

In my End is my Beginning
Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis
edited by Asia Benedetti, Angelica Bertoli,
Andrea Golfetto, Maria Novella Tavano

Art in the Capitalocene from Awareness to Action

The Work of Marzia Migliora and Luigi Coppola

Virginia Vannucchi
Università degli Studi di Firenze, Italia

Abstract Over the past two decades, 'eco-art' increasingly focused on issues related to climate collapse and the so-called Anthropocene, often embracing apocalyptic and destructive narratives. Through two case studies of Italian artists Marzia Migliora and Luigi Coppola, this contribution aims to highlight how some of these practices can range from raising awareness to inspiring action, using tools such as the archeology of social imaginary, utopia, and practices of commoning, effectively promoting sustainability and societal change. The article underscores the ability of eco-art to generate new imaginaries that transcend visual representation, acting as catalysts for cultural and environmental change.

Keywords Eco-art. Capitalocene. Social imaginaries. Marzia Migliora. Luigi Coppola.

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1 Introduction

The rise of global ecological awareness in the 1960s and 1970s, which ushered in what is now termed the Anthropocene, compels humanity to reevaluate its relationship with the Earth. This environmental crisis has triggered a shift in global consciousness, necessitating a



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Quaderni di Venezia Arti 8

e-ISSN 2784-8868

ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-878-1

Open access

Submitted 2024-10-01 | Published 2024-12-11

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DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-878-1/010

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rethinking of the social framework, starting with the concept of 'nature' – often viewed as subordinate to 'culture' in Western thought. As this mindset contributes to phenomena such as forced migrations and environmental degradation, contemporary artists increasingly advocate for new terrestrial policies. While some visual culture still adheres to apocalyptic narratives, eco-artists like Marzia Migliora and Luigi Coppola transcend mere representation of environmental collapse. They actively engage in creating and structuring new social imaginaries and future-oriented creative laboratories. This contribution examines the intersections between eco-art and social imaginaries, focusing on how the works of Migliora and Coppola demonstrate a trajectory from awareness to action.

2 Nature Versus Culture: How Social Imaginaries Shape Reality

A central issue in today's environmental debate is examining modern perceptions of nature, including the language used to describe it. Addressing the relationship between ecology and social imaginary in modernity, Cornelius Castoriadis argues that the concept of nature has lost significance due to the relentless pursuit of rational control typical of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. This economic perspective views nature merely as a resource, devoid of cultural value. Castoriadis suggests that ecological thinking challenges this view by questioning the creation of needs and advocating for self-limitation in relation to our planet:

It isn't a love of nature; it's the need for self-limitation (which is true freedom) of human beings with respect to the planet on which they happen to exist by chance. (Castoriadis 2010, 203)

Timothy Morton further develops the theme of extractivism, by critiquing in terms of causality the romanticization of nature, seen as a backdrop for human events, a *locus amoenus* or a pure space to be preserved (Morton 2009, 79-139). Morton argues that viewing nature in this way reinforces its image as an 'Other', separate from humanity, turning it into a commodity and reinforcing the nature/culture divide. In contrast, postnatural studies propose concepts like 'ecosophy'¹ and Gilles Clément's 'symbiotic man':

1 The core idea behind the concept of 'ecosophy' – a term first introduced by Arne Næss in 1960 – involves a fundamental shift away from anthropocentrism, viewing humans not as occupying the top of the hierarchy of living beings, but as equally interconnected with every other being in the ecosphere, forming part of a whole together with other species. See Næss 1989; Guattari 2018.

colui che è idealmente in grado di restituire all'ambiente la totalità dell'energia che gli sottrae. (Clément 2015, 65)

By linking environmental collapse with social imaginaries, as Morton and Castoriadis do, we are prompted to examine the roots of the current economic system. This perspective suggests that ecological crises are deeply connected to the capitalist imaginary, since:

Ecology's capacity to apprehend environmental crises as a problem of the social imaginary gives its questions and arguments a radicalism in the sense of going to the fundamentals of the capitalist imaginary. (Adams et al. 2015, 37)

Comparing ecological thought with theories of social imaginaries reveals a direct link to what is conventionally called Anthropocene.² In light of Nicolas Bourriaud's question, "Cosa significa l'arte in un mondo dove predomina l'urgenza?" (2020, 7) the image - understood as an active field rather than a passive simulacrum - takes on renewed importance. It is within this conceptual frame that ecological art practices are situated.

