

From Géohistoire to Geoaesthetics: An Art Historical Segue for our Times

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Philosophy, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari contend, is *géophilosophie*. In their 1991 reflections on the nature of philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari observe that “philosophy is a geophilosophy in precisely the same way that history is a geohistory from Braudel’s point of view.”¹ It is no coincidence that they conceived the term *géophilosophie* along the lines of what Fernand Braudel had designated as *géohistoire* in an essay written while he was imprisoned during the Second World War.² As is now widely known, Braudel’s *géohistoire*—“the study of a double liaison, from nature to man and man to nature, the study of an action and a reaction, combined, mixed, confounded, renewed endlessly in the reality of the everyday”³—found its fullest articulation in the first volume of *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*, the magisterial book that opens with meticulous descriptions of mountains and water bodies to emphasize that the natural environment was not merely the setting or an inert backdrop for human action.⁴ Taken together, these frameworks insist that the earth is not a passive stage but a generative agent in the making of historical form and meaning.

Thinking alongside *La Méditerranée*, here I return here to Braudel from within via the discipline of art history where the French historian’s pioneering scholarship offers methodologies to explore the circulation of objects and materials across vast oceanic spaces in the early modern

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1991), trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell as *What Is Philosophy?* (Columbia University Press, 1994), 95.

² Fernand Braudel, “Géohistoire: la société, l’espace et le temps,” in *Les ambitions de l’histoire*, ed. Roselyne de Ayala and Paule Braudel (Éditions de Fallois, 1997), 68–114. For Braudel’s *géohistoire*, see Guilherme Ribeiro, “A Arte de Conjugar Tempo e Espaço: Fernand Braudel, a Geo-história e a Longa Duração,” *História, Ciências, Saúde—Manguinhos* 22, no. 2 (2015): 605–39.

³ As Braudel writes: “La géohistoire est l’étude d’une double liaison, de la nature à l’homme et de l’homme à la nature, l’étude d’une action et d’une réaction, mêlées, confondues, recommencées sans fin, dans la réalité de chaque jour.” Braudel, “Géohistoire,” 102.

⁴ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (Armand Colin, 1949).

period.⁵ Such art historical deliberations on entanglements and encounters across oceanic scales, Alicia Walker argues, fruitfully shift our focus away “from origins and localities as the defining factors of history and toward the consideration of movement across boundaries traditionally defined by language, religion, ethnicity and geography.”⁶ The implications of the concept-term *géohistoire* for a discipline such as art history also take us beyond connected histories, to use Sanjay Subramanyam’s felicitous phrase, to engage the indelible tractions between the natural environment and creative practices in shaping the contours of the early modern world.⁷ Take, for instance, the notion of geoaesthetics, a term that I have employed elsewhere to consider artistic practices shaped through human interaction with geographical, botanical, zoological, mineralogical, and climatic formations.⁸ The concept of geoaesthetics has, of course, emerged only recently in scholarly discourse to designate post-1960s environmental art as a “form of thinking that works between the territory and the earth by opening up zones of indeterminacy.”⁹ However, the intellectual roots of the concept-term take us back to Braudel’s *géohistoire* and Deleuze and Guattari’s *géophilosophie*, from which we may rethink the diverse indices of both the phenomenal and the noumenal within which geoaesthetics functions in art history.

At face value, this line of enquiry is not new. Whether tracing the global circulation of silver from Potosí or porcelain from Jingdezhen in the early modern period, art history has always been attentive to earthly formations that are at the center of artistic production.¹⁰ Our embattled ecological present, however, requires new art histories aligned with other registers of thought beyond narratives that solely focus on connectivity, mobility, and exchange under the menacing shadow of global capital formation. While art historians such as Ananda Cohen-Aponte have already proposed that we decolonize the so-called Global Renaissance by introducing questions of colonial power and hegemony when writing histories of artistic exchange in the early modern period, my proposition is for a history of art that is equally alert to Indigenous worldviews, the vitalism of more-than-human actants and actors, and other minor ways of being in alterity that

⁵ There is a significant body of art historical scholarship on the global early modern; for recent appraisals, see Stephen J. Campbell and Stephanie Porras, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Global Renaissance Art* (Routledge, 2024) and Monica Juneja, *Can Art History Be Made Global? Meditations from the Periphery* (De Gruyter, 2023).

⁶ Alicia W. Walker, “Globalism,” *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012): 185.

⁷ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 735–62.

⁸ Sugata Ray, *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion: Geoaesthetics in the Land of Krishna, 1550–1850* (University of Washington Press, 2019).

