

# Ecology, Aesthetics and Everyday Cultures of Modernity

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A Workshop at the Käte Hamburger Research Centre global dis:connect

## Book of Abstracts

*(in order of presentation)*

### Keynote

*David Whitley*

### **Animated Lives: Modes of Understanding the Changing Environment?**

‘Time is the school in which we learn,  
Time is the fire in which we burn’

The resonance of the American poet, Delmore Schwartz’s epigrammatic couplet has perhaps never been more apparent than in our current period of ecological crisis. This opening talk explores two moments in time, some 60 years apart, whose concerns are reflected upon in popular works of art. My aim is to characterize some of the archetypal forms in which our ecological consciousness is embodied, together with the aesthetic challenges these pose; my hope is that the twin exemplars that emerge will serve as touchstones for the varied thinking, from multiple perspectives, that we will do collectively over the two days of the symposium. I will be focusing primarily on two animated films from the Disney/Pixar stable that raise particularly interesting questions about relationships between ecology, aesthetics and the everyday cultures of modernity. *Bambi* (1942) embodies key elements the ethics of conservation, particularly as these were conceived in the mid-twentieth century. Together with the novel by Felix Salter on which it was loosely based, it also shows how the legacy of Romanticism has been refracted in popular art. *WALL\*E* (2008) explores the crisis of consumption that is so central to our ecological consciousness in the late Anthropocene. Beyond their archetypal narratives, however, I suggest that the aesthetic challenges encountered in each of these films exemplify central issues in the way ecological thought has evolved over time within our everyday global cultures.

## Panel 1: The Language of Plants

*Sarah J. Moore*

### **Trees Speaking Slowly in Manhattan: *Time Landscape* and Ecological Aesthetics**

In 1978, a rectangular plot in the lower east side of New York City was transformed into a slowly developing forest that sought to recreate the sylvan landscape of Manhattan inhabited by Indigenous North Americans and encountered by European settlers in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Conceived by Alan Sonfist, following research on precolonial botany, geology, and history, *Time Landscape* was initially planned to represent distinct stages of forest grown. However, it quickly lost its crisp boundaries between grasses, saplings, and grown trees and is now, 45-years since its planting, a verdant forest in miniature. In contrast to monumental earthworks from the same era that involved rapid transformations of often remote sites—Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970—Sonfist employed the slow process of time and agency of regional flora as his media within a dense urban setting. Evoking seed banks of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that collected nearly extinct flora to preserve nature for future generations, and the work of artists of the time who sought to capture a landscape that was rapidly receding, *Time Landscape* addresses a complex and uncertain future and questions of sustainability. Conceived not as a discrete place or object but as the slow agency of trees, *Time Landscape* blurs the boundaries between materiality—the miniature forest itself—and its production. Neither land nor landscape, it is an in-between formation of material mobility and non-hierarchic scatter. *Time Landscape* is an unruly site that fidgets, its materiality moving in and out of human controlled system as the trees speak, slowly.

*Vera-Simone Schulz*

### **Picturing Plants: Ecologies, Aesthetics, and the Deceitful Display of Tropical Falsehoods**

Art history has been increasingly dealing with issues related to the environment and the Anthropocene in recent years, forming part of the environmental humanities, and plants have found much renewed scholarly attention in art historical scholarship. Even more, however, plants have come to play key roles in the art world. This paper focuses on four case studies and contemporary art projects from Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Puerto Rico in which plants take center stage. It interrogates how contemporary artists drew on plants to discuss colonial layers, and complex intersections between the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial. It investigates the ways how plants have been used by artists to investigate the stratigraphies of the everyday cultures of modernity, but also how their deceitful display by colonial powers has been negotiated in these works, revealing the toxicity and tropical falsehoods of colonial regimes and coloniality that is on-going, while also pointing at possible futures.

