

Reflexions on Visual Art at the Time of Environmental Crisis

Talk given at the American Center for the Arts - dorothy's gallery, Paris, April 2012



The Skogafoss Waterfall, Iceland, oil on linen, 2012, 115 x 94 cm

This talk “Reflexions on Visual Art at the time of Environmental Crisis” may not be exactly what you are expecting. I will not cover a panorama of visual artists concerned with the theme of ecology. There are many different ways to treat this theme since the 60’s and 70’s when environmental art is said to be born. This is a subject of art history and too vast for the evening. I will limit myself to my own trajectory, a story in itself, which may also reflect the inner approach of many artists today.

I’m not sure which direction I’m taking, for art is par excellence the profession of the unconscious, and if today I can talk of the path I’ve followed, with a certain logic that binds all the elements together, it is because now the years have gone by and certain elements have repeated themselves. I feel detached from the world I have built and no longer own it.

The story began when my children were little. There was a clear connection between the fragility of a baby in my arms, and animals, especially their young, as I saw in photographs in books from the local children’s library.

In my etchings of animals, I tried to discern what attracted them to me. Which were the expressions that brought my attention toward them? This was already the beginning of both an artistic and ecological path.

For these innate expressions are precisely those which solicit human beings to protect them. And art, meaning transformation, can heighten them. This requires training for an artist, but even more so, a close contact with the unconscious, the dream part in us. A child will capture these expressions sometimes faster than a professional artist specializing in animals. And I do not always succeed in this.

Since that time, over 20 years ago, I have been persisting in this project. I am inspired by the rest of the realm of the living, plants and the shadows they cast, as well as light. I learned that it is not necessarily through realism that light can be represented. Light in art is other than light in nature, and each artist has its own way in showing it. Light has a function: it can bring beauty to the work, and can bring a feeling of hope, like a sign, which path to take. We will always need this, especially at moments of crisis.

I am also attached to the world of ideas, to concepts, which is the backdrop of contemporary art. Nature is fused into artwork today, such as in the case of Landart, or seen in curiosity cabinets, or in the use of photography. This corresponds to a need for the freshness of nature, which is becoming less and less accessible to us as we keep laying concrete everywhere onto grasslands. There are also now sketchbooks with little pockets instead of pages to draw on in order to gather seeds and other natural elements. In my installations exhibited in this gallery, I put into play this contemporary viewpoint, where nature replaces art.

Nevertheless, this idea of incorporating nature into the work of art does not satisfy in an artist the desire to represent wildlife, especially as it is becoming rarer and rarer. I take an example of the dandelion I painted over there. The dandelion is not rare like a Sumatran tiger, but it is wild. To paint the fragile plant, to copy it brings irreplaceable pleasure. And if we can also allow the presence of light, color, sensuality, all those elements that enriched art history since the cave paintings, we are at the height of our experience. Certain contemporary artists have professed to abandon these elements in order to

feed an ideology. This ideology has to do with a reassessment of what art is all about. And such challenging is always justified. But now we can also go past this, make progress. We can now see nature as an essential guide in our artistic research.

I think there can be a fusion of energies, that we can include both the rigors of traditional techniques and the new languages of contemporary art. I don't call it so much return to nature, nor a return to figurative work, such as recourse. There are many artists and writers over history from all over, like da Vinci, Dante, Constable, Corot, Gibran, Tagore, or musicians, dancers like Isadora Duncan, who warned everyone else, " watch out, let us not forget nature, she is the source of art".

I complete this pictorial work with writing. Writing is useful in bringing unity to thought. It's a way to go always further, in a commitment toward society. My first piece of writing, "The Movement of Leaves", which I began writing 15 years ago, and finished 6 years later, is an account of my teaching and how the study and the respect of nature is interweaved into this teaching. The courses for children, teenagers and adults serve as a springboard to express ideas, such as the different dichotomies that emerge from the central pair, art and nature. The teaching especially venerates the natural model, the care and physical effort one brings to it when learning how to draw it, in the same manner as a caring gardener.

In this school, children and adults draw a lot. Through drawing, a feeling of love is born for natural elements, whether animals, plants, insects, trees or seeds, and consequently the desire for protection is assured. Drawing enacts a relationship between the brain and the hands: a channel that passes by the heart. For a complete ecological teaching in school, we need drawing. Goethe said that he only saw things when he drew them.

In the essays I wrote, first "The Portrait of the Siberian Tiger", where I begin with a meditation on a painting, and "The Pull", where I tell the story of revelation at the foot of a tree in the Fontainebleau forest, I already contemplate a more militant calling for nature protection.

