

**ENVIRONMENTAL ART  
AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO ESTABLISHING AN AWARENESS OF  
THE SACRED IN NATURE.**

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by

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## ABSTRACT

The introduction establishes the goal of the research, which is to discover that art concerned with re-evaluating the relationship to the environment and spirituality can serve to connect people to one another, and to the environment. The context of the research is the contemporary ecological and spiritual crisis of the postmodern world.

The background places the discussion within the contexts of modernism and postmodernism.

The historical background focuses on the period from the 1960s to the present day. Land and Environmental artists who work in a manner that is conscious of environmental issues and who suggest a sacred and creative attitude to ecology are discussed.

My own creative work which is a response to both ancient and contemporary sites as well as to contemporary theories of art and spirituality is discussed. The four projects, are discussed in chronological order, they are: *Quest - A journey into Sacred Space*; *Gaika's Kop - Sacred Mountain*; *Labyrinth - Journeys to the Centre*; and *Transforming the Centre*.

The conclusion shows that the multi-faceted, intertextual and relativistic philosophy of postmodernism has brought about a significant change in the attitude of humanity towards the environment. Artists who reject the modernist aesthetic and philosophy are

making art that emphasises relationship to, rather than separation from the natural world.

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## INTRODUCTION

The goal of this research is to establish that environmental art can contribute to a re-evaluation of the relationship between humanity, the environment and spirituality.

Contemporary Land and Environmental artists who work in a manner that is conscious of environmental issues and who suggest a sacred and creative attitude to ecology will be discussed. The focus will be on land and environmental art from the 1960s to the present day.

It will be necessary to elaborate on my own creative work and how it is a response to both ancient and contemporary sites as well as to contemporary theories of art and spirituality.

The context of the research is the contemporary ecological and spiritual crisis of the postmodern world. Humankind has recently had to acknowledge that it has the potential to destroy itself and the planet. The choice to continue on a destructive course of action, or to re-evaluate ideologies and expectations is what contemporary Western society now faces.

According to a report issued early in 1990 by the 'Worldwatch Institute', an independent environmental research group,

"The world has about forty years to achieve an environmentally sustainable economy or descend into a long economic and physical decline. Change

cannot take place without a transformation of individual priorities and values - materialism cannot survive the transition to a sustainable world".<sup>1</sup>

The ecological and spiritual crises are related. The overpopulation, loneliness, poverty and a lack of contact with the cycles of the natural world that is experienced by technological societies has led to a loss of meaning, a loss of the sense of the sacred. Fundamentalist religious groups attempt to re-establish this, but their stress on "Man's dominion over the Earth," the next world, and a relationship with a male god serves to make the problem worse by reinforcing a patriarchal system of values. Religion, philosophy and technology have in the names of God, knowledge and progress joined forces to create this extreme stage of crisis.

"We live in a culture that has little capacity or appreciation for meaningful ritual. Not only does the particular way of life for which we have been programmed lack any cosmic, or transpersonal dimension, but its underlying principles of manic production and consumption, maximum energy flow, mindless waste and greed, are now threatening the entire ecosystem in which we live."<sup>2</sup>

## **BACKGROUND**

The Enlightenment, which had initiated the modernist traditions of perpetual innovation, mechanism, positivism, empiricism, rationalism, materialism, secularism, and scientism, objectified the relationship between the individual and society, humanity

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<sup>1</sup> Gablik, S. 1991. p 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p 2

and nature. Cartesian philosophy, upon which the modernist worldview is based, focused on non-interactive, non-relational and non-participatory individual experience. Modernism stressed the alienation, isolation and autonomy of the artist and art which was in romantic exile from society. The English art critic Cyril Connolly wrote,

"It is closing time in the gardens of the West. From now on an artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude and the quality of his despair".<sup>3</sup>

The avant-garde scorned the notion of the artists' responsibility to society. In the catalogue for his exhibition held at the Whitechapel Gallery, the painter Georg Baselitz wrote,

"The artist is not responsible to anyone. His social role is asocial; his only responsibility consists in an attitude to the work he does. There is no communication with any public whatsoever. The artist can ask no question, and he makes no statement; he offers no information, and his work cannot be used. It is the end product which counts, in my case the picture".<sup>4</sup>

## **THE HISTORY OF LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL ART**

The traditional landscape genre was transformed in the 1960s when many artists stopped representing landscape, and made their mark instead, directly in the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p 20

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p 25.

environment. Symptomatic of the counter-cultural impulses of that time, artists rejected the traditional gallery system and moved outdoors. This movement is primarily sculptural, but encompasses performance and conceptualism. Land art encompasses earth, eco and environmental art. Mapping, photographic documentation and text-based accounts are often an intrinsic part of the work.

The late 1960s was a time of great social and political upheaval in the United States and Europe, it was the era of the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the civil rights marches and the student uprisings. Irving Sandler in *Art of the Postmodern Era* notes,

" The chaos of the moment derived from and reiterated an essential crisis of faith in the Western body politic. In the denouement of the Second World War, the State, which was still viewed as the primary instrument of social action, began to lose stature. The grand industrialist matrix of the early twentieth century social life started to fray and give way to the more intricate dynamics of consumerism and new technologies. This shift was liberating but also fraught, and one price paid for this autonomy from established institutions was an inevitable sense of alienation. For all the sound and fury of the counter culture attacks on the notion of the institution, practical change was limited. The effect on sensibilities generated by the efforts to remake, and sometimes even make from scratch, an idea of society did, however, have a dramatic impact on our view of ourselves and the world around us".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Kastner, J and Wallis, B. 1998. p 13.

This sociological revolution gave rise to a generalised concept of revolution that included the notions of political emancipation, sexual revolution, alternative lifestyles, and a concern for ecology.

An annual Earth Day has been celebrated since 1970, this has led to a greater awareness of environmental issues. This was spurred on by the environmental disasters of Love Canal, Chernobyl, the Alaska Oil Spill and Three Mile Island. The citizens of many countries started looking to their governments to provide solutions to their anxieties relating to the global ecological crisis. With the increasing awareness of the need for major change; many of the most basic assumptions underlying modern Western society were shifting. A new philosophical framework for negotiating moral and spiritual issues emerged. Artists who rejected modernist aesthetics, which were isolationist and aimed at disengagement and purity, chose to make art that was environmentally and socially aware, participatory and purposeful. This new paradigm reflected a will among artists to participate socially, to shift the focus from objects to relationships, community and environment. There was a desire to express interconnectedness rather than separateness. The relationship between personal creativity and social responsibility was evolving beyond the old pattern of alienation and confrontation.

"If we are to avoid destroying the integrity of the ecosystem, we must redesign our fundamental priorities." <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gablik, S. 1991. p 6.

This growing awareness of ecological and feminist concerns and a dissatisfaction with social and political systems resulted in an unwillingness amongst artists to produce commodities which perpetuated those systems. Land Art presented a challenge to orthodox expectations of the artistic object and the gallery structures that supported it. The awareness of the failures of Modernism: mass war, nuclear threats, population explosion, repressive economies and global pollution gave rise to what the geographer David Pepper has called the 'ecocentric catechism'. This is manifested in the notions of,

"anti-materialism; love and respect for the land; the land as one organism; the extension of 'natural rights' from humans to the rest of nature; the need for an ecological conscience rather than mere agronomic management; and the plea to return to an outdoor holistic science of natural history".<sup>7</sup>

Rejecting the economic and aesthetic framework of the traditional art gallery system, land artists shared a conviction that art could exist beyond the institution. Leaving the gallery implied an anti-authoritarian gesture, a break with tradition. Despite the apparent sculptural and conceptual nature of much land art, there was often a complex relationship between the work and the social and biological context of the site in which it existed. Artists would need to interact with land officials, industrialists, property owners, technicians, workmen and watchmen, in the process of making a work on a particular site.

