

Demos, T.J., *Decolonising Nature, Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016.

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In 2017, the still contested term *climate refugees* entered mainstream media; the Chinese state issued a red alert because of the continuous smog that asphyxiates parts of the population.¹ The case of ‘smog refugees’, as they came to be called in the media, is one among the numerous complicated consequences of the contemporary environmental crisis. In this context, the task of writing on a subject that is as contemporary as the ongoing ecological crisis is not an easy one. Moreover, attempting to link it with art practices can appear superfluous to many. However, the current ecological crisis incites different creative responses to the conditions of the present, such as the publication *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics*² or *The Anthropocene Project* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin,³ a series of exhibitions, publications, and lectures from 2013 to 2014, to name but a few. Artistic practices that relate to ecological issues have been increasingly gaining ground in the last years.

Only recently has scholarship investigated the topic, which situates *Decolonising Nature* in a rather new field of academic research. Professor of history of art and visual culture in the University of California, Santa Cruz, and director of the Center for Creative Ecologies, T. J. Demos seemed to take this into account. However, it is not by chance that Demos chose to write on the topic of art and ecology. The book is in many ways a natural progression for him, whose latest project include the exhibition ‘Rights of Nature: Art and Ecology in the Americas’ at Nottingham Contemporary (UK) in 2015 and the publication of a long series of articles on the moving image and ecology since 2010. In *Decolonising Nature*, next to giving an overview of contemporary artistic practices, the goal is to address the environmental crisis as a mere product of financial capitalism, as the author puts it, ‘inextricable from social, political and economic forces’ (p. 7). Contrary to common belief, financial capitalism is not an abstract process, but has very real, material consequences, that have a detrimental impact on our environment. The examined works in *Decolonising Nature* point precisely to this destructive results. This is why, Demos’ conception of a poignant artwork is weighed according to its political effectiveness. Expectedly, the term *necessity* appears throughout the book.

Through his elucidating introduction, he provides an exhaustive study of recent scholarship from environmental humanities. At the same time, he deploys the theoretical tools of his analysis, notably the recent philosophical developments that attempt to rethink the relationship between human and nonhuman life.⁴ Via such analytical means, Demos’s work presents an in-depth study on the

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/21/smog-refugees-flee-chinese-cities-as-airpocalypse-blights-half-a-billion>), last accessed February 2, 2017.

² http://hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2014/anthropozaen/anthropozaen_2013_2014.php, last accessed February 2, 2017.

³ Scott, Emily Eliza, and Kirsten Swenson. *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015.

⁴ Ranging from object-oriented ontology and speculative realism to the newly born interest for indigenous cosmologies, Demos referenced a wide scope of scholarship: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham,

dialogue between art and ecology, examining different parts of the world where such exchanges happen today. Thus, the subject matter of the book extends from India to Mexico and to the Arctic and beyond, making this 'expanded geography' appear arbitrary, rendering the exercise of reading disorienting at times. Comparatively, the vast array of examples the author employs to illustrate his argument can confuse the reader.

The opening chapter explores the first instances of art attempting to raise ecological consciousness, mostly from the 1960s to the 1980s. Demos remains dubious about the political potential several of these initiatives convey. Agnes Dene's *Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan* (1982) is exemplary in this regard; these urban gardens raise doubts because the artist reproduces the monoculture model, the same model that has been criticized for its environmental effects and that permitted corporate industrial-chemical agribusiness, which the work is apparently against (p. 43). Another example is the more recent, travelling exhibition 'Fragile Ecologies: Contemporary Artists' Interpretations and Solutions', which discusses the role of the artist as a potential agent of change, a shared concern with *Decolonising Nature*. Demos's scepticism around such initiatives is based on the fact that they objectify nature, rendering it an aesthetic object of reverence (p. 52), an artistic counterpart of so-called Green Capitalism. The politics of sustainability, praised by some of the works in 'Fragile Ecologies', are put in question.

