

Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology

An Introduction

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This special issue of *Third Text*, dedicated to contemporary art and the politics of ecology, 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.

Numerous key questions motivated our investigation: If ecological imperatives are frequently invoked by governments, corporations and certain strands of environmental activism in the name of a post-political ‘green’ consensus for which nothing less than the life of the planet is at stake, how might critical art contribute to an imagination of ecology that addresses social divisions related to race, class, gender and geography in the North and South alike? How might the concept of biopolitics, as elaborated by figures ranging from Bruno Latour to Vandana Shiva, enable a rethinking of hitherto articulated discourses of eco-aesthetics, especially as regards the relationship between ecological art and eco-feminism, or the art and ecology of democratic political composition? How might cultural practitioners contest the financialization of nature by neoliberal globalization, as analysed in Marxist approaches to political ecology, and how might they provide alternatives to the economic valuation of nature or promote a new articulation of the commons against its corporate enclosure? To what extent are recent philosophical writings associated with the so-called ‘speculative realism’ movement (for instance, those of Robin Mackay, Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Timothy Morton) pertinent to contemporary endeavours in rethinking ecology and activism, considering nonhuman environmental agency, or positing experimental

1. Further contributions to this special issue can be found in the online supplement. See <http://www.thirdtext.com>.
2. Political ecology possesses a varied and complex genealogy, articulated at the intersections of cultural geography, human ecology, anthropology, environmental studies and political economy over the course of the twentieth century. In general, it examines the unequal distribution of costs and benefits of environmental changes according to social, cultural and economic differences and in relation to their political implications. For overviews, see Raymond L Bryant and Sinéad Bailey, *Third World Political Ecology*, Routledge, London, 1997; and Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2004.
3. Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, trans, Athlone, London, 2000, p 68; and *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis, trans, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 1995
4. For an overview of environmentally engaged art since the 1960s, see TJ Demos, 'The Politics of Sustainability: Art and Ecology', in Francesco Manacorda and Ariella Yedgar, eds, *Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet, 1969–2009*, Koenig/Barbican, London, 2009, pp 17–30.

aesthetic approaches to species extinction? How have recent international exhibitions and environmental summits represented sites of conjunction for the innovative investigation of art and ecology? And lastly, how have critical artists engaged an expanded field of ecologically oriented media activism, encompassing websites, documentary films, protest activities, academic research, political forums and various combinations thereof? Such a list of queries comprises an admittedly ambitious (and no doubt impossible) set of research goals for a single issue of a journal to satisfy; equally impracticable has been the commitment to research an inclusive global coverage of practices – still, the impressive results presented in these pages address more than a few of these pressing matters of concern.¹ Representing a number of distinctive initiatives that exceed any single approach, the articles commissioned for this special issue from leading and emerging artists and scholars at the cross-section of art and ecology are exemplary of some of the new and innovative ways of conceptualizing and responding to these questions.

The term 'political ecology', as employed herein, identifies multiple competing approaches to the environment, agency and social composition. These approaches nonetheless share the common ground of a scientific-cultural interdisciplinarity and a philosophical criticality, which, when brought together with contemporary art, indicates 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.² To begin, the issue acknowledges the signal legacy of Félix Guattari's political ecology, as developed in his texts *The Three Ecologies* and *Chaosmosis*, the influence of which is felt equally in contemporary politico-ecological theory and eco-aesthetics. As Guattari explained:

Rather than remaining subject, in perpetuity, to the seductive efficiency of economic competition, we must reappropriate universes of value, so that processes of singularization can rediscover their consistency. We need new social and aesthetic practices, new practices of the self in relation to the other, to the foreign, the strange – a whole programme that seems far removed from current concerns. And yet, ultimately, we will only escape from the major crises of our era through the articulation of: a nascent subjectivity; a constantly mutating socius; and an environment in the process of being reinvented.³

The 'transversal' approach of Guattari's ethico-aesthetic paradigm – according to which he insisted on thinking ecologies simultaneously across subjective, social and environmental registers – has extended a mandate to artistic practice that has yet to be fulfilled. Nonetheless, his insistent rejection of the separateness of 'nature' (a nature that much 1960s and '70s earth art and environmentalist practices isolated and thereby reified in their otherwise well-intentioned attempts to rescue ecosystems from destruction and restore degraded habitats) remains an increasingly important, if underexploited, theoretical resource for current approaches to ecologically concerned art.⁴ Moreover, Guattari's integrated network-based approach directed against the commodification of nature by 'world integrated capitalism' anticipated the Marxist-inspired and postcolonial-allied anti-corporate globalization strand of eco-activism of the last decade and a half.

