



Received: 08 November 2015  
Accepted: 26 February 2016  
Published: 21 March 2016

\*Corresponding author: Malcolm Miles,  
Department of Architecture, University  
of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK  
E-mail: [m.f.miles@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:m.f.miles@plymouth.ac.uk)

Reviewing editor:  
Zoe Strecker, Transylvania University,  
USA

Additional information is available at  
the end of the article

## VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Eco-aesthetic dimensions: Herbert Marcuse, ecology and art

Malcolm Miles<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** In his last book, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978), Marcuse argued that a concern for aesthetics is justified when political change is unlikely. But the relation between aesthetics and politics is oblique: “Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness ... of the men and women who could change the world.” (p. 33). Marcuse also linked his critique of capitalism to environmentalism in the early 1970s: “the violation of the Earth is a vital aspect of the counterrevolution.” (Ecology and Revolution, in *The New Left and the 1960s*, Collected Papers 3, 2005, p. 173). This article revisits Marcuse’s ideas on aesthetics and ecology, and reviews two recent art projects which engage their audiences in ecological issues: *The Jetty Project* (2014) by Wolfgang Weileder—which used recycled material and community participation to construct a temporary monument within a wider conservation project on the Tyne, N-E England—and *Fracking Futures* by HeHe (Helen Evans and Heiko Hansen)—which turned the interior of the gallery at FACT, Liverpool, into what appeared to be a fracking site. The aim is not to evaluate the projects, nor to test the efficacy of Marcuse’s ideas, more to ask again whether art has a role in a shift of attitude which might contribute to dealing with the political and economic causes of climate change.

**Subjects:** Cultural Studies; Cultural Theory; Postmodernism of Cultural Theory

**Keywords:** contemporary art; ecology; critical theory; aesthetics; ecological art

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Malcolm Miles

Malcolm Miles is a professor of Cultural Theory in the School of Architecture, Design & Environment, University of Plymouth. His research revolves around the relation between critical theories of culture and society (mainly the Frankfurt School) and modern and contemporary art, literature and architecture.

His recent books include *Limits to Culture* (London, Pluto Press, 2015), *Eco-Aesthetics: Art, Literature and Architecture in a Period of Climate Change* (London, Bloomsbury, 2014) and *Herbert Marcuse: an aesthetics of Liberation* (London, Pluto Press, 2011). His next book will be *Cities & Literature* (Routledge, 2017/18); he is also working towards future writing on radical aesthetics from Schiller to Ranciere, and on the utopian content of modernist painting.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In 2015, world leaders agreed to try to limit the extent of global warming by restricting carbon emissions. The pledges they made may, or may not, be kept. Meanwhile, as public attitudes shift in various ways faced by the prospect of rising seas and increased frequency of floods and fires, the article asks whether contemporary art contributes to a shift to a more ecological perspective. It does this not by trying to measure art’s efficacy (an impossible task) but by returning to the writing of Herbert Marcuse in the 1970s on aesthetics, ecology and politics. The author argues that Marcuse’s work remains relevant, proposing that art’s revolution is oblique, but, probably, what we have to give hope in face of global capital’s relentless destruction of the planet.

## 1. Introduction

In December 2015, Alan Sonfist exhibited photographs of himself from the 1970s, climbing naked the trees on a Caribbean island, with bronze sculptures of tree branches, at the Art Basel fair at Miami Beach. Sonfist also recalled walking in a hemlock forest during his childhood. Noting that it has since died due to human actions, he reflects that nature is safest “when left to be like it is.” (E-mail, 8 December 2015). Among Sonfist’s other work is *Time Landscape* (1978), a fenced-off lot on the corner of West Houston Street and La Guardia Place, New York, planted with the tree species which grew on Manhattan before its white colonization. Lucy Lippard describes *Time Landscape* as, “a curious triangle of untended vegetation” and a, “poignant hybrid between art and nature.” (Lippard, 1997, p. 252) I think this hybridity has two aspects. In particular, the seemingly original (implying authentic) natural growth is the result, not of natural evolution, but of art, hence a manifestation of a historically specific human-produced culture; and, in general, an art project which intervenes in the processes of what is conveniently called the natural world inevitably raises issues of the relations between people and environment, and the equally inevitable impossibility of a complete separation of the two spheres. The question then is how the spheres meet, and to what extent compromises are acceptable. At one polarity is the green-washing used by global capital to mask the harm done by products from automobiles to computer equipment and smart phones; at the other is a small minority of people living off-grid, making as few compromises as they can. As the effects of climate change become more directly felt around the world, dealing with the tension between these polarities may become more urgent.

And indeed, while Art Basel took place in Miami, international climate change talks in Paris reached agreement on pledges to limit the carbon emissions which produce global warming. For Jim Yong Kim, President of the World Bank, this is, “a game changer.” (Harvey, 2015, p. 7) But a British newspaper reported that the pledges made in Paris “do not add up enough to avoid 2C of warming” (ibid). Bill McKibben warns that realizing the 2C target means,

you don’t get to do drilling or mining in new areas, even if you think it might make you lots of money. The Arctic will have to be completely off limits, as will the Powder River Basin of Montana and Wyoming [...] You’ve got to stop fracking [...] You have to start installing solar panels and windmills at breakneck speed.

(McKibben, 2015, p. 29) To many, this will seem wishful thinking. Business as usual remains the prevailing mantra, and has a lot of money and political influence behind it. What, for instance, was the carbon footprint of all the delegations flying in and out of Paris for the talks meant to save the Earth? or all the dealers, collectors, critics and sponsors flying in and out of Miami for Art Basel?