## Panel 2: Geopolitical Aesthetics

*Nicolas Holt*

### **Fertile Media and Mineral Matters**

Throughout the early-1970s, Chilean media artist Juan Downey (1940-1993) produced a series of ecological installations, often inside his New York City loft, that all shared a common component: their dirt. More specifically, these installations, many of which featured living plants, had their soil suffused with a natural nitrate fertilizer only found in Chile's Atacama Desert. Downey saw this fertilizer not just as a more environmentally-sound alternative to its synthetic counterparts—which were then (and are) radically disrupting the planet's nitrogen cycle—but also a boon to the Chilean economy—itsself disrupted by increasing United States Cold War interventionism. While as everyday as the dirt beneath our feet, Downey recognized how this fertilizer entangles planetary processes of regeneration with transnational economies of resource extraction. Such entanglements are definitive of the present geological epoch called the Anthropocene, and in this context Downey's work is instructive, if understudied. By exploring Downey's early-1970s ecological installations alongside the (geo)history of Chilean nitrate fertilizer, this presentation tries to deepen our understanding of the relations between the artist's environmental aesthetics and this everyday agricultural product. At base, this presentation will crisscross contemporary art history, media studies, and the environmental humanities to clarify how Downey's use of Chilean nitrate fertilizer reveals a *mineral media*—an earthen material uniquely capable holding within its orbit conflicting geopolitical forces, biospheric processes, and locales as distant as the artist's NYC loft and the Atacama.

*Ananya Mishra*

### **Salu Majhi's Kashipur, Ten Years On: Reflections on an ongoing Audiovisual Archive**

Since 2017, Arna Majhi and I have been archiving Kui oral epics of the Kondh bard Salu Majhi from the village of Kucheipadar in southern Odisha, India. Kucheipadar was one of the primary sites of struggle against aluminum mining companies like Utkal Aluminum International Limited (UAIL), and Aditya Birla. The neighboring sites of Lanjigarh have similarly incurred industrial invasions by Vedanta. Indigenous anti-mining movements that started in the 1990s continued for more than two decades with demonstrations in Odisha, Delhi, and London. In the meanwhile, several companies have settled in the villages, radically altering the ecologies of southern Odisha, and the fabric of the Kondh, Paraja and other Indigenous communities. As a literary researcher, I have been working on the English translations of Kondh singers Bhagban Majhi, Salu Majhi and the late Dambu Praska. This paper will discuss the aesthetics of Kui song-poetry that straddles dissimilar magnitudes of temporal perceptions that the Anthropocene commands: the *dongar* (mountain) of deep geological time, and the *dongar* as capital in the history of mineral extraction. I will also share extracts from the ongoing audiovisual project, that will engage with questions of aesthetics and representation in contemporary Indigenous archiving. Reflecting on my ongoing collaboration, some questions that this paper will discuss are: what are new ways of collaborative archival work between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in contexts of endangered song cultures? How to reimagine audiovisual aesthetics where Indigenous voice and the representation of Indigeneity in dominant Indian and Anglo-European centers does not invite/ reinvent stereotypes of the colonial gaze?

### Panel 3: Of Form and Feeling

*Nathalie Kerschen*

#### **Expressing Nature: On Character, Earth Materials and Eco-Phenomenology in Architectural Design**

In my thesis, “Reclaiming Nature in Computational Architectural Design: From Biology to Phenomenology” (2022), I demonstrated that scientific accounts of nature, serving as models to generate complex materials and forms computationally, remain insufficient to move viewers emotionally and intellectually towards more climate-friendly designs. Further, I showed that artworks and architectural projects, such as Olafur Eliasson’s competition project for the Ililussat Iceford (2016) or Diller & Scofidio’s The Blur Building (2003), proved more successful at reviving humans’ relationship with nature. Since they “express” rather than “represent” (Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier, 1997) nature using earth materials, they frame that which remains often unaccounted for architecturally: the embodied, that is, lived experience of ice or fog. To conceptualize these projects, I turned toward recent discussions in enaction (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012) and eco-phenomenology. This philosophical attempt at engaging with the “experience of nature” through the “nature of experience” (Toadvine, 2015) can be traced to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “empathy” (*Einfühlung*, 2003). In the context of this workshop, I would like to expand on this theoretical framework by reading it against the backdrop of the late 18<sup>th</sup>/ early 19<sup>th</sup> Century architecture of Etienne-Louis Boullée. Using metaphorical language and geometry to symbolically convey a building’s “character,” his “architectures [of] atmosphere or mood” (Perez-Gomez, 2016) are reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup>/ 20<sup>th</sup> Century discussions in aesthetics on *Einfühlung* (Mallgrave, 2013). Although Boullée’s conception of nature certainly differed from contemporary ones, the question rises whether his large-scale projects’ *drawn expression* of nature anticipated what I call current eco-phenomenological trends in the arts and architecture, ones which enable viewers to *feel into* nature synaesthetically instead of solely contemplating at it from a (technological) distance.

