

FROM PRAXIS TO

POLICY: **environmental shift**

through art and culture

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the role of art and cultural institutions in the global eco-social crises

Zoran Erić

1. Analysis of the Eco-Social Crises and the Concept of Economic Growth

The year 1972 was marked by several major pioneering events that gave a strong impetus to the increase of awareness of humanity that climate change is not just a phase to be considered in the future, but the imminent threat to all living organisms on the planet and the predominant issue that needs to be urgently and carefully addressed. Initially, the United Nations Conference on Human Environment was held in Stockholm in June 1972 and delivered the so-called Stockholm Declaration.¹ This was the first supranational initiative to draft a globally binding document on the human environment that overtly pointed out the main ecological threats the world is facing, such as the destruction and depletion of irreplaceable resources, the extinction of numerous species, pollution of land, water, and air, etc.: all results of human activity. As a response to this negligence, a set of principles was detailed in the Declaration in order to protect and safeguard the environment.

1. See: <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/29567/ELGP1StockD.pdf>

The same year 1972 witnessed ground-breaking research and a report by the Club of Rome's experts called *The Limits to Growth*.² This document leaned on the pioneering study by computer engineer Jay Forrester of MIT. The researchers used computer simulations to predict the economic and social consequences of exponential growth in relation to the limited availability of resources. The research concluded that labour and capital should be largely redirected to combat global environmental constraints and that at some point during the 21st century, it would thwart further growth. As a possible solution to the problem of excessive growth, the theory of degrowth appeared.³

John Bellamy Forester has rightfully argued that the crisis the planet Earth faced at that time could not be regarded as “a crisis of *nature* but a crisis of *society*”.⁴ At the roots of the crisis are the relations of production, and the imperative of technological advancement that—along with demographic changes (i.e. overpopulation)—are shaping the dominant social system.⁵ Nowadays, fifty years and numerous UN conferences, protocols, and documents later, humanity has not advanced much in fighting the effects of climate change. The *fossil economy* of self-sustaining growth, based on the growing consumption of fossil fuels and the consequent continuous increase in carbon dioxide emissions, which is also the main cause of global warming, is still in place along with the latest version of capitalism.⁶

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2. Meadows, Donella H.; Meadows, Dennis L.; Randers, Jørgen. & Behrens, William W., III. (1972). *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, digital version accessed at: https://collections.dartmouth.edu/teitexts/meadows/diplomatic/meadows_ltg-diplomatic.html
 3. The term *decroissance* was proposed by social philosopher and journalist André Gorz exactly in 1972, and theoretical frameworks were set by mathematician and economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, philosopher Jacques Grinevald. etc. The theory was originally developed in the French-speaking world, but it was not until 2008 that the English term *degrowth* appeared and the theory gained a global dimension. See: Momčilović, P. (2019). *Odrast, održivost i hrana*. Beograd: Institut za urbane politike; i zajedničko.org Platforma za teoriju i praksu društvenih dobara, p. 39.
 4. Forester, John Bellamy. (1999). *The Vulnerable Planet: A Short Economic History of the Environment*, New York: Monthly Review Press, p. 12.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Malm, Andreas. (2018). *Fosilni kapital: Uspon parnoga pogona i korijeni globalnog zatopljenja*. Zagreb: Faktura, p. 21.

As Patel and Moore have argued, it appears that for the majority of the population, it is paradoxically easier “to imagine the end of the planet, than to imagine the end of capitalism”.⁷ The logic of profit-seeking, growth-based, extractivist capitalism is still very difficult to change and replace, even with the softened version of “green capitalism” that would seek to explore the monetization of new and renewable sources of energy. Over the centuries, capitalism has proven not to be a mere economic system, but a method for humanity to orchestrate its relations to nature,⁸ namely through the Anthropocentric and exploitative perspective.

