Framing Sustainability

Environmental Art, Museum Curation, and the challenges of art-inspired change

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Degree project/Independent project • 30 credits
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, SLU
Faculty of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences
Environmental Communication and Management - Master's Programme
Uppsala 2025

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Credits:	30 credits
Level:	Second cycle, A2E
Course title:	Master thesis in Environmental science, A2E
Course code:	EX0897
Programme/education:	Environmental Communication and Management - Master's Programme
Course coordinating dept:	Department of Aquatic Sciences and Assessment
Place of publication:	Uppsala
Year of publication:	2025

Online publication:	https://stud.epsilon.slu.se
Keywords:	Art, Environment, Museums, Curation, Advocacy, Interpretation

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Faculty of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences
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Division of Environmental Communication

Abstract

This thesis critically examines the intersection of environmental research, artistic expression, and museum curation, analyzing how these domains converge to influence public discourse on ecological issues. Art indeed serves as a potent medium for raising awareness and spark emotions, yet this raises questions regarding epistemological framing, interpretive agency, and the ethical implications of representation. Similarly, museums function as cultural institutions that mediate environmental narratives, negotiating tensions between advocacy, institutional objectivity, and public engagement. This study interrogates the extent to which art and museum practices contribute to meaningful ecological awareness or risk reinforcing superficial activism, ideological biases, or exclusionary discourses. Additionally, it explores the role of curatorial or artistic action in constructing imaginaries. This research discusses the effectiveness of art and museum-led initiatives in fostering sustained engagement with ecological issues.

Keywords: Art, Environment, Museums, Curation, Advocacy, Interpretation

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1. Introduction

The intersection of art and environmental communication has been extensively explored in academic research (Chen, Mei-Hshin, 2022 ; Kaufmann, 2023, Sommer, 2020), with numerous studies highlighting the ability of art to evoke emotional responses and foster social narratives of education and action, also relating to environmental issues (Sommer, 2020; Kaufmann et al., 2023). However, a persistent assumption within the literature remains: that for art to induce change in a viewer's conception of sustainability, it must be explicitly labeled or advertised as environmental. Both art and environmental narratives have underlying assumptions that need to be separated from simple information reporting, and their presentation may need to shift in character to be effective in a broader sense. This assumption raises crucial questions about the ways in which art is created, presented, framed, and finally interpreted within museum spaces, as well as the need to define the role of curators, artists, and institutional structures in shaping these narratives. Beyond the artwork itself, many other factors have a role in determining how environmental themes are communicated and understood. Furthermore, the way in which art has been instrumentalized as a medium for the development and promotion of environmental narratives depicts controversial aspects. This thesis seeks to critically examine these aspects's influence in the context of environmental narratives, particularly through the decisions and perspectives of those working within the museum field, as well as that of people who actively create art.

Existing research acknowledges the role of museums in constructing social narratives (Jacobson et al., 2016), yet much of the authors in this field focus on communication strategies rather than on museums or artists as active participants in environmental discourse through their own curatorial and institutional practices. This perspective often risks reducing curators, artists, and museum guides to passive facilitators rather than key agents in shaping the different messages that audiences encounter. However, their roles need to be acknowledged as central, as they impact the viewer's experience; their skills, expertise, and intuition in creating, selecting and presenting works can profoundly shape the viewer's engagement and understanding with art. Artworks that may not initially appear connected can be framed in ways that encourage thematic and conceptual links, subtly guiding the viewer toward particular interpretations while maintaining the open-ended nature of artistic expression. This curatorial influence raises critical questions about the ethics of interpretation—particularly the balance between nudging audiences toward environmental awareness and allowing for personal, existential, and philosophical engagement with art. If art is instrumentalized as a mere vehicle for sustainability messaging, does it lose its deeper existential significance? And conversely, if environmental themes are left entirely to audience interpretation,

does this limit the potential impact of art in fostering environmental awareness and action?

This thesis will address these tensions by investigating the role of art museums as spaces of environmental meaning-making, examining the practices of curators, museum guides, and artists who engage with ecological themes, whether explicitly or implicitly. Through interviews with curators, artists, and museum professionals, this research will explore how these actors negotiate the balance between advocacy and artistic integrity, as well as the institutional and financial constraints that may shape curatorial decisions. These interviews will provide insight into the pressures and motivations behind exhibition curation, including how audience expectations and institutional priorities influence the framing of environmental issues. By analyzing cases of contemporary museums that engage with environmental topics, this study will assess how different curatorial approaches influence audience perceptions, emotional engagement, and cognitive processing of ecological issues. A key aspect of this analysis will be the extent to which curatorial and artistic choices enable or limit interpretive openness—whether exhibitions invite critical reflection, diverse perspectives, and existential engagement, or whether they reinforce fixed sustainability narratives that risk didacticism and ideological closure. Additionally, this research brings to the attention the socio-economic and cultural exclusivity of museums, questioning how these institutions contribute to or challenge dominant environmental narratives. Historically, art museums have been spaces that cater primarily to educated, upper-class audiences, which raises concerns about accessibility, inclusivity, and the potential reinforcement of Global North perspectives in environmental discourse.
While resource constraints may limit the scope of some aspects of this research, this study aims to uncover the intricate relationships between art, curation, and environmental messaging. By bridging gaps in existing literature and highlighting the active role of curators, artists, and museum professionals, this thesis will contribute to a deeper understanding of how art institutions shape environmental discourse—whether by reinforcing dominant narratives, challenging assumptions, or opening new avenues for existential and ethical reflection on sustainability.

1.1 Problem Formulation

The main point of this thesis is addressing the fact that both art and museums have a very definite role in the shaping of narratives within societies, but the connection between art-inspired social outcomes relating to environmental knowledge and practices might need to undergo certain presuppositions, or even shifts. One important step is understanding the passage between interpretation and creation of narratives. Narratives are indeed common perceptions, thoughts, feelings that develop in society, starting from different inputs, similar to pieces of a puzzle. Narratives are indeed socially constructed frameworks that emerge from diverse personal experiences, cultural discourses, and institutional messages. These collective perceptions and meanings help individuals and societies make sense of our realities, they reinforce group identities, and influence behavior (Fisher, 1984; Hall, 1997). In communication studies, narratives are viewed as central to public discourse and identity construction, functioning not just as stories but as powerful rhetorical structures and social mechanisms that legitimize certain worldviews. Dominant narratives are often maintained through media, education, and politics, but can be contested by counter-narratives that challenge established power relations and offer alternative frames (Fraser, 1990). As new inputs enter public discourse, collective narratives evolve, highlighting their dynamic role in shaping and reshaping societal understanding. As individuals, we tend to make our own narratives, but we ground them on our perception and understanding of reality, which, when living in a society, relates to other people's narratives, interrelating the personal and the common understanding. When people share life experiences within the same society, they will most likely have a similar understanding of things, and thus translating them as narratives (Fischer, 1987).

