

Comment

Ruminations on the role of artists in a world of science

Edward Morris, Susannah Sayler

These days a lot of people seem to be wondering about possible correspondences between art and activism and art and science. To get at that we have some business to take care of, namely answering the vexing question: What is art?

The definition of a word is its use. People get confused about this and it causes a lot of problems. Most often the question “What is Art?” arises in a critical context. In such a context we ought to acknowledge that Art refers more to an achievement than to a specific set of practices or objectives. That is to say: you can set out to make art; buy yourself some paints; get an easel; immerse yourself in a landscape; paint from noon to night; then show a critic what you have done and run the risk of that critic stating baldly “That is not Art.”

“That is not art” has become an increasingly fashionable rhetorical maneuver -- by both high and low practitioners of criticism. You are just as likely to hear it coming out of the mouth of a bewildered philistine glancing at a Brancusi as you are from a professional critic looking at photography by The Canary Project.

People are always tossing around definitions of Art. Here are few that come to mind, which I think actually jibe with how we use the word in the abstract way under consideration in this journal:

- “An axe to break the frozen sea inside us” (adapted from Kafka)
- “The creation of forms symbolic of human feeling.” Works that are “congruent with the dynamic forms of our direct sensuous, mental and emotional life.” (Suzanne Langer as found in Anne Spirn’s *The Language of Landscape*).
- “An emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time.” (Ezra Pound)

These definitions are chosen somewhat at random (they happened to be either on my mind or in a book that I am currently reading), but they, like nearly any definition of art that I can imagine, have the following in common: Art, as it is generally regarded, is a product of human activity that can access regions of feeling (and thought) that otherwise would be difficult or impossible to access (either because of their subtlety, immensity or undesirability).

So, whoever utters, “This is not Art” is always right in so far as it applies to him or her. (But that person could be very wrong about the capacity of a given work to reach others.)

The main point I want to establish with all this is that Art inevitably is a form of communication (even if the artist herself intended to be uncommunicative) because Art is always received/seen/listened to and something always is conveyed in the process. Whether that communication is able to access realms of feeling (and thought) worthy of the term Art or whether it is limited to something more pedestrian is a judgment call.

So if that is Art, then what is an artist? Answer: someone who aspires to make Art. (In other words, you can be an artist and never successfully make art. And by large this is true of the vast majority of artists).

In January 2006, my wife Susannah Sayler and I set out to photograph landscapes around the world that were being transformed by global warming. We called our work The Canary Project. From the beginning, as now, we had both activist aims and artistic ambitions. These two types of motivation overlap in places and in other places feel completely distinct. As activists we initially wanted to convey the urgency of global warming (at the time, particularly in the US, there was a big problem with people even acknowledging the reality of climate change). Because many people need to see something to believe it, we felt photographs were a good method for this.

Our artistic interests, however, are more difficult to express. In a way, we were interested in what we couldn’t see in the landscapes. How difficult it is to picture geological processes; how difficult it is to photograph danger; how seductive it is to capture the beautiful and have that be the focus of our energies.

We were interested too in a world without people and here the artistic aims begin to fray against the activist.

I could say a lot more about these artistic aims, but it would extend very much beyond the scope of this article. I also wish to say that while our artistic aims have deepened and evolved greatly, our activist aims have changed only slightly. People by and large are convinced that climate change is happening, but, incredibly, are by and large apathetic. Our task now is to motivate action. Part of this task is to deepen understanding of climate change so that the gravity of the situation is more truly felt; and part of this task is to energize a commitment to solutions. This is a crisis of vision. We have to show both the apocalyptic and the utopian possibilities. As artists attempting to make art, we have to show ourselves these things first. And that is not always easy.

So in answer to the question of whether we are artists or communicators? I would say both. As should be clear from the exposition of art above, we do not see “artist” and “communicator” as mutually exclusive. We hope to communicate on different levels to different people. We are also trying to communicate to ourselves. This last form of communication is exploration and is artistic intent.

