Dynamics of the Intransitive

Dynamics of the Intransitive
Undirected Interventions

Edited by Eva Backhaus, Grit Dommes, Susanne Hauser, Tim Lörke, Henning Podulski, Laura Rogalski, and Andrea Schütte

Intervening Arts
DIAPHANES

Sonderforschungsbereich 1512
Intervenierende Künste

Funded by
DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation

DIAPHANES, Zurich 2025

Print edition
ISBN 978-3-0358-0843-8

OA-Edition
ISBN 978-3-0358-0844-5
DOI 10.4472/9783035808445

Cover image: Mateja Bučar, *Dual/Dancers Without Answers*, 2020.
Photograph/Courtesy: DUM – Association of Artists, Ljubljana.

Layout: 2edit, Zurich
Printed in Germany

DIAPHANES – Schöneggstrasse 5 – CH-8004 Zürich – kontakt@diaphanes.net
DIAPHANES Berlin – Dresdener Strasse 118 – 10999 Berlin – berlin@diaphanes.net

Table of Contents

Sue Spaid

The Willful Artist: Keeping Art Alive, but for Whom?

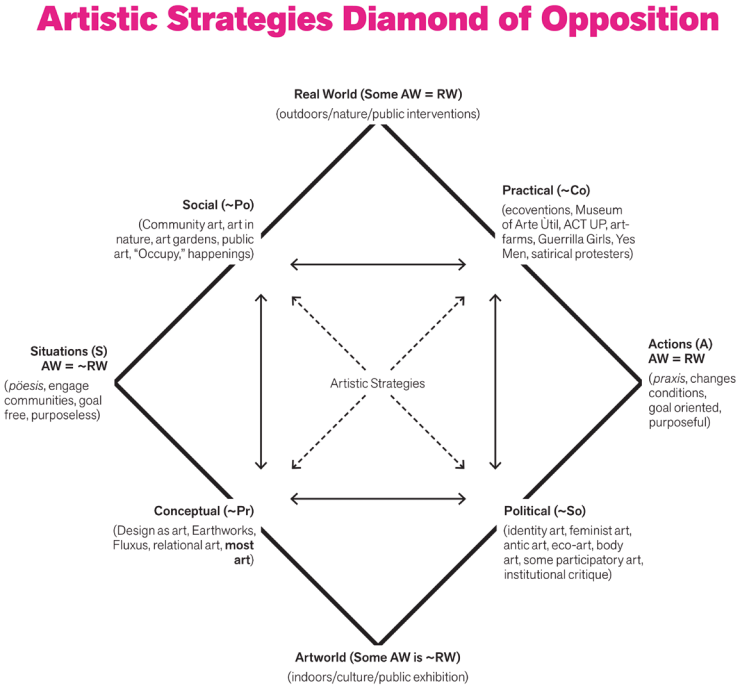

Fig. 1: *Artistic Strategies Diamond of Opposition*. Designed by Kristian Bjørnard.

Introduction

Oftentimes, an artwork's context determines whether people deem it practical, political, social, or conceptual art. In selecting a particular context for their art, artists adopt an approach, what I call the "artistic strategy." As fig. 1 illustrates, political and conceptual art are typically sited in the context of the artworld (minimally, an art exhibition), whereas social and practical artworks are sited in spaces that enable them to intervene in the real world. Social and conceptual artworks are open-ended "situations," while practical and political artworks are "actions" meant to serve some purpose. Practical artworks act on whatever "world" they inhabit, whereas political art acts on the artworld. In drawing connections between practical artworks and the "intransitive" and political art and the "transitive," this paper aims to show that practical art is more flexible than political art. Moreover, artists who aim for practical art require willfulness.

Consider Hans Haacke's *Ten Turtles Set Free* (1970), whereby he released ten turtles purchased from a pet shop into a forest in Southern France. Originally performed in the context of an art opening at Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul de Vence, France, Haacke's action was deemed conceptual art, since it invited guests to reflect upon turtles' lives as systems that connect their original habitat and life in the pet shop to their new habitat, where their arrival likely altered another system. Were he primarily focused on liberating captive turtles, it would be political art. Political art invites audience members to engage urgent problems, yet it rarely poses strategies for changing the system. It would have been practical art had Haacke freed ten turtles as a demonstration of "how and where to release" wild animals kept as pets. Museums that exhibit photos of this early example of nonhuman collaboration frame it as conceptual art indicative of ecosystems.[1] If the event of freeing turtles convenes community members to discuss pet turtles, it is social art. The arrows in fig. 1 demonstrate how artists (and cura-

1 "Hans Haacke Art Nature Politics," 2020, Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, Germany, https://museum-abteiberg.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2020_06_04_Raumtexte-Hans-Haacke_DINA4_EN.pdf (accessed October 31, 2024).

tors) can (and do) alter artworks' contexts to engender different artistic strategies.

In addition to practical and political artworks having different audiences, practical artworks exhibit "practicality." That is, they offer practical strategies that can be applied by anyone elsewhere, though not necessarily as art. Political artworks modify or inform gallery goers' beliefs, while practical artworks attempt to get people to "do something" novel. That is, in addition to being art, they act on the world, not just the artworld. By showing that something different can be done, practical artworks demonstrate the possibility for a changed world. Unfortunately, the artworld tends to favor artworks that resist utility, making artworks tasked with acting on the world artworld *deviants*. Let's just say, aside from Tania Brugera's "Museum of Arte Útil" exhibition (2013-2014) at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Netherlands, and a handful of my own exhibitions, I know of no other exhibitions that have specifically addressed practical art.

