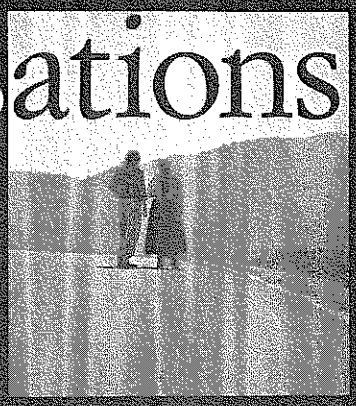
Suzi Gablik

Conversations before the end of time



Dialogues on Art, Life & Spiritual Renewal with

James Hillman Arthur Danto

Richard Shusterman Ellen Dissanayake

Hilton Kramer Coco Fusco Carol Becker

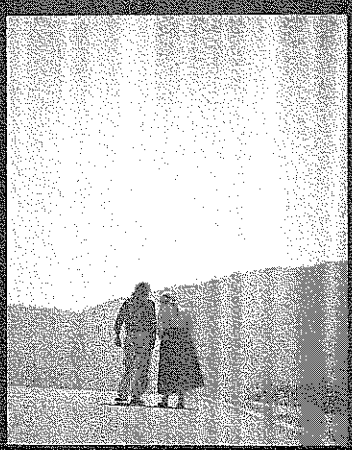
Theodore Roszak Guerrilla Girls David

Plante Mary Jane Jacob Rachel Dutton

& Rob Olds Christopher Manes Thomas

Moore Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

Laurie Zuckerman Leo Castelli



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Contents

Viewing the World as Process

CAROLYN MERCHANT

Are capitalism and ecology incompatible? There is another, more optimistic scenario than the one of collapse, which, according to Carolyn Merchant, is based on the ability of systems to reorganize themselves and to create order out of chaos. As global warming, pollution and resource depletion escalate, increasing the need for environmentally sustainable solutions, the contradictions within the various levels of our civilization may force us to reverse

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CAROLYN MERCHANT

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the priorities currently given to production and economic growth, and to seek out other philosophies that harmonize better with the constraints of the ecosystem. In this way, the direction and cumulation of social changes begin to differentiate among the spectrum of possibilities so that some ideas assume a more central role in the array, while others move to the periphery. From this organic process, cultural transformations develop that Merchant refers to as "ecological revolutions"—a reorganization of our consciousness in relation to nature that could take about fifty to seventy-five years to complete. The current global ecological revolution, if it succeeds, means that a value-system oriented to nature as process, as a teacher whose ways must be followed, will eventually replace the dominant, mechanistic image of nature as an "it" that is our legacy from the scientific revolution. The objectification and commodification of nature have sanctioned human actions toward the environment that are emotionally neutral and encourage domination and control rather than intimacy, reciprocity or nurturing.

Carolyn Merchant is an environmental historian at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of several books, including The Death of Nature, *which traces the alterations that took place in our relationship to nature as a result of the scientific revolution's mechanization of the world picture. At that time, the shift was from an animate,*

organic universe to mechanism as the dominant metaphor for binding together the cosmos, society and the self into a single cultural reality. The disembodied eye, based in a spectatorial epistemology that posits a subjective self reflecting on an objective world exterior to it, is paradigmatic of the domination of the earth through the controlling scrutiny of the overseer, for whom seeing from a distance (rather than a face-to-face relationship) is the primary source of knowledge.

When my friend John Browder, a professor of urban studies, informed me he was going to bring Merchant to speak at Virginia Tech, I wondered how it would be to dialogue with her about the new process paradigm in relation to art. John was already setting up appointments on a very tight schedule, and there was no time to write to Merchant in advance, explaining who I was or describing the project. John said he would hold open a slot for me and gave me her phone number. In the event that Merchant agreed to see me, I could have exactly fifty minutes at two o'clock on Tuesday. It took many calls before I finally reached Merchant. I found myself trying to plow as much information as I could into the potent silence at the other end of the line. It was definitely a lightning strike. I was unsure if, in just a couple of minutes, I could ignite the curiosity of someone I'd never met, who clearly had no idea who I was. When I

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hung my request on the air, there was a pregnant pause. Finally she said, "Is your 'reenchantment' related to Morris Berman's Reenchantment of the World?" *"Yes," I replied, "it is." "All right," she said, "I'll do it."*

We met in John's office on campus on April 6, 1993, and sat on opposite sides of his desk with the tape recorder on. There were no preliminaries; we simply began the dialogue. Of all the conversations in the book, this one was perhaps the most difficult, the most taxing. As I sat across from Merchant, who was austerely dressed in a navy blue suit, I was very conscious of her imposing intelligence, and I could see that the whole situation was a wild card for her. She interrupted to make herself a cup of coffee. Then she sat down again, and the two of us began a slow dance, allowing our thoughts to weave a complicated web around the subjects of science, art and ecological revolutions. As it says in the Nike advertisement, you do the tango. Just do it.

