

# Art for Earth's Sake - a Manifesto,

by Helen Moore

## Art for Art's sake and its legacy

"The idea of changing or improving the world is alien to me and seems ludicrous. Society functions, and always has, without the artist. No artist has ever changed anything for better or worse."

**Georg Baselitz, painter**

Many reading the slogan 'art for Earth's sake' will recognise its echo of the aesthetic movement's 'Art for Art's Sake',<sup>1</sup> and perhaps wonder at the appropriation. I first encountered it in *Resurgence Magazine* (No.223), though it may well have its origin elsewhere. Since then, I have taken it up and spent time exploring its implications, realising that it reflects the spirit and intention that lies behind my work as a self-styled eco-poet and environmental writer. And yet, with its utterance can come a raft of uncomfortable feelings about art's purpose. Contemporary culture largely dislikes any Art that's aimed at creating social change - it's unfashionable and flies in the face of many of our underlying cultural attitudes. Instead, it seems we feel the reader, viewer or audience should be as free and unimpeded by political or spiritual messages as the supermarket consumer, where everything is bound up in a host of subliminal stimulations, out of which the individual constructs his or her own narrative. Amongst writers, it may also raise the hackles of those who have long adhered to the mantra of most creative writing instruction: '*Show, don't tell!*' Amongst artists in general, it can also raise more pragmatic concerns about the means of production for Art as commodity in a world where economics has a tight grip. By contrast, art that challenges the status quo may receive few publishing deals or grants and at the moment is largely ignored by the establishment. Nevertheless, I'm committed to its pursuit and hereby seek both to explore the modern discomfort with engaged art, and to show how and why a growing number of artists, writers and poets, have taken it up.

Art's earliest origins in the human story were with sacred or shamanic purpose (eg. cave paintings), but the rise of civilisations and empires transformed Art into artefacts to be traded and owned as status symbols in societies where the divisions between rich and poor were often extreme. Down the centuries, many artists and artisans survived through the patronage of the nobility, but this came at a price - paintings, sculptures and poetry had to reflect the values of these materially and socially privileged patrons, and thus few artists were at liberty to express their authentic sense of inner or outer phenomena. Then, in 1789 the revolution overturned a host of oppressive and exploitative social structures in France, its fervent calls for 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' spreading far and wide. In England, Coleridge and Wordsworth developed this new sense of the people's freedom in their collaborative *Lyrical Ballads*, which intended to exemplify human individuality and social diversity, with poems such as 'The Female Vagrant', and which in its very form sought to break away from what were then traditional norms of poetry.

In the 'Advertisement' preceding *Ballads*, the pair write: "It is the honourable characteristic of Poetry that its materials are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind. The evidence of this fact is to be sought, not in the writings of Critics, but in those of Poets themselves.... Readers of superior judgment may disapprove of the style in which many of these pieces are executed. It must be expected that many lines and phrases will not exactly suit their taste. It will perhaps appear to them, that wishing to avoid the prevalent fault of the day, the author has sometimes descended too low, and that many of his expressions are too familiar, and not of sufficient dignity."

By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Romantic cry for freedom had sparked the imagination of French poet, Théophile Gautier, who proclaimed that Art was an end in itself, not

a means to an end. The idea burned in the minds of other French poets, such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé, and was soon disseminated in England and America, where Swinburne, Coleridge, Carlyle, Poe and Emerson became its advocates. A work of Art, they said, had an intrinsic value without didactic or moral purpose; Art is self-sufficient and need serve no other purpose than its own ends. In the visual arts, Burne-Jones, D.G. Rossetti, William Morris and Aubrey Beardsley also took up aestheticism and their high ideals found expression through reference to Classical mythology, medievalism, chivalry and sensuousness.

To my mind, the aesthete's philosophy was as much the Romantic response to centuries of social oppression as a reflection of the underlying worldview. Cultures are always built on sets of myths or stories, many of which we may not be conscious.<sup>ii</sup> Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a philosophical position named 'Cartesian dualism' had come to dominate the way Westerners think (and largely still does). It stemmed from the French philosopher, René Descartes', and his famous dictum: 'I think therefore I am', which separated mind from matter and the self from the world. Nevertheless, the revolutionary proclamation of Art as an end in itself – that it need not be (nor should it be) didactic, politically committed, propagandist or moral; that it should never be judged by non-aesthetic criteria (eg. its usefulness) – grew to be extreme. Believing themselves to be beholden to no one, some artists came to regard themselves as special - even superior to ordinary people. The cult of the individual ego and sensibility spawned the viewpoint that Art had no reference to life and at its extreme, therefore, no relationship to morality. The poet or the artist could thus effectively withdraw from life, become the outsider; the lone, misunderstood genius.

