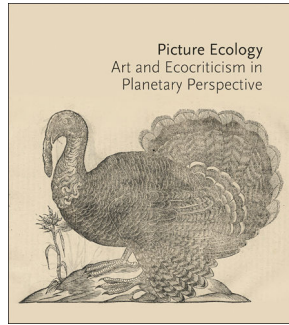


KARL KUSSEROW (ED.), *PICTURE ECOLOGY. ART AND ECOCRITICISM IN PLANETARY PERSPECTIVE*

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2021, 304 pages with 150 color ill., ISBN 978-0-6912-3601-8.



Reviewed by
Olga Smith

As a discipline, art history is yet to develop what Ursula Heise defined as a “sense of planet”. Profoundly embedded in national traditions of art and anthropocentric frameworks, art history has thus far struggled to respond coherently to Heise’s call to envision relations that would be premised “on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole”.¹ As such, the ambition of *Picture Ecology* to study *Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective* is urgently timely and impactful in potential.

Carefully designed and richly illustrated, the book brings together fifteen essays by leading figures in the growing field of ecocritical art history. The breadth and quality of scholarship represented here is outstanding. The essays cover a wide spectrum of temporal and geographic ranges, from China’s Song dynasty to the art of the twenty-first century, with the early modern period and the nineteenth century being especially well represented with case studies from France, India, Japan, Mexico, and Spain. Such a global outlook is appropriate to a publication that invites the reader to think in terms of the planetary ecosystem, and distinguishes it from the existing studies with a narrower focus on a specific period

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Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet. The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, New York 2010, 31.

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or region.² However, the absence of voices from outside the Anglo-sphere is striking in a publication that embraces a global perspective. There is a reason why respondents from the US dominate: *Picture Ecology* proceeds from a symposium, organized in conjunction with the exhibition with a particular focus on American art, entitled *Nature's Nation. American Art and Environment* (2018–2019). While the publication extends the focus beyond American art and thoughtfully engages with indigenous knowledge, the legacy of European ecological imperialism, and postcolonial critique, there is a sense that an opportunity has been missed to include approaches from outside the Anglo-American institutions and intellectual traditions.

Picture Ecology adopts ecocriticism, understood as a continually evolving practice attuned to the questions of ecology, to bring into focus planetary interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life, and the ensuing considerations of sustainability, ethics, and justice. “Approaching visual culture eco-critically”, writes the book’s editor, Karl Kusserow, in his stimulating introduction, “affords distinctive insight into current and previous worldviews, allowing us to contextualise and more effectively contend with the troubled ontologies and ideologies that informed our path to the present, while encouraging more enlightened – just, ecumenical, and sustainable – ways forward” (p. 12).

Approaching visual culture eco-critically, states Kusserow, involves engagement with real-life matters of ethics, personal engagement, and pedagogy. “I have chosen to pursue ecocritical art history as the best available means of reconciling professional obligations with the inescapable sense that ecological disaster is terrifyingly near at hand, and that humans – myself included – are responsible for it” (pp. 12–13). This is taken from a statement provided by De-nin D. Lee, who, like each of the contributing authors, was invited to reflect on the aims and uses of eco-art history. Reproduced in the introduction, these statements offer a clear understanding why such research *matters*, in moral, but also pragmatic and applied terms. As such, it is easy to see that these statements could be useful in a pedagogic context, for example, as prompts for engaging classroom discussions. The introduction, however, offers little in terms of an indication of a guiding principle, or themes, according to which the essays are presented in the book. In what follows, I outline a number of themes that I identified, that may assist in helping to navigate diverse theoretical positions, vocabularies, and practices, richly represented in this book.

One prominent strand concerns a form of ecocritical reading that can “bring attention to neglected evidence of past ecological and proto-ecological sensibility”. This form of ecocriticism was first

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Recent examples include Maura Coughlin and Emily Gephart (eds.), *Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene in Nineteenth-Century Art and Visual Culture*, London 2020; Charlotte Gould and Sophie Mesplède (eds.), *British Art and the Environment. Changes, Challenges, and Responses since the Industrial Revolution*, New York 2022; Lisa Blackmore and Liliana Gómez (eds.), *Liquid Ecologies in Latin American and Caribbean Art*, New York 2020; De-nin D. Lee (ed.), *Eco-Art History in East and Southeast Asia*, Newcastle upon Tyne 2021.

identified by Alan C. Braddock, over a decade ago.³ As a contributor to *Picture Ecology*, Braddock offered a detailed study of the engravings by Diego de Valadés in *Rhetorica Christiana* (1579). Valadés's racial identity as a mestizo (combining European and Indigenous American ancestry) is highlighted to claim that his illustrations of the Christian doctrine display a commitment to “a visual affirmation of Indigenous culture and cosmopolitan environmental knowledge” (p. 118). Braddock acknowledges that, as a missionary, Valadés was complicit in the colonial project of Spain in Mexico. But the implications of enfolding indigenous knowledge into global imperial ambitions of the Catholic Church in this context require sharper scrutiny, and to acknowledge that race has been central to the production of the category of ecology and its taxonomic hierarchy.

