



Marie-Anne Lanavère, Tentative de réponse à la crise, 2022.

MA TRANS - Art, education, engagement

FOR A DEEPLY ECOLOGICAL ART

Or, Ecology Stemming from Art

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20 November 2023 by [Marie-Anne Lanavère](#)

TEXT

In the contemporary art world, a professional sector based on the globalised market economy where I worked for over twenty years as a production manager, a curator, and later as a – mostly public – institution director, environmental awareness only started guiding my choices late in my career. I usually prioritised the production, circulation and transmission of artistic projects, and the ecological paradigm only very occasionally interfered with creative and curatorial freedom. In the aughts, institutions and private companies alike had to adapt to CSR¹ and various ISO charters and standards, out of a spirit of competitiveness, to clear their conscience, or simply out of conformism. Rather than risking the collapse of the whole system, cultural institutions quickly understood how to circumvent environmental consciousness, which if adhered to would necessarily have turned these structures on their heads. One such loophole consisted in outsourcing the issue to consulting and environmental coaching agencies. Broadly speaking, the

foundations, biennales and institutions which I considered to be the most advanced and in step with current social issues had in fact succeeded – by sleight of hand – in addressing environmental matters as though they were external study subjects rather than an internal mechanism they could examine. Although based on worthy intentions, the organisation of research seminars, residencies and exhibitions not *with* but *on the subject of* ecology means these institutions can still avoid embracing a truly ecological approach of art. Perversely, without even realising it, they participate in a system that does not acknowledge the urgent necessity of change, bringing the Earth's overshoot day earlier every year.

Shortcuts enabling action do exist, but these hopes demand that we renounce some of our advantages. An ecological approach necessarily implies that we abandon part of what has been elaborated over the past years; that we relinquish everything that we have capitalised on, in fact: valued social positions, networks, privileges and so on. This is a terribly difficult process to initiate within our professional field, where so much energy is invested in supporting creative projects and assuming a trade union-like role in negotiating statutory rights for the still overwhelmingly precarious artists and art institution workers. However, after years spent campaigning in this way, it finally became apparent to me that art – in what is, to me, its most essential features: poietics, presence and encounter – is in continual decline in our liberalist society. Moreover, though it is increasingly looked down on, art has been unable to eschew the capitalist paradigm that only values production, commodification, and media potential.

However, hope does sporadically blossom in art spaces, through deeply ecological work methods, uniquely embodied by people who resist their financiers, their hierarchy and even their colleagues, and who know how to say “no” to artists themselves, however talented, when their creative liberty starts rhyming with economic liberalism.

Integrating artistic labour into a deeply ecological approach that isn't limited to the use of certified products – such as “PEFC” paper² for example – implies acknowledging the loss of meaning induced by artistic production itself, particularly with regard to the resources it uses. Where do the materials I work with come from? How do I process them? What will become of them once they are processed? Making responsible choices has become almost impossible in metropolises – centres for trade and commerce where commodities transit from everywhere and nowhere, just as long as you pay. Although cities are *deterrestrialised* and city life increasingly feels like survival, this is also where hubs of activity, including cultural activity, are still being developed, and where most professional artists live, whether because of spiralling precarity or a lack of alternatives. Over a century ago, William Morris stated that our understanding of materials had been lost, not so much because of industrialisation itself as because of the division of labour necessary to increase productivity: “Even if a tree is cut down or blown down, a worse one, if any, is planted in its stead. [...] the very food on which both the greater and the lesser art subsists is being destroyed; the well of art is poisoned at its spring.”³

Writing from a political territory dealing with the crisis of the sensuous, the contemporary American anthropologist David Abram can help us reframe our relationship to materials not as exploitable resources but as presence: “Of course, our human-made artifacts inevitably retain an element of more-than-human otherness. This unknowability, this otherness, resides most often in the materials from which the object is made. [...] Genuine art, we might say, is simply human creation that does not stifle the nonhuman element but, rather, allows whatever is Other in the materials to continue to live and breathe.”⁴

Because the production and promotion of contemporary art, in this context, are alienating (rather than supporting an encounter with art as otherness), finding a way to connect with materials as presence would not only allow us to better inhabit the Earth but to be inhabited by it in return.

