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Weathering art history: metaphor and method

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Contemporary eco art often exposes climate change. Ice, water, and loss characterise Roni Horn's *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* (2007), a compelling collaboration of words, sculptural elements, and social interactions sited in a former library in Stykkishólmur, a fishing community on the west coast of Iceland. *Water, Samples*, its most visually dramatic element, is a forest-like stand of twenty-four floor-to-ceiling transparent glass columns that display water taken from Icelandic glaciers. Some have gone extinct since the work was installed. Adding to the affect and poignancy of this forfeiture, in a press release that celebrated the first anniversary of the Writers in Residence programme housed at the library, the British sponsoring organisation, Artangel, noted that Horn collected her archival samples from the 'tongues of glaciers'.¹ 'Tongue' is a technical term that refers to the extension of a glacier. Metaphorically, it also underscores the centrality of spoken and written language in eco art and ecocritical art history and makes present our responsibility as historians of visual culture to speak and write about climate change in our institutional roles. Horn's 'water words' in the floor of *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* suggest locality and direct experience, whether that of visitors wandering through the columns or of those who fish the waters that we can readily see from the library. As she suggests, it is a truism worth recalling that we don't directly experience climate change – the macro systems that play out over extended timeframes and geographies – but instead the immediacies of weather, usually the decidedly relative category of 'strange' weather, the unexpected or apparently abnormal. Horn also claims that when we talk of the weather, we are more accurately talking about ourselves or perhaps our planetary predicament.

The weather and related environmental phenomena are an increasingly significant thematic preoccupation in art history and visual studies.² Astrida

1 "First Anniversary of Roni Horn's *Vatnasafn/Library of Water*", *e-flux*, 22 May 2008, www.e-flux.com/announcements/39279/first-anniversary-of-roni-horn-s-vatnasafn-library-of-water/ (accessed 4 June 2025).

2 Andrew Patrizio's 2022 plenary address at the Paul Mellon Centre for British art was titled "Apocalyptic Conjectures: The Weather of Art History". See, for an overview of the field, Shria

Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker discuss weathering as ‘a logic, a way of being/becoming, or a mode of affecting and differentiating that brings humans into relation with more-than-human weather’.³ Rather than re-examining studies of weather in eco art, however, my aim is to probe a less-discussed area of concern by adapting the idea of ‘weathering’ in institutional contexts to ask and show how an ecocritical art history might work. People speak of the ‘climate’ of labour negotiations, of a university department or curatorial department in an art museum. If Anglo-European art history has a climate, or several, then these perceived norms inevitably change. How can we move these institutional infrastructures in ecocritical directions? If we analogise further to say that these small inflections are the ‘weather’ of a field, that we might take or alter the ‘temperature’ of a discipline at a given time and place, then it is these local circumstances that we need to discuss and can potentially influence.

Ecocritical approaches are quite new in art history and adjacent fields, but hasn’t some art always been eco art, at least in retrospect and through the lenses of ecocritical art history? If we think of weather as the atmospheric phenomena of the planet – independent and localised aspects of the Earth’s life that nevertheless impact all beings and all materials – then a significant swath of art (new and old, across media, and from most global traditions) can be considered under this heading. Extreme weather has been imaged for centuries and in many art traditions. Sugata Ray has shown in *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion: Geoaesthetics in the Land of Krishna, 1550–1850* (2019) that cataclysmic climate events have been extensively depicted in the visual arts in many cultures and times. Think too of Leonardo da Vinci’s deluge drawings from the early sixteenth century, or early landscape painting in China showing flooding, although portraying nature as an ideal refuge was a much stronger inclination in that tradition and worldwide, especially in garden design. For example, the well-known, anonymous Yuan-dynasty (1279–1368) scroll painting *Yang Pu Moving His Family* shows a scholar moving house in some haste across a river. Early and recent art can be linked in their concern for the Earth. Contemporary artist Jun-Fei Ji alludes to this type of work in Chinese art as a response to the human and planetary scars inscribed recently by the Three Gorges Dam project in China. *Below the 143 Meter Watermark* (2006), depicts the human and environmental chaos caused by forced domestic migration ahead of the impending flooding that created the dam’s massive reservoir. Even before ‘art’ was a category, an ecocritical approach

Chatterjee et al., “The Arts, Environmental Justice, and the Ecological Crisis”, *British Art Studies* 18 (2020), <https://britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-18/> (accessed 4 June 2025). See also: “Weathered History”, <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/weathered-history-leibniz-association/lgVhMeBlg6zDLg?hl=en> (accessed 23 November 2023); Mark Cheetham, *Landscape into Eco Art Articulations of Nature Since the '60s* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018).

