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Full citation: Weintraub, Linda. "Introduction to Environmental Art." In *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2012. <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6476>

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# **INTRODUCTION TO ENVIRONMENTAL ART**

by Linda Weintraub

May 2014

Journeying into the territories currently occupied by eco artists requires pre-planning, a process that resembles packing up camping gear. Experiencing eco art and camping excursions both impose unexpected circumstances. For this reason, camping and eco art entail relinquishing the security of familiar environments and assembling unaccustomed protections. The former involves exposure to storms, thorns, insects, and predators. The latter involves relinquishing the strategies, genres, themes, and approaches that are rooted in art's revered legacies. Eco artists are not radicals, bent on destruction. They are visionaries inventing new means of art-making that are capable of addressing the Earth's mounting vulnerabilities and crises. Careful preparation optimizes opportunities to enjoy a pleasurable and enriching experience.

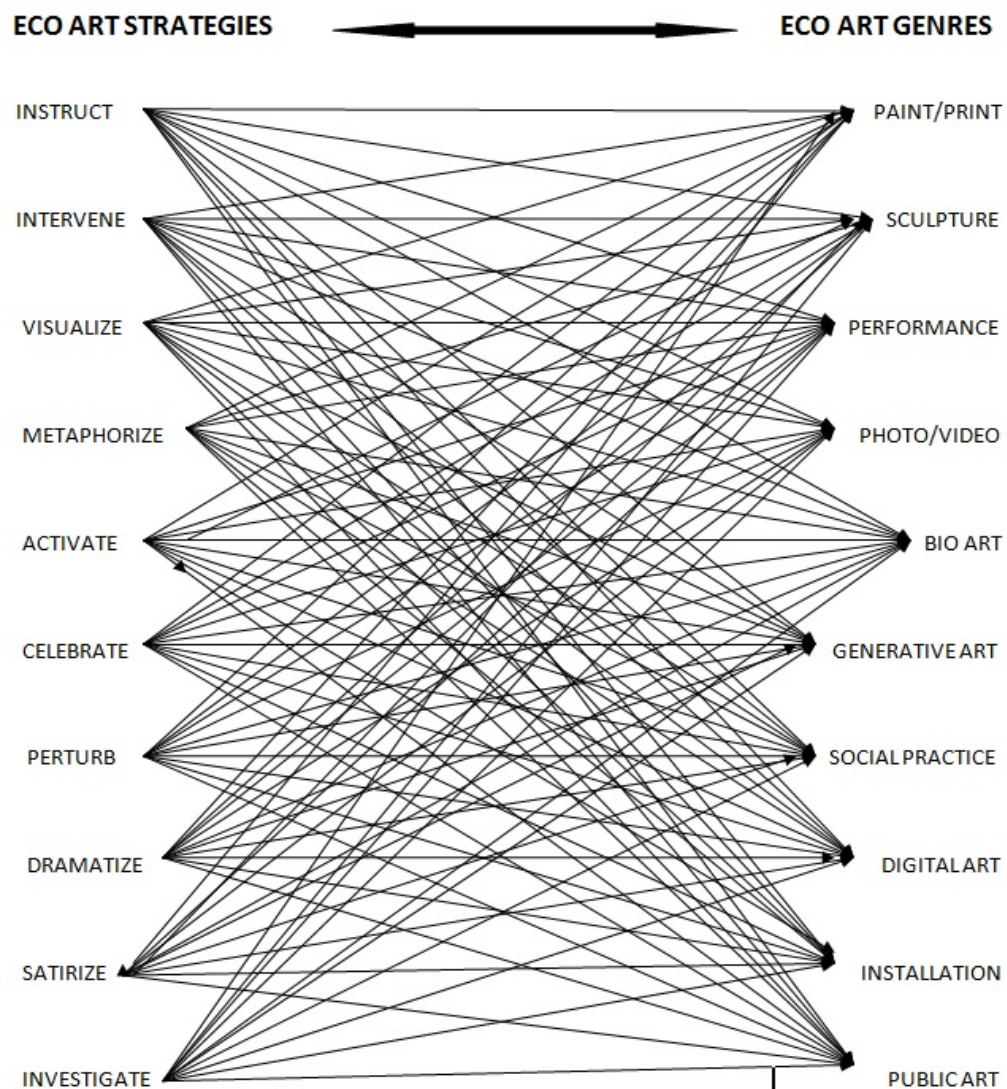
The following diagrams lay out the terrain of contemporary eco art by identifying four kinds of attributes that apply to every eco art work: art strategies, art genres, environmental issues, and environmental approaches. Each diagram presents twelve manners in which eco artists are manifesting that attribute. The diagrams chart the dense network of interrelationships among these attributes. They are as complex, dynamic, and intricately interconnected as the connections between life forms, inert substances, and environmental conditions within functioning of ecosystems. These diagrams are offered to anchor your conceptual tents and lace up your inquisitive boots so that your venture into the fertile cultural terrain of contemporary eco art will be rewarding.

