

The Pull

Essay on Art and Ecology

by Anna Husemoller Jeretic

It's not a lack of riches we have to worry about under the sky, it's a lack of sharing. Zhuangzi

There are moments in life when we are split in two. The two halves form a whole, but there is a force that extends toward the two poles. Like a circle formed by a rubber band. The rubber band can stay round, exact, harmonious, but the thumb and forefinger holding it up pull it in opposite directions and alter its shape. We are not able to choose one direction or the other, because the two halves are vital. Our only option is to integrate them little by little and find the path toward serenity.

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I attack the weeds in my orchard. It is a wild cherry orchard in June, bursting with transparent sweet and sour jewels, especially delicious when you taste them directly from the tree, at the time of their ultimate redness. Then in July the plum tree branches curve downward with the weight of abundant violet fruits. In August, the honey-colored mirabelles replace the purple and then in September and October the apples take over the realm. In order to gain entrance, I cut down the thorns, the nettle stalks and Queen Anne's Lace with the scythe. This way I see more clearly and feel at peace. Then I deliver the piles of cut greenery to my neighbors' goats.

In a strange way, this frenetic cutting away reminds me of the brutal act of deforestation of the rainforest. It seems that the motivation to cut down the trees runs deeper than money. It's also out of territorial greed, and a fundamental need for light and clarity.

We forget that the luminosity is less rich in the clearings of cut-down trees than when the light hits the trunks and branches unequally and disperses into sparkles in the leaves.

Maybe someday we can impose laws to keep these excesses low, but the human destructive needs are also signs of internal frustrations, disenchantments, broken hearts, as in the legend of Rolando Furioso, who cut down a whole forest because of unrequited love...

I let the greenery grow here and there. There is not a single trace of regularity in this garden. Heraclitus said a handful of rocks thrown haphazardly on the ground is the greatest order of all. Anyway, there's no danger of too much manicure at my place. Although the area is large, I don't use the lawn mower, just the scythe. Thanks to the many wildflowers, some of which I have not seen anywhere else, there are many bees in this orchard.

I visited the Sixtine Chapel a few years ago, in wonder over the richness of Michelangelo's colors and volumes. I spent a long time with my eyes toward the ceiling absorbing its splendor. When I went outside into the garden to have a picnic with my family, I laid down on the grass. I then felt another unexpected emotion, just as powerful as the first. I noticed some tiny pink and yellow flowers in the grass and was surprised to discover such intricate beauty. I expanded them in my head to appreciate their details. I let this other type of richness imbue my senses, and then imagined the Sixtine Chapel covered with wildflowers... This became the subject of my painting "The Sixtine Chapel".

Michelangelo didn't like to paint the plant world: he only saw grandeur in humans, in their limbs, and their godliness.

This was another time. Today it is especially in nature's many forms that I see elegance. And barbarism in humans who place themselves on pedestals and shamelessly destroy ecosystems for their own gain.

I take a walk and discover models at every pace: an illuminated path toward my neighbor's house, light on the bark of a tree with shadows of the leaves on the trunk, a bird watching me or new light green plants sprouting from the dark soil...

The models in my orchard solicit me, "don't forget us!" They are perfect and infinite masterpieces. I don't allow myself to dismiss them. Once we let our mind absorb nature's complexities, the possibilities are inexhaustible. And when our thoughts wander, the unconscious teems with life.

We cannot take a sketchbook into the water to draw the bright and marvelous colors.

But nothing is lost. For at an unexpected moment in my work, the same varieties of color I see underwater appear, when I'm at work with something else.

This is when an image of lichen in the Forest of Fontainebleau appears as the Corsican underworld where I chanced to swim last Summer.

I draw this and that in my orchard, pencil on paper. Everything that catches my attention. I feel appeased, and happy to know something new about nature, to love it a little more. A day is finished and I can rest and free myself from the stimulation, before a void takes over, and then a desire to begin again.

Like all artists, I look for quality. Artistic quality is impossible to define. Despite our efforts to grasp a definition, the criteria evolve every day. This notion is constantly put into question. The discussions have never been so vibrant. Certain artists feel lost, others, indifferent to the currents of today's art, calmly forge their own different paths.

At school we experiment with colors and forms. We learn composition and harmony. We follow Kandinsky's personal trajectory and search for a successful mixture of geometric forms and chromatic juxtapositions. During my years at high school, I remember wondering: once you master this aptitude to create contrasts, balances, and harmonies each time, what next? Perhaps modern artists asked the same question when abstract art was sufficiently explored?

After producing magic perhaps one out of ten times, and the rest of the time at least a successfully decorative effect, are we then accomplished as artists? Now we can continue to produce works and sell them, without further investigation. This is the mind of a commercial artist: aving the impression of pursuing our research, while we are instead simply repeating ourselves.

We learn another discipline at high school: reproduction from nature or a photograph. We could produce a certain beauty by proposing a penciled version of nature, and even more if we succeed in deviating from it in a subtle way. This shows that the copier is not only skilful, but free. The copier brings a dreamlike quality to the representation and at the same time, warmth. We learn the techniques early on, and refine them at college.

