

The visual arts and the ecological challenge

Article in connection with the exhibition. *To plant Art at a Food Camp. Mad Foodcamp 2011 August 28* by Else Marie Bukdahl. D. Phil. Former president for The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts.

Visual arts have always been, to a greater degree than poetry, interested in understanding, interpreting and visualizing nature's many changing manifestations and the complicated, organic growth processes that have created them. The act of creation in nature and art - despite their differences - has often been compared and the world of art has been characterized as a new form of nature. Especially during the Baroque period individual artists used elements from nature as artistic building materials - for example Giuseppe Arcimboldi (1527-1593) made his portraits using fruit, vegetables, fish and books.

It is within garden art - first and foremost in Arabic and English Romantic gardens - that one can most clearly see efforts to protect nature and be more careful about using its resources whilst creating an earthly paradise. However, it is first during the 1960s that Ecological Art began to appear. It was American artists who were in the forefront - and primarily Robert Smithson - who at this time produced large and small Land Art, projects "where the artist's materials consist of natural phenomena or of nature itself". For example, *Spiral Jetty* (1970).



He characterized Ecological Art as art that uses the actual site as starting point and basis for creative activity, whether on land, water or in the air. It involved working within the site and with moving oneself within the site in order to investigate and present

fundamental processes, concepts and structures. The raw materials are nature itself and things created by nature.¹

At the same time a number of other prominent artists - for example Michael Singer and Alan Sonfist - were occupied forming the landscape from the standpoint of nature itself. They are individually quite different, but what they have in common, as Michael Auping commented in 1983, is that their art works "directly or indirectly, reflect the concerns of increasing numbers of biologists, ecologists and legislators attempting to develop a legal ethic that addresses man's relationship to the land; an ethic that views natural objects, such as trees, mountains, rivers and lakes as having a legal right to existence."² They created works in nature and/or restored it.

Joseph Beuys launched a project in 1982 at Documenta in Kassel, for the growing of 7000 trees, which he called a "social sculpture".³ He has described his ecological goal as follows: "I believe that planting these oaks is necessary not only in biospheric terms, that is to say, in the context of matter and ecology, but in that it will raise ecological consciousness - raise it increasingly, in the course of the years to come, because we shall never stop planting."⁴ A part of the project has been realized in New York in West 22nd Street between 10th and 11th Avenues.

Robert Morris planned an ecological project, which he called "working farm" (1968) but it was never realized.

By the end of the eighties Michael Singer, had become renowned for his innovative approach to garden design, architecture, infrastructure and planning as a means to "promote environmental justice, generate ecological renewal, inspire civic responsibility and enhance quality of life without sacrificing economic viability." He has often asked the following question: how do we balance and integrate human needs with those of nature, how do we live with nature rather than against it?

He responds by creating ecological gardens, for example *Concourse C. Denver international Airport* (1994), Colorado. He responds also by converting power plants into inviting buildings with an aesthetic utilization of "green technology" and by letting nature take over facades and leisure areas.

¹ Cited in: E. M. Bukdahl, "The breakaway from classic aesthetics, the Romantic garden and 1970s ecological art" in *The good, the beautiful and the sustainable? SBI – Town Planning 69* - Institute for National Building Research, 1994, p. 110.

² Cited by E. M. Bukdahl in "*The Re-Enchantment of Nature and Urban Space. Michael Singer Projects in Art, Design and Environmental Regeneration*, 2011, Utzon Center, Aalborg, p. 12.

³ Norbert Scholz, "Joseph Beuys 7000 Oaks in Kassel," *Anthos* (Switzerland), no. 3 (1986), p. 32.

⁴ Johannes Stüttgen, *Beschreibung eines Kunstwerkes* (Düsseldorf: Free International University, 1982), p. 1.



