

Laura Mitchinson 2204668

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Image Making

Question: **Analyse the impact of the environment and sustainability on art practice by describing how artists have responded to these issues in their work. Provide evidence from at least 2 artists and thinkers.**

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Sustainability and The Environment

The extraction and manipulation of Earth's resources—whether motivated by boredom, curiosity, or imagination—may ultimately stem from our desire for greater comfort, or so it is now presented to us. "The climate crisis is a leadership crisis" (Johnson and Wilkinson, 2021, p. xx), which attempts to destroy our fragile ecosystem, and with rapid species decline and natural systems failing, it is no wonder artists are responding in increasing numbers, perhaps just in time for a global shift in consciousness.

"Species survival depends on us keeping pace with the rate of change as it does on the nature of the change itself." (Bridle, 2023, para 3).

The 2016 Paris Agreement warned us of catastrophic consequences unless we could limit rising global temperatures to 1.5°C. Last year, the world exceeded its annual threshold. (McCabe, K, 2025)
Our environment is an intrinsic part of the art world, with an ever-changing identity that profoundly impacts human creativity, from the first sustainable cave paintings to contemporary, politically and socially charged Environmental art. Climate catastrophe is here, happening faster than any science could have predicted, and it is intensifying.

This essay examines the influence of environmental concerns and sustainability on the work of Anish Kapoor, Meg Webster, and Echo Morgan, with a particular focus on materiality and the object, informed by theories from Guy Debord, Yves Citton, Donna J. Haraway, Claire Bishop, James Bridle, as well as the anthologies *The Object* and *All We Can Save*, and Ali Smith's *Artful*. Sustainability, defined as "causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue for a long time," and the environment as nature—"the air, water, and land in or on which people, animals, and plants live" (Cambridge, 2025).

Anish Kapoor is known for his behemoth, void-like sculptures and his use of pigment, working with contrasts, materiality, space and perception.



Fig. 1. *Svayambhu* (Anish Kapoor, 1997)

His "monochromatic painting, sort of slowly making its way through the gallery" (CollDocumentary 2012), *Svayambhu* 1997 (meaning "autogenerated, self-made"), shown in Figure 1, is created using a mechanical track system, wax, and oil-based paint. Each installation is site-specific, requiring reengineering and recoating each time. Crucial to the design, "Aerotrope researched and experimented with different compoundings of wax in order to achieve the most versatile balance between material stability and plasticity" (Aerotrope, no date), indicating that the environmental impact and sustainability of the piece did not impact the result.

When interviewed on a solo exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London (CollDocumentary 2012), he said, "I don't feel I have a message to give, a thing to say, so therefore I'm not trying to illustrate a point", yet from the perspective of Bridle (2023) *Svayambhu* could be described as a programmed, artificial phenology, responding to the gallery and changing like the seasons.

Dismemberment, Site 1 (2003-2009, fig. 3) is a 75-metre-long sculpture commissioned by a New Zealand art patron. Gargantuan, representational, and described as a mythological entity, this site-specific work only considered the environment in an aesthetic, ritualised sense; "the taking apart of a body" where he feels the sculpture becomes part of the land. (Kapoor, no date). The site is a perceptual environment that resists acceleration, disrupts extractive viewing habits, and cultivates slow, embodied, and ethical modes of attention—precisely the kind of aesthetic practice Citton identifies as vital in an age of attention crisis. (Citton, 2016)

However, this has a cost. Composed of 47 tons of steel and 6.5 tons of polyvinyl fabric mesh, these materials rely on the petrochemical industry for both transportation and their production.



Fig. 2. *Dismemberment, Site 1* (Anish Kapoor, 2003-2009)

Sharing respect for the 2021 Turner prize collective nominees, Kapoor maintained distance by saying, "they speak of a different agenda", and warned "against agitprop, because art is, in the end – in its best and purest forms – unknowable." (*Anish Kapoor: 'The government is damn dangerous and a bunch of f***ing*

liars' | *The Independent*, 2021) However, in 2025, working with activists from Greenpeace, his 39 x 25ft canvas was installed on an oil rig off the coast of England, specifically on Shell's North Sea platform (Figure 2).



Fig. 3. *Butchered* (Anish Kapoor, 2025)

Kapoor's *Butchered* (2025) utilised seawater, beetroot powder, and a non-toxic, food-based pond dye to make a visceral point about the oil and gas industry's damage to the environment.

As Kapoor stated (Greenpeace UK, 2025), "We can't sit and watch. We have to take part in a full and real way. Shell pays no heed."

Extraction, greed, and pollution are wholly different creative motivations from his earlier works. Emboldened by the need for sustainability and threats to our environment, he has now created the agitprop he previously warned against, making a newsworthy piece of protest art.

