CONTEMPORARY ECO-EMBEDDED ART PRACTICES IN ASIA AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN PROTECTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL INTERESTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on examining the significance of the various approaches of art adopted by contemporary Asian artists for tackling the threatening situations of pollution, deforestation, global warming etc. To create an awareness of such environmental issues these artists adopt various ritualistic and performative approaches which also interactively involve the public. In an Asian context, art, customs, rituals and environment are intertwined together. They are in fact utilized as the various means of seeking loving relationships with nature and the organisms living in it. Such approaches for creating awareness of the values of nature and environment in life are not new. Instead they have been part of various traditions still flourishing throughout Asia. Taking inspirations from these the artists are now not only fulfilling their artistic ambitions but they are also proving to be the active agents in saving the environmental interests. Various ritualistic traditions were devised to create a sense of belonging to the nature and to understand its benevolent properties. Due to rapid industrialization and propagation of consumer mentality during recent decades most of such beautiful practices are disappearing. These factors not only have disturbed the ecological balance in the significant ecological zones but also they have threatened the sustainability of the practitioners of such cultural practices. Analyzing the eco-embedded art practices of contemporary artists like Aradhana Feisal, Sheba Chhachhi, Navjot Altaf, Aliya Paibani etc. This paper assesses their contributive extent in awareness for conservation and maintenance of environment.

Key Words: Eco-embedded art in Asia, Eco-aesthetics, Politics of ecology, Contemporary eco-sensitive artists, Sustainable ecosystem

INTRODUCTION

If art has to stay relevant, it will have to not only address the joys and aspirations of the masses but also provide creative solutions to its fears, confusions and anxieties together with celebrating the meanings of life and echoing with rhythms in nature. We may find several Asian artists who evoking such sentiments in their works are responding well to the present global crisis of climatic change and other environment related problems. But before we delve deeper in the art scene of Asia we must have an acquaintance with the current situation of the ecological crises. Since the post-liberalization era started, the power of capitalism has been conspicuously growing up by leaps and bounds. The entire globe has felt it self helplessly victimized of the all co-modifying attitude of the integrated world capitalism towards nature and human world. The lifestyle of the people around the globe in many respects has been overtly materialized. Due to propagation of mass media irrational subjectivity, we have seen during last few decades that various natural resources has exhaustively been exploited for mass production with utter disregard for the fact that the nature though restores it self but not with the same pace that we have been trying to tap it with through this period. As a result many serious problems related to ecological balance and human sustainability have come out which are posing sheer threats on future survival of mankind and several other species on this planet. There is no need to explain how serious
this issue is as we have already seen two disastrous events (Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir) India in our own country just in last two consecutive years which put a big question mark on our present understanding of life and its relation to the surrounding environment. Deep dissatisfaction among the masses, endangering phenomena of many of the species of both animals and plants changing climatic conditions across the globe are some of the pertinent issues that have compelled us to rethink on such several parameters like our present ways of governance, development policies, using natural resources, educational methods, sanitation and health implementation, treating demographic issues, addressing subaltern voices, risk management capacities, laws related to protection of natural and cultural heritages. We may see that feeling the urgency for acute response to deal with this crisis there has developed a green consensus among the various disciplines like academics, governmental and non-governmental organizations, film and communication media, politics, religious institutions etc. There has been several approaches adopted, either individually or in combination such as ecologically oriented media activism, academic research, political forums, protest activities, cyber-activism etc. to cope with this crisis.