⁹ Gary Shapiro, “Territory, Landscape, Garden: Toward Geoaesthetics,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 9, no. 2 (2004): 113. Recent scholarship on geoaesthetics in contemporary art, literature, and cinema includes Susan Ballard and Liz Linden, “Spiral Jetty, Geoaesthetics, and Art: Writing the Anthropocene,” *The Anthropocene Review* 6, nos. 1–2 (2019): 142–46; Mark A. Cheetham, *Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature since the ’60s* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018); and Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru, eds., *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century* (Northwestern University Press, 2015), among others. Conferences include the biennial Geo-Aesthetics Conference initiated by the International Association for the Study of Environment, Space, and Place in 2008. Contemporary art exhibitions include GEO-AESTHETICS, Museum for Contemporary Art, Citadelpark, Ghent (2013). For a historiography of the term, see William L. Fox, “Geoaesthetics,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2014), 171–75.

¹⁰ See Stacey Pierson, *From Object to Concept: Global Consumption and the Transformation of Ming Porcelain* (Hong Kong University Press, 2013); and Dana Leibsohn, “Made in China, Made in Mexico,” in *At the Crossroads: The Arts of Spanish America and Early Global Trade, 1492–1850*, eds. Donna Pierce and Ronald Otsuka (Denver Art Museum, 2012), 11–40, among others.

have been all but marginalized by colonialism, capitalism, and the global circulation of objects and material.¹¹ From such a perspective, Potosí is not only the source of silver, a singularly precious metal that fueled the early modern global economy from the Americas to Asia, but, as anthropologist Pascale Absi has indicated, a mountain with contingent personhood.¹² Indeed, posthuman critiques from disciplines such as anthropology have by now linked the geological (nonlife) and the biological (life) to reimagine the vitality of entanglements across lifeworlds.¹³



Figure 1: Krishna Holds up the Govardhan to Shelter the Villagers of Braj. Folio from a *Harivamśa* (Legend of Hari; an epithet of Krishna) manuscript, ca. 1590–95. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 28.9 x 20 cm. Collection: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Edward C. Moore Jr. Gift, 1928rofl-v08-2026_Braudel_Ray Image 1.png

Along the same lines, a geoaesthetic approach from within art history promises to disturb the post-Enlightenment foundations of the discipline that emerged from a specific Westernist bourgeois intellectual culture with roots in European colonial expansionism.¹⁴

What would such an approach look like? Imagine accounting for relationships between the human species and the materials that constitute the planet in a manner not centered around ecological domination and resource extraction; imagine writing a history of art in which land itself becomes the entangled medium through which geoaesthetics is exercised; imagine an art history not just of trade, production, and technology, but of the geological imbued with agency and caught up in processual flows. Think, for instance, of the hill that the divine Krishna is believed to have miraculously lifted to protect the inhabitants of Braj from the torrential rain sent by Indra, the king of gods (figure 1).¹⁵ Narrated in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (Tales of Vishnu; fourth or fifth century CE), the elegiac account begins with the young cowherd encouraging the pastoral

¹¹ Ananda Cohen-Aponte, "Decolonizing the Global Renaissance: A View From the Andes," in *The Globalization of Renaissance Art: A Critical Review*, ed. Daniel Savoy (Brill, 2017), 67–94.

¹² Pascale Absi, *Los ministros del diablo: El trabajo y sus representaciones en las minas de Potosí* (Institut français d'études andines; Fundación PIEB; Institut de Recherche pour le Développement; Embajada de Francia en Bolivia, 2005).

¹³ See especially Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ As Donald Preziosi writes: "In point of fact, Art History makes colonial subjects of us all. In other words, the Enlightenment invention of the 'aesthetic' was an attempt to come to terms with, and classify on a common ground or within the grid of a common table or spreadsheet, a variety of forms of subject–object relationships observable (or imagined) across many different societies." Donald Preziosi, *In the Aftermath of Art: Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics, with a Critical Commentary by Johanne Lamoureux* (Routledge, 2006), 77.

¹⁵ See David L. Haberman, *Loving Stones: Making the Impossible Possible in the Worship of Mount Govardhan* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Charlotte Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends in Medieval India* (Oxford University Press, 1996); and Paul M. Toomey, *Food from the Mouth of Krishna: Feast and Festivities in a North Indian Pilgrimage Centre* (Hindustan Publishing, 1994), among others, for the history of the Govardhan.

community of Braj, the pilgrimage center in north India where Krishna is believed to have spent his youth, not to worship Indra, but to commemorate the end of the monsoon by venerating the hill that stands approximately eighty-five miles south of New Delhi.¹⁶ To persuade the cowherds, Krishna states: “Cattle and mountains are our gods. Brahmins offer worship with prayer; cultivators of the earth adore their landmarks; but we, who tend our herds in the forests and mountains, should worship them and our kine.”¹⁷ Heeding Krishna’s advice, the pastoral community prepares a feast in honor of the Govardhan hill, emphasizing the rock/divine-body assemblage as generative matter with elemental agency. Subsequently, to reveal the sacredness of the Govardhan, Krishna proclaims: “I am the mountain.”



