

Eco-art and the Concept of Monumentality: Three Case Studies

Dr. JOHANNIS TSOUMAS

School of Applied Arts and Culture

Department of Interior Architecture

University of West Attica, Greece

Abstract

The ecological issue is a prominent and serious problem that plagues humanity, especially in recent decades. The ways of dealing with it through activism, international political and social protests and general art are not enough as they mainly focus on its superficial commentary. However, dealing with this issue should be prominently about the awareness and conscience awakening of world societies. One of the ways to highlight the gravity of this problem is to correlate and finally connect it with the concept of monumentality. Ecological art can combine its great environmental messages with the power, earnestness and importance of the monumentality concept, thus projecting their grandiose value of environment and at the same time the need for people to adopt a new, thorough and conscious way of its protection. This research focuses on the coexistence of ecological art with the architectural monumentality concept through the activist ideology of three great visual artists whose work contributes to the conscious formation of consumers and users of industrial products, the debris and waste of which constitute a severe threat to the viability of planet Earth.

Keywords: *eco-art, monumentality, space, Anthropocene, installations, waste materials, ecological awareness.*

Introduction

According to Butler (2022: 19) the Anthropocene age, the one we are currently going through, can be described as 'a moving window of human and natural processes rather than a fixed point in time' and is defined by human domination on Earth's ecosystems. In this context, it is observed that the current environmental practices and efforts of all kinds have developed a discreet, often didactic discourse in recent decades. It is also believed that the form of creative intervention, which can also be called 'ecological art' or else 'eco-art' is part of a broader *ecodidactic* art that seamlessly connects visual arts with design, architecture and space in general. This type of intervention further mobilizes different audiences in different urban or non-urban landscapes, while involving new ideology and sensitivity forms regarding climate change, environmental pollution, but also the importance of sustainability, while forming a new type of explanatory discourse that places the ecological issue 'in the public sphere for in depth discussion'.

In such a context the following question arises: what exactly could eco-art be and what are its typical characteristics? This kind of art is created by artists who

through their work focus on the commentary and projection of regional or global environmental issues, creating a new problematic on important ecological concerns such as the climate change, the environmental pollution, etc. Eco-art, through its many types such as painting, sculpture, constructions, installations, digital media and photography, is often associated with ecological activism as it constitutes in itself a form of protest and awareness that can help people understand the real dimensions of the problem. It is also important to note that ecological art deals with the cultural, aesthetic, social, moral, and even economic development of global societies and the impact it has on the respective global ecosystems. It is no coincidence, then, that the development of this type of art starts to become proportional to the rapid expansion of the ecological problems that plague our planet.

Some of its Key Objectives are

- to give people again the opportunity to envision and redefine their relationship and coexistence with nature through a new way of thinking and acting,
- to redefine the use and usefulness of waste materials through the idea of reuse (upcycling),

- to be a form of informational art in relation to environmental issues, culture, the evolution of ecosystems and nature in general,
- to support the importance of activism, but also the significance of collaboration between many different action and creativity groups such as artists, scientists, educators, various community groups, etc. (Fournier; Lim; Parmer; Wuilfe, 2010: 45).

On the other hand, according to Curtis (1996: 455) the concept of monumentality, especially in terms of architecture, can be defined as an intellectual quality that is inherent in a structure that is linked to the concepts of classicism and eternity. For centuries now, the concept of monumentality has been associated with majestic, large constructions made of stone, marble, wood, and even metal and glass erected in public places in many parts of the world. Thus the first types of monumental architecture can be found in the Egyptian pyramids, tombs and cenotaphs, the ancient Greek temples and their surrounding areas, in the large Roman buildings and in Christian churches and Ottoman mosques, that is, in majestic architectural structures built mainly for religious and social reasons, invoking memory and immortality. However, monumental constructions made of modern materials that served other purposes than those can be found during the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe and America. According to Robb (2001: 188) monumental structures could serve as natural manifestations of social order and collective will and were often associated with political, economic and social power. We can thus understand why monumental architectural structures have never been mere accumulations of materials and designs, but have helped to form power relations and inequalities between those who inhabited or simply used such buildings and those who either visited them for various reasons or simply bypassed them (Given, 2004: 105).

Today, in general, the concept of monumentality covers everything from various types of architecture contracted with the concept of power such as, to the buildings of religious worship, architectural, non-functional structures-symbols, such as the Brandenburg Gate and the Eiffel Tower, and fortification structures such as fortresses and castles.