These faculties may be enough to become a "good artist". There will always be a place in the world for good technicians. They'll sell well perhaps and gain admiration for these skills and ingenuity. The people will say, "Fortunately there are still artists like you!" They

will stay humble next to the great masters of the past by their magisterial skill, but integrally superior to the well-known artists of today, who don't always exploit their manual abilities. As long as they don't repeat themselves, while saying to themselves, "Oh, that worked well, because I sold well, so I'll make more of the same kind," as long as its value doesn't depend solely on virtuosity and the internal struggle is still there, emotion will inevitably become part of the work. For technical facility alone will only inspire admiration, not deep attachment.

Constable was suspicious of the rampant virtuosity of his time, because he felt it led the artists astray from the truth. He painted clouds in an unreal way, without aiming for photographic reproduction, infusing them with great emotion. It is precisely this impassioned quality and digression from realism that granted him his place as one of the greatest cloud painters of all times.

Artists seem to always repeat the same error throughout history: an excess of naturalism can kill nature. Instead of working for her, we do her harm. For nature also wants spontaneity, her most essential trait.

Certain artists today represent natural scenes with phenomenal technique, transforming nature into dream-like strokes. I'm thinking of an artist who exhibited pencil drawings of ocean wavelets at the Pompidou Center in 2005, or Livio Ceschin with his surprising etched branches and another etcher, H el ene Baumel, who creates intoxicating mountain scenes out of aquatint. This type of magical naturalism is uplifting, because of its contrast to work that is deliberately sloppy, so characteristic of art today.

Today, the good technician very often receives less attention than the artists who follow this. And in schools everywhere, it is harder and harder to find rigorous training in drawing, painting and sculpture.

Artists supported by state institutions sometimes have less facility in technique or have deliberately abandoned it. But they've learned how to express themselves through other visual media and produce a sensation, sometimes by the sheer size of their works, their ability to shake the public's sensitivities one way or another (an important criteria) and by gaining the approval of art dealers and the

press. Unlike artists from the past, it is common to show preparatory drawings, as if to justify something, otherwise they do not always show technical skill.

Today I've learned that it is not always necessarily accepted by the judges of art to produce something "beautiful". Others feel that as atrocities abound all over the planet, it may even be considered a crime to make something too pleasant to look at: this is a luxury we cannot allow ourselves.

Perhaps it would even be better to propose something ugly: this would show rebellion. It would be powerful and purging: we would cure evil with evil. Many artists have incorporated this formula into their work.

But now it has become old idea to create ugliness as a way to transgress the idea of beauty, this "bourgeois convention". This type of irony produces less effect than before, at the time of its first emancipation. We can still find the type of art that continues to retain other peoples' interest, by its appearance of virility, in spite of its repetitiveness. This is still an option. People may continue to say "this is different" (those who see the phenomenon for the first time), "this is strong" or "this is revolutionary!" And then there's a tendency for them to think, "There! That's true artistic quality, because it moves us, it makes us think. Whew! Now we know what art is, true art!"

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When I look skyward toward the light shining through the cherry tree leaves and the wild transparent carmine fruits, I ask myself; how I can I even venture to compare the beauty of nature with artwork that professes ugliness? These "rebellious" creations probably only speak to insiders. Maybe one even has to eclipse the cherries and their smooth sparkling skin from existence, along with the vast natural world as well, in order to appreciate fully this type of narrow artistic expression.

Then I prepare a cup of coffee to drink among the trees in the orchard. Coffee, born in the heart of the rain forest, penetrates my senses, and I'm convinced that the value of art lies in the very warmth of this liquid, joined with the profusion of the greenery in the orchard, as well as the flow of thoughts that follow.

And I make a sketch of one of these fruit trees, some lines and scribbles. I draw certain details, those that attract my eye, certain branches, leaves and cherries and not others. With a not very well sharpened pencil. Then I think about the differences between Western and Oriental writing. A Chinese master, Fan Zeng, explained to me during a lecture at Unesco in May 2009, that the ideograms from the East are founded on these very lines and scribbles, derived from the shapes in nature. Eastern writing is integral to the landscape, as us Arabic, which resembles the curves found in sand dunes, their lights and shadows. Western writing is squarer, for it was utilitarian from its beginnings. And today it is difficult to integrate our writing into our images. We have calligrams, and writing is not absent from our visual arts, but the letters and images remain always distinct. The beauty of illuminated manuscripts is intoxicating, but the beauty here comes from the juxtaposition of writing and image, and not mimesis. In Asian calligraphy we can see an innate respect for nature, in ours, defiance, and a will to control.

This is why I invented my own alphabet... I can write it easily with a paintbrush and it integrates itself harmoniously into the leaves of a tree, in the manner of Oriental writing. It attaches itself like lichen to rocks, like Mayan calligraphy, it emerges from the ground among the young spiraled sprouts.

I have seen exceptions: in etchings by Livio Ceschin, for example. In his “Landscape with a Cow” his thin delicate and organic calligraphy gets confused with the field grass.

In the Fall, I visit the FIAC in Paris. I find artworks I like, some of them in hidden corners. However, the overall effect is not easy to absorb, because of the exorbitant number of items. It is particularly disturbing to see the art world taking on the airs of materialistic society, as if it were an economic model to follow. How free I feel as I leave!

By contrast, the Parisian streets take on new meaning. And I see a young striped cat come out of a basket at the edge of the road, its lithe body and tender and naughty eyes. The appearance of this living being, its feline determination and softness, breathes a certain energy that overshadows everything I saw at the fair. It overcomes the mercantilism called “art”.

Then I go down the stairs into the metro. I observe the shadows of people against the ceramic walls, which blend into mine. They are blurry and shifting, imprecise and changing.

