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BA Fine Art

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.

Is artwork covering sustainability sustainable? An essay looking into the contradictions of environmental activism.

Introduction

One of the major reasons why art stays profoundly relevant in the contemporary world is its capacity to catalyze discourse. Nina Simone once said, “An artist's duty as far as I'm concerned is to reflect the times, that to me is my duty” Art can be a powerful vehicle for shedding light to topics that society often shies away from addressing. Art functions as a form of activism, and that is why it is so important. When society silences crucial conversations, artists step in to give a voice to those issues, “What art does is to coax us away from the mechanical and toward the miraculous. The so-called uselessness of art is a clue to its transforming power. Art is not part of the machine. Art asks us to think differently, see differently, hear differently, and ultimately to act differently, which is why art has moral force.” (Jeanette Winterson, *Winterson*, 2006) However, this role is not without its complexities, it raises questions of authenticity and ethical responsibility, particularly when the wrong individuals—those not directly affected by certain issues—attempt to speak on behalf of marginalized groups. An often-discussed concept in contemporary art circles is that of the “white savior” complex, which points to the tendency of privileged artists to assume the role of moral or social saviors. My focus, however, is on artists who address environmental concerns but, in their methods, and intentions may inadvertently perpetuate harm. After having done extensive research about artists that have often addressed environmental issues, I have chosen to investigate figures such as ‘Ana Mendieta’, ‘Olafur Eliasson’ and ‘Christo and Jean Claude’ I want to put it out there that I am certainly not asserting that any of these artists are hypocrites, that would be a far too sweeping claim, I simply intend to examine how their work contributes to, and sometimes complicates, the environmental dialogue. Their names emerged repeatedly in my research, prompting a deeper exploration of the tensions inherent in activist art. My goal is not to arrive at a definitive conclusion, but rather to offer a nuanced, multi-faceted investigation that presents the complexities of art as activism and its potential for both positive impact and unintended consequences.

The artists

When investigating the work of these artists, it becomes clear that their approaches to environmental activism are as varied as their individual practices, for example, Ana Mendieta, her environmental art is often grounded in her exploration of the body's relationship with nature, challenges notions of land art while highlighting the fragility of ecosystems. A quote taken from a thesis I read titled "Ana Mendieta – A Search for Identity, A thesis in art history" reads, "Tying her body to the land is how she felt an abundance of power and found her real niche" (Finkelstein, *A thesis in art history*, 2005) Ana Mendieta seeks for that connection with the earth and femininity. On the other hand, Olafur Eliasson's large scale installations, such as his iconic "Weather Project" create immersive experiences that draw attention to environmental crisis, yet they also rely heavily on energy intensive materials and processes, raising questions about the sustainability of his work. Works of his such as "Olafur Eliasson, (Ice Watch, 2014)" a piece of work where Eliasson transported twelve enormous blocks of cast-off ice from a fjord in Greenland to Paris for an installation, he had timed the installation to coordinate times with the UN climate conference. Eliasson arranged the twelve giant blocks (eighty tons in total) like numbers on a doomsday clock to melt publicly in the Place du Panthéon. But this piece of work, whilst appreciated by most, came under criticism. In an article by Duke press, they have written, "the most obvious criticism of Ice Watch, might address the irony of harvesting, shipping, and refrigerating ice to promote awareness of the human impact of global warming. (Hornby, *Appropriating the weather, Olafur Eliasson and climate control*, Duke U Press, 2017) It raises the question of whether there is a far more eco-friendly way to make such a statement, it also makes us think about whether a work like this is more artificial than we realize. In a similar context to Eliasson, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's monumental, often temporary installations, like "the gates" in central park- show a commitment to transforming environments and public spaces, but they also provoke debate over the environmental impact of constructing and deconstructing such large-scale projects. The main reason I would relate their work to the work of Eliasson, is because their works are both considered forms of 'Land Art', in an essay by The University of Texas, they have written, "Since the 1960s one form of art is consistently debated for its ethics, This form of art goes by many names, including "land art, "earth art," and "earthworks", and includes the use of the environment to make an artistic point." (Schoberg and stroud, *Powerful Art, Harmed Environments: The Ethics of Altering the Environment for Artistic Ends*, 2020) and later on in the essay they write specifically about Christo and Jeanne-Claude, "These artworks are about the relationship between humans and the natural environment, including the harm we often do to our planet. While many deem this form of art as a "necessary evil", others believe that the harm to the environment cannot be justified by the intention to spread awareness to a cause, however laudable" (Schoberg and stroud, *Powerful Art, Harmed Environments: The Ethics of Altering the Environment for Artistic Ends*, 2020) I think this is a great way to explain societal views on land art, people view land art as one of the most important contemporary art forms as it can raise awareness, start discussion and make us think, "Land art foregrounds the experience of landscape and nature. It is not simply a picture of, or a sculpture placed in the landscape; the site is often an active component of the work. Given that it can take place away from the gallery, documentation is a key aspect of the work and how we access it." (Tufnell, *10 amazing facts about Land Art*, 2022)