As climate change remains an increasingly urgent global issue, communication experts analysed plenty of ways in which to approach the problem effectively, making the broadness of this discourse, both in academic, social, political and personal effort vast and varied.
What this research aims for is underlining that museums and artists have contributed greatly to shape public understanding of ecological crises (Bentz & O'Brien 2019), but might need to revise their approach when going further. Through exhibitions and many different artistic expressions, art has always translated complex social issues into evocative, emotionally resonant experiences. The cases in history are innumerable. Art in this sense mirrors how human existence is developing, how it is felt, and at the same time reveals the biggest struggles of each epoch. However, this engagement raises fundamental questions: To what extent should museums and artists advocate for sustainability, and do they have a responsibility to do so? How can they do so without reducing art to a tool? A central challenge is indeed the tension between art's intrinsic value and its

instrumentalization for environmental messaging. This remains a critical point, because art lives and thrives when it remains label-less. Who's to say what it is? Who's to say what it should be? And, more importantly, who's to say what its purpose might be?

However unrealistic it is to attempt to respond to such questions here in this research, attention should be given to the way in which art is created, presented, used and understood. This is not discussing its value or its purpose, but rather understanding when art loses its character, both by bringing out a message or trying to spark a reaction, sort of a transformation into advertisement. Thus, the problem of instrumentalisation is paramount ; art indeed needs to remain non-instrumental, maintaining its existential value. Art exists as a space for reflection, ambiguity, and existential inquiry. When it is employed primarily to serve an external agenda—no matter how urgent—there is a risk that its philosophical depth is diminished in favor of didacticism (Marcuse, 1987; Rancière, 2004).

Museums and academic research, as institutions that mediate historical, social and cultural narratives, must critically assess how they construct and communicate environmental themes. If they present singular, deterministic perspectives on sustainability, they risk limiting the multiplicity of interpretations that art and culture allow. The correlation between art and environmentalism threads the line of ideological prescriptivism, of imposing an interpretation, and apart from not being necessarily ethical, it does so not in the most efficient ways.

Furthermore, art and museums in general, despite being more and more popular and inclusive, still attract a quite specific portion of the population. The instrumentalism of art in environmental research might not only be ineffective per se, but it might also be "preaching to the choir", appealing to an educated, upper class public that is already aware if not already involved in the research and practices. That being said, this research tries to explore this complex terrain related to art, museums and environmental communication.

1.2 Research aim

This research aims to lay out a comprehensive analysis on the stance of museums professionals and artists regarding the relation between art and the environment. It aims to understand their thoughts, actions and ideas for further developments relating to the issue. It aims to also discuss ” environmental” art, to uncover if it makes environmental narratives develop or hinders the final message, considering the role of museums, artists and art in shaping public narratives on ecological issues. Particular focus is needed on the conceptual challenges of balancing advocacy within environmental messages with artistic integrity. Through a combination of theoretical analysis and empirical research, this study investigates how museums professionals and artists navigate these issues practically and conceptually. By examining the intersection of environmental research, artistic practice, and curatorial strategy, this study seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of how cultural institutions can meaningfully contribute to ecological awareness while preserving the existential and autonomous value of art.

2. Art, Museums and Environmental Communication

Environmental communication is a well developed field, both in business practice and academic research. Despite its expansive and multifaceted character, some alternative ways to approach this field still need to be expanded. In this sense, environmental communication explored at length several issues on how this wicked problem has been presented. For the purposes of this thesis one important example is given by Weber (2006), who argues that canonic environmental related communication doesn't produce an emotional response, providing an explanation to the lack of action both to a personal and societal level. Other authors stress the fact that communication about environmental issues do aim to develop emotional responses, but would do so mainly negatively, resorting to "apocalyptic tones", leading either to feelings of despair or skepticism about alarmism (Foust & Murphy, 2009). Lorenzoni et al. (2007) identified several psycho-emotional barriers related to denial of certain aspects of the problem or solution, including: denying one's own responsibility, pointing to government inaction, arguing that climate change can't be stopped, and claiming that there are no alternatives to current behaviors. Overall, Roosen et al. (2018) also suggest that the tone of most environmental communication is rather negative.

With these presuppositions in mind, it becomes logical that such a wicked problem needs not to appeal to facts or directives, but rather aim to explore different ways of communicating, hoping to spark different (and possibly more constructive) emotions. Right now it frequently focuses on the negative consequences that collective behaviour has on the earth, triggering guilt and shame, and aims to elicit fear and anxiety about the future. This may have a short-term positive effect and trigger some changes of behaviour as a way for people to deal with the uneasiness they experience, but the effect may be increasingly lower after the feeling subsides because the threat is not constantly in our awareness. Kaufmann (2023) also suggests that different approaches to environmental communication are needed to transcend existing scientific knowledge, to challenge individual value-action gaps, and engage more people in science. As these examples suggest there is a gap between personal and systemic, societal and individual, and a well set understanding that straight communication has yes informed us, but not always pushed us to better outcomes, possibly alienating us to the problem; indeed, it has been acknowledged that increased environmental knowledge does not always translate into increased pro-environmental behavior (Klöckner 2015; Steg and Vlek 2009).

The examples that academics bring to the table as to why environmental communication is so complex to successfully achieve are many. Facing a problem that is so multifaceted, global yet so personal, embedded in politics and economy makes environmental communication research's approaches incredibly vast, inevitably becoming multidimensional and pluridisciplinary.

This thesis aims to explore art as a way to continue this dialogue, not by substituting other important communication practices, but rather by supporting them and providing a different approach. The literature that explores the connection between art and environmental research is quite extensive, and so is research that explores art as a communication method. To cite a few authors, Chen, Mei-Hsin (2022), Bentz & O'Brien (2019), Ernst et al. (2016) greatly support the value of art as a communication means, and lay down the benefits that this different approach can lead to. In a specific sense, these authors argue that the dialogical approach of pure scientific matters makes climate change feel distant and unconcerning, almost alienated to most people. It is mentioned that art can engage a person in rebuilding the meaning behind the work, rather than taking for granted its message; making its message less alienating and more palpable (Kaczmarczyk, 2014, as cited in Chen Mei Hsin, 2022). Kaufmann et al. (2023) also supports this broader view, stating that art related to the environment can engage various senses, which gives participants spatial, temporal, and embodied understanding of their data, and that data visualization type impacts participant emotional experience. Jacobson et al. (2016) sustains that giving some strong emotional grounds right from the awareness phase can help the communication attempt when it becomes deeper. Sommer (2020) supports this psychological approach to the matter, providing the historical examples of these practices.

Viewing an image in an artistic context can foster appraisal processes that influence emotional experiences, allowing the viewer to aesthetically judge negative stimuli more positively, thereby suppressing the immediacy of content that carries an emotional stimulus.

