



Eco-LOGIC

As environmental dangers loom larger in the public eye, artists are beginning to address ecological issues in their art. Several artists suggest ways of thinking ourselves back into the overall scheme of nature.

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Critic-in-Residence

AFTER REMAINING DORMANT FOR MOST OF THE '80s, ecological awareness is suddenly all the rage, subject of a best-selling book (*The End of Nature* by William McKibben), object of a celebrity benefit sponsored by Madonna and Kenny Scharf, and theme of any number of recent art exhibitions. For an art world which has lately been content to accept Baudrillardian assurances that nature is nothing more than an arbitrary cultural code, such recent occurrences as the Alaskan oil spill, the widening of the ozone hole and the depletion of the Amazon rainforests have rather forcibly brought home the point that nature may be real after all.

However, as reflected through the prism of art, ecological awareness too often has remained enmeshed in a romanticized notion of nature as Other. The myths of arcadia, the sublime and the conquest of nature by technology all tend to oppose nature to mankind and culture and to glorify or dramatize the conflict between them. This is certainly the underlying text of the romantic landscapes of Church, Ryder and Turner as well as those of their latter-day descendants like Mark Innerst and April Gornik, for whom the archetypal landscape image is that of a tiny figure reduced to insignificance before the fury or magnificence of

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, an "artist-in-residence" at the New York Department of Sanitation, brings to the fore the disposal of waste products. Shown here is a detail from Ukeles's *Re-Entry*, an installation of 20 tons of recyclables exhibited in 1987 at P.S. 1 in association with the Department of Sanitation. Photo: James Nubile, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York City.

Eleanor Heartney is one of the International Sculpture Center's two Critics-in-Residence for 1989-90. The Critic-in-Residence Program is designed to promote excellence in the evaluation of contemporary art by providing forums and support for the work of talented critics. The program is made possible by a generous grant from Anne and Ronald Abramson of Washington, D.C.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Re-Entry*, an architectural structure built out of waste materials, attempts to make the despised and normally ignored sanitation system visible. This piece was exhibited in 1987 at P.S.1 in association with the Department of Sanitation and measures 90 x 18 x 13 feet. Photo: ©James Nubile, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York City.

Detail of a panel of shredded plastic from Ukeles's 1989 *Recycle Works*, a mixed-media installation of panels made from recyclable materials such as glass, rubber, plastic, earth, aluminum and piled steel shavings from subway wheels. Photo: Karen Yamauchi, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York City.



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materials that will provide a view of the collection trucks, an observation deck looking out over the barge launching area, and a wall of video screens that will monitor the facility's other activities and provide information on waste management and other environmental issues.

Set against a particularly lovely view of the Hudson River, *Flow City* is a graphic demonstration of the city as organism, in which the flow of garbage operates as a kind of circulatory system. Waste

maintenance becomes a metaphor for the maintenance of life on the planet, and Ukeles reminds us that the earth is an ecosystem in which garbage, toxic waste and chemical and nuclear by-products only *seem* to disappear.

The reemergence of environmental concerns at the end of a decade that seemed largely devoted to private gain is a hopeful sign. The new prominence of artists like Carol Hepper, Petah Coyne, Meg Webster and others (many of whom have long been concerned with environmental themes) seems to suggest that the art world as well has turned away from the self-aggrandizing individualism of the 1980s toward a more socially and ecologically minded consciousness. Of course, as the much-publicized but probably not particularly remunerative Madonna-Kenny Scharf rainforest bash suggests, even the environment can become fodder for fashion disguised as politics. If eco-awareness is to be anything more than another art theme-for-a-day, it will be thanks to artists like Ukeles, Nyzio and, much more problematically, Bickerton, who suggest ways of thinking ourselves back into the overall scheme of nature. □



Materials donated by city workers festoon Mierle Laderman Ukeles's steel *Ceremonial Arch Honoring Service Workers in the New Service Economy*, 1988. Photo: D. James Dee, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York City.

