

*Wounded landscapes, tense equilibriums, and broken connections:
Art, Earth and humans*

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Abstract: This text delves into the complex interplay between humans and the natural environment, exploring its philosophical, historical, and ecological dimensions. From ancient contemplations on living in harmony with nature to the present-day ecological crisis, the narrative examines the impact of human activity on the Earth's ecosystems, emphasizing issues such as deforestation, pollution, and mining. The author highlights the growing awareness of this ecological crisis and its reflection in contemporary art. Various artistic projects and exhibitions are discussed as powerful means to address environmental challenges and provoke critical reflection. The text concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for a paradigm shift in humanity's relationship with nature, urging a collective effort towards coexistence and sustainable practices to heal the wounded landscapes and repair the damaged balance between human activities and the Earth's ecosystems.

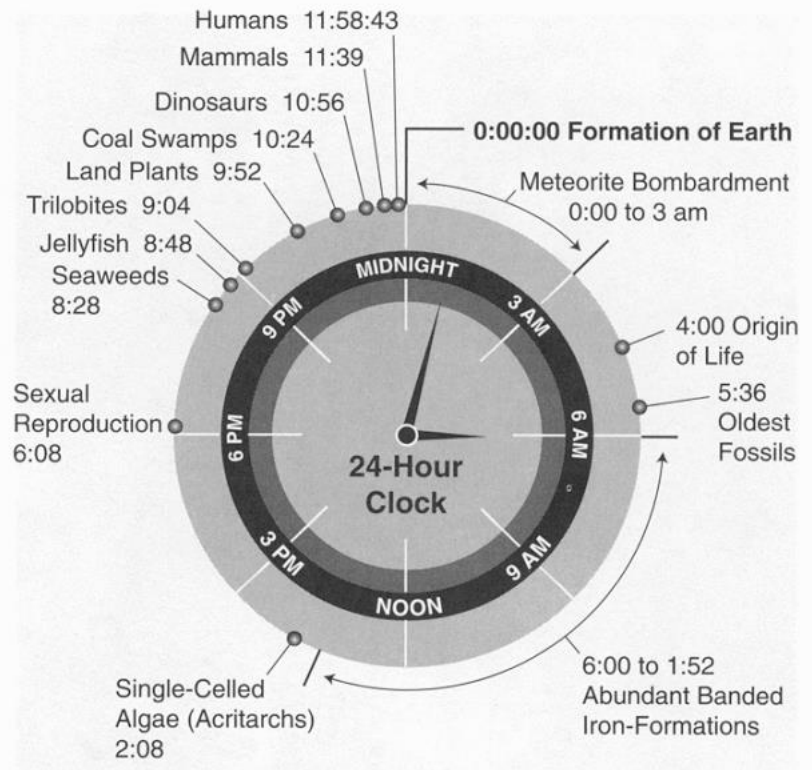
Keywords: wounded landscapes; ecological crises; natural ecosystems; contemporary art.

Introduction

Since ancient times, the relationship between human beings and their natural environment has been at the core of philosophy, arts, science, and humanities. Aristotle and Plato wrote about the harmony with nature and the connection between species, although many philosophers and scientists have explored the idea of *phusis* (φύσις) (Greek term for 'growing') and the *natura* (Latin term for 'birth', from *nascor* which means 'to get born'¹), increasingly contrasting the concept of the natural with that of the artificial.

¹ Ducarme, F., Couvet, D. What does 'nature' mean?. *Palgrave Commun* 6, 14 (2020). In: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0390-y> (Accessed:18 October 2023)

Most likely, human beings have always asked themselves the basic questions of their existence: What am I doing here? Who am I? Where do I go? These questions have received many answers – in connection with nature, the spiritual, the mystical and the inscrutable – but today they continue to generate doubts and diverse answers. What we do know is that in the development of the Earth's existence, we humans were among the last ones to arrive (see the *Earth Clock* image below) and we can assume that, since we are immersed in our consumerist societies, many of us do not care anymore about those who were already there, and about the land that has hosted us.



Earth Clock. Source: One Clock / Meritnation²

Moreover, if we look at the exponential growth of the human population (for example the rise from 2 billion in 1927 to 8 billion in 2023) and if we compare it to all other species that make the Earth's population,³ the impact of human activity on the Earth's ecosystems is unprecedented. The ecological footprint⁴ of the human population, the way we use ecological resources, is beyond any imaginable limit, although it must be recognised that this footprint is vastly different for communities across the world.

