

# (eco)versations

curated by Janet Botes

## GREEN ART 2012

### A Green Art Manifesto

By Kai Lossgott,  
with contributions from the curator and participating  
artists Simon Max Bannister, Janet Ranson, Danelle Malan,  
Stefanie Schoeman, Nicolle Marais and Claire Homewood

#### GREEN ART REFLECTS RECESSION AESTHETICS.

The facts on climate change are in. We know the statistics. We also know that pure facts have not resulted in the lifestyle shift that must be made within a generation. The time for talking is over. Green artists are uniquely situated to imagine and grow the cultural values our future depends upon, a task that requires a departure from conventional practice.

Seeking to define the movement in his own 'Green Art Manifesto' (Huffington Post, New York 2009), in true manifesto fashion, the American artist and activist Brendan Smith, predicts the final death of high art and the 90-year legacy of conceptual art, which he sees in its most radical exponents to have discouraged communal and hand-crafted practices, with certain notable exceptions. Smith's vision of green art draws parallels between the art of the Great Depression, such as the 1930s Arts and Crafts Movement, and the increasingly interdisciplinary and communal art practices of the current post-millennial recession.

The comparison is not unjustified. Our dwindling bank balances have resulted in a healthy shrinkage of our egos and a new search for meaning beyond the capitalist-consumer lifestyle. For many, this has resulted in the realisation that we don't need much to live but we do need to simplify our lives. Despite the advantages of social media, factors such as technology, inflation and the recession have fuelled our obsession with saving time, and working harder and faster, leaving us increasingly stressed and emotionally disconnected. Many feel an increasing need for real-life connection as well as interaction with other people and animals.

In this spirit of 'back to basics', inspired by the simple lifestyles of our rural ancestors, many artists today are mirroring the current shift in human identity towards seeing ourselves as inter-dependent with the living systems of the planet. They are exploring how we may live together more healthily and responsibly in the fast-paced urban environments of today.

**Green artists are change agents.** For (eco)versations curator and artist Janet Botes, green art is concerned with environmental themes, aiming to raise awareness and ask questions, to generate support or to inspire action. The desire to occupy ourselves with the current ecological crisis that threatens our survival is a moral one. We cannot assume that it comes 'naturally'. It is a choice. Many green artists today have lived the ideology of a sustainable lifestyle and endeavored to become part of the change. They have taken the responsibility to change themselves and their community.

**Green art knows its challenges.** "Green" is the popular face of environmental politics and philosophy. As such, green art, too, engages with pop culture and informal communities. It does this out of a deep need to heal the rift between a largely inward-looking contemporary art world and a general public which has little concern, education or appreciation for it. The critical context of green art is as frequently informed by environmental issues and politics as it is by the demands of the art world. Its allegiance lies with its applied context, not its discipline. Many green artists draw on their background knowledge in zoology, botany, geography, environmental science or community activism, whether through formal or informal education.

**Green art is not about the end of the world, it is about developing resilient lifestyles.** Doomsday scenarios announcing the end of the world have only induced disaster fatigue. We feel powerless and overwhelmed with shock every time we browse through the average daily newspaper or watch television news. When faced with climate change, the sheer complexity and grand scale of the problem cause us to react passively, to abdicate responsibility. Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus in *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility* (2007) call for a new environmentalism that can sidestep the mythical references to apocalypse and turn to an activism engaged in improving the present moment.

The most obvious response to the cry "It's the end of the world!" certainly would not seem to be "Great, let's make some art." However, as the French media sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard has pointed out, life after the apocalyptic disasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century continues as usual. Art, in as much as it is concerned with the inner symbolic world of human beings, is also concerned with re-creating it. It is through our inner symbolic world that each of us is able to make meaning of our existence in these challenging times. Green art today offers the opportunities to imagine and embody the cultural languages of the future.

**Green art emphasises solutions rather than problems.** "On a small planet swarming with billions of people - all of us consuming food, ideas, products and resources - as quickly and efficiently as possible - it can be hard to remain mindful of the rhythms of nature, the fact that the planet is finite, and that thousands of other species need the share it with us," observes Janet Ranson. Brendan Smith emphasizes that green artists work with their local community towards building resilience in coping with the alienation, loneliness, fear as well as feelings of loss that characterise modern urban life and fuel the lifestyle of over-consumption. When we realize how valuable each and every one of us really is, we realize how valuable our surroundings are.

#### GREEN ART PLANTS SEEDS THAT ALTER THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS.

**Green art provokes awareness.** Janet Ranson remarks that "Green art serves to wake us up, to show us new perspectives and reintegrate us in our one, precious world." For Danelle Malan, "Green art generates awareness surrounding our relationships to the physical world we live in." Malan purposefully refers to the 'physical world'. She does not separate wilderness, park, or city, or suburb, object or living thing, or human. In the end, all these encounters are about relationship. The artist is the interface engaging with all of this. It is up to us to design navigational tools that enable us and future generations to make the practical changes needed to live responsibly.

