



# SAYLER / MORRIS

*Artist Packet*

# SAYLER / MORRIS

**Location**

USA

**Website**[sayler-morris.com](http://sayler-morris.com)**Social Media** [@ecotoolshed](https://www.instagram.com/ecotoolshed) [@eco-toolshed](https://twitter.com/eco-toolshed)

## BIO

Artist duo Susannah Sayler and Edward Morris (Sayler/Morris) create site-specific and historically-inflected artworks that respond to our changing relationship to nature, culture, and ecology. Their work includes photographs of landscapes impacted by climate change, such as [History of the Future](#); a short-film called [Their World Is Not Our World](#), about a man-made “wilderness” park in The Netherlands; and [Water, Gold, Soil: American River](#), a multimedia project that explores how California rivers transition from free-flowing wilderness to rigid canalization.

Sayler/Morris felt they also could be effective by supporting a larger network of creators and established [The Canary Project](#), a platform for collaborative works that deepen public understanding of climate change. In the same spirit, Sayler/Morris additionally developed [The Canary Lab](#) at Syracuse University. Created in the spirit of experimentation, The Canary Lab is a hub of interdisciplinary study of ecological issues. Each course explores a theme such as food or shelter, and extends into the university setting through film screenings, speaker series, and community collaborations.

Recently, Sayler/Morris launched a new platform called [Toolshed](#) that connects ecologic thought with action by gathering and sharing tools for a livable future. Toolshed grows from an acknowledgment that climate change has reached a tipping point and cultural producers have an important role to meet the new challenges this rapid change will bring. Toolshed includes a physical base based in Hudson, New York, and a virtual space. Modeled on tool lending libraries, both in-person and online components are aimed at freely distributing practical tools and methodological approaches.

## Highlights

- Fifteen years making diverse work about ecological issues that have a broad range, from the poetic to the directly activist
- Activate a variety of spaces, including science museums, art museums, and public spaces. Audiences range from children to local leaders
- Develop popular interdisciplinary courses on ecological activism at Syracuse University in collaboration with local farms and nonprofits via Sayler/Morris' campus-based Canary Lab
- *Cross Pollination: Heade, Cole, Church, and Our Contemporary Moment* exhibition at Thomas Cole National Historic Site, includes installation of *Eclipse*, the art duo's video about the extinction of the passenger pigeon
- Their most recent work concerns the Ecuadorian Amazon



## Themes

- Anthropocene & Posthumanism
- Beyond Nature/Culture
- Climate Change
- Democracy & Capitalism
- Environmental Justice & Ecological Systems
- Extractivism, Deforestation & Desertification
- Indigenous Practices
- Multispecies Ethos & Animal/Nature Rights
- Post-/Anti-Colonialism & Decolonization
- Science, Technology, Data & Mapping
- Water & Food Practices

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*We believe that cultural production is a crucial building block in social movements. Art opens a space for belief, and belief makes a space for change. Beginning in 2020, we decided that a change of metaphor was needed. No longer just a matter of sounding the alarm (the canary in the coal mine of our original Canary Project), we must urgently assemble and distribute tools for building resilient communities, tools for seeing the world in a new way, tools for finding joy and common cause.*

## GETTING REAL

**Get to know the artist you will be working with. The following offers a few personal notes about the artists, their perspectives and personal motivations.**

Artists are real people whose lives are often organized by daily tasks, like caring for and nourishing our families or managing a home. Like most people, their career paths can be unpredictable and serendipitous as they explore new avenues. For example, Ed came from a non-art background, as he studied Japanese poetry in a PhD program at Harvard, was formerly a partner in a major investigations firm, and co-founded a software company.

In the spirit of their collaborative and creative work. Susannah notes that if she could borrow a tool, she would really like to learn how to use canning equipment. While her grandmother obsessively canned fruits and vegetables, her mother knows the method but never taught Susannah. Ed would like to figure out how to build a chicken coop in their backyard. While he reckons he could find the instructions online, he would need the tools and materials to make it happen. The virtue of a tool lending library is that one can take a chance experimenting on something like this without spending the money on the tools.

Sayler/Morris began their practice after reading, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate* by Elizabeth Kolbert. They were shocked into action by this book and their practice began with this deceptively simple impulse to convey the climate crisis in a way that inspires a response. In their 2006-2014 *History of the Future* project, they even consulted with Kolbert as they photographed landscapes around the world that were impacted by climate change.