Bringing together the diverse strands of this legacy here, Christoph Brunner, Roberto Nigro and Gerald Raunig's article 'Post-Media Activism, Social Ecology, and Eco-Art' deploys Guattari's ecologies to explore the relations between creative media and activism as exemplified in the political, social and cultural engagements of the Occupy movement. In addition, in 'Art, Ecology, and Institutions: A Conversation with Artists and Curators', moderated by Steven Lam, participants Gabi Ngcobo, Anne Sophie Witzke, Jack Persekian, Nato Thompson and Liberate Tate reflect further on the significance of Guattari's theory for contemporary curatorial practice concerned with interlinked categories of art, environment, art institutions and economics.

Bruno Latour's 'politics of nature' constitutes a second modelling of political ecology, giving further contemporary theoretical impetus to Guattari's position. According to Latour, it is politically imperative to do away with the concept of nature altogether, given its ideological function that sanctions a 'factual' and depoliticizing scientific discourse. Rather than positioning political ecology as the protection of 'nature', Latour defines its aim as the progressive composition of a common world, beginning with an epistemological critique of the very assumptions of scientific authority that could lead to a democratic politics. Exchanging 'matters of fact' for 'matters of concern', Latour envisages new inclusive assemblies of humans and nonhumans, offering creative ways of thinking about alternative modes of governance wherein ecological sustainability, the defence of biodiversity and the rights of multitudinous life forms and environmental objects could be newly considered.⁵

Latour's proposals for an egalitarian political ecology are directly or indirectly taken up here by various contributors: World of Matter, comprising an international group of artists and researchers including Ursula Biemann, Peter Mörtenböck and Helge Mooshammer, among others, have contributed a self-selected portfolio of texts and images from their newly established media, art and research platform, which aims at contesting the anthropocentric domination of the Earth and the assumption of the paramount role of human agents, and supporting a more horizontal and sustainable approach to resource distribution, investigated via open-access media and aesthetic presentation. Meanwhile Nabil Ahmed, in his article 'Entangled Earth', explores the intertwinement of human and non-human actors in Bangladesh in relation to cyclones, iron and gas – what he, after Michel Serres, calls 'earth objects', those that wield a planetary geological force – linking them to the country's corresponding anti-capitalist struggles for climate justice.

Marxist cultural geography, particularly that of the late Neil Smith, provides a third approach to political ecology, one that shows how Latour's version remains incomplete, particularly by its failure to address the recent commodification of nature in corporate practice under neoliberal governmentality. According to Smith, 'capitalized nature', 'nature banking' and 'ecological commodities' were first introduced in the 1980s, the beginning of green capitalism (the legatee of the environmentalism of decades past), with the invention of 'debt-for-nature' swaps and, eventually, carbon offset credits.⁶ The financialization of nature, whereby biotic forms and Earth's resources are subjected to an economic calculus, Smith points out, is integral to the larger project of neoliberalism.⁷ Dedicated to creating

5. See Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Catherine Porter, trans, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004; and Bruno Latour, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public', in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds, *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2005, pp 14–41.

6. See Neil Smith, 'Nature as Accumulation Strategy', in *Coming to Terms with Nature*, Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, eds, *Socialist Register* 43, Merlin, London, 2007; see <http://neil-smith.net/vectors/nature-as-accumulation-strategy>.

7. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005. On recent artistic practices that critically engage and challenge the financialization of nature (such as the work of Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway, Tue Greenfort, Amy Balkin, and Nils Norman), see T J Demos, 'The Post-Natural Condition: Art after Nature', *Artforum*, April 2012, pp 191–197.

