



plot

Maria Thereza Alves, Liverpool Docks, 2004

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Edited by Simon Read



Jem Southam, *Whale Chime*, Lower Greensands, Oct, 1994.
Courtesy of the artist.

Fundamental Variables

MARTHA FLEMING

The researchers presenting their ongoing work in this publication are grappling with matter of the most primordial sort: earth, stone, water, vegetation. This involvement is not uniquely metaphoric, as is often mistakenly assumed when such investigations are carried out by artists. They are investigating the interlace of matter with technologies – human technologies such as language, shipping, agriculture, hydrology, global trade. Each of them employs a structured methodology designed specifically for their focused inquiry, involving both inductive and deductive reasoning, observation, experimentation and hypothesis. To this extent, they are scientists, as we commonly understand the term.

The parameters of their cultural investigations require them to include complex variables which science has generally avoided as often too difficult to handle. Variables such as the erosion of linguistic meaning and what landscapes mean to us, the change in value of shipping cargos over time, and the effects of alterations to legislation, to urban boundaries and to irrigation.

And so they are also experimenting with scientific methodology itself, extending it to embrace variables that only the most advanced cosmologists or particle physicists can begin to encompass nowadays through the support of major institutions funded far beyond the dreams of most artists.

What is of interest to them is not a repeatable experiment tied to the discovery of a supposedly fundamental universal law, but rather the absolute uniqueness of the very real precise cases which they are studying and in which they are implicated. Like Heisenberg, they know that the observer is part of the observation – they are attempting to forge new methodologies for new questions, not for new laws. These fundamental questions are very urgent: How are we to live on the Earth? How can we restabilise what has become fragile? How can we understand what we have done and its implications?

Though their projects are unique and site-specific, they are engaged in a broader form of global problem solving, where the interdisciplinary meets the international. Any scientific research centre seriously interested in developing new and sustainable solutions would do well to involve them – and other artists – in the same sort of extended collaborations in which they engage other professionals with different skillsets. There is no scientific emergency that is not also cultural, suggesting that the oft paraphrased Einstein is right: ‘We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.’



Jem Southam, *Whale Chine*, Lower Greensands, Feb, 2000.
Courtesy of the artist.

Beauty and the Bureaucrat

SIMON READ

Lodged in our psyche by history, stereotypes of landscape are reaching the end of their relevance in the face of new challenges. Exacerbated by the pressures of an increasingly urbanised culture, our senses are becoming dulled to much that is distinctive in our immediate environment. No longer having the parameters to interpret for ourselves what we see, we rely increasingly upon information as a substitute for direct engagement, with the effect that with eyes wide open we could be flying blindly into environmental disaster. Looking beyond our shores, this predicament is echoed in guises unique to other geographies. In matters other than environmental, the controlled world we had come to regard as our oyster is no longer a safe holiday destination and within that world, renascent dreams of cultural selfhood are redrawing the map.

My own concerns begin parochially; I live in an area formally known as the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).¹ This is a designation that carries a high level of environmental protection,

enshrined in legislation equivalent to that enjoyed by the National Parks. Just as for a National Park, there is a boundary where that which enjoys or endures protection begins and ends. Immediately outside of it is a redundant American airbase, RAF Bentwaters; established during World War 2, it ceased to be of strategic importance at the end of the cold war and was closed down. What do you do with the longest runway in Europe? The Americans could not take it with them, neither would they demolish it. Should it be considered a resource in spite of being in the wrong place, or should it be dug up and forgotten? A great many alternative uses for the site had already been considered, so it came as no surprise when, in 1998, a planning application was lodged with the local authority to establish a civilian airport. The context at the time was that the development of Regional Airports in South East England was being actively encouraged in order to relieve pressure on Heathrow and Gatwick and that, from the point of view of the office of the Deputy Prime Minister, a proposal to develop Bentwaters made perfect sense. This is curiously disingenuous since protection against unsympathetic development in the vicinity of an AONB is guaranteed by act of parliament and it is also not a foregone conclusion that military occupation of a site is automatically justification for its re-use as a civilian facility. A proposal of this nature must be subject to an alteration of the Local Plan, which can only happen as the result of a public planning inquiry.

Predictably the local community was opposed to the application and although the applicant went to great lengths to trivialise this, the grounds for objection were justifiable. The argument was that a development of this order would be antipathetic to the continuing development of a regional identity with a distinctive landscape, rich in wildlife and, possibly more to the point, possessing a thriving leisure industry. Indeed any gain that an airport development might offer in terms of jobs would be at the expense of a regional development plan already well advanced and in perfect accordance with the AONB guidance. In the preparation of the case against the proposal, a great deal of effort was spent on understanding the complexities of

environmental law and how it applied to the matter in hand. Evidently the applicant had not similarly prepared himself, for having already received tacit approval from the local planning office he fully expected his case to be upheld.

As it progressed, the public hearing became increasingly mired in such imponderables as the status of acid grassland habitat and the plight of the Nightjar and questioned very closely the implications of the AONB designation. The Chief Planning Officer found himself in a cleft stick; by the nature of his office, he was bound to uphold any planning legislation that gave the correct protection to the area. But as a civil servant, his duty is to facilitate and he had not foreseen any insurmountable obstacles to the application. A moment of burlesque occurred when he was asked by the Chairman, if given the nature of the objections on the grounds of negative effects upon the natural beauty of the environment, would he be so kind as to define his understanding of beauty? This is not a fair question since current government legislation on the inviolability of the natural environment is predicated upon an assumption of what is meant by the word beauty. Flummoxed for a response that could align aesthetics to a definition in law, he resorted to visual stereotypes and to be fair, in the absence of adequate guidelines, there was nothing else that could register on his radar screen. So far as the Countryside Agency is concerned the purpose of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is to protect 'natural beauty'. There is no escape from tautology.² The protection in law of an ideal of beauty is a vague cultural habit embedded in our national psyche and synonymous with a very particular identification with landscape that defies any satisfactory definition based on aesthetics in general or art in particular.

The concept of beauty in landscape that forms the basis for government legislation originates in a watered down understanding of the picturesque. This, it must be borne in mind, was coeval with a particular period of cultural advance and social upheaval in the 18th and 19th centuries. Through the industrial revolution, new and exclusively industrial urban centres developed;

these concentrated communities could only become sustainable if farming practices were sufficiently productive to create a surplus. For this and other reasons such as food shortages in the Napoleonic Wars, farming methods moved away from the mediaeval model to one, ratified by parliamentary enclosure, where efficiency and productivity, for the first time, took precedence. This in turn displaced a whole sector of the rural community to become fodder for the new industrial centres, or else to opt for emigration. As a consequence, an erstwhile busy landscape was reconfigured as an ordered one, eerily empty, where, for the cultivated landowner, the invention of the 'model farm' coincided with the birth of the romantic view and aesthetic of the sublime. Of course, the cultural community of the time became a driving force behind the creation of a vision appropriate to what was in effect a socio economic fait accompli. In contemporary parlance, this is no more than good marketing. The process of converting wasteland into managed farm estates and productive land to picturesque wasteland, was contextualised in a celebration of wilderness; the concept of the land was shifted from one hitherto understood from the inside by a predominantly rural community to one of exclusion, experienced only from the outside as a series of framed views.

We have inherited this formula. It is a key to how landscape has become part of the entertainments industry for a consumer oriented society. Be this as it may, as a template it cannot promote a shared sense of responsibility for the environment and may be inappropriate to the times we live in. Indeed the effect is to confirm the authoritarian view that the point of interface between people and the environment must be managed. In this country Government Agencies and NGOs adopt a proprietorial role and have developed strategies of damage limitation for threatened landscapes, which may in the short term serve the purposes of conservation but ultimately do little to engage a constituency represented by the visiting or stakeholder community. Mass mobility and the association of open space with leisure amenity have brought with them the strategy of marketing protected landscapes. For all



Richard Misrach, *Dead Animals #165*, 1987.
Courtesy of the Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, USA.



Andreas Gursky, *Engadin 1*, 1995.
Courtesy of the Monika Sprüth/Philomene Magers Gallery, Munich, Germany.

conservation projects, no matter how vulnerable a site may be, investment must be justified by ensuring access, even to the extent of setting false trails and creating diversionary 'honeypots'. By sleight of hand it has become a standard practice to accomplish the double objective of protecting habitat and creating commodity.

The visual arts have always been a fundamental part of the mechanism that gives emotional ties to land the identifiable form that in due course may ossify as law. As a countercurrent, other perceptions of the land, precipitated by a post industrial, post modern experience of the world, are gaining currency against a backdrop of potential environmental meltdown. Narrowing the view down to look at artists who use photography, it is interesting to reflect that there are a great many common denominators and whilst individual works may be geographically specific, they also invite comparison on a global level. The potency of the legacy of the picturesque endures and has become a paradigm for a contemporary reinvestment in landscape. Richard Misrach may initially beguile us with panoramas of the Nevada Desert under big skies, but secondarily shocks us with the fine detail of irradiated livestock carcasses, the result of military carelessness and subterfuge. Through a quieter use of the same convention, Jem Southam chooses to examine the gentle volatility of coastal processes as they diminish the Isle of Wight day by day in multiple small avalanches. For Andreas Gursky, although landscapes themselves might remain transcendent, they are changed by the cultural expectations of their use. They can be a setting for mass social gatherings, extreme sports such as a windsurfing championship in a Norwegian fjord or the Ski Marathon in the Alps at Lausanne, each a testimony to heroism commodified. John Kippin similarly has explored sites of infinite sublimity such as Stonehenge, where, as a puny echo, he discovers a crowd of visitors under drab umbrellas.

What use is art to a drowning man? This is a moot point in the light of current environmental imperatives. It is arguable that where the need is urgent for a particular disciplinary response to a specific issue, the presence

of an artist might be superfluous. Without the recognition that change has cultural implications that in turn influence social response, this will continue to be the case. Only if there is a sincere wish to cross disciplinary boundaries is it possible to imagine a reciprocal relationship between mechanical analysis and intuitive response. With the help of Jean Fisher, Fernando Palma Rodríguez and Maria Thereza Alves, this is the territory I wish to explore. In different ways we share an interest in the social and political perception of land. Jean Fisher has for many years supported contemporary Native American artists in their struggle for the rights of indigenous peoples to sociopolitical and cultural sovereignty; fittingly she introduces both Fernando Palma Rodríguez and Maria Thereza Alves. These two artists complement each other in the way that they negotiate issues of cultural integrity through rich metaphor, permitting us to find something that resonates beyond the constraints of time and place. Whether we are looking at the accidental colonisation of foreign territory by stowaway plants in ship's ballast or the odyssey of the migration of the monarch butterfly, we are in no doubt that poetry is the ground where these issues meet. For me, emotional attachment to our native landscape is the result of a formula established a long time ago, the essence of which is a code that paradoxically has become instrumental in separating us from our birthright. If a renewed sense of social responsibility for the environment is to be engendered, awareness of the dynamism of a cultural understanding of landscape is essential. If disregarded, blinded by science, we risk drowning in indifference.



John Kippin, *Pilgrims, Stonehenge*, 1994. Exhibited in 'Nostalgia for the Future', Photographers Gallery, London, 1994.
Courtesy of the artist.

NOTES

1 The designation and management of AONBs and National Parks is the responsibility of the Countryside Agency which is the Government Agency. Since 2006 this role has been subsumed by a new organisation called Natural England.

2 'The Countryside Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development', Section 4.7, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. *Department of the Environment, Planning Policy Guidance, 7 February 1997.*

'Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty AONBs are designated by the same means and under the same legislation as National Parks. The primary objective of designation is conservation of the natural beauty of the landscape.'



