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Rezension: „The Artist as Ecologist: Contemporary Art and the Environment“ von Filipa Ramos

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In „The Artist as Ecologist: Contemporary Art and the Environment“ untersucht Filipa Ramos, wie zeitgenössische Künstlerinnen und Künstler sich in ihrer Praxis von der Abbildung der Umwelt hin zur aktiven Transformation der Beziehung von Mensch und Natur bewegen. Durch Praktiken, die indigenes Wissen, ländliche Lebensweisen, Performance, Klang und Ausstellungskonzepte in den Mittelpunkt stellen, zeigt sie, wie Kunst zu einer ökologischen Intervention wird, die den menschlichen Exzeptionalismus infrage stellt und neue Formen des Gemeinsamen eröffnet.

In „The Artist as Ecologist: Contemporary Art and the Environment“ Filipa Ramos examines how contemporary artistic prac-

tices shift from depicting the environment to actively transforming human–nature relations. Through works that center Indigenous knowledge, rural practices, performance, sound, and exhibition-making, Ramos shows art becoming an ecological intervention that challenges human exceptionalism and invites new modes of inhabiting the world.

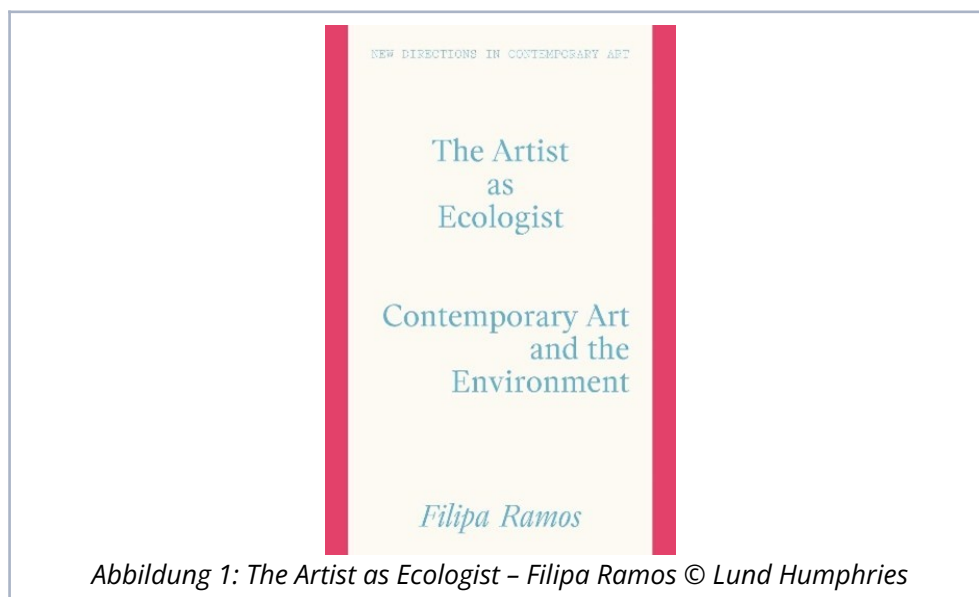


Abbildung 1: *The Artist as Ecologist* – Filipa Ramos © Lund Humphries

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In *The Artist as Ecologist: Contemporary Art and the Environment*, Filipa Ramos assembles a compelling collection of artworks and artistic practices that demonstrate art's transition from its symbolic or representational function to becoming an intervention into modes of being in the world.

Ramos argues that art – after having contributed to its consolidation – can contribute to the deconstruction of the modern project of “human exceptionalism”. Analysing examples of artworks and artistic practices or methodologies, *The Artist as Ecologist* follows the shift of contemporary art from mere observation or representation of the state of the world to proposing modes of inhabiting it that break with modernity’s separation of man from the environment, and the use of knowledge as a form of domination.

Ramos astutely connects the climate crisis with the moment when the ethical lapses of modernity become apparent, and the need for ways of conceiving of nature that break with its detachment from culture is exacerbated. As such, artists whose practices reflect on relationality within the environment become ecologists, their work “artistic gestures of transformation”. The book divides these artistic gestures of transformation into five forms of action, corresponding to the book’s five chapters: *Claiming*, *Returning*, *Performing*, *Reverberating*, and *Exhibiting*.

