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A Role for Art in Ecological Thought

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Abstract

This article redresses an oversight in current eco-theory that offers no means for revising still-persistent conceptions of nature and the natural. It proposes an *ecologizing* mode of analysis as one corrective. Throughout the essay is an attempt to redeem the human, the artificial, and with them, the city. The argument discovers along the way that in order to profess its non-existence, one must name and thus reify nature, a linguistic curiosity that makes clearer the extent of nature's ideological reach. This *reflexive foil* should be taken into consideration by those who find the persistence of nature troubling to the future of eco-theory and eco-awareness.

Keywords

nature, art, eco-art, ideology, Levi R. Bryant, Timothy Morton, Slavoj Žižek, Ren Jie

In response to the troubling ecological circumstances in their region, China's artists have made the environment a concern central to their work. Outstanding examples include Cai Guo Qiang's large-scale painting *The Bund without Us*, which depicts Shanghai's renowned historic riverfront reclaimed by nature and teeming with wild animals centuries after human beings have inexplicably vanished. And Zheng Bo's many photographs of Shanghai industrial sites overtaken by subtropical vegetative growth (Leo Xu Projects) complement his 2015 installation *Weed Party*, for which he re-erected in a Shanghai gallery a building's exterior wall—complete with graffiti and bill postings—surrounding it with live, thriving weeds. "Homo sapiens may finally come to respect the vanguardism of weeds," Zheng says, "which have always tried to pull us into a rewilded future" (Leo Xu Projects n. pag.). He refers to large-scale projects like "Rewilding Europe," an attempt to return sizeable tracts of land back to their pre-agrarian (and thus, pre-urban) states (Kolbert n. pag.). Grand efforts to this end include the re-introduction of now extinct Paleolithic species through back-breeding, the mating of Paleolithic-like examples of an existing species until a sufficiently pre-agrarian offspring is achieved.

Ironically, the rewilling agenda is as "unnatural" as any brightly lit alloy cityscape, the prefixes *re* and *back* calling attention to its engineered artificiality. The motives for such projects rely on a now dated logic juxtaposing anything human—including culture, artifice, and by all means the city—against a fantastical conception of old grande dame *Natura*, never purer than when she is farthest from the grit and grime of human reach. Socio-ecological schemes like rewilling have as their aesthetic counterparts a particular species of eco-arts, more examples of which I cover below, that relies on a troubled understanding of the natural which time and again suggests misanthropic, human special—as in *species*—self-loathing.¹ This attitude transfers from religion to ecology the notion of the Fall, Adam and Eve's fateful defiance that barred humanity from the balanced and harmonious garden, and thrust us into a savage world in which Abel, the innocent shepherd, who evaded the corruptions of urban life by wandering with his flock and living close to nature, was murdered by Cain, the farmer, and thus, according to the ancient line of thinking, the representative of technologically savvy urban dwellers. An environmentalist religiosity must lean on the fulcrum of a divinized and therefore problematic *Natura*, the persistent, classical formation that stands not only for birds, trees, and mountains,

¹ Three forms of misanthropy, the hatred of humans, have been identified in the context of nature: the misanthrope's use of the wilderness to escape other humans, the assumption that humans harm the wilderness, and the position that humans can only relate to nature in negative ways (Gerber). Cai and Zheng situate humanity in a manner conforming to all three.

not only for complex systems biological, chemical, and physical, but also as the marker of human personhood (in the form of immutable metaphysical essence) and arbiter of human behavior (which deems some actions unnatural and thus criminal).² As a signifier with a near endless range of signifieds, it is no wonder that nature has, according to many eco-theoretical proposals, not only exhausted its ecological usefulness but also presented itself as a potentially dangerous fallacious distraction.

I take a cue from recent, popularized eco-theory that locates both this misguided thought-habit and a possible solution to it in the influence of the arts (Morton, *Ecology* 29–78, 140–205), but wishing to avoid engagement with any eco-art pre-packaged with problematic environmentalist messages, I seek out the ecological on more unlikely terrain. As seen in the image (Fig. 1), Shanghai and Hangzhou, China, artist Ren Jie composes her installation *Trail, Reflection, Lonely* of dipping, rising, and lilting string, a spare abstraction that tempts us to see within it, first, the shape of a human hand (if one missing fingers),³ and then the resemblance of a distant, silhouetted mountain range. If this reading doesn't seem forced it is only because in an ecological context we expect to find what interests the conventional environmentalist eye. Mountains do the job nicely. And yet might this game of flipper-box—of holding one eye closed to reveal one shape, then holding closed the other eye to reveal another—might it not suggest an intrusive laying of human hands upon an unsullied natural vista, and if so only restrict us to more questionable aggrandizements of the natural world at the expense of our species? Is there not some other way that we may begin to glean in such a work something of ecological import? Or better asked: Is there not a way that the work of art—*Trail, Reflection, Lonely* or any other work—might permit us to fashion an analysis tailor-made for the present moment in eco-theory?

