

## The Materialization of Nature (Part 1)

“It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.” - Theodor W. Adorno

The opening quote of this essay is the first sentence of Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* from 1970<sup>1</sup>. It is a short sentence that accentuates the outcome of a prolonged, systematic process throughout our history of society, culture and art, exposing the direction of a development toward an increasingly interconnected correlation of these three branches; but it was not until the final third of the twentieth century that the recognition of an inner, yet persistently sophisticated and dynamic complicity between this new (post-Duchampian / postmodern) paradigm of *art* and the notion of *nature* fully started to establish itself within the context of contemporary practices – stimulated by diverse developments in artistic production throughout the art history of the twentieth century and accompanied by an increasingly sensitive theoretical and critical (self-) reflection, calling for a more dynamic, conceptual relationship.

This essay will introduce my investigation into the field of *nature as material* and *system aesthetics* and commence (art) historical origins and connections, survey artists whose works are relevant for my preliminary research and how their approaches are supportive for the development of my own artistic identity and process. Moving on, these initial observations presented in this first writing will be the point of origin for a more in-depth discussion throughout this semester's research with regards to the significance of the thematic critique of nature in contemporary art, its association with materiality and system aesthetics in conjunction with my own work.

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. – *Aesthetic Theory*. The Athlone Press Ltd, 1997. p.1

## Introduction:

### **Art and Nature - A Paradigm Shift**

From antiquity and far into modern times the perception of the interconnection between art and nature was defined by hierarchical hypotheses. At first nature was a model, an *archetype* for artistic inspiration; then it transformed into a *replica*, emulated by art and enabled through critical dialogs regarding the subject of nature and the sublime<sup>2</sup>. We could undoubtedly keep the history of the relationship between art and nature short, summarize everything in a single sentence and proceed, but let us take a more comprehensive look at this development since it offers an interesting insight into the adaption of nature into the practices of the contemporary visual arts.

The theorem of artistic imitation remained crucially formative in both stages of this particular, aforesaid change, even though it was heavily scrutinized – and often dismissed – by the thinkers and theorists of the past. One of the very prominent critics of artistic imitation, for example, was the Greek philosopher Plato. He perceived the artist as nothing but an imitator whose work was not of great significance for the greater goal of forming a well-structured, autonomous society<sup>3</sup>. However, the function of the artist in those times was predetermined to comply with the ingenuity of nature, hence respecting the system of an all-encompassing higher order – or the creative genius of a divine entity. Centuries later, with the begin of the Renaissance<sup>4</sup> and transiting to the end of the

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<sup>2</sup> Referring to “sublime” perceived as an aesthetic and philosophical concept described i.a. by Kant, Schopenhauer and Hegel.

<sup>3</sup> Danto, Arthur C. – *What Art Is*. Yale University Press, 2014. p.x (preface) – Here Danto explains the foundation of Plato’s idea of forming a society ruled by the people, a democracy (from Greek: δῆμος (dēmos): “People” and κρατός (kratós): “Power”), as well as Plato’s personal opinion about the artist and his contribution to the successful formation of a form of government based on democratic values: “*In Book Ten of The Republic, Plato’s character – Socrates – suggested that if you want to imitate, nothing could be better for that than a mirror, which will give you perfect reflections of whatever you aim the mirror at, and better than an artist can usually achieve. So, let’s get rid of the artists.*”

<sup>4</sup> The Renaissance, literally expressing the process “rebirth” or “reawakening”, marked the cultural revival that arose in Europe, based on the rediscovery of the art, literature and teachings of the ancient (Roman and Greek) world. The period spanned from the beginning of the fourteenth century into the seventeenth century, instigating the transition from the medieval into modern times.

eighteenth century, a reversal to a rather anthropocentric approach took place, resulting in the departure from the former sacredly and spiritually associated, normative ethics. Eventually in the nineteenth century, these anthropocentric progresses were concluded with emphasis, granting the artists more autonomy in personal and bespoke artistic expression. The perception of nature transformed. It was no longer just a reference, a seemingly naïve signifier of a higher inviolability that could not be challenged but instead had to be observed and obeyed. The concept of nature went through a phase of modernization to eventually serve as a new transmitter for the creative and critical dialog, taking on the position of an aggregator offering the potential of multiple, literal and non-literal, entry points.

