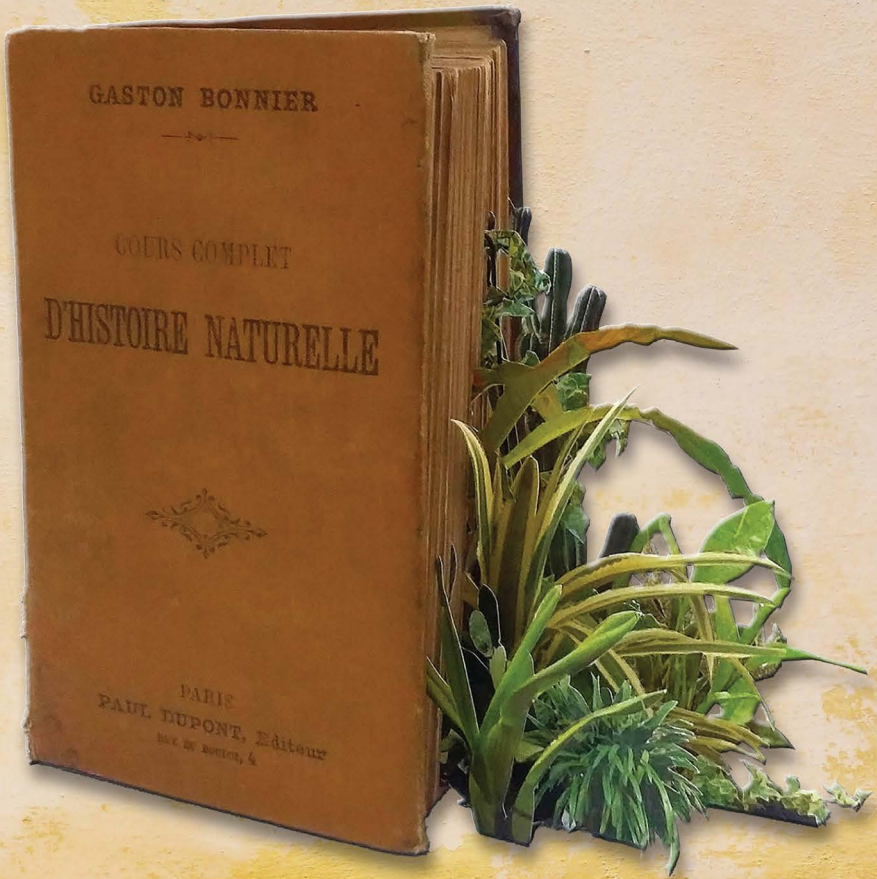


# Decolonial Ecologies

The Reinvention of Natural History in  
Latin American Art

Joanna Page





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Cover image by Rodrigo Arteaga, 'D'Histoire naturelle' from *Botánica sistemática* (2015). Book intervened with plants and earth. Carmen Araujo Arte, Caracas, Venezuela. Photograph by the artist. Background image: Mona Eendra. Flowers beside Yellow Wall, February 15, 2017

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# Conclusion

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This conclusion reframes some of the central arguments I have pursued in this book in two principal ways. Firstly, I explore how many of the artworks discussed could be read as instances of a *decolonial neobaroque*. I tease out what this might add to our understanding of their critical approach to modernity and the Enlightenment, as well as their gestures toward the existence of alternative modernities. In the second part of the conclusion, I discuss the relationship forged in these artworks between humans and the rest of the natural world in the light of Enrique Leff's concept of *environmental democracy*, finding in the correlation between biodiversity and cultural diversity the basis of an argument for local responses to environmental change, in place of the West's typical search for "one-world" solutions. In the context of Latin America today, as Maristella Svampa and Enrique Viale argue, this provides an opportunity to counter the paralysing catastrophism of Western discourses of the Anthropocene.