*Jane Boddy*

#### **Form-feeling and the Aesthetics of Nature around 1900**

This talk investigates the relationship between perception, feeling, and nature in the art discourse around 1900. In particular, I examine German speaking authors who (1) shared a psychological impulse in developing a notion of perception/feeling that was universal in scope—that is, encompassing everyone, at least principally—and (2) for whom landscape and natural forms were considered as a beginning of the ability to see/feel. The presupposition that natural forms lie at the basis of seeing/feeling will be investigated, which was responsible for arguments emphasizing both human sameness and difference. I will proceed in two steps. *First*, I examine at how the designer August Endell devised a notion of perception/feeling that would eliminate any interpersonal difference. He did not want people’s emotive responses to form to just appear the same on the surface; rather, he tried to eliminate even hidden variation by ensuring that in perception, underlying physiological processes are the same among persons. This starts, according to him, with attentiveness to the beauty of natural forms. *Second*, I then consider how this notion was counterbalanced by a teleology in the course of which it was possible to differentiate and categorize people on account of their visual/experiential habits. Referring to the writings of Oskar Hagen, among others, I will discuss how an ecological notion of vision was perfectly suitable for nationalistic, racial arguments in ways that enshrine and naturalize forms of seeing/feeling.

#### Panel 4: Between the Known and Unknown

*Jutta Teutenberg*

#### **I Have Virtually the Same Hands He Had: Experimental Prehistory and the Changing Idea of Human Origins in the Visual History of Prehistoric Man around 1900**

The hand axe is a symbol of man's ability to handle and to change things quickly (Osbert G. S. Crawford). It emancipated itself in the 19th century from a natural to a cultural object, from a geofact to a manufact. But how and why? Prehistoric objects were not exclusively created 10,000s of years ago, but also in the 19th and early 20th centuries, because the study of prehistory increasingly included the imitation of prehistoric manners and customs. I will present various researchers (Max Verworn, Frank Hammilton Cushing, Marjorie Quennell) who did experimental prehistoric research, produced and used hand axes in the 19th century. The reasons for these praxeological attempts are extremely varied: they often wanted to explore the intelligence of prehistoric man, but also the complexity of manufacturing. This reenactment of the production and use of aesthetic everyday objects of prehistoric times around 1900 also created parallels to indigenous Americans, Africans and Australians whose everyday practices were declared by researchers, like John Lubbock, to be those of prehistoric man. The researchers were forced to think and decide about the unity and diversity of man. The hand axe was then on the edge: made by nature or man? Changing environment or culture - in Europe or even worldwide?

*Magdalena Grüner*

#### **Abyssal Visions: The Science/Fictions of the Bermuda Oceanographic Expeditions (1929-1934)**

*Beauty Flashes in a World of Eternal Night* and *Giants of the Deep Greet the Bathysphere* are the intriguing titles of two gouaches painted by artist Else Bostelmann for the December 1934 issue of the *National Geographic Magazine*. The accompanying article, written by ecologist and deep-sea explorer William Beebe, recounts the events of the latest season of the *Bermuda Oceanographic Expeditions*. Bostelmann's images invoke Beebe's sightings of abyssal fish from the so-called *Bathysphere* – a hollow steel ball with three portholes – lowered from a barge on the open ocean, half a mile into the depths of the sea. Between 1930 and 1934, the Bathysphere would descend a total of thirty-seven times, providing first-hand glimpses of the (nearly) lightless expanses of the deep-sea for the first time in history. During the dives, Beebe communicated via telephone with his associate Gloria Hollister, who stenographically noted his descriptions while sitting on deck of the mother ship. These notes in turn saved as the basis for Bostelmann's renderings of deep-sea creatures. Consequentially, the artist herself had never seen the organisms she painted; nevertheless, they were supposed to serve as preliminary specimens for the description and naming of new species. I want to center my paper around these images and ask: how was ecological knowledge produced about a place as physically, epistemically, and aesthetically inaccessible as the deep sea? How are scientific facts produced for – and perhaps with – the audience of the *National Geographic Magazine*? What is the role of visual objects in this process?

