

Flow of Creativity and Sustainability: The Role of Art in Shaping a New Perspective and Fostering Ecological Awareness

*Fluxo de criatividade e sustentabilidade:
o papel da arte na construção de um novo olhar e
na promoção da consciência ecológica*

*Flujo de creatividad y sostenibilidad:
el papel del arte en la construcción de una nueva
mirada y en el despertar de una conciencia
ecológica*

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RESUMO

This paper examines the *Eco Showboat* project, led by Anne Cleary and Denis Connolly in Ireland (2022-2023), which travelled along waterways to unite scientists, local artists, and communities around ecological and climate challenges. The study critically explores art's role in fostering ecological awareness and community-based action. Using a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, it shows how the project facilitated dialogue among artistic, scientific, and local perspectives. Findings reveal that this collaborative, participatory model goes beyond merely representing environmental issues, contributing to the

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definition of “ecological art” as a transformative and interventionist practice with tangible social and environmental impacts. Ultimately, the project illustrates ecological art as a living practice, reconnecting nature and culture and inspiring sustained, community-driven engagement with ecological challenges.

Keywords: Eco Showboat; *ecological art*; *interdisciplinarity*; *landscape*; *community engagement*.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina o projeto *Eco Showboat*, liderado por Anne Cleary e Denis Connolly na Irlanda (2022-2023), que percorreu vias navegáveis reunindo cientistas, artistas locais e comunidades em torno de desafios ecológicos e climáticos. O estudo analisa criticamente o papel da arte na promoção da consciência ecológica e da ação comunitária. Utilizando uma abordagem qualitativa e interdisciplinar, demonstra como o projeto fomentou o diálogo entre perspectivas artísticas, científicas e locais. Os resultados mostram que esse modelo colaborativo e participativo vai além da mera representação de questões ambientais, contribuindo para definir a “arte ecológica” como prática transformadora e intervencionista com impactos sociais e ambientais concretos. Por fim, o projeto ilustra a arte ecológica como prática viva, capaz de reconectar natureza e cultura e inspirar engajamento comunitário contínuo.

Palavras-chave: Eco Showboat; *arte ecológica*; *interdisciplinaridade*; *paisagem*; *engajamento comunitário*.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el proyecto *Eco Showboat*, dirigido por Anne Cleary y Denis Connolly en Irlanda (2022-2023), que recorrió vías fluviales reuniendo a científicos, artistas locales y comunidades en torno a los desafíos ecológicos y climáticos. El estudio analiza críticamente el papel del arte en la promoción de la conciencia ecológica y la acción comunitaria. A través de un enfoque cualitativo e interdisciplinario, muestra cómo el proyecto facilitó el diálogo entre perspectivas artísticas, científicas y locales. Los resultados revelan que este modelo colaborativo y participativo va más allá de la mera representación de problemas ambientales, contribuyendo a definir el “arte ecológico” como práctica transformadora e intervencionista con impactos sociales y ambientales tangibles. Finalmente, el proyecto ilustra el arte ecológico como práctica viva que reconecta naturaleza y cultura e inspira un compromiso comunitario sostenido..

Palabras clave: Eco Showboat; *arte ecológico*; *interdisciplinarietà*; *paisaje*; *participación comunitaria*.

Introduction

Ireland's current socio-political and cultural vitality has created optimal conditions for the emergence of new dynamics across a range of fields. It is within the broader mobilization around environmental issues that artists Anne Cleary and Denis Connolly launched the artistic and scientific project, the *Eco Showboat*. Navigating Ireland's rivers, they brought together scientists, artists, and local communities through activities such as installations and performances, aiming to raise awareness about environmental and climate issues, while also exploring ways to promote sustainability at both local and global levels.

This project falls within the category of the so-called ecological arts, which are increasingly taking on an engaged and active role in the context of today's ecological crisis and climate upheaval. The artists not only aim to interpret and represent the condition of human and non-human life, but also seek to raise awareness and, in some cases, suggest solutions in response to the forewarned scenarios.

The careers of Anne Cleary and Denis Connolly trace a trajectory, of which the *Eco Showboat* project is the most recent expression. In the contemporary art scene, they occupy a dual position: as creators of unique and original works and as performance artists, having shown in prestigious museums such as the Pompidou Centre in Paris or the Barbican and the Tate Modern in London, among others.¹ In recent years, they have increasingly taken on the role of initiators and facilitators of participatory events with an ecological focus, wherein the event itself becomes integral to artistic creation.

As artists we see ourselves as both observers and participants in the works we create, and in recent years we have worked to bring the public and our artistic collaborators into works that we call entanglements. These investigations have led us into partnerships with musicians, dancers, writers and teachers. We have become filmmakers, writers, photographers and even computer programmers (Connolly, Cleary, 2010).

The figure of *entanglement* is particularly representative of the *Eco Showboat* project: places, people, actions, and both individual and collective experiences intersect to collectively shape the event – an artwork centered on environmental and climate themes.

The project comprises a variety of artistic expressions, including music, installation, and performance. The artists also established an ongoing dialogue with scientists and local communities through exchanges and workshops.

