

The art of maintaining a radical voice

oil over water
money and fire over life
carbon over time

In recent history we have seen the likes of Joseph Beuys, Gustav Metzger, APG, Conrad Atkinson, Margaret Harrison, Suzanne Lacy, Augusto Boal, John McGrath, John Fox, Adrian Mitchell, Benjamin Zephaniah, Ai Weiwei, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Platform fighting for social and environmental justice. This presentation explores the extraordinary work of Nick Reeves OBE, who suddenly died in July 2013 aged 60. Nick was an artist and was also the Chief Executive of CIWEM, The Chartered Institution for Water and Environmental Management. CIWEM is noted for its high professional standing in environmental science and engineering, and as a leading independent voice for environmental policy to industry and governments.

In 2007 he created the 'Art and Environment Network' (AEN). About twenty artists and arts professionals accepted Nick's invitation 'to put creativity at the heart of environmental policy and action'. Despite some critics and sceptics, the AEN flourished with regular meetings, workshops, and significant input to CIWEM's Annual Conference and Parliamentary Reception. The AEN was a network of networks that included CCANW, the RSA, Arts Council England, several universities, the RCA, Environment Agency, and international environmental corporations like Arup.

Then in June 2010 Nick, Dave Pritchard (AEN Chair) and I (AEN Vice Chair) wrote a letter to the Guardian...

Dear Editor

Cleanse the oil stains from Art

Paul Robeson, the actor, singer and civil rights activist, said artists must elect to fight for freedom or be in slavery.

Recent catastrophic events in the Gulf of Mexico have brought to head a situation that for many years has been uncomfortable, but tolerated. Now, as media coverage of the environmental disaster is being controlled by its perpetrators, we, the under-signed, find it necessary to stand up and deplore the Tate galleries' sponsorship by BP.

How can this country's most revered arts establishments continue to allow themselves to be supported by those who are culpable in such catastrophes, with the terrible legacy of environmental, social and economic damage that is left in their wake? The present disaster is but one kind of risk inherent in the

carbon industries' attendant culture of mendacity, greed and destruction, backed by generations of craven politicians.

The Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management's Arts and Environment Network (AEN) was formed in 2007 to 'put creativity at the heart of environmental policy and practice'. Its members represent august and respected cultural institutions, universities, and agencies entrusted to care for the environment. As we start to witness the tangible effects of global warming and climate change, we are incredulous at the degree of cognitive dissonance displayed by our society. In the face of increasing global poverty and deprivation we are disgusted by the disregard for social and environmental justice. The cynical atrocities of oil corporations in their pursuit of wealth and power at the expense of people, wildlife, landscapes and ecosystems force us to speak out.

We deplore the continuing acceptance of guilt monies and influence from the petro-carbon industries, as this sullies the arts, and undermines our cultural institutions (and in turn perhaps our culture). At times of economic recession, there are debates about replacement funding for the Arts, but crimes against the environment are crimes against humanity. Oil money is an expedient too far.

As the world and indeed Tate have learned to flourish without support from slavery, tobacco and alcohol, we and they must learn to emerge from the culture of fossil fuels and the insidious oil industry. BP, Shell and all other petro-chemical corporations must be denied control of our arts and cultural institutions, right now. As Tate is about to celebrate 10 years of funding from BP, we call on the Trustees and Director of Tate to put a halt to the tyranny of oil patronage and cleanse the oil stains from art. We further call on the Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, to use his powers as the responsible minister to ensure this happens.

Yours faithfully,

Dave Pritchard
Chair of the CIWEM Arts and Environment Network

David Haley
Vice Chair of the CIWEM Arts and Environment Network

Nick Reeves
Executive Director
Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management & member of
the CIWEM Arts and Environment Network

Over half the Network resigned, but others joined and we continued. Suffice to say that the sceptics and critics increased their opposition to Nick's Arts and Environment activities. While this strengthened his resolve, he became most frustrated by the lack of outcry from artists in general.

In 2012, to Nick's delight, the AEN set about creating an edited anthology of essays from national and internationally renowned artists and arts practitioners.

'We Assert...' A Manifesto

Synopsis

Taking its inspiration from historic manifestos of political and artistic intent, this collection of texts and images presents the intensely personal, the deeply philosophical, and the clearly articulated frustration, anger, love, pain and hope for our futures.

