

TOPIC 01  
SUSTAINABILITY



**EDI-**

**H'S'BT**

**TORIAL**

DIALOGUES ABOUT  
DESIGN

READING DURATION 8 MIN.

**ANNA ZIKA**

## *What's the matter?*

It is war. The consequences of industrialization and mass consumption also threaten the existence of our planet. Politicians are meeting at climate conferences to look for solutions. Artists intervene in the environment they want to protect with their works. They are becoming experts in soil renaturation, disposal techniques, and pollutant removal. More and more people are trying out healthier lifestyles and forms of individual and regional self-sufficiency. Various institutions are committed to the social equality of all sexes, of »whites« and »people of color.« A total change in our attitudes and behavior is urgently needed and is at least beginning to emerge

That sounds like a description of our present, doesn't it?

It is - also - a description of conditions around 1970, when the consequences of the Vietnam War, the over-exploitation of nature, the exploitation and discrimination of people, and the deepening of the gap between rich and poor were recognized as problems and became a matter of awareness. The results at the time included the founding of the Club of Rome, which commissioned the study the Limits to Growth in 1972, as well as the organic food movement.

## Looking Back

What could we have learned from this if we could learn? As early as 1962, biologist Rachel Carson warned of the consequences of pesticide use in industrialized agriculture in her book *Silent Spring*: the title of her book imagined a world in which songbirds would be extinct. Malicious reactions, such as the accusation of hysterical lies or the question of why a childless woman should care about the future of humanity, did nothing to prevent the book from becoming a bestseller - especially as the author was unfortunately proved right with her warnings.

**Ten years later,** in 1972, the Stockholm Environmental Summit banned the herbicide DDT (immediately after the Second World War, people had been sprayed with it to prevent the spread of epidemics in refugee camps).



Max Kühn, What we like

At the same time, more than fifty years ago, the US researchers Donella and Dennis Meadows at the Institute for System Dynamics at MIT calculated the »limits to growth« in a computer simulation: »If the current increase in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production and the exploitation of natural resources continues unabated, the absolute limits to growth on Earth will be reached within the next hundred years.«<sup>1</sup> In other words, 50 years from now, the raw materials used to date will no longer be available in sufficient quantities (or at all) if we continue to produce and consume as usual.

1 Meadows u. a.: Die Grenzen des Wachstums (1972), 14. Aufl., 1987, S. 17.

To prevent this, it would have been necessary, among other things, to curb the global rise in birth rates, introduce more efficient ecological agriculture, use fossil fuels much more sparingly, and abandon widespread deforestation. Although the authors presented this in their publication, which appeared as a report to the Club of Rome, with great urgency and clarity, and although the book edition proved to be a widely read, high-circulation success, we are now in the midst of a climate catastrophe: summers that are too hot and too dry on the one hand, torrential rainfall with symptoms of flooding on the other - even in Central Europe!

The goals were by no means utopian: the model called for by the Club of Rome for a global system of sustainable economic activity should prevent a »sudden and uncontrollable collapse« and simultaneously be capable of

**»satisfying peoples basic material needs.«<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>2</sup> vgl. Ulrich Grober, Bildwelten der Nachhaltigkeit – zum Design eines Begriffs, in: Simone Fuhs u.a. (Hg.), Die Geschichte des nachhaltigen Designs, 2013, S. 34-41, hier S. 34.



Florian Lind, Harz



Lousia Klose, »Liebes Ahrtal, wie geht es dir ?«, Ahrtal  
(November 2021)

The concept of sustainability is over three hundred years old. In 1713, the Saxon lawyer and mountain councilor Hans Carl von Carlowitz formulated his *Sylvicultura oeconomica, oder haußwirthliche Nachricht und Naturmäßige Anweisung zur wilden Baum-Zucht*. In it, he admonished people to consider a »continuous, stable and sustainable use« of forest stands, in which only as much should be cut down as could grow back in the foreseeable future. If this instruction had been followed, there should not have been any violent deforestation to the point of clear-cutting, monoculture, and other forms of greed-driven forestry in the first place. The bark beetle plague would not have reached the critical stage, the consequences of which are dramatically demonstrated to us on almost every walk through the forest.

