REVIEW

THE MUSEUM AS ECOSYSTEM
A LIVING ARCHIVE

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Exhibition, *Arts of the Earth*.
Curated by Manuel Cirauqui.
Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao
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Arts of the Earth is an exhibition curated by Manuel Cirauqui in the Guggenheim Bilbao conceived as a historical review highlighting the relationship between art and nature in the last fifty years and exposing the current situation regarding ecosystems. The exhibition follows a chronological order, but at times the past and the present intersect, as the work of Hans Haacke and Sumayya Vally; as a result, through the interplay of narratives, they overlap in certain moments across the different rooms. In ecology and agriculture, 'biodiversity islands' involve planting a group of native plants on devastated land to act as host plants that nourish and shield the soil from sunlight.[1] They protect, sustain, nurture, educate, build, feel and nourish. This may be related to Jane Bennett's emphasis on the Spinozian concept of a mosaic of bodies. This mosaic is made up of interrelated entities that influence one another; each entity is a 'mode' capable of modifying and being modified, what leads to an understanding of a landscape as a mosaic, shaped by and dependant on patches of agents that structure a single ecosystem.[2] As if that were the case, seven galleries feel interconnected and nourished one another

and the Guggenheim Bilbao, like Gaia, is presented as a vast organism that hosts different forms of life and fields of knowledge in coexistence. The aim is to analyze how we can challenge the notion that we own the earth, so that we can see ourselves as beings on the same level as it, interdependent and connected to its balance. The exhibition aims to challenge the notion of the individual body and illustrate how it belongs to other forms of matter; to promote local art in parallel with, or in relation to, the region's own biodiversity within the context of the exhibitions; and to explore how the relationship with the earth and the soil has been depicted in art over the last 50 years.[3]

The exhibition welcomes visitors directly with living art in the hall of rooms 201 and 203. Hans Haacke is part of this lively trend in the hall, greeting the viewer with his work *Directed growth* (1970-72) including three main elements—beans, string, and soil—and analyzing the intervention from the soil and directionally guided by human for nutritional purposes as the direct intervention of land cultivation. According to Deleuze and Guattari, and their theory of the assemblage, all bodies, whether living or inanimate, possess an energetic potential that influences others; in the case of stretched rows of twine such as Hans Haacke's, it acts as a conduit that channels the plant's energy and the factor that determines the direction of its growth, linking the inanimate with the living. This theory is based in two concepts that are, on the one hand, Spinoza's 'affective' bodies, according to which one body affects another, and, on the other hand, the idea of 'becoming-agency' by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which refers to assemblages of living matter or matter capable of acting, defined as 'vibrant' matter by Jane Bennet, matter that appears dead but continues to mutate or is capable of transferring energy.[4]

Accompanied by Sumayya Vally's work, both pieces feature entities. In the hall, where past and present meet, Sumayya depicts landscapes through plants transported in canoes with her work *Grains of Paradise* (2024), complemented by bridges made specifically for the Belgian city of Vilvoorde in 2024. Both of the first rooms emphasise the organic through a review of territorial and political archives and works influenced by communities depicted by the artist Paulo Tavares with a multimedia installation in collaboration with the Inland/Campo Adentro collective and Claire Pentecost with her work *American flag* (2024), as well as regenerative art-science projects, such as those by the artist Mel Chin, who collaborates with other species in *Revival Field* (1990), including hyperaccumulator plants. Its curator points out the following about the artworks in the exhibition´s catalogue: "They are living readymades [...]."[5] This permeates the exhibition, followed by room 202, standing out works by artists Agustín Ibarrola, *Untitled series* (n.d.) (wood and paint) or Giuseppe Penone, *Fingernail and Laurel Leaves* (1988) (glass and laurel leaves), among others, and room number 205 with Jean Dubuffet *Le Jardinier* (1959), Joseph Beuys *Agnus castus* (1972) or Michelle Stuart *Extinct* (1992), who create paintings with dried plants and other works based on raw materials. All these artists were certainly committed to seize what nature offers as a gift, collecting the natural waste.

An evident inclination towards artworks in terms of their durability or biomaterial formats can be observed in this exhibition. As the curator states, "[...] few are made to last."[6] This gives us an idea about new trends in art regarding its impact, as its final formats are found among the archive of works that no longer exist and remain as documentary or photographic archive, site-specific works or non-durable living materials. Earning this choice, the showcased works cannot avoid to be multidisciplinary and rely on the contribution of science. This is brought to life by selecting and bringing into conversation sculpture, design, architecture, photography, installation, video art, documentary video, textile art, science, agriculture and activism.

