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Climates Within and Without: Confronting Climate Emergency in Museums

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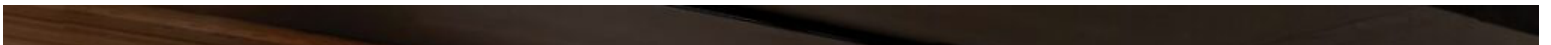
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#ecology

#museum

#sustainability





Vue de l'exposition Plastic Heart: Surface All the Way Through du Synthetic Collective (2021) ; Art Museum, University of Toronto ; Déchets générés pendant l'installation ; gauche : Skye Morét, Thank you to our Industrial Partners (2020) droite : Kelly Wood, Great Lakes: Accumulations (2020) Photo : Toni Hafkenscheid

What does it mean to make a museum sustainable? The term “sustainability” has been used to apply to the long-term health of the museum sector—as in, how can we make sure that museums remain viable into futures unknown? But more recently, as futures unknown are impacted by the challenges of climate change, sustainability is increasingly linked with a greener vision for the sector. In part, the expansion of interest in sustainability is linked with the climate emergency having been brought home through many high-profile emergency situations, key among them floods following Hurricane Sandy in 2012, which inundated numerous galleries in New York City, and the 2019 Getty Fire, a wildfire in California that licked at the edges of the Getty Center, testing the institution’s fire defenses.^[1]

Emergency situations tend to focus attention: it is becoming increasingly obvious that the sustainability of the museum sector is dependent on confronting and responding to the effects of a world in the throes of climate change. But how can we move beyond talking about the weather to addressing the underlying and continuing uneven causes and unevenly distributed effects of climate emergency? At the Centre for Sustainable Curating (CSC), located at Western University in London, Ontario, we suggest that only a holistic justice-

centred approach to understanding and responding to climate change and sustainable museum practice can address the weather outside and the climates within (historical, current, and future).[2]

Before exploring this statement in more detail, a caveat: this short piece focuses on larger-scale museums with front-of-house (galleries) and back-of-house (conservation, storage, offices) operations, comprising multiple departments and collections, that maintain gallery standards of temperature and humidity. The article brackets out the art biennale and art fair circuits, which have major issues in terms of the carbon footprint of travelling art and audiences. Also not considered are smaller museums, artist-run centres, and commercial galleries, even though they are often leaders in sustainable practices created in response to fiscal challenges and as a result of doing more with less. It is easier to lay out the current ecology of sustainable museum practices through the largest institutions—the ones that are the most intensive users of energy and create extensive amounts of waste.

In his recent book *Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum* (2020), Fernando Domínguez Rubio turns his attention to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Though his goal is to demonstrate how art objects are rendered legible to audiences only through constant intervention, he additionally provides an extraordinary and detailed overview of the material impacts of museums, as well as the way they navigate the porous boundary between indoor and outdoor environments. Rubio writes of art objects on museum walls, “Instead of change and transformation, you see stability and permanence. Instead of the movement of things, you see the infinite pause of objects.”[3] These are processes that require endless interventions: the removal of impurities and the creation of restricted temperature and humidity ranges through expensive HVAC systems and air conditioning, the relentless control of insect and other animal life, the constant conservation of important art works exposed to light and air, the creation of detailed legal contracts that track the intentions of the artists, and the building and maintenance of specific storage situations that lock out the real world outside. In an illuminating passage, Rubio notes that the energy consumption of the New York storage facility for the MoMA “is actually higher than that of a large hospital ... , which means that keeping artworks alive demands more energy than caring for human bodies.”[4] Without even accounting for the cycle of changing exhibitions, the shipping of works, and the travel of museum staff and audiences, the very existence of museums is an extractive proposition. And the more that wildfires, floods, hurricanes, power outages, and even particulate pollution and dirt brought in by audiences present threats to artworks and artefacts deemed worth of protection, the more energy is demanded to protect them.

