

TIMING

Ilka Nelson



Rheinelle Sculpture Park, Gelsenkirchen, Germany. Artist: Herman Prigann

This is a story. The characters are boundary riders, the plot is deep and the setting rises from a memory. Like all stories it is grown from one little seed, its life dependent on a complex pattern of circumstances. Some call this fate, gamblers I've bet call this luck, and one artist I know calls this timing.

In 2009 we find ourselves in the Kingdom of paradigms, witnessing the passing of the old guard. The Industrial Kingdom, ruled by capitalism and exponentials, is being exiled for isolating its people. The throne is being taken by an era of environmental awakening and a renewed faith in the poetics of limits. Across the globe, evidence of people reclaiming their connection to themselves and their world, is rapidly growing.

Throughout the ages artists have played a pivotal role in the evolution of humanity. With each passing epoch they courageously journey to the edge of what is known and then ride further to discover wild frontiers. These boundary riders traverse both inner and outer realms and bring back stories for their people. If 'Aesthesis' means noticing the world then artists are the Aesthesis Soldiers of the People, they translate the imperceptible.

Changes, especially ones of large scale, bring revolution and revolt. The capitalist rulers are not relinquishing their power without a fight and they use a most lethal weapon - consumption. "Capitalism inherently contains a principle of growth that depends on turning nature, which is subject, into something that is object, commodity and resource."¹ The art of the industrial era has mirrored this principle and become an object of status rather than a process of ritual, connection and celebration.

Artists, like civilians, are susceptible to corruption and they too have been spellbound by capitalism. Consumption is a parasite, its chameleon characteristics enabling it to host on anything human: bodies, language, desire, shelter, art..... If this parasite was an organic species it would belong to an ecosystem in balance but it is an artificial construct without a predator. Consumption therefore runs rampant and is suffocating both the spirit (inner) and the planet (outer).

As a direct result of exponential consumption, our world is "on the brink of massive extinction, the most profound extinction in the last 65 million years" This is not a natural occurrence, it is the genocide of our life source and yet gluttony is rendering us paralytic and too stoned to act.² "To believe we have no ethical obligation to our planetary home is the epidemic psychosis of our time. Make no mistake, a culture that

¹ Gablik, S: *Conversations Before The End Of Time*, page 336. Thames and Hudson, 1997

² Hallen, P: *Eco-psychology* www.abc.net.au/sundatspectrum/s846923.htm, ABC Television, 2003

can do so much to damage the planetary fabric that sustains it, yet continues along its course unimpeded, is mad with the madness of deadly compulsion".³

And this is where the plot thickens. It is time to remember "nature is the beginning and end of culture" and we need the Aesthesis Soldiers to awaken this memory.⁴

A long time ago artists were also magicians. During the industrial age the craft of alchemy was superseded in public favour of logic and reason. This transpired that modern art, while instrumental in 'liberating' society, became a manifestation of ego, separatism and the individual, which are capitalist concepts that imbue fear. Art is glued upon the skin of culture with urgency, bewilderment and desperation. The age of pioneering has finished yet we are addicted to finding something new to gag our fear. We have paused, reluctant to shift our gaze to other dimensions thus willing a cataclysmic fate that David Suzuki describes as driving the planet toward a brick wall at 100 miles an hour. Rather than applying the breaks we are busy arguing over who has the steering wheel.

By remembering our ecological self people can realise "we're here like anything else. This is greatly liberating. We can enjoy ourselves. We don't have to be the vanguard of evolution anymore".⁵ The summit of creativity has not been reached but the limit of our consumption has and regurgitation is a common side effect when gluttons overeat. Change is occurring and now is the time for artists to farewell the cul-de-sac of self and resume the path of magician, where understanding the interdependence of energy is penultimate. "Plants, animals, organic, inorganic. It's a continuum. We clarify things so we can talk about them, but everything exists in relationship."⁶ It is possible for artists to ferry humanity into new realms but it requires riding into the truth of a resource finite planet and bringing the mystery of connection back.

The artist-magicians of today are known as Transdisciplinary Maestros. Their vocation is defined by the way they see the world. While artefacts are an essential navigational tool for humanity, like lighthouses are for pirates, objects will not provide the global mobilisation this moment in history requires. Artists need to work with governments, corporations and communities to create 'continuum'. The tools for this course of action are dialogue, direct experience and accountability. The leading character of this story is a maestro of such skills but in order to meet him we need to pass through the gates of Sustainability.

The gates of Sustainability are guarded by two seraphs, Time and Location. Entry is granted upon reciting the three golden laws:

1. To exist, be it plant, project or person, there is a natural sequence: the seed begins in embryonic darkness then sprouts into light, followed by growth and experience to attain wisdom which brings rest again back in the shadows – this is the law of cycles.
2. Every community, be it geographical, social or organisational, has a unique combination of elements. Each element requires sustenance to ensure the continued survival of its community – this is the law of ecology.
3. Sustainability is a web of energy that connects all communities creating a grand dance of cycles – this is the law of continuum.

