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BioArt with **Brandon Ballengée**

AN INTERVIEW WITH
JOHN K. GRANDE

NEW YORK CITY, 2004

Exploring the boundaries between art, science, and technology, Brandon Ballengée creates multidisciplinary works out of information generated from ecological field trips and laboratory research. Since 1996, Ballengée has collaborated with numerous scientists to conduct primary biological research and advanced imaging procedures, which is documented in *Ecoventions*, a book from the Contemporary Arts Center of Cincinnati published in 2002. His works have been exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, Beijing, Vienna, Seoul, and London; have appeared on ABC's *World News Tonight*, BBC's *Today Show*; and have been featured in *Art Press*, *Genewatch*, MIT's *Leonardo Journal*, *The Journal of Experimental Zoology*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Sciences*.

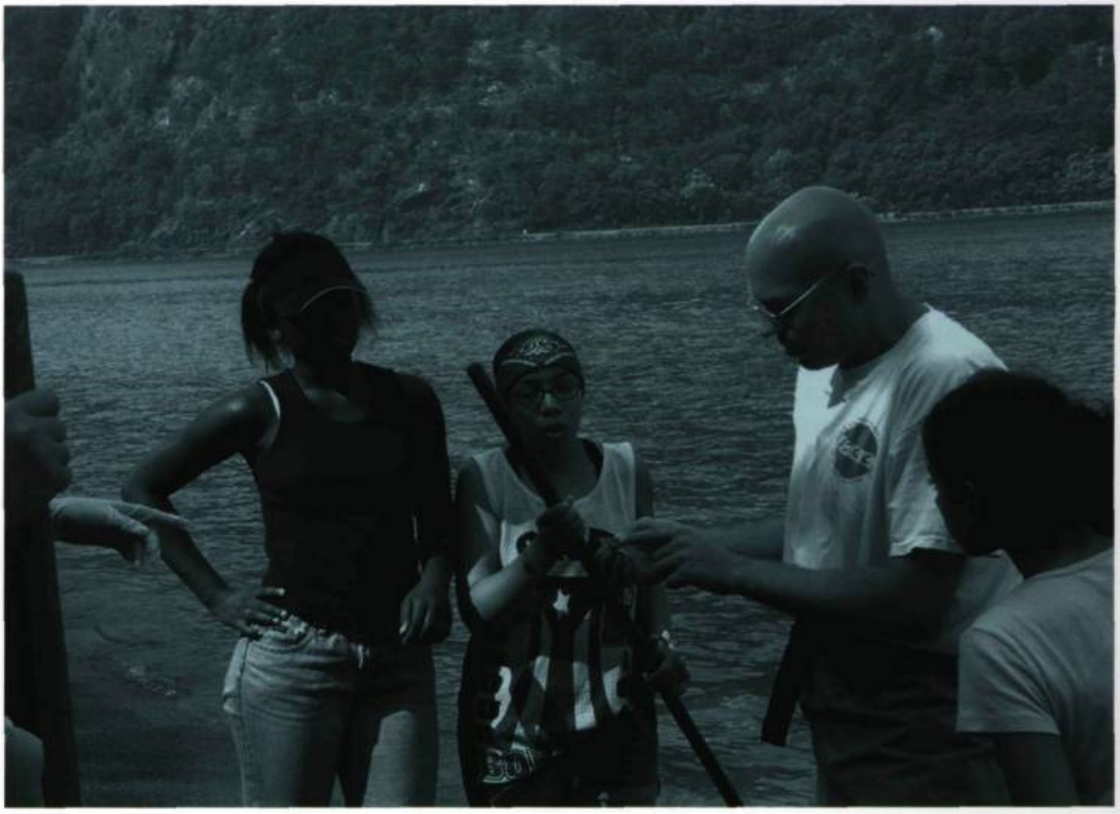
His theoretical article entitled "The Origins" and Application of Artificial Selection is included in *Biomediale*, a new anthology published by the National Center for Contemporary Art in Kaliningrad, Russia. He has collected specimens for several scientific organizations, including the Peabody Museum at Yale University, The American Museum of Natural History, and the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at U.C. Berkeley, and others. In 2001, He was nominated for membership into Sigma XI, the Scientific Research Society. He regularly conducts ecology / field biology / genetics workshops or "Eco-Actions" open to the general public at urban parks, zoos, petstores, and fish markets. In 2003, Ballengée was an artist in residence at the Natural History Museum in London. He recently participated in the 2004 Geum-Gang Nature Art Biennale in South Korea. Recent solo exhibitions include Wave Hill and The Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning in New York City, and The Yager Museum at Hartwick College, Oneonta, New York. Upcoming solo exhibitions will be held at The Carriage House Center in New York City, organized by Nurture New York's Nature, and Kunstverein Ingerstodt in Ingerstodt, Germany. Archibald Arts in New York City recently published the artist's first limited edition *Love Motel for Insects*.

