

IN CONVERSATION WITH MAJA AND REUBEN FOWKES

*We interviewed Maja and Reuben Fowkes to discuss their curatorial practice, art, philosophy and sustainable art.
Text by Maja and Reuben Fowkes, Questions by Rod Bennison and Giovanni Aloï*

What is a Translocal Curator?

We understand translocality as a situation which combines the particular insights gained from being deeply based in one or more localities with the comparative perspective gained by working in more than one discursive context. This position stands in contrast to the superficiality of viewing art from a purely international and generalising perspective, as well as providing a way to surpass the limitations of considering contemporary art primarily through the prism of nationality.

Your curatorial practice strongly revolves around ideas of ecology, memory and translocal exchange. Over the years you have curated influential gallery shows, organised conferences, written extensively on arts and the environment and edited a number of blogs like Translocal.org and Sustainability and Contemporary Art. What is at the origin of your commitment to art and the environment? And how did this develop?

Our interest in issues of art and ecology developed quite organically, from dealing with the notion of a dichotomy between civilisation and the natural world in our show *Human/Nature* (2003) to a reassessment of landscape as a genre in contemporary art in *Unframed Landscapes* (2004), an exhibition which was shown in the UK, Hungary and Croatia. In 2006 we shifted our focus to organising an international symposium on Sustainability and Contemporary Art at Central European University Budapest, which was pioneering in the sense that it brought together contemporary artists, environmental scientists and ecological activists to explore common ground around an expanded notion of sustainability. Since then we've continued to organise annual events with the same partners at Central European University and to concentrate on specific theoretical aspects of art and sustainability, with a symposium in 2008 on 'Exit or Activism?' and in 2009 on 'Hard Realities and the New

Materiality', all of which are documented on our website.

Altermodern, the 4th of Tate's Triennials and brain child of Nicolas Bourriaud, attracted controversy in the UK, mainly because of its stark imbedded arrogance involved in declaring that 'Postmodernism is dead', (as we read in the manifesto that accompanies the show). The claim that a new modernity is emerging due to increased globalised communication and physical travelling (the internet being a propelling factor), the surpassing of nationalisms in favour of the definition of multicultural platforms (a new universalism) lead artists to respond to a new globalised perception of the world and our lives. Do you agree? Do you see yourselves and your curatorial practice fitting in Bourriaud's blueprint for a new artistic era? Do you see any space for Sustainable and or Environmental Art in Bourriaud's vision?

In our view, Bourriaud's reading of the 'death of postmodernism' could be seen as useful provocation in terms of thinking about the present moment in contemporary art and in that sense he has already achieved his purpose in that people feel the need to position themselves in relation to his thesis of altermodernity. His analysis of the two phases of post-modernity, with a first phase belonging to the 1980s characterised by the 'eternal reversions of modernist forms' and a second phase after 1989 in which a 'multiculturalist mythification of origins' was expressed through the question 'where do you come from?' and identified with genre, ethnicity, sexual orientation or nation, opens up space for conceiving of contemporary art in the era after identity politics. In terms of sustainability, Walead Beshty's installation of Fedex Sculptures, damaged glass cubes Fedexed around the globe, pointed to the critique of the overproduction and overcirculation of contemporary art, and on the whole the notion of a 'new modernity' does not exclude the



Walead Beshty's

Fedex® Kraft Box ©2005 FEDEX 330504 REV 10/05 CC,
 Fedex International 2-Day, Los Angeles-Brussels, 2008
 (two-way mirror glass with safety glass laminated, silicon)
 photograph by Walead Beshty ©

reassessment of the relationship of sustainability and contemporary art.

In Sensuous Resistance: The Legacy of Modernism for Sustainable Art, you wrote: "If for modernism, form was a question of aesthetic values, in the sustainability of art, form is a matter of ethical values." Could you give us some examples of Sustainable Art in which this concept can be re-traced?

In general we prefer to talk about the sustainability of art, rather than Sustainable Art with capital letters, as our primary interest is in the implications of a broad notion of sustainability for the whole of contemporary art, rather than just a niche area, such as is associated with the term Environmental Art. Artists that consider the ethical aspects of their formal decisions, such as what are the implications of the use of animals in art or of people in community art projects, are in that sense giving precedence to ethics, rather than aesthetics.

In The Implications of Sustainability for Contemporary Art, we read: "The notion of sustainability has spread from the field of

environmentalism to many other areas of human activity, including the spheres of art and culture. There is a growing understanding that radical change is required, if we are to find a way to 'meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' For art, the implications are felt in the preference for sustainable forms, the critique of unsustainable art world structures, and the reassessment of art history from the point of view of our relationship to the natural world. It offers a challenge to the ingrained habit of producing objects and the relentless search for novelty in contemporary art". What would you say is the place of Sustainable Art within the broader international artistic panorama, and which are the most notable implications and challenges involved? Are there geographic or social realities that are more sensitive to Sustainable Art than others?