While these artists strive to raise awareness about urgent ecological issues, their practices often engage in resource-heavy, temporary spectacles that may ultimately contribute to the problems they seek to address. This raises the important questions about the sustainability of art intended to advocate for sustainability – questions that challenge the intentions of these artists and complicate the broader role of art in contemporary activism.

Ana Mendieta

In this analysis, I aim to explore each artist individually to provide an in-depth examination of environmental art and its impacts. Ana Mendieta, a prominent figure in this field, was born on November 18, 1948, in Havana, Cuba. Her early life in Cuba was abruptly altered when she and her sister were sent to the United States on September 11, 1961, as part of the "Operation Peter Pan" program. This initiative, designed to move Cuban children to the U.S., looked to protect them from the new Marxist-Leninist government of Fidel Castro (Guggenheim.org, Ana Mendieta). Mendieta's religious upbringing—spanning a Catholic orphanage and a boarding school—shaped her worldview. Later, she moved to Iowa, where she began developing her artistic career.

Mendieta's Cuban heritage and the culture of her homeland were integral to her work. In one of her writings, she poignantly expressed her longing for Cuba:

"Pain of Cuba body I am my orphanhood I live, In Cuba when you die the earth that covers us speaks. But here covered by the earth whose prisoner I am I feel death palpitating underneath the earth. And so, as my whole being is filled with the want of Cuba, I go on to make my mark upon the earth, to go on is victory" – Ana Mendieta, June 1, 1981 (Olga Viso, *Unseen Mendieta*, Prestel Publishing, 2008).

In 1967, Mendieta began studying the art of primitive and indigenous cultures at the University of Iowa, an experience that deeply influenced her creative process. Her work reveals a profound connection to the earth and reflects the comfort she found in both her cultural identity and natural elements. Through performance art, Mendieta utilized the earth as a powerful medium, drawing on her childhood beliefs. Although raised Catholic, she later embraced a more expansive spiritual view, writing:

"Now I believe in water, air, and earth. They are all deities. They also speak; I am connecting with the goddess of the sweet water—it is raining a lot. Those are the things that are powerful and important. I don't know why people have gotten away from these ideas" (Matano, *An Interview with Ana Mendieta, Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, University of California Press, 2000).

While Mendieta's work may not fit the traditional definitions of "land art" or "earthworks," her artistic legacy is deeply tied to the environment. Her creations, rooted in elemental and cultural connections, have left a meaningful imprint. Mendieta's practice did not merely use the earth as a medium; it also fostered a symbiotic relationship with nature. Her work was transformative and

influential, emphasizing the significance of cultural and environmental identity without causing harm to people or the environment.

Olafur Eliasson

“Having an experience is taking part in the world. Taking part in the world is really about sharing responsibility.” --- Olafur Eliasson 5 June 2012. Olafur Eliasson’s work is deeply intertwined with land art and environmental activism, as reflected in his own words: “*I see the artist as a participant, a co-producer of feelings*” (Olafur Eliasson, September 19, 2008). Born on February 5, 1967, Eliasson is an Icelandic-Danish artist renowned for his sculptures and large-scale installations. His art often incorporates elemental materials such as light, water, and air temperature to heighten the viewer's sensory experience (Olafur Eliasson’s Biography, *Who’s Who* [in German], 2024). Eliasson’s participatory approach places humans at the center of environmental contexts, suggesting that human experience defines and shapes the environment itself. While his works are undeniably impactful and powerful—he ranks 14th on the list of the most influential artists—their widespread admiration raises questions about the processes behind their creation. Could this acclaim blind audiences to potential environmental contradictions inherent in his methods? A particularly contentious example is *Ice Watch*, an installation featuring blocks of glacial ice transported from Greenland to urban spaces to raise awareness about climate change. Minik Rosing, a professor of geology and a collaborator on the piece, defended it against criticism, saying:

"An iceberg like that—Greenland loses 10,000 every second, so you can take 30 of them. Hopefully, it is going to change something: an awareness of what is happening, so maybe we'll make changes in our behavior" (Frieze, Minik Rosing, 2018).