3 The Artist as an Archaeologist of Thought: Marzia Migliora's *Paradoxes of Plenty*

Italian artist Marzia Migliora (Alessandria 1972) uses carefully selected, recycled, and reworked images to create new visual landscapes. Her series *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza* (2017-22) explores the relationship between capitalism and agriculture, highlighting how extractive practices from the early twentieth century to the present have transformed harvests into mere products, erasing traditional land care methods. The series, translated as *Paradoxes of Plenty*, takes its title from the final chapter of Tom Standage's book *An Edible History of Humanity* (2009), which is a key reference for Migliora. Standage's work reveals how food has always been more than sustenance: it has been a means of power, global trade, social cohesion, ideological influence, and conflict. This transformation of harvests into products reflects a broader trend of domination over plants, animals, and people.

² The polysemy around the term 'Anthropocene' is not the focus of this contribution. However, it is important to note that each of the terms currently in use (Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene, Anthroscene, Technosphere, Plantationocene) highlights specific nuances in describing the impact of human responsibility on climate collapse, shedding light on different aspects of the same phenomenon. See Parikka 2014; Haraway 2015.

The series includes over fifty collages in various sizes, created using techniques such as collage, *papier collé*, drawing, and watercolor on paper. Raised by a family of farmers in northern Italy province of Alessandria, the artist grew up in close contact with plants and animals. Her childhood memories constitute one of the pillars of her aesthetics and poetry, also characterized by a strong sense of belonging to the Italian peasant civilization. Migliora utilizes a diverse array of sources, such as vintage agricultural manuals inherited from her grandfather, American Tall-Tale postcards,³ and advertisements from the 1960s, a decade renowned for its pronounced consumerism. Despite their different origins and chronologies, these sources share a common thread: they reflect a historical perspective that views nature as a manipulable resource, shaped by industrial, economic, and green revolutions. For Migliora, creating art involves an archaeological approach to thought. She excavates pre-existing visual sources as remnants of the collective imagination, rearranging them through what Cristina Baldacci terms a ‘metabolic process’:

l’appropriazione e la risignificazione delle cose [...]. Una “Durcharbeitung”, per riprendere un termine che Lyotard modella sulle orme di Freud. (2020, 14)

This process, influenced by Lyotard’s concept of ‘perlaboration,’ aligns with what James Gibson describes as one of the primary characteristics of the image in relation to knowledge and cognitive processes:

It can be suggested [...] that images, pictures, and written-on surfaces afford a special kind of knowledge that I call mediated or indirect, knowledge at second hand. Moreover, images, pictures, and writing, insofar as the substances shaped and the surfaces treated are permanent, permit the storage of information and the accumulation of information in storehouses, in short, civilization. (Gibson 2014, 37)

³ Also known as ‘exaggeration postcards’, Tall-Tale postcards typically spread in rural areas of the United States, particularly in the north, during the early twentieth century. Accompanied by humoristic captions, they often depicted enormous animals and crops being transported by train or wagon, reinforcing the American myth of abundance. Their popularity persisted until World War I, when the government imposed a ban on German postcards. Following this, the production of Tall-Tale postcards gradually declined, though some continued to be created until the 1960s (<https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS364>).



Figure 1 Marzia Migliora, *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza #14*. 2017. Collage and drawing on paper, 29 × 42 cm. Milan; Naples, Galleria Lia Rumma. Courtesy the artist

As noted by Pier Luca Marzo, Migliora uses images to layer information and connect different temporalities:

una sorta di supporto della memoria adatto a viaggiare nel tempo sociale ritessendone il significato in termini di continuità tra passato e futuro. (Marzo 2015, 102)

Baldacci compares Migliora's practice to the 'best tradition' of photomontages and *papier collés* by artists like Hannah Höch and Martha Rosler, highlighting how her image combinations create "relazioni anacroniche e frizioni semantiche che inducono a pensare" (Baldacci 2020, 14). The absurdity and paradox within her works aim to spark viewer awareness. Artworks such as *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza #14* [fig. 1] and #19 illustrate the deceptive narratives surrounding food in the twentieth century. For instance, the corn plant, central to the artist's family history, is depicted being tamed by circus performers or inflated with an air pump to symbolize genetic manipulation.



