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Landscape Now

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Cover image: David Alesworth, *Unter den Linden*, 2010, horticultural intervention, public art project, terminalia arjuna seeds (sterilized) yellow paint.. Digital image courtesy of David Alesworth.

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Contents

Outside In: Reflections of British Landscape in the Long Anthropocene, Mark
A. Cheetham



Outside In: Reflections of British Landscape in the Long Anthropocene

Mark A. Cheetham

Abstract

The genre of landscape, earth, and land art from the 1960s and 1970s, and more recent ecological art, are typically separated in the field of art history. While there are good reasons to distinguish these modes in terms of materials and purpose, and to avoid seeing them as superseding one another teleologically, I argue in favour of their comparison and linkage. All are practices of picturing and manipulating the Earth. All are part of the Anthropocene conceived as beginning in the Industrial Revolution. Focusing on the widespread habit of moving landscape—"the outside"—into structures, art galleries, and institutional matrices in work by Chris Drury, Simon Starling, and John Gerrard, I argue that in specific practices and as categories, eco art, land art, and landscape are active and imbricated actants in the Anthropocene.

Authors

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Landscape *versus* Ecological Art

What are the implications of comparing artistic practices on and about “landscape” by British artists over several centuries? The disciplinary norm is instead to draw distinctions between: 1) the landscape tradition in Britain (or any national grouping with such a long history) from the seventeenth century forwards; 2) experiments in land and Earth art in the 1960s and 1970s; and 3) what is now widely referred to as ecological art, which has increased in prominence since its inception alongside land art in the early 1970s.¹ In their catalogue to the exhibition *Uncommon Ground: Land Art in Britain 1966–1979* in 2013, Nicholas Alfrey and Joy Sleeman warn against “questionable assumptions about the continuity and adaptability of a British landscape tradition.” I suggest, however, that a consideration of *both* differences and plausible connections in this extensive artistic engagement with the Earth can expand our understanding of contemporary eco art on the one hand and “landscape now”, considered in terms of both its past and current preoccupations, on the other. To this end, and instead of deploying the habitual art historical periods and considerations of medium that largely underline the divisions between landscape, land art, and eco art, I will adapt aspects of the notion of the Anthropocene as the temporal and thematic frame for this comparison. I will think in terms of connected practices of picturing the Earth and of my examples as unequivocally *of* the Anthropocene. In David Matless’ instructive coinage, they are “Anthroposcenic”, defined as “landscape emblematic of processes marking the Anthropocene.”²

If we allow that there are distinct but also interrelated practices that we call landscape, land art, and eco art, it follows that these aesthetic representations and presentations at the very least coincide temporally and thematically with widely influential descriptions of the Anthropocene—the term introduced by Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen almost twenty years ago to describe the geological epoch following the Holocene.³ Though its origins and causes are widely debated, the Anthropocene is often understood to encompass our time and that of our predecessors for some centuries, a period in which human activity has altered the planet as formerly only “nature” was thought to do.⁴

Competing descriptors such as the “Capitalocene” (Jason W. Moore),⁵ and the “Chthulucene” (Donna Haraway)⁶ underscore the fact that the main cause of global warming and attendant climate disruption continues to be capitalist expansion and industrialization. The same is true for Jussi Parikka’s memorable neologism “Anthrobscene”, which stresses the indecency of the wanton disregard for, and humiliation of, the integrity of the Earth, of humans, of non-human animals, and of other organisms and inanimate

materials.⁷ Whatever precisions we might add to the term Anthropocene, most importantly that its characteristic effects have not been caused by all humans equally, as Haraway states, “There’s a need for a word to highlight the urgency of human impact on this planet, such that the effects of our species are literally written into the rocks.”⁸

As creatures of the Anthropocene, when and especially how this epoch began and will end for humans and the planet are increasingly urgent questions. The Industrial Revolution in Britain is an oft-cited starting point for anthropogenic change. As a way to suspend the notion that there is a progression from the genre of landscape to land art to today’s eco art and also to question their separation, then, we may consider all three modes as phenomena of the Anthropocene conceived as beginning during the Industrial Revolution and specifically in Britain. Some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century landscape paintings in Britain memorably reflected the power and excesses of industrialization, for instance, de Louthembourg’s *Coalbrookdale by Night* (1801) (Fig. 1). More often, landscapists avoided picturing such anthropogenic effects on the land by vaunting happily cultivated passages of the picturesque. The temporal coincidence of the Anthropocene so conceived with the flourishing of the landscape genre alone justifies their comparison and perhaps linkage, but before I extend this argument, I want to enter a caveat powerfully stated by Zoe Todd about the seemingly magnetic power of the concept of the Anthropocene:

