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34 Within and Beyond the Art World: Environmentalism Criticism of Visual Art

Abstract: In relation to literary ecocriticism, ecocritical analysis of visual art is in a nascent stage. Despite, or perhaps due to, the centrality of idealized representations of nature in the history of art, and also because of the dominance of the gallery mercantile system as the chief means of display and dissemination of works of art, researched and documentary projects on ecosystems and vulnerable cultures and biotic matter, public art performing sustainability, and photographs as critical landscapes, have been slow to gain attention. A genealogy of significant group exhibitions in museums is followed by focus on current approaches. Visual art is often called upon to effect political change; reified categories of political engagement and aesthetic autonomy are dissolving in more nuanced conceptions of art's social position and contributions. Issues of agency and materiality are becoming central, as well as environmental justice. The work of critical art historians Malcolm Miles, T. J. Demos, and Emily Eliza Scott are featured.

Key Terms: Art, environmental, eco-art, photography, aesthetics, Demos



Fig. 1: Richard Misrach. *Trees, Hazardous Waste Site, Dow Chemical Corporation, Plaquemine, Louisiana, 1998*, detail. Courtesy Richard Misrach.

1 Within and Beyond the Art World: Environmentalist Criticism of Visual Art

If aesthetics, or the arts, have agency in relation to climate change, it is probably in critical acts of re-distribution and re-identification within but beyond the regime of the art-world. (Miles 2014, 70)

In comparison to the vigorous production of both direct literary ecocriticism and meta-criticism of its interpretive strategies evident in previous chapters, by the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century commensurate ecologically-engaged criticism of visual art is sparse. In relation to the study of what is frequently termed ‘eco art,’ the discipline of the history of art has not produced a professional organization and journal addressing artistic environmentalism; those writing about such work under the banner of ‘ecocriticism’ are a micro-minority. There is no articulated, even semi-consensual ecocritical methodology as applied to visual art. Given the prominence of art in current culture – evident in museum attendance, websites as both sources of information and sharing of ideas about art, auction activity, and the focus on artists’ biographies and the art world in films and novels – as well as the increasing presence of climate change in media discourse, the slight connection between environmentalism and art criticism/scholarship is paradoxical. And that is especially so because of the history of art’s longstanding centrality of depictions of nature – as animals, ‘Mother Nature’ idols, property, terrain and the settings for emotional and aesthetic ‘primitivism.’ Yet here and there curators and art writers have been drawn to promoting art addressing environmental threats in exhibitions, catalogue essays and reviews. A few scholars are devoting sustained attention to that work, considerably enriching our understanding of visual art’s participation in the conversation about our relation to the material and social world and its actants, taken in the widest sense. These developments are best introduced in relation to two factors: the ecosystem of the art world and its precedent acculturations of nature.

In the middle of a serious conversation about producing the currently most substantial and ambitious exhibition and catalogue on art about sustainability, the German Federal Cultural Foundation’s *Examples to Follow! Expeditions in Aesthetics and Sustainability*, curator and editor Adrienne Goehler exclaimed about a contrary attitude: “Today, the art market is god” (Gersmann and Willms 2010, 8). Much more than in the field of literature, an impediment to a public presence of works addressing environmental concerns is that support for artists’ production of, as well as viewers’ accessibility to, visual art is profoundly entwined with international systems of monetizing art: displaying portable and saleable objects, merchandising, distributing, marketing, and consumerism, AKA ‘collecting.’ Western society is pervasively “ocularcentric,” declared intellectual historian Martin Jay (1988, 3) precedently, even prior to our present image saturation via social media and iPhone, describing “the ubiquity of vision as the master sense of the modern era.” Combined with Guy Debord’s famously

acute 1967 designation of our era as a “society of the spectacle,” over the past roughly 40 years, this orientation has increasingly privileged art of instantaneous perception and ephemeral sensory snap such as Jeff Koons’ gleaming monumentalizations of twisted balloon doggies – simultaneously Pop and luxe. Literary critics could dismiss this populist, albeit high-end, work as they would flashy down-market-driven thrillers reaping million dollar advances, but visual art is much more dependent than the literary field on the commerce of its art to provide viewers’ necessary direct experience of the work. And in contrast to literature disseminated and read in editions and despite plentiful illustrations of art not to scale and in altered color on screens or in printed reproductions, sensory perception ‘in the flesh – that of the viewer’s and the work of art’s – is essential to comprehending it. (This is aside from the fraught issue of an ‘original.’ Like printed publications, photographs and other kinds of prints do not have an original distinct within an edition, but the artist’s manipulation of vagaries of the printing process and choice of scale of prints and format of presentation also make direct viewing in person essential for comprehension.) Galleries, commercial, marginal, and nonprofit, are in turn the fundamental source of promotion and distribution – ‘marketing’ – to museum curators and art critics/scholars as well as potential buyers. Exhibitions are not only necessary for an artist’s exposure to audiences, they are the main stimulus to curators’ and critics’ research and writing about them, as are the latter’s ensuing publications, keeping the career cycle moving.