Unlike political artworks that remain tethered to issues that risk becoming outdated, the contents of practical artworks can be updated/modified, so long as they're mutable site-relational actions. Since each venue is unique, sites demand relevant formats to reach particular audiences. Consider the Guerrilla Girls, who bypassed the artworld altogether by launching their game plan in the street. Since 1986, they have called themselves "the conscience of the artworld." Positioned for the long haul in the struggle for gender parity, these collaborators constantly adapt and mutate, directing their humor critical of bad actors farther afield (from sexism to racism, museums, collectors, Hollywood, politicians...). Depending on the venue and format, a Guerrilla Girls billboard campaign can be deemed political art (it invites people to think differently), social (it gets people talking), conceptual (text art/reducible to an idea), or practical (it changes people's actions). Applied to art's presentation, these strategies supplement art's aesthetic features. In fact, sometimes the aesthetics stay the same, as when a Guerrilla Girls billboard is exhibited indoors.

Although contemporary art is rarely practical, *all art* is useful to someone somewhere (not necessarily its purpose) and has an artworld function, what Arthur Danto termed "achieving

work."[2] Thus, utility itself is not a feature particular to practical art. Until the late nineteenth century, most commissioned artworks were practical, though they didn't exhibit practicality. Historic examples of practical art include: 1) monuments, busts, or everyday things meant to commemorate notable events or figures (wine amphorae decorated with Greek battle scenes, or the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, c. 190 BCE); 2) depictions of biblical stories meant to educate church goers (Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel, 1508–1512 or Leonardo da Vinci, *Last Supper*, 1495–1498); 3) portraits of historical figures or events meant to impress passersby (Titian, *Equestrian Portrait of Charles V*, 1548 or Jacques-Louis David, *Death of Marat*, 1793); or 4) building decorations indicative of power/ownership/status.

Recent efforts to remove public monuments deemed harmful are exemplary of practical art's capacity to "act on the world."[3] If these artworks weren't "doing something," there would be no calls to remove them. By contrast, we read political art through the lens of some historical narrative that places it at a remove, which significantly reduces its "power." Moreover, the removal of previously practical artworks and objects from palaces, churches, and indigenous communities to museums reduces their risk of "doing something." A case in point are the myriad Central African "power objects" on view in museums. Inhabited by spirits meant to provide either doom, luck, or healing powers for a particular recipient or communities, such objects are rendered harmless as art.

In reaction to the state's or church's hand in directing art's future, the notion of *l'art pour l'art* ("art for art's sake") gained traction in the late nineteenth century as contemporary artists started championing particularly "impractical" contents that couldn't easily be put to use. Ever since, uselessness has been the avant-garde's

2 Arthur Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 125.

3 In terms of artworks that "do something," I have in mind the move to remove the *Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt* in front of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, or the confederate monuments in Richmond, Virginia and elsewhere. Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016) stirred negative reactions in the "Whitney Biennial," though not when her portrait of Emmett Till, a brutally-murdered young African-American boy, lying in his casket debuted in her solo show "Waiting for the Barbarians" at Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin.

most distinguishing (and enduring) feature. Not surprisingly, this trend coincided with the rise of democracies in Europe, whose foundation is individual freedom, and especially the right to free speech, which incidentally is the cornerstone of political art. Ever since, the artworld has valued contemporary art as exemplary of personal expression in defiance of earlier expectations that art ought to be in the service of the church, the monarch, or the state. Of course, minimalists, post-minimalists, and conceptual artists took this in the opposite direction by creating expressionless artworks void of meaning, yet no less political.[4] John Cage's dictum "I have nothing to say (and I'm saying it)" epitomizes that era's artists.

Just as minimalism was gaining momentum, the American art critic Clement Greenberg published "Modernist Painting" (1965), which took the "art for art's sake" mantra further by advocating art's isolation from real world influences, as if art could be disentangled from life. Art historian Christopher L.C.E. Whitcomb adds, "The underlying assumptions at work here, first of all posit that the visual artist, by virtue of special gifts, is able to express the finer things of humanity through a 'purely visual' understanding and mode of expression. This 'purely visual' characteristic of art made it an autonomous sphere of activity, completely separate[d] from the everyday world of social and political life."[5] Not only did Greenberg erroneously attribute his formalist enterprise to Immanuel Kant's having tied aesthetical judgments of taste to beautiful objects' "purposive purposelessness," but he managed to convince the artworld that nothing good could come from purposeful art. Any artwork at risk of being "instrumentalized" is thus automatically ugly.

But of course, being "put to use" by the artist is not the same as being in the service of others. Moreover, all art has a purpose, even if it's just something to be exhibited in a show or a way to occupy the artist's spare time. Numerous philosophers, noticeably Casey Haskins, have poked holes in Greenberg's version of Kant. Haskins denies Kant's "strict autonomism," such that "what an

4 Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts* 64, no. 5 (1990), pp. 44–63.

