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Environmental Art and Activism: Editors' Notebook

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*Environmental Art and Activism:
Editors' Notebook*



Olafur Eliasson. *Ice Watch*, Place du Panthéon, Paris, 2015.

You might remember Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* art installation in the Place du Panthéon in Paris during the 2015 climate summit. The ice blocks that Eliasson positioned in the shape of a clock and allowed to melt generated visceral responses and affect in observers in Paris and around the world. As Alexandre Melay writes in his article on Eliasson's installation in this issue, "L'expérience était bouleversante. Impuissant, le visiteur assistait au réchauffement climatique et à la mort de l'Arctique en direct" (7). Reflecting on Eliasson's installation, our

sense of horror that even this small amount of already-threatened glacial ice was intentionally melted reinforced the message of this environmental activist art: as youth climate activist Greta Thunberg has so impactfully reminded us, we ought to feel this horror “every day,” to feel “as if the house was on fire, because it is.”

In our discussions last year, *The Goose*'s editorial team planned to devote an issue to environmental activist art. We shared an academic interest in this topic and an appreciation of activist-artists like Eliasson, who often face precarious situations to protect land and water and challenge environmental injustices, while also negotiating the politics of representation, performance, commodification, celebrity, and complicity. We sent out a call for submissions for a themed issue designed to showcase and discuss activist art and to contemplate the roles that artists play in environmental justice movements.

We received an impressive set of essays, poems, and book reviews that engage with this theme. Looking at the submissions, however, we found ourselves wondering about the contributors' claims that the cultural texts they study or produce either are or are not activist. Engaging with these texts as editors, we gained a deeper understanding of the complexity involved in creating and studying activist art. We became increasingly attentive to the many different ways of linking art and activism—e.g. art as activism, art as inspiration for activism, art as compatible with activism, art as distraction from activism, art as supplement to activism. We were also reminded that there is no clear line that separates environmental activist art from other environmental art, and that drawing such distinctions often amounts to the narrowing of our understanding of what art is for or to the depoliticization of works deemed not activist enough.

In *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*, Nicole Seymour writes that ecocritics have “tended to take an instrumentalist approach to environmental art That is, they have regularly evaluated cultural texts on their capacity to inculcate ‘proper’ environmentalist feelings—often reverence, love, and wonder—educate the public, incite quantifiable environmental activism, or even solve environmental problems” (26). An instrumentalist approach is especially common when it comes to environmental art that is described—either by the artist or by others—as activist. Indeed, in his foundational work on writer-activism, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon describes writer-activists as those “who have deployed their imaginative agility and worldly ardor to help amplify the media-marginalized causes of the environmentally dispossessed” (5). For Nixon, the vocation of such authors is to “educate the public” (to borrow Seymour's phrase) by drawing attention to oft-ignored environmental harms.

As Delia Byrnes notes in her review of *Bad Environmentalism* in this issue, “Seymour adopts a distinctly *non*-instrumental approach as she engages environmental art as metacritique, catharsis, and cultural diagnosis rather than solely as prescription” (2-3). While we remain excited about the potential role of art in social and ecological change, we agree with Seymour's argument that there is more to environmental art than its instrumentalist uses. If environmental art is more than only a tool for environmental activism, what else might it be or

do? We propose to keep this question open. We suggest that while this issue began with an explicit focus on activist art it may be read more expansively as reflections on and illustrations of the various and complicated relationships between art and activism.

The articles in this issue take up a range of examples of and positions for environmental art, beginning with Melay's article on Eliasson's *Ice Watch*, "Esthétique environnementale : art, écologie et politique." French editor Julien Defraeye offers this introduction to the issue for French readers and a summary of Melay's article:

La revue *The Goose* s'intéresse dans son numéro 17.2 à la question de l'art et de l'activisme environnemental, qui jouent conjointement un rôle essentiel dans la représentation et l'articulation des inquiétudes quant à l'avenir de notre planète. L'article d'Alexandre Melay « Esthétique environnementale : art, écologie et politique » se penche sur le travail de l'artiste islandais danois Olafur Eliasson, notamment sur l'installation éphémère *Ice Watch* (2015), horloge composée de douze blocs de glace sur la place du Panthéon, pendant la conférence de Paris sur le climat. *The Goose* vous invite dans ce numéro à réfléchir sur le rôle décisif joué par ces artistes engagés dans l'activisme environnemental.

