A Non-Universal Universe:
Eco Art and the Art of Prehistory

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On the night of June 20th, 2016 I was walking home with two friends when we all suddenly stopped in our tracks to stare up at the sky. The moon was enormous and yellowish, commanding our attention. As soon as I got home, Facebook notified me that we had witnessed a rare cosmic event: a full moon coinciding with the summer solstice, which hasn't happened since 1967. Seconds later I received a message from a friend I'd just said goodbye to, telling me the same thing—she'd seen it on Facebook too. Following the disturbing realization that Facebook's algorithms probably noted that we had been looking up at the sky together, I was hit by an acute feeling of vertigo, a sense of space and time collapsing. Earth-bond ecological cycles, the rhythm of the cosmos, and the incomprehensible space of the digital had collided with my small existence.

Some aspects of this vertiginous crisis—a momentary twinning of the instantaneous and the infinite—is phenomenologically specific to our current moment, a time when rapid information transfer rips together time and space in unfathomable ways. On a day-to-day scale we experience this space-time conflation, however unconsciously, every time we write emails; on a planetary scale, advancements in geology and astronomy have made us aware of the relations between space and time in vaster ways. For instance, because light takes time to travel across galaxies, the images of distant areas of the universe seen through new super-telescopes are probably billions of years old. To look far into the universe is literally to see into the past, to time travel. It's conceivable that someday we might see an image from the beginning of time.

On the other hand, existential crisis is nothing new: it might be fundamental aspect of human existence. Humans have been reckoning with the scale of the universe and our place within it for millennia. Stonehenge, an ancient astronomical observatory, was likely used to predict cosmic events like eclipses, connecting past with future like a telescope. This and other ancient cites are evidence of a longstanding human desire to map time onto space through acts of artistic-scientific creation.

In her 1983 book *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, Lucy Lippard wrote that through studying ancient works of art like Stonehenge she "began to perceive places as spatial metaphors for temporal distance," allowing us to "explore the crucial connections between individual desires (to make something, to hold something) and the social values that determine

what we make and why."[1] Proposing a kind of time travel through art, she traced the use of basic, elemental forms in artistic practice while resisting any universalization of their meanings. From a circle of stones to a handprint on a wall, she sought connections while simultaneously affording cultural and historical specificity. It was in this tension between specificity and universality, through engagement with the natural environment, that she perceived the potential for political action in contemporary art.

Lippard began writing *Overlay* in 1977 while on a self-imposed nature retreat. She had hoped to find respite from the contemporary art scene, which she was exhausted with, and instead found herself looping back to it, prompted by her discovery of a line of ancient stones in the English countryside. This led her on a quest to reclaim "the symbolic possibility in contemporary art" through excavating its "subterranean layers"—the impulse behind the act of creation, the integration of art and life, and the origins of basic forms abstracted from nature. Acknowledging that any origin story is a cultural construction, and that the act of seeking origins is a political act, she deliberately moved away from discourse promoting anything "pure" or "natural," instead positing the telling and re-telling of cosmogonies as an act of political appropriation.

Lippard discusses many the works of the "originary" Land Art crew of the 1960s-70s, who came together first at the seminal 1968 *Earth Works* exhibition at the Dwan Gallery in New York City: Robert Smithson, Hans Haacke, Walter de Maria, and Dennis Oppenheim. But a large part of the book is devoted to bringing others into the discourse, particularly women such as Ana Mendieta, Louise Bourgeois, and Nancy Holt, who were relegated to the "nature" half of the nature/culture divide and therefore long left out of the Land Art canon. Precisely because of that cultural history, in my reading Lippard seems to suggest that women and other marginalized groups could find agency to deconstruct the boundary between art and life that many (white male) twentieth-century cultural movements had purported to do. While the re-integration of art and life had been "a major impetus in American art since the 1940s," such as in Abstract Expressionism and Modernism, Lippard argues that those "succeeded in expanding art's meaning in daily life only rarely," and that certain Land Art practices were achieving what they had not.[2]

The primary aspects of the Land Art that Lippard was interested in did not approach nature as primitive or universalizing, but as a vehicle for collective understanding and collective action—as opposed to the general state of contemporary art at that time (and in ours) whose only collective logic was the force of the market. In a recent essay Jussi Parikka writes:

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[1] Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, The New Press, New York, 1983, p. 4.

[2] Lippard p. 6.

