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Two Perspectives on Ecological Art

Summary

In the paper “Two perspectives on ecological art”, we will compare two perspectives on sustainability and the practicality of an ecological artwork. One perspective is from Latvian media artist Maija Demitere, researching slow media art, deep sustainability, and food production. Demitere uses micro-gardening prototypes as an instrument to inform the public on the problems of food production (local food, biodiversity, pesticides, herbicides, pollution caused by agriculture). Demitere uses gardening in combination with DIY (Do it Yourself) technologies to talk about slow living, ecology of the mind, and mindfulness.

The second perspective is offered by Jan Glöckner. Glöckner is a German artist and researcher. His research interests are collaborations between fungi and Hominidae. Glöckner reaches out with diplomatic gestures towards fungi to re-localise humans within the larger domain of living entities. He is working on an ethical framework that draws from deep ecology and Tibetan Buddhism to ensure the rights of microorganisms and macroorganisms in artistic, industrial, and research setups.

The first part of the paper will focus on recycling, waste management, waste produced by households, and the artists' perspective on the problem. The second part will focus on a specific case of the exhibition "Life" by Olafur Eliasson at the Foundation Beyeler in Riehen, Switzerland. The second part will also look at the idea of "artistic greenwashing". The last part of the article will attempt to conclude what can be considered an actual sustainable artwork and propose possible key points that describe a (deep) ecological artwork.

The paper uses such methods as case studies, literature analysis, and autoethnography.

Keywords: sustainable art, ecological art, art research, research-based art.

DIVAS PERSPEKTĪVAS PAR EKOLOĢISKO MĀKSLU

Kopsavilkums

Rakstā „Divas perspektīvas par ekoloģisko mākslu” ir salīdzināti divi viedokļi par ekoloģiska mākslas darba ilgtspējību un praktiskumu. Pirmo perspektīvu piedāvā latviešu mediju māksliniece Maija Demitere, kuras pētījums fokusējas uz „lēno” mediju mākslu, „dziļo” ilgtspēju un pārtikas audzēšanu. Demitere izmanto mikrodārzkopības prototipus kā instrumentus, lai informētu sabiedrību par pārtikas ražošanas problēmām (vietējā pārtika, bioloģiskā daudzveidība, pesticīdi, herbicīdi, lauksaimniecības radītais piesārņojums). Demitere izmanto dārzkopību kombinācijā ar DIY (*Do it Yourself* 'dari pats') tehnoloģijām, lai runātu par „lēno” dzīvesveidu, prāta ekoloģiju un apzinātu, mērķtiecīgu esību (*mindfulness*).

Otru perspektīvu piedāvā Jans Gleknars (*Jan Glöckner*). Gleknars ir vācu mākslinieks un pētnieks. Viņa pētniecības intereses ir sadarbības veidošana starp sēnēm un hominīdiem (cilvēklīdzīgām būtnēm). Gleknars ar saviem diplomātiskiem žestiem „uzrunā” sēnīti, ar mēķi atrast līdzsvaru starp cilvēku un pārējām dzīvām būtnēm. Gleknara pētījums balstās „dziļajā” ekoloģijā un Tibetas budismā, kas veido teorētisko pamatu, lai nodrošinātu mikroorganismu tiesības rūpnieciskās un pētniecības iekārtās.

Darba pirmajā daļā uzmanība pievērsta otrreizējai pārstrādei, atkritumu apsaimniekošanai, mājsaimniecību radītajiem atkritumiem un mākslinieku skatījumam uz šo problēmu. Otrajā daļā apskatīts Olafura Eliasona (*Olafur Eliasson*) mākslas darbs „Dzīve” (*Life*), kas bija skatāms Beielera fonda mākslas muzejā Rihēnē, Šveicē. Otrajā daļā aplūkota arī ideja par mākslinieku aktivitātēm, kas varētu tikt sauktas par zaļmaldināšanu („zaļo mazgāšanu”, „zaļajām pīlītēm”). Raksta noslēgumā tiks piedāvāts, kādi kritēriji būtu lietojami, lai atpazītu patiesi ilgtspējīgu/ekoloģisku mākslas darbu, kas saskanētu ar „dziļās” ekoloģijas idejām.

Darbā izmantotas tādas metodes kā gadījumu izpēte, literatūras analīze un autoetnogrāfija.

Raksturvārdi: ilgtspējīgā māksla, ekoloģiskā māksla, mākslas pētniecība, pētniecībā balstīta māksla.

