Ecological Art: Ruth Wallen and Cultural Activism

Susan Birchler
University of South Florida

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd

Part of the American Studies Commons

Scholar Commons Citation
Birchler, Susan, "Ecological Art: Ruth Wallen and Cultural Activism" (2007). Graduate Theses and Dissertations.
https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/635

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
Ecological Art: Ruth Wallen and Cultural Activism

by

Susan Birchler

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Liberal Arts
Department of Humanities and American Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Andrew Berish, Ph.D.
Priscilla Brewer, Ph.D.
Stacy Holman Jones, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
May 15, 2007

Keywords: art history, radical art, land art, earth art, postmodern art, ecology, deep ecology, ecofeminism, anarcha-feminist, feminism, cultural politics, social movements, New Social Movements, Environmental Movement, Direct Action, Nonviolence, Winnie Brienes, Noël Sturgeon, prefigurative politics, direct theory

© Copyright 2007, Susan Birchler
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my mother Mary Ann and her namesake Mary, my beautiful, generous, patient, sister. Without her comprehension, her courage and her unstinting support, this paper would never have materialized.
Acknowledgement

No creative production emerges without the assistance of a group of people willing to knock around half-formed ideas, suggest sources, laugh at the folly of it all and keep each other centered and sane. This thesis would never have seen the light of day without the help of people who enthusiastically stood behind me and my work. I would like to thank Dr. Andy Berish for his wholehearted support, his amazing ability to articulate different viewpoints, consistently astute observations and editing skills. Special thanks to Dr. Priscilla Brewer for adding another layer of polished and in-depth editing. I would like to thank Dr. Daniel Belgrad, Dr. Maria Cizmic and Dr. Mario Ortiz for generously devoting time and energy in sharing information, and providing direction. I would especially like to thank my colleagues, Walter Danielak, Damon Lazzarra, Niki Kantzios, Jeanna Whiting, and Jennifer Melko, for their wonderful support.

No set of thank yous would be complete without talking about my family. My sister Mary threw herself into this endeavor as if she herself was going to school. Despite a personal mantra about not being deep, she immediately grasped the concepts I was talking about and willingly engaged in obtuse academic discussions. My two brothers, John and Donald, didn’t blink an eyelash either, but dove into multiple conversations about what I was doing and provided me with a running dialogue on the ins and outs of attaining a degree. My father, John Birchler, and my Aunt Phyllis and Uncle Bob, all rallied behind the effort, providing loving encouragement. Thanks to everyone.
Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii

Chapter One - Introduction: Cultural Activism ............................................................. 1
  Ruth Wallen .............................................................................................................. 5
  Ecological Artists .................................................................................................... 7
  Ecological Art .......................................................................................................... 8
  Changing a Worldview .............................................................................................. 9
  Eco-Wisdom ............................................................................................................. 11
  Direct Theory and Prefigurative Politics .................................................................. 14
  Cultural Activism ..................................................................................................... 17

Chapter Two - Social Movements .............................................................................. 21
  Characteristics ......................................................................................................... 22
  History ...................................................................................................................... 24
  Cultural Politics ....................................................................................................... 28
  Prefigurative Politics and Direct Theory .................................................................. 34

Chapter Three - Ecological Art .................................................................................. 44
  The Current Worldview ........................................................................................... 47
  Cultural Politics ....................................................................................................... 49
  The Ecology of a Worldview ..................................................................................... 50
  Ecological Art .......................................................................................................... 58
  Cultural Activism ..................................................................................................... 64

Chapter Four - Ruth Wallen ....................................................................................... 66
  Reflections on Arroyo Seco ..................................................................................... 67
  History ....................................................................................................................... 70
  Cultural Stories ........................................................................................................ 75
  Cultural Activism ..................................................................................................... 78
  Viewpoints ............................................................................................................... 79

Chapter Five - Conclusion ......................................................................................... 92

Endnotes ...................................................................................................................... 97

Bibliography ............................................................................................................... 99
Ecological Art: Ruth Wallen and Cultural Activism
Susan Ann Birchler

ABSTRACT

Twentieth century modernity has provoked multiple problems ranging from environmental degradation to human rights violations. Globally, diverse communities of people have organized to promote, not just reactive reforms, but a fundamental alteration of the foundational worldview underlying these issues. Radical activists committed their work to promoting an alternative ethos based on egalitarian, democratic, and ecologically-wise concepts. An array of methodologies emerged from these endeavors. More radical political groups focused on cultural tools to engage people in the construction of an alternative worldview. Radical activists utilized two forms of cultural politics: prefigurative politics, the physical presentation of an envisioned future and direct theory, the constant interaction between theory and practice. Within the artistic community, Ecological Artists centered their practice on cultural activism, creating publicly accessible, site-specific collaborative pieces that illuminate and utilize ecosystem principles to promote an eco-wise worldview.
The concept of utilizing cultural production as a method for achieving social transformation has only recently been analyzed within the social movement discipline. Artists rarely utilize social movement vocabulary, or the term "activism" to describe their practices. To date, no correlation between artistic production and social movement strategies has been made. I argue in this thesis that Ecological Artists are cultural activists who simultaneously developed strategies and methods similar to those being worked out by radical social movement activists. While prefigurative politics and direct theory are terms defined within social movement discipline, the cultural activities are similar. Political activists' internal organization and external political work, prefigurative of an envisioned future and the result of constant interaction between theory and practice, correlates to the necessary collaborative organizations of Eco-Art and the physical presence of the work, a manifestation of the constant interaction between ecosystem theory and artistic practice. In this thesis I analyze the work of Ecological Artist Ruth Wallen as a form of cultural activism. I argue that the intention, execution, and content of her work are forms of prefigurative politics and direct theory. Ruth Wallen has been practicing Eco-Art for twenty years. Her work is focused on the heart of Eco-Art, its intention to produce an eco-wise future through artistic practice.
Chapter One

Introduction

Imagine going to the movies in downtown Los Angeles, settling into a seat in a darkened theatre with some popcorn, and instead of the barrage of advertisements which usually precedes a film, a short series of slides about environmental issues is shown. Ruth Wallen's slide show, "If Frogs Sicken and Die, What Will Happen to the Princes?", a set of nineteen images, was shown in the Laemmle Grande Fourplex Theatre in 1999. The slides explore the frog as an indicator of human interference with environmental processes and uses questions, irony, and story-telling to coax the viewer into becoming aware of their relationship with environmental issues.

Visitors attending a campfire talk in Chaco Canyon National Park, sat down and, instead of the usual stories, they were treated to a multi-image slide lecture/performance that showed them the ecological dynamics in the park. Ruth Wallen photographed particular sites in the canyon over time, recording the minute changes that gradually occur due to insects, animals, wind, rain, sun, cold, and heat. "Intimate Details" gave temporary visitors the opportunity to see themselves as operating within the long-term, ecosystemic processes of the park. The aesthetically rich photographs that drew people into the viewing process, combined with information on the relationships that sustain the
ecosystems of the park, allowed park employees the opportunity to raise visitor awareness and to provide a richer, more involved experience for them.

Ruth Wallen is one of a growing number of artists creating what has come to be defined as Ecological Art. These widely accessible, public artworks don't just present a series of unrelated facts, such as names and categories of plants and animals. The artists are purposively presenting in their works the relationships between all the elements, including humans, in an ecosystem, that work together in mutual dependency and competition to sustain themselves within that ecosystem, or through certain activities, change the ecosystem.

"The focus of a work of art can range from elucidating the complex structure of an ecosystem, examining a particular issue...interacting with a given locale, or engaging in a restorative or remediative function" (Wallen Toward).

Their works are about the totalities of ecosystems and the ultimate purpose is to create social transformation. Ecological Artists are attempting to replace the current dominator/instrumental worldview with an ecologically wise one.

"Ecological art...is grounded in an ethos that focuses on communities and interrelationships. These relationships include not only physical and biological pathways, but also the cultural, political and historical aspects of communities or ecological systems" (Wallen Toward).

Ecological artists share the goal of creating social transformation with activists, engaged in the political arena, within certain social
movement groups. Eco-artists have chosen to work within the cultural milieu to disseminate an eco-wise consciousness. Certain radical social movement activists have also turned toward cultural productions, although still centered on political action, to achieve similar goals. The people working in social movements claim the word activist and activism without hesitation. Except for feminist artists, the words activist and activism are not regularly utilized by artists, critics, or academics, to explain, define, or speak about artistic production.

I argue in this thesis that Ecological Art is a form of cultural activism and Ecological Artists are cultural activists. I am also arguing that Ecological Artists and certain radical social movement activists have been simultaneously developing, since the seventies, similar cultural methods to achieve social transformation. I am making a correlation between the New Social Movement activities, defined as direct theory and prefigurative politics, and the cultural work of Ecological Artists. I believe that Ecological Art, the physical, cultural presence in mainstream culture of an alternative radical ethos, eco-wisdom, contains possibilities to rework culture from the inside out and in doing so promote the social transformation Eco-Artists are looking for.

Both direct theory and prefigurative politics are forms of what social movement scholars call cultural politics, methods of achieving social transformation by modeling an alternative ethos through a cultural presence. For political activists, this cultural work presents itself within the internal
organizational structures and relationships and also in the external political work. Winnie Brienes, a social movement scholar, coined the term prefigurative politics in 1989, in order to analyze and explain how radical activists were always attempting to create and model, in the present, characteristics of an envisioned future culture (Brienes xiv). Nearly ten years later Noël Sturgeon coined the term direct theory as a method to analyze and explain the predilection of radical New Social Movement activists to utilize a constant interaction between theory and practice. She claims that this modeling of a behavior, informed by a certain ethos, and presented through the internal organizational culture and the external cultural framework of political activity, contains multiple possibilities for promoting social change (Sturgeon 37).

I argue in this thesis that Ecological Art presents characteristics of direct theory and prefigurative politics. Ecological Art is the publicly accessible, physical presence of ecological theory on multiple levels. The work models a future world in which all cultural, social and political activity would be informed by eco-wisdom. In presenting what an envisioned future might be like, it is a form of prefigurative politics. Eco-Art usually presents ecosystemic properties on two additional levels. It often is both a functioning ecosystem itself and it is the physical presence of ecosystem theory, the result of the interaction between theory and practice. It is a form of direct theory.

By presenting ecosystemic theory, or eco-wisdom, on so many levels, Ecological Art presents multiple opportunities for visitor/participants to construct
an understanding of ecological principles and in the process perhaps alter their belief systems. Ecological Art contains possibilities to change the culture from the inside, altering the fundamental assumptions through which people choose certain activities and assent to political and economic choices. It is a form of cultural activism, and Eco-Artists are cultural activists, two terms I have coined to analyze and explain the characteristics of any work that utilizes cultural modes of expression to create social change. This thesis examines the confluence between characteristic practices of radical social movement activists and Ecological Artists. I will be analyzing the works of Eco-Artist, Ruth Wallen, through the lens of prefigurative politics and direct theory as a form of cultural activism.

Ruth Wallen

In 1979 Eco-Artist Ruth Wallen completed *The Sea As Sculptress*, an artwork focused on the generativity and diversity of the San Francisco Bay's ecosystems. Wallen built three, eight-by-two foot wooden frames with six blocks of wood strung in the middle and submerged them at different sites in the San Francisco Bay. Over a year's time, the human impact on the three Bay ecosystems was revealed through differences in the diversity and complexity of the marine life settling on the wood. Wallen utilized macrophotography to document the temporal lifecycles and interdependencies of the species over the year. The most polluted area of the bay yielded sparse aquatic life throughout the entire year. The most generative site was situated furthest offshore, near the coast of the old Alcatraz prison. Marine life on two of the frames evolved, over the months, from simple layers of algae to complex communities of algae,
mussels, barnacles, tunicates, bryozoans, crustaceans, crabs and seaweed (Wallen 180 Story).

Wallen created “a series of multi-image lecture/performances that integrated scientific information with storytelling” (Wallen Toward). The work revealed an additional cultural story of the human impact on the San Francisco Bay’s ecosystems. Describing her artwork, Wallen states: “Accompanied by images that dissolved in a continuous multi-image slide show, I presented stories of working on the project, descriptive scientific information and periods of silence” (Wallen 180 Story). A major element in the performance piece was the ending discussion during which the audience was encouraged and empowered to collectively create a deeper comprehension of the issues presented. Her work drew attention to both the scientific and aesthetic elegance and beauty of the Bay’s marine life-forms and their ecosystemic properties – the intertwined relationships, both healthy and degraded, of the Bay’s various biota, including human beings. Presenting this artistic work at various venues, including the Exploratorium, espace dbd (a gallery in Los Angeles) and various educational settings, Wallen “hoped that after viewing the work the audience would have a better appreciation of the richness of the marine life of the San Francisco Bay” (Wallen Toward). Wallen utilized the educational experience of The Sea as Sculptress not only to provide a venue for her audience to become intimate with sea-life, but also to raise awareness of an upcoming referendum for a canal that would have, had it passed, seriously damaged the ecosystem of the Bay and put marine life at risk.
I argue that Wallen’s work is a confluence of scientific observation, artistic creation, ecological theory, and cultural activism. It is simultaneously a form of activism, an aesthetic performance piece, an academic cultural study, and a science lecture. The artwork functions as an experiential bridge between the encapsulated elite vocabulary and practices of multiple disciplines: art, science, cultural studies and social activism. Ecological art is privileged as an art form, in its capability to communicate the complexities of different disciplines in elegant, uniquely holistic ways. While revealing through an artistic experience the cultural and ecological history of the bay and the intimate relationship between the water and human beings, the work also provided an opportunity for consciousness-raising, and for political and social activism.

In my opinion, Ruth Wallen pushed the boundaries of conventional artistic practice, providing not just a vision of utopian political and cultural change, but a working process with the potential to both educate viewer/participants and assist them in the formulation of an ecological consciousness that might, in turn, promote the construction of a different world.

*Ecological Artists*

Wallen’s work is part of a complex, ecologically informed, artistic practice: Ecological Art, or Eco-Art. Ecological artists are concerned with environmental issues, not just singular crises such as oil spills or sewage overflow, but with the basic starting points from which those crises emanate – a societal belief system. Eco-Artists are engaged in an attempt, through the cultural production of their artwork, to change the public’s attitudes towards, physical engagement with, and
active choices about their relationship with the non-human natural world. Ecological artists are attempting to create a sea-change in public belief systems, physically prefiguring a working alternative to the current paradigm. As Ruth Wallen states on her website, "Ecological art exists in a social context. While the work may express an individual vision, the work is created to communicate, to stimulate dialogue and to contribute to social transformation" (Wallen Toward).

Ecological Art

According to Ruth Wallen, the relationships Eco-Artists attempt to develop between the Ecological art piece, the viewers/participants and collaborators/builders is the most important element of Eco-Art. Ecological artists attempt to provide a learning environment, one experienced both through the body and abstractly as a concept. Driving ecological artists' practice is the hope of providing a connective spark between people and the art that will assist in the production of an ecological understanding or wisdom, the foundation for a positive, pro-active belief system informing social transformation.