The edge, as described by Ali Smith, has agency. *Butchered* occupies the space between the oil rig and the ocean of life below, and they carry power, memories, and meaning.

Due to its controversial location, *Butchered* now only exists as photographs, disseminated within a commodified, image-driven world, hegemonised by Capitalism—authentic human interaction supplanted by algorithmic-oriented passive consumption, however, this image-driven world can carry this art, as it works through broken time. (Smith, 2012)

Debord (2017) notes that modern society has become dominated by representations and images — "the spectacle"—that mediate all social relations. Debord sees this as a form of social control, where the spectacle serves to maintain the status quo by distracting and pacifying the public through endless representations of life rather than life itself, much like his *Dismemberment* works and *Svayambhu*. However, in collaborating with Greenpeace UK (2025), this control is interrupted; "BUTCHERED symbolises the deep wounds the fossil fuel industry has left on our planet – and the harm it continues to cause people, in its relentless pursuit of profit."

Their actions throughout history push back against the capitalist agenda.

"Things condense power and violence. Just as a thing accumulates productive forces and desires, so does it also accumulate destruction and decay." (Hudek, 2014, pg. 48)



Fig. 4. *Butchered* (Anish Kapoor, 2025)

Considering the petroeconomy's benefits from Kapoor's sculptural endeavours, a collaboration with Greenpeace using biodegradable material indicates a shift in the consideration of sustainability in his work

and the environment. "To think-with is to stay with the naturalcultural multispecies trouble on earth."
(Haraway, 2016, para 2.)

In contrast, the natural world has been a focus for Meg Webster since she began exhibiting in the 1980s, rooted in Minimalism and Land Art—movements historically focused on formal systems and earth materials—Webster diverges from their often monumental and extractive tendencies. She instead emphasises sustainability, care, and ecological intimacy, making her work part of a broader shift in contemporary art toward environmental responsibility.

Locally sourced materials form each sculpture, "not static objects, they remain open to their environments, shaped by shifting light, air, and temperature, engaging the viewer's body and senses in a continuous, unfolding exchange." (*Minimal: Pinault Collection*, 2025)



Fig. 5. *Salt Cone, Mound (1988), Wall of Wax, Mother Mound (1990), Circle of Branches (2025), Bourse de Commerce, Paris (Meg Webster, 2025)*

Within the Pinault Collection's exhibition "Minimal" (Figure 5), Webster incorporates elements of salt, wax, clay, soil, and living branches, defining sustainability through the use of locally sourced materials. The impermanence of these materials affects their presence in art history. "A leaf in the wind, a speck of dust in the universe. Man is expendable. While structural concepts affirmed man's object mastery, the drooping materials acknowledge the collapse of the great illusion." (Hudek, 2014, p. 128)

It is no surprise that her fragile sculptures are gaining momentum in the art world, when rapid climate change is affecting works of art worldwide. (*How the world's most priceless artifacts are being protected from climate change*, 2025)

Bringing the environment indoors evokes a conversation between the viewer, the sculpture, and the site, as the materials transform under the influence of gravity, or as shown in Figure 6, with children's fingertips.