For example, *Solid Waste Transfer and Recycling Center (1989-1993)*, Phoenix, Arizona is transformed into an enthralling and fully functional facility.⁵



Michael Singer has shown how design can innovatively address environmental, social, political and economic concerns, as well as provides solutions that promote regenerative outcomes. He is also interested in encouraging ecological production in the

⁵ Cited by E. M. Bukahl in *"The Re-Enchantment of Nature and Urban Space. Michael Singer Projects in Art, Design and Environmental Regeneration"*, 2011, Utzon Center, Aalborg, p. 91. In this book one can find many examples of Michael Singer's sustainable and artistically convincing gardens, architecture, infrastructure and city planning. Many of these projects are the collaborative work of the *Michael Singer Studio* and his interdisciplinary team

local area. This has also become one of his artistic areas of responsibility. In an interview he has pointed out that:

“In the USA a movement has started, which could be called "back to the future", where we learn from the good things of the past. For example, there are many people who produce vegetables locally; instead of transporting them half way round the world they can be grown hydroponically in water with organic fertilizer. It is spreading at the moment in the USA. We want to combine technical know-how with the sensibilities of the old days. Young people who, for example, have taken a degree in philosophy or linguistics, cultivate their urban kitchen gardens with great ardour on balconies and roof terraces in the cities.”⁶

Michael Singer's newest work is *South Cove Environmental Regeneration Islands*, in West Palm Beach Florida.



It can be called a "21 Century environmental version of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. Michael Singer tells us that the stone spiral "will soon be planted with oysters and salt water filtering plants to regenerate the now polluted waters and provide access to the public in order for them to understand how we need to re-claim the natural life that was systematically destroyed throughout the 20th Century. And how this can be very beautiful even in an urban setting."⁷

In the last three decades more and more artists - also the artists whose work is on display in the exposition *Planting Art at Foodcamp* - are working towards finding artistically satisfying solutions regarding the relationship between art and ecology.

⁶ Interview by the art critic and writer, Lisbeth Bonde with Michael Singer in *Weekendavisen* August 5, 2011. Michael Singer has also created a Center for Creative Solutions for Marlboro College, Brattleboro in Vermont. Indeed Vermont, where he lives during the summer and fall is at the forefront of the local, sustainable agriculture movement. See his description of the Center and the latest summer program: <http://ccs.marlboro.edu/>

⁷ Unpublished letter to Else Marie Bukdahl, April, 11, 2012.

Parallels between science and art, and between philosophy and art, have inspired their artistic production. But they know that since the concept never entirely coincides with artistic expression, visual art is able to grasp perspectives or reveal traces and significances that the philosopher and the scientist cannot grasp with their tools alone. The work of art is a visible world full of presence and intensity. In principle it may be experienced by all, irrespective of individual background.

The chairman of the well-known and successful organic food company *Årstiderne* (The Seasons), Thomas Hartung, has had the excellent idea to - as he puts it - “plant art at a food camp”, at the big *MAD Food Camp Festival* at Refshale Island in Copenhagen. Therefore, together with Anette Holmberg MA, he invited 4 artists to create installations or other forms of art that contain new visual responses to the relationship between art and ecology, art and food production. Anette Holmberg is the Founder of Yard Gallery and the Shipyard loft CPH. The four artists have all created new, visual strategies and extended a concept of art that enshrines a new understanding of ecology and have sometimes actually developed ecological food products.

Søren Dahlgaard has always experimented with both the artistic forms of expression and the materials that he has used. In 2008 he exhibited no less than 135 dough portraits at the Danish National Museum of Art. In his videos he has drawn on surprising aspects of our reality. The same is true of his installations, for example, the *Breathing Room* (2010), which is a very impressive art project. You enter a white room, which literally breathes. His most comprehensive work is *growing vegetables on the coral island Hibalhidhoo*. From 2002-04 he built a large vegetable farm on a small coral island in the Maldives. The idea was to find out which vegetables can grow in the humid and hot tropical climate of the Maldives in order to produce fresh vegetables for the inhabitants and tourist resorts in the area, since all vegetables were usually imported from far away. It was a pilot project in drip irrigation. This is an irrigation method, which saves water and fertilizer by allowing water to drip. It is a very successful alternative to the traditional methods. A cornucopia of many different vegetables was cultivated.



This system together with other new forms of technology was introduced to many island communities and it has contributed to a better lifestyle for the inhabitants.