Juxtaposing the two items—Sonfist in Miami and the Paris talks—it is far from obvious that art has a role in producing the shift of lifestyle and changes to the dominant economic system which could really deal with the causes of climate change. Yet, I would argue that art, with a broader cultural context, is a factor in the evolution of people’s attitudes to each other and to the planet’s eco-systems. *Time Landscape* may, for example, remind passers-by that cities are artificial environments, that nature has its own momentum or that profit and the price of real estate have been set aside in this small, green but not vacant lot. *Time Landscape* is art, and an exception in urban development, but it opens an imaginative potential of possibly far-reaching importance. And while one factor in the production of climate change is the evident unsustainability of late capitalism, another—which is cultural—is the normalization of that system.

These issues preoccupied Herbert Marcuse in his writing on ecology and aesthetics in the 1970s. In his last book, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, he argues that a concern with aesthetics is justified by the “miserable reality” in which political change is unlikely to occur (1978, p. 1). In two earlier papers on ecology, he politicizes the emerging green debate, juxtaposing ecology and capitalism as incompatible frameworks. In this article, I revisit Marcuse’s work, and review two recent art projects, *The Jetty Project* (2014) by Wolfgang Weileder; and *Fracking Futures* (2013) by HeHe (Helen Evans and Heiko

Hansen). Both projects took place in the north of England, although HeHe are based in Paris. I do this not to audit the efficacy of either Marcuse's arguments or the projects, but to ask in today's terms whether art may have a potential to contribute to the shift of human attitudes necessary for a sustainable society (which Marcuse saw as political and economic as much as cultural). In the 1970s (at the University of California, San Diego), Marcuse frequently used material from newspapers and contemporary culture, in one case, ending a public lecture with a screening of Joan Baez singing. He did this to situate his ideas in the world in which his audiences lived. More than 30 years later, generationally and geographically distant from San Diego in the 1970s, I cannot construct documentable connections between the two projects I review and Marcuse's writing. I write about them, instead, as cases of contemporary art which engage with relevant questions, and on which I have been able to have dialogues with the artists. My phrasing above—a potential to contribute to a shift ... —is deliberately distancing, following Marcuse's argument that the turn to aesthetics is justified when the direct route of political change presents an impasse.

## 2. Ecology and politics

In an interview in 1970, the year of the first Earth Day, Marcuse argues that the environment is dominated by transnational companies, and: "no decent human and natural environment can be created until the real sources of pollution have been eliminated," while the, "mental pollution" of consumerism breeds inaction (Marcuse, 1970/2014, p. 346). He defines ecology as a natural state of interlinking coexistences which is undermined by the competitiveness and built-in obsolescence of consumerism. To regain ecological integrity requires a new economic system: "Nature in the present capitalist society is [...] material for domination and exploitation," while in a socialist society, "nature would exist in its own right" as both living space for human beings and animals, and as the domain of, "its own creations." (ibid) Part of the context for these remarks is that environmental activism began in the early 1970s as "revolutionaries eager to live free and in common" tried to save the redwood trees of Northern California through direct action (Winslow, 2012, p. 140). Another part is Marcuse's continuing revision (but never rejection) of Marxism.

Marcuse delivered two papers on ecology: "Ecology and Revolution" and "Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society" (Marcuse, 2005, pp. 173–176, 1979/2011, pp. 206–221). The first was given in 1972, during the Vietnam War. He begins by calling student protest, "a spontaneous movement which organizes itself as best it can, provisionally, on the local level," adding that this is why it cannot be co-opted by the establishment (2005, p. 173) He calls the Vietnam War, "ecocide"—chemical warfare strips the environment of both human and plant life—asserting that this shows, "where contemporary capitalism is at: the cruel waste of productive resources in the imperialist homeland goes hand in hand with the cruel waste of destructive forces [...] by the war industry." (ibid) This is not rhetorical. Rachel Carson observed in *Silent Spring* that industrialized agriculture regularly uses technologies which produce an excess of destruction while the gas used in the Holocaust was a by-product of the chemical industry's development of a commercial product for exterminating moths in textile warehouses (Carson, 1962/2000, p. 31). Peter Slotterdijk makes the same point in *Terror from the Air* (2009, pp. 42–46). For Marcuse, Carson and Slotterdijk, I think the issue is that this is not anomalous but routine, are driven by a relentless commercialism. Marcuse continues in "Ecology and Revolution,"

[...] monopoly capitalism is waging a war against nature—human nature as well as external nature. For the demands on ever more intense exploitation come into conflict with nature itself, since nature is the source and locus of the life instincts which struggle against the instincts of aggression and destruction. And the demands of exploitation progressively reduce and exhaust resources: the more capitalist productivity increases, the more destructive it becomes. This is one sign of the internal contradictions of capitalism. (174)

For Marcuse and others on the New Left, the contradictions of capitalism reach beyond production: built-in obsolescence represents a quest for ever-expanding sales but is inevitably wasteful; innovation leads to more extensive markets via economic colonialism but also to conflicts which

expose the counter-revolutionary aspect of a totalitarian consumerist regime. Marcuse calls this regime insanity, implying that an underlying sanity, or a natural state (like nature in its own right), can be recovered. That implies in turn that human nature is universal, not historically specific but, leaving that aside as a legacy from German Idealism which would now be contested, Marcuse's argument is that economics and politics are both suffused with capital's power relations:

The process by which nature is subjected to the violence of exploitation and pollution is first of all an economic one (an aspect of the mode of production), but it is a political process as well. The power of capital is extended over the space for release and escape represented by nature. This is the totalitarian tendency of monopoly capitalism: in nature, the individual must find only a repetition of his [sic] own society; a dangerous dimension of escape and contestation must be closed off. (174)