Furthermore, art does not only aim for the personal sphere ; Roosen et al. (2018a, 2018b) further explained how contemporary art that addresses climate change can help audiences overcome psychological barriers via disrupting daily life routines, offering a space of reflection, and/or strengthening a sense of group identity among the visitors, thereby facilitating motivation for change. Art can indeed also reinforce a sense of group identity among the public appreciating the same work of art, and this is a way to engage people in social movements and elicit social change. The mentions that art provides a space, a reason to interact, to exchange information and experiences are many.

Many contemporary artists explore social and environmental questions and find a visual expression to formulate their critique or suggest alternatives in artworks.

That being said, the way in which art appeals to environmental communication challenges needs to be understood ; Either by making environmental art oneself or by viewing and experiencing it, art can inspire to explore alternative ideas and change perspectives. Art is often ambiguous and open for interpretation, which invites reflections on its meaning and the topics it portrays (Roosen et al. 2018). Perhaps conversations are sparked, in which hearing different meanings and opinions can expand one's own views. The strength of art lies in deepening questions and creating a space to explore these questions (Galafassi et al. 2018a). Art is free to challenge, provoke and be controversial, as it can express what sometimes might not be possible to be said with words (Bentz & O'Brien 2019). Furthermore, as seen above, art and emotions are strongly related, art stems from emotions and simultaneously evokes emotions (Nurmis 2016). Thereby, art can facilitate developing an emotional connection to environmental topics (Bentz & O'Brien 2019). And being emotionally invested gives a motivation to stay engaged with environmental topics (Roosen et al. 2018). Additionally, art sparks inspiration and engages human senses, which can develop an embodied knowing of climate change (Roosen et al. 2018; Kaufmann et al. 2023). "Climate is culture" – this is how artist David Buckland describes the relation between climate change and society (Buckland 2012:1). While climate change is a result of modern culture and economic frameworks, culture can also positively shape the future of earth's climate. Climate change can be seen as both a cultural and societal phenomenon, which reframes humans' relationship to nature and the environment (Galafassi et al. 2018a). One expression of the cultural dimension of climate change is the emergence of environmental art. Environmental art as a field of art grew out of the environmental movement of the 1960s and 70s and has steadily become more and more widespread since the 2000s (Thornes 2008). Environmental art can open up for reflexivity, inspiration and exploration and it provides an emotional access to climate change (Bentz & O'Brien 2019).

Art is promoted as an alternative communication method, as it provides emotional access rather than appealing to rationality (Kaufmann et al. 2023).

The instrumental side of communication is purpose-focused, it uses language and non-verbal cues to achieve a goal, like persuading, demanding, or alerting (Pezzullo & Cox 2018). Communication from a constitutive angle shapes and negotiates meanings and values. It might draw on certain perspectives and beliefs and can influence how environmental issues are approached, for example as threats or as chances. The instrumental side of environmental communication sees art as a tool for potentially motivating behaviour change. Burke et al.'s (2018) study on environmental art as a communication tool can be evaluated as an example of an instrumental approach. They describe viewing art as a strategy to evoke emotional reactions with the goal of potentially motivating people to rethink and change their behaviour. Roosen et al. (2018) take a psychological perspective on art as climate

communication and show primarily instrumental aspects, but also constitute ones. On the instrumental side they describe art as a communication strategy which can be more effective in motivating action by evoking emotions than strictly scientific communication. They also discuss art and communication constitutively by saying that its combination inspires and invites reflection.

I formulate that most authors consider art in its direct form, so directly by artists to the public, almost like a product. The consideration of who's behind art and exhibitions seems to be overlooked while conducting research on this topic. Moreover, art is often presented just as an alternative way to get messages over to someone. There are actually many occasions in which an artwork's meaning can be modified (either distorted or enhanced), relating to museums, curators, guides and the institution's own influences. All these sets of conditions definitely have a relevance in the way in which the artwork is presented and received by the viewer, and thus have relevance in the emotional construction of meaning. There is not much acknowledgement in the literature on how these curation factors can influence the viewer, and possibly how the viewer's experience can be expanded by the curator's and guides' work. Another instance is when museums act as sources of information not only through art, but through other means ; here the relevance is given to the fact that museums do have an authority in society, making them important in social dialogue. This is well exemplified by Bikovska and Chern Li Liew (2022), who investigated how the museums efficiently utilised their Facebook platforms to communicate about climate and environmental-related challenges, offering a snapshot of how museums contribute to communicating climate-related topics and climate change education.
The authors mentioned in the previous paragraph clearly mentioned the role of museums in the construction of social narratives, not how the museums relate art itself to the environmental discourse, but rather how the museums communicate messages themselves (as actors) to the visitors. As mentioned above, this surely provides insights on how museums act in their social setting, but it also makes the curators and the exhibitions settings not actively engaged in the discourse, or rather, their role is not acknowledged; the museum is often yet another actor suggesting something.
As mentioned above, the connection of art and environmental communication has been vastly explored in academic literature. Cultural institutions are extremely important in shaping how societies think and act. Museums are in their essence institutions of public memory, therefore they have the capacity to frame memories or make them persistent in time. At their best, museums today can create the tools to write the contemporary narratives that are needed to understand the present. By building on the traditional role of modern art to question and provoke, contemporary art museums speculate about possible futures as well as reconsider

the past. In general, over the past 20 years, museums have become significantly more popular and changed their self-perception from being archives to becoming participative experiences and educational instruments, exploring and taking over new roles providing experiences for an increasingly differentiated public (Groys, 2013).

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical frameworks used to draw conclusions from the data will come from communication theory and social theory. The scope for this research is vast and will tremendously change in significance, depending on the theories that are used to analyse it ; this is because both communication and art in their essence are fundamentally complex to catalogue according to theory.

Art, as a medium of communication, presents unique challenges due to its inherently fluid and multifaceted nature. It spans various communication "domains", from semiotics, which examines signs and symbols in a straightforward way, to phenomenology, which explores subjective experiences and perception. It has elements that connect to social constructivism and critique as well, making it one of the most versatile and fluid communication methods. This complexity makes art difficult to categorize within conventional communication theories, emphasizing its open-ended and interpretive nature. The main point is that art cannot be placed in one category, and it shouldn't aim to respond to a certain outcome. If art would for example be categorised only into a semiotic sphere, then it would lose its supposed universality, or emotional appeal. On the opposite side of the spectrum, if made and advertised as a socio-psychological tool, it would lose its semiotic directiveness and efficiency. Different artworks will carry tendencies to different communication domains; nevertheless, the underlying factor is that artists do not produce art for academics (or others) to tell what it is, what it produces or in which theoretical category of communication it should fall into. Those processes simply hinder all of the above mentioned outcomes, which should rather come from personal interpretation of each visitor.

