

The Art of Sustainability: Creative Expression as a Tool for Social Change

DOMINIC STUCKER AND JOHANNA BOZUWA

Much of the work to date on sustainability has relied on intellectual arguments, reams of compiled data, and complex charts and graphs. These tools are essential for developing an accurate understanding of social and ecological trends, but they often fail to engage people's emotions. Artist Jay Mead uses several different media, including creations made from found objects, shadow puppet shows, and giant puppetry, to help people connect with nature and tap into their personal visions of a more sustainable future. According to Mead, by stimulating the right side of the brain, this kind of "heartwork" leads to an intuitive understanding of systems and new approaches to entrenched dilemmas. While our current socio-environmental challenges can be daunting, Mead finds that creating art in a group sparks a sense of hope as people concentrate on taking tangible action together.



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According to recent research, our climate is changing faster than anticipated, and the Earth is headed toward largely irreversible global tipping points (see Barnosky et al, "[Approaching a state shift in Earth's biosphere](#)," *Nature*, June 7, 2012). While many are convinced that we can innovate our way out of our problems using science, technology, and policy changes, it is becoming increasingly clear that such solutions alone will not suffice – we also need new ways of being, communicating, and collaborating to address the current and inevitable environmental and social challenges we face.

The good news is that we already have many of the tools we need to make the transition to sustainability, including systems thinking and creativity. A systems approach encourages us to convene diverse stakeholders to better understand the integrated economic, social, and environmental systems we seek to change. Creativity and the arts help us gain clarity of vision and tap into the breakthrough thinking necessary for innovating a new reality and a new relationship between people and planet.

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In this article, we introduce artist Jay Mead and his philosophy of art as a way to enhance systems thinking and promote social change, all in service of achieving environmental and social sustainability. We describe his unique and engaging approach to helping people tap into their often-latent creativity and ability to be in tune with and learn from nature. By inviting people to let go of inhibitions and

assumptions, Jay supports them in deepening their capacity for creative expression and their relationships with one another and their surroundings. In this way, they develop fresh perspectives and shared visions of a vibrant future.

Hunger for a Different Kind of Experience

Jay Mead coined the phrase the “[art of sustainability](#)” to refer to the technique of applying creative

expression to advance the principles and aspirations of sustainability. Much of the work to date on sustainability and systems has been portrayed in graphs and diagrams through a logical, scientific lens. While these tools and perspectives are essential to developing an understanding of the world, they are abstractions that can leave people wanting. “People are hungry for a different kind of experience,” Jay comments. Art makes systems more

Artist Jay Mead



My life has been a journey down a path of design and creation. From a young age, I was enamored of art and have experimented with many different media. While at Dart-

mouth College, I became involved with and was deeply affected by the political and community aspects of [Bread and Puppet's](#) work. (Vermont-based Bread and Puppet has been performing its unique style of political theater since the mid-1960s.) Through various demonstrations in New York City and Washington, DC, in the 1980s, I discovered that art could be a tool for activism. I began teaching art at a high school and, realizing the great potential for promoting personal and global change through creativity, have continued to teach throughout my life.

I also ventured into community art as a core member of [Wise Fool Puppet Intervention](#), a giant puppet company that formed in San Francisco in the late 1980s and performed political theater for 10 years in the Bay Area, Central America, Germany, and the Czech Republic. We were involved in using art to send a social message. My seminal piece during that time, which combined my studio work with environmental activism, was “[Found Stump](#).” Commissioned by the San Francisco

Arts Commission, the 20-foot-tall piece was made entirely of recycled wood. It highlighted the destruction of California's ancient redwoods and the misuse of this extraordinary resource.

The instructional part of my career has increasingly moved outside of the classroom and into residencies and workshops, including programs at the University of Chicago and Vassar College as part of the “Big Art” project; a performance residency at [Visão Futuro](#) in Purangaba, Brazil; and multiple residencies with the Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows in Vermont. This work is as much about empowering people of all ages to create as it is about seeking social transformation through art.

