global dis :connect

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How can art history account for ‘ecological art‘ beyond the promises of sustainability through the lens of extraction and consumption?

The problem

Contemporary art increasingly addresses climate change and ecological crisis, often focussing questions of sustainability and individual renunciation. Art historical scholarship continues to follow suit, privileging artistic intention and ecological awareness while often neglecting the material infrastructures that sustain such reflection. Digital image production, exhibition making, and global logistics depend upon extensive resource extraction and energy consumption. Still, ecological art is frequently understood only as a response to ecological crisis rather than as part of the systems through which it is produced.

Core interest

The project investigates forms of dis:connected ecology in contemporary art. It examines how ecological discourse emerges from artistic practices that remain embedded within extractive infrastructures. Rather than evaluating artworks according to ecological intentions alone, it asks whether practices that intervene directly in relations of production or develop counter-extractivist forms of cultivation, collecting, and commoning might operate more ecologically than symbolic forms of awareness-building. It develops the concept of the “extractive turn” and proposes an art history of consumption as a materialist framework for contemporary visual culture.

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The project addresses the disconnection between ecological representation and ecological materiality. While contemporary art increasingly presents itself as environmentally conscious, it remains embedded within networks of extraction, labour, consumption, digital infrastructures, and fossil-capitalist forms of production and resource exploitation. At the same time, ecological discourse often assigns a moral burden of responsibility to artists and artworks, displacing systemic contradictions onto individual actors. The project instead aims to reconnect ecological reflection to the global infrastructures that materially condition its very possibility.

Preliminary results

Initial research reveals a striking convergence between artistic self-description, curatorial framing, and scholarly interpretation in contemporary ecological art. Ecological claims are frequently reproduced without sufficient attention to the material conditions of artistic production. Historical analysis further suggests that art has always depended upon extractive processes, from quarrying and pigment production to photography and media technology. Under conditions of digitality, these material demands intensify dramatically, making extraction a central category for understanding contemporary visual culture.