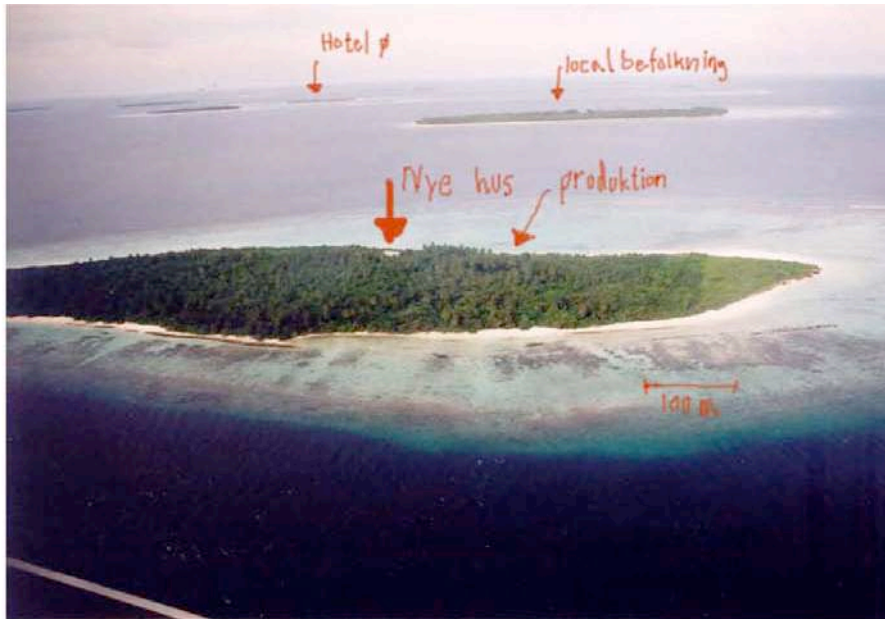
In 2011 he set up an exhibition entitled *Growing Vegetables on a Coral Island* in Aarhus Contemporary Art Center (22.1- 3.4 2011). The main focus was on technology, research and all the knowledge that is needed to run the entire production that a greenhouse represents. At the exhibition he presented, among other items, *9-meter row of chili plants growing under Green Power LED production module deep red/blue 45 W and in the foreground you can see a Green Power LED powering lamp. Deep red/white 18 W.*



Another work presented was *60 cucumbers, 70 chili- and 30 tomato plants. Automatic drip irrigation system, fertilizer mixer, EC-, pH and hydrometer. Growlights Agro 400 W 12 pcs. (Photosynthetic Photon Flux) 660 mmol/sek (yellow light spectrum). Fans, pollinating bees, predator mites have been released to eat thrips on the chili plants.* It is all about systems that are used in the great project *Growing Vegetables on a Coral Island.*

Hibalhidhoo. Rasheed Araeen, who is one of the founders of Eco aesthetics, also bases the theme for 2011 in Aarhus Art building on the manifesto of Eco aesthetics from 2009. He comments correctly that Søren Dahlgaard has created a work that “enters into life’s processes” and has given an island group a new basis for life. The project has also, Rasheed stresses, contributed in a productive way to “demolish the difference between instrumental productivity and artistic creativity.”⁸ And it has thereby made a new opening within the concept of art. In the exhibition *Planting Art at Foodcamp* we also meet Søren Dahlgaard's project from the coral Island *Hibalhidhoo* presented artistically as an installation of photographs. He has placed a small island of sand (3 meter diameter) on the grass in the festival area, suitably next to the international conference stage, with some armchairs and photo albums showing the research, construction, testing of plants and life on the island during the 2 years of the pilot project.

⁸ Søren Dahlgaard, "Discussion: Rashed Araeen and Søren Dahlgaard" in *op. cit.*,



Images from the vegetable farm in the Maldives, which employed and trained 15 people from 2002-04 by Soren Dahlgaard.

The island Hibalhidhoo is 36 acres.
The shadehouse is 13 ft tall and 2500 m2.
Lettuce and cucumber plants inside the shade house.
Bottom right: The irrigation system for the plants.