JKG: What got you into making ecological art?

BB: I grew up in a rural area surrounded by woods and wetlands. The forest teamed with vibrant birds, exotic strange insects, and humble toads. A nearby stream emptied into a marsh that was filled with mysterious life! I would spend hours every day catching and drawing vividly colored salamanders, diverse species of fish, box turtles, and other fantastic creatures. Nature was my refuge and classroom.

When I was a teenager, the largest forest trees were cut and sold to a lumber company. Today, half the forest is under a housing subdivision and most of the stream runs through pipes. It is the same everywhere - ecosystems altered or diminished by a growing wave of Wal-Mart superstores, fast food chains, and the continued sprawl of suburbia. Much of my early work dealt with this sense of loss and was infused with the classical theme of man versus nature. As this interest grew I wanted to dig in deeper, so I began collaborating with biologists and participating in ecological surveys. This evolved into conducting primary biological research and the fusion of my art with these practices. The Earth, once again, became my studio.

Since 1996, I have been focusing on the global declines of frog, toad, and salamander species and the increased numbers of deformities I find in their populations. Amphibians are a "sentinel" species and are



Brandon BALLENGÉE, with students in the Hudson River, 2003.

considered the "environmental canaries in the coal mine". About one-third of them are declining or already gone! A world that they cannot live in cannot support much else - even us. I have also been working with students and members of the public on hands-on "Eco-Action" — fieldtrips to study the Hudson River, New York City's Jamaica Bay, and other altered eco-systems. By getting our feet wet we can learn a lot about our backyard and the life-forms we share this planet with.

Do you believe that art can play a role in society, in advancing things?

I believe art can change the way people see the world. In North America, the scenic Hudson River Valley landscape was a subject for Thomas Cole and the artists of the Hudson River School. Cole symbolically painted the Hudson's degradation during the industrial revolution, I interpret this as an early form of environmental consciousness and perhaps even artistic protest. Almost a century later Joseph Beuys, bathed and swam in bogs to raise awareness about these sensitive ecosystems. Sharing Beuys fondness for mud, my work is created from information, specimens, and other materials collected on field-surveys or generated in a biology laboratory. By bringing the public along, I try to bridge communities, local eco-systems, the great diversity of life found within, and also the causes for this degradation.

A group of inner city kids pulls a net through a polluted section of an urban river — from the broken glass and beer cans they find feisty green crabs, silver-sided fish, and a seahorse. There are yells of excitement at seeing the wiggling catch and a sense of melancholy when looking at the trash. We count the animals for research and draw them. Later, we take water samples, clean the beach, and I use these experiences to create an installation to reach more people. Many of the Eco-artists of today are attempting to transform the society and the environment we live in. Even if just at a small scale we are planting seeds for future change.

Is your work as much intercultural as artistic?

My practice attempts to blur numerous boundaries. These transdisciplinary works are generated at various locations and involve collaboration with participants from diverse age, economic, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. Working and communicating with diverse groups is vital to the creative process. It allows the works to function as site-specific — not only in geographic terms, but also culturally. This intellectual exchange also permits the work to grow in novel directions, guided by group ideas instead of a solitary artist's hand — like organisms evolving to changing environmental stimuli.

Theatre of life and deconstructing the timelessness of art. It was a laugh.

[...]

I have been putting together the idea of documenting and studying life in different territories to represent different things. Some of my specimens are from fish markets, I do collections for various scientific organizations at fish markets and pet stores. Collecting specimens from each you get a better idea of what is showing up at the markets in NYC. Many are declining and some are almost commercially extinct species such as Chilean Seabass, Swordfish, and Orange Roughy. It is a huge environmental problem — over-fishing — that most people are unaware of.

Canada stuck to their guns about over-fishing. The problem is that offshore the factory ships are still over-fishing and taking them away.

