

Art History, Ecocriticism, and the Ends of Man

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Alan C. Braddock and Charles Irmscher (eds.), *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History* (University of Alabama Press: Tualoosa, 2009). 304 pp., hardcover 978081731686, \$60.00

In the Marxian sense of dialectics, all thought is subject to nature. Nature is not subject to our systems. The old notion of 'man conquering nature' has in effect boomeranged. As it turns out, the objet or thing or word 'man' could be swept away like an isolated sea shell on a beach, then the ocean would make itself known.

– Robert Smithson, 'Art and Dialectics'

In the seminal essay 'The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline' (1939), Erwin Panofsky definitively separated humanistic inquiry concerning the interpretation of what he called 'the records left behind by man' from the realm of natural phenomena and its attendant scientific and technical disciplines.¹ Panofsky envisioned the sciences and the humanities progressing along separate but equal tracks, with their objects of inquiry remaining fundamentally discontinuous. 'Nature' was only a concern for the arts and humanities insofar as it became an object of symbolic representation that could be read diagnostically as the expression of this or that cultural universe—including what Panofsky describes as the 'anthropocratic' world-view of the post-Renaissance West. Panofsky's phrase 'anthropocracy', first used in his discussion of the mathematicization of space in linear-point perspective, has an undeniably ominous tone, especially when considered in light of contemporary ecological crises on a planetary scale. Such crises involve not the triumph of 'man' over 'nature', but the uncontrollable doubling-back upon humanity of nonhuman environmental systems as they are increasingly pushed toward catastrophic disequilibria by the unintended residues of two centuries of fossil-fuel capitalism.

What then becomes of art history when the natural world of the scientists and the 'records left behind by man' of the humanities can no longer be separated, when the very nature that would become an object of cultural representation is marked in advance by the economic, political, and technological dynamics of human history? Some version of this question has long been posed by materialist historians ranging from Marx to Braudel to Lefebvre concerned with the dialectical 'co-production' of social practices and nonhuman environments. But as Dipesh Chakrabarty has recently argued, the radically unpredictable forces unleashed by 'anthropogenic' or 'man-made' global warming have mutated such questions almost beyond recognition.²

Though they do not explicitly invoke Panofsky's canonical definition of the Humanities, an interrogation thereof is an

implicit starting point for Alan C. Braddock and Charles Irmscher in their groundbreaking co-edited volume *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History* (Alabama 2009). Braddock and Irmscher begin their introduction by citing the 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) *Fourth Assessment Report*, widely considered to be the definitive statement of scientific consensus concerning the anthropogenic nature of climate change and its associated network of ecological disturbances—polar melting, sea level rise, hurricanes, fires, desertification, and human displacement. As Braddock and Irmscher translate the IPCC's mandate, 'human culture must now change dramatically and rapidly for life on earth as we know it to survive in some acceptable, sustainable form. The planet [...] is approaching a "tipping point" after which global warming and associated environmental changes could become self-generating forces accelerating beyond out control'. Braddock and Irmscher go on to ask, 'If art historians and other scholars in the humanities care about such things—and presumably they do—how can they respond? What options do they have for confronting this global environmental crisis?'. While avowing the limited political capacities of academic research *per se*, they ask if art historians might nonetheless 'reassess and redirect scholarly inquiry itself on some level, in the hopes that his move would foster solutions through a transformation of environmental perception and historical understanding?' (KP, 2).

A Keener Perception is a marvelous first step in reorienting the discipline of art history, aiming in the editors words to 'defamiliarize' art-historical materials by excavating their often neglected or unconscious ecological dimensions: 'we believe that every work of art has environmental significance and is therefore open to ecocritical inquiry, regardless of its specific ideological claims or orientation'. Here they posit one of the key tenets of ecocriticism, a movement initiated in the early 1990s by literary scholar Lawrence Buell (who provides a preface to the volume) that 'emphasizes issues of environmental interconnectedness, sustainability, and justice in cultural interpretation' (KP, 3). Eco-criticism has a deliberately politicizing thrust, marking a departure from the traditional American transcendentalist 'wildness ideal' aiming to preserve 'nature' as a realm of redemptive purity untouched by human activity. Following developments over the past two decades in environmental activism, eco-criticism emphasizes the entwinement of ecological damage with already-existing patterns of social inequality in terms of geography, race, class, and gender.