Beyond the ancient and ongoing philosophical speculations about 'us and the Earth' or 'us on the Earth', a more conscious reflection about the impact of human activities on the natural environment did not take off until the 1960s. The consequences of the industrial

² "If the Earth was 24 hours old, how old would humankind be?" *Meritnation*. In: <https://www.meritnation.com/blog/history-of-earth-on-24-hour-clock/> (Accessed:18 October 2023)

³ In the population counter The World Counts, it is estimated that "if calculated by weight, the human population makes up about one ten-thousandth of life on Earth". *The World Counts*. In: <https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/state-of-the-planet/world-population-clock-live> (Accessed:18 October 2023)

⁴ *Global Footprint Network*. In: <https://www.footprintnetwork.org> (Accessed:18 October 2023)

revolution, and the multiple ongoing pollutants (chemicals, radioactive contamination, industrial emissions, transportation, etc.), were suddenly knocking on the door of the human consciousness: in 1962 the biologist Rachel Carson, published the book *Silent Spring*, documenting the environmental harm caused by the use of pesticides; in 1970, the first *Earth Day* was proclaimed on April 22nd; and in 1971 UNESCO published the message *S.O.S. Environment*, signed by 2,200 environmental scientists.⁵ These, and many other signs, began to appear to indicate the alarming situation and to seek a change of perspective and attitude.

Today, we could certainly assert that there is a growing awareness of living in a moment of deep ecological crisis. The soil that breathes under our feet is being smothered under another highway lane, another skyscraper, or yet another concrete giant being built on the land. The oceans are choking on plastic, we look up to the sky in search of the stars and instead we see satellites and we realise that we have colonised everything around us: the land, the air, and the water. What is this destructive force we have inside that does not show us the limits and impacts of our actions? What is preventing us from acting in a sustainable way for the future of the Earth and its current and future inhabitants?

Art, Earth and the advent of the humans

In the short video animation titled 'Man' (2012), author Steve Cutts gives a straightforward and provocative vision about the impact and legacy of the human being on the planet Earth.⁶ In Cutts' work, from man's appearance 500,000 years ago, his 'progressive' walk has transformed animals into food and coats, eventually leading to the transformation of natural landscapes into grey and noisy cities. According to Cutts, everything led towards a mass of trash in a highly polluted environment that destroyed land, sea, sky, and every living being; depredation in its fullest meaning. It is a visual tale of the unsustainable passage of humans on the Earth and the sad and miserable reality of the human inability to live with, instead of living against, nature. If we look beyond the screen and Steve Cutts' dystopian video animation, the situation doesn't seem to be better.

⁵ The UNESCO Courier. *S.O.S. Environment*. UNESCO, Paris (1971). In: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000078269> (Accessed:18 October 2023)

⁶ Steve Cutts, *Man*, 2012 – video animation. In: <https://www.stevecutts.com/animation.html> (Accessed:18 October 2023)



Steve Cutts, *Man* (2012), video animation still.

The remnants of the industrial revolution and the perturbing speed of global capitalism are leaving indelible traces on Earth's territories. Wounded and mangled landscapes emerge daily before our eyes, while so-called *progress* has inflicted a process of colonisation on nature, serving purely economic growth.

Silence, darkness, the intrinsic mechanisms of nature, the sacredness of organic ecosystems with all their inhabitants, and the conformations of various terrestrial landscapes are all under constant threat of human exploitation. Wounded landscapes scattered around the planet are demonstrating their fragility and revealing the betrayal of one of the Earth's most consequential inhabitants: human beings.

The symbiosis, the alliance, and the complicity of people and land are currently suffering a deep fracture. The ecological impact of human activity has reached an alarming level, and human greed is leading us past the point of no return.

Amazon deforestation; plastic islands in the oceans; mining activities that destroy ancient Aboriginal sites; gigantic cemeteries of second-hand clothes in the Chilean Atacama Desert; toxic garbage mountains that contaminate the land and sea; coasts scarred by massive tourism infrastructure; ghost architecture, and myriad other examples reveal the use and abuse of land and its resources.

