

Zeszyty

#48

Artystyczne

Kuratorstwo dla planetarnej równowagi

ZA

Kuratorstwo dla planetarnej
równowagi: troskliwe strategie
kuratorskie wobec wyzwań
współczesności

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Independent art curator based in San Sebastián, Spain, currently a PhD student in Sustainable Curatorial Practices at the University of the Basque Country. Her curatorial portfolio includes exhibitions throughout Europe, such as *Immateriality of Rejection* (Helsinki, 2024), *Ways of Healing* (Bologna, 2024), and *Memorie future / Disseminati* project (Trento and Rovereto, 2023). Her research and publications address ecofeminism, sustainable artistic practices, eco art, and cultural welfare, consistently pursuing ecocentric solutions for improved art systems and exhibition-making practices.

Sustainable Curating: The Exhibition as Ecosystem

Abstract

By acknowledging the profound interconnections between culture and nature, exhibitions can become sites of collective care, fostering new narratives of belonging that resist the destructive forces of capitalism. The egocentric logic shaping human superstructure does not accommodate rhizomic and collaborative approaches to conceptualizing exhibition-making and the broader art ecosystem. Through hypocritical greenwashing, environmental sustainability is presented as defining human-ecosystem interactions, yet without genuine implementation of Gaia theory or recognition of humanity as an integral component thereof.

To introduce Gaia's natural sustainability principles to the art world, one may apply to exhibition-making the fundamental chemical principle: nothing is created, nothing is destroyed, everything is transformed. While this natural law has traditionally been considered within scientific domains, it remains valid across all natural and anthropogenic fields. Once an exhibition is conceived, all impacts on people, economy, and environment cannot be annulled; they merely assume different forms and are displaced elsewhere. Working on sustainable curatorial strategies entails applying nature's laws to all art production, beginning with exhibition-making in terms of societal, economic, and environmental impact, while recognizing that the anthropocentric system humans have constructed now constitutes an integral part of the ecosystem and inevitably contributes to shaping it.

Sustainable exhibition practice challenges the artificial divide between culture and nature, urging us to reconceptualize curating as a practice integrated within Gaia—the holistic ecosystem. This necessitates fostering mutual care, interconnection, and ecological justice, precisely as Nature operates. The exhibition, consequently, transcends mere display to become a practical recognition of sustainability practices' value in guaranteeing a more equitable art system, characterized by recognized human rights (social sustainability), conscious environmental footprint (environmental sustainability), and balanced resource utilization (economic sustainability).

Keywords: Sustainable curating, Ecofeminism, Integration Practices, Eco Logic, Gaia, Ecosystem

Kuratorstwo zrównoważone: wystawa jako ekosystem

Abstrakt

Dzięki dostrzeżeniu głębokich powiązań między kulturą a naturą, wystawy mogą stać się przestrzeniami wspólnej troski, sprzyjającymi powstawaniu nowych narracji przynależności, które przeciwstawiają się destrukcyjnym siłom kapitalizmu. Egocentryczna logika kształtuje superstrukturę ludzką nie uwzględniając kłączowego i opartego na współpracy podejścia do konceptualizacji tworzenia wystaw i szerszego ekosystemu sztuki. Poprzez hipokryzję ekokłamstwa, zrównoważony rozwój środowiska bywa przedstawiany jako definiujący interakcje między człowiekiem a ekosystemem, jednak bez rzeczywistego wdrożenia teorii Gai lub uznania ludzkości za jej integralną część.

Aby wprowadzić zasady naturalnego zrównoważenia Gai do świata sztuki, można zastosować do tworzenia wystaw podstawową zasadę chemiczną: nic nie powstaje, nic nie ginie, wszystko się przemienia. Chociaż prawo to tradycyjnie rozpatrywano w kontekście naukowym, ma ono zastosowanie we wszystkich dziedzinach związanych z naturą i działalnością człowieka. Po stworzeniu wystawy nie można anulować jej wpływu na ludzi, gospodarkę i środowisko; przybiera on jedynie inne formy i przenosi się w inne miejsce. Praca nad zrównoważonymi strategiami kuratorskimi wymaga zastosowania praw natury do całej produkcji artystycznej, począwszy od tworzenia wystaw pod kątem wpływu społecznego, gospodarczego i środowiskowego, przy jednoczesnym uznaniu, że antropocentryczny system stworzony przez ludzi stanowi obecnie integralną część ekosystemu i nieuchronnie przyczynia się do jego kształtowania.