Nature is enclosed—as in the tourist reservation which compensates for alienating toil—but has the potential to be bountiful. This utopian potential (which tends to be lent a universal quality) is not a Rousseauesque lost Eden but a *promesse du Bonheur* which Marcuse finds in Charles Baudelaire's poem *Invitation au voyage*, and cites in an essay on French literature under totalitarianism (Marcuse, 1945/1998, pp. 199–214; see Miles, 2011, pp. 65–85). It is difficult to translate the term *promesse du Bonheur* without restricting its allusory scope, but I would suggest a deep, conscious or latent, sense of happiness which is pervasive and a foundational quality of the human psyche: an immanent rather than imminent revolution which colours all perception, and is revolutionary in its radical otherness to the dominant, oppressive actuality: *Ver Sacrum*, the Sacred May when the whole world blossoms. Similarly, Ernst Bloch writes that nature is, “the architecture for a drama that has not yet been performed [...] *not a bygone but a morning land*.” (1986, p. 1353 [italics original]) That is, not a lost Eden to be regained but—in keeping with Enlightenment—a potential liberation which unfolds through history.

Marcuse juxtaposes capitalist destructiveness to this promise of happiness (which in another form becomes a universal, constitutional right to the pursuit of happiness) which is eroded by capitalism when it is separated as a reserve of leisure in compensation for alienation, but is not destroyed. At a simpler level, Marcuse emphasizes that consumerism renders nature as a commodity, hence devoid of values other than exchange value. This is a pollution of human consciousness alongside the more literal pollution of the environment, and typifies Marcuse's integration of a case for nature in a case for a new—or New Left—politics and a new kind of economy (but not that of state socialism in the East bloc as such).

Marcuse's second talk on ecology was delivered to a wilderness class in California after 36 million acres of wild land had been consigned to developers. He begins, “There isn't much wilderness left to preserve.” (Marcuse, 1979/2011, p. 206). Again, he discusses the death of “nature” within the destructiveness of the affluent society but, post-Vietnam, returns to the Freudian theory of Marcuse (1956), arguing that consumerism is an aspect of a destructive state of mind introjected to a point at which it seems normal, as if natural, and is evident in “the institutionalized destructiveness characteristic of both foreign and domestic affairs.” (207) This normalized state of mind allows increases in military spending, reliance on nuclear weapons, environmental pollution and “subordination of human rights to the requirements of global strategy” to seem almost uncontentious (ibid, and echoes his previous argument: “the ecological struggle comes into conflict with the laws which govern the capitalist system” (2005, p. 175). In 1972, he returns to the effect on individual consciousness:

The primary drive towards destructiveness resides in individuals themselves, as does the other primary drive, Eros. The balance between these two drives also is found within individuals. I refer to the balance between their will and wish to live, and their will and wish to destroy life, the balance between the life instinct and the death instinct. Both drives, according to Freud, are constantly fused within the individual. [...] any increase in destructive energy in the organism leads [...] to a weakening of Eros [...]. (Marcuse, 1979/2011, p. 208)

Consumer culture is a location of this weakening of Eros, despite the promises of satisfaction which consumerism offers (which it never delivers); wants are manufactured, that is, and are imposed by the system which leads consumers to introject them if they are individuals' own needs. Similarly, needs presented by institutions (normalized systems) are internalized in an "affirmative" (208) culture which breeds conformity. They can be negated only by a "radical character structure." (209) There is an analogy between the pervasive promise of happiness cited above and Eros, taken here as the source of the energy by which the necessary radical sensibility emerges to counter consumer capitalism. Against the drive for profit, Marcuse advances, "a primary rebellion of mind and body, of consciousness and the unconscious [...] against the destructive productivity of established society" as in repressions and frustrations produced by pursuit of profit and productivity. (210) He concludes,

The ecology movement reveals itself [...] as a political and psychological movement of liberation. It is political because it confronts the concerted power of big capital, whose vital interests the movement threatens. It is psychological because [...] the pacification of external nature, the protection of the life-environment, will also pacify nature within men and women. A successful environmentalism will, within individuals, subordinate destructive energy to erotic energy. (Marcuse, 1979/2011, p. 212)

He adds that protest seems marginal, but this is its authenticity; and, acknowledging a spectre which haunted the Frankfurt School, continues, "The goal of radical change today is the emergence of human beings who are physically and mentally incapable of inventing another Auschwitz." (213).

Marcuse condemns the technological-consumerist twentieth century, then, proclaiming Eros as an emancipatory force. Does that help? Is too much left to a supposition that consumerism *does* produce resistance, or that a new sensibility emerges of its own momentum? Marcuse saw a vicious circle in that a revolutionary consciousness is a prerequisite for liberation but emerges only within the conditions of a revolution (Marcuse, 1970/2014, p. 80). There is no exit from such discursive traps, only a possibility to shift the ground of the question from a temporal trajectory to a co-presence of a state of mind portending a utopian future within, the dominant society. If there is a latent memory of happiness, it reappears during, not after the end of, dark times. Aesthetics is a metaphorical location of such co-presence, offering a critical distancing whereby aesthetic experience interrupts routine so that alternative futures might be imagined.

### 3. Aesthetics and ecology

Marcuse argues that the ecological revolt is a refusal not only of consumerism but also of the war machine. To that machine, he attributes the sentiment, "It is no longer enough to do away with people living now; life must also be denied to those who aren't even born yet by burning and poisoning the Earth, defoliating the forests, blowing up the dikes." (Marcuse, 2005, p. 173) The psyche of consumerism is a counter-revolution, but the revolution which *can* be foreseen is an aesthetic revolution: a reminder of bliss which realigns consciousness. Art is a vehicle for this content which inflects the conditions in which consciousness is shaped, obliquely reshaping how experience is perceived.