As a Métis scholar, I have an inherent distrust of this term, the Anthropocene, since terms and theories can act as gentrifiers in their own right, and I frequently have to force myself to engage in good faith with it as heuristic. While it may seem ridiculous to distrust a word, it is precisely because the term has colonized and infiltrated many intellectual contexts throughout the academy at the moment that I view it with caution. ... I ask myself: “What other story could be told here? What other language is not being heard? Whose space is this, and who is not here?”⁹

Keeping Todd’s warnings about the Anthropocene as a frame in mind (though without pretending that my argument assuages her concerns), my proposal offers the unorthodox view that landscape, land art, and eco art invite comparison because they are overtly of the Anthropocene and cross-pollinate one another throughout this ongoing time-frame.



Figure 1.

Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg, *Coalbrookdale by Night*, 1801, oil on canvas, 85.5 × 124 cm. Collection of The Science Museum (1952-452) Digital image courtesy of The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum (Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Suggesting as I am that landscape finds its way into eco art, and that contemporary practices can also revise our views on the earlier work in the landscape genre, has another hazard that can be turned to critical advantage. It summons the spectre of Kenneth Clark's frequently criticized *Landscape into Art*.¹⁰ Just when land art was becoming established in the mid-1970s, Clark's second edition reiterated his pessimism about the future of the landscape genre. In accidental company with land artists themselves, many of whom criticized the habits of earlier landscape painting in Europe and the USA, he excavated an historical and conceptual Ha Ha between then contemporary work with the land and earlier landscape depiction. One objection to Clark's account is that he plots a linear progression through which landscape elements, once simply decorative or stage-setting supplements in religious and historical paintings, achieve independent status in the nineteenth century as "pure" landscape. Accounts of landscape as a category—and as a more general, fluid response to nature in art—since Clark's time similarly suggest, with varying degrees of explicitness, that landscape, land art, and then eco art also follow one from the other chronologically, dialectically, and in some accounts, teleologically. They largely agree, as Clark predicted and as W.J.T. Mitchell polemicized in his "theses of landscape", though for different reasons, that landscape is over. My counter-claim is that these articulations of the Earth coexist—both in the recent past and now.¹¹

I will not rehearse the litany of critiques of the landscape genre by land artists or recount eco artists' various complaints since the 1970s about both landscape and land art. Instead, let us ask what an emphasis on analogies among these practices yields for our understanding of this array of practices. Connections are there to be discussed. For example, the pioneering land artist Nancy Holt recalled in 2013 that it was during a visit to England in 1969 that her interests in landscape depiction and theory solidified. Ditto for those of her husband, Robert Smithson:

It was in England that the roots of that kind of thinking began [she recalled]. I always think of Gilpin. ... we were going back, in terms of our roots, our ancestral roots, and also finding out how the English treated their landscape, how the natural—having it fit into the existing landscape—transformed the formal garden. ¹²

Whether or not we can recruit Gilpin's theories as a progenitor, Holt was an innovator in emphasizing land art's relationship to the human body and human reality, a stance also adopted by others at the time and since, including the British artist Chris Drury.

Bringing the Outside In: Chris Drury

Drury describes himself as an environmental artist working at the interface of art and science to make "site specific nature based sculpture". ¹³ He also calls himself a land artist, and he frequently refers to landscape. His extensive portfolio is instructive regarding ongoing relationships between eco artists and the previous generation, not least because his practice began with the noted land artist Hamish Fulton in the 1970s. Sympathetic with Fulton and with Richard Long's principle to "take only photographs and leave only footprints" in the landscape, unlike these mentors, Drury nonetheless acknowledges his debt to remotely sited American land art, often criticized in Britain at this time because of its scale and intrusiveness. ¹⁴ For Drury, it:

opened up a field of debate and paved the way for much of what has happened in the landscape subsequently—in particular, the process of removing works from the white space of the museum or gallery and allowing them to interact with the world as it is. ¹⁵

For him, the camera obscura is the ideal tool with which to explore this gap, to bring nature from the outside into a human structure, and to enact the confluence—or the productive confusion—of inside and outside that exemplifies the principle of ecological interconnectedness.

