

Are we accountable? A view on contemporary art and its relations to environmental sustainability.

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“The Anthropocene is the name given to a geological period in which human-made stuff has created a layer in Earth’s crust: all kinds of plastics, concretes and nucleotides”.

(Morton T., 2021, p. 6)

As humans we are only too aware of the global climate decline. Morton speaks on this Anthropocene period we are in and have been in since 1945. This means collectively we have caused a new period, where our life choices will determine the Earth’s demise. So how does this relate to contemporary art? Art and the Environment have always come hand in hand. The environment and climate change has had a major influence in art, weather to resource materials or inspire and raise awareness. This essay discusses both the positive and negative impacts of art practices on the environment with topics including waste within art, artists use of the environment, issues of transportation and artists who intervene in the climate crisis.

The use of art to bring awareness to climate change is effective as it is a visual language that is sure to reach large audiences, locally and globally. Galleries create spaces for this artwork like the Hayward Gallery’s exhibition *Dear Earth* (2023). This exhibition and many like it show the strong association that is present between art and the environment by displaying art which opens people’s minds to the danger and speed of the climate decline. They can also increase the closeness people feel to the issues. For example, *Dear Earth* presents varied connections with the environment such as emotional and spiritual. The exhibition was inspired by artist Otobong Nkanga’s idea that “caring is a form of resistance” (*Dear earth*, 2023). By caring and creating works about the issue they can raise enough awareness to cause change or influence.



Figure - Dear Earth, South Bank Centre, 2023

This is also prevalent in the Gallery Climate Coalition (GCC) which is an organisation of artists working to reduce their and others environmental impacts. The GCC advocates for zero waste and the reduction of their CO₂ emissions by 50%. There is a carbon calculator on their website that provides the carbon emissions created by transportation, including air travel, shipping, road use, energy used, trains, packing and printing. This is for fellow artists or anyone to find out how much carbon production their actions cause.

“Art and ecology can work together to identify environmental issues and restore fragile ecosystems through affirmative works of art.”

(Mary Ann Stankiewicz and Don H.Krug ,1997)

It would be assumed that environmental artists practices should be some of the most eco-friendly, however, in some cases the opposite affect can occur. Artist Olafur Eliasson’s piece *Ice Watch* (2018-2019) included him bringing 30 broken off icebergs from the waters of

Greenland's Nuup Kangerlua fjord. Some of these were then displayed at the entrance of the Tate and the rest outside Bloomberg L.P.'s European headquarters.



Figure 2-Ice Watch, Phaidon, 2018

This piece was designed to make people directly view the effects of climate change and see how fast things are happening by viewing the ice melting before their eyes. Eliasson wanted to cause viewers to think more consciously about how they can change their day to day lives to prevent these rapid affects. While he should be commended for this thought-provoking piece, Mychal, L. (2020) notes he had to use cranes, cargo ships and containers to transport the ice. Using these cause air pollution, water pollution and oil pollution so could be seen as opposing his message of becoming climate conscious. When confronted with this Ellison said:

“Everything we do has a carbon footprint and of course this includes the things we do to address climate change”.

(Rea, N., 2018)

As an artist presenting the issues of climate change does it make it okay to create more of a carbon footprint just to be able to change other minds?

Ice Watch does have an impact on viewers, so there's a possibility more people become eco-friendly which is going to have a great impact on the environment. It is also not easy to argue against there being no alternative to preventing everything that raises your carbon footprint. This is especially prevalent in the terms of transport. Art uses transport to go to galleries, markets, collectors and more and in every case, there will be varied kinds of damaging product produced. However, ideally this would not be the case, it is not overall sustainable for artists to excuse their negative impacts on the environment with the idea that it is for the greater good. Eliason didn't have to ship the ice overseas especially knowing what that means for the water, it gives the artist an egotistical look.

Artist Phyllida Barlow discusses this topic of transportation in art, putting forward the idea that instead of transporting the art, it is made in the locations they are being displayed in (though this becomes a problem for commercial galleries). As well as this, she thinks the return to performance work would be affective which usually includes just the body, the most sustainable resource for an artist. This doesn't mean all artists must become performance artists, there are other practices where the environment isn't damaged or even comes out on top.

