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**Exploring the Impact of Ecofeminist Theory on  
Contemporary Art**

A focus on National Participations at the 59th Venice Art  
Biennale (2022)

**Supervisor**

Ch. Prof. Matteo Bertelé

**Assistant supervisor**

Ch. Prof. Federica Maria Giovanna Timeto

**Graduand**

Ludovica Morroi

**Matriculation number**

893495

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## INTRODUCTION

During the 1970s, the intersection of feminist and environmentalist concerns gave rise to a powerful and thought-provoking theoretical framework known as Ecofeminism. As global concerns over the environment and gender inequalities continue to grow: thanks in part to social movements such as #Me Too and Fridays for Future, Ecofeminism has garnered significant attention in recent years. This philosophy, which, as we will analyse, has grown and evolved over time, now incorporates increasingly intersectional contributions that recognise different systems of domination, including racism, classism, ethnocentrism, capitalism, and colonialism<sup>1</sup>. This research aims to explore the profound influence of the ecofeminist movement on contemporary art practices, which has long been overlooked, by tracing its evolution over time and, finally, by delving into the specificities of the 59th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia - *The Milk of Dreams* (2022) and some of its national pavilions. The exhibition, which provides a platform for artists worldwide to express their perspectives on different topics, in this edition has provided multiple insights on the relationship between the preservation of the environment and gender issues.

Through the analysis of different artworks, and curatorial choices, we will explore how ecofeminist principles have influenced contemporary art discourse, with the aim of deepening our understanding of how art can engage with and address pressing socio-environmental concerns. Indeed, throughout history, artists have often responded to social shifts and advocated for change through their creative expression, and social movements have deeply influenced and shaped their artistic practices. However, there has been limited discussion on the impact of Ecofeminism on contemporary art. Therefore, this research aims to highlight its significance within the art world in acting as a catalyst to enhance conversations about sustainability, gender equality, decolonialism, and other pressing issues of our time.

In the first chapter, we will delve into the origins and development of Ecofeminism, seeking to understand its theoretical underpinnings and historical context. Indeed, Ecofeminism emerged in Western countries in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a result

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<sup>1</sup> Warren, *Ecological Feminism*, London-New York: Routledge 1994, p.2.

of peace, feminist, and ecology movements within the broader context of second-wave feminism. It recognises the intrinsic link between gender inequality and environmental degradation, highlighting the common roots of the oppression on both women and nature, and the need for a holistic approach to social and ecological justice. Furthermore, Ecofeminism emphasises the importance of addressing gender disparities in environmental decision-making processes, acknowledging that women often bear the major brunt of environmental degradation and the consequences of climate change.

As we will analyse, Ecofeminism has also been deeply shaped by socialist and anti-capitalist influences. Thanks to the contributions of scholars such as Maria Mies, Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Silvia Federici, Ecofeminism challenges the capitalist paradigm of endless growth and exploitation, emphasising the need for a sustainable and equitable resource management, which promotes alternative economic models that prioritize well-being over profit.

As Ecofeminism has evolved, it has also embraced postcolonial perspectives, recognising the differential impact of environmental degradation on marginalised communities and indigenous peoples, as well as the consequences of imperialism and colonialism on both people and the environment. Additionally, we will discuss the queering of Ecofeminism, which involves challenging heteronormative structures and traditional gender roles, exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ people within the context of environmental justice, thus moving away from the essentialist constructs of the beginnings.

The second chapter, instead, will examine the influence of the ecofeminist movement on contemporary feminist art practices from the 1970s to the present. First, we will explore the artistic representation of the feminine divine through Goddess Art and its connection to Ecofeminism, delving into works that challenge traditional patriarchal narratives to celebrate the power and wisdom of matriarchal religions and practices rooted in the connection with nature. For instance, we will analyse the exhibition *Feminine Power: the Divine to the Demonic* at the British Museum (2022), which showcases artworks that explore the multifaceted aspects of feminine identity and spirituality as a means of addressing current concerns.

Then, as evolving understandings of gender have significantly changed the focus of Ecofeminist art over time, the feminist approach to Eco-Art will be analysed. We will take as a starting point the exhibition *Weather Report: Art and Climate Change* curated by Lucy Lippard in 2007. By showcasing artistic expressions that blurred the boundaries between science, aesthetics, and public space, in fact, Lippard provided a platform to consider the significant impact of climate change through the works of different feminist artists. Additionally, we will explore *Groundswell: Women of Land Art* exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center of Dallas (2023), which highlights the contributions of women artists to the Land Art movement and their unique perspectives on the relationship between nature, gender, and art. Indeed, while male artists gained prominence in Land Art for their monumental interventions in the landscape, the equally innovative and transformative works created by women artists such as Nancy Holt, Alice Aycock, Agnes Denes, and others were often overshadowed or disregarded, obscuring their pivotal roles in defining and evolving the essence of this artistic movement.

To further demonstrate the diversity and richness of ecofeminist art practices, we will explore the collective exhibition *ecofeminism(s)* curated in 2020 by Monika Fabijanska at the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York, which is currently the only retrospective on the topic. The aim of this overview, which is fundamental for our analysis, is to highlight the multiple ways in which artists can engage with ecofeminist themes, concepts, and methodologies, fostering a deeper understanding of the potential of art as a vehicle for social and environmental transformation.

The last chapter will specifically focus on the 59th Venice Art Biennale - *The Milk of Dreams* and a selection of three national participations, which provide valuable insights into Ecofeminism and its role in shaping contemporary art practices. By analysing the artworks and curatorial choices within the Venice Biennale, in fact, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of how ecofeminist theories are being visually expressed and presented within the context of a major international art institution.

Furthermore, analysing specific National Pavilions will provide a more in-depth exploration of this intersection. For instance, we will explore *The Sámi Pavilion*, the project presented in 2022 by the Nordic Pavilion, which centres on the indigenous Sámi people's traditional knowledge and sustainable practices, highlighting the

importance of indigenous perspectives and challenging the Western-centric notions of ecology, progress, and development. Indeed, the Nordic Pavilion's symbolic transformation aims to pay tribute to the artistic contributions and inherent sovereignty of the Indigenous Sámi people, whose ancestral lands extend across Norway, Sweden, and Finland, as well as into the Kola Peninsula in Russia. In particular, we will analyse Pauliina Feodoroff's performance *Matriarchy*, which was conceived precisely for this occasion. The performance, which celebrates the decolonisation of the female body and its communion with the land, has a tangible goal as well: raise money to buy back privatised Sápmi lands in order to manage them and enable ecological renewal.

Additionally, we will examine the project *Orchidelirium: an Appetite of Abundance* presented by the Estonian Pavilion, who was hosted for this occasion in the Rietveld Pavilion, the historical Dutch venue located in the Giardini. Taking the colonial relationships between Estonia, Indonesia, and the Netherlands as a starting point, the project provides a nuanced examination of colonial history and its complexities by merging historical and contemporary artworks, drawing attention to the interconnections of colonialism, feminism, and the exploitation of natural resources.

Then, we will delve into the Chile Pavilion's project titled *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol*, which, through an immersive installation, provides viewers with a multisensory experience of the Patagonian peatlands it aims to preserve. The project also highlights the intrinsic connection between the preservation of the peatlands and the survival and recognition of the Selk'nam people, an indigenous tribe whose ancestral territory encompassed the entire island of Tierra del Fuego. Furthermore, it is important to note how the Chilean contribution extends beyond the immersive installation presented at the Venice Art Biennale, being a multi-temporal and multi-media project rooted in the Chilean concept of environmental conservation as an anti-colonial act<sup>2</sup>.

By examining these National Pavilions and their engagement with ecofeminist themes, the aim is to shed light on the global reach and impact of Ecofeminism within the art world. Through these case studies, we will uncover the diverse ways in which artists from different countries and cultural backgrounds have incorporated ecofeminist principles into their artistic practices, offering a nuanced and multifaceted exploration

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<sup>2</sup> C. Machiavello, C. Marambio, *Introduction*, in *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* exhibition catalogue (Venice, Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol, 23 April - 27 November 2022), edited by C. Machiavello, C. Marambio, Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, pp. 16-44, here pp. 18-19.



of the relationship between gender, ecology, and artistic expression, and highlighting the potential of art as a catalyst for social and environmental change.



## **1. What is Ecofeminism? A look into the past to understand the future**

What is the connection between women and ecology? And the one between the oppression of women and nature? It is from these questions that ecofeminist theories begin to flourish. Ecofeminism, in fact, is a social movement consisting of many different ideas and approaches, and as a result, it cannot be easily defined, nor is it possible to generalise the social issues it covers. Since the 1970s, there has been a proliferation of works by many international authors, resulting in a substantial and ever-growing body of literature on Ecofeminism and the various issues it covers. In this chapter, recognizing it would be impossible for me to be exhaustive, my aim is to provide a solid framework for understanding the origins of the movement and how and why it has become relevant to contemporary feminist art practices.

Ecofeminism emerged in Western countries as a result of peace, feminist, and ecology movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This philosophy has grown and evolved over time, incorporating increasingly intersectional contributions, as we will now begin to further explore. Ecofeminist theorists have different views on how to make impactful social changes, and especially in addressing the role of Western dualism, capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism in the persistence of environmental degradation and oppression along different regards, including gender, class, and race. However, despite the differences, Ecofeminism is unified by the endeavour of its exponents to the survival of our ecosystems and the ending of all kinds of oppressions. Unlike more mainstream feminisms, “Ecofeminist analyses are structurally intercultural” writes the American philosopher Karen Warren<sup>3</sup>, and she adds:

What makes ecofeminism multicultural is the fact that it includes in its analysis of the women-nature connection, the inextricable interconnection of all social systems of domination, for example, racism, classism, ethnocentrism, imperialism, colonialism and age discrimination, emotional preferences, and so on<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> K. Warren, *Ecological Feminism*, London-New York: Routledge 1994, cit., p.2

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## 1.1 The question of gender in the Ecofeminist movement

In 1962, it was the work of the American biologist Rachael Carson, *Silent Spring*, to plant the seeds of the modern ecological movement. Denouncing the consequences of chemical insecticides on human and animal life, Carson pointed out the greater vulnerability of women and children to pollution, radically criticising science and anticipating instances of contemporary Ecofeminism. The desire to dominate nature, conceived as a pure resource, was destroying life on the planet<sup>5</sup>, stated Carson.

The term “*ecofeminism*” was then coined by the French author Françoise d’Eaubonne, and it first appeared in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, published in 1974. In this fundamental text, d’Eaubonne argues that feminism is not just a political movement for gender equality, but also a matter of life and death, as patriarchal capitalism is destroying the planet and all its inhabitants, including human beings. Therefore, she argues that the oppression of women and the domination of nature are interconnected, and that the exploitation of the environment is rooted in patriarchal thinking which objectifies and dominates both women and nature. According to her, the liberation of women and the preservation of the environment are interconnected, as both are crucial for the planet’s survival.

In *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, d’Eaubonne identifies three main forms of domination that are intertwined and mutually reinforcing: patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism. The author argues that these three systems of oppression contribute to the destruction of the environment and the exploitation of women, and that they cannot be addressed separately from one another. D’Eaubonne sees Ecofeminism as a way to bridge the gap between feminist and ecological movements, which she sees as being too often disconnected from each other. Therefore, she emphasises how, as the liberation of women and the protection of the environment are intertwined, feminist and ecological battles should be viewed as complementary and mutually strengthening.

Furthermore, the author focuses on the environmental and social costs of development, particularly in the context of industrialization and modernization, arguing that the dominant economic system rests on the concept of unlimited growth

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<sup>5</sup> B. Bianchi, *Ecofeminism: thought, debates, perspectives*, in “DEP, rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile”, edited by A. Zanonati, Venice: Ca’ Foscari University, Issue 20, July 2012, pp. I-XXVII, p. III

and expansion, which culminates in the overexploitation of natural resources and the degradation of the environment.

D'Eaubonne, in her analysis, focuses especially on the issue of over-population, and anticipating the emergence of a new humanism, she addresses what she considers to be the two imminent threats to humanity:

Since man took possession of the soil, therefore of fertility (later of industry), and the womb, therefore of fecundity, it was logical that the excessive exploitation of the one and of the other led to this double threat: excess birth and destruction of the environment<sup>6</sup>.

It was not a question of reviving a form of matriarchy, but rather of condemning the destruction of women's power and control over their own fertility<sup>7</sup>, which should instead be ensured through freedom of access to contraception and abortion, as she claims. It is important to note that, in stating so, d'Eaubonne primarily targets industrialised countries. Additionally, she condemns the hypocrisy of these wealthy countries which, in the name of economic development, demand Southern countries to control their births, and thus women's bodies, in a neo-colonial, paternalistic way that is devoid of any self-criticism. Indeed, d'Eaubonne emphasizes the role of Western nations in perpetuating global inequalities, noting that the burdens of development are unevenly distributed and that marginalized populations, especially women and indigenous peoples, bear the most severe consequences of environmental degradation. She highlights the ways in which development projects can displace communities, destroy ecosystems, and degrade the health of both people and the planet. Summarising, d'Eaubonne's ecofeminist approach emphasises the need to recognise the interconnections between social and environmental issues, arguing that development must be rooted in a feminist and ecological perspective, and highlighting the importance to examine the relationship between gender and the environment. This perspective underlines the importance of prioritising sustainability, equity, and social justice in economic development, and of recognising the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect and reinforce each other. As we will notice, with this text d'Eaubonne already introduces many points that will be further developed over the

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<sup>6</sup> F. d'Eaubonne, *Le féminisme ou la mort*, Paris: Pierre Horay, 1974, cit., p.221

<sup>7</sup> B. Bianchi, *Ecofeminism: thought, debates, perspectives*, p. XI

years by a multitude of different authors, whose names will appear frequently throughout.

In 1978, Françoise d'Eaubonne also founded the movement *Écologie et Féminisme*, which had little resonance in France, but that later generated significant interest in Australia and the United States<sup>8</sup>. In fact, in 1980, the first ecofeminist conference – *Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s* – took place at Amherst, Massachusetts, after the Three Mile Island nuclear accident occurred on March 28 of the preceding year. The conference explored the connections between feminism, militarism, health, and ecology. It was followed by the formation of the Women's Pentagon Action, a feminist, anti-militarist, anti-nuclear war weapons group<sup>9</sup>. According to Ynestra King, one of the organizers of the gathering, "Ecofeminism concerns the connection and totality of theory and practice. It affirms the special strength and integrity of every living thing"<sup>10</sup>.

The same year of publication of *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, the anthropologist Sherry Ortner published another work that became one of the main points of reference for the rise of ecofeminist thought. In *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* (1972) the author investigates in depth the origins of the subordination of both women and nature. Ortner, in fact, examines the relationship between gender and culture, arguing how women are associated with nature and men with culture in multiple societies. She suggests that this correlation is not a universal or inherently natural phenomenon, but rather a result of culturally constructed ideologies throughout history. Additionally, Ortner draws on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and his theory of binary oppositions to argue that the association of women with nature and men with culture is part of a larger system of symbolic thought that underlies many cultural practises<sup>11</sup>.

Besides, the first feminist author to point out and deeply analyse that in the logic of patriarchy both women and nature appear as "the other" was the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in her outstanding work *The Second Sex*, published for the first

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. II.

<sup>9</sup> M. Rao, *Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: A Review*, in "DEP, rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile", edited by A. Zabonati, Venice: Ca' Foscari University, Issue 20, July 2012, pp. 124-142, p. 125.

<sup>10</sup> Y. King, *The Eco-Feminist Perspective*, in: Caldecott, L. & S. Leland (eds), *Reclaiming the Earth: Women Speak out for Life on Earth*, London: The Women's Press, 1983, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> S. Ortner, *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?*, in *Feminist Studies*, Autumn, 1972, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 5-31.

time in 1952. The book was an essential contribution for the entire feminist movement and, most importantly, it remains highly relevant to this day. Ortner, in addition, suggests that this system of thought is not fixed or immutable, but rather subject to change and reinterpretation over time. She also discusses the ways in which gendered symbols and practises are linked to social power and inequality, arguing that the association of women with nature has often been used to justify their subordination to men<sup>12</sup>. The author eventually suggests that challenging these gendered associations and the power structures that underlie them is a major step in achieving gender equality.

During the Enlightenment period, for instance, intellectuals placed great importance on reason, science, and progress, regarding these as inherently masculine qualities. In contrast, women were frequently associated with the body, emotions, and nature, and were deemed less capable of rational thought. The Enlightenment also saw the emergence of the concept of the individual, which further reinforced the idea that men were the primary actors in the public sphere of politics and commerce, while women were once again relegated to the private sphere of the home and family. Moreover, the rise of capitalism during this period further entrenched the dichotomy between public and private domains, as men were regarded as the primary agents of economic exchange and production, while women were expected to focus on domestic duties and children's education.

As briefly anticipated, it was within the first ecofeminist conference of 1980 – *Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s* – that the interconnections between feminism, militarism, health, and ecology became clearer. Protesting against male

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<sup>12</sup> During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, the Enlightenment further reinforced the links between the associations man/culture and woman/nature that had already been established in ancient Greek thought. In fact, the philosopher Aristotle distinguished between two spheres of human life: the *polis*, or the public sphere of politics and civic engagement, and the *oikos*, or the private sphere of the household and family. Aristotle placed a high value on abstract thought and intellectual pursuits and saw these as the hallmarks of the *polis* and the life of the citizen. In contrast, the *oikos* was seen as a realm of practicality and necessity, where the primary concerns were the material needs of the household and the reproduction of the family. This distinction between the *polis* and the *oikos* had important implications for the construction of gender roles and the division of labour in ancient Greek society. Men were seen as the primary actors in the public sphere, while women were relegated to the private one, where their primary role was to manage the household and raise children. This division of labour was seen as natural and necessary for the functioning of society and had a profound impact on the construction of masculinity and femininity in ancient Greek culture and therefore in the development of Western society.

subordination, ecological devastation, and the threats of atomic and chemical weapons, women's Western movements realised how much patriarchal domination and violence against women and nature are strongly tied together.

After the fundamental book of Francoise d'Eaubonne, many other feminist authors started investigating the evidence that ecology is a feminist issue. Among them it is impossible not to mention Susan Griffin and Mary Daly, Carolyn Merchant, Ynestra King, Karen Warren, Val Plumwood and Greta Gaard. Their works, published between the late '70s and the '90s, have laid the foundations of ecofeminist thought and given the cues for its evolution. Naturally, they do not have a single and shared approach to the analysis of these connections, and just as different feminisms do exist, there are different declinations of Ecofeminism too. As Manisha Rao highlights in her paper *Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: A Review*, the differences within ecofeminist theories reflect the diverse analysis of the connections between the oppression of women and nature, as well as the different solutions proposed to overcome them.

Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature*, first published in 1980 and considered a cardinal text of the ecofeminist movement, takes a radical approach to the issue. Her perspective was heavily influenced by Sherry Ortner's article, and her book aims at furthering the analysis of the historical roots of the modern environmental crisis<sup>13</sup>. Merchant argues that this crisis is not simply a result of human activities but is deeply rooted in the Western cultural and intellectual tradition. Therefore, the book provides an overview of the historical context in which the modern environmental crisis emerged, tracing the development of Western science and technology from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution. Merchant argues how this period saw the emergence of a new perspective that viewed nature as a machine to be controlled and exploited for human purposes, and how this concept became a key turning point in the Western cultural and intellectual tradition. Merchant, indeed, shows how this worldview was reflected in the work of great figures such as Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, and Isaac Newton, among others<sup>14</sup>.

The author continues exploring the implications of this mechanistic worldview for the natural world and for women, arguing that the subjugation of nature is intimately

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<sup>13</sup> M. Rao, *Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: A Review*, in "DEP, rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile", p. 127

<sup>14</sup> C. Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990, p. XXI



linked to the subjugation of women, and analysing how women marginalization and oppression was perpetuated throughout history. For instance, she discusses how the metaphor of the Earth as a nurturing mother has been used in Western culture to reinforce the subordination of women and the domination of nature<sup>15</sup>. This metaphor, in fact, has been used to naturalise women's roles as caregivers and nurturers, subsequently justifying their exclusion from the public sphere and from positions of power. In addition, it reinforced the idea that nature is passive and vulnerable, and that it requires human control and domination. Additionally, Merchant shows that this metaphor can be traced back to ancient myths and religious traditions, but it became more prominent during the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century. During this period, scientists and philosophers often used the metaphor of the Earth as a machine to describe the natural world, but they also used the metaphor of the Earth as a nurturing mother to describe the natural world's ability to sustain life. However, Merchant argues that the metaphor has been used as well to obscure the ways in which human activities have harmed the natural world and disrupted ecosystems, causing environmental degradation.

However, feminist scholars including Cecile Jackson, Janet Biehl, Meera Nanda, and Bina Agarwal have critically assessed the ecofeminist movement, highlighting the potential for these perspectives to display "ethnocentric, essentialist, blind to class, ethnicity, and other differentiating cleavages, ahistorical, and neglect the material sphere"<sup>16</sup>.

As Janet Biehl states, talking about the image of women portrayed by Ecofeminism, they "retain the patriarchal stereotypes of what men expect women to be. (They) freeze women as merely caring and nurturing beings instead of expanding the full range of women's human potentialities and abilities"<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, she adds that "The use of metaphors of women as 'nurturing' – like the earth, and of the earth as female abound are regressive rather than liberating women"<sup>18</sup> and therefore only reinforcing stereotypes. What Bina Agarwal further points out in her article *The Gender and*

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 20

<sup>16</sup> C. Jackson, *Women/Nature or Gender/History? A Critique of Ecofeminist Development*, in "The Journal of Peasant Studies", 20, 3, April 1993, pp. 384-419, cit., p. 398

<sup>17</sup> J. Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*, Boston: South End Press, 1991, cit., p. 15

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 17

*Environment Debate: Lessons from India*, published in 1992, is that those ecofeminist theories seem to lose sight of how the notions of nature, culture, and gender are “historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and time periods”<sup>19</sup>. Women, especially those in impoverished rural households, are often both impacted by environmental degradation and involved in movements to protect and restore the environment. They play a dual role in their interactions with the environment, both positively and negatively. However, it is not acceptable to unquestioningly assume that there is an inherent link between women and nature or that women naturally have positive attitudes towards environmental conservation simply because they are most severely affected by ecological decline. This assumption, in fact, ignores the complex and varied experiences of women and their relationships with the environment.

On this matter, Alicia H. Puleo points out that, as a matter of fact, there were no Spanish or Latin American authors in the first Ecofeminism, since there was a vast difference in the environmentalist movements of the 1970s in the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon world compared with the Spanish world, mainly due to the late industrialization of Spanish-speaking countries<sup>20</sup>. In the same paper, the author focuses on the rejection of Enlightenment by ecofeminist movements and proposes a more balanced vision that aims to recognise the positive elements of its legacy. Even if the criticisms moved towards the Industrial Revolution are mainly legitimate, it is important to remember that it was during that period that the tradition of condemning oppressive doctrines and practises started, along with the fights for freedom against fanaticism and despotism<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, Puleo adds:

The recognition of human rights, anti-slavery, feminism, and modern anthropocentrism belongs to the emancipated face of the Enlightenment. The disenchantment of the world is not only oppression and manipulation of the human and non-human world; it is also a fight against prejudice, superstition, and authoritarianism. Religious wars, accusations of witchcraft and lives crushed by prejudice are also realities in a world inhabited by spirits. Correct does not mean destroy. Eroding the learned basis of Modernity without distinguishing its

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<sup>19</sup> B. Agarwal, *The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India*, in “Feminist Studies”, 18, 1, Spring 1992, pp. 119-158, p. 123

<sup>20</sup> A. H. Puleo, *Speaking from the South of Europe* in “DEP, rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile”, edited by A. Zanonati, Venice: Ca’ Foscari University, Issue 20, July 2012, pp. 78-89, p.79.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, cit., p. 82

components prepares its terrain for the return to chains. The sleep of reason produces monsters, as Goya saw in his well-known engraving<sup>22</sup>.

Ecofeminist theories have generally been critical of modern rationalism and have advocated for a re-enchantment of the natural world in order to restore its lost dignity. In the arts, the emergence of Goddess Imagery during the 1960s was a direct result of the influences of second-wave feminism, which indeed included Ecofeminism. The rise of the Goddess Art was motivated by archaeological findings indicating the existence of ancient matriarchal societies and the widespread worship of female deities during prehistoric times. This celebration of feminine spirituality thus became a source of inspiration to numerous artists,<sup>23</sup> as we will explore in the next chapter.

However, there are instances where this re-enchantment is based on a mystification of new ecological forms of community life that may ignore the gender power relations present within them. In other cases, there is silence on traditions that have a strong patriarchal content. In doing so, they may omit all forms of criticism and prejudices of pre-modern cultures and idealise the lives of native communities, which can be problematic. While this approach may be useful for an efficient alterglobal<sup>24</sup> strategy and for empowering women in countries undergoing destructive development, it is important not to idealise the past, particularly in terms of the role of women. Instead, Critical Ecofeminism calls for an examination of customs based on patriarchal prejudice, even if they belong to convenient ecological cultures. This approach acknowledges the need for a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between gender, power, and the environment, and aims to challenge oppressive patriarchal structures in all their forms.

Another critique towards the firsts' ecofeminist approaches was moved by the American sociologist Susan Prentice. She argued that emphasising the special

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> E. Heartney, *The Once-Reviled Goddess Movement Gets a Second Chance*, in "Art in America", 18 May 2023, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/wangechi-mutu-judy-chicago-goddess-movement-gets-a-second-chance-1234668640/> [last access on 11 September 2023]

<sup>24</sup> Alter-globalisation, also referred to as alternative globalisation or alter-mundialization, is a social movement that advocates for global cooperation and interaction. Its exponents oppose what they see as the harmful consequences of economic globalisation, arguing it often fails to promote human values such as environmental and climate protection, economic justice, labour protection, protection of indigenous cultures, peace, and civil liberties. Therefore, the movement seeks to challenge and transform the negative aspects of economic globalisation while promoting a more equitable and sustainable global society.

relationship between women and nature can imply that what men do to the Earth is inherently bad, while women are inherently more in tune with environmental concerns. This binary thinking ignores the fact that men are capable of developing a strong ethic of caring for nature, just as women are. In fact, the issue of male *deresponsabilisation* in our patriarchal culture is still being discussed today by intersectional feminism, as finding a solution requires challenging and transforming gender norms and power structures. By challenging patriarchal systems and advocating for gender justice, feminists seek to foster an environment that encourages active participation of men in environmental stewardship. This involves dismantling power structures that reinforce gender inequalities in order to create spaces that facilitate inclusive decision-making processes. It is through these common efforts, that we can foster a more inclusive and collaborative approach to environmental responsibility.

Prentice's critique thus suggests that the focus on women's relationship with nature can distract from a more critical analysis of the root causes of environmental destruction, such as capitalism and its domination of nature. By framing the issue as a gendered one, it may become more difficult to see how economic systems and power structures play a role in environmental degradation. Overall, Prentice's argument highlights that while an emphasis on the special relationship between women and nature can be useful in some contexts, it is important to be wary of oversimplifying the issue and ignoring the broader social and economic factors that contribute to environmental problems<sup>25</sup>.

As Alicia H. Puleo perfectly summarises in her paper:

even when feminists know that there are constructivist ecofeminisms which stopped trying to identify women and Nature, an objection remains: Why must we add one more task to the oppressed while the oppressors destroy without a care in the world?<sup>26</sup>

Hence, it is of fundamental importance to overcome this strongly dualistic way of thinking in order to actually bring about a significant positive change.

Val Plumwood precisely discusses the nature of dualism in her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, published in 1993. According to the Australian philosopher, every dualism is connected to others in a labyrinth of oppressive relationships

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<sup>25</sup> S. Prentice, *Taking Sides: What's Wrong with Ecofeminism?*, in "Women and Environments", Spring 1988, pp. 9-10

<sup>26</sup> A. H. Puleo, *Speaking from the South of Europe*, cit., p. 84

characterised by a logical structure of exclusion and negation. Dualism is not just a dichotomy or hierarchy that can be contingent or overcome, but a way of thinking that renders equality and relationships unthinkable, it is a relationship of separation and domination characterised by a radical exclusion that is not open to change. Religion, philosophy, science, cultural symbols, social models, sexual norms, education, and the economy all reflect this logic of dominance that places the existence of men at the forefront and pushes that of women to the background, conceptualising it as non-essential and without its own purposes<sup>27</sup>. The issue at hand is not just the utilisation of value hierarchies and value dualisms, but rather how they have been employed in oppressive conceptual systems to legitimise subjugation and establish inferiority. The underlying principle behind such frameworks is the logic of domination, which serves to validate the act of subordinating others. For Plumwood, the key to address the ecological crisis is to challenge the logic of dualism and develop alternative ways of thinking about our relationship with nature. This involves observing the interconnectedness of all aspects of the world, including humans and non-human beings, and developing a more holistic and relational approach to environmental issues. It also requires recognising the gendered dimensions of ecological degradation and the ways in which women and marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by this crisis. Consequently, by noting and challenging the logic of dualism, Plumwood suggests that we can work towards a more equitable and sustainable future. Other scholars addressing the limits of this dualistic view, just to mention some among the most notables' ones, are the already mentioned Karen Warren, Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva and Greta Gaard, regarding whose works we will shortly elaborate upon. As is therefore evident, it is crucial to further analyse the ecofeminist contributions that helped developing the movement through addressing wider dimensions. In fact, as we will examine, socialism, post-colonial, and queer feminism have provided enrichment and new perspectives to the subject, contributing to the distinctive intersectional character of Ecofeminism and to its relevance in the current climate debate.

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<sup>27</sup> V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, London-New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 41-59

## 1.2 Socialist and Anti-capitalist influences

As already mentioned, even if the ecofeminist movement was first born to address primarily gender issues, it was always interconnected with other concerns. A noteworthy aspect of the movement is the incorporation of socialist and anti-capitalist perspectives and the fight against production power structures. By delving into the works of influential authors such as Maria Mies and Silvia Federici, among many others, we can explore how these scholars have contributed to the ecofeminist discourse by examining their writings, which emphasise the connections between gender, ecology, and power systems. Through their analyses, these authors have provided a framework for imagining an alternative, more equitable, and sustainable future by bringing attention to the ways in which capitalism perpetuates gendered and ecological inequality. In this paragraph, we will examine their core ideas and contributions shedding light on their critical perspectives within the ecofeminist movement.

To start analysing this topic, we need to step back as far as the 1980s, when numerous scholars placed the theme of the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism at the centre of their reflection<sup>28</sup>. Patriarchy is not just an idea or an interpretive category, it is a system of power relations that views women and subordinate subjectivities as resources. Specifically, the same ideology that underpins nature's exploitation. This interpretive tendency is central to the work of the Bielefeld School, which included the authors Maria Mies, Claudia von Werlhof, and Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen, among others. The Bielefeld School was a prominent group of scholars within the field of Ecofeminism that emerged precisely in the 1980s, in Germany, and played a significant role in advancing ecofeminist theory. The intellectuals associated with the School made substantial contributions to the understanding of the interconnectedness between patriarchy, capitalism, and ecological issues. Its members argued that the patriarchal system, with its inherent power imbalances and domination, is intertwined with capitalist modes of production that exploit both human labour and the natural environment. They emphasized the need to challenge these oppressive systems and highlighted the intersectionality of gender, class, and race in understanding the multiple dimensions of domination and exploitation, critiquing the prevailing

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<sup>28</sup> B. Bianchi, *Ecofeminism: thought, debates, perspectives*, p. XVIII

economic models that prioritize profit and growth at the expense of social well-being and environmental sustainability. In particular, the work of Maria Mies *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, published for the first time in 1986, had great resonance. In its introduction, the author writes:

The confusion in the feminist movement worldwide will continue unless we understand the “female question” in the context of the social relations that constitute our reality today, namely in the context of the global division of labour under capitalist accumulation. The subordination and exploitation of nature, of women, and of the colonies are preconditions for the continuation of that model<sup>29</sup>.

In her studies, Maria Mies has focused especially on the significance of non-wage labour relations in capitalist accumulation, such as domestic work in industrialized societies and subsistence economies in the Global South. Reflecting on the influence of Maria Rosa Dalla Costa’s writings in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* and Selma James’ *A Woman’s Place* from 1972, which were the first to interpret domestic work as a source of capitalist accumulation<sup>30</sup>, she writes:

The discovery that domestic work in capitalism has been systematically excluded from economic analyses, and that this exclusion has turned it into a ‘colony’ and an unregulated source of exploitation, opened our eyes to the analysis of other similar colonies of exploitation that do not involve wages, particularly the work of small farmers and women in the Third World<sup>31</sup>.

The point of these studies is that the denial of dependence on reproductive and subsistence activities has led to the perception of women and nature as limitless resources to be exploited without consequences. This perspective is considered a significant factor to the environmental crisis, and tightly connected with the false sense of male autonomy that underpins anthropocentrism, which places human beings at the centre, ignoring the interdependence of all living beings.

Additionally, in 1993, Maria Mies co-wrote with the Indian physicist and activist Vandana Shiva the book *Ecofeminism*. The text collects the considerations and insights of two women coming from very different experiences and contexts but with common perspectives: Shiva comes from the ecological movement and from the Indian South, while Mies comes from the feminist movement and from the German North<sup>32</sup>. The

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<sup>29</sup> M. Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale. Women in the International Division of Labour*, London: Zed Books, 1986, cit., p.2

<sup>30</sup> B. Bianchi, *Ecofeminism: thought, debates, perspectives*, p. XVIII

<sup>31</sup> M. Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale. Women in the International Division of Labour*, cit., p. 34

<sup>32</sup> L. De Joannon, *Matter matters. Un’introduzione all’ecofemminismo di Maria Mies*, Italia: IAPH, 2021, p. 58

decision to collaborate on writing a joint book did not occur spontaneously but rather after careful consideration of the potential and limitations that a remote collaboration would entail. There was a significant concern, from a conceptual standpoint, of inadvertently presenting a single, all-encompassing, and all-embracing vision, a static theory of Ecofeminism that, despite being informed by both perspectives, would suppress all other viewpoints, and establish itself as the dominant and hegemonic model<sup>33</sup>. By the 1990s, the need for diverse and pluralistic discourses and narratives had already become a matter of fact. Feminism recognised the importance of embracing dissonance, acknowledging the variety of impulses, celebrating the diversity of experiences, and fostering a multitude of stimuli for reflection and action by engaging in a nuanced discussion about feminism that respected and incorporated these multifaceted aspects. Therefore, the authors sought to create a space for the exploration of different perspectives within Ecofeminism, with the goal of fostering a dynamic and evolving understanding of the subject.

The concerns that were evident during the writing of *Ecofeminism* in 1993 have now become even more pronounced in their most alarming aspects. This is why reflecting on Ecofeminism and its practises holds significant relevance for our present time and the times ahead. By opposing an unsustainable production model and a lifestyle that prioritises consumption over genuine desires and ownership over communal sharing, the Ecofeminism discussed by Mies and Shiva presents a profoundly different alternative that emphasises a return to the immanence of life and a sense of belonging to the world. As they write: “To ‘transcend’ nature can no longer be justified, instead, nature’s subsistence potential in all its dimensions and manifestations must be nurtured and conserved”<sup>34</sup>. In fact, the ecofeminist horizon resides within itself, not in a hypothetical future conceived through a teleological lens. It can also be found in the past, in the rediscovery of ancient wisdom that regarded the Earth as something sacred, deserving of respect and protection in the eyes of humanity.

*Ecofeminism* provides a glimpse of a world where the dominance of *Mr. Capital*, as humorously defined by Mies, is not unchallenged<sup>35</sup>. Across 20 essays, Mies and Shiva delve into a thorough critique that encompasses two aspects: the detrimental impact of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> M. Mies, V. Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, London: Zed Books, 1993, cit., p.8.

<sup>35</sup> L. De Joannon, *Matter matters. Un'introduzione all'ecofemminismo di Maria Mies*, p. 60



capitalist means of production on the environment and the shortcomings of traditional Marxist utopias that fail to challenge the commodification of the natural world. Throughout their work, Mies and Shiva explore a wide array of subjects, beginning with the dismantling of the binary divisions between “man”, predominantly referring to white, rich, and able-bodied cisgender men, and “nature”, encompassing both the non-human world and subaltern subjectivities. Their writing covers an extensive range of issues, among which are care work, reproductive rights, colonialism, contemporary North-South relations, and modern agriculture. In their exploration, they consistently provide concrete examples, empirical data, and clear explanations to elucidate the interconnectedness of these seemingly disparate topics, offering a lucid and accessible analysis. Anyway, as Lenja Gloger points out in her analysis of *Ecofeminism*:

It should be noted that the essays are still very binary in their distinction of “men” and “women”. The conclusions the authors eventually come to, however, are still shockingly relevant today, even almost 30 years after the anthology was originally published”<sup>36</sup>.

Talking about the socialist and anti-capitalist influences in the ecofeminist movement, it is impossible not to mention the magazine *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, which emerged in 1989 as a platform for critical discussions on the intricate connections between capitalism, ecology, and social justice<sup>37</sup>. It was crucial in sparking a discussion on the relationship between Ecofeminism and Ecosocialism. Within its pages, influential ecofeminist scholars like Ariel Salleh, also known for her preface to *Ecofeminism* in the 2014 re-edition, and Mary Mellor made noteworthy contributions to this debate. Salleh, in her groundbreaking work *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern* (1997), examined the intersections between ecological sustainability, feminist politics, and Marxist theory, arguing that Ecofeminism and Ecosocialism share the common goal of challenging the capitalist system’s exploitation of both nature and marginalised communities. Similarly, Mary Mellor, in her influential book *Breaking the Boundaries: Towards a Feminist Green Socialism* (1992), explored those connections, emphasising the importance of feminist principles in building a sustainable and equitable society. Through their works, Salleh and Mellor

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<sup>36</sup> L. Gloger, *Ecofeminism by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva – Review by Lenja Gloger*, in “The Feminist Library”, 17 July 2022, <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/ecofeminism-by-maria-mies-and-vandana-shiva-review-by-lenja-gloger/> [last access on 10 August 2023]

<sup>37</sup> B. Bianchi, *Ecofeminism: thought, debates, perspectives*, p. XIII

propelled the discussion on how Ecofeminism and Ecosocialism can inform one another, offering insights into the potential for a transformative, intersectional approach to environmental and social struggles. Moreover, the authors have demonstrated that even ecological thought that references Marxism remains trapped within an oppositional logic.

