



Thoughts on Strategic Action

Tim Collins

For better or worse, we have entered an era that I would describe as one of participatory ecology. Humanity has succeeded in affecting global climate. We have seriously diminished the diversity of life on the planet and recently achieved the ability to manipulate the gene pool. In the quest to control nature and expand material culture, we have discovered limits to our deterministic world views. We have fallen headlong into unwanted ownership for natural systems through indiscriminate use, and are now faced with significant and troubling responsibilities. We must seek new models of perception, understanding, and interaction if we are to acknowledge and act upon these responsibilities. We are in an era where we are responsible for the health of nature, because it is in direct relationship to our own ultimate health and well being.

I would like to begin to answer the question of how we do our work, by describing specific research questions that drive our collective inquiry. Can artists working as cultural agents affect the public policies and private economic programs that mark and define urban places and ecosystems? Can artists develop a public realm advocacy that addresses the perception, meaning, and form of nature, while expanding the creative act beyond the authorship of the artist?

The work is about social and ecological change; I describe it as ecological art, or eco art. It is a creative process that recognizes the historic dichotomy between nature and culture, and works towards healing the human relationship to the natural world and its ecosystems. The work is also fundamentally interdisciplinary (relational). I cannot rely on the art world as the only point of engagement and interpretation and I must utilize other intellectual frameworks and support networks. I am convinced that those of us involved in this practice cannot confine our learning or production to art. In this interdisciplinary model, artists expand their practice by moving outside their discipline and its institutionalized relationship to society. Eco art expands each of the combined perspectives, thus providing artists with a new path to social engagement and the potential for new life-affirming nutrients (intellectual engagement, communities of practice and funding). Inherent in this path is the responsibility for artists to educate themselves in multiple disciplines. In turn, their work needs to be received and evaluated for the totality of its intention and not by traditional artistic standards alone.

Objectives for Arts-Based Social and Ecological Change

- Advocate compassionately for natural and human communities.
- Address damages to diversity and the dynamics of ecosystems.
- Express value, with the intention of transformation.
- Balance the technical with the biological and ecological.
- Encourage interdisciplinary expert participation and knowledge.
- Facilitate supplementary response through discourse with citizens.
- Create conceptually informed aesthetic experiences of complex systems.

The public realm of our time demands the attention of artists, scientists and citizens; this is our fundamental point of engagement. One hundred years ago, cities worked with industry to lobby state and federal government to capture the waterways and waterfronts throughout the world, homogenizing form and privatizing use. Today, abandoned post-industrial waterfronts stand ready for transformation. We are at an historic turning point: those who have taken the time to have their voices heard will define the future of our rivers and waterfronts. We believe that this is one of the most significant space-based public realm opportunities in over a century. We work to inform and enable alternative voices in this discourse of change. To do this, our project teams develop strategic knowledge, and broad community discussions about rivers, streams and their attendant banks. The strategic knowledge helps us understand what is happening in and along our rivers and streams, and how we can either help or hinder a public realm recovery. Our Project Teams have developed rigorous field methods to acquire this knowledge, gathering scientific data that leads to a spatial understanding of the past through maps and texts on changing land use characteristics. We work to understand existing river conditions in terms of water quality and bank conditions. We

then conduct a map analysis of each subject area to understand the forces affecting water quality, botany, bio-diversity, public access, use and bank conditions. The Project Team also looks at historical material to understand the rivers and the range of human activities that have influenced how the rivers have changed over time. Using these tools, 3 Rivers 2nd Nature (3R2N) seeks to identify the potential for preservation and restoration of natural and cultural systems through ongoing dialogues with citizens, experts and other interested parties.

At the most simplistic level, there are two primary approaches to creating a public platform for transformative discourse from the bottom up (*levitation*) through individuals and communities or from the top down (*gravity laden descent*) through policies and decision-makers. Given the power (politics and economy), which defines and controls access to these realms, where and how does the artist engage either realm in a meaningful way? This is a question that deserves serious consideration and experimentation. We prefer the former, but fault no one for their interest and engagement in the latter. Each individual will find different means of access.

We are invested in the lyrical, the critical, and the transformative modalities of artistic engagement.

