In 2007 the Miami-based artist Xavier Cortada produced *Astrid*, a small abstract painting consisting of liquid splotches of blue pigment in a grainy, grayish-white field on paper (fig. 1). The work recalls postwar expressionism of the New York School or later post-painterly abstraction, but such associations only scratch the surface of the picture’s meaning. The more we learn about the artist, his materials, and the context of production, the more we recognize this to be a work of our time, even as it gestures to the past and future. Cortada created *Astrid* at McMurdo Station, the U.S. Research Center on Ross Island, Antarctica, during a National Science Foundation Antarctic Artists and Writers Fellowship in 2006–7. The picture belongs to a series of mixed-media Ice Paintings that he produced there using ice and sediment samples from the nearby Ross Sea and Dry Valleys of West Antarctica provided by scientists studying climate change. The painting’s title, *Astrid*, refers somewhat counterintuitively to the King Leopold and Queen Astrid Coast, located far away along the eastern shore of Antarctica. According to the artist, he chose titles for works in this series “by randomly selecting the names of geographic features from a map of the continent that inspired their creation.” Randomness aside, Cortada has asserted unambiguously his environmentalist belief that human beings are “custodians of the planet who should learn to live in harmony with nature.”

Currently artist-in-residence at Florida International University, Cortada exemplifies the cultural and ecological transnationalism of the twenty-first century. In addition to producing work on commission for the White House, the World Bank, and numerous public collections in Florida, he has collaborated with artists around the world, creating eco-art projects in the Netherlands, Latvia, and Hawai’i, peace murals in Cyprus and Northern Ireland, AIDS awareness murals in Geneva and South Africa, and child welfare murals in Bolivia and Panama. Cortada is an American artist but also self-consciously a citizen of the planet. He describes his most recent series, Ancestral Journeys, a collaborative project with the National Geographic scientist Spencer Wells, as “work that uses genetic data to explore how nature influenced human migration and history,” specifically regarding the various pathways that today’s residents of the Western Hemisphere took from Africa sixty thousand years ago. His point here is that “Perceived differences among people [have] often allowed for exploitation, marginalization, segregation and alienation. Inside our DNA we carry genetic markers that prove that we share the same ancestors and are one human family.”

Returning to *Astrid* with Cortada’s eco-cultural sensibility in mind, we can better appreciate how topical nuances of meaning inflect the work’s evocation of earlier
expressionism. For one thing, the Antarctic materials and production site bring to mind recent reports of polar ice melt associated with global warming. Such reports have appeared since the 1970s, but in May 2014 Eric Rignot, a UC-Irvine glaciologist, announced at a NASA news conference: “Today we present observational evidence that a large sector of the West Antarctic ice sheet has gone into irreversible retreat. . . . It has passed the point of no return.” As a result, the world ocean level could rise as much as four feet within the next two centuries, forcing the displacement of millions of people from coastal areas around the globe.3

This may seem like a lot for one small painting to address, but Astrid does so at multiple registers. It creatively conjures the aerial maps and satellite images that scientists such as Rignot use to represent the increasingly unstable environment of Antarctica—a continent whose glacial disintegration has global consequences. Areas of white lightly stained with blue in Cortada's work metaphorically suggest continental “landmarks” like the Thwaites Ice Shelf or Pine Island Glacier Basin, which lately have begun to collapse into the ocean. Viewed in terms of materiality instead of metaphor or representation, Astrid functions as a token or specimen of a place undergoing irrevocable change wrought by human actions elsewhere—especially actions associated with Western modernity since the Industrial Revolution. As the artist informed us:

With the ice paintings, I wanted to melt the very ice that threatened to (melt and) drown my city [Miami]. The work, beautiful and serene, would be a precursor of horrors to come. . . . I melted the ice on paper to create the works, adding paint and sediment. The works were made in Antarctica, about Antarctica, using Antarctica as the medium (provided to me by the very researchers who inform us about Antarctica).4
With its expressive abstraction, Astrid recalls the heroic dynamism of American art about 1950, at the apogee of U.S. cultural modernism and military power, but its aqueous sensibility also suggests the dissolution of those human institutions amid global climate disruption—to which Americans until recently have contributed more than any other people. This interpretation takes on added significance in light of the growing scientific consensus that Earth has entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, distinguished from the preceding Holocene by the fact that humans since the nineteenth century have become the primary drivers of environmental change on a planetary scale. In describing this historic development, scientists associate the post–World War II period with a “Great Acceleration” of anthropogenic transformation.5

Cortada’s Astrid provides a fitting introduction to these issues and this series of commentaries, highlighting the significance of ecology as a key concern not only in American art today but also as a defining idea in the history of modernity writ large—an idea whose comprehension demands our acceptance of environmental change as an irrevocable fact of life. Coined in 1866 by the Prussian naturalist Ernst Haeckel, the term “ecology” reimagined nature holistically as a dynamic network of beings and things. As Haeckel explained:

By ecology we mean the body of knowledge concerning the economy of nature—the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its organic and inorganic environment; including above all, its friendly and inimical relations with those animals and plants with which it comes directly or indirectly into contact—in a word, ecology is the study of all those complex interrelations referred to by Darwin as the conditions of the struggle for existence.6

An ardent supporter of Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection, Haeckel offered ecology as a way of studying the conditions—“the struggle for existence”—that brought about evolution. For Haeckel, as for Darwin and biologists today, “the animal” includes the human animal, a species whose morphology has resulted from countless mutations occurring over millennia in tandem with other beings to whom we are historically related. Although Haeckel embraced Eurocentric beliefs about racial hierarchy that were common in his day, he also affirmed and popularized Darwinian ideas about the evolution of human beings within a broader ecological web of life.7

In 1863, when Charles Baudelaire famously defined modern life for artists as an aesthetic spectacle of “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent,” George Perkins Marsh—an American diplomat, art connoisseur, and environmental historian—articulated change in ecological terms in his book Man and Nature; Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action. Marsh’s text is considered a key work in early ecological writing for its attention to environmental relationships as well as its critique of myths about the ineffable abundance and inexhaustibility of the earth as a natural resource. Whereas Baudelaire celebrated change as an opportunity for artistic renewal and originality, Marsh saw a disturbing trend toward depletion and destruction wrought by humankind. As he wrote in the preface to Man and Nature:

The object of the present volume is: to indicate the character and, approximately, the extent of the changes produced by human action in the physical conditions of the globe we inhabit; to point out the dangers of imprudence and the necessity of caution in all operations which, on a large scale, interfere with the spontaneous arrangements of the organic or the inorganic world; to suggest the possibility and the importance of the restoration of disturbed harmonies and the material improvement of waste and exhausted regions. . . . Modern ambition aspires to yet grander achievements in the conquest of physical nature, and projects are meditated which quite eclipse the boldest enterprises hitherto undertaken for the modification of geographical surface.8
Marsh bore witness to unsettling alterations in flora, fauna, land, waterways, and even climate. A few earlier nineteenth-century writers—Darwin, Georges Cuvier, Thomas Malthus, and Charles Lyell—had begun to destabilize the older, classical vision of plenitude through critical analysis of evolution, extinction, population, and geology, but Marsh drove an important new nail in the theoretical coffin of classicism by verifying anthropogenic change on a global scale. He revealed real forests, animal species, and other environmental conditions to be “ephemeral,” “fugitive,” and “contingent” owing to human activity.9

As a work of art that confronts and creatively engages climate change as a planetary issue, Cortada’s Astrid resonates more with Marsh’s ideas than Baudelaire’s. Such a statement will seem strange, since few people today outside academic circles in environmental science and history have even heard of Marsh. Yet, the perspective espoused by Marsh and variously filtered through subsequent generations of ecological thinkers has been gradually embraced by a growing number of artists—and art historians—for whom ecology and sustainability now serve as guiding concerns. Accordingly, we offer this introductory essay along with the following commentaries as marking a kind of tipping point in the emergence of such considerations within our field, where they now shape not only contemporary practice but also historical interpretation and museum design—topics treated here by Robin Kelsey, Emily Eliza Scott, and Kinshasha Holman Conwill.

New scientific reports about climate change have added more urgency to these concerns among all stakeholders, including people in the arts. On March 31, 2014, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a study confirming that the effects of global warming are now visible on every continent. It catalogues and quantifies a daunting array of observed phenomena: melting polar ice, rising sea levels, acidifying water, intensifying heat waves, pervasive flooding, dying coral reefs, migration of animal and plant species beyond their historic ranges, rising extinction rates, growing risks to food supplies, increasing socioeconomic inequalities, and the displacement of entire human communities. Such conditions will worsen during the coming century, according to the IPCC, even if humans manage to take immediate radical steps to curb greenhouse gas emissions. On May 6, 2014, the U.S. Global Change Research Program unveiled its National Climate Assessment. This report declares that “climate change, once considered an issue for a distant future, has moved firmly into the present,” adding that as “warming and other climatic changes are triggering wide-ranging impacts in every region of our country and throughout our economy.” In our view, these findings confirm that issues of ecology and sustainability will increasingly affect the arts for the foreseeable future.10

An earlier and only somewhat less alarming IPCC report published in 2007 was cited by Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher in the introduction to their co-edited collection A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History (2009), which brought historical scholarship in our field into a conversation with “ecocriticism” for the first time. Defining “ecocriticism” as a form of inquiry that “emphasizes issues of environmental interconnectedness, sustainability, and justice in cultural interpretation,” Braddock and Irmscher argued that it “can contribute to a broader re-imagination of environmental relations, responsibilities, and possibilities facing our planet today” while also enriching art history itself. “Where art history is concerned,” they wrote, ecocriticism “entails a more probing and pointedly ethical integration of visual analysis, cultural interpretation, and environmental history than has so far existed in the field.”11 A key point here is that art need not have an overt “green” agenda to be worthy of ecocritical study, since every creative artifact has environmental implications of some sort, intentionally or otherwise.