A group of European artists working with nature created an organisation called Art in Nature in 1989. Their aim was to create environmental awareness with the use of their practice. One of the questions they were trying to address was "What is the position of the world of art with respect to nature?" (Tufnell, B. 2006, p. 83). This question is very important to this essay, we must question how accountable we hold the art community for their effects on nature. These artists use of material is using nature as their only source. "The artist intervenes in nature without causing irreversible damage" (Tufnell, B. 2006, p. 83). To be able to create art without it having impacts is achievable.

One of the many artists involved in Art in Nature is British artist Andy Goldsworthy. The material in his practice involves snow, ice, leaves, bark, sticks, feathers, clay, and rock (Goldsworthy 1990, p. 38). Goldsworthy works with land; some work is permanent, and

others may only last a few minutes. He believes that nature's spaces are a collective and the different materials are not independent, which shows his respect for the material.

Goldsworthy's practice includes the use of the natural colours, creating holes, cracks, or sculptural shapes by placing materials together in particular ways. His work is documented and displayed in photography as shown below in figures 3 and 4.



Figure 3-Rowan leaves laid around hole, Andy Goldsworthy, 1987



Figure 4 Touching North, Andy Goldsworthy, 1989

Seeing the beauty of nature is a way art practice can exploit their privilege to show the world that we must change. As well as this we can see art made without destruction or waste.

Art has a vast range of materials, which expands to almost everything we can think of. With this comes a lot of waste produce, the experimenting, the prototypes, and the final product all create waste. Waste in the environment is not sustainable for artists to continue with in their practice.

“The more the issues of sustainability and the environment become really significant for all of us, what happens in the studio is now reaching a critical point. In terms of how things are built, how things are wasted or retained, and I have to begin to examine that.”

(Phyllida Barlow, 2022)

Barlow highlights how art practices are not sustainable anymore and must find change. Waste cannot be measured in art, but we can get an idea that it creates negative impacts. knowing how there's a range of materials producing their own carbon footprint. For example, Cement which creates large amounts of carbon dioxide, through the process of the chemical reaction when being made. Overall, it makes up 8% of the worldwide emissions (Ramsden, K., 2020).

It is also good to note that even if the materials used do not cause carbon emissions themselves the use of it produces a demand in production. The industrial production of these materials causes carbon emissions. Art practices can reduce this by using recycled materials like reusing concrete from old structures or the environment as a sculptural tool.

The exhibition *Souls grow deep like the rivers* exhibits black artist from Southern USA who created art based on America's history of slavery, segregation, and institutionalised racism. All the materials were locally sourced "scrap metal, found objects, branches, roots, clay soil and composite materials" (Royal Academy of Arts, p. 8). This exhibition proves that it is possible to have art practices where waste isn't created. Instead, waste and found materials are used, for example Lonnie Holley's *Keeping a Record of it (Harmful Music)* 1986.



Figure 5 Keeping a record of it (harmful music, Lonnie Holley (no date)

This piece was created to comment on the 1950's racist mindset that music made by black creators was a danger to white ears. In the piece is a rusted and broken record player with a snapped record on top with a skull in the centre. The rusty metal presents the harm, as the artist uses the idea that we are all aware of how rust is can cause serious harm if cut. The skull is presenting death and morbidity, staring the viewer in the face, like a confrontation. It is 'keeping a record' of the past discrimination. The show itself being extremely powerful, interlinking sustainable materials with a forceful message portraying how any artist can do

the same. Artists do not have to label themselves as environmental artist to be environmentally conscious.

There is also the discussion that use of materials are based on what people have access to. In richer areas of western countries using things like concrete, tar and non-organic resin is very easy as they are accessible. However, as shown in *Souls Grow Deep like the Rivers* in places like Southern USA in the 1950's where the community is less fortunate materials are harder to come by so re-using material and using locally sourced materials are more common.

“Their lives shaped by segregation and living in economically deprived circumstances, most artist here had to find alternative means to obtain both education and art materials... when acrylics and water colours were impossible to acquire, house paint was large in supply.”

(Royal Academy of Arts, 2023, p. 20)

Art practices in richer countries must see how privileged they are in comparison and have a conscious mindset that the impacts of their work will affect places like Africa first. For example, Chad is the most vulnerable country to the effects of climate change according to the Notre Dame- Global Adaptation Indicative Index (Iberdola, 2020). This is an index of countries being examined by their exposure, sensitivity, and ability to adapt to climate effects. Looking at this through a social context Chad may not produce the most emissions but they will be the most effected as a lower income country. Whilst in the UK waste is transported to countries like Malaysia, Turkey and Poland (*Greenpeace UK, 2021*). In lower income countries it becomes more difficult to dispose of these plastics therefore leading to the burning of those plastics, which is incredibly dangerous. This releases toxic gases that are bad for human health (e.g. cancers and damaging immune systems) as well as the planets eco-system this is unfair and unsustainable. Every day waste is already overbearing so artists must take this into consideration when selecting materials.

