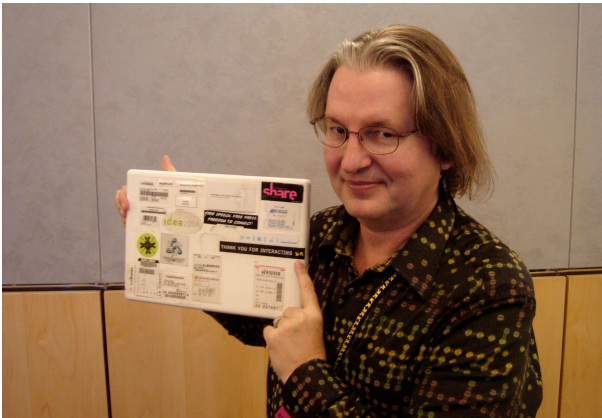


Keynote presentation: Ecology and the Politics of Change

Bruce Sterling



BRUCE STERLING: Thank you for inviting me to your very interesting event. I have come here to the cultural capital of Sharjah to learn rather than to teach, but since I was asked to speak, I will venture to talk a little bit. Your symposium is addressing art, ecology and the changes taking place in politics and culture. Specifically, carbon trading, carbon offsetting and the application of sustainable materials in today's artistic practice.

Why is that? Personally, I'm not surprised by this development. I've been expecting this for years. It makes my heart glad to see this happening. As I explained in the Washington Post recently, I see certain inevitability about this. Let me try to explain why that is. I am a futurist, and in futurism we have a phenomenon known as "pace layering." Obviously everything changes in life. But not everything changes at the same rhythm. Some are deep, slow, profound changes and some are quick and shallow. We can think of these layers being stacked on top of one another.

The lowest and deepest and slowest is nature. The natural world. Culture. Government. Infrastructure. Commerce. Fashion. So how does this work in

practice? Let's consider the city of Sharjah. The natural foundation of Sharjah is the desert and the two seas. They are what they are. The culture is a Muslim Arab culture. Its centuries old. The government is what it is. It's been that way quite a while. When we look at the infrastructure, though, since the 1970s, a mere forty years, fantastic changes. As for commerce, commerce is booming. And fashion. Yes, it is frenetic, is it rapid in pace, and it is fickle. That is as it should be.

What makes the art world special? Art is both fashion and culture. It is very sensitive to trend but the best art is also culture. Culture is our heritage; it is the source of our being. Art has the power to sink through the pace layers. Changes in the upper layers may drip down, but changes in the deeper layers are titanic. They will shake everything above them. Have there been any major recent changes in the deepest layer? Changes in nature itself? Yes, the climate is changing. The ocean is growing warmer. Rivers, lakes, icecaps, mountaintops are changing. Genetic engineering changing the very tissue of life. Invasive species are moving from one continent to another, and as the earth grows warmer, species are being jostled from one locale to another.

Art the mirror of nature, the lens of nature... Art the experimental arena, art a place of cultural intervention. In every human culture, we have deep, long-held expectations about nature. We expect nature to remain what it is, We also think that if we leave nature alone it will return to wilderness, a natural state. This is not the case any more. The climate is changing, so nature is changing as well. If we simply preserve a piece of nature, a wilderness reserve, it will not remain the place that it once was. The sky above the earth is changing so the earth cannot remain what it was. So, in our century, there

is no natural state for nature to return to. There are only unnatural states.

There is no place to hide from the sky, so a change in nature affects every pace layer above it. We have greenhouse art and greenhouse fashion, here and now, but we will also have greenhouse culture, greenhouse government, greenhouse infrastructure, greenhouse commerce. I will give you an example: the recent Stern report in Britain. This is the business world realizing that it is cheaper to maintain a planet than to ruin it. In other words, climate change costs money. Yes, it does. Storms, climate damage, rising seas, droughts, floods, they are very expensive for business.

For government, climate change is a national security threat. When more money has to be spent on emergency response, refugee movements and so forth, there is less money for other aspects of governance. Infrastructure? Climate change damages roads and buildings, it harms infrastructure. So we are going to see a comprehensive series of very large efforts by large enterprises: private, local, state and national, to save whatever can be saved of the previous natural order. The primary motivator of this effort will be not be art and fashion. Frankly, it will be fear. The climate is changing much more quickly than anyone, even scientists, suspected it would. There is no resisting the political, economic, social, cultural effects of this. Every pace layer will change.