And the world of shadows becomes the guiding light to the unknown, the inaccessible meaning of life, the infinite richness yet to be discovered.

The Parisian streets and the shapes transcribed onto the asphalt take on the qualities of nature. This spectacle on the ground transcends all the possibilities of art.

The art opening

During the opening of my work at the end of 2007, I presented a series of prints that imitated the colors of copper and its oxidations. I entitled the show “the Nature of Copper”. There were few visitors that evening, because of a general transport strike.

People from my village came, as well as two of my three brothers. I was tired from the preparations, and troubled by the story of a car accident involving five boys from my daughter's class, two of whom were in a coma and three of whom would not survive. In the case of such suffering so close by, the ritual of an opening seemed superfluous, perturbing.

In spite of this context, the intense artistic work, the emotion and family support brought personal meaning. In fact, with each effort made in this profession, the contribution of others is of capital importance.

The next day, however, a friend who had come to the opening asked me “did you sell well?” Although this is a habitual question after an exhibit, I could not help feeling bad, and I didn't answer. Of course I organize shows for money, but a good show is essentially a large project, a *mise en scène*, a message especially. This friend's question seemed inappropriate, as if he didn't understand the core of what I do. It was extremely discouraging to be reduced to an artist who makes shows merely for money and reputation.

I don't like the effect of putting the artist on a pedestal during an opening. On the contrary, it would be ideal if the artist stays invisible for the evening. The artist is only responsible for the handiwork which a hidden force ordered him to execute. He works for this invisible

cause, whether it be called God, nature or beauty. He feels sufficiently glorified by the pleasure this work granted him, by being pushed along by this unknown energy which actually is shared by all great artists, and the rest appears superfluous. An artist will perhaps appreciate the attention the first time or the second, but then will tire of it: it is nothing compared to the pleasure the work can bring!

If I sell well, I am happy, but this sensation is like a chemical substance that artificially elevates me above reality for a short period. It's not a well-deserved salary: that would be too much. I prefer to believe that money should be earned differently. In a strange way, I almost feel better after not selling well, perhaps because this feeling is more familiar! Could this be the hidden cause of some of my defeats?

A failure joins me to the entrails of the earth. A wave of nostalgia keeps me humble and closer to our organic sources. I die and am born in one day. It is like breaking with a loved one, a new beginning alone. I feel sad, yet infinitely free.

And to walk in the streets of the city, in a state of anonymous serenity, without attracting attention, sad or happy, is one of the greatest luxuries in life.

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In visual arts, the image is printed in the conscience like a dream, before understanding it. Intricate thoughts flow from the image and ask for explanations, although it is too early to grasp the meaning. An artist will receive a commission in the depths of his soul, and will not know why it has to be carried out; it is simply required of him whatever the obstacle. Then, during its execution and later when people begin to look at the work, make comments, and suggest explanations for which the artist didn't even think of himself, the internal mission begins to become more defined. Sometimes the work has to be interrupted and resumed later, because certain elements that are needed to pursue it haven't yet been experienced by the artist. When the artist listens to a person talking, notices something in the garden for the first time, travels somewhere, or reads a significant passage in a book, new ideas to incorporate into the work dictate its natural progress.

For a true work of art, whether rich in detail or light and spontaneous, is the product of layers and layers of inspiration and thought.

This phenomenon, where an image precedes an idea, has no place in conceptual art. The concept comes first, its expression afterwards. The work is often dependent on a context: a museum or other institution, a theory; or sometimes, its title is the work itself. Although the conceptual work may be the fruit of an ingenious idea and can stimulate its onlookers intellectually during the breadth of time they are looking at the work, there is a risk that it will not mark these people in a lasting and profound way.

In a work made by hand, subtle thought processes weave naturally into the work, and the skills and knowledge acquired over the years integrate subtly into the texture. Invisible forces participate, magic is possible. Without the signs that the work was made by the hand by the artist himself, it will give the impression of having been done industrially, and is liable to look poor in emotional depth, and tactile warmth. There may be no grace.

A visual artist should not depend on electronic languages, which take him away from handiwork, and brings him closer to the earth. A truly independent artist should be able to create images with charcoal on a rock.

In addition, handiwork is health: it purges thoughts, and clears away superfluous or negative ideas. If the artist feels intense pleasure in the creation of his artwork, it will be imbued with sensuality and become a message of hope.

The apprenticeship of contemporary art is transmitted by osmosis and imitation of others' work. In order to be accepted, contemporary artists continually feel obligated to transgress conventions while all possible barriers have already been overcome by one artist or another. We have reached the limits of sexual shock, apocalyptic visions as well as the desecration of religions: what more is left? The breaking down of rules by pioneer artists is now only being repeated, as variations ad infinitum of the same thing. Contradictions abound; for instance: artists think they're rebellious, while they are actually submissive. When submission takes place, there are crowds. And art joins the superfluity of world production; it commits the same errors as the consumer society.

An artist motivated only by vanity is an insignificant element on this earth. His work will not be worth anything and the world is already full of works without artistic value. And since technical skills are not needed to create a “contemporary” piece of work, the possibilities to dupe the public have become more and more numerous. In the manner of the excess of wrappings of all that we consume, we are filling the world up with art works devoid of artistic quality.