was entitled "Form" to underline his fascination with the structures and systems of nature. In a manner that recalls the work of artists like Alan Sonfist and Gilberto Zorio, or Hans Haacke in his pre-political days, Nyzio frequently creates environments that change organically over time. At the Anchorage in Brooklyn last summer, he ran water over a huge shower curtain, allowing a film of algae and organic matter to grow over it. Another work, *Perfect Progression of Random Spacing*, which has been exhibited in several shows since it was first constructed in early 1988, features a column of clear plastic filled with water-immersed golf balls whose slimy green coating grows thicker with each reappearance.

While Nyzio's works have something of a science-project ambience, there is generally an edge which lifts them out of the realm of Gee Whiz experimentation and onto a more philosophical plane. For instance, *Form*—an iridescent tapestry composed of

thousands of small squares cut from butterfly wings pinned to the wall—is astonishingly lovely, rippling with shades of rose, blue and violet that shift as the viewer crosses in front. At the same time, and in a way far more effective than Bickerton's bald description of cadmium's toxicity, all those little wing fragments remind us that there is often a link between beauty and cruelty and between art (or culture) and ecological destruction. A work which makes a similar point is *Morphology*. Here, a miniature mountain has been created from a mound of milkweed bugs—the kind that are used in experiments by college biology students—that Nyzio raised himself.

Despite these hints at a political stance, Nyzio's works are more poetic than polemical. They unify the forces and materials of nature with those of the industrial world, implicating both sides in the organic world's cycles of dissolution and regeneration.

BICKERTON'S NEATLY ENCAPSULATED RUBBISH and Nyzio's disintegrating golf balls and shower curtains touch on the problem of waste management. No artist, however, has considered this issue as thoroughly as Mierle Laderman Ukeles. For the last 10 years she has been the unsalaried artist-in-

residence at the New York Department of Sanitation (her interest in the subject goes back to 1969). Ukeles uses a variety of media to drive home the social and global implications of waste management. Much of her work has attempted to make the despised and normally ignored sanitation system visible. To this end she has choreographed street "dances" for garbage trucks, created multimedia installations within waste facilities, built architectural structures out of waste materials and even undertaken to shake the hand of every sanitation worker in New York.

For the last five years she has been working with the sanitation department to open the city's new marine transfer station on West 57th Street to public view. This station is the site at which thousands of tons of garbage are transferred each day from trucks to barges on their way to a landfill in Staten Island. When completed, *Flow City*, as Ukeles has named her project, will have three parts. It will consist of a passage ramp built of crushed waste