At the same time, other than photographers, few producing eco, ecological, environmental, or environmentalist art – the designations themselves are as unstable as that of ‘ecocriticism’ – produce portable works easily sold and domesticated. They tacitly perform per *Third Text* editor Rasheed Araeen’s (2009, 681) admonition, in “Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century” that “Art must now go beyond the making of mere objects meant for art museums and/or to be sold as precious commodities in the art market. Only then can it enter the world of everyday life and the collective energy which is struggling not only to improve life itself but to save this planet from total destruction.” They aim to unsettle the broader political ecology either by projects that directly restore natural resources or interdisciplinary research projects about disrupted natural ecologies and societies, which appear in exhibitions rarely, represented in documentary pictures, videos and printed matter.

Another reason for the slight presence of environmentalist art in exhibitions is related to the compartmentalization of nature and culture. Dialogue in the art world, explained German cultural historian Hildegard Kurt (2004, 239), has been “often hindered by the error of seeing sustainability only as an ‘environmental subject’ and not a genuinely cultural challenge.” Similarly, Goehler noted that in governmental and NGO environmentalist “manifestos [...] mention is made of [...] three dimensions of sustainability, the social, the ecological but also the economic. But there is no practical action following on this insight. The fourth dimension, the cultural, is always forgotten. [...] The suspicion is that it’s eco art, social art, or political art. The fear of being used by parties or political currents is great” (Gersmann and Willms 2010,

8). The deplorable politicization of climate change in the United States – delaying the government’s participation in emissions limitation protocols and necessary transitions to renewable sources of energy – is undoubtedly a significant source of its few group exhibitions of environmentally-engaged art, none of them in main urban museums. In the past 15 years or so, large group exhibitions have originated in major German cities, in London, and in culturally marginal cities in the United States, dotting the museological landscape: one each in Aachen, Berkeley, Boulder (Colorado), Chicago, Pittsburgh, San Diego, Sydney and Turin and two each in London and Cincinnati (none in New York or Los Angeles). Germany’s *Examples to Follow!* opened at Berlin in 2010 and traveled to six German cities and Addis Abba, Beijing, Lima, Mumbai, Puebla (Mexico), and São Paulo. The presentation of that exhibition is exemplary not only for its wide-ranging educative essays on aspects of sustainability by progressive scholars and the diversity of art shown, but by the fact – enviable by this American – that the government originated it as public education.

A more provocative source of the late and marginal interest in both eco art and ecocriticism is, ironically – and perhaps counter-intuitively – the very long-standing presence of representations of nature, embedded in the history of art as landscape painting. Switching from interpretive microscope to telescope reveals the history of both artistic representations of the natural environment and discussion about them as long. In Chinese art history, landscape painting was established as an independent genre by the fifth century with *shan shui*-pictures of mountain and water as rivers, lakes, falls, which were discussed as the yin/yang of female malleability – the liquid could fill any void, and shape shift from vapor to ice – and masculine indomitability (which, however, could be altered by an incessant waterfall). In the west, synecdoches of nature such as bison and fertility goddesses preceded frescos of Roman gardens and Biblical narratives of Edenic meadows and the Flight into Egypt situated in wooded groves. With the construction of safe roads between villages and the rise of cities, medieval fears of wild spaces between them – ‘wilderness’ – images of undeveloped (natural) terrain became instead idealized spaces of primal refuge and harmonious respite alongside sheep. Nature became a prompt for a withdrawal into the self and an emphasis on feeling, characteristics of the Romantic spirit as epitomized by Caspar David Friedrich’s motionless figures deep in moonlit reveries, seen from the back, serving as surrogates for the viewer standing parallel before them, facilitating calming contemplation or melancholic musing. ‘Nature’ became a vehicle for experiencing both overwhelming feeling of the “sublime” prompted by both its vast scale and violent ferocity and the felicitous “beauty” of a pastoral meadow. The economic worth of forested property – not only as lumber for construction but as firewood, a main source of heating metals, foods, and homes – also contributed to the status of paintings that depicted privately owned groves. When the discipline of art history was formalized in the nineteenth century, this reverential attitude toward nature was already officially sanctioned by professional academies as the Salon-worthy genre ‘Landscape.’

Nineteenth century landscape painting was the impetus to both of the rare book-length monographs on artists written from perspectives that could be considered tacitly or proto ecocritical. Ann Bermingham's *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition 1740–1860* (1986) contextualizes Romantic landscape painting within the governmentally sanctioned accelerated enclosures for private cultivation of countryside land once held in common or thought unsuitable for agriculture. This, intensified by John Constable's identification with the agrarian countryside of his birth, Bermingham convincingly argues, led to his development beyond the picturesque form's classically harmonious order. Instead Constable's naturalism sought to animate the landscape tradition by conveying's nature's 'primitivism' (Bermingham 1986, 153). "Considering that nature for Constable had a double significance [as] both landscape and self," his rough, penumbral scenes expressionistically "inscribe the loss they are meant to recover" (151, 11).

