

VISUAL CULTURE: CAN IT ADVANCE SOCIAL OR ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE?

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## Introduction

Visual culture has traditionally espoused the collective values, beliefs, and desires of society. Essentially, it played a crucial role in transformative periods of history. In the World War II, for instance, visual propaganda and photography were responsible for influencing political awareness in the UK (Rennie, 2008). Likewise, visual culture informs 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens of prevailing challenges and sensitises them to the available courses of action. Challenges, such as climate change, threaten people's livelihood and security. Yet these effects are outcomes of destructive human activity, like tropical deforestation that destabilises ecosystems; and the burning of fossil fuels that spews copious amounts of greenhouse emissions into the atmosphere (O'Brien, 2010). Thus, as visual culture advanced change in difficult situations in the past, it has the potential to inspire and direct action on the existing environmental problems too.

This paper will explore how visual culture can play a role in guiding people towards a more responsible management of the environment. It will focus on the educative and informative aspect of visual culture at the individual and community level. It bases its arguments on the fact that sustainable engagement with the environment is the social and cultural duty of every community member. The paper, therefore, tasks visual culture with re-educating the individual to examine how best he or she can co-exist with nature through good environmental practices. Moreover, in doing so, it highlights commendable works that show the impact that art can have on communities' relationship with nature.

## Background

Popular British nature-related artwork primarily focuses on praising the beauty of UK's landscapes and wildernesses. It also mainly aims to encourage the public to explore and identify

with the outdoors, in places such as the Kielder Forest; Tresco, and; the National Botanic Garden of Wales. Exhibited works include those from foreigners and British citizens. For example, the Iron Tree—shown at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and created by Chinese contemporary artist, Ai Weiwei—has only one artistic purpose. That is, to celebrate the cycle of nature (see Photo 1 below). However, art enthusiasts have also found the tree’s form to “suggest a critique of broader societal structures” in its tackling of social inequalities and poor environmental practices (Lisson Gallery, 2016).



Photo 1: Ai Weiwei's Iron Tree (source: lissongallery.com).

Then again, Britain has always had a history of employing artists to educate the public on social and environmental issues. In the World War II period, for example, the nation through the War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC), managed to sustain the morale of its citizens using works from a select number of contemporary artists (Rennie, 2008). The approach was significant in the sense that Britain chose to uphold its societal values through visual culture as the rest of the world seemingly turned to barbaric war rhetoric. The choice of the art at the time also suggests that there is a discretion that needs to be adhered to when deciding between visual

arts meant to advance socio-environmental causes (Rennie, 2008). For instance, works by Graham Sutherland, Henry Moore, and Paul Nash commissioned by the WAAC featured realism (in contrast to the abstract) so as to pass their messages to the public more directly.

Similarly, the visual arts have a role to play in mitigating the negative effects of climate change. Moreover, Britain needs to institute the arts in its socio-environmental policies because just like during the war, they have the ability to re-educate the public en masse. For that reason, the following sections will discuss the five capabilities of the visual arts that can advance socio-environmental change.

### Pass Messages

Although some communities destroy their environment knowingly, there are those that remain ignorant of how their practices continue to degrade nature. Art can thus raise awareness by highlighting the negative outcomes of particular behaviours, such as the pollution of rivers (Chawla and Cushing, 2007). To this end, Betsy Damon's projects serve as a good example of how a visual culture can be an effective communication media on matters concerning sustainable environmental practices. Her *Living Water Garden* project in Chengdu, China—for example—exhibits a large-scale demonstration of the lengthy and complex process of rehabilitating a polluted river (Keepers of the Waters, 2012a).

Betsy Damon's project has sensitised thousands of Chengdu residents to desist from littering or dumping trash into their rivers. That goes to show that with proper execution, visual arts can primarily tell communities about what they might be doing wrong (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). However, to be convincing enough, visual arts must pass their message in way that is not too casual as to water down the gravity of its topic—but also in a manner that is simple enough for the majority to understand (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). Fortunately, Betsy

Damon applied this principle when she designed the *Living Water Garden*. For instance, she used the analogy of a fish, “with each part of the [garden’s] treatment system represented by a body part [of a fish]” (Keepers of the Waters, 2012b). The purification commences at the “eye” where the “water journey starts”; before burbling “through an aeration system” (lungs), and ultimately, spilling into the cleaning ponds (stomach) (Keepers of the Waters, 2012b). Interestingly, the garden passes the polluted water through a gradual process that takes up to 12 hours to complete. Visitors who wish to see the resultant clean water must therefore wait until evening when the clean water flows from the end of the park.

By aping Damon’s approach, it is easy for other visual artists to take part also in the efforts to advance change. The artist shows that participation does not need one to prepare for complex objectives, such as drawn out public campaigns. She has illustrated that through communicating a simple message, art can influence communities to re-evaluate their actions.

