In the turbulence of nature. How do artists and nature respond?

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Abstract

In this thesis the discussion of global warming and nature reclaiming comes into play. Delving deeper into how artists are using art and their work as a way of raising awareness about climate change. The exploration of nature reclaiming our land is a key part of this thesis while using artists who support this as examples, researching into specific locations that were left abandoned by humanity and taken back by nature itself.

Introduction

Living in a world where nature is failing. Nature is a key part of human survival yet we treat it as though it can be easily replaced. In this thesis we will discuss the severity of global warming and the ways artists are responding to help raise awareness on climate change and the need to start acting and fast. Nature reclamation will also be another key point in this essay, thus meaning though we take from nature it fights back by reclaiming land abandoned by us. Chapter one is specifically designed to discuss nature using multiple different examples of cities and buildings that are now home to nature. Linking in artists who photograph these buildings for projects, using something they enjoy doing while also giving us a clear view of how many buildings are actually abandoned. The question that is being portrayed here is the question of why are new buildings being built when so many capable buildings are left to rot and fall to the ground. Architecture is taking over our planet, new buildings being created destroying healthy woodland, while run down buildings are left to become homes to nothing but hollow memories.

In chapter 2 we will talk through the famous artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser and how he dedicated his life to nature through painting and architecture. The way he chose to build his architecture was unique but also helped nature thrive amongst us. He chose to work at peace with nature building around it instead of over it, he believed that we could live in a world where nature coincided with architecture. Majority of architecture demolishes the nature around us to build on top of the land but Hundertwasser didn't believe in this, which will become more clear through the

research. Hundertwasser's work was based on his belief of nature coexisting with society and therefore built his life around protecting nature, creating a connection between his work to the Anthropocene epoch.

The final chapter becomes more broad, where we reflect on the many artists who have created so many memorable pieces of work that are linked with environmental art. These artists are trying to raise awareness of climate change and nature struggling through the medium of art. One of the artists that will be shown is Olafur Eliasson; he takes pieces from nature that were already destroyed and displays them as an immersive exhibition experience. While others like Agnes Denes create work that will help nature thrive for time to come, they made work to display that would also feed hundreds. We also discuss how art has changed a massive amount over the decades, by the way we display our artworks. Using nature to display it in site specific works.

Chapter 1 - Nature Reclaiming

In this chapter you will read about how nature reclaims buildings and cities that we have left abandoned. You will read about specific locations that have been documented, and the history behind how it began, to how it looks to this day. The power of nature is remarkable. Even after the destruction of nature from humanity, nature somehow emerges stronger than ever. If we left nature alone it could thrive, “as any gardener knows, nature doesn't need much space to thrive - give her an inch, and she’ll take a mile” (Gosling n.d), the speed of which nature regrows is substantial. Nature is one of a kind and is spectacular. David Attenborough spoke about this in one of his documentaries ‘A Perfect Planet’, he speaks about how nature survives and exactly what it needs to live. “From mighty storms to freezing winds, weather is vital to life. Rain clouds form and powerful winds carry this fresh water around the globe, revitalising the land” (Attenborough 2021). This shows that a little rain goes a long way with nature and is a key part of its survival.

Of course everyone knows that nature is reclaiming land that we have left abandoned, nevertheless the sheer amount of cities that are being abandoned and becoming overgrown with foliage is beyond belief. As I see it we are increasing global warming by removing ridiculous amounts of forestry in order to build unnecessary buildings. Although there is a positive behind the multitude of towns that are being built, that being the breathtaking remains of uninhabited forgotten locations. Houtouwan is a small village off the eastern coast of China, best known as “China’s forgotten village swallowed by nature” (Wong 2022). Buried so deep below

the ivy you can only see the resemblance of what the buildings once were, which were homes to more than 3,000 residents (Wong 2022). Being abandoned in the 90's it has given mother nature only 3 decades to create the masterpiece that lays over Houtouwan (Gosling n.d). Freelance writer Stefan Andrews wrote about the beauty inside this village stating "Once abundant with life, today the vacant properties of Houtouwan are almost entirely camouflaged under layers of thick greenery." (Andrews 2019). The undisturbed village has now become rather famous with tourists for its unique touch from nature (Wong 2022).

