

# **CULTIVATING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS**

---

## **Developing Environmental Awareness through Art**

Shai Zakai\*

*Israeli Forum for Ecological Art*

### **Introduction**

The following chapter responds to the governmental report's section on "Environmental Education and Promoting Public Awareness," by examining the role of the arts in this area, and in seeking ways to incorporate Israeli artists in efforts to solve environmental problems. Two important questions guide our discussion:

Does an interdisciplinary framework for cooperation truly exist, as the governmental report claims?

Can the artist become a link between people and the environment and reclaim her or his traditional role as a social and cultural agent?

Our argument, that the artist's role should be promoted and adopted as a means toward environmental progress, introduces possibilities that are not yet imagined in current environmental policy in Israel. In this sense, the present chapter is more than just a critical analysis of the government's report. We contend, furthermore, that as an issue for environmental policy, these questions should be presented from an inherently environmental standpoint, and not only from an artistic one.

Our central argument is that any interdisciplinary cooperation, which the governmental report claims to favor, will be incomplete unless the role of artists is enhanced in these processes. This will be achieved not merely by including artists in groups of professionals who research, restore and reclaim damaged environments, but chiefly through an authentic integration

---

\* Assisted in preparation of the report: artists Dov Or-Ner, Amir Balaban.

of an artistic viewpoint into the field of environmental study. Conversely, an environmental approach must be introduced within art studies. Serious interdisciplinary cooperation on environmental issues—involving artists, scientists, humanists, planners, activists, and governmental bodies—does not exist in Israel. We argue that until this integration is achieved, dichotomous patterns of thinking, which separate science and governance from art and culture, will continue to prevail. Visual art has the power to transform the way individuals think about the environment, as we illustrate in a few historical and contemporary examples. Artists can play a major role in mediating between the community and scientists, and between citizens and their environment.

This chapter concludes with practical suggestions for changing the current situation, at the level of government and of NGOs. The course of action indicated includes: official incorporation of artists in decision-making processes; allocation of resources for ecological art projects; hiring of artists as consultants to governmental projects; the creation of formal programs for professional training for artists on environmental and planning issues; as well as the creation of venues for study, exhibition, and creative work.

### **The current situation**

The environment has no face. It has no image. If an environmental problem lacks a face, the existence of the problem is diminished. Jewish culture is at a certain disadvantage where images are concerned. This is reflected even within the educational system, where a great discrepancy exists between written materials and contemporary visual material available for students. In the age of channel-surfing, this discrepancy is all the more apparent.

Take, for example, the problem of illegal mining of sand: if the public is not presented with a mirror that reflects the problem visually (through photography, filmmaking, poetry etc.), they will not be aware of the problem, and consequently the intensity of their response will be much diminished. Similarly, the public does not have an intimate knowledge of local biodiversity. The life of the zebra is more familiar to most people than the life of the local gazelle. Art has much to contribute to this sort of familiarity and experiential, local connection. Even the most proficient scientist would not succeed in communicating the severity of an environmental problem to the public, because she or he would not know how to evoke a mixed response from the audience, or provoke a deep sense of belonging or the feeling of “Genius Loci.” This can be the role of an artist, a director, or a writer. Art

has the power to impact the environment, as well as raising awareness of environmental issues.

Decision-makers in the environmental realm in Israel do not involve artists in decision-making processes. Engineers, architects, and even landscape architects do not, as a matter of routine, engage in dialogue or collaborative efforts with artists. Even scientists, ecologists and environmental consultants do not view artists as partners in the process of environmental problem-solving. No venue exists in Israel for training in the fields of Eco-Art, involving planning, conservation or reclamation, so that they might later join an existing interdisciplinary framework. Although ecological art can offer unconventional solutions to environmental problems, and has the status of a recognized profession in some places in the United States, Germany and England, in Israel it is still not recognized as a discipline in its own right.