² These are senses of nature and the natural in which Cronon's classic figure of wilderness as but a mirror turned to humanity—reflecting not the actual wild but our own needs—is applicable.

³ I am grateful to an anonymous reader for this interpretation.



Fig. 1. Ren Jie, *Trail, Reflection, Lonely*. Used by Permission.

Ecologizing will stand for rendering ecological that which only appears to remain outside the purview of ecological issues, finding in an object of analysis a jumping off place or point of departure from which we may begin to explore more intimately the many parts at play within the now less than useful over-generalization, nature. The application of critical pressure to what would otherwise remain unexamined in eco-theory familiarizes us with the material systems and processes that make up our natural habitat, in this way distancing us further from faith-oriented ecological Falls. Ren Jie's piece permits us to question more deeply than before the mythic garden itself. "Nature doesn't exist" (Žižek, "Censorship" Part 1 n. pag.), we

have heard, and “Down with nature!” (Morton, *Ecology* 13), we have heard even more loudly. But such prominent voices have not yet hazarded a guess as to just how we might begin the process of what will amount to nothing less than ideological revision. This is a glaring oversight. If a radical upset of *nature* and the *natural* as we have always understood them is to mark the next phase of ecological consciousness, as I agree that it should, then a deliberate attempt at re-directing our thinking about our habitat, about how we *conceive* of that habitat, must be counted among the issues of importance at the present time. To many savvy ecocritics my focus on nature as a problematic myth may seem an unnecessary whipping boy long-since dealt with in the criticism. And yet, each semester when my students are asked the simple question, “What is nature?,” from their answers emerges a personification, quite literary, with no causal relationship to humanity, or which existed only before the proliferation of our species, or which exists presently but apart from human culture. Apparently, the causal, temporal, and spatial separation of the natural from the human was not sufficiently mended with the ecocriticism of the past, so we must re-fit these strains of conversation to meet present needs, one being the need for a process by which we tailor conceptions of ecology for the long twenty-first century ahead.⁴

Thus this essay poses the question: how might we even begin to *think* nature (and the ideological freight that comes with it) out of the conceptual lexicon? Rendering ecological that which at first glance does not speak to ecological matters allows me to embark on a project of de-familiarizing what is still all too commonly taken for granted either as natural or artificial.⁵ Specifically, the present essay gleans from Ren Jie’s installation the ecological significances of one of the primary orders of nature, space, for as Timothy Morton once succinctly put it: “in order to have an environment, you have to have a space to have it in” (“Why” 54), a seemingly simple comment masking a profundity deserved of attention in the following pages. Addressing the assumed divides between the natural and the human, the artificial, and by extension, the city, ecologizing *Trail*, *Reflection*, *Lonely* accents the physical principles and ecological nuances shared by her piece and that urban artifice of spatial

⁴ We are hardly finished with the topic of nature. Beyond Morton and Žižek, Lawrence Buell (*Prismatic* xi), Jeffrey J. Cohen (*Prismatic* xxii-iii), and Levi Bryant (*Prismatic* 296-97, 300, and throughout) have recently addressed the persistence of nature. And though different from my own, their terms ask us to take on the concept with fresh thinking.

⁵ An intense line of critical de-familiarizing is already underway within a diverse circle of eco-theorists responsible for a range of influential essays in collections like Cohen, *Prismatic Ecology*; Cohen and Duckert, *Elemental Ecocriticism*; and, of course, Iovino and Opperman, *Material Ecocriticism*. Without explicitly intending to, each of these works proactively scrutinizes and reinvents our conceptions of the natural.

relations, architecture.⁶ The scope of this argument, itself a widely arcing environ, draws primarily on the work of three philosophers, Timothy Morton, Levi Bryant, and Slavoj Žižek, both to hazard an example of an ecologizing approach to critique and to suggest the ecological redemption of the city through the architecture that is so central to it.