I perceive in Ecological Art two simultaneously occurring functions. One function is to reveal not only ecological processes, but also how people are always firmly embedded in, and integral to, the dynamics of the ecosystems they inhabit and are engaged in. Ecological Art's other function is to actively model an alternative reality, a cultural and social framework based on ecological theory. I would argue that Ecological Art thus works for change within a cultural venue on two fronts; it subverts dominant ideology, the dominant/subordinate relationship between humans and the nonhuman world and, at the same time, creates a
working cultural alternative. As Stuart Hall states, “material and cultural practices are all part of the complex networks of social reality that shape our experiences and political potentials” (Kaufman, 263). Eco-Art creates the possibility for consciousness-raising and provides a lived example of how to apply that new awareness to real situations, building a physical culture while at the same time reinforcing, through practical usage and experience, abstract theories, principles and beliefs.

Because Eco-Art is a process-oriented practice, always pointing to the natural processes of the ecosystem, modeling those processes in its own physical presence and presenting the physical presence of an ecosystem, it cannot easily be defined by the content it presents, its mediums, or physical forms. Instead Eco-Artists’ praxis occurs within parameters defined by the objective of creating ecological wisdom. The means by which that objective is accomplished is informed by the same ecological ethos. Eco-Artists state that their intent is to promote a different social belief system. I argue that their work promotes that goal by physically manifesting ecological theory and foreshadowing an envisioned, utopian, alternative reality.

*Changing a Worldview*

Whether the physical form of an Eco-Artist’s work saves a damaged site, conserves an ecosystem, provides ongoing remediation, or a symbolically draws attention to the intertwined human/nature relationship, the intention to fundamentally replace the dominant worldview with one based on ecological wisdom is of paramount importance to Eco-Art as praxis (Gablik 49 Ecological).
For the most part, human activity since the eighteenth century has been informed by assumptions and value systems formulated during the Enlightenment. Harvard Professor, Tu Wie-Ming, speaking of the impact of worldviews on the current ecological problems, states: “We are so seasoned in the Enlightenment mentality that we assume that the reasonableness of its general ideological thrust is self-evident” (Ming 21). He goes on to define the Enlightenment mentality as, the human desire to become the measure and master of all things, and notes that it is still the most influential moral discourse in the political culture of the modern age (Ming 21). Eco-feminists, social ecologists, deep ecologists, radical ecologists and systems theorists increasingly place the onus of responsibility for the degradation of the world's ecosystems on the Enlightenment worldview.

A growing chorus of voices is pointing out that the fundamental roots of the environmental disaster lie in the attitudes, values, perceptions, and basic worldview that we humans of the industrial-technological global society have come to hold. The age has permitted and driven us to pursue exploitive, destructive, and wasteful applications of technology (Metzner 164).

Some people have perceived the activities informed by this particular worldview as being suicidal.

The particular form of production in modern society—industrial production... creates accumulating ecological stresses on air, water,
soil, and biota (including human beings) and on society’s ability to maintain and reproduce itself over time (Merchant 9).

Increasingly people have looked towards the networked, interrelated, communicative processes by which ecosystems function and remain healthy for both inspiration and models for sustainable human cultures. People, who are invested in creating new ways of thinking about and being in the world based on an ecological ethos, may differ in their subjective viewpoints, definitions of spirituality, or methodologies and strategies, but they share a common definition of ecological wisdom.

Ecological Wisdom

Ecological wisdom, as defined by Gregory Bateson, is “the knowledge of the larger interactive system – that system which, if disturbed, is likely to generate exponential curves of change” (Bateson 439). Ecological wisdom insists on a holistic definition of the earth, identifying the world as nested communities, operating as self-regulating systems, comprised of organic and inorganic entities, continuously engaged in a communicative interrelationality, “in a combination of competition and mutual dependency” (Bateson 436). Each ecosystem is nested within larger and larger systems and interconnected networks. A skin cell, for instance, has its own ecosystem and is, in turn, part of the ecosystem of the skin, which is an integral part of the ecosystem of the body, and the body engages in multiple ecosystems as it interacts with other people and environments, like a house or beach. Every entity in an ecosystem is in constant communication with the others, each conveying a message of
difference to which an entity may or may not respond. No entity is autonomous or ever out of communicative relationality with the other entities in the ecosystem in which they are engaged. This creates a community, an ecosystem, each of which is nested within the other and networked together. Ecosystems are always in the process of communicative interrelation with each other.¹

Every ecosystem has a built in set of recursive, self-corrective feedback loops, bringing information back into the system, that function to maintain and sustain the system.² Most systems are “self-corrective against disturbance” (Bateson, 435). In the forest environment a feedback loop might be simplistically conceived as the communicative relationship between a bee and a flower. If a drought kills a large quantity of flowering bushes, the bee population receives the communication of too little pollen – a feedback loop of information that provokes a response. Either the bees alter their cultural repertoire, the learned routes to existing flowering bushes, and search for new flowers or they die off.

Ecosystems rely on communicative relationality. If all entities in an ecosystem are engaging in systemic self regulating processes, they need to be able to communicate difference and to do so they must always be ‘in relation’ to and dependent on one another. This is an important shift in human self-perception, imagining one’s subjective self as always being in relation and dependent on every other species in an ecosystem.³

The Enlightenment-based mentality privileges autonomous, non-communicative action, emphasizing individuality and self will. A systemic worldview insists on situating people within the ecosystems, both natural and
social, that they inhabit and are engaged in. Systems theory insists that people are dependent on and always in an entwined, communicative interrelationship with all organic and inorganic entities sharing that system. “Systemic approaches help us shift our focus and attention from ‘things’ to processes, from static states to dynamics, and from ‘parts’ to ‘wholes’” (Tilbury 81). In my opinion, there is such a fundamental difference between the two value systems that a switch in worldviews requires people to literally deconstruct their assumptions and beliefs and then reconstruct a different concept of reality based on ecological wisdom. I argue that assisting people in this endeavor is the task that both Ecological Artists and environmental activists have set themselves.

Both Ecological Artists and activists in the Environmental Movement hope that a deeply profound alteration of people’s belief systems will not only provide a different cognitive and theoretical worldview founded on ecosystem theories, but also provide an impetus for people’s active engagement in social, political and cultural change. Theoretically, the manner in which people experience their culture will influence the choices they make. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz stated, “Culture is a model for experience; and cultural symbols reinforce an ethos, making plausible a world-view which in turn justifies the ethos” (Swidler 278). I am asserting in this thesis that the holistic, process-oriented practices of Eco-Art can promote the creation of different cultural symbols, vocabulary, rituals, assumptions and experiences that contain a robust potential for disrupting dominant ideology. They also assist people in reconstructing their worldviews.
The drive to provoke an alteration in a worldview capable of informing radical social, cultural and political transformation is shared by activists involved in not just the environmental movement but other diverse social change movements: Feminism, Fair Global Trade, Human Rights, Labor, Civil Rights, and Nonviolence. Each of these movements often utilizes similar methodologies, strategies and activities to promote the knowledge and awareness necessary for the larger voting public to, not only passively accept, but actively rally behind certain ideas demanding and working for change. Many radical activists rely on cultural work to both present alternative, abstract theories and also to physically manifest them. “Strategies, tactics, and organizational forms are not only means to other ends but are also ends in themselves, ways of communicating something important about those who use or participate in them” (Polletta 107). Ecological Art, as a vigorous practice, presents characteristics of two current strategies employed by radical, new social movement activists: direct theory and prefigurative politics.

Direct Theory and Prefigurative Politics

Noël Sturgeon coined the term “direct theory” to explain the particularly unique practices of activists within the Direct Action Movement. Sturgeon “learned to read the movement’s practices and structures as a form of theorizing through practice” (Sturgeon 36). Upon analysis, she concluded that the activities of the Direct Action Movement activists were split between the realization of a specific goal, such as closing a nuclear plant, and the experimentation with, and constant interplay between, the radical theories they were espousing and the
cultural, social and political structures they used to achieve those goals. In order to break down hierarchical power structures, for example, activists began to practice consensus decision-making with rotating leadership.

My analysis of Ecological Art revealed that Eco-Artists utilize direct theory, constantly employing and physically experimenting with ecosystem theories and art’s intent, content, forms, and processes through the lived experience of their artistic practice. Often this constant interchange between theory and practice results in the physical manifestation of larger social, cultural, and political agendas. Ecological Art presents a physical reality containing characteristics within its design processes, contents and forms, of a utopian future, based on ecological wisdom with the stated intent by the artists that their work would promote social transformation.

The physical manifestation of an envisioned, future reality with the intention of creating societal change has been observed as a normative practice for radical activists within a range of New Social Movements. This praxis has been defined as prefigurative politics. Cynthia Kaufman, in her book on radical social activity, states, “prefigurative politics is based on the belief that we are creating the new world we are advocating as we go, and so we should try to build in the present the institutions and social patterns of the society we are working towards” (Kaufman 277-78).

The physical manifestation of ecological theory through Ecological Art prefigures a process-oriented sustainable society informed by an ecological ethos. The physical forms, content, collaborative practice, and organizational
structure of Ecological Art function similarly to the organization structures and political practices of the Direct Action Movement:

They both serve "as practical frameworks to accomplish immediate and specific movement goals,...as methods of radicalization of internal consciousness-raising for participants; as efforts to change public opinion on certain issues, or external consciousness-raising for participants; as critical commentaries...and finally, as forms of prefiguring an alternative vision" (Sturgeon 37).

In my opinion, Eco-Art is the physical manifestation of a constant interaction between theory and practice, resulting in a material reality that makes real a utopian vision. This practice maps onto the New Social Movement discipline's definitions of direct theory and prefigurative politics.

Ecological Art can be perceived as a set of cultural strategies attempting to re-order people's cognitive awareness by making real a different way of thinking – an ecological wisdom. They conceive, experiment with, and currently practice, methodologies and strategies that were simultaneously being worked out and experimented with by activists within social movement groups. The Social Movement activists' practices of direct theory and prefigurative politics, analyzed and defined through New Social Movement Studies, were also developed and practiced by Ecological Artists. Both New Social Movement Activists and Ecological Artists are practicing a form of cultural activism, relying on lived experience to promote different cultural symbols, and metaphors capable of provoking people into a heightened awareness of their world, leading
to a reconsideration and reordering of their belief systems. Both groups are choosing to utilize new nonhierarchical process-oriented, culturally-based methods and strategies to achieve social transformation.

Ecological Artist Ruth Wallen's works focus on providing opportunities for people to reconsider their relationship with nonhuman nature. She has been developing her artistic practice within the postmodern cultural and political milieu. Her work is situated within the contemporary artistic debates about the role of art in the postmodern world, the artist as integral to the functioning of society, art as a communicative medium, and the capability of art to transform society. Wallen, heavily influenced by the previous generation of seventies feminist artists, began her artistic career a decade later, in the early eighties. While her work drew on the theoretical foundation of feminist artists, her work is engaged in border issues and the environment.

Cultural Activism

Wallen began working for the park service as an environmental specialist when she was an undergraduate studying anthropology and biology. Her first job with the park service during her junior year consisted of assessing environmental impact statements "based on cost-benefit analysis" (Wallen 179 Story). The work caused her to wonder "about all the impacts that were not so easily quantifiable. How can one assign value to the preservation of a burial ground of native peoples who have long since been displaced?" (Wallen 179 Story). Questioning the limited scope of her work, she "dreamed of making art" (Wallen 179 Story). While initially choosing to work primarily with photography, Wallen's
later pieces gradually evolved into more complex, multimedia performance/presentations. Wallen’s gravitation towards, and active engagement with ecological wisdom, informs much of her work.

Her first piece of ecological art was *The Sea as Sculptress*, followed closely by *Intimate Details*, a 1981 piece about Chaco Canyon National Historical Park in New Mexico. Wallen has produced ecological art covering a wide range of environmental issues such as the impact of building development in her 1988 piece, *I Love Del Mar*, and the significance of frogs as an indicator species in her 1999 piece, *If Frogs Sicken and Die, What Will Happen to the Princes?*.

Wallen states that her work examines the culturally shaped relationships between humans and the ecosystems in which they are engaged and, as well, humans’ relationships within social structures. She perceives Eco-Art as “grounded in an ethos that focuses on communities and interrelationships. These relationships include not only physical and biological pathways, but also the cultural, political and historical aspects of communities or ecological systems” (Wallen Toward).

Wallen hopes to provide a cognitive learning experience which might open a door to a different understanding of the ecological processes inherent in the world. On her website she states: “I hope that my projects will provoke a similar investigation for the viewer, encouraging them to develop a relationship to place and/or contemplate an issue, examine their preconceptions, and envision new possibilities” (Wallen Toward).
I argue that Ruth Wallen's work, informed by a specific form of experimentation and a constant interplay between ecological theory and practice, presenting the characteristics of an envisioned future, maps onto the definition of direct theory and prefigurative politics. Her intent to create social transformation informs a set of cultural practices which are shared by radical activists within New Social Movements. While Wallen has not utilized New Social Movement vocabulary to define or discuss her work, or used the word “activist” to define herself, nonetheless both ecological artists and new social movement activists share a common goal: to create a new world through cultural practices which are capable of both informing about, and modeling the new cultural, social, and political structures to which they are committed. The strategies of artists and activists may have evolved within different discourses and venues, but they map onto one another through a common goal to make real, through their practices, a theoretical framework, and in doing so, create a synecdoche, a smaller physical model that stands in for a larger envisioned future. They share a belief that a goal towards achieving social transformation does “not rest on a privileged social agent, historical teleology, or totalizing social theory;... (it is) normatively grounded in broadly shared values” (Hunter, 237).

Ecological Art inserts into mainstream culture the physical cultural presence of an alternative eco-wise worldview. By modeling ecosystems theory, speaking about ecosystems in the content of the work, and being the physical presence of eco-wisdom, Eco-Art presents multiple opportunities for visitors/participants to engage in the construction of ecological comprehension.
In doing so they can create a feedback loop carrying an alternative cultural repertoire back into mainstream culture and thus changing it from the inside out. I argue here that this cultural method to create change developed simultaneously in the practices of a particular artistic community and within radical social movement groups and, although the practice has been defined within social movement activity as direct theory and prefigurative politics, the characteristics of each practice are very similar. Ruth Wallen’s work presents characteristics of direct theory and prefigurative politics and is a form of cultural activism. Her eco-art is ripe with the potential to achieve social transformation by creating communities of people who begin to deconstruct their worldview and reconstruct their belief systems and in doing change their cultural relationships to nonhuman nature and each other.
Chapter Two

Social Movements

Twentieth century social movements have a rich and diverse cultural history. I believe they can be better understood by focusing on the multiple theories, philosophies, and motivating factors of involved activists, than by generating a timeline of specific events or charismatic leaders. Social movements are comprised of individuals who agree to join a particular kind of community in order to pursue social and political change and who have the ability to change that community if it does not respond to their needs (Brienes xxiv). Once we acknowledge that social movements are an expression of individual passions and desires, much of what occurred over the past decades snaps into focus. Social Movements have never just been about political and social change; for many people they were also about working towards the creation of an envisioned world. Activists were working to create a culture within which they could live and relate to one another in a completely different manner, based on a humanitarian ethos. Winnie Brienes states in her book Community and Organization in the New Left, that for many New Left activists, personal transformation was viewed as an important element in social transformation. An analysis of any social movement, right or left, cannot be understood without factoring in this behavior (Brienes xxiv).
Social movements are defined as "collective efforts by socially and politically subordinated people to challenge the conditions and assumptions of their lives...the term refers to persistent, patterned, and widely distributed collective challenges to the status quo" (Darnovsky vii). Social movements come into being when individuals feel compelled to instigate a group response to particular political, economic, or social circumstances and collectively work to promote an alternative worldview.