Other projects include numerous sculptures for the Sculpture Fest in Woodstock, Vermont, my first book, *A Little Farm Story* (Harbor Mountain Press 2011), and one-of-a-kind shadow puppet shows. I am currently adapting “The Turning,” a shadow puppet show I created with Elizabeth Sawin on climate change and a vision of the future, into a graphic novel.

I work with Sustainability Leaders Network, bringing the “Art of Sustainability” to leaders in the social and environment change movement. We see creative, out-of-the-box problem solving as essential for addressing the many challenges we face in bringing about a life-sustaining future for people and planet.

visible while creating a sense of immediacy and adding resonance to a given problem.

The picture book *A Little Farm Story* (Harbor Mountain Press, 2011) is a good example of Jay's artistic rendering of systems. With vibrant illustrations and haiku-style writing, he portrays the interconnectedness of a farm, the seasons, and the role of humans in those systems. The illustrations bring the concept of local agriculture to life for readers. Rather than using complex diagrams, Jay translates the systems thinking ideas of interrelationship and feedback into beautiful, moving, and accessible paintings.

Jay describes this deepening of systems thinking as a move from head to heart, and he therefore refers to his pieces as "heartwork." Sculpture, painting, and performance can generate an emotional response and novel insights into a social or environmental system. For Jay, this kind of heartwork allows him and others to reflect on and process life-changing events, whether a personal tragedy or the clear-cutting of an ancient forest.

Through art, people can grasp the magnitude of a challenge. For instance, Jay recalls a thought-provoking exercise, originally carried out by 140 students, faculty, and staff at Dartmouth College, in which people collected and carried all of their garbage in a plastic sack for a week. This activity had two purposes: to make the carrier and others more conscious of the amount of waste they generated, and to create a moving art installment. "Because some of us live in an abundant place, the amount of waste we produce isn't obvious," says Jay. When the problem is hanging on the actor's back, it is impossible to ignore.

What If?

In addition to making problems visible, art also engenders hope. In her syndicated *Dear Folks* column, the late Donella (Dana) Meadows, professor, farmer, and co-author of *The Limits to Growth* (Club of Rome, 1972), shared her reflections on the state of the world and the long road to sustainability.

Sustainability Fellows

Convened by [Sustainability Leaders Network](#), the Fellows Network consists of 80 leaders from around the world who are alumni of the Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows Program. Fellows strive to address social, economic, and environmental issues at their root causes, as taught by Donella Meadows, the inspiration for the program. They are active across sectors and issues areas, bringing a wide range of representation into conversations. Fellows learn to apply a suite of leadership practices – visioning, systems thinking, reflective conversation, and creative expression – to many fields, from renewable energy and climate to water and sustainable agriculture, from poverty eradication and social entrepreneurship to corporate social responsibility and media for social change.

Jay Mead has worked closely with the Fellows Network to pilot the Art of Sustainability approach, offering participants hands-on opportunities for creativity, spontaneity, and reflection. As Fellow Kristi Kimball, program officer with the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in California, put it, "[Through the Art of Sustainability workshop] I gained a new sense of hope and inspiration, the re-ignition of the creative side of my brain, and a recommitment to and refinement of my original vision for my professional and personal development."

Art makes systems more visible while creating a sense of immediacy and adding resonance to a given problem.

She always ended her letters with the inspiration she took from what was just outside her window, such as a bee collecting honey. In these seemingly inconsequential details, she drew hope from her surroundings and from nature's resilience. Dana's engaging and poignant writings are another example of the art of sustainability.

As an artist and teacher, Jay finds inspiration in Dana's visionary words and applies them to his art. He says, "My artistic passion is driven by the question 'what if?'" The question "what if?" represents an unknowing and a trust that new insights and ideas will emerge that lead to the discovery of one's personal vision, connection to nature, and care for the greater community of life. In Jay's view, this inquiry involves expanding possibilities and a different type of intelligence than the rational one on which we generally rely. We spend much of our daily life using the left side of our brains and looking logically at the world around us. By engaging in the artistic process, our minds tap into a wealth of knowledge that, for many of us, has been dormant since childhood. Allowing ourselves to consider the "what if" can stimulate the right side of the brain, opening up expansive possibilities, an intuitive understanding of systems, and new approaches to entrenched dilemmas.

