

Exhibition Analysis. “Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment”.

By Jennifer Cabral

It was during the closing weekend of “Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment” that I had a chance to roam the galleries of the Princeton Art Museum. I entered the gallery expecting to have the usual experience I encounter in that space: having a unique and intimate encounter with significant objects of art belonging to Princeton University. This is possible because of the relevant collection of this institution, which is recognized as one of the leading university art museums in the country. According to their website: *“With a history that extends back to the 1750s, the earliest days of art collecting at Princeton, and collections of over 100,000 works of art spanning the world of art from antiquity to the present, the Princeton University Art Museum is one of the finest university art museums in the world.”*¹

But as soon as I stepped into the gallery assigned to special exhibitions that housed “Nature’s Nation” I realized I was entering a different territory. Greeting me with walls plastered with different hues of green signifying nature was a plaque with the following inscription: *“Indigenous Land Acknowledgement - The land on which this building stands is part of the ancient homeland and traditional territory of the Lenape people. We pay respect to the Lenape peoples, past, present and future and their continuing presence in the homeland and throughout the Lenape diaspora.”* Above it, was hanging a hand-beaded belt. It was the work by Lenape artist J.R. Norwood “Kelekpethakomaxkw” (Smiling-ThunderBear) called: Mathakawenanak Scheyichbink (We Fight Them in New Jersey), 2013.²

The following description by Alpers (1991) is a perfect description of my experience when I was faced with this artwork: *“Museums turn cultural materials into art objects. The products of other cultures are made into something that we can look at. It is to ourselves, then, that we are representing things in museums. But museums provide a place where our eyes are exercised and where we are invited to find both unexpected as well as expected crafted objects to be of visual interest to us.”*³

Such a presentation allowed me to acknowledge the Lenape peoples throughout that exhibition, which interwove their presence “present, past and future” in my interaction with each artwork on display. To this day, I carry that acknowledgement each time I step into the Princeton University Art Museum and Campus. As mentioned on a text by Alpers called “The museum as a way of seeing” (1991): *“It is only recently that peoples or group nations and even cities have felt that to be represented in a museum was to be given recognition as a culture, therefore giving rise, I supposed, to questions about how to do it right.”*³ I believe the “Nature’s Nation” exhibition and the iterations that accompanied it - the online exhibit and printed catalog - will stand as an example of how to pay cultures the deserved recognition.

After its premiere at Princeton University Art Museum (Oct. 13, 2018–Jan. 6, 2019), the exhibition traveled to the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts (Feb. 2–May 5, 2019) and it is now being featured at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas (May 25–Sept. 9, 2019). “Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment” was one of the largest exhibitions I’ve attended in this museum. As the corresponding catalog of this show makes sure to point out: *“Nature’s Nation has been a singularly costly initiative”*.⁴ More than 120 paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, photographs, videos, and works of decorative art were presented. And unlike previous exhibitions, most works of art were not part of the permanent collection of the museum. Therefore, the high cost of the show comes from transporting the work

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from around the country. As mentioned on the online exhibit called “Ecology of an exhibition “ created as a complement to the physical exhibition and simultaneously presented as an interactive display in the museum gallery: *“Exhibitions depend upon the presentation of works of art in the original. In deciding whether to borrow a work of art, curators have to weigh its potential aesthetic and interpretive role in the exhibition against that of other similar objects, as well as the cost - financial, logistical, and otherwise - of procuring it, a calculation that increasingly includes environmental impact.”*⁵

It was undoubtedly a significant endeavor involving different departments of the museum. The exhibition occupied the Special Exhibition gallery, the American Art gallery and the Contemporary Art gallery. (Appendix A) In order to accommodate such a vast array of objects museums resort to temporary walls. As described by the online exhibition of this show: *“Temporary walls are often built in an exhibition gallery to increase the space available for hanging objects for display and to direct and enhance visitors’ spatial experience of the exhibition.”*⁵