**Green art opens new eyes.** For Stefanie Schoeman, "Environmental art reminds us to actually look at what is happening around us. It hopes to inspire the viewer to spend a little bit more time observing." This is inspired by the experience of spending silent time in nature and becoming aware of its living presence, an idea that forms the cornerstone of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess' pioneering contemporary environmental philosophy Deep Ecology. Laying the first foundations for the green movement and environmental ethics in 1973, today this philosophy can be extended to seeing intrinsic value in all things, animate and inanimate. In their life and in their work, green artists nurture an active and responsible relationship with the world around us. While they respond to intellectually critical contexts, green artists know that continuous cynicism and anger are fundamentally counter-productive to the health of our human psyche and society. Schoeman aims to create installations that gift the viewer with the possibility of experiencing "care, concern, gratitude, awe and wonder."

#### Green artists find beauty in unusual places.

Nurturing open-mindedness and open-heartedness, green artists encourage us to look closer at human lifestyle, culture, industry, as well as finding new ways to relate to nature. In this everyday approach, green art seeks beauty by re-examining what we take for granted. Often these are small, simple things. One may see this as a subversion of the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Edmund Burke's concept of the sublime, which informed German Romanticism and has influenced other movements in landscape art and painting to this day. For Burke, the sublime was a deeply mixed feeling of awe and fear.

It references the grandeur of mountain ranges and forests. For green artists, in looking closer at what is known and familiar, we may find a new kind of beauty in unexpected places, as advocated by the Situationists under the French philosopher Guy Debord. Beauty transports us outside of ourselves and allows us to see things from another perspective, argues the philosopher Elaine Scarry, in a revival of the classical argument on beauty and justice. On discovering beauty, we connect emotionally beyond mere looking. We glimpse ourselves in relation to something that is connected to a larger and more powerful system or whole, which it may be safe to surrender to. We willingly cede ground to the thing of beauty before us and allow it to be greater than we are, or recognise that it is. In doing so, we lose our self-centredness. An other, perhaps an art object or a person or process, becomes for a while the centre of our world.

Scarry argues that this act of imagination is the foundation of all justice, namely the realisation that other entities inhabit their own perspectives, which may be different to our own. The cure to climate change is empathy, and this exhibition aims to inspire empathy through the eyes, a visual and emotional re-connection that recognises the intrinsic worth of the fragile world around us, as mirrored in ourselves.

#### Green art is a valuable information

**currency and provocation tool.** "Green art can speak on behalf of a greater cause and educate people to the essential diversity of the environment and the need to protect it and not exploit it," writes Simon Max Bannister. Community collaborator and facilitator Claire Homewood notes that, as opposed to design, art "communicates effectively on unconscious levels. The Green Artist is conscious of this and creates work that positively affects the Whole." In reflecting on green art, Danelle Malan sees it as her duty to "encourage and empower individuals to make educated decisions regarding his or her role in the current global environmental crisis." Although green art is not didactic in intention, it may inspire a new understanding. Understanding the need for strategic partnerships beyond the inward-looking tradition that has alienated artists from their audience over the past 100 years, green artists may work alongside educational programmes and initiatives surrounding green political activism. Janet Botes' initiative at the Green Expo 2012 reflects this profound generational shift in understanding, informed by the cultural and economic imperatives of the recession for new communications and income strategies beyond the limited conception of the 'market'.

#### GREEN ART IS SOCIALLY CONNECTED AND CIVICALLY ENGAGED.

**Green artists are inspired by the renewal of traditional community values.** These include integrity, responsibility, and accountability. This generational shift has resulted from witnessing wide-spread corruption of their elders, and the toxic capitalist consumer lifestyles which have resulted in the human-induced aspects of climate change. Urban living over the 20th century saw an increase in individualism, self-absorption and disconnectedness. The recession of the early 21st century, combined with the development of social media technologies, has inspired a new popular culture of sharing and collaboration.

As opposed to the exclusive policies and unwritten rules of the gallery system, Claire Homewood advocates an inclusive aesthetic of social interaction and communal processes. Homewood makes extensive use of collage and found visual material from discarded magazines and newspapers in her personal practice. For (eco)versations, she presents her Collage Mural Project, an installation that creates an informal public space in which visitors participate in the design of the ecological mural being painted by eight artists. Viewers are able to see this process unfold on a daily basis.