Some of Jay's most powerful workshops involve groups of participants creating art in nature and in community. By being present in the moment, participants draw inspiration from natural ecosystems and human interactions. The immediacy of the experience creates a visceral understanding of the given system and engenders innovative ways of thinking, being, and acting.

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Art in Nature Workshop

One kind of nature workshop that Jay offers is inspired by the work of British artist Andrew Goldsworthy. Goldsworthy uses natural material, including snow, ice, leaves, bark, rock, clay, stones, petals, and twigs, to create outdoor sculptures inspired by and part of nature. Jay encourages participants to follow Goldsworthy's lead by immersing themselves in the outdoors and creating their own in situ pieces employing found objects.

Participants find that, by sitting quietly, eyes opened or closed, they hone their skills of observation, noticing patterns and processes that have evolved over millennia. Using all their senses, they experience and learn from nature. Perhaps they see the streams, brooks, and river in a basin, noticing nature's nested hierarchies. Gazing skyward from a soft bed of pine needles, they might observe the forest's resilience in flexibility, trees swaying in the wind. Or they smell the pungent soil, part of the annual cycle that returns sustenance to the trees' roots. Perhaps they see the genius in a flower, tracking the sun and folding its petals at dusk; or in the capacity of a cactus to store water; or in the design of a feather. Through the "playful meditation" of this art exercise, participants learn from and create in tandem with these natural systems.

As a result, people tap into their own creativity as a way to explore, express, and clarify their visions for the future. In addition to personal discoveries, people often gain a greater sense of connection to the group and the place. Michael Dupee, senior vice president for corporate social responsibility at Green Mountain Coffee Roasters in Vermont, notes:

The Art of Sustainability session helped me to profoundly reconnect with the natural system in which we live and my own potential as a creative being. The result for me has been a deepening experience of a very powerful way of being in the world – a way of being that creates the space for me to show up for life differently, to connect with people differently, to ask different questions, and to generate different responses to the challenges I encounter. I hesitate to describe this as a *new* way of being – rather, in my heart, it feels like an entirely *old* way of being . . . but a way of being to which I had lost my connection.

In this activity, the creative process is one of humility and co-creation with nature, with the vision for the piece often emerging throughout the process. For example, Trista Patterson, an





ecological economist with the United States Forest Service in Alaska, collected small red berries and wanted to create a heart shape alongside a forested stream. The water, however, pulled some of the berries into the current, carrying them into eddies downstream and highlighting flows not visible to the casual observer. The lesson was one of letting go, of collaboration, of fully participating in the process and being open to an array of outcomes. Ultimately, the creative process helps us learn about ourselves, gain insights about our place in the world, and clarify our visions for the future.

Puppetry for Social Change

While the global process toward sustainability can be daunting, Jay finds that creating art in a group sparks a sense of hope, as people concentrate on the beauty of the moment and on taking tangible action. Jay has found that shadow puppetry and giant puppetry are useful tools for social change, because these art forms cannot be created or performed without a community effort. By developing and telling a specific story, the players have made something that they can see, hear, feel, and share with others. Their work can have a transformational effect on themselves and on the audience.

Shadow puppetry is an ancient form of art that uses light or fire to create shadows behind a screen to tell a story. The most classic versions of shadow puppetry are found in Bali and greater Indonesia. The art form is one of the oldest, going back to the time of cave dwellers. By using this medium, Jay connects his art to something ancient, while dealing with contemporary issues.

The Turning

An example of one of Jay's shadow puppet plays is "The Turning," which he wrote in collaboration with climate scientist Elizabeth Sawin. "The Turning" tells the story of a complex, global challenge we currently face, while also inspiring hope.

