

# Beyond the green: Approaches and practices on the objectification of nature

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## Abstract

Throughout history, nature has occupied a central place in art, not only as a vital source of life but also as a fundamental source of aesthetic inspiration. Since the late twentieth century, environmental and philosophical debates have positioned nature as an ethical and political actor within art. As a result of this ideological shift, artists have adopted aesthetic strategies that intervene in nature by relocating it, or parts of it, into spaces such as galleries and museums. Organic elements have been exhibited either in their original forms or transformed into new constructs shaped by natural references. The study examines how nature becomes an art object through contemporary theory, revealing ethical, ontological, and ideological tensions. In this framework, the article analyzes the works of Stéphane Thidet, Mark Dion, and Carlos Garaicoa using critical discourse analysis. The findings reveal that these practices instrumentalize nature while simultaneously questioning anthropocentric representations and enhancing ecological awareness.

## Keywords

contemporary art, ecological art, nature, object, representation

## Highlights

- In contemporary art practices, nature is not merely an aesthetic object, but is also treated as a field of inquiry at the center of ethical, political, and ontological debates.
- Artistic practices that bring nature into exhibition spaces, despite their deep ideological and conceptual background, carry the risk of disrupting nature's vital cycles due to their tendency to transform nature into a controllable object.
- The works of Stéphane Thidet, Mark Dion, and Carlos Garaicoa demonstrate that, in the process of objectifying nature, ecological sensitivity must be considered not merely as a virtue in itself, but also requires attention to the production processes, spatial arrangements and theoretical contexts of these practices.

# Yeşilin ötesi: Doğanın nesneleştirilme hareketi üzerine yaklaşımlar ve pratikler

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## Atıf

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## Öz

Doğa, tarih boyunca yalnızca yaşamsal bir kaynak değil, aynı zamanda estetik ilhamın da temel referanslarından biri olarak sanatın merkezinde yer almaktadır. Yirminci yüzyılın ikinci yarısından itibaren çevresel ve felsefi tartışmalar, sanat alanında doğanın etik ve politik bir aktör olarak değerlendirilmesini gündeme getirmiştir. Bu dönüşümün getirdiği ideoloji sonucunda sanatçılar doğanın kendisini veya bir parçasını galeri, müze gibi mekânlara taşıyarak doğaya müdahale eden estetik stratejiler benimsemişlerdir. Organik unsurlar kimi zaman mevcut halleriyle sergilenmiş, kimi zaman da yapay ancak doğal referanslarla örülü yeni doğa kurgularına dönüştürülmüştür. Çalışma doğanın sanat nesnesine dönüşüm sürecindeki pratikleri güncel kuramsal yaklaşımlar temelinde inceleyerek ortaya çıkan etik, ontolojik ve ideolojik gerilimleri görünür kılmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda makale, Stéphane Thidet, Mark Dion ve Carlos Garaicoa'nın konuya referans olabilecek çalışmalarını eleştirel söylem analizi yöntemiyle analiz etmektedir. Araştırma sonucunda incelenen pratiklerin doğayı araçsallaştırırken aynı zamanda insan merkezci temsil biçimlerini sorgulatan ve ekolojik duyarlılığı derinleştiren eleştirel bir farkındalık potansiyeli barındırdığı ortaya konulmuştur.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

çağdaş sanat, ekolojik sanat, doğa, nesne, temsil

## Öne çıkanlar

- Çağdaş sanat pratiklerinde doğa, yalnızca estetik bir nesne değil, aynı zamanda etik, politik ve ontolojik tartışmaların merkezinde konumlanan bir sorgulama alanı olarak ele alınmaktadır.
- Doğayı sergileme mekânlarına taşıyan sanatsal pratikler, derin ideolojik ve kavramsal arka plana sahip olmalarına rağmen, doğayı kontrol edilebilir bir nesneye dönüştürme eğilimleri nedeniyle tabiatın yaşamsal döngülerini kesintiye uğratma riskini barındırmaktadır.
- Stéphane Thidet, Mark Dion ve Carlos Garaicoa'nın çalışmaları doğanın nesneleştirilme sürecinde ekolojik duyarlılığı tek başına bir erdem olarak kabul etmenin ötesinde, pratiklerin üretim süreçlerini, mekânsal yerleşimini ve kuramsal bağlamlarını dikkate almayı gerektirdiğini göstermektedir.

