

# **Problem-Solving and Networking: Contemporary Ecological Art**

Cynthia Robinson

## **Prologue**

*I dreamt I went to Vinalhaven. I walked along the edge of a vibrant salt marsh and drank in the salt air. Migratory birds flew over my head, their songs and flapping wings mixing with the music of the softly lapping waves. I knew in my dream that this place had not always been so healthy; that unseen fishing nets and other refuse had been randomly killing fish and poisoning the seashore and the marsh area. I knew that it had taken a new vision and a combination of forces and resources to transform the marsh. I knew these things, but could not see the artist's hand in the result. An invisible but positive creative force had been at work in the cove. I awoke with a new confidence in possibilities for positive transformations of local ecologies, and an admiration for the individuals bringing new visions to these ecologies.*

## **Introduction: Nature and Art**

How do we value our natural environment? How do we value the experience of that natural environment, and consequently, the artist's response to natural, ecological, environmental experiences or predicaments? These questions are at the root of a complex web of discourse around how we view, value, manage, preserve and call attention to the place where we live.

Before I go any further, I need to identify what I mean by "nature" or our "natural" environment. I will be using these terms to refer to the environments that have

had minimal to no impact from humanity. Of course, it could be said that there is actually no place or thing on Earth that has not experienced impact from the existence of humankind, since our very air has been altered. But for the purposes of this essay, I define "nature" or "natural" as those areas and materials that have not been significantly physically moved or altered by human society.

An increasing number of artists are motivated by a sense of urgency concerning local and global environmental crises. These artists are positioned to express, connect, and communicate strategies for dealing with environmental issues, but the question of valuing this position and resulting purpose is still being established and questioned. A large group of artists are submerging their artist's practice in collaborative and research-based projects. The resulting "artwork" is often a multi-media and interdisciplinary work connecting art, technology, biology, geology, geography, and other disciplines. Now, how do we value such an "artwork"? When the lines between science and art, artist and scientist become blurred, how do we recognize the "product" or "process" as art? Does the motivating sense of urgency come through the work and what do we get from the experience of such an artwork?

What happens when artists let go of the art-object and the sole authorship of an artwork? What happens when an artwork is a process over time, created by many people, some of whom are not "artists", and this artwork has an ecological function? What happens when artists connect to each other, forming a network of communication and discourse?

To explore contemporary environmental art, it will be important to consider the content, practices, and ways that this work can be evaluated.

### **First: A Look at Environmental/Ecological Content**

Like Vinalhaven, the actual physical site of *Ghost Nets* 1991-2000 an artwork by environmental artist Aviva Rahmani, many areas of our earth are damaged. We, as humans, have used, manipulated, destroyed, polluted, and transformed our environment. Folding nature and environmental issues into art-making requires understandings of our place in nature, the history and consequences of human interaction with nature, and the natural materials themselves. Throughout human history, nature has been manipulated. A tradition of entitlement over the natural environment was common practice in European History. Carolyn Merchant suggests that during the industrial revolution, "the new images of mastery and domination functioned as cultural sanctions for the denudation of nature. Society needed these new images as it continued the processes of commercialism and industrialization, which depended on activities directly altering the earth- mining, drainage, deforestation..."<sup>1</sup>

The environment was a cog in the wheel, a material to be used. "The big picture" connecting the environment to human survival was not fully understood as a concept and was certainly not given as much weight as the excitement of human industrial "progress". Industry needs superseded the romantic spiritual connection with the natural environment.

This mentality continued in the "New World". As Amy Lipton says, "The prevailing moral and religious conviction of the nineteenth century- Manifest Destiny- was a doctrine

to develop the whole continent and thereby extend and increase America's political, social and economic primacy. The nineteenth-century landscape painters were invested in this concept and they urged their viewers to see God's presence in all of nature."<sup>ii</sup>

Such an interesting contrast: as Americans feel it necessary to explore, conquer, and exploit new territory, they are also looking for signs of a Garden of Eden. As Barbara Novak suggests, "Behind the recourse to the cult of the wilderness, primitivism, and the artistic alliance with science was that single aim: to get back to the beginning. The artists ...wanted to be the first to behold God's work since the moment of nature's birth, and in this primal vision, to behold God."<sup>iii</sup>

Is this what we are still looking for? Are we still searching for that spiritual center in its most pure and untainted state? The contradictory and intended tragedy of the Hudson River School landscape painters is that as they celebrated and displayed the beauty, simplicity, and spirituality of the wilderness they encountered, their attention to this beauty whetted the appetite of a culture on the move. They are only partly responsible for a long parade of culture wanting to possess that environment. Plenty of other trajectories in the industrial revolution made this parade possible.

