

## **Aladdin's Lamp and Art after the End of the Holocene: 1:1 Scale, Ecoaesthetics and Rewilding**

One of the classics of conceptual art, the Uruguayan artist of German origins Luis Camnitzer, a teacher and writer on education, likened the art world to an Aladdin's lamps storage.<sup>1</sup> We collect, conserve and admire "vessels", we view them in museums, contemplate their ornaments and forms. We can write the history of these objects, name the styles and tendencies. But what really interests us is the genie trapped inside a lamp or a bottle; we believe he is there with his superpowers. We have created a very sophisticated system of sustaining the belief in the existence of this spirit: museum edifices, frames and plinths, books and catalogues, specialist language, the cult of "geniuses". This system may be extremely costly and energy-intensive. What's more, it requires specialist knowledge and (fittingly for a cult) an appropriate degree of initiation. Art would therefore be something of "handicraft+", although it is difficult to determine, without sliding into esotericism, what hides behind the mysterious "plus".

What if the genie does not exist? Or – apparently a much more interesting possibility – he has left the lamp and seldom visits it, inhabiting instead many different places, objects and actions? Here we could evoke Marcel Duchamp, whose lecture *The Creative Act* in 1957 reflected on the term "art coefficient". Duchamp took an interest in the discrepancy between what the artist wants to say through her or his work but loses the intended meaning and what the work communicates "in and of itself", without the artist's intention. Following this trope, the Canadian theorist Stephen Wright ventured to propose a certain intellectual and perceptual exercise: let's assume that no separate set of objects and phenomena exists that could be called artworks and those that are not art. Instead, there is a certain "substance" whose degree of intensity increases or decreases in various objects and actions. The coefficient of art can therefore be measured in all human activities as well as their material and immaterial effects. Welcome to the world of genies liberated from the bottle once and for all!

Artmaking is about adding and more seldom about subtracting. This involves a peculiar paradox: even the artworks that convey a critique of the exploitation of natural resources and rapacious modernisation materialise in the form of energy-intensive and costly objects. Effort invested in keeping artworks alive: air-conditioned halls, sophisticated forms of display, specialist transport, is little short of gargantuan. Skittish ideas captured in material forms suck out resources and energy. At the same time, postulates have been formulated in art for several decades to refrain from production and shift artistic work to the sphere of environmental and climate activism. This is how we can consider, for example, the process of the dematerialisation of the artwork in conceptual art in the 1960s, a practice that often rested on ecological foundations. This aspect has been marginalised in Western art history as incongruent with the cool, analytical, "inorganic" image of this artistic tendency. In his conversation with Ursula Meyer in 1969, Lawrence Weiner, a pioneer of conceptualism, declared straightforwardly: "If you can't make art without making a physical imprint on the physical aspects of the world, then maybe art is not worth making. In this sense, any permanent damage to ecological factors in nature not necessary for the furtherance of human existence, but only necessary for the illustration of an art concept, is a crime against

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<sup>1</sup> Luis Camnitzer, *Where is the Genie?*, an edited version of a keynote speech for the conference *The Idea of the Global Museum*, held at the Museum für Gegenwart at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, December 2016, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/100/268759/where-is-the-genie/> [accessed 20 January 2022].

humanity.” Two years later, a text was published in Poland to accompany the plein-air “Ziemia Zgorzelecka – 1971: Art and Science in the Process of Protecting the Human Natural Environment” in Opolno-Zdrój. This manifesto, which articulated the principles of what was most likely the first climate plein-air in Europe, included the following forecast: “The modern-day civilisation model is the most supreme machine we know heading for self-annihilation. This results from the drive to constantly change the world. We are currently witnessing a manifest crisis of science as a universal remedy for all problems of humankind.”