Drury has been constructing what he calls cloud chambers since 1990, huts that act as camera obscuras, usually sited in nemoral surroundings. He describes his fascination with this ancient technology:

A large preoccupation in my work has been the exploration of what inner and outer nature mean. These cloud chambers are still, silent, meditative and mysterious spaces. Outside, they are discreet objects which sit unobtrusively within the landscape; are in fact made of the material of the landscape. They are often built partially underground, so that in these dark spaces what is outside is brought in and reversed. Clouds drift silently across the floor. ¹⁶

Wave Chamber (1994) was built beside a reservoir in Kielder Water and Forest Park, Northumberland (Fig. 2). The rock structure and its aperture are designed to transmit the sense of water to the interior. Drury suggests that: “The rippling surface of the water is projected on to the pale floor of the chamber, which echoes to the sound of the waves.” ¹⁷ There are precedents that take us back to the eighteenth century and reflect again in the present. Much as in Alexander Pope’s subterranean grotto refuge at his garden in Twickenham and indeed in many examples of contemporary eco art, both vision and sound are important to the sought effect. Pope’s cavern was unusual as a camera obscura in that it was underground. ¹⁸ Drury has created two works that share this feature: *Tyrebagger Cloud Chamber* in 1994 and *Cloud Chamber for the Trees and Sky* in 2003. The moving images that his chambers capture are very much of the Earth. A typical example is *Sky Mountain Chamber* of 2010, made from 150 tons of local limestone and sited in the Trento area of Italy. The materials and beehive shape of the structure pay homage to the Dolomite mountains in this region. An aperture in the side of the camera obscura allows the peaks of these mountains to be projected upside down onto the wall of the interior. We see nature brought indoors for our contemplation but also an unexpected collaboration between a space for art and what is clearly not art—the external world.



Figure 2.

Chris Drury, *Wave Chamber*, Chris Drury, *Wave Chamber*, 1996, dry stone beehive hut, 400 cm tall. Collection of Kielder Partnership. Digital image courtesy of Chris Drury (All rights reserved).

A book by the philosopher Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, which was published in 1990, gives one perspective on this outside-in movement. With Félix Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* (1989), Serres' book was a prescient, Earth-centred anticipation and analysis of theories of what has come to be called the Anthropocene. It remains a striking indictment of what our technological culture has created. Serres holds that we are combatants in a "world war" that takes the material Earth and all its inhabitants as the target of multiple hostilities, in part because Western technological society is obsessed with data and with words. "We busy ourselves only with our own networks," he claims, to the extent that we have forgotten nature because "the essentials [of our lives] take place indoors and in words, never again outdoors with things." ¹⁹ But here we need to pause, perhaps recalling the camera obscura's talent for bringing the outside in and productively complicating any firm lines we might draw between nature and culture. Serres reiterates a commonplace that sets nature/outside against culture/inside. His broader insights can be revised by looking at how eco artists work expressly across this borderland between the artwork and exhibition spaces as physically and socially "inside" and nature as something beyond their limits. To offer ready paradigms in these terms, then, if eco art *articulates* such a border, land art wanted out of the museum and the city, at least in theory. Even Robert Smithson's site versus non-site dialectic—the epitome of land art in the USA—denied art institutions their former authority and rendered impossible the notion of a simple "outside" or "inside".

Outside-In in the Gallery and Museum Contexts

Conveying nature into an art gallery or cognate institutional setting today is arguably a peculiar symptom of industrialized societies' apparent alienation from the non-human environment. Powerful examples include Olafur Eliasson's Tate Turbine Hall installation *The Weather Project* in 2003, which not only recreated an atmosphere inside but also displaced and disseminated discourses about weather throughout the city via posters in taxi cabs, again complicating the nature of and exchange between outside and inside. Pierre Huyghe's *Untilled: Alive Entities and Inanimate Things, Made and Not Made*, seen at documenta 13 in 2012, was an outdoor, bee-filled garden in the composting area of the documenta site.²⁰ But with its learned homage to Joseph Beuys' *7000 Oaks* (which was initiated at documenta in 1982) resonating from the carefully placed felled oak tree, the work also functioned within the institutional scaffolding of the gallery and exhibition. There is also a long and growing list of museum-sponsored eco art exhibitions, demonstrating the angst of the Anthropocene and, more hopefully, a widespread will to grapple with its issues in the aesthetic.²¹ Perhaps this move indoors seems somehow unusual, unnatural, but that view depends too much on the understanding of land art as paradigmatically sited remotely—there are many urban examples—and on a too simple binary of inside versus outside. If we think in terms of a longer history, presenting nature indoors via murals, mosaics, tapestries, and of course paintings, has been the norm in the West since well before landscape became a separate genre of art. Contemporary eco art makes us think more critically about this habit.

