

**RE-MEDIATION AND REMEDIES:  
POSITIONING ECOLOGICAL ART OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY  
IN THE QUEST FOR BIODIVERSE FUTURE**

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Contacts: [diego.mantoan@unipa.it](mailto:diego.mantoan@unipa.it)**ABSTRACT**

The paper addresses the development of ecological art or Eco Art movements since the inception of the new millennium, focussing on the re-mediation of artistic practices towards sustainable futures and the emerging remedies in the quest for biodiversity consciousness. Starting with an analysis of engagement as a peculiar legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Avant-Gardes, the paper discusses the shift in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with regard to the environmental awareness of artists engaged in sustainability. The paper argues that practitioners and practices have evolved in a twofold direction: on the one side towards a manifest way of positioning themselves in relation to sustainability issues, while on the other side exploring a set of postmodernist devices as societal remedies in the frame of biodiversity topics.

**Keywords:** Eco Art, Public Art, manifesto, sustainability, engagement**RIMEDIO E RIMEDI: POSIZIONARE L'ARTE ECOLOGICA DEL XXI SECOLO NELLA RICERCA DI UN FUTURO BIODIVERSO**

Il contributo affronta lo sviluppo dei movimenti di arte ecologica o Eco-arte dall'inizio del nuovo millennio, concentrandosi sulla "ri-mediazione" delle pratiche artistiche verso futuri sostenibili e sui rimedi emergenti nella ricerca di una nuova coscienza della biodiversità. A partire da un'analisi del concetto di *engagement*, eredità peculiare delle Avanguardie del XX secolo, l'articolo discute lo spostamento avvenuto nel XXI secolo rispetto alla consapevolezza ambientale delle artiste e degli artisti impegnati nella sostenibilità. Si sostiene che pratiche e praticanti si siano evoluti in una duplice direzione: da un lato, verso un posizionamento esplicito rispetto alle questioni di sostenibilità; dall'altro, verso l'esplorazione di dispositivi postmoderni intesi come rimedi sociali nell'ambito dei temi della biodiversità.

**Parole chiave:** Eco Art, Public Art, manifesto, sostenibilità, engagement

## 1. DIVERSITY AND ENGAGEMENT

Defining art as something that is *engaged* almost seems like an oxymoron given the persistence of the stereotype of *art for art's sake*. The conception that art would have only itself as an end stubbornly resists in collective imagination, assuming that art loses its *raison d'être* if it deals with concrete things or sets itself material objectives. Art would only be art when it is universal and purposeless, let alone when it can have a program or purpose, a specific objective or an active engagement. In doing so, however, the artist is deprived from any possibility to have a lasting impact on society and its related environment. Not by chance, as early as the mid-nineteenth century, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, in his manifesto *Du principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale* (1865), written for his realist friend Gustave Courbet, defined a social and educational field of action for artists. Stating that art history highlighted a peculiar affinity of artistic practice to power structures over the centuries, the French philosopher and anarchist concluded that the liberation of art was only possible if it devoted itself to the militant engagement for wider society, away from the elitist and sterile attitude of the Fine Arts.<sup>1</sup> The idea that art could be a force of change in society later became a paradigmatic belief for many of the twentieth century Avant-Gardes, be they utopistic or disruptive. With the *Manifesto del Futurismo* (1909) Filippo Tommaso Marinetti identified this tool as the method *par excellence* through which to delineate artistic action and its reverberation in the broader social, economic, political and technological framework.<sup>2</sup> From that moment on, declaring one's artistic intent in a revolutionary sense –that is, detailing its relevance for the change of the whole society– became the very synonym of Avant-Garde as an engaged art form.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, indeed, Postmodernism decidedly built on the notion of engagement in order to present ideas and practices that spilled over from the art world, thus hitting the nerve of many open issues in politics, society, economy and the environment.<sup>3</sup> Particularly, between the 1960s and 1970s feminist claims, on one side, and ecological statements, on the other said, formed the backbone of new artistic platforms that proposed to stir the public debate. Writing about *Woman's Art* in 1973, for instance, the Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT set forth to devise artistic strategies that superseded the monolithic circumstances of patriarchal society<sup>4</sup>. In her words, the power of art lies in its morphological ability, since it provides a variety of signs and meanings that permeate the social construction of reality opening to a (bio)diversity of possibilities that resonates in the concrete interrelation of elements in nature. Regarding the straightforward stance towards environmental protection, in his 1977 speech on satellite TV for the opening of the *documenta 7* exhibition in Kassel, the German artist Joseph Beuys urged communities to take responsibility for the calamitous industrial drift and change the shape of society through creative action.<sup>5</sup> Not by chance, five years later he provided a concrete example of social and environmental sculpture when initiating the *7000 Eichen* (1982) project, again at *documenta* in Kassel, which involved the public in reforesting the urban space with seven thousand oak trees.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> P.-J. Proudhon, *Du principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale*, Garnier frères, Paris 1865, pp. 367-376.