Distributed into seven rooms of the Guggenheim Bilbao museum, the show displays a distinctive approach to an ethical, unique and hand-crafted rather than mass-produced. Hereafter, the exhibition provides examples of how to produce large-scale works without causing damage, using local mud, clay and fertile soil, by artists such as Gabriel Chaile *The Young People Remembered Their Songs* (2025), David Bestué *Pommes, xiprer, barca, barranc* (2021) or Delcy Morelos *Sorgin* (2025). Cirauqui offers a beyond-visual experience, allowing the visitor to feel the humidity caused by placing the body among the trees and grass mounds in works such as Hans Haacke's, or the smell of hummus in Delcy Morelos' work *Sorgin* (2025), which is the only piece on display in the entire architecture of room 206. Here we can see the influence of care-based movements that has been incorporated into artistic practice, from Hans Haacke in the 1970s to Delcy Morelos today. In the 1970s, with the rise of the feminist movement, the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, through her performance pieces *Maintenance Art*, marked the beginning of the politics of care in art. Although she confined maintenance tasks to domestic art, she laid the foundations for the idea of care as the bedrock of life through her own artistic practice.[7] This artist, who combined the traditional knowledge associated with care and survival with artistic practice, refers us to her heritage through works such as the reuse of wool as an agricultural waste product in *A Thousand Milks* (2025) by Asunción Molinos Gordo and the large looms of textile and seeds *La crecida que sana* (2025) by the Unión Textiles Semillas collective placed both in room 209, or the work by Delcy Morelos in room 206.

Morelos creates site-specific living installations for exhibition halls. In her first solo exhibition opened in July 2025 in the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, the same concern made incorporate one of Morelos' site-specific installations, *Mother* (2025) in one of the rooms very close to Joseph Beuys' work on display in the same exhibition. This demonstrates an unavoidable repetition of comparisons between the two artists that, in the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin as in the Guggenheim exhibition in Bilbao, creates that conversation between mutant archives and the raw. Joseph Beuys was one of the pioneers and contemporaries of the Land Art movement, which was established in 1969. He was greatly influenced by the energy theory of Paracelsus, a Swiss physician and alchemist, who believed that all things are energy and mutable matter.[8] Thus, Beuys developed a body of

work entirely dedicated to linking the human perception of nature with other living beings or matter, as can be seen both in his work *7,000 Oaks* (1982) as in *Agnus castus* (1972), both of which were exhibited alongside the archive of site-specific interventions in places such as Kassel in Germany, and framed works made from plant matter at the Guggenheim Bilbao. The dialogue between the two artists, both at the Hamburger Kunsthalle and at the Guggenheim Bilbao, centres on a comparison between a pioneering period in Beuys's career, which coincided with the United Nations Conference on the Environment in 1972, an event that would transform the way climate change and the care of the land are conceived, as opposed to the work of Delcy Morelos, a contemporary artist who works with raw materials but, in this case, draws on the entire heritage of indigenous knowledge, seeking to reconnect with natural origins and who, like Beuys, always treats matter as something alive and full of energy and potential for growth, even within exhibition spaces.

This living archive continues in room 207, encountering living plant containers *Wardan Case* series (2012-2024) by Isa Melsheimer and the work of Asad Raza *Root Sequence. Mother Tongue* (2017), arranging trees in the hall, standing out the power of botanical growth and adaptation. The last room of the show, number 209, is conceived as a compilation of works created using raw materials accomplished through design and textiles conceived for thinking the human body as a landscape to care for, through animal-based, plant-based or mud-based materials.

The decision by curator Manuel Cirauqui to approach the history of art and the ecosystem following a historical order from the 60´s to nowadays with artists who work with living archives, the key themes of this exhibition are around the soil as the main source, hence the name of the exhibition, 'Arts of the Earth', regarding agriculture, motherhood, soil fertility and land conservation, keeping focus especially on botany and geology. Therefore, in this exhibition, art truly lies largely in dialogue, not merely in the material itself. The pieces relate to one another through the discourses and dialogues that arise between activism, science and art. It explores the archive beyond institutional boundaries, viewing the environment itself as a living archive in constant flux, presented through fragments drawn from a variety of disciplines and perspectives, in order to understand the singular through the plural. Whether because they are site-specific installations in natural settings, because the materials are in a state of constant decay and are ephemeral, or because they are existing in the present moment within the gallery's atmosphere during the exhibition, the display presents the body being absorbed by the landscape and in coexistence with other types of life, provoking a feeling of awe and belonging to the museum´s ecosystem. Throughout the exhibition, one might speak of spatial ecology and human geography in relation to one's place in the world and one's role within nature, as the curator measures the territory through human physical occupation, creating installations that, taken together, evoke a return to the womb. Throughout the tour, the works invite the visitor to snuggle up amongst Asunción Molinos Gordo's woolen canvases *A*

Thousand Milks (2025) and Claudia Alarcón's large tapestries *Caminando al futuro con el aliento de nuestro saber* (2024), lying down on the earth and sinking into it as Ana Mendieta *Untitled*, from the *Silueta* series (1978-1980) and Fina Miralles *Relacions. Relació del cos amp elements naturals. El cos cobert de terra* (1975) do, or smelling the scent of straw and hummus from Meg Webster *Soft Broch* (1984-2022) and Delcy Morelos *Sorgin* (2025). Sharing the same air in a room is equal to sharing a piece of the present-day history.

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1 Ipinza Carmona et al., *Bosques y biodiversidad [Forests and Biodiversity]*, 113.
2 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 71-72.
3 Cirauqui, *Artes de la Tierra [Arts of the Earth]*, 47.
4 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 74–75.
5 Cirauqui, *Artes de la Tierra [Arts of the Earth]*, 71.
6 Cirauqui, *Artes de la Tierra [Arts of the Earth]*, 15.
7 Martín, *Artists Against the Museum: A Brief Overview of American Institutional Critique from the 1960s to the 1990s*, 260.
8 Bernárdez, *Joseph Beuys*, 13.