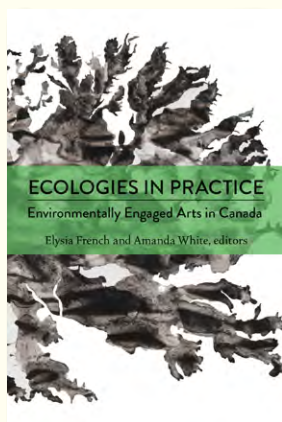


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- 1 Alison Cooley, Amy Luo, and Caoimhe Morgan-Feir, "Canada's Galleries Fall Short: The Not-So Great White North," *Canadian Art*, April 21, 2015, <https://canadianart.tempurl.host/features/canadas-galleries-fall-short-the-not-so-great-white-north/>.
- 2 Michael Maranda, "Hard Numbers: A Study on Diversity in Canada's Galleries," *Canadian Art*, April 5, 2017, <https://canadianart.ca/features/art-leadership-diversity/>.



Elysia French and Amanda White, eds.
Ecologies in Practice: Environmentally Engaged Arts in Canada

Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2024
302 pp., 22 illus., some colour
\$44.99 (paper) ISBN 9781771126120

/ *Isabelle Gapp* /

As the climate crisis intensifies, the importance of place-based, microscale research becomes ever more urgent. As art critic, curator, and activist Lucy Lippard observed, "Local landscapes reflect global crises"¹—a principle that guides *Ecologies in Practice*, edited by Elysia French and Amanda White. Yet this collection goes further than Lippard's idea to ask not just how the local reflects the global, but how place-based artistic practices might act as environmental interventions in their own right. In the Canadian context, where environmental realities are deeply entangled with ongoing settler-colonial histories and cultural politics, this approach proves particularly generative.

Ecologies in Practice brings together the voices of artists, scholars, curators, writers, and educators who explore how art can respond to, reflect on, and intervene in the layered environmental and cultural crises of our time. Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, French and White frame the book as a "toolkit" (11), a set of "roadmaps" (1) for reimagining how artistic practice can be a form of environmental engagement. In doing so, the book contributes to the growing field of scholarship at the intersection of art, ecology, and research-creation, emphasizing praxis as a mode of ethical and situated inquiry. Its approach aligns with work by Natalie Loveless, who frames research-creation as a critical method in times of ecological crisis,² and T.J. Demos, who highlights the role of contemporary art in challenging dominant environmental narratives.³ Within *Ecologies in Practice*, contributors collectively demonstrate ways of being-with, learning-through, and creating-in-response to varied, often inter-connected ecologies.

Structured around four themes—Interrupt, Witness, (Re)Place, and Reflect—*Ecologies in Practice* takes a holistic approach to what French and White term "environmentally engaged arts." Yet the strength of *Ecologies in Practice* lies less in its editorial structure than in the thematic resonances that emerge organically across its contributions. This review draws out these emergent themes: pedagogical practices and knowledge transmission; scale and relationality (individual/collective, local/global); and loss, renewal, and the ethics of witnessing. These themes will resonate with a broad audience, particularly those scholars interested in the environmental humanities and place-based creative research, who are looking to incorporate environmentally engaged arts into their own research, practices, and pedagogies.

In their interview-style chapter on "Dirty Nature," David Huebert and Tom Cull reflect on the persistent binaries that they are repeatedly faced with in their teaching. "Wild/civilization" and "nature/culture" (33) are identified as the two that most often rear their heads in the humanities and require consistent disruption when faced with environments that are instead polluted, corroded, or wasting away. Huebert and Cull explore how environmental change disrupts the classroom, using pedagogy, creative writing,

and activism to challenge binary thinking. The pedagogical emphasis appears again in Mary Ann Steggles's discussion of sustainability in ceramics education. Here, questions of material sourcing—where the fuel for kilns comes from, or the impact of mining metal oxides—become entry points for thinking about how creative practices themselves might shift in response to ecological realities. Like Huebert and Cull, Steggles ends by foregrounding student projects, offering a hopeful model for how sustainable thinking can be embedded in the act of making. The classroom, as several chapters suggest, becomes a critical site of resistance—a space for cultivating sustainable methodologies and nurturing an environmental ethics through creative practice.

Another recurring theme is the tension between individual and collective action. Camille Georgeson-Usher first introduces us to “the act of gathering,” where “we might get a sense for how we move through the world collectively although in our own universes” (27). Georgeson-Usher writes that, within the work of Skwxwú7mesh/Sto:lo/Hawaiian/Swiss artist and ethnobotanist T'uy't'tanat-Cease Wyss, the urban and community garden allows audiences to “imagine otherwise” (29), to explore what living in harmony with plant and animal nations might look and feel like. Ellyn Walker further writes of curating shared experiences between human and ecological “living relations” (51) with a focus on Canada. Reflecting on her own curatorial practice, Walker describes her “methodology of curatorial intertextuality,” whereby “multiple perspectives, stories, histories, and voices can be woven together and made to coexist” (54). In a time of ecological crisis, our conception of community must become more expansive.