For the purposes of this research, the focus will be on understanding how curators, guides, artists, and audiences conceive art, and the connection between art and environmental communication within the museum and public context. The methods and intentions behind their communication directly influence the construction of meaning of anyone that is exposed to the art, possibly with implications for how environmental narratives are received and internalized by the portion of society museums and artists address. As seen in previous paragraphs museums, as cultural institutions, play a significant role in shaping social narratives, and the interactions among these professionals are central to how those narratives are constructed and conveyed. Social practice theory becomes particularly relevant here, as it examines how everyday practices and interactions contribute to the broader forming of social patterns and meanings. It comes from the concept that neither technological innovations nor the persuasion of individuals to choose different, 'better' behaviors will catalyze sufficient change. The key lies in transforming and reconfiguring social practices, which are composed of material objects and environments, and socio-cultural meanings as well as the skills and competences to do something

(Keller et al., 2016). Moreover, social theory provides a critical lens for examining the relationship between environmental communication and societal factors such as class, social status, and educational background. Museums often cater to specific demographics, and these elements can shape both access to and interpretation of environmental themes within art. This framework allows for an exploration of how these disparities manifest in the audience's reception of art and their engagement with environmental issues. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the research will analyze not only how communication occurs through art, within museums or public spaces, but also its broader implications for inclusivity, accessibility, and the societal impact of environmental narratives not only relating to the upper levels of wealth and education.

4. Methods

This thesis employs a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences, roles, and perspectives of art museums, curators, and artists in the context of environmental communication. The primary objective is to investigate how environmental narratives are shaped, mediated, and interpreted within the museum context, and how institutional, ethical, and curatorial choices influence the public's engagement with ecological and climate-related issues. By focusing on the lived experiences and reflections of professionals within the art world, this study seeks to understand the subjective processes that guide artistic and curatorial decisions, and how these, in turn, inform and shape public perception.

In particular, this research aims to uncover the various layers of meaning that guide artistic and curatorial practices. This includes an interest in the conceptual and aesthetic strategies employed by artists and curators, the spatial and sensory experiences offered by museum exhibitions, and the modes of communication that emerge in the dialogue between art, space, and audience. A key focus is the way these elements interact to stimulate critical reflection, emotional engagement, and personal connection to environmental concerns.

An important dimension of this inquiry is the examination of research as a creative and ethical process. The study explores whether and how curators and artists engage in forms of research—whether formal or informal—to deepen their knowledge and expand the relevance and applicability of their work. This is especially significant when their practice intersects with environmental sciences. Understanding the epistemological basis of their work—what sources they consult, which disciplines they draw from, and how they interpret environmental knowledge—sheds light on how art can function as both a communicative and investigative practice.

Given the complex and often intangible nature of environmental communication through art, a qualitative methodology is the most appropriate choice. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for capturing the vast and often ambiguous dimensions of meaning that arise in this field. It enables the researcher to investigate not only what is being communicated, but also how it is being perceived, experienced, and interpreted by those involved in its production and presentation.

Through semi-structured interviews, this study seeks to understand how emotions, personal beliefs, and embodied experiences influence the ways in which artists and curators approach environmental issues in their work. It also considers how they perceive audience engagement—what they believe viewers feel, learn, or question when interacting with an environmentally themed artwork or exhibition. Rather than seeking generalizable truths, the goal is to identify patterns of thought, recurring tensions, and meaningful divergences in how practitioners in the art world make sense of their environmental roles.

Ultimately, qualitative research offers a way to enter into the lived worlds of practitioners and institutions, providing insight into how environmental art functions not only as a visual or intellectual experience, but also as an affective, ethical, and spatial one. It allows for the consideration of context, ambiguity, and contradiction—all of which are central to the intersection of contemporary art and climate discourse.

4.1 Data collection

In the previous section it was explained the validity of qualitative methods in this discourse. For the purposes of this thesis, seven qualitative interviews were made, mainly with curators and artists, but also other museum professionals that cover different roles which also are based in the communication effort to the visitors. Most of the interviewees are located in Sweden, Italy and the Netherlands.
These interviews were designed to capture insights into strategies, ethical considerations, institutional frames and the conceptual frameworks that guide their work. Questions were simply worded, limited in number and open-ended to allow for elaboration and reflection, encouraging participants to openly discuss their values, professional and personal approaches to environmental themes, and their views on the role of art in fostering ecological awareness. Some questions were prepared to fit the most crucial aspects, especially regarding their experience, allowing to have a consistent set of answers between all interviewees ; despite this, it has been equally important to improvise during the interviews, letting the interviewee develop the themes that they wanted to develop, the themes which are perceived by them as most important (Creswell, J.W and Creswell J.D, 2018). Interviewing individuals who operate within museums from diverse professional standpoints—such as curators, artists, and other professional figures—was crucial for understanding the distinct perceptions and roles of these key actors, and of course how they interact and differ. Most of the artists that participated not only had experience working with museums, but also within galleries and public spaces, leading to interesting different insights on the space's influence on art reception. These interviews help illuminate how each professional group approaches their work, the dynamics of collaboration between them, how they think about sustainability and the influence they collectively exert on the audience's experience and interpretation of environmental themes. It is important to relate this to the literature and known practices already developed on these themes, to have a thorough data set and an understanding on how theory and practice differs.

The qualitative methods approach created a well-rounded dataset, allowing for a nuanced analysis of how museums and their personnel contribute to the communication of environmental narratives, and the challenges they might face.

Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Initial contacts were identified based on their professional affiliations, connecting to environmental research or practices. The first interviewees were selected through research on the institutions that are related to environmental panels. Further participants were then recommended through referrals. All interviews were conducted online and their audio was recorded with the consent of the participants. Transcriptions were anonymized to protect identities and analyzed thematically. Because of logistic constraints, it hasn't been possible to visit every museum whose professionals that were interviewed worked in/with, but thorough research has been done to understand their history, active exhibitions and efforts.
Most interviewees had themes of sustainability close at heart in their daily life, and some of the interviewees already had experiences or professional interest in research related to environmental challenges. Some were even actively engaged with environmental research panels such as the "Mistra EC", based in Sweden.
Overall, these interviews offer perspectives on their intentions and processes, helping to uncover the broader themes they engage with and the challenges they face, plus giving insights on their stance regarding what has already been done in these fields. By integrating these qualitative approaches, it has been possible to draw meaningful conclusions about the emotional and cognitive impacts of curatorial practices, as well as the broader role of art and museum professionals in shaping environmental communication.

4.2 Data Analysis

The outcomes of the semi-structured interviews have been analyzed through thematic coding, to identify key patterns and insights that emerge from the data. Thematic coding provides a structured approach to categorizing and interpreting qualitative data and allows for a deeper understanding, organizing and grouping of responses. By utilizing coding theory, the goal is to ensure that the data is systematically analyzed, making it possible to identify and explore the underlying ideas and relationships across different responses.

