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Eco-feminist graphic territories

Some of the most powerful contemporary works of art addressing issues related to the representation of the environment, its exploitation and degradation, the ecological crisis, and global warming are those that draw on eco-feminist thought through eco-art, starting with the profound insights and knowledge of the so-called First Nations. The article aims to outline the current graphic scenarios of eco-feminist thought and the connections between action strategies and the most emblematic images, starting with some of the visionary projects that have often led to changes in governmental policies and practical applications, expanding the dialogue on previously unexplored issues.

The aim is to help facilitate, through images, the recognition of the binomial – much debated today – human/non-human, the integration of graphic forms of a heterogeneous nature used in environmental analysis, and the critical reading

of the cultural approaches this vision of Nature offers to all species in terms of psycho-physical well-being. The iconographic review proposed within the article aims to bring these landscape visuals to light through the composition of the image, becoming a vehicle for communication, dissemination and eco-feminist activism, reaffirming the connections between the instrumentalisation of nature and the acquisition of scientific knowledge.

Keywords:
Representation; Graphic Codes; Eco-Feminism;
Relational Aesthetics; Post-Human

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1970s, a powerful activist and academic movement emerged that, over time, saw the rise of climate action and justice movements around the world, initiating the definition of social and artistic issues finding expression in eco-feminism and eco-art.

Through eco-feminism, as a movement, the connection between the exploitation and domination of nature, and the domination of women, in a patriarchal society is recognised: a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world, and female subordination and oppression (Warren, 2015).

At the origins of the discourse, in the last decades of the 20th century, lies the Green Belt movement, in Kenya and the developing world. Indeed, it is with the movement *Chipko*, in India, the early 1970s saw a growth of feminist activism in the anti-nuclear environmental movement in the West. Following this, other movements - culturally akin - helped to collectively shape the central philosophy of eco-feminism (Singh, 2019), such as the "Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña", founded in 1978 as the Federation of the Garifuna People of Honduras, for the defence of cultural and territorial rights, with the aim of achieving survival as a distinct culture.

Again, in 2010, the *Movimiento de Defensa por el acceso al Agua, la Tierra y la Protección del Medio Ambiente*, which, following the serious effects caused by the intensive and rational use of natural resources in the province of Petorca, Chile, keeps the debate on the preservation of territorial values and, in particular, soil and water, alive by promoting the rationalisation, development and protection of living conditions in relation to the proper use of environmental resources.

The criticism levelled by these cultural groups is directed at traditional Western male chauvinist views on women and nature, as the philosopher Val Plumwood argues in her *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), which sees in Western culture a systematic failure to recognise dependence on nature and the resulting master dis-



course generating points of no return capable of constantly threatening survival on earth (Warren 2015). Plumwood therefore argues that in order to achieve a sustainable future we must work on a true ecological democracy, beyond the dualistic culture that sees the binomials nature/culture and reason/nature as opposites (Plumwood 1993). Fifty years after its origins, eco-feminism seems to be broadening to embrace more and more strongly shared themes oriented towards possible alternatives for an increasingly sustainable culture (Garzón, 2022). The resurgence of these visions has seen, among other factors, the involvement of the youth climate movement and the focus on the indigenous Abya Yala women who defend the land against extractivism, even today at the cost of their lives (Wildy 2012).

Fig. 1 - Alicia Barney Caldas, *Yumbo*, 1980. The photos show the twenty-nine glass cubes (20 cm side) in which particulate matter is captured from the air in Yumbo, Colombia, <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/magazine/la-penetracion-necesaria-pour-exiger-le-bon-alicia-barney-maria-evelia-marmolejo-et-les-origines-de-lart-ecologique-colombien/> (last access 15 July 2024).
© Photo: Fernell Franco.

ECO-FEMINIST IMAGES OR NEW ECO-DESIGNS

The construction of spaces and territories we inhabit takes on a cultural significance strongly conveyed by man-woman otherness, historically recognised in an all-Western reference system in which even the project and its formation has been limited, hierarchised and optimised by androcentric power structures (del Valle 1997). With the feminist critique of the 1970s, this system is challenged in order to draw, with the introduction of the gender perspective, a critical revision of the polarised knowledge that had been disseminated up to that time.