The Bund without Us and *Weed Party* are but two examples of a particular species of eco-arts that gives aesthetic voice to the misanthropic urges still present in otherwise well-intended and ecologically inclined work. Beyond these pieces, consider much of the work of Mary Mattingly. Her *House and Universe*, an arresting photo of a nude body lying under a twine-bound ball of garbage, does not distinguish the human from the trash but both the human and human products from a supposed natural purity the trash defiles. And then there are Jo Coupe's "metaphors for life and death," her compelling lead casts of live plants, which blur the boundary between nature and artifice but only to accent the unhealthy intrusion of the latter ("In Pictures" n. pag.). And just before unveiling *The Bund without Us*, Cai Guo Qiang sailed a barge loaded with 99 human-size stuffed animals past Shanghai's Bund. An image difficult to forget, some hung over the railing "as though seasick from the currents of our times" ("Artist Reimagines" n. pag.), Cai said, while most languished above the polluted Huangpu River he wished to draw attention to. Functionally, these works offer something equal to an aesthetically and conceptually fetching public service announcement about our troubled relationship with the world we inhabit. And yet it is in this role that their shades of self-flagellation establish our ontological distance from the very habitat we seek to draw closer to. Such thinking reifies again and again an Edenic nature that is always "over there," "over yonder" (Morton, *Ecological 3*), and impossibly other from ourselves (Žižek, "Censorship" Part 2 n. pag.). Each of these works—artfully mature, strangely beautiful, and unquestionably disturbing—speaks to a still-tenacious self-effacement. They appeal directly to our guilt over what we have done to a divinized, salvific conception of the natural. The following analysis of Ren's *Trail, Reflection, Lonely* points to another possible avenue for critique of such conceptions.

Viewing the image of the piece, one recognizes right away a first point of departure: the installation's reliance on the catenary curve to make the sloping shapes

⁶ After an illustration of this mode of critique, I conclude by likening it to the biomimicry—the "emulat[ion of] nature's forms and processes to create more sustainable technologies" (Schwan 20)—now growing in popularity in design circles. (Examples include heating and cooling air-duct systems based on the efficient branching patterns found in anything from trees to the human lung.) The application of a biomimicry-like critique particularizes nature, making clearer the many signifieds that are otherwise missed in our overuse of a too large term.

of its strings. From *catena*, chain, the catenary describes the natural curve of any chain, string, or line of cable allowed to hang from both ends by its own weight. This simple curve accounts for a range of architectures, from the single cable suspension bridge, always sloping as a catenary curve, to the impressive arches and domes for which it is most well-known. In Shanghai, China, the exposed cables in Pudong International Airport's interior roofing wed form and function to reveal a suspension apparatus that arcs according to the same principles. The curve is also employed so that its structures appear shaped by climactic or geological forces, such as the sloping rooftops of the Yoyogi National Gymnasium and the Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defense, while the Olympic Stadium in Munich and Denver International Airport rise in regular intervals, steep but smooth, resembling the peaks of mountains tipping out of high altitude clouds. Unsurprisingly, the curve has been praised for its "organic" beauty and associated with nature (Natural Builders n. pag.). Descriptions like these—admittedly, including my own—are faintly congruent to the supposed balance-of-nature, especially depictions of it as machine-like, which is an anthropocentrism that finds its coordinate in celebrations of the catenary's naturalness and its qualities of "perfect equilibrium" (Jefferson 419).⁷ Such idealizations exemplify the very mental habits an ecologizing mode of thought challenges.

Ren Jie's gracefully erratic peaks and slopes trouble fantasies of balance and equilibrium, and describe what amounts to the muse of the architect's labors for millennia: a more effective way to span distances. The problem of distance and the solution of artificially spanning it recall, perhaps surprisingly, the tease of spatial relations, the near and the far, in Walter Benjamin's definition of aura as "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be" (222). Benjamin's illustration of the uniqueness of the original work of art apply to the identification of primitivistic forms of ecology, which also tend to fetishize origins—a state of nature—either in an outright pursuit of Edenic utopias, or in the much subtler disparagement of human technology and its myriad products.⁸ In fact, the problem boils down to fetishizing harmonious man-and-nature origins, origins that likely never existed and, even if they

⁷ Criticisms of the still widespread belief in the balance of nature are many. Bryant offers a recent and insightful treatment focused on positive and negative feedback loops in the food chain (*Prismatic* 290-91).