## The Politics of the Decolonial Neobaroque

The artworks presented in this book produce clear critiques of forms of knowledge and practice that are associated with Enlightenment philosophy and science. They compose alternative discourses of modernity that are less exclusionary, although they are (for the most part) still forged in dialogue with the scientific, literary, and visual traditions that have characterized the evolution of natural history in Europe and the Anglophone world. One way in which they do this is to create baroque imaginaries, firstly to invoke the baroque's historical co-option in Latin America as an instrument for anticolonial and anti-institutional expression, and secondly, to access a storehouse of

techniques that may be turned to decolonial and post-anthropocentric ends.

I suggested in Chapter Three that Baraya's absurd quest to collect and identify every type of artificial plant in the world should be read as a parody of the exhaustive encyclopaedism of the Enlightenment. Replacing this ambition with a playful theatricality, which extends to the use of *trompe l'oeil* and reflexive techniques, aligns his *Herbario de plantas artificiales* with the ludic repetitions and illusionism of the (neo) baroque. A similar reading could be proposed of Kueva's painstaking re-enactments of Humboldt's journeys and the extensive false herbarium he assembles, Corrêa's mock seed collection and the intricate forgeries he creates for his *Sporophila Beltoni* project, and the plants that sprout from Arteaga's *Botánica sistemática*. Romo himself identifies his portrayal of nature as "baroque" in its excess and exuberance: he represents the natural world "como un carnaval en permanente despliegue" (as a continually unfolding carnival).<sup>1</sup> The baroque folding-in of the stage and the world is the principal strategy used in Arteaga's diorama works, such as *This Path One Time Long Ago*, as it is in La Padula's *Museo liberado*. A baroque sensuality and excess define many works by Cardoso and Coca, while the great baroque theme of mortality and the transience of life is amply explored in taxidermy works by Corrêa, Malva, and others. In the symbiotic, co-evolutionary relationships depicted by Cardoso and Rodríguez, we might even find strong echoes of ways in which baroque art typically troubled the distinction between subject and object, multiplying perspectives and confounding hierarchies, as "in a co-evolutionary relationship every subject is also an object, every object a subject."<sup>2</sup>

What might profitably be read as instances of a decolonial neobaroque, I will argue, must be carefully positioned in relation both to the historical baroque and to the postmodern neobaroque in Latin America. A significant body of scholarship has traced indigenous and *criollo* counter-appropriations of the baroque in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Latin American art and architecture. Many writers and researchers have attempted to locate a nascent American cultural identity in such subversions. In an influential essay published in 1957,

1 Fariás, "El álbum de la flora imprudente," 23.

2 Pollan, *The Botany of Desire*, xx.

José Lezama Lima identified the baroque as “an art of counterconquest” in the New World, as the cultural hybridization evident in the work of sculptors such as Aleijadinho and El Indio Kondori disrupts the imposition of colonial authority, relativizing it through the inclusion of indigenous figures and myths.<sup>3</sup> Overly simplistic accounts that pit a hybrid baroque against a conservative one have been usefully nuanced in more recent years, allowing a more heterogeneous and fluid understanding of the Latin American baroque to emerge, as a phenomenon that cannot be characterized as largely derivative or wholly revolutionary.<sup>4</sup> In a similar way, the art projects explored in this book simultaneously borrow from and reject traditions of the European Enlightenment, creating paradoxical constellations that reflect complex histories of intellectual and cultural exchange.

The “wayward, rich afterlife” of the baroque has inspired many “neobarques.”<sup>5</sup> Drawing on seminal essays by Lezama Lima, Severo Sarduy, and Alejo Carpentier, critics have identified traits of the neobaroque in the fictional texts of many twentieth-century Latin American writers that bridge elite and popular cultures, modernity, and the non-rational.<sup>6</sup> For Sarduy, for example, the baroque is the epitome of artifice. His emphasis on linguistic play makes of the baroque an “espacio de dialogismo, de la polifonía, de la carnavalización, de la parodia y la intertextualidad” (space of dialogism, polyphony, carnivalization, parody and intertextuality).<sup>7</sup> His analysis strongly concurs with many Anglophone and European studies of the techniques developed in postmodernist texts to subvert authority and any kind of ontological certainty, defining the neobaroque as an “arte del destronamiento” (art of dethronement).<sup>8</sup>

Redefining the baroque too broadly may lessen its analytical value, however, by stripping it of its historicity and its capacity for social and cultural critique. Mabel Moraña finds that the postmodern pluralities

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3 Lezama Lima, “Baroque Curiosity,” 213.

