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Art and the Environmental Crisis

From Commodity Aesthetics to Ecology Aesthetics

TIMOTHY W. LUKE

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What is the role of art in today's ecological crisis? In many respects it is critical, because the arts have been one of the main engines driving the wasteful ways of modern capitalism. Every year brings a new set of artistically mediated expectations and aesthetically intensified consumer requirements—always predicated upon the waste of more scarce resources, the overconsumption of energy, and the misuse of productive talents.¹ This discussion, then, is an ecological critique of these aesthetic dynamics. It is written not from the perspective of an interventionist artist concerned about ecology, but rather from the vantage of a radical ecologist concerned about art. Telling this story is not easy. It weaves together insights about social ecology, late capitalism, transnational commerce, consumer ideology, and contemporary art in language drawn from critical theory, radical ecology, and art interpretation. Still, hearing the story may be even harder.

To change ecology globally, it is now clear that the inhabitants of each human locality must reconsider the entire range of their ecological interconnections to local, regional, national, and international exchanges of goods and services. Such rethinking immediately raises the issue of the “bioregions” within which all human communities are rooted. As many ecological analyses have suggested, however, modern industrial societies virtually ignore the constraints of bioregions.² Bioregions are the complex sets of social and ecological connections that cultures have to particular lands, waters, plants, animals, peoples, and climates. Being more mindful of local environments, histories, and communities ideally should lead to the development of an ecologically sustainable, self-reliant society. Yet for at least a century, the changing ecology of advanced capitalism has become less and less attentive to environmental concerns. Today, advanced corporate capitalism essentially ignores the boundaries of bioregions, effacing their uniqueness and diversity. The concept of “ecology” should imply concern for the total pattern of all relations between natural organisms and their environment. However, complex modern economies, with their superexploitation of eons-old stocks of nature's resources in the lifetimes of only two or three human generations, operate at levels beyond and above the natural balance

of the biosphere. These established patterns of economic and ecological relations are excessive in extent and wasteful in quality, while generating immense environmental destruction over much of the Earth. Such ecological dynamics in contemporary capitalism, which function over, beyond, or outside of nature's inherent balance, must be seen as an artificial “hyperecology” of an ultimately unsustainable type.

A successful ecological society, tied sensibly to its bioregional context, ultimately should assume the characteristics of a “permaculture.” The bioregional basis of any permaculture would be guided by larger social goals, such as the conservation of energy and its allocation in accessible, democratic forms. Its economic processes would not *mine* nature with unsustainable forms of agriculture, forestry, industry, or fishery. Rather, it would tend to *mind* nature in the cultivation of sustainable, low-impact methods of producing the food, fiber, energy, shelter, and material means of ecological communities on a localistic, self-reliant basis. Unlike modern capitalism, permacultures would not consume huge amounts of energy and resources from all over the planet. They would resist the colonization of other bioregions to produce antiecollogical products for the enjoyment of a few core capitalist sites capable of structuring export flows for their advantage.

Such permacultural ways of life presume the entire reconstruction of the forms of contemporary ideal and material culture.³ They directly contradict modern capitalism's “epharmaculture,” with its dependence on constantly increasing, wasteful mass consumption out of artificially generated “technoregions.” These technoregions ignore almost all concrete cultural ties to local land, water, plants, animals, climate, and peoples in order to respecify social space technoeconomically, according to the demands of global capitalist exchange.⁴ With little regard to place, tradition, or ecosystem, basically similar kinds of urbanized, suburbanized, or ruralized zones of consumption emerge at many different planetary sites by using varying inputs of energy, natural resources, food, water, and population, drawn from all over the Earth through transnational commodity, energy, and labor markets. Without the arts, epharmaculture could not endlessly refuel its unrelenting production of newer

goods, trendier products, and fresher images, inasmuch as the commercial arts guide each individual's recoding of his or her personal aspirations in terms of scientifically designed and organizationally produced material satisfactions.⁵ The destruction of nature begins with the original human desire to control the environment. Yet once this greed for power and possession develops, the commercialization of art in the design salons and artistic studios of every individual imagination mobilized by the market constantly stimulates individuals always to desire more.