A chronologically-arranged collection spanning the history of the United States from the colonial era to the present, *A Keener Perception* would make an excellent supplementary textbook to Francis K. Pohl's magisterial *Framing America: A Social History of American Art* for surveys of U.S. art history. The book would also work beautifully in specialized courses in courses on environmental history, landscape studies, and—with certain qualifications to be discussed below—an emergent curriculum concerned with contemporary art and ecology.

Though the first several essays on topics such as colonial-era travel illustrations and the visual cultures of natural science are of interest, the core of the book's argument really starts with the entry by Angela Miller entitled 'The Fate of Wilderness in American Landscape Art'. Miller tracks the shifting ideologies of what she calls 'nature's nation', moving from the aristocratic-cum-Romantic landscapes of Cole, in which the religiously-inflected sublimity of frontier 'wilderness' stands against the utilitarian values of Jacksonian capitalist democracy, to the harmonious developmental narrative of the 'middle landscape' of Asher Durand's *Progress*, to the late-nineteenth century preservationist project of Thomas Morand's paintings of Yellowstone. Morand's paintings were circulated as part of the successful campaign to have Yellowstone designated as the first National Park in 1872. Miller notes the relationship between the granting of federal protection to Yellowstone *qua* wilderness and the military campaigns required to evict Native Americans from this supposedly 'untouched' natural realm. In a concise axiom of US environmental history Miller writes, 'the first federal headquarters in Yellowstone Park was a fort, complete with a gun turret' (KP, 104).

Elizabeth Hutchinson offers a compelling account of the social lives of Carleton Watkins' photographs of the ancient Sequoia trees in what became Yosemite National Park in the early days of California statehood. Hutchinson pays close attention to the ways in which Watkins photographs of the 'Grizzly Giant' tree were framed in formal, ideological, and physical terms as they would have appeared in the expensive limited-edition albums through which Yosemite first became a site of interest for an elite reading public. Twenty years later, however, Watkins' photographs had become a kind of image-bank for the mass-tourist industry, which by the early twentieth century had reconfigured Yosemite from a being a challenging experience of the 'frontier' to a fully-serviced zone of commercial recreation.

Also of interest are an essay by Braddock on the 'racial ecology' of Thomas Eakins's paintings of Philadelphia waterways, Jeffery Myer's essay on the critical recasting of the American 'pastoral ideal' in the work of Harlem Renaissance painter Aaron Douglas, and Mark Andrew White's essay on the religious imagery of 'mother earth' used by Texas regional painter Alexandre Hogue in representing the Dust Bowl. All of these essays draw on critical environmental history to decode the iconographic or ideological conventions of the works in question, but they largely remain caught on what Bruno Latour has diagnosed as the 'shoals of the "social representation of nature"' approach endemic to the humanities.³ Latour calls for a more expansive account of the ways in which cultural practices such as art come to participate in 'sociotechnical networks' wherein the 'matters of fact' produced by the sciences become 'matters of concern' for new publics and political constituencies. White comes closest to such an approach in his citation of Conrad Lorentz' (undoubtedly problematic) Resettlement Administration documentary film *The Plow That Broke The Plains*, but this takes a backseat to the formally retrograde and culturally nostalgic

antimodernist canvases of Hogue. To be fair, pre-WWII US art does not offer much in the way of avant-garde experimentation; however, ecocritical readings of more artistically complex and ideologically diverse figures working in North America during the so-called 'Machine Age' including Dorothea Lange, Lewis Hine, Marcel Duchamp, Diego Rivera, Tina Modotti, Charles Sheeler, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Lewis Mumford might have proven rewarding in this context.