The parade into the wild has a long history and has links to other human phenomena such as population explosions, radical industrialization, and human negligence, ignorance, and material greed. The parade has ultimately led us to a critical situation where the ultimate survival on the planet Earth for all species has been compromised. "Civilization needs to be tamed as well

as nature. American society in earlier centuries tamed nature, but in this century civilization needs to tame itself and recognize the integrity of wild places."<sup>iv</sup>

Peter Saunders ties recent economic development to the controlling relationship humanity has with the environment in his "Capitalism and the Environment": "Economic development has always involved transformation of the natural environment, but in the last two hundred years the pace of development has quickened, and the relationship between human beings and the natural environment has changed fundamentally as a result. One aspect of this change is that we have extended our control over the natural environment. Two hundred years of industrial capitalism have harnessed and tamed nature... In another sense, however, nature now seems more threatening than ever before. The more we have extended our control over nature, the more we have brought about changes in the environment whose effects may be unpredictable."<sup>v</sup> So a quantitative change becomes a qualitative change.

Affected ecosystems have much less time to adjust to these changes, and thus the need for action has an increased urgency. The urgency creates a desperate cause, which many artists respond to, using their individual strengths and interests as their diving boards. The result is an expansive interconnected web of discussion. The exciting concept rising today is based on the belief held by some artists that the current prolific discussions are a sign of hope; that transformation of the relationship between humankind and nature is at the doorstep.

For some ecofeminists, who express that the earth is a living organism, the basic concept is one of respect. They promote caring for the earth as if it were a child or a

mother. As with many concepts, this one can be taken into an unintended territory. Carolyn Merchant in Earthcare, suggests that this concept can be a "problematical image for both environmentalists and feminists...If Gaia is a self-regulating homeostatic system, then 'she' can correct problems caused by humans or even find humans expendable."<sup>vi</sup>

So then we need to ask, what is our responsibility? If we don't do anything, will the Earth heal itself? Many believe that the extent of the transformations already made, make it difficult and perhaps impossible for the earth to repair itself without help.

Our environment can inspire contemplation and reflection. Looking at where we live from a naturalist's point of view allows us to discover and celebrate the beauty of wild areas, the amazing potential in nature to rebound from damage and the diversity of materials that exist in nature. The naturalist's job is tied directly to the history of art through artists such as the Hudson River School landscape painters. These artists were the visual reporters of their time, taking details and views, as well as commentary on newly explored scenes, back to city folk.

Some environmentalists take the judgmental route, finding the fault and condemning the future. For many environmentalists, there is a tendency to spend a lot of time lamenting the damage that humans have inflicted on the earth. Some artists have become environmental activists, calling attention to many negative issues. Alexis Rockman, for example, created a series of posters warning communities about the dangers of eating fish caught in the Hudson River. The posters, part of the "Riverkeeper" project used images of a mother, her son, and an unborn child that had been contaminated by PCBs. They were

displayed in bus shelters, on billboards, and elsewhere in New York City in 2001.

There are several very different approaches or suggestions for changing our environment's future. Our journey continues with groups of people and artists who want to work with each other creating communities for change. It is a broad grouping of environmental or ecological artists who are interested in having an impact on nature, improving, managing, and maintaining nature. Their multi-disciplinary projects most often focus on effecting change- not simply observation or appreciation of nature. These artists are also reaching out to one another to form a network of support and discussion.

Ann Rosenthal, a contemporary environmental artist believes that a new way of thinking about the environment has begun which "...characterizes the emerging ecological paradigm...as a shift from the parts to the whole; from structure to process; and from objective to contextual knowledge."<sup>vii</sup> This is reflected in the role of the "ecoartist". Rosenthal goes on to suggest that in the past, society has looked to control nature and has not considered the "interconnections and interdependencies"<sup>viii</sup> involved.