Certain works are characterized by violence, which reflects both an internal wound and a wound for the Earth. Violence in art sometimes also reflects the lack or restraint toward the planet. I'm thinking for example of certain videos by Kitaro, whose work was exhibited in Paris at the Cartier Foundation, where he has vehicles explode, without any good reason. This type of production reflects not only an internal crisis, but an environmental one.

I think that today, as far as art is concerned, one important task is to lead society out of the narcissism and adolescence of contemporary expression, in order not to stagnate there any longer.

However, if an artist expresses himself through pure and personal questioning, his search will be emblematic of others on earth. A talented artist will have the power to relay this universal message; his solitary voice will represent the voice of the planet with integrity. His deepest desire to propose new artistic forms, always closer to our organic beginnings, will be brought to life. Artistic quality will come naturally.

I'm thinking about the size of a work of art. Why do we have to imagine more and more enormous artworks? Is it because it is more difficult today to convey a message to a general public whose visual vocabulary has become so vast through cinema, publicity and the computer? Not surprisingly contemporary art museums are becoming more and more numerous and voluminous. We have to conceive of an ever more sparkling and colorful production, to shine more, or do something still more shocking and sensational, if that is still possible. This amalgam of installations and inventions, reflections of the surplus of production in general of this work, gargantuan and plastic or metal structures with chemical colors impose themselves in a natural environment. We have already seen this! Living artists take

over the Grand Palais in Paris, were it seems that the main goal is to take up as much space as possible.

In the Grand Palais I exhibited a few prints, hidden in one of the stands of a gallery during a *Salon de l'Estampe*, and my contribution marked a contrast with the enormous sculptures placed in the middle one month later, as if the artist was obliged to play the role of a politician, struggling for power and territory.

I am wary of these missions where one must fill up a certain space with invasive objects. Let us fill it with light!

I'm thinking of the Amish story told to children: a father wants to bequeath his farm to one of his three sons. In order to choose which one will inherit it, the three brothers are given the task to fill up the barn on three consecutive days. The one who fills up the most, up to the brim if possible, will have the farm. The first brother, very proud of himself, spends the day filling it up with hay. The second, even better, with wheat. The third one lights a candle at the end of the day. The barn becomes his, of course.

If we think about the power of a book, a small object, on the conscience of its reader, a work of art can be of average size and correspond perfectly to an attentive eye. Its true value will be recognized over time.

In February 2010, I visited a show of Haitian artists at the Musée de Montparnasse. The paintings were of average size and expressed the Haitian condition movingly, not only of today, but of five centuries ago, not only of their people, but of oppressed people all over the world.

A humble artist has but a hidden place in this world hungry for sensation. His voice does not acquire sufficient energy to be heard among this chaos of imagery and filling up of space. But the work of an artist of integrity will eventually overcome the rest, because his is the voice of the living soul. It is our responsibility, as artists of today, to find the way to relay this message with strength, and without compromise.

The Call from the Wild

The news doesn't help us to appease the tormented soul, with the promise of an ecological catastrophe through inevitable warming. There is such urgency in this situation, and the individual feels powerless.

And how is it possible to act through art? I'm thinking of the work of artists I like, especially Andy Goldsworthy, Giuseppe Penone who work with nature, and many others. Franc Kracjberg is not only a phenomenal artist but a militant ecologist.

There is an apparent contradiction between art and ecology. Art is a long process, which needs to ripen with time, and the state in which we've put the earth demands immediate action today. Art is individual work, ecology group work.

Is it not much more of a priority to stop people from felling trees in a primary forest, than entering a workshop to work, especially if this work only adds to overall waste? If we absolutely have to make art, let it be magical, nothing else. I'm imagining a waterfall of pure water in the world of art.

At the beginning of winter

The trees begin to show the shape of their branches and the leaves fall into my hair as I walk toward my workshop. When a project takes a long time, I feel like a work horse, and find myself starting over and over again. I don't give up easily, because the vision of the final product looms over me, and I do all I can to pull through.

Art as an activity seems false to me, a luxury without intrinsic value, especially when I have become aware of the deep manipulations we are imposing on our ecosystems.

I look up an oak tree in the Fontainebleau forest. It is communicating something to me. Then I see the red mark on its trunk: it will be cut down, although it is perfectly healthy.

Then from one moment to the next, I see my profession in a different light. I feel an irresistible call in the fresh late Fall air. It grasps me so suddenly, and leaves me without uncertainty. Hesitations

and doubts weave into artistic life. There are no ambiguities in this powerful pull toward the earth.

The Care

The garden is the beginning. The fruit trees draw my attention. I free them from their dead branches hanging toward the ground. I cut them in pieces and add them to a pile. With the same care of an artist for his work.

In the heart of the Summer, I catch sight of a mother duck and her eight ducklings crossing the street. I follow them from afar and see with amazement that they're heading toward my studio in the woods. With my neighbors we try to redirect them toward the lily pad pond on the property where we live. These lily pads were gifts of the Monet family from Giverny to our landlord long ago. The waddling creatures flap their wings with joy as they discover the pond. We build a little house and install it on the island in the middle of the lily pads. And build a fence around it so that the ducklings don't go out too easily and become easy prey for the cats, great spectators of their slightest movements. They go out anyway, but are scared when they do and quickly slide back in. The ducklings can hardly believe their happiness, as they splash merrily among the stalks and crackly leaves; sleep in the sun along the edge of the pond or on top of the green rafts. And their elegant mother seems to look at us with gratefulness. She keeps a gracious eye on the six smaller, fuzzier versions of herself, peeping all around her. Once in a while she gathers all eight of them under her wings for a nap. After three days, she flies off and comes back with algae in her beak, distributing the little leaves on the surface of the water. She even goes out on Saturday evening.

