

Siân Ede – Report on the RSA’s Art & Ecology forum, Venice, June 2007.

It encapsulated the paradox at the heart of the art world – musing on impending climate disaster on a balmy morning in one of the world’s most dreamlike cities, which is what was required of me at the RSA’s Panel on Art and Ecology held in the Wales Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. I was in the company of the clever, well-dressed and influential people who make up the art-world and the paradox was apparent in much of the art we had all been viewing in the Giardini Pavilions, in the vast Arsenale and in sites all over Venice. A striking number of works were charged with political concern – masses of documentary photographs of ravaged cities, of people whose lives had been shattered by war, works which were intended to goad, hurt and, at the very least, stimulate contemplation. While we might worry about definitions around the boundaries where fine art meets photo-journalism, we certainly expect it to rouse compassion and guilt, awe or profound puzzlement, yet it is also a commodity, stuff purchased as investment. This was evident in the presence at the Biennale of the gallerists, dealers and collectors, striking bargains over elaborate meals, the air buzzing with private jets over Marco Polo airport already packed to capacity with scheduled airlines bringing in the cognoscenti. So much for carbon footprints.

All one could do was lament the fact that new international biennales and triennales are announced every week all over the world and we didn’t have the power to suggest viable solutions nor the bravery to go on strike and refuse to turn up. This point had been made by Professor *[forget his name]* of *[where?]* who, before my talk, had given a lucid explanation of the physical condition of Venice – not sinking any longer, but

in danger from rising sea levels and commercial development of its natural flood defences – firmly placing the problem in the *realpolitik* context of the modern market-place. Tourists wanted to see the fabled city and to do so in considerable comfort. How to reconcile the two? The lavish and health-conscious breakfast provided at my own hotel, I remarked, could feed a small third world nation for a week. Any proposals for bringing Art and Ecology together might sound sentimental and sandal-wearing. I am not one of those who sees Art as instrumentalist anyway. It isn't 'about' anything in particular, unless you choose to see it that way. It certainly isn't propagandist. And while artists as responsible citizens may be extremely concerned about impending environmental disaster, such awareness may make its way only tangentially into their work. Trailing clouds of Romanticism as we may still be in relation to Nature, the world has rapidly become urbanised – art reflecting this in its obsessive use of detritus, mess, litter, possessions as both subject matter and media. The Romantic Sublime, as presented in the Hudson River School's towering vistas, for example, might now seem colonialised. Our new awareness of climate change alters our way of reading a lot of traditional artworks. That waterfall –has it dried up? Those ancient trees – are they still there? Perhaps we will be able to read the concern in new art only in retrospect.

At the Gulbenkian Foundation we currently run a Public Art programme, inviting applications for unusual ways of developing and siting art in public localities. Although a commitment to environmental themes is not obligatory, they seem to creep in. A particularly good example is a project involving the Forestry Commission which owns swathes of coniferous forest in Argyll. The Commission's policy is changing dramatically and while it still plants and logs trees for public and

commercial use, it is now much more responsibly restoring or re-planting indigenous broad-leaved forest and also taking long-term steps to restore peat bogs, by letting vegetation rot over time. The Argyll site also happens to contain archaeological remains of ancient Scottish kingdoms. How can these sites be opened up for public enjoyment and education? The answer is to involve arts groups – Glasgow based installation creators NVA and the National Theatre of Scotland, which will make new sculptures and installations to blend in and signpost the hidden Neolithic sites and construct a log amphitheatre for special performances. It is edifying when public bodies recognise the uniquely tough sensibilities of artists.

A major project for the Foundation is a three year residency programme arranged by the London-based Galapagos Conservation Trust on the Galapagos Islands, famously associated with Darwin's speculations which led to the *Origin of Species*, and home to the Charles Darwin Research Station. Four artists a year will participate and create new work in time for an exhibition to celebrate the big Darwin anniversary in 2009. This is no easy project. The Pacific islands are owned by Ecuador and seen by some as a potential goldmine. They attract an increasing number of eco-tourists and new hotels and cafes are being built. The pristine habitat has long disappeared, not just because of the rats, cats and dogs that have been brought to the island, but by tourists who flock to see rare animals (once creatures without any self-protective shyness) and who inadvertently leave the remains of their picnics to invade the indigenous plant species. Tensions build up between the impoverished local community, government officials, tourists, responsible and less so, and research scientists. The Irish artist Dorothy Cross accompanied by actress Fiona Shaw have made an initial foray and report on a confusion of beauty and squalor, ancient and commercially modern,

scientifically analytical and messily human. The islands represent a microcosm of the world at large where the ecology must include the social, political and commercial, besides the natural and scientific. We might justify the artists' carbon-expensive journeys if they can reflect on life on the islands in such a way that might *deter* other visitors. The challenge will be great, requiring an ability to see things in a holistic context, not just as rare specimens. But it is surely a challenge they can rise to in their individually original ways.

ENDS

994 words

Siân Ede

Siân Ede is Arts Director at the Gulbenkian Foundation which supports the RSA's Art & Ecology programme. She is author of *Art & Science* (I B Tauris, London, 2005)