The objective of this paper is to reflect on the process that was implemented and its effects in the context as well as to explore how this experience might support and inspire similar initiatives. The research is based on qualitative, *in situ* data collection carried out in 2024, when the authors conducted interviews with some of the participants and project promoters, aiming to explore their perceptions and document factual elements of the initiatives. These interviews were conducted on site and complemented by photographic documentation of the materials produced during the project, to which the authors had access. In addition to this post-project fieldwork, the authors had previously engaged with the *Eco Showboat* in 2023, actively participating in some phases of the journey, including navigating aboard the *Mayfly* – the project's boat – and taking part in some activities. This direct involvement provided valuable contextual understanding and insight into the project's processes and intentions. Given this level of engagement, the authors had both observational and participatory perspectives, which informed the analysis.

To best represent this work/process, the text is structured in two parts. The first one introduces the concept and some of the foundations of ecological art; outlines the national Irish context – which in several ways fostered the realization of the project – and describes the organization and development of the *Eco Showboat*. The second part focuses on specific actions involving the most representative media, including music, sculpture, performance, and videomaking. In conclusion, key thematic threads will be drawn from this presentation to offer a reinterpretation of the project's specificities, while highlighting its contributions to contemporary ecological art and broader socio-environmental expectations.

Ecological Art: Reuniting Nature and Culture

Although the label “ecological art” remains imprecise due to the diversity of works and approaches it encompasses, its emergence and original usage in the late 1960s – which gained clearer definition in the 1990s – refer to a more specific set of artistic practices. Art historians and artist-researchers have identified some general features of this field, emphasizing its aim to connect humans and nonhumans in relationships of interdependence. According to Kagan (2014), drawing on Gablik (1991), ecological art typically engages in connective practices that foster empathy beyond rigid dualisms – such as “nature vs. culture, developed world vs. underdeveloped, man vs. woman, reason vs. emotion, etc.” (Kagan, 2014, p. 2). It emphasizes reconstruction and transformation rather than mere critique and is guided by an ethical responsibility toward diverse communities of life.

These ideas are grounded in rejecting the separation of nature and culture and reimagining shared spaces as inclusive of other species, protected as commons, and cultivated through care. An example presented by Kagan (2014) is the *trans-species art* of Lynne Hull, whose habitat restorations serve both human audiences and wildlife “clients,” illustrating ecological art’s move away from treating nature as passive backdrop.

This vision aligns with theoretical contributions that challenge anthropocentrism, such as Timothy Morton’s concept of “hyperobjects” – vast entities like climate change or plastic waste that exceed human-centered understanding – which suggest that art should emerge not solely by, for, and about humans, but through collaboration with nonhuman forces, even if that collaboration is uneasy (Morton, 2013).

The work of Viveiros de Castro also sheds light on this idea by showing how Indigenous art traditions have long anticipated key principles of ecological art: emphasizing interdependence, collective identity, and the integration of human and nonhuman worlds in artistic creation. Through his concept of Amerindian perspectivism, Viveiros de Castro (1998) proposes that animals, spirits – and even rivers and forests – may possess agency and perspective, thus grounding an art practice that views nonhumans as co-participants rather than passive subjects. Although he does not write directly about art, his ideas have had a significant influence on contemporary theory, curatorial

practice, and artistic production by offering new ways to think beyond anthropocentrism. As Cesarino (2017, p. 4) notes, the “speculative variation around multiple possibilities of existence” that he proposes opens space for art to create “a reflective experience grounded in the diversity of modes of existence”. This influence is evident in curatorial practices and projects that view objects as active agents, challenging the conventional boundaries between subject and object, human and nonhuman.

Tsing (2012) further enriches this perspective by showing how interspecies relationships shape resilience and cultural histories, arguing that ecological stability comes not from human control but from embracing unpredictable interdependencies. Her collaborative work on the Feral Atlas² exemplifies interdisciplinary approaches that blend scholarship, art, and digital tools to trace human-nonhuman entanglements.

Together, these frameworks reinforce the idea that art can and should emerge from more-than-human networks, acknowledging nonhuman agency and ecological richness. This convergence finds expression in the *Eco Showboat* project, which draws on Morton’s concept of hyperobjects, Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism, and Tsing’s notion of interspecies resilience in practices “that are genuinely exploring the fabric of life’s complexity” (Kagan, 2014, p. 3). In this way, the project shifts human protagonism, becoming an open process shaped by multiple ecological flows – while also being situated within a specific social and political context that will be explored next.

Transformative Flows as the Context of Action

Initially tied to and dominated by England, Ireland’s economy functioned largely as a complement to the British economy until 1978, when the country joined the European Monetary System (Kiely, 2020). Until that point, significant emigration had counteracted natural population growth, keeping the population size relatively stable (O’Toole, 2018), even as local modernization efforts began in the early 1970s. Ireland’s deeper integration into the European Union in subsequent years laid the groundwork for economic expansion and, by the mid-1990s, economic development and a sharp rise in per capita GDP led to substantial inward migration flows. This rapid growth was supported by a business-friendly tax policy and regional and social funding from the European Union (O’Toole, 2018).

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Since then, the intense migratory flow has become an integral part of the country, and Ireland has turned into a multicultural society. Thus, it may be said that over the last 150 years, Ireland has both “spread itself out” and “is often produced elsewhere” (O’Toole, 2018, p. 12), and, in a second moment, it has welcomed that “elsewhere” within its own borders.

Long associated with its traditional character, the country has entered a phase of transformation. In this regard, some have spoken of a sensation of experiencing history in “fast forward,” “as transformations accumulate in economic practices, religious experiences, cultural achievements, and political relationships, both internal and external [...]” (Foster, 1988, p. 3).