Sayler/Morris find much of their inspiration through reading, particularly critical theory and contemporary science writing by authors who undo our Western conceptions of nature. One of the key challenges of their recent work on Toolshed is to connect complex but vital philosophical ideas to action and to make those ideas relatable or felt by greater numbers of people. A sample of the thinkers that have inspired Sayler/Morris' Toolshed project:

- Edouard Glissant, *Martinican and francophone theorist, writer and poet.* [Poetics of Relation](#)
- Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux), *author, theologian, historian and activist.* [Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto](#)
- Merlin Sheldrake, *biologist and writer.* [Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures](#)
- Ross Gay, *poet and community activist.* [The Book of Delights](#)
- Donna Haraway, *Professor Emerita and scholar of science, technology and feminism.* [Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene](#)
- Bruno Latour, *French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist.* [Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory](#)
- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *anthropologist and scholar of the anthropocene and feminist studies.* [Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection](#)
- David George Haskell, *biologist and writer on ethics, human culture and biology.* [The Songs of Trees](#)
- Robin Wall Kimmerer (Citizen Potawatomi Nation), *scientist and professor.* [Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants](#)
- Masanobu Fukuoka, *Japanese farmer and philosopher.* [The One-Straw Revolution: An Introduction to Natural Farming](#)
- [The Whole Earth Catalog](#), counterculture publication emphasizing self-sufficiency, ecology and alternative education

## ARTMAKING IS A KIND OF PROBLEM-SOLVING

**Art allows us to visually and physically respond to the world around us. Learn how the artists use their medium and artistic process to tackle challenges and problem solve.**

While Sayler/Morris began as photographers who captured the impact of climate change, they have shifted to consider how to cultivate truly ecological thinking and action in themselves and others. They believe that any significant change in a society begins with cultural change, with changes in worldview. And they believe that artists, as one form of cultural producer, play an important role in forging those changes. For Sayler/Morris ecology is more than what we often think of in terms of ecosystems and so-called "nature." Ecology for them is about how things relate to one another and affect one other. It is systems thinking and action. All of their work, whether a contemplative museum installation or a more activist project like their tool lending library, seeks to cultivate such ecological understanding.

This shift to ecology broadly speaking has also brought a shift in how they conceive their function as artists vis-à-vis the climate movement. No longer about the warning of the canary in the coal mine, Sayler/Morris seek to identify what tools we collectively need to co-create a prosperous, rich and just future for ourselves and our communities. Just as science writing and journalism has helped spread accurate data about climate change, they believe that creative expression can help to effectively share information through both formal and informal networks. The underlying challenge is how to galvanize and support individual and collective action to help people develop ecologically conscious ways of inhabiting the earth.

The artists' **Toolshed** platform is one such site where people can start collecting the physical tools along with the expertise needed to empower them to produce their own food, create their own shelter, harness alternative modes of energy, and live more equitably and responsibly. The virtual iteration of this expansive archive exists at [tool-shed.org](http://tool-shed.org), where one may also find intersectional entries ranging from Ross Gay's [poem on Eric Garner](#) to essays on the French Caribbean writer, poet, philosopher and literary critic [Edouard Glissant](#). These writings are accompanied by overviews of [community composting](#) and [Community Land Trusts](#), reflecting the artists' deep passion and sense of the interconnected nature of empathy, wellness and resilience with climate consciousness and social justice. This online platform will culminate in a book. The online platform is complemented by on-the-ground projects such as a tool-lending library in the Hudson Valley, partnering with Basilica Hudson.

In addition to their recent work with Toolshed, Sayler/Morris are currently working on a project on the Ecuadorian Amazon, which investigates different modes of thinking about the forest and, indeed, how the forest itself thinks. A major point of inspiration for this project is their interactions with the Cofan and other indigenous people who are protecting their territory in the Amazon and in the process protecting a crucial ecosystem for the entire planet.

Depending on the set of artistic, social, intellectual and philosophical problems they perceive as they move between projects, Sayler/Morris work in multiple disciplinary categories, including:

- Photography
- Video
- Installation
- Graphic design
- Historiography
- Writing and book production
- Poster design and advertising campaigns
- Website production
- Workshop development and public conversations
- Community collaboration

## WE THINK YOU SHOULD LOOK AT THIS

Read, watch & listen to a collection of resources by and about the artists. Resources are annotated and include suggested audiences or age groups for efficacy.