Similarly, Greg Thomas (2000) sensitively attends to material conditions – both geographical and on canvas – in his boldly titled *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth Century France: The Landscapes of Theodore Rousseau*. Thomas also emphasizes the artist's personal connection to a locale and asserts that Rousseau's richly verdant paintings of the wildness of the Forest of Fontainebleau implicitly "embody an ecological mode of vision." Generally "without [the depiction of] an intervening human agent," Rousseau's paintings "force us to attend to the connective tissue [and] organic interrelationships of its constituent parts" (Thomas 2000, 198). Rousseau's appreciation for the ancient woods near the village of Barbizon extended to the artist's "arguing successfully for the establishment of land preserves in 1853; politically, he became perhaps the world first conservationist" (2000, 2).

The development of ecocriticism of visual art is belated, in that it both parallels and follows the trajectory of the onset of literary ecocriticism, which itself has been described as tardy. Reflecting on what she identified as literary criticism's delayed engagement with growing concerns with nuclear, ecological, and environmental threats, Ursula Heise (2006, 505) has noted, "most of the important social movements of the 1960s and '70s left their marks on literary criticism long before environmentalism did, even though environmentalism succeeded in establishing a lasting presence in the political sphere." She plausibly ascribes it to literary theory's emphasis on language, semiotics and denaturalization, issues of deconstructive interpretation that also applies to the discipline of art history. In contrast, when art historians moved away from French critical theory, focus shifted to social constructions of identity, particularly those affected by race, gender and sexual orientation, and in United States, to 'culture wars' with repressive politicians during the early confusing years of the onset of the HIV infection, initially strongly associated with gay men and practitioners of culture.

And yet, contemporary with the development of literary ecocriticism, two major exhibitions of American historical painting examined representations of the social and natural landscape of the West in relation to political ideologies. In 1991 The

National Museum of American Art/Smithsonian Institution's *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920* controversially represented – and within the precinct of the United States capital – western terrains as a theater for exploitation of Native Americans. The next year the revisions expanded to outright recognition that nature, in landscape painting, was a site of *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West*, (Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma and Yale University Art Gallery). The latter included historian William Cronon's (1992, 78) “counternarrative in which what we sacrifice to progress is at least as valuable as what we gain” – a model for environmentalist attention to visual art.

A broader source of resistance by intellectually ambitious art professionals to considering landscape as a site of politicized social constructions was the historical association of the genre with the regressive romance of nature. This view was articulated in 1966 by Robert Smithson, the influential conceptualizer of Earthworks – expansive earthen sculptural environments in remote desolate terrains – who, seeking to distinguish his work from a counterculture back-to-nature movement with which critics wanted to affiliate it, noted, “Deliverance from the confines of the studio frees the artist to a degree from the snares of craft and the bondage of creativity. Such a condition exists without any appeal to ‘nature’” (Smithson 1996a [1968], 107). He objected to the “wishy-washy transcendentalism” of the “mediocre impressionist [style] painter” Allan Gussow, who wrote in a book published by Friends of the Earth that artists should be like “lyric poets [...] celebrating” American land (Smithson 1996b [1973], 163). It was not chic for a vanguard artist – or art historian/critic utilizing continental theory – to join the ranks of what the “international left [...] caricatured,” as Rob Nixon (2010, 253) put it, “as a [...] hippy-dippy-tree-hugging dopehead deep ecologist [...].” Rather than falsely idealized locales, the sites Smithson chose to work in were geographically marginal and ideologically complex, “between the sylvan and the industrial.” “Dialectics of this type are a way of seeing things in a manifold of relations, not as isolated object” (Smithson 1996b, 162, 160). Smithson's death in 1973, at 35, prevented him from investigating these entwined relations, taken up decades later by artists engaged in politicized ecologies. A concurrent lineage of artists, affiliated with post-Rachel Carson environmentalism, was drawn toward environments that were not only spatially environmental but that united what Gyorgy Kepes (1972, 9, 6) described as “artistic and poetic sensibility and ethical conscience.” “Instead of further probing into matters of form [typical of the Earthworkers' and Land Artists' large scale troughs, marks and mounds], artists today are asking fundamental questions about the role and purpose of art [...] to provide a format for the emerging ecological consciousness.” Over the next decade, a new genre of ecologically-sensitive environmental art developed that deliberately brought viewers close to experiencing soil, foliage, water, astronomy – sculptural observatories were big in the 1970s – and which often directly rehabilitated degraded local habitats and ecological systems.

