

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Transforming the Cinema Into a Wholly Sustainable Space

The exhibition *Ecocinema* explores the relationship between humans and nature, and goes a step further: transforming the Kunsthalle into four movie theaters, using sustainable, natural materials.



Georgia Holz November 6, 2019



Adam Curtis, *The Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts (All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace, ep. 2)* (2011), exhibition view Taxispalais Kunsthalle Tirol, 2019, (courtesy A. Curtis, all photos by Günter Kresser unless otherwise noted)

INNSBRUCK, Austria — *Ecocinema*, the title of the current exhibition at [Taxispalais Kunsthalle Tirol](#) in Innsbruck, Austria, lacks nothing in terms of clarity. The show, curated by Nina Tabassomi, only displays films that present alternative models to an anthropocentric ecology and explore the

question of how to arrive at a “pleasurable responsive relationship” to our planet, as it is stated in the exhibition text. *Ecocinema* follows the ubiquitous theme of the relationship between human and nature, and goes one step further compared to other exhibitions: For the

complex film program, the Kunsthalle was transformed into four movie theaters, using sustainable, natural materials. Structured along the four chapters — “Opening Credits,” “Propositions,” “Precursors,” and “Practices,” the heterogeneous and diverse footage, a total of about 10 hours, ranges from artistic positions, documentary formats for television and cinema, to conference recordings.

“Opening Credits” acts as a prologue for the entire exhibition and locates us in the concrete present: speeches by the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg and her Austrian colleague Lucia Steinwender, who summarily took the microphone out of the hands of former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz at a climate conference in 2018, to formulate a moving appeal against his administration’s climate policy. The two documents outlining current politics are juxtaposed with the abstract, poetic counter-proposal by [Nikolaus Gansterer](#) and [Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll](#). In “Reflecting Relational Traces: The Desert Ice Factory” (2019), filmed in the ruins of a former ice factory in the Sharjah desert (and, by the way, the only “art film” in the narrow sense of the term), the camera brings us microscopically close to relics of human activity that testify to the conflicts that follow the clash of human and non-human entities .



Nikolaus Gansterer & Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, “Reflecting Relational Traces: Desert Ice Factory” (2019) exhibition view Taxipalais Kunsthalle Tirol, 2019, (courtesy the artists)

The chapter “Propositions” is dedicated to alternative, activist, and scientific proposals. Self-proclaimed ecosexuals, activists, and artists [Annie Sprinkle](#) and [Beth Stephens](#), playfully and personally interweave their research on the human impact on the water cycle in California with their documentary *Water Makes Us*

Wet: An Ecosexual Adventure (2017). Of their numerous interviewees one is the feminist thinker and science historian Donna Haraway, who was also portrayed by [Fabrizio Terranova](#) in his extraordinary documentary *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival* (2016). Shot in her home in California (which she herself helped build) the

film's elliptical structure is inspired by Haraway's own story telling and experimental approach to science. It is an intense immersion in the mind of the influential thinker, scholar, and icon of feminism.



Still from Annie Sprinkle & Beth Stephens,
Water Makes Us Wet: An Ecosexual Adventure
(2017) (courtesy the artists)

A look back at the history of ecofeminism and at early environmental activist Rachel Carson is provided in the third chapter "Precursors." [Adam Curtis's](#) as always clever and enlightening documentary *The Use and Abuse of Vegetation Concepts* (2011) follows the controversial thesis that our

idea of nature as a self-regulating ecosystem is based on a static machine theory that does not in the least correspond with the dynamic complexity of life and nature.

Finally, in the last chapter, practical examples of life in communication with nature and other non-human protagonists are presented. *Vivian's Garden*, (2017) [Rosalind Nashashibi's](#) empathetic approach to a matriarchal complicity, portrays the symbiotic lives of voluntary exiles Vivian Suter and her mother Elisabeth Wild in the jungles of Guatemala. There they lead a simple life together with the indigenous people — in harmony with nature and shaped by art and mutual care. The constant threat of natural disasters and criminal machinations is calmly incorporated into their narrative. [Marwa Arsinios's](#) "Who is afraid of ideology?" was shot in 2017 in the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Syria (often referred to as Rojava) where the disaster of the Turkish invasion is happening right now. The filmic essay draws a contradictory picture of the Kurdish women's movement and its ideology, which more or less emerged from Syria's civil war.

With their heterogeneity, the selection of films works very well to represent a diverse picture of global environmental challenges and possible alternative responses. What tends to end up in accompanying programs elsewhere is brought here to the big screen — not distinguishing between artistic and documentary, independent and mainstream formats. Since at least Documenta 13, the topic of



Marwa Arsanios, "Who is afraid of ideology? (Part I)" (2017), exhibition view Taxipalais Kunsthalle Tirol, 2019

climate change, ecology, and the relationship between humans and nature is omnipresent in the art world. Seemingly everywhere artists propagate a rethinking of and demand for activism.

But there seems to be a double standard at work, one which

does not take its own field in view, but rather tends to criticize others for their action or omitted action. That is exactly where art's criticality runs into the void. The big dilemma facing the art scene is the contradiction between the symbolic concerns of the institutions and their actors on the one hand and their policies and structural decisions on the other. A prominent example is the current Venice Biennial, which features numerous works dealing with our global ecological disaster, but still fails to address or change its own effects on the fragile ecological system of the city of Venice. A climate-neutral balance for the ecological footprint of their own institution was only recently put up for discussion for the first time – by the Tate in London.



Fabrizio Terranova, *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival* (2016); exhibition view Taxipalais Kunsthalle Tirol, 2019, (image courtesy Icarus Film)

The exhibition *Ecocinema*, although thematically aligned with this trend, largely dispenses with moralizing accusations, at least on the part of artists, allowing activists to speak, offering concrete practices and suggestions on how to tackle the approaching climate catastrophe on the micro-

political, that is, individual level. With the use of sustainable natural materials for the design of the display, seating, and insulation of the movie theaters, the exhibition manages to break through this double standard, at least to a certain extent. It takes serious steps to comply with the content and demands of the artists whose work it presents,

therefore is coherent in the sense of cultivating a resource-friendly thinking and a design with sustainable materials, but it also creates an atmosphere of cautious optimism. The successful transformation of the cinemas into an environmental space allows the films to be staged as an immersive physical experience addressing all senses: the haptic experience of sheep's wool, hay, bark mulch, [spelt glume](#), and trees mingles with the intense smell of these materials. Thus, the exhibition creates the resonance space it claims to — in which we might recollect and move forward at the same time, experiencing an affirmative attachment to the non-human, if only for a short time.

Ecocinema, continues at the [Taxispalais Kunsthalle Tirol](#) (45 Maria-Theresien-Straße) in Innsbruck, Austria through November 10. It was curated by Nina Tabassomi.

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