

The Paradox of Ecological Art

Last summer, some friends of my boyfriend came up to Liverpool to see the Liverpool Biennial art exhibition and to show us their new baby. With the Covid restrictions eased, we sat down in a beer garden to enjoy some burgers. I don't know much about babies, and I was surprised when the mother pinched off a piece of the burger patty and placed it into the child's mouth. Do babies eat meat?

At that moment a certain nausea came over me. It wasn't just that the baby regurgitated the beef, and had to have the flesh-crumbs removed with a moistened napkin. It was a nausea of a more philosophical kind, if you like. I already knew, of course, that among the foods, beef is disproportionately responsible for climate change. But seeing that merry little mouth chew and spew made this fact tangible. The baby was eating its own future. All of us were eating it. We were like parts in some grinding machine, consuming flesh and expelling fumes that would eventually suffocate this very child.

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Such morbid visions did not exactly interfere with my quality of life back in the summer of 2021. But they were occurring disturbingly often. In part, this was because I was preparing to teach a course on art and ecology in next semester. Climate crisis weighed heavily on my mind, and so did our cultural responses to it.

Environmental art, also known as eco-art, is a contemporary genre that focuses on ecological themes. It often involves direct interventions into nature. A straightforward example is a work such as *Ice Watch*, by the Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing. ¹

Ice Watch consisted of 12 gigantic blocks of ice, carved off a melting glacier in Greenland and transported to Europe. The work has been shown several times, in Copenhagen, Paris and London. Each time some 80 tons of ice were arranged in a circle, illuminated by dramatic lighting and allowed to slowly melt. The documentary photographs of Eliasson's installation show children and adults in winter clothes hugging the gleaming ice blocks: perhaps to protect them; perhaps to say goodbye.



Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing Ice Watch, 2014 Supported by Bloomberg. Installation view: Bankside, outside Tate Modern, 2018 Photo: Justin Sutcliffe. Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles © 2014 Olafur Eliasson

Ecological art has its origins in the 1970s, but today it exists in many forms.² To raise awareness, artists uproot majestic trees and exhibit them in museums; others show extinct animal species in videos or in installations. Some artists have sought to repair degraded landscapes; this has become known as 'reclamation aesthetics'. For example, the Hungarian-American artist Agnes Denes reforested an entire disused quarry in Finland to create a geometrically perfect virgin pine forest. Still others foster a sense of connectedness with Earth's flora and fauna. In his exquisite videos, the Chinese artist Bo Zheng shows naked men wondering around a rainforest, seeking sexual intercourse with the plants.³

From eco-horror to eco-erotics, ecological art reshapes the viewers' relationships with the natural environment. In art criticism, the dominant view is that such art creates empathy with nature. On the BBC Radio 3 Free Thinking programme in June 2021, you might have heard curator Hans Ulrich Obrist arguing that eco-art can create an emotional connection with the Earth, which scientific data alone cannot secure. As he put it, 'images have an impact on dreams, and dreams have an impact on actions'.⁴

Indeed, we find similar strategies present in mainstream cultural production. In David Attenborough's documentary *Blue Planet II* there is an interplay of horror and erotics of sorts: we fall in love with the marvellous creatures inhabiting our oceans, and we despair as they are suffocated by floating plastic bags.

Undoubtedly, such cultural production has created empathy with nature: if by 'nature' we mean oceans, forests, polar caps, and their inhabitants. Yet, as I contemplated the beer garden that summer, full of happy, culturally sensitive people eating beef, I could not help but wonder whether our eco-sensibilities might not be developing in the wrong direction.

But are we asking too much of cultural production anyway? What attitudes can art change?

