

Conversation with Nature: Ecological Consciousness and Expression in Contemporary Art Curating

Yuke Zou

College of History and Culture,
South China Normal University,
Guangzhou, China

Corresponding author:
20220421091@m.scnu.edu.cn

Abstract:

Under the backdrop of economic and social development along with the irreversible process of urbanization, natural spaces are actually experiencing increasingly intense pressure, having reached a critical point of overload. Beneath the tip of the iceberg lies the struggle between human expansionist desires and rationality - how to interpret the relationship between humans and the environment, how to seek a balance between industry and nature, and how to break the deadlock in conflicts of interest. These thoughts all reveal humanity's eternal exploration and care for nature and the inner world. Influenced by various global ecological issues, the combination of art curation and ecological themes has become a hot topic of interest in recent years. This study focuses on exploring ecological awareness and expression in contemporary art curation, utilizing literature analysis and case analysis methods to search for and read relevant materials and literature. It also conducts in-depth analysis and reasoning on exhibition cases held in natural and urban spaces, analyzing the ecological awareness and expression manifested in various curation practices. The study finds that, due to the unique attributes and functions of exhibitions, curation plays a significant role in responding to public crisis issues, reflecting on, and reconstructing the dynamic relationship between humans and nature.

Keywords: Ecological consciousness; curating; holistic interconnection.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the increasingly urgent background of the global ecological crisis and conducts research based on the emerging trend of combining

ecological issues with art curation. As a means of conceptual output, art curation can play a significant role in promoting coexistence among multiple species within ecosystems and reconstructing the relationship between humans and non-humans. As a

window connecting the public with cutting-edge ideas, it holds unique significance in addressing public crises, disseminating healthy ecological concepts, and advocating for new sustainable lifestyles.

This study categorizes exhibitions based on their venues, discussing the ecological awareness presented in exhibitions held in natural spaces and urban spaces respectively, and exploring how curatorial practices function to initiate dialogues with nature. The paper employs the literature review method to search for and read relevant materials and literature. The advantage of this method lies in its effective absorption and utilization of previous research findings in the field, facilitating the progression of the study. Additionally, it utilizes the case study method, delving into individual cases to examine their curatorial logic and the final presentation of exhibits.

This research aims to analyze specific exhibition cases and comprehensively elaborate related concepts, making an attempt to break through the traditional „human-centered“ mindset. Thus, it provides a more comprehensive and balanced perspective to view the diverse interactions among various elements within ecosystems.

2. Concept

In this era, the futures of humans and non-humans are increasingly intertwined and interdependent within a mutual uncertainty [1]. Humanity now finds itself in a fragile epoch. The issues of climate change and global warming, loss of biodiversity, air and ocean pollution, as well as various potential global ecological crises, have become increasingly urgent—in the face of these challenges, „ecology“ has gradually emerged as a focal concept. The concept of ecology was first proposed by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel in 1869: ecology is the science that studies the interrelationships between organisms and their surrounding environments (both non-living and biotic) [2]. Its core lies in constructing a linear network that observes the dynamic connections between „living beings“ and their environments, emphasizing the holism and interconnectivity among things, rather than being confined to the study of individuals in microbiology.

As the concept of ecology permeates various aspects of social life, the scope and connotation of the term „ecology“ have become increasingly broad, extending from „the state of existence“ to refer to or modify beautiful things, such as natural, healthy, beautiful, harmonious, sustainable, and so on. Therefore, it can be said that the expansion of the connotation and extension of „ecology“ represents the dynamic development process of ecologization. This process has even evolved into a state of „pan-ecologization“ [3]. In the field of art, this is man-

ifested in the birth of ecological art. The definition of ecological art encompasses three sets of concepts: natural ecology, social ecology, and cultural ecology. Natural ecology refers to the material environment for human survival and development; social ecology refers to the existing external institutional system in the legal sense; cultural ecology is the collection of numerous spiritual products created by humans. These three constitute the cultural logical relationship of ecological art: natural ecology is the material basis for the existence of social ecology and cultural ecology, while social ecology and cultural ecology belong to two sets of conscious products. In the process of mutually influencing and transforming each other, they further influence and transform natural ecology.