Conventionally, consumption is assumed to be the function of humanity's technological relationship to the environment. People supposedly manipulate the environment to create objects and processed materials that will satisfy innate needs for material goods and services. Today, many believe that capitalist corporations are the most appropriate tool for producing these materials. Questions of social ecology, then, are submerged almost from the beginning in the commercial assumptions of political economy. Entrepreneurial capital, for example, as it historically emerged in the modern bourgeois city, transformed the economic and social relations of agrarian economies. As its markets penetrated the people's living place and working place, the city came to invade the countryside, the market to dominate the farm, the mind worker to control the hand worker, and the capitalist metropole to imperialize the precapitalist periphery. Yet this cycle implied its own inherent limits by tying its survival to pushing commercial exchange into new geographic spaces. In the 1880s and 1890s capitalist entrepreneurs found fewer and fewer precapitalist bioregions to penetrate commercially. Capitalism could no longer expand extensively. It therefore made a decisive shift to *intensive* expansion. Since the 1880s marketing and manufacturing, in a sense, have responded by inventing new technoregional sites of exchange. They intensified exchange by colonizing everyday socioeconomic processes in cultural space, through scientific management, industrial design, and professional development. Conjuring these virgin territories out of culture as the new urban consumer society of modernity was a brilliant but essentially antiecological solution to the crisis of extensive production.⁶ The encirclement of nature in the closing of the naturally limited bioregional frontiers opened up artificially unlimited technoregional zones of conquest to the building projects of mass consumption-based industrial capitalism.

The geographic codes of entrepreneurial capital, therefore, gradually rewrote the surface of the planet, extending outward from the original Eurocentric orbit of commercial exchange and capturing the inhabitants of numerous non-European zones of *terra incognita* until every frontier was closed and all unexplored territories were mapped. Every bioregion from the Antarctic to Africa to the Arctic to Asia to the Antipodes soon was catalogued to its fullest extent for any economic utility or ecological possibility. The closing of this world of nature to an extensive mode of production forced

capitalists to open innumerable new artificial worlds for an intensive mode of production. Every craft and science rapidly projected its technical geographies into the new unexplored worlds opened by the intensive expansion of global exchange.

In the postimperial geography of corporate capitalism, transnational topographies and transcultural territories emerge from the interactions of international communication, travel, commerce, and transportation.⁷ No longer grounded in one planetary place, one ethnonational location, or one environmental site, these image-driven technoregions, semi-imaginary and semireal, are the real homelands of modern individuals. Their names are taken and passed as metaphors; yet technoregions are, in fact, the common ground of transnational society. Contemporary workers and modern corporations, for example, no longer set out to prosper in "the new world" or "the colonial world." Instead, they labor to make their marks in various technoregions, ranging from the banking world, the scientific world, the art world, the educational world, or the literary world to the financial world, the fashion world, the business world, the music world, or the advertising world, to name only a few.

To keep growing, capitalist exchange generates new hierarchies of mass consumption by developing different "consumption communities" around distinct grades of material objects and services. Concomitantly, this increasingly homogenized object world is invested artistically with rich, new heterogeneous symbolic and imaginary differentiations, in order to distinguish the various relative grades within these communities of consumption.⁸ Under late capitalism, consciousness management and design industries spend millions of dollars and thousands of hours on the arts carefully to distinguish objects that are artificially defined and symbolically differentiated but essentially identical, in the marketplace. In the final analysis, aesthetic means of cultivating passive consumption through the controlled emancipation of personal, self-seeking, and sensual fulfillment serve as the material basis of late capitalism's hyperecological cycles of accumulation and reproduction, while this profligate waste of resources is rapidly destroying the Earth's ecological balance. Meanwhile, such hyperecological benefits are largely still reserved for the enjoyment of only a few hundred million people, mainly in Japan, Europe, and North America, while the Earth's other billions live in comparatively—or extremely—squalid poverty.