The **Israeli Forum for Ecological Art**, an NGO formally founded in 1999, is working to gain recognition for this discipline nationwide, in the spirit of Agenda 21, which calls for better communication between scientists, decision-makers, and the public, as part of environmental policy-making. In this context, artists constitute more than merely a certain type of public or a particular segment of the public, but are a necessary and vital link for remedying the absence of public awareness, as noted in Agenda 21. Art must be seen as an invaluable asset to society. The Israeli Forum for Ecological Art has been taking an increasingly active role in working for the environment and towards the promotion of the four-way dialogue that is so absent still: artist-scientist-community-establishment.

## Background

History can offer examples of the artist's contribution to environmental awareness. In nineteenth-century United States, artists who drew distant landscapes were able to influence decision-makers, by fusing their documentary gaze with their rich imaginations, with the result that a site's natural beauty, made famous through a certain painting, could cause policy-makers to preserve that place, and accord it the legal status of a park or reserve. In other words, the artist's sensitive eye contributed to the public's awareness of a place's beauty, but also contributed to its conservation (for example, Thomas Moran's paintings, such as "Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone," 1872). However, in the course of time, artists' social

stature, as well as their ability to influence decision-makers, has declined dramatically.

In Israel, already in the 1930s, the late artist Itzhak Danziger created "Nimrod," sculpted out of Nubian sandstone. This work, together with his sheep sculptures, became a unique expression of the local landscape, and a part of Israeli cultural heritage. In the early 1970s, Danziger initiated the rehabilitation of the Nesher Quarry (in the north of Israel, adjacent to Haifa), as an experiment in interdisciplinary work involving artists, ecologists and scientists. This unique mode of work was unprecedented at the time, and was not to be repeated for a long time afterwards. Danziger's work was defined by Moti Omer (Director of the Tel-Aviv Art Museum) as a "declaration of loyalty of a local resident to his home, an obligation to involvement and acceptance of the burden of that involvement".<sup>1</sup>

In modern Israel, the 1970s saw the blossoming of environmental art. This decade in Israel was characterized by artists' involvement in social activism. The novelty of this movement lay in the fact that artists began to venture out of their studios to work in open spaces, in the street, in the desert, and in abandoned quarries. The work produced had a conceptual dimension, and sometimes made a political statement. This art, for the most part, did not produce objects for museums and collectors, but expressed itself as "earth-art", as body art and as performance art, among others.

Danziger's work, together with the earth-works and the recycling works of the 1970s (Avital Geva, Dov Or Ner, Micha Ullman) laid the foundations for ecological art in Israel in the 1990s. The dream of organic nature and an egalitarian society was replaced with the dismal vision of a dying Nature.

One of the first artistic works in Israel that dealt with ecology was produced in 1970 under the name "Jerusalem River Project", by artists Joshua Neustein, Georgette Batlle and Gerard Marx. This was a two-week long attempt to depict an imaginary dried-up river, using the sound of flowing water in the Jerusalem hills. "Jerusalem River" created an illusory, symbolic dimension of a river's flow (using a loudspeaker system), thus underscoring metaphorically the need for a wet element in Jerusalem's arid landscape, just as depicted in the Bible, in ancient maps, and in Jerusalem folklore. This project was sponsored by the Israel Museum.

In 2001, 29 years later, artist Shai Zakai is rehabilitating a river-bed that was clogged-up by cement from a nearby factory and quarry, in a project entitled "Concrete Creek." In this three-year long project, the artist reha-

bilitates the creek bed on two simultaneous planes: the physical cleansing is paralleled by a spiritual cleansing, i.e. the physical cleansing of the river-bed from waste and cement products, and the spiritual cleansing of the polluters from their indifference to the environment. The activity in the stream receives an ecological meaning, not only at the practical level of cleaning up the gully, but also in the broader sense of “environment”, which encompasses interpersonal and community ties among people, and between people and their surroundings. This project was sponsored by the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Science, Culture, and Sport, private funds and NGO green movements.

### **The Government’s commitment to an interdisciplinary framework**

Agenda 21 notes a “lack of awareness about the nature of the interrelated nature of all human activity and the environment” (Agenda 36.8). Similarly, it calls for “multi-disciplinary courses, in areas that have an impact on the environment.” (Agenda 21 Chapter 36.D)

The Ministry of the Environment is the only government branch that is showing an understanding of the importance of interdisciplinary work in relation to environmental issues. However, other ministries lag far behind. Although the governmental report speaks of a transformation in environmental education in schools, which “are now teaching the subject from an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary framework,” this treatment of the problem is inadequate and superficial. The government’s understanding of “interdisciplinary cooperation,” in this context, is limited to cooperation between a biologist and a chemist, for example, but does not include cooperation between a psychologist and an historian, or an artist and a botanist.