8. Smith reiterates Donna Haraway's conclusion made in the late 1990s that 'life itself is a capital-accumulation strategy', in *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*, Routledge, New York, 1997, p 65; and references Cindi Katz's observation that 'nature' is also an accumulation strategy for capital, in 'Whose Nature, Whose Culture? Private Productions of Space and the Preservation of Nature', in Bruce Braun and Noel Castree, eds, *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*, Routledge, New York, 1998.
9. Smith, op cit, p 19. In some ways, Latour theorizes 'a truly democratic production of nature'; one wonders what Smith's response would be.
10. 'The Corporate Control of Life' is the title of Vandana Shiva's contribution to Documenta 13's *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts* publication project, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, Germany, 2011. That Shiva was commissioned to write this text by an international art exhibition speaks to the promising growing concern for political ecology within the cultural realm. Among Shiva's many other important contributions, see *Ecology and the Politics of Survival: Conflicts Over Natural Resources in India*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, California, 1991; John Vandemeer and Yvette Perfecto, *Breakfast of Biodiversity: The Political Ecology of the Rain Forest Destruction*, Food First, Oakland, 2005; and *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability and Peace*, Zed, London, 2005.
11. Shiva, *The Corporate Control of Life*, op cit, p 4
12. See also Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*, South End, Cambridge, 1997.
13. See Shiva, 'The Corporate Control of Life', op cit, pp 12–20.

new fields of capital rather than protecting natural reserves, neoliberalism constitutes the key political-economic driver of the globalization of fossil-fuel capitalism that is responsible for anthropogenic climate change, environmental despoliation and the worldwide growth of socio-economic inequality, especially since the mid-twentieth century. The externalization, domination and production of nature – for instance, in relation to biotechnology and geo-engineering – comprises what Smith terms 'the real subsumption of nature', applying equally to instrumentalized nonhuman life forms and the increasingly modified biology of human nature.⁸ Indeed, nearly all of the discussions in this issue resonate in one way or another with this analysis, showing that the struggle against corporate globalization is central to the politics of ecology in contemporary art. Smith's analysis is therefore of crucial import, but disappoints readers by leaving his concluding question – 'If the production of nature is a historical reality, what would a truly democratic production of nature look like?' – unanswered.⁹

Supplying one response to Smith's query, and a fourth definition of political ecology, is the climate justice activism around the 'rights of nature' pitted against its 'corporate ownership', as exemplified by Indian scientist and environmental campaigner Vandana Shiva, who speaks for an indigenous ecology allied with eco-activists of the Global South.¹⁰ 'Life in all its variety and diversity is rapidly becoming the "property" of corporations through patents and "intellectual property rights"' she writes, detailing the workings of 'free' trade as set up by the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund.¹¹ These global economic arrangements, Shiva charges, 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.¹² On a positive note, she points to the recent successes of grassroots activist campaigns against the practices of such enclosure, including the legal battle in 2005 against the United States Department of Agriculture and chemical conglomerate W R Grace, which claimed to have 'invented' the use of the neem tree for controlling pests and diseases in agriculture; the successful legal campaign by the Research Foundation and Greenpeace against Monsanto's patenting of wheat plants; and a four-year drive to overturn Texas-based RiceTec's patent claims to genetically modified basmati rice, a grain grown for centuries on the subcontinent.¹³ Despite these few promising advances for environmental justice, the battle continues against multinational corporations with billion-dollar budgets and high-level political connections that seek to control life and produce nature for profit.

One can add to these ongoing struggles Nigeria's Movement of the Survival of the Ogoni People, protesting against the ransacking of their environment by oil companies (in particular Shell) and demanding reparations, a contested terrain examined in these pages by Basil Sunday Nnamdi, Obari Gomba and Frank Ugiomoh in their essay on 'Environmental Challenges and Eco-Aesthetics in Nigeria's Niger Delta'. The correlation between social-justice environmentalism and artistic practice is also taken up in my discussion with film-maker

14. See also Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p 24, which explains: “Ecology without nature” could mean “ecology without a concept of the natural”. Thinking, when it becomes ideological, tends to fixate on concepts rather than doing what is “natural” to thought, namely, dissolving whatever has taken form. Ecological thinking that was not fixated, that did not stop at a particular concretization of its object, would thus be “without nature”.
15. On the aesthetic-forensic elements of the lawsuit against Shell’s destruction of Ecuador’s environment that relies on the country’s ‘rights of nature’ laws, see Paulo Tavares, ‘Murky Evidence’, *Cabinet* 43, fall 2011, pp 101–105.
16. See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2010; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005; Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2010; and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed, *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*, Verso, London, 2007.
17. See Andrea Whittle and André Spicer, ‘Is Actor Network Theory Critique?’, *Organization Studies* 29, 2008, pp 611–629; and Hal Foster, ‘Post-Critical’, *October* 139, winter 2012, pp 3–8.