In *Claiming*, Ramos examines the practices of Indigenous artists across three continents: the Australian Karrabing Film Collective, the North American peoples’ cinema collective COUSIN, and the Sámi artist Britta Marakatt-Labba. Through different media – Karrabing and COUSIN make films, videos and installations, while Marakatt-Labba is a textile artist – the three examples share a resistance to creating representational art about the Indigenous experience. Their storytelling is not made for audiences that sit back and “await enlightenment”. Instead, the works are intentionally

obscure, resisting “the instrumentalisation of knowledge in order to exert control” and challenging the position of Indigenous people as subject to be ‘discovered’ – both literally and figuratively –, attempting instead “to be seen without having to perform one-self”.

Returning zooms in on artists who have revalorised rural practices. The chapter discusses the work of three artists whose practices blur the lines between art and life(style). In 2007, Fernando García-Dory launched the Shepard’s School to demonstrate the role of art in redefining rural identity and later set up INLAND, a project exploring an agroecological and artistic para-institution that enables the exchange of situated knowledge across local, national, and international levels. Amy Franceschini’s initiative, Futurefarmers, reimagines “forms of togetherness across people, land and food systems”, and their project *Flatbread Society* is an intervention that superimposes typically rural settings and activities on an urban landscape, placing an arable field dedicated to nine ancient grains and a Bakehouse in the heart of a new private property development in Oslo. Tabita Rezaire’s Amakaba is both a production hub and a place of exchange and collaboration for the women in the community. For these artists, return is not coming back to the land, but rather a challenge to the image of the land as intact, pure and uncontaminated by urban life, insisting on the entanglement of nature and culture, and the need for practices that acknowledge this entanglement.

Performing is dedicated to live, time-based works that comment on environmental issues. Joan Jonas' performance *Moving of the Land II* builds on the artist's previous work on ocean spaces and consists of videos of historical, scientific and amateur footage of maritime life, both free and in captivity, and the artist's performance in front of the projection screen, literally casting a human shadow on the other beings. *Sun & Sea (Marina)* by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė and Lina Lapelytė is an opera-performance that comments on the touristic spectacle unfolding on seashores and its impact on the environment, inviting audiences to reflect on their own participation in it by confronting them with relatable characters. For his project *F.O.C.A* (seal in Spanish), Eduardo Navarr wears a costume that alters his human senses, making him "slightly less human and more seal", and allowing him to explore the ways in which humans can connect to marine animals. Though often involving the human body, the works here can be read as alternative modes of relationality with the environment that, nonetheless, decenter the human.

Reverberating turns to sound as a way to bridge between human and more-than-human experience. Tomás Saraceno's *On Air*, Jana Winderen's *The River*, and Carlos Casas's *Bestiari* all expose their audiences to imperceptible sounds in their surroundings that imply the presence of more-than-human beings. By making the presence of spiders, the underwater life in the River Thames, and creatures from natural and imagined Catalan landscapes heard, these pieces confront audiences with the limitations of their own

perception and propose their extension by suggesting “new ways of hearing and being in tune with nature, of reverberating nature”.

Exhibiting unpacks the exhibition format – as a mode of presenting art to audiences –and its embedded logic. Documenta 13’s showing of Pierre Huyghe’s *Untilled*, the 16th Istanbul Biennial’s showing of *Feral Atlas*, and Tate Modern’s showing of Anicka Yi’s *In Love with the World* are examples of exhibitions that create an environment in which the audience’s modes of perception and sense-making are forced out of their habitual patterns.

Ramos assembles a convincing collection of ways in which artists and cultural institutions depart from modern observation or representation of the relationality of the environment. Her analysis articulates the experience of an audience faced with its own inability to perceive or understand the complexity of its surroundings and is forced into new modes of “being in the world”. The work of artists as ecologists remains opaque and may, at times, seem inaccessible to audiences because it is an activation of not-yet-known possibilities, rather than a representation of an existing state of things. What makes Ramos’ analysis even more compelling is her consideration of the pitfalls that await these practices – whether it’s continuing the reification of nature or more-than-human beings, their own carbon footprint or exploitative practices –, pointing once more to the complexity of practices of care and the attention they demand.