## Panel 5: The Limits and Edges of Perception

*Jonas Dahm*

### **How to Listen in on Posthuman Becomings?**

When interviewing the musician Cosmo Sheldrake for a radio feature I produced in 2021 about his Album “Wake Up Calls” – composed of the sounds of endangered British birds – Sheldrake told me that he tried to let the “Birds take the Centerstage”. Yet, he ultimately felt it impossible to really leave his anthropocentric position. Listening through his seven years of recording and editing the birds present in the album however, a process of decentring the human composer and centering the birds sonic agency seems audible. Looking at this and other examples from the field, I want to explore the impossibilities and differences as making audible the disconnections and possible entanglements of human and non-human aesthetics. In relation to western epistemological traditions, this might offer situated and embodied ways of questioning dualistic societal natural relations. Exploring their production, I ask in what concrete ways music and sound art may attempt to produce posthuman becomings in locally situated ways while facing global challenges such as the so-called Anthropocene.

*Jessie Elizabeth Alperin*

### **Viewing the Earth from Above: Imagining Ecological Seeing in Odilon Redon’s *Le paravent rouge***

This paper focuses on Odilon Redon’s symbolist, decorative object *Le Paravent Rouge*. Created between 1906-1908 for the home of the Dutch art collector Andries Bongers, *Le Paravent Rouge* is one of Redon’s last works — made when he was creating many decorative screens of marine life and flowers. In contrast to his other works, *Le Paravent Rouge* has been neglected by scholars; perhaps, due to its extreme abstraction and strange perspective hovering above ambiguous, yet clearly ecological phenomena. This paper argues that *Le paravent rouge* collapses a series of environments, ranging from the deep sea, the geological formations of the earth, and the celestial atmosphere within the boundaries of both the screen and its surrounding domestic space. The folding screen itself is inherently an environmental object as the screen mediates space just as space mediates one’s experience with the screen. The process of folding and unfolding transforms the image from a stable object into a work of intimate interaction and investigation. Thus, the work does not assert a total nor immutable view of the universe, but one that is always in process of reflection filled with mystery and uncertainty, provoking more questions than answers. I argue that Redon’s screen presents an extreme sense of disorientation and dislocation. The screen’s perspective appears to be viewing the earth from directly above. Timothy Morton aptly writes that it is “the *impossible* viewpoint that is the cornerstone of ecological thought.” This paper takes Morton’s claim seriously within the context of turn-of-the-century decorative arts and Redon’s impossible view of the Earth from above and at a reflexive distance. Redon’s method of creation falls under what I term “imaginative ecological seeing” in that he transforms an observation of nature into an imaginative perception of an ecological relationality or environmental ideas to make the original observation even more palpable and evocative of what lies beyond human perception.

## Panel 6: The Prism of Pastoral

*Mibir Kumar Jha*

### **Plateau, Picturesque: The Pastoral Configuration of India's Chhotanagpur Plateau in Colonial Literature**

The postcolonial, ecocritical and spatial turns in literary criticism have renewed the interest in the pastoral. Not only does the pastoral exist as a genre that illustrates man's interactions with nature, it also functions as a buffer between wilderness and civilization. While substantial scholarship on the pastoral has emerged in recent times from countries which were once settler-colonies, in postcolonial nations like India, inquiries pertaining to the pastoral, its relevance and impacts have been limited. In the locodescriptive narratives of the Chhotanagpur Plateau in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, two processes appear to be at play. On the one hand, there is [colonial] civilization, marching into the region through industrial-scale mining, infrastructural development, expansion of agriculture and Christian proselytization, whereas on the other is a certain 'pastoralizing tendency', one that accords affective, recreational and moral values to the native landscape through an imagination which remains distinctively British. This paper, through a close reading of Maria Mitchell's memoir *A Missionary's Wife Among the Wild Tribes of South Bengal* (1871), argues that the pastoralization of the Chhotanagpur Plateau follows closely at the heels of both the region and its indigenous peoples' 'civilization'. At a time when Industrial Revolution in Britain had begun to threaten the country's old pastoral order, in India's Chhotanagpur, modernity enabled the colonizers to access a formerly 'wild' terrain and ideologically construct it as a pastoral space. This pastoral spatialization had lasting impacts as it altered both the landscape of the plateau as well as the cultural identity of proselytized natives.

