Philosophy’s engagement with ecology has broadened the theorising of our relationships with others to include non-human species and environmental situations. Recent analysis has blurred the distinction between nature and culture, indicating that our view of nature includes social constructs, while cultural structures are dependent on natural milieux. This paper will discuss contemporary art that encompasses ecological ethics in the light of recent philosophy employing concepts of relational mutuality, bridging the dualistic tendencies that have developed in ecopolitics.

Art concerned with the environment interrogates the intersection of nature and culture, testing the limits of what is understood by environment, and exploring the interrelation of humanity, the sciences and technology with the natural world. As in Merleau-Ponty’s conception of a ‘fold in the flesh of the world’, the environment is breathed, ingested and incorporated into our bodies, so that ‘the flesh lines and even envelopes all the visible and tangible things with which it is surrounded’... ‘The flesh’ is an amalgam of materiality and consciousness, a shimmering and fluid primordial dimension, enfolding the living and non-living, the interior and exterior states. Our apprehension of the world is inseparably grounded in the bodily realm of sensation, mobility and performativity. Experience of the natural world is also located in cultural attitudes, mediated by artificially constructed spaces and equipment, as well as social and cultural representations. Social systems operate on a practical, material level, as well as on a discursive level, where ideas coalesce into ‘symbolic regimes of normative belief’, constituting the behaviours and beliefs embedded in social processes that legitimate domination and exploitation of the environment.

These concepts will be related to works of art broadly concerned with the environment made by contemporary artists in the Asia-Pacific region, demonstrating an engagement through imagination and metaphor with the social and ethical dilemmas of the technological age. Many have responded to the ecological crises that have developed through global warming, environmental degradation and technological manipulation of the natural world. Their work continues the shift beyond the traditionally detached realm of aesthetics, by expanding techniques, contexts and collaborations into an active ethical engagement through art practice.

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