This represents a moment filled with potential, as transitional contexts are rich in possibilities and generate conditions in which new “species” of organization, articulation, movement, value scales, and more may materialize. Under these newly emerging conditions, old certainties are called into question, creating an experimental space that also set the stage for the artistic sphere to undergo radical change from the late 20th century onward (Tipton, 2007).

In the 1960s, faced with a lack of dedicated venues for exhibiting visual arts, Ireland had developed a distinctive practice of organizing large-scale arts festivals. These festivals offered artists a unique freedom of expression, shaping their formation and fostering an environment that encouraged innovation. This dynamic proved crucial for the evolution of the Irish art scene in the following decades, when the government and public policies finally began to give sustained attention to the cultural sector (Graeve, 2024).

Among the available exhibition opportunities, unconventional venues were also used for art displays, playing a significant role in reinforcing the messages conveyed by the works themselves. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s – despite limited resources – this environment “did lead to the establishment of a series of exciting artist-run groups and collectives, especially in Belfast, making up for the lack of ‘official’ spaces” (Tipton, 2007, p. 128). These groups began to experiment beyond the traditional boundaries of Irish art.

In terms of expressive forms, since the 1990s there has been a noticeable tendency to “transcend ideas of identity” – once maintained in opposition to British colonialism – and to emphasize internationalism: the aim has shifted toward addressing issues that go beyond the local, placing on the agenda “global and universal concerns that range from climate change to age-old issues of loneliness and poverty” (Marshall, 2007, p. 101).

Environmental challenges in particular became a central focus for Irish artists. For instance, from the 1980s onwards, Barrie Cooke addressed themes such as effluent leakages in rivers, algal infestations suffocating lakes, and the spread of the invasive *Didymosphenia geminata*. In 1986, Gwen O’Dowd contributed a work to raise funds for victims of the Chernobyl disaster. The urgency surrounding radioactivity also inspired the Clean Irish Sea campaign in 1988, supported by Greenpeace, which featured works by O’Dowd, Cooke, and artists from other countries bordering the Irish Sea (Scott *et al.*, 2020). Increasingly recognized as major landscape painters of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Cooke and O’Dowd exemplified what Gablik (1991), as discussed by Kagan (2014), described as key features of ecological art: connective and reconstructive practices that aim to transform rather than merely represent, grounded in ethical responsibility toward human and nonhuman communities.

An important turning point that affirmed a connection to broader human concerns came in 1995 with the *L’Imaginaire Irlandais* festival in France, where a younger generation of artists presented works that questioned identity and power (White, 1996). Yet, attempts to project a modern image of Ireland met with limited enthusiasm abroad, as foreign audiences continued to expect rural stereotypes and nostalgia – expectations further reinforced by the diaspora and marketing (Slaby, 2012).

Nonetheless, driven by economic prosperity, supportive public policies, resilience built over decades, artist-led initiatives, and the creation of new spaces and institutions dedicated to artistic production and recognition (Tipton, 2007), new initiatives continued to flourish. From the 2000s onwards, avant-garde artists increasingly engaged with global themes rather than exclusively Irish subjects – exploring, for instance, the tension between nature and culture (Clare Langan), or humanity’s denial of looming threats (Paddy Jolley) (Marshall, 2007).

In parallel, artist-led ecological projects were also emerging in the international scene. A notable example – that is relevant to this case – is Bethany Wiggin’s *WetLand Project* (2015) on Philadelphia’s Schuylkill River: a floating habitable sculpture by Mary Mattingly, built from repurposed materials that functioned as a collaborative platform for sustainability experiments and ecological engagement, hosting public workshops, university classes, and volunteer-led research initiatives. Through these actions, *WetLand* highlighted the importance of amplifying local, often overlooked voices – both human and nonhuman – to tell the story of long-unfolding ecological crises.

Thus, it was at the intersection of Ireland’s evolving artistic context and broader ecological movements, such as those that generated the *WetLand*, that the *Eco Showboat* project emerged. Shaped not only by human intention but also by transformative flows within this context, the project articulated since 2019 was based on the interplay of artists, rivers, climate, and communities and unfolded through a series of actions and collaborations in 2022-2023. In line with Morton’ (2013) perspective, it transformed environmental crisis into something locally felt, shared, and embodied. Set against this backdrop, the *Eco Showboat* reflects both Ireland’s cultural evolution and a wider engagement with contemporary ecological challenges.



Figure 1. Map of the expedition in 2022 and 2023. Source: School of Looking.

In 2022, the boat and its artist-organizers – Cleary and Connolly – traveled from south to north along the River Shannon and River Erne, moving from Limerick to Enniskillen, using only photovoltaic energy. In 2023, they crossed the country from west to east via the Shannon, Grand Canal, and River Barrow, from Askeaton at the mouth of the Shannon to the port of Howth on the Irish Sea (figs. 1 and 2).

Along the way, Cleary and Connolly collaborated with local and regional artists, scientists, and community groups. Community involvement in the project embodied key principles of ecological art, emphasizing co-creation, interdependence, and ethical engagement. Artistic actions were collaboratively shaped with regional actors, integrating the organizers' vision with local cultural practices and ecological contexts. This participatory approach was grounded in partnerships with local institutions and regional artists that already developed activities in the areas, and it was guided by shared responsibility, fostering connections with communities. By valuing local knowledge and collective agency, the project nurtured a sense of shared ownership and belonging, ultimately forging durable and meaningful relationships locally.

