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Response: A Portrait of Four Environmental Artists in Vermont

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The University of Vermont

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Response: A Portrait of Four Environmental Artists in Vermont
A Short Documentary Film

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A Senior Creative Arts Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts and Science in Environmental Studies

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Abstract

Since the Abenaki native peoples first began to produce and trade craftwork in the area now known as Vermont, the artwork of the state has been intertwined with the landscape and the natural resources available here. As artists in Vermont begin to adopt the use of sustainable or recycled materials and environmental tropes in their work in response to the environmental challenges we face, it’s important to examine the defining characteristics, variations, and contradictions within this artistic movement. This project is a short documentary film about four Vermont artists who take different approaches to addressing environmental challenges. The film explores the commonalities and differences in the artists’ approach to process, content, participation, and materiality. It is intended to create a sense of identity and community among environmental artists in Vermont, explore the advantages and challenges of these approaches, and inspire creative solutions in others to environmental problems.
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Introduction

The purpose of this creative arts thesis is to learn about the ideas, processes, and media that comprise eco-art and communicate them through a short documentary about four Vermont artists whose work could meet the criteria of eco-art. Eco-art is a term that both confuses and interests people, and this project seeks to explore the characteristics that define it, the variation within it, and its inherent contradictions as it manifests itself in Chittenden County, Vermont.

Art is an essential tool in the environmental movement. It has the power to reach people on an emotive or abstract level that facts alone cannot. Environmental art is also fraught with contradiction, especially in relation to its own sustainability. Eco-art is a sub-category of environmental art which emphasizes ecocentric perspectives and sustainable use of materials. Even though Vermont has a relatively strong record on environmental protection, Vermonters still face local problems with waste, conservation, food production, and energy production as well as the global problem of climate change. There is a small movement of local artists who have chosen to emphasize eco-art approaches in their work in order to address the challenges we face, whether they consider themselves eco-artists or not. By looking at four artists who take very different approaches to addressing these challenges, I hope to represent the scope of innovation within this movement without losing a sense of intimacy with them as the subjects of the documentary.

I feel that it is an important task to communicate the ideals and practices of this movement to a broader audience who may not be aware it exists. I have chosen the medium of documentary production because it is a craft that I have studied and practiced, and feel that it is the medium that will allow me to most effectively communicate the research I conduct. Video offers a unique opportunity for an engaging balance of entertainment and education, and I see it as the strongest possible format for me to synthesize my education at UVM in both Environmental Studies and Film and Television Studies. In the same way that visual art presents an opportunity for emotive and abstract connection with a viewer, the documentary form functions as a powerful tool for emotive connection and dissemination of information.

I set out to make the short documentary in January with the intention of finding four artists in Chittenden County who took either complementary or contradictory approaches to
making what could be considered eco-art. The determined goal of the project is to produce a high-quality, engaging documentary that examines the defining characteristics, variations, and contradictions within Vermont’s eco-art movement, and explore the commonalities and differences in four artists’ approach to process, content, participation, and materiality.
**Literature Review**

**Political & Media Ecology**

First coined by Ernst Haeckel in 1873 and quickly adopted by scientists such as Charles Darwin, the term *ecology* refers to the study of processes that influence the distribution and abundance of living organisms, and the interactions that those living organisms have with each other and with the nonliving environment. This is different from environmentalism, which is the contribution of opinion, attitude, and action to the information that is provided by ecology (Weintraub, 2012). The term *political ecology* was first used by Frank Thorne in 1935, then was widely adopted in the 1970s to describe the study of the political, economic, and social factors that have direct or indirect relationships with ecological issues and changes (Robbins, 2012). The purpose of integrating politics, economics, and social factors with ecology rather than to focus only on apolitical ecology is to account for the numerous ways in which human distribution, abundance, interactions, and politics relate to and impact nonhuman ecology. Political ecology combines approaches in order to develop a more holistic approach to studying nature’s relation to humankind, resulting in “a scientific-cultural interdisciplinarity and a philosophical criticality” (Demos, 2013).

In 1989, Felix Guattari developed an idea of political ecology that focused more on transversal and action oriented approach (Guattari, 1989). He saw the ecological crises of the modern era as a result of the result of our having become subjects of a capitalist, globalist economy, seduced by efficiency. The solution for Guattari is a reappropriation of our social and aesthetic practices so as to redefine our relationship to ‘the other’ or to the foreign. Through this process, he sees an escape from the “major crises of our era through the articulation of: a nascent subjectivity; a constantly mutating socius; and an environment in the process of being reinvented” (Guattari, 1989). Bruno Latour has since furthered Guattari’s grassroots, action oriented approach to political ecology by accounting for contemporary ecocentric thought. Ecocentrism is essentially the opposition to age-old anthropocentrism, in which humans have viewed nature as a separate medium from us for exchange of resources and waste; the greater this separation, the greater signifier of our progress. However, from the ecocentric perspective, this separation is what has allowed for such severe degradation, pollution, and destruction of the
environment in which we exist and interact, and we must instead understand our interactive role as a part of nature (Weintraub, 2012). Latour accounted for this view by describing a pursuit for a progressive creation of a common world, suggesting alternative modes of governance and aesthetics that account for biodiversity, sustainability, and the rights of various life forms (Latour et. al, 2009; Demos, 2013).

