

# Spreading ideas and keeping sane through creativity (the aim) Or Huge Disgusting Works of Art (the result)

How can we, as artist activists, transmit our ideas about what's wrong with the world and what could be better, without sounding dull or preachy?

Well, first we could understand that any transmission needs a broadcaster and receiving sets. Most people don't want their view of reality challenged, changed, dismantled or disrespected. Some people will be open to see and hear though. Others will always be on the edge of the feeling that the world is not alright, and are interested in anyone who's trying to articulate that.

Even then though, people don't automatically see what you think you've put out there, because they are still seeing through the filter of their own reality, and we can read/see/hear best what we think we already knew. This is positively called "Taking ownership of ideas". It can in reality be "missing the point", but it is a genuine and joyful magic taking place in a brain.



**The rocket stove was a collaborative project, made from clay on the site, and making tea very efficiently, for over a year now!**

Examples for me are reading Permaculture stuff or hearing Buddhist dharma and thinking "Hey, I thought this all along! I've always been part Buddhist-Permaculture designer and I didn't know it! (No need to pay for that course then)". And, most of all, science fiction. Apocalyptic sci fi as a vindicating manifestation of my underlying belief that this version of civilisation is unsustainable and the stiff mainstream will crack into hideous violence.

Now the writers and directors of apocalyptic sci-fi were not necessarily doing it on purpose, but they solidified vague questions that already existed in my head like How desirable are rebellions or benevolent green dictatorships? What is the value of our civilisation? Which ideas do we need to keep, and which must we let go of? Can we consciously design new ways of living? How can we rehabilitate the term "Anarchy"?

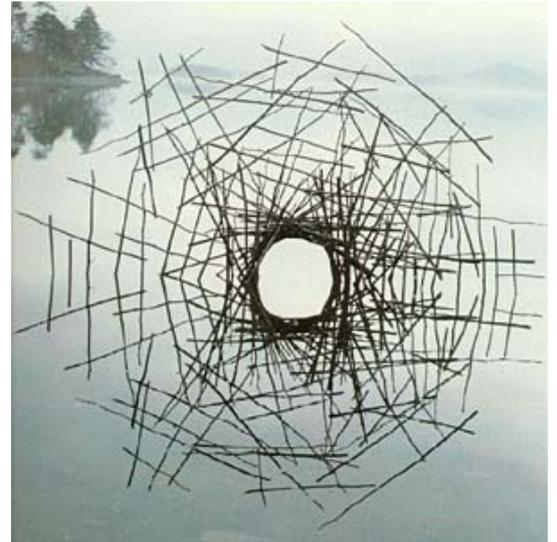
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**What is the value of our civilisation? Which ideas do we need to keep, and which must we let go of?**

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An example of transmission in art more respected than apocalyptic sci-fi and more intentional, is Andy Goldsworthy, he who arranges and photographs rocks, snow, leaves, thorns, stones etc. He's extremely successful with his beautiful, simple, international, wordless (though tonnes of interpretation is available) art. Does it transmit a message? Well I can convince myself, that his art is telling the world to slow down, appreciate and interact with simple materials, appreciate natural decay. I can be made happy and feel vindicated and empowered by his success.

But then I can remind myself that a conservative conservation group can find in his art, support for their campaign to keep the neo-peasantry off the land; to wallow in the luxury of a spacious, rich, post-industrial landscape; to resist innovation and the repopulation of the countryside. To try and conserve a particular shape to the constantly changing landscape. The same goes for Yann Arthus-Bertrand's lovely "Earth from The Air" photographs. These tour galleries trying to promote sustainable planet use, but the scale of the problem and its presentation does not facilitate any solutions in itself, and cynics would regard the pictures as a last-chance-to-see, "what we've lost" exercise, pointing out the irony of his main tool, the aeroplane.



Andy Goldsworthy

So transmission is slippery unreliable stuff between individual producers and receiving brains. It's unpredictable, magical. Magic happens inside. It is partly, and a part of, individual perception which can rarely be transmitted. Maybe it will transmit, but it's not the artist's will that decides that, it's the receptive will of others, as well as many other changeable circumstances.

Accepting, that, what do we make / write / draw? Whatever we want! Talking to yourself keeps you sane. It's a bit of a Zen exercise to write, draw and catch (Beauty, perceptions, insight) happily knowing that it's just for you. Simply a discourse with yourself. Playing with yourself!

This may not be satisfying, partly because it gets lonely, and partly because you know that art can transmit, because you have received messages yourself - stirring songs, heart-crushing images. We aspire to transmit too!