The art terms ‘environmental’ and ‘ecological’ – still today equivocal and frequently used interchangeably – began to be disambiguated in the first major museum exhibition to survey contemporary artists’ projects responding to nature perceived as threatened. In 1992, notably the same year as the United Nations’ Earth Summit in Rio and the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, The Queens Museum, NYC, organized “Fragile Ecologies, Contemporary Artists’ Interpretations and Solutions.” The title distinctly signals the application of what Kepes (1972, 9) called “moral intelligence” in an activist stance of taking responsibility for problems and attempting to combat them. Curator Barbara Matilsky’s (1992, 38) discussion of artists’ projects of the previous two decades emphasized early environmental art that “visualized the forces, processes, and phenomena of nature: organic growth, light, water, crystals, etc.” These works were neither spatially environmental – viewers didn’t necessarily move within a work – nor overtly politically environmentalist, but were more about bringing viewers’ attention to phenomena, prior to the ecocritical attention to both humans and matter having interacting generative agency. Many artists were drawn to the ravages of mining. On a 15-acre site near Scranton, Pennsylvania scarred by strip mining activities Harriet Feigenbaum encircled a pond formed from coal-dust runoff with rings of trees, facilitating a restoration maintained as part of a wetlands preserve (*Willow Rings*, 1985) (Matilsky 1992, 45–46). Robert Morris, who dotted a terraced former gravel pit with tree stumps (*Johnson Pit #20*, 1979, Kent, Washington) famously declared in a symposium and article that artists’ land reclamation should not be “used to wipe away technological guilt” (qtd. in Matilsky 1992, 47).

Other projects presented models of growing plants for food (the early eco artists Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison’s *Survival Series*, from 1971; Bonnie Sherk, *Crossroads Community/The Farm*, 1974–1980, San Francisco; Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield, Battery Park City, NYC*, 1982). But the catalogue offered little social/historical contextualization regarding postwar anxieties about population growth, world food production and famine, despite the controversy prompted by Paul Ehrlich’s publication of *The Population Bomb* in 1968 and Barry Commoner’s more optimistic response in his 1971 *The Closing Circle*. It was too early for the concept of ‘nature’ to be questioned; neither are the works closely read as aesthetic objects creatively materialized. Rather, particularly in the final chapter’s designation of some works as “ecological,” discussion of subject matter dominates, and the goal is pragmatic, to provide local, specific “solutions to deteriorating natural and urban ecosystems” (Matilsky 1992, 56). Often cited as exemplary among this first phase of eco art, restoration of nature as damaged environments and its restitution as public park, is Patricia Johanson’s *Fair Park Lagoon* (1981–1986) in downtown Dallas. This large pond had become a polluted black hole surrounded by museums. The New York artist worked with a local marine biologist in the botanical design. To both bring viewers close to marine life and to feature a local plant, she used specific root structures for the design of serpentine walkways in cast concrete projecting atop areas of the water. The “Fragile Ecologies”

catalogue, as an inaugural survey of art addressing vulnerable natural resources, usefully documents the period's art and curatorial thinking.

At the end of the millennium, an ambitious exhibition and catalogue at the Ludwig Forum for International Art, Aachen, Germany, *Natural Reality: Artistic Positions Between Nature and Culture*, shifted the discourse. In her introduction, guest curator Heike Strelow (presently owner of the eponymous gallery in Frankfurt) both displayed attitudes that sound like Deep Ecology – “man and his culture are a part of nature” – typical of eco art identity of the time, and, demonstrating ideas in transition, also declared “nature [as] the origin, condition, and result of human experience,” an early description within the art world of nature as cultured (Strelow 1999a, 19). The latter paralleled what Lawrence Buell (2011, 90) has described as an aspect of first wave literary ecocriticism, “the meaning of existential contact with the environment today now tends to be more self-consciously framed as socially mediated, [...] framed accordingly as a product of historical circumstances of acculturation.” The “occupations” of Strelow's (1999b, 97) “artist-explorers [...] take place beyond mimesis and super-elevation of nature,” in favor of an alternate “concrete ‘natural reality.’” For example, artist Igor Sacharow-Ross draws upon scientific training and technology to present an ongoing laboratory as a luminous column aquarium containing algae in danger of extinction, subjected to experiments.

Further extending the constructive aspect of the artist's role in society, Strelow (1999a, 19) also emphasized the utility of art as beyond the popular eco art focus of instrumental material healing of natural environments: “The environmental crisis is therefore also a crisis in our social, cultural and intellectual environment, and grappling with it cannot be limited to the recultivation of waste dumps.” In a subsequent large format anthology Strelow (2004) edited, *Ecological Aesthetics, Art in Environmental Design: Theory and Practice*, she advocated “transdisciplinary thinking and acting – connecting things spatially and intellectually.” Aesthetics is not only “the ancient idea of teaching perception and cognition [but] aligning aesthetics in the sense of a wholistic perception with an integrative understanding of nature and culture” (2004, 12, 10). The object of attention was environments, but the artist's role being promoted was that of a public intellectual addressing more than the condition of botanical, agricultural or architectural/urban environments. In that volume, Hildegard Kurt was again a strong conceptualizer with a wide cultural purview, declaring that