These ideas about political ecology have been applied to a wide range of aspects of human activity in order to further study the ever-expanding interactions we have with the various aspects of our ecosystems and our own social structure, such as community ecology, acoustic ecology, industrial ecology, and media ecology (Weintraub, 2012). The latter of these variations, media ecology, is the study of how media, technology, and communication affect human environments by shaping our perception of the world around us. It is an examination of “how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival. The word ecology implies the study of environments… complex message systems which impose on human beings’ certain ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving” (Postman, 1980). By examining the ways in which media shapes collective human consciousness and action, we can uncover motivations behind behavior patterns and utilize these ideas to create media environments that have a positive impact on people and the planet. This concept relies on the idea that communication technology has historically been a primary cause of social change. This concept is also furthered by the advent of the internet, which presents a sort of ecosystemic network society of media exchange (Ruotsalainen et. al, 2015). In order to use what we know about media ecology to transition to a sustainable and ecocentric future, Guattari argues that we must make the transition from “the mass-media era to a post-media age, in which the media will be reappropriated by a multitude of subject-groups capable of directing its resingularization” (Guattari, 1989). This means that the people impacted by environmental degradation will have the capacity to produce the media that covers it.

TJ Demos (2013) asserts that in response to neoliberalism, the political-economic driver of a fossil-fuel based economy responsible for anthropogenic climate change and much of the existent socio-economic inequality, there has been a resistance against this very corporate globalization, emphasizing the importance of the political ecology of media. By putting media creation in the hands of subjects of a global, capitalist economy, people are able to create a media environment that promotes a sort of grassroots ecocentrism rather than a subjugating,
anthropocentric media environment that comes directly from the corporations whose ‘progress’ relies on such media ecology (Demos, 2013). Because the ecological crisis is a political, cultural and social one, the solution is to call for a sort of “eco-sophy as well as an eco-art, as a political, social and cultural revolution able to reorient the objectives of production, the forms of organization, the ways of being together” (Brunner et. al, 2013).

**Eco-Art**

Humans have been giving form to their sentiments, conditions, purports, beliefs, aesthetic values, and agendas in the form of art for approximately forty thousand years, producing manifestations of what might be referred to as culture. The elements that distinguish eco-art, as we recognize it today, first began to appear in the late 1960s in European and American culture. This was an era defined by the opposition of ‘counterculture’ to ‘culture’, the former of which was united by an opposition to mainstream authority and values (Raducanu, 2016). Meanwhile, mainstream culture embraced an ever-expanding need for industrial consumption and social restraint, without a need to challenge “the assumption that it was good to amass power over the environment and exercise it to expand the population, longevity, and ease of humans” (Weintraub, 2012). The environmental movement of the 1960s challenged this assumption in its embrace of ideals such as low population growth, voluntary simplicity, organic farming, and back to the land movements, all of which are indicators of an entirely new paradigm. This constitutes revolution because it presents an antithesis to a long history of human chauvinism and anthropocentrism, insisting instead upon a conscious understanding, recognition, and respect of our place within natural systems. Patricia Sanders defines this change in values as a sort of “forward-looking postmodernism [which]… endeavors to construct a frame of values more conducive to a sustainable environment and to social harmony.” In the creation of art, the change allowed for the ability to symbolize complex abstractions in concrete ways, and therefore gives art the powerful ability to raise awareness and advance a shift in the popular mind-set (Sanders, 1992).

Through expression and use of raw material, artists have been able to convey these concerns and have an impact on public opinion and rhetoric. Such artists explore different themes relating to man’s relationship to the environment. Land art first appeared in the United
States in the 1960s as a way of linking art and nature, and eco-sculpture has seen a recent increase in popularity, likely correlated to increased demand for integration of nature into urban spaces. In the 1980s, artists began to employ unconventional and natural materials in the making of land art, and a focus on the piece’s natural space and context became important (Raducanu, 2016).

As shown by all esteemed artists in history, innovation is an integral component of creating works of art of notoriety. The practice of creating eco-art relies on this idea of innovation, as mediums, processes, and themes utilized must address the continuous “compounding environmental woes and humanity’s determined efforts to rectify them” (Weintraub, 2012). This allows for a broader definition of eco-art, one which can include works of engineering, gardening, farming, researching, and education, so long as they engage an environmental consciousness in the subject. The inclusion of these various media also promotes an incorporation of intersectionality and political ecology along with innovation, as artists can collaborate and experiment to create works that are ethical, good for the environment, and physically, mentally, and socially engaging.

Weintraub establishes three sources of ecological consideration for artists to draw from; nonhuman organisms, the nonliving environment, and human actions. The artist then applies their own intuition, opinion, and interpretation to the various physical, behavioral, spatial, and temporal relationships that exist within the three all-encompassing sources.