Movements typically flourish where there are mounting crises of legitimacy, where the old systems of authority and legitimacy are challenged through broad cultural ferment or social upheaval...Whether these periods of conflict give rise to a radical politics depends upon the capacity of diverse movements to form cohesive social blocs (Boggs 21).

Historically, social movements have promoted conservative as well as liberal, and radical ideas. According to Carl Boggs, movements are created to disrupt dominant hegemonic narratives, shape alternative meaning-making systems and forward a new vocabulary based on different belief systems, constituting, through wide-ranging practices, a different worldview.

Characteristics

In the broadest sense, all social movements share common characteristics. The actions of movement participants are both spontaneous and diligently orchestrated over time. “Social change occurs through a long, uneven historical process that is governed by no linear or law-like patterns” (Boggs 5).
They are fluid, dynamic entities, characterized by a disbanding of old groups and the continuous creation of new ones as well as an ebb and flow of intense, dedicated activity. With a broad enough base and committed members, a social movement can adjust its strategies, goals, and institutional processes to meet new historical circumstances. Simple goal accomplishment is not the only measure by which social movement activists judge their efficacy. Instead, they often recognize the power of small and symbolic successes, as well as the achievement of unstated goals such as community formation. Because social movements are often constituted from an oppositional standpoint challenging the status quo, people in power frequently react violently, even to those demands that seem reasonable to the general public.4

The comprehension of social movements has been filtered through value systems for both the participants and academic scholars (Darnosfky vii). The most conservative people have perceived the collective public activities of social movement participants as evidence of the inherent problems with democratic processes, and they often advocate the “need for authoritative control” (Darnosfky vii). The political center has perceived these practices as symptoms of governmental and societal failures, revealing areas where reform was needed. Radicals and the left supported a dismissal of the legitimacy of governmental, bureaucratic power-structures altogether. Within some social movements there have always existed profound anti-authoritarian radical strains calling for deep democratic processes and nonhierarchica structures of power (Brienes 14-15).
History

At the end of the nineteenth century, social movements in the United States were predominantly reactions to the modern, industrialized, capitalist system. Many of those struggles were framed by a vocabulary examining the relationship between class, labor, authority, power, and capitalist production, and many of them advocated revolution: a complete violent overthrow of one system for another. The more radical social movements during that era were, most notably, the radical pacifists, the Catholic Worker Movement, and anarchists. “Their ethically oriented criticism of capitalism, emphasis on the activism of moral witness and distrust of hierarchical organizations distinguished them from the old left parties and organizations proper” (Brienes 14). Although labeled the “New Left”, the 1960’s social movements actually drew more on these radical strains of ideology than the communist or socialist theories of the “Old Left”.

A deep streak of anti-authoritarianism, an embrace of moral means to reach moral ends, a value system that privileges people over bureaucracy, and an embrace of cultural and personal activities as important elements, are characteristics drawn from the twenties and thirties radical contingent that were utilized by the New Left. The New Left has been defined as the sixties activists involved in the Student Movements, the Free Speech Movement and the Anti-War Movement. The New Left layered in Marxist and postmodern theories concerning culture and hegemony: concepts central for understanding the hold which advanced capitalism had on people’s consciousness (Brienes 16).
Before the “New Left” coalesced, there were multiple social movements already organizing grass-roots support for peace, nonviolence, civil rights, the environment, and anti-nuclear issues, as well as the nascent formations of the women’s and gay rights movements. In particular, the peace and anti-nuclear movements had been sustained through World War II by Quaker groups committed to passive and active nonviolence. According to Barbara Epstein, these groups brought ideas of egalitarianism, nonhierarchical leadership, community and personal empowerment to the New Left (Epstein 32).

The sixties and early seventies “New Left” abandoned a strictly Marxist theoretical base as an inadequate response to the global industrialized state.

On balance, the early new left and the student movement were not traditionally socialist. They did not believe in a working-class revolution, or in a Marxist analysis of social change and of political organization...Existentialism and not Marxism was relevant to them and captured their mood (Brienes 16).

For many people the capitalist system had created an unacceptable social culture that gave “preference to property rights over personal rights, technological requirements over human needs, competition over cooperation, violence over sexuality, concentration over distribution, the producer over the consumer, means over ends, secrecy over openness, social forms over personal expression, striving over gratification, Oedipal love over communal love” (Yinger 20).
These ideas were embedded in the culture of America and a response to them could not be articulated only in the political arena. The circumstances required a cultural strategy as well as a political one.

Much of the activities of sixties social movement participants were not just a reaction to the exaggerated economic purposiveness that the post-war society inflicted on them, but also a collective working out of alternative ideas, structures, relationships and communities. "The deep desire for democratic participation was evident everywhere, particularly in the thick of political actions. Yearning for community and for a democracy in which the individual had some influence was profound among new leftists" (Brienes xiv). This experimentation with radical alternatives produced a unique decade of social movement activity, during which there were no set rules accepted by all participants about organizational structures, leadership, or the manner in which a person could be involved.

The New Left emerged from the radical pacifism of the Civil Rights Movement. The first students and young people to become radicalized did so through the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The Civil Rights Movement "was formative for the politics and outlook of the new left; styles of work, ideas and organizational forms were learned directly from SNCC" (Brienes 11). The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was formed in 1960 to organize on campuses in support of the civil rights movement "and other student-oriented political issues" (Brienes 11). Many of these activists, as well as the people participating in the 1964 Berkeley Free Speech Movement, were heavily involved in the Civil Rights Movement. This gave them direct
experiences in nonviolent philosophy, Quaker consensus decision-making, personal empowerment, a commitment to deep democratic processes as well as activities informed and shaped by a strong ethical and moral stance.

The "New Left" focused on the relationships between the military industrial complex and the university. Activists also addressed issues of colonialism and systems of oppression. "In the Berkeley rebellion and repeatedly thereafter students expressed opposition to a faceless and inhumane bureaucracy organized for industry and profit, and the necessity of non-cooperation in order to force it to stop" (Brienes 24). There followed a series of struggles between the universities and the students during which the students often spontaneously formed collective actions and used participatory democracy to sustain them and to make decisions. On site, large groups of people, often hundreds, together would hash out each new decision on how to proceed. (Brienes 25)

For nearly everyone who has chosen to speak or write of the experience, it is described as a transcendental empowerment. Michael Rossman, talking about his experience on the Berkeley campus surrounding a police car said:

And the dialogue on top of the car continues. People are getting up there and talking and people are listening. And people are voting on this and people are voting on that.

It's almost enough to make you believe that if it were given a chance, the democratic process might work. I just might work.

People quoted books as if books were relevant...as if it all meant
something. And listening to them, I almost believed for the first time in years that it did mean something (Brienes 47).

Much of the commitment to consensus decision making and egalitarian democratic processes that the New Social Movements adhere to emerged from these kinds of experiences with empowerment and community formation through radical participatory democratic processes. It is these personal forms of alternative social and cultural experiences, the lived experience of participatory democracy, which activated a deep desire to recreate them again (Brienes 27).

The process was one of energetically, even joyfully, creating and experiencing connectedness and meaning, which often dissipated quickly, only to be recreated and dreamed of long after, shaping an alternative vision of society. These feelings and experiments were among the driving inspirations and goals of the movement and new left (Brienes 27).

Cultural Politics

The goals of the New Left pushed past the boundaries of political revolution and embraced social, cultural and personal transformation as being equally important. While the activities of the sixties were presented through the media as focused on specific goals, such as an end to the war, in fact, as a famous 60's Berkeley slogan stated, “The issue is not the issue.” The issue was to imagine, and make real through practices, a new model of reality (Brienes 55). “The activists of the sixties tended to gravitate to what seemed more fundamental issues of how social life as a whole should be organized, what ideas it should be
ruled by" (Epstein 38). It is their presentation of and experimentation with radically alternative modes of being in the world that was both most represented in the press and thus widely known, yet at the same time grossly misunderstood.

Some of this misunderstanding stems from the activists' apparent lack of interest in conventional political arena, while at the same time presenting themselves as working for social change, a radical process few people entrenched in mainstream ideology were prepared to comprehend. New Left activist Dick Flacks summed up these ideas nicely in a paper written for SDS:

If I understand what we are trying to work on when we say we are building a “movement,” I think it has to do with two types of goals. One, which we might call “existential humanism,” is expressed by the desire to change the way we, as individuals, actually live and deal with another people...Secondly, we say that we seek a radical transformation of the social order. In short, that we act politically because our values cannot be realized in any durable sense without a reconstruction of the political and social system....I think it is inescapable that our movement must encompass both sets of orientation. It is clear that politics apart from an existential ethic becomes increasingly manipulative, power-oriented, sacrificial of human lives and souls—it is corrupted (Epstein 42).

The tension between attempting to create an alternative society and conducting practical strategies to achieve political goals became one of the major problems of the movement. Society is accustomed to a democracy based on
compromises to achieve political goals, not just legislative, but ethical and moral ones. But the activists were unwilling to sacrifice the means to the end, or unnecessarily compromise the philosophical ideas to which they were committed. For some people, especially the larger public, this stance was so far outside the mainstream understanding of how political systems operated, the mass media rarely even commented on it. How to work out the tensions between these two seemingly disparate goals became the real, if unstated, work of activists in the following decades (Darnofsky xvi). The internal problems of how to prefigure the world they were yearning for by creating empowering, egalitarian, participatory processes while still attaining political goals, was the real issue, as the Berkeley slogan stated, of the sixties activists (Brienes 36). This turn to cultural politics, personal transformation, symbolic successes, and creation of community eventually overrode political strategy, as politics based on unethical compromises and reforms began to look less and less appetizing. Many critics of the “New Left” and “New Social Movements” blame the lack of political effectiveness on these tendencies, and often rightly so. However, in doing so, they gloss over the fact that bridging the two goals is still foremost in many people’s movement efforts. The methods for achieving both goals are still in formation (Darnofsky xxvi).

The sixties activists’ experimental attempts to work out what seem to be disparate goals, the reliance on cultural rather than political means to create change, as well as the lack of definitive authoritarian leadership, was perceived by the general public as an incomprehensible tangle of activity. From the public
viewpoint as well as the academic one, the sixties countercultural movements have been generally labeled a failure. Other than stopping the war, people, in general, fail to comprehend the cultural impact these activities produced in the American public. As activist and scholar Winnie Brienes states:

[the] negative evaluations of the new left were often made on the basis of instrumental criteria, which entailed overlooking the movement’s radical challenge to existing society....It was my view, then and now, that the demonstrations, confrontations, experiments in collectivity and participatory democracy, questioning, militancy, drugs and counterculture and the radicalization of individuals and American culture which accompanied these, were what was accomplished (Brienes xv).

Activists brought their experiences, questions, and willingness to experiment and utilize prefigurative politics to the "New Social Movements" (NSM) that appear after the New Left has expended its energies on the anti-war movement. While some NSM groups are dedicated to liberal reform politics, investing in the current political system, radical New Social Movements are smaller networked organizations that, like the marginal pacifist movements of the forties and fifties, often work together in coalitions, share the responsibility for strategizing and organizing, and are committed to the creation of an alternative society. These new groups can be broken into five general genres: "Urban social struggles, the ecology movement, women's and gay liberation, the peace
movement, and the cultural revolt linked primarily to student and youth activism” (Bogg 40).

But these groups didn’t just continue New Left ideas unexamined. The members of these groups began to articulate an alternative vision of both the structural framework of their organizations and the culture or set of belief systems, rituals, and customs which supported that framework. They utilized an “innovative theorizing grounded in the distinct experiences, challenges, and opportunities presented by advanced industrialism” (Boggs 39).

New Social Movements have several shared characteristics, some drawn from the sixties New Left, while others are distinctive innovations which speak to the unique particularities of the contemporary globalized, industrialized world.

Perhaps their most striking feature is that they emerge primarily outside the bourgeois public sphere — as extra-institutional phenomena rooted in civil society—which is precisely the sense in which they can be understood as social or even prepolitical (Boggs 47).

The oppositional stance of early labor struggles, attempting to grapple directly with the political system are abandoned, focusing instead on creating large-scale social change through “face-to-face relations, at the level of personal identity and consciousness, in the household and neighborhood, whether or not such change is enunciated in public politics and macro-level power relations…Social transformation is mediated through culture as well as politics narrowly defined—that the personal and the cultural are as politically real as, and are not reducible to, power struggles in the state and economy” (Darnofsky xiv).
New Social Movements are focused on subverting the current ideological hegemony and providing multiple opportunities to slowly replace it in people's understandings with a different value system based on “a shift of cultural values away from instrumentalism and materialism toward an ethic of participation, communalism and self-actualization” (Boggs 48). To do so, social movements attempt a repoliticization of civil society from the grassroots which involves an "ongoing challenge to hegemonic beliefs, values, attitudes, myths—the struggle for a new discursive terrain with distinctive rules and language, with new principles of legitimacy contesting the old ones” (Boggs 47).

On a practical level this involves reaching out to people, offering opportunities to raise consciousness by revealing the inherent contradictions and problems of the current economic and social order; providing opportunities for people to empower themselves by changing their perceptions of themselves as active social agents; modeling an alternative world and inviting people to partake of it, and creating opportunities for community formations. This requires grassroots cultural work to create what Raymond Williams calls an “emergent hegemony” (Boggs 47).

Activists within NSM’s have radically altered the entire scope of what a movement is, how it works and for what purposes.

As Carl Boggs states:

In a relatively brief span the new movements have stirred intense debate over the relationship between economic crisis and political change, the viability of mass insurrection, the role of labor, the
definition of democracy, and the significance of personal and cultural factors in creating a new society... Perhaps most important, they have held out a range of novel and compelling visions of the future, inspired by the themes of feminism, recovery of community, ecological renewal, and participatory democracy, while rejecting the facile connection between industrial development and human liberation (Boggs 9).

Boggs has the advantage of time on his side as he looks backward on NSM history. It took quite a lot of time for people, either academics or the public, to understand this. For many years, these radical practices were viewed with confusion and skepticism. The work of the New Left and NSM has often been labeled a failure for the inability to create a new world order today.

Prefigurative Politics and Direct Theory: Cultural Activism

In 1982, Winnie Brienes, an activist and professor, felt compelled to refute the commonly held negative perceptions of the sixties and seventies movements and published Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962-1968: The Great Refusal. In this book she acknowledged the importance of “New Left” practices not just to American society, but also to the “New Social Movements” that came out of and drew on the experiments and utopian yearnings of the sixties activists. She challenged the conventional analysis of sixties social movements as disorganized and ineffectual. She chose to focus, not on social movements as large organizational entities with leaders and goals, but rather on the activists who built those social movements and who, learning from their
experiments, reconstituted the later New Social Movements based on those belief systems. Foregrounding the unstated utopian goals and aspirations of people participating in the sixties social movements broadens the definition of organizational success (Brienes xiv).

Activists ability to live their value systems, to create possibilities for empowerment, to treat each other with respect, to create communities and utilize deep democratic processes was, in fact, highly important and often constituted a more deeply personal sense of accomplishment than an instrumental attainment of strategic goals, such as stopping the war.