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Some scholars in literature, history, and cultural studies have been doing ecocriticism since the early 1990s, but art historians have been relatively slow to get onboard, except when addressing explicitly environmentalist art produced since the 1960s.12 Delayed engagement with ecocriticism on the part of art historians undoubtedly owes something to enduring disciplinary boundaries. For some scholars, ecology and sustainability are categorically different from aesthetics. For others, environmental concerns probably retain an aura of elite, white, liberal privilege and, therefore, constitute a distraction from seemingly more urgent issues involving human civil rights and postcolonial critique. In our view, such objections neglect the pervasive force of anthropogenic environmental change, not to mention the opportunities that ecocriticism presents for enriching the field.

For guidance in navigating these issues, we turn to two scholars outside art history whose recent work in ecological criticism provides helpful cues. Timothy Morton has written several books and articles that engage ecology from his perspective as a literature theorist with a wide-ranging knowledge of philosophy and environmental science. He is perhaps best known for advocating the abandonment of “nature” as a concept. As he explains in Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics (2009), “the very idea of ‘nature’ which so many hold dear will have to wither away in an ‘ecological’ state of human society,” because it “is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art.” In effect, says Morton, “nature” keeps the environment at arm’s length or even farther away in the background, like a romantic landscape painting hanging on a wall. Contrary to the transcendent “nature” such painting promises, ecological art—like Cortada’s Astrid—emphasizes materiality, change, strangeness, and intimacy.13

In Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (2011), the literature scholar Rob Nixon critiques growing inequities between modern neoliberal elites and impoverished,
displaced, and disempowered communities of the global South that already bear the brunt of climate change and other forms of anthropogenic environmental destruction. For Nixon, art and literature must reveal the slow, "attritional" violence such destruction inflicts on those communities. A brilliant series of photographs titled Oil Rich Niger Delta by the Nigerian artist George Osodi eloquently glosses Nixon's ideas by showing children in the delta defiantly going about their lives against the backdrop of gas flares, oil spills, and general environmental devastation wrought by multinational corporations (fig. 2). To many Americans, Osodi's nightmare vision of petro-imperialism in sub-Saharan Africa might suggest the outsourcing of such conditions to disenfranchised people elsewhere in the world. In reality this is not necessarily so, as any American who has experienced the negative environmental consequences of fracking or pipeline spills can attest. Indeed, Osodi's work prods us to revisit the history of art and environmental injustice here in the United States. For example, using an ecocritical perspective, we might consider a long trajectory of oil pictures exposing the destructive effects of petroleum extraction in North America since the nineteenth century, as in David Gilmour Blythe's Prospecting of about 1861–63 (fig. 3), showing the Pennsylvania landscape littered with derricks and detritus.14

Our introduction has only briefly sketched some of the issues confronting artists and scholars in our field regarding ecology and sustainability. In light of recent science, we wonder whether "adaptation" might be a more appropriate term than "sustainability." Whereas "sustainability" implies maintenance of historically familiar conditions, "adaptation" acknowledges transformation and defamiliarization, in keeping with the IPCC report and the National Climate Assessment. Analogous to those scientific studies, a growing body of contemporary art vividly testifies to changes well under way, even as some historical works and world heritage sites face unprecedented environmental dangers. Scholarship, teaching, and museum practice have begun to recognize and engage these changes, but more needs to be done to adapt our field to the new world we are creating.

Notes


4 Xavier Cortada, email message to authors, June 3, 2014.


Ecology, Sustainability, and Historical Interpretation

Martin Johnson Heade’s *Approaching Thunder Storm* (fig. 1), one of the most curious and affecting of American paintings, is structured as a prophecy. Although the title speaks of an “approaching” storm, and the picture’s yellow atmosphere crackles with anticipation, the foreground bears signs of a squall already passed: a sail resembling a beached fish lies draped over a rock; a man sits on a broken board by a slanting, tombstone-like post; and a black pot, such as those once used for heating tar to make boat repairs, rests askew on the beach. Beyond the foreground, this aftermath gives way abruptly to a brooding expanse of still, inky water. What advances toward us across it is not a storm but a rowboat, a motif bound structurally to time, in that the rower faces backward and thus sees the course traveled and not the way ahead. Like the surroundings of the seated figure on shore, the coming of the rowboat imagines the foreground as a future. Whereas time in nineteenth-century American landscape routinely takes the form of a beckoning prospect of distant possibilities, here it operates in reverse; through an ocular opening framed by the arcs of cloud and shore we survey the past. At the center of the oculus sits a sailboat, pinned flat to the picture plane, bearing a man standing and facing us, tiny at this distance. The distant man wears the reddish-orange and light browns of the foreground figure, indicating that the two may represent a single person at different points in time. The figure sitting on the broken board evidently looks back on an earlier moment, before his boat was battered and his sail undone.