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ECOLOGICAL ART

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It. *Arte ecologica*; Fr. *Art écologique*; Germ. *Ökologische Kunst*; Span. *Arte ecológica*. With ecological art (or eco-art, a hyphenated form that became very common in the 2000s) is implied an artistic production carried out with awareness to solicit and sensitize the audience to reflect on ecological issues or goals. Ecological art does not necessarily have directly to do with nature, nor does it inevitably use natural materials; on the contrary, it often concerns provocative, multifaceted projects on technology, sustainability, non-human entities, hyper-objects, contemporary catastrophism and climate justice. According to the definition proposed by Timothy Morton, ecological art “includes its environment(s) in its very form” (Morton 2018: 52). Therefore, the production of eco-artists, while not necessarily assuming an activist dimension, is *ipso facto* “engaged” (Ardenne 2019: 56). By showing the frailty of our ecosystem, it aspires to exercise a transformative role on public opinion, mobilizing behavioral changes and emphasizing the urgency of agency for halting the contemporary ecocide.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Some critics (Ardenne 2019a: 52) place the “official origin” of ecological art in the 1940s. For others, however, this question remains unanswered, as they consider all art to be ecological (Morton 2018). Undoubtedly, since the 1960s the intersections between art and ecology have been increasingly numerous and complex, moving from “marginal beginnings” to “maturity” (Ardenne 2019a). In fact, if at the beginning of the 1980s the “ecological awareness” of an artist was still praised only because their production was not invasive and aggressive toward the landscape and the territory (Auping 1983) – as often happened in the so-called environmental art, marked by an “ecological indifference” – with the passing of time, more “ecological wisdom” and less “sustainability rhetoric” are demanded from contemporary artistic and activist ecological practices (Demos 2016: 23 and 36). The turning point came at the threshold of the 21st century, when, following the introduction of the term at the beginning of the

millennium (Crutzen, Stoermer 2000), a lively debate on the Anthropocene began to spread, involving the most disparate fields and thus, inevitably, also art (Turpin, Davis 2015; Reiss 2019). Thus, there is a transition from a pioneering, and at times naïve, ecological art to an increasingly reflexive, post-anthropocentric (Demos 2016: 19) and natureless art (Morton 2007).

Many of the early artists engaged in ecological projects – including Alan Sonfist with *Time Landscape of New York city* (1965-present), Harrison with *Portable Fish Farm Survival Piece* (1971), Joseph Beuys with *Bog Action* (1977) and *7,000 Oaks* (1982), Agnes Denes with *Wheatfield* (1982) – presented mostly “restorationist projects” (Demos 2016: 19) with which they aimed to explore self-sufficient harvesting or independent farming practices against the abuses of agribusiness and the chemical industry. Despite the meritorious intentions of these anti-capitalist projects, a few decades later, the criticalities and contradictions of “outmoded approaches to ecological matters” are evident (Demos 2016: 40). More sophisticated and fruitful, however, were other projects conceived in the 1970s around the theme of ‘pollution’, understood as both chemical and mediatic. These were the ambitious social and technological ecology projects conducted, among others, by Hans Haacke and Dan Graham. With the *Rhine-Water Purification Plant* (1972), the German artist was engaged in purifying the waters of the Rhine through a bio-technological system, thus inviting its users to reflect on the consequences of their daily actions and inspiring future eco-artists (Skrebowski 2013), while Graham reflected on the “pollution” caused by media images, such as broadcast television. The first trend – which could be defined as “eco-critical art” – deals with atmospheric and marine pollution, ozone, global warming, rising seas, deforestation, water scarcity, overexploitation of natural resources (Brown 2014; Ardenne 2019b; Boetzkes 2019), while the second trend deals with the ecology of communication and tries to contrast iconic pollution in all its forms (e.g., TV, photos, social media) using visual ecology strategies to face the “pollution” caused by media images, such as broadcast television, using visual ecology strategies to deal with the overabundance of images (Fontcuberta 2016).

