Should ecological thinking localise education for the visual arts? 5/11/09 3221

Some thoughts on ecological thinking to start – is this a totalizing force; does it try to put things in the box, make things certain, known – is it (just) science? Wouldn't that challenge the visual arts, arts that are free, that suggest anything is possible and that pursue a creativity that knows no bounds? Or we could say - isn't environment out there, subject to scrutiny by anyone, by artists as well as scientists, - can't we work both severally and together on it in our disciplines?

Background

For me the ecological is more abstract than that even; it's an attempt to comprehend the systemic and dynamic and the qualities that maintain structures and processes in any environment*****. I've talked of system ecologies in a variety of contexts.

I started early on the ecological, for in my teens my dad set up a company called Ecological Laboratories. From a shed in the garden it sold a particular fungus (peniofera gigantea) to the UK's largest tree-grower, so that when they cut down trees they could protect the forest by promulgating the growth of a benign fungus rather than the destructive one that might grow if they did not do this. It appealed to my developing sensibility; humanity protects the environment, it said. As I grew older, indeed as our ecologies matured, so I came to understand that such selective intervention in the huge stands of spruce that made up that monocultural environment is, well, probably monocultural in itself. In the same way biodiversity may be poorly understood as, say, foxes eating out of the dustbins in central London, or more poignantly (and locally) as a problem connected with humans feeding ducks on the local nature reserve. Is that biodiversity? Ecological thinking sure makes the common sense world we inhabit a complicated place.

So I'll start with some of my recent thoughts.

I've been trying to put ecology in the Arts academy for a while. Working as I do with Graphic Designers, my thoughts arise mainly from design concerns, but you'll see that business of Media is core to my interrogations as to what is going on and I have searched and found the evidence for my argument from the practice of Art as well. I'm hoping that what I want too say is pertinent across the visual arts.

Ecolography was my first attempt to examine the way that the **understanding of the eco** had been made **graphic**, been subject to the visual arts. I started collecting logos, elements of greenwash, recycling symbols and the like. Involvement with a shorter form, Eco-graphy, was brief; Searching the web I came across this ********.

There was already a scientific journal of that name – dedicated the study of "broad spatial and temporal patterns" in ecology. It is also this******, the study of ultrasound visualizations. Clearly there are reasons to stay away from such neologisms.

I received an Education for Sustainability grant for **Ecoloqo.** I led a student design team to build this Web2.0 offering from 2007. It allows members to crop the interesting graphics of eco-websites into their own collections, and using a tagging system enables search by subject, member or comment. It remains a repository of some 800 websites that have a sustainability concern and focuses on their design. (Read slide elements)

Search for ecological actants

Such concerns about ecology in visual communication can be traced in the same time frame as my own ecological understandings. First things first, a graphic design based manifesto from 1964, *********decried 'the high pitched scream of consumer selling… proposing a reversal of priorities in favour of the more useful and more lasting forms of communication' Adbusters.org, amongst others, republished it updated in 1999, 35 years later, to acknowledge the "Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises (that) demand our attention."

Ten years later Designer's Accord, 'is a global coalition of designers, educators, and business leaders, working together to create positive environmental and social impact.'********* Hopenhagen is a web presence to address the most pressing of our ecological misunderstandings to date; what Lord Stern calls the greatest market failure of all time, our ecological ignorance of the role of carbon in fossil fuel.

A year ago I presented a paper at our Networks of design conference that focused on this *******– a graphic representation of cultural history of carbon emissions. Eco-graphy? Design? Broad spatial and temporal patterns, though, to be sure.

And taking networks of design as an example, looking at the networks conference itself – interrogating the process of the network of design, how people had got there, - revealed that it was inherently unsustainable. The message from this text revealed some sobering aspects to the nature of design history as the story of the flow of emissions capacity across cultures. You can't understand this as an energy graph – this is about steam engines and electric light and cars and television, yes, you've got it – culture. So bringing an ecological thinking into the visual arts is fraught with issues that arise out of the disciplinary nature of our scholarship, its objectivity in relation to the business of living life.

Ecological thinking revealed such networking dependencies for me at that conference; and to my mind it impacts on most settled epistemologies in the face of such evidence as is now being presented to us. The science is now secure – it's up to us to translate ecological thinking into the ways we're best at understanding the world.

Working in design, my conclusion from my paper last year was that for design it will change design behaviour and localise a more networked design. I believe the search is on, moreover, for an epistemological reorientation across all disciplines, profounded and supported in my view by the failures of our polity. But I'd like to turn to the way our cultural productivities aren't working either. ********* there's a turbulence in the creative industries

Some theoretical thinking

And I'd like to rehearse some positive new ideas about networks from Benkler; Yorchai Benkler from Harvard. His 'Wealth of networks' book from 2006 has presented all media communication theorists

(at the very least) with some thinking about digital networks that we should all contemplate. We see the evidence before us. Closed CD/music *****shops, students online during lectures *****(!), 300 million on Facebook (my 86yearold uncle in California asked me to be a friend recently) – tell me you haven't had an email suggesting you buy what others bought after you bought…

Benkler argues that since the introduction of the mechanical press and the telegraph, … through to the satellite, the capital costs of fixing information and cultural goods in a transmission medium - a high-circulation newspaper, a record or movie, a radio or television program - have been high and increasing. *******

   The high costs involved (for these creative industries) in making a widely accessible information good and distributing it ..(has).. muted the relative role of nonmarket production, and emphasized the role of those firms that could … communicate on (this) mass scale.

