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Green Creators

Paul Ardenne, *Un Art écologique. Création plasticienne et Anthropocène*, Le Bord de l'Eau

By Juliette Bessette

What effects do works of art have on consciousness and society? Ecological art asks this question in a new and urgent way, by calling upon us to befriend endangered nature.

Reviewed: Paul Ardenne, *Un Art écologique. Création plasticienne et Anthropocène* (Ecological Art: Plastic Creation and the Anthropocene) Lormont, Le Bord de l'Eau, 2018, postface de Bernard Stiegler. 304 p., 27 €.

The disturbance of the ecosystem caused by human activity is undeniable. In his book, *Un Art écologique. Création plasticienne et Anthropocène* (Ecological Art: Plastic Creation and the Anthropocene), the art historian Paul Ardenne sets out to explore the approaches adopted by different artists as they confront this ecological situation in the age of the "Anthropocene"—a term currently fashionable in the publishing world, but with which the author claims not to be particularly comfortable.[1]

How can plastic creation help us understand ecology, and what forms are best suited to this approach?[2] Ardenne has no intention of succumbing to the visual

[1] This term is still a topic of debate, including in the scientific community. Ardenne prefers the concept of Neholocene (end/finsihed-Holocene) coined by the geologist Jean-Paul Barusseau. The concept of Capitalocene has also been proposed, as this new geological being the result not simply of human activity but activity within the capitalist system.

[2] Bernard Stiegler's postface, "L'art dans la situation post-véridique et le nouveau conflit des facultés noétiques dans l'Anthropocène" (Art in a Post-Truth Situation and the New Conflict of Noetic

fascination for the morbid, to which plastic arts are too often inclined. The risk is that these spectacular forms will have little more than a cathartic effect on the public, without triggering genuine ecological commitment. In his critical study of apocalyptic reason, Michael Foessel writes: "The current danger lies less in the apocalypse than in the appearance of a new form of insensitivity. Ascetics dispossessed of a world organize their lives around calculation and predictions so that they never have to confront contingency. They internalize catastrophe, and thus never have to see it."[3] To be sensitive is a prerequisite of sorts for the artists Ardenne timidly proposes to call "eco-artists"[4] or "'green' creators" (p. 11). Rendering people sensitive, in this way, takes on all its importance: the question raised here is that of the effects art purports to have on the society from which it arises. Given the urgent need for action, do not artists have an ethical responsibility before their audiences? If so, what are possible ways in which they can contribute through forms of sensuous creation?

What ecological art is not

Without claiming to rewrite art history and without decreeing the right way to create in today's world, Ardenne simply attempts to understand what kinds of practices might be associated with an ecological art. Working in nature or with living things is not enough: in this respect Land Art, which developed in the 1960s—the period Ardenne sees as laying the foundation for art with a "green" message—is particularly revealing. The range of approaches associated with this movement helps to clarify one of the book's major arguments: its distinction between "hard" and "soft" works of art (p. 72). The former are characterized by aggressivity and violence towards the ecosystem in which they are placed (as evidenced in irreversible destruction, lasting pollution, or the removal of matter). "Soft" works of art, for their part, have no significant effects on the ecosystem. An example Ardenne gives is that of the artist Denis Oppenheim who, in 1968, dug concentric furrows into the snow along the US-Canadian border, at the boundary of two time zones, to evoke the passing and

Faculties in the Anthropocene) proposes—like others before him and as he has done previously—to rethink the work of art on the basis of the concept of entropy (Entropocene) by way of a fairly impenetrable philosophical analysis.

[3] Michael Foessel, *Après la fin du monde. Critique de la raison* apocalyptique, Paris, Seuil, 2012, p. 288, quoted by Thomas Schlesser in *L'Univers sans l'homme*, Paris, Hazan, 2016, p. 238.