These are describe the fundamental tools of culture-based change. We need more tools, we need better tools.

We need more diverse practice, we need better practice, we need to accomodate and appreciate difference.

The gene pool requires diversity for survival.

Our methods

1. Strategic action, systems-based inquiry that reveals gaps in knowledge and experience.
2. Creative knowledge, ideas that can shape perception, and, in turn, human values.
3. Physical engagement, an experience of systems that are ignored, unseen, uncared for.

Methods result in engagement

4. Social engagement, relationships with anyone and everyone interested in change.
5. Economic engagement, relationships with those interested in supporting the work.
6. Intellectual engagement, relationships with colleagues engaged in this work.
7. Moral engagement with ecosystems and organisms that have voice, but no language.

Engagement results in a desire

8. We are interested in the pedagogy and of art-based social and ecological practice.
9. We are interested in a pedagogy of creative public realm/common resource advocacy.
- 10 We are interested in an expanding programs of engaged-research in fine arts settings.
11. We are interested in the art of change, and the ecology of health in the post industrial.

The question of primary authorship is of diminishing import for artists interested in change.

I believe that the future is less about me and more about we.

Tim Collins and Reiko Goto



*My artistic subject matter is the life of nature.
By contemplating nature, I seek to renew my own identity.*

Reiko Goto

When Tim and I first visited Pittsburgh, and Carnegie Mellon University, it was in April, there was still some snow on the ground. At the time, we lived in San Francisco; we loved the ocean and the land there. When we saw the rivers and hills in Pittsburgh, we both felt they could become important to us in our work and our lives. In the first hour of our visit, someone used a rock to break our rental car window, and my purse was stolen. The incident made us feel unwelcome and uncomfortable in this new place. I kept the rock in my pocket. On the way back to the airport. I asked to Tim to stop the car on a bridge over the Monongahela River. On the surface of the rock I wrote, "Dear Rivers, we were very happy to see you in this place. This rock has caused us loss, anger, and sadness. If you accept our feelings about this rock, we may return. If we do, we promise to do something good for you in the future." I threw the rock into the river.

We did return. Over the last ten years, we have been teaching then working as research fellows at Carnegie Mellon University. As research fellows, we have focused upon two site-specific projects: The first project was Nine Mile Run, an urban stream and slag dump. The second project focused upon, the three rivers of Allegheny County. We entitled this river project 3 Rivers 2nd Nature. At the simplest level, there are two dominant ideas of nature: first nature the idea of wilderness or land that is assumed to be unaffected by human development: and the other is the idea of second nature, a cultural landscape, where humanity affects everything. Pittsburgh is a poster child for second nature. It continues to be famous for resource extraction, working rivers, and its historic steel industry. Andrew Carnegie started building large steel mills in the late 1800s, and steel production reached their productivity climax in 1926. During that era, the air, the water, and the earth were polluted by mills and city waste. Trees with broad leaves could not survive in the filthy air, and torn up soils on the hills. The sky was dark even during the daytime. Fish and waterfowl were missing from the rivers. This environmental and ecological destruction, involved a pervasive violence to all living beings. William Jordan, in his book *The Sunflower Forest*, uses Sartre's quote to illustrate the idea of a land ethic, "*shame...is shame of self; it is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the other is looking at and judging.*" "Who is the other? Is the "other" among us, or is it them? Why can't we hear their voices? Who is responsible for the commonly held resources of air, water, and soil? Have we lost our land ethic? Is there no shame? By the late 1980's, the steel industry declined and many large mills were closed. Since then, the environmental quality has become much better and wildlife has been coming back, but there are many severe industrial scars that still exist in the land and hearts of this region. This year, the City of Pittsburgh released plans to log a hillside, strip mine the last remnants of coal, flatten a hill, bury many springs and streams to create a flat site for development.

Many people avoid talking about things that they cannot clarify intellectually. I feel anxious when I say that I believe everything has life and spirit, how could we help or support the spirit of rivers? The word "spirit" comes from the Latin word *spiritus*, breathing or *spirare*, to breath. The definition of spirit in the English dictionary is "an animating or vital principle held to give life to physical organisms." The rivers breath in and out constantly, it is most obvious in the spring and fall. The water is cooler than the air in the spring, and warmer than the air in the fall. The rivers exchange vapors in the form of low-lying clouds, fog, and swirling mists. We see the rivers breath, like we see our own on cold days.