Sustainability is a challenge and opportunity for contemporary art as a whole, and a dimension that artists, curators and museums are increasingly considering in their work. It is not really possible to talk about a trend or movement of Sustainable Art at this point, but rather of the spread of an understanding of sustainability into artistic practice, often on an intuitive rather than theoretical level. There is a contrast though within the 'international artistic panorama' with the market-driven art scene, which is tied to the logic of a growth-model borrowed from the neo-liberal economic system. The East European conceptual art of the 1970s, precisely because of the lack of commercial art market structures and limited resources, resulted in works which were of low environmental impact and provoked artists to find alternative and inventive artistic methods.

In Unframed Landscapes you sustain that "While Earthworks were formally 'unframed', internally they still expressed the modernist desire to achieve mastery over nature. Land art can be regarded as the most macho of the post-war art movements". Do you think that such modernist desires nonetheless hark back to the Romantic or Arcadian view of a human desire for a perfected nature?

In general the modernist or avant-garde approach to nature consciously marked a break with attitudes to nature that crystallized with Romanticism, and was primarily about how to come to terms with the changes that industrialism, urbanization and technology were bringing to humanity and the relationship to the natural world.

Is there a suitable gender connotation to the current practices involved in Environmental and Sustainable Art?

The feminist challenge to patriarchal modes of the early 1970s occurred in tandem with environmentalist critiques of industrial civilization, and the post-colonial questioning of Western domination. Within contemporary art, sustainability is also an issue for artists dealing primarily with gender, although there is no automatic link between the two fields.

*Guattari's focus in **The Three Ecologies** is his conception of "ecosophy" - the three related ecologies of environmental, mental and social worlds and their amalgamation into a methodological practice. Guattari's argument is that we have an erroneous conception of ecology, of environmental struggle, and that only by broadening our views to include the three ecologies will we be able to affect any enduring changes in our social/cultural/natural environment. How relevant or influential do you think Guattari's theorisation of 'Three Ecology' has been, and how has it shaped methodological practice?*

Guattari's *Three Ecologies* is of continuing relevance, twenty years on from its first publication, for his insight in bringing out the 'third dimension' of mental ecology or human subjectivities. This is valuable in terms of art and sustainability in that it creates a space for artistic creativity as an 'antidote to mental pollution.'

Do you agree that the post-Marxist views that were expressed by Guattari and others have fed into the constructionist perspectives that now pervades animal studies and other disciplines in the humanities? Do you think its time for animal studies and the animal movement more generally to recognise its roots may in fact be in environmentalism and not in such Marxist, post-Marxist or even humanist ideology, given that such critiques are replete with images of nonhuman animals being used solely as human economic devices; that, in such views, an animal's unique animality, and thereby our humanity within that animality, is being denied. Surely, in denying animality, the Cartesian view of nonhuman animals as machines is not assuaged by such ponderings, but affirmed?

Within sustainability and in terms of artistic attitudes towards animals, an interesting example is Ivan Ladislav Galeta's series of *Garden Scenes* films, in which he works in the garden with one hand on a spade, and the other holding his camera. Chickens walk about, pecking in the soil, in and out of camera, but they are not instrumentalised by his gaze or made to play a role in the film, showing the artist's conscious desire to avoid any sense of physical or symbolic exploitation of animals in his work. He has a similar attitude to plant life. More generally though, there have been attempts to identify an ecological dimension in Marxist thought.

How has the continued human impact on the planet, such as by climate change or pollution, informed your work over the years? And, has the established art of environmental despoliation and pollution influenced your curatorial work, such as the works of the American, Steve Sack?

The recent increase in public discourse about climate change is becoming a subject of interest in its own right, and heightens our awareness of the continuing tension between technological and more holistic approaches to ecology.

Could you choose three works by different artists who in your opinion are addressing sustainability and environmental concerns in effective and diverse ways?

Artists whose work we have featured in our writings, exhibitions and the symposia all deal with sustainability in one form or another, and many have informative websites. Austrian artist Oliver Ressler has numerous interesting projects in this respect, including the film *What would it mean to win?* (2008). Heath Bunting from Bristol's work in genetic art, sport art and general autonomous attitude connects with sustainability in many ways. Hungarian artist Beata Veszely's work on horse archery and exploration of the figure of the artist in the landscape also says a lot about the social and psychological dimensions of sustainability.

What is the future of Environmental and Sustainable Art?

Artists genuinely interested in sustainability will increasingly have to define themselves in relation to the problem of greenwash within society and also in the art scene, a phenomenon which is on the increase as the system seeks to appropriate the ecological critique for its own purposes.

