Research In Context

ADAD5003

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BA Fine Art: Research & Context

Question 3:

Analyse the impact of the environment and sustainability on art practice by describing how artists have responded to these issues in their work. Provide evidence from at least 2 artists and thinkers.

Word count 2750

LOVE YOUR MOTHER

A lot of people have eyes but do not really see, as art folk we have a gift for observing, finding creative outlets to shed light on current situations, to think about the materials we use and messages that connect people and places to the wide views of the world and how we treat it. This essay will examine the artists relationship with the environment, sustainability and responses to these issues. In order to do this the work of artists, Lewis Prosser, Lorenzo Quinn, Ana Mendieta, Robert Smithson, 'Washed Ashore Project, Art To Save The Seas' and David Nash, will be analysed to compare and understand the considerations to our environment. We will touch upon the writings of Merlin Sheldrake, Eunice Newton Foote, naturalist David Attenborough and Rachel Carston. The artists and thinkers selected have inspired and helped many learn more about the natural world and opened our eyes to the magic that exists in these special more untouched places.

In terms of concern for our planet, some bury our heads in the sand, others show greed and choose not to see where the actions of few lead many to an unstable future. Many are intrigued by this and some of us choose to fight however we can, only hoping it makes all the difference. The environment we live in is so fragile, such a fine balance that can be tipped so easily, just like the changing seasons. The small actions matter even if it does not feel particularly direct or game changing, things take time, but do we have enough time? we as artists can help spread the messages of the pending future of our mother world. The title 'LOVE YOUR MOTHER' taken from the boot of a beat'up old Nissan, resonated as it was so simple yet so potent and loaded. Such a simple thing, to love and care… for the one that gave you life ?...

In terms of the current state of our planet, we cannot create more water and the ocean absorbs heat we produce. “Wind is incredibly important on both a global and local scale” (King and Nasir, 2022 p.33) causing erosion and weather events as well as being heavily relied upon to regulate temperature, moister and the dispersion of pollen from flora, forna and funga. CO2 is at the highest it has been in 2 million years, all this leads to “frequent heavy rain events and record-breaking heatwaves, increasing the area burned by wildfires and supersizing our storms and hurricanes” (Johnson & Wilkinson, 2021 p106). Analysis shows us “the cost of inaction is higher than the opposite” (Mulhern, 2021) . We live in a highly material world, everything is made of something. Even when you consider Digital art as cleaner, emissions caused by the internet have been exceeding that of airplanes for over a decade, “The Stormtrooper Scandal” comes to mind (www.bbc.co.uk, 2024).

In David Attenborough’s ground breaking television series ‘blue planet’ he states,

> We are at a unique stage in our history. Never before have we had such an awareness of what we are doing to the planet, and never before have we had the power to do something about that. Surely we all have a responsibility to care for our Blue Planet. The future of humanity and indeed, all life on earth, now depends on us. (Attenborough, 2020).

This series is unique for not only showing the underwater world that makes up over “71 percent of earths surface” (NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, 2023), but for bringing to the public ideas not discussed before. Rachel Carson an American biologist (1907-1964) also said “One way to open your eyes is to ask yourself, What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?” (Michals, 2015). I feel this heavily relates to Attenborough and

his found way of connecting to the world through the screen, making it accessible for all. We are at a critical turning point in our goal of a sustainable future, we all have a responsibility to use that power to turn back the clock, to practice what we preach and use methods that are kinder to our mother world.

The first leading women scientist for climate change, Eunice Newton Foote never really credited for her work, it is claimed particularly in the ecofeminist movement because of her gender, theorized in 1856 changes carbon dioxide would have on the atmosphere, “from a single experiment, she drew a profound conclusion: an atmosphere of that gas would give to our earth a high temperature” (Johnson & Wilkinson, 2021, p1.) If we as a species listened and respected one another more maybe solutions would have risen sooner as well.

The Sycamore Gap Tree on Hadrian’s Wall, is a good example of man’s intense relationship with nature. A few individuals changed its course, a testament to what a human impulse can do and the senseless devastation left behind for the rest. This place touched a lot of people, it was a sight to see. Some of the saplings are being given to charities, groups and individuals as a symbol of hope. The destruction sparked outraged but nature showed its resilience. So does the good outweigh the bad? Do people like Julia Hill the Environmentalists actions balance out the darkness this world sometimes lives up to. Hill lived in a 1000 year old Californian redwood tree for 738 days, to prevent logging companies from cutting it down. She wrote a book ‘Legacy Of Luna’ (2000) about this period in her life. Whatever our form of art, giving voice to the voiceless has a very strong appeal.