Sanjay Kak and artist Ravi Agarwal regarding the manifold ecological crises facing India today, particularly in relation to the country’s implementation of an undemocratic neoliberalism and the resulting conflicts when corporate interests take priority over tribal rights vis-à-vis mining and mega-dam projects. This artistic-activist campaign against corporate globalization also finds resonance in the Turkish context as examined by Berin Golonu in ‘Activism Rooted in Tradition: Artistic Strategies for Raising Environmental Awareness in Anatolia’, and in Latin America as explored in the dialogue between artists Eduardo Abaroa and Minerva Cuevas, ‘Corporatocracy, Democracy, and Social Change (in Mexico and Beyond): A Conversation on Art and Life’.

In one sense, Latour’s eco-philosophy and the climate justice programme of activists like Shiva might seem opposed; for Latour defends a post-natural politics,¹⁴ while Shiva campaigns to establish the rights of nature in recognized courts of law – an emergent legal formalization exemplified in the Bolivian 2011 ‘Law of Mother Earth’ and the 2010 Ecuadorean lawsuit filed by a group of environmentalists (including Shiva) against BP following the Deepwater Horizon disaster, an action mandated by Ecuador enshrining the rights of nature in its constitution.¹⁵ In this issue’s curatorial roundtable, the activist-artist collective Liberate Tate discuss how and why they have joined the battle by targeting oil giant BP’s corporate sponsorship of major arts institutions such as the Tate Museums and the British Museum (as well as mass-spectacle events like London’s 2012 Olympics as a ‘sustainability partner’ – where corporate greenwashing could not be more crass!). Extending the logic of recent activism’s legalistic strategy here, the photographer and activist Subhankar Banerjee asks ‘Ought We Not to Establish “Access to Food” as a Species Right?’, discussing his proposal in relation to the precarious political ecology of the Arctic and the conflict over prospective oil drilling and resource exploitation that pits governments and corporations against the protection of biodiversity, the rights of animals and those of increasingly politicized indigenous peoples.

Yet, while seemingly opposed theoretically, both the post-natural and the rights-of-nature parties remain 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. Both lend support to a different, more equitable organization of global governance, sloughing off hierarchies between technocrats, experts and corporate elites, on the one hand, and disenfranchised laypeople and marginalized populations on the other. Further complicating the discourse of political ecology is the potential antagonism between those who acknowledge the role of nonhuman agency in environmental processes (for instance, non-Western knowledge systems, Actor-Network Theory, or ‘new materialisms’ philosophy),¹⁶ and critics attendant to the dangers of an anthropomorphizing fetishism, a renaturalized ontology, or of unwittingly forgiving human irresponsibility when nonhuman causality is affirmed.¹⁷ As it is by no means simple to overcome or quickly settle this discord, perhaps the necessary recourse is to introduce the epistemological and ontological divergences within the very

18. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, 'Ideologies of Environmentalism', in *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India*, Routledge, London, 1995, p 98. The authors explain that the 'environmentalism of the poor' in the Indian context includes: the moral imperative of checking overuse and doing justice to the poor; the need to dismantle the unjust social order; the emphasis on habitat reconstruction via technological means; and the revival of community-based management systems. These diverse commitments, which operate under different ideological regimes, can also enter into conflict with each other.
19. Rob Nixon, 'Environmentalism and Postcolonialism', in Ania Loomba et al, eds, *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2005, p 238. Also see Ramachandra Guha, 'Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation', in A Brennan and N Witoszek, eds, *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland, 1999, pp 313–324; and Rob Nixon, 'Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the Poor', in Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers, eds, *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa*, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, 2011, pp 257–286. On the Ahwahneechee eviction, see Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West*, University of California, Berkeley, California, 1999, pp 215–385.

formation of a politics of ecology, meaning acknowledging them as yet-to-be resolved differences to be addressed by the new composition of a common world of which Latour speaks.

