



# ken yonetani: sweet barrier reef



## NICHOLAS TSOUTAS

*Coral reefs are the most species-rich marine ecosystem on earth. Tens of thousands of species have evolved to co-exist in coral reefs, each species with its own unique shape and its own role in the ecosystem. Coral reefs have evolved to their present form over millions of years, continuously responding to changes. Nevertheless, these living underwater treasures are easily damaged. Unprecedented pressures from global climate change, agricultural and urban runoff and over-fishing have severely degraded many coral reefs over the last twenty years. Concerted decisive action is needed to reduce air and water pollution, and to establish and support marine reserves, in order to protect these living underwater treasures into the future.*<sup>1</sup>

When talking with Ken Yonetani in preparation for this text, I was impressed by the quiet anxiety with which he expressed his concerns about the environment and its centrality to his art practice. “For me”, he says, “environmental loss caused a sense of anxiety”. He is quiet, since he does not state his claim as a crusading environmentalist with dogmatic insistence. Anxious, because as an artist he tries to explain his deep concerns that time appears to be running out for him, for humanity, based on the knowledge that we cannot continue with the denial or the amnesia on issues relating to the future of the environment and the future of the planet. “We are dying” he says quietly, with an unsettling certainty that we are destroying our world by maintaining social patterns of industrialisation, which will almost certainly cause permanent irreversible destruction for our world and for human beings.

“Now we must think about the environment.” Yonetani’s message is clear and uncomplicated, because he believes in the Jungian sense that we have a great responsibility to universal issues like the environment and the finely balanced ecosystems that sustain life, that forms and informs our collective unconsciousness, that functions beyond language; beyond borders; beyond political, social and economic differences. For Yonetani, what distinguishes his art practice from conceptual art is that his vision extends beyond conscious human experience, drawing inspiration from something that speaks to the spirit and the heart of human kind, as Morris Berman expressed; “Real knowledge is not merely discursive or literal; it is also, if not first and foremost, sensuous. In fact, it is very nearly erotic, derived from bodily participation in the learning act. *De gustibus non est disputandum*, goes a scholastic saying; about things eaten, there can be no argument. Or as the Sufis put it, those who taste, know.”<sup>2</sup> Like Berman, Yonetani believes we live in a state of disenchantment, a modern world that has lost its spirituality, because it no longer experiences the enchantment of the natural world, or the ability to respect and revere the environment since modernity has already commodified its very experience. Yonetani does not want the experience of the natural world to be mediated solely through televisual media representations of extinct or endangered species.

For the 2009 Venice Biennale, Yonetani continues his exploration of the *Sweet Barrier Reef* installation, a subterranean, white sugar-coated coral reef; a dying world that the artist has previously explored in his installations at the 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art and at Artspace, Sydney, in 2005. Yonetani states,

*Sugar represents human desire. I use it as a metaphor for consumerism. The increased production of the sugar industry reflects society’s more widespread desire for instant gratification, so the sexual nature of my sculptures is also closely related to this idea of consumerism as a manifestation of desire. But coral is a living organism and its appearance can be very sexual; so, as well as having a metaphorical value, the sculptures are also based on coral forms I’ve observed whilst diving. The philosophy of Zen, represented by the garden, is my answer and my message. Society has become more scientific and rational, but people are communicating less with nature. The world used to be enchanted. I like more enchantment.*<sup>3</sup>

Yonetani’s work seeks to position his art practice as a means of quiet protest that aims to radically alter and change our ecologically destructive practices. For Yonetani, understanding our responsibilities to the practice of deep ecology calls for self-realisation and change in all human beings. *Sweet Barrier Reef* provokes anxiety and uncertainty, as viewers are invited to linger in their fascination with the bleached coral, absorbed in the intricate sculptural details, caught in the aesthetic beauty of Yonetani’s installation, but acutely aware of the tensions that exist between the enchantment of the natural environment and the harsh realities of its death that is acutely implied by the work.