The project emphasized therefore a bottom-up approach – a strategy recognized as essential for complementing macro-level ecological directives set by public policy. This orientation aligns with the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which emphasizes that “the effectiveness of decision-making and governance is enhanced by the involvement of local stakeholders [...]. Integration across sectors and scales increases the chance of maximizing co-benefits and minimizing trade-offs” (IPCC, 2019).

The project was supported by several Irish institutions which, in response to the growing complexity of climate-related obligations under EU policies and programs, complemented top-down strategies with a more localized, human-scale approach. It also tackled the issue of declining water quality in Irish rivers, streams, and lakes – an issue often linked to insufficient community engagement within state-led water protection frameworks (Weiner *et al.*, 2022). Dedicated funding was provided through an SFI Discover Award, further strengthened by ongoing collaboration with staff from the Local Authority Waters Program (LAWPRO) and additional support from the Arts Council, Creative Ireland, Waterways Ireland, and local authorities across the country.



Figure 2. Aerial view of the *Mayfly*, the project's boat, traveling along the waterways.
Source: School of Looking.

Thanks to this support, the *Eco Showboat* was able to develop and organize a range of activities that dealt with biodiversity and helped raise awareness or explain key environmental issues at both the local and global level, engaging in community mobilization and empowerment to varying degrees. Such as recommended by Kagan (2014), in doing so, it broke from traditional human-centered art, inviting people to sense the vast, “uncanny” networks we inhabit (Morton, 2013).

Post-Studio Practice: Bringing Art into Being within Context

The activities linked to the *Eco Showboat* project were integrated into preexisting flows – both physical, such as the movement along rivers, lakes, and canals, and conceptual, involving social and ecological transformations. Drawing on the dynamics of what is known as post-studio practice, the project fostered an adaptive and collaborative form of art, cultivating a mode of artistic dialogue that is both critical and attuned to real-world conditions.

The term post-studio was first employed by conceptual artist John Baldessari and is often associated with the practices of artists such as Daniel Buren and Robert Smithson (Columbano, 2015). As Milan (2023, p. 268) notes, its strength lies in the possibility to “literally and metaphorically stick to the reality of the place where the work was produced and exhibited”. This approach resonates with environmental art, as it enables artists to actively engage with local contexts, shifting from a fixed or static object into a fluid process embedded within the environment and communities. In this sense, artistic practice begins to reflect the reality of the environment, allowing “hyperobjects” to “spontaneously” bring art into being through their pervasive presence (Morton, 2013).

In this context, a logic of transformation rather than mere representation (Kagan, 2014) shapes the work’s political dimension, aligning artistic creation with active engagement and change (Volvey, 2007).

By recognizing that post-studio practice enables artists to embed their work more profoundly within existing flows, Cleary and Connolly expanded their approach. By adopting the concept of the artist’s studio as dispersed across multiple sites of production – occupying diverse spaces beyond any single, fixed geographical location (Eastwood, 2017) – they were able to engage directly with the ecological and social currents shaping the project’s meaning and impact.

Like Buren’s shift from canvas to context and studio to city (Milan, 2023), the *Eco Showboat* extends artistic practice beyond fixed, indoor spaces into dynamic, public environments shaped by movement and landscape. It emerges as a hybrid and collaborative form of intervention, and supplements scientific and political discourse with an approach that is not only desirable but necessary for addressing the climate crisis, which “in its uncontained and uncontainable nature, [...] disrupts our sense of boundaries and expectation” (Barber; Gilson, 2023, p. 4). As Morton (2013) puts it, “global warming [as other hyperobjects] is an object on whose inside we find ourselves”.

Artworks Within the Artwork

Throughout the progression of the project, the sequence of actions performed along the waterways constituted a cohesive artwork in its own right – yet it did not diminish the unique value and significance of each distinct intervention. The presentation of selected actions helps illuminate the interplay between artwork and process, being and becoming, artistic intervention and ecological engagement.

The Resonance of Music in the Landscape

Within the *Eco Showboat* project, the relationship between music and what is commonly referred to as nature was explored in two distinct ways: through the use of sounds inspired by nature and through the direct incorporation of natural sounds themselves (Rothenberg, 2012). Through both approaches, the artists proposed diverse forms of dialogue between sensory perception and cognitive interpretation.

Composing and performing music inspired by nature is a process rooted in the physical characteristics of the landscape, but also in its cultural dimensions, thereby integrating these aspects into ecological systems. Through the act of creation, the artists find their place and, in turn, draw the audience into a space of critical reflection (Spartz, 2019). Several works and performances from the project were shaped by this sensibility. At the Belturbet marina, composer Deirdre Murphy (2022) created *The Water Song*, a piece inspired by the flow of water and its interactions with the ecosystem.

This dialogue between sensory and cognitive perception was also made explicit in the work of Deirdre O'Mahony, particularly in a collaborative project with farmers that focused on soil health and regenerative agriculture to promote biodiversity and water quality. For the *Eco Showboat* project, O'Mahony collaborated with Suzanne Crampton, a farmer from Kilkenny, to create *The Farmer's and the Dung Beetle's Song*, a musical work inspired both by traditional Irish music and by the beetle itself. This piece was performed on the banks of the River Barrow by Siobhan Kavanagh and Michelle Doyle.

