

Article

The practice of ecological art

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Date de publication : 15 février 2014

Abstract

The genre of “ecological art”, as originally conceived in the 1990's on the basis of practices that emerged from the late 1960's onwards, covers a variety of artistic practices which are nonetheless united, as social-ecological modes of engagement, by shared principles and characteristics such as: connectivity, reconstruction, ecological ethical responsibility, stewardship of inter-relationships and of commons, non-linear (re)generativity, navigation and dynamic balancing across multiple scales, and varying degrees of exploration of the fabric of life's complexity.

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Texte intégral

“We believe that in a well-functioning system, cultural diversity and biodiversity exist in a state of mutual interaction – the former self-conscious and able to intend and transform, and the latter the pattern of self-organization from which we all spring and to which we all return, and which ultimately determines the possible” (Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, 2004) ¹.

Over the past decade, as the global crisis of unsustainable development has become increasingly difficult to ignore (with the combined effects of climate change, massive extinction of species, etc.), the interest for ecological issues and related themes has been rising in the art worlds. In this context, the labels “ecological art” and “eco-art” (or “ecoart”) have gained increased attention in recent years, and are being used loosely by a variety of practitioners and commentators, sometimes even interchangeably with expressions such as “environmental art”, “land art” and “art in nature”.

However, the emergence and original usage of the term “ecological art” refers to a more clearly defined set of artistic practices: The name “ecological art” appeared in the 1990's, to qualify artistic practices that emerged from the late 1960's onwards. Focusing on ecological art in this more specific, original usage, and considering it as a set of social-ecological practices, I will consider some of its salient characteristics. ²

The “ecoartnetwork”, an invitational network and mailing-list (started in 1999) which is gathering more than a hundred practitioners and friends of ecological art, among whom are several key figures in this movement or genre, issued a statement that circulated on the ecoartnetwork mailing-list in 2011, as an attempt at self-definition:

Ecological art “embraces an ecological ethic in both its content and form/materials. Artists considered to be working within the genre’ subscribe generally to one or more of the following principles:

- Attention on the web of interrelationships in our environment—to the physical, biological, cultural, political, and historical aspects of ecological systems.
- Create works that employ natural materials, or engage with environmental forces such as wind, water, or sunlight.
- Reclaim, restore, and remediate damaged environments.
- Inform the public about ecological dynamics and the environmental problems we face.
- Re-envision ecological relationships, creatively proposing new possibilities for co-existence, sustainability, and healing.” ³

Some of the general features of ecological art practices were already described by a few art historians and artists/researchers over the past two decades. Especially, the art historian Suzi Gablik, back in 1991, ⁴ highlighted three important characteristic of this emerging movement that would come to be known as ecological art:

1. These are “connective” practices, cultivating empathy and responsible dealings with fellow humans and

non-humans, rather than merely affirming an individual self in opposition to society. One early work that epitomized this attitude is *Touch Sanitation* (1979-1980) by Mierle Laderman Ukeles.⁵ In this sense, the practice of ecological artists is often explicitly inspired by, and referring to ecofeminist philosophy (e.g. Carolyn Merchant), which from the 1980's onwards, allowed ecological artists to overcome the rigid dualisms of nature vs. culture, developed world vs. underdeveloped, man vs. woman, reason vs. emotion, etc.⁶ Such a connective quality in artistic practices, which tends to reach beyond superficially connective "relational aesthetics" à-la Bourriaud, has also received renewed attention in the past decade, for example in Grant Kester's writings on "collaborative, participatory and socially engaged practices" in art.⁷

2. These are practices which aim to be "reconstructive" of sustainable ways of living, and not only "deconstructive" of modern social systems (as discussed by Gablik in the context of postmodern discourses of the 1980's and early 1990's). Their reconstructive quality also implies that these practices are generally aiming to be transformative rather than representative (as Rasheed Araeen lately pointed out about the Land Art of the 1960's and 1970's)⁸, and that ecological art is neither useless (in the sense of art for art's sake), nor functional (in the sense of fulfilling already defined functions).

3. These are artistic practices which subject themselves to ethical responsibilities toward communities (understood as both human and non-human communities of life). In *The Reenchantment of Art*, Gablik contrasted these practices to e.g. the individually confrontational and self-hero-ifying practice of Richard Serra in the production of his *Tilted Arc* (1981) and in the subsequent controversy that ended with the work's removal (1989).

Another important feature of the practices of ecological artists, as stressed in 2004 by Tim Collins, is the shaping of shared spaces for people and other species and the advocacy for such shared spaces (such as commons and ecosystems). This implies common care and "stewardship through inter-relationship".⁹ One example of such a practice is the "trans-species art" of Lynne Hull, whose clients include multiple species, human beings being just one of them. Hull's works include restorations of wildlife habitats, co-conceived with local human communities and tried & tested for suitability by non-human clients.