Zrównoważona praktyka wystawiennicza podważa sztuczny podział między kulturą a naturą, zachęcając nas do ponownego przemyślenia kuratorstwa jako praktyki zintegrowanej z Gają – holistycznym ekosystemem. Wymaga to wspierania troski, wzajemnych powiązań i sprawiedliwości ekologicznej, dokładnie tak, jak działa Natura. Wystawa wykracza zatem poza zwykłą ekspozycję, stając się praktycznym uznaniem wartości zrównoważonych praktyk w gwarantowaniu bardziej sprawiedliwego systemu sztuki, charakteryzującego się uznaniem praw człowieka (zrównoważenie społeczne), świadomym wpływem na środowisko (zrównoważenie środowiskowe) i zrównoważonym wykorzystaniem zasobów (zrównoważenie ekonomiczne).

Słowa kluczowe: Zrównoważone kuratorstwo, ekofeminizm, praktyki integracyjne, ekologia, Gaja, ekosystem

Sustainable Curating: The Exhibition as Ecosystem

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Nothing is Created, Nothing is Destroyed

The increasing prominence of ecology in artistic practice reflects its gradual emergence within global political discourse: the consequences of human exploitation of the biosphere have become undeniable in contemporary times, rendering continued ignorance untenable.

Nevertheless, the logical recognition of humanity's integration within the planetary ecosystem appears insufficient to catalyze collective ecological consciousness. Our deficit of awareness, coupled with the relentless imperative for progress, has precipitated the current geological epoch—the Anthropocene—wherein large-scale anthropogenic activities fundamentally reshape environments and modify ecosystems.¹ “During the past two centuries, the global effects of human activities have become clearly noticeable”²: the magnitude and severity of ecosystem transformations initiated by humanity over the past two hundred years rival modifications that natural processes required millennia to accomplish. Since the First Industrial Revolution, humanity has emerged as the predominant influence on global ecology.³ Examining selected data from the comprehensive research conducted by McNeill and Engelke: global population

¹ Timothy Morton, „A Quake in Being. An Introduction to Hyperobjects,” in: *Hyperobjects* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

² Paul Crutzen, „Welcome to the Anthropocene,” 2000.

³ Simon L. Lewis and Mark Andrew Maslin, „A Transparent Framework for Defining the Anthropocene Epoch,” *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 2 (August 29, 2015): 128–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019615588792>.

expanded from 900 million at the end of the eighteenth century to 2 billion by 1930, ultimately reaching 7 billion in 2011; worldwide plastic production increased from 1 million tons in 1950 to 300 million tons by 2015; in 1945, immediately preceding the post-war economic boom, approximately 40 million motor vehicles existed globally, whereas by 2014 this figure had escalated to 850 million. These and additional data substantiate the theory of the “Great Acceleration” characterizing the contemporary period, commencing in the years following World War II. These authors emphasize that such an accelerating trajectory “cannot persist indefinitely.” While they refrain from predicting precise timelines for resource depletion, they acknowledge this moment will constitute merely a brief interlude in Earth’s history. Conversely, the Anthropocene will endure considerably longer, as “our capacity to alter ecosystems will only increase.”⁴

At the 22nd Triennale di Milano (2019), titled *Broken Nature: Design Takes on Human Survival*, numerous transformations occurring over the past two centuries were cartographically represented in a significant installation: *The Room of Change* (2019) by Italian collective Accurat.⁵ This team of researchers and designers synthesized an extraordinary volume of data concerning nature, the universe, human well-being, and technology through design visualization, presenting them collectively in a comprehensive timeline.⁶ In front of this incredibly complex, rich and precise scientific representation of changes, the viewer has no possibility to orientate himself. Through the vision of this mural, it is possible to perceive the large scale of our impact, both positive and negative, both on nature and on humanity itself.