In defining eco-art, we must be careful not to refer to all art that deals with land, natural systems, consumption, or climate as eco-art. The key distinction is seen in the opposition of anthropocentric and ecocentric means of production and longevity. Anthropocentric production encapsulates a reliance upon commerce and industry, while ecocentric production is emphasizes small-scale sustainability within systems. Anthropocentric longevity prioritizes human efforts to preserve the conditions that a work exists within and protect against ecosystem forces, while ecocentric longevity promotes work that can interact, mutate, grow, die, evolve, or decompose with ecosystem forces (Weintraub, 2012). These ideas stem from political ecology, which must aim to be an environmentalism that privileges social and ecological justice, political engagement, and responsibility to those who have contributed to climate change least but bear its consequences most. This opposes an environmentalism of the affluent that privileges natural purity. These must be considerations and criteria in the creation of environmental, critical art.
Aesthetics of political ecology must therefore transcend the boundaries between the visual culture of activism, artistic mediums, and “the appearance of nonhuman agents of environmental change” (Demos, 2013).

It is more difficult to define what eco-art is than establish what it is not because of its broad inclusion of so many media. However, these are two examples of monumental works of eco-art that encapsulate many of eco-art’s ideals. The first is from the advent of this new form, while the second is a more contemporary example:

**Fig. 1: Ant Farm - Cadillac Ranch (1974)**
A land art installation, displaying a “herd” of used Cadillac automobiles next to a highway. This piece comments on civilization’s rapid transition from scarcity to excess, and evokes themes of suburban development, consumerism, monoculture farming, and planned obsolescence/waste. The cars themselves represent the design shifts over a 15-year period that Cadillac indulged in to make each previous model obsolete (Weintraub, 2012).

**Fig. 2: Maya Lin – What is Missing? (2009)**
A multimedia work which includes a video projected onto a billboard in Times Square, New York City, featuring shots of species that are predicted to soon go extinct due to pollution or habitat fragmentation. Lin calls the effect on viewers “landscape amnesia”, which is the idea that we can’t recognize what’s missing from an environment if we have forgotten what was there in the first place. The film and its surroundings can be seen as a representation of political ecology; relating human activity to its direct (but often unseen) effect on the natural world. The project also includes an interactive online element (Weintraub, 2012).
The essential qualification of both of these pieces, is that they each take an ecocentric perspective on the relationship between humans and nature. *Cadillac Ranch* in displaying the environmental cost, utter absurdity, and waste associated with our rapidly evolving consumer tastes, and *What is Missing?* in establishing a visible presence (or lack) of species within our system of consumption and waste.

Themes that eco-art cover include but are not limited to habitat, range, niche, systems, energy, life/death/extinction, climate change, technology, waste, and sustainability. Aesthetics that eco-art focus on include but are not limited to multiplicity, place, outlines/borders, spirals, patterns, complexity/chaos, fractals, scale, dynamism, stability/flexibility, and systems. Sanders identifies three distinct types of eco-artists: those who display environmental problems through shock or humor, those who educate about the systematic or hidden nature of our environment, and those who engage through political activism or action (Sanders, 1992). An eco-artist is aware of the physical materials used to produce their work and takes into account the energy cost, life cycle, current state (depleting, recycled, restored, etc.), waste products, and social impacts of the use of each material. Manufactured materials might include repurposed used objects, components of discarded objects, or overruns of manufacturing that would otherwise be discarded. Non-manufactured materials might include plants, plant parts, animals, animal parts, or mineral elements (Weintraub, 2012).

In the last few decades, new technology and forms of media have introduced a variety of new artistic approaches and mediums into the world of eco-art. Brunner furthers Guattari’s concept of post-media, as an opposition to mass media in which subject-groups create content and take control of the semiotic components that constitute their world. He uses Occupy Wallstreet as an example, where videos, recording devices, music, livestreaming, and projections created the components of a grassroots media ecology (Brunner et. al, 2013).

**Vermont Art**

While Vermont is very small in size and population compared to other states, Vermont looms large in the national imagination as a place of an “unhurried rural lifestyle, a proudly independent spirit, and a close-knit sense of community” (Mantell, 1998). Since the mid-19th century, Vermont’s beautiful scenery has drawn urbanites from all over the United States.
Artists and writers who sought inspiration and peace and quiet were also drawn to Vermont, and fine crafts thrived with superb small museums, festivals, historic buildings, and artist studios or galleries in small towns. Vermont has sustained many of America’s lost traditions: the town meeting, the country store, the county fair. “Vermont’s most noteworthy creation has been the industry based on its own image” (Mantell, 1998). Today, Vermont has found a way to embrace contemporary culture without abandoning its tradition, natural capital, or sense of identity.

The first Vermonters, Abenaki natives, produced artistic craftwork such as birch-bark boxes and embroidered quills, which became popular trade items (Mantell, 1998). As European settlers began to set up towns in Vermont and brought with them a bustling sheep industry, by 1850 nearly all of Vermont had been cleared for pasture. Just a few decades later, much of this land was reclaimed by nature as the sheep industry moved west, establishing most of the second-growth forests on hilly landscapes that we see in Vermont today (Albers, 2002). The first popular paintings of Vermont are landscape paintings by Hudson River School artists such as William Sonntag from the latter half of the 19th century, which depicted Vermont as a sublime wilderness. This early wilderness trope eventually gave way to a celebration of Vermont’s pastoral lands in the early 20th century (Mantell, 1998). Because the landscape has been shaped to both meet economic needs and satisfy philosophical beliefs, there has always been a conflict between practical requirements and romantic ideals in Vermont (Albers, 2002). Because of this, much of the art produced in Vermont throughout the 20th century focuses on the intersection of commerce and culture in Vermont, which is intertwined with the state’s natural resources and idyllic scenery.