Implicating oneself in the environment is a recurrent approach in how many of the chapters confront their engagement with the land. Writing about the ongoing project *seeds are meant to disperse*, Christina Battle unearths how the seeds she collects are grown, saved, and shared “to encourage and support alternative systems of exchange” (66). Battle reflects on the role of the individual in what is saved, noting her “own relationship to the seeds I select and the impact my actions have” (71). In a time of climate crisis, the question becomes: what do we choose to save, and what do we lose?

Similarly, “Carbon Study: walking in the Dark,” by Genevieve Robertson, whose work also graces the book's cover, foregrounds the embodied act of drawing with found, processed, and excavated materials as a mode of environmental witnessing. These works are, as she writes, “more spectres than specimens” (98), gesturing toward the loss that underlies even acts of regeneration. By “collecting, excavating, processing and drawing with found materials” (98), drawings with coal, charcoal, and graphite are made from the remnants of forest fires. Robertson writes that it is the role of the artist to call attention to ecological loss, of “locating oneself in [...] the darkness of ecological breakdown” (98). Loss and change, or “aftermath and regeneration” as photographer and educator Andreas Rutkauskas writes in his chapter “After the Fire,” are unavoidable themes in environmentally engaged arts. And yet, while artists such as Edward Burtynsky typically approach scorched landscapes from a large-scale, God's eye viewpoint, Rutkauskas' work and writing challenge “wildfire aesthetics” (157). He brings us closer to the land, adopting a grounded and human-scale vantage point, where ecological damage, loss, and cycles of renewal can be intimately seen and felt.

This ripple effect of change and loss, which Georgeson-Usher likens to chaos theory, is also taken up by Lisa Hirmer in her essay on passenger pigeons; with the once-abundant pigeons now extinct, oak forests have suffered, and invasive insects have taken root. She references the butterfly effect, the unintended consequences of our actions. Leah Decter's poem, visualised along a red thread that winds across pages and places, speaks to human displacement and loss of connection to the land. Art bears witness to environments and communities rendered extinct or under threat.

The attentiveness of *Ecologies in Practice* to Indigenous, Black, feminist, and marginalized perspectives is among its strengths as it repeatedly foregrounds the entanglements of culture and community, environment and local knowledge. Other contributions, like Maria Michails's “Mapping Narratives: Methods and Entanglements of Social Practice,” explore environmental trauma through a community-based lens—here, the transportation of crude oil is not an isolated issue but embedded in a web of

histories, stories, and local-global connections. Sensory experiments and oral histories offer collective and accessible methods of exploring and engaging communities in their environments. Michails's work is echoed by Dona Prieto's chapter on her photographic work *1:10000* (2018–23), which expands the national framework implied in the book's title by exposing the entanglement of Canadian mining practices in the global South. Such work resists the idea that the "local" can ever be disentangled from broader geopolitical and settler-colonial systems.

Natalie Doonan's chapter on immersive, sensory experience further complicates static understandings of place. Through virtual reality and site-specific practices, Doonan proposes that "space is not static and unchanging, but dynamic and relational" (135). She explores how simultaneous virtual and in-situ experiences might foster a "self-reflexive engagement of the entire sensorium" (135), enabling a deeper connection to place. A similar sensorial ethic informs Emma Morgan-Thorp's "Listening in Place," where listening becomes a shared, communal act—an attunement not just to sound but to the conditions that make hearing (and being heard) possible (169). Morgan-Thorp advocates for "deep, humble, and open listening" (270), an accessible practice for many.

Where Georgeson-Usher opened with a call to gathering, Emily McGiffin, in the last chapter, walks us through the (attempted) creation of a shared creative space. How do we work and create together and ensure that we are a *part* of the human, more-than-human, and environmental community in which we find ourselves? How do we ensure that our practices (creative, literary, political, or otherwise) are sustainable, not least environmentally but also in a way that ensures local longevity? Art, community, and environment are inextricably bound together. We must remain cognizant of the profound effect creative thinking can have in times of environmental change.

Throughout *Ecologies in Practice*, what resonates most strongly is the idea that environmental knowledge is not separate from the act of living. Whether through ceramics, seeds, sound, or drawing, each contribution offers a way of being with ecologies—human and more-than-human, remembered and disappearing, local and

global. This orientation is particularly relevant in a time when environmental loss can feel abstract or overwhelming or geographically removed. While the volume's geographical focus is on Canada, this national framing is not limiting. The contributors to this volume return our attention to the small scale, the local, the everyday, and the relational. *Ecologies in Practice* is a timely, necessary contribution to conversations on how artists navigate, resist, and remake ecologies in a time of crisis.

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- 1 Lucy R. Lippard, *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (The New Press, 2019), 109.
- 2 Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Duke University Press, 2019).
- 3 T.J. Demos, *Beyond the World's End: Arts of Living at the Crossing* (Duke University Press, 2020).