



# WEIRDY BEARDY

**The Danish artist Tue Greenfort uses his art to provoke fresh consideration of our impact on and place in the environment. But he doesn't wear sandals. And he's no weirdy beardy, says Max Andrews**

Earlier this year Tue Greenfort was in London installing some dead flies high on a gallery wall for one exhibition, and in another showing an early video in which he locks two of his art school staff in a room. Whether investigating the decline of the Scandinavian soused herring industry, constructing table-top habitats for ants, or driving exhibition visitors around the countryside in his vegetable-oil powered bus,

Tue Greenfort is an artist with a playfully committed take on the natural world and the human species. And a passion for boomerangs.

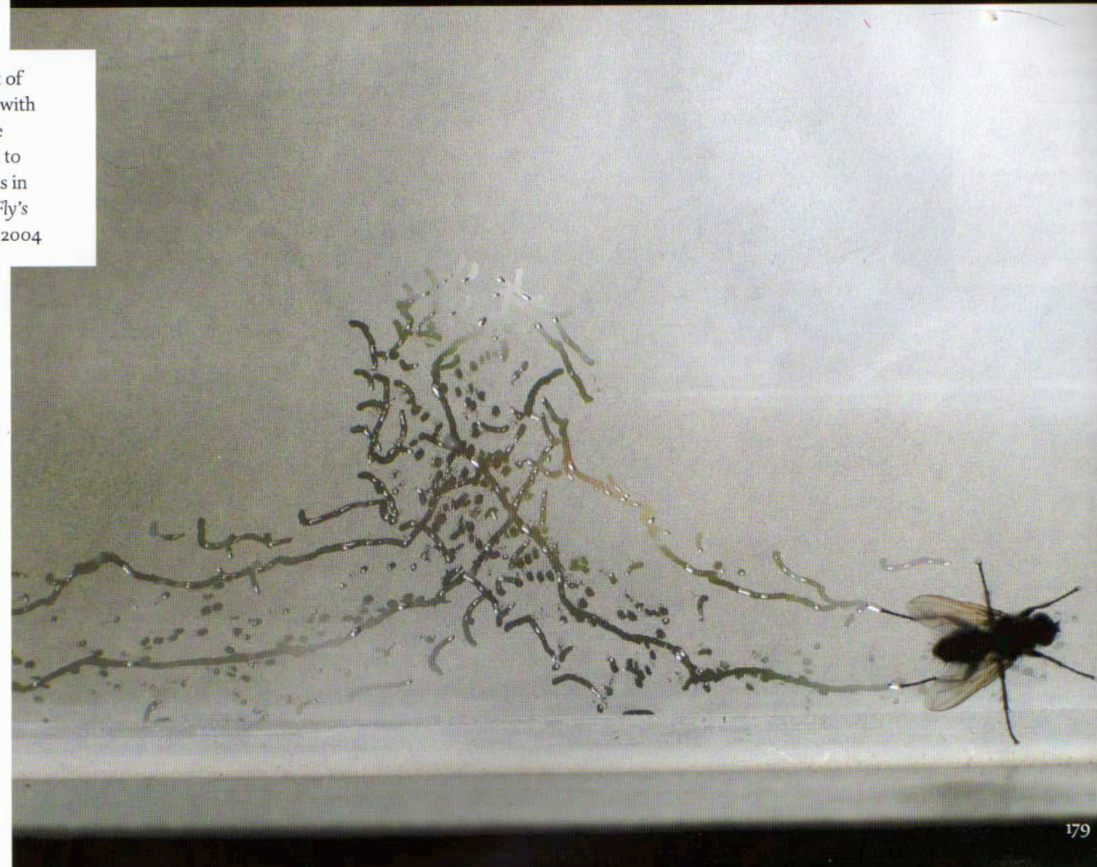
For his show at the Kunstverein Frankfurt in 2002 he installed a switch on a streetlamp in the city, suggesting citizens might make a sardonic gesture of energy economy by only turning it on when they needed. And in 2004, in what is perhaps his best-known work, the artist constructed a photographic 'trap' for capturing images of urban foxes near his Berlin studio in Daimler straÙe 38. When a vixen attempted to eat the sausage that was attached to a shutter release mechanism, it triggered

the camera and the animal effectively took a picture of itself. Greenfort has also made a series of nesting boxes for birds, similarly rigged with shutter-triggers to record the portraits of the occupants as they perched.