Land Art is primarily sculptural, the works involve manipulation of three-dimensional materials in physical space. It often involves process, site and temporality and merges

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<sup>7</sup> Kastner, J and Wallis, B. 1998. p 13.

the boundaries of sociology, science, history and art. The artist and viewer become a participant in, rather than an observer of nature. This participation goes beyond mere appreciation of art and site as many land artists took a proactive stance in demonstrating their concern with environmental issues. Artists were no longer forcibly rearranging the natural world, rather they sought to create an emotional and spiritual relationship with it. Environmental artists actively remedy the damage done to the landscape, rather than poeticise it.

In October 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, and five months after the student riots in Paris, Robert Smithson organised an exhibition entitled 'Earthworks' at the Dwan Gallery in New York. This exhibition included large scale, outdoor works which resisted acquisition by collectors. Much of the exhibition consisted solely of photographic documentation of works that were either permanently sited in distant locations or destroyed. The nature of the projects shown was unconventional: a room full of earth and mile-long drawings in the desert by Walter de Maria; rings cut into a wheat field by Denis Oppenheim; trenches gouged through forests and mud flats by Michael Heizer. The message of the show was a pointedly pessimistic comment on the current state of the environment in America. Although not conventionally political, the Earthworks exhibition opposed the existing socio-political structures and removed art from the confines of the studio and gallery. One of the contributors to this exhibition, Robert Morris wrote,

" What art now has in its hands is mutable stuff which need not arrive at a point of being finalised with respect to time and space. The notion that

work is an irreversible process ending in a static icon-object no longer has much relevance".<sup>8</sup>

The temporary nature of many of the works was important, Heizer published photographs of the deterioration of the pieces years after they were made. Along with Smithson, Oppenheim and De Maria, he was involved with practices designed to break down the object, these included negation (cuts, holes, removals); duration (space as a factor of time); decay (decomposition of organic and inorganic materials); replacement (transfer of materials from one context to another); dispersion (patterns produced by gravity in the form of spills, pours, slides, etc.); growth (seeding, harvesting); marking (temporary random patterns on public surfaces); and transfer of energy (decomposing, sterilising).

Some critics regarded early Earth Art as environmentally destructive. Robert Smithson caused a major ecological controversy when he proposed making an *Island of Broken Glass*, near Vancouver in 1970. He planned to drop two tons of glass shards on a rock outcrop. The project was halted by the Canadian Society for Pollution and Environmental Control, as the glass would harm the local seals and birds. Smithson, however, believed that he worked in a manner that intended to revitalise the landscape and which directed the attention of observers to its spatial, historical, geological and cultural dimensions. He referred to his *Spiral Jetty* (illustration i) as an ecological work of reclamation and he envisioned a movement to involve artists in the reclamation and improvement of industrial wastelands.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p 24.

"Across the country there are many mining areas, disused quarries and polluted lakes and rivers. One practical solution for the utilisation of such devastated places would be land and water re-cycling in terms of Earth Art... Art can become a resource that mediates between the ecologist and the industrialist. Ecology and industry are not one-way streets, rather they should be crossroads. Art can help to provide the needed dialectic between them. A lesson can be learned from the Indian cliff dwelling and the earthwork mounds. Here we see nature and necessity in consort". <sup>9</sup>

Smithson proposed solutions for the reclamation of strip-mining pits and for the disposal of waste materials from mines. In a proposal for the re-use of a strip-mining pit in Ohio he wrote

" The artist must come out of the isolation of galleries and museums and provide a concrete consciousness for the present as it really exists, and not simply present abstractions or utopias. The artist must accept and enter into all of the real problems that confront the ecologist and industrialist. Art should not be considered as merely a luxury, but should work within the processes of actual production and reclamation. We should begin to develop an art education based on relationship to specific sites. How we see things and places is not a secondary concern, but primary". <sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Holt, N. (ed.) 1979. p 82.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p 84.

After Smithsons' death in a plane crash in 1973, his widow, Nancy Holt, continued to work on the projects, saying that she saw environmental art as functional or necessary aesthetics, which, rather than being cut off from society, was an integral part of it.

The ideas of necessary aesthetics and that art was integral to society, became a feature of the work of many subsequent Earth Artists, who focused on natural forces such as light, energy, growth, and gravity. In their works the natural sites or forces were uninterrupted and unimpeded. The landscape was left unscarred.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the artist Hans Haacke made work like the self-describing *Ten Turtles Set Free* and *Spray of Ithaca Falls, Freezing and Melting on a Rope*, which involved only observations of natural processes. In his work *Grass Grows* (illustration iii) he exhibited a small mound of soil scattered with grass seed. In a manifesto he wrote,

"make something which experiences, reacts to its environment, changes, is nonstable ... make something sensitive to light and temperature changes, that is subject to air currents and depends, in its functioning, on the forces of gravity ... articulate something natural".<sup>11</sup>

The New York artist, Alan Sonfist, worked in a similar vein to Haacke. He sought to create a form of Land Art that was harmonious, ecologically responsible and aware of historical context. His project *Time Landscape*, intended to convert several urban sites

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<sup>11</sup> Kastner, J and Wallis, B. 1998. p 32.

throughout New York City into a reconstruction of the pre-colonial, seventeenth century landscape that once existed there. In order to make this work he had to enter into negotiations with the city authorities, and eventually, after ten years of research, restore the damaged soil and replant native vegetation.

The increasing involvement of women artists and the impact of Feminism on art movements since the 1960s is important. Lucy Lippard, in a 1980 *Art Journal* essay entitled *The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s* claimed,

"feminists are more willing than others to accept the notion that art can be aesthetically and socially effective at the same time".<sup>12</sup>

The idea that contemporary art could be utilitarian found expression in work that involved performance and the natural world. These works critiqued issues of domesticity and work, and took a stance on social concerns such as ecology, agriculture and waste treatment.

Women artists such as Ana Mendieta, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Betty Beaumont, Helen Mayer Harrison and notable male exceptions such as Joseph Beuys made art that looked at issues of cultural identity, community and co-operation. For many of these artists, the mundane, everyday activities of washing, cleaning, gardening, and nurturing, which are activities conventionally associated with the feminine and with caretaking, were the material of their artistic investigations.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p 34.

Some feminist artists invested the landscape with a mythic, maternal identity and made work that was markedly different to their male contemporaries, who were seen as

"hard-hat-minded men digging holes and blasting cuts through cliff sides, recasting the land with 'masculine' disregard for the longer term".<sup>13</sup>

The work of these early feminist artists involved ritual and regarded the earth as an intimate extension of the human body. The work was simple and gestural, involving walking, pointing, or the temporary displacement of natural elements. These works often utilised or studied social or political groups and emphasised environmentally conscious actions.

Women artists sought to create a female world away from patriarchal constraints and to reconstruct a separate women's history, traceable back to prehistoric matriarchies and Goddess religions. The belief in Jungian notions of the collective unconscious, the Earth as the mother of all living things, and the association of women with nature and men with culture informed many of their ideas. Many feminists drew an explicit link between the earth and the female body, relating the oppression of women directly to the abuse of the earth.

The artists who typify this feminist impulse, combining myths, dreams and sacred images in rituals that referred to nature and earth Goddesses are Mary Beth Edelson and Ana Mendieta. Edelson's work implied the belief that pagan nature worship offered a union between the human and natural realms, which superseded conventional religion

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p 34.

and rationalism. Her performances, such as *See For Yourself: Pilgrimage to a Neolithic Cave* (1977), enacted in a cave in Yugoslavia, combined ritual chants, rings of fire, mandalas and a woman's body. It was an attempt to universalise female spiritual experience. The Cuban born artist, Ana Mendieta, focused on the female body and sexual identity. Her earthworks combined performance and ritual that made reference to goddess related spirituality. She worked in the natural landscape with mud, rocks, earth, trees, flowers, leaves, moss, blood, fire and ash. Her work involved personal healing and purification rituals (illustration ii).