⁸ Although he appears to intend otherwise, when Etienne Turpin places human architecture "in the archive of deep time" (5), he suggests humanity's undesirable mark on the natural world and conjures images of a nature returning to its pre-human origins with the ruins of skyscrapers still standing, if partially consumed by the righteous Earth (an image that speaks of both Cai's *The Bund without Us* and Zheng's *Weed Party*).

did, can certainly never be returned to. This is the aura of nature expressed in Jo Coupe's fern cast in lead ("In Pictures" n. pag.), which suggests the nearness of *Natura* that is also so far away. Benjamin's elaboration of aura proves helpful: "Unapproachability is indeed a major quality of the cult image. True to its nature, it remains 'distant however close it may be'" (243 n.5). By "cult image" Benjamin means the culture of belief that forms around a sacred, original work of art, quite near but untouchable. Likewise, distance and unapproachability respectively fashion both a mythic nature and the human self-loathing juxtaposed against it. Benjamin may rely on what are only spatial figures, distance and nearness, but figures allude to and also create realities. In fact, spatial figures play a role in Morton's illustration of an ambient poetics, the mode of environmental literature that re-creates a "fantasy space" (*Ecology* 67), a "circumambient, or surrounding, world" (33). In his description of ambience, the figures background and foreground (47), inside and outside (48), space versus place (49), internal and external (51), and the liminal "in-between" (51), all amount to powerful spatial allusions that distance us from the natural spaces we wish to describe or reproduce. The tendency to regard it as "other" is what appraises nature at a cult value rivaling Benjamin's original work of art.

An alternate ecological consideration might note how the artifice of architecture takes fantastically infinite space (after all, *where* does it end?) and mimetically suggests its finitude. By this I mean that the boundaries of structures and built environments offer the representational impression of a finite natural space. A finite space recalls the limits of the area we share with the other organisms that make up our web of material, environmental dependencies. And without getting entangled in postmodern semantics, it quietly ponders our *place* in that finitude.⁹ Accepting Henri Lefebvre's classic formulation that no social relation exists "save in and through space" (404), this ecological consideration of architecture extends the relations from human society to non-human life and even non-life. It also acknowledges that spatial finitude lies at the crux of indigenous rights, property law, the tragedy of the commons, urbanization, and urban gentrification, all of which speak of limited habitable domains and thus are at their core issues as environmental as the Air Quality Index, fair trade black beans, and spring water with high mineral content. "For in order to have an environment, you have to have a space to have it in" (Morton, "Why" 54).

⁹ The historical problem with the distinction between space and place is its tendency to retain binary thinking, with space representing the objective, or natural, and place the subjective, human, domain. On this tendency, Morton (*Ecology* 49) cites Harvey (243, 246).

More than merely instrumentalizing the work of art, ecologizing Ren Jie's *Trail, Reflection, Lonely* demonstrates how the artificial provides an important mediation to our understanding of nature. Note how Ren has arranged the piece, its simple lengths of string dangling from plastic fasteners, in a manner conspicuously two-dimensional for an installation that is, for a genre typically so pronounced in its three-dimensional distinction from the hanging canvas and framed photograph neighboring it in a gallery. In most cases, an installation wants us to note this substantial presence, its thingy-ness sharply accented by its composition of actual objects. Ren's installation somehow succeeds in achieving an illusory flatness in its resemblance to a lined figure sketched on the wall. The expectation of three-dimensions, the illusion of two-dimensions, these qualities couple with the catenary's architectural nuances and speak for the piece's projections of spaciousness, environmentality, perimeter, territory, and presence. Morton's brief comment linking space and the environment has provided a touchstone thus far in this essay, and deserves to be quoted in full: "For in order to have an environment, one must have a space to have it in. And in order to have environmental awareness, one must be aware of space as more than just a vacuum. One must start taking note of, taking care of, one's world" ("Why" 54). Taking note of something precedes caring for it, another simple profundity, and one uncovering the profound simplicity of our appreciation of space in the architectural demarcation of it. His 2002 comment was no doubt written as Morton built the conceptual aperture of *Ecology without Nature*, which through its identification of ambience or "fantasy space" (67) gave space such a significant role in environmental studies.¹⁰ By 2002 Morton says that he had stopped teaching literature courses "about the environment" and had begun teaching about space, or "spaciousness" ("Why" 54). *Trail, Reflection, Lonely*, appearing in Ren's body of work *Around the Mountain*, sustains a meditation on this very matter. Ren reminds us that "[e]veryone lives in space while ignoring their [spatial] surroundings, and this reflects the profound meaning of the ancient Chinese poetry: 'I can't tell the true shape of Lu Mountain because I myself am on the mountain'" (*Around the Mountain*).¹¹ Ren's citation of the old poetry uncovers an ancient recognition of a modern dilemma, Freud's "unknown known" (which Žižek has ecologized ["Censorship" Part 2 n. pag.]). This is the unconscious circumstance, the present reality of which one remains consciously unaware. The realization of it, the collapse of the unknown and the known, can be

¹⁰ A version of the comment appears early in *Ecology without Nature*: "In order to have an environment, you have to have a space for it; in order to have an *idea* of an environment, you need ideas of space (and place)" (11).