I'm wondering if the mother duck is more intelligent than the others. Does she know that on the Seine river, with a bit of luck, maybe just one of her ducklings would have survived by now, at this stage of their development? The fish and herons would swallow them up quickly. At our place, the heron passes by several times, but seems to have decided to give it up. Maybe he sees that the ducklings are too well protected under the leaves, these natural shields, and under their mother's wings.

Then one night we hear a strange, loud quack. It turns out to be a fox imitating its prey, badly. We scare it away, but this is probably not enough. The mother's nervous behavior shows she is aware that the call is not of her own species. She swims in circles with her young ones following her, peeping away. And I have trouble falling asleep. The next day they're gone.

I feel blessed by this fleeting appearance in my garden. If I had built a more solid fence, the ducklings would have been caught inside, deprived of their true path in life. The lily pad pond was a short-lived idyll, but at the same time, the mother duck knew she couldn't stay. I also didn't want to be the one to prevent her from leaving if her instinct dictated her to go on with her family.

I saw the difficulty in generating this balance: protect but also keep free. This measure, between protection and freedom, is exactly what we need to find on a world scale for the remaining wilderness.

Do you think the fox ate the ducks? Not yet anyway. I hear the duck family has been spotted in another street, waddling toward a castle with a large pond.

Return to Art

In the “Movement of Leaves” (2004), a report on my teaching art to children and adults, I write that a similar act of balance between rigor and ease, restraint and overflow, reserve and release are at the core of art. In this same quest for delicacy, art and ecology are one.

In life as in art, I'm not proposing a return toward systems of the past. On the contrary, we need to move onto something new.

The painting “The Dream Studio”, two versions of which I painted in 2006 in the beginning of Spring and in 2009 at the beginning of Summer, represents a real dream I once had of an artist studio open to the sky and the orchard. A terra cotta sculpture of a kangaroo leaning against a tiger is sitting on the work table. It symbolizes a peace only conceivable in the imagination. The flesh-colored walls suggest a certain warmth but also the nakedness of the artist face to face with the world. The workshop takes on the naïveté of a child's drawing of a house. Children may draw houses to affirm their stability on earth. But this studio, exposed to the elements, suggests stability in instability, protection in vulnerability.

In this painting, I see “ecology” which means, “the study of habitat” in Greek, as the mother of art. It proposes a vocational vision, because it is a place to work, as well as an animist one, as opposed to the classical dualist vision of habitat and nature. In a context where habitat and place of work extend to the natural environment, art and ecology are joined.

The shape of this workshop imitates my own, but I will have to leave it. This is a precarious situation, like the status of the artist, which is sometimes difficult to maintain or justify, and is constantly put into question.

Toward Action

In the case of my artistic work, I have been interested in animals for about twenty years, without knowing how to take action in their favor. The work of an artist is much too indirect. I prepare shows of etchings and paintings where animals are seen in their natural habitat. I encourage children to paint them, but I have always felt powerless in trying to save lives on Earth through artistic means. I have thought over this continually however for twenty years, as expressed in my essay “The Portrait of the Siberian Tiger” (2007).

Little by little, possible paths begin to appear. By conversing with others about common concerns, we find the true course of action. By leaving the artist’s studio and joining the world.

For some people, art and ecology are linked in an obvious way. Just recently I met José Galinga at the Espace Krajcberg in Paris. We are a group of artists involved in an artistic project for his people, the Kichwa, of Sarayaku, Ecuador, who are fighting against the deforestation of a vast tropical forest surrounding their homes. The people will plant 15 concentric circles of flowering trees, the largest circle measuring 300 kilometers, around their village in the heart of the forest. He proclaimed us “yatchaks” (shamans). These words gave us courage immediately. Without having a precise idea about what an artist is in Europe (actually we only have a vague notion of this ourselves), he attributed to us then and there a determinant role. A shaman has the role of intermediary between people and nature: he is both artist and ecologist. As a militant for the forest, Galinga feels

small compared to his adversaries, the oil companies. But the art work he envisions is monumental, without disturbing the ecosystem of this forest. This is contemporary art, a gigantic Land art project, a piece created by a community. Galinga says they will win, for they are on the “side of the living”.

The right rhythm on a world scale is yet to be found. In art as in life, the only cadence to follow is that of nature, whether found in a strong wind or a calm undulation in the water.

A matter of energy

The big solution for the problem of climate is the transfer of energies. Toward sustainable energy, and on a personal scale, a very different internal energy.

Perhaps anyone searching for true well-being would inevitably find their own call toward the earth. Both deep well-being and care for the living earth come together spontaneously. So many books about happiness within the family, marriage, sexual life, office life and so few of our relationship to the environment! We are underestimating the amount of energy we gain if we pay attention to the earth, because the subject detaches us inevitably from our internal struggles. It can mean a return toward the idealism of youth, which has been abandoned by some because of practical life. In any case, in spite of the inevitable climate change, ecological action gives a role to individuals and even happiness: the ego is freed from its full-time quest for pleasure and its inevitable disappointments. Those weary of egocentrism can fuel their energy into altruistic work. At the times of great revolutionary thought, like at the beginnings of conceptual art in the 60's, we were encouraged to have a wider vision, to let go of rules, transgress the last barriers, in favor of complete tolerance. Now we are challenged to attain a wider vision yet: toward the earth, and selflessness.