The German artist Joseph Beuys, who worked between the early 1950's until his death in 1987, was one of the most important artists concerned with art as spiritual and ecological regeneration. He was a founder member of the German Green Party, the only European ecological party to have achieved a significant foothold in conventional politics. Believing that art was an integral part of everyday life, his practice focused on meetings and discussions as much as on the production and staging of performances, sculptures and installations. Discarded and found materials are a feature of his work, as well as his trademark felt and fat (Beuys was a fighter pilot during World War Two. After crashing in the Crimea, he was rescued by Tartars, who covered his body with fat and felt to keep him warm and alive). His paintings and drawings are characterised by the use of *Braunkreutz*, a mixture of hare's blood and rust. He believed that every person had the potential to be an artist, linked to all animate and inanimate things in one ecosystem. His work involves ritual, performance or action in space. He utilised symbols, such as a dead hare or stag as metaphors of German political trauma. In a work entitled *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), he used a live coyote, an endangered animal, sacred to the Native American people. He wrapped

himself in felt and spent three days co-habiting and developing a relationship of mutual trust with the Coyote, with whom he shared a cage. In this work Beuys commented on the imperialism of the North American involvement in the Vietnam War and the near extermination of Native American tribes.

A work entitled *7,000 Oaks* (illustration vii) illustrates his utopian idea of social sculpture, designed to effect a revolution in human consciousness. For the Documenta 7 show at Kassel in 1982, he planted seven thousand oak trees in the centre of German cities. Each of these trees was planted next to a basalt stone marker. The first tree was planted in 1982, the last one, eighteen months after his death, by his son. He wanted to practice *Verwaldung*, afforestation as redemption. He stated that the project was a

"movement of the human capacity towards a new concept of art, in symbolic communication with nature ... I believe that planting these oaks is necessary not only in biospheric terms, that is to say, in the context of matter and ecology, but that it will raise ecological consciousness - raise it increasingly, in the course of years to come, because we shall never stop planting".<sup>14</sup>

Beuys believed the oak tree to be a symbol of regeneration,

"because it is a slowly growing tree with a kind of really solid heartwood. It has always been a form of sculpture, a symbol for this planet ever since the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p 35.

druids, who are called after the oak. Druid means oak. They used their oaks to define their holy places." <sup>15</sup>

The basalt stone markers had a significance,

"...it is a natural form which need not be worked on as a sculpture or by stonemasons. The stone is similar to what you will find in the basalt column of the Giant's Causeway, but more triangular in shape with five, six or seven angles or irregular angled stones which come from the volcanoes...the nearest volcano to Kassel is only thirty kilometres from the centre of the town. It is very natural to take the stone to the place where I will plant the trees." <sup>16</sup>

The intention of much of his work is to point to the transformation of all life, of society and of the whole ecological system. Despite the universalising overtones they are always rooted in the spatial, social and political contexts of their environments.

Many of the ecologically concerned artists of the 1970s made clear links between natural and political systems, within the context of the gallery and outside. Helen Mayer Harris and Newton Harrison, a collaborative team, focused on environmental policy and the political powers shaping it. In *Lagoon Cycle* (1972 - 1982), (illustration iv) they presented their research into the history and function of the watersheds of various cultures. *Lagoon Cycle* does not exist as an earthwork, (although some of their suggestions have been adopted by local city planners in Los Angeles), it consists of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p 267.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p 267.

drawings, maps and conversational dialogue between a fictitious witness and a lagoon keeper and is referred to as ecopoetry. The research conducted by the Harrisons entailed speaking with scientists, ecologists, politicians, and sociologists. It represented their concern with ecological issues, their belief that original water systems should be restored and that human and natural needs should be integrated. Their ecopoetry had a didactic function; it proposed practical solutions to food production and irrigation systems.

With postmodernism, the modernist idea of change is negated, artists de nounce authorship and originality. Postmodernism deconstructs the ideologies of modernism, especially the notions of mastery and originality. In an essay entitled *The Anorexic Ruins*, the postmodernist philosopher Baudrillard claims that because everything has been done already, artists can only imitate, in an inferior manner, the great artistic visions that occurred between 1920 and 1930. He believes that

"The maximum in intensity lies behind us, the minimum in passion and intellectual inspiration lie before us".<sup>17</sup>

According to Baudrillard there is no future, no reason to hope. Everything has become

"nuclear, faraway, vaporised."<sup>18</sup>

The deconstructivist artist and critic, Ronald Jones claims,

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<sup>17</sup> Gablik, S. 1991. p 5.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p 8.

"to imagine at this point that art can somehow transcend the power structure, as the process, conceptual and earth artists thought during the 1970s - or that it can change anything, is quite simply self-delusional. There is no longer any possibility of escape from the system, and the nondeluded individual of today is the one who has given up naive hopes, and any pointless idealising of the artist's role ... no form of cultural expression is outside the commodity system".<sup>19</sup>

In an essay entitled 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984), the marxist cultural critic, Fredrick Jameson criticises the postmodern condition. He refers to the modernist notion of the logical, integrated individual who is able to locate and organise itself in an external world, being replaced by the postmodernist notion of the individual as a psychically fragmented schizophrenic trapped in a maze of competing signs. He argues that postmodernist relativism, (view from everywhere) as opposed to modernist objectivism, (view from nowhere)

"tends to demobilise us and surrender us to passivity and helplessness, by systematically obliterating possibilities of action under the impenetrable fog of historical inevitability."<sup>20</sup>

For the deconstructionists, there is no future beyond deconstruction and demystification.

In an interview with Brigitte Devismes of Flash Art magazine, J.F. Lyotard states,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p 7.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Kastner, J and Wallis, B. 1998. p28.

"What was once part of the avant-garde, always loses its disruptive power. That is the strength of the capitalist system, its capacity for recovering anything and everything. In this sense, the 'artists' are pushed forward, they are literally chased out of the very deconstructed forms they produce, they are compelled to keep on finding something else".<sup>21</sup>

There is no fixed relationship between a signifier and the signified, no pattern connecting the whole. Lyotard described postmodernism

"as incredulity toward metanarratives".<sup>22</sup>

This disorienting, universalising view of postmodernism, which glosses over the issues of gender, ethnicity and location, pays no attention to the way in which specific situations or contexts shape particular practices. It is contradicted by the practical ecological endeavours of many contemporary artists and art critics who continue to aspire to transforming what they see as our dysfunctional culture. Offering an alternative, reconstructive approach to deconstructionist postmodernism, Suzy Gablik, in the *Reenchantment of Art* claims that...

"reconstructivists are trying to make the transition from Eurocentric, patriarchal thinking and the 'dominator' model of culture toward an aesthetics of interconnectedness, social responsibility and ecological attunement... The essence of the new paradigm emerging in physics, general systems theory and ecology changes our whole idea of reality with the

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<sup>21</sup> Cited in Gablik, S. 1991. p 26.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p 26.

notion of interconnectedness - an understanding of the organic and unified character of the universe. If there is any bond among the elements of this 'counter culture', it is the notion of recovery ... of our bodies, our health, our sexuality, our natural environment, our archaic traditions, our unconscious mind, our rootedness in the land, our sense of community, and our connectedness to one another".<sup>23</sup>

This holistic paradigm unites the inner and outer, the subjective and objective. When applied to society and culture, the perception of a unified field makes individuals codetermining factors in the process of producing an understanding of reality. The notion of an objective observer, who could approach the world out there without taking part belongs to a classical world-view. Gablik believes that by changing belief systems people can change experience, and that by not giving legitimacy to dominant and destructive social structures, the individual can bring about positive social and environmental change. She quotes philosopher and theologian, David Ray Griffin.

