

## **Engaging the Heart: art and the environment**

**By Jacquelyn Murphy**

With the recent rise in environmental consciousness, it is not surprising that artists, invariably the barometers of society's concerns, have responded by creating work that raises awareness of nature's plight. Art has always weighed in on issues of the day and, in times of unrest, has been part of the struggle. Perhaps one of the most famous examples of this being Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*: a protest by Picasso against the bombing of the village of Guernica during the Spanish Revolution. However, the role that artists play in these debates is varied; ranging from the artist as activist, to the artist as interrogator, to the artist as observer.

In her multimedia exhibition *Antarctica – a Place in the Wilderness* Judy Parrott assumes the role of the observer. She seeks to transport us, through the engagement of our senses, to one of the most pristine ecosystems remaining on Earth. She eases us into an awareness of this place by capturing the beauty and texture of its geography, the timbre of its soundscape and the patterns of daily life. By bringing the Antarctic alive she enables us to feel a part of it and, by association, to come to care for it.

Parrott spent 6 weeks in Antarctica as part of an Australian Antarctic Division Arts Fellowship. There has been a long history of artists in the Antarctic dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and to William Hodges, an artist aboard Captain Cook's second voyage to the Southern Hemisphere. In more modern times Australia, New Zealand, Britain and America have all offered artists Antarctic Arts Fellowships. The purpose of such fellowships is to enable those with a 'non-science focus' to experience the Antarctic first-hand so that they can communicate this unique experience and understanding to others. The Australian fellowship asks recipients to focus on the 'extraordinariness' of the Antarctic: its fauna and flora, geopolitical and scientific significance, and the community who call it home. This belief, that artists are well placed to communicate issues regarding the environment, has been gaining ground. It is seen as an alternative to other social campaigns, such as anti smoking, which use scare tactics as a means of generating change. The United Nation's Environment Programme openly acknowledges the importance of artists in its own high profile campaign:

*...Artistic expression inspired by our natural environments is a strong alternative approach in efforts to strengthen community engagement in conservation and preservation... The universal language of art serves as a catalyst that can unite people in thought and action and can empower individuals, communities, and leaders to incorporate environmental values into social, economic and political realms<sup>1</sup>*

This recognition, that environmental values need to be incorporated into different realms, leads us to the notion of ecology. Ecology, the study of an organism within its environment, is perhaps a more appropriate framework through which to explore art and environmental issues. Ecology, by its very nature, links and interrelates every aspect of the ecosystem - from land to resources to politics. More so than environment, ecology encompasses the holistic and interdisciplinary way in which artists work. As Michaela Crimmin from The Royal Society of Arts, which has focused extensively on art and environmental change for 250 years, explains:

*We started off looking at art and environmental issues but found that people tended to think of landscape, which is not what we mean at all. It's about habitats, social issues and survival. Ecology seems to open up the breadth, complexity and interconnectedness of this, from biodiversity and habitats through to conflict and poverty.<sup>2</sup>*

The remit of Parrott's fellowship was to do just that – address the many habitats of the Antarctic, be they social, political or environmental. Parrott's photographs swing between images of pure beauty to that of prosaic documentation. In her work *Antarctic Midnight* and *Approaching Storm* she captures the incandescent beauty of nature's colours on canvases of ice. In *Sea Ice* she creates a black and white abstract of ice floes and, in contrast, reveals the chameleon nature of ice in the delicate filigree of *Ice on Rock at Mawson West Arm*. Alongside these images are photographs that bring us face to face with daily existence in the Antarctic: the stalwart icebreaker in *Aurora and Sea Ice*, bringing people and supplies and providing the only tangible link with the outside world; the use of diverse modes of transport as seen in *Ski, Heli at Jakes* and *IRB*; and the variety of activities from *Field Training* to *Dive to Friday Drinks* and *Sport*. As her photographs present us with a visual record of the Antarctic, the didactics that accompany them provide us with brief explanations and a context in which to view them.

Together they create a setting in which to begin our own explorations of this unique place.

Though a dominant feature of this multimedia exhibition, the photographs are, however, only part of the story. While interesting in their capture of texture, pattern and shadows - the nuances of this white world - they have even greater significance when viewed alongside the other components of the exhibition: the soundscape, memorabilia and diary extracts. The soundscape introduces us to the clatter of Antarctic life; the resonance of barge horns, the call of penguins, the creak of ice, and the screech of an unusual dinner bell. It is through the soundscape that Parrott also introduces us to the people of the Antarctic expedition and the story of the transient community that exists there. We meet the expedition's doctor, the carpenter, environmental officer, and the scientists. We learn about waste management, the fragility of resources such as fuel, and the geology of the land. We also hear about the history of the community over the past 10 years as change takes place - advancing from letters to emails, ships to aeroplanes - and one of the world's last frontiers succumbs to progress.

It is through Parrott's diary extracts that we are first introduced to the artist and her personal responses to her journey. In all other aspects of the exhibition she has been an invisible collector of images and sounds; her presence only revealed through her choice of *what* is photographed or recorded. In her diary extracts, we meet Parrott as the participant-observer, ' forever documenting'. She fills in the details of the place - from descriptions of the environment, "Penguins scatter from their ice floats as we approach"<sup>3</sup> to explanations of the scientific work being done there:

*... drilling sea ice to analyse the algae which grows there. It is the algae which feed the Krill which feed the fish which feed the seals and penguins. If the sea ice melts, the algae dies - and the food chain...<sup>4</sup>*

It is through her diary that we gain the strongest sense of the uniqueness of the place and the degree to which it is unlike anything else we could encounter.

The memorabilia in the exhibition presents us with additional information about the Antarctic. It comprises a collection of eggshells, feathers and rocks; a wall of maps and charts; and the reconstruction of a camping scene that includes cold weather clothing, a portable stove, a sleeping bag, and an ice axe. These objects provide us with a tangible connection to the Antarctic and, in conjunction with the other components of the exhibition, contribute to a sense of place. This is an exhibition that occurs in layers - the photographs and accompanying didactics create a backdrop; the diary extracts immerse us in the details; the soundscape brings the place alive; the memorabilia gives it materiality. It is a sensory journey into the Antarctic and, through the engagement of our senses, we experience the exhibition and therefore the Antarctic on many different levels.

The Director of Friends of the Earth, one of the most influential environmental campaigning organisations in the world says:

*The ability of the artists to communicate complex disciplines is one of the major advantages of working with artists. It's really important for the environmental community to reach out in ways that don't involve cold statistics, science and data but can engage at a human level, and art has the enormous potential to do that.<sup>5</sup>*

By engaging our senses, Parrott appeals to us on a human level to not just engage our heads but also our hearts. Through this multi-layered approach, we are inspired to learn more about the Antarctic environment and to care about its future. The Antarctic is at the forefront of climate change and, perhaps by engaging with this very remote, very significant ecology in all its dimensions, we will resolve to do our bit for the environment.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Art and the Environment'. (The Unlearning Intolerance Seminar Series, New York) *United Nations Department of Public Information Education Outreach*, 8 May 2008. 5 June 2008 URL: <http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicles/tolerance/seminar.html>

<sup>2</sup> Anna Minton, 'Down to a fine art, Environment' in *The Guardian*, Jan 10 2007, p 1

<sup>3</sup> Judy Parrott, Caption for image from the exhibition *Antarctica – A Place in the Wilderness* 2006

<sup>4</sup> Judy Parrott, Caption for image from the exhibition *Antarctica – A Place in the Wilderness* 2006

<sup>5</sup> Anna Minton, 'Down to a fine art, Environment' in *The Guardian*, Jan 10 2007, p 2