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Gisela Parak

“Our Only World”—An American Vision

On 24 May 1974 Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Russell Train opened an extraordinary photo exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution’s Visitor’s Center. Entitled “Our Only World,” the show consisted of 113 photographs of environmental pollution. After being dismantled, six exhibition sets toured the United States until 1978, intended to be a visual display of American environmentalism. The exhibition was employed not only to enlighten American pupils and adults; it was also sent to the 1976 World Environment Exhibition in Tokyo to promote the United States’ transnational vision. “Our Only World” is conceivably the first example of a photo exhibition in which a national government consciously employs photographic eco-images to emphasize the complexity of environmentalism and to sanction specific behavioral patterns. Employing visual mediation to campaign for environmental awareness at a governmental level was a vanguard in environmental policy in 1974. Simultaneously, the design of the exhibition was to function as a reaction to the debates that were emerging from the new global environmental movement: a proposal to the United Nations (UN) Economic and Social Council in July 1968 suggested a UN Conference on the Human Environment be held in Stockholm. Despite the concerns about environmental depredation prevalent in many industrial nations, the implementation of this proposal was purposefully delayed until 1972 to give national governments the opportunity to take action in advance, such as passing environmental legislation.¹ In the United States, President Nixon signed the National Environmental Policy Act in January 1970 as a reaction to the growing national environmental conscience, and in December the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was founded as an answer to both domestic and international appeals.

“Our Only World” was influenced considerably by these political circumstances. The show merged several of the period’s most important catch phrases into its design. First, the omnipresent metaphor of “Spaceship Earth,”² initially used by Ambassador Adlai Stevenson in his 1965 Geneva speech, served as the overall theme of “Our Only World” and was quoted in almost every review of the exhibition. Second, Barbara Ward’s and René Dubos’s

1 Wade Rowland, *The Plot to Save the World* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1973), 33.

2 Among others, the “Spaceship Earth” metaphor was picked up by UN Secretary General U Thant in 1970 and elaborated on at book length by Howard Odum, *Environment, Power and Society* (New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1971); Peder Anker, “The Ecological Colonization of Space,” *Environmental History* 10, no. 2 (2005): 246.

book, *Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet*, was paraphrased to become the exhibition's slogan. Discussing the just, global distribution of resources and wealth, this book contributed significantly in coining a postwar critique of both Cold-War science and technology, and of the imperialistic separation of the world into so-called developed and developing countries. And Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, "Everything is connected to everything else,"³ was project director Gifford Hampshire's inspiration to photographically emphasize the connection between pollution and its effects.

Figure 1:
LeRoy Woodson:
Birmingham steel
plant, 10/1972
© National
Archives
(412-DA-11388).



Figure 2:
Alexander Hope:
Polluted salt
marsh in Middle-
town, 05/1973 ©
National Archives
(412-DA-11439).

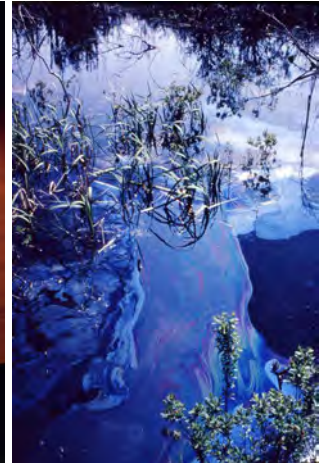


Figure 3:
Marc St. Gil:
Burning discarded
automobile bat-
teries, 07/1972 ©
National Archives
(412-DA-11382).



3 Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Man, Nature, and Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1971).