Interestingly there have been multivariate creative responses from art world and other organizations, devoted for creative cause too, which are not only oriented to question the Germaneness of prevailing nature of political responses towards the demands for conservation of natural resources, socio-ecological responsibilities undertaken by the corporate sectors, eco-conscious value imparting parameters of educational organizations, relevance of socio-cultural authorities in developing eco-aesthetical sensibility among the masses, modern ways of life and its emphasis on bland consumerism, mapping local geographies from the position of cosmopolitan perspectives, misleading idea of linking everything to the process of globalization etc. But they have also proved themselves to be the significant agents in creating awareness about the significance of sustainable life among the masses. At times going beyond these they have even undertaken such projects themselves to work for sustainable ecological cause. Felix guattari has insisted upon the need for ethico-aesthetical paradigm to counter the elusive power of capitalism which he thinks it as the root cause for the current ecological situation of crisis. This paradigm has been the guiding principle behind many eco-aesthetical activities around the world during last two decades and a half. In the Asian continent which is though already verdant with many traditional eco-sensitive customs and rituals, this crisis seems graver, as it is aggravated by the problems like poverty, over-population, low per capita income, high rate of illiteracy and pollution, etc. It needs an urgent notice of the world communities to run a massive campaign for making it a sustainable place to live happily. The Asian artists who are concerned with eco-aesthetical sensitivities noticing the richness of indigenous traditions have tried to embed their art-related activities into the local cultural contexts and have tried to correlate them with the indigenous customs and rituals. Thus they have been successful not only in fulfilling their artistic ambitions but they have also expressed their due concern with the problems of the societies and the environment in which they have not only grown and lived but have also become the leaders who show the new vistas of life which teaches how to live sensibly in harmonious relation with the nature and at the same time, acknowledging and celebrating the diversity of life patterns on this planet.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

To highlight the possibilities of the contribution of eco-embedded art practices in resolving some of serious environment related problems. The paper is intended to highlight how the contemporary artists and the other art practices in the Asian regions which have unequivocally experimented with the current ecological issues and how their bold statements have set the exemplary models for the political and planning authorities and also how they show the ways through the adoption of which the campaigns like river cleaning, mass tree plantation, managing tourism waste etc. can be run to address the situation.
The paper also highlights how these artists and the creative institutions by adopting collaborative projects lead and inspire the local societies and the educational institutions and authorities for community participation to deal with the situations in an efficient manner.

**DISCUSSION**

Adopting theoretical and interpretative approach for analyzing the sources of inspiration and the impacts of the various art projects and efforts undertaken by the artists and the collaborative projects conceived and materialised by the institutions and groups the significance of these eco-embedded artistic activities have been highlighted. The frame works adopted for the discussion can be considered as the integrated sum of the conceptual models such as Guattaris ethico-aesthetics paradigm, Bruno Latours politics of nature, Marxist cultural geography given by Neil Smith, the climate justice activism the rights of nature proposed by Indian scientist and environmentalist Vandana Shiva, Berin Golunus activism rooted in tradition etc. 

**Eco-art, eco-aesthetics and politics of ecology**

Several terms such as eco-art, convention, social ecology, post-media activism and political ecology etc. has been used to denote the socio-politico-ecological activist engagement with creative media and ethics. These having some contextual nuances of the variations in their meanings have been used to address the issues currently related to the environment and its restoration with public engagement.

Etymologically the term art is the derivation of the sanskrit root *rta*. *Rta* signifies the dynamics of the cosmos and the process through which it is continuously being created and maintained the virtues and the perfection involved in its evolution. So *rta* is the way something is done with excellence and in agreement with the natural order. *Rta* does not find any discordance between science and art instead it seeks an integrated approach towards life, nature and the human and non-human worlds. Today there are attempts to understand art in this sense. It is a major shift from traditionally held modern western view of art that was thought to be something that is done creatively for its own sake only to be appreciated because of beauty and order in its forms and that it may not necessarily should have any purpose utility or function.

Defining eco-art or broadly called ecological art is a challenging task as every day a new approach to respond to the present crisis of nature and environment are being invented and many other new dimensions of engagement with the public and media are added to the one that already exists. Ruth Wallen in order to catch up with this fluidity and broadness of the area has recently tried to present the condensed version of many of his conversations with his colleagues and others as the definition for eco-art ecological art is grounded in an ecological ethic and systems theory addressing the web of interrelationships between the physical biological, cultural, political and historical aspects of ecosystems. Asking probing questions, fashioning potent metaphors, identifying patterns, weaving stories, offering restoration and remediation, inventively using renewable materials and re-envisioning systems, ecological artists inspire, advocate and innovate, revealing and/or enhancing ecological relationships while modeling ecological values. Ecological art inspires caring and respect for the world in which we live, stimulates dialogue, sparks imagination and contributes to the socio-cultural transformations whereby the diversity of life forms found on earth may flourish.