Brienes feels that the New Left’s expressive and apolitical elements are its central features. Where critics see pathology, she sees “the healthy and vital heart of the new left, its prefigurative politics” (Brienes 6). Brienes coined the term “prefigurative politics” to describe the qualitative, utopian, cultural characteristics of the new left.

The crux of prefigurative politics imposed substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that “prefigure” and embody the desired society...attempting to develop the seeds of liberation and the new society prior to and in the process of revolution (Brienes 6).

From this standpoint, much of the previously unintelligible countercultural activities: the reliance on cultural activities to articulate values and create communities, long discussions, consensus decision making, the continual
presence through symbols incorporated into dress, lifestyles, and acts, of the
ideas of love and respect; concepts of sharing, the insistence on personal
radicalization and transformation, can be viewed as part of radical political
activity (Brienes 43-45).

These activities become elements of prefiguring an alternative worldview
based on communal, egalitarian and participatory values. Brienes perceives
their presence in the physical culture of America as a form of creating new
meaning-making symbols as well as sharing that vision with anyone willing to
invest the time to understand. Mixing a commitment to respect for other people
with a commitment to expressing alternative value systems, these activities are
powerfully present, but are not intended to force ideas on people through rhetoric
or authoritarian or violent means. They are meant to invite and persuade. The
New Left experimentations with prefigurative politics were carried into radical
New Social Movements by the New Left activists who reconstituted smaller
grass-roots organizations after the large anti-war movement dissipated.

Similar to the New Left activities, NSM activists, rather than standing back
and writing about their theories, work them out through actual experimentation
with organizational structures, processes and actions. Noël Sturgeon, activist
and academic, defined this activity as direct theory, “the constant interaction
between theory and practice” (Sturgeon 36).

She observed that people within the Direct Action Movement analyze,
criticize, change, and affirm, both themselves and mainstream culture, through
the praxis of direct theory. Although her analysis was strictly written as a “thick
description" of Direct Action, other radical New Social Movements share similar practices and her theory can be applied to them as well.

Direct theory is a dynamic process that takes prefigurative politics to another level. From this viewpoint every theory/action has exponential capabilities to build on past experiences, fine tune the present ones, model an alternative reality, create personal and cultural transformation, and at the same time present a critique of the mainstream framework. For Sturgeon, the organization structures, as well as the cultural and political practices of movements

serve several functions: as practical frameworks to accomplish immediate and specific movement goals, such as forcing the closure of a specific military facility; as methods of radicalization of internal consciousness-raising for participants; as efforts to change public opinion on certain issues, or external consciousness-raising; as critical commentaries on the American tradition of radical social movements; and finally, as forms of prefiguring an alternative political vision (Sturgeon 37).

By viewing social movement activities as “direct theory”, Sturgeon opens the door for a more holistic understanding of NSM actions.

Her analysis of direct theory “intends to redefine ‘effectiveness’ away from a limited notion of instrumentality and toward a more comprehensive understanding of how movements act as important promulgators of new forms of ‘commonsense’ apprehension of political realities” (Sturgeon 37). Sturgeon sees
the praxis of direct theory as a cultural method to create new meaning-making
codes that can be shared outside the immediate "family" of movement activists
and thus has a potential to impact mainstream culture. Because alternative
modes of action are shared within internal engagement in NSM's organizational
structures and the external engagement with the public through practical political
activity, the construction of new modes of action can be perceived as a
"collective construction of knowledge" (Sturgeon 41).

The concept the construction of new ways of viewing the world is a
collective endeavor is integral to my argument that public artistic activity contains
the possibility to fundamentally transform society. If the viewer/participants, the
coalition of people involved in getting the piece made, and the artistic community
are positively involved, that process moves beyond strictly oppositional,
confrontational politics towards a methodology of altering society from the inside
out, through mutual consent. By engaging diverse peoples, both inside and
outside social movement groups, the process might create communities,
temporary or permanent, consciously acknowledging shared beliefs. New Social
Movement activists do sometimes take an oppositional stance to an issue, but
their focus is also on the construction of a new future, a stance rarely perceived
or acknowledged. I argue that by physically modeling a pragmatic alternative
and inviting others, through public activities, to comprehend and participate in
that alternative, both social movement activists and ecological artists are in the
process of creating a feedback loop capable of communicating difference to the
larger eco-social system and in the process change the their culture.
The ability of cultural activities to alter mainstream culture was initially articulated within the feminist movement that took the stance, the personal is political. Sturgeon points out that many of the characteristics of new movements are derived from activists putting into praxis feminist theories on “changing personal relations as a method for revising social relations, the expansion of the political arena into previously ‘private’ areas...the preference for transformational models of social change, and the supposed expressiveness rather than instrumentality of new movements” (Sturgeon 44). She states that many of the practices of new social movements, such as nonhierarchical power structures are directly derived from the experiments and theories of the early women’s movement.

Noël Sturgeon, like Winnie Brienes, challenges the mainstream academic analysis of social movements, claiming it is too synchronic and fails to comprehend the holistic, diachronic power of New Left and New Social Movement experiments: their prefigurative characteristics and the social movements as “symptoms of social strain...as phenomena needing to be treated or controlled” (Darnofsky viii). This reformist lens was gradually replaced by Marxist analysis. According to Brienes, Darnofsky, Sturgeon and Epstein, the activities of the sixties “New Left” social movements are often misunderstood as people gloss over radical concepts to focus on strictly instrumental oppositional strategies. Academics, employing Marxist analysis, look exclusively for class and economic factors as well as the movement’s success at mobilizing large numbers of people. Sociologists utilizing the older liberal centrist, reform-
oriented analysis reduce activities “to quantifiable or at least highly specific factors” (Brienes 19). Sociologists evaluate each component of an incident, the demands made, the institutional response, the historical particulars of the action, and finally the specific outcome, at face value. In doing so, sociologists, like Marxists scholars, “lost or ignored the radical hopes, experiments and vision of the students...This means, in effect, that the cultural, personal and social implications, the deeper subjective political meaning has often gone unnoticed or unrecorded, and has been excluded from an analysis of the political significance of the movement” (Brienes 19).

In the eighties, recognizing that Social Movements in the late twentieth century needed more sophisticated analysis, academics articulated a new empirically based theory, Resource Mobilization or RM for short. RM is invested in analyzing the opportunities and methods by which goals and revolution are attained. “RM’s core assumption was that movements were to be understood not as aberrational or deviant phenomena, nor as ‘symptoms’ but as deliberate, patterned frameworks of collective action” (Darnofsky xii). Resource Mobilization focuses on the study of the conditions “that promoted movement growth and political effectiveness” (Darnofsky xii). RM was instrumental in situating social movements as integral elements of society and revealing the internal machinations and politics of social movement organizations. (Darnofsky xii)

Recourse Mobilization, however, was clearly perceived by activists themselves as being an inadequate model to completely explain practices and
goals not limited to the completion of specific political agendas, but including the creation of an alternative ethos (Darnofsky xv).

A more comprehensive scholarship has focused on the particular and unique activities of New Social Movement activists. "New Social Movement theorists stressed that social transformation is mediated through culture as well as politics narrowly defined – that the personal and the cultural are as politically real as, and are not reducible to, power struggles in the state and economy" (Epstein xiv). Activists and scholars became deeply immersed in evaluating how meaning-making and identities are created through cultural practices as well as how cultural strategies can be an effective means of altering hegemonic belief systems.

However, New Social Movement theory is still in a nascent form of conception. Scholars are still attempting to bridge the gap between purely empirical, goal-oriented analysis such as Recourse Mobilization, and one that acknowledges and values the cultural, prefigurative and qualitative characteristics. The problems in analytically braiding together these two seemingly disparate goals mirrors the processes activists struggle with as they attempt to work out how to accomplish both goals at the same time. "NSM theory has tended to avoid examination of how cultural change and the transformation of social structures can be brought together. It has all too often evaded issues of class, power, and policy rather than rethinking them" (Darnofsky xv). Social Movement theorists in general struggle with a gap between "a dominant, structural approach that emphasized economic resources,
political structures, formal organizations, and social networks and a cultural or constructionist tradition, drawn partly from symbolic interactions, which focuses on frames, identities, meaning, and emotions" (Goodwin vii). Winnie Brienes’s prefigurative politics and Noël Sturgeon’s direct theory clearly and unapologetically situate themselves in the constructionist, cultural camp; however there are opportunities for a structuralist viewpoint, if people begin to see that “structures are cultural (though not only culture)” (Polletta 97). Francesca Poletta argues that culture is the symbolic dimension of organizations, and institutions. “Symbols are signs that have meaning and significance, through their interrelations; the pattern of those relations is culture. Culture is thus patterned and patterning” (Polletta 100). Her argument is that the institutions and culture cannot be forced apart, but that a culture creates opportunities for people to choose certain forms of institutions and that a culture is then embedded in, and continually helps recreate those choices. A disruption in the unconscious acceptance of that institutional culture, through witnessing or experiencing another form, opens the door to different institutional choices. Poletta argues for utilizing a cultural/structural lens to analyze the unique, varied practices of New Social Movement activists. I draw correlations between this particular view of utilizing cultural activism to alter an existing culture and ecological artists who, through manifesting a physical reality of ecological theory, utilize a cultural tool, to alter the underlying belief systems and in the process, present opportunities for social transformation (Poletta 100-102).
When Winnie Brienes describes activists prefiguring an alternative culture and Noël Sturgeon talks about theorizing through practice, they are articulating a process for disrupting the dominant culture by presenting the physical reality of an alternative belief system a large number of people are engaged in creating, which can be both personally and institutionally transformative. Cultural activism, providing opportunities for the shared construction of knowledge and meaning-making has the potential for subtly transforming a cultural worldview and thus a society over time.

I argue that Ecological Art is the physical manifestation of ecological theory, prefiguring an envisioned future informed by eco-wisdom, which provides multiple opportunities, through interaction with the piece, for the public to engage in collective construction of ecological comprehension. Understanding the inherent systems processes of the world, allows people to alter their worldview from a dominator/instrumental model to one of eco-wisdom. By approaching their daily choices through a new belief system, people have opportunities to participate in the transformation of society. Ecological Art can be perceived then as a form of cultural activism. Although Ecological Artists do not use the word activism or activist to describe their work, nonetheless, the characteristics of their work match definitions of radical New Social Movement’s cultural activities. Ecological Art can be perceived as a form of prefigurative politics and direct theory.
Chapter Three

Ecological Art

Ecological Art is the physical presentation of eco-wisdom. Eco-Artists' intent is to provide a ripe possibility for the visitors to question their assumptions about the human/nature relationship and reconstruct their worldview from the current, dominator model to one of eco-wisdom. To do so, this particular form of art illuminates, explains and models ecosystemic processes. Eco-Art intimately addresses the visitors, creating a relationship between the site and each person, making them a participant in the construction of ecosystem knowledge.

Eco-theory states that the planet earth is comprised of multiple nested ecosystems. On earth, a relatively thin, surface layer sustains multitudes of living creatures, from microscopic single-celled amoebas to massive, one hundred and eighty ton blue whales. This biological plenitude does not exist willy-nilly across the surface, but has settled into ecosystems, manageable groups that exist well together in particular geographical environments. All entities within an ecosystem are networked together by their activities, processes of communication, exchange, and feedback loops that together create relationships based on mutual dependency and competition. To examine an ecosystem is to study the relationships that create communities and how they are maintained within the ecosystem that sustains them. From this vantage point the study of a
bee is not just the accumulation of factual information about size and wing span, but more importantly, how the bee interacts with, and what kind of communicative relationship the bee has with all the other components, flowers, birds, trees, bugs, etc. in its ecosystem.

All entities in an ecosystem are in constant communication with each other conveying a message of difference to which each can choose to respond or not. This communication places each entity in a necessary relationship to one another. The flower communicates to the bee that it is not a leaf, but a pollen-producing entity, creating a mutually beneficial relationship. "What is necessary for an organism to know, always concerns a relationship: how the perceiving creature relates to the outside entity that is being perceived and vice versa" (Small 56).

These groupings, or ecosystems, practice patterns of existence based on "a combination of competition and mutual dependency" (Bateson 436). The bee relies on the flower for sustenance and the flower relies on the bee for propagation and together, along with the related and dependent activities of other species, they create and continuously recreate an ecosystem that sustains them. At the same time, every flower is in competition with the others to attract the bee and every bee is in competition with the other bees to gather as much pollen from every flower as possible.

This pattern of dependency and competition occurs at every level of biological interaction, micro and macro. Every ecosystem is comprised of nested and interconnected networks. The stronger the ties between all the entities in the
ecosystem, the more likely the ecosystem is to sustain the entities well. Without
guidance or even a conscious decision to do so, the activities of different species
interlock to make sure all of them have what they need and maybe even a little
more (Bateson 312-320).

Ecosystems theorists define this interlocking phenomenon as feedback
loops. Each entity’s activities provide feedback loops which either strengthen or
alter the existing system. Simplistically, a drop in deer population in a specified
area communicates difference, a loss of a food source to the predator, the wolf,
who receives the information and either moves into another ecosystem and/or
some portion of the wolf population dies, balancing the relationship between the
deer and the wolf such that each sustains the other (Bateson 312-320). Humans
also exist within ecosystems, both bio/physical and social, and have an
exaggerated capability to create both damaging or, if they choose, sustainable
feedback loops.

A portion of my argument that Eco-Art as cultural activism holds the
potential to assist in social transformation rests on the idea that the natural
processes are the greatest common denominator among all people. Their
experience of the solar and lunar cycles, weather systems, and the presence of
other life forms create a bond, however tenuous, between people. People may
have created deep divisions amongst themselves based on race and religion but
when precipitation occurs in the air, as snow, sleet, mist, or rain, it sill makes
everyone wet. The sun provides warmth and light for everyone’s day, however
short or long, which is damped down as it disappears below the horizon.
Nonhuman life skitters, slides, flits, lopes, zooms, glides and meanders across human eye-lines, a constant reminder that non-human nature, eternally, unabashedly and unremittingly resides with people. Even today, with sophisticated technology ready-to-hand, a frost can ruin an orange crop and a flood can decimate fields. People can't get away from the world in which they live, as much as they attempt to distance themselves through encapsulated dwellings and overly protected indoor, public spaces. It is not that people do not feel a connection to the natural ecosystems in which they find themselves engaged, it is how they choose to think about that relationship that shapes how they act within them.

The Current Worldview

Any worldview that people employ to explain their relationship with the natural world is "socially organized and culturally conditioned" (Belgrad 3). "We not only study nature and live in and from it, we also construct the very ideas of nature...We not only ponder, we organize our ponderings into grand narratives that become part and parcel of a way of life we live" (Rasmussen 176). The ideologies informing the choices and activities people engage in are framed and constituted through cultural meaning-making systems: stories, music, ritual, visual aesthetics, film, dance, the qualitative and quantitative sciences, and dialogue (Swidler 273). People utilize cultural production to make meaning of their experiences and at the same time affirm their value systems. "Culture is a model of, and a model for experience; and cultural symbols reinforce an ethos, making plausible a world-view which in turn justifies the ethos" (Swidler 278).
Meaning-making systems are not static, but always in dynamic process and therefore open to analysis, reworking, and change.