However, the feminist scholar who has contributed the most to broaden Marxist thought through the revision of its most critical aspects is the renowned Italian-American philosopher Silvia Federici. In her notorious book *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici presents a thought-provoking argument concerning the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, analysing how they played a crucial role in establishing a new societal position for women, compelling them to engage in unpaid reproductive labour to satisfy the demands of a rising capitalist system. Published in 2004, the book draws upon an extensive research project initiated in the 1970s alongside the Italian feminist Leopoldina Fortunati<sup>38</sup>, which adopted a Marxist-feminist perspective to reevaluate the transition to capitalism drawing upon a diverse range of historical sources. As Federici herself states in the book introduction, especially important for her research was Maria Mies' *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*: “[...] That re-examines capitalist accumulation from a non-Eurocentric viewpoint, connecting the destiny of women in Europe to that of Europe’s colonial subjects, providing for a new understanding of women’s place in capitalism and the globalization process”<sup>39</sup>.

In her book, Federici conducted a meticulous analysis of the European witch hunts, aiming to reassess the purpose and nature of primitive accumulation during the shift from feudalism to capitalism. Her significant contribution lies in uncovering the mechanisms through which production became separated from reproduction and how this led to the imposition of a violent sexual division of labour. By challenging prevailing interpretations, including those of Marx, regarding the transition to capitalism as a progressive and inevitable transformation in social relations, Federici underscores the experiences of women, portrayed as witches, and colonized

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<sup>38</sup> N. Heenan, *Women and Capitalism: Revisiting Silvia Federici’s ‘Caliban And The Witch’*, 2 November 2020, in “Hampton Institute”, <https://www.hamptonthink.org/read/women-and-capitalism-revisiting-silvia-federicis-caliban-and-the-witch> [last access on 22 August 2023]

<sup>39</sup> S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004, cit., p.13

individuals, exemplified by Caliban from Shakespeare's masterpiece, *The Tempest*. By focusing on the industrial wage-earning proletariat as the protagonist of primitive accumulation, in fact, Marx overlooked the profound transformations that capitalism introduced in the reproduction of labour power and the social position of women<sup>40</sup>. Building upon this hypothesis, Federici weaves together the often-silenced narrative of struggles that accompanied the transition to capitalism. Furthermore, Federici contends that throughout each stage of capitalist expansion, new instances of violent primitive accumulation and land expropriation can be observed. For this reason, Federici intertwines the destinies of witches in Europe with those of colonial subjects in the New World, emphasizing the processes of subjugation and the construction of racial hierarchies that accompany colonial expansion. The capitalist accumulation that Federici investigates through a Marxist lens is primarily an accumulation "of differences", of inequalities and hierarchies built upon gender and race, constitutive processes of social segmentation within class domination. Because of this, the feminist scholar has no doubts: the witch hunts are a "class war waged by other means"<sup>41</sup>.

### **1.2.1 The *subsistence perspective* and the *politic of the commons***

Silvia Federici, in *Re-enchanting The World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (2018) and *Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender, and Feminism* (2021) as well as in other texts, deepens her critique of capitalist extractivism, observing its consequences for the environment and for women. This is exactly the point where her research further intertwines with Ecofeminism. Indeed, where Marx underestimated the environmental destruction caused by industrial and technological expansion, Federici's feminism, in line with the thought of Carolyn Merchant, Maria Mies, Ariel Salleh and Vandana Shiva, to whom she refers, imagines an ecological care work removed from the circuits of big corporations<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> A. Curcio, *I colpevoli roghi della storia europea e le lotte delle donne* in "Il Manifesto", 30 March 2016, <https://ilmanifesto.it/i-colpevoli-roghi-della-storia-europea-e-le-lotte-delle-donne> [last access on 22 August 2023]

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> F. Timeto, *Discutere «Genere e Capitale» Come potrebbe essere diversamente: produzione, riproduzione e tecnologie* in "Machina", 26 March 2021, <https://www.machina-deriveapprodi.com/post/discutendo-genere-e-capitale> [last access on 22 August 2023]

Already theorized by Mies and her colleagues Bennholdt-Thomsen and von Werlhof, the elaboration of the *subsistence perspective* gathers a plan comprising of values, actions, alternative models, and new habitus that place the value of life, i.e., the quality of life, at the core. The subsistence perspective argues that since the Second World War and the ensuing economic boom, activities involved in the immediate creation and maintenance of life have been progressively undervalued and marginalized, giving way to an unsustainable profit-centred model. As Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen wrote in their book, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy* (1999), a subsistence perspective entails resisting monoculturalisation and ceasing war against subsistence. It prioritises freedom, happiness, and self-determination within necessary limitations, not in an ideal world but in the present reality. Additionally, it values tenacity, resistance, a viewpoint from below, and a world of abundance<sup>43</sup>.

It is in the words Mies chooses to depict the subsistence perspective that the conjunction of critique and proposal becomes apparent. Indeed, the patriarchal capitalist system not solely needs to be interrogated on a theoretical, but most importantly, on a practical level encompassing the methods of production and communication. It is not something new to view subsistence as a perspective when life remains the primary focus of activities: in the global South, peasants, farmers, and indigenous people, along with entire communities, are fighting to maintain their autonomy and places of survival.

One of the main focal points of the subsistence perspective is acknowledging the worth and the significance of biodiversity. By reconceptualising an economy with a moral and ethical foundation, it becomes feasible to try out different forms of production and consumption that are collaborative and supportive of both human and non-human beings. Through the interaction of diversity and knowledge new possibilities for a just and sustainable future can arise. Once again, women express voices of difference and, in contrast to the age-old universalisation of the neutral male as a unified reference point, there are women that have upheld and safeguarded diversity and biodiversity for millennia, as Silvia Federici comprehensively explains in her studies<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> V. Bennholdt-Thomsen and Maria Mies, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy*, (1999), London: Zed Books Ltd 2005, p. 17

<sup>44</sup> I must acknowledge that I was fascinated by the witch figure since childhood, possibly due to the countless stories about her character. In fact, the witch embodies the continuity between humanity and nature, particularly women and nature, in numerous narratives. Additionally, as Jude Ellison Sady Doyle

In Federici's writings, in fact, the idea of the *commons* plays a significant role. The author examines the historical *enclosures* of common lands and resources, as well as the resistance movements that have emerged to reclaim and defend the commons. Federici also highlights the ways in which the commons, including communal lands, forests, water sources, and knowledge, have been systematically privatised and enclosed by neoliberalism, underscoring how this process of dispossession, which frequently goes hand-in-hand with extractivism, has disproportionately impacted marginalised communities, and particularly women. For these reasons, the author heavily criticises the World Bank and UN policies, which legitimate new *enclosures*, supposedly implemented in the interest of preservation, which however drove indigenous peoples off their lands, restricting the access to those who could afford it, for example through ecotourism<sup>45</sup>.

Federici argues that the defence of the commons has been a crucial aspect of resistance against capitalist exploitation, examining historical examples such as peasant revolts, indigenous struggles, and communal practices that challenge the enclosure of common resources. Furthermore, Federici advocates for reclaiming and defending the commons to be able to actualise collective action, solidarity, and the revitalization of communal practices to create alternative social and economic systems that we can classify within the framework of the subsistence perspective. The commons are seen as a basis for building autonomous and self-determined communities that allow for collective decision-making, resource sharing, and the cultivation of sustainable relationships to challenge capitalist modes of production and consumption. In the words of Federici:

The concept of “common” is about the quality of our relations, it is a principle of cooperation and responsibility towards each other and towards the earth, forests, oceans, and animals<sup>46</sup>.

The author, further emphasises the importance of recognising reproductive labour, care work, and communal caregiving as part of the commons, arguing that these forms of labour, as already mentioned usually performed by women, are undervalued, and exploited within capitalist systems:

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effectively analyses in her book *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power*; men's attempts to contain the witch's power further highlight this connection.

<sup>45</sup> S. Federici, *Il Femminismo e la politica dei beni comuni* in, in “DEP, rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile”, edited by A. Zabonati, Venice: Ca' Foscari University, Issue 20, July 2012, pp. 63-77, p. 65

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, cit., p.71

If the home represents the *oikos* on which economy is based, then are the women, historically workers and prisoners of the home, who must take the initiative to claim it as the centre of a collective life, traversed by many people and forms of cooperation, capable of providing security without isolation and closure, allowing the sharing and circulation of community goods and above all, providing the foundation of collective forms of reproduction. [...] Stating that women should lead the process of the collectivisation of reproductive labour does not mean naturalising domestic work as a female vocation. It is rather a refusal to forget the collective experiences, knowledge and struggles that women have accumulated on reproductive labour, whose history represents an essential part of our resistance to capitalism<sup>47</sup>.

In conclusion, we can definitely see how the subsistence perspectives and the politics of the commons, as examined by Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Silvia Federici provide significant insights about the relationships between gender, labour, and ecological justice. These perspectives, in fact, provide a solid foundation for comprehending how Ecofeminism can be viewed as a decolonial approach. In the following section, we will examine the relations between ecofeminist theories and decolonial perspectives in detail, delving into how the emancipation of women, the protection of collective resources and the dissolution of colonial power structures intersect in the quest for environmental and social equity. Additionally, we will further analyse the intersectional developments of the ecofeminist movement.

### **1.3 Intersectionality and the evolution of Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism, known for its enduring dedication to intersectional analysis, has consistently focused on comprehending the distinct experiences of individuals confronting discrimination. However, it is only in recent times that ecofeminists have explicitly labelled their work as intersectional.

To start analysing what intersectionality means and how it is interlaced with the ecofeminist movement, we can directly take the words written by A.E. Kings in her 2017 article, *Intersectionality and the Changing Face of Ecofeminism*:

The term intersectionality, which is generally attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw, began as a metaphorical and conceptual tool used to highlight the inability of a single-axis framework to capture the lived experiences of black women. Whilst many disciplines (including Ecofeminism) have used the ‘tools’ of intersectionality before 1989, modern day usage of the term is usually associated with Crenshaw’s specific approach. The development of Crenshaw’s intersectionality, originated from the failure of both feminist and anti-racist

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

discourse to represent and capture the specificity of the discrimination faced by black women<sup>48</sup>.

While the concept of intersectionality originated from the specific experiences of Black women, feminists further developed it as a valuable analytical tool to address and resolve the most fundamental and contentious issue in feminist scholarship, namely the existence of differences between women, hence the impossibility of considering them as a single, homogeneous entity. The intersectional framework has presented feminism, and consequently Ecofeminism, with a useful occasion to address some of the issues from its past, requiring the discipline to challenge an history that was frequently essentialist and exclusionary. In her article, A.E. Kings also refers to the work of Mari J. Matsuda, that recognised the importance of “asking the other question”<sup>49</sup> in order to recognise the interconnection of all discriminations. In fact, Matsuda states:

When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’  
When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the hetero sexism in this?’ and  
When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where are the class interests in this?’<sup>50</sup>

Matsuda’s examination of “asking the other question” presents a practical framework and a valuable initial step for intersectional analysis. Nevertheless, the development of intersectionality has exceeded its initial bounds. The accomplishment of intersectionality in feminist and ecofeminist undertakings emphasises the reflexive nature of both disciplines, as well as the flexibility of intersectionality in its interpretations and applications.

The reach of intersectional theory, in fact, is evident in the various academic fields committed to its exploration, such as sociology, psychology, politics, post-colonialism, queer and women’s gender studies, anti-racist scholarship, development research, and environmentalism<sup>51</sup>. Intersectionality has emerged as a powerful instrument in ecofeminist research, helping to broaden our comprehension of the complex interplay of a person’s relationship with the environment, which is never entirely reliant on any

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<sup>48</sup> A.E. Kings. *Intersectionality and the Changing Face of Ecofeminism* in “Ethics and the Environment”, vol. 22, no. 1, 2017, pp. 63–87, cit., p. 63

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> M. J. Matsuda, *Beside My Sister; Facing the Enemy: Legal Theory out of Coalition*, in “Stanford Law Review” Vol. 43 No. 6, 1991 pp. 1183–92, cit., p. 1189.

<sup>51</sup> A.E. Kings. *Intersectionality and the Changing Face of Ecofeminism*, pp. 63–87.

single aspect of their existence, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, or age, but rather it is a combination of all those factors together and even more.

As Greta Gaard argues in *Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Replacing Species in a Material Feminist*, women's environmentalism faced a backlash in the 1990s when even feminist scholars, as we have noted previously, criticised the movement for pursuing "an exclusively essentialist equation of women with nature".<sup>52</sup> However, both Gaard and Kings emphasise that, despite the critics, early ecofeminist analyses were never ahistorical and static<sup>53</sup> and during the '90s they had already begun to confront the issue of gender essentialism within the movement. In her article, however, Kings underlines that caution is necessary when characterising previous ecofeminist research as intersectional. While it is true that Ecofeminism frequently explored intersectional perspectives, it did not adopt intersectionality as the conceptual framework it is commonly understood as today. Therefore, clear distinction must be made between the two. The combination of intersectionality with the non-explicit use of intersectional concepts in Ecofeminism risks diminishing the valuable and frequently groundbreaking theoretical and practical contributions that intersectionality has provided to academic research. Climate change and environmental degradation are multifaceted issues that require an intersectional analysis for deeper understanding, and the lack of widespread agreement on how to address these issues from an intersectional standpoint is particularly concerning. Any failure to acknowledge and address the intricate nature of climate change's impacts and burdens, can lead to confusion and ultimate failure, therefore intersectionality must always be considered when attempting to comprehend these issues. By adopting an *intracategorical* approach, intersectionality urges us to acknowledge the existing power structures that mould our society, allowing academics to present culturally multifaceted analyses<sup>54</sup>. Therefore, in the following section we will examine the evolution of intersectional Ecofeminism within postcolonial and queer studies.

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<sup>52</sup> G. Gaard, *Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Replacing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism*, in "Feminist Formations", Summer 2011, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer 2011), pp. 26-53.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



### 1.3.1 Postcolonial perspectives

When examining the encounter of postcolonial studies and Ecofeminism, a number of prominent themes arise. Both areas of study critique prevailing power structures and aim to decentre Western-centric points of view, stressing the significance of acknowledging various voices and experiences, specifically those belonging to marginalised communities in the Global South. By using a postcolonial lens, researchers can gain a critical understanding of the past and present effects of colonialism upon the complex connections between social and environmental issues, leading to a more transformative approach. Ecofeminism complements this approach by emphasising the gendered aspects of environmental degradation and how women, particularly in postcolonial contexts, are disproportionately impacted by ecological crises. These fields provide valuable insights into the intricate intersections of power, gender, race, and the environment, providing frameworks for analysing and deconstructing oppressive systems whilst advocating for social and environmental justice.

The interconnections between colonialism and capitalist growth, which as we already examined implies ecological degradation, were first analysed by the Marxist philosopher Rosa Luxemburg<sup>55</sup>. In her book *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), Luxemburg already explored how “the destruction of indigenous peoples and social formations in the non-Western world by Euro-American capitalism was not an accidental or secondary feature of capital accumulation, but rather its fundamental prerequisite”<sup>56</sup>. In her perspective, the notion presented is that development, in its current form, is a continuation of the colonial process. Consequently, similar to the struggles faced by colonised peoples in their fight for liberation from colonialism, there has been an ongoing struggle for liberation from development itself. This struggle arises from the recognition that development, as a primary driver of natural and human exploitation, poverty, and dispossession, perpetuates systems of oppression.

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<sup>55</sup> V. Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, New Delhi: KALI FOR WOMEN, 1988, p.1

<sup>56</sup> P. Hudis, *Rosa Luxemburg Anticipated the Destructive Impact of Capitalist Globalization*, in Jacobin, 29 July 2023, <https://jacobin.com/2023/07/rosa-luxemburg-globalization-imperialism-marx-capital> [last access on 17 September 2023]

Vadana Shiva, widely regarded as the foremost advocate of postcolonial Ecofeminism, takes Luxemburg arguments to deepen the analysis of colonial implications within the modern Western development paradigm by substantiating her claims with concrete data. In fact, she vividly portrays the subsistence strategies and social structures of rural communities in India, offering real-life examples that illustrate the impact of development on these communities.

Shiva presents her argument based on her personal experiences as a physicist, philosopher, ecofeminist, writer, and science policy advocate, as well as on her active participation in the Chipko movement in the 1970s, which is of particular importance. Her research and activities encompass a broad spectrum of areas, such as agriculture, food security, biodiversity, ecology, and gender. She engages in intellectual pursuits, academic research, grassroots campaigning, and government advising<sup>57</sup>. Shiva's extensive body of work made an outstanding contribution to broader the discourse on ecology and the environment, specifically regarding postcolonialism in the Global South. In her most known work, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988), Shiva undertakes a thorough analysis of how the seemingly prosperous façade propagated by Western, patriarchal, capitalist modern science leads to social alienation and ecological catastrophes, and especially how this affects women living in rural Indian communities. Starting from the author's practical and intimate understanding of the subject, the book cunningly integrates elements of geology, mythology, economics, and plant physiology to substantiate the core argument<sup>58</sup>.

One of the most known theories developed by Shiva is the paradigm of *maldevelopment*, namely, according to her own words: "a development bereft of the feminine, the conservation, the ecological principle"<sup>59</sup>. Shiva, in fact, argues how economic growth, as it is intended in the West world, accentuates male domination over nature and women, in a clear reference to previous ecofeminist theories. Moreover, her analysis concentrates on distinguishing between poverty as culturally perceived from a Western viewpoint, which may not align with genuine material deprivation. Subsistence economies that meet basic needs through self-sufficiency are not impoverished, according to the author's argument. From a Western perspective,

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<sup>57</sup> B. Tizzoni, *Postcolonial Ecofeminism* [final thesis], Venice: Ca' Foscari University, 2018

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> V. Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, 1988, cit., p. 4.

however, they are often seen in that light due to their lack of participation in the consumption of goods produced and distributed by the global market economy. This economic system, historically and politically shaped by the colonial experience, is in fact based on productivity and commodification, which according to Shiva is the cause of the paradox and the crisis of development itself.

What the author advocates for in her book is above all the recovery of the feminine principle, referred to as *Pakriti* in the Indian tradition. She argues that the reclamation of this principle as a political tool is the key to overcoming *maldevelopment* and its colonial and patriarchal implications, and this can be achieved through women's ancient knowledge of nature, which according to her holds the answer to this issue. Inevitably, as previously mentioned, Shiva refers to her personal involvement with the Chipko movement, a grassroots Indian organization recognised for its non-violent opposition to deforestation and other ecological threats, which gained prominence during the '70s. Primarily led by local communities, particularly women, in the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand, the Chipko movement remains an important voice in environmental activism. The Hindi term "Chipko" translates in to "hug" or to "embrace", and it symbolises the act of embracing trees to avoid their felling.

Everything started in 1973, when a logging contractor arrived in the village of Mandal with the intention of felling a substantial quantity of trees. In response, the women of the village decided to resist and safeguard them, by organizing themselves into a human chain, encircling the trees, and physically embracing them to prevent lumberjacks from cutting them down. As a result, the logging operation was compelled to withdraw without having accomplished the felling of a single tree, thereby culminating in a triumphant outcome. The success of the Chipko Movement in Mandal inspired similar protests in other parts of the region and other states in India, spreading awareness about the preservation of local ecosystems, water resources, and livelihoods, drawing attention to the adverse impacts of deforestation, including erosion, landslides, and loss of biodiversity.

The Chipko movement, which advocated community-based forest management, sustainable forestry practices and the recognition of natural resource rights for local communities, became a catalyst for environmental activism in India and inspired similar movements led by women all around the world. Since 1977, for instance, The

Green Belt Movement in Kenya, also known as GBM, has created a green belt encircling major cities through the planting of millions of trees. The movement was initiated by Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The goal of the movement was to minimize deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, and the scarcity of firewood in the spirit of self-reliance and empowerment of the local communities, and especially women. As Janet Muthuki, in her article *Challenging Patriarchal Structures: Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya*, writes:

Maathai's academic and professional qualifications have challenged the norms of the Kenyan patriarchal society. She was the first woman in East and Central Africa to obtain a Master of Science degree, the first woman to earn a doctorate from the University of Nairobi, the first woman to serve as senior lecturer at the institution, the first woman to hold an associate professorship at the university, and the first woman to be invited to chair a department. In 1977, she abandoned a promising academic career to found the GBM<sup>60</sup>.

Maathai and the other women joining the movement, in fact, faced various challenges due to Kenyan deeply patriarchal society. The introduction of a capitalist economy during colonialism significantly contributed to the marginalisation of indigenous women. Subsequently, Kenyan governments have favoured foreign investment, foreign resource ownership, and capitalist principles of resource exploitation, perpetuating this marginalisation<sup>61</sup>. These policies have resulted in environmental degradation and impoverishment conditions in all colonised countries. Wealthy governments, foreign corporations, and elites in the Southern regions benefit from resource extraction, while indigenous people are significantly affected, leading to considerable disparities in both resource and income distribution.

The issue of extractivism, which refers to the exploitation and extraction of natural resources for profit-driven purposes, is precisely the common denominator that connects these movements with numerous others that originated from local and/or indigenous communities worldwide. Acknowledging the harmful social, ecological, and cultural effects caused by extractive industries, these communities have united to express their dissent and assert their entitlements to safeguard their territories, means of subsistence, and customary knowledge systems. By working together, these

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<sup>60</sup> J. Muthuki, *Challenging Patriarchal Structures: Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya*, in "Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity", no. 69, 2006, pp. 82–91.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

movements aim to challenge the prevailing view of resource exploitation and push for sustainable alternatives that prioritise environmental stewardship, community resilience, and the health of current and future generations.

The main critique aimed at Shiva concerns her categorization of South and Asian women as a unified group, as noted by the Indian economist Bina Agarwal. As already mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter, Agarwal accuses Shiva of essentialism for considering woman to have a special relationship with nature, but at the same time she agrees on how it is undeniable that: “The colonial experience and the forms that modern development has taken in Third World countries have been destructive and distorting economically, institutionally and culturally”<sup>62</sup>. Nevertheless, Agarwal argues that attributing all the issues in the Global South to Western developmental strategies disregards the other side of the problem, i.e.: “local forces of power, and property relations that predate colonialism”<sup>63</sup>. From this standpoint, a postcolonial ecofeminist approach strives to assimilate Agarwal’s concerns without wholly dismissing Ecofeminism as trivial. By utilising her critiques as a fundamental viewpoint, this approach can in fact engage with and tackle these criticisms.

The Argentine-born philosopher Alicia H. Puleo also shares similar critiques of Ecofeminism, while acknowledging its importance in highlighting the unequal distribution of costs and profits in the economic use of resources<sup>64</sup>. The key point stressed by the author is that women’s tremendous efforts in defence of ecological sustainability must be accompanied by their empowerment as an integral part of society. For instance, the author examines the pivotal role played by Latin American women in agroecology, facilitating community-based independence from traditional agricultural practices. Moreover, in this way women enable themselves to break free from household confines and assume leadership roles within their communities, while also attaining economic stability<sup>65</sup>.

In conclusion, the purpose of this exploration of postcolonial Ecofeminism is to highlight the inequitable effects of extractive industries on disadvantaged communities, specifically women, who frequently experience the full impact of social,

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<sup>62</sup> B. Agarwal, *The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons From India*, in “Feminist Studies”, Spring 1992, pp. 119-159, cit., p. 125.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, cit., p. 126

<sup>64</sup> A. H. Puleo, *Speaking from the South of Europe*, p. 84.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

economic, and environmental injustices. Through their scholarship and activism, postcolonial feminists have highlighted the need to challenge dominant narratives that perpetuate the subjugation of both women and the environment. Focusing on the experiences and agency of women in resistance movements against extractivism in the Global South, postcolonial Ecofeminism provides vital perspectives on alternative frameworks that prioritize environmental sustainability, social justice, and the decolonization of resource governance.

### **1.3.2 Queering Ecofeminism**

As we begin our analysis of queer Ecofeminism, we cannot fail to mention Greta Gaard, one of the first and most prominent academics to challenge the heteronormative assumptions and binary thinking present in mainstream environmentalism and feminism. In her works, Gaard offers an objective and innovative outlook for the reassessment of our comprehension of gender, sexuality, and the environment. Through the incorporation of queer viewpoints and experiences, Gaard enriches the ecofeminist discourse and inspires new strategies to address environmental issues. Queer Ecofeminism acknowledges that identities and relationships are not rigid or confined within traditional gender and sexuality categories, and it recognises the fluidity and diversity of human experiences, encouraging the exploration of the complex interactions between individuals, communities, and the non-human world. By adopting a queer perspective, Ecofeminism increases its inclusivity, encompassing a greater range of voices and experiences. Queer Ecofeminism, in fact, encourages us to rethink our relationship with nature, challenging the idea of it as a passive and untouched entity separate from human society. Instead, it recognises the dynamic and intricate interdependence between humans and the environment, emphasising the importance of acknowledging and respecting the various means of understanding and existing in the world. Nevertheless, as Catriona Sandilands highlights: “It is not enough simply to add ‘heterosexism’ to the long list of dominations that shape our relations to nature, to pretend that we can just ‘add queers and stir’<sup>66</sup>. While some

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<sup>66</sup> C. Sandilands, *Lavender’s Green? Some Thoughts on Queer(y)ing Environmental Politics* in “Under Currents: Journal of Critical Environmental Studies”, 6, pp. 20-25, cit., p.21

ecofeminists acknowledged heterosexism as a concern, they had yet to explore the feasible intersections between ecofeminist and queer theories.

Greta Gaard's 1997 essay, *Toward a Queer Ecofeminism*, thus is a groundbreaking piece as it directly examines the links between the two viewpoints for the first time. According to Gaard, the first argument linking Ecofeminism and queer theory is the devaluation of eroticism by Western culture, which corresponds to the devaluation of women and nature. Gaard elaborates upon Val Plumwood's "master model" and adds that it is necessary to include white/non-white, rich/poor, heterosexual/queer and reason/erotism dualisms within Plumwood's analysis of dualistic categories of alterity and negation<sup>67</sup>. Regarding the heterosexual/queer dualism, Gaard writes that:

A queer ecofeminist perspective would argue that the reason/erotic and heterosexual/queer dualism have now become part of the master identity, and that dismantling these dualisms is integral to the project of Ecofeminism. [...] Bringing these dualisms into the list of self/other and culture/nature dualisms offered by Plumwood is one step toward queering Ecofeminism. [...] From a queer ecofeminist perspective, then, we can examine the ways queers are feminized, animalized, eroticized, and naturalized in a culture that devalues women, animals, nature, and sexuality<sup>68</sup>.

Moreover, according to Gaard, the issue of sexual oppression is not limited to the heterosexual/queer binary. As queer theories have demonstrated, the main problem is the fear of eroticism within Western culture. Gaard's article, with a long excursus, analyses precisely the suppression of free sexual expression from the Neolithic era to the Colonization of America, encompassing the rise of Christianity. She argues that this serves as a means of controlling the discourse surrounding sexuality and reflects Western society's deep-seated homophobia and aversion towards eroticism. As she writes:

It would be inaccurate to argue that Christianity opposed queer sexuality per se; rather, Christianity opposed all sexual acts that were not purposely procreative. [...] The inferiority and subordination of women, animals, the body, nature, the erotic, and all their associates was proclaimed by law, decreed by religion, and relentlessly enforced. From the fourth through the seventeenth centuries, all those perceived as "nature" were persecuted through a series of violent assaults: the Inquisition, the Crusades, the witch burnings, and the "voyages of discovery"<sup>69</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> Greta Gaard, *Toward a Queer Ecofeminism*, "Hypatia", Vol.12, No.1, 1997, pp. 114-137

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, cit., pp. 119-120

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

From the 16th century's explorations and beyond, in the rhetoric of Christian imperialism, Europeans assumed the role of civilizing the wild nature, which resulted in the expropriation of Native lands, the elimination of their cultural and spiritual practices, rape, and slavery. Since the Spanish invasion of the Americas, issues of gender and sexuality have been used to justify colonial persecution. The colonialist fear of eroticism persisted with the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers, the founding of the United States, westward expansion, and into the 20th century.

From an ecofeminist queer perspective, Gaard contends that the concept of sexuality is implicit within the gender category. According to her, heterosexuality, of course, is implied in the conception of dominant masculinity as in the Plumwood model, both in a specific sense and within certain parameters. In the context of nationalist colonialism, Gaard explains that specific notions of race, gender, and sexuality are interconnected, providing better insights for comprehending the entire postcolonial discourse. In Gaard's perspective, a queer Ecofeminism aims to liberate the erotic by reconceptualising humans as equal participants in both culture and nature. It is imperative to view sexuality as a natural part of human experience and reject the social constructs that limit its expression, and ecofeminists must prioritize queer liberation, just as it is crucial for queer people to fight for the liberation of women and nature, since these mutual oppressions derive from perceived associations.

However, it is important underline how queer liberation has not always been acknowledged as part of feminism and environmental justice. In *Out of the Closets and into the Climate! Queer Feminist Climate Justice* (2019) Gaard explains how the LGBTQ+ community has consistently played a vital role in various social movements including women's suffrage, 19th century abolitionist movements, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s, the Civil Rights movement, and the social movements of the 1960s<sup>70</sup>. Nevertheless, within these movements, queer people have not always been recognised for their work and they had to form separate organisations to protect their needs and interests. In this text, Gaard also provides an overview of how the consideration of queer people began to feature in the discourse on the environment. In 2002, for instance, an international group of activists outlined the *Bali*

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<sup>70</sup> G. Gaard, *Out of the Closets and into the Climate! Queer Feminist Climate Justice*, in *Climate Futures: Re-imagining Global Climate Justice*, edited by K. Bhavnani, J. Foran, P. A. Kurian, D. Munshi, London: Zed Books, 2019, pp. 92-101



*Principles of Climate Justice*, highlighting the links between climate change and environmental justice. They laid out a list of 27 principles, covering women's and youth rights and ecological debt issues, but still omitting LGBTQ+ people's rights. In 2014, a seminar entitled *Queering the Climate Movement* offered by Fossil Fuel Divestment Convergence highlighted the urgency of addressing the intersections of queer rights and climate justice. In September 2014, another seminar on queerness and climate was held during the *People's Climate March*, titled *Queers for Climate*. This further highlighted why climate change is a queer issue and how queer activism can be effective<sup>71</sup>.

Additionally, while it is challenging for LGBTQ+ individuals to have a voice and achieve equality, the situation is even more complex for queer and trans people of colour (QTPOC). These communities, in fact, are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change, facing double marginalisation and discrimination, making them vulnerable on all levels. Due to environmental disasters, healthcare issues, and lack of food and water resources, low-income queer and trans people of colour, especially those with disabilities or mental illnesses, are even more vulnerable, as highlighted by the Audre Lorde Project<sup>72</sup>. About this, Gaard writes: "Queer and trans politics recognize that confronting climate change, like confronting anti-trans violence, is deeper than survival or adaptation: it requires challenging the systems of oppression that exploit the Earth and most human communities"<sup>73</sup>.

After Greta Gaard, other scholars are exploring the interconnections between Ecofeminism and queer justice. Asmae Ourkiya, founder of The Ecofeminist Institute for Coaching and Consultancy, in their 2020 article *Queering Ecofeminism: Towards an Anti-Far-Right Environmentalism* perfectly summarises the importance of queering Ecofeminism. In the current global climate, where far-right political ideologies pose a threat to various vulnerable communities, it is imperative to revisit Ecofeminism through a queer lens and remove all essentialist perspectives. Essentialism in any form propagates harmful concepts like the idealisation of womanhood, the superiority of

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> The Audre Lorde Project is a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two Spirit, Trans and Gender Non-Conforming People of Colour centre for community organizing, focusing on the New York City area. Through mobilization, education and capacity-building, the project works for community wellness and progressive social and economic justice, as stated on their website: <https://alp.org/>

<sup>73</sup> G. Gaard, *Out of the Closets and into the Climate! Queer Feminist Climate Justice*, cit., p. 124.

heteronormativity, and racial prejudices that fuel neo-nationalism. However, refusing essentialism should not be understood as rejecting differences. We are all unique individuals, but we are inherently equal by virtue of sharing the same humanity and 99.9% of our DNA. Consequently, through the eradication of essentialist politics and ideologies, we can create opportunities for equality and abolish discrimination, oppression, and exclusion, explains Ourkiya<sup>74</sup>.

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<sup>74</sup> A. Ourkiya, *Queering Ecofeminism: Towards an Anti-Far-Right Environmentalism*, in NiCHE: Network in Canadian History & Environment, 23 June 2020, <https://niche-canada.org/2020/06/23/queering-ecofeminism-towards-an-anti-far-right-environmentalism/> [last access on 25 September 2023]

## **2. Ecofeminism and Contemporary art: how 1970s Feminist Artist inspired today's ecological art practices**

Ecofeminism and Contemporary art converge at the intersection of social and environmental consciousness, creating a complex relationship that challenges traditional power structures and fosters transformative thinking. Contemporary art, as a powerful medium of expression, offers artists a space to explore ecofeminist ideals and address pressing environmental and social issues, as the art historian Masha Meskimmon notes in the introduction to her book *Transnational Feminisms, Transversal Politics and Art* (2020)<sup>75</sup>. Using a variety of artistic forms and techniques, artists can critically assess oppressive ideologies, confront exploitative practices towards the environment, and develop alternative narratives of sustainability and equality. Using nature-inspired elements, sustainable materials, and community-led methods, artists can encourage viewers to re-evaluate their relationship with nature, challenge dominant power structures, and consider equitable and ecologically sound perspectives. Their work can therefore dissolve the boundaries between art, environmental activism, and stewardship, underlining the urgency of collective response and systemic change. The intersection between Ecofeminism and Contemporary art acts as a catalyst for dialogue, contemplation, and activism, promoting a deeper understanding of the interconnections between gender, ecology, and social justice, and offering transformative perspectives. This intersection extends beyond representation or aesthetic exploration alone, as it involves activism, critical inquiry, and envisioning alternative ways of existing in the world.

Ecofeminist artists frequently challenge dominant narratives that promote the exploitation of both women and the environment, exploring the intersection of patriarchal power structures and ecological decline, drawing attention to the inequitable effects of environmental problems on marginalized groups. Their artistic practices seek to challenge the commodification and objectification of nature and the feminine, emphasising the intrinsic worth and interdependence of these vital elements. Various artistic techniques, such as immersive installations and performative interventions, are employed to promote introspection, prompt emotional responses,

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<sup>75</sup> M. Meskimmon, *Transnational Feminisms, Transversal Politics and Art. Entanglements and Intersections*, London and New York: Routledge, 2020.

and inspire the audience to examine their impact on the environment and social inequality. Numerous Ecofeminist Art practices also emphasise partnership and communal involvement, as artists frequently collaborate with local communities, scientists, activists, and policymakers, forming partnerships that facilitate forums for discussion and collective action. This collaborative approach acknowledges the significance of diverse perspectives and systems in dealing with complex environmental challenges and emphasises the importance of working together towards progressive change. Furthermore, contemporary ecofeminist artists frequently explore sustainable materials and techniques, experimenting with natural and recycled materials while prioritizing ecological sustainability in their creative processes and advocating for responsible consumption and production. By incorporating sustainable techniques into their art, these artists foster a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between artistic expression, environmental responsibility, and social change.

In addition, Ecofeminist Art seeks to promote positivity and resilience in the face of environmental challenges, frequently imagining harmonious communities coexisting with nature. The movement also scrutinises current growth-oriented economic models and supports more sustainable, decentralised methods of societal organisation. Ecofeminist Contemporary art also engages a wide range of viewers and enriches conversations about social and environmental justice through innovative exhibitions, public interventions, and digital media platforms. It encourages audiences to adopt a critical approach to these pressing concerns, whilst promoting empathy, understanding and collective accountability for the health and care of our planet and its inhabitants. Indeed, to quote bell hooks: “Imagination plays a vital role in the struggle for liberation globally”<sup>76</sup>.

In summary, the intersection of Ecofeminism and Contemporary art provides a significant platform for activism, critical inquiry, and envisioning alternative futures. Artists operating in this field are contesting patriarchal power structures, assessing exploitative activities, promoting cooperation, adopting sustainable techniques, and

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<sup>76</sup> b. hooks and A. Mesa-Bains, *Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2018, cit., p. IX.

encouraging visionary change, all of which add to a broader drive for ecological awareness and ethical justice.

In an interview released for Block Magazine, the art curator Monika Fabijanska outlines the genesis of Ecofeminist Art<sup>77</sup>. According to Fabijanska, the emergence of this art can be traced back to the late 1960s, a period characterised by the rise of Conceptual Art and the exploration of spiritual feminism, but also still marked by the exclusion of women from the art market. In response, feminist artists ventured beyond the traditional boundaries of painting and conventional art gallery displays, creating new artistic genres such as Social Practice and Eco-Art. These artists pushed the boundaries of art, both figuratively and literally, by exploring uncharted territories. The socio-political climate at the time, with the anti-war movement during the 1960s and 1970s as well as the environmental and anti-nuclear protests of the 1980s, had a noteworthy impact on the growth of Ecofeminist Art, as we already mentioned. Such movements offered a fertile ground for artists to address pressing social and environmental issues and to challenge established power structures through their creative expressions.