BUT now ubiquitously available cheap processors have dramatically reduced the … costs …(of) cultural expression and communication, and have rendered feasible a radical reorganization of our information and cultural production system, away from … commercial, concentrated business models and toward … nonproprietary appropriation strategies, in particular nonmarket strategies whose efficacy was dampened throughout the industrial period by the high capital costs of effective communication.

IF ******

 The technological means of sensing our environment, processing it, and communicating new information goods is declining in cost, this begins to privilege **human communicative capacity** - the creativity, experience, and cultural awareness necessary to take from the universe of existing information and cultural resources and turn them into new insights, symbols, or representations meaningful to others with whom we converse.

This human capacity becomes the primary scarce resource in the networked information economy.
… Its liberation from physical constraints leaves creative human beings much freer to engage in a wide range of information and cultural production practices than those they could afford to participate in when, in addition to creativity, experience, cultural awareness and time, one needed a highly capitalized information production systems.

 From our friendships to our communities we live life and exchange ideas, insights, and expressions in many more diverse relations than those mediated by the market.
…
The promise of the networked information economy is to bring this rich diversity of social life smack into the middle of our economy and our productive lives.

The networked information economy has upset the apple cart on the technical, material cost side of information production and exchange.

The institutional ecology, (his word, not mine) the political framework (the lobbyists, the habits of legislatures), and the legal culture (the beliefs of judges, the practices of lawyers) have not changed.

They are as they developed over the course of the twentieth century - centered on optimizing the conditions of those commercial firms that thrive in the presence of strong exclusive rights in information and culture.

The outcome of the conflict between the industrial information economy and its emerging networked alternative will determine whether we can evolve into a society marked by social practice of nonmarket production and cooperative sharing of information, knowledge, and which he argues will improve freedom and justice in liberal societies.

Not that these positions are uncontested – Andrew Keen deplores what he calls the 'cult of the amateur', suggesting that talent will out and that business models will re-emerge to support the incentive to make audiences for talent.

Keen's argument suggests that the Internet is only temporarily eliminating authority, an authority that rests in the stability of our modernity – the epistemological core of our culture. Talent is the inherent feature of our social and cultural forms and the markets that it engenders will re-emerge.

For others though, programmes like X-Factor or American Idol, flip mass media from being '*media for the masses to media by the masses'*, extending populism and making obsolescent the gatekeepers of the established culture industries. Many suggest that Keen is ignoring what Clay Shirky, author of 'Here comes everybody' calls an 'epochal change', just as McLuhan suggested that because what we witness is **breakdown** of established economic function, with business models in disarray and flurries of protective and reactionary behaviour as a response, what we are seeing is **breakthrough** to new forms. (see Federman, 2009)

****** two instances of the change

media artist in Galway buys newspaper twice a week

Youtube, 20 hours of video every minute, has developed content recognition software.

All this implies deeper changes in the creative industries are resonating with my humble attempts to bring ecology to the arts academy. *Studies are also emerging in the social sciences into the way the destructive and anti-ecological works in the social nexus, examining the base for motivations and perceptions that keep us consuming beyond the threshold of happiness, ignorant of the ecological repercussions beyond the horizon.*

Implications

Localisation isn't therefore an absolute process, but the balance is changing between the actants, as Bruno Latour would say, and affording a reevaluation of the way the threads of creativity are woven into the social fabric. Most simply it is the way that the networked information economy creates just two states – HERE or THERE

We can also see this reevaluation in the tensions inherent the recent Digital Britain report. ******Published this year it sets out Government thinking about the roll out of digital network broadband across the country, assessing its impacts across the board - on culture, governance, education etc.

Digital Britain mounts a robust defence of copyright standards and the enforcement actions required to support creative industry inputs into culture.   But in a fundamental contradiction – born of the tension between the older industrial habitus of the established creatives and the early attempts to realize the inherent democratization of not only governance but of cultural processes afforded by the networked information economy. It recognizes these trends with calls for ubiquitous skilling whilst at the same time calling for file sharers to have their access restricted. The vision is of a digital culture in community and a locality of digital culture, one that echoes my basic premise.

So I'm suggesting that just as the pressures from sustainability or ecological thinking emerge in the thrust to interdisciplinary thinking – because the specialisms of modernist epistemology haven't worked, so the growing awareness and interpretation that the actual physical pressures of resource shortages (peak oil, for eg), -actual physical changes - are going to bring change into all our disciplines, and will require us to reevaluate where we are, and why we do what we do.

