

Form Follows Function

Eco-Art and Its Place in the Sustainability Movement

Ted Mero

When George Mason University's (GMU) Art and Design building opened in 2009, the School of Art had an ideal new home, offering plentiful room for galleries, lecture halls, and studio spaces. The building's immediate surroundings, however, were left barren in the construction aftermath, and narrow pathways left little room for the school to landscape.

A pair of GMU art students, desperate for color beyond the artificial creations around them, formed a student group to inject life into their concrete surroundings—placing daisies in glass jars and planting vegetables on the campus grounds to get the momentum started.

Meanwhile, a local artist turned GMU professor began teaching a course in agricultural art and decided to use the exterior space as an experimental art studio. Nearly four years later, the class, now known as eco-art, holds a prominent spot in GMU's general education curriculum, while the outdoor green studio continues to evolve as an educational vehicle of art and sustainability. The space, also utilized for a permaculture certification course, makes an interesting test case concerning the relationship between art and the environment and the benefits of unifying them.

The sustainability movement has long been spurred by the leadership of experts in fields such as environmental science, engineering, and architecture. Design, whether of buildings or landscapes, is a key piece of those efforts.

Art, on the other hand, can offer something the aforementioned fields typically cannot: freedom. Strip away budget restraints, client demands, looming deadlines, and time-tested industry conventions. Suddenly taking a risk on a new idea or approach becomes less reckless, the thought of failure less daunting, and the possibility of creating something that hasn't been done before that much likelier.

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Whether the result is as basic as turning a construction zone into a garden, or as significant as laying the blueprint for a multimillion dollar industry, artists can offer new ways of thinking about the preservation and revitalization of our world.

Eco-Art Over Time

The partnership between art and environmentalism can be traced back to the 1960s, when artists began to challenge conventional notions of exhibitions and sales by escaping the confines of galleries to pursue land art or site-specific art. In the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City, Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* sculpture—a re-created area made up of New York's native trees from precolonial times—introduced the idea of bringing nature back to urban communities, one of the first environmental art projects to directly address ecological issues.

In the early 1990s, Mel Chin's *Revival Field* offered a shining example of what is possible when blending art and science. Chin partnered with scientist Rufus Chaney to detoxify a 60-foot section of landfill in St. Paul, Minnesota, using a special group of plants, known as hyperaccumulators, to extract heavy metals from the soil through the plants' biomass.

Chin's work conceptualized the scientific process, known as phytoremediation, through art and provided a model for several larger scale green remediation projects to follow. Phytoremediation is now a multimillion dollar industry with clean-up sites around the world.

"There have routinely been projects that were initiated by artists to solve problems that scientists couldn't have solved or practitioners couldn't have solved because they were in some way outside the normal conventions of the scientists and practitioners," says Sue Spaid, an art curator and writer who co-curated the 2002 exhibition (and authored the corresponding book) *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies*, which highlighted artist-initiated projects that employed inventive tactics to physically transform local ecologies.

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The GMU Green Studio progression from 2011 to 2012

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“There’s dozens of cases in *Ecovention* of artists working on ecological projects that no one in science or ecology would’ve thought of doing because it was just too whacky,” explains Spaid. Spaid and co-curator Amy Lipton worked to find projects that met a standard of inventiveness that they use to judge all art, one that brings forth new realities, not merely beautiful images. The artists also needed to demonstrate that their projects weren’t simply created in a vacuum, but collaborative efforts with community members and local specialists, such as ecologists, landscape architects, and urban planners who could test and evaluate the scientific aspects of a given project.

Such projects tend to cost less than the average land-use project, allowing the artists to take more risks in their work. If the risk pays off, as it did with Chin’s *Revival Field*, the idea can grow into an accepted mainstream practice.

“I think people look at *Ecovention*, and they see some of the approaches and they can reproduce those things to a larger scale,” Spaid notes. “But they probably couldn’t have built it on an initial scale.”

