

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Ecofeminist Art Takes Root

ecofeminism(s) at Thomas Erben Gallery offers an urgent reminder of our present climate and human rights emergencies. Likewise, the works featured imply that another world is, and has always been, possible.

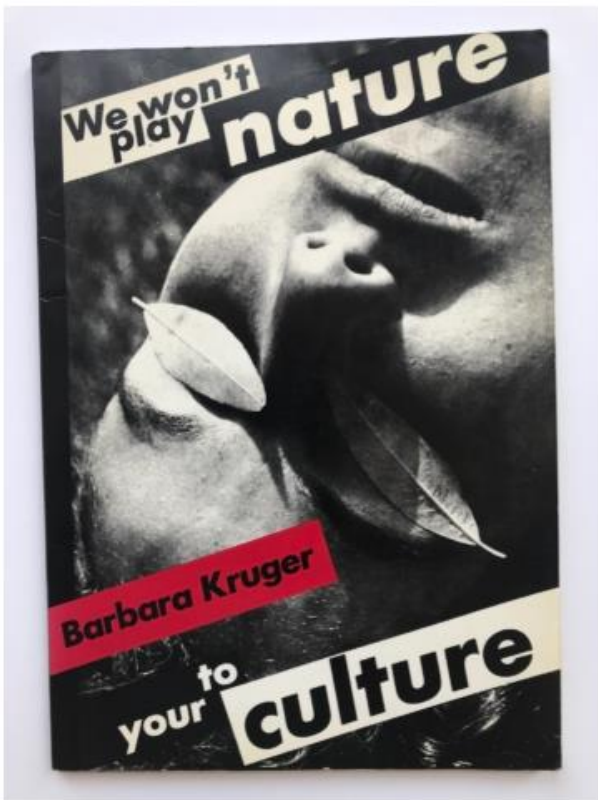


Cassie Packard July 15, 2020



Installation view of *ecofeminism(s)* at Thomas Erben Gallery, New York (all images courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery, unless otherwise stated; photo by Andreas Vesterlund)

ecofeminism(s), a group show at Thomas Erben Gallery, is aptly titled. Lowercase and implicitly plural, the name nods to ecofeminism's defining heterogeneity, its status as more of a broad coalition or affinity than a cohesive movement. Ecofeminism's unifying tenet is that the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women are interconnected under a patriarchal framework of ownership, domination, and self-interest. However, ecofeminists have historically differed as to whether women's connection to the environment skews more biological or more social. The general preponderance of one view over another trends chronological;



Barbara Kruger, "Untitled (We won't play nature to your culture)" (1983), book cover, 11.82 x 8.27 x 0.2 inches (photo by Andreas Vesterlund)

ecofeminists of the '80s critiqued the essentialism of their forebears, while some ecofeminists today point out the blind spots of their poststructuralist predecessors.

With the dearth of research on ecofeminist art and ecofeminism more generally, it takes a keen eye to piece together an exhibition that does justice to the topic. But *ecofeminism(s)* does just that. Featuring work from the late '60s — when ecofeminism first began to take root — to the present-day, the exhibit displays numerous approaches to the critique, dismantling, and reimagining of patriarchal ecologies. Much of the material on view documents or springs from social practice and performance, arguably ecofeminism's preferred genres. The exhibition cites ecofeminist touchstones, with photographs of Agnes Denes's "Rice/Tree/Burial" (1968) — believed to be the first ecological site work in the ecofeminist pantheon — as well as an image of one of Ana Mendieta's storied *Esculturas Rupestres* (rupestrian sculptures), the abstracted Taíno goddesses that she incised into the landscape.



Left: detail view of Betsy Damon, "The Memory of Clean Water" (1985); right: installation view of "The Memory of Clean Water" at Thomas Erben Gallery (©Betsy Damon, image courtesy the artist; photos by Andreas Vesterlund)

Betsy Damon's "The Memory of Clean Water" (1985) is another such touchstone. Using handmade paper pulp, Damon made a 250-foot cast of Utah's Castle Creek riverbed before the river was dammed. The sculpture climbs the gallery walls and spills onto the floor. It is as delicate as it is massive, its fragile multicolored surface pockmarked with small holes and natural detritus. Damon made the work with a traditional art context in mind. However, when she learned about pollutants in the river she "woke up", realizing that she wanted to turn her focus toward community organizing, teaching, and founding a water-related nonprofit. The sculpture is a landmark work in Damon's oeuvre, but it also signifies a moment of reckoning in which she decided that her activism had to employ new tactics and take new forms to be effective.

Intersectionality is at ecofeminism's core, and environmental racism — the fact that BIPOC communities are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation — is central to its project. Brazilian artist Carla Maldonado collaborated with the Cipiá Indigenous Community Center in Manaus to make "Dystopia of a Jungle City, and the Human of Nature" (2019). Alternately four- and single-channel, the video pairs footage of the Indigenous community's day-to-day life with layered forest sounds. A voiceover by Maldonado explains that, under Brazil's far-right president Jair Bolsonaro, private-sector development is rapidly deforesting the Amazon as protections for the Amazon's Indigenous peoples are being pared back.



From Carla Maldonado, "Dystopia of a Jungle City, and the Human of Nature (still)" (2019), multi-channel video (©2019 Carla Maldonado, image courtesy the artist)

Ecofeminist art can challenge law and public policy, but it can also beat such systems at their own rules. Made in defense of mineral rights, Eliza Evans's inventive "All The Way To Hell" (2020) is surely a thorn in oil and gas developers' sides. The work is presented as a framed contract alongside a vertical stack of wall-mounted cylinders made from minerals. Evans inherited three acres of land in Oklahoma and when developers expressed interest in her mineral-rich property, she sought to protect it by drafting a contract that fragmented the land into

