

## *The artist as healer*

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**Abstract:** Amidst escalating ecological crises, artists grapple with representing landscapes in the Anthropocene era, where human activity dominates. Departing from traditional portrayals, the artist advocates for acknowledging interconnectedness within ecosystems. Through personal experiences and projects like "Happy Owners," the author challenges conventional perceptions and inspires critical engagement with nature. Recent explorations into ancestral rituals and the Breton coast underscore a personal journey towards understanding human-environment relationships. Ultimately, art serves as a medium for interpretation and exploration, rather than didactic activism.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene; ecological crises; interconnectedness; public engagement; ancestral rituals; human-environment relationships

The planet is in a bad state. This is an undeniable fact and it is mainly the responsibility of human beings. The influence of human activities on the ecosystems and the geology of the planet is such that, according to some scientists, it could mark the passage to a new geological era called the Anthropocene. The word etymologically translates into "the era of man," but if it attributes to man a predominant role, this role is unfortunately that of a destructive force. The Anthropocene could therefore be interpreted as the era in which human beings have become a virus and the wounds caused to the planet are deep and lasting.

The current state of nature is dramatically changing the way artists represent it. It no longer seems possible today to represent a sublimated, idealized nature as a simple setting for human activities. As Philippe Descola has pointed out in "Beyond Nature and Culture" (2013), the landscape painted in the Western tradition since the Renaissance, with its horizon line and vanishing points, reveals a naturalistic vision of the world that positions human beings outside of nature and keeps the viewer at a distance from the landscape. This vision is today not only outdated but also dangerous. Nature itself is an obsolete concept, which should be rethought as a set of interrelations between living species and their ecosystem, including human beings.

How, then, to represent the landscape? How to approach this subject as an artist?



*Red forests, Soazic Guezennec, Exhibition view, Aujourd'hui le paysage Centre d'art contemporain de Lacoux 2004. Image courtesy of the artist.*

The preservation of nature is today a major political issue. Should art take part in the citizen's debate and claim to contribute to inspire a change? Or is it presumptuous and vain for an artist to claim to want to heal the world? If artists are the antibodies of society, then doesn't the current state of the world reveal a real deficiency of art as an immune system?

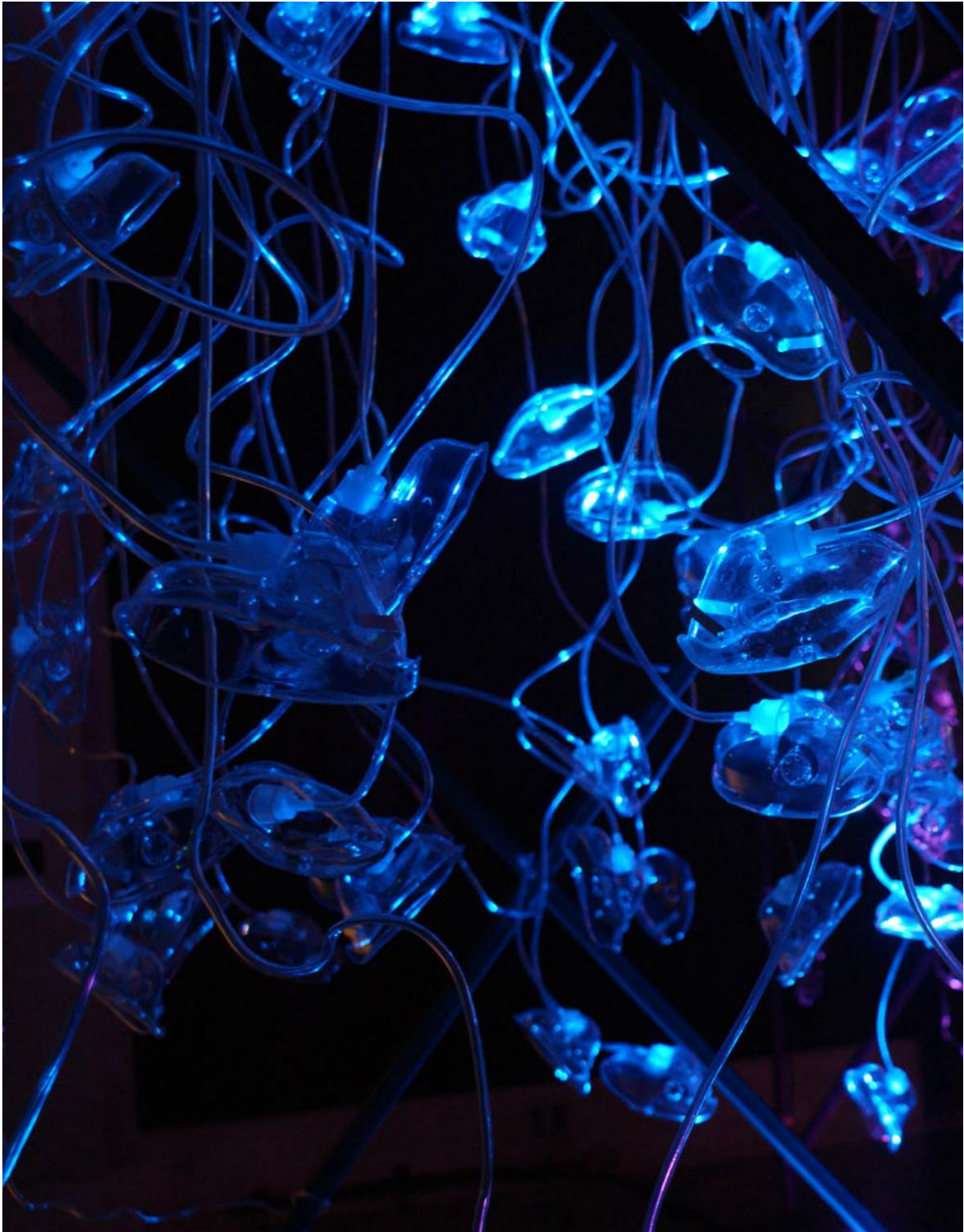
My artistic practice has been built around these questions for over 25 years. More exactly since a trip to the Amazon, in French Guyana in 1995. The dam of Petit Saut had just been constructed. Hectares