This tropical farm project can serve as an inspiration as to how it is possible to make a difference in the world by minimizing transportation of food, creating local jobs and turning a seemingly utopian idea into reality. At the same time it has started visual dialogues with the food products at the *The Food Festival*, because it presents photographs of a multitude of real vegetables.

Camilla Berner has also established new openings within the concept of art. With a sharp falcon-eye, she works with small and often overseen places in our environment in order to make us aware of that nature we turn our backs to and which we would like to control. Through her installations she shows us poetic nature-scenes that can inspire us in our daily lives and give us new lyrical experiences. She has visualized her view of nature, for example, in *Pavement and Parliament* (2003), which is an evocative site-specific installation. She has planted seeds directly in the cracks between the floor's cement elements. Part of the installation is a list of the plants registered outside, within near proximity to a deserted industrial area, for example in the concrete. The only

materials she has used are soil and Italian ryegrass. The work was displayed in the exhibition entitled "Other rooms", FLS hall 9, Valby.



Pavement and Parliament 2003

Steds-specifik installation; græs sået direkte i revnerne mellem gulvets betonelementer. Til installationen hører en liste over planter registreret udenfor i de nærmeste omgivelser i et forladt industriområde, bl.a. i betonbelægningen.

Materialer; muldjord, græs (Italiensk Rajgræs)

Fra udstillingen 'Andre Rum', FLS hal 9, Valby

Dobbelt Landskab - en have (Double Landscape - a garden) (2008) (fig. 10) is another example of one of her site-specific installations.



Dobbelt Landskab - en have 2008

Skulpturen opstilledes i maj på en nyslået græsplæne. Efter anvisning blev græsset slået helt op til kanten af skulpturen, men aldrig under. Græsset skulle have lov til at vokse op. Skulpturen stod i 4 mdr. Ved fjernelse af skulpturen blev tilbage et kvadrat af langt græs, som viste at almindelige græsplæner består af langt flere plantearter end man er tilbøjelig til at antage. Dimensioner; 395x395x85 cm. Materialer; træ + eksisterende vegetation i græsplænen

Fra udstillingen 'Den Nye Almindelighed' i De Gamles By (maj-sept.)

It is based on a fine interaction between sculpture and grass. A sculpture is erected on a lawn that is kept constantly cut, whilst the grass under the sculpture is allowed to grow. When the sculpture is removed after some months an impressive square "grass sculpture" appears - the organic has conquered the sculpture's own space.

Black Box Garden (2011) is a garden project placed in Krøyer's Place in Copenhagen. In the construction of the garden the artist has only used the plants and other materials that she found on the site, an unused building block. Everyday she does a couple of hours work in the garden e.g. she removes weeds from the paths. Afterwards she writes about the experiences and the day's work in a diary. It is placed on a blog hosted by the public art organization *Publik*. In this way she is creating not only a garden but is mapping out the process of construction and gives us therefore insight into the gradual development of the plants. She is also interested in how the site can become a public place until the building process starts.

The project that Camilla Berner presents for us in the *Planting Art exhibition* is also to the highest degree integrated into the site where it is placed. It is a moss garden. She has set it up on Refshale Island, where the *Mad Foodcamp* is placed. Her starting point is in the design of the circles and she has created a new circle that is surrounded by wilderness. When positioning the vegetation on the festival site moss is revealed from underneath. Shaping it in a circle gives the landscape a character of a manmade construction - like the crop circles that inspired the design of the festival. And - as she has put it - "the circle will demonstrate the principle of designing a garden determined by and with the existing plants".



It is therefore the site's particular conditions of growth that create the garden and give it its special profile. She does not cast beforehand a net of interpretation upon the existing nature. She agrees with Robert Smithson's comment that "perception is prior to conception, when it comes to site selection or definition. One does not *impose*, but rather *expose* the site – be it interior or exterior (...) the unknown areas of sites can best be explored by artists."⁹ Her project also contains a reference to the sister project at Krøjer's Place, *Black Box Garden*.