5 Christopher Whitcomb, "Art for Art's Sake," *Modernisms*, http://arthistoryresources.net/modernism/artsake.html (accessed October 31, 2024).

artwork *is*, as an object of value, is to be distinguished from what it *does*."[6] Haskins rather terms Kant an "instrumental autonomist," given that he considered fine art "a mode of representation which is purposive for itself, and which, although devoid of a purpose, has the effect of advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interests of social communication."[7]

In light of today's practical artists' goal to create something that acts *on* the world, practical art not only deviates from *l'art pour l'art,* but it requires a *willful* artist keen to beat the odds, since outcomes are rather unpredictable. The potential for practical art to act on the world, even after its initial mission fails, sets practical art apart from political art. I associate results, completion, and achievement with the transitive (*y* accomplishes *x*), whereas perdurance, mutability, and adaptability characterize the intransitive (*y* persists). Like an arrow, the transitive fixes on an identifiable goal, while the intransitive zigs and zags. With each new attempt, the intransitive either gets closer to its target, identifies new targets, or lies dormant, awaiting new opportunities.[8]

Part and parcel with "practicality" is finding ways to avoid giving up. One could thus say that political art is transitive (there's little room for zigging and zagging), whereas practical art, however purposeful, is intransitive, so long as it remains in a state of becoming. Henceforth, my focus is a subset of practical art known as *ecoventions* (a portmanteau word combining ecology and invention), which I define as "artist-initiated, practical actions with ecological intent."[9] Exemplary of an ecovention is Agnes Denes' *Tree Mountain* (1992–1996/present) (see fig. 7), a manmade mountain hosting 11,000 Finnish Pines planted in a mathematical pattern derived from a pineapple/sunflower. A large-scale artwork, *Tree Mountain* serves as a cap that protects an aquifer beneath the Earth's surface. This practical strategy not only protects the reservoir, but is also applicable elsewhere.

6 Casey Haskins, "Kant and the Autonomy of Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47, no. 1 (1989), p. 43.

7 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, trans. J. C. Meredith (London: Clarendon Press, 1911), p. 306.

8 Thanks to Eva Backhaus for suggesting these additional points.

9 Sue Spaid, *Ecovention Europe: Art to Transform Ecologies, 1957–2017* (Sittard: Museum De Domijnen Hedendaagse Kunst, 2017), p. 35.

Unlike historical examples of practical artworks, ecoventions are freely pursued, since they are, by definition, artist-initiated, though of course ecoventions sometimes arise as commissions. Although ecoventions are meant to be purposeful, so many factors lie beyond the artist's control that they risk defying their purpose. For example, Lynne Hull worked with Mayans in the Yucatan Forest to build the innovative *Puente Monos* (treetop monkey bridge) (1998), enabling spider monkeys to safely avoid busy roads when moving between trees. Although the monkeys rejected her bridge, perhaps because they didn't trust its manmade materials, similar "monkey bridges" have been *de rigeur* in Costa Rica since 2006. When artists are disappointed by the outcomes of theirs or others' practical artworks, they often assess the problems and rework them.

Although ecoventions that fail seem rather "impractical," they are practical art all the same, given the artist's effort to do something. As we shall see, even failed ecoventions stand to boost participants' wellbeing.[10] Similarly, political art that fails to engage viewers' beliefs is no less political art. In fact, attention to an ecovention's failure often inspires other artists to improve upon failed attempts. For example, some people are reassessing *Tree Mountain*, given its apparent tree loss, even though the reservoir remains protected.

To demonstrate ecoventions' connection to the intransitive, I first introduce political art's "problem," which is effectively its short shelf-life *as* art. Whether political artworks achieve their goal or not, they quickly join art history as records of their era's struggle, rather than providing extant tools for present struggles. I next describe several concrete examples that depict ecoventions as ongoing, e.g. alive so long as they're properly maintained, no differently than artworks housed in collections. Finally, I explain ecoventions' connection to willfulness, as in the "willful artist," or as Sara Ahmed terms it, the queer "willful subject" who risks deviating from the norm.[11] Like Ahmed's queer "willful subject," practical art is indeed a deviation.

10 Sue Spaid, "Popular Culture and Wellbeing, Teamwork Action, and Freedom," *Journal of Somaesthetics* 5, no. 1 (2019), pp. 6–20.
11 Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).

Political Art's "Problem"

From my experience, the question spectators most frequently ask is "What does it mean?" There is an unwritten assumption among both the public and art's advocates, whether critics, historians, collectors, or philosophers, that artworks, and especially political art, are meant to convey some message. While I define artworks as "things that prompt the *urge* to interpret," the verb "interpret" as used here doesn't literally mean "transcribe a perceptual experience into some artist's 'hidden' (or embodied) message." In this case, the verb "interpret" is far closer to the notion of "give it value," "grant it significance," or "make it fit," based on what you already know (or can find out) about the world.[12] The interpretation in question has less to do with "meaning," and more to do with attempting to answer the following questions. Why would an artist make this? Why does it matter that they made this? How does it challenge what I already know about art or the human condition? What does the public's reaction indicate? How does it disrupt art history or plant seeds for art to sprout in new directions?

I address political art's "problem" for several reasons. I worry about the recent tendency to subsume all art whose contents address current issues under the banner of "political art." Instead of explicitly defining political art, Vid Simoniti offers a "taxonomy of political art" that includes a "shared notion of truth in the face of disinformation and polarization; of participation in the face of unequal access to power; and of finding shared values in a fragmented and unequal society."[13] Political art has become a catch-all category for those who presume artists have something novel to say about their era and believe art offers an effective vehicle for conveying artists' views. While I agree that art can be a game changer that has invited audiences to reconsider a host of issues ranging from colonialism and racism to human rights, family matters,

12 For an analysis of how curators, critics, and art historians devise meaning, see Sue Spaid, "How Husserl's Phenomenology Facilitates our Grasp of Unfamiliar Artworks," *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 11, no. 1–2 (2024), pp. 63–79.