In 1972, extending the ideas of his 1945 essay on French literature (cited above), Marcuse says,

[...] the struggle for an expansion of the world of beauty, nonviolence and serenity is a political struggle. The emphasis on these values [...] is not just a romantic, aesthetic, poetic idea which is a matter of concern only to the privileged; today, it is a question of survival. People must learn for themselves that it is essential to change the model of production and consumption, to abandon the industry of war, waste and gadgets, replacing it with the production of those goods and services which are necessary to a life of reduced labour, of creative labour, of enjoyment. (Marcuse, 1979/2011, p. 175)



The aesthetic image is the world of beauty glimpsed by Baudelaire in *L'Invitation au voyage*:

Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,

*Luxe, calme et volupté*

*Far away, only order and beauty,*

*luxury, harmony and sensuousness.*

(Baudelaire, 1856/1958, p. 54, author's translation)

For Baudelaire, according to literary critic Marcel Raymond, external nature is, "an immense reservoir of analogies" in which images of sensory perception correspond to ideas (1970, pp. 10–11). Nature is seen in appearances which evoke or correspond to the writer's or reader's state of psyche, making a utopian aesthetic distinct from actual alienation or oppression. But utopia seems unattainable and the place to which *L'Invitation au voyage* invites readers is precisely *là*: there, not here; and it is the interior of the Paris apartment in which the poem was written, evoking other-worldliness as aesthetic reality permeates everyday life. Marcuse writes, "Sensuality as style, as artistic a priori, expresses the individual protest against the law and order of repression." (1945/1998, p. 204); if sensuality is unpolitical, nonetheless, it, "preserves the goal of political action: liberation." (ibid)

The play on reality and imagination permeates Marcuse's aesthetics and Baudelaire's poetry. Citing Paul Eluard (whose love for poetry was dropped by parachute into occupied France in miniature editions in 1943—see Miles, 2011, pp. 65–85), Marcuse says,

To these political poets [Baudelaire and Eluard] and active communists (Eluard and Louis Aragon) love appears as the artistic a priori which shapes all individual content, first and foremost the political content: the artistic counterblow against the annexation of all political contents by monopolistic society. The artist counteracts by transposing these contents ... to a different sphere of existence, thereby negating their monopolistic form and rescuing their revolutionary form. (1945/1998, p. 205)

I suggest, then, that Marcuse's earlier literary critique informs his later aesthetic theory, so that the radical otherness of the promise of happiness becomes, indirectly, art's autonomy in a play of the real and the unreal: "The autonomy of art reflects the unfreedom of individuals in the unfree society. If people were free, then art would be the form and expression of their freedom. Art remains marked by unfreedom; in contradicting it, art achieves its autonomy" (1978, pp. 72–73). Autonomy is claimed for modern art and literature, seeming to deny political agency (as the white-walled modern art museum refuses recognition of the world of the street outside), yet—Marcuse argues and I agree—becoming an indirect means to imagine a radically other world.

#### 4. Radical aesthetics

In the 1970s, after the failure of revolt in 1968, Marcuse argues that aesthetics is justified by the absence of a prospect for real political change. In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, he begins, "In a situation where the miserable reality can be changed only through radical political praxis," a concern with aesthetics is justified (as said above) by despair: conditions are changed only in the imagination, but, "art as art expresses a truth" which is revolutionary. (Marcuse, 1978, p. 1) Art interrupts the codes and structures of perception which affirm the social order, while beauty fractures its surfaces:

[...] the work of art is beautiful to the degree to which it opposes its own order to that of reality—its non-repressive order ... in the brief moments of fulfilment [...] which arrest the incessant dynamic and disorder, the constant need to do all that which has to be done in order to continue living. (Marcuse, 1978, pp. 64–65)

Art juxtaposes different realities. The resulting jarring encourages new perceptions and can transpose the dominant reality into art, whence that reality appears unreal or absurd. This is partly informed by Marcuse's view that the actually existing socialism claimed by the East bloc during the cold war did not actually exist. Rudolf Bahro argues similarly within the East bloc that the Communist Parties are sub-functions of the industrialization which shaped the West, and unlikely to deal with environmental destruction (Bahro, 1986, p. 23). Marcuse knew Bahro's work, and wrote letters seeking Bahro's freedom when he was prosecuted for his views. Both Marcuse and Bahro look to a green alternative within socialism, nonetheless, but a socialism of a more fundamental kind. Marcuse sees a contrast between capitalism's *quantitative* excesses (which are to an extent replicated in the East bloc) and a *qualitative* change: "quantitative progress militates against qualitative change even if the institutional barriers against radical education and action are surmounted." (Marcuse, 1969, p. 27) Capitalism uses nature for its productive ends, but qualitative change means a reorientation of attitudes to the environment and, by implication, an emancipatory recoding of perception. If a concern for aesthetics is justified by the unchanging political reality, the relation between art as aesthetic experience and political change rests on a reconstitution of individuals' states of psyche at a social scale: "Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness ... of the men and women who could change the world." (Marcuse, 1978, p. 33).