Nevertheless, in academic debates, the scepticism towards the threat of climate change and its strong effects (that are already causing numerous natural disasters) diminishes, while the heated debates over alternative social models and futures are getting the spotlight. Along with global networks or much stronger grassroots environmental organizations of activists, the need for a paradigm shift and different social relations beyond self-destructive *disaster capitalism*⁹ has proven to be the only response to the eco-social crises of today. One example of the potential of the movements for social, environmental, and distributive justice to produce a discursive shift is the clear distinction between economic *development* that underlines the need for improvement in human capacities and conditions, and the ever-present economic *growth* that solely aims to increase the production of goods and services that generate profit.¹⁰

Today’s eco-social crisis is clearly the outcome of global capitalism, by whatever term we want to define it. Therefore, it is a great misconception that the environmental crisis, which is perceived as a problem of all humanity, can be solved by the universalist attitude of the entire human species that strives to preserve the planet if we ignore the social tensions in which we live.¹¹

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7. Patel, Raj & Moore, W. Jason. (2018). *History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature and the Future of the Planet*, Carlton, Australia: Black Inc., p. 15.
 8. Ibid.
 9. The term of Naomi Klein.
 10. Harvey, David. (1996). *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, p. 379.
 11. Keucheyan, Razmig. (2016). *Nature Is a Battlefield: Towards a Political Ecology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 4.

These tensions are particularly strongly felt in the Global South, as well in the European “semi-periphery”, most notably in the “Western Balkans”. These regions are still subjugated (often willingly and in accord with local corrupt politicians) to the neo-colonial and neo-extractivist policies of huge transnational corporations and the most powerful countries that either seek to explore newly discovered resources (lithium, gold, cobalt, or other minerals and ores), or to treat these lands as *sacrifice zones* for “export” and disposal of their waste. The ecocides that the lands and local population will suffer from these actions cannot be an obstacle to the battle for energy, resources, and profit. Henceforth, systemic social changes are needed to deal with the effects of predatory extractivist capitalism whose leitmotif is “Grow or Die!”.¹² A paradigm shift in social relations that would acknowledge and appreciate the uneven global development and all social, racial, cultural, etc. differences is the only path to address the crisis of the environment, its devastation, and pollution would, it is to be hoped, slow down the rapid pace of climate change.

2. The Artistic Practices That Introduce New Models of Environmentally Conscious Working Methods

Recent artistic practices that tackle environmental problematics from diverse perspectives have strongly emphasised the need for transdisciplinary work and alliances with various natural as well as humanistic scientific disciplines.¹³ These artistic positions have engaged in the sphere of the political in order to reimagine, rethink and reinvent new perspectives and horizons for action that would contribute to the establishment of different types of social interactions, more sensitized to environmental protection. In their practice, the artists are conducting research on diverse natural and cultural complexes while entering the field of political ecology discourse, and examining the unequal distribution of costs and benefits of environmental change according to social, cultural,

12. Kovel, Joel & Löwy, Michael (2001) *EcoSocialist Manifesto*, <https://climateandcapitalism.com/2017/04/27/three-manifestos-climate-struggles-and-ecosocialism/>

13. De la Torre, Blanca. & Erić, Zoran. (2022) “Con los pies en la Tierra”, pref. cat. CAAM, Las Palmas, pp. 208-209.

and economic differences. They join the aesthetic dimension of experimental and perceptual engagement with a commitment to postcolonial ethical-political practice while bearing in mind the way local—and particularly indigenous—activities and knowledge interact with global economic constellations.¹⁴

In the United Nations Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, culture and the arts stand out as the fourth pillar of sustainability and are important for the so-called “green transition” and the active struggle for a fairer future and coexistence of all living beings on the planet. However, much more relevant than the often declarative protocols are the artistic initiatives themselves which are of great importance in finding creative solutions to new and different social relationships. and creating connections based on the principles of solidarity and social justice. The capacity of art to transgress the limits of the art system, transversally connecting with other humanities and scientific fields in the struggle for environmental justice, has proven to be exemplary in the debate for the paradigm shift in social relations. Nevertheless, the role of socially engaged art has often been criticized from the “far left” positions for being strongly embedded, even in its small niches, in the art system that is still predominantly reproducing the capitalist system and hence cannot have a strong transformative role and potential to “repair the society”. On the other hand, the blurred boundaries between art that strives for social and environmental changes and the positions of radical activists, have contributed to the criticism from the “far right” that their actions are perceived as “eco-terrorism”.