<sup>2</sup> F.T. Marinetti, *I Manifesti del futurismo, lanciati da Marinetti [et al.]*, Firenze, Lacerba 1914, pp. 6-10.

<sup>3</sup> T. Dufrène, P.J. Schneemann, *Introduction*, in "CIHA Journal", 1, 2021, pp. 5-10.

<sup>4</sup> V. EXPORT, *Woman's art. A manifesto*, in "Neues Forum", XX/228, 1973, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Ref.: Joseph Beuys, *Speech made during live satellite telecast of opening of documenta 6* (1977), Kassel, Germany | colour video, 10' | Collection Wulf Herzogenrath

<sup>6</sup> D. Schwarze, *Meilensteine: Die Documenta 1 – 13*, Verlag B&S, Berlin 2012, pp. 122-124.

Hence, the idea and the practice of the declaration of intentns –be it through a manifesto or a statement, as gradually adapted by the various artistic movements– maintained throughout the twentieth century the ability to project the work of artists beyond the narrow confines of the art world and to place it in the concrete circumstances of its own time and place. In the progression of the artistic discourse, the declaration has evolved through the history of Modernism, first, and Postmodernism, later, taking on a paradigmatic role as an artistic argumentative format –therefore as both a device and a strategy– capable of reclaiming social relevance for art.<sup>7</sup> The manifesto, for instance, is at the same time the formal materialization and the aesthetic expression of a programmatic as well as rhetorical will to give voice to a problem, to announce an urgency, and to identify a precise need for action. It should therefore come as no surprise that in response to the environmental emergency we are facing since several decades, numerous artists and collectives have demonstrated their commitment –in the literal and metaphorical sense– through this consolidated tool of contemporary artistic grammar.<sup>8</sup> Communicating, planning, defining themselves, and positioning themselves through a verbal-visual device has thus become a concrete way for artists committed to issues such as the environmental crisis, the loss of biodiversity, global warming and their irreversible repercussions to give body and image to their activism. Thus, the very act of engagement helps in understanding society, nature and the world as spaces of diversity, in which the richness of differing positions and elements constitutes the real proof of wellbeing and prosperity.

## 2. ENVIRONMENT AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Today's Eco Art movements and individual artists engaged in environmental issues consciously place themselves in the wake of the significant Public Art season that began in the 1960s and 1970s, when a growing number of artists took on the role of civic agent operating in the interstice between the art system and the broader social field.<sup>9</sup> From the outset, the theories and practices developed by public artists focused on the complex interaction between extractivist capitalism, patriarchal society, postcolonial power, and the growing environmental drifts observable in the loss of natural, social, and cultural habitats.<sup>10</sup> Especially after the 1973 oil crisis, artists such as Barbara Steveni, John Latham, Nancy Holt, and Joseph Beuys demonstrated the commitment that public art could assume in the debate on the conditions for development oriented towards social justice and environmental protection, for example by baptizing hills of mining debris, planting trees in deforested urban areas, or turning landfills into community spaces.<sup>11</sup>

However, starting from the new millennium, a radical change in the awareness of artists committed to environmental issues can be observed, precisely because of the qualitative leap in problems related to climate change and environmental collapse. In 2001, following a conference of artists on the outskirts of Munich, the *Tutzinger Manifest* was published, which was the first to explicitly refer to the issue of sustainability in art –that is, taken as a goal that can be reached solely by a shift in cultural paradigms facilitated by creative

<sup>7</sup> W. Asholt, W. Fähnders, *Manifeste und Proklamationen der europäischen Avantgarde (1909-1938)*, Metzler, Stuttgart 1995.

