

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Gillen D'Arcy Wood

book review of

Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene in Nineteenth-Century Art and Visual Culture edited by Maura Coughlin and Emily Gephart

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 19, no. 2 (Autumn 2020)

Citation: Gillen D'Arcy Wood, book review of *Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene in Nineteenth-Century Art and Visual Culture* edited by Maura Coughlin and Emily Gephart, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 19, no. 2 (Autumn 2020), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2020.19.2.12>.

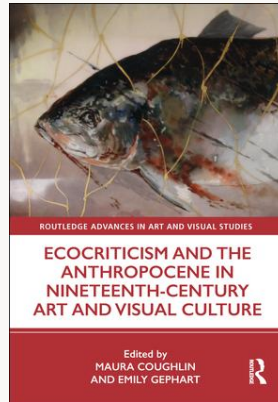
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).



Maura Coughlin and Emily Gephart, eds.,
Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene in Nineteenth-Century Art and Visual Culture.
New York: Routledge, 2020.
265 pp.; 52 illus.; bibliography; notes; index.
ISBN: 978-0367-18028-7

In his *Six Lectures on Light* (1885), John Tyndall explained that the “natural” blue appearance of the sky was the consequence of diffraction—light waves reflecting unevenly against particles suspended in the atmosphere, *bending around* obstacles in their path. In her new materialist manifesto *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Jane Bennett promoted diffraction as a mode of critique, one that avoids binary thinking and seeks out oblique pathways. So-called diffractive reading characterizes many of the best essays collected in this new Routledge volume, which eschews the traditional nineteenth-century art historical narratives—based on artistic movements, genres, styles, etc.—in favor of a rough, even random, assemblage. Adapting Ruskin’s famous account of Turner’s skies in “Of Truth of Skies,” Polly Gould in her essay “Ruskin’s Storm-Cloud and Tyndall’s Blue Sky: New Materialist Diffractions of Nineteenth-Century Atmospheres” defines diffractive reading as “looking through” rather than at objects (117). *Looking through* Victorian-era objects—from landscape paintings, to luxury dinnerware, to bird hats—the essayists in this volume find various oblique paths to an ecocritical horizon only just coming into view in period art historical scholarship.

As the title of the volume suggests (but which the introduction only tentatively elaborates upon), both ecocriticism and the nineteenth century stand in a somewhat diffractive relationship to the Anthropocene, the emergent critical frame that threatens to displace all historical periodization as we have known it, and even render ecocriticism itself an outmoded term. Perhaps the field itself has arrived too late to ecocriticism to ponder both its implications and eclipse all at once. As editors Maura Coughlin and Emily Gephart acknowledge, while contemporary art has fostered “new dialogues about living in the Anthropocene . . . the field of nineteenth-century global art history has not seen as much of a focus on either the ecological agency of the image or the material ecology of artmaking” (5). The essays energetically redress this deficit, even if the greater challenge of systematically “visualizing the Anthropocene,” as Nicholas Mirzoeff has nominated it, is reserved for future work inspired by this volume. For the present, the crowd of heavyweight nouns competing for space in the book’s title—“Ecocriticism,” “The Anthropocene,” “Nineteenth-Century,”

“Art,” “Visual Culture”—are symptomatic of a field in transition, unsure of its proper objects, even as it bends diffractively around and through them.

Alert to these problems of critical framing, and the heterogeneous nature of the contributions, Coughlin and Gephart helpfully divide the nineteen essays into five groups, with a short preface to each section as supplement to the volume introduction. The first group, headed “Political Ecologies,” includes essays on Civil War art in reference, open or implied, to slavery and the global cotton market; on the colonial application of Arts and Crafts iconography to bio-invasive horticulture in New Zealand; an “ecolonial reassessment” of Indian artifact collecting in the aftermath of dispossession and genocide (49); and popular art celebrating nature’s conquest in the form of the Panama Canal. All four essays depict a nineteenth-century world of extraordinary environmental upheaval and devastation. In the United States, indigenous peoples and native fauna are systematically exterminated, millions of acres cleared for cotton farming and enslavement, then further millions of trees and animals sacrificed in a war to end the plantation system. Abroad, the ecological imprint of “Little Europes” is no less violent, with New Zealand and Panama transformed, in the course of a few generations, from forbidding “wilderness” into productive, comfortable habitats for white overseers of the emerging global economy.

