



# A Proposal: Must We Ecologize?

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*In response to Pierre Huyghe's recent exhibition Umwelt at the Serpentine Gallery and the concurrent publication in Grey Room of a series of media-historical essays focusing on the genealogical lineages of the notion of ecology, the following proposal was written concerning the possible implications of an "ecological turn" in media theory for contemporary art history.<sup>1</sup> The proposal was sent to André Rottmann and Luke Skrebowski for responses. Their extensive reflections follow.*

—Eric C.H. de Bruyn

At one time Félix Guattari proposed that we distinguish between three ecologies—the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity—in order to produce a cultural and political diagnosis of our planetary crisis.<sup>2</sup> More recently, media theorist Erich Hörl has extended the proposition. He claims that “there are thousands of ecologies today: ecologies of sensation, perception, cognition, desire, attention, power, values, information, participation, media, the mind, relations, practices, behavior, belonging, the social, the political.” Indeed, he proposes that there is “hardly any area that cannot be considered the object of an ecology and thus open to ecological reformulation.”<sup>3</sup> Hörl makes this proposition in the introduction to an edited collection on *General Ecology: The New Ecological Paradigm*, which includes contributions from media, cultural, and environmental studies but leaves out any direct reference to art history. Nevertheless, Hörl's statement may be taken to pose a challenge to the methodological framework of art history, which could be considered ill-equipped to deal with such an ecological turn: not even an “art history without names” comes close to what is being suggested here.

Crucially, Hörl's “new ecological paradigm” is predicated on a splitting of ecology from nature. In other words, the possible provocation of Hörl's statement to the field of art history is not (or not only) one that is answered by questioning the environmental agency of the visual arts within the age of the Anthropocene—let alone by engaging in a more general investigation of the legacy of artistic representations of “nature.” Rather, what is called for is a more specific focus of art history and art criticism on the conceptualization of *environmentality*,

not environmentalism per se (although, clearly, negotiations of the current environmental crisis within artistic practice are part and parcel of such a general ecology). In this respect, art history with right might claim that, since the 1960s at least, it has developed an environmental analytic of its own in its constant confrontation with a vastly expanding field of art. Even a quick comparison of Robert Smithson's drawing *A Surd View for an Afternoon* (1970) with Pierre Huyghe's intricate diagrams for *Untilled* (Documenta 13, 2011–2012) and *After A Life Ahead* (Skulptur Projekte Münster, 2017) might provide a sense of this progressive "ecologization" of artistic practice. So, if we are not to dismiss this ecological turn as yet another attempt to reformulate art history in terms of a "generalized" visual culture, what new perspectives may it hold in store for a discipline that, admittedly, is equipped with a limited set of concepts to define the multiple levels and circuits of exchange between art and its "surround," whether this is considered in an architectural, economic, social, technological, informational, or even geological sense? And, in addition to prompting reconsideration of what such various notions as milieu, ecosystem, habitus, or ambiance have to offer art history, this proposal and its responses mean to explore the following question: to what extent might a specifically *ecological* perspective lead us to a reconsideration of the existing, artistic concepts of medium, site, or environment?<sup>4</sup>

Attending to the media-theoretical dimensions of Hörl's provocation only expands the stakes for the history and criticism of art. According to Hörl, the environmental turn within contemporary discourse is not the mere result of "social development" but is generated by a deeper seismic event; namely, the shifting tectonics of media-technological strata. In short, the *Umwelt* has become permeated by the web of media technology, establishing a *milieu* that is inhabited by both human and inhuman agencies and governed by a new form of rationality, a governmentality that operates on ecological principles of self-organization. We are living, then, not so much in Gilles Deleuze's society of control but, more specifically, within a social space of environmentality, where the "main problem is the capture and the control, the management, the modulation of behavior, of affects, of relations, of intensities, and of forces by means of environmental (media) technologies, whose scope ultimately borders on the cosmic."<sup>5</sup>

Insofar as cultural history is explained in terms of radical transformation in the relation between technology and power, Hörl conducts German *Medienwissenschaft* as we have come to know it. This approach leaves little room for a typically art-historical focus on the material specificity of individual artistic practices. One might also name other interventions within media studies that, of late, have proposed the need to "elementarize" media on the ecological, dynamic

scale of an all-enveloping milieu.<sup>6</sup> Yet, for the sake of brevity, let me stay with Hörl's approach. As the new paradigm of general ecology is presented to us, any potential tensions within the sociotechnic apparatus of capture and control play themselves out on the macropolitical scale of the biosphere, or what Hörl renames the technosphere. And as his previous statement maintains, the environmental expanse of the technosphere "borders on the cosmic." But short of considering the hubris of certain individual practices, such as the *Planetary Reliefs* of Yves Klein, how is art history to engage with such a technoeological scale of events? Rather than following this route, which can lead only to some notion of the technological sublime, let me try to articulate the situation in a more particular fashion.

