

Syracuse University Art Museum
Art, Ecology, & Climate Project



Mike Goode, Kate Holohan
Jeffrey Adams, Jeanelle Cho, Abigail Greenfield

Art, Ecology, & Climate E-Museums: A Teaching Guide

Why does a university art museum matter for teaching ecology or fighting climate change? A painting cannot prove the theory of evolution or write future environmental policy. A ceramic vase did not help discover atomic energy any more than a photograph can be used to remove microplastics from oceans (though perhaps a sculpture could). Nevertheless, every artwork is profoundly ecological because it is composed of organic and inorganic materials that have histories and because it shapes ways of being in, thinking about, and inhabiting the world with other life forms and elements.

The Syracuse University Art Museum's permanent collection is loaded with artworks that reinforce, reject, or problematize the conceptual and political frames through which different people and cultures organize, interpret, and inhabit the planet on which we live. Many artworks in the collection also depict, react to, or evoke feelings about specific ecological changes. Still others raise political concerns about the causes of, and unevenly experienced harms created by, such changes. Teaching with the museum's collection can help students see how art has contributed, does contribute, and can contribute to shaping ecological futures, for better and for worse.

A nineteenth-century American landscape painting (title page, left), for example, can

make visible enduring, politically problematic, artistic and intellectual conventions through which “nature” gets separated conceptually from humanity and culture. It can also open discussion about how, why, and with what effects early wilderness preservation movements targeted sublime landscapes rather than, say, less visually striking landscapes through which salmon migrate.

A basket named for the Thanksgiving Address by a Haudenosaunee basket-maker (title page, middle) can provoke discussion about how its form and materials (black ash, sweetgrass, moose hair, and moose antler) connect to the ecologically minded cosmology that the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address articulates. Given that black ash trees have been decimated by emerald ash borer beetles that migrated to North America from Northeastern Asia via industrial shipping, the basket also invites reflection on how the ecological histories of its component materials affect its significance.

Finally, a contemporary photograph of a young woman walking across oil pipelines in Okrika (title page, right) serves as documentary evidence of how global reliance on fossil fuels has affected living conditions and air, soil, and water quality in a part of Nigeria where oil was discovered in the late twentieth century. It

can also generate rich conversations about the ways it makes visible the ecological complexity of everyday lived habitats.

The Art, Ecology, and Climate Project has created fifteen thematically organized, online collections of ecologically interesting objects curated from the Syracuse University Art Museum's permanent collection. Together, these online collections – or “e-museums” – showcase nearly 1,000 unique objects. The e-museums' purpose is to help instructors across disciplines use the university's art collection to teach ecological thought, encourage ecological being, and help students recognize how new ecological crises often reactivate or exacerbate older histories of social injustice and harm.

What follows is a brief overview of the fifteen e-museums, including keywords pertinent to each, and some suggested course assignments relevant to any of them. On the Art, Ecology, and Climate Project's website (accessible via the dropdown menu from the “Learn” tab on the Syracuse University Art Museum's main webpage), you can find in-depth teaching guides for each of the fifteen e-museums, as well as in-depth teaching guides for several artworks that make appearances in multiple e-museums.

E-Museums Descriptions



Animals and Animality

Artworks that represent animals and animal behaviors in different ways, including works that call attention to humans as animals and works that use animals – both real and fantastical – to represent or symbolize other things.

Keywords: *animals, animal behaviors, habitats, species, wild animals, domesticated animals, pets, game, livestock, trained animals, performing animals, circuses, zoos, endangered species, extinct animals, mythological animals, sacred animals*



The Anthropocene

Artworks that register humanity's profound ecological and geological impact on the Earth in the past century, or that depict climatological and geological events that have intensified over time due to human activity, or that offer historical windows onto things like sea levels and glacial expanses prior to the twentieth century.

Keywords: *The Anthropocene, slow time, climate change, climate grief, industry, development, capitalism, urbanization, war, extraction, deforestation, fossil fuels, petrochemicals, electricity, nuclear energy, water scarcity, carbon emissions, pollution, contamination, hurricanes, forest fires, floods, desertification, sea levels, glacial melt, endangerment, extinction, environmental justice, hyperobjects, landscape*



Atmospheric

Artworks that make air – and the pollutants and particles suspended in it – visible as a medium for sound, temperature, respiration, and light effects. Many of the works are landscapes in which the sky is a key focus. Several of the works in this gallery are abstract.