Because of this orientation, the practice of ecological art avoids focusing mostly on the gifts of talented individuals, but aims rather to foster the non-possessive, shared authorship of a process that eventually "develops a life of its own" (as coined by Helen and Newton Harrison). The work carried out by the Harrisons, from the 1970's to this day, also constitutes an exemplary practice in this respect. For them, the real client is the land itself, and creativity is understood as a shared flow, meshing individual and collective processes. Such understandings of creativity among ecological artists coincide with the values of the "Creative Commons" movement and more generally with the rediscovery of the collective human management of Commons as beneficial to bio- and cultural diversities.¹⁰

Back in 1969 in her manifesto of "Maintenance Art", Mierle Laderman Ukeles suggested another, related quality: Artists adhering to Maintenance Art, and I would argue, ecological artists, are striving for a regenerative (non-linear) quality (rather than a merely generative, linear quality, as was the case in modern art). This fundamental insight has been declined in various forms (and with a variety of reformulations) since then among ecological artists.

Complementing these characterizations of ecological art, I suggest adding the following elements :

The practice of ecological art is often navigating across different scales, such as :

- Different scales of ecological relations at the local, regional/national, bioregional (e.g. watersheds), continental, and global levels: The work of the Harrisons, from the *Lagoon Cycle* (from 1972 to 1984) to *The Force Majeure* (since 2008), is exemplary in this matter, as it spans, e.g. in *The Force Majeure*, from the level of one single mountain, through the level of bioregions, to the level of e.g. the entire European peninsula and the global biosphere. Here, the work of ecological artists prefigured the concerns for a combination of "sense of place" and "sense of planet" that gained attention more recently in the literary field of ecocriticism.¹¹
- Balancing, at multiple scales, the ego-... & the eco-.... perspectives: While some ecological artists are (I think, mistakenly) only aiming for an "eco-centrism" - which is partly understandable, as a move away from a long tradition of anthropocentrism in mainstream western culture, some artists are more attentive to the productive tension, and complex interdependence, between ego-centrism and eco-centrism, and do not try to negate or erase the dimensions of ego-centrism and autopoiesis (self (re)production/creation/making) in the development of all lifeforms.¹² One exemplary practice of this careful attention unfolded itself with Shelley Sack's notion of "I-sense / ich-Sinn" as developed through her social sculptures, such as the "Earth Forum" as part of the "University of the Trees".¹³ Balancing the ego-... and the eco-... involves balancing individuals & communities, as well as different scales of communities, and human & non-human communities.
- Connecting the level of everyday activities (and the creative "practice of everyday life" à-la De Certeau); the level of critical reflexivity and systemic questioning – with, among some eco-artists, explicit references to (and thorough study of) scientific insights from systems theories, ecology and complexity research (e.g. in the writings of the Harrisons, Aviva Rahmani and more recently Alyce Santoro); the level of envisioning and

imagining of heterotopia (rather than planned solutions and utopia); and in some cases also a level that might be alternatively considered as shamanistic, animistic or spiritual. ¹⁴

I also argued at length elsewhere that ecologically meaningful artistic practices are practices that are genuinely exploring the fabric of life's complexity (and engaging into what I characterized as “aesthetics of complexity”). ¹⁵ The following elements contribute to this engagement :

- As already mentioned above, eco-art practitioners are interpreters of interdependence (and not fiercely independent modern heroes). They value regeneration in life and highlight systemic effects. They act as co-operators of life's creativity rather than solely creative individuals. The Harrisons coined the expression “conversational drift” to refer to the processes that can be allowed to emerge thereby. For example, such a conversational drift facilitated the re-appropriation of Helen and Newton Harrison's Green Heart Vision (1994-1995) by Dutch policy-makers (since 1999 at the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Environment and Forestry), working towards the implementation of a biodiversity ring/corridor around the so-called “green heart” of Holland's Randstad. ¹⁶

- They typically do not draw neat and clear lines between “nature” and “culture”, overcoming simplifying dichotomies. But they also do not confuse living ecosystems with non-living cybernetics (as tend to do some other artists working on or with technology). ¹⁷ This is an important aspect for aesthetics of complexity: to avoid collapsing reality into uni-dimensional thinking or into rigid dialectics (working instead in a way that coincides with the “dialogique” advocated by Edgar Morin).