Usually the galleries in that museum are quiet. The space is vast. And I find myself alone with a piece of art. Because it was the closing weekend of “Nature’s Nation” that was not the case. The galleries were busy and loud. But I still experienced a sense of flow and pleasant pace in this exhibition. It wasn’t an overwhelming and exhausting experience but, instead a very instigating and stimulating one. As mentioned by Alpers (1991): *“One measure of a museum’s success would seem to be the freedom and interest with which people wander through and look without intimidating mediation between viewer and object that something such as the ubiquitous earphones provides.”*³ The exhibition played with the curiosity of the audience. A work of art that exemplifies how the engagement with visitors stemmed from establishing intriguing questions and presenting different perspectives is the inclusion of a high chest of drawers, ca. 1760. It

was not only included in the exhibition as an example of furniture design and historic relic, but as evidence of the trade of mahogany in Philadelphia during that period. ⁶ Another impactful presentation was the side-by-side display of a Yosemite painting by Albert Bierstadt called “Bridal Veil Falls” and Valerie Hegarty’s installation “Fallen Bierstad”. The first is a romantic view of the natural beauty of the land; and the second a burned, perforated and unstable version of the same painting. It brought to the audience in the gallery a visceral experience of witnessing that which was once pristine, transcendent and untouchable being now destroyed. (See appendix B)

Technology was present but was definitely not a significant element of this exhibition. But one of the works I experience in the gallery was the video: EXIT by Diller Scofidio + Renfro (DS+R). A design studio with a focus on cultural and civic projects. This work explores how global populations are unstable and on the move in unprecedented numbers for economic, political and environmental reasons. This was just a video version of the original work which was conceived as an installation. (Appendix C) Because of the significance of this theme in correlation with the exhibition I was glad to see this work being showcased. But the length of the video was not compatible with the single display and headphones installed in the gallery. I clearly remember feeling self-conscious of occupying the device during the entire 20 minute video. (See Appendix D) I was glad to find this work available online so I could experience it in its entirety without rush. The content of this work created in 2008 instead of becoming dated has gained relevance with the passing of time. ⁵

The other technology element in this exhibition was included in a reading area midway through the exhibition in the form of a touchscreen. The interactive content presented at the gallery became the basis for the website created in connection with the “Nature’s Nation” exhibition. The online exhibit called: “The ecology of an exhibition” turns the table on criticism of works of art by showcasing the environmental impact of

the exhibition itself. ⁶ As described on the museum website: *“By focusing on how objects from seventy lenders nationwide came to the Museum, were installed in the galleries, and interpreted in the accompanying catalog, the website offers visitors a way to consider the implications of cultural activities generally and to reflect on how they might more sustainably be undertaken.”* ²

I would consider the content of this website and gallery display very relevant and complementary to the exhibition. The online content “The Ecology of an Exhibition” presents interesting descriptions of the careful considerations that were taken throughout the entire preparation and conceptualization of this exhibit. But it is not in any way a representation of the in-person experience, nor should it be. Here the content is valid in itself. When presented in parallel it reinforces the physical exhibition and its ecological considerations not only as subject matter but as actions and choices executed by the museum - from printing the catalog to the footprint of transporting artworks cross country. It was appropriate to present this content simultaneously amongst the galleries of the museum. (See appendix E)

I admit I find the webdesign of the exhibition limited and not very interactive. Browsing content from one page to the next is no longer sufficient to engage the public and even that basic functionality was not very functional on the website and made it hard to return, or go to different sections of the online exhibition. The in-person-exhibition was so encompassing and enveloping that it is not surprising that I was disappointed with this online presentation. I wanted it to be a representation of the physical exhibition instead of offering its own content. As mentioned by Carreras in his text “A story of great expectations: Past and present of Online/Virtual exhibitions. (2014)”: *“the virtual exhibit becomes an excellent way to disseminate real displays though in a different virtual format, which will have a long-lasting life. Therefore,*

*virtual exhibits are in fact fixed resources once the real one is dismantled, and they could be used in different contexts and forms such as multimedia archives.”*⁸

Maybe my disappointment with the online exhibition comes from the inability of the website to perpetuate that experience, to preserve the impact each gallery space had in my visitor experience. But I am glad I don't need to rely on my memories for that. The printed catalog of this exhibition satiated any lack of its online version. I found references, content and images to keep my experiences in those galleries alive.