Fig 1. (Lewis Prosser 2021) Penrolin

The first artist that we will look at is Lewis Prosser. He dubs himself the 'absurdist basket-maker', which is certainly fitting of his work that explores woven costumes. "He constructs moments of wonder and rebellion through material culture and performance". (Prosser, 2014) His work has real connection to the land, myth, cultural tradition, particularly in his homeland in Penarth, South Wales. He considers the natural environment within his materials and awareness. His work is not as politically charged in messages to be kind to our world mother but the considerations to a traceless practice is clear, and moving forward this is of the upmost importance. The idea of using sustainable materials such as willow, makes the work take on an elemental feeling of connecting to the earth, water or specific spaces, as you might choose to use feathers as a symbol of the sky. This image is of a collaborative piece of work by L, Prosser, Perry and Glynn, called 'Hen Galen – Penrolio' "the celebration of the Welsh new year, local Penarthians gather at the clifftops to roll the giant head of

Bendigeidfran down Cliff Hill and onward to England" (Prosser, 2024). The sense of community and tradition Prosser brings is magic and what makes villages thrive in togetherness, being open to collaborative works in the community and working with other artists, this is also important for collectively making a redeeming impact to our planet.

Fig 2 (Merlin Sheldrake,2020) Untitled.

Merlin Sheldrake has a keen thirst for knowledge, being an award winning publisher of his book 'Entangled Life' (2020) and an ecologist. His language is engaging, a real mix of fact and magic but accessible so anyone can take away information from his life's work on Fungi and the ecological world of wonder. His ability to connect and share his knowledge is really admirable. Sheldrake has a brother, Cosmo Sheldrake, he is a musician, using nature or wild sounds in his work, everything from birds to whales, to performing to animals, with animals, as a pair they do a lot to share how amazing our world is as a collaborator and how much we owe to it. In his book he states "without this fungal web my tree would not exist, without

similar fungal webs no plant would exist anywhere. All life on land, including my own, depends on these networks". (Sheldrake, 2020, p.8)

The fact that our world at one time for around 100 years was made up of fungus trees we now called Prototaxites is truly fascinating, the fossilised remains baffled paleontologiosts for sometime but they soon got to the bottom of the mystery. "Prototaxites spp. were locally abundant, as concluded from allochthonous charcoalified fragments in Lower Devonian fluvial rocks in the Welsh Borderland, where Prototaxites often makes up a high percentage of fossil remains." (Honegger et al., 2017).

The epoch is a geological way of refering to time devided into eras by shifts in the worlds state and measured in the earths rock layers, we are officially in the Holocene, "a time of relatively stable climatic conditions, beginning about 11,700 years after the last major ice age" (Rothmer, 2024). scientists are devided over the emergence of a new epoch, the Anthropocene. The change is related to humans, our impact being nothing like the world has seen before, threatening the sustainbility of our planet. This change is said to have began a while ago but proving a change in epoch is no easy feet evidence has been collected and is awiting aprovel. "First coined in 2000 by chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer, the word stems from the Greek words anthropo, meaning man or human, and cene, meaning new – new man" (Rothmer, 2024). Does this word make a spectacle out of us, there is a feeling alot like we are laughing at ourselves for how complicated we make things.

Fig 3. Ana Mendieta (1973-1977) Silueta

The visionary imagination of Mendieta's art stands out for a number of reasons. The series of 'Silueta' which is politicly charged as to the imprint of ourselves we leave on the world, like scars or bodies returning to the earth. Everything is connected and to consider the impact we have on the earth and on each other is important. Mendieta once said "My art is grounded on the belief in one universal energy which runs through all being and matter, all space and time". (MoMA, 2024). In everything we see there are signs of change brought forward by human evaluation and how our world responds to us, just as we respond to it. Mendietas work could be seen as rather provocative, as the idea of being naked yet covered makes you think on how vulnerable we are yet feel safe and confident perhaps when we can hide. As to the flowers in this particular piece, they symbolize the cycle of life, energy changing forms. A lot of her work is steeped in eco-feminism, she is a true idol to many.

Fig 4, Lorenzo Quinn (2017) Support

Art helps to start conversations, imagine ripples on a still pond, it is a great starting point in making waves or movements, the more people involved the better the outcome. Quinn's 'Support' is a perfect example, hands symbolising how humans can so easily destroy, save or create. The artwork responds to Venice's delicate relationship with the sea and the subtle undertones of the effects of global warming, especially rising sea levels. "It's the same problems, just worlds apart" (Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Wilkinson, 2021 p96). This piece was a part of the Venice Biennale of 2017. Seeing as this is still a major issue today shows us that time is not on our side and becomes yesterday so fast and we must 'support' one another in making bigger waves.

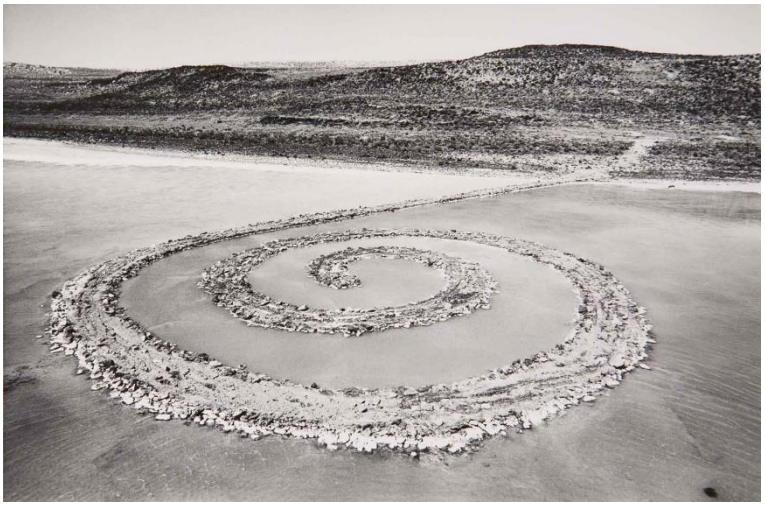

Fig 5. Spiral Jetty, Robert Smithson, (1970)