The closing of the natural frontiers in the 1880s and 1890s, then, simply saw the displacement of the colonizing impulse into new realms of activity, defined by geographies of economic, technological, and social spaces, rather than physical, military, and strategic ones. Defining, developing, and defending these socioeconomic topologies and cultural geographies has been the central concern driving the ephemeraculture of corporate capital for over a century. To get corporate capital to decamp from such zones and then to find the means to reclaim human life from the technoregions will

be immensely difficult, if not impossible. The *raison d'être* of advanced technologies and the economic survival of corporate capital are tied to keeping these artificial territories under their sway. If real change is to be attained, everything developed over the last century—all that is commonly called “civilization,” “modernity,” “development,” or “progress”—will need to be completely rethought. To survive, some means must be created of scaling back ephemeral cultural life in the technoregions of late capitalism to the limits of permacultural living in the bioregions of the now-ravaged biosphere.

The revolutionary development of the commercial arts over the past century parallels in lockstep the emergence of corporate hyperecologies. Commercial art and commercialized artists are simply one of the professional-technical expressions of the aestheticized commerce that rests at the core of late capitalism, and that liberates new wants and mobilizes fresh desires in order to justify corporate capitalism's wasteful consumption of natural resources. Such desires are late capitalism's only truly renewable resource of any importance. Once produced, the sign values of aestheticized consumption continue affirming and concretizing the hyperecological order of late capitalism in the objects and images of the consumer goods themselves.

On the other hand, these manifest and latent meanings in mass consumption also can afford critical, ecologically concerned artists tremendous opportunities to challenge the symbolic essences of late capitalism, questioning both the media and the messages that the hyperecology of late capitalism uses to integrate individuals and society into its reproduction. There are a few precedents, of course, for this sort of revolutionary turn in art. Although they were not ecologically minded, critical challenges against the consumer codes of mass consumption can be found in some currents of Dadaism and Surrealism in Europe prior to 1945. A few artists working in these movements called into doubt, from both progressive and reactionary political positions, established social codes of appropriation, interpretation, and reception of consumer goods, with their radical recasting of mass-mediated images and mass-circulated consumer codes. Similarly, the Situationists in the 1960s expressed a radical critique of everyday life and capitalist society's cultivation of spectacle as a mechanism of social integration.⁹ In the United States during the heyday of its *Pax Americana*, before 1973, many different artists, ranging from Robert Rauschenberg, Tom Wesselmann, Claes Oldenburg, Edward Ruscha, and Wayne Thiebaud to Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Duane Hanson, James Rosenquist, and Robert Bechtle, played with

the material and symbolic codes of American consumer society in their work. Some Earth art and Conceptual art, which continued to advance the dematerialization of the art object that started with Minimalism and performance art in the 1960s and the 1970s, invited audiences to rethink artistic praxis. With their work on desert landscapes, artists in these modes broke the museum-bound carapace of market-driven aesthetic interpretation and valorization.¹⁰

More recently, we see some contemporary artists attacking the symbolic codes of consumption head on. In different ways and from various perspectives, their work brackets and questions the hyperecologies of waste, ecocide, and global crisis that are built into contemporary corporate capitalism. In the 1970s and 1980s, the installation artists Judith Barry, Hans Haacke, and Dana Birnbaum employed multimedia presentations effectively to criticize some of the codes of consumer ideology or the managerial mind-set of corporate power. Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger work with mass-mediated language and slogan signs and use the political rhetoric of advertising to subvert contemporary consumer codes. Tony Cragg's use of “trash” and “household waste” carries a critical ecological subtext, as he refashions plastic fragments and consumer-goods containers into moments of human identity or political protest. Much of Sue Coe's and Roger Brown's work strikes at late capitalism's abuse of nature, the misuse of resources, and the use of corporate power to contain individuals and society in the many mass-mediated traps of consumer culture. Finally, the ecological gleanings of Dominique Mazeaud, garbage performance art of Mierle Ukeles (*figs. 1 and 2*), and trash assemblage installations by Ciel Bergman (*fig. 3*) are critical new attempts to recast aesthetic appreciation in ecologically vigilant practice. Most important, like much of the work just discussed, the performance or interventionist quality of their artwork makes it very difficult to commodify and thereby subsume into the tamed circuits of big-time art markets.

