Art and the Environment in Britain. 1700-Today (Rennes, 2 - 3 Mar 17)

Rennes 2 University, Rennes, France, Mar 2–03, 2017
Deadline: Sep 16, 2016

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Call for Papers – Art and the Environment in Britain, 1700-Today

Keynote Speaker : Stephen Daniels, Professor of Cultural Geography at the University of Nottingham, UK, Director AHRC Landscape and Environment Programme.

The concern of artists for the fate of their environment – understood as the natural world in which they breathe, live and create – is often thought to be a relatively recent phenomenon. The term "environmental art" was indeed coined in the 1960s, while more recently eco-art has been used to refer to the rise of ecological awareness and pressing concerns for sustainability, with a more specifically political and activist take on environmental art. Recent exhibitions in Britain, such as "Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969–2009" at the Barbican, and "Earth: Art of a Changing World" at the Royal Academy both held in 2009, or "Art and Climate Change" presented in 2006 and 2007 in London and Liverpool, along with the "Art & Environment" conference held at Tate Britain in 2010, testify to this recent interest in environmentally-conscious practices. Contemporary artistic practices directly engage with the environment, thus displaying multi-faceted relationships between British visual arts and the surrounding world of trees, plants, animals, and even sounds. However, the contemporary focus on preservation and political activism should not obfuscate the fact that the interaction between Britons and their environment has a much older history. Visual artists from earlier periods also had something to say, both in pictures and in related writings, about their place as humans cohabiting with non-humans, both animate and inanimate, in a physical world whose boundaries were relentlessly pushed back and transformed. As explorers and scientists uncovered new areas – from the far reaches of the earth to that of human ancestry –, these artists reacted to an expanding environment which elicited all kinds of emotions, from excitement and wonder to, all too quickly, anxiety and a sense of loss. The British countryside, largely mediated by the visual representations of eighteenth-century landscape painters, has now become artistic heritage, part of a national identity defined by an osmotic relationship with exceptionally hospitable surroundings. The way eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists represented – and, in the case of landscape gardeners, actively refashioned – a natural world on which cities impinged at a quickening pace in fact often bore the mark of an awareness that what they contemplated and plundered for ideas and ideals was in constant flux. The advent of the Industrial Revolution was to be one of the most decisive illustrations of the transformative power of man over a land so far presented as a timeless Eden. Brought up with the Enlightenment notion that emotional engagement was mandatory for any self-regarding man of feeling, British artists were the prime observers of and witnesses to the alterations that humankind imposed on

the natural substrate that ensured its maintenance. Just as their productions betrayed the preoccupations of their times, their personal takes on the relationship between humans and their environment, disseminated through visual representations, contributed to shaping contemporary debates.

The word “environment” as in “nature, or conditions in which a person or thing live” did not appear until 1827, at which time it was used by the reformer Thomas Carlyle to translate the German “Umgebung”. The much older verb “to environ”, in use in the English language since the late fourteenth century, had come from the French “environner”, and conjured up the image of a circle with a centre around which other elements turned, or veered. For centuries, the centre of this circle was firmly believed to be humankind. Yet, as Keith Thomas has made it quite clear in Man and the Natural World. Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800 (1983), man’s theologically grounded belief in his total dominion over nature was gradually, over the course of the three centuries spanned by the British historian’s study, dented by “new arguments”, “new conditions” and “new sensibilities”. As what Thomas called the “dethronement of man” had started a century earlier at the very least, Charles Darwin’s 1859 Origin of Species was to provide the final nail with which to close the coffin of a certain human uniqueness tightly shut. Closer to us, the momentous post-human turn in the humanities – an umbrella term that encompasses an amazing variety of paradigm shifts – currently contributes to reinforcing the idea that humans live in a symbiotic environment characterised by a porous line with non-human animals and machines, and where New Materialist theories such as Jane Bennett’s go as far as claiming agency for “things” such as food, commodities, electricity and minerals. Part of our scientific committee, TJ Demos advocates the definition of a post-anthropocentric political ecology. His very latest book, Decolonizing Nature, Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology, published in 2016, posits that creativity, and more specifically contemporary art, are instrumental in developing this less possessive relationship to nature.

Whether one thinks of environment as context, setting, climate change, green spaces or sounds, today’s epistemology invites us to rethink man’s relation to the external world to the extent that the “inside” and “outside” coalesce, nature and culture merge, man and animal are reconfigured. How have British artists responded to these shifting perceptions of the world around them, of this great swirling circle of life and non life in which they found – or imagined – themselves diversely positioned, for a long time at the centre, then in a more undefined place – at the margin even? How has art itself positioned itself in this newly defined environment? A precursor to such interrogations, environmental art was early on intended as a decidedly extensive term, which, due to the American influence of Robert Smithson, came to encompass both sites and non-sites, both the pastoral and the urban. With the introduction of Environmental art departments in British art schools in the 1980s, the environment has been understood by artists as all the different contexts available to them outside of the gallery. We see this conference as an ideal opportunity to highlight these tensions between different definitions, and to look into terminologies, as well as historical variations; to explore the links between representation and preservation; the way British artists have represented animals, natural elements and the climate, and their preoccupation with environmental aesthetics and the altered positioning of humankind in the world, in a British context.

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Conference website:
https://artenvironuk17.sciencesconf.org

Abstracts of about 400 words should be uploaded, along with a short biographical note, to the conference webpage.

All questions to be sent to:
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Deadline for submissions: September 16th, 2016

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