[4] See, notably, as Ardenne advises, Linda Weintraub, *To Life! Eco* Art *in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2012.

arbitrary limits of time (*Annual Rings,* 1968, Fort Kent, Maine). This work travels through its site in an ephemeral and delicate manner. In contrast, the kilometer-long copper bar that Walter de Maria shoved into the earth (*Vertical Earth Kilometer*, 1977, Kassel) symbolizes the artist's despotic appropriation of the earth. "Earth though you may be, I do with you as I please, says the artist. I act as I wish, I do with you as I wish. Is this rape ?" (p. 73).

Thus the criterion of softness that Ardenne identifies is based not on artistic values, but on an attitude of respect that seeks to provoke, among the public, a feeling of *philia* or friendship towards the natural milieu. In the context of the current ecological crisis, this feeling becomes an attitude of compassion: in his introduction, Ardenne promptly puts forth the idea of "care." To this he quickly adds responsibility: one must dress the wounds that human beings have inflicted on the earth, but also begin a process of reparation. "How can one live in a sick world without simply surviving in it, and what can one do to restore this sick world's health?" (p. 12).

Becoming an actor

As he gradually tightens his argument, Ardenne also excludes projects that, while "soft," do not address ecological questions directly. Artists who practice ecological art are fully conscious of the reality of the context in which they create, and go beyond clinical observations and the denunciation of a disintegrating world by acting. Their work upends artists' and the public's relationship to the work of art and provokes collective awareness of the urgency of ecological issues.

Without being written in an activist vein, the book is, in this way, necessarily tied to thinking about social and political structures. Ardenne calls for a new, ethically-based creative movement, in which artists would demonstrate a personal investment in a higher morality, that of preserving life and tending to the earth. The reception process—on the largest possible scale—is of major importance to this function of art, this new creative economy, as the public, if it too is to be responsible, must become an actor confronting this predicament.

An ethical assessment

At first glance, one might regret this book's catalog-like form—the fact that it presents a sequence of more or less isolated initiatives. Readers—particularly art historians, who are accustomed to historiographical classifications—may be surprised, even frustrated, by its fairly systematic examination of individual proposals. But Ardenne justifies his rejection of simplistic, "reductive, [and] excessively classificatory" labels (p. 9): he embraces a *documentary* approach that he, of course, admits is incomplete. This is indicated by the indefinite article in the book's title—"*An* Ecological Art": its point is not to bring together all the proposals into a coherent movement. Quite the contrary. The author is aware of the dangers of "greenwashing," which is the corollary of ecolabelling, and he is committed to "the greatest analytical and semantic prudence" (p. 9). "Step by step," he documents the attitudes characteristic of various artists at particular times. A synthetic overview of the theme of "an ecological art" would not only be an impossible exercise, but a misplaced one. It is not a movement, but rather a multitude of "plastic forms and sensuous creations" (p. 7). This method respects each approach's integrity and also makes it possible to mention numerous artists whose ecological commitment in their work has been partial or temporary.

Even so, Ardenne organizes his book into three parts, distinguishing the great "families" of artistic initiatives, which he presents gradually, culminating in the most ecological kinds of art possible. The first, "immersing oneself in nature," evokes the relationship between the earth and artists' or their art's involvement in nature. The second, "towards eco-creation," involves a genuine ecological demand on the part of artists. Finally, the last part, "towards useful art, one step at a time," fully joins the environmental struggle and the quest for concrete results. Here, the author reveals his major concepts: ethics, responsibility, commitment. He values artists "whose entire oeuvre will now be dedicated to valorizing the ecological cause" (p. 11).

If one keeps the idea of softness in the background, it is apparent that this commitment cannot be limited to spectacular actions. Useful art, in its diversity, often takes the form of *in situ* work—ephemeral, temporary, local, and socially and politically located in the place in question. Ethical art gets little media attention: it does not seek critical, institutional, and monetary recognition. "It does not need prestige in that it does not aspire to artistic domination, but is supported by the logic of human and planetary necessities" (p. 183). Its highly diverse plastic forms can range from the

most traditional of practices (anchored in the visual) to the invention of new forms of expression that Ardenne calls *contextual*,[5] which integrate natural processes as well as the public. As for material realization, except for respectful integration into the ecosystem (mentioned above), the decisive criterion relates not to the work, but to its cost, the condition being "that its carbon footprint not be excessive" (p. 241).