I am now a member of the Democrats Abroad Environment Policy Group. Since President Obama's election, the number of our group multiplied by ten. When Bush was in office, no one could even conceive of helping the planet; there were too many hurdles. With Obama's ideals of altruism, more and more people, at least in the States, felt the desire to commit themselves to one cause or another.

As if the incredible energy of this country, veered most recently toward material and personal satisfaction above all, shifted ever so slightly. No great strides have been taken yet in the government, because it struggles against the powers of large competitive corporations, and there is often the sensation of going backwards. However, when competition leans toward sustainable energies, there will be more radical change.

In this group of expatriates, no one is searching for power. There are no frustrated politicians in search for identity. They are present with the sincere hope to find a way to act, help out. How revitalizing it is for an artist of another, constantly submitting to a contest to sell oneself in an over-developed world, to participate actively in this movement!

The beginnings

After meeting people, taking trips here and there, reading the papers, we see the beginnings of a new awareness in ecology, and in a less significant fashion, in art. We are part of a collective movement, artists as well as non-artists, an internal and often imperceptible current of people who struggle for the living.

I enjoy when nature and city life confront each other, such as in the reflections of trees on the windshield of a car. And gardens that crop up here and there in New York City, among aggressive skyscrapers, symbols of another era. These are signs of a renaissance, the language of human gratefulness for the intimate pleasures nature offers. It's as if a dialogue has opened up between human development and the natural world, and the possibilities are boundless. Artistic inspirations emerge, like little plants sprouting in pavement cracks.

Ecology is an immense counter-movement, in opposition to the desperate souls trying to seize the last riches of the earth. In a television program, I heard of an island covered with tropical forest, inhabited by an indigenous tribe, which was “successfully” appropriated by mainlanders to make hotels with divine swimming pools.

The true ecological movement, without resorting to the bitter weapons of a moralizer, will know how to work in tune with nature. We now must have this understood by as many people as possible.

Internal Ecology

Sometimes it takes a little effort to open our senses to the pleasures nature offers us and its many subtleties. It doesn't always console, doesn't always offer satisfaction, and is not always fascinating for the troubled soul. I'm thinking of the movie *Trainspotting*, where a group of drug addicts succeed in putting a stop to their heroin intake. We see them begin a healthy stroll in the picturesque Scottish mountains. But this appears boring and tedious to them after all, and they don't have enough energy to keep up their healthy resolutions. They run back to the drugs, which is what they call "better than life". They are not able to form an intense intimacy with reality and in consequence, nature. It's a waste, because nature also can drug you in a salutary way, for those who understand its powers. The characters of this movie are dependent on a more immediate stimulation of the intense chemical effects of drugs. They are emblems of an artificial and violent life that leads to tragedy.

In the "Rio Negro manifesto of integral naturalism", Pierre Restany and Franc Krajcberg in 1978 write of the importance of internal ecology before anything else.

According to this group of artists, we are struggling less against air and water pollution than thought and feeling pollution.

Naturalism as discipline of thought and perceptive conscience is an ambitious and demanding program which is far more important than embryonic ecological perspectives. It involves struggling much more against subjective pollution than objective pollution, the pollution of the senses and the brain, much more than that of air or water.

A Space for Wilderness

The Chinese philosopher, Zhuangzi, from the 4th century BC said “everyone knows the usefulness of the useful, but no one knows the usefulness of the useless!” This is when he describes a majestic tree in a public square, left standing because it grew out knobbly and cannot be exploited for woodwork. Actually, it is used as shade for the horses, who are so happy to escape there from the heat of the sun.

Unfortunately some of the most beautiful trees in the world are transformed into toilet paper, a useful product. I'm thinking especially of the majestic trees from frontier forests.

2500 years ago, Zhuangzi made it clear that if the planet is to survive, we should reserve space for what we don't try to control, the useless (which is what we attribute to art!) for what is useful will be destroyed one way or another.

It is a question of balance between the useful and the useless, between freeing and protection. Ecology is an art in itself, for it requires talent and sensitivity, a mastery of tight-rope walking.

It would be wonderful if governments understood not only the importance of culture, but its counterpart, the wilderness as well. The present government in France advocates the total exploitation of the country's natural resources: we cannot say it has set this ecological idea in motion.

The human brain is a microcosm of the world. There is a part you can control, and another, the wild part, the “useless” part, inspiring and intuitive, which has to be let alone to express itself.

Otherwise it will work against us, and in full force.

For the Artists

It can be quite a change for an artist to start caring for nature, to bring it back in her life again. The adjustment is not always simple for everyone, except for those who have already incorporated the natural world in a personal or artistic life. As artists, vanity and individualism are encouraged; as ecologists, concentration gets shifted toward the world.

Artists have to work for themselves, sell a name, and sometimes a face, that can be attached to their artistic work. An ecologist does the opposite: for a work of great impact you need a team.

I always thought we formed one soul. A great soul, capable of beauty and strength. This belief allows me to be detached from competition, because I feel we share this soul with everyone. I see our talents as universal resources. A great piece of art, a painting, a moving musical moment, a great passage in a book, are all incarnations of this hidden strength we share.