People still imagine that a concern with the climate is merely trendy, and that it is something fashionable to talk about. That's not the case. This is a very deep-rooted problem that is two hundred years old with a very slow, profound pace. Climate change is a world problem that will outlive everyone alive today. Some societies will thrive in that world while others won't do as well. I would predict that the areas that thrive will be those that embody the changes that are inevitable. Certain places will become the change that we have to see.

What kind of changes? Well, obviously the practice of pouring smoke into the sky has to stop. It has to, so it will. There are those who think that global carbon taxation is the best method to do this. I don't have a problem with that idea, but a tax is a tool, and it is a governmental solution rather than a cultural one. The fact of the matter is that putting smoke in the air is not a business. It's a threat to the prosperity and survival of yourself and your neighbours. It's a foul act, like exporting raw sewage into a river.

Spreading smoke is like spreading disease. Tomorrows advanced societies will not ask for a tax license to spread disease; they will simply say, we are healthy here. We don't spread disease, we defeat disease. The cultural attitude will change. There will be a cultural revulsion against harming the sky. There will be a dread of that, like the dread of a pestilence. This practice will go away, not because the United Nations tells us not to do it, but because we are dishonoured by it. People will be shamed out of it. When everyone is dirty in a world growing steadily dirtier, it's easy to be lazy and cynical. When some among you are clean and you know yourself to be dirty, it's a hard business to bear.

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There are those who think that selling carbon is a disadvantage to change. I frankly think this makes very little difference. I myself come from Texas. We sell a great deal of oil. I happen to be from the capital of Texas. Austin, Texas. Our mayor recently unilaterally declared us to be the world capital of the fight against climate change. Obviously this was a very bold and recklessly Texan thing for a city mayor to say.

Does it matter that practically everything in the city of Austin was built with oil wealth? Not really. We have wind wealth and solar wealth in Texas. The energy business is the energy business, it's not the carbon-spewing business. Changing the climate is not a business at all. Changing the climate is an anti-business, it makes everyone poorer. It doesn't matter that we used to sell a lot of oil in Texas. Everyone bought the oil we sold, everyone was obviously implicated. We didn't start selling oil until 1901 and we now import more oil than we sell. It's not a permanent state of affairs. We know we've run out of

oil in Texas. Oddly, that doesn't much trouble us.

Soon, surprisingly soon, we're going to stop burning carbon. We won't simply reduce the emissions, as the Kyoto Treaty language says. We are going to get rid of carbon emissions entirely. Then there is a further problem. We have to get rid of the emissions that are already there. The coal and oil burned by our grandparents is still in the sky. Our descendants will have to remove that. Restoring the climate is going to be a very large and profitable enterprise.

I know this is hard to imagine, that there will be cities, cultures, factories that take the carbon out of the sky and put it back into the ground. That will be necessary, though, because, otherwise, in a hundred years, London, Tokyo, Washington, Beirut, Mumbai, Alexandria, those cities will be under water. People in London and Tokyo will pay a lot of money not to drown. What is unimaginable is the thought of major cities going underwater without mankind lifting a finger. Of course we will lift our fingers rather than watch the poles melt and the seas rise.

So, who will they pay? First of all, people who can imagine doing it. Second, those people will have to be able to do it. Practically speaking, they will have to be capable of some rapid infrastructural changes. Something like spinning a race-car, filling it with a different fuel, and heading in the other direction. Not easy, but necessary.

They will have to be a bold, inventive people capable of cheerfully putting aside some older preconceptions. For instance, the East and the West. If you go to a city-state like Singapore, you see them suffer a great deal over these legacy cultural problems of theirs: here in Singapore, they like to complain, we are neither the East nor the West! Singapore would very much like to be a creative capital, they spend a lot of money and effort at it. If you talk seriously to Singaporean artists, you see them really moaning and wringing their hands. They consider their situation to have well-nigh insurmountable cultural difficulties for creative artists. They really claim to find that situation burdensome, even though they are living in Singapore, wealthy, well-educated, air-conditioned, and clearly having a rather good time of life.