Ardenne is categorical: the ecological costs of Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* (2015, Paris), an artistic and media event occurring during the 2015 Paris climate talks, were "outrageous" (p. 261). What he means is that the work's symbolic impact is out of all proportion with its carbon footprint. Herein lies the entire question: "What can art be, in such a context? Nothing, or very little. That is, nothing or very little in terms of concrete effectiveness" (p. 7). This ineffectiveness is further reinforced by the book's chilling dedication to the memory of three activists who died for the cause—Ken Saro-Wiwa, Vital Michalon, and Rémi Fraisse, "martyrs of the ecological cause, our guides" (p. 5).

What, then, is art's point? Ardenne, in his introduction, speaks of a *desperate* struggle (p. 7). Yet throughout his book, he reaffirms artists' role in the fight for a better world, notably through their example. Eco-artists, who not only have responsibilities like the rest of us, but feel a sense of responsibility, are determinedly engaged in a quest leading to ecological activism. They adopt a constructive attitude, a struggle that uses sensuousness and symbolism. But this fight cannot be waged at any ecological cost.

This interpretation inspires deep skepticism towards commodified art, which is characterized by the enormous ecological impact of producing and transporting materials for making art, exhibitions, and the nomadic lifestyle of artists and the globalized art world. But it also leads to a feeling of defiance towards artistic initiatives that, though dubbed "contemporary," continue to operate outside of their own context—that is, a period of ecological emergency.

[5] The author has already worked on this topic: see Paul Ardenne, *Un art contextuel, création artistique en milieu urbain, en situation, d'intervention, de participation,* Paris, Flammarion, 2009.

Anthropocenart

As for art historians, do not they, too, have a responsibility towards those creations that Ardenne describes as demonstrative, militant, and exemplary (p. 262)? In conclusion, he offers an overview of another history of art, proposing the neologism "anthropocenart" (p. 260). He does not propose a new grand narrative, but suggests a mode of sensibility that has remained far too unexplored. Ardenne makes clear that he has no illusions as to how long it will take for such initiatives to penetrate art history's conventions of taste. We are in a moment of transition—the time required to change mentalities. His book is an appeal for us to leave our mentality behind: it lays the foundation for a field of investigation that must still be developed. As Ardenne says on the first page, his approach partakes in "a spirit of clarity, information, and a call for further research."

Further reading:

- Nathalie Blanc, *Les formes de l'environnement. Manifeste pour une esthétique politique,* Genève, Metis Presses, 2016.
- Nathalie Blanc, Julie Ramos, *Ecoplasties. Art et Environnement*, Paris, Manuella Editions, 2015.
- Michel Deguy, *Écologiques*, Paris, Hermann, 2012.
- Frédéric Legault, "Anthropocène ou Capitalocène? Quelques pistes de réflexion," *L'Esprit libre*, published online June 12, 2016.

  https://revuelespritlibre.org/anthropocene-ou-capitalocene-quelques-pistes-de-reflexion
- Guillaume Logé, *Renaissance sauvage, l'art de l'anthropocène*, Paris, PUF, 2019.
- Linda Mestaoui, *Green art: la nature, milieu et matière de création*, Paris, Editions Alternatives, 2018.
- Thomas Schlesser, *L'Univers sans l'homme*, Paris, Hazan, 2016.
- Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, "L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime," dans Hélène Guénin, ed., *Sublime. Les tremblements du monde*, exhibition catalog, Metz, Centre Pompidou-Metz, 2016, p. 44-49.
- Editorial by the research group Labos 1point5, "Face à l'urgence climatique, les scientifiques doivent réduire leur impact sur l'environnement," *Le Monde* Sciences, March 20, 2019, p. 7.

- Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, "Faut-il prendre l'avion pour être savant?," *Le Monde*, April 3, 2019, p. 33.

First published in *laviedesidees.fr*, 19 June 2019
Translated from the French by Michael Behrent with the support of the Institut français.
Published in *booksandideas.net*, 7 November 2019.