Introduction

While the definition of sustainability is quite well understood and accepted, when searching for the term “sustainable art” or “environmental art” in basic search engines, we can venture into a convoluted world of different descriptions, definitions, and philosophies.

Sustainability – the quality to be maintained at a certain rate or level (Cambridge Dictionary 2021).

Environmental sustainability –

1) The quality of causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue for a long time (Cambridge Dictionary 2021);

2) The idea that goods and services should be produced in ways that do not use resources that cannot be replaced and that do not damage the environment (Cambridge Dictionary 2021).

The idea of sustainability is to keep the planet as it is now for future generations. The idea of keeping the planet as is, is also a bit problematic because if we can “improve” the planet, why not do it? Maybe because everyone's views on *what could be better* are different. More on that later in the article.

To be thorough, there is no one definition of “sustainable art”.

Wikipedia offers us this perspective: “Sustainable art is art in harmony with the key principles of sustainability, which include ecology, social justice, non-violence, and grassroots democracy.” (Sustainable art [n. d.]

Artists working with environmental problems and ideas can be seen in all possible fields, such as visual arts, filmmaking, photography, sound art, sculptures, conceptual art, performances, theatre, dance, design, and others. There are no limits to the form and language used to convey the message. Environmental art can be eco-friendly, eco neutral, or in some ways even damaging to the environment. As the viewer, we can comment on this, but as the artist, we are allowed to use whatever means necessary to visualize our concept.

Ecological art or eco-art has roots that are more concrete compared to sustainable art and a bit more history (as in – more chapters in art history books). Eco-art is concerned with ecological ideas and problems, also natural and artificial environments, natural processes and their visualizations, site-specific art, land art, creating sculptures out of natural materials, or recreating natural materials. The take-away could be – environmental and sustainable art represents and/or is trying to educate, *save the world*, comment on environmental problems, also visualize environmental problems, while eco-art can be only representative and concerned with aesthetics and materials, but definitely not excluding activism and again –

saving the world.

In this article, we will try to find a checklist of what environmental art should be, what an environmental artist should think about. And how, as a viewer, judge the environment-related part of an artwork.

The text is created as a dialogue between two *struggling* environmental, eco, process-based, slow media, new media... artists. The deep interest in the subject comes from the individual and lengthy struggle and desperation that the field of environmental art lacks basis and definition, while artists, producers, curators, journalists, and art critics are using trendy environment-related keywords to sell their products.

Latvians Versus Nature

I'm concerned with my living environment and the mainstream culture of Latvia. I have lived in Liepaja for most of my life, in Riga for studies, in multiple Dutch cities for studies and fun. "Latvians" in this context are people whom I have met and known throughout my life – in schools, universities, on streets, in cafes and bars, exhibition openings, concerts, etc. My views on "Latvians" come from my own experiences and perspectives.

The way in which we experience nature is conditioned by our society. Latvians have a very romanticised view of nature. Latvians are definitely not tree-huggers and activists, but we have a deep appreciation of everything "green" and an inner belief that it will always be there as our roots, our country, and our feeling of belonging.

52 % of the country is considered forest lands (the data includes swamps, bogs, marshes, and forest infrastructure (infrastructure takes up 2.5 % out of the total)) (Ministry of Agriculture [n. d.]). 52 % is a lot! And the forests keep reclaiming more and more unused farmlands every year. However, the data should be considered together with such other statistics like urbanisation and population change (Official statistics of Latvia shows that population changes in cities over the years are very small and there are no major trends to follow; however, population growth in the country in 2020 was negative, -14452 (Oficiālās statistikas portāls [n. d.])).

We can see that forests and deforestation are not a problem in Latvia. However, biodiversity and natural forests are a completely separate subject – there is no real discussion on biodiversity and forest fragmentation in Latvia.

I think the remark that Latvians are not tree huggers and activists requires more explanation.

Latvians are no strangers to (somewhat) natural gardening and food production. Growing tomatoes, cucumbers, strawberries, and keeping apple trees is considered normal – it doesn't raise any questions, considerations.

DIY home and gardening stores during the gardening seasons are well-equipped with seeds, seedlings, pots, planters, soils, and fertilizers. However, there is no discussion on biodiversity, GMOs, native plants (and seeds). Over years of doing my research on food production, I have witnessed that biodiversity has become a prominent part of the discussion and subject for research and artworks. When I started my research about 7–8 years ago, the topical problems were GMOs and monoculture, while today, artists are very vocal about biodiversity. Latvians, on the other hand, are showing no interest in switching from their rose gardens to growing plants native to the Latvian countryside.