**The wedding cakes at this anarchist wedding were a huge, delicious work of art - instead of making one big cake, the couple just asked everyone to bring some cake, and the resulting cake tent was a stunningly beautiful exhibition, before it became a sort of riot!**

So lots of people are trying. Anyone could take a photo, anyone could write a book. The only difference between novelists and everyone else is that they do it. Will carries it through. Will, concentration, inspiration, free time, support, and perhaps self respect verging on arrogance. Whatever the reason, in this small self-discourse, we are empowered.

Why not everyone?

One could argue that that whole list can only be facilitated. Nothing can be given, in the way that you could argue that no one can be taught or healed; all teachers and healers do is facilitate a safe space for people to sort themselves out.

How can we facilitate these inspiring spaces then? How can we guide other people into this "Artistry" head space we've discovered.

Well there are some ideas to break down. So far we've been talking about art as something wilfully produced by an individual. We need to broaden this definition to include random discourse, dancing, play, jamming and other experimentation, which doesn't necessarily leave any evidence behind. Play is a key term for this wider definition of empowerment, and this wider facet of art.

Thus I propose that the best way to effect change with art, is to enact the change with the art. Painting a picture with forty participants is a huge, risky, potentially disgusting project, but I believe the participants would be more affected than if they'd all just seen a picture that someone else painted. Maybe they took part, but they still don't like the picture, but this exercise in forming community, compromise and facilitating space for play and relaxation is process poetics. The process is more important than the result. Yet the result is infinite ripples onward.

Process poetics is a term coined by poet Gertrude Stein around 1905. She was a good mate of Picasso's, he who would paint over and over whole canvases, exercising the belief that the process is more fun than the completion or consumption of art. She was a poet who asserted that making up poems is more fun and more worthwhile than reading other people's.

The process is easier to judge a success, than value judgements imposed on art. It only needs to happen. Simple murals or



**Climate Camp loos 2008 were painted by volunteers inspired by Cuban Poster Art. Fully functional, and extremely smart.**

acoustic ceillidhs in parks may not be considered beautiful by people who just see them, but if those involved felt like gelled humanity for a while, that's success. Our economic world is obsessed with results and longevity of evidence, but fun and connection is only ever served in blinks.

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**Don't go mad trying – community, play and relaxation cannot be forced. They can only be facilitated.**

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A more passive appreciation of art can be "Something In Common" with humans you feel you have nothing else in common with. Common ground from which to address any issue. Philosophically, I don't deny that we can use art to facilitate empowerment and stimulate debate. But in more daring and concrete terms, we can use art processes to form community. Literally bringing people together to interact as equal human beings with ideas and value. Creating together without travelling far, consuming passively, or consuming massively. Consensus decision making and other tools, radical for some, can be experimented with in a playful environment much more easily than where group decisions "matter" in a wider sense!

As activists and solutionists we assert that another world is possible. In doing so we show our will and freedom to imagine, our will to experiment, but we also have to invite. An invitation to a simpler life is not appealing to everyone. An invitation to play, to create, to enjoy in a way that does not consume, is more appealing.

Don't go mad trying – community, play and relaxation cannot be forced. They can only be facilitated. A comments board erected beside an existing artwork in the public domain is a great way to find your more forward co-conspirators, then together you can formulate other plans to kick your community up the arse.



**This shelter for Hackney Forest Garden was devised and constructed from the materials to hand, with the skills amongst the group, in just two days.**

The most successful community art work I have been involved in, is the Beltane Fire Festival. This is a recreation of a traditional pre-Christian seasonal festival, which began with about twenty professional dancers and drummers getting together for fun in the mid eighties, and now includes a couple of thousand amateur performers, all volunteering time and resources. With spokes councils, consensus decision making, massive group faith and autonomous units gelling for a shared aim, the festivals, broadly termed ritual performances, are the most radical thing most of the performers do all year.

