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Eco-aesthetics: Art, literature and architecture in a period of climate change
by Malcolm Miles
London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2014, 256 pages
ISBN: 978-1-4725-2940-4 (paperback) Price £17.99
Reviewed by Julia Peck, University of Roehampton, London

What can be done about climate change? Can art, architecture or literature encourage us to lead less carbon-dependent lives, or help us live with the effects of climate change? These questions are explored in Miles' self-styled 'wayward' book, which aims to analyse which 'ideas and attitudes might contribute to an ecologically aware relation between human observer and the worlds which they observe' (4). Aesthetics, for Miles, is not an opportunity to discuss beauty or sensibility. Instead he uses two paradigms to underpin his book: firstly, relational aesthetics, which aims to analyse artworks based on the human relations that are represented or prompted by the artworks' existence; and secondly, the 'expanded field', which has enabled traditional boundaries around types of art practices, such as sculpture, to be eschewed. Miles is therefore able to discuss a plethora of subjects but the juxtaposition of wildly different practices and objects can sometimes be disorientating. Importantly, many of the examples under scrutiny are not objects typical of the art market but instead include land art, installation art, performance art and architecture, all of which may be temporary in their existence.

Although Miles' book deliberately avoids the traditional form of presenting an argument in favour of engaging more directly with his material, I found this made some of the chapters lacking in purpose; certainly I would have preferred a more structured approach. Quotes, texts and objects could all have been more thoroughly introduced and analysed. Projects that are discussed in depth - such as Herman Prigann's earthworks in Gelsenkirchen, which reflects on both the industrial past of the site and the economic and social benefits that the site brought - are interesting discoveries that provide opportunities for thinking about the dialectics of human-nature relationships. Miles also acknowledges that it is perhaps the 'alternative social, political, economic and cultural formations' (2), and the ways in which diverse publics engage with them, that are the real site of hope in an increasingly consumer-led society.

Chapter Three, which engages specifically with aesthetics, will not be easy for newcomers to the subject but it is an important part of the book as it establishes Miles' approach. Given the emphasis on the social and political, however, and the blurred boundaries between art and other forms of cultural practice, one is prompted to ask why Miles did not foreground his knowledge and use of critical theory more confidently, especially as the links to aesthetics remain patchy throughout the remainder of the book. A more systematic use of Cultural Studies

as a means of analysing diverse cultural practices would have been particularly productive for the last chapter where Miles argues that incipient forms of culture and eco-art practices are part of a larger green imaginary (174). The types of cultural practice that he analyses – such as the Social Work Research Centre in Rajasthan – that encourages self-sufficiency and solidarity through training and activities such as water harvesting, suggest that rarefied art is not the way to go forward, Such projects speak of creative solutions to incipient problems and create a more optimistic outlook for the future. In contrast, Chapter Two, on theoretical approaches to ecologies, is lucid and helpful, and it is notably one of the chapters where Miles spends more time explaining and introducing his subject.

Although the social and political aspects of Miles' analysis seem much more important than aesthetics, the book examines many interesting and important art works and practices, some of which are illustrated. HeHe's *Nuage Vert,* an installation in Helsinki where a laser projection brought attention to the Salmisaari combined heat and power plant, was combined with social activities, such as asking local people to switch their lights off, which in turn increased the size of laser beam. Miles notes that the resulting 'green cloud' was highly ambiguous, visualising 'a global process of dereliction' (155). Links are made to debates about neoliberalism and our broader economic and social realities; instances of change and resistance are outlined. Miles could have been more sympathetic to his readers, increasing the frequency with which artworks or ideas are explained or introduced; his analysis of individual books, artworks and practices could have been extended, and in some cases, significantly improved. This is a flawed book but it contains insights into the diversity of cultural practices that are responding to climate change, which will hopefully, in turn, inspire further social, cultural and economic transformation.