13 Vid Simoniti, *Artists Remake the World: A Contemporary Manifesto* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), pp. 6–7.

LGBTQ+ issues, alternative life styles, capitalism, climate change, ecological issues, etc.; truly impactful art is rather "practical," that is, it can be adapted to fit various sites, eras, and contents. While political art transmits artists' insights regarding the here and now (or the there and then), practical art awaits its time and place. In truth, much of what gets filed under the coarse-grained category of political art is rather social when it involves people socializing, as in discussing things together; conceptual when it is the outcome of some implemented idea, or practical when it acts on the world, thus reserving political art for visual editorials.

Moreover, gallery tours and object labels that present answers to the question "What does it mean?" effectively curtail an artwork's longevity (death by meaning). The most generous reply would be "I really have no idea: what do you think?" The privileging of an artwork's meaning incidentally prevents art from "doing something" (acting on the world) once its significance is identified (aka "revealed"). As John Cage put it, "understanding precludes experience."[14] What was once alive, now seems dead. Marcel Duchamp once remarked how after forty or fifty years, artworks lose their freshness, "die," and become the history of art.[15] When artworks no longer feel mysterious, we stop exploring them. It's as if our passing familiarity grants us a pass to pass by. We unwittingly shut them out; game over. This is even more the case for those who suspect an artwork's content to contradict or challenge their beliefs. When art is primarily appreciated for its meaning, potentially practical art becomes political art.

By contrast, practical artworks act on us throughout our lives, despite our passing familiarity. Artworks that perdure strike me as practical, not political. We see them differently at each stage of our lives, largely because we've changed, plus the contexts in which we experience them modify them anew. Even people inhabiting differing eras and locales experience them differently. Political art's specificity, given its link to a particular newsworthy story, has repercussions for both the study of art history and intransitiv-

14 Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 250.
15 Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. R. Padgett (New York: Da Capo Press, 1987), p. 67.

ity. When tied to a particular era, political art endures as art, but fails to perdure, once its meaning becomes more or less fixed. Consider ancient Greek amphorae with their elaborate ochre and black depictions of battle scenes. Initially meant as practical art, their display in a vitrine not only consigns them to art history, but their reference to a long-forgotten battle reassigns them as political art. While practical artworks continually act on us, political artworks are more likely to exemplify *aboutness*.

Aboutness is a term made famous in the artworld by Arthur Danto, a philosopher who shared my definition of artworks as "things that prompt the urge to interpret," though his explanation for how/why this happens is totally the opposite of mine.[16] For Danto, aboutness frames artworks as symbolic expressions held in an internal relation with their embodied meanings. If meanings are embodied as Danto claimed, then each artwork's meaning precedes its initial public presentation, a view I consider highly unlikely. In fact, his notion of aboutness specifically characterizes what I identify as political art's "problem." He explicitly stated, "There is a sense and a reference for pictures and imitations, just as there is for terms and both of them have to be connected in the right way for successful *communication* [emphasis mine]."[17] No doubt, successful communication requires connecting sense and reference in the right way, but artworks do far more than communicate. Even so, the tendency to categorize provocative artworks as "political art" reduces them to their manifest critical concern.

In contradistinction to Danto, I propose an existential view. Artworks epitomize isness, that is, they have being. Aboutness arises from their myriad presentations.[18] Instead of theories preceding artworks, as Danto maintained, theories arise as art writers and curators test out ways to present otherwise ineffable things. I doubt that art historians charged with researching an artist's oeuvre consider aboutness an "ontological property" embodied in artworks, as Danto did. Moreover, the fixation on political art's message tends

16 Sue Spaid, "Mad Men and Pop Art," in *A Companion to Arthur C. Danto*, ed. Jonathan Gilmore and Lydia Goehr (London: Blackwell, 2022), p. 319.
17 Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace,* p. 73.
18 Sue Spaid, "The Gist of Isness: Philosophy for Avant-Gardes," *X-tra*, 8, no. 3 (2006), p. 10.

to stifle artworks' potentially dynamic relationships with varying audiences. I prefer the notion of "work" to aboutness, since "work" reflects some artworld consensus regarding each artwork's art historical significance, arising from its reception in varying contexts over time.[19] As hinted at above, once practical artworks no longer act on us, they too join art history.

My main concern is the aboutness feature inherent in political art. Trained to procure aboutness, art historians are naturally drawn to artworks that "prompt the urge to interpret," since it gives them plenty to write about. In 2021, the College Art Association, the main society for artists and art historians in the US, hosted eighty-nine panels over four days that featured nearly 325 presenters addressing issues "including but going beyond eco-art and eco-criticism, with a special focus on climate justice and intersectional thinking as priorities."[20] Panelists discussed artworks by numerous Native American artists, as well as bird wellbeing, songbird "consent," planetary flesh-relations, co-embodiment, the loss of the other vs. extinction, and artworks created by cephalopods (cuttlefish, octopuses, and squids), whose "adaptive colorations" enabled them to blend in with computer-generated images of artworks. And there was a lot of discussion about "grief" in terms of changing landscapes, degraded land, lost species, etc.

Despite so much creativity, I noticed only one artist who creates living sculptures, that is sculptures made from materials such as plants, animals, or fungi that are still alive. I was totally shocked that most images presented in the context of our "climate crisis" were that of paintings and photographs. That is, almost all were "aboutness-exuding" cases of political art. Not one was a practical artwork tasked with mitigating climate change. Given our "addiction to oil,"[21] we human beings desperately need easily

19 Sue Spaid, "On Work's Perdurance: Artworkers, Artworks, and Contents," *Rivista di Estetica* 79, "Aesthetics of Contemporary Work," ed. Angela Condello, Tiziano Toracca, and Kuiying Zhao (2022), p. 19.