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Consider a painting that also hangs in Liverpool, not far from the spot where my friends and I had our lunch. David Hockney's *Peter Getting Out of Nick's Pool* won the John Moores Painting Prize in 1967, and still hangs in the Walker Art Gallery here. The young man is shown hoisting himself out of the water; his tanned back and buttocks are in the very centre of the composition, just above the electric shimmer of the swimming pool, painted in Hockney's trademark white and red squiggly lines. The homoerotic charge of the painting was clearly at odds with social views in Britain at the time. 1967 was the same year that homosexuality was partly de-criminalized; but, of course, it was far from being broadly accepted.⁵

Over the following 50 years Britain and many other countries have seen an incredible shift in attitudes towards homosexuality. Now, it would be insane to attribute that shift to any particular artwork, or even to the arts collectively. But if we want to study the influence of the arts on social attitudes, the great shift of views regarding gay sex may be informative. Here, the painting prefigured social change: art contained a kernel of a future sensibility. In the ensuing decades, the relaxed acceptance of queer desire that we see in Hockney's canvas spread through mainstream media. By the time of my own teens, I could see acceptance of homosexuality signalled in TV shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or in videos by George Michael. And as culture changed, so did the laws. Indeed, over in the USA, Joe Biden, when still Vice-President, attributed the wider acceptance of homosexuality to daytime sitcoms such as *Will & Grace*.

So, here's a theory. Unlike propaganda, the arts do not address political beliefs explicitly. An artwork instead offers a new way of organizing experience. Philosophers have called this by different names: Nelson Goodman called it 'worldmaking'⁶, Jacques Rancière 'the distribution of the sensible'⁷, and the critic John Berger a 'way of seeing'.⁸ Hockney's picture contains no argument for the acceptance of homosexuality. But it organizes the perceptible world in such a way that gay desire appears salient and normal.

Art creates a new sensibility. Mass culture can spread it. Once that sensibility is in place, new laws and policies become acceptable, or even demanded. Art prepares the ground for the law.

In reality, of course, the arrow of causality is never quite as straightforward as this sketch suggests.

But let's take it as a working model. Now, can we apply it to eco-art today? Can we say that artists like Olafur Eliasson create empathy with the natural world, which might then lead to political demands? Can we claim, as curator Hans Ulrich Obrist suggests, that art leads to dreams, and dreams to actions?

It's an attractive thought, but on reflection it seems wrong when applied to most environmental cultural production today.

It's well known that the climate catastrophe does not simply require an empathetic response from some imaginary public at large: it requires radical changes to the economy of fossil fuel-emitting nations. Areas such as construction, agriculture, transportation, trade, will have to change. But in the cultural imagination, these activities are separate from images of nature. Boarding an EasyJet flight for a holiday occupies a different part of our sensibility to emotions about forests and icebergs. We might know they are connected, sure. But they don't inhabit the same 'way of seeing'. This is quite different from the political situation of queer people—as well as other minorities—whose political fates have been directly constituted by how they are portrayed and seen.

Paradoxically, then, ecological politics does not demand that we should change our attitudes to nature. Indeed, art about nature might be only tangentially related to the politics of climate change, because empathy with nature largely targets the effects of the climate crisis. But what needs to change are sensibilities around the everyday activities, which are its cause.

And there, the cultural change may have to be dramatic. The citizen-consumers of the global North might have to accept such measures as severely reducing beef consumption, or paying for mass-replacement of water boilers with heat pumps, or unprecedented green investment into developing nations. Taxing beef consumption must begin to seem as ordinary as limits on smoking.⁹ Spending public money to help South Africa close coal power stations must become as unremarkable as spending it to fix public roads here.¹⁰ Yet, such interventions today largely seem as far-fetched, or difficult, or unimportant as gay marriage seemed in 1967. What aesthetic forms would transform these sensibilities? A storyline in *Eastenders* about loft insulation? A neo-Futurist painting extolling the beauties of the wind turbine? How to change our way of seeing these things, without moralism or recrimination, is very much an open question. But it might be that the great eco-artwork still to come must tackle a subject as mundane as a heat pump, rather than the glories of nature.

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After that sunny lunch with burgers, my boyfriend, his friends, their child and I finally go to the Liverpool Biennial, showing at Lewis's, a long disused department store in the city centre.

There is one work on the ground floor which captures the baby's attention. It is called *Inflation*, by the Argentine artist Diego Bianchi. This is an installation of human-sized forms, made of flesh-coloured resin and solidified foam. They look like gloopy, vaguely human body parts, wrapped in cables, headphones, batteries, and other digital detritus. The boy coos happily at the sculptures—I make a mental note that at eight months, babies don't yet grasp the concept of the uncanny.