Often this was in part as a reaction against the industrialising materialism and burgeoning capitalism of the age. In his essay 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891), Oscar Wilde wrote: "A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want. Indeed, the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes a dull or an amusing craftsman, an honest or dishonest tradesman. He has no further claim to be considered as an artist."

Given the socio-historical context, these sentiments are understandable. Yet Wilde himself was capable of descending into what has ended up being a seductive cynicism, epitomized by his epigram: 'The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has yet discovered.'

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Modernism continued to show aestheticism's traits and according to artist and critic, Susi Gablik: "We still live with the fall-out from this philosophy."<sup>iii</sup> Dadaism was a nihilistic aesthetic, and although a perhaps inevitable development at the time – a response to the bourgeois institution that controlled Art and its display and distribution – its chief mode was destructive. The Dadaists used shock tactics (a method still employed by many artists today), to question the very concept of the artist as originator of an artwork and to explode the traditional perceptions of what constituted art.

By contrast, the stilted and soulless cultural expression of Russian Socialist Realism and the state-endorsed Art of Fascist Germany and the Chinese Cultural Revolution must have served to warn Western artists of the dangers of allowing artistic expression to be hijacked for didactic or propagandist purpose.<sup>iv</sup> But as Western 'Pop Art' evolved through the 1960's as an aesthetic (or escapist?) reaction against a corrupt and increasingly commercialised world, amongst other phenomena, I believe that the advent the Cold War and the apocalyptic threat of nuclear warfare left many artists feeling disempowered and negative about both political and spiritual engagement. The problems could seem too vast, so best ignore them!<sup>v</sup> Truth became even more difficult as aspects of Postmodernist thought instilled the notion that language is a game and meaning inherently difficult to apprehend. And so, in our largely secular and materialistic culture, it could seem entirely legitimate to sit on the fence, and through the endless labyrinth of relativism, remain sceptical about the positing of any truth at all.

Naturally, cultural and historical context does alter one's perspective, but relativism can simultaneously negate the existence of any transcendental truth. Jettisoning all awareness of the bigger picture, (one which now so desperately needs addressing), artists may end up focussing introspectively, or on domestic or historical subject-matter. In saying this, I don't mean to imply that these aren't legitimate grounds for exploration. Much was achieved throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, frequently by artists who had traditionally been marginalised, yet who explored such areas in order to address a range of social issues from domestic violence to racism. Women writers, such as Maya Angelou, often broke new ground by describing powerful and intimate portraits of lives that had never been deemed to be worthy of literature's attentions, much in the way the *Lyrical Ballads* did.

However, Western Art has come to be quite narrow in its preoccupations and increasingly dark. Today, the seediest, most dysfunctional aspects of human life are explored over and over again, largely it seems because sensation sells. And in a society where the cult of the individual has been taken to its extreme by social Darwinism intertwined with economic doctrine ('survival of the fittest' meets free-market global capitalism), relativism has almost inevitably slipped into the laissez-faire position of 'anything goes' – including, extreme violence, pornographic sex, misogyny, torture. Film-makers, writers, visual artists and pop musicians seem unconcerned by any thought of the effect that their material may have on the lives of their audiences; as Gablik writes:

“Like scientists in our culture... artists have been encouraged not to worry about the applications, consequences or moral purpose of their activity.”

### **Knowledge in the Information Age**

“Raw data can be turned into information, which then, through much added effort and value, can rise to the level of knowledge, which is the foundation for wisdom.... Our society is basically motion without memory.”

**James Billington, librarian of the American Library of Congress** <sup>vi</sup>

Nowadays we're bombarded by news reports about what many (including myself) have come to believe is the greatest threat to the survival of the ecosystem that will support human life: climate change. Yet few writers or artists have so far responded to it and I find myself wondering if this cultural absence isn't partly due to the excesses of the information age, where we're fed on a diet over-rich in data, but for which we lack the time and the stomachs to ruminate it, thereby converting it into knowledge and ultimately wisdom. Instead, it's just the next course of news, views and statistics; and the next; and the next – news stories 24/7, if we so wish.

In a recent article in *The Guardian*,<sup>vii</sup> Robert MacFarlane bemoans this cultural absence: “the deficiency of a creative response to climate change is increasingly visible.... Where are the novels, the plays, the songs, the libretti, of this massive contemporary anxiety?”

He goes on to suggest that any literary response “would need to find ways of imagining which remained honest to the scientific evidence. It might require, one would think, forms which are chronic – which unfold within time – and are therefore capable of registering change, and weighing its consequences. And it might require literary languages which are attentive to the creep of change; which practise a vigilance of attention and a precision of utterance.... But presumably there would be room too, for more bumptious vernaculars: for satire, say, or for polemic.”