## **2.1 Goddess Art: the feminine divine and its artistic representation**

As previously discussed, Ecofeminism is firmly rooted in spiritual feminism, which asserts the interconnectedness of all living beings and the inseparability of matter and soul, consequently rejecting the dichotomy between nature and culture. In the art field, one of the first responses was Goddess Art, which aimed to restore women's empowerment by affirming their underlying connection with nature<sup>78</sup>. This movement was inspired also by 1960s archaeological discoveries revealing the existence of ancient matriarchal societies and the widespread worship of female deities during prehistoric times, as Eleanor Heartney explains in her article *The Once-Reveiled Goddess Movement Gets a Second Chance* (2023)<sup>79</sup>. The finding of numerous

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<sup>77</sup> A. Mazur, M. Fabijanska, *Emergency Art History. Monika Fabijanska in Conversation*, in Block Magazine, 8 June 2021, <https://blokmagazine.com/emergency-art-history-monika-fabijanska-in-conversation/> [last access on 16 October 2023]

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> E. Heartney, *The Once-Reveiled Goddess Movement Gets a Second Chance*, in "Art in America", 18 May 2023, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/wangechi-mutu-judy-chicago-goddess-movement-gets-a-second-chance-1234668640/> [last access on 16 October 2023]

Palaeolithic and Neolithic statuettes and images depicting women, further reinforced this theory. The renowned Venus of Willendorf, a four-inch figurine discovered in Austria that dates to the Upper Palaeolithic era, is one of the most striking examples<sup>80</sup>. It is uncertain whether these images truly symbolised goddesses to the prehistoric societies to which they belonged, and numerous other interpretations have also been suggested. However, within the feminist spirituality movement, they are recognised and treated as such, as argued by Cyntia Eller in her article *Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality*, published in 2000. One of the foremost exponents of this new paradigm was Marija Gimbutas, an archaeologist specialised in Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures. In her 1974 book, *The Goddesses and Gods of Ancient Europe*, she challenged established narratives of European prehistory, which traditionally portrayed growing societies as inevitably marked by inequality as they transitioned from nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyles to settled agricultural communities with a division of labour. Gimbutas, in fact, offered an alternative perspective, arguing that cooperative and harmonious social orders, centred on women, existed during the Neolithic period. Contrary to popular belief, she contended that these societies were not inherently patriarchal or violent. Instead, she theorised that around 4400 BC these peaceful social orders were disrupted and replaced by nomadic invaders during the Bronze Age. Gimbutas rejected the notion that female figures were merely fertility goddesses, recognising instead that they embodied the creative and destructive forces of life. She emphasised that these figures played a central role in the spiritual belief systems of female-oriented societies, which were deeply intertwined with nature and goddess worship. Gimbutas proposed that the Neolithic societies of Europe were predominantly peaceful, in tune with nature and organised around “matristic” principles, a term she preferred to “matriarchal” to convey their deference to female authority, as Eleanor Heartney wrote in her article<sup>81</sup>. In contrast to previous scholarship that marginalised the importance of female figures, Gimbutas’s work has shed light on their central position within these ancient cultures, highlighting their essential role in shaping belief systems and social structures.

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<sup>80</sup> C. Eller, *Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality*, in “Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion”, Vol. 16, No. 1, Indiana University Press, 2000, pp. 23-44.

<sup>81</sup> E. Heartney, *The Once-Reveiled Goddess Movement Gets a Second Chance*.

Through her research and reinterpretation of European prehistory, Gimbutas has challenged long-held assumptions and drawn attention to the cooperative, peaceful and female-centred aspects of Neolithic societies. In fact, as Eller wrote in her essay, spiritual feminist art especially focused on reproducing prehistoric images and icons by imaginatively linking contemporary women with goddesses of the past. For instance, in 1985, the American artist Cheri Gaulke captured photographs of a naked woman covered in clay, portraying her precisely as the Venus of Willendorf we mentioned before, for a performance named *Susan Maberry as the Earth Mother on the Day after the Nuclear Holocaust*. This exhibit exemplifies both repetition and reinterpretation, using a figure that resembles the Palaeolithic Venus to deliver, as she wrote, “a contemporary ecofeminist message”<sup>82</sup>. Indeed, in the words of Elinor Gardon, an art critic and spiritual feminist herself, goddess images contribute to giving women “a model of empowered selfhood”<sup>83</sup>, just as the heroines of fantasy and science-fiction comic books, adds Eller<sup>84</sup>.

*Heresies*, a feminist publication focusing on art and politics that circulated from 1977 to 1993, in its 1978 spring edition entitled *The Great Goddess* showcased a wide collection of poems, artworks, academic essays, and imaginative speculations that vividly demonstrated the depth and complexity of perspectives concerning the topic. In this issue of the magazine, in fact, the art critic Gloria Feman Orenstein analysed the works of some of the most influential artists involved in Goddess Art at the time. In her essay, Orenstein mentions various artists, including Carolee Schneemann, who, in her 1963 *Eye Body* performance, evoked the Minoan Snake Goddess by adorning her body with two snakes in a set of transformative actions. The Latin-American artist Ana Mendieta, on the other hand, merged her body with the earth in her artistic practice, for instance in her piece *Silueta de Laberinto* (1974)<sup>85</sup>. Her *Silueta* series (1973-80) is composed by more than 200 earthworks in which the artist has burned,

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<sup>82</sup> C. Eller, *Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality*, cit., p.26.

<sup>83</sup> E. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess: A Symbol for Our Time*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989, cit., p. 255.

<sup>84</sup> C. Eller, *Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality*, cit., p.27.

<sup>85</sup> G. F. Orenstein, *The Remergence of the Archetype of the Great Goddess in Art by Contemporary Women*, in “*Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Arts & Politics*”, Vol. 2, No. 1 (5), April 1978, pp. 74-84.

carved, and moulded her silhouette into the landscapes of Iowa and Mexico. Mendieta's sculptures embodied her belief in the earth as a deity, derived from Afro-Cuban Santería and the indigenous Taíno customs of her homeland. In fact, while numerous feminist artists in New York at that time were influenced by the rediscovery of Jungian archetypes and pursued a universal Goddess image, Mendieta's creative expression was firmly based in her Caribbean identity. Forced into exile from Cuba in her youth, Mendieta expressed a profound sense of being expelled from the womb of nature. To reconnect with it, she used her body to merge with elements such as sand, ice, and mud, seeking unity with the earth as a means of returning to that primordial source<sup>86</sup>. Therefore, her *Siluetas* series considerably represented her longing for her cherished Cuba, whereas the series *Esculturas Rupestres*, as we will further analyse, acted as the climax of Mendieta's deep experience of displacement. Through her artwork, Mendieta seeks comfort and a means to renew the links that bind her to the infinite expanse of the universe, representing a significant return to the welcoming embrace of the Earth Mother<sup>87</sup>.



Ill. 1 - Ana Mendieta, *Silueta de Laberinto*, 1974, Earthwork.  
The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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<sup>86</sup> J. Brough, *This Artwork Changed My Life: Ana Mendieta's "Silueta" Series*, in "Artsy", 1 September 2020, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-artwork-changed-life-ana-mendietas-silueta-series> [last access on 16 October 2023]

<sup>87</sup> M. Fabijanska *ecofeminism(s)*, Press Kit, 28 August 2020, New York: Thomas Erben Gallery.



Buffie Johnson's paintings, instead, celebrated natural symbols that are recognised as sacred in the worship of the Great Goddess, as in *Pomegranate* (1972), where the fruit recalls Persephone and Demeter's myth and their connection with the life-giving powers of the feminine. Mary Beth Edelson ritual performances channelled ancient goddesses, whereas Betye Saar designed talismans to pay homage to Black Goddesses and Voodoo Priestesses. Additionally, Judy Chicago made a major contribution to Goddess Art conceptualising and creating the striking multi-media exhibition *The Dinner Party* (1974-79)<sup>88</sup>. The work depicts an extensive ceremonial banquet arranged around a triangular table with a total of thirty-nine place settings, each commemorating an important woman in history, including several goddesses of pre-Christian religions such as Ishtar and Hatshepsut. The settings are composed of embroidered runners, golden chalices and cutlery, and Chinese hand painted porcelain plates adorned with raised central motifs inspired by vulvar and butterfly forms, that for Chicago symbolise both freedom and metamorphosis, as Orenstsein explained<sup>89</sup>. The artist's intention with this piece was to rediscover the richness of women's heritage and reclaim the *herstory*<sup>90</sup> of our culture. This is also reflected by Chicago decision to focus on the so called "minor" arts, such as embroidery and pottery, which are traditionally associated with femininity. Despite falling under the category of feminist art, it is important to note that Goddess Art does not always align with Ecofeminist Art. This piece, in particular, is considered distinct from that context, although there are numerous overlaps<sup>91</sup>.

In her essay, Orenstsein also refers to surrealist artists including Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, and Remedios Varos, and their relevance in creating a new feminist myth in which women become the link connecting all forms of life in the cosmos: "The great

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<sup>88</sup> G. F. Orenstsein, *The Remergence of the Archetype of the Great Goddess in Art by Contemporary Women*.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> The term *herstory* emerged in the '70s to denote a feminist approach to history that highlights the role of women and is narrated from a female perspective. The term was coined as a variation of "history" and constitutes a feminist criticism of the traditional historiography that often wrote from a male-centric viewpoint, thus "his-story". It should be noted that feminists used the term provocatively since the etymology of "history" bears no relation to the possessive pronoun *his*.

<sup>91</sup> During the 1970s, depictions of the vulva, known as Cunt Art, were frequently used by the feminist art movement. Some critics contended that this emphasis on biological identity limited women's artistic expression, but feminist artists argued that incorporating vulva imagery in their artworks aimed to promote a positive portrayal of women's sexuality. For instance, Judy Chicago often incorporated vulva imagery into her artistic creations, precisely as in *The Dinner Party* (1974-79).

catalyser and transformer of life energies”<sup>92</sup>. In this way, the author introduced one of the main themes upon which the art curator Cecilia Alemani based the 2022 Venice Biennale, as we will further explore in the next chapter.

Furthermore, the projects featured in *Heresies* evoke a sense of enthusiasm for the potential that feminist critiques of the male-dominated Judeo-Christian theologies prominent in Western culture can unleash, writes Eleanor Heartney in her article *The Once-Reviled Goddess Movement Gets a Second Chance*<sup>93</sup>.

The concept of the Goddess emerging from *Heresies* is that of an entity that represents a connection between nature, spirit, and body, rather than a person or an individual actor. The primary argument put forth by the contributors is that this figure encourages social cooperation and harmony with the forces of nature. It is their belief that this feminine power promotes a more cohesive society, one that recognises the rights of other people, other species, and the earth itself, whereas masculine power is seen to emphasise domination and control, Heartney explains. Moreover, the issue *Great Goddess* investigated a cross-cultural method, incorporating essays on the spiritual practices of Native Americans, secret female societies of West Africa, and the worship of Indian Goddesses.

However, akin to the broader second-wave feminism movement, the artists who focused on the Goddess in the 1970s were predominantly white, with some notable exceptions, such as Mendieta. Indeed, Heartney explains how the Goddess Movement faced significant criticism during the ‘80s. The idea of women building shrines to pagan goddesses, performing rituals to mark the phases of the moon, or invoking the spirits of women burned as witches seemed to be strongly anti-intellectual. The focus on the Goddess was therefore criticised as being too idealistic, subscribing to the New Age fancies of lost matriarchal societies, and identifying women with nature in an outdated fashion. It was also seen as promoting essentialism, ignoring historical context, and engaging in cultural appropriation<sup>94</sup>. Therefore, the theories of Gimbutas as well were dismissed due to those reasons. Ultimately, as the 1980s progressed, the

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<sup>92</sup> G. F. Orenstein, *The Remergence of the Archetype of the Great Goddess in Art by Contemporary Women*, cit., p. 83.

<sup>93</sup> E. Heartney, *The Once-Reviled Goddess Movement Gets a Second Chance*.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

celebration of matriarchy yielded to the deconstruction of gender, as analysed in the previous chapter.

The art historian Jennie Klein, in her article *Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s* (2009), noted how: “Unlike other gender movements once considered radical, such as feminism or gay rights, feminist spirituality has always remained on the margins of mainstream culture and academic acceptability”<sup>95</sup>. Klein notes that even in two of the most influential retrospectives about feminist art of the last decade, *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007) and *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Feminist Art* (Brooklyn Museum, New York, 2007), feminist art referencing Goddess Imagery remained stigmatised. As the author further explains, there is minimal acknowledgement of the role played by feminine spirituality in the practice of the exposed artists. Art historians and critics also tend to avoid discussing the topic and opt for explaining the intentions behind such works through contemporary theory<sup>96</sup>. The reason behind it is the fear of being judged essentialist, invoking nostalgia and primitivism, as Klein notes, and potentially undermine feminists gains in the academic field. However, in the works of Goddess artists both those instances were used to challenge the patriarchal limitations imposed on women’s bodies. According to the feminist critic Rita Felski, nostalgia: “May mobilise a powerful condemnation of the present for its failure to correspond to the imagined harmony of a prelapsarian condition”<sup>97</sup>. As reported by Klein in her essay, this was precisely the purpose of most feminists in the Goddess Art movement. Regarding accusations of primitivism and cultural appropriation, Professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University, Rebecca Schneider, argues that unlike modernist artists such as Paul Gauguin or Pablo Picasso, in this instance are the “primitives” and the women themselves to use their bodies to re-establish their subjectivity<sup>98</sup>. In conclusion, Klein contends that the objective of Goddess feminism was to engage in political acts of reappropriation as a means of addressing current concerns, rather than a way to revive forms of matriarchy.

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<sup>95</sup> J. Klein, *Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s*, in *Feminist Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2009, pp. 575–602, cit., p. 578.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> R. Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, cit., p. 59.

<sup>98</sup> R. Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 134.

### **2.1.1 *Feminine Power: the Divine to the Demonic* at the British Museum (2022)**

Though long stigmatized, in recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in Goddess Art. This renewed emphasis on female power icons is a response to the significant challenges that women face in today's socio-political climate, where their autonomy and agency are increasingly marginalized in both domestic and global spheres. At home, women face ongoing gender inequalities, including discriminatory policies and pervasive gender-based violence. Globally, women's rights are jeopardised by oppressive practices that restrict their freedom, limit their access to education and healthcare, and preclude their participation in decision-making processes. In the US, the recent overturning of the Roe v. Wade law concerning the right to abortion in 2022 is a stark reminder of this reality. Against this backdrop, the exploration and celebration of female power through artistic expressions assumes greater significance, serving as a call to action to unify and bring together different voices in the fight for women (and human) rights. Through art, advocacy and community building, individuals and groups strive to create spaces where female autonomy is respected, protected, and celebrated. Moreover, the present climate crisis highlights the pressing necessity for alternative views on nature, progress, and technology<sup>99</sup>.

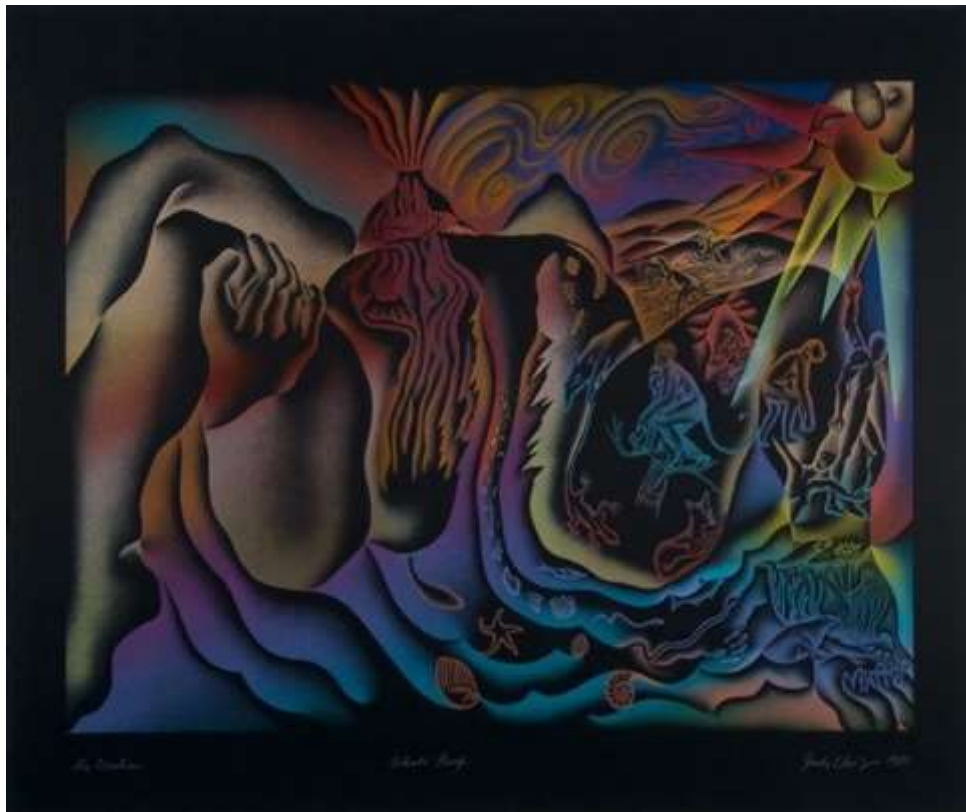
Modern-day Contemporary Goddess artists share the same desire as their forerunners in using symbols of feminine power and divinity to inspire alternative futures. Nevertheless, the new generation also incorporates a wider range of cultural influences and references<sup>100</sup>. In 2022 British Museum's exhibition, *Feminine Power: the Divine to the Demonic* (19 May - 25 Sep 2022), goddesses and supernatural creatures play numerous roles both in the creation and in the destruction of life. The exhibition sought to offer a cross-cultural analysis of the extensive impact of feminine spiritual figures on global faiths and religions. Bringing together sculptures, holy artefacts, and artworks across six continents, from the past to the present days, the exhibition showcased the various facets of feminine power and their significant impact throughout history. In fact, the goal was to offer an opportunity to investigate the significant functions that goddesses, demons, witches, spirits, and saints have played

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<sup>99</sup> E. Heartney, *The Once-Reviled Goddess Movement Gets a Second Chance*.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

in moulding our comprehension of the world, as well as the way in which different cultures interpret femininity and the role played by women in ancient societies. The exhibition offered insights by examining divine as well as demonic figures that have been feared and revered for over 5,000 years. It aimed to demonstrate how the varied expressions of feminine spiritual powers across the globe encourage the on-going reflections on contemporary perceptions of femininity and gender identity, ranging from wisdom, passion, and desire to war, justice, and mercy<sup>101</sup>. For this reason, the curators Belinda Crear and Lucy Dahlsen articulated it in five sections, namely: *Creation and Nature, Passion and Desire, Magic and Malice, Justice and Defence, Compassion and Salvation*. Moreover, the exhibition examined the impact of feminine spiritual authority and its relevance in modern times by consulting with current worshippers, religious groups, and top experts such as Bonnie Greer, Mary Beard, Elizabeth Day, Rabia Siddique and Deborah Frances-White.



Ill. 2 - Judy Chicago, *The Creation*, 1985, colour screenprint in forty-five colours on black paper, 61x101,7 cm, British Museum (not on display).

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<sup>101</sup> B. Crear, *Introduction*, in *Feminine power: the divine to the demonic*, exhibition catalogue (London, British Museum, 19 May - 25 Sep 2022), London: British Museum Press, 2022, pp. 13-23.

While certain exhibition reviews have criticised it for lacking the potential to be fully subversive in proposing a feminist perspective, such as Anna Souter's one for *Hyperallergic*<sup>102</sup>, some contemporary artworks were particularly noteworthy. In the first section, we find once again the pioneering artist Judy Chicago with *The Creation* (1985). The work is part of the artist's major project called *The Birth Project*, carried on during the '80s, and it depicts a female deity as Mother Earth, surrounded by swirling colours and symbols of fertility and life, which opposes the traditional Abrahamic creation narrative from an unapologetic second wave feminist perspective<sup>103</sup>.

*The Birth Project* by Judy Chicago is a landmark artistic venture that sought to celebrate the experience of childbirth and challenge the prevailing patriarchal narratives surrounding it. Spanning from 1980 to 1985, this ambitious series featured more than 100 pieces of art ranging from textiles and needlework to mixed-media sculptures and collages. Chicago worked with a range of female artists and artisans to investigate various facets of childbirth, encompassing physical and emotional changes and societal and cultural impacts. The initiative aimed to recuperate and pay tribute to the potency of female bodies and their capacities for reproduction. Chicago's work in *The Birth Project* not only drew attention to the frequently neglected topic of childbirth but also stimulated debates on feminism, the rights of women, and the politics of representation, as we can observe thanks to the artwork displayed in the exhibition.

Moving on to the second section, we find a life-sized sculpture by the American artist Kiki Smith titled *Lilith* (1994), clinging upside down with a piercing gaze. In Jewish tradition, Lilith is considered the first wife of Adam, created by God from the same earth as him. Nevertheless, Lilith declined to submit to Adam and because of that she was banished by the Garden of Eden. In certain versions of the story, Lilith is portrayed as a seductive and dangerous figure, while in others she is even depicted as a demonic being or night demon, associated with sexual temptation and childbirth complications. As she is often illustrated as a rebellious and self-reliant character who challenged patriarchal authority, to some feminists, Lilith has evolved into a symbol of female

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<sup>102</sup> A. Souter, *The British Museum Takes the Feminism Out of "Feminine Power"*, in *Hyperallergic*, 29 August 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/752644/the-british-museum-takes-the-feminism-out-of-feminine-power/> [last access on 07 November 2023].

<sup>103</sup> B. Crerar, , *Introduction*, in *Feminine power: the divine to the demonic*, exhibition catalogue.

strength and opposition against gender norms and subjugation, being regarded as a powerful archetype, symbol of female independence, sexual freedom, and resistance to male domination.

In Smith's artwork, the sculpture of Lilith is cast from the body of a real woman, precisely highlighting its aim of portraying an actual female body rather than an idealised depiction of it, thereby returning Lilith's subjectivity to her<sup>104</sup>. Additionally, her eyes are realised in blue glass to enhance the illusion of a lifelike appearance and underline the power of the gaze and its implications<sup>105</sup>.



Ill. 3 - Kiki Smith, *Lilith*, 1994, silicon, bronze, and glass, unique, 83.8 × 69.9 × 48.3 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA).

To conclude, the last artwork we are going to explore is by the Kenyan American artist Wangechi Mutu, to whom a mid-career retrospective at the New Museum of New York was dedicated last Spring. Mutu, in her decades-long practice, investigates the enduring impact of colonialism, globalisation and African cultural traditions. Her figures and environments are both seductive and threatening, taking the viewer on a journey of material, psychological and socio-political transformation.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> For instance, considering Laura Mulvey's concept of the *female gaze* as opposed to the dominant male gaze in visual media and the further developments of this theory, *Lilith* could be considered a perfect representation of this perspective shift that centres instead the subjectivity of women. To quote/unquote Mulvey, here Lilith is the one who is looking, rather than the one being looked at.

This artist, who claims both Nairobi and New York as her home, actively traverses between cultural traditions, challenging colonialist, racist and sexist worldviews with her visionary projection of an alternate universe informed by Afrofuturism, post-humanism, and feminism. In the exhibition, her sculpture *Grow the Tea, then Break the Cups* (2021), is displayed at the end of the section *Compassion and Salvation*, making it the last work visitors can observe. It shows the bust of a female figure emerging from soil, ornamented with charcoal, oyster shells, feathers, wood sticks, porcelain, and hair. Drawing on East African mythologies and histories, the artist showcases a goddess made of found materials and local elements from Kenya's land. Shards of porcelain and shells are used to represent breakage and displacement, while quartz symbolizes healing properties. Mutu frequently combines various cultural and spiritual traditions to create unique female figures that reflect her personal experiences. In fact, Mutu considers this figure, along with the many others she portrays in her artworks, to be a reflection of herself and a means of presenting new depictions of the divine and the feminine<sup>106</sup>.



Ill. 4 - Wangechi Mutu, *Grow the Tea, then Break the Cups*, 2021, Soil, charcoal, paper pulp, wood, brown quartz, porcelain, crystal, ornaments, oyster shell, tin can, hair 94 x 43 x 29.8 cm.

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<sup>106</sup> B. Crerar, , *Introduction*, in *Feminine power: the divine to the demonic*, exhibition catalogue.



As argued by Eleanor Heartney at the end of her article, the imagery of the goddess provides precisely a means for the new generation of feminist artists to explore issues as wide-ranging as environmentalism, indigeneity, and gender fluidity<sup>107</sup>. Although these artists share a deep respect for the nurturing and collaborative attributes linked with femininity, their works also mirror the prevalent apprehension and cataclysmic outlook of our age. Rather than solely concentrating on upliftment, the artists are well aware of the potential for societal collapse as climate change accentuates the dual nature of the natural goddesses, both givers and takers.

As reported by Heartney, Wangechi Mutu herself recognises the implications of today's issues, stating that: "Building on the backs of other human beings by ravaging, squandering, and pillaging depletes the earth and us all. The planet is intelligent and alive and constantly reminding us of what it can be like if we treat each other fairly"<sup>108</sup>.

## 2.2 A feminist approach to Eco-Art

As we continue our analysis of the development of Ecofeminist Art, referencing Monika Fabijanska's interview, it is important to note that Ecofeminist Art is a vast phenomenon. Its growth over time can be likened to the progression of an extensive geography, encompassing both natural and social sciences, argues Fabijanska<sup>109</sup>. While the literature on Ecofeminism as a theory and as activism is extensive, that on Ecofeminist Art is limited and highly fragmented. It was even excluded from major feminist art exhibitions, including the previously mentioned *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007). Therefore, its scope and richness are only familiar to experts in this area. As the art curator explains, over time, evolving understandings of gender have significantly changed the focus of Ecofeminist Art, moving it away from essentialist perspectives such as Goddess Art. Instead, it has broadened into areas where gender is not the only focus, blurring the boundaries between Ecofeminist Art and ecological art – and this also because of the changes in feminist theories and

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<sup>107</sup> E. Heartney, *The Once-Reveiled Goddess Movement Gets a Second Chance*.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> A. Mazur, M. Fabijanska, *Emergency Art History. Monika Fabijanska in Conversation*.

perspectives<sup>110</sup>. Consequently, differentiating between these two approaches has become more complex<sup>111</sup>.

Fabijanska describes how feminist Eco-Art diverged from canonical Land Art by prioritising environmental care and minimizing permanent impacts. This contrasts with the monumental and irreversible alterations to the landscape typically associated with the latter practice. However, as we will explore, there are numerous feminist artists that embraced this movement in their own way, challenging its conventions. Moreover, Fabijanska proceeds arguing how some feminist artists questioned the very idea of a finished masterpiece, instead seeking to create art that depicted the natural cycle of life and its various transformations, such as growth and ageing, exemplified by artists such as Helène Aylon. Consequently, this shift marked a dramatic deviation from the customary method of presenting art in gallery spaces. Ecofeminist artists, especially those referred to by the feminist art critic Lucy Lippard as “Garbage Girls”, such as the pioneer of maintenance art Mierle Laderman Ukeles, focused on pollution and waste restoration issues and proposed revolutionary art forms, which entail environmental repair. Noteworthy artists in this field include the already mentioned Betsy Damon, Aviva Rahmani, and Agnes Denes, who is considered to be the pioneer of this movement<sup>112</sup>.

### **2.2.1 *Weather Report: Art and Climate Change*, an exhibition by Lucy Lippard (2007)**

In 2007 it was Lucy Lippard herself to curate the exhibition *Weather Report: Art and Climate Change* at *The Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art* (14 September – 21

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<sup>110</sup> These changes can be traced back to the impact of feminist new materialism on many disciplines, which has also challenged the boundaries between them. At its core, feminist neo-materialism challenges conventional and often binary notions of gender by highlighting the embodied sexual and social aspects. It aims to dismantle the entrenched dichotomy between the mind and body, culture and nature, and the subject and object, which have historically oppressed and sidelined women and their perspectives. In the art field, feminist neo-materialism examines how gender and sexuality are embodied, performed, and represented through material forms and practices. It emphasises the materiality of artistic mediums, objects, and bodies, and how they shape and are shaped by gender and sexual dynamics.

Source: R. Coleman, T. Page, H. Palmer, *Feminist New Materialist Practice: The Mattering of Methods*, in “MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture”, 15 May 2019, <https://maifeminism.com/feminist-new-materialisms-the-mattering-of-methods-editors-note/> [last access on 05 December 2023]

<sup>111</sup> A. Mazur, M. Fabijanska, *Emergency Art History. Monika Fabijanska in Conversation*.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

December 2007), in Colorado, which included works by many of those artists. Marda Kirn, the Director of EcoArts, an environmental arts organisation based in Boulder, conceived the project, and approached Lippard with the concept. Shortly thereafter, Joan Markowitz, Co-Director of the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, joined the conversation and BMoCA became the co-organiser of the exhibition, in collaboration with EcoArts. The exposition showcased 51 national and international projects, ten of them being collaborations, for a total of approximately 60 artists involved<sup>113</sup>.

“The predominance of women in *Weather Report* will probably be chalked up to my history of feminist activism, but I didn’t count as I was selecting the artists”, states Lucy Lippard herself in conversation with Regina Corowell for Women’s Media Centre<sup>114</sup>. However, she noticed how there were simply more women artists dealing with these issues, and the results therefore reinforced her conviction that women are more likely to make effective public artworks, engaging and working alongside their audiences, and advocate for nature through participatory Eco-Art. This derives from the fact that socially, as already argued, women are conditioned to be better listeners and care givers, so as Lippard argues: “We might as well run with it instead of theorizing ourselves into denying it”<sup>115</sup>. As Mierle Laderman Ukeles noted in the 1970s in her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, it is not a coincidence that women artists are mainly responsible for managing waste, maintenance, and sanitation in the aftermath of civilization<sup>116</sup>. Nevertheless, Lippard recognises how, over the last decades, things have changed and the distinction between men’s and women’s work has faded, giving way to a certain level of integration. In fact, she states how: “There’s no reason why women should be any better at this than men, but I suspect it will often be women who step up to bat”<sup>117</sup>.

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<sup>113</sup> R. Cornwell, *Lucy Lippard on Eco Art and Climate Change*, in “Women’s Media Center”, 6 December 2007, <https://womensmediacenter.com/news-features/lucy-lippard-on-Eco-Art-and-climate-change>, [last access 10 November 2023].

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> As we analysed in more detail in Chapter 1, reproductive labour has been widely discussed in feminist theory, particularly by Silvia Federici and Maria Mies. It refers to the unpaid work associated with the reproduction and maintenance of the workforce and society as a whole. It includes activities such as childcare, housework and emotional support that are traditionally assigned to women. Federici argues that reproductive labour is crucial to the functioning of capitalism as it sustains and reproduces the workforce, yet it remains undervalued and invisible within the economic system. This question, of course, has had a major impact on feminist art practices as well.

<sup>117</sup> R. Cornwell, *Lucy Lippard on Eco Art and Climate Change*.

Fins Dunaway's 2009 essay in the "Environmental History" journal of Oxford University, examines how *Weather Report* went beyond mass media representations of climate change to offer a fresh and insightful perspective<sup>118</sup>. By featuring the city of Boulder and its surrounding region as the central focus of the exhibit, it even demonstrated the effectiveness of site-specific art in situating its local ecosystems within a broader global context. As Dunaway highlights, throughout her career Lucy Lippard has aimed to connect the creative energies of art with political opportunities in spaces beyond the confinement of galleries and museums. She took part to the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) in the late 1960s, which used visual imagery and theatrical display to protest against the Vietnam War. During the 1970s, profoundly influenced by the women's liberation movement, Lippard began to combine feminism with her work, challenging art institutions' systematic exclusion of women artists. During the 1980s, while continuing to engage with feminist art, Lippard focused her energies on multiculturalism and identity politics, and became involved in struggles against US military intervention in Central America<sup>119</sup>. Eventually, Lippard's interest turned to landscape and cultural geography, leading to the publication of her 1997 book, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentred Society*<sup>120</sup>.

Apart from her groundbreaking and prolific written works, Lippard has often taken on the role of a guest curator at various museums and galleries. However, it had been 20 years since she last curated a show, until *Weather Report*. In the exhibition, her curatorial choice to focus on conceptual and site-specific artwork appeared more suitable for effectively addressing the overwhelming volume of available information

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<sup>118</sup> F. Dunaway, *Seeing Global Warming: Contemporary Art and the Fate of the Planet* in "Environmental History", vol. 14, no. 1, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 9-31.

<sup>119</sup> It is important to note that Lucy Lippard travelled extensively within Latin America, specifically visiting Buenos Aires. Nevertheless, Lippard's engagement with Latin America went beyond Argentina, as she travelled to other countries such as Mexico, Brazil, and Chile, which expanded her perspective on the diverse artistic practices, concerns, and methodologies in the region. In doing so, Lippard acknowledged art's power as a means of self-expression and resistance, primarily in contexts characterized by authoritarianism, social inequality, and human rights issues. Through her written works and curatorial initiatives in fact, Lippard exhibited and advocated for Latin American artists which consequently enhanced their recognition and visibility within the global art community.

<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, Lippard was an early advocate of conceptual art. In 1968, she described it as representing the "dematerialization of the art object". While recognizing that not all conceptual artists escape from a strictly art-referential environment, Lippard asserts that idea-centric art offers a vital method of linking with real life. According to her, conceptual art empowers artists to challenge established hierarchies of visual expression, to evade the restricting boundaries of the art world, and to intercede in crucial dialogues concerning culture, authority, and identity.

on the subject, continues Dunaway<sup>121</sup>. BMoCa exhibition venues were entirely filled by the show, while the site-specific artworks extended beyond the museum's spaces, scattering throughout the city. The artists present used a wide range of media, resulting in a broad spectrum of artistic expressions. Despite their divergent styles, Lippard confirms that all these artists are knowledgeable or inquisitive enough to participate in dialogues with scientists or the community<sup>122</sup>. The collaboration between artists and scientists was in fact pivotal to the exhibition and fostered a stimulating and exceedingly rich exchange of ideas. *Weather Report* aimed at highlighting the surprising collaboration between contemporary art and climate science, demonstrating their potential to present new viewpoints on the topic.



Ill. 2 - Photograph of *Connect the Dots: Mapping the High Water, Hazards and History of Boulder Creek* by Mary Miss, Boulder, Colorado, mixed media, 2007. Courtesy of the artist and Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art.

One of the works present, Mary Miss's *Connect the Dots: Mapping the High Water, Hazards and History of Boulder Creek* (2007), confronted visitors with the catastrophic impact of a five-century flood, which typically occurs once in every five hundred years, but may happen more frequently as the planet warms. The focus of the exhibit was the potential aftermath of such an occurrence on Boulder Creek. Working

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<sup>121</sup> F. Dunaway, *Seeing Global Warming: Contemporary Art and the Fate of the Planet*.

<sup>122</sup> L. Lippard, *Weather Report: Expecting the Unexpected*, in *Weather Report: Art and Climate Change*, exhibition catalogue (Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, 14 September – 21 December 2007), Boulder: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007 pp. 4-11.

together with a geologist and a hydrologist, Miss installed blue discs on buildings and trees at a level equal to the projected floodwater height. The blue dots created a sense of fear, the dominant emotion linked with climate change warnings, in the local environment. Their threatening presence was noticeable in different areas of the city, including the Central Park, which is situated right across from BMoCA, the lovely Boulder Creek Path, a pedestrian and bike path considered one of the United States' most appealing ones, and even on the walls of the City Hall and the downtown high school. The *Connect the Dots* artwork therefore vividly illustrated the potential human impacts of global warming. The piece attracted spectators who were already immersed in the surrounding environment and provided them with a tangible and emotionally charged encounter with the imminent catastrophe. Suzaan Boettger, an art critic, noted that the bright dots overhead had an immediate and gripping effect on the viewers, making them realize the imminent threat of being swept away by rapidly flowing water<sup>123</sup>.

*The Mountain in the Greenhouse* (2001), a video created by the renowned environmental artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison<sup>124</sup>, shares a similar declaration of intent. Drawing upon the research conducted by a conservation biologist from the University of Vienna, the video documents the upward movement of three species of white and purple flowers along an alpine mountain. As the video progresses, the mountain gradually becomes enclosed within a virtual greenhouse, resulting in escalating temperatures. By the end of the video, the purple blooms have reached the summit and then they simply disappeared, leaving only a few patches of white flowers. In his article, Dunaway analyses how other works present in the exhibition moved past this focus on the destruction of species and environments to target instead the way climate change can force a vast number of populations to migrate<sup>125</sup>. The eco-artist Aviva Rahmani, together with James White, a climate scientist at the University of Colorado, here presents her work *Trigger Points, Tipping Points* (2007). At the core of Aviva Rahmani's artistic approach lies in fact her innovative concept of *Trigger Points*

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<sup>123</sup> S. Boettger, *Global Warnings*, in "Art in America", Issue No. 6, pp. 154-161, June/July 2008.

<sup>124</sup> Also E. Heartney refers to them in her article *How the Ecological Art Practices of Today Were Born in 1970s Feminism*, already cited.

<sup>125</sup> F. Dunaway, *Seeing Global Warming: Contemporary Art and the Fate of the Planet*.



*Theory as aesthetic activism*<sup>126</sup>, to which this work refers to. This revolutionary approach involves deliberately employing traditional aesthetic techniques and scientific analysis on carefully selected areas of degraded landscapes. By focusing on these particular “trigger points”, Rahmani aims to catalyse large-scale restoration of ecosystems, one step at a time. This theory challenges the standard method of ecological restoration by prioritising targeted interventions instead of attempting to tackle vast areas all at once. By strategically concentrating on these trigger points, Rahmani optimises the prospect of ecological rehabilitation, proficiently directing the restorative process of damaged ecosystems. The 2007 project consisted of a series of digital prints, partly derived from satellite imagery, and completed with drawings and texts by Rahmani. It considered the catastrophic impacts of global warming on conflict zones around the world that are proximate to coastal areas. Examples include devastating flooding and hurricanes across the lower Mississippi, an increase in the water levels of the Ganges River, and of the sea in and around Bangladesh, as well as desertification along the Nile River and throughout Darfur.



Ill. 3 – A. Rahmani, Mississippi 2040 detail of *Trigger Points, Tipping Points*, digitized print on archival paper, 2007, 33 x48 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art.