Confronted with this remarkably complex, detailed, and scientifically precise representation of change, viewers find themselves deliberately disoriented. Through this mural’s visualization, one perceives the extensive scale of anthropogenic impact, both beneficial and detrimental, on both natural systems and humanity itself.

4 McNeill and Engelke.

5 Giorgia Lupi, „The Room of Changes,” in *Broken Nature. XII Triennale Di Milano* (Milano: Triennale di Milano, 2019), 186–89; T. J. Demos, „Climate Control: From Emergency to Emergence,” *E-Flux* 104 (2019), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/104/299286/climate-control-from-emergency-to-emergence/>.

6 For an image of the work, please check Giorgia Lupi, „The Room of Changes.”

Beyond this singular artwork, the Broken Nature exhibition exemplifies how curatorial practice can reconceptualize exhibitions as spaces for reimagining our entanglement with the more-than-human world. By acknowledging the profound interconnections between culture and nature, exhibitions can become sites of collective care, fostering alternative narratives of belonging that resist the destructive forces of anthropocentric logic. The egoism structuring human superstructure precludes rhizomic and collaborative modes of conceptualization regarding not only exhibition-making but the entire art ecosystem.⁷ Through hypocritical greenwashing practices, environmental sustainability is positioned as defining human-ecosystem interactions, while simultaneously disregarding *Gaia* theory and failing to internalize that humanity constitutes the ecosystem—indeed, presently its most consequential component. Sustainability discourse itself frequently treats humans and nature as discrete entities, consistently prioritizing human well-being over holistic ecosystem health. Given that humanity represents the primary causative factor in planetary degradation, the foundational concept underlying sustainable policies constitutes an inherent paradox—one among many “human paradoxes”⁸.

Our insufficient awareness in evaluating the consequences of our behaviors—intensive agriculture, mass livestock production, deforestation, intensive fishing, resource extraction—derives partially from the multitude of actors perpetually engaged in terrestrial life. Predicting ecosystem responses to invasive practices proves nearly impossible due to the numerous living entities comprising these systems. In 1979, James Lovelock first theorized a hypothesis now widely recognized. He applied the name of *Gaia*, historically attributed in ancient Greece to the Earth goddess, to conceptualize Earth as a living entity.⁹ All life forms and materials on and beneath Earth’s surface constitute compo-

7 The rhizome is a networking structure, especially evident in the underground structure of specific roots. Mushrooms were particularly studied for their ability to create very dense rhizomes, not only for creating a great and collaborative underground environment but also for potential organic-based materials based on rhizome, like mycelium. See: Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025).

8 Mark Daniel Cohen, „The Paradox of Eco-Logic: The Art of Agnes Denes,” in: *Agnes Denes: Art for the Third Millennium - Creating a New World View. A Retrospective*, ed. Ludwig Museum exhibition catalogue (Budapest: Marcus Campbell Art Books, 2008), http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/pdf/WRITINGS_The_Paradox_of_Eco_Logic_by_Mark_Daniel_Cohen.pdf.

9 James E. Lovelock, „Preface,” in *Gaia. A New Look to Life on Earth*, 2000th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

nents of a singular system—a meta-organism: “we are part of a greater whole”. While this concept has resonated intuitively throughout history, anthropocentric rationalization has distorted it: humanity has historically instrumentalized the Gaia concept to assess ecosystem tolerance thresholds, attempting to forecast limits and risks of transgression. Predictably, such assessments consider exclusively consequences for humanity and its systems. Lovelock argues this represents not merely territorial exploitation but exploitation of the theory itself. Although Gaia pervades existence, it possesses an atopic nature: it cannot be localized.¹⁰ From this perspective, it constitutes the most transcendental yet immanent concept, present in all phenomena, perpetually perceptible yet never fully recognizable.

