



# “Green” and “grey” ecologies as a notional context of contemporary artistic practices<sup>†</sup>

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## Abstract

The author highlights the need for the societies to become aware of the ecologically motivated ethics of responsibility. She discusses the division of ecological practices into “green” (e.g. establishments of reserves, protection of endangered species) and “grey” ones, which have been analyzed by P. Virilio, who defined them as “no longer an ecology of substance, but an [...] ecology of the shrinking world.” According to the author, ecologically committed art contributes to propagating responsible attitudes, by drawing for instance on the tradition of avant-garde commitment. It is manifested in all currents which expose the dangers of the advancing technology and look for means of overcoming such threats (grey ecology).

## Key words

Art, ecology, environment, technology

When in the late eighteenth century Count Buffon was writing his *Histoire Naturelle*, he was convinced that primeval nature which had not been transformed by the human hand is utterly unworthy of attention. He believed it to be a “barren and miserable” land which mirrored the reflections of mortality. On the other hand, he saw vigor and charm in nature that was civilized, ordered, and reshaped by the human. Such an opposition, in particular the value attached by Buffon to each component, is astonishing today. As Wolf Lepenies (1996) explains, the French

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naturalist drew on the classical theology of the physical world, in which the power of creation and destruction rested solely with God. Francis Bacon's agenda, perpetuated by René Descartes in *Treatise on Method*, which inspired human conquest of nature and its subjugation, could in this context be implemented without concern for the destructive impact of ever more readily undertaken transformations.

However, as nature became historicized in the nineteenth century, people grew aware of the dangers involved in unchecked exploitation. Today, when so much is said about "limits to growth" (which regrettably still fails to be reflected in policies and in the ordinary, everyday actions of people), when various "green" ecology movements nostalgically refer to the utopia of nature, one obviously protects and finds charm, even sublimity, in those areas which Buffon thought "barren and miserable," a visible sign of the world's transience. We are now inclined to associate mortality with our own actions, and yet we often continue these actions against the increasingly widespread critique of the anthropocentric view of the world—that is to say, we continue to pollute and destroy our environment, formerly "pure" and primeval nature. It has also undermined our certainty of our own culture-dependent condition (which became a "second nature").

In *Das Unbehagen der Kultur*, Sigmund Freud pointed to the ambivalences inherent in the practical implementation (in accordance with the Baconian-Cartesian program) of the omnipotence and omniscience which had once been attributed to God. As Freud wrote, "man has become a god by means of artificial limbs, so to speak, quite magnificent when equipped with all his accessory organs; but they do not grow on him and they still give him trouble at times" (1994, 23). He also added that despite making themselves resemble God, humans today do not feel happy and are tormented by fears. Almost at the same time, Ernst Bloch, an extraordinary philosopher (little known in Poland, though) was gravely concerned with the "anxiety of the engineer" (and the scholar) who saw the materiality of the world (the foundation of experience so far) slip at an increasing pace through their fingers. In those days, perhaps only the futurists were apt to believe that taming the natural around us and within ourselves would bring humanity nothing but happiness.

Freud and Bloch considered the positive and negative aftermath of the "technologization" of human experience, a process they observed as it was happening. Today, we are even more vehement than they were in stressing the disadvantages of striving for "omnipotence and omniscience," both with respect to the environment and the human being, while seeing anthropocentrism—noble though its intentions may have been—as a manifestation of excessive pride and disregard for outcomes in near and remote environments as well as on future generations. Still, the critique does not mean a return to the classical theology of the physical world; there is no need for grand moves in the notional domain ("metaphysical" ones) to

be able to accept ecological values (in the broad sense, drawing on Greek sources) as superior.

In a variety of fields, contemporary ecology reckons the losses and designs various conservation strategies, which in the "green" dimension include establishment of nature reserves, supporting threatened animal and plant species, elimination of pollutants in the environment, etc. A number of such undertakings is associated with efforts to improve quality of life—a value much highlighted in consumption-based societies.

The domain of ecology is not determined solely by suitable policies (applied to macro-, mezo- and microenvironments) and the practices they provide for. It is also a sphere of individual commitment—small steps taken every day. Art can and does enter into each of these areas, from sweeping programs to initiatives aiming to save several trees on a particular street in a city.

Before I discuss the forms of art's commitment to ecology, I should elucidate a number of more general issues. We usually see ecology in conjunction with politics, while it would also be worthwhile to put more stress on its ethical aspect, as it very much tallies with the ethics of responsibility, previously advanced by Max Horkheimer and extensively elaborated today by Hans Jonas, Karl-Otto Apel, or Dieter Bimbacher. The responsibility in question encompasses not only one's loved ones, but distant fellow human beings as well—those whose faces we do not know, who not only live far away but also have not yet been born. Thus, ecologically committed art indirectly contributes to propagating responsible attitudes, and perhaps this is what its foremost task consists in today and in the future. In so doing, it opposes the egotistical and narcissistic proclivities of the consumerist system (which, as already observed, does display ambivalent traits, in that by emphasizing quality of life it empowers ecological movements which operate beyond consumerist ideology). Moreover, art punctures the pride-filled balloon of the anthropocentric image of the world.