A recurring theme in contemporary ecologically sensitive artists is this connectivity: the concept that each small species plays a part in a complicated puzzle of life on Earth. Changing any species' (plant or animal) environment will cause changes in other species' environments. By extension, the web connects various artists working in an array of media, environments, and structures to a larger "movement". I use this last word as an expression of excitement and hope that there is a physical change taking place across these disciplines; that

all the theory, discourse, whining, and conversations are actually encouraging and enforcing real, measurable, and visible change in specific ecologies.

John K. Grande, another contemporary artist, links the predicament of nature to the future of humankind from another angle: "The sense that resources (ourselves included) have limits is essential to our survival both as individuals and as a planet."<sup>ix</sup> He goes on to say: "An active acceptance of an equal, not superior, relation, to other species and elements in our ecosystem is essential."<sup>x</sup> It is the suggestion of many artists working with and through the environment that the relationship between humankind and ecologies should be more of a conversation than a dictation. We need to become better listeners and partners with our environments.

Ecology is a natural center for this dialogue of connectivity since the science of ecology is a holistic science. It can be defined as, "The idea of cyclical processes, of the interconnectedness of all things, and the assumption that nature is active and alive... No element of an interlocking cycle can be removed without the collapse of the cycle. The parts themselves thus take their meaning from the whole. Each particular part is defined by and dependent on the total context."<sup>xi</sup>

Many environmental or ecological artists are finding local and constructive ways to improve that human/environment relationship and re-establish an environmental value system.

### **Purposes in Ecological Art**

What happens when art has a scientific motivation or purpose? Why are "Ecoartists" making distinctions between

what they produce, and what other environmentally sensitive artists do?

Mark Dion says in his "Manifesto Notes" "We are not living in a simple age and as artists of the time our work reveals complex contradictions (sic) between science and art, between empiricism and the ideal, between nature and technology and between aesthetic conventions and novel form of visualization. Our goals vary; while some may wish to dissolve the contradictions in our social relations to the natural world, others may be invested in analyzing or highlighting them."<sup>xii</sup> As we explore and examine the web of environmentally sensitive art, it is clear that making generalizations for the entire group of artists is unfair. It is also a natural tendency to attempt to group like-purposes together in order to understand the wave as a whole. We also need to look at the diverse root system that current artists draw from.

Over the last 40 years, many artists have responded to the land and to their environments through projects such as earthworks, land art, and reclamation projects, addressing issues such as urban sprawl, mining, deforestation, pollution, and waste. Goals for these works ranged from exploring the use of natural materials in art, challenging the notion of the gallery/museum space by using landscapes as sculpture, raising awareness about industrial environmental casualties, confronting viewers with issues that are normally hidden.

The variety of goals continues, as Mark Dion says, some artists today wish to meld with the environment, healing, managing, maintaining, reconfiguring, and reconstructing specific ecologies. The art process that produced *Ghost Nets* fits into this category. Other artists

wish to re-frame the relationship between humankind and environment, presenting, highlighting, proposing, discussing, and affirming specific environmental issues. The website that was created as part of the *Ghost Nets* project fits into this category, taking the one salt marsh as an example of a widespread predicament. Though the goals for their specific art works vary, and even vary within the individual artist's body of work, this group of artists seems to share a general goal of transforming the human-environment relationship.

### **What do artists bring to ecological discussions?**

Artists bring the element of communication to environmental discourse. Many artists excel at collaborating, researching, putting together disparate thoughts, juxtaposing and synthesizing information from various fields and presenting the synthesis in a visual format.

An example of this communicative platform is found in *Imaging the River*, a recent exhibit at The Hudson River Museum. The exhibit weaves together the area's rich history of landscape painting and contemporary artists' conceptions, responses, and visions of the current state of the river and its future. The river emerges from the exhibit as a significant intersection of American industrialization and expansion and an important natural resource. Informing and transforming our perceptions of the Hudson River and its environs, the exhibit includes a variety of approaches; sparkling sedimentary drawings, video celebrations of the light, the flow, and the composition of the river, as well as photographic and

painted commentary on the pollution and over development of the river valley. Guest curator, Amy Lipton, of *ecoartspace* in Beacon, New York, says "All of the artists in Imaging the River share a common desire to make their particular experiences a part of the river's continuum."<sup>xiii</sup> The blend of century-old work and very recent work reveals the rich territory artists explore when inspired by our natural environment. Media in the exhibit include painting, sculpture, photography, drawing, video, digital work, and multi-disciplinary work. Water and soil samples bring the physical river into many artworks. Throughout the exhibit, materials are interwoven with the river, letting the river speak for itself.