## Introduction

Nature has been one of the fundamental reference points for art throughout history, from primitive depictions in caves and temples to early idealised landscape paintings, and in contemporary art to conceptual and material-based practices. Today, it continues to occupy a central place in contemporary art's conceptual and material-based practices. The perception of nature by artists has undergone profound transformations in parallel with both the evolutionary changes of nature itself and the internal shifts within artistic disciplines. Consequently, the perception of nature has been subject to continuous transformation. This evolution has given rise to artistic practices in which nature- once approached solely as a subject of representation- has become materially present as both an object and a medium within contemporary art. Especially since the second half of the 20th century, ecological and post-humanist approaches in the discipline of art have not only used nature as a theme but also transformed it into a field of intervention as an ethical, political, and ontological actor. The transfer of nature itself or a part of it to exhibition spaces creates a framework that goes beyond a purely aesthetic experience, allowing us to reconsider nature's ontological status, ethical boundaries, and the relationship between humans and nature. Artists who adopt this approach have embraced an interventionist stance that aims to increase sensitivity towards nature by addressing it beyond its physical and material appearance. However, this stance, whether conscious or unconscious, carries the risk of instrumentalising, aestheticising, or even controlling nature. The production processes and modes of expression employed by artists who transfer living elements of nature into galleries, museums, or artificial environments can, in some instances, contribute to their objectification and subjugation. At this point, it has been seen that once art turns its production field to nature, it can also cause damage to nature (Özden, 2023, p. 267). In this context, nature is positioned in some approaches as being in limbo between representation and intervention, permeable yet at a threshold with defined boundaries. Within certain artistic practices, it occupies a liminal, permeable yet ultimately untranscendable threshold between representation and intervention. At the same time, contemporary artistic engagements with nature have the potential to cultivate environmental awareness. On the other hand, nature-based production practices in contemporary art, while possessing the potential to raise environmental awareness, must also take on the responsibility of critically highlighting the tendency to reduce nature to a controllable form by miniaturising it. Thus, the relationship that art establishes with nature can be evaluated as an area of action, discourse, and ethical questioning that goes beyond merely an aesthetic connection.

In this sense, the article focuses on the movement of nature's objectification in contemporary art, intending to analyse the aesthetic, conceptual, and ethical tensions embedded in the process through which nature becomes an art object. Under this aim, the study employs the frameworks of eco-critical and post-humanist art theories to analyse the subject, grounding its analysis in perspectives that position nature not as a passive object but as an active subject. These theoretical approaches propose a shift in perspective, suggesting that nature should no longer be conceived of as a static entity, but as an agentive actor. Such a framework facilitates

the examination of artistic interventions in nature not solely as aesthetic gestures, but also as political and ethical concerns. Thus, the work of art becomes a platform that, besides being a visual representation, also questions the form, boundaries, and areas of responsibility of the relationship established with nature. The article employs a qualitative research design and analyses examples of artistic practices that have emerged over the past twenty-five years. While the works referenced and examined may be considered too recent to be fully historicised, they exhibit sufficient conceptual depth to support a theoretical analysis. In this study, the installations *Insomnies* by Stéphane Thidet, *Neukom Vivarium* by Mark Dion, and *Jardim Frágil* by Carlos Garaicoa are analysed through the lens of critical discourse analysis. The method under discussion here focuses on the modes of representation of nature in artworks, the conceptual frameworks underlying these representations, and the ideological meanings they embody. The analysis of the artistic works revealed an aesthetic context in which nature becomes intertwined with representation, intervention, and control, thus providing a conducive ground for an eco-critical evaluation. The article's aim is twofold. First, it seeks to reposition nature not merely as a represented object but as an ethical, political, and ontological subject. Second, it aims to contribute meaningfully to both art theory and environmental ethics literature by framing the relationship between contemporary art and nature as a multilayered site of inquiry.

### ***The movement of objectification and nature***

The representation of nature in the annals of art history underwent a profound transformation with the advent of modernity. Cartesian dualism, which posits the distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, positions nature not as a sentient subject but as a measurable object, laying the groundwork for an anthropocentric worldview (Merchant, 1980, p. 194). From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, scientific discoveries and technological advancements have contributed to a shift in perspective regarding nature, reducing it to a controllable, systematic, and possessable entity. In art, particularly in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, nature was depicted within an idealised framework through the genre of landscape painting. This aesthetic of representation neglected the intrinsic qualities of nature, reducing it from a lived, vital entity to a displayed aesthetic surface. Concurrently, the industrialisation and modernisation in Europe brought about a profound transformation in artistic production. Artists, seeking to redefine art using everyday materials, began to re-conceptualise common objects, industrial products, and found materials as artistic metaphors. This process has resulted in the transformation of these objects into art objects.

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ontological shifts clear in the general trajectory of art paved the way for the direct use of human and animal bodies as artistic material (Baker, 2001, p. 18). In addition, DNA, biological elements such as cells, and fossils have given rise to the idea that they can be art materials. Within this broadened repertoire of objects, including nature in objectification practices, not only redefined the meaning of the art object but also transformed its modes of presentation, its relationship with the viewer, and its spatial context. Nature ceased to function merely as a representational element and was treated as an art

object in its own right. This approach is characterised by the aestheticisation of nature as an entity that has been extracted from its own living environment - fragmented, selected, divided, and displayed. In this sense, the journey of meaning and value attributed to objects within the world of material things has, over time, evolved into a process in which artists objectify all forms of entities, including nature itself.

