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**TRANSFORMING REGIONAL
ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT:
ARTISTIC PRACTICES AT
CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUMS IN
RIJEKA, PODGORICA, AND BELGRADE**

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Transforming Regional Ecological Thought: Artistic Practices at Contemporary Art Museums in Rijeka, Podgorica, and Belgrade

Since 2000, the world's population has grown by roughly 32 percent, reaching around 8.2 billion people today. This rapid growth, primarily driven by increased consumption and the overuse of limited natural resources, raises serious concerns. As essentials like food, water, and energy become scarce, competition for them increases, creating not only economic and social challenges but also serious environmental risks.

At the same time, military spending is on the rise worldwide. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), countries are investing more in their armies, especially in the West. Weapons production is increasing to support allies like Ukraine in ongoing conflicts. The United States and NATO allies are expanding their defense budgets, with the U.S. military budget having nearly tripled since the 1970s. Meanwhile, Russia plans to spend a record one-third of its federal budget on defense in 2025.¹

These issues extend beyond politics and international relations, directly affecting our everyday lives and the future of humanity. The global dependency on unsustainable energy sources persists due to the structural entrenchment of fossil fuels within the economic system and the influence of vested interests that obstruct the transition to renewable alternatives. This reliance contributes significantly to climate change, environmental pollution, and the degradation of natural ecosystems.

The key is to focus on renewing and conserving natural resources; however, one of the main challenges in contemporary times is identifying a singular cause of environmental degradation, given the complexity and multidimensionality of ecological issues. These problems arise not only from militarization and the structural characteristics of the dominant economic system, but also from the prevailing patterns of consumption and lifestyles that reinforce and sustain that system.

To address these challenges, we must recognize their deep roots in our way of life. The economic system we live in often values profit over people, and technology is advancing in ways that make individuals feel like mere cogs in a larger machine. This process not only undermines fundamental human values but also reduces our awareness of the long-term effects of our actions. The question persists as to whether meaningful change is feasible.

When we talk about freedom, we must also ask: Are we aware of our own place in society? What changes are necessary to ensure true freedom for individuals? A truly free person is someone who is both creative and aware. They not only understand the reality they inhabit but also possess the power to improve it.

Is it possible to limit the influence of global economic and political forces at the local level? In the contemporary context, can the concept of emancipation still be applied meaningfully with-

¹ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/arsenal-instability-how-expanding-western-defense-production-impacts-negotiations-ukraine>

in the boundaries of a single community or nation-state, or has globalization fundamentally undermined the possibility of autonomous and independent local action? Furthermore, is there potential to constrain the power of global economic and political structures within a specific locality, thereby facilitating the emergence of a novel form of society – one that is free in its relative isolation while also capable of disseminating that freedom more broadly, consistent with Marx's vision of revolution as a catalyst for the establishment of world socialism?

However, the ecological crisis and the way people are connected today make it impossible to wait patiently for gradual, humane social change that could ultimately include everyone. Capitalism, by its nature, is constantly expanding. Today, it encounters no real barriers to spreading its (anti)values, which were previously constrained by social rules and restrictions. The rapid advancement of technology and the internet, along with the relocation of social interactions, communication, and even cognitive functions into digital domains, has facilitated a significant transfer of agency and control from humans to machines. The rise of artificial intelligence stands as a prominent and illustrative example of this transformative shift. It makes individuals more dependent, weakens their ability to take action, and makes it even harder to find universal solutions in a world where work and knowledge are becoming increasingly specialized.

This is why Rudi Supek was right when, more than forty years ago, he warned that solutions to humanity's survival in an ecological crisis cannot be purely technical: "Capitalism promotes a kind of technological optimism to mask the growing shadow of crisis looming over humanity, weakening the arguments of those who seek to prevent its catastrophic outcome."²

If technology alone cannot resolve these issues, then the answer must lie in values and human awareness. Changing today's way of thinking requires a new kind of communication – a universal

² Rudi Supek, *Ova jedina zemlja* (SNL, Zagreb, 1978), 259.

language that can compete with the language of technology. The crisis of humanity can be transformed into an ethical and artistic message, one that resonates with people everywhere about their place in the world.

In this sense, art can serve as a bridge between reality and new values that challenge the status quo. Creative outputs can illuminate modern problems and provide a way to think critically about them. Art becomes a means to connect those who are aware of the issues with those who have not yet seen them. This helps create change and preserve human values. Through artistic expression, art examines its own role while also revealing the truth about the human condition. This renders art profoundly significant, even in times when its role is unclear, and when it is uncertain whether art itself serves the very forces that limit human creativity and freedom.