Maria Thereza Alves, Ballast heaps, Dunkirk, 2005

Alternating Currents

JEAN FISHER

Although it is common to speak of globalisation as a new phenomenon, it has taken several centuries for it to mutate into its present form. Whether by voluntary or forced migration, the massive geographic displacement and cultural dispossession of peoples over recent centuries has confronted us with a crisis of identity, belonging and effective agency, that is, participation in the social and political decisions that govern one's life. This is not only an issue for diasporic populations striving to create a space of belonging in 'host' nations, but concerns the latter themselves, given that the new 'world order' of free market capitalism and the commoditisation of all aspects of life have destabilised those presumed stable traditional structures – class and religion, work and home – by which an individual secured a sense of belonging and agency in society. Globalisation and its 'unhomeliness', rather than produce the liberalist utopia of a universal, united humanity, has increased tensions between local needs and affiliations and the demands of global management. In the sphere of culture, one response during the late 20th century was an entrenchment of and demand for the recognition and rights of ethnic

minority identities, defined by their difference by a dominant other which had excluded them from political and social participation in the structures of power. But if place as such could no longer guarantee belonging when almost everyone was in some degree dislocated and deprived of authorising their own experience, how adequate was cultural identity as an alternative? The problem with the dualism identity/difference as a political category is that it presented a closed, essentialist view which assumed each individual was representative of a collectivity defined anthropologically in terms of presumed fixed ancestral origins, but which failed to accommodate the multiple identifications that arise in the translations and transactions that take place at the multi-ethnic, multicultural intersections of societies. In truth, identity is not some immutable essence, but a mobile contingency that is continually subject to modification by the multiple identifications and positions through and from which the individual experiences and understands the world and through which new collective assemblages or alliances come into being.

Belonging may conveniently be seen as attachment to place, but it is an attachment intimately tied to language – to the stories, familial and mythic, told to us in childhood in which place is woven with perspective – a way of seeing the world and acting in it; and to the narratives we weave around our life experiences, in which past, present and future form a *pas de trois* of ever-adjusting moves, the same but always different. For this reason we can never fully leave the place of departure, nor fully settle in a place of arrival. Accordingly, Lawrence Grossberg suggests that belonging should be thought not in terms of identity but in relation to agency: 'agency involves relations of participation and access, the possibilities of moving into particular sites of activity and power, and of belonging to them in such a way as to be able to enact their powers.'¹

It is to the complex and often paradoxical issues of belonging and agency that the work of the two artists presented here, Fernando Palma Rodríguez and Maria Thereza Alves, is addressed. For both artists, the point of departure



Fernando Palma Rodríguez, *Maya Child and Monarch*, 2005

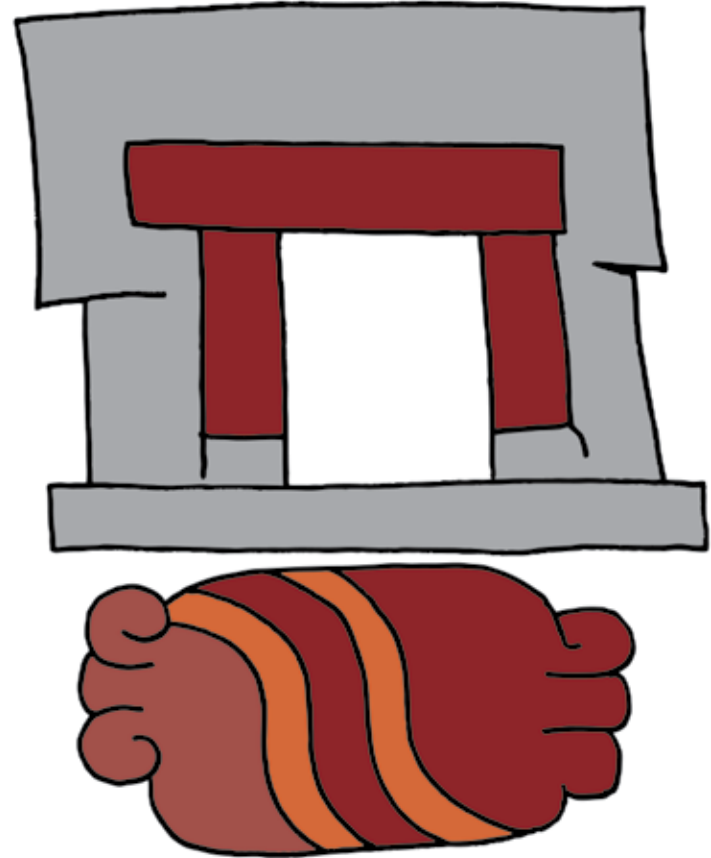
16

is the Americas – Mexico and Brazil respectively – and their indigenous perspectives, accompanied by a deeply felt concern for the relations between land and the narratives that sustain a peoples identity. At the same time, both artists are travellers across continents, ‘itinerants’, occupying a space that is anarchical in its relative detachment from the perspectives and habits of the places in which they take up residency, but a space which enables them the relative freedom of artistic ‘vectors’, seeking out ‘particular sites of activity and power’ through which they can make novel and productive connections amongst differing cultural positions.

NOTES

1 Lawrence Grossberg, ‘Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is?’, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, London: Sage Publications, 1996, pp. 99–100.

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Fernando Rodríguez Palma New Horizons of the Past: The Indigenous Landscape

JEAN FISHER

One of the most contentious contemporary debates is the extent to which western technology and its exploitation of the earth's resources has perhaps irrevocably disturbed the balance of the global ecosystem beyond nature's powers of resilience and regeneration. Counter arguments to those of predicted disaster, drawing on evidence from geological deep time that the earth has always undergone dramatic cyclical changes, should not, distract us from the fact that there is in the here and now an insupportable level of immiseration amongst the world's peoples directly attributable to land exploitation and mismanagement. Amongst the West's managerial elite, the belief remains that advanced technology can correct what it destabilised in the first place, which is alarming for several reasons, not least because of the accompanying assumption that Western liberal democracy, consumer culture and life style, including its agricultural technologies, are what the rest of the world desires and, indeed, must have despite themselves. Meanwhile, the priority of the world's poor and dispossessed must surely be a secure and stable sense of belonging.

Western assumptions about land and ecology are a continuation of the Judaeo-Christian belief inherited by science and capitalism in man's separation from and superiority over the natural world, which has accorded him the messianic divine right to control and manipulate it: the 'wilderness' aka 'desert', which in Biblical jargon means 'not under the plough' must be turned into a 'garden'. Moreover these assumptions derive from a centrist, urban view of nature and land that is governed, on the one hand, by the abstract calculations of politics, economics and demographics, and on the other, by concepts of landscape inherited from the Romantic aesthetic of the early nineteenth century leisure classes. The sublimity of 'dark satanic mills' was equalled by the extreme expressions of natural forces, both to be experienced from a safe distance.

This aesthetic is based on pictorialism and the picturesque, in which the land becomes not a body to be inhabited but a *picture to be contemplated*. The Romantics are the precursors of the concept of 'conservation', derived from a Rousseauian perception of industrialised civilisation as a 'fall' from the innocence and plenitude of Eden. Against such a fate the remaining non industrialised 'wildernesses' and their native inhabitants as the last survivors of 'natural' man had to be preserved so that the European could periodically renew contact with the lost Eden. Indigenous peoples and those remnants of land that escaped industrialisation were, at best, to be frozen in enclosures 'reservations',¹ 'national parks', 'wilderness areas', 'heritage sites' ultimately to be distanced further from reality by a fetishising commodification; or, at worst, as in the case of indigenous Mexico, Indian nations were to be eradicated from the post conquest, Hispano Mexican national narrative and displaced by the indifferent category of 'rural peasant'. One needs to question closely, therefore, whether solutions to projected global or local ecosystem meltdown, dictated by a centralised metropolitan bureaucracy unfamiliar with 'nature' except as transient escapism, are not still contaminated with dangerously distracting Romantic ideals. One needs policies that work with natural processes not in isolation from them, which means in turn devolving

centrist policies and empowering local communities with the resources to develop their own land in a sustainable manner.

Twentieth century art practice has seldom deviated from the Romantic view. One of the last serious involvements with 'landscape' was Land Art of the late 1960s and 1970s, art historically bracketed by Rosalind Krauss as 'sculpture in the expanded field' – a description that retains the whiff of colonial expansionism. A cursory glance at some of its North American exemplars reveals them to be 'image based' objects, conventionally encoded in modernist terms as simply more grandiose versions of gallery art – image based also insofar as the photographic record is how most people know them. Typically, Land Art projects sought out remote and seemingly 'unpopulated' landscapes whose Biblical connotations should not be lost on us. Amongst the most infamous of these are Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*, 1969 – a displacement of 240,000 tons of earth in the Nevada Desert; Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*, 1977 – 400 steel lightning conductors set in a grid over a square mile of the New Mexico desert; and the boulders that make up Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, in Utah's Great Salt Lake.

All these works were realised through the use of expensive technologies and, as far as can be ascertained, were designed from an aesthetic perception of the landscape not from sensitivity towards the local ecosystem. Amongst the British artists involved in Land Art, Richard Long is the most famous and credited with being ecologically 'correct' since he used modest means and often degradable local materials. However, like his North American counterparts, he trekked across what he calls 'empty landscape', betraying the residues of a European colonial mentality that assumed the right to make one's mark on, or, in this case, exploit the land as material for art, no matter whose territory, 'empty' or not, it may be.²

Ecological events demand new questions of art's engagement in the wider social sphere. Is it possible for art to relinquish the historical fictions of the

self-generating individual and itself as a self-enclosed discipline answerable only to the marketplace in favour of one that necessarily interfaces with other human activities and knowledges? How to rethink, on the one hand, the nature and function of artistic practice that would produce such an engagement, and on the other, how to reconceptualise its relationship with nature and the environment? As Simon Read has repeatedly asked, in what way can an artistic sensibility be effectively and practically integrated into communal projects of environmental sustainability without being compromised and marginalised by romanticist attitudes?

The apparently irreconcilable conflict in land use between food production and environmental sustainability is a false one based in our slavish acquiescence to the universalisation of European methodologies and ideologies. Western industrial farming technologies have always been venally predisposed to short-term economic gains, sustained over centuries by an ever-expanding corporate land use, dispossessing local farming communities and deforesting vast tracts of land; and by the use of ultimately toxic chemical fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides, all contributing to ecological stress from loss of surface water retention, contaminated aquifers, rainfall shortage and soil erosion, or to unrestrained flooding – effects that local ecologies and farming methods once kept in check. We need, therefore, to rethink the relationship between the global and the local, industrial and traditional technologies, and reverse the dynamic in which the former, by economic and political force, displaces the latter.

It is the complex interrelation between the forces that operate on cultural dispossession and survival that concerns the art practice of Fernando Palma and interfaces with the problem of how one might rethink agricultural ecological and communal sustainability beyond the technological solutions of the West. Amongst the key sites in which these issues are undergoing revolution are the indigenous populations of Central and South America. This should not be surprising. Contrary to the tenacious Western perception

of pre conquest indigenous peoples as ‘primitive’ and without technology, we should remember that most Western staples derive from sophisticated indigenous agricultural technology developed over millennia: potatoes, tomatoes, beans, squash and maize, to name a few.³

Much indigenous knowledge was forced into obscurity not only by the aggressive introduction of European concepts of private ownership, methods of intensive farming, crops, weeds, animals and diseases, but also by a wilful misreading of the Indians’ pragmatic relation to land as ‘mystical’, a view advanced to justify Indian dispossession. The background to Palma’s work lies in a contemplation of the ongoing consequences of the Spanish conquest of Mexico in terms of both the ecosystem and ideology. The devastation began in the first century of conquest with the deforestation and erosion of Mexican soil through overgrazing by vast herds of European livestock – pigs, cattle and sheep – and by mining and sugar plantations, and continued through a national policy of unmanaged exploitation as Mexico struggled to ‘modernise’,⁴ a situation that has long since been exacerbated by the economic and political conditions operating between Mexico and the United States.⁵ The European Romantic concept of the idealised landscape and its modern version ‘conservation’ have never been part of the Mexican national consciousness, which has therefore lacked even this form of ecological management.⁶

However, what remains as a latent and under represented resource for reversing these trends is indigenous knowledge. Admittedly, this often means re educating local communities to value those traditions that can be remobilised to benefit contemporary realities. Palma’s homeland Milpa Alta, a small region in the mountains to the south west of Mexico City, known significantly as the ‘lungs of Mexico City’, is currently under stress from a combination of environmental factors, including de population and fallowing of farmland due to reduced financial viability of maize production; unregulated building through Mexico City’s ever expanding encroachment on its hinterlands; illegal logging of the remaining woodland as a desperate

source of income, leading to increased soil destabilisation and water loss; and loss of biodiversity through pollution drifting from the city itself.