4 See, for example, Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind*, 198; Cacho Casal, “Introduction: Locating Early Modern Spanish American Poetry,” 1–5.

5 Kaup, *Neobaroque in the Americas*, 2.

6 See, for example, Arriarán, *Barroco y neobarroco en América Latina*. The seminal essays most often cited are those by Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*; Sarduy, “El barroco y el neobarroco”; Carpentier, “El barroco y lo real maravilloso.”

7 Sarduy, “El barroco y el neobarroco,” 175.

8 Sarduy, 183.

and polyphonies of Sarduy's baroque "existen fuera de la historia y más allá de la especificidad de la cultura, es decir, más allá de toda referencialidad y de todo proyecto social organizado" (exist outside of history and beyond cultural specificity, that is to say, beyond all referentiality and any organized social project).<sup>9</sup> Likewise, she objects to the dehistoricized version of the baroque offered by Omar Calabrese, arguing that his readings rest on a series of abstract, universalized features that he considers to be inherent in baroque culture everywhere.<sup>10</sup>

The baroque has thus variously referred to a specific historical period, a movement in the history of art and architecture, an expression of anticolonial resistance, and a postmodern poetic strategy. I wish to recuperate the term here in a way that connects all of these, but focuses principally on its critique of Enlightenment philosophy and European (and Eurocentric) modernity. In using the term "neobaroque" to describe the reinventions of natural history by recent Latin American artists, I acknowledge the specific continuities they suggest with the historical baroque, namely, the rearticulation of aesthetic strategies that pluralize European narratives of modernity. On the other hand, I wish to drive a wedge between a "postmodern" neobaroque, which—in much literary criticism, at least—celebrates excess and performance in order to subvert authority, linear histories, and essentialized identities, and a "decolonial" neobaroque, which, in the work of these artists, involves acts of historical re-embedding as much as ones of disembedding. Here, the excesses and the hybridizing effects of the neobaroque become important means of rehistoricization, as they return to specific moments in the history of art and scientific illustration, both pre- and post-Enlightenment, in order to incorporate a critique of modernity within some of its most paradigmatic genres.

This approach aligns them with a decolonial project that, for Dussel, does not share postmodernism's critique of reason *per se*, but certainly concurs with its critique of the "violent, coercive, genocidal reason" that is generated by the Eurocentric myth of modernity.<sup>11</sup> My argument is closely aligned here with that of Irlema Chiampi, who argues that the baroque reappears in the twentieth century in Latin

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9 Moraña, *La escritura del límite*, 77.

10 Moraña, 64; see Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque*.

11 Dussel, "Eurocentrism and Modernity," 75.

America “to bear witness to the crisis or end of modernity and to the very condition of a continent that could not be assimilated by the project of the Enlightenment.”<sup>12</sup> In this way, the neobaroque becomes “an archaeology of the modern” that reveals something of the character of Latin America’s “dissonant modernity.”<sup>13</sup>

These artists amply demonstrate how the neobaroque may serve a decolonial critique of modernity in the Latin American context. They do not invoke the baroque as an inherent and ahistorical trait, as Alejo Carpentier risks doing when he claims that Latin America is baroque because of “the unruly complexities of its nature and its vegetation [...] our nature is untamed, as is our history.”<sup>14</sup> Instead, they develop a specific critique of the colonial imposition of Enlightenment thought, which has become synonymous with the emergence of modernity and scientific rationalism in the European context. As a response to the abstractions and extractions of Enlightenment and colonial science, their work comprises a series of symbolic acts of *reinsertion* and *reconnection*. Their embrace of baroque concerns and aesthetics is therefore not primarily a postmodern, dehistoricizing bid to unseat the discourses of the metropolitan centre, but a decolonial, *rehistoricizing* venture that seeks to rebuild Latin American modernity in a way that excludes neither its pre-Enlightenment past nor the centuries of cross-fertilization between indigenous and European imaginaries. In the introduction, I suggested that the multiple temporalities convened in the artworks discussed in this book create a series of “folds.” Deleuze identifies the creation of folds as the “operative function” of the Baroque.<sup>15</sup> These folds do not subject historical references to an indiscriminate mash-up, however, but allow us to grasp the multiple temporalities of modernity that are often made invisible in Western accounts. The techniques of citation, repetition, and reenactment used in these art projects contest the linear, unified history of positivism and humanism in order to reveal its violence, but also to recover something of value for the present in what it has excluded in the past.