Figure 1 Eisele (N/A) *Houtouwan.*

Even though humanity built this city on top of nature it is remarkable to see how nature has responded to it by sprouting back up once left alone, it gives somewhat hope that nature could survive. French photographer Romain Thiery explores sublime abandoned buildings similar to Houtouwan, where nature is retrieving the land that was taken. His photography work is detailed looking closely at the most fascinating areas of architecture, meaning that the majority if not all his work on this topic has some sort of greenery coating the bricks of the buildings. He has a fascination with derelict buildings that have had enough time for ivy and shrubs to grow between the cracks of the bricks and windows (Callejo 2019). Another

fascination of his is the abandonment of ancient pianos left in these buildings, he manages to capture the both side by side rather neatly. He found this passion from his childhood where he would follow his mother on her photography expeditions, while also playing the piano. He decided to link them both together in his work (Romain Thiery Biography n.d). Travelling around Europe to capture this magnificent imagery he has spent over a decade on this project (Callejo 2019). In a way artists like these are not only discovering land where forgotten buildings sit and nature is thriving, but they also help advertise the quantity of wasted structures. Similarly in my practice I visit abandoned buildings where nature is reclaiming the land, it is incredible to see it in person. Romain Thiery is a photographer that has inspired me throughout my projects. Houtouwan gives a perfect example of nature fighting back and reclaiming parts of land back.

Moving on to the disaster of Chernobyl, delving into the history of how it became abandoned and reclaimed by nature. Chernboyl was once a very populated city in Ukraine, but now is a complete ghost-town with nothing but nature left behind. The city of Chernobyl was destroyed by the hand of a living but is still vital in my practice as it has been completely taken over by nature since the disaster. The image below shows the tests being completed where the nuclear plant exploded nearly 30 years later to determine how long it would take for it to become habitable again. The outcome of this was 20,000 years (National Geographic 2019). How amazing is it that nature is still thriving under those conditions, but humanity can’t, this just goes to show that we don't give enough credit to nature and if we helped it could thrive in our society.

Figure 2 Ludwig (2019) *Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster.*

Routine maintenance had been set but “During the test, however, workers violated safety protocols and power surged inside the plant.” (Erin Blakemore 2019). Attempts were made to shut it down but unfortunately they failed, and that's where the disaster began. During the investigation the physicists from the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences stated “Forget it”, “You will never return to Pripyat”. (Midnight in Chernobyl P.260). And that is completely true for our lifetime.

The research into Pripyat Amusement Park shows in detail part of Chernobyl completely run down and taken back by nature. I have come across it many of times in my individual practical work due to the decaying rides that you can see peaking over the trees. The fascinating thing is that this amusement park never actually got to fully open their doors. In realistic terms they destroyed the land that was there to create this amusement park only for it to never open its gates.

Figure 3 Ryzhkov (2020) *Pripyat Amusement Park.*

The image of the bumper cars clearly shows it being deserted, the leaves scattered across the track, the cars coated with a blanket of rust, it gives you a haunted feel. The irony of nature reclaiming land that had never even opened to the public. Yet again this is an amazing example of nature reclaiming land that links to Chernobyl.

Chapter 2 - Friedensreich Hundertwasser

Moving on to the second chapter we will be discussing the famous artist Friednsreich Hundertwasser throughout his life as an architect. As well as the anthropocene epoch that links to Hundertwasser and the way he works. Today, to build architecture means to remove greenery, Friedensreich Hundertwasser spent his whole life trying to change this perspective. I've decided to dig deeper into Friedenreich Hundertwasser and his life throughout this chapter for that exact reason. Unfortunately, the way we are living isn't sustainable, Hundertwasser saw this throughout his life and fought for change.

> While the warming of Antarctica occurred progressively and scientists charted it faithfully, the collapse of five billion tonnes of Antarctic ice in a matter of months saw nature cross an unpredicted threshold (Johnston,Gismondi and Goodman 2019 P.13).