The mining activity can be mentioned among those that cause the most damage to the natural landscape. A recent study, published by a team of scientists in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS), focuses on the correlation between mining and deforestation and points out that:

Growing demand for minerals continues to drive deforestation worldwide. Tropical forests are particularly vulnerable to the environmental impacts of mining and mineral processing. [From 2000 to 2019] we find that 3,264 km² of forest was directly lost due to industrial mining, with 80% occurring in only four countries: Indonesia, Brazil, Ghana, and Suriname.⁷

⁷ Giljum, S., Maus, V., Kuschnig, N., Luckeneder, S., Tost, M., Sonter, L. J., & Bebbington, A. J. (2022). A pantropical assessment of deforestation caused by industrial mining. *Proceedings of the National*

How many natural landscapes do not exist anymore? The further we go in the direction of the harsh exploitation of the Earth, the faster we will make the land that hosted us for millennia disappear. Against this thrust of this rush to disaster what role does art play?

Art has always provoked questions directly linked to the challenges of its times and many artists have openly addressed the ecological collapse. In 1982 Joseph Beuys proposed the performative action *7000 Eichen* (7,000 Oaks) for Documenta 7. Together with citizens, gardeners, environmentalists and city planners, the artist planted 7,000 trees in the city of Kassel, between 1982 and 1987.⁸ The main intentions of the artist were to heal the landscape and the society wounded by the damages of the second world war and to reconfigure the lost equilibrium between man and nature. Beuys was fully conscious of the environmental devastation caused by post-war industrialisation and by human exploitation, and he acted firmly in *defense of nature* (title of another of his actions). As he explained in 1982, ‘I wish to go more and more outside to be among the problems of nature and problems of human beings in their working places. This will be a regenerative activity; it will be a therapy for all of the problems we are standing before.’⁹

Exactly 40 years later, at Documenta 15 in 2022 the sensibility towards the ecological discourse and the concerns about the human exploitation that the Earth suffers from have certainly increased. In the last exhibition in Kassel, projects such as the *Water System School*, by Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun, the *New Rural Agenda* proposed by the Indonesian collective Jatiwangi art Factory, *Tropical Story* by the visual research band Ikkibawikrrr, or the extensive work presented by the arts collective Inland, offer some inspiring examples of how art can reflect on environmental challenges.

Several other examples can illustrate the growing and transversal efforts – geographically and conceptually – made by artists and creators all over the world to stimulate reflection and create consciousness. The environmental premise, the relationship between humankind and nature, the various questions about climate and ecology, have undoubtedly activated an intense flow of creative activities, exhibitions, biennials, festivals, seminars and encounters that revolve around these themes. An interesting example close to the approach analysed here, is the exhibition project *Touch Nature*. As explained in the concept text, ‘The exhibition takes a critical look at the current uncontrolled exploitation and economization of the planet’s resources, as well as the extensive interference in earth processes, which causes the destruction of habitats and the gradual loss of untouched nature.’¹⁰ Among the different artists included in the project it is worth mentioning the work of Oliver Ressler, artist and filmmaker that has often addressed the ecological emergency and the toxic nature of capitalism in his art practice. In his film of 18 minutes ‘Leave it in the ground’, he refers to oil extraction claiming that many ecological disasters and the climate crisis are not technical and scientific problems,

Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 119(38), e2118273119. In: <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2118273119> (Accessed:18 October 2023)

