

Different Approaches of Nature Art in the East and the West

Abstract of the DLA Thesis

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Introduction

From the beginning of the 1990s in several European countries I created site specific art works in which, besides the challenges of the three-dimensional space, the atmosphere and material “found” at the site became increasingly important to me eclipsing more and more the experiences “brought from home”. While working on my art piece in the *Abiko Open Air Exhibition* in 2002 in Japan I consciously let myself influenced by the materials found in nature. I incorporated the natural environment into the artwork. In the following years I was invited to several nature art events held predominantly in Asia, in Taiwan, Korea, Mongolia and India. That time the question, where the high degree of the love of nature comes from in this part of the world, started occupying me. But I still worked with the bravery of the uninformed, intuitively and I was not entirely aware of the history, the cultural and religious background of this characteristic art manifestation native to Asia. Gradually, it became clear to me that I should study the Asian nature art events especially in their relation with similar events organized in the Western countries.

In my thesis I initially intended to present nature art in the context of my own works and the Eastern nature art events I am familiar with. But when I started writing the paper, I realized there is no comprehensive study published in the field yet. I concluded that it is impossible to discuss nature art without giving a short description of its predecessors and some sort of historical overview. Therefore, I attempted to put together, if only mosaic like, a picture with more definite outlines based on the available literature and my personal experiences. By all means this picture is quite roughly drawn, and while drawing it a lot of interesting correlations surfaced, and even more areas were brought to light that require further investigation.

What is nature art?

As studying the subject I found out that nature art is not a widely known concept, its meaning is unconsolidated and ambiguous even in art literature, and its generally used English definition, “art for and with nature”, is too limited and simplifying in my opinion. It seemed evident then that having drawn an outline of the historical evaluation of the depiction of nature I introduce my thesis with clarifying the essence of nature art.

Nature art events are quite variedly named throughout the world. The term nature art is unknown in the United States. In the home country of land art they probably insist on accurately naming its countless schools such as ecoart, environmental art, earth art, resource art, primitivist art, etc. In Europe nature art or natur kunst has been in use as a collective concept for the last 10-15 years. The term nature art is used quite confidently in Asia so much so that in Korea it is fully integrated into the professional language of art. The Hungarian equivalent of nature art, “természetművészet” was mentioned first by *Katalin Keserü* in the foreword of the catalogue of the exhibition entitled as *Természetesen (Naturally)* held in Ernst Museum, Budapest. For me the most acceptable definition of nature art is the concept of the exhibition written by *János Sturcz* in the same catalogue. I worked with this definition throughout the thesis: "In our selection we focused on art works that: 1. strive to recreate the harmony with nature; 2. directly apply natural materials, objects, energies and sites in art works, that is, which are based on direct bodily contact with nature. Therefore, nature indicates basically not the theme of representation but rather an attitude that could not be linked exclusively to a single school (e. g. resource, ecological, green, primitivist, ritual, earth, land, etc art) but it is formed in the intersection and as a result of interaction of all these approaches..."

As the above choice of definition may seem to be somewhat arbitrary, it is important summarizing the characteristic features of art works born in the spirit of nature art. The pieces are usually created in natural, perhaps rural environment far away from the urban settings. The “sign” brought to life this way reinforces the specialty, unique

character of the given landscape, their interrelation is unalterable, the art work is not able to exist outside of this environmental context.

When realizing the artwork, the artist makes use of the natural materials available in the given environment, therefore a certain period of life is encoded into the ephemeral works at the moment of creation. In this case the myth of conventional artwork intended for eternity does not prevail, the piece exists in the time of the periodic changes of nature.

In handling materials, the artist mostly relies on artisanal techniques and refrains from using machines. The nature artist respects folk art, art outside of the Western culture, and does not take it out of its own context.

From a certain perspective the prepared art works are created in opposition to the mainstream ideas. They are usually not portable, therefore they cannot be exhibited in the emblematic museum sites of the world. Moreover, they cannot be concentrated, so they are of no interests for the collectors.

The nature artist could be described by a behavior that is just being formed. It has not been crystallized into a perfect term, but in certain cases it has become a worldview or even an action. While observing the natural artist's creative attitude, we should focus on the ability of how he/she leaves a harmonic sign bearing hidden content in nature.