In addition to fostering awareness on the use of materials, deep ecology could also influence the ways in which teams working in cultural institutions collaborate with the artists invited for exhibitions and residencies. Some professional contemporary artists (who suffer from exploitation themselves) unwittingly act in an extractivist manner. In this respect, I have often felt uncomfortable when artists draw inspiration from artisanal knowledge, such as the herbalist’s medicinal plants and Western indigenous wisdom (water diviners, druids, and contemporary healers), when they “steal” this knowledge without giving anything in return, when they syphon inspiration and techniques, or simply when they act too hastily, approaching the understanding of a given territory in a consumerist way. These mechanisms are painful to articulate, especially when one wants to support and respect artists and their work. But I have shared these concerns over the course of the nine years I spent at the head of the Centre International d’Art et du Paysage (CIAP) on Vassivière Island, first and foremost with my team. Together, we discussed our limits and paradoxes. These reflections were developed over time, through cooperation with artists open to debating, particularly Tiphaine Calmettes, Etienne de France, François Génot, Suzanne Husky, L’amicale mille feux, RADO, Liliana Rojas Sanchez, Natsuko Uchino, as well as researchers Cristina Consuegra and Alexis Zimmer, L’école de la terre and my fellow art centre directors Béatrice Josse and Émilie Renard.

In order to guide visiting artists to a subtler understanding of the area, the team members at Vassivière first had to learn how to inhabit their own region. Transmitting a local way of life in order to change the working habits of artists is key in striving towards an ecology of art, not only by drawing inspiration from the histories and cultures of local communities but also by respecting them, to the degree that it is sometimes preferable to keep indigenous and vernacular lore secret, if accessing it implies a long process that requires an extended residency, or that artists come back several times in order to carry out their research.

To live and work ecologically in a specific place means reaffirming a local level that for a long time has been neglected by contemporary art, while also overcoming a very common neo-colonial attitude in our professional practices, by deconstructing the complex power mechanisms that involve the large institutions and small associations that exist in every region.

More specifically, in a rural area like Vassivière, an ecological approach demands that we be more attuned to the territory's subtle realities, so as not to dominate traditional or less visible forms of knowledge, and to avoid imposing the prism of urban, globalised, contemporary art. One way of working ecologically for me has been to try to slow new CIAP commissions for artworks in public space, after 30 years of accumulating sculptures in the museum's garden. Even before I applied for the position of director, these permanent outdoor artworks felt like a form of pollution serving the tourist attractiveness of an *ungrounded* island, whose future was never decided through local cooperation. From 2014 on, my extensive conversations on the subject with Benoît Antille of the Valais School of Art (École de Design et Haute École d'Art du Valais, ÉDHÉA), based on his critique of the project economy in sculpture parks and commissioned art in nature, have helped me to question the functioning of artistic institutions in rural areas.⁵ We expanded these conversations together during a 2017 symposium at the CIAP, *L'art dans l'espace rural* (Art in Rural Spaces), and

by attending a 2019 seminar at the Whitechapel Gallery (London) entitled *The Rural Assembly*⁶, which helped me solve some of my intellectual predicaments in relation to the right stance to adopt when dealing with these issues.

Considering all the paradoxes and repositioning attempts I have experienced over the past few years, while working in a geographical context defined by the exploitation of resources (such as hydroelectric reservoirs and industrial forests on the Plateau de Millevaches) and public policies for the classification/protection/reservation of “nature”, I have come to realise that it is not necessarily in the places where we believe it is possible to act ecologically that we fully can. In an art centre like Vassivière, when preparing an exhibition for example, it seemed more sustainable to spend time exchanging with the local community, to listen to its aspirations for the space, to communise means in order to implement a form of wealth redistribution, and to allow artists and the team to conduct in-depth research – even if this meant organising fewer exhibitions every year, or travelling less, or occasionally deciding not to be irreproachable when it came to the biodegradability of the materials we used.

Ultimately, addressing contemporary environmental emergencies through/from art signifies relearning how to live by mastering the new skillset of the *business of living* (and of dying). Adopting a holistic approach shows us that places, nature, ourselves and others are all connected. This requires listening, increasing attentiveness and collaboration, and especially developing our sensorial perception of a more-than-human world, to quote David Abrams, in contrast with what is theoretically prevalent today. To take care of the earth and its lifeforms in everything we do, even when we’re in the city, pertains to a cosmogonic relationship that has largely been lost in Western cultures, and that we can now reinvest, including by drawing inspiration from faraway indigenous and native cultures. The Rencontres de la Ferme de Lachaud (on the Plateau de Millevaches), which I take part in every year since I moved to the Limousin area, have helped me discover and draw inspiration from anthropologists and philosophers of nature, although until recently I was unable to transpose these ideas to my life in any concrete way. The translation into French of the founding texts of ecofeminism, most notably by Cambourakis press, have helped me reconnect with Western forms of paganism, and to discover living ritual and plastic forms in the here and now, rather than having to search for them elsewhere. I organised numerous conferences at the CIAP de Vassivière and elsewhere in this spirit.⁷