George Mason’s Green Studio

In 2009, Mark Cooley and Ryan Griffiths, artists of the Washington, DC, suburbs, curated an exhibit at George Mason University called *Agra-Art*, featuring a variety of local artists who, in one way or another, used agriculture in their work. The show was so successful that Cooley was hired by the school to teach a course in agra-art. The irony is that Cooley and his friend had stumbled on the topic somewhat accidentally. “When we put the show together, we went out looking for artists that were into relational art, artists that are forming a relationship with an organization

or group or that just brings people together to participate in some way,” Cooley says. “And while were doing that, we discovered all these artists that were doing gardening, agriculture projects, getting communities involved and calling it art.”

As Cooley began his first agra-art course, he’d noticed students planting vegetables in the construction zone surrounding the newly built art and design studio. He met with the ground supervisor of GMU to ask if he could use the space for his class as an experimental growing area. “It was just wide open at that time,” Cooley says. “They said, ‘fine, it’s less work for us to maintain and it’s a nightmare trying to get around the buildings.’ We got quite a bit of land around the building to really do whatever we wanted. So we called it the Green Studio and have been working there ever since.”

One of the students initially planting in the space was Justin Raphael Roykovich, who helped form the student group SoA Green to bring more life to the School of Art building. The effort began as a rogue operation, but once Roykovich realized he could lean on GMU’s School of Sustainability for financial support and Cooley for extra manpower, the outdoor studio’s progress became more visible and helped start an important dialogue among the school’s art students.

“What I tried to contribute to the green space was both academic and theoretical,” explains Roykovich, now pursuing his MFA at Rutgers University (New Brunswick, NJ). “There’s a lot of artists who are working in this (eco-art) genre, and these simple gestures (in the green space) were my way of contributing to that while also bringing recognition to the fact that this was already an established practice among many artists.”



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Olivier Giron in “Something Out of Nothing”

Starting a Dialogue

The scene opens with an open, grassy field. In the back corner of the screen lay a collection of tires lumped together with a pile of indiscernible materials. Olivier Giron appears in a white jumpsuit and begins to turn the materials into “Something Out of Nothing,” the name of the artist’s three-minute video, shot in fast-motion. By the end, the something is a fully enclosed, nonfunctional outhouse, complete with toilet and swinging door.

Giron’s video is part of a larger effort to inform the public of illegal dumping in his native Fairfax County, Virginia, where people have been taking truckloads of trash into the middle of the woods. Giron is documenting his findings through the use of geo-tagged photographs correlated to an online map and posting them on the website of Let’s Do It!, an international organization that’s helped him launch Let’s Do It! Virginia. Beyond that, he’s building and leaving the “trash” sculptures on-site in hopes of starting a dialogue with the illegal dumpers.

After earning his bachelor’s degree in land architecture, Giron earned his MFA in photography from George Mason with the help of Cooley, who played a key role on his thesis committee. Giron believes coming from a structured background, as he did in design and architecture, has helped him approach his art from a more methodical perspective.

“Whether I’m doing a photography project or a sculpture project or landscape design, I approach it the same way, by starting out with sketches and diagrams and thinking about relationships,” Giron says. “In that sense, I feel like I have benefitted in allowing my creativity to grow, but at the same time I have a very practical sensibility in how I approach things.”

Sketches Come to Life: Artist Patricia Johanson

Patricia Johanson, one of the pioneers of minimalist art in the 1960s, first gained public attention when she created *Stephen Long*, a 1,600-foot strip of color running along an abandoned railroad track that would transform depending on the amount of visible natural light. (At sunset, the yellow stripe turned orange and the blue stripe turned violet.)

Interested in closing the gap between human designs and thriving habitats, Johanson earned a degree in architecture and drew hundreds of inventive sketches for environmental projects, which often involved taking built objects like dams and water basins and turning them into ponds and gardens. When Harry Parker, then director of the Dallas Museum of Art, saw Johanson’s drawings at a New York City art gallery, he commissioned her to restore Fair Park’s Leonhardt Lagoon, which had nearly died off due to degradation. Johanson recommended a list of plant and animal species to be added back to the ecosystem and ultimately deployed sculpture to control shoreline erosion, create microhabitats, and increase public access.