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<sup>126</sup> A. Rahmani, *Trigger Point Theory as Aesthetic Activism: A Transdisciplinary Approach to Environmental Restoration*, [final p.h.D. thesis], Plymouth University, 2015.

If the current trajectory of these river systems persists, and if the apocalyptic projections come to reality, the human communities associated with them will be forced to seek refuge elsewhere. Therefore, Rahmani's piece and her conversation with White introduce questions of class, power and justice that are often missing from the climate change debate, highlights Dunaway<sup>127</sup>. This underlines the fact that not all nations and peoples bear the same responsibility for global warming, nor are they all equally at risk from the imminent disaster. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that *Trigger Points, Tipping Points* premiered at 2007 Venice Biennale, within the 100 days<sup>128</sup> collective project *Joseph Beuys. Difesa della Natura. The Living Sculpture. Kassel 1977 - Venezia 2007. Omaggio a Harald Szeemann*<sup>129</sup>.

Nowadays, one of the most well-known Rahmani's projects is *The Blue Trees Symphony*, started in 2015. As the artist herself writes: "As the devastating impacts of anthropocentric behaviours have emerged in the Anthropocene, the spectre of globalized "ecocide" has also emerged, requiring creative policy solutions"<sup>130</sup>.

*The Blue Trees* project was an experiment aimed at demonstrating how art can prevent ecocide by legally redefining the public (economic) good in order to reconcile it with the common (community) good, Rahmani explains<sup>131</sup>. The project began when a group of New York state activists invited the artist to do develop a strategy to protect trees slated for destruction to make way for extended natural gas pipelines. To achieve this, in her article Rahmani explains how she came up with the idea of mapping and transforming individual trees into musical notes, which are then translated into a symphonic composition. The project utilises GPS technology to locate specific trees, which are then marked with blue paint to symbolize their transformation and draw attention to their significance. These marked trees serve as "tree-notes" within the

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<sup>127</sup> F. Dunaway, *Seeing Global Warming: Contemporary Art and the Fate of the Planet*.

<sup>128</sup> This is a reference the duration of *documenta*. In 1977, in its 6<sup>th</sup> edition, Beuys turned the exhibition area into a "social sculpture", inviting the public's active participation and engagement through discussions, lectures, performances, and workshops. His aim was to stimulate discussion and prompt individuals to reflect on their connection with the natural world and society, promoting a more environmentally aware and sustainable way of life. Moreover, it is noteworthy how in *documenta* the artist presented some of its most radical ecological projects.

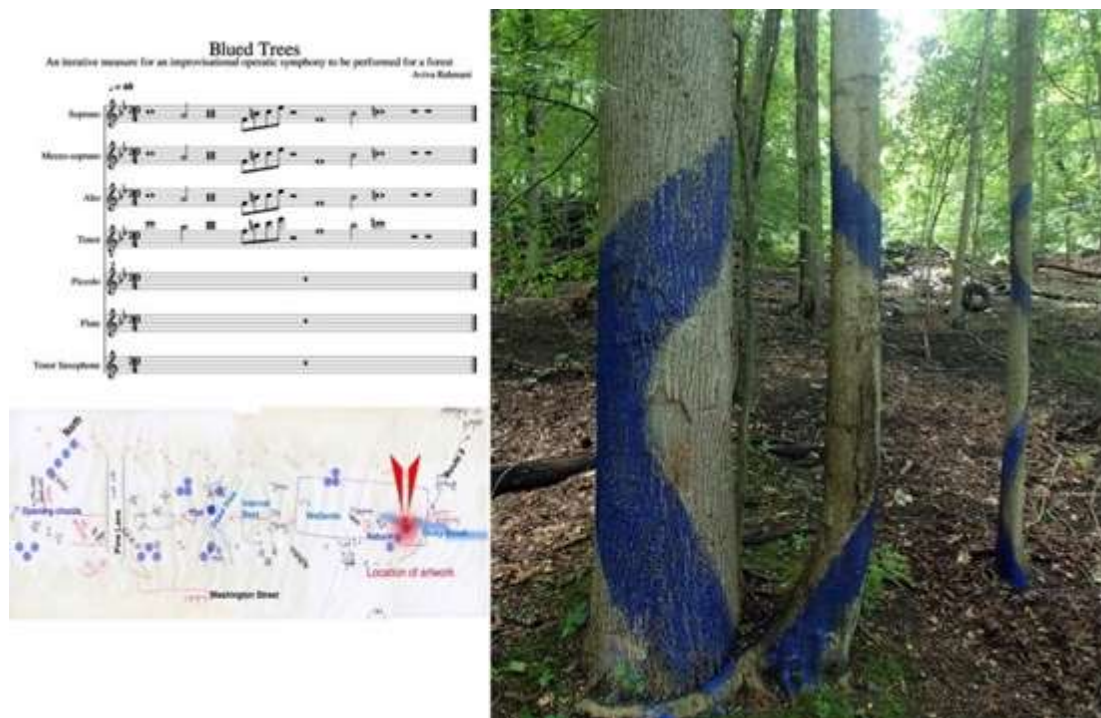
<sup>129</sup> A. Rahmani, *Trigger Points/Tipping Points*, on her official website: <https://www.avivarahmani.com/trigger-points-tipping-points>.

<sup>130</sup> A. Rahmani, *The Blue Trees Symphony as Transdisciplinary Mediation for Environmental Policy*, in "Media+Environment" vol. 3 issue 1, 15 July 2021 <https://mediaenviron.org/article/25256-the-blued-trees-symphony-as-transdisciplinary-mediation-for-environmental-policy> [last access 13 Novembre 2023]

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.



symphony, representing specific musical elements. The mapping process involves utilising aerial satellite imagery and ground-truthing to identify and select the trees that will become part of the symphonic score. The project aims to envision and promote the concept of continental habitat relations, emphasizing the interconnectedness and importance of preserving ecosystems on a larger scale. The musical composition is developed in the key of G major, a key historically associated with harmony and stability in Baroque music, influenced by renowned composers like Bach. As the artist argues, this choice of key contributes to the emotional impact and resonance of the symphony<sup>132</sup>. *The Blue Trees Symphony* focuses on the urgent need for environmental protection by showcasing an unperformable time signature. With thirty-two beats per measure and the quarter note receiving one beat, the rhythm becomes too rapid for conventional musical performance. This deliberate choice encourages listeners and participants to imagine a different world and prompts contemplation about the need to protect and preserve our environment, explains the artist.



Ill. 4 - *The Blue Trees Symphony Overture* in Peekskill, New York, filed in 2015 by attorney Patrick Reilly. Right, three GPS-located tree-notes; top left, score for iteration in each measure; bottom left, working map of the GPS-located aerial score.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

While the project emphasizes the musical aspect, it also incorporates visual elements. Indeed, the blue marks were painted with a permanent mixture of non-toxic paint and buttermilk, on which moss could grow, creating a striking visual contrast within the natural environment, therefore attracting attention, and stimulating conversations about environmental issues. The combination of the blue trees and the symphonic score creates a unique and immersive artistic experience.

Furthermore, the project aims to provide legal protection for those trees under the Visual Artists Rights Act (VARA). As the artist writes:

The Overture was installed on the summer solstice of 2015 in Peekskill, New York, and the elements were immediately submitted for copyright registration. Rather than copyrighting the forests endangered by natural gas pipelines in *The Blued Trees Symphony*, we copyrighted relationships between the human teams, the art, and the trees in their habitat<sup>133</sup>.

The project expanded quickly, particularly in areas threatened by pipeline expansions. It extended to Virginia, West Virginia, upper New York, Washington, and Canada, gaining international attention, and even being presented in China, Korea, and Japan<sup>134</sup>. As Rahmani explains in an interview for “Earth 911”, there were several legal issues that she and the people involved in the project had to deal with. Under copyright law, there is a notable differentiation that arises, as activist art cannot be safeguarded in the same manner as other creative forms of work, explains the artist. Nevertheless, this undertaking employs a proactive strategy by initiating an alternative system that includes conceptual, legal, and community relations. Additionally, they had to tackle the vital issue of guaranteeing the longevity of the artwork. For example, copyright cannot extend to a garden due to its fluid nature, however, in the context of this project, the artwork is as long-lasting as the trees themselves, which can survive for centuries and form an intrinsic part of the geology of the land. In order to better establish the work’s importance, they demonstrated its cultural significance by producing critical reviews and films about the project. The issue of eminent domain is a crucial piece of this puzzle. The argument the artist has put forward, which others are now repeating, is that anything in support of fossil fuels cannot be considered as serving the public good if eminent domain is meant to benefit the public. The methane issues linked with

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> M. Ratcliffe, *Earth911 Interview: Artist Blocked Pipeline with Blued Trees Symphony*, in “Earth911”, 8 May 2018, <https://earth911.com/inspire/artist-blocks-fracking/> [last access 13 Novembre 2023].

natural gas support this argument and make the idea of natural gas as a bridge fuel unfeasible, adds Rahmani<sup>135</sup>.

In another interview<sup>136</sup>, the artist emphasises that any litigation around the project will also discuss a new interpretation of art's importance as a crucial component of permanent ecosystems. When combined, legal action against deforestation slows the corporations down, while activist litigation can make it an expensive and difficult legal process. At the very least, according to the artist<sup>137</sup>, the project highlights these issues and provides indications of a potential positive outcome. In conclusion, the core message conveyed by artists and activists involved through *The Blue Trees Symphony* project underscores the indispensable impact of pioneering environmental science on shaping debates of a legal and political nature regarding the safeguard of ecosystems and water. This wisdom has been held in high esteem by indigenous communities for innumerable generations, underlines Rahmani<sup>138</sup>, adding that the use of fossil fuels has a disproportionate impact on young people, communities of colour, and specifically indigenous communities around the world<sup>139</sup>. To differentiate between past site-specific art and present-day ecological art, the emphasis is on detailed ecological readings of natural settings and a dedication to remediation. In this context, degradation refers to our intimate relationship with the environment and with ourselves as a whole, states the artist. Conclusively, as Rahmani recognises, this position is informed by different philosophies that feature artistic expressions and oppose capitalist endeavours<sup>140</sup>. According to the artist's perspective, art functions as a cultural tie that enables communities to adapt to crisis, and there has never been a greater need for it<sup>141</sup>.

Returning to Lippard's exhibition and Dunaway's article, some of the most noteworthy pieces on display were in fact those able to envision a brighter future, based on cleaner energy sources and fostered by new forms of human-nature relationships. A striking

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> R. Denson, *Earth Day EcoArt by Aviva Rahmani Confronts Deforestation, Fracking, Nuclear Hazards in Eastern US Woodlands* in "Huffpost", 21 April 2016 <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/earth-day-ecoart-confront-b-9721354> [last access 13 Novembre 2023].

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

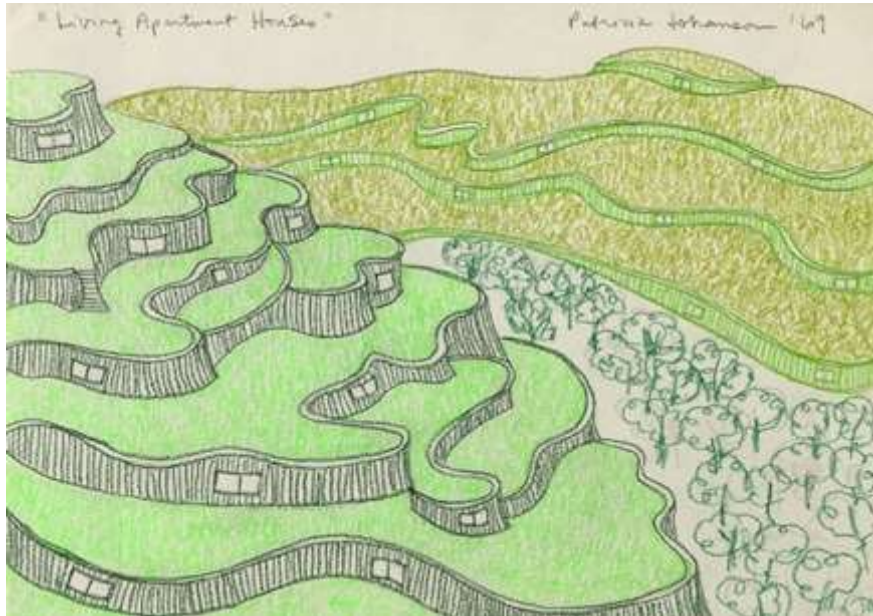
<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> A. Rahmani, *The Blue Trees Symphony as Transdisciplinary Mediation for Environmental Policy*.

<sup>140</sup> R. Denson, *Earth Day EcoArt by Aviva Rahmani Confronts Deforestation, Fracking, Nuclear Hazards in Eastern US Woodlands*.

<sup>141</sup> A. Rahmani, *The Blue Trees Symphony as Transdisciplinary Mediation for Environmental Policy*.

example is the set of drawings by Patricia Johanson, a pioneer of Eco-Art, commissioned in 1969 by *House & Garden* but never published before. Johanson's pieces are the oldest in the show, yet among the most visionary, states Dunaway<sup>142</sup>.



Ill. 5 - Patricia Johanson, *Living Apartment Houses*, 1969, pencil, coloured pencil, 43.18 x 58.42 cm.

As he explains, one of the drawings displayed at *Weather Report* is *Living Apartment Houses* (1969). Here, Patricia Johanson depicted urban structures distinctively, diverging from the established notion of isolated skyscrapers that represent a completely human domain. Instead, she portrayed the buildings as undulating terraces ornamented with vegetation, merging seamlessly with the adjacent trees, and shaping a harmonious whole. Prior to the rise of the green roof trend in North America, Johanson foresaw its ecological advantages, recognizing its potential to form microhabitats for plants, birds, and other creatures. Additionally, she noted its capacity to alleviate flooding by absorbing rainwater. Nowadays, with the heightened concern over global warming, green roofs are celebrated for their ability to conserve energy. The insulation they provide and their capacity to mitigate urban heat effects are highly valuable.

Johanson and other artists presented in *Weather Report* strive to diminish the distinction between science and aesthetics, as well as between customary perimeters

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<sup>142</sup> F. Dunaway, *Seeing Global Warming: Contemporary Art and the Fate of the Planet*.

of art galleries and communal areas. *Living Apartment Houses* offers a glimpse into Johanson's concept of revitalising the urban environment as an ecological art form, adds Dunaway, encouraging viewers to appreciate their surroundings as if they were a piece of art, providing a new outlook on the world. Through her work, Patricia Johanson visualises and conveys empowering emotions that are often missing from environmental discussions, expressing the belief that a better world is possible. Her aim is to dissolve hierarchies and put everything on the same level, art, people, plants, soil, and water. In a world where apocalyptic rhetoric dominates discussions about the fate of our planet, some may find Johanson's words and drawings naive. However, they offer a glimpse of an environmental politics that not only seeks to delay the impending crisis, but also envisions the possibility of human societies forging a better future for themselves and all of Earth's inhabitants<sup>143</sup>.

Johanson's works embody principles that are often missing from mainstream environmentalism or overlooked in the mass media's framing of the environmental movement, which tends to highlight overwhelming narratives of destruction. Rather than focusing solely on quantitative concerns such as energy efficiency and carbon emission reduction, though these are crucial, environmental policies should also provide a broader sense of hope for qualitative improvements in human life.

As Christine Fillipone writes in her essay *Patricia Johanson: Ecological Practice as Conceptual Art* (2018)<sup>144</sup>, Johanson's lifelong study of ecosystems and her commitment to their preservation provide a fundamental critique of the often-overlooked unpaid labour required to maintain the health and well-being of our environment, including clean soil, air, and water. In this respect, Johanson's work, along with that of Ukeles and many other ecofeminist artists already mentioned, expands the concept of institutional critique<sup>145</sup>. Furthermore, Johanson's focus on the

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> C. Fillipone, *Patricia Johanson: Ecological Practice as Conceptual Art* in "CSPA Quarterly", no. 20, 2018, pp. 7–17.

<sup>145</sup> In the art field, institutional critique denotes an artistic practice where artists examine, question, and challenge the structures, practices, and ideologies of art institutions such as museums, galleries, and other cultural facilities. This approach emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s in response to the perceived constraints and power dynamics within the art world. Artists who engage in institutional critique typically aim to uncover power structures, biases, hierarchies, and socio-political contexts that influence the creation, display, and reception of art within these institutions. They may address issues such as the commodification of art, the exclusion of specific perspectives, the effects of wealth and politics, and the institutional norms that establish what is deemed significant or deserving of exhibition.

inherent connection between human beings and their environment places her firmly within the framework of open systems, which is another aspect of Conceptual Art and institutional critique.

Conclusively, Lucy Lippard's 2007 exhibition, *Weather Report*, presented a stimulating investigation of the intersection between art, environment, and climate. The exhibition challenged conventional boundaries and emphasised the pressing demand for ecological understanding and action, as illustrated by the artworks of the analysed artists, which have a significant connection to ecofeminist theories. By presenting artistic expressions that blurred the lines between science, aesthetics, and public space, Lippard provided a platform for contemplating the significant impact of climate change on the world. The exhibition promoted dialogue and fostered hope, envisioning a future where the arts and environmental consciousness merge to generate a more sustainable and harmonious planet.

### **2.2.2 Groundswell: Women of Land Art at the Nasher Sculpture Centre of Dallas (2023)**

As we previously anticipated, the Land Art movement that emerged as a groundbreaking shift in artistic expression during the 1960s and the 1970s, was characterized by monumental sculptures, earthworks, and installations that merged art with the vast canvas of nature itself. However, amidst the acclaim and recognition accorded to the movement, there has been a critical oversight: the profound contributions of women artists who, despite pioneering and shaping Land Art in their own distinctive ways, have remained largely marginalised within its historical narrative. While male artists gained prominence for their monumental interventions in the landscape, the equally innovative and transformative works created by female visionaries such as Nancy Holt, Alice Aycock, Agnes Denes, and others were often overshadowed or disregarded, obscuring their pivotal roles in defining and evolving the essence of Land Art. This oversight overlooked the remarkable creative endeavours of women who not only embraced the movement but forged its pathways with their unique artistic language, challenging conventions and reshaping the boundaries of art, nature, and gender. In fact, many of the concerns highlighted by these artists four or five decades ago remain pertinent today, covering areas such as environmental



degradation, land preservation, ecological issues, and investigations into indigenous land management and ownership, explains the art critic Tom Teicholz in his article for Forbes, *From the Ground Up: Women Artists of Land Art*<sup>146</sup>.

The exhibition *Groundswell: Women of Land Art* that opened in September at the Nasher Sculpture Centre in Dallas (23 September 2023 – 7 January 2024), presents an original and interesting attempt to update the canon of Land Art. Organised by Jeremy Strick, the Director of the Nasher, and Leight A. Arnold, Nasher Associate Curator, this show aims to challenge the discourse around Land Art, which has historically been dominated by male artists, such as Robert Smithson, Walter de Maria, Michael Heizer, and James Turrell. Therefore, *Groundswell* aims to expand the discourse and highlight underrecognized contributions from ecofeminist artists in the field. This is achieved through a thoughtfully curated exhibition, showcasing the works of twelve artists, some of whom have been previously mentioned: Lita Albuquerque, Alice Aycock, Beverly Buchanan, Agnes Denes, Maren Hassinger, Nancy Holt, Patricia Johanson, Ana Mendieta, Mary Miss, Jody Pinto, Michelle Stuart, and Meg Webster.

As noted by Stick in the press release:

This exhibition presents a fuller, truer history of this pivotal movement. In our time of deepening environmental crisis, *Groundswell: Women of Land Art* gathers work by 12 artists whose art powerfully provokes consideration of our relationship to the land, through both ephemeral and grand gestures. We are proud of how this exhibition presents their critical, profoundly relevant contributions<sup>147</sup>.

The significance of Land Art as a subject worthy of reevaluation has never been more important than in our current era. Amid environmental crises, it stands as a relevant and crucial movement that demands recognition and redefinition, as its exponents demonstrated a moral foresight beyond their time and grasped the profound notion that caring for our planet requires a deep understanding of the Earth's finite resources.

As Land Art prioritised the temporary action over the commodity of the art object, some of its masterpieces have been lost to the wind and survive only as photographs, while others cannot be displayed within the confines of an art venue. In fact, like *Weather Report*, also this exhibition expands beyond the boundaries of the museum

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<sup>146</sup> T. Teicholz, *From the Ground Up: Women Artists Of Land Art*, in "Forbes", 8 October 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomteicholz/2023/10/08/from-the-ground-up-women-artists-of-land-art/?sh=1f6196c16f19> [last access on 22 November 2023]

<sup>147</sup> J. Stick, *Nasher Sculpture Center Announces Groundswell: Women of Land Art*, Press Release, 20 April 2023, Dallas: Nasher Sculpture Centre.

and into the surrounding landscape. What Arnold has wisely done to showcase the artworks is to group the artists by the different aspects of Land Art they represent, rather than giving each one their own room or space. Therefore, the exhibition is structured around four thematic sections: *Charting the Land and Sky*, *Architecture, Ruins, and Exposed Infrastructure*, *The Emergence of Ecological Art*, and *From Land Art to Public Art*. The pieces in each space hold a dialogue with one another, while their thematic groups provide a conceptual framework for viewing them. Certain artworks have been reimagined specifically for the Nasher, while others are displayed through their original documentation or through striking new colour prints derived from the original images.

Among the artworks exhibited, stunning prints of Lita Albuquerque's iconic 1978 *Malibu Line* and her pigment creations in the Mojave Desert and Arroyo Grande are on display. Michelle Stuart's *Nazca Lines Star Chart* and *Nazca Lines Southern Hemisphere Constellation* (1981-82), on loan from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, captivate visitors with their stunning beauty and enigmatic nature. The exhibition also includes aerial photographs that display Alice Aycock's exceptional *Maze* constructions of 1972, and some of her most notable works such as the impressive *Three Fold Manifestation II* (1987) and the *Low Building with Dirt Roof* (1973), which is currently kept at New York's Storm King.

Another art critic, Deborah Solomon, in "The New York Times"<sup>148</sup> states that Nancy Holt was one of the most notable women in Land Art featured in the exhibition. She studied biology at Tufts University and later married Robert Smithson, with whom she formed a pioneering Land Art duo. Holt best-known creation, *Sun Tunnels* (1973-76), was located in Utah, right in proximity of Smithson's famous *Spiral Jetty* (1970).

However, the most relevant Holt's piece here on display is *Pipeline*, originally created in 1986 and reimagined specifically for the exhibition. Prompted by her observations of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, Holt conceived the System Work Pipeline while in residency at the Visual Arts Centre of Alaska. The installation is composed of steel ducts that represent the vast pipeline winding through Alaska's landscape. Beginning

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<sup>148</sup> D. Solomon, *Women of 'Groundswell': Thinking Outside the Spiral*, in "The New York Times", 18 October 2023, [The Women of 'Groundswell' Challenge the Land-Art Canon - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/18/arts/land-art-women-groundswell.html) [last access on 22 November 2023]



outside the front entrance of the Nasher Sculpture Centre, the structure snakes through the main gallery before culminating in the outdoor sculpture garden. Within the pipeline, a particular section leaks oil, resulting in a gloomy black pool that contrasts with the whiteness of the surrounding area, recalling the snowy landscape of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. As Holt puts it, this is a poignant reminder that: “Breakdowns happen more often than people might think - pipes can rust or crack, paving the way for oil spills”<sup>149</sup>. As is evident, Holt’s *Pipeline* invites viewers to reflect on the implications of industrial infrastructure, the fragility of the environment and the potential impact of human intervention on natural landscapes. By using the visual language of the pipeline and incorporating the element of dripping oil, Holt encourages contemplation regarding the interplay between human activities, fossil fuels, and the environment’s vulnerability.



Ill. 9 - Nancy Holt, *Pipeline*, 1986. Steel, oil. Overall dimensions variable.  
Holt/Smithson Foundation / Licensed by Artists Rights Society, New York.

Another noteworthy piece on display is *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* (1982), by Agnes Denes, which is considered one of the most influential artists in the ecofeminist movement. The project involved cultivating and reaping a two-acre wheat field located in downtown Manhattan, two blocks from Wall Street and the World Trade Centre,

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<sup>149</sup> N. Holt, *Pipeline*, 1986, In “Nancy Holt Sightlines”, Alena J. Williams, University of California Press, 2011. Originally published as an untitled statement about *Pipeline* in *Alaskan Impressions: Nancy Holt / Michelle Stuart*, exhibition catalogue, unpaginated (anchorage: Visual Art Centre of Alaska, 1986.)

facing the Statue of Liberty. With the help of the Public Art Found, Denes transformed an abandoned landfill into a thriving wheat field, symbolising both the cycles of nature and the human impact on the surroundings. The process involved digging 285 furrows in the ground by hand: for four months, the artist and her assistants became farmers, nurturing their crop. In 1982, Denes told the New York Times that her concept aimed to introduce: “A clash between rural essence and urban sprawl within the world’s most valuable urban real estate”<sup>150</sup>, reports Alina Choen in her article *Agnes Denes’s Manhattan Wheatfield Has Only Grown More Poignant* (2019)<sup>151</sup>. At the time, the artwork served not only as a commentary on the city’s economy and real estate mechanisms, but also as a statement in favour of environmental awareness. According to the artist’s website, the soil beneath her cultivated field, once a literal landfill, had an estimated value of \$4.5 billion. The land has since undergone extensive development and transformed into Battery Park City. The project demonstrated an audacious stance on land use, sustainability, and the connection between urban areas and agriculture. Denes utilised the wheat field as a visual and conceptual contrast to the encompassing urban landscape, urging viewers to contemplate the significance of land, food production, and the consequences of urbanisation. Like all ephemeral Land Art, the legacy of *Wheatfield - A Confrontation* exists only in the memories and photographs that recorded its existence. One of the most widely circulated images, also in *Groundswell*, shows Denes standing in the middle of the golden field, wielding a staff. Dressed in a striped button-down and jeans, her legs partially submerged in the crop, she evokes the image of someone on the prairie. The towering skyscrapers in the background, however, provide an intriguing yet unsettling contrast: in a contest between a solitary figure and colossal architecture, the outcome seems obvious<sup>152</sup>. Another compelling image focuses solely on the field, with the Statue of Liberty appearing beyond it, seemingly emerging from the crops – a compelling juxtaposition with this symbol of American freedom, states Cohen<sup>153</sup>.

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<sup>150</sup> C. Haberman, L. Johnston, *New York Day by Day*, in “The New York Times”, 2 August 1982.

<sup>151</sup> A. Cohen, *Agnes Denes’s Manhattan Wheatfield Has Only Grown More Poignant*, in “Artsy”, 16 October 2019, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-agnes-deness-manhattan-wheatfield-grown-poignant> [last access on 22 November 2023]

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.



Ill. 10 - Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield - A Confrontation*, 1982. Photo by John McGrall.  
Courtesy of the artist and Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

Denes' *Living Pyramid* (2015-2017) is also on display at *Groundswell*. This artwork evokes thoughts of the romantic allure of ancient ruins often sought by tourists, juxtaposed with the contemporary fascination with green-clad “living” walls and roofs. In the exhibition, are also present numerous drawings depicting a reconfigured world and universe, alongside her inventive isometric reinterpretation of the globe. These works are not only ingenious, but also occasionally humorous, states Teicholz in his article<sup>154</sup>. Furthermore, is remarkable to note that, as already mentioned, Denes was present also in Lucy Lippard's exhibition with her collaborative work *Tree Mountain - A Living Time Capsule - 11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years* (1992–96), sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme and the Finnish Ministry of the Environment. As part of the project, Denes and 11,000 volunteers planted 11,000 pine trees upon an artificial mountain in the Pinziö gravel pits near Ylöjärvi, in Finland. In *Groundswell*, we also find Ana Mendieta with her *Siluetas* series (1973-80) and Patricia Johnson's drawings for *House and Gardens*, as well as her noteworthy *Fair Park Lagoon* (1981-86). Originally built in 1936 as a flood control basin for Fair Park in South Dallas, the lagoon required restoration by 1980. The Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, now known as the Dallas Museum of Art and situated within Fair Park at that

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<sup>154</sup> T. Teicholz, *From the Ground Up: Women Artists of Land Art*.

time, commissioned Johanson to revitalize the basin using funds from the National Endowment for the Arts' Art in Public Places initiative. Johanson developed two outdoor sculptures that flank each end of the lagoon. Located at the southern edge are *Pteris Multifida*, named after the Texas Fern, and at the opposite end, *Sagittaria Platyphylla*, better known as Delta Duck Potato, two species that thrive along water banks. The flowing structures of the sculptures imitate the shapes of the plants they represent. Over a five-year design process, the project underwent six revisions which initially disappointed the artist. Nevertheless, reflecting on Fair Park Lagoon thirty-seven years later, Johanson holds no grudges and acknowledges that aesthetics is a concern limited to artists and art critics. Although the result does not entirely match Johanson's initial vision, it does accomplish two of her key aims: creating a fully functional animal ecosystem and integrating individuals into nature through approachable pathways<sup>155</sup>.

Mary Miss instead, like she did for *Weather Report*, created a new work for this exhibition, *Stream Trace: Dallas Branch Crossing* (2023). It is a site-specific piece that traces an underground stream of water that flows beneath the Nasher Sculpture Centre, indicated in the garden through a sequence of stainless-steel poles and reflective X marks, extending outward into the neighbouring area and fostering participatory walks. In fact, Dallas-based creatives, scholars, and experts from various fields are guiding walks that loosely trace the historical route of the Dallas Branch, this small watercourse that was confined in concrete and covered over during the early 20th century. The Dallas Branch springs from the contemporary Uptown Dallas district and terminates at the Trinity River in the Design District. Participants of these walks may opt to venture from the Nasher Sculpture Centre towards the Dallas Branch's starting point or from the Nasher to its outlet near the Trinity River. Each walk is expected to last about 1.5 hours and, to ensure smooth return arrangements to the starting point, attendees are encouraged to bring a bike or use public transportation. With this artwork, Miss aims to bring back to the surface the history of Dallas, its

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<sup>155</sup> L. Thompson, *A Landmark Exhibition about Land Art: "Groundswell" at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas*, in "Glasstire" (Texas visual art), 7 November 2023, <https://glasstire.com/2023/11/07/a-landmark-exhibition-about-land-art-groundswell-at-the-nasher-sculpture-center-dallas/> [last access on 22 November 2023]

infrastructure, and the communities that once lived along the riverbanks, to highlight our connection with the natural systems that support our lives<sup>156</sup>.

In conclusion, the exhibition *Groundswell: Women of Land* illuminates the profound effect of those women artists imaginative expressions on our comprehension of the interconnectedness between art and nature, frequently within an ecofeminist perspective. These artists have challenged established artistic conventions and raised awareness of urgent environmental and societal concerns by ingeniously utilizing the natural landscape as a canvas and a medium. Their works inspire a sense of awe that prompts viewers to reconnect with the environment and ponder their place within it. The exhibition celebrates the distinctive perspectives and contributions of women land artists and, in paying tribute to their artistic accomplishments, it also encourages forthcoming generations of artists to explore uncharted avenues and embrace the infinite possibilities of art in dialogue with nature.

### **2.3 ecofeminism(s), a collective exhibition (2020)**

Until today, the only retrospective on Ecofeminist Art is the one curated in 2020 by Monika Fabijanska at the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York (19 June - 24 July, 8 - 26 September 2020). The title, *ecofeminism(s)*, expresses its aim unequivocally: to examine the heritage of pioneering ecofeminist artists and how their ideas and strategies are being continued, developed, or opposed by the younger generation<sup>157</sup>. With a deliberate emphasis on pluralism, Ecofeminist Art embraces a diverse range of approaches, inviting multiple perspectives to coexist within its very structure. As stated in the press release, the examination of the past fifty years demonstrates the groundbreaking nature of the early feminist artists' work and its long-lasting importance both in the arena of women's rights and in the advancements of social action. Their investigation of the relationship between humanity and nature appears particularly significant, and their insightful recognition of how Western patriarchal beliefs and religions have participated in the mistreatment of women and the environment resonates significantly in the era of the #MeToo Movement and climate

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<sup>156</sup> M. Miss discusses *Stream Trace: Dallas Branch Crossing*, with L. Arnold, Nasher Sculpture Centre, 12 September 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhaGUBGxHoc&t=32s> [last access on 22 November 2023]

<sup>157</sup> M. Fabijanska *ecofeminism(s)*, Press Kit, 28 August 2020, New York: Thomas Erben Gallery.

change, states Fabijanska<sup>158</sup>. However, although Ecofeminist Art during the 1970s and the 1980s mainly included Goddess Art, ritual performances, and ecological Land Art, the curator presents an intriguing question: “What distinguishes contemporary female environmental artists as ecofeminists?”<sup>159</sup>

As we have seen, the emergence of Ecofeminist Art in the late 1960s responded to various factors, including the growing influence of Conceptual Art, spiritual feminism, and the exclusion of women from the art market. These circumstances stimulated the creativity of ecofeminist artists, leading to the development of innovative media and exploration of previously unexplored artistic territories. Ecofeminism represents one of Contemporary Art’s most abundant undiscovered treasures: it can captivate the viewer, stimulate their intellect, and inspire change, states Fabijanska. Additionally, Ecofeminist Art restores art’s initial purpose, which emerged prior to the Enlightenment, when the worlds of science and art were employed as tools to comprehend the world and propose solutions. Throughout the years, however, Ecofeminism has progressed from a focus on femininity and essentialism to an awareness of gender as a social construct, and even further, towards an analysis of gender performativity itself as well as its intersections with other social categories. Today’s ecofeminist artists obviously still address environmental degradation with varied responses to patriarchal power structures, capitalism, and the idea of progress, but the movement is much more racially diversified. Especially indigenous ecofeminists draw inspiration from their own traditions to maintain a deep connection with nature and strengthen their critique of colonialist politics, which perpetuates overextraction, water privatization, and the marginalisation of indigenous peoples. Moreover, they employ Social Practice and activism as tools, placing more importance on criticising worldwide corporate strategies and devising innovative proposals for a sustainable existence on Earth. However, as Fabijanska argues, defining modern Ecofeminist Art is challenging since it covers a broad range of expressions to explore the intricate link between women and the natural environment. These explorations may entail imagining a divine Goddess figure, assessing the negative effects of environmental degradation on reproductive and children’s health, investigating queer

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

concepts of identity intertwined with nature, and many more. As Fabijanska argues, Ecofeminist Art is inherently polyphonic, with different viewpoints and opinions that may be at odds with each other. For example, certain artists protect endangered species within the framework of posthumanism, while others, such as Native American artists, incorporate hunting techniques and the use of fur in their ecofeminist works<sup>160</sup>. Due to this, the selection of the works for the exhibition was based on variety. Fabijanska selected 28 artworks by 16 artists, with half being pioneers of Ecofeminist Art and the other half being from the younger generation. The curator embraced the principle of presenting artists who have devoted a significant portion, if not their entire lives, to exploring Ecofeminism, rather than presenting individual, isolated projects within the field. Although the exhibition focused on Ecofeminism in the United States, the curator aimed to highlight the global impact of our political and consumer preferences<sup>161</sup>. Accordingly, the curator achieved this by including works from ecofeminists that deal with the issues that regions of significant environmental vulnerability have to face, from Alaska to the Amazon to the Arctic.

*The Earth Ambulance* (1982) by Hèlene Aylon opens the exhibition. Aylon artistic practice has always been intertwined with the politics of warfare and their profound impact on both human life and the environment. Furthermore, the artist explores how these issues intersect with the patriarchal religious systems that form the foundation of our civilization. As a painter, ritual performer, and installation artist, Aylon remained dedicated to her mission of rescuing the Earth and freeing the concept of God from the constraints of patriarchy throughout her extensive career, explains Fabijanska<sup>162</sup>. *The Earth Ambulance* was a remarkable piece. It consisted of a real ambulance transporting pillowcases filled with soil rescued from Strategic Air Command military bases, which controlled the majority of U.S. nuclear weaponry and armaments. Departing from Lawrence Berkeley Laboratories in Berkeley on the 2nd of May 1982, *The Earth Ambulance* traversed ten states, gathering soil from multiple nuclear facilities such as the Livermore Weapons Laboratory, situated in California. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of June, during the SALT disarmament talks<sup>163</sup>, a mass demonstration was planned at the United

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<sup>160</sup> A. Mazur, M. Fabijanska, *Emergency Art History. Monika Fabijanska in Conversation*.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> M. Fabijanska *ecofeminism(s)*.

<sup>163</sup> The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) comprised two sets of negotiations and international agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union.



Nations in New York City. The project's goal was to draw attention to surveillance activities at SACs. Aylon was already associated with the Women's Party for Survival (later Women Against Nuclear Destruction) and taught "Performance Art as Anti-War Strategy" at the Feminist Institute in Berkeley during the autumn of 1981. The artist collaborated and incorporated ritualistic elements into her work, resulting in performative ceremonials. Her project was also inspired by her Jewish heritage and her concern for refugee women who carried their most valuable possessions in a "sac". Similarly, Aylon and her colleagues sought to protect the Earth itself and its diverse richness, symbolising it in their "sacs" (the pillows) as they moved them to a safer location.



*Ill. 11 - Helène Aylon, The Earth Ambulance (detail), 1982, inkjet pigment print, 27.94 x 21.59 cm. Estate of Helène Aylon, Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects*

In the realisation of this project, Aylon was joined by twelve women from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds, including Marie Fowler, a Native American who introduced them to the lands of the Hopi and Navajo. Through this encounter, they were confronted with the devastating realisation that the deadly nuclear cycle originated in these ancient lands, which were being exploited for their uranium reserves. Arriving at the headquarters of the United Nations, the group carried used army stretchers decorated with pillowcases on which women from across the country had written "dreams of peace and nightmares of war". They emptied the soil from the



pillowcases into transparent containers, creating a visually evocative installation of different soils across the street from the UN - a testament to the power of painting combined with the artistic medium.