### **Effects of Current Ecological Art**

What do we as audience and as community get out of this kind of artwork? Stephen White says in an interview with *greenmuseum.org*: "Science and politics have proven that linear, Western-guided principles offer a wealth of solutions. But their inherent problem is that they are 'status quo' disciplines that are stuck in a short-term gratification paradigm. I believe that lateral thinking/creative approaches to our challenges are needed to 'immune boost' our collective conscious in order to combat the former disciplines' i.e., science, politics, and the stock-market, power structure. Their power is concentrated, not in the hands of human beings, but rather in that of large multi-national conglomerates that are not creative or ecologically sound in their approach to economic theories as they overlook our intrinsic connection with nature. "<sup>xiv</sup> He goes on to say, "Artists, who are not bound by any discipline or structure and who are not ordered or limited as to what they explore, may more easily

find routes to experiment with solutions to our environmental problems.”<sup>xv</sup>

We get a new way to look at key issues in our collective survival. We get hints, suggestions, road maps, and examples of what we, as individuals, can do to effect positive and healthy change in our local ecologies. The biggest outcome is that we get discussions, interactions, problem-finding, consciousness-raising.

New configurations of environmental art bring refreshing attitudes and strategies to the ecological mission. They also bring a need from some to categorize artists and processes. “Ecological art” or “ecoart” brings the connotation of healing, encapsulating, highlighting landscape issues. “Bioregionalism” implies specific solutions for specific places, which fights the tendency of making generalizations about the Earth. A newer term is “Ecoventions” which is described as an “inventive strategy to physically transform a local ecology”<sup>xvi</sup>. Tim Collins has coined the term “ecohumanism” and defines it, “whereby we become responsible for the restoration, healing and long term health of nature as an extension of the human condition.”<sup>xvii</sup> Lynn Hull invented a term, “trans-species art” to refer to her sculptures that are designed for use by non-human species.

Dividing all these ways of thinking into different categories helps us to understand specific artists’ motivations and bodies of work in more depth, and to appreciate the movement’s many factions. But the division can also contribute to a reduction in the value of the genre, reducing it to a sub-heading, rather than connecting it to a positive force in art in general.

Peter Fend replies to a greenmuseum.org survey on the future of environmental art, "The environmental art movement and eco-art constitute slim, weak efforts to bring art back to its original function. Part of the weakness comes from being categorized as a subsection of art..."<sup>xviii</sup> The challenge is to give value to environmentally and ecologically sensitive art by folding it into the main stream of contemporary art. The problem is that even within the art-world, the environmentally sensitive work is not given weight aesthetically. Aviva Rahmani says, " The art world is our new "Academy"- and has become a corporate culture, and vertically based. Ecological art is based on a horizontal strategy, making it more inclusive and interconnected."<sup>xix</sup> Actually even within the ecoart grouping there is much discussion on who should be included and who should be excluded. The line seems to be between artists that are creating activity-based projects that physically change ecologies, and artists who are creating projects that highlight ecological situations. The hard liners seem to be saying: "less talk, more action". But the strongest development is this discussion and conversations, within projects, between disciplines, and between artists.

### **The Ecological Intervention Artist's Practice: Research, Science and Art Combine**

Currently, many "ecoartists" are working at ways of improving damaged nature. Debbie Mathew believes in the healing nature of environmental art and she divides ecoart into three disciplines: the biological, the social, and the spiritual. For her, the biological discipline "means that the artwork utilizes scientific explanations of ecology as its framework"<sup>xx</sup>. The social discipline ties together

natural systems with human social systems, and the spiritual ties nature to mythology, the sacred, and belief systems.

The interventionist environmental art practices tend to deemphasize the physical artwork and the artist's authorship, while emphasizing the project's process and collaborative material.

Sometimes the collaboration is with the environment or the physical site itself. Taking samples from sites, using dirt, water, grasses as drawing materials, letting sculptures submerge and emerge in tidal waters, using the site's sounds as part of video projects, preparing an area for a natural growth process, recording changes in specific ecologies over time, are only some of the ways artists can collaborate with ecologies. For Lynn Hull and her "transpecies" work, her art process works with local ecologies to provide an element, be it water for desert creatures, or islands to nest in for water-fowl, designed to improve that environment's inhabitants.