Eco-art works in interest of the public and the environment as a progressive art movement at the intersectional points of the areas like society, politics, culture etc. It stresses community involvement and participatory democracy by applying imaginary ideas and inspiring techniques in creative formulations of the situations in which the local public and the society are embedded such that they may be taught why they should acknowledge their obligations to the other members of the biosphere and how a sustainable future can be created. Thus eco-artists starting from the basic points work as the cultural activists. By producing cultural materials and providing learning environments the ecological artists attempt to alter the beliefs and practices of the
people so that they may be oriented towards the better understanding of the ecological issues and the spiritual wisdom. Ecological artists try to evoke the dormant creativity of the participating community members so that they may too become the active agents of social transformation.

Eco-aesthetics taking interdisciplinary stance and setting debates on the linkages between human and non-human formations goes beyond the present options and talk on the possible alternatives to deal with the politics of ecology. Traversing across the disciplines like art-practice, humanities, social sciences the eco-aesthetics seeks to question the traditional notions of aesthetics and explores the possibilities to provide its newer meanings. It is a form of critical response to the elites governance and corporate sectors rhetoric of saving the environment.14

**Eco-embedded art practices in Asia**

Understanding the gravity of ecological situation and inspired from the sense of obligation for nature and society many of the artists from Asian region has come forward to take a vanguard step for creating awareness to save the planet. This becomes evident if we go through some of the recent art events and festivals held in various regions of the continent.

If we start from India, we recently saw five such eco-embedded art festivals that attracted artists not only from the country but also from the other parts of the world they are site specific Project Buddha Enlightened 2006 at Bodh Gaya, Bihar Sandarbh sculpture workshop 2009 at Baroda, India. Performance art based event art Karvan 2010 the in context : Public-art-ecology a residency programme at KHOJ Studios, New Delhi, India and the installation and the site specific 3rd Regional art workshop, January 2014, Silchar, Assam, India. The idea behind the Buddha Enlightened held during 25th of October to the 12th November 2006 was to explore the meanings and values of life and spirituality and to trigger off interaction and mutual respect among the artists and the residents. It was an attempt to engage the artists to the present situation of the world and contemplate over the idea of tolerance and holistic development and express their views through their site specific works of art. Several artists responded uniquely and marvelously showed their concerns about nature and environment and the man’s intimate relations with these. The vancouver-based Bryan Mulvihill as his part of performance invited and served tea to the local residents of Bodh Gaya in his own designed clay cups that were prepared by the help of local potters. Another artist, Christophe Meyer from France in his lyrical performance likened the act of having tea in a clay cup (Kulhar) to be the kiss of the earth in the morning. In his another act giving the metaphorical vocabulary to the cows of Bodh Gaya Meyer painted them in vibrant colors of red and pink to create a sense of blend and harmony of Hindu and Buddhist culture and transformed this gentle creature into the powerful emblem of benevolent nature and spiritual. Dutch artists Jozef Van der Heijden and Maurice Frymuth together created a video project which envisaged that Napoleon after being barred from heaven wanders through various places and finally to his solace he visits India and sits beneath a tree that symbolized Mahabodhi tree with a coconut and a Tibetan prayer wheel in his hand. Cuban artist, Pango created a number of paintings on his own created canvas using burlap and paper with the help of local Thangka artist to develop a spiritual perspective even in consumption of cheapest material, which he considers necessary for creating a sustainable world.15