#### Educate and Entertain

Visual culture has become increasingly commercialised. As a result, productions aim to attract as much readership, viewership, or subscription as possible (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). In the process, works erode their edutainment value as they attempt to fit into what the consumer wants to see—as opposed to what the consumer *should* see. However, self-styled “politically interested and environmentally conscious” Scottish artist—Keith Barrett—seeks to remedy that trend through his artwork (Barrett, 2001).

An example of his work—the popular sculpture, *Whalsay*—is located at a remote island off Shetland, Scotland. The piece not only draws attention to the beauty and importance of the sea, it also serves as an illustration of how artificial structures can co-exist peacefully with nature. Barrett argues that his works are part of the environment where he places them. He thus

explains that his sculptures would have no significant meaning if he removed them from their intended landscapes and displayed them on gallery exhibitions, for example (Barrett, 2001).

The sculptor's technique is relatable to the concept of using visual arts for providing instruction. That is, for visual culture to advance change, it should dictate how consumers should treat its assertions (King, 2006). It should not allow people to fall back into their comfort zones, which are essentially responsible for the current indifference to ongoing socio-environmental degradation. Similarly, the sculptor also provides a lesson on how to schedule the functions of his art to bring about behavioural change. He requires visitors to first see and interpret how his sculptures interact with the landscape. Only after adequate 'education' does the sculptor recommend the visitors to engage further with his sculptures to get an emotional and cultural understanding of how they can co-exist with nature. In the long run, however, Barrett provides entertainment value to the consumers of his sculptures. He targets the visitors' emotions to endear them to the value of nature. The Whalsay artwork, for instance, is a compelling reminder of how the sea contributes to people's livelihoods.

#### Tell or Pass Stories

In order to create engagement, art needs to have a storytelling aspect that captures the sensual, emotional, and cognitive appeal of its audience. Having done that, it can then go ahead to educate or influence the audience towards a particular objective (Curtis, Reid and Reeve, 2014). In that respect, philosopher-naturalist and composer—David Rothenberg—excels as a storyteller whose mission is to make people understand nature better (Powell, 2007). The artist has previously produced works where he records and imbues musicality into seascape sounds. He is famous for having gone to great lengths to record whale sounds in Russia and Canada while playing his clarinet simultaneously.

However, it is through his visual project—the BBC documentary, *Why Birds Sing*—does he ultimately succeed at making a riveting case for why we should respect nature (Powell, 2007). The production even shows Rothenberg playing his clarinet alongside birds at the National Aviary of Pittsburgh. To the majority of his audiences, the naturalist cum artist first seems intent on recreating birds' melodic abilities alone. However, it is only through further consumption of his work that one gets to understand the deeper meaning of his efforts. Rothenberg creates a narrative where the birds are elevated into equal partners with man in nature. He essentially argues that, "birds sing for the reason humans do: because they can, and because they must" (Rothenberg, 2016).

Rothenberg propagates the concept of visual art that seeks to educate by passing shareable stories (Lehtonen, Juvonen and Ruismäki, 2013). The artist not only creates the relevant stories concerning sustainable socio-environmental practices, he also reminds his audience of the aesthetic value of nature that needs careful scrutiny for it to become defensible. Rothenberg's *Why Birds Sing* is both a remarkable piece of art and an explainer of an otherwise ignored subject of the melodic capabilities of birds. Through it, one would re-discover the beauty of nature. It manages to paint nature's assets as a creative resource, which humans should protect, so that they can continue to enjoy it in perpetuity.

#### Provide Aesthetic Value

Visual culture has traditionally provided its consumers with an entertaining, pleasurable, but sometimes provocative insight into their communities' affairs (Reid, Reeve and Curtis, 2005). In addition, visual works earn their way into becoming keepsakes by first providing for aesthetic value. As a result, it is only logical for any piece of visual culture that seeks to advance change to be aesthetically pleasing for it to grab the fleeting attention of consumers. Yet, it is

quite the challenge to create pieces that have the potential to raise socio-environmental awareness without passing off as being too niche. However, ecological artist and designer—Jackie Brookner—succeeds where most visual artists falter in creating pieces that have an outright aesthetic appeal.

Brookner uses various materials depending on whether they fit into the community's cultural heritage. As a result, her notable preferences have previously included volcanic rock, wetland plants, and even fish parts. She draws inspiration from the Latin origins of the words: “humble”, “humus”, and “homage” to come up with inspirational aesthetic designs because they refer to soil/ground and man. In addition, she argues that: “Hidden in the roots of our words we find what we seem to want to forget—that we are literally the same stuff as earth” (Green Museum, 2016).