To introduce Gaia’s natural sustainability to the art world, one may apply to exhibition-making the fundamental chemical principle: nothing is created, nothing is destroyed, everything is transformed.¹¹ While this natural law has traditionally been considered within scientific domains, it remains applicable across all natural and anthropogenic fields. Once trauma is inflicted, it cannot disappear – it can only metamorphose. Once an artwork is fabricated from materials, it inevitably transforms over time and eventually reaches its terminus, becoming something else. Once an exhibition is conceived, all impacts on people, economy, and environment cannot be revoked; they merely assume alternative forms and are displaced elsewhere.

Exhibition as Context

Marcel Duchamp’s 1938 site-specific installation *1200 Bags of Coal*, realized for the International Exhibition of Surrealism, may be considered among the earliest experiments in environmental art. This work—re-enacted in 1972 by Elaine Sturtevant—consisted of 1200 jute bags suspended from the ceiling of the Galerie des Beaux-Arts.¹² The contents of these bags remain unknown: they

¹⁰ Emanuele Coccia and Frédérique Ait-Touati, *Le Cri de Gaïa. Penser La Terre Avec Bruno Latour* (Paris: La Découverte, 2021).

¹¹ R. W. Sternier, G. E. Small, and J. M. Hood, „The Conservation of Mass,” *Nature Education Knowledge* 3 (2011).

¹² Alice Pfeiffer, „Sturtevants Matchy-Matchy Retrospective,” *Art in America*, February 10,

may have been filled, as André Masson proposed, or contained incombustible, lightweight material as Man Ray suggested. The bags were not conceived as artwork components but as elements transforming the exhibition space, which housed Surrealist artworks and installations. Consequently, the work aimed to alter spatial perception, subvert visitors' expectations, and guide them through a modified environment toward a unique experiential encounter.

In *Context as Content*, a seminal essay first published in 1976, Brian O'Doherty argues that "by exposing the effects of context on art, of the container on the contained, Duchamp recognized an area of art that hadn't been invented". The gallery space reveals itself as "suitable for manipulation."¹³ The relationship between containment, interiority, and exteriority is interrogated by the artist analogously to his questioning of spectator and collector roles—the latter unable to purchase and collect his coal bags. Through this critique of art object value, the art system, and exhibition space, Duchamp established the foundation for the "crisis of the object" emerging in visual arts during the 1950s and early 1960s, concurrent with the rise of anti-academic and anti-authoritarian art practices. This initial experimentation in exhibition space transformation underscores context's significance for artworks exhibited within or adjacent to it. Consequently, reflection on site-specificity becomes essential when considering sustainable exhibition-making practices. Is it coherent to exhibit sustainable artworks or Eco Art within unsustainable events—where works arrive from distant locations via polluting transportation, curators travel internationally, or exhibition spaces employ disposable installations and high-consumption lighting systems?

Curators can no longer circumvent consideration of exhibition-making's impact, not solely due to global commitment to environmental emergencies that should inform their practice, but specifically—when engaging with Eco Art—as a matter of coherence and respect for artists' works and statements.

2010, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/elaine-sturtevant-57907/>.

13 Brian O'Doherty, „Context as Content,” in: *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: The Lapis Pres, 1986), 65–86.

The Exhibition Ecosystem

Working on sustainable curatorial strategies entails applying nature's laws to all art production, commencing with exhibitions—one of the primary vehicles of artistic meaning. Conceptualizing, planning, and creating exhibitions involves diverse elements of humanity's superstructure. The term "superstructure" here references the Marxist philosophical concept without literal adherence.¹⁴ It is employed in this publication to encapsulate the complexity of human constructs transcending natural algorithms and shaping global decision-making: capitalism, consumerism, progress, exploitation, warfare, divinity, logic, economy, currency, society itself and its interconnections—all constitute invisible yet ubiquitous "hyperobjects" created by humanity to configure the world according to mechanisms apparently most expedient in the short term.¹⁵ Throughout human existence, this "superstructure" has evolved from the primal objective of survival into something so convoluted and entrenched that it no longer possesses discernible purpose. Concrete, natural objectives have become obscured, yielding to the purposeless pursuit of individual progress in a continuous, meaningless acceleration that jeopardizes universal well-being.