Still, nonhuman actors – cyclones that cause havoc and alter the weather patterns of national politics; soil that bears witness in courts of law to past environmental crimes; and errant stones that seek postcolonial justice – make an appearance in several contributions here. While human activity is increasingly understood as taking on agency in relation to geological developments – some scientists claim we have entered the 'anthropocene' era when humans, for the first time in history, become the principal driver of geological change – the participation of nonhuman objects, life-forms and forces is also allotted an ever greater determinative role by analysts of the environment. See in particular in this issue the discussion of indigenous knowledge systems and Native American eco-aesthetics in 'Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous Ecologies and "New Materialisms" in Contemporary Art' by Jessica L Horton and Janet Catherine Berlo; and 'Against Internationalism' by Jimmie Durham.

Beyond investigating these complex developments in political ecology, *Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* responds to a commitment to move beyond Euro-American environmentalism, toward a concerted engagement with the postcolonial South and East. In so doing, it adopts the imperative to avoid the exclusivity of what Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha have termed 'environmentalism born of affluence', which historically privileges conservation and natural purity over social justice and political engagement in questions of the differential effects of climate change and environmental destruction and the historical responsibility for their causes. Consequently, this issue remains attentive to 'the environmentalism of the poor' – meaning the rights, political demands and matters of concern of those who have least contributed to climate change but who are due to pay its greatest costs.¹⁸

The distinction raises the subject of the longstanding conflicts between environmentalism and postcolonialism. In the North American context, past environmentalisms have frequently swung toward a Jeffersonian agrarianism, defined by a romantic, transcendentalist primordialism, one unconcerned with and even hostile to the concerns of postcolonial studies with social justice and anti-colonial struggles. Environmentalism's preservationist celebration of wilderness, leading at times towards an eco-nationalism, has typically opposed the focus of postcolonialism on hybridity, migration and cross-culturation. A key question, as Rob Nixon asks, has therefore become: 'How to draw on the strengths of bioregionalism without succumbing to ecoparochialism?', in relation, for instance, to Shell and Chevron's exploitation of the oil fields in Nigeria's Ogoniland, or the lasting effects of Agent Orange on one million Vietnamese people, or the repressed memory of the eviction of the native American Ahwahneechee people from Yosemite Valley during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to fulfil its mythology as pure wilderness?¹⁹ Far from outdated, similar stakes are confronted today in relation to the Arctic, which pro-drilling campaigns self-servingly frame as a barren wilderness awaiting exploitation, to which activists respond that it is actually a

20. See Subhankar Banerjee, 'From Kolkata to Kaktovik En Route to Arctic Voices: Something Like an Introduction', in Subhankar Banerjee, ed, *Arctic Voices: Resistance at the Tipping Point*, Seven Stories, New York, 2012, pp 1–22.

21. The philosophy of 'climate justice' emerged in 2000 with the Climate Justice Summit in The Hague, shadowing the Sixth UN conference on Climate Change (COP 6), and has since been advanced by activist groups such as Climate Justice Now! and the Climate Justice Action Network, and supported by indigenous peoples' organizations such as the 2010 World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. As the Global Justice Ecology Project explains, climate justice demands the inclusive participation of marginalized communities in the global climate negotiation process, and that negotiations reflect the understanding that climate change jeopardizes human rights and exacerbates socio-economic inequalities worldwide. Environmental justice, therefore, is inextricable from economic equality, democratic politics and the human rights of indigenous and marginalized communities. See <http://globaljusticeecology.org/>.

22. For an important precedent that brings together the fields of contemporary art, eco-aesthetics and postcolonial concerns, see Rasheed Araeen, *Art Beyond Art: Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the 21st Century*, Third Text, London, 2010.

23. For the best articulation of this notion of aesthetics, see Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Gabriel Rockhill, trans, Continuum, London, 2004, p 85. In this regard,

vibrant ecosystem home to numerous species, migrating animals and indigenous peoples.²⁰

The emergence of the climate justice movement in 2000 has helped to begin to overcome Euro-American parochialism as well as its ecology of affluence, by asserting that climate change is a rights issue founded in an ethico-political commitment to considering how the causes and effects of ecological change relate to concepts of social, economic and environmental justice. From this basis follows the assumption that climate change cannot be stopped without transforming the neoliberal corporate-based economy – bringing together an anti-capitalist politics with a rights-to-nature ecology.²¹ Broadly speaking, then, the present and ongoing challenge is to reunite a critical environmentalism with an ecologically attendant postcolonialism, engendering a political ecology based on the commitment to environmental sustainability, biodiversity, social justice, human rights, economic equality and democratic practice – which identifies the overarching criteria for consideration of the artistic practices and critical positions considered in this issue.²²