## **ECO ART STRATEGIES**

Environmentalists of all persuasions are assessing the dividends reaped from humanity's empowering technologies. Over the course of civilization, these technologies have gradually bolstered the position of humans above all other populations of living creatures, even propelling them beyond the peak niche granted to them by evolution. Growing evidence of the correlation between the assertive actions of humans and the disruption of eco system functions are instigating a profound shift in consciousness. Environmentalists are challenging the assumption that progress is measured by the capacity to control

and harvest Earth's resources. This involves diverting civilization from the entrenched course of human chauvinism.

While environmentalists are tackling this challenge in numerous ways, environmentalists who are also artists gain from the added sources of influence bestowed upon them by their profession. Eco artists are at liberty to summon imagination, vision, wit, humor, exaggeration, ridicule, glorification, and every other expressive means that artistic license allows. Artistic expression even sanctions dispensing verifiable observations and factual data in the manner of journalists and scientists.



## **GLOSSARY ECO ART STRATEGIES:**

**Visualize** refers to an artistic strategy designed to manifest abstract data and invisible forces with the goal of increasing public awareness and motivating modifications in behavior. Typical techniques include photographs, animation, and web applications.

**Metaphorize** means the use of comparison to denote a kind of object, action, or condition.

**Activate** refers to artworks created for the purpose of energizing the audience to take an action or motivate people to reform behaviors.

**Dramatize** refers to art that highlights a condition or issue by expressing it so vividly that it has an emotional impact on the audience.

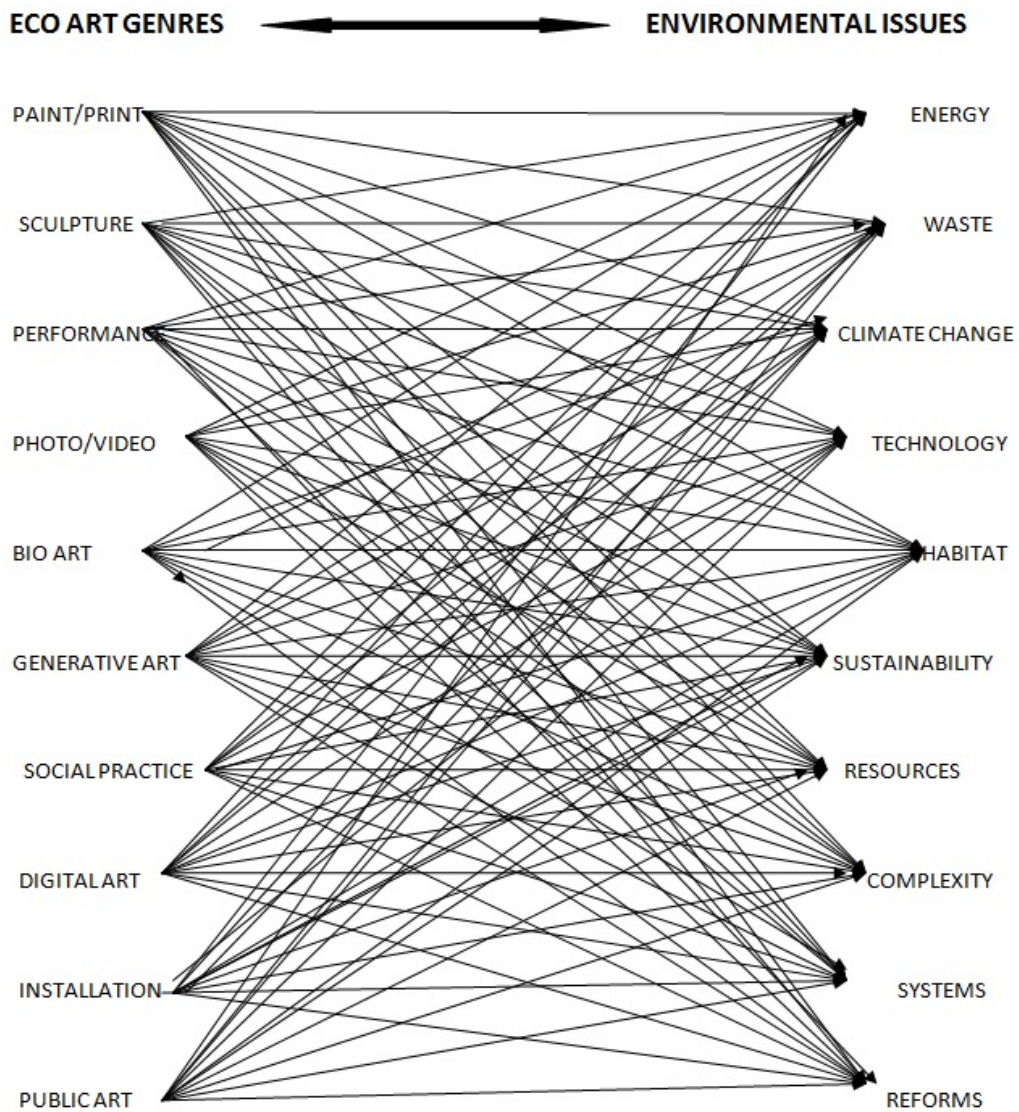
**Investigate** refers to artworks that are the product of extensive research, methodical experimentation, or public inquiry.