Spanning the pre- and post-war periods, Jonathan Massey's article provides a generally informative account of the career of Buckminster Fuller spanning from his early dymaxion housing experiments in the 1930s up through the his multimedia environment for the 1967 Montréal pavilion. The inclusion of an article on Fuller in *A Keener Perception* was a canny decision on the part of Braddock and Irmischer. It brings into relief the fact that over the course of the twentieth century, many strands of ecological thinking radically departed from any 'wilderness ideal' of pristine nature as an aesthetic amenity in favor of a technocratic approach to ecology in terms of the optimal calibration of resources, populations, and technological systems at a planetary scale. Fuller understood ecology (*oikos*: house) in terms of 'planetary housekeeping', a task that would take as its mandate the very biological survival of the human species and would thus transcend all partial interests in the name of a universal post-political community.

Fuller is without a doubt a crucial figure for any ecocritical approach to postwar art history, but Massey's essay is deficient in several respects. While Massey notes Fuller's enthusiasm for technocratic principles of resource management, this does not seem to register as a problem for the author. Indeed, Massey ignores the voluminous literature that has emerged over the past fifteen years in magazines such as *Grey Room* concerning the dangers of an uncritical retrieval of what Felicity Scott has called Fuller's 'technoutopian' imaginary.⁴ Perhaps the most problematic aspect of Massey's essay is that he ends with a celebratory account of the work of Sir Norman Foster's 'green architecture', which pays homage to Fuller's innovations (geodesic principles, energy-efficiency, eco-friendly construction techniques). Foster exemplifies what I have elsewhere diagnosed as an 'eco-vanguardist' tendency in contemporary architecture that appeals to principles of ecology and sustainability as self-evidently progressive, disregarding their contested imbrication with wider social, political, and economic dynamics at urban and planetary levels.⁵ They thus provide an unquestioned 'green' alibi for the elite clients they serve, which in the case of Foster, has involved transnational banks, insurance companies, and luxury real-estate developers from New York to Singapore to Dubai. Given the earnest left-wing orientation of *A Keener Perception*, Massey's concluding celebration of Foster—an aesthetic service provider for an ecologically destructive system of global capital—stands as something of an intellectual blemish for the book overall. Indeed, it is a 'teachable moment' in light of Mark Wigley's remark apropos Fuller's notion of 'planetary housekeeping'

that 'the very idea of the house is structured by a very particular politics, a very particular violence. If ecology is really knowledge of the house, it also has to be knowledge of this structural violence'.⁶

Along with its uncritical attempt to retrieve Fuller as a harbinger of sustainability in contemporary design, Massey's essay is also a missed opportunity to assess the centrality of Fuller to the emergence of ecology as an explicit matter of concern among those in the visual arts in postwar neo-avant-garde art (a period that is entirely neglected by the book). To be fair, this was not Massey's aim in the paper, but such a paper would have noted the ways in which Fuller's popularization of cybernetic ecology made its way into the artistic field via writers such as Jack Burnham and Gyorgy Kepes. Fuller was an important stimulus to the programs of collaborative design groups ranging from the rural communalism of Drop City, to experimental urban infrastructures of Pula, to the ephemeral architectures and guerilla media events of Ant Farm, all of which claimed in some form or another an affinity with the emergent environmentalist movement.⁷ At the same time, artists such as Hans Haacke and Helen and Newton Harrison were experimenting with the imbrication of social and ecological systems both inside and outside the space of the gallery.