Sustainability or future viability intends to achieve nothing less than the humanization of industrial Modernism. [...] All in all, a constructive dialogue beneficial both to art and to sustainability can take place only when it is accepted that art has, ever since the start of Modernism, increasingly become a form of knowledge. Far from restricting itself to designing surfaces, art is involved in designing values, and increasingly become a medium for exploration, cognition and for changing the world. (Kurt 2004, 239)

The goal recalls Hubert Zapf's (2008, 852–853) assertion that “Literature [...] acts like an ecological force within language and the larger system of cultural discourses, transforming logocentric structures into energetic processes, and opening up the logical space of linear conceptual thought into the ‘ecological space’ of nonlinear complex feedback relationships.” This is certainly the social impact that visual artists aspire to, and if their research, projects, environments, and pictures transfer well to the two-dimensional image form of the internet (and especially if those works then, preferably, stimulate direct viewing), they may have an impact even greater than novels’ innumerable and dispersed readers. The avant guardians, as adventuresome environmentalist artists are sometimes called, employ new strategies to change the conversation. That is the thrust of Malcolm Miles’ argument as an *Ecological Aesthetics* of ‘engagement.’

Environmental art goes beyond the position taken by [Herbert] Marcuse in *The Aesthetic Dimension* that ‘... miserable reality can be changed only through radical political praxis,’ while art offers ‘... retreat into a world of fiction where existing conditions are changed and overcome only in the realm of the imagination.’ But in dark times art is what we have, a means to interrupt the codes of perception of the dominant order. Environmental art not only interrupts, but also creates alternative models. (Miles 2004, 202)

Exemplifying that, Miles, a British cultural theorist, describes the London group PLATFORM, which for a pilot project in the 1990s of a “real possibility,” used a turbine to generate renewable energy from London’s Wandle River for the music room of a local school (cf. Miles 2004, 204). Similarly, in an article pointedly titled “Aesthetics in a Time of Emergency,” (adopting Walter Benjamin’s phrase from “Theses on the Philosophy of History”) Miles (2009, 423) described the Argentine group Ala Plástica’s work with a botanist to devise a propagation system of reeds to aid the restoration of a coastal area to, as Alejandro Meitin and Silvina Babich describe, “sustain socio-natural systems [...] connected to cultural and biophysical ecology of the area.”

Notably, Miles (2001, 71) seems to have been the first to methodically refer to the art form as not “eco art” or “ecological” but “environmentalist art.” To those attuned to history, “Ecologic Art” – the first exhibition on that theme, at the John Gibson Gallery in New York, 1969, or “eco art,” carry loose associations from the 1970s for forms of earthen art that weren’t ecological in manner, or alternatively, per Johanson, above, to art that is literally ecological in process or materials (cf. Boettger 2002, 218 and 2010, 3–5). But neither of those may pertain to photographic media or subjects such as corporate greenwashing, only tangentially about ecology. Also, Buell’s (2005, 12) dissatisfaction with the term ‘ecocriticism’ applies here, “because it implies a non-existent methodological holism.” Gisela Parak, editor of and contributor to *Eco-Images, Historical Views and Political Strategies*, published by the Rachel Carson Center, Munich, likes the term “eco-images [because they are] informed by a decisively environmental agenda [...]. This formative intention,” Parak singularly (2013, 5), among the publications referred to here, asserts, “is not necessarily provided by the producer of the

image; it may also be created by the author of the narrative of the images' dissemination" thereby acknowledging both that artists may refuse the personal identification as 'environmentalist' as confining, yet a critic can convincingly interpret the work as such. Jane Bennett (2010, 111) objects to terming a discursive approach 'environmentalism' because it could imply a false ontological distinction between humans and their milieus and correspondingly, construe nonhumans, things, or contexts as inert or passive – "A more materialist public would need to include more earthlings in the swarm of actants." True, but that literal reading of 'environment' does not recognize environmentalism's source in ecological thinking, defined by Commoner (1971) as everything being connected to everything else. Expansive reconceptualizations like Bennett's will encourage more overt articulations of environmentalism's holistic ecological basis while the term's implications of political engagement when applied to art forms also indicate intentions beyond aesthetic investigations.

Like Kepes, firm in the need for substantial social change and the potential of works of art toward producing it, Miles is yet more outspoken against capitalism (without elaboration) as a relentless promulgator of environmental devastation. (In her provocative book reductively dramatized as *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* Naomi Klein [2014, 21] forcefully articulates the more persuasive claim commonly heard among present day environmentalists that it is actually the deregulated capitalism of neoliberalism that makes "our economic system and our planetary system [...] now at war.") Displaying what Greg Garrard (2004, 3) generalized as ecocriticism's "avowedly political mode of analysis," regarding the environment, Miles' *Eco-Aesthetics* is if not in nominal intention, then in practice, a strong exemplar of that in visual art scholarship.

