

Preface

“IS THAT ALL?” were the words that led to the writing of this text. They were uttered by Skip Schuckmann, a near-stranger at the time, when I told him I had just acquired raw land in the Hudson Valley, New York, and planned to live there the rest of my life. I described the rolling hills, wildflower meadow, forest stream, and a view of the Catskill Mountains to the west. My description culminated in an exuberant, “It’s so beautiful!” His question triggered a journey of discovery that ultimately led me to refashion my personal lifestyle and redirect my professional pursuits. Both morphed as I discovered that beauty was not all the site afforded. Its visual qualities were gradually enhanced by previously unrecognized assets. Its botanical and zoological populations, for example, performed wondrous feats of resilience and set exemplary standards of resourcefulness. Over time, the resources that sustain these species have sustained me and my family. At first, we harvested the stone, moss, berries, acorns, deer that were available for harvesting. Then, optimizing the productivity of this habitat became my life mission. I am diligently transforming our eleven acres according to permaculture principles. Water management, soil creation, food production, animal husbandry, forest gardens, composting, fencing, terracing, and winter gardening are hands-on primers in ecology and joy. Over time, I directed this newly acquired appreciation of the hypersensitivity of ecosystems to my profession by founding Artnow Publications. The eco art “textlets” it publishes are produced according to stringent environmental principles.

The thesis and format of the book you are reading are also products of the question, *Is that all?* When I applied that inquiry to the question, *Why write an eco art textbook?*, compelling reasons proliferated. They, too, exceeded honoring the beauty that graces our fair planet. Five persuasive answers supplemented the Earth’s immense storehouse of visual pleasures. *Why write an eco art textbook?*

- Because responding to current environmental crises is the singular challenge of the current era.
- Because artists possess astute communication skills that can disseminate existing environmental strategies of reform and preservation.
- Because art’s inspirational capacity can activate the behavioral changes and policy reforms of custodial care for our planetary home.
- Because the creative ingenuity that is the special province of art can be directed to life-sustaining problem solving.
- Because art has long served as conscience of a culture.

THESIS

Eco art stands out from the din of environmental warnings, policies, and campaigns because its content is enriched by artistic imagination and its strategies are emboldened by artistic

license. All forty-seven artists represented in this book augment humanity's prospects for attaining a sustainable future. By bolstering eco art's status as the current era's definitive artistic movement, they are establishing an entirely new set of standards for measuring an artistic masterwork.

While the previous sentence accurately describes this book's thesis, skeptics are plentiful. They note, with good reason, the many ways the creative individuals the book features jeopardize their status as artists. Driven by the desire to strengthen the planet's weakened defenses and preserve remnants of our planet's vitality, these artists venture beyond conventional art boundaries into uncharted territories. They typically address issues that non-art professionals claim, create works that function like objects with no pretensions as art, conduct processes that do not resemble studio art practices, and share creative responsibility with non-artist collaborators. Another entry on this challenging list is provided by medium. Eco artists replace art store supplies with living plants and microbes, mud and feathers, electronic transmissions and digital imagery, temperature and wind, debris and contaminants. The finale is that eco art is defined as a mission, not a style. For all these reasons, eco artists can be viewed as either defectors from art or as pioneers inaugurating a new art movement.

In all these ways the artists in this book pose the question, Does eco art merit inclusion within the ever-evolving chronicle of art history? The answer may depend upon whether the need to address the pressures currently besetting the planet carries the cultural weight of postwar anxiety in the 1940s that gave rise to a new art movement—abstract expressionism. It will be determined by whether environmental concerns loom with the significance of commodity abundance in the 1960s that spurred another new art movement—pop art. There is no consensus yet on whether chapters exploring contemporary eco art will follow the chapters on abstract expressionism and pop art in future art history texts.

Even before eco art's status within the history of art is resolved, this book advocates for its inclusion within academic curricula. Students benefit by receiving an education that addresses predicaments and crises that are critical to their well-being and to their children's prospects. In a complementary manner, pedagogical attention to eco art benefits the planet by funneling the creative ingenuity of art students into ventures designed to alleviate the innumerable problems that currently beleague the Earth and its populations. These benefits can be channeled through courses that focus on critical theory, studio art, art history, social practice, environmental studies, and cultural studies.

Although eco art has been hovering in the wings of the art scene for more than half a century, two phenomena are converging that might ultimately cast it in a leading role in the current era's cultural chronicle. First, its mission is becoming ever more crucial, as the Earth's ability to sustain current and future generations of humans becomes more precarious. Like leaders in education, politics, industry, ethics, legislation, health, commerce, and security, today's eco artists are expanding and intensifying the missions introduced by their predecessors—environmentalists and eco artists of the 1960s and 1970s. Second, the number of international artists rejuvenating the planet has reached a critical mass. My files brim with artists from across the globe who are applying environmental remedies and defenses. Over 300 made the first cut. Forty-seven were ultimately selected for presentation in this text. Thirteen are twentieth-century eco art pioneers. The rest are twenty-first-century eco art explorers. The selection process considered which work of art epitomized an ecological issue or exemplified an ecological art method. Since so many were worthy, decisions ultimately involved differentiating *good* from *better* in order to arrive at *best*. This critical

assessment was leveled at works of art, not artists, whose careers are far too varied and extensive to consider in a single volume. Ultimately, the works chosen serve as case studies that encompass the accomplishments of innumerable art colleagues, set standards of environmental integrity, and introduce areas ripe for further exploration.

FORMAT

In order to accommodate contemporary habits of accessing information, this book deviates from publishing conventions. For example, its Table of Contents does not impose a pre-determined sequence for accessing the text. Each chapter is a discrete unit of text, able to serve as a building block that can be used to construct individualized reading experiences. In this manner this book is attuned to the electronic communication strategies that have accustomed today's readers to engage with texts that are participatory, expandable, and versatile. These qualities were transferred to book form by utilizing three organizing schemes—banners, schematics, and indexes. Each consolidates and conveys a specific range of environmental concerns or art approaches. These schemes facilitate compare-and-contrast analysis and expedite the reader's selection of text according to individual interest or an instructor's academic discipline.

Banners introduce the artists' chapters. They serve twin purposes. They provide a synopsis of the specific text by identifying the core themes and methods that are particular to the artworks in that chapter. In addition, they establish the context for those artworks by presenting an overview of all the eco art options considered in the book. To respect the interdisciplinary nature of eco art, two banners relay environmental considerations and two are devoted to art considerations:

- Eco issues addressed by eco artists
- Eco approaches adopted by eco artists
- Art genres employed by eco artists
- Art strategies activated by eco artists

Schematics consolidate the information conveyed in the banners into four diagrams: eco issues, eco approaches, art genres, and art strategies. Each banner provides information about the individual chapter. Each diagram provides the broad perspective. The four schematics illustrate the relationships among the artists and identify the distribution of their concerns and methodologies. Schematics construct a visual equivalent of eco art's dynamic interconnections.

Indexes ensure that the information contained in the schematics is easily accessible. They assemble all the artists and group them according to precise eco issues, eco approaches, art genres, and artistic strategies.

In sum, these three schemes serve as signposts for explorations deep into eco art territories.

It is hoped they and the content they support will foster the appreciation and production of eco art so that it can augment humanity's prospects for attaining a sustainable future.