However, from our current vantage, among the most important voices to address art and ecology during that period was undoubtedly Robert Smithson. In a compensatory note regarding the dearth of post-war materials in the book, Braddock and Irschmer briefly mention Smithson one among other earth artists 'for whom 'environment' has signified material, perceptual, or historical space largely devoid of ecological concerns' (KP, 15-6). This characterization may apply for instance to Michael Heizer (though his massive earthworks in the Southwestern desert were haunted by the shadow of nearby nuclear testing ranges); but it is severely mistaken when it comes to Smithson. In the final three years of his life, Smithson developed a prescient critique of the 'ecological spiritualism' of artists and writers who called for a 'lyrical celebration of nature' as an ahistorical aesthetic amenity while ignoring the 'dialectical' entanglement of human practices and naturally-given systems. 'Dialectics of this type' wrote Smithson, 'are a way of seeing things in their manifold relations, not as isolated objects. Nature is indifferent to any formal ideal [...] but this does not mean one is helpless before nature, but rather that nature's conditions are unexpected'.⁸ Among the 'unexpected' conditions of nature was precisely its non-separability from humanity, such that even the most apparently remote sites, processes and events already bear the trace of human involvement or interference. Smithson sardonically cites the 'urbanized wilderness of Yosemite with its electrical outlets for campers', and expresses a preference for avowedly artificial spaces such as Central Park. More radically, Smithson would in the final years of his life turn his attention to abandoned strip-mines, for which he proposed ecological 're-mediation' projects involving a feedback-loop between media technologies (maps, photographs, films) and the

sculptural transformation of damaged environments into sites of what Latour would call 'matters of concern.'

Smithson's late writings on ecology constitute a radically underestimated moment in the history of the relation between art and ecology, a topic which was almost entirely off of the agenda of avant-garde art criticism in the 1980s and 1990s for several reasons. First of all, theories of postmodernism in their various guises were widely (mis) understood to involve what Leo Steinberg called in his discussion of Robert Rauschenberg a 'shift from nature to culture' (later telegraphed by Frederic Jameson's axiom that 'nature is gone for good').⁹ Against what he identified as a sort of residual wilderness ideal on the part of the abstract expressionists—whom he called 'nature painters' in search of a transcendent visual experience—Steinberg interpreted Rauschenberg in terms of a condition of immanence in which media systems and ecosystems become radically intertwined. Polemically associating modernist painting with the very art-historical past from which it claimed to break, Steinberg frames the stakes of Rauschenberg as follows: 'not the Renaissance man who looked for his weather clues out of the window; but the world of men who turn knobs to hear a taped message 'precipitation probability ten percent tonight' transmitted from some windowless booth.'¹⁰ In postmodernism, the viewer is no longer projected by the artwork not as a disembodied eye within a optical landscape for a vertically-oriented subject—as in the 'thickets' of Pollock or the 'clouds' of Rothko—but rather as 'dump, reservoir, switching-center' on a horizontal plane in which the viewer is entirely immersed with no recourse to a pristine 'outside.'

However, while Steinberg insisted on displacing 'nature' as a transcendent principle, it is significant that ecological tropes strongly informed his analysis. Indeed, the associative chain 'dump, reservoir, switching center' provides a perfect vocabulary for Rauschenberg's own little-known design for an Earth Day poster (1970). In this work, a rough grid of appropriated news-fragments depicting devastated industrial landscapes and contaminated habitats—arguably echoing the format of a pin-up landscape calendar—is overlaid with a faded, torn-out reproduction of an American eagle—a creature situated ambivalently between imperialist nationalism and ecological endangerment.

Steinberg's emphasis on pollution, noise, and waste indicates both a debt to and an implicit critique of the cybernetic models of ecology that were gaining traction in the early seventies due to the efforts of figures such as Fuller, Kepes, and Burnham. All of the latter recognized the obsolescence of a wilderness ideal that would posit nature as a pure 'outside.:'; however, in their technoutopian vision of the artist as a planetary problem solver concerned with restoring a homeostatic balance to 'spaceship earth', such figures were to give ecology a bad name among left-oriented critics working in the late seventies and early eighties, for whom the term smacked of a compensatory technocratic ideology legitimizing the *status quo* in the aftermath of the failed political aspirations of 1968.¹¹ Indeed, this is partially to explain why in their respective accounts of postmodernism's

expanded field, Rosalind Krauss and Craig Owens would both silently exclude the question of ecological remediation pioneered by the very artist they championed as the exemplar of critical postmodernism: Robert Smithson. This was especially unfortunate given that the theoretical figures introduced into artistic discourse by Krauss, Owens, and Smithson himself – Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, Benjamin – could have enormously productive consequences for a critical consideration of both the ‘wilderness’ and the ‘technocratic’ approaches to ecology.

