



**T. J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott and Subhankar Banerjee (eds)**, *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change*, New York: Routledge, 2021. ISBN: 9780367221102 (cloth); ISBN: 9780429321108 (ebook)

As the largest petrochemical complex in the United States, the Houston Ship Channel is much more than a geographically expansive dilemma. In addition to numerous studies that have detailed the lasting negative health effects caused by the complex, those operating within the arts have likewise employed their own methods to creatively address and coalesce around shared socioecological concerns regarding the channel's environmental impacts. Consider, for example, the multivalent messaging articulated by the artists and activists who held replica dinosaur figurines donning air quality sensing necklaces in front of Houston's spewing industrial refineries. Such an eclectic scene, representative of the artist collective Not An Alternative's collaborative work with Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services (T.E.J.A.S.), is but one case of the increasingly prevalent merging of critical art practices and social movements that address the climate catastrophe.

The fence-line communities in Houston and frontline populations around the world suffer from similar yet differentiated forms of contamination. Mirroring environmental justice analyses, Not An Alternative and T.E.J.A.S. foreground the low-income Latinx communities who live among Houston's most polluted neighborhoods, producing an aesthetic refusal to being rendered invisible. Heeding the ultimate fate of the dinosaurs, these communities have opposed and organized against the threat of extinction at the command of the fossil fuel industry, linking both localized air pollution and global climate imbalances to a political and economic system that will always deem some lives – human and more-than-human – as disposable. Documentation of this collaborative project provides a fitting cover image for *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change*, as it locates the acutely perceptive and indispensable role of art in further elucidating and actively resisting the structural conditions



underpinning the current climate crisis. The image,<sup>1</sup> like the volume itself, proposes that future worldviews must be visualized before they can be realized, thereby maintaining that visual culture is a vital arena where knowledge production, community building, and political formations can emerge.

Featuring 40 essays and interviews from over 50 global contributors in a nearly 450 page tome that cohesively reaffirms this approach, the book showcases some of the most crucial thinking in the rapidly growing field of contemporary ecological art.<sup>2</sup> Co-edited by art historians T.J. Demos (UC Santa Cruz) and Emily Eliza Scott (University of Oregon) and artist-scholar Subhankar Banerjee (University of New Mexico), this volume offers an array of anti-capitalist, decolonial, and climate justice-based responses to art scholarship, art practice, and visual culture more broadly. It follows previous edited volumes on ecocriticism and the arts (Braddock and Irmsher 2009; Davis and Turpin 2015), yet departs in both its particular focus on contemporary iterations of the climate crisis and its decidedly political orientation beyond that of cultural critique, further building upon the editors' own major contributions to the field (Banerjee 2012; Demos 2016, 2017, 2020; Scott and Swenson 2015), among their countless other essays, curatorial projects, and scholarly works.<sup>3</sup>

The editors insist the arts “provide a vital site of intervention, complementary and alternative to the earth sciences, engineering, design, and economics, which have popularly defined climate-change discourse and policy”, with contributions to the volume highlighting “creative and experimental practices beyond the techno-scientific, apocalyptic, positivistic and/or spectacular media and pop-cultural image systems through which climate breakdown is so often

1 See <https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Companion-to-Contemporary-Art-Visual-Culture-and-Climate/Demos-Scott-Banerjee/p/book/9780367221102>

2 The 2021 College Art Association annual conference, for example, had specific programming focus on the climate crisis.

3 Most relevant of these is perhaps a special issue of *Third Text* and its online supplement edited by Demos (2013a, 2013b) on contemporary art and the politics of ecology, featuring essays by Banerjee and Scott.

experienced and visualized” (p.1). Demos, Scott and Banerjee make clear in the introduction that “artistic practice, including its substantial historical resources, forms, and techniques, is uniquely poised to get at the tremendous complexity and the variegated multisensory, material, and representational aspects of climate breakdown” (p.7). While it does indeed do so, the volume simultaneously deepens a rupture within art historical scholarship by considering visual production grounded within and co-produced alongside social movements, unsettling the singular focus on individual expertise, achievement, and genius in the arts that is so reified within the same neoliberal economic and political processes to blame for the climate crisis.