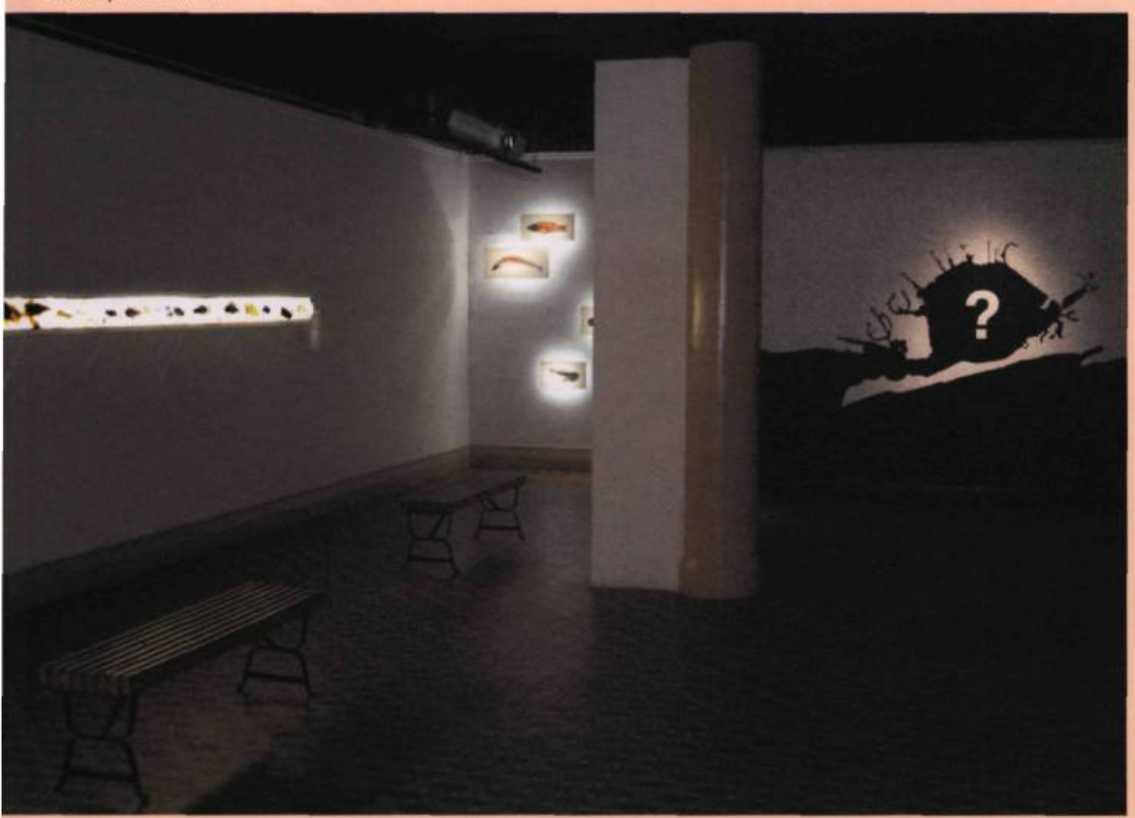
Without an international moratorium on the Atlantic Cod population in the northeast they will be commercially extinct within 10 years. In the UK they are already preparing for the death of Cod by searching for other viable species. There may still be some left in the future but they will not be the giant fish from the history books. The big Cod common 25 to 50 years ago are now rare or going fast. In terms of evolution the Cod decline is quite interesting. What is happening is that we have selected out so many large fish the cods that are thriving are smaller and fast breeding individuals. We are reshaping the species! It is a whole other kind of genetic manipulation or unnatural selection. We are just sort of unconsciously doing it.

The fish market survey I worked on was a year-long study funded by the Queens Museum of Art. Even though I was collecting data and specimens for science, the Museum could see the inderdisaplinary art side and supported the work. I went out 2 or 3 times a week and completely catalogued what turned up in the markets. I went with translators from the Museum because initially the seafood venders thought I was a health inspector. Why did this weird bald guy turn up every day and not ask them for the whole fish not just a fillet? They explained to the market vendors that it was an art project. I also teamed with a group of marine biologists to identify the more rare species. Each specimen was photographed, digitally scanned them and then preserved for later scientific natural history museums. London has some, The American Museum has some and several universities.

One Flushing market actually let me do a permanent installation. It has been altered somewhat. I created a series of multilingual signs that talked about the danger of species extinction in six different languages and the need for conservation. I was really surprised they supported this in a fish market. I created a website that was bilingual as well. In the end we even did public tours in the markets.

Weren't there some ultra-rare species in the markets I believe?