Tea Mäkipää (born 1973) is a Finnish artist known for her installations, interventions, architectural works and videos. Through them she visualizes ecological catastrophes and an impressive alternative vision of existence. In 2007, she was invited to contribute to the 8th Sharjah Biennial: Still Life – Art, Ecology & the Politics of Change. Her contribution was an artwork called *10 Commandments for the 21st Century*, which strongly expressed her ecological activism. Sharjah is "the cultural pearl" of The United Arab Emirates. In the last five years the ruler of Sharjah and his staff have tried - through the world of art and in society as such - to publicize and solve ecological questions. In one of Tea Mäkipää's outdoor installations - called *Atlantis* (2007)



you can see a house with one half submerged under the water of a lake. However, in the other half, which is not submerged, life goes on in the usual way. One can hear both singing and conversations. The work symbolizes not only the vulnerability of our modern life, but also the endless battle to triumph. Her photographic installation *World of Plenty*, which was shown at EXPO 2005 in Aichi, Japan, is - as Manick Govinda has expressed it - a fantastic panoramic, idealistic utopia showing humankind sharing the planet in complete equality to other living species. This vision of living at one with nature is Mäkipää's hope for the future." She represents what one could call ecological humanism, which emphasizes that we are dependent upon our environment - especially

⁹ Robert Smithson, "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site", *Artforum*, June 1967. Reprinted in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt, New York 1979, p. 47. The Danish edition of the article – *Udvikling af et lufthavnsareal* - was undertaken by Stig Brøgger and is printed in *ta'6*, 2. Årgang, nr. 2, p. 8.

nature - and therefore we must protect and respect it. In an article entitled *New Humanism*, she has also presented her view of ecological problems, which she has summarized as following: "The feeling of global guilt connected to frustration and powerlessness can be fought against by introducing the ecological viewpoint and integrating it in all kinds of education."

For the exhibition *Planting Art at Foodcamp* she has chosen to use an old van to re-establish the natural biotope¹⁰ in the city that has disappeared. The project is called *Biotope - to go*.



She describes her project this way: "Species that have disappeared from urban Denmark, can find a lebensraum inside a car, on a parking lot with the help of small donations by friends of wildlife, who can feed the parking meter. The ecosystem inside the van can be viewed through the windows of the parked vehicle." On the roof of the van she has put sand in which she has planted sunflowers, asters and lavender. On the bonnet are the same plants. In the driver's seat is a skunk surrounded by sunflowers that are planted in a bed of sand.



¹⁰ *Biotope* is an area of uniform environmental conditions providing a living place for a specific assemblage of plants and animals.

On the backseat creep two lizards - surrounding them are chrysanthemums and lavender. The van has a sign: Please protect nature and put money in the parking meter. People walking past the ecosystem-filled van will hopefully pay the parking fee and protect the biotope from being towed away by the police.”

This work visualizes in both a clear and impressive way the extent to which people dominate and control and do not respect the right of animals and plants to maintain their proper place in the urban environment.

At the exhibition *Deep Green*, which was presented at *Den Frie - Center for Modern Art* in 2007, a group of artists aimed to visualize different contributions to climatic and ecological problems by presenting their interpretations of the catastrophes resulting from irresponsible treatment of the earth's resources. Camilla Berner and Sebastian Schiørring, who are both participants in the *Planting Art at Foodcamp* that is currently being shown at the Food Festival, curated *Deep Green*. It was created in order to put the Climate Change Conference's agenda in 2009 - into an artistic context. Camilla Berner, who is also a landscape architect, has always been interested in visualizing the interaction between ecology, urban spaces and social relationships. She has also run workshops on this topic. Sebastian Schiørring has worked as a journalist, musician, producer and visual artist. He has also been interested in creating artistic interpretations of ecological problems. In 2006 he presented, for example, the film collage, *Everything's Gone Green*, in Airplay, which is Denmark's only open-air gallery. The two artists have therefore, in both theory and practice, had the special prerequisites to create such an exhibition. They have - as Sebastian Schiørring has commented in an interview - wished to enter a discussion of values that is centered on the politics of climate, as well as make a contribution to how art in a purely political space could pose some questions that make sense and ensure that one, as onlooker, can participate in the discussion. It has - Camilla Berner pointed out in the same interview - been important for us both to have chosen some works that we felt had a strong artistic voice and had a great deal of integrity as art.”¹¹ The exhibitions *Deep Green* and *Planting Art in Food Camp* have in common that the curators and other planners have placed the artistic interpretations of the ecological and other climate-related problems as the absolute top priority.