Across the Arts Academy we find…

Design is a different process within the networked information economy of a sustainable ecology. Designers have sought to establish a general or globalised reach for their ideas but are dependent on personal networking and social capital that makes for 'successful design' in national economies. Nearly 75 % of creative industry is aggregated in the SE of the country. This industrial model design carries a networking cost – the physical movement of individuals. Designers do a lot of traveling, or don't live anywhere round here. Just as we see that the majority of advertising spend move to the internet, we observe the increases in online working, telecommuting, videoconferencing etc. The local is emergent.

For Media the threats are seen as over-reliance on the highly capitalized, centralized media productivities – in tension with individual or local capacities. The breakdown of the authority of mass media sets up the innovation of a participatory networked creativity, with everyone in their locality. Our new local radio is testiment to these changes

For Art I've looked to Popper, in his 2007 book "From technological to virtual art" where he suggests that we are moving from artists investigating "new communal structures, creating knowledge systems and practising information visualization" as a **neocommunicability** - to a newer condition that sees

"community-based systems (that) utilize processes of exchange, learning, and adaptation, and are built on the premise that meaning in a work of art is based on exchange and communication between groups." For Popper this is the "humanization of technology"; " it is the passage from technological to virtual art through the humanization of the machinic through artistic imagination."

This confidence echoes the observation of systemic qualities we have seen for design and media. He continues " Digital Art depends on the internet to give it meaning. This means all other existing means for presenting art have little impact on how the works are perceived. Net culture is what validates the artwork, and as society becomes infused with fast broadband we have the beginning of another medium." (Popper, 2007) In other words, what we are seeing is a cultural shift, a consilient breakthrough, and one we must allow to develop through its humanization of seemingly technological processes.

This is a medium that affords everyone everywhere their creative opportunity, and to my mind that changes the position of the arts academy.

So how does this speak to us here, in the context of a gathering of smaller institutions across the world? For smaller institutions, often in remoter places, there are real challenges for design (and all visual arts) within national economies where creative industries have been focused on the larger conurbations. A distributed design intelligence in the networked information economy produces a much more local activity. *Where creative industries are ecologically threatened there will be those who suggest that we should include ecological thinking in all our programmes*. Indeed as an Associate Dean in our Faculty of Design some 10 years ago we tried to oversee a process of embedding sustainability within the aims and objectives of all our courses. But it was seen as irrelevant. And indeed, only last week, a scion of the design industry Sir John Hegarty, suggested there was little ecological thinking in his part of the world.

What success we have in raising consciousness was hard won, as exemplified by the difficulties that our 3D design course has had with sustainability at the epitome of its awareness. For many others, their ecological thinking has been token engagement.

Surely the point is that a sustainable design awareness (is that 'ecological thinking'?) embodies all the qualities of the ecological – attention to the different qualities or actants in changing material culture, not as a bolt-on effect with alien language forms, but as intrinsic activities in the qualities of our educational process.

Even as we assemble here this week, The UK government has announced its plans for HE, reinforcing reports that suggest that for institutions, sustainability or ecological thinking is the dynamic for strategic institutional change in HE. So it won't be enough to express ecological thinking in the repertoire of the visual arts; the visual arts must be part of a new ecological praxis, led out by visions of an ecological future. At the core of this is the new digital networked reality. Recent calls for HE to lead the way by halving its carbon footprint in an accelerated timescale (by 50% before 2020 – just ten

years!) suggest a growing realisation that innovation and new cultural forms must emerge from the universities not as 'subject' or tacit knowledge but as a transformative engagement at the core of our increasingly digitally networked culture – questioning/researching/envisioning the very way we live and work!

It leads to some provocative suggestions. Should we encourage placement programmes, should we encourage shorter term engagement with the institution (VLs for the day) both of *which embed carbon* in our pedagogy? We can't invite people here without them causing the emission of at least 5% of a sustainable annual carbon budget. How can we seek to entertain the precepts of an ecoversity, encouraging sustainable behaviours? We sell bottled water and carbonated sugar drinks rather than installing drinking fountains about the place. We use leafblowers rather than employ gardeners.

The Centre for Sustainable Futures project realized that knowledge was not enough, we had to embed increasing sustainability or ecological thinking into everything that happened in the university's relation to its economic/ecological hinterland – the ecology of the university is not in the knowing, representing, mediating or subjecting of ecology to academic scrutiny.********* The ecological thinking of a university is in the way it expresses itself as the epitome of our local ecological knowledge, it becomes the way we express our understanding, our developing consciousness.
This is action research, as my previous forays into taxonomy taught me there is no prescription implied here.

If anything we are all chasing a lost folksonomy of sustainability, and this implies a learning project, enjoining student /staff /infrastructure/ locality (population, democratic processes and all) in a reorientation. **final****
A localizing networked information economy and a developing digital culture will support local visual arts as vibrant component in a broader local and digital arts university revolution. Now we can start work on the "reassembling (of) the social" that Bruno Latour suggests is the purpose of the educational and political process. Perhaps the question is not whether we should localize, rather how we should build our academy for its inevitability.

http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/jul/30/universities-carbon-emissions)
 Federman, M 2009, 'The Agenda on Andrew Keen's Cult of the Amateur' What is the next message blog http://whatisthemessage.blogspot.com/ accessed October 2009