

The Road Less Traveled: A Choice for Fundamental Personal Change

Change is inevitable. And it is necessary. Having the ability to adapt to new environments and situations has been humanity's greatest asset. It is my belief that we, as a human civilization, have come to a tipping point because of our advancements in science and technology combined with our modern way of living, especially a desire to acquire wealth without regard for other people or the planet as a whole. We must, once again, use our greatest skill and adjust our behaviors to fit within the means of the current world that we helped shape. Our social, political, economic, educational and environmental systems are in disrepair and need to be transformed. One look at the news will give you a clue of what I'm talking about: child rape and prostitution, domestic violence, protests on every continent demanding social justice, countless wars, blatant government corruption, corporate bailouts, stock market instability, government economic defaults, Bernard Madoff's Ponzi scheme, global warming, the ozone hole, Fukushima, Deepwater Horizon and the list goes on and on. Humanity has faced many challenges in the past but this time, with so many potential major catastrophic events looming, we need fundamental change. I believe the change that is necessary lies at the heart of each individual: to value all life more than valuing self-interests and profits. I am just a single quiet voice in proclaiming this need for a shifting global paradigm: a turn to a more sustainable way of living for the future of humanity and all life. The artwork I create is a reflection and a documentation of my thoughts and personal actions in regard to a more sustainable way of living.

The fundamental change that I am pursuing lies in understanding and valuing all life. Everything is interconnected. I believe, as a modern civilization, our awareness of the natural world has diminished, unlike indigenous cultures that understood and respected the

interconnections of life. My response is to take action by investigating nature through personal experiences, then bringing those experiences into my art to facilitate awareness by those who view my art. In the process, I am getting to know myself in new ways as well as reconnecting with nature. My investigation has taken me from wild edibles to “primitive” skills to blindfolded walks in the forests and beyond.

During my blindfolded walks I navigate the forest without bumping into trees. I sense the trees. I feel the ground with my feet: soft areas, hard areas, sandy areas, or ones covered with leaves. I am aware of subtle changes in topography: up and down, bumps here and depressions there. I notice the crunching of dry leaves beneath my feet as I walk. I am fully aware of the subtle sounds that used to blend together as background noise, like the sounds of a slight breeze rustling the leaves, the buzzing of flying insects and of course the singing of many songbirds. Walking blindfolded in the woods not only reconnects me with the forest but also heightens my proprioceptive sense.

Taking these experiences as the basis for an art exhibition, much the same way that Hamish Fulton uses his walks as the foundation of his art, I collaborated with four Millersville University students to produce *Experiential Epistemology: An Awareness Installation*. All of us walked blindfolded in the forest. Then we brought what was essential to our experience into the gallery for an experiential installation.

What was important: we were aware of our presence in the forest, the ground we stepped on, dry leaves, grass or soil, whether the ground was even or slanted, uphill or downhill, the sounds of our steps, the birds and insects, the smell of the woods, the smell of ourselves, and the awareness of the trees, shrubs and living material around us.

In the gallery, we are not outside, so we didn't want to falsify nature by trying to create a natural setting inside. But we wanted to let viewers be aware of our outdoor experience by having a similar gallery experience. So we designed the exhibition to make viewers aware of their presence inside the gallery, what they stepped on, what sounds they heard, what they smelled and what they saw. Live plants were brought into the gallery but were kept in their plastic containers to show that we were not trying to recreate a natural environment indoors. We used technology as a contrast to nature by showing video footage of our blindfolded walks. The images were projected large enough to cover an entire wall and go onto the floor and ceiling of the gallery, so the viewer walked into the images and became a part of the work as well.

The idea of creating an experience for the viewer is important to me. I feel as though the viewer becomes present and is involved, as opposed to viewing the work from the outside. The viewers become participants, which has a larger impact on them.

My work like Fulton's work relies on personal experiences. However, Fulton's work goes far beyond his personal experience of the natural world. As he moves through the landscape during his multiple-day hikes he intends to "leave no trace." He does not try to manipulate the landscape and create land art or earthworks. His work consists mostly of nature photography taken during his walks combined with words, or simply words with no imagery. The works are based on his walks but are not meant to recreate the experience of the walks, similar to my gallery experience mentioned earlier. Today, Fulton's art functions as a manifesto for environmental concerns.