In "Writer as Activist, Activist as Writer," Marybeth Holleman enumerates some principles for a writer-activist and argues that writing and literature can spur activism, can exist in tension with more concrete action, and can be forms of action in themselves. Ecologist Aaron M. Ellison and artist David Buckley Borden draw on lessons from their collaboration on two art installations to reflect on the relationship between reflection and action in their essay "Ecological Art: Art with a Purpose." Is art meant to be "aesthetic, communicative, provocative, or a call to action" (12)? Instead of making a claim that any of these is its sole purpose or meaning, Ellison and Buckley Borden conclude that ecological art can combine all of these elements. In "Upstream Downtown: Theatre Creation through a Feminist and Multispecies Lens," Morgan Johnson and Alexandra Simpson use their play *Upstream Downtown* to consider the potential of feminist multispecies performance to model different ways of knowing and of world-making across species.

Poetry editor Emily McGiffin has curated an activist-themed poetry section for this issue. She offers this introduction to the poems:

Lois Beardslee's "Cranberry Picking Season" beautifully depicts the nurturing work of Folded-over Woman, whose strong, feminist activism responds to the social and environmental ills that have disrupted her seasonal tasks. In "Conservation," Laurie D. Graham explores the border territory between activism and grief and the difficulty of effecting real change. A similar theme is explored by Rob B. Budde and Andrea L. Nicki, whose poems depict the engaged activism of blockades and protests and the communal strength they express. Memona Hossain laments the displacement of silence from contemporary urban life and points to the feelings of fear and anxiety that have led us to betray it. Finally, Natalie Joelle's "lawgleaning" explores the subversive act of reclaiming food waste and its ethics of environmental care and economic independence.

The cover image for this issue, a poster by Lindsey Davis, uses image and text to stress the intertwined fate of humanity and forests and to advocate that to “save humanity” we must also “save the trees.” See Davis’s two posters and her artist’s statement under the “Visual Art” category.

Our book reviews section, assigned by David Carruthers and edited by Alec Follett, is international in scope and ranges across creative genres and fields of study. The reviews align with the activist theme and serve as a way to become acquainted not only with the books under review but also with ongoing practices and discussions of environmental art and activism. For example, Angie Abdou writes of Patrik Sampler’s characters in *The Ocean Container* that “they wait for the right time to take action and for some clear sign of what that action might be. They wait and wait and wait, until it is too late” (2). David Shaw considers the tension between action and inaction in his review of *Anthropocene* by Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal, and Nicholas De Pencier, whom he sees as “concerned advocates” and “awestruck observers” (2). Through her reading of Sarah M. Pike’s reframing of the actions of environmental activists as ritual in *For the Wild*, Alda Balthrop-Lewis advocates that the study of religion can help scholars better understand environmental activism.

We would like to thank the artists and critics who contributed to this themed issue on art and activism, which we are excited to share with our readers. Thanks also to our editorial team, directeur du contenu francophone (French editor) Julien Defraeye, poetry editor Emily McGiffin, and copy editors David R. Anderson, Jenna Gersie, and Nathan TeBokkel, for the care and attention they brought to issue 17.2. We also want to thank our former book reviews editor David Carruthers and our former copy editor Joseph Maslen for their service. Congratulations and best wishes to our co-editor Amanda Di Battista and family on the birth of Nathaniel in February.

As the official publication of ALECC (Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada / L’Association pour la littérature, l’environnement et la culture au Canada), we also wish to direct our readers to the Spring 2019 ALECC newsletter for updates on the organization and its members: <https://alecc.ca/newsletter/>.

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