

In
SPITE
of



HOPELESSNESS

By

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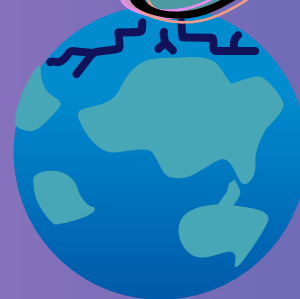


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hen a creature is repeatedly exposed to negative stimuli, it may come to believe it has no control over its circumstances. This phenomenon, known in psychology as "learned helplessness," can lead to profound depression and other mental health issues (Schaus 7). In the face of global challenges like climate change, individuals often grapple with feelings of futility, questioning whether their actions can make a meaningful difference. However, even amidst bleak prospects, it is crucial for humanity to recognize the deep interconnection between society and nature. Rather than viewing nature as separate or "other," humans must acknowledge their integral role within the ecological and environmental systems of the Earth. By understanding this interconnectedness, we can cultivate a perspective that transcends scientific analysis alone and finds deeper expression through art, offering new ways to comprehend our place in the world

The Melbourne Docklands had once been a bustling swamp and lake full of life. Plants, birds, fish, and even kangaroos lived amongst the flowers and grass that decorated the nearby rivers (Deerson 42). According to Melissa Deerson, the author and facilitator of the Field Trip, “Colonists came and took the land...by the 1850s they had turned it into a rubbish dump for their industries”(42). Today, the Docklands have been revitalized for modern urban usage; a man-made oasis filled with fake grass and struggling business. For self-serving reasons, humans have destroyed a once-diverse habitat, only to turn it into a sought-after area for urban growth. Yet, what seems to be a desolate place of man-made creation allows the field trip participants, with their scattered seeds, collected samples, and bird calls, to unveil layers of overlooked life—sparrows, dandelions, jellyfish, and bees—and

bees—and moments of connection that challenge perceptions of barrenness (42). The persistence of the chaotic nature of life stands resilient, integrated itself around, through, above and below the Docklands. Although the time of swamps and lakes, plentiful birds and plants are missed, there is beauty in what exists within life that persists in an urban setting even after desolation.



The Dinner Party, written by Kevin Lair, explores the relationship between bullfrogs and human activity within the framework of art. Bullfrogs were drawn to the West Brook Artist's site due to the construction of a farm pond stocked with fish (Lair 40). Unfortunately, these bullfrogs are invasive predators that prey on other species and spread diseases, often devastating more vulnerable amphibian populations (40). It may seem counterintuitive that building a pond—an act intended to create a habitat—could result in the proliferation of an invasive species. Why would habitat construction, especially when human activity is typically associated with habitat destruction, have such negative effects?



The answer lies in a lack of understanding of the environment and how humans coexist with nature. Nature is increasingly perceived as something “out there,” detached from human spaces, much like the neutral setting of an art gallery. The Dinner Party challenges this perspective, questioning our notions of both the environment and art. At a critical moment in our understanding of nature and art, the bullfrog becomes a symbol, dissolving into or emerging from the boundaries of both (40). Occupying a liminal space between food source and nature, the bullfrog forces us to reconsider its role and the impact of its presence due to human activity.



Blair Butterfield's journey is an excellent example of how art can address environmental issues whilst promoting community involvement. Butterfield reinvented the function of art as a vehicle for sustainability and activism by withdrawing from the

commercial art industry to produce *Art of Cultural Evolution* (Butterfield 35). Projects like *Colony1* and the *Midtown 34th Street Project* show how innovative ideas may spur useful ecological solutions like sustainable living, urban farming, and renewable energy (37). In addition to being examples of climate resilience, these initiatives highlight the urgent need for cultural change in order to reduce consumerism and re-establish a connection with nature. Butterfield has demonstrated how art can transcend aesthetics and serve as a catalyst for significant social and environmental change through cooperative initiatives with artists, scientists, and local communities. Although the reoccurring fear echos humanities individual inability to solicitate change, the truth is far from that. It requires individuals to create something substantial, seen through Blair Butterfield's work.



The harsh truth is that the climate crisis has reached a point of irreversible change. Marc Schaus writes that, "even if we ceased all human-derived carbon emissions now... the greenhouse gases we've already pumped... will reportedly warm the planet for centuries (Schaus 7)." Yet rather than succumbing to the "learned helplessness", there are still preventive measures to mitigate the worst impacts. In the end, the conversation promotes a movement from hopelessness to resolve by presenting the scientific realization of irreversible climate change as a springboard for creativity and teamwork rather than a cause for giving up. Yes, humans have made mistakes. But now, it is our responsibility as a species to do our part and fix what we can do. Humans and nature are not opposites; we coexist on this planet. In the words of the scientist overheard by Schaus:

"It's all connected and it's all just getting started...This isn't just the temperature knob on one person's house you're fiddling with. Not just your house, or one other person's. Not at all...no...this is our house"(13).

References

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