Palma’s artistic energies over the past decade have been put to the service of Calpulli Tecalco an NGO composed of his local community of Nahua people, alongside experts in agricultural biology, archaeology, linguistics, architecture and law. Amongst the aims of Calpulli Tecalco is a revival of the local Nahuatl language, not as some nostalgic return to a pre conquest arcadia (a Judaeo Christian mystification), but as a means of reinvesting indigenous values and traditions with appropriate contemporary technological skills to recover the future.

Indigenous knowledge is based in a view of human nature relations incommensurable with the European; that is, as distinct from the Judaeo Christian concept that man is ‘above’ a nature perceived as a wilderness to be ‘tamed’ through cultivation, the Amerindian view, as Palma explains, is that the human and the natural world evolve as one and the same ‘body’ and it is the task of humans to maintain the health of this body through careful collective and aesthetic management. Indigenous communal belonging to ancestral lands is a profoundly unsentimental, ethical relation alien to the concept of land as individual property and commodity. This worldview is embedded in the language itself: words and linguistic expression, traditional stories and cyclical rituals are reminders of the mutual, mythic origins of nature and people and of human responsibility to return imbalance to a harmonious whole. To do otherwise is to court catastrophe. To understand this is to abandon the European notion of progress where ‘tradition’, or the past, is the inaccessible and redundant ‘other’ of the present. Across indigenous America, ‘tradition’ means not cultural stagnation but continual renewal; the assimilationist agendas of settler nation states imposed on indigenous peoples have consistently overlooked the *adaptability* of indigenous cultures, often as a form of resistance, where assimilation and adaptation are by no means the same thing. Against this realist, practical philosophy of action, it is the Judaeo Christian heritage that emerges as idealist, ‘mystical’

and destructive. Belatedly, indigenous perspectives have recently begun to filter into mainstream consciousness as a result of the scientific evidence on global warming; firstly, because indigenous land and resource husbandry highlights the deleterious effects of land mismanagement and pollution by Western technology; and secondly, because many indigenous populations inhabit remote, ecologically vulnerable locations and have been amongst the first to witness and report environmental changes (for example, the Inuit in the Arctic Circle and the Kogi in the high Andes of Colombia.)

For Palma and Capulli Tecalco, self sustaining community means an intimate and necessary relation between the land, the aesthetic, the technological and the linguistic. Recovery and reassessment of traditional farming values towards environmental renewal is possible through two major routes. In the first place, the land itself is inscribed with the history of its people: the hillsides of Milpa Alta are criss crossed with the remains of pre conquest, stone walled agricultural terraces, animal and plant life that to the archaeologist and biologist reveal patterns of human thinking and agency in relation to the climate and topography. In the second place, on a very practical level, the language Nahuatl needs to survive through transmission from the older generation that still speak it to younger generations in order for the artist and linguist to decipher, translate and transmit the cultural values and practical wisdom contained in the images and texts of Mexican codices, sculptures, mural paintings and ancestral myths. Art practice here, then, has a vital role of translation and transmission.

Palma's answer to the question, how may art practice engage with communal projects of environmental sustainability, precisely involves rethinking the nature of art beyond its own mythologies, which, in Palma's terms, parallel the mythologies of Western technological development and are therefore contaminated by the same mindset in need of revision. What Palma seems to be advocating is that artistic engagement requires acquiring expertise in an interdisciplinary field of enquiry so that technology can be reconfigured to



Ancient terraces of Atocpan. Photograph by Angelica Palma.

the dimensions of tangible human experience; and so that interdisciplinary points of intersection can be more productively understood and therefore more precisely presented in aesthetic form. He quotes the case of the stone carver from a distant civilisation, whose worldview we may not know but whose strength and integrity is visible in the elegant working of the material. Over the past decade Palma has drawn on his dual engineering and artistic training and dual cultural experience of the Nahua and Europe, to produce 'temperamental' robotic machines made of scavenged and recycled industrial and natural materials that tell new stories of the urban landscape and the

fragile relationship between humans and technology. They are made in the ethical spirit of indigenous Coyote, boundary violator and orchestrator of cultural renewal and, in Toltec cosmogony, Nezualcoyotl, the 'poet and engineer responsible for the great dikes and aqueducts of Tenochtitlan.'⁷ Most recently, Palma has directed his electronic and digitalised robotics skills to the fabrication of sculptures based on the Monarch butterfly. *Tocibuapapalutzin* (Our Lady Butterfly), 2005, is a field of butterflies cut from soft drink cans and mounted on wires connected to a micro controller and sensor, so that a quivering wave is set in motion by the passing viewer – a reminder of the effects of human actions on the natural world. The significance of the Monarch butterfly lies in both its status as a species endangered by deforestation and pollution and as a metaphor for reaffirming the political unity of indigenous America.⁸ As such, it is the subject of a pan American artistic event to be organised by Palma and Calpulli Tecalco.

In speaking of cultural renewal, Frantz Fanon insisted that it was the role of the intellectual and artist to mobilise his or her imagination to conjugate cultural memory with the realities of the present towards a new national consciousness, 'giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons'.⁹ Fanon was concerned in the broadest sense with 'storytelling', understanding that a peoples' sense of themselves and their agency was contingent upon the invention of new, productive social narratives. Although Calpulli Tecalco is a local initiative responding to local concerns it provides a challenge to the habits of Western thinking. Its attentiveness to the relations between interdisciplinary alliances and the reformulation of social narratives articulated through historical and contemporary perspectives of people and land, presents a model of broad cultural relevance to the issue of how belonging as attachment to place and language may also possess the potential to secure belonging as participation and agency in sites of activity and power.

NOTES

1 In answer to a question about the situation of Native Americans by a Russian student in a 1988 Moscow address, Ronald Reagan made a telling slip of the tongue when he referred to the 'reservation' as 'preservation'.

2. Richard Long interviewed by Colin Fitzpatrick: 'There is some comment on the lack of people in my work, but it is just a question of choice, the subject of my work is walking, or making sculpture in empty landscape. Most of the world's surface is still open landscapes. I feel I am a realist working in the real spaces of the world.' www.dundee.ac.uk/transcript/volume2/issue2/long

3 As we speak, a method, originating from the Mayan region of Guatemala, of replenishing degraded soil and improving crop yield through co cropping with the mucuna bean is revolutionising local farming in impoverished regions of South America and Africa. The mucuna bean, like most leguminous plants, has root nodules rich in nitrogen. Although the bean is not suitable as yet for human consumption, it produces rich, organic mulch that both replenishes the soil and discourages weeds and therefore dispenses with much of the expense of fertilisers and labour intensive tillage.

4 Such scenarios are rife throughout Latin America. See 'The Conquest of Nature, 1492-1992', *Report on the Americas*, North American Congress on Latin America, vol XXV, no 2, September 1991.

5 For instance, the United States policy of intensive corporate farming and its insistence on the use of costly herbicides, pesticides and fertilisers puts small Mexican farmers out of business increasing land de population and fallowing through emigration to the cities and the US. The US market now exports rather than imports from Mexico maize and seed, but in GM form, which risks contaminating and eradicating indigenous varieties. Recently, the switch in US maize cultivation from food crop to bio fuel created a massive increase in the cost of maize in Mexico, the food staple of the country's poor.

6 For a thorough analysis of the relations between socio politics and environmental change in Mexico, see Joel Simon, *Endangered Mexico: An Environment on the Edge*, London: Latin American Bureau, 1997.

7 José Martín González, 'La Ascendencia de Coyote', in *Fernando Palma Rodríguez: Mechatronic Circus*, London: 198 Gallery and Llandudno: Oriol Mostyn Gallery, 2000, p 16.

8 The Monarch butterfly is a continental migratory insect that overwinters in Florida, Texas and Michoacán, returning to Canada in the spring. The eastern Monarch butterfly has been claimed as the national insect by both the United States and Canada, and as the state butterfly of West Virginia. A shop display in the departure lounge of Mexico City airport a few years ago included shoes, scarves and other ‘accessories’ printed with the Monarch butterfly.

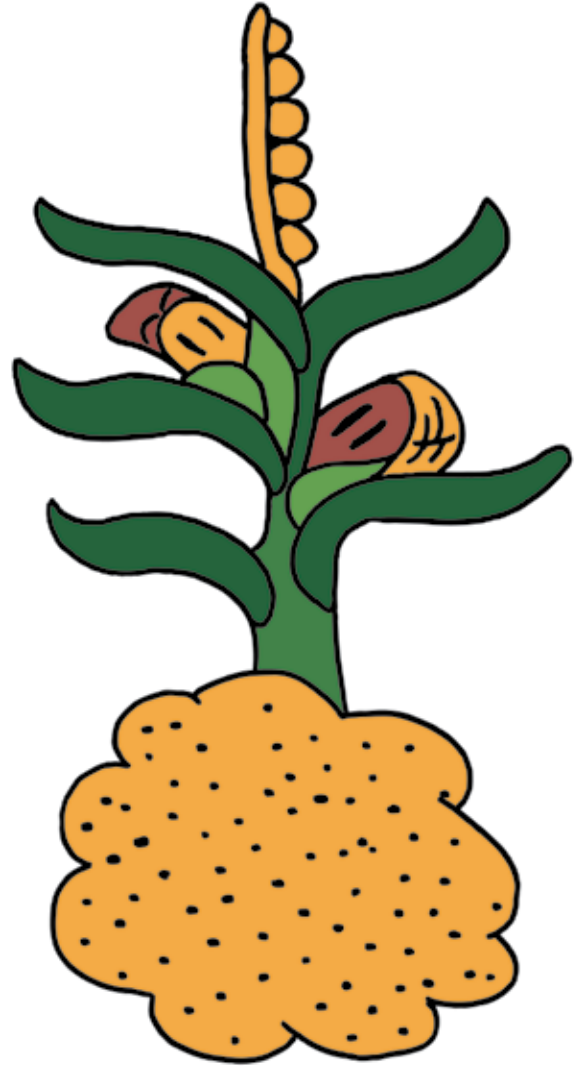
9 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961, trans. Constance Farrington, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, p 193.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors Jean Fisher and Fernando Rodríguez Palma extend their gratitude to Dr Barker-Benfield, Senior Assistant Librarian at the Bodleian Library, Oxford University, for permission to view the Codex Mendoza, and to Ms Rigmor Batsvik of the Bodleian Image Library for kindly providing documentation.



Fernando Palma Rodríguez, *Tocibuapapalutzin*, 2005



Actopan

FERNANDO RODRIGUEZ PALMA

In the voice of Nahuatl, Atocpan means ‘Where waters gather’. With today’s climate change, however, Atocpan may now be rendered as: ‘Where the last stand of indigenous communities around Mexico City gather’.

Atocpan, a native town of Aztec ancestry composed of approximately 20,000 people, is located southeast of Mexico City, between Sierra Chichinautzin and the ever growing largest metropolis the world has ever seen, which, like a monster of our time, threatens to swallow anything and everything in its path. Today Atocpan battles for the survival of a way and philosophy of life that, although rapidly disappearing, is still rooted in its people, its original Nahuatl language and in its surroundings.

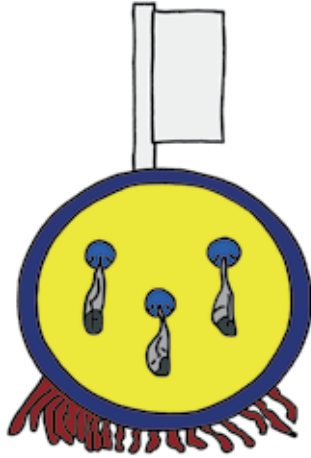
Atocpan is a naturally endowed fertile land where countless generations of people learned to live and work alongside the forces of nature, creating in the process an astonishingly productive as well as beautiful way of tilling the land. The ancient method of terracing, known in the local Nahuatl language as

tetepamitl, is a way of working a steep and predominantly volcanic landscape, making effective use of the terrain, rain water gathering and solar energy to produce up to two harvests a year: a method that was not only able to adapt terracing technologies to a naturally difficult land, but was also the product of a people with a view of life, known as *chichinancalli*, where humans saw themselves on an equal footing to animals, plants and land.