Keywords: *air, atmosphere, light, climate, climate change, weather, clouds, wind, storms, snow, ice, warming, temperature, times of day, seasons, air quality, breathing, pollution, smog, smoke, dust, desertification, landscape*

E-Museums Descriptions



Bewilderment

Artworks that heighten ecological awareness by estranging their viewers from familiar elements, organisms, or habitats. Works in this gallery sometimes depict surprising ecological encounters; others call attention to the senses as ecological media; others rely on abstraction, juxtaposition, or novel points of view to create uncanny effects.

Keywords: *bewilderment, uncanny, ecological being, ecological care, human, nonhuman, wildness, sensory perception, natural, unnatural, landscape*



Entanglement

Artworks that capture complex interconnections between different organic and elemental components of a place, habitat, or ecosystem. Some works depict cultural entanglements with nature over vast distances; others foreground often-overlooked elemental components of a habitat; others represent the complexities of microhabitats or specific cohabitations between human and nonhuman organisms, including trees and pets.

Keywords: *Entanglement, enmeshment, complexity, dynamics, network, ecosystem, global, planetary, habitat, cohabitation, elemental, pets, hyperobjects, ecological being, ecological care, object-oriented ontology*



Environmental Justice

Artworks that provoke critical reflection on injustices that result from the entwining of cultural and environmental histories. Some works highlight direct histories of harm; others depict ecological practices that have contributed to crises for certain people or species; still others attend to ways that ecological crises exacerbate cultural inequalities.

Keywords: *environmental justice, protest, race and racism, nationality and nationalism, intersectionality, indigeneity, migration, botanical colonialism, mineralogical colonialism, settler colonialism, capitalism, slavery, globalization, public health, epidemic, natural disaster, industrial accident, labor rights, property rights, animal rights, animal abuse, plant rights, extinction*

E-Museums Descriptions



Environmentalisms

Artworks that afford glimpses into spiritual relationships to the environment across cultures and traditions. In addition to objects whose materials or ecological motifs are cosmologically significant, the gallery includes representations of spaces, rituals, practices, and beliefs in different cultures that invest the natural world with spiritual meanings.

Keywords: *spiritual, religion, cosmology, nature, culture, mythology, belief, sacred spaces, sacred structures, sacred objects, rituals, animal motifs, plant motifs, symbolism, pantheism, animism, climate change, environmental justice*



Extraction

Artworks that depict laborers and industries engaged in various processes of environmental extraction, such as mining, drilling, logging, shell collecting, and excavating (for commercial and for military purposes).

Keywords: *mine, quarry, shaft mining, pit mining, drilling, offshore drilling, refining, excavating, construction, fossil fuels, coal, oil, heavy metals, precious metals, steel, cement, sand, logging, milling, deforestation, old growth forest, silkworm cultivation, silk harvesting, shell diving, shell collecting, capitalism, industry, pollution, emissions, brownfields, landscape*



Food Systems

Artworks that depict domestic and global food systems, past and present. Works in the gallery represent different aspects of food production, processing, distribution, commercial sales, and consumption.

Keywords: *food, food systems, food distribution, food commerce, food preparation, food consumption, gathering, hunting, fishing, capitalism, agriculture, ranching, livestock farming, slaughtering, butchering, drying, packing, brewing, shipping, trucking, markets, grocery stores, restaurants, food carts, soup kitchens, lunchrooms, kitchens, barbecues, meat, dairy, vegetables, grains, bread, alcohol, liquor, subsistence, sustainability*

E-Museums Descriptions



Materials

Objects in the collection created out of ecologically interesting materials, including various materials derived from animals, plants, and minerals.

Keywords: *bone, ivory, shell, hair, wool, dung, gelatin, plant fibers, wood, mahogany, willow, plywood, paper, calabash, silk, cotton, plastic, resin, heavy metals, precious metals, stone*



Plants and Plantings

Botanical prints, images of lush habitats in architectural ruins, decorative objects comprised of plant fibers or bearing floral motifs, and representations of ornamental horticultural practices (gardening, topiary, arboreal avenues, synthetic greenery).

Keywords: *plants, roots, branches, trees, plant fibers, textiles, botany, gardens, gardening, horticulture, avenues, forests, hedges, arbors, vegetables, fruit, flowers, wildflowers, blooms, weeds, invasive species, endangered species, extinction, biome, growth, overgrowth, regrowth, cultivation, blooming, flowering, decay, floral motifs, arboreal motifs, ruins, botanical print, still life, landscape*



Pollution and Contamination

Artworks that reference air, water, and soil quality issues and the industrial, military, and consumer contexts that contribute to them. Many of the works also foreground the emission of greenhouse gasses.