"We will not overcome the present disastrous ways of ordering our individual and communal lives until we reject the view of the world upon which they are based. And we cannot reject this old view until we have a new view that seems more convincing. Change is most likely to occur, through people who are as far removed from cynicism as they are from utopianism".<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Gablik, S. 1991. p 19.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p 23.

Reconstructive postmodernism is active, it focuses on healing and the knowledge that transformation cannot come from ever more production and consumption, but from an integrating vision of saving the earth.

"In our present situation, the effectiveness of art needs to be judged by how well it overturns the perception of the world that we have been taught, which has set our whole society on a course of biospheric destruction. Ecology (and the relational, total-field model of ecosophy) is a new cultural force we can no longer escape - it is the only effective challenge to the long-term priorities of the present economic order. I believe that what we will see in the next few years is a new paradigm based on the notion of participation in which art will begin to redefine itself in terms of social relatedness and ecological healing".<sup>25</sup>

Two 'functional' site-specific works that embody these concepts by involving local communities in restoring environments that have been destroyed or damaged by human intervention are *Flow City* (1983) by the American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles (illustration vi), and *Still Waters* (1992) by the British collective PLATFORM. Both these works use alternative energy production, waste management and information distribution to re-educate the public about their ecosystem. Members of PLATFORM stated their goals as to

" provoke desire for a democratic and ecological society ... and to create an imagined reality, which is different from the present reality".<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p 26.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Kastner, J and Wallis, B. 1998. p 39.

*Flow City* is an enormous walk-through view station that allows visitors to observe the process of urban garbage disposal. It is designed in three parts: a long, arcade-like entry ramp made of recyclable material, a clear glass bridge that passes over the dumping stages, and a video wall that shows various operations and provides information on environmental topics. Ukeles is an artist-in-residence for the New York Sanitation Department, her work focuses on the labour involved in waste management. In *Touch Sanitation: Ritual Handshake* (1978-79), she shook hands with every garbage collector in New York City. Her work enables members of the public to make connections between their urban lives and the natural world. Ukeles says,

"...if people can directly observe how the city works, they can then direct their actions and ideas towards the construction of a meaningful public life".<sup>27</sup>

PLATFORM's project, *Still Waters* also attempts to alter the public's perceptions of the environment. The work involved specialists from a variety of disciplines, as well as the community who were observers and participants. The project was an attempt to draw attention to the lost history of London's watershed. It incorporated four sites within the city and involved performance artists and publicists. One of the sites involved digging up the River Effra, which had been buried since the late nineteenth century under urban South London.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p 39.

Both projects combined an awareness of the importance of public sites, an interest in reclaiming lost or suppressed histories and an interest in contributing to social change. The artists formed alliances with other public interest groups and had to interact with pre-existing transportation, waste-treatment and environmental reclamation organisations. They involve political action and a response to immediate concerns.

Many artists have developed their own companies, programmes and organisations to be more effective in answering the needs of the ecological issues that they are concerned with. American artist Peter Fend is the head of Ocean Earth, a company involved in massive ecological projects based on early earthworks. Satellite imagery is used to highlight global disaster areas such as Chernobyl and the Persian Gulf. The work involves consulting, teaching, networking and building new structures. In a project entitled *Ocean Earth, Oil Free Corridor*, (illustration ix) which was originally shown at the 1993 Venice Biennale, the Adriatic and Red Seas are suggested as possible sites for the development of Ocean Earth's Giant Algae system. These systems, which can be grown in the seas, can provide a renewable and non-polluting energy source, an alternative to petroleum. This system challenges the mineral fuels industry as the aim is to introduce a global algae production industry, which will make oil and gas unprofitable and - in view of the pollution caused - unappealing.

Another example is the work of the Vietnamese-American artist and civil engineer, Viet Ggo. In 1983 he started his own business using his patented 'Lemna System' which uses duckweed (lemnaceae), a small aquatic plant, which can be grown all over the world, to transform waste into protein-rich animal food. The *Devil's Lake Wastewater Treatment Plant* (1991), (illustration viii) in Devil's Lake, North Dakota is a sewage treatment

plant in the form of a snake-shaped earthwork. The plant purifies the environment by removing harmful phosphorus, nitrogen, and algae. It acts as a waterpark for the community, informs visitors about the environment and adds beauty to the environment. He has described his work as a fusion of engineering, architectural planning and art.

Some artists have chosen to include the activity of ritual in their work by replacing societies' passive expectations of art with a more active model. This is an attempt to consciously restore the severed connections between art and life, by reconnecting medium and message, subject and object. Ritual can create a balance between the individual and the group, between theory and practice, object and action. Images and activities are borrowed from ancient and foreign cultures, but they only become ritual in the true sense when the group or community connects them with the past, (the last time we performed this act) the present, (the ritual we are performing now) and the future (will we perform it again?) - ritual involves repetition.

"Discussing or even exploring the prehistoric site today is like visiting a museum, or peering around a church as a tourist. For all the formal beauties that are accessible, the essence of life is elusive. Contemporary artists are looking to ancient forms to restore that breath and also to take it for themselves. The animating element is often ritual - private or public, newly created or recreated through research or imagination (in itself a breath of life)".<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Kastner, J and Wallis, B. 1998. p 238.

For prehistoric as well as for many traditional cultures the ritualisation of activities and oral knowledge perpetuated belief and tradition. The contemporary incorporation of ritual into art is a response to a need for communal and historical identity. Emphasising correspondences between their work and art and those of traditional cultures, contemporary artists (notably feminist artists) evoke ancient rituals, especially those relating to the agrarian cycles of birth, growth, sacrifice and rebirth.

Fern Shaffer and Othello Anderson, work with rituals to mark the seasonal equinoxes and solstices and to heal the earth.

"The significance of what we do is to reenact or remember old ways of healing the earth. An ancient rhythm takes over; time does not exist anymore. We perform the rituals to keep the idea alive".<sup>29</sup>

For both artists the experience of "oneness with nature and being aware of the ecosystem" is what the rituals signify. They work at sites that are believed to be sacred, using ritual movement, clothing and crystals. Shaffer creates shamanic outfits and dances in order to facilitate the magical transformation that is needed to make the rituals come alive (illustration x).

Traditional shamans would wear magical clothing in order to communicate with the spirits, and to access alternate states of consciousness. It is in this visionary trance state that knowledge from the spirit world would be obtained. The functions of the shaman would be magical healing and soul-retrieval; many traditional people regarded soul-loss

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<sup>29</sup> Gablik, S. 1991. p 43.

as the gravest of all illnesses. For contemporary people the attraction of shamanism lies in the notion that it can provide a possible basis for reharmonising the out of balance relationship with nature.

"The shaman can hear the voice of the stones and trees. The shaman does not live in a mechanical, disenchanted world, but in an enchanted one, comprised of multiple, complex, living, interacting systems".<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p 45.

## **PERSONAL CREATIVE RESEARCH**

My creative research is a response to many of the environmental and spiritual issues that have been referred to. My work is site-specific and focuses on creating an awareness of the sacred in Nature. I am concerned with re-evaluating the relationships between spirituality and ecology, humanity and the environment. The site-specific work that I make is often situated in wild and sacred places and is of a temporary nature. People are invited to visit the sites, in a manner that is reminiscent of a pilgrimage or quest. My belief is that artists and visionaries have a responsibility to humanity and the earth in creating an awareness of the ecological and spiritual crisis and offer meaningful and sacred alternatives.