Sadly, yes. As species that were common in



Brandon BALLENGÉE, *Water of Life/Water of Death a Map of the Present and the Uncertain Future of Jamaica Bay*. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Brandon BALLENGÉE, *Breathing Space for The Hudson: Charting the Biodiversity and Pollutants of The Hudson River*, 2003. Detail. Photo: Courtesy of Archibald Arts and the artist.

the past disappear, we fish for other almost any species. We are eating our way through the food chain.

So there is no filtering or selection/regulation system for catches in the market?
It's the sheer volume of fish that are coming in from all these sources. There is no overall global agent protecting all aquatic species. Even local regulations don't apply to international waters. The markets are getting live fish from Asia, South America, and the West Indies. Others are flash frozen and sent from all over the globe. I remember walking in one day and seeing a whole one metre by one metre section of hundreds of juvenile Orange Roughy that were 6 inches long.

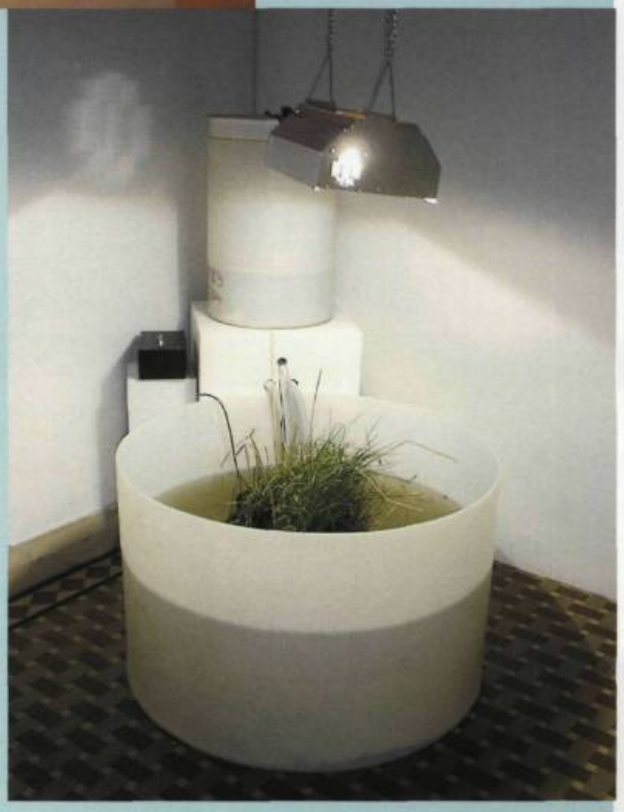
So they were undersized...
Yes. They were undersized. The problem is that they had not bred out yet so they could not replenish their population. The problem is that they are quite popular now. They breed late in life and are a cold water fish. They are 20 or 30 years old when they reach sexual maturity. The problem is that we are scooping up all the young adolescents and selling them at gourmet and sushi restaurants throughout the city. It is disturbing — yet people just don't know. If we learn what fish to eat we can make a big difference.

I catalogued these fish and tried to show people what was going on. I selected between 70 and 100 species and created Iris prints to exhibit. These were presented in evolutionary order in an installation at the Queens Museum of Art in 2001. I also made a selection of about 400 actual preserved fish and other specimens from the markets to exhibit.

That is what Alan Sonfist is doing. He makes collages based on geology, the same as you are doing with bio-history.
That is quite interesting to me — this notion of evolution. Some of the species that are showing up and are now declining have been around 250 million years or more, and yet something that we are doing now is wiping them out. It is not just over-fishing, it is habitat alteration or complete loss and even climate-related. Consciously or not we are engineering life on this planet.

The ice melts now are producing some remarkable archaeology. This Prof. from Oxford is getting fresh samples from mastodons, grasses and so on as the ice melts.
We can learn a lot about evolutionary relationships from molecular DNA. Sometimes referred to as maternal because it is passed on from mother to daughter, molecular DNA can be traced back through thousands of generations. Nuclear DNA from males mutates more frequently and is harder to follow in a chronological line. Ironically, as archeologists are looking at past genes, biologists are taking tissue samples from today's species to act as genetic banks in the face mounting global extinctions. ⇦

Writer and art critic John GRANDE's reviews and feature articles have been published extensively. John Grande's latest contributions include an essay for Nature the End of Art: Alan Sonfist and Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists *(www.sunypress.edu) and* A Biomass Continuity *in collaboration with Coco Gordon. He also curated* Eco-Photo *at Dorsky Gallery, New York in January 2005.*



Brandon BALLENGÉE, *Untitled Island*. Detail from *Losing Ground: The Rapidly-Changing Ecology of Jamaica Bay*, 2004. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.