Figure 2 Marzia Migliora, *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza* #17. 2018. Collage and drawing on paper, 20 × 42 cm. Milan; Naples, Galleria Lia Rumma. Courtesy of the artist

These works examine the shift from traditional land stewardship to intensive, depleting practices driven by capitalist agriculture: a loss experienced by Migliora's family, as the artist states:

Ho passato la mia infanzia in una casa circondata da campi coltivati e popolata da molti animali. Le coltivazioni intensive di mais e di grano allineate in file ordinate hanno rappresentato il mio paesaggio domestico, e da tempo sono anche oggetto della mia ricerca artistica. La vita contadina, la cura della terra e la determinazione delle specie vegetali, credo abbiano formato il mio sguardo d'artista. La mia famiglia è solo un caso fra le innumerevoli vittime di un sistema di industrializzazione che ha scambiato il cibo per merce e l'idea di sviluppo come progetto meramente economico. Oggi un contadino vende cento chili di mais all'incirca al prezzo di una pizza: credo che questa semplice comparazione mostri una distorsione di metodi, economie e valori di un mercato il cui modello economico corrente non protegge l'agricoltura



Figure 3 Marzia Migliora, *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza #16*. 2018. Collage and drawing on paper, 29 × 42 cm. Milan; Naples; Galleria Lia Rumma, Courtesy of the artist

familiare – diventata ormai impraticabile – perché ideato per le aziende agricole su larga scala. (Lucchetti 2020, 10)

In *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza #16* [fig. 2] and #17 [fig. 3], Migliora presents a child manipulating nature amidst a backdrop of industrial pesticides⁴ and figures in protective suits, evoking a war metaphor against intensive monoculture. These pieces highlight the shift from biodiversity to monoculture and the industrialization of agriculture. Featured in *Rethinking Nature*, an exhibition at the MADRE Museum in Naples (17 December 17 2021-2 May 2 2022), the three works *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza #38*, #39 [fig. 4], and #44 address contradictions in agriculture through the lens of farmers, seasonal migrants, and former colonial

⁴ From research, the image of the child seems to come from a 1927 illustration that appeared on the packaging of the toy kit for scientific experiments *Amusing and Mystifying Tricks*, produced by Maryland's Porter Chemical Company.



Figure 4 Marzia Migliora, *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza #39*. 2021. Collage and drawing on paper, 70 × 100 cm. Milan; Naples, Galleria Lia Rumma. Courtesy of the artist

laborers. Focusing on imported products like coffee, sugar, and cocoa, these pieces reveal the racial and exploitation systems behind agricultural production, exposing how capitalist practices have 'whitened' and commodified these products through strategies of visual marketing and pop culture. By combining images of field workers and portraits of white women enjoying coffee in their homes as a bourgeois status symbol, Migliora reveals how the modern colonization process "si è [...] spiritualizzato, emancipandosi dal suo corpus geo-culturale d'origine" (Marzo 2011, 8), embodying what we call 'globalisation'. Migliora's art, through its exploration of human-environment relationships and social imaginary, helps visualize the potential for change. As Migliora stated during the exhibition *Marzia Migliora. Lo spettro di Malthus* (10 October 2020-12 March 2021) at Museo MA*GA in Gallarate, she aims not to provide solutions but to raise awareness:

L'arte ha, ha avuto e avrà sempre un forte potere di attivazione-generazione di pensiero. In qualità di artista [...] credo che il mio

ruolo sia quello di dar voce a situazioni scomode. Le mie opere sovente nascono da un fastidio, da qualche cosa che ci accade, da un problema che non posso risolvere materialmente, ma su cui intendo attivare delle riflessioni attraverso il mio fare. (Lucchetti 2020, 19)