- They are inter- and transdisciplinary practitioners, both when working by themselves, and when working (as is often the case) in teams with other professionals from a variety of backgrounds as well as with local communities. One concrete, applied example is Patricia Johanson's infrastructural projects in cities around the world. ¹⁸

- They are often practicing a participatory research & art, comparable to what is known in the social sciences as Participatory Action Research. In this manner, they are encouraging others to take ownership while maintaining self-critically “a clear understanding of the relationships of power and our role in that context”. ¹⁹

- They value and practice embodied learning/knowing, cultivating a wisdom grounded in sense perceptions (inspired by phenomenology), aiming for a deep, spatialized knowing of ecological contexts in their local specificities, their diversities and their inter-relations.

- They work with an iterative process of exploring and experimenting (which is more attune to living complexity than a more linear research design and working process would be), remaining “open to all possibilities” in a way that “can question and redefine anything at any step” (Lynne Hull). One example of this serendipitous learning is David Haley's practice of “question-based learning”, e.g. in his Walks on the Wild Side (since 2004, in Manchester).

- Their practice includes a necessary “embedded ecological critique”, as was e.g. personified in the character of the “Witness” in the Lagoon Cycle (in contrast to the hubris of some more problematic artists interested in ecological issues such as Peter Fend, whose ambitious work is however often unencumbered by any precaution principle).

- Their art elaborates complex critical relationships to techno-science (as exemplified, once again in the Lagoon Cycle, by the self-reflexivity on experiments and by the comparison of the buffalo's ecosystemic and economic relationships vs. the tractor's technosystemic limitations). In this regard, they differentiate themselves from the largely hypo-critical relations to technologies of some other artists (such as Eduardo Kac regarding genetic engineering, and Victoria Vesna regarding nanotechnologies). This does not mean that ecological artists necessarily adopt a neo-luddite radicalism: The discourses and practices cover a spectrum from an almost neo-luddite rejection of modern technologies to a careful exploration of “post-human” themes.

I am not claiming that the elements I suggested here, especially regarding ecological artists' explorations of the fabric of life's complexity, are present in all the practices of all artists who are labeled (or regard themselves) as ecological artists, even within the 'circle of recognition' of the above-mentioned “ecoartnetwork”. ²⁰ Rather, I am pointing at these elements as signs of certain qualities in these practices which, under the normative perspective of sustainability studies, can be considered as contributive to aesthetics of complexity and cultures of sustainability. ²¹

Furthermore, even though they share some relatively common characteristics, as I suggested above, the practices of ecological artists are diverse, and differentiate among themselves in multiple ways :

While certain works of ecological art consist in direct interventions in natural habitats and/or on human infrastructures (with “ecoventions” as discussed by Amy Lipton, Sue Spaid and Patricia Watts), others prefer an approach that may be less directly interventionist at the material level while focusing on expanding human consciousness (as do some practitioners of social sculpture). Besides, direct intervention can also mean altering the perception and understanding of a site, without physically modifying it too much, as the example of the Nine Mile Run project by Tim Collins, Reiko Goto, Bob Bingham and John Stephen in Pittsburgh

showed.

Some practitioners (such as e.g. John Jordan and Isabelle Frémeaux, with the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination) engage in politically radical activism/artivism with subversive political agendas, which they merge with ecological practices (such as permaculture in the case of Frémeaux and Jordan), while others prefer to engage with a large cross-section of society, including more conservative political forces.

Some ecological art projects can be closely associated to local, national or international policy, infrastructure, public service or industry entities, while others focus exclusively on local communities, and can engage in community mobilization and empowerment to varying degrees.

When they engage with communities, ecological artists may initiate either “shallow” or “deep dialogues” (as labeled by Collins), i.e. short or long-term project engagements with specific contexts.

Some ecological artists impose on themselves more stringent direct environmental responsibilities than others (e.g. by judging more closely the work in terms of its ecological restorative benefits or balancing its other/indirect merits vs. the generated ecofootprint/environmental impact).

Some practices are characterized by a professional engagement in applied natural sciences (as e.g. Brandon Ballengée's work) while others focus for example on phenomenological experience. Some practitioners (such as for example the collective “foam” in Brussels) ²² engage more than others in explorations of new technologies and socio-techno-scientific systems, that may be relatively less critical but may also be experimentally more open-minded.

Ecological art is gaining both relevance and urgency as a social-ecological practice, as the global crisis of unsustainability continues to aggravate itself. Some commentators have announced recently that ecoart is reaching a “critical mass”. ²³

However, and to varying degrees depending on the above-mentioned differentiations, the practice of ecological art brings with it a number of difficulties and challenges in the relationships of its practitioners to the art world of contemporary art. I will not explore these difficulties in further details now, although a thorough art-sociological analysis of the changing tensions between the practice of ecological art and the established institutions and conventions of contemporary art, would be warranted, to better accompany and support the shift towards cultures of sustainability.