My unanswered research question is still lingering in the air – how to change the views and habits of people regarding food growing and consumption and production of household trash. I have failed to see any long-term change influenced by my own work or the work of other artists.

Latvians can drink tap water in their homes, groundwater pollution is not a problem in most parts of the country. Garbage and recycling is not part of everyday considerations for most; there are no regulations restricting people or forcing them to recycle. All this leads to the Latvian sense of trust that the “nature” (the wild, the forest, plants, birds, animals, etc.) is definite and will be there forever, unchanged.

Germans Versus Nature

The romanticization of the abstract idea of nature and the value of nature, is deeply engraved in the national narrative. Caspar David Friedrich and Goethe are just two prominent figures who have contributed largely to this. Yet, land use is currently accelerating at tremendous speed. The younger generation is increasingly aware of the loss of nature in Germany and on a global level, and the implications for all living entities. Policymakers are slow to react to the challenges of global warming and instead try to deny this generation's political agenda by using terms like “terrorist” on them. This might radicalize this generation further.

We might shortly look at the example of the Hambacher Forst. This case splits German society amongst the seams of generations and classes.

The Hambacher Forst is a formerly 4100 ha large forest that is being cleared by the RWE AG (German multinational energy company) in order to exploit their largest open-pit mining project for the excavation of lignite. Since 1970 the forest has been reduced to around 500 ha. It is a good example of the deep entanglement of policymakers and industry through lobbying in Germany. As activists started to squat the forest to prevent further destruction, police forces entered several times and cleared out the squats. Only

after massive solidarity in the younger generations and the older ones (above 55 years of age) and a series of lawsuits filed by the NGO BUND (German Federation for the Environment and Nature Conservation) concerning the bat *Myotis myotis* (the killing of an endangered species is a federal crime in Germany) led to the stop of the forest clearings. In the age of global warming, this shows the gap between worldwide agreements to prevent further warming of the atmosphere and the capitalist interests of industries and actions of local government representatives. Policymakers have agreed to preserve the remainder of the forest, although no law to back up this decision has been made to this day.

Everything is Garbage

A bio artist uses living beings, animals, the human body, genetic engineering, interventions in the natural body as a medium for art ideas and artistic expression. Live tissue, living organisms, and living processes is the common theme. The term “bio art” was first used in 1997 by probably the most recognisable bio artist, Eduardo Kac. However, it should be mentioned that bio artists existed long before the name. Yet, bio art is far from being sustainable. In many artworks, non-humans are exploited and “used” for a purpose, just like in other industries, to the sole advantage of humans. Additionally, much of the technology of bio artworks that deal with gene editing is highly sophisticated and therefore resource-intensive.

Out of the list of nature-related art fields, bio art has the most concrete definition and understanding in art history. Ecological artists or eco artists are a lot more loosely defined. Except for writers who copy-paste their eco art definition from Wikipedia, everyone's definition has a different focus.

Wikipedia informs us:

“Ecological art is an art genre and artistic practice that seeks to preserve, remediate and/or vitalize the life forms, resources and ecology of Earth, by applying the principles of ecosystems to living species and their habitats throughout the lithosphere, atmosphere, biosphere, and hydrosphere, including wilderness, rural, suburban and urban locations. It is a distinct genre from Environmental art in that it involves functional ecological systems-restoration, as well as socially engaged, activist, community-based interventions. Ecological art also addresses politics, culture, economics, ethics, and aesthetics as they impact the conditions of ecosystems. Ecological art practitioners include artists, scientists, philosophers, and activists who often collaborate on restoration, remediation, and public awareness projects.” (Ecological art [n. d.]

On the one hand, the eco artist is concerned with the relationship

between the environment and human intervention; natural vs industrial, wild vs cultural; on the other hand, eco art is also supposed to raise awareness. We believe this duality is a big part of the problem that allows eco art to be translated into absolutely anything.

Visual artists (and contemporary art critics) are using “eco art” to tag anything that has to do with natural materials, including found materials (human trash found in nature, natural materials found in nature, materials collected from garbage dumps, etc.) and sustainability (leaving the weird, sometimes messed-up science to bio art).