This form of historically oriented ecocriticism, practiced by Braddock, as well as Kusserow in his essay on the representations of Saint Francis, is revealing of the ways in which art made before the concept came into being remains relevant to today's struggle for a habitable planet. Maura Coughlin and Emily Gephart, who have previously collaborated on *Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene in Nineteenth-Century Art and Visual Culture* (2019), contribute an essay that brings together two lesser-known figures in the nineteenth-century painterly canon, Élodie La Villette and William Trost Edwards. Their shared passion for observing and painting the sea, argue the authors, contributed to fostering “the intellectual climate in which dialogue about the sea took shape between its scientific study and its rich metaphors” (p. 207). Greg M. Thomas's contribution offers another fascinating exploration of the interchanges between art and intellectual ideas in nineteenth-century France, through a study of a canonical figure of that period, Gustave Courbet. Through a methodology that Thomas developed in his ground-breaking work of visual ecocriticism, *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France* (2000), Thomas uncovers Courbet's “ecological aesthetics”, lucidly analyzed through an array of themes, motifs, and painterly effects.⁴

An ecocritical approach thus often invites a re-examination of longstanding preconceptions of art history. In his essay, Sugata Ray urges a reconsideration of art history from a posthuman point of view. Attentive to the complexity of interspecies relations, this masterful analysis also engages a critique of the Eurocentric presumptions of art history, analyzed in his book *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion*.⁵ In his essay in *Picture Ecology* Ray traces “the global

³ Alan C. Braddock, Ecocritical Art History, in: *American Art* 23, 2009, 24–28, here: 26.

⁴ Greg M. Thomas, *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France. The Landscapes of Théodore Rousseau*, Princeton, NJ 2000.

⁵ Sugata Ray, *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion. Geoaesthetics in the Land of Krishna, 1550–1850*, Seattle, WA 2019.

career” of a bird that is erroneously known in English as “turkey” (due to a misattribution of its origins to Turkey). In approaching the representations of this bird by a Mughal court painter, Ray mobilizes key tools of art history: visual analysis, study of provenance, contextualization, etc. These are combined with approaches from postcolonial studies and posthumanism to arrive at an identification of “a picture ecology” that was epistemically different from “the imperialist ambitions of European seaborne colonialism” (p. 107). De-nin D. Lee’s essay offers another perceptive contestation of art history’s presumptions, specifically, the association of “classical” Chinese landscape painting with untouched wilderness. Perpetuated in the works of contemporary Chinese artists, lucidly analyzed by Lee, these associations can “reinforce a notion common to Orientalist thought: that a harmonious relationship between humans and nature prevailed in premodern China” (p. 42). Lee proceeds to offer a corrective to this misconception, in the example of an eleventh-century painting by Li Gonglin, to contest Orientalist misconceptions and the genre category of “landscape”.

Yet another group of essays displays a notable preoccupation with the “ecology of the inhuman”, as defined by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in identifying practices associated with new materialism.⁶ The ostensible subject of Mónica Domínguez Torres’s essay is Philip II’s fascination with “the white iridescent matter of pearls” (p. 82). The essay delves into the sixteenth-century history of the Spanish Habsburgs, who cultivated the association of pearls with the figure of the Virgin Mary, supplying this precious material to adorn Christian devotional imagery as well as royal portraits, to state their claims to universal monarchy. Torres interposes this familiar narrative of royal patronage with a chilling account of brutal and indiscriminate methods of pearl extraction in the Caribbean in the course of the Spanish colonization of the New World, led by Christopher Columbus. Torres’s unflinching analysis reveals that a profit-oriented extractive industry in the service of imperial ambitions devastated the living environment that nourished pearl-producing oyster beds. Confronting the myths of celestial air bubbles as the origin of pearls, Torres identifies their presence in the history of natural sciences and the history of colonial violence. Through this ecocritical labor of recontextualization pearls emerge as telluric, planetary, and almost creaturely matter.

This line of reflection continues in Gregory Levine’s essay, dedicated to the study of the *tachikibutsu* in Japan: the practice of carving an image of a Buddhist icon into the body of a living tree. Having developed from the indigenous tree-worshipping cults, this practice was assimilated into Buddhist religion with its anthropomorphized iconography. The study of “tree-icons” has remained marginal in the history of sculpture, because of “an intensification of the sacred in the non-human that resists their conceptualisation

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Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone. An Ecology of the Inhuman*, Minneapolis 2016.

as ‘art’” (p. 138). The “tree-icons” are redemptive to humans but they are damaging to trees, however carefully they are inscribed. Levine’s sophisticated exposition of the moral conundrum is alive with compassion and compels the reader to consider the entanglements of human and arboreal bodies, as “trees, in their physiological response to being cut into weaken the certainty of the image” (p. 145).