»The careful treatment of the forest was a central concept for expressing the long-term continuity of usability over time. [...] In the Saxon forest, a new way of thinking was emerging that anticipated the sustainability idea of the 21st century,«<sup>3</sup> Annette Kehnel points out in »Wir konnten auch anders,« her book on the »History of Sustainability.« The benchmark of the economy should be »the true forces of the forests,« the natural, self-regenerating carrying capacity of the ecosystems<sup>4</sup>. But the historian goes back even further: she explains successful concepts for sustainable fishing on Lake Constance or the long-distance pasture farming practiced by farmers in southern France as early as the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. Various forms of recycling means of production, be it building materials or textiles, were also a matter of course - in some cases well into the age of industrialization.



Leon Haas, »peak of an iceberg« (2023/2024)

**As a spiritual virtue, charitable thinking determined human and economic activity;**

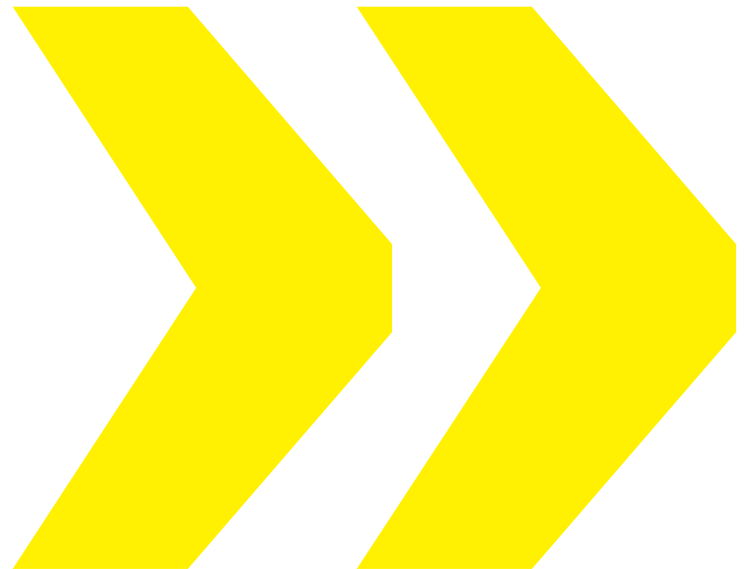
**pious foundations or easily repayable communal micro-credits contributed to their financing.**

3 Annette Kehnel, *Wir konnten auch anders. Eine kurze Geschichte der Nachhaltigkeit*; München 20225, S. 64f

4 *ibid.*

Items of daily use were repaired or resold - sometimes professionally by qualified specialists - until the material resold until the material cycle was almost closed again. Such concepts have worked for a large part of the population for centuries and are currently the subject of lively debate under newer terms such as degrowth, upcycling, or bricolage. But why is the acceptance and application of tried and tested cultural techniques so slow? Why is so much still being produced, even though we need less, and so much thrown away, even though we »could still use it«? Annette Kehnel knows the sad answer: »Because we want to solve the problems of the future with modern concepts. Modernity may still sound progressive and innovative, but historically speaking, this modernity is now more than two centuries old. This means we want to solve the challenges of the early 21st century with concepts developed in the late 18th and 19th centuries«. <sup>5</sup> In the first peak phase of industrialization towards the end of the 18th century, freedom, equality, fraternity, and (technical) progress, growth, and prosperity became the fundamental values of an emerging bourgeois society<sup>6</sup>. Their need for political autonomy was unhappily linked to Charles Darwin's idea of the survival of the fittest:

»In the popular version of the theory of evolution developed by Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, self-interest was often confused with selective advantage. The ability to adapt to the environment, to skillfully exploit available resources, and to outperform the competition were misunderstood as success factors in evolution. [...] And what natural selection was for the evolutionary biologist, the invisible hand of the market became in economic theories, [...] which regulates everything and thus made the old-fashioned moral ballast of pre-modern societies superfluous«. <sup>7</sup>



5 Kehnel a.a.O., S. 11

6 Aufzählung nach Kehnel, a.a.O., S. 12.

7 Kehnel, a.a.O., S. 13.





Kai Litke, »Werkstoffe«, Bad Lippspringe (2023)

This ballast - such as ethics of industriousness and modesty - was thrown overboard all the more frenetically by people who, around the middle of the 20th century, had just emerged from the Second World War and the endless suffering associated with it. While the principle of »masculinity« may have just been shipwrecked in the role models of statesman and soldiering, in the generalship and diplomacy, it now celebrated all the more cheerful rebirth as an engineering achievement and managerial talent.