Art can reflect social change and the possibility of transformation. Through this, it engages with reality and contributes to shaping society. In this sense, the artist can be seen as a social activist working toward change. "The mission of the artist becomes the mission of a revolutionary – one who is dissatisfied with an inhuman reality and seeks to transform everyday life, becoming both a prophet and a creator of a fully realized humanistic world."³

Understanding the role of art also means understanding the role of institutions dedicated to it. If the purpose of art is to "make individuality social,"⁴ then institutions should take this further by raising awareness on a broader level. They need to address major social issues and ensure these topics reach the public. Their role is to promote art as a means of examining society, communicating important themes, educating, and encouraging action.

The question of art's social role is not a novel one. However, as we attempt to understand today's world, we must ask: Can art

³ Danko Grlić, *Umjetnost i filozofija* (Mladost, Zagreb, 1965), 30.

⁴ Ernst Fišer, *O potrebi umetnosti* (Minerva, Beograd, 1966), 7.

still respond to the social challenges of our time? Can it even exist outside of capitalism? Fredric Jameson argues that “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production in general,”⁵ meaning that many forms of art, like architecture, are now closely tied to the economy.⁶ Modern art blurs the line between high culture and commercial culture,⁷ weakening its impact and the emotional depth that once defined it.

This shift affects how we see human experience, making it no longer about personal, inner reality, but rather one shaped by capitalism. Jameson points out that aesthetics focuses on individual experience rather than abstract theories about reality.⁸ This means personal experience must become part of art, a space where emotions, perspectives, and social issues are explored. This is especially important today, as we face a crisis of humanity itself.

The cause and effect of this crisis is humanity’s own desire to control nature, without realizing that we are a part of it. If nature is destroyed, human freedom is also at risk. If art is to remain independent, it must ask important questions and offer solutions to modern problems. This brings us to another question: What gives art the power to speak on social issues? Contemporary German philosopher and artist Judith Sigmund raises the question of the social function of art:⁹

“One of her important conclusions was that the functions of art signify causal structures in relation to society as a social order, not only in the sense of performance, but also in the sense of the creation of context.”¹⁰

⁶ *Ibid*, 19.

⁷ *Ibid*, 15.

⁸ *Ibid*, 110.

⁹ Barbara Stoltz, “A Nature Thing: What Does Contemporary Ecological Art Produce?”, *Arts* 12, no 2: 67, Basel, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12020067>

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

When discussing the social role of art, we must see it as a form of social responsibility. In today's world, marked by political crises, economic inequality, and looming ecological disasters, art cannot remain indifferent. It must respond and, in some way, offer solutions. This is especially true for how art engages with environmental issues and how different artistic movements¹¹ address ecology as a crucial topic.

At this point, we must consider not only the nature of contemporary art but also the role of institutions, especially museums dedicated to contemporary art. As public institutions, these museums play a role in shaping cultural policies within specific historical and geographical contexts.

Claire Bishop, examining the relevance of contemporary art museums, builds on Rosalind Krauss's¹² critique of the commercialization of art and museum spaces. However, Bishop argues for a more radical and experimental museum model, one that is politically engaged with the present moment¹³. She highlights the role of museums in "articulating cultural values," emphasizing that creativity and intelligence are under threat from financial pressures. Art and its institutions should resist being reduced to mere statistics and market trends.¹⁴

Bishop, in her research, particularly highlights the specificity of three museums that resist hyperproduction, a logic from which even contemporary art museums are not exempt.

"Today, however, a more radical model of the museum is taking shape: more experimental, less architecturally determined, and

¹¹ Barbara Stoltz emphasizes the need to distinguish between the concepts of environmental art, ecological art, and sustainable art.

¹² Rosalind Krauss, an American art theorist and historian, is one of the most influential intellectuals in the field of contemporary art, known for her contributions to the analysis and criticism of contemporary artistic practices, particularly in the contexts of modernism and postmodernism.

¹³ Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology, or, What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (Koenig Books, 2013), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 62.

offering a more politicized engagement with our historical moment. Three museums in Europe—the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, and the Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (MSUM) in Ljubljana—are doing more than any individual work of art to shift our perception of art institutions and their potential.”¹⁵

However, observing contemporary art museums in Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro – specifically the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Podgorica – there seems to be a lack of decisive engagement with ecological issues.