SUZI GABLIK: One of the things you say in *The Death of Nature,* Carolyn, is that civilization has advanced itself at the expense of nature. The problem is that civilization has set itself above nature; this is part of the hierarchy of the masculine "power over," which has meant patriarchal dominance and a repression of the feminine. We might start by talking about whether you think there are significant changes

going on in our culture about those issues right now; for instance, do you think the culture-nature dichotomy is just as profoundly lethal as ever it was?

CAROLYN MERCHANT: I guess I would start by rephrasing what you say I say—which is not to talk about civilization in some large abstract sense, but Western industrial capitalism since the seventeenth century, as it developed in North America and Europe. Capitalism inherently contains a principle of growth that depends on turning nature, which is subject, into something that is object, commodity and resource. Capitalism is committed to growth, as is state socialism, but with different principles—the former for commodity production, the latter to fulfill basic needs and raise living standards. As global capitalism spread the market economy throughout the Americas and the colonial empires in the early modern period, and now throughout the rest of the Third World, it has brought nature into a very compromising kind of position. Nature gets transformed from independent subject into object and is used to advance the interests of entrepreneurs and elites at the expense of fulfilling basic needs for everyone, especially the poor.

SG: You've also talked about the shift in our relationship, since the mechanization of the world picture, from what used to be a face-to-face reciprocal interaction of humans with nature, to this notion of the disembodied eye that surveys and measures nature

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from a distance. That was particularly resonant for me, because of its parallels with the development of art.

CM: Right, the dominance of vision is part of, first, the Greco-Roman world that replaces a kind of oral, face-to-face culture of the Homeric era, and it gets amplified in the Renaissance with the empirical eye and the eye of the mind. This is the essence of science's reduction of the world to experiment and mathematics as the only forms of valid knowledge.

SG: There really is a strong parallel here with what happened to art when it became purely visual, and stopped being a participatory, face-to-face experience. It began to address what Gary Snyder has called "a faceless audience," where you don't direct your expression to anyone in particular. Rather, you're making autonomous objects that have no context until they're siphoned off into an institutionalized setting, where they become pure commodity, or spectacle, or fetish.

CM: So isn't that a kind of reification, or abstraction, of the word "art"? I mean, some art is still participatory if it includes dance, or if it involves the audience. Tribal art might be an example of what you were saying we've moved away from.

SG: Exactly, but we have very few instances of that kind of participatory involvement in our culture, at least

when it comes to the so-called fine arts. The fine arts tend to exist either on stage or in an art gallery for a faceless audience for whom they become spectacle. The audience rarely has a participatory role. It has an observer role.

CM: So even with music, or with dance, which maybe involves some other aspects of the body than just the eye, it's still reduced to a sort of spectator sport?

SG: Absolutely. And ultimately, in the case of visual art, to the production of autonomous objects that can only be viewed, or commodified and sold, rather than used in some manner to serve society's needs.

CM: So do you see a way of getting back to the more participatory forms?

SG: That's actually what my book *The Reenchantment of Art* is about. It tries to show that everything in our culture is now moving in the direction of process-oriented and interactive models. My work is mostly about artists whose focus is less on making objects and more on participatory or collaborative relationships. But getting back to what we were talking about originally, would you say that we have to confront the fact that capitalism, and the capitalist way of life, is lethal to the ecology then?

CM: Yes, absolutely.

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SG: Do you see signs that the necessary changes are beginning to happen? Do you feel hopeful that we will make it across this threshold of change before we completely destroy the life-support systems of the earth?

CM: I have this idea that we're in the midst of a global ecological crisis, which is a way in which society is reorganizing itself and its consciousness in relation to nature, to ecology—and that's what I call "ecological revolution." It's a process of both visionary thinking that's challenging older paradigms and putting out new ideas, and of social movements that put pressure on the vulnerable economic and social structures.

SG: Did getting rid of George Bush and Dan Quayle make you feel more hopeful?

CM: Well, that certainly was a small step in the right direction, but I'm distressed at this point to see that some of the green program is being rapidly undermined—the mining and grazing and forest issues.

