

# Ecology > Landscape

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During a recent trip to Paris coinciding with COP21, the 2015 United Nations Climate Change conference, I viewed a striking contemporary art installation at the Palais de Tokyo that prompted critical reflection about the meaning and value of "landscape" in an era of planetary ecological disruption. [1] Titled simply Exit, the installation consisted of a forty-five-minute multimedia display projected on the wall of a darkened circular gallery. It surrounded viewers with maps, figures, texts, and sounds that collectively offered a "visual representation of the world's population in motion" (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> Pixels of color morphed from the shape of one national flag to another, signifying millions of euros in remittances sent by immigrants to family members back home; flowing streams of variously hued dots represented hundreds of thousands of displaced refugees; and the names of several dozen densely populated coastal cities suddenly submerged with a splashing sound, denoting the anticipated impact of polar ice melt and the rise of ocean elevations due to global warming by the year 2100. The static image reproduced here hardly captures the dynamic complexity of the installation or its visual and sonic impact, a fact that raises questions about the limits of representation and scholarly analysis. Is it desirable, or even possible, for art to depict "political, economic and environmental forces"? What future, if any, does

conventional landscape representation have in a world increasingly shaped by global ecological systems and environmental politics?

While viewing *Exit*, I remembered earlier attempts to visualize environmental information on a large scale, including nineteenth-century panoramas and grand landscape paintings such as Thomas Moran's *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* (1872, Smithsonian American Art Museum), an enormous work marking the creation of the first national park in the United States. [4] Compared with *Exit*, however, that kind of historical image now seemed quaint, static, selective, and politically regressive. Whereas *Exit* drew attention to disenfranchised populations forced to "exit" their native lands amid social and ecological disruption, *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* celebrated human dislocation—in the form of Indian removal—as an inevitable fact of Manifest Destiny. In the foreground of Moran's huge picture, the figure of a Native American turns his back on the sublime landscape, signifying aesthetic ignorance and justifying his dispossession, while a white man standing next to him points to the natural spectacle in a possessive gesture of aesthetic admiration. Inverting the imperialism of Moran's painting, *Exit* critically traces patterns of human dispossession and dislocation on a planetary scale in order to raise consciousness and prompt ethical action on behalf of the displaced. It may seem unfair to compare works representing different historical moments and

disparate media, but I do so nonetheless because nineteenth-century landscape painting remains the go-to genre for "ecological" rumination in American art history, despite its political implications and the fact that the word "ecology" entered the English language only in the 1870s. [ 5]

Landscape painting can actually hinder ecological understanding when it idealizes "Nature" as a distant, exalted aesthetic object removed from human experience and history- a familiar effect of pictures in the Hudson River School tradition that represent rural and mountain scenes largely untouched by modernity<sup>6</sup> For the ecological philosopher Timothy Morton, traditional landscape imagery reinforces a stark nature/culture dichotomy The gallery of Nature is a special kind of private property, without an owner: "Keep off the Grass, Do Not Touch, Not for Sale." [ 7]

The trouble that Morton identifies with landscape aesthetics recalls the historian William Cronon's critique of "the trouble with wilderness," as it fosters nostalgic longing for "Nature" as a place apart, segregated from our ordinary habitats, which consequently suffer from neglect, degradation, and environmental injustice. [ 8] In 1972 the artist Robert Smithson even advocated "the end of landscape painting," because he viewed "Nature as a physical dialectic rather than a representational condition." [ 9] Smithson, Cronon, and Morton share a growing suspicion of landscape painting's propensity for

reducing the world to a picture when, understood ecologically, it is much more complex. After all, land constitutes only part of a planetary ecosystem that also includes built environments, oceans, atmospheres, solar radiation, invisible energies, nonhumans, social relationships, and many other things. Even the most meticulous, large-format landscape pictures-like those of Moran or the contemporary photographer Andreas Gursky-inevitably select, freeze, or overlook details and connections animating the vital mesh of forces that Exit's creators, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, more fully and critically visualized in their collaborative, interdisciplinary presentation.