Pollution, recycling, intensive farming and habitat loss - a range of the issues that his work has touched on - are all too often stigmatised as being 'special interest', exclusively beardy or 'green' science issues. Yet Greenfort's projects always express how we are all already acting ecologically, in the sense that we're organisms in communities and environments that use resources. "There is a childish fascination >



The smallest of interactions with nature prove inspirational to Greenfort, as in his series *A Fly's Composition*, 2004







Top left: *Flexible Christmas Tree Collection*, 2005  
 Top right: *Untitled*, 2002 - Greenfort fitted a streetlamp with a switch.  
 Right centre: *Cell Structure*, 2001  
 Below: *Untitled*, 2004, a manhole cover print taken in Berlin. Below right: *Pneumatic Sausage*, 2003







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> that as we get older we seem to forget or we just accept that we don't understand," the artist says. "Our lives and surroundings become a habit. But I can't help still being deeply fascinated by a small fly tickling my left hand, by a moth in the kitchen cupboard or mould turning a lemon green."

His artworks have often involved plenty of research that might seem scientific. A P.E.T. plastic water bottle sculpture, for example, comprised a wry exploration of the economics of the world's most precious resource. Shrunken from 1.5 litre size to half-litre size by heating, the diminutive bottle came with a sobering, absurdly long title that explained how it apparently takes more water to produce such a container than it eventually holds. However, such projects always exist as resolutely artistic enterprises. As Greenfort suggests, "I'm not a scientist - what I do is not scientific research and as an artist I don't have to make empirical work in the way that scientists do. Science has made knowledge a specialist issue - we are somehow taught that success comes from more of the right kind of knowledge. But I'm against this construction. It's a suppressive structure, a product of the history of science. I don't observe nature as an external phenomenon but play and interact within a space - call it a habitat or a certain environment - where other organisms are present beside me. It's a form of mirroring and it's important for me to turn to the other forms of life that exist alongside human life."

Greenfort was born in rural Denmark, but now lives and works in Berlin. "I started out as a painter," the artist explains. "But this was before I became aware of different artists' practices that directly took up environmental questions and ecological issues. I came back to my real interest in the idea and understanding of the natural world. I was interested in these issues before my time as an art student, when I 'birded' a lot, studied butterflies and was a member of several environmentalist groups. Art interested me then but there was no direct connection to my other interests in nature."

"So I only later saw the connection and got inspired to make art around environmental issues," he adds. "Watching nature programmes on TV by the likes of Jacques Cousteau in the 80s was certainly influential for me. They usually had a very pessimistic moral message along the lines of: 'if you don't want these beautiful animals to become extinct in your lifetime then we'd better change our way of living', and this didn't go unnoticed with me. On the other hand it was a very important experience for me as a child to see how the landscape was changing where I was living >



> in Denmark. For example, I witnessed a moor being completely changed in the course of a few years through the different interests of hunters and farmers."

Greenfort's 2005 exhibition, *Danish Pigs and Other Markets*, took a critical view of industrialisation and commercialisation, with an investigation of outmoded agricultural practices and the legacy of environmentally inclined art from the 1960s and 1970s which remain as inspirational as ever for the artist. Along one wall was a series of works on paper highlighting a 1970s poster design by Michael Witte that ridiculed the widespread use of antibiotics in meat production. Witte's appropriation of the happy pig logo of the Danish Slaughterhouse Association, along with the deliciously ambiguous slogan "Danish pigs are healthy - they're bursting with penicillin!", landed him in what became landmark legal proceedings, though ultimately neither the charge of copyright infringement or libel would stick.

BONAQUA *Condensation Cube* (2005), also referred to an existing artwork, German-American artist Hans Haacke's celebrated sculpture *Condensation Cube* (1963-5), as well as the power of branding. "I find the category of sculpture especially interesting because it is able to mutate, expand and reformulate its position and meaning," says Greenfort. "Haacke made seminal works in the 60s and 70s concerning natural phenomena before making his overtly political art and I became interested in reformulating some of them."

But Greenfort rejects the way art often gets discussed as a matter of historical periods. "I think the idea of an artistic generation smells bad," he says. "I don't like it because it's so closed and market orientated. Conceptual art or site specificity is rather more like a vocabulary within which I operate." As in the original Cube, a sealed clear acrylic box was partially filled with water, creating a sculptural environment that was continually in flux, condensing and puddling as people's presence in the room varied the air temperature. Only Greenfort flipped the implications of the cube, using it "as a container with which to question the Coca-Cola company's motives - my cube was filled with the brand's aggressively marketed BonAqua bottled water."

Musing with a highly controversial "refreshing product" with "the pure taste of crystal water" (as Coke's website describes BonAqua) is perhaps not most people's idea of what environmentally concerned art might

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look like. Where are the photos of beady-eyed birds slicked in oil? What about the wind chimes? The intelligence and wit of Greenfort's work though is that it dodges these perceptions of often all-too-worthy or stridently messianic 'eco-art' and in the process abandons the notion that culture somehow needs to help or revere a 'thing' called 'the environment'.

Greenfort's projects understand environmental issues in a way that acknowledges that things have got a whole lot more complex since we all first heard of terms like 'global warming' and 'ozone layer depletion', and although the situation is no less desperate, any response has to adapt to its time.