“Today nature is filmed, pictured, written about and talked about everywhere... those images and discussions are increasingly phrased in terms of crisis and catastrophe but the current crisis is not only out there in the environment; it is also a crisis of culture. It suffuses households, our conversation, our economies. To speak uncritically of the natural is to ignore these social questions.”<sup>4</sup> *Sweet Barrier Reef* is an installation that not only communicates Yonetani’s environmental concerns and fears, but does so with a desire to communicate the urgency of those fears and the necessity for solutions and change in the way we engage with the environment. *Sweet Barrier Reef* is a site for this exchange, in which the audience becomes a necessary component for it to function in its capacity to engage this environmental crisis and the catastrophic consequences that confront us. This relationship between audience and artwork functions performatively, encouraging us to attend to the restoration of ecological balance and harmony. Moreover, the development, or perhaps more accurately the reliance upon the audience as the site of exchange, is the centre and meaning of Yonetani’s work. What Yonetani asks of us is where is the work actually located? The work itself (its beauty and formal sculptural qualities aside), is in reality the catalyst that provokes dialogue and exchange on these issues of ecological vandalism and the rampant capitalism of consumerism. When the audience becomes cognisant of these questions, it is in this performative space that the work is realised in its potent capacity, that shifts and complicates the spiritual with the need for political agency. This is consistent with Nicolas Bourriaud’s artwork as “social interstice”, where the “possibility of a relational art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art”.<sup>5</sup> It is precisely in this charged space of relational aesthetics that Yonetani’s work functions as a means of renegotiating the possibility of art outside its historical precondition, investing it with the necessary agency for both social and environmental change.

Julia Humphrey notes;

*Ken’s work is often concerned with breaking down the false barrier we place between ourselves and nature by re-enacting the link between human action and its impact(s). For his sugar coral installations, he has also made sculpture like cakes. It is only when these are cut open that we realise their true form and their destiny—to be consumed by us the onlooker. Through this act of consumption, the idea that we are participants and not alienated observers within the cosmos takes on a new meaning.*<sup>6</sup>



Page 116: Ken Yonetani, *Sweet Barrier Reef* (detail), 2008

Page 117: Ken Yonetani, *Sweet Barrier Reef* (Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art installation view), 2008

Above: Ken Yonetani, *Fumie-Butterfly Mandala* (ANU School of Art Gallery installation view), 2004

Opposite: Ken Yonetani, *Sweet Barrier Reef* (detail), 2008

Photos courtesy the artist



This results in an installation that no longer is dependant on aesthetics and art historical issues (albeit his work is seductively aesthetic, beautiful visual ‘eye-candy’), but is concerned with a social and political integration, where the work “generates a situation” (to use Hou Hanru’s expression) that critically problematises the sugar industry’s knowing and flagrant abuse of the environment. Yonetani is seeking a responsible resolution to the environmental crisis that is impacting upon coral reefs around the world, from Okinawa to the Philippines. Any attempts to gain control over nature has led to attempts to control human behaviour in ways that limit freedom and prevent self-realisation. “Wanton destruction of nature reflects the distorted social relations at work in hierarchical systems, in which elites subjugate other people whilst pillaging the natural world for prestige, profit and control.”<sup>7</sup> The sugar industry’s use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides has detrimental and polluting impacts upon coral reefs. During the typhoon seasons these chemicals and soil are washed into the ocean turning the water blood-red and as a result bleaching the coral. “Still the questions remain: how long can the industrialised world afford to run backwards in this race for the future? What makes the environmental issue so explosive? Is it possible to forge models of order from the environmental issue that counter the dissolution tendencies of reflexive modernisation?”<sup>8</sup> Yonetani’s installation acknowledges the substance of these questions and comprehends the complexity and difficulties demanded by a global responsibility that requires supranational action.

Yonetani’s message is relatively simple in that we need to learn to inhabit and co-exist in a better way. His anxiety however, is compounded by the speed of a looming environmental catastrophe that is further producing a heightened anxiety for future generations. As a father of two young children Yonetani realises that as Paul Virilio proffers, “faced with an accelerated temporality which affects mores and art as much as it does international politics, there is only one particular urgent necessity to expose and exhibit the accident.”<sup>9</sup> But in the context of humanity’s abuse and commodification of the environment, the “accident” becomes our knowing of its continued destruction. Virilio goes on further to state that “if, according to Aristotle, ‘the accident reveals the substance,’ the invention of the substance is also the invention of the accident. Seen this way the shipwreck is indeed the futuristic invention of the ship, the air crash the invention of the supersonic plane and the Chernobyl meltdown, the invention of the nuclear power station.”<sup>10</sup>

More significantly this silence/blindness allows and authorises unrestrained corporate violence upon the environment, violence that is more often than not justified politically in its expediency (in terms of protection of the economy and protection/creation of employment, either way they amount to the same thing) and an invisible and seemingly acceptable automatic process of capital, with the effect that it is necessary and its absolution will disappear from our collective consciousness. The damage to reefs caused by sugar industry pollutants is the necessary collateral damage that occurs in the belief that society ultimately benefits by the profit motives of the sugar industry. Concealment is revealed as an acceptable precondition of capital insofar as the sugar industry does not declare the effect of its products upon the environment, nor according to Yonetani the incommensurable damage it has done to the (Great Barrier) reef—and is not compelled to do so. After all in modernity industrialisation and capital takes precedence over the environment and we accept the unacceptable.