Even scientists aren't sure of the future, artists like Hundertwasser are essential to our survival as they are not only raising awareness, but they are giving back to nature.

We discuss who Hundertwasser was as a person, an artist, and how he became famous for his architecture. He began as a painter but was always intrigued with architecture. He had a passion for building as it offered a level of protection for so many that had no roof over their heads (Schmied P.6). Hundertwasser was always being questioned why, as a known painter, he was so captivated by architecture and having the need to meddle with it, his response was always "But as a painter I am also just a man" (Hundertwasser 1968). Being a painter does not mean that he is

secluded too only that. His aim was to create mesmerising buildings at a low cost without destroying nature, and not to create buildings of the usual technological ways. His main aim with creating these buildings was not for the technological side of things. The most important tool for him is a shovel when creating his architecture (Schmied P.6). He began his career as an architect by painting his dream designs using natural colours, such as dark greens, dirty yellows (Taschen P.10). In 1946 Hundertwasser worked on a farm, and he remembered vividly “how brown the soil was and how green the grass, and I decided to become a painter.” (Hundertwasser). It appears Hundertwasser always combined the natural colours of the earth into his architecture paintings and designs, in a way this shows how truly blessed he was to have nature around him. Colour in architecture was important to Hundertwasser, it has become so unnatural to add colour into our architecture yet he chose to test the matter, going outside of the public's comfort zone in order to support the nature around him.

> It is absolutely clear that colour in architecture has to do with nature and that the colours in architecture either have to adapt to nature or must be a counterpoint to nature or a contrast, but a good contrast to nature, one which underscores nature and underscores architecture. This means that architecture and nature should complement one another and by their juxtaposition set themselves in a good light. (Hundertwasser, 1981).

His wise words are a clear example of what we should be doing to help support our natural surroundings.

“The straight line leads to the Downfall of our Civilisation, 1953.” (Hundertwasser P.30). Here we discuss whether there is a need for constant straight lines in our lives, whether maybe there’s a way to go around nature instead of through it. Our lives are full of straight lines, it’s almost repetitive. Everything looks the same

whether that is the architecture around us, the pavements, or even the streets, everything is in straight lines. Whereas Hundertwasser always worked in uneven, zigzag lines even while walking in his day-to-day life, “It pleases me enormously that the line I trace is never straight, never confused, but has a reason to be like this in every tiny part” (Hundertwasser P.30). His argument is that everybody makes uneven lines without even realising, through their feet. Walking around leaving ‘trails’ he believed that these marks were “more beautiful, more genuine and more justified than those I could draw on paper” (Hundertwasser P.30). This would explain why Hundertwasser’s architectural work didn’t have a solid structure, it was always unevenly shaped with nature intertwined. How does this help our environment? Well, it doesn't necessarily help but it's a step in the right direction as doing this would allow trees to remain where they are and build around them. As Hundertwasser said “architecture and nature should complement one another”. (Hundertwasser 1981, p.48).

The Forest Spiral in Darmstadt is one of Hundertwasser’s most famous buildings, also his last, and rightfully, completely covered in nature. Due to it being the most known out of all of them, it gave the perfect example of how he carried out his work, delving into the making and the way this helps our planet thrive.

Figure 4 Hundertwasser (2020) *Forest Spiral*.

He believed that The Forest Spiral could be a solution for the future, in the sense that nature is growing all over it, and not completely destroyed (Hundertwasser 1996, P.266). This could be a crucial part of improving global warming. “It is a building dedicated to nature and people’s dreams” (Hundertwasser P.266) believing that this is a great way that nature could gain a stable position in our beloved cities. The building is constructed below the grass turf meaning that above the hotel is blooming with grass, trees, and even wildlife (Hundertwasser 1996, P.266) It is said that “The Forest Spiral in Darmstadt is an unusual building that illustrates solutions for the future.” (Hundertwasser P.266). Which brings me to my question of, what is being done to help climate change? Hundertwasser started an amazing revolution where you could build without harming nature, nature and people living peacefully side by side. But unfortunately, after Hundertwasser passed away his dreams followed. We still tear down nature to build our cities for the simple reason of it being ‘easier’ and ‘saves more time’, humanity yet again being lazy.