## **ECO ART GENRES**

The legacy of art offers each generation of artists an expanding repertoire of genres. Eventually, each is enriched by tradition. These options swelled in the last century as vanguard artists integrated new technologies and experimental processes into their studio practices. Even those artists who adopted such traditional genres as painting tampered with the parameters established by history. For example, spatial constraints exploded as paintings came to occupy two, three, and four dimensions; levels of durability ranged from stable to ephemeral; replicability encompassed unique and multiple creations; levels of individualization ranged from personal to anonymous, etc. These radical changes were accompanied by a wellspring of unconventional mediums.

In the current era, such advances are being conducted by eco artists. Their material choices carry the significance of ethical mandates regarding the environmental impact associated with all kinds of material use by humans. Some eco artists are engaging in new genres like bio art and generative art. But even those who adopt traditional genres like painting, sculpture, photography, and installation are radical. Eco artists in both camps are adopting three new categories of mediums. One utilizes sap, pollen, feathers, bark, bone, branches, stones, and innumerable other ingredients that account for the wondrous storehouse of materiality on Earth. Another draws from a profusion of discarded and degraded manufactured materials. A third explores the vast array of living plants, microbes, and animals.

In sum, newly introduced genres and those that carry the aura of historic tradition are both reformulating art to align with environmental messages. As the previous diagram illustrates, every artistic strategy can be applied to every art genre. Likewise, as the following diagram illustrates, every art genre can be summoned to address every environmental issue.



## **GLOSSARY ECO ART GENRES:**

**Performance art** utilizes the artist's own body as the medium to convey the thematic, stylistic, and compositional components of an artwork. Performance art can be scripted or unscripted. It can occur in an art venue or not. It can engage audience participation or not.

**Bio art** is distinguished by its medium, which is living matter in the form of tissues, bacteria, fungi, or entire living organisms and their life processes. Gardening, raising animals, and biotechnologies such as genetic engineering, tissue culturing, and cloning are all bio art processes.

**Generative art** is a process-oriented art practice that evolves in real time through a dynamic, self-contained, semiautonomous operative system. It exhibits a degree of complexity that makes behavioral prediction difficult.

**Social practice** artists maintain that sustainable environmental practices can succeed only if relationships among people and between people and their surroundings are included. Thus, their artworks are as likely to address human rights and economic opportunities as to address water treatment and forest management. Social practice art is not mediated through an image or a sculpture. Communication proceeds directly from artist to community members, who are often invited to become participants in the artwork.

**Digital art** is distinguished by the use of digital technologies to create imagery and produce art objects. Digital art is also referred to as computer art, multimedia art, and new media art. Eco artists who produce eco visualizations frequently rely upon digital technologies.

**Installation art** refers to three-dimensional artworks designed to fill interior architectural spaces, as opposed to art that is confined in a frame or set on a pedestal. Installation art can be temporary or permanent and can be presented in art venues or non-art spaces. It typically incorporates a broad range of materials not commonly associated with the production of art.

**Public art** is distinguished by its location within the public domain, where it is accessible to an entire community. It usually appears in built environments. As opposed to public sculpture's detachment from site, public art emerges from the site's local history, physical conditions, and/or resident populations. Public artists are less concerned with creating objects than in instigating experiences.