Another question is the diversity of worldview-related premises behind ecological movements and their purely hybrid nature, which in general involves drawing on various cultural traditions. Bio- and eco-centric "deep" ecology are the most active movements today, along with assertions which rely on a more rationalized ethical argumentation. However, when one examines texts written by representatives of "deep" ecology in greater detail, it becomes evident that they often employ the same myth of "untainted" nature and the human who is integrally bound to it (clearly, a nostalgic myth), which the critics of early modern industrialization resorted to as well. Meanwhile, Jean-Jacques Rousseau is simultaneously relevant and obsolete. His thought is relevant as far as preserving the memory of the sources (often mythologized) is at stake, yet it is no longer applicable because (which needs to be explicitly stated) no return will ever succeed. We are too profoundly steeped in our "second nature," though even this one has to be protected

due to the expansion of the “third nature.” Freud and Bloch never anticipated the actual scale of the developments they had predicted. With the emergence of virtual worlds and advances in communication technologies (which tend to be treated as technologies of pseudo-communication), as well as genetics, plastic surgery, etc., and the rapidly quickening pace of life and experience, we move about in a world which is far more artificial than the realm of “second nature,” and thus we drift even further away from primeval nature.

Jean Baudrillard, a philosopher and sociologist who likes to conceive bleak scenarios for the future, has little faith in the possibility of protecting the first and the second nature alike. “Certainly, this whole panoply of survival issues - dieting, ecology, saving the sequoias, seals or the human race - tends to prove that we are very much alive (just as all imaginary fairy-tales tend to prove that the real world is very real),” he states, adding that “we have subtly passed over into a state where life is excessively easy” (Baudrillard 1988, 42—43).

Paul Virilio (1989) also warns against the easiness with which “the entire world comes home” while we succumb to the dangerous phase of “new [physical] settlement” combined with new (mediatic) nomadism. However, the originator of the aesthetics of disappearance suggests certain strategies with which it could be overcome. “The Greens, the green movement is in my view a precursor to another, grey ecology: no longer an ecology of substance, but an ecology of distances, ecology of the shrinking world,” he states in one of his numerous published interviews (Virilio 1993, 61). Thus, he confronts the *thaumatological* attitude, in which speed, appearance, and disappearance are treated as a kind of miracle, with the *dramaturgical* approach, which insistently highlights the negative aspect of increasing speed, the failures, the disasters, and the dangers of uncontrollable progress. When the burden of real experience vanishes, when it is replaced by a TV or computer screen, one needs to think about building rescue rafts—an immobilizing system to prevent ominous scenarios from coming true. When practicing “grey” ecology, we should think and act like the group of nineteenth century engineers who, on their own initiative, met in Brussels to counteract collision risks owing to the spread of railways throughout Europe. Threats have to be identified promptly and equally promptly responded to, as speeds today surpass the capacities with which the human had been naturally equipped, causing atrophy of the sense of reality and dematerialization of experience (felt already by Bloch’s protagonist) on a much greater scale than thinkers in the first half of the twentieth century could have imagined. Will our future indeed consist in being disabled entities composed of artificial limbs, in Freud’s vein? Baudrillard goes as far as referring to “plastic surgery for the whole human species,” because “the only physical beauty is created by plastic surgery, the only urban beauty by landscape surgery, the only opinion by opinion poll surgery” (Baudrillard 1988, 32), we find ourselves in a situation of anthropological

uncertainty we have brought on ourselves and which the author of *Fatal Strategies* compares to transsexuality.

The fact that we are "connected to machines" compels us to address yet again the questions which Descartes sought to answer in *Treatise on Method*. The implants we grow so accustomed to make us realize that the faculties which set us apart as a species—thinking and feeling—have come under threat. This is how, according to pessimists, the modern understanding of ascendancy over external and internal nature comes to an end.

The diagnosis is obviously exaggerated, but it suffices insofar as it inoculates us with adequate doses of anxiety and urges us to act in the domain of "grey" ecology.

Personally, I am of the opinion that in fact we do not live solely in the world of "second" or "third" nature, but in multiple worlds which generate various types of experience ("old" and "new" ones). The hybridization we yield to in the process need not be immediately ascribed negative value. The point is to devise such rules of transitioning between these worlds and types of experience that 'that their specificity is neither compromised nor eliminated'. And when new regions reveal their seductive power and take us under their sway completely, one needs strategies to protect the experience of the old type, without which the anthropological condition is made seriously vulnerable indeed.

Thus outlined, the broad context of "green" and "grey" ecology associated with the ethics of responsibility creates a vast scope for art and runs, as it were, athwart its previous divisions and qualifications. It is in that very context that we find the extension of avant-garde commitment, though it is no longer treated in a universalist and unconditional manner (as in some of the early avant-gardes). Moreover, by virtue of coupling "green" and "grey" ecology, pro-ecological artistic practices comprise not only the creative actions described in *Kunstforum* (1999) or certain domestic practices in the domain of "land art," or (especially as regards Poland) "arte povera" (definitely less spectacular than land art), or site-specific art (functioning in opposition to Marc Augé's non-places), but also the works of Orlan or Bill Viola, for instance. In short, these artistic practices may result in projects in which artists analyze the perils of technical and technological development, both for the environment and our own condition (which are correlated, after all), and in projects showing ways to overcome such threats. The employed conventions and artistic techniques may vary (the most interesting are perhaps those that use new technologies to demonstrate the destructive aspects of that very same technology). I would not hesitate (in an overly pompous manner, perhaps) to reiterate a view already expressed here—namely, that it is in broadly understood pro-ecological art that I see the principal *raison d'être* of the present-day and future-oriented commitment of art, which at the same time draws on the most eminent ideological traditions of the avant-garde (yet without their limitations and one-sidedness).

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