“Life imitates art far more than art imitates life”<sup>5</sup> – these words from the dialog between the characters Cyril and Vivian in Oscar Wilde’s *The Decay of Lying – An Observation* concisely summarized the reversal of the traditionally perceived dogma of imitation to a new doctrine. Vivian eventually concludes that “external Nature also imitates Art. The only effects that she can show us are effects that we have already seen through poetry, or in paintings. This is the secret of Nature’s charm, as well as the explanation of Nature’s weakness.”<sup>6</sup> These statements emphasize the renewed perception of nature within the arts and the transition from a formal notion to an ongoing, philosophical debate.

Within the context of a contemporary approach to nature we have to acknowledge that this reversal of the imitation scheme as mentioned in Wilde’s writing – and with it the dialectic exchange about the overall idea concerning “nature” as a concept – not only opened up many new conduits for the visual arts, it subsequently made it an obligation that nature as a source for artistic expression has to become part of a broader discourse within critical contemporary methodologies. Our general understanding of nature, based on the conception of nature according to the naturalist (“everything is nature”) as well as the cultural approach (“basically everything is nature”), is ultimately nothing else but a

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<sup>5</sup> Wilde, Oscar – *The Decay of Lying – An Observation*, in: *Intentions: The Decay of Lying: Pen, Pencil and Poison; The Critic as Artist; The Truth of Masks*. Brentano’s New York, 1905. p.32

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.55

byproduct of our cultural, socio-economic and political coexistence and thus a prejudiced apperception of the thematic. The difference between nature and culture – including the attraction, peculiarity and endangerment contained within this coexistence – is entrenched in a complex interlinkage of the entirety (the “universe”). It is undeniably the diverse field of the visual arts – perhaps more than any other theoretical and critical convergence – that consolidates an ability to fathom the complexities of even those interrelations and interdependencies through a critical investigation into the interconnected systems by means of its own *hyperdiversity*<sup>7</sup>. In this regard, nature has to be part of the dialog within the field of the visual arts – in close observation of the interrelated fields of environmentalism and ecology. To understand the contemporary significance, we will have to look into the (recent) past of nature within the art historical context and its transition from a reference into a material of complex communication.

### **From Earthwork to System:**

#### **The Extended Perception of Nature in the Visual Arts**

The artists of the American *Land Art*, among others Walter De Maria, Robert Smithson or Nancy Holt, who attracted attention with predominantly large-scale work in and with the landscape since the 1960s, can certainly be acknowledged as precursors, pioneers and instigators for today's perception of nature within the context of contemporary art. While the (generic) art object underwent a comprehensive transformation throughout the 1960s and 1970s by means of *dematerialization* as noted by Lucy R. Lippard<sup>8</sup>, thus taking on new, idea-based formats that can be defined as a shift into *Conceptual Art*, the notion of

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<sup>7</sup> I borrowed the term *hyperdiversity* from an EU pamphlet surveying the perspectives on urban diversity. The complexity of urbanized systems and the interlinkage of modern cities and their infrastructure displays similarities of non-linear structures that can also be found in the condition of postmodern culture, including the visual arts and the concept of nature as seen through the lens of the arts. As the text states on p.2 “*hyperdiversity refers to an intense diversification of the population in socio-economic, social and ethnic terms, but also with respect to lifestyles, attitudes and activities.*” thus factors that directly and indirectly influence the development in the visual arts. The pamphlet can be found following the following link: [https://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/policy\\_briefs/divercities\\_policy\\_brief\\_0913.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/policy_briefs/divercities_policy_brief_0913.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Lippard, Lucy R. – *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. University of California Press; Reprint edition, 1997.

nature transformed as well – although paradoxically through *materialization*, resulting in a hybrid form of a semi-theoretical disposition: the former concept of nature converted into a new, tangible material, accessible to the artists and representing both – a) building site and b) component for original works that challenged the perception of nature as it used to be communicated through creative outlets up to this point in the history of art.

In May of 1960 Walter De Maria reflected on his idea of an *Art Yard*. „I have been thinking about an art yard I would like to build. It would be sort of a big hole in the ground. Actually, it wouldn't be a hole to begin with. That would have to be dug. The digging of the hole would be part of the art. Luxurious stands would be made for the art lovers and spectators to sit in. They would come to the making of the yard dressed in tuxedos and clothes which would make them aware of the significance of the event they would see. Then in front of the stand of people a wonderful parade of steam shovels and bulldozers will pass. Pretty soon the steam shovels would start to dig. A small explosion would go off. What wonderful art would be produced. Inexperienced people like La Monte Young will run the steam shovels. From here on out what goes in can't easily be said. (It is hard to explain art.) As the yard gets deeper and its significance grows, people will run into the yard, grab shovels, do their part, dodge explosions. This might be considered the first meaningful dance. People will yell 'Get that bulldozer away from my child.' Bulldozers will be making wonderful pushes of dirt all around the yard.”<sup>9</sup>

