

# **Research in Context**

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## **Dissertation Proposal:**

### **Biophilia, Environment & Sustainability**

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## **Biophilia, Environment and Sustainability**

### **An Independent Research Document Proposal**

A brief framework for this writing is to explore the correlation between three key words to derive a question for my independent research document. This will be supported by three contemporary and historical visual artists/philosophers, together with at least three images. My research will be centred around the key words Biophilia, Environment and Sustainability, building a formal, orderly, critical examination and expression of thoughts and ideas. As part of the research, I will be looking at various visual artists including Ned Kahn, Nils-Udo, Trevor Paglen and Olafur Eliasson which will be complimented with the philosophies of John Berger, Holmes Rolston III and Arnold Berleant.

## **Biophilia**

“In every walk with nature one receives far more than one seeks.” (John Muir, 1877).

Biophilia is a term first devised by psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm within *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973) describing the psychological attraction of humans to all that is alive and vital. The term is derived from the ancient Greek words *Bios* meaning life and *Philia* for friendship or affection. A further hypothesis proposed and introduced by Edward O. Wilson in his book, *Biophilia* (1984), in which he defines Biophilia as an innate affinity or “urge to affiliate with other forms of life” and living systems, has become a widely recognised theory which is evidenced both anecdotally and qualitatively. It suggests that humans subconsciously seek to connect with nature and other forms of life (both species and phenomena). But a hedonistic disconnection from nature by hu-

mankind is resulting in the degradation of ecosystems, loss of species and a climate that is rapidly heading to crisis point. Therefore, reconnection with nature is imperative in order to conserve and regenerate the planet. But how do we reconnect with nature? Is it possible to halt and reverse “mass destruction” caused by “mass distraction”? (Harland, 2018, p.6)

Art has often been used as a medium to highlight social and political issues and a good example is ‘*The Fate of the Animals*’ by Franz Marc in 1913 which represents Marc’s premonition of the human destruction of the entire world, a reality that resulted from World War 1. His use of angles and jagged shards reveals how he saw the connection between humankind and nature - fractured and jaded. However, the positioning of a blue deer in the centre of his piece symbolises hope for regeneration.

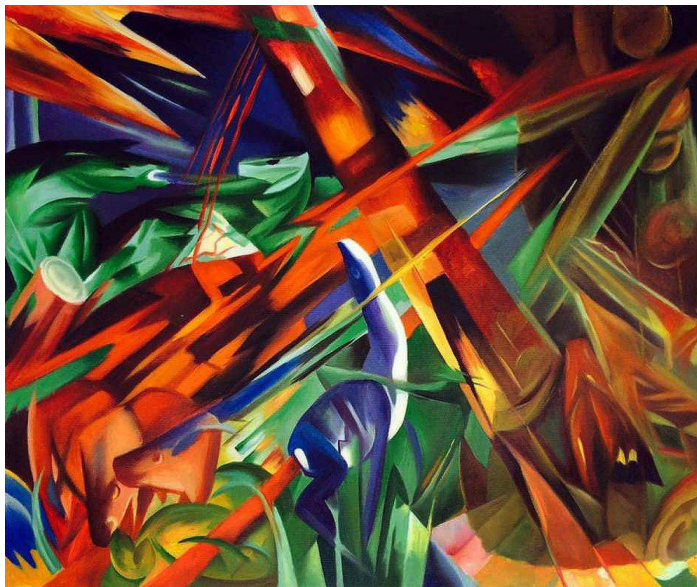


Fig. 1: *The Fate of Animals*, Franz Marc, 1913

In his paintings, Marc always attempted to “Intensify feelings for the organic rhythm in all things, trying to establish a pantheistic contact with the tremor and flow of blood in nature, in animals, in the air...” He believed that through art, it is possible to evoke re-

sponses from his audience to “stand before new pictures as in a dream and... hear the apocalyptic horseman in the air.” (Marc & Kandinsky, 1912).