of forest pointed their dead branches above the surface of the water, like so many steles to all the sacrificed lives. Further upstream, gold miners were dumping mercury into the water and fish were lying belly up on the surface of the river. Over two weeks, we went up the Tapanahoni river by dugout canoe in order to reach an inselberg, a rocky mountain which reigns majestically over this part of the Amazonian Forest. Guided by the Indians who attribute a sacred character to it, we approached the mountain to the rhythm of a series of rituals, as if we were going to meet a divinity, in an atmosphere of meditation and humility. The day after we returned from the expedition, I visited the space center and witnessed the launch of the Ariane rocket.

This experience gave me a deep uneasiness, an awareness of the western arrogance in its way of approaching nature and exploiting its resources. It also convinced me that the landscape could only be represented as the result of a relationship between a natural habitat and its occupants. Finally, it fostered the conviction that it was essential for me, as an artist, to experience different environments in order to represent them. Since then, I have continued to travel the planet, from the African deserts to the Himalayan summits, in order to observe, feel, and make visible the ills inflicted on landscapes and to question the relationship of human beings with their environment.

Representing the damaged landscape of the Anthropocene poses another question: if it is destined to be transformed, even to disappear, then shouldn't its mode of representation, like any human endeavor, be subject to the same laws of nature? This questioning of form goes hand in hand with a moral question that the context of the pandemic has accentuated for me: what sense is there in producing perennial works to describe nature that is itself endangered by a society of abundance and accumulation? Already in the 60s, Land Art artists opposed the concept of works dedicated to eternity in favor of temporality and disappearance. By choosing nature as material and as a surface of inscription, they integrate the process of modification, decomposition and degradation in the work and thus resist to the commodification of art. Their works refer to the deliquescence, the formlessness, and the chaotic. Exposed to erosion, they are doomed to disappear. My interventions on the territory claim a filiation with this practice, as much poetic as political. They privilege the relationship with the site, the improvisation, a simplicity of means and the ephemeral; similarly, in my work the light, the rain, the waves, the snow, the wind, the grass, and the rocks become co-authors of a work of which I am only the conductor. The artistic gesture consists in weaving links between the elements and favors a certain attenuation, a stripping down to represent the impermanence of nature and what links us to it.

To make the public enter the landscape in order to make him aware of its wounds, to use natural materials to integrate the future of nature in the work, raises awareness on the fragility of the landscape. But what good is it to raise awareness if there is no hope of remission? The protection of nature is now a major issue and is at the center of political discourse. Representing the landscape with its vulnerabilities and forces in action becomes a political as well as an artistic gesture. If the artist does not have the capacity to bring solutions, perhaps he can nevertheless arouse the imagination by conceiving desirable projections that can be set in motion. Numerous artists today incorporate interdisciplinary approaches in order to bring together various expertise around ecological issues and create works as spaces for discussion and experimentation, which in turn can become true vectors of change in society.