Exhibition-making engages numerous aspects of the anthropocentric superstructure alongside elements of the natural ecosystem. Like many human activities, it cannot be confined to either natural or anthropogenic domains, inevitably involving both and thereby providing practical demonstration of Gaia theory. Exhibition-making typically affects diverse ecosystem actors:

It impacts **artists** in terms of temporal investment, effort, psychological and professional engagement, remuneration (or its absence), and visibility.

It affects **curators**, designers, and all personnel engaged in the process, including advisors and frequently unacknowledged collaborators.

14 „The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit: constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas – also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form.” Marx, Engels, and Lenin, „Engels's Letter to J. Bloch; from London to Königsberg, Written on September 21, 1890,” in: *Historical Materialism*, Progress Publishers (Berlin, 1972), 294–96.

15 Morton, „A Quake in Being. An Introduction to Hyperobjects.”

It influences **spatial dimensions** through multiple modalities: the exhibition venue, planning and discussion spaces, transit spaces utilized by participants, and potentially engaged public spaces. Public and private infrastructure may also be encompassed within this category.

Curators and artists aspire for exhibitions to impact **culture, opinions, and public discourse** through constructing and offering valuable, comprehensible concepts. Educational systems frequently function as either recipients or organizers.

Curators typically seek optimal methods to engage **diverse publics**, constituted by more or less defined demographic groups.

Economic systems are affected through both expenditures and potential (albeit rare) revenues. Exhibition-making engages various secondary and tertiary sector industries for material and service provision. Analogously to production industries, waste management sectors become involved not only during installation and deinstallation processes but also in managing communication materials and quotidian refuse.

The natural environment is invariably affected through multiple pathways: basic resource consumption, artwork and installation production, transportation, and end-of-life installation management. Water, sustenance, electricity, and air constitute fundamental resources for daily existence and, consequently, for exhibition-making.

While this enumeration may omit certain elements, all components—including those potentially overlooked—can be synthesized into three principal ecosystem categories: economy, society, and environment. Consequently, achieving sustainability in exhibition-making necessitates addressing **societal, economic, and environmental sustainability**, while recognizing that the anthropocentric system humans have constructed now constitutes an integral part of the holistic ecosystem and inevitably contributes to its configuration.



Fig. 1. Venn diagram illustrates the intersection between economic, societal, and environmental sustainability in exhibition-making. Ideally, the exhibition ecosystem's equilibrium resides within the central intersection zone.

As microcosmic ecosystems, exhibitions can challenge the superstructure and the artificial dichotomy between culture and nature, compelling us to reconceptualize curating as a means of fostering mutual care, interconnection, and ecological justice. As components of Gaia, exhibitions and all their constituents bear responsibility for their impact, even when awareness thereof remains incomplete. Exhibitions transcend mere display sites or vehicles for ecological discourse; they represent practical recognition of humanity's active participation in the ecosystem's natural entanglement.

Applying sustainability values to exhibition-making entails treating it as a balanced ecosystem, thereby guaranteeing a more equitable art system characterized by recognized human rights (social sustainability), conscious environmental footprint (environmental sustainability), and balanced resource utilization (economic sustainability).

Responsible Eco-Logic

Artist Agnes Denes, like Leonardo da Vinci, employs a multidisciplinary approach to art which, according to the artist, has become necessary. As she articulates, we inhabit an “age of complexity” wherein we are perpetually inundated with information that we lack either time or inclination to internalize.¹⁶

16 Agnes Denes, „The Paradox of Eco-Logic,” in: *The Human Argument. The Writings of Agnes Denes* 1, ed. Klaus Ottmann (New York: Spring Publications, 2007), 215–19.

