

Down to a fine art

The planet's 'environmental emergency' is providing inspiration for a growing movement of artists whose work focusing on habitats, social issues and survival aims to raise awareness. Anna Minton reports

- Anna Minton
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When Matthew Taylor, former head of the prime minister's policy unit, took over the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) last month he may not have imagined he would be sharing a platform with one of the leaders of the anti-capitalist movement.

Artist and activist John Jordan, who founded the Reclaim the Streets movement in the 1990s, received a rapturous reception at the RSA's recent conference on arts and ecology. But while most of the other artists present had no past experience of direct action there was a distinctly political whiff in the air.

The conference, which is part of a two-year RSA programme on arts and ecology, brought together many of the leading lights of a growing artists' movement based on what Jordan describes as "ecological thinking" and what curators are calling "ecological art" or "environmental art", says Jordan.

For Taylor, the response of yet more artists to what he describes as the "environmental emergency" is akin to past struggles at times of social and political unrest. "At certain times artists have chosen to engage with the issues of the day, from industrialisation to the struggle against fascism," he says.

But while this environmental emergency is at the centre of the work, its avowedly political and interdisciplinary nature also takes it beyond what might more generally be associated with ecological art and into the realm of geopolitics, private property and territorialism.

Michaela Crimmin, head of arts at the RSA, explains: "We started off looking at art and environmental issues but found that people tended to think of landscape, which is not what we mean at all. It's about habitats, social issues and survival. Ecology seems to open up the breadth, complexity and interconnectedness of this, from biodiversity and habitats through to conflict and poverty. I'm interested in giving artists a context in which they can explore these issues."

Consequently, work featured by artists Lara Almarcegui, Klaus Weber and Tue Greenfort explores the geopolitical relationships of land use planning, focusing on how land is owned and controlled and how public access to places is restricted, themes that are also developed by American artist Amy Balkin and Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija's project The Land.

Empty spaces

In her work, Almarcegui focuses on the empty lots and demolition sites of the city. "Empty lots are spaces of freedom and possibility. They are the only places not designed by architects but still filled with the idea of possibility," she says. Her projects have engaged with city authorities to obtain permits to open wastelands to the public and, in one instance, get the land protected.

Balkin's This is the Public Domain is an attempt to create a piece of common land in Kern County, California, owned by the public in perpetuity. The impossibility of doing this illuminated the constraints of property law in the US and led her to attempt to transfer

intellectual property rights to the land to enable its public use as an art work, rather than as a piece of real estate.

For Turner prize-winning artist Jeremy Deller, the impetus to get involved in an ecological project came from his frustration with the way he feels regeneration agencies use artists and from his interest in the declining bat population in cities, their habitats threatened by the loss of common land and the destruction of building roosts.

"I was invited to a workshop on regeneration and I got very angry at the way art was being used as a decoration for large projects. The ambition of what people want from artists is so low. It makes you angry you're being used to soften the blunt edges of ugly development.

"Historically, artists have been involved in cities and how they are perceived. I was interested in making a public sculpture for bats but I felt that would be a half measure - it's not just about bats, it is for bats," Deller says, explaining the genesis of his project, with Arts Council England and the RSA, to design a bat house at the Wetland Centre in south-west London.

As for Jordan, he has been involved with one of the most unusual projects: to create a climate change opera in the square mile of the City. The opera, *And While London Burns*, explores the role of the City in climate change through a walking "audio adventure" which highlights the role of multinationals and financial institutions in fuelling climate change.

James Marriott, director of Platform, the arts and environmental activists' organisation, who co-wrote the opera, explains: "It's a way of dramatising and humanising these systems. It's over-dramatised like all opera, which is why we chose the medium."

Platform says the work "catapults the climate crisis from the cold realms of science and economics into the emotional world of culture", which is clearly one of the aims of the RSA's programme. But while artists appear adept at working across disciplines and communicating complex messages in innovative ways, the scientists and policy makers who are also part of the programme seemed less comfortable.

For environmental organisation Friends of the Earth, which has recently linked up with painter Kurt Jackson, the ability of artists to communicate complex disciplines is one of the major advantages of working with artists. Director Tony Juniper explains: "It's really important for the environmental community to reach out in ways that don't involve cold statistics, science and data but can engage at a human level, and art has the enormous potential to do that. Kurt is on the tip of a breaking wave in terms of raising environmental awareness through a different route."

Jackson, who has a background in zoology, is supporting Friends of the Earth with a new exhibition in central London's Messum's Fine Art Gallery. Proceeds from sales will go to Friends of the Earth and Jackson will speak about why he has chosen to work in this way. "I've always had an environmental agenda to my art. If you have a strong set of environmental values then everything you do will be influenced by that, especially the way you work," he says.

Cape Farewell is another multidisciplinary programme bringing artists, scientists and educators together to raise awareness about climate change by leading expeditions of artists and scientists to the High Arctic where they experience extreme temperatures of -30C. Rachel Whiteread, who joined the 2005 expedition, credits it with inspiring her recent work in Tate Modern's turbine hall, with its resemblance to an "Arctic valley".

Cape Farewell, which is supported by Arts Council England and the British Council, will be leading two more expeditions to the Arctic in the autumn and holding a series of events with the South Bank Centre and the Eden Project. Its director, artist David Buckland, describes the project as a "conversation between nature and art and science".

Direct action

But for many in the art world, the question of artists as communicators is not a straightforward one, opening up the contentious issue of the role of the artist. Curator and critic Francesco Manacorda says: "I'm always suspicious when people want artists to communicate messages, whether it be with a direct action agenda or in a mainstream politics way. It's much more interesting to show different ways of looking at a problem."

But Crimmin believes this vexed area need be no more complex than how people choose to work together. "There's art as activism, there's art as questioning, there's art as revealing," she says.

Yet while there may be uncertainty over the role of the artist as mere communicator, there is a consensus that the interdisciplinary, holistic way of working of many artists has a lot to offer other more silo driven disciplines - particularly among the scientific community. The interdisciplinary way of working that is common to so many artists is also well suited to the subject matter of ecology, which by its very nature links and interrelates every aspect of the ecosystem, from land use and resources to politics and power.

For many artists, disillusioned at the vast amount of wealth and corporate sway in the art market, this way of working also offers a way out of the market system and a cleaner arena to operate in.

Even so, while it seems justifiable to talk of a growing movement of "ecological artists" - even this year's biennial in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates is focusing on ecology - there is no doubt that it remains a diverse and diffuse coalition.

But despite this huge diversity Taylor hopes that the RSA can provide "a hub" for the emerging coalition. "There's the energy and a real appetite to strengthen these networks and we'd be really enthusiastic to play a role as a hub for the development of loose global networks of artists who want to be active in responding to the environmental emergency," he says.

He doesn't feel it is incongruous that he should be taking the lead in this. "I'm not going to become an anti-capitalist myself, but I can see there's energy around these people and they have a contribution to make to the debate. If we're going to work with artists we need to understand this plurality and individuality. We need a tolerance of this diversity if we're going to tackle this emergency," he says.

• Kurt Jackson's exhibition for Friends of the Earth: January 17 to February 3 at Messum's Fine Art Gallery, Cork Street London W1

messums.com

rsa.org

capefarewell.com

platformlondon.org