Artists concerned about ecology, especially those working in the highly commercialized art fields of advertising, fashion, interior design, product styling, mass media, and the like, must recognize that their labor often has been essential in the destruction of bioregional permacultures, and is still a material foundation of such destructive activity; it is used to redefine the good life of modern consumption in the technoregions of transnational exchange. Without the aestheticization of commerce, life as we know it in late capitalism would be impossible. Those artists willing to strike away from the academy and gallery culture of high-art aestheticism and to renounce the mindless trends of con-



FIG. 1 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Ceremonial Arch Honoring Service Workers in the New Service Economy*, 1988, steel arch with materials donated by city agencies, 132 x 148 x 108 inches. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

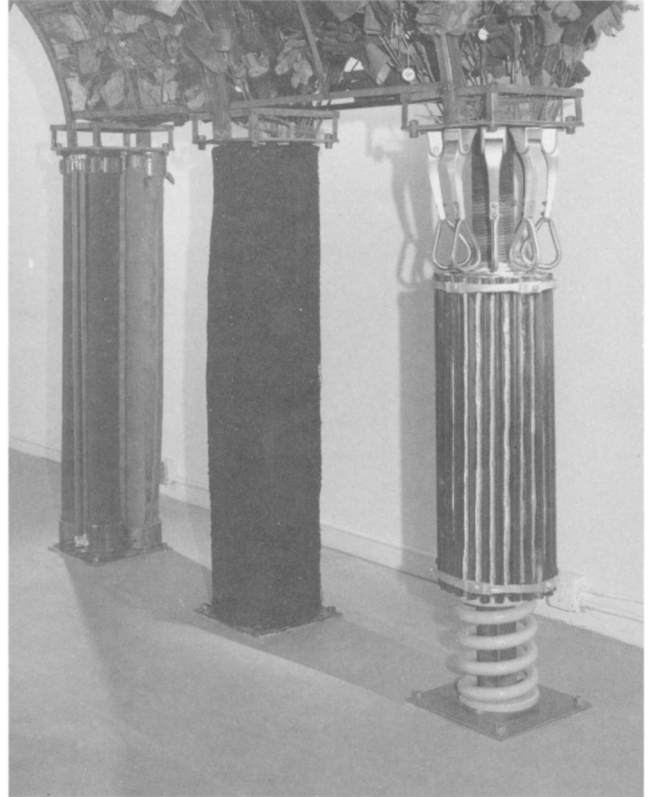


FIG. 2 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Ceremonial Arch Honoring Service Workers in the New Service Economy* (detail).



FIG. 3 Ciel Bergman, *Sea of Clouds What Can I Do*, 1987, installation of nonbiodegradable material from the Santa Barbara coastline, Santa Barbara Arts Forum, California.

sumer design can be important instigators of change in response to the ecological crisis. Artists now have at least two major avenues of attack by which to intervene directly in the circuits of late-capitalist reproduction and to create an ecology aesthetic.

First, those artists working immediately within the industrial design and consciousness-management segments of industry might attack from within the codes of consumption, doubting and disparaging the desires they encode in consumer goods for others to need.¹¹ These desires have been and still are the essential artifacts of late-capitalist production, and their perpetual aesthetic intensification is required for this industrial regime to continue. Yet only a radical reconstruction of almost everything manufactured that now exists could begin to create a sustainable permacultural mode of production out of that handful of salvageable techniques and artifacts held within the unsustainable ephemera-culture of late capitalism. To do this as well as keep their jobs and continue at their crafts, artists must embrace new values consonant with a permacultural, ecological way of life. Rather than stimulating individual desires for the flimsy, the superfluous, and the trendy, artists must identify new, environmentally sensible values—durability, utility, and permanence—in their works and designs. By linking artistic practices with a general cultural awakening to the critical importance of ecological values and by embracing values of ecological sustainability, artists can help to begin revolutionizing the present system from within their vocations and crafts. From the current realities of technoregions and suppressed memories of bioregions, ecological reformers and environmentally aware artists must identify the humane potentialities of technology and the untapped possibilities of nature. Such ecologically aware artists will be important in working out the radical new ecographics for making human artifacts ecologically useful, practicable, and beautiful, rather than environmentally useless, impracticable, and destructive.