Simon Starling's *Island for Weeds (Prototype)* of 2003 (Fig. 3) and *One Ton, II* of 2005 (Fig. 4) explore the ins and outs of border crossing to articulate ecological systems and issues. The floating garden that is *Island for Weeds* animated the eighteenth-century importation to Scotland of rhododendrons as well as the plants' subsequent takeover of local flora and recategorization as weeds. Mirroring the plants' original migration from Spain, Starling's island transported them to the Venice Biennale, where he represented Scotland in 2003. While the work echoes Robert Smithson's *Floating Island to Travel Around Manhattan Island* (envisioned in 1970 and well known from drawings; realized posthumously in 2005), but perhaps more significantly, it highlights the long-standing impact of species migration because of human exploration and migration. A prime example of this effect in the Anthropocene is naturalist Joseph Banks, who accompanied James Cook to the south seas in 1768-1771. Banks sought to improve the lot of indigenous peoples by giving them domesticated animals new to their ecosystems. The ecological impact was horrendous. Starling's peripatetic island also raises issues of indigeneity, immigration, involuntary migration precipitated by

climate change, and hybridity that are directly analogous to the concerns of contemporary societies and the ever-migratory players in the international art world.



Figure 3.

Simon Starling, *Island of Weeds (Prototype)*, installation view at The Scottish Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2003. Soil, rhododendrons, water, plastic pipes, metal, self-regulating pressure system, 244 × 610 × 366cm. Collection of The Modern Institute / Toby Webster Ltd. Digital image courtesy of Simon Starling (All Rights Reserved), DACS/Artimage 2018. Image courtesy The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow. Photo: Jeremy Hardman-Jones (All rights reserved).



Figure 4.

Simon Starling, *One Ton, II*, 2005, platinum/palladium prints framed in acrylic boxes, five parts, each framed 75.4 × 94.6 × 5.9 cm. Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Gift of Gerald S. Elliott, Albert A. Robin by exchange (2014.35.a-e). Digital image courtesy of MCA Chicago (All rights reserved) | Photo: Nathan Keay.

Starling's *One Ton, II* engages such concerns in a more material and less overtly art-historical manner. The title refers to the amount of ore that must be extracted and refined to produce the platinum used to print the five images displayed, photographs that simply show the open-pit mine in Africa that is the source. Both telluric and national boundaries are crossed in the making of this and any image, an ecology that is absurdly expensive in terms of the planet's energy and that Starling makes visible. He is "interested in what it means to make something in a culture in which our connections with making and manufacture are increasingly distant—we have become estranged from the things we use every day."²² What is the cost to the Earth in material and organic terms of printing images in this manner? Starling poses a similar question in *Inventar Nr. 8573 (Man Ray)* (2006). We view a sequential slide projection in which we come closer and closer to a Man Ray photograph until we can see the "geology of its medium", to paraphrase Jussi Parikka—the silver particles that make up the photograph.²³ Starling's approach to eco art is specifically contextual and material in this way. Concerned to explore and display the short- and long-term processes and implications of extraction, fabrication, and the use of art media, his work is mindfully ecological.

Starling's extensive *Project for a Rift Valley Crossing* of 2015–2016 exemplifies not only the practice of complicating relationships between inside and outside through art—those malleable boundaries in museums,

technologies, and the artist's self-placement around institutional structures in the art world—but also Timothy Morton's idea of “the ecological thought” (Fig. 5). As Morton defined the notion in 2010:

The ecological thought is a thought about ecology, but it's also a thinking that is ecological. Thinking the ecological thought is part of an ecological project. The ecological thought doesn't just occur “in the mind”. It's a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings—animal, vegetable, or mineral. Ultimately, this includes thinking about democracy. ²⁴