The completion of Leonhardt Lagoon, her first large-scale project, led to the design or completion of dozens more across the globe, including Endangered Garden in San Francisco, where she designed a new water pump and holding tank along the San Francisco Bay. The sewage facility’s roof, designed in the image of the endangered San Francisco garter snake, serves as a public walkway along the bay. The facility design also created microhabitats for butterflies (in the serpent’s 20-foot-tall head) and small marine life (under the facility’s steps, which fill with water at high tide).

Johanson remains active in her work and serves as an inspiration to young environmental artists looking to make an impact beyond the aesthetic aspects of creation. In fact, she suggests any young artist entering the field shouldn’t think of what they are creating as art. “Focus on solving problems—not making art,” Johanson asserts. “If you’re an artist, your work will inevitably be considered art.”

“I have learned, as an observer of nature, that form follows function, so I am never concerned about how things look. I am more interested in how they perform in the world, and what are the implications of human structures for our shared future, such as the loss of biodiversity.”

To see images and read more about Johanson’s work, visit www.patriciajohanson.com.

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Giron believes that, while his architectural background helps him stay grounded, his artistic side has its own advantages. “The thing I respond to about art is that it’s more flexible in how you approach things—and it can just be about a dialogue,” Giron explains. “Maybe more can come out of it, and that’s fantastic. But to me, as I push my own work, having the ability to talk to people about things they would normally not think about is worthwhile on its own.”

When Giron first began his illegal dumping project, he focused on the science of it, photographing sprawling stretches of trash and highlighting statistics and other fact-based information to illustrate the devastating effects of the pollution. It wasn’t until he brought more of an artist’s mentality to it, however, that he started to garner a significant response.

“People weren’t really engaging with that because they are so inundated with imagery of waste and our ecosystems being devastated,” he says. “By engaging the project from a social standpoint, where I was making this a social experiment about what happens when you do something in the middle of nowhere and people see it and engage with it, it tended to interest people more.”

Bringing the Barren to Life

Many of the students who initially started planting in the studio space outside George Mason’s Art and Design building have come and gone. But the grounds have continued to evolve alongside Cooley’s class, as the instructor shifts from experimentation to a more concrete agenda.

“This (past) spring is the first time we’ve had students with a plan going in there to really handle some of the functional aspects of the space,” Cooley says. “Water run-off, erosion, just a lot of challenges in the space, so as we’ve worked, we’ve learned out of necessity how to deal with those issues, but not in a way the university generally deals with them.”

The students, for example, have built berms and other landforms to re-route water run-off. Additionally, the space is now being utilized for George Mason’s permaculture certification course, and the university is in the process of installing a forest gar-

den with both edible and medicinal plants, bringing the students’ final design project to life. Cooley has applied for a grant through GMU’s Office of Sustainability to get the support needed to complete the project, and it is in the final stages of approval.

“This will be the second installation of an edible garden due to the permaculture course,” notes Danielle Wyman, manager of outreach and community engagement for GMU’s Office of Sustainability. “The permaculture course from last year helped install a food force on campus through a grant from the office. We’re really excited to see there’s a growing trend (for grant-earning projects) after each permaculture course.”

As for Cooley’s eco-art class, GMU’s general education committee recently designated it a synthesis course, making the class a prominent option on the general education course curriculum. “Getting it worked into the curriculum is a really important way to make sure you get students,” Cooley says. “And students who come into this class are at least attracted to some aspect of sustainability. So you get the biology major, the art major, and so forth. Everyone’s interested in the subject, but you get different skills sets.”

As sustainability programs grow in number at higher education institutions across the country, will art find its way into more course curriculums? Spaid, who is currently curating *Green Acres*, an agra-art exhibit that will be on display at the Arlington Arts Center in Arlington, Virginia, through mid-October and at the American University Museum in Washington, DC, through November, believes it should.

“There should be at least 10 master’s programs in the United States in eco-art,” she says. “It’s a huge field that we’re overlooking, because I think it’s the kind of program that can be totally collaborative and could attract scientists and artists to find solutions in totally different ways than they are usually addressed.”

Regardless of higher education’s role, veteran and young artists alike will continue to take chances with their work and discover new ways to tackle the world’s sustainability challenges.