

Environmental Humanities Course Module
Exploring Environmental Issues Using Eco Art

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May 2019

Overview

Ecological and environmental art, or “Eco Art,” describes works of art that engage issues related to the environment, ecology, and/or sustainability. Broadly, Eco Art serves as a compelling means of conceiving humanity’s relationship to the natural world. In part because ecological topics such as climate change, extinction, and pollution are dominated by scientific discourse, Eco Art offers new pathways for artistic expression and for understanding ecological issues. In the words of art writer Linda Weintraub, Eco Art “stands out from the din of environmental warnings, policies, and campaigns because its content is enriched by artistic imagination and its strategies are emboldened by artistic license.”¹

Eco Art is a relatively newer art genre and its definition is still evolving. Historically, Eco Art could be traced all the way back to Paleolithic cave paintings of Bison and to modern landscape painters like Claude Monet or photographers like Ansel Adams. However, contemporary Eco Art differentiates itself from art that represents nature as the “subject” of a work through its focus on connecting people to environments, its ethical urgency and activism, and its attempt to imagine new ways of living with nature. In recent decades, the genre is moving toward a deeper relationship between social concerns and environmental systems, processes, and phenomena². Diane Burko’s work, for example, represents the social and cultural aspects of climate change. Eco Art—as a sub-genre of Environmental Art—is flourishing, both in terms of concept and practice. The Eco Art Network of international artists offers the following definition of Eco Art: “... an art practice that embraces ethics of social justice in both its content and form/materials. Eco Art is created to inspire caring and respect, stimulate dialogue, and encourage the long-term flourishing of the social and natural environments in which we live. It commonly manifests as socially engaged, activist, community-based restorative or interventionist art.”³

Much Eco Art is site-specific, designed to be experienced outside of a traditional art gallery space, or performative and experimental rather than merely representational. Ultimately, Eco Art remains a capacious but meaningful term that encapsulates a wide range of creative installations, projects, and experiences--from paintings to operas to sculptures to virtual reality experiences.

¹ Weintraub, L. (2012). *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press. 5.

² Kastner, J. and Wallis, B. Eds. (1998) *Land and Environmental Art*. London: Phaidon Press.

³ Naidus, Beverly (2009). *Arts for Change: Teaching Outside the Frame*. New York: New Village Press.

Keywords

Ecological art, eco art, environmental art, environmental planning

Goals

The concept of Eco Art can be used to provide initial exposure to various environmental issues, including but not limited to climate change, environmental justice, environmental ethics, water quality and quantity, air quality, waste management, recycling, toxic land redevelopment, green infrastructure, and environmental design. This module has the following goals:

1. Introducing environmental planning topics by using a series of Eco Art projects
2. Discussing the content of each art work and exploring how it connects to the environmental topics or issues being discussed in a given class
3. Understanding the use of Eco Art as visual method/tool and its strengths and limitations in learning or teaching environmental planning topics
4. Assigning students to create their own Eco Art projects to encourage higher level of thinking, self-expression, and creative reflection on the content covered in the course

User Guide and Sample Implementation

A user guide on this module is attached. It includes an outline of lesson steps and suggested activities or assignments. These items are organized in a sequence, along with suggested time to complete each item. This user guide has been developed following a sample implementation of the learning module in a course titled Environmental and Sustainability Planning, offered in Spring 2019 and taught by Dr. Meenar, Department of Geography, Planning, and Sustainability at Rowan University. Total enrollment in this course was 24.

Materials

The following materials are attached:

- A reading list
- PowerPoint slides



Sample Eco Art projects created by students in Spring 2019

Left: "Toxic Grounds" by Stephanie Evans

Right: "Flood of Memories" by Meghan Wren