Seeking out and including specific information from resources outside of the parameters of art in order to create a knowledgeable and functional artwork project is a complicated but rich approach. The concept is not a new one. Helen and Newton Harrison paved the way for such research adventures in the 1970s and 1980s. Artists who began in the past to work in relation to environmental issues addressed urban planning (Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison's: "Green Heart of Holland"), waste (Mierle Laderman Ukeles' "Flow City"), and deforestation (Agnes Denes' "Tree Mountain"). Each of these artists called attention to the relationships between human culture and nature. Their work in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s laid the

foundation for large-scale projects involving huge amounts of planning, collaborations, and time.

Research projects have demonstrated that artwork can be functional, extremely well-informed, scientifically correct, and still be an aesthetic work. Agnes Denes in her "Tree Mountain" drawings, in which she proposes the planting of 10,000 trees and Peter Fend in his "Ocean Earth" displays that present visions for large bodies of water have shown that even the research proposals for projects can be valuable artworks. One of the outcomes of these research pieces is the resulting discourse around the proposals. Mark Dion is one of many who carries out a scientific process as the central part of his artwork, and then creates a display that has more in common with a science museum than most art museums. The data accumulation, categorizing, predictions, demonstrations are all so much a part of our human culture, it is not surprising that they should become more important in our art culture.

Stacy Levy is a contemporary artist who combines art and science. In her artist's statement, she verbalizes what that synthesis means to her: "I am interested in showing the invisible aspects of the natural world at all of its scales: the delicate architecture of microorganisms and their complicated relationships of eating and being eaten, the spiraling hydrological patterns of a stream, the prevailing winds and their effects on vegetation, the flow of water through a living system."<sup>xxi</sup> Her work in Pennsylvania takes these observational issues and applies them to dealing with the after effects of coal mining on water systems.

Artists like Stacy Levy are continuing artwork projects that deal with land reclamation issues such as Mel Chin encountered in his "Revival Field" and Viet Ngo designed in his "Lemna Systems". Most of these projects involve collaborations with several kinds of scientists, landscape designers, city planners, and industry professionals. Levy's "Testing the Waters" involves improving the tainted water coming off coal mine areas through a water treatment park. The park is then a venue for education and recreation, which is part of a movement that works to integrate environmental situations with public activities and subsequently public economies.

Jackie Brookner also deals with water purification through her "biosculptures". Her "Prima Lingua" of 1996 features a moss-covered rock that essentially cleanses the water that hits it, and then releases the purified water to the fish and plants below it. Brookner also works to integrate her "biosculptures" into community through her "Salway Park Wetland and Stormwater Filtration Project" in Ohio. This is a pilot project that links a greenway area, an arts center, storm-water issues, landscape architects, sidewalks, ballparks, water, and art.

Venturing outside the field of art to connect to wide environmental issues can be challenging, and at times may seem presumptuous, but for some artists it seems not only natural, but essential. As Robert Smithson says, "I felt it was wrong to consider sculpture as an object that you would tack onto a building after the building is done, so I worked with these architects from the ground up. As a result I found myself surrounded by all this material that I didn't know anything about- like aerial photographs, maps, large-scale systems..."<sup>xxii</sup>

Many artists are researching and working with previously un-traveled areas. Aviva Rahmani explained that her wish to rework local ecologies necessitated a quest for scientific information. She began attending lectures meant for scientists, where she asked questions from the artist's point of view. As her vocabulary assimilated some of the scientific terminology, the response to her presence at such gatherings improved. Later, when presenting her concept for a more artistically oriented group, attendees wondered who was this artist talking like a scientist?

Rahmani often gets the question: is it science or is it art? She responds by talking about how historically, until very recently, science and art were not separated. The shaman was the artist and the scientist for the culture. The separation that exists now is an artificial construction. Artists like Rahmani, Brookner, Hull, and many more are reconnecting these roles.