The second group of four essays, titled “Material Ecologies,” opens with a fascinating essay by Laura Turner Igoe, “A Gruesome Sight’: Randolph Roger’s *Nydia* in a Marble World,” on the popular Victorian sculptural subject *Nydia*, the so-called “blind flower girl of Pompeii.” *Nydia*’s journey from the pages of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s 1834 pop-historical sensation *The Last Days of Pompeii*, to the industrialized marble quarries of Carrara, thence to adorn the parlors of the dilettanti across the transatlantic metropole itself marks an exemplary nineteenth-century crossing between text and image, public and private, and labor and luxury. More than that, Igoe argues, Randolph Rogers’ popular sculpture, reproduced by the dozens, offers an opportunity to “reconnect aesthetic objects like *Nydia* with their chains of production” (83), a course that ultimately brings us full circle from the Vesuvian ash cloud of Bulwer-Lytton’s novel to the dust-choked quarries of Carrara, where hundreds of workers died and sickened annually to supply international art collectors with its distinctive blue-veined marble, in this case taking the barely believable shape of a pristine white slave girl. Igoe’s analysis—which marries traditional art criticism, economic materialism, and environmental history—demonstrates the power of the new ecocritical art history, embodied in this volume, to generate revelatory and original narratives, presenting to our view a global, *material* nineteenth century heretofore unimagined.

The volume’s subjects—purveyors and critics of art—seem equally divided between nature fantasists and ecological doomsday prophets. Randolph Rogers, creator of *Nydia*, falls squarely in the former camp, as does the popular George Henry Durrie, with his sentimental depictions of antebellum New England in winter. The ever-present snow of Durrie’s village-scapes, argues George Philip LeBourdais in “Cryoscapes: Snow and Fantasies of Freezing in the Art of George Henry Durrie,” “operates as a seal that protects families from the threats multiplying beyond their walls” (96). This packaged typology of the New England environment, riven with human desires, connects directly to Yankee nostalgia, and sells like hotcakes. By contrast, the remaining contributions to Part 2 deal with ecological viewpoints closer to our own. John Ruskin’s particulate “storm clouds” and the apocalyptic coalfields of

Belgian artists Constantin Meunier and Maximilien Luce, marginal in their own time, now appear to us more as the “true” record of the nineteenth century—visualizations of the Anthropocene too long obscured, in the art historical canon, by dazzling society portraits and the waterlilies of Monet.

The essays of Part 3 are likewise concerned with the nature/ecology split: how romanticisms of nature in the nineteenth century sit side-by-side, or more often enable, the ecocidal trajectories of colonialism and wholesale monetization of global resources. The 1890s “wild life” photography of George Shiras sentimentalized deer, while celebrating the indiscriminate slaughter of wolves in Jesse Landau’s “A Better Acquaintanceship with Our Fellows of the Wild’: George Shiras and the Limits of Trap Photography.” Nothing, however, captures the ironies of the embryonic nineteenth-century conservation movement more memorably than the presidential china of Rutherford Hayes, designed by Theodore Russell Davis. As Naomi Slipp describes in “Gilded Age Dining: Eco-Anxiety, Fisheries Management, and the Presidential China of Rutherford B. Hayes,” Davis approached his charge—a celebration of American fauna—with religious zeal and a taste for the uncanny. Turkeys, fish, and crabs literally filled the plates on which they were painted, gazing back at the diner on their sacrificial flesh. The contemporary rapid decline of several Atlantic fisheries complicated these images further, however, overlaying the gustatory abundance of a presidential dinner with indices of loss—gluttony served with side orders of peculiarly Anthropocenic guilt and anxiety.

Maura Coughlin documents an equally fraught marine romance in her essay “Shifting Baselines, or Reading Art through Fish,” whereby the fishing villages of the Normandy coast, from the 1820s onward, were overrun by tourists who, in turn, craved representations of the local fisheries culture they were destroying. They snapped up sentimental coastal paintings and turned traditional fisherman’s labor, such as shrimping, into “vacation pastimes” (147). Coughlin offers a timely warning—representative of the volume as a whole—against the easy rehearsal of nature-nostalgia in our own art-historical curation of the nineteenth century, here so clearly “inadequate in our own age of biological scarcity, pollution of our oceans and the commodification and gentrifications of shorelines” (156).