The story takes place in a future city where the mayor announces that the world has not only achieved a zero carbon footprint, but has started

to decrease the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. With this news, the city celebrates the hard won victory of sustainability. The mayor describes the struggles that the world has surmounted before achieving this goal, such as starvation in some areas and the extinction of different species. Among the festive crowd, a grandmother takes her granddaughter through the city, describing the times before sustainability (our current reality). They also walk past examples of the elements that helped bring about a more sustainable world, such as wind turbines, community gardens, bicycles, solar installations, and mass transit.

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This particular play highlights essential leadership practices for social change work, such as systems thinking, visioning, reflective conversation, and creative expression. People often look at the world around them and see problems. The next step after problem identification is visioning, in which people envision solutions and ways of being that transcend the challenges they see. Jay and Elizabeth intentionally incorporated real-world solutions in the play to help the audience envision how the described future can become reality.

In the first few performances, Elizabeth began by speaking about the current reality of climate change and sustainability, leaving most of the audience feeling discouraged. She then changed roles and became the storyteller of the shadow puppet play. Jay comments, "Beth hit you with the hard reality of the present and then the promise of the future." Workshop participants were solely audience members and not players.

For later performances, however, Elizabeth and Jay involved participants as performers. Being part of

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the performance drew the group into the vision being portrayed. Many saw this art medium as a practical tool for effecting change within their own communities and lives; some have even brought shadow puppetry into their work.

Giant Puppetry at Visão Futuro

Jay also uses the related medium of giant puppetry to create change. These puppets are larger than life, and the players do not hide behind a screen but are within the puppets. The giant puppets are best suited for pageantry and outdoor performances. A good example of Jay's work in

giant puppetry was his facilitation of a community performance in Brazil in 2006 at Visão Futuro.

Visão Futuro is an eco-village outside of São Paulo. Jay worked with community members to put on a giant puppetry performance highlighting environmental and sustainability issues relevant to Brazil. For two weeks, Jay and the Visão Futuro community collaborated on the vision and realization of what was to be portrayed during the play. Given the grand scale of the puppets, the performance had to be a community event. Jay taught the group how to create the puppets, write a storyboard, and animate these giant theatrical elements.

Jay and the Visão Futuro community created characters and props that depicted the greed, fear, and apathy that the current economic system perpetuates. Questions arose about humans' relationship with and place within nature. By personifying these ideas in giant puppets, the artists

Co-Creating with Nature

I [Dominic] participated in two of Jay's art in nature workshops along rivers in Vermont and Connecticut. In his workshops, Jay invites participants to see nature anew through quiet observation, sensing, and play. The invitation includes being fully present, setting aside transient to-do lists and deep-seated preconceptions about how the world works. Participants are asked to start from a place of unknowing – playful for some, meditative for others – allowing deeper wisdom to emerge.

Encouraged to accentuate patterns in nature, we created a wide variety of art from found materials. I was drawn to the flow of water in each basin and created pieces that traced these lines. Personally, I think I wanted greater flow in my own life, a balance of the dynamism and confidence of water as it makes its way through the world. Professionally, I am now conducting research on how we can cooperate in shared river basins to adapt to climate change impacts.



Dominic Stucker along Connecticut River, Vermont, October 2011

made emotions and abstract concepts tangible. Participants used art as a tool to describe and to better “feel” the systems around them.

The group used raw materials from their surroundings, for instance bamboo and recycled materials found on site, to create the giant puppets. The incorporation of what the area had to offer opened up possibilities for reuse along with broadening perspectives of what is beautiful. In this process of rediscovering the environment, new opportunities arose. Also, by incorporating the four major elements of earth, air, water, and fire, the community was able to further understand the interconnectedness of different natural systems.

Participants used the natural landscape to tell their story. The play moved throughout the community’s grounds, with players walking up and down the rolling hills, stopping within the forest, and finally launching a giant puppet across the water to an island where audience members stood chanting. Through the performance, the community of Visão Futuro journeyed into a story that continues to be told every day in Brazil: the balance between struggle and celebration.