Through the geometric precision of the cube, the two eco-artists Alicia Barney and María Evelia Marmolejo (Fig. 1), in February 1980, placed twenty-nine glass cubes - without lids - at a site in Yumbo, an industrial city adjacent to Cali, Colombia. Barney would return the next day and every day of the month to retrieve and cap each time a cube, each one dirtier than the previous one due to airborne particulates.

In this possibility of making air pollution, caused by multinational factories, visible through a performative act, it becomes one of the most emblematic examples of eco-art realised in response

to environmental transformation and degradation. Helen and Newton Harrison, known as the Harrisons¹, inspired by the use of documentation and graphics in conceptual art, they combined maps, sketches and aerial photographs in projects that suggest systemic approaches to specific ecological situations. In the project *Peninsula* (2000-2004), the two artists redraw the continent's map, eliminating political boundaries, so that the natural system of drainage basins and forests can be seen as one. And even earlier, the imposing image of a dragon, *Casting a Green Net: Can It Be We Are Seeing a Dragon?* (1998), on a map of northern England to dramatise the representation of estuaries as an interconnected whole.

In line with these visions, in the work of the Harrisons, in works such as the *Serpentine Lattice* (1993) the large form depicted becomes a graphic lens on the disappearance of the temperate rainforest of the North American Pacific coast. The hand-drawn map complements the photographic panels, text and images of the 95 per cent felled forest, which has seen some 75,000 miles of waterways and rivers damaged. The plan drawn up by Studio Harrison was to control the high ground from San Francisco Bay to Yakutat Bay in Alaska, setting a scaffold for sustainable rainforest reclamation in the temperate Pacific Northwest coast. *Casting a Green Net: Can it Be We are Seeing a Dragon?* (1998), is the word/image/narrative trinomial, shaping a project to make the Trans-Pennine area of northern England more self-sufficient; the proposed green network is narrated with five maps reworked in such a way that the roads interact with the rivers, mountains and proposed new urban models.

In *The Shape of Turned Earth: A Brown Coal Park for Südraum Leipzig*, of 1996, numerous eco-artists were invited by the Cultural Foundation of the Free State of Saxony and the Cultural Programme of the Siemens Corporation to return personal visions of the so-called *black triangle*, formed by the borders of Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany, on how artistic readings would respond to the open-cast lignite mines. A complex operation of graphic interpretation, in an ecological key, with