Following, the feminist and social activist Andrea Bowers displays *Feminist Spirituality and Magical Politics Scrapbook* (2003). In her practice, and within the broader context of protest movements in the United States, Bowers addresses issues such as climate justice and environmental activism, as well as immigration and violence against women. Drawing from her personal experience of participating in and being arrested during a sit-in dedicated to the protection of an oak forest located in Arcadia, California, the artist produced a series of works in 2013 that aimed to capture the essence of activism and preserve records of these ventures, which are often excluded or omitted from authorised historical narratives, reflecting the disregard for women's achievements throughout history.

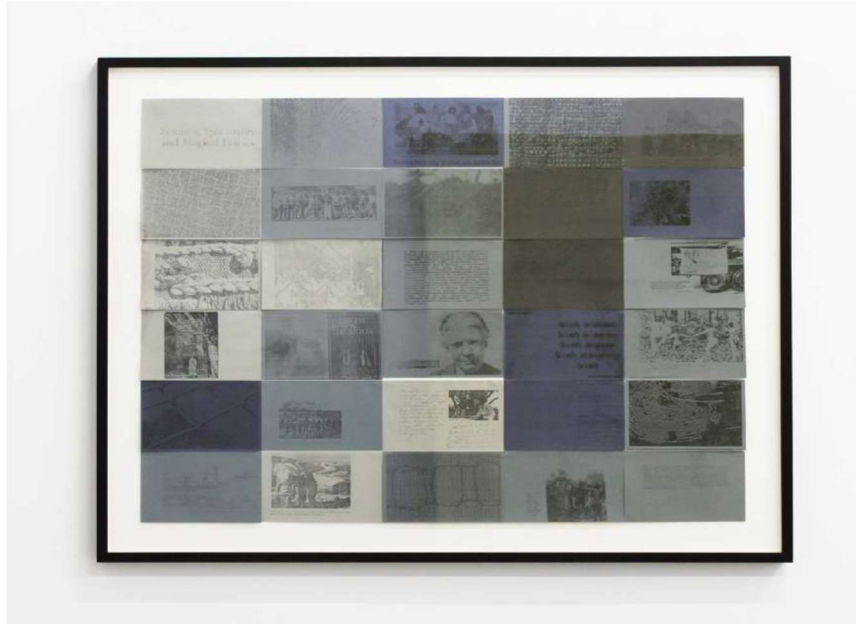
Bowers presents modern activists participating in diverse causes in her videos, which include tree-sitters (as depicted in *Vieja Gloria* from 2003), anti-fracking activists (as shown in *The United States v. Tim DeChristopher* from 2010), and indigenous demonstrators opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline<sup>164</sup> (as portrayed in *My Name Means Future* from 2019). Early history and lasting impacts of Ecofeminism are essential subjects in Bowers' works as well, explains the curator. In the *Magical Politics* series, which features the artwork here showcased, *Feminist Spirituality and Magical Politics Scrapbook* (2003), the author delves into the spiritual underpinnings of pioneering ecofeminist activists as she pays tribute to their acts of civil disobedience. Among the actions highlighted, there are the 1980 Women's Pentagon

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<sup>164</sup> Energy Transfer Partners (ETP) built the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) to transport crude oil from the Bakken field in North Dakota to Illinois. The pipeline crosses under the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers and Lake Oahe and lies within half a mile of the current boundaries of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. The land on which the pipeline is being built was purchased from the tribe by Congress in 1958. Notably, the DAPL passes through significant cultural and burial sites that are of immense importance to the Standing Rock Sioux and other Native nations. While much of the DAPL was approved and built under state regulations, the federal government, specifically the Army Corps of Engineers, has jurisdiction over 37 miles of the pipeline's 1100-mile route. This jurisdiction includes areas where the pipeline crosses or runs under streams, rivers, and federal dams. The Standing Rock Sioux, along with other Native communities and environmental organisations, strongly oppose the pipeline due to concerns about greenhouse gas emissions associated with the oil being transported. There are also concerns that a potential spill could lead to contamination of state and tribal drinking water sources.

(See more at: <https://eelp.law.harvard.edu/2017/10/dakota-access-pipeline/> [last access on 07 December 2023]).

Action and the 1981 Mothers of Peace protest at the Diablo Nuclear Power Plant, which was built near the San Andreas Fault. Furthermore, it is probable that the artist Helène Aylon participated in those protests, as her Earth Ambulance was present in the proximity a few months later.



Ill. 12 - Andrea Bowers *Feminist Spirituality and Magical Politics Scrapbook*, 2003, photocopy on paper, 84.5 x 108.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery.

Then, there is Betsy Damon with her pivotal work *The Memory of Clean Water*, made in 1985. The installation, a paper pulp cast of a desiccated riverbed in Utah, serves as a tribute to the river prior to its damming. The vibrant colours dominating the 250-foot cast are primarily derived from indigenous plants utilized in the pulp, explains the curator<sup>165</sup>. Initially, Damon was active as a performance artist in New York during the 1970s, as we saw in the previous paragraph, and her work was significantly influenced by spiritual feminism and healing rituals. Afterward, she devoted her artistic practice to public space projects, concentrating on water decontamination. Her significant public projects, such as the *Living Water Garden* in Chengdu, China (1998), were devised to inform and present how water can purify itself through the utilisation of natural processes. Damon's advocacy for living water stems from her research at sacred water sites on Native American reservations in the United States and in Tibet. The artist draws a comparison between the natural water cycle and the blood

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<sup>165</sup> M. Fabijanska, *ecofeminism(s)*.

circulation within the human body, drawing inspiration from the spiritual scientific writings of anthroposophist Theodor Schwenk. Through this hypothesis, the artist aims to highlight the interconnectedness between humans and nature.



Ill. 13 - Betsy Damon, *The Memory of Clean Water*, 1985. Courtesy of the artist.

Proceeding, we find once again Agnes Denes, here with *Rice/Tree/Burial* (1977). This artwork is recognised as the first ecological site work, states Fabijanska<sup>166</sup>. It was originally performed in 1968 in Sullivan County, in New York State, as a private ritual. For this performance, Denes used rice as a symbol of life, trees chained together to denote human interference with nature, and buried her haiku poetry as a nod to invention, explains the curator<sup>167</sup>. The act of burial held great symbolism, representing the cycle of passing, reconnecting with the soil and earth, disintegration, and transformation. Denes described her work as a way to communicate with the earth and with future generations. A decade later, she performed this ritual on a much larger scale at Artpark, in the New York State, which was once a former industrial dumpsite near Love Canal<sup>168</sup>.

In 1977, Denes planted a half-acre of rice near Niagara Falls in response to soil toxicity. One year later, she chained some trees together in a sacred forest that had previously been a burial ground. To conclude, on the 20th of August 1979, Denes buried a time

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> A landfill site, which in the 1970s was the scene of a major environmental catastrophe.

capsule at Artpark that contained microfilms of her letter, addressed to “Dear Homo Futurus”, as well as responses to an international survey exploring human values and the future of humanity. It is scheduled to be unveiled in 2079.

This project led to some of Denes’ most famous works, such as *Wheatfield, a Confrontation* (1982) and *Tree Mountain – A Living Time Capsule – 11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years* (1992–96), which we have already come across. Throughout her long career, we have seen how Denes’ works emphasise the importance of conservation as an individual and collective responsibility that extends far into the future, underscoring the significance of preserving our environment for generations to come.



Ill. 14 - Agnes Denes, *Rice/Tree/Burial: Burial of the Time Capsule*, 1979/2020. One of three ink jet pigment prints on Epson Ultrasmooth Fine Art Paper, 27 x 12/20 x 55 cm (each sheet), 6 images at 10 x 12 x 18/20 cm on each sheet.  
Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

Moving on, we come across the artist Eliza Evans who has degrees in theology, economic sociology, and visual arts. Evans believes that art is most powerful when it disrupts established patterns. By concentrating on the effects of climate change and everyone’s ability to make choices, her projects seek to enlighten and distribute awareness. A particular project of hers, *All the Way to Hell* (2020), challenges the customary method used by oil and gas companies to obtain rights to privately-owned mineral estates. For this exhibition, Evans has developed this new project in which she offers the mineral rights of three acres of her Creek County, Oklahoma, property for sale to 1.000 people. This proposal aims to prevent fossil fuel development in the area. The project strategically utilizes litigation as a tool for resistance, similarly to Aviva Rahmani’s *The Blued Trees Symphony*. By dividing the mineral rights into smaller

portions, *All the Way to Hell* (2020) turns overhead into a weapon. Evans is extending an invitation for individuals to buy a portion of her mineral rights to serve as a trial for a participatory and informative sit-in approach. Inspired by the previously mentioned Agnes Denes' 1992 project, *Tree Mountain - A Living Time Capsule - 11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years*<sup>169</sup>, Evan's *All the Way to Hell* allows for active engagement and encourages participants to take responsibility for bringing about change.

Within the exhibition, we also encounter Bilge Friedlaender, a minimalist feminist artist whose work is currently undergoing a rediscovery. Drawing inspiration from the spiritual feminism movement, Friedlaender's art embraces the belief in the interconnectedness of all things and the absence of discrimination between the soul and matter within nature. Initially, Friedlaender's works on paper were influenced by Agnes Martin and driven by her fascination with the mathematical principles that can be found in nature. Eventually, the artist ventured into creating minimalist paper installations incorporating natural elements such as linen, sticks, stones, sand, and beeswax. Notably, her artwork *Heart Nests* (1977) explores the inherent human tendency towards embracing, which may be rooted in the comfort of the initial womb embrace and the subsequent search for that embrace after birth, as reported by Fabijanska<sup>170</sup>. Wrapping and protecting her artworks becomes a crucial aspect of Friedlaender's practice, in fact she ingeniously designed her installations to be folded and packed into small, nested boxes.

In 1989, Friedlaender created *Cedar Forest* for the 2nd International Istanbul Biennial, which marked her return to Turkey after thirty years. In fact, she emigrated to the U.S. after completing her studies at the Istanbul Academy of Fine Arts in 1958. The artwork on display includes handmade paper sculptures, an artist's book of etchings and a monoprint, as well as an installation made using natural materials to create an immersive atmosphere. The artwork took inspiration from the epic of Gilgamesh and aims to explore concepts of mythology, gender, and environmental issues. In the ancient tale, Gilgamesh, the Sumerian king, seeks fame and glory through the destruction of the sacred cedar forest, an act that is often celebrated as a heroic endeavour in traditional interpretations. However, Friedlaender challenges the myth of

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<sup>169</sup> M. Fabijanska *ecofeminism(s)*.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.



the male hero and reclaims the presence of Ishtar, who is traditionally portrayed as a threatening goddess. Instead, in the artwork, the artist portrayed her as a metaphor for the awakening of women consciousness, explains Fabijanska<sup>171</sup>, challenging the perception of Ishtar as a negative force. In this way, she disrupts and subverts the conventional gender dynamics and power structures embedded in the myth, offering a new interpretation of it in which Ishtar represents empowerment instead of antagonism. Here, it is evident how the distinctions between Ecofeminist Art and Goddess Art frequently blur and the two movements tend to overlap. Through *Cedar Forest*, Friedlaender invites viewers to inquire into societal norms, reassess conventional myths, and contemplate female empowerment and environmental consciousness, provoking reflections on the impacts of human actions and the relationship with nature.



Ill. 6 - Bilge Friedlaender, *Cedar Forest*, 1989, nine freestanding handmade linen paper sculptures, variable dimensions. Courtesy: The Estate of Bilge Friedlaender

As we move on, we find the Native American artist Sonya Kelliher-Combs, which in her artworks honours the traditions and heritage of her people, namely the Iñupiaq from the North Slope of Alaska and the Athabascan from the Interior. Her art especially highlights the obstacles encountered by her community, such as marginalisation, mistreatment, and land degradation caused by industrial exploitation and climate

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

change. Kelliher-Combs employs conventional techniques and locally sourced materials in her artistic practice, drawing inspiration from the ancestral connection between her people and the environment. Materials like animal skin, fur, and membrane were vital for their cultural practices. Growing up in a rural community, Kelliher-Combs learned the significance of land and sea as sources of spiritual and physical nourishment for a healthy life. The beliefs she grew up with involve honouring all that is harvested, exhibiting regard for the environment that sustains individuals, families, and communities, caring for one another, and displaying moderation by refraining from taking more than is necessary, reports the curator<sup>172</sup>.

The history of Alaska's native people has been marked by deep multigenerational trauma, from the almost complete eradication of Alaskan Natives by Russian and American colonizers in the 1830s and 1900s, to the physical and cultural abuse endured in boarding schools and churches, particularly by children and women. Therefore, Kelliher-Combs' art delves into this trauma and addresses the struggle of Indigenous women against stereotypes that objectify and sexualise them, amplifying the voices and experiences of her community while addressing the ongoing challenges they face. Her work provides a platform for dialogue, advocacy, and healing, and powerfully highlights the historical and contemporary injustices experienced by the Alaska Native people.

Sonya Kelliher-Combs' artwork may be perceived as potentially contradictory within the framework of ecofeminist theory, which emphasises non-exploitative relationships with nature, due to her use of animal fur and other elements. However, it is crucial to approach her work from a decolonial perspective, recognising the artist's Native American identity and the cultural traditions that inform her artistic choices. Viewing her art solely from a Western perspective risks obscuring the indigenous knowledge and practices embedded in her work. The incorporation of animal materials into her art practice is deeply rooted in her heritage and reflects the longstanding relationship between her people and the natural world. Therefore, it is essential to approach her work with cultural sensitivity and an understanding that indigenous perspectives on the environment and sustainability may differ from mainstream Western ideologies<sup>173</sup>.

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<sup>172</sup> M. Fabijanska *ecofeminism(s)*.

<sup>173</sup> However, as analysed in Chapter 1, this may risk omitting all forms of criticism and idealising the lives of indigenous communities, which can be problematic. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the

By acknowledging and respecting Kelliher-Combs' indigenous identity and artistic choices, we can engage in a more nuanced dialogue that recognizes the complexities of her art within the context of her cultural heritage, which is something very important when discussing works of indigenous artists.

Moving on along the exhibition, we discover Brazilian artist Carla Maldonado's 2019 film, *Dystopia of a Jungle City, and the Human of Nature*, which was a collaborative project with the Cipiá Indigenous Community Centre in Manaus. The film serves as a touching tribute to the daily lives of the indigenous community, which are closely intertwined with nature, achieved through skilful editing that mirrors the rhythms of forest sounds. Simultaneously, it also functions as a clear warning of the harmful policies of the far-right administration under the leadership of Jair Bolsonaro, which markedly compromised the protective legislation governing the Amazon rainforest and its inhabitants. Significant to this, an agreement was established between the United States and Brazil in September 2019, to encourage private-sector growth in the Amazon, thereby worsening the vulnerability of the region. The documentary illuminates the critical challenges endured by the Amazon, such as escalating wildfire outbreaks due to drought and the advancing deforestation that endangers the forest's precarious tipping point. If surpassed, this threshold would culminate in the permanent demise of the entire forest, with catastrophic implications for worldwide climate stability.

Through Maldonado's artistic vision, the viewer can bear witness to the decay of this delicate environment. The film portrays the tragic conflict between Bolsonaro's regime and global corporations on one side, and indigenous communities on the other. The indigenous people, who live near "civilization" and are becoming more reliant on it, now ask us to examine our stance and make a stand, states Fabijanska<sup>174</sup>. Therefore, Maldonado explores both rural and urban areas to document the narratives of marginalised communities and the challenges they face, employing Ecofeminism as an approach to counteract the harm inflicted upon the environment by patriarchal hierarchies and capitalist economies. In some of her other works, she investigates the quest for successful uprisings that can guarantee our survival, frequently turning to

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complexities of Indigenous realities rather than oversimplifying them, as emphasized as well by numerous indigenous feminist theorists.

<sup>174</sup> M. Fabijanska *ecofeminism(s)*.



women leaders within indigenous communities in Brazil who possess a profound awareness of our interdependence with the natural world, for example in her 2019 multimedia installation titled *Amazon Inferno*<sup>175</sup>.

Proceeding, we find different artworks by Mary Mattingly. As Fabijanska argues<sup>176</sup>, Mattingly is a highly respected artist in the ecofeminist movement, which exhibits her skills by employing Social Practice and activism to confront global corporate strategies while envisioning progressive solutions for life on Earth. The artist, as an integral part of her artistic practice, often creates innovative methods for sustainable living after natural disasters and for future societies, envisioning ecological spaces and communities that promote resource sharing. One noteworthy piece is *Microsphere: A Breathed Commune* (2012), which features people living in dome-shaped structures that float on industrial waterways. Mattingly's works frequently predicted issues linked with the increase in both migration and water privatisation, with many scenes depicting a post-apocalyptic era where nomadic individuals rely on wearable technology or self-contained systems for survival, explains the curator.



*Ill. 16* - Mary Mattingly, *Swale*, 2017, Archival Pigment Print, 76 x 76 cm, Edition 1/5.  
Courtesy of Cloudfactory and Robert Mann Gallery.

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<sup>175</sup> Find more on the artist official website: <https://www.carlamaldonado.com/>

<sup>176</sup> M. Fabijanska *ecofeminism(s)*.

One of Mattingly's latest projects, which is also a self-sufficient living model, is *Swale* (2016 - ongoing). *Swale* was created due to the artist's concern for food security and the preservation of water as a shared resource, as growing food on public land is prohibited. This 130 by 40-foot barge, which is a floating food garden, has docked at various piers in New York City and enables people to obtain free fresh food products. *Swale* is a multifaceted project that also incorporates living quarters, rainwater collection, and an autonomous solar power system. In 2016, the addition of *Fugue in B Flat* by Jessica Segall enriched the collaborative aspect of the project, which serves as both an art installation and a community engagement initiative, achieved through extensive collaboration with local groups. In 2020, *Swale* ceased operating as a result of the pandemic and is currently being rebuilt on a permanent vessel and will re-launch in the summer of 2024<sup>177</sup>.

In conclusion, Mattingly's interdisciplinary approach allows her to tackle complex environmental issues by combining art, activism, and education, fostering dialogue and awareness about pressing ecological concerns. Overall, her art serves as a catalyst for conversations about sustainability and aims to urge individuals to reflect on their role in preserving and respecting the natural world.

Next, we encounter once again the Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta, this time displaying *Bocayu* (1981). This piece is part of a group of incisions, *Esculturas Rupestres*, Mendieta created in the Escaleras de Jaruco caves situated in Cuba. This series take their names from Taíno goddesses, such as Bacayu, portrayed by this artwork and symbolising the Light of Day, or Atabey, which represents the Mother of the Waters. Although Land Art frequently involves modifying or rearranging large areas of land, Mendieta aimed to form an intimate bond with nature, striving not to disturb but rather blend in with it, as previously discussed. Therefore, her ceremonies and ephemeral impressions on the environment were intended to be communicated to viewers solely through photography and film.

In *ecofeminism(s)* we find also displayed Aviva's Rahmani's *Physical Education* (1973), one of her early performances. This is the first work in which she draws parallels between violence against women and the environment, a theme which has

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<sup>177</sup> As can be found on the artist official website: <https://marymattingly.com/blogs/portfolio/swale-2016-ongoing>

since had a profound impact on her artistic practice. For it, participants were instructed to travel from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) to the Pacific Ocean carrying a plastic bag filled with tap water mixed with soil collected along the way. Upon reaching the beach, they were instructed to pour the contents of the bag onto the sand and replace them with ocean water, symbolising the human-made water cycle and the impact of human activities on the environment. Finally, the mixture was to be flushed down the CalArts toilet which, as a symbol of private and intimate spaces, becomes a metaphor for violation and abuse. The documentation of the performance, presented as a photo essay in its original format of a slide projection, captures the essence of the artwork.

Approaching the end of the exhibition, we meet the Japanese artist Hanae Utamura. Born in 1980, her focus is on the importance of ritual in open landscapes, specifically those impacted by nuclear contamination, which as we have seen is a recurring theme in Ecofeminist Art. Since Utamura grew up eighty miles from Fukushima and her father was a scientist working in nuclear power research, her art mainly centres on the relationship between nature and civilization. She examines the connection between mankind, science, and the natural realm, using her body as a medium for expression. Utamura's artistic practice focuses in moving away from the human perspective and instead engaging with the environment as an entity that existed long before humans and will continue to exist long after. Her artworks present hypothetical standpoints that surpass the human understanding, investigating non-human and post-human perspectives. In her *Secret Performance Series* (2010-2013), here displayed, Utamura performs prolonged rituals that seem to be efforts to control nature. Nonetheless, nature takes an active role as a co-creator in these performances, questioning the superiority of humans over the natural world. Inspired by early ecofeminists, Utamura stresses the connection between the energy in the universe and the energy in our own bodies. Moreover, the artist's interventions delicately underscore the ephemerality of art and challenge the conventional idea of leaving a mark into the world. As we already had the opportunity to analyse, the rejection of the desire for a lasting impact is another common theme in Ecofeminist Art, and Utamura's pieces align with this worldview, emphasising the fluid and constantly shifting aspects of our relationship with the environment.

Lastly, to conclude this exhibition, we have three pieces from Cecilia Vicuña series *Precarios* (2014). Vicuña, a Chilean artist, poet, and activist, is well-known for this contemplative series, which delves into several themes including vulnerability, impermanence, and the precariousness of being. To symbolise this, the structures often appear suspended, or floating. The artist employs a broad range of materials including discarded objects, natural fibres, and various found materials to craft this intricate and fragile installations. In *Precarios*, Vicuña poses a challenge to traditional ideas of permanence and stability by encouraging viewers to reflect on the transient quality of existence, as well as, once again, the interconnectedness between humanity and nature. Using her creations as poetic metaphors for the fragile state of our environment, social systems, and personal experiences, the artist urges us to consider our responsibility towards the delicate ecosystems and communities we inhabit.

Entrenched within feminist and indigenous principles, Cecilia Vicuña's unique art practice is founded on her strong belief that the political, environmental, and indigenous issues are inherently interconnected and necessitate holistic contemplation. Her focal point centres around the colonial legacy, highlighting the systematic deprivation of indigenous rights and ecological destruction. Vicuña views art as a potent means of political resistance, and with her work she aims to redirect attention towards narratives that have been erased or marginalized for too long by traditional ones, uncovering lost perspectives. Her *precarios* consist of carefully crafted collages of both natural and artificial materials, including driftwood, feathers, stones, yarn, wires, and bottle caps, combining ritualistic and assemblage elements into minute compositions. Called also "basuritas"<sup>178</sup> by Vicuña, these sculptures, act as miniature totems that encapsulate the essence of haiku poetry. *Precarios* first appeared in 1966, installed by the artist along the coastline of Concón. In fact, Vicuña states that *precarios* belong to the oceans, as many of their components were collected from there, so they are incomplete until the sea embraces them once more, reports Fabijanska<sup>179</sup>. Following the Chilean coup d'état orchestrated by General Pinochet in 1973, Cecilia Vicuña sought refuge in London. Here, between 1973 and 1974, she created over 400 *precarios* as an act of political defiance in response to the coup.

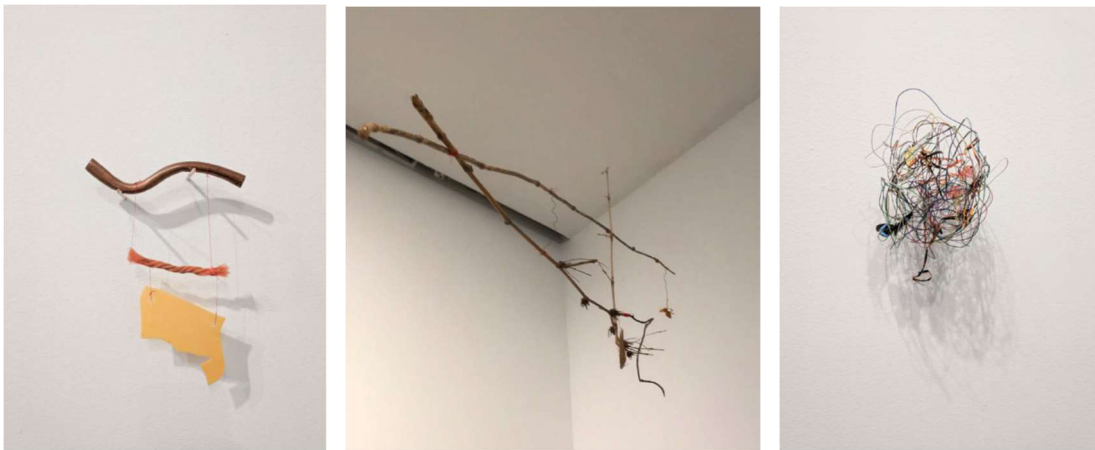
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<sup>178</sup> From the Spanish *basura*, meaning rubbish.

<sup>179</sup> M. Fabijanska *ecofeminism(s)*.

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that Vicuña has also written twenty-two books covering her visual art installations and poetry which have been translated into several languages. Furthermore, she frequently presents on an international level, being recognised in recent years as one of the most influential Ecofeminist artists.

As we will further explore in the next chapter, she was also featured in 2022 Venice Biennale - *The Milk of Dreams*, where she was awarded the Golden Lions for Lifetime Achievement.



Ill. 17 - Cecilia Vicuña, from the left: *Tres elementos (Precarios)*, 2014, mixed media, 17.5 x 14.6 x 0.6 cm; *Untitled (Precarios)*, Date TBD, mixed media, 30.5 x 87 x 0.3 cm; *Bola de cable (Precarios)*, 2014, mixed media, 14.6 x 15.2 x 11.9 cm. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul.

In conclusion, the *ecofeminism(s)* exhibition presented an impressive variety of artistic expressions, tracing the development of Ecofeminist Art from the 1970s to the present day. As noted by John Jones<sup>180</sup>, it is intriguing to consider the early position occupied by Ecofeminist Artists in the art scene. The emergence of Ecofeminist Art is closely linked to the widespread marginalisation faced by women, nature, and indigenous communities within society, while it also stems from the marginality and exclusion of women artists in the commercial art industry. Unfortunately, this has resulted in the underrepresentation and disregard of many influential ecofeminist artists throughout the historical discourse of art. Despite making substantial contributions, ecofeminist artists have frequently been overlooked, with their voices often being suppressed or

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<sup>180</sup> J. Jones, *Revisioning inclusive tomorrows through the art of 'ecofeminism(s)'*, in "Stir World", 7 September 2020, <https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-revisioning-inclusive-tomorrows-through-the-art-of-ecofeminism-s> [last access on 28 November 2023]

diminished due to systemic biases and limited opportunities for recognition and representation. This dual aspect of marginalisation highlights the pressing need for a critical reassessment of art history narratives, one that both acknowledges and amplifies the vital role played by ecofeminist artists in shaping artistic discourse and challenging societal norms. To rectify this historical oversight and promote a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of art history, it is crucial to shed light on the experiences and artistic pursuits of these artists. As we have observed, the restrictions of the commercial art industry have led them to utilise unconventional, organic, and ephemeral materials, which has aligned them with various movements, including Conceptual Art and Land Art. Moreover, the scarcity of documentation, whether intentional or not, has obstructed the identification and recognition of Ecofeminist Art. In the 21st century, in fact, Ecofeminism's popularity had declined significantly, prompting Monika Fabijanska to investigate art movements and trends from the previous five decades that can be incorporated within this extensive framework, emphasising the importance of safeguarding it and examining its remarkable artistic legacy. In addition, the exhibition provides a platform to address social and environmental concerns while promoting community building by bringing the legacies of established ecofeminist artists to a new generation of practitioners. Fabijanska, in fact, stresses the significance of preserving this legacy and believes that women should not bear the burden of reinventing the wheel with each new generation. In conclusion, we have explored how the multidisciplinary nature of Ecofeminism provides an advantageous arena for scholars who work within the areas of feminism, ecology, and associated subjects to explore shared terrain and participate in informative conversations. In fact, the aim of this exhibition was precisely to promote collaboration among scholars and practitioners, facilitate connections, and encourage a collective exploration and comprehension of the principles and practices of Ecofeminist Art.

### **3. Where are we at? The 59. Venice Art Biennale National Pavilions as a point of observation**

As we have analysed so far, exploring the complex relationship between art and Ecofeminism requires a nuanced understanding of the different expressions and approaches used by artists. Indeed, as previously examined, artists convey this relationship through a range of different artistic forms, encompassing Goddess Art, Eco Art, and Land Art, among others. These expressions serve as a medium for artists to explore the interplay between environmental and feminist concerns, reflecting their unique perspectives and creative visions.

As the Venice Art Biennale is widely recognized as a preeminent platform for Contemporary Art worldwide, it provides an exceptional opportunity for artists to engage with current global issues. The 59th edition of the Venice Biennale in particular, entitled *The Milk of Dreams* (2022) and curated by Cecilia Alemani, director of New York's High Line Art, offers a valuable platform for comprehending the latest developments at the crossroads of art and Ecofeminism.

The theme of the exhibition, which we will now further explore, centres precisely around the concept of imagining new harmonies and co-existences that were once deemed impossible and proposing unexpected solutions, as they distance themselves from anthropocentrism, has explained the President of the Venice Biennale Roberto Cicutto<sup>181</sup>. Furthermore, in addition to the exhibition curated by Alemani in the Central Pavilion and in the Arsenale, the National Pavilions showcase works by artists from around the world, highlighting the diversity and richness of different artistic practices and contributing to the overall global character of the Biennale, which promotes cross-cultural exchanges and dialogues, emphasising the interplay between local and global dynamics. The Sámi Pavilion, Estonia Pavilion, and Chile Pavilion for instance, which we will analyse in the following sections, present various artistic forms that explore ecofeminist concepts from diverse perspectives and cultural backgrounds, significantly contributing to the discourse of Ecofeminism in Contemporary Art.

In the Venice Biennale 2022 exhibition halls, in fact, numerous artists showcase their unique perspectives on Ecofeminism, resulting in a multifaceted examination of

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<sup>181</sup> R. Cicutto, *Introduction*, in *Biennale Arte 2022 - The Milk of Dreams*, exhibition catalogue (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April - 27 November 2022), Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, cit., p.22.

political and social concerns. Through their creative expressions, they often challenge the widespread devaluation and objectification of women while exploring the complex interrelationships between humanity and the environment, and the consequences of patriarchal capitalism on communities and ecologies that suffer from marginalisation. Employing different artistic media, these artists sought to evoke an empathetic connection with nature, thereby compelling viewers to re-evaluate their personal and societal connections with the environment.

Exploring the wide array of artworks featured within the central exhibition and the National Pavilions of the Venice Biennale provides a valuable opportunity to examine the intricate and ever-changing discourse surrounding the intersection of art and Ecofeminism, providing artists with a platform to express their innovative interpretations, and allowing audiences to analyse and delve into the nuanced connections between these two fields. As we will observe, the artworks on display not only demonstrate the artists' unique perspectives on Ecofeminism, but also provide insights into the ways in which this dialogue is constantly evolving on both a global and a national scale. In fact, it is important to note that each nation selects the artists who will represent it at the Venice Biennale, showcasing national artistic practices, cultural traditions, and social contexts, which highlights the connection between art, identity, and national representation. However, the artists' contributions transcend mere national representation, as National Pavilions serve as microcosms of larger global conversations, reflecting on how different ideas and artistic expressions resonate within specific cultural, social, and political contexts.

### **3.1 *The Milk of Dreams*: insights on Ecofeminism**

As we start talking about 2022 Art Biennale, it is impossible not to mention that, for the first time in its 127-year history, it featured a significant majority of women and gender nonconforming artists from all over the world, particularly from non-Western countries, reflecting the current global panorama of creative ferment.



According to Cecilia Alemani, this curatorial decision deliberately moves away from the traditionally male-centric role dominating the history of art and culture<sup>182</sup>, with the aim to demonstrate increasing recognition and appreciation of artists who have long been underrepresented or marginalized within the art community. Alemani, who is the first Italian woman the Biennale has ever had as a curator, has chosen to give space to artists who have been historically overlooked, making this decision with the awareness that criticism may arise due to the unprecedented nature of the operation. As she states in the catalogue, this is something personally important to her and it has greatly influenced her curatorial work in recent years<sup>183</sup>.

In an interview for Frieze, Alemani states how, nevertheless, the choice of the artists was not based on specific quotas or percentages, but the exhibition simply reflected the world and society we live in<sup>184</sup>.

Considering the Institution's historical context, which was founded 1895, it is clear that achieving equal representation of man and women artists' works on display has been a rarity. The average participation of women artists has in fact consistently remained below 10% throughout the previous editions of the Art Biennale since its opening at the turn of the last century. A worrying statistic that, however, well highlights the ongoing challenges faced by women and gender non-conforming artists in achieving recognition and equal opportunities in the art world, reports Alemani. Over the last two decades, the proportion of women artists featured in the Biennale has gradually increased to 30% and, although the upward trend is encouraging, it is important to critically examine whether this figure truly reflects the demographic breakdown of artists in Italy or the wider international art community. It is unfortunately evident that the representation of artists in the Biennale still falls short of accurately reflecting the diversity and talent present in society today.

The 2019 edition, curated by Ralph Rugoff, was an exception to this pattern as it achieved gender parity in the Biennale exhibition spaces for the first time in its

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<sup>182</sup> C. Alemani interviewed by M. Papini, *The Milk of Dreams*, in *Biennale Arte 2022 - The Milk of Dreams*, exhibition catalogue (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April - 27 November 2022), Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, cit., p.32

<sup>184</sup> M. McLean, *Cecilia Alemani: 'I Think the Shows Have Become More Professional or More Perfected, and Kind of Lost'*, in "Frieze", 22 April 2022, <https://www.frieze.com/article/59th-venice-biennale-2022-interview-cecilia-alemani> [last access on 9 January 2024].

history<sup>185</sup>. This was in fact a significant milestone towards addressing gender imbalances in the art world.

Furthermore, since no previous edition has been referred to as “the men’s Biennale”, Alemani sees no reason why this one should be renamed “the women’s Biennale”, as has been done by numerous Italian and international publications:

I think it is important to remember that in 57 editions of the Venice Biennale over 125 years, there has been always, always, always a great majority of males. And it’s never been a problem. And to me it’s interesting that gender becomes a topic of interest when you reverse it<sup>186</sup>.

While many artworks featured in the exhibition are created by explicitly feminist and ecofeminist artists, such as the already mentioned Cecilia Vicuña (whose work we will further explore), and Simone Leigh<sup>187</sup>, among many others, there are also artists who, according to the curator, probably would not describe their practice as feminist<sup>188</sup>. According to Alemani, *The Milk of Dreams* could be viewed as a feminist show only if the term is understood to highlight the importance of connections and interdependence. As we have previously discussed, while it is important to note that there are various interpretations and expressions of feminism today, this is precisely the point that its exponents are trying to convey since decades. Therefore, it could be argued that the 2022 Art Biennale had a significant feminist dimension, whether it was completely intentional or not.

However, as the curator acknowledges<sup>189</sup>, exhibiting many women, gender nonconforming and non-Western artists alone does not definitively solve the problem of underrepresentation, but it can prompt a corrective impact, or at least provide significant symbolic value. In fact, in this context it is particularly important to also address the systemic barriers and biases that have historically hindered the participation and recognition of these artists, which involves scrutinising and questioning the systems, organisations, and connections that sustain gender

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<sup>185</sup> C. Alemani interviewed by M. Papini, *The Milk of Dreams*.

This was also reported in various articles published in 2019 by publications such as Frieze, Artribune, Flash Art and E-Fluxus.

<sup>186</sup> M. McLean, *Cecilia Alemani: ‘I Think the Shows Have Become More Professional or More Perfected, and Kind of Lost’*.

<sup>187</sup> Winner of 2022 Art Biennale Golden Lion Award for the Best Participant at the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia.

<sup>188</sup> C. Alemani interviewed by M. Papini, *The Milk of Dreams*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

inequalities, while also advocating for programmes that can enhance their career growth and visibility in the arts.

The inclusion of artists from diverse backgrounds, stressed by Alemanni in this edition of the Art Biennale, enriches the exhibition by bringing forth unique perspectives, narratives, and aesthetics, while promoting a more comprehensive understanding of art and a more inclusive and equitable environment for artists worldwide.

The 2022 Venice Biennale in this way provides a platform for artists, actively challenging historical imbalances in the art world and promoting a more balanced representation of artistic achievements. The shift towards inclusivity and diversity in the art world is significant as it represents a broader cultural change, that reflects a growing recognition of the importance of representation, equality, and the need to challenge established narratives. The Venice Biennale, actively engaging with artists from diverse backgrounds, not only showcases their work but also creates opportunities for dialogue and cross-cultural exchange, promoting a broader comprehension of art and culture.

Moving on to the theme of this Biennale, as the curator Cecilia Alemanni explains in the catalogue, the title of the exhibition, namely *The Milk of Dreams*, is derived from a book of fairytales by Leonora Carrington. In it, the surrealist artist portrays a magical world where imagination is the prism through which life is constantly reinvented, and one is allowed to change, transform, and become different from oneself. Alemanni's Biennale, in fact, showcases fantastical creatures and transformative figures, just like the ones portrayed by Carrington in her tales, that invite viewers to embark on a journey exploring the metamorphosis of bodies and the essence of what it means to be human.

As the curator states<sup>190</sup>, the exhibition arose from the discussions she had with multiple artists in the months leading up to the opening. From these conversations, a plethora of questions have persistently emerged that not only relate to the current moment in history, where the survival of humanity itself is at stake, but also encapsulate many others that have long permeated the fields of science and the arts.

Therefore, the exhibition is based on a series of questions: “How is the definition of the human changing? What constitutes life, and what differentiates plant and animal,

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<sup>190</sup> C. Alemanni interviewed by M. Papini, *The Milk of Dreams*, p.25.

human and non-human? What are our responsibilities towards the planet, other people, and other life forms? And what would life look like without us?”<sup>191</sup>

To answer them, this edition of Biennale Arte is articulated around three main thematic areas, explains the curator, that often intersect: the portrayal of the body and its transformations, the interaction between individuals and technology, and the intricate links connecting the bodies and the Earth<sup>192</sup>. For their development in the exhibition, the studies on the post-human by the philosopher Rosi Braidotti<sup>193</sup> have been fundamental, as Alemani points out.

