

LUCY LIPPARD:

An Insurmountable Opportunity

MAYBE PUBLIC ART is our last chance? As Alfredo Jaar has pointed out, "For all its failings, the world of art and culture is...the last place where you are still free to dream of a better world." In that world—where vision is respected—artists would be called to envision and help build a sustainable future.

For instance, Alan Sonfist's 1978 *Time Landscape* at Houston Street and LaGuardia Place in New York turns out to have been prescient. According to a recent article, in order to better cope with storm water and sewage runoff, and to ease the pressure on Manhattan's aging infrastructure, a law is being proposed to develop green rooftops and "landscaped sidewalks and streets with larger, deeper soil and plant areas as well as permeable pavements." Sonfist's artwork functions like that, but in addition it is a poignant hybrid of art and nature, a "living history" showcasing plants that thrived in colonial times. Another example is Patricia Johanson's prescient ideas, demonstrated in her 1960s writings on "total environmental design," and her call for artists to be seen and employed as "creative intelligences."

It seems imperative for all visionary artists to begin immediately to participate in the movement to halt global climate change, which physician John Fogarty has described, in the words of Yogi Berra, as "an insurmountable opportunity." The economic disaster we are experiencing today could be solved with an all-out attack on the sustainability front. A clean energy workforce, as projected by environmental organizations, could produce some 5 million new green jobs, including many for artists—a kind of green WPA. Public art, in its infinitely varied and unlimited forms, can potentially attract the broad audiences necessary for "change we can believe in." Many young collectives around the world, as well as other independent thinkers and believers in DIY, are not waiting for the feds to act. They are doing it themselves.

I admired each of the 17 temporary public works around the town of Boulder, Colorado, that were made for my exhibition *Weather Report* in 2007. But the image that sticks with me (maybe because it can be expressed so well in words) was a projection piece by Helen and Newton Harrison inside the museum. Grounded in a scientific collaboration, *The Mountain in the Greenhouse* illuminates the way ecosystems are climbing mountains as the climate warms. When they reach the top, they will have nowhere else to go.

This image holds a clear and powerful—and very visual—message for everyone on this planet. I'd like to see it displayed from Times Square to Tiananmen Square, and on TV and all the other so-called public media. I'd like to see environmental organizations actively seeking out artists who can deliver this kind of cultural impact, who can make art that may or may not answer to conventional definitions—actions and object lessons that may be hidden in social energies not yet recognizable as art.



Newton and Helen Harrison, *The Mountain in the Greenhouse*, 2001, from the video "Peninsula Europe," duration: approx. 3 minutes. To view this "global morality play" online, visit http://theharrisonstudio.net/gh_video.html.