The first step in the analysis involved outlining the roles of the professional figures involved, such as curators, guides, and artists. Understanding how these individuals act in their professional role is crucial for uncovering their awareness and eventual contributions to environmental narratives, or the social "stance" that derives from them, and eventually the differences between different standpoints.
Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and conceptual categories across the interviews. This process involved repeated readings of the transcripts, highlighting key concepts, grouping responses into themes that had

been chosen basing on their importance, such as "knowledge and experience with art/curation", "art and communication," “emotional relevance”, "perceived difficulties in their work”, “future ideas or projects”. The specific coding themes relate to the questions that have been posed, focusing on critical aspects that needed to be connected with the literature, such as involvement with the matter, professional experience, emotional engagement, perceptions of responsibility, construction of meaning, and personal research. It is important to start and firstly understand what the interviewees thought about the underlying topics, mainly that of how art and environmental communication function on their own and then together, to then give them freedom to expand on the parts they thought were more important. This provided insights into how their current practices align with or diverge from broader environmental communication goals. The focus then shifted to exploring how their work can enhance environmental communication efforts in both current contexts and potential future scenarios.

The analysis was interpretive, aiming not only to report on recurring ideas but especially to understand the underlying assumptions, tensions, and values embedded in participants’ reflections. This was crucial, because the interviewees not only work closely with themes of sustainability, but they also believe personally in developing the themes they are working on. They have an active interest and knowledge in these topics. It was clear that for most of them it’s not only part of their job. Besides that, they also have complications and guidelines to follow, as sometimes the institutions they work for have different priorities, making other parts of the agenda become more central. Their view on this is also important to explore.
An interesting part of the analysis involved briefly assessing whether the responses acknowledged social theory-related concerns raised in earlier research questions, such as the impact of class, access, and cultural narratives on environmental communication. This alignment is critical for understanding how deeply issues of inclusivity, representation, and societal impact resonate within the professional practices and self-perceptions of museum staff, and if their work acknowledges and tries to make it more accessible.

5. Findings

This chapter presents the key findings from interviews conducted with artists, curators, and other museum professionals across multiple European contexts. Most of them work in contemporary art museums or galleries. The participants work across four European countries (The Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, and Finland). The interviewees include practicing visual artists, curators working in contemporary art institutions, and museum professionals including education and program managers. Some of the visual artists also had experience curating professionally. Their insights provide a layered understanding of how art and curatorial practice works, connecting to how environmental narratives are shaped, mediated, and interpreted through art. Interviews with artists, curators, and museum professionals demonstrate that their understanding of these different elements are at the very basis of their work. All the professionals involved in this research demonstrated a deep understanding and firm opinions on how art can contribute to environmental challenges. In other words, where the literature suggests for art to just try to spark an emotion related to environmental concerns, this thesis suggests that for art to be useful in environmental communication it should maintain its non-instrumentality, its broad character, and rather aim to question our position in the world instead of providing data or facts.

5.1 The Role and Power of Art in Environmental Communication

The interviewees express in different ways how the reach of art is undefined but potentially endless, as it aims to spark thoughts and emotions, which are of course deeply personal and thus effective. Furthermore, despite the fact that trying to define art per se might be controversial, since art can be anything and lacks a single definition, the role of artists, museums, and curators is essential in society and needs to be valued. All the interviewees showed great care and deep knowledge of arts and the environment. Within this research it has been very important to understand first their experience in dealing with art, the environment or environmental research, and then exploring how they combine these elements in their work. What emerges is a complex interplay between emotion, autonomy, institutional structure, and spatial experience in fostering environmental engagement.

Across all interviews, a shared belief emerged in the profound communicative potential of art. Artists and curators emphasized that art is not simply a medium to transmit facts or data, but a mode of engagement that resonates on emotional, sensory, and spiritual levels. “Art can reach you on a non-verbal level, it can reach you in an emotional, spiritual way or it can reach you when you were, like, two

years old," one artist explained. This deeply phenomenological potential was seen as a strength, as it allows art to reach individuals in ways that other forms of communication may fail to reach. This was echoed in multiple interviews, emphasizing that the affective experience can drive people to new insights or emotional awakenings that rational arguments or data cannot. As seen in the literature review, this emotional dialogue was positively backed by lots of academics.

Many participants emphasized that art's strength lies in its fluidity, ambiguity and refusal to become purely instrumental. A frequently cited sentiment was: "I don't want to tell you what to think. It's more about creating something where you can make up your own mind." This was often positioned in contrast to overt activism or science communication. One artist observed, "We already have the facts. What we don't have is the emotional space to process them." The idea that art creates that space—where contradictory feelings, uncertainty, and reflection are allowed—was key. The concept of viewer autonomy was deeply tied to the idea of emotional and intellectual agency. "It's crucial that I don't tell people how to understand my work..the viewer needs to have agency," noted one artist. Another echoed: "We're not just asking people to understand. We're asking them to feel. And that can't be forced." Others noted how this openness contrasts with the often rigid narratives in environmental policy and media: "People come into exhibitions with their own fears, hopes, doubts. Art allows them to bring those into the experience."

A recurring notion was that emotional engagement leads to cognitive transformation. As one artist put it, "Art has the potential of transforming you and how you think of things. And it involves your emotions. So emotions and more intellectual processes collaborate. And that I think is the basis for change." These transformations were described not as instant conversions, but subtle shifts that accumulate over time. A curator noted, "You can't always measure the impact right away. But someone might think differently a month later because of something they saw."

Another curator expressed: "Art has been used throughout history to address injustice and uncertainty. Why should environmental discourses be any different?" This notion of continuity—placing current environmental work within the larger arc of art's engagement with society's issues—was reinforced by other respondents who drew connections to past movements such as protests, feminist art practices, or resistance art under oppressive frames.

As one curator states, "Museums hold memories of human history. They are the place to go to when you want to know more about you, yourself and your surroundings. And there are so many histories to learn from. So I think that it's such

a fantastic resource. We can learn from objects, we can learn from the topics of art. And then when people come to a museum, they usually are open minded because they come to experience something with all your senses and esthetic experiences and experience where all senses are involved."

Many artists shared that their work was not premeditated or strategic but rather intuitive, driven purely by artistic intuition and experience. One reflected: "When I start a project, it's not because I want to say something specific about the environment. It's because I feel something needs to be expressed—and later, maybe that connects to a part of us that analyses it in an existential way." A curator remarked: "The artists we work with don't come in with an agenda. Their work simply resonates with environmental themes because it can make the viewer question its place in an ecosystem."

Multiple interviewees made a point of distinguishing art from science, cautioning against didacticism. "If [art] tells you too much what to think, then the line between art and propaganda gets a bit too blurry," said one artist.

Aesthetic and sensory experiences were seen as vital entry points to environmental awareness. "There's already so much information," one curator noted. "What's missing is space to breathe." Another said, "We need to create moments where people are not overwhelmed but invited to be with the complexity of the issue." This emphasis on slow, embodied engagement aligned with several curators' efforts to create meditative or immersive installations.