Bearing in mind such distant critical positions, it is important to emphasise that the policies of artistic approaches dealing with environmental problematics seek to redefine social relations based on respect for class and race, gender, and other differences, but also the rights of the non-human world in the fight against exploitative extractive capitalism, new forms of economic colonialism, and production relations that threaten the global ecosystem and the survival of the living

14. Demos, T. J. (2016). *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, pp. 9, 12, 26.

world on earth. These artistic practices are associated with the social movements that grew out of the struggle against extractivist politics in many corners of the world. They are forming new horizontal associations and alliances striving for pluriverse – a myriad of different worlds with their own epistemic foundations – with the aim to explore the potential for social transformations, so needed to cope with eco-social crises. The critical potential or artistic practices that arise at different latitudes and geographies is seen in the habitus of the artists as individuals and collectives sensitised to the different and more equitable ways of treating the natural environment whilst taking care of their own carbon footprint. Their working ethics are based on the principles of solidarity which is sufficient to be considered an alternative model of thinking and acting in the social sphere that is in the shadow of the ever-growing authoritarian political forces. Regardless of the performative effect art has on actual social relations, the only way to deal with the global eco-social crises is to start reinventing and reimagining different futures beyond capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism.¹⁵

3. The Role of the Cultural Institutions: To Reproduce the Dominant Ideological Matrix or to Challenge It?

In the current eco-social crisis and the threat climate change presents, cultural institutions are facing the same problem of how to cope with these urgent issues. To this end, major international associations such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art (CIMAM) have formed working groups and provided guidelines and toolkits touching on sustainability issues.¹⁶ The need to rethink and re-imagine the methodology of working so as to face the eco-social crisis has forced museums

15. De la Torre, Blanca. & Erić, Zoran. (2022) op. cit. pp. 196-209.

16. See the following documents: **OECD/ICOM Guide “Culture and Local Development: Maximising the Impact”**, <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/OECD-ICOM-GUIDE-MUSEUMS.pdf> **Resolutions adopted by ICOM’S 34th General Assembly** https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Resolutions_2019_EN.pdf **CIMAM Toolkit on Environmental Sustainability in the Museum Practice** <https://>

and other cultural institutions to redefine their roles in society. Still, in many local contexts, these institutions cannot be considered independent from dominant ideological constructs they are bound to reproduce in the cultural sphere, such as retraditionalization on one hand or commercialization on the other. The politically and economically driven phantasm of creating spectacles for a large number of audiences, even in the period of the global pandemic, still positions many cultural institutions as *landscapes of power*. On the opposite pole are the institutions whose activities and work with the public and communities represent an ideal position for raising awareness, and education concerning climate change and familiarisation with the goals of sustainable development and *green transformation* in all spheres of society, including culture. The role of museums and other cultural institutions could therefore be one of strongly stepping forward as vital social actors in the domain of environmental problematics, and not waiting for “top-down” legislation and “green agendas”. Museums should thus enable all activities related to climate change to be carried out in a way that does not inherently disenfranchise people or communities, locally or globally. They should therefore first understand the impact of climate change and adapt their practices, buildings, programmes, and collections to be prepared for future challenges. Museums, along with all other institutions should globally support the tendencies and social processes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible.¹⁷ In all aspects of their activities, they should lead by example and persistently encourage the reduction of their carbon footprint. Finally, they should encourage and empower their audiences to understand the role that everyone has to play in climate action and to be trained and master the skills for that role: consume fewer goods and materials, create less waste, and ensure that everything they use can be renewable.¹⁸

cimam.org/documents/159/CIMAM_Toolkit_on_Environmental_Sustainability_in_the_Museum_Practice_2021.pdf

