BioArt with Brandon Ballengée

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Exploring the boundaries between art, science, and technology, Brandon Ballengée creates multidisciplinary works out of information generated from ecological field trips and laboratory research. Since 1996, Ballengée has collaborated with numerous scientists to conduct primary biological research and advanced imaging procedures, which is documented in Ecoventions, a book from the Contemporary Arts Center of Cincinnati published in 2002. His works have been exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, Beijing, Vienna, Seoul, and London; have appeared on ABC's World News Tonight, BBC's Today Show; and have been featured in Art Press, Genewatch, MIT's Leonardo Journal, The Journal of Experimental Zoology, The New York Times, The New Yorker, and The Sciences.

His theoretical article entitled “The Origins” and Application of Artificial Selection is included in Biomediale, a new anthology published by the National Center for Contemporary Art in Kaliningrad, Russia. He has collected specimens for several scientific organizations, including the Peabody Museum at Yale University, The American Museum of Natural History, and the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at U.C. Berkeley, and others. In 2001, He was nominated for membership into Sigma Xi, the Scientific Research Society. He regularly conducts ecology / field biology / genetics workshops or “Eco-Actions” open to the general public at urban parks, 2005, petstores, and fish markets. In 2003, Ballengée was an artist in residence at the Natural History Museum in London. He recently participated in the 2004 Geum-Gang Nature Art Biennale in South Korea. Recent solo exhibitions include Wave Hill and The Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning in New York City, and The Yager Museum at Hartwick College, Oneonta, New York. Upcoming solo exhibitions will be held at The Carriage House Center in New York City, organized by Nurture New York's Nature, and Kunstverein Ingerstodt in Ingerstodt, Germany. Archibald Arts in New York City recently published the artist's first limited edition Love Motel for Insects.

JKG: What got you into making ecological art?
BB: I grew up in a rural area surrounded by woods and wetlands. The forest teemed with vibrant birds, exotic strange insects, and humble toads. A nearby stream emptied into a marsh that was filled with mysterious life! I would spend hours every day catching and drawing vividly colored salamanders, diverse species of fish, box turtles, and other fantastic creatures. Nature was my refuge and classroom.

When I was a teenager, the largest forest trees were cut and sold to a lumber company. Today, half the forest is under a housing subdivision and most of the stream runs through pipes. It is the same everywhere - ecosystems altered or diminished by a growing wave of Wal-Mart superstores, fast food chains, and the continued sprawl of suburbia. Much of my early work dealt with this sense of loss and was infused with the classical theme of man versus nature. As this interest grew I wanted to dig in deeper, so I began collaborating with biologists and participating in ecological surveys. This evolved into conducting primary biological research and the fusion of my art with these practices. The Earth, once again, became my studio.

Since 1996, I have been focusing on the global declines of frog, toad, and salamander species and the increased numbers of deformities I find in their populations. Amphibians are a “sentinel” species and are
Brandon BALLENGÉE,
Uncertain Future of
through a polluted section of an urban river
eco-systems, the great diversity of life
Almost a century later Joseph Beuys, bathed
society, in advancing things?

Do you believe that art can play a role in
society, In advancing things?
I believe art can change the way people see
the world. In North America, the scenic
Hudson River Valley landscape was a
subject for Thomas Cole and the artists of
the Hudson River School. Cole symbolically
painted the Hudson's degradation during
the industrial revolution, I interpret this as
an early form of environmental conscious­
ness and perhaps even artistic protest.
Almost a century later Joseph Beuys, bathed
and swam in bogs to raise awareness about
these sensitive ecosystems. Sharing Beuys
fondness for mud, my work is created from
mud, my work is created from

Is your work as much intercultural as artistic?

The fish market survey I worked on was
a year-long study funded by the Queens
Museum of Art. Even though I was
collecting data and specimens for science,
the Museum could see the interdisiplinary
art side and supported the work. I went out
for 2 or 3 times a week and completely cata­
loged what turned up in the markets. I went
with translators from the Museum
because initially the seafood venders
thought I was a health inspector. Why did
this weird bald guy turn up every day and
not ask them for the whole fish not just a
fillet? They explained to the market
vendors that it was an art project. I also
worked with a group of marine biologists
to identify the more rare species. Each
specimen was photographed, digitally
scanned them and then preserved for later
scientific natural history museums. London
has some, The American Museum has
some and several universities.

One Flushing market actually let me do a
permanent installation. It has been altered
somewhat. I created a series of multilingual
signs that talked about the danger of
species extinction in six different languages
and the need for conservation. I was really
surprised they supported this in a fish
market. I created a website that was bilin­
gual as well. In the end we even did public
tours in the markets.

Weren't there some ultra-rare species in
the markets I believe?
Sadly, yes. As species that were common in
the past disappear, we fish for other almost any species. We are eating our way through the food chain.

So there is no filtering or selection/regulation system for catches in the market?

It's the sheer volume of fish that are coming in from all these sources. There is no overall global agent protecting all aquatic species. Even local regulations don't apply to international waters. The markets are getting live fish from Asia, South America, and the West Indies. Others are flash frozen and sent from all over the globe. I remember walking in one day and seeing a whole one metre by one metre section of hundreds of juvenile Orange Roughy that were 6 inches long.

So they were undersized...

Yes. They were undersized. The problem is that they had not bred out yet so they could not replenish their population. The problem is that they are quite popular now. They breed late in life and are a cold water fish. They are 20 or 30 years old when they reach sexual maturity. The problem is that we are scooping up all the young adolescents and selling them at gourmet and sushi restaurants throughout the city. It is disturbing — yet people just don't know. If we learn what fish to eat we can make a big difference.

I catalogued these fish and tried to show people what was going on. I selected between 70 and 100 species and created Iris prints to exhibit. These were presented in evolutionary order in an installation at the Queens Museum of Art in 2001. I also made a selection of about 400 actual preserved fish and other specimens from the markets to exhibit.

That is what Alan Sonfist is doing. He makes collages based on geology, the same as you are doing with bio-history. That is quite interesting to me — this notion of evolution. Some of the species that are showing up and are now declining have been around 250 million years or more, and yet something that we are doing now is wiping them out. It is not just over-fishing, it is habitat alteration or complete loss and even climate-related. Conscious or not we are engineering life on this planet.

The ice melts now are producing some remarkable archaeology. This Prof. from Oxford is getting fresh samples from mastodons, grasses and so on as the ice melts.

We can learn a lot about evolutionary relationships from molecular DNA. Sometimes referred to as maternal because it is passed on from mother to daughter, molecular DNA can be traced back through thousands of generations. Nuclear DNA from males mutates more frequently and is harder to follow in a chronological line. Ironically, as archeologists are looking at past genes, biologists are taking tissue samples from today’s species to act as genetic banks in the face mounting global extinctions. 

Writer and art critic John Crandall's reviews and feature articles have been published extensively. John Crandall's latest contributions include an essay for Nature the End of Art: Alan Sonfist and Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists (www.sunypress.edu) and A Biomass Continuity in collaboration with Coco Capitan. He also curated Eco-Photo at Dorsky Gallery, New York in January 2005.