

The Artist as a Catalyst of Nature

Does anybody have a definition of NATURE?

Is it land untouched by human hands? - Is it a park by Capability Brown? - Is it everything that grows? - or is it the entire non-urban surface of the globe: ground, wind, sea and sky?

I believe that one's idea of nature is conditioned by the country in which one lives and the culture to which one belongs. My own rather romantic ideas about ^{the contrast between a cultivated} landscape and ^{wild} nature most certainly spring from being a Dane.

What we treasure is the basic structure of gently undulating countryside ~~with small valleys and the occasional high~~ ~~precipitous escarpment~~ ^{we adore the untempered} alive with forests, hedges and fields of varying shape and colour broken up by straits and fiords, and a sea which constantly remodels the coastline. There is no space for giant land-art manifestations and there is nowhere for the artist to create an effect just by having been there, for somebody has always been there before. The single spots that have never been under the plough are treated like monuments in line with bronze-age tumuli and menhirs.

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So Danish artists dealing with nature usually confine themselves to the use of materials that stem from nature, using straw, twigs, handmade paper - Jane Balsgaard - ~~- form Ronnau -~~ leaves, earth, tree trunks or boulders - Alfio Bonnano - The objects are used to express the artists' thoughts and feelings and ^{the} more often than not taken out of their context in the process and isolated in exhibitions. Only very few are dealing with ~~the~~ materials in situ, hanging ropes/^{or cloth} from trees, tying reeds together in the marshes - Michael Jensen. Such works usually only last a season and only survive in photographs.

In order to illustrate the complexity of attitudes: nature used for the benefit of the artist - more or less - and art used to draw attention to nature, I shall have to introduce a Swedish ~~name~~ structure called NIMIS.

By constructing NIMIS Vilks has created a passionate discussion in law-abiding Sweden about art and nature and the artist's role. Most people love the place but ~~there are~~ ~~there~~ it has its fierce enemies. Assaults on it have been made with axes and fire and even with explosives. Once it was 3/4 burned down. But Vilks, on his daily ritualistic visits, patiently rebuilds with the materials of the forest.

NIMIS has become part of the land, a man-made, yet de-personified link between sea, rocks and forest. It has no ultimate shape but is growing, changing and decaying in harmony with nature. It represents "the gentle touch" of the artist, the kind of work which may stimulate our awareness of nature and inspire us with a ritualistic respect for nature's own materials.

Great changes are happening in the landscape to-day. The methods of farming have made small fields and poor soil obsolete and the straightening out of ~~winding~~ winding rivers is being reversed. Those are problems shared by many countries. Common also is the knowledge of the ecological and environmental imperative. In other words certain areas have for one reason or another got to be recreated ~~or~~ or reinvented, ~~or~~. What to do and how to do it, is a question which demands political, social, ecological and aesthetic considerations.

~~With this goes a special appeal~~ With this goes a special appeal to the artist. With the freedom of thought, the sensibility and fullness of imagination which goes with being an artist, and NOT a specialist, that is a gardener, farmer, ecologist, architect etc., he may have visions of never dreamt of ~~esthetic~~ potentials in the landscape. By working with lines and forms that are not static, with colours and scents that change with the seasons, with wind and water, rain and snow, the whole tremendous range of possibilities that nature fosters, he may ~~perhaps~~ create new links between the activities of man and the life of nature. He may, in fact, as frased by Alan Sonfist, help to "subtly redirect nature and allow it to make its own statement".

This is one of the great challenge of the 90'ies and a situation where the critic should play the part of animator and bridgebuilder between the specialists and the artists - a new and tremendously worth while role. and one which has to do with the future of the Earth for which we are - all of us - responsible.