The fact that these threatening problems are entirely artificial - and do not represent natural disasters or divine punishment - is described by the Anthropocene epoch designation: this will soon be the official name of the era in which we live: The International Commission on Stratigraphy will decide by the end of 2024 whether the epoch labeling will follow a recommendation by the Nobel Prize winner for chemistry, Paul Crutzen. Crutzen, who discovered the hole in the ozone layer in 2000, proposed this term to replace the Holocene. While Holocene literally means »the completely new,« i.e., something that can no longer be increased, Crutzen emphasizes »the central role of humanity in geology and ecology. [...] A species, [...] sedentary for 10,000 years at most, recognizes itself as the force reshaping the planet«<sup>8</sup>. And that is not a good.

The massive changes brought about by humans came into effect around 1950, »when the so-called Great Acceleration caused resource and energy consumption to skyrocket exponentially«<sup>9</sup>, says Bernd Scherer. Why is it called the »Great Acceleration«? Because a few generations of people consumed and continue to consume fossil fuels that took billions of years to create and store<sup>10</sup>. The middle of the 20th century was characterized by the period after the Second World War, when millions wanted to console themselves for personal losses and grievances, primarily through consumption. »I really deserve this after all the misery« was the motto of the »economic miracle«; however, it was not only the economy that grew, but also the world's population.



Lousia Klose, »Liebes Ahrtal, wie geht es dir ?«, Ahrtal (November 2021)



Leon Haas, »peak of an iceberg« (2023/2024)

9 Kim-Melina Bezram. Epochal. ZEIT Nr. 30, 13.7.2023, S. 27.

10 Das Anthropozän ist auch eine Geschichte der Unterdrückung. Bernd Scherer im Gespräch mit Fritz Habekuß und Maximilian Probst, ZEIT Nr. 30, 13.7.2023, S. 28.

However, this increase in the consumption of resources and workforce is only the logical consequence of a development that began in the 18th century at the latest, when the invention of the steam engine made production energies possible that went far beyond individual muscle power and performance. The enthusiasm for industrialization did not stop at agriculture either: the introduction of nitrogen-based artificial fertilizers at the beginning of the 20th century counteracted food shortages and famines but also poisoned natural environments and is still contributing to the extinction of species worldwide today.

Above all, however - according to Bernd Scherer - the Anthropocene represents a »history of the oppression of nature and people«. In other words, people who live in the »industrialized nations« exploit people in other countries who have to extract raw materials under devastating conditions or produce goods that they cannot afford themselves. Or they exploit people in their own countries who come from other countries: in his work »Petrochemical America,« American photographer Richard Mizrach, together with landscape architect Kate Orff, documented the consequences of the oil processing industry for the regions along the Mississippi. The plants are located

»on the land of former plantations. The descendants of the slaves of yesteryear breathe the refinery fumes today.

Exploitation may take other forms, but at its core, it does not change«<sup>11</sup>.

Need a few more figures? Kim-Melina Bezram provides them in her ZEIT article »Epochal«: »People today move more sediment than all the rivers and winds. And the plastic produced yearly weighs as much as all the earth's inhabitants put together. People use around a quarter of what the biosphere produces for themselves by harvesting and felling, processing and burning, slaughtering and fishing. [...] Over the past <sup>50</sup> years, zoologists have documented how water and land populations have shrunk by an average of two-thirds.

Due to the enormous losses of entire species, biologists are discussing the 'sixth mass extinction' in the earth's history. Meanwhile, a few species are grotesquely numerous. The live weight of all farm animals is more than 20 times greater than that of all wild vertebrates.«<sup>12</sup>



Max Kühn, »WHAT WE LIKE«

12 Bezram, a.a.O., S. 27.

13 Scherer, a.a.O., S. 28.

14 ebd.

Humans create and destroy their environment like no other living being. This fact is as absurd as it is complex. A scientific perspective alone is not enough to investigate it; »The history of the earth and the history of mankind are intermingled in a way that requires a new description and new knowledge,«<sup>13</sup> Bernd Scherer points out. The philosopher was director of the House of World Cultures in Berlin until 2022; he is familiar with working with scientists, artists, and activists. He sees holistic artistic approaches as a way of overcoming the specialization and differentiation that have become commonplace in research and science, especially in the modern age: »Our worldview is not only the result of the accumulation of knowledge but also the exclusion of knowledge«<sup>14</sup> - and the exclusion of stories: as Annette Kehnel, among others, explains. As Annette Kehnel, among others, points out, official historiography consistently ignored the success stories of communal social associations and practices of mending and recycling to report instead on the economic and political rise of single, primarily male individuals or dynasties. Women in medieval communities, small farmers, or mendicant monks as heroes were too unsexy for narratives. Similarly, indigenous knowledge, women's wisdom, healing, or magical knowledge was systematically ignored or presented as a curiosity.