SG: You say in *The Death of Nature,* and I'm quoting here, "The death of the world soul and the removal of nature's spirits helped to support increasing environmental destruction by removing any scruples that might be associated with the view that nature was a living organism." The people I know, who do have a sense of the living quality of nature, certainly

have those scruples, but somehow they seem to be in a serious minority, in terms of megaindustries, corporations, government and the like. How do you think we're ever going to turn all that around? At a more personal level, it worries me that even if one is a deep ecologist at heart, it's still very hard to imagine life without the many technologies that are so destructive in this culture. Even if you manage to tone down your lifestyle, you're still hooked up to, and dependent upon, electricity, cars, planes—we all continue to use them. But in order to really save the planet, it would seem as if all that eventually has to go. What do you think?

CM: I don't think it all has to go, but I do think it has to be reorganized in a way that's sustainable. How that will happen is critical to whether we can achieve this global ecological revolution, or not. But I don't see any way that Western market capitalism is going to go back and get rid of all that—

SG: You don't think it might simply be forced to?

CM: I think it might be forced to become sustainable. It will be forced to become ecologically viable, because the contradiction between the economy and ecology is deepening all the time. And global capitalism is continually undermining its own resource base and its own conditions for perpetuation. Now, ideally one would go toward a totally different kind of system, one that we haven't seen yet on this planet,

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some new form of a socialist way of being with nature, not oriented toward growth, nor toward total industrialization. But probably there'll be something along the lines of green capitalism, which I don't think is enough. Certainly capitalism, at least, will have to confront its own situation.

SG: What is your sense of the viable time frame for making this turnaround?

CM: Well, my thought with *Ecological Revolutions* is that these are processes which take several decades—five, seven decades, or something on the order of fifty to seventy-five years. And so, when you look back on it you can say, yes, that between the beginning and the end—let's say the 1970s to the mid-twenty-first century—looking back from that watershed you would say there's been a real transformation in thinking, and in economic relations to nature, and also in reproduction.

SG: You sound fairly hopeful that this is already in process, and that it will take place successfully.

CM: I don't know if it will take place successfully, but I think it's possible. I don't know if it's probable even, but I think it's possible. One of the things that's changed in the last two decades is a tremendous global awareness to the issues and problems; even as those problems have deepened, more thinking has gone into looking for alternatives on all kinds of

levels, and more groups have organized themselves who are trying to rethink and restructure our relationships with nature and with each other.

SG: Is it your sense that the scientific community is making some necessary alterations in world view here?

CM: My hope lies in some of these new ideas which you mentioned earlier, of process philosophy, process physics, David Bohm's work, Ilya Prigogine's work, the work on chaos theory and complexity theory. All these have inherent within them a different set of assumptions about nature. They view the world as process rather than as manipulable parts that are rearranged through external forces, which was the Newtonian conception.

SG: Has your work or your thinking ever brought you toward considering what art should be doing in terms of these changes—or is that completely outside of your sphere?

CM: I don't know if I've thought much about how art would reflect these changes, but I think it would, just as science can reflect and support them. Deep ecology, for example, is putting forth a whole new set of assumptions about the nature of reality, of ontology, epistemology, ethics, psychology: all the foundations of the modern world are being challenged by postmodernist thinking. But I don't think deep ecology will necessarily lead the transforma-

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tion, just as the new art will not lead the transformation, but it will reflect it, support it, encourage and nurture it.

SG: You don't think that deep ecology is at the forefront of the change in consciousness that has to occur in all spheres?

CM: A change in consciousness is part of it, but I don't think it is the instigation, or the cause, of it.

SG: What will be the instigator, or the cause, then; the catastrophic depletion of the earth?

CM: Yes, but I don't think it will be catastrophic. I mean, I don't agree with a kind of "limits to growth" theory of exponential growth and collapse. I like better the order-out-of-chaos approach, which is that we're in a state of crisis and chaos now, and out of that will come a regrouping and a reorganization.

SG: You mean something unforeseen, something new will emerge?

CM: Right. And I think the visionary thinkers and artists see that—they see what needs to emerge, and they can imagine it. If it's participatory art, they can even involve us in a participatory way in new modes of being, with respect to nonhuman nature.

SG: Would you describe this as a kind of moral responsibility of our time to do this?

CM: Yes! What I think chaos theory suggests is the need for a new ethic about nature, not an ethic of domination and control, which is what Francis Bacon and the seventeenth-century scientific revolution led to. But rather, I call it a partnership ethic, in which nonhuman nature is active, free, alive, organic, in process, and unpredictable. We need to recognize as humans that this is part of reality. Nature can't be totally predictable, and it can't therefore be totally controlled or dominated. And that makes us more humble with respect to the nonhuman world.

