

## ARTICLE

**Ecosophical alternative realities****Alban Mannisi\*** 

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**Abstract**

Since Western postmodernism sparked awareness and shaped our governance and lifestyle at the turn of the millennium, Global North ecosophies have attempted to grasp the ecological and ontological crises, creating their own performative narratives in the process. Pervasive throughout all modes of thought about our relationship to the world, environmental consciousness is part of political ecologies and contemporary hermeneutics. From design philosophies to laws and representations, everyone has an opinion on how we should manage our biospheres. This has led to the Global South being flooded with Western ethics, which are often hostile to them in the manner of imperialist modes of operation. Even more astonishing is the versatile plasticity of these conceptual changes, which are less disruptive than radical and pursue the same resilient environmental ethics that gave rise to them. Thus, the world of contemporary art is flooded with thinkers of a new ecological esthetic modeled on the genesis of the Anthropocene. The era of neoliberal ecological esthetics in communication design has thus become a soft power advocacy for Western imperialism, much like built environment experts who damage the world they claim to protect. It glorifies a myriad of empowering narratives of the corporate, privileged, wealthy, and educated elite, reminiscent of the aristocrats of past Western imperial empires. In an era of mutating environmental esthetics, we will explore the foundations and issues of these ecosophical alternative realities that perpetuate indifference toward both humans and non-humans. We will also examine how contemporary ecological relativism is leading new generations to disengage from generic communication design and embrace other existence praxis.

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**1. Toward a custodian heuristic lens**

A deeper understanding of the roots of our ecological and ontological crisis and of their countercurrents, such as the renewed global interest in the ecological philosophies (i.e., ecosophies) that guide humanity's adaptation to its environment, is essential to confronting their systematic erasure by contemporary societies and the recurring orchestration of our collective indifference to the foundations of our ecosystems.

Such an insight enables us to examine the form of ecological relativism that sustains the scientific, ethical, and political confusion underpinning our economic and market systems. Since the emergence of concerns about climate change, environmental degradation, spatial inequality, and social justice, our societies have entered a grey zone

of partial awareness. Yet they have swiftly reorganized themselves to overlook the true source of these realizations: The pernicious values inherited from monarchical and corporate traditions—an enduring legacy of environmental imperialism.

We will therefore seek to comprehend how an entire apparatus of experts, disciplines, and intelligences collaborates to construct a seemingly benign, consensual narrative communication design intended to justify the “lesser evil” of pre-approved changes, which has ultimately produced a way of life confined to the market economy: A marketed ontology.

Under the guise of heightened ecological awareness, an entire environmental esthetic has been reconfigured to provide a new backdrop for a Western culture that remains outward-looking and unyielding in its exploitation of the planet’s resources. It exposes an evolution of enlightenment-born habits and cultural capital—now neatly tailored to the guilt-ridden conscience of younger generations, yet still conceived from a place of impunity.

While Western universalist ideals have long sought to impose their worldview for self-serving ends—what we might call imperialist environmentalism—the repeated failure of these ever-renewed ideological projects, which promise transformation yet deliver none, has opened the door to profound contemporary upheavals. The Global South’s growing awareness of the power of its own environmental ethics—paired with a certain strategic disinterest—offers a glimpse of new forms of hope.

However, what about the environmental constructs that lie behind these ecosophical alternative realities? What of their architectures and mechanisms, shaped by the thought, politics, and esthetics embedded in our everyday lives? Which initiatives today allow us to better apprehend the intangible environmental esthetics that define other ways of living? These questions aim to deconstruct such parachuted expertise and to approach the problems through a custodian heuristic lens.