- 3 Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker, “Weathering: Climate Change and the ‘Thick Time’ of Transcorporeality”, *Hypatia* 29, no. 3 (2014): 558–75, at 562. See also Tim Ingold, *The Life of Lines* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2018, part II).

can link the remote past to our present. ~~Perhaps~~ Our Paleolithic forebears ~~who~~ left images of their hands in caves in what is now called Indonesia or France or Spain, and painted outside too, as we see in aboriginal Australia and parts of North America, only to have weathering remove such traces. Weathering is a matter of time, or matter in time.

An examination of weathering as an active and expansive rubric, as both a description of important themes in art and a call for a reorientation in the field, is one step towards an ecocritical history of art as an actor in a reorientation towards the planetary in the environmental humanities and with climate scientists. How can this trend towards an ecocritical art history be encouraged and refined further? I am suggesting nothing more – or less – than a change in emphasis and perspective. Art history would benefit from further ‘weathering’, that is, being more responsive to and reflective of meteorological phenomena in what it studies and presents to students and to a broader public in exhibitions. An emphasis on weathering would displace other formerly central priorities for what is discussed and shown. Metaphorically and practically, an ecocritical emphasis in curatorial and scholarly practices can produce a positive ‘weathering’ of these fields, a patina. To ‘weather’ art history, then, is to bring the material realities of climate and planetary phenomena to bear on artworks and their contexts of creation *and* to modify the discipline by articulating the importance of these perspectives. In addition, art historians and curators need to ‘weather’ – in the sense of patiently surviving – institutional resistance to this relatively new set of priorities. An ecocritical art history would be *inconvenient* in the sense that emerging truths about climate change were troublesome in Al Gore’s famous documentary about climate change, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). From forest fires to mass extinctions, what we see and discuss might be displeasing, threatening, and dispiriting for people forced into climate migration, for example. Such re-emphases are always ‘inconvenient’ because, to be significant, they must be fundamental, not simply thematic add-ons.

While it is crucial to think globally and beyond the human when, as Gore and so many others enjoin us to do, we ponder ecology now, we also have to think and act locally. How, for example, do we teach ecocritical art history or teach ecocritically? My academic department changed the way it offered the introductory (mostly Western) art history course in 2017. No more surveys and great works; we would instead feature specific themes under the heading ‘Art and Ideas’. I volunteered to teach a new ‘thematic’ introduction to art using an ecocritical rubric. My approach – which I think serves well beyond the classroom – was to stress how climate disruption, for example, literally subtends the creation of art globally. We discussed canonical artists and movements, but always from an ecocritical perspective. Instead of detailing Rembrandt’s style or biblical iconography, I pointed out that he and other seventeenth-century Dutch painters of iconic windmills would be a good way into discussions of water management in flooding areas, which affects ever more people worldwide, and land use in general. But why read about the Anthropocene instead of Cubism, I asked? I emphasised that

these weren't either/or, on/off switches but instead matters of emphasis in what I focused on and what I wanted students to learn from the classes and readings. For example, I would lecture on, and we would discuss, 'Exploration, Colonization, Cultivation' across different global traditions instead of moving according to the traditional art-historical, causal, and chronological canon. Most of the contemporary art we examined was eco art, whether it focused on global weather or the impacts of climate disruption on animals and people. Conventional art-historical approaches and priorities – iconographic, stylistic, biographical, national, a mode that I call 'untroubled' art history – were used and flagged as important, but they were subsumed by my ecocritical agenda. My approach was not primarily aimed at increasing the 'diversity' of the canon and did so only to the extent that I discussed image-making around climate migration and featured Indigenous artists.

While both formal and informal responses from my 110 first-year students, mostly seventeen- to eighteen-year-olds, were positive, I sensed throughout that many found the emphases on the planet strange, even frustrating, and wondered why they heard so little about what they seemed to think was normal, decidedly untroubled, and self-referential history of art. Worries about how and where we can practise ecocritical art history have stayed with me. If one is fortunate enough to teach in a university setting, individual courses should not be islands but part of a well-planned curriculum. How well did I prepare my first-year students for a subsequent course in, say, photography in the nineteenth century? Should one be a 'gradualist' with ecocritical approaches, seeking to blend (or blend in) with traditional canons and teaching? Or perhaps the discombobulation of some students' expectations can be effective and change how they look at art. Ecocritical art history should and can avoid the over-specialisation (of time frame, medium, style, movement, national grouping, etc.) that we often see in art history courses and curricula. At the same time, an effective ecocritical art history needs to work with specifics, which brings me to examples of how the visual culture of weather as a cipher of climate disruption can be used pedagogically to develop an ecocritical art history.