> It is significant that land art emerges after World War II; the dates identified recently as key to the Anthropocene era are the start of the nuclear (explosion) age and the Great Acceleration produced by a massive number of interlinked chemical, technological, economic, lifestyle and general biotic changes—as a broader environmental consciousness that was part of the emergence of earth works although the actual term Anthropocene came later.[3]

Given that the term Anthropocene is now in wide usage and that the "broader environmental consciousness" of the 1960s can only have intensified in the last decade, I'd like to propose another contemporary *Overlay* of artistic practice on Lippard's. These practices are polyvocal, but as shorthand I'll place them under the rubric "Eco Art." The "Eco" prefix connotes the fact that they are indebted (directly or indirectly) to the legacy of Land Art, and also refers to the current state in which our relationship with the environment has been itself commodified—the reduce-and-reuse environmentalism-lite non-ideology of the neoliberal subject.

Irmgard Emmelhainz summarizes our current condition as one in which

> critical disposition, symbolic gesture, political position, and everyday life are completely dissociated. This dissociation leads to pervasive contradictions: denouncing hunger in Africa, but drinking coffee at Starbucks; expressing solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, but consuming Israeli goods; protesting against violence, but exploiting one's own employees; opposing slavery, but buying clothing manufactured by enslaved people in Southeast Asia; expressing concern about global warming, but buying food in supermarkets; applying for government and corporate funds to produce projects that critique them. Our post-political and post-ideological era is characterized by a sharp discrepancy between political position, political action, and symbolic gesture.[4]

In this context, the potential of the symbolic gesture to be a collectivizing force has often become what Lippard feared it would: empty references to the "nature" and "the natural"; a recourse to empty abstraction with a false claim on authenticity and universality; an excuse for political inaction and a denial of art's socio-political entanglements rather than an incitement to creative action within them. Like the Land Art that Lippard championed as counter-practices, the Eco Art that I find interesting seeks engagement with the symbolic beyond its cooption. It represents life cycles themselves, not the token green arrows of the Recycle logo.

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[3] Jussi Parikka, "Earth Forces: Contemporary Land Arts, Technology and New Materialist Aesthetics," *Cultural Studies Review* vol. 21, no. 2, September 2015.

[4] Irmgard Emmelhainz, "Geopolitics and Contemporary Art, Part I: From Representation's Ruin to Salvaging the Real, *e-flux* journal no. 169, January 2016.

It's worth noting that the same strategies central to Land Art as a historical phenomenon are in fact alive and well. Many artists find continuing relevance in building earthwork-style, site-specific, temporary interventions in a landscape. Artists have been pursuing these strategies for a variety of reasons since the Paleolithic. But the Eco Art I'm referring to forges new strategies. Its aesthetics and methodologies are informed by the digital landscape as well as the physical one, which entails a new relationship between the sign and its referent. Eco Art has a different understanding of performativity than Land Art-style practices: it construes performance as a collaboration between living and non-living actors. And in this regard, formally its processes often resemble a closed loop rather than cycles of generation and decay—it is not ephemeral in the same way that much Land Art is. Eco Art is both generative and commemorative. Like Land Art, Eco Art employs ancient forms and symbols, but these are used with an awareness of their cooption.

Marguerite Humeau is a French artist who "explores the means by which knowledge is generated in the absence of evidence"—or the tenuous relationship between the scientific and the mythic. Her installations are performative in that they are anthropomorphic; they animate themselves. For *The Opera of Prehistoric Creatures* (2012), she used archaeological evidence acquired from the Natural History Museum to build a structure loosely replicating the mouths, windpipes, and lungs of prehistoric creatures, through which air is blown to approximate what sounds they may have made. Because there are no fossil records of the soft tissues of ancient creatures, she can only imaginatively approximate the way they would have been shaped, and so she imaginatively co-designs their bodies. In another sound sculpture titled *Requiem for Harley Warren "Screams from Hell"* (2015), geology becomes re-animated. "Inspired by recordings of 'screams' emanating from various fissures in the planet's crust," the piece "comprises a choir of shrieking and bellowing sculptures." Using various rare minerals to produce and amplify sounds and also power a burst of flame, her "requiem" is for a changing planet—and for a type of human relationship to a living Earth.

These constructions are imagined archaeologies, but are also imagined futurisms: what will happen to our own soft tissues when our own species is gone? Can information capture the way living systems work? In the series of mechanical processes that drive both these installations, a collaboration between human and non-human actors is forged, but not in the sense of a flat hierarchy: life is absent, but longed for. In a purely formal sense, the mechanics also acknowledge direct cause-and-effect relationships: this bellows prompts this flow of air which bursts this flame: an elegant Rube Goldberg implying the domino effect of human activity on the environment.

