

# Thinking beyond Images

“Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system.” Prof. Wangari Maathai (2004 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech)

It is important to consider the reasons why we are looking at *sustainability* as discourse within a global framework. Within the learning environment, one will nurture the advancement of learners' skills and competencies such as those stated by Sacha Kagan / Volker Kirchberg in their publication *Sustainability: a new frontier for the arts and cultures* (2008: 16-17).

- (1) competency foresighted thinking,
- (2) interdisciplinary work;
- (3) cosmopolitan perception, transcultural understanding and cooperation;
- (4) participatory skills;
- (5) planning and implementation;
- (6) empathy, compassion and solidarity;
- (7) self-motivation and in motivating others; and
- (8) distanced reflection on individual and cultural models.

These are skills that are imperative globally, but these are symptoms of the disease that we are dealing with and does not address the reason for the disease. The disease that we are dealing with is **social injustice** and the only way to combat the injustices against societies and nature that are created by the ravages of socio-economic development is consider notions of sustainability with urgency. We thus use sustainability as a strategy to safeguard future generations.

When considering Sustainability, there are 4 major sectors that we embrace:

***Human sustainability.*** Human sustainability examples include things such as access to food, water, healthcare, education, justice, fair working conditions, development of skills etc.

***Social sustainability.*** Social sustainable supports the creation and development of communities with thriving social relationships and increased economic opportunities, while at the same time respecting the environment.

***Economic sustainability.*** Economic sustainability is focusing on the efficient use of resources to improve profitability and achieve economic growth to improve the standards of living retaining a synergy to create prosperity without negatively impacting people, society, and the environment.

***Environmental sustainability.***

Environmental sustainability aims at improving human well-being and long-term sustainability by preserving the environment and more rational use of natural resources.

## What has Africa contributed to this idea of sustainability?



- I draw attention to the efforts of the now late Professor Wangari Maathai from Kenya who initiated the Green belt Movement (GBM) in the 1970s. In partnered with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) began its planting of a *Billion Tree Campaign*.

- Professor Maathai in 1977 working under the banner of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) responded to the needs of rural Kenyan women in addressing the challenge of water shortages as streams were drying up that affected their food supply (erosion, lack of water for irrigation, home usage access to firewood amongst other resources).
- The GBM encouraged these women to work together to grow seedlings and plant trees to bind the soil and store rainwater which has a ripple effect on the land. More fertile soil allows for the provision of planted crops, attraction of insects, birds and small animals and more trees meant firewood for stoves etc.

# Visual Arts: cultural sustainability.

Culture is a "complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [a human] as a member of society." United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

How do we learn and appreciate different cultures that exist in this world and this includes indigenous knowledge, customs and cultural experiences, cultural objects and art making? and secondly, how do we appreciate notions of sustainability or recognise the need for sustainability inherent in art making?



Available at: <https://pza.sanbi.org/hyphaene-coriacea>

For example: Africa is already undergoing rapid urbanization, resulting in more deforestation and polluted air and water bodies. With the growth of Africa's middle class, there will be a greater aspiration for convenience, including consuming disposable goods, resulting in greater pressure on the environment.

This exhaustion on the land also affects basket weavers as lifestyle demands pressurise more woven baskets for economic gain compared to functional uses only. This results in over harvesting of the palm leaves (Mokola or Ilala leaves) required for weaving.

To recognize cultural sustainability, we can categorize these into two types: material and immaterial.

- Material - buildings, heritage sites, cultural objects, and preservation. These are important as these material sites contribute to our identity and our acknowledgment of our place within the world.
- Immaterial - language, knowledge, and traditional practices and how we transfer these from one generation to another.

The question remains- How do we harvest these two types into discussions that clarify our position or response to ideas on sustainability?