**Green art is founded on an ethos of shared social creativity.** Creativity need not and should not be reserved for artists, and innovation is increasingly being understood as a vital element in both personal and socio-economic growth. In this vein, Simon Max Bannister observes that the creative process of green art is also deeply rewarding because "Through the expression of green art we inevitably come full circle to see ourselves once again as fully integrated and part of nature." Beyond being a community of artists and entrepreneurs, green art is a generational movement aligned with the broader changes kindling in cultural pockets all over the world. Inherent in these changes are creativity and imagination. Brendan Smith, as co-founder of the Labor Network for Sustainability, remarks: "We are a generation of organic farmers, cooks, and beekeepers; we are bike mechanics and green carpenters; we are musicians, journalists and poets; we are environmental and social justice activists; we are artists. We are bound by the simple desire to make the world a better and more beautiful place."

**Green art is approachable and accessible to viewers.** There is more to life than chasing art galleries. Multi-disciplinary artist Danelle Malan speaks of getting involved in public parks, community centres, hospitals, offices, homes and shops, thus inviting their various demographics to explore green issues through art. It is in this spirit that the Green Expo presents an ideal platform for (eco)versations.

**Green art joins with communities outside the art world.** We cannot divide the artist community from the bankers, farmers, executives, mothers, and the full diverse spectrum of vocations. In these times, we share one challenge that transcends race, gender, age, class or creed. We avoid disconnected and disempowering institutions that reinforce class and other differences. Brendan Smith asserts: "We are where we want to be: we don't dream of riches or selling in galleries - for us, to survive selling our interactive green art and living free, self-directed lives rooted in community is the definition of 'making it' as a green artist." Janet Ranson finds the idea of green art "helpful as an orientation towards a greater awareness of my own (and your) place in the greater scheme of things." Community artist and creative facilitator Claire Homewood cuts right to the heart of the issue. "We are one living organism made up of unique individuals, we are part of a greater whole, and it is our challenge to co-create this world in alignment with nature and to nurture each other's potentials."

## INTEGRATING PERCEPTION, PROCESS AND PRODUCT

**Green art may not harm the environment.** "Green art is art that has a consciousness about it - from start to finish," writes Nicole Marais. Brendan Smith explains: "We refuse to destroy the planet to make a living." This is no easy task given current conventions. "The requirement of green art is great and difficult to achieve," Simon Max Bannister admits.

**Green art makes conscious use of materials and where they come from.** For Janet Botes, "the integrity of the artwork flows from the full integration of meaning with the medium, material and process." Simon Max Bannister writes that "Inevitably, the artist is in danger of contradicting the very process of creating, as this can be so energy- and resource-intensive that the work is in fact negated by it." In green art, the sourcing of material frequently becomes of prime importance. For example, the cycle of consumption inherent in the modern lifestyle can be commented on through recycling and manipulating waste materials. It may also emphasise the intrinsic value of the planetary ecosystem by insisting on energy efficiency and eco-friendly materials and techniques that, in the words of Botes, "have little or no negative impact on the environment or health of living beings." This includes found materials, often taken from nature, such as leaves, rocks, twigs, wood and sand, but just as often human industrial and consumer waste products salvaged from backyard rubbish bins and municipal dumps. For instance, Janet Ranson's assemblages, inspired by the human-manufactured phenomenon known as the bonsai tree, combine industrial and organic waste.

For Simon Max Bannister, "The most effective 'Green Art' is about an economy of material and energy." This is reflected in his photographs, interventions into the urban and rural landscape, and his minimalist installations as well as the wall pieces exhibited for (eco)versations that feature plastic flotsam collected from the mid-Atlantic gyre. "Once products of society, their purpose has been discarded and lost, they have drifted far with the ocean currents, each on its own fragmented journey. These pieces continually come apart, but not before being reclaimed by pelagic organisms that utilize them as floating islands. This is the next nature, a combination of the synthetic and the organic."

**Green art revives the hand-made.** Echoing the 1970s writings of American art and cultural critic Suzi Gablik, the green artist Brendan Smith calls for a reappraisal of currently flourishing craft and functional art practices, noting their collaborative and personalised aspects. This involves a reappraisal of value itself, and of how we attach value to art.

After a number of recent inter-disciplinary initiatives such as the COPART movement ahead of COP17, green politics are also gaining prominence in more established South African art practice, as can be seen by the winners of the 2012 ABSA L'Atelier Awards, Elrie Joubert, and the SASOL New Signatures, Ingrid Bolton, both of whom engage with environmental science whilst 2012 Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK) winner Katie Barnard du Toit protests against fracking.

The urgency of climate change is transnational. South African artists are increasingly acknowledging that our national conversations fit into the planetary conversation. Issues surrounding cultural difference continue to be vital in understanding how we live together. However, our responsibilities as human beings have broadened. There can be few themes more relevant to human life today than 'green art', for want of a better term, and developing sustainable and resilient solutions to the current ecological crisis that threatens our survival.

Green artists are leading exponents and co-creators of this vision. At times provocative, at times inspiring, it is their imperative task to wake us up to the possibilities that exist today for the better future they envision.

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