

# TAKE

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ecology

*T J D e m o s*

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creative  
ecologies



*Upon this handful of soil our survival depends. Husband it and it will grow our food, our fuel, and our shelter and surround us with beauty. Abuse it and the soil will collapse and die, taking humanity with it.*

-From the *Vedas* (Sanskrit scripture), c. 1500 BCE



**T.J. Demos** is a professor in the Department of the History of Art and Visual Culture, University of California, Santa Cruz, and Founder and Director of its Center for Creative Ecologies. He writes widely on the intersection of contemporary art, global politics, and ecology and is the author of several books, most recently, of *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and Political Ecology* (Sternberg Press, 2016). His new book, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*, will soon be released (Sternberg Press, 2017).

How can art — as a site of creative construction, of the imaginative building of alternative worlds and potential futures — contribute to a great transformation toward a radically different form of life, one beyond the environmental violence and social destructiveness of advanced capitalism?

To grow requires a healthy medium. Take soil. Damage, we know, is the result of industrial agriculture, leading to a crisis of food provisions. Conventional farming's use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides, and herbicides destroys soil's health, diminishing its fertility. The situation is dire: the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation informs us that farmers have only sixty more years of growing crops, owing to soil depletion and erosion—in other words, only about a hundred harvests left, even as world population is expected to grow substantially. Farming becomes mining, a mode of extraction, when it withdraws value from the earth and transforms it into commercial profit, rather than replenishing it as a creative ecology with long-term benefits. How can this latter

sense of environmental health be legitimised and dignified within the arts? With the current cultural turn toward investigating multispecies and post-anthropocentric ways of knowing and being, propelled further by the threat of catastrophic climate change in the age of the Anthropocene, these questions could not be more urgent, nor solutions more readily available.

For me, “creative ecology” means directing the science of biological connectivity (ecology), toward generative, rather than destructive, ends. It supports a culture of life, rather than one of short-term profits and the ruination of liveability. Ecology itself is not value free. Indeed, in the past it has functioned often as the science of empire, owing to its participation in the five-hundred-year-old colonial project: one of the rationalisation and instrumentalisation of nature. Climate change crisis represents its culmination, leading to dysfunctional environmental systems, mass species extinction, soil erosion, global warming, and desertification, what

Amitav Ghosh has recently referred to provocatively as *The Great Derangement*. What role can the arts play in cultivating liveability amidst this profound and intensifying disorientation, at once geological, socio-political, and economic?

Proposing a notion of creative ecology means decolonising nature—not in the sense of reclaiming some sort of original wilderness or pure nonhuman environment (these represent fictions of a colonised world), but instead releasing the environment from its reduction to “natural resources,” as if it exists purely for human exploitation and consumption. It complements the decolonisation of culture, rescuing art from its relegation to consumerist object, decorative collectible, object of speculation. Doing so, we retreat from anthropocentric as much as economic domination, cultivating the more-than-human world as a well-functioning, self-organised ecosystem, and liberating culture from its commercial exploitation. In the environmental context, this is abetted

Left side image:  
Subhankar Banerjee, *Caribou Migration I*, from the series “Oil and the Caribou”, 2002. Image courtesy: Subhankar Banerjee.



Subhankar Banerjee, *Caribou Tracks on Coal Seams II*, from the series "Coal and the Caribou", 2006. Image courtesy: Subhankar Banerjee.

through diverse practices of organic farming, permaculture and biodynamic approaches, which foster biodiversity, improve soil fertility, and strengthen connectivity and relations of mutual support within the web of life. In a handful of healthy soil, there are more micro-organisms, astonishingly, than the total number of humans who have lived on Earth. In the cultural context, it is accomplished through energizing non-profit and public platforms of exhibition and distribution, cultivating a context for art in the public interest.

The antithesis is colonial ecology, identifying a system of power and inequality, one that subordinates human and nonhuman difference to appropriation and value extraction, bringing terrible forms of forced labour and slavery, exploitation and

economic inequality, which continue under various names in our present. As such, current global arrangements designate a networking of systems that is at once legal, economic, cultural, corporate, institutional, technological, and militaristic, which supports, regulates and legitimises practices of world-destroying extraction and their environment-transforming effects. In this regard, a creative ecology would suggest nothing less than a radically different mode of world-building, a cosmopolitics based within the values of equality and justice, rather than hierarchy and exploitation, individual wealth accumulation and competitiveness. Thinking in terms of creative ecologies—open to multiple formations—would not only focus on building self-sustaining connections within the natural world, but also extend the values of equality and justice to the cultural, legal, economic, institutional, and technological realms.

Creative ecologies, finally, also draw on the cultural significance of artistic expression, validating sites where *making*—unfolding from the ancient sense of the word 'art'—is celebrated precisely for the connectivity it opens up, the kind of world it creates, the types of institutions, values, forms of life, and relations it brings into existence. These are the criteria that I've focused on in examining artworks that practice the decolonisation of nature—such as the valuing of the sovereignty of the forest and the traditional biodiversity of rice varieties arrived at through traditional non-chemical based farming, as enshrined in the work of Amar Kanwar and positioned against the corporate-led industrial destruction of the environment and its diverse inhabitants (*The Sovereign Forest*); or visualising the beauty of ecologies of the Far North, including caribou migrations, tied to the political struggle for nonhuman rights, as photographed in the work of Subhankar Banerjee;



Video still from Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares's *Forest Law*, 2014. Image courtesy: Ursula Biemann.



Claire Pentecost, *Soil-erg*, mixed media installation with compost and organic material, DOCUMENTA (13), 2012. Image courtesy: Claire Pentecost.

or the correlation of Indigenous sovereignty claims with rights of nature that seek to protect the Ecuadorian Amazon from the despoliation of oil drilling, as addressed in a video project of Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares (*Forest Law*); or the sculptural works of Claire Pentecost that transform soil itself into a medium of currency, the soil-erg, whereby its intrinsic value, derived from its ecological worth, takes precedence over the commercial significance of money.<sup>1</sup>

All of these practices participate in a reconfiguration of values that is nothing less than urgent today.

As writers, artists, cultural practitioners, curators, and educators, we confront a politico-ecological imperative to mobilise creativity itself as a desperately needed resource in the reconstruction of the conditions of life's ongoingness. If beauty was once inextricable from environmental wellbeing, one that also connected to forms of social and economic health and equality — a network of relations that was ruptured with modernisation — then we must reclaim it in the name of survival. That doesn't mean regressing to the past, though history offers multiple lessons and resources we

shouldn't forget. It means reinventing a future worth living amidst capitalist ruins.

1. See my recent book, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).