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建设性

Constructive Postmodernism and Ecoaesthetics

后现代思想
与生态美学

主编 曾繁仁 [美]大卫·格里芬

Editors-in-chief Zeng Fanren David Ray Griffin

山东大学出版社

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**第四辑 环境运动、环境美学、
环境设计与环境教育**

**Section 4 Environmental Movement, Envi-
ronmental Aesthetics, Environ-
mental Design and Environmental
Education**

Visual Culture and the Beginnings of the Environmental Movement in the United States

Gail Levin

(The City University of New York)

Abstract: American visual culture moved beyond the appreciation of the country's natural beauty and resources as seen in landscapes painted in the nineteenth century. By the 1940s, some artists had begun to express their concern that technological developments were endangering the natural environment. Their concern bears a complex relationship to aesthetics, which I will address here through a close study of developments in visual culture that accompanied the evolution of the environmental movement in the United States.

Today numerous artists are working on environmental reclamation projects, hoping to return damaged ecosystems to healthier states. My focus here will be on the artists who helped raise awareness that the environment was endangered and who issued individual calls to action. Concern with damage to the environment first registered as alarm with the invention of the atom bomb. By the 1940s, a few artists had already begun to produce work focused on this danger. Widespread American awareness of other threats to the environment became apparent with the 1962 publication of *Silent Spring*, a book by Rachel Carson, who wrote about environmental problems that resulted from the use of synthetic pesticides.

In 1965, Alan Sonfist first proposed a radical new purpose for art that would transform a city lot in the middle of Manhattan into a site-specific forest of native plants like what might have grown in the area prior to human intervention. Although it took him until 1978 to realize his plan, his was early to envision environmental reclamation. I contrast such artists with so-called "Land" or "Earth Artists," who focused on aesthetics and not the well-being

of ecosystems. I explore also the links between environmentalism and feminism, featuring women artists active in Eco-feminism, the social movement that sees a link between the oppression of women and nature.

Key words: environmentalism; artists; eco-feminists; reclamation; atomic

American visual culture has gradually moved beyond the appreciation of the country's natural beauty and resources so apparently in the painters of grand landscapes of the nineteenth century. By the 1940s, some American artists had begun to express their concern that technological developments were endangering the natural environment. Their concern about the environment bears a complex relationship to aesthetics, which I will address here through a close study of developments in visual culture that accompanied the evolution of the environmental movement in the United States.

Today numerous artists are working on projects that involve environmental reclamation, with efforts to return damaged ecosystems to healthier states. Here, however, we will focus on the American artists who helped raise awareness that the environment was endangered and who issued individual calls to action. These artists were working alone, not as adherents to any movement. Nonetheless, their work helped to publicize important issues. A few artists have gradually and consistently helped to shape attitudes toward the state of the environment and mobilize those who want to recognize mankind's responsibility to respect and maintain the earth.

Concern with damage to the environment first registered as alarm with the invention of the atom bomb. The possibility of radioactive contamination was second only to the fear of nuclear annihilation. By the 1940s, a few American artists had already begun to produce work focused on the danger of the atom bomb. Richard Pousette-Dart (1916-1992) painted *Crucifixion—Comprehension of the Atom* in 1944, from his perspective as a pacifist, a vegetarian, and a conscientious objector, who refused to fight in World War II. He drew a parallel between the destructive potential of the atom bomb and the crucifixion of Christ. Pousette-Dart continued to explore this theme after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 and the Bikini Atoll test bombings in July 1946. He painted *The Atom: One World* in 1947-1948, assigning a title implying that contamination across the Pacific in Asia would also contaminate the American continent, for we are all one world.

Pousette-Dart's early concern with the atom bomb was shared by Philip

Evergood (1901-1973), one of the American painters who worked in the Social Realist style, which focused on social and racial injustice and was intent upon heroizing the working class. In creating a message of social and political protest, Evergood painted *Renunciation* in 1946, depicting the world after an explosion of the atom bomb. Imagining the end of civilization as we know it, he depicted a variety of primates observing the nuclear mushroom cloud and indicting mankind for destroying nature.^①

By the early 1950s, American popular illustrations were depicting imagined nuclear disaster. On August 5, 1950, the cover of *Collier's*, a popular magazine, featured "Atom Bomb Hits New York City; Illustration for 'Hiroshima, U. S. A. '" by the science fiction illustrator Chesley Bonestell (1888-1986). The cover and other illustrations by Bonestell accompanied a feature article, "Hiroshima, U. S. A. Can Anything Be Done About It?" by Chester Lear, who argued that "when the danger is delineated and the means to combatting it effectively is made clear, democracy will have an infinitely stronger chance to survive."^②

Other illustrations were prompted by the existence of nuclear test sites in the American West. About a place known as Frenchman's Flat, the Advertising Council produced a public service newspaper advertisement headlined with the plaintive query: "Mummy, what happens to us if the bomb drops?"