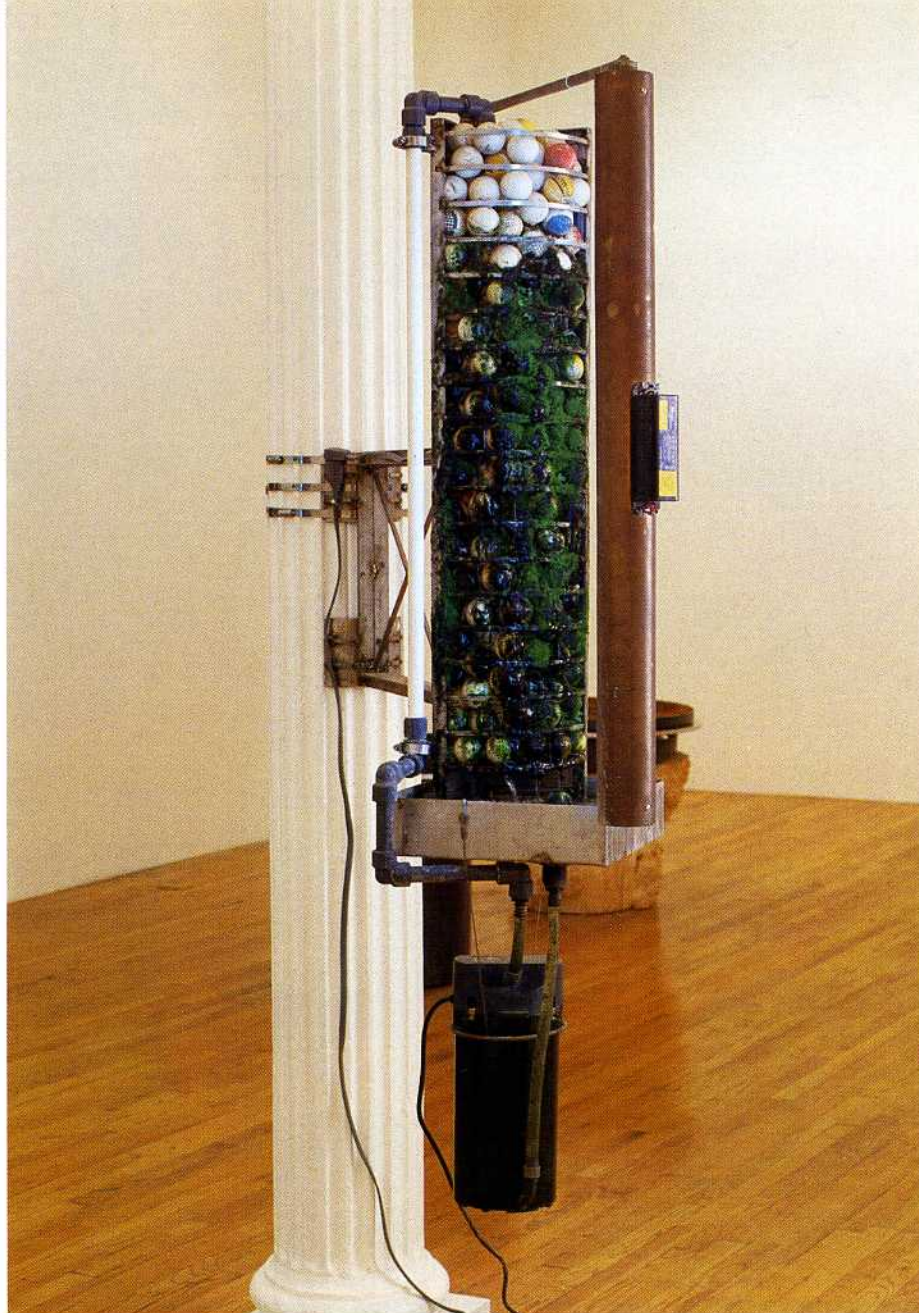
seed pods, dried grasses, industrial rubbish and trash. Designed to suggest time capsules that could theoretically be floated out to sea or hung from mountain cliffs (though it is unlikely any owner of these pricey items would be persuaded to set them free), these works embody a rather pessimistic notion of nature as relic. In a conversation with artist Mark Dion recently published in *Galleries Magazine*, Bickerton described his intent:

Most often, for western culture, nature's place has been that of property or resources. This view now seems to be changing or shifting. This body of work implies that no view of nature is innocent, without interest; whether that view be nature as product or nature as museum. In the U.S. we no longer engage in a dialogue of how nature constructs us, but rather how we construct nature. What can be considered nature in the days of genetic alteration, waste management, desertification, all-natural frozen fruit drinks?

Nature, Bickerton suggests, is inextricably entwined with the forces of development. In keeping with this philosophy, the cases are constructed of environmentally hazardous materials. *Composition in Red and Yellow*, for instance, is a kind of homage to Minimalism and consists of two protruding boxes, one featuring a painted square of cadmium red, the other of cadmium yellow. On the side of the boxes Bickerton lists the toxic qualities of cadmium.