It is worth reemphasizing that the new paradigm of "general ecology" is not to be reduced to the recently established field of ecocriticism. Again, its target is not "environmentalism" or concomitant issues of sustainability or preservation. Although the term was coined by biologist Ernst Haeckel, ecology is hardly now restricted to the life sciences. Its current prominence is mostly due to the postwar science of cybernetics. Therefore, we can agree with Hörl that ecology has come to describe a complex field of entanglements between heterogeneous, biotic, and abiotic systems. Where we might disagree is to what extent the ecological biosphere is fully transformed into a technosphere, as this, it seems to me, would prematurely restrict the aesthetic and political options open to cultural practice.

Another point of contention, which challenges certain *idées reçues* in art history, is that the typically modern paradigm of technics, which understood technology as an extension of instrumental reason, has become obsolete. If technics was originally based on a conception of natural processes as teleological and purposeful in orientation, within the new apparatus of environmentality, Hörl insists, this can no longer be true. The autonomization or "becoming environmental" of technology, which is attended by a veritable "explosion of environmental agencies [*umweltlicher Handlungs- und Wirkmäche*]," means that technics no longer acts as the support of a means-end rationality and that nature itself is seen as always already having lacked a given aim and purpose.<sup>7</sup>

It is not hard to see what might have inspired such a statement: it was a basic proposition of so-called second-order cybernetics that any living system is organized in an autopoietic manner and therefore is *nonteleological* in its development.<sup>8</sup> A well-known algorithmic model of such an autopoietic or self-organizing system, for instance, is the cellular automaton that also helped organize Huyghe's *After A Life Ahead*, a "time-based bio-technical system" installed at Skulptur Projekte Münster in 2017.<sup>9</sup> Autopoietic systems or machines operate

in a recursive fashion, producing in a circular fashion the organization that produces them. Typically, the notion of autopoiesis can be expressed only in a highly convoluted manner. To paraphrase the well-known definition by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, an autopoietic machine is organized as a network of processes of production of components, which “through their interactions and transformations . . . continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them” and in the process “constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in the space in which they (the components) exist by specifying the topological domain of [the autopoietic machine’s] realization of such a network.”<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, a living system (which is what autopoiesis attempts to define) is not a goal-directed system, but a deterministic system closed on itself. Causality can, thus, provide a conceptual framework of comprehension only to an extrinsic observer who is witness to certain modulations of an autopoietic system. That is, only from an external position of the observer can an autopoietic system be said to “function” or “fail.” Or, as Huyghe has done, one might state instead that the eco-system to which we are exposed is indifferent to our presence: its complex interactions, whether biotic or computerized (or both), are not fully visible, nor wholly comprehensible, to the spectator. Here, a topological difference between inside and outside, immanence and exteriority becomes apparent that is comparable to Jakob von Uexküll’s well-known distinction between *Umwelt* (a species-specific, perceptual world) and *Umgebung* (a physical surrounding irrespective of an organism’s perceptual experience of that environment). In contrast, then, to some of the prevalent spatial or contextual models in art history, such as the “institutional system” or “site-specificity,” an ecological model promises a subtler mode of describing the exchanges between inside and outside, system and environment.

At the same time, if the new ecological rationality is said to be characterized by its radical reevaluation of relationality, then there does not appear to be all that much new under the sun. Is that not exactly what minimal art proposed in its pursuit of the nonrelational (i.e., its negation of the work of art as self-enclosed, organic whole) and its attempt “to take the relations out of the work of art and make them a function of space, light, and the viewer’s field of vision”?<sup>11</sup> Even so, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the “algorithmic” character of minimalism or systems aesthetics could be probed further. If modernity reduced a multitude of relations to a few essential ones, as Bruno Latour has argued, this is no different from a system of algorithmic governmentality. “There is, in other words, a neoliberal-capitalist destruction of the relation,” as Hörl puts it, “a reduction of relations to calculable, rationalizable, exploitable ratios, in the form forcefully wielded by