¹¹ With the help of Yang Siyuan, I have revised for clarity M Art Center's translation of Ren's comment, originally in Chinese.

profoundly and proactively disorienting. For example, Morton places the beginning of an ecological consciousness at the moment when we first saw Earth from space, specifically because “[t]he first aeronauts, balloon pilots, immediately saw Earth as an alien world. Seeing yourself from another point of view is the beginning of ethics and politics” (*Ecology* 14).

If this is the swell, then the ecological consciousness crests in the experience of seeing nature as alien, an ideological apocalypse (an *unveiling*) brought about by the disintegration of an unapproachable *Natura* into the processes and systems, the vectors and forces, that it actually is. In this case, the catenary is not simply “natural” because it appears in spiders’ webs (which it does), but the curve forms as a response to gravity, falling as it does in an attempt to reduce surface tension. Imagine a bridge made of a single beam set across two supports. Overburdening the beam with too much weight would cause it to snap at the bottom due to the force of tension (while at its top the beam buckles under a different force, compression). The catenary’s unique curve is a matter of tensile forces (i.e., *of tension*) at work on the string (or chain or spider’s web) that constantly pulls from each end, no matter how taut, in order to reassert the leisurely fall of the curve. The philosopher-mathematician among the first to identify the catenary’s equation, Gottfried Leibniz called this the “principle of least action expressed by the chain” (qtd. in Director n. pag.). In other words, its tendency is to *relax*, and this paradoxically affords strength and makes possible its architectural usefulness. Instead of mythologizing a “big Other” nature (Žižek, “Censorship” Part 2 n. pag.), parsing it out into any of the various signifieds to which it refers can make it alien in Morton’s sense, though the parts have always been as much of our unconscious circumstance as has been the generality nature. The difference between the two is a difference of historically intense emotive potential. *Natura* is a belief system almost transcendental in its signification, in defining essential personhoods, governing social behaviors, and inspiring primitivistic affections for the natural world. Tensile forces are not. Bruno Latour’s ecology that “dissolves nature’s contours and redistributes its agents” (21) speaks for a kind of particularization. According to his *Politics of Nature*, we must think in ways that “internalize the environment that [we] had viewed up to now as another world” (58). Ironically, making nature alien in this way also internalizes it by reducing its distance (its aura) through knowledge. Each of its parts is approachable and knowable, so that making it strange also makes it homely (recalling Freud again, his *Unheimlich*). Knowing its parts takes what was once otherworldly and places it squarely in our world.

If the structures we build highlight the space we occupy, and if its finitude is to remind us of our ecological limitations, then we might consider architecture and ecological accountability in the same thought. This proposition leads us to two considerations, the first of which takes its cue from the modern history of mimetic arts and the impression of control they afford over their subjects.¹² Through replication we manage, we demarcate, and we fashion for ourselves a kind of talismanic certainty and safety, or at least their comforting illusion.¹³ On the other hand, it is our cities growing ever more crowded that alerts us to the preciousness of our available human habitat. Again space is a primary order of nature, a status shared with time. The limits of time are easily inferable in terms of a human life-span (a temporal measurement that is also figuratively spatial). It is our present ecological condition that can make us as intimate with the limits of space as we are with those of time. There are livable time and *habitable* space. There is nothing beyond these. Morton has intimated the possibility of a “material aspect” to space (*Ecology* 33). Architecture offers a sketch of that materiality, which may still permit counter-productive fantasies of human-engineered domination of nature but not without also representing our limits within the natural world.

