Collaborating with Nature: Reinterpreting Human Ecology

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Terry Chatwin (1946 – 2012).
Abstract

This project investigates visual strategies for representing human ecology; the study of interrelationships between people and their environment. Motivated by the numerous human induced environmental issues confronting contemporary society, this research develops poetic reinterpretations of human ecology through metaphor, allusion and symbolism. The artworks operate in collaboration with nature, revealing hidden or obscured connections between artificial and natural elements to emphasise the inclusive relationship between society and nature. This strategy intentionally contrasts the often didactic and sensationalistic methodologies employed by scientific and governmental institutions in specific relation to environmental issues.

The development of the project is informed by Lucy Lippard’s ideas relating to personal narrative and how this contributes to the transformation of anonymous ‘space’ into a familiar ‘place’. Miwon Kwon’s concept of the discursive site has motivated the creation of aesthetic strategies specifically directed towards prompting viewers to reconsider familiar ecological exchanges. This aspect of the project, supported by principles drawn from the field of ecological aesthetics, has facilitated the development of works embodying connections between society and nature.

Artistic responses consist of three distinct formal approaches: sculpture; site-specific installation; and multi-image digital projection. The sculptures juxtapose natural and artificial materials to reference and explore nature/culture interrelationships and processes. The site-specific installations further develop these ideas by directly engaging in situ features in order to reinterpret the operation of a local ecosystem. These installations also explore the interfaces between artificial and natural features in areas analogous to the peri-urban zone; locations where ecological complexity creates a particularly dynamic environment. The suite of digital work represents interactions between natural elements, the artist’s home, and the artist, as a means to evaluate the potential for a personal human ecology to contribute to a broader environmental discourse.

These three divergent formal methodologies facilitate an assessment of their respective potential to embody and convey ecological considerations to viewers.
From this experience it is possible to identify the distinct characteristics and advantages in directly engaging features via interventions sited at the natural/artificial interface where the actual lived context provided by these in situ exchanges generates projects that reveal localised interaction’s potential for prosaic ecological exploration. This research also contextualises the domestic environment as the basis for generating rich, novel and socially relevant ecological reinterpretations. In combination these phenomena contribute to the discourse relating to nature, culture and human ecology.
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