

I OFTEN DAYDREAMED about writing this book in a tiny cottage by the sea or in a cabin surrounded by forested peaks. Instead, I had to be content with an office at the Queens Museum of Art in Flushing Meadows Park, New York City, squeezed in between the Grand Central Parkway and Van Wyck Expressway. It turned out to be a most fitting place. Like many of the sites for artwork discussed in this book, it has been transformed by man. Once a thriving wetland, sheltering a myriad of marsh birds and plants, the site became a landfill where trash was dumped. Later, the land was reclaimed for the Worlds' Fairs of 1939 and 1964. Planted with locust trees, oaks, and pines, it is now the second largest park in New York City. Ironically, the two fairs celebrated the theme of progress, based on total faith in a technology that few suspected would leave massive environmental damage in its wake. Flushing Meadows Park is a perfect example of a fragile ecology. It is a place where nature's balance has been breached and one that depends upon our constant vigilance to ensure its future as an urban oasis. Many of the artists discussed in *Fragile Ecologies* and featured in the exhibition by the same name are attempting to revitalize similar urban waste sites for people and for other forms of life.

Artists are in a unique position to effect such environmental changes because they can synthesize new ideas and communicate connections between many disciplines. They are pioneering a holistic approach to problem solving that transcends the narrow limits of specialization. Since art embodies freedom of thought, spirit, and expression, its creative potential is limitless. Art changes the way people look at reality. In its most positive mode, art can offer alternative visions.

While studying nineteenth-century landscape painting and its relationship to natural history, I first became aware of the artist's ability to translate ideas into images that profoundly influence public perceptions of nature. Paintings by Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), François-Auguste Biard (1799–1882), and Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900) enabled students of science to visualize concepts of erosion, glaciation, and other natural forces that contributed to the formation of the planet. Their works also stimulated a heightened appreciation for the earth and its indigenous populations, fostering a cult of travel to remote and remarkable places. European civilization's traditional fear of mountains and other awesome aspects of nature gave way to wonder and experiences of spiritual transcendence. This change in attitude was also sparked by writers and poets such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), William Wordsworth (1770–1850), and Walt Whitman (1819–1892), all of whom contributed to a merging of culture and nature during a period of intensifying industrialization.

Recognizing the impact of art on ideas and feelings about nature and alarmed by the deteriorating condition of the planet, I became interested in how contemporary artists were responding to environmental issues. I found many parallels between the landscape painters of the nineteenth century and artists today: both integrate social and natural history, they collaborate with or are influenced by specialists in other fields, and they communicate the wonder of nature to the public. By expanding the tradition of the artist as naturalist, an increasing number of artists are providing solutions to environmental problems.

An understanding of ecology — the interrelationship of all forms of life in their diverse environments — is essential for the survival of the planet. The word derives from the Greek words *oikos*, which means "house" or "habitat," and *logos*, which translates as "doctrine." Although the term originated in 1866, it was not



## Introduction

Why is it that all of Gaia dances in  
harmony while we humans are the  
only ones out of step?

—Rachel Rosenthal

(performing Pangaeon Dreams,

New York City, 1991)





• Tony Da, *Symbols of the Southwest*, 1970

*Symbols of the Southwest*, Tony Da, a member of the San Ildefonso Pueblo tribe, interprets this theme of interconnected harmonies. Here, man and woman, bird and animal are abstractly defined and unified within one space. Inspired by ancient Navajo sand paintings, and prehistoric pottery and fabric designs, the artist fuses past and present styles of art and beliefs to celebrate the regenerative forces of nature or, as the wiseman Black Elk described, the community of all living things.

until the 1890s that the first important books on the subject were published. Many contemporaries describe the science simply as "planetary housekeeping." The earth houses a wide range of ecosystems — communities of plants and animals that depend on a particular environment or habitat for life. An ecosystem can be as small as a decaying redwood tree or as large as the Pacific Ocean, and it includes the dense populations of cities. Ecological art attempts to ameliorate one of the critical problems facing the planet: the widening gulf between natural and urban ecosystems.

This study begins with prehistoric art and surveys critical interludes in history — hunting-and-gathering, the emergence of agriculture, the Industrial Revolution — in order to place into perspective art since the 1960s, which forms the book's core. The emergence of ecological art may be understood as part of a long tradition of artists responding to the environment. Keen observers of the natural world, artists throughout history have sought metaphors in nature to help define human existence. During periods characterized by environmental change, artists responded by inventing new genres and imagery to cope with the problems of human survival. Although the forces of "progress" were often against them, they eased the psychological tensions that arose as a schism developed between a reverence for nature and its exploitation.

The first works of art ever created — the cave paintings of western Europe — established harmony between people and animals. Preserving nature's balance has since motivated artists throughout the millennia. Art, ritual, and myth, intricately intertwined until relatively recently, developed in response to this paramount need to secure a sacred connection to the earth. Over the centuries, the relationships between people and nature grew more distant. Since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, this gap has widened. However, many artists, especially landscape painters, continued to maintain the primacy of nature through their art.

Since the late 1960s, an important new art movement has emerged to reestablish a vital link to nature by communicating an experience of its life-generating powers. Artists interpret specific environmental problems, as well as the forces and phenomena of nature. In contrast to earlier artists who mediated a balance between people and nature through painting and sculpture, contemporary artists actually restore or re-create natural ecosystems. Their artworks are located in or near major cities. Landfills, vacant urban lots, rivers, wetlands, the continental shelf — these are all creatively undergoing remediation and reclamation by artists. Not only are many of these sites made inviting for native species of plants and animals, they are conceived as public spaces where people can develop a closer relationship with nature.



Ecological art is rooted not only in nature and the natural sciences but also in the cultural history of a site. Many artists are inspired by Native American cultures, which have long practiced environmental ethics. Tribal beliefs and customs, although differing from group to group, were all based on a harmonious and economically sustainable stewardship of the land. Their ceremonies and myths are spiritual celebrations of nature that connect people to the earth. This type of bonding is essential for establishing respect for the entire community of life (FIG. 1). Native American art, mythology, and beliefs have influenced the theme, content, and imagery of many ecological artworks.

In indigenous cultures, nature centers the members of a group by providing necessary boundaries of behavior, as well as access to the realms of metaphysical enlightenment. The relationship of first peoples to their environment offers industrialized cultures important lessons in communication and psychological and social integration with nature. Paradoxically, the systematic destruction of forests, prairie, tundra, and other habitats also threatens the human inhabitants from whom we have so much to learn.

Although this study focuses on art of the United States, international connections are noted. Despite an emphasis on Western culture, other traditions are acknowledged as enduring models for elevating environmental consciousness. The arts and philosophy inspired by Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, and the many forms of animism embrace a unity among all living things. These ideas permeate the work of many contemporary artists, who transcend the expression of individual ego and seek to express a more encompassing and more harmonious ecological order.

In this quest for balance, we must stand rooted like a tree and yet be fluid like the waters. Nature provides us with the essential metaphors for life and an understanding of our existence. The culture we have developed is essentially the sum product of humanity's search for meaning and identity. Ultimately, nature is essential for both cultural blossoming and human survival.

It is the story of all life that is holy  
and good to tell, and of us two-legged  
sharing in it with the four-leggeds  
and the wings of the air and all green  
things; for these are children of one  
mother and their father is one Spirit.

—*Black Elk*

(*Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux,*

*born nineteenth century,*

*from Black Elk Speaks)*