



ECOART IN ACTION

Activities, Case Studies, and
Provocations for Classrooms
and Communities

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Introduction

You hold in your hands a field guide or road map to contemporary ecoart practices compiled from the contributions of members belonging to the Ecoart Network. Along this journey, there are many places to stop, check out the view, get your feet wet, or jump into the deep end.

In this moment of the Anthropocene, we can draw inspiration from Aldo Leopold, who wrote, “It takes all kinds of motives to make a world.” We need both “doers and dreamers”¹ to help us address the problems brought on by climate change. Whether you are a doer or a dreamer, we hope what you find here will enrich your work.

This introduction provides some context and background on the evolution of ecoart;² why we wrote this book and who it is for; and how to navigate the many contributions herein. The field of ecoart is continually changing as new practitioners engage with the work, integrating ideas from science, ecology, social justice, and activist movements.

1. Curt Meine, *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 294.

2. This introduction is intended to spark your interest to learn more. A comprehensive bibliography is provided for those who want to dig deeper.

3. This move outside of the gallery had earlier precedents—for example, the work of the Bauhaus in Germany and the Arts and Crafts movement in England and the United States, both of which advocated for the usefulness of art to enhance the quality of life.

What Is Ecoart?

Since the beginnings of humankind, art has been a way to record, interpret, and better understand the world. During the 1960s, along with various social and environmental justice movements, artists began working outside of the gallery context.³ Some artists began using the raw materials of nature to reshape the land or call attention to natural processes. Generally known as earth art, earthworks, or land art, these works tended to be monumental in scale and were often located in isolated terrains. Artists also brought natural processes and materials back into the gallery to emphasize ecological systems. Concurrent movements emerged in Great Britain, Italy, Japan, the Middle East,

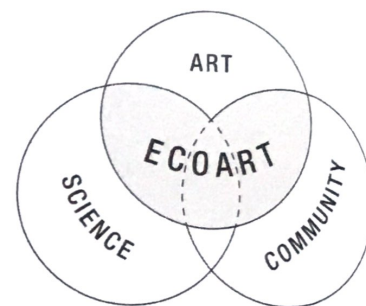
and South America. Some artists began walking the landscape, leaving temporal works behind and recording their walks through photography, maps, and/or writing. These forms of documentation were exhibited in galleries or presented in publications, opening up new ways of engaging audiences and sharing ecoart practices. Ecoartists today may borrow from these modes of presentation.

In addition to these approaches to place and landscape, ecoart has also been informed by conceptual art, feminist art, and performance art/happenings, as well as by critical theories arising from feminism, ecofeminism, and deep ecology. Aligned with systems theory and ecological thinking, deep ecology recognizes the inherent value and interdependence of all living things. By asserting that humans are not separate from nature, ecoartists see natural, political, and cultural systems as complex, nuanced, and related.

Several streams of thought converge in ecoart practice.⁴ One stream flows from the traditions of the visual arts. A second flows from the life sciences (biology, botany, zoology, microbiology, physiology, biochemistry, and related subjects), physical sciences (physics, chemistry, astronomy, and related subjects), and social sciences (anthropology, economics, history, geography, political science, psychology, and sociology). Merging and mingling with these two streams are the practices and concerns of environmental and social justice movements, which manifest through a range of participatory and community-focused strategies. The convergence of these three streams demonstrates the interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary,⁵ and collaborative nature of ecoart.

Using the Venn diagram at right, we see three interconnecting fields that suggest possibilities for integrating these three streams of thought and action through ecoart practice. Taken collectively, these provide a framework for understanding the diversity of ecoart approaches, and the many options for engaging in this work.

Ecoartists bridge formal and informal knowledge and experience, both inside and outside the field of art, and make connections, relationships, and systems visible. Regardless of the form an ecoart work or project might take, our practice is as follows:



Three Interconnecting Fields of Ecoart Practice. Image developed by the editors, 2018.

