

HIVE AND CAIRN: Communicating With Nature Through Artistic Intervention

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Ars brevis vita in periculo. (Short-lived art, life in danger)
--Alexsandra Mańczak¹

Abstract

The artist's transgression of what is arguably an erroneous split, created in the 17th century, between nature and culture, re-connects that which is undeniably human and intentional with that which is non-human and unintentional. Through human imagination and its expression in the arts a rapprochement is made with the world; we are not alienated observer but rather collaborative partner.

Predicament

There is little doubt that the divide exists: most prominently figuring at the dawn of the Scientific Revolution in the rationalist philosophy of Descartes and the method of enquiry promoted by his contemporary Bacon, whose philosophies led to the separation of “us”—humanity (at least, those of the civilized world—there were many cultures excluded) with our reasoned intelligence, oral and written

communication, from “them”—plants, animals, and the soulless “Godless heathens” who were also treated as mere mechanisms: raw, unconscious material, ours for enquiry and industry.

The reductive methodology employed in dissecting Nature was responsible for much good science and much that was heartless, including unconscionable experimentation on sentient beings; but compassion and empathy were no match for the philosophical underpinnings of the nascent investor-driven capital economies of the west. This utilitarian comprehension of the world created, as Christina Ljungberg writes, “the predicament of modern civilization, ...the exploitation of humankind and nature, the destructive split between mind and body and between nature and culture, and the ensuing alienation experienced by modern man.”²

In the mid-19th century Thoreau wrote about the profound effect our attitude toward nature had on both the natural world and humanity; by the mid-20th, John Muir, Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson made it apparent our rapacious attitude had to change, that we needed to replace a hubristic Cartesian dualism with something that encompassed all life on equal terms. Merchant wrote of the “death of nature” and Serres spoke of a new contractual obligation to live within it, while the repercussions of the back-to-the-land movement begun in the late 1960’s spoke to our alienation and yearning for a deeper connection with nature. Finally, in *deep ecology*, developed at the close of the 20th, we find in Arne Naess, Gary Snyder and

others a response that heals a deep wound, their philosophy a holistic approach to Gaia.

Nature in Art

Art has responded to nature since humans first began representing the world in chalk and paint on hillsides (the Uffington white horse, Oxfordshire) and cave walls (Cueve de la Arana, Valencia). However, for most of art history, creative interpretation of nature was no exception to Cartesian dualism, notably in paintings, where the natural world was depicted variously as malleable material to be aesthetically arranged in still lifes (Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Teapot*, 1902-06³); as backdrop to portraits (John Singer Sargent, *William Marshall Azalea*, 1902⁴); as romantic tourist view (Seurat, *The Morning Walk*, 1885⁵); and as sublime wilderness to be both admired and feared (Peer Balke, *Stetind in Fog*, 1864⁶).

“Modernist artists do not see themselves as *representing* the world,” writes Mel Gooding, editor of *Artists Land Nature*, “but rather as reporting and recording from *within* it” [my emphasis]. He goes on to point out that art also operates within the same uncertainty principle as science, where “the observer and the observed could not be distinguished.”⁷

In the 20th century, artists continued to situate the natural world as a disenfranchised object as, for example, in the large-format black and white photographs of Yosemite by Ansel Adams,⁸ which represent the undisturbed world; or in the photographs of Edward Burtynsky of mines, tailing ponds and other human intrusions into the (un)natural world⁹.

In 1970 the possibility of nature as a “collaborator” was recognized with Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*¹⁰, a coiled groin of rock extending into Utah’s Great Salt Lake, a monumental pieces which was (and still is) alternately covered and revealed by changing water levels. Here, and in the “land art” to follow of Christo/Jean-Claude¹¹, and James Terrell¹², the natural world was approached by art (or intruded upon by art) through the intervening action of an artist, where the exterior world was simultaneously object and subject, raw material and co-creator. “Here we have a human-artist interfering with nature,” writes Aleksandra Manczak; “nature then assumes the artist’s role: by answering in its own language,...it transforms the human’s work.”¹³

Is it art speak or hubris to claim unconscious nature, a world without intent, can be a collaborative agent in a process driven by the imagination of an individual artist? Or is there something more to the work, a transaction that invents or exposes a dialogue between human and non?

I am prejudiced toward a belief that nature indeed speaks to us, having engaged in an intimate and lifelong “conversation” with it, but I cannot claim its response has always been clear. The frequencies and means by which the natural world communicates fall mostly beyond the range of our human senses, and so it is an imaginative discourse I engage in, a way of comprehending the world when its actions fall beyond my limited grasp of its science.