A characteristic of ecological art – whether it is related to environmental pollution or iconic pollution, particularly of social networks – is the ever-increasing awareness of the use of images, which must never turn into abuse. Whether artists – as photographer Richard Misrach does with his *Petrochemical America* series (1988-2012) – reject a too seductive and aestheticizing presentation of the Anthropocene, which ends up embellishing its perversions and neutralising its contradictions (Demos 2017), or whether they emphasize – as photographer Edward Burtynsky does – the disturbing sublimity of decaying industrial-environments or natural environmental dereliction (Somhegyi 2021), ecological art, in more or less radical ways, is constantly engaged in making us reflect on the ecocide of our time. Similarly, visual culture is increasingly sensitive to ecological issues and interested in inspiring a more thoughtful use of the image and an evaluation of its necessity and possibility of recycling, which characterizes much art committed to combating the current iconic fury. Many artists in recent decades have contributed to an iconic ecology capable of counteracting the overproduction and overconsumption of images: from Joachim Schmid’s *Bilder von der Strasse* (1982-2012), which saves junk photos thrown away by their owners, to Max Dean’s *As Yet Untitled* (1992-95), a photographic installation in which a robotic arm lets the viewer choose whether to save or destroy individual photos taken at random from a rich collection of photographs of

popular and family life. From the visual impact of multidisciplinary artist Ira Lombardía, to the undeveloped camera rolls from the war in Lebanon by fictive photographer Abdallah Farah, narrated in the performance *Latent Images: Diary of a Photographer* (2015) by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. From Philipp Schmitt's *Camera Restricta* (2015) which – through the use of algorithms and GPS technology – reduces the overflow of digital imagery, preventing banal photos from being taken in hyper-photographed locations, to Penelope Umbrico's *Suns from Flickr* (2006-2016), a megaproject in which single clippings of images shared on the web on the same subject form a new hybrid totality. The intersections between art, visual culture and ecology are therefore increasingly frequent and significant. By recycling, destroying, not producing, limiting, deleting, not posting on social networks, or just imagining, visual eco-artists are proposing alternative ways to deal with the iconic overdose and saturation that overwhelms us.

On the other hand, climate change is increasingly perceived as an "aesthetic challenge" (Brady 2013) not only by philosophers and aestheticians, but especially by many eco-artists active in what, with Ardenne (2019a), we can call the "mature" phase of ecological art, in which a "transitioning to caring about nonhumans in a more conscious way" takes place (Morton 2018: 119). Prompted by the far from "neutral" debate on the Anthropocene (Demos 2017), artists are increasingly engaged in projects of recognition, recodification and respect for non-human entities, showing "solidarity" with them (Morton 2018: 119-126), as Marina Zurkow does in her *Elixir* series (2009) – in which the human is enclosed in crystal bottles floating against the backdrop of inhospitable landscapes – or as Olga Kisseleva does in her *Bio-presence* Series, in which she recodes the DNA of extinct plants (2013). Olafur Eliasson's artistic research is also highly emotional, especially in the iconic installation *Ice Watch* (2014, 2015, 2018), in which blocks of ice arranged in the shape of a clock melt in public spaces of European cities, to make users and pedestrians perceive the climate disaster more closely (Reiss 2019: 77-86; Rossi 2020: 96-101).

The ecological artist then becomes "a communicator, an intermediary" (Ardenne 2019: 62), capable of evoking those "hyper-objects" such as global warming, nuclear radiation, plastic and toxic waste, by which we are surrounded (Morton 2013: 129). In doing so, they are not afraid to be disturbing: their artistic research "must include ugliness and disgust, and haunting weirdness" (Morton 2018: 138), to reveal the hypocrisies of "ecological speech" that is "deeply distorted by the oil economy we live in" (Morton 2018: 211). The ecological artist is thus a sentinel against all political-institutional rhetoric and against an overpromising "green" mainstream, who struggles against anthropocentric abuse and facilitates alternative narratives that are increasingly inclusive with respect to the "more-than-human realm" (Hughes, Armstrong 2021: 139).

While climate catastrophe can be an opportunity to take stock of the space and value that the Western world has (or has not) attributed to art (Bourriaud 2020), ecological art – as often culturally engaging, emancipative and activist – offers itself as a powerful antidote to ecocide through unconventional, trans-disciplinary and alternative approaches (Drabble 2019; Sommer 2019; Hughes, Armstrong 2021). Therefore, it can be understood as an artistic practice that exerts an exemplary function, "provides a model for the kind of coexistence ecological ethics and politics wants to achieve between humans and

nonhumans" (Morton 2018: 41), helping to conceptualize the/a future for humankind as well as for the nonhuman.

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