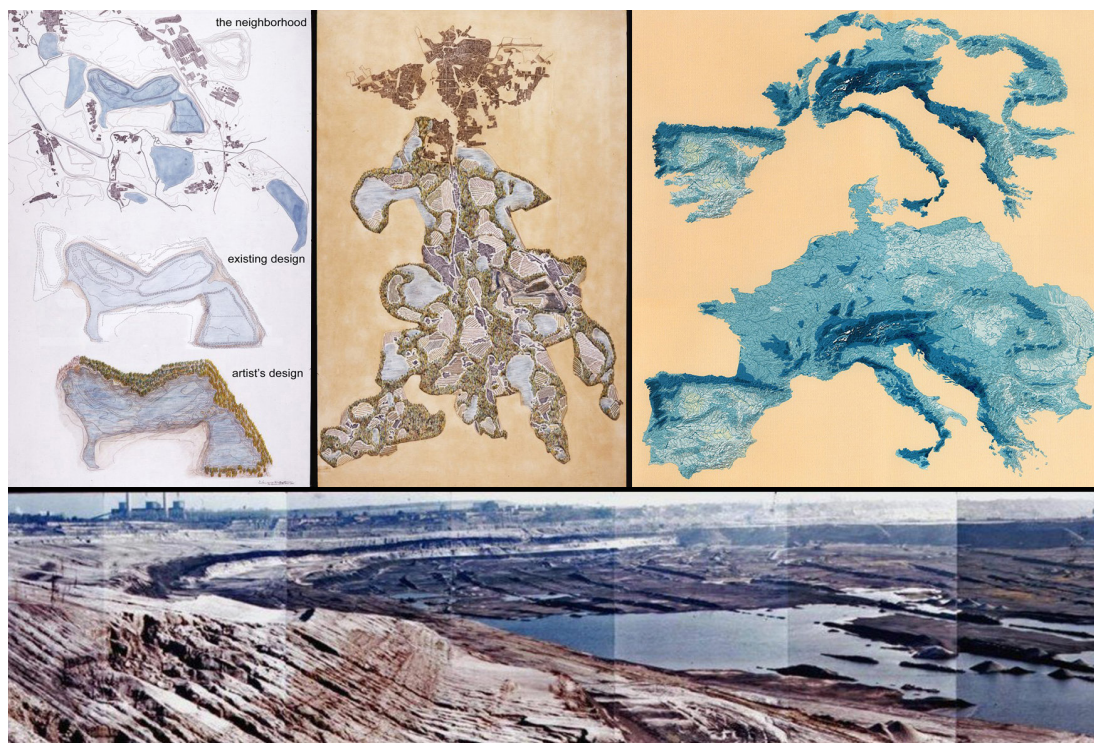


Fig. 2 - The Harrisons, left and centre, *The Shape of Turned Earth: A Brown Coal Park for Südraum Leipzig*, 1996. Right, *Peninsula Europe I*, 2000-03, <https://www.theharrisonstudio.net/art-projects-2/force-majeure-synthesis-2009-present> (last access 22 August 2024). © Courtesy of the Helen and Newton Harrison Family Trust.

the aim of transforming the closure of an existing mine into a regenerated ecosystem, through the creation of complex earthen folds near the physical limits.

The Harrison's images recount the phases of land transformation that, following the arrival of trees, shrubs and other plants, restore a forest from the migration of appropriate species and at the same time allow this ecosystem to evolve autonomously, also establishing a new sequentiality of events in the park, as occurs in natural lakes.

However, as can be seen in Figure 2 - which schematises the carboniferous region south of Leipzig - if on the left, the lake system is now biologically impoverished; in the mapping in the centre, the project area becomes a lake district delimited by the biodiversity of the water table that rises by filling the excavations. The graphic representation describes the new ecological continuity and thus the sequentiality of the ecosystems of the transformed land.

Known for her artworks oriented towards themes such as waste flow, environmental sustainability, climate, Mierle Laderman Ukeles photographed critical realities through her site-specific work (Fig. 3), narrating her most significant idea in images that capture her in the act of artistic maintenance and herself as a "maintenance artist". In the course of her action, Ukeles attempts to draw parallels with artistic practice, documenting the most significant moments with maintenance workers, including sanitation workers and cleaners, leading to one of her best-known projects, the regeneration of a landfill in New York. An artistic statement that recognised in ordinary actions, in the everyday, generally associated with women and the working class, new forms of artistic expression, to the point of theorising and giving life to the *Manifesto for the Art of Maintenance*, of 1969. In addition to washing steps, Ukeles is shown in the security and conservation spaces of the Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art, on the campus of Vassar College in New York, raking up fallen leaves, or cleaning a Soho pavement. Photographs of ordinary actions to highlight the silent work of those who maintain the institutions of power and



Fig. 3 - Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 1973. Left and centre, *Washing / Tracks / Maintenance: Outside*; right, *Washing / Tracks / Maintenance: Inside*, July 22, 1973. All three images ar part of *Maintenance Art performance series*, 1973-1974. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

society. Her artistic process becomes the fruit of a patient research carried out through direct contact with the people interviewed about their work and maintenance habits; the representation of her protests takes place in the choreographic medium of photography, leading to a large multitude of images describing the time span of the action.

Agnes Denes, deeply involved in the feminist activist community of the 1970s, also recently developed a complex body of work during a retrospective at *The Shed in New York*, showing her 1982 *Wheatfield*, a huge wheat field planted on two acres of land and surrounded by skyscrapers: images contrasting the swaying yellow wheat in front of the city of Manhattan served as a reminder that even the most powerful urban system could not survive without the ancient art of agriculture (Heartney, 2020).