Although some individual artists address environmental themes, these museums do not organize a sufficient number of exhibitions or events focused on sustainability. Topics such as eco-art and eco-aesthetics remain fundamentally underexplored, despite being prominently featured in trend-driven contexts. This dynamic renders these themes, despite their ecological framing, predominantly consumerist in nature; in fact, such projects not only fail to critically challenge capitalism but often cater to and reinforce it.

An exemplary exhibition that adequately addressed an ecological theme was the 2020 show *The Gaze Effect*¹⁶ held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade. It featured sculptures, murals, performances, and workshops, forming a large international project curated by Zoran Erić and Blanka de la Torre. This exhibition was not just a “model for exhibition policy and a reflection on the role of museums in the current global ecological crisis,”¹⁷ but also an effective curatorial response to the 2020 pandemic. It tackled key issues such as activism, environmental protection, waste management, and ecocide.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6

¹⁶ <https://msub.org.rs/exhibition/efekat-pregleda/>

¹⁷ Zoran Erić, *Izložba efekat pogleda je eksces u trenutnoj politici izlaganja u muzejima*, <https://greenartincubator.org/news/zoran-eric-izlozba-efekat-pregleda-je-ekscs-u-trenutnoj-politici-izlaganja-u-muzejima/>

The participation of 60 artists from around the world, alongside experts, researchers, and cultural workers, demonstrated the gravity of the project and the museum's social responsibility.

Echoing Theodor Adorno's idea that art must be both autonomous and active – "art must bring chaos into order"¹⁸ – such events challenge the passive role of institutions. Museums, as part of the system, must critically reflect on it and propose solutions to urgent issues, even when society may not recognize them as important. Their role is to warn and propose change.

The Gaze Effect had a broad geographic and thematic scope, setting global problems within a local context. It also transformed the museum space into a public forum. Erić emphasized the importance of communication and networking as essential for building sustainable communities:

"The program was designed as a public forum where environmental organizations, activist groups, experts, artists, and citizens discuss pressing ecological issues in Serbia, their causes, and potential solutions, all within the museum space."¹⁹

The exhibition followed the 7R principles—Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Repair, Repurpose, Rethink, and Reject—ensuring sustainability in every decision. Guidelines included using local materials, avoiding air transport, and requiring artists using digital prints or photography to produce their work on-site and recycle it afterward. Such curatorial and museum practices, rarely seen in post-Yugoslav countries, set an important precedent. They serve as a model for ecological awareness in the arts, providing concrete examples of sustainable artistic production. By highlighting topics that promote environmental justice, they help educate the broader society and inspire action.²⁰

¹⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Minima moralia, Refleksii iz oštećenog života* (Beograd, 2009-2015) frg. 143, 127.

¹⁹ Erić, Op. cit.

²⁰ Zoran Erić, *Ka zelenim muzejima i galerijama*, <https://greenartincubator.org/materijali/>

The second museum under consideration, Montenegro's Museum of Contemporary Art in Podgorica, was established in 2023, following the transformation of the Centre for Contemporary Art of Montenegro, the country's principal institution for contemporary art, into a museum. Until now, the museum has not hosted any significant exhibitions, lectures, or similar events focused on topics related to ecology, climate change, or the environment, despite Montenegro being the only European country to define itself as an ecological state in its Constitution. At the same time, it has significant issues with waste disposal, exploitation of forests and rivers, and air pollution in cities in the central and northern parts of the country. These issues clearly require heightened institutional attention, especially from institutions that should raise public awareness of social issues and, accordingly, network with similar institutions to warn the public about the actual situation, even when it is not entirely obvious, though it often is.

Although exhibitions on ecology in a broader sense have been held in the gallery spaces of other art institutions in Montenegro, they have not directly addressed ecology, nor have they focused on the artist-nature relationship or proposed artistic practices that could be considered ecologically engaged.

Between June and September 2024, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Montenegro hosted a major exhibition titled *Montenegro Today*, which explored the contemporary Montenegrin art scene through five segments, or five exhibitions: *The Landscape That Watches Us* (dedicated to ecology), *Dream Fragments* (on intergenerational and transmedia representations of creative ideas and their communication with the audience), *Living Images* (focusing on history, economy, politics, and social engagement), and *Identity* (dealing with identity issues and gender equality).