Take for example one of his more direct pieces: A very gray, black and white grainy photograph of a misty morning overlooking the landscape. Across the left side of the image, reading sideways, is printed in light blue letters: TO BUILD IS TO DESTROY. Also on the left

side of the image is printed, also reading sideways, in smaller white letters: NO MAN-MADE OBSTACLES FOR THE WINTER WINDS 14 SEVEN DAY WALKS CAIRNGORMS SCOTLAND 1985-1999. It is not hard to understand his message about the impact of humanity on the natural landscape.

Fulton's work responds to the environmental debates about how humans interact with the planet. "In an indirect way, without preaching, he encourages us to reconsider our personal relationships with nature. The work is not protest art as such, but as Fulton says: 'The single most important issue of our times is the condition of the planet.' He calls for our awareness by proposing an alternative model for the relationship between man and nature." (Tufnell 17)

Andy Goldsworthy is another artist who embraces nature and tries to get to know a place through his artwork. On one occasion, he worked with ice at Glenmarlin Falls on the River Scaur in Dumfriesshire.

"When the cold arrived, that is where I went. I was disappointed at first because it was too sheltered. Only one pool was barely frozen. I used the precious ice – the work was not good, but it gave me a feel for the place. As the winter progressed, it became colder. Different pools started to freeze on different days depending on how sheltered they were or whether they were fed by running water (these pools were the last to freeze). As the cold intensified, my work became more ambitious and demanding – one work a day, with the ice sticking in just a few minutes. What I learned that week went beyond the ice in my hand." (Goldsworthy 1-2)

Goldsworthy, like Fulton, doesn't present his experience as the art. He presents the viewer with beautiful photographs that result from his hands-on experience of the place. His ephemeral works may last only a few moments, while he takes the photograph, before it is blown away by a slight breeze, such as when he works with leaves or feathers. Other pieces like his stonework will exist much longer for many people to notice, appreciate and contemplate.

Many of Goldsworthy's photographs present ordinary objects put together in extraordinary ways. These images create a dialog about the place for the viewer to contemplate.

Take for example a simple image of a rocky beach with a pile of rocks in the foreground. The sand appears at first to be light brown to tan in color. The rock pile in the foreground transitions from red rocks at the top of the pile to light red to white to grey and finally the bottom layer of rocks are black. The rock could be from anywhere but through a closer inspection of the blurred middle ground of the photograph you're able to notice the individual colors of rocks in the landscape. They match the colors of the rock in the foreground. It is this subtle information that makes viewers reevaluate what they are looking at, bringing them closer to the subject and closer to getting to know the place. Goldsworthy's process enables him to become familiar with the materials and the place where he works. His images allow his viewer to have a similar experience.

My installations also rely on my personal investigation of nature and my awareness of it and myself. Blindfolded walks are not my art but they are the foundation upon which I create installations. Through the MFA program, I also developed an object-oriented style of art making that communicates my feelings for the need of fundamental social change.

Artists throughout history have assessed their era and used their artwork to advocate change. They use their art as a catalyst for thought. I feel it is not the artists' role to provide answers or present viable solutions, but only to ask unique thought-provoking questions that begin or continue the dialog and provoke the debate. As the international hacking group Anonymous stated in one of the latest messages about social change, "...Artists: move the movement, stoke the flames..." (Anonymous 2:18) That is the power of art, to "move the movement," by presenting topics that the general public chooses to ignore and advance the dialog.