Although the fears of atomic disasters were more obvious in the popular illustrations than in the vanguard artists, it is the work of the latter that has kept atomic fears before our eyes, even when the original meanings have sometimes been unexplored or later obscured. The subject of the atom bomb became the implied theme of an entire series of abstract expressionist paintings by Adolph Gottlieb: "Blasts," produced from 1957 to 1961, became the signature images of his maturity. In this series, he used minimal forms and fields of color to suggest events so earth shattering that they evoke emotion in viewers. Gottlieb made each disc seems to pulsate, bringing to mind atomic energy. Indeed, his choice of the title, "Blasts," has been and should be

① Kendall Taylor, Philip Evergood, *Never Separate from the Heart*, Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1987, who writes that Evergood was inspired to make this painting after witnessing some of the nuclear testing done in Nevada in 1946. Stephen Petersen, "Explosive Propositions: Artists React to the Atomic Age," *Science in Context* 17 (4) (December 2004), pp. 579-609, who says that Evergood was inspired by the tests at the Bikini Atoll in 1946.

② Chester Lear, "Hiroshima, U. S. A. Can Anything Be Done About It?" *Collier's* (August 5, 1950), pp. 11-15.

interpreted as referring to the dangers of the atomic age. The horrors of the World War II affected Gottlieb and many of his fellow artists. In the midst of the war in 1943, Gottlieb wrote, "That these feelings are being experienced by so many people throughout the world is an unfortunate fact, and to us an art that glosses over or evades these feelings is superficial and meaningless."^①

Gottlieb's "Blasts" suggest that he understood and referred not only to the Atomic Age, but also to the devastation caused by the atom bomb. A red sun, surrounded by its serene blue halo in the upper register might denote the sun's triumphant rising the day after destruction. Gottlieb repeatedly represented both the bomb-blast and the sun-disc, which seem suspended in a permanent tension.

As he worked on the "Blast" pictures, Gottlieb must have been aware of the growing movement of anti-nuclear activism that led in 1962 to the Women's Strike for Peace and called for a ban on nuclear testing. The movement's co-founders, Bella Abzug and Dagmar Wilson, protested the contamination of dairy products caused by radioactive fallout from nuclear testing. On July 15, 1962, Women's Strike for Peace demonstrated in Mercury, Nevada, where the U. S. Atomic Energy Commission had set up a nuclear test site.

At the same time, the United States, in response to the resumption of testing by the Soviet Union, conducted a series of 36 nuclear test explosions in the Pacific. This was both the largest nuclear weapons testing program ever by the United States, and its last atmospheric test series. On July 25, 1963, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union signed a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, outlawing atmospheric testing. Then on October 7, 1963, President Kennedy ratified the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. This was regarded as the first international environmental agreement.

The threat of nuclear contamination felt very real. As a child growing up in the 1950s, I recall begging my parents for our own fallout shelter, a plea that I intensified at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev narrowly averted war. Meanwhile, in 1963 in New York City, in response to the missile crisis, two avant-garde artists Robert Morris and Robert Huot performed in *costume the dance, War*, at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village. Their frightening costumes were made of found objects. Their primitive choreography

① Adolph Gottlieb, *Exhibition Catalogue*, Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York, 1977.

consisted of hitting each other with sticks and then releasing white doves, the symbol of peace.^①

American awareness of other threats to the environment became apparent around this time. The environmental movement in the United States could be said to have begun in earnest with the 1962 publication of excerpts from *Silent Spring*, a book by marine biologist and conservationist Rachel Carson. These excerpts appeared in June 1962, three months before the book's official publication in three issues of the *New Yorker* magazine. Carson's essays about environmental problems that resulted from the use of synthetic pesticides were widely read in this popular weekly.

Carson's work even attracted the attention of conservative artists such as Edward Hopper and his wife Josephine Nivison Hopper, who painted both urban and rural landscapes. They had long cherished the fragile natural life around their home on the outer reaches of Cape Cod, prizing the local birds and even the timothy grass that turned golden in autumn. Jo Hopper commented: "All Cape Cod grass is special. No weeds grow on Cape Cod; everything that comes out of the ground is beautiful."^② The aging Edward Hopper, already in poor health, managed to paint a watercolor of the local landscape, *Mass of Trees at Eastham*, later that summer of 1962.