People's perceptions of the human/nature relationship have significantly altered over the centuries. The nonhuman natural world has been constructed at different periods of time as being malicious, beneficent, the site of romanticized bliss, as god or goddess incarnate, as alive, dead, a mechanical clock, a victim in need of saving, and the site of capitalist investment. The modern impulse, starting with the Enlightenment, has turned towards a dominant stance insisting on the ability of people to control, through reason and technology, natural processes. The contemporary worldview has also commodified most elements of the natural and human world, refusing to see the connected characteristics of all entities in favor of fragmentation and assigned monetary value (Merchant 11).

This particular worldview allows people to think of themselves as outside of and in control of the ecosystems they inhabit. Growing numbers of people around the world have connected these attitudes with contemporary world problems;

The assumptions of that worldview have led to widespread ecocide, nuclear arms, the globalization of unqualified-growth economies...loss of meaning beyond consumerism, loss of community and connectedness with other people, and loss of a secure sense of embeddedness in the rest of the natural world (Spretnak, 4 States)
However, the seeming arrogance of a dominator model of human/nature relationships is being challenged by a wide and varied array of individuals and groups: scientists, grass roots political groups, environmentalist organizations and new ecologists (Spretnak 4 Reweaving). But it is not just scientists and social movement activists who are working to alter this particular hegemonic worldview; it is also cultural activists: artists, writers, poets, musicians and filmmakers who utilize their creativity, individually and collectively, to promote a sea-change in public belief systems, from a dominator, mechanistic model to an ecosystemic worldview.5

Cultural Politics

As some people work at the creation of different cultural symbols of meaning, informed by ecological wisdom, they search for chances to share these ideas with larger and larger audiences. “Meaning derives from that which every individual is able to produce and to share with others” (Melucci 295). Each opportunity to promote a different viewpoint with others enhances the ability of the cultural meaning to be received and understood by an even larger group of people. I argue in this thesis that as people are coaxed and persuaded to experience a different viewpoint by the activities of cultural and political activists. People are offered the opportunity to build layers of deeper comprehension, and open themselves up for further opportunities to explore alternatives. By accepting the invitation on any level, people’s abilities to alter their expectations, assumptions and belief systems and, in turn, their actions, is strengthened. “Changes in culture do mean changes in modal types of character” (Sussman 49).
As people begin to think in different ways, they begin to see themselves in relation to others in different ways and they also begin to utilize a new cultural repertoire.

*The Ecology of a Worldview*

Similar to the way all the elements in an ecosystem work to sustain and/or transform each other I believe that all the elements of human existence, abstract thought, metaphorical thought processes, physical experiences, empathy, passion, and group interactions promote the formation and continuation of a culture. All of these elements behave like feedback loops, affecting the others in loops of meaning-creation. People’s activities, physical and abstract, work and rework culture. The efficacy of each individual feedback loop is linked or situated in relation to the ability of the others to strengthen a certain cultural worldview. Each time an activity models a new way of thinking, through a physical presence, a dialogue, a scholarly examination, emotional responses and bodily activity, it also presents an opportunity to provide alternative tools from which certain kinds of activities can be created and recreated. The tools and the activity function together as feedback loops capable of strengthening and adding new ways of doing things. “Indeed, a culture has enduring effects on those who hold it, not by shaping the ends they pursue, but by providing the characteristic repertoire from which they build lines of actions” (Swidler 284).

A bee may stray from the area in which he normally finds food and in his flight find a new source, a collection of flowering bushes. When the bee returns to the hive and communicates a new location, he models a new flight plan and
creates a new tool in the bees' cultural repertoire, a new flight pattern for the other bees. When other bees utilize it, they create strengthening feedback loops which insert the new flight plan into the culture of the hive as a normal routine. What was new, becomes normal.

Pertinent to my argument about cultural transformation is my assertion that people also have similar processes in their acceptance or dismissal of new ideas. People discover new ways of doing things by watching others model a new way of being or experimenting themselves with new ways of living in the world. The old ways are known and known well; the new require effort. New practices become easier through consistent use acting as feedback loops. "The frequency of use of a given idea becomes a determinant of its survival in that ecology of ideas which we call mind; and beyond that the survival of frequently used idea is further promoted by the fact that habit formation tends to remove the idea from the field of critical inspection" (Bateson 509).

The efficacy of Ecological Art as cultural activism rests on my assertion that a worldview and the cultural habits it generates can be perceived as an ecosystem, sustained through the feedback loops of people's belief systems articulated through written and spoken thoughts, creative productions such as rituals, art and music, as well as daily lived behavior. Like an ecosystem, a worldview cannot be controlled from the outside. In no ecosystem "can any part have unilateral control over the whole" (Bateson 316 steps). Reason alone cannot change people's minds, precisely because people are also always attending to their passionate and emotional desires as well. Laws, one part of
our culture, can constrain behavior but do not inherently change people's minds without cultural persuasion.

It is only when people utilize every element within a culture—laws, reason, literature, scholarly dialogue, art, music, rituals, etc.—that a robust feedback loop, capable of promoting a change in belief systems is slowly developed. "Culture has independent causal influence ...because it makes possible new strategies of action...constructing entities that can act (selves, families, corporations), shaping the styles and skills with which they act, and modeling forms of authority and cooperation. It is however, the concrete situations in which these cultural modes are enacted that determine which take root and thrive, and which wither and die" (Swidler 280). From this viewpoint, I assert that creative productions like art, music, poetry and literature cannot be separated out from the internal workings of a cultural system and are indeed integral to any attempts to create significant, lasting change in people's worldviews.

Gregory Bateson articulates this idea in his book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. He states that quantitative fragmentation of knowledge, the categorization and adding up of entities, neglects the relational properties of all living things organized into ecosystems. He calls this kind of activity overly purposive and states that this kind of knowledge actually doesn't say very much. For Bateson, mere knowledge, used in a purposive way, can only create runaway conditions. For Bateson these runaway conditions continue to create exponentially larger problems. He calls this form of thinking unaided consciousness and states it is
the creative venue of the arts that makes the relationships, the patterns that connect, visible, intimately knowable, and thus available to be acted upon. Ecological Artist Mel Chin also perceives artistic production as integral to the workings of society.

My goal for art is to create a condition where one can see the possibility of change. Art is not static, it is catalytic. Art is not just a language, it is useful, it makes things function. It has a critical relationship in society. Artists are essential parts of society, not members of an elite. We have our function in society (Weintraub 50 Art).

Bateson, who was not an artist, stated, "Art...has a positive function in maintaining what I call 'wisdom', i.e., in correcting a too purposive view of life and making the view more systemic" (Bateson 147).

Bateson defines ecological wisdom as the "knowledge of the larger interactive system-that system which, if disturbed, is likely to generate exponential curves of change" (Bateson 439). For Bateson and other systems theorists, there is a great deal of difference between knowledge, the categorization and numbering of elements, and wisdom. The bee may have innate knowledge of how to fly, and learned knowledge of its immediate surroundings in the form of facts, but unless the bee learns how to communicate and be communicated to, to be in relation to the other entities in his environment, the bee will not understand, holistically, how to survive and where to find another flowering bush if the one he was going to dies. The bee also has to know how to communicate to the other bees where the new bush is because he is dependent
on them for survival. The same systemic and communicative wisdom the bee
exhibits, humans also must understand and utilize, in order to compile wise ways
of being in the world that sustain humans within their ecosystems. "Artistic
creation is a way of knowing the experiential world of relationships in all their
complexity and in knowing it, we learn how to live well in it" (Small 50).

It is this form of ecological wisdom, the knowledge constituted through all
human endeavors, rational, creative, and mundane, of the systemic nature of the
world, that some groups of people would like to present as an alternative to the
contemporary dominator model and in the process transform people’s belief
systems into a more sustainable ethos.\(^7\)

The work involved in generating this new worldview, based on ecological
wisdom, has been the focus of an ecosystem of activists who approach their
work through engagement with social movements or scientific communities, and
others, through their creative endeavors. Scientific, social and cultural activists
hope to change the current worldview, which they believe has caused
exponential, runaway conditions threatening the sustainability of the human race.
On a large scale, all of these groups want to achieve a society informed by
ecological wisdom. They share a commitment to utilizing cultural activism as a
means to social transformation. Both cultural and social movement activists
have, over the last forty years, developed unique strategies of action intended to
help promote and ultimately achieve an ecologically wise society.

The academic analysis of social movement structures, methods and
strategies has examined, recognized and given definitions to multiple forms of
praxis. Two unique practices, prefigurative politics and direct theory, germinated in the New Left practices of the sixties and seventies, became a major part of the Radical New Social Movements that followed (Sturgeon 37).

While the word activist is more generally understood within the discipline of social movements, artists were also actively pursuing social transformation through cultural practices and as early as the seventies defined themselves as cultural activists, especially in the feminist arena. It was women, creating art meant to promote a feminist consciousness, who first referred to themselves as activists and articulated the idea that their work was a form of activist intervention (Lacy 27-28 Mapping).

Many artists using art to promote social change learned from and built on feminist artists' methods and practices. “By the end of the seventies feminists had formulated precise activist strategies and aesthetic criteria for their art” (Lacy 27 Mapping). Other artists, emulating the feminists, began to consolidate artistic production with activism for a variety of issues such as race, community, and ecological issues, working towards a “redesign of the world” (Beaumont 162). These early experimentations, trying to reach large audiences, naturally gravitated towards public and community-based art projects where the work would be an important contribution to the community and could also have a greater impact on larger numbers of people. “Because of their activist base, early feminist artists were concerned with questions of effectiveness, stimulating what is today a fairly sophisticated conception of
the nature of an expanded audience and an understanding of how to reach it” (Lacy 65 Name). Audience involvement became an integral part of public art. In addition, it was within public art practice – murals, community art centers, publicly sited works, and publicly accessible theater – that marginal artists such as women, denied access to established male-dominated galleries and museums, could gain a foothold as artists.

Public art developed along two trajectories of artistic thought. One, the more dominant for several decades, was focused on the cannon-in-the-park syndrome; placing large sculptures on publicly accessible sites. These sculptures often had little to do with the particular history or culture of the space itself. A large body of work was developed along this trajectory, including Claus Oldenberg’s oversized sculptures of mundane objects like screws and stamps and the wind sculptures of Alexander Calder (Lacy 33-36 Mapping).

From this conception of public art, particular forms of Earth or Land Art emerged that emphasized manipulating the land itself to create sculptural elements. Digging into the land, building the land up, moving earth or stones around from one place to another, and manipulating natural elements like twigs or stones, were the primary characteristics of this form of earth art, which often failed to acknowledge the relationships between their work and the biota that lived in and utilized their manipulated spaces. Earth or Land Art is indexical to the artists and their emotional experience with the land. They are a presentation
of "reports of experience and of traces and documentations of events in which the artist has been in some way purposively involved" (Goody 20).

The second trajectory of Earth or Land art developed after it became evident that inattention to site and community members had led to an artistic practice that often inappropriately forced its presence onto the public. Starting in the late seventies "some artists and administrators in the field began to differentiate between 'public art' – a sculpture in a public space – and 'art in public places', a focus on the location of space for the art" (Lacy 23 Mapping). The confluence of thought between feminist activist art, focused on public involvement and therefore often placed or performed in public spaces and the new bureaucratically approved concept that art in public spaces should engage the community in some way, created an aura of respectability and acceptance as well as public funding for audience-engaged art. Artists attempting to make a statement, empower communities, communicate about values or insert an alternative viewpoint into public spaces had tentative access to public acceptance and, more importantly, funding. The agenda of public officials usually focused on community building and restoration of abandoned downtowns, often overlapped with activist artists' purposes without acknowledging the possibility of the artists' potentially subversive goals to change the structure of society (Lacy 24-26).

57
Ecological Art

Ecological Art emerged as separate and distinct from the more traditional Earth Art, although most often critics have mistakenly situated it within that practice. While an engagement with topography is a connecting feature, the intent and goals of Earth Artists and Eco-Artists are often significantly different and it is this difference which has been proved difficult for critics to articulate, immersed as they often are in the idea of art as a solitary, individual expression of a subjective experience. Through that lens critics were hard pressed to see an artwork that was primarily indexical to the site, the community, and the ecosystem, rather than being about the artist. According to Ruth Wallen, artists deliberately separate Ecological Art, or Eco-Art as an artistic practice from Land or Earth Art, precisely because it is not just about an artist's subjective interpretation of a landscape's features.

Ecological Art is deliberately created to explain the systemic nature of the world. My analysis of Ecological Art revealed that most pieces function on three levels: they explain ecosystems, they model ecosystemic processes and the works are themselves ecosystems. Integral to my argument is the assertion that Ecological Art has the potential to act as a strong feedback loop, creating eco-wisdom consciousness by utilizing multiple human experiences, desire, emotional and bodily experiences, abstract and metaphorical thought patterns and intellectual engagement, to present eco-wisdom. In that Ecological Artists must use an interdisciplinary coalition of people to assist them in the creation of their
works, it also functions as an eco-social system. Ecological Art is trying at all
times to present a view of the world through the lens of eco-wisdom. It is always
prefigurative of a world informed by eco-wisdom and at the same time it is the
physical working out or manifestation of ecosystem theory. It is a form of cultural
activism intended to change the public’s worldview. Ecological Art fits the
definition of strategies defined within Social Movement practices: prefigurative
politics and direct theory.

Ecological art has been defined, through practice and dialogue, by the
artists themselves, who are more centered on intent than strict rules about
medium, size or theme. “The artists’ mission is to re-envision the human/nature
relationship and to communicate, to stimulate dialogue, and to contribute to social
transformation” (Wallen Toward). Eco-art seeks to create for the public a more
complex understanding of ecological systems and processes by situating humans
as functional and integral entities existing within the ecosystems they inhabit.

Ecological Art addresses both the heart and the mind. Ecological
art work can help engender an intuitive appreciation of the
environment, address core values, advocate political action and
broaden intellectual understanding (Wallen Toward).

Through my analysis it became clear that Ecological Art has to be defined
from multiple positions in order to fully comprehend what it is and how it works.
Ecological Art, to be effective, has to be publicly accessible. The physical
formations themselves can be highly varied, ranging from large parklands that
remEDIATE or restore some part of the ecosystem to a set of ecologically oriented
bus posters. The physical presence of ecological art cannot be only understood through the eye’s enjoyment of an aesthetic object, but rather as a piece that also provides an experiential learning experience, aimed at promoting eco-wisdom.

Through my analysis I perceived that the content of ecological art usually provides an opportunity for the visitor/participant to start perceiving the eco-systemic relationships inherent in the site, as well as the subject matter and/or issue it is addressing. The physical piece is usually an ecosystem itself, either literally a constructed ecosystem, or a piece in which all the elements behave as an ecosystem, establishing a relationship between the parts which create and sustain the whole.

I assert that Ecological Art presents in its internal and external organization, ecosystemic properties that emphasize processes, time, relationships, and communication. The works are always reminding people that they are embedded within the ecosystems they inhabit and in which they are engaged. The physical presence of Ecological Art prefigures a culture informed by eco-wisdom, and at the same time, the physical formation is an active working out, through creative cultural production of ecological theory. Eco-Art is a form of prefigurative politics and direct theory.