#### LEGALLY BLANK

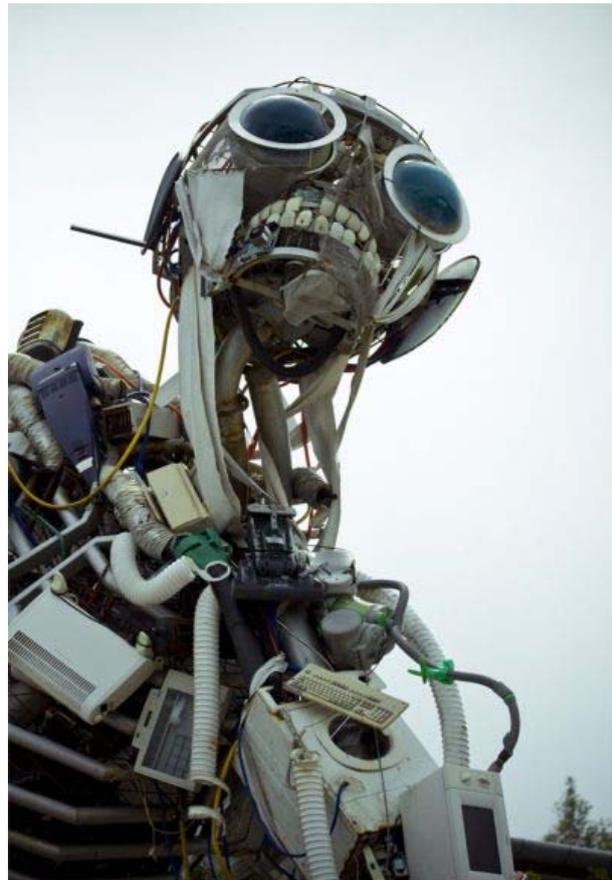
When you paint a picture on a legally blank wall, you empower loads of young people asserting their individuality (little taggers) to scrawl on top of it too. You also force the law to re-blank it to reassert itself. You can paint a picture again: you're working for fun, council man with the white paint is only working because he's paid, and he only works so many hours a day. You are stronger as long as you decide to keep bouncing back, cohorts will extend your period of will! Bear in mind that you also further disempower those who fear the change; OAPs scared of the swearing on the wall.

#### MATERIALS

Now art, through the industries of cosmetics, photography, manufacture of paints is the excuse for a lot of waste, consumerism and pollution, but sustainability of materials is far from impossible. You don't have to paint on walls. The streets are covered in one-man's-rubbish, another pack's treasure. Everything is canvas, everything is marker. The bark of the plane trees arranged on the pavement, the green circuit board from inside every electronic item...

The RSAs WEEE man is a superb recycled art initiative, but if we all made one (Which is the point - he is constructed of the average UK citizen's lifetime-production of waste electric and electronic items) then we wouldn't be able to move on this already overcrowded island! (JOKE\*\* Luckily we ship all our electronic waste to china, where there is more room\*\*).

At the other end of the "recycled" scale, lies my own work – tiny wire trees and creatures. My empowering "sourcing, recycling", "no tools", "no electricity", "Anyone could do it" mes-



WEEE man photo left-hand



**Steel wire recycled art**

sages are lost on most people, in particular the people who buy it! By making a living from my art, I cheapen its democracy. I add mystery and barriers which is sad. That's a key condition of art to earn though, which only really works for individuals. In groups, art rarely makes money (talk to orchestras, dance troupes and theatre companies), but it can foster community and provide focus for fun and thinking, with good chances for inclusivity, human interaction, empowerment and broadening people's minds.

Obviously, I've barely touched art within action – last years Climate Camp Ostrich, banners etc. I'm sure we can all share inspiring examples. The only example I'd like to set down here is a story I heard from Christiana in Denmark. Last year Christiana was attacked by the authorities. A bulldozer knocked down a house, the anarchists rioted, and were annoyed with the hippies for not engaging with the attack. But the hippies had built a new more beautiful house, overnight.

***Unobjectionable Public Art Ideas***

Snowmen, sandcastles, beach-debris art, (anything temporary and harmless in fields) workshops inside hired spaces, chalk, ceilidhs in parks, baking words, dancing in the ruins...

***Slightly More Objectionable but still temporary Public Art Ideas***

Graffiti, subvertising, cardboard sculpture, Box Wars, Pillow Fight Club, parking spaces hired for anything - some astro turf and a deckchairs laid out on them was fun action in Glasgow and New York with the slogan "Parks not parking" Reclaim the Streets

In the open, someone always objects. To WHERE it is, WHAT it is WHAT it's MADE OF... So think about your materials, access/inclusivity, freedom, siting, timing... but then engage with your objectors On Your Own Terms – comments boards etc.

So, to tie back to my beginning – BY OURSELVES all we really have is a discourse with ourselves, but we can invite others to co-create. We can create wider forums for wider empowerment, which IS the message. ACT OUT the message, don't just tell it. Transmission works better by experience.

**Jed Picksley**

For more photos of Permaculture Nomad's work visit :-

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jedtomas>