As discussed in Chapter 1, contemporary developments are challenging the Enlightenment concept of modern man as the measure of all things. The anthropocentric worldview is in fact slowly giving way to a more fluid conception of human identity, as we enter a new era that recognises the limitations and biases inherent in the Enlightenment paradigm. This perspective acknowledges that the boundaries of human existence are not fixed, but rather permeable and subject to renegotiation. It acknowledges the existence of diverse experiences, identities, and abilities that go beyond traditional definitions. This invites consideration of the possibility of alliances and collaborations between humans and other species, as it is increasingly recognised that various life forms are interconnected and interdependent. Therefore, developing new relationships that go beyond traditional hierarchies requires moving away from dominating and exploiting non-human species and embracing mutual respect, cooperation, and shared responsibilities. This is of great importance as it expands the concept of “human” to include a broader spectrum of individuals and experiences.

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Rosi Braidotti is a contemporary philosopher and feminist theorist. Born in Italy in 1954, she is currently the director of the Centre for the Humanities at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. Braidotti has contributed significantly to gender studies, critical theory, and posthumanism. Her theoretical framework, known as “nomadic theory”, challenges traditional concepts of identity, subjectivity, and power. Braidotti explores the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and postcolonialism in her writings, where she critically examines the contemporary context’s impact on our understanding of identity and the self, considering globalization, technoscience, and environmental crises. Braidotti advocates for a more inclusive and non-hierarchical understanding of subjectivity that embraces diversity and difference. Braidotti’s most influential works include *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (1994), *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002), and *The Posthuman* (2013).

This change in perspective is evident in the fantastical creatures depicted in Leonora Carrington's works. Her artistic creations, which serve as the inspiration for the entire exhibition, act as a catalyst for discussions and reflections on the fluidity and complexity of human identities, inviting viewers to question and transcend the limitations of a strictly anthropocentric worldview. As stated by Alemani, under the increasing pressure of technology, the boundaries between the body and the object have been transformed, giving rise to mutations that are re-mapping subjectivities, hierarchies, and anatomies.

At the same time, our society exhibits a profound dichotomy in its relationship with technology, points out the curator. On the one hand, there is a discourse of technological optimism, suggesting that scientific progress can constantly improve human life; on the other, there is a growing concern about the increasing presence of machines, driven by the rise of automation and artificial intelligence. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted this issue, as physical distancing measures have led to an increased dependence on electronic devices for communication, reinforcing the perception of technology-mediated isolation.

*The Milk of Dreams* was created and planned precisely during the time of great instability and uncertainty caused by the outbreak and spread of the COVID epidemic. For this reason, the Venice Biennale was forced to postpone this edition by one year, a rare occurrence that has only happened twice before, during the two World Wars. It was also the first time, perhaps since the wars, that the artistic director was unable to see many of the works or meet most of the artists personally.

Although *The Milk of Dreams* is not an exhibition about the pandemic, it does, of course, reflect the changes and challenges of our time. As demonstrated by history, and in the particular case of the Venice Biennale, art and artists can inspire new ways of living together and offer endless possibilities for transformation. Alemani once again states this, highlighting the potential of art to shape our world.

It is in this socio-cultural context, that many contemporary artists have adopted a paradigm that goes beyond anthropocentrism to celebrate a renewed sense of connection with the non-human world, encompassing animals and the Earth itself. Their artistic pursuits aim to foster a deep sense of kinship, bridging the perceived gap between organic and inorganic entities, animate and inanimate matter. Simultaneously,

some artists are responding to the erosion of supposedly universal systems by reclaiming localised forms of knowledge and engaging with emergent politics of identity, explains the curator<sup>194</sup>.

Furthermore, some of them aim to a re-enchantment of the world, as theorised by feminist philosopher and activist Silvia Federici, which refers to the ability to reject capitalist instances and reconnect with nature, others, and the body<sup>195</sup>. To achieve this, they often combine indigenous traditions with personal mythologies, similar to the artistic approach of Leonora Carrington. This fusion encourages a reconnection with ancient wisdom, prompting a renewed sense of wonder and reverence for our place in the world.

Therefore, contemporary artists can challenge us to rethink our relationship with technology, reclaim diverse knowledge systems, and establish new connections across traditional boundaries of species, culture, and identity through their creative expressions, often echoing the instances of radical ecologism and Ecofeminism.

As discussed by Alemani in conversation with Marta Papini, Surrealism had a significant impact on the exhibition's concept, particularly because of the role played by women artists and the international nature of the movement. Furthermore, this movement continues to inspire artists today, who show a renewed confidence in the transformative force of the imagination and in magic, reflecting society's search for alternative ways to navigate uncertain times.

As explained by J.J. Charlesworth in an article for "Art Review", while during the 20<sup>th</sup> century the mainstream contemporary art world tended to downplay or ignore countercultures that embraced spiritualism and the occult and considered non-Western spiritual art merely as ethnography or superstition, in the last decade there has been a significant shift. Once countercultural movements are now mainstream, and this is reflected not only in the art world, but also in academic revisions and rediscoveries<sup>196</sup>. Therefore, it is worth noting how the opening of recent exhibitions such as *Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity* at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection (9 April – 26 September 2022, parallel to the Art Biennale) and *Surrealism Beyond Borders* at the

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<sup>194</sup> C. Alemani interviewed by M. Papini, *The Milk of Dreams*.

<sup>195</sup> See Federici's book *Re-Enchanting the World; Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (2018) discussed in Chapter 1, paragraph 1.2.1.

<sup>196</sup> J.J. Charlesworth, *The Return of Magic in Art*, in "Art Review", 30 May 2022, <https://artreview.com/the-return-of-magic-in-art/> [last access on 1 February 2024].

Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (11 October 2021 – 30 January 2022) and Tate Modern in London (24 February – 29 August 2022)<sup>197</sup> are further reinforcing this consideration. As the Biennale, the exhibition at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection has particularly focused on the art of Leonora Carrington, with the aim of drawing attention to the women artists of the Surrealist movement whose work has been long overlooked, such as Remedios Varos and Leonor Fini, among others.

Throughout her Biennale exhibition, Alemani sought to create a coherent narrative that would facilitate visitors' comprehension of the interconnections and sources of inspiration between the contemporary artworks on display and their historical antecedents, particularly from the 20th Century. In pursuit of this objective, the curator conceived five distinct "time capsules", designated as smaller historical segments within the exhibition, which effectively display noteworthy artworks and documents obtained through major museum loans and an accurate selection. These time capsules serve the purpose of facilitating a deeper exploration of the exhibition's central themes and fostering a nuanced comprehension of the references it incorporates thanks to a trans-historical approach. As Alemani explains:

[...] These presentations also prompt reflection on how the history of art is constructed around museum practices that establish hierarchies of taste, and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. They thus participate in the complex process of rewriting and rereading history that has marked the last few years, when it has become clearer than ever that no historical narrative can ever be considered final. Though the stories told in these capsules might seem at first glance like minor, lesser-known episodes, they truly foreshadow the concerns of recent decades, and can serve as interesting models for our time<sup>198</sup>.

For the first of them, *The Witch Cradle*, which is located inside the Central Pavilion, Alemani presents a museum-like display of women Surrealists and other avant-garde artists who shared some of the ideas of the movement but worked outside of it, as well as others whose works correspond with it visually. The time capsule takes its title from a Maya Deren's rare short film from 1943 that visitors could find here on display. It was shot in Peggy Guggenheim's *Art of This Century* gallery in New York and starred none other than Marcel Duchamp<sup>199</sup>.

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<sup>197</sup> C. Alemani interviewed by M. Papini, *The Milk of Dreams*.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid, cit., p. 31

<sup>199</sup> K. White, *Don't Call Them Witches: Your Guide to the Séance Photographers, Psychic Visionairies, and Occultists of the Venice Biennale*, in "Artnet News", 20 April 2022, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/guide-to-the-witches-of-the-venice-biennale-2101401> [last access on 9 January 2024]

The central topic of this time capsule, which as we have seen is also the thread running through the entire exhibition, is undoubtedly that of the body and its representations. As mentioned in the previous chapter, women artists have historically focused on and explored the body, making it the central theme of their practice and research. This is due to a deep-rooted and culturally conditioned relationship with care work, which often has led them to deal with the themes of birth, death, and subsistence. Due to their exclusion from the public sphere and the denial of a voice by a patriarchal system, women have been forced to start from their own subjectivity to reclaim themselves, starting precisely from the only space available to them, the battlefield that has historically been, and still is, the women's body.



Ill. 18 – *The Witch's Cradle*, time capsule, Central Pavilion

Women surrealist artists displayed a view of the body that surpassed the Enlightenment's notion of the individual by exploring its metamorphic, hybrid, and irrational dimensions. This concept began to be contested at the beginning of the 20th century with the emergence of new technologies, the study of psychoanalysis, which greatly influenced the art field, and the feminist concept of the *Neue Frau*, which laid the foundations for women's emancipation. Other avant-garde movements as well, such as Futurism, Bauhaus, New Objectivity, Harlem Renaissance, and Négritude, also rediscovered female archetypes, esoteric and shamanic traditions, and explored hybridization with machines.



Moreover, women artists who were part of these movements were particularly concerned with reassessing personal and collective identity. They rejected heteronormative gender norms by exercising control over their own bodies with complexity and ambiguity, often using irony, something usually missing from their male counterpart's practice<sup>200</sup>. Among the artists here showcased, we find Baya Mahieddine, Toyen, Loïs Mailou Jones and Antoniette Lubaki, who employ nature as a metaphor for women's condition, anticipating and foreshadowing later ecofeminist issues. Others, such as Mary Wigman, Jane Graverol, Laura Wheeler Waring, and Meta Vaux Warrick make use of archetypal figures, an element that reappears in the 1970s in Goddess Art, as we analysed in the previous chapter.

As explained in the exhibition catalogue, even if each one in her own way, what all the artists here showcased have in common is their use of the metamorphosis as a means of responding to identity constructs<sup>201</sup>. Through their artworks, these artists explore the fluidity and malleability of identity, questioning fixed notions and societal expectations while inviting viewers to reflect on their own perceptions of it.

Also featured here are in fact Claude Cahun's extraordinary self-portraits, in which the artist blurred gender and identity, the bleeding signs of Carol Rama, the provocations of Valerie de Saint Point, and the contributions of the Italian futurists. Additionally, it showcases the perturbing surrealist visions of Remedios Varo, Dorotea Tanning, Leonor Fini, and Leonora Carrington, which are populated with animals and hybrids. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the themes explored in the exhibition and their multiple manifestations, it is essential to start by exploring their origins. Therefore, it is by examining the artists featured in *The Witch Cradle* and their unique approaches that we can trace the roots of these themes and their evolution over time. The second capsule, *Corps Orbite*, is instead dedicated to the relationship between body and language. Although not directly related to Ecofeminist Art instances, it is worth mentioning it as it pays homage to Mirella Bentivoglio's exhibition *Materializzazione del Linguaggio*, which was presented at the 1978 Art Biennale.

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<sup>200</sup> A. Mahon, *Daughters of the Minotaur: Women Surrealists' Re-Enchantment of the World*, in "Biennale Arte 2022 - The Milk of Dreams", exhibition catalogue (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April - 27 November 2022), Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, pp. 86-159, here p.87.

<sup>201</sup> C. Alemani interviewed by M. Papini, in *Biennale Arte 2022 - The Milk of Dreams*, exhibition catalogue.

Organised at Magazzini del Sale (salt warehouses), it was the Institution's first major exhibition of women artists and was therefore dubbed the "pink ghetto" by many at the time. For this occasion, in fact, Bentivoglio brought together eighty women artists and writers of the 19th and 20th centuries who were part of Visual and Concrete Poetry movement. Although they were very active, they were often excluded from major group exhibitions, as addressed in the anthology *Women in Concrete Poetry 1959 - 1979*, published in 2020<sup>202</sup>. This publication, in fact, aims to highlight previously unrecognised contributions to the history of Concrete Poetry, underlines M. N. Liberty in an article for "The Brooklyn Rail", taking as its point of departure precisely Bentivoglio's exhibition at the Venice Biennale<sup>203</sup>.

In *Corps Orbite* Alemani proposes some of the artists presented in 1978 once again, demonstrating a connection between the works of Bentivoglio herself, Mina Loy, and Ilse Garnier with the visions and mediumistic experiments of Milly Canavero, Linda Gazzera, Josefa Tolrà, and Georgiana Houghton. Additionally, it connects to other forms of writing such as the automatically woven canvases of Rosemarie Trockel or the vibrant graphemes of Carla Accardi. This historical capsule therefore explores the relationship between body and language, using writing as an instrument of self-determination and an expressive form of desire, as long being used by feminist writers, from Gertrude Stein to Virginia Woolf<sup>204</sup>.

Instead, the most significant time capsule for our analysis of Ecofeminist Art representation at the 2022 Venice Biennale is undoubtedly *A Leaf A Gourd A Shell A Net A Bag A Sling A Sack A Bottle A Pot A Box A Container*. It draws inspiration from a 1986 essay titled *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* by the writer Ursula K. Le Guin, in which the author examines anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher's radical reconstruction of the origins of human civilization.

Fisher postulated that the ability for human ingenuity begins with actions of gathering and tending to the environment, challenging the conventional understanding of human

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<sup>202</sup> A. Balgiu, M. de la Torre, *Women in Concrete Poetry 1959–1979*, Brooklyn, NY: Primary Information, 2020.

<sup>203</sup> M. N. Liberty, *Women in Concrete Poetry 1959–1979*, in "The Brooklyn Rail", November 2020 Issue, [https://brooklynrail.org/2020/11/art\\_books/Women-in-Concrete-Poetry-19591979](https://brooklynrail.org/2020/11/art_books/Women-in-Concrete-Poetry-19591979) [last access on 1 February 2024].

<sup>204</sup> J. Higgie, *Body Language*, in *Biennale Arte 2022 - The Milk of Dreams*, exhibition catalogue (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April - 27 November 2022), Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, pp. 160-185, here p. 164.

technological development. Therefore, Le Guin questions the widely held notion that arrows, and other hunting tools were among the first technical achievements made by humans. Rather, she contends that the first tools made by our ancestors were bags and nets for carrying items, as well as receptacles for storing grains, berries, and nuts. While we are familiar with the weapons and hunting equipment of our ancestors, Le Guin argues, we have long overlooked the importance of containers as the first human invention<sup>205</sup>.



Ill. 19 - *A Leaf A Gourd A Shell A Net A Bag A Sling A Sack A Bottle A Pot A Box A Container*, time capsule, Arsenale.

Building upon Le Guin’s pivotal ideas, which are also echoed by Donna Haraway in *Sowing Worlds: A Seed Bag for Terraforming with Earth Others*<sup>206</sup>, the focus of this capsule lies in understanding the symbolic, spiritual, and metaphorical associations between nature and the human body through an iconological examination of diverse container forms. These forms include nets, bags, eggs, shells, bowls, and boxes, and are manifested in sculptural configurations, volumetric ceramics, and scientific

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<sup>205</sup> C. Sharpe, *What Could a Vessel Be?*, in “Biennale Arte 2022 - The Milk of Dreams”, exhibition catalogue (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April - 27 November 2022), Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, pp. 366-383, here p.367.

<sup>206</sup> D. Haraway, *Sowing Worlds: A Seed Bag for Terraforming with Earth Others*, in *Biennale Arte 2022 - The Milk of Dreams*, exhibition catalogue (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April - 27 November 2022), Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, p. 422-427.

inquiries into corporeal reproduction. Critical of the exclusive symbolic association of the female body as a container, particularly in the context of pregnancy, this presentation embraces the notion of the container as more than a mere receptacle for external objects. Instead, it recognises it as a potent metaphorical apparatus and a fully realized expressive instrument, explains the catalogue.

For instance, the design objects displayed here by Sophie Taeuber-Arp are functional containers that embody the modernist ethos through their abstract decoration, while Ruth Asawa's wire-woven womb sculptures remain open and transparent, without a clearly defined exterior or interior, constantly interacting with the surrounding environment. In contrast, Toshiko Takaezu's vividly glazed porcelain and stoneware are fully enclosed, evoking planetary bodies or the fertility and mystery of nature. Maria Sibylla Merian's meticulous studies of insects and flowers from Suriname explore volumetric forms as containers for carrying life, paying particular attention to nature's sculptural genius. Similarly, Bridget Tichenor's paintings feature fantastical shell-covered creatures with volumetric bodies.

The presented artworks frequently feature the recurring motif of the egg, which serves as a metaphor for the creation of new life. In Mária Bartusová's oval plaster casts, it meets the more literal models of papier-mâché uterus that Aletta Jacobs used in her groundbreaking anatomical studies. Tecla Tofano's ceramics instead, provide a strong political and feminist agency to a medium that has traditionally been sexualized and undervalued, while Maruja Mallo created portraits of hybrid bodies out of the concave forms of shells. For this reason, Dalí himself nicknamed the artist, which was one of his friends, "midad ángel, midad marisco"<sup>207</sup>.

It is not a coincidence that some of the most openly Ecofeminist works featured in *The Milk of Dreams* are precisely located in the portion of the Arsenale surrounding this historical capsule. Furthermore, many of these also strongly intertwine ecological and feminist concerns with decolonial ones, such as a series of drawings by Brazilian artist Rosana Paulino displayed along the Corderie. The artist is particularly known for her socially conscious artistic practice, as her work focuses on issues of race, gender, and identity. In her practice, she especially explores the complex and often overlooked

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<sup>207</sup> C. Sharpe, *What Could a Vessel Be?*, means "half angel, half sea creature".

narratives of Afro-Brazilian history and experiences using a variety of different media, such as printmaking, drawing, sculpture, and installation.

The *Jatobá* (2019) series of drawings displayed in the Arsenale, is a significant part of Rosana Paulino's artistic practice. The series is named after the Jatobá tree, a native Brazilian species known for its strength and resilience, which for the artist represents an archetype of female wisdom. In these drawings, the female body is depicted intricately intertwined with natural elements such as leaves and roots.

*Senhora das Plantas* series (from 2015) also explores the relationship between women, nature, and spirituality. It draws inspiration from Afro-Brazilian religious practices, such as Candomblé and Umbanda, and delves into the symbolism of plants and their connection to feminine power and healing. Through her intricate and vibrant artworks, the artist portrays women as guardians and nurturers of the natural world, embodying strength and wisdom<sup>208</sup>. The *Senhora das Plantas* series also addresses the marginalisation and erasure of Afro-Brazilian spiritual practices and traditions, highlighting their importance in shaping cultural identities.



Ill. 20 - Rosana Paulino, from *Jatobá* series, 2019, watercolour and graphite on paper, 65x50 cm, Corderie, Arsenale.

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<sup>208</sup> E. Simões, *Ancestry, territory and science*, in “Arte Brasileiros”, 17 October 2022, <https://en.artebrasilios.com.br/artista/rosana-paulino/> [las access on 13 January 2024].

By combining botanical imagery with cultural symbolism, Paulino prompts viewers to contemplate the interdependence of nature, spirituality, and the endurance of Afro-Brazilian heritage. With her practice, Rosana Paulino challenges societal norms, confronts historical injustices, and amplifies the voices of those who have been silenced, making a significant impact in the Brazilian art scene and beyond.

Another Brazilian artist worth mentioning is Solange Pessoa. Her practice encompasses a wide range of themes and mediums that reflect her profound engagement with the natural world and its interconnectedness with human existence. Drawing inspiration from her upbringing in the Brazilian countryside and the practice of other Brazilian artists such as Maria Martins, Pessoa often incorporates organic materials like soil, plants, and animal bones into her artwork, creating a tactile and sensory experience. Her installations and sculptures evoke a sense of both harmony and tension, as she juxtaposes elements of nature with artificial objects and symbols of industrialization. Through this juxtaposition, Pessoa raises questions about the impact of human activity on the environment and the urgent need for sustainable living practices.



Ill. 21 - Solange Pessoa, *Soníferas I*, 2020, oil on canvas, 158x150 cm, Corderie, Arsenale.

In addition to her material choices, Solange Pessoa's body of work explores the relationship between the human body and the natural world. She frequently incorporates references to the human form in her installations, sculptures, and mixed media artworks, using it as a symbolic representation of the interconnectedness between individuals and the environment. Pessoa's artistic exploration examines the complex dynamics between humans, nature, and the broader ecological context, drawing attention to the detrimental effects of patriarchal systems and capitalist exploitation, which have led to ecological degradation. Solange Pessoa, in fact, intertwines artistic expression with ecological concerns to create captivating visual experiences while advocating for the urgent need for ecological awareness and responsible action.

Also on display along the Arsenale is the installation *Earthly Paradise* (2022) by the Colombian artist Delcy Morelos. While Morelos's early works focused on painting, and were characterised by the use of red pigment, over her 30-year career she expanded her material investigations to include ceramics and textiles. This led to a gradual development of a more sculptural practice, which includes materials such as earth, clay, fabrics and plant fibres, culminating more recently in large scale multisensory installations. After witnessing the devastating effects of land dispossession and violence in her homeland, Morelos has embraced Earth as the principal symbolic medium within her expansive installations. Drawing from her indigenous heritage, Morelos considers this material not only as a homage to Mother Earth but also as an embodiment of a living entity, representing the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The incorporation of herbs and spices in her installations indirectly alludes to an ancestral Andean ritual, where offerings of food were presented to the goddess Pachamama following a bountiful harvest. These large-scale installations reflect our current ecological concerns, as Morelos returns the earth to its original state through a modern ritual<sup>209</sup>.

About her installation for the Venice Biennale, *Earthly Paradise* (2022), the artist says that it is: "A penetrable, fragrant, receptive, feminine, and fertile sculpture. It is also an enabler of life. It occupies the space by creating a horizon of black mixed soil,

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<sup>209</sup> J. Sánchez González, D. Morelos, *Delcy Morelos: Working with Soil to Free the Soul*, in "MoMa Magazine", 25 May 2023, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/900> [las access on 13 January 2024].



scented, and sweetened with alimentary and fragrant substances”<sup>210</sup>. The installation’s maze-like structure invites viewers to engage with the earth in a unique way, as visitors can perceive the scent of earth mixed with hay, maize flour, cocoa powder, cloves, and cinnamon, while also sensing the moisture, temperature, texture, and darkness of the medium.



Ill. 22 – Delcy Morelos, *Earthly Paradise*, 2022, earth, clay, cinnamon, cloves, cocoa, cassava starch, tobacco, copaiba, bicarbonate, charcoal, variable dimensions, Corderie, Arsenale.

This work evokes the minimalist aesthetics of land artists, as it recalls Walter De Maria’s *New York Earth Room* (1977), but while a lot of Land Art was characterized by an approach to earth as inert matter to be manipulated<sup>211</sup>, Morelos’s use of it draws inspiration from Andean and Amazonian cosmologies, conveying the idea that nature is not an object to be exploited and controlled from an external and privileged perspective. Instead, it suggests that we are part of nature ourselves, and as the earth infiltrates and influences our bodies and senses, our human existence takes on a new form.

Sandra Vásquez de la Horra installation as well catches the eye. The artist spent her formative years in Chile during Augusto Pinochet’s military regime, eventually departing the country in the 1990s to pursue her studies in Germany.

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> As we have analysed in the previous chapter.



Through her work, Vásquez de la Horra usually challenges traditional representations of women and interrogates power structures inherit in both patriarchal and colonial systems, offering a nuanced perspective on the complexities of gender dynamics in society. Vásquez de la Horras's art, in fact, explores the complexities of decolonial discourse, drawing inspiration from her Chilean heritage and Latin American cultural motifs. Her works provide a platform for the reclamation and reinterpretation of indigenous narratives, challenging dominant historical ones and confronting the ongoing effects of colonization. In addition, she incorporates elements of Ecofeminism Art, employing symbolic imagery of flora and fauna to represent Mother Earth and underscoring the significance of environmental stewardship, therefore highlighting the interconnectedness between women and the natural world. Through her exploration of gender inequality, environmental consciousness, and post-colonial narratives, she demonstrates strong a commitment to using art as a catalyst for critical dialogue.



III. 23 - Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, *Las Cordilleras Encontradas*, 2017-2021, various materials, Corderie, Arsenale.

For *The Milk of Dreams*, the artist arranged her artworks, which are usually drawings, in a wood structure she designed herself, which resembles a house or a hut. Some of them portray women's bodies blending with surreal landscapes, as in *Erupciones* (2019) and *Flotante y su genealogía* (2020), vanishing into light, as in *Saludo a Olorun* (2021), or becoming the bearers of texts, as in *América sin Fronteras* (2017) and *La Voz de un Pueblo que lucha* (2019). Moreover, the use of accordion folds in her

graphite, watercolour, and wax-on-paper pieces creates a sculptural space for her figures in a new series, *PACHAMAMA* (2021), which references once again the Andean Earth Goddess.

When considering Ecofeminist Art at the 2022 Venice Biennale, it would be impossible not to talk about the outstanding work of Cecilia Vicuña, another Chilean artist we already met along the way. As we have mentioned in Chapter 2, in recent years Vicuña's work has gained increased recognition and scholarly attention within the context of Ecofeminist Art, and her artistic commitment earned her the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the 2022 Venice Art Biennale.

Despite being largely unnoticed by the mainstream art market for a long time<sup>212</sup> in fact, Vicuña's art practice has been revisited and reevaluated through an ecofeminist lens as the global discourse around environmental issues and gender inequality has intensified. As we have analysed, her artistic exploration of the interconnections between nature, culture, and feminism strongly resonates with contemporary concerns related to ecological sustainability and social justice. In addition to her participation at the group exhibition *ecofeminism(s)* at the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York (19 June - 24 July, 8-26 September 2020), her first solo show in a New York museum, *Cecilia Vicuña: Spin Spin Triangulene*, was held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in 2022 (27 may – 5 September 2022)<sup>213</sup>. As the 74-year-old Chilean artist and poet is now being recognised and acclaimed for the relevance of her work, Tate Modern honoured this achievement with a monumental installation by Vicuña, called *Brain Forest Quipu*, at Turbine Hall in October 2022.

The art critic Lucy Lippard, whom we already met in Chapter 2 as well, has written extensively about Cecilia Vicuña art practice, praising her unique approach, and emphasizing her ability to bridge diverse artistic disciplines and challenge traditional boundaries. In her article *Floating Between Past and Future: The Indigenisation of Environmental Politics*<sup>214</sup>, for example, Lippard recognises how Vicuña's art is deeply

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<sup>212</sup> H. Cotter, *The Precarious Art of Cecilia Vicuña*, in "The New York Times", 9 June 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/09/arts/design/cecilia-vicuna-guggenheim-artist-poet-review.html> [las access on 13 January 2024].

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> L. Lippard, *Floating Between Past and Future: The Indigenisation of Environmental Politics*, in "Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry" Volume 43, Issue 1, Spring/Summer 2017, London: Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, pp. 30-37.

rooted in social and political contexts, particularly in relation to issues of feminism, indigeneity, and the environment, expressing admiration for Vicuña's work, able to evoke a connection to the natural world and ancestral knowledge. Additionally, she has praised Vicuña's use of materials and techniques, which as we have seen include found objects, organic matter, and traditional craft practices, which the artist uses to investigate topics such as the delicate nature of life, environmental sustainability, and the relationship between humanity and the natural world.

At the 59<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, visitors could find *NAUfraga*, an installation created by the artist specifically for the occasion. The name is derived from the Latin words *navis* (ship) and *frangere* (to break). The installation is part of her *precarios*<sup>215</sup> series and was created using ropes, strings, and small debris found around Venice, such as shells, bits of plastic, scraps of nets, and straw threads, perfectly in line with the aesthetic of the rest of the series. These items appear to remain suspended in space, much like the feathers of Indian amulets, at the mercy of the wind and other natural forces.



Ill. 24 – Cecilia Vicuña, *NAUfraga*, 2022, twigs, plastic, metal, wire, sticks, etc., variable dimensions. Central Pavilion, Gardens.

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<sup>215</sup> See Chapter 2.

According to the artist, the work symbolizes the impact of human activity on the environment and is a reflection on the exploitation of natural resources, which is causing Venice to sink, as well as many other lands around the world. Furthermore, she adds, it represents a journey towards the memory of the Lagoon, its vegetation, and the ropes knotted by its first inhabitants. It catalogues small, ephemeral things and remembers ancient gestures, while also conveying a message for hope: “May the rustling of its twigs move our hearts that we may care for the Earth’ because the Earth cares for us”<sup>216</sup>.

Displayed in the Central Pavilion of The Biennale, visitors could also find multiple large paintings, such as *Leoparda de Ojitos* (1977) and *La Comegente* (1971), inspired by 17th-century Cuzco painters who subverted Christian iconography under Spanish colonial rule in Peru.

At the awards ceremony, held during the Biennale’s inauguration on the 23 of April, Cecilia Vicuña said:

It is a great honour and a joy for me to receive the Golden Lion Award at a time when humanity is trying to keep peace and justice against all odds. I believe our art and consciousness can play a role in the urgent need to move away from violence and destruction, to save our environment from impending collapse. Venice is particularly meaningful to me. Some of my paternal ancestors came to Chile from Northern Italy in the 19th century, so I learned to love its history and art as a child. My grandparents would be honoured to know of the Award. My maternal line is indigenous, so I am very proud to be part the Venice Biennale curated by Cecilia Alemani, that highlights “artists imagining a posthuman condition challenging the presumed Western condition using the white man as a measure of all things”. I am joined by an extraordinary set of artists sharing in the spirit of *The Milk of Dreams* we badly need to find a new way of being in this Earth<sup>217</sup>.

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<sup>216</sup> L. Giudici, *Cecilia Vicuña. A poem of knots and threads*, in “Arte Morbida”, 26 April 2022, <https://www.artemorbida.com/cecilia-vicuna-una-poesia-di-nodi-e-fili/?lang=en> [las access on 13 January 2024].

<sup>217</sup> C. Vicuña, Biennale Arte 2022 - Awards Ceremony, in Biennale YouTube Channel, 23 April 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIwMWo9dXIg> [las access on 13 January 2024].

Regarding the other historical capsules arranged by Alemani along the main exhibition, *Technologies of Enchantment* takes inspiration from the exhibition *Arte Programmata, Arte Cinetica, Opere moltiplicate. Opera Aperta.* organised by Bruno Munari in Milan in 1962. Here, artworks by key Italian artists from the '60s such as Dadamaino, Grazia Varisco, and Nanda Vigo are displayed.

Artists within Programmed and Kinetic Art movements aimed to incorporate technology and programming into their artistic practice, embracing the newly discovered potential of machines and computers to generate visual patterns, movements, and transformations. Those movements were also characterised by a collective spirit and a shared approach to art that aimed to challenge the notion of individual authorship. This was rooted in the belief that art should be a communal experience, accessible to a wider audience that goes beyond the confines of the art world. Therefore, artists within Programmed and Kinetic Art often collaborated with scientists, engineers, mathematicians, and other experts to explore the intersections between art, technology, and science, to create interactive and dynamic artworks that actively engaged with the viewer, blurring the boundaries between the artwork and the audience. Furthermore, it is noteworthy highlighting how the collaborative and non-authorial nature of Programmed and Kinetic Art reflected the wider social and cultural context of the 1960s, characterised by a growing interest in collective movements, participatory practices, and the democratisation of art.

Additionally, some artists within the movement were particularly interested in investigating the conceptual connection between technology and the human body, analysing how technology and programmed systems could imitate or simulate human behaviours, movements, or patterns. This investigation, which raised questions about the relationship between human agency, automation, and the role of the body in relation to technological processes, further blurred the boundaries between art, science, and engineering.

This leads us to the last time capsule, *Seduction of the Cyborg*. In her 1985 work, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway introduced the concept of the cyborg as a metaphorical figure that challenges traditional boundaries between human and machine, nature and culture, and gender and identity. Moreover, Haraway identifies

the female body as the space in which these boundaries appear more vulnerable<sup>218</sup>. Haraway argues that the cyborg blurs the boundaries between the organic and the technological, representing a hybrid entity, envisioning a post-human world where new possibilities for identity, embodiment, and social relations can emerge. In the art field as well several artists, such as Rebecca Horn, Hanna Höch, and Louise Nevelson, explore the intersections of technology, biology, and culture. It is worth noting that these artists were not active during the same period, as Höch was a key figure of the Dada movement in the early 20th century, while Nevelson rose to prominence in the mid-20th century with her monumental wooden assemblages, and Horn gained notoriety in the late 20th century with her thought-provoking installations and performances. However, as with other time capsules, Alemani associates certain artists based on the subject matter, rather than on the historical period in which they lived, to provide visitors with a broader overview of the topic.

In this case, what these artists have in common is the use of digital media, interactive installations, robotics, bio-art, and other technologies to investigate the relationship between human and non-human entities, challenging established ideas of identity, gender, and expression. In fact, they often explore the implications and consequences of our ever-increasing reliance on technology and the ways in which it shapes our understanding of ourselves and the world around us, challenging normative concepts of the body and identity, disrupting binary thinking, and exploring both the possibilities and potential dangers of merging humans and machines. Therefore, their art provides a platform for critical reflection on the social, cultural, and ethical implications of technological advancements and invites viewers to engage with complex questions about the future of humanity and the boundaries of being.

To conclude our short overview of *The Milk of Dreams*, before delving into the national participation's projects, we find Precious Okoyomon's installation *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (2022). For this installation, displayed at the very end of the Corderie, the artist has created an environment in which mysterious post-human figures made from wool, yarn, dirt, and blood emerge. To realise it, Okoyomon has worked with soil and various types of plants, including kudzu, an invasive vine species

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<sup>218</sup> M. Biro, *The Cyborg as Producer*, in "Biennale Arte 2022 - The Milk of Dreams", exhibition catalogue (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April - 27 November 2022), Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, pp. 498-537, here p.499.



native to Asia that was introduced to the US as a way to combat soil erosion caused by massive cotton plantations, and sugar cane. The latter was grown in the artist's grandmother's garden in Nigeria, making it an element that links Okoyomon to their roots. As both of these species are inevitably linked to colonialism and slavery narratives, and therefore to racialisation and diaspora, the installation aims to represent the connection of these issues with nature by claiming the plants as a symbol of rebirth, but also of anti-colonialist protest. In fact, while their growth at the Biennale may be limited, it is possible to imagine a scenario where it is not, and plants take over<sup>219</sup>.



Ill. 25 - Precious Okoyomon, *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, 2022, Corderie, Arsenale.

After visiting the central exhibition, the Biennale experience continues and expands with a look at the National Pavilions. In the 2022 edition, there is a clear continuity of themes and trajectories between *The Milk of Dreams* curated by Cecilia Alemani and the individual participations, which highlights the global urgency that characterises the themes animating the exhibition. In fact, although a general theme is chosen to provide a cohesive framework for the exhibition, it is not strictly imposed upon the curators of the National Pavilions. Instead, they are given the freedom to interpret and respond to the general theme in their own way, according to their artistic vision and the artists

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<sup>219</sup> A. Greenberger, *Artist Precious Okoyomon Brings Lush Flora and Live Butterflies to Venice Biennale*, in "Art News", 20 April 2022, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/precious-okoyomon-venice-biennale-installation-1234625947/> [last access on 13 January 2024].

they choose to showcase. Therefore, each curator can bring their unique perspective and curatorial vision to the pavilion, resulting in a rich tapestry of artistic expressions from different cultures and backgrounds. By granting curators some degree of autonomy, the environment of the Venice Biennale encourages them to present thought-provoking works that reflect the contemporary art scene of their respective countries, enhancing artistic exploration, experimentation, and cultural exchange.

For instance, the 2019 Venice Art Biennale curated by Ralph Rugoff, *May You Live in Interesting Times*, did not have a defined theme per se. Its aim was to investigate how artists and curators engage with pressing issues, address socio-political concerns, and examine the impact of various global phenomena on individuals and societies in their own unique way, emphasising the role of art as a means of understanding and responding to the challenges and changes that define our times<sup>220</sup>.

In addition to the Biennale main focus, articulated around the spaces of the Arsenale and the Giardini, it is noteworthy to highlight that there are other interesting participations scattered throughout the city. However, due to the city's morphology and the huge extent of the exhibition, it is nearly impossible to see everything. Therefore, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the instances and proposals presented by the pavilions, it is highly recommended to make a selection before beginning the visit, in order to be able to see the most prominent ones.

Within the seventy-nine national participations of the 2022 Art Biennale, several ones stood out due to their unique qualities, such as originality, formal completeness, or their ability to address significant issues of contemporary relevance. Out of this diverse array of proposals, for our analysis on how Ecofeminist and post-colonial concerns are expressed within the art world, we will analyse three of them, which are particularly relevant in this regard on many levels. However, it is worth noting that the value the Venice Biennale lies in the cohesive and integrated nature of the presented proposals, as what contributes to the relevance and impact of the exhibition is the interconnectedness and coherence of the various artistic contributions.

The 2022 Venice Biennale generated extensive discussions within and beyond the art world, with a variety of opinions expressed. The event received both positive and

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<sup>220</sup> R. Rugoff, *Introduction by Ralph Rugoff, Curator of the 58th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale* official website: <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2019/introduction-ralph-rugoff> [last access on 1 February 2024].



negative criticism, creating a lively dialogue about its artistic direction and curatorial choices. Negative critiques often questioned whether the Biennale was too “politically correct” or, on the contrary, too cautious in addressing the pressing issues it advocated for. Some argued that it did not fully engage with the complexities of contemporary challenges and missed opportunities to drive a real meaningful change. Conversely, positive voices praised the event for its thought-provoking exhibitions, innovative artworks, and its ability to foster dialogue on urgent global concerns.

