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# ASPECTUS

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**CAITLIN DOLEY**

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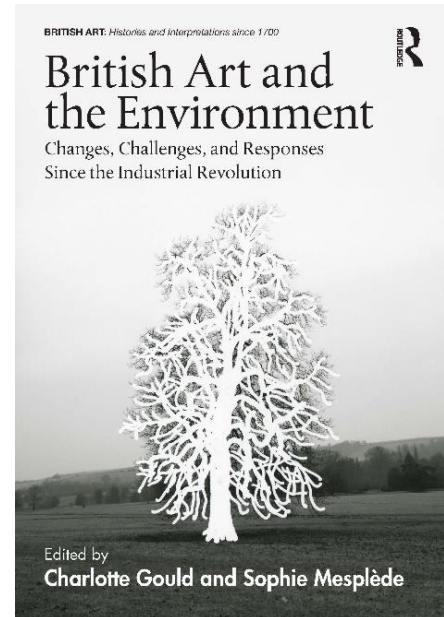
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Book Review

**Eds. Charlotte Gould and  
Sophie Mesplède,  
*British Art and the  
Environment: Changes,  
Challenges, and  
Responses Since the  
Industrial Revolution***



**CAITLIN DOLEY**

Published at a time when the effects of climate change are terrifyingly visible around the world, *British Art and the Environment: Changes, Challenges, and Responses Since the Industrial Revolution* is a highly apposite text that encourages consideration of how art can inform and impact the history of the interaction between Britons and their environment. Whilst artists' concern for their environment – understood here as the natural world in which they live and work – is often thought to be a relatively recent phenomenon that commenced in the mid-twentieth century, this compendious edited volume demonstrates how art can in fact be used to reveal that the relationship between Britons and their environment has a far more extensive and, importantly, thought-provoking history.

Charlotte Gould and Sophie Mesplède's rigorous introduction positions the advent of the Industrial Revolution in Britain as one of the most decisive illustrations of the transformative power of man over the natural world. The editors also persuasively cast nineteenth-century British artists – still raised with the Enlightenment notion that emotional engagement with nature was obligatory for any educated and self-aware man – as the prime observers of the extreme alterations that mankind began imposing on the Earth. Gould and Mesplède evidently desire to demonstrate that just as an artist's creative productions betray the preoccupations of their times, so too can their personal takes on the relationship between humans and their environment contribute to shaping contemporary debates.

*British Art and the Environment* features thirteen subsequent chapters written by a diverse group of international researchers; two of these chapters are records of interviews held with the artists Tim Martin and Adrian George, and there is also an afterword by cultural geographer Stephen Daniels. The multiplicity of historical and contemporary figures and artworks attended to in these chapters enables the reader to identify a number of tensions between different definitions of the environment, as well as allowing them to compare and contrast how various artists throughout modern history have expressed their preoccupation with environmental aesthetics and the altered positioning of humankind in the world, albeit

in a British context. From the outset though, the inevitability of John Ruskin (1819 – 1900) “casting the longest shadow over this volume” is acknowledged, with the chapters written by Amy C. Wallace, Laura Valette, Paul Cureton, Aurore Caignet, Frédéric Ogée, and Thomas Hughes all engaging in some way with the critic’s numerous opinions on and writings about the natural world.<sup>[1]</sup>

However, whilst these six chapters do spend time analysing related subject matter, they reach an intriguingly diverse range of conclusions about artistic responses to the changing environment of the long nineteenth century and, on the whole, *British Art and the Environment* should be recognised as a book that identifies the origins of the current climate crisis, dedicates significant time to analysing the initial creative responses to it, and then expands outwards from there. Although the book is not organised chronologically, the chapters authored by Camille Manfredi, Pat Naldi, Kasia Ozga, and Edwin Coomasaru move on in time to offer interesting interpretations of how Britons have interacted creatively with their environment from the twentieth century through to the present day. Here it is interesting to note that ideas relating to the environment as affecting both personal and cultural identities have evidently carried over from the nineteenth century into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A number of the chapters (those by Amy C. Wallace, Laura Valette, Paul Cureton, Aurore Caignet, Pat Naldi, and Edwin Coomasaru) identify and then set about considering both how and why certain environmental imaginaries were constructed in the visual culture of the nineteenth century (if not before), and now continue to remain unchallenged as realistic in the imagination of the British public to this very day. Ultimately though, the chapters that form this book are to be understood as united by their consideration of how, since the Industrial Revolution, artists, art historians and cultural organisations have worked to communicate the urgency of the climate crisis to their respective audiences.

*British Art and the Environment: Changes, Challenges, and Responses Since the Industrial Revolution* provokes productive new thinking by encouraging its reader to pay close attention to the environment as it is understood and then subsequently represented by visual artists. The sheer variety of the artistic representations featured in this volume means that the editors’ opening promise that “the chapters [...] [will remain] attentive to the country’s [Britain’s] idiosyncratic perception of its own position in the world” proves impossible to fulfil; this in itself is an important reveal though, as it demonstrates the extent to which the environment prompts creativity and self-reflection in very personal and unique ways.<sup>[2]</sup> *British Art and the Environment* is undoubtedly essential reading for anyone interested in expanding their understanding of environmental approaches in art history; it will also prove a highly useful source for individuals interested in exploring how ecological and aesthetic theories could be understood as inseparably intertwined. Ultimately, *British Art and the Environment* is a text that – perhaps somewhat unwittingly but nevertheless usefully – reveals just how long it has taken the discipline of art history to take an environmental turn, what an interestingly

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Gould and Sophie Mesplède, ‘Introduction’, in *British Art and the Environment: Changes, Challenges and Responses Since the Industrial Revolution*, ed. Gould and Mesplède (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

complicated process this is proving to be, and how much more critical work there remains to be done going forward.