The climate crisis, experienced on a daily basis through the painful loss of biodiversity, the seasons, and a general deficit of hope for the future, requires the activation of massive deposits of imagination. Meanwhile, the art world as a model of production, distribution, relations with its audiences, is burdened by numerous flaws: a penchant for exaggeration, extravagance, competition, overproduction, elitism. Part of art history is also the tradition of observing the sky and the earth, variable light conditions, temperature and humidity. History of 19th century painting alone can teach us a lesson about the degradation of the natural environment in the industrial revolution era. Through artworks we experience destructive processes to which art itself frequently contributed. At the same time, emerging steadily from the intersection of art, political activism and ecological thought since the 1960s is a reflection on art seen from the perspective of geologic time and a need to create works that are neutral or beneficial for the environment. The postulate of such artists as Bonnie Ora Sherk, Betsy Damon and the OHO Group was to refrain from producing new artworks, which fill museum storage spaces, and to hand agency over to non-human forces. For example, the American artist Bonnie Ora Sherk (1945–2021) engaged in transforming neglected areas of the city into green enclaves useful for local communities. Sherk called her early works from the 1970s “environmental performance sculptures” – she found places that could act as stage settings for her temporary interventions. The performer’s presence was supposed to change the perception of “dead spaces”. In October 1970, while wandering around San Francisco, Sherk came across an enormous puddle filled with rubbish and building materials – the remains of the construction of the giant 101 Freeway Interchange. The artist returned there with a photographer, put on an evening gown and sat there for an hour in an armchair sticking out of dirty water, smoking cigarettes and contemplating the surrounding urban landscape. This scene is a graceful illustration of the concept of “dark ecology”, proposed several decades later by the philosopher Timothy Morton – the boundaries between the natural and the unnatural, the artificial and the organic, have been blurred. In the mid-1970s, Sherk chose to adopt a more active approach to urban regeneration by initiating the creation of spaces where local communities could work, learn and relax together as well as spaces for animals (which at that time were ever more often involved by the artist in joint interspecies actions). Her most famous project, *Crossroads Community (The Farm)*, 1974–80, was a community garden set up under the highway overpass in the same location where the photo *Sitting Still I* was taken a few years prior. The farm grew to seven acres and included garden beds and the Raw Egg Animal Theater, a building for animals, among other facilities. Used by residents of residential neighbourhoods in the vicinity: Mission, Bernal Heights, Potrero Hill and Bayview, the place served as a kindergarten, a neighbourhood club, a playground, a farm.

Taking Camnitzer’s reflection about the genie further in the context of Sherk’s work, the spirit would remain invisible, but no longer contained in the vessel that restricts his movements and distracts attention from possibly the most important thing in art: the work of imagination, care and building an interspecies community.

A term that could come in handy in describing art that does not consist in imitating and recreating the visible world (that is continuous production and search for “novelty”) is *1:1 scale*. In reference to artistic practices in the 20th and 21st centuries, this category was introduced by the already mentioned Canadian theorist-escapist (currently a farmer) Stephen Wright. Artistic practice on the 1:1 scale uses “the world as its own map” instead of developing models of reality. It is the world which it describes, a territory that is its own map. Wright evokes an excerpt from Lewis Carroll’s story *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* from 1893 with a mention of a cartographic project in which one mile of land corresponds precisely to one mile of the map. Employing this literary reference, Wright addresses artistic practices that challenge the legitimacy of developing artificial models of reality in art spaces. Artists set up their own museums, gardens, political parties and schools, they are active as consultants, cooks, therapists, etc. Institutions have a hard time recognising art on the 1:1 scale because of the elimination of its defining features that allow for capturing such practices, naming them and putting them under evaluation by a historian or a critic. However, 1:1 scale offers the possibility to enjoy real effects of such practices, good and bad, those for humans and for non-humans.

Of note in this context are practices that address modern-day ruins, entropic processes and cataloguing human-modified landscapes. For example, the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), an organisation founded in 1994 in Los Angeles, develops exhibitions and research programmes devoted to the modification of the planet’s surface by the *Homo sapiens* species. Among CLUI’s programmes is the conceptual American Land Museum, which covers the territory of the entire United States, and whose collection comprises objects described by the Center’s team: disused factories, dumps, aircraft boneyards, mock-ups of cities for military exercises, slag heaps, etc. According to the critic, theorist and curator Lucy Lippard, the CLUI is the most important heir to the conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s, but at the same time the Center’s activity is difficult to categorise as art. Locations indicated by this organisation do not automatically become artworks, but what is certainly involved is the use of exhibition as a tool – “exhibiting” objects and buildings found in landscape.<sup>2</sup> Worth enumerating among kindred inspirations and historical references is Robert Smithson’s classic essay *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* from 1967, which depicts the artist’s post-industrial town as a “found” exhibition of sculptures in public space. Six years later, Smithson took an interest in the Bingham Canyon Mine, an open-pit copper mine, one of the largest man-made excavations. On the tide of projects devoted to the renewal of post-industrial areas, Smithson made an official request (left unanswered) to the Kennecott Copper Corporation, which managed the mine. He proposed that they stop mining and change the status of the site into an artwork, whose form would refer to a 19th century cyclorama. From the bottom of the mine one could observe plants and animals reclaiming it throughout the next centuries.