Henceforth, the reader is frequently confronted by the following methodology: starting with an analysis of 'a politically ineffective' visual production, Demos juxtaposes it to another work that, in turn, eradicates the doubts of the author, a technique that runs the risk of becoming didactic. For instance, the whole argument in the chapter 'Climates of Displacement' is based on the victimizing drift of the artistic group Argos Collective towards the inhabitants of low-lying island states, such as the Maldives, whose entire populations will become climate refugees because of water rise (p. 68). Subhankar Banerjee's epic photographs of northern Alaska, along with his writings, stand as the counter model. His images and texts represent how climate change has a deep effect on the mobility of indigenous Arctic populations, but abstains from victimizing these people.

Continuing with numerous examples of the intersection of ecological activism and artistic intervention, Demos lingers over what geographer Neil Smith defined as 'the financializing of nature', notably the take-over of nature by financial markets (p. 105). The examined works, such as Amy Balkin's *Public Smog*, offer possibilities of de-financializing nature through the critical act of visualizing the invisible system that sustains global ecology. Balkin purchased parts of the atmosphere over major cities, like a park in airspace, questioning the politics of pollution. Creating small pockets of 'capitalism's pollution free zones' was also among the concerns of the dOCUMENTA (13) exhibition in 2012, one of the art world's main events, taking place in Kassel every five years. In the last chapter, 'Gardening against the Apocalypse', Demos comments on some of the thirteenth edition participants and their varied interpretations of gardens, adopting an overall critical approach. When talking of an 'uncommitted theoretical pluralism, a tendency familiar in the liberal milieu of contemporary art' (p. 240), he seems to feel dubious about Donna

NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, eds., *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, (Melbourne: Re: Press, 2011).

Haraway's post-human approach being put alongside Vandana Shiva's eco-activist aesthetics, both present at the exhibition.

Throughout the book, it becomes clear that Demos puts forward artistic actions and works that are closer to Shiva's post-colonial, ecological struggle for justice than to Haraway's sci-fi activism. Devoting a chapter to the ecologies of art and revolution in Mexico, he goes as far as drawing a consciously slippery parallel between the Zapatista Army of National Liberation and contemporary artists working on ecological issues in the United States' southern neighbour (p. 157). Examining Pedro Rey's *Guns for Shovels* (2008), where the artist collected guns to melt them into steel and fabricate shovels to plant trees, Demos is clearly inclined towards creative ways to repair a past (and present) infused by the violence of narcotic trafficking. Furthermore, he emphasises forms of resistance that are inspired by, or related to, indigenous culture (whose native environment is often deeply altered by neo-colonial politics). Inspired by Michel Serre's *The Natural Contract*, the group Word of Matter, through experimental documentary video work, points out the urgency of making a contract with the Earth; by inventing it, the natural contract will pay justice to nature as a universal declaration of the rights of nature. Such a juridical proposition may entail a more convincing political latent than the one Demos saw in other projects. In fact, Word of Matter, in which artists such as Ursula Biemann and Judy Price participate, stands out among of the artistic examples of *Decolonising Nature* because it engages with non-anthropocentric factors; going beyond human agents, they aim at a definition of an ecology where human and nonhuman hold equal sway. After a lot of short mentions to the term *Anthropocene*, the citation of Timothy Morton's saying that, 'we are no longer able to think history as exclusively human, for the very reason that we are in the Anthropocene', sounds, at last, to the point.

What Demos is ultimately trying to ask us in *Decolonising Nature*, is if we can imagine different consequences of the ecological crisis other than poverty and deepening economic inequality? Overall, *Decolonising Nature* is abundant in theoretical references and artistic examples that attempt to give an answer to this question. Sometimes, the panoramic scope the book aims to cover can make it difficult to distinguish its main argument from its sources. The ecologically concerned artists, political activists, and rich scholarship Demos refers to, however, make of the book a great addition to the dawning research on the intersection between art and ecology.

References

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