No doubt land art had an accelerator role in the development of nature art. But among the contributing factors we should also mention the expansionist-activist attitude originating from the avantgarde movement that had an impact on the act of exodus to nature, and the survival of the utopist attitude of science and technology in the decades of postmodern as well. Other contributing factors were the emergence of computer technology, the understanding of the ecological problems of the globalizing world as a result of the chaos theory or the electronic media, which all influenced the artists' thinking who are sensitive to ecological issues.

Nature art in the West

From the debut of land art onwards nature emerges in the Western contemporary art as the location, subject and material of the artistic act. It is no longer just a motif of representation or a background scene. It is noteworthy that in the United States at the

time of the first land art creations in the sixties, different attitudes, characteristic to the artists' relation to nature could already be identified. Among these attitudes those were acknowledged and followed that approached nature in the spirit of acceptance, worry and humility. In my opinion three important schools can be identified among them with respect to their formation.

The classic „earth moving” land artists – *Walter de Maria, Heizer, Smithson*, etc – acknowledgedly did not care for ecology and environmental issues. They rather proclaimed the heroism of the human (creative) power, referring especially to their own personal skills. As a result of the criticism received, this macho behavior softened by the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties. Their activities calmed down into recultivation acts which from time to time reflected ecological problems (*Heizer: Effegy Tumuli, Buffalo Rocks*, Illionis, 1985). Their passionate exodus from the White Cube was only partly realized too, because of „sociological development” and financial reasons they drifted back to the galleries in a roundabout way. Their attraction to monumentality remained unchanged. It is proven not only by the above typical land art works but also the pieces exhibited in galleries such as the *Walter de Maria's 5 Five Continents Sculptor* with dimensions of 13 x 23.5 meter, weighing 325 tons.

In contrast with them, the artist held to be centrists (*Richard Long, Hamish Fulton, Hans Haacke*) consider their attitude as a ritual interaction during which they hardly interfere with the landscape or they just border it with the lense of the camera. Traces of Buddhist attitude can be observed in their activity. In their case we can speak of a sort of alliance with nature where, besides utilizing natural materials, one can be part of the interaction of the artist with the resources and the elements. They confront the man-made geometry with the chaotic composition of nature quite discreetly in their works that are more moderate in their dimensions as well. For them intervention cannot be dominant. Therefore, they highlight the dependence of people on nature in their artworks that could be considered as certificates of the respect of nature.

This creative method suggesting a slight Buddhist attitude spread in Europe too. Some well-known curators obeying to the century-old habits tried to cram this method into a system, display it in museum like circumstances and according to the logic of the museums, then operate it as a homogenous network. By now it is obvious, that this

project failed because its logic contradicted the basic principles of nature art corroborating that the rules of art industry cannot be applied in this field. Nature art cannot be domesticated with the methods of gallery industry as it happened with *arte povera*.

The three artists whom I put into the last group and describe as „eco day laborers”, *Alan Sonfist*, *Denes Agnes* and the *Harissons* are probably the farthest from the "earth moving" artists of the first group. Creating in the spirit of ecology and environmentalism, they emphasize postmaterial values. The increasingly agitative ecoart came to life in the United States based on the activities of the artists of this group. In this school the aesthetic element became less important and the social act overlapping with other disciplines grew more significant. This typical American phenomenon has become known as *ecovention*.

Looking back from the perspective of nature art we can see that in the West some of the schools emerging from nature art manifestations dated from the emergence of land art have reached their full state and now they flourish. Eco attitude daring to enter into the field of science or co-operating with politics is such a school. There are other schools, however, that disappeared or softened just like the „earth movers" where the autotelic interference was transformed into a landscape recultivation act. When speaking of the shaping of different attitudes we can observe a change in the artists' approach to nature. It is of course closely related to the emergence of ecology issues and the increased sensitivity of the society towards these problems.

We can conclude, however, that the tendency of change that can be perceived in the perception of nature of the Western art society points to an approach to nature, based on respect and harmony, that has always been the integral part of the Eastern *weltanschauung*.

