

Beyond Green

by Stephanie Smith

Sustainable design has the potential to transform our everyday lives through an approach that balances environmental, social, economic, and aesthetic concerns. This emerging strategy emphasizes the responsible and equitable use of resources and links environmental and social justice. By doing so, it moves past a prior generation of more narrowly eco-centered or “green” approaches. Although still a fledgling movement, this holistic, ethical, pragmatic, and wildly inventive mode has the potential to redirect design toward progressive ends, a phenomenon that designer Bruce Mau succinctly dubbed “massive change.” This shift derives from and speaks to a much more widespread desire to find socially and environmentally responsible—in other words, sustainable—ways of living and working, a desire being enacted around the world in large and small ways not only by activists and designers but also by growing numbers of corporations, policy makers, and possibly even you.

Beyond Green explores some of the ways in which contemporary artists also grapple with this impulse to build a more sustainable future (whether or not they think this is actually possible). This exhibition does not survey all such efforts. Rather, it calls attention to a florescence of recent art making that resonates with the considerations at the heart of sustainable design. The project brings together thirteen artists and artists’ groups based in the United States and Europe, leaving it to others to explore work coming from other parts of the world (sustainability seems likely to become a strong current among artists living and working in rapidly industrializing economies such as China’s, for instance). It is important to note that environmental concerns are part of the mix of these artists’ practices, but just that—they have no desire to be labeled as “eco” or “green” or even “sustainable” artists. They work in an expanded field, blending art, activism, and design to varying degrees. This exhibition focuses on only one strand of this art by presenting objects, structures, and processes/networks that use aspects of sustainable design to metaphoric, practical, speculative, ironic, and playful ends.

Green as the new black

About five years ago, I began to notice hybrid electric-gas cars on Chicago’s streets. A few years later, a new logo cropped up at gas stations around the city: the green-and-yellow sunburst that introduced British Petroleum’s new incarnation as self-proclaimed, eco-friendly “bp,” purveyor not only of petrochemicals but also of solar power (their ad campaign initially touted their capacity to move “beyond petroleum”). Around the same time, the city government launched a campaign to make Chicago “the greenest city in America,” and national magazines like *Dwell* began to feature eco-chic design strategies. This trend toward the greening of corporate practice, civic policy, and consumer desire has continued at a rapid pace. New advertising campaigns promoting eco-conscious corporate practices are rampant, and on a more personal level, we can purchase all kinds of goods for a green lifestyle much more easily than we could just a few years ago: even my decidedly gritty local grocery now sells organic milk.

What to make of all this green? Its return to (relatively) mainstream fashion—especially after a stretch through the 1980s and 1990s when environmental concerns languished at the fringes of social attention—might seem purely positive. However, if detached from a broader set of pragmatic and ethical considerations, green practices might be just another trend: a fleeting surface treatment rather than a deep and demonstrable good. (Activists, for instance, stay alert for “greenwashing,” in which corporations highlight their environmentally friendly practices primarily as a public

relations device without significantly changing their overall business practices). Green tactics only address one strand of a complex problem. In these globalized times, a more holistic approach seems a sensible and necessary response to the deep interconnection among human activities and other “natural” systems.²

Sustainable design offers such an approach. It grows out of a broader set of policies and theories about sustainability that have developed over the past three decades. To meld two of the definitions that design historian Victor Margolin provides in his essay in this catalogue, sustainability involves meeting the needs of the present without sacrificing the capacity of future generations to meet their own needs, and doing so with equal attention to social and environmental justice.³ Theorist Tony Fry prefers to think in less anthropocentric terms; he asks “is the essential project ‘sustainable development’ (the reform of the existing methods of development, but retaining its fundamental objectives) or ‘the development of sustainment’ (redirecting development toward a very different basis for the creation of economy, society, and a relation between human beings, the artificial worlds they create, and the biosphere)?”⁴ Despite these differences of emphasis, both definitions underscore the need for change and the capacity for human action to enact it.

Sustainable design puts such thinking into practice by reimagining the ways we live and the stuff of daily life: *structures* such as offices, homes, and other buildings; *objects* such as tools, books, clothes, and cars; and *processes* and *networks* such as transportation and recycling systems. In doing so, it utilizes many established elements of green design, such as the use of recycled materials and renewable energy sources. But to reiterate, sustainable design posits that a purely green approach, which considers environmental questions in isolation from other factors, is incomplete and ineffective. Ethics have to be considered, along with a pragmatic attention to the entire life cycle of any designed thing from its production, through its useful life, to its disassembly and whole or partial reuse.⁵ Although sustainable design practices are gaining footholds in societies around the world through personal, civic, and even corporate efforts, the complexity of our current situation means that massive change is indeed necessary and only just starting to percolate in the face of many and persistent obstacles.