In contemporary art, production practices that encompass every form of mental and conceptual imagination include numerous works, projects, and exhibitions addressing the question of nature, or that which belongs to nature, as an art object. Throughout history, nature has functioned as both a vital source of sustenance and a wellspring of aesthetic inspiration for humanity. From the earliest depictions of nature in caves and temples to landscape paintings, and more recently, to eco-art practices and biospheric installations, organic elements of the natural world have consistently occupied a central position within the fine arts. Particularly since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artists have increasingly engaged in nature's objectification through practices that involve the exhibition of natural entities, such as a branch, a stone, a seed, or even a tree that has been uprooted and relocated into an art space. As Timothy Morton observes, "In the modern age, nature has ceased to be something we think about; it has become a possession we own, shape, and even exhibit" (Morton, 2007, p. 33). This observation underscores how contemporary art entails a renewed negotiation of the boundaries between nature and artistic practice within the context of environmental ethics. For instance, in his recent series *Exobotanica*, Japanese artist Azuma Makoto presents a salient example of this tendency. Makoto's practice involves removing cut plants and flowers, especially orchids, bonsai, and other exotic species, from their natural habitats and situating them in a range of environments, including the stratosphere, the polar regions, and the depths of the ocean (see Figure 1). The artist has documented these installations through the medium of high-resolution photographs, with the intention of transforming them into visual experiences that recontextualise the plants beyond their ecological limits and native environments. In the experimental installations, the plants are positioned as objects, suspended in the atmosphere, amid glaciers or deserts. This highlights the tension between vitality and artifice, life and display.



Figure 1. *Exobotanica* (Azuma, 2024)

Makoto's practice, in which he intervenes in a plant's ecological function and transforms it into an aestheticised, exhibition-oriented object, poses a significant problem for environmental ethics. Classical philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, and Baumgarten have long distinguished the beauty of nature from that of art, conceiving natural beauty as an experience of disinterested pleasure (Kant, 2007, p. 87; Hegel, 2018). However, Makoto's work diverges from this tradition by elevating nature itself to the status of an art object, rather than presenting nature as a source of representation or inspiration. In doing so, his practice instrumentalises nature, diverging from Kant's notion of disinterested pleasure, disrupting Hegel's dialectic between nature and spirit, and reducing Baumgarten's sensory aesthetics to a purely decorative formalism. Makoto's approach thus raises several questions of both aesthetic and ethical nature. Arne Naess's principles of deep ecology, for instance, argue against the instrumentalisation of nature for human purposes. As posited by Naess, the tenets of deep ecology are predicated on the notion that nature possesses intrinsic value and that all living beings possess an equal right to exist (Naess, 1989, p. 29). From this standpoint, reducing nature to a mere object within an artistic context can be regarded as an act that violates its ethical status through representational strategies. Consequently, the reconceptualisation of nature as an artwork not only reconfigures its aesthetic and ontological status but also invites critical reconsideration of its meaning within the framework of ecological ethics (Garrard, 2016). Beyond the ethical debates surrounding nature, the movement of objectification and its broader reflections within the art context offer a range of interpretive possibilities. The objectification movement, which encompasses all forms of objects, including those derived from nature, has introduced new perspectives on spatial context and viewer interaction. The exhibition of various objects, whether in gallery settings or public spaces, plays a crucial role in directing the viewer's perception and engagement with the artwork. Indeed, the rational and form-obsessed rules of modernist movements in art history, with their meticulous, theatrical, and exaggerated aesthetic ideals, exemplify paradigms that constrained the autonomy of the object. Nevertheless, as Graham Harman posits, the object is well situated to rescue the treasures buried within the ruins of formalism (Harman, 2022, p. 14). In this respect, both the object and the broader movement of objectification provide fertile ground for new aesthetic interpretations. Furthermore, through its autonomous structure, which allows the object to breathe within its own existence, it offers the viewer a multilayered field of experience and multiple interpretative pathways, transforming the object into a bearer of meaning. This transformation enables objectification to evolve from a passive instrument of representation into an active, autonomous entity that interacts with the viewer. Accordingly, the ideological framework that underpins the positioning of any object, whether natural, artificial, or biological, as an art object within a gallery or public contexts assumes paramount importance. The movement of objectification thus represents not merely an aesthetic preference but also a complex representational strategy encompassing the political, ethical, and epistemological dimensions of humanity's relationship with nature.

### ***The ideological background of the objectification movement***

The instrumentalisation and transformation of nature into an object in contemporary art are not merely aesthetic matters but also ideological projections. This approach extends beyond visual representation, manifesting as a broad field of intervention encompassing the shaping, reconstruction, and even regulation or functionalization of nature across diverse contexts. Shaped by Cartesian dualism, this paradigm began by positioning nature as a passive “thing” in opposition to the thinking subject. The advent of modern scientific and technological advancements further elevated nature to the status of an entity that could be controlled, shaped, and displayed. It is evident that art functions in a dual capacity; not only as a practice of reflection, but also as a mechanism that reproduces nature within certain frameworks of meaning. This process serves to legitimise an anthropocentric worldview. In contemporary artistic practices, the use of nature as both physical material and a conceptual tool often exposes the ideological foundation underlying such productions. The foundation is closely intertwined with the scientific, technological, sociological, political, and philosophical dynamics of its time. Within this theoretical framework, the reduction of nature to an art object represents not only an aesthetic choice but also an instrument of power, reshaping and exerting control over nature itself. Thus, the relationship between art and nature is not confined to mere representation; rather, it engenders a critical and transformative space for inquiry.