The landscapes described in eco-feminist art that embrace the interiority of the human being were anticipated in the work of Bonnie Ora Sherk, who in 1981, initiated a series of projects entitled *A Living Library*, imagining a large library

next to the New York Public Library in Bryant Park, Manhattan (Fig. 4), once an image of drug dealing and nicknamed *Needle Park*. Her idea was to create a series of *Gardens of Knowledge* similar to the information shelter provided by the nearby library, with themes such as mathematics, highlighting the patterns of nature, or religion, exploring the symbolism of various plants. Although the project was never realised, it provided the spark for her current work (Heartney, 2020).

In recent years, numerous women's groups, formed in post-humanist intellectual circles, have strongly linked their interests to the preservation of the planet and its regeneration, translating an imagination strongly caged in sexist hierarchical superstructures into new graphic forms of expression of place and landscape. The eco-feminist visuality that operates in eco-art activates a confrontation with the different modalities of the topics addressed, preparing the field for interactions that increase the sense of awareness of environmental conditions (Millner, 2023).

Numerous eco-artists, such as the environmental activist and vice-president of Colombia, Francia Márquez, aware of the richness and biodiversity of their country, reclaim their will by fighting the devastation of illegal mining in the department of Cauca through works that draw attention to the environmental problems of territories that still dream of having drinking water, against an extractive model that only favours the privileges of a few. And it is through self-managed digital projects with a feminist, popular and internationalist perspective such as *Marcha*², images build dialogues between apparently distant geographies and spaces, cultural bridges to the Global South, bringing together *Abya Yala*³ and *Mama Africa*. Visual narratives that articulate words and forms, producing images of denunciation with the desire

to understand and recover the memory of indigenous American peoples and the situation of their territories. In this context, the images echo phrases such as: “*Todas somos políticas; Defensoras del Perú: Estamos en un momento histórico para recuperar nuestra identidad; Feminismo Comunitario Antipatriarcal de Bolivia: El primer territorio de defensa hoy es el proyecto político del Vivir Bien*”. In the actions of these voices, *Las Defensoras*, they take care of the history of the place, they aim at the preservation of identity, they encourage the collective being to become aware of the plundering of bodies, understood also as land, as Nature. Stories of territorial resistance to defend the genealogy of populations in their own places, for the protection of water in the evocation of the words of the Honduran environmentalist and activist Berta

Cáceres Flores⁴, who in 2014 warned of the need to protect life: «*¡Despertemos humanidad, ya no hay tiempo!*».

Movements as testimonies of activists resisting the militarisation and plundering of nature, contamination of rivers and land, deforestation, fires and forced displacement combined with ethnic violence. Movements to share the need to decolonise and end the feudal patriarchy inherited from the days of invasion and colonies. Movements against systems of economic oppression and against the oligarchy that manages the great wealth of minorities. New perspectives, new scenarios.

The representations of these claims charge the scene with colour, texts in large letters interpose themselves between the faces of hydro-feminists, demanding greater water autonomy, the preser-