The full title of Starling's work describes the components that he animates to remind us of the interconnectedness of materials and our lives: *Project for a Rift Valley Crossing. A canoe built to cross the Dead Sea Rift between Israel and Jordan using 90 kg of magnesium produced from 1900 litres of Dead Sea water*. The artist had a functional canoe fabricated from magnesium extracted from Dead Sea water, a particularly rich source of this light and strong mineral. The video component of the project tracks his journey across this body of water. Akin to *One Ton, II*, still photographs document the pumping of water from the sea, the usually unseen source for magnesium. A particularly sensitive strategic site in the Middle East, garnering the necessary permissions to paddle across the Dead Sea is—analogue to the land art schemes of Christo and Jean Claude, for example, such as *Running Fence* (1976)—perhaps the most significant part of the journey, one that touches on state politics as well as the politics of ecology. As Starling reports in an interview:

The very nature of the place is so determined by what's going around it. Even on a physical level, the environmental changes that are happening in the Dead Sea are fundamentally driven by local politics, and water use, and control of land, and so on. It's palpable when you go there. ²⁵

The “outside” elements of Starling's *Project for a Rift Valley Crossing*—the extraction of water, then magnesium; the trip across the Dead Sea—cross both materially and conceptually with their “inside” art components, the canoe as a sculpture (recently purchased by the Arts Council in Britain) and the seemingly banal photographs of the (unidentified) Dead Sea that picture the (unexplained) pumping apparatus. ²⁶



Figure 5.

Simon Starling, Project for a Rift Valley Crossing, 2015-2016, Canoe cast in Dead Sea magnesium, 2 paddles, 2 canvas seats, Dead Sea water, tanks, wooden welding jig, 2 silver gelatin prints, installed dimensions variable. Collection of The Arts Council (ACC28/2016). Digital image courtesy of Simon Starling (All Rights Reserved), DACS/Artimage 2018 and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow.

Let me propose another linkage of “landscapes” across supposed art historical barriers of time and genre, first with works that examine “the commons” in the agrarian past and the digital present. The Irish artist John Gerrard calls his hypnotically artificial virtual-reality simulations of buildings “portraits”, but they are in “landscape” format in all senses and often engage with issues of land use. They demonstrate how land comes into eco art. Given that they exist only as files to be projected in a gallery or viewed on a computer screen, chances are that we will experience them in landscape format too, often indoors and certainly under the auspices of an art institution. Two of Gerrard’s works make oblique reference to paradigmatic land art’s interventions into the agricultural system, specifically those of Dennis Oppenheim in the late 1960s and Agnes Denes in the 1980s. Both *Sow Farm (near Libbey, Oklahoma)* (2009) (Fig.6) and *Farm (Pryor Creek, Oklahoma)* (2015) (Fig.7) graphically show what art might do now in the vast spaces of the United States after land art heroically claimed the West, but the works exist only in digital form. Fascinated by what takes place in the Oklahoma landscape, Gerrard returned to produce *Farm (Pryor Creek, Oklahoma)*, in which he went to great lengths to picture one of Google’s “data farms”. While he does not announce a political programme in the way Denes and Oppenheim did in *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*—in Manhattan in

her case or along the US/Canada border in his—it is apparent that reflection on mass consumption, industrialization, and digital surveillance informs these simulations.

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Figure 6.

John Gerrard, *Sow Farm* (Near Libbey, Oklahoma), 2015-2016, realtime 3D projection, single screen, colour still, duration 365 days. Collection of Tate (T14279). Digital image courtesy of Courtesy of John Gerrard (All rights reserved).

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 7.

John Gerrard, *Farm* (Pryor Creek, Oklahoma), 2015, simulation still, installed dimensions variable. Digital image courtesy of Courtesy of John Gerrard (All rights reserved).

Gerrard states: “to me, the landscape—dotted with farms and oil fields—also represents the global trend of unrestrained, mass consumption.”²⁷ *Farm* shows similarly monolithic and characterless buildings from the outside. This time, however, the “crop” is data, a resource extracted, cultivated, stored, analysed, and protected in a Google “server farm”. Accustomed to harvesting images from Google’s various sites at will, Gerrard wanted to visualize the hardware too. Because Google would not allow him access to images of the site, he hired a helicopter and photographer to take the 2,500 photos that were in turn painstakingly rendered into this virtual simulation. Ephemeral in the extreme, the Internet is at once pervasive, invisible, and increasingly under scrutiny for breaches of privacy. Gerrard here brings it down to earth by showing us its materiality, how demanding this network is on Earthly resources—cooling systems are prominent—and therefore how entwined it has to be with other social and economic systems. Just as the term “farm” describes a new form of husbandry, so too “landscape” is repurposed as a concept. Wikipedia claims that: “Data farming is the process of using designed computational experiments to ‘grow’ data, which can then be analyzed using statistical and visualization techniques to obtain insight into complex systems.”²⁸

Is it too much of a stretch to think of Gerrard’s work in terms of much earlier landscape traditions? *Farm* is too commonplace in what it shows to be thought of as sublime or picturesque. But there is another significant aesthetic category from this period that does resonate with Gerrard’s creations. The tedium of the buildings more likely leads to an experience of bathos, that bottoming out or sense of baseness that is thought to be the antithesis of the sublime. As theorized by Pope in “*Peri Bathous*” of 1727, bathos suggests a fall from ideals, a degeneration, but also a profundity.