The discussion will focus on four site-specific projects, made during 1998 and 1999. The term site-specific means that the artist engages with a specific environment, either in an interior space or in the landscape. The connotations, implications and aesthetics of the particular site become an integral part of the artwork. The environment becomes an element of the artwork and the artwork suffers a loss of meaning outside of the specific environment.

As it is intended that the works relate to an ancient and continuous tradition of sacred sites, I make reference to many archetypal symbols and concepts. The projects will be discussed in chronological order.

### ***QUEST - JOURNEY INTO SACRED SPACE***

The project *Quest - Journey into Sacred Space* was part of a site-specific exhibition, organised at Nieu-Bethesda, by the Ibis Gallery and the Rhodes University Fine Art Department. The exhibition, which ran from late June the end of July of 1998 was called *!Xoe*. This is a word denoting 'home-land' or 'home-place' in the language of the *!Xam* a nomadic hunter gatherer people that once inhabited the Great Karoo.

A number of South African artists were invited to Nieu-Bethesda to take part in the *!Xoe* site-specific project. We were asked to make work in and around the village. I chose to work in the landscape, on a beautiful and windswept hillside.

I asked the poet, Brian Walter to collaborate with me on the project. He wrote a series of poems, four of which actually formed part of the installation. The installation represented an attempt towards what could be called a reconsecration of the relationship between humanity and the Earth.

Participants arriving at the site saw, in the distance, an outcrop rising above a cleft in the earth. This represented a powerful symbol of the mystery of life: the *yon*i and *lingham*, the *yin* and *yang* and the sacred marriage which is the focal point of many an initiatory journey and represents the potential of all things to be constantly re-born, re-created. Viewers became participants or initiates and needed to engage with the work in a visual, physical, creative and spiritual manner. They embarked on a quest of significance, where the connectedness of human beings to the elements and the cosmos was re-established. They participated in a ritual, which goes back to the rituals of

Palaeolithic people entering a cave, medieval people going into a cathedral, the journey of the shaman entering a trance, a quest towards wholeness.

The quest was embarked upon at a portal or gateway in the shape of a *mandorla* (an almond shape) or *yonis* ( ). This shape is a universal symbol of the feminine and of birth. The portal was made of iron (the stones around the site of the installation are rich in iron, hence their reddish colour). Woven around the portal were plants, bones and pods, which symbolised life, death and renewal, the cycle of all things. By stepping through the *yonis* shaped portal, participants entered the realm of the feminine and, from here, the journey needed to be a creative and magical process of enlightenment and revelation.

A few steps beyond the portal was the next stage of the quest, where participants found four horn-shaped sculptures, placed so that they were aligned to the cardinal points. The use of sacred geometry in establishing sacred sites is universal (the chapter referring to the installation *Gaika's Kop - Sacred Mountain* deals with the subject of sacred geometry in greater depth). The sculptures, made from sneeze-wood and metal, supported glass mandorlas on which poems by Brian Walter were painted.

The poems were a visual element, shaped within the *mandorla* in forms suggesting pods, eggs, skulls or fossils. Participants could engage with the landscape through the lines of the poems, or, changing focus, read the poems against the backdrop of the landscape. The poems had no fixed order, but each in some way referred to the cardinal point towards which it was directed. While they reflected across from each other, offering different viewpoints and attitudes, they were thematically interlinked. They

dealt with colonial intrusions into the landscape and the destruction of the San vision of a connected relationship between humanity, the earth, animals and the universe.

In the ironic poem *Reason*, which was read facing north, towards the interior of the African continent, modern dismissiveness of the sacred was aligned with the destructive ignorance of colonial perspectives.

### Reason

Any place  
is neither here  
nor there: nothing means  
anything really. This is no  
soul-space, or centre, and doesn't exactly sync  
with either pole. It's not Africa in any special sense: not  
more so than any yard of continent beyond that farm fence  
of Wilgerbosch; and no way will standing here looking North  
help anyone think of the human hurt of the dead in Rwanda,  
of Angola's lifelong war, or make a viewer part of any African thing,  
black, boer, coloured, san or bushman thing. There is no trip, here, in or out,  
and nothing asks who you are or I, or where you stand, nor does the dead  
sand beneath us fossil up images of apartheid's wrong.  
So much for this place. What matter if, somewhere  
north in a hilltop grave, lies a woman who once wrote:  
"When that day comes and I am strong,  
I will hate everything that has power,  
and help everything that is weak"? She  
was a white woman, and she is gone.  
Be here, grounded. Best you  
watch your own head: Dont get bent,  
messing with the stuff out there, or  
the past here, where other minds  
once peeped at wagons, that also went,  
as might seem reasonable to do,  
about their own business, cutting  
brand new tracks across  
a place they thought  
they knew  
to be their vast  
and empty, dead  
Karoo.

In the poem *Shape*, however, reconstruction was sought through an image reminiscent of Helen Martins' creative use of broken and ground glass on the sculptures, walls and ceilings of the Owl House at Nieu-Bethesda. This poem was read facing west, the direction of the sun set.

### Shape

To tread  
 " ... the path to truth,  
 at every step you set your foot  
 down," she said, "on your own heart".  
 And here lies the heart: centre, for now, of all  
 you know. Underfoot, time has stoned the living  
 past into rock-boned pods, overhead, what we call  
 stars are thrown eternally apart from each other. Time,  
 which is nothing, in any real sense, is what we cling to,  
 with gravity. Hold it, now is the time  
 to dream stories. The stars  
 are splints of shining glass that she threw  
 to the empty heavens, and then, when our sun lies  
 wounded on the westful edge, and the dark dies upon us,  
 we will know that she will collect her scatterlings,  
 and that, even as we face the night,  
 she sets off to catch those broken bits  
 of far flung stars, to bare them home  
 in the old sackload of each trodden heart,  
 and that she will puzzle the bits, one  
 by broken one, and shape  
 them with her darkblind care  
 together, to redawn our dead  
 and waking sun.

Emphasising female creativity and the challenge to patriarchal frontiers, each poem included a quotation from Olive Schreiner's "Story of an African Farm", which is set in the Karoo. The poem *Absence* faced East, the direction of the rising sun, while *Balance* faced South, towards the ocean and Antarctica.

## Absence

His heart  
 "seemed full of little  
 bits of glass, that hurt."

This dawn broke with a great  
 vacancy, ground into hurtful bits:  
 an emptiness of quagga and trekbokke,  
 of a hunters foot-trail so telling  
 that you could feel the absent bodiness  
 that had pressed each print into careful form:  
 an emptiness of hearts once plucked like the string  
 of the gorah bow that drew this place, its hills  
 and all its dawn-dimmed stars, to be one.  
 Tendon-spirit that curved that bow is broken,  
 and who of us can now ever really know that far star  
 Canopus, pronking in the grey hollow dawn, who gave  
 the hunter his cunning arm and flick-sharp eye, and took  
 from him a fasted emptiness. The beauty of this broken  
 place can never be the same.

In all the heart of this place small sharp chips, as of glass  
 crunched into grains, of dreams that humanly dreamed  
 themselves, lie broken, in this place, dreams  
 that could feel the dark of springbok flanks  
 ripple upon kindred ribs: sacred hunter  
 of the dawn, storyteller, singer  
 of the rising day: dead, ground  
 down, hunted away by men  
 whose own hearts would break  
 up and draw apart, men who  
 never understood  
 the game.

## Balance

Somewhere,  
 out beyond that hill,  
 snaking through the valley,  
 past the town, stands Aasvoelkrantz,  
 rising like a god from the ground: deadpan  
 idol, giving away nothing. Its packed its own memories  
 and will do and say fokoll. Its aasvoel soul has flapped away.  
 Its not dead, mind, but, "like when the priests of Baal  
 cried aloud to their god" they found "Baal was gone a-hunting".  
 Now we come and pick about this dry ribcage of godswold, and grow

fat on it, and, like vultures full-fleshed, cannot rise from the kill.

