

Digging up Ecology in the Archives (Rennes, 31 Mar 26)

Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes, Mar 31, 2026

Deadline: Jan 23, 2026

Lola Lorient

Digging up ecology in the archives: an ecocritical history of art criticism.

Workshop.

Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes.

In the contemporary era facing environmental and humanitarian threats that have never been experienced before, art history is slowly taking an ecological turn (Braddock and Irmscher, 2009; Kusserow, 2011; Boettger, 2016). Yet the discipline has many assets to catch up (Patrizio, 2019). One of its main sources, archives may be called upon to write an ecocritical art history. Etymologically, archives are separate from ecology in so far as the term "archive" derives from the Greek "arkheion" which is a place where official documents are kept, whereas "oikos" refers to the house. While the former suggests a closed and fixed institution, the latter became the lexical root for a science that gradually became receptive to complex interactions and interdependencies on a global scale. Have archives confined the discipline of art history outside environmental concerns? Shall we open them to revisit art of the second part of the 20th century through an ecocritical lens? Based on archival research, this workshop will delve into the relation between art and its surrounding discourses in relation to environmental thoughts within art criticism. The rise of ecological art practices at the turn of the 1970s drew relevant interests from scholars (Nisbet, 2014; Fowkes, 2015; Ramade, 2022). However, these paradigmatic practices tend to be touched on as foreshadowing current artistic practices, while a wide array of artworks, exhibitions, critical comments, and theories that crossed ecological issues to varying degrees remain in the blind spot. This workshop calls both for qualified historical clarifications and epistemological thinking on archives as potential sources for ecocritical histories.

This workshop session aims at exploring the multiple, often conflicting, ideas of ecology and eco-art introduced and developed by art critics from the second half of the 20th century. The contributions of critics and theorists such as Lucy Lippard, Suzi Gablik, T.J. Demos, Malcolm Miles, and others, will be considered as having played a key role in building a theoretical framework for eco-art that goes far beyond the reception of artworks. It also influences artistic production itself, by establishing a shared—though often unstable and ambiguous—vocabulary. This reflection aligns with the need to historicize ecological notions within the visual arts, avoiding retrospective readings likely resulting in conflation that project present-day sensibilities and categories onto past periods. Indeed, ecology is subject to varied interpretations, reformulations, and conceptual ten-

sions. Terms such as “nature,” “environment,” “system,” “landscape,” or “biosphere” carry different meanings depending on their theoretical, political, and historical contexts. Besides, discourses on ecological art does not merely reflect an external reality (“the environment”) but actively participates in its semantic, conceptual, and political construction. Far from being neutral or purely technical, ecological visions often reflect specific ideological and cultural positions. In this sense, the history of eco-art is also a history of its critical narratives, interpretive categories, and internal contradictions.

The proposals will consider some milestones of ecological interests or commitments by art critics, in addition to putting into the limelight aspects and issues left behind in the historiography. Further investigations through archival research may qualify such identified moments, as well as revealing unexpected views on art and the environment. Through a comparative analysis of these different critical models, the presentation will seek to put forward how the various ideas of ecology applied to art have generated distinct perspectives on the role of the artist, the aesthetics of landscape, and the political agency of art in addressing the environmental crisis.

Contributions may address the following questions:

Have art criticism and its archiving been receptive to ecology?

How can archives contribute to recount art critics’ activities in relation to environmental topics?

How can we interpret and analyse polysemic terminologies in relation to ecology when they appear as fragments in the archives?

Did art criticism adjust and synchronise with the rise of environmental concern among artists and society over the last decades? Was its interest for topics and artworks relating to the environment belated or at odds with sciences, environmental activism and policies?

Can archives help in debunking deceptive and misleading projects deemed ecological?

Scope of the workshop

Our research workshop is intended as an opportunity to build a network of young researchers (doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers) engaging in ecocritical art histories, interested to share their readings and knowledge. For this reason, the session at the Archives de la Critique d’art in Rennes will start with a collective discussion on shared readings – a list of selected books and articles that may be particularly useful in defining the topic will be sent to the selected participants. Discussions on key readings that allow interpreting artistic phenomena through an ecological lens will be encouraged. Founding texts approaching environmental discourses in the arts without falling into banalities will be included as well. The point is to establish frameworks that will allow us to build a rigorous and historically grounded eco-critical perspective. This discussion will be followed by individual papers on case studies based on research in archive funds. The language of the workshop will be English. If participants prefer to deliver their papers in French or Italian, we expect them to send a written English translation in advance to be sent among participants. We expect to publish the results of the discussions and case studies on a website dedicated to the project.

We invite you to send your proposal for an individual paper between 300 and 500 words and a short biography by 23rd January 2026 to Lola Lorant (Université Rennes 2) and Maria Vittoria Mondini (Università La Sapienza, Rome; Università Ca’ Foscari, Venice) to lola.lorant@univ-rennes2.fr.

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