Atocpan is also rich in history. Research into the terracing systems of the area carried out in diverse studies by the researchers of Calpulli Tecalco NGO show that the first people to begin the construction of this cultivation system came from Teotihuacán, more than 1000 years ago. On the collapse of Teotihuacán, terracing technology was inherited by the Toltec and continued to thrive until the arrival of the Spaniards in the early fifteenth century. Atocpan, the town, was founded by warring Aztec families in the 1400s, becoming part of Malacachtepec Momoxco, an important post on the way to the rich woodlands of Oaxtepec and Cauhnahuac, as well as an invaluable source of corn and cotton production destined for Tenochtitlan, the then



Teuhtli: Lord of dust. Terracing systems occupied for home habitation today, Atocpan.
Photograph by Angelica Palma



Left to right, Fernando Palma Rodríguez, 2007
Neo pictograms of the four original Nahuatl quarters of the town of Atocpan. Above Panchimalco: 'Where the shields and flags are kept'.

capital of the Aztec world. During Spanish colonisation, Malacachtepec Momoxco became an independent state, or *tlacatecayotl*, nourishing and continuing the *chichimanacalli* view of life.¹

More recently, between 1910 and 1920, Malacachtepec Momoxco became the battlefield between two opposing views of man and his relation to nature: the private monopoly of land by the Castilian speaking people of Mexico City together with the hacienda system of large landowners, and the Nahuatl forces of Emiliano Zapata, who fought for the redistribution of land to indigenous people.² Today, Atocpan and its *tetepamitl* system are in danger of being lost to the gross side effects of the forces of globalisation in Mexico.

ART, ECOLOGY AND LANGUAGE

Atocpan is the home of Calpulli Tecalco NGO AC, an organization borne out of the necessity to address the detrimental consequences of the chaotic growth of Mexico City and its effect on its periphery. Calpulli Tecalco is committed to the reinvigoration and preservation of the Nahuatl language as a strategy for preserving the Nahuatl identity of the community, and the conservation of its surrounding environment.³

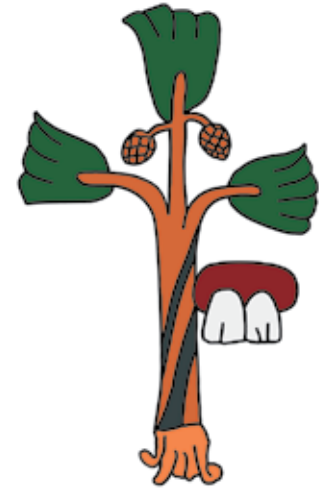
To accomplish this commitment, Calpulli Tecalco has, from the start, given art a central role, both as a forum for the promotion and dissemination of its work, and as a platform for research into a different artistic aesthetic – an aesthetic able to embrace current dilemmas of land use and conservation, together with ancient views of land, man and nature inscribed in the Nahuatl language and the original character of the community.



Nuchtlán: 'At the edge of cactus'.

Significantly, the Nahuatl language holds a key to both man and nature, and man and art. Nahuatl is rich in agricultural vocabulary describing the earth or soil's qualities and man's relation to nature. The language has no concept of 'being', as in the verb 'to be' in the Spanish or English languages; rather, subject and action are not distanced by a sense of being. It is a figurative manner of speech that sculpts verbs and nouns by a process of agglutinating different word roots into a new word, and favours what linguists call 'diphrasism';⁴ in the process, land, man and nature are treated as equal. Moreover, the language, sadly truncated in its natural evolution at the hands of Spanish religious fanatics, never quite achieved a written form. But surviving codices, like the Codex Mendoza Bodleian Library, Oxford, testify to such a development.

By using pictographic ideas, the Nahua people were able to convey form as



Ocotitlan: 'At the edge of the Ocote trees'.

Atrocpan

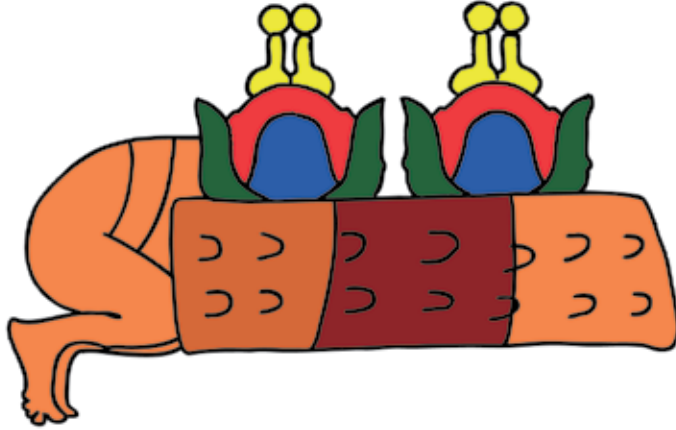


Tuctlan: 'By the corn maize fields'.

word and word as landscape. For example, the town Xochimilcaltzinco is composed of three root words: *xochitl* (flower), *milli* (field) and *tzinco* human behind. The translation of Xochimilcaltzinco therefore becomes: 'At the end of the field of flowers'; and from the drawing we can appreciate the union of man and nature.

LANGUAGE

Abmo tiquiillcabua in Nabuatlabtoli 'We will not forget the Nahuatl language' Compelling associations of man, earth and word are to be found in a close examination of the Nahuatl language. The Nahuatl word for cultivation on steep hillsides, known today as 'terrazas' in Spanish or 'terracing' in English, is *talmomoxtli*, which means, 'altar made of soil or platform of soil', conveys the respect the Nahua communities placed on the land as a source of sustenance



Pictogram for the town Xochimilcatzincó: 'At the end of the field of flowers'.

and on farming activity as an act of worship. It is believed that the region of Malacachteticpac Momoxco, now known as Milpa Alta, was regarded as a centre of worship to Xillonon, the god of the young maize cob; and each and every terrace or *tlalmomoxtli* was regarded as an altar to the god. Malacachteticpac Momoxco translates as 'place surrounded by mountains covered in *tlalmomoxtli*, or altars.'

Other words of the Nahuatl language confirm the Nahua peoples' empathy with the world. For instance, the word for 'thank you' in Nahuatl is *tlazobcamate*, which literally means 'to place manure' on the recipient of such a gesture. The concept of thanking someone with such an association may seem an insult to non Nahuatl speakers, but the Nahua, by virtue of being the inheritors of thousands of years of agricultural knowledge, had placed high esteem on the act of fertilizing a plant with manure, and by association, the cultivation of friendly relationships becomes apparent.

This intimacy of word, man and land is also found in other words, such as the verb *toca*, 'to plant', which is synonymous with the verb 'to name', as in naming a person. Hence a person answering, 'My name is...' would say in Nahuatl, 'No *toca*...' which, on close examination clearly means, 'I was planted with...'⁵ Even more surprising is the examination of the verb 'to love', or *tlazobtla*, whose root word is *tlazolle*, meaning, 'full of rubbish', 'sinner', 'stain', 'dust'.

The importance of such concepts for our purpose, however, becomes apparent when contrasting the art forms of pre Hispanic times with contemporary ones. Pre Hispanic Mesoamerica never cultivated anything resembling the western genres of portraiture and landscape, but, rather, invested the world with mutable personae, exchangeable with myth, nature and man. The representation of a hero, for instance, was always embedded in myth as well as in different aspects of nature and man. One of the best known heroes of ancient Mexico was Quetzalcoatl, the 'Plumed Serpent'. Quetzalcoatl was a priesthood, and a priest of this order would have been known by the same name, 'Quetzalcoatl'. The most famous of such priests was a ruler of ancient Tula early twelfth century, who, according to legend, was fooled by a wizard and made to get drunk, upon which, having committed social and religious transgressions, he was obliged to flee his city state and abandon his people.

Quetzalcoatl, also the god of knowledge and of virtue, was the Milky Way, and the twin appearances of the planet Venus: as Morning Star, the herald of a new day, and as Xolotl, or Venus in its pursuit of the dying sun at different times of the year. Nonetheless, there is not one portrait representation of such an individual phenomenon myth, only complex representations of character attributes, and meanings of the word. Quetzalcoatl is a permutation of two nouns and their respective synonyms: *quetzalli* 'feather' or 'precious', and *coatl* 'snake' or 'twin'. Therefore, the translation of this name may be applied to different manifestations of the same persona: Plumed Serpent, Plumed Twin, Precious Serpent and Precious Twin. Such a complex amalgam of meaning and real event is repeated in the treatment or representation of dignitaries or

public figures. In the few codices that survive, historical and mythical events as well as landmarks, human and animal protagonists are treated in the same way as realities embedded in portents, represented by human, animal or natural attributes. On close examination of the treatment of land and event in surviving codices such as Codex Mendoza and Codex Nuttall, we can appreciate that the world is a state of mind, where reader, protagonist and event are on the same level.

This understanding of the world is more comprehensible to us today if we accept that the indigenous concept of 'persona' is not confined to human beings alone, but is actually conferred on nature, animal and human being.

Again, such concepts, far from being lost, remain latent in the Nahuatl names of Atocpan's region and in the original language. The names of the different mountains surrounding the area are each connoted by a persona: Tlaloc Rain God, Cuahutzin Venerable Eagle, and Teuctzin or Teuhtli Lord of Dust, and these are the protagonists of a number of stories from oral tradition that express customs and relationships between people and environment.⁶

TECHNOLOGY

Stone and Wood were talking, cracking jokes, warming themselves by the fire when Technology arrived. Without a word Technology pushed Wood into the fire: 'It is for the best', he said. Realising that Stone remained motionless, he went on: 'So you think yourself tough? See how you like it if I drop you into water.' Water boiled fast, too fast, and Technology said, 'Too clumsy, not cool; this is no way to cook, clumsy, clumsy.'

Now, Language was hiding, watching. 'Love is like a flavour, it is trapped till a mouth gashes it out,' Language mouthed quietly; 'Death is like the entrapment of strength, it is like a spring about to jump...but where?'

So this is how technology was born by the hand and the mouth of humans, Love

concluded.

And, again, manure, soil and dust are the names of love; love is composed of detritus forms of animal, soil, plant and man. If not for love, then for what? Art must aspire to the condition of animal, soil, plant and people; and, in the equation, people must be earth and earth, people...

And ecology is therefore an act of love.

To Cayita Papayita, my inspiration and love

NOTES

1 Rudolf A. M. Van Zantwijk, *Los indígenas de Milpa Alta: Herederos de los Aztecas*, Amsterdam: Instituto Real de los Trópicos Colección de Antropología Cultural y Física 1960. During his field research in Milpa Alta the Dutch anthropologist Rudolf Zantwijk writes in 1957: '...the towns of Milpa Alta of which Atocpan is one of twelve towns speak Nahuatl as their first language; only in Tecomitl, the town most estranged from the community, has 30% of its population adopted the Spanish language.'

2 Fernando Horcasitas, *De Porfirio Díaz a Zapata. Memoria Nahuatl de Milpa Alta*, México: Lingüista y Etnólogo, 1989.

3 Danniell Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, *Vanishing Voices: the Extinction of the World Languages*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 'Native languages and their communities are vital to the preservation of the environment; they must actively participate in their localities'.

4 Diphrasism means the use of two concepts in order to figure a third; e.g. In *xochitl* (the flower the song), is interpreted as 'poetry'. Angel Maria Garibay K., *Llave Del Nahuatl*, México: Editorial Porrúa, 1989.

5 In Atocpan the verb 'toca' is nowadays thought by children to mean 'to name' as in naming a person; the perception of the synonym meaning 'to plant' may now be difficult to perceive due to the abandonment of land related activities in favour of commercial ones by the inhabitants of the community in the last few decades.