The ideological underpinnings of nature’s objectification manifest themselves in diverse forms and intentions before the viewer. This phenomenon occurs through two distinct mechanisms. Firstly, there is the transformation of nature into an object of representation, which is then transported into the gallery space. Secondly, there is the creation of experiential environments that reconfigure humanity’s relationship with nature. One of the earliest examples through which the ideological grounding of the objectification movement can be traced is Robert Smithson’s *Nonsite* series. In these works, the artist collects organic materials, such as stones and soil, from specific geographical locations and exhibits them in geometric metal containers or between glass panels within the gallery. This mode of installation is predicated on the notion of presenting and representing that which belongs to nature as an object. *Nonsite* does not directly contain nature itself; rather, it constitutes an abstract map or conceptual field of its representation (Smithson, 1968). Smithson thus performs a spatial transposition of nature’s material presence. By situating nature within a ready-made framework, the artist effectively displaces it from its original environment, thereby asserting control over it while revealing its fragility.

In contemporary artistic practices, nature functions both as the subject and the material of art, while simultaneously being subjected to anthropocentric interventions. Artists utilise the material and aesthetic resources of nature to construct new configurations of the natural world. However, these constructions inevitably carry the risk of reasserting dominance over nature’s autonomy, thereby reducing it from a living ecosystem to a spectacle or object of display (Bennett, 2010). At the same time, while such practices may gain legitimacy within contemporary art discourse, the multilayered nature of these works often risks rendering the artist’s ideological positioning invisible. A compelling example of this tension can be found in Hans Haacke’s *Grass Grows* (1969), a small-scale physiological system installation that

simultaneously demonstrates nature's autonomous productivity while spatially constraining the very processes it represents (see Figure 2). Haacke's artistic practices comprise a conical mound of soil scattered with germinating grass seeds, thereby creating a controlled ecological process within the gallery space. The installation functions independently of the viewer, thereby exemplifying an organic process in which the continuously sprouting grass transforms the material element itself. *Grass Grows* transposes nature's self-generative capacity into the gallery environment, turning biological processes into the very medium of art, while simultaneously provoking questions regarding the representation and mediation of such processes within the artistic field.

By allowing the grass to grow throughout the exhibition, Haacke's work presents nature not merely as an object of representation but as a self-generating process. In doing so, it exposes the aesthetic distance constructed between human domination and nature, thereby critiquing the confinement of nature within a controlled space and its transformation into an object of observation (Lippard, 1973). However, the multilayered structure of *Grass Grows* complicates the work's underlying ideological interpretations by viewers, rendering this layer partially obscured. In order to engage with this dimension, the work can be interpreted through the posthumanist framework proposed by Rosi Braidotti. From this standpoint, nature is not regarded as an entity that is entirely subject to human control, nor is it considered a transcendent power that exists beyond human existence. Instead, nature is conceived as a network of agents that coexist and transform alongside humans. This viewpoint allows nature to be reinterpreted not as a passive motif within art, but rather as an active generative force (Braidotti, 2013). It positions nature not merely as an entity to be represented, but as a subject with which an ethical and political relationship must be established. In this regard, *Grass Grows* can be regarded as an early artistic approach that resists the objectification of nature by embodying a posthumanist sensibility at the core of its ideological framework.



Figure 2. *Grass Grows*, New York (Haacke, 1969).

A significant historical threshold in the diversification of ideological intentions and forms emerged in the latter half of the 1960s, when the study of ecology became a central problematic of art. During this period, a comprehensive understanding of the environment developed, seeking to transcend the binary of nature and object. In accordance with this perspective, artistic practices began to evolve beyond the mere presentation of nature as an object, instead exploring ways to engage with it as a dynamic system. At the same time, a number of projects were produced that focused on the transfer of miniaturised versions of natural phenomena into gallery or museum contexts. These artistic endeavours, which involve the control and reconfiguration of nature within artificial environments, are grounded in ideological frameworks that aim to foster direct interaction with viewers and raise environmental awareness. Within this paradigm, the personal biosphere installations of the American artist Vaughn Bell serve as a prime exemplar (see Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3. *Village Green* (Bell, 2009)

The underlying concept of these installations is to transfer and reconstruct a small fragment of a natural ecosystem within an artificial environment. They treat nature as a portable entity while simultaneously making ecological fragility experientially visible. As Bell herself acknowledged, biospheres are “only a crude resemblance of the original ecological system” (Brown, 2014, p. 203), constituting a miniaturised and controlled version of nature (Sayan, 2024, p. 1044).