Certainly, there is much to be explored here. I myself have attempted to do so in my own writing (*Changing Nature: Eco-Notes of a Digital Woman*, Green Seer Books) and am grateful that MacFarlane has highlighted the need for a variety of artistic responses to climate change. But if an artist is to be an effective agent of social change, there needs to be a deeper exploration,

even deconstruction, of one's consciousness. This initially requires a look at the kind of culture that shapes us, and a first port of call might well be the nature of the information we're fed.

In our times, the freedom of the media is subtly challenged by the fact that it's ultimately beholden to corporate interest. Regarding the press, Norman Mailer paints this relationship in lurid terms: "There is an odour to any Press Headquarters that is unmistakable... the unavoidable smell of flesh burning quietly and slowly in the service of a machine."

Quoting Mailer, David Edwards, co-editor of Media Lens elaborates<sup>viii</sup>: "The machine in question makes money. Like all employees, journalists are recruited to maximise profits. In essence their job is to sell wealthy audiences to the all-important advertisers, on whom the average broadsheet depends for fully 75% of its revenue. The hidden agenda – undiscussed, often unconscious – is to report the 'truth' in an interesting, entertaining way that does not alienate these advertisers, or wealthy media owners, or parent companies or governments."

What, then, is the likelihood of engaged Art being featured by the media (in the arts reviews etc)? Are the artists with whom we're most familiar the ones that uphold, or at least do not threaten, the status quo? Could the cultural absences around the environmental crisis partly be explained by the fact that journalists are unable to profile artists who are working with these issues, for fear of offending vested interests?

### **Freedom of Expression in the Corporate World**

"People find it difficult to confront and express the truth and the reality of their lives. Fear is the disease which prevents them from saying what they want to say."

**Heri Dono, Indonesian artist**<sup>ix</sup>

Ironically, many artists seem to have renounced our hard-won freedom of expression. Surrendering themselves to the dictates and constraints placed upon them by the market-place, which at its least subtle, may include product-placement, or less perceptibly, decisions not to produce material that won't be highly marketable, they call into question their status as 'artists'. (Here, I recall Wilde's words in this corporate context: 'the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist.')

Many visual artists appear content to produce Art that's still just exploring the production of shock or sensational effect, in much the way that the Dadaists were doing nearly a century ago. Like rebellious adolescents, they test the boundaries of what the great, overarching parent that is the establishment will tolerate and lap up the fat cheques that come their way. Conversely, the contemporary literary scene often buries itself in history: the plethora of historical subjects shows an almost pathological inability to look at the present moment. Meanwhile, the majority of contemporary poetry manifests a closed loop of self-referentiality, even deliberate obscurantism. The Poet's human-centred eye is all important and if poetry is not self-reflexive (the human ego still holds sway), there is a focus on lyricising the minutiae of human life – the aesthetics of the quotidian, where even snooker can become gilded by the poet's Midas touch. Contrary to Coleridge and Wordsworth's assertion that the 'materials' of poetry "are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind", there has been a reduction to a narrow spectrum of traditional themes.

In *The Ode Less Travelled*, Stephen Fry comments: "I think that much poetry written today suffers from anaemia. There is no iron in its blood, no energy, no drive.... Far too many practising poets default to a rather inward, placid and bloodless response to the world."<sup>x</sup>

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Fry keeps his own poetry entirely private!

## **The Impotence of the Art/Life Separation**

“Creating a work of art is not a harmless thing. It always is a powerful medium. Art is extraordinarily powerful and important. It challenges people’s lives.”

**Chögyam Trungpa**<sup>xi</sup>

Without a doubt, the feelings of despair and powerlessness so prevalent in today’s society translate for many writers and poets into a fear of speaking truth, even perhaps, as I have heard one remark, of appearing ‘parasitic’ in writing about world events. Around the Art/Life debate there exists a kind of paralysis and consequently Art returns to formalism, clever technique in order to hide its alienation from the kind of world we now inhabit.

Interestingly, in tracing Western cultural histories over the past two centuries, I have found myself looking at the way that historical context has shaped Art – a perspective which flies in the face of the aesthetic assertion that Life and Art are separate. It’s a relationship that many artists seem unwilling to look at; nevertheless, the great political writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, George Orwell, clearly believed that the division was based on a false premise. No Art can be apolitical. He writes: “The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is in itself a political attitude.”<sup>xii</sup>

Adopting the position of separation can also have a negative effect on the artist herself. Only too well do I recall my fears when, as a young woman in the early ‘90’s I was first determining to become a writer, that I would have to be unhealthy and degenerate in order to embark on the path. It was as if the 19<sup>th</sup> century image of the mad, tortured genius were there as an off-the-peg identity for me to assume. And if I didn’t, if my soul cried out for something else, could I then consider myself a ‘*real*’ artist?