# Examples of artworks: Reading sustainability

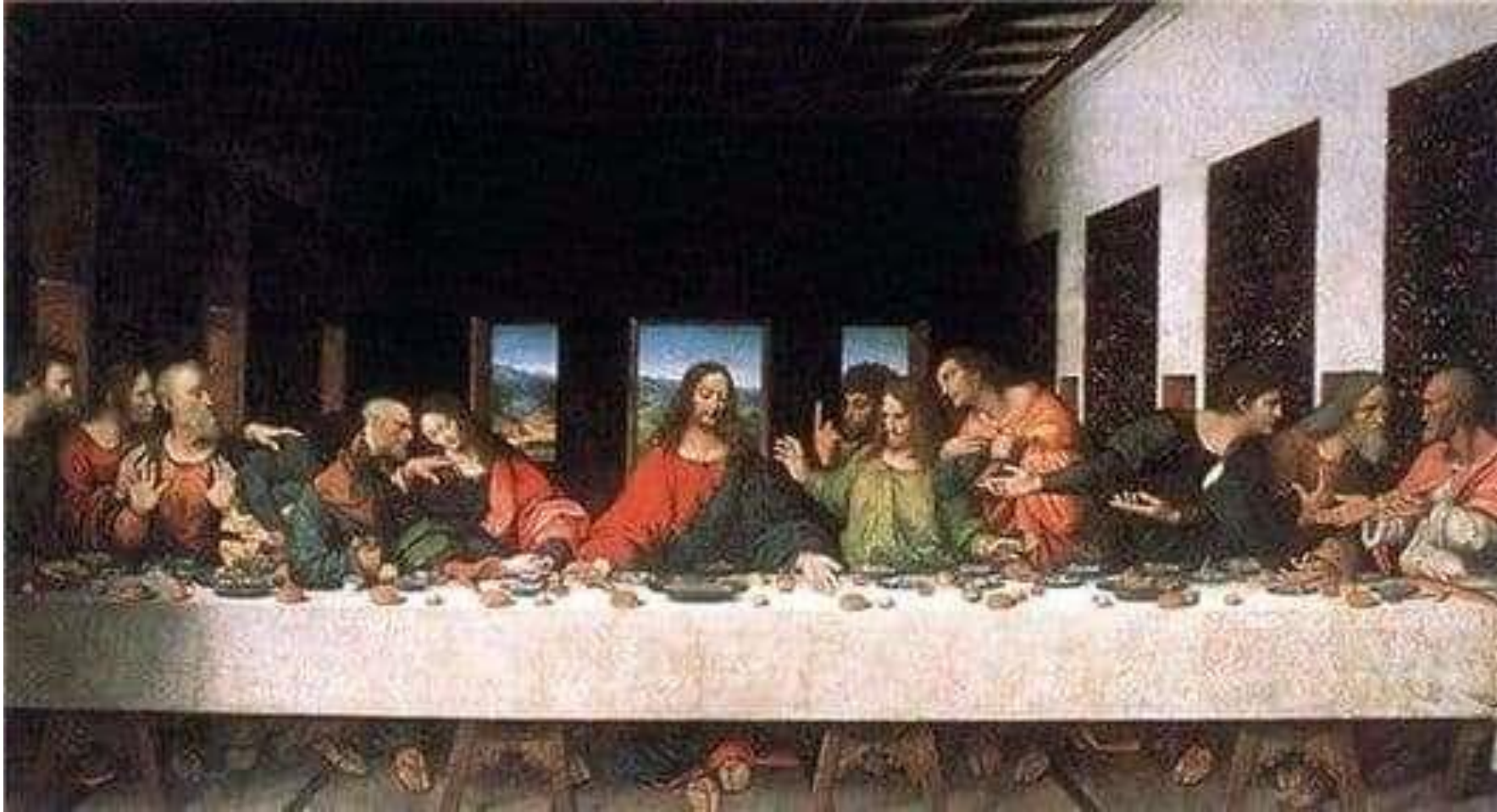
Detail of the ceiling paintings of the San people in the Drakensberg, South Africa. Courtesy © Stephen Townley Bassett  
Available at: <https://theconversation.com/an-ancient-san-rock-art-mural-in-south-africa-reveals-new-meaning-157177>



- Images are visual texts that are filled with information that require you to interpret what you see and allow your imagination and framed knowledge collection to rationalise the visual.
- The idea of documenting and archiving information has been available to us globally from as early as prehistoric times. Images that adorn wall surfaces are filled with paintings of animal types and human forms.
- We are also aware that paintings are also representations of human- spiritual relationships and human-non-human relationships.
- Why would these be painted if not to preserve the narrative of these relationships? To safeguard both relationships between humans and nature as well as human and spiritual relationships.
- The value of respect for me is central in keeping this balance between and of these two relationships.

# Leonardo da Vinci :*The Last Supper*

Available at: <https://en.opisanie-kartin.com/description-of-the-painting-by-leonardo-da-vinci-the-last-supper/>



The period of the Renaissance is well documented and so is the work of the artist, da Vinci, and his works. He was not the only artist who painted particular images that reflect a specific religion. Once again, the idea of sustaining the human-spiritual relationship.

- The question is why. What values does this relationship have that require continual visual depiction that familiarises people with its representation?
- In my view, it has to do with relationships between each other as humans, issues of greed, relationships between humans, and the spiritual and respect amongst other values that we hold important. We have to look beyond the physical representations to allow narratives that extend further that you must believe in God.
- What I am promoting in this presentation is that sustainability is a new word that we use due to the situations we find ourselves in as we failed to respond to the preservation of what we had. And artists continue to draw attention to our plight as human beings.

# Fabrice Monteiro

Untitled #1, 2013, from the series *The Prophecy*

*Underwood, J. 2021 African Artists from 1882 - Now*



- The Senegalese-based photographer, Fabrice Monteiro focusses on waste in his series *The Prophecy*. “The photograph, the first in the series, features a giant jinn— a supernatural creature present in West African spiritual cultures. Wearing a costume fashioned from waste, it towers over a smoking rubbish pile as toxic fumes rise into the air. Monteiro began the series to educate West Africans about the dangers of pollution and the effects of plastic waste in particular, an issue that impacts not just Africa but the entire planet.”

*Underwood, J. 2021 African Artists from 1882 - Now*



The work is a collaborative piece with Senegalese stylist, Doulsy who works with recycled materials. But more than anything this image is a message: the model is holding a child's doll, looking out over the wreckage. It represents the future generations that we are condemning to environmental catastrophe through our overconsumption.

“I decided I wanted to shoot a series to raise awareness of environmental issues in Senegal, in the hope that people would realise that things do not have to be this way. I wanted to connect environmental issues with the cultural interests of the population and started researching animism – the belief that objects and the natural world are imbued with spirits. With this series, I wanted to create a series of spirits sent by Mother Earth to warn humankind about its neglect and destruction of the environment. Each of the shots in the series addresses one environmental concern: coastal erosion, oil spills, sanitation and the burning of the land for agriculture, for example. But this image, the first I shot for the series, was about plastic consumption” (Fabrice Monteiro) *Underwood, J. 2021 Fabrice Monteiro (p225) in African Artists from 1882 – Now.*

# Rozelle Greyling, South African artist

Also draws attention to waste and the relationships that are built between human and the landfill sites that they harvest.





# The Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui

Combines arts, culture, and sustainability. His works, consisting of recycled wood, bottle caps, and iron nails, have been featured at the Venice Biennale, Tate Modern Museum, Haus der Kunst Munich and Zeitz Mocca in South Africa.

Available at: <https://zeitzmocaa.museum/artists/el-anatsui/> and on EVC's website: <https://explore-vc.org/en/objects/el-anatsui-rising-sea.html>