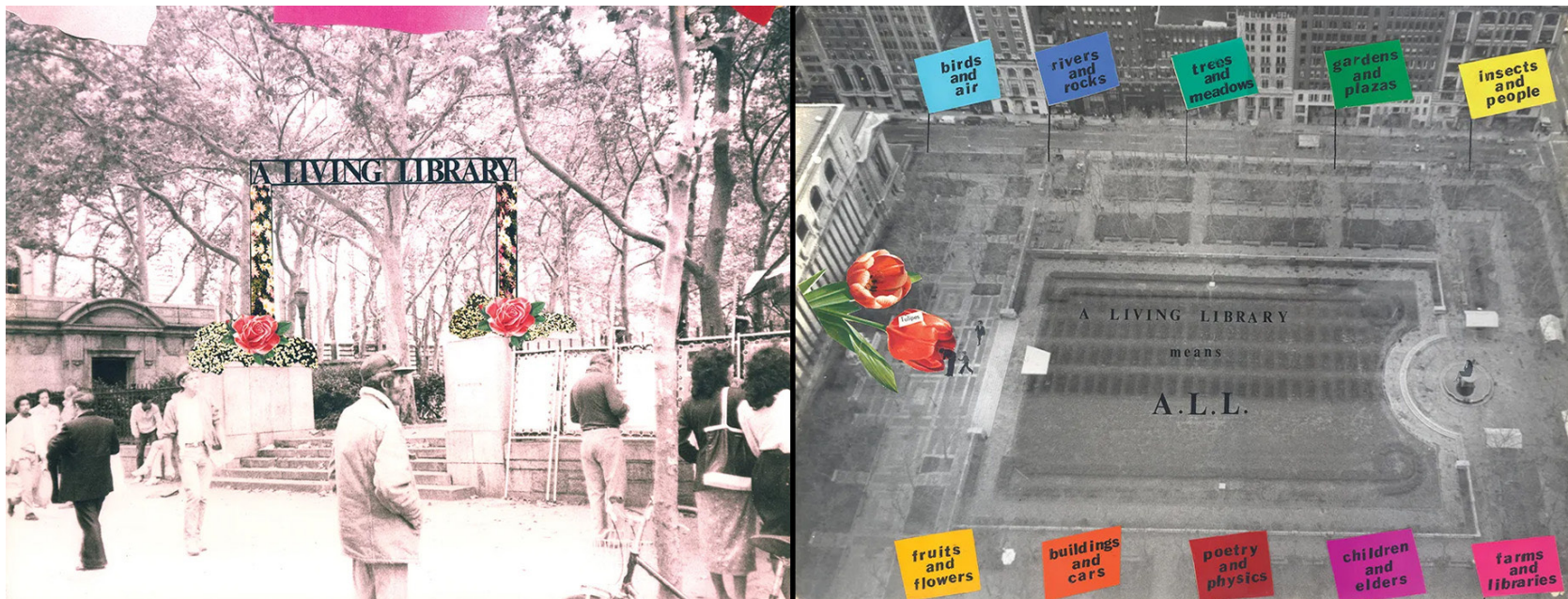


Fig. 4 - Bonnie Ora Sherk, *A Living Library & Think Park*, Bryant Park, New York, 1981-83, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/ecofeminism-women-in-environmental-art-1202688298/> (last access 26 August 2024) © Bonnie Ora Sherk.



Fig. 5 - Andrea Bowers. Left, *Eco Grief Extinction Series, How You Treat Us Is How You Treat the Earth* (retrieved from Deena Metzger, *Bird: Molokai Creeper, Declared Extinct October 2021*, Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Leiden, Netherlands), 2022 (ph. Jeff McLane); centre, *Gravity and Grace, Grace Is The Only Exception* (etrieved from Simone Weil, *Gravity & Grace*, 1997), 2023 (ph. Mark Blower); right, *Gravity and Grace, Not To Fall Into Despair*, (etrieved from Deena Metzger, *The Winter of Pablo Neruda, Ruin and Beauty. New and Selected Poems*, 2009), 2023. © Courtesy of the artist, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; Vielmetter, Los Angeles; and Andrew KrepsGallery, New York.

vation of ancestral knowledge and natural assets, declared common and collective goods, and arms upwards, signalling the action as it unfolds. The voices of protest produced by the mouths in the foreground (LGBTIQ+ movements, feminist, socio-environmental associations), the multitude of subjects and large posters signalling motivations and catchphrases. These images become a space for words and relations, a space for education against patriarchy and against the colonialist world that increases the exploitation of water and

the destruction of the territory, in a parallel vision in which violence on women and their bodies is witnessed; hence, the evocation of the *Pachacuti*⁵, a revolution, a sequencing of space and time that necessitates a renewal of the cosmos. The visual apparatuses configured in these cultural contexts are latent with forms and meanings that have historically recorded the battles for the protection of forests and rivers, for the recovery of ecosystems and spaces linked to the reproduction of life. With a gaze over time more aware of

