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## ***Historical Art, Ecology, and Implication***

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For fifteen years, I have researched, published, lectured, and taught about art and ecology, focusing on contemporary contexts as well as historical work produced long before Ernst Haeckel coined “ecology” (*Oecologie*) in 1866, and prior to the emergence of modern environmentalism. After doing collaborative American projects for a while, I am now writing a new monograph broaching interpretation in a broader and deeper context. With the title *Implication: Theory and Practice in Ecocritical Art History*, my book ponders what global historical art can reveal about ecological relationships, even in the absence of “ecology” as a word and concept. Historical art also raises interesting questions about current environmentalism, including contemporary activist scholarship, which often recycles idealist conceptions of nature and representation. My argument builds upon historical and philosophical work by Raymond Williams, Ramachandra Guha, William Cronon, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Timothy Morton, Walter Mignolo, and Steven Vogel, among others. These scholars, in revealing nature and the related concept of wilderness to be overdetermined Western cultural constructs, have forcefully critiqued them and even called for their abandonment in favor of an anti-idealist, transnational, and trans-species ecological ethics.

Yet today, others seek to impose rigid ideological expectations and formal constraints on artistic practice in pursuit of utopian imperatives. Rendering the globe as a theater of binary abstractions (Global North, Global South), activist rhetoric often reifies nature as a category of otherness—a pristine place of alterity from which the *colonus* (after the Latin *colere*, meaning “to farm or cultivate”) must somehow be extracted and uprooted in order to restore a precolonial, pre-cultivated state of being. Such thinking rekindles a type of romantic idealism criticized long ago by the geographer William Denevan as “the pristine myth” for its historical amnesia about the environmental transformations wrought by ancient Indigenous communities.<sup>1</sup> To dream of returning to a pristine state of purity is to imagine, falsely, a world without implication—a world from which it is ostensibly possible to obtain a privileged position of objective distance. Art and ecology insistently prove otherwise. Another troubling trend in recent environmental scholarship entails a radical narrowing of admissible artistic strategies and formal possibilities. Disparaging formal experimentation and abstraction, such scholarship often endorses representation and narrative as privileged modes for addressing ecological inequities. This threatens to impoverish and instrumentalize art while inadvertently mirroring the normalizing impulses that environmentalism claims to oppose.

I prefer an approach suggested by Morton, who says all art—“not just explicitly ecological art—hardwires the environment into its *form*.” For Morton, art “isn’t just *about* something

(trees, mountains, animals, pollution, and so forth),” it “is something” and “does something” (emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup> I think historical art does something ecologically significant with form by revealing implication (from the Latin *implicare*, meaning to entwine)—an intractable state of entanglement, interconnection, and mutual responsibility. Art of the past discloses implication through various forms, not just (seemingly) transparent representational critiques of environmental injustice, but also subtler maneuvers of divulgence, display, and defamiliarization.<sup>3</sup> Creative diversity and biodiversity should go hand in hand.

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<sup>1</sup> William M. Denevan, “The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82, no. 3 (1992): 369-85.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>3</sup> On ecocritical defamiliarization, see Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher, *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 9.