» It is fair to say  
that the deprivation  
of natural beauty

has set the modern en-  
vironmental movement  
in motion. «<sup>15</sup>

Ulrich Grober

»According to conventional historiography, such significant activities as wars, conquests, and explorations were crucial to social evolution, but not the work of women, which has always been seen as separate from it. This is precisely why it provided a powerful basis for a new subversive art practice that was at home beyond power structures,«<sup>16</sup> says Jeffrey Kastner in his standard work on »Land and Environmental Art.« According to Kastner, land art has »largely fallen under the radar« of art history. This is all the more regrettable and surprising as this art reacted directly and spectacularly to the circumstances at the end of the 1960s.

The works of Land Art, which can be understood as a »deliberately romantic search for a renewed connection with a kind of atavistic inspiration or as a serious commentary on the factual state of the late industrial biosphere,« »take nature as their starting point, the individual's reactions to nature and his actions within it.«<sup>17</sup> The installations or actions in the industrial wasteland or largely untouched desert landscapes »reflect the dissonances of the present.« The era was marked by the Vietnam War and escalations of violence in the US civil rights movement and the Europe-wide student demonstrations - culminating in 1968.



Janik Peltzer, Tagebau Hambach (2018)

16 Jeffrey Kastner, Vorwort, in Ders. (Hg.), Land und Environmental Art, Berlin 2004, S. 10-17, hier S. 16.

17 ebd., S. 12.

The global chaos, but also the spirit of optimism, was an expression of a deep crisis that the political and cultural establishment in the industrialized nations had fallen into. Kastner also sees a »more confusing dynamic of consumption and new technologies«<sup>18</sup> at work and, associated with this, »inevitably a feeling of alienation,« as Andrea Vetter, a well known explorer of ecological and economical transformation, points out more than 50 years later! It is also identified as one of the central problems in social and ecological change. Vetter crystallizes environmental damage and social and gender injustice as further critical points in our present and thus puts her finger in wounds that have been festering for several decades because even around 1970, »ecological and feminist consciousness had awakened« and the call for »a simpler, more natural existence«<sup>19</sup> had become loud:

»The political frictions of this period and the increasingly decentralized and 'bottom-up' political attacks on the 'institutions' that contributed to these frictions were echoed in the art world in that they increasingly questioned their institutional traditions«<sup>20</sup> - and in the fact that places for the realization of artistic concepts were sought outside of museums and galleries, namely above all in injured nature or the wilderness. The art critic Barbara Rose immediately recognized the programmatic nature of forms of artistic resistance against established cultural institutions, which simultaneously represented resistance against political, social, and ecological conditions: »The spheres of ethics and aesthetics merge here.«

»The spheres of  
ethics and  
aesthetics  
merge here.«<sup>21</sup>

18 ebd.

19 ebd.

20 ebd.

21 Barbara Rose, *Problems of Criticism VI: the Politics for Art Part III*, Artforum, New York Mai 1969, Wiederabdruck in Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era, from the late 60s to the Early 90s*, New York 1996

Today, this fusion is more urgent than ever, and that is why we see designers and students of design disciplines in particular as being challenged - not only them but also the political and economic decision-makers who must open up these spaces for action for them. There has certainly been no lack of inspiration from art in recent decades: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, for example, focused on every day but vital practices such as cleaning and purification with her actions and installations. While many people in this country are familiar with the performative works of Joseph Beuys, who carried out prominent symbolic actions such as sweeping out the Grafenberg Forest (1971) or healing the rinsing fields in Hamburg harbor (1982), probably only a few people know that Mierle Laderman Ukeles implemented her manifesto Maintenance Art («the art of preserving») in a cycle of 13 actions between 1973 and 1976: she mopped streets in Soho and cleaned museum floors, worked as a museum attendant and identified these assignments as »art«: [\[Image\]](#).

Later, Laderman Ukeles made herself available to the New York City Sanitation Department as an unpaid employee to acquire expertise in waste management and to be able to act pseudo-professionally as part of an official system.

