

An eco-aesthetic for economization? Non-modern social practices of art and ecology.

Written by Giacomo Bazzani

A central issue of the ongoing debate on ecological practices concerns the different self-positioning of activists in front of political and economic institutions. It ranges from local practices of self-empowerment of marginalized groups (eg. Deirdre O'Mahony in rural Ireland), to protest activism like Occupy Wall Street movement, to alternative anti-capitalist economic models (eg. Theory of degrowth). The ecological activism has different faces, models and targets. If on one hand this diversity is a resource, enabling the movement of creative and innovative capacities, on the other it threatens to fragment the energies and disperse the efforts in many directions. This article seeks to analyze two of the main lines of fracture crossing the different positions in the field of ecology, trying to place them in the theoretical frame defined by Bruno Latour's research on the relationship between nature and culture and Michel Callon's research on economization.

The ecology of nature and culture

Bruno Latour's research put a cornerstone on modernity theory concerning the modern distinction between nature and culture. According to the frame developed in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), the distinction between nature and culture is a product of modernity, or rather, it is

modernity. For the pre-modern society, politics could deal with science, as well as science with politics: the collective problems require joint solutions; skills often overlap and dialogue is useful to both groups of expert. Differently, with modernity science is freed from politics and politics is left to deal only with the human. Scientists, for their part, will take care only of the non-human, taking as their goal the knowledge of nature (external and separate from the "human" of the humanities). By this way, technique would try to control and even modify nature, in order to correspond to the demands given. It is worth emphasizing that these demands came about through *culture*, and not from the natural sciences themselves. The freedom of science (made non-human by humans) from politics would allow for an extraordinary development of science and technology, of which we are seeing the enormous effects today (i.e. Modernity). Modern scientists no longer have to discuss their research and their findings with political or religious authorities, thereby creating the conditions for new researches and findings impossible under their previous submission to such authorities. If things (non-humans) are external to and separate from humans, the scientists' work is driven only by an objective reality that does not need to be controlled, and indeed it also could not be controlled by humans! But even though things are thought of as non-human, as part of being-in-the-world, they can still only be made separate and distinct from the human through a human work: in the future, politics and culture could therefore reacquire a key role for science. While studying the scientific laboratory, Latour describes how the "revealed nature" is actually a "constructed nature" made by the humans (Latour, Woolgar 1979). Thus, if nature is made by

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humans - something of which the ecological crisis is also a
further confirmation- culture and politics can not deal only
with humans: the ecological crisis can not be faced only by
scientists without political support; but also politics,
without science and technique, risks to only talk to humans,
and have no effects neither on humans, nor on non-humans.
Sadly, this is precisely what is happening in the ecological
crisis we are going through.

In this perspective a supposed superiority of culture
or politics over science, or vice versa, is purely
illusory. The non-modern world, as Latour will explain,
is made only of hybrid objects, composed of different
chains of nature and culture. Understanding how the
different chains between nature and culture, human and
non-human are connected, is the only possibility for
orientation and to arrange a reasonable intervention of
both humans and non-humans in the world. The ecological
crisis, even in this aspect, is a clear example of a
vulnerable - technical, scientific and political -
network. The mere assertion of the superiority of the
cultural on the scientific or political sphere (in the
modern form), risks being vain and illusory, if at all
able to marginally affect the ecological disaster.
Still, the challenge is about how to find an innovative way
to understand the relationship between nature and culture
and between science and politics.

Marjetica Potrc (Slovenia 1953), with her
"Contemporary building strategies", elaborates
architectural modules based on the idea of economic
and environmental sustainability. In *Forest Rising* (2007),

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for example, the artist / architect has developed "a rural school, equipped with satellite dish and solar panels, [that] stands on an island elevated by tree trunks. The project is based on practices developed by Amazonian communities in Brazil in response to the most pressing social, economic and environmental concerns of the 21st century. Their ideas for the future include the development of small-scale economies, a new citizenship, the University of the Forest, the protection of knowledge, the protection of territories, and global connectivity". The architectural modules at the same seek to respond time to sustainability criteria related to the use of resources, the political organization of the community, education and civic participation, and last, but not least, to a possible link between the local and the global. A device able to mobilize scientific knowledge and advanced technology, linking them with an ancestral life balance coming from the Amazon rainforest.