Hopper's colleague and long-time friend, Charles Burchfield, had long painted nature from a closer perspective. He developed a deep love of nature and considered becoming a naturalist, but eventually his interest in aesthetics won out. By the age of nineteen, he was reading the essays of the American naturalist John Burroughs and those of the transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau. Burroughs was, after Thoreau, the most important writer in the early development of the conservation movement in the United States. Burchfield also read the travel journals of the naturalist John Muir and John James Audubon, the ornithologist, naturalist, and painter.

Burchfield's *Dream of Butterflies* of 1962 communicates the beauty of butterflies, but it took Rachel Carson to remind the viewer just how fragile butterflies were. She urged her readers to care about the butterflies, bees, birds, and other animals that were harmed by efforts to eliminate harmful

① Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body: The Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964*, Duke University Press, 1993, p. 101.

② Josephine Nivison Hopper to Mary F. Williams, letter of September 5, 1958; she noted that they read Rachel Carson in the *New Yorker* in her unpublished diary.

insects with unsafe pesticides like DDT. She described monarch butterflies as “brightly fluttering bits of life,” as she watched their migration past her home in Newagen Point in Maine for the last time in 1963. Even before Carson became identified with environmental activism, she had written about nature and science. She authored *The Sense of Wonder*, a book for children. Carson had begun writing about nature full-time during the 1950s. She had won the National Book Award for her 1951 book, *The Sea Around Us*, which also attracted many readers.

By the end of the 1950s, Carson focused on conservation, writing *Silent Spring*. It caused such a sensation that it was selected as the Book-of-the-Month for October 1962, bringing another 150,000 copies to readers all across the country. Carson's efforts alerted many Americans for the first time. An estimated audience of ten to fifteen million people saw the national television special, CBS Reports, “*The Silent Spring* of Rachel Carson” that aired April 3, 1963. Chemical companies worked to discredit her claims and tried to suppress her book but only created more public interest. The book caused change in national pesticide policy and an eventual ban on DDT and other pesticides. The activism that Carson encouraged eventually resulted in the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, a federal government bureau that is still operating.

Carson's death from complications of breast cancer in 1964 was marked by a popular cartoon drawn by the Mexican-American artist, Gustavo “Gus” Arriola (1917-2008), known as Gordo. One of his trademarks was to employ comic pseudonyms for many of his comic strips, usually a phonetic pun of a recognizable name or word. Fittingly, he used “Frenda Man” for this Gordo strip, rhyming “Friend of” with Brenda, the first name of a popular comic strip character, the reporter, “Brenda Starr,” implying that Carson was a “friend of mankind.”

Six months after the publication of *Silent Spring*, Murray Bookchin's book, *Our Synthetic Environment* (1962), raised issues about pesticides similar to those addressed by Carson. A decade earlier, Bookchin had warned about the dangers of chemical additives in food. Writing under pseudonyms, he was originally published under the name Lewis Herber. His environmental philosophy grew out of his leftist background. He believed that capitalism, with what he viewed as dominating hierarchies and emphasis on economic growth, necessarily destroyed nature. His point of view put him at odds with

ecologists who favored a more spiritual outlook and with environmentalists dedicated to more gradual reform.

Yet another important critique of consumer society in the United States during the early 1960s was Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, published in 1964. He attacked technology and "the manipulation of needs by vested interests." He blamed the new militarized, waste-oriented economy, linking the domination of nature to a post-scarcity society focused on poor consumer choices: the manipulated desire to possess things.

In 1965, Alan Sonfist first proposed a radical new purpose for art that would transform a city lot in the middle of Manhattan into a site-specific forest of native plants similar to what might have grown in the area prior to human intervention. He called this project Time Landscape and it took him until 1978 to realize it. Sonfist's stated goal is "to educate and inspire an understanding and protection of the natural world."^① His project was seen at the time as the polar opposite of fellow "Earth Artist" Robert Smithson's efforts to apply art concepts directly onto the earth in remote places, which often polluted the land in the process. It is fair to say that Smithson, in a work like *Asphalt Rundown* in 1969, an "Earthwork" produced in Rome, Italy, used the land, but his focus was neither on preservation nor restoration. Indeed, while Sonfist could only restore a tiny plot of land in Manhattan, he put the idea of returning the land to its pristine state into the public discourse. His Time Landscape is most significant for its role in raising awareness and setting in motion countless later reclamation projects.^②