Exploration of the concept of Biophilia reveals that visionary artists take inspiration from nature and its biorhythmic cycles, creating a forum for environmental activism and sustainability and this has been the case throughout history. It raises questions about how observant we are and in the words of John Berger, “Seeing comes before words. Child looks and recognises before it can speak. But there is another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world: we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it.” (Berger, 1972, p.7)



Fig. 2: *The Pond Biophilia 2*, Geoff Dunlop

Artist Geoff Dunlop's *The Pond Biophilia* project was partly inspired by the writings in the masterpiece *Walden* (1854) by American Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, philosophising about his experience at Walden Pond, Massachusetts. Thoreau believed that humans are an intrinsic part of nature itself and that there is an unending cycle of life and energy that exists between everything, emphasising the importance of seeing, connecting

and being spiritually at one with the natural world. In a similar vein, Dunlop aimed to capture the essence of an unremarkable space in nature (a pond in a woodland) and over time documented the changes that happen, through photographic images, of the circadian biorhythms of the seasons. His regular visits and observations reveal the beauty of the simplest things in nature and demonstrates his growing affinity for and spirituality with that space, which embodies the artistic philosophy of Franz Marc - an intense connection with the organic rhythms of nature. Through this artwork, it reveals that it is possible to really 'see' the world around us but only if we truly look. In the words of Claude Monet, "It's on the strength of observation and reflection that one finds a way. So we must dig and delve unceasingly."

This raises questions: Does humanity really care about the natural order of things? Do we really see what is around us? As an artist, is it possible to force a change? Can art be used as a means of protest highlighting climate change issues, and ultimately be a catalyst for change and used to influence the global leaders of the world?

The initial exploration into Biophilia as a key word raises several questions about how art can be used to visualise the issues surrounding humanity's indifference to the natural world and the looming crisis. Sub-genre words such as observation, reflection, circadian biorhythms and bio-time, interconnections and consciousness can be investigated further in reaching my proposed question for next year.

## Environment

“We’ve been given a warning by science, and a wake-up call by nature; it is up to us now to heed them.” Bill McKibben

We live in the Anthropocene age, a period where human activity impacts both the environment and the climate. According to Holmes Rolston III in his work *Environmental Ethics* (1988), our ethics during this age suggested that “We rationalise(d) that the place we inhabit has no normative structures, and that we can do what we please.” (Rolston III, 1982, Vol.4, no.2, p.150). The current climate crisis tends to support that theory, that humankind takes what it wants without care or consideration for its implications for the planet - consumerism and urbanisation gone too far.



Fig. 3: *The Weather Project*, Olafur Eliasson, 2003

Olafur Eliasson is an environmental artist who is widely recognised for his contribution to the Climate Change debate. His iconic installation at Tate Modern, *The Weather Project*, attracted over 2 million viewers and it left an indelible mark on their perception of the world. Again in 2014, his *Ice Watch Project* (collapsed glacial ice blocks recovered from Greenland, positioned to represent a clock), strategically exhibited in Copenhagen to coincide with UN's reporting on Climate Change, encouraged people to interact with them, highlighting the reality of global warming. Eliasson is considered to be an important influencer of current global politics and an inspiration for many artists.

In the early 1960's, the concept of Environmental and Land Art was created - pioneering artists Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, Christo & Jeanne-Claude, Ana Mendieta and Agnes Denes were drawing attention to ecological issues and human disharmony with the natural world, by actively embedding their art within the environment, without disturbing or disrupting it. Not only did this style of art enable the artists to break out of the confines of the studio or gallery space but their artworks, made from organic materials, were also transformable over time by the forces of nature itself. Natural processes and energies such as the movement of the wind, the power of sunshine and darkness, precipitation or lack of it, growth, erosion and decay could be "seen" at work, encouraging the audience to see more clearly the ecosystems around them, encouraging them to connect with the environment.

Today, Environmental Art is even more important in appealing to our awareness of the symbiotic connections between humans and nature through visual stimuli, highlighting the fragility of the planet, and is designed to provoke a positive sensory response towards activism.

Philosopher Hugo Kükelhaus introduced the idea of the sensorium to achieve a deeper inter-connectedness with nature through his 'Experience Field' exhibits at the 1967 World Expo in Montreal. His exhibits were designed to be immersive and experiential to instil a conscious awareness of the world, not by intellectualising about it but through the body and senses. This approach teaches one "how the eye sees, the ear hears, the nose smells, the skin feels, the fingers touch, the foot recognises the ground, the hand recognises objects, the brain thinks, the lungs breathe, the blood pulses, and the body moves" by using the senses.

