

Introduction

As part of my third year of my BA Community Arts degree, we were allowed some choice over our elective subject. I chose to do this 5 day module because I specialise in Art and decided that I wanted to do some work out-with the art studio. I also really like being in a natural environment and as a child spent a lot of time outdoors. For me this experience outdoors would hopefully encourage a lot of emotions and memories which connect with my childhood. The five day course consisted of two days in University attending lectures and workshops and three days on various site trips. At one of our classroom workshops we learned about the art of Haiku, a Japanese practice of nature poetics. I wrote some of my own Haiku to convey the emotions felt during some of the site visits. Here is an example from our visit to Perth.



1. "In the summer sun We see, admire and note Sigh, and reflect"

Why Environmental Art?

"Many of our attachments to nature evolve through knowing some environment, living in it, or being able to relate to it because it reminds us of other places we know or other things we value."

(Emily Brady, 1998)

Environmental Art originated in the 1960's but the concept of art and its relationship with nature has been recorded as long ago as cave men telling their stories through cave paintings. Nature has always been an area of deep intrigue and fascination due to the wonder and awe at its creation. As you look at the dark of the thickest forests or

the light reflecting off a lake you begin to realise that you are only part of a huge universe created around it's natural environment. Sometimes it seems impossible to detach yourself from the stresses and strains of urban life, but when you do you find a restful and uplifting experience in the arms of Mother Nature herself. Further on in this paper I will highlight the link between our emotions and the aesthetic experiences we encounter.

Some Artists and their Works

There are any artists who work in a variety of settings, focusing mainly on studio work, some of which is inspired by the outdoors, but Environmental Artists are those who work in and alongside the environment to create art which enhances our natural environment. It may also serve a purpose such as highlighting issues of conservation or providing a purpose for the area in which it stands. The art must have a relationship with it's habitat and in a sense be site specific to be considered environmental art. It is an area of debate, but I believe that Environmental Art can only be considered so if it is not harmful to the environment it is in. I feel that art that destroys or recreates the natural environment in order to highlight or fit in with the art work is not environmental art at all but more a case

of public art. One web definition of Public Art states that

“Public art is art that is exposed in a public space, either an outdoor location or in a publicly accessible building”
(www.en.wikipedia.org)



**2. ‘Riverside Sculpture’ Perth
PHOTOGRAPH by GLEN COUTTS**

This type of art is simply created and positioned where desired, having little or no connection with its site. Some artists who I believe deserve the credit of being true Environmental Artists are those such as Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long. Their work seems to be acquired through careful selection and appreciation of the surrounding environment.

The Aesthetic Experience



Just as art can evoke emotions so can the natural environment which we choose to work in. These may not always be positive emotions but it is important that we learn from our emotions. The human being is a highly emotive species and our emotions range from happiness to anger, from pleasure to sadness. It is important to recognise the values and inspiration that working with nature can bring.

The word aesthetic could be defined as something that is pleasing in appearance, and the aesthetic experiences deriving from work in the natural environment generally symbolise beauty in some shape or form. An aesthetic experience tends to be the experience of one person and what they would deem to be beautiful and pleasing on the eye. It is important to realise that this experience will be different for everyone and what one person sees as beauty, another may see as bad taste.

“Beauty exists neither intrinsically in beautiful objects nor in the eye of the beholder but in the relationship between the individual and their environment, in short what he calls the experience.”

(John Dewey)

John Dewey claims that beauty lies in the relationship with the environment and in a sense that is what Environmental Art is about. As I explained earlier in this paper I believe that proper environmental art is that which recognises and enhances its surroundings. I feel that the use of natural materials helps in the aesthetic process because it makes the art seem as if it has somehow evolved from the environment it is in. Adding man made materials somehow destroys the natural beauty of the landscape and may instead produce an eye sore rather than a pleasure.

“These works (ephemeral gestures) are intentionally sensitive to their natural surroundings, indeed, they evolve so much from their surroundings that one might confuse the artefact for nature itself.”

(Emily Brady, 2001)

Types of Environmental Art

In her paper ‘What is Environmental Art?’ Stephanie Ross defines 4 main courses of Environmental Art. In the following section I aim to introduce and explain the main aspects of each method.

Masculine Gestures

Masculine Gestures tend to be large scale works of art which have had a massive effect on the environment which they are part of. These gestures use materials which will probably stay in place for long periods of time, pushing the land or environment to form around about them. This is damaging for the landscape and the surrounding ecosystem. Works of 'art' such as Robert Smithson's 'Spiral Jetty' have detrimental consequences and these are the very works which I am unsure even deserve the title of being environmental art. His work, which is now under water yet still having an effect on the environment, has been an area of controversy with art critics worldwide.

Ephemeral Gestures

This is the type of Environmental Art that I am most interested in and the area which I have researched the most. Ephemeral Gestures, in contrast to Masculine Gestures, have little impact on the land and are generally small scale art works. The materials used in creating these pieces are mainly natural and gathered on site. These are the works which I feel are most natural and nearly always have a connection with the land in which they are placed. Work like this must be recorded on film because soon the natural materials will be re-claimed by the land they came from. Two

of the main artists in this area are two that I named earlier; Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy. I have taken a lot of inspiration from these artists and their works.