Once you pass through the gates you leave behind a terrain of banality where shopping malls, television screens and gallery walls disconnect your body from the earths lay lines beneath you. You leave behind a one dimensional civilisation and are welcomed back to site specific locations where your connection to land is your 'primary relationship' and you begin too recapture "the rich, poetic, wild ways in which we can relate to nature and ourselves. [You realise] our potential for relating to each other is really complex and beautiful".⁷

³ Gablik, S: *Conversations Before The End Of Time*, page 337. Thames and Hudson, 1997

⁴ Strelow, H: *Ecological Aesthetics* page 12, Birkhauser, 2004

⁵ Gablik, S: *Conversations Before The End Of Time*, page 69. Thames and Hudson, 1997

⁶ Weyler, R: *Greenpeace*, page 113. Raincoast Books, 2004

⁷ Gablik, S: *Conversations Before The End Of Time*, page 100. Thames and Hudson, 1997

In 2004 I entered the gates of sustainability and found myself at the Rheinelbe Sculpture Wood, Gelsenkirchen Germany, in the company of artist Herman Prigann. It was a profound experience - a collective epiphany of mind, heart and soul. Prior to this meeting I had sensed the power art had to reconnect people and place but I had not found a direct experience of this process. At Rheinelbe I discovered art on a scale more immense than I had conceived possible; where a slab of landscape became a canvas to cross pollinate politics, business, history, economics, social identity, spirituality, aesthetics and environmental ecology. Herman Prigann had regenerated an open cut coal mine back into a forest and park for the Gelsenkirchen community.



Aerial view of Rheinelbe Sculpture Park, Gelsenkirchen, Germany. Artist: Herman Prigann

Gelsenkirchen is situated on the Rhine River in north-west Germany. This is an ancient flood plain where the flat topographical landscape is studded with industrial smoke stacks. Coal mining has been the main industry of this region with the recent closures of many mines bringing economic depression to local communities. When you enter the Rheinelbe you traverse the layers of the regions past and you become part of marking out the future. The old rail line that carried coal carriages between the mine pit and the depot is now a public thoroughfare connecting two sides of the town.

If you enter the park from the south you are engulfed by a forest of birch trees, they feel like they have always grown here making it hard to imagine this area of Earth was once an open wound. As you walk beneath the iridescent green canopy you pass remnants of the industrial age - concrete slabs that have been salvaged from demolished factories - but these relics look more like archaeological finds than industrial waste for they are entangled in vines and conjure the poetics of ancient colosseums.

As you walk further you begin to ascend a spiral path, around the next corner the forest suddenly ends and you meet a mountain balancing an Inca like tower at its peak. The tower is a monument of what has been lost and what can be found. It is an arresting structure, shape shifting from shrine to temple to shelter, standing solidly in the sky as a symbol of change in contrast to the neighbouring smoke stacks.

The mountain is constructed from the waste soil of surrounding mines. Working with engineers, Herman designed the mountain to mimic the mounds made by burrowing animals. The waste soil was said to be unusable due to its toxicity. By employing natural designs, Herman has created a system to replenish the organic composition of the barren soil. Biological chemists and horticulturalists are studying the mountain's ecological progress.

This project works on a collective level and takes shape through joint contributions from multi disciplines, community members and natural ecology. While Herman has seeded the site with structural pieces these are openings that allow people to engage a dialogue with their surroundings. Trails through the park are carved by the natural movement of bodies in relationship to nature. The artist works without his ego as the driver. He creates 'interconnectedness' through an understanding that nature and people will continue to change the site beyond his time. The local Youth have graffitied Herman's iconic tower and wild raspberry vines have smothered his stone installations, this is an affirming sign for Herman as his intention was to create wild spaces and restore wilderness.



Rheinelbe Sculpture Wood. Artist: Herman Prigann

The Rheinelbe project is an example of a magician's work. The German government and the corporations who funded the project need to be heralded for appointing Herman as Project Director. They understood the expertise required to create and coordinate the environmental and social regeneration of the site and contracted an artist with the appropriate transdisciplinary skills.

"Humans are diminished and distorted if they're not embedded in the natural world".⁸ During the course of history, art detoured from its ritualistic capacity to connect us with nature. As we evolved we refigured our surroundings and forgot that which sustains us. Our built environment became veils that masked our vulnerability. How do we remember our physical and psychological bond with nature? We take time to experience the wild spaces of our local area; we get to know it intimately,

This is an extraordinary time for artists. We have the opportunity to bridge paradigms. As Aesthesis Soldiers we can reclaim our role as boundary riders and light the way for communities to find their ecological identity. As Magician's we can bring together representatives from every discipline and facilitate dialogue and ecological action.

The message of this story is people need to reconnect with nature for the future health of our planet. The stakes are inconceivably high which means it is perfect timing for artists to take courage, abandon capitalism and bring culture into the environmental paradigm.

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⁸ Hallen, P: *Eco-psychology* www.abc.net.au/sundatspectrum/s846923.htm, ABC Television, 2003
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