## 2. Repetition ends in difference

It was artists who unraveled the enigma of our natural world and enabled civilizations to make crucial discoveries that neither politics nor the market had much incentive to produce. Whether it is representations leading to cartography (Mauro, Italy, 15<sup>th</sup> century), poets expressing environmental ethics (Saigyô, Japan, 12<sup>th</sup> century), performing arts magnifying Indigenous cultures (Sabran, Malaysia, 21<sup>st</sup> century), or iconography questioning telluric forces (Cézanne, France, 20<sup>th</sup> century), among many others, artists are developing sensitive approaches to reveal the mutations of the tangible realities of our biospheres

through intangible phenomena.<sup>1</sup> Since the expansion of epistemologies, such as Haeckel’s ecology (1866), which was referred to as “serious science,” Western civilizations have systematically imposed their environmental ethics and esthetics globally.<sup>2</sup> The brazen attitude of artists who lecture the world on how nature should be managed has similarly been imposed as an indisputable universal value (Figure 1).

The present distinction between craftsmen, engineers, and artists, inherited from the 18<sup>th</sup>-century European Industrial Revolution, which categorized disciplines with the aim of allegiance to capitalist models, has since shaped our generic worldwide ontologies. Former communities of practice, whose values were intertwined, have been categorized as either blue- or white-collar workers. The emerging “artist” community became the sole relevant philosopher of art (i.e., esthetics). Today, the democratization of artistic education, based on Global North principles, is perpetuating such biopolitics. While working-class individuals embrace these ethics and work “for the love of art,” the privileged classes are reluctant to change the comfortable status quo. Repetition ends in difference;<sup>4</sup> class mobility remains a cronyism trick within the Global North art community.<sup>5</sup>

Such an esthetic legacy has also biopolitically mutated worldwide environmental ethics. According to the so-called plasticity of Hobbesian capitalism, decolonialism, minority empowerment, and anti-capitalism are now evolving within the intellectual frameworks they were initially fighting against. Recent breaches in international conventions exposing endless resource exploitation and ethnic supremacism (e.g., neoliberal ecology, as defined by sustainable development) demonstrate that such laws were not intended to challenge the West/Global North, enlightening us on contemporary environmental esthetics. The art milieu established values, institutions, and pedagogies to honor their own practices and customs, while simultaneously claiming to engage in self-criticism.<sup>6</sup> Global South artefacts are only acceptable to the Western world within the context of museums and conservation protocols.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Western environmental protection is imposed anywhere in the world, as if non-Western civilizations were incapable of protecting their own biosphere due to their indigenous engineering. Whitewashing, such as the endless repetition of Western environmental history,<sup>8</sup> guilt-washing (Australian “white” reconciliation), and the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai, ensures that anything contradicting Western ecosophy remains ignored and stifled beyond sporadic symbolic gestures.

<sup>1</sup> Distortion of the seminal work of Gilles Deleuze



**Figure 1.** *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, Germany (1817–1818). A drawing painted by Caspar David Friedrich. Reprinted from Ref.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Ecological relativism

This entanglement of intellectual, institutional, and ecological domination are not a symbol of the decadent empires' legacy, which allows us to hope for renewal as they disappear. Rather, they are the built environment we experience daily.<sup>9</sup> Such epicolonialism is deeply embedded in our corporatist lifestyles through environmental imperialism. This fuels the spread of Western ethics<sup>10</sup> and the influence of academic and intellectual institutions across the globe,<sup>11</sup> completely reshaping ontologies in the "Global North" satellites, such as South Korea, Singapore, China, Israel, and Dubai, to name but a few. If the Sustainable Development Era (2000–2020) was a deliberate manipulation of environmental fears, what follows is the moral imperative to engage modern political philosophies with neoliberal ecologies. This is currently producing our poor, deleterious ethics, covering up the complexities of the worldwide environment. We are witnessing the rise of a greenwashing market society,<sup>12</sup> which is producing indulgent, self-serving, and disruptive ecological influencers.

#### 3.1. Green grey zone

While we can grasp the causes of our inability to anticipate the constant, rapid changes in our atmosphere that inflict climate anxiety, we can also grasp why people profit from this status quo. What is hard to fathom is how this imbroglio is maintained. How has a whole generation of performative activists and thinkers devoted itself to covering the tracks of those who are poisoning their biospheres? The reason for this would simply be a culture of impunity within the fields of artistic and built environment studies. The ecological upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries produced a candor and permissiveness toward the inability of experts to establish the scientific and political philosophy of this phenomenon. This gave rise to a sense of impunity and

an absence of moral accountability among environmental artists, creating a "grey zone": A poetry of innocence.