Certain artists think their works, paintings, sculptures, or installations represent themselves, but we forget sometimes that it is only a piece of matter or colors taken from the environment and transformed with our hands, or in certain cases, even by others, whom the artist has ordered to do according to his idea. This matter will eventually pursue a reverse procedure and decompose little by little into the earth. Certain works will disintegrate faster than others: certain works by Andy Goldworthy's will come apart even during the day, and the red plastic rhinoceros in the Pompidou center a bit longer.

Some say that artists don't hurt the earth, especially those who live and work in harmony with her. But there are probably very few artists who have attained this ideal. I believe that we artists, including myself because I'm very greedy, are as guilty as the rest. With Picasso before us in time, we are encouraged to believe that success depends on how prolific we are. So we find ourselves striving to make as much and as large as possible, sometimes at the price of artistic quality.

One of the techniques I explore, etching, a toxic procedure, with varnishes, thinners, acids and cleaning agents, as well as plastic gloves after plastic gloves, ejects me definitively from the realm of the true ecologist. I have contemplated the paradox of this profession: these same unctuous substances seem quite necessary to attain what I hope to capture most of all: the limpidness of nature.

Nevertheless, it would be ideal to follow a rhythm that involves little expense of natural resources.

There are artists who have integrated efficiently the notion of balance with nature in their work. I'm thinking of the artist Kôichi Kurita. In the Summer of 2009 on the floor of the Abbey of Noirlac, near Bourges, France, he gathered one thousand squares of handmade paper on which he made piles of samples of different colored earth,

from Japan and the Centre region of France. This sober work harmonized so perfectly with the Cistercian architecture and minimalist subtle stained-glass windows by Resnais. During his ritualistic installation where he filled the space so completely yet so sparsely, he was able to transmit his message unassumingly and with a scant amount of Earth's resources.

Certain elements of contemporary art can serve ecological causes.

Firstly, contemporary art is politically active: it likes to take on a social role. And we need languages that have the strength to shake people's consciences, open them up to new ideas.

Secondly, faced with an over-cluttered world in its search for immaterial concepts, contemporary art, if it isn't trying to monopolize space, strives for a certain minimalism, a certain airiness. Yves Klein was one of the first to investigate immaterial matter, like water and fire in architecture. The Land-artists as well; they mostly only transform a landscape without destroying it and often in an ephemeral way. For longer-lasting works like Stonehenge, art and nature end up co-habiting peacefully over the years.

Another quality we often find in contemporary art is the ephemeral. Some contemporary artists are concerned with not adding to our already extensive cultural heritage. In ephemeral contemporary art projects, only photos and videos remain. I'm thinking of flock of sheep Gloria Friedmann installed in front of the Pompidou Center in the 80's. I wasn't there for that, but I saw the video during her retrospective at the Bourdelle museum in 2008. Do these sheep represent the multitude of artists who follow each other?

Another pursuit in contemporary art is the indefinable fusion between art and life, or art and nature. This ultimate quest, both evident and inaccessible, serves as a guiding light for a persevering artist.

Painting

The act of painting animals is primordial to humans since the cave paintings. Also, children love drawing and painting animals, after

houses, suns and rainbows. Artists who make this an integral part of their lives cannot live without this privileged contact with living beings through painting, sculpture, and drawing. There is simply no other way to show this love.

This is only one of the reasons we cannot limit painting to a discipline of the past. The act of painting may be vital for certain people, like reading is for others. To not value this and instead give priority to contemporary art concepts seems criminal to me. It would be a great offence to discourage a person from painting only because painting is losing its place in the art world.

For nothing can replace the sensual gesture of a paintbrush.

The difficulty with painting today is to find a painting that doesn't resemble that of the past. This is why artists explore other techniques, other surfaces, other textures. More and more imagination is required to create something new, and at the same time adhere to the deep expectations of the public.

We are many in the world of painting. There are general currents and some people follow others by repeating the same message. Pioneer visions are rare, yet it is only here that true artistic quality can be found.

Painting also has the power to express concepts, as much as other art forms. Like a book, it can serve as an emblem of our time. It can catalyze a change in consciousness.

Art will inevitably evolve as we make long-awaited necessary changes in our philosophical conception of nature. If we are able to dismantle our anthropocentric thought, what form would our artistic production take? This is yet to be seen...

Our artistic works appear too often as interpretations of interpretations, like advertisements. Do we know the true sources of the forms we are exploiting? If we are not aware of them, nature will inevitably remain too detached from the human world. Have we forgotten what snowflakes look like under a magnifying glass or spirals of sprouts in the ground in the springtime? We don't realize how vast and infinite the physical world is, jungles, volcanoes, seas: so many areas we have yet to explore. Thanks to technology today, we have even more to be inspired by. These new areas can be exploited

by artists, such as the birth of stars, views from satellites, new species, microscopic details.

And to think this infinity can be found in my orchard...

Painting, drawing and sculpture are the best techniques for representing these natural resources. To present nature, for example, by integrating plants and other organic elements into a work, is a trend in contemporary art, such as in the work of Anselm Kiefer who pastes dried sunflowers on his paintings. This carries meaning, but it is still less revelatory than a copy of a plant with all its intricacies. A copy is an imprint of an intimate bond: the person has touched it, felt it, lived with it during the period he observed it, and then drew and painted it. The sensual and dream-like quality of the work corresponds to how much the artist felt for it and lent it his talent. And this love and care is the source of true ecology.