I think back to that vision I had at lunch. There is a resonance of sorts. Bianchi's sculptures look as if a spell has momentarily fallen off the everyday; we see the grotesque cost of all those plastics and rare-earth metals. The effect is humorous, rather than moralistic. In accompanying videos, we see dancers clown about clad in that same fleshy foam. It looks as if toxic waste had been cross-bred with *The Muppet Show*.

The title of the exhibition is 'The Stomach and the Port', and most of the artworks in some way interrogate trade and consumption.¹¹ There are sculptures that look like mouldy fruit, but are made from semi-precious stones; and drawings of sea creatures in an inky medium that mimics crude oil. There is a thoughtful video by Alberta Whittle, which draws links between the changing climate in the Caribbean and the visual memories of the Transatlantic slave trade.

Much of the art here interrogates the systemic and economic bases of the ecological catastrophe. My friends point out that these works are experimental and ruminative, and sometimes hard to grasp. But

perhaps, like with the David Hockney painting in 1967, the role of contemporary, avant-garde works is to create kernels of a future way of seeing, rather than to convey clear messages. I wonder what kind of politics might become possible in a culture where this sensibility would become widespread: where mainstream films, music, TV, Netflix series treated extractivist consumption with the same suspicion that we see in Diego Bianchi's sculptures.



Diego Bianchi, Inflation, 2021. Installation view at Lewis's Building, Liverpool Biennial 2021.

Photography Stuart Whipps

After we wave goodbye to our friends and their beautiful child, my boyfriend and I walk home. On a quiet street we briefly hold hands. It took some 50 years after that David Hockney painting for this to become a conceivable thing to do. What ecological crisis asks of cultural production now is a much greater shift in perception. Let's see how long it takes.

This text first appeared as a BBC Essay in May 2022, while Vid Simoniti was a New Generation Thinker on the scheme run by BBC Radio 3 and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0c9gy38>

1 Ice Watch, 2014. The work can be viewed here: <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK109190/ice-watch> [accessed 10 August 2022].

2 There are many scholarly overviews of eco-art. See, for instance: Mark Cheetham, *Landscape into Eco Art* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2019).

3 One of the films in Bo Zheng's series was a Liverpool Biennial 2021 commission <https://www.biennial.com/2021/exhibition/artists/zheng-bo> [accessed 10 August 2022].

4 'Free Thinking: Can Artists Help Save the Planet?', Free Thinking, BBC Radio 3, 3 June 2021 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000wlkc> at 33'48 [accessed 10 August 2022].

5 Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, revised edition (London: Quartet Books, 2016).

6 Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing, 1976).

7 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004).

8 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1973).

9 Ing-Marie Gren, et al, 'Design of a climate tax on food consumption: Examples of tomatoes and beef in Sweden', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 211 (2019), pp. 1576-1585 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.11.238> [accessed 10 August 2022].

10 Larissa Jane Houston and Oliver C. Ruppel, 'Just Energy Transitions in Progress? The Partnership between South Africa and the EU', *Journal for European Environmental & Planning Law*, 19.1-2 (2022), pp. 31-54 <https://doi.org/10.1163/18760104-19010004> [accessed 10 August 2022]. See also Louise Boyle, 'First-of-its-kind agreement sees South Africa receive \$8.5bn to ditch coal at Cop26', *The Independent*, 2 November 2021 <https://www.independent.co.uk/climatechange/news/...> [accessed 10 August 2022].

11 Liverpool Biennial 2021, <https://liverpoolbiennial2021.com/> [accessed 19 August 2022].

12 I am grateful to Charles Ogilvie, Director of Strategy for COP26 at the Cabinet Office, for talking to me about climate policy in ways that have informed this essay – but any misconceptions are mine alone.

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*<https://liverpoolbiennial2021.com/programme/art-against-the-world/>. Vid's academic publications span philosophy and history of art, and have included work on Adrian Piper, histories of biotechnological art, and philosophy of political art. His monograph on the role of contemporary art in democracy, also called *Art Against the World*, is forthcoming with Yale University Press in 2023.*