One particularly striking reflection came from an artist who described their practice as a form of emotional labor: "I see my role as creating space for feeling. We can't move forward on climate if we don't mourn what's lost. Art can hold that grief." Others emphasized joy, connection, and even playfulness as equally valid responses: "People need to feel hope. Not naive hope, but grounded hope. And sometimes art can do that." These emotional modalities—grief, hope, awe, anger—were seen as fundamental to building more sustainable cultural imaginaries and more grounded capacity in acknowledging our place in the world.

In sum, the findings show that art's power in environmental communication lies not in broadcasting facts, but in offering emotionally rich, ambiguous, and reflective experiences that encourage viewers to think, feel, and imagine differently. It is precisely this openness, this refusal to dictate, that makes art a powerful force for transformation. This attention to the autonomy of interpretation is not about detachment, but rather about deepening the personal connections that viewers may have with environmental concerns. Artists frequently spoke of the "magic" that can occur in the space between artwork and audience. "Sometimes I'm surprised that it

actually happens," one participant said. "That something happens between the viewer and the work... that's kind of magic for me."

5.2 The Curatorial and Institutional Framework

Curators reflected on their own evolving roles in navigating these topics. One curator described how museums are not simply neutral repositories of objects but active elements of culture in society. The potential of these spaces to act as transformative environments within society is vast, functioning not only by communicating to each visitor, but also providing a space for dialogue and didactics. In this, curators act as mediums between the art and the visitor.

Regarding this, curators voiced concerns about the limits and pitfalls of using art too instrumentally. "We have to find the balance," one said. "It's important that it doesn't tip over so that art becomes just instrumental to science... because we also believe that art is important in itself." Another curator described how artworks can function as "taps," allowing people to understand something "in a completely new way... to understand your whole system." The key here lies in the curator's experience in conveying artwork's messages in a clearer, more impactful way.

This tension that emerged around curatorial authority and artistic freedom is crucial. That means understanding how curators can impact the experience and interpretation of exhibitions, without making their work seem overly directive. As one curator stated, "You're meant to be supportive, not use artists and artworks to make your own narrative," or "We need to do more to give audiences the keys to unlock the artworks."

While curators often work with contemporary topics, the challenge lies in ensuring that "the art can still be free and creative within that... also giving space for what is not always planned or expected." Understanding the role of curators has been crucial for this thesis. Here, curators must be seen as facilitators of dialogue. They make art more understandable, create links between artworks, and overall they have the responsibility to present the artwork "as it is," however enriching it via spatial placement or connection with other artworks.

"We can always talk about the art and present different layers, but we should never use it as an instrument to just take it and run with it and, and turn it into something that it isn't from the start." One example of this interviewee's opinion could be giving a certain title to an exhibition, to introduce concepts that could be difficult to come across in normal everyday scenarios. In this case, the curator's work functions as a channeling of meaning, an attempt to expand the visitor's experience and understanding of the exhibition. "Many people enter a museum not thinking about the fact that everything is curated. Everything is curated to tell a story. So in

a way, all visitors to all exhibitions are, in a way, manipulated. Yes, the objects are put together to tell a story and to convey something, a message of some sort." But this does not mean distorting the message; it's enriching it, making the message more accessible for the viewer. And that takes lots of knowledge and expertise.

They work within institutions that serve as mediators between artwork and public, and this dual function carries both possibilities and constraints. "Nothing in a museum is random," one curator stated. "Everything is curated to convey something—even if that something is ambiguity."

Curators spoke at length about their responsibilities in shaping not just what is shown, but how it is encountered. "Our job is not to use art, but to frame it. To help people slow down and notice. That's very different from telling them what to think," said one. This interpretive act was described as both ethical and aesthetic. Another reflected: "People don't want to be preached to. They want to be invited into a conversation."

Curators also discussed the long-term impact of exhibitions. "We want to plant seeds," said one. "Even if people don't remember the name of the show, maybe they remember how it made them feel. That matters." Another noted that success could not always be measured through attendance numbers: "A quiet moment of connection can be more powerful than a crowded opening night."

5.3 Spatial Context and Environmental Art

Architecture played a significant role. Some museums were praised for their integration with natural elements. One professional described a museum with limited electric lighting: "The environment has a huge impact on the experience because of the architecture. It's designed in such a way that it slows you down." Or, "There's something beautiful about the contrast between the natural and the artificial. It makes both feel more alive."

Art placed in natural landscapes was seen as uniquely powerful. "Even if the viewer misses the message, they're still in the landscape, thinking, walking. That counts for something," said an artist. These encounters, free from the formality of museums, were described as more intimate and embodied, and more importantly, they place the person in nature, possibly allowing them to reflect.

This spatial turn reflects a broader reimagining of art's role—not confined to galleries, but embedded in everyday life. Space, in this view, is not just a backdrop but an active participant in shaping meaning. The environment, in this sense, is not only the subject of art but also its co-author. Ultimately, the curatorial role was framed as a delicate balancing act—between openness and clarity, innovation and

tradition, institutional obligation and artistic freedom. Yet it was clear that curators saw themselves as key agents in shaping how art and environmental discourses are made, shown, and received. Their task is not only to support the artwork, but to create the conditions under which its meaning can unfold.

The spatial context of art—where and how it is encountered—emerged as a critical theme. Artists and curators alike emphasized that location shapes meaning. Several artists discussed their move away from conventional exhibition spaces toward public and outdoor contexts. “I’ve been working quite a lot in the public domain,” said one artist. “Trying to direct myself to people in their everyday moment, not necessarily those who search for art.”

Public space was often framed as more democratic. “When you exhibit something in a park or a public square,” one curator said, “you’re not just preaching to the converted. You’re inviting everyone in.” Another artist added: “Even if they don’t understand the art, they’re outside. They’re walking. That’s already something.”

5.4 Accessibility and Institutional Limitations

Another critical concern was accessibility. Some curators questioned whether their institutions truly served diverse publics. “The museum as a concept is very exclusive,” one curator noted. “It excludes a lot of different parts of society. And that is not very welcoming to all different kinds of competences.” Others discussed internal efforts to become more inclusive: community advisory boards, multilingual materials, and participatory programming. These strategies were not seen as optional, but integral to any ethical practice around art.

While curators valued openness, they also acknowledged the structural limitations of their institutions. Despite their potential, museums were also seen as struggling to connect more widely. One artist stated “The museum as a concept is very exclusive, it excludes a lot of different parts of society. And that is not very welcoming to all different kinds of competences.” Or, as mentioned by a curator, “There’s still so much elitism in the art world,” one curator admitted. “We tend to overcomplicate things... we sort of forget to really reach people.”

Some participants noted that simply exhibiting environmentally-themed artworks may not be enough, especially when dealing with audiences unfamiliar with scientific concepts. Not only this, but also issues of museums being institutions, and thus working with funding arise; the fact that there is an agenda, dictated by someone else, may lead the museum’s efforts and role to different directions. The priorities that museums as institutions have may vary due to this. Funding, bureaucracy, and donor interests were common obstacles. “We’re constantly

negotiating between doing what feels necessary and what's fundable," one curator explained. "Sometimes the two don't align."