<sup>8</sup> P. Schneemann, *Manifesto*, in "CIHA Journal", 1, 2021, pp. 11-26.

<sup>9</sup> D. Mantoan, *The public artist as a fringe agent for sustainability: Practices of environmental(ist) driven art-activism and their digital perspectives*, in T. Thomson, A. Schwan (eds.) *Palgrave Handbook on Digital and Public Humanities*, Palgrave, London 2022, pp. 505-506.

<sup>10</sup> L. R. Lippard, *Projecting a Feminist Criticism*, in "Art Journal", 35/4, 1976, p. 338.

<sup>11</sup> A. C. Braddock, R. Ater, *Art in the Anthropocene*, in "American Art", 28, 3, Autumn 2014, pp. 2-8.

means.<sup>12</sup> This shows the early consciousness of artists regarding the irreparable effects of human activity on nature, demonstrating how the question of sustainability was already opening a radically new perspective at the turn of the 21st century. Even more, a *post quem* term was imposed –as was the case with the discovery of the New World or the dropping of the first atomic bomb– that made it impossible to address environmental problems unless in the context of a cataclysmic emergency.<sup>13</sup> The change in scale meant realizing that the future held the risk of the extinction of entire species of animals and plants, possibly including the human one, and not just isolated events of biodiversity loss and harm to nature.

Despite the radical oversizing of the ecological problem, both the Avant-Gardes of the early twentieth century and more recent Public Art movements with their ecological practices constitute the matrix that inspires the most recent experiments in Sustainable Art, precisely because of their programmatic intent and deep consciousness.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, they offer a variety of attitudes and strategies based on the conscious acknowledgment of the conditions of the human and natural environment. Taken together, they offer artists committed to sustainability at least four possible perspectives for their social and environmental endeavors: utopia, apocalypse, empathy, and vindication.<sup>15</sup> First among these driving forces is that of utopia, understood as the aspiration to renew society as a whole and its production systems through art, as was the case on opposing poles with Futurism and the Bauhaus. A similar impact is also exerted by the risk of apocalypse, seen as the opposite mirror of the utopian tendency, since it feeds on the anguish for the unstoppable destruction of the present, as already emerged in the nonsensical aspects of international Dadaism.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps of less emotional intensity, but equally programmatic in their concrete effects, are artistic attitudes guided by empathy, as in the case of the remedies to social iniquities proposed by Public Art of the late twentieth century. Finally, vindication is a paramount strategy that fits the case of minority positions, such as with the emergence in Western society of Art Feminism in the 1970s that powerfully operated towards the reimagination of gender issues.<sup>17</sup>

Altogether, these four attitudes rooted in artistic practice of the previous century provided a relevant playbook for artists engaging environmental topics in the new millennium. In fact, most practitioners active in the first quarter of the twenty-first century in the field of Sustainable Art come from a background in art education or some sort of institutional training, which makes them decidedly aware of the above possibilities of action. Hence, recurring to a variety of creative devices to tackle the climate crisis and its related problems becomes also an exercise in the use of historicized practices of appreciation and intent, while at the same time testing their artistic and social effectiveness.<sup>18</sup> That is to say, that contemporary artists who are drawn towards environmental topics well beyond the art world necessarily refer to the instruments and media which make sense in artistic practice, especially since Postmodernism. Indeed, practitioners in the field recur to creative means capable of societal re-mediation, of building structures of significance and,

<sup>12</sup> H. Kurt, B. Wagner (a cura di), *Kultur – Kunst – Nachhaltigkeit*, Klartext-Verlag, Essen 2002, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Mantoan, D., *programmatico: Il ritorno ai manifesti nell'arte ecologista del XXI secolo*, in E. Di Stefano, D. Mantoan (a cura di), *Libro d'arte biodiverso: parole e immagini tra estetica, arte e ambiente*, Bisso Edizioni, Palermo 2024, pp. 136-137.

<sup>14</sup> S. Kagan, *Art and Sustainability*, Transcript, Bielefeld 2011, p. 234.

<sup>15</sup> M.H. Pröpper, *Sustainability Science as if the World Mattered: Sketching an Art Contribution by Comparison*, in “Ecology and Society”, 22/3-31, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> H. Foster, R., Krauss, Y.A., Bois, B.H.D., Buchloh, D., Joselit, *Art Since 1900: Modernism Antimodernism Postmodernism*, Thames & Hudson, London 2016, pp. 654-660.