Another example was provided by the music of Shahab & Shayan Coohé, who, in turn, presented an improvisation inspired by the Mayfly (Ephemera fly), the symbol of the project.

The other musical approach explored in the project involved the direct incorporation of natural sounds. As Spartz (2019) notes, the use of environmental sounds in musical composition reflects a broader movement to reconnect contemporary life with its ecological realities. This approach, according to Schaffer (2001), blurs the boundaries between music and ambient sounds – inseparable in certain cultures. Several initiatives within the project stood out in this regard.

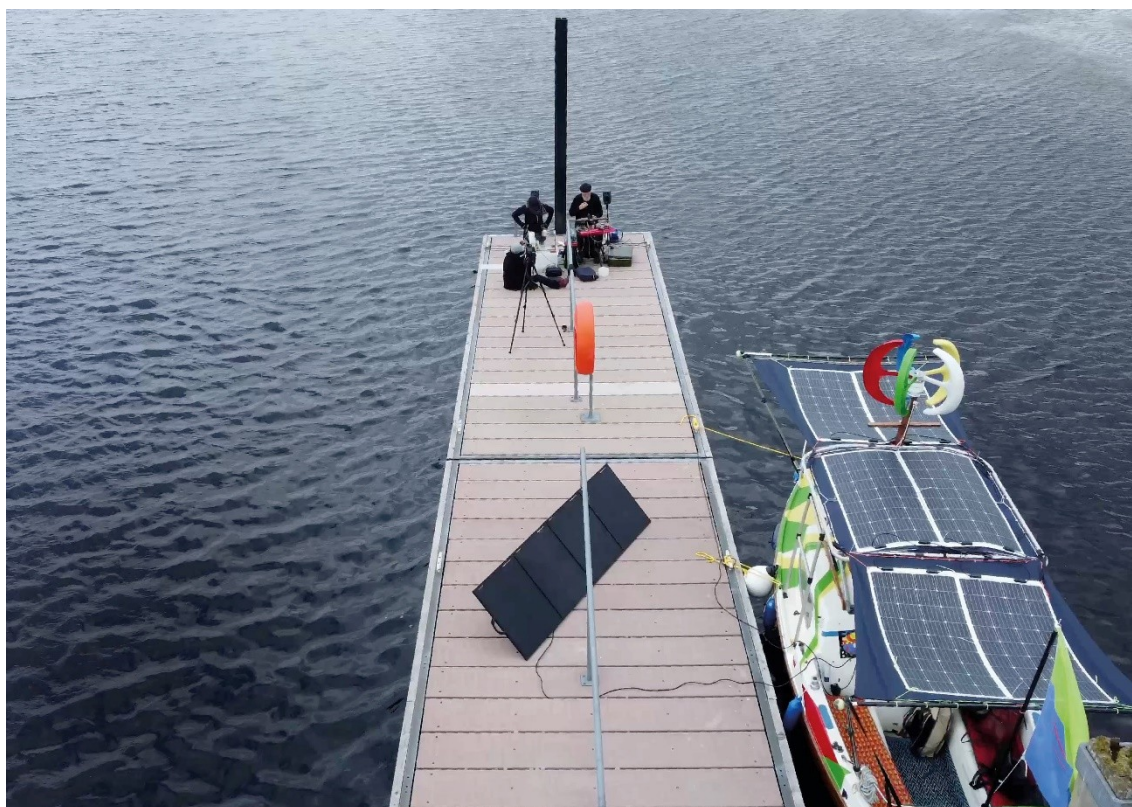


Figure 3. Mick O'Shea and Irene Murphy on a floating dock in 2022, composing with recorded and real-time sounds. Source: School of Looking.

Artists Mick O'Shea and Irene Murphy explored the continuity of temporal flows through their work in Clonmacnoise, participating in both editions of the project at different locations: a floating dock in 2022 (Fig. 3) and an old barge in 2023. Their practice involved layering previously recorded sounds with real-time wind and water audio, embracing ephemeral and intangible flows.

Sound artist Slavek Kwi explored an “underwater sound ecology” using samples recorded in Lough Derg on Ireland’s Atlantic coast as well as during trips to tropical regions such as the Amazon, Australia, and South Africa.

Establishing an artistic dialogue with nature, Paul Berg’s work at Lough Derg – drawing influence from artists such as Bill Fontana – captured the sound of water through resonating cylinders, imbuing it with an emotional dimension. He employed a floating musical sculpture – *An Crannóg Ceoil* (Fig. 4) – composed of resonant tubes and native plants, as a means to raise awareness about water conservation and the improvement of water quality.



Figure 4. Paul Berg’s floating musical sculpture *An Crannóg Ceoil*. Source: School of Looking.

The project’s boat itself, the *Mayfly*, was transformed into sound artwork through the use of sensors and Arduino boards that captured the sounds of its engine and interactions with water. Developed in collaboration with engineer Nicholas Ward from the University of Limerick, this installation created a dynamic dialogue between nature and technology.

Performance Art: A Bridge Between Emotion and Reflection

Performance art – rooted in Ireland since the 1970s (Phillips, 2015) – has been particularly represented in the *Eco Showboat* project. According to Artaud (as cited in Jones, 1998), by abolishing the stage and the auditorium, performance allows for direct communication with the audience, who, placed at the heart of the action, are physically affected. This immersion in the very space makes participants more aware of the implications of their actions.