The physical site of Ecological Art can function as an ecosystem. The works often utilize their own internal ecosystemic properties to model alternative solutions to environmental problems. A remediative ecosystem is usually a total environment, often utilizing a large piece of land that can
be walked through, functioning either to heal an ecosystem, reclaim some
piece of land that has been neglected or abused or provide alternative
solutions to local ecosystem problems. One of the first examples of this
kind of art was constructed in 1969 by artist Patricia Johanson. She
transformed a “water sewage treatment plant into a park. As water
passed through a series of natural filtering systems, each would form a
lake, increasingly accessible for human consumption” (Tilbury 16).

In 1990, artist Mel Chin worked with Rufus L. Chaney, a Senior
Research Scientist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to develop plans
for the ‘green remediation’ of toxic waste from the Pig’s Eye landfill.
Chaney developed “hyperaccumulator plants for extracting toxic
substances from the soil through the plant's vascular system. The goal of
the artist was to eventually restore the area for plants, animals, and
humans” (Greenmuseum).

Like Chin and Johanson, other Eco-Artists have created public remedial
and restorative landscapes. These creative endeavors include recreational parks
with natural water cleaning systems, reforesting clear-cut or badly damaged
woodlands, and reclaiming chemical landfills through biological systems. This
type of Ecological Art, a physical remedial ecosystem itself, presents alternative
methods for dealing with environmental problems. A too purposeful approach
might attempt to control waste through chemicals or technology alone, which
could create problematic, exponential runaway conditions. An ecological
approach, using natural systems, contains the solution within sustainable
feedback loops. The artworks are cultural activism, providing a new cultural repertoire by prefiguring a future in which solutions to problems are informed by eco-wisdom. They are also the physical functioning presence of eco-theory.

While examining many works of Eco-Art I perceived that some ecological art is not remediative, but guides the visitor/participant through a set of elements that are about ecological issues, but more importantly, behave as an ecosystem themselves. The various parts of this particular form of Eco-Art have a pronounced relationship to one another, each dependent on the other for the whole to sustain itself as a complete piece. The relationships between the various elements provides an experiential learning experience that both illuminates ecosystem theory and embeds the person within an ecosystemic experience at the same time.

In 1993 Michael Singer and Linnea Glatt helped design the Phoenix Arizona Recycling Plant. It is not remediative or restorative, but the plant itself is an eco-social system, designed to guide visitor/participants through a site that always speaks to them about their recycling efforts, displays the process through which their bottles, cans, and paper are brought onto the site and recycled, and honors their involvement in recycling. "The concepts of renewal and transformation are integral to all elements of the design: buildings, roads, landscape, water, and wildlife habitat" (Singer Selected).

A person must walk through the multiple elements of the site in order to fully experience the total, recycling process. There is a public amphitheatre, viewing platforms and parklands. The least likely site for visitors, a garbage
recycling plant, was designed to invite the community into an experiential understanding of the recycling process. It is a highly popular site, functioning as a publicly accessible community center, and a tourist destination as well. Speaking about it, Michael Singer stated; “People come to the Phoenix project and say 'Well, where is the art?' It’s really not there. It’s within the design, it’s within the questioning, its raising new issues.” (Singer 77 Land/Nature).

My analysis of the site revealed that all the elements within it act in relationship to one another. To understand the entire garbage recycling process, a visitor must view the various procedures from all the platforms and the amphitheatre window. The site embeds people in relationship with their waste. It is an eco-social system itself, relying on multiple elements, in relation to one another, to communicate effectively and it illuminates and utilizes ecological theory. The Phoenix recycling plant is prototypical of a culture in which people acknowledge and honor their place within the ecosystemic processes they are a part of. As a form of cultural activism, it inserts an alternative eco-wise model into the dominant culture creating a feedback loop, the opportunity for people to alter their perceptions of themselves in relation to the ecosystems that sustain them.

Because Ecological Art is site and community specific, multidisciplinary and often requires governmental permission and funding, artists are always creating and utilizing coalitions of people to get their work built and displayed. The multidisciplinary aspect of ecological art, drawing on botanists, biologists, carpenters, builders, welders,
environmental scientists, community organizers, and many others, resembles an ecosystem of elements. On a deeper level, the internal organization necessary to get an ecological art completed requires a working eco-social system. For people willing to think about it, this adds another layer of eco-wisdom to the primary physical characteristics.

This layering of ecosystem processes, utilized in every aspect of ecological art, the intent, planning, content and execution, can present to the public a piece with few contradictions or divided claims. An ecosystemic means is utilized to produce eco-wise ends, an Ecological Artwork which often models, both physically and abstractly, the eco-knowledge necessary to create it. By modeling alternative methods based on eco-wisdom and presenting, in the entirety of the artwork, eco-wisdom, Ecological Art has potential to alter peoples' perceptions of their relationships to the ecosystems which sustain them. Ecological Art can model an eco-wise future, matching the definition of prefigurative politics. Physically manifesting in the intent, content, and execution of the artwork the principles of ecosystem theory, Ecological Art also matches the definition of direct theory. The practice of Ecological Art becomes a form of cultural activism.

*Cultural Activism*

Cultural activists such as Ecological Artists and social movement activists have been attempting for several decades to create a new worldview based on sustainable, egalitarian, democratic principles. Despite their efforts, the attempt
to infuse subversive culture practices into the dominant society by engaging multiple groups of people has rarely been acknowledged as a politically effective tool by society. Only rarely have these kinds of practices been recognized within mainstream social movement analysis as a method for creating alternative desires, changing people's worldviews or helping to create new ways of being in the world. It is only within the radical fringes, often misunderstood by the larger public, that these impulses to break down binary oppositions have been articulated. Feminists, Direct Action and global justice groups claim that coalition building, inclusive groups and publicly accessible cultural productions contain an inherent possibility to transform society from the inside out.

Both prefigurative politics and direct theory, as practiced by both cultural and social movement activists, utilize similar methods to connect to the humanness of people, their desires, emotional and physical experiences, as a way to draw them into an alternative vision of the world.

I acknowledge that cultural change takes time and even if it seems like there is no more time and very few chances to enact change, every time a cultural feedback loop is established, it creates a stronger opportunity for the next one to not only be created, but also to promote change within the ecosystem. Ecological Art presents possibilities precisely because ecological problems seem so urgent and they are the greatest common denominator between people, the issue where the most people might be drawn into exploring and comprehending eco-wisdom.
Chapter Four

Ruth Wallen

Ruth Wallen created her first piece of Eco-Art, *The Sea as Sculptress*, in 1979. Since she has been committed to creating artwork that assists the visitor/participant in the construction of eco-wisdom which she hopes will promote social transformation. Wallen has never utilized the words “activist” or “activism” to describe herself or her work. Nonetheless, in their intent, design, content and execution, Wallen’s Eco-Art functions as a form of cultural activism.

The design elements in Wallen’s works’ promote eco-wisdom. Her works are comprised of multiple components. Visitor/participants are invited to engage their time and energy in understanding them as a set. Her works function as eco-social systems, allowing people to experience systemic principles on several levels. The experience creates relationships between the work and the visitor/participant and the work itself talks about the systemic relationships within the ecosystems she is examining. These components offer multiple layered opportunities for people to engage in the construction of eco-wisdom. Wallen admits she attempts to create small models of larger ecosystems to assist the visitor/participant in comprehending systemic principles (Wallen Toward). Wallen states she uses stories to talk about ecological principles. I believe she is actually telling what I define as cultural stories, a story about a culture that has a
cultural outlook embedded within it. Her works present alternative cultural stories, creating feedback loops capable of returning information back into mainstream culture, possibly providing opportunities for societal change.

Reflections on Arroyo Seco

In 2001, Wallen participated in “Trailmarkers”, a weekend festival of outdoor art. In a neglected riparian pond area, under a highway overpass, she created a minimally intrusive piece, Reflections on Arroyo Seco. Her installation invited people to walk into the space, sit with it over a period of time and experience an embodied intimacy with the pond, through being still and aware. The installation was designed to promote communication, understanding and relationship between two cultures: the human industrially developed culture and the rich, complex riparian ecosystem. Wallen’s intent was to create optimum conditions for guiding people into an alignment with the temporal rhythms of the biological entities living in and around the pond space. She hoped this experience might promote the visitors’ perception of themselves as being intimately connected to the plants, animals, bugs, and biota that made their permanent home in that ecosystem. The visitor’s emotional response, whether spiritually transcendent, intellectually informed, artistically excited or zenlike, was less important to Wallen than the possibility of the visitor leaving with more pronounced ecosystemic consciousness (Wallen Toward).

Physically, the artwork was fairly minimal. Wallen used macrophotography to take photos of the smaller biota, bacteria, snails, and worms inhabiting the pond that the naked eye might miss. She inserted the
slides into the small, colorful, plastic viewers that photographers use and hung them from the bushes and trees in the site. The space was cleaned of trash, making it more accessible to sitting and observing. She left a statement hanging from a tree, inviting people to ask questions about the site, to think about the relationship of the pond to the highway and to their use of both.

I invite you to have your own experience at the site. What does the water hide and what does it reveal? The site provides a contrasting vision – a riparian pond nestled next to stark concrete, under majestic bridges designed to provide a park-like atmosphere for motorists.

You may need to look closely to find animal life in the viewers. As I sat, I noticed more and more small details, but I no longer heard the din of the traffic overhead. What do you choose to perceive and what do you choose to ignore? (Wallen Toward). Wallen also hung a blank book, inviting people to respond to the experience, which was full by the end of the festival. In a telephone interview, Wallen recalled:

There was a small text panel that explained some of the things I thought about when I was contemplating the space and the contradictions of the space and I found that people...looked through the viewers and then they started to just look at the pond itself... That was what I wanted, what I hoped for...They told me all kinds of things...Some...drew pictures...and some of them wrote about my
piece, some of them gave me quotes, like someone quoted Thoreau (Wallen Interview).

Based on the entries in the diary, Wallen had achieved some measure of what she had intended. People had become aware of the multiple biota living in this small wet area. Visitors had taken the time to sit with the place, begin the process of intimate knowing, thinking about the relationships between themselves and the pond (Wallen Interview).

The embodied interaction between the visitor, the slide viewers and the pond, coupled with a pointed set of questions aimed at unveiling the connecting ties between them, provided the potential for people, individually and collectively, to begin constructing knowledge about eco-wisdom. The piece functions as an eco-social system, relying on all the elements arranged in the area, working together as a set, to provide a cognitive and bodily learning experience. I assert that by providing a new cultural tool, the visitor/participant’s ritual of sitting quiet, observing and being aware of themselves as part of the riparian ecosystem, the work subverts mainstream cultural assumptions, promotes consciousness-raising and cultural awareness. It can be perceived then as a form of cultural activism.

As an ecological artist, Wallen designed the piece to promote ecological wisdom, the comprehension of connecting relationships. The design of Reflections on Arroyo Seco reflects twenty years of working out, through practice, the particulars of promoting eco-wisdom through art. I would argue that this constant interaction between practice and theory makes her work a form of direct theory.
History

Ruth Wallen is a faculty member in the MFA program in interdisciplinary arts at Goddard College and a lecturer at the University of California, San Diego. In a phone interview she explained the history of her artistic career:

I worked for the park service when I was an undergraduate, as an environmental specialist, my undergraduate training was in anthropology and biology and actually my first job with the park service was when I was an intern, my junior year in college and I worked for a summer writing environmental impact statements...My initial relationships with them (the park service) was not as an artist...My first invitation to do Chaco\textsuperscript{10} was because I knew someone in the park service who had actually been a professor of mine in college...He saw the work I had done at the Exploratorium and said this is gorgeous, let's do something in Chaco. When I got there and did the piece the local superintendent of Chaco loved it...but when the piece was sent to Harper's Ferry which is a natural interpretation center, it was like - this doesn't meet the mission of the parks...At the time I did that I was in my mid-twenties and it was kind of scary because I knew how to be an interpretative specialist.\textsuperscript{11} I mean there were rules on how to do that. But there were no rules on how to be an artist and at the time...the whole public art movement was in its infancy and so I was just doing what made sense to me on a gut level (Wallen Interview).
Wallen, dissatisfied with producing environmental impact statements, turned to art “to shape the values that inform ecological decision-making” (Wallen 3 *Enacting*). Wallen spent time over the next decades developing a unique practice that, although addressing multiple themes and presenting different physical appearances, nonetheless was informed by a deep commitment to promoting ecological wisdom. Her work is situated within Ecological Art history as a significant presence during the nascent formations of the praxis and as following older artists, like Helen and Newton Harrison and Mel Chin, whose initial trials and experimentations were instrumental in working out the parameters of Ecological Art.

*The Sea as Sculptress*, Wallen’s first major Ecological Artwork, was first shown in 1979, *Reflections on Arroyo Seco*, was designed in 2001. In the two decades between the works, and in the five years since *Reflections*, Wallen has produced five nature walks, three pieces about housing development in San Diego, and one piece about the health and environmental standing of frogs, a major indicator species for environmental degradation (Wallen *Story*).

The Nature walks, *Intimate Details* in Chaco Canyon National Park (1980), *The Children’s Forest Trail* in San Bernadino National Forest (1995), *Viewpoints* in the Tijuana River Estuary Park (1995), and the *Carmel Mountain Interpretative Panels* (2005), were created as interactive learning sites. “Including the observer in the process of developing knowledge becomes most significant to my work” (Wallen 181 *Story*). Wallen admits her intention to coax the visitor/participant into an engaging cognitive, activity, (questions mixed with bodily involvement),
promoting the collective construction of ecological knowledge. I would argue that her works also function as a catalyst for the temporary formation of two communities: one established among the visitor/participants as active agents and another formed between the people and the ecosystems in which they are engaged.

_Greetings From San Diego_ (1989), _I Love Del Mar, The Merchandising of Suburbia_ (1986), and _Legends_ (1990), examine housing development. These works address the aggressive split between people's intimate knowledge of a place – its history, unique ecosystems and cultural practices – juxtaposed against the fantasized promises of new housing developers who strip away the "place" of a place and overlay romanticized simulacra of Italian Villas, the French Riviera, medieval communities, or Spanish exoticism, as a replacement. She situates her examination of this tendency within a cultural story about disruption, disappearance and trauma, advocating healing through "making relationship, reestablishing connections" (Wallen 3 Enacting). She states: "I saw the potential of Ecological Art as connective – examining, restoring and re-envisioning ecological relationships between various components of an ecosystem, from the biophysical to the socio-cultural" (Wallen 3 Enacting).

Wallen makes use of cultural stories once again in _If Frogs Sicken and Die, What will Happen to the Princes?_. A switch in medium, this piece consists of nineteen bus posters posing questions based on the relationship between the ubiquitous cultural use of frogs in human stories, and the actual decline of frog species due to the environmental degradation caused by human activity. Wallen
states: "In my project, consisting of digital montages that trace the historical importance of the frog to human cultures, I extend the metaphor of indicatory species, using the frog as an indicator of the human relationship to nature" (Wallen 184 Leonardo).

One of the most interesting and unique elements often found in Wallen’s work is a focus on the temporal nature of ecosystems, how they continuously reconstitute themselves over time and cannot be understood without that knowledge. *The Sea as Sculptress* is an intimate look at the growth of aquatic life over a period of time and the impact of human activity on that growth. Wallen wanted to give the aquatic life a presence, create an opportunity for the ecosystems processes they generate to talk with the visitor/viewer through her work. "Without any pretense of objectivity, I envisioned a reciprocity between the observer and observed" (Wallen 2 Enacting). *The Sea as Sculptress* insists on understanding aquatic systems as occurring over time. This work also subverts the scientific concept that knowing is about naming, cataloging and counting. “In my performances I suggested that there was more to see, that there was more to understanding a complex system than simply knowing the names of the components" (Wallen180 Story). Wallen suggests with this work that ecosystems can only be understood through the story of relationships through time.