Sandarbh is a residency programme held annually, which centers around Baroda, India. Its sphere of activities traverses around the nearby cities and the villages from both the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan, India. The popularity of this project has grown up to international level and now it is regularly held in other parts of the world also. It inspires artists from India and Abroad to do work who are inspired from historical, cultural and political contexts and to relate them to the ideas and issues which are currently relevant. It involves local communities from the villages and children from the schools in their interactive community projects. Sandarbh is an art initiative that discourages the commerce-oriented art production and supports the move away venture from the city life. For a general
idea of how the art practices done in this annual event evoke the ecological issues we shall consider the Sandarbh workshop held from the 23rd of October to the 3rd of November 2009. One remarkable work in this event which is worth mentioning here was that of the participating artist Madhu Das from Bangalore, Karnataka, India. He showed his concern towards our irresponsible generosity as he termed it for the road side trees in Baroda, India. Through his site-specific installation work he drew public attention towards how the tree-saplings which were protected by iron made tree-guard when grew young became disfigured by the non-removal of these guards which are now sink into the tree trunks such that their removal seems impossible. He photographed several of such mutilated trees found around the city and set a road side exhibition of these photographs which attracted a lot of viewers who expressed their anguish over and also reflected on such kinds of negligence. Dozen of other artists also showed their concerns on the issues like female feticide important in the context of the region because it is much prevalent evil practice here migration etc. The artist Abdul Haque PM’s artwork titled, I have an idea but drew viewers attention in which the artist had intelligently used balloons as an expressive tool in his artwork to change the commonly held rigidity of our opinions which are often thrust by us in response to any new idea though they may be useful for the society and environment but instantly rejected calling it outlandish. Actually Abdul had imagined a balloon like giant water tank which could adjust its size in accordance to the amount of water contained within it.16

Art Karvan held in the year 2010 was a live art project which travelled across the several cities of North and Eastern India during the period from the 12th of February to 18th of April. It invited 30 artists from India and Abroad to actively express and interact with each other with their views on the conditions of environment and politics and the society in the region. The basic idea behind the Art Carvan was to move out of the core towards periphery to develop a new outlook. Focusing on performance art the most of the activities were to be carried out in the streets and public places at different locations in the traversing cities like New Delhi, Patna, Ranchi, Lucknow, Kolkata, Santiniketan Shimla, Jammu, Srinagar, etc. To interact with the people, react according to the needs of environment and to provoke the dialogues. Besides other burning themes the main theme that recurred during the whole journey of the Art Karvan was that of environment and pollution. During the project several discursive sessions were held in which not just the artists but audience were compulsorily invited at different places and cities and they were encouraged to question and to become the part of the so conceived activities of the artists.

Diverse contexts of the cities and the localities provided artists to approach differently.17 Another important event held in 2010 related to ecology and art where the artists and the creative media found their due freedom to express the need of our concerns towards ongoing environmental crisis at various levels was in context : Public-art-ecology residency at KHOJ studios, New Delhi, India. The focus of the event was that of intervention in public sphere. The activities of the artists who were from India and Abroad Germany, Japan and the USA ranged from mapping weather patterns and the effects of climate change on local communities, interactive video sculpture, examining the signification of trees in the context of road zones, designing interactive tableaux to raise questions around conservation consumption, memory and acculturation and many such pieces of art and performances.18

Navjot Altaf’s collaboration project for the above event barakhamba 2010 with the environmentalist Ajay Mahajan and the scientist Faiyaz Khudsar and other interested individuals/groups from Barakhamba road and other parts of Delhi was related to de-choking of the trees and draw attention towards the conditions of the soil and creating awareness for planting trees. The main highlight of their project was to draw attention towards the context of road side zones and working towards ecological sustainability and social equity.19

Aliya Pabani, Namrata Mehta and Tejas working as the temporary group in KHOJs in
context: Public-art-ecology 2010 undertook a very unique approach to create a bilateral communication between the public art and the public. Their project and the object of my extension was aimed to create an artwork in public space that might act more as a feedback system that is co-created by its participants, viewers and the artists. They created from the stainless steel two objects cone like vessels one concave and other convex, assembled with devices that could record sound and video. They were designed such that they could be hung at common public places like shops and stalls. These two instruments were shifted to different places back and forth at Gurgaon and Chandni Chowk on regular basis throughout the event where they were kept in public trust. The public was encouraged to interact with the devices by. The purpose of these objects was to serve it self as the receptacles of peoples aspirations and memories and to provide to the public an opportunity to reflect upon how they interact with their environment and the social surrounding.