Art is socially produced, a product of its time, but equally a means of standing back to speak against a society's institutions: "This contradiction is preserved and resolved in the aesthetic form which gives the familiar content and the familiar experience the power of estrangement" leading to the emergence of a new consciousness as well as new perceptions. (Marcuse, 1978, p. 41) Art offers beautiful illusions, but, "Art's unique truth breaks with both everyday and holiday reality." (49) The following passage sums up the theory:

The world intended in art is never and nowhere merely the given world of everyday reality, but neither is it a world of mere fantasy, illusion, and so on. It contains nothing that does not also exist in the given reality, the actions, thoughts, feelings, and dreams of men and women, their potentialities and those of nature. Nevertheless the world of a work of art is "unreal" in the ordinary sense of this word: it is a fictitious reality. But it is "unreal" not because it is less, but because it is more as well as qualitatively "other" than the established reality [...] Only in the "illusory world" do things appear as what they are and what they can be. By virtue of this truth (which art alone can express in sensuous representation) the world is inverted—it is the given reality, the ordinary world which now appears as untrue, as false, as deceptive reality. (Marcuse, 1978, p. 54)

Fredric Jameson's reading of hermeneutics as, "a political discipline" retaining contact with "the very sources of revolutionary energy during a stagnant time" while "preserving the concept of freedom itself [...] during geological ages of repression." (Jameson, 1971/1974, p. 84) seems to be a more recent formulation of the idea. Marcuse's concern for aesthetics is informed by Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* from the 1790s, and Jameson also cites Schiller as one of the first thinkers to consider "cultural revolution" and the relation between a revolutionary consciousness and action: "only after revolutionary change can the [...] the post-acquisitive human nature, come into being" while the Terror in the French Revolution "stands as a warning that purges cannot complete a process" for which objective social conditions have not matured. (91)

This is the problem of socio-economic (objective) and individual (subjective) conditions which Schiller sidesteps in a way which pre-empts Marcuse, reading art as offering glimpses of freedom during dark times. Marcuse writes:

Classical German aesthetics comprehended the relation between beauty and truth in the idea of an aesthetic education of the human species. Schiller says that the "political problem" of a better organization of society "must take the path through the aesthetic realm, because it is through beauty that one arrives at freedom." (Marcuse, 1968, p. 117, citing Schiller, 2nd letter, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Humanity*).

Marcuse, following Schiller (Lund, 1985, p. 186), characterizes art as a vehicle of freedom via reality's inversion, making the normalized reality appear false. In 2015, as I write, Marcuse's writing reminds me of a more optimistic past—my time as an art student in London in the late 1960s—yet, I think his theory that art renders dominant realities unreal remains helpful. First, the absence of political change in face of climate change is another form of the impasse which Marcuse identified in the 1970s in terms of environmental destruction and war, both by-products of capitalism. Second, moments of beauty are revolutionary in subverting the dominant reality. There are, despite power's iterations to the contrary, always alternatives to the way things are. I move now to the two art projects, *The Jetty Project* and *Fracking Futures*.

### 5. The jetty project

Dunstan Staiths (a kind of jetty) is the largest timber structure in Europe, built to carry the rail tracks by which coal was taken from pits in the Durham coalfield to boats on the river Tyne. Opened in October 1893, it is 526-metres long. Wagons were shunted to the end of the Staiths, then tipped to unload their contents into the holds of boats below. This was difficult: sometimes dangerous work, sometimes done by lamplight at night to keep the coal moving, and dependent on a high skill level and close cooperation between the engine drivers above and the loaders below. More than a million tons of coal were moved annually during the 1900s, rising to four million in the 1930s. Then, new technologies and market shifts caused the trade to decline. The Staiths ceased operation in 1977, after which they were colonized by birds. Conservation began in 1990 when part of the structure was opened to the public during the Gateshead Garden Festival (an effort at culturally led urban regeneration). The adjacent riverside was scripted for industrial redevelopment, but no takers appeared and the land has now been used for new housing. Dunstan Staiths is a listed industrial monument (hence eligible for government funding for conservation) and a landmark in sight of the quaysides of Newcastle and Gateshead with, today, their plethora of designer bars, luxury hotels and new arts spaces.

In 2014, sculptor Wolfgang Weileder worked with regional and national agencies and local people to create a temporary work to draw attention to the need to conserve the Staiths as a public resource. Conservation looks to the past but raises questions as to which, or whose, past is re-presented. Art in conservation projects faces the same issues, drawing out contested readings of pasts to re-present them as *a* past, *a* story, not *the* past or *the* narrative. In the case of Dunstan Staiths, it entailed conservation of wildlife sites but also scope for informal uses by diverse publics. As it happens, one of those informal uses, by anglers cooking fish they had caught, led to an accidental fire which destroyed a section of the timber structure. In a more contentious way, conservation here cannot overlook the need to deal with de-industrialization in Tyneside and the presence of local memories of what seemed better times (when there was work in the mining industry), even though the Staiths' function was to transport a fossil fuel producing global warming. Readings of industry may, then, be nuanced.

The *Jetty Project* began with a one-day symposium at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead—an example of the reuse of de-industrialized space, in a converted flour mill—when professionals and academics cited cases of art, architecture and conservation, local people shared memories of the Staiths and thoughts about their cities, and everyone looked at conservation as a form of culture (reflecting a way of life). From these discussions, the *Jetty Project* emerged as having three parts: *Cone*, a temporary sculpture on the Staiths (Figures 1–5); *Gap*, a quarter-scale reconstruction of the burnt section, for exhibition (Figure 6); and *Bridge*, a proposed reconstruction of the missing section of the monument in metal, inserted into the Staiths. For architect Michael Tawa, *Gap* plays on “simulation and dissimulation around notions of original and copy, fact and counter-fact.” (Tawa, 2015, p. 187) But while *Gap* is a professionally made artwork, *Cone* was co-produced by Weileder and building apprentices from Gateshead College (image 5). Collaboration replaces competition; the use of sustainable materials also challenges capitalism's wastefulness: *Gap* uses recycled timber; and *Cone* uses Aquadyne, a material made from plastic bottles, fabricated in 100 cm × 22 cm × 4.5 cm slabs of dark grey flecked by streaks of colour surviving from the raw



**Figure 1. Dunstan Staiths.**

Source: Photo M. Miles.