This collaborative approach exemplifies Jay’s emphasis on process. Through the construction of colossal pieces of art, he and the community bonded around a shared vision – to instruct the audience about sustainability and the role of community in Brazil. In the group’s work together, new connections were made and new ideas were accepted to further the vision. Although the performance was specific to Brazil and to the site, this type of small-scale cooperation exemplifies the change in interactions needed on a global scale. As Jay comments, “A lot can be done with committed people, and the people of Visão Futuro are committed to the betterment of humanity.”

In Jay’s shadow and giant puppetry productions, the common threads of community, rediscovery, systems, visioning, and hope emerge – key components in creating social change.

Art from a Systems Perspective

As we have seen in the above examples of art in nature, shadow puppetry, and giant puppetry, the creation of art can help us better experience, understand, and act within the systems we seek to change. In fact, systems thinkers encourage many of the same approaches that are found in

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the creative process. In her classic article, “[Dancing with Systems](#),” Dana Meadows describes the importance of letting go, applicable to both creating and thinking in systems:

The future can’t be predicted, but it can be envisioned and brought lovingly into being. Systems can’t be controlled, but they can be designed and redesigned. . . . We can listen to what the system tells us, and discover how its properties and our values can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone. We can’t control systems or figure them out. But we can dance with them!

Dana goes on to highlight some of the same qualities practiced in Jay’s Art of Sustainability sessions as guidance for navigating complex systems. At least four are about observation and learning:

- Get the beat
- Listen to the wisdom of the system
- Expose your mental models to the open air
- Stay humble, stay a learner

These guidelines encourage us to notice the diversity of stakeholders, flows of information, and behavior of the system over time. Dana encourages us to notice what works well before making changes and, when we intervene, to do so in the spirit of experimentation and humility, learning from our mistakes.

In order to achieve an inclusive view, she urges us to:

- Expand time horizons
- Expand thought horizons
- Expand the boundary of caring

When creating art with nature or engaging in a community puppetry performance for social change, we see that all things are interconnected. For example, when we observe a particular ecosystem, we see the links between the different forms of flora and fauna. By expanding the geographic and temporal scope of care, we become better informed about the decisions we make,

decisions that impact people in distant places and futures, thus increasing our collective chances to survive and thrive.

These nuggets of wisdom, present both in systems thinking and in creativity, are essential for addressing the many challenges we face in bringing about a sustainable future for people and planet. They provide meaning, expansive possibilities, and a view of the big picture, offering a profound sense of new possibilities. Sustainability is an art. And art helps us break through old ways of thinking and our sense of isolation to get to sustainable solutions together. ■

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Video](#) by Colleen Bozuwa of an art-in-nature session led by Jay Mead along the Housatonic River, Connecticut, 2009.

[Video](#) by Colleen Bozuwa, documenting the creation of a giant puppetry performance led by Jay Mead at the Visão Futuro ecovillage, Brazil, 2006.

ART & PHOTO CREDITS

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Upper left: Michaelyn Bachhuber along Connecticut River, Vermont, October 2011

Upper right: Chris Page on Mt. Tamalpais, California, November 2010

Lower left: Nirmala Nair along Connecticut River, Vermont, October 2011

Lower right: Anonymous along Connecticut River, Vermont, October 2010

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Upper left: Alex Bauermeister and Maria Kogan with Maria's piece along Connecticut River, Vermont, October 2010

Upper right: Huma Beg along Connecticut River, Vermont, October 2011

Middle left: Maria Latumahina along Connecticut River, Vermont, October 2011

Middle right: Catharina (Any) Sulistyowati on Mt. Tamalpais, California, November 2010

Lower left: Michael Dupee and Carmen Negron-Dupee with her piece along Connecticut River, Vermont, October 2010

Lower right: Carmen Negron-Dupee along Connecticut River, Vermont, October 2010

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