*Senne Schraeyen*

### **Counteracting the Polluted and the Pastoral: Roger Raveel's Attempts towards an Engaged Aesthetics of Complexity**

This paper presents a close-reading on the Belgian artist Roger Raveel. I focus on the conception of his artistic style *de Nieuwe Visie* (the New Vision) by contextualizing it in the late sixties and mid-seventies. By exploring the question: *how did de Nieuwe Visie contest outdated Nature values?*, we discover how Raveel aimed to move audiences towards an ecological view on daily life. With vibrant assemblage paintings and incorporating his philosophical concept of the square as communicating everything-and-nothing *de Nieuwe Visie* served as an ontological tool to register the contemporary ecological complexity of his rural residence Machelen-aan-de-Leie. It focused on communicating the tension and interactions between the things of nature and contemporary culture. First, I focus on *de Nieuwe Visie* as a counteraction to artistic traditions. The influential *Latemse Schools* conceived a pastoral imago of Raveel's residence, the Leie-area, by depicting it as a premodern space that omits modernism. Raveel contested this legacy with the ideology of the contemporary villager that embraces modern, consumerist objects. Second, I focus on the dissemination of his ecological identity through his art. As someone focusing on complexity, Raveel contested the reductionist political view on the landscape to a facilitator for wealth upheld by the Belgian government. As countercultures started to call for an holistic approach, Raveel increasingly promoted his visual language as a new outlook on life. For this, we look at his contribution to an environmental protest happening. By associating his works with this, Raveel adds a temporal ideological layer to his practice.

## Panel 7: Ice Tales

*Oliver Aas*

### **Arctic in the Expanded Field**

Not since the heyday of the Arctic explorations have the polar regions received as much attention as they do now in the context of anthropogenic climate change and glacial dissolution. Yet the figure of the Arctic, often taken at its mimetic value, has largely gone uninterrogated. That is to say, how and why the Arctic is deployed still needs to be unpacked. The question of Arctic dissolution, however, probes a representational problem. In its figurative elusiveness, we might ask, how does melting become legible in the culture writ large? In search of answers, this paper looks at several recent examples and contexts, from Russian politics to contemporary art (Olafur Eliasson, in particular), that deploy the Arctic melting to convey a political message. More specifically, it looks at how the Arctic becomes an occasion for entirely different projections of the future. And, through a close reading of contemporary cultural texts (understood in the broadest sense), this paper argues that melting—the material aesthetic movement from solid (ice) to liquid (water)—has become the elemental if not narrative record of our time. This paper pays particular attention to the problem of form.

*Kaila Howell*

### **Romantic Discord: A Reading of Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice***

Historically, Romantic studies have typically emphasized the theme of harmony between humanity and the natural environment. Focusing on evidence drawn from across Romantic literature and art, scholars have singled out Romanticism as a wellspring of proto- environmentalist ideas. In the face of rising industrialization and a growing detachment from the natural world, the Romantics offer a positive model for rethinking the relationship between human civilization and nature. In opposition to such a view, this paper engages the topic of ecological discord in Romantic art. Through a close reading of Caspar David Friedrich's well-known painting, *The Sea of Ice*, it considers how Romanticism has also offered paradigms for imagining an essential incompatibility between human and non-human orders. By superimposing disjunctive spatial and temporal regimes, Friedrich's painting probes the limits of representation, challenging an allegedly Romantic ideal of unity between nature and culture. Produced during a period of unchecked territorial expansion and ecological imperialism— fueled in part by a mythos of geographical tabula rasa— Friedrich's painting offers a competing narrative of inaccessibility and contraction. Finally, this paper situates Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, often read as a work of proto-abstraction, within a discourse of form and formlessness. In tandem with its project of resisting representation, Friedrich's painting challenges the order of the aesthetic, refusing the transformation of matter into image and asserting a counter-regime of discordance.