Gablik writes: “the hidden constraints of a morally neutral, art-for-art’s sake philosophy is that it has led to the marginalized condition of artists in society. Autonomy and self-sufficiency have condemned art to social impotence and allowed it to become sucked into the giant web of all our cultural addictions – to work, money, possessions, prestige, materialism – and to the whole psychology of affluence that is now threatening the ecosystem in which we live with its dysfunctional values and way of life.”<sup>xiii</sup>

## **The insights of Gaia Theory and Quantum Science**

“Quantum theory... reveals a basic oneness of the universe. It shows that we cannot decompose the world into independently existing smallest units. As we penetrate into matter, nature... show(s) us a complicated web of relations between the various parts of the whole. These relations always include the observer in an essential way. The human observer continues the final link in the chain of observational processes, and the properties of any atomic object can only be understood in terms of the object’s interaction with the observer.”

**Fritjof Capra**

Shelley once pronounced that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world’ and there are many indications that as much as Life shapes Art, Art shapes Life. We’ve only to think of the enormous influence of 20<sup>th</sup> century science fiction in firing the imaginations of scientists and engineers to develop technologies that would reflect the futuristic worlds writers had depicted. Or of the Orwellian ‘Big Brother’, which has nowadays morphed into popular culture and the lives of millions of people in the form of the infamous reality TV show. Similarly, from the ecological perspective, James Lovelock’s Gaia theory has shown that just as Life on Earth has been influenced by the specific conditions of climate and geography, so biological Life shapes Gaia. In the Earth’s evolutionary story, even the presence of Bacteria

began to alter the atmosphere, making it more oxygen-rich and thus conducive to Life. If it weren't for the biota, our planet would have the same kind of 'dead' atmosphere found on Mars.

Ecology teaches that we are inextricably interwoven, interdependent with all beings. We *need* the trees to breathe, the Bees and insects to pollinate the crops that become our food, the rains to fall to give us water. This radical interdependence completely overthrows Cartesian dualism, replacing it with Satish Kumar's visionary revision: 'You are, therefore I am'.<sup>xiv</sup>

At the same time, advances in quantum science have shown amongst other things, the nature of the 'unified field' and the effect of the observer on the observed. Once again, these are enormous paradigm shifts in terms of traditional Western thinking, despite the fact that this break-through in our understanding of the laws governing our Universe effortlessly intersects with ancient Eastern philosophy and spiritual beliefs.<sup>xv</sup>

### **Implications for the Artist**

"It is the responsibility of the poet to be a woman to keep an eye on this world and cry out like Cassandra, but be listened to this time."

**Grace Paley – 'Responsibility'**

What then are the implications of these paradigm shifts and the environmental crisis for the contemporary artist? First and foremost, it can no longer be denied that Art for Art's Sake resides on a fundamental fallacy – art is not, nor can it ever be, separate from Life. Scientifically, we understand that consciousness has a role in shaping material reality and in one stroke, the artist has a responsibility for at least considering the effect on the wider community of the kind of work that he or she puts into the world. No longer is it possible to reside in relativism. Suddenly, and even without a God, transcendental truth reappears on the horizon. Homo sapiens is a part of a Universe that he and she have *not* created and we depend on its harmonious balance for our survival. Only a full and rich biodiversity on Earth will ensure the continuation of the kind of biological Life that's able to support us. Naturally, then we require culturally diverse and ecologically interdependent arts to reflect this.

For me, the new awareness of my interdependence with all beings fills me with awe and wonder. No longer can I take anything for granted and I feel humbled as never before. And whilst it's true that I can never know what listening I'm speaking into, I now want to scrutinise the intention that lies behind the work I release into the world. Do I want to contribute to more violence or despair? Or do I want to help people envision a sustainable future for our species on this planet?

In terms of her own discoveries of the new philosophical framework, Gablik writes: "The socially entrenched scenarios of innovative style, fashion and competitive consumerism as a way of life were being challenged by other possibilities that included a sense of community, an ecological perspective, and a deeper understanding of the mythical and archetypal underpinnings of spiritual life. What was in the air was a new set of values, concerned with "right" living in an interconnected universe, rather than with achieving success within the art world."

For Gablik, Art had become "a creative work in service to the whole."

### **Transforming Consciousness**

"No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it."