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Biography

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1 Available at: <http://moncon.greenmuseum.org/papers/harrison1.html>

2 However, I will neither engage in a thorough art historical inquiry, nor list all available definitions of the term. For an overview of definitions of "ecological art" and a presentation of selected artists and curators working within this genre since the late 1960's, see: Sacha Kagan, *Art and Sustainability: Connecting Patterns for a Culture of Complexity*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2011 (2nd ed. 2013), pp. 269-343. For a wider selection of artists, see also: Linda Weintraub, *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet*, University of California Press, 2012.

3 Source: internal communication on the ecoartnetwork mailing-list, in preparation for eventual wikipedia entries (November 2011). See www.ecoartnetwork.org for more information about this network and a list of its members.

4 Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1991.

5 See also the Manifesto of "Maintenance Art" which Ukeles wrote in 1969.

6 More recently, the merging of ecofeminism and queer studies, into "queer ecologies", started to attract the attention of some practitioners of ecological art. This further development in ecofeminism was initiated in the late 1990's, by: Greta Gaard, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism", *Hypatia*, 12 (1), 1997.

7 Grant Kester, "Collaborative Practices in Environmental Art", in: Crawford (Ed.), *Artistic Bedfellows: Histories, Theories, and Conversations in Collaborative Art Practices*, Lanham: University Press of America, 2008. See also: Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

8 Araeen unfortunately ignored the decades of practice (and the already practiced qualities) of ecological art, in his recent 'discovery' of "ecoaesthetics": Rasheed Araeen, "Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century", *Third Text: Critical perspectives on contemporary art & culture*, 23 (5), 2009, pp. 679-684.

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11 For the discussion in the field of ecocriticism, with a plea for "eco-cosmopolitanism", see: Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The environmental imagination of the global*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

12 See also Kagan 2011 (op. cit.), pp. 350-351 in 2nd edition (2013). In this line, I also developed the concept of "autoecopoiesis": See Kagan 2011, pp. 214-215. On the new understandings of life grounding these approaches, see also: Andreas Weber, *Enlivement: Towards a fundamental shift in the concepts of nature, culture and politics*, Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2013.

13 See <http://www.universityofthetrees.org/> ; see also: Sacha Kagan, Marco Kusumawijaya, Heike Löschmann and Rana Öztürk, "Report - radius of art: Thematic Window - Art toward Cultures of Sustainability", Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2012 - available at <http://www.boell.de/educulture/education-culture-thematic-window-art-toward-cultures-of-sustainability-14219.html>

14 Practices, philosophies and self-understandings are varied around this level. While Joseph Beuys or Suzi Gablik (1991, op. cit.) turn to "shamanistic" rituals, David Abram advocates for an "animistic" phenomenology (David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, New York: Random House, 1996), and Dominique Mazeaud speaks of "the spiritual in art" (Dominique Mazeaud, "Concerning The Spiritual in Art in Our Time?", 2010, available at <http://dominiquemazeaud.blogspot.de/2010/02/concerning-spiritual-in-art-in-our-time.html>).

15 Kagan 2011 (op. cit.). My understanding of complexity is based on the transdisciplinary tradition initiated by Edgar Morin.

16 See http://theharrisonstudio.net/?page_id=534

17 Kagan 2011 (op. cit.). See also: Sacha Kagan, *Toward Global (Environ) Mental Change: Transformative Art and Cultures of Sustainability*. Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2012.

18 Caffyn Kelley, *Art and Survival: Patricia Johanson's environmental projects*, Salt Spring Island: Islands Institute, 2006.

19 Collins 2004 (op. cit.).

20 I am using here the expression "circle of recognition" in art-sociological terms, as Hans Abbing and myself did over the past decade. In short: Compared to an "art world", a "circle of recognition" is both smaller and potentially more open to inter- and transdisciplinary hybridizations than an art world ; it can be variably in- and exclusive.

21 On cultures of sustainability, see Kagan 2011, 2012 (op. cit.), and Sacha Kagan, "Cultures of Sustainability and the aesthetics of the pattern that connects", *Futures: The journal of policy, planning and futures studies*, 42 (10), 2010.

22 See <http://fo.am/>

23 Weintraub 2012, op. cit., p. xiv.

Pour citer cet article

KAGAN Sacha. The practice of ecological art. *[plastik]* [en ligne], 15 février 2014. Disponible sur Internet : <http://art-science.univ-paris1.fr/plastik/document.php?id=866>. ISSN ISSN 2101-0323.