4 **Cultivating Communities: The Agricultural Turn in Recent Italian Activism**

In the context of Socially Engaged Art (SEA)⁵ and as to artists committed to contemporary issues, the influence of Nicolas Bourriaud's ideas is significant. Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, which focus on the interactions between people and the social dimension of art, has been foundational. However, since the early 2000s, the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in art has evolved, surpassing Bourriaud's framework. Emanuele Rinaldo Meschini notes that while Bourriaud's work was pioneering, it lacked a sociological dimension in understanding relational aesthetics, making it less effective for examining socially engaged artistic practices and their interactions with both urban and agricultural spaces (Rinaldo Meschini 2021, 70). In the past two decades, there has been a resurgence of activism within art, opposing globalist capitalism. This has led to a divide in art criticism between those who prioritize the aesthetic value of artworks and those who focus on the ethics of the interventions. Key figures in this debate include Claire Bishop and Grant H. Kester.⁶ Rinaldo Meschini summarizes this divide:

L'ethical imperative che per Bishop moralizzava la critica artistica, per Kester rappresentava, con altri termini, una responsabilità ed una condizione che diventava essa stessa opera nel momento in cui informava e comunicava in maniera partecipativa l'intero processo creativo. (Rinaldo Meschini 2021, 75)

⁵ In this respect, see Sholette 2010; 2022; Helguera 2011. While both authors examine Socially Engaged Art (SEA), they offer distinct yet complementary perspectives. Helguera provides a practical and accessible guide, focusing on the methodologies and collaborative strategies artists can employ to engage with communities. His work is anchored in the 'how' of SEA, offering concrete tools for artistic practice. Sholette, by contrast, explores the political dimensions of SEA, critically assessing the intersection of art, activism, and the economy of invisibility. He introduces the concept of 'dark matter' to describe the vast array of socially and politically engaged artistic practices that, while significant, remain marginalized or unrecognized by mainstream art institutions.

⁶ Since the 2006 debate in the pages of *Artforum*, the differences between the two apparently incompatible viewpoints gradually narrowed, due to the emerging of increasingly hybrid practices. In this respect, see Rinaldo Meschini 2021, 74-85.

The debate between ethics and aesthetics becomes particularly relevant in eco-art related to the Anthropocene. Donna Haraway cautions against the risk of creating “miti autoindulgenti e autoappaganti” (Borselli 2023, 39) that propose a clean slate rather than learning from and inheriting the past.

From the 1990s, some artists have moved from urban interventions to agricultural ones, notably Joseph Beuys in Bolognana and Gianfranco Baruchello with Agricola Cornelia. Over the past twenty years, a growing number of individual artists, collectives, and communities have turned to agriculture as their focus. These practices are often described as new genre public art, relational art, dialogic art, community art, participatory art, or political art.⁷ Antonella Marino describes this ‘agricultural turn’ as a shift in the relationship between art and agriculture “da sensi largamente naturalistici, georgici o poveristi” (Marino, Vinella 2018, 56) towards alternative thoughts and actions counter to industrial and consumerist urban models. In Italy, agro-ecological art has unique characteristics, including an educational model based on experiential learning that integrates scientific research with agricultural practice. This approach fosters continuous knowledge exchange through workshops, meetings, and transdisciplinary educational programs. Additionally, residencies organized by institutions, foundations, companies, and curatorial collectives offer artists opportunities to develop projects on-site (see Marino, Vinella 2018). Notable examples in Italy include PAV - Parco Arte Vivente in Turin, a contemporary art center that features an open-air exhibition site and a museum, intended as a venue for fostering interactions between art, nature, biotechnologies, and ecology. The Fondazione Baruchello in Rome merges art with social practice, offering a platform for experimentation and community engagement. Cittadellarte - Fondazione Pistoletto in Biella, spearheaded by artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, integrates art into a broader vision of social transformation, focusing on sustainability and ethical practices. Connecting Cultures in Milan is distinguished by its international collaborations and interdisciplinary approach, fostering dialogue between diverse cultural and artistic perspectives. Curatorial collectives such as BAU and Aspra.mente in Trentino, Liminaria in

7 The aforementioned genres share common characteristics centered around active public engagement. While emphasizing different yet related nuances, these approaches focus on direct interaction between the artist and the audience, aiming to foster dialogue and collaboration. They often address social and political issues, using art to challenge conventional practices and provoke critical reflection on societal concerns. By involving the public as active participants rather than mere spectators, these genres seek to transform the role of art in society. Claire Bishop offers a comprehensive analysis of these themes, examining the implications of participatory art practices and their impact on both the artistic process and societal dynamics. In this respect, see Bishop 2012.