Figure 4. *Village Green* detail (Bell, 2009)

The notable proliferation of projects that share conceptual similarities with Bell's works is closely tied to the increasing scale, speed, and intensity of human-induced environmental degradation from the 1960s to the present day (Sezgin, 2022, p. 10). For artists whose habitat is the urban environment, ecological disruptions such as melting glaciers, global warming, rising sea levels, species extinction, and mass migration, each a form of geopolitical compulsion, have prompted a shift towards ecology-centred artistic production. While these potential future dangers have necessitated structural transformations in governance and policy, they have also given rise to new artistic fields for those seeking to contribute to the reconstruction of life through contemporary art. Within this framework, a number of exhibitions have incorporated nature as a site of political responsibility. For example, "Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art" in Chicago, "Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet" in London, and "The Oil Show" in Dortmund explored the politics of fossil fuel dependency. Similarly, ecology-oriented works by activist artists such as Hans Haacke, Robert Morris, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, and Allan Sonfist have redefined nature as not merely a subject to be represented, but as a domain that demands intervention in response to ecological crises (Sezgin, 2022, pp. 25-26). These projects' ideological foundations, together with their potential to draw public attention to the dangers of environmental change, demonstrate art's political and pedagogical role. Indeed, alongside scientific discourse, the mainstream media, documentaries, and investigative journalism, art is a powerful medium for cultivating environmental awareness, emotional engagement, and alternative visions of ecological futures. However, such contributions do not necessarily guarantee an ethically grounded relationship with nature.

As ecological art practices often contain internal contradictions in their intentions, objectives, ideologies, and potential outcomes, they require critical interpretation. An eco-critical reading that situates these practices within ideological and political frameworks provides a more Earth-centred perspective. Ecocriticism is a political mode of enquiry that examines how artistic practices engage with environmental discourse, establishing connections with related disciplines such as history, philosophy, sociology, art history, and ethics (Garrard, 2016, p. 16).

This approach allows us to evaluate ecology-oriented artistic projects in terms of their coherence and potential to address environmental crises.

When viewed through an eco-critical lens, artistic practices that position nature as an art object have been shown to reveal that some works are, paradoxically, grounded in anti-ecological foundations in their content, presentation, or modes of production. A number of recent art exhibitions have adopted ideological frameworks to raise awareness of urgent environmental issues, such as air quality and climate change. However, these exhibitions also contain significant contradictions. The transportation of artworks, the provision of air-conditioning in galleries, the printing of exhibition catalogues, and, most notably, the involvement of major energy and petroleum corporations whose industries are among the leading contributors to global warming – in the sponsorship and financing of such events, exemplify these inconsistencies. In this context, Documenta 13 is notable for reflecting these tensions. Despite being presented as a sustainable exhibition, its “green” aesthetic practices were, in essence, in conflict with its ecological claims (Sezgin, 2022, p. 26). In light of these contradictions, the task of what McKee calls “the new environmental art is to bring the very concept of environment into question, treating it as a conditional assemblage composed of biological, technological, economic, and administrative structures whose boundaries and agents are in constant conflict” (2003, p. 557). McKee’s emphasis suggests that environmental art should not merely employ aesthetic strategies to depict or evoke sensitivity towards nature but should instead establish a critical framework that interrogates how nature itself is constructed within social, economic, and political contexts. Indeed, with the emergence of increasingly action-oriented artistic approaches, nature has ceased to be perceived merely as a living environment; it has been drawn into the mechanisms of production, representation, and consumption, thereby assuming an objectified form (Merchant, 1980). This transformation has played a crucial role in reshaping artists’ perceptions and engagements with the natural world.

### ***Practices in the liminality: Approaches to the objectification of nature***

Within the discipline of art, the transformation of natural elements into art objects is frequently justified through the terminological frameworks of *Ecological Aesthetics* (Zeng, 2001) or *Green Rhetoric, Green Capitalism* (Sezgin, 2022, p. 127). These terms are employed to denote representations of nature that rely on artistic interventions into ecological processes and employ green materials such as trees, soil, water, grass, or seeds. While some of these approaches appear to be grounded in a comprehensive understanding of ecology, they often risk overlooking nature’s spontaneity and its vital functions within the ecosystem. The transformation of the green into an art object appears to be an expression of aesthetic admiration for nature’s ontological continuity and generative vitality. However, this process essentially re-instrumentalises nature, reducing it to an anthropocentric aesthetic perception (Bennett, 2010). While such practices may ostensibly aim to establish a more ethical relationship between art and nature, in practice, the concept often manifests as a form of representational romanticism or even nature fetishism (Brady, 2013, pp. 4-6). At this juncture,

practices that might be called “in the liminality” come into play. These are artistic approaches situated in the transitional zones where the boundaries between nature and culture, subject and object, ethics and aesthetics become blurred.