Personal change that stems from personal evaluation is the fundamental change that I feel is happening today, that will move us beyond our current dilemmas. In 1970 Gil Scot Heron recognized this change and recorded “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” a song about the changes that take place inside a person’s mind. When asked about the song Heron replied, “You have to change your mind before you change the way you live and the way you move. So when we said that the revolution will not be televised, we were saying that the thing that is going to change people, it’s something that no one will be able to capture on film. It will just be something that you see and all of a sudden you’ll realize: I am on the wrong page or on the right page but the wrong note and I got to get in sync with everyone else to understand what is happening in this country.” (Blumberg)

Forty-one years later, this is the exact process that is happening throughout the world. I am living and documenting it through my personal experiences. I am only one. But I am one. One voice bringing awareness to the need for basic change in the way we, as a human culture, think, feel and act.

Godfrey Reggio also recognized the shifting global paradigm and took action in 1982 by producing the first in a series of movies, the Qatsi trilogy, a thought-provoking film series that questions modern civilizations and the use of technology as a measure of progress. Qatsi, a Hopi word meaning “life” or “way or life,” is used in each of the three film titles: *Koyaanisqatsi* - life out of balance: (1982), *Powaqqatsi* - parasitic life: (1988) and *Naqoyqatsi* - life as war: (2002).

Koyaanisqatsi, the first film in the series, begins by showing how wonderful technology is through a rocket launch beautifully shot in slow motion. Then, for contrast, it cuts to time-lapse cloud formations gracefully flowing over the natural landscape, followed by other stunning imagery with human influences: endless rows of cultivated flowers, power lines cutting through

the landscape, smoke billowing from chimneys, aerial views of cities and the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb explosion (showing the destructive force of technological advancements). We witness humans in their mindless factory jobs poking hotdogs as they get stuck in machines on a high-speed production line (progress for humanity?). We see women picking up Twinkies, as fast as possible, only to put them down on another conveyer belt that whisks them away in another direction. The film comes full circle and ends with the Atlas-Centaur space rocket launching and then exploding in midair. This final sequence frames the movie well. In the beginning we are shown the great possibilities of technology and in the end, what can go wrong if modern civilizations misuse technology.

The movie questions whether technological advancements are really improving humanity's standard of living and suggests there is a disconnect between humanity and the Earth--as the title suggests, a life out of balance (with the planet). At the end of the movie a solution is not presented. We are left with only questions. However, what the movie does do is provoke thoughts that advance the idea of sustainable living. In an interview, Reggio stated, "I try to take a thousand pictures and offer you the power of one word, so that you can begin to rename the world in which you live.... That is the power of art. It leaves you free to have your own point of view." (Godfrey, 2006, 3:02)

Reggio's other two movies in the trilogy speak about what was and still is happening. *Powaqqatsi* - a parasitic life reflects on humanity plundering the earth of natural resources. And *Naqoyqatsi* - life as war, well, just look at any major news headlines and you see what he is talking about.

Reggio was not trying to provide answers. He was offering an alternative view of "progress" in the hopes that viewers would question what they saw and think about their own

relationships to other people, nature and technology. Then they could develop their own conclusions and ultimately bring about change in their behaviors.

My thinking is in line with the Qatsi trilogy. Humanity is out of balance with our planet. We're parasitic, think of ourselves first and are willing to destroy others through war to sustain an infinite growth paradigm (a term coined by Michael Ruppert, a former Los Angeles police officer, investigative reporter and social advocate for change, referring to our economic system based on growth and debt).

I must say that I am not opposed to science or technology. As a matter of fact, I am very interested in science and the scientific way of thinking, particularly physics, the study of the universe from nano particles to vast black holes. True science is great. One aspect that makes it great is that it openly admits that it could be wrong. The theories that are produced from the scientific method of thinking and analyzing are up for debate and peer review anytime. With new information, theories can be revised, strengthened or completely discarded.

The advancements in technology that have contributed to improving life for humanity are far too long to list. One thing is for sure: it has made the earth a relatively smaller place. We can travel longer distances faster and we can instantly communicate around the globe. The Internet has made it possible to share information and ideas with the world at the touch of a button. Through social media people are sharing information, giving their opinions and presenting alternatives that are crucial to the future of humanity. We have become a much more interconnected human population because of modern technological advancements.

It is my belief that we are disconnected from the Earth because of our modern way of living. I believe technology is a great asset to humanity and we need to use it to our benefit, not for our destruction. We, at least in the United States of America, view the world and everything

on it as a resource, not as home for all life. The Earth is our home and we are not taking care of the place we live.