**Figure 2. Wolfgang Weileder at Dunstan Staiths while working on Cone.**

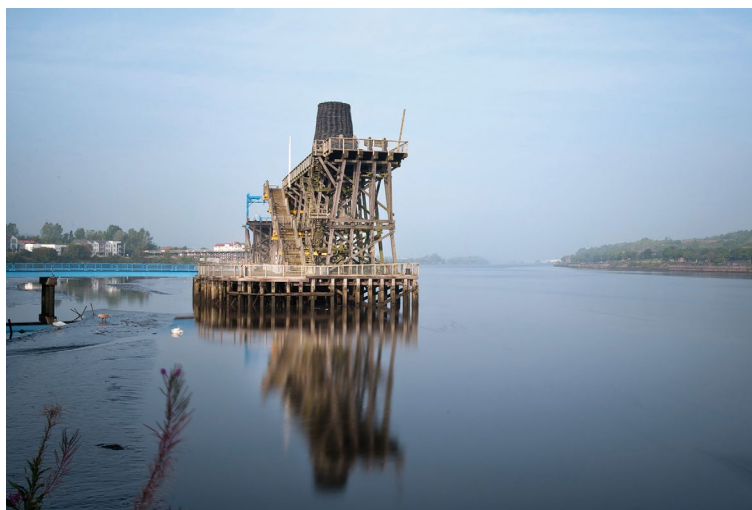


material. On its deconstruction, the slabs of Aquadyne were reused in a building project. It could be objected that any use of plastic—a by-product of petroleum—is unsustainable, but, given that these already exist and bottles would otherwise go to landfill, I suggest this kind of recycling is reasonably close to sustainability (and no less so than accessing an online journal via equipment cased in plastic, containing rare earths and so forth).

During the project, *Cone* was a focal point for community group meetings and guided walks, set in a peri-urban zone which has been shaped by industry for four centuries but is presented in the

**Figure 3. Wolfgang Weileder, *Cone*, 2014, Gateshead, Aquadyne.**

Source: Photo Colin Davison, courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 4. Wolfgang Weileder, *Cone* 2014, Gateshead, Aquadyne.**

Source: Photo Colin Davison, courtesy of the artist.



marketing of the new housing nearby (on the Garden Festival site) as semi-rural. While *Gap* plays on simulation and dissimulation, *Cone* evokes both the vernacular bottle kilns seen in old photographs of the area and the pure form of modernist art—the sphere, the cylinder and the cone—to play on ambivalences of ruination and conservation, and a tension between a ruin and lost but remembered past, and a process of conservation which re-contextualizes its objects.



**Figure 5. Wolfgang Weileder, *Cone*, 2014, Gateshead, Aquadyne, interior with apprentices and site manager from Mears construction firm.**

Source: Photo Ed Wainwright, courtesy of the artist.



Sociologists Simon Guy and Angela Connelly remark that while sustainability is a term used to denote maintenance, local conversations on *Cone* evinced tensions, “between maintenance and restoration; between removing the obsolete and embracing new forms, yet remaining attentive to the memory that is inherent in places and the effect of decay as a reminder of urban decline.” (Guy & Connelly, 2015, p. 103) Urban decline is not natural but determined by government policies and the operations of capital (especially in regions such as the north-east where ship-building and mining were intentionally terminated by government action); in contrast, it seems, conservation is lent a cultural guise which conforms to a rose-tinted, air-brushed past of polite children, happy housewives and smiling workers (British equivalents of the North American white picket fence). The loss of employment, and solidarity in the workplace, enhances a tendency to reframe the past romantically as compensation (just as nature is used for leisure in compensation for toil). Sustainability can fall into a similar trap, as a non-contentious solution to problems the causes of which are forgotten. Guy reads *Cone* as more critical, and even disruptive in a slowing-down of routines to reveal otherwise hidden fragments of reality which, “can be subsequently recomposed through a collective activity.” (Guy, 2015, p. 27)

Inserting *Cone* onto the Staiths in the summer of 2014 changed the monument’s appearance, signalling the beginning of a campaign for its conservation; and the processes of its making were non-routine while evincing memories but also critical views of the present and future. Weileder regards his work as political:

**Figure 6. Wolfgang Weileder, Gap, 2014, Newcastle, reclaimed timber.**

Source: Photo Colin Davison, courtesy of the artist.



I have a political opinion and I'm a political artist [...] I do not explicitly say that, but I hope that my work will shape things or that I can influence the world and make it a better place through my work.

(quoted in Guy, Henshaw, & Heidrich, 2015, p. 45) *Cone* initiated social interactions and conversations which can be read as part of a process of grass-roots articulation which is where alternative future visions arise. This is a slow process, building up a momentum through repeated encounters until something shifts in public awareness.

The Staiths and *Cone* when it occupied the Staiths in 2014 are iconic images. One is a ruin which supports wildlife, the other an artwork reminiscent of past industrial forms constructed in a material denoting a more sustainable future. *Cone* was photogenic, and a meeting place with a good view. It reminds me of Marcuse's remarks (above) that, "the world of a work of art is "unreal" [...] a fictitious reality. But it is "unreal" not because it is less, but because it is more as well as qualitatively "other" than the established reality." (Marcuse, 1978, p. 54) Yet, my abiding memory of the event at Baltic (in which I took part) is of respectful debate which recognized the loss of benefits from the industry to which the Staiths is a monument—coal—and the need to stop burning fossil fuels. The project did not need to raise the environmental agenda because several local people introduced it. The use of a recycled material for *Cone* enhanced this awareness, but I think it is important, too, to remember that industry was not all bad, and that the need is not to dismiss it but to extricate its benefits from the excesses and the destructiveness of global capitalism. I may be too pragmatic, but I see no prospect of a return to a pre-industrial era.