*Medusa Garden, Soazic Guezennec. Image courtesy of the artist.*

My works “Happy Owners” and “Happy Tourists” respond to this same desire to invent other ways of relating to nature; to inspire change by inserting themselves into the public sphere. Conceived in 2010 in Mumbai, “Happy Owners” is a “SurReal estate agency,” a parody of a real estate agency that designs utopian urban projects in which nature deploys all its power. The SurReal estate agency then

promotes these utopias by hacking the communication vectors of the real estate industry. Supported by Columbia University, GSAPP, “Happy Owners” has opened 10 branches in India, one in Turkey and one in Germany, each time using a local context to suggest housing transformations. The objective of “Happy Owners” is not to provide solutions, but to raise questions and to promote utopias that can inspire reality.



*The map to the secret cave Clay- Rocks 48°42'17.6"N 3°43'02.1"W 2018. Soazic Guezennec. Image courtesy of the artist.*



*Get lost, Soazic Guezennec. Image courtesy of the artist.*



*Happy Owners India, Soazic Guezennec. Image courtesy of the artist.*

The same motivation inspired the performance installation "restitution from the earth to the stars." The installation presents a bouquet of flags planted in a pile of rubble. The flags are made of dyed pieces of fabric with holes in them. Participants are invited to plant the flags in the landscape, allowing light to pass through the holes to make a constellation appear. The gesture of planting a flag, which usually marks the conquest and possession of a territory, is diverted to signify a renunciation and a restitution. By planting the flag, each participant reconsiders his or her position on earth, under the sky, and in the cosmos and agrees to initiate the decolonization of nature.



*Restitution of earth to the stars, Soazic Guezennec. Image courtesy of the artist.*





*Restitution of earth to the stars, Soazic Guezennec. Image courtesy of the artist.*

For more than 20 years I have been representing wounded landscapes in order to make the public aware of the fragility of nature and to invite them to assume their responsibilities and take action. The period of the COVID-19 pandemic has awakened doubts and questions about the meaning of all this: Is it really the role of art to substitute itself to politics in an attempt to rethink our relationship with nature? Is it even desirable to attribute a function to art? During this period, there was an increasing expectation to diffuse a supposed artistic antidote to the unedited situation in which we lived on social media networks. Since the resumption of exhibitions and residencies, calls for applications including proposals for workshops, mediation spaces, and collective works on ecology have become commonplace. Despite the opportunities to participate, this frenzy has awakened in me a feeling of helplessness and has led me to question my artistic desire.

I felt, above all, the need to reconnect and to re-establish the link with what surrounds me, near and far. I took refuge on the Breton coast of my childhood and found myself under the stars facing the horizon. I went to explore the ponds. I listened to the history of waves and cormorants, I animated rocks, transformed lichens into geographical maps, revealed archaeological sites, lit fires and revived volcanoes. I connected the elements to compose ephemeral stories, like sketches of works in progress, mixing past, present and future.

I approached the landscape as a sensitive subject – carrying traumas, vulnerability to fears, and invented magical formulas with healing powers – with the intention of reviving ancestral rituals.

The way the work is perceived, or the use that is made of it, seemed to me superfluous. I do not create for a certain public, to awaken consciences, or to inspire change. I only create out of need, the desire, a way of seeing, a need to translate the world in a sensitive language to make it bearable; I create to detect the world's mysteries and to evaluate my place in this complex mesh.



*A day on Earth, Fire, Soazic Guezennec. Image courtesy of the artist.*

## **References**

Descola, Philippe. 2013. *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Soazic Guezennec** is a French visual artist, who spent 1 year in Africa, 7 years in Mumbai and 7 years in Berlin, before settling back in Bretagne in 2023. She creates multimedia installations combining painting, video, landart and performance, to question the relationship between human beings and their environment. In each new territory, she investigates the landscape to collect the elements that will enable her to create a sensitive portrait of the environment. This portrait takes the form of immersive installations, in which the public is invited to wander, interact and reflect. Soazic Guezennec has shown her work in over 15 different countries, in galleries, museums and art centers. She took part in the Habitarium exhibition at the Musée de la Condition Publique in Roubaix in 2018 and won a Draussenstadt grant from the city of Berlin for her HappyTourists project in 2023. She regularly collaborates with actors of change to translate the challenges of their mission in a sensitive way. Soazic Guezennec is a graduate of the Institut Supérieur de Gestion and the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Arts de Paris Cergy.