<sup>17</sup> L.R. Lippard, *The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s*, in “Art Journal”, 40/1-2 (*Modernism, Revisionism, Plurism, and Post-Modernism*), 1980, pp. 362-365.

<sup>18</sup> A. Connelly, S.C. Guy, E. Wainwright, W. Weileder, M. Wilde, *Catalyst reimagining sustainability with and through fine art*, in “Ecology and Society” 21/4, December 2016.

thus, of reinventing worlds.<sup>19</sup> This further explains, why Eco Art movement of the new millennium hardly recur to techniques such as painting and sculpture, which belong to the Fine Arts or Modern Art periods, since they pertain to a cultural dimension that was rather confined against wider society.

### 3. STATEMENTS AND STRATEGIES

More than two decades after the *Tutzinger Manifest* was published, it is possible to look at environmental art movements of the new millennium as a true Avant-Garde and, at the same time, as a phenomenon firmly positioned on the margins of both the art world and society at large, a so-called *fringe movement* capable of stimulating sustainable development.<sup>20</sup> In order to better analyze the engaged action of many ecological artists and activists –which comes from a contraction of the terms artist and activist– it is essential to refer to the artistic and social categories they themselves use in an attempt to define their own practice and their position in relation to the art world and society in general. The profusion in this field of manifestos, declarations, theoretical writings, catalogues, interviews, magazines, as well as scientific volumes and academic papers are characterizing elements of this ecological season compared to artistic experiences more embedded in the art system.<sup>21</sup>

This phenomenon should be analyzed at least from two perspectives: on the one hand, eco-artists urgently need to conceptualize their activity in order to find a place for it in the history of art and, at the same time, to mark its social function for the development of a sustainable culture. They firmly believe, as curator Sacha Kagan puts it, that:

Sustainability is about reinventing worlds; it is a cultural project. Cultural (and arts) organisations are bearers of ‘spaces of possibilities’ towards sustainable futures.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, it is a question of overcoming a merely instrumental vision of art, typical of scientific communication that places artistic activity at the end of the process of knowledge transfer. As scholars Angela Connelly, Simon C. Guy, Edward Wainwright, Wolfgang Weileder, and Marianne Wilde affirm:

Art can be used as a tool to provoke issues. It is a disservice to relegate art to an emasculated role as the communicator of science since art does not just represent the world ‘as it is’; rather, art can criticize, challenge, and disturb social conventions.<sup>23</sup>

Far from being an empty labeling exercise, such statements of intent in the field of ecological art fulfill a dual task: on the one hand, they accomplish a much needed self-definition of theories and practices in the artistic field, while and on the other manifesting their position with respect to society and sustainability sciences.<sup>24</sup> The writings of curators in this activist field, such as Lucy Lippard and Yasmine Ostendorf, should be

<sup>19</sup> S. Kagan, *Prefiguring Sustainability: Response-Ability & Spaces of Possibility*, in H. Van Den Bergh (ed.) *Art for the Planet's Sake*, IETM, Brussels 2015, pp. 29-32.

<sup>20</sup> D. Mantoan, *The public artist as a fringe agent for sustainability*, cit., pp. 516-517.

<sup>21</sup> T. J. Demos, E. E. Scott, S. Banerjee (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change*, Routledge, London 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Cit. S. Kagan, *Prefiguring Sustainability*, cit., p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> A. Connelly, S.C. Guy, E. Wainwright, W. Weileder, M. Wilde, cit.

<sup>24</sup> M. Fowkes, R. Fowkes, *The Principles of Sustainability in Contemporary Art*, in “Praesens: central European contemporary art review” 1, 2006, pp. 5-11.

understood in this very sense. The former, a historical activist since the days of American Art Feminism, has well conceptualized the potential of art as a response and remedy to the various challenges of climate change:

Artists cannot change the world... alone. But when they make a concerted effort, they collaborate with life itself. Working with and between other disciplines and audiences, and given the chance to be seriously considered outside the rather narrow world of art, they can offer visual jolts and subtle nudges to conventional knowledge. [...] At best they can make the hot breath of climate change both vivid and immediate to this visually oriented society, and they can inform us in the process. They can also deconstruct the ways we are manipulated by the powers that be and help open our eyes to what we must do to resist and survive.<sup>25</sup>