This perspective supports the notion of a "necessary evil"—a small environmental cost justified by the potential to inspire significant behavioral change. However, critics highlight the environmental impact of such projects. For example, Eliasson’s studio collaborated with the environmental charity Julie’s Bicycle to calculate the carbon footprint of *Ice Watch*. Their estimates revealed that the installation consumed 35 Tonnes of CO₂ (Soldati, “*Blocks of Ice Are Melting in the Heart of London*,” 2018). This raises an essential debate: does the awareness generated by such art outweigh its environmental cost? While it may be impossible to reach a definitive conclusion about whether Eliasson’s art does more good than harm, it is crucial to address both perspectives. To fully evaluate the role of environmental art, we must consider not only its cultural and emotional resonance but also its tangible environmental impacts. By engaging with these complexities, we can foster a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between art and environmental responsibility.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude

I have examined an artist who uses her body as a medium to explore environmental art and another whose practice centers on addressing environmental issues, despite facing significant criticism. Now, I turn to the collaborative work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Christo, born on June 13, 1935, in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, met Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon in Paris in 1958, where their partnership—both personal and artistic—began (Christo and Jeanne-Claude: *The Early Years*, Matthias Koddenburg, 2020). Initially celebrated for their monumental projects, their work has more recently come under scrutiny for its perceived lack of sustainability, particularly in an era where environmental consciousness is paramount. When reflecting on their work, Gillo Dorfles' thoughts in *The Object* resonate:

"Today we are witnessing a new phenomenon, the urgency on the part of man to fix certain objects of common use and to avail himself of them as provocateurs of works of art, to introduce into the work of sculpture or painting elements taken from daily life almost as if to halt their transitoriness" (Dorfles, *The Object*, 2014).

This observation invites a critical interpretation of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's projects. Do they merely take landscapes that are already aesthetically pleasing and "fix" them by wrapping them in materials that introduce environmental harm? Their art often employs plastics and synthetic fabrics, such as polypropylene, which hold harmful chemicals. These materials, absent before their interventions, can pose ecological risks and undermine the sustainability of the very environments they engage with. One of their most iconic and controversial works, *Surrounded Islands* (1983), exemplifies these issues. This project involved encircling islands in Miami's Biscayne Bay with 6.5 million square feet (about twice the area of a large shopping mall) of bright pink fabric, resulting in environmental protests due to the potential ecological harm to local wildlife, such as ospreys and eagles. Furthermore, the project carried an astronomical cost of \$3 million (approximately \$8 million today, adjusted for inflation) (Wright, *Christo's Most Controversial Artworks*, 2020). What I find most troubling, however, is their response to criticism. When questioned about their motivations, Christo remarked that wrapping landscapes brought them personal pleasure, likening their work to painting: *"A painter isn't asked why they paint what they paint. They were moved by something or someplace that wasn't enough"* (Fischer, *It's a Wrap: Christo and Jeanne-Claude*). Yet this analogy seems inadequate. Unlike painting, which often involves minimal environmental impact, their projects can cost millions of dollars and leave significant carbon footprints. To suggest that landscapes "weren't enough" without their interventions feels both pretentious and selfish, particularly given the environmental cost of their art.

Ultimately, while their work is undeniably striking and innovative, it raises pressing questions about the balance between artistic expression and environmental responsibility. In an era of heightened ecological awareness, the critique of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's projects serves as a reminder that art must be scrutinized not only for its aesthetic value but also for its broader impact.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I passionately believe that art plays a crucial role in fostering meaningful conversations and addressing critical issues. However, not all art is created in a manner that is healthy or sustainable. While there will always be both positive and negative aspects to any artistic endeavor, it is essential to scrutinize whether certain artists deserve the high regard they are often given. We must examine all sides of an artwork, including its intentions, execution, and impact.

Thorough research is vital, as is raising awareness about environmental issues through art. However, it is equally important to acknowledge and critique the potential harm caused by certain artistic practices. We should not shy away from addressing controversial or hypocritical works, especially in a time when privileged individuals often invest vast sums in art that may offer little tangible benefit to society. That said, art is still inherently subjective, and every argument has multiple dimensions. This is precisely why the intersection of art, ethics, and environmental responsibility deserves further discussion and critical examination.

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