6 Dona Luz Jiménez, *Los cuentos en Nahuatl*, México: UNAM. 1979. Edición bilingüe Nahuatl Español.



Maria Thereza Alves, Derelict Boat, Ballast Grounds, Bristol Docks, 2007

Maria Thereza Alves Migration's Silent Witnesses

JEAN FISHER

If there can be said to be a 'founding moment' to globalisation, it is the so called 'discovery' of the Americas in 1492. According to the philosopher Enrique Dussel, until then Western Europe had been a fairly insignificant territory on the periphery of the known civilised world to the East. Following its disastrous Crusades, Europe found its attempts to forge an overland route to this fabulous world of wealth and knowledge blocked by Islam and the Turks, forcing it to seek a sea passage. When Portugal controlled the eastward sea route round Africa, Spain had no alternative but to develop the westward passage across the Atlantic, opening the oceans to globalised mercantile shipping. With the increased lucrativeness of the trans Atlantic trades routes, the eastern trade routes fell into relative decline, leading to the rise of wealth and hence of technological and military power of Western Europe. For these reasons, Dussel describes this era as the beginning of modernity and the first politico-economic 'world-system'. The major countries to capitalise on this mercantile expansion protected by military sea power were those on the western seaboard of Europe. As Dussel describes it, when Spain supported

by its colonial ports in Flanders lost its initial advantage, power shifted to the more economically pragmatic that is, proto capitalist largely Protestant countries, first Holland, then England, and later, of course, with full blown capitalism, the United States.¹

As we well know, this early globalisation did not follow a path of equal exchange between Europeans and the peoples they encountered in the 'new' territories. New natural resources and markets had to be secured by annexing territories and establishing colonial settlements, and cheap labour organised to work the mineral mines and monocrop plantations, all safeguarded by a military, technocratic infrastructure in which the 'natives', if they could not be coerced, had to be violently subdued or eradicated. With the global extension of European empires, human trafficking (indenture and slavery) became as lucrative as the trafficking of goods and raw materials, eventually displacing peoples to Europe and the Americas not only from Africa, but also from the Indian subcontinent and SE Asia. As has often been said by postcolonial commentators, modernity began with the traumas of cultural dispossession and displacement. In the decolonisation period following World War II, the majority of, now mostly voluntary, immigration patterns into Europe retraced the old colonial trade routes.

The growth of European imperialism from the late 17th century to the early 20th century cannot be divorced from two further major sociopolitical changes. Firstly, the industrialisation of both agriculture the sequester of arable land into vast estates and manufacture, leading to the massive migration or displacement of people from rural to urban areas. Secondly, the rise of the political entity, the nation state, demarcated and policed by more or less distinct if sometimes contested geographical borders, the concomitant demand for a coherent national identity and the gradual expansion of citizenship rights across a population usually administered by the nation's governing elite *as if* it homogeneously shared the same cultural narratives and descent, language, aspirations and beliefs a fallacy even within the small geographic territory of the United Kingdom). But imperialist and

nationalist interventions severely altered the relationship between geopolitical boundaries and cultural and ethnic boundaries and the distribution of power among diverse populations. The assumption of national homogeneity is not sustainable in states whose boundaries include federated ‘nations’ or ‘peoples’ – defined as possessing distinct social organisations, worldviews and symbolic systems and hence distinct cultural identities and ways of constructing subjectivity. This is especially so when considering the subjugated position of indigenous nations within settler nation states, whose early legal status as nations was subsequently reduced to that of one ‘ethnic minority’ amongst others in a melting pot where differences, it was assumed, would dissolve into an Anglo-Saxon model of identity, effectively rendering indigenous peoples as foreigners in their own homelands. Thus, despite the vicissitudes of several hundred years of enforced assimilation and disempowerment, political sovereignty, land and resource rights, educational priorities and cultural survival remain on the agendas of indigenous peoples under settler states.

Nor is this assumption tenable in nation states comprised of culturally and ethnically diverse diasporic populations. Whilst they do not, like indigenous nations, claim political sovereignty and land rights, since in their search for a new belonging, they accept the principles of integration, they may come into conflict with the nation-state over minority ethnic rights (the citizen’s right of social and political participation without prejudice and discrimination and familial and cultural affiliations that extend geographically beyond the boundaries of the nation state.

Boundaries geographical, cultural or social create binary oppositions: inside/outside, native/foreigner, citizen/non citizen, cultural authenticity/inauthenticity, assimilation/isolation, and so forth. The foreigner is whosoever does not belong to the defined group, indeed, within the European schema, native and alien are mutually constituted by the very act of definition. If the foreigner was historically defined according to the *jus soli* law of the soil and *jus sanguine* blood tie, under most modern, democratic nation states, the right of citizenship has not been dependent on atavistic criteria of belonging but defined legislatively. It has been the general tendency in liberal democracies to grant rights of citizenship under *jus soli* with the implication that ethnic and religious affiliations were outside the legislative mandate of the state or if an individual accepted the social and political terms of the nation: nationality, or ‘naturalisation’ as it is quaintly termed.

One notable exception is Germany’s application of *jus sanguine*, which grants citizenship rights to ethnic Germans in Russia, but denies them to Turkish settlers in Germany. Following hundreds of years of human migration, in our ‘multicultural’ societies, specific cultural practices now exist alongside new mixed ethnic urban populations and syncretic cultural processes where multiple historical trajectories may or may not coincide. Nonetheless, we still confront tensions and disjunctions between what constitutes cultural and ethnic identity and national identity and citizenship, testing the human capacity for hospitality and hostility.

It is in the context of these complex issues of migration, belonging and



Maria Thereza Alves, Ballast Notice, Dunkirk, 2005



Maria Thereza Alves, *Wake*, Berlin, 2000. Taking a core sample from a construction site.

national identity that the work of Maria Thereza Alves is addressed, especially the body of works collectively titled *Seeds of Change*, which provides us with unexpected relations between the old mercantile shipping routes and the biodiversity of flora adjacent to European and Scandinavian ports, several of which were implicated in the slave trade.

That flora do not escape the politics of national identity is signalled not simply by the fact that most nations have 'adopted' a flower as a national symbol, as if it were somehow exclusively contained within its borders. In a complex work, *Wake*, 2000, prior to *Seeds of Change*, Alves identified several construction sites in Berlin that she considered suitable for an artwork based on investigating the botanical history of the earth by way of seed germination. In addition to taking core earth samples and organising appropriate conditions for germinating whatever seeds had lain dormant in the soil, the artist conducted an extensive investigation of records relating to the history of that part of Germany and the movements of goods, animals and people, including refugees and soldiers. Amongst her findings of the Charlottenstrasse/Französischestrassen site was the link between Berlin and Alsace-Lorraine (from which Huguenots had fled, amongst them gardeners). Furthermore, as she comments: 'During the 1800s, the rise of nation states also affected the field of botany. Priority was given to national studies of flora.' With the successive exchanges of Alsace-Lorraine between Germany and France, 'unlike conventional botanical studies, the research from Alsace Lorraine documents not only the flora but also how political changes affected that flora.' Species specific to the region had to be added or subtracted from the national inventory.² She also locates lists of flora including species from all parts of the world, representing seeds not only legitimately introduced by trade, but also 'piggybacked' into Germany on clothing, shoes and baggage, animal fur and hooves, and so forth. Bismarck's attempts to create a German national state and identity, to be reflected by the 'national' flora of his Minister's Garden, once in the vicinity of Alves's Vossstrasse/Behrenstrasse site, would undoubtedly be thwarted by the lack of respect given by plants to national borders.



Maria Thereza Alves, *London Villa*, Repossari, 2001

Seeds of Change extends the artist's strategies of archival and botanical research into specific sites of interest, involving historical research, map referencing, core sampling of soil and seed germination. This time in connection with the ballast discharged on, mostly, designated sites by ships before they entered port. As Alves points out, ballast represented all kinds of material picked up by ships in exchange for unloaded cargo and would therefore contain and transport seeds from the point of origin to the country of deposit. Alves's ballast narratives therefore retrace the shipping trade routes that affected the illegal entry of plants that, at this juncture in time, in Britain, may be so familiar as to blur our concept of what does and does not represent an 'authentic' British' flora; that is, like people immigration, seed immigration

problematizes the means by which national identity and belonging is defined. As Alves also points out, the biodiversity of British flora has accelerated only since the 18th century with the introduction of alien plants that without doubt subsequently 'escaped' the confines of their ornamental or 'landscape' gardens. Most significantly Alves points out how this affected the English landscape.

The question of native/alien, inclusion/exclusion, however, remains a controversial political issue, even in botanical terms. In Kew Gardens' website devoted to its Millennium Seed Bank Project, set up to preserve the 'rarest, most threatened and most useful species known to man', the threats to plants are listed as: 'climate change, habitat loss, invasive alien species

and over exploitation.³ One might wonder about 'invasive alien species'. If the rights of citizenship and belonging are to be granted by *jus soli*, then the successfully rooted 'alien' literally claims such rights. It goes against the grain of nature's own processes to censure alien species because of their inadvertent dissemination and successful colonisation of specific ecological niches. Alas, this is also true for humans; the global movements of humans have ensured that nothing stays securely in one 'place', intercultural exchanges blur the distinctions between inside and outside, and belonging must be a constant process of negotiation.

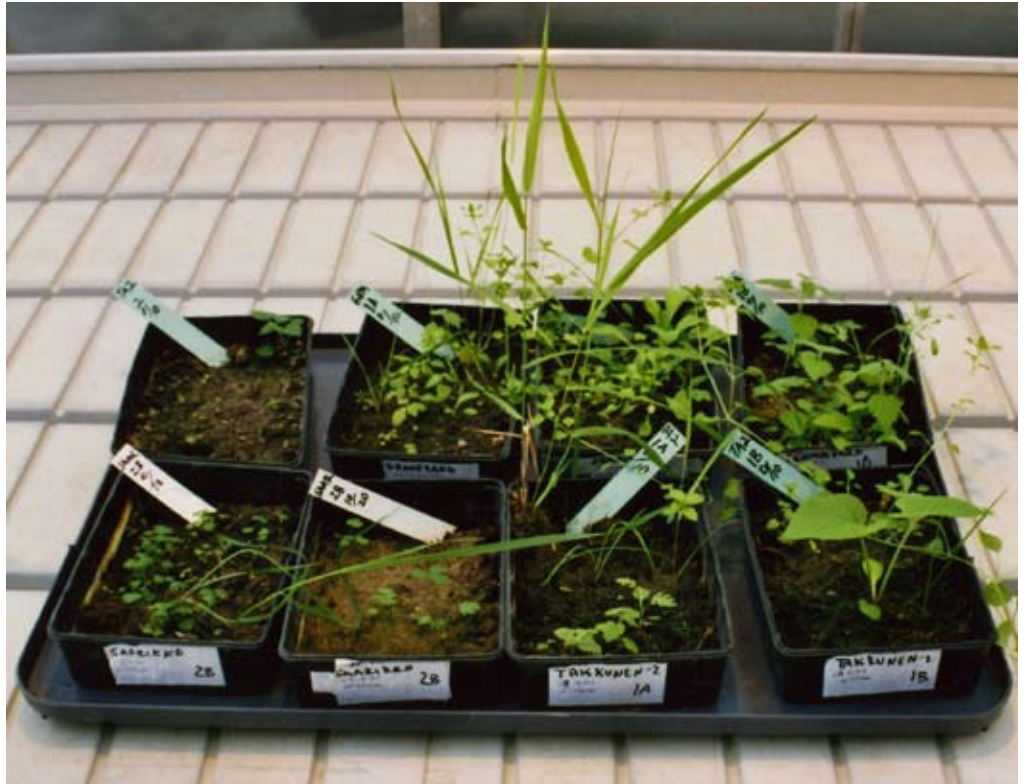
Alves' artistic practice is itself a form of negotiation. Unlike orthodox scientific research it is not concerned with the determination of principles that could be made universal, but with uncovering the buried socio political histories and realities of locality: it is about reintegrating 'lost' stories into contemporary local narratives. In this respect, Alves's excavation of dormant seeds in layers of soil yields an elegant and surprising 'eccentric' reading of the historical archive and the familiar forms and usages of documentation, insofar as the 'archive' is as much about what it conceals as what it potentially reveals, or is allowed by its administrators to reveal. Throughout this process of excavation, Alves functions less as an 'exemplary' authorial artistic subject than as a mediator and catalyst in projects often involving the collaboration or advice of non art professionals for instance, the botanists Drs Heli Jutila and Bernd Machatzki, local civic officials and the participation of local communities. The *Seeds of Change* project in Pori is exemplary in its engagement with the local people and the symbolic role of the botanical stranger in the circulation and exchange of shared interests among the community. In Bristol, the artistic aim is to produce a garden the intention for Marseilles, which was thwarted by a change in local government administered by local residents and a reminder of the maritime history of the city and its involvement with the Americas and Africa via the slave trade.