SG: The dominant philosophy of Cartesian-Kantian aesthetics has really taken its cue from science, in the sense of creating a value-free, autonomous discipline that has been purged of any ethical or moral imperatives—this is what we call "art for art's sake." My work has been involved with trying to change that framework, to shift our ordinary understanding of art away from value-free, autonomous thinking. It certainly parallels certain issues in the scientific world, such as the assumption many scientists make that they don't have moral responsibility for the consequences of their work, their responsibility is simply to do research and get the information. Artists often take the same view about art: their responsibility is to make art. It's not to save the planet, or anything grandiose like that.

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CM: I think there are ethics embedded in world views, so just as there was an ethic of propitiation embedded in the organic world view of the premodern world, there is an ethic of control embedded in the mechanistic world view. I think a new scientific world view will be recognized as not value-free, but rather will have values associated with it. It will be a process-oriented, ecological world view in which humans and their values are part of nature.

SG: Then it's likely to be cyclical, rather than linear?

CM: I don't know if it's cyclical, necessarily, but it's certainly nonlinear. Certainly cyclical ideas are critical to how we think about ecology, but I don't think cyclical is the only way, even if it was the way of the past—tied to sun and moon and tides, and so on—because I don't think we can go back to what a premodern consciousness was like.

SG: If you had to take a mindset like that of George Bush, and it was your task to make this person understand deep ecology, what would you try to do first? Do you think such a person could undergo a change in understanding—this is something that has come up in other conversations—or is somebody like him a lost cause? Would it be better just to focus on a different sort of person altogether?

CM: I think that most change takes place through young people, and the old ways of thinking, or the old

strongly held opinions, die out, just as linear thinking dies out, and nonlinear, or nondeterminative thinking, or a partnership ethic, or process-oriented thinking, comes in with young people, who become concerned and interested. It also comes in with new ways of teaching. Society reproduces itself and perpetuates itself through the laws and governance of the social order, which Bush represents, and which our government represents, but it also allows points of change and transformation—it's not cast in stone. However, it is very difficult to change something that has gotten so large and bureaucratic and consumed with its own perpetuation, as, say, the federal government has now.

SG: I see other problems, not only in the overwhelming aspects of our institutional structures, but also in the addictive nature of the whole culture, which is something that Anne Wilson Schaef writes about in *When Society Becomes an Addict*. So many of us have grown up with a way of life—I had this experience in a major snowstorm recently, when it seemed like the power might go out—in which, well, we just don't have any hunter-gatherer skills! [Laughter]

CM: That's why I say we can't go back.

SG: I have artist friends who have given up everything and are learning survival skills with a wilderness tracker, because they believe industrial civilization will soon collapse. But when I confront my own fear

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that they could be right, I find it very difficult to contemplate learning how to forage for food, or learning how to hunt and trap and make shelters and all that. Can you do those things?

CM: No, and I don't think that's the answer either.

SG: I'm glad to hear it!

CM: I mean, I don't see that kind of collapse happening, because I think we're a lot smarter than to just let it happen. What I see happening over a period of time, that in retrospect we might call a revolution, is a series of changes and adjustments—you might even call them painful changes—towards sustainability. These will be in the things that are the necessities of life: food, clothing, shelter, energy, health care, old-age care. In food, for example, through sustainable agriculture. What does that mean? It means a way to treat the soil as the living thing that it is, not the dead matter you assume it is when you put pesticides and chemicals on it. It means developing ways that will use biological controls rather than chemical controls, which are based on a different paradigm and a different ethic. In sustainable forestry, it means using methods that are not self-defeating, and forestry is moving in that direction. It isn't there yet, but there are very strong pressures to become sustainable, such that we're not undercutting our own resource base.

SG: Do you feel deep ecology is moving us away from the mechanized world picture, and back toward a more organic, animistic vision of reality?

CM: I'm not sure that deep ecology's project is to move us "back." Away from the mechanistic, yes, but I'm not sure calling it animistic is correct.

SG: How *would* you define the new world picture, as it moves away from mechanism, if it isn't definable as the old animism or organicism?