Together, these findings present a multifaceted portrait of the roles that art, artists, curators, and institutions play in environmental communication. Rather than delivering fixed narratives or solutions, the participants in this research advocate for practices rooted in openness, emotional resonance, inclusivity, and spatial awareness. Art is positioned not as a tool to explain the climate crisis, but as a catalyst to feel, think, and imagine within it—offering experiences that make the complexities of the environmental moment personally and collectively navigable.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the intricate and often conflicting roles that museums, curators, and artists play in shaping environmental narratives. These tensions reflect broader debates in the literature on the responsibilities of cultural institutions amid the climate crisis. The discussion here explores these dynamics in relation to four linked themes: the balance between artistic autonomy and environmental advocacy; the processes or constraints that shape curatorial choices; the unpredictability and multiplicity of audience reception; and the accessibility and inclusivity of environmental discourse in the museum space. In doing so, this section connects the empirical insights of the study to the theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature review and identifies gaps for further research.

A key contrast that emerged between the literature and the interviews is the concern that producing or exhibiting artworks that are overtly connected to environmental themes may compromise artistic autonomy. While the literature considers art as a powerful means of communication that can be effectively used for raising awareness and action, many curators and artists interviewed expressed resistance to framing exhibitions around clear environmental advocacy, fearing that such instrumentalization would limit the interpretive richness of artistic work. This reflects arguments in aesthetic theory that advocate for the preservation of art's autonomy. As one curator noted, "Art must remain an open field of meaning—it should disturb rather than resolve."

Respondents often articulated a desire to provoke emotional, intellectual or even spiritual engagement rather than deliver a clear, defined message. Moreover, several interviewees described using techniques such as metaphors, ambiguity, and multisensory elements to foster emotional resonance and existential reflection. One artist mentioned, "It's not about showing melting ice—it's about evoking a sense of vulnerability." This sums well the existentialist response that art often aims for. This highlights a middle ground between advocacy and abstraction. It supports the argument that environmental art can offer meaningful engagement not by telling audiences what to think, but by inviting them to feel, reflect, and question. The findings reinforce the idea that aesthetic strategies should be tailored to foster affective experience and interpretive openness, thus encouraging deeper and more sustained ecological thinking. A major theme raised by participants was the concern that directly addressing environmental issues through art might limit creative freedom. Several curators and artists expressed a preference for using ambiguity, metaphor, and affective strategies over explicit messaging. This echoes Groys

(2013), who argues that museums increasingly operate as spaces for reflection and interpretation, rather than as conveyors of fixed meaning.

One curator noted, “Art must remain an open field of meaning—it should disturb rather than resolve.” Another artist said, “It’s not about showing melting ice—it’s about evoking a sense of vulnerability.” These comments reflect a desire to maintain artistic openness while still addressing urgent environmental concerns.

This tension reflects the broader shift, discussed by forms of self-exploration and alternative values in contemporary cultural practice. It also aligns with Galafassi et al. (2018a), who emphasize the power of symbolic and emotionally resonant aesthetic practices to foster sustained reflection on ecological issues. Rather than delivering fixed narratives, many participants positioned art as a medium that encourages individual engagement and meaning-making.

At the institutional level, this study underscores the extent to which museums are shaped by financial and structural constraints that complicate their ability to engage with environmental discourse. The influence of funding—whether from governmental bodies, private donors, or corporate sponsorship—often dictates the extent to which curators can integrate pressing matters into exhibitions. The concerns about greenwashing raised by some respondents point to a broader issue within cultural institutions: the contradiction between their public commitments to sustainability and their reliance on funding sources that may contribute to ecological harm. This reflects broader critiques of institutional complicity in capitalist and extractivist systems, raising questions about whether museums can ever be truly independent actors in the environmental discourse they claim to facilitate. The findings suggest that while many curators are aware of these contradictions, and still affirm that they are trusted and free in their operations, they must comply with the institution’s agenda. This strategic negotiation reflects the complex position of museums as both cultural and economic entities.

These dynamics mirror Fraser’s (1990) analysis of how cultural institutions navigate the contradictory demands of public service and market logic. While museums often brand themselves as environmentally conscious, their operations may be entangled in unsustainable practices or affiliations with environmentally harmful industries. Respondents were aware of this contradiction and described strategies to mitigate or subvert it. These included choosing artists whose work carries implicit ecological themes, programming events that address sustainability without overt confrontation, and framing environmental issues through broader lenses such as interconnectivity or resilience. Such strategic negotiation reflects the concept of “critical complicity,” wherein curators work within structural constraints to introduce critical content in subtle and subversive ways. The findings also

highlight differences across institutions: while some curators reported relatively open curatorial processes, others described bureaucratic or ideological gatekeeping that limited critical engagement. This suggests that institutional culture and governance structure are significant determinants of how far museums can go in challenging dominant environmental paradigms.

This discourse revolves also around artists themselves. In their work, intuition, feelings and experiences are paramount. Despite this, some artists raised concerns regarding the strong influence of the art market in the construction of culture. In this sense, this frame adds yet another "giant" to look out for when creating art ; the market that heavily influences those who get seen, and those who won't, hindering the construction and divulgation of culture.

Audience reception emerged as a third major theme, revealing that visitor responses to environmental exhibitions are highly variable and often unpredictable. Many curators expressed uncertainty about how their exhibitions were received, noting that some visitors sought factual clarity while others appreciated emotional or abstract encounters. One respondent explained, "You might build an exhibition around climate anxiety, but visitors walk away thinking about family or memory instead."

Museums, then, cannot fully control how content is interpreted. Instead, curators must provide collections and descriptions that can accommodate diverse expectations and effective registers. As one curator put it, "You prepare the soil, but you can't predict what will grow." This approach aligns with Galafassi et al. (2018a), who highlight the value of multisensory and affective experiences in fostering deeper and longer-term engagement with ecological questions. It needs to be noted that this is not so much a constraint, but rather a point of strength in constructing meaning. Educational programming, interpretive materials, and staff mediation were identified as crucial for guiding but not dictating visitor interpretation. Rather than privileging a single mode of engagement, successful exhibitions offered a spectrum of affective, intellectual, and sensory stimuli. The findings suggest that affective and experiential approaches may be more effective than purely informational displays in sustaining audience attention and emotional investment.

Moreover, some respondents reported using audience feedback mechanisms, such as comment walls or post-visit surveys, to gauge impact. These tools, while limited, offer curators insights into how visitors experience the exhibitions they plan, which in turn can be useful for future curatorial strategies. Overall, the study shows that acknowledging and embracing interpretive multiplicity is essential for meaningful environmental engagement.