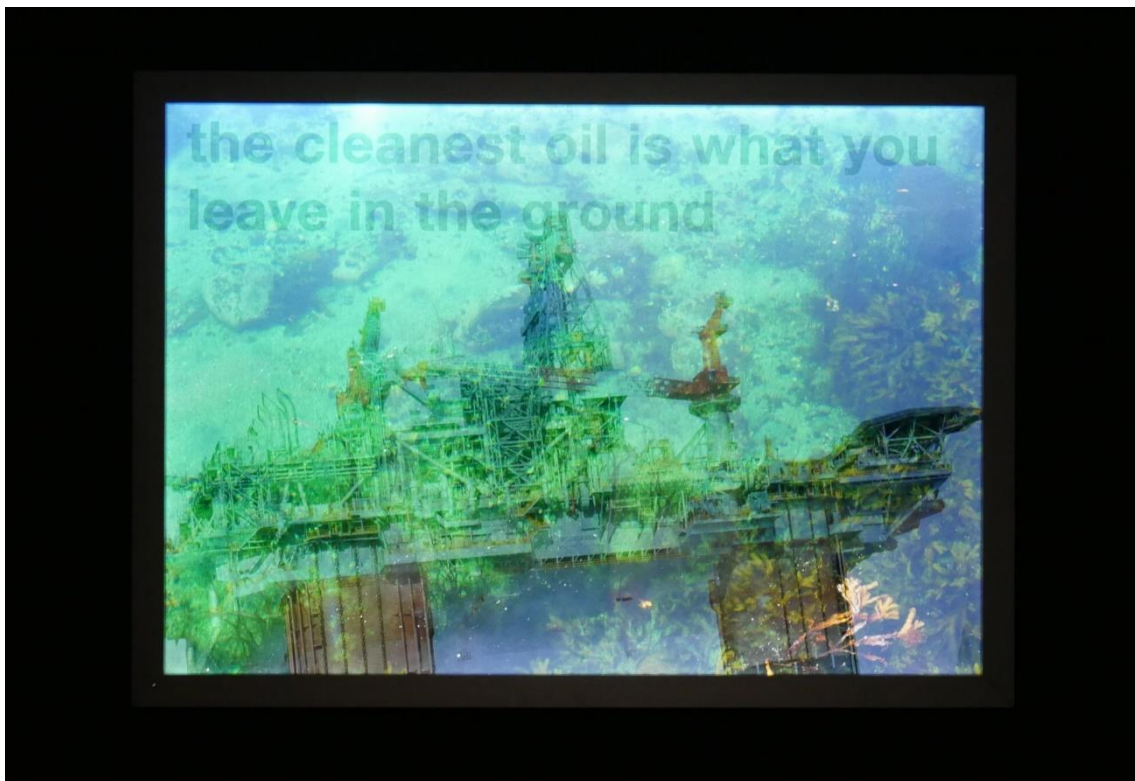
⁸ The planting activity continued after the death of the artist in 1986.

⁹ Demarco, Richard, “Conversations with Artists,” *Studio International* 195, no. 996 (September 1982): 46.

¹⁰ The exhibition *Touch Nature* at the Austrian Cultural Forum is part of a multimedia installation series showcased in eleven Austrian cultural forums across Europe and the United States (2021–2025). See more at https://www.instagram.com/touch.nature_project/ (Accessed:18 October 2023)

but political problems. The film was shot in the Lofoten archipelago, in Norway, where a group of ‘politicians have advocated extracting petroleum in one of the largest fish and aquatic life spawning grounds on the planet, the sea encircling the Lofoten archipelago. The deepwater drilling would have unpredictable effects on the fish populations and some of the world’s cleanest waters.’¹¹ As highlighted by the art theorist and cultural critic T.J. Demos:

Ressler’s work is significant for raising a set of critical questions that few others are asking today. Among them, a critical inquiry into the nature of value and the value of nature, which anthropogenic climate change forces us to ask, even while dominant corporate-media discourse is generally set on suppressing it altogether: that is, whether we as a civilization would agree with the fisherman or the oil producer, as represented in *Leave It in the Ground*. Do we support the intrinsic value of nature as an ecologically integral site of biodiversity and interconnected life systems, seeing the Norwegian archipelago as a spawning ground of fish that forms part of a complex and interdependent ecosystem? Or do we agree with the oil producer who views the archipelago as a source of wealth accumulation, because ‘people can live with less fish, but not without oil.’¹²



Oliver Ressler, ‘Leave It in the Ground (The cleanest oil)’ (2014), LED lightbox, 84,1 x 59,4 cm.

¹¹ Ressler, Oliver, *Leave in it the ground*, 2013. In: https://www.ressler.at/leave_it_in_the_ground/ (Accessed:18 October 2023)

¹² T.J. Demos, “Denaturalizing the Economy: Oliver Ressler’s Political Ecology,” in: Oliver Ressler, *Cartographies of protest*, Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2015, p. 94. In: https://www.ressler.at/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Cartographies_of_Protest-Oliver-Ressler.pdf (Accessed:18 October 2023).

Another dimension full of suffering – both human and the land – is that which refers to mining exploitation. From Manifesta 9, which took place in the former coal-mining site of Waterschei in Genk (Limburg, Belgium), to a series of contemporary art exhibitions all over the world, the process of extractivism and the huge ecological and societal impact of it has become an important point of discussion. The project *EXTRACTION: Art on the Edge of the Abyss* is a good example of a continued series of art interventions, aiming at:

shining a light on all forms of extractive industry—from mining and drilling to the reckless plundering and exploitation of fresh water, fertile soil, timber, marine life, and innumerable other resources across the globe (...) addressing the suicidal consumption of the planet's natural resources, which is the most pressing environmental issue of our time.¹³