Her commitment ranged from the handshake ritual (Touch Sanitation 1978-79<sup>22</sup>) [\[Image\]](#), in which she shook the hands of New York waste disposal technicians, to the co-planning of a waste loading station for ships on the Hudson River (Flow City, 1983-1995<sup>23</sup>) [\[Image\]](#): in the middle of a transfer point for waste to be transported away, she set up an information station from which visitors could experience how gigantic quantities of urban waste were approached and then dumped onto barges.

22 vgl. ausführlicher Kastner, a.a.O., S. 155.

23 Vgl. ausführlicher Mark Feldman, Inside the Sanitation System: Mierle Ukeles, Urban Ecology and the Social Circulation of Garbage, in: Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies, Vol. 10, Issue 1 (Waste Issues), 2009 Article 5. =<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/61174751.pdf> (Abfrage 22.9.2023)



Mierle Laderman Ukeles used recycled materials in her realization. They presented environmentally relevant themes in a video: »Flow City serves as an interface where the extremes of the dialectic between nature and culture are brought into a visible coexistence«<sup>24</sup> is how Patricia C. Philipps describes this work. The artist hoped her project would inspire viewers to »steer their actions and ideas in such a way that they contribute to building a meaningful public life.«<sup>25</sup>



Consciousness-raising and the need for action had been accentuated in the USA against the backdrop of an environmental protection movement that was at least 100 years old and could refer to the dropout author Henry Thoreau and the natural philosopher John Muir as eloquent pioneers. Land Art seemed to formulate itself as a meaningful, aesthetic expression of this movement.

24 Patricia C. Philipps Maintenance Activity. *Creating a Climate for Change*, in Nina Felshin, (ed.) *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, Seattle 1995, S. 188.

25 ebd.

At the same time, in 1970, the Senator from Wisconsin, Gaylord Nelson, proclaimed Earth Day<sup>26</sup> and thus also changed ecological awareness far beyond the borders of the USA. For a while at least, artists were now involved in municipal environmental projects. For example, the American Patricia Johanson was commissioned by the San Francisco Arts Trust in 1988 to design a sewer for the San Francisco Bay Area. With the Endangered Garden [Abb.], an attractive habitat was created that protected various endangered species and recreation for people<sup>27</sup>, considering ecological and aesthetic requirements.



Philipp Meuser, Serie »The Mountain that Walks«, »Wildfire II«, Mecklenburg Vorpommern, Hagenow (2023)

26 Vgl. <https://earthday.de/ueberuns/idee/> (Abfrage 22.9.2023)

27 <https://patriciajohanson.com/projects/endangered-garden-2.html>; vgl. außerdem Kastner S. 159.

# Why this detailed look back?

To demonstrate how »forgetful« people can apparently be when it comes to facing up to uncomfortable truths. Everything known, everything tried, little learned. What a pity!

In many of his publications, sociologist Harald Welzer uses the term »cognitive dissonance«<sup>28</sup> to explain this rigidity in people's actions: we are not only shown the effects of the coronavirus crisis by scientists, we even experience them, and yet we do nothing to change our consumption or the way we live together - because »the others« are much worse, or »the politicians« should decide...

## *7,000 apple trees?*

What we have compiled about the Anthropocene as an age of crises sounds terrible and depressing. And it has been known for a long time. In 1985, the science journalist Hoimar von Ditfurth wrote his book about the global threats to humanity - threats that humanity itself had produced - among which the threat of nuclear war still had a special significance at the time: »So let's plant an apple tree.«<sup>29</sup> The title referred to a quote attributed to Martin Luther, who is said to have said that if the world were to end tomorrow, he would plant an apple tree today. In this way, Ditfurth deliberately juxtaposed pessimism, fear, and hope in his presentation.

After devastating forest fires in Canada alone in the summer of 2023, an apple tree is, of course, no longer enough. But replanting 7,000 oak trees in the 1980s, initiated by artist Joseph Beuys, was at least a clear sign.

Of course, such actions won't save the world. Still, continuity in symbolism and in the development of narratives can help people to come up with more concrete ideas to shape their lives differently: more justly, more environmentally friendly, in short, more sustainable. The visual and applied arts are very much in a position to contribute to this. You will find some of them in this issue.

29 Hoimar v. Ditfurth, *So lasst uns denn ein Apfelbäumchen pflanzen*, Hamburg 1985.

# ANNA ZIKA



# THANKS FOR READING

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