When considering Hundertwasser and the way he chose to work it forms a connection to the anthropocene epoch. Due to him continuously trying to seek a way of nature coinciding with humanity. National Geographic speaks a lot about the Anthropocene times, it is also known as the Anthropocene epoch. The meaning behind this is “an unofficial unit of geologic time” which was used to help describe to us “the most recent period in Earth’s history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet’s climate and ecosystems.” (Geographic n.d). According to National Geographic the word Anthropocene came from the Greek words ‘anthropo’, which means for man, and ‘cene’ meaning new, which was made popular by Eugene Stormer who was a biologist and Paul Crutzen a chemist in the 2000 (Geographic n.d). The question is “now that we are on the threshold of the Anthropocene epoch, how should humans envision and understand their place in the world?” (Sigurd Bergmann and Forrest J.Clingerman). Whether we humans have the means and cultural tools to be able to imagine a new way of living with the natural environment at a crucial time when our planet needs us (Bergmann and Clingerman 2018). It is a great question because even though you see more information and statistics about how fast our earth is deteriorating, the majority of us still carry on our daily lives as we would before. Nicolas Bourriaud discusses art in the Anthropocene with humans and objects, he states that “according to most scientists, the geological balance where the impact of human activities is actually absolutely visible and tangible on planet earth” (Bourriaud 2015). He is interested in how this impacts our portrayals of our world today and how it affects the artwork that we see. In his discussion he forces us to consider what art would be without nature (Bourriaud 2015). A world without nature for our art would be extremely generic and unoriginal, nature inspires a lot of artworks which would make sense to why artists are fighting

for change in global warming. Many artists are working in the anthropocene epoch as they believe nature deserves a chance at survival which is something Friendenreich Hundertwasser believed in his whole life which was proven through my research into him in this chapter.

Chapter 3 - Artists responding to climate change

Next, we will discuss how artists are responding to climate change through art and how people are reacting to this. Climate change is something that you hear about everyday, but not enough people are actually pushing for change. In any case there are a small number of people trying to make a change, artists are pushing for a difference, the question is how are they doing so? We become greedy with nature, taking so many things that go to waste. Cree Indian Proverb quotes “Only when the last tree has died and the last river been poisoned and the last fish been caught will we realise we cannot eat money.” This goes to show that in today’s society all we think about is our greed for money, but in reality when time comes we can’t actually eat the money we thrive for, it is the nature around us that is going to keep us alive. Yet we treat it as though it is easily replaceable. As Josee Johnston states “Rainforests are frequently described as the global ‘common lungs’.“ (Josee Johnston P.40). It means that without the ‘lungs’ the whole body cannot survive, meaning nature itself cannot survive.

Art is a massive part of raising awareness to the severity of global warming, artists use their skills to create artworks such as sculptures where the public can interact and understand better through something beautiful. Here is discussed how art is becoming a huge part of the push to save nature. Artsper magazine believes that

> Nature began to be depicted beyond pure aestheticism, as art and nature found themselves at the heart of this political battle. In fact, nature’s deterioration has profoundly changed the relationship between artists and the landscape.

This is an amazing example of how powerful art can really be if given the chance, it helps change lives. It’s true that art changes with time, in the 90’s art was almost always exhibited in gallery spaces; now art is often displayed outside in natural spaces for a much larger scale for their work (Artsper Magazine 2021). Due to site specific land art, artwork is no longer clear without the consideration of the space in which it is presented, the environment plays an active role in most of the artwork that is being exhibited in this generation. Situ art means land art, a movement where artists are attempting to create artworks in the site specific area which is the natural environment itself. The environment around it becomes the artwork in a lot of artists' work that are produced in this era (Artsper Magazine 2021). Walter De Maria created a work piece called Lightning Field in 1977, where he used the environment around him to create his work. It is a well known piece in this art movement of situ art for this reason. The piece is a permanent installation and is located in Quemado, New Mexico. It is created out of 400 steel posts that are scattered over a kilometre of the desert, the reasoning behind this work is to be able to allure lighting to the rods. It’s a somewhat immersive experience as you're able to stay near the installation in a type of shed to watch the lightning strike hit the rods at night (Artsper Magazine 2021). This is an incredible way to show the true beauty of what nature can do, and give us a reason to fight back against the pollution.