"Organizations like Greenpeace certainly played an important role for me in the late 80s," he says. "And at that time I had serious dreams of becoming one of the fearless Greenpeace warriors fighting against nuclear power plants and whalers. But over time I think these adventurous organisations ceded to more basic desires. The romantic ideals of riding the waves and fighting evil industries became compromised as the picture became more complex."

Of course, artists shouldn't have any responsibility to devise solutions or answer questions about such ecological dilemmas. But Greenfort trusts that both art and environmentalism have the capacity to institute change and tackle misconceptions. "If something good has come out of the environmental movement," he says, "it's exactly that recycling has become part of our daily behaviour. Having to separate and categorise

waste material alone might make us more aware of the fact that everything is a part of a closed flow of materials, and that waste is a most vital material. If we want to go on partying we have to understand the importance of reusing waste. The consumer also has the power to prevent industry from using unnecessary packing. A really impressive artwork on this subject is Mierle Laderman Ukeles' work *Touch Sanitation* (1979-80), which involved more than 8,500 workers from the New York City Department of Sanitation. Over the course of eleven months, Ukeles's intention was 'to face and shake hands' with each sanitation worker while saying the words: 'Thank you for keeping New York City alive!'

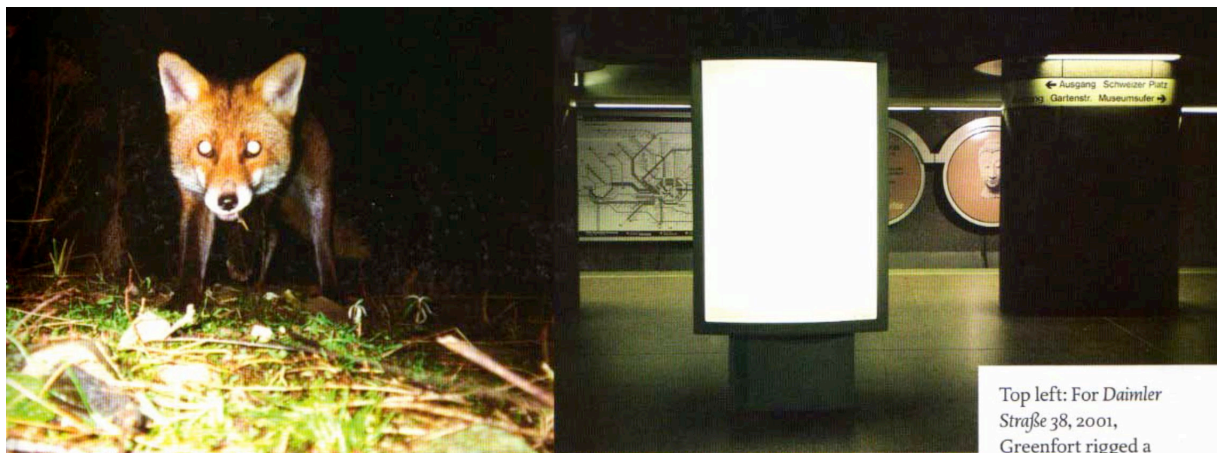
Greenfort's latest endeavour has been to run a minibus on alternative fuel. "The 1973-74 oil crisis hit the fossil fuel economy hard. I was almost born on a car-free day in Denmark," he says. "I once heard a rumour about a Swedish inventor in the 60s who had made a car that could run on water. He was killed by the oil industry, so the story went. Nils Norman's *Geocruiiser* (2001) project [the British artist's biodiesel-powered coach and mobile eco-library] inspired me, but it had been something that I'd wanted to realise for a long time."

When the invitation came earlier this year to participate in the group exhibition *A Whiter Shade of Pale*, taking place in several venues in northern Germany, the opportunity to explore non-petrol transportation finally arose. "The idea of a free bus route between the states of Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein over the ferries of the river Elbe seemed to perfectly suit the concept of the exhibition I was working on," says the artist. "So I had a diesel bus converted to run on pure vegetable oil and it served to connect the exhibition's venues. The route went through a rural landscape with fields of oilseed rape. It gave the drive a sense of the possibilities of acting locally, independently and free of multi-national fuel monopolies."

Greenfort's conceptually elegant art promotes ecological evolution rather than revolution. It assumes that culture and nature are synonymous collaborators, yet never without a dose of mischief or the whiff of conspiracy. And what about the boomerangs? They are a new fascination for him. So far he has made a video of a boomerang with a light on it, making a trail in the dark. But he also runs boomerang-making workshops. Keep your eyes on the skies. ●

Greenfort is represented by Johann König, Berlin





Top left: For Daimler  
Straße 38, 2001,  
Greenfort rigged a  
camera so that animals  
can trigger the taking of  
their own photograph.  
Top right: *Transparent  
Öffentlichkeit*, 2003.  
Bottom: A 2001 video  
work, *DDDA*, of two art  
curators locked in room