The change in paradigm that the Western world so urgently needs in order to escape its current crisis demands that, in addition to political struggle, individuals be able to transform themselves in every sense: in their relationship to the senses, to others, to sexuality, to love, to nature, and so on. Taking this risk may entail a painful endangerment, which can only be achieved by renouncing certain privileges, in order to better nurture the attachments we really care about.

“So, it is no longer a matter of a system of production picking up again or being curbed, but one of getting away from production as the overriding principle of our relationship to the world. Hence the primary importance for using this time of imposed isolation in order to describe, initially one by one, then as a group, what we are attached to; what we are ready to give up; the chains we are ready to reconstruct and those that, in our behaviour, we have decided to interrupt.”⁸

This was philosopher Bruno Latour’s advice during the first Covid-19 lockdown in France, which he expounded in an article and later in participative workshops entitled *Où Atterrir (Where should we land?)* created with S-composition⁹ at La Mégisserie in Saint-Junien, near Limoges and elsewhere.

Although this appeal, which acted as a wake-up call in cultural milieus, has undeniably helped me to implement change on a personal level, I also needed it to take the form of narratives that spoke directly to my emotions. Nastassja Martin’s deeply moving story, published in 2019, seems like a perfect example, because of the revolutionary adequacy between her poetic style of writing, her object of study – the Evene people of Siberia – and her own transformation, not only as a researcher but as an individual in her relationship to reality.¹⁰ Closer to home, artist Boris Nordmann, in collaboration with the association Quartier Rouge based in Felletin (Creuse department), has been organising workshops since 2017, during which work around the human body echoes the observation of animal behaviour and writing experiments, where subjective experience meets anthropological considerations. In his “corporeal fiction”, *Lou Pastoral*,

Nordmann puts himself at risk when connecting with his research subject, an endangerment that is similar to Nastassja Martin's stance. He simultaneously succeeds in embodying corporeal forms and showing the necessity of reversing our point of view.

When Latour's aforementioned text, "What protective measures can you think of so we don't go back to the pre-crisis production model?" was published, I was still in office at the CIAP de Vassivière, and rather than cultivating my interest in art's ability to change the world, I had started realising that in order to actually change things, I needed to start by changing my own life, scale down my material needs, and be more mindful of the needs of my close relations and other *more-than-human* beings. Before Covid happened, my team had already asked that we put on fewer exhibitions, but it wasn't before I was engulfed in multiple crises that I started understanding how I should act. At the same time as I was experiencing a crisis of responsibility as the director of an institution, my child was having behavioural problems in school, which led me to another crisis, a parenting one. I finally left the CIAP in April 2021, in order to devote myself entirely to leading a better life and to loving differently.

I have now joined a collective organisation – which is still embryonic and imperfect, due to the fact that it is constantly evolving – because I believe it is the best thing I can do in the face of the environmental crisis on my own level, that is, based on my current experience and means. Here, my comrades offer me sensitive and intellectual support which helps me see through the scam of green transition. By contrast, I recognise the potential of small-scale action by working from a broader criticism of the capitalist production model. For me, this is one of the conditions for operating a paradigm shift and moving away from the model that Western patriarchal modernity has imposed on us for centuries. In concrete terms, this demands that I move out of my comfort zone in order to transform *myself*, by learning about autonomy and communisation, two vital aspects which I had neglected until then. Now, with others, I am imagining a form of food-producing agriculture that will be able, on the long term, to feed dozens in the area, as well as a way of cultivating and farming that fosters sharing with *more-than-humans*. On a broader scale, I am trying to contribute to a project that to me seems like it could become an inspiring model for exchanging with other groups, through the networked transmission of forms of knowledge and experimentations, not at the margins of society but in permanent connection with beings, the earth and the world.

Artistically, I feel a greater freedom than in my previous occupation, even though, during those twenty years, I did try to find my way into the interstices that the profession offered: attempting to express, from the margins of the exhibition, ideas from outside the frame, from places of latency and emergence, embracing the partly hidden meanings that could appear in these spatial and temporal intervals, and manifesting the unexpected connections between different artworks. These approaches were so invisible that only a few friends from the contemporary art world followed me down this path – Gyan Panchal, Caroline Ferreira, Anne Bonnin, Simone Menegoi, Marjorie Micucci and Cécilia Becanovic. I am grateful to them for sharing their emotions with me; without them I would have collapsed a lot sooner!