By engaging the senses it is possible to alter perceptions and actions and American Environmental artist, Ned Khan, attempts to do just that by creating works that choreograph natural phenomenon, making visible the invisible forces of nature. Khan combines science and technology within his art, emphasising the natural energies and elements of wind, fire, sand, water and how they interact and encourage viewers to observe, re-discover, wander through and interact with his artworks.



Fig. 4: *Encircled Cloud*, Ned Khan, 2012



Fig. 5: *Encircled Cloud*, Ned Khan, 2012

Like Olafur Eliasson, Khan's approach to environmentalism captures the essence of the world, revealing its fluid motions, energies and mysteries which is a concept that is similar to biophilia and one that can be further investigated in determining my independent research proposal.

Another example of the clear signs seen throughout nature that greenhouse gases and global warming, created by human activity, are having a significant impact on the planet is evidenced in this photograph, captured by Dylan Fox, of soil erosion in Utah's Badlands.

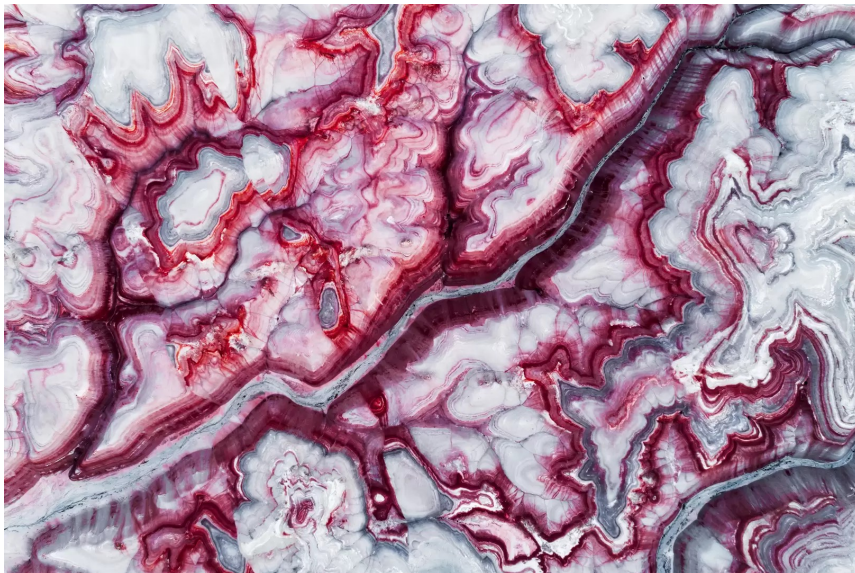


Fig. 6: *The Tipping Point: Freaky Phenomena*, Conde Nast Traveller, March 2021

The vivid colours and imagery are extraordinarily beautiful but symbolic - it should be viewed as a warning sign that our environment is in danger and should be protected and nurtured, not destroyed. The symbolism of colour in this context is important and will be explored further within my intended research proposal.

Investigating the key word environment has reinforced the importance of the sub-genre words observation and symbiosis, and generated others, namely, natural phenomena - energies & forces, visible, invisible and freaky - all emphasising the fragility of Earth, and the symbolism of colour.

## Sustainability

Sustainability “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (UN General Assembly, 1987, p43)

This definition of Sustainability was the cornerstone of the Brundtland Commission, established by the United Nations in 1983, and has been used as the driving principle for environmentally friendly development ever since. Sustainable practices have evolved considerably since then and in 2015 the United Nations created *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, outlining 17 core universal objectives embodied within an action plan “for people, planet and prosperity... determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path... in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet.” (p.3). One aspect of this plan is to implement practices that re-evaluate consumerism, manufacturing and design through global collaboration. The relevance of these goals for the art world challenges artists to become innovative in their use of natural materials in all design processes - to be in harmony with the key principles of sustainability, with the view to raising awareness of social, ecological and political issues. The goal of the sustainable artist is to emphasise the need to “protect the planet from degradation, sustainably manage its natural resources and take urgent action on climate change.” (UN, 2015, p.3)

Sustainable Art embraces these philosophies: some artists revive ancient practices of up-cycling and transforming discarded/broken objects, while others use ‘pollution’ and ‘found objects’ as their medium, focusing on conservation, protection, restoration and activism (Ecological art) or simply using nature as their source to immerse the artwork and sculptures into the fabric of the land (Land or Earth Art).