Perhaps it asks too much of artists and poets to be the conduit we require to engage in a culturally acceptable dialogue with nature (as opposed to hugging

trees), but the alternative is, once again, tried and “true” reductive science, which may inform but does not necessarily tell us what we need to hear.

Experiencing art, an exchange of sensory information between creator and observer-participant, is more of an instantaneous gestalt than a dialogue—we respond, at least initially, without the mediation of language. Likewise, the non-human world signals its environment (including us, sometimes) without using language, which requires a fundamental shift in thinking to accept the existence of, much less comprehend, an ecosystem’s semiotics.

In short, the rest of us need to find a way in.

The artist—object—receiver triad is culturally biased toward human goals (selling the art, for one), but it is nevertheless an engagement which, if the art involves nature, has value beyond appreciation of the art itself.

Aganetha Dyck’s bee-built art¹⁴ and Andy Goldsworthy’s sculptures¹⁵ are examples of a hybrid *nature-art* which speaks to our longing to connect with the non-human.

Hive

Aganetha Dyck, 2007 recipient of the Governor General’s Award¹⁶, defines the interaction between her and forty thousand honeybees a *collaboration*: the title of her recent exhibition at the Burnaby Art Gallery¹⁷, which comprises scans of hive interiors; a poem in brail (by Di Brandt)¹⁸ mounted on individual panels which were inserted into a hive to be *interpreted* and *accreted* by the bees; backlit steel plates with cut-out words which name various roles the bees take within and outside the

hive, to which are attached honeycomb fragments; and a series of embroidered canvas and paper drawings which have traces of bee business.

Aganetha began working with *apis mellifera* in 1990 when she was looking for beeswax to seal canning jars, another art project¹⁹. At the Bee Keeping Co-op in Winnipeg she saw a 15cm high sign crafted in honeycomb, created by a local apiarist. "Seeing this bee work, instantly recognizing that the bees were artists...was a fundamental and immediate shift in my art..." Aganetha writes. "I wanted to collaborate with the honeybees. I had no hesitation that my...ongoing and uncompleted studio work would be discarded."²⁰

Aganetha's process begins in the winter, when the hives are dormant. She creates or locates objects that will be inserted into specially constructed hives in the early summer. The hives have enough room to contain the object(s) and allow the bees to build their hexagonal wax storage cells for Aganetha's project and their own needs. Late in the summer, working with a beekeeper who is also a philosopher, Phil Veldhuis (University of Manitoba), "a generous, knowledgeable guide" with whom she has collaborated for 15 years, she removes the objects from the hives and continues her work in the studio.

She has consulted bee scientists in Canada (Mark Winston, Vancouver) and France (Yves Le Conte, Avignon) to further her understanding of the bees highly ordered lives; in return, the scientists realize, from an artist's wide-field view, a different insight into their research.

“If there is any one major difference [between artists and scientists] it has to do with the structure of risk taking,” Mark Winston told me recently. He ran the bee lab at SFU and is the author of, among other works, the seminal text *The Biology of the Honey Bee*. “Scientists tend to diminish the number of qualities that we are examining until there is one thing that we are testing. While our hypotheses may be creative and risk-taking, in the sense of ‘we don’t know the answer’, the way we explore them tends to be more orderly, whereas artists may take similar issues and explore them in a much less-organized fashion. Different kinds of beauty and creativity arise from those processes. When artists and scientists interact successfully...they learn to appreciate each other’s parallel lines of thought.”²¹

Cairn

He has been called “the handyman—shaman of British art”²². Andy Goldsworthy makes art outdoors, using natural materials. His art can be small and practically invisible, set deep in a woods where only the most intrepid might stumble upon it, or it can be monumental, as in the meandering stone wall he built at Storm King, a sculpture park in upper New York state.