To weather art history is at once a metaphor and a method. We can open one line of discussion about art-historical method in ecocritical art history with questions about media, specifically what form eco artists use and what art-historical habits might filter the work that we respond to in scholarly writing, in exhibitions, and in teaching. Eclipsed though not irrelevant in the artworld, painting is not the expected conveyance for information about climate change. Philadelphia painter and climate activist Diane Burko paints the retreat of the Columbia Glacier, and photographs the effects of glacier tidewater receding in Greenland, presenting her work as often to international conferences of climate scientists and geographers as she does directly to the artworld. The fact that she deploys familiar art media gives her a platform often foreclosed by more arcane media. The announced double meaning of her 2021 exhibit in Washington, DC, *Seeing Climate Change*, can be traced in her vivid images of receding glaciers in the cryosphere and damaged coral reefs in warm oceans (Figure 2.3). We are used to seeing weather change;



Figure 2.3 Diane Burko, *Seeing Climate Change* (2021). Installation view, American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, Washington, DC. Courtesy of the artist.

Burko's arresting images of some of the world's largest glaciers insist that we modify frequent assumptions that climate change is too gradual to see to accord with contemporary glaciology in a period of rapid climate disruption of all sorts.

Ecocritical art history has momentum, with many art historians and curators now consciously reflecting on how the planet's past informs art from many locales, traditions, and times, especially the present. Their work is not anachronistic but instead a reorientation in the way we construe art's histories. Looking at the landscape genre with ecocritical eyes, for example, is part a methodological choice within the institutional structures that shape the history of art and connect the past and present of the planet. There are nineteenth-century examples of what we could call environmental protest around exploitative land use, such as Félix Emile Taunay's remarkable *View of Native Forest Being Reduced to Coal* (c. 1840). The composition is jarring, bifurcated as it is into two unequal, off-balance zones, a structure that defied the academic conventions of the landscape genre that Taunay knew well. On the left, we see the practice of 'contract slavery', in which notoriously exploited Black workers clear and burn the forest for its charcoal, while the right presents the Edenic lushness of Rio de Janeiro's Tijuca Forest, contemplated rather than felled by two more privileged onlookers. In retrospect, we can also find images of colonial agriculture as abuse of both enslaved peoples and the land.⁴

⁴ See Charmaine A. Nelson, *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* (London: Routledge, 2017).

Ecocritical art history can productively disrupt typical artworld hierarchies of medium, authorship, and exchange value. If the weather or the Earth more broadly is the focus, an expansive range of aesthetic and material practices can be compared on an equal basis. A concluding case study is of an ecocritical approach to aspects of the weather through two very different nineteenth-century examples of visual culture, one by the largely forgotten inventor George Merryweather and the other by J. M. W. Turner. These instances are linked by their concern with the implications and technologies of predicting the weather but would not likely be compared in a conventional art-historical context. Victorians were arguably as obsessed with the weather as so many are today, giving us a potent link between contemporary responses to the planet and those of two hundred years ago. Forecasting the weather was a matter of life and death, as it increasingly is today, and a matter of money. In Europe as elsewhere, rapidly expanding trade at this time led to more shipping and more shipwrecks. The new science of meteorology attempted to perceive and predict atmospheric change, a central indication of changing weather.⁵ A case in point is the eponymous Merryweather's invention of the *Tempest Prognosticator*, short for what he more descriptively called the 'Atmospheric Electromagnetic Telegraph, conducted by Animal Instinct', sometimes also referred to as the leech barometer (Figure 2.4). His unique apparatus employed the tendency of leeches to respond to variations in atmospheric pressure. When a storm approached, up the bottles they went, running into a piece of whalebone, which triggered bells at the top. The potentially imperceptible chimes activated by individual leeches were amplified by teamwork: the more bells, the more likely the storm. In a letter to the Whitby Philosophical Society in 1850, he wrote, 'the subject is one of great importance, not only as affording the means of causing the salvation of life, but the protection of property'.⁶ In fact, the Prognosticator was a memorable example of we might call the entanglements of different species' worlds with empire. The design of the Prognosticator evokes an Indian temple and thus alerts us to the interconnectedness of the British Empire, science, trade, and profit, all of which were literally on display here when Merryweather's gizmo was shown and offered for sale in the 1851 Great Exhibition in London.