*Reflections on Arroyo Seco* is about inviting people to sit and closely observe themselves and other species within an ecosystem that has a different temporal rhythm than the fast-paced human cycle. By slowing down and taking the time to comprehend these temporal processes, the visitor/participant is
coaxed into an understanding of the larger temporal rhythms of ecosystems and in doing so, begins the process of constructing larger eco-wisdom through an understanding of the smaller one. Wallen writes in her artist statement:

I carefully defined small systems that were representative of large scale environmental dynamics. Through repeated observation of the tiny changes in these systems, by conflating time and scale, I attempted to provide an intimate view and deep appreciation of long term, larger scale environmental processes (Wallen Toward).

Wallen has focused her work on revealing the relational properties of all ecosystems, whether they are social, only between human beings, or between the biological and physical elements of a particular place.

I would argue that Wallen’s works are an opportunity to illuminate the fundamental pattern that connects people to one another and the natural world in which they are embedded, the communicative relationships based on mutual dependency and competition that through continuous use and feedback loops, constitute functioning ecosystems. Her works are the physical presence of the interaction between ecosystems theory and artistic practice.

I suggest that Wallen’s work can be perceived as a bridge between the contemporary hegemonic belief in the autonomous, separate individual, viewing the nonhuman natural world as a collection of commodified, controllable elements and a new ethos based on comprehension of the ecosystemic, relational properties of the entire world. Her work becomes connective on many levels, both between the old and new belief systems, and also illuminating
people's ties to each other and to the physical sites they inhabit and in which they are engaged.

The different elements that Wallen frequently utilizes, contribute to this connective tendency. These components assist in the formation of an interactive piece that both talks about and models ecosystemic processes. Her works rely on visitor/participants constructing eco-wisdom through interaction with the multiple components of that piece and she asks questions which usually require time, energy, commitment and engagement in the process. The works hold potential for subverting the dominant cultural story and gradually replacing it with an alternative story based on Eco-Wisdom.

Cultural Stories

Telling an alternative cultural story is an important element in Wallen's work. A story told by a culture can inform certain kinds of behavior. The ability to change the cultural story contains the opportunity of changing behavior as well (Swidler 273). Her works often focus on the stories or myths, constructed through human action that justifies or explains how people interact with each other and how people interact with the other biota within ecosystems.

My analysis of Wallens' works revealed that she is focused on the influence of culture on the development of strategies of actions. While she has never referred to the sociologist Ann Swidler in her writings, Wallen's work follows the pattern Swidler laid out in, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies”. Swidler describes culture as “a 'tool kit' of symbols, stories, rituals and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve
different kinds of problems...[and] to construct strategies of action" (Swidler 273). I argue that Wallen's works illuminate the cultural outlook created by human stories told about a place and provide an alternative tale capable of providing different strategies of action informed by eco-wisdom.

Wallen's works also reveal the internal culture of a site created by the communicative relationships between all the bio/physical elements in an ecosystem. *The Sea as Sculptress* presented the temporal story of the relationships between sea, biota and human beings at three different locations. Her work subverted the industrialist's cultural story that the Bay was not polluted, the environmentalists story that the Bay was so polluted that little life could be sustained anywhere, and the commonly held association of Alcatraz prison with barrenness, insisting that nothing could live there. Wallen's year-long work blurred the seemingly airtight boundaries between those stories, proving all three to be flawed and inserting an alternative story. While not adhering to strict scientific, quantitative observations, nonetheless the work provided a wealth of information about marine life in polluted and non-polluted waters by showing the relationships between the various forms of aquatic life. The work showed clearly how human activity, informed by certain reinforcing stories about domination and control, can create runaway conditions that severely alter ecosystems.

I suggest that the insertion of a different cultural story, valuing the relationships among different species within aquatic ecosystems, might alter human belief systems. A change in worldview might be capable of altering human activity in relation to decisions about the Bay.
The elements in Wallen’s works – relationships, temporal awareness, and cultural stories – contain possibilities to promote a deep, intimate comprehension of Eco-Wisdom. Most importantly, Wallen’s works provoke and promote a social transformation through concentrated activities, constructing an alternative cultural story about human relationships with each other and with the nonhuman natural world. This alternative cultural story, embodied and modeled within an interactive piece, always situates people within ecosystemic processes. This frame of mind insists on an understanding of human activity as feedback loops that are either sustainable for all life, humans being intimately connected to the healthy life processes of other biota, or over time destructive of it. An acceptance of this ecological ethos informs the cultural construction of a new human story, continuously returning that information back into mainstream society, helping to continuously reinforce the idea.

For Ecological Artists social transformation occurs through cultural activity. Their work attempts coaxing, persuading and provoking people, through embodied interactions with a site that speaks about and models ecosystemic properties, to comprehend their embeddedness within ecosystems and ecosystemic processes. “Publicly available meanings facilitate certain patterns of action, making them readily available, while discouraging others” (Swidler 283). A readily available comprehension of ecological principles through Eco-Art potentially could promote eco-wise choices.
Cultural Activism

This intention to alter the world through cultural interventions that might prove capable of changing people’s belief systems parallels the objectives of radical New Social Movement activists. Ruth Wallen, like many Ecological Artists, may not use the word activism to describe her work, nonetheless her work is a form what I describe as cultural activism. I am arguing that certain characteristics of her work share commonalities with the activities of social movement activists. Her works both discuss ecological theory and at the same time model the theory through a working physical manifestation of eco-wisdom. Her works exemplify human behaviors that are prefigurative of an envisioned future when eco-wise activities can be taken for granted. They also present, through intent, planning, content and execution, a constant interaction between ecosystem theory and artistic practice.

As discussed in chapters two and three the physical manifestation of direct theory is different for social movement activists and Ecological Artists. Analyzing social movement activities, Noël Sturgeon divided direct theory into internal organization structures and political practices (Sturgeon 37-40). For Ecological Artists, the radical activists’ internal organizational structures translate into external organizational working patterns: coalitions of people working for governmental and nonprofit agencies, the community members for whom the art is intended, and the interdisciplinary groups of artists, botanists, biologists scientists, and workers necessary to design and build the piece. Social Movement activists’ political practices translate for Ecological Artists into the
actual physical characteristics of the public artwork, presenting a constant interaction between theory and practice.

**Viewpoints**

A close reading of Wallen's *Viewpoints*, the nature walk at The Tijuana River Estuary Park, illuminates how Ruth Wallen's artwork utilizes what has been defined within the Social Movement discipline as prefigurative politics and direct theory.

The Tijuana River Estuary is an intertidal coastal area which straddles the border between the United States and Mexico. The estuaries' high and low tides provide a generative environment for multiple, diverse species. The Tijuana River Estuary was once a much larger water system, but approximately 90% of it was lost to development in the last half of the twentieth century. Suburbs sit on landfill where once there were marshes, wetlands and a water system in which water was once captured and diverted into the underground aquifer and cleaned on its route out to the Pacific Ocean. Before long-term, human intervention the estuary was the environmental jewel of the coastline (Saldana *Tijuana*).

Fed by the rivers and streams of northern Mexico, the water once moved from the Mexican hills down through wetlands and to protected reef areas before finally emptying into the Pacific Ocean. For centuries a generative source of food and basic materials for coastal Indians, the river and estuary system was revered. Currently, although significantly smaller, the Tijuana River estuary is still "an essential breeding, feeding, and nesting ground and key stopover point on the Pacific Flyway for over 370 species of migratory and native birds,"
including six endangered species" (Tijuana River). The estuary system affects the health and sustainability of inland and ocean species and human habitats for miles up and down the coast line.

In 1971, 396 acres was set aside to create Border Field State Park. In December of 1980, the Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge was created, taking in 505 acres, which was enlarged in 1982 to the current 2,531 acres of land named the Tijuana National Estuarine Research Reserve, and officially designated a national wildlife sanctuary. The land is mutually owned by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the City and County of San Diego, the US Navy, the California Department of Parks and Recreation and several private owners (Tijuana River).

From the sixties on, the Mexican side of the border area became industrialized. Fueled by trade and labor agreements, Tijuana was rapidly developed by business owners seeking cheap labor and a release from the pollution controls in place in the United States. Investment in Mexican industry was compressed within several decades and the Mexican government paid little attention to the environmental concerns growing in the United States. The Tijuana rivers and streams moving from Mexico to the United States soon bubbled and frothed with a curiously lethal stew of industrial chemicals and human effluent. The wetlands ecosystems became highly contaminated. Wildlife began to die off. The sand became encrusted with dried chemical waste and sewage. Fish caught in the region could not and still cannot be consumed. Silting continuously closed off the mouth of the estuary, preventing the water
from exiting the system, creating brackish, algae-ridden water, rather than the clear clean water that for centuries sank into the aquifer and flowed out to sea. In addition, the parkland had become a major passageway for illegal immigrants attempting to pass undetected into the United States. At night, the border patrol lights up the landscape and chases immigrants through the brush and marsh, disrupting the nocturnal ecosystem. This situation has become so bad that the Imperial and Coronado Beach areas, once thriving seaside tourist spots, have to continuously close their beaches due to severe water pollution. The Navy seals moved their training headquarters much farther north and Border Patrol guards receive hazardous pay for exposure to toxic waste. Within fifty years the ecosystem had been drastically altered, endangering all species of life including human beings (Saldana Tijuana).

In 1995, ecological artist Ruth Wallen received a grant from the city and help from park employees who did the heavy work, to install a nature walk, Viewpoints, in the park. It was a temporary. “The piece at the Tijuana River Estuary was only up for about a month, because they already had this whole interpretative plan that they were going to spend about ninety thousand dollars on” (Wallen Interview). Wallen “was directed by park officials to avoid controversy and focus on the biological resources” (Wallen 182 Story). Her challenge was to “frame ecoystemic concepts in a way that included human beings in the natural environment” (Wallen 182 Story). She also wanted to produce a walk that created “an embodied relationship to place” (Wallen 183 Story).
Wallen chose twelve sites along an already established park trail to place viewing stations. Each station consisted of a unique viewing scope and an interpretive panel. The visitor/participant is asked to "see" the landscape differently through each viewing scope and answer the questions posed on the adjacent panel. I assert that the questions asked on the initial panel are difficult to resolve until the person has walked further and experienced several more stations. This activity promotes a temporal, interactive relationship between all the stations.

Each of the twelve viewing scopes was constructed differently. They either frame, telescope in on, or deform the view. The distorting scopes were meant to provoke the viewer/participants into questioning how they perceive or view a landscape. Wallen was inspired by the "metaphor of the Claude glass. In the 18th century, Europeans on country walks would stand with their backs to the landscape and use this concave glass mirror to frame an idealized view" (Wallen 182 Story). Claude glasses came in different colors so the viewer could imagine the scene at different times of the day. Wallen created her viewing scopes with this distortion in mind. "One was a spotting scope, which means if you look really closely, you can see all the birds, ... in one case the colors might be changed and one was a polarizing filter, so there was always something that I think invited people to look and think about how they were looking" (Wallen Interview). The distortion in the glass at each station matched the question on the interpretive panel placed next to it.
The panels, rather than focusing on plant and animal identification as in a traditional nature walk, refer to ecological concepts, such as 'niche,' 'diversity' or 'endangered species,' as well as to historical occurrences such as a proposed sewage treatment plant or the reliance of the endangered, clapper rail population on periodic dredging to keep the mouth of the estuary open. To encourage further thought, each panel includes a challenging question that relates the human to the nonhuman environments (Wallen 183 Story).

Each panel asked different questions that correlated to the distortion of the vista through the viewing scope. The visitor/participant became involved in the construction of ecological wisdom as they moved from viewpoint to viewpoint answering the questions.

The first panel provides a foundation of information about the site and asks the overarching question that can only be examined by contemplating the questions asked in the other panels.

What is the ideal view of the estuary? At one time wetlands were viewed as wastelands. Later they glittered with dollar signs and were filled in to make prime shoreline real estate. By the seventies scientists sounded the alarm, claiming that coastal wetlands were among the most productive habitats in the world.

This work is a proposal in a dozen questions: Instead of answers it offers a suggestion to think ecologically, to examine
relationships. The viewing stations point to phenomena from all parts of the estuary. Viewing scopes both frame and deliberately distort the view. Do we, like the users of the Claude glass, turn our back on nature in search of preconceived or idealized views? (Wallen story 183).

This introductory panel is paired with a convex viewing scope, with three smaller views around the edges that seriously fragment the view, deepening the suggestion that humans can have multiple viewpoints about a particular place.

Another panel explains how human presence in the area has increased sedimentation in the rivers, which eventually builds up and blocks the mouth of the estuary, seriously altering the make-up of the ecosystem. This panel asks the question:

How might aquatic habitats change when the river no longer flows into the sea? What life forms perish when a boundary no longer permits exchange? (Wallen Toward)

"The corresponding viewing scope has a divided lens, half clear, half covered with a red filter" (Wallen 9 Enacting). The division within the scope, creating an artificial boundary for the viewer’s perception, is a metaphor for the artificial boundary, the shutting off of the estuary's mouth created by sedimentation. The color red suggests danger. The manmade, constructed view, created by a human-made scope, suggests that a person could tear down or alter that artificial boundary in the same manner that it was constructed, by first thinking about it and then engaging in an empowered activity.
One scope which fragmented the view into five sections was placed next to a panel that poses a question about the wisdom of introducing foreign plant and animal species into an environment.

The designer of the aquaculture park proposed using the water hyacinths to clean sewage effluent. These beautiful flowering plants are not indigenous to California and might quickly choke native species. How many species have been imported without fully considering the consequences of their introduction? (Wallen Toward).

The fragmented landscape seen through the scope is a metaphor for the fragmentation of the ecosystem which occurs when nonnative plants and animals alter particular ecosystems, often resulting in runaway conditions. The viewing stations engaged the visitor/participants in an embodied or cognitive learning experience, requiring them to use their bodies to engage with the scopes and their minds to interpret the questions asked. The learning system was a process which required effort, concentration, thought, time and involvement. I would argue that the efficacy of the work was based on the combined experience of all the viewing scopes and interpretative panels together. It rested on the fact that each was in relation to the other, communicated something about the previous and the next question and in turn, created a relationship between the people engaged with them and the part of the estuary that was framed for them by the viewing scopes. As a group they also held out the possibility of
creating a temporary community of visitor/participants. The entire piece of twelve viewing stations prefigured an envisioned future in which, rather than engaging in an activity informed by cultural stories about domination and control, people would instead wish to intimately comprehend and be aware of the entire system, and the relationships between biological and physical elements within the ecosystem. In this prefigured world, people, possessing a worldview informed by eco-wisdom, will hopefully engage in activities that are informed by that understanding. Instead of dividing, counting and categorizing static entities, people will look for the temporal relationships that create ecosystems and attempt to view them as being always tied to each other and themselves. Viewpoints is prefigurative of a future where the larger percentage of people, informed by eco-wisdom, would expect to come to any public place and be informed, not of individual names of birds and plants, but the ecologic relationships between them and the temporal ecosystem story of a place. The presence of a prefigurative model, physically manifested through an ecological artwork, coaxed people toward listening to alternative cultural stories concerning their relationship to ecosystems and provided a context for examining a deeper, richer understanding of human roles within these ecosystems.