Another example in this line is the art exhibition *Under/Mining*, which addressed the history, memory, sociocultural and environmental impact of mining in Cyprus through a contemporary art perspective for the first time.¹⁴ The exhibition took place in the ex-mining community of Kalavassos, a village in the Larnaka region, whose history and heritage are strongly linked to the mining activity and its impact. The different local and international artists involved in the exhibition addressed this specific topic, highlighting the multiple layers of complexity that the mining activities entail, from the use and abuse of the Earth's resources, the mirage of the employment opportunity, and the inhuman conditions for the miners and their families, to the environmental disasters and the agony of the landscape. Artists Melita Couta, with her work *Kappakli* – referring to the three-piece enamel food container used by the miners to transport their food to the mines – and Klitsa Antoniou, with her video projection *Never Mine* and the set of installations *Metallum Terrae, Milk and More Milk*, both addressed the complex layers of the human condition history and development, highlighting this double narrative of human responsibility and human necessity, trapped between death and life, hope and exploitation.

In another example, in India the movement against the bauxite mining in Odisha's Kashipur was inspired by the song composed by its leader Bhagwan Majhi. *Gaon Chodab Nahi* (We will not leave our village), was made into a music video in the early 2000s and echoed several questions and concerns raised by mining-affected communities across the world:

*You erected dams, submerged villages, established factories
Cut off forests, set up mines, made sanctuaries
But where do we go leaving our water, forest and land,
O god of development, say, how do we save our lives?*

¹³ *EXTRACTION: Art on the Edge of the Abyss*. In: <https://www.extractionart.org> (Accessed: 18 October 2023)

¹⁴ *Under|Mining*. *CUT Contemporary Fine Arts Lab*. In: <https://www.cutcontemporaryfineartslab.com/mining.html> (Accessed: 18 October 2023)

*We will not leave our village, we will not leave our jungle,
We will not leave mother earth, we will not leave struggle.*¹⁵

The wounded landscapes, and the whole Earth, struggle against humanity's constant greed and need for control. But this control is nothing more than an illusion and the more the landscape is subdued to the unlimited human desires, the harsher will be the consequences and the responses of broken ecosystems. In the video *Earth Fight* by Mimiko Türkkan, the artist is confronting a wounded landscape, hitting the ground with a gesture of anger and helplessness.¹⁶ The surrounding environment and the power of the gesture seem to address this constant and unresolved paradox: the human attitude of causing damage to everything we should take care of (the Earth and the others). Wounded landscapes reveal the broken balances and the open wound of the humanity as the more we destroy the land the more we destroy ourselves.



Mimiko Türkkan, *Earth Fight* (2022) 4'52, 4K video, sound 3 Ed. + 1 A.P. Still.

Healing a wounded landscape and recovering from the massive and constant mechanism of exploitation is not an easy task. The architecture of power that governs human relations and impinges upon the connection with the multiple natural ecosystems, has caused chains of crises that affect the earth and contemporary life. Those who run this architecture of power are not currently weaving a path of harmony between nature and the human population.

Art can propose new tools, it can change the narrative, it can reflect on challenges from different perspectives, and it can nurture movements, but the hegemony of the exploitation system in which we live (the one that can provoke the human fatality and the

¹⁵ Bhattacharya, Aritra, "Mining-affected communities seek refuge in art to express rage, reason and reflection", in: *Mongabay*, 13 August 2021. In: <https://india.mongabay.com/2021/08/mining-affected-communities-seek-refuge-in-art-to-express-rage-reason-and-reflection/> (Accessed:18 October 2023)

¹⁶ *Earth Fight*. *mimiko türkkan*. In: <https://www.mimiko.net/portfolio/earth-fight-2022/> (Accessed:18 October 2023)

planet's catastrophe) requires a broader awareness. Surrounded by wounded landscapes, humanity must find the way to allow and accept a functioning system of co-existence. As stated by author Cal Flynn: 'This is a corrupted world, yes – one long fallen from a state of grace – but it is a world too that knows how to live. It has a great capacity for repair, for recovery, for forgiveness – of a sort – if we can only learn to do it so.'¹⁷ Switch off the light. Don't touch. Stay silent. Leave nature alone.¹⁸

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¹⁷ Flynn, Cal, *Islands of Abandonment: Life in the Post-Human Landscape*. Harper Collins, Glasgow 2021.

¹⁸ *Leave Nature Alone*. In: <http://leave-nature-alone.org> (Accessed:18 October 2023)

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