The discussion of Olafur Eliasson comes into play here, and how his environmental work has helped raise awareness about global warming, discussing multiple different pieces he has created on this topic. Olafur Eliasson is one of the many artists whose work is aimed at global warming and the ways we can help to slow the impact. He created an unforgettable piece in the centre of London back in 2018, it was solely

based on giant ice glaciers. Eliason travelled to the waters of Greenland to extract 30 blocks of ice glaciers that had broken away from the land due to climate change, during this procedure geologist Minik Rosing helped. He then decided to place them in London in an open exhibition where people could interact with them, being able to go up to the ice blocks and touch them gave the opportunity for the people to feel some sort of emotions towards what they were seeing in the hope that it would kick start their journey to being slowing global warming (Yalcinkaya 2018). In this installation there are 24 ice blocks placed in a circular design outside Tate Modern and the other 6 outside the Bloomberg headquarters in London. It began on December the 11th 2018 and ended when all of the ice had melted which all depended on the weather at that time. Members of the public were able to interact with them while watching the thawing happen right in front of their eyes. Eliasson states in an interview that “I’m not naive, i understand that this one project probably will not suddenly tilt something major around, but i do honestly believe that I am part of a movement” (Eliasson 2018). The installation coincided with the meeting of the world leaders at the COP24 climate change conference in Katowice, Poland. It aimed to influence urgent public actions against global warming (Yalcinkaya 2018). Rosing talks about the difference in climate change since the installation “Since 2015, the melting of ice in Greenland has raised global sea level by 2.5 millimetres. Since the discovery of the greenhouse effect in 1896, global temperatures have increased more than one degree celsius. Earth is changing at an ever-increasing speed” (Rosing n.d). The rate of climate change is increasing fast at worrying speed.

Figure 5 Eliasson (2018) *Glacier*.

He spoke about his work and stated “the ice is amazingly beautiful - you can smell it, you can kiss it, and essentially put your hands on it and touch Greenland", “it is a lot more physical, it suddenly gives a stronger sense of what it is they’re talking about when they say the Greenland ice caps are melting.” (Eliasson 2018). It's an amazing back story to the reasoning behind this work, it’s purely on Eliasson wanting to raise awareness on how nature is in danger as global warming is increasing causing the glaciers to deteriorate at such rapid speeds. Even in some of his most recent work that is displayed on the second floor of Tate Modern's Blavatnik building there are still some still very interactive pieces. As you walk into the room a map is displayed with 40 pieces of Olafur Eliasson’s work on it, where he allows multiple different opportunities for the public to interact with his work (Curtis 2020). In an exhibition review by Francesca Curtis she talks a lot about how Eliasson’s work is very interactive, “They can stand under a rainbow coloured rain shower in *Beauty* (1993), battle through fog in *Din Blinde Passager* (2010), and interrogate their own shadow broken into a spectrum of colour in *Your Uncertain Shadow* (colour) (2010).” (Curtis

2020). He creates work that allows the public to interact with it, allowing them to learn more about climate change and what we are doing to this planet.

We move on to Agnes Denes who is another environmental artist who has raised awareness on the severity of global warming, we talk through her work during her life as an artist using one of her most known pieces. Agnes Denes is an artist who has created their life work solely based on global warming and ways to help improve the way of living with nature surviving around us. The reason for researching her is because she is one of the first colonists of environmental artists, which of course is a huge part of what my research is based on (Lee 2020). Agnes Denes states “My art is about overcoming our limitations” (Agnes Denes). Compared to the majority of artists who work with the earth, Denes makes her work without disturbing the natural surroundings. Instead of this she creates her work in harmony with the nature around it, creating solutions for this at the same time. Majority of her work is creating using seeds, the reason for this is so that it can grow and flourish in the environment it's placed in for time to come. She creates art works to raise awareness while also helping the environment in itself by planting and growing crops (Lee 2020). Much like her piece in 1982 called Wheatfield - A Confrontation where she is protesting against global warming, she decided to prove somewhat of a point by planting a wheatfield that was two acres big in a landfill. It was created after the Twin Towers in downtown Manhattan was built back in 1982 as a way to show that the land beneath them was flattened in order to build them, meaning they took a lot of nature away (Public Delivery 2019).

