

Dan Peterman – On art and ecology

Interview by Oliver Zybok (English version)

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Berücksichtigung kollaborativer Elemente

(Considering Collaborative Elements)

Monografien & Interviews

Introduction: Oliver Zybok

Climate change is an unintended consequence of industrial and technological processes. Within the parameters of the optimization of these processes, humanity has achieved astonishing progress. Recent decades have seen an enormous increase in computing power, in the performance and safety of cars, the productivity of dairy cows, the versatility of construction materials etc. On the other hand, there has been a rise in the number of disaster reports: the ozone layer is thinning, the poles are melting, tsunamis and tornadoes are getting more frequent, it is warm in February and cold in June, we have swine fever, bird flu, BSE and the rest. Common to all these problems is that they are characterized by major optimization within the intended parameters. But at the same time this optimization seems to be accompanied by a worsening of environmental problems which arise from unintended parameters or consequences of the optimized processes.

O. Z.: In our globalized world an increasingly large role is being played by larger, interdisciplinary associations of great complexity. People are having to learn to cope with things they don't understand if they are not to capitulate in the face of the incredible complexity. How can art react to this current awareness problem on the part of the general public?

D. P.: Artists have the possibility of continually adapting the ways in which they pose questions and engage situations. So they have a lot, potentially, to offer in the face of complexity you point at here. There certainly is no single correct way to build awareness of current ecological crisis or even a single way of defining what, precisely, the problems are. But art can be a dynamic form of inquiry that launches diverse, multifaceted, interdisciplinary models. The important thing, as ecological issues sweep into ever more compelling view, is that we bring many different tools to bear on our situation. Not just tools that tell us how we should fix things, but tools that help deepen the telling of the story, or that guide us to look in directions we have been neglecting.

O. Z.: Your artistic activity has for more than 20 years been closely coupled with a complex building in Chicago. Could you briefly explain the importance of "The Building", as it is tersely referred to, for your artistic work up to the present day?

D. P.: The more socially engaged projects I've launched or collaborated on—including a youth bike shop, multiple urban agricultural projects, and several experimental cultural initiatives—re-examine some basic assumptions about the role of an artist in society at large, and

more specifically, the role of the artist in his or her own corner of the world. For me this work is based on a complex chemistry of personal commitment and artistic insight and is a sustained effort to be critically alert as an artist and citizen. A stable context for pursuing this kind of work is essential. In other words, a site that can anchor activities that evolve over long periods of time as opposed to scattered sites and arbitrary, limited time frames. The "Building" you referred to has continually evolved to accommodate diverse people and projects and of course different audiences. It's been a studio/laboratory for me, but the process of launching projects here doesn't mean that they are destined to be identified as art. This has been a situation that has allowed me an extended meditation on the relationships that form between a diverse cluster of activities in a specific, frequently conflicted, urban context. Managing the building, has been an exercise in managing systems and local ecologies. And, at the conceptual core of this work, there are aesthetic dimensions that I find compelling and that continually feed into other projects. As a brief follow up to your question, the building, after burning down in 2001 and being rebuilt, now operates as the "Experimental Station". It is less fluid than it was in its earlier, deliberately unnamed phase in the 90's; but has solidified its presence in the local community. It is a bit more institutional—by necessity—but still allowing me to push on the margins of a socially engaged art practice.

O. Z.: What would you say was the relationship between art and science?

D. P.: Over the years I've playfully explored this relationship with projects like, "Synthetic Sewage" in the late 1980's, "Sulfur Cycle" at the MCA in Chicago, and "the Universal Lab" more recently. My personal response is to shy away from the restrictiveness of scientific method, and poke fun at scientific certainty, but I frequently rely on scientific analysis and appreciate the intuitive decision-making that often shapes and informs scientific work. The impact of climate change, the urgency of addressing ecological issues, is to some extent pulling art and science together. Science has information that must find its way into intelligent policy. That means that the complex stories related to how we got here, what the future will look like, how quality of life will be affected, what agency we as individuals have, must be quickly and compellingly told. The problem here is pushing an oversimplified notion of art as a means of translating information to new audiences. This is, understandably, what the scientific community sometimes asks of artists. In the best circumstances the possibility of real interdisciplinary collaboration emerges at this intersection of art and science, in a climate of maximum flexibility and openness.

O.Z.: Can you think of an example from actual practice where this interdisciplinary approach (between art and science) has been successful in the long-term?