CM: For one thing, it's a problem to call it a picture, because that's exactly what we're talking about with spectators and vision, and the idea, as Heidegger said, that it's not that the picture of the world changed, but that it became a picture at all, with the emergence of modernism. So it would be, as you said, something more participatory. It would be new and different ways of knowing and being-in-the-world. It would be something that reminds us of the way other cultures have interacted with the world —aboriginal cultures or Native American peoples. There is a land wisdom there—a way of doing things and growing crops that has worked in the past, but which we have lost through our emphasis on mechanism—that would be part of this. And part of this new wisdom would be—

SG: Synthetic in character, then? It would be drawn from many different sources: the best of technology

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and the best of the older traditions. Is that what you're trying to say?

CM: Yes, except it's not like going around the world and picking this or that thing and trying to paste it together—not appropriating it, but coming to it ourselves.

SG: You feel it would be more like an emergent thing, something that will rise up in and of itself, with us and through us, rather than that we go out to try and find it.

CM: Exactly. It will arise out of our attempts to get away from the betrayals of the past, to see what has not worked and to try to make something else work. It will be something that comes out of our own cultural conditions and predicament of the moment; it may draw inspiration from other places, but these ideas will have to work in a context that is uniquely our own.

SG: Since you're talking about creativity here, I'm wondering if you have personally encountered any art that speaks to you from these new emerging principles?

CM: We have in California a project called "Reinventing Nature," which in a way sounds arrogant, but it really means that there are overlays of changing constructions of nature that people make all through

history. "Reinventing" suggests that there is a deep cultural construction that goes on and that can change. One dimension of that is art in the landscape. Specifically, in San Diego, Newton and Helen Harrison are looking at whole watersheds, and thinking about how those watersheds—

SG: Can be restored to health.

CM: Yes! They think of the world as a giant conversation in which everybody is involved, not only people, but trees and rocks and landscapes and rivers. So it's seeing things on a regional basis, and in artistic terms at the same time. And also seeing it in participatory terms, in which many people are engaged in a conversation together, people of all cultures, who are connected to, or living in, a place or a wider region or watershed.

SG: Before we fold our tent here, it strikes me that your own writing—and I bracket what I'm about to say with the statement that I'm in awe of your books—is done in a kind of old paradigm mode of distanced, objective scholarship, and I'm wondering if there is any sense in which you feel that perhaps even your own work needs to undergo transformation in relation to the notion of a process paradigm?

CM: Yes, that would be a good idea! My recent book on *Radical Ecology* [1992], which is meant for a general audience and for classroom use, tries to give exam-

'enting" suggests that there is a deep
:uction that goes on and that can
limension of that is art in the land-
ılly, in San Diego, Newton and Helen
looking at whole watersheds, and
how those watersheds—

l to health.

ς of the world as a giant conversation
ody is involved, not only people, but
; and landscapes and rivers. So it's
ın a regional basis, and in artistic
ıe time. And also seeing it in partici-
ı which many people are engaged in
ogether, people of all cultures, who
:o, or living in, a place or a wider
ished.

our tent here, it strikes me that your
nd I bracket what I'm about to say
ınt that I'm in awe of your books—
of old paradigm mode of distanced,
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be a good idea! My recent book on
1992], which is meant for a general
classroom use, tries to give exam-

ples and to set scenes and places in the community that help draw us into a problem, so we can talk about some of the contradictions in that problem. I think in that book I did try to use a style that comes less out of the academy and involves people more as participant readers. But, it's still a book, and it's still the written word, and I'm still an academic, so I am not, in that sense, a creative artist trying to create new forms of writing. And I'm not sure that I'm capable of doing that. I mean, I have my own creativity, it shows up in certain ways that I put ideas together, and synthesize things, and try to search for new examples, but I'm not sure that it's my role, really, to invent new creative art forms.

SG: I totally understand that. My own gift is in the same sphere, it's basically that of a synthesizer, taking information from lots of places and integrating it. But I have found a need to personalize what I do more, to leave behind, in a sense—and it may be easier to do this in aesthetic philosophy than in scientific philosophy—the scholarly mode, with elaborate footnotes, and so forth. Of course, one runs into other problems then, where your work may be considered not serious or intellectual enough.

CM: I guess I've been trying to do it more in terms of teaching, because I do see young people as the hope for change, and personalizing, I think, is very important. And so, in my environmental history class, I ask people to start by thinking about their personal

environmental histories—the environments that they identified with most closely as they grew up; what environments their parents lived in, and their grandparents; and how their parents' and grandparents' values about the environment may be very different from the values they may have developed or feel now. Trying to understand what it was like in their own immediate family history connects people to places and to change over time. It asks them to involve themselves in history in a personal way, and to understand things that they had never really thought about before. So I think of my teaching as the way in which I can bring this creativity forward.