We can also find a way to rethink the past in the light of the present in the long term project *Potato Perspective* by the artist Asa Sonjasdotter (Sweden 1966). Sonjasdotter adopts historical and anthropological methods to re-read the political history of modernity through the role played by a non-human: the potatoes. These included recording the passages of power and of technical-scientific innovation onto its "skin", making its naturalness an effect of political history. In the artist-activist practices, the potatoes become a bottom-up activism device, that did not claim and oppose the naturalness of nature to the political corruption, but rather a kind of proto-natural device apt to produce political organization and collective action: The

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potatoes are not only influenced by the current power, but
they are also able to mobilize collective political action.

Art and economy in the economization

Still a few decades ago the creative energies of art were seen as a viable alternative to capitalism and to the exploitation with which it is associated. The romantic art, the avant-garde and the neo-avant-gardes were easily seen as a form of resistance to the iron cage of modernity described by Max Weber, or to the marxist exploitation of capitalism. Art, as a free and separate space of experiment from everyday life, made it possible to avoid the logic of accumulation, subjection and rationality typical of modernity and of the modern capitalism. The avant-garde artist refused the compromise with everyday life and the corruption of the *polis*, to enact an ideal world instead, free from constraints, as a result of artist imagination and its ability to reject the rules. Creativity and imagination were a valid antidote to the banality and the negativity of modern capitalism: an ideal world could emerge on the canvases of the artists, or the way they operated already represented an alternative. With the coming of what has been described as the post-fordist society, driven by neo-liberal policies (Campbell, Pedersen 2001), the alterity of artistic action – traditionally understood – from capitalist behavior has, however, failed. Creativity has become an essential part of the economic process of innovation and its policy support and encourages enterprise and innovation efforts of individuals.

Barbara Kruger's *Untitled (I shop therefore I am)* (1987),

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from being a critical corrective to the world of

consumption, has become, twenty years later, the slogan of
a Christmas sale of a luxury department store in London.

[1] The work hence maintains its ambiguity in between support and criticism of mass consumption, but if used as a shopping mall advertising campaign, its ambiguity becomes largely irrelevant, more than anything attracting attention to the store it represents.

In the same way, theorists of new economic geography (Scott 2008) give cities the advice that they should facilitate the participation of artists and creatives from various sectors to encourage economic and urban development. If art and creativity have become a central factor in the economic development, the next, crucial question would be: have they lost all critical possibilities, becoming servants of capitalism? Are art and creativity just another exploitative device?

If this is correct, the artistic sphere does not seem to have the critical skills required to build an alternative to the ecological disaster. The creative and visionary action of contemporary artists seems to fully support the current model of economic development, that contributes to the global crisis. So is it better to drop out of the creative arena in favor of alternative activist practices?

To be able to answer the question it would be useful to come back to the distinction between nature and culture and to try to place the economic and the artistic action within this distinction. Despite the success of the work of Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1957), and the

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development of the academic discipline of political economy,
the dominant economic policy and approach in the economic
discipline in general, remains close to the neoclassical
economic model (Davis 2006).

Even though Polanyi has shown how institutions and economic behavior are the result of historical institutions and not of anthropological characteristics of human beings, economics primarily adopts models of the study of economy that think the individual action as a constant maximization of its utility (utilitarianism). As if, regardless of who they are, where they come from and where they are going, all individuals are still maximizing their own utility - also irrespective of whether they know what this means or not. This vision has been widely commented (Hollis, Nell 1975) as a reductionist vision of individual action, because it attributes a single and unique motivation to actions (individual utility), treating this as an anthropological and non-historical type of data.

This kind of reductionism is also visible in the photographic series *Economical Study on the Skin of Caracans* (2006) by Santiago Sierra (1966, Spain), where the artist photographed the skin of the back of ten people of Caracas who affirmed to have zero dollars. The series continued with ten people who affirmed to possess one thousand US dollars, and finally, ten people who affirmed to have a million dollars. From each of the three series of ten photos he retained an average tone of grey, corresponding to the average color tone of the ten persons' skin. From these gray values corresponding to zero, a thousand and a million dollars, the artist then deducted the value in dollars of

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the white and black skin colors. The result of the
calculation was that a totally white skin has the value of
nearly twelve million dollars, whereas one with a totally
black skin owns a debt of two thousand dollars.

