

# Trumpeter (1994)

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## Art as Environment

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About the Author: *John Grande* is a Montreal-based freelance writer whose first book *Art and Environment* was recently published by The Friendly Chameleon, Toronto. His next book *Art as Environment* dealing with the same issues will be published in the Spring of 1994 by Black Rose Books, Montreal, Canada.

Ecological imperative or environmental hysteria? In an age of cultural relativism it all depends upon which version of the truth you're shopping for, or does it? *Which nature? Whose Art?* reads a recent brochure from TICKON (Tranekaer Internationale Center for Kunst og Nature) on the island of Langeland in Denmark, the latest testing ground for an art involved in establishing a new relation with Nature. These questions are extremely pertinent to artists working towards the betterment of "a world that is vulnerable in some absolute sense" .1. The great irony is that this is happening at exactly the same time as the formal definitions of art and the theories they are built upon, are fragmenting and hybridizing. When Picasso painted *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907), adopting the angular faces from an imported marginal culture, the violent, abstract fury of his groundbreaking vision destroyed any lingering notion of continuous and contextualized reality, thus furthering the visionary schism between humanity and Nature. For all its so-called individualism, today's art eulogizes the culture of dislocation and consumption. Individualism has lost its roots in endemic collective cultural values.

What exactly is Nature? A word, a subject, an issue or a state of being? For centuries we have assumed history and art to be a series of formal progressions. Inimically tied to the economic progress of Western civilization our cultural definitions of Nature, like the art itself, has defined Nature as aesthetic real estate, mere material to be manipulated, transposed and reformed to present some suitable eulogy to humanity's superior relation to Nature. "Man invented art. It wouldn't exist without him. Art has no biological source. It's addressed to a taste", Duchamp once said..2. Who could now deny that art has always been a part of Nature? Both involve materials, their physical properties and inherent limits. They have origins and involve a context. It is at this crucial point of juncture that economy and ecology truly meet.

Art is as necessary to society as the sun is to Nature, for it guides us to identify who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. It is a point many of today's assemblage artists fail to realize as they allude to the malaise of over- production and consumption, appropriating and manipulating the flotsam and jetsam of industrial society in new and ingenious ways. A seemingly inevitable response to utilitarianism gone amuck, driven to its limits by a marketplace where hyper- inflation and resource exploitation go hand in hand, their works do nothing to re-connect us with Nature. They merely reaffirm the syntax of the industrial product. The inner ear of the product will always be the materials they are made from in their original, natural context. Responding directly to various aspects of climate, geology, vegetation, even other life forms, today's environmental artists (David Nash, Andy Goldsworthy and Nils Udo among others) approach these concerns from the other end of the spectrum creating plantings, spit-welded ice assemblages, tree grafts, patterns of berries and leaves floating in idyllic

backwoods reserves far from the hue and cry of the urban centers where most of us live. How socially involved is this new vision?

It's a long time since we idealized landscapes, saw Nature as a seemingly inexhaustible reserve, as the Romantics did when the first factory smokestacks were going up, though our advertising billboards still project those images. Re-discovering Nature in its own context, as individuals opposed to the alienation and confused reality of our cities, environmental artists are proffering a vision of art as a detail of the landscape. Disconnected from the root cause of environmental devastation, a burgeoning civilization and economy based on profit and competition, this brand of environmental art is as exclusive in its purist vision as formalist or even post-modern art. Ephemeral is in. We attribute ethical values to a work of art based on its supposed permanence or impermanence without considering that human culture and civilization themselves have always been a part of the culture of Nature. Kandinsky hermetically sealed natural design and color and codified them into an all too rigid spiritual system or language of art. Goldsworthy inverts the order only to come up with design in Nature. Somehow it seems too simplistic, particularly as our vision of Nature in the West has always implied the unbridled chaos and delight of a constant, spontaneous and endless transformation. Where do society and Nature meet? Again, the culture of relativism plays a role, precisely because these works involve an ecological consciousness as premeditated as Duchamp's once was, a land art in microcosm, where the subject has been preselected and demands that Nature be considered only in its ethically correct context. We need to do more art that involves and adapts Nature in our cities.