Eco artists, if we follow the term, can make installations from collected garbage, found instruments and materials disposed of by others (some specific professional tools like fishing nets). We are now witnessing the age of endless sculptures made out of recycled and unrecycled trash. Some of those sculptures are just visual artist's self-expression, most are made with the aim *to inform the public about the importance of recycling*. The words “inform the public” have been chosen quite carefully. Let's talk about that a bit later.

To find some value in those garbage sculptures, we can appreciate the aesthetics, the haunting images and emotions, and sometimes we can look at the beauty or the naivety of a person who just wants to do their part to make the world a little better.

Exposing the viewer to an artist's vision, to interact with the viewer, to make them think, to make them see things differently, to focus the attention on a problem – a bit of a boring list of possible motivations on why to make an artwork. To make the viewer think about recycling – to shame a person into recycling. We see this on the same lines as most animal rights movies. Recycling is incredibly important, as well as switching to a plant-based diet consisting of native and locally sourced foods. Can art actually change the views and habits of people?

Returning to shaming people into recycling – presenting piles of garbage, islands of garbage, sea animals trapped in plastics, massive sculptures made out of plastics – the only goal for such artwork (sculpture, film, photo series, etc.) is to scare people. Social pressure is a lot more powerful tool than most are aware of. People don't like to say “no”, people don't want to be the bad guy. Most will have a need to be perceived as good. In a group of people, we can see that most will agree that recycling is important (or at least not say that recycling is unnecessary). However, in 2019 only 23 % of Latvian household garbage was recycled, and only 46 % of household garbage in Europe was recycled (Latvijas Zaļais punkts 2019). In Germany, the amount of household garbage per head in 2000 was 458 kg, but only 51 % of it was recycled. In 2018 the amount rose to 535 kg per head, but 99 % of it was recycled. Since

2018 there has been a continuous drop in the amount of household garbage (Abfallaufkommen 2020).

German Perspective on Recycling

As a person that grew up in Germany during the mid-1980s and the 1990s, I was raised to recycle. It was simply part of my normality. When I started to change my living places more frequently (artists tend to be very mobile), I was challenged with different recycling systems and discovered how not knowing where I can safely dispose of the garbage I produce makes me feel uneasy. While there are differences in German counties when it comes to what is recycled in which coloured container, the situation is quite different in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Switzerland, the places where I spent enough time to worry about my garbage.

Why is recycling easy for me in Germany? First, I speak German, and I was raised to recycle in Germany. Second, there is money to be made with recycling, so the recycling industry has an interest in your garbage, companies even come to collect it from you. And the most important one: there is political action to back it up. Households and industries are forced by law to recycle, and there are fines if one fails to comply. There is still illegal garbage dumping, but paired with the German tradition of denouncing one's neighbours for breaking the law, it is up to large firms that bribe officials or the government to fail in dealing with nuclear waste, rather than households.

As this sounds too good to be true, I am sharing an authentic memory from my childhood, and, yes, I am aware that it is not politically correct, but it is part of the reality of the 1990s. My family made two holiday trips to France during the early 1990s. We rented a houseboat and rode it down the river. Water came in plastic bottles that we used to buy in supermarkets, as the water tank of the boat was not big enough to hold enough water for cleaning the dishes, cooking, and hydrating six persons. I was unfamiliar with plastic bottles, as they were very rare in Germany at this time, only for some syrups, and did not have a refund system with them, so my parents never bought them. So I asked my father, why are there no glass bottles, like at home, which we would return or recycle in containers? He said to me that soon the French will also adopt glass bottles and will have a similar recycling system as we have at home. Years later, Germany has adopted plastic bottles, and even if they get recycled, they will not become drinking bottles but will be downcycled (exported to China) to become, for example, fleece jackets (reimported to Germany) that slowly degrade with every washing cycle into microplastic that accumulates in water bodies.

Artistic Greenwashing

As artists working at the intersection of art, science, and engineering, we often encounter works and people that claim to be non-exploiting towards non-human agents involved, sustainable, environmental, etc. At a closer look, these claims turn out to be false, or the authors misinterpreted what they were doing. But should artists get a free pass and be allowed to present their concepts in any way they want?

“Greenwashing” describes practice, service and/or product that pretends to be “green” – to be sustainable, bio, eco, local. A hotel can practice greenwashing by advertising that its cleaning services are sustainable (while in reality using non-sustainable cleaning products and services). Product packaging can be in green tones, with a bunch of green-related stickers (that they put there themselves!) describing the product as natural, produced sustainably, even promising that they are paying fair salaries to their employees, using sustainable shipping methods, and so on.