International in scope, the volume features a number of scholars thinking from and/or writing about the Global South, although still skewing toward those based in what is now the United States. Rather than focusing on market-based, technological, and politically reformist solutions so often proposed from the North, however, the volume instead turns to the communities disproportionately devastated by an increasingly unstable climate. With place-based accounts in locations as varied from West Papua to Chemical Valley near Aamjiwnaang First Nation land in what is currently called Canada, the volume spotlights both the causes and effects of climate change to better attend to the sources of climate transformation. It is thus not only timely in the academic and political sense, but also regarding the coronavirus pandemic, with numerous references to the entanglements between the root causes of ecological disrepair and ineffective governmental responses to public health emergencies. The wide display of fields and methodologies represented offer an invaluable starting point for emerging and established scholars who wish to write about the environmental arts in a more critically engaged fashion, especially those in fields adjacent to art history and visual studies. Accordingly, the volume serves to expand the burgeoning environmental humanities and social sciences to more fully examine aspects of visual culture, with its interdisciplinary capaciousness of value to those in the fields of cultural geography and political ecology who are interested in how art might aid or complicate their research.

The volume is necessarily ambitious, for thoroughly representing the climate crisis is an arduous, if not impossible, task due to its all-encompassing nature. It is “dizzily convoluted, comprising many correlated and at times seemingly contradictory processes happening in multiple places and times, at varying rates and scales, and with myriad types and degrees of consequence” (p.3). To best attend to such complexities, the volume is separated into six distinct but sometimes overlapping and cross-referencing parts: “extractivism”; “climate violence”; “sensing climates”; “in/visibilities”; “multispecies justice”; and “ruptures/insurgencies/worldings”. Each of the six sections is preceded by a succinct thematic overview provided by the editors. These individual sections merit brief summary, the last of which I believe provides a proverbial jumping off point for future politically engaged scholarship on the arts and climate change.

Following the growing field of media ecology, the volume’s first section considers the relationship between the origins of fossil capital and how its contemporary effects on people and environment are visually mediated. Contributors expand and connect discussions of extractivism beyond its immediately recognizable relationship to natural resources to less considered aspects of extraction rooted in labor, gender, and cultural exploitation. “Extraction”, as the editors note, “forms an enormous web of primary resource mining and secondary juridico-political appropriations, cybernetic technologies, and data infrastructures”, importantly linking extractivism – and, thus, climate change – to ongoing processes of settler colonialism and imperialism (p.12). An example is Brazilian architect Paulo Tavares’ examination of the spatial logics undertaken by Brazil’s right-wing military dictatorship in its mutual decimation of Indigenous peoples and land following the US-backed coup of 1964. “Aided by mapping technologies developed by the Cold War military industrial complex”, Tavares explains, “Amazonia was conceived and visualized as a limitless resource-terrain open for capitalist exploits upon which a series of cartographic imaginaries, government discourses, and grand strategies were projected and implemented” (p.28). By appropriating and producing similar

forensic imaging to that utilized by the military government, Tavares labels the techno-cultural consequences of deforestation in Amazonia as “ecocide by design”, with territorial planning having the potential to disrupt global ecological conditions.