Its easy to business by the unseen of a place: those whose shadowed back  
 when guns outshot their kindred of the footfall race and snapped for them  
 that bowstring that drew them to the moving moon. But we plan and map.  
 With friendly phone numbers fixed in our heads we quickly postcard  
 through the sites. No tightknot string will draw us towards anything  
 we see, and the unseen lives unfelt. So, lets go somewhere  
 out beyond that hill, and conceive of such a god: think  
 south, through the town, past AasvoelKrantz,  
 across Karoo and the Outeniqua, down  
 through surf and salt rock, leagues of sea,  
 to that clenched soul of Antarctica  
 that fixes this dry land we know,  
 that delicate fulcrum of our lives,  
 backpacked with miles  
 of ice and snow.

On the third morning after installing the work, a strong wind shattered the glass on  
 which the poems were written. Although unfortunate, it seemed appropriate, as the  
 poems made reference to shattered, broken, "little bits of glass that hurt", stars that are  
 "splints of shining glass", and "small sharp chips, as of glass crunched into grains".  
 After the glass had broken, the poems were written in wire, a solution inspired by Helen  
 Martin's fence writing at the Owl House in Nieu Bethesda.

The quest continued to the third stage where four *mandorlas* were set into the veld soil  
 (again these *mandorlas* were aligned to the cardinal points). Each *mandorla* contained  
 or symbolised one of the four elements, believed by medieval alchemists to be the basic  
 materials of all life. Participants could place themselves at the centre of the *mandorlas*,  
 which symbolised the cosmos and continuity, a Mandala, a Buddhist *Chakra* (The  
 Wheel of *Dharma*), the Celtic cross and the solar or lunar discs found in the San  
 engravings at Driekops Eiland near Kimberley.

The quest served as an initiation into elemental and sacred mysteries. The concept of viewers being objective observers of an artwork was no longer appropriate as they became participants and initiates.

### ***GAIKA'S KOP - SACRED MOUNTAIN***

The *Gaika's Kop - Sacred Mountain* installation was site-specific to the summit of Gaika's Kop, which is one of the highest and most prominent mountains in the Amatola range. It opened on the 21 March 1999, the date of the Autumn Equinox in the Southern Hemisphere. Visitors to the site made the journey to the summit of this massive and beautiful mountain, which I see as a sacred axis, reaching deep down into the molten core of the earth.

Gaika's Kop was formed by molten dolorite pushing its way, through the surrounding sandstone, to the surface. Dolorite is much harder than sandstone, which has eroded away.

The top of Gaika's Kop forms part of what was the Gondwana surface. The base of Gaika's Kop belongs to what is known as the Post Gondwana surface.

The San-Bushmen associated Gaika's Kop, and the surrounding area of the Amatola basin with the Mantis god Heitsi-Eibeb, who they believed, fathered their people. Like the Egyptian deity Osiris he died in a battle fought against darkness and was resurrected in the morning, with the rising sun. The present name of Gaika's Kop is a misspelling of the name of the Xhosa chief, Ngqira who once ruled in the area.

The archetypal concepts of the *Axis Mundi*, the Labyrinth, Sacred Geometry, the Androgyne and the Tree of Life are referred to as this work is intended to relate to an ancient and continuous tradition of Sacred Sites.

In symbolic terms Gaika's Kop represents an *Axis Mundi*, the axis of the world, linking the sky, the earth and the underworld. It is both a high point and the earth's navel. The idea of a mountaintop being sacred is extremely ancient. The creation myths of many cultures allude to a world covered in water (which is both creative and destructive). After a great battle between the forces of cosmos (order) and chaos, the water subsided and a mound of earth, the primordial ground of creation appeared.

Temples and sacred sites were often placed on a temenos, a high and sacred place. Temples, ziggurats, pyramids, *stupas* and cathedrals are all symbolic and architectural representations of the primordial and sacred mound and are approached in a ritualistic manner which relates to the shape of the sacred mountain, or to the spherical shape of the heavens, or to the course of the sun. The most basic and common ritual movement is circumambulation, which entails walking around the holy site in a clockwise direction, the direction of the sun. Other types of ritual movement are to walk upward towards the summit of the sacred mountain, or to walk inward, which is an initiatory journey to the interior of the cave, sanctuary, maze, labyrinth or mandala.

The labyrinth on the summit of Gaika's Kop was based on a Navajo medicine wheel and composed of four interconnecting spirals. Each spiral route to the centre was entered from one of the cardinal directions. The Labyrinth was marked out in stones and rocks that were found on the mountain. People who visited the site were able to walk along

the spiral paths of the Labyrinth to the centre. (For further information on the symbolism of the Labyrinth, refer to the chapter on *Labyrinth - Journeys to the Centre*)

Related to the labyrinth in form and concept is the mandala, consisting of the intersection of a circle, (symbolising the shape of the heavens) and a square (symbolising the earth). They can be seen as maps of the cosmos. Their purpose is to unite heaven and earth as well as to sanctify the four directions of the earth. In Tantric Buddhism a mandala is projected onto the human body in the form of a spiral that relates to the seven major *chakras*.

Many traditions considered the use of geometry vital to establishing and planning a sacred site, which was often a plan of the universe in microcosm. The cardinal directions north, south, east and west were considered, in order that the holy site related to the earth, heavens, constellations and deities.

The winged figure that stood in the centre of the labyrinth was both female and male. It represented the union of opposites that was referred to in medieval alchemy as the Sacred Marriage, *conjunctio, hierosgamos*, or *chymical* wedding. Symbolically it is related to the Chinese concept of *yin and yang*. This *chymical* wedding was a process of fermentation that demanded fire in order to turn lead into gold, or matter into spirit. According to Jung there is a parallel between this alchemical process and the process of intimate union or inner conciliation and healing between the unconscious and conscious aspects of an individual. In mythology and religious ritual this mystical union took place between goddess and god, priestess and priest, queen and king, earth and heaven, moon and sun and ensured the continuation of life.

The image of the Androgyne or Hermaphrodite is an image that unites the opposite sexes into a single being, into oneness. Myths often make reference to the first and most ancient deity as being androgynous, embodying primordial perfection and wholeness. Examples of deities embodying this state of unity are: *Zervain*, the Persian god of limitless time; Zeus and Heracles who are often represented dressed as women; Aphrodite is sometimes depicted as having a beard; Dionysus is shown as having decidedly feminine features; the Chinese deity of night and day is androgynous. In Hinduism there is the concept of the *shakta-shakti*, and many deities, notably *Siva* are depicted as being half-male, half-female. A prayer to *Siva*....

...the self that hovers  
in between  
is neither man  
nor woman.

The androgyne, being the personification of cosmic wisdom is often winged, yet its body made of dark earth, has roots, which connect it to that primal element.

The World Tree, or Tree of Life is also an *Axis Mundi* uniting the three main regions of the world, roots in the underworld, the realm of the dead, and branches reaching into the sky. The Scandinavian shaman deity, Odin, like Christ was sacrificed on this tree, which is used in both traditions as a vehicle to traverse the three cosmic zones, the heavens, the earth and the underworld. In the Christian tradition the cross, often portrayed as the Tree of Life, stood on the Sacred Mountain at the centre point of the world, Golgotha, the place of skulls, where Adam, the first man, was buried.

Five sculptures made of metal and sneeze-wood form part of the installation, one standing at the centre and four at the peripheries of the Labyrinth. They are intended to

be symbolic representations of the "Tree of Life" and contain poems by Norman Morrissey as well as visual, sculptural components.

### The Prayer

Give us something we can offer  
the stone we stand on,  
the sun, the moon sailing her seasons,  
the wind that rinses the stars:

give us this day  
hearts to know things  
inhuman, superhuman

that we may at last  
be ourselves.