Eastern Europe

With respect to nature art, Eastern Europe cannot be compared to either the creative gestures of the American land art, where man's desire to dominate nature prevails, or to

the Western European attitude that can rather be characterized by the heroic creator's myth. Eastern European artists can be described by the creative behavior of the „little gesture” (*Ulrich Bischoff*) that does not cause a fundamental change in the environment, it only comments and interprets it providing an opportunity for us to see it from a different perspective. This can be explained, in addition to the limited financial means and the lack of gallery networks, by the suffocating political atmosphere and the escape from the official culture politics.

In the seventies art groups such as *Pécsi Műhely (Pécs Workshop)* in Hungary, *Sigma* in Timisiora, Rumania, *Bosch+Bosch* in Subotica and Novi Sad in Yugoslavia were motivated by finding the new forms of expression and by being in sync with Westkunst. Another route to nature art was laid down by sculpture and installation as trying to find the answer to the question of the „sculpture of space or the space of sculpture” (*Magdalena Abakanowicz, Wanda Mihuleac, Petre Nikolovski*).

From the seventies onwards the forms of expression of nature art was enriched by an important, typically Eastern European element. Here the relatively underdeveloped agriculture, manual tilling of the land, family stockbreeding ensured the continuous contact with nature. That time the so-called modern neo-avantgarde movements and the expansionist trends breaking with the accepted modes of expression could still meet the traditions of living folk art (*Władysław Hasiór, MAMŮ*).

In the eighties some Rumanian artists moved to rural environment in the spirit of the thought „agriculture is art and art is agriculture” (*Gheorghe Ilea, Alexandru Chira*). They interpreted the courtyard of the farm as „the church of remembrance” whose priests are the farmers, the actual artists of nature. Living folkart had different presence, if any, in the Eastern European art and countries.

Nature art in the East

In the second half of the thesis I examined the Eastern man's perception of nature with respect to object creation and environmental design (wabi-sabi, Feng-shui, Indian artisanship, garden design, ink drawing, calligraphy) that contributed to the spread of nature art in the Asian continent. And drawing from my own personal artistic experience,

I presented some Asian nature art events highlighting their concept, organization techniques, their network building activities and future goals. By analyzing some of the participating artists' works I presented characteristic nature art creative attitudes, and discussed the experiences and lessons acquired when creating my own art works.

The Eastern man's worldview is influenced much more by religious and cultural traditions than the Western man's. As I outlined it in my thesis, each Eastern religion, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism or Taoism, approaches nature with a special attitude and spirit, very different from ours, which fundamentally determines the Eastern artists' practice of nature art. The Eastern man's worldview defines not only his/her relation to nature but also the relation to the objects created. Wabi-sabi whose aesthetics can hardly be interpreted for Westerners, Feng-shui that intends to bring about the harmony of the external environment, its Korean version, Sen, and the artifacts of the Indian artisanship follow nature, its laws, dynamics and powers. The Eastern man's ultimate goal is a „creative union with nature” that is obviously perceptible in the nature art works as well. The Eastern nature art has never had aggressive, conquering or even transforming intentions. It is much more characterized by the intention of the gentle action of leaving a sign behind following the inner dynamics of nature.

This approach can be observed in the nature art manifestations that emerged first in the seventies with the debut of the Korean Yatoo in the Asian region, and which have become more prominent since then. The emergence of land art probably played a part in Yatoo's move to nature. However, what has happened in nature art since then can be considered as a result of an autonomous development, which, in my opinion, is absolutely independent from the developments of Western creative art.

One of the goals of the Indian *Sandarbh Artists Workshops* is to organize interactive international artistic events in the isolated village that is useful for both the artists and the locals. While working together, locals can have an insider view into the artists' work, and the artists are able to learn not only the artisan techniques but the locals' way of thinking as well. Here, the artist must resign from his/her sacred role for a month and acknowledge that the work of art does not have an exceptional standing, and it

is not protected by the consecrated aura of any institution. That is, they should accept that not the end product counts but the attitude change of the participants of the creative process, taking the completeness of the environment into possession spiritually and materially.

The more significant nature art events in the Chinese speaking countries take place outside of the People's Republic of China. In Taiwan and Honkong there are more usually annually organized nature art events. The *Environmental Art – Sculpture & Installation Exhibition* is such an open-air exhibition held in the botanic garden of the city. Another important event is the exhibition and symposium organized in the Shihmen National Park in Hualien county in the Southern part of Taiwan, where floated timber is designated as the raw material to be used for the creation of art works. The most celebrated events in the Taipei area are the *Guandu International Outdoor Sculpture Festival* held in the Guandu National Park focusing on using locally available raw materials, and the *Juming International Art Camp* operated as a recurrent programme of the privately founded Juming Museum providing excellent circumstances. The events concentrate on ecology issues highlighting different themes from time to time.