Donna Haraway’s pioneer work in animal studies is a constant reference point in the volume, and nowhere more so than in Part 4, subtitled “Natural Histories/Animal Agencies.” Joan Greer’s “Visualizations of ‘Nature’: Entomology and Ecological Envisioning in the art of Willem Roelofs and Vincent van Gogh” zooms in on the neglected entomological miniatures of Dutch landscape artists traditionally celebrated for human-scaled renderings, while Emily Gephart and Michael Rossi co-author a brilliant study of bird hat fashions at the turn of the twentieth century in “How to Wear the Feather: Bird Hats and Ecocritical Aesthetics,” in which the extravagant plumage of rare birds, and even stuffed birds themselves, adorned society headgear in Paris and New York. These millinery fancies, dependent on avian mass slaughter, were justified by Darwinian commentators as evincing a common bond between human and non-human, demonstrating “a shared affinity for display—a nature which underwrote culture” (205). At the same time, these bird hat fashions, so conspicuously monstrous, rallied conservationists and single-handedly “revived the Audubon Society” (196). A rare happy ending. Annie Ronan’s “Petting Billy: Albert Laessle’s Significant Other(ness),” an odd ecocritical tale from the same period, concerns a vogue for public

animal sculpture. The celebrated bronze billy goat of Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia, a favorite of children for generations, has been recently retired, its body “dangerously thinned out [and] razor-edged” (170), a victim, like so many of Earth’s animals, of an anthropocenic “love” indistinguishable from murderous uncaring. The first live beluga whales put on display in Britain in the 1870s, the subject of Kelly Bushnell’s intriguing study “Looking at Leviathan: The First Live Cetaceans in Britain,” were similarly such victims.

The fifth and final group of essays—subtitled “Agriculture and Resource Husbandry”—like the others bears the character of a miscellany, an ecocritical cabinet of curiosities in which every item rewards attention, but no real comprehensive vision is forthcoming (despite the editors’ best efforts at theoretical framing). Caroline Gillaspie revisits the famous Tontine Coffee House of old New York in “Coffee House Slip: Ecocriticism and Global Trade in Francis Guy’s Tontine Coffee House, N.Y.C.,” which hosted the first Wall Street stock market while offering refreshments (coffee, rum, etc.) to traders massively invested in those very commodities. Shana Klein’s reading of the “Fruit Piece” still lifes of African-American Robert Duncanson in “Cultivating Fruit and Equality: The Still-Life Paintings of Robert Duncanson” is similarly interested in how commercial art of the nineteenth century disclosed the exploitative networks of trade on which the art market, and society at large, depended. Duncanson’s prominent pineapples, imported from the Caribbean to the Midwest at huge cost, congratulate the viewer/buyer on their access to a tropical cornucopia, while submerging the realities of the plantation system that provided them in an image of pure opulence, fruits literally spilling off the plate.

The volume is notable for its deliberate scarcity of canonical names, and how it eschews all discussion of the “grand march” of romantic and modern art—those artistic movements we normally associate with the nineteenth-century art-historical narrative. A real virtue of the collection accordingly lies in redirecting our gaze away from the art museum wall to the workshops, plantations, streets, parlors, and dinner tables of the nineteenth century, where visual-cultural artifacts were actively consumed and the rituals of anthropocenic domination enacted through a dizzying, emergent array of secular icons and images of the natural world.

Given all this, it’s something of a surprise for the reader to meet with John Constable near the very end. But in keeping with the diffractive ecocritical spirit of this important and surely influential collection, Kimberley Rhodes selects a minor Constable landscape from the 1820s, *Dell at Helmingham Park*, merely as a prompt to historical analysis of park aesthetics, and deer herd management in particular for her essay “A Haunch of a Countess’: John Constable and the Deer Park at Helmingham Hall.” The deer of Helmingham Park, evanescent presences in Constable’s multiple sketches and paintings of the estate, offer the lure of the wild, but are entirely domesticated in reality, imprinted by the logic of “natureculture” and the Anthropocene as clearly as if it were branded on their delightfully sketched hides.

Gillen D’Arcy Wood
Professor of Environmental Humanities
Associate Director, Institute for Sustainability, Energy, and Environment

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
Gdwood[at]illinois.edu