Combining materials, resources, and people is all part of the artwork. This combination can be a new freedom. Tim Collins suggests that artists think through this combination: "Like the contemporary aesthetic philosophers, artists have to slip some of the bonds of history, and think carefully about how to define interdisciplinary practice and what it means to act upon these ideas in the world."<sup>xxiii</sup> Widening the circle of resources can both inform the artist's work, and also make connections allowing the work to operate in other communities such as the social, scientific, philosophical, and historical realms. As Collins says, "I cannot rely on the art world as the only point of engagement and interpretation and must utilize other intellectual frameworks and support networks. I am convinced that those of us involved in this practice cannot

confine their learning or production to art. In this interdisciplinary model, artists expand their practice by moving out side their discipline and its institutionalized relationship to society."<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **Evaluating and valuing the interdisciplinary artwork**

The project-based artwork does not fit into traditional forms of evaluation and discussion in aesthetic terms. Only recently, have new formats for discussion of these process-oriented works been developed. Assigning aesthetic value to the process of research, negotiation, collaboration, and action is imperative in understanding the work.

The valuing of environmentally sensitive work must connect to the valuing of environment. Holmes Rolston III says, from the environmentalist point of view, "The land ethic rests upon the discovery of certain values—integrity, projective creativity, life support, community—already present in ecosystems, and it imposes an obligation to act so as to maintain these."<sup>xxv</sup>

The sheer volume of artists working in this discipline, in its widest definition, demands that the art world rework historical criteria to enable the evaluating of the work. Questions to consider: How does the work function in its environment? How will that function change over time? Is there a lasting impact made on an ecology? Is there a discursive impact? How is that impact presented? How do the various individuals involved with the project contribute to the impact of the work? How can this work transform local community views? How can that

transformation be measured or identified, and how will that transformation in turn transform local ecologies over time?

Time, process, transformations, conversations... Stacy Levy collects water over time; Mel Chin plants, nurtures and harvests a toxic field; Susan Steinman Leibowitz sets up gardens in unlikely places that will nurture and educate inner city communities over time; Mark Dion collects bugs over several days. The concept of time and process is really important to these project-based artists. It takes time to set up, propose, prepare for the implementation of the concept behind the artwork, and the artwork itself is often valid not as a stopped moment, but as a tracking of changes in a particular setting over time. The evaluation of such an artwork must take the element of time into consideration. One photo, one display will not represent the artwork in its entirety.

However, representing the artwork object is not the only goal. For some artists working on environmentally sensitive projects, one of the goals is to communicate the concept, not the object.

For Aviva Rahmani, the actual artwork site on Vinalhaven Island is not "visitable". Aviva doesn't want to have people come to her saltwater marsh for three reasons: 1. Because that visit would have the focus the audience on the particular place, and her intent is to have the work represent the larger issues; 2. Because the visit would create human traffic in an area that she doesn't want damaged further; and 3. Because she is definitely not interested in the administration and sales angle of marketing the marsh as a destination.<sup>xxvi</sup> Her audience is then guided to peruse the website that describes the project, and to feel the inspiration of the concept behind

it. The internet has become an important site for presentation as well as networking and discussions. Here is another presentation platform that must be included in the evaluation of many artists' work.

How is multi-disciplinary environmental work seen as art? When research, observation, analysis, function, activity are parts of an artwork, the art-object can be less important. The process and discourse may be more important results from the artwork. When we recognize the entire experience as art, what happens? Integrating these systems, processes, and approaches into art creates a new format. As Stephen Wilson says in Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science, and Technology: "The projects require analysis of the problem, for example, why do the plants that used to grow on a certain spot no longer flourish? They require speculation about possible remedial strategies, for example, what species of plants can be planted to extract the toxins? Conventionally, these are scientific questions, but when the project becomes art they become art questions...That which gets created must ultimately make sense, both aesthetically and scientifically."<sup>xxvii</sup>

An artists' collaborative group, "Littoral" has designed their mission on this project-based and interdisciplinary edge. They describe their practice: "Although some of our interests and projects appear to lie outside the remit of the art world, we see ourselves as pioneering the role of the arts in response to social, environmental and economic change. This work anticipates the need fore a new inclusive aesthetic, and we are engaged in a parallel programme of curatorial projects and theoretical enquiry to map out this new are of critical art

practice."<sup>xxviii</sup> They use "immersion strategies"<sup>xxix</sup> to work with communities, a practice that tends to allow the artist's hand to be imbedded in the issue and affected community. They use the term "problem-finding"<sup>xxx</sup> rather than problem-solving, which reveals their interest in raising the important questions as a way of raising awareness.