The question of how images are used in communicating complex concepts such as climate change rightfully resonated across a number of essays in the collection. Nineteenth-century works created by William Blake, William Morris, and above all Ford Madox Brown provide an impetus for Stephen F. Eisenman’s partisan account of capitalism’s logic of extractivism, speciesism, and perpetual growth. Some authors approach images pragmatically, as straightforward means of raising awareness. In his essay, Finis Dunaway describes documentary photographic practices of Lenny Kohm and Subhankar Banerjee as directed at gathering support for environmental protection. Locating these practices in a longer historical perspective would have perhaps explained what distinguishes them from canonical examples of the conservationist movement, such as the work of American landscape photographers Carleton Watkins, William Henry Jackson, and Ansel Adams. Activism and images perhaps closest to investigative photojournalism are the subject of Anne McClintock’s freeform essay that covers the contested territory between visual culture, politics, and questions of witnessing.

This contested territory has already received ample scholarly attention, for evident reasons.⁷ T. J. Demos has been one of the main figures in this field, and his contribution to *Picture Ecology* is an impassioned response to the images of devastating wildfires that have recently swept through the world. Demos is quick to decry “insufficiency of the image”, but it is not immediately apparent that his concern is with a specific kind of image – the mediatized images of disasters, the mainstay of the rolling TV news, press, and social media. Rejecting the idea of “*picturing of ecology*” Demos instead declares his interest in the “*ecology of pictures*” in the media (p. 289, original emphasis). However, exactly how the discourse on climate change is manipulated and what corporate interests this “ecology” serves are unexplained. The status of the photojournalist images illustrating the article in this context is perplexing, since it is unclear whether they are offered as examples of the images’ complicity with the corporate agenda or as praiseworthy exemplars of resistance. The essay seems to argue against Demos’s own rich and nuanced

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See, for example, Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (eds.), *Art in the Anthropocene. Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, London 2015; Julie Reiss (ed.), *Art, Theory and Practice in the Anthropocene*, Wilmington, DE 2019; Eva Horn, Challenges for an Aesthetics of the Anthropocene, in: Gabriele Dürbeck and Philip Hüpkes (eds.), *The Anthropocenic Turn*, New York 2020, 159–172; Christopher P. Heuer and Rebecca Zorach (eds.), *Ecologies, Agents, Terrains*, New Haven, CT 2018.

writings about the capacity of images, notably artworks, to serve the cause of environmental advocacy.⁸

The practice of close looking, argues Andrew Patrizio in his essay, can provide one of the most generative tools in the service of ecocritical art history. Patrizio advocates for “extreme” forms of attention that go beyond the “the ocular-centric epistemologies of art history”, towards “the kinds of multisensory, embodied, and effusive form of attentive engagement” that takes inspiration from Donna Haraway’s “tentacular thinking” (p. 33). This relates closely to Patrizio’s arguments in *The Ecological Eye* (2019), the first publication to offer an extended program for a re-invigoration of art history as an ecocritical practice.⁹ The essay, in contrast with the strategy adopted in the book, is illustrated with a wide range of artworks as examples of ecocritical reading. Despite this, there is a strong sense that the “extreme” form of attention is still a horizon of possibility rather than a clearly defined method, ready to be incorporated into the art historical curriculum. Questions of pedagogy also arise in James Nisbet’s captivating essay. Nisbet takes as the point of departure for his essay the challenge of teaching *in situ* Walter De Maria’s work of land art, *Las Vegas Piece* (1969), which is steadily eroding, blending in with the surrounding landscape of the Nevada desert. Contemplation of the eroding grid outline of *Las Vegas Piece* opens onto a sustained reflection on “uneven intersections” (p. 225) between urban grids imposed by settler colonizers of the Paiute lands of Nevada and grids in art history discourses, to reveal a fascinating history of indigenous practices, territorial development, and ecological implications.

Rachel Z. Delue raises with particular clarity the problem of representing “nature as *system*”: “as a dynamic and complex network of relationships at the register of the global” (p. 154, original emphasis). Her essay takes as a case study an illustration of the Andean landscape made by Alexander von Humboldt during his travels in South America that departs from the convention of landscape representation to incorporate a wealth of environmental data, including information about air temperature, geology, and plant species. Delue’s essay convincingly illustrates not only the idea of nature as system but also stands for the book’s key message regarding the fundamental interconnectedness of living and non-living matter in the planetary web of life.

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T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene. Visual Culture and Environment Today*, Berlin 2017; id., *Decolonizing Nature. Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Berlin 2016.

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“A history of perception [...] offers a valuable set of exemplary instances of looking, paying attention and knowing the consequences of doing these well.” Andrew Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye. Assembling an Ecocritical Art History*, Manchester 2018, 31.