20 "Call for Proposals 2021 CAA Conference," https://inside.mica.edu/research/opportunities/1226 (accessed October 31, 2024).

21 In 2006, then President Bush famously said that "America is addicted to oil." While his assessment was true, his remediation plan was a disaster. His goal was to replace 75% of the U.S.'s Middle-Eastern oil imports with ethanol and other energy sources. By now, it's well known that even though ethanol is a biofuel, producing it is energy intensive. Early research not only suggested

implementable strategies for cooling the planet, such as keeping rainwater local, planting trees to absorb rainwater and sequester carbon, restoring degraded lands, boosting biodiversity, and innovating pollinator, bird, and human habitat. Since the 1960s, scores of artists have done just this as their art.

Keeping Art Alive: How Ecoventions Sustain Isness

When it comes to ecoventions, and especially those tasked with mitigating climate change, artworks must "do," rather than "mean" something. Artworks that "do" put something in motion and thus live lives beyond mere significance. Observing photographs, videos, and paintings of flooding cities, sinking islands, or melting glaciers no doubt stimulates people's raw emotions. However, such images have thus far failed to compel people to change their behaviors, even as they successfully "act on the world" by provoking anxiety, panic, and uncertainty. Most people admit they must change their habits, but how does art inspire such changes? Much like Mahatma Ghandi's motto "be the change you wish to see in the world," art that avails change in one place inspires change elsewhere.

To get a sense of practical art's potential to mitigate climate change, I review below a range of ecoventions that still engage passersby and thus avail the potential for ecological change, enabling strivers living elsewhere to not only survive, but thrive. When faced with viable solutions, people adopt alternatives, rather than remaining frozen in fear. I present these artistic approaches as six basic steps in a community's strategic plan geared toward mitigating climate change.

that ethanol's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are 44–52% lower than that of gasoline, but also claimed that improved farming techniques could make its GHG emissions negative (the plant's carbon sequestration rate exceeds that of burning the fuel in cars and planes). However, more recent research that accounts for the conversion of land under conservation to farmland to raise corn, suggests that ethanol is a global warming disaster as compared to the higher sequestration rates of untilled prairies and forests. Leah Douglas, "U.S. corn-based ethanol worse for the climate than gasoline, study finds," *Reuters*, February 14, 2002, https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/us-corn-based-ethanol-worse-climate-than-gasoline-study-finds-2022-02-14/ (accessed October 31, 2024).

1. Keep rainwater local

Although meteorologists have attributed greater hurricane rainfall to warming oceans, an unspoken factor is groundwater depletion, which has contributed anywhere from 10–30% of sea level rise. Sea levels in the western Pacific Ocean have been rising two to three times faster than the global average, totaling about 30 cm since 1990, and are expected to rise anywhere from 20 cm to 2 m by 2100. At 10–30%, groundwater depletion could account for up to a 60 cm rise! The two main causes of groundwater depletion are 1) sustained pumping of water from aquifers and 2) aquifers not being recharged because rainwater is evaporating rather than being absorbed by soil, plants, and trees. Uncharged aquifers dry out the vegetation living above, leading to less evapotranspiration, which breaks the hydrologic cycle altogether.

For these reasons, rainwater harvesting is essential, not just a cute pastime. Rainwater harvesting stores and reuses water locally, preventing it from flowing into rivers, thus optimizing absorption. Moreover, it lessens the stress on the local wastewater system. In an ideal world, agriculture (irrigation, livestock watering, etc.) would largely depend on harvested rainwater, reducing the reliance on groundwater. Belgian artist Vera Thaens (b. 1958) has built numerous public sculptures that demonstrate the ease of collecting rainwater from urban sites and circulating it through several plant beds in order to purify it to a level that qualifies as drinking water (fig. 2 and 3).

A 2007 scientific study stressed "the impact of changes in the water cycle on climate change [...] This opens the possibility of a constructive solution to many of the problems associated with climatic changes."[22] Timothy Green adds, "groundwater has been an historical buffer against climate variability."[23] Rather than researching groundwater's role in mitigating climate change, most research regarding climate change's impact on the water cycle focuses on forecasting how rising temperatures and varying pre-

22 Michal Kravčik, M. et. Al., *Water for the Recovery of the Climate- A New Water Paradigm* (Košice: People and Water Ngo, 2007), p.7.

23 Timothy Green, "Linking Climate Change and Groundwater," in *Integrated Groundwater Management: Concepts, Approaches and Challenges*, ed. Anthony Jakeman et al. (Heidelberg, Springer Nature, 2016), p. 98.

Fig. 2: Vera Thaens, *Roof Runoff Purifying System* (plant plan), 2017, Sittard, Netherlands, Photograph: Vera Thaens.

cipitation rates will impact water tables, flooding, runoff, water quality, energy use, food production, etc. Recycling rainwater and finding ways to prevent rainwater from entering rivers help to boost groundwater and recharge aquifers.