The founder of a global network of activists and art organizations dedicated to ecology, the *gala Green Art Lab Alliance*, Ostendorf has been able to make artists' commitment to environmental re-mediation concrete and tangible without suggesting coercive paths:

And what is the responsibility of the artists? We just have to trust they will ask the right questions. Artists have a unique ability to respond to society, which is their artistic response-ability. [...] We need to build solutions that speak to local audiences and environments; otherwise we remain lost in translation.<sup>26</sup>

If understood as proof of engagement, the above statements and considerations are revealing of the attitude and participation that activism is placing on environmental topics in the new millennium. It is by no means a question of sporadic preoccupation or science communication, but rather an earnest and vocational quest to put the research methods and strategies of contemporary art to the service of broader society, in an attempt to provide a different approach to knowledge construction and awareness dissemination.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. RE-MEDIATION AND REMEDIES

On top of the focus on self-definitory exercises, what emerges from an overview of the past twenty five years in Eco Art is a season of heated search for remedies to the ecological crisis, as well as for a cultural re-mediation of the conceptual problems that often hinder humankind to come to terms with the environmental sphere.<sup>28</sup> The purposeful direction of ecological art in the first decades of the twenty-first century is supported and exercised through a variety of artistic devices and remedies capable of intercepting society and the environment well beyond the closed circuit of contemporary art. An open list thereof comprises recurring devices such as proclaiming manifestos, writing scientific papers, organizing exhibitions, building networks, founding artist collectives, devising participatory actions, offering instruction sets, and catalyzing public events. All of these can be intended as artworks in their own right or, more specifically, as creative practices pivoting an expanded concept of art, very much in the sense of Beuy's *social sculpture*.

The device most frequently used is undoubtedly the manifesto, as argued in the previous paragraph. In this regard, one of the best-known cases is the *COP21 MANIFESTO* (2016) by Julie's Bicycle, a prolific sus-

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<sup>25</sup> Cit. L. R. Lippard, *Weather Report: Expecting the Unexpected*, in L. R. Lippard (ed.) *Weather Report: Art and Climate Change* (exhibition catalogue), Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder 2007, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Cit. Y. Ostendorf, *The S-word*, in H. Van Den Bergh (ed.) *Art for the Planet's Sake*, IETM, Bruxelles 2015, pp. 33–34.

<sup>27</sup> G. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art* (1999), in Z. Kocur, S. Leung (eds.) *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden 2015, pp. 155–157.

<sup>28</sup> H. Kurt, *Aesthetics of Sustainability*, in H. Prigan, H. Strelow, V. David (eds.) *Ecological Aesthetics*, Birkhäuser, Basel 2004, pp. 238–241.

tainable art organization in the United Kingdom, which was published on the occasion of the international conference that led to the historic albeit largely disregarded Paris Climate Accords. In a very revealing and self-aware passage, it emphasizes that:

The creative community [...] can make a unique contribution to the global sustainability challenge. Collectively we shape not just our material world, but our conceptual world too, including the values that underpin our lives. The creative industries generate wealth and employment but we also innovate, we shape and express cultural values, influencing how people feel and the choices they make: as such we have huge potential to prompt, and reinforce, positive and sustainable change.<sup>29</sup>

Going further into the direction of reshaping knowledge systems, the use of academic essays characterized the work of artists such as the American Ruth Wallen in an attempt to structurally insert herself into the broader debate of sustainability sciences, claiming a role for artistic means as cultural drivers for biodiversity and diverse modes of knowledge building:

New metaphors and artistically generated dialogues question reified relationships while sparking new ones. Fresh narratives inspire further change and innovation. Values and perceptions may shift as new knowledge emerges. Ecological art is a growing force in the shaping of values, visions and innovations so that we may ensure the well-being of future generations of the diversity of life forms inhabiting this planet.<sup>30</sup>