#### 3.2. Narrative design

Our disengagement from the complexity of our ever-changing environments has led to the emergence of new narratives shaped by neoliberal political ecologies. The narrative design that gave rise to the "alternative reality" strategy is characterized by those who feel offended and disempowered by reality.<sup>13</sup> "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."<sup>14</sup> In our market-driven society, prospectivists are no longer expected to understand the world; rather, they are expected to sell product designs that claim to solve problems, as expressed in the marketing philosophies of our corporate universities worldwide. The resurgence of narratives deemed obsolete by post-modernity has given rise to the liberal trend of communication design. This enables the sale of generic soft power based on anarcho-capitalist beliefs to people who are disillusioned with an environment that, as Lovelock expresses in the Gaia hypothesis,<sup>15</sup> has backfired due to engineered mutation.

#### 3.3. Marketed ontology

To apprehend why our societies, politics, economics, and esthetics devote a substantial amount of energy to disregarding indigenous engineering knowledge that has been proven beneficial and utilized by humanity for millennia, enabling us to focus on more important issues and improve the lives of those affected by Gaia's periodic upheavals, we must decipher the hidden agenda of such environmental imperialism.<sup>2</sup> It relies on contemporary work ethics manufactured for engineers, influencers, and artists to sell new products. This process structurally diminishes what already exists, what works, and what is used to support speculative economies. It alters the fundamental purpose of universities and institutions of artistic learning, shifting the focus from assessing, deciphering, accounting for, and questioning the construction of our environment to extracting components from it for oneself. What exists is no longer a benefit provided by our ancestors; it is a set of techniques that benefit some people and are therefore considered useless by the marketed ontology. This ontology must earn its survival in an environment not designed for our humanity, but to serve us. "Nature produces to serve human beings," a protestant environmental ethic that forms the basis of capitalism<sup>16</sup> and sustainable development.<sup>17</sup> This concept has since become prevalent in neoliberal ecosophies, encouraging citizen participation,

<sup>2</sup> Such enquiries produce multiple pieces of pedagogical material through the author's academic work, such as [www.scapethical.org/environmental-imperialism-sabotage/](http://www.scapethical.org/environmental-imperialism-sabotage/)



urban farming, and other seemingly harmless activities that promote ecocide goals.

### 3.4. Resilient extractivism

Were we naive to believe that great discoveries and voyages around the world were not inspired and fueled solely by the desire to seek out treasure that could be monetized? Rereading Proudhon's *Property Is Theft*<sup>18</sup> reveals that the upper classes reinterpret environmental ethics and the ontological morality of post-sustainable development to reappropriate the legitimacy of existential resistance from the very people they harm and manipulate. As we mentioned earlier, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seemingly been a period of re-examining malpractices, but it has mostly served to solidify these same patterns. Contemporary "artists" around the world have emerged as a reflection of eco-societal dynamics, amplifying the trends of their time. A new philosophy of art, or esthetics, also interprets the concept of an ecological civilization<sup>19</sup> as an unconditional corporate and neoliberal imperative to support a financial ecological transition. Sadly, this serves propaganda much more than it analyzes mechanisms. Although narratives about the role and social position of artists have traditionally been seen as being beyond the scope of alliances and obligations to power, the government, and the market, this performative self-determination suggests otherwise in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is preoccupied with environmental consensus. The desire to entertain a society, lost by the disappearance of modern narratives, motivates the ignoring or judicious use of an abundance of contradictory data on subjects recently explored by the hard sciences and their translation into toxic political ecology.