We offer another view on greenwashing – the idea that, if I recycle, I can do whatever I want – I can buy all the plastic containers I want, as long as I recycle. I can buy as much clothing as I want, print as many emails as I want, etc. As long as I recycle.

If an artist uses recyclables to make their sculptures, where do the recyclables come from? If we walk around our local forest, collecting plastic bottles to make a sculpture out of them, it's great – we can visualize the amount and types of local litter. However, if we do it on a commercial scale, eventually, the curators and gallery owners will not have the time and interest to collect garbage in the street.

If the artist's idea is still focusing on sustainability, but the material is just colourful plastic bought in a crafts store, can that still be considered a sustainable art/ecological art piece?

I [Maija] used to do workshops on DIY batteries made from copper, zinc, and food leftovers, usually apples, because in my garden, I always have rotting apples fallen from trees. All the metals and wires in my original workshop were collected from all sorts of places, used electronics, my university's and my family's storage. I was invited to do the same workshop in two different galleries in the Netherlands. Both times all my materials were store-bought – all the metals, wires, and wire clips. Also, the apples were fresh from a store.

A case study – “The dying pond” of Eliasson

At the Fondation Beyeler, artist Eliasson has installed an artificial pond that one has to cross when entering his exhibition “Life”, a solo show. The pond is a bright “toxic” green, which is achieved by the fluorophore dye

Uranin. It is used as a diagnostic in medical, earth science, and plant science applications and for tracing streams in water bodies. Why the pond is filled with it, save for effect, is unknown, Eliasson has not specified why the pond that “shall be a space for co-existence” (Stahl et al. 2021), and shall serve the purpose of aiding the viewers in thinking about how to “make the world liveable for all species”, needs to be coloured brightly fluorescent green.

Safe from these questions in function and aesthetics in the artwork, the bigger problem was that the plants put into the pond simply died (presumably unrelated to the use of the dye). One might argue now that Eliasson is showing the viewer how bad it is to treat non-humans in this way, by killing them and having a stinking ugly pond in front of the Fondation Beyeler, which would be a questionable practice in the manner of “Look, I have killed, in order to show you that killing is bad”, but still would make sense in a twister manner that is not unknown in the art-world when it comes to moralistic positions and artworks. Yet, the death of the plants is not part of the concept of the artwork (confirmed by the press division of the Foundation). The dead plants get replaced by new ones on a regular basis. This degrades the plants in the artwork to expendable consumables. These actions do not line up with the goals Eliasson mentioned earlier. Truly, Eliasson is not collaborating in this artwork; he is exploiting the non-human agents for the goal of his art and labelling it as educational to the viewer. A good example of “greenwashing” in the arts.

Conclusions: What Could be Called a Sustainable Artwork?

“Deep” sustainability is a term that Maija is using in her research to describe sustainable art that is research-based, aimed at society (can be practically used in some ways in everyday lives, in future research, prototypes). The “deep” comes from deep ecology; “deep” as the opposite of “shallow”.

The adjective “deep” can be used to describe something “real”. As mentioned before, not all environmental and ecological art should be activism; as well as not all art that is made out of plastic bottles is conceptually related to any environmental issues. Cultivating ecological consciousness in society is not the mission of all artists working with ecology, sustainability, and climate change. As artists, we are allowed to do anything. And most artists don't particularly care what kind of tags and descriptions are attached to their work.

Should a sustainable/environmental/bio artwork make people go home and recycle? Should it shame or scare people, make them feel sorry for endangered species, biodiversity, etc.? No, but every decision an environmental

artist makes should be deliberate, conscious. An artist can come up with their own ethics to follow, but they should be reasonably consistent.

While the “realness”, the deepness of a working prototype, an actual instructional work aimed to better the environment, is important to the authors of this text, it's not the only approach to art. Here, we offer a traditional checklist for environmental artwork:

- Designed, created, transported and exhibited using sustainable materials, conscious energy and processes (for example, types of paint, oils);
- Designed, created, transported and exhibited using some ethical norms (for example, if using child-labour, cheap-labour, non-humans, then treating them ethically within the concept of the artwork);
- The artwork and the artist should be aware of their concept and its actual connection to sustainability, environmental issues and ethics (sustainable art cannot be sustainable by accident without the artist's intent).

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