Aviva Rahmani spent a large part of her "Blue Rocks" 2002 project at Vinalhaven, Maine negotiating the use of rocks on the island for a temporary site-specific artwork. She painted several large rocks in a causeway area with blue-tinted buttermilk that would cause moss to grow. The piece was designed to call attention to a tidal blockage problem, and the blue tint would fade over time. The Selectmen of the island agreed, finally, and the project began, only to be halted after the election season, by the incoming group of selectmen, who did not want the artwork to go on as planned. The artist ended up organizing a "washing party" to remove the offensive blue solution. What happens to the value of the collaborative artwork project when the collaborators change and the project is changed so dramatically? In Aviva's list of "Lessons Learned", she includes: "Let go of controlling the outcome...Track the follow-up both as a political action and as a record of art...Build on anything that was accomplished."<sup>xxxi</sup>

Ann Rosenthal and Steffi Domike's "River Vernacular" of 2003, combines a map of the river, postcards (with stamps, informative text, and anecdotes) from specific spots on the river, and delicate veils of hanging cloth which had been dipped in the river at the same specific locations. The work connects stories of social interactions with the effects of industrialization and expansion on the Hudson River Valley. The antique-looking postcards serve as

journal-like memoirs and as an inspired communication tool for expressing the sense of loss and the observation of change.

### **Epilogue:**

I recently did visit Vinalhaven. I spent two hours driving around the island, observing its beauty and diverse terrain, as well as the evidence of human intervention both past and present. There are old quarries, and new housing developments, and simple misunderstandings such as allowing local residents to burn wood from a petrified forest. I asked questions and heard about a variety of issues facing the 1200 year-round inhabitants of the island. One of the outcomes of my visit was to see the opportunity for linking ecological predicaments through dialogue. How do we quantify discussions that can be catalysts for transformative thought?

There are positive transformations occurring in environments, one local ecology at a time. This is the ultimate value of the current ecological art movement. It is a strong, informed, and diverse group of artists that are forming new networks to discuss and communicate their concepts. Their work and discourse are giving value to both the environment and to environmental art.

For me this expanding and interconnected network of artists is a signpost for a positive shift in artistic and social thought. It doesn't mean that all ecological artists agree on how to proceed, or even what the role of the artist should be in ecological art. It also does not mean that all ecological artists are self-less collaborators. There remain challenging and perhaps unanswerable

questions, but the spread of discourse is encouraging and provides a rich soil to grow new models for ecological project-based artworks.

Suzi Gablick believes that a transformation is now happening. She talks about "Changing paradigms... It means exploding the humanist notion of the autonomous individual as the solitary center of all meaning, and replacing it with a sense of human dependence on a stable climate, fertile soil, living rivers and forests, and a sustainable biosphere."<sup>xxxii</sup>

We might not get back to an Eden-like earth, but these project-based artworks are giving us glimpses of new and improved, healthier environments framed by artists/scientists. The dialogue produced by their proposals and works are beginning the work to develop new paradigms. We'll need to continue the problem-finding.

Thinking back to Vinalhaven and "Ghost Nets", and immersing the artist's role in water, rock, shells, reeds, and sea-life grows a new and strong nature/culture moss. The new growth has a respect for the origins of our environmental landscapes, a belief in the value of current ecologies, and a conviction for problem solving through partnerships.

It is the beginning,  
the very first  
note of a melody  
older than breathing.

Long before we

Who walk, swim or fly  
arrived  
this pond was singing.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

From "Rain" by Joseph Bruchac

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- <sup>i</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare* (New York, Routledge, 1995), 77.
- <sup>ii</sup> Amy Lipton "Reconsidering the River" *Imaging the River Exhibit Catalogue* (The Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York 2003)
- <sup>iii</sup> Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1980), 155-156.
- <sup>iv</sup> Holmes Rolston III, "Valuing the Environment" in *Thinking Through The Environment*, Mark J. Smith ed. (London and New York, Routledge, 1999), 210.
- <sup>v</sup> Peter Saunders, "Capitalism and the Environment" in *Thinking Through The Environment*, Mark J. Smith ed. (London and New York, Routledge, 1999), 270.
- <sup>vi</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare* (New York, Routledge, 1995), 4.
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