Campobasso and Foggia, and Giuseppefraugallery in Sulcis-Iglesiente are respectively recognized for their contemporary art projects that address pressing issues of our time, transcending the boundaries between nature and culture; initiatives aimed at revitalizing rural areas through artistic processes; and projects of public art and artist residencies. A notable concentration of agro-ecological art is found in Puglia, with initiatives like Free Home University of Lecce (funded by Ammirato Culture House), which explores the intersection of art, agriculture, and community building. Fondazione Lac O Le Mon emphasizes cultural and environmental sustainability through its diverse artistic programs. Parco dei Paduli engages with the local landscape and heritage, while Casa delle Agricolture (see Marino, Vinella 2018), a long-term project by artist Luigi Coppola, investigate the relationship between art and rural environments. The latter will be the focus of the next case study, highlighting its distinctive approach to integrating art with agro-ecology and local traditions.

5 He Who Sows Utopia Collects Reality: Luigi Coppola and Casa delle Agricolture

Since 2013, Luigi Coppola (1972, Lecce) has been involved with Casa delle Agricolture (House of Agricultures) in Castiglione d'Otranto, a small village in the municipality of Andrano, Lecce. Here, he established a rural development project focused on revitalizing abandoned land, repopulating the countryside, and fostering a sustainable economy through social cohesion. Collaborating with farmers, agroecologists, activists, and journalists, Coppola integrates agricultural and aesthetic practices, viewing art as a catalyst for cultural and societal change. Coppola's work is grounded in agroecology and permaculture principles, aiming to activate long-term projects and participatory processes, with particular attention to commons and building communities. He emphasizes the regeneration of landscapes, drawing inspiration from nature:

Io provo a imitare la natura, operando in modo rigenerativo. Costruisco colline vegetali, scavando solchi e interrando prima i tronchi più grandi fino ai rami più sottili, rimettendo in circolo la materia organica. [...] Come in una grande scultura vivente. (Ascari 2022)

Coppola's practice addresses the challenges of Salento's depopulation, driven by over-tourism, consumerism, and phytopathologies like *Xylella fastidiosa*. This epidemic has drastically altered the landscape, transforming lush olive groves into bare, desolate areas. Coppola advocates for new behaviors, recognizing that even non-productive trees contribute to the ecosystem:

Si parla di ulivi morti, ma il più delle volte hanno ancora le radici vive, forse non sono produttivi, ma bisogna imparare a convivere con questi fantasmi, prendersi le proprie responsabilità, pensare che anche noi 'siamo' il paesaggio. Dobbiamo includerci in quel dramma e metterci le mani per recuperare un contatto con l'ecosistema a cui apparteniamo. (Ascari 2022)

Casa delle Agriculture works to “revive abandoned lands, repopulate the countryside, generate solidarity-based economies, and strengthen the bonds of the community by building a new cultural and social model of living together based on natural agriculture”.⁸ The collective organizes initiatives to revitalize neglected areas, cultivate native crops, and explore commons and circular economy principles. Coppola highlights the importance of maintaining the balance between aesthetics and practical outcomes, emphasizing that collaborative practices can offer substantial space for experimentation and narrative development:

Lavorare su pratiche collaborative o collettive non significa orizzontalità e appiattimento nella mediocrità. [...] Personalmente ho moltissimo spazio di azione e di sperimentazione nel tessere i fili di una narrazione del possibile e delle relazioni ordinarie e straordinarie. Il mio approccio in questo progetto è essere al fianco e non al di sopra e provare a comprendere come la mia azione artistica tiene aperto il processo. Dirò di più, utilizzo questo spazio che mi è concesso come linfa per il mio processo artistico [...]. La mia azione non è esclusiva rispetto alle istituzioni artistiche, anzi per quello che è possibile cerco di ridurre le distanze che separano queste ultime dalle istanze del reale. (Marino, Vinella 2018, 108)

Direct examples of this concept are evident in his artworks, where aesthetic value is consistently preserved alongside functional outcomes and politically motivated actions. *Dopo un'epoca di riposo* (After an Epoch of Rest) is an installation comprising a video and a series of painted banners, which Coppola presented at the 16th Quadriennale di Roma in 2016. This artwork visually represents the Parco Comune dei Frutti Minori (Minor Fruits Park), one of several initiatives developed by Coppola within the framework of Casa delle Agriculture. This participatory project converted former illegal dumping sites into cultivated areas, focusing on biodiversity and the common good. The practice of mixed seeding, referred to as 'evolutionary population,' implemented at the Parco Comune dei Frutti Minori allows the soil