His art is sometimes created alone, and left in place to suffer the vicissitudes of weather, or it may be an installation, outdoors or in a gallery, which requires specialists to assist in the construction: machine operators and quarrymen to lift heavy stones for an arch now in front of the Cirque du Soleil building in Montreal (first built at a quarry in Dumfriesshire, Scotland); plasterers to work clay walls in galleries and museums in San Francisco and Digne-les-Bains and elsewhere; in the

documentary “Time and Tide,” the film crew carry sheets of ice to help Goldsworthy build an ice cairn before sunrise.²³

He begins with materials found *in situ*: stones, leaves, sticks, ice, mud, moss, clay, water, branches. In *Chestnut Leaves Creased and Folded Held With Thorns*, a rectangular pattern of leaves with regularly spaced diagonal folds is plastered against a tree, which begins to lose its shape a few hours later, as the ordered leaves peel away from their placement²⁴. His work is altered by the “devolution” of weather and time, often as it is being created; many of his most affecting works disappear within minutes of their creation, photographs the only evidence of their existence. Goldsworthy’s *performances* (my term, not his) are not intended for an audience but are part of his respect for nature itself, almost as if he must atone for culture’s transgression—or his own—by propitiatory offerings. (Actually, Andy’s enjoyed making things outdoors since he was thirteen²⁵.) Of one completed work, he writes, “I don’t know what I expected, but nothing prepared me for the intensity of the experience. An artist makes things that become a focus for feelings and emotions—some personal, some public, some intended and some not.”²⁶

Whenever the opportunity presents itself, he will create a frost shadow: standing very still on cold, sunny mornings, he tries to “find time between freeze and thaw to...cast a cold shadow that will hold the frost whilst the surrounding area melts”²⁷, something so ephemeral that only the first passerby may notice it before the work vanishes.

Sometimes his work is so subtle it is difficult to differentiate from the

surrounding site, were it not for the later publication of one of his bestselling large format books. *Mud Moss Beech Tree Spring Into Summer—Drumlanrig, Dumfriesshire, 24 April 1999* shows the base of a tree which has a mossy aperture: which part is the tree, and which the artist's work? In many cases as the surrounding vegetation matures over the course of a growing season or years, his sculptures become part of the landscape, hidden (*Scour Glen, April-August 1999*) or used prosaically, as sheep pens, for example (*Cambria, 1996*)²⁸.

The question confronting the viewer is: "Should we...stop admiring the beauty of a rose and instead admire the poet who admirably sings about it? Would not that be reasonable if the rose *in itself* is neither beautiful nor ugly?" asks Arne Naess.²⁹ As much as we admire the rose or the waterfall or the lone tree against the horizon, we do not attribute it to an artist (God, perhaps); what then to think of a work which falls somewhere between man and nature.

Intervention

Nature (the world external to human culture) acts **on** Andy Goldsworthy's work, as it **assists** Aganetha Dyck in the creation of hers.

It is by interposing an abnormality in the bees' normal activity that initiates the second stage of AD's art, after her initial creation of the piece, or her appropriation of an artifact for the specific purpose of creating a piece of art. She calls the bees' action *participation*: but have the bees any choice? The artifact inserted into the hive is an intrusion into their (admittedly artificial and constructed) home space, and their choice to do something with it is limited by

instinct and intelligence. Yet we cannot deny the beauty and intelligent design (in a non-teleological sense) of their hexagonal wax structures, excreted and shaped onto the surfaces presented to them.

What does a bee know? Social, organized, communicative, bees are the most studied insects, and the most storied, having been linked with humankind since pre-history³⁰. Mark Winston says bee brains are “about the size of a large pinhead, yet bees are able to use their brains to behave differently in different contexts,...bees [can] learn,...they have memories, and...individuals make decisions about which job to do depending on the colony’s requirements.”³¹

Aganetha does not claim that bees understand art or even comprehend that the honeycomb they are constructing for her will be removed—if they did, surely they’d move on to more bee-rewarding projects. But there is intelligence at work, and the logic and accuracy of honeycomb construction, or of their well-proven and studied communication^{32,33} by “dance,” says there is more than we yet know to being a bee than its misunderstood “impossibility” of flight³⁴.

As the artist is driven to create what we perceive, for the most part, as non-functional, decorative or allegorical responses, so the bee is driven to construct and maintain a hive for the practical purpose of raising brood and storing enough honey to last the winter. Goldsworthy says, “I cannot explain what I am looking for”³⁵. It is a leap to suggest a connection, yet I feel that underlying both Dyck’s and Goldsworthy’s work is their response to a muted, but nevertheless present, call from the bees, flowers, ponds, streams, and hilltops, a world discounted and distressed by

our ignorance.

Collaboration between artist and nature is probably an illusory but necessary fiction the artist requires to engage *world* with *man-in-the-world*.