Contemporary Vermont art incorporates images of landscapes and small towns, alluding to the past and present while sometimes imagining a future. Works often employ pastoral tropes, displaying Vermont’s natural beauty and seeming freedom from development, while other works question and explores the future of Vermont in an increasingly developed world. Other common subjects of Vermont art are farms, labor, and solitude (The Art of Action, 2009). Additionally, many contemporary works make use of the seasonality of Vermont, displaying the lush summers, colorful falls, snow-covered winters, and lively springs. The aesthetic is one based on trees, hills, light, and waterways (Mantell, 1998).

Especially in a small state like Vermont, an artist’s their work is rooted in the communities they live and work in, contributing to the idea that “regionalism and community are
essential parts of contemporary art” (Kadour et. al, 2011). When artists display their work in community venues, they help to develop a sense of pride and identity among Vermonters, strengthening the bond between Vermont’s landscape, culture, and individuals (The Art of Action, 2009). A love of Vermont’s landscape itself has “influenced contemporary Vermont artists - not just those who paint landscapes… but also those who use the land itself in their work” (Mantell, 1998). This sentiment hints at the possibility for Vermont to become a hub for eco-art based on its history, artistic tropes, and trends towards the future.

Documentary

Since the 1980s, documentary has become an increasingly popular form of social engagement and entertainment, expedited by the free dissemination of information and eagerness for grassroots media brought on by the Internet in the 21st century. While ideas about reality and representation complicate our understanding of documentary, it can generally be understood in the definition proposed by John Grierson in the 1930’s, as “the creative treatment of actuality” (Nichols, 2010). This definition is applicable because it displays the central tension of the documentary form: the actual, non-fiction events that take place within a given time and place and the filmmaker’s construction of these events into an interpretation. By recognizing and understanding this dichotomy, we can begin to understand the ethics, rhetoric, and formal decisions that define and distinguish documentary.

Another important dichotomy of documentary is the relation between desire for reality as knowledge and desire for reality as spectacle. The spectator expects the information and action of subjects to be rooted in verifiable reality so that the experience contributes to their knowledge of the real world, but also expects pleasure in looking, specifically enjoyment in observation of the Other (Gaines et. al, 1999). This becomes a difficult balance to strike, as the documentarian must maintain a devotion to both reality and concrete knowledge while engaging the spectator in their desire for the spectacle of ‘otherness’.
Ethnography is generally understood to mean the study and documentation of a group of peoples or a culture. As a branch of anthropology, ethnography has been applied to documentary in order to categorize a broad group of films that depict people or culture. This form has historically struggled with issues of representation that stem from the colonizing filmmaker-subject relationship and the expectation of the camera as having an invisible presence (Heider, 2007). This struggle can be most clearly seen in Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*, which most historians consider to be the first commercially successful ethnographic documentary. In an effort to replicate contemporary preconceptions about Eskimos held by much of the western world, Flaherty directed the subjects and staged much of the film so that the subjects embodied these preconceptions about Eskimos as indigenous hunter-gatherers (Ruby, 1991).

Strategies for minimizing this type of representation include allowing subjects to have substantial input in the rhetoric of the film, acknowledging the presence of the camera and its effects on subject behavior, and involving subjects in the production process. Collaborative, subject-generated films have been successful in addressing the concern about filmmaker authority and the question of who has the right to represent whom. Whereas traditional means of imaging the world are generated by people outside of the subject’s environment, cooperative production offers the possibility of perceiving the world from the viewpoint of the subject (Ruby, 1991).

Another way to combat issues of representation in ethnographic film is to acknowledge the allegorical nature of documentary and adopt formal experimental techniques that minimize the divide between subject and object, or mind and matter, in order to liberate ethnography from its bond with the real and portray the subjective experience of the subjects rather than an ‘objective’ observation of the culture (Russell, 2003). An example of this is Marlon Riggs’ controversial 1989 film, *Tongues Untied*, in which he blends interviews and documentary footage with performance, poetry, and music by gay black men, often shirtless or naked against a
featureless black background. The effect of this is a fusing of the personal with the social, functioning as a political manifesto of the history and contemporary treatment of gay black men, and a visceral representation of such subjectivity (Renov, 2004).

Fig 4: Stills from Riggs’ “Tongues Untied” 1989

Bill Nichols establish six broad modes of documentary, three of which are relevant to this project: expository, participatory, and poetic. The expository mode emphasizes rhetorical content and dissemination of information, as narration or interviews provide the narrative basis or the film. The participatory mode emphasizes interaction between the filmmaker and their subjects, as the narrative becomes dependent on the interaction between the two. The poetic mode emphasizes subjective interpretation of its subjects, minimizing rhetoric and allowing a non-traditional narrative to emerge from formal juxtapositions and patterns, often perceived as avant-garde (Nichols, 1991).