In 1968, Paul Ehrlich published, *The Population Bomb*. His title uses metaphor to compare the rise in human populations to the atomic bomb, projecting major catastrophes, as humanity's needs outstripped available resources. Ehrlich was a founder of the movement known as Zero Population Growth. A center of the Zero Population Growth movement was Yale University, where activists argued "that a constantly increasing population is responsible for many of our problems: pollution, violence, loss of values and of individual privacy."^③ Though now rather forgotten, in the late 1960s Zero Population Growth became a big political movement in the United States and

① Alan Sonfist, brochure on the artist's website.

② For example work by Mary Miss or Lillian Ball.

③ "ZPG-A New Movement Challenges the U. S. to Stop Growing," *LIFE Magazine* (April 27, 1970), p. 12.

in parts of Europe and was linked to both environmentalism and feminism.

Several feminist artists also became active in environmentalism. Eco-feminism is the social movement that sees a link between the oppression of women and nature. One eco-feminist artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, based in New York City, is best known for her 1969 manifesto entitled *Maintenance Art—Proposal for an Exhibition*. She challenged the domestic role of women and proclaimed herself a “maintenance artist.”^① Ukeles often performs service-oriented artwork that she calls Maintenance, which she defines as the realm of human activities that keep things going, such as cooking, cleaning and child-rearing. Her project, “Touch Sanitation” (1970-1980), featured her shaking hands with more than 8500 workers in the New York City Department of Sanitation while saying “Thank you for keeping New York City alive.”

By the 1980s, another feminist artist, Helene Aylon, used performance art to protest the proliferation of Strategic Air Command (SAC) nuclear sites around the country. In 1982, she created an “Earth Ambulance.” With ten other women, she drove it across the United States, stopping at SAC sites to meet other women and to “rescue endangered Earth” by digging and placing earth into pillowcases—“another kind of sack.”^② She then transported the filled SACS to the United Nations Second Special Session on Disarmament on June 12, 1982. A self-proclaimed eco-feminist, Aylon’s anti-nuclear activism also includes her ongoing Bridge of Knots installations, covering the facades of museums with knotted pillowcases scripted with dreams and nightmares about nuclear war.

Alexis Rockman is a contemporary artist who paints post-apocalyptic scenes of how the landscapes might look in the future after climate change. His *Manifest Destiny* is a large panoramic mural that he painted on commission for the Brooklyn Museum in 2004. It portrays the Brooklyn waterfront with tropical vegetation but without any people, as he imagined it in the year 5004, after climate change resulted in a catastrophic sea level rise. “By then, he believes, the effects of global warming will have left New York

① <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2009-03-20/draft-mierle-interview/>.

② contrary to SAC

City soaking in 82 feet of water the color of orange pekoe tea.”^① Rockman consulted with scientific experts to formulate his nightmare vision of mutated fish and sea creatures that gleam with radioactivity and tropical vegetation all set among the submerged ruins of buildings, the Brooklyn Bridge, the wrecks of a Dutch sailing ship and a 20th-century submarine. After this mural was exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, it was featured in a show called “Alexis Rockman: A Fable for Tomorrow” at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D. C. The exhibition took its title from the first chapter of Carson’s *Silent Spring*.

The legacy of these artists who sounded the alarm about the environment goes on, sometimes in the face of those who would deny the fragility of the earth. Among American politicians, some, such as Texas Governor and recent Presidential contender, Rick Perry, deny global warming: “There is a substantial group of scientists out there who are skeptical about the ‘incontrovertible’ statements that global warming is due mainly to man’s involvement. What is true is that our temperatures have gone up and down for millennium.”^② Yet climate change has recently caused unprecedented drought in Texas and tornadoes and floods elsewhere in the United States. A little over a year ago, we witnessed the nuclear power disaster in Japan. Before that there was the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. Artists today not only make aesthetically pleasing reclamation projects, but they continue to keep environmental issues before the public and the politicians who have the power to act to protect the environment.

① Linda Yablonsky, ART/ARCHITECTURE; “New York’s Watery New Grave,” *New York Times* (April 11, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/11/arts/art-architecture-new-york-s-watery-new-grave.html>).

② Rick Perry, “Rick Perry talks global warming in Hampton, NH,” Saturday, October 1, 2011 (<http://newhamshireprimary.blogspot.com/2011/10/rick-perry-talks-global-warming-in.html>).