

# It Starts with the Artist: Solutions for a sustainable media arts practice

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**Much has already been written about how to conserve media artworks after they have been created. However conservation is one part of a larger sustainable question for contemporary media artists. This paper focuses on socially conscious art and practical solutions for a sustainable media arts practice.**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Much has been written already about how to conserve media artworks after they have been created, this in turn has led to a new way of working which will ensure that media art is maintained for future generations to see and enjoy. Conservation is one part of a larger sustainable question for media artists and this paper focuses specifically on what artists working with technology can do to be mindful of their environmental impact before their work is even created. It looks historically at the premise of art as being socially conscious and more practically at contemporary solutions for a sustainable media arts practice. These are highlighted in the online peer resource (<http://www.art-ology.co.uk>). The paper ends with a look at a number of case studies and some ideas as to what the future of art might bring.



**Figure 1:** Aphra Shemza at work in her studio, 2016.

## 2. SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS ART

Artists and arts organizations have been viewed as community leaders for decades and the choices they make often set the tone for how society approaches or reacts to certain issues and can often be a catalyst for change (Lewis 2010).

The idea that art could be implemental in social change has long since been prevalent in art history. The Wagnerian concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk or 'total work of art' as laid out in Wagner's 1849 essay 'The Art Work of the Future,' advocated for all the art forms to come together; poetry, music and dance. Once united, they would then look to unite the masses, and through this unification social and political reform could take place.

With the launch of the Bauhaus in 1919 by Walter Gropius the idea of a 'unified work of art' (Miller 1993) took centre stage. Gropius believed that the way to political and social reform was to create work, which promoted the 'synthesis between art and technology' (Greenberg 1979). In creating this unity, he hoped to show society the benefits of technology through functional modernist design and abstract art for the masses; a visual language for a universal audience.

The boundaries of art and life became further eroded in the quest for social change in the 1970s when Joseph Beuys began to promote the term 'Social Sculpture.' With his involvement in the FLUXUS movement whose 'goal was to destroy the

boundary between art and life' (DiTolla 2018) and the Happenings of the 60s, the narrative for Social Sculpture came from one 'of socially collaborative, participatory, dialogical and relational art' (Rojas 2010). He believed that 'as spectators became participants, the catalysis of social sculpture would lead to a transformation of society through the release of popular creativity' (Moore c.2010).

Unification is the common denominator of these ideas and concepts. Unification of the arts or art and life or art and technology. Also the viewer is placed centre stage and their active participation is considered when and how the work is produced. In Beuys' work, this is crucial as there is no distinction between art and life itself.

If we think of art as a tool with which artists are able to explore and raise questions about our human existence or the lives/society we inhabit, it follows that artists are in a unique position to set precedents and take charge of the way in which they produce their work. Being free agents enables them to be bold in their approaches and make changes to the way in which they create work that will lead the way forward for other artists or industries to follow.

Art is a practice through which vital aspects of society and life may be examined, challenged and renegotiated (Eliasson 2006).

The utopian idea that art can change the world has long become out-dated for a contemporary creator and audience, but perhaps it is still important for utopian ideals to exist today but with realistic or practical solutions?

To me there is an essential difference between, thinking in terms of the future and thinking utopian. Utopian dreams are more or less thoughts on how things should be. Thinking about the future, however is something very realistic. Utopian concepts ought to be unrealistic. That of course, does not exclude the possibility of having a realistic solution contained in the utopian elements (Rams 2007).

### 3. CONTEMPORARY MEDIA ARTISTS

Media artists working with technology are often passionate about innovation and the future. With their progressive forward thinking they are able to produce many thoughtful and engaging artworks.

Whilst being excited about what these new medias allow them to explore many artists are apprehensive about the unknowns they present in terms of material stability, sustainability and maintenance.



**Figure 2:** Tim Murray-Browne in collaboration with Aphra Shemza. *Post Truth and Beauty*, 2017.

There has been a fair amount of research done into how to conserve media artworks after they have been created. Much of which has been carried out by museums and institutions for example; 'Matters in Media Art' produced by the New Art Trust, Museum of Modern Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Tate & 'Inside Installations' also produced by Tate. Not to mention the artist Rafael Lozano Hemmer's ground breaking 'Best practices for conservation of media art from an artist's perspective'. However little has yet been written about what an artist should consider before the work is even created.