*The Prayer* was etched onto a copper spiral, which would continuously turn in the wind.

### The Voice of the Stone

I am the Mother,  
old magma  
thrust from Earth's roiling womb,  
a breast held up to heaven.

I will crumble slowly  
in the instant of eternity  
that's God's inhalation.

*The Voice of the Stone* was placed so that when reading the poem, one faced north,  
towards the interior of the African continent.

### The Voice of the Sun

I am He who strokes this breast,  
warms Earth's womb,  
bends the seed to ripeness:

I am He  
who twirls the eagle  
high as men's dreams,  
who dies to arise forever.

*The Voice of the Sun* was placed on the eastern side of the labyrinth, so that when reading it one faced the direction of the rising sun.

### The Voice of the Moon

I am She  
 who wisps round  
 from nothing to nothing  
 - pulling seas,  
 towing lives from dark to dark  
 like a lantern.

*The Voice of the Moon* faced west, the direction of the sun set.

### The Voice of the Wind

I wander, bluster,  
 peal in triumph, keen in sorrow,  
 tear my hands on ragged rock,  
 soothe them over still water:  
 aren't I rather like you?

This sculpture stood at the southern entrance to the Labyrinth, south being the direction from which the prevailing winds blow.

The installation remained on the summit of Gaika's Kop for a month. During this time it was the cause of a certain amount of controversy. Members of a fundamentalist Christian group based on Hogsback, convinced a local farmer that the work, which he believed to be on his property, was "satanic". The farmer told an SABC news crew that he was convinced that "witchcraft rituals" were being enacted. A crudely constructed wooden crucifix was placed at the site of the installation. Both the farmer and forestry official threatened to damage the work by "throwing it off the mountain". The sculpture representing the androgyne was mutilated by having the penis broken. I received

anonymous phone calls from people who either threatened me or quoted biblical passages that related to idolatry and witchcraft.

This controversy attracted the attention of the media, who reported on it on television and in the press. The work was intended to be temporary so as not to have any long-term environmental impact. It was removed from the mountain top and taken to Grahamstown where it formed part of the exhibition that was held over the period of the Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts in July 1999.

### ***LABYRINTH - JOURNEYS TO THE CENTRE***

*Labyrinth - Journeys to the Centre* was site-specific to a grove of oak trees and an old settler well situated behind the International Library of African Music (ILAM) on the Rhodes University campus. The unicursal, spiralling labyrinth centred on the well and was entered between two oak trees, whose branches and leaves formed a protective canopy.

The labyrinth was made from wattle and daub. I employed four women who were skilled in this building technique to teach me and assist me with the work. The traditional use of this type of building is widespread in sub-Saharan African domestic architecture. The buildings and encircling walls of traditional villages were usually circular and composed of hard clay mixed with a small amount of cow-dung. The construction of a wattle and daub wall entails planting a skeleton of strong vertical support in the ground, usually about a metre apart. After the support has been

established, a woven grid of slender horizontal sticks is bound to the uprights using hide, roots grass or in recent times, wire.

The mud (*udaka*) is mixed with cattle dung and sometimes grass for strength. This daub mixture is applied in two layers, one from the inside, the other from the outside.

Traditional builders use their hands, rather than tools for applying the daub; this gives rise to a beautiful variety of patterns and textures. This gives a tactile and sculptural quality to the surface of walls. Men and women play different parts in building.

Women plaster the houses with daub, cut grass for the thatched roofs and plaster the floor, men cut the wood for and construct the framework as well as thatch the roofs.

The mud used on the floors is mixed with cow dung and sometimes ant heap and ox blood. Cow dung has disinfectant properties, ant heap has strong binding qualities and seeds have difficulty germinating in it. The ox blood also has binding qualities and adds sheen and colour to the mud.

The labyrinth is an ancient symbol, which can be a design, a building, an open path, a path enclosed by banks or hedges, or a dance. There are two kinds of labyrinth; the unicursal, in which a single route leads straight to the centre and the multicursal, which is designed to confuse. The design of the labyrinth suggests the course of the sun, its decline into winter and darkness, its increase towards summer and light. Labyrinths appeared in prehistoric rock carvings and in traditional cultures as symbolic maps of the underworld. They were associated with death and rebirth. The inward journey is death, the outgoing one life. In death one returns to the body of the mother, the earth, from which one is reborn. This is seen as the great initiation. Lesser initiations marked the different stages of life, which were marked by ceremonies that were rebirth rituals.

(The term initiation refers to a body of rites of transition, which serve to alter the religious and social status of the initiate). The initiatory journey to the centre was labyrinthine, often dangerous and arduous, it is a journey from the profane to the sacred. This death and rebirth symbolises the continuous transformation and purification of the spirit throughout life. The labyrinth represents both the earth and the human body as source of life.

In myth, the labyrinth is presided over by a woman and walked by a man. In the centre dwells a monster. Theseus, a mythical hero, defeated the Minotaur in the labyrinth beneath the palace of Knossos. In Christian mythology, ritual maze or labyrinth dances were associated with St. George killing the dragon or Christ showing the path to salvation. Some dances feature ropes, which could represent the thread that was given to Theseus by Ariadne, which allowed his escape from the labyrinth - in other words, his rebirth. This thread could also represent the umbilical cord.

Many Christian churches like Chartres Cathedral had labyrinths featured somewhere in their design. The traditional religious interpretation is that they symbolised the folds of sin that barred the path to heaven. They were sometimes used as substitutes for pilgrimages to the Holy Land and were called '*Chemin de Jerusalem*'. Pilgrims would traverse them on their knees as a form of penance.

A poem written by Norman Morrissey was painted on the mud floor. It could be read as one progressed through the spiral. The wind would blow the fallen leaves of the oak trees to hide and reveal the words of the poem.

## Dione

Once upon his time  
 Kronos, Earth's first limber clod,  
 took to wife Dione  
 - moon-wisp, slender oak tree.

But Ancient Night still clogged his veins,  
 his sons would bud new worlds  
 to make him ugly,  
 he ground them back to clay.

So Dione, doves nesting in her hair,  
 hid a glimmer she'd borne  
 to grow bright on the hills.

This clearness at her feet  
 has wombed our skies  
 ever after.

The well was situated in the centre of this labyrinth, its still, dark waters reflected the branches of the oak trees, the sky as well as the face of the participant who had made the inward journey. The Minotaur encountered is the dark aspect of the self. The centre is the womb, place of potential life, balance and infinity. Contemporary religion, which emphasises the light of reason and avoids the irrational recesses of the unconscious psyche, has transformed this dark interior into the abyss of Satan.

To many ancient cultures, underground water is seen as coming from the realm of the earth, the ancient mother. Many of the ancient sacred sites have wells, springs, underground streams, or catacombs in their foundations. Holy wells are found in the crypts of many Christian churches, which were built over and around pre-Christian shrines. In Christian symbolism the well signifies salvation. The act of drawing water from a well is, like fishing, symbolic of drawing out and upwards the contents of the

deep. To look into the waters of a well is tantamount to the mystic attitude of contemplation and meditation.

Water being under the influence of the moon, is the lunar element. It is associated with birth and the feminine principle, the womb, the *prima materia*. Water regenerates, like blood or sap. Baptism by water or blood washes away the old and sanctifies the new.

The planning of this labyrinth evolved in collaboration with a group of dancers and musicians who used rhythm and movement to express their transitional journey to the centre. Dance, which incorporates the body and movement, is ritualised experience. Like music and singing, dance is not a static form of creative expression, it lends itself to repetition and therefore to ritual.