In the Italian panorama, there have been notable reviews, including Elvira Vannini’s piece in “Machina”, Marco Baravalle’s in “NECSUS - European Journal of Media Studies”, and Federico Giannini’s in “Finestre sull'Arte”. Each of these reviews of *The Milk of Dreams* harshly criticise the ideology and cultural practices behind the event, denouncing the opportunistic use of concepts like feminism, posthumanism, compost theories, and new materialisms to promote a new cultural logic of neoliberalism. In particular, Baravalle argues that the exhibition demonstrates the tendency of the liberal democracy art industry to appropriate these concepts for depoliticization purposes, promoting a conflict-free and dialectic-free vision of reality<sup>221</sup>. Additionally, the author critiques curator Cecilia Alemani’s approach, arguing that the exhibition presents a world without power relations or conflicts. This contrasts with radical positions, such as those of the climate justice movement and queer, decolonial, and transfeminist theories, therefore reflecting and perpetuating dynamics of privilege, depoliticization, and neoliberalism which permeate the contemporary art world.

Accordingly, Elvira Vannini highlights how art has been instrumentalised by capitalism to naturalise social inequalities and celebrate the wealth of a few, emphasising the influence of economic power on art exhibitions and their function in consolidating the capitalist system. The author criticises the curatorial direction of the Venice Biennale, arguing that the rhetoric of feminism has been co-opted for capitalistic purposes, and that there has been a failure to address political and social issues in a critical way. Moreover, the role of feminism in Contemporary Art is also

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<sup>221</sup> M. Baravalle, *The Milk of Dreams, or The Lukewarm Cup That Puts Commons to Sleep*, in “NECSUS - European Journal of Media Studies”, Autumn 2022\_#Materiality, Issue 11 (2), pp. 327– 339.

examined, highlighting how neoliberal institutionalisation has depoliticised and assimilated feminism as a profit-making tool<sup>222</sup>.

Federico Giannini, whose thinking is in line with the previous reviews, in his article also highlights the contradiction between the postcolonial rhetoric of the exhibition and the predominant role of galleries run by white Western men in promoting the exhibited artists<sup>223</sup>.

In addition, Silvia Bottani's article for "Doppiozero"<sup>224</sup> provides another valuable perspective to this discussion, underlining how the exhibition presents numerous ideas that highlight the urgency of the discourse it prompts. However, while many artists are now identifying themselves as *artistst*, quoting Vincenzo Trione<sup>225</sup>, the system in which they operate is remaining unchanged, she explains. The art establishment, which includes not only biennials, but also galleries, magazines, advisors, fairs, and auctions, is a major industry sustained by a system of growing social inequalities. Beneath its shiny facade in fact, there lie serious problems of precariousness among cultural workers, tax evasion, money laundering, and financial and real estate speculation. The exponential growth of this corollary of events since the mid-1980s is no coincidence in the current financial market, notes Bottani, and this trend is starting to be critically echoed in the art world as well<sup>226</sup>.

Simply proposing a Biennale driven by feminist agency is not enough, even if it may offer a valuable starting point. Merely adopting queerness or post-humanist thought, which envisions a utopia free from the constraints of identity, gender, and biological limits, nor constructing a sisterhood based on intellectual privileges, is sufficient, remarks the article. The inclusion of magical realism and ayahuasca, as well as insightful contemplations on the centre-periphery dialectic, will not be adequate on their own when the underlying framework remains, invariably, the one of capitalism<sup>227</sup>.

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<sup>222</sup> E. Vannini, *Quando la fiction capitalista recita il genere*, in "Machina", 18 June 2022, <https://www.machina-deriveapprodi.com/post/quando-la-fiction-capitalista-recita-il-genere> [last access on 13 January 2024].

<sup>223</sup> F. Giannini, *La Biennale di Venezia moralista. Un latte dei sogni che guarda al passato*, in "Finestre sull'Arte", 3 May 2022, <https://www.finestresullarte.info/recensioni-mostre/recensione-il-latte-dei-sogni-biennale-di-venezias-2022> [last access on 13 January 2024].

<sup>224</sup> S. Bottani, *Biennale 2022: The Milk of Dreams*, in "Doppiozero", 7 May 2022, <https://www.doppiozero.com/biennale-2022-il-latte-dei-sogni> [last access on 14 January 2024].

<sup>225</sup> See V. Trione, *Artivismo*, Turin, Italy: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2022.

<sup>226</sup> See T. Montanari, V. Trione, *Contro le mostre*, Turin, Italy: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2017.

<sup>227</sup> S. Bottani, *Biennale 2022: The Milk of Dreams*.

If art aspires to revolutionize the world, to restore its enchantment, perhaps it must be prepared to reject the very system it relies upon, otherwise, as long as the framework remains unchanged, any content, even the most revolutionary, will essentially feed the capital machine. At most, it may be seen as cultural entertainment or little more than a surreal reverie, “profit disguised as content”, concludes Bottani<sup>228</sup>.

However, despite the diverse opinions expressed about the exhibition, our research aims to acknowledge the significance of specific national participation that explore ecofeminist and postcolonial issues in innovative ways. As we will explore, these proposals offer valuable insights into the intersectionality of environmental and feminist concerns, as well as shedding light on the enduring effects of colonialism. The artists’ explorations in fact, offer critical perspectives on power dynamics, gender relations, and the exploitation of natural resources in a global context. By examining these national participations, our research aims to deepen our understanding of the complexities surrounding ecofeminism and postcolonialism, and to contribute to the broader discourse of these topics in the art world.

### **3.2 The Sámi Pavilion**

The collaboration between Finland, Norway, and Sweden in Venice began in 1962 with the construction of the Nordic Pavilion at the Giardini. Until 1984, each country independently organized its own exhibition within the space. However, from 1986 to 2009, the pavilion was commissioned as a collective entity with curatorial responsibility alternating between the collaborating countries, while from 2011 to 2015 the Nordic countries decided to curate the pavilion individually, according to a rotation system. Finally, in 2017, they resumed their joint curation approach, which led to a significant transformation of the Nordic Pavilion in the 2022 Biennale edition, which became *The Sámi Pavilion* for the first time ever. The initiative, organized and supported by the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA), presents the works of Sámi artists Pauliina Feodoroff, Máret Anne Sara, and Anders Sunna.

The Nordic Pavilion’s symbolic transformation aims to pay tribute to the artistic contributions and inherent sovereignty of the Indigenous Sámi people, whose ancestral

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

lands extend precisely across Norway, Sweden, and Finland, as well as into the Kola Peninsula in Russia.

The project was curated by a distinguished team composed of Sámi scholar Liisa-Rávná Finbog, the Director of OCA, Katya García-Antón, and Sámi land guardian Beaska Niillas. Together, the curators have organised an exhibition that showcases the essence of Sámi art, culture, and their profound relationship with the land. The main aim is to amplify the voices and narratives of the historically marginalized Sámi community, fostering a heightened understanding and appreciation for their cultural heritage within the global art sphere. This exhibition serves as a platform for promoting broader comprehension and admiration of the Sámi community's rich cultural legacy, which has been overlooked and undervalued for centuries.

As stated by the curator Katya García-Antón, it took 60 years since the inauguration of the Nordic Pavilion for Sámi artists to be honoured in this way<sup>229</sup>. The curator explains how the project represents a significant milestone resulting from a broad and longstanding movement led by the Sámi community. In addition to the Sámi themselves, non-Sámi collaborators have contributed their support throughout the process, with a shared objective of addressing the consequences of colonialism on the Sámi people.

In fact, in a context where the impact of colonialism continues to devalue Sámi perspectives, endangering their existence, *The Sámi Pavilion* emerges as an integral component of the Sámi people's struggle for self-determination and the ongoing decolonization process aimed at their empowerment. It demonstrates that the Indigenous presence is boundless, resonating with resounding power, resourcefulness, and a spirit of playfulness, states García-Antón<sup>230</sup>.

Moreover, she explains how *The Sámi Pavilion* stands as a testament to the Sámi community's advocacy for the right to preserve and develop their cultural practices, advocating for the restoration of spiritual and intellectual material heritage. As part of a wider political and artistic movement, the project contributes to the global effort of Indigenous self-determination and the integration of Indigenous perspectives into art

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<sup>229</sup> K. García-Antón, *To Great with Respect is to Listen*, in "Čatnosat. The Sámi Pavilion, Indigenous Art, Knowledge, and Sovereignty", exhibition catalogue (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April - 27 November 2022), Amsterdam: Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA) / Valiz, 2022, pp. 41-69, here p. 59.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, p.60.

and society. This movement promotes coexistence and rejects the privileging of one worldview over another. However, presenting *The Sámi Pavilion* within the pavilions section of the Venice Biennale poses its own set of challenges.

The main one arises from the nation-state framework that underlies the Giardini, explains the curator. The Venice Biennale, which serves as the precursor to all biennials, was in fact established based on the model of World Fairs. Historically, these fairs exhibited and commodified indigenous bodies, lands, technology, and resources to reinforce the nation-state paradigm. However, in the era of globalisation, this trend has started to falter. During the last decades, artists from diverse backgrounds have presented projects in the Biennale and Giardini sections that critically examined the supremacist tendencies of Western modernity, also displaying artworks that embrace their own distinct, locally rooted modernities, challenging established narratives.

As García-Antón notes<sup>231</sup>, the Venice Biennale has been enhanced by a critical discourse that reflects global shifts in ethics, aesthetics, and socio-politics, advocating for the recognition of diverse worlds and perspectives. Nevertheless, walking along the central avenue of the Giardini, where the imposing pavilions of former empires (Great Britain, Germany, and France) stand, can be an unsettling experience, states the Sámi curator. The Nordic Pavilion for instance is located on an avenue which faces the Russian Pavilion, with the Danish Pavilion as its neighbour.

Since the philosophical foundations of Sámi worldviews have often been overlooked as ethnographic curiosities, what happens when they become the reference points for artists presenting their work in Venice? How do holistic Indigenous epistemologies and Western dualistic epistemologies interact within the confines and limitations of a distinctly Western space? How can the Indigenous Paradigm be activated and protected from appropriation within this context? These are the questions posed by the curator to demonstrate the challenges of reconciling Indigenous perspectives with Western frameworks at the Venice Biennale.

Individuals involved in *The Sámi Pavilion* have therefore contributed to the project with their respective expertise, including Sámi scholarship, political activism, land stewardship, and traditional Sámi handicraft, comprehending the mechanics of the Biennale and the Western art historical context. As the curator explains, the project has

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

been structured using collective knowledge to emphasise reconnection to Sámi concepts, values, and knowledge systems, and the curatorial approach has been reimagined specifically for the project. The aim is to contribute to the decolonization processes in Sámi, Finnish, and Scandinavian societies, encouraging intellectual creativity and practical self-governance and self-definition.

*The Sámi Pavilion* focuses on three key elements, explains the curator: trans-generational relationships, holistic Sámi epistemology, and Sámi spiritual perspectives<sup>232</sup>. Since bonds between generations have been severed by colonialism, the project aims to create a space for relationships that facilitates the transmission and continuity of knowledge across generations. During the past in fact, Sámi children were prohibited from learning their language, cultural practices, and connection to the land in residential schools, as Western values were imposed upon them. Although residential schools no longer exist, Sámi children still face challenges in learning their language, history, and worldviews in school, struggling with navigating the pressures of a dominant consumer society, the dispossession of their lands, and the extractive industries.

Furthermore, Sámi forms of knowledge are a fundamental aspect of the conceptual framework of *The Sámi Pavilion*. While indigenous knowledge is often referred to as “traditional”, this label can lead to misunderstandings due to its association with the Western construct of the 19th century, which is deeply intertwined with the ideologies of modernity and imperialism. Consequently, the term “traditional” may be perceived as something stagnant or unalterable, disregarding the fact that all knowledge is refined through lived experiences to prevent obsolescence, explains García-Antón<sup>233</sup>. In this context, the term “ancestral knowledges” may be more suitable, continues the curator, as it conveys knowledge that is inherited and evolves over time rather than being confined within the boundaries of a specific tradition.

Besides, the recent decades of Indigenous scholarship and creative endeavours have clarified for Western audiences that their knowledge is rooted in a life shaped by ancestral ways of existence, action, perception, and thought. This forms the foundation upon which Indigenous existence thrives, an aspect strongly embraced by the Sámi

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid, p. 63

<sup>233</sup> K. García-Antón, *To Great with Respect is to Listen*, p. 66.

project. In fact, it is important to acknowledge that Sámi epistemology adopts a holistic approach, which is collectively and actively constructed.

Furthermore, the transmission, construction, and activation of spiritual and cosmological knowledge play a significant role in the conception, production, and presentation of the artists' works in *The Sámi Pavilion*. Although this knowledge predominantly remains within the private realm, the catalogue and the project's overall visual proposal provide a public representation of it. For instance, the catalogue contains various contributions, including poems, plays, stories, reflections, and essays, that originate from Sámi spiritual and cosmological knowledge.

As the curator concludes, the importance of a spiritual reflection in the global context and in the arts is particularly evident in the last years. This consideration emerges from a historical background in which colonial religions were forcibly imposed on indigenous peoples under the guise of a self-proclaimed "civilising" mission. This imposition has had far-reaching effects, promoting dichotomous and patriarchal perspectives and enforcing sexual binarism, explains further García-Antón. As a result, it has had a profound impact on the intricate and nuanced gender dynamics present within indigenous societies as well.

Within the arts, the exploration of spirituality becomes a means of artistic expression and resistance, allowing artists to confront the legacy of colonialism and challenge prevailing power structures. Through their creative work, artists can reclaim and celebrate indigenous worldviews, fostering a renewed appreciation for the diverse perspectives, knowledge systems, and cultural practices that have historically been marginalized or suppressed.

In conclusion, *The Sámi Pavilion* represents an outstanding initiative that aims to generate artistic projects focused on healing, restoring, and rediscovering Sámi ways of existence, thought, and action in the world. The project establishes a dedicated space that prioritises the pursuit and activation of Sámi sovereignty. At the core of this endeavour, lies a fundamental understanding that Sámi people and their ancestral lands are inseparable and indivisible entities, explains the curator<sup>234</sup>. Consequently, any occurrences or changes that happen in the land directly affect the Sámi people. Therefore, the project aims to create an interconnectedness between the physical space

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid, p. 69

of the exhibition and the broader sociopolitical context of Sápmi, acknowledging the influence of Sámi spiritual worldview on both. Through artistic expression and engagement in fact, it actively contributes to the revitalization and preservation of Sámi identity, knowledge systems, and ways of being in the world.

### 3.2.1 Pauliina Feodoroff *Matriarchy* (2022)

For our analysis of Ecofeminism in Contemporary Art, Pauliina Feodoroff's contribution to *The Sámi Pavilion* is the most relevant one. About the performance she conceived for the Venice Biennale 2022, Feodoroff states: “*Matriarchy* celebrates the decolonisation of the female body and its communion with the land. In our society everybody leads, and nobody leads”<sup>235</sup>.

Pauliina Feodoroff is a Skolt Sámi artist, theatre director, land guardian, and politician, who has both Keväjäu'rr origins, from the Finnish part of Sápmi, and Suõ'nnjel ones, from the Russian part. Her family, like many other Sámi people, suffered the profound effects of ever-shifting nation-state borders, as they were forced to move to Finland after Russian borders were re-drawn and closed during World War Two. This is why Feodoroff also considers the dispossessed lands as her ancestral homeland<sup>236</sup>.

Furthermore, the history of her family is closely intertwined with the disruptive consequences of Soviet collectivisation, the logging of ancient Sámi forests, the contamination of Sámi land and rivers, and the accelerating impact of climate change. The dispossession of Skolt Sámi territory during colonialism and subsequent environmental contamination have had a profound impact on their society, resulting in a significant decline in births, explains further Feodoroff<sup>237</sup>. Additionally, these factors have contributed to the erosion of their language and knowledge of how to live in harmony with the land without subjugation.

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<sup>235</sup> A. Haglund, “*Matriarchy*” by Pauliina Feodoroff at the Sámi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, in “bastard”, 23 April 2022, <https://bastard.blog/matriarchy-pauliina-feodoroff/> [last access 16 January 2024].

<sup>236</sup> From the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA) website: <https://oca.no/thesamipavilion/thesamipavilion-pauliinafeodoroff>

<sup>237</sup> K. García-Antón, *Please do not buy our lands, buy our art, begs the Begging Queen, and sells the views of her lands as portrait*, in “Čatnosat. The Sámi Pavilion, Indigenous Art, Knowledge, and Sovereignty”, exhibition catalogue (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April - 27 November 2022), Amsterdam: Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA) / Valiz, 2022, pp. 4-13, her p.5.



Feodoroff's artistic practice skilfully integrates various artistic mediums, including theatre, performance, and visual arts, within the context of these complex geopolitical and ecological conflicts. In addition, she collaborates with the non-governmental ecological organization Snowchange<sup>238</sup> on programs aimed at revitalising Sápmi forests and rivers. In fact, Feodoroff also played a significant role in co-drafting the mandate for Finland's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Finland in 2019 and has served as President of the Sámi Council.

In the exhibition catalogue, Feodoroff discusses the importance for Sámi people to have something to hold on to in order to move forward and not succumb to the pain of the losses they have suffered on many levels as a result of colonisation. For instance, the artist believes that this can be found in the interconnection between art and land guardianship, which aligns with the Sámi cosmology that views the world as a network of relationships and reciprocities. According to this perspective, people and their cultural expressions are an integral part of their surroundings, which include the land, waters, species, and non-human entities, rather than being separate from them<sup>239</sup>. Within this framework, Feodoroff draws on the ancestral knowledge of her Skolt Sámi people to revitalize and sustain a self-governing future for her community, while honouring all connections with those who share their environment.

At the core of this interconnectedness concept lies the acknowledgment that humanity does not hold a central position on the planet, emphasising the perception of land and its resources as a bestowed gift that necessitates reciprocal responsibility. In fact, Feodoroff explains how the Sámi people attribute the capacity to lead a fulfilling existence and the measure of one's humanity, referred to as "lähttet olmo láhkai", precisely to acts of reciprocity<sup>240</sup>. This set of values is not exclusive to the Sámi people but is also shared by numerous Indigenous cultures worldwide, underscores Katya García-Antón, curator of *The Sámi Pavilion*.

Within Sámi culture, traditional practices for land and water stewardship serve as tangible means of reciprocation. For instance, the act of returning fish bones to the river nourishes the young fish residing there, while in the past, animal innards were

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<sup>238</sup> See more at: <http://www.snowchange.org/>

<sup>239</sup> K. García-Antón, *Please do not buy our lands, buy our art, begs the Begging Queen, and sells the views of her lands as portrait*, p.8.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

given back to the forest to enrich its biomass. Expressing gratitude thus establishes a connection between the two parties, engendering a reciprocal obligation for their mutual survival.

Feodoroff's performance *Matriarchy* (2022), developed in collaboration with Sámi Elder Asta M. Balto, explores themes of interdependent care, power dynamics, and the effects of colonization on the Sámi community, aiming to reclaim Indigenous sovereignty and prompt new forms of existence. The performance has a tangible goal as well: raise money to buy back privatised Sápmi lands in order to manage them and enable ecological renewal<sup>241</sup>.

An important theme in *Matriarchy* is the analysis of begging as a strategy. Working alongside a group of Sámi and Nordic dancers and performers, Feodoroff uses this concept to explore the submissive position into which Indigenous peoples, particularly women, are often forced into, with the aim of raising awareness of the process of submission itself. This is done in order to help identify, disrupt and ultimately dismantle these patterns and to subsequently show how sovereign identities and ways of being can emerge instead.



Ill. 26 - Pauliina Feodoroff, *Matriarchy (First Contact)*, 2022. Documentation from performance at “The Sámi Pavilion”, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia - *The Milk of Dreams*, Venice. Courtesy: OCA.

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<sup>241</sup> E. Fullerton, *Sámi Pavilion (Nordic Countries)*, *Venice Biennale 2022*, in “Studio International”, 25 October 2022, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/nordic-sami-pavilion-venice-biennale-2022-interviews-sweden-norway-finland> [last access on 18 January 2024].

The performance is structured in three parts, the first titled *First Contact*, in which Feodoroff presents a collection of duodji objects<sup>242</sup> and introduces their creators. This exploration serves as a commentary on the epistemic violence inherent in the initial encounters between Indigenous and settler populations. The establishment of asymmetrical power relations, with devastating consequences for Indigenous communities, resulted from misunderstandings and misinterpretations that arose precisely from them. Feodoroff, with her performance, emphasises the importance of the Sámi tradition of gifting as a crucial aspect of their relational framework, which as we have seen is characterised by reciprocity and the construction of balanced relationships. However, the settlers misinterpreted these gestures of respect as Indigenous acknowledgments of hierarchies, explain Feodoroff<sup>243</sup>, and this later led to mechanisms of taxation and control, perpetuating power imbalances and hindering the establishment of genuine partnerships.

In the second part of the performance, entitled *Auction*, Feodoroff presents a series of video portraits showcasing Indigenous landscapes that are currently under threat from aggressive commercial logging and other forms of industrial land use. These video portraits are auctioned off as artworks, symbolising the commodification and exploitation of these vulnerable environments. The artworks on display include landscapes from Feodoroff's Skolt Sámi and other Sámi lands, as well as First Nation's land in Turtle Island, North America.

The performed auctions at the Venice Biennale were a preview of the actual auction of the works which held place a few months later. The funds raised thanks to it contributed to a Snowchange Cooperative program which aims to secure the purchase of threatened lands in order to protect them from further devastation. Furthermore, the project will support the rewilding of these landscapes by revitalising Sámi knowledge systems necessary for their ecological restoration. In its own way, this part of the

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<sup>242</sup> Duodji objects are of great cultural and artistic value to the Sámi people. Duodji, also known as Sami handicrafts or traditional Sámi crafts, encompass a wide range of handmade objects created by Sámi artisans using traditional techniques and materials. These objects are deeply rooted in the Sámi cultural heritage and serve both utilitarian and symbolic purposes. Duodji objects can include items such as clothing, footwear, jewellery, tools, utensils, and decorative items. They are made from materials found in the Sámi environment, such as reindeer hide, antler, bone, wood, and natural fibres such as wool and plant materials. (Source: K. García-Antón, *Please do not buy our lands, buy our art, begs the Begging Queen, and sells the views of her lands as portrait*).

<sup>243</sup> K. García-Antón, *Please do not buy our lands, buy our art, begs the Begging Queen, and sells the views of her lands as portrait*, p. 10

performance recalls Aviva Rahmani artwork *Blued Trees Symphony* and Eliza Evans' *All the Way to Hell* (2020) we analysed in Chapter 2.

The incorporation of the concept of auction in this part of the performance, which has significant ties to the art world history and economic practices rooted in or connected to colonialism, is used by Feodoroff to reinterpret and recontextualise it, giving agency to those who actively resist the ongoing violence that shapes the realities of the Sámi people today.

In the catalogue, the curator explains how Western artistic depictions of Arctic landscapes often excluded or marginalized the presence and perspectives of Indigenous peoples, perpetuating colonial narratives of land control and exploitation<sup>244</sup>. In her performance, Feodoroff, who calls her artworks "landpersonsapes"<sup>245</sup>, purposefully redirects this narrative through a choreography involving the bodies and gazes of women performers, aiming to include and highlight the perspectives of Sámi peoples, who have been historically excluded from such depictions. During the late 19th and 20th centuries in fact, there was a significant increase in image production driven by the modernist desire to assert dominance through the construction, control, and dissemination of images. As a result, these images played a central role in imperial processes of nation-building and territorial expansion, particularly in areas considered wilderness or *Terra Nullius*<sup>246</sup> from a colonial perspective. To this day, Sámi people are often seen as obstacles to governmental policies promoting large-scale mining, industrial forestry, and the construction of hydro-electric and wind farms, demonstrating the tensions and

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> E. Fullerton, *Sámi Pavilion (Nordic Countries)*, *Venice Biennale 2022*.

<sup>246</sup> The concept of *terra nullius*, meaning "land belonging to no one", played a crucial role in the historical context of colonialism. This construct portrayed Indigenous lands as unoccupied and without rightful ownership, therefore colonial powers employed it to legitimize their occupation and appropriation of those lands during the period of European expansion. Furthermore, the notion had profound consequences as it facilitated the displacement and dispossession of indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories, undermining the foundations of their cultural, social, and economic existence. The imposition of colonial rule and land appropriation disrupted indigenous governance systems, traditional practices, and spiritual connections to the land, resulting in profound social and environmental consequences for indigenous communities, including the loss of autonomy, cultural heritage, and ecological balance. (Cf.: L. Finbog, *The Story of Terra Nullius, Variations on the Land(s) of Saemie that Nobody Owned*, in "Čatnosat. The Sámi Pavilion, Indigenous Art, Knowledge, and Sovereignty", exhibition catalogue (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April - 27 November 2022), Amsterdam: Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA) / Valiz, 2022, pp. 3-11)

conflicts that arise from the intersection of Indigenous rights and environmental preservation with profit-driven industrial interests.



Ill. 27 - Pauliina Feodoroff, *Matriarchy (Auction)*, 2022. Documentation from performance at “The Sámi Pavilion”, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia - *The Milk of Dreams*, Venice. Courtesy: OCA.

Feodoroff's video-portraits created for auction are aware of this historical and cultural context. In her work, performers act as allies of the land and invite the viewer/buyer to engage with the artwork on terms that respect their sovereignty. The purchase of the artwork creates a new relationship between the buyer, Feodoroff, and the First Nation custodians mentioned earlier. Through a reciprocal agreement, both personal and legal, the buyer obtains the video-portrait and the right to visit the land regularly by prior arrangement. In exchange, custodians take on the responsibility of protecting and restoring the land, potentially creating new allies for Sámi epistemologies of reciprocity and care. Feodoroff's approach in fact, as we have seen, aims to find common ground between different worldviews while acknowledging the creative resilience that Indigenous peoples have developed over centuries to preserve crucial aspects of their way of life.

The first auction was held in 2022 at the Museum of Modern Art in Helsinki, for an undisclosed sum, which enabled Feodoroff to buy about 100 acres of forest, reports

“The Washington Post”<sup>247</sup>. Subsequently, negotiations were conducted with five other institutions. “It’s outrageous that we need to buy our own lands, to keep our way of living, to keep the carbon trapped in the ground,” Feodoroff said, “but to influence Finland, you have to go through Venice”<sup>248</sup>.

The closing act of the performance, *Matriarchy*, celebrates instead the decolonisation of Indigenous women’s bodies and their communion with the land: “We don’t want to be governed and nature doesn’t want to be governed”, states Feodoroff<sup>249</sup>.

The performance features two contemporary dancers and twins, Birit and Katja Haarla, and explores a rather queer spectrum of femininity, explains A. Haglund in its review<sup>250</sup>. In the performance in fact are represented two contrasting figures: a butch, wearing work clothes, and a *domme femme*<sup>251</sup> wearing sky-high stilettos and long, sharp nails. Their contemporary dance engages in a dialogue that challenges patriarchal expectations of leadership, suspending traditional notions of who should take the lead: the dancers’ movements suggest a dynamic that appears to lack hierarchical structures. This dialogue incorporates elements of both queer imagery and principles of social ecology, delving into concepts of collaboration and interdependence, states Haglund.

Through their dance, a multifaceted representation emerges, which challenges conventional assumptions and stereotypes imposed on Indigenous women. As explained in the exhibition catalogue, this performance is mindful of the matriarchal power embedded in the spiritual and social structure of ancestral Sámi forms of existence, which was specifically targeted by “colonial strategies of

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<sup>247</sup> S. Rubin, *In an ancient reindeer forest, one woman has found a way to slow climate change*, in “The Washington Post”, 30 November 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/interactive/2022/climate-change-reindeer-habitats-deforestation/> [las access on 18 January 2024].

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> E. Fullerton, *Sámi Pavilion (Nordic Countries), Venice Biennale 2022*.

<sup>250</sup> A. Haglund, “*Matriarchy*” by Pauliina Feodoroff at the Sámi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

<sup>251</sup> The terms “butch” and “*domme femme*” are both associated with queer culture and gender expression. “Butch” typically refers to a person, often assigned female at birth, who presents themselves in a more masculine or androgynous way. This term has historically been used within lesbian communities to describe individuals who embody traits and behaviours that are traditionally associated with masculinity. On the other hand, the term “*domme femme*” combines elements of dominance and femininity. It often refers to a person, typically assigned female at birth, who embraces a dominant role within a queer relationship or dynamic, while presenting themselves in a more feminine way. It is noteworthy underline how those terms can be interpreted and applied differently by different people within the queer community.



patriarchisation”<sup>252</sup>. Consequently, the aim of this performance is to re-centre those matriarchal values, which are inherit in Sámi culture, as crucial catalysts for Indigenous self-governance in the future ahead.



Ill. 28 - Pauliina Feodoroff, *Matriarchy (Auction)*, 2022. Documentation from performance at “The Sámi Pavilion”, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia - *The Milk of Dreams*, Venice. Courtesy: OCA.

The performance continues with a lively dance featuring the same two dancers, now accompanied by music from Sápmi. They elegantly leap and exchange colourful Sámi fabrics, creating captivating movements. Here, gender roles appear to be disregarded in favour of a celebratory dance expression, in which the dancers from the first part of the performance join them, holding long sticks adorned with fabrics of various colours, reminiscent of traditions of resistance and protest.

The performers engage in choreography that resembles a demonstration, with some participants singing along to the music. These images of indigenous resistance and celebration not only emphasise the interconnectedness of political action and cultural liberation but also evoke deep emotions, reports Haglund in his article, as most of the

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<sup>252</sup> K. García-Antón, *Please do not buy our lands, buy our art, begs the Begging Queen, and sells the views of her lands as portrait*, p. 12

audience attending identified as Sámi. He proceeds stating how this was a significant moment for Indigenous recognition not only within the Nordic art scene but also on a global scale, thanks to the huge platform provided by the Venice Art Biennale.

In the article, Haglund also reflects about how discussions on Indigenous and environmental struggles often give rise to primitivism ideals, which express a desire to regress into a state of untouched purity. However, applying this expectation to Indigenous peoples and their arts is not only racist but also counterproductive, as Haglund explains<sup>253</sup>. Indigenous lifestyles are not inherently “pure” or “natural”, as we already had the chance to discuss. It is therefore crucial to acknowledge that no individual, whether indigenous or not, exists solely within one cosmology: we are all a complex amalgamation of various worldviews and perspectives. At the same time, one notable difference between Indigenous and industrial societies is the radical nature of indigenous approaches, proceeds explaining the article, which lies precisely in the recognition of the interconnectedness of human culture and nature as a living, pulsating network, rather than a resource to be exploited and consumed.

In Sámi culture the spiritual, linguistic, and cultural connection with the landscapes of Sápmi continues to this day, driven by the recognition of their intrinsic value and through a set of practices that include reproductive care, intergenerational respect, awareness, and interaction with non-human elements.

It is in this context that *Matriarchy* finds its strength, serving as a compelling reminder to viewers of the distinctive features of Indigenous cosmologies. The performance concludes with the powerful statement “Don’t buy our land. Buy our art instead”, with which Feodoroff not only asks the audience to consider their own position in relation to the Sámi struggles, but also proposes an allyship that involves listening, observing, and supporting Sámi artists and their work.

In conclusion, as we have analysed, the performance situates itself within the social and political reality of the Sámi people, acknowledging the need to heal from the damage caused by colonialism, while advocating for renewal and a return to land-based practices and values. Through communal dances, songs, and displays of Sámi cultural elements, *Matriarchy* successfully evasions, but also tangibly prompts, a more caring and connected future in which tradition blends with modernity.

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<sup>253</sup> A. Haglund, “*Matriarchy*” by Pauliina Feodoroff at the Sámi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.



### 3.3 Estonia: *Orchidelirium, an Appetite for Abundance* (2022)

In 2022, Estonia celebrated 25 years since its first national participation at the Venice Art Biennale. For this occasion, the Netherlands invited Estonia to exhibit in the Rietveld Pavilion, the historic Dutch venue located in the Giardini.

Although this was Estonia's first time exhibiting in the Giardini during the Art Biennale, they had previously exhibited here on past editions of the Architecture Biennale. For instance, in 2000 the country was hosted in the Polish Pavilion, as Poland did not participate, while in 2008 the Estonian Pavilion was constructed between the Russian and German pavilions and consisted of a yellow gas pipe<sup>254</sup>.

For the 59<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition, Estonia presented in Venice a compelling, multi-layered ecocritical project, titled *Orchidelirium, an Appetite for Abundance*, and commissioned by the Estonian Centre for Contemporary Art. The artists featured in the exhibition included Kristina Norman, who already represented Estonia at the 2009 Venice Art Biennale, and Bitá Razavi. The exhibition was conceived in collaboration with curator Corina L. Apostol and was inspired by a series of botanical watercolours and paintings created by Emilie Rosalie Saal (1871-1954), an Estonian-Dutch artist who was active in the first half of the 20th century.

The project presented a nuanced examination of colonial history and its complexities by skilfully merging historical and contemporary artworks, as well as various mediums, offering an unforeseen viewpoint on the intricate relationships between the East, West, North and South of the world during the twentieth century, highlighting the enduring manifestations of these dynamics in the present era.

Along with the exhibition held at *The Sámi Pavilion*, the concept of *Orchidelirium - An Appetite for Abundance* also provokes an interesting dialogue, which is particularly relevant given its location, usually difficult for countries like Estonia to access<sup>255</sup>. The project, in fact, delves into multiple dimensions of power hierarchies, encompassing themes such as subjectivity, agency, oppression, territoriality, autonomy, and the complex relationships occurring between colonial subjects. Therefore, the remarkably complex exhibition and research process led the team to confront difficult choices and

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<sup>254</sup> M. Arusoo, *Fareword*, in *Orchidelirium, an Appetite for Abundance*, exhibition catalogue (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April - 27 November 2022), edited by K. Norman, B. Razavi, C. L. Apostol, Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, pp. 8-10.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

decisions in a world where multiple answers can coexist, explains M. Arusoo, Commissioner of the Estonian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and Director of the Estonian Centre for Contemporary Art<sup>256</sup>.

The curator, Corina L. Apostol, explained how the idea for the exhibition sparked when she found out about Emilie Rosalie Saal's work. Apostol, who was born in Romania and later moved to the United States to continue her studies, returned to Europe in 2019, as she became curator of the Tallin Art Hall until 2023. She is specialised in Russian and Eastern European art, and in her work she focuses primarily on socially engaged art<sup>257</sup>.

When the artist Kristina Norman, with whom she already worked, introduced her to the biography of Andres Saal, an Estonian writer, photographer, and topographer who lived in Indonesia during Dutch colonial rule, Apostol was immediately intrigued by the work and the story of his wife, namely Emily. As an Estonian woman artist at the time, very little was known about her work and all the different experiences she made, since her work was overshadowed by her husband's career, and her name was relegated to a footnote in his books. Nevertheless, Emilie lived a quite unique life: she was raised in Tartu, Estonia, but received her education in St. Petersburg, and later became a resident of Jakarta, before eventually settling in Los Angeles.

The interesting thing is to notice how Saal, who was once a colonial subject herself when Estonia was part of the Russian Empire, radically changed her social position when she later became a member of the privileged white Dutch colonial society in Indonesia, where she moved with her husband at the end of the 19th century.

Although her story may seem similar to that of many white European noblewomen who engaged in botanical art as a hobby, her achievements stood out as she was able to travel extensively, particularly across Indonesia, challenging societal norms by organising expeditions to study tropical plants.

Being married to a high-ranking official, Emilie had in fact extraordinary opportunities to explore botanical gardens and other locations throughout the archipelago, which were not accessible to women of lower social classes, including Indonesians. Additionally, it is known that the Saal's household employed a minimum of twelve

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> B. Bălan, CURATORS #8 Corina Apostol, in "Revista – ARTA", 3 August 2022, <https://revistaarta.ro/en/curators-8-corina-apostol/>, [last access on 2 February].

Indigenous servants, who facilitated Emilie’s artistic pursuits, reports Apostol. Therefore, the curator argues that her career was largely enabled by Dutch colonial rule over the Indies, and as a result, her art is deeply implicated within the context of colonial expansion. This is why her work continues to be relevant in contemporary discussions, as it provides a thought-provoking case study that encompasses intertwined narratives of self-determination, colonial experiences, neo-colonial structures, botany, science, and art<sup>258</sup>.



Ill. 29 - Emilie Saal, *Bamboo Orchid*, lithograph, c. 1910-1920. Courtesy of Corina L. Apostol.

However, Saal’s artistic contributions were not recognised in Estonia, and Apostol found lithographic reproductions of her work only in the United States. Once she moved there with her husband in fact, she was able to expose 300 of her botanical works at the Exposition Park of the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science, and Art in 1926.

Apostol and Norman’s initial conversations about Emilie Saal’s work led to *Orchidelirium*, a long-term project that uncovered unexpected narratives associated with Emilie’s life, work, and travels. As a result, Bitra Razavi, an Iranian artist based

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<sup>258</sup> C. L. Apostol, *Introduction*, in *Orchidelirium, an Appetite for Abundance*, exhibition catalogue (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April - 27 November 2022), edited by K. Norman, B. Razavi, C. L. Apostol, Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, pp. 11-31, here p. 11.

between Estonia and Finland, was also invited to collaborate on this project, as she is known for her thought-provoking exploration of identity within various cultural contexts. Due to her experience of living in three very different countries in fact, she is well equipped to reflect on the relationships of these cultures and on the perception of her heritage in the Western world<sup>259</sup>. For instance, in the photographic series *Pictures From Our Future, Pictures From Our Past* (2016), Razavi aimed to explore the rise of xenophobic nationalism in Estonia, which is a theme addressed also in the Estonian Pavilion's project, as we will further analyse. In Eastern Europe, where borders have often been redrawn, cultural and ethnic homogeneity is seen as an asset that helps prevent the disintegration of the state, Razavi explains<sup>260</sup>. However, with this work her aim was also to highlight how, even if European countries often forget, many of their own citizens were once refugees.

Eko Supriyanto, an Indonesian dancer and choreographer, also joined the Estonian team, along with several advisors and collaborators from different backgrounds who made their valuable contributions to the realisation of the project.

The exhibition title *Orchidelirium* was chosen by Apostol in reference to the phenomenon of “orchid fever” that gripped Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This phenomenon, which relied extensively on indigenous Indonesian labour, was largely fuelled by the captivating botanical illustrations circulating in the West, explains the curator<sup>261</sup>. As a result, trees were cut down to access the orchids growing on their branches, and paths were cleared through the rainforests to transport these specimens, while ordinary plants were ignored in pursuit of more attractive tropical species, bringing significant consequences for the Indonesian ecosystem.