The ethics of Yonetani’s work presents a responsibility to his children and future generations to ensure that such environmental damage and the frequency of industrial and post-industrial repetition is exposed not only in social and legal processes but also within the realm of art, philosophy and culture. Not to do so, is possibly a greater irresponsibility and crime to future generations as “the most atrocious act becomes easy when the path leading to it has been cleared.”<sup>11</sup> In this sense capital and industry seem simultaneously indifferent and complicit.

The more reliant we have become upon sugar, the more we witness the voracious progress of capital, the more catastrophic and environmentally painful is the tragedy of environmental destruction. Such destruction is politically and economically linked to current realities; product and by-product exist simultaneously and inhabit each other. We are expected as witnesses to accept, adjust and adapt (and possibly mutate) to the consequences of environmental disaster, as we live and exist in a perpetual contaminated zone. Virilio further states; “the time proceeding the accident is a time that does not communicate with the time that comes after it... the accident is now global, it embraces the whole future of the world and the future of the living”.<sup>12</sup>

Of course in relation to *Sweet Barrier Reef* Yonetani clearly warns that the impending ecological disruption is no accident. It is in fact premeditated, deliberate in its actuality and realised only as an abstraction detached and distant from the consequences and sources of economic production. Yonetani is not only a witness to the deception—political, corporate, economic and cultural—but is decisive in his refusal to remain silent. As witness he feels compelled to speak out, to focus his energy upon exposing issues and compelled to present art that makes visible the effects of capital’s environmental atrocities, for their actions now demonstrate a conscious knowledge of their materialist philosophy. In a strange way such knowing makes the very idea of knowledge itself a victim of profit motivated corporate economies, as this greed relies on social silence and political complicity. In this context all consciousness comes to a halt, an inertia that not only refuses to respond to the reality of their (corporate) actions, but denies both the reality and their actions. Strangely, we are all vigilant and deeply concerned when an oil tanker spills its cargo. We all react with idealistic indignity with the rage that demands economic penalties and justice as we watch the encounter played out on television, but have difficulty in acknowledging what is concealed or made invisible, because our desire is sometimes greater than our conscience. Yonetani openly admits he has a sweet tooth, but is horrified by the impact of the sugar industry’s pollutant waste that destroys coral reefs.

The irony (or perhaps paradox) in Ken Yonetani’s *Sweet Barrier Reef* is that in order to construct his artwork he relies upon the very substance he criticises, that also utilises a polystyrene infrastructure to support the sculptural manifestations—which must have a half life of several thousand years. Unfortunately like most art, even art that is environmentally conscious, it is not necessarily environmentally friendly, and the difficulty for most concerned artists is how to make work that sustains its objectives but uses materials that remain environmentally (if not philosophically) sound. The remaining question of course is what happens to *Sweet Barrier Reef* after its Venice exhibition? Landfill? Or as Yonetani himself cheekily suggests in a recent interview in Sydney’s tabloid *Sun Herald*, when asked about the limited commercial appeal of his installations and whether anyone has bought one, “Not so far, but maybe at Venice. There are lots of strange people at the *Venice Biennale*. Who knows... maybe one million dollars?”

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Katharina Fabricius is a leading Australian coral reef ecologist at the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS). See K. E. Fabricius, O. Hoegh-Guldberg, J. Johnson, L. McCook and J. Lough, ‘Vulnerability of Coral Reefs of the Great Barrier Reef to Climate Change’ in *Climate Change and the Great Barrier Reef*, eds. JE Johnson and PA Marshall, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and Australian Greenhouse Office, 2007: 515-554

<sup>2</sup> Morris Berman, *The Re-enchantment of the World*, Ithaca: NY, Cornell University Press, 1981

<sup>3</sup> ‘Monk Practises Sweet Enchantment’, *Artery* 8, Spring, Australia Council for the Arts, Sydney: NSW, 2008: 3

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature*, London: Blackwell Press: 12

<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: Les Presses du Reel, 2002

<sup>6</sup> Julia Humphrey in Felicity Fenner, *Handle With Care, Adelaide Biennial of Australian Contemporary Art*, Art Gallery of South Australia, 2008: 66

<sup>7</sup> Michael E. Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth’s Future*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994: 2

<sup>8</sup> Ulrich Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics, Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order*, trans. Mark Ritter, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997: 90

<sup>9</sup> Paul Virilio, *Unknown Quantity*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002: 5

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*: 6

<sup>11</sup> Hermann Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism: Warning to the West*, Alliance Book Corporation, 1939

<sup>12</sup> Virilio, *op cit*: 201