For years, CIWEM's Art and Environment Network (AEN) considered how it might declare its diverse disciplinary interests and beliefs through the production of a manifesto. The the AEN and some of its associates their views about the potential convergence of art and ecology in a world challenged by economic, environmental, and social crises.

The title, 'We Assert...', is drawn from the American artists, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison's chillingly beautiful contribution, *A Manifesto for the 21st Century*. Like other contributions, it sees humanity bent on self-destruction, but then envisions a '... culturally generated acceleration of adaptation behaviours at great scale...' for our world to emerge as a new reality.

Thanks to Richard Povall at the Schumacher College, this manifesto has been republished online at:

Nick Reeves managed to co-opt engineers, scientists, business people, TV personalities, MPs, ministers, Lords, Royals, activists and artists to support environmental and social justice that was very often considered to be inappropriate by the powers that be, yet he had an infectious camaraderie and directness that few could resist.

As Vedic ecologist, Ranchor Prime, writes:

If we are to resolve the environmental problems that now beset us, we must examine the connection between our environment and our way of life. A way of life does not exist in a vacuum. It is based on a way of thinking, a philosophy of life.

Gandhi recognized this truth. He believed that it would not be possible to bring about change in society without a corresponding change in the way people behaved. To change the way people behaved meant to change the way they thought. Therefore Gandhi's primary objective was to influence people's philosophy of life. (Prime 2002)

So, how may art and artists hope to influence, change, transform individuals, their society and their environment?

Probably what is needed is a whole spectrum of strategies. Ranging from radical revolutionaries to policy makers, and from power-brokers to permaculturists and people just opting to live lifestyles that differ from the cultural norm, or the dominant narrative. Indeed, passive activism is not to be confused with inaction. Quite the opposite. Poet Adrian Mitchell passionately expressed passivism through his poetry to change the way people thought about many issues. The Quaker declaration, 'speak truth to power', also comes to mind.

Systems theorist, Gregory Bateson referred to ecology as 'the pattern that connects', but let us also consider ecology as the pattern of values.

The beauty of ecology is that it is not an object. It's the **relationship between** objects or things. It's how they relate to each other. Bateson talks about the evolution of the human hand, and that most science focuses on the development of finger joints, fingernails and the articulation of the thumb. However, the ecology of the human hand is the space between the digits. This is the context for how the hand operates and why it is the way that it is.

So, this notion of space takes me to my favourite quote from Robert Pirsig's book, *Lila: an inquiry into morals*; 'The most moral act of all is the creation of space for life to move onwards'. For the past twenty years or so, this idea has become my personal mantra. And if we then take the meaning of the word 'art' from its etymological Sanskrit origin, '*rta*', we discover that art is the dynamic process by which the whole cosmos continues to be created, virtuously. We may then consider art as a means for making it possible for life to emerge. As Fritjof Capra puts it:

'... emergence'... 'has been recognized as the dynamic origin of development, learning and evolution. In other words, creativity – the generation of new forms is a key property of all living systems. And since emergence is an integral part of the dynamics of open systems, we reach the important conclusion that open systems develop and evolve. Life constantly reaches out into novelty.'

In the science of complex systems, a dynamic form of equilibrium is called a Strange Attractor. The difference between an Attractor and a Strange Attractor is that an Attractor represents a state to which a system finally settles, while a Strange Attractor represents some kind of trajectory upon which a system runs from situation to situation without ever settling down. This may, also, be understood as the pattern of evolution in natural and social systems.

But please note the moral imperatives and values both explicit and implicit in the emergence of evolution – the right way for things to progress ecologically. Not financially, or legally, but virtuously in art, science and activism. And so, 'Network Ecologies' may be a way of seeing our relationship to the environment and our engagement with environment as many diverse realities, each pregnant with a potential future.

In the meantime, the AEN continues its input to the Environmental Photographer of the Year, the Nick Reeves Award for Art and the Environment, and contributes to the ecological arts ACE lobby group.

Finally, it is worth reflecting that Nick Reeves' greatest success was not in what he achieved in his lifetime, but in what he set in motion; the many networks and connections he initiated; the doors he opened; the people he introduced to each other; the space he created for life to move onwards; and the life philosophies he influenced, much of which was accomplished with great enthusiasm, warmth and conviviality. This was his art.