All sustainable artists aim to visualise the power and beauty of the natural world, creating an environmental aesthetic experience. By definition aesthetics is the philosophy of the appreciation of beauty and taste in an object, and the relatively new sub-field of environmental aesthetics considers the appreciation of the world in its entirety, the whole environment, not just specific objects. Exploring these divergent concepts of aesthetics raises many sub-genre questions: is the aesthetic experience a “disinterested judgement” as proposed by Immanuel Kant and therefore is it possible for art to really instigate global change?; or can it be, in the words of Arnold Berleant, “illuminated and illuminating”, especially if art can induce the viewer to “experience (the) environment not primarily through one sense but through a whole spectrum of perceptual awareness”? (Berleant, 2012, p.40); or will a climate-changed world still provide a positive environmental aesthetic experience from familiar everyday surroundings? (Nomikos,A.: Place Matters, 2018). Can a positive aesthetic experience be had from urbanisation and consumerism?



Fig. 7: *Water House*, Nils-Udo, 1982

The works of Land artist Nils-Udo are ephemeral and transient yet they clearly demonstrate the connection between the aesthetics of nature and activism - in the words of Nils-Udo, "it is an essential commentary on life". Aesthetics is important in evoking an emotional response to the environment which can change an individual's behaviour, guided by morality and responsibility. It can be argued that if the art can inspire one person to change their attitude to nature, then even this small change can lead to bigger changes and so have a significant impact on the future. This idea that one insignificant change can achieve significant results was described by Edward Lorenz metaphorically as "The Butterfly Effect" and was intended to be used as a way to understand complex mathematical systems (Chaos Theory). But the symbolism of the "butterfly" is intriguing, as in many cultures the "butterfly" is associated with the soul and resurrection, representing hope, courage, endurance, renewal, transformation and life.

This suggests that if many react empathetically to art then collectively such behavioural change can influence politics and culture and so inspire the movement towards sustainability and ultimately regeneration. But is it necessary for art to be beautiful to inspire activism? Or does it simply need to raise awareness of threats that pervade our lives today and tomorrow?

Artist Trevor Paglen does just that - in his "Bloom" series, he created images of flowers/nature using AI algorithms to alter his original photographs. The result is very unnatural and disturbing - the intense colours are jarringly inconsistent with reality creating an image without soul, an image that might be viewed as if in the future, a memory, reminiscent of a vanished world. Paglen's exhibition cleverly reinforces the idea put forward by Holmes Rolston III in his latest publication *A New Environmental Ethics: The Next Millennium for Life on Earth* (2nd Edition, 2020) that we are heading towards "a synthetic life on

an artificial planet ... that would rupture history.” (Rolston III, 2020, p.53). To add to the intensity of the aesthetic experience, Paglen installed surveillance cameras on the pretext of providing a virtual exhibition during the recent Pandemic. However, the juxtaposition was that these cameras were effectively monitoring the audience’s every move and response, engendering a feeling of being watched - paranoia.

Paglen’s artworks reinforce the idea that art is a useful tool for stimulating a response but it also suggests that technology can be used to survey and highlight the crisis that is unfolding. Sub-genre words arising from researching this keyword include aesthetics, regeneration, butterflies, technology, surveillance, complexity of environments and behaviour which can be further researched within my proposal next year.

Examination of my chosen three words has raised several questions and many diverse sub-genre words relevant to my proposal. It has revealed that biophilia, environment and sustainability are intrinsically linked to each other. I am proposing, as a starting point for next year’s Independent Project, a principal working question ‘How does a reconnection with the natural environment create a positive aesthetic experience that stimulates a willingness to change behaviour? Further research will focus on the sub-question Can such behavioural change not only reverse climate change but leave a ‘positive handprint’ on the world, through the mediums of art and technology? The proposed questions will likely change as I further explore the ideas and concepts around sub-genre words such as observation, circadian biorhythms and bio-time, symbiotic interconnections and consciousness, natural phenomena (visible, invisible and freaky forces of nature), human disinterest and distraction, symbolisms of colour and butterflies, aesthetic experiences, surveillance and technology.

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