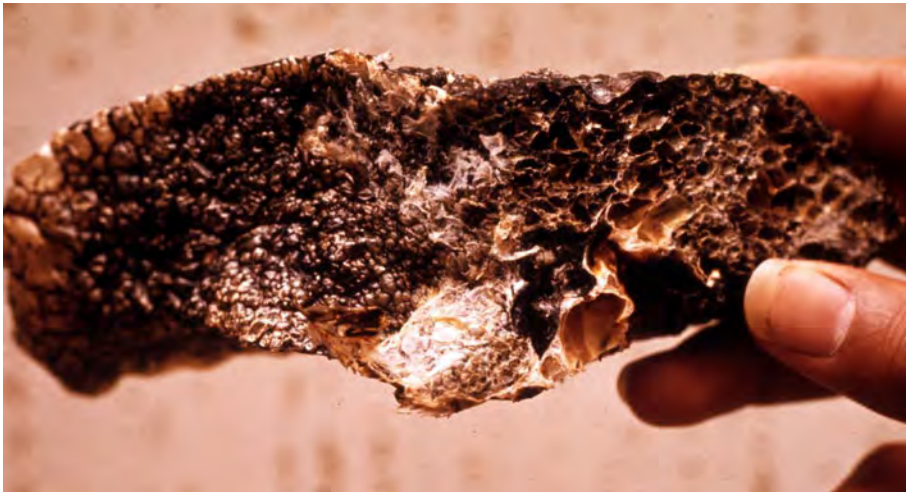


Figure 4:
LeRoy Woodson:
Birmingham coal
miner's lung
showing effect of
black-lung disease,
06/1972 © National
Archives
(412-DA-11389).



Figure 5:
LeRoy Woodson:
Normal lung,
shown for compa-
rison with lung
affected by black-
lung disease,
06/1972 © National
Archives
(412-DA-11391).

Figure 6:
LeRoy Woodson:
Robert B. Jones,
retired worker, is
totally dependent
on his home oxy-
gen machine for
survival, 06/1972
© National
Archives
(412-DA-11390).

After three general introductory sections, the exhibition concentrated on the five core areas of the EPA, visually illustrating not only environmental policy achievements but also problems of water and air pollution, waste management, noise abatement, and radiation: Photos of thick, black smoke clouds emphasized the negative implications of commercial production; rainbow-colored oil streaks and monochromatic water discoloration drove home the consequences of the sewerage-disposal system. The long-term effects of particle and air pollution were exemplified by contrasting a tar-stained smoker's lungs with lungs in a healthy state; a pulmonary patient was shown in pitiful dependence on a breathing machine.

The exhibit relied on deterrent, shocking pictures, but also—especially in its opening sections—on the beauty of nature, allowing the audience to compare the is and the *should be* state of the American landscape. In its last two sections, the political agenda motivating the exhibition—the legitimization of specific environmentally friendly behavior—shone through. Under the subtitle “Protecting Our Environment,” accomplishments such as new sewage treatment plants or air pollution test facilities were presented as technical solutions to the environmental crisis. Introducing images like these, the curators were obviously suggesting an expansion of these role-model projects. Their appeal to join a movement of environmental protection was further developed in the last section on recycling. The section challenged the audience by claiming, “It’s Up to You.” The very same motto had also been emphasized by EPA Administrator Russell Train in his speech at the inauguration of the show.⁴



Figure 7:
Jim Olive:
Children in Fort
Smith are learning
that protecting
the environment
will take more
than awareness,
06/1972 ©
National Archives
(412-DA-11452).

The function of persuasive eco-images presented in the exhibition was to promote this mandate of individual empowerment and to stress the notion that successful environmental protection depended on individuals. The viewer was not only informed but also reminded of his/her duties. A concluding photograph stressed this intention by presenting a recycling container in front of a school class. The message of the photograph was openly inscribed on the box: “Fight for Your World.”

As illustrative material to spread environmental education and to increase environmental conscientiousness, “Our Only World” was a success. The show received benevolent reviews, which

4 Russell Train, “Opening remarks, Manuscript,” 23 May 1974: Entry 412-M, Box 2, File 2, General Records of the Environmental Protection Agency, Record Group 412, Photo Division of the National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

reflected ordinary inhabitants' anxiety about environmental devastation during these days and the public agreement to do something against further pollution.⁵ Though the photographs of "Our Only World" succeeded in spreading the show's didactic message, the exhibit did not proactively add a single new issue to the discussion. On the contrary, it presented the lowest common denominator of the current state of the environmental discussion. For example, "Our Only World" did not pick up Commoner's and Dubos's call for a new "scientific ethic" or "science of civilization" to restrict technological developments, nor did it refer to the call of certain ecologists for a restriction of consumerism.⁶ The show proudly presented technological achievements to mitigate the damage, but did not suggest sustainable technologies or ideas for prevention. The need for new cars remained unquestioned, but better means of exhaust control were displayed as solutions to the problem. Although the "atomic menace" was vividly discussed among contemporaries, the show presented atomic power plants as an adequate solution to meet the nation's demand for energy. In this light, "Our Only World" disseminated a far less substantial ecological prospect than that proposed by environmental writers of the early 1960s. When on public display, the responsibility of industrial companies was lessened through the removal of references to specific firms from images of negative examples. "Our Only World," as a governmental vision, educated the public but did not reveal any unknown facts or question the model of economic growth.

