

Living in ecologies
How new media art can teach us to think sustainably
By Veronica Fanzio

An obvious affirmation: our present-day is characterised by the encroachment of technology into daily landscapes. To quote Adam Greenfield,

“a hundred million connected devices sing through the wires and the aether” (6)

Concurrently, the environmental crisis is urging us to rethink our role in the world and the means by which we inhabit it. To unknot the complexity that characterises our modern epoch and reflect on how we can reassess our relationship with nature, new media art¹ offers some important insight.

Thus, the fundamental question is: what can technologized art teach us about ourselves and our relationship with an increasingly digitised reality, in a historical moment where we must not assuage ourselves from being caretaker of the Nature that surrounds us?

The answer may be found in the theoretical bones of new materialism. Emphasising the artistic and aesthetic dimension found in media culture, this ontology situates material objects in relation to their connection with human and natural streams, allowing us to gaze over their possibilities as agentic forces. Looking at the human as post-human, it unravels the connection between all elements, natural and technological included, as it conceptualises the world as an intricate and open system.

In this sense the new materialist approach equips us for the discovery of new, unexpected patterns of organisation between environments and their potential for adaptation. Moreover nature becomes central, together with human artefacts, in the development of an ecosystemic approach to communication (Peters 2015, 3)².

In line with this approach, we can look at the three spheres of; nature, humans and technology through the lens of ecology, as famously described by Guattari in *Three Ecologies* (1989). This seminal body of work aptly considers the complexities that reside in the relationship between human and natural environments as it does not separate organisms but rather, lingers at their interconnections.

To put this framework into practice, below is an image extracted from the [Habitat](#) exhibition by Heleen Blanken (2019), showcased at the Nxt Museum in Amsterdam from 2019 to 2022. The artwork is a data-driven installation that transposes the natural environment of the Leiden Naturalis Biodiversity Centre into digital ecosystems with strong game-like aesthetic features (Nxt Museum 2020). It spans a large, blank wall as a narrow river of water flows beneath the screen, reflecting the images. Artificial rocks rise here and there on the ground, open to interaction.

¹ For media I intend what is beautifully put down by the [Oxford Language Dictionary](#) as “the intervening substance through which sensory impressions are conveyed or physical forces are transmitted.” New media art labels the art forms that are created and/or transmitted through non-analogic media.

² New materialism is in fact strongly nurtured by (or fuses with) the actor network theory, another object-oriented ontology that redeems nonhuman and human entities with agentic powers that agitate the surrounding technological and social systems (Crawford 2020).



Habitat by Heleen Blanken at Nxt Museum, Amsterdam, 2019 to 2022, retrieved from [Nxtmuseum.com](https://nxtmuseum.com)

The audience can interact with the immediate objects, while people's motions are captured and translated into subtle distortions on the screen: there begins a symbiosis of the wandering humans with the digital render of a natural centre, and the very present element of water that mirrors the screen.

The imprint of the digital sphere is pervasive and the spectator is left with no choice other than to embrace it and become a participant. This artificially mediated symbiosis draws attention to the interrelationship between human agents, natural elements, and digital representations, all mutually informed and bonded in a cause-effect relationship.

Focused on the uncertainty that underlies such interactions, Blanken's installation invites us to reflect on our yearning for nature and in doing so, how we explore new, technologized dimensions of this relationship (ibid.).

More concretely, this artwork offers us the opportunity to reflect upon humans' capability to both scientifically inspect and preserve nature (supported by technology to an ever greater extent) and the 'art pour l'art' mannerism that often underlies artistic spectatorship. The conjugation of these capabilities, and the realisation that we are co-participants in the cycle of creation, can impel us to be more compassionate and caring toward nature, and hopefully foster a more critical usage of technology.

Consulted resources

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