the mathematics of power.”<sup>12</sup>

It should come as no surprise that Huyghe has styled names for multiple exhibitions after the term *Umwelt*.<sup>13</sup> Yet the question is not only how any one specific work by a contemporary artist may be situated in relation to a new paradigm of general ecology or, alternatively, environmentality, which Hörl proposes as “the contemporary form of governmentality.”<sup>14</sup> Rather, we must ask what might this retroactively entail for the way in which the history of institutional critique has been written or for the politics of identity and representation that have governed so much writing on contemporary art. Which, to be sure, does not entail that we should simply tack the “flat ontologies” of speculative realism, with its mythical scheme of a “world without us” onto the ecological turn.<sup>15</sup> If an autopoietic system consists of circuitous loops—all feedback allowing of no dialectics—it is not the metaphysical fantasy of a world without observers that should concern us: a “pure, a-subjective (or even antisubjective), indifferent materiality.”<sup>16</sup> Rather, it is a question of a new type of dialectics that can unfold between, on one hand, ecological systems and, on the other hand, systems of observation.

## Notes

1. Christina Wessely, “Watery Milieus: Ecological Perspectives in Marine Biology and Aquarium Studies around 1900,” *Grey Room*, no. 75 (Spring 2019): 36–59; and Florian Sprenger, “Environments of Experimentation and Epistemologies of Surroundings: John Scott Haldane’s Physiology and Biopolitics of the Living,” *Grey Room*, no. 75 (Spring 2019): 6–35.

2. Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: Athlone Press, 2000).

3. Erich Hörl, “Introduction to General Ecology: The Ecologization of Thinking,” in *General Ecology: The New Ecological Paradigm*, ed. Erich Hörl and James Burton (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1.

4. On milieu, see Georges Canguilhem, “The Living and Its Milieu,” *Grey Room*, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 7–31. On habitus, the locus classicus in art history is Erwin Panofsky’s *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (Latrobe, PA: Archabbey Press, 1951), where Pierre Bourdieu first picked up the term before developing it further.

5. Hörl, 10.

6. See, for instance, John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Eva Horn, “Air as Medium,” *Grey Room*, no. 73 (Fall 2018): 6–25; and Florian Huber and Christina Wessely, eds., *Milieu: Umgebungen des Lebendigen in der Moderne* (Leiden: Wilhelm Fink, 2017).

7. Hörl, 12.

8. Hörl builds his genealogy of ecological discourse on a limited history of cybernetics, distinguishing between a first phase, second phase, and third phase. Only in the last phase, which he dates (somewhat mysteriously) to ca. 2000, is the “ecologization” of society completed through the “radical environmental distribution of agency by environmental media technologies” (9). N. Katherine Hayles explains the difference between first- and second-wave cybernetics as follows: “first-wave researchers concentrated on building artifacts that would behave as cybernetic mechanisms. . . . By contrast, Maturana and others in the second wave look at systems instantiating processes that count as autopoietic. The homeostat might behave cybernetically, for example, but it does not count as an autopoietic machine because it does not produce the components that produce its organization. Perhaps because of this emphasis on process, autopoietic theory has proven readily adaptable to the analysis of social systems.” N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 141. Here Hayles is presumably referring to, among others, Niklas Luhmann, who is also an essential reference for Hörl.

9. Studied in computer science and mathematics, a cellular automaton or tessellation structure consists of a regular grid of cells that is developed according to a mathematical function and establishes patterns that stabilize in time. Discovered by Stanislaw Ulam and John von Neumann in the 1940s, Francisco Varela, a main protagonist of second-wave cybernetics, would become fascinated by such computer simulations known as the “game of life.” For more on Huyghe’s installation, see Nico Anklam, “Pierre Huyghe,” *Skulptur Projekte Archive*, <https://www.skulptur-projekte-archiv.de/en-us/2017/projects/186/>; and Rottmann’s response in this issue of *Grey Room*.

10. Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *Autopoeisis and Cognition* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980), 78–79.

11. Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 15.

12. Hörl, 8. For the most concise statement of Latour’s position, see his “To Modernize or to Ecologize? That’s the Question,” in *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millenium [sic]*, ed. Noel Castree and Bruce Braun (London: Routledge, 1998).

13. *Umwelt*, Esther Schipper Gallery, Berlin, 2011.

14. Hörl, 5.

15. Hörl seems to suggest as much when he writes, “the concept of ecology finally allies itself with the new materialisms that are struggling, at the heart of this contemporary fascination, to articulate a non-modern ontology and epistemology.” Hörl, 3.

16. I draw here on the excellent critique of speculative realism in Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), 31.