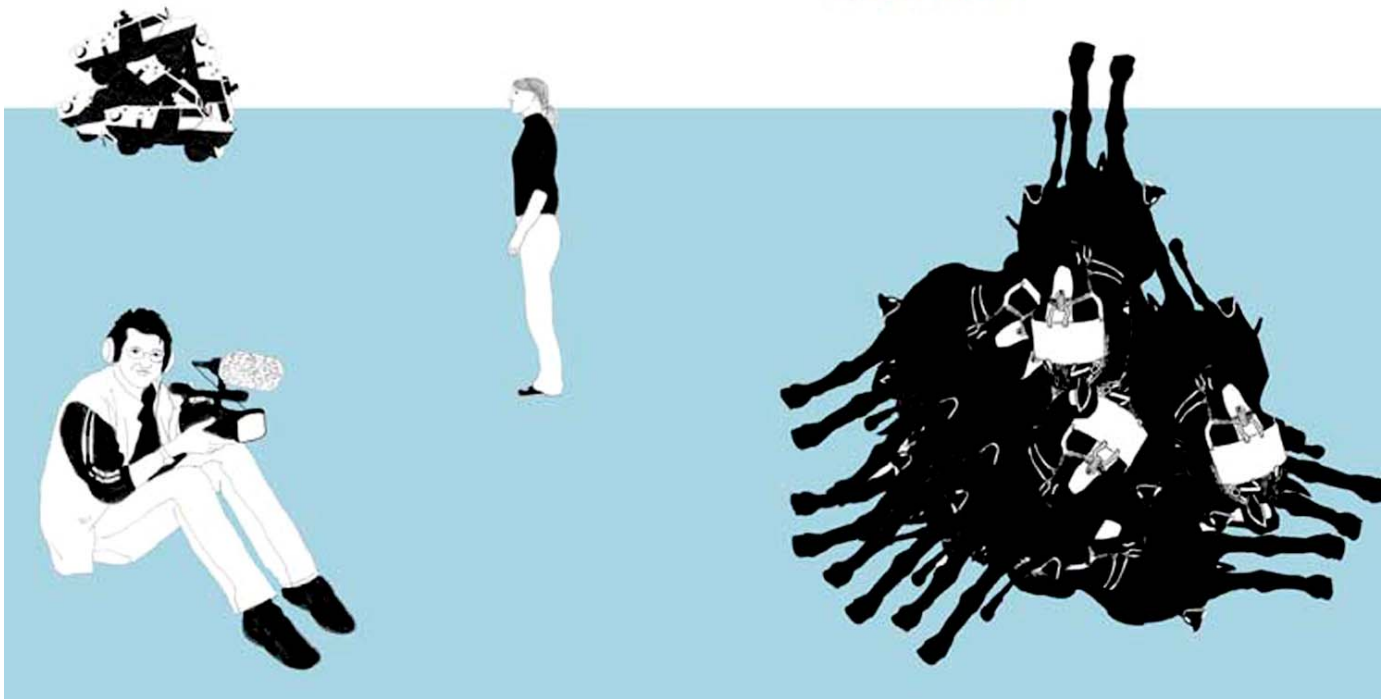
As curators, can you provide some idea as to how art has been influential or can be more effective in making people more environmentally aware? Should it?

We do not envisage art to have utility. As soon as art is seen in this way it is connected to the art market and we're back into the capitalist, market-driven, growth model of production. If the utility of art is understood as a vehicle for advocating social changes or raising environmental consciousness we come to the problem of art as propaganda, which can also be counterproductive, as it undermines the subversive potential of artistic autonomy.

What are currently working on?

Our current project on the Ecological Footprint of Contemporary Art is conceived as a broad-based

WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO WIN?



Zanny Begg & Oliver Ressler

What would it mean to win, Film Poster, 2008 ©

investigation into the environmental sustainability of the international art world that includes both consideration of the direct environmental impact of art works, conferences, biennials and art fairs, and discussion of the potential positive offsets associated with the social role of contemporary art in a globalised world. The project is supported by Arts Council England, and we recently gave a talk about our approach to the subject at Modern Art Oxford. In the autumn there will be further public presentations of the project.

Maja and Reuben Fowkes are independent curators of contemporary art who deal in their work with ecology, memory and translocal exchange. They are members of the International Association of Curators of Contemporary Art (IKT) and the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), and in addition to their curatorial activities publish their writings in Art Monthly, Exindex, Frieze, Umelec, Time Out, Art Margins, Greenmuseum.org, as well as books and academic journals.

Maja and Reuben Fowkes were interviewed by Antennae in Spring 2009 © Antennae