Environmental Documentary

When the motion picture camera was first developed, it was used to investigate the physiology of animal motion. In its early stages of development, the motion picture presented a unique opportunity for both entertainment and science. Because of this overlap, the natural science film would come to “transform American perceptions of and interactions with wildlife over the course of the twentieth century” (Mitman, 1999). In the 21st century, the documentary film has exploded as a popular means of sensory entertainment and dissemination of scientific and social information. Environmental documentary specifically must balance this expectation of entertainment and science in order to achieve its purpose. Though the environmental crisis could be considered the epochal challenge of our times, it is an invisible crisis to most of us on the planet. This leaves environmental filmmakers with a significant responsibility in the 21st century: to accurately convey the scope of the challenges and provide viewers with a means of meaningful action. (Duval, 2017) Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth (2006) represents a
significant moment in this exchange of cultural information, in which every citizen of the world is targeted but then mobilized to respond to the conditions of climate change (Bozak, 2012). Other commercially successful films in this category include *Blackfish* (2013), *Chasing Ice* (2012), *The Cove* (2009), and *If a Tree Falls: The Story of the Earth Liberation Front* (2011). Cinema produces and discloses worlds, and therefore presents an ethical imperative to revivify our relationship to these worlds of images and their connotations. Cinema not only represents reality, but presents the opportunity to shape, extend, and reform reality (Ivakhiv, 2013).

Environmental documentaries can be organized into four categories: the ethnographic film, the art film, the historical archive film, and the campaigning film (Hughes, 2014). While many employ a variety of these forms at different levels, they all share the common subject of the environment. Contemporary activist documentaries cannot be viewed as a means to disseminate knowledge alone, but as a response to “the ideas, beliefs and emotions that emerge in the process of audio-visual research into the environment” (Hughes, 2014). What is important about this notion is that the filmmaker must understand their role in the social process as well as in shaping a subjective experience.

Common iconography of environmental documentary includes large machinery, factories with colored pollutants pouring out, images of mass production and consumption, waste and landfill sites, cities, crowds of people, landscapes, cities, and threatened animals. Common characters are scientists, passionate activists, journalists, agricultural workers, politicians, and antagonistic corporate managers. Stakeholders in the production of environmental documentaries that influence the public sphere include the scientific community, the activist community, conceptual artists, the documentary community, consumers, governments, and corporations (Hughes, 2014). This new form of activist eco-doc can be seen as a merging of Nichols’ poetic and participatory modes into what film theorist Helen Hughes calls the ‘conceptual mode’. In such a mode, a significant portion of the film and its funding are devoted to creating an event related to a concept that is larger than the work itself (Hughes, 2014).

Like environmental print and photography, the eco-doc is also fraught with contradiction between its content and the material demands of production. This is especially true of film, as the development of the motion picture is a defining aspect of the modernity that eco-documentaries attempt to examine critically (Duval, 2017). Because film as a medium is made possible by the very modernity it critiques, the filmmaker must acknowledge their own personal
and professional involvement in a force of environmental change. This implies a necessity of intention in this type of documentary filmmaking, which can become more difficult when a filmmaker seeks to use ironic or argumentative communication (Hughes, 2014). Jennifer Baichwal’s 2006 documentary, Manufactured Landscapes, draws attention to this contradiction by examining the specific changes in landscape that are brought on by the consumption of the plastics, metals, and chemicals used to produce and distribute photographs (Hughes, 2014). This type of acknowledgment recognizes that the image “is not only materially and economically inseparable from the biophysical environment, it is the environmental movement’s primary pedagogical and propagandistic tool” (Bozak, 2012). If the medium is used to draw attention to the problem of its own sustainability, we can begin to develop better practices without the forcing the disappearance of environmental media, which undoubtedly effects human and social opinion and action.

While documentary is a response to the world that surrounds us, through a contemplative, argumentative, or ironic process, it nonetheless is one of the most powerful tools if not the most powerful tool for the environmental movement in today’s media ecology (Hughes, 2014). In a geological era that ecologists have dubbed the Anthropocene, where humanity is the most powerful influence the world’s climate and our actions have been shown to be causing a sixth mass extinction, we turn to documentary film to frame our challenges and steer us towards a sustainable future (Duval, 2017).


**Methodology**

This thesis project has gone through a number of changes throughout the process. It has been expanded to include artists who do not consider themselves eco-artists, but whose work could meet the criteria of eco-art. I also abandoned an original idea to create a collaborative multi-media piece with the artists, as the timeline, budget, and availability of the artists did not allow for it.

The creative arts project is a short documentary film about the creation of eco-art in Vermont. It is a small community here that has received minimal attention or resources, and the film seeks to convey the importance of place-based artistic collaboration to the dissemination of environmental knowledge among local communities. It combines expository and poetic modes of documentary filmmaking and is influenced by the participatory mode of documentary, but it would not qualify as participatory. While the film certainly draws attention to the interaction between filmmaker and subject, the narrative is not dependent upon it. The film also attempts to adhere to the ideals of ethnographic and environmental documentary in its production, and incorporates some of the concepts behind eco-art in its style. The research is focused on defining characteristics, variations, and contradictions within Vermont’s eco-art movement through an investigation of four artists.