### 3.5. Habitus and cultural capital

During the era of sustainable development, the advocates of ecological esthetics rode an alternative wave, undermining art, political ecology, and environmental ethics. The highly effective mimicry of communication design, which today prevails as an art form and comforts the habitus and cultural capital it was supposed to challenge, is shaping our generic global model. Thus, in a seemingly unacknowledged impulse that has become problematic after decades of tentative openness toward minorities and oppressed peoples, we often see iconographies depicting the Westernization of the world as a golden age. This is used to justify yet another regime change carried out by the Global North. The West admires the reproduction of its values and way of life at the heart of a deeply colonized global environment. An ultimate point at which these other cultures would finally have understood what progress and civilization mean, since so-called regressive forces have

repressed them (Figure 2). This is the case today with the political ecology of the Chinese settlers led by Lee Kuan Yew in the former Nusantara region. Its Singaporean Garden City Ecosophy was designed mainly to attract foreign investors.<sup>19</sup> Or even the present fascination with Chinese technology, provided that the latter develops in accordance with a neoliberal Confucianism and a profoundly Western esthetic. This is not to evoke the green colonialism of Israel in Palestine, where Palestinian villages are destroyed under the guise of planting exotic specimens.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.6. Decolonial ecosophy or Western phantasm

Our ability to propose alternatives based on our personal experience of our environment—or our "ecosophical esthetic phantasm"—is enabled by the "risk-taking impunity" embodied in our neoliberal ecological speculation. It creates a blur that allows vague, positivist, and naive thinking to find comfort in the uncertain changes that only the underprivileged endure. In our project, Ulu, the focus is on questioning new forms of environmental imperialism from the perspective of political ecology, a field that claims to be both conscious and responsible (Figure 3). When complex problems, whose stakes are raised by natural disorders caused by humans (i.e., the Anthropocene), are approached in the mode of reveries, wandering and poetic ideas, in the so-called artialization.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, after attempting to refine the impact of political ecology on society, the philosopher of science Latour<sup>23</sup> will turn to artistic experimentation. In a desire to communicate environmental problems, using different methods, but also because of the vagueness of the political philosophy of ecology. We can stage a revolution in a white cube or a theatre. However, it will have no repercussions outside those walls.



Figure 2. Beirut Debbas Square, Lebanon (1967). Reprinted from Ref.<sup>21</sup>

If democracy is a prerequisite for enabling capitalism to benefit the Global North,<sup>24</sup> “art” has become a means of empowering Western civil society and raising its own environmental ethics. Although this principle can be viewed as beneficial, we deplore the fact that artistic expression is considered solely in terms of the acceptance of former imperial customs. Similar values are espoused by generations of young creators who play a fool’s game by supporting the very classes that control them. In the worlds of “contemporary art” (1950–2000), architecture and design, a way of thinking stemming from 19<sup>th</sup>-century principles that is still celebrated today, invisibilizes countless ways of life and Eastern and indigenous values that exist outside urban, capitalist concentrations.

The breadth of such ecological relativism can be illustrated by the remarks of the ecological philosopher Ivan Illich: “schools are repressive institutions that stifle creative expression, instill conformity and crush pupils into not only accepting the interests of the powerful but also regarding these to be just.”<sup>25(p4)</sup> When it comes to advocating for better environmental management, these individuals are usually highly educated in Western pedagogical models, which they then use to propagate their views anywhere in the world to protect their own extractivist ethics. While the pedigree of environmental crises is beyond doubt, the ability to express an opinion without involvement or accountability undermines all ecological perspectives.

The excesses and reckless opportunism of globalist colonialism (e.g., the World Economic Forum) have definitively altered the esthetic ecosystem of subaltern environmental advocates. They categorically exclude themselves from communication design and environmental

esthetics, thereby repeating the customary indifference of the dominant classes to the multi-sectoral justice issues that our world faces. Although our present situation may seem pessimistic, it is intended to emphasize the profoundly positive and hopeful aspects that are currently emerging. These require a new hermeneutics and currency for other existence praxis.