If the customary role of art is to prompt a dialogue amongst its viewers 'after the event', as it were, around an already prescribed object, in Alves's

case the dialogue begins prior to the emergence of the work; indeed, whilst the artist initiates the project and controls its final outcome, the work's trajectory is conditioned by the conversations and local knowledge brought to the project by its advisers. This approach has been called, amongst other things, 'dialogical aesthetics'⁴ drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of certain structural forms of literature capable of simultaneously articulating differing meanings, interpretations and points of view. At base, the aim of this approach is to disengage art from discourses that maintain its distance from everyday realities in order to explore its relation to the wider socio political sphere. By analogy, Alves's *Seeds of Change* projects address the vexing questions of agency and belonging beyond essentialist definitions of race, ethnicity, class, religion, etc. There is acknowledgment that, whilst one may speak from positions informed by specific cultural experiences and perspectives, these are modified through the reconfiguration of social and historical narratives, by which the 'native' and the 'alien' may come to balance the relations of hospitality and hostility and recognise a political solidarity in shared experiences, interests and goals.

NOTES

1. Enrique Dussel, 'Beyond Eurocentrism: The World System and the Limits of Modernity', in *The Cultures of Globalization*, eds Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998, pp 5, 13 21.
2. Maria Thereza Alves, *Wake: A Project for Berlin*, Berlin: DAAD/ 4FREE exhibition at BuroFriedrich, 2000, pp 14 15.
3. www.kew.org/msbp. According to the MSBP, the project is in collaboration with several countries which choose and keep for their own bank seed samples selected by themselves. A second major seed bank is to be built in a concrete room deep in the permafrost of Spitsberg Island in a collaboration between Norway and the independent international organisation Global Crop Diversity Trust.
4. Grant Kester, 'Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-engaged Art', in [eds] Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp 76 88.



Maria Thereza Alves, Ballast plants, labelling with residents' names, Reposaari, 2001.

Seeds of Change

MARIA THEREZA ALVES

Seeds of Change is an ongoing investigation of ballast flora in the port cities of Europe. Projects have been developed for Marseilles, Reposaari, Dunkirk, Exeter, Liverpool, Bristol and further projects are scheduled for Lisbon and Genoa. Material such as stones, earth, sand, wood, bricks and whatever else was economically expedient was used as ballast to stabilise merchant sailing ships according to the weight of the cargo. Upon arrival in port, the ballast was unloaded, and along with it seeds native to the area where it had been collected. The source of these seeds can be any of the ports and regions and their regional trading partners involved in trade with Europe.

Seeds contained in ballast soil may germinate and grow, potentially bearing witness to a far more complex narrative of world history than is usually presented by orthodox accounts. Although they have the potential to alter our notions of the identity of place as belonging to a defined bio-region, the historical importance of these seeds is rarely acknowledged. The *Seeds of Change* project is, therefore, designed to question those discourses that define

the geographical and ‘natural’ history of place: At what moment do seeds become ‘native’? What are the socio political histories of place that determine the framework of belonging?

I began to study ballast in Marseilles after reading Dr. Heli Jutila’s doctoral thesis on ballast flora, where she mentions that, ‘Although seeds seem to be dead, they are in fact alive and can remain vital in soil for decades, and even hundreds of years in a state of dormancy.’¹ Some of these seeds have already germinated; others, given the right conditions, still retain the potential to germinate.

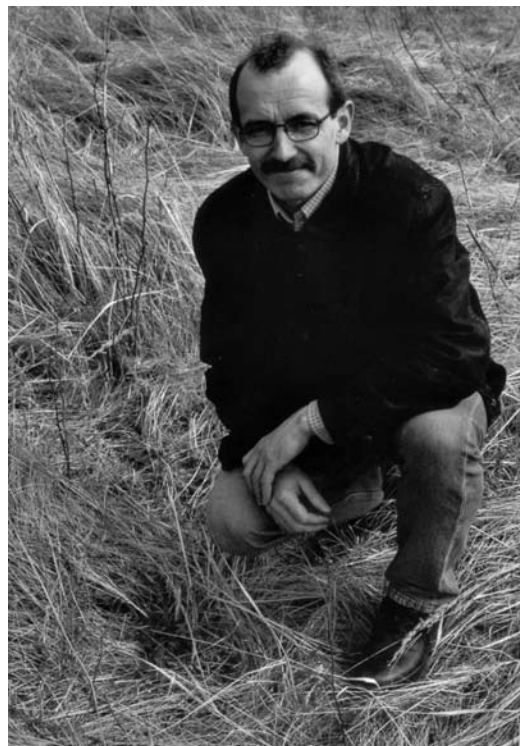
I have no interest in duplicating scientific work within an ‘art’ context; therefore, having verified that no previous ballast studies had been conducted by scientific institutions in Marseilles, I approached Dr Jutila to act as my advisor for the botanical aspect of the project. My basic procedure in the *Seeds of Change* projects is firstly to research local archives for clues and then to locate ballast sites with the aid of map references. From these sites, I take samples of the earth and pot them. Researching through different archives in Marseilles, I discovered both legal and illegal ballast sites, including mention of a ballast depot as early as 1816 and, later, of one built on the Pierre de Marbre Quay. Pilot soil samples were collected from these sites along the port and the seeds were germinated. The final artwork was to take the form of a garden built on a site near an immigrant quarter, but a change in local government with a more right wing bias meant that the project could not be completed.

The Taidemuseo Museum of Contemporary Art in Pori, Finland, contacted me to develop the investigation begun by Dr. Jutila on ballast flora in the Finnish port of Reposaari Island. Due to time restrictions, Jutila’s research had been limited to those public areas where it is unnecessary to seek permission; therefore, after discussions with her, we agreed that my project would be most useful to ballast flora studies if investigations were made in the more



(left to right: Maria Thereza Alves) Vekko Anderson and ballast flora growing at the back of his house, Reposaaari, 2001

private domain of residential gardens. Reposaaari was at one time Finland's major deepwater port from which ships carried substantial cargoes of wood and tar to as far away as Australia and to which they returned with cargo that was generally much lighter, and therefore required additional ballast, which was unloaded at any convenient point along the dock. From the project's early stages, the local community revealed an enthusiasm for their ballast plants and was keen to show us specimens and tell us about them. As a consequence, I realised that it was essential to work with the local community and to include them as active participants alongside the botanist's research.



Mauri Tai and ballast flora growing on the side of a local road, Reposaaari, 2001

Soili Tuukki has several ballast plants growing in her garden, some of which had sprung up naturally, while others had been the result of bartering with neighbours. Soili leaned over the end of the fence at the back of her garden and pointed out an exotic ballast plant growing in her neighbour's garden. She hoped that in due course the wind would blow its seeds under her fence and into her garden. Eero Raesma's house had formerly been in the harbour area. In the middle of the front garden, an exotic ballast plant stands in solitary splendour. Towards the back, large areas are covered with ballast flora. Liisa Santavuori's house, along with that of her brother, is built directly on a tract



Eero Raesma and ballast flora in his garden, Reposaaari, 2001



Soili and Vikke Tuukki and their ballast plants, Reposaaari, 2001

created from ballast material and ballast plants grow abundantly around their gardens. Vekko Andersson's house is on what had been known as the London Road, at the end of which is London Villa. Its foundations and grounds were levelled with ballast that was accidentally spilled from wagons onto the road between the dock and the house. Ballast plants now grow abundantly where one would not think to look for them, at a considerable distance from the original ballast sites. Vekko suggested that I visit a site near the former port, where earth was being removed to lay the foundations for new houses. The excavated soil had been piled up to the side forming a small hill, which was speckled with ballast stones and where already a garden of ballast flora had sprung up. Vekko invited me to feel the difference in texture of the ballast earth for myself.

The samples taken from private gardens and newly discovered ballast sites were placed in a greenhouse in the museum in Pori. This became a meeting place for sharing information between the residents of Reposaari and Pori and the scientific community. Although the infrastructure is as yet inadequate to take full advantage of the scope of the project, it became clear that the port's community has such a unique knowledge of ballast flora and the distribution of ballast soil that their contribution would be vital to any continuing scientific study in the area.

Investigations in Dunkirk confirmed that research into ballast flora discloses unacknowledged historical horizons: my term for this is 'borderless history'. Dunkirk is a typical port where an apparently direct trading relationship with one country becomes exponentially complex. Dunkirk's main trading partner has historically been England: over fifty British ports are recorded including some in Scotland and Ireland. When trade with Spain and Portugal is added, including their thirty two colonial territories, we begin to build a complex relationship between trading partnerships and the possible sources of ballast seeds arriving in Dunkirk from the Americas, the Caribbean, Asia, Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Oceania. If one also takes into account the inland

network of canals that connected Dunkirk to Central and Northern Europe and the South of France, then the distribution of ballast plants becomes impossible to predict. Moreover, when considering the colonial period, borderless history must also include the origins of slaves, indentured workers and indigenous peoples transported to the plantations as well as the produce shipped to Europe – histories of displacement that further contribute to the analysis of ballast flora in Dunkirk.

The first mention of ballast in the Dunkirk archives is in the Ordinance of 1681. The Bureau of Ballasting and Deballasting had been created by the mid 19th century. Entry of ballasted ships into the port was commonplace: one hundred and sixty seven ships carrying only ballast to a total of 11,379 tons arrived between January and April of 1858. In the 19th century, the botanist Dr. Bouly de Lesdain documented 'non native' plants in the Dunkirk area that had originated in Asia, Africa, Australia, the United States, India, extra tropical South America, tropical America and the sub tropical zone of the Mediterranean. Staff at the Ecology Centre in the city were both unaware and disinterested in the phenomenon of exotic non native species growing in Dunkirk, even though there exists data by a contemporary botanist of one plant from South Africa and another from India thriving in the port area. The scepticism of port authorities, librarians, botanists and other specialists highlights the suspicion that our colleagues in other fields hold for art and artists.

For the Dunkirk project, soil samples were taken from probable ballast sites, germinated and exhibited on board a historical ship in the Musée Portuaire. Accompanying this was '*Seeds of Change: Dunkirk: Where did it all go?*' a proposal to establish a park to receive samples of earth removed due to development or introduced as part of the hard core for building. Since the 17th century, the city has undergone massive reconstruction: piles of earth, sand and stones have been shifted from one part of the port to another, continually extending seed histories beyond their original sites.



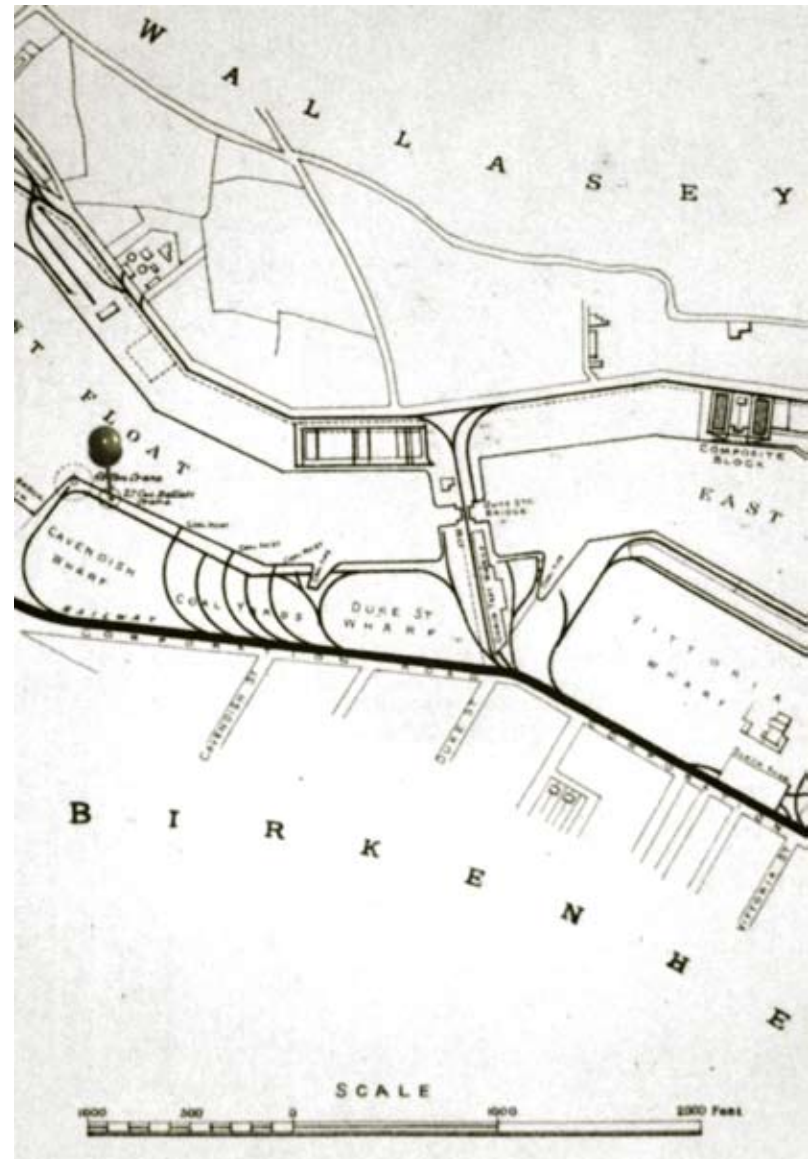
Maria Thereza Alves, Dunkirk ballast site, 2005.