From the late seventies on, writers such as Lucy Lippard and John Beardsey have stepped in to fill this critical void. They have approached the ecological projects of artists such as Smithson, the Harrisons, Joseph Beuys, and Agnes Denes in terms of a kind of New Age mysticism, with the artist defined as a shamanic healer with the task of reuniting a generic ‘humanity’ with the primal symbols and rhythms of ‘mother earth’. By default, then, ecology as a matter of artistic concern has long been associated with a uncritical naïveté and has until recently received little critical treatment outside of a fragmentary and episodic series of reviews and catalogue-essays.¹² In its neglect of the vexed status of ecology in neo-avant-garde and postmodernist art, *A Keener Vision* misses an opportunity to begin rectifying this major historiographical problem.

Though it does not engage post-war art-historical discourse as defined within the tradition of *October*, the concluding essay in *A Keener Perception* by Finis Dunaway concerning the Arctic landscape photography of Subhankar Banerjee rectifies to some degree the overall paucity of the volume’s approach to modern and contemporary art. Preceded by compelling essays on the ideologically ambivalent legacy of Eliot Porter’s early Sierra Club ‘nature photography’ in the 1960s (Rebecca Solnit) and the claims for subaltern environmental justice subtly woven into the textiles of Navajo artist Alberta Thomas (Janet Catherine Berlo), Dunaway’s essay begins with an account of Banerjee’s work being censored by the Smithsonian Museum in 2003 after one of his images was shown before congress by the Barbara Boxer during a debate about the Bush administration’s drive to open the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to oil-drilling.

In his own autobiographical account, Banerjee originally went to Alaska searching for the ‘last frontier’ of North America, a zone of untouched natural wilderness. However, upon arriving in the ‘far north’ of ANWR and learning about both the natural ecosystems and the ingenious populations of that region, Banerjee came to recognize ANWR as ‘among the most connected places on earth.’ Indeed, as he learned from his indigenous interlocutors, ANWR is a kind of ground-zero for the accumulation of global pollutants, but also for the ‘anthropogenic’ global warming that is rapidly contributing to the destabilization of hitherto-taken for granted weather-patterns and seasonal processes on which both nonhuman and human populations of the Arctic region have long depended for survival. Consider, for instance, the photograph *Caribous Migration I*, used by Braddock and Imscher for the cover of a *Keener Perception*. Taken from a

straight-above perspective enabled only by modern aeronautic technology, the photograph shows several trails of tiny bodies resembling ant-columns as they haphazardly traverse a white field that is broken up in the middle by an expanding gulf of crystal-blue water. The seasonal passage of non-human creatures over the surface of the earth might have once provided a reassuring ‘outside’ to the disruptions of capitalist modernity; but in the era of climate change, every-square inch of the planetary ecosystem bears the trace of anthropogenic side-effects – including the migratory patterns of caribou due to increasing irregularity of the freeze-thaw dynamics of the tundra ecosystem.

Such anthropogenic traces are not visually self-evident in Banerjee’s photographs, and he insists that we read the images in relation to extensive captions that include the voices of scientists and indigenous people bearing witness to the long-term destabilization of formerly predictable climatic dynamics. Banerjee has placed great emphasis on the uneven levels of ecological vulnerability to which the habitats and life-support systems of indigenous people of the Arctic are exposed by global warming, a challenge to mainline discourses that frame global warming in terms of the shared fate – and possible redemption – of a universal *anthropos* defined first and foremost at the level of species-survival (a trope first popularized by figures such as Fuller in the 1960s). In collaboration with indigenous and environmental activist groups Banerjee has circulated his images in various formats and circuits of non-art publicity ranging from newspaper ads, editorials, websites, power-point presentations, and activist visual exhibitions in sites such as the 2009 climate summit in Copenhagen.¹³

