

Editorial: Creative Writing and Arts

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The earth's surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art. Various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places with each other—one cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth projects. One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing. (Smithson 82)

Written at the end of the 1960s and published in *Artforum*, these compelling and often-quoted words are the declaration of a clash and a secret correspondence: tensions and alliances between the way we perceive things and the way the things around us—elements, forces, processes—work. The author of these lines, which are taken from an essay titled “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects” (1968), was Robert Smithson, one of the first land artists. In spite of his short life—he died in an airplane crash at the age of 35 in 1973—Smithson's influence on the contemporary art scene is huge: not only did he contribute to changing the physical *ratio* of art (his gigantic *Spiral Jetty* is both an icon and a program of this artistic movement), but his works and ideas also triggered a reconfiguration of the conceptual categories of the debate. In fact, if perception is “entangled within the unresolvable, continually oscillating interplay between cognition and materiality—both inexorably verging on imminent collapse” (Boettger 132), Smithson's theoretical considerations implied that, though not unproblematically, mind and matter are contiguous to one another, and that our cognitive and creative processes follow the same rules as the earth's geological dynamics. In the dawning age of ecological crises and ecology of mind, art and the natural world were essentially entwined, their interaction being the necessary key to a mutual understanding.

And “Artistic Ways of Understanding and Interacting with Nature” is precisely the title of our Fall 2015 Special Topic Issue. Seen from the “parochial” corner of the Creative Writing and Art Section, no other subject could have been more appropriate for enhancing the conversation between academic essays and creative contributions programmatically pursued by *Ecozon@*. In our segment of the journal this translates into a variety of works that reflect on the art/nature (or art/environment) interplay in different ways and from different parts of the world. Not surprisingly, the works that we have included in our selection are mostly visual, but as often occurs in these pages, poetry will have the final word.

The first contribution, *Islas de Recursos/Resource Islands*, comes from Spain and is authored by the eco-artist Lucía Loren. The photos published in our section document the evolutionary stages of an important project/intervention carried out by Lucía in the

Natural Park Sierra María-Los Vélez (Andalucía) during an artistic “field research” residence hosted by “Joya: arte + ecología.” Her eco-artwork explores the *espartal* (esparto field), one of the more representative ecosystems of the semiarid zones of the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa. The function of esparto grass for this biome is vital: interacting with the underground minerals, its roots increase the soil fertility, creating “resource islands” that foster the vegetation’s growth and the soil’s balance. Loren’s *Islas de Recursos/Resource Islands* uses art to investigate the importance and the potential of esparto fibers as a means to control erosion and enable re-vegetation processes in semiarid zones. The installation of esparto “bio-rolls” in a *cárcava* (rill) creates a protected space in which, by retaining water and supplying nutrients to the ground, processes of erosion can be effectively contained. As the artist explains in her description (which I recommend for reading): “Each piece has a word embroidered that references both the effect of the organic rolls on the land and a possible more balanced poetic interaction of the human being with the landscape that surrounds us: to *shelter*, to *secure*, to *recover*, to *filter*, to *purify*, to *soften*, to *nurture*.”

The second contribution comes from San Francisco and consists of two series of paintings by George Woodward. Born in 1928, Woodward can be considered one of the most interesting and inspired artistic interpreters of California’s environmentalism. Complementing Loren’s eco-artistic approach, he expresses ecological awareness in a figurative language, and shows that, whatever the form or medium, environmental artmaking always involves an ethical stance. The artist’s political-elemental ecology is epitomized by these two series, *The 4 Elements* (2011) and *Rolling Drunk on Petroleum* (2012)—each one composed of three 30 x 22 inch panels in which different media (gouache, acrylic, printing ink, monotype, graphite, charcoal, pastel, wax pencil, and chalk) are combined. Headings are already very eloquent. The three paintings of *The 4 Elements* are respectively titled *Only in the Plural*, *Balance*, and *Gordian Knot*. As they evolved from sacred ontological principles for the Greeks and grew into “the splendid array of 118 chemical elements,” the four elements “lost their moral dimension”—we read in the description. These three paintings, George explains, “speak of our need to balance the parts of our world and of our character. They add the astrological symbols which once provided a spiritual connection to their ruling gods: Venus ♀; Saturn ♄; Jupiter ♃; Mars ♂. I’m too much of a materialist to expect wonders from those symbols, but they’re a delight to look at.”

Symbols (and Woodward’s paintings) are delightful to look at, of course, but the elements are nonetheless wondrous per se. Also because they can perform eternity in an endangered world: “The naturally occurring elements cannot, by definition, be at risk, in the sense of species extinction or ecosystem collapse. Elements may act as poisons or pollution when out of place or when combined with other elements [...] but they are not themselves threatened by inappropriate unions or monstrous transgressions,” writes Stacy Alaimo in her contribution to Cohen and Duckert’s *Elemental Ecocriticism* (299). Taken in themselves, elements are pure, undying, and dreadfully innocent. Human involvement in the use, transformation, and consumption of what results from the metamorphoses of these original natures is another story, however. This is the case with

oil, “allied with happiness for North Americans” since the mid-twentieth century, a moment in history which can be correctly pictured as “a high point of petromodernity”: an epoch of “modern life based in the cheap energy systems made possible by oil” (LeMenager 67). Woodward’s *Rolling Drunk on Petroleum* (2012) recaps the stages of petromodernity by creatively reflecting on Kurt Vonnegut’s well-known words: *Dear future generations: Please accept our apologies. We were rolling drunk on petroleum.* Here, the painter visually complements Vonnegut’s satiric utterance with a mixed technique in which old frames of *Krazy Kat* comics in blue or pale green are embedded in a murky and clotty collage covered with acrylic paint (and here, again, in an ironic *mise en abyme*, petroleum is used to demystify the narrative of this collective, epochal drunkenness).

After Loren’s islands of resources and Woodward’s elemental political ecology, the Turkish artist Tunç Özceber encouragingly redeems the dimension of the picturesque in two photographs, collected under the title *Human Touches in Nature*. As he declares in his description, “In my photographs I always add a positive touch of the human presence to natural settings.” Beneath the apparent simplicity of these pictures we can recognize what the theorist of environmental aesthetics Allen Carlson calls the “engagement model”: an approach that “beckons us to immerse ourselves in our natural environment in an attempt to obliterate traditional dichotomies such as subject and object, and ultimately to reduce to as small a degree as possible the distance between ourselves and nature” (6-7). By representing the beauty of these endangered places—places where the human presence is not alien—Özceber invites us to acknowledge and treasure this mutual belonging, including the natural world not only in our aesthetics but also (and primarily) in our values.

But, after so much visual art, we want to conclude this section with a cycle of poems by Sharon White. A prize-winning poet and essayist based in Pennsylvania, White’s poems are indeed themselves very visual—and very dynamically so. In these four lyrical tableaux, she interweaves snapshots of inter-elemental and cross-species conversations—conversations that take place silently, without being planned, between humans (mostly women) and nonhumans (mostly wild animals, reindeer, bears, birds). Although without words and consciousness, the bond that ties them is a form of prevailing maternity: the reindeer is often a calf and the woman is often a mother. From their distant and apparently disconnected plains of existence, they are related by their being totally exposed: they are prey, whether of bears or of men. In putting them in close proximity, the poet (a poet of “vanished gardens” and twilight landscapes) seems to invite them to keep each other’s company. This, after all, is also a way to understand and interact with the natural world—a necessarily more-than-human world in which, as Smithson wrote, “various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places with each other.”

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