Similarly, the introduction to the first anthology of texts by art historians, literary scholars and historians deliberately applying 'ecocriticism,' *A Keener Perception, Ecocritical Studies in American Art History* (2009), edited by art historian Alan C. Braddock and literary scholar Christoph Irmscher, is also notable for its polemical claim not about the revelations therein about the art and artists – which are plentiful – but the urgency of climate change, which they didactically recount, and their declaration of an "'environmental turn' in cultural interpretation" (Braddock and Irmscher 2009, 3). The methodology of many of the contributions, almost entirely analyzing historical art, is akin to that of first wave literary ecocriticism's contextualization of works of art within environmental history, both overtly environmentalist images such as Alexandre Hogue's *The Crucified Land* (1939), a desiccated and desolate field dramatizing the devastating midwestern drought in the 1930s, and latent references as in Thomas Eakins' to industrialization in *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River* (1877). Several would serve as informative parallel studies for literary scholars (and a third are written by them), while demonstrating to literati how those trained in visual analysis perceive ecological aesthetics not just as political subject matter or biographical expressions but conscious manipulations of materiality, technique, and art historically informed style. Activist author Rebecca Solnit is

perceptive in her comparison of Ansel Adams' pristine black-and-white long shots of majestic panoramas and Eliot Porter's innovative adoption of color in sharply delineated close-ups, encouraging a more intimate absorption. Both photographers were ardent environmentalists; the Sierra Club published Adams' grandly nationalistic *This is the American Earth* in 1960 and Porter's more aesthetically oriented *In Wilderness is the Preservation of the World* in 1962 just two months after *Silent Spring*. The enormous popularity of both served as drivers of populist environmentalism.

More recently, Adams' and Porter's isolated vistas' absence of either humans or signs of their use/abuse of land as resources for them, and thus the landscapes' idealist faux purity "fixed in an ideal state, qualities that nature as ecology never possesses," per art historian Robin Kelsey (2014, 11), have become a popular academic theme of disparagement. Those gloriously unpeopled national parks and landscapes – in the twenty-first century, only a fantasy experience – could appear to be representing nature as an autonomous entity, what Yates McKee (2007, 541) has described, in an often-quoted statement from a rare historical account of environmentalist thinking in the visual arts, as "the environment as a determinate thing to be represented, protected and defended by experts, rather than conceiving it as a figure that mediates a network of sociopolitical, economic and natural forces in which all citizens [or more currently, instances of vital matter?] have a stake."

Yet ironically, those photographers' intense focus on the forms of nature in landscapes – soaring ridged mountain rock in Adams black-and-white scrutiny and in Porter's, verdant hues of mottled and mossy rock – conveys natural "matter's 'expressive' dimension," per Serpil Oppermann (2014 From Material to Posthuman Ecocriticism). They convey the intensely material vitality that Bennett advocates attention to, such that these encompassing vistas and graphic textures were undoubtedly attractions engendering viewers' vicarious intimacies, manifested in the ballooned membership enrollments in protective/activist organizations such as Environmental Defense Fund, founded in 1967 (Oppermann 2014, 25; Bennett 2010).

More topically, the current critical focus on eliding human/non-human distinctions in which all living things can be taken to be stakeholders finds a frequent artistic subject in the Indian-American photographer Subhankar Banerjee's dramatic illustrations of the Arctic as a focal point of global warming, toxic migration of birds and caribous and resource wars. Major Arctic river deltas lie atop vast amount of oil and natural gas reserves and are politically vulnerable to potential resource extraction. Industrial development would disturb the coastal plain that is the main calving area of the Porcupine River caribou herd. In Banerjee's *Caribou Migration, Oil and the Caribou*, the abstract beauty of tiny specs of caribou, seen from the air, as they migrate over icy aquamarine veins on white expanses, his most widely-reproduced image, is a persuasive document for caribou protection. So it's a twist to see in another of his photographs an immediate close-up of Gwinch'n Nation men from NE Alaska and NW Canada, Alaska and the Canadian Yukon, slaughtering caribou. In highlighting this mixed-species rights issue – competing claims for environmental justice – and the

interconnectedness of resource needs Banerjee's photographs serve a politically progressive aim that McKee attributes to environmentalist artists. That is, to "unsettle the self-evidence of 'environment' itself, addressing it as a contingent assemblage of biological, technological, economic and governmental concerns whose boundaries and agencies are perpetually exposed to conflicts" (McKee 2007, 557).

This is the complex imbrication of visual, rhetorical, environmental and political realms within which American art historian T. J. Demos (2009, 17) also works, moving the environmentalist discourse of art forward from consciousness raising about endangered natural resources and environments – "being accomplished by the mass media and culture industry" – to more direct political responsiveness often addressing corporate monetization of nature. In a historical overview for another important exhibition catalogue, *Radical Nature*, Demos (2009, 18) wrote, "When confronting the claims of sustainability, one needs to ask what sustainability means, whose interests it promotes, and whose are left out?" This theme of nature, and sustainability of it, as not being value-neutral entities was elaborated in the January 2013 issue of *Third Text* Demos (2013a, 1) edited devoted to "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology" which "investigates the intersection of art criticism, politico-ecological theory, environmental activism, and postcolonial globalism."

