

TOM AND CONNIE MERRIMAN (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)



We have been creating socio-political art for 20 years. Over that time, our perspectives and methodologies have evolved with the art; however, our core concerns have remained intact. We have maintained a concern for disenfranchised people who are adversely affected by economic, environmental, and political issues beyond their control. We have been concerned with the consequences of globalization and large-scale extraction of power. We recognize that social and environmental issues cannot be separated. We have always believed we could make change through art.

Like Raymond Burr in the movie *Godzilla*, standing on a hillside out of harm's way, reporting on Godzilla's destruction of the earth, our early works were journalistic narrative art, which stood to witness global events. It was more an observation of a phenomenon than an overt critical statement. In the 90's our methodology shifted. We stepped down from the journalist's hillside vantage point to become more directly involved with the community experiencing Godzilla's wrath. Our current methodologies have evolved from our earlier experiences, and we have developed a common process that can be applied, with variations, to most of our projects.

The genesis for a project is quite often derived from identifying some issue that has an element of environmental or social conflict. We try to identify the different stakeholders in the conflict and research their positions. We visit the area of the conflict to gather personal first-hand impressions, take photos, and possibly collect materials or specimens. We try to establish an understanding of what the issues are surrounding the conflict and what the agendas of the various stakeholders might be.

In all of the projects we have been involved in, all stakeholders believe that their positions are valid and their actions are justified. When they have the opportunity to openly state their position, it is apparent that it is a conflict of values and beliefs that fuels the conflict. The question that we pursue, but find very difficult to answer is how do we reconcile conflicting belief systems?

Tom and Connie Merriman collaborate on projects that combine traditional mark making with time based media and documentation systems to create installations that explore the relationship between natural resources and economic and political power. In the 90s the Merrimans created works in response to the development of Hydroelectric Dams in Quebec, Canada that displaced native people and destroyed a vast ecosystem. Recently they focused on a project that investigated Mountain Top Removal coal mining in West Virginia and its subsequent impact to the people and environment of that region. Tom is Senior lecturer in the Design Dept, at Carnegie Mellon University. Connie is an artist and educator currently working with The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, Arts and Education Program.