Alongside written statements, Eco Art has made use of consolidated devices in the grammar of engaged art, starting with the organization of collective exhibitions as acts of denunciation. Such is the case of one of the earliest exhibitions on the climate collapse, titled *Weather Report: Art and Climate Change*, which was curated by Lippard in 2007 at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Colorado, in the aftermath of the devastating Hurricane Katrina. While Ostendorf demonstrated the usefulness of an international network of artistic organizations as a tool for coordinating environmental awareness and local practices – the aforementioned *gala*–, the emergence of more geographically localized collective experiences has been one of the most effective means of promoting environmentally-oriented art. In this regard, the case of the subverted artist residencies founded by sisters Isabella and Tiziana Pers in 2011 in northern Italy is paradigmatic. Together they started *RAVE East Village Artist Residency* in Friuli, a country cottage turned into a gathering point for animals saved from the slaughterhouse and for artists committed to safeguarding biodiversity.<sup>31</sup> The point of radical departure in their endeavor is precisely the will of subverting the traditional concept of an artistic residency, in order to create an environment in which animals were to relate to the invited artists, not the other way around, as clearly expressed by Tiziana Pers:

When contemporary art talks about issues that should be revolutionary, such as anti-speciesism, there is often a patina of hypocrisy or superficial knowledge that fails to get to the heart of the matter. I have seen artists talk about these themes without having the radicalism it requires, that depth that really leads you to have a cohesion between the form adopted and the content of the work.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Julie's Bicycle, *COP21 MANIFESTO*, in "CSPA Quarterly" 14, August 2016, pp. 27-29.

<sup>30</sup> R. Wallen, *Ecological Art: A Call for Visionary Intervention in A Time of Crisis*, in "Leonardo", 45/3, 2012, pp. 234-242.

<sup>31</sup> Mantoan, D., *Animal farm residencies*, in "Burlington Contemporary", May 25, 2024.

<sup>32</sup> D. Capra, N. Covre (a cura di), *L'altro RAVE: East Village Artist Residency*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2023, p. 225.

Finally, one can highlight the recurring use of three typical devices drawn from Public Art: participatory actions, shared instructions, and open events that share the capacity to involve the spectators in the artistic process and, more generally, to raise awareness of environmental issues in specific communities and local areas. A striking example of participatory action is *Piccola Primavera Dorata* (2021), created by Sasha Vinci in collaboration with hundreds of schoolchildren to realize a physical catalyst of biodiversity. The Sicilian artist set out to reuse the fallen trees in the park of the Royal Palace in Caserta, near Naples, by creating a sculpture made up of individual blocks with the head-size of each child, which together form the habitat for new bird nesting sites.<sup>33</sup> A set of computer instructions are then those of *Solar Protocol* (2020), an operation by Tega Brain, Alex Nathanson and Benedetta Piantella, who created a digital community spread across the globe. The project consists of a network of low-cost servers powered by small solar panels, which mutually maintain and run a shared web platform that graphically responds to the levels of self-produced clean energy, so that it shuts down in the absence of sunlight.<sup>34</sup> Finally, an open event was the one organized by Juan Zamora in Murcia on the occasion of the *Manifesta 8* exhibition, when he set up *The Race, 14.4 km* (2010). The event was a free marathon in which people ran a length through the city equal to the distance between Spain and Morocco –just over a dozen kilometers– to make the public physically aware of the geographical proximity of immigrant populations.<sup>35</sup>

## 5. LEGACY AND PROSPECTS

A quarter of a century spans as wide as at least one full artistic generation, so the time is ripe to draw some conclusions on this wide season of Eco Art movements, or Sustainable Art, that developed since the start of the new millennium. Not by chance, the initiators of the *Tutzinger Manifest* in 2001, which came as the earliest reckoning in the arts of the apocalyptic scale of climate change and biodiversity loss, decided for a reboot of this manifesto in 2021.<sup>36</sup> This is proof enough that cultural activism in this field came as a necessary awakening over the last two decades, but still keeps unfolding its self-aware practices in wider society. Any sort of conclusions about this ongoing phenomenon may thus be provisional, though offering a sufficient diachronic depth and, particularly, a wide array of stably operating practitioners and interesting examples, by now.

First, it must be noted that the field of ecologically-oriented art does not amount to a unified style, nor does it show a prevalent choice of medium. To the contrary, artists that are engaged in sustainability topics rather embrace the entirety of postmodernist practices. Even more, they speak a fluent contemporary art grammar to re-mediate cultural and linguistic paradigms that affect humankind's vision of the environment. In doing so, it becomes evident that practitioners operate on a vocational basis to offer their agency in society's discussion on environmental futures. This means there is a minor interest in entering the self-referential discourse of the art system, rather opting to act in a separate sphere in direct contact with communities or with likeminded artists and organisations. In a way, this has given rise to a separatist

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<sup>33</sup> G. Tidona, S. Vinci, *Internatura*, Mimesis, Milano 2023.