Visual artist Diane Henshaw and actor Patrick McEneaney explored the interplay between contemporary drawing and body mime within the geopark landscapes and the vast green belt of the Fermanagh region – areas threatened by industrial mining and hydraulic fracturing. Rooted in the principles of *live art*, their performance took the form of an interactive drawing session beneath the bridge structure, visually connecting it to the water below. This act unfolded alongside a conversation that served as a call to action in defense of ecological values.

The *Ephemera* project by Anna Macleod and Padraig Cunningham – developed as part of the *Eco Showboat* program and connected to Macleod's ongoing *Water Conversations* series exploring water themes since 2007 – resulted in several site-specific interventions at Lough Key Forest Park. In one of these actions, the artists immersed themselves in the lake while carrying a transparent flag embroidered with the word *Mayfly*. The flag's translucency allowed the waters of the lake to remain visible, creating the illusion that the word *Mayfly* floated directly on the surface, symbolically merging the natural environment with the artistic gesture.

Another notable work, *Mesocosm*, created by Christine Mackey in active collaboration with the local community, took the form of a floating island composed of aquatic gardens. These gardens featured native plants sourced from the artist's personal seed collection, carefully accumulated over several years, for their phytoremediation properties – natural abilities to cleanse and restore water quality (Fig. 5). The community played a key role in both the construction and installation of the piece, fostering a sense of shared ownership and deeper engagement with the project's ecological aims.



Figure 5. *Mesocosm*, a floating island composed of aquatic gardens, designed by Christine Mackey and constructed in collaboration with the local community. Source: School of Looking.

True to her approach centered on “the idea of the garden as a living herbarium” which interweaves ecological systems with social dynamics, Mackey (2019, p. 93) consistently embraces a collective and decentralized practice. She prioritizes interaction between artists and audiences, emphasizing collaborative processes in which outcomes are shaped not by institutions or individual authorship, but through the shared agency of all participants (Mackey, 2013). The installation of *Mesocosm* at Blackrock Pond, near Drumshanbo, was part of a performance in which the floating island, towed by a boat crafted from woven local plants, created a visual and sensory dialogue with the surrounding landscape.

In a similar performative vein, renowned choreographer Cindy Cummings presented a playful improvisation on the banks of the River Barrow in Graiguenamanagh, in dialogue with the music of Anna Tanvir and Maninder Singh. Blending contemporary dance with traditional forms, her collaborative approach consistently engages artists and scientists alike, using the exploration of Irish landscapes as a means to address pressing contemporary issues such as environmental awareness.

Amplifying Sculptures: From Landscape to living Experience

By engaging directly with the areas surrounding Ireland's waterways, the *Eco Showboat* project sought to deepen and clarify its connection to the landscape. In line with Rosalind Krauss' (1988) vision, sculpture – and, by extension, other artistic interventions – moves beyond a self-contained form to enter into dialogue with its spatial context and the viewer's lived experience.

This perspective, which is related to post-studio practice and enhances collaboration with nonhuman forces, seeks to establish a continuous and dynamic relationship between the artwork, the physical space, and the audience. In this context, Alan Phelan's installation in Banagheer involved placing colorful geometric objects – representing artificial rocks – along the local marina, exploring the intersection between artificial and natural worlds with the question, "Can rocks save the planet?"

According to the principle proposed by Krauss (1988), these artificial sculptures were not static objects but dynamic forms that engaged in a dialogue with the natural landscape, encouraging viewers to move through space and time, thereby shaping their experience as the artwork unfolded with each shift in perspective.

This approach redefines sculpture: if time is the fourth constitutive dimension of the sculptural work, participatory interaction amplifies the artwork through the immersive experience, the viewer's movement, and changes in environmental factors such as light, sound, and weather conditions.

To enrich his work with a scientific perspective, Phelan organized a presentation with Dr. Patrick Wyse Jackson from Trinity College Dublin, exploring the links between geology, climate change, and art.

Another intervention was in Boyle, where Pádraig Cunningham materialized the underground bed of the River Shannon by planting stems along the surface, reconstructing a map of the river's course, particularly the section known as Mayfly (Fig 6).

In addition, three sculptures installed on the shore of the Boyle River evoked the transition into the cave, creating a contrast between constricted parts and wider expanses. Cunningham's work transformed the site itself into an active component of the artwork. By walking among the stems, the audience engaged in a process of discovery that merges artistic expression with geological insight. The resulting art installation was at once physical, conceptual, and experiential.



Figure 6. Pádraig Cunningham mapping the underground bed of the River Shannon by planting stems along the surface, reconstructing the river's hidden course. Source: The School of Looking.

In this case, a dialogue between art and science was established through the association of the work with the historical and geological context of the project, with the intervention of Stephen McNamara from the Shannon Cave Group.

Videomaking: A Debate Between Reality and Perception

Visual arts played a significant role in the *Eco Showboat* project. Organizers Cleary and Connolly documented each stage of the journey from various angles, ranging from aerial photos taken with drones to underwater photography. Other artists also offered an immersive and personal experience, gradually building a visual narrative to further spread and amplify the effects of this experience.