Perhaps what we see in Gerrard's animation is the bathos of the ideals of a digital commons. Historically, the commons referred to shared land. Today we hear references to the "digital commons" and the "digital landscape" without making the connection to the privatization of data and communications that Gerrard alludes to in reproducing Google's server farm. Calling this work "a postmodern pastoral", Gerrard claims that he wants the urban,

London public to be more aware of these sites, as it is here [in the city] that we consume their work. In ... *Farm* there is a more ambiguous sense as it is not clear if we consume the products of this Farm or are consumed ourselves.²⁹

In picturing both the infrastructure and the fate of the digital commons, *Farm* stands in contrast to (but in fruitful conversation with) *Cornard Wood* (1748), Thomas Gainsborough's nostalgic portrayal of what remained of the agricultural commons in mid-eighteenth-century rural Suffolk (Fig. 8). As Ian Waites explains, parliamentary legislation that forced "the enclosure of operable fields [by private interests] was largely completed before 1700, but many areas of woodland waste [as shown here] remained in common well into the eighteenth century."³⁰ The locals' commons prerogatives are on display in this painting: they contentedly gather wood, graze animals, and take a drink from a stream. The economy of this landscape is evident too: we may imagine a narrative progression in which labourers take what they have foraged home or to market in the town seen in the distance. Harmony among peasants, animals, and the land prevails. Even the large, dark, and empty swampy part of the landscape shown to the right of the canvas hides no sublime threat, no lurking banditti, as in Salvator Rosa's seventeenth-century images, for example. Yet this mysterious area is perhaps an admonitory image of the unproductive path, of the sin of letting the land simply be rather than actively cultivating it. It is not the route to a prosperous future.³¹ The lively concord presented by Gainsborough on the left, by contrast with what we might describe as the banal zone to the right, is that of a thriving pre-Anthropocene ecosystem, soon to be erased. If the positive path is clear in *Cornard Wood*, what are we to think and do in the face of Gerrard's emotionally flattened landscapes? *Farm* is superficially anodyne, yet in our post-Edward Snowden times, reminders of the mere extent of personal information housed and tilled in this and many other companies' and governments' facilities is chilling to many people. Gerrard's animations present failed yet dominant landscapes.



Figure 8.

Thomas Gainsborough, *Cornard Wood*, near Sudbury, Suffolk, 1748, oil on canvas, 122 × 155 cm. Collection of The National Gallery (NG925). Digital image courtesy of The National Gallery (Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

In *Western Flag (Spindletop, Texas)* (2017), commissioned for Earth Day, he cleverly and evocatively pictures a ragged “flag” created in the air by trails of smoke apparently burning off from oil extraction (Fig. 9). The flag is doubly immaterial, both visually ephemeral and a simulation. It graphically suggests the dilapidation and ebbing away of oil culture, one of the dominant and most negatively impactful of Anthropocene industries from an environmental perspective. While *Western Flag* goes to great lengths to look like a live feed from the Texas site named in its title—one of the most bountiful oil wells ever discovered, the Lucas Gusher, opened in 1901—it is important to know that this oil field is now abandoned, tapped out. While Gerrard and his assistants laboriously mapped this location, were we there, we would see no flag marking the triumphs of early twentieth-century oil exploration. Petroculture is past, he seems to claim, in Texas and globally. Our ongoing dependency on oil leaves an increasing ecological burden on the planet, as we see in *World Flag (Amazon, Danube, Nile, Yangtze)* (2017), which shows a polychrome, banner-like “flag” in the form of a gasoline spill rippling on the rivers named. *Western Flag* was first shown on a huge LED screen in the majestic Fountain Court of William Chambers’ Somerset House in London (Fig. 10). The importance of this siting is not easily overstated when we think of landscape painting and also the history of science and technology of which the oil industry is part. In 1780, the Royal Society located there, as did the Navy

Board in 1789. It was of course also the home of the Royal Academy from 1779–1857 and thus the locale for lessons in and exhibitions of landscape painting, most notably by J.M.W. Turner as both a student and professor. Today, it houses both the Courtauld Institute of Art and the Courtauld Galleries.

