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Eco Art: Ethical Artistic Engagement in the Anthropocene

Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature Since the '60s by MARK A.

CHEETHAM

Pennsylvania State UP, 2018. \$34.95 USD

Reviewed by **EMMA MORGAN-THORP**

Mark A. Cheetham's *Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature Since the '60s* is essential reading for those questioning the ethics and possibilities for making art in the Anthropocene. Although, following Zoe Todd, Cheetham professes a discomfort with the term "Anthropocene," ecological and climate catastrophe serve as the purpose and setting for this incisive and complex work on the relationships among landscape, land art, and eco art.

Cheetham's core theories are elucidated by eight case studies across five chapters. In the first chapter, "Manipulated Landscapes," he presents a survey of the motif of deracinated trees, and introduces his central concepts and terminology, including landscape, land, ecology, environment, border, and nature. He explains the key tendencies of eco art—direct action, aesthetic separation and withdrawal, and articulation—and goes on to grapple with the question foremost on my mind as I first opened his book: can we responsibly make art about and in the face of ecological disaster? Further, "should we continue to produce works and display them using the same largely capitalist structures and attitudes that spawned our current climate problems?" (12). His answer is a qualified "yes," and is accompanied, thankfully, by a series of recommendations for how best to proceed. Here he draws on the work of Lorraine Code, who advises

questioning the hegemony of science, and Amanda Boetzkes, who posits that eco art can demonstrate "the earth's ultimate unavailability to human perception" (13). The author reveals that Olafur Eliasson's 2003 installation *The weather project* inspired his interest in eco art, and that he included Eliasson in his 2018/19 exhibition "Ecologies of Landscape" in Toronto, which—like *Landscape into Eco Art*—investigated the ways in which artists can engage with the Earth during the Anthropocene. This chapter lays the groundwork for the rest of the book, explaining why landscape and eco art should be considered together.

In chapter two, "Beyond Suspicion: Why (Not) Landscape?," Cheetham makes his case for considering land art and eco art as part of the same tradition as landscape. In doing so, he offers two case studies. The first, "Earth-Death Pictures," discusses Rúri's *Archive: Endangered Waters*, which documents our historical moment of ecological catastrophe in such a way that both our relationship to waterfalls and their independence of us are made visible. The second, "Indigenous Landscapes," takes up the work of Kent Monkman and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, who each employ unique strategies for counteracting colonial appropriation of land and imperial constructions of landscape as empty.

Chapter three, "Remote Control: Siting Land Art and Eco Art," moves from landscape to the land art of the 1960s and '70s, and discusses qualities of remoteness and ephemerality in several works. Its first case study discusses Michael Heizer's *Levitated Mass*, which, in comparison to many of the stunning works of eco art detailed throughout this book, feels unconvincing as a prompt for deeper consideration of our relationships with the

earth. This is perhaps due to the fact that it, in Cheetham's words, "largely sidesteps questions about how and where we understand the concept of nature these days" (111). In comparison, Roni Horn's *Vatnasafn / Library of Water*, the subject of the second case study, is overtly political, drawing a firm connection between Iceland's human inhabitants and their weather. The Library of Water remains to this day a site for artist residencies and community collaboration. The author's transposition of these two case studies informs his broader question about the qualities of an ecological art that serves a proactive environmental purpose.

The two final chapters question in greater depth the use of eco art strategies for the consideration of human interactions with nature. In chapter four, "Contracted Fields," Cheetham investigates instances where "nature" is brought inside the gallery. His case study for this chapter, "Bringing Nature In; the Camera Obscura in Land and Eco Art," argues for the illusory nature of the border between interior and exterior. According to Cheetham, when it comes to eco art, "much of this work truly is in two places at once, or hovers across this liminal zone" (156). Chapter five, "Bordering the Ubiquitous: The Art of Local and Global Ecologies," features two final case studies: "The Crystal Interface" and "The Emotional Life of Water." Here Cheetham analyzes the role of crystals in eco art and employs new materialism and affect theory to bring him to the culmination of this study: the question, what can artists concerned with climate change and ecological collapse do to effect material change? In other words: does eco art matter?

As a newcomer to the study of art history, I was captivated by this book. While

theoretically dense and in dialogue with an extensive body of existing scholarship, *Landscape into Eco Art* welcomes the reader into the topic and inspires further investigation of its themes. There are just enough beautiful photographs reproduced within to give the reader an understanding of the pieces being discussed, just few enough to spark a thirst for more. While by no means limited to Canadian artists and works, Cheetham examines a very generous array of Canadian subjects; throughout, he engages thoughtfully with the ongoing legacies of colonialism and imperialism in these art histories. Cheetham describes his project as "an inquiry into how eco artists mobilize what they perceive as their artistic responsibility to landscape and the earth" (73). It also convincingly argues the importance of understanding the interrelations between landscape, land art, and eco art.

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