A sustainable art?

One can easily see how this sort of design might affect daily life. But how does it resonate with art making and particularly with the art presented in *Beyond Green*? At any given moment, artists have access to a relatively limited set of visual languages and conceptual strategies, picking up on or pushing against them. These must be considered along with the broader cultural context—the widespread desire for a more sustainable future—mentioned earlier.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, large numbers of artists began favoring ideas over objects and devising works for sites other than gallery and museum spaces. Growing out of this shift, and in tandem with wider phenomena such as the lingering effects of 1960s countercultural experiments and a growing sense of urgency around environmental problems, some artists began to pursue land art: environmentally based projects informed by conceptual and site-specific modes of art making. Earthworks—one variety of land art—consisted of works sculpted in (and in fact, from) remote or pastoral landscapes and often made no obvious environmental claims.⁶ Other examples from this period were informed by more explicitly pragmatic and didactic purposes, focusing for instance on the impact of human development on particular ecosystems.⁷ Since the late

1970s, increasing numbers of environmental projects have dealt not only with such out-of-the-way sites but also with towns and urban centers.⁸ One common trait of these diverse works—apart from their engagement with environmental material—has been their emphasis on particular places.

Whether or not the artists in *Beyond Green* directly refer to these predecessors, their work must be considered in relation to and in distinction from them, and one key difference concerns this issue of site specificity. Many of the *Beyond Green* artists have worked in such modes, which remain a rich part of contemporary practice.⁹ They also work, however, with a more nomadic sensibility exemplified by the mobile structures, objects, and processes/networks featured in this exhibition. Such works might have a generative connection to a particular spot, but they can mutate and adapt over time and in new places. Additionally, many address the contested spaces of contemporary cities and towns and thus might be seen as extending that strand of environmental work that emphasizes populated places rather than remote ones. Such projects chip away at perceptions that “the environment” is something “out there” and that cities are not as deeply connected to other ecosystems as they are to global trade networks. They reflect the current reality that as far-flung people and places become more entwined, ever-spreading populations and communications networks reduce the number of places that might qualify as “out there.” (They also remind us that, for all their flaws, cities have some innate characteristics—for instance, the pooling of resources made possible by density—that can be amplified into sustainable spaces.)

In addition to site-specific and environmentally focused predecessors and parallels, the artists of *Beyond Green* should also be considered in relation to two aspects of European and American art during the 1990s that have an even more direct relationship to their work: the rise of critical practice and the fertile crossover between art and design.

Critical practice in art can be defined as an ethically based, conceptually grounded approach that addresses the social sphere from a position of critique and does so by embracing process as well as product and involving multiple constituencies, sites of production, and strategies for collaboration. As artist and critic Dan S. Wang writes,

what critical practices share is a fundamental aspiration: to present questions and challenges about the way the world is, the ways we perceive it, and the ways in which we can act in it. These questions or challenges might be presented in general terms or with respect to a particular social detail or situation. This aspiration can be described as inherently critical, because the inescapable implication is that a world with different social arrangements, behaviors, or both is possible.¹⁰

Of course there is nothing new about that pull toward relevance, the impulse to grapple with the pressing questions of one’s time and even to use creative endeavors as a means to enact social change. That desire recurs again and again in art, but it finds varied manifestations among different generations and situations.¹¹

In the 1990s, new modalities of art making channeled the urge for social engagement into particular forms. As indicated above, collaboration has been an especially important vehicle. The last decade has seen the formation of many successful artists’ groups

that address social questions not only by working with people outside usual art communities but also by forming collectives and thereby contesting or sidestepping traditional notions of authorship while also pooling resources. Equally important has been the spread of conversational and relational ways of working that derive their meaning in part from interactive processes. The latter have yet to be adequately addressed by historians and critics, but some important attempts have been made: art historian Grant Kester coined the term “dialogical art” for art that takes form not through objects but rather through platforms or processes meant to foster dialogue;¹² and critic Nicolas Bourriaud devised the influential term “relational art” to describe works that take on meaning largely through the participatory engagement of the audience.¹³ Such modes of working are part of the wider artistic culture (and counterculture) of our moment, and though used by artists with differing aims, they have been particularly strong channels for critical practice, which has in turn been an especially fertile and increasingly visible presence within American and European art since the mid-to-late 1990s.¹⁴