What seed histories specific to Dunkirk are being lost in redistribution of earth? But also, what histories are arriving with new materials? The samples collected for the park were to be available for future studies of the history of Dunkirk: the history of its earth.

According to Sue Shepard in *Seeds of Fortune*, ‘...at the end of the last Ice Age, the British Isles were home to only a handful of plants...The majority of the rest of the plants now considered indigenous were introduced over two centuries between 1735 1935.’² Ballast flora is an unacknowledged component in the making of the British landscape, particularly from the 18th to the early 20th centuries when mercantile shipping used ballast as a matter of course.

In Exeter ample documentation on ballasted ships exists in the city archives from the 1700s onwards. A ballast depot can be seen on an early map of the port and is easily identifiable today. In Liverpool, a 19th century map of the port shows a ballast crane no longer in existence on Cavendish Wharf in the West Float, adjacent to the coal yards in Birkenhead. Surprisingly, in *The Flora of Cheshire* by Lord de Tabley, there is mention of non native plants found growing on the ‘ballast made roads at Claughton and Birkenhead’.³ There had been so much ballast coming into the port of Liverpool that one way of getting rid of it was to use it as construction material. Although ballast flora grows throughout the city of Liverpool, it has become remote from its intimate connection with shipping and therefore the history of the city. The intention of the project for Liverpool was to re establish these modest but complex ballast histories by examining the apparent randomness of these plants sprouting by roadsides, through cracks in the pavement and in the seams in the concrete upon waste ground. *See illust. opposite contents page .*

In Bristol, contrary to our ideas of mercantile shipping practice, in the triangular trade route between England, the Americas and West Africa, ships frequently returned in ballast to their homeport. Indeed, there is a record



Maria Thereza Alves, A 19th century map showing a ballast crane on Cavendish Wharf, West Float, Birkenhead, 2001.

of one ballasted ship arriving with no other cargo from Boston to Bristol, which one might assume to be an uneconomic rarity. However, according to Kenneth Morgan in his study, *Shipping Patterns and the Atlantic Trade of Bristol, 1794-1770*, by the mid 19th century, sugar production, which had been the main cargo exchanged for slaves in the West Indies, had so diminished that it was common for ships to return to Britain in ballast.⁴ R.B. Sheridan in 'The Commercial and Financial Organization of the British Slave Trade', 1750-1807 explains that slave ships frequently returned to the homeports in ballast rather than wait for weeks or months for return cargo.⁵ In 'Profitability of Slave and Long Distance Trading in Context: The Case of Eighteenth Century France', Guillaume Daudin reveals an astonishingly seldom mentioned economic detail: 'Slave cargoes were more valuable than colonial goods cargo. A single slave cargo required four to six direct trade operations with the West Indies to remit its income in colonial goods.'⁶ It appears that the slave trade resulted in a great deal of ballast crossing the Atlantic to homeports in Europe.

References to ballast in the port of Bristol exist from as early as 1680, with a regulation prohibiting its discharge into the river. The post of Ballast Master was created in 1700, and records refer to the salary of the Ballast Master at Hungrood. Henry West, the Haven and Ballast Master in the mid 18th century writes about witnessing the 'widow Bowen...throwing her ballast that she had brought out of the keep from some ship overboard into the river.' There is mention of a Ballast Wharf and there is even a Ballast Lane in Avonmouth. A flora dating from the 1930s, written by the botanist Cecil I. Sandwith, mentions sites where plants had been found on ballast in Wapping Quay, Grove Quay, and between Avonmouth and Shirehampton.

The proposal for the *Seeds of Change* project in Bristol is to take earth samples from historical ballast sites and to create a garden where seeds will be germinated and cared for by interested community groups. It is intended that this garden will serve as a forum where local residents – some originally

from those countries that traded with Bristol) along with the scientific community, will be encouraged to cooperate in identifying the ballast flora that has become part of the landscape and history of Bristol. The results will be exhibited in the Arnolfini Gallery.

Seeds of Change aims to create a public forum where individuals can actively participate in and develop the direction of an artwork. If official histories fail to account for, and even work against local knowledge and experience, art, by contrast, has the potential to reclaim such narratives as contemporary social

NOTES

1 Heli Jutila, 'Seed Banks of Grazed and Ungrazed Baltic Seashore Meadows', PhD thesis, University of Turku, Pori, Finland, 1997.

2 Sue Shepard, *Seeds of Fortune*, Bloomsbury, USA, 2003.

3 Lord de Tabley, *The Flora of Cheshire*, 1899.

4 Kenneth Morgan, *Shipping Patterns and the Atlantic Trade of Bristol, 1749-1770. The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 46, No. 3 Jul., 1989, pp. 506-538.

5 R. B. Sheridan, 'The Commercial and Financial Organization of the British Slave Trade', 1750-1807. *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 11, No. 2 1958, pp. 249-263.

6 Guillaume Daudin, 'Profitability of Slave and Long-Distance Trading in Context: The Case of Eighteenth Century France', *The Journal of Economic History*, no. 64, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 144-171.



Simon Read, *Force 9 gale at East Lane, Suffolk*, 2005.

Crumbling Assets

SIMON READ

In November 2005, Peter Boggis was forbidden to continue piling up a sacrificial rubble and soil cliff in front of his rapidly diminishing property at Easton Bavents to the north of Southwold in Suffolk. To some he is the local hero who refused to let himself be bullied by government agencies and who incidentally prevented Easton Marshes at Southwold becoming inundated by storm tides. To those same government agencies he is the thorn in the flesh that has muddied the water and muddled the issue of coastal protection in a way that is considered both counterproductive and unsustainable. A quiet and very English struggle is going on along the length of the East Anglian Coast: it is between the state as represented by the Environment Agency and English Nature¹ taking the high ground of geodiversity and landscape integrity, against a community who find themselves obliged to accept the loss of considerable areas of land to the effects of climatic and isostatic change, whilst apparently total protection is granted to foolish urban development on river floodplains.

It is no mean operation that Peter Boggis has set up: through shrewd

interpretation of landfill regulations, there have been an average of ninety lorries a day dumping spoil along his cliff front, whilst 40,000 tons per annum have been sacrificed to the effects of coastal erosion. The work is a kilometre long deep brown intrusion along a yellow, sandy cliff; in another context, and by comparison with the poured asphalt works of the sculptor Robert Smithson,² it is an audacious, if unintentionally dramatic, achievement. This is only interesting in that the justification for stopping the work is one mightily close to another aesthetic; that of the picturesque, wild and unsullied. It is in the nature of cliffs that they should erode, indeed, to safeguard the integrity of the landscape character, allow scope for research and guarantee that the processes of erosion and accretion continue, it is essential to keep them in a state of perpetual disintegration. To this end English Nature have extended a current SSSI³ designation to the cliffs and foreshore at Easton Bavents, effectively bringing the works to a halt. Set against this, there is something compelling and admirable in the Sisyphean labour of piling up earth for it to be continually washed away. Its summary prohibition and the failure to forge a stewardship agreement, offends the integrity of a community, hardened by centuries of fighting and acquiescing to the North Sea.⁴

DEFRA⁵ has established a point system whereby it is able to calculate the relative merits of protecting one threatened area over another. For all of the right reasons this has been set up to guarantee transparency and even handedness, but also for the right reasons, it is bound to favour the built environment, where avoidable human loss through flooding or erosion would be unacceptable. The rural, or predominantly agricultural community finds it difficult to enter the equation where common ground lies only in the source of the threat rather than the nature of the loss. Informed by the European Habitats Directive and crucially outside of the range of the political spotlight, it is considered a peripheral affair best left to those advisory bodies that know best. This is a territory where English Nature is arbiter; judgements based upon issues of biodiversity and geodiversity lead to the conclusion that inaction is best practice as a local application of a global strategy; too

bad if you happen to live there. Sadly it is naïve to expect to have a say in the protection of your property especially, if by good fortune, it happens to enjoy a protective designation such as an SSSI. If you decide to take the initiative on the assumption that it is a fundamental human right, you may well find yourself up against the full weight of European Law. In these situations the heavy hand of eco bureaucracy does little to endear itself to a public bemused by arcane decision making processes, configured in a context remote to where they are applied. Since the Industrial Revolution the interface between a cultural understanding of land and how it is managed on behalf of the people, has always been problematic. Although the greater amount of land in Britain may yet be under private ownership, government, through the medium of its agencies has adopted the role of arbiter for access and management, developing a specialist code that is impenetrable to few but the initiates. This is not a helpful state of affairs considering the imminent need for the community, in the widest sense, to acknowledge its responsibilities as stakeholder in the environment and become an informed participant. This cannot happen when the decision making process is carried out by another more highly specialised community, behind closed doors.

Recently I met representatives of English Nature and the Environment Agency to discuss the feasibility of renewing a section of our local river wall. The intentions of this project are to protect a salt marsh threatened by tidal erosion and reinstate a landing facility from the river, for public access to the coastal network of footpaths. At face value, this is a worthy enough proposal and although I was expecting to have to argue our case carefully, I was surprised at how closely the debit and credit of environmental benefits were interrogated. Whilst without doubt this is correct procedure and any higher authority would have looked approvingly over our shoulders, it leads to the conclusion that the safest route for any authority is to agree to nothing. To do otherwise is a matter of individual interpretation of the guidelines, which opens up the potential of personal liability. The tenor of our meeting was benign and the outcome a restrained enjoiner that, rather than saving a

saltmarsh from avoidable loss, it could have a detrimental effect upon integrity of the foreshore and therefore may not be advisable. Even handedness and heavy handedness are close relations in the consultative process where the strategy is to keep a prescriptive approach but avoid appearing unduly patronising. Effectively, homegrown initiatives are discouraged on the basis that they may not be scientifically informed enough; an alternative approach could be to adopt this as a starting point and to foster enthusiasm in a way that confirms the principle of partnerships. There is otherwise a risk that the myth or story that attaches people to place may be subverted by a higher imperative, intolerant of voices that are different in kind. The forces of conservation can become evangelical and, like any other rigorous belief system, have little latitude and lack the capacity to reflect.

Any river exerts a magnetic pull on those people who live with it; flowing through their psyche, the potential for transfiguration should never be underestimated. I wonder for how many people, their first introduction to the melancholy of an East Anglian tideway was Thomas Crabbe's exiled Peter Grimes on the mudbanks of the River Alde. Certainly my first encounter with a muddy Suffolk estuary was tantalisingly familiar because I had already experienced it as a primary school child in deepest Somerset.

*When tides were neap, and, in the sultry day,
Through the tall bounding mud banks made their way,
Which on each side rose swelling, and below
The dark warm flood ran silently and slow;⁶*

For a landscape to be understood it must first be imagined. The writer and field biologist, Barry Lopez uses the expression 'the landscape of the mind'⁷ by which he means that a landscape and how it is perceived by those who live within it, is a reciprocal affair. In his book *Arctic Dreams*, he argues compellingly for the need to have recourse to the indigenous community when seeking to interpret unfamiliar territory. Any intention to apply an



Simon Read, *Reclamation works at Easton Bawents*, 2005.

environmental analysis to a particular landscape would do well to have accommodated at the outset, a sense of place from those whose place it happens to be. It cannot be configured solely in mechanical terms; we may know it through experience as much as through empirical models. The 'picturesque' as a means of visualising landscape, may well have outlived its usefulness, prompting the need to take a fresh look and recognise another kind of poetry of place that will serve better in relation to future challenges. This may not be cast in such a heroic mould, but serves as a reminder that the future is bound to changes in nature driven largely by our own behaviour.