**Einstein**

At one time, the Muse was revered as a goddess and many artists rightly, I think, still retain a degree of reverence towards the source of their inspiration, whether they believe it to be the divine, or an upwelling from the unconscious mind (that realm co-habited by the collective

and the individual psyche.) Nevertheless, an unexamined artistic output is usually a fusion of the self-portrait in the context of the social collective; thus, if we're to achieve deep social change, we can no longer fondly uphold the Muse's autonomy, happily scribbling down everything she tells us. Instead, we must look deeply at the myths and stories that shape our belief-systems, whether social, political, environmental or personal.

With regard to this, our sense of identity is one aspect that Gablik rightly understands as needing to be expanded in order for an artist's work to convey deep ecological awareness. Transcending contemporary definitions of self that are posited in a spectrum of elements including race, gender and class, she draws on the insight of the deep ecologist, John Seed, who says of himself: 'Myself now includes the rainforest. It includes clean air and water.'

We live in an age where our civil and human rights are increasingly upheld (although there is still much work to be done on this front in many countries around the world.) However, in the West we often conflate this with the prevailing cult of individualism, stridently proclaiming rights that are unsustainable – eg. the right to cheap fuel or cheap flights – forgetting that with rights come responsibilities.

As a writer living in the West, I feel immensely privileged to exist in relative luxury, with abundant food, clean water, and in having been educated to a high level. In coming to see firstly the enormous social and environmental injustices in this world, then to feel intense compassion for all beings (human and non-human) that are suffering, and simultaneously to understand the knife-edge on which our survival as our species rests, I can do nothing other than focus my energies on raising and shaping consciousness, using art as a vehicle for social change.

### **Biocentric Art and Sustainable Poetry**

"I take it into me and grow  
Say the trees  
Leaves above  
Roots below"

**Gary Snyder – *The Uses of Light***

As a poet, I seek to get away from any artistic reinforcement of the human-centred world. I want to write work that is biocentric or ecocentric, where I develop and share my understanding, reverence and compassion for all the species with which I share this planet. This is not to say that the human-centred or even the dark night of the human soul cannot have a place in my work – I am human and therefore I experience despair and bump up against my personal frailties and my ego – but I want to be aware that I don't give these aspects more attention than they deserve. In Nature, darkness goes hand-in-hand with the light and I want to acknowledge that both energies exist in the world – and perhaps even bring more light to counterbalance all that negative energy out there! Sometimes, humour or satire is the best medium through which to work, but in our culture there is a tendency to avoid addressing deeper issues by laughing things off. So I want to be strong enough to resist that easy way out, and be sufficiently courageous to acknowledge truth and the higher spiritual dimension where appropriate, nor fear to make reference to the more spiritual or visionary states of consciousness when I experience them.

The kind of lightness of touch to which I aspire is exemplified in Billy Mills' definition of what he calls 'sustainable poetry'.<sup>xvi</sup> He writes:

"Sustainable poetry... illuminates the deep ecology view that we need to adopt an ecocentric mode of living in the world if we are to survive. If the role of philosophy is to inspire action, the role of poetry is to be in the world. Like the laws of physics, like mathematics, this poetry is descriptive, not proscriptive. It also accepts the sceptical view that full knowledge of the world cannot be attained through the medium of the senses."

Mills also upholds the positive aspects of relativism: "Rather than saying that nothing is unless it is held in the mind of the human observer, it asserts that many things are that have never been perceived, and that for most things that are perceived, the perception is imperfect.... We are part of the weave of things, and our view inevitably depends on where we sit in that weave."

### **Some Pointers for Artists aspiring to be Agents of Social Change**

"The writer cannot be a mere storyteller; he cannot be a mere teacher; he cannot merely X-ray society's weaknesses, its ills, its perils. He or she must be actively involved in shaping its present and its future."

**Ken Saro-Wiwa**

In creating this manifesto, I found myself thinking back to that young woman I was, trembling at the concept of the artist that I didn't want to have to be in order to make my way in the world. Consequently, I want to focus now on visioning the new, engaged role of the artist, so that others, who may be embarking on the path, may find the way more easily.

In reflecting about the role and function of Art and the artist, it's interesting to look back into history or to explore cultures where things are very different, in order to help us revision the kind of artists we want to be. India's wandering mystic poets have always fascinated me: the notion of moving from village to village directly exchanging poetry for food and lodging has a great romance and neatly avoids the interventions of the 'machine'. Their presence echoes the wandering minstrels found in medieval England, who themselves stemmed from the Celtic bards. Having myself been initiated into the revived tradition (as 8<sup>th</sup> Bard of Bath), I've found it important to connect with our native Bardic culture and to explore what it is to be a poet from this ancient perspective.