During roughly the same period, design and lifestyle emerged as another major area of investigation for European and American artists, who expanded their practices by creating functional works that drew on the visual languages and materials of fashion, architecture, and interior and product design.¹⁵ This blurring of boundaries paralleled the general ascendancy of design as a driver of desire within popular culture. Think for instance of the popularity of lifestyle magazines that cut across wide demographics, from *Readymade* to *Wallpaper* to *Martha Stewart Living*, the success of the Scandinavian retailer Ikea, or Target’s promotion of itself as a low cost/high style purveyor of “design for all.” Critic Hal Foster, among others, has unpacked some of the problematics of the infusion of design into so many aspects of contemporary culture, as we all become targets of increasingly focused niche marketing strategies aimed to infuse the “designed subject” with ever-greater consumer needs.¹⁶ Some of the artists investigating design share his concerns or have looked away from consumerist drives and toward emancipatory ways of using design that draw on the utopian ideals of past moments of art/design overlap (the Bauhaus, the Constructivists) or more directly on progressive thinkers outside the art world, such as Buckminster Fuller or Victor Papanek, author of the 1972 classic *Design for the Real World*. The latter strand of practice has been especially important for *Beyond Green*.

In many ways the ascendancy of design and the rise of critical practice in art have been distinct developments; many artists exploring design as a site of investigation have no interest in engaging social questions, and many others working in a relational manner have little investment in making objects. The convergence of these two strands can provide rich opportunities for artists to create satisfying visual forms that provide new ways of embodying critical practices. And when this convergence occurs around environmental questions, it resonates strongly with sustainable design’s goal of bringing social and aesthetic concerns together with environmental and economic ones.

Beyond green and into the museum

So what can we gain—or lose—by bringing these hybrid practices together within the particularly powerful framing space of the museum?

For museums to remain relevant, they must make space for projects that productively explore the tensions between the world “out there” and the protected precinct of the museum through works that provide rich experiences for visitors. In all its hybridity and occasional messiness, such work extends the boundaries of contemporary art in important ways. Museum exhibitions provide a means of introducing this work to wider audiences and, with luck, of securing a place for it within official records of art history. On a more practical level, through the commissioning of new projects and other kinds of support to artists, museum exhibitions can provide material resources and recognition that may be useful to the artists as they pursue their own independent projects.

Museums can themselves be strengthened by stretching to accommodate such art. Practices that perforate the boundary between the museum and the rest of the social sphere can make even the famously difficult white cube more responsive to current art and enticing to visitors of all kinds. When practitioners from different backgrounds come together to participate in exhibitions and accompanying programs, the museum becomes a platform from which to sustain existing networks and to create new ones. [Figure 1] Museums can also learn from art they present; in this case that means taking up the challenge to make museums more sustainable spaces.¹⁷

There are potential losses as well. The art presented in *Beyond Green* was for the most part planned with a dual commitment to its discursive and speculative function within the museum and its application in other arenas.¹⁸ Still, some of the projects sit a bit more comfortably within the white cube than others, and there is always a risk that the museum setting could overdetermine the ways that visitors respond to these works. Indeed, other works that might fall under the heading “sustainable art” would not (could not) be appropriately housed in museums. Still, it is worth presenting works like these in spite of what is lost; the benefits—not the least being the potential for institutional change—outweigh the risks.

Who knows what will come next, and whether sustainable design will have a lasting impact on art making, museum practice, and the social sphere. Still, I find it heartening that space seems to be opening up both within the wider culture and inside the art world for practices that feel hopeful. Ironic detachment has its benefits (and indeed, appears within some of the works in this exhibition), but earnest engagement has a place and is finding expression within complex, experimental forms of contemporary production. The trick, of course, is not only finding ways to enact change in large and small ways but also finding the creativity, courage, and resources needed to sustain it over time.



FIG. 1
At a community design workshop held during *Beyond Green*’s opening weekend in Chicago, teams of exhibiting artists, community members, students, professors, designers, architects, planners, and others created this model, which shows playful and practical ways that sustainable design might be used to improve the built environment in an area adjacent to the University of Chicago’s campus.