This expansive knowledge base simultaneously constitutes both the objective and instrument of our progress, which profoundly affects the planet and, consequently, our own species. As Denes argues, "the normal balance of nature no longer controls us"; we have appropriated evolutionary processes while refusing to acknowledge this appropriation or assume responsibility for it.¹⁷

According to Jackie Brookner, writing for *Art Journal* in 1992:

"There is so much we have not wanted to see. We have not wanted to look at the destruction we are causing, at our own death, our own bodies, our own waste, nor to acknowledge that we humans are not the center of the world. Recent art, some of it explicitly ecological, some of it not, is asking us to look at what our toxins and garbage and overpopulation are doing to the earth (Buster Simpson, Antony Gormley, Mierle Ukeles), to acknowledge our own vulnerability and limitations (Louise Bourgeois, Joseph Beuys, Kiki Smith), to find new ways of seeing ourselves and our identity with Earth (Ana Mendieta) within the larger infinity (James Turrell Agnes Denes, Mel Chin, and Andrew Goldsworthy)"¹⁸.

These "toxins" may be tangible or intangible, immanent or theoretical, visible or psychological, as articulated in the curatorial concept underlying *Immateriality of Rejection*, a collective exhibition held in Helsinki in 2024. Responsibility rejection constitutes the foundation of all other forms of psychological and material refusal, generating imbalances within the art system that consequently manifest societal, economic, and environmental impacts on Gaia. Applying Eco-Logic principles to all art practices represents the sole means by which the art world can assume responsibility for its impact—both material and immaterial—through quantitative and qualitative analysis followed by consequent action.

When addressing sustainability from an anthropocentric perspective, scientists and philosophers frequently prioritize human species survival, perceiving environmental crisis as threatening our cherished superstructure. Following James Lovelock's reasoning regarding Gaia's evolution, we must consider a species' role within Gaia's comprehensive mechanism without privileging its needs over the primary system's survival. Indeed, examining our own evolution, Lovelock affirms that we have biologically developed characteristics contradicting Dar-

17 Denes.

18 Jackie Brookner, „The Heart of Matter,” *Art Journal* 51, no. 2 (1992), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/777382>.

winism, as their development conferred no direct advantage. "Why should we evolve something to our disadvantage unless it was for altruistic reasons?"¹⁹ Lovelock queries. Apparently, Darwinism, in concert with Gaia's evolution, creates a composition wherein short-term changes advantage species survival, while long-term changes serve the broader ecosystem's survival. Regarding our own survival, we apply Darwinism from a self-interested, anthropocentric perspective. "How on Earth did we evolve to be so altruistic and have such enlightened self-interest?"²⁰ Lovelock inquires further. No definitive answer exists for this philosophical question. Certainly, our instinct and interests tend toward Darwinist survival without acknowledging that within this very mode of thinking, Gaia's termination—and consequently that of the human species—becomes inevitable and likely accelerated.

Following Eco-Logic principles, assuming responsibility in exhibition-making necessitates prioritizing the exhibition ecosystem's sustainability above all else.²¹ When organizers manage substantial budgets, they frequently neglect ecosystem balance, allocating excessive resources to disposable installations without seeking convergence between economic and environmental sustainability. Does affluence justify waste? Eco-logically, certainly not.

"With great power comes great responsibility"²² proclaimed Uncle Ben in *Spider-Man vs. Wolverine #1* (1987), encapsulating in the Peter Parker Principle the entire "human argument": humanity's struggle to identify its role within cosmic mechanisms.²³ Having appropriated our evolutionary trajectory, freely and consciously determining our biological and cultural progress, humanity bears the enormous responsibility of controlling processes that only our species can initiate. As art practitioners, art serves as the medium not merely for communicating this responsibility but for implementing it through practice, perpetually striving toward a more sustainable and equitable art system.

19 James Lovelock, *We Belong to Gaia* (Dublin: Penguin Random House UK, 2006).

20 James Lovelock.

21 Denes, „The Paradox of Eco-Logic.”

22 Brian Cronin, „When We First Met - When Did Uncle Ben First Say 'With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility?'” *Comic Book Resources*, July 15, 2015, <https://www.cbr.com/when-we-first-met-when-did-uncle-ben-first-say-with-great-power-comes-great-responsibility/>.

23 Martin Recke, „With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility,” *Next*, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://nextconf.eu/2020/03/with-great-power-comes-great-responsibility/>.

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Frédérique Aït-Touati & Bruno Latoura, 2019. SOC.

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