Despite these deficiencies or conceptual limitations, the show was sent to Tokyo to represent US environmentalism at an international world fair. This gesture supports the argument that the United States was witnessing the birth of environmental diplomacy under the Nixon presidency, and solidified the understanding of the United States as the driver of exchange on environmental questions at the international level.⁷ The United States sought a leading position, for example, by creating environmental institutions and pressuring NATO's North Atlantic Council to create the Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society in November 1969. Today, this aspired leadership in global

5 See Evaluation Papers and Newspaper Clippings, 1972–1977, Entry 412-M, Box 2, File 2, General Records of the Environmental Protection Agency, Record Group 412, Photo Division of the National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

6 Ernst Callenbach, *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston* (Berkeley: Banyan Tree Books, 1975).

7 J. Brooks Flippen's observation of Richard Nixon's and Russell Train's efforts marginalizes protagonists from communities other than the United States, in particular the United Nations, which took an essential role in shaping international environmentalism; J. Brooks Flippen, "Richard Nixon, Russell Train, and the Birth of Modern American Environmental Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 4 (2008): 638.



Figure 8:
Earth, as seen
by astronauts
Eugen Cernan,
Ronald Evans, and
Harrison Schmidt
from Apollo
12/1972 ©
National Archives
(412-DA-11344)

environmental issues is criticized for failing to have harmonized fissures between the Eastern and Western blocs.⁸ But even after the UN Conference on the Human Environment and the foundation of the United Nations Environmental Program, the United States continued to perceive itself as the international leader on environmental policy.⁹ In contrast to this belief, the implementation of environmental laws staggered at home. During a time of recession, the political administration tended to support businesses in any jobs-versus-environment questions.¹⁰ It has been pointed out that the Nixon Administration's halfhearted attempt at enforcing environmental policies was accompanied by a "continual lack of support"¹¹ from other federal agencies. Most politicians were not willing to question the ideology of abundance and "their country's right to consume so

8 Jacob Darwin Hamblin, "Environmentalism for the Atlantic Alliance: NATO's Experiment with the 'Challenges of Modern Society,'" *Environmental History* 15, no. 1 (2010): 56, 61, 71.

9 Flippen, "Birth of Modern American Environmental Diplomacy," 618.

10 Joel A. Mintz, *Enforcement at the EPA: High Stakes and Hard Choices* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 26.

11 Rosemary O'Leary, *Environmental Change: Federal Courts and the EPA* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 8.

much of the world's resources,"¹² although the problem of economic justice has become a large debate in American intellectual circles since the early 1950s.¹³

In this period of environmental endorsement, "Our Only World" provided a path-breaking technique, using the medium of an exhibition to increase environmental awareness in an easily accessible, educational, and entertaining format. However, the exhibition failed to develop a proactive, innovative agenda. It repeated popular headlines and weaved them into its own vague message. As a somehow uninspired ensemble of photographic eco-images, originally intended to enlighten visitors of American and foreign nationality, "Our Only World" cannot be considered a progressive role model for environmentalism and particularly not a transnational vision. Thomas Robertson wrote that Americans started to perceive the whole earth as "American" after World War II, as explicated by Anselm Adams's photo book *This is the American Earth* analyzed in Robin Kelsey's contribution to this volume.¹⁴ By incorporating only pictures of American examples, "Our Only World" maintained a single-minded perspective of global environmental problems. Although one of the iconic NASA views of planet Earth was used—a view focusing on the southern hemisphere—this incident did not alter or improve the show's conceptual statement.¹⁵

It can be concluded that the founders of "Our Only World" consciously employed eco-images not only with an educational intent, but especially to reaffirm and underpin the role of American environmental policy as a forerunner of and role model for international action. While the didactic component of the images is still evident today, the limited transnational perspective provided by "Our Only World" represents a gap between entitlement and reality in the American claim to its role as a precursor of global environmental diplomacy.

12 Donald Worster, "Environmentalism Goes Global," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 4 (2008): 641.

13 For further early critique, see Fairfield Osborn, *The Limits of the Earth* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1953); Harrison Brown, *The Challenge of Man's Future: An Inquiry Concerning the Condition of Man During the Years that Lie Ahead* (New York: Viking Press, 1954); William Thomas (ed.), *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

14 Thomas Robertson, "'This Is the American Earth': American Empire, the Cold War, and American Environmentalism," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 4 (2008): 584.

15 Denis Cosgrove, "Contested Global Visions: One-World, Whole-Earth, and the Apollo Space Photographs," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 84, no. 2 (1994): 290; Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), 57.