Though Rubio does not make this claim, museums’ continued and expanding use of resources must be connected to their extractivist past.[5] The last few years have seen the development of overarching policies and guidelines on sustainability for museums by museum governance bodies such as the International Council of Museums, following the UN 2030 Goals on Sustainable Development and focused on “protecting and safeguarding cultural and natural heritage, supporting education for sustainable development, and supporting research and cultural participation.”[6] Such developments are laudable and have led to the implementation of energy-reduction strategies (including, for example, the introduction of solar panels, grey water systems, composting of cafeteria waste, and numerous exhibitions and much programming dedicated to climate change). Nonetheless, a holistic and justice-centred approach would move far beyond protection and education to ask how we might connect ongoing work toward sustainability with the past injustices enacted by museums, with a goal of using the museum as a place to work through and understand how constellations that seem disconnected on the surface (to use just one example: collections of Indigenous belongings, the building of pipelines, and wildfires) are deeply interconnected.[7]

Take vinyl signage as an example. Signage made of flexible vinyl and other forms of plastic are ubiquitous in the museum sector because it is cheap, easy to install and remove, and professional-looking. Arguably, vinyl has allowed the introduction of significant amounts of information into museum spaces, and is thus partially responsible for the introduction of critical museology and programming into white box spaces. But plastic labelling generally, and PVC vinyl labelling in particular, is also very much tied into plastics researcher Max Liboiron’s (2021) argument that pollution *is* colonialism, representing an ongoing settler

entitlement to land. The seemingly innocuous presence of vinyl is linked to its production, including the extraction of fossil fuels and the creation of multiple toxic chemical pollutants such as dioxin, hydrochloric acid, and vinyl chloride in its manufacture, the release of endocrine disruptors phthalates in its making and use, and its final leaching of persistent organic pollutants following its brief use within the museum.^[8] Drawing attention to the embodied carbon^[9] of the materiality of vinyl is a crucial step in understanding the role that something as ubiquitous as common signage plays in larger questions of sustainability.



Joyce Wieland, Home Art Totem (1966). Technique mixte. Accroché au mur avec les trous de l'installation précédente. Photo : Toni Hafkenscheid.

An equally important question is the practical one of what comes next. The CSC follows the Synthetic Collective^[10] in arguing that form and content are related. In this sense, walls do not need to be repainted, holes in walls do not need to be repaired, gallery infrastructure (plinths, moveable walls, and other elements) can and should be reused as often as possible, the energy consumption of digital displays should be weighed against their impact, and the purchase of equipment should be future-proofed against obsolescence. For the CSC and the Synthetic Collective, the visibility of such approaches draws attention to their underlying politics. But the aesthetics of low-carbon curating are not currently received practice, and because of this many strategies are seen as situational rather than field-defining. Equally, it

would be disastrous should such strategies just become an aesthetic trend that can be overwritten when the next idea comes along. Taking such questions into account, institutions such as the Museum of Vancouver have been piloting the use of compostable and biodegradable materials in labelling, such as clay-coated paper printed with vegetable inks, in a search for seamless integration of low-waste and low-impact materials into the daily operations of a major institution.

What does it mean to make a museum sustainable? Clearly, there is not one answer; there are many. In fact, however, the multiplication of questions actually allows us to delve further into action if not solutions, highlighting the role that museums can play in confronting myriad changing environments.

The French translation of this article is also published in the 268 issue of *Vie des arts* – Autumn 2022 and can be consulted [here](#).

[1] These are just two high-profile examples. Globally, including in Canada, many museums and sites of natural and cultural heritage are under threat from fire, floods, rains, drastic temperature changes, and hurricanes.

[2] This sentence is an in-folded reference to the work of Christina Sharpe on atmospheres of anti-Blackness, as described in her book *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). The CSC regularly works with and learns from other groups focused on museums and sustainability, including Ki Culture, Creative Green, STiCH, Art/Switch, and the Gallery Climate Coalition. See also www.sustainablecurating.ca.

[3] Fernando Domínguez Rubio. *Still Life: Ecologies of Modern Imagination in the Art Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 7.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 165.

[5] See also Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), explored in further depth in a later section of the article.

[6] Henry McGhie, “The Sustainable Development Goals: Helping Transform our World Through Museums,” International Council of Museums, January 21, 2020, <https://icom.museum/en/news/the-sustainable-development-goals-helping-transform-our-world-through-museums/>.

[7] See Kirsty Robertson, “When the Land Comes First: Oil, Museums, and (Missing) Protest,” in *Tear Gas Epiphanies: Protest, Culture, Museums* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), p. 182–218.

[8] Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, especially p. 100–02.

[9] I am grateful to Deborah Wang for introducing me to this term, which is more frequently used in design and architecture than in museum studies, and relates to the amount of carbon emitted during the full life cycle of building materials from their manufacture or harvest to their degradation.

[10] Synthetic Collective, *A DIY Fieldguide for Reducing the Environmental Impact of Art Exhibitions*, 2020, <https://syntheticcollective.org/fieldguide/>. For the sake of transparency, I am a member of the Synthetic Collective, and the CSC regularly works with the Synthetic Collective.

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