## 6. Fracking futures

In 2013, HeHe occupied the gallery at FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology), Liverpool, to install what looked like a fracking (hydraulic fracturing) site (Figures 7–9; video). The work was co-commissioned by The Arts Catalyst, a London-based organization which facilitates art-science

collaborations and critical debates on culture, science and society. The context for *Fracking Futures* is a political-economic controversy. The British Government has issued a large number of licences for fracking exploration, many in North-west England where high unemployment is seen cynically as likely to decrease resistance, and fewer in the prosperous south where local opposition is more likely and where there are more individuals in possession of wealth and influence. Indeed, the first opposition occurred in the south, at Balcombe, a village in Sussex set amid rolling chalk downs epitomizing an English pastoral vision. Local people, Green Party Member of Parliament Caroline Lucas, and green activists from around Britain disrupted the fracking company's operations and set up a protest camp.

To represent fracking in a gallery under these conditions is thus a political act, although the work's form is no less aesthetically resonant for that. HeHe used the gallery space at FACT—which has a regional public for experimental art using new technologies, and an occasional public of tourists in a city known for the Beatles—to create, “a temporary, experimental drilling site for hydraulic fracking [...] making a fracked landscape.” (Evans, 2013, p. 117) To the unsuspecting visitor, it may have seemed, not implausibly given current news coverage of fracking, that FACT was trying to become energy self-sufficient by drilling into its gallery floor for shale gas. Tiles were ripped up. A small-scale drilling rig was installed. Sudden tremors were produced. An “unquantifiable subterranean noise” (ibid) sounded at intervals as discoloured water bubbled in a pit. Periodically, a sudden, violent eruption of flame signalled a release of gas being flared. In fact, FACT would have no legal rights to the space under its property under British law, and fracking is done outdoors, yet the installation's pyrotechnics achieved a viable suspension of disbelief (akin to that of theatrical performance). Evans says spectators were, “introduced to the sounds and sensations of hydraulic fracking, allowing them to become more deeply connected to the contentious issues that surround the process.” (ibid). HeHe were careful not to take a public position on fracking but the theatricality of the installation may indicate its critical distancing via a visual and sonic medium, in an art-space known for exhibiting work manifesting art-and-technology interfaces and, at times, work which has a political edge. Compared to the conservation aims of the *Jetty Project*, *Fracking Futures* re-presented industry in its most destructive state, ripping things apart, regardless of the human or natural consequences.

*Fracking Futures* was part of FACT's 10th anniversary programme. A six-metre neon sign outside the gallery said Capitalism Works for Me, inviting passers-by to vote yes or no, by Steve Lambert. Most people said No. Seeing that first, visitors may have anticipated a critical spoof rather than a fracking site, but this does not detract from the work's provocation in context of recurrent anti-fracking protests ([www.frack-off.org](http://www.frack-off.org)). As a visual presence, the installation is evocative: crashes and bangs and flashes of ethereal light and a disturbing, doom-like soundscape. As a political statement, it is intentionally muted as the artists stand back from the issue to enable publics to form their own views (while there is little doubt as to where Evans and Hansen actually stand). While Cone played

**Figure 7. HeHe, *Fracking Futures*, Installation, FACT, Liverpool.**

Source: Photo courtesy the artists.





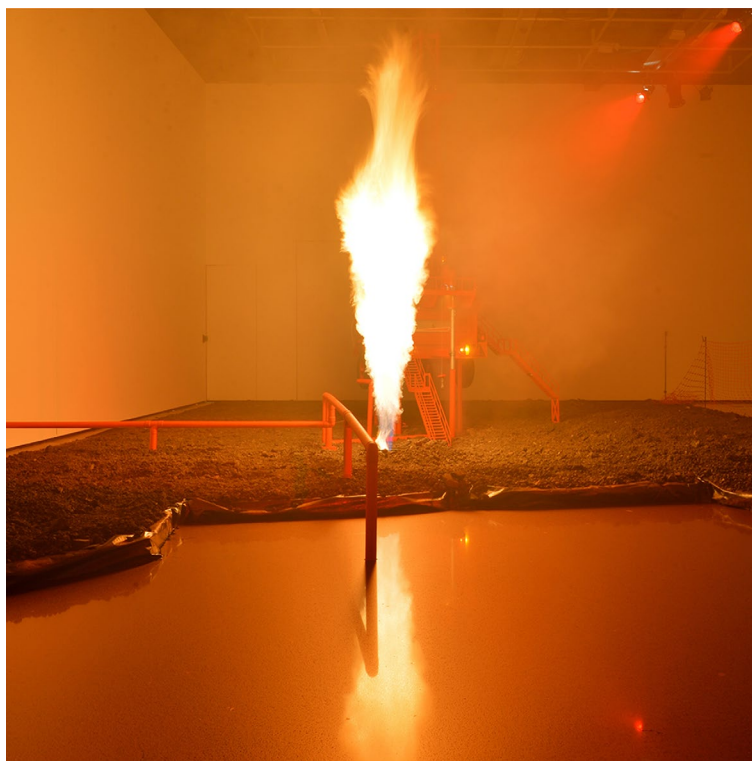
**Figure 8. HeHe, *Fracking Futures*, Installation, FACT, Liverpool.**

Source: Photo courtesy the artists.