In the 1990s, public art with environmental protection as its theme first entered the public's field of view, with various paintings, videos, installations, and other artworks made from green materials dominating the mainstream. In recent years, the connotation of ecological art has increasingly transcended the call for environmental awareness, and its protagonists have gradually shifted from environmental workers, visual artists, and others to curators.

In terms of form, the idea of „holistic interconnection“ in ecological art coincides with the operational approach of „coordination, integration, and presentation“ in curatorial practice. At the same time, as a way and action of reflecting on the present and producing cognition, design curation possesses diverse curatorial languages, applied curatorial functions, and enlightening exhibition foresight when addressing public crisis issues [4]. Therefore, it can be regarded as a highly critical tool for uncovering the intricate connections between things, thereby transcending binary thinking, deepening our understanding of the world we live in, and empowering the response to and resolution of contemporary issues.

3. Case Study

3.1 Exhibition Events in Natural Spaces

In *Liquid Museum* Li Degeng deconstructs exhibitions into four elements: the exhibits as objects, the exhibition hall as the field, the audience as the subject, and the narrative established on the basis of the three [5]. Although exhibitions possess material entities, their value is embodied in their spiritual aspect. Placed in an ecological context, the topics discussed in exhibition narratives consistently point to reality, at which point the choice of spatial form becomes a new issue.

The Land Art Exhibition is a relatively cutting-edge and emerging phenomenon. Following an architectural definition proposed by Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe, its unique-

ness lies largely in breaking through the „universal space“ that conventional exhibitions rely on, and creating an open, perceptually-driven field. Kitagawa Furalng mentioned, „If the same artwork is displayed in a white cube (*2) exhibition space, whether it is in Tokyo, New York, or Johannesburg in South Africa, it will appear the same and receive the same evaluation. This evaluation is obtained in the same cubic space, stripped of the cultural and historical background elements of the display location.“

Taking Japan’s Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial as an example, it is located in the rural areas of Niigata Prefecture, Japan. Centered around the overarching theme of humans and nature, the exhibits appear randomly in fields, mountains, and even the backyards of locals. Without a set viewing route, visitors are free to explore the scenarios. This cleverly breaks the conventional paradigm of gallery and museum viewers facing walls and lights, engaging in a one-way communication with the artwork, and instead deeply involves the real environment in the dialogue, allowing viewers to more clearly perceive the connection between their „true selves“ and the „environment.“ The narrative function of the exhibition is actually weakened in the natural energy field, replaced by the awakening of the most primitive and simple emotions of human beings returning to their spiritual home. The warmth of the sunshine, the touch of the wind, and the scent of the grass all contribute to a sense of empathy with nature when immersed in it.

„Tunnel of Light“ by Leandro Erlich is one of the most representative works in Echigo-Tsumari. As seen in Figure 1, he covered the exit of the Seikyo Gorge Tunnel with stainless steel panels. The smooth surface reflects the scenery outside the tunnel like water, creating a magical visual effect that gives a sense of spatial transformation. While „capturing, moving, and projecting“ the world, it also prompts viewers to re-examine the boundary between man-made objects and nature. The line between virtual and reality seems to be just a thought away - do we choose to stay in the bizarre world inside the tunnel, or step out into the external reality?

„White Shirts“ was a work from the first Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale. As shown in Figure 2, the artist Christian Boltanski installed black frames on a farmland, collected white shirts from locals to hang on clothes hangers, and used transparent fishing lines to secure the hangers to the frames. The white shirts, a common item in daily life, achieved a transcendence of identity within the context of land art, simultaneously connecting to their original status as ready-made objects and their role in cultural narrative. In this work, the white shirts serve as symbols of human life, encompassing a wealth of subjective experiences from the viewer. They can be seen as a resource,

a consumer good of modern life, and evoke various associations. Their state in the farmland, whether hanging statically or swaying with the wind, all demonstrate the interaction between the object and its environment. In a scenario that originates from daily life but transcends it, the objects are stripped of their inherent „service to humans“ attribute, prompting a reevaluation of human self-positioning.