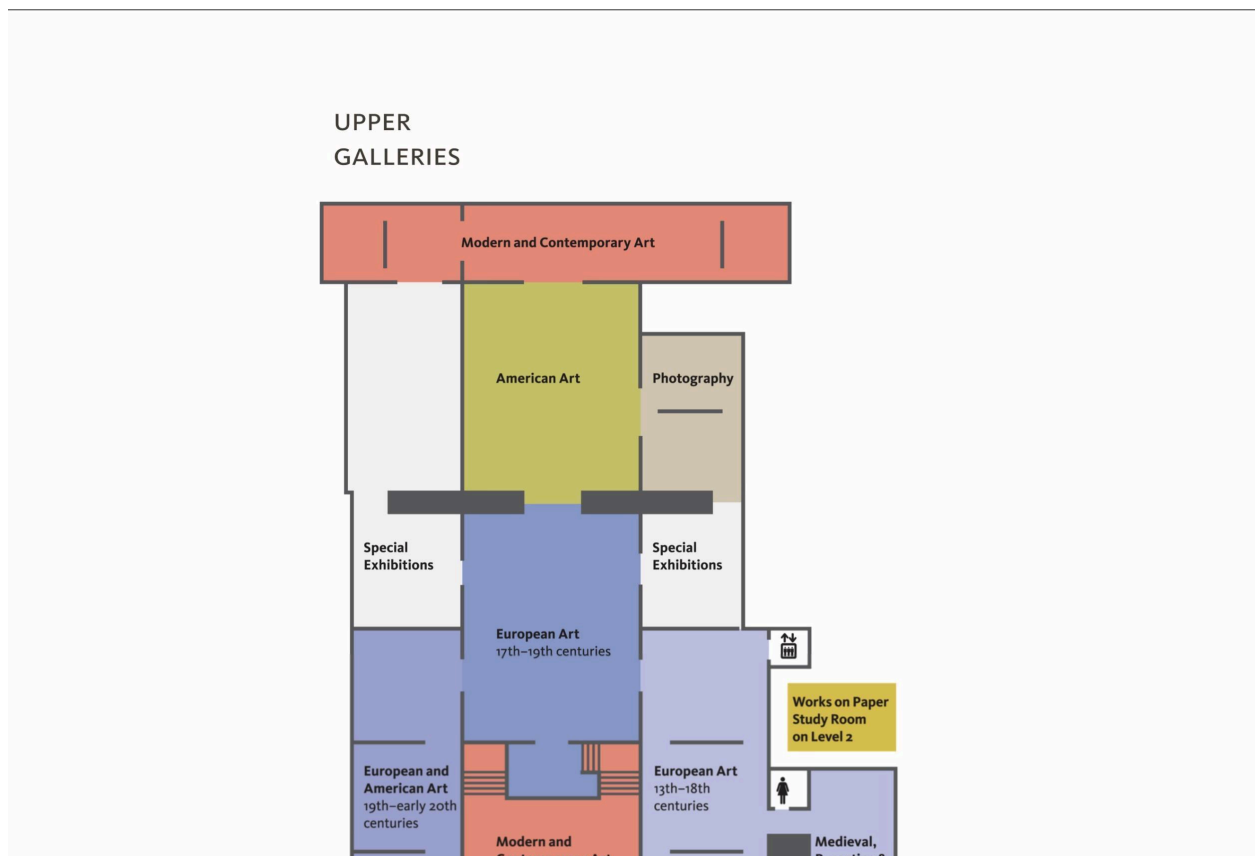
In addition to the in-depth essays that compliment even further the physical presentations, the historical background, and the intention of curators and the artist body are woven together in an influential publication. As mentioned by Louis Bury in a review of this exhibition: *“the exhibition’s wall texts—informative but not overwhelming—are pitched toward a non specialist audience, while its gargantuan and star-studded catalog is pitched toward experts.”*⁹ I agree with such remarks. The content display on the galleries' labels was accessible to the general public while this catalog will satisfy any art scholar. Earlier this year this catalog was nominated the year's best art exhibition catalog by the Association of American Publishers and was the recipient of an Award of Excellence by the Association of Art Museum Curators (AAMC).¹⁰ As mentioned by Carreras (2014): *“the collecting and cataloging functions of a museum can continue behind the scenes while installations do more in the way of encouraging seeing and suggesting ways to see. Recent monographic shows in which the detailed documentation is put in a catalog separated from the evidence offered by the works themselves provide one model for this.”*

The testament of time will confirm if exhibitions with a concomitant online, physical and printed iterations will have a more everlasting impact in future audiences. My guess is that a well cataloged exhibition such as this most definitely will.

Appendix:

A) Map of Princeton University Art Museum Gallery spaces.