In some cases, ecological art is creatively mixed with

the concept of monumentality, especially in terms of historic architecture or sites, and borrows many of its features to highlight the importance of the ecological problem. Commenting on selected cases of artists and their works we can understand the importance of the partnership between the ecological issue, art and the meaning of the monumental ideal.

The Case of Naziha Mestaoui

When art meets the ecological issue, technology and monumental architecture, the works produced can be considered as the epitome of the Anthropocene art. These works combine anthropocentric and biocentric principles and mentalities in order to bridge the essentially imaginary gap between them. Naziha Mestaoui is a deeply influential artist of this type of art as with her work, she transmits elements of the weakened natural environment to the urban space. In this way, she contributes to the friendly union of urban and environmental ideology and inspires new ways of promoting the monumental value and priority of the ecological issue and the concept of sustainability.

With her digital project, which premiered to the general public of Paris in 2015 as part of the 21st United Nations Climatic Conference (COP21), combining all of the above into one interactive installation, entitled *One beat One tree*, Mestaoui focuses on the reckless destruction of the forests of the world, inevitably in the extinction of wildlife, but also in the humiliation of the eternal tribes who have been living in them and from them for centuries. Her idea is based on the projection of various endangered types of exotic or even European trees and forests, on the largest and most famous historical monuments and buildings of the City of Light such as the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe, but also on monuments of other great capitals of Europe such as the Colosseum in Rome, the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, the Tower Bridge in London etc. It is, thus, an amazing combination of contemporary art and technology with the classicism of architectural history, while at the same time it gives to the global ecological problem the grandiose dimensions and significance of a historical monument.

(Tsoumas, 2020: 9). These bottles were 'stacked' on specific metal cases in the shape of letters so that as a whole they formed the word 'Help'. Each 'letter' was hand-assembled and all of them weighted more than two tons in total. This installation, which could also be lit, was monumentally large so that it could be seen almost from everywhere and symbolized the cry of despair of humanity to address the catastrophic environmental issue of marine pollution from plastic waste. It was no coincidence, however, that it first appeared on the archeological site of the island of Mozia, off the coast of Sicily, in 2016, the coastline of which as well as of the wider region of Sicily, were literally haunted by the polluting power of plastic debris (Valeri 2016, 37). It was thus an immediate challenge for visitors who had the opportunity to visit, at the same time, two completely different sites of art and culture: Mozia's Phoenician archaeological site with the ruins of an ancient temple and, at the same time, the invasive remnants of modern post-capitalist civilization turned into art, that is, two different forms of monumentality.



Figure 2 Maria Cristina Finucci: *Help the Oceans* - *The age of Plastic*, Mozia island, 2016

© Times of Malta.

Having managed to combine contemporary art with archeology and public space, but mainly with the need of visitors to receive answers to their ecological questions, Finucci installed the same work in the Roman Forum, in 2018, but also in the courtyard of the University of Milan in 2019, projecting the same meanings, which at the same time involved, inter alia, a deep political interpretation.

The case of Sarah Sze

Like ourselves, our waste deserves a second chance. As in the previous case, here we are also dealing with the

application of the upcycling concept as a means of conveying critical and timely messages regarding overconsumption, waste production and the destruction of the environment in the Anthropocene era. But, we additionally have to take into account the concepts of personal or collective remembrance and consciousness.

Sarah Sze is an American eco-artist who seeks to turn the waste mainly found in the urban environment such as paper, cardboard, wood, glass, plastic, metal and rubber into works of art that not only affects the space that hosts it, but also defines it. Her ideas go beyond the concept of conventional material recycling as she creates works that go beyond the economic, cultural and social value of the original products.



Figure 3 Sarah Sze: *Triple Point*, expansion to the outside and the entrance of the showroom.

© www.thedailybeast.com/sarah-sze

At the 55th International Art Exhibition - Venice Biennale, in the United States Pavilion, she presented her work titled *Triple Point* which included a series of interconnected installations that transformed the space into a series of immersive experiences for the visitors (Vogel, 2013). Her work directly involved the old Venetian building itself where the gallery was housed, including, beyond its internal space, its exterior, entrance and exit, challenging, in this way, the eternally undisturbed Palladian sense of architectural order. Traces of Venice's urban landscape - old photographs of the city, building materials, newspapers, magazines, threads and ropes, and even old vaporetto tickets - were collected to create these almost disorderly installations, which gave strong emphasis to the ecological problem in the urban space. Besides, her work also seemed to borrow the monumentality concept of the

16th century Venetian architecture and, through it, to stress the importance of the ecological problem as a new form of non-negligible power that must be treated accordingly.