#### 4. Other existence praxis

An occurrence that symbolizes this phenomenon is the reversal of public and media opinion in response to Greta Thunberg’s stance. As soon as the political ecology activist identified the producers of climate and social injustice, her aura disappeared (Figure 4).<sup>26</sup> Performative environmental artists live off the opportunisms of our time without troubling themselves about their own predatory involvement, thereby highlighting the cynicism of this era in which the same people who caused the ontological and ecological crises are now supporting their erasure. If the veil falls, it will reveal a rich and abundant set of exciting indigenous organizations.<sup>27</sup>

Such contradictions are particularly disheartening given the numerous examples of honest and responsible environmental esthetics. This suggests that these modes of expression and thought would tend to disappear without the efforts of “Global North” saviors. Yet it is precisely the repetition and omnipresence of these monopolies that obscures and reduces the visibility and transmission of this appropriate, salvatory philosophy of art. This is what the indigenous populations we work with around the world demonstrate, attesting to a healthy and benevolent energy in their communication of ethics and genuine environmental esthetics.



**Figure 3.** Movie. 16 mn. Ulu, Melbourne (2019). © Alban Mannisi. Photograph by the author. (<https://www.scapethical.org/ulu/>).



**Figure 4.** Hundreds of Tunisians gathered in Sidi Bou said near Tunis to welcome the Global Sumud Flotilla, Tunisia (2025). Photograph taken by Brahim Guedich. Reprinted from Ref.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4.1. Intangible environmental esthetics

The members of the Coranderrk clan in Victoria, Australia, are committed to sharing and bearing witness to the distinctive Indigenous Australian connection to the land and environment. This transcends the understanding of exogenous settlers unless they abandon their deeply rooted European hermeneutics. Repeating the same types of demonstration within the familiar settings of Western institutions, such as museums, galleries, and art communities associated with Western artistic culture, can only diminish indigenous culture.<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand, environmental ecosophy is expressed and demonstrated in radically different ways outside of Western culture, to the extent that we should no longer revere these practices as we do within Western customs and traditions.<sup>29</sup> Such approaches are vain, disrespectful, and culturally toxic, effectively accelerating the erasure of living traditions. This is evident in museums presenting artworks from around the world in the same way as those produced in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In doing so, these situations contribute to the premature extinction of living cultures. This is achieved by acculturating indigenous artists, who are trained to produce artefacts and symbols according to our own codes and values. We should guide our curators and museum scenographers away from bringing these vivid expressions into our tombs, and toward celebrating them in their natural habitat. A beautiful perspective that would testify to a renewal of our artistic experiences, instead of making us all sink into the dereliction of our enlightenment paroxysm.

Examples of poetic expression of the living outside of Western patterns abound, but we still need to see them in their natural habitats. We should not bring them back to Western places of worship, devitalized, dying from being caught and tamed. Understanding their construction, the political philosophy of ecosophies, and how they are transmitted allows us to better grasp their singularity. Often composed of other beliefs and intangible phenomena that are barely discernible to a homogenized and sanitized culture like the West can be today, they require different approaches, where the absence of benefit is the most important factor. Acknowledging that esthetics within their ecosystem is one of the most crucial attitudes of our time,<sup>30</sup> new ways of recognizing our realities can help us to identify the idiosyncrasies of certain esthetics in their own contexts, rather than reducing them to a single, essentialist interpretation in our white cubes.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.twma.com.au/events/the-soils-project-groundwork-tarrawarra-museum-of-art-wandoon-estate-aboriginal-corporation/>

#### 4.2. Debunk parachute expertise

The fruit of subaltern and other decolonial studies, emerging from the same knowledge makers in a more radical way, are attempts to avoid the “parachute science” of environmental issues.<sup>31</sup> As in politics, this has discredited the empirical knowledge of custodian heuristics. Ecological relativism has developed a generalized skepticism. This has been boosted by ambient global colonialism (the free market as an open bar) and any “influencer” in art galleries or academic journals. Entitled to give their opinion on the multi-sectoral crises we are experiencing with complete impunity. The crux of the problem is the continual renewal of fantasies about Global North (i.e., white) saviors solving problems of inequity, injustice, and segregation in regions whose wealth is stolen to ensure the Global North's own global power. These fantasies have never achieved anything other than diluting the reality experienced by generations who are disconnected from the vile ethics that underpin them.<sup>32</sup>

How can we stop the spiral of environmental imperialism, where even harmless artists now dare to reason about the core issues of communities and ecosystems as a simple trend of self-love? How can we avoid imposing external cultural norms on societies already scattered by our imperial extractivism? How can we stop relying solely on Western artistic models, such as the atelier, the museum, and the gallery?