Now, I let myself try things out without worrying beforehand whether they are art or not. These days, whatever I create, I create with pleasure, particularly because I am producing things for my friends: a poster to advertise the spring cleaning of our community centre, an invitation to the collective potato harvest, etc. And when I am asked to contribute to a contemporary art catalogue, now I am brave enough to send in a drawing, embracing its illustrative function and its non-referenced style.

Isn't ecological art amateur by definition? Devoid of any professional aim, ecological art should be integrated into our everyday existences, and should reach out to all areas of life.

It should be useful in the same way applied arts are, but also in the sense that all art forms – even when they are created for no particular purpose – seem to be universally useful, if only because they transform our perception of the world.

Another characteristic of this deeply ecological art I so much want to see materialise is that it is an art of the common, in other words, an art created in the service of a common cause, for a group or a village. Yet at present, most artists create objects individually, which, in the best-case scenario, will then be shown publicly. Although cultural policies increasingly incentivise displaying artworks to “audiences” in order to justify public spending on the arts (which represents barely 1% of France’s global budget), I have often noticed that making an artwork public, exhibiting it, organising Q&A sessions with the artist, and so on, does not necessarily go hand in hand with the communisation of art, despite the best efforts of the professionals involved. The examples of art of the commons that I have taken part in recently are very different in this respect, because they are planned by the artists in co-creation with amateur groups: a parade for the Day of the Dead performed by a group of ten locals and initiated by Cellule d’Actions Rituelles in 2019, an installation of food cooked in ovens built for the occasion in a public building by Doriane Albert and Anna Gianferrari (of the *FEU* association) in 2021, an altar for the dead created collectively and accessible 24 hours a day...¹¹ Artists offer their talent to the community, sometimes anonymously, and they accept that the end result no longer belongs to them. Note how these forms of art of the common are ecological in the sense that they are precisely located in space and time. They happen locally, becoming important moments in the life of the individuals or groups taking part in their realisation (unlike unknown viewers who discover artworks once they are finished).

Lastly, deeply ecological art should be connected to the earth and to *more-than-human* beings, not as a theme (i.e. an artwork dealing with agriculture) or as a skill (i.e. the art of agriculture). It should be completely integrated into cultivation practices. From the space I inhabit, when I examine the different agricultural methods at my disposal, biodynamic farming seems to ideally connect the gestures of cultivation with the microbiological and cosmic levels. In a field so drastically affected by the mind/body, subject/object dichotomies, which have become all the more flagrant in the wake of industrial agriculture and its irreversible consequences on all lifeforms, for the past century the biodynamic approach has been trying to recreate a connection between sensory perceptions and nurturing practices. When I started working as a farmer, this connection suddenly started seeming familiar, due to my knowledge of art history – through the historical

links between the biodynamic approach and artistic practices ranging from dance to painting – and especially because of my interest in certain processes that are present in art and in agriculture alike, such as losing control, transitory states, incompleteness, shapelessness...

Earth-based energetic practices, which are less widespread in the cities where I worked (although they are fashionable there too – to a certain degree at least, since they are considered to be just as irrational as biodynamic farming is in academic and professional environments), open up approaches to some of the earth's unexplained aspects – at least through the practices I can access in France right now: intuitive communication, geobiology, garden harmonisation, and so on. In these practices, sensorial experience is central. Unlike agricultural policies which focus only on hyperproduction, through the prism of energetic practices I can consider food-producing agriculture that is not only aimed at feeding me, a human, but at creating a balance between other visible and invisible beings. Wasn't this exactly the dimension that interested me in contemporary art to begin with?

Artists such as Suzanne Husky and Etienne de France have helped me envision a space for exchanges between art and farming: Suzanne through ecofeminism, Etienne through speculative fiction.

I now try to connect earth-based practices and art practices by drawing from energetic methods, considered as a bridge between two worlds that used to be separate.

I can achieve this by cherry-picking techniques during courses, workshops and trainings, but my theoretical base is still shaky. Thanks to a conversation with Nicole Pignier,¹² I have been able to connect cultural and cultivation practices in a neatly conceptual way. Based on the works of Augustin Berque, Pignier foregrounds a co-articulation of the living through the gestures of farming. The accounts of the farmers she introduced us to, and that she recorded talking about their relationship to livestock and garden farming gave me a great deal of hope for the future of our world.