Many artists throughout history that have been on the forefront of social transformation; risking their careers, facing jail time and even being physically punished as they communicate the need for change. One of today's most prominent internationally recognized social advocates in the arts is Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. He is no stranger to the oppressive nature of the "powers that be" that are interested in maintaining control over the population even if it means disregarding human rights and human life. He was harassed and beaten by police and recently unlawfully detained for 80 days. By going full-bore into political art and using social media, Ai Weiwei has made artwork that is affecting the world by informing and engaging the general populace, far beyond the art community, from urban youth to international leaders.

On May 12th, 2008 a major earthquake devastated the Sichuan province in China killing 70,000 people. The local citizens wanted to know how many people were killed in the disaster, but the government refused to release the names of the dead. Ai was so outraged at the lack of government responsiveness he joined an investigation into the number of student deaths caused when government buildings collapsed due to poor construction. He established a "citizen's investigation" and surveyed schools and recovered names, birth dates and the names of the schools of the children who were killed. The project was not kindly received by the Chinese government because the investigation uncovered the widely reported fact that the school buildings' poor construction played a principal role in the disproportionately high mortality rate of schoolchildren, a fact that was strenuously covered up by government authorities.

Once the names were collected Ai posted every single name on his blog. Then he created works of art that spoke of the Chinese government's unwillingness to accept responsibility. "She

lived happily for seven years in this world,” is a quote from a grieving mother whose daughter was killed in the Sichuan earthquake. The statement was presented on the facade of Haus der Kunst museum in Munich, Germany, written in Chinese with 9,000 brightly colored backpacks. *Remembering* brought the Sichuan earthquake reality to the world. Unable to let the tragic event be forgotten, Ai continued to create work about it.

This April, as Ai sat in jail, Harvard University Graduate School of Design displayed another piece of his that commented on the Sichuan earthquake victims. The untitled work consists of 5,335 children’s backpacks commemorating each child killed by inadequately constructed schools. The black and white backpacks were stacked in large cubes outside of the Northwest Labs, forcing college students to navigate around them to enter the building. His work resonated with the students and can be understood by people in all societies because it not only speaks to China but it relates to government and corporate cover-ups throughout the world.

Ai is very clear about his intent with his work. He has said his role is to be an example that an individual can make a difference by triggering changes in thinking and opening up new ideas and possibilities which bring about changes in behavior. He is interested in social transformation and has used social media to reach hundreds of thousands of people. With his blog posts, he reached out beyond the art community to those involved in the earthquake and those with compassion for human life. He lit a spark for future generations to act.

Ai questions the status quo, whether it is exposing suppressed events or challenging the norm, to facilitate action. In today’s evolving world, my work relates to Ai’s because we are part of the same global consciousness that recognizes the need for fundamental change. I have not gone anywhere close to where Ai Weiwei has in confronting oppression and corruption. But then again, I have only just begun.

Another individual who continues to question the status quo is Michael Ruppert the founder of Collapsenet. Collapsenet is an alternative news and information website dedicated to informing individuals about the change that is occurring. He is a bit of a doomsday naysayer, suggesting that society, as we know it, is in collapse because of the way money works and peak oil that occurred in 2005 (the point in time when petroleum extraction reached its peak.) One of his major messages is: Change the way money works or you will change nothing. The infinite growth paradigm is a way of thinking where our monetary system only works when it continues to grow. It is based on endless consumption and on a finite planet that is not sustainable. Why is it that after the attacks on September 11, 2001 President George Bush said we must continue to.....shop? Yes, Shop. Why Shop? The answer is: we must support the infinite growth monetary paradigm at all costs.

Peter Joseph is a young forward thinker, filmmaker and founder of the Zeitgeist movement, a utopian movement concerned with the future of humanity. It describes itself as a sustainability advocacy organization, seeking a long term restructuring of human society, notably being opposed to money and advocating scientific decision-making based on available resources. His third movie, *Zeitgeist: Moving Forward* describes the resource-based economy. The system restructures cities and inventories all the resources on earth which are then distributed efficiently to the places of need (as opposed to our inefficient economic system that uses 6 calories of energy moving 1 calorie of food.) I think the system has its flaws, but I mention it because it provides an alternative way of thinking to the infinite growth paradigm.