Keywords: *pollution, emission, contamination, waste, air quality, water quality, soil quality, landfill, greenhouse gasses, fossil fuels, coal, gasoline, jet fuel, steam, smog, smoke, chemicals, petrochemicals, plastic, extraction, deforestation, industry, capitalism, highways, automobiles, trains, airplanes, water treatment, landscape*

E-Museums Descriptions



Power and Energy

Artworks that represent power and energy production and use.

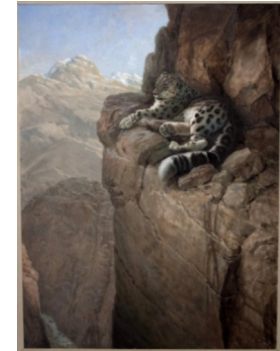
Keywords: *wind power, water power, steam power, animal power, nuclear power, electricity, hydroelectricity, power lines, power grid, fossil fuels, coal, oil, natural gas, horses, oxen, camels, steam engines, internal combustion engines, jet engines, transistors, circuits, appliances, tools, windmills, sailboats, clippers, steamships, container ships, steam shovels, trucks, automobiles, rickshaws, bicycles, airplanes, rockets, industry, highways, infrastructure, urbanization, smoke, pollution, emissions, greenhouse gasses, capitalism, landscape*



Water Use

Artworks that highlight life's dependency on and entanglement with water. Many of the works focus on humanity's end uses of water for drinking, farming, cleaning, religious ritual, and recreation.

Keywords: *water, drinking vessels, wells, water carrying, farming, irrigation, aqueducts, industry, hydroelectricity, canals, transportation, shipping, sailing, cleaning, washing, bathing, swimming, skating, sailing, baptism, shorelines, coastlines, sea levels, storms, landscape, seascape*



Wilderness and Wildness

Artworks of wilderness and “wild” life that provoke critical thought about the “wild” as a conceptual category.

Keywords: *wild, tame, wilderness, sublime, mountain, waterfall, national park, preserve, desert, ocean, swamp, forest, wildflower, weed, wild animal, safari, tourism, captivity, zoo, cage, landscape*

Course Assignments

- Have students write a 250-word gallery label for a particular artwork, as if the artwork is to be exhibited in a larger thematic show containing the other works in the same e-museum (or a thematic art exhibition more generally about ecology or about climate change).
- Have students write 500-word environmental histories of a particular species, ecological impact, place, or practice referenced in a particular artwork. Then, have them reflect for another 500 words on how that history affects the interpretation or cultural significance of the artwork. To what extent is the artwork participating in or calling out whatever might be problematic about the broader environmental history it references?
- Have students write a biography of the material(s) used to create a particular artwork. How does approaching the artwork through its materials affect our understanding of it? How do the history of those materials since the artwork was created potentially change the artwork's significance over time?
- Have students curate a smaller topical ecological e-museum (10-15 works) out of one of the larger e-museums and then write a 500-word introduction to their museum. Alternatively, have students produce a 3-page learning guide for their museum. Ideas for topics can be found by scanning the keywords in the "E-Museum Descriptions" section above.
- Have students generate video essays on an ecological topic of their choice by sequencing images within a particular e-museum or across e-museums, and by zooming into and out of artworks to highlight certain details. Have them write reflections on what commentaries or narratives they were aiming to deliver through their video essay.
- Have students identify 2-3 artworks in an e-museum that they regard as being in dialogue with one another about a topic or issue. Then, have them write or present on the dialogue they've identified. Alternatively (or in addition), have students write paragraphs describing an imaginary artwork that, if they had the time and skill, they would create to intervene critically in the dialogue they've already identified in the 2-3 artworks they've selected. What medium and materials would their artwork consist of and why? What things would their artwork do to establish itself as an intervention into the dialogue? Why is this intervention important?
- Write an imaginary interview between yourself and the artist about the ecological significance of their artwork. Think about what you would like to know about the artist and artwork to assess that significance (its materials, its subject matter, its intended audience or use, and so forth). Consider how the artist might answer.

Art, Ecology, & Climate Project

Project Team and Sponsors

Professor Mike Goode

Professor of English and William P. Tolley Distinguished Professor in the Humanities

Kate Holohan

Curator of Education and Academic Outreach, Syracuse University Art Museum

Jeffrey Adams

Ph.D Student in English

Jeanelle Cho

'24 (Architecture)

Abigail Greenfield

'25 (History and Political Philosophy)

William P. Tolley
Distinguished Teaching Professorship
in the Humanities

 **Syracuse University**
Art Museum



 **Syracuse University**
Office of Undergraduate Research
& Creative Engagement

 **Syracuse University**
College of Arts & Sciences

 **Syracuse University**
Graduate School