Much of the art we now see in galleries and museums no longer attempts to embrace an all-encompassing aesthetic, but instead preselects its discourse, style and approach without stopping to consider that art might indeed have a greater purpose than mere titillation or fulfillment of one's innermost fantasies (read artistic freedom). If post-modernism involved abandoning a rationale of responsibility to the inherent characteristics of materials and their origins in Nature, and relied intensely on a basic disconnectedness from materials, it was because it reflected the characteristics of hyper-inflation that invaded the language and marketplace of art. The international market continues to view the artistic output of specific bio-regional and marginal, yet ethnically resolved cultures, as potential product, not as a cultural reality. Today's environmental artists have consciously excluded from their discourse the bio-regional diversity of human cultures that are also part of the culture of Nature. Where is the humanity in all this? If we are now experiencing a softening of the contemporary art market, like the economy in general, could this be a symptom of our inability to realize the important role cultural identity plays in generating intricate, locally based economies that integrate a responsibility for indigenous resources with industry? Artists have an important role to play in sensitizing us to these issues, because they instinctively understand these concerns.

The journey of self-discovery into and through Nature that is part of the creative process by definition involves a meeting of the unconscious processes of procreation inherent to Nature and of the objectification necessary to any artistic practice. The reason so much of today's art lacks the essential ingredients of innovation, ingenuity and creativity is precisely because collective cultural and social values that have generally given art its meaning have been eroded and fragmented by our ongoing drive for the nebulous freedoms that an aesthetics based on an ephemera-culture of consumption now offers us. From this oblique perspective it becomes hard to see the central connection between Nature and the environments that surround us, yet all environments are Nature transposed, reconstituted, fabricated. Nature is as oblique and varied in its present-day forms as civilization. The two are in a constant state of flux and overlap. Any serious attempt to discover the dark heart of real creativity must involve participating in the re-definition and re-contextualization of human culture within the context of Nature as it now exists. Meanwhile, Nature remains as oblivious to human endeavor as it ever was. It is up to us to re-generate our social and environmental landscape, to make it more-

interesting in new and varied ways. Much of this will have to happen in the major cities where most of us now live.

If reason has been part and parcel of humanity's survival gear over the ages and has led to the dilemmas we now face with the art of our times, to abandon reason in favor of the relativistic dogma of pure ideation cannot possibly lead us out of the legacy of our current dilemma. It is only by confronting issues of interpretation and mindset that art will find new avenues for re-generation. To think, act and create naturally is not an easy task in an ephemera culture that emphasizes distraction, distortion and de-contextualization. It requires the awareness that everything does indeed matter. The solutions are neither structural nor syntactic, but involve a basic confidence in perception, intuition, and the ritual of exploring and working with a sense of responsibility for the potential power and magical properties of materials. Ingenuity and innovation is a more powerful antidote to civilization's woes than any sense of guilt or culpability.

We are experiencing a slow moving transformation to a more holistic state of culture where resource and communications technology and permaculture will have to work in tandem. Good and evil, right and wrong imbued art with hierarchical religious and ideological overtones. They helped to form the vision we now need to leave behind. When we look at a tree! no different than it was one thousand years ago, we say Nature *reproduces* its own forms, when in fact Nature *procreates* itself. It is we who invest Nature with a purpose as a living object-container. We do the same in the eclectic urban wilderness which is likewise Nature on an *a priori* basis, simplifying its confusion of details. To develop a stronger relation to Nature we now have to generate procreative models for human culture and civilization - our future depends on it. Nature is the art of which we are a part.

## Footnotes

1. Thomas Berry, Art in the Ecozoic Era, *Art Journal*, Summer 1992, p. 48.
2. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, New York: DaCapo Press, 1987, p. 100.

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