### Read:

**Claims to Immediacy: The Artist as Historian and *Eclipse* at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art** ([click here](#))

A description of how history is written as “a constant negotiation between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real within the collective psyche.” The essay is centered around a video installation, *Eclipse*, about the extinction of the passenger pigeon. (Good for advanced undergraduate and graduate education).

**Object in View: The Canary Project: Photographs and Fossils** ([click here](#))

An essay that accompanies their photographic series, *A History of the Future*, where Sayler/Morris provocatively juxtapose fossils from university collections with photographs of landscapes in which scientists are studying climate change. (Good for undergraduate students and graduate education).

**“What is a River in California?” by Edward Morris and Susannah Sayler in *Boom Magazine*** ([click here](#))

An essay about California rivers’ transformation from wilderness to rationalization filtered through the lens of Martin Heidegger’s reflections on the hydroelectric plant of the Rhine River in “The Question Concerning Technology.” (Good for undergraduate and graduate education).

**“The Pensive Photograph as Agent: What Can Non-Illustrative Images Do to Galvanize Public Support for Climate Change Action?” by Edward Morris and Susannah Sayler in *Images of Climate Change: Visualizations, Imaginations, Documentations*** ([click here](#))

An essay about the project, *A History of the Future*, that identifies a pathway for photographs to create social change by creating sensitivities around political issues. (Good for undergraduate and graduate education).

**“Destroy this Book,” in *Green Patriot Posters*** ([click here](#))

A summary of their climate change awareness project that situates their work artistically and historically within the Works Progress Administration (WPA) posters, contemporary social media, and the Obama campaign. (Useful for both secondary and higher education).

**Shelter Book** ([click here](#))

A book that encapsulates the thinking that occurred over a semester-long Syracuse course led by Sayler/Morris on the topic, “Modern Primitive Exchange: Shelter,” about the meaning of building and dwelling. (Useful for both secondary and higher education).

**“Susannah Sayler on Canaries, Climate Change, and Collaboration” by Gary Green in *Urbanautica: Journal of Visual Anthropology and Cultural Landscapes*** ([click here](#))

An interview with Susannah Sayler on photography, the origins of the Canary Project, and collaborating as artists and parents. (Useful for both secondary and higher education).

## Watch:

### **WILDER Workshops** ([7 minutes 30 seconds](#))

A video that captures the workshops designed to build community and a livable future by creating a geodesic dome and building bike-powered phone chargers.

### **Their World is Not Our World** ([3 minute clip](#)); ([22 minute video](#))

An excerpt from a video essay about the Oostvaardersplassen, a controversial man-made nature preserve outside of Amsterdam

### **Eclipse** ([3 minute video](#))

A video installation that commemorates the passenger pigeon, which went extinct over a hundred years ago

### **The Canary Project the Gowanus: Caught In The Act** ([8 minute video](#))

A video that distills the process of research, brainstorming, and creating a collective installation *Fieldnotes from the Gowanus*. This was a commission from the [Sheila C. Johnson Design Center](#) at Parsons School of Design/The New School for an exhibition focused on local responses to understanding climate change and created by Brooklyn Independent Television.

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## WE'RE ALL DIFFERENT

We all learn in different ways. Depending on the characteristics, demographics, or age-group of your intended audience, we have a few suggestions for making the most of your ViVA engagement. The following offers recommendations based on previous collaborations fulfilled by the artists.

### *Community & General Public*

Sayler/Morris work in such diverse ways (poster project to essay in academic journals; practical tool-lending libraries to contemplative installations in art museums; collaboration with an urban farm to commissions for science, art and other museums) because they are committed to reaching diverse audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

Their engagements and collaborations range from one-time talks to long-term investments. They particularly love engaging with local leadership in a community. They place a heavy emphasis on listening to individuals and community members about their needs and vision as an important first step in the process. Based on their own experience and creative insights, Sayler/Morris could help you brainstorm community-based projects that your organization or group could plan and implement.

Examples of past collaborators and engagements include:

- Rotary Club in Nebraska City
- New Americans or recent immigrants
- A Hiroshima atomic bomb survivor
- A museum about writers
- An ethnographic museum
- A small town arts festival
- Artists from across the United States and abroad

### *University Audiences*

Through their Canary Lab at Syracuse University launched in 2006, Sayler/Morris embarked on an ambitious interdisciplinary curriculum centered on creative approaches to ecological activism. In courses like "Art and Architecture as Evidence," they partnered with local organizations like Salt City Harvest Farm, a nonprofit that provides farmland to recent immigrants to Upstate New York.