In a 2015 solo show called *Life Update* at Kunstalle Lissabon in Portugal, the Estonian artist Katja Novitskova displayed a cluster of sculptures referencing reproductive cycles but also

absent of life. Along with a series of large, standing, two-dimensional prints of animals including a seahorse and stingray, she showed strange objects: metal frames holding hanging cradles that rotated, jiggled, blinked, and played soothing baby-music. These alien-like found objects are popular products for newborns. With names like "Peaceful Snuggles Swing 'n Sway," the electronically animated cradles ostensibly mimic soothing parental movements and sounds. Novitskova modified them with various glue-on attachments, like fake hair, to exacerbate the strange and uncanny curvature of the machines' arms and legs—meant to resemble organic forms, they look highly artificial and oddly predatory, leering and blinking, plugged into the wall with thick silver umbilical cords. Novitskova's juxtaposition of images of animals with incubator machines highlights the paucity of artificial reproductions of nature, but also, through aesthetic humor, sympathizes with the desire to do so. Like Humeau's imagined projections of the past, the empty cradles magnify what's absent: soft tissue.

In another projection of today as the future-past, Dora Budor brings up the ways in which even fixed materials that we take for granted as historically stable are in fact continually mutating. Today, not only the histories we tell but the way we conceive of what history as a form of preservation must change. Budor describes this process: "Spurred by climate change, bacteria have reappeared on some of the world's oldest mummies, rapidly decomposing their ancient skin into black slime. Once understood as stable, rigid and dead, biological and ecological forces have suddenly revived these deeply historical bodies in a Frankensteinian way – a symbolic indication of the current moment."

In the spirit of Frankensteinian metamorphosis, the Croatian artist works with cinema props left over from action and sci-fi movies like *300: Rise of Empire, Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, *The Fifth Element*, *Batman Returns*, and *Johnny Mnemonic*. She also borrows techniques from cinema special effects and makeup, like fake wounds and scars. A piece called *The Architect, Infected at the Bone* from 2014 overlaid scars taken from the effects department of *300* onto an electrical fuse box, whose wiring extended into the wall of its installation. In a series of works as part of the exhibition *Spring* at Swiss Institute in 2015, set props from *The Fifth Element* were artificially aged using weathering paint and integrated into an organic-looking armature of epoxy clay and latex prosthetics meant to look "diseased." This recontextualization at once portrays the props as precious cultural artifacts and scraps of detritus leftover from a passed or passing era. Encased in a network of imitation soft tissues, the future-fossil is reanimated as part of a new system of infrastructure and maybe of values too.

Another strand of Eco Art does incorporate living organisms. Rather than intervene in the natural landscape as Land Artists did, these works bring chunks of nature into the exhibition space. One well-known example is Abraham Cruzvillegas' empty garden plots in the Tate's Turbine Hall (*Empty Lot*, 2015), planters filled with soil that called for intervention on the part of visitors, who

could plant seeds in them. This gesture is a one-to-one inversion of Land Art practices, and I would argue, in that sense amounts to little more than an empty symbol. Projects that present more complex interrelations with the natural environment often do so by creating the conditions for functional interactions between living and non-living elements. For one, the installation *Primary Producers* (2014) by Rachael Champion comprises a landscape of pools in which various species of algae to grow among stones of "pebble dash," a contemporary house-building material, producing a co-designership between the two. In another case of installation-as-habitat, in a series of projects under the title *Orgs*, the Finnish artist Jenna Sutela incorporates a species of slime mold called *Physarum polycephalum*. Creating formally complex, habitable plexiglas topographies for the creature to multiply across, Sutela makes room for the organism to thrive according to its own logic and intelligence.

These projects all forge new mythologies, not in opposition to so-called primordial ones but *overlaid* upon them. Like the Land Art that Lippard wrote about, they provide a political counterpoint to a masculinist logic of domination over nature. Strategies of domination are reinforced rather than undermined by reification of the "primitive" or the "natural," and so the job of Eco Art is to skew and mutate the very meaning of the natural. As Parikka writes: "There are more interesting aspects to the term posthuman than mere talk about the end of the human." Eco Art is art that does not preach the end of humanity, nor our irrelevance, but looks to the past for signs of the more-than-human to imagine what we will, or can become.

As it evolves Eco Art will need to do even more than this. It will need to integrate the ethics of its own production along with its self-performance. Whether physical or digital, all artworks have physical substrates: they have material effects on the environment. It is through a consideration of the repercussions of material action on our dying planet that will allow it to stay politically relevant. "In doing so, they become not only decorators and object makers but image makers, shamans, interpreters, and teachers. At its most effective, their art helps us to understand how ancient patterns apply to our own, to move toward a reintegration of the political and cultural, the personal and the natural, and all the permutations thereof."[5]

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[5] Lippard p.13.