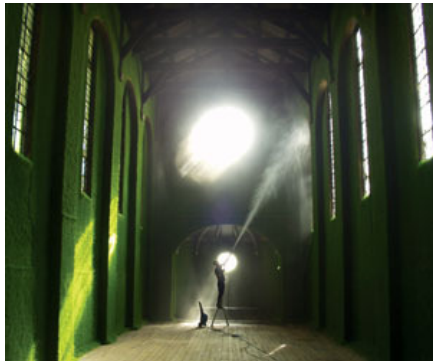


# The new Romantics

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Artists are turning their backs on the insular metropolitan scene and engaging with the threats facing the environment



Can art do anything to change the minds of those who care more about big bucks than about carbon emissions? A new wave of environmental artists, in Britain and abroad, is testing the boundaries between art and activism. With the tired irony of the largely metropolitan Young British Artists running out of steam, and the solipsistic theories of late modernism lying exhausted as a beached whale, artists are once again looking to nature for inspiration.

Since the industrial revolution, art movements have intermittently turned away from the smut and dirt of the urban environment. In the 19th century, Romanticism was a reaction against the Enlightenment. Thoreau talked of a simpler life, while the Lakeland poets wrote of the beauty and truth to be found in nature. Technology and progress were considered pragmatic and rational, while the wilderness was seen as a utopian space of freedom and possibility.

This was echoed in the land-art movement, which from its 1960s beginnings turned away from modernist aesthetics and the financial hegemony of the fine-art market. Working outside the gallery fitted in with the iconoclastic mood of the times. This, too, was a utopian moment when students and artists believed that the world was on course for a better future and working with the land gave the chance to experiment with democratic, non-hierarchical spaces.

Joseph Beuys, co-founder of the German Green Party and creator of the seminal long-term project *7,000 Oaks*, begun at Documenta 7 in 1982, is usually cited as the godfather of this movement. In America artists such as Robert Smithson - who built the now almost mythical *Spiral Jetty* (1970), an earthwork that juts into the offshore shallows of Great Salt Lake in Utah - and his partner Nancy Holt engaged directly with environmental issues. So did their compatriots Agnes Denes, Betty Beaumont and Walter de Maria (best known for his *Lightning Field* of 1977, built in the high desert of New Mexico). In this country, Richard Long and Hamish Fulton turned the walk into an art form, charting its observed minutiae. Andy Goldsworthy constructed ephemeral works in the natural environment and then photographed them.

Although this "first" generation of land artists probably would not consider themselves eco-warriors, their work within the natural world outside the gallery (though not always beyond its monetary reach) has created a receptive climate for a younger generation concerned with the earth and its environment. Many artists are looking to the periphery, outside the organised environs of the art world, blurring the boundaries between art, science and practical engagement. A poetic response alone no longer seems sufficient as the temperature rises and the ice caps melt: these artists are interested in action.

The American artist Brandon Ballengée, collaborating with the Gaia Institute and the New York State Museum, has worked to populate newly created waste-water management sites with native amphibians that will not only control mosquito populations but act as health monitors for wetlands. In this country Jeremy Deller, winner of the 2004 Turner Prize, is working with Arts Council England and the Bat Conservation Trust to design a bat house for the London Wetland Centre.

The feminist critique of land and environmental art of the 1970s contributed significantly to new approaches in sustainable art practice. The first generation of ecofeminists set out to establish

relationships based not on old hierarchies, but on a sense of respect, awareness and interconnection. Renata Poljak's film *Great Expectations* suggests, through a story about intensive building on the Dalmatian coast and the resulting disruption to its historically organic architecture, the existence of a link between patriarchy and environmental degradation.

Social critique and wide-ranging research are also catalysts for the work of the American conceptual artist Amy Balkin. *Invisible-5*, her self-guided audio tour of the highway corridor between the San Francisco Bay and Los Angeles, articulates how geopolitics affects the health and welfare of local people by deciding the distribution of toxic risk. For her recent installation *Public Smog*, at the Peer Gallery in Hoxton, east London, she bought and withheld carbon-dioxide emissions credits from international markets in order to create a temporary clean-air park; she plans after this to submit an application to declare the entire atmosphere a Unesco World Heritage Site. Balkin foresees that the project will illustrate some of the complexities and contradictions inherent in such processes.

A range of further initiatives is seeking to harness the power of art to draw attention to the looming environmental crisis. The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce is working in partnership with Arts Council England to create a programme of events that involves artists, ecologists and scientists who are addressing ecological concerns. And Platform, which has been running for 20 years, has brought together environmentalists, artists, human-rights campaigners, educationalists and community activists, to list a few, to create innovative projects driven by a need for social and environmental justice.