To dig a participatory Earthwork garden thus was Walter De Maria's vision, a notion of nature as an experience in combination with social interaction. It is a model that anticipates Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of *Relational Aesthetics*, suggesting ties to contemporary artists like Thomas Hirschhorn. In contrast to Hirschhorn's work like the *Gramsci Monument*, his 2013 participatory outdoor sculpture located in a housing project in New York's Bronx, De Maria's idea was to create an event for the elitist, tuxedo wearing and art loving audience – a happening for the whole family that would be constantly

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.54-55

threatened by the presence of bulldozers and staged explosions. The digging of the hole was meant to be part of the art, while the mentioned explosions symbolize De Maria's fascination for the elemental forces and natural disasters<sup>10</sup>. His idea of the Art Yard was never realized; an abridged version however was presented in the 1968 exhibition



Walter De Maria – The New York Earth Room. 1977

*Earthworks* at the Dwan Gallery in New York, although without participation opportunity for the audience. Another project by Walter De Maria brought the new perception of nature as material and concept directly into the exhibition space and to the audience. In September of 1968 the artist created his first *Earth Room* installation. It was located inside

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<sup>10</sup> De Maria, Walter – *On the Importance of Natural Disasters* (May 1960), in *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, ed. Jackson Mac Low and La Monte Young (Bronx, New York: self-published by the editors, 1963; reprinted, New York: Heiner Friedrich, 1970). Published in: Kastner, Jeffrey (Editor) – *Nature (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art)*. The MIT Press (March 2, 2012). P.24



the Gallery Heiner Friedrich in Munich, Germany and titled "*50 m<sup>3</sup> Level Dirt / The Land Show: Pure Dirt / Pure Earth / Pure Land*". To create his piece De Maria brought 50 cubic meters of fresh black soil into the exhibition space, separated from the visitors by a one meter high glass pane. His installation was a visual experience as much as it was a sensorial one. The smell of the dirt and the intense humidity stood in stark contrast to the exhibition space – nature detached from its origin, presented as a meditative space with a pseudo-minimalist appeal. While the installation in Munich was temporary, a second temporary version of the Earth Room was installed inside the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt, Germany in 1974, followed by a third, permanent Earth Room sculpture, created by De Maria in New York's SoHo district in 1977. Founded by the DIA Art Foundation, *The New York Earth Room* has been on display since 1980, consisting of over 250 cubic yards of black soil with a total weight of 280,000 pounds, displayed on approximately 3600 square feet of floor space, measuring 22 inches deep<sup>11</sup>.



Hans Haacke – Grass Grows. 1969/2011

1969 marked another milestone regarding the change of the perception of nature within the context of art. The *Earthart* exhibition at Cornell University in New York<sup>12</sup>, organized

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<sup>11</sup> <https://diaart.org/collection/collection/de-maria-walter-the-new-york-earth-room-1977-1980-135/>

<sup>12</sup> Published in 1970, an officially digitalized version of the original exhibition catalog for *Earth Art* can be found by following this link: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924020514380;view=2up;seq=1>

by Willoughby Sharp, featured works by artists Robert Smithson, Günther Uecker, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Morris, David Medalla, Richard Long, Neil Jenney, Jan Dibbets and Hans Haacke. The latter installed an artificial biotope inside the gallery and sowed it with fast growing weeds. Hans Haacke is of particular interest for my research since his vision of systems ties right into my investigation and work of this semester, especially his installations at the intersection of systems and nature:

In 1963 Haacke built his first *Condensation Cube*. This transparent cube changed its visual appearance through the condensation of distilled water enclosed within the object, sensitive to external influences such as light fluctuation and variations in room temperature. It is a visual pun at the clean and uncomplicated forms of Minimalism, an atmospheric circulation system and an astute anti-organism, contrasting the seemingly disimpassioned trends in the arts. It also marks the merge of the newly introduced field of *system aesthetics* with the recently reconfigured state of nature in the arts.



Hans Haacke – Condensation Cube. 1963

Haacke proclaimed his artistic concerns in 1965 when he wrote: “... make something which experiences, reacts to its environment, changes, is nonstable ...



... make something indeterminate, which always looks different, the shape of which cannot be predicted precisely ...

... make something which cannot “perform” without assistance of its environment ...

... make something which reacts to light and temperature changes, is subject to air currents and depends, in its functioning, on the forces of gravity ...

... make something which the ‘spectator’ handles, with which he plays, and thus animates it ...

... make something which lives in time and makes the ‘spectator’ experience time ...