the environmental anomalies and contradictory metaphors that characterise the contemporary landscape, eco-art has initiated a work of recovery and reactivation of social contestations in environmental, economic and gender terms, offering further forms of expression on the possible conditions of humanity told through images. Against the environmental degradation caused by patriarchal systems, American artist and activist Andrea Bowers expresses her sociopolitical engagement by advocating for issues such as wom-

en's rights, workers' rights, the arms industry, immigration policies and the climate crisis through the physical manipulation of recycled matter. In 2019 he realises Ecofeminist Sycamore Branch, *Honor Earth*, one of her recent narratives of resistance and rebellion in which steel, neon tubes and reused transformers write sentences of light as *The Earth Does Not Belong to Us We Belong to the Earth*. Three years later, with the *Eco Grief Extinction Series*, Bowers abstracts words and female subjects onto opaque backgrounds that accentuate the effect of a fragmentary space obtained by juxtaposing cardboard in pieces of different sizes, depicting timeless figures of women, captured in a suspended condition (Fig. 5). In her images, the face of a young woman returns with a warning, *How you treat us is how you treat the Earth*, evoking the binomial woman-nature and the parallelism between the senseless exploitation of natural resources and the violation of the female body. These imaginative visions of places and landscapes, both interior and exterior, hint at necessarily new ways

of reading/interpreting/representing, ready to be accommodated within a system of representation, even a normative one, of reality and its figurative syntheses, isolating times and spaces, in order to relocate them within the abstraction of the codified object. The graphic landscape symbolism and eco-feminist social symbolism show some of the possible ways of reaching other ways of inhabiting the landscape, precisely from its iconography. Glimpses located between abstract visions and utopian but strongly realistic landscapes, which take shape in the figurativeness of the image and verbal connections more assonant to the language of advertising than to that of architectural codification. The more enigmatic systems of representation are replaced by more comprehensible ones, such as axonometry or perspective, producing a democratisation of the architectural project, with the aim of making the graphic discourse recognisable in the colour palette, density and unprejudiced hybrid way of representing the complexity of the landscape in its connection with

a specific ideological thought (Amann, Bautiste, Cánovas, 2022).

ECO-FEMINIST GRAPHIC CODING

Today, we are witnessing a growing normative attention towards gendered approaches in the definition of the design of spaces and territories, but a re-examination of architectural theory, historical-critical references, and perceptive maps of places that redefine the structure in urban and territorial planning still remains to be dealt with, especially in the academic sphere.

Making visible the graphic production of some of the eco-feminist protagonists of eco-art means showing the imagery of a collective body that uses multidirectional narrative and visual systems and that inevitably implies ways of constructing the image of the project by means of a gendered approach with the introduction of variables, including graphic ones, common and increasingly democratic (Amann, Bautiste, Cánovas, 2022).

The experience of the eco-feminist image is located in a language graphic and metaphorical language in which ideas and things, outside the formal codification of the hierarchical way of normative looking, makes it easier to construction of other images. In this sense, images, with their symbols and their conjugations, assume a highly political power that passes through the control of a shared and democratic imaginary. These minority eco-artistic landscapes also claim the possibility of actions future, which render imperceptible the tool used to construct the image to leave the invisible disobedience a hybrid aesthetic.

Continuing with this vision, eco-feminism becomes a synthesis of elements of feminism and ecology, reaffirming a post-human future, in which humanity gives form to a symbolic dimension, declined according to alternative narratives that address the urgency of protecting the environment from the exploitation of capitalist society (Braidotti 2015).

Graphical landscapes that tell of a post-human time, endowed with aspects that are at times



Fig. 6 - Andrea Bowers, details, 2022-23. © Courtesy of the artist, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; Vielmetter, Los Angeles; and Andrew KrepsGallery, New York.

childlike, inclusive and experimental, a metaphorical manifestation that evokes descriptive languages and detailed explanations in the figuration of the composition (Fig. 6).

In these communicative apparatuses, the methods of representation, symbols, annotations and backgrounds, together with the techniques - generally collages, paintings, photomontages - render retrospectives and narratives more topical than ever, through the use of the image as a vehicle of communication, aesthetics, protest and/or self-assertion.