"No form of dance is permanent, only the basic principle of dance is enduring, and out of it, like the cycle of nature itself, rises and endless succession of new springs out of old winters".<sup>31</sup>

The dance and music was free form, spontaneous and improvised, yet the concepts underlying the spiral, labyrinthine dance and the trance-like process are ancient and relate to springtime rituals that were performed when the earth's fertility was reawakened after the long dark, winter.

"Christianity has lost its dances, and consequently its spiral, growing motion, the natural circling around the spindle\axis. All that remains is the

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<sup>31</sup> Kastner, J and Wallis, B. 1998. p 239.

linear procession. A sixth century Gnostic hymn warned " who danceth not,  
knoweth not what cometh to pass".<sup>32</sup>

As the dancers move through the labyrinth, the spiral winding to the centre emulates the whirling of the planets in the galaxies, the pattern of shells, clouds, whirlpools and the folds of the brain. The microcosm of the labyrinth places the dancer in harmonious relationship to the macrocosm of the universe.

"In contemporary art, ritual is not just a passive repetition but the acting out  
of collective needs".<sup>33</sup>

### ***TRANSFORMING THE CENTRE***

*Transforming the Centre* was a continuation of and development on *Labyrinth - Journeys to the Centre*. A number of significant transformations took place, one of the most obvious was the fact that summer had transformed the oak trees and the undergrowth surrounding the labyrinth, the space became green, lush and dark.

The spiral journey to the well has become longer, more complex and mysterious. (The centre had been left open to allow for dancing). The inward journey reveals that the walls of the labyrinth transform from wattle and daub to trees and plants; the centre has become a place of life and growth where the labyrinth reveals its serpentine nature. The

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p 239.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p 239.

coils of an earthen snake twist up from the depths of the well and become the labyrinth itself.

Like the labyrinth the serpent or dragon is coiled. In mythic imagery it is depicted as creating and protecting a treasure at the centre or under a tree. This treasure is wisdom, divine knowledge and spiritual immortality. The serpent image occurs universally.

Jung provides an explanation for these recurring images:

"Man is no longer a distinct individual, his mind widens out and merges into the mind of mankind - not the conscious mind, but the unconscious mind of mankind, where we are all the same".<sup>34</sup>

In the Hermetic, Cabbalistic and Tantric traditions the serpent or dragon is the guardian of the threshold between worlds and of the springs of life and immortality. As serpents are continuously sloughing their skins, dying and being reborn, they, like the moon, are symbols of timeless regeneration and resurrection. The undulating motion of the snake is often associated with the branches and roots of trees, and with the movement of water. The phallic shape of the serpent can represent procreative male energy and it is often associated with female deities.

It was believed that snakes lived underground and in darkness, they are therefore often associated with death and the dark aspect of humanity. As well as being able to traverse the under and upper worlds, they are also able to swim, and are sometimes seen as mediating between the realms.

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<sup>34</sup> Campbell, J. 1974. p 186.

The serpent rising from the depths of the well alludes to the concept of *Kundalini*, which in the Tantric tradition is seen as being a serpent, coiled and slumbering at the base of the spine in the *chakra* or energy centre known as the *mulhadara*. The aim of the mystic is to rouse this serpent through the practice of yoga. As *Kundalini* ascends through the *chakras* it brings increasing powers into play until it reaches the highest point, the *sahasrara*, at the crown of the head, when total awareness and enlightenment is attained.

In India, evidence of the practice of Yoga can be found on seals, which date back to the Indus Valley civilisation, which existed between 2500 and 1500 BC. These seals show figures of people seated in yoga postures, accompanied by serpents, which appear to rise up from the ground.

Biblical reference to the worship of serpent deities occurs in the book of II Kings 18. A brazen serpent, named Nehushtan was worshipped along with the image of his spouse, the goddess Asherah in the temple of Jerusalem. This serpent was associated with Yahweh who in Numbers 21

"sent fiery serpents among them and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against Yahweh and against you; pray to Yahweh, that he may take the serpents from us'. So Moses prayed for the

people. And Yahweh said to Moses, 'make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live'.<sup>35</sup>

This serpent relates to the legend of Moses' rod, which he used to frighten Pharaoh and to bring life-giving water in the desert. According to Christian myth, Moses' use of the healing serpent is a prefiguration of the Crucifixion;

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14).<sup>36</sup>

In early Christian times there were Christian sects, who honoured the serpent of the Garden of Eden as the first appearance of Christ as savior. One of these sects was known as *Perates*, which is derived from a Greek word, meaning "on the yonder side". This corresponds with the Sanskrit word "*paramita*" or "yonder shore", which is the goal of Tantric meditation which aims to raise the serpent energy of *Kundalini*.

The final stage of this project will involve planting the indigenous trees that formed the centre of the labyrinth, in a grove on the outskirts of Grahamstown. (Thirty indigenous trees have been donated to this project by Albany Working for Water). A tree planting ceremony will involve the dancers and musicians who assisted with conceptualising the first stage of the labyrinth. The aim of planting this grove is to answer a need that is both environmental and spiritual.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p 296.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p 297.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to establish that art concerned with re-evaluating the relationship to the environment and spirituality could serve to connect people to one another and to the environment. The work of contemporary Land and Environmental artists working in a manner conscious of environmental issues and suggesting a sacred and creative attitude to ecology was discussed.

Postmodernist philosophers have shown that meaning and power are not determined by one dominant viewpoint. As perceptions of the world have become increasingly multifaceted, intertextual and relativistic, the relationship of human beings to the environment has changed considerably. Knowledge of the fragility of the environment and the great threats that face it call for a redefinition of cultural production as political activity that is collaborative, multicultural and engaged with community in an active, reconstructive manner. Many artists address the issues of nationalism, local culture, class, race, gender and sexuality. These artists have recognised a responsibility to society and to the environment. They reject the modernist philosophical and aesthetic framework that views the artist as working in isolation from society. The focus has moved towards an art that expresses interconnectedness rather than separateness, which emphasises relationship, community and the environment. The artist and viewer have become participants in, rather than observers of nature. Land artists no longer seek to re-arrange the natural world, but seek to create an emotional and spiritual relationship with it.

My own creative work expresses this concern with the relationship between the artist, the work of art, humanity and the environment. People visiting the sites are not merely observers, but participants. It was necessary to walk, climb or dance through, up to and into the installations in order that they be experienced. The first three projects involved collaboration with the poets, Brian Walter or Norman Morrissey. The poetry was an integral part of the works and was written on glass, etched into copper and brass, or painted onto the ground.

The installations related to both ancient and contemporary sites as well as to contemporary theories of art and spirituality. They incorporated a number of archetypal symbols, some of them recurring. These were the concepts of the alchemical elements; earth, water, fire and air, the journey, the labyrinth, the tree of life, the axis mundi, the well, the androgyne and the serpent. These symbols were discussed within the context of the particular installations.

## GLOSSARY

Androgyne	An hermaphrodite.
Axis Mundi	The axis of the world.
Chakra	The continuously turning wheel of the Buddhist law.
Dharma	The law of Buddhism
Kundalini	A Tantric Buddhist concept, which relates to awakening the energy centres of the body through the practice of yoga.
Lingham	The Sanskrit word for penis.
Mandorla	An almond shape.
Mulhadara	The tantric energy centre at the base of the spine.
Paramita	A Sanskrit word meaning 'yonder shore'.
Prima Materia	The primal matter, believed by the medieval alchemists to have formed all things.
Sahasrara	The tantric energy centre at the crown of the head.
Shakta	The male principle in the tantric and Hindu traditions.
Shakti	The female principle in the tantric and Hindu traditions.
Stupa	A domed mound, used for the purpose of ritual circumambulation and meditation in the Buddhist tradition.
Udaka	The Xhosa word for the mud used in wattle and daub architecture.
Yoni	The Sanskrit word for vagina.

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