As poets who learnt their craft over many years, the Bards were esteemed figures in the Celtic world and in a pre-literate culture had a vital role in being the keepers of the lore and lineages. News of important battles, floods or marriages would be wrapped and shaped into verse, which was memorised and shared wherever a bard might be summoned or end up. There was also a deep awareness of the sacredness of the land, the trees and the animals, their qualities respected in a way that suggests a shamanic relationship with Nature. The story of Taliesin, from the northern Welsh kingdom of Gwynnedd, is one that evokes the transformation of a young man into a great bard. Having accidentally drunk from the elixir of wisdom prepared by the goddess Ceridwen, he shows his courage in the face of her rage and is metamorphosed into various animal and bird forms (the Salmon, the Raven), till finally as a grain of wheat he is consumed by Ceridwen and then reborn as a gifted bard.

I also find inspiration and solace amongst modern writers and artists who have stood up for their political and spiritual vision, often to be initially decried or unrecognised by their contemporaries – William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Pablo Neruda, Marge Piercy are to name but a few. None were poets whose work was introduced to me in school (role models must sometimes be sought out in unusual places!) Their work and their biographies have instructed me well, and from them I have learnt that following one's heart is all important; that fashions in Art come and go; that taking risks, standing up for what you believe, renouncing fame and fortune, thinking outside the box, sheer determination and following your dream are all that counts in terms of making visionary Art.

The means to support oneself is another important point to be mentioned. For years I was influenced by Virginia Woolf's essay, 'A Room of One's Own' (1929), and believed that owning a tiny studio flat in Edinburgh would be the answer to my dreams, providing the elusive space and freedom to write. In fact, Woolf was arguing for much more than just that physical space;

her essay was a defence of women's rights – specifically the same rights to education and self-expression that male writers enjoyed – but for many years I failed to read the small-print, as it were, ignoring the fact that she was financially sustained by a bequest from her aunt. Before that, Woolf had managed by holding down a variety of jobs and somehow I'd overlooked her description of that time:

“To begin with, always to be doing work that one did not wish to do, and to do it like a slave, flattering and fawning, not always necessarily perhaps, but it seemed necessary and the stakes were too great to run risks; and then the thought of that one gift which it was death to hide – a small one but dear to the possessor – perishing and with it my self, my soul – all this became like a rust eating away the bloom of the spring, destroying the tree at its heart.”

I have included this at some length simply to illustrate that unless the writer has private means, careful thought should be given as to how to juggle the lack of financial reward that may accompany a non-commercial path as an artist, and the absolute imperative to provide for one's basic needs. Nevertheless, being in the world is important, and some lines of work – compared with Woolf's time, there are many more that are open to us now – can be an enriching and important way of developing the whole person, who also happens to be an artist. As ever, Art and Life are not separate!

Being in the world, I've come to understand that seeing oneself as an agent of social change is an art to be learnt and honed, just as much as the craft of Art itself. Some time ago I decided that my poetry needed to be accessible; I wanted to use language that touched people and hoped to create an art of the people, for the people, whilst avoiding the modern pitfall of catering for the lowest common denominator – the modern phenomenon of 'dumbing down'. This is a balance that will only be found through trial and error. It will involve finding an audience and learning to communicate, seeing what works and what doesn't in terms of people's response; it's an art I'm still perfecting!

Generally, audiences do not appreciate being preached at either – no matter how 'right' you think you are! Put yourself in their shoes: would you really like to be on the receiving end of that tirade you've just penned? And whilst some of today's 'ranty' performance poets may be entertaining in the way that the man on the soap-box at Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park may offer temporary entertainment value, their words may leave little lasting impression (though this is not always true!) Be aware of your anger; own it; meditate!

The poet, Mary Oliver, who has won enormous popular support in the US, has written of her desire to contribute only goodness to the world:

“Years ago I set three “rules” for myself. Every poem I write, I said, must have a genuine body, it must have sincere energy, and it must have a spiritual purpose. If a poem to my mind failed any one of these categories it was rebuked and redone, or discarded.”

Oliver's style is gently inspirational, touching people's hearts primarily and helping them to view Nature in a deeper way. Similar things could be said of many eco-poets writing today, including Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder and Alice Oswald.

## **Means of Production**

“In the production of art, social institutions affect, amongst other things, *who* becomes an artist, *how* they become an artist, how they are able to *practise* their art, and how they can ensure that their work is produced, performed, and *made available* to the public.”

### **Janet Wolff**

My final area of focus has not been left until last because it's of lesser importance. Despite the fact that it is often ignored and overlooked by artists, especially those in service of the machine, I have placed it here simply because it often comes last in the creative process, although

it may need to be conceptualized at earlier stages. This is the means of production, the practical issue of how one disseminates one's work in the world.