Certain people believe that representational work is elitist: you have to be trained for figurative art, whereas everyone should be able to become an artist. Others believe that contemporary art is high-brow, because it tends to put down manual work. Recently I met a Land-artist at the Espace Krajcberg, who valued land-art very highly for its democratic value: land-art is for everyone, even for those who don't know how to draw. I am sensitive to this point of view, but I persist in believing that a total visual artist should not let go of rigor: he ought to draw regularly to keep his eye muscles in shape. In whatever visual language we choose, it is important to know proportions, angles, spherical triangles. Goethe said he didn't see a thing unless he drew it.

I think we've come to a point where there can be a fusion of forces. There is no reason we can't exploit fine techniques, which take time and show love for nature, and accept the languages and new tools of a savory contemporary art.

We can't be afraid of beauty. In spite of certain fanatic ideas to destroy it, there will always be resurgences, for man needs it fatally. We have questioned it enough these last years. Let artists show us the power and magic of our universe's primordial forms!

I sit down in the hills of Slovenia where there is a view of Sveta Gora, the “sacred mountain” in the distance and the wild forest behind it. I take interest in the landscape, and the wild grasses in front, which extend higher in the sky than the monastery itself behind it. I draw what I see, with a particular pleasure in drawing the slender, moving grasses, that seem to sway in front of me to the same rhythm as the act of drawing itself, as well as the sensual contact of the rough pencil on the paper. My drawing book is nestled among the stalks. The bottom half is tinted with green from the grass. I observe the shadows of the grasses covering the book with vertical and horizontal stripes. These lines make me think of the striped universe of Pietr Mondrian and Daniel Buren, of their trajectories from realism to abstraction. The scene of nature in front of me, by the different messages it evokes, becomes the subject of a painting.

In nature we can find the comfort of an abstract world. In moments of internal confusion, the weaving in and out of tree branches and their shadows can express unsolvable thoughts, at times when you cannot force a dénouement of these dilemmas. Abstract graphic traits are appealing.

At times of clarity and peace, the world's details, both in observing nature and in the act of painting, can answer to healthy curiosity. And the desire for representation takes over once again.

I would like to contribute to the ecological cause by elevating the status of plants and animals, showing others the wonders of the tropical forest or representing the vast variety of animal species.

In April 2010 I listened to Pierre-Henri Gouyon from the Paris Museum of Natural History speak during the 40th anniversary of Earth Day. He explained to us that true biodiversity doesn't only mean the great variety of living beings on earth, but also the possibility of each being to evolve, mutate, follow its own path.

In the context of such an immeasurable and abandoned domain, my desire to represent human beings and their seriousness diminishes, for we are so tormented anyway in every possible circumstance in life, whether we are rich or poor, good-looking or plain. In the light of the barbarisms and perversions for which we are so often responsible, do we really deserve all this attention?

This is why I painted “Art for the Birds”. The emperor penguin, its beak upwards and the marabou stork, in deep thought, represent the

art critics. Certain birds inspect the paintings in a funny way, others don't give them any attention at all. The hummingbird gets mixed up and tries to get nectar out of a painted flower. Next to the feathered and colorful creatures, the representation of the naked human, as shown in the framed pictures in the back, appears repetitive and bland. It seems that those who practice this type of art exclusively have forgotten the infinite qualities of biodiversity. This painting tries to take human beings off their pedestals.

And the painting “A member of each species travels to Copenhagen in December 2009 to protest” (2009). The background is a view of a canal, the old trading house and the Christianborg palace in Copenhagen. In the front, there is a polar bear, an orangutan, a frog, a Siberian tiger, a turtle. On the bridge you can see a panda, an elephant, and a rhinoceros. In the canal, a pink dolphin and the legendary mermaid from Copenhagen. The animals have their own voice to be heard! And with the presence of the mermaid we wonder, will these animals become as mythical as her?

These paintings are pieces of a puzzle, a “visual book”, a visual extension of a mind.

On Writing

Writing integrates itself into the visual work; the texts branch out from the images and bring unity and value. But there comes a time when it is best to stop the flow of words, because they risk weighing on a visual world, and impinge its development.

Writing is for our mind, as drawing is for our eyes. When we draw a building, we discover surprising details, some of which we would not have noticed without a pencil. When we write down an idea, we end up discovering other paths of thought, some which we wouldn't have pursued, had we not begun to connect them with words.

Perhaps the moment to stop writing is when formulas take shape, like dams holding up the flow and the life of the mind. The internal movement of the imagination would stiffen and lose its rhythm.

The best paintings and works of visual art propose a non-verbal continuum.

For the artistic part of a person is like the wilderness. Untameable, indescribable and fragile: it's best to let it live and evolve in its own manner, because it remains essential for the rest.

Return to the workshop

After a walk outside, a day in the streets of Paris, a moment of writing, I am full of new models and ideas, and can go back to the workshop. It's calling me there.

I feel then a tangible contact with the minutes passing by. Having formed an intimate and privileged connection with time, each moment carries meaning and forms its own entity.

After having written these thoughts, I know there is no culmination: the different paths I have chosen have no end. I can discern a unity in the apparent disorder and multiplicity of my work, which brings me a certain feeling of peace. After the dissonance, harmony appears all the more calming.

I'm searching to reconcile these two directions, one toward art and the other toward care for the earth, in a visual form. In order to live and work in a greater bond with the natural world.

Chartrettes, France, January 2011