Whether it is Michael Ruppert and Peter Joseph addressing our economic issues by advocating an alternative to our monetary system, Hamish Fulton or Andy Goldsworthy connecting with “the place” to acknowledge our environmental problems, Godfrey Reggio

addressing technology's influence on our society or Ai Weiwei tackling our political corruption problems by confronting politicians in his art, there is still an underlying fundamental problem that needs to be considered. Until we fundamentally change the way we think the changes are only superficial and temporary. The social, political, economic, educational and environmental problems are only branches on a tree and the roots need to be addressed. If we, as a whole, reconfigure our thinking to value life, then our actions will adjust accordingly, and the solutions will stem from those actions. Change is more important today than in the past because the stakes are higher: the world has been made smaller and more interconnected by technology, the economy is global and if nuclear warfare happens it could destroy all life.

So what am I doing to alter my life? Am I keeping within the system and voting for a different politician, recycling, driving less to conserve gas, volunteering at the local soup kitchen, putting my money in the market in a "green" company or some other form of change? Not necessarily. I feel like many of these changes are like the leaves on the tree I mentioned previously, only surface changes. It is like a new year's resolution to go to the gym to get healthier. It only lasts a short time. There is a difference between a new year's resolution and looking in the mirror and saying, "If I don't change I may not be here much longer or at least in a healthy capacity." The latter change is fundamental the former is not.

I am examining myself and recognizing the need to value life above everything else. I must say some surface changes have been interesting as they evolved. One big change has been my diet. You are what you eat and I eat healthier than I did in the past. I didn't wake up one day and decide I was this kind of eater or that kind of eater, it just evolved over a few years. I have chosen to participate in activities because I want to participate in them not because it's a job and I get paid to do them. How many health issues are stress-related due to jobs or our monetary

system? Too many. So I am stopping to smell the flowers, literally, making an effort to slowdown and reconnect. I care and am getting involved as opposed to stepping away and thinking of myself. I am reconnecting with the local natural world around me, and that is giving me a different perspective on many issues. Trees and plants are living things, you know, not just resources for human consumption. And cows, pigs and chickens are animals not just livestock (stock or money that happens to be alive.) Am I out protesting animal rights or living in a tree? No, not yet anyway. I think those actions are necessary just like all the “Occupy” protests worldwide, but it is not where I am currently choosing to put my energy. Everyone has a place. And my place, so far, has been to take a good look at my person and make adjustment for the better of the whole, establish a community art center and found the Lancaster Creative Factory, an entity that cultivates creativity through education of the visual arts and craft. I believe the creative mind is a free mind and will solve any and all the problems of the world.

My thesis exhibit is a reflection of my thoughts and actions in regards to personal change. I use plant materials and technology in the installation to show my appreciation for both (although I don't fully understand either) and to comment that they are not separate. We, as humans, are natural and so is technology, but there is a disconnect in people that I talk with who think of themselves as separate from nature. We are not and we need to reestablish that man/nature connection. I use clay for what it is, the earth, and the ceramic pottery as a metaphor for all the indigenous cultures that value the earth and all the interconnections in their ecosystems. The other object or materials in the exhibition have significance along with their juxtaposition to other objects and materials.

To facilitate global social transformation, to make the world more hospitable for all life, I am evaluating myself and adjusting my thinking. That in turn changes my actions and

behaviors. Then I use those thoughts and actions for the foundation of my artwork. The goal for my artwork is for viewers to question what they see and then question their own thinking in the hopes that they could find their own form of personal change. Personal change that stems from personal evaluation is the fundamental change that I feel is necessary for our human evolution to move us past our current dilemmas. I don't feel I can say it any better than it already has been said; in the words of Michael Jackson, "If you want to make the world a better place take a look at yourself and make a change."

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