In Homi Bhabha’s (1994) theory of cultural hybridity, the concept of the “in-between” emphasises that identities and representations are not fixed but are produced within transient, fluid spaces. Within this theoretical framework, “practices in the liminality” can be understood as artistic strategies that navigate the ambiguity between representation and intervention in contemporary art’s engagement with nature. That is to say, the tension between transforming nature into an art object and seeking to protect or critique it. In this sense, borderline practices occupy an intermediary position that neither reduces nature to mere representation nor overlooks its ethical, aesthetic, and political dimensions. These practices do not position nature as a mere resource for sustaining life, nor simply as an object; rather, they position it in a kind of “liminal” or “transitory” state of being. This intermediate condition, as articulated in recent philosophical discourse, particularly in the plastic arts, resonates with the theoretical framework of new materialism, which challenges traditional dualisms such as nature/culture and subject/object. In new materialist thought, matter itself is conceptualised as an active agent that interacts with both human and nonhuman entities. It is dynamic and performative, capable of generating its own effects. New materialist thinkers such as Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, and Donna Haraway argue that material entities are not passive but active and relational. From an epistemological perspective, every new mode of expressing materiality serves to expand its potentialities. From this standpoint, nature is not regarded as a passive object opposed to humanity but as a complex, interwoven totality endowed with its own dynamics, agency, and vitality. Indeed, within the field of art, it is no longer possible to regard nature as separate, pure, or unspoiled by culture. As T. J. Demos notes, contemporary ecological aesthetics “rejects outdated notions of pure nature as existing apart from culture, instead situating the organic environment within diverse ecologies of technology, media, and culture” (Demos, 2016, p. 12). In Demos’s formulation, nature does not occupy an external, non-subjective space nor function merely as an aesthetic backdrop. Instead, it possesses ethical and political subjectivity, situated at the intersection of human and nonhuman activity. Within this theoretical and interdisciplinary framework, the representation of nature in contemporary art reflects a range of approaches that reconfigure the relationship between materiality, agency, and aesthetics.

Stéphane Thidet’s installation *Insomnies* (2016), renowned for its depiction of nature’s presence within artificial environments, can be regarded as a paradigmatic exemplar for examining the theoretical framework previously discussed (see Figure 5). The installation comprises six steel beds situated in a dormitory-like space, each filled with straw and covered with linen mattresses. Gattilier plants emerge directly from the soil beneath the beds, from which they are also rooted. In this work, Thidet introduces an organic component of nature into an enclosed interior, thereby preventing the plants from performing their essential ecological functions, such as participating in the carbon cycle or sustaining symbiotic relationships with their environment. This interruption of natural processes raises significant questions about the anthropocentric instrumentalisation of nature in art. As Rosi Braidotti

(2013) argues in *The Posthuman*, framing nature exclusively within human systems of meaning suppresses its agency and reduces it to a symbolic object. Thidet's artistic intervention of exhibiting living plants within an artificial environment, detached from their natural context, transforms them into cultural allegories, objects of contemplation rather than active participants in ecological cycles. This mode of representation does not romanticise nature, but rather reconfigures it into an aestheticised object, thereby weakening its connection to the living world (Morton, 2007). In *Insomnies*, nature remains materially present but is conceptually isolated, deprived of vitality and relational context. As Samantha Deman (2017) observes, Thidet's project evolved from a simple procedural setup into a complex experiential system in which artificial lighting mimics the natural rhythms of day and night. This manipulation of time constitutes an aesthetic strategy that underscores how artificial temporalities can distort nature's organic temporal order. Nevertheless, the reduction of organic matter to a representational device in Thidet's work transcends the confines of mere instrumentalisation. Contemporary practices of this kind challenge habitual and established modes of perceiving and representing nature, thereby complicating the viewer's interpretative engagement. Works such as *Insomnies* acquire meaning through the interplay between the artist's intention to see in nature and the revelation of that nature that the artist intends to achieve. In this sense, Thidet's installation does not sever its connection with philosophy, culture, or sociology; rather, it transforms within and through them. As Aktulum (2016, p. 10) suggests, the modes through which such works are perceived continue to evolve in dialogue with multiple disciplinary perspectives.

The selection of Maubuisson Abbey as the venue for Thidet's *Insomnies* exhibition was not made without careful consideration. The abbey has historically functioned as a monastic space characterised by retreat, discipline, and obedience. The incorporation of the Gattilier plant within this setting, intertwined with its historical and symbolic connotations, establishes a direct dialogue between nature and the ascetic rituals once practised in the monastery. Thidet's integration of the plant into the structure of beds evokes the transformation of nature into a mediator of bodily restraint and spiritual control. During the medieval period, Gattilier, commonly known as the chaste tree, was used in monasteries to suppress sexual desire. Within *Insomnies*, this botanical reference serves as a historical marker that confronts the viewer with collective memories of ritual, abstinence, and moral regulation. Thidet's use of this plant thus renders visible the ways in which nature has been repeatedly reshaped within the confines of anthropocentric ethical and religious frameworks (Thidet, 2016). At this point, nature manifests not merely as an ecological or aesthetic element, but as a cultural, historical, and spiritual representational field. From the perspectives of both posthumanism and ecological aesthetics, *Insomnies* can be interpreted as a "liminal practice" one that prompts viewers to question the representation of nature while simultaneously unveiling the mechanisms through which such representations are reproduced.



Figure 5. *Insomnies* (Thidet, 2016)

From an analytic perspective, the concept of the artwork is founded on interpretation. The experience of encountering an object without knowing it is, in fact, an artwork- seeing it merely as a tree or a plant- can be likened to the experience of tracing marks before learning to read. Conversely, perceiving it as an artwork entails a transition from the world of things to the world of meanings. It is therefore evident that artworks possess a textual force; they are read as they are seen, for they are inherently interpretable. As Danto (1981/2012, p. 571) observes, the artwork, much like the object whose existence depends on interpretation, contains an extraordinary degree of what might be called the abnormal.