The above example leads us to another term useful in the context of museology in an era of climate crisis: *rewilding*, that is making a site wild (again), renaturalisation. This term appeared in the 1990s in a debate about new, more radical strategies of protecting the natural environment. It was proposed by Dave Foreman, the founder of the organisation Earth First!. The organisation Rewilding Europe describes this tactic on its website as leaving possibly the

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<sup>2</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (New York: The New Press, 2014), pp. 27–29.

vastest wild spaces free from human intervention to allow natural processes to once again create diverse landscapes, damaged ecosystems to regenerate, and to enable the renaturalisation of heavily transformed areas.<sup>3</sup> The fundamental rule of *rewilding* is: “nature manages itself”. In a certain sense, this means a reversal of processes initiated by humans during the Neolithic revolution. It is tempting to apply this term to artistic practices that involve refraining from production and, instead, creating conditions for other species that can take control over a given area.

Of note in this context is the practice of the artist John Latham, who was employed at the Scottish Office in Edinburgh in 1975–76 (as part of the Artist Placement Group experimental programme). Latham was assigned the task of developing a feasibility study concerning the removal of nineteen suburban slag heaps, left after the mining of oil-bearing shale since the 1860s. Latham approached the slag heaps as process sculptures and proposed nominating them as monuments of historical, cultural and natural significance. A group of slag heaps ultimately became protected by virtue of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act. Nominating slag heaps as landscape-as-art can also be seen to do away with the dichotomy between the natural and the artificial. It also brings to mind Joseph Beuys’ enigmatic proposal (few traces of which are found in museum archives and writings) concerning the “conservation” of Dutch light. Beuys assumed that the unique light conditions known from old paintings had been ultimately lost at the beginning of the 20th century due to the land reclamation project in the Zuiderzee, a former North Sea bay. *Rewilding* as an artistic activity could theoretically allow for restoring the sublime experience of being blinded by the bay water surface.

Last but not least, thinking about art of the future we may evoke the *ecoaesthetics* programme proposed by the Pakistani-British artist Rasheed Araeen. This minimalist sculptor and installation artist, founder of the *Third Text* journal, postulates going beyond the supremacy of the *Homo sapiens* species and unleashing the “creative energies of free collective imagination”. He criticises the very system in which art functions, which maintains hierarchies, glorifies blind growth just for the sake of growth, separates creative energies from everyday life processes and petrifies them in the form of “narego” – the narcissistic ego of the artist. Araeen proposes two terms: nominalism and cosmoralism. The former refers to launching useful processes by artists which are implemented by local communities – fluid, lasting, based on sustainable development. Towards the end of the 1970s, Araeen visited the desert territories of South Balochistan, from which his ancestors originated. Greatly impressed by the majestic Pakistani landscape, the artist asked himself: “Why cannot this landscape become an artwork?”. An engineer by education, Araeen proposed the construction of a dam in the desert to help retain water from periodic rivers. The structure would become both a sculpture and a functional dam, an artist’s work and a feat of engineering, it would serve aesthetic contemplation and improve living conditions. This would not be a model of a situation meant to highlight a certain problem, and therefore Araeen’s task would consist above all in *not making* art. The second proposal, cosmoralism, is a total vision of a network of cooperatives and ecological villages based on fair cooperation between the Global North and Global South, which would result in the reforestation of the Sahara, among other effects.

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<sup>3</sup> Rewilding Europe, “What Is Rewilding?”, <https://rewildingeuropa.com/what-is-rewilding-2/> [accessed 20 January 2022].

Imagining a new world is a step in the right direction. This is where the role of artists can be distinguished in an era of planetary change: mobilisation and activation of processes of imagination that would offer an alternative to doubt and the sense that it is already too late to do anything.

By way of conclusion, I would like to refer to the science-fiction short story *Rainbow Wrasse* from 2018 by the Irish writer Francis McKee. It is set in a realm in which forecasts about the planetary system's ultimate destabilisation become reality. The human population has shrunk significantly, the available farmlands can only sustain a micropopulation. Communities camp out here and there, making use of abandoned airports from which no aircraft will ever take off again. The Internet is rationed and available to the protagonists for just a few hours a week, but this is enough to keep up a florid correspondence. Few artworks have survived. A box of films on 35 mm film stock, several abstract paintings. These are showcased during rare ceremonies. Former museum staff and curators have abandoned white cube temples and work in a garden, conducting valuable experiments in the field of interspecies aesthetics. They communicate with fungi and lichens, produce antibiotics, vegan protein and vitamins. However rough, this vision has certain allure. In a world after the end of the Holocene the human being is no longer an omnipotent being who systematises, modernises and exploits natural resources. They must adjust to the expectations of non-human sisters and brothers. Solace also comes with the promise that art can be invented completely from scratch, even if this entails the ultimate abandonment of the museum and the movement-restricting costume of contemporary art. Regardless of whether Aladdin's lamp hides a magical creature inside or just the promise of its existence, it reminds us about the role played by imagination in our common work for the sake of a better future.