Demos' scholarship is distinctive for two sorts of contributions to dialogues of environmentalist criticism. In acknowledging sources of the idea of political ecology – "an eco-aesthetic rethinking of politics as much as a politicization of art's relation to the biosphere and of nature's inextricable links to the human world of economics, technology, culture, and law," he identifies Bruno Latour's call to set aside the concept of an autonomous 'nature,' "given its ideological function that sanctions a 'factual' and depoliticizing scientific discourse" and doesn't recognize the extent to which nature is an entity both linguistically and materially determined by human thought and actions (Demos 2013a, 3). (Timothy Morton, Jane Bennett and many others have of course also significantly contributed to that expanded conception of the collective, the mesh, of vital matter.) Yet he is also sympathetic to the more fundamentalist notion of the 'rights of nature' held by agriculturally-based peoples in the global South, which implies a bound and stable definition and a traditionally understood discrete entity to be protected, especially against territorialism by global state-like corporations in deregulated economies. The latter seek to patent native seeds and to hybridize them so they expire before reproducing, what Indian environmental activist Vandana Shiva, speaking on behalf of indigenous agriculture, has termed 'bio-piracy.' In 2010 Ecuador put the rights of nature in its constitution and in 2011 Bolivia established a 'Law of Mother Earth.' Demos is rare in visual environmentalist discourse for addressing these seemingly contradictory 'post-natural' and 'rights of nature' attitudes. He reconciles them by highlighting underlying affinities committed "to inventing a new ecology of politics that would redistribute agency, rights and representation so that environmental decisions are made by a more inclusive, egalitarian collective" (Demos 2013a, 5). Secondly, in addressing the above, Demos' work both as

editor of the *Third Text* issue and his book *The Migrant Image, The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis*, about artists' films, videos and photographs, gives rare exposure outside of international biennial-or-so exhibitions to environmentalist artists and writers in the global South and the crucial issue of climate justice.

Australian curator Rachel Kent introduced the large group exhibition in Sydney, *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World*, with the assertion that "Above all, the artists in this exhibition demonstrate that to make art is to participate, through conversation and debate, about how best to live today" (Kent 2010, 5). (This project was unusually responsible in its self-reflexivity, as artist Lucas Ihlein displayed his environmental audit of the Museum's paper and power usage, air transport for the freight of artworks, and other aspects of its administrative and public operations.) While this sort of social relevancy has always been an implicit expectation – by artists and 'consumers' – of works of culture, as climate change exacerbates, the call for social functionalism is increasingly pressed upon environmentalist art, more so than of literature. Those speaking from political and activist orientations seek art fulfilling an instrumentalist purpose. Nato Thompson (2005), a prominent New York activist curator bluntly declared, "Instead of discussing whether aesthetics are 'good' or 'bad' we can critique projects based on their position and reception. What type of transformative effect do these projects have? The question is not 'is it art' but more importantly, 'what does it do?'"

One useful behaviorist analysis is in an online contribution to Demos' *Third Text* issue. American art historian Emily Eliza Scott (2013, 1) addresses environmentalist art as operating in an investigatory mode, demonstrating an "educational turn, in the art world" in which the art work results from research in diverse subjects. She analyzes "Artists' Platforms for New Ecologies" that serve as springboards for investigations by groups of artists united either by shared regional ecologies or critical practices dispersed over the globe. Some include elements to spur active engagement, such as Matthew Friday's *A Map Lacking Boundaries* (2009–). Tracking a "new ecosystem" ensuing from bacteria accelerating toxic acid mine drainage into regional watersheds in southern Ohio, Friday sent subscribers of the commissioning artists' group, Regional Relationships, a do-it-yourself package including an ecological flow chart of chemical and institutional agents, a tube of iron oxide pigment distilled from mine drainage, a paintbrush, and an invitation to produce a diagram about one's own local ecosystem and potential collectives (Scott 2013, 6). Another group, the Arctic Perspective Initiative (API) "aspires to redirect technology to socially and politically emancipatory ends" by "quite literally" designing structures such as mobile live-work field stations for extreme Arctic conditions for users ranging from "film makers to subsistence hunters" (7).

The extensive interdisciplinary and socially responsive qualities of these pragmatic projects present art, as Scott (2013, 9) points out, as a boundless, "interconnected system." The identity and function of these works are "based on social exchange – on common knowledge and knowledge commons – [and] represent a potent alternative

to [customary artistic practices] under capitalism” (2). They are not making discrete objects which could easily move through marketplaces. Pertaining to the group *World of Matter*, represented in the *Third Text* issue, Scott (2015, 175) describes the contents of a book by and about them as “a collection of images and reflections on primary materials and the complex ‘ecologies’ – social, economic, political, discursive and Earth systems – with which they are entangled.” Inspired by the new materialist orientation, the work of art is viewed as a nexus of networks, operating ecologically. When presented in a gallery, as in a *World of Matter* exhibition at the James Gallery, The Graduate Center of City University of New York, Fall 2014, the objects consisted of rather straightforward documentation in the form of videos projected on monitors and screens, headphones, a water laboratory, maps, texts, photographs, and archival materials in glass cases. The work is *about* an ecological attention to matter, but function as educative vehicles – a “‘critical documentary’ form of image making” – speaking to cognition rather than requiring on the part of the viewer a developed sensitivity to what Bennett calls “sensory attentiveness to the qualitative singularities of the object” (Scott 2015, 4–5; Bennett 2010, 15).

