



Looking for Boas in the Mangroves

Gliding effortlessly through the tangled branches of the Mangrove trees, the boa moved to a fork and paused there to coil and wait. In the Mangrove swamps a constant ebb and flow of salinity ensures all creatures, including plant life, coordinate within this brackish ecosystem. We pause, and look up at the coiled boa, not more than two feet above us. Almost within reach, and certainly, if we were prey, it could drop. But somehow Nature knows, at a very deep level.

Mangrove trees look like squatting men, with their outstretched limbs descending into the dark pools of mystery. There is a vulnerability and nakedness in this position, which suits neither the charging brigade nor the occlusion of flight. We are all in this together.

The mangrove swamp is a metaphor and a lesson for our own survival in a society that has grown increasingly brackish. Artists hang on to any part time job they can get in the hope that they will endure and have time to make art. I am reminded of the two grey storks I saw standing on the bank. They wait all day for the salinity to reach a certain degree and then they can drink for twenty minutes.

The crabs have a more successful strategy. They exude water from an orifice at the top of their carapace. The water runs down their back and gives off carbon dioxide while taking on oxygen. Then it drains back into the shell and is recycled endlessly. What can we do as artists to emulate the crab in our society?

Varieties of mangroves order themselves according to their capacity to handle salinity. The Red Mangroves can occupy positions closer to the ocean while the Black Mangroves are found deeper into the swamps. Trees get rid of the salt by exuding it through their leaves and sending it to the old leaves that drop off into the water. They develop tubules that protrude up from their roots to get additional oxygen to their roots. Their seeds are long, weighted, missiles that drop, lodging themselves in the clay as miniature trees, ready to sprout and grow. No waiting around for special conditions! One can only be dumbfounded at Nature's capacity to adapt.

Mangrove swamps are also incredibly important as carbon sinks. They absorb 10% more carbon than the rainforests do, yet are constantly destroyed to make way for shrimp farms and other construction. Certain vulnerable societies that are dependent for survival on these swamps have realized this to their cost. The shrimp farms did not perform well and the water quality was altered. In addition, fish became scarce. The fish spawn in the ocean near the swamp mouth and swim into these protected zones to mature before venturing back out into the ocean. The best place to fish is near the juncture of swamp and sea. Destroy the swamp and you decimate your own food supply.

Some of these affected societies have been managing their swamps and gaining a renewed appreciation for them as a necessary partner in the struggle to survive. The Capitalist idea "survival of the fittest" has no place here! Instead, an environmental communalism prevails. If someone wants to chop down a tree, they have to plant five trees to replace it.

There are many kinds of art with different needs, but I don't think any of it is particularly successful at generating a living. Galleries and auction houses thrive on exclusion, which drives the price and profit. Grants are also exclusionary, due to paucity of funds, bias towards forms or even shades of nationalism. Art theory creates power structures within institutions so these can hold sway over what gets exposed or validated. Like storks we wait for our twenty minutes!!

I think we need to alter the paradigm. Instead of trying to mold existing, dysfunctional structures to our needs, we should find ways of support within our own community. I don't mean artist-run centers so much as finding a commonality among artists generally. If art was no longer primarily about selling or getting gallery representation but about showing, discussing and trying to link with one another in a broad conversation, I wonder whether it wouldn't begin to generate a discrete identity. Perhaps Art, as a definition of a certain activity,

has to go. At the moment we are being defined by the system and we are passive within that, embracing failure, rather than actively making our own system.

Democracy is a shredded beast right now, with threads hanging down where the holes are. Yet, we can see a surge in popularity for certain social ideals, despite the reigning ideology or oligarchical despotism. I believe in the theory of critical mass that predicts change once a certain point is reached. It's painfully obvious that something has to change and the prevailing society has to be dismantled. How do we reimagine ourselves within and without our surroundings?

Could we artists change the world of art? Change the definition, change the venue, and change the whole idea? We validate the system by endorsing its presence, participating in its particular fantasy, thus negating our ability to adapt. Could we drop our own seedlings, fully formed, into the mud like the mangrove trees? I would like to present art that functions as a mode of thought and whose point is to engage the public and world with ideas about environmental coexistence and the human condition. There are many other creative manifestations that remain unrealized because there is no vehicle. What did the Dadaists do to stamp their character into existence, despite it being anti-art?

The key is probably a collective surge of support for an alternative way of showing and disseminating work. Artists need to inhabit a metaphor that can build a unified identity. Perhaps I am being naive, but I can't help feeling that there must be a way of reimagining our collective destiny. The concept of good and bad art is the least helpful polarity. Creative divisions should fall away and a sharing economy should be established. The strength of open source technology and a free Internet is inspirational here. If artists gave voice as a totality and simply moved to occupy the tree, we could shed our gnarled skins and maybe become boas in the mangroves.

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