The contemporary art market is ruled by money and vested interests. In such a tightly regulated arena it is hard for any artist to hold on to the integrity of his or her vision. For them, just as for Romantic artists in the 19th century, turning away from the metropolis to work on the ecological periphery indicates that society is renewing its utopian beliefs. Artists who choose to work this way are neither jaded nor fashionably solipsistic, but rather still believe in art's potential to engage and influence. They believe that art can (often more easily than science) deepen our understanding of the natural world and our role in it. An aesthetic response to nature is a barometer of a society's sense of universal connectedness - a sense that relates directly to the future strategies we choose to take for the planet's environmental sustainability. It is often said that forests are the lungs of the earth; perhaps artists may yet become the keepers of its soul.

*"Land, Art: a cultural ecology handbook" edited by Max Andrews is published on 12 December by the RSA's Arts and Ecology programme (£20). For more information on Arts and Ecology, see [www.thersa.org/arts](http://www.thersa.org/arts)*

Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey have been collaborating since the 1990s. Recently they were involved with *Cape Farewell*, which took scientists, writers, artists and film-makers to the High Arctic to make work that draws attention to rising CO2 levels. Working closely with the National Whale Stranding scheme at the Natural History Museum, they removed the skeleton from a minke whale washed up in Skegness, cleaning and immersing the bones in a highly saturated alum solution that encrusted the skeleton with a chemical growth of ice-like crystals. As the work progressed, so did their understanding of how the ocean absorbs carbon dioxide entering the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuel.

Their project *Fly Tower* will involve covering the north and west faces of the Lyttelton Theatre on London's South Bank with clay and grass seed. Unfortunately, though due to launch in September, it had to be halted temporarily due to potential problems stemming from hosepipe bans. Having discovered excess groundwater in the car park, however, they are now laying pipes to use this forgotten source to irrigate the installation. "We have often worked with grass in the past to investigate processes of growth and decay," says Ackroyd. "But these are difficult times and we need to ask serious questions about what we are doing, how we are doing it and who we are doing it for. Now we have to think where the water comes from."

**Katie Holten** cultivated her love of nature during hours spent weeding as a child. "I see it as a practical thing to do," she says, "to make work that comes from an environmental base." Drawn to bleak "gaps" in the public domain, she seeks to redefine city spaces with transplanted weeds, plant life and natural pathways, or what she refers to as "an optimistic circle of weeds in the wrong place". In 2002, she transplanted native weeds from around the Norwegian town of Hamar to a patch of grass under threat from hotel development plans. "Paths of Desire", her first solo show in the United States, at the Contemporary Art Museum St Louis, will open next spring. It will combine indoor installations with long-term outdoor work.

Holten represented Ireland at the 2003 Venice Biennale, and won a Fulbright scholarship to study at Cornell University between 2004 and this year. But her career as an environmental artist really began when she won an Erasmus scholarship to Berlin's top art school in 1997. "Art wasn't about paint on canvas. It was about me and how I reacted to my surroundings."

**Heather and Ivan Morison** are keen amateur gardeners. Their passion for all things green has inspired work on the commercial flower industry: *I lost her near Fantasy Island. Life has not been the same* (2006) was a jackknifed lorry spilling out its load of 25,000 flowers in a street in Bristol city centre. The installation was dispersed by members of the public as they walked home carrying armfuls of sunflowers, irises and roses. "Through a long-term series of interventions we hope we can influence the

conscious of the public," Ivan explains, "jolting people out of the everyday, transporting them somewhere quite different, and, in doing so, making them think."

For their commission from Transport for London to mark the 15 December centenary of the Piccadilly Line, the Morisons will produce 52 sound pieces to celebrate one living creature each week. Broadcast between announcements at Knightsbridge Tube, the works will encourage awareness of an environment beyond the London metropolis.

**Amy Balkin** undertakes public-art projects in the form of websites, installations, writings and lectures, combining cross-disciplinary research with social critique. The San Franciscan artist has spent much of the past two years concentrating on *Invisible-5*, a collaborative effort with the non-profit environmental justice campaign group Greenaction. She created an audio CD tour of the Interstate 5 motorway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, offering listeners a "critical understanding of that landscape they're travelling through, presenting the problems of environmental justice in exurban California".

*Public Smog*, exhibited in London last month, is "a series of gestures and interventions to examine the commodification of the atmosphere". It documents her nomination proposal to Unesco for the atmosphere to become a World Heritage Site. The artist insists she is not an environmental preacher, but rather a strong defender of political art. "Howard Zinn remarked on the role of artists in the time of war," she says, "and I think there is the same opportunity for artists to engage politically in the time of climate change."

**Sue Hubbard and Olivia Shean**