**Figure 9. HeHe, *Fracking Futures*, Installation, FACT, Liverpool.**

Source: Photo courtesy the artists.



on industry's loss and future prospect for sustainability, *Fracking Futures* played on believability as a criterion for a rhetoric which portends the intentional, government-sanctioned ruin of the land by a global industry. This is my reading, but perhaps the work says that, just as the spoof is unreal, so real plans for fracking should be unimaginable.

If there is a problem, it is that *Fracking Futures* is exciting; like the disaster movie, it produces adrenalin, which is addictive. Mike Davis wrote of a doomsday narrative of Los Angeles as a variant on the genre of disaster movies (Davis, 1998), which similarly clouds the issues of urban ecology, while the (also alarming) end of history pronounced by Francis Fukuyama renders the construct of

history itself outmoded. Political scientist Arthur Kroker links Fukuyama's scenario to the Fukushima nuclear meltdown: "where self-confident proclamations about the end of history are simultaneously confirmed and cancelled by a very material historical event, nuclear catastrophe." (Kroker, 2013, p. 211). The difficulty is that the disaster scenario becomes strangely attractive or simply normalized by repetition in different ways. Nonetheless, I would say that the force of *Fracking Futures* is its play on the real and the unreal, which destabilizes any narrative. If this touches a new sublime of environmental destruction (though less than images of melting ice sheets in their vast blue expanses), I think it does so critically, as the suspension of disbelief required by the work is unlikely to be lost on the spectator. And that non-suspension is the crack through which other scenarios can be momentarily glimpsed.

In a previous project, *Nuage Vert (Green Cloud)* in Helsinki in 2008, HeHe invited public participation. Working with the energy supplier, people served by the Salmisaari-combined heat and power plant were asked to turn off appliances at a specific time for an hour, and the reduction in emissions measured. This (they were informed) determined the size of a green laser image of a cloud projected onto the power plant's real emissions cloud at night. As emissions declined, the laser cloud expanded. The work's performative quality thereby contributed to awareness of the practicalities of a sustainable way of dwelling. Evans writes,

*Nuage Vert* is based on the idea that public forms can embody an ecological project, materialising environmental issues so that they become a subject within our collective daily lives [...] A city-scale light installation projected onto the ultimate icon of industrial production alerts the public, generates discussion and can persuade people to change patterns of consumption. *Nuage Vert* is ambiguous, as it does not offer a simple moralistic message but tries to confront the city dweller with an evocative spectacle, which is open to interpretation. (HeHe, 2013)

I suggest that the work's efficacy is in its enabling spectators to form their own view, and that both *Nuage Vert* and *Fracking Futures* have an aesthetic presence which sets them apart from the realities they critique, through either participation or shock, and embeds them in political and economic debates. If the work had no aesthetic quality, I suppose that no one would take any notice of it.

## 7. In place of conclusions

*Fracking Futures* played on semblances to produce critical anticipations; *Cone* played on semblances to engender critical imaginings of the region's post-industrial future. I cannot say to what extent spectators came away from either project with new ideas. Such projects offer a *potential* for critical perception, and inflect rather than reverse understandings of a situation. Both projects face political issues indirectly, introducing critiques into everyday situations to bring them into contemporary art—the art-world is a public—as much as to bring art into those situations. Geographer Erik Swyngedouw argues that although there is a consensus on environmental issues, "concern is disavowed to the extent that the facts [...] are elevated" in, "a short-circuiting procedure" as a humanitarian rather than a political cause (2010, p. 217). He has in mind campaigns to save (nice) species, and images of exotic places under threat, which enforce this consensus. This is not to dismiss such concerns but to assert a vital need for a crack in the surfaces of the problem's presentation, giving rise to imagination of other ways the world could be. I doubt, too, that Swyngedouw is dismissing the human happiness which, for Marcuse, was a political aim. It is worth recalling that, for Marcuse, a latent memory of bliss and a moment of beauty were *radically other* in face of the dominant reality, putting that reality into the realms of a desired unreality.

Yet, theory is luxurious when island communities face obliteration by rising sea levels. My meditations on beauty are at best an indirect response. McKibben says that fossil fuel companies have reserves in the ground which are five times more than those that can be used if the projected 2C limit of warming is to be met; but, "Left to its own devices, the world is still planning to spend the next decade or two limbering up" while climate disasters recur with increasing regularity. (2015, p. 29) He

sees hope in mass refusal, which is an affirmation of faith until I connect it to Marcuse's idea that capitalism produces resistance, of itself, in its contradictions. I am left with this idea, then, that Eros is a counter-force to capital's counter-revolution. Life reasserts its value in face of continuing denial. What has changed since Marcuse wrote about aesthetic liberation is that art is now less interested in beauty and more in resistance, interruption, contradictions and the fissures which demonstrate the dominant society's inbuilt failure. I end by re-citing a passage from *The Aesthetic Dimension*:

The world intended in art is never and nowhere merely the given world of everyday reality, but neither is it a world of mere fantasy, illusion, and so on. It contains nothing that does not also exist in the given reality, the actions, thoughts, feelings, and dreams of men and women, their potentialities and those of nature. Nevertheless the world of a work of art is "unreal" [...] because it is more as well as qualitatively "other" than the established reality [...] the world is inverted—it is the given reality, the ordinary world which now appears as untrue. (Marcuse, 1978, p. 54)

#### Funding

The authors received no direct funding for this research.

#### Author details

Malcolm Miles<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [m.f.miles@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:m.f.miles@plymouth.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup> Department of Architecture, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK.

#### Citation information

Cite this article as: Eco-aesthetic dimensions: Herbert Marcuse, ecology and art, Malcolm Miles, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2016), 3: 1160640.

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