Wallen's artworks are not just a model of future activity, they are also a form of direct theory. Her public physical installations are the result of constant interaction between ecological theory and practice. The piece not only models
ecosystemic ideas, but it also, in intent, planning, organization, content and execution, acts as an eco-social system, providing layers of nested ecological modeling. The work as a whole contains possibilities to assist people in the construction of eco-wisdom.

In utilizing an ecological process to create eco-wisdom, there are no contradictions or divided claims. The means is the end: doing equals constant being. The organizational method of designing and producing the work model ecosystem processes and the physical piece itself functions and communicates best if organized as a functioning ecological system.

Wallen, along with most Ecological Artists, relies on certain forms of external organizational working patterns that are collaborative and interdisciplinary to design and produce her works. As a public artwork, situated on state and federally funded land, Viewpoints required a coalition of government, city and state officials, and the assistance of park employees. To produce Viewpoints, Wallen herself had to draw on academic, artistic, scientific, and ecological knowledge and she had to rely on other people’s research concerning the Estuary’s historic cultural stories in order to formulate appropriate questions, design and build the viewing scopes, and install interpretative panels at assigned spots according to governmental regulations. She had to apply for a city grant, framing her vision within acceptable park service vocabulary. Perhaps most importantly, she relied on the community of park service employees to weld, install and maintain the pieces. The collaborative and interdisciplinary
nature of these endeavors mirrors the kinds of relationships which constitute an ecosystem and thus always point towards coalitioning as an eco-social system.

Gregory Bateson states that within an ecosystem, no one element can control the entire system. He insists that any attempt to do so results in runaway conditions, throwing the system out of its established balance and creating degraded conditions (Bateson 315). Translated into organizational structures, it suggests that hierarchical, domineering, systems of power have a high potential to create runaway conditions and working with and beside people is more likely to produce sustainable results. Returning to the example of the bee and the flower, each element in the system works together to create an ecosystem that sustains all of them. Simplistically put, the bee pollinates the flower, which in turn, provides sustenance to the bee as an enticement for it to come. It is a non-cognizant system, based on the relationship between the bee and the flower that constitutes a sustainable ecosystem. The act of creating interdisciplinary groups of people who, unlike the bee and flower, knowingly and willingly engage in a common goal is an ecological process. A coalition of people, each relying on the other to do their part, as the bee and the flower rely on one another, is an eco-social system, which in turn is engaged in producing another eco-social system, the art-piece itself.

The physical elements of Viewpoints were organized as an ecological process, involving communicative relationships between the elements as well as between the elements and the visitor/participant. All the elements of the piece needed each other to be a complete learning process. Like the bee and flower,
the stations functioned separately and together simultaneously. As a group they created an eco-social system precisely because of the relationships established between them. The piece was organized, as ecosystems are, in a nonhierarchical manner. It invited rather than demanded people use it, as the flower invites the bee. The piece, as a whole, is both temporal itself, requiring time to work out the riddles, and additionally, speaks directly to the viewer/participant about the temporal processes of the estuary, referring to sedimentation over time, the yearly migration patterns of endangered species, and the continuous flow of water through a wetlands system.

The initial panel asks the viewer not to turn their back on nature, suggesting instead that the viewer turn around, and engage directly with the landscape. The panel said: “Stop. Look. Listen. What can we learn?” (Wallen Toward). Each additional panel asked a question that required the viewer to refer back to the original panel and its admonishment not to “see” the estuary through a distorted lens, but to sort out their relationship through constructive questioning. An early panel’s question about what life forms perish when human-caused sedimentation creates impermeable boundaries leads to and provides a cognitive layer of thought for the next questions about human intervention in maintaining endangered species population - who are endangered by the human-caused blockage of the estuary mouth. By asking layered questions, Wallen points toward and assists the viewer/participant in creating knowledge about runaway conditions caused by unmindful human activity. Similarly, a panel about a proposed aquaculture park asks, “How would we treat our wastes if we
saw them as a resource instead of something to be discarded?” (Wallen Toward). The next panel layers onto this initial foray into eco-wisdom by reestablishing and questioning the current culture of domination and control, exemplified by introducing a non-indigenous plant form, water hyacinths, which can cause even worse runaway conditions. That panel asks: “How many species have been imported without fully considering the consequences of their introduction?” (Wallen Toward).

While each panel and scope functioned individually, the full impact of what they implied pointed towards and modeled required experiencing the entire piece as a set of communicative related entities, working together to constitute a healthy, vibrant, eco-social system. The potency of Viewpoints rests on the willingness of the visitor to engage in the construction of knowledge. It is possible that some people only glanced at one or two panels and scopes. But it is also possible, that there were people who, after experiencing the work as a set, walked away with a nascent glimmer of eco-wisdom, or perhaps a more sophisticated comprehension.

Regardless of the level of comprehension of the visitor/participant, an alternative world informed by eco-wisdom was prefiguratively modeled by the panels and scopes, which refused to admit that individual plants and animals live independently in the estuary, as the current template for Federal, State park interpretative panels suggests, but rather that they live in constant communicative relationship to one another, affecting each other constantly through those relationships.
Ruth Wallen's Ecological Art, a praxis resulting from the constant interaction between eco-theory and artistic practice, physically presented that theory in all the elements of the piece. The organizational coalition necessary to produce the piece, as well as the internal organization of the piece itself was eco-theory made real.

Ruth Wallen is one of a growing number of Eco-Artists. As practitioners, rather than producers of static items for contemplation, their art is form of activism, intent on creating social transformation through an alteration of cultural stories and belief systems from a current mechanistic, domineering worldview to one valuing relationship, community, dependency competition and sustainability: an eco-wise worldview. "Ecological art exists in a social context. While the work may express an individual vision, the work is created to communicate, to stimulate dialogue, and to contribute to social transformation" (Wallen Toward). Like radical social movement activists, ecological artists believe that it is through culture that one worldview is replaced by another. "A new world will be born of changed encoded in the details of our lives as we are living them now. The fabric of the new society will be made of nothing more or less than the threads woven in today's interactions" (Mcallister 111).
Chapter Five
Conclusion

Ruth Wallen, Betsy Damon, Mel Chin, Betty Beaumont, John Singer, Agnes Denes, Wayne and Helen Harrison: This is a short list of the many artists practicing Ecological Art. The nascent formations of this particular genre of art began in the seventies. Galvanized by a seemingly endless series of environmental crisis during the sixties, mercury in fish, polluted waters, oil spills, and species eradication, large numbers of people, including artists became involved in environmental issues. Activists approached these problems from multiple standpoints: through the law, education, community organizing, and cultural production. It is the cultural approach that is rarely acknowledged among general public opinion as being a form of activism although feminist artists have been making that argument since the seventies. Ecological Artists clearly state that their intent is to change people’s worldviews or belief systems from an enlightenment based ideology to one of eco-wisdom, and in doing so hopefully produce a change in the kinds of choices people make on a daily basis. The vocabulary they utilize to describe and analyze their works however, rarely includes the words activism or activist. I argue in this thesis that Ecological Artists are cultural activists who simultaneously developed strategies and methods similar to those being worked out by Radical Social Movement activists.
While these activities have been defined within the Social Movement discipline, I argue that Ecological Artists are utilizing direct theory and prefigurative politics as a method to create social change.

Radical Social Movements activists, starting with early feminists, are committed to change through cultural work. When social movement analysts talk about culture, they are not necessarily referring to art, literature, music and film. The kinds of cultural work they are referring to are primarily focused on internal organizational cultures and a cultural ethos that frames external political activity. For example feminist theories about non-dominant organizational structures have led to the cultivation of an internal organizational culture which breaks down dominant/subordinate relations. This theory has been presented, worked out and modeled by its physical manifestation; consensus decision making, rotating leadership, and networked affinity groups. External activity of radical social movement activists operates the same way. A commitment to Ghandian philosophy of respectful power, presents a physical presence in the form of the rules of direct action; carry no weapons, treat everyone with respect, be inclusive, and do not destroy private property. The role of social movement activists has always been defined as being an integral to the creation of a new society.

The role of the artists in society has been largely defined in the twentieth century as separate and apart from society. Artists' place in the social order has been framed for a long time by the Modern sensibility of the artist as a solitary individual presenting his/her genius of subjective expression and talent through
their work, separate and apart from society. Considering an artist as an integral part of the functioning of a society is a radical thought. Those artists who have been attempting to make that argument, most notably Suzi Gablik and Carol Becker, have met with considerable resistance to the idea. Perceiving artists as a fundamental, dynamic force for change is an even further stretch for many people, still steeped in modern art ideology. Nonetheless, many artists, such as Suzanne Gablick, Suzanne Lacy, Linda Weintraub, and Mel Chin have made the argument that artistic production is fundamental to a healthy society. There are a fair number of artists who have committed their work to the creation of social change through cultural activism: education, consciousness raising, and making the political personal.

The idea that culture plays an important role in the creation of people's belief systems and that cultural production can insert new meaning-making systems into the culture and thus rework it and change it, was first articulated by feminists artists in the seventies, who unabashedly called themselves activists. Their nascent ideas and practices provided a model and inspiration for later artists, who embraced the idea of social change through their cultural creativity. However, rarely did artists choose to use the word activism.

Ecological Artists were no exception. While they firmly believed that their work could promote change in the world, they did not use the word activist to describe themselves or cultural activism to define their work.

I assert in this thesis that at all levels of activity, Ecological Art can be perceived as a form of cultural activism and ecological artists as cultural activists.
By producing new meaning-making symbols, Eco-Art which is physical, not abstract, and easily comprehensible inserts new feedback loops into the mainstream societal culture and these loops, communicating about difference, are capable of changing the belief systems that support the organizational activities of that culture and in turn change the culture itself.

Eco-Art as a praxis was historically developed through a constant interaction, a continual working out between artistic production and ecosystem theory. Like an onion, each layer of the most effective Eco-Art productions present information about ecosystems. Each piece of Eco-Art functions as an ecosystem. As a piece, the work communicates to the viewer about ecosystemic properties, presents a working model of an ecosystem, and at the same time is the physical manifestation of eco-wisdom. This continuous play between practice and theory in the creation of a physical presence that speaks to and of that theory is a form of direct theory.

Ecological Art is also a form of prefigurative politics, modeling new ways of being in the world informed by eco-wisdom, prefiguring an envisioned future where an entire worldview and society has been generated based on eco-wisdom.

All of the elements of Ecological Art; its prefigurative modeling of an eco-wise future, the presentation of ecosystem properties in its internal and external organization, the modeling of a working ecosystem and the physical cultural presence of eco-wisdom present characteristics of direct theory and prefigurative politics. Ecological Art in utilizing ecological principles to create functioning
ecosystems presents multiple opportunities for the visitor/participant to engage in
the construction of ecological wisdom and in doing so, alter their belief systems,
or worldviews. This beginning construction of a worldview, based on eco-
wisdom, can create a new cultural repertoire, a set of known tools, utilized to
make decisions and act in the world which holds the promise of creating societal
change, one person at a time. Ecological Art is a form of cultural activism and
Ecological Artists are cultural activists.
Endnotes

1 The information about ecosystems, condensed in this section, has been drawn from multiple sources. Gregory Bateson was one of the first people to articulate the ideas of communication, relation and feedback loops. He collected much of his work in a single volume called *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Fritjof Capra, a Deep Ecologist, wrote *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* in 1996, which takes Bateson's thinking to a deeper level. Other people, including Mary Catherine Bateson and Peter Harries-Jones have written a good deal of material, working through the complexity of Gregory Bateson's work. I drew on Noel Sturgeon and Carolyn Merchant’s work on Ecofeminism.

2 Recursive is a term utilized in Ecosystems theory to describe how information is contained within ecosystems and is continuously fed back into the system which either sustains the system, or alters it. It literally means - to come back in. For example, to continue working with the bee and flower metaphor, the location of flowering bushes in continuously returned into the ecosystem of the hive through the flight pattern of the bees. It is a recursive element within an ecosystem.

3 Again this information is a compressed version of many people’s articulation of ecosystem theories: Bateson, Capra, Merchant, and others.

4 There is a long history of powerful institutions and corporations reacting violently to the demands of people involved in Labor, Civil Rights, Human Rights, Feminist, and many other struggles for justice and equality. Some of the more famous incidents are: the Ludlow Colorado Massacre of 20 people during a copper mine strike, the April 1963 bombing of an African American, Alabama church during the Civil Rights Movement and the 1964 murders of three civil rights workers who were found buried in a Levee.

5 The most obvious example of artistic production in service of changing a worldview is Al Gore’s 2006 documentary on global warming, *An Inconvenient Truth*. There are multitudes of people who have dedicated their artistic output to create ecosystemic wisdom: Wendell Berry’s poems and fiction, Suzi Gablik’s dialogues in *Conversations Before The End of Time*, Alan Sonfist’s and Joseph Beuys’ tree plantings, Betty Beaumont’s underwater fishery habitats and so many more.

6 Bateson examines this issue over and over and applies it in numerous disciplines. His initial explanation of the principles can be found in an essay addressing alcoholism in *Steps to An Ecology of Mind*. He dedicates an entire essay called “Conscious Purpose vs Nature” in his book where he applies the ideas to human society.

7 The academic examination of groups dedicated to creating an eco-wise world, has categorized them according to personal theories about strategies, and standpoints. Whether they want to “Reenchant Nature”, or find spiritual or ethical principles there, all of these groups, Ecofeminists, Social Ecologists, Deep Ecologists, or Ecological Artists agree on the basic principles of ecosystem theory.
There is a large body of work by artists who were very involved in re-arranging earth on a large scale. The most famous person is Robert Smithson, who built a spiral jetty of stone in the Great Salt Lake. Michael Hiezer, Richard Long, and Dennis Oppenheim are famous for bulldozing or mowing patterns in the earth that are so big they can only be perceived from afar.

Written material that specifically addresses Ecological Art is mostly found in articles and websites. In every major book I picked up, the work of Eco-Artists is completely folded into Earth Art and there is little recognition of the difference between the two. Even several websites, ostensibly about Ecological Art, include paintings, weavings, dance, and other forms of artistic expression that are really about the artist's subjective expression of a site, rather than a site which illuminates ecosystemic principles.

Ruth Wallen was invited to create a set of interpretative panels to be placed along the trail in The Chaco Canyon National Park in Arizona. Her friend wanted something different than the usual panels which normally just function to identify single elements in the environment.

The National Park Service has a template for all the interpretative panels placed in National parks. The panels are usually placed at strategic sites along trails to point out pertinent or picturesque elements in the landscape. They rarely point out the relationships between all the biota in an ecosystem.
Works Cited


*Greenmuseum.org*. 22 March 2007
  &lt;http://greenmuseum.org/c/aen/issues/chin.php&gt;


Michael Singer Artist. 22 March 2006 <http://www.michaelsinger.com/>


--- "Towards a Definition of Ecological Art" *About Eco-art.* University of California, San Diego 22 March. 2007 <http://communication.ucsd.edu/rwallen/ecoframe.html>


--- "Eco-tistical Art-An experimental Initiative at the 2005 CAA Conference". *Art Journal*. 65 (Spring 2006) 55