Well, that's quite true about Singapore: I don't want to make fun of them. They are neither the East nor the West, and they have been lamenting about it for one hundred and fifty years. So that's not the news. The twenty-first century has a different kind of news: which is that neither the East nor the West is

sustainable.

Let me try to be very clear and simple about this, because this is a modern cultural problem as opposed to the kind we are used to. The world as we know it is not sustainable. The East is not sustainable. I mean by this that the East can't go on in its present form. China cannot burn an infinite amount of coal and put that into the sky, there is not room enough in the sky, and it is not possible. So the East is not sustainable. And the West is certainly not sustainable. The West is covered with old-fashioned legacy infrastructure that is clearly impeding Western progress. And the North is not sustainable, and the South is not sustainable. And the poor are not sustainable, and the rich are not sustainable. And the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike.

That's our situation. Some polities and places in the world are going to be able to comprehend this and do something useful about it. Those places will be world capitals. And other places and polities will obsess about the outdated problems that are of little contemporary relevance. Those will be the backwater places. It is by no means given that today's cultural capitals are tomorrow's cultural capitals. Some of them, yes. All of them, no way.

The changes required from us are so comprehensive and drastic that places already undergoing comprehensive drastic changes have a very good chance of leading the world. These leading places will need to be capable, energetic, technically advanced people with some capital and some executive ability. That's rather obvious. They will also need a new cultural vocabulary of thinking and feeling.

The future is not anyone's possession. It's not that we get to the future and then we are given some future in a bag. The future is a continuous process. We deserve a future when we understand what is happening and we are wise enough to get on top of events. A sustainable society is not a stolid place where everything is measured and regulated. A sustainable society is a lively, vivid place where people are creating possibilities rather than restricting them.

We don't need to do less in order to deserve a future. We need to do better. We have some serious problems: well, serious problems focus our energies. Only dead people have no problems. Our problems are our opportunities in disguise. Ecological problems, and we do have them, are not restricted to nature and the state. They are political problems,

infrastructural problems, but they are also cultural problems, design problems, artistic problems, and problems of sensibility.

We're in trouble because we are primitive, all of us: we all live in filth and we can't see it. We're like eighteenth century people who lived before germ theory. We're ignorant of the global squalor that surrounds us, and, as a world society, we have bad taste. The next twenty years will change that. We are going to see and realize what is happening to us, and a very common reaction will be stark fear and denial of the truth. But not everyone will be afraid, and the younger people among us will wonder why we make such a fuss about our lost realities. Let people see. The rest will follow, at its own various paces. The avant garde will be the avant garde and the deepest levels will be the deepest levels. But make the invisible visible. That's what's needed now.

Change what people see. Change how they see. The tools for this are at hand. If you can leverage that new awareness, you can drive the whole culture, you can change people inside and out. Suddenly the people will realize that their lives are full of unmet demands. And their vitality is very great. They won't just hope for tomorrow, they will embody it.

It's going to happen, I know it. It is happening because the future is already happening at events like this one: yes, the future is here now, in Sharjah, it's just not well distributed yet. I hope you can take what you learn here and spread it as far as you can. Thank you for your attention and your hospitality.

This talk took place on 5 April 2007 at 10am.

*'Still Life: Art, Ecology and the Politics of Change'
Sharjah Biennial 8, 4 April – 4 June 2007
Symposium 5–7 April 2007, Expo Centre, Sharjah*

*A Sharjah Biennial programme conceived and developed
by RSA Arts & Ecology, Latitudes in collaboration with the
American University of Sharjah (AUS)*

*Symposium conceived and developed by:
Michaela Crimmin (Royal Society for the encouragement
of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce, RSA, London)
Max Andrews and Mariana Cánepa Luna (Latitudes,
Barcelona)
In collaboration with:
Jeremy Bendik-Keymer (AUS)
Amir Berbic (AUS)
Roderick Grant (AUS)
Tarek Talat Al-Ghoussein (AUS)
Symposium Coordinator:
Sharon Ahimaz (Sharjah Biennial)*

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