"The Waterfall", which will come out this year, a much longer writing, is a more extensive development of these ideas. Here the travelogue, the different

countries I visited with my family, serve as a point of departure on formulations about visual art: how visual art can evolve in favor of nature during the environmental crisis, in order to calm it and call others to join in. It is not the only role art can play, but art has many different roles, as many as there are artists in the world.

Here is an extract from this book:

Almost every day I take a walk across my village and then into the fields or the forest, often at the same hour of the day, around 5 in the evening. I call this my “Emmanuel Kant” walk, because the 18th century philosopher was said to take a walk every day exactly at the same hour. People were able even to set their watches to the punctual time he passed by their house.

I cross the wheat fields and observe the progress of the wildflowers along these parcels, their evolution from a bud to a flower and then a fruit, and the change of colors in their leaves. I count on this time to relax and review the good sides of a sometimes tumultuous life, both mine and the planet's. During moments where all can seem lost or falling apart, this walk brings me back to serenity.

One day, the sky a violet dark blue, I see a bird landing on a dry stem in the light of the sun. I am moved by the power of this scene. In the apparition of such infinite and simple beauty, I realize the well of hope one can reconquer here. Both for humanity and the vast nature that surrounds us.

It will overcome all degradation.

Thanks to airplanes and easy access to wonderful images of all over the planet, we can be constantly surrounded by beautiful scenes; Chile, the Andes; Iceland, the glaciers; Borneo, the remaining jungle... To travel there is so easy compared to 50 years ago.

But a moment of beauty in a daily life seems particularly precious. When it appears in our familiar place without searching for it, it comes with a special strength and gives us confidence, because we realize then that this source of energy accompanies us at all times.

In the first chapter of this book, about France, my adopted country, I talk of the philosophy of Montaigne, a “ground philosophy”, which always accompanies me in my thoughts. Montaigne was an environmentalist, as all great geniuses were, such as Tagore, Tolstoy and so many others. He professed a humble and moderate attitude, something we need to put into action, now

that we need to make efforts in “dis-anthropocentrizing” ourselves for the sake of the planet.

It is not easy thing to stay humble for a human being, even for those who inspire it. We would have to be continually humiliated by defeat in order to remain meek, and stay close to the earth. But there is another less painful way; that is, by keeping in mind the immensity of nature, its beauty, and remaining simply captivated. An artist can encourage this.

In the chapter on Africa, one of the first chapters, I talk about the importance of manual work, among other subjects. We can arrive at a very great intimacy with nature with this work, which can keep us even-keeled with it.

In the chapter on Indonesia, I develop the idea of drawing by going one step further, in seeing creation as an extension of nature. In this chapter I study how the environmental crisis has encouraged a link between art and science during the environmental crisis. I show that only as an extension of nature our artistic work can serve as catalyst in the environmental mission. And I question about how with such natural abundance one sees in the jungle, why do we stay at home to create new electronic worlds, at a time when this profusion is at risk and requires our protection.

One can become part of groups, political and collective, but I conclude that the true work of visionary is performed individually, and then by communicating with the world. This adds depth and value to a program of wildlife preservation.

Later in the chapter on Mexico, I develop the idea of giving up the self, very difficult for us artists, obliged to establish a name. It seems paradoxical, to profess both individual and collective work, but I think it is possible, in order to maintain our legitimate position in vast nature, to never think that we are greater than what surrounds us.

The philosophical question is thus at the basis of this environmental action, as I remain a practicing artist. This philosophy advocates gentleness, seen in Montaigne and so many others, as well as conciliation. This will to conciliate can perhaps save us, because it reflects nature. Nature is a realm of

complex ecosystems of opposites, creations and destructions. If our profession as artist and environmentalist imitated an ecosystem, we could expect a much more clement treatment of the environment. True ecology is beyond morality, because it imitates the amorality of nature.

Here is another extract from “The Waterfall”:

The lyre bird is a living example of emancipation from moralism. This whacky feathered creature can teach us so much. He finds a spot in the middle of the forest and builds himself a little pedestal out of earth to perform a concert. His concert is closer to a comic stand-up show. He can imitate the most varied sounds, those of other birds, but also machines and human voices. According to what I learn on internet, when I want to integrate the bird into a painting and need to know its physiognomy, he can imitate a machine-saw, a hammer, and even the conversation of the wood cutters themselves. In imitating these types of sounds, you get the feeling he is accepting deforestation as part of his environment. His forest is no longer the virgin one in the South of Australia, as his ancestors knew it, there are new sounds now! Wisely, he knows how to live with these realities by integrating them into his art, and with humor. This crazy creature seems to know that we can't find purity in life, it's only in art! For him, performance art... And on top of this, he is filmed and made into a u-tube. Vanity is not only human...