The artist's approach has resulted in positive critical acclaim for her work. Her obsession with using materials that the local audience can relate to makes it easy for them to find the beauty in her offerings, and ultimately, embrace it. She mirrors what Reid, Reeve and Curtis (2005) found in their report, *Creating Inspiration*, to be the ability of art to be perceived as aesthetic based on its cultural relevance. Admittedly, one of Jackie Brookner's popular pieces—*Prima Lingua*—was commissioned by the Appalachian State University in 1995 to symbolise a human tongue licking and cleaning dirty water. It was covered in mosses and liverworts but it eventually ‘grew’ into a piece that was delightful to see. Nonetheless, the *Prima Lingua* communicated how interdependent organisms constitute ecosystems. In essence, it also reminded its audience that humans should desist from being indifferent to the contributions of nature, and thus, they should act responsibly towards it (Green Museum, 2016).

Yet although Brookner created hundreds of bio-sculptures for her various commissions, she frequently displayed the human form through its body parts only—instead of the whole body. For example, her 2001 bio-sculpture—*The Gift of Water*—continued her style of admonishing man for his assumption that he is a bystander in matters related to the ecosystem (Brookner, 2001; Green Museum, 2016). Still, *The Gift of Water*, contained all the signature marks of the bio-sculptor, which included an aesthetic design covered by biomass—but meant to raise awareness on a pertinent socio-environmental issue.

### Manage Expectations, Tensions and Contradictions

As a potent media, visual culture has the potential to act as a mediator when contradictions occur or tensions rise (Rennie, 2008). In socio-environmental matters, especially, it is more likely to hear of confrontations between environmental activists and the alleged exploiters. Greenpeace climate change campaigners, for example, are renowned for their offhand protest tactics, which regularly land them into trouble with law enforcement agencies (Vidal, 2008). However, art can otherwise act as a protest media without unnecessarily drawing out confrontations. Works by the British (and Dutch) artist—Lilian Cooper—are a good example of how to agitate for sustainable socio-environmental behaviour while avoiding drawing out violent confrontations in the process. She describes herself as an artist that has, “a fascination for the natural environment, built form and how we function in these surroundings” (Cooper, 2016).

Her work on the Trumpington Park and Ride, outside Cambridge displays her panache to unearth feelings of resistance against the battle that urban landscapes seem to be winning over the rural landscapes (Cooper, 2012). Commissioned by the Cambridge County Council Transport Department, she provided texts to be displayed on glass walls that encouraged travellers to

remember the more serene rural landscapes as they went on with their busy schedules. Her work for Park and Ride known as, *Welcome to Cambridge*, reads:

This way for rippled hills and ripe, bursting fields blue sky and dressed stone formality. Dipped anthracite clouds poised to varnish. Domestic housing, waving effervescent flowers, pensive dogs and green flag grass. Quiet walls and walked stone lead to hidden squares and bursts of persistent lawn (Cooper, 2012).

To the environmental minded, Cooper's style manages to communicate what one would relate with unspoiled nature. Yet, it does so in the midst of a crowded and polluted environment using subtlety to avoid an outright clash of perspectives. Likewise, for visual culture to be effective in bringing about change, it needs to avoid creating unnecessary sideshows that can lead to the blurring of the intended message. Moreover, Cooper's *Flashcards* project, where she stuck labels on a garden's vegetation to express her vision of the ideal garden, indicates that socio-environment change should be a gradual process. In essence, Cooper advocates for patience and perseverance if one wishes to realise long-term change. On the other hand, the artist seemingly excels at managing expectations since she exhibits pieces that admit to being faced with insurmountable challenges. Her *Flashcards*, for instance, talk of desirable outcomes despite the "ground [on which the garden is planted being] still filled with lead, mercury and whatever else was dumped over the centuries" (Green Museum, 2002).

### Conclusion

The paper has introduced five different ways through which visual culture can advance social and environmental change. It has touched on artworks, such as video, sculptures, and urban 'graffiti'. It has shown that these artworks can all display visual culture's ability to (1) pass messages; (2) entertain and educate; (3) tell or pass stories; (4) provide aesthetic value; (5) and, manage expectations and tensions. Moreover, it has exposed the role of art in creating the

awareness necessary to sensitise people to how nature functions around them and why they should act more responsibly towards it. On the other hand, it has provided the pertinent reminders of how all biotic forms are interconnected in their dependence on nature for their survival.

Ultimately, through an analysis of contemporary visual arts it is evident that a sizeable selection of society acknowledges the risk we are all facing through our continued indifference to nature. These works aim to communicate the gravity of the problem through their aesthetic properties, educative, entertainment, and narrative functions. They effectively recreate the intricacies and sophistication of nature in their attempt to get their consumers to appreciate the beauty of their bio-ecosystems. Admittedly, works such as Betsy Damon's *Living Water Garden*, do not hide the inadequacies of nature. However, they do so with the aim of educating communities to re-think their actions towards their environment, since it cannot withstand the ongoing abuse infinitely. Yet in conclusion, it is apparent that with proper adaptation and use, visual culture could turn around the looming threats of the existing climate change effects.

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