The issue of accessibility emerged as a significant concern, with many respondents acknowledging that museum audiences tend to attract educated, middle- and upper-class demographics. This observation aligns with Rancière's (2004) critique that cultural institutions often reproduce social hierarchies despite claiming inclusive missions.
Also regarding a complete assessment of accessibility frame, the scope of this research needs to be expanded. For the purposes of this thesis the interviewees were limited to European spheres of influence, despite the reach of the institutions they work for. It would be a much more complete analysis if global perspectives and efforts would have been analysed. This thesis itself reflects broader critiques within environmental humanities about the persistence of Eurocentric frameworks in sustainability discourse. As discussed in the literature review, Galafassi et al. (2018a) emphasize the importance of integrating multiple knowledge systems, including those from the Global South and Indigenous communities, into environmental communication. Including these perspectives would provide a more complete and equitable understanding of how environmental knowledge is shaped and shared.

Several respondents emphasized the need for longer-term collaborations with communities, rather than one-off inclusions. Some mentioned artist residencies, co-curation models, and multilingual interpretation as steps toward greater inclusivity. While these efforts are nascent, they indicate a recognition that genuine environmental engagement must also be socially and epistemically inclusive.

This study opens several pathways for future inquiry. First, further research is needed on how different audience demographics engage with environmental content in museums. While this study focused on curators' and artists perspectives, understanding visitor interpretation in more detail—especially among underrepresented groups—would help refine curatorial strategies. Second, further studies could assess whether and how environmental exhibitions can lead to lasting changes in awareness or behavior. The success of ecological art here lies not only in immediate reaction but in its capacity to influence ongoing cognitive and emotional processes. Measuring this requires more than attendance metrics; it calls for qualitative engagement over time.

Third, comparative studies across institutions with different funding models and governance structures could illuminate the systemic factors that enable or inhibit environmental critique. The span needs to be broader, considering public art, global museum and galleries efforts.

In conclusion, this study shows that museums are uniquely positioned to engage the public with environmental issues, but they do so within complex webs of artistic, institutional, and ethical tensions. The curators and artists interviewed here navigate these challenges with creativity, knowledge, criticality, and great care. Their insights offer the groundwork for how cultural institutions might evolve into spaces of ethical, affective, and inclusive environmental engagement.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has explored how art museums, curators, and artists contribute to environmental communication, focusing on the ways they shape and present ecological narratives to the public. Based on interviews with professionals in the field and analysis of curatorial practices, the research shows that art is surely another way of developing environmental narratives. Museums are active cultural arenas where artistic expression, educational goals, and institutional pressures meet—and sometimes clash. The findings point to both the promise and the challenges of using art and museum practices to engage audiences with urgent issues. The promises mostly rely on art giving a possibility for people to reflect, learn, experience and share opinions with others. It might very well have a sparking effect for further interests and more sustainable practices.

One of the central tensions identified in this study is the pressure to make art serve a clear environmental purpose. While art can powerfully move people and provoke deeper awareness, artists and curators also emphasize that art should not become a tool for delivering simplified messages or solutions. Instead, they argue that art must maintain its openness, ambiguity, and capacity to speak to existential human questions—qualities that are often lost when art is used only for advocacy. This tension between emotional resonance and instrumental messaging is a key challenge in curating environmental exhibitions. Curators, in particular, play a crucial role in shaping how audiences interpret environmental art. Their choices—what to include, how to frame it, how to guide the experience—deeply influence the emotional and intellectual impact of exhibitions. However, these choices are often constrained by factors such as institutional politics, funding sources, and the expectations of a relatively narrow audience.

The thesis also highlights issues of access and inclusion. Many museums still primarily cater to well-educated, privileged audiences, which can limit the diversity of perspectives represented in environmental narratives. For museums to contribute to environmental awareness and action, inclusivity is essential—both in who they reach and in how they approach curation.

In summary, art and art museums have the potential to be powerful spaces for engaging with environmental issues, not by offering direct solutions or clear calls to action, but by fostering deeper reflection, emotional connection, and dialogue. Their strength lies in creating experiences that challenge people to think differently about their place in the world and their relationship with nature. If museums and their curators can embrace this role with thoughtfulness and integrity, they can help expand the ways we imagine and respond to the environmental crises of our time. Ultimately, this study argues that while museums and environmental art undeniably influence ecological discourse, their impact depends on their ability to foster critical

engagement rather than impose singular narratives. By maintaining a balance between advocacy and artistic integrity, they can create spaces for deeper, more nuanced explorations of our relationship with the environment—ones that preserve both the autonomy of artistic expression and the intellectual rigor of curatorial practice.

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Popular science summary

Museums and artists are increasingly shaping how we understand and engage with environmental challenges. Through immersive installations, thought-provoking exhibitions, and interdisciplinary collaborations, cultural institutions serve as vital mediators between scientific knowledge and public discourse. By leveraging the emotional power of art and the educational capacity of museums, these spaces aim to translate complex environmental issues into tangible, relatable experiences that inspire awareness and action. However, questions remain about how effective these efforts truly are in fostering meaningful engagement with ecological crises.

This study examines the role of environmental art and museum curation in shaping public perceptions of sustainability and climate change. Art has the capacity to evoke deep emotional responses, making abstract environmental data more accessible and personal. By engaging audiences on a sensory and affective level, it can encourage new ways of thinking about humanity's relationship with nature. Yet, the translation of environmental issues into artistic expression carries risks—messages may become oversimplified, aestheticized, or distorted, potentially undermining the urgency and complexity of ecological discourse. Museums, too, must navigate the challenge of balancing their role as educators with ethical and institutional constraints. Their engagement with environmental themes is shaped by factors such as funding, audience expectations, and the need to maintain institutional neutrality. These pressures raise questions about how museums frame sustainability narratives, whose perspectives are amplified or omitted, and whether exhibitions serve as genuine sites of critical engagement or fall into the trap of symbolic, performative activism.

Drawing on interviews with curators, artists, and museum professionals, this research explores the extent to which cultural institutions foster critical reflection and action on environmental issues. It examines whether exhibitions lead to deeper public understanding, behavioral shifts, or merely reinforce passive awareness. A key concern is the potential for "greenwashing" within the museum sector—where institutions publicly align themselves with sustainability while failing to critically examine their own environmental impact or perpetuating Western-centric narratives of ecological responsibility. The study also considers how museums can ensure inclusivity in environmental discourse, addressing barriers that limit access and representation, particularly for marginalized communities whose ecological knowledge and experiences are often excluded from dominant environmental narratives. Ultimately, this research offers insights into how museums and artists can refine their approaches to environmental storytelling to create more meaningful, lasting engagement. By developing curatorial strategies that emphasize ethical engagement, critical dialogue, and inclusivity, cultural institutions can move beyond surface-level advocacy and play an active role in reshaping public

understanding of environmental challenges. In a time of ecological uncertainty, their role in fostering nuanced, reflective, and action-oriented discourse has never been more critical.

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