

Eco-critical Approaches to Art History (online, 12 Nov 25)

Online, Nov 12, 2025

www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/anthropocenes-histories-eco-critical-approaches-to-art-history-tickets-1780185896939

Sophie Page

This seminar explores how ecocritical thinking is reshaping art history across different periods and materials. Three scholars—Bob Mills (UCL), Esme Garlake (UCL), and Alan Braddock (William & Mary College)—will discuss the role of nonhuman agency, ecological ethics, and material histories in art.

Date and Time:

Wednesday, November 12, 4 - 6pm CET

Registration:

Free Access via Website
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Ecocriticism, Wildness and Medieval "Rock Art"

Bob Mills, UCL History of Art

This paper will explore a series of understudied religious sites with medieval origins: rock-cut hermitages in central and northern England, whose carved interiors seem physically to trouble the distinction between art and objecthood that has traditionally been a mainstay of art history. Taking as a point of departure recent ecocritical critiques of this objectifying tradition, the paper will also consider the sites in question with reference to a broader ongoing effort in the humanities to recognise nonhuman entities as agents in the making and reception of art and architecture. Finally, by situating works of medieval "rock art" alongside broader notions of wildness in the period, the paper will touch on some of the potential challenges of filtering these phenomena through an ecocritical prism. While the sites in question arguably implicated their medieval beholders in a sense of other-than-human wildness, periodically they also betray the persistence of an ethos of human control over and use of nature. This points to the need for interpretive frameworks that remain attuned to the specific historical contexts in which these hybrid visions of human and non-human agency assumed meaning.

Why Piero di Cosimo is not the Renaissance hero of the Anthropocene

Esme Garlake UCL History of Art

This paper explores the tension between ‘using’ artworks to illuminate our context of twenty-first-century environmental breakdown and remaining historically specific to the artwork in question. For ecocritical art historians – and especially those who focus on pre-industrial periods – navigating this tension can often tie us in knots. Where should the balance lie? I will attempt to answer this question by sharing my ecocritical approach to researching and writing about a painting *The Forest Fire* (c.1500) by the Italian Renaissance painter Piero di Cosimo. In the last two decades, Piero di Cosimo has been increasingly celebrated by art historians as an animal lover, empath and ecologically sensitive historical figure from which lessons can be learned, to challenge our own anthropocentric worldviews. However, as this paper will argue, this framing teaches us far more about our current historical context than that in which Piero was living and working – and it actually prevents us from recovering valuable insights into Renaissance perceptions of animals and environments.

Looking at Cows, Reanimating Gelatin: The Biopolitics of Photographic Emulsion
Alan Braddock (William & Mary College)

In this presentation, I focus on gelatin and its emergence as the dominant emulsion material in photography during the late nineteenth century, when it largely replaced albumen and other substances, thanks in no small part to the commercial innovations of George Eastman. Throughout the nineteenth century, gelatin was made of both plant and animal matter for various purposes, including uses in food and pharmaceuticals, but Eastman and his scientists at Kodak were instrumental in crafting photographic gelatin from specially purified collagen that originated in cow bones and cow hides obtained from industrial slaughterhouses and tanneries. Animal-based gelatin thus provided a stable, portable, and commercially abundant emulsion material, the convenience of which cannot be overstated. By making it possible to expose pictures on dry, portable glass plates or film without the need for wet chemicals, gelatin facilitated a veritable revolution in consumer access to the medium, epitomized in Kodak’s famous advertising slogan, “You press the button, we do the rest,” referring to how Eastman’s company ingeniously de-coupled the taking of snapshots from the messy back-end process of developing them. By the late nineteenth century, consumers could simply shoot pictures and send their Kodak Camera back to the company for printing, after which the device was returned newly loaded with film. Gelatin enabled this with its stability and portability. These advantageous properties allowed gelatin silver printing and related processes to dominate photography for over a century into the digital era. An ecocritical perspective on gelatin invites us to think about materiality and animality together by looking beyond familiar anthropocentric considerations about artistic style, representation, and humanistic social context. Instead of viewing gelatin as a neutral substance of marginal interest, my presentation seeks to center and politicize this essential material by interpreting its production, ubiquity, and seeming invisibility as epitomizing reification—capitalism’s tendency to transform labor and living beings into exchangeable commodities while concealing knowledge and historical memory of them. To counteract this reifying tendency, I use ecocritical strategies for reanimating gelatin and tracing aspects of its commodity chain to recover what I call the biopolitics of photographic emulsion.

Reference:

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