Thus the issue of ‘matter’ presents an ironic inversion in expectations by appreciators of literature and of visual art. Politically engaged artists and critics display skepticism about the efficacy of art as expressive and productively ambiguous object, particularly that which uses traditional artistic materials such as the oils and minerals purposefully brushed onto woven fibers stretched around a rectangle found in what could be called the “world of matter” that is an art museum. But practitioners of literary material ecocriticism intently attend to matter’s agential resonances, assimilating the traditional sensitivities of artists, who profoundly experience matter speaking to them and through them as agents of creativity. In a procedural reversal, it is the materialist literary critics who more directly espouse the approach Susan Sontag (1969, 30) advocated in her 1961 assertion that “A work of art is a thing *in* the world, not just a text or commentary *on* the world” (emphasis in the original).

Addressing the dilemma of how art should respond in relation to a social crisis, the climate change journalist and activist Bill McKibben (2005) referred to the need to “unsettle the audience,” and urged, “What the warming world needs now is art, sweet art.” “We can register what is happening with satellites and scientific instruments, but can we register it in our imaginations, the most sensitive of all our devices?” (2005). This is the familiar pathway for the power of art, not to change structures directly – legislators, administrators and construction workers are better at that – but to alter ways of thinking in individuals who then manifest that in personal decisions and political actions.

Malcolm Miles is one who has wrestled with ecological art’s function in relation to ecological problems. While aligning himself with Adorno, Benjamin, and Marcuse and maintaining that “aestheticism remains a form of resistance,” Miles (2014, 67) acknowledges that art’s criticality no longer derives solely from its ontological autonomy. The explicit political position, yet the meta-analysis of the “critical function” of

artists, collectives, and projects working in “a space between aesthetics and politics” makes his stance distinct among more recent criticism of environmentalist art, which as noted generally ignores art works’ aesthetic or formal qualities in favor of attending to the political dimensions of the subject matter and the way the art operates across several disciplinary domains (Miles 2009, 422). Artists wringing their hands over the intersection of art and activism – aesthetic vs. political ‘engagement’ – a conflict frequently voiced even in New York’s commerce-driven art world despite its reputation as a bastion of political progressivism – could note his remark that for art that “crosses boundaries between art, social research and environmentalism [...] it no longer matters whether it is art or something else” and move on (Miles 2004, 202). If that’s too simple, Miles (2009, 431–432) elaborates on Jacques Rancière’s conceptualization in *Politics of Aesthetics* that art “intervenes ‘between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning.’”

The most productive of these thinkers/observers of art/writer/scholars all recognize that categorical imperatives – between agency and materiality, actant and environment, art and politics – have dissolved. How is art to be effective toward social change? Demos (2013b, 91) boldly declares that it is not through “the instrumentalization of form and submission of art to sociological assessment [...] which are less than compelling when they curtail art’s formal creativity, theoretical complexity, indeterminate and potentially contradictory meanings, and contemplative possibilities.” And in this time of dangers, political and ecological, he “would argue that the act of criticism must therefore grapple with the paradox of political art [...]. It is contingent upon viewers and readers to stake a claim and to argue for the validity of a particular formulation of the politics of aesthetics, to invest this otherwise potentially empty formulation with meaning in relation to the singular expressions of specific artworks” (92).

The title of Demos’ *Migrant Image*, from which the above is quoted, can then be understood as a pun not only of images addressing situations of impoverished itinerants but about the potential richness of a mobile and evolving fusion in which images serve both political/instrumental and aesthetic/expressive aims. That orientation is also actualized in an incisive analysis by Scott of a 24-minute video by the Puerto Rico-based artists Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Caldazilla. *Raptor’s Rapture* features the dramatically darkened, spotlit, interaction of a griffon vulture and a musician, female, who explores and plays a flute made 35,000 years ago from the wing bone of a griffon vulture. Scott (2014, 15) delineates this work as exemplifying art that “moves beyond the purely human-focused to [...] illuminate entanglements between the human and the nonhuman as they unfold in time, signaling the rethinking of humans as natural – one among other species and surroundings – and nature as historical.” Her account of the communication through the primal forms of music and corporeal movement is both about, and enacts, work that “trades a topical approach for one that operates in the realm of affect, or even the existential.” And Scott’s eloquent

evocation of an encounter across multiple registers of species, matter, sound, time, and imagery exemplifies a topically current way artists and art historians are looking at, tussling with, performing, and thereby bringing us within our complex and vulnerable ecologies.

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