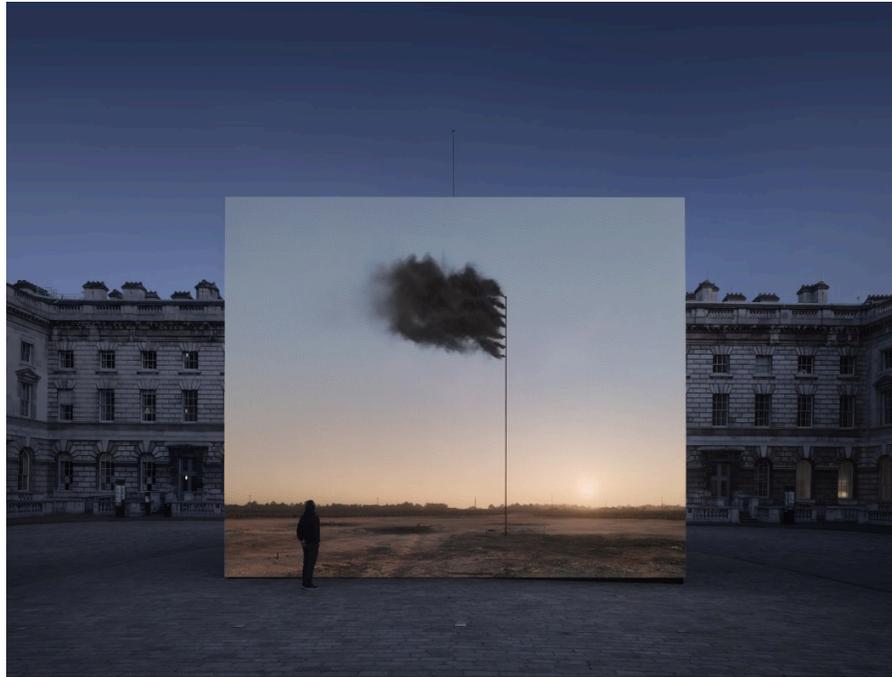


Figure 9.

John Gerrard, *Western Flag* (Spindletop, Texas), 2017, film, dimensions variable. Installed in the courtyard of Somerset House, London. Digital image courtesy of John Gerrard. DACS/Artimage 2018 and Thomas Dane Gallery, London and Simon Preston Gallery, New York. Photo: Will Pryce.

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Figure 10.

John Gerrard, *Western Flag* (Spindletop, Texas), realtime simulation, duration 24 hours. Digital image courtesy of Courtesy of John Gerrard (All rights reserved).

Parallel to the connection and distinction between weather as immediate, in contrast to climate conceived as protracted temporally and distributed on a planetary scale, the contemporary artworks discussed here elaborate singular phenomena—Starling’s sourcing of magnesium from the Dead Sea, for example—that have global ecological implications. Chris Drury’s cloud chambers are grounded on their sites, but that locale varies. *Western Flag* and *World Flag* are, like the environmental issues they raise, global in both inception and implication. On the most general plane, then, all landscape, land art, and eco art is of the same Earth. But as the profound resonances of *Western Flag* also suggest, environmental effects and crises are experienced

locally. The fact that *Western Flag* was at its first showing framed by elite British art and art history, past and present, offers an opportunity to ask why and to what advantage we discuss ecological landscape art in terms of a national tradition, a “locality” in this sense. Gerrard’s *Western Flag* was temporarily inscribed in the institutions and practices of British landscape. By loose analogy again, there is a reason for thinking about connections among a national tradition in Britain and both land and eco art projects that in whatever ways arise from these coordinates. I began by asking what the implications—the value—of comparing artistic practices on and about “landscape” by British artists over several centuries might be. One important task for eco art today is to present both specific environmental conditions “on the ground” and their global implications. A long, historical consideration of landscape practices—such as those implied by the specific siting of Gerrard’s *Western Flag*, combined with its allusions to the global networks of the petroleum industry—articulates this expansive view in a way that a focus on past landscape traditions or on contemporary eco art alone cannot.