**Research Design**

The research being conducted in this project is qualitative and ethnographic in nature. The creative aspect of the project allows for my own interpretation, experience and artistic vision to be a part of this research. I chose this style of research because I think it’s a very effective form of research and communication. Documentary must be rooted in factual research about a group of people, but allows the information to be presented in an entertaining, engaging, and personal manner that can help reveal aspects of the subject that facts alone fail to encompass. I chose to focus on expository and poetic modes of documentary because I felt it offered an opportunity to emphasize rhetorical content and academic dissemination of information while allowing a non-traditional narrative to emerge from formal juxtapositions and patterns. By combining these, I can engage in both an academic and artistic pursuit, expanding the possibility of research and interpretation.
Stages/Timeline

Development:

This stage is comprised of research, brainstorming, financing, and contacting potential subjects. Research was done for my proposal, I brainstormed with my advisors and friends, failed to secure any financing, and reached out to eight artists in the area who I thought would meet the criteria. I also secured equipment from the Film and Television Studies Department and got commitments from two fellow film students, TJ Wasserman and Ayla Stern, to operate a second camera and sound equipment on the more significant shoots. This stage was started midway through the fall semester in ENVS 201 Research Methods and was completed by January 16, 2018 (the first day of Spring Semester).

Pre-Production:

In this stage, arrangements with subjects, locations, and a crew was completed. This involved meeting with each of the artists, deciding on the four that I thought represented the best variety for the documentary, and plenty of emailing and scheduling with them and the crew. The pre-production stage was finished by January 29, 2018.

Production:

This stage was comprised of the recording of all raw footage. I visited each artist a minimum of two times to shoot throughout this process. For the first visit to each, I brought either TJ or Ayla and we filmed a full-length semi-structured interview. The remainder of those days and each additional visit consisted of filming the artist at work, the artist showing us around their studio, or conducting interviews in a more casual fashion. The production stage was finished by March 19, 2018 (the end of March Break).

Post-Production:

In this stage, all of the images, audio, and visual effects recorded in production were edited together into one cohesive short documentary. I edited the film on my own using Adobe Premiere Pro, After Effects, and Photoshop. The initial period of picking selects and watching the interviews enough for a story to emerge took a long time, and I was able to produce a first draft in late April. I then produced a series of drafts that underwent critiques from my advisors,
subjects (to ensure their story is being told as they wish), and trusted friends in order to provide
external input for me to improve each draft of the project. By May 5, 2018, I completed a
polished, cohesive 18-minute piece. As the full-length film was the finished product of my
thesis, the post-production stage was officially be finished on May 5, 2018, but there will be a
few more rounds of drafts before a final version is released publicly.

Distribution:

I had initially intended to include this stage as part of the thesis, but the post production
stage ended up being too time consuming and intensive to allow for time to plan a screening or
explore release plans. I determined that it was more important to focus on the quality of the film
itself. However, I am now looking into planning a public screening in Burlington in late May
with the artists. After that I am going to look into promoting the film through Vermont PBS and
the Burlington City Arts Council, then will eventually release it for free online. The distribution
stage does not have a discernable completion date.
Results

Current private link to full documentary:

https://vimeo.com/267914536

Password: eco
Discussion

When I set out to do a thesis project, my academic goal was to find a way to incorporate aspects of what I have learned in both of my areas of study at the University of Vermont: Environmental Studies and Film and Television Studies. I feel that the format of this project allowed me to accomplish this by exploring formal, practical, and theoretical approaches to documentary film production while doing a research-based investigation of an environmental topic. It was an invaluable experience for me to be able to take a creative approach to learning about a topic and then to try to effectively communicate what I learned to a broader audience in an engaging manner.

As I began to hone in on the idea of a documentary about eco-art, I found that most people I talked to did not know that there was such a thing in the first place. Many were curious about what defines this type of work and how an artist can overcome the contradiction of material creation in response to a problem heavily intertwined with the production of materials. Based on this feedback, I decided to structure my approach as a sort of case study into the similarities and differences of the approaches of four local artists who either embrace the title of eco-artist or whose work meets at least some of the criteria for eco-art. I chose four artists because I thought this would offer enough variety of ideas and approaches without being detrimental to the depth I could explore with each of them in a short time frame. Because I had trouble finding local artists who embraced the title of eco-artist, I chose to broaden the scope of my project so as to include artists who described themselves as environmental artists but whose work could arguably fall into the sub-category of eco-art. This also opened up a dialogue with the subjects about the relevance of these distinctions and the advantage of varied approaches, which I believe strengthened both the conflict and overarching message of the film.

The criteria for the artists included being based in Vermont (within an hour drive of Burlington), having received some public recognition for their work, and incorporating ecocentric perspectives of the human-nature relationship or recycled/sustainable materials in their work. The four artists were specifically selected for their difference in approach, as I felt it was important to reflect the idea that eco-art should incorporate ecological principles of intersectionality and systems thinking. The four artists selected were Cami Davis, Nancy Winship Milliken, Anne Cummings, and Brian D. Collier. Cami makes oil paintings that explore
the intersection of human perception and the natural world, and teaches at the University of Vermont. Nancy makes outdoor sculptures and installations using repurposed materials. Anne makes collages out of post-consumer waste and teaches art at Colchester High School. Brian makes participatory installations that explore spaces he describes as “renatural”, and he teaches studio art at St. Michael’s College.

I felt that these four approaches offered enough overlap to relate each to one another without offering much redundancy.

