it's in that space where public value, a phrase which is used regularly now; it's in that space where the public value occurs it seems to me.

So today I think is about the specifics of practice. Material interactions with ecological issues and the transformation of context inter-place. It's about strategic questions as well which underpin practice and it's about how such processes can be valued and how their relations with other forms of human negotiation with the world take place, whether these are carried out in social or scientific settings, and how those negotiations can be sustained. So we're going to explore this subject further this morning through the work of an academic: Gary Genosko, an agency with Claire Cumberlandidge and an artist Nils Norman. There will be an opportunity to ask questions after Gary's presentation before we move on to the following two and then there will be questions at the end of the second two presentations.

Gary Genosko is an associate Professor at Lake Head University in Thunder Bay, Ontario. He's the author of Felix Guattari, An Aberrant Introduction, and he is also Chair of research in Techno Culture studies. Gary...