

T. J. DEMOS [1]



Extinction Rebellion, mural in London (2019). Photograph: Henry Nicholls/Reuters

A surge of recent art has engaged ecology in newly complex ways, including by confronting environmental injustice and social violence in aesthetically provocative forms. Consider the visual culture materializing and abetting pipeline blockades and Indigenous sovereignty struggles, including at Standing Rock in the US, with activists defending life, water, and land. Or the creative social engagements motorizing the recent campaigns to remove arms and drug dealers, petrocaptalist profiteers and climate deniers from the governing bodies of cultural institutions (including the Whitney Museum in New York, the Tate and Serpentine in London, the Louvre in Paris). Or the direct actions and social media feeds driving recent Extinction Rebellion interventions across the world, placing bodies and screens in continual interaction, as the environmental movement manifests demands to stop the destruction of ecosystems and habitats that is placing multispecies life in jeopardy.^[2]

By variously mobilizing aesthetics—which I take as the organization of sensibility in the expanded field, considered beyond the narrowly defined and institutionalized category of art—as an interventionist politics, these diverse practices approach ecology as a mode of “intersectionality.” Intersectionality insists on the inseparability between environmental matters of concern and sociopolitical and economic frameworks of *in/justice*. As a political terminology and methodological proposal, the word emerges from a long history of African-American activism, particularly around antiracist, antisexist commitments, more recently codified in the Black feminist legal theory of Kimberlé Crenshaw.^[3] It also connects to multiple struggles for decolonization, where decolonization means foremost the return of life and land to Indigenous sovereignty, but more broadly the emancipation of existence (including the mind, imagination, perception, and social relations) from generalized capitalist capture and exploitation.

Intersectional thinking refuses to divide systems of oppression (such as those tied to race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability) that overlap, and thereby challenges the essentialization of one or another term in isolation. Similarly its radical versions oppose the separatism of identity politics, in favor of solidarity across difference. While ecology isn’t generally considered within the framework of intersectionality, its political version demands it.

One might consider aesthetics (including visual culture, collective modes of embodiment, artistic experiments, screen-based media, political interventions and forms of living otherwise) as increasingly a site of intersectionality. By that I mean a place of multiplicity and relationality—comprising indissociable sociopolitical hybridity, experiential being(s)-in-relation with other non/humans, and post-internet forms of existence that are more and more blurred with screens and media. Media holds the potential not only to immerse life within capitalist virtuality (we all know this well), but also, critically, to return our awareness and sensibility (our many modes of sensing) to the more-than-human, including to environments of inequality and climates of justice. These latter include the cases when screens figure as zones beyond computer-based stimulation and simulation, where biodiverse geographies, such as the forest and the sea, as much as urban spaces and infrastructure, provide so many screens of politico-ecological experience and potential transformation. A leaf is a screen that registers light, as well as a cybernetic element in a larger complex system. Sensing is and becomes a multispecies affair: biosemiotic and techno-organic, relational and structural. Media *represents* (producing and leaving traces of signification, as when charred trees mark a forest burn, or worms indicate healthy soil) and *lives* (actively facilitating multispecies connections, as when a flower’s color and scent attract pollinators necessary for floral regeneration).

How might experimental screens facilitate social justice and multispecies flourishing from within capitalist ruins?

The Invisible Committee writes: “All the reasons for making a revolution are there. Not one is lacking. The shipwreck of politics, the arrogance of the powerful, the reign of falsehood, the vulgarity of the wealthy, the cataclysms of industry, galloping misery, naked exploitation, ecological apocalypse—we are spared nothing, not even being informed about it all. ‘Climate: 2016 breaks a heat record!’ *Le Monde* announces, the same as almost every year now. All the reasons are there together, but it’s not the reasons that make revolutions, it’s bodies. And the bodies are in front of screens.”^[4]

How might experimental artistic practice explore, I wonder, the multiplicity of screen aesthetics in more expanded ways, where the screen is not just a consumerist surface, but a site of ecological engagement, where ecology is intersectional? (The etymology of the word “screen” is useful, once meaning protective surface and shield, but also to cut, scrutinize, and examine, before becoming associated with surfaces of virtual projection). We know that, contra the above, screens are not monolithic, monological, totalized by capital—how, consequently, can we intervene in this dominant logic so that the screen pixelates antagonism, cuts through fake news, scrutinizes inequality, embodies political intervention, generates emancipatory energies? We already know that screens are more than mere commodity objects or unappropriate tools of oppression—how might we rethink screens as political media ecology?

Ecology functions precisely as a site of indissoluble relationality that highlights, and indeed is constituted by, interaction (or better, “intra-action,” in the sense posited by Karen Barad, whose theorization within the field of feminist science studies importantly rejects the separateness and purity of originary categories, arguing instead for a political ontology of being-in-relation, drawing on the insights of quantum physics^[5]). Just as carbon pollution materializes and exacerbates differential sociopolitical impacts—and there is indeed no way to account for toxicity outside of its uneven, embodied, bioaccumulated consequences—so too does economic inequality produce unequal vulnerabilities to environmental injustices (including for the more-than-human living in sacrifice zones and areas of hazardous waste). In the human realm, those exposed to pollution, in other words, are not surprisingly those with the least financial resources.