As we have seen, the positions of Guattari and Latour reject the isolated status of 'nature' in favour of an emphasis on transversal connections between emergent subjects, newly conceived democratic social collectives, and de-financialized and singularized environments. In similar fashion, environmentally concerned artistic practice relinquishes the privileged position of its autonomous and exceptionalist positioning, and joins a widening of its aesthetic parameters to visual culture at large that engages the environment. In other words, the aesthetics of political ecology, as represented here, brings about a blurring of the divisions between activist visual culture, artistic forms and the appearance of non-human agents of environmental change. Aesthetics in this sense designates the mode of appearance that 'parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world', and reaches a moment of politicization when conventional categories of and separations between the seen and heard versus the forgotten and overlooked are challenged and redistributed.²³ Indeed, as Yates McKee writes, 'The new biopolitical artist', the one concerned with an environmentally defined politics of survival:

... must now be understood as a contingent location within an open-ended – though not necessarily egalitarian – field of aesthetic participants, including media strategists and investigative journalists, photographers and videographers, Web and graphic designers, charismatic spokespersons and ordinary movement members, organizers and demonstrators.²⁴

Such is an accurate picture of many of the hybrid practitioners of eco-aesthetics discussed in these pages, whose work includes documentary practice in film and photography; community-based activism; neoconceptual investigations of site and eco-institutional critique; site-specific public interventions and sculptural projects; legal and forensic research; construction of alternative archives; new or 'post-' media aesthetics; and indigenous approaches to earth objects. While all the articles in this special issue speak to this development of politico-ecological aesthetics, the contributions of Patrick D Flores, 'Delicacy and Danger', surveying Asian art and ecology; Raqs Media Collective, 'Three and a Half Conversations with an Eccentric Planet'; and Luke Skrebowski's 'After Hans Haacke: Tue Greenfort and Eco-Institutional Critique', are particularly pertinent

Rancière identifies the aesthetic implications and conditions of Latour's definition of political ecology as 'the progressive composition of the common world' in *Politics of Nature*, op cit, p 18.

24. See Yates McKee, 'Art and the Ends of Environmentalism: From Biosphere to the Right to Survival', in Michel Feher with Gaëlle Krikorian and Yates McKee, eds, *Nongovernmental Politics, Zone*, New York, 2007, p 557. Thanks are due to Yates McKee for collaborating in the early stages of planning this special issue.
25. See Anthony D Barnosky et al, 'Approaching a State Shift in Earth's Biosphere', *Nature* 486, 7 June, 2012, pp 52–58.
26. See Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*, Nation, New York, 2011; Gwynne Dyer, *Climate Wars: The Fight for Survival as the World Overheats*, Oneworld, London, 2010; and Mark Hertsgaard, *Hot: Living Through the Next Fifty Years on Earth*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York, 2011.
27. Barnosky et al, op cit, p 57
28. Naomi Klein, 'Capitalism vs the Climate', *The Nation*, 9 November 2011, online at: <http://www.thenation.com/article/164497/capitalism-vs-climate>
29. See Greenpeace, 'After Rio + 20 – Is there Hope for Change Left?', 22 June 2012, online at: <http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/blog/forests/after-rio-20-is-there-hope-for-change-20120622>; and George Monbiot, 'Rio + 20 Draft Text is 283 Paragraphs of Fluff', George Monbiot's Blog, *Guardian* website, 22 June 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/>

to its critical analysis and innovative conceptualization in the global present.

A recent issue of the scientific journal *Nature*, dedicated to climate-change science to date, warns of the growing risk of a 'critical state shift' in the Earth's biosphere. The planetary tipping point, which could push us into unpredictable and therefore all-the-more-likely catastrophic conditions, scientists explain, is being forced by human activity around population growth, resource consumption, habitat transformation and fragmentation and greenhouse-gas-driven climate change.²⁵ With atmospheric carbon dioxide levels a third higher than pre-industrial levels and growing unchecked, the world faces a near future of intensified global warming, desertification, acidification of the seas and the precipitation of a mass species extinction event, the intensity and scale of which has not been witnessed in sixty-five million years. Our current predicament looks ahead to a world of massively reduced biodiversity, rising heat waves and environmental disasters including stronger storms, more disease and pestilence, increased drought and less frequent but more intense precipitation events, more wildfires and lower crop yields. These eventualities are likely to spark further wars and conflicts for precious energy resources and food, military counter-insurgency against rebellious populations, and the further entrenchment of fortress communities of the politically elite and wealthy, separated from the rest of humanity worldwide.²⁶

