

MAMMUT #5

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Cover Image: Batholith Etchings by Eben Goff

The *Batholith Etchings* are somewhere between pictorial and physical. Drawn lines are the result of impressions of shard-shaped printing plates with rough edges and happenstance scratches. The tumbled shapes convey tectonic states of erosion and accumulation, where discord results in a harmonious natural process.

Eben Goff is a Los Angeles-based artist who investigates material process and landscape.

Title illustration on page 11 by Erin Hauber

Erin Hauber is principal designer at cottage industries (cottageindustriesdesign.com) where each day she investigates new ways of thinking and making. Her practice extends beyond the studio to include graduate studies at North Carolina State University, cross-disciplinary collaborations, teaching and mentoring emerging designers and curating design-related events.

Introduction

BY MATTHIAS MERKEL HESS

For our fifth issue of Mammut, we borrowed the title of the 2010 Gorillaz song Some Kind of Nature as a theme to investigate our ongoing interest in art and nature. Both terms are so broad as be almost indefinable and this opens up a lot of terrain for investigation, imagination and reflection on the meaning of the words and what role art can play in our relationship with processes of the world.

The issue is anchored by a reprint of a 2008 essay by Max Andrews on art after environmentalism, and an interview with the ecologically-minded curator Patricia Watts. The rest of the theme section contains work that we've seen in exhibitions or studios in Los Angeles. Rather than offer a specific direction, we hope the images and words here speak directly to the ongoing dialogue between human actions and the natural world.

"Some kind of nature (Some kind of nature, some kind of soul) Comes from one within us Oh, Lord, forgive me (Some kind of mixture, some kind of gold) It's got to come and find us All we are is dust"

—Some Kind of Nature by Gorillaz, 2010



The Ebb and Flow of Ecology and Art: An interview with Patricia Watts

BY MATTHIAS MERKEL HESS

Patricia Watts is founder and West Coast curator of ecoartspace, a nonprofit founded in 1999 to provide a platform for artists addressing environmental issues in the visual arts. She is currently co-curating a project in New Mexico commissioning international artists to create site-specific works around the state exploring perceptions of a larger universe, space travel, the science of space and the cosmos. Mammut co-editor Matthias Merkel Hess interviewed Watts via email about her work.

Matthias Merkel Hess: You have curated art and ecology themed shows for almost 15 years now. What's changed in that time?

Patricia Watts: That's a big question. So much has changed in the last 15 years!

In the late 1990s, I spent most of my time trying to educate state parks, nature centers, natural history museums and art museums about this work. Back then it was mostly an "invisible" type of art that for obvious reasons was being over looked—ecological art, artists restoring degraded environments, working in collaboration with biologists and watershed stakeholders, communities. It was a time when it was important for me to make distinctions with these activities in comparison to the earlier Earth Art and Land Art movements. I was a new mother and was interested in bringing these artists into schools to do educational workshops with students and felt aesthetics was a great way to illustrate the principles of ecology, to bring an awareness of our interdependence with the natural world. However, I also became concerned that artists could potentially contribute more to the consumption of nature without a real understanding of the science.

After the millennia, by 2002, with the war in the Middle East beginning to occupy our minds and diminish our resources, I think artists were desperately looking for new tools to engage the sciences. When we realized that the world was not going to end with Y2K, or 9/11, and that the internet was a great tool for sharing scientific data, artists were digging fast and deep for information to create content for their work. Much of what was being done in galleries remained traditional arts, painting, photography, and sculpture. However, a younger group of artists emerged on the scene by 2004-5, especially after our first big climate change hit with Katrina, and this work was more activist oriented, sited in populated environments outside the gallery walls. Around this same time, I had moved to the Bay Area and found with its rich history in environmental activism, there were artists doing important community-based projects. Much of this work was inspired by the Situationists movement of the 1960s and was more recently labeled relational aesthetics by Nicolas Bourriaud, and dialogic art by Grant Kester. It involved public actions, educational activities, walking and mapping environments, etc., including planting gardens, foraging foods, creating demonstration events of simple technologies, and providing examples of replicable systems for creating like-minded communities.

Something that I have also noted in the last six to seven years is that these artists are more consumer or product driven, focused on what people can do in their own backyards. As a generation that has grown up on television and computers, I think they are accustomed to having information at their fingertips and have had the support to do the right thing within the personal realm with quick response time. They are a more entitled consumer. I think my generation, the artists who came into their work during the late 80s/early 90s, when installation art and conceptual art was evolving, felt that looking at the big picture, a more visionary approach, was the way to go. They wanted to shine a light on the collective culture, to examine the way we were living and how it was affecting the planet as a whole.

All along the way, especially for the Art World, the question remained: Is it Art?

MMH: Does it matter if what you are doing is, as you put it, "Art" with a capital "A?"

