

Can artists save the planet?

Ossian Ward ponders art's role in our fragile ecosystem

As concern mounts that the world is heading for some catastrophic disaster caused by pollution, climate change and the relentless pillaging of resources, it seems natural that artists will want to respond to this plight through their work. What is less clear is what they can do, if anything, to help avert a global ecological emergency. On Monday and Tuesday a group of scientists, academics, politicians and artists will discuss this and many other pressing environmental topics at a symposium, cheerfully titled 'No Way Back?' at the Royal Society of Arts.

Far from a soapbox for doomsayers, the speakers at the symposium include artist Jeremy Deller, who is this week launching a competition to design a bat house at the London Wetland Centre in Barnes. Since filming his famous flying bat sequence for 2004's Turner Prize-winning work 'Memory Bucket' and seeing the artificial habitats constructed for the creatures in Texas, Deller has become a certified bat lover: 'I'm not an eco-artist, it just so happens I love bats.' Even though his proposal is not so much a work of art as a practical proposal for the preservation of bats in the city, Deller says there are wider resonances. 'The project is also about housing [for humans] in this country, because we have similar requirements to most other mammals – we also need somewhere warm, dry and safe to live.'

The symposium is part of the RSA's grand 'Arts and Ecology' programme that encourages artists to tackle green issues, but not all of the initiatives are as

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straightforward as Deller's bat house. Artists Heather and Ivan Morison, for example, recently 'crashed' a lorry in the middle of Bristol, spilling 25,000 flowers in order to provoke conversation about the transportation of roses from Ecuador. The pair's current gallery show in London, 'Earthwalker' at Danielle Arnaud, provides subtle conceptual cues about man's adverse impact on nature through their juxtapositions of images from flower auctions in Holland with photographs of dead or stuffed animals. 'We're not making a statement, just prodding things and



Heather and Ivan Morison, 'Starmaker (Earthwalker)', 2006



Tue Greenfort, 'Daylight', 2006

leaving them open,' says Heather.

Without waging an ecological campaign or even necessarily using biodegradable or recycled materials, Morisons' art has always taken a sideways glance at such currently exigent topics as sustainability and global warming. When they travelled through Eastern Europe to Russia, Mongolia, China and New Zealand in 2003 without ever getting on a plane, the idea was not to reduce their carbon footprints, but to

'have a connection to where you are every step of the way'. During this 'Global Survey', as the project came to be known, they posted back cryptic but inspirational postcards bearing messages such as: 'Mr & Mrs Ivan Morison do not understand it. Why are they cutting down all the Siberian larches? Arkhangelsk, Russia'. Heather explains that 'regardless of your professional life, you can't help but be influenced by the environment.'

Another recipient of an RSA 'Arts and Ecology' commission, Berlin-based Danish artist Tue Greenfort says he is 'not trying to come up with proposals for a better world but to intervene in the problems that are already there', although he is somewhat more provocative in his methods. Combining the nerve of an activist with the wit of an artist, Greenfort's quirky solutions to the global energy crisis have so far included: ferrying art lovers around in a truck powered by vegetable oil; convincing a gallery to switch to a more eco-friendly source of energy for the duration of his exhibition; and installing handy electricity-saving on/off switches onto lamp-posts in Frankfurt, Germany.

Greenfort reacts quickly to his surroundings, so for his current show in London, 'Rococo Eco' at Max Wigram, he has responded to the Bond Street gallery's previous incarnation as a fur shop by displaying two fur coats spliced together from silver fox and mink alongside a mirror and the kind of trap used to catch the animals. This means visitors can watch themselves trying on the coats while considering their place in this cycle of life, death, art and luxurious living.

His RSA residency will culminate in a major public sculpture that aims to highlight our woeful attempt to become a 'zero-waste society' (only 17.5 per cent of London's domestic waste was recycled in 2004-05). In February, at an as yet undisclosed location, he plans to line up one wheely bin from every London borough and private company that recycles rubbish to form a colourful, 60-metre long barrier representing the bureaucracy behind waste management and the so-called 'green-washing' that corporate companies hide behind in their bid to be eco-friendly. 'Garbage is also an economy and so is difficult to change,' he explains.

Perhaps the symposium will give the wasteful, resource-heavy art world cause for reflection too, as it sends exhibition crates flying to ever more far-flung places and employs harmful chemical materials and noxious paints in the pursuit of cultural progress. Hopefully artists will become a force for change after all, because even works of art as transient as a line of bins or a spray of discarded flowers can leave a more enduring impression on the mind than news bulletins or television adverts reminding us to separate paper from glass.

'No Way Back?' takes place on Dec 11 & 12 at the London School of Economics (see Other events), when the bat house website www.bathouseproject.org will also go live. Heather and Ivan Morison show at Danielle Arnaud until Dec 10 and Tue Greenfort is at Max Wigram until Jan 13

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