<https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/files/attachments/pages/museum-floorplan-0315.pdf>



B) Photograph of American Art Gallery during “Nature’s Nation” exhibition



C) EXIT by Diller Scofidio + Renfro (DS+R) Studio.

<https://dsrny.com/project/exit?index=false§ion=projects&search=Exit>

DSC + RN



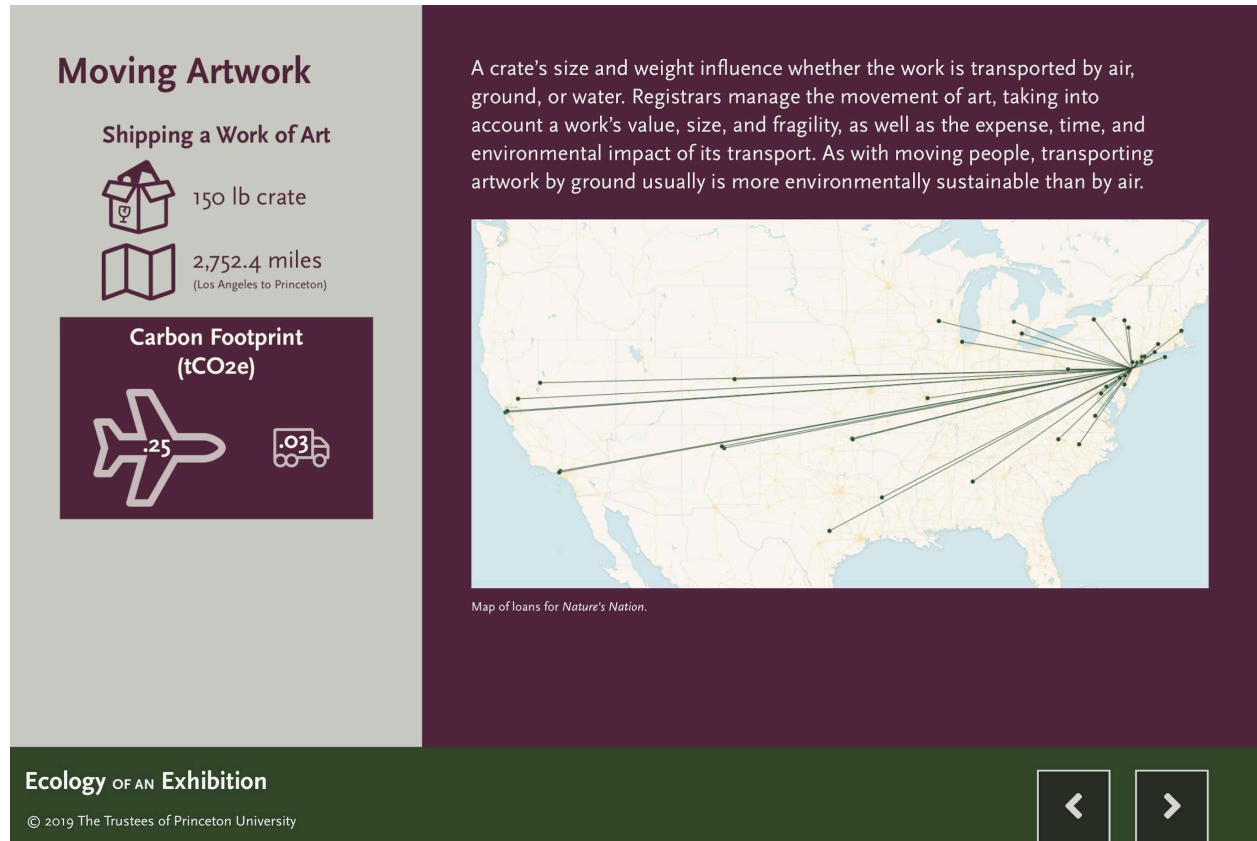
index

D) Photograph of Jennifer Cabral-Pierce at Contemporary Art Gallery of Princeton Art Museum interacting with Video Art installation EXIT by Diller Scofidio + Renfro (DS+R) at “Nature’s Nation” exhibition.



E) Ecology of an Exhibition webpage

<https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/ecologyofanexhibition/start>



References:

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- 6 Teaching Nature's Nation | Princeton University Art Museum. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/mhv/story/teaching-natures-nation>
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