Lingering throughout my argument is the suggestion of what Levi Bryant refers to as “material flow” from nature to culture. “Cultures are never isolated islands floating in the clouds, unconnected to everything else,” he says, “but always take the form they take, in part, because of the geography of the land, and draw on material resources from the world around them” (*Prismatic* 299). “To think societies,” he continues, is not to think something *distinct* from ecology but to think particular ecological formations” (300; emphasis in original). Among those formations Bryant includes modes of social and political thought, which can be regarded as “variations” of ecological thought (300). His emphasis on thought as ecological recalls the spatial thinking which makes possible the seeing and experiencing of our limited environment. I add that to think something, anything, “distinct from ecology” is to relapse back into grandiose, idealizing terms, in this case the golden hued *Ecological* (capital *E*), a late, sophisticated cousin of pristine *Natura*, and much like her, a well-

¹² As the object of Renaissance representational art, nature (or the reality depicted on the fresco or canvas) was treated as an adversary to be subjugated. One epitaph written upon the death of Raphael read: “Here lies Raphael; while he lived Great Mother [Nature] feared that she would be conquered, and when he died feared that she would die” (qtd. in Garrard 237).

¹³ Harris suggests the troubling relationship we have with representational images, which have always somehow seemed to “magically transform themselves into what they represent.” He provokes us with the compelling example of how difficult it would be for anyone to poke out the eyes of the photograph of a loved one (163-64).

wrought fiction. That *Ecological* can recall the artful religious narrative of a pure nature protected by a somehow pure ecological or environmental agenda alerts us to the cunning of nature's aura. Terms like *ecology* (in this usage), *wild*, *wilderness*, and even *essential*, *innate*, and *pre-given* are not merely synonymous but actually mirror the distant-nearness necessary to cult belief. My addition returns us to the line of reasoning that Bryant has flipped: if cultures are never isolated from nature, as he asserts, then nature (as we know) is cultural. Importantly, that the wedding is logically mutual takes a crucial step toward rehabilitating that garden of culture, the human city, as well as its artifice previously—and quite artificially—regarded as unnatural.

Just as Benjamin suspected of the aura of the original work of art, the danger lurking beneath nature's aura lies in its potential usefulness to political authority to maintain or enlarge hegemony. At present this appears already underway on the urgencies of an eco-morality intended to save us from ecological disaster or even special extinction. As Timothy Luke noted in the 1980s, the value system of

deep ecology [which prioritizes the non-human over the human] could function as a new strategy of power for normalizing new ecological subjects—human and non-human—in disciplines of self-effacing moral consciousness. . . . [D]eep ecology also could advance the modern logic of domination by retraining humans to surveil and steer themselves as well as other beings in accord with “Nature’s dictates.”
(85; ellipsis added)

More recently Žižek has identified ecology as a new opium for the masses peddled on the currency of ideological fear: “fear of catastrophe—human made or natural—that may deeply perturb, destroy even, the human civilization, fear that pushes us to plan measures that would protect our safety” (“Censorship” Part 1 n. pag.). Fear allows ecology to replace the “declining religion,” to “take over religion’s fundamental function, that of putting on an unquestionable authority which can impose limits” (“Censorship” Part 1 n. pag.).¹⁴ Because authority is built not only on

¹⁴ Particularly in Europe, we are already seeing the Right take its position upon the ecology platform. Like the anti-immigration Dutch People’s Party (Nelson), the Hungarian radical nationalist movement Jobbik merges environmental concerns with its anti-immigration position, specifically in its warning against the threat of invasive (foreign) species to plants and animals native to Hungary (Jobbik). And French far-Right leader Marine Le Pen’s Front National has recently crafted a patriotic “New Ecology” in nationalist opposition to global measures such as climate talks (Nelson n. pag.). Le Pen herself refers to the EU and to lax national borders as “anti ecological” (Aronoff n. pag.). Because most such parties profess a skepticism of climate science,

fear but also on foundational (and oftentimes fantastic) beliefs, moving forward we have to “‘un-learn’ the most basic coordinates of our immersion into our life-world: what usually served as the recourse to Wisdom (the basic trust in the background-coordinates of our world) is now *the danger*” (Žižek, “Censorship” Part 2 n. pag.; emphasis in original).

A recalibration of coordinates must become central to the ecological project if we are to steer ecological thought into a future consciousness void of clinging myths and still glowing auras. My argument finds a tool for recalibration in ecologizing, and doing so, answers to the responsibility of the critic. Because “[t]heories too are agents, entities in the world,” Bryant must ask if any given instance of theory or criticism is “adequate for generating action and new ways of living” (*Prismatic* 301), among which thought—thinking, re-thinking, and recalibrating—must be included.¹⁵ While Morton’s comment that ecocriticism “is too enmeshed in the ideology that churns out stereotypical ideas of nature to be of any use” (*Ecology* 13) may lack attention to the nuanced positions held among ecocritics, it does cast light on the herculean task of ideological revision ahead. Just one avenue to this is to redeem the artificial precisely within the context of the natural. Thus far ecologizing has pursued this end by allowing Ren Jie’s installation to lead us to instances in which nature, in the form of physical principles, blurs with human artifice. It will continue to do so as it further highlights the role of the artificial as a mediator to the natural, that is, by accenting the importance of the artificial in our knowledge of the natural world. Perhaps then this essay might better be considered a role for art *criticism* in ecological thought, since my use of ecologizing relieves the artist of the responsibility of rendering her work a socially, ecologically motivated statement—a statement that might find more expedient expression in the terms belonging to the critic.