**Design** is characterized by a systematic effort to fulfill a predetermined purpose, which is often functional. Deliberation and forethought replace improvisation and spontaneity.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

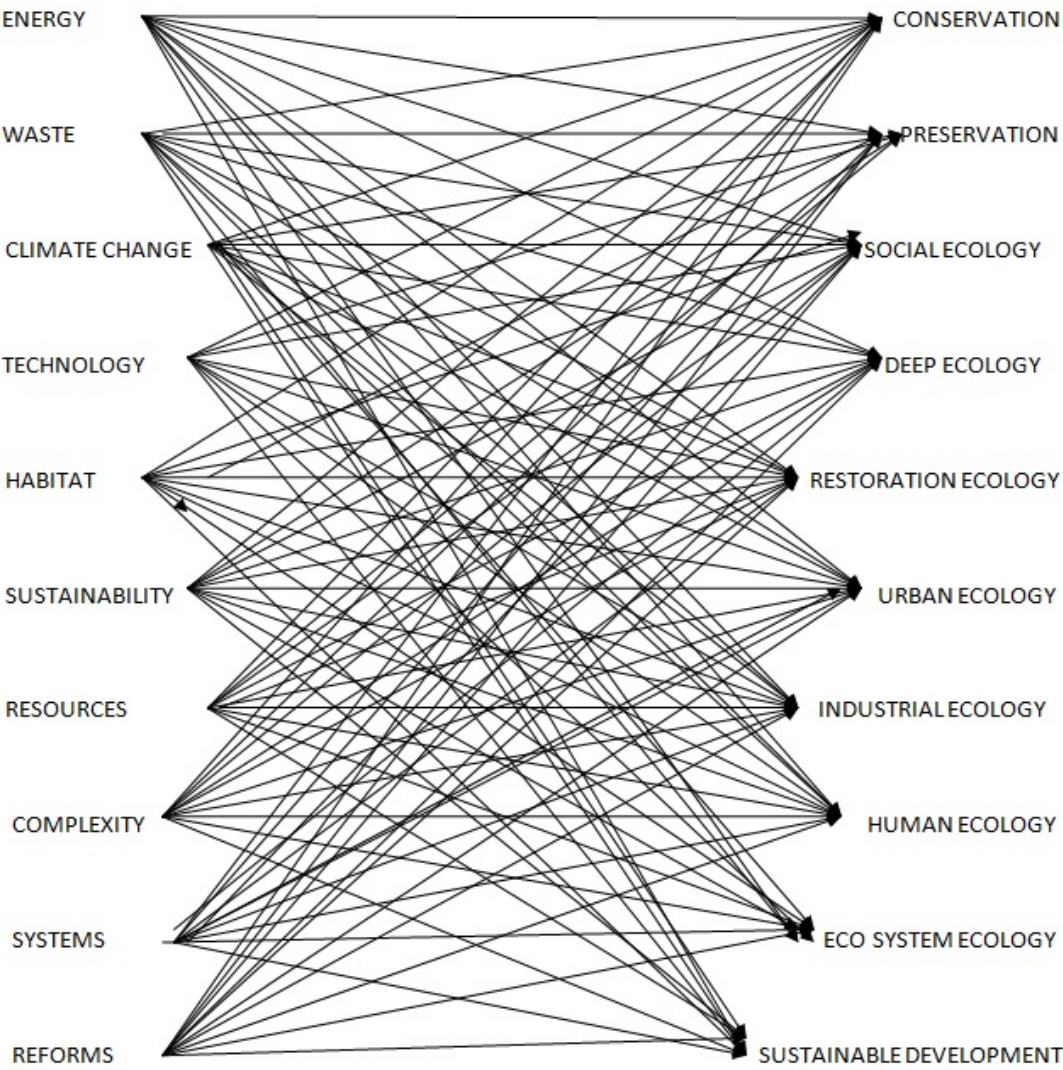
The menu of eco art themes includes fossil fuel dependence, energy conservation, land use, rain water harvesting, alternative energy, deforestation, extinctions, manufacturing protocols, mining, erosion, loss of top soil, waste management, herbicides, pesticides, genetically modified crops, oil spills, over-harvesting fish and game, draining wetlands, acid rain, over-population, genetic manipulation, consumerism, mono agriculture, toxic waste, irrigation, introduced species, carbon dioxide emissions, heavy metal accumulations, water contamination, ozone depletion, climate change, smog, species loss, local production, bio mimicry, loss of habitat, privatization of natural resources, rights of indigenous peoples, soil contamination, global warming, energy conservation, bio-engineering, monoculture, urban gardening, desertification, sustainability, radioactive waste, recycling, free trade, mutations, eco-feminism, composting, up-scaling, environmental legislation, green architecture, environmental education, organic gardening, hydroponic gardening, urban gardening, community sponsored agriculture, to name a few. All these subjects are rooted in real world conditions that yield consequential outcomes.