The first exhibition aimed to present nature as an artistic starting point, an initial impulse in artistic creation, with a special focus on landscape as a significant motif in Montenegrin painting, as well as flora and fauna as elements of contemporary art practices. To a lesser extent, the exhibition addressed the issue

of pollution and ecological disaster through a segment featuring several female artists whose works tackle these themes or dedicate part of their overall artistic work to them.²¹

A notable paradox in the Montenegrin art scene can be observed: many artists who claim to work on ecological issues fail to address ecology in their statements, and their artworks cannot be deemed ecologically engaged. On the other hand, some artists who do not explicitly cite ecology as a central focus of their creative work often create environmentally conscious pieces or works that explore ecological issues and encourage broader reflection on related themes.²²

As for the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, a review of its exhibition program over the past five years reveals that only one exhibition directly addressed ecological (im)pos-

²¹ This refers to artists Brigita Antoni, Arijana Kadić, and Mirjana Marsenić Vujović, whose installations speak partially and in varying ways about nature, or use materials that hint at the need to speak about nature or respond to it. Antoni has previously had several installations that unequivocally examined themes like human sustainability in the contemporary ecosystem, establishing herself as an artist of eco-sensitivity. Her work in this exhibition follows that spirit, featuring the installation *Matter Dolorosa*, which displays waste bags filled with plastic. However, the use of plastic bags in her work and in Arijana Kadić's art, as well as nylon strips in Marsenić Vujović's work, communicates an ambiguous message because, despite their ecological intent, the artworks fall into the category of non-ecological works. This raises the question of the extent to which these works embody critiques and directly contribute to ecological injustice. A broader attempt at eco-art is represented by the Montenegrin artist Ivanka Vana Prelević, who presented her work *Dream in a Dream* at the exhibition *Montenegro Today*, created in a mixed technique (wood, cotton, leaves, LED light).

²² In this regard, it is worth mentioning the short film *Anthropomorphic Trouble* by Adrijana Gvozdenović and Gode Polekaite from 2021, which is a part of the New Media Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Montenegro and is the only work in the MSUCG Collection that addresses ecological issues. In terms of questioning the perspective of survival in today's context, it is worth mentioning the video work *Terraforming* (2020) by Siniša Radulović. Particularly notable is the installation *There will be no other end of the world* (2017) by Teodora Nikčević, who combines photography and material to create an "artificial forest." By tackling issues such as extinction, climate change, and the depletion of natural resources, the work consistently raises questions about the future of the world and the possible end.

sibilities: the solo show *Make a Wish* by artist Nikola Ukić. Although the artist does not primarily work with eco-art, this exhibition is ecologically significant because it raises questions about material usage and explores contemporary materiality through the use of raw textures.²³

A brief overview of the exhibition production of these three museums leads to the conclusion that the most important art institutions in Belgrade, Podgorica, and Rijeka lack content that could be interpreted as an attempt to draw the broader public's attention to ecology as one of the most critical issues of today, with the exception of the Belgrade exhibition *The Gaze Effect*.

The issue of ecology demands full responsibility from all societal actors and requires social activism. This activism need not be focused solely on ecological and related issues, but on the broader significance that addressing these issues would have within specific communities, whether through raising awareness or concrete actions.

The *Effect of the Gaze* exhibition in Belgrade is a notable exception to the norm that museums and other public cultural institutions generally refrain from engaging with pressing issues that align with their social function and *raison d'être*. The elitism of cultural institutions, their limited social engagement, and the emphasis on high art that corresponds with capitalist trends of consumerism pose a significant problem, raising the question of the responsibility of cultural institutions as one of the primary issues that we, as recipients, must confront. The weak regional networking of institutions based on the exchange of experiences and collaborative action in establishing new artistic practices also warrants attention.

Some museums, especially those operating within the independent scene and outside formal institutions, are more actively engaged with pressing issues such as ecology. It appears that the emancipatory potential lies more on the margins than within the central, formal art institutions.

²³ <https://mmsu.hr/dogadaji/nikola-ukic-zazeli-zelju/>



Finally, are these institutions not obligated to educate the public, provide a platform for communication, and foster a deeper understanding of contemporary social trends? Modernity is past, making it no longer possible to experience art in the same way. Beauty has become a camouflage for truth, the last tremor of humanity in a postmodern era where aesthetics is no longer unambiguous and sensitivity is no longer pure. Concrete action should be undertaken by all, especially those who are paid to be socially responsible. Responsibility is the new angle for art that intends to survive. It is the word that must summon action, for art must offer the truth about the world as it is. Only then will change be possible.