At present some agility is required of the reader, since it is precisely in challenging the conception of nature that I must rely on it. Nature is such a linguistically entrenched part of the ideology that it must be named as it is eradicated. We have already witnessed this in the previously cited cries “Nature does not exist”

we may assume that they build their ecological positions not on data but on populist emotions, partly founded on the fear of catastrophe to which Žižek refers, and partly on a subtle religiosity that has as its foundation a faith orientation to nature.

¹⁵ Bryant says, “thought itself unfolds in a series of ecological relations involving the technologies I use, ideas that have come before me, the animals and persons I relate to, the world about me, the languages I speak, even the vitamins and foods that I eat” (“Wilderness” n. pag.). Thus the material flow between nature and culture is also an immaterial flow, as epistemology, knowing, is itself an ecological process, a manifold of associations that together result in thought and knowledge.

and “Down with nature!,” which first reify and make plain nature’s persistent power before even the intimation of an “ecology without nature” can sink in. The German philosopher of history Hans Blumenberg understood this self-erasive problem in the context of philosophy’s transition from one era to the next: “Even when modern philosophy conceives of itself as in the sharpest possible contradiction to its theological prehistory, which it considers itself to have ‘overcome,’ it is bound to the frame of reference of what it renounces” (69). A major failing of current eco-theoretical battle cries is the assumption that nature is a frame of reference already overcome simply through our disavowal of it. And yet each time we discredit nature as a fiction we simultaneously reassert its powerful reality. A vestige of this logical snafu appears in the term *more than human*, which, intending to raise-up the non-human, actually insists upon our privileged ontological status. It would seem that we are trapped in a reflexive foil, a proposition or effort that in its execution undoes itself. Assuming that this is but one of the puzzles of ideological revision, my suggestion is that we make ourselves intimate with the term *nature*, familiarizing ourselves with its myriad range of signifieds, the systems, physical principles, and laws to which it refers. In time, the over-generalization becomes particularized and its use—and the baggage brought with it—bit by bit is exhausted. But to this end both the term and the fictive juxtapositions of nature against the human, the artificial, and the urban, these must appear plainly in the very arguments intended to question them—in the hopes of eventually breaking the frame of reference of what we renounce.

Such a proposition involves a permissive twist of logic helpfully figured in *Trail, Reflection, Lonely*’s artificial mediation of natural principles. The twist, quite literally, is that the modest plastic arcs from which Ren’s strings hang are themselves inverted catenaries. This old technique used by architects and designers for capturing a strong and attractive archway uncovers the corresponding properties of tension and compression.¹⁶ The early twentieth-century architect Antoni Gaudí famously suspended *catenas*, chains, in tightly hung groups and, letting them hang in catenary curves, then placed a mirror underneath so that the reflection inverted the chains and revealed their potential as arches. This was part of his method for designing the hauntingly gorgeous Church at Santa Coloma de Cervelló (never completed), the steep catenary arches of the structure resembling smooth, graceful, and impossibly huge stalagmites rising from the ground (“The Geometry” n. pag.). Like so much of his geometric work, Gaudí’s mirror-reflected chain added a modern page to the history of mathematics and architecture. Commissioned in the 1670s to design what became that spectacular feat of the English Baroque, the dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral

¹⁶ These, too, are examples of biomimicry, as an anonymous reader observed.

in London, Robert Hooke simply reverted to (or perhaps pioneered) the lo-fi technique of copying the catenary by tracing a hanging chain onto paper, and then inverted the page to find his dome's ideal shape. He hid his discovery in an enigmatic anagram made of a series of repeated letters that included *a b c d e f g i l m n o p r s t u x*.¹⁷ Not revealed until after his death, the Latin solution translates: "As hangs a flexible cable so, inverted, stand the touching pieces of an arch" ("The Enigma" n. pag.).¹⁸ The trick employed by Hooke and Gaudí accounts for much more than the simple, aesthetic appeal of Ren's *Trail, Reflection, Lonely*. Her arches do not merely reflect the angles hanging from them with attractive uniformity, but the installation's several arches and curves repeatedly describe physical principles elucidated through architecture: the catenary resists tension in one direction and responds to compression in the other. That the rigid beam bridge of my previous example both snapped due to tension and buckled under compression speaks of the versatile strength of the catenary's kinetic slope, a characteristic accounting for its extraordinary longevity in architecture and design.