Sebastian Schiørring participated himself in the exhibition *Deep Green* with the project *Læse Station. (Reading station)*. He has built some benches where visitors could read about various aspects of *climate change* and also chosen a very site-specific work for the exhibition *Planting Art in Food Camp*.

¹¹ Interview 20 April 2009, by [Kopenhagen.dk](http://www.kopenhaegendk.dk) (up-to-date information on contemporary art) - see also website: www.denfrie.dk



He has taken the three Refshale flags¹² that are placed at the front of the Island where the festival and exhibition is being held as the starting point for his project. Just opposite, on the next island is the official Danish flag. The three Refshale Island flags will be taken down and replaced by three new - “the ambivalent rendering of Nordic identity, the spiritual, food scarcity and social uprising. The new flags will be blue and white and have different simple geometric patterns.” He has been merging UN's World Food Program (WFP) flag and traditional Arabic tiles.



Even just replacing the old flags with new ones is in itself a creative act that signals a new order and new perspective. In connection with this installation he has made a video-work that interprets - in a story - the themes that the flags represent: identity, food scarcity and social uprising, And thus they can become subtly placed in a new context - they have moved, so to speak, from the physical and active space to the digital world. Because of its centrality in our lives, food becomes a perfect vehicle for ritual, and

¹² See www.refshaleoen.dk

food rituals become central to most religions. *Everything's Gone Green* is a video work prepared in much the same way as a dish. A new "theme specific" scene was filmed on location at "Refshaleøen" two days before the opening and mixed with previously filmed sequences from films made in 2006 and 2007.



The artists - also those who we meet at *Planting Art a Food camp* - have on display a variety of qualified solutions about the relationship between art and ecology. They have in both a surprising and inspiring way created new art. All of them have also transcended the given boundaries of the present world of art, conquered new cultural spaces and taken to themselves the methods of science. With this they have enabled us to become more active in the efforts to protect nature and create sustainable growth, which benefits both nature and our health, whilst drawing us into a fascinating space of experience that widens our perspective of the known world.

Illustrations:

1. Robert Smithson. *Spiral Jetty*. 1970. Great Salt Lake, Utah, U. S. A.
2. *Concourse C. Denver International Airport*, Colorado. 1994. Designed and built by *Michael Singer Studio*.
3. *Solid Waste Transfer and Recycling Center*, Phoenix, Arizona. 1989 -1993. Designed by *Michael Singer Studio* and Linnea Glatt.
4. *South Cove Environmental Regeneration Islands*, West Palm Beach Florida. 1012. Designed by *Michael Singer Studio*.
5. Søren Dahlgaard. *Inside view shade house, lettuce and cucumber*. Hibalhidhoo.
6. Søren Dahlgaard. *Exhibition of the Greenhouse project*. Gallery Image 2011.
7. Søren Dahlgaard. *Exhibition of the Greenhouse project*. Gallery Image 2011.
8. Søren Dahlgaard. *Growing vegetables on a coral Island - Hibalhidhoo*. 2002-2004.

9. Camilla Berner. *Pavement and Parliament*. 2003.
10. Camilla Berner. *Double Landscape - a garden*. 2008.
11. Camilla Berner. *Moss Garden*. 2001.
12. Tea Mäkipää. *Atlantis*. 2007.
13. Tea Mäkipää. *Biotope - to go*. 2011.
14. Tea Mäkipää. *Biotope - to go*. 2011.
15. Tea Mäkipää. *Biotope - to go*. 2011.
16. Sebastian Schiørring. *Reading station*. 2007.
17. Sebastian Schiørring. *Changing the Flags*. 2011.
18. Sebastian Schiørring. *Changing the Flags*. 2011.
19. Sebastian Schiørring. *Everything's gone green*. 2006, 2007 and 2011.

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