PW: Yes and No. Or, No, definitely not CAPITAL A. I am more interested in how this work interacts with an audience, what are the strategies that the artists are using to engage citizens, scientists, policy makers, as well as the art world. How are they successful at what they are trying to achieve? I do think it is important to participate in a formal contemporary art dialogue, whether the work is acknowledged by critics or not. I usually find most critics misunderstand the work. They might be great writers, know art history or contemporary art theory, but do not understand the motivations of the artists or the science behind the work. If you don't understand the science or the principles of ecology, it is basically hard to know whether the work is good or not, in my opinion. The biggest criticism of this work is that it is not aesthetic, it is not a sophisticated object that allows collectors to engage in the work. It is work that is being made for an audience at large, the masses. It is only a recent phenomena that art schools are creating social practice programs that support this kind of work, after basically thirty plus years of community arts in the United States.



Windsock Currents by Crissy Field, 2005, San Francisco, California

Alternative energy installation by RT Livingston and interpretive performance by Red Dive. A month-long event through National Park Service in conjunction with UN World Environment Day.



 $Sweet \ Survival: Urban \ Apple \ Orchard \ II \ {\rm by \ Susan \ Leibovitz \ Steinman}, \\ 2006-2008, Sonoma \ County \ Museum, Santa \ Rosa, California$

MMH: I think it's a big challenge to make work that speaks to both scientific and aesthetic concerns. That's why I was particularly impressed by Gustav Metzger's 2007 "Reduce Art Flights" proposal, which specifically targets all the travel that goes on in the name of contemporary art. I think Metzger was also saying that the art world should address its own wastefulness before tackling larger issues. How do you negotiate the challenges of art that while often idealistic and informative, can come across to some as preachy and didactic or ineffectual and wasteful?

PW: I have been very impressed with some of these artists who really take the work seriously. One in particular, Eve Mosher, has refused to travel abroad to give a single lecture, preferring to book multiple engagements during an extended trip. It is great when an artist thinks about their footprint on the planet especially when choosing materials for installations. However, most artists take on too many projects, traveling all over the world, and use materials that they know are wasteful or worse, toxic to manufacture and to be around. There are a lot of potential contradictions for an ecological artist. As a curator, working both independently and having worked for a museum, I have tried to create sustainable standards for organizing a show by choosing green printers for invitations or eliminating snail mail, creating digital catalogues rather than printed ones, using Skype whenever possible for panel discussions, meetings, etc.

I think this practice has developed some useful strategies over time for disseminating information that is less didactic. I see many emerging artists being more playful, taking on alternate personae, creating performative works to address the pedantic aspects of educating people about our interdependence on this planet such as LA's Urban Rangers or Fallen Fruit collectives. I think these artists have been on a tough learning curve the last decade in creating a context, an environment for understanding a huge amount of information interpreted from scientific publications on climate change and information accessed online to early work done in the 60s and 70s in the environmental movement. There is definitely a harsher critique of this work in the museum or gallery context, compared to the community arts or performative work in the public sphere.

MMH: An environmental consciousness seemed to enter the mainstream in the last decade, for example with the Toyota Prius or just about every corporation touting its "green" credentials. To a certain extent, there seemed to be a parallel interest in eco-topics in the art world. Has this interest faded or is it still there?

PW: I think the green movement was rediscovered by artists in the 90s (the 60s turned upside down). As with any fad or movement, its roots are years prior. The com-

mercial world only woke up to the "green" movement when the numbers of people who were shopping for organic foods hit over 30 percent of the food market, somewhere around 2004/5. Artists have been addressing environmental issues through the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s. Although, there are so many exhibitions addressing the natural world right now I can barely keep track of them. On the ecoartspace fan page on Facebook we make around three posts a day with events, shows, etc. happening internationally. In a two-year period we now have almost 5,000 fans.

I definitely think we are riding a wave and that at some point in the near future, being green will just be normal, an inevitable transition due to a lack of natural resources. Behavior modification is a slow process, so over a 40-year period really, here in America, we might finally adapt to the fact that we cannot consume the world's resources without restraint. Something that people in countries with smaller land mass and higher populations figured out long before us.

Personally, I feel I am stepping back from focusing specifically on what you can do in your own backyard. I do think some of this work, probably a lot of it, is really a form of preaching to the choir. I don't have much hope for convincing countries like China to truly go green. There are simply too many people and the monetary gains are too hard to compete with when it comes to managing natural resources. I guess I feel in some way, we have pulled the plug already. My current focus is much more of a Macro perspective or a more spiritual way of exploring what it means to be human at this point in time on planet Earth. We are part of a much larger system, a universe that interacts with our planet in ways that we simply do not have any control over. When the sun flares and bombards our planet with solar radiation interfering with our communication systems and also magnetic poles can shift, it just seems evident to me now that we are dealing with something that is much bigger than saving the planet.

So, I guess my answer is yes, I do see that this work will fade out, like it did in the 1980s. Culture is a system that ebbs and flows with the economy and with our ability as humans to comprehend what we are doing to ourselves.