The recycling and recomposition of collages, through a hybrid creation of visual things, fuses the handmade, the digital, the intuitive and the scientific, in a graphic display of analogue representations, hand and digital drawings, axonometries, superimpositions and different assemblages.

CONCLUSIONS

Images collected in this iconographic review often resort to metaphors of multitudes, to large spaces often surrounded by emptiness, to solitary subjects portrayed in the suspension of an action, be it a photograph or a montage of forms. Visual themes that increase cultural awareness on the necessary re-appropriation of the nature of things, respect for cyclicity, as well as knowledge of places for the achievement of a psychophysical well-being that establishes new relationships between the person and the surrounding environment. The eco-feminist vision embraces environmentalist, animal rights and feminist movements by emphasising, in its denunciation images, the close dependence between any form of exploitation (natural, social, ethnic and gender) and the necessary vindication of minorities.

The highest expression of this thought is highlighted in the images above in which the figure of the woman restores new life practices for the redefinition of the rights of nature, as is the case with the evocation of the "Pachacuti": the reaffirmation of a circularity of space and time that leads to the renewal of the cosmos.

The formal solutions adopted make the meanings of the image distinguishable; in fact, in addition to the metaphorical representation of the landscape, the selected works portray the actual conditions of the surrounding space, giving rise to a reading of mapping, established on the basis of geographical boundaries that highlight mountains, land masses, hydrographic basins, also in their evolutionary processes, in their morphological transformations.

Very often, as we have seen, the accompanying texts include factual descriptions of problems and strategies, together with poetic dialogues that mix various quotations from planners, ecologists, botanists and foresters with the voices of the artists themselves; their principles have found their way into numerous urban plans and environmental projects. Images for denunciation. Images for new planning. Social cartographies that become veritable visual recorders, in which aesthetic, dimensional, ecological, environmental and social data are catalogued.

Many of the strategies and graphic principles adopted in eco-artistic and eco-feminist practices are part of numerous urban plans and environmental projects, providing, for instance, feasibility mapping for the reclamation, restoration and ecological reinvention of specific watersheds or environmental systems; or transnational strategies for the introduction of green agriculture, the restoration of biodiversity and the reorientation of irrigation systems.

As the works of art and critical representations reviewed in this article reveal, landscape, social and geographical conditions show impacts and cultural reactions through critical imagery, the proposed reaffirmation of rethinking strategies that start from visuality and implement graphic messages that look at the symbolic responses of transforming landscapes, merging forms of cultural expression with the processes of representation of territories.

The images of denunciation, born out of artistic and ideological processes, provide graphic modes of analysing and recognising possible solutions, delegating to codification and sign schematism

the setting of symbolic levels that open up new architectural, urban and environmental practices.

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- Figures 5-6, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; Vielmetter, Los Angeles; and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

NOTE

[1] Among the main pioneers of the eco-art movement, Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison (often known as 'the Harrisons') worked for some forty years with biologists, ecologists, architects, urban planners and other artists to initiate collaborations to discover ideas and solutions to support biodiversity and community development. For further details: <https://www.theharrisonstudio.net/> (last access, 18.05.2024).

[2] For further details, please consult the official website *Marcha. Mirada popular, feminista de la Argentina y el mundo*, <https://marcha.org.ar/> (last access 21.08.2024).

[3] *Abya Yala* (land in full maturity) is the expression used by movements in support of Native Americans to refer to the American continent. It is the term used, before the European conquest, by the indigenous Kuna people who inhabited an area corresponding to today's Panama and Colombia, to refer to their territory. Today, the same definition is used by indigenous communities to define the American continent.

[4] Berta Isabel Cáceres Flores was a leader of the Central American indigenous Lenca people, descended from the Maya. She was co-founder of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations of Honduras and an activist for the environmental protection campaign that prevented the construction of a dam on the Río Gualcarque, sacred to the Lenca. Cáceres Flores was assassinated in her home by military forces in 2016.

[5] The compound name *Pachacuti* is related to an ancient Andean

cosmological concept, representing a catastrophic change of world-eras and associating time with the physical world, linking it to the concept of changing, turning, returning to a starting point.

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