Of course, Exit had its own limitations. The installation's emphasis on abstract statistical data left out concrete, material experience faced by individual migrants in particular circumstances. It also conjured the totalizing impulses of the panopticonan unfortunate but unavoidable comparison in light of the display's circular arrangement.[ [10](#)] Finally, Exit imagined migration almost exclusively in humanistic terms, with no mention of the Sixth Extinction of nonhuman species, many of which are being forced by global warming, deforestation, and other environmental disruptions to relocate from habitats in which they evolved over millennia.[ [11](#)] With its anthropocentrism, Exit constitutes a kind of mirror reversal of **Maya Lin's What Is Missing?** (fig. 2), an online, interactive, global memorial to extinct and endangered

species that largely ignores human beings, except as agents of biodiversity loss. [ [12](#) ]

Where does all this leave us? Contrary to the distancing, reifying, and idealizing conventions of landscape aesthetics, ecology is about interconnectedness and political implication. Recent work on "critical landscapes" is certainly welcome, but ecological artists, scholars, and activists may need to abandon the default genre of landscape in favor of something expansively transnational, transspecies, and transzonal that avoids nostalgic references to a pristine "Nature." [ [13](#) ] Imagine creatively merging *Exit* and *What Is Missing?* into a multimedia work of environmental justice writ large, at once well informed about macrolevel ecological complexities yet also attentive to the microperspectives of specific stakeholders (human and nonhuman) in a variety of locales. That's asking a lot of art, but ecology is greater than landscape, so let's act accordingly.

1 *Rising Seas and Sinking Cities*, from *Exit*, 2015.

Multimedia installation © Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Mark Hansen, Laura Kurgan, and Ben Rubin, in collaboration with Stewart Smith and Robert Gerard Pietrusko. Photo: Luc Boegly

2 Maya Lin, *What Is Missing? Ocean Acidification*, ongoing. Online memorial © Maya Lin Studio, Courtesy Pace Gallery

1 *The Palais de Tokyo installation participated in ARTCOP21, "a global festival of cultural activity on climate change," <http://www.artcop21.com/>.*

2 *Opening statement, Exit installation, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, viewed by author on December 7, 2015. The installation was created by the American architecture and design firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro, with inspiration from the French philosopher Paul Virilio and collaborative input from an interdisciplinary team of artists, scientists, and statisticians.*

3 *Ibid.*

4 *See <http://americanart.si.edu/images/L/L.1968.84.l%5Fla.jpg>.*

5 *The word "ecology" first appeared in Ernst Haeckel, *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (Berlin: Reimer, 1866), 286-87. On its English language dissemination, see Astrid Schwarz and Kurt Jax, eds., *Ecology Revisited: Reflecting on Concepts, Advancing Science* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 145-53. On Moran, see, for example, Peter H. Hassrick, "Yellowstone, Art, and the Emergence of Aesthetic Conservation," *Yellowstone Science* 13, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 5-14. Regarding *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* and Native American dispossession, see Angela L. Miller, "The Fate of Wilderness in American Landscape Art: The Dilemmas of 'Nature's Nation,'" in *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art**

*History*, ed. Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2009), 101-6. On the "ecological" activity of Frederic Edwin Church-in landscape design, not painting-see Jennifer Raab, *Frederic Church: The Art and Science of Detail* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2015), 17, 175-78.

6 Some scholars argue that Thomas Cole's art forcefully critiqued deforestation and economic development. See, for example, Alan Wallach, "Thomas Cole's River in the Catskills as Antipastoral," *Art Bulletin* 84, no. 2 (June 2002): 334-50. I find the artist's work to be ambiguous and prone to contradiction. Braddock and Irmscher, introduction to *Keener Perception*, 5-9.

7 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010), 5-6.

8 William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W W Norton & Co., 1995), 69-90.

9 Robert Smithson, "Letter to John Dixon" (1972), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996), 377

10 Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 195-228.

11 Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014).

12 *What Is Missing?*, <http://www.whatismissing.net/>; and "Maya Lin's 'Last Memorial' Honors 'What Is Missing,'" *Climate in Context* (blog), *Climate Central*, August 6, 2012, <http://www.climatecentral.org/blogs/maya-lins-last-memorial-honors-what-is-missing>.

13 Emily Eliza Scott and Kirsten Swenson, eds., *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics* (Oakland: Univ. of California Press, 2015).

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