Giving expression to this gloomy forecast are practices considered in this issue by Emily Apter, who investigates what she terms '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. While no single or simple politics corresponds to the various expressions of this aesthetic (as Apter points out), let us hope that such a consciousness works to further stimulate the energies of activism and artistic engagement that will help to avert future catastrophes, and will do so by making visible to what degree any future world of ecological sustainability and democracy must be founded on an awareness of the current claims and historical sensitivities of climate justice.

For the scientist-contributors to *Nature*, the solutions to prevent the disastrous effects of climate change include reducing world population growth and per capita resource use; rapidly increasing the world's energy production supplied by sources other than fossil fuels (such as solar, wind and hydro power); elevating the efficiency of existing means of food production and distribution instead of converting new areas; and enhancing efforts to manage and cultivate areas of biodiversity and ecosystem services in the terrestrial and maritime realms.²⁷ While productively raising climate change awareness, *Nature's* technocratic prescriptions appear perilously devoid of climate justice considerations. Environmental justice activist Naomi Klein fills in some of the blanks and summarizes what needs to be done on the social, political and economic fronts to meet such goals:

We will need to rebuild the public sphere, reverse privatizations, re-localize large parts of economies, scale back overconsumption, bring

georgemonbiot/2012/jun/22/rio-20-earth-summit-brazil. On the compromised discourse of sustainability, see Demos, 'The Politics of Sustainability'; and Janet Kraynak, 'The Land and the Economics of Sustainability', *Art Journal*, vol 69, winter 2010.

30. As articulated in, for instance, the Kari-Oca Declaration, 'Indigenous Peoples Global Conference on Rio + 20 and Mother Earth', 13–22 June 2012, published on <http://www.indymedia.org.uk>.
31. On the London Occupy movement's relation to political ecology, see the 'environment' category of *The Occupied Times*, at: <http://theoccupiedtimes.co.uk>, including such essays as Melanie Strickland, 'Earth Injustice: Why Our Legal System is Failing the 99%', 22 January 2012; Liz Gallagher, 'Exposing Our Exposure: How Energy Companies Are Risking Our Future and Their Balance Sheets', 12 July 2012; and Ragnhild Freng Dale, 'Get the Shell Out!', 18 June 2012. For US perspectives see Nick Mizroeff, 'Occupy Climate Change!', at <http://nicholasmizroeff.com/RTL/?p=353>; and Talib Agape Fuegoverde (aka Yates McKee), 'Occupy Criticism, Occupy Spring', *The Brooklyn Rail*, 2012, at <http://brooklynrail.org/2012/03/art/occupy-criticism-occupy-spring>.

back long-term planning, heavily regulate and tax corporations, maybe even nationalize some of them, cut military spending and recognize our debts to the global South.²⁸

Of course these sensible recommendations could not be further removed from the economic priorities of the international governing community, as assembled in the recent UN-convened conferences on climate change. While *Nature* was cautiously optimistic in anticipation of Rio + 20 – entitled 'The Future We Want', coming two decades after the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 – the UN conference was soon derided by environmentally engaged civil society as one that 'takes us nowhere'. Indeed, in what has become a tragic ritual of anti-democratic obstructionism, the US representatives saw to it that any mention of rights, equity, common but differentiated responsibilities, and phrases like 'unsustainable consumption and production patterns', were summarily deleted from the final document. No agreement on cutting greenhouse gases was made; instead, economic growth was delinked from the use of natural resources, and 'sustainable development' overwrote sustainable ecology.²⁹ In other words, the meeting that best approximates what a global forum would be for legislating action on climate change ended in a massive failure – expressive only of the 'we' that represents corporate interests – bringing charges by activist groups that the continued Washington-promoted consensus around the 'green economy' is nothing short of a 'crime against humanity and the earth'.³⁰

It is rather the counter, grassroots summit meetings that have defined the greatest realization 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. In addition, the international Occupy movement has recently added to the energy around environmental activism and the creative reclamation of the commons.³¹ 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 'planetary dysphoria'.