Figure 6 John McGrall (1982) *Wheatfield - A Confrontation*.

The photo was taken by John McGrall, while Agnes Denes walks proudly through the crop of wheat she had created. The field was planted by Denes herself in 1982 summer time, the land that she planted on was a property worth $4.5 billion people thought this created a satire feel (Public Delivery 2019). She drew attention to the fact that in today's society our priorities are completely wrong, we are so greedy with money that we forget that we only get one earth and one chance, yet climate change is something that is becoming increasingly worse quicker than ever. When talking about her work for this project Denes says

> "Making art today is synonymous with assuming responsibility for our fellow humans. We are the first species that has the ability to consciously alter its evolution, even put an end to its existence. We have gotten hold of our destiny, and our impact on earth is astounding. Because of our tremendous 'success' we are overrunning the planet, squandering its resources." (Agnes Denes 1982).

What she says is completely true in the sense that we are evolving on this earth but we are not helping nature evolve.

Conclusion

‘In the turbulence of nature. How do artists and nature respond?’ The research found in chapter one comes to the conclusion that no matter how much we push nature to its limits it will always try to fight back in some way or another, in this case it’s reclaiming buildings and cities that were once beloved by us but soon left derelict.

In chapter 1 it was discussed about how nature reclaims parts of our world without control from humans. There were many examples of the places nature has reclaimed and the reasoning behind this, the history of the places. Houtouwan, “China’s forgotten village swallowed by nature” (Wong 2022) was the first example presented that demonstrates that in order for nature to reclaim these buildings they have to be left untouched by the human hand, usually meaning that they’re abandoned and left to the elements for nature to take over.

On the other hand in chapter 2 Friedensreich Hundertwasser and his method of creating work demonstrates an example of how specific artists are working towards a world where nature and humanity can coexist peacefully. *The Forest Spiral* is one of Hundertwasser’s (1995-2000) most known architectural buildings due to the nature that's growing all around the building, “It is a building dedicated to nature and people’s dreams” (Hundertwasser P.266). The conclusion found from this is that there is an easy way to live with nature. We as a society are addicted to creating our land in straight lines, straight buildings, straight walls, and even straight fences. Whereas if we followed Hundertwasser’s dream of building around the trees and

grass it would save so much of the greenery. It just takes a little more work that unfortunately civilians aren't willing to do.

In the last chapter multiple things were discussed inside, how corporations are ‘helping’ the environment compared to how artists are creating artworks on the matter to both help raise awareness and work with nature itself. The argument was whether corporations are actually helping or if they’re doing it simply to gain more money, Josee Johnston talks about how the majority of these companies are doing it for popularity and money. Overall we concluded that there are corporations that are pure about their methods of battling global warming. We also discussed how artists are using their work to reflect on climate change and the ways we can overcome it. Agnes Denes, being one of the most memorable colonists in environmental artists, creating work that can feed the hundreds for time to come.

To summarise everything, nature is struggling and needs our help. We live our lives normally without realising the harm we are doing to this earth; we should praise the artists who are trying to make a difference through media that can be quite playful for the viewers to remain engaged. Our generation is so money driven and selfish that we don't care what environment we leave for future generations to come.

List of illustrations

Figure 1 :

Eisele, Johannes. “China’s Most Beautiful Abandoned Village: Houtouwan,” *CNN Travel*, 2022, edition.cnn.com/travel/article/houtouwan-china-ghost-village/index.html#:~:text=China%27s%20forgotten%20village%20swallowed%20by%20nature%20Maggie%20Hiufu,an%20Internet%20sensation%20and%20an%20unusual%20travel%20hotspot.. Accessed 3 Nov. 2022.

Figure 2:

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