Fig. 1 Leandro Erlich, Tunnel of Light (2012)
[6]



Fig. 2 Christian Boltanski, White Shirts (2000) [7]

The year 2020 was marked by the global pandemic of the novel coronavirus, a shared traumatic memory for all humanity. The desire to leave enclosed spaces and digital media behind, and to return to nature and touch reality, was stronger than ever. After local restrictions eased slightly, designers Numen / ForUse and Simon Morasi Piperčić curated a furniture exhibition for the furniture brand Prostoria in 2020, located in a Croatian forest.

The exhibition hall was composed of wooden „islands“ designed by Prostoria, with Figures 3 and 4 showcasing two different islands respectively. The islands were assembled into various geometric shapes, including squares, L-shapes, upright wooden pillars resembling walls, and more. The rigorous grid formation of the exhibition hall created a surreal atmosphere, contrasting with the freely scattered trees and shrubs in the surrounding forest. The works were arranged in living room-style installations, making each island appear like a „home with transparent walls and a roof.“ Visitors were allowed to enter the is-

lands and interact with the exhibited furniture. When the soft comfort of the furniture was combined with the harmonious stability of nature, it not only triggered emotional identification among the visitors but also conveyed the concepts of sustainable development and environmental protection.



Fig. 3 Polygonal Easy Chair on the Island [8]

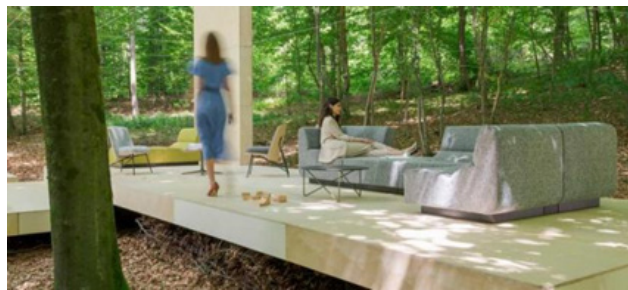


Fig. 4 Modular Layout Sofa on another Island [8]

3.2 Exhibition Events in Urban Public Spaces

Compared to the exhibitions held directly in natural spaces, such as the aforementioned land art festivals, exhibitions in urban spaces target a different audience and have distinct objectives. While the former tend to have a milder and more relaxed tone, leaning towards popular culture and incorporating elements of cultural tourism or commercial attributes, the latter, as exhibitions in the traditional sense, carry a stronger academic critique function and heavier social responsibility. In other words, they are more curated. In the continuously evolving and increasingly complex urban environment, artists and curators are constantly exploring ways to sustainably collaborate with nature and engaging in various curatorial practices.

The Smithsonian Design Museum's Sixth Cooper-Hewitt Design Triennial in 2020, with the theme of „Nature,“ proposed seven strategies for establishing beneficial connections with nature: „understand, remediate, simulate, salvage, nurture, augment, and facilitate.“ These seven

distinct branches each elaborate on contemporary designers' attitudes towards nature, among which there are radical solutions that encourage the establishment of a lasting partnership between humans and nature.

It's worth mentioning that most of the exhibited works utilized new materials and cutting-edge technologies to reveal the purest connection between humans and nature in avant-garde forms, creating a striking visual impact. One such exhibit is the installation „Curiosity Cloud“ by mischer'traxler studio, as shown in Figures 5 and 6. This installation consists of 264 inverted, suspended glass spheres, each containing a handcrafted insect. When visitors approach the installation, radar-controlled light bulbs illuminate, causing the insects to start rotating and flying within their containers, touching the glass and making sounds. These insects represent 25 different species from around the world, categorized into three groups: „extinct or highly endangered, common, and newly discovered.“ Together, they form a species anthology that could never coexist in reality, instead presenting a complete cycle of extinction and rebirth in alternation. This narrative transcends reality, standing outside of time and natural laws to experience the lifecycle and reflect on the interactive relationship between industrial products and living organisms from the perspective of an environmental community. Additionally, it embodies an expression of ecological aesthetics, which transcends conventional aesthetic value judgments and views natural beauty through the lens of life's existence, ecological balance, and sustainable development [9]. Matilda McQuaid, one of the curators, stated, „Through the concepts and actions of design, we have the power to become active advocates in the relationship between humans and nature.“ Caroline Baumann, the director, added that this triennial provides timely insights into how designers respond to the current environmental and social challenges faced by humanity. It is not just an exhibition, but a call to action.