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12 Chiampi, “Baroque at the Twilight of Modernity,” 508.

13 Chiampi, 508.

14 Carpentier, “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real,” 105.

15 Deleuze, *The Fold*, 3.

The connection between the neobaroque and decolonial thought in the Latin American context has been briefly proposed but not fully developed in recent scholarship. Both Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo return to the scene of the historical baroque in America to give instances of the kind of critical appropriation and resignification of European culture that would provide the foundation for a new Latin American cultural identity born out of colonial difference.<sup>16</sup> Neither considers, however, how the particular aesthetic and conceptual modes of the baroque might be carried forward to create opportunities for a critical revision of European modernity in our own time. This possibility is suggested by Monika Kaup, who grasps the potential of the neobaroque for the construction of “a new kind of temporality.”<sup>17</sup> Kaup proposes that we understand the baroque as an “alternative modernity” that rejects the Enlightenment’s rupture with the past and with nonrationalist thought, affirming instead “the impure, hybrid coexistence of the disjunctive (modern and premodern, global and local, faith and reason, science and wonder).”<sup>18</sup>

César Augusto Salgado suspects that the deep interest in the baroque in Latin American cultural theory “may have no equivalent in current postcolonial thinking.”<sup>19</sup> Bhabha, Spivak, and other postcolonial theorists who speak from other regions of the colonized world are of course centrally concerned with the contradictions that are inherent to colonial projects; for Bhabha, cultural hybridity marks out the “ambivalent space” of colonial power, where “other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority.”<sup>20</sup> But as the European colonization of the Americas *predates* the Enlightenment, its contestation also implies, as Salgado argues, “a response to the failure of enlightened ideals to transform and modernize Latin American society and culture.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, I would argue, it involves a response to the epistemic and ecological violence involved in that project of transformation and modernization.

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16 See Quijano, “Colonialidad del poder, cultura y conocimiento en América Latina,” 142; Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, 61–62.

17 Kaup, *Neobaroque in the Americas*, 21.

18 Kaup, 6.

19 Salgado, “Hybridity in New World Baroque Theory,” 317.

20 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 114, 112.

21 Salgado, “Hybridity in New World Baroque Theory,” 326n4.



Although they are often irreverent in their articulation, these artistic projects also represent more serious endeavours to recover a cultural history that has often been supplanted or sidelined. When artists and sculptors from Mexico or Brazil inserted Amerindian or African deities among the Western gods and goddesses that were a mainstay of baroque art, Serge Gruzinski observes, they opened the way for “the recomposition and rescue” of non-European pasts.<sup>22</sup> Works by Toriz, Romo, Corrêa, Villavicencio and others reinscribe popular and indigenous myths and practices into cultural histories from which they have often been erased. Their palimpsestic, transhistorical techniques unfold alternative temporalities that yield us a glimpse, to borrow Kaup’s phrase, of “a modernity without an irreversible break with the past.”<sup>23</sup>

An aesthetics of reconnection and recomposition also allows these artists to explore how art expands our knowledge of the world, both for and beyond the purposes of modern science. If baroque art was a response to “the gathering regimentation of knowledge” in the Renaissance,<sup>24</sup> then the neobaroque techniques of these artists expose, from the perspective of the other “end of modernity,” the gross insufficiency of Enlightenment systems of knowledge in the face of environmental crisis and the many forms of cultural and economic dispossession that have resulted from the historical collusion between European colonialism, capitalism, and modern science. Not content merely to show where Western science has fallen short, these works also demonstrate the potential in art to assemble and create plural epistemologies, promoting the kind of interaction between scientific and other forms of knowledge and practice that is essential to the decolonial project. As the “global” project of modernity careers into ever more grievous forms of social and environmental crisis, these works clearly demonstrate that the contemporary power of the baroque lies, as Bolívar Echeverría affirms, in the force with which it poses “la posibilidad y la urgencia de una modernidad alternativa” (the possibility and the urgency of an alternative modernity).<sup>25</sup>

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22 Gruzinski, “The Baroque Planet,” 120.