In Japan, influenced by land art and the Western nature art events, from the nineties onwards events started proliferating, which went back to Buddhist-Shintoist spiritual foundation, used the „modern” language and tried to make contact with the similar Western events. The acknowledgedly most famous one is the *Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial*, which were organized in a small mountain region in three times in 2000, 2003 and 2006. The goal of this huge budget event, arranged in a valley composed of nine depopulated villages, was to realize an internationally recognized artistic event with the inhabitants of the villages to attract masses of people, provide income for the inhabitants and co-operation opportunities for the artists.

The *Abiko Open Air Exhibition* with ties to the Abiko Ajima Art Center was initiated by the artists living in the Abiko area in a rural environment. The focal point of the event is the art centre where projections, receptions, lectures are held, while the creative work is performed in the neighboring bamboo forests in pre-selected locations, utilizing materials available on the spot.

The Korean Yattoo group organizes the *Four Season Workshop* and the related *Geumgang Nature Art Biennale* where art pieces are created in the nature without using any tool at all. As a result of the persistent, determined and goal oriented activities of the group, the event is considered to be equal in rank with the great Asian biennales and known as the most important integrating manifestation of nature art. Its dominance has outgrown the Korean art scene.

Based on my research I conclude that the contact of the two branches of nature art, the Eastern and the Western one was made due to the activities and European presence of the Korean Yattoo. The greatest achievement of the contact established is an international nature art network that is operated by art organizations, periodicals, a great number of thematic web pages and the *Geumgang Nature Art Biennale*. The only criterion of the voluntary participation in the network including many kinds of creative attitudes, is the attitude of „humble approach” to nature, which becomes more and more subtle making the participants react to the increasingly diverse questions raised by the frequent environmental issues of our time.

The nature artists of our time continue simultaneously both the Eastern nature art philosophy and the American eco-laborers’ novel thinking and proclaim the necessity of paradigm change formulated by them. They are willing and open to co-operate with anyone to achieve their goals, moreover, they need the co-operation of the social environment for realizing their projects.

Summary

While writing the thesis my most exciting discovery was that on the imagery map of nature art Eastern Europe is much closer to Asia than to its own continent. This is corroborated by the surprising analogies I discovered when compared my own photo archive and the catalogues that Yattoo members gave me. That time I did not realize this correlation yet. It was crystallized only later after I studied the biography of MAMÜ members and had long talks with the Yattoo members. The aversion to dictatorship in power and the resulted limited exhibition opportunities motivated the exodus to nature in both countries. The similarity experienced in their attitude to nature was based on the correspondence of the religion present as a cultural background and the object creation

aesthetics of Sen in the Korean group on one hand, and the rural, close to nature life experience of the members of the Marosvásárhely (Targu Mures), Rumania based group. This isolating, creative method that considers nature as a safe hideout could become general in Eastern Europe, because in peasant culture this close to nature the natural liturgies originating from the ancient, pagan religions were preserved, and they were blended with Christian traditions, but ensured the sacred and respect based character of the relation to nature. The tricks of living folk art object creation that were inherited by tradition from the beginning of time, could still be learned, just as Feng shui, wabi-sabi or the techniques used to date by the Indian artisans in the East.

Nature art, that appeared in Asia and became an established term, is still an elusive concept in Europe and it is not used at all in the United States. In my opinion nature art is such an exciting, comprehensive field of visual art that provides opportunity for the artists who want to leave the gallery system anyway (public art, street art) for real, due to the worsening ecology issues very relevant, exciting and socially committed artistic expression.

The fact that nature art appeared as an academic programme in some European universities indicates that its canonization has started. I am convinced that this tendency should be strengthened in Europe. It is especially true for the Eastern European region, where this time the artistic expression in question would not mean the takeover of a Western practice, but the survival of an existing, traditional „own” artistic mode. In the spirit of this realization we plan to start a nature art programme in the Visual Arts Department of Eszterházy Károly College in Eger, Hungary.