In 2000, the Harrison Studio, founded by Americans Newton Harrison (1932–2022) and Helen Mayer Harrison (1929–2018), recommended that the Dutch water authority let former agricultural lands in the Krimpenerwaard return to their wetland state. Their artwork, *The Krimpenerwaard* (2000–2007) proposed that the government cease pumping water from the land, which would cause the water table to rise, thus halting the evaporation of invaluable peat moss.[24] They predicted that over time, a lake would emerge to facilitate the replacement of dairy farming with fishing, tourism, cranberry bogs, and orchards.[25] Amazingly, the Dutch government heeded their advice and has made it part of their Krimpenerwaard Water Area Plan.[26]

24 Spaid, *Ecovention Europe*, p. 205.
25 Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Time of the Force Majeur: After 45 Years Counterforce is on the Horizon* (München: Prestel, 2016), p. 333.
26 https://www.schielandendekrimpenerwaard.nl/actueel/werk-aan-schoon-en-voldoende-water/watergebiedsplan-krimpenerwaard/ (accessed August 22, 2025).

Fig. 3: Vera Thaens, *Roof Runoff Purifying System* (implementation), 2017, Sittard, Netherlands, Photograph: Vera Thaens.

2. Plant trees and prairies (and protect peat moss bogs) to sequester carbon, absorb rainwater, cool cities, and clean air

These days, the benefit of trees is so widely known that tree planting hardly seems a remarkable strategy for mitigating climate change. Kenyan Wangaari Maathai (1940–2011) won the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for having inspired people to plant 30 million trees throughout Africa. Even so, it's remarkable that German artist Joseph

Fig. 4: 431art, *#botanoadopt® Bannwald* (sculpture in public space), 2009/present, Schöppingen, Germany. Photograph: 431art.

Fig. 5: 431art, *#botanoadopt® #Pflanzenklappe® (Plant Hatch)* (participatory sculpture), 2024, Monheim am Rhein, Germany. Photograph: 431art.

Beuys (1921–1986), who launched the urban Save the Woods campaign in 1971, envisioned reforesting Kassel by collectively planting 7,000 trees adjacent to locally-quarried basalt stele as art. Beuys' proposal proved liberating, since it demonstrated (in the context of a major international art exhibition) that practical artworks count as contemporary art. Although hardly the first practical artwork of that era, it was definitely the first to legitimize ecoventions, as it received widespread attention.

More recently, the German duo 431art (formed in 1996 by Haike Rausch and Torsten Grosch and based in Frankfurt am Main) have been developing various strategies to get people to engage with plants on a more intimate level than they ordinarily would. To this end, they've initiated carefully-orchestrated Botanical Powwows (2020), Audiowalks (2022–2023), and Empathy Trainings (2019). Since 2009, their long-term project *#botanoadopt®* (fig. 4 and 5) with the *#Pflanzenklappe®* (*Plant Hatch*) (fig. 5) have inspired hundreds of people to adopt otherwise discarded plants (2,213 to date). All of their efforts are geared toward raising people's awareness of the significance of plants for human survival, as well as mitigating climate change. Their imaginative activities inspire participants to grasp plant intelligence, since their artworks demonstrate plants' capacity to feel, communicate (squeal), and respond to external stimuli in their environments. When the protected Kelsterbach

Fig. 6: Agnes Denes, *Certificate of Custodianship,* 1996, Ylöjärvi, Finland. Photograph: Sue Spaid.

Bannwald (forest) was cleared in 2009 for the further expansion of Frankfurt Airport, 431art rescued thirty-three young beech trees from the area secured by police forces and transplanted them to Schöppingen, Germany (fig. 4). This artistic action resulted in *Bannwald*, the only beech trees from the Kelsterbach Bannwald still in existence. Two years later, Germany's historic beech forests were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The citizens of Ylöjärvi, Finland, invited American-Hungarian artist Agnes Denes (b. 1931) to build *Tree Mountain* as a strategy to prevent real estate developers from building homes atop land

Fig. 7: Agnes Denes, *Tree Mountain: A Living Time Capsule, 11,000 Trees, 11,000 People, 400 Years*, 1992–1996/2011, Ylöjärvi, Finland. Photograph: Sue Spaid.

that once hosted a rock quarry. Their worry was that development would harm the pure water stored in natural rock catchments below. Although Denes' choice of the Finnish Pine was meant to boost an endangered species, the idea of a monoculture forest is deemed outré today (fig. 6 and 7). During the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the Finnish government announced its plan to commission this artwork to do its part "to alleviate the world's ecological stress."[27]

These days, a lot of research is focused on figuring out which ecosystems sequester the most carbon: forests, wetlands, prairie grasses, or meadows. Until recently, the primary carbon offset strategy has been to pay to plant trees, but this naïve approach is increasingly being challenged, as recent research shows that other ecosystems "do it better."[28] Since forests take so long to develop, constructed wetlands, prairies, and meadows pose speedy alternatives that incidentally boost biodiversity. Consider that wetlands

27 https://thinkglobalgreen.org/a-living-time-capsule/ (accessed August 22, 2025).
28 https://earth.org/natural-weapons-helping-to-mitigate-climate-change-seagrass-and-peatlands/ (accessed August 22, 2025).

cover only 4–6% of all of the land mass, yet they account for "20–30% of the carbon storage of terrestrial ecosystems."[29]

In 1970, Dutch artist Hans de Vries (b. 1947) replaced impervious city sidewalks with peat tiles as performance art. His action suggested the folly of destroying peat bogs to build cities. As it turns out, peat bogs are the most efficient carbon sinks, which offers yet another reason for scientists to be so focused on wetland conservation. Responsible for one-third of the global terrestrial carbon stocks, prairies are also an important soil carbon sink. Recent research shows that "plant diversity increases soil organic carbon (SOC) storage by elevating carbon inputs to below ground biomass and promoting microbial necromass contribution to SOC storage."[30]

3. Restore Degraded Lands

While the Harrisons' main motivation for encouraging the Dutch government to stop pumping water from the Krimpenerwaard was to prevent the peat bog from evaporating, the Dutch artist herman de vries (b. 1931) envisioned transforming six square kilometers of agricultural land in Weerribben into a nature reserve, comprising freshwater wetlands and marshes. According to de vries, "[A]fter 80–100 years, the area will probably have grown into one extensive older marsh as a result of succession... [A]n existing forest will be made more attractive for hikers and made accessible for small boats."[31] This visionary project, which occupied him from 1998–2014, not only restored degraded land, but actively sequesters carbon.

