Editor’s Introduction to Volume XI

Ecologies of Nature and Culture: The Dialectics of Environmental Entropy and Decolonization in Art of the Americas

Ecology is broadly defined as the empirical study of interactions between organisms and their environment. This analysis, however, often assumes that the “environments” studied exist in a natural state without addressing the social constructs we use to define concepts of nature and the limits of environment. Given their interdisciplinary backgrounds, art historians are able to provide unique contributions to the intersecting fields of art and ecology by bridging intellectual gaps located at disciplinary interstices, such as those that distinguish esthetics and social histories from environmental sciences. Every artist and scholar who participates in the developing discourses centered on the dynamic between art and ecology must engage dominant ideas of the environment, which may assume a variety of forms, from the social and political, to digital or built. To engage with environments means also to engage with the dichotomous relationships that exist between species and place. Not surprising then, is the questionable, socially-constructed concept of a “natural” environment in the Anthropocene, as the term “nature” itself continues to be adopted and adapted to suit any number of socio-political agendas and their corresponding methodologies.

Stemming from its early modern European origins, the field of art history is grounded in a teleological narrative that, reflecting Judeo-Christian ideas and values, tells the story that, “man overcomes nature.” Here, the human species is the measure of all things and its domination over the natural world, validated, if not demanded, by biblical precedent, is explicitly understood. Recent interdisciplinary scholarship in the visual and material cultures of the Americas calls these colonial and capitalist histories into question. The problematic applications of the socially constructed term, “nature” have been addressed through the lens of eco-criticism in work by scholars, such as, Alan Trachtenburg, T.J. Demos, Elizabeth Kolbert, and Alan C. Braddock, among others. Their approach to the humanities has proven useful to critically and creatively analyze the work and intentions of artists when interpreting the loaded subject of “nature,” allowing, furthermore, the social, political, and economic relationships seen as corresponding to it to become more legible and accessible to a wider audience. At this time, however, the role that art plays or should play in the developing vernacular of climate change and scientific environmental discourse remains unclear; this is a question that has received little systematic attention in art history.

The eleventh volume of Hemisphere: Visual Cultures of the Americas is a compilation of scholarly essays that address the multivalent ecology relationships structuring or framing discussions of art, art practices, and environment. In the age of climate change versus green capitalism, it is no longer reasonable to assume that human culture is mutually exclusive of nature; instead, these two fields are seen as interpolated in the so-called Anthropocene. This journal presents scholarly studies that present interdisciplinary research within multiple geographic and historical contexts, and that provide potential solutions to the systematic incorporation of ecology and art history into a diversified practice that is, both, valuable and relevant to scholars today. Such scholarly collaborations benefit from the creative approaches drawn from the increasingly overlapping fields of art history, visual and material cultures, ecology, and environmental sciences, among others.

— Amy Catherine Hulshoff