As a synthetic mode of reading, ecologizing pulls together and unifies disparate objects and frames of analysis (such as eco-theory, contemporary art, physics, and architecture). It aestheticizes and makes critically plain natural principles typically the intrigue of only science and design. And so, as an approach to critique it is not unlike the biomimicry that applies to technology and design the "forms and processes" of nature (Schwan 20). Its associative aims function much like an ecology, and its treatment of art is not as a rote imitation of the natural world but as a point of entry into a deeper knowledge of laws, principles, systems, and functions of that world, the very objects of artificial, technological improvement sought by biomimicry. Biomimicry's insistence on sustainability finds traction, too, in ecologizing's effort to re-route the narrative about nature, to particularize the grand genus into its more realistic—and ideologically sustainable—many species.¹⁹

I have not mentioned any of the data showing that the city produces a lower carbon footprint than its country cousin, the rural community. Many pieces in this issue make those numbers plain. Instead I have attempted a redemption of the city by fitting it squarely within a complex of nature's functioning parts, along the way

¹⁷ Some say he hid the solution from his competitor Isaac Newton ("The Enigma"), while others contend he only stole it from another competitor Christiaan Huygens (Jardine n.24).

¹⁸ "Ut pendet continuum flexile, sic stabit contiguum rigidum inversum" ("The Enigma" n. pag.).

¹⁹ I should mention, however, that Janine Benyus, the pioneer of biomimicry, opens her book with an idealization of the aborigine, the one who is closer to nature than we of the "developed" world. For more on the ecological significance of this sub-plot in the nature narrative see Krech; Buell, *Future* 23-24.

uncovering a puzzle. What I have called the reflexive foil—again, a proposition or effort that in its execution undoes itself—insists that the concept *nature* is a binding frame of reference, and this requires us to familiarize ourselves with the impressive reach of its influence precisely in order to move beyond its conceptual restrictions. The present essay has hazarded such a move if not through an illustration of art and architecture as a mediator to our understanding of nature, then through Bryant's material flow and the Möbius strip tendency for nature and artifice to fashion one another. Along lines not unlike these, Žižek says:

if humanity were to stop abruptly its immense industrial activity and let nature on Earth take its balanced course, the result would have been a total breakdown, an imaginable catastrophe. “Nature” on Earth is already to such an extent “adapted” to human interventions, the human “pollutions” are already to such an extent included into the shaky and fragile balance of the “natural” reproduction on Earth, that its cessation would cause a catastrophic imbalance. (“Censorship” Part 2 n. pag.)

Žižek cites as an authority an environmental scientist whom he does not name, but we can entertain his proposition for its idea-value: culture forms as a response to nature, and nature, too, acculturates.

Without quite as much ambition as he, I conclude only by looking again to art, this time to the photography of Binh Danh, a Vietnamese-born artist, whose impressive wall-sized daguerreotypes of stately National Park scenes reflect their viewers on their metallic surfaces. National Public Radio featured his work in a column titled “National Park Daguerreotypes Invite Viewers to ‘Merge With the Land,’” a title recalling the same faith-oriented nature-ideology this article has been occupied with, only now alongside *Ecological, essential, and innate, the Land* assumes old-time *Natura*’s aura. But in Binh Dahn’s actual comments, he says he wants viewers to “become a part of this land; that they, in a way, merge with the land—but they don’t quite disappear into the land. That they still see themselves in it” (Ulaby n. pag.). Danh’s comment, not to mention his work, suggests a flow (material, immaterial) in two directions, and returns us to *Trail, Reflection, Lonely*’s faint resemblance to both a human hand and a mountain range. Now our game of flipper-box—of seeing one image and then another, always discretely—becomes a mutual superimposition or palimpsest. Binh Danh further points us to a new garden within the arts with a message inclusive enough for a twenty-first century ecological

vision. Surely an unsullied nature is missing from this garden, and if so, then I add that missing also is the belief in a sullied humanity.

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