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Green Art

As buildings, landscapes, vehicles and all manner of products are finding new ways to be made more sustainably, various corresponding ways of measuring their greenness have arisen, from 'Green Star' for buildings to 'GreenTag' for products. But unlike objects with a defined purpose, how do we assess the green credentials for works of art?

Text Tone Wheeler

Despite Kermit's maxim that 'it's not easy being green', it seems everyone in design wants to be that way these days, including those in the art world. While the initial reaction might stress sustainable materials (no more lead paint on linen or sculpture in asbestos and rainforest timbers, thanks), the question gets far more difficult, and interesting, when we consider how much of today's art is of a more ephemeral nature: performances, events, festivals, concerts. How do we sort the good from the bad in the green wash-up?

A good place to start is artists with a strong interest in environmental themes. In the 1960s, parallel to the political movements with an environmental focus, there were a number of artists whose work was intended to raise consciousness, issue alerts or challenge traditional approaches to the environment in art. Robert Smithson's show *Earthworks* in New York (1968) and his highly influential *Spiral Jetty* (1970) in a Utah salt lake are often regarded as markers of the beginning of 'land art'. This was where artists rejected traditional methods, particularly in sculpture, in favour of works that had a greater connection to nature. These were also less able to be 'commodified' as a saleable product, often only being seen as photographs in a gallery that represented works often executed in remote locations like the southwest desert, which remains a favourite place for US artists). This lineage became well-known through the work of Andy Goldsworthy, whose book titles (*Wood, Stone, Leaves, et cetera*) indicate both his interests and the materials used and, more recently, through the sky viewing 'oculi' of James Turrell, who recently completed one such sculpture in the forecourt of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.



Marr Grounds, sculptural gate (2003), Narra Bukulla. Photo: Tone Wheeler.

This approach of immersing the art in the landscape, rather than just depicting it, crash-landed in Australia in 1969 with the arrival of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who 'wrapped' a section of the coastal sandstone cliffs at Little Bay, just south of Sydney. Although not overtly ecological, their later work is often seen as highlighting the intersection between human intervention and the natural.

One lasting legacy of their visit was the impact on their key Australian assistant Marr Grounds, son of the late Sir Roy Grounds. Marr,

a trained architect, was already heading in another creative direction based on his studies in environmental art at Berkeley in the 1960s, and he organised his architecture students to assist Christo in the installation. Marr Grounds has since gone on to become Australia's finest 'artist in the environment', executing works such as *Dingo Fence* in remote areas and more recently establishing an excellent collection of 'environmental sculpture' at his private outdoor museum in Narra Bukulla on the NSW south coast. Typically, such works use only

found objects – collected sticks to form a wave, as in Peter 'Beatle' Collins' work – or, in some of Grounds' art, reinterpreting found rubbish such as a tree 'ringbarked' by thongs or a huge earth sphere of crushed wire invisibly suspended in the spotted gum trees.

As evocative as they are, some see this approach as harming the very environment they celebrate. A more minimalist or 'healing' art that is considered to be more in tune with the environment is the work of sculptor John Davis, whose fabrications of fragile materials use ideas derived in part from Aboriginal artefacts, and are intended to decay and eventually disappear. Jennifer Turpin's work *Tied to Tide*, with steel crane-like structures moving to the tide and waves, is part of a movement that seeks to draw attention to the subtleties of the environment and heighten respect, especially where previous uses such as wharf activities have highly polluted the harbour.

Turpin's work highlights one of the two ways that artists have responded to the sharper focus of the politics of sustainability: by making art that is increasingly provocative on environmental issues. Erth (Environmentally Recycled Theatre) is a trio of artist/activists whose work has evolved from street theatre to

physical objects that emphasise a wide range of sustainable practice. Using the mantra of the 'Three Rs' (Repair, Reuse, Recycle) as a starting point, their *Metal Tiger*, commissioned by the City of Sydney, used a wide range of materials sourced from not-for-profit group Reverse Garbage to create a six-metre-long, human-powered and LED-lit tiger for Chinese New Year. In keeping with their green ideas, the material in the tiger was itself recycled into a 'rabbit' for the following year's celebration.

Art has also headed down a more practical pathway, fusing art and industrial design. Early works by Palmer and Fairbanks explored the use of PV solar cells within art, evolving into commercial bags made from recycled materials with cells recharging various devices. Much of this crossover has concentrated on recycled materials. A small competition for clothing made from waste as 'wearable art' that started in the town of Nelson in New Zealand has evolved in 20 years to a worldwide phenomenon, not only influencing, arguably, the aesthetics of layered clothes but also highlighting the responsible use of fabrics and labour in mass-produced clothing.

As 'green design' becomes more mainstream, art has responded. Rock festivals

stress recycling and 'green power', theatre staging uses recycled materials, 'natural' materials are

highlighted in traditional painting and sculpture straddles the two-edged sword of both, using (and highlighting) the environment. But as the lines of design and art are blurred, the critique continues: that the work still consumes energy and that use of materials continues to increase.

The most common defence mounted is that it is 'raising awareness', but what kind of art will be produced when we are all aware of how hard it is to be green? **ar**

With thanks to Kerri Ainsworth for help with researching this article.

Erratum: in AR 124, I listed William McDonough's co-author on Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things as 'Michael Baumgarten'. This should have read 'Michael Braungart'. With apologies to the author.