Performance Works

These are fairly similar to Ephemeral Gestures in the way that they are created making minimal disruption to the environment in which they stand. Performance works tend to be on a larger scale than the small Ephemeral Gestures as seen in the paragraph above. These works are created and left for show for a few days then completely dismantled by the artist in order to return the surrounding environment back to the way in which it was found. Performance Works must also be caught on film, due to the dismantling process happening so soon after creation.

Landscapes and Proto Gardens

Landscape work of this kind takes a lot of planning and time. Landscapes are cultivated and grown to recreate the artists plan and it may take years to see the final result. Even at that the result is sometimes hard to see from close up, yet from a distance or from an aerial view, it may then appear to be man made rather than natural.

Environmental Context

The site for our projects was Ardmore Point, which is approximately a 45 minute drive from Jordanhill. Ardmore Point is a nature reserve area managed by the Scottish Wildlife Trust, and as a peninsula, takes approximately an hour to walk the nature trail around the point.



3.

We were asked to create a piece of art which would be site specific and would highlight the area in which it was situated. During our visit to Ardmore Point I had a few ideas based on things I saw but I was able to refine these ideas during my research time the following afternoon. This meant that I was able to go the following day with a plan in mind and get started straight away, making full use of the time available.

My Influences

I was deeply influenced by the ephemeral works of artists such as Andy Goldsworthy. I have always been interested in stones and shells etc and so decided that I would work with these materials in the environment I gathered them from. Therefore my chosen site was the mud flats in a rather sheltered position near the back end of the point. This site was ideal for me because although the tide was coming in, it was slow enough for me to create my work, photograph it and then see the effect the approaching tide had on reclaiming the natural materials I had used. On the actual day I had some extra time at the end and so I created a second piece, very strongly influenced by Andy Goldsworthy's work.

When I realised I had some spare time I began using the hammer I had brought along with me to crack open some pebbles. I did this purely out of interest to see how many pebbles you would need to crack before getting a straight split. When I had a few of various sizes I decided to create a piece of art with them and placed them under a tree framed by some twine.

My Artistic Response

My main work on site was an Ephemeral Gesture responding to the landscape and the natural materials found there. I wanted to create something which would temporarily celebrate the area. We had been talking in class about cairns and the way they were built to create a landmark, to identify the height of a hill or act as a marker for those trying to reach it. I had this vision of cairns somehow crowning the area as their own. From this I decided to base my work on a cairn which would highlight its spot until the tide washed it away. I thought it may make people stop and think for a moment about the area and its significance in the environment. I chose an area on the mud flats which I felt was quiet and sheltered.



4.

I set to work by gathering pebbles of three different colours. I find it amazing that pebbles can be overlooked as all being the same as one another, but my search for three contrasting colours, really showed how different they all were. I chose some

grey, some white and some orange coloured pebbles. I decided on mixing these with sand to create my cairn. It started as if I was creating a sand castle and I personally started to worry that my work would not be unique enough and after some thought decided to keep working on my original idea.



5. This is my cairn almost half completed. It took me a while to position the pebbles in the right shape on top of one another

While working I realised that many people would have chosen that area because of its silence. The fact was that it was far from silent and I decided I wanted to incorporate this in my piece as a sort of controversial point. The sound of the seaweed popping, the waves, and just the general atmosphere around me, suddenly seemed alive in the silence that I was creating. To do this I decided to place a small bluebell growing out the top of my finished cairn. This signified life coming from the materials, which the majority of people will assume to be 'dead'.



6. MY FINISHED PIECE 'Seashore Cairn'

What did I learn from this experience?

I have always spent a lot of time outdoors, but since this module I have realised the way in which I view my surroundings has changed. I have become more artistic in my appraisal of certain environments and have found myself drawing ideas from various settings and the emotions I feel about them. It has made the environment more colourful in many ways because I can now connect this awareness of 'natural' art with my career.

Conclusions

As a Community Artist I could use this type of work with my specified client groups of children and young people. Some of the children I work with are from the inner city, urban area and many have rarely been away from this. The children have various needs and can be challenging to work with but I believe work in the

natural environment could in some ways provide a therapy for them. It would be interesting to try work of this sort for many reasons. I would use it to help the children develop their ideas, working in groups and on their own. It would also be beneficial for them to think about the natural environment and the emotions they encounter here as oppose to inner city. It may also encourage them to think about beauty and what it really stands for. I can see myself using the skills gained on this module in the future, especially in a therapeutic sense. I wish to finish this paper with a quote from Andy Goldsworthy which I feel justifies his work and his ethical reasons behind what he terms as art. For me it highlights the relationship between humans and the environment around us and how we should be doing all we can to show others the vastness of nature itself.

"Knowing where things come from, taking responsibility for what I use is important, accepting that I will change a place but making sure as much as possible that the change is sympathetic to the place, recognising as much as possible that as a person, I am part of the land. I am on this earth and by being here, by being alive, I do affect the land. All of us do. In my work, I hope I celebrate life."

(Andy Goldsworthy, 1992)