The project Bhogi / Rogi by Sheba Chhachhi for this KHOJs event was also very interesting. It was an interactive video intervention. She collaborated with the German artist Thomas Eichorn for this project. The project intended to highlight the way we are constituted by our consumption habits. The important feature that it targeted upon was the consumption of the genetically modified crops by the common masses of India. The work was intended to raise question about the consumption patterns of the ordinary public and their longer implications. A very significant work in the context of our discussion of eco-art by Sheba Chhachhi that also needs to be mentioned here is the site-specific performance-cum-installation art – the black waters will burn (created for the Yamuna-elbe public art and outreach project 2011) which reflects upon the current state of the river Yamuna, perhaps the most polluted one in India. Though her main preoccupation is with feminist concerns, yet keeping her preoccupation intact she has done a few site-specific performances. Since 2005 she was contemplating upon the cultural memories and the eco-philosophy lying embedded in the associated narratives of the river which she thought earlier, will open the vistas to express the grave situation of the river. But to her utter despair this time it was coming out of methane from the river that prompted her to devise this poignant piece of performance. She refers to the sacred text of Yamunaashatak hymn that describes the river in anthropomorphic terms as a beautiful sensual woman. Comparing these two ideas of the river (mythological and actual) the picture emerges as that of a wounded female form. In her own words for me, the hymn was a device to look at the strange disconnect between worshipping the goddess and complete disregard for the river. When it was dark one could see the reflection of floating installation on the water which appeared as the burning flames. Expressing her anguish she says for me the death of the river is also the death of the feminine.

The 3rd regional art workshop was held 13th 14th and 15th of January 2014 in Barak Valley in Silchar in the North Eastern state of Assam in India. Artist from India and Abroad were invited to do site-specific performances and artworks in collaboration with the indigenous people and using folk resources. The focus of the event was to celebrate native subjects against the so called value system created by the society. The artists took seemingly trivial objects and through their imagination and incorporating the ideas of local population transformed them to a visually appealing and significant looking objects thus highlighting the value of the native objects and significance of the local practices to the locals. For example one of the several significant artworks created during the workshop was the native rickshaw borrowed from the local rickshaw puller that was later transformed into a vibrantly colourful vehicle. It was in a way a statement that inspires the use of traditional and to live the life in its full. The workshop ended in the small village of Choto Dudh Patil which on that day looked like a dynamic natural stage where creative activities materialized in the form of 10 site specific installations created with the found natural and household materials from the local environment.
Taiwanese artists in USA with the title going green : New environmental art from Taiwan held from June to November 2010. It was again a site specific eco-art event in which works of 16 Taiwanese artist were displayed or created at four different places in USA Flushing, NY, Philidelphia, PA (it consisted of two venues), Eureka, CA and Venue Five Pembroke, NC. Curated by Jane Ingran Allen, the going green was in fact as she tells was intended for the western world. Observing the significance of ecological art in context of Taiwan Allen says I think because the environment is becoming such a pressing issue everywhere. Taiwan, because it is a smaller island is going to be more affected because it is very crowded and very urbanized. Coughing Earth done by Chin-Chin-Yang was one of the several important works done for this event. It was the combination of video projection and installation. A wheel chair was used which symbolized sick earth. A projector was put on it for roving and was decorated with branches of some trees. The images projected on were of rising water and the fish. Another significant site-specific-work was everything is Buddha created by Chao-Chang Lee. The schuylkill centre for environmental education in philadelphia. This work though can be interpreted in many ways perhaps expresses the need of likening our faith and perspective for the environment with that of spirituality.24 This event came out to be the forerunner for the annually held Taiwan Wetlands international environment art project in the country Yunlin County which first started in 2009.

In its fourth edition in 2013, the Cheng-Long Wetlands international environment art project six artists from Taiwan, Europe and USA which included Giorgio Tessadri from Italy/Belgium, Johan Sietzema from Netherlands, Kuochun, Michael Rofka from Germany, Michele Brody from USA and Chiu and Yachu Kang from Taiwan were invited. They all created very interesting huge site-specific eco-artworks on the wetlands of Cheng-Long with the help of local volunteers. In order to highlight the ephemerality of such artworks these huge installations were to be made entirely with biodegradable or recycled materials found locally such as oyster shells, reeds, driftwood and bamboo etc. Referring to the event theme, fish on the table the artists explored the idea of importance of preserving natural resources for the future. One of the interesting artwork by Michael Rofka the milkfish was an enormous fish created out of assembling the bamboos inside which the viewer can go through the opening at the fishs eye. They could peek through the gaps between the bamboos and could experience the outer world as a fish would do. The cultural exchange with the local community was the integral part of the event which provided the artists with opportunity to learn some basics and skills needed to survive in the rural wetland environment. Due to this annually held event the village has started developing because of the attention of the government and other organizations and the villagers too could gain experience of the outside world by interacting with the participating artists.25 In its fifth edition in 2014 the artists were encouraged to do with some functional aspect of the site specific works with locals participation. The functional aspects of the installations were to be oriented towards being useful in some way for the locals profession of fishing.26