Second, artists working outside of the immediate circuits of commodity design might attack the wastefulness of ephemera-culture more critically from without, reappraising the flawed totality of hyperecological late capitalism by creating new images of ecological change. For example, they might continue to subvert the symbolic codes of this ecological regime's reproduction, challenging its imagined benefits and satisfactions in showing its actual costs and dissatisfactions. Plainly, if these aesthetic challenges succeed, they will run the danger of being immediately tamed and subsumed by the art markets. Yet by raising ecological concerns in their artistic work, significant new styles of resistance may develop out of this aesthetic imagining of new ecoregions for cultural development, which may, in turn, recenter everyday life within each human community's bioregional context.

Guided by this imagination, practices of permaculture may move more quickly from the realm of the imagined into

the practical sphere of everyday experience. Today, too many artists, ironically, are implicated in both the ongoing constitution of the codes of consumption and the infrequent articulation of critiques directed at these same codes. From this contradictory position they have every incentive not to act against the ephemera-culture; still, they also have one of the last chances to imagine how an ecological permaculture could arise from the hyperecology of late capitalism. —

Notes

This paper originally was presented at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University on March 24, 1990, at the Colloquium of Artists Concerned about the Environment. A much different version appeared in *Art Papers* (January–February 1991).

1. For examples of how artists and art collaborate in the rationalization of capitalist commodity production, see Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire* (New York: Pantheon, 1986); Bevis Hillier, *The Style of the Century, 1900–1980* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1983); Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Bryan Holme, *Advertising: Reflections of a Century* (New York: Viking Press, 1982); Richard Guy Wilson, Dianne H. Pilgrim, and Dickran Tasjian, *The Machine Age in America, 1918–1941*, exh. cat. (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1986); and Chester H. Liebs, *Mainstreet to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985).
2. See Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land; A Bioregional Vision* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1985); Jonathan Poritt, *Seeing Green* (London: Blackwell, 1984); and, most important, Thomas Berry, *The Dream of Nature* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988).
3. See Timothy W. Luke, "Notes for a Deconstructionist Ecology," *New Political Science* 11 (Spring 1983): 21–32.
4. For one comprehensive critical overview of this hyperecological cycle, see Bill McKibbin, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989).
5. See Timothy W. Luke, *Screens of Power: Ideology Domination and Resistance in Informational Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 19–58. Also see Wolfgang F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
6. See Siegfried Gideon, *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948); and James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960).
7. As Edward W. Soja suggests, modernity always is composed of "both context and conjuncture. It can be understood as the specificity of being alive, in the world, at a particular time and place; a vital individual and collective sense of contemporaneity. . . . Spatiality, temporality, and social being can be seen as the abstract dimensions which together comprise all facets of human existence. More concretely specified, each of the abstract existential dimensions comes to life as a social construct which shapes empirical reality and is simultaneously shaped by it. Thus, the spatial order of human existence arises from the (social) production of space, the construction of human geographies that both reflect and configure being in the world. . . . The social order of being-in-the-world can be seen as revolving around the constitution of society, the production and reproduction of social relations, institutions, and practices." *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 25.
8. See Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Basic, 1988).
9. See Elisabeth Sussman, ed., *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957–1972* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).
10. See, for a parallel argument, Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica: Lapis Press, 1986); and Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984).
11. To change contemporary society, they will have to do more, however, than simply advance the interests of green consumerism or tout environmentally aware products, as do such publications as *Shopping for a Better World*, *The Green Consumer*, *The Environmental Shopping Handbook*, or *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth*. At best, these efforts make minor changes at the margins, but do not do anything radically to transform society in more ecologically rational ways.

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