**Figure 3:** LED tape and circuit in Aphra Shemza's studio.

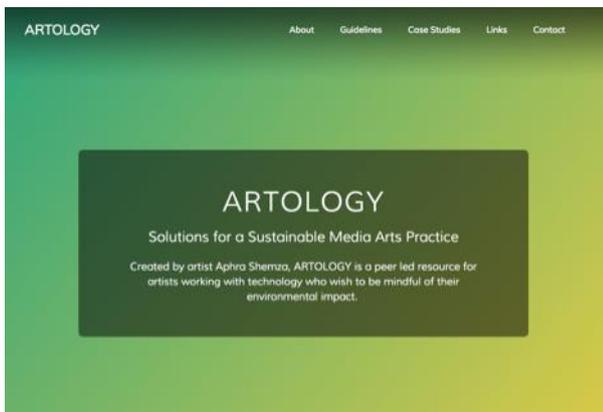
Through the use of technology automatically media artists are forced into a dialogue with our throwaway consumer culture. Artist Michael Darling states, 'the...issue concerning my creation of work was the preciousness of materials...sheet steel, mild steel and exotic lumber – tend [to] cost lots of money as do the tools to fabricate them with,' (2010). Not only do the tools and materials to create work cost money they also cost the planet, perhaps then the role of the media artist is to address these concepts practically in the way that they work rather than in the outcome they produce.

Our goal as concerned artists involves reducing our negative impact on the planet while maintaining the positive contribution of... [art] (Mitchell 2010).

#### 4. ARTOLOGY

Created by artist Aphra Shemza, ARTOLOGY is an online, peer-led artist resource for artists working with technology that wish to be mindful of their environmental impact and ensure the longevity of their work for generations to come.

ARTOLOGY does not advocate for all media artists to create work centred around climate issues, but does call for a seamless integration of a sustainable or ecologically conscious practice into a media arts practice. One which does not inhibit the work conceptually but makes it stronger in the long run leading the way forward for the other arts and industries to follow. It starts with the artist.



**Figure 4:** ARTOLOGY Homepage (<http://www.art-ology.co.uk>).



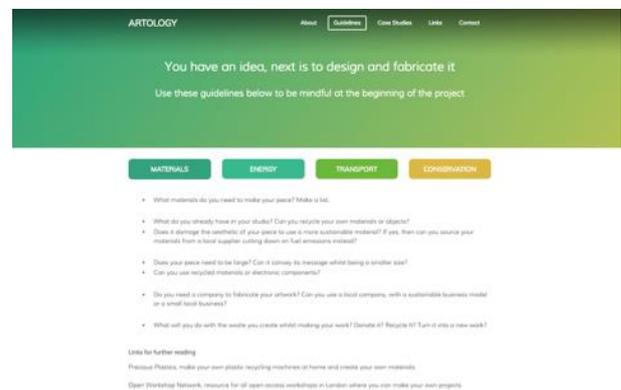
**Figure 5:** Installation view of Shemza's work from the SPACE/LCN 4<sup>th</sup> Showcase, 22–24 March 2018.

A pilot website was launched (<http://www.art-ology.co.uk>) at the SPACE/LCN 4<sup>th</sup> Showcase which ran from the 22–24 March 2018 at SPACE Studios in East London. The website was exhibited alongside *Untitled (Prototype for a Sustainable Artwork)*, 2017 Made from sustainable oak from *Saunders Seasonings* a local wood supplier and recycled LEDs from the artist's studio. *Untitled (Prototype for a Sustainable Artwork)* was a first step towards a more sustainable practice for the artist. The two pieces were exhibited as a rumination on the issue of sustainability in the

media arts and were meant to get people talking and asking questions.

The website currently has a guidelines section that speaks to the artist and invites them to engage with a series of questions about the work they intend to make. How they may be able to think creatively about designing their work and thinking about things in a more ecologically conscious way. As Steen V. Mitchel (2010) states 'Consciousness entails constant questioning,' which is why I have chosen to structure the website in this way. Rather than the site consisting of a variety of instructions for artists, it asks artists to actively engage with it consciously answering questions and adapting it to suit their own practice.

Each section also includes a list of relevant London based links to suppliers, courier companies and further resources and reading.



**Figure 6:** ARTOLOGY Guidelines page (<http://www.art-ology.co.uk/guidelines>).

The website also has a case studies feature. This includes certain artist's works as examples of pieces, which adhere to the guidelines and links to Shemza's previous papers and talks hosted around the subject.

#### 4.1 The future of ARTOLOGY

ARTOLOGY currently exists as a local London based pilot website with the resources being limited to the UK. The future of ARTOLOGY would be to expand the website into a dynamic resource which would allow artists and creatives to upload and update the content of the website themselves. This would create a worldwide open source network of ecologically conscious media artists not limited to one country or curator.

It is with hope in the artist's 'creativity, flexibility, and willingness to question and seek information (that) will help us to continue to make responsible artistic decisions' (Mitchel 2010).