How we treat the environment is how it will react back to us, we raise the temperature of the world then the icecaps start to melt, and sea levels rise. It is all based on cause and effect. James Bridle describes the environment as an “otherness of a more-than-human-world” (Bridle, J, 2023, p.10) , which is the idea that as humans we view other-than-human life as less than us. There becomes a hierarchy of worlds where human life sits at the top and we put this ‘other’ world to the side, despite the fact we must rely on the other-than-human world to exist. Artwork’s help create connectivity with this other life and us. Art can be spread globally reaching areas like cities where nature isn’t prominent and create people to remember its importance and hopefully reduce harmful environmental activities.

“We consistently think of human as primary and the earth as derivative rather than thinking of the earth as primary and the human as derivative. This must change.”

(1992 Quoted in Grande, J.K., 2004 p. 8)

One of many examples how the other-than-human world is smarter than we see it at face value is the Wood Wide Web. Physiologist Rajiv Angrish (2022) explains the theory that trees and plants share resources through underground network of a fungi called mycelia.



Figure 6 Mycelium, John, E. and Brewer, G. (2023)

This fungus is found to connect roots of trees and plants in the soil. They help the exchange of things like nutrients and water. This system has been seen through observations like living tree stumps. Decade old tree stumps found to have been kept alive through the surrounding trees and in turn the stumps transport water to those healthy trees. It has also been seen that plants alert each other against danger, when plants are attacked, they send signals through the fungi system to the surrounding healthy plants which then produce insect repellent. As humans we communicate in a very similar way, using internet networks and communities. Artists rely on networks, like Instagram, to spread work. We are not so far removed as we think we are from this other world.

“Organisms exist in relation to one another and to their environment shaping conditions of life and being shaped by them.”

(Johnson, A.E. and Wilkinson, K.K. 2021, Citing: Jane Zelikova, p. 287)

Canadian artist Betty Beaumont states “nature is an integral part of the human value system” (Grande, 2004, p. 151). Beaumont is one of the many artists who chooses to intervene in the climate crisis through their work. This is the most sustainable corner of the art world for the environment. Betty Beaumont creates site specific and conceptual pieces over a range of social, economic, political, architectural, and environmental pieces. Her environmental work attempts to change the environment for the better. Her piece *Ocean Landmark* started at a hydroelectric power plant where her and a team of scientists created 500 tons of coal fly-ash blocks. Which is made into 17,000 bricks. It was situated in the Atlantic off the coast of Fire Island where the bricks were deposited at the bottom of the ocean. These blocks have then gone on to create a healthy marine eco system, where fish and plants thrive. The national oceanographic and atmosphere administration called this work a “fish haven” (Kemp, 2004). As an installation piece Beaumont has removed the issues of waste from art practice as well as fossil fuel waste. The work also meant that fishing was cleaner because the fish themselves were healthier. Beaumont’s work proves that any positive movements within nature also improves human life.



Figure 7 Ocean landmark, S, C., Betty Beaumont, 2012



Figure 8 17,000 coal bricks, Betty Beaumont, Creative Capital

In conclusion, art practices are accountable for their carbon footprint and other negative impacts of their work, artists are not indifferent from any other person on their accountability. There are still going to be many environmental issues like transportation that will not be solved so easily but decreasing our impacts where we can, will have a dent on climate affects. Shown through Betty Beaumont's Ocean landmark, art practices can provide a better eco-system. Lonnie Holly and Andy Goldsworthy are two artists whose practices have sustainability embedded within, with material work and reducing their arts potential addition to waste and emissions. These two are also part of larger groups within Souls grow deep like the rivers and Art in nature organisation. These artists also practice reducing their environmental impacts despite not all being climate artists. Art has such a reach and influence on our societies that changing mindsets wouldn't be hard if the artists is conscious within their own practice. Climate change isn't something that is going to happen, it is present, and it is leading us to global destruction. Timothy Morton (2021, p.7) states that we must stop calling it global warming and climate change but instead start calling it mass extinction.

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