Aganetha claims she and the bees, as well as their beekeepers, create the work together, that the bees are not merely wax and honey-making machines. On the surface of it, it seems absurd to imagine a communication between bee and artist, or between the natural materials with which AG works. After all, it is the artist who initiates the “conversation,” although inspiration often comes from external stimuli. Interestingly, both artists claim it is more often nature that decides the outcome. “The bees...dictate when our bee work is complete.”³⁶

Which begs another question, is art complete when the artist leaves it, or when it is observed? Is a sculpture in the woods anything more than a pile of rocks?

Old pond
A frog jumps in
The sound of water
--Matsuo Basho³⁷

Arne Naess gives the example of three people looking at a tree. P1 has experience E1, and so on. “The tree in the external world confronting P1, P2 and P3 may be *the same*, and its properties are...most adequately described by modern physics. Consequently...we get as many as four trees, one external and three internal. When nobody looks at the tree, the three internal ones disappear...”³⁸.

While this is rather obvious, what we must note, Naess says, is that the tree in the mind of the observer **does not exist**. Not in the brain, “because then it would have been seen long ago by scientists.” The tree *as an experience* is actually nowhere, a construct, a subjective gestalt: we identify it and give it qualities, such as size, shape, colour, condition, age, which are internal constructs applied to an external object.

Three people walking through the woods near Andy Goldsworthy’s home in Scotland come upon a braided root made of mud and moss in a provocative and unlikely double helix. One is delighted by the playful re-ordering of natural elements; another is disturbed, even annoyed, by the imposition of a man-made rearrangement of an otherwise “random” nature. And did the third person even *see* the work?

Confronted by a pile of sticks or a honeycombed shoe, we are uncertain if this work respects nature, or mocks it. No matter how an artist working in and with the natural world may claim to honour it, he or she imposes an artifice which nature then unmindfully acts upon.

The cold Bay of Fundy waves topples one of AG’s cone-shaped pile of slate stones three times during its construction before it eventually remains standing, as a “finished” work of art, for at least two cycles of high and low tides³⁹.

Any implication that it is more than chance and the dynamics of natural forces which alter or unbuild one of Goldsworthy’s pieces, or that Aganetha’s bees in any way accede to the importation of a foreign object into the hive, is to risk the charge of anthropomorphism. For anyone—artist or environmentalist—to claim a

collaborative status with the non-human world necessitates granting nature agency, intent and consciousness.

“Acceptance” and “rejection” is our interpretation of the temporal consequences of the intervention; nothing nature “does” is done with intent. Realizing this imbalance between *provocateur* and nature heightens our awareness of how frequently we are at the mercy of the larger world, and thus in some measure reverses the imbalance in favour of nature.

There is a healing process at work when we encounter these artist's works: the gulf between us and nature has been bridged by the action of nature on the art, putting both the artist and us, as observer/witnesses, in the position of realizing that what we do to nature can also be done to our works in nature by nature itself, and by extension, to us. Artistic intervention in the natural world is simultaneously “injury” and “medicine,” whereby artist, nature and observer-participant form a healing circle, closing the rift between nature and culture.

Through Nature’s undirected, unconscious response, and our awareness of the artificiality of the artwork, our senses are reawakened, our eyesight restored. *This* is the correspondence we’ve been looking for.