Her work titled *Images in Debris* was created in 2018 and was purchased at its first exhibition at the Victoria Miro Gallery, London by the Canadian collectors Audrey and David Mirvish. It is an installation mainly related to space, but also to time and to human relationships and habits, through worn, useless objects (pieces of fabric and wood, empty plastic bottles, paint containers, used paper, glass or metal containers etc.). In this work, Sze tries to reconstruct time within a specific spatial context by holding and uniting various images and objects of everyday life that she has searched for and found, each of which has its own story. However, the entire installation looks like it has been composed with fragments and as a whole it refers to the reconstruction of a majestic, almost monumental building that is collapsing. Here, of course, strong symbolism is found for the collapse of the new cultural reality edifice which seems to be deconstructed in a monumental way. Sze simultaneously emphasizes the didactic power of memory and ecological reconstruction in contrast to the concepts of overconsumption, waste and urban landscape collapse.

Part of this work is another two-dimensional work titled *Afterimage, Rainbow Disturbance* which constitutes a different approach to the space concept. Here, the classic canvas hosts flat, useless objects such as old photos, pages from old magazines and newspapers, product packaging objects, threads and paper tape which in combination with acrylic and oil paints, inks, shellac, glue, even water primer seem to create a new environment. However, this composition is not limited to the traditional canvas space, but expands to the showroom space like peculiar wallpaper, claiming its almost permanent installation there as a part of gallery's interior architecture (Compton, 2018).

In this work the concepts of urban culture, artistic thought, ecological awareness, sustainability, but also those of personal experience and narrative actively contribute to the concept of monumentality. The expansive

and almost authoritarian value of the composition creates again a kind of educational art that raises many new questions to the viewers about the relationship between the arts and the urban environment, but also their share of responsibility in shaping the production and consumer culture of the Anthropocene era.

Conclusion

Ecological art and its original representatives, especially since the early 2000s, paved an important path for the art of the following decades and subsequent generations as their work commented, cauterized and finally redefined the environmental problem in the collective memory and consciousness. The eco-artists featured in this research, however, highlighted ecological art through its connection with monumental architecture, creating a new narrative that emphasized not only the artistic value of their works, but also the enormous dimensions of the ecological issue itself. The concept of monumentality was used in a witty, ingenious and at the same time effective way that attracted the interest of spectators, while asking them important questions about the destruction of the environment in which they sought answers. The combination of these two completely different concepts and art forms proved to be constructive and fruitful as it constituted a point of reference for ecodidactic art in the Anthropocene era.

References

1. Butler, R. D. (2022), *The Anthropocene*. New York: Routledge.
2. Compton, N. (2018), 'American artist Sarah Sze pulls apart her creative process'. Available at: <https://www.wallpaper.com/art/sarah-sze-afterimage-victoria-miro>
3. Curtis, J.R.W. (1996), 'On Monuments and Monumentality: Louis. I Kahn'. In: Curtis, E., ed. *Modern Architecture Since 1900*. New York: Phaidon Publications.
4. Fournier, A.; Lim, M.; Parmer, A.; Wuilfe, R. (2010), *Undercurrents: Experimental Ecosystems in Recent Art*, New York; New Haven: Whitney Museum of American Art and Yale University Press.

5. Given, M. (2004), *The Archaeology of the Colonized*. London: Routledge.
6. Lanigan, R. (2018). Inside the High-Tech Japanese Art Installation That's like Stepping into a Dream. Available at: <https://www.mutualart.com/Article/Inside-the-High-Tech-Japanese-Art-Instal/CFDF755E05940250>.
7. Nadkarni, N. (2008), *Between Earth and Sky: Our Intimate Connections to Trees*. Oakland: University of California Press.
8. Robb, J. (2001), 'Island identities: ritual, travel and the creation of difference in Neolithic Malta'. *European Journal of Archaeology*, issue 4.
9. Tsoumas, J. (2020), 'Plastic waste as both source of inspiration and medium for contemporary artists'. *FACTA UNIVERSITATIS series: Visual Arts and Music*, Vol. 6, No 1.
10. Valleri, M. (2016), 'L' installazione all' isola di Mozia: Help, il grido del Mediterraneo'. *Tempi* 1, issue 3.
11. Vogel, C. (2013), 'At Venice Biennale, Sarah Sze's 'Triple Point''. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/31/arts/design/at-venice-biennale-sarah-szes-triple-point.html>