Fig. 5 Mischer'traxler studio, Curiosity Cloud (2020) [10]



Fig. 6 Detail view on an ebony-yewelwing dragonfly [10]

4. The Return of ‚Human‘ - Breaking Free from the Shackles of Anthropocentrism

As Paul O’Neill has stated, curatorial practice is a form of „living-out“ or a cognitive process that constantly adjusts and changes with the occurrence of practice, and these changes also enter other fields through different paths. Therefore, this cognitive process possesses unpredictable and open characteristics [11]. John Tagg has also proposed that curation is a form of mapping [12]. It attempts to accomplish four tasks: first, to measure the scale of a thing; second, to determine the metrics; third, to endow it with an ideological characteristic; and finally, to conceal from the viewer the methods leading to this measurement, shaping, representation, and ideology. When we attempt to explore the expressed (exhibiting) and implicit (inhibiting) ecological consciousness in contemporary art curation from a pan-ecological perspective, we can also follow the logic of mapping.

If the anchor point lies in the scale of the relationship between humans and nature, the curator’s efforts are directed towards capturing the intricate relationships between humans and the environment, society, and culture. By utilizing various measurements (such as anthropology, sociology, genealogy, ethnography, and other interdisciplinary fields), they organize these into a systematic language and externally express them in the form of an exhibition for society. When viewers enter the exhibition space, they interact with the environment and engage in reflection, thus achieving the purpose of idea dissemination and completing the exhibition process. Compared to other universal curatorial practices, in the realm of ecological curation, the focus on the experimental and research aspects of the exhibition far exceeds that on practicality.

In conclusion, the ultimate goal of an ecological exhibition is to provoke reflection on the relationship between humans and nature. In traditional Chinese culture, there is an ancient saying, „Man can conquer nature,“ which embodies the desire of people in agricultural societies with low productivity to overcome the natural world. Entering the industrial era, the exploitation, extraction, and even destruction of nature became even more unstoppable in the face of humanity’s insatiable greed. From being embedded in nature to altering it, and from altering it to „creating ecosystems,“ human abilities have continuously „advanced,“ leading to an increasing capacity to destroy the source of human life—the physical natural world [9]. It can be said that the history of productivity development is also the history of humanity’s worship of material goods. Changes in material society are inevitably accompanied by changes in ideological states—humans have transitioned from a „natural state“ where they did not distinguish between themselves and objects, to a state of producing (agriculture) and conquering certain organisms (animal husbandry) in accordance with natural laws, and then to a state of widespread conquest. Ideologically, humans have shifted from the „naturalism“ of hunting and gathering to a mixed state of „utility-morality“ in agricultural and industrial societies, with human-centrism gradually growing stronger in this process [13].

Over the years, curation has increasingly been placed within a broader political, economic, and cultural context, serving as a methodology to examine and respond to current public events and pressing issues. Guided by the question of how to break free from the shackles of human-centrism, we urgently need to rethink our relationship with other species, „decenter“ humans who have been considered the measure of all things, and view the entire planet as an interdependent whole of various ecosystems. From this perspective, we can construct a new curatorial mindset within the symbiotic context of the „post-ecological“ era [14]. Regardless of the form they take, the curatorial practices mentioned above all succeed in incorporating the human role into the natural landscape, acknowledging the agency of objects, and engaging in dialogue with nature with humility and caution.

5. Conclusion

Based on the above, it can be concluded that there exists a complex and intimate connection between humans and various elements within the natural world and ecological systems, engaging in extensive and enduring interactions. Various curatorial practices all reflect an understanding, construction, and innovative approach to the global ecological system. The significance of this research lies in

integrating the ecological concept of „holistic interconnectedness“ with curatorial theory and practice, striving to promote a profound fusion of ecological ideas with art curation, thereby facilitating interdisciplinary integration and development. From a humanistic perspective, it guides the public to understand and cultivate an ecological aesthetic, shifting towards a more environmentally friendly and sustainable lifestyle. Future research can delve deeper into how curatorial practices transmit ecological concepts through knowledge dissemination, maximizing their public functions. In this way, we hope to harness the power of culture and art to create a more mutually supportive and harmoniously coexisting world.

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