At the Custodian Heuristic Institute, we are committed to conveying this through initiatives that promote the customs and practices of art and culture within their own ecosystems.<sup>33</sup> We aim to transmit the biospheric design of indigenous communities beyond Western aristocratic hermeneutics and the constant expectation to see a counterpart or mirror of Western artefacts in other cultures, such as literature, cinema, and theatre, which mimic the artistic landscape of the Global North.

Despite their constant efforts, we already know that solutions will not come from those who created the issues. What we can see nowadays is a profound setback that communities and cultures suffer because of such blatant disdain for their dignity. Many societies are currently adopting a dodging strategy to avoid endless performative debates and guilt-washing.

Undoubtedly, the most important issue is the point at which the hierarchies, policies, and ethics of Western institutions become irrelevant. As is always required, for example, during the smoking ceremony within Indigenous Australian communities, participants must present their credentials to be admitted, engage in conversation, and build relationships with the land's custodians. Participants



can no longer enter places as though they were their own, taking what they want and criticizing the local practices, as long as they do not revere their own. This silent upheaval is happening outside the media and arenas of a world that has been contaminated by violence and absurd self-esteem and has therefore failed to be appreciated.

Unlike the satellites of the Global North, such as Singapore, South Korea, or Dubai, whose desire to please the imperial hegemony of past centuries has tainted them, the environmental esthetics of cultures that are no longer interested in being validated by past powers can go unnoticed. This, however, can be considered beneficial, as they facilitate constant, useful dialogue between nature and culture, humans and non-humans. This can be seen in Hindu-Balinese culture, Japanese Shintoism, and Malaysian Muslim practices, among others. Even if these practices have not yet been widely recognized, there remains an opportunity to reconsider how we interpret the environment, and in the meantime, these cultures will remain undisturbed.

## 5. Beyond the green dodging loophole

Aberrant consensus, orchestrated by opportunists and undermining over a century of whistleblowers' warnings, has given rise to a new form of green dodging. The persistence of these societies of distrust—already visible with the rise of transitive, globalized post-modernities—has culminated in a radical shift: A profound rejection of thought systems originating in the Global North, whose economies continue to subsist through the exploitation of the Global South. This moment calls for a complete reassessment of our understanding of ecology and ecosystems—one grounded in indigenous environmental engineering and humanities perspectives—and for the development of new environmental pedagogies capable of restoring dialogue between Indigenous and exogenous communities, long eroded by absurd, alienating, and disturbingly myopic behaviors and customs.

New environmental rights, such as those granted to rivers and forests,<sup>34</sup> reflect a renewed embrace of environmental esthetics. In this approach, nature becomes the author of its own beauty once again, no longer requiring mediators, artists, or scientists. This shift signals the end of an art form, its milieu, and its philosophies—born from societies so estranged that only through such strategies could they sustain contact with complex realities. Today, beyond the walls of museums, futile and fraudulent ethical dead ends that deprive us of the ability to grasp realities as they are, just and benevolent diplomacies are once again flourishing. These realities no longer exist for us to exalt ourselves, to display, or to exploit them, but rather to allow us to simply be nature, among nature.

“The old world is dying, the new world is slow to appear, and in this twilight, monsters emerge.”<sup>35(p276)]</sup> What lies ahead remains, of course, unknown—or perhaps already recognized through other forms of knowledge that we have yet to understand, value, and rediscover both around us and within ourselves. It is precisely this awareness that many civilizations celebrating the museum of death have so treacherously and methodically sought to annihilate. These abrupt transitions reflect these alternative realities. A final exploration of toxic and moribund thoughts, in the hope of an eternity, whose instigators, as usual, have already fled.

Such acts of dodging will, in turn, enable Gaia to cleanse herself of these obsolete customs—as an ecosystem dies out, a cultural cool burning, yielding to a new cycle of renewal.

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Data used in this work are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Images from third parties are available from the original repositories under the specified licenses.

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