17. For more detailed analysis, see: Erić, Zoran; Marković Božović, Ksenija; Karaulić, Jovana & Đurđević, Vladimir. (2022) „Ka zelenim muzejima i galerijama“, Green Art Incubator toolkit, <https://greenartincubator.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Ka-zelenim-muzejima-i-galerijama.pdf>
18. McGhie, Henry (2021). Mobilising Museums for Climate Action: Tools, frameworks and opportunities to accelerate climate action in and with museums. London: Museums for Climate Action, pp. 4-5.

In spite of all the guidelines given by the professional associations, and notwithstanding the examples of good practices that are happening in recent years, it is difficult to say that most of the cultural institutions are sensitised and take care of their sustainability and carbon footprint. Furthermore, we are witnessing that environmental issues are often becoming the theme for many exhibitions of contemporary art, and that major institutions and art manifestations are getting along with this “trend”. However, a major concern raised by T.J. Demos is how these exhibitions are being produced and realized. He claims that:

... one must also confront the troubling observation that exhibitions dedicated to sustainability are fundamentally contradictory; for even as they seek to address climate change and work towards creative solutions (...) they contribute to the very problem of global warming by virtue of their own carbon footprint, the results of transporting artworks, maintaining the exhibition spaces climate control and printing catalogues.¹⁹

A big curatorial challenge is thus how to address the issue of environmental justice both in content and in form, and also to rethink exhibition politics with respect to the proposed set of sustainability guidelines for each project and for the cultural institution itself. The new curatorial methodology of work that I strongly advocate must follow the set principles of sustainability and implement them in all phases of each project and its realization. To this end, a number of guidelines have to be established in order to take care of the carbon footprint of the curatorial project such as:

- No new petrol-derived materials will be used: plastic, PVC, etc.
- No pollutants will be used.
- New materials will have ecolabels: ecological paints, etc.
- Recycled paper and FSC wood will be used.
- Plinths, vitrines, frames and exhibition devices will be reused if possible.

19. Demos, T.J. “The Politics of Sustainability: Contemporary Art and Ecology,” in *Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969–2009*. London: Barbican Art Gallery, 2009. p. 19.

- A waste plan will be made.
- There will be a general plan of reducing energy.
- Biodegradable materials will be very welcome!
- LED lighting is used in the whole exhibition space.
- No air shipping of artworks. Only land transportation will be used.
- Priority to local production and materials will be emphasised.
- Artists who use photography or digital print will be asked to produce the works on site and to recycle them after the exhibition.
- Meetings will be done via Skype, never requiring any trip to the museum.
- The 7 R's of sustainability will be applied to all decisions: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Repair, Repurpose, Rethink and Reject.²⁰

Still, these guidelines are more ambitious than regular practice in the context of “official” cultural policies and politics of exhibiting, at least in the institutions in the “Western Balkans”. The apparently neglected cultural institutions in this “region”, with poor infrastructure, basic funds, and lack of staff, are facing the same dilemma as any other blockbuster institution in major financial centres of the world – how to respond to climate change. Regardless of the globally uneven positions and economic aptitudes, there is no doubt that opting for the capitalist logic of growth and profit should not be the one that cultural institutions must follow. Within its own local context and capacities, each institution needs to adopt a particular set of measures, implement educational programmes, draft sustainability guidelines, and develop practices with respect to energy consumption, politics of programming, and behaviour of the workers, that would all be respectful to the environment and sensitised to the urgent need to respond to the imminent threat of climate change.

20. The sustainability guidelines that a colleague Blanca de la Torre and I have adopted for the projects *Overview Effect* at MoCA, Belgrade 2020/2021 and *Con los pies en la Tierra*, at the CAAM, Las Palmas, 2022/2023 we curated together.

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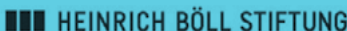
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