23 Kaup, *Neobaroque in the Americas*, 22.

24 Greene, “Baroque and Neobaroque,” 150.

25 Echeverría, *La modernidad de lo barroco*, 15.

## Environmental Democracy and the “Humanization” of Nature

Plural epistemologies and multiple modernities may, these works suggest, assemble a more effective response to global environmental crisis. In Chapter Three, I read the agroecological practices depicted in Rodríguez’s illustrations alongside research on the relationship between biodiversity and cultural diversity. A similar correlation is also suggested in the works of Toriz, Corrêa, Romo, Baraya, and De Valdenebro. Against the globalizing pretensions of Western technomodernity, many political ecologists in Latin America have called for an “environmental democracy,” which Leff defines not merely as the right for voices to be heard, but as “the right to inhabit the world through different cultural rationalities and territorial conditions.”<sup>26</sup> “Environmental democracy” is in part a call to recognize that the value of nature “cannot be translated or reduced to market prices”: that equity cannot be wrought by providing economic compensation to indigenous groups for the loss of natural resources, and that it is impossible to calculate the present or future value of biodiversity, which is “the result of centuries and millennia of ethno-ecological co-evolution.”<sup>27</sup> In the context of the conflicts that have arisen between indigenous communities on the one hand, and transnational biotech companies, mining companies, state development agencies, and other actors on the other, Leff states unequivocally that “Equity can only be achieved by subverting and abolishing any and all barriers to the autonomy of peoples and by creating conditions for appropriating the ecological potential of each region through the cultural values and social interests of each community.”<sup>28</sup>

The commitment of many artists discussed in this book to exploring perspectives on the natural world that are deliberately subjective, partial, or multiple may be read alongside the rejection of many Latin American political ecologists of “one-world” solutions to environmental problems that merely reinforce the power of the global capitalist order. This becomes both a political stance and an epistemological one. In her own search for a rational knowledge that is not tied to militarism,

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26 Leff, “Power-Knowledge Relations in the Field of Political Ecology,” 243.

27 Leff, “On the Social Reappropriation of Nature,” 89, 102.

28 Leff, 100.

patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism, Haraway wants to replace a “disembodied vision” and “the view from above” with “partial sight” and “objectivity as positioned rationality.”<sup>29</sup> This partiality is to be understood as a recognition of the situated nature of all knowledge, but for Haraway it also opens up routes through which science might connect with subjugated knowledges. As she states, “We do not seek partiality for its own sake, but for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible.”<sup>30</sup> Leff similarly locates an “environmental rationality” in “a politics of difference,” arguing that “the construction of an environmental rationality is achieved through the socialization of nature and community management of resources, founded on principles of ecological and cultural diversity.”<sup>31</sup>

A focus on the partial, the plural, and the local combats the globalist approach to environmental crisis that has become dominant in the responses explored by Western governments and scientists since the 1980s. These have tended to favour planet-wide solutions—such as a global carbon tax or mega-scale geoengineering projects—that would only increase the power of “green” companies and the hegemony of technological modernity.<sup>32</sup> Focusing on the local also allows us to look beyond the catastrophism of many environmentalist discourses. Maristella Svampa and Enrique Viale observe that the dystopian global narrative of environmental apocalypse, which merely induces paralysis, may be contrasted with myriad initiatives at a local level across Latin America that are based on self-determination, sustainability, and social economy enterprises.<sup>33</sup> They lament that these sources of hope and innovation are difficult to translate into projects with a global reach. But the kind of pact they envision would not be one that negates the value of the local but draws its dynamism from it: if they dare to imagine “un gran pacto ecosocial y económico desde el Sur, en clave nacional y latinoamericana” (a great national and Latin American ecosocial and economic pact emerging from the South), this would be founded on

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29 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 196.