Footnotes

- 1 For a detailed discussion of the interactions among these three categories, see Mark A. Cheetham, *Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature since the '60s* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018).
- 2 David Matless, “The Anthropocenic”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2017: 363–376. doi:[10.1111/tran.12173](https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12173).
- 3 See Jan Zalaciewicz et al., “The New World of the Anthropocene,” *Environmental Science & Technology* 44, no. 7 (2010): 228–231.
- 4 An exception to this “long” Anthropocene is the view held by Zalaciewicz and other scientists that the nuclear age is the preferred starting point: “Like any geological boundary, it is not a perfect marker—levels of global radiation really rose in the early 1950s, as salvoes of bomb tests took place. But it may be the optimal way to resolve the multiple lines of evidence on human-driven planetary change. Time—and much more discussion—will tell.” See University of Leicester, “Did the Anthropocene Begin with the Nuclear Age?” *ScienceDaily*, 15 January 2015, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/01/150115083044.htm. Accessed 22 March 2018. My argument, however, is not concerned with geologists’ definitive tracking and codification of anthropogenic traces in the Earth’s crust but instead with visual depictions of human effects on the land—a much longer articulation.
- 5 Jason W. Moore (ed.) *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).
- 6 Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene: Donna Haraway in Conversation with Martha Kenney”, in Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (eds), *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 255–270.
- 7 Jussi Parikka, *The Anthroscene* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
- 8 Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene”, 259.
- 9 Zoe Todd, “Indigenizing the Anthropocene”, in Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (eds), *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. London: Open Humanities Press, 244.
- 10 Clark, K. (1976 [1949]) *Landscape into Art* (London: John Murray, 1949; 2nd edn, 1976). Critiques include W.J.T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape”, in W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.), *Landscape and Power*, 2nd edn (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5–34.
- 11 Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape”, 5.
- 12 Cited in Joy Sleeman, “Nature, Like a Person, is not One-Sided: Robert Smithson in Search of the Picturesque in England, Wales, and Central Park”, *Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 58 (2012): 211.
- 13 All quotations from the artist are from his website: <http://chrisdrury.co.uk/>.
- 14 Long’s principled methodology is often cited and repeated, for example, see Patrick Barkham, “Interview: Richard Long: ‘I’m Proud of Being the First Person to Cross Dartmoor in a Straight Line’”, *The Guardian*, 16 April 2017, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/16/richard-long-earth-sky-houghton-hall-interview. Accessed 18 March 2018.
- 15 Chris Drury’s website: <http://chrisdrury.co.uk/>.

- 16 <http://chrisdrury.co.uk/>.
- 17 <http://chrisdrury.co.uk/>.
- 18 For a full discussion of this remarkable grotto, see Elizabeth Harvey and Mark A. Cheetham, "Obscure Imaginings: Visual Culture and the Anatomy of Caves", *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 105–126.
- 19 Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*. Translated by Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 29.
- 20 documenta 13 was in Kassel, Germany, 9 June–16 September 2012.
- 21 Attending this type of exhibition is the ongoing controversy about corporate sponsorship of exhibiting institutions by, for example, oil companies. For a full discussion, see Mel Evans, *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).
- 22 Simon Starling, "Clever Objects—Tell-Tale Objects: Simon Starling in Conversation with Christiane Rekade", *Art History* 36, no. 3 (June 2013): 648.
- 23 Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
- 24 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 7.
- 25 Alex Quicho, "Simon Starling in Conversation", *OCULA*, 13 April 2017, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/simon-starling/>. Accessed 18 October 2018 .
- 26 A relevant comparison is Chris Drury's canoe journey in 2009, which inspired his exhibit *Chris Drury: Land, Water and Language* (Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Arts Centre, Scotland, 2010). My thanks to one of the anonymous readers of this article for this information.
- 27 Cited in Jeff Campagna, "Q and A: Irish Artist John Gerrard", *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2010, www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/q-and-a-irish-artist-john-gerrard-4543615/. Accessed 22 March 2018.
- 28 See "Data Farming", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Data_farming. Accessed 21 March 2018.
- 29 Nicholas Forrest, "Interview: John Gerrard on His 'Slippery' Sims at Thomas Dane Gallery", Blouin Art Info, (United Kingdom), 16 February 2015, <http://uk.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1103413/interview-john-gerrard-on-his-slippery-sims-at-thomas-dane#sthash.lDQaD1MC.dpuf>. Accessed 21 March 2018.
- 30 Ian Waites, *Common Land in English Painting* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press), 46.
- 31 My thanks to David Solkin for aspects of this reading.

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