## 5. THE FUTURE OF ART

In his short essay 'Art with a Capital A,' Alan Watts imagines a world where the workers are liberated by machines. Where art and life become one and the world becomes a utopian environment free of slavery to the system.

All art is in transition...in preparation for a return to the inseparability of art and everyday life. The paintings are vanishing into the walls: but they will be marvellous walls. In turn, the walls will vanish into the landscape, but the view will be ecstatic. And after that the viewer will vanish from the view.

However art inseparable from everyday life will not be narrowly functional or utilitarian. By reason of electronics and automation we are moving...into an age when there will hardly be any distinction between work and play...Art will therefore cease to be propaganda calling attention to misery. It will use all the facilities of electronic technology to create an exuberant splendour which has not yet been seen since the days of the Persian miniatures and arabesques... (Watts 1971).

Although this idea is far from coming into being in the present day or will perhaps never become true, what if there is a way to step further into the future one where art and life come closer together? One where art has a function to perform for greater social betterment.

### 5.1 CASE STUDIES

#### 5.1.1 Little Sun



**Figure 7:** Olafur Eliasson, *Little Sun*. Photo by Anton Kurt, 2013.

In 2012 the artist Olafur Eliasson renowned for his large-scale installations using light, air and water, founded the Little Sun project with Frederik Ottesen.

Light is for everyone – it determines what we do and how we do it. This is why we have developed the solar-powered lamp Little Sun.

One part of the artwork is the lamp and the activities it enables. The other is the successful distribution of Little Sun in off-grid communities, its journey from production to usage (Eliasson).

This project was launched at Tate Modern in 2012. What started as a small project aimed to help the lives of a small Ethiopian community has helped millions of people worldwide with the power of the sun. The Little Sun harnesses the power of the sun through solar panels providing a portable light for communities without any electricity.

This is art that can truly change the world; it is engaging, educational and crucial for the communities in need.

#### 5.1.2 Michael Singer Studio

Michael Singer is an artist and designer who specialises in designing sculptural, architectural and landscape interventions. 'From the 1990's to the present his work has been instrumental in transforming public art, architecture, landscape, and planning projects into successful models for urban and ecological regeneration' (Singer). Singer's work really has merged much of what was once seen as separate entities which is why it is so ground breaking; sculpture, architecture, urban planning and ecology all come underneath the remit of the studio.



**Figure 8:** Stuttgart Memorial Garden, 2002. Courtesy of Michael Singer Studio. Photo credit: K.D. Bush.

In his 2002 'Stuttgart Memorial Garden' Singer created a one-acre garden split into light and dark areas each with layered surfaces meant to represent remembrance. He created a number of wells and pools of water within which he housed stone sculptural forms. He uses the water from natural springs converging on the site, to pass through the stone moving from one part of the garden to the next. This highlights the passage of time and functionally cleanses the water as it passes through the different materials.



**Figure 9:** *Alterra Atria Gardens, Courtesy of Michael Singer Studio; Photo Credit Edwin Walwisch.*

His Alterra Atria Gardens made for the Alterra Institute for Environmental Research, 'focuses on interdisciplinary collaboration for sustainable development in balance with ecological systems.' (Singer) It too is a series of sculptural spaces this time built inside the building complex that are designed to be the heart and lungs of the building. Not only does the space look incredible, it also cleans the air, filters the water and provides an effective climate control system for the whole building.

These two garden pieces are the smallest of the Singer Studio's work, other projects include; 'Living Docks,' a large-scale intervention on the West Palm Docks in Florida which opens the space to vegetation and wildlife. 'The Phoenix Recycling Facility,' an aesthetically beautiful but functional recycling facility and the 'NYC Cogeneration Power Plant', an alternative power plant design.

The Singer studio's work is breathtakingly complex and at the same time has a pure abstract simplicity to the design. It is functional, providing much needed systems for the inhabitants and communities surrounding it but still carries the effortless quality of art and sculpture. This is an ingenious way of integrating art and life and perhaps the way forward for the next generation of artists. A real-life splendour harking back to Watt's essay 'Art with a Capital A.'

### 5.1.3 Summary

These case studies show that already contemporary artists and designers are looking at how they can integrate art with life, through the use of sustainable design and functional technological projects. These ideas have already provided millions worldwide with much needed resources and improved the lives of many people and also the planet as a whole through their ecologically sound principles.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Through the use of open-source material, resource sharing and peer-led activities, media artists can take control of their practice. This paper advocates for an environmentally conscious media artist, one who seamlessly integrates a sustainable practice into a media arts practice and sets the example for others to follow.

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