Figure 2: Satellite image of the Govardhan hill. © 2018 Esri, Earthstar Geographics, CNES/Airbus DSrofl-v08-2026_Braudel_Ray_image2.png

Imagine the Govardhan not merely as mineral matter hardened into a mass but as the manifest form of Krishna himself, a hill that bled if wounded (figure 2).¹⁸ While the origin of this narrative cannot be traced back to sixteenth-century texts with certainty, priests at the site reiterate the account to pilgrims to affirm, in Jane Bennett’s words, “the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations.”¹⁹ One could contend that it was the alchemic quality of stone as elemental matter (*dhātu*) that made the hill a sacred site and a living being concurrently. Consequently, the ecumenical imaginings of the hill as both a divine being and a homoclinical ridge prompt a renewed art historical attentiveness to the geomorphological material that constitutes land—the texture of stone, the granulation of dust, the color of soil—to envisage a history of art that is receptive to the agentive force of matter in relation to human action on the planet.

¹⁶ Although the Sanskrit term *vraja* was used in scriptural sources to refer to the mythic space where Krishna had spent his youth, the geographic space of modern Braj was invented only in the sixteenth century when reformers arrived there to reclaim the purported sacred sites associated with Krishna’s life. For this history, see Ray, *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion*; John S. Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (Harvard University Press, 2015); and Alan W. Entwistle, *Braj: Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage* (Egbert Forsten, 1987), among others.

¹⁷ *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, translated by Horace H. Wilson as *The Vishṇu Purāṇa: A System of Hindu Mythology and Tradition* (The Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1840), 524.

¹⁸ According to local legends, the Govardhan bled when workmen struck the bedrock while digging a well on the ridge. That night, Krishna appeared in a dream to the workmen, explaining that their tools had cut his body and that they should refrain from further construction on the hill. Interview with Pandit Goswami, Govardhan, November 18, 2012.

¹⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), vii.

Obscuring the boundaries between art and the natural environment and between animate beings and inanimate matter, an engagement with the epistemic subjectivity of rocks then allows for an exploration of the contours of a geoaesthetic art history, as I have argued elsewhere. Moreover, going beyond questions of global connectivity, cognates such as *géophilosophie*, *géohistoire*, and geoaesthetics allow us to visualize stones as entangled in relational flows that intimately connect representation, theology, and the natural environment. Such an approach, in turn, has significant implications for how we engage with the materiality of artistic practices, in the process problematizing the purported rift between nature and culture that, as we now know, was an invention of a Westernist rationality that had emerged in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century natural philosophy.²⁰ This is not to suggest that the pre-Enlightenment world was intrinsically green, a world in which the human species lived “in harmony with nature.”²¹ Rather, it is in the conjoining of material and materiality—that is, the physical and the phenomenological—that stone becomes more than itself. Stone, aligned differently, becomes effervescent matter with the potential to unravel the ostensible dichotomies between nature and culture that haunt our anthropogenic present. And it is this epistemological reformulation that Braudel’s *géohistoire* or the “relations between man and his environment” demands in a besieged present in which environmental precarity etches its mark on every aspect of life.²² A

²⁰ For a history of eighteenth-century scientificism, see Thomas L. Hankins, *Science and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

²¹ As Ursula K. Heise notes: “Nowhere is this more obvious than in North American environmentalist thought, which has variously cast antiquity, Indigenous cultures, premodern rural cultures, or European cultures as models for how to live ‘in harmony with nature.’ [...] Both problematic and empowering, such visions of the past enable a critical distance from the present even as they may distort historical realities. A historically oriented eco-cosmopolitanism would aim to recuperate a more accurate sense of the ecological cultures of the past with their achievements and their shortfalls.” Ursula K. Heise, “Environmentalism, Eco-Cosmopolitanism, and Premodern Thought,” in *Premodern Ecologies in the Modern Literary Imagination*, eds. Vin Nardizzi and Tiffany J. Werth (University of Toronto Press, 2019), 285.

²² Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper & Row, 1972–73), 1:102.