Serious and persistent as he was, however, Merryweather's Prognosticator was never a commercial success. A more practicable technology for rescuing sailors caught in the storms was both more successful in saving lives and the subject of a painting that inhabits the high end of visual culture, J. M. W. Turner's oil painting *Life-Boat and Manby Apparatus Going Off to a Stranded Vessel Making Signal (Blue Lights) of Distress* (c. 1831; Figure 2.5). Across a canvas of approximately 90 × 120 cm, Turner has presented a powerful storm cloud approaching from

5 See Katharine Anderson, *Predicting the Weather: Victorians and the Science of Meteorology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

6 George Merryweather, *An Essay Explanatory of the Tempest Prognosticator* (London: John Churchill, 1851), 5.



Figure 2.4 George Merryweather, *An Essay Explanatory of the Tempest Prognosticator* (London: John Churchill, 1851). National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum.

our left and engulfing a ship that we can barely perceive. The ship fires a brilliant flare into the blue-grey vault, stretching the atmosphere upwards. Approaching the distressed ship is a small rescue craft and its animated crew. These sailors are the least indistinct elements in the entire composition, which is characterised by frantic disruption in nature, emotion in people, and confusion throughout. Extending from the bow of the rescue craft, we can just make out two ropes that seek to tether the distressed ship, inadequate to the rescue attempt. The technology named in the painting's title – the rope shot from a shore-bound mortar called the Manby apparatus – is enlisted at the precise moment we witness. Captain George Manby's improvements on earlier rope-firing technologies earned him a gold medal from the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1818. An article from 1827 underlines the fact that 'on the eastern part of the Norfolk coast, where Captain Manby has been stationed, 332 persons have been rescued from stranded vessels from the year 1808 to 1826'.⁷ The Manby apparatus is shown in action if one knows to look for the payload arcing high in the sky towards the flare and ship. If we see this detail, we feel immersed in the moment of rescue. If we don't notice it, the scene suggests a universal evocation of distress at sea and the intercalation of human striving with natural phenomena.⁸ Across the middle of the horizontal composition stretches a pier with docks and ships behind. The pier is increasingly beset by high waves. The sky and beach to the right are awash with light and temporarily calm as the storm nears. Three figures – perhaps a mother and two children – stand on the shore. The weathered fragment of a ship's hull in the foreground is a memento mori that suggests the high stakes of the attempted rescue. The rightmost figure's prominent gesture suggests either prayer for a rescue or jubilation at its imminent success. Have they heard the report of the mortar firing behind them, visible to us as a puff of thick white smoke? Or is this happy resolution implied only for us, the audience?

Neimanis and Walker provide a model for a weathered ecocritical art history. They claim that 'the body (a human body, a gust of wind, striations of rock) can no longer be understood as an autonomous entity, unaffected by (and ineffectual in) its environment. Instead, the very conditions of its possibility rely on its entanglement with a dynamic system of forces and flows, ... [and] these forces and flows cannot be conceived of outside of a temporal frame'.⁹ One way to specify these ideas in an art-historical context is to imagine that they are describing Turner's painting or Merryweather's *Tempest Prognosticator*. Thinking about weather in a

7 *Society ... for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce ...*, Vol. XLIV (London: 1826), 76.

8 The illustrations in Manby's own publication on the invention are by contrast abundantly clear, suggesting that Turner was concerned with the overall atmosphere and terror of the scene as well as with the lifesaving technology. See George Manby, *An address to the British public: with suggestions for the recovering property from sunken vessels; also, for the means for rescuing the lives of sailors from stranded vessels; and for the prevention of shipwreck ...* (London: John Gathercole, at the Polytechnic Institution, 1838).

9 Neimanis and Walker, "Weathering", 565.



Figure 2.5 Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Life-boat and Manby Apparatus Going Off to a Stranded Vessel Making Signal (Blue Lights) of Distress* (c. 1831). Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 122 cm. Copyright: Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

way that recapitulates the fundamentals of ecology as construed in the nineteenth century *and* in a contemporary posthuman and materialist manner can yield a weathered art history that places its prime attention on planetary phenomena. This reorientation connects ‘pre’ and ‘post’ ecology both thematically and materially. Art has arguably always and everywhere been inflected by ecological matters, whether in its themes or substances. A weathered, ecocritical art history that focuses on connections between the past and present elaborates this fundamental claim. The histories of the planet and of art are not past in the sense of gone or absent. A long view in art history can help us to understand and potentially address the ever more consequential impacts of anthropogenic activity on our planetary home.

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