Sometimes, I think, science is a language of explaining, whereas art is a language of belonging. These are complementary endeavors, not exclusive ones. Explaining is, after all, a way of belonging. And art, like science, is a way of understanding the world. However, it increasingly seems that the sciences and humanities are retreating into specialized vocabularies that make each discipline foreign to the other and both of them inaccessible to the general public, who nonetheless must be moved by science and art if we are to have any chance of forestalling catastrophic changes in the natural world. Now more than ever we need those rare individuals who can navigate both disciplines, the artists and scientists who can observe, represent, and call our attention back to the living world.

Hara Woltz is a conservation biologist who has studied the endangered waved albatross and the giant tortoise in the Galápagos archipelago, and she is an artist who has exhibited her photographs and paintings at Sotheby’s in New York City and at the

Field Books

Working the liminal space between art and science

Art by Hara Woltz
Text by Erik Reece

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She has also worked as a landscape artist on several continents. All of her work seems to arise out of the understanding that we are witnessing, and often looking away from, the Sixth Great Extinction.

In her paintings, collages, and site work, Woltz is collapsing, or at least complicating, the boundaries between art and science in a way that is both beautiful and useful. She moves easily between her scientific field books and her artist’s sketchbooks, merging them into a new kind of text that dramatizes the liminal space between art and science, the sacred and the mundane. For this, Woltz uses Moleskine Japanese pocket albums, or accordion books, the pages of which unfold into sixty panels, allowing her to extend her thoughts and images along that continuous horizon. Each book is dedicated to a single subject—flight, decay, tortoises, stillness.

Recently, in the journal Conservation Biology, James Tolisano called on fellow scientists to stop dismissing art as “irrelevant” to their own work, and to instead recognize artists as “the new naturalists.” It is the artist’s power of observation, he goes on to say, that “can lead to interesting ideas.” Certainly Charles Darwin was first a brilliant naturalist whose powers of observation, on full display in The Voyage of the Beagle, ultimately led to the insights of natural selection. It seems fitting, then, that much of Hara Woltz’s fieldwork has taken place in the Galápagos and has been supported by the Charles Darwin Research Station there. Woltz says that because both art and science “involve acute and careful observations of the surrounding world,” it makes sense that they coexist so easily within her own field books. In her works Airports for Albatross and They Fly to Peru for Breakfast, for instance, these observations take the form of field notes about the nesting behavior and flight patterns of the albatross, as well as careful drawings of the birds and the island they inhabit.

To understand Woltz’s accordion books, I think it helpful here to recall Roland Barthes’s distinction between a classical work of art, and a contemporary text, which cannot be classified under traditional genres or definitions. Rather, the hard-to-define, protean text relies, as Barthes said, on “the activity of associations, contiguities, [and] cross-references” that coincide with “a liberation of symbolic energy.” Woltz’s texts are challenging in this same way, asking reader-viewers to make, on their own, the connections and associations between the liberated symbols within her palimpsests. Woltz uses whatever is at hand—found material like maps, quotations, photographs, even the image of her own echocardiogram. Brought together within the same text, within a new context, these languages and imagery from art and science cross-pollinate in a way that poses questions for a single discipline, or even a single form of...
representation, cannot fully answer. And the text is fundamentally about asking questions that the viewer must answer and act on.

Like a broken line painted down the middle of a road, these words, "more than 1 million vertebrates killed/day — American roads," run vertically up the left side of Road Crossing Structures for Amphibians and Reptiles. To the right is the bloody image of a dead snapping turtle and the notation, "some run over intention-ally . . . why?" More red is smeared across the background of the next two panels, and in the foreground we see an aerial image of Baldwinsville, New York, where Woltz worked on a site project to mitigate roadkill by installing tunnels that would lure amphib-ians and reptiles into safe passage below the human routes.

By moving her work off the page, onto the actual landscape, Woltz extends the definition of text even further to include the
physical world, where the artist might effect actual, physical change. Then that world gets translated back into the collapsible microcosm of the accordion book.

On the most elemental level, Woltz describes these books as her “mode of occupying the world.” It is a mode that employs the imagination to call us back to that world—to pay better attention to it, to better understand it, to better inhabit it. Near the end of his book The Creation, E. O. Wilson writes, “To be a naturalist is not just an activity but an honorable state of mind.” It is honorable, Hara Woltz suggests in her art, because such a state of mind is attentive, curious, reverent—capable of wonder and empathy.

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