The explicit reference to Minimalism pops up again in a piece titled *Minimalism's Evil Orthodoxy Monoculture's Totalitarian Esthetic #1*. The sculpture, which consists of a set of elegant rectangular containers, is made up of a variety of man-made and natural substances, including steel, concrete, glass, rubber, plastic, soil, rice, coffee and peanuts. Bickerton has explained that this work points to an unhealthy connection between the ordering reductive logic which underlies the aesthetic of Minimalism and the impulse towards mastery which lies behind much of our agricultural and military policy.

Another theme of these works is the futility of our romantic longings to return to a state of undefiled nature. That this cannot be is the message of *Stratified Landscape #1*, which looks like a cross between a museum display and a piece of farm equipment. A row of boxes with glass windows and a canvas basket are stacked on top of each other. They contain samples of materials—



David Nyzio's process-oriented assemblages mix natural forces with man-made materials as if their interdependence were never in question. In his 1988 *Perfect Progression of Random Spacing*, the slimy green film of algae that coats the water-immersed golf balls appears thicker every time that the work is exhibited. Photo: Grant Taylor, courtesy Postmasters Gallery, New York City.

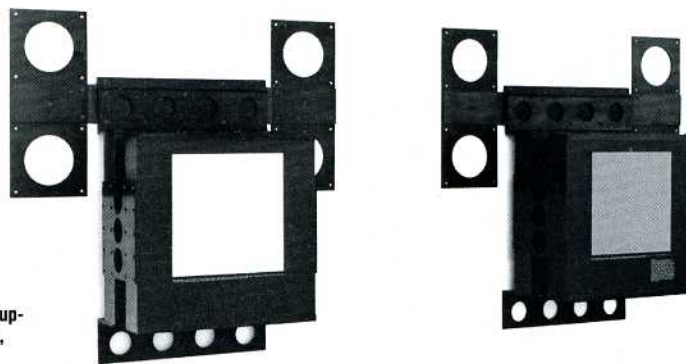
dried seaweed, bits of coral, quartz stones, beans—as if they were putting nature on the examining table.

Like Bickerton's forays into commodity critique, these works are deliberately complicit—actually drawing support from the system they rhetorically condemn. While they do effectively demonstrate the intermingling of nature and culture, they offer no way out of the destructive cycles they chronicle and prefer instead to luxuriate in the certainty of environmental disaster.

NEITHER AS TRENDILY APOCALYPTIC NOR AS FLATLY didactic as Bickerton's seed-filled reliquaries, David Nyzio's process-oriented assemblages mix the natural and the industrial as if their interdependence were never in question. A recent exhibition of his works at Postmasters Gallery in New York City



Containers in Ashley Bickerton's *Minimalism's Evil Orthodox Monoculture's Totalitarian Esthetic #1*, 1989, juxtapose soils from Asia, Africa and South America with rice, peanuts and coffee—those continents' staple crops. Photo: Fred Scruton, courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York City.



Right: On the sides of *Composition in Red and Yellow*, 1989, Ashley Bickerton lists the toxic qualities of the cadmium red and yellow that supply the piece's only color. Photo: Fred Scruton, courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York City.

nature. One may trace this attitude as well in the work of many of the Earth artists of the late '60s and '70s, whose grandiose land reclamations and transformations at times suggested the aftermath of skirmishes in the war between the forces of nature and development.

What has been largely missing in art that deals with nature—and from the larger world it reflects—is a sense of genuine connection between the processes of nature and of those of human life, culture, urbanization and industrialization. It also lacks an awareness that to speak of nature is to speak of ourselves as well. Only now that some of the earth's essential regenerative

systems may have been irreparably damaged is it becoming clear that the mere conquest of nature may be a Pyrrhic victory. To mend the rift between nature and culture it will be necessary to balance their respective claims, rather than play the game of winner take all.

Three artists whose work recently has been visible suggest different systematic ways of thinking about nature and culture. The most problematic is Ashley Bickerton, who has recently turned from a celebration of consumerism to an exploration of environmentalism. His most recent New York show at Sonnabend Gallery featured a variety of elaborate storage cases containing