In terms of book-publishing, Professor of Political Science of the Arts in Utrecht, Joost Smiers describes the changes that have come about as a direct result of the influence of global capitalism: "Not so long ago, editors used to decide what books would be published. This has changed radically in large companies where power has shifted to so-called publishing committees, in which the financial and marketing staff play pivotal roles. Profit margins for book publishing used to be around 2 per cent. The demand now is 15 per cent.... The consequence is that small print-runs are out of the question and predictable losses on some books considered culturally important – the risks publishers took in former times because they loved books – will no longer be covered by the profits from other books." <sup>xvii</sup>

As already acknowledged, being an agent for social change may not make one many friends within the artistic establishment and challenging the status quo can be a lonely business, though developing networks with other like minds – be they artists, or not – is important. Contrary to the popular misappropriation of Darwin, co-operation or mutual aid has long been the way that our species has been so successful on this planet; but for anyone considering embarking on the path of penning radical poetry, Mills offers the salutary warning:

"Sustainable poetry is not a career move... it is difficult for those poets who live and work within the confines of the literary and/or teaching professions, who have to some extent been colonised by the machine, to do work that questions the status quo. Consequently, it is likely that any attempt at sustainable poetry will come from apparently marginal writers."

In his essay, Mills describes the way that the arts have become part of the state's economic development strategy and sets this within the context of the environmental crisis: "We live on a finite planet, with finite resources available, and at some point growth will tip us over the edge. The arts are not immune to this fact...."

Nowadays, the majority of books published in the West are printed in the Far East, where workers are paid low wages and do not enjoy the same rights that our workers would. This is simply to satisfy the mass-market demand for cheap books at any cost. To ignore this as an engaged writer, is to risk contributing to the very problem one is challenging.

As Smiers writes: "A book is only partly a literary creation or the outcome of a design process; there is a considerable economic aspect represented in it, too, and the environmental consequences of printing so many millions of books are becoming a matter of increasing concern."

Recently, I found myself astonished at the Hayward Gallery's retrospective of the American artist Dan Flavin (1933–96), whose hundreds of fluorescent light tubes fill the space. <sup>xviii</sup> Apparently, he himself did not even encourage people to spend long examining their arrangement; they were there, perhaps, just to create an effect. I wouldn't condemn his choice to create this installation – indeed it may offer some reflection of our profligate society: lights on, no one at home! However, I do wonder how long our society can continue to support such wasteful consumption of non-renewable resources in the name of Art?

I hasten to add that this is not a call for some fascist Art police to be sent to studios and studies up and down the land to hunt down unsustainable Art, but it's important to raise these as issues for consideration. Fortunately, many artists have already examined these issues and have taken up the challenge of exploring art-forms and media that leave little impact on our Earth. The work of Andy Goldsworthy and Nils-Udo are fine examples of this; their creations are often formed from found objects in the natural environment and remain for posterity solely through the medium of the camera. <sup>xix</sup>

At a time where technology facilitates the work of many artists, I too have sought to get around the difficulties I face with publishing my work, by taking the means of production into my own hands. I'm inspired by William Blake's hand-printed and sewn books and Emily Dickinson's 'fascicles' (pamphlet poems), but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, my books benefit from the speed

and ease of the digital technologies. Although I'm not natural with computers, I take on as many aspects of book production as I can, including: typesetting, graphic design, printing and binding. Ultimately, I feel enormously liberated in this – I can choose to use recycled papers and my own photographs to illustrate my books or as cover images, freedoms that many up-and-coming authors in my position would not enjoy under contract to a large publisher.

Distribution is, of course, limited and depends on my own efforts to reach audiences through personal contact. In the past, the independent book stores, which Smiers describes as “vital for freedom of communication and diversity of opinion” would have often been instrumental in selling radical writing. Indeed, San Francisco's City Lights Bookstore had a strong role in establishing the Beat poets, particularly Allen Ginsberg<sup>xx</sup> – but these days many independents struggle to survive in the face of the corporate chain-stores, the distributors offering bigger discounts to the big book chains for bulk quantities. And as an alternative to books, the Internet nowadays serves as a medium for the dissemination of ideas. At the time of writing, I'm learning to build myself a website on which I plan to publish this manifesto and other work and ideas.

### **Posterity**

“A work of art is created because there is basic sacredness, independent of the artist's particular religious faith or trust.”

### **Chögyam Trungpa**

Shakespeare famously yearned for his love to find immortality through the writing of a sonnet, and many artists work in the hope that they themselves will somehow cheat death through the legacy of their work. As part of my changing consciousness, I personally have tried to chip away at all traditional notions and definitions of social recognition, fame and success, simultaneously contemplating the possibility that there will be no posterity.

The end of history? The end of Homo sapiens on planet Earth? My focus has come to be the present moment. And though I hold the still elusive dream of making enough from sharing my Art to support my basic needs, my greatest sense of achievement comes when I find I've touched someone's heart or helped open someone's eyes to our deep interconnectivity with all beings. The priceless feeling of achievement this gives me has become both my motivation and my real reward.