How do we understand the task of a discipline concerned with ‘the records left behind by man’ – as traditionally opposed to the cycles and processes given by nature since time immemorial – when every gust of wind, drop of rain, and lap of the sea bears unintentional and uncontrollable trace of anthropogenic activity? To echo the Smithson epigraph with which we began this review, Panofsky’s ‘man’ has arguably been dissolved into an ocean of uncertainty whose turbulence intensifies with each ton of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere – the overwhelming responsibility for which lies with privileged consumers, corporations, governments, and other institutions in the Global North. In the wake of the dissolution of ‘man’ understood as the sovereign agent and interpreter of its own history, the arts and humanities must reorient themselves in terms of what Judith Butler has called ‘the limits of the human’:

If the humanities has a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a task at present, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense. We would have to interrogate the emergence and the vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense.¹⁴

Notes

1. Erwin Panofsky, 'The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline', *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 25.
2. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climates of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35, 2009, pp. 197–222.
3. See Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2004), p. 32.
4. Felicity Scott, 'Architecture or Technoutopia?' *Grey Room* Vol. 3, 2001, pp. 112–26.
5. See Yates McKee, 'Haunted Housing: Eco-Vanguardism, Eviction, and the Biopolitics of Sustainability in New Orleans,' *Grey Room*, Vol. 30, 2008, pp. 84–114.
6. Mark Wigley, 'Recycling Recycling,' in Amerigo Marras (ed.), *Eco-Tech: Architectures of the In-Between* (Architectural Press: Princeton, 1999): p. 47.
7. See Felicity Scott, *Architecture or Techno-Utopia. Politics After Modernism* (Cambridge: MIT, 2007) and Yates McKee, 'The Public Sensoriums of Pula: Cybernetic Abstraction and the Biopolitics of Urban Survival,' *Art Journal*, Vol. 67, no. 3, 2008, pp. 46–67.
8. Robert Smithson, 'Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape,' (1973) in Jack Flam (ed.) *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 160. For an extension of Smithson's notion of 'dialectical landscape' to a site of contemporary politico-ecological conflict, see Yates McKee, 'Wake, Vestige, Survival: Sustainability and The Politics of the Trace in Allora/Calzadilla's *Landmark*,' *October*, Vol. 133, 2010, 20–48.
9. Leo Steinberg, 'Reflections on the State of Criticism' in Branden Joseph (ed.), *Robert Rauschenberg* (Cambridge: MIT, 2002), pp. 28. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press: Durham, 1991), p. ix. In an exemplary misreading that collapses 'nature' and ecology, Eleanor Heartney writes defensively, 'postmodern theory relegates nature to the junkheap of outmoded concepts.' 'Ecopolitics/Ecopoetry: Helen and Newton Harrison's Environmental Talking Cure,' in Nina Felshin, ed. *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), p. 141.
10. Steinberg, p. 34.
11. See Luke Skrebowski, 'Recovering Hans Haacke's Systems Art,' *Grey Room* Vol. 30, 2008, pp. 54–83. and McKee, 'Public Sensoriums'.
12. For steps toward a critical synthesis of these materials, see Jeffery Kastner, ed. *Land and Environmental Art* (Phaidon: London, 1998), Yates McKee, 'Art and the Ends of Environmentalism,' in Michel Feher, ed. *Nogovernmental Politics* (Zone: New York, 2007), and TJ Demos, 'The Politics of Sustainability: Art and Ecology' in *Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet, 1969–2009* (Barbican: London, 2009), pp. 16–30.
13. For an extended discussion of Banerjee, see Yates McKee, 'Survival,' in Henry Sussman, ed. *Impasses of the Post-Global* (Open Humanities Press, forthcoming, 2011).
14. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso: London, 2004), p. 151.

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