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- 1 See Bruce Mau, *Massive Change* (London: Phaidon Press, 2004).
- 2 Useful recent texts include Tony Fry, *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* (New South Wales University Press, 1999), Michael Braungart and William McDonough, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002), and "The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post Environmental World," a 2004 paper by Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus that was commissioned by the Nathan Cummings Foundation and widely distributed over the Internet.
- 3 See Victor Margolin's essay in this volume, p. 21.
- 4 Tony Fry, email correspondence with the author, October 23, 2005.
- 5 Two popular conduits for ideas about sustainability, especially in relation to business, are *Cradle to Cradle*, (note 2) and Paul Hawkins, Armory Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins, *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution* (Boston: Back Bay Press, 2000).
- 6 Apart from the now ubiquitous *Spiral Jetty*, famous examples include Michael Heizer's massive sculptural excavation into a Nevada desert, *Double Negative* (1969), or Richard Long's performative work *A Line Made by Walking* (1967), in which he flattened a path through a grassy meadow and documented the results with a photograph. Some projects initiated in the 1970s remain works-in-progress, such as James Turrell's *Roden Crater*; these iconic forms of land art remain the most well-known manifestations of environmental work, receiving continued attention in the scholarly and popular press. Key texts include John Beardseely, *Earthworks and Beyond* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), Jeffrey Longner and Brian Wallis, *Land and Environmental Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), and Gilles Tiberghien, *Land Art* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995).
- 7 For the former, think of Robert Smithson's unrealized plans of the early 1970s to remediate mining sites as a sculptural project; for the latter, Joseph Beuys's public tree planting, the *7000 Oaks Project*, first realized in Kassel in 1980, or Helen and Newton Harrison's gallery installations exploring watersheds.
- 8 Projects by Mel Chin, Mark Dion, Platform, Buster Simpson, Susan Leibovitz Steinmann, and Mierle Ukeles are just a few of the examples that could be mentioned here. The Cincinnati Arts Center's 2002 exhibition *EcoVentions: Current Art to Transform Ecologies* also explored this topic.
- 9 Critics such as Miwon Kwon and Claire Doherty have been useful in pushing the understanding of site-specificity; see Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Boston: MIT Press, 2004) and Claire Doherty, ed., *From Studio to Situations: Contemporary Art and the Question of Context* (London: Black Dog Press, 2004).
- 10 Dan S. Wang, "Practice in Critical Times: A Conversation with Gregory Sholette, Stephanie Smith, Temporary Services, and Jacqueline Terrassa," *Art Journal* 62, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 68-88.
- 11 Examples as varied as nineteenth-century painter Gustave Courbet, the early-twentieth-century Russian revolutionary Constructivists, artists affiliated with the Popular Front between the first two world wars, and the 1980s work of HIV/AIDS activists Gran Fury are just a few that might be cited here.

- 12 Kester uses one of the artists' groups in *Beyond Green*, WochenKlausur, as a primary example. See Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
- 13 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Press de Racel, 1998).
- 14 This is partly a function of technological changes: the Web allows autonomous artists and artists' groups to form networks and share information more quickly than in the past so that groups like Temporary Services in Chicago can maintain an ongoing dialogue with artists, writers, and activists in Vienna, Copenhagen, Paris, or Portland. That same technology helped fuel the international antiglobalization and antiwar movements, which have produced ideologies and visual strategies that have often overlapped with critical practice, as demonstrated by *The Interventionists*, an exhibition curated by Nato Thompson at MassMoca in 2004. Shows like Thompson's are indicative of our situation within one of those recurring moments at which the broader art world has directed attention to socially engaged and activist practice through a developing critical and art-historical examination as well as through major museum exhibitions.
- 15 Some of the influential artists working in this manner include Atelier van Lieshout, Jorge Pardo, Tobias Rehberger, Joe Scanlan, Superflex, and Andrea Zittel. Such crossover has been documented through exhibitions like the Generali Foundation's *Designs for the Real World* (2002), the Walker Art Center's *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life* (2003), which focused on design but shares similarities with many of the practices featured in *Beyond Green*, and several design shows that have featured artists in *Beyond Green*, including the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum's *Inside Design Now: National Design Triennial* (2003) and the Museum of Modern Art's *Safe: Design Takes on Risk* (2005).
- 16 See Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (New York: Verso, 2002): 13-26.
- 17 I have taken this phrase from a symposium at which I discussed related issues, "Dual Commitment: Recent Examples of Public Art in Austria and the United States," organized by the artists Wolfgang Schneider and Beatrix Zöbl and held in various sites in Linz, Salzburg, and Vienna, July 2005.
- 18 To extend this thought, there are many ways to generate more sustainable museums: for instance, how might we devise more energy-efficient climate control systems, or bring sustainable thinking into the often wasteful practices of exhibition design, or do more to share resources and strengthen networks with other institutions or with our neighbors? Some of these changes would require major shifts, but others might be implemented more easily.