<sup>34</sup> A. Pasek, B. Piantella, *Solar-Powered Media*, in "lowcarbonmethods", July 2021, <http://lowcarbonmethods.com/local/zine.html>.

<sup>35</sup> See Juan Zamora's portfolio at p. 33: [http://juanzamora.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Juan-Zamora\\_PORTFOLIO.pdf](http://juanzamora.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Juan-Zamora_PORTFOLIO.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> See the program of the second conference of the Tutzinger Manifest: <https://www.ev-akademie-tutzing.de/veranstaltung/nachhaltigkeit-als-kulturelles-projekt/>

domain for Eco Art, as envisioned by Lucy Lippard for Art Feminism in the 1970s<sup>37</sup>, or, at best, an entirely alternative sector in the sense of Howard Becker's theory of autonomous art worlds, each constituted by its own creators, facilities, and public.<sup>38</sup> Whatever its internal structure may be, the field of Sustainable Art has shown a structural understanding of contamination with the world at large as a paradigm for fostering societal change. Indeed, as proved by examples such as the *gala* international network, this sector has grown strong out of a high level of cooperation among collectives or groups of practitioners, not just single artists. The aim of such an intense work of coordination is, in fact, the creation of a stable relationship to single communities or to society in general, in order to form a basis for activating new behaviours and attitudes towards environmental issues.

Precisely because of the necessity for societal relevance of these artistic endeavours, success and failure in terms of social and environmental efficacy in this domain shows the persistence of two strains of risk that must still be managed by practitioners. First, as happens with most fringe activities, the way that leads them towards the inner art world through institutionalization can be fatal. Usually, when the art system comes to subsume alternative endeavours it turns them towards forms of aestheticism or purism, which in the case of environmentalist-driven practices may cause a loss of urgency of social relevance. This can be seen, for instance, in the ingenious and compelling work by Tega Brain, *Coin-Operated Wetland* (2012), first installed in a rather shabby looking environment in a Sydney gallery with laundry hanging on the walls. The piece consists of two washing machines constantly using the same water that is filtered through a natural system of homegrown wetland, but the 2021 installation at the Smithsonian in Washington looked excessively technological taking away much of the original poetics. The second aspect which much Eco Art must face is that its operations are usually bound to local engagement or particular contexts, thus they might fail to find widespread dissemination. Indeed, as Yasmine Ostendorf noted in working with diverse art organisations across the globe, not even the term sustainability is universally accepted. If practitioners do not adapt to local contexts, the consequence is a loss of immediacy driven by the difference in attitude and understanding of ecological topics which often vary at geographical level.

Over two decades on, the field of Eco Art and its practitioners have grown internationally proving paramount for their social and political engagement, although in varied forms according to local constituencies. Its creative cycle may seem to have reached a downturn, especially when it is being institutionalised, but the solutions it has come up with constitute exemplary projects for sustainability sciences at large in terms of environmental and behavioural re-mediation. Given the persisting and ever-growing challenges of climate breakdown and biodiversity loss, ecologically-engaged art represents perhaps the new millennium's most inspiring and effective alternative in terms of knowledge building and a powerful catalyst of societal action-taking. Eventually, many practitioners in this field have lived up to the expectancies that the creative sector truly has the «potential to prompt, and reinforce, positive and sustainable change.»<sup>39</sup> As happens with adaptation in the context of biodiversity, they showed we must take into account that the transition beyond climate change «also implies that our lives will look and feel differently.»<sup>40</sup> Whether for the better or for the worse depends on everyone's engagement, which can be stirred by art, though.

<sup>37</sup> Lippard, L.R., *Projecting a Feminist Criticism*, cit., p. 339.

<sup>38</sup> H. Becker, *Art Worlds*, University of California Press, London 2008, p. 38.

<sup>39</sup> Cit. Julie's Bicycle, *COP21 MANIFESTO*, cit. p. 28.

<sup>40</sup> Cit. A. Pasek, B. Piantella, *Solar-Powered Media*, cit.

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