Their courses integrate a range of approaches that includes beginning each course session with a meal ([Art & Ecology: Food](#)) or concluding a course by publishing a book ([Modern Primitive Exchange: Shelter](#)). The course on [OS Fermentation](#) included a slow-cooking class, a reading group, a hand-on fermentation workshop, and a gallery installation.

Consider partnerships between your art, environmental studies, and agricultural sciences departments for your Sayler/Morris virtual talk, and create interdisciplinary connections. A full list of talks that they've given to college and university audiences is listed on their [C.V.](#)

*These experiential approaches to teaching and learning can be creatively extended into the ViVA engagement you have contracted. Your ViVA Educator is excited to develop a community-specific approach to your audience's needs and desires. See the following section "Let's make this fit."*

## PROMPTS AND FEEDBACK

To maximize audience engagement, this section demonstrates possible questions, discussion prompts and listening guides to help your audience get the most out of the artist talk.

### *Before*

- What is your current understanding of climate change? How has your knowledge or awareness of climate change evolved over the last 5 or 10 years?
- Thinking about your own natural environment, whether it's a local park or backyard, what are some things that you appreciate about nature? Have you noticed any changes over the last 5 or 10 years?
- Sayler/Morris is building a tool shed in Hudson, New York for people to gather and share tools (i.e., skills, knowledge, materials) that will help people survive in a rapidly changing world. If you were to build your own tool shed, what are some tools that you already have and would like to share? What is something that you'd like to borrow?

### *During*

- What is the main goal of Sayler/Morris's practice, and do you see any connections to yourself or your community? If you wanted to implement their approach, what are some challenges you might face and how could you ask Sayler/Morris to help overcome that?
- Listen for the different materials and approaches that Sayler/Morris use. These could range from photography to architecture to community events. Why do you think they're using those specific approaches? Do you have another approach that might work and you could offer?
- What do you think is the most pressing ecological issue in your community? What tools, information, or approaches would you need to help improve the issue? Perhaps you could ask Sayler/Morris if they've faced a similar challenge.

### *After*

- Take out a piece of paper, journal, or phone and jot down one new idea you'd like to try based on what you learned from the talk.
- Ask every person to write down a tool that they'd like to share on a Post-It or notecard. Assemble these on a wall as the start of your community tool shed.
- Think about the places of sharing in your community. This could include a book library, a seed library, or an online group (i.e., "Buy Nothing" or free-cycle). How can you support and expand these existing organizations? Brainstorm one additional space of sharing that you'd like to create to make the future more livable.

## HAVE YOU ALSO THOUGHT ABOUT...

This section highlights opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and resources for further exploration based on the artists' previous work and experience.

- [Creative Activism](#) (with Mike Bonanno of the Yes Men)
- [Contemporary Art and Journalism](#) (Duke Center for Documentary Studies)
- Land-use politics and history in Ecuador (How Forests Think)
- Rocky Mountain Land Library collaboration on the Time/Life series called *The Old West* ([The End of the Myth](#))
- Animal welfare at Oostvaardersplassen near Amsterdam ([Their World is Not Our World](#))
- 1945 atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ([That Day Now](#))

## LET'S MAKE THIS FIT

Creating a unique, enriching and personal experience for your audience is our highest priority. To help us do so, we would love to know more about your goals and intended audience.

- What about Sayler/Morris's work resonates with you? How do you think it aligns with some of the conversations, movements, or issues percolating in your community? Is there a specific goal you have in mind for the talk?
- Who are the people in your classroom, community, or group that are currently engaged on a consistent basis? What are their needs? What are they curious about?
- Can you describe a new type of person that you'd like to engage through this talk? What have been past barriers to participation? What is your strategy to let them know about the event?
- Would your audience benefit from an experiential or hands-on aspect to the talk? This could be a shared meal during or following the talk, or encouraging participants to sit outside if possible.

## WE'RE HERE TO HELP

Please reach out with any questions or concerns you may have throughout the process. We are happy to help, and so look forward to working with you!

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We have created a client portal with access to images, press ready biographies, a post-event survey and additional assets to make your event a success. The password to this page is available from your ViVA contacts listed above.

[vivavirtualartists.org/client](https://vivavirtualartists.org/client)

### *About us*

ViVA is a nonprofit education and curatorial platform connecting internationally-recognized artists and projects emphasizing women, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and social justice to diverse students, educators, and communities across all disciplines and ages.

### *For more information*

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**ViVA**

VIRTUAL VISITING ARTISTS