

# Ann Rosenthal



## Supposition

There are too many answers and too few questions for the complex world we inhabit. As much as we try to “do the right thing” and “just get along,” we continue to make the same mistakes. Clearly, our desire for a better world is not enough to bring it about. In our attention-deficit-disordered world, with instant communication and sound-bite analysis, having the time and patience to think and act deeply borders on the subversive. Success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is measured in speed, efficiency, and packaging. Where are places for contemplation, deep listening, and thoughtful action?

Postmodern theory tells us that our experience is socially constructed. If “reality” is of our own collective making, then we can fashion a different world, but we must first cultivate a deep understanding of how things came to be the way they are. Of course, there is no single answer. The *process* of questioning, however, can lead to insights and, eventually, to more *sustainable* solutions—in contrast to the “crisis responses” that have become the mainstay of postmodernity.

## Foundation

My work and my life are guided by the following quotation by bell hooks:

Since the disruption of the colonized/colonizer mind-set is necessary for border crossings to not simply reinscribe old patterns, we need strategies for decolonization that aim to change the minds and habits of everyone involved in cultural criticism (hooks 4).

Through text and image, I seek to expose old patterns and disrupt the colonized/colonizer mindset through asking questions that destabilize what we assume to be immutable.

I grew up believing that “history” was comprised of objective facts. It took me many years to realize that the glories of war, which I resisted learning in school, were only one version of history. An essay by William Cronin, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” challenged my programmed understanding of history when he analyzed two historical interpretations of the Dust Bowl. One position extolled the heroic efforts of humans struggling to conquer nature; the other exposed the hubris of humans who insisted on bending nature to their will with disastrous consequences.

A potent strategy for decolonization is offering alternative histories. With the Western narrative of progress still firmly in place, environmental history is rarely acknowledged, let alone integrated into historical and cultural analysis. Whereas postcolonial theory has offered deep insights into relationships between humans, it has yet to be applied to our relationship with non-human nature. (Ecofeminist theorists are a notable exception and have made important contributions in this regard.)

Given the above insights and shortfalls of postmodern theory and historical critique, I have taken as my project over the last several years to challenge historical narratives and offer “alter-tales” (Haraway).

## Intention

My professional background is a hybrid of writing and image making. As a result, my interests in design, publishing, artist books, collage, and installation have been consistent over 30 years. Integrating these forms and processes, my current practice complicates the social and natural histories of “place” through:

- Reframing the local urban/rural environment to see it anew;
- Suggesting how the nature/culture boundary has evolved;
- Questioning how personal and public decisions have been determined;
- Opening a dialogue to re-vision what we want our eco/social communities to be.

Underlying the above is an attempt to transform the way in which we relate to one another and the planet, including:

- Shifting from instrumentalist to systems/relational thinking;
- Perceiving the environment as “Self” rather than “Other”;
- Extending “community” to include non-human nature (Leopold);
- Rekindling our social desire for sustainable cultures and environments (Heller).

I acknowledge that this process of transformation must be reflected in my own life and cultural production. Thus the following are the values toward which I strive, as well as those I believe are common to ecoart practice:

1. Land Ethic—recognizing that we are members of an interdependent “community” that includes not only humans, but “...soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively: the land.” (Leopold).
2. Systems Thinking—visualizing patterns and relationships across disparate information and knowledge systems; applying the lessons of ecosystems to our human communities (Capra).
3. Sustainability—designing our lives, work, products, social systems, and relationships to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development).
4. Social and Biological Diversity—understanding that diversity among disciplines, cultures, and species is a prerequisite for systems health and resilience.
5. Social and Environmental Justice—insisting that all species have a right to a clean environment that supports our health and the integrity of the ecological systems that sustain life.
6. Collaboration—bridging the boundaries between disciplines, communities, cultures, classes, genders, and species, respecting what each contributes to designing solutions that work for everyone.
7. Integrity—closing the gap between what we value and how we act in the world.

## Process

My process for realizing the above is informed by many years as a professional editor and project manager. This process is more organic than linear. Some decisions need to be made before others, but there is a lot of fluidity: research is guided by location, but it may also change the location. Often, a form is present at the outset, but it is responsive to the research and location. Even at the time of installation, seeing the work in the space/site may prompt last-minute changes. I’ve found that attempting to control everything in advance can produce a lifeless result.

More often than not, I work collaboratively. Though there are challenges and compromises in collaboration, I find the benefits outweigh any frustrations. Combining the strengths and interests of others with my own makes for a richer and more potent result.

The following outlines my general process for developing a project:

**Selecting a location:** Determined by my own/collaborative interests, and/or by invitation within the context of an exhibition or project.

**Research:** Evolving an understanding of the social and natural history of a place through conversations with local citizens and academics, civic and business leaders, activists and environmental organizations. This research generally takes the form of texts and images.

**Form:** Determining the form and structure for interpreting/presenting the research. This may be based on prior projects and is guided by the space/site for the work (e.g., gallery, museum, local site, historic building).

**Editing and Drafting:** Research is selected, edited, and synthesized for maximum impact to convey the contradictions of public and private histories, nature and culture, beliefs/values and realities.

**Production/Installation:** Producing the final images, texts, presentation.

**Follow-up events/feedback:** Developing a public interaction/feedback complement to the work to encourage dialogue.

The integration of text and image is always challenging. I struggle against the text illustrating the image or vice versa. The goal is to have each element hold its own, so that in juxtaposing the two, new meanings and questions are suggested. (For a recent example, see [www.studiotara.net/RiverVernacular](http://www.studiotara.net/RiverVernacular)).

If the work is intended to foster activism, then opportunities for individual and community involvement must be integrated into the work. I have found it highly effective to contextualize the work within a related public event, such as an environmental conference, an arts fair, or Earth Day/community celebration. Follow-up events could include a roundtable discussion with local environmental, community, and academic leaders who address issues suggested by the work. This is an ideal opportunity to involve and connect the many people and institutions who have contributed to the project.

### **Aspirations**

Most of my work to date has been sited in a gallery/museum context. I believe this remains a viable aspect of art practice. The “white box” separation from daily life, though sharply criticized, is precisely what makes it valuable—offering a respite from the ferocious pace of postmodernity and inviting reflection.

Nevertheless, siting my work exclusively within a gallery context is restrictive. I want to reach a wider audience—those who may not frequent a museum. The visceral experience of both working on location and experiencing the work in situ cannot be duplicated in a gallery. I am particularly drawn to sites embedded with history and memory—ghosts of place that can be called forth into conversation.

In parallel, I am developing opportunities to apply my interpretive practice to interdisciplinary projects. One such project is writing a grant with the Center for Urban Environmental Research and Education (University of Maryland) working on a team with social and natural scientists to interpret the environmental history of Baltimore.

### **References**

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