Upon furthering my research and brainstorming with the four artists, I determined that it was important to incorporate some of the ideas that drive eco-art into my formal approach to documentary filmmaking, such as an openness to improvisation and discovery, a focus on aesthetic themes of place/context and materiality, and an implication of the self within a broader system. I also tried to approach each artist a little differently in my technique so as to reflect their unique approaches. This can be observed in the focus on interaction and collaboration with Nancy, the focus on visual relations and emotiveness with Cami, the focus on detail and immersion with Anne, and the focus on patterns and context with Brian.

The stated aim of the film was to examine the defining characteristics, variations, and contradictions within the Vermont eco-art movement, and explore the commonalities and differences in four artists’ approach to process, content, participation, and materiality. In the following section I will explain some of the specific choices I made in specific parts of the film so as to try to achieve my aforementioned goal:

**Context and the White Panes**

The documentary opens on a white screen which serves as a window pane of sorts for a title animation sequence. The animation is hand-drawn on 362 individual pieces of paper and was worked on in for an Animation class. I had tried to work with recycled newspaper but
struggled to produce anything that worked, so I ended up using printer paper. This sequence functions as way to immediately draw attention to the inherent contradiction of environmental art: production as a response to a problem of overproduction. The content of the animation seeks to introduce an aspect of each artist while calling attention to the relationships and dependency between them. The fact that we only see the hands of the artists is meant to introduce the theme of communication through hands and call attention to the ways in which we have the power to negatively shape our environment as well as the power to take agency to improve it. The title, *Response*, also seeks to reflect this idea of taking positive agency over the world we impact.

The pristine white pane becomes a visual motif throughout the film when displaying photographed work of the artists, emphasizing the impact of context and place in our perception of aesthetics, ecology, and the world more broadly. This was partially inspired by Brian’s work examining the ways in which de-contextualizing objects shapes our understanding of and relationship to the world. Throughout the project, I found the relation of place and context to our relationship to the world to be a crucial theme in the work of all four artists.

I wanted to incorporate this theme into my approach and extend it to apply to the ways in which videos we watch affect our understanding of the world and influence the movements we
care about. The fact that I am filming the subjects in the first place implies a subjective importance above other potential human subjects. Although I am editing the footage into a highly constructed and subjective experience to be consumed publicly, people generally trust documentaries to reflect truth. To account for these often-unrecognized implications of documentary, especially in relation to the themes of the topic I was exploring, I felt it was important to implicate myself in the production of visual information that impacts our media ecology.

This implication can first be seen in Cami’s reflective moment at 13:55, in which she attempts to justify the importance of people experiencing both literal and artistic surrealism as TJ’s silhouette steps in front of the camera to move a chair out of the shot. I saw this as an opportunity to introduce the idea of the impact of my subjective experience on film. As she looks at the ground at 14:16, the shot glitches into a shot of me from a similar angle setting up the camera to shoot one of her paintings, then we see those shots of the painting within the white window pane. Cami’s words reflect the power of an abstracted reality on a viewer’s perception, and the cut of myself filming to the white pane of her work reflects the ways in which my subjective impact on the experience of the film can shape and abstract the reality a viewer perceives as well. Having received feedback from some people, I understand that this intent may not come across very clearly. However, I feel that its ambiguity offers a much-needed moment of reflection after the more conflicted discussion of materiality, regardless of whether the viewer recognizes my attempt to call attention to the power of video in shaping perception.

The final place where this comes into the film is from 17:24 – 18:10, where Cami, Brian, and Anne each make a comment related to the potential power of art to shape perception. Here I brought in the final white pane, which for the first time displays the work of all four artists side-by-side (fig. 11) followed by cropped video panes of their hands working on their respective crafts (fig. 12). The white background then fades out, followed by the video panes, to a series of shots in which we see me setting up shots (fig. 13). This is intended to break down the separating and de-contextualizing effect of the white pane and recognize the four artists’ work as
part of a broader, related system. The shots of myself function as both metaphorical and literal representations of that system of relations and the power it has to shape perception.

**Fig. 11: Collective works > Fig. 12: Collective hands > Fig. 13: Camera set-up**

**Improvisation and Evolution**

In the first scene of the film, we are introduced to Nancy and her experiment of trying to get cow prints on canvas. The last scene of the film documents the uncovering of those canvases in which Nancy is initially disappointed with the results. Taking the suggestion of her helper, they shake off some of the excess ink and dirt and find a much more interesting pattern underneath. She then stores the canvases and explains how regardless of how she feels about the result, it’s still a contribution to her ongoing, ever evolving process. I decided to use this as the story that the rest of the film is anchored in, in part because it was only thing I captured on film that presented an actual narrative of events, and in part because I felt that it represented a crucial philosophy that informs this type of work. For Nancy, her process is a constant improvisation and experimentation so as to investigate our relationship to animals and the natural world. This openness to possibility is what allows her to constantly evolve her work, and reflects the need for experimentation and improvisation in our handling of environmental challenges.

**Fig. 14: Nancy brings out the canvases**

**Fig. 15: Nancy and assistant shake off the dirt**
This philosophy is clearly exemplified in Cami’s work, where improvisation plays a key role in her process. As she explains, “otherwise I’d just be executing something I already know, and the interesting part is what I don’t know yet.” Her paintings are grounded in references to the natural world, but she applies her own perception and intuition to that world. She views this process as letting go of distinction and separation and as channeling a greater presence, a process which only works if you “listen to the painting to tell you where to go.” As her paintings develop more and more relations, they evolve into surrealistic interpretations of ecological interdependence.