One of the most emblematic videos features the passage through the locks of the Ardnacrusha hydroelectric power station, which stages the interplay between perceived elements and the materiality of the site, as well as between sensory and cognitive perceptions. The video captures an environment defined by aged concrete walls and water, evoking a sense of timelessness. The image of the boat passing through the locks underscores the monumental nature of the structures, highlighting technological achievement as an expression of power (Feenberg, 2008). At the time of its construction, the imposing scale of the locks provided the newly formed Irish State with a narrative of transformative technological power, symbolizing the ongoing political renewal (Fig. 7).

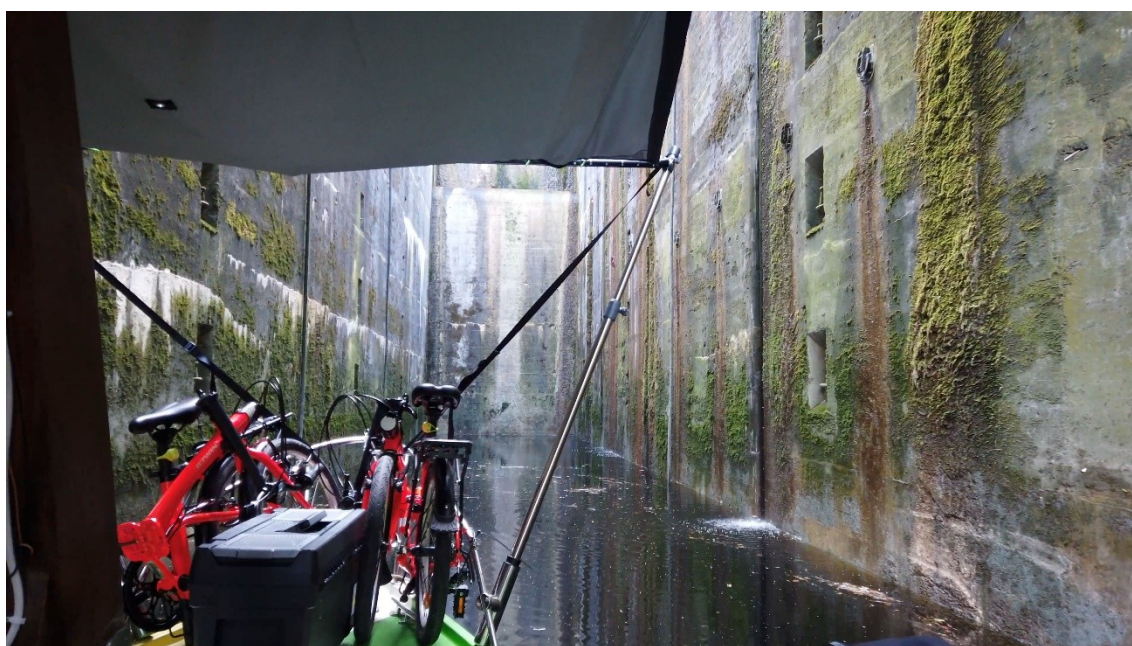


Figure 7. The *Mayfly* passing through the locks of the Ardnacrusha hydroelectric power station.
Source: School of Looking.

This perspective of technology regards the natural world as a mere “permanent reserve” of resources to be exploited for human ends (Heidegger, 2007). The video depicting the passage through the locks was projected multiple times along the *Mayfly* route, offering a stark contrast to other videos and photographs that documented biodiversity, showcasing the beauty and diversity of the threatened landscape. In doing so, it contributed to the mobilization for its conservation.

Another aspect explored by the videos was a more direct and contemporary critique, focusing on controversial topics to raise awareness about unsustainable practices. Despite their harmful impact, these practices are often deeply rooted in local traditions due to economic pressures.

The activities also prompted reflections on the role of artists in conveying scientific issues to the public, highlighting the inherently subjective nature of documentaries. These works do not present reality in an objective manner but rather through a process of negotiation between art and science, and between sensory and cognitive perception (O'Brien, 2004) – an idea that resonates with Terry Tempest Williams' reflection that poetic language and artistic expression can create vivid, sensory experiences, allowing readers to not only understand but also *feel* the essence of scientific concepts (Bartkevicius & Hussmann, 1997).

Issues such as peat extraction – traditionally used as a heating fuel by local communities in Ireland, although it captures more CO₂ from the atmosphere than trees – and industrial developments – which generate pollution while creating jobs and boosting the local economy – were debated and highlighted through presentations and discussions around artistic videos created specifically for the project.

In Askeaton, Michelle Horrigan's video exposes the environmental damage caused by the Aughinish Alumina industrial complex, sparking public debate through an ecofeminist perspective that highlights how extractive industries disproportionately harm both nature and marginalized communities.

Her work shares clear parallels with Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*, a book in which Williams (1991, as described in an interview with Bartkevicius & Hussmann, 1997) transforms personal tragedy into a deeper moral and spiritual awakening: Williams links the illnesses affecting the women in her family to nuclear testing, connecting the health of women to the health of the planet, and challenges patriarchal systems that exploit both land and female bodies for political and economic ends (Alkhatabi, 2019). Both Horrigan and Williams critique environmental destruction as inseparable from gendered power structures, calling for an ethical, caring relationship with the Earth rooted in resistance and justice.