As we are living in this current climate crisis, a lot of land art and sculpture shows signs such as these, mitigating swift actions in global warming. Even as early as the 1970s artist's recognised changes in the environment, forms such as Spiral Jetty (1970) in the great Salt Lakes of Utah created by Robert Smithson is an example of this. The earth work is affected by fluctuations in water levels which "submerge the work or leave it completely exposed covered in salt" (Utah.edu, 2020) which dries and erodes, which Smithson was continually fascinated by.

Fig 6 community project (2021) Come Soar With Us

An environmental art project worth mentioning is ‘Washed Ashore Project, Art To Save The Seas’. This project based in USA Bandon has created over 80 artworks, cleaned over 300 miles of beach and processed over 60,000 lbs of plastic. At first glance the artwork is unappealing for the plastic nature of them, like giant eyesores but on further inspection you can see the amount of detail, time, effort and the scale of this problem these pieces speak of without words. Our eyes look past the tacky plasticity and start to see the underlying message of sea trash and its intricate problem. This work engulfs the viewer with feelings and senses washing over them like the plastic filled sea itself. These kinds of projects get people thinking about cleaning, reusing and leaving spaces as you found them or even in an better state. It is amazing what we as humans can achieve, this piece is of a bold eagle called Rosa, after Rosa parks, made amidst the covid academic, a nationwide collaborative project, mailed out its parts and brought together as a whole, we realise the capabilities we have, to come together and share overwhelming joy in hard times.

Fig 7. David Nash (1977-ongoing) Ash Dome

Garden design is yet another beautiful form of art. In the book 'Funny Weather' (2020) Olivia Laing also touched upon this viewpoint stating, "bedded in the material, nearly domestic subject to happenstance and the weather" (Laing, 2020). Landscaping is like learning to paint with the earth's seasonal colours, creating spaces to admire and dive into even in the depths of winter. There is nothing quite like seeing that working with our mother earth has paid off, when you stop fighting her and learn to work with her, what plants best suit a space or what space best suits a plant, how to encourage growth in more efficient ways. Creating sanctuary not just for human eyes to feast on but homes, microsystems, climates and shelters for all sorts of creatures big and small. We as humans feel a need to intervene and make spaces our own but there is nothing to say this cannot be done without kind consideration.

The best way to illustrate this point is by using David Nash's Ash Dome (1977), set in the dramatic mountains of Eryri, exact location unknown, is a perfect example of human interference. Seemingly cruel at first manipulating nature.. but when we start thinking about collaboration, working with not against it becomes truly intriguing, imagine if we build shelters this way or living, breathing homes. These Ash trees have thrived and are tended to, and was produced by Nash as art for the future. So it becomes a symbiotic relationship, there is a wonderful artistic partnership here, "Art is grafting with nature" (Bachelard and Farrell, 2006, p10). A relationship steeped in older traditions. This piece has recently been affected by ash dieback and Nash's response to this was to plant an outer dome of Oak trees, still tending to the Ash Dome but giving it a protective outer circle and also as a failsafe if the original doesn't survive.

Drawing together the insights into art and nature, the analysis of these two forces as individuals is great, so when you bring them together, they are explosive and deadly. Art has helped to shape our world with knowledge shared and clues of its history through millennia, it is just as living as the natural world and all the magic it holds, our mother earth says the way is clear, but who is listening? Do we need all the details to be part of a solution? As artists we react to different events or spaces, similar to Prosser with his sense of storytelling and community. Ana Mendieta and Lorenzo Quinn with powerful messages, to projects like Washed Ashore being able to make bigger change. David Nash and his manipulation of living structures and thinkers like The Sheldrake Brothers, sharing knowledge and collaborating with nature. Art can take on many forms but it all predicates change and coming together with the same goals to find the most unlikely collaborators, to make you think about or look past the

mystery or to spot light negative situations. Everything is connected and it is our duty to help people question things and open their eyes to what is potentially ‘not right’ or just ‘out-right’ beautiful.

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Fig 5. Robert Smithson, (1970) Spiral Jetty, available at: https://umfa.utah.edu/spiral-jetty (accessed 02/12/2024)

Fig 6. Washed ashore (2021) Come Soar With Us available at:

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Fig7. David Nash (1977-ongoing) Ash Dome https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artist-living-sculpture-starts-dying-david-nash-stoical-life-death-ash-dome-1307201 (accessed 02/12/2024)