Within this conceptual trajectory, a work that can be examined alongside Stéphane Thidet's *Insomnies* is Mark Dion's installation *Neukom Vivarium* (see Figures 6 and 7). In this piece, Dion transports the segmented trunk of a fallen tree into an exhibition space, preserving and displaying it within an artificial greenhouse environment. Through this act, *Neukom Vivarium* transposes nature into the museum context as a directly exhibited, observable organism sustained by technological systems. The installation rejects the notion of pure nature and instead exemplifies a "post-natural aesthetic" in which nature is entangled with cultural, technological, and temporal strata. The organic element, which is temporally fixed within the museum space, becomes detached from its own ecological cycle and reconstituted as an artwork.



Figure 6. *Neukom Vivarium*, Olympic Sculpture Park (Dion, 2006)

Dion's installation embodies a dual structure: first, it renders nature visible; second, it confines it within a display case, thereby transforming it into a spectacle-like art object. As Demos (2016) notes, in such approaches, nature is depoliticised and becomes instrumentalised as a component of the institutional narrative. Although Dion's work is ostensibly concerned with raising ecological awareness, the act of extracting the tree from its natural context and re-presenting it to the viewer produces a representation that paradoxically undermines this aim. The artist himself describes the project as follows:

We take a tree that is part of an ecosystem and relocate it by recontextualising it. We put it into a kind of Sleeping Beauty coffin -a greenhouse we built around it- and we keep it alive through an incredibly complex life-support system of air, humidity, water, and soil remediation to make sure it stays alive. All these things copy what nature does. It is very difficult, expensive, and technological. Yet once we destroy a natural ecosystem, it becomes almost impossible to bring it back. In a sense, we are constructing a failure (Miller, 2008).

Dion's statement illuminates the ethical and ontological tensions embedded in the installation. While intricate technological systems attempt to replicate nature's functioning, it remains impossible to fully reproduce nature's spontaneity and continuity. At this juncture, the artist's intervention metamorphoses into a representation in which the boundary between nature and object persists in a liminal state. This interventionist approach not only reflects the objectification of nature but also reveals the expression of an anthropocentric desire for control. In essence, the displaced tree trunk no longer belongs to the forest but exists instead as an artistic object displayed for the viewer's gaze. As Danto (1981/2012) contends, the process by which an object becomes a work of art involves interpretation, context, and the construction of meaning. In other words, an object's transformation into an artwork is not achieved solely through physical alteration, but through the interpretive framework that renders it meaningful. In this context, *Neukom Vivarium* can be regarded as an example of a natural element being recontextualised, both spatially and hermeneutically. Consequently, Dion's installation unveils the objectification of nature and the constitutive role of interpretation in its transformation into an art object (Harman, 2022, p. 200). The logical plane upon which the tree ascends into the domain of art signifies a transformative process, akin to

the conferral of a new identity, an act of interpretation, and a symbolic baptism. The object (the tree) is elevated to the status of a work of art only when interpreted within the theoretical framework of the art world.



Figure 7. *Neukom Vivarium*, Olympic Sculpture Park (Dion, 2006)

The final case study addressed in this research focuses on *Jardim Frágil* (2013), a work by Carlos Garaicoa that brings together living plants and fragile glass architectural forms (see Figure 8). This installation can be regarded as a conceptual continuation of the preceding examples discussed in the study, each of which foregrounds the boundary relations between the natural and the artificial. *Jardim Frágil* spatially and materially stages the liminal condition in which the process of nature's objectification unfolds - neither within a purely natural nor an entirely artificial plane. On initial observation, the work evokes the impression of an aestheticised landscape miniature. However, it subsequently relocates plants from their original habitats into the gallery space, a domain associated with urban architecture. The installation thus presents a model in which nature is confined within the urban environment and reduced to an object.

Garaicoa's artistic practice removes nature from the realm of mere representation, instead integrating it into the fabric of contemporary urban utopias. In this respect, the artist's work aligns with William Cronon's (1996) concept of nature as a cultural construct. However, by repositioning nature in this way, *Jardim Frágil* reveals not a pastoral landscape, but the mechanisms of domination that modern urban ideologies exert over the natural environment. The presentation of nature in an aestheticised, delimited, and deliberately fragile form serves as a meta-artistic commentary on its own staging, thereby prompting an inquiry into how nature is performed within the space of art. The installation does not merely offer the viewer an experience of the natural world; rather, it reveals how nature is aestheticised, instrumentalised, and transformed into an object of control within urban modernity. In essence, *Jardim Frágil* presents a critical discourse on the impact of urban planning, surveillance, and regulatory systems on nature, while simultaneously exposing the cultural mechanisms that discipline and reconfigure its representation.

Building upon Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of the *Third Space*, this work generates a hybrid form that exists at the threshold between nature and culture. This form of representation exposes how the disciplining and representation of nature within the gallery space translate into an aesthetic mechanism of control, thereby illustrating that ecological awareness can be constructed through aesthetic strategies (Bennett, 2010). The installation achieves this in two distinct ways: firstly, through the use of glass vitrines and miniature architectural elements, and secondly, conceptually through displacement, aestheticisation, and vitrification.