We see no reason why the artist could not include “science” among the things he communicates. I doubt this function is entirely new, however. I think Freud was an artist and a scientist. I think much sculpture communicates science. But what we are talking about here is something slightly different. We are talking about artists attempting to communicate climate change or issues that are thought of as environmental. We are talking about picking up on the warning signals of science. We are talking about artists explicitly carrying forward a torch that scientists lit but which they can carry no further. This is perhaps a new role and one that I hope is embraced by more people in the art world.

It is extremely important to acknowledge that we (like most people working on this issue) have no power to corroborate or even hypothetically test the premises of climate science upon which the warnings of the IPCC and the National Science Academies are predicated. We are TRUSTING the science community to be right and we are hearing the unusual tones of urgency in the writing. We are acting on that trust.

In that sense, our work is necessarily a translation of science. We would not know what to look for in the landscapes without scientists telling us. Our response to climate change is predicated on the overwhelming but difficult-to-hear voice of the climate science community (particularly the IPCC and National Science Academies).

Scientists cannot gracefully become advocates or activists. It is mutually contradictory to their field. I am arguing that is not mutually contradictory to the field of artists, who are by nature communicators, even if they are complex communicators. (“Tell the truth, but tell it slant” says Emily Dickinson). Therefore, it is our responsibility to translate this work of scientists into an affective mode.

(By the way, we would very much like to work with a scientist on a pure collaboration. Thus far we have worked with scientists as informants and guides, but no scientist thus far has taken a real interest in helping us shape our work, to produce a work together. I hope this changes.)

So does that mean that the artist has a “social” role today? Not inherently, but that role is certainly available. In choosing to have a social role the artist ensures that his or her work will have value beyond its merits as Art.

The artist may also find that the social function serves as a block to some people in appreciating whatever unique emotional/intellectual access that work has to offer. In other words the social function may ensure that the work’s character as Art is obscured to some or to all, temporally or permanently. That is a bit sad for the artist, and a test of his or her commitment to the social function in question. Yet, it is disingenuous, and actually I think a bit reprehensible, privately to harbor intent for a social function but to disclaim that intent publicly. Nonetheless many artists do this for the benefit of their careers. They do this because they fear the “This is Not Art” critique, which is always justified for the individual making it, but nonetheless sometimes wrong and the product of elitism or other forms of closed-mindedness.

In fact, we believe that if you are an artist specifically engaged in an issue like the degradation of landscape from climate change and resource mismanagement (like Edward Burtnysky, for example), and you decide not to acknowledge your social function, that is tantamount to Nihilism. We are categorically opposed to Nihilism (despite the beguiling films of Werner Herzog).

Authors

Edward Morris co-founded The Canary Project in 2006 with his wife Susannah Sayler and assumed a director role in 2007. Morris was formerly a partner at the James Mintz Group, an international investigative firm. In 2004, he was one of the lead investigators in the impeachment inquiry of Connecticut Governor John Rowland and has managed investigations in a variety of complex litigation matters including, a multi-billion dollar antitrust case; defense of toxic tort claims; and patent infringement cases. Morris received a MA in Regional Studies: East Asia from Harvard University and a BA from Wesleyan University. Morris became interested in gathering visual evidence of global warming after reading a series of articles on the subject by Elizabeth Kolbert. This interest became a passion after seeing the massive retreat of the Pasterze Glacier in Austria. He is currently a Loeb Fellow at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. E-mail: edward@canary-project.org.

Susannah Sayler's images of global warming have been exhibited in major art and science museums, galleries, public venues as well as in print media. As a travel photographer, Sayler has photographed for numerous guidebooks and magazines in the U.S., Europe and Asia. As an artist, she has exhibited her work throughout the U.S. and had her first show in Spain in 2005.

In recent years Sayler has been increasingly drawn to landscapes. She is interested in the way landscapes can be photographed to convey complex and subtle emotional content, not usually associated with nature photography - emotions like isolation, vulnerability or elation. As a teen, Sayler made a project of measuring the acidity in lakes and ponds near her house after hearing about the threat of acid rain. That impulse has recently been reawakened and combined with her technical interest in how to photograph landscapes. Sayler has an MFA in Photography and Related Media from the School of Visual Arts. More of her work and a cv can be found at: www.saylerphotography.com. She is currently a Loeb Fellow at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design.

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