Moving to Thailand, we have a beautiful regularly held eco-embedded art in residency ComPeung at Doi Saket District in Chiang Mai that invites local and international artists to stay there for at least one month or more and provides platform for exchanging the ideas and engaging with the local community. The ComPeung envisions itself as being an open playground for dialogs, alternative contexts, experiments, explorations and mutual learning. The mesmerizing beauty of the nature and the serenity of the place in Doi Saket provide the artists a retreat into the bounties of nature, to come out of the materialist life. The tranquility of the place inspires them to be intuitive, spontaneous and to experience the force that connects them to the nature and then express it creatively in their artworks. The monks from the nearby monastery help artists in their projects, they help them recycle wastes and the artists from these wastes giving them second lease of life create wonderful artworks.

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In Cambodia at SA SA BASSAC gallery held recently a very interesting video documentation of eco-art performance by the artist Khvay Samman who is the native of Phnom Penh an exhibition with the title - untitled from July 15th to 21st August 2011. It is a powerful statement against the property developers irresponsible tactics of acquiring land by filling the Boeung Kak Lake the largest in Phnom Penh with sand and in its wake has displaced water and forced thousands of native people to leave their homes for high rising buildings and commercial centers to incongruously develop. The artists work consisted of nine photographs and a video. Using himself as the subject the artist has submerged himself partially into the polluted water of the lake where the construction process is on or where there is vulnerability of lake for undergoing this similar fate in future and then he pours full bucket of sand on his head. He has documented this same process at different places of the lake in video and photographs. In spite of the risk of illness and arrest for encroaching or forfeit of the camera the artist fearlessly highlights the irrevocably changing condition of the natural environment and the miserable plight of the poor urban people.

Another very ambitious artist and the activist Arahmai Feisal from Indonesia is also very much concerned with the current predicaments of the environment. She is famously known for her engagements with after disaster situations and marginal communities. Her flag project was aimed at developing a collective creativity Through her open art system, she defining art in completely new way emphasizes on achieving values, engaging in democratic language and also taking critical approach when needed. She is more concerned with the process of art rather than the product. She believes in working in collaboration which she thinks come out of the exchanges of ideas and experiences. Since 2010, she has been engaged in working with the Buddhist monks of Yushu a remote village in Kham region of (now the part of Chinas Qinghai Province) Tibet to restore life in this casualty ridden (from earthquake) region. The importance of this beautiful place is that it is situated in the highest and the largest plateau in the world and the third largest ice depository on earth thus called the third pole serving as the largest water tank provides water to over two billion people. She was aggrieved by the sight of garbage, contaminated water and the naked land for which she made plans with scientists and the monks to reforestation and cleansing. Until now there has been 60,000 trees planted on the nearby mountain slopes and the valleys have been covered with valuable medicinal herbs and shrubs of colorful flowers. Her call to the humanity is that if we believe that mutual dependency is a fact of life that humans are a part of nature we should bear the responsibility of conservation and sustainability for future generations.

**CONCLUSION**

The brief discussion that we had on wide-ranging art works approaches of the contemporary artists or groups, purpose of community participatory events or the projects done for the sake of environment and sustainability, which are not just the creative aspirations of the art world as we may perhaps mistakenly think, but they are in fact the powerful expressions of the time should be enough to get a view how the world is transforming for a better place to live in. But these efforts by some handful of creative or active individuals would not be enough until they will get support from the masses or until every individual on earth starts thinking upon the poignant condition of the environment and the presently held perceptions about life.

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