This creature shows us that a space with wildlife, both separated and continuous, is sometimes possible. He admits the existence of us humans, and the least we can do, is to venerate him. I think that the forest companies should first learn the curiosities of the forest before given the license to take from it. Perhaps industrial saws would show more clemency.

I discuss these ideas in the chapter on the United States. I see in our president an icon of the spirit of resolution and solidarity, which can only benefit us greatly if we were all to follow this. Usually during lectures on the environment, there are two points of view. For example, we see the environmentalist on one side, a member of an association of wolf conservation, that tries to allow an increase of 1000 wolves in France before he would be satisfied, and the shepherd, who sees himself as the true environmentalist, because he lives without electricity, wakes up at 4 in the morning while we are all sleeping peacefully in our well-heated houses. The best path to follow is certainly to listen to both sides, and arrive at a depolarization of our own minds. I always like to think of Atticus, the lawyer and father in “To Kill a Mockingbird”. He defends an innocent black man. Until the end of the book, he

doesn't judge his racist adversaries, even when he loses in the end. He says to his children that you have to try the skin out of the other person in order to understand his point of view. To arrive at this depolarization, which Harper Lee the author proposes, is a very slow procedure, and we are far from this today. I often have heard that this very polarization characterizes our world today. Perhaps because we are pulled around by complexity, all sorts of pollution and we need to reject what seems to be the problem, and purify ourselves. The democrats say it is the republicans, and the republicans the democrats. For some, Obama is the devil, so you have to expel him and then the problems will be gone. And then there are polarizations in groups. Even environmental groups. This makes me sad, because here we supposed to work together for a common cause, and should let our ego by the side. But everyone seems to want power and fall into a demonization of the other. As if the temptation is rooted in us. But it would be ideal to absorb all the contrary points of view and embrace them, like Atticus, as Obama presumably tries to do.

This wider vision is easier to adopt if one is passionate about something, like art, or someone, a love story for example, or even a true environmental mission, in order to rid oneself of impurities and pettiness. All our energies of frustration can be channeled into what we're passionate in.

This is how the image of the waterfall comes in. It symbolizes many things, both negative and positive, but in the end it is purifying. It may mean excess, overflow, ultimate change, crisis, and in a deeper sense of the word, revelation, when all lies are evacuated. It can mean the cataclysm we're afraid of with climate change. And it can also mean the most legitimate source of energy, not so much water as gravity itself.

I also make a correlation with visual art: drawing is happy sobriety, a eulogy of gentleness, but the waterfall can only be represented spontaneously with a paintbrush. The ribbons of water falling down, made with different types of paintbrushes, resemble hieroglyphics.

In the introduction, I write about a movement, like an underlying current at the beginning, which brings us faster and faster toward the waterfall precipice. I put into question the passive and overly soft character of my work, or art in general, and need something stronger. I love this wistfulness, but am

impatient at the same time. Writing thus becomes in itself a “waterfall”, a rebellious act. And militant action can be added to this.

According to an artist I met last summer in Montpellier, during a workshop between artists and scientists, climate change inspires contemporary artists for its vertiginous side, as if it were like a drug. The contrary reveals itself in my work, because climate change has led to a questioning of my chosen profession. It seems to be luxury work, for spoiled children, and I feel the need to add a political commitment to my time. I describe the birth of this feeling in “The Pull”. This type of engagement, which I have not defined very well yet for myself, may be parallel to the Barbizon painters’ movement, thanks to which the idea of natural reserve was born in France. It was not initially the paintings that spurred this on, although they serve as lasting icons for this, but their militant action. The touristic panels in the Fontainebleau forest tell the story of how Theodore Rousseau became alarmed in 1837 with the reforestation by resinous trees. Oak trees were cut down and replaced by pines. And then in 1861, Napoleon made a reserve of 1017 acres for esthetical concerns. They’re called ecological reserves today. And there are many more today, but never enough for us.

We are panicked by climate change, and scientists are pessimistic in general, but we also have the possibility to believe in a benevolent change. It’s important to believe in it; this only catalyzes the change. We should be able to identify old beliefs that keep us prisoners of a dysfunctional system, and express a liberating vision, by bringing a sensation of appeasement. The rain forest shamans are valued as intermediaries between human beings and nature. There is no reason artists cannot take on this role today, at a time we most need it.

These thoughts on art and ecology cannot be rounded up in a conclusive way. I thought I would exhaust them by writing the book, *The Waterfall*, but I realize, that not so long after I finished it, I have not. These are subjects that only keep unraveling with time.