

Anthropocene: What could art do for the environment?

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Restorative justice is an approach oriented to repair, as far as possible, the harm caused by a crime or another relevant transgression. From its birth, this method has changed greatly and it has been applied in other fields such as family disputes and environmental conflicts.

Restorative practice has found a very fertile ground in environmental matters, since they encompass the concept of restoration and damage reparation. The E.U. has also demonstrated its sensitivity to this subject: the European directive 2004/35/CE⁵⁴ disposes some actions and specific provisions to prevent and remedy environmental damage.

However, it is still difficult to share a common definition of “environment” and to detect its main interests. Indeed, the environment could be identified as a non-physical and speechless entity. Therefore, it may be hard to establish its interests, represent them and find who is liable for damaging them. Furthermore, are we sure that those recognised guilty by the law are the only ones responsible? Are we convinced that damages such as the ozone hole or climate change can be repaired?

Environment speaks through facts: pollution, natural catastrophes and extinction. Some of us are unfortunate enough to experience them directly, while others might need to be informed of their existence. Common sensibility is unstable and subject to change: it is often interested in scandalous news catching its attention and reaching its conscience. Therefore, media play a big role by photographing environmental degradation and amplifying the shock effect for their spectators and

⁵⁴ Directive 2004/35/CE of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 April 2004 on environmental liability with regard to the prevention and remedying of environmental damage.

readers. They take a side on controversial disputes and influence people's viewpoint while fostering the spread of fear and concern.

What can art do for the environment? It can be a different and efficient way to give it a non-filtered voice taking the opposite path and slowing the information system down. It could act as a mediator, speaking through metaphors and allegorical language to give people objective information. Art can help the population to think about a specific subject, while offering a variety of pictures, videos, and high-resolution images. Sometimes art can hurt people's feelings; sometimes it can provoke them; and sometimes it can raise their awareness, altering their perception and pushing them to action. These goals are similar to the ones of mediation.

A recent example of this practice is "Anthropocene"⁵⁵, an exhibition organized by the MAST Foundation⁵⁶ in Bologna. Here, the artists Ed Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier make the spectators reflect on the concept of "Anthropocene", a term derived by the Greek word "ἄνθρωπος"⁵⁷ and introduced in the 2000s by the Dutch chemist Paul J. Crutzen. The project was created on the researches of the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG).

According to their theory, the geological era in which we are living is influenced by the exploitation of natural sources by the humankind. The unnatural development of our lands, the pollution of water and death of species would be a consequence of the human footprint on Earth. Therefore, the artists decided to investigate different kinds of exploitation, such as extraction, climate change, extinction and techno-fossils, gifting the spectators with a variety of photography and videos.

⁵⁵ The term "Anthropocene" could be defined as the current geological age, in which human activity has a dominant impact on climate and the environment.

⁵⁶ Further information about "Anthropocene" can be found here: <https://anthropocene.mast.org/en/exhibition/>.

⁵⁷ The ancient Greek term "ἄνθρωπος" (andròs) means "man".



Edward Burtynsky, Oil Bunkering #4, Niger Delta, Nigeria, 2016. Courtesy of MAST Foundation

The result is a worrying picture of the current environmental situation, globally widespread. From Asia to Europe, from Africa to the Americas, only a few places still look untouched, such as the coral gardens of Komodo archipelago and the forests in Vancouver Island. Here, the artists help us to understand these damaged realities both mentally and emotionally to make us reach our own opinion.

A second example of the relationship between art and the environment can be found in the work of Olafur Eliasson⁵⁸. In 2003, the Danish artist created “The Weather Project”⁵⁹, transforming Tate Modern Turbine Hall into a huge, misty indoor solarium with an urgent ecological message about global warming. “I don’t want to use a fear-based narrative”, confessed the artist, “but we are living in a climate emergency. A lot of the work deals with the experience of nature, the atmosphere, or ecology, and now these things have been weaponized”⁶⁰. His message is clear: “We need to re-imagine and re-engineer the systems that brought us to where we are. We need to take risks. We don’t have a choice. The future has to be different from the past.”

⁵⁸ <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK101003/the-weather-project>

⁵⁹ “The Weather Project” is an exhibition created in 2003 by Olafur Eliasson for Tate Modern. The artist created a site-specific installation using a semi-circular screen, a ceiling of mirrors and artificial mist to create the illusion of a sun.

⁶⁰ Javier Pes, *We are living in a climate emergency: Olafur Eliasson on How He’s Using His Tate Modern Show to Combat Earth’s Greatest Crisis*, on Artnet, July 9, 2019.



Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003 Courtesy of Olafur Eliasson

Going back in time, *Land Art*, an artistic current born in the US at the end of the sixties, is another interesting example of art acting as “mediator” for the environment. The movement was inspired by a futuristic novel by Bryan W. Aldiss. In the book, natural resources are extremely rare because of human pollution. Land artists seek a reconnection with nature in opposition to our cold and artificial metropolis. They often use elements taken from Earth, such as rocks, sand or gravel to create installations directly integrated with the environment that develop and change in time. One of the key concepts is that the nature is the real subject of their work: mankind is only a temporary inhabitant of our environment.

Examples can be found in the work of Richard Long. “*A line made by walking*” (St. Martin, 1967), a picture of a line created by the artist while walking in a grass field, represents one of the first land artworks. Similarly, the artists Christo and Jeanne Claude offer a number of different projects, such as “*The Floating Piers*” (Lake Iseo, 2016)⁶¹, wrapping elements of nature and the city. Once again, the attention of the observer is taken to the environment and its exploitation.

⁶¹ “*The Floating Piers*” is a site-specific installation created in 2016 by Christo and Jeanne Claude on Lake Iseo. The artists used 70.000 sq. Meters of nylon fabric to build piers floating on the lake, which allowed visitors to “walk on water”.



Richard Long, *A line made by walking*, 1967. Courtesy of Tate Liverpool

Finally, a different use of art for the environment can be found in *eL Seed*. The French-Tunisian Artist is famous for using Arabic calligraphy to spread messages of peace, unity and find common threads between different cultures. In 2016 the artist chose the *Manshiyat Nasr* district in Cairo to realize one of his most ambitious projects: “*Perception*”⁶². The neighbourhood is known for being home of the Coptic community of Zareeb, which collects the garbage of the city but is still neglected by most of its inhabitants. eL Seed created an artwork covering fifty buildings and visible from the highest part of town. The piece uses the words of Saint Anathasius of Alexandria: “Anyone who wants to see the sunlight clearly needs to wipe his eye first”. In this case, the artist shed a light on the district, not only bringing “art” and “beauty” but mainly altering the perception people had of that community. Here, art should question our assumptions and judgements of a specific social environment, leading us to accept differences.

⁶² For further information about the projects, please see <https://elseed-art.com/projects/perception-cairo>.



eL Seed, Perception, 2016 Courtesy of eL Seed

In conclusion, we could say that restorative justice has gone far beyond the instrument of mediation, extending its definition, including new methods and field of interests. As seen in this article, art can facilitate a specific message, stimulating emotions and an introspective dialogue, awareness of facts and accountability on what we can do to improve a damaging situation. Therefore art has become a strong vehicle, and can be defined a “proper mediator”, used to promote awareness and responsibilities in the environmental field.

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