... articulate something Natural ...”<sup>13</sup>

In 1968 Haacke refined his perception of systems within his contemporary vision of art at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York: “A “sculpture” that physically reacts to its environment is no longer to be regarded as an object. The range of outside factors affecting it, as well as its own radius of action, reaches beyond the space it materially occupies. It thus merges with the environment in a relationship that is better understood as “system” of interdependent processes. These processes evolve without the viewer’s empathy. He becomes a witness. A system is not imagined, it is real.”<sup>14</sup>

Another indicator for the intermingling of the subjects of nature and systems regarding Hans Haacke’s work can be found in the referential readings of my research: both volumes of *Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art* that I am using, the edition on *Systems*<sup>15</sup> as well as the one on *Nature*<sup>16</sup>, include a marginally edited excerpt of a conversation between Jeanne Siegel and Hans Haacke concerning the notion of *systems aesthetics*, where the artist makes a very important statement on the perception of nature

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<sup>13</sup> Lippard, Lucy R. – *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. University of California Press; Reprint edition, 1997. p.38

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.39

<sup>15</sup> Shanken, Edward A. (Editor) – *Systems (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art)*. The MIT Press (March 13, 2015). ISBN: 978-0262527194

<sup>16</sup> Kastner, Jeffrey (Editor) – *Nature (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art)*. The MIT Press (March 2, 2012). ISBN: 978-0262517669

in his work, referring to a former quoted statement<sup>17</sup>: “I don’t consider myself a naturalist, nor for that matter a conceptualist or a kineticist, an earth artist, elementarist, minimalist, a marriage broker for art and technology [...]. I closed my little statement from 1965 with “articulate something natural”. That has an intended double meaning. It refers to “nature”, and it means something self-understood, ordinary, uncontrived, normal, something of an everyday quality.”<sup>18</sup> After mentioning that he often gets labeled as a naturalist based on the conceptualization of his artwork, Haacke continues that the perception of nature “is inconsistent only for those with a naïve understanding of nature – nature being the blue sky, the Rockies, Smokey the Bear. The difference between “nature” and “technology” is only that the latter is man-made. The functioning of either one can be described by the same conceptual models, and they both obviously follow the same rules of operation. [...] The world does not break up into neat university departments. It is one supersystem with myriad subsystems, each one more or less affected by all others.”<sup>19</sup>



Hans Haacke – Rheinwasseraufbereitungsanlage (Rhine Water Purification Plant). 1972

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<sup>17</sup> See first paragraph on page 9 of this essay.

<sup>18</sup> Siegel, Jeanne – *Hans Haacke. System Aesthetics: Conversation with Jeanne Siegel//1971*. In: Kastner, Jeffrey (Editor) – *NATURE (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art)*. The MIT Press (March 2, 2012). p.28

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p.28

What Haacke describes at the end of the last quote is the characteristic framework of a rhizomatic structure, an interconnected non-linear, non-hierarchical root configuration, the lateral antagonist to the arboreal organism that creates subsidiary systems, side-shoots and dismisses the binary blueprints which we as a society prefer to project onto everything and everyone. It is a term derived from botany and adapted as a philosophical concept throughout the visual arts and philosophy, developed and popularized by contemporary French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, and French philosopher, psychotherapist and semiologist, Felix Guattari, in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*<sup>20</sup>.

I am a strong believer in Deleuze's and Guattari's theory of the rhizome and rhizomatic approaches regarding almost all aspects of life; and even though their theories and writing are not the easiest to comprehend – overall, *A Thousand Plateaus* is quite dense and unquestionably a complicated read – I perceive their contributions to philosophy as an invaluable guideline for creative thinking on an advanced level and as a profoundly critical reference for contemporary systems aesthetics. I will therefore include it as an essential part of this year's research in my running library. To conclude my writing and to carry over the concept of the rhizome into my next essay on the materialization of nature, which will feature an in-depth focus on contemporary practices concerning systems and nature in the visual arts, I will finalize this text with a quote that reflects my view on all methods concerning my way of engaging in theoretical and practical work: "We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They've made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. Nothing is beautiful or loving or political aside from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes. [...] Thought is not arborescent, and the brain is not a rooted or ramified matter. [...] Many people have a tree growing in their heads, but the brain itself is much more a grass than a tree."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Introduction: Rhizome. Root, radicle, and rhizome – Issues concerning books – The One and the Multiple – Tree and rhizome – The geographical directions, Orient, Occident, America – The misdeeds of the tree – What is a plateau? In: Deleuze, Gilles / Guattari, Felix – *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press; 2 edition (December 21, 1987). p.3ff

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p.15