4. Boost biodiversity

Before scientists realized meadows' prowess at sequestering carbon, they were especially appreciated for providing habitat for a diverse range of native species. In 1986, herman de vries was keen

29 Xin Yang, Jiao Zheng & DanYang, "Variation of soil organic carbon stability in restored mountain marsh wetlands," *Sci Rep* 14: 23702 (2024) https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-75473-3 (accessed August 22, 2025).

30 https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abo2380 (accessed August 22, 2025)

31 herman de vries. www.hermandevries,org/work/-watergoed.php

Fig. 8: Helen Mayer Harrison & Newton Harrison, *Future Garden* (*Dachgarten-ansicht*), 1996–1998. Photograph: Peter Oszvald, Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn.

to protect meadow grasses, mixed shrubs, and young trees from real estate and agricultural development, so he purchased the 4,000-square-meter meadow adjacent to his property in Eschenau, Germany. From the outset, he viewed his action as an artwork, not a land acquisition. At the time, he was worried that agriculture was eliminating hedgerows, thickets, and small orchards.

A decade later, the Harrison Studio created the 3,600-square-meter field *Future Garden, Part 1: The Endangered Meadows of Europe* (1996–1998) (fig. 8) by transplanting a 400-year-old meadow from the Eifel region onto the top of the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn, Germany. After exhibiting this transplanted meadow on the museum's roof, they transplanted it once more to Rheinauenpark, a local park along the Rhine River, where it remains to this day. Renamed *A Mother Garden for Bonn* (1997/present), its seeds have sprouted meadows throughout Bonn's park system. Not only did the Harrisons save an invaluable ecosystem from destruction due to home building, but they also augmented diversity by combining a wet meadow, a

Fig. 9: Jackie Brookner, *Veden Taika (The Magic of Water)*, 2007–2009/present, Halikonlahti, Salo, Finland. Courtesy: Nevada Museum of Art, Center for Art + Environment Archive Collections. Gift of Terry Iacuzzo.

dry meadow, and a stone meadow. They call it a "future garden," since they envision meadows replacing monocultures.

5. Innovate bird, insect, and human habitat

From 2007–2009, the American artist Jackie Brookner (1945–2015) created *Veden Taika* (*The Magic of Water*) (fig. 9), a series of three manmade islands floating in large lagoons that were once part of the Salo Municipal Sewage Plant, but have since become the Halikonlahti Bird Pools in Salo, Finland. She realized, "The birds needed nesting areas separated from surrounding land so that the eggs and young birds will be protected from small [land] mammals."[32] A long-term bird watching area, this site still contains oils and fatty organic pollutants, as well as heavy metals that were deposited while it was in use as a wastewater treatment facility. Thus, the larger island offers bird-nesting sites, while the smaller islands deploy phytoremediation to clean the water.

32 Spaid, *Ecovention Europe*, p. 157.

Fig. 10: Anne-Marie Maes, *ElbBienen*, 2018–2019/present, Hamburg, Germany. Photograph: Felix Amsel.

In 2019, Belgian artist Anne-Marie Maes (b. 1955) installed *ElbBienen* (fig. 10), a large-scale sculpture that hosts a beehive and straddles six pylons situated in the Elbe River in Hamburg, Germany. By positioning this visible sculpture high above the city, Maes aims to connect various parks, as bees venture from one park to the next. Bees tend to fly only two kilometers from their hive, so I imagine that with each successive bee generation, their offspring will start to head southwest with the wind, eventually connecting the "OpenGreens" situated between the Golden Pavilion on the Hamburg side of the Elbe River and Altenwerder/Moorburg, where Beuys proposed in 1984 to restore a spoils field created by dumping whatever had been dredged from the bottom of the Elbe onto that field. Since insects, birds, and mammals regularly move between urban gardens, Maes characterizes such connected gardens as "OpenGreens".[33] The sculpture's presence adjacent to the Golden Pavilion serves as a beacon that reminds everyone that human wellbeing is entangled with nonhuman wellbeing.

33 https://opengreens.annemariemaes.net (accessed August 22, 2025).

6. Create Sustainable Urban Infrastructure for Human Beings

Co-founded by Danish artist Ion Sørvin (b. 1964), N55 have been the artworld's leading developers of people-powered, fossil-free transportation vehicles. They also build vessels for living, working, communing, and growing food (fig. 11). Although several N55 vessels associated with navigating water suggest a doomsday prognosis, N55 are rather utopic in their vision of people freely rising to the occasion to make our world a better place. Their water focus reflects their residing in Copenhagen near the sea, where it's imperative to provide seaworthy human habit.