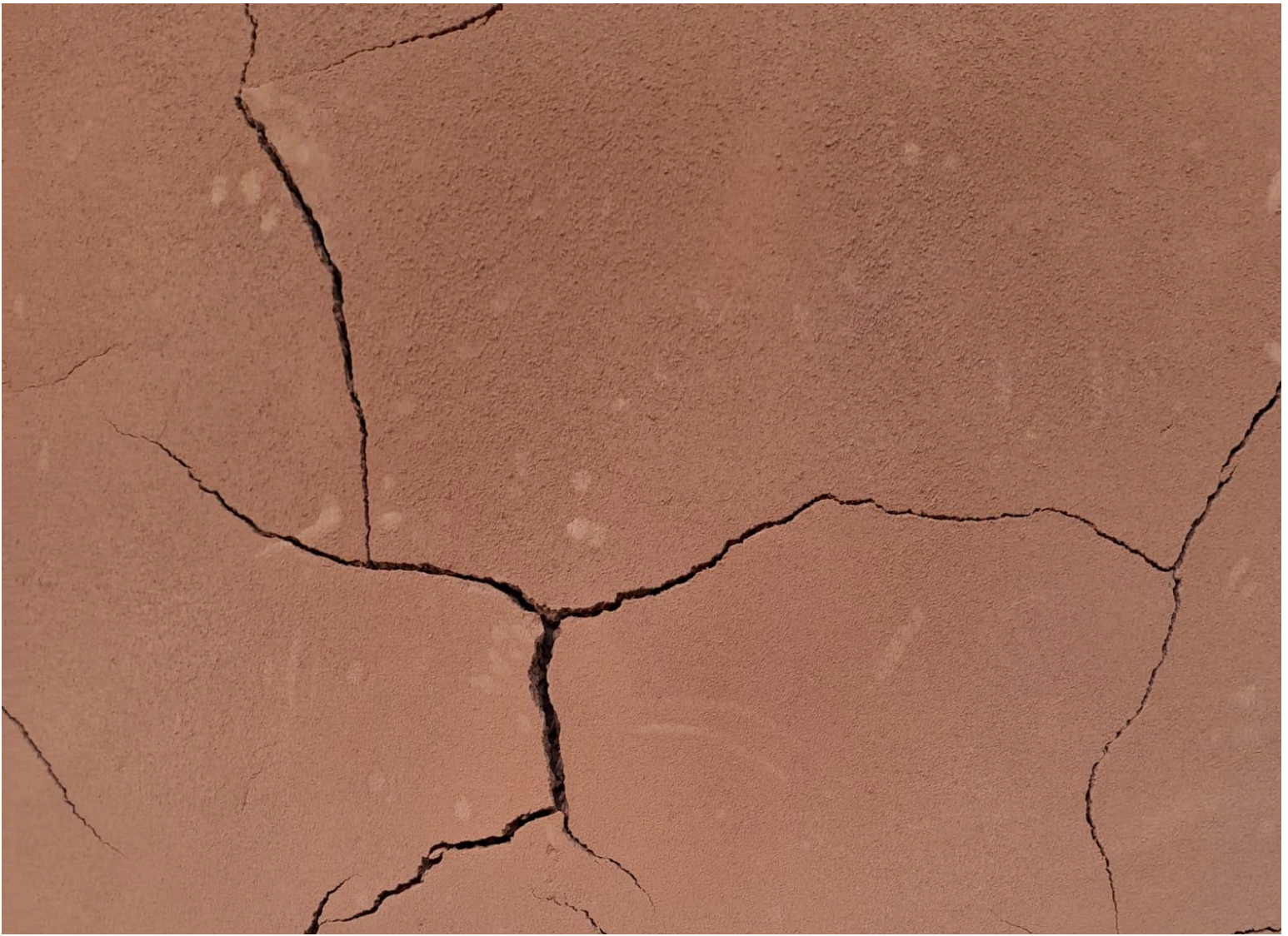


Fig. 6. *Mother Mound* (1990), (Meg Webster, 2025)

Forming meaning through the idea of the "power object[s]" by studying alongside Richard Serra and Donald Judd ('Meg Webster Sculpts With Earth, Salt, and Beeswax', 2024), Webster encourages human connection through "sensorially rich sculptures" that are larger than the self.

Plants used to attract pollinators in some installations, such as *Glass Spiral* (1990, Figure 7), highlight biological systems and growth cycles. The display of such works involves tending and care, underscoring the ongoing maintenance that ecological systems (and sustainable practices) require.



Fig. 7. *Glass Spiral* (Meg Webster, 1990)

Using soil, herbs, shrubs, flowers and native grasses, she has created "nutrient rich topsoil" for landfill spaces ('Socrates Sculpture Park - Meg Webster', no date), creating ecosystems that draw attention to natural processes.

Many installations demonstrate growth, decay, pollination, sensory experience of scent and texture, again mixing artistic expression with organic function - environmental stewardship rather than passive representation, using what could be described almost as nature's readymades, "It is not a difficult jump, then, to shift to the use of organic materials that have a limited life - they die, they rot." (Hudek, 2014, p. 80) In addition, Webster's practice directly resists the logic of Citton as he critiques contemporary culture's demand for rapid attentional turnover. Webster requires our time, and with minimal visual clues that request prolonged or repeated engagement, their sensory subtleties draw attention away from image-based consumption. (Citton, 2016)



Fig. 8. *Solar Grow Room* (Meg Webster, 2016)

Paula Cooper Gallery (no date) notes how integrating solar power and live vegetation makes sustainability a functional part of the work, not just a theme. Shaped by earth and organic matter, her works have anticipated later ecological conversations about the fragility and interdependence of natural systems.

This is what a more-than-human politics actually looks like: the careful and conscious attention to the needs and desires of others, the acknowledgement of their agency and value, and the willingness to adapt our existing structures of society and place, to better account for all of us (Bridle, 2023, para 2).

Over time, Webster's art has become more explicitly ecological, reflecting contemporary concerns about climate change, biodiversity loss, and sustainable futures.