D.P.: Many artists have made significant work in relationship with scientists: Mel Chin and his bio-remediation plantings, the experimental art and technology projects in California that influenced the development of Robert Irwin and James Turrell, some of the bio-gas energy research projects that the Danish collaborative "Superflex" has conducted, to name a few. I've frequently communicated and collaborated with scientists. I'm in regular contact with a physicist

at the University of Chicago who loves to scheme about exhibitions and demonstrations and models that might open up his research to a broader public. We haven't done anything together yet, but something will probably happen. I can't think of a better approach for interdisciplinary interaction than the simple fact that we see each other every few months and bounce ideas off of each other. I think it is important to not over-determine this kind of process, but also not underestimate the value of simply bringing people together and creating occasions for interdisciplinary ideas to take root.

O. Z.: Most of your works are, regardless of the period in which they were created, always of current relevance—this is not a service artists should be expected to provide. I recall your 1993 work *Spending Energy/Storing Energy Spent* for the Kontext Kunst exhibition in the Neue Galerie at the Landesmuseum Joanneum in Graz. Here you made reference to the behaviour of collecting and recycling of old batteries in Austria particularly. Of course the work has a global character and now seems more timely than ever: “renewable energies” in the transferred sense.

D. P.: It is nice to hear someone say this, but of course I can also imagine how easy it is to say that all of my work is irrelevant too. Some of my thematic interests, and ways of working, bridge the emergence of ecological discourse in the sixties and seventies in the United States and elsewhere. As a student, along with the conceptual art influences you might predict, I was interested in the political and social dimensions of artists like Hans Haake, Stephan Willats, and Martha Rosler, and I was also reading Gregory Bateson, and *Whole Earth Catalogs*. I've been interested in these kinds of ideas for a long time, and even though I frequently feel like each project struggles to completely reinvent the way I make or do something, I realize there is a lot of connection between past and present works. Systems of material in motion, and in particular waste systems have always been of particular interest to me. The loss or abandonment of the originally intended purpose, that is to say objects after they have been “used up” creates a much more interesting and open economy of values and ideas and meanings. “*Spending Energy/Storing Energy Spent*” was a reference to this kind of situation. The batteries were dead, presumably useless, and had become an environmental liability. There was no market for them so they were simply being collected by the local government. This was the right thing to do but also wonderfully absurd. My stacking and playing with the spent batteries in the context of an exhibition simply brought them into a new field of vision without any need to transform or redefine what they already are.

O. Z.: Quite generally you devote a lot of attention to the theme of recycling. What is striking is that the remains and residues you occupy yourself with represent in your thinking the basis for positive changes. The scepticism takes a clear back seat behind a certain optimism.

D. P.: Participating in a conversation, like making art, is an optimistic act. If I'm going to commit time and energy it is because I think there is something to be gained. This may sound very simplistic, but I'm not talking about providing solutions or prescribing appropriate behavior. I'm simply expressing an optimism that my time and yours will be well spent in this conversation. Waste systems, recycling included, generally involve a rich set of circumstances related to

monetary valuations, cultural perceptions, environmental impacts, taboos etc. Looking closely at recycling systems reveals a lot of slippage, failure, and waste along with the benefits, and little utopias, that might be found. The point is that it is a sphere of interaction that is frequently open to reinterpretation and reinvention. It carries with it an intrinsic criticality of an over-consumptive society that has swung wildly out of sync with its own ecosystem. As a result it is very complex and compelling. So yes, in short, I'm very optimistic that there are many fruitful conversations to be had.

O. Z.: What projects are you currently working on?

D. P.: I am currently working on the restoration of a project here in Chicago that has had some hard public use. this is a minimal outdoor installation from the mid 1990's that is somewhat like an oversized Carl Andre sculpture, very minimal, but made of reprocessed, post consumer plastic. Entitled "Ground cover", the piece carries forward a critique of consumer culture by quietly asserting its presence in public urban space. It has developed a very popular secondary use as an outdoor summer dance floor. Now 13 years old it need some major rebuilding and a revisiting of my original intentions including its "drift" into a public accessory for dancing. I'm enjoying addressing these issues that question the rules and identity and meaning of objects in public space.

A more current project "Granary" involves the full sized recreation of a 2000 year old Han Dynasty burial ceramic of a grain storage structure. The ceramic model sits in the asian collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. There is a commuter train line that originates at the Art Institute and ends, one hour south, at the Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park located at a 700 acre prairie restoration site. That is where my full scale version will be sited, over-looking an actively farmed field. I'm interested in all the layers of ecological connection that spin out of this: the urban train line, food production and food security issues, historical references and traditions of agriculture, urban versus rural land use issues, and of course the institutional contrasts.

