Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology
An (Online) Introduction

TJ Demos

The six essays included in this online supplement advance further the thematic engagement of *Third Text* 120, a special issue dedicated to contemporary art and the politics of ecology. The issue investigates the intersection of art criticism, politico-ecological theory, environmental activism and postcolonial globalization. The focus is on practices and discourses of eco-aesthetics that have emerged in recent years in geopolitical areas as diverse as the Arctic, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Europe and Mexico. The numerous contributors address new aesthetic strategies through which current ecological emergencies – including but not limited to the multifaceted crisis of climate change – have found resonance and creative response in artistic practice and more broadly in visual culture. As such, they contribute to an emergent and increasingly urgent field of study, which, not surprisingly, has exceeded the page limits of a single journal issue.

Starting off this online selection of essays is Sven Lütticken’s ‘Mutations and Other Misunderstandings: Notes toward a History of Bio-aesthetic Practice’, which offers a wide-ranging genealogy of the concept of nature, including the unnatural and the post-natural, as it has intersected with modern artistic practice, philosophy and critical theory. In so doing, he discusses the writings of Félix Guattari – one of the central touchstones for the issue’s consideration of political ecology in recent theoretical developments. In his account, that conceptualization includes the insistence that nature cannot be separated from culture, that ecology is defined by mutation rather than homeostasis, and that it take on an oppositional cast against what Guattari calls ‘integrated world capitalism’ – offering an early descriptor for what we now term corporate globalization. The latter’s negative effects of ecological homogenization and socio-economic inequality are addressed by Terri Weissman in ‘Detroit’s Edible Gardens: Art and Agriculture in a Post-Environmental World’. Her essay considers numerous grassroots gardening practices, such as the Earthworks Urban Farm, D-Town Farm run by the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, Brother Nature Produce and Freedom-Freedom Growers, in relation to the pragmatics of ecological self-sufficiency and the aesthetics of Detroit’s post-industrial, post-urban environmental greening, even while none of the collectives she discusses consider themselves as explicitly or solely artistic. Those practices are posed against the corporate takeover of farming (for instance, by the corporation Hantz Farms) in a conflict that positions a local experimental micro-economy of community subsistence farming against those who would resurrect the neoliberal financialization of nature in order to maximize profits over people. As such, Weissman invokes a second strand of political ecology engaged in this *Third Text* issue: that of a neo-Marxist commitment to both the critique of the neoliberal eco-economy and the support for radical visions of a de-privatized commons of ecological sustainability.
That radical vision is also addressed in Nicholas Mizroeff’s ‘Countervisuality and the Common: The Global Social Movements, Imagination and Climate Change’, which asks how political ecology has been explored and mobilized by the recent Occupy movement. Mizroeff examines how visuality corresponds to the arrangement of social and political relations, and how recent global uprisings have proposed a model of ‘countervisuality’ by which they elect to see things differently, and thereby to occupy creative alternatives in approaching the environment, including re-animating the commons (stretching back to the history of the Diggers during revolutionary seventeenth-century England), forms of radical democracy (as practiced by Occupiers and North African protesters), and a post-capitalist sustainability (addressing the fact that the very viability of carbon-based life is today at risk).

Expanding our examination of political ecology and the visual culture of art and activism to the global South, Emilce Heredia Chaz addresses ‘The Sea in the City: Art and Politics in Environmental Conflicts in Argentina’, and Uwe Martin and Frauke Huber, members of the World of Matter platform, contribute the study ‘Land Rush – Ethiopia’. Heredia Chaz investigates how a local and diverse coalition of neighbours, children, artists, environmentalists, scientists, students and teachers have recently united to protest against the incursions of corporate development and environmental degradation in the port of Bahía Blanca in the province of Buenos Aires, doing so in part by proposing solidarity with the wildlife of seagulls, crabs, flamingos and fish. The network of human and nonhuman actors defines an emergent type of political ecology, resonating with the work of Bruno Latour and his conceptualization of a postanthropocentric model of agency and rights that correspond to a progressive recomposition of a common world (and representing a third strand of political ecology engaged in this issue). Meanwhile, Martin and Huber extend the analysis to the Horn of Africa, considering the effects of the transformation of the landscapes of Gambella in Western Ethiopia into agribusiness operations. By investigating the conflicts between corporate interests and those of tribal peoples, such as the Anuaks, the authors’ analysis and presentation of visual footage of environmental ruination and social devastation resonates with the postcolonial social justice eco-activism of Vandana Shiva, which represents the fourth and final model of political ecology considered in this special issue of Third Text.

Shiva speaks for an indigenous ecology allied with eco-activists of the global South, protesting against the fact that ‘life in all its variety and diversity is rapidly becoming the “property” of corporations through patents and “intellectual property rights”’. As she details the workings of the ‘free’ trade as set up by the WTO and IMF, she charges that these global economic arrangements underwrite ‘biopiracy’, committed by corporations operating in a global and deregulated economy that have greedily patented natural resources, and created monopolies of seeds and natural medicines, otherwise used and freely shared by indigenous communities for generations. For Martin and Huber, such piratical corporate activities also include the massive agribusiness land grab that is occurring at present in sub-Saharan Africa.

Finally, Emily Eliza Scott has contributed a study of ‘Artists’ Platforms for New Ecologies’, which examines how groups like the Arctic Perspective Initiative, Regional Relationships, Greetings from the Cornbelts, and the Midwest Radical Cultural Corridor variously bring together artists, activists and environmentalists. In so doing, they realign the collaborative commitments of social ecology, critical regionalism and radical pedagogy alongside...
These practices build on decades of collectivized art and activism and offer a microcosm of the political ecology that we have seen vitalized in the last two years of uprising and occupations. It is of course the counter grassroots practices and meetings that have defined the greatest promise of democratic dialogue, political inclusivity and the negotiation between environmental imperatives and climate justice – such as the Peoples’ Summit at Rio in 2012, the Klimaforum09 that shadowed COP15 at Copenhagen, as well as the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba in 2010, which gathered activists, NGOs, indigenous peoples, farmers, scientists and governmental delegations. The challenge remains how to channel such collective commitment to environmental justice into large-scale transformation, one drawing on all the resources of eco-aesthetics and political ecology, to rescue our future from the increasingly likely scenario of what Emily Apter (in the print edition of this issue) calls ‘planetary dysphoria’ – an emergent planetary aesthetic consumed by melancholy, suffusing economic, social and cultural life that is informed by a newfound sensitivity to the real and imagined processes of the earth’s destruction and the end of life as we know it. With this special issue, dedicated to contemporary art and the politics of ecology, and bringing together a diverse range of emerging voices and leading scholars, we intend to contribute to addressing that challenge.

1 For my full introduction to this special issue, see TJ Demos, ‘Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology: An Introduction’, Third Text 120, vol 27, no 1, January 2013.


5 I address the relations and conflicts between these four positions in my full introduction in Third Text 120, print issue. See the various texts of Vandana Shiva, including: The Corporate Control of Life in Documenta 13: The Book of Books, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, Germany, 2012; Ecology and the Politics of Survival: Conflicts over Natural Resources in India, Sage, Thousand Oaks, California, 1991; Breakfast of Biodiversity: The Political Ecology of Rain Forest Destruction, Food First, Oakland, California, 2005; and Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability and Peace, Zed, London, 2005.

6 Shiva, The Corporate Control of Life, op cit, p 4


© Published Creative Commons License
CC BY-NC-ND 3.0
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0

TJ Demos is a Reader in the Art History Department at University College London. He writes widely on modern and contemporary art and is the author, most recently, of Return to the Postcolony: Spectres