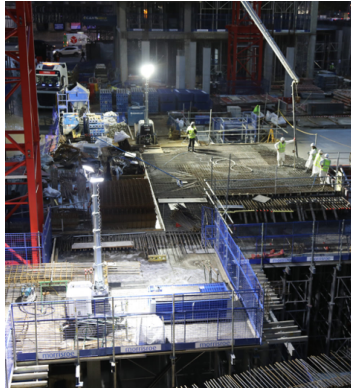
Working on a fruit and tree farm armed with my artistic perspective, I consider each plant and tree simultaneously as a singular being and as part of a whole. For the first time, I have encountered the earth, which holds minerals, vegetables, animals, living and dead creatures, some of which will remain foreign to me forever. Earth gives, even when we don't know how to give back. I have only just begun imagining a form of ecology stemming from art.¹³

Notes

1. (Editor's note). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is the management of a company's economic, social and environmental impacts. ↵
2. (Editor's note). The Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) is an international forest certification organisation whose aim is to guarantee the sustainable management of forests, through a certification label for forest owners, timber contractors and companies in the forest, wood, and paper sectors. ↵
3. William Morris, "Art Under Plutocracy", Conference at the Russell Club at University College Hall, Oxford, 1883. Reprinted in May Morris (ed.), *Collected Works of William Morris (1910-1915)*, Volume 23, London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1910-15. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1883/pluto.htm> (last accessed 3 November 2023). ↵
4. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, New York: Vintage Books, 1996, p. 64. ↵
5. Benoît Antille is currently conducting a doctoral research at the University of Amsterdam, *The Artist as Expert: A Critical Analysis of the Project Economy*. ↵
6. *The Rural Assembly: Contemporary Art and Spaces of Connection* [seminar], London: Whitechapel Gallery, 20-22 June 2019. ↵
7. See for instance the seminar "Habité-e / Être habité-e : quelles relations au vivant ?" organised in Eymoutiers and Cieux (Limousin) in May 2019 by Nicole Pigner, l'École de la terre, and the Cercle Gramsci of Limoges. Also see Barbara Glowczewski and Geneviève Pruvost's visit of the CIAP with their students of the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) to meet local healers, which resulted in the collective publication *Des énergies qui soignent en Montagne limousine : Enquête collective* (Geneviève Pruvost and Barbara Glowczewski, Lamazière-Basse: Maïade éditions, 2021). ↵
8. Bruno Latour, "What protective measures can you think of so we don't go back to the pre-crisis production model?" http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/P-202-AOC-ENGLISH_0.pdf; "Imaginer les gestes-barrières contre le retour à la production d'avant-crise", AOC, 29 March 2020, <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/fr/node/849> (last accessed 8 February 2023). ↵
9. S-composition is a theatre company founded in 2004 by composer and producer Jean-Pierre Seyvos: <https://s-composition.eu/> (last accessed 10 March 2023). ↵
10. Nastassja Martin, *In the Eye of the Wild* [2019], translated by Sophie R. Lewis, New York: New York Review Books, 2021. ↵
11. All these performances took place in the village of Faux-la-Montagne (Plateau de Millevaches) during the Samhain festivities organised by the association Par la racine, which guides local communities in their relationship to death. ↵
12. A semiotician and researcher at the Limoges Faculty of Literature and Science, she has contributed to creating a school for the planetary garden alongside Gilles Clément and the Lycée agricole des Vaseix, in the form of a B.A. in "Aménagement paysager, design des milieux anthropisés" (Design and landscaping of anthropized environments). See her talk at the École nationale supérieure d'art de Limoges (ENSAD) during the seminar *Matière et architecture : de la terre au territoire*, October 2021, available at <https://youtu.be/hfKDJHGCWMs> (last accessed 8 February 2023). ↵
13. For further information, see Marie-Anne Lanavère "Marianne Lanavère jette son costume de directrice aux orties (entretien avec Émilie Renard)", *Lili*, no. 3, 2021, p. 122-128, https://www.la-criee.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/REVUE_3_WEB_page.pdf (Last visited: 8.2.2023), and Manon Simons, *La part invisible*, film for Télémillevaches, 2021, 16 min., <https://telemillevaches.net/videos/la-part-invisible/> (last accessed 8 February 2023). ↵

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