The subtitle *An Appetite for Abundance* was drawn instead from a painted photograph of Java, captured by Andres Saal and embellished by Emilie. It showed a still life composition of fruit and vegetables arranged in a pyramid shape, framed by a deep red curtain and an intricately decorated cup with stag motifs. The subtitle thus highlights the desire to acquire and exploit exotic flora from its native environment, translating

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<sup>259</sup> B. Razavi in conversation with M. Agu and S. Preiman, *People are not sure if they are putting me in danger when writing about my work*, in “Block Magazine”, 2 December 2020, <https://blokmagazine.com/people-are-not-sure-if-they-are-putting-me-in-danger-when-writing-about-my-work/>, [last access on 2 February].

<sup>260</sup> B. Razavi official website: <https://bitarazavi.com/#/pictures/>, [last access on 2 February].

<sup>261</sup> C. L. Apostol, *Introduction*, in *Orchidelirium, an Appetite for Abundance*.

it into European visual culture in order to fuel colonial and commercial ambitions<sup>262</sup>. Taken together, the title and the subtitle reveal the stark contrast between the colonial desire to collect, consume, and commodify Indigenous ecosystems and the violent realities experienced during colonial times.

According to the curator in fact, the Estonian Pavilion presents a great opportunity for Estonia to confront its colonial past, an issue that is rarely addressed in the country, which has instead recently been characterised by an increasingly nationalistic climate<sup>263</sup>. In fact, what Apostol highlights is how Estonia has always seen itself in antagonism with and as a victim of the Soviet Union, but it is now time to consider other perspectives as well.

For instance, Kristina Norman's work *Afterwar*, created to represent Estonia at the 2009 Venice Biennale, specifically addressed the themes of colonialism and historical memory, focusing on the context of Estonia and its Soviet past. The artwork explored the complex aftermath of war and the impact it had on collective memory and identity. With her work, Norman already aimed to promote a less binary approach to history and challenge the notion of winners and losers in historical narratives. In contrast to the dominant post-independence narrative of Estonian victimhood and Russian aggression prevalent in the Baltic States, *After-War* took an unusual stance, serving as a pretext for decoding existing cultural practises<sup>264</sup>. "By not choosing a historical 'truth' from either of the confrontational 'memory collectives', I am asking

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid, here p. 14.

<sup>264</sup> *After-War* is a case study analysing the conflict surrounding the Bronze Soldier monument in Tallinn, Estonia. The statue was erected in 1947 to commemorate Red Army soldiers but became a source of contention in post-Soviet Estonia. While many Estonians viewed the monument as a symbol of Soviet occupation and repression, Russians saw it as a representation of their victory over Nazism and their identity in Estonia. In April 2007, the conflict escalated when the Estonian government relocated the Bronze Soldier to a military cemetery, as this act was perceived as an attempt to marginalise the local Russian community, leading to two nights of riots in Tallinn. On 9 May 2009, which is Victory Day for many Russians, Kristina Norman brought a golden replica of the sculpture to its original location as a symbolic act. The installation, through its provocation, aimed to highlight the unresolved issues surrounding the Bronze Soldier and encourage more tolerant approaches to history, democracy, and xenophobia. The golden statue was later showcased in the Estonian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Art Biennale, within the *After-War* larger project, which comprehended video documentaries and photographic records of the of the events surrounding the Bronze Soldier statue conflicts. (Cf: M. Laimre, Kristina Norman's *After War*, in *Afterwar*, exhibition catalogue (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 7 June - 22 November 2009), Estonia: Centre for Contemporary Arts, 2009, pp. 29-48)

uncomfortable questions regarding democracy, tolerance, xenophobia and fear”, stated Norman in this regard<sup>265</sup>.

Therefore, Apostol’s curatorial perspective aimed to generate a meaningful dialogue with non-European perspectives through a transversal collaboration with Indonesian artistic communities, raising questions about how to interpret and come to terms with events that challenge our preconceived notions of history. This was made possible especially through the collaboration with the Indonesian curator Sadiyah Boonstra, who co-curated *Orchidelirium*.

Moreover, Apostol highlights how the Estonian Pavilion’s artistic team aimed to challenge and transcend the traditional concept of “national representation” at the Venice Biennale, an institution historically structured around nationalism, as we previously noted. However, as the 2022 edition particularly tries to highlight, this concept may no longer accurately reflect the reality of the art world, as nowadays identities have become increasingly fluid and complex than ever.

Within the project, artist Kristina Norman developed a film trilogy (*Rip-off*, *Thirst*, *Shelter*) in which, through microhistories, she explores issues of colonialism and ecological degradation using Emilie Saal’s life history as a starting point to create visual and semantic connections. *Rip-off* addresses in particular the experience of Estonian women under the Baltic-German colonial systems, drawing a parallel to the dynamic between Emilie Saal and her Indonesian servants. In fact, it portrays the lady of a manor painting beautiful orchids on her veranda while her servant takes care of the plants growing in the garden.

In *Shelter*, Norman uses the metaphor of the cage as a liminal space of transformation. The short film, inspired by Andreas Saal travelog, portrays a zookeeper who gets trapped in a cage, causing her to question her own humanity as she is viewed as an animal by the people outside. In *Thirst* instead, the artist shifts the anthropocentric perspective to examine the contemporary exploitation of orchids, which are extensively cultivated in Dutch greenhouses. In order to do so, Norman depicts a dystopian universe dominated by machines that mass-produce, extract, and transport resources from Estonian peat bogs to use as a substrate for these flowers.

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<sup>265</sup> K. Norman official website: <https://www.kristinanorman.ee/after-war/>, [last access on 2 February].



Ill. 30 – K. Norman, *Rip-off, Thirst, Shelter*; 2022, (digital video with sound, total running time 35 min), Documentation from screening at the Estonia Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia - *The Milk of Dreams*, Venice.

Through the three distinct storylines and their characters, which offer multifaceted perspectives from women and non-human entities, Norman's trilogy exemplifies the main actors within historical and contemporary colonial structures, showing the cycle of violence perpetuated against people, animals and nature that lies underneath them. Within the pavilion space, Indonesian artist Eko Supriyanto's performance film *Anggrek* (Orchid) engages in a dialogue with Norman's trilogy, interrupting it at intervals, thus challenging the colonial gaze from the perspective of the colonised. Shot on location in a quarry in Central Java where mining is still taking place, the film reports colonial structures that continue to exploit Indonesia's ecosystems, as well as exploring issues of gender and race generated by colonialist perspectives. The aim of this work is to explore the extent to which colonialism has truly ended, encouraging viewers to decolonise their gaze, beginning with the recognition that orchids, for instance, are not merely exotic flowers, but they have a deep connection to their native lands and their exploitation.

Supriyanto himself and dancer Putri Novalita are the central figures in the film. They interact with the mining quarry environment and the surrounding natural landscape through physical gestures that aim to represent indigenous ways of life and knowledge, and to imagine and embody resilient futures despite the intergenerational wounds of



the colonial legacy. The film not only addresses the issues mentioned above in fact, but also highlights the erosion of indigenous ecological wisdom and the profound understanding of nature held by indigenous communities.

As co-curator Sadiyah Boonstra explains further, many contemporary Indonesian artists are interested in exploring the complexities arising from their colonial history and its lasting effects as a system of oppression, which encompasses economic, racial, and gender policies and practices. Some of these artists employ an ecofeminist perspective to highlight the interdependence of gender, nature, and the legacies of colonialism, addressing environmental issues that can be traced back to colonial historical events. Ecofeminism, in fact, is deeply rooted in women's movements in Indonesia, explains Corina Apostol, which is why many artists draw inspiration from its instances. Their aim, thus, is to critique the ongoing impact of colonialism through creative practices, proposing alternative visions grounded in local cosmologies<sup>266</sup>.



Ill. 31 – E. Supriyanto, *Anggrek (Orchid)*, 2022, (digital video with sound) Documentation from screening at the Estonia Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia - *The Milk of Dreams*, Venice.

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<sup>266</sup> S. Boonstra, *Against 'Orchidelirium' and 'Pornotropics': Indonesian Artists on the Coloniality of Nature, Gender, And Race*, in *Orchidelirium, an Appetite for Abundance*, exhibition catalogue (Venice, *Orchidelirium: an Appetite for Abundance*, 23 April - 27 November 2022), edited by K. Norman, B. Razavi, C. L. Apostol, Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, pp. 195-215, here p. 196.



Furthermore, Bita Razavi engages with the theme of the Estonian Pavilion by incorporating material and formal references from both Indonesian and Estonian cultures and traditions. Through her work, manifested as spatial installations within the exhibition space (*The Allegory of the Cave*, *Elevated Platform* and *Kratt*), Razavi encourages the audience to reflect on their own positionality, to consider the power dynamics and hierarchies between the colonisers and the colonised, and to engage in discussions about who has the authority to discuss privilege, in what context, and why.



Ill. 32 – B. Razavi, *Kratt*, 2022, installation, different materials, Estonia Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia - *The Milk of Dreams*, Venice.

*The Allegory of a Cave*, casts artificial plants' shadows on the wall opposite the *Kratt* sculpture to simulate a tropical garden. These shadows are created by artificial lights that simulate sunlight, giving the illusion of a day cycle. With this work, Razavi refers to what is often overlooked and made invisible in botanical art, such as the omission of the local context and its exploitation. In another corner, the interplay of tree shadows from outside the pavilion and the window grid within naturally reveals variations in the play of light.

In addition, the exhibition space features Razavi's specially designed Wardian cases that thematically align with Kristina Norman's film trilogy, highlighting the roles of women in colonial and ecological struggles, the conditions and aftermath of women's liberation, and the lasting impact of colonial structures. In them, a selection of archival

research together with a poetic commentary written by the curator Corina Apostol is displayed. Wardian cases are here presented as a symbol of the commodification and the exploitation of nature, in relation to their historical use in transporting plants from indigenous lands to European markets.

*Kratt*, inspired by an Estonian folklore creature, is instead a kinetic sculpture featuring rotating replicas of Emilie Rosalie Saal's botanical drawings that visitors can access by climbing to the top of the *Elevated Platform*. Regarding this installation, it is noteworthy to highlight how some parts of it were removed without the artist's consent, resulting in the exhibition of an incomplete work. In fact, a series of archival photographs depicting destroyed landscapes in Dutch East Indies, documenting the conditions of colonial extraction of both labour and land through the over-exploitation of natural resources, were intended to be the central focus of *Kratt*. The kinetic sculpture was designed to print Emilie's drawings on the upper part and the consequences of colonial practices on the lower part. However, the lower images were removed, and did not appear in the exhibition, explains Razavi on her official website<sup>267</sup>. This resulted in *Erased Images of a Work About Historical Erasure*, a traveling exhibition that presents the images removed from the installation in different venues, moving from Theran, to Helsinki, Amsterdam, Vienna, and several other cities. The aim is to shed light on the complexities that arise when European colonial history is narrated solely from a European perspective and within a European context. Razavi also intends to address the existing power structures in the art world that enable such erasures, arguing that these are comparable to those addressed and criticised by the art world itself, precisely as in the Estonian Pavilion's exhibition, *Orchidelirium - An Appetite for Abundance*<sup>268</sup>, thus demonstrating the incoherence present within art institutions. It is also interesting noting how, even though the Ministry of Culture, the commissioner, and all the members involved in the project knew about the deleted parts, no explanation was provided to visitors, states Razavi in an interview for "Dartz Magazine"<sup>269</sup>, adding how the exhibition handout text describing this work still

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<sup>267</sup> B. Razavi official website, <https://bitarazavi.com/#/erased-images-of-a-work-about-historical-erasure/> [last access on 2 February].

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> N. S. Abadi, *Interview with Bita Razavi and AmirAli Ghasemi on Razavi's Installation at the 59th Venice Biennale*, in "Dartz Magazine" 17 July 2022, <https://darz.art/en/magazine/interview-bita-razavi-amir-ali-ghasemi/895> [last access on 2 February].

mentioned that “the privileged visitors who gain access to the *Elevated Platform* have the chance to activate this printing machine if they accept its consequences”. However, as the word *consequences* referred to the irreversible damage and the destruction of the landscapes shown in the archival photographs that were supposed to be on display, their removal turned this conceptual project into a merely decorative one<sup>270</sup>. Furthermore, there is very little information available about this removal, as no statements have been released by the organisers of the exhibition, thus making it challenging to understand the exact dynamics and responsibilities behind it.

This situation urges us to reflect on the organisation of art projects presented in prestigious international art institutions and on the true interests behind them, echoing the criticism made of the 2022 Venice Biennale mentioned in the previous paragraph. When addressing decolonisation, feminism, ecology, and other pressing issues, it is crucial to avoid diluting their radical demands. Otherwise, it may be suggested that these pursuits are driven solely by a superficial interest in aligning with prevailing art market trends for aesthetic and capitalist purposes, thereby reducing these critical issues to mere commodities.

At this point, it seems somewhat rhetorical when the curator Corine Apostol explains how the development of *Orchidelirium* was shaped by various perspectives and strategies, since her intent was to investigate in depth the connections between Emilie Saal’s botanical work, Estonia’s involvement in colonialism in Dutch Southeast Asia, patriarchal structures, and Emilie own emancipation at the expense of her women Indonesian servants<sup>271</sup>.

However, in an interview for “Echo Gone Wrong”, an on-line magazine representing Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian Contemporary Art scenes, Apostol stresses how she is particularly proud to have presented this project at the Biennale in the Dutch Pavilion, utilizing the building’s historical context and structure itself as a backdrop for the exhibition<sup>272</sup>. This is something undoubtedly remarkable, as it underlines even

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> A. Menikou, “*Orchidelirium: An Appetite for Abundance*” at the Biennale Arte 2022, in “Echo Gone Wrong”, 23 December 2022, <https://echogonewrong.com/orchidelirium-an-appetite-for-abundance-at-the-biennale-arte-2022/> [last access on 20 January 2024].

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

more the complexities of power structures and their dynamics, also agrees Razavi<sup>273</sup>. Furthermore, Apostol expresses her wish for the Venice Biennale to update its format in the next years, giving countries that have been subject to colonial rule a central place in the Giardini, encouraging exchanges that can lead to innovative connections between different contexts.

Additionally, Apostol discusses about her interest in the artistic perspectives of Estonian and Indonesian artists and the dialogue that has emerged between them. As she reports, curating this project made her more aware of the choices artists can make when using their inherent power and visibility to address issues of privilege. Therefore, the removal of Razavi's work in this context is particularly disappointing. On a wider scale, both *Orchidelirium* and the related events provided an opportunity to discuss the lasting colonial and neocolonial frameworks that still exist in our world and how art can challenge these power structures instead of just depicting or explaining them, promoting empowerment, and helping communities and individuals find common ground. Additionally, it can also prompt the investigation of power dynamics within art institutions themselves.

In fact, art can have a truly transformative power when approached from a holistic perspective, rooted in colonial and postcolonial viewpoints. Furthermore, Apostol herself stresses how art alone, of course, cannot solve the climate crisis, end colonialism, or cure a pandemic<sup>274</sup>. It is not beauty that will save us. Nevertheless, art can serve as a means of resistance, repair, and knowledge, as it has the potential to create new understandings, languages, and ways of being. However, in order to prompt positive changes, viewers must actively engage with the material, aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional tools provided by art, concludes the curator<sup>275</sup>, as well as critically questioning what they see.

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<sup>273</sup> N. S. Abadi, *Interview with Bita Razavi and AmirAli Ghasemi on Razavi's Installation at the 59th Venice Biennale*.

<sup>274</sup> A. Menikou, "Orchidelirium: An Appetite for Abundance" at the Biennale Arte 2022.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

### 3.4 Chile: *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* (2022)

Chile participated at the Venice Art Biennale – *The Milk of Dreams* with an outstanding collective project, titled *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol*. The Chilean Pavilion, located within the Arsenale, in 2022 was curated by independent US-Chilean curator Camila Marambio and organised through a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Cultures, Arts, and Heritage and the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The project is based on over than a decade of eco-cultural cooperation in Tierra del Fuego and developed from the transdisciplinary research practice of *Ensayos*, a Chilean platform that rethinks the role of art in creating growing communities oriented towards biodiversity conservation and contextualized ecological actions<sup>276</sup>.

As part of the Venice Biennale, the curator explains that an immersive installation was created to provide viewers with a multisensory experience of the Patagonian peatlands the project aims to preserve. Furthermore, *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* was created by a skilled multi-disciplinary artistic team consisting of the sound designer Ariel Bustamante, and the art historian Carla Macchiavello. Together, Bustamante and Macchiavello have been collaborating since 2008 to bring this extraordinary project to life. The filmmaker Dominga Sotomayor and the architect Alfredo Thiermann, who already worked on sonic architectures with Ariel Bustamante, were also invited to contribute with their expertise to the development of the project. Additionally, the artists were supported by a dedicated curatorial team consisting of ecologist Bárbara Saavedra, Selk'nam poet Hema'ny Molina, and cultural producer Juan Pablo Vergara, while also a team of talented collaborators have contributed with their expertise to the realisation of this project.

The expression “Hol-Hol Tol”, which inspired the title of the project, derives from the language of the Selk'nam people and means “heart of the peat bogs”<sup>277</sup>. The Selk'nam are an indigenous tribe whose ancestral territory included the entire island of Tierra del Fuego, where they lived in harmony with the peatlands of their territory for 8,000 years, until the arrival of Western settlers responsible for their genocide. Although the official narrative claims that the Selk'nam people are extinct, today Selk'nam

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<sup>276</sup> C. Machiavello, C. Marambio, *Introduction*, in *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* exhibition catalogue (Venice, Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol, 23 April - 27 November 2022), edited by C. Machiavello, C. Marambio, Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, pp. 16-44. (See more at: <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/>)

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

communities refuse to be erased from history<sup>278</sup>. In fact, they demand recognition as a living culture, emphasising the importance of their language and customs, and defend their rights and those of the peatlands as inextricably linked. According to their beliefs, their earliest ancestors transformed into mountains, rivers, trees, peat, and animals, thereby creating *Karokynká*, namely Tierra del Fuego. Consequently, every element of nature holds sacred significance for them. If the peatlands, as wetlands, are in urgent need of conservation in this increasingly hot and dry environment, their survival is also intrinsically linked to the survival and recognition of the Selk'nam people, which is precisely what the Chilean project aims to convey.

In an article for “The Brooklyn Rail” the curator Monika Fabijanska, whose exhibition *ecofeminism(s)* (2020) was analysed in Chapter 2, explains how the immersive installation at the 2022 Chilean Pavilion ingeniously translated ecofeminist social practice into a compelling experience<sup>279</sup>.

Upon entering, visitors, limited to eight every fifteen minutes, were immediately greeted by a distinct olfactory sensation - a damp, earthy aroma embodying both decay and vitality. The room itself was dimly lit, with low hanging lights casting a soft glow over the lush, vibrant carpet of moss. Droplets of water permeated the surroundings, while stacks of red plastic containers lined the walls. A ramp extended above this green field, leading to a circular structure of sturdy steel poles. As the audience climbed onto this raised platform, which was surrounded by a translucent screen, darkness descended, and a film projected from the outside transformed the space into an authentic Patagonian peat bog.

Within the installation, the design, scent, imagery, and sound combined to create a sensory environment that allowed the audience to perceive the movement of the wind and the yielding nature of the soft ground. Sound artist Ariel Bustamante, for instance, recorded the sound of trees rustling, his breath under the waters of the peatbogs, as well as *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol*'s collaborators and their children laughing and singing in Selk'nam. These were the sounds that echoed through inside the Chile Pavilion. Then, as Dominga Sotomayor's camera delved deeper into the earth, viewers were

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<sup>278</sup> See more at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/oct/03/we-are-alive-and-we-are-here-chiles-lost-tribe-celebrates-long-awaited-recognition>

<sup>279</sup> M. Fabijanska, *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol: The Chilean Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale*, in “The Brooklyn Rail”, June 2022, <https://brooklynrail.org/2022/06/artseen/Turba-Tol-Hol-Hol-Tol-The-Chilean-Pavilion-at-the-59th-Venice-Biennale> [last access on 21 January 2024].

immersed in the essence of the peatland itself, becoming one with it, reports Fabijanska.

However, since the screen appeared scratched and wrinkled, questions may have been raised about the reasons for using such inferior materials. Eventually, subsequent information appearing on screen revealed that it was made from a biomaterial skin composed of algae, collagen, and glacial acetic acid that will decompose naturally within six months, aided by fungus and moss.



Ill. 33 - Pavilion of Chile, Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol, 2022, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia - *The Milk of Dreams*, Venice. Photo: Andrea Avezzi.

This was just one aspect of the broader efforts undertaken by the creative team to address greenhouse gas emissions and waste generated by the project. The team, in fact, made several efforts to reduce its environmental impact. As Fabijanska reports, they calculated their carbon footprint using the carbon calculator provided by the Climate Gallery Coalition<sup>280</sup>, collaborated with Rebiennale, a company that is specialised in recycling materials from previous exhibitions<sup>281</sup>, and selected an energy-

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<sup>280</sup> The Gallery Climate Coalition (GCC) is an international community of arts organisations that aims to reduce the environmental impact of the sector. Its primary goal is to facilitate a reduction of the sector's CO<sub>2</sub>e emissions by a minimum of 50% by 2030, as well as promoting zero waste. (See more at: <https://galleryclimatecoalition.org/>)

<sup>281</sup> See more at: <https://rebiennale.org/en/>



efficient website host that supports renewable energies. Additionally, they actively participated in conservation initiatives in the region of Tierra del Fuego.

Since air travel accounted for the majority (93.93%) of the pavilion's carbon footprint, the decision to use a biodegradable screen may not be immediately perceived as essential. However, every decision made by the artists serves as a valuable lesson, encouraging the exploration of alternative materials and the re-evaluation of deeply ingrained behaviours. Although the bio-screen presented potential obstacles, it did not diminish the emotional, aesthetic, intellectual, and ethical significance of the pavilion's conceptual framework<sup>282</sup>.

It is also interesting to note that the sphagnum moss used in the installation was not sourced from Patagonia but was obtained from a German farm where it is cultivated for agricultural and forestry purposes, with the specific aim of safeguarding natural reserves. *SphagnumLab*, a paludiculture<sup>283</sup> laboratory within the Chilean pavilion, is in fact a collaborative effort with leading peatland research institutions worldwide, wherein scientists gather data on the growth of sphagnum moss under diverse conditions, contributing to the development of alternative approaches to peat bog extraction on a global scale. Furthermore, once the exhibition at the Venice Biennale closed, the sphagnum moss was donated to a group of local grassroots organisations working in environmental conservation and regenerative agriculture<sup>284</sup>.

To inform visitors about the significant global climate impact of peatlands, the Chilean Pavilion also features a descriptive panel explaining that these ecosystems constitute the world's largest carbon stores, surpassing forests in carbon absorption. However, once drained, they emit greenhouse gases. As peat accumulates at a rate of only one millimetre per year, its destruction is irreversible within the timespan of human existence. Therefore, peatland plays a central role within the pavilion precisely reflecting the understanding that nature and culture are intertwined rather than opposed. Peatlands are archives of climate and cultural information spanning millennia, encompassing seeds, atmospheric chemicals, ancestral artifacts, and burial

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<sup>282</sup> M. Fabijanska, *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol: The Chilean Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale*.

<sup>283</sup> Paludiculture is a farming and agroforestry system designed to generate a commercial crop from wetland conditions using species that are typical of (or tolerant of) wetland habitats. (Source: <https://lowlandpeat.ceh.ac.uk/paludiculture>)

<sup>284</sup> See more at: <https://turbatol.org/sphagnumlab.html>



sites, explains Fabijanska in her article. Essentially, they embody the extensive history of coexistence between humans and other living beings over thousands of years. As briefly anticipated, *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* is an extension of *Ensayos*, a decade-long research project and collective founded by curator Camila Marambio. The approach of *Ensayos* is deeply rooted in the perspectives shared by both Indigenous and ecofeminist thinkers, notes Fabijanska<sup>285</sup>. In accordance with them in fact, the project aims to bridge disparate disciplines and transcend the rationalistic division between humanity and nature that characterises Western culture. Therefore, *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* as well seeks to explore alternative ways of understanding and engaging with the natural world by adopting an interdisciplinary approach. Through it, the project aims to facilitate dialogue, prompt critical reflection, and foster a deeper appreciation of the interrelationships between humans, nature, and culture, challenging prevailing paradigms and fostering a more holistic and inclusive understanding of our relationship with the environment.



Ill. 34 - *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* team working on the field in Tierra del Fuego.

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, it is noteworthy how the Chilean project is not limited to the immersive installation presented at the Venice Art Biennale but has been extensively explored also in the catalogue, thanks to the participation of numerous contributors from different fields, as the sound designer Ariel Bustamante, the art historian Carla Macchiavello, the filmmaker Dominga Sotomayor and the architect Alfredo Thiermann, who realised the project's installation in collaboration with the ecologist Bárbara Saavedra, Selk'nam poet Hema'ny Molina, and cultural producer Juan Pablo Vergara.

As Machiavello and Marambio explain in the book's introduction, *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* is a multi-temporal and multi-media project based on the Chilean concept of environmental conservation as an anti-colonial act<sup>286</sup>.

Furthermore, the book is described as a tribute to Latin American women who have passionately protected and advocated for their environment while also fighting for their rights in the face of both patriarchal and colonial oppression. The catalogue texts were written by a group of over 35 women from diverse backgrounds in peatlands, resulting in an immersion in the often-overlooked history of Latin American Ecofeminism, which brings together different views on the topic. The commission, started in October 2021, began with *Rumors*, a series of short texts that served as an anticipation of the *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* project. For it, the artist Isabel Torres sensorially adapted these texts, that were then recorded by Ariel Bustamante as an integral part of the project.

What all the women involved in *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* have in common, even if investigating it from different perspectives, is a shared anti-colonial approach to Ecofeminism, whose current critical strands are interwoven into multiple disciplines such as archaeology and art. These texts encourage engaging in multidirectional and interdisciplinary dialogues that encompass a wide range of perspectives, including local viewpoints, intergenerational experiences, and diverse forms of knowledge such as Indigenous, communitarian, and more-than-human understandings. Some of these texts also suggest the need for a more comprehensive understanding of well-being, recognising that certain communities and coexistence practices can be both

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<sup>286</sup> C. Machiavello, C. Marambio, *Introduction*, in *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol*, pp. 18-19.

collaborative and conflicting. As explained by Machiavello and Marambio<sup>287</sup>, the emergence of new socio-environmental agreements and proposals in Latin America, particularly those linked to the legal recognition of environmental rights, further highlight the immense potential of this approach.

In the context of peatlands, for instance, there is a complex and intricate system that extends beyond what is visible to the naked eye. These environments are characterised by layers concealed beneath the surface, holding a wealth of information and processes that are not readily apparent. Likewise, the authors of this book depict the horizon of knowledge and understanding as infinite and ever shifting. Within their texts, they highlight the presence of diverse voices and actions that are often overlooked or unheard, as they originate from entities that transcend the human realm. These perspectives, experiences, and ways of communicating that differ from our own make it challenging to fully comprehend or engage with them, the authors explain. Moreover, certain narratives and memories preserved only through oral traditions or cultural practices made accessing and comprehending them particularly difficult, even if they are embedded within the very essence of our beings, technology, and material artifacts, often leaving an intangible presence. In fact, even though we may not perceive or acknowledge them, these memories are interwoven into the fabric of society, subtly impacting our collective consciousness, and shaping our perception of the world.

By highlighting these aspects, the authors of the book invite readers to acknowledge the limitations of their own perspectives and experiences. This encourages a broader exploration of knowledge that encompasses diverse voices and recognises the significance of non-human entities in shaping our understanding of the world through an academic approach that values multidimensionality, interdisciplinarity, and openness to alternative ways of knowing and perceiving.

Furthermore, when the contributors of the *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* project celebrated the opening of the Chile Pavilion at Morion Laboratorio Occupato in Venice, in April 2022, they did so through poetry, aiming to emphasise its political significance<sup>288</sup>.

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid, p. 39

In Venice, the aim was to share the transformative energy found within the poetry of women from different backgrounds who have, each one in her own way, effectively challenged the established patriarchal and nationalist orders of meaning. Although *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* catalogue primarily focuses on the poetry of individuals who have resided and worked in Tierra del Fuego, the editors also sought to amplify the voices of those living in other regions of Chile and throughout Patagonia to encompass a broader range of perspectives and experiences, acknowledging the diversity of inhabitants beyond geopolitical boundaries. As Machiavello and Marambio explain in fact, what the poets featured in the book have in common is that they occupy what can be referred to as borderland positions and use poetry as a healing force.

Furthermore, during the event held at Morion, the developers of the project extended an invitation to Chilean women who participated in the 59th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale. Among them an honourable mention goes to Norma Ramírez, mother of the artist Cecilia Vicuña, who opened the event singing a song. Notably, Cecilia Vicuña herself played a valuable role in the project through her texts and poems, one of them being *Water is Gold*, an unpublished piece from 2006.

The project *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* also led to another exceptional event: The Venice Agreement. Signed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2022, on World Peatlands Day, this agreement embodies the commitment of peatlands guardians worldwide to redirect the course of ecological and cultural management of these wetland ecosystems towards effective conservation. By adopting a grassroots approach that acknowledges the vital role of local initiatives in the international peatland conservation process, The Venice Agreement establishes a new benchmark for the assessment and implementation of safeguarding and rehabilitating peatlands at the local level.

The genesis of The Venice Agreement took place over a two-day gathering at TBA 21's Ocean Space as part of the *Becoming Fresh & Salty Drops (of water)* programme celebrating the water and life forms of the Venice Lagoon<sup>289</sup>. Here the collaborative efforts of *Ensayos* and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Chile, supported by the Greifswald Mire Centre and We Are Here Venice<sup>290</sup>, engendered its development

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<sup>289</sup> See more at: <https://tba21.org/becomingfresh>

<sup>290</sup> We Are Here Venice is a Third Sector Organisation (TSO) founded in 2015 and committed to the preservation of Venice as a living city. It operates as a research collective and activist platform, reinforcing connections between sources of information, stakeholders, and the local community. See more at: <https://www.weareherevenice.org/>

through a transdisciplinary approach. *Ensayos*, led by Camila Marambio, undertook the curation of the project, with design and organizational support from Bárbara Saavedra, Nicole Püschel, and Antonieta Eguren of WCS-Chile.



Ill. 35 - The Venice Agreement Poster, 2022

The initial inspiration for the Agreement emerged during the second Bi-national Peatland Seminar between Chile and Argentina, which gave rise to the Patagonian Peatland Initiative, and the curatorial project *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol*. The interdisciplinary nature of these initiatives formed the foundation for convening specialists from ecological science, conservation practice, climate change policy, First Nations representatives, and environmental artists to craft an innovative declaration. Following the creation process, the agreement garnered the signatures of 38 participants.

The Venice Agreement aims to expand its reach by incorporating additional geographical locations and attracting more signatories in the coming years. This is in line with the objectives of the Global Peatland Initiative<sup>291</sup>, a collaborative

<sup>291</sup> Established during the UNFCCC COP in Marrakech, Morocco, in 2016, the Global Peatlands Initiative represents a collaborative effort involving prominent experts and institutions. Its primary

international organization dedicated to preserving peat bogs. Therefore in Venice, Dianna Kopansky, the UN Coordinator of the Organisation, emphasized the importance of strengthening the connection between local experts and global decision-makers for the sake of the future<sup>292</sup>.

Given the diverse nature of peatland expertise, The Venice Agreement is constructed upon transdisciplinary intersections encompassing conservation biology, indigenous science, youth-led activism, land management, legislative processes, education, and art. Notably, fruitful discussions took place among Indigenous and non-Indigenous scientists, artists, lawmakers, poets, coming from Lithuania, Ireland, Argentina, Iran, Norway, Spain, India, and Sápmi as well. The perspectives from Kenya and Uganda further enriched this tapestry with remarkable contributions. Notable peatland policymakers and activists, of course, were also involved. Facilitators Charo Lanao and Manuela Zechner guided all these experts, while workgroup leaders, including Uruguayan writer and sociologist Denise Milstein and Chilean art historian Carla Macchiavello, employed a meticulously designed program to channel the participants' diverse experiences towards the collaborative development of an agreement founded upon experiential and research-based knowledge, which is crucial for the activation of peatland protection efforts on a local scale.

The Venice Agreement places great value on the interconnectedness of human well-being and peatlands, acknowledging that deliberate, responsible, and accountable actions can ensure the preservation and restoration of this unique relationship for future generations. Simultaneously, the agreement recognises the specific requirements for achieving effective peatland protection. Therefore, it emphasises the importance of establishing an active coordination mechanism from local to global levels, fostering multi-layered collaboration, implementing immediate and effective measures to safeguard healthy peatlands, and establishing a new framework to acknowledge the cultural, spiritual, and ancestral value of peatlands.

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objective is to conserve peatlands, which serve as the largest reservoir of terrestrial organic carbon globally, thereby preventing its release into the atmosphere. See more at: <https://globalpeatlands.org/about>

<sup>292</sup> See more at: <https://turbatol.org/venice-agreement.html>

Conclusively, to try to summarise the extensive project behind Chile's participation in the 2022 Venice Art Biennale, I will directly borrow the words of Machiavello and Marambio, who state:

As ever, this is about setting our imaginations free; it's a magic spell, a multisensorial journey into the heart of peatlands. It's a journey to the heart of the marginalized (the bogs, the science of conservation, the Selk'nam people, Tierra del Fuego, the work of women, poetry, collaboration, transdisciplinary cultural exchange), to interweave worlds and bring fragments together, to gather strengths and leave behind the binary, to add (like streams to a river) to the biodiversity of this planet Earth. As ever, this is part of a continuum that we briefly join, to transit and get drenched in together. Laying out the pathway, revealing the process, taking hold of a friend's hand to unlearn together; asking for help, companionship, solidarity, an attentive ear; putting our feet (and heads) into the bog, keeping quiet; admiring each other (and other women) on their journeys<sup>293</sup>.

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid, cit., p. 17





## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this thesis has explored the profound influence of the ecofeminist movement on contemporary art practices, shedding light on a topic that has long been overlooked in art exhibitions, hence in art history. By tracing the evolution of Ecofeminist Art and analysing specific case studies, this research has deepened our understanding of how art can engage with and address pressing socio-environmental concerns. Furthermore, it has shed light on the artistic practices of women artists who have often remained on the margins of the mainstream art narrative, highlighting their contributions and how their legacy continues to influence contemporary artists today. The research began by delving into the origins and development of Ecofeminism, which emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s as an intersectional framework that acknowledged the link between gender inequality and environmental degradation. Over time, it has incorporated socialist, anti-capitalist, postcolonial, and queer perspectives, expanding its scope to address different global issues.

The thesis then explored the influence of the ecofeminist movement on contemporary feminist art practices. For instance, it examined how artists have represented the feminine divine and challenged patriarchal narratives through Goddess Art during the 70s and its revival in the present day. Additionally, it analysed the feminist approach to Eco-Art, which blurs the boundaries between science, aesthetics, and public space to address the impact of climate change. The contributions of women artists to the Land Art movement were also highlighted, emphasizing their often-overlooked role in shaping the essence of this artistic movement.

Furthermore, the thesis examined the collective exhibition *ecofeminism(s)* (2020), which showcased the diversity and richness of Ecofeminist Art. By reviewing this retrospective, which is currently the only one on the topic, the research underscored the multiple ways in which artists can engage with ecofeminist themes, concepts, and methodologies, highlighting the potential of art as a vehicle for social and environmental transformation.

Finally, the thesis focused on the 59th Venice Art Biennale - *The Milk of Dreams*, curated by Cecilia Alemani, and its national participations. Through the analysis of specific artworks and curatorial choices, the research provided a deeper understanding of how ecofeminist theories can be visually expressed and presented within the context

of a major international art institution. Furthermore, the examination of certain National Pavilions, such as the Sámi Pavilion, the Estonian Pavilion, and the Chilean Pavilion, showcased the global reach and impact of Ecofeminism. These case studies revealed how artists from different countries and cultural backgrounds can incorporate ecofeminist principles into their artistic practices, offering a nuanced exploration of the relationship between gender, ecology, and artistic expression. Indeed, we also had the opportunity to explore how Ecofeminism is being addressed by various contemporary Indigenous artists who, working in close connection with the people and the land, are truly promoting positive change and environmental reparation, as the Sámi and Chilean pavilions demonstrated with the projects they presented at the Venice Art Biennale in 2022.

Furthermore, these exhibitions provided the opportunity to analyse the complexities that arise when European colonial history is narrated solely from a European perspective and within a European context, urging us to reflect on the organisation of art projects presented in prestigious international art institutions and on the true interests behind them. Indeed, when addressing decolonisation, feminism, ecology, and other pressing issues, it is crucial to avoid diluting their radical demands. Otherwise, it may be suggested that these pursuits are driven solely by a superficial interest in aligning with prevailing art market trends for aesthetic and capitalist purposes, thereby reducing these critical concerns to mere commodities.

Overall, this research has underscored the significance of Ecofeminism within the art world to act as a catalyst for enhancing conversations about sustainability, gender equality, decolonialism, and other crucial concerns of our time. While it is acknowledged that art alone may not bring about tangible and immediate change, this research sought to highlight the transformative potential of artistic expressions in the ecological discourse. The exhibitions and the artworks analysed serve as compelling demonstrations that it is possible to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing environmental dialogue, which gains particular strength within an intersectional framework. With dedication and a commitment to being part of the solution, in fact, individuals from diverse backgrounds can actively engage in addressing environmental challenges through their artistic practices. In essence, the research aimed to underscore the significance of integrating art and ecofeminist concerns,

emphasising that artists, as well as art institutions, have a valuable role in raising awareness, inspiring action, and fostering a deeper understanding of complex social issue.



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