As a matter of cultural habit we have invested in the promise of the scientific community to ensure the stability of our natural environment. However, in doing so we not only absolve ourselves from individual responsibility but also consent to a strictly functionalist model for landscape. For most of us, our relationship with land is embedded in cultural memory, all that is necessary is to cross national boundaries even in such narrow confines as Europe, to realise that people inhabit it in different ways and it is not easy to differentiate between effects of cultural memory and politics. You could say that the land is the stuff of dreams, and that if we are so foolish as to allow the right to dream to be hijacked, the care of the environment will become no more than a rational process and the act of caring, a political decision subject to availability of funds.

In public life there is an ambiguity over the status of landscape in Britain, undervalued as a component of the national economy, but still considered a green and pleasant land at the service of a largely urban sensibility. For other nations the sense of emotional attachment endures as fundamental to their national identity. This is something I became aware of when working in Norway; its landscape inspires a fierce attachment but imposes severe constraints. It forces travellers to divert around winter snows and then put up with wet stormy journeys. It chimes with native hardiness and is a symbol of independence especially resonant for a nation that only emerged from

Danish control at the beginning of the last century. An artist, who provided particularly vivid testimony to a national identity, happened to have spent most of his professional life living in Dresden; this was Johan Christian Dahl. Born in Bergen in 1843, he was educated in Copenhagen and eventually moved to Dresden, where he fell under the spell of Casper David Friedrich; from whom he absorbed a preoccupation with the sublime. It intrigues me that an artist from the mountains and the sea could only exercise his birthright through a cosmopolitan aesthetic gleaned from a highly industrialised environment far from home. It is even more fascinating that in absentia his work became iconic. Only by being a voluntary exile could he realise the full symbolic potential of his native landscape.

A single birch tree on a precipice, preternaturally lit, bends to the full force of one of those katabatic storms typical of the fjord lands, that without warning, tumble down the mountain, foundering ships and flattening everything in the valley below. *Birch in a Storm* bears the hallmark of that celebration of romantic landscape, ubiquitous through European nations intent upon expansion. Just as the new Americans used the reinvestment in landscape as a vehicle to articulate their great excuse, 'manifest destiny', for the Norwegians it was the means through which they could capture an inherent desire to bond anthropomorphically with their land. It is a matter of conjecture that a way of visualising what hitherto had only been imagined is a necessary precursor in the growth of national self awareness. However without the potential for art to act as mediator, it is difficult to imagine a more satisfactory starting point for an interface between nature and culture.

Our national talent for procrastination has become a symptom of the absence of a coherent vision of landscape, perhaps this is because we have become conditioned to it being configured politically and continually tinkered with, but perhaps it has always been thus. On our coastline there is a collision course of unquestionable threat and institutional paralysis that generates deeply unsatisfactory solutions. I have been looking at East Lane in Suffolk,



Johan Christian Dahl, *Birch in a Storm*, 1849.
 Photograph by Werner Zellien. Courtesy of the Bergen Kunstmuseum.

another place that teeters on the edge of England. Here the tendency for soft cliffs to retreat has been delayed by the presence of a wartime concrete fort, with the effect of interrupting the normal cycle of erosion and accretion of sediment. East Lane is a track running from the village of Bawdsey to the sea, where there is the fort and a tiny settlement, comprising a bungalow with a belvedere, a defiant red and ultramarine corrugated iron Edwardian villa and a massive Martello Tower. Tower 'W' is one of a chain of defences, erected in a hurry along the East Coast to forestall the threat of the Napoleonic invasion that never happened. Now it is truly threatened, but this time by falling victim to the North Sea which at last is poised to outflank the concrete fort. One would expect a philosophic acceptance of the inevitability of this state of affairs; the sight of plumbing sticking out from the side of a retreating cliff is too common to be poignant. But this is without reckoning with the determination and sheer bloody mindedness of the owner of the tower and local landowners who are dead set against allowing nature, abetted in their view by a disinterested government, wash their property away.

Badgered to do something, but unable to justify major engineering works, one temporary solution to the problem is to import resilience; shiploads of granite, quarried in Norway, have been used the length of the East Anglian coast to break up the energy of storm driven waves and to protect vulnerable areas from excessive loss through erosion. As a response to the righteous indignation of the local community at the absence of an affordable plan, this 'rock armour' has been used to shield the cliffs, but despite its bulk, it is a holding action and could be interpreted as no more than an extravagant display of good will. The soft cliff is certain to subside behind the weight of the stone and the sea to outflank it at the point where the protection stops in an effect picturesquely known as 'terminal groyne stress'. It is debatable that transferable strength will ever consistently be the right solution for an essentially mobile coastline; obdurate it may be, but in due course the cliff will carry on retreating and the rock become an encumbrance on the beach.

Norwegian rock, just as the concrete bunker system and Martello Tower, is a symbol of permanence; it represents decisive action, and defies transience. There is a fundamental difference over how threatened landscapes are perceived, candid scientific opinion cannot be entertained unless it is able to carry with it a constituency in the thrall of an ingrained and subjective grasp of what landscape should be. If government agencies do not acknowledge this, they will meet nothing but intransigence in their pursuit of equitable solutions to impossible problems.

I have traced the source of the rock armour used at East Lane to Larvik in Southern Norway. It is a by-product of the extraction of fine granites known as 'dimension stone' for cladding and other architectural applications. In order to ensure that it is free from faults or a tendency to develop seams, the stone is not blasted but is carefully split and cut out using diamond saws. This process creates colossal waste in the form of massive regular blocks, which, because of the production methods, are particularly stable and therefore suitable for coastal defence purposes. As a waste product this cannot be indefinitely stockpiled and consequently is available at little more than the price dictated by the logistics of handling and the cost of transportation. Changing weather patterns and the threat to our coast are a gift to the quarry operators and perhaps it sheds light on the relative preparedness in this country to use rock armour for emergency works.

On the west coast of Norway, north of Bergen, in an area known as Sunnfjord healthy fjord, there is a small village called Vevring that I have considered a spirit home since 1970's. Here I first became attuned to the relationship between landscape and the stories that animate it. Stark cliffs drop straight to the sea and carry on down to unimaginable depths, impossible to find with a fishing line. These are echoey places where the splash of an oar sends up flocks of crows and the odd heron. Spikes jammed into crevices support networks of wires where streams enter the fjord and salmon gather; illicit netting has always taken place here. In just such a place a deepwater dock



Simon Read, *Rock Face at Vevring, Norway*, 2007.

has been built for ships to load rock. Originally this was of the 'rock armour' variety but the venture failed and the site became moribund until 'Rutile', a far more valuable substance was detected. Rutile is the crystalline form of titanium oxide and although it has value as a gemstone, the commercial value lies in its high reflective properties, there are a huge number of applications where this is desirable, it is the sun bloc component in the cosmetics industry, it is the base for white paint including artist's titanium white, it is used in the heat protective coating for spacecraft and in nanotechnology.

Originally set up as a quarrying operation on a local basis, corporations such as Conoco and Dupont became interested after it became clear that there could be more at stake. It was never going to be a simple matter to extract the mineral and so eventually the rights were sold to a Norwegian mining company. Although in principle this is a good strategic diversification of national mineral interests, the local community were outraged and considered it no more than an exercise in corporate violation. No matter that it only exists in memory that the fjord was once alive to early morning banter from boat to boat as one lucky individual reels the cod in hand over hand, whilst another's line lies slack; the fear is real, the threads of the story are unravelling. Solvency for any community lies in the viability of markets beyond its control, challenging its sense of pride and hard won independence. It is a worldwide experience; where commodity is identified and a market created, the local economy is boosted, but the effect in human terms is disorientation and a sense of loss.

The plans are yet to be developed and environmental impact studies completed, but it has already been established that the silicate Eclogite and its derivative Rutile, are extremely stable and are not essentially pollutants. However the major impediment is that only 4% of the material extracted will be of any value, the rest will be waste, which depending upon the methods used, could be massive boulders and/or vast amounts of a gluey paste. Acceptable methods of disposal must be agreed before any operation can be

considered: dumping in the fjord has been mooted for the paste derived from the separation process, but for the stone, despite prior experience, export as ballast or rock armour for coastal defence is most desirable. The prognosis is unclear and the community uneasy; it is not only the prospect of a noisy and messy industry on its doorstep but also the fear that if there is to be blasting, it might destabilise a neighbouring cliff face that already has a whopping great fault in it. Should this fail; it could cause a wave large enough to wipe all of the wooden houses from the waterfront.

NOTES

1 The Environment Agency is the agency responsible for putting into action government policy on the natural environment and natural resources. English Nature is the agency responsible for advising government upon the welfare of the natural environment, including stable habitat for flora and fauna, biodiversity and geodiversity. In 2006, English Nature was subsumed into 'Natural England' a new agency with a wider remit.

2 Robert Smithson, *Asphalt Rundown*. Rome, Italy, October 1969.

3 Sites of Special Scientific Interest were created as a result of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, 1949. Notification to the planning authorities of 'areas of land of special interest by reason of its flora, fauna, geological or physiological features'. This is intended as a protection against inappropriate development or farming practice.

4 In October 2007, Peter Boggis won the right to challenge the use of an SSSI designation to prevent continuance of his operation through the European Court of Human Rights.

5 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

6 In 1810, George Crabbe published 'The Borough', a long poem about Aldeburgh, Suffolk, of which 'Peter Grimes' forms a part.

7 Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*. Macmillan 1986.



Simon Read, *Tbingnes*, Vevring, Norway, 2007.

Biographies

Martha Fleming is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow with the Department of Mechanical Engineering at King's College London. She has been a Visiting Associate Professor with the University of Copenhagen's Faculty of Medicine Museum, a Fellow of The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, and artist in residence at the Institute of Astronomy Cambridge and the Science Museum London as well as Development Manager at the Royal Society. Her large scale siteworks of the 1980s and 1990s, made with Lyne Lapointe, explored social and political issues in abandoned buildings in the urban fabric of Montreal, New York, London, Madrid and Sao Paolo.

Jean Fisher has degrees in Zoology and Fine Art, ultimately becoming a freelance writer on contemporary art and globalisation. She is the former editor of *Third Text*, and the editor of the anthologies, *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts* 1994, *Re verberations: Tactics of Resistance, Forms of Agency* 2000 and, with the Cuban curator Gerardo Mosquera, *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture* 2004. A selection of her essays, 'Vampire in the Text', was published in 2003. She is Professor of Fine Art and Transcultural Studies at Middlesex University.

Maria Thereza Alves is a Brazilian born artist who studied art and photography at the Cooper Union, NYC. In 1976 she was the representative of the Brazilian indigenous peoples to the UN Human Rights Committee, Geneva, and in 1981 a representative of the Brazilian Partido dos Trabalhadores Workers' party. In 1987 she co founded the Partido Verde Green Party in São Paulo. She has participated in conferences and exhibited her work internationally, recent solo shows including Gallery 101, Montreal, 2001; Taide Museo, Pori, Reposaari, Finland, 2001 and Musée Portuaire, Dunkirk, 2005. Her recent participation in group exhibitions includes the Liverpool Biennial, 2004 and in 2005, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, Kunsthallen Nikolaj, Copenhagen and La Chaufferie, Strasbourg.

Fernando Palma Rodríguez is an artist of Mexican Nahua origin, who builds kinetic sculptures using a 'mechatronics' process. He received a BA in Fine Art and Art History from Goldsmiths College, London, an MA in sculpture from the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, and spent two years at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, most recently in *Choqueyapu boy Chuquiago*, Museo de Arte Moderno Tambo Quirquincha, La Paz, 2007; *And it does move*, Bochum Museum, Germany, 2006; *Moving Parts*, Kunsthau Graz, Graz, 2004 and Tinguely Museu, Basel, 2005; and *The American West*, Compton Verney, 2005. Palma collaborates with individuals and organisations worldwide.

Simon Read has increasingly recognised the need to enhance a cultural awareness of environmental change through his work. Having moved his operation from London to Suffolk in 1980, he has acquired a habit of working in concert with his immediate landscape. In the recent past, using photography he has explored ways in which the behaviour of the sea may be harnessed as an active component, building his own equipment to ensure continuity between an idea and its realisation. This has led him to the point that there are several critical issues that do not appear to lend themselves readily to an orthodox studio activity. He has exhibited widely internationally and in the UK and his work is represented in many public collections. He is a senior lecturer in Fine Art at Middlesex University



Chris Woods, *Barges Discharging Rock, East Lane, Suffolk*, 2007.

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