Although Brian’s work might appear very controlled, he actually incorporates aspects of improvisation and discovery in a number of ways. All of his work takes place in areas he calls ‘renatural areas’, which are places dominated by human impact but which still support some type of plant/animal ecosystem. He sees the driving concept behind his work to be the notion of experiment and discovery as he tries to find innovative ways for people to discover and engage with the natural elements of these spaces and take agency over them. By creating situations for spontaneity, as with his collection of very small objects, Brian can engage with people in a manner where there is a constant process of experimentation and discovery.

For Anne, this philosophy has more to do with her treatment and organization of materials. As she collects post-consumer waste from roadsides or portrait subjects, she organizes them by color, content, and shape. Starting with just a pencil sketch, she uses waste to create a larger mosaic. While she doesn’t see that larger image as improvisational, she does sees her
treatment of the relationships of the pieces of waste to be such. Whether in literal reference or in color and shape relation, Anne constantly experiments with organization of these relationships so as to create interesting sub-context for the viewers who chose to look closely at the individual pieces.

**Materials**

The driving tension in the documentary is the ways in which each of the artists approach the use of materials in their work. As previously mentioned, the unavoidable contradiction of this type of work is that artists are producing in response to a problem caused by overproduction. I saw the ways in which each of the artists dealt with this contradiction to be the most divisive and interesting aspect of this work to explore.

Cami is likely the least environmentally responsible with materials as she relies entirely on oil paints and large canvases, but she is open about the shortcomings of her approach and acknowledged off-camera that this would likely disqualify her from the category of eco-art. The justification of her use of materials relies in the hope that the impact of the work is greater than the effects the waste produces.

Although much of Brian’s work does involve production of non-recycled material, he uses his work to call attention to aspects of our material world that we overlook. Like Cami, he explained to me off-camera that he feels that if it has a greater impact on people’s behavior towards the environment than the impact of the degradation caused by the work, then the it is justified in its production. When possible he tries to use recycled or
non-toxic materials, but for him it is most important to focus on the broader impact of the work.

For Nancy, materials drive her work. Most of her work uses repurposed material, and much of what she is interested in is the histories they hold. Her work often takes the form of an experiment in the outdoors with repurposed materials. While she acknowledges that some of the materials she uses inevitably go into a landfill, she maintains that the non-toxicity of her work is an important factor in her work.

Anne takes the furthest step to address this contradiction of materiality in that her materials are not only repurposed, but are the by-products of the over-productive economy that is responsible for many of the environmental challenges we face. By using repurposed canvases and post-consumer waste as the materials for her work, she is able to minimize her impact on the environment while simultaneously drawing attention to the problem of materials and waste in our culture.
Conclusion

Like the artists portrayed in the documentary, I don’t feel that I’m the one who can say whether or not this film will have any impact or relevance at all. What I do hope is that it provokes someone to think critically about their relationship to the natural world, aesthetics, and the creation of meaning. Whether or not it has any sort of success is not as important to me as the potential for the documentary to spark interest or empathy in another human being. I believe the film offers a successful, open-ended exploration of the questions I initially posed without forcing any definitive claims or judgements about the movement or the artists in particular.

This project was an attempt to apply the analytical skills I have learned in environmental studies classes to the creative skills I have learned in film production classes. I am pleased with the work I have done and am proud to have a finished a full-length creative product that I believe reflects both aspects of my education. The pre-production and production stages ran smoothly and I felt that I was learning a lot about the subject and each artist along the way. The post-production stage was an uphill battle, and I don’t think I have ever put as much concentrated time and focus into anything as I have editing this short documentary. This stage has consumed nearly all of my time from the end of March until now, perhaps to the detriment of classes and some personal relationships, in large part because of my obsessive tendencies. I finished this stage later than intended and will not be able to make a screening of the film part of this academic deliverable. I do not regret spending the extra time and sleepless nights to make the film itself as strong as it could be; after all, that was the goal of the project. The distribution stage is just now beginning for me, as I am now trying to plan a screening and determine the most effective and wide-reaching form of public release.

While it seemed like this project might consume me whole for a little while, with a little perspective I now feel that it was a tremendous opportunity for me to take on a significant responsibility, form connections and relationships with documentary subjects, practice my craft, conduct research, and synthesize many of the different aspects of my educational experience at UVM. Like Nancy’s attitude towards her work, I see this piece as the start of an ever-evolving process of learning, experimentation, and discovery.
Bibliography


Appendices

Timeline

- Development: August 26, 2017 – January 4, 2018
- Pre-Production: January 4, 2018 – January 22, 2018
- Production: January 22 – March 29, 2018
- Post-Production/Writing: March 29, 2018 – May 9, 2018
- Distribution: May 9 -

Budget

- Equipment – Provided by the University of Vermont Film and Television Studies department ................................................................. $0
- Crew – T.J received 1 credit and valuable experience ................................................................. $0
- Adobe Creative Suite ($20/month) ......................................................................................... $80
- Gas to drive to shoot locations ............................................................................................... $113

$193*

*The budget for the project was provided from my own savings.