With the silencing of issues (for instance, with the tendency of some eco-art to isolate and celebrate the nonhuman realm in an otherwise admirable effort to escape anthropocentrism; or, conversely, the important but exclusive focus on intra-human oppression in social justice art), we encounter specialized vision that has advantages, but also a limiting partitioning of the sensible, which asks for more relational work to overcome myopia, even blindness to interconnections. If not, we risk narrowing the scope of ecology, even performing epistemic violence, which can translate into the extremes of privilege and exclusion in white environmentalism, green capitalism, environmental nativism, and climate change denialism. Instead, the most compelling cultural work is that which explores and develops modes of ecology-as-intersectionality, wherein political ecology, for instance, links with Indigenous and/or queer rights activism and/or movements against police brutality, media censorship, and capitalist extraction, and where proposals for multispecies justice are inseparable from demands for economic equality, democratic inclusivity, and postanthropocentrism.

How to image and imagine these connections, materialize their mediations, sense their co-becomings, perform their emancipatory effects—in building what might be called an *insurgent multispecies universality* urgent to challenge the spread of apocalyptic extinction, capitalist extractivism, and all of their toxic social inequalities?^[6]

The sheer complexity of this mounting intersectionalist formulation—which demands that we cultivate flourishing imaginaries, mutualist practices of commonality, biodiverse forms of life, drawing as well on suppressed traditions that have long supported such goals—is perhaps overwhelming; its analysis ever incomplete, its realization continually in process. But such overwhelming complexity forms the basis of what might be called a much needed *cosmopolitics*, as in the animation and ongoing formation of new worlds—or, as the Zapatistas say, a world in which many worlds fit.^[7]

In this vein, it is crucial to comprehend “naturecultures” (a term grammatically performing the refusal of binaries, as mobilized in the work of Donna Haraway) as sites of complex and indivisible relationalities—media screens—between and within the slippery hybrid category of the non/human, where humanity itself operates according to regimes of selective inclusion and inclusive exclusion, and where practices of antiracism, social justice, antispeciesism and antisexistism co-constitute and intra-act upon and with each other in response to multiple intersecting oppressions. These also merge with more-than-human realms, environmental materialities, and life-forms that are impacted by oppression and violence in ways that are integral and cannot be separated or pulled apart without risks of essentialism, idealism, or fetishism.

In our emergency times of disastrous environmental transformation—though we must ask, whose emergency is it? Who will survive the emergency and who won’t? how can we radicalize emergency in the struggle against endless war and expanding violence?—it is nonetheless urgent to bridge aesthetics and politics, and expanding consideration of these entanglements so as to challenge white supremacy, the militarization of everyday life, creeping fascism, and apocalyptic populism, as well as mass extinction, fast and slow environmental violence, and extractive capital. These are the central ingredients of socioecological climates that differentially impact being and define the uneven exposure to toxicity, violence, and death—that means tracing the current transformations of art, too, especially where it—and its screens—resists the clutches of market-driven institutionalized forms and the mere representation of ecologies, extending into and generating new forms of life, emergent postcarbon futures, and socioecological justice.

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REFERENCES AND NOTES

[1] This revised essay was originally published as: T. J. Demos, “Ecology-as-Intra-Intersectionality,” *Bully Pulpit, Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2019), <https://doi.org/10.24926/124716839.1699>.

[2] For further examples and more discussion of these and other such conflicts, see my recent books *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2016) and *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2017).

[3] See Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (January 1, 1989), pp.139–67.

[4] The Invisible Committee, *Now*, trans. Robert Hurley (NY: semiotext(e), 2017), p. 7.

[5] See, for instance, Karen Barad, “Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-membering, and Facing the Incalculable,” *New Formations* 92 (2018), pp. 56–86.

[6] I’m building on Max Tomba’s recent book *Insurgent Universality: An Antanthropocentric Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), adding a postanthropocentric imperativity in building new—and in some ways very odd—forms of multispecies solidarity across all sorts of difference.

[7] For more on this onto-epistemological politics, see Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena, eds., *A World of Many Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

T.J. DEMOS is an award-winning writer on contemporary art, global politics, and ecology. He is Professor in the Department of the History of Art and Visual Culture, at University of California, Santa Cruz, and Founder and Director of its Center for Creative Ecologies. Demos is the author of numerous books, including *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Sternberg Press, 2017); *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Sternberg Press, 2016); *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis* (Duke University Press, 2013)—winner of the College Art Association’s 2014 Frank Jewett Mather Award—and *Return to the Postcolony: Spectres of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Sternberg Press, 2013). Demos co-curated *Rights of Nature: Art and Ecology in the Americas*, at Nottingham Contemporary in January 2015, and organized *Specters: A Ciné-Politics of Haunting*, at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid in 2014.

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