The essence of interdisciplinary work is the complete equality of all professions and disciplines, working together from different perspectives on one assignment. Each of the participants brings with him or her a different solution, and as a consequence the whole process receives broader dimensions and gains in richness. Unfortunately, however, even the Ministry of Culture and Science does not carry out any regular activities that genuinely involve both of these departments (i.e. Culture and Science), so that in reality the two branches operate as dichotomous entities. As long as there is no policy that integrates the different specializations of these government ministries, no interdisciplinary approach to education will emerge from policymakers.

## **International Ecological Art**

The type of activities that are emerging on the international art scene can serve as models for a new partnership in Israel. A large group of artists, mainly in England, Germany and the United States (but in other countries as well), now devote their life and art to the exploration of, and response to, environmental problems. Museums and galleries have produced extensive exhibitions about ecology, galleries sell documentation of degradable works, which are designed to leave behind only a photographic record, and governments consult with ecological artists before reclaiming a river, a quarry or a garbage dump. Many scholarships exist for artists working on such projects, and in distinction from the situation in Israel, an artist receiving such a scholarship will hire scientists and ecologists to be part of his/her team.

Recently, a tender was put out for the rehabilitation of the largest landfill in the world, in New York City. Artists were invited to compete for the project. In Greece, the Ministry of Culture took on the rehabilitation of an abandoned quarry, whereas in Israel the Ministry of Infrastructure is responsible for this area, and artists are never invited to compete for tenders. Throughout the world, art residencies that specialize in the environment host visiting artists for varying periods of times, and contribute to the local community through their work. One of the famous visiting artist residencies is located in the center of a garbage dump in San Francisco. Ecological artists around the world are usually either environmentalists themselves, or collaborate on a regular basis with ecologists. In different countries around the world, one can find interdisciplinary courses taught by artists in the academy (e.g. England: University of Manchester, Schumacher College, USA: University of New Mexico, Goddard College, Carnegie Mellon University, and others). These programs include study of environmental ethics, environmental literature, and the relationship between humans, environment and culture, through the language of art. Scientific conferences devote sections to ecological art, and present work created through collaborations between artists and scientists (e.g. Artscience 2001, City University of New York, in New York City, 2001).

## **Recommendations for change**

In order to promote true interdisciplinary cooperation toward raising environmental awareness, in the spirit of Agenda 21, and to facilitate artists' role as social and cultural agents, we recommend the following courses of action:

Artists and humanists should be incorporated into decision-making processes, at the highest level. Planning committees should include environmentally concerned artists, philosophers, historians, etc. as an inseparable part of the team.

A framework will be created for the development and promotion of art works that investigate environmental issues, and that involve interdisciplinary teams working within communities, with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Science, and the Ministry of the Environment.

The Ministry of Education, together with all other stakeholders, should prepare an annual program incorporating ecology with the arts and humanities. The program should be implemented by teams of interdisciplinary coordinators, working together. Programs involving artists and communities in joint ecological-art work should be supported and promoted.

Interdisciplinary Centers for Creative Inquiry should be established for raising awareness and instigating change by introducing a creative dialogue that is at once more visual and more spiritually oriented.

A joint committee of the Ministry of the Environment, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Infrastructure should be established, with executive powers, to revise the law of Quarry Rehabilitation, and allow artists to take part in these projects.

An incentive should be given to industrial plants to siphon off a certain percentage of their profits for ecological art projects focusing on the rehabilitation of the damage caused by their activities.

Incentives should be given to scientists and planners to include artists in ecological projects.

National and local campaigns should be encouraged to give a more central role to Ecological Art.

**Notes**

---

<sup>1</sup> *Makom*, Editors: Danziger & Valero, Kibbutz Meuhad, 1982