The copious thematic possibilities were all gleaned from the last four percent of the time that has lapsed since Homo sapiens first stood upright and began striding across the Earth. This brief period is crammed with an astounding succession of innovations—from agriculture and writing, to nuclear power and space probes. Artists are among the many environmentalists who are scrutinizing humanity's epic expedition on the Earth, weighing each breakthrough against the inadvertent breakdown that may result.

Banks of super computers would be required to examine the innumerable thematic choices available to eco artists. The topics that appear on the following schematic provide a synopsis of foundational ecological concepts. The diagram demonstrates that every environmental issue can be associated with every environmental approach.



**ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES** ↔ **ENVIRONMENTAL APPROACHES**





## ENVIRONMENTAL APPROACHES

Seven billion people are alive today. Every living individual affects the environment by exhaling carbon dioxide, casting shadows, generating warmth, consuming food, occupying space, urinating, sweating, defecating, seeking comfort, and shedding hair, cells, and nails. How many people exaggerate their impact by squandering, polluting, and disrupting? How can the toll wrought by humans be mitigated?

Environmentalists ponder such questions. Humanity's ability to domesticate the material world and control the intricate matrix of its causes and effects indicates that the future of all components of the planet, not only civilization, will be shaped by human demands for security, human desires for convenience, human means of achieving comfort, and human definitions of happiness.

Environmentalists differ from ecologists whose scientific pursuits exceed the vagaries of individual interpretation. However, ecological data can be selected, edited, and combined in innumerable ways. As such, it can fuel opposing sides of most debates. Since there is no tablet etched with a definitive code to unite the environmental movement, a multiplicity of approaches prevails. Thus, each environmentalist must ask: Should I promote responsible use of the Earth's resources or preserve wild territories? Is the human soul the location of reform or the human mind? Should reforms be concentrated in industry, the city, or rural areas? While these approaches are contradictory, at their root exists an abiding conviction that the well-being of the planet and all its living occupants have become a human responsibility.

The following diagram demonstrates that when it is adopted by an artist, each environmental approach can be conveyed by enlisting any art strategy.



## GLOSSARY ECO ART APPROACHES:

**Conservation** refers to management schemes designed to utilize the planet's resources to derive the most benefit for the most people while minimizing environmental damage and resource depletion.

**Preservation** is a policy that respects the inherent ability of ecosystems to determine their own optimal compositions and evolution. Preservation strategies often safeguard threatened territories by isolating them from human interference.

**Social ecology** studies the relationships between human populations and their environments, noting the environmental impacts of social structures such as hierarchical political systems, competitive economic

systems, and consumerism as well as ethnic and gender inequalities, international law, and urban planning. Social ecologists attempt to reformulate such social structures to reverse humanity's negative impact on the environment.

**Deep ecology** is a philosophy that envisions the universe as unified and interconnected and recognizes the inherent worth of all forms of life without regard for human utility and pleasure. As such, deep ecologists pursue metaphysical unification of humans and their surroundings, as opposed to relying on reason, to guide environmental reform.

**Restoration ecology** recreates a function or a condition that existed in an ecosystem prior to the onset of a disturbance.

**Urban ecology** examines the cycling of matter and the flow of energy among plant life, wildlife, and humans in urban habitats. Urban ecologists attend a broad range of city problems, including storm water runoff, smog, heat sinks, and local wildlife.

**Industrial ecology** is the study of material and energy flows through industrial systems. Industrial ecologists monitor the impacts that industrial activities have on the environment, including the extraction of resources, the transformation of resources into commodities, transport, packaging, and disposing of wastes.

**Human ecology** investigates the effect of humans on plants, animals, other people, and nonhuman populations, and vice versa. Human ecologists strive to shape living and working spaces, food and clothing, leisure activities and forms of transportation for the betterment of the planet.

**Ecosystem ecology** studies energy and matter as it courses through locally defined ecosystems. Ecosystem ecologists consider the integrated actions of biotic and abiotic components of ecosystems and their interactions with adjacent ecosystems.

**Sustainable development** is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."<sup>1</sup> In ecosystems, sustainability involves biological systems that remain diverse and productive over time. For humans, sustainability involves long-term maintenance of social and economic systems.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm>.