Despite the absurdity of the work, what it brings into the scene is the possibility of translating the individual into a single monetary scale, reducing its subjectivity to the amount of money owned. This concept, derived from the marginalist economy, postulates an anthropology of the individual based on a rationality that is kept constant, and that in this case is oriented to money maximization.

The nature of the utility to be achieved is not studied, because the question is given as an independent variable, as a result of cultural influences. Culture and politics, then, can set the ends, while the economy should identify the way to achieve them. The economy thus takes an apparently neutral role in front of individuals and politics: presenting itself as a vehicle for society purposes, apparently disinterested yet simultaneously beneficial for the community. Such self-positioning of economic science, so far away from culture and politics, can only take place within the sphere of nature, in the exact same way in which nature in modernity is separated from culture, as described above. Often economics, like physics, seeks general laws of human behavior, making observations irrespective of the political and historical context. A separation between economics and politics has striking similarities to the separation between nature and culture. In fact, it is impossible to separate the economic action from the institutional and political environment. Not only, as Michel

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Callon has effectively argued (2010), does economic science
have performative effects on policies, institutions and
individuals.

At the beginning of the book *Do economists make markets? On the performativity of economics*, MacKenzie, Muniesa and Siu (2007: 1) describe the experience of the young Harvard economist Jeffrey Sachs, who was sent to La Paz in January 1986 by the International Monetary Fund to advise the Bolivian central institutions about managing the problem of hyper-inflation. Some years later, Sachs recognized that the morphology of Bolivia, which he already saw from his plane when landing in La Paz, plays a central role in determining its economic and chronic poverty. Sachs says that: «Almost all the international commentary and academic economic writings about Bolivia neglected this very basic point. It bothered me greatly that the most basic and central features of economic reality could be overlooked by academic economists spinning their theories from thousands of miles away» (Sachs 2006: 105). His lack of knowledge of the context has not pushed him to interrupt his work of counseling. The hyper-inflation was stopped and luckily: «Monetary theory, thank goodness, still working at thirteen thousand feet» (ibid.).

What emerges from the economist's description is the ability of economic theory – which is presented as descriptive of reality – to perform the results expected. Despite analytical admission of its incapacity to understand the real contextual factors that generated the economic reality observed (hyperinflation), the prescriptive actions take place anyway and achieve the desired results.

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This performative vision of the social reality does not use the theoretical approach to economy as a frame within which to read the social dynamics, but rather it poses economic theory as one of the actors that can allow a specific form of society. This approach to the study of economics has been theorized by Caliskan & Callon (2009) as the need for "going beyond the notion of economy and towards the study of economization" (ibid: 393). Different theoretical approaches to economics "in combination, can provide us with a strong vantage point for studying processes of economization, and especially marketization" (ibid.).

In this perspective, the artistic and activist practices, rather than trying to influence the ecological culture of the next generations of humans, in order to bring ecological individual utilities driving the economic behavior, may try to reprogram new forms of collective economic action in the very present.

The art collective Democracia (Spain 2000) with the work *Charity* (2007) sketches some of the extreme social and ecological consequences that proceed from the dominant economic order. The artists attach the word "Charity" to the dustbins that hypermarkets use to throw away food that has gone bad, and which are then regularly used by the city's poor to supply themselves with food. These objects contain two levels of economic use and rationality that are apparently incommensurable: an economic provisioning on the one hand and a rationalization of de-territorialized markets on the other. Objects that link, and at the same time separate, individual stories and social structures belonging to the same historical and political

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With the work *From Flesh to Flesh* (2016) Sonjasdotter, in collaboration with the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, traces the social and environmental history of the production of fertilizers in Norway (one of the leading global producers): from chemical processes, to economic organization, to the social consequences. The project also proposes a form of non-extractive production of soil fertilizer, linked to the bio-cycle of humans. This is just one way of bringing nature back into the context of the human and enact forms of economy that would be historically and socially viable and sustainable.

Giacomo Bazzani is a curator and PhD candidate in Political and Social Change at the University of Turin and the University of Florence. He has contributed to a number of publications and curated exhibitions including Guerrilla Girls, Jens Haaning, Marjetica Potrc, Mario Rizzi, Social Impact, Veit Stratmann, The Yes Men and Justin Randolph Thompson, among others.

[\[1\]](#)

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