O. Z.: Do you maintain close contacts with environmental activists? Do they have any influence on your work or conversely, do you with your artistic attitude have any lasting influence on their actions?

D. P.: Yes. There are a number of people that I maintain close contact with. Over time, I've been fortunate to develop relationships with individuals who have strong insights into what I do and how my projects put ideas out into the world, but who are also very clear on what they do as activists. I think that a beneficial exchange occurs. At times I think we've been able to exchange our critical frameworks, slip into a different pair of shoes, so to speak, and reassess our own activity. In addition, I think the cultural value of conceptual art, outside of the artworld, is under rated. I wish there were more activists who had a stronger background in conceptual art.

O.Z.: Have there been specific projects with environmental activists that you've carried out together?

D.P.: Yes, Back in the late Eighties I did a project with Ken Dunn who is a highly regarded eco-activist in Chicago. This was called the "Chicago Compost Shelter" and involved building a shelter out of a VW van buried in composting horse manure and wood chips. The decay of this material produced heat that in turn heated the van that served as a warmed, emergency shelter for homeless people who worked at Dunn's recycling center. The project had an engaging interplay of practicality, because the shelter really functioned well as a source of warmth and shelter during a very cold winter, and symbolism that foregrounded the difficulties of being homeless in Chicago. Part of the shared motivation behind building this project was the city government's grossly inadequate attempts to address homelessness. Since this project there have been many different strategies and degrees of collaboration that I have participated in, in fact I find it hard to not think of what I do without collaborative elements being taken into account.

O. Z.: Isn't one making it too easy for oneself when one declares the climate issue to be primarily a moral issue, as Al Gore tried to do in his 2006 film *An Inconvenient Truth*?

D. P.: I don't have any problem with making this a moral issue because that is going to speak to some people effectively. I'd like to be sure, however that we all get a dose of humbleness and understand there are going to be many different ways that we need to come to grip with climate change. So yes, I agree with you that any single approach is too easy. It is an economic issue, a public health issue, a philosophical issue, a spiritual issue, a personal issue and a global issue. We as individuals are all part of the "we" that is increasingly in tension with the ecosystem that sustains us. Climate systems are going to change with increasing rapidity, and other ecological systems are going to collapse. As a result humans living on planet earth are going to be increasingly stressed. There is no shortage of reasons for grappling with this situation so I'm not going to be overly critical of Gore. As a prominent political figure, he launched deeply into a personal narrative, as a tool to help us digest some basic scientific facts. I give him a lot of credit for the willingness to do that and also for Obama's ability to now move some progressive environmental policies forward.

O. Z.: Your works don't come across as moralizing, instead you often show a great deal of humour when you put your finger on the wound. I'm thinking for example of the 1996 work *Accessories to an Event*. Do you deliberately use humour as a stylistic device?

D. P.: A stylistic device sounds too formal. Humor in some form or another is a necessary binder. I don't know how an idea ever makes it off the drawing table if humor isn't lurking somewhere. It may be absurd, ironic, playful or dry as hell—I may be the only one who sees it—but it's always there.

O. Z.: To what extent do you think art institutions should get involved in environmental themes, for example the current climate-change debate?

D. P.: My inclination is not to limit the discussion to art institutions, but yes, to the degree that all institutions should get more involved, art institutions should as well. Your question, however, is probably intended to question the degree to which an art institution should specifically adjust its own programming to respond to issues of sustainability, or climate change. Here I have to hesitate. In my own teaching in Chicago, I've adopted a more overt Art and Ecology agenda, but a fundamental piece of this agenda is the recognition that the artworld, by virtue of its flexibility and its diversity is already an ecologically significant component of society. To some degree this aligns with the notion of "modest proposals" that Charles Esche has written about. The key point here is not to restrict the arena of ideas that artists address but to expand them. This means empowering artists and what they do. It may sound cliché, but good art helps us see further, and better, and deeper into our world and ourselves. In my teaching I'd be frustrated by only looking at eco art, land art, systems art, etc. The best artists (not necessarily the most prominent) are already beneficial ecological forces even if they are not thematically linked to environmentalism, climate change, or sustainability. I believe the intersection of art and ecology is a valuable cultural niche, gaining in influence, but not likely, in my opinion, to benefit from voicing a mandate for directing institutional programming.

O.Z.: By the way, where are you teaching?

D.P.: I am teaching at the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

O. Z.: What remains to be done?

D. P.: I think that is a pretty good question to keep asking ourselves.

(End)