4. The idea of converging streams of thought is discussed by Patricia A. Shifferd and Dorothy Lagerroos in relation to arts-based community development and sustainable community development. See "Converging Streams: The Community Arts and Sustainable Community Movements," CAN/API, 2006; available at <https://tinyurl.com/yy8t72ps>.

5. The term *transdisciplinary* involves recognizing incommensurable ways of knowing the world and bringing these modes of knowing into relationship with one another.

- hybrid, relational, and inter- or transdisciplinary
- embraces ecological and systems thinking
- shifts culture and raises awareness through individual, collective, local, or transnational action

Sometimes ecoart is negotiated and unfolds within and through knowledge communities in lived places, and can include collaborations with more-than-human worlds/life-forms. Ecoartists strive for practical impacts, ranging from reconnecting people to place to restoring and remediating ecosystems.

In response to accelerated global events, which have raised awareness of environmental challenges,⁶ ecoart emerged in multiple places, more or less simultaneously. From moving outside of the gallery or museum system to working in the landscape and with communities, ecoartists have adopted and adapted the tools of multiple disciplines, professions, and practices, and have aligned with the goals of social-change movements to benefit the entire web of life. Thus, ecoart brings multiple spheres of knowledge and skills together to reframe and/or address the most pressing social and environmental problems of the Anthropocene.

Goals of This Book: Pedagogy and Urgency

Ecoart is a pedagogical practice, whether in an institutional setting, such as a school or college, or in a public setting, when working in communities. As educators, we strive to empower our students and those we work with, and we are guided by many foundational thinkers and writers of educational theories. For example, the work of John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Maria Montessori, and Rudolf Steiner transformed education to emphasize experiential, student-directed learning, and raised questions about power and privilege. The Feminist Art Program, developed by Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro in 1970, used consciousness raising to prioritize the experiences of women, and emphasized participatory art pedagogies using the processes of collaboration and community engagement. This program was one of many experiments in community-based art that have

6. Those events included publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962; the first Earth Day in 1970; the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm) in 1972; the Earth Summit (the "Rio Summit") in 1992; the use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War; and the elevated global awareness of impending environmental problems. The legal implications of the use of Agent Orange ultimately led to the conceptualization of the concept of "ecocide."

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"Art is essential to our movements: environmentalists have always been good at appealing to the hemisphere of the human brain that values bar graphs and pie charts, but the message of our peril needs to get across in far more visceral ways as well. And here artists are as important as scientists, as this wonderfully comprehensive account makes clear."

—**BILL MCKIBBEN**, environmentalist and author of *The End of Nature*

"Even as California combusts, Greenland's vaulting ancient ice dome sweats, and seas swell, this Anthropocene period of Earth history, hubristically named by and for our species, is in its earliest formative stages. That's both good and bad news. The bad news, of course, is that we haven't seen anything yet. The good news is that humanity and the wider living world won't see the worst outcomes if we all spread the activities, learn from the case studies and amplify the provocations offered in this vital field guide to ecoart in action."

—**ANDREW REVKIN**, journalist, educator, musician, and author of five environmental books, including *The Burning Season* and *The North Pole Was Here*

"*Ecoart in Action* is an extensive and invaluable field guide to the ways in which the arts can raise consciousness and instigate action on ecological issues. Transformative projects are carefully laid out by an amazing group of artists and writers whose dedication to the issues goes back decades. Packed with brilliant ideas for a vast number of contexts and participants, this book is crucial to our hopes for a sustainable future."

—**LUCY R. LIPPARD**, art critic and author of *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West*

Ready-to-go approaches for facilitating ecologically focused, environmental art projects

Compiled from 67 members of the Ecoart Network, a group of more than 200 internationally established practitioners, *Ecoart in Action* offers practical solutions to critical environmental challenges. Each contribution provides models for ecoart practice adaptable for a variety of classrooms, communities, and contexts.



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ISBN 978-1-61332-146-1



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ART | ENVIRONMENT | EDUCATION