Notes

- ¹ Aleksandra Manczak. *The Ecological Imperative: Elements of Nature in Late Twentieth-Century Art*. Leonardo 35, no.2 (2002):131-136
- ² Christina Ljungberg. *Wilderness from an ecosemiotic perspective*. Sign Systems Studies 29 (2001): 169
- ³ Paul Cezanne. *Still Life With Teapot*. National Gallery, London. http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/cezanne/keyimage_lrg.htm (accessed March 22, 2009)
- ⁴ John Singer Sargent. *William Marshall Cazalet*. JSS Gallery. <http://jssgallery.org/Paintings/WilliamMarshallCazalet.html> (accessed 3/22/09)
- ⁵ Georges Seurat. *The Morning Walk*. National Gallery, London. <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/cgi-bin/WebObjects.dll/CollectionPublisher.woa/wa/work?workNumber=NG6557>(accessed 3/22/09) 2009)
- ⁶ Peder Balke. *Stetind in Fog, 1864*. A Mirror of Nature, Nordic Landscape Painting 1840-1910. Minneapolis Institute of Arts. http://www.artsmia.org/mirror-of-nature/nordic-art-detail.cfm?nor_art_cat=8&lng=0 (accessed 3/22/09)
- ⁷ Mel Gooding. *Artists Land Nature*. (NY: Abrams, 2002): 10
- ⁸ Ansel Adams. *Yosemite Images*, The Ansel Adams Gallery. http://www.anseladams.com/ansel_art/yosemite.html
- ⁹ Edward Burtynsky. *Breaking Ground series*. Edward Burtynsky Photographic Works. <http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/>
- ¹⁰ Robert Smithson. *Spiral Jetty*, 1970. <http://www.spiraljetty.org/> An interesting sidebar: a Canadian oil and gas company had applied to drill just 2.5km from the spiral jetty in the salt lake. After much letter-writing from concerned parties, the state of Utah denied the application, and is considering an ecological preserve for the entire lake, with special consideration for Smithson's work.
- ¹¹ Christo and his partner Jean-Claude wrap islands as well as buildings in cloth; they have recently covered sections of the Arkansas River in Colorado in blue fabric (2012 completion) <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/otr.shtml> (accessed April 1, 2009)
- ¹² James Terrell is working on one of the largest land art projects ever, the conversion of Roden Crater in Arizona to a public night-sky observatory. See New York Times, Nov.25 2007 <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/arts/design/25fink.html> (accessed April 1, 2009)
- ¹³ Manczak, *The Ecological Imperative*, 132
- ¹⁴ For an introduction to Aganetha Dyck's work, see: Aganetha Dyck (<http://members.shaw.ca/ahtenaga/>) or Michael Gibson Gallery (http://www.gibsongallery.com/artists_pages/dyck/dyckindex.html)
- ¹⁵ For an introduction to Andy Goldsworthy's work, see: Cass Sculpture Foundation (<http://www.sculpture.org.uk/biography/AndyGoldsworthy/>) or Artnet (<http://www.artnet.com/artist/7145/andy-goldsworthy.html>)
- ¹⁶ The Canada Council. *Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts*. <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/prizes/ggavma/2007/oj128182721784195744.htm>
- ¹⁷ Aganetha Dyck. *Collaborations*. Burnaby Art Gallery, personal visit (February 3-April 12, 2009).

¹⁸ Di Brandt's poem, which begins "& then everything goes bee/sun exploding into green" was published in a slightly altered version: Di Brandt. *Now You Care* (Vancouver: Coach House, 2003).

¹⁹ Aganetha Dyck: *The Large Cupboard*. Michael Gibson Gallery. (accessed March 19, 2009)

²⁰ Aganetha Dyck, personal email to M.Cox. March 29, 2009

²¹ Mark Winston, personal interview with M.Cox, Simon Fraser University, March 17, 2009.

²² Robert Macfarlane. *Strange rearranged*. (Times Literary Supplement, Feb 11 2005)

²³ *Rivers and Tides*. DVD, directed by Thomas Riedelsheimer (2001; Germany: Mediopolis Film-und Fernsehproduktion, 2002)

²⁴ Andy Goldsworthy. *Time*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008): 39

²⁵ Michael Brunton. *Q&A with Andy Goldsworthy*. (Time, April 13 2007).

²⁶ Andy Goldsworthy, *Passage*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004): 69

²⁷ Goldsworthy, *Time*, 16

²⁸ All references to images found in Goldsworthy, *Time*.

²⁹ Arne Naess. *The Ecology of Wisdom*. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008): damned if I could find the page!

³⁰ For a thorough overview of the bee in human history, see Hilda M. Ransome, *The Sacred Bee in Ancient Times and Folklore* (New York: Dover, 2004. A facsimile of original pub.1937)

³¹ Mark Winston, interview, 2009

³² A.L. Kroeber. *Sign and symbol in bee communications*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 38 no.9 (1952): 753-757

³³ J.R. Riley et al. *The flight paths of honeybees recruited by the waggle dance*. Nature (2005): 205-207

³⁴ The flight of the bee is unusual, but obviously not impossible. Douglas Altshuler et al. *Short-amplitude high-frequency wing strokes determine the aerodynamics of honeybee flight*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (2005): 18213-18218

³⁵ Goldsworthy, *Time*, 122-24

³⁶ Dyck, email, 2009.

³⁷ Matsuo Basho. Trans. Robert Hass. *The Old Pond*. <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-old-pond/> (accessed April 1, 2009)

³⁸ Arne Naess. *The Ecology of Wisdom*: 75

³⁹ *Rivers and Tides*.

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