Fig. 9. *Portrait 爱LOVE* (Echo Morgan, 2021)

The practice of Echo Morgan (Xie Rong) incorporates symbols and influences from her childhood in China and adulthood in the UK, as well as the gestures of her voice and body, and the dynamics of live performance. Exhibiting since 2010, she explores a personal narrative, often expressing the complexities of freedom, patriarchy, motherhood and governmental control. She describes how she gave herself a new name in 2004 to "completely escape from Xie Rong's life", yet her identity crosses over between both versions of herself. (Morgan, 2012)

Grounded in concerns for sustainability and the environment, her 2021 work developed a critical perspective on short grass landscapes as ecological disasters. Figure. 9, *Portrait 爱LOVE* (2021) shows risograph printed, self-portrayal layered with habitual wildflowers and weeds, examining the emotional forces involved in the ongoing colonisation of wild environments, hoping for more-than-human, inclusive wild spaces.

The emergence of this perspective includes reflections on her father during childhood in the 1990s, tracing geographical transformations from forests to concrete across her lifetime. (Morgan, 2012)

Rong's practice aligns with Citton's (2016) call for aesthetic forms that repair our attentional environments, offering spaces where attention is shared, sustained and ethically reimagined. They cultivate attentional

care, as demonstrated at the Festival Territori in Ibiza, Spain, where Rong performed *Echo of Posidonia* (Figure 10), utilising body paint, twelve anchors, chains, and seawater.



Fig. 10. *Echo of Posidonia, Live* (Echo Morgan, 2022)

In an interview with Innovate Grant (2023), Morgan explained how fragile "posidonia is[...], due to climate change and pollution from tourism. A scar from a large boat in the meadow can take a century to recover. Studies have found that 29% of Posidonia has been lost since 1879."

Posidonia acts as a sink for carbon, supporting the coastline - a "haven" for marine life. This piece of art embodies the natural world, utilising sustainable, performative objects situated beside Ibiza's Posidonia marine reserve.

James Bridle explains that humanity's survival depends on a new compact between humanity and the more-than-human world, asking what our ecosystems want, instead of what we want from them.(Bridle 2023)

Using her body as a canvas and voice for these ecologically vital marine plants, she painted herself white with bright green plants that suggest hope and life. She empowered the audience, inviting them to help her

lift the chained anchors from her neck, symbolising community effort with relational objects, yet as described by Lygia Clark, "The same object may express different meanings for different subjects at different moments." (Hudek, 2014, p. 212). Human impact is responsible for the damage caused to these underwater meadows. The sea is a conflicted space that represents vulnerable lives making desperate journeys. The negative impacts of tourism upon such a fragile ecosystem are our responsibility. Alongside her accompanying spoken words, the anchors depict this. Audience participation raises awareness of these issues in a personal and meaningful way. (Innovate Grant, 2023)

The resilience of the body inspires her, as does the notion of transformance and the limits of the self. As highlighted by Bridle (2023), our species needs to tackle the damage that Capitalism is doing by transforming and pushing limits, using our incredible technologies in the best way.



Fig. 11. *Tangram presents "Nature Echo" at LSO St Luke's (Echo Morgan, 2024)*

Xie Rong's collaboration with the musical collective Tangram highlights the impact of various environmental issues from both Eastern and Western perspectives. Their exploration of climate change led to the creation

of music, dance, and performance arts centred around themes such as trees, bamboo, plastic, mountain rocks, ice, bioluminescence, oceans, and marine life.

Potter (2024) described the collaboration as "a journey navigating the fragile and destructive relationship between humans and our environment through sound, installation, and performance art."

Preparation for the performances included crafting seven lanterns shaped like water drops using bamboo. Xie described this process as a "conversation with nature" (Xie Rong on Instagram: 'NATURE ECHO 💧', 2024). She viewed her role in the performance as a means to reveal the unseen rhythms that connect us to the natural world, challenging the notion that humanity is separate from nature. The dialogue between her and the other artists emphasised the interconnectedness of all people.

This performance framework requires a form of hyperattention, one that Claire Bishop (2025, p. 19-20) argues is a necessary asset for addressing the climate emergency.

Conclusion

The practices of Anish Kapoor, Meg Webster, and Xie Rong are profound, influenced by sustainability and environmental thought. Driven by the use of biologically safe or living materials as primary media, not just symbols, they have created works that function as ecological systems, rather than static objects or at least representations of such, which underscore important issues.

Our world needs ecological representation within art, because "politics, remember, is the art and science of making decisions together about things which affect all of us"

Together, their practices frame sustainability not only as an environmental concern but as a way of relating to space, materials, and time. Kapoor addresses the environment through transformative scale and perception, Webster through ecological materiality and care, and Morgan through minimal, attentive interaction. Collectively, they suggest that sustainable art practices can operate across material, perceptual, and relational dimensions, offering varied responses to the environmental challenges of contemporary culture.

"The only way forward is together." (Bridle, 2023)

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