30 Haraway, 196.

31 Leff, “On the Social Reappropriation of Nature,” 104.

32 For an excoriating critique of “Big Green” and the “magical thinking” of planetary-scale geoengineering projects to combat climate change, see Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*.

33 Svampa and Viale, *El colapso ecológico ya llegó*, 261.

the existence of a plural politics shaped by diverse organizations and on the recognition that “las luchas en defensa del planeta adoptan una carnadura local y territorial polifacética cada vez más urgente y radical que ya no puede ser ignorada” (struggles to defend the planet are adopting a multifaceted local and territorial form that is increasingly urgent and radical, and that can no longer be disregarded).<sup>34</sup>

Leff’s call for “the socialization of nature” pulls in a rather different direction from the purist views expressed by some First-World environmental thinkers, for whom “nature” should be entirely removed from human projections and values.<sup>35</sup> Rosi Braidotti objects to the anthropomorphism she finds at the heart of “deep ecology” approaches, such as those proposed by Arne Naess, which extend morality and rights to nonhumans. She identifies deep ecology’s “full-scale humanization of the environment” as “sentimental” and “regressive.”<sup>36</sup> Yet the artistic reinventions of natural history I have explored in this book suggest that the “humanization” of nature is not necessarily to be feared or denounced. If the root of ecological destruction is the ontological separation between humans and the rest of the natural world, which is at the core of the Enlightenment project, then finding ways of resocializing or even rehumanizing it becomes an important mode of contestation.

This might take the form of emphasizing the cultural and personal value of collections or acquisitions that are usually governed by exchange value (Baraya, La Padula), re-entangling animal lives with the myths and fantasies that arose from our past proximity with them (Romo, Toriz, Corrêa), exploring embodied forms of encountering the natural world that create relationships of horizontality and reciprocity (Villavicencio), creating exhibition spaces that break down distinctions between the natural and the cultural (Arteaga), exploring the symbiotic relationships between flowers and human desire (Cardoso), or highlighting practices that increase biodiversity through the selective

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34 Svampa and Viale, 276.

35 Michael Soulé’s influential work in conservation biology maintained that species have an intrinsic value, beyond human use (see Soulé, “What Is Conservation Biology?” (1985). This position has been challenged, for example by Peter Kareiva and Michelle Marvier in “What Is Conservation Science?” (2012), who argue that “ecological dynamics cannot be separated from human dynamics” (962) and that it is indefensible to protect biodiversity when the cost is mostly borne by the “poor and politically marginalized” (967).

36 Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 116.

cultivation of seeds and the practice of polyculture (De Valdenebro, Rodríguez). These artists' works sit alongside others that are critical of the precise ways in which nature has been "humanized" in Western technomodernity, through extractivism (Kueva), museum practices of killing and exhibiting animals in order to promote nationalist discourses or to domesticate other species (La Padula, Malva, Bustos), and the power of commercially circulated images of Latin American nature that are idealized or otherwise inaccurate (Sant'Ana, Bermúdez, Coca). In relation to the rest of my corpus, some of the works produced for the *Paraná-Ra'anga* expedition—such as the photographs by De Zuviría and a number of the views expressed in Glusman's video—appear anomalous in their representation of an apparently "untouched" nature, an idea that is roundly renounced by the expedition's ecologists. They demonstrate how difficult it remains for us in the West today to grasp the extent to which the natural world has already been reorganized as a result of human activity.

What emerges from this corpus as a whole is a recognition that there is little about the natural world that has not already been "humanized," and that the impact of anthropogenic activity on the environment may be, but is not necessarily, destructive. Indeed, these art projects call us to entwine our lives more closely than ever with the natural world, and to question the ontological divide between the human and the nonhuman on which Western modernity has been founded. Paying closer attention to the non-linear histories of ecological change allows us to understand the roles of imperialism and global capitalism in shaping the environmental crises of today, but also to glimpse alternative ways in which we might dwell in changing landscapes in the future.