The Buddhists teach that we must abandon self-grasping ignorance and try to cherish others more than ourselves. I still have a long way to go... how the ego can trick us all into believing we're separate from everyone else, that our needs are more important than those of others! But I truly believe that if everyone – whether artists or not – learnt to live like this, we could be confident of a sustainable future on this mysterious and bountiful planet we inhabit. So, let's be neither complacent nor despairing about there being any posterity to admire our work or vision. Instead, let's just help roll on these Great Turning Times!<sup>xxi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> I have used the capitalized 'Art' to show the perspective of art as separate and self-sufficient, and the lower case 'art' to show the opposite viewpoint, where art is deeply integrated into Life.

<sup>ii</sup> See Midgley, M., 2004, *The Myths We Live By*, Routledge, London

<sup>iii</sup> Gablik, S., 1984, *Has Modernism Failed?* London

<sup>iv</sup> It should be emphasized that in these circumstances, the artists concerned often had little choice but to obey the commands of the state to which they were enslaved.

<sup>v</sup> Nevertheless, there were many artists who engaged with the subject of nuclear warfare, including writers: Ian McEwan, J.G. Ballard, Martin Amis and Neville Shute.

<sup>vi</sup> Edwards, D., 2002, 'Outside the Machine: How to be an Ethical Writer', see [http://www.medialens.org/articles/the\\_articles/articles\\_2002/de\\_ethical\\_writer.html](http://www.medialens.org/articles/the_articles/articles_2002/de_ethical_writer.html)

<sup>vii</sup> *The Saturday Guardian*, 24/09/05

<sup>viii</sup> Edwards, D., 2002: *Ibid*

<sup>ix</sup> Van der Plas, E., Halasa, M., and Willemsen, M., (eds), 2002 *Creating Culture in Defiance: Spaces of Freedom*, Saqi Books, London

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<sup>x</sup> Fry, Stephen, 2005: *The Ode Less Travelled*,

<sup>xi</sup> Trungpa, C., 1996, *Dharma Art*, Shambala Publications, Boston, Mass.

<sup>xii</sup> See 'Why I write', in Orwell, G., 2002, *Essays*, Penguin, London

<sup>xiii</sup> Gablik, S., 1984, *Ibid*

<sup>xiv</sup> Kumar, S., 2004, *You are therefore I Am: A Declaration of Dependence*, Green Books, Totnes

<sup>xv</sup> See Capra, F., 1991, *The Tao of Physics: an Exploration of the parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, Flamingo, London

<sup>xvi</sup> For Billy Mills on Sustainable Poetry, see: [http://www.terriblework.co.uk/sustainable\\_poetry.htm](http://www.terriblework.co.uk/sustainable_poetry.htm)

<sup>xvii</sup> See Smiers, J., 2003, *Arts Under Pressure: Promoting Cultural Diversity in the Age of Globalization*, Zed Books, London

<sup>xviii</sup> The Hayward Gallery writes: 'One of the most innovative figures in 20th-century art, Flavin used fluorescent light as his medium, adapting mass-produced, commercially-available materials into works of profound intensity and astounding beauty. Moving beyond the traditional realms of painting and sculpture, he became a key exponent of minimalism in the early 1960s, alongside artists such as Carl Andre, Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt. Flavin's works, complex geometric forms in a series of dazzling colours, will transform the dramatic spaces of the Hayward Gallery, itself an icon of 1960s design. Including works spanning his career, from his early 'icons' and 'monuments' to corner pieces, corridors, barriers and large-scale installations, the exhibition will present around 60 light works, as well as a selection of sketches, drawings, and early collage constructions, to explore Flavin's practice – what he called 'as plain and open and direct an art as you will ever find'.' See: [http://www.hayward.org.uk/future\\_exhib\\_detail.asp?i=173](http://www.hayward.org.uk/future_exhib_detail.asp?i=173)

<sup>xix</sup> More about environmental artists can be found at: <http://www.greenmuseum.org>

<sup>xx</sup> For more than 50 years, the Citylights bookstore has served San Francisco-based writers, artists, and intellectuals with a meeting place. City Lights Publishers began with the Pocket Poets Series, through which its founder, Ferlinghetti, aimed to create an international, dissident ferment. His publication of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* in 1956 led to his arrest on obscenity charges, and the trial that followed drew national attention to the San Francisco Renaissance and Beat movement writers.

<sup>xxi</sup> The US deep ecologist, Joanna Macy, coined this phrase to help envision the changing consciousness and thus the changing social order of our times. See <http://www.joannamacy.net>