The ecoventions discussed in this section have not only been successful, but they are still in use. The primary factor that enhances ecoventions' practicality is that they incidentally boost human wellbeing. Such healing acts incidentally facilitate survival skills, both for makers and users. Kevin Melchionne calls such fringe benefits the "valuable compensatory role" of everyday aesthetics.[34] I've noticed that this rarely works the other way around, since the acquisition of survival skills doesn't necessarily foster wellbeing. For example, being an expert marksman rarely offers "compensatory values," since possessing this superior skillset doesn't necessarily assuage whatever fears or concerns drive people to acquire this means of self-protection. I imagine, however, that those who envision with others develop a sense of "belonging," which is why even ecoventions that fail still boost wellbeing. Moreover, those who engage in teamwork earn "trust." Those who see goals through to completion learn "perseverance." Those who know how to modify/moderate goals foster "harmony." Those who treat problems as opportunities for solutions discover "resilience." Those who develop "confidence" achieve wellbeing. Compensatory values are generative.

34 Kevin Melchionne, "The Point of Everyday Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 12 (2014). https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=700 (accessed August 22, 2025).

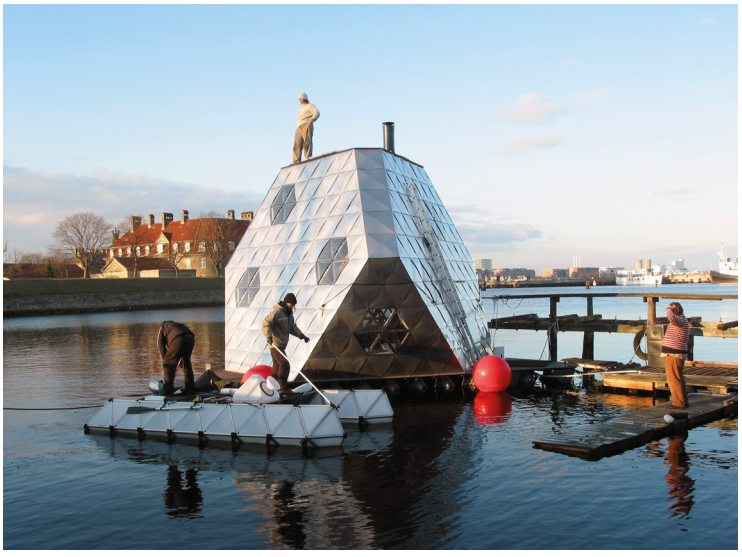

Fig. 11: N55, *Floating Platform/Spaceframe*, 2002, Copenhagen, Denmark. Photograph: N55.

Willful Artists

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, transitive verbs require direct objects: we discuss *x*, we make *x*, we enjoy *x*, or we interpret *x*. The action comes to fruition. By contrast, intransitivity suggests an ongoing process. Consider the verbs "perdure," "adapt," and "mutate": these actions go on and on, enabling artworks to respond to future audiences inhabiting different eras and locations. Moreover, focusing on aboutness hastens an artwork's entrance into art history, while *isness* sustains its relevance over time, enabling an artwork to perdure and thrive as art with the capacity to act on us.[35] Artworks indicative of the intransitive are those that are

35 In 2006, I travelled around the United States presenting the paper "The Gist of Isness," which originated as a 2005 public debate with Arthur Danto titled "Aboutness vs. Isness." Sponsored by the Lower Manhattan Arts Council, this debate took the form of a town-hall forum. In other words, Danto did most of the talking.

interpreted over and over in varying contexts and for varying audiences over time. They thus defeat aboutness.

When preparing my presentation for Berlin in November 2023 , I was inspired by the translation of *Eigensinn* (obstinancy) as "willfulness." In trying to "fit in," I struck upon the notion of the willful artist who doesn't give up, even though few believe what they are doing has anything to do with art. Even worse, others think they are wasting their time and talents. Others view their vision as a pipedream that will never pan out. After sixty years of ecological artists innovating strategies for mitigating climate change, willful artists have definitely found scientific success, though not yet "artworld success" in terms of proper art criticism. Moreover, artists who create ecoventions effectively test strategies for others to modify and apply elsewhere, so in many ways their art is *objectless*.

As mentioned in the introduction, Sara Ahmed has developed a notion of the willful queer subject who deviates from societal norms. Inspired by Augustine's discussion of the will, Ahmed describes the will as an impulse to existence, not "I will *therefore* I am," but "I will *then* I am." While I don't mean to draw an equivalency between deviant artists and queer willful subjects, validating the latter implicitly validates the former. One of Ahmed's points is that the adjective "willfulness" begins as an insult lobbed at someone, but the willful queer subject takes up this mantle and makes it their *raison-d'être,* so as to ensure survivability (perdurance).

Ahmed poses an interesting question: "Is it possible then to experience oneself as willing something that one does not bring about?"[36] She doesn't explain whether the "what" "one does not bring about" is because "willers" actually act in concert with others, rather than alone; or because what "comes about" is unlike anything "willers" could have anticipated, much less willed. To my lights, both answers reflect the artist's position. Not only do most artists collaborate, but artworks succeed in ways the artists could never have imagined, much less willed. Duchamp coined the "art coefficient" to describe the gap between "the intention and its real-

36 Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 24.

ization, a difference which the artist is not aware of."[37] He continued, "In other words, the personal 'art coefficient' is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed."[38] While willful artists probably don't "will" to keep art alive, that they dared to deviate from the norm in the first place is what keeps art alive for the world.

37 Marcel Duchamp, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sonouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), p. 139.
38 Ibid.