The display of nature within a vitrine, a glass case, creates a boundary that is transparent yet impermeable; thereby, it is precisely on this threshold that the tension between representation and intervention becomes most evident. In this sense, *Jardim Frágil* occupies an intermediary plane. Here, nature is neither entirely natural nor wholly absorbed into culture; rather, it emerges as an artificial life form situated at the intersection of aesthetic, political, and spatial interventions (Bhabha, 1994). Garaicoa's installation exposes the fetishising tendency inherent in transforming the "green" into an art object, while simultaneously offering a critique of the in-between condition of nature in modern urban utopias. This state of in-betweenness signifies not only a formal but also an ethical and ontological rupture (Brady, 2013). Consequently, *Jardim Frágil* can be conceptualised as an aesthetic space in which the boundaries between nature and culture are redefined. This redefinition initiates a new field of ecological inquiry within the arts, offering a spatial critique in which the lines between representation and intervention are blurred. In doing so, the work demonstrates the possibility of an artistic awareness and a critical eco-aesthetic sensibility that operates beyond the green.



Figure 8. *Jardim Frágil*, Brasília (Garaicoa, 2013)

## Conclusion

The concept of nature is broad in scope, encompassing not only the physical environment but also reality, life, truth, the ideal, and even representations of the divine. In contemporary art practices, nature transcends these broad definitions and is treated as an aesthetic display object that the artist can shape and transfer to controlled spaces such as galleries and

museums. It is also regarded as a phenomenon that raises conceptual, ethical, and political issues. The positioning of nature, or its organic elements, as an object, when examined through the intersecting theoretical perspectives of posthumanism, ecological aesthetics, and new materialism, opens up a multilayered field of inquiry.

In this study, examples that serve as the basis for discussions of the objectification of nature have been examined within the framework of the aforementioned theoretical approaches. In this context, nature has been addressed as an area of ethical and political inquiry. They are instead understood as fields for ethical and political inquiry into nature itself. These theoretical underpinnings have facilitated the examination of the ambiguous boundaries between representation and intervention in artworks. In doing so, they render visible the threshold at which the ideological background between nature and culture, subject and object, is questioned. The artworks primarily discussed within the historical and conceptual framework of this study go beyond inviting the viewer to a purely sensory experience. They tend to foster an awareness of the epistemic and ethical deficiencies inherent in the cultural and spatial reconfiguration and instrumentalisation of nature. Additionally, analyzing works through the lens of new materialist thought demonstrates that material entities in nature can be regarded as active subjects. This shift enables a move beyond an anthropocentric perspective. In this theoretical context, the study examined the works of three artists Stéphane Thidet, Mark Dion and Carlos Garaicoa each of whom renders visible different aspects of the objectification of nature. These artworks have been shown to establish rational frameworks that embody theoretical approaches to the movement of nature's objectification.

Stéphane Thidet's *Insomnies* (2016) makes visible the issue of nature's reduction to an aesthetic spectacle and its instrumentalisation by placing a natural element, the Gattilier plant, within an interior space, thereby disrupting its vital ecological cycles. Concurrently, through its historical references (the monastery and the Gattilier plant), the work underscores the re-significance of nature within the confines of cultural, historical, and moral norms. In this sense, *Insomnies*, demonstrates that the objectification of nature is not merely a formal transformation, but also a representational strategy intertwined with ethical and ideological tensions.

Similarly, Mark Dion's installation *Neukom Vivarium* (2006) repositioned an uprooted tree trunk within a high-tech space, presenting an artificial ecological aesthetic that rejects the myth of pure nature. The work highlights both the challenges of transferring natural ecosystem processes into a cultural setting and the conceptual tensions between representation and intervention. Consequently, *Neukom Vivarium* contributes to theoretical discourses that reveal the political and ecological implications and motivations underlying the objectification of nature.

The final work examined in this article, Carlos Garaicoa's *Jardim Frágil* (2013), brings together living plants and fragile glass architectural structures to create a hybrid space that is neither entirely natural nor fully artificial. By displacing plants from their original habitats and exhibiting them within the context of an urban gallery, the work exposes how modern urban utopias subject nature to control. In this process, nature is transformed into an aesthetic

object. *Jardim Frágil* thus becomes a metacritical representational practice that interrogates this transformation itself.

When the examples discussed in this article are considered collectively, it can be argued that the transformation of nature into an art object is not a one-dimensional act, but rather one that carries with it the potential for critical awareness. Artistic practices aimed at exhibiting nature in the context of galleries or museums involve an intervention that disrupts life cycles and objectifies nature. On the other hand, these practices make this intervention visible, enabling a questioning of human-centred forms of representation. Ultimately, the fundamental dichotomy between nature and culture can, beyond the notion of the green, be adapted into artistic practices through mental and conceptual processes that construct new layers of meaning. Consequently, the duality of nature and culture is being re-examined in light of ethical values and mental processes through artistic practices that respect nature, and new layers of meaning are being constructed through these practices. Instead, the production processes, spatial configurations, ideological underpinnings, and theoretical contexts of these practices must be considered. This approach contributes to the deepening of the relationship between art and ecology on both a critical and practical level.

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