In California, I learned the care of baby animals, we would pay attention to the sound of their breathing. When a wild baby was ill, one of the most effective treatments is simply to hold the baby warmly. Sometimes I wonder, how might I learn to hold and care for a river? Can I hear its breath?

My ecology and environmental art practice involves two actions: one is to ask nature, and the other one is to enter into a community of nature, to seek its support with other people. What does it mean to ask nature? I have heard that Eskimos have many words to describe various kinds of snow. The Eskimos can verify not only the different shapes and textures of snows, but also the different conditions when it is snowing. Careful observations and generations of life experiences make the Eskimo understanding of snow different from people who live out side of their region and culture. I am not an Eskimo rooted in my

cultures endemic knowledge of place. I seek to understand nature, I must actively seek to become native to this place that I am occupying. I seek relationships with people who have been or are becoming native to this place. I seek a community of care.

Carolyn Merchant, in her book *Radical Ecology*, describes bioregionalism: *“Bioregionalists are local caretakers. Dedicated to the concept of living-place, they espouse watershed consciousness.”* In the 3 Rivers 2nd Nature project, we are not working at a bioregional scale, but we are invested in living places, and living water. Tim and I have been working with citizens, experts, and college students. The Aquatic and terrestrial conditions of our rivers and streams are the primary areas of our study. Our work method is an interdisciplinary (dialogic, relational) approach. Experts help us understand what questions to ask of nature. Citizens help us understand why we should ask these questions at all.

Community participation is essential to our process, transformation starts at the moment when people gather to discuss their place. Each community (human and nature) has different interests and struggles, different relationships to their place. Each community includes people who have observed and stood as witnesses for the nature that defines their regions. When I attended a public hearing for the Nine Mile Run development, some people asked about wild turkey and deer. They cared about wildlife. The public and private development interests did not. We worked to organize a series of events called Community Dialogues. We start from a site tour and discussion of the place. We seek presentations by experts and environmental organizations. Our goal is to find new ways for people to speak and to see. To find new ideas and methods for creative engagement with our place. We are interested in experience, dialogue, mutual values, and diverse visions, and real examples about culture, nature, and place.

William Jordan has said, *“Finally, consider another kind of encounter with shame—the shame of change—and the most radical kind of change—creation.”* The spirit and heart of art is creativity. Creativity is one of the abilities that everyone possesses. Creativity is the process of changing our place, our culture and its ecological context. The shame that William Jordan speaks of comes from realizing that we must clear away the old, to make way for the new. It is the shame of loss and even death, which is the pre-condition of rebirth and new life. This is a natural condition that occurs and reoccurs each year in nature, in human communities it takes more time. To create change and transformation we must consider radical democratic processes that include diverse human communities, we have to understand why some members of our human community are quiet. We must also consider the silent participants, the community of nature that define the form and phenomenon of our place: the sunshine, the air and clouds, the trees, the grasses, the water in the rivers and—them; the beings that live on the land in the air and in the water. A change and transformation takes time, and often we cannot predict how long it might take, it can be very hard to tell if it was a success. If an artist chooses a life of inquiry and social or ecological transformation, he/she must be flexible to work with many different kinds of people, life-forces, place, materials, and subject matter. Depending on what kind of opportunity, funding, and place, the artist must seek different ways to express and present his/her ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Each creative effort has a beginning and an end. This leads us to the next cycle of creative engagement and practice.

Nature always gives me tremendous amounts of energy and hope. When I was working with our botanist on the Ohio River, we saw a large factory. The riverbank was built with high vertical steel walls. The place seemed to be very old. There were many cracks in the steel walls. Through the cracks in the steel, we saw beautiful woody plants growing. We realized that they were all Pennsylvania native plants. The botanist and I were just astonished by the fact that the plants could return in such a difficult place. The relationship between human and nature is never an equation, it is always a miracle.