

*Disciplinary Wildings: Ecotones and Sacrifice Zones as Nonhuman Pedagogues in
Contemporary Environmental Art Activism*
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As ecocriticism and Anthropocene studies have gained a foothold in art history, early adopters have collectively demanded the formation of new frameworks, methods, and metaphors for rendering legible planetary crisis in its multiscalar forms. But as Timothy Morton counters in *All Art is Ecological*, the climate crisis and its conjuncture do not require new paradigms, but “attuning” to those which already underpin the broad spectrum of life: “You are breathing air, your bacterial microbiome is humming away, evolution is silently unfolding in the background... You don’t have to *be* ecological. Because you *are* ecological.”¹

Taking up the call to tune and settle into ecological foundations, my project will turn the art historical eye to at-risk ecosystems through community-oriented arts practice situated therein. Through three site-dependent artworks, the project will contend that ecotones and sacrifice zones—ecological designations for interstitial habitats that buffer larger ecosystems and areas of terminal ecological ruination, respectively—act as more-than-human pedagogues of reparative visual rhetoric, offering germane structures for organizing our relationships to the planet and seeking equitable environmental futures. My three case studies will be as follows: firstly, *Sustaining Traditions: Digital Teachings* (2018), a gift archive by Ojibwe and Potawatomi artist Kelly Church to future generations of Indigenous weavers after the emerald ash borer blight in Upper Michigan; secondly, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* (2019), a collaboration between Dread Scott, John Akomfrah, and community actors whose procession snaked through the New Orleans segment of present-day Cancer Alley; and thirdly, *Mississippi. An Anthropocene River* (2018–19), an audacious interdisciplinary undertaking by all manner of creative practitioners at five different river field stations in order to “read the Anthropocene landscape.”² Each of these case studies is situated in and dependent upon their relationships to a sacrifice zone and ecotone or their overlap. Contextualizing these emergent, ecologically-attuned practices within the centuries-long precedent of nature’s representational codification—abetting its scientific codification under Enlightenment paradigms—I pair my case studies with taxidermy dioramas, facsimiles of each artwork’s ecosystem where such codification was both established and contested.

The inclusion of ecosystems as aesthetic actants, collaborators, and pedagogues in each of the case studies mentioned above will require the expansion of disciplinary borders. Expanding on art historian Andrew Patrizio’s assertion that “the history of art is a discipline that values and nurtures ecologically sympathetic skills for future use,”³ and inspired by Eduardo Kohn’s argument for an ‘anthropology beyond the human’ in his pathbreaking text on biosemiotics, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, this project aspires to sketch what an ‘art history beyond the human’ might look like.

¹ Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), 105.

² This project fell under the umbrella of the Anthropocene Curriculum, funded by the Max Planck Society.

³ Andrew Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 30.