The second section, on climate violence, provides an appreciated expansion of Rob Nixon’s (2011) much cited account of “slow violence” – the often delayed, dispersed, and obscured quality of environmental destruction – to consider other kinds of temporalities and violences related to climate, including the increasing threat faced by environmental activists who dare to speak out. “Climate violence”, the editors suggest, “can be quick *and* slow, punctual *and* protracted” (p.75). In her essay on the three-part *Habitat* video series by Bougainvillean artist Taloi Havini, Amber Hickey notes the inseparable relation between the Autonomous Region of Bougainville’s fight for independence and the peoples’ long resistance to transnational mining operations in the region. Hickey argues that “within the context of the longstanding movement against the mine and for Bougainville’s independence”, Havini’s work “shows us how the extinction of land, life, and culture (facilitated by capitalism) has been and continues to be refused through constantly unfolding resurgent practices on Bougainville” (p.129). The implicit exploration of Nixon’s concept in this section is compelling, and he is one of a handful of major ecological thinkers whose ideas are repeatedly brought to the fore throughout the volume. Yet one might feel that the contributions as a whole remain somewhat fixed to this prior generation of theorists more so than other recent volumes such as *Racial Ecologies* (Nishimi and Hester Williams 2018), which approaches environmental justice from an ethnic studies lens rather than through the environmental humanities and, therefore, operates within a genealogy of critical scholarship whose vital considerations have still not fully percolated into writing on the arts.

Parts 3, 4 and 5 of the book all proffer imaginative ways in which life is enmeshed within our capacity to sense – and make sense of – the multiplicities of climate. As the editors suggest in their introduction to the “sensing climates” section: “One lesson to draw is that if we are to enable movements of climate justice as effective levers of social transformation, we must first

carefully consider which climates are sensed and how, as well as the formation of their sensing subjects and social formations” (p.152). Ranging from cultural and media studies scholar Heather Davis’ elucidation of anti-colonial breathing to environmental justice scholar Julie Sze’s inquiry into the use of subversive satire in online visual media addressing climate justice, the contributors examine unconventional new systems of sensing a warming planet. These approaches are increasingly important, for, as the editors note in the fourth section, “Climate change is often invisible, or rather *invisibilized*, so as to reinforce its apparent separateness from social and political realms” (p.216), an issue historicized by American artist Amy Balkin’s writing on the visualization of atmospheric politics. The volume’s penultimate section on multispecies justice blends more-than-human scholarship with attuned political analysis, featuring art historian Jessica L. Horton’s insightful conversation with Santa Clara Pueblo artist Rose B. Simpson on her relationship to permaculture as rooted in Indigenous knowledge and practice, as well as postcolonial literary scholar Ashley Dawson’s essay detailing artist collective SeedBroadcast’s agri-Culture seed sharing initiatives against biocapitalism’s processes of privatization.

If the first five sections serve as a comprehensive overview of the field, the last – on “ruptures/insurgencies/worldings” – is a manifesto of sorts, implicating the corporatized art world through experimental practices and emancipatory world-building activities that expand what the integration of art, aesthetics, and politics might be capable of creating in material terms. The contributions to this section are the most provocative and, as such, invaluable for pushing future scholarship in the direction the volume intends. “The arts can assist in overcoming the challenging and paradoxical formulation of climate justice positions and praxis in an unjust world of unsustainable capitalism”, the editors argue, “thereby pulling the not-yet – as well as the oppressed, marginalized, silenced, and submerged – into existence” (p.386). Here, artist-activist John Jordan insists that the very concept of modern art has colonized imaginations everywhere, bluntly stating: “We have now had 200 years of art and the world is getting worse”



(p.393). It is within this critique of art that Steve Lyons and Jason Jones of Not An Alternative question the capacities of museums to actually serve the needs of their publics, instead proposing institutional liberation, or “a practice of institutional seizure that generates counterpower by strategically mobilizing the power institutions already have” (p.418).

The volume fittingly ends with a heartfelt conversation between Banerjee and Melanie K. Yazzie and Nick Estes of the Red Nation, an Indigenous revolutionary socialist organization whose political program of the Red Deal foregrounds Indigenous and Black struggles alongside solidarity with the political projects resisting neocolonial repression in Palestine, Venezuela, and Chiapas, among others (see The Red Nation 2021). In many ways, the Red Nation’s principled internationalist and anti-imperialist ecopolitics are the foundation upon which future art and movements must continue to intermingle, for there is no alternative to the kind of radical politics necessary to counteract and dismantle the globally hegemonic legacies of colonialism and capitalism that still prevail. Art and visual culture, as this volume advocates, can provide the catalysts needed for this world and its masses of inhabitants to survive, no matter the climate.

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*May 2021*