⁸ Luigi Coppola, “Portfolio 2020-2012”, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-2g9Uq-w0oE0L7FuhDoMC8V007QMyukZd/view> (2024-08-23).

to naturally determine which seeds will thrive, thereby challenging traditional agricultural methods. In *Dopo un'epoca di riposo*, Coppola recalls this approach as a metaphor for the integration of contemporary migrants, asylum seekers, and the local community. The artwork contrasts the utopian vision realized in Castiglione d'Otranto with text from banners inspired by William Morris's *News from Nowhere: Or, an Epoch of Rest* (1891), a novel that combines elements of utopian socialism and speculative fiction.

Among the initiatives of Casa delle Agriculture and Parco Comune dei Frutti Minori are Scuola delle Agriculture (School of Agriculture), aimed at knowledge exchange and interpersonal relationships; and the festival *Notte Verde: agriculture, utopie e comunità* (Green Night: agriculture, utopias, communities) [fig. 5], co-directed by Coppola annually. Coppola's work aligns with the concepts of commoning and the commons,⁹ striving to create "common spaces for uncommon knowledge" (Tan 2016, 15). His approach reflects a broader international trend towards

alternative societies, social movements, and urban transformation" in response to "accelerating financial and ecological crises, and massive migration flows paired with aggressive waves of selective enclosure. (Baldauf, Gruber, Hille et al. 2016, 21)

The educational and pedagogical focus of Scuola delle Agriculture emphasizes the link between commoning spaces and artistic research methodologies, fostering collective thought and action over imposed structures. As shown by his interest in Morris's novel and the inclusion of its principles in his artworks, Coppola's practice is deeply rooted in utopian ideals and social imagination. He believes that art can play a crucial role in constructing commons and challenging cultural and economic limitations (Ascari 2022), and states:

il potenziale che ha l'artista di scardinare le invisibili barriere culturali presenti nella nostra società e aprire nuovi immaginari è incredibile, perché ha la possibilità di abbandonare la logica meramente produttivistica e agire seguendo criteri di riproduzione sociale e culturale. (Marino, Vinella 2018, 107)

⁹ David Bollier and Silke Helfrich offer a definition of commons as dynamic social systems where individuals and communities fulfill their needs through self-organization and collaboration, relying less on the marketplace and monetary exchange. Within a commons, a specific community manages a shared resource and its use. This approach encourages people to recognize their interdependence and foster relationships focused on collective well-being, equity, fairness, and mutual support. Examples of commons include time banks, food cooperatives, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), community gardens, and alternative or local currencies, among others. See Bollier, Helfrich 2019.



Figure 5 Marco Zeno Rizzo, view of the artwork *Tavole della Maddalena* by Luigi Coppola on the occasion of *Notte Verde: agriculture, utopie e comunità*. 2014. Courtesy Luigi Coppola

His motto is “Chi semina utopia raccoglie realtà” (He who sows utopia collects reality), reflecting his commitment to creating new futures through artistic and community engagement.

6 Conclusion

The evolving frontier of eco-art showcases a rich diversity of approaches, with action being one of its prominent forms. This does not imply that non-action-based practices are merely descriptive, as demonstrated by Migliora. The focus here is on how various eco-art practices, whether they involve visual representation or direct human action, can effect change and foster a new awareness or tangible impact on the environment. Eco-art, defined as artistic practices addressing climate collapse, includes both catastrophic narratives of the Anthropocene and more constructive, imaginative works. Marzia Migliora’s approach underscores the significance of addressing underlying social and cultural ideas alongside direct environmental

action. Her work illustrates how addressing historical human behaviors contributing to climate collapse requires challenging the dichotomy between nature and culture. Ecosophic imaginaries – those integrating human and natural worlds – promote positive, non-damaging actions toward the environment. They emphasize that humans are an integral part of nature, challenging the rigid separation between the two. This perspective encourages a deeper, more nuanced political responsibility, suggesting that re-evaluating our relationship with nature can lead to more meaningful and constructive environmental actions.

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