In another video, Kevin O'Dwyer and Anne Cleary explored the pilgrim's road (Slí Mhór) to the monastic site of Clonmacnoise as part of a documentary on the central Irish regions, registering the impact of drainage and industrial peat exploitation on the landscapes. The documentary "Winter on the Water" by Cleary & Connolly presented the family life of artist Marta Golubowska on a canal boat in Robertstown, Kildare, highlighting the challenges of winter.

The videos also played a crucial role in promoting the project, facilitating its sharing within communities and creating a ripple effect. In 2022, the project's audiovisual content garnered over twelve thousand views on Instagram and five thousand on Facebook, acting as a platform for community engagement and attracting coverage from both national and international media.

Conclusions

A community's perception of its territory is often invisible to its own members. Yet this perspective – shaped by the actions the community takes within its living environment – is vital to the future of both the landscape and the life it sustains.

The *Eco Showboat* project, carried out in two sessions on Ireland's waterways³, offers a rich and multifaceted body of work on the role of art in the construction of an ecological vision and committed action for the preservation of living environments, both human and nonhuman. The project's long duration, the high number of participants – including artists, scientists, and local community members – and the uniqueness of each action performed represent a constellation of data that, in itself, deserves specific and in-depth reflection.

The *Eco Showboat* project wove this vision through images, narratives, and the emotions evoked by the works, thus influencing the representations and perceptions of the territory, the environment, and ecological issues. This process fostered and encouraged the emergence of new collaborations between communities, associations, and local institutions, prompting concrete actions and contributing to the development of new policies. Moreover, the works were documented through videos, photographs, publications, and digital archives, ensuring the sustainability of the experience and inspiring other actors to continue the work undertaken.

In this way, the *Eco Showboat* contributes to the contemporary redefinition of ecological art, going beyond the mere representation of environmental issues to engage in a transformative approach. By navigating through the rivers and canals of Ireland, it places artistic activities in a process of continuous flow and transformation, where the works interact with the landscape and the gaze of the inhabitants, becoming an integral part of a moving ecosystem.

Performances, installations, and community exchanges unfolded within an open-ended dynamic, where the emphasis lay not on immediate or easily defined outcomes, but on shared experience and ongoing transformation. One of the project's core strengths was its capacity to bridge diverse disciplines and participants, fostering a cross-disciplinary approach to ecological concerns. By bringing together artists, scientists, and locals, the project moved beyond simple awareness-raising to cultivate a genuine collective reflection on our relationship with the environment. The dialogue between artistic creation and scientific knowledge enriches the understanding of issues related to the environment while proposing new ways to interact with the territory.

Additionally, the project encourages active involvement from residents, who can participate at various levels, even becoming co-authors rather than mere spectators. Since the 1960s, artists like Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica have emphasized the power of sensory and participatory experimentation, thus opening up the artwork to the public's contributions. In this shared and "living" experience, the work moves beyond aesthetic or utilitarian hypnosis to become "the starting point for all kinds of social and political changes, at the very least the ferment for such changes" (Oiticica, 1992, p. 103).

By reinventing or reactivating the perception of landscapes, the *Eco Showboat* generates renewed narratives, revealing the perspective of a community on its environment and opening up new perspectives. It confirms the role of art as a lever for transformation.

This critical reading of the project and these initial conclusions open the way for future lines of reflection. First and foremost, ambitious and fluid projects such as the *Eco Showboat* seem less concerned with imparting a critical gaze or imposing an externally derived ecological consciousness than with inviting local communities to interrogate how they perceive and relate to their own territory. Participation, in this context, seems to function as a mechanism for constructing shared

experience – even before any collective action directed at carrying out a pre-defined project. Within these artistic processes, understanding shared experience not merely in aesthetic terms but as lived – or even *living* – experience (see the notion of *vivência*, Lygia Clark in the 1960s – Clark, 2014), particularly in relation to environmental themes, has as its primary effect the rewearing of the many connections that modernity and global economic systems have unraveled. It reconnects participants with one another, with the landscape, with the soil, the air, the water, and with other living beings. This is a reconnection to the cosmos – essential for sensing oneself as part of a greater whole, and indispensable for learning to care for it.

Looking towards future directions in ecological art, the *Eco Showboat* approach can indeed be replicated and meaningfully expanded – and this is already taking shape through a new project, *Catchments*, also led by the School of Looking. *Catchments* moves beyond navigable waterways to explore freshwater environments across Ireland, deepening public understanding of freshwater biodiversity. While continuing similar participatory and site-responsive activities, it now intentionally engages underprivileged minorities – including young adult refugees, adult learners and special needs groups –, demonstrating how ecological art can integrate social justice and inclusivity into environmental engagement. Importantly, the project brings together citizen art and citizen science, underscoring the value of combining empirical data with empathy and creativity to nurture broader ecological awareness.

As such, the seemingly ephemeral nature – albeit to varying degrees – of the actions carried out, from installations to performance art, contributes to the construction of a gaze that is, in contrast, both enduring and evolving.

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NOTAS

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- 1 More information is available at: https://www.connolly-cleary.com/Home/About_Us.html. Last access: 11 ago. 2025.
 - 2 An interactive digital project that analyzes the Anthropocene and documents the “feral dynamics” arising when nonhuman entities become entangled with human infrastructures.
 - 3 A detailed report, including figures and photographs, is available at: https://www.schooloflooking.org/EcoSHOWBOAT/ECO-SHOWBOAT_REPORT_2021-2023.pdf. Last access: 11 ago. 2025.