

ART AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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Art and Art History
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The CORE writing course I will be teaching is called “Art and the Environment.” The subject of the course represents an attempt to engage students with the issues of climate change, but through the lens of art history. I have taught this course as a graduate seminar, but it will be transformed into a CORE class with assignments and discussions redesigned for this demographic.

The topic of the course stems from my own personal intellectual experiences as well as a desire to engage students on a subject that is clearly and directly relevant to their lives. While at a previous institution, I participated for two years in an interdisciplinary faculty research group entitled, “Ecology and Spirituality in America.” The group included professors from law, anthropology, political science, philosophy, history, and religion. Because of the interdisciplinary aspect of the participants, we read research from multiple fields, something beneficial to academics but often difficult because of time constraints. We began with the basics on global warming and evolved into a group that interacted with the strong, local religious movements combating climate change through creation care ideology.

The experience led to much personal methodological growth, but it also tapped into a previously unrecognized need to teach about topics of immediate relevance. Like any historian, I certainly maintain that the teaching of history has value in that it educates us about the present. In all of my courses I consistently make analogies to contemporary issues to illustrate the past; however, as a Precolumbianist who works on material over one thousand years old, it was refreshing to explore issues discussed in the newspaper each day. As these issues tumbled over into my teaching life, I felt the need to create a course where students could see that art also might provide avenues to address issues of global warming. Perhaps, I should also confess that I

felt a personal need to actively contribute to what may be the greatest challenge to human survival.

While the course will ultimately ask students to consider the merits of current artists involved in projects surrounding climate change, as an art historian, I will also take an historical perspective. We begin with one of the most famous works of environmental art, Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*. Iconic and hauntingly beautiful, the earthwork immediately lets us move right into the critical issues of the course. The work certainly demands that viewers reevaluate their preconceived notions of what art is, and it equally demonstrates that artists can actively incorporate the natural environment. On the other hand, this “environmental” work involved considerable destruction to the natural landscape and is representative of the male, heroic gesture quite prevalent in the 1970s. This work will facilitate discussions about the need to consider artworks within the framework of their own time period while simultaneously allowing that we can also analyze works with current notions of the world.

Other sections of the class will investigate artists thoroughly immersed in environmental materials but who distance themselves from any direct environmental message. For instance, the course will explore the work of Andy Goldsworthy. Goldsworthy uses twigs, stones and leaves to create visually stunning works of art out in the landscape, photographs them, and then lets these transitory objects dissipate into the environment again. These works intrinsically use the environment, but they do not contain any overt message about human destruction of the landscape. Goldsworthy made another work in which he gathered snow and installed giant snowballs in urban London, but expended much energy transporting and storing the snow before installation. We will ask questions about the ethics of using environmental

media in ways that have major, negative environmental impacts. As the course moves forward, we will focus upon artists who directly address issues of environmental degradation in their art, like Mel Chin who created the *Reclamation Field*. In this work, Chin took a small plot of land and planted vegetation designed to draw out the toxic pollutants in the industrialized soil. As a class we can discuss the commendable aspects of bringing environmental damage to public awareness even as we note that the real environmental benefit may be minimal and might even be construed as the continuance of the male heroic gesture and its ability to further a career in the art world.

Finally, the class will encounter emerging artists who directly attack global warming by engaging large social groups, thereby raising awareness of the issue and creating works that potentially have a real, positive effect on the environment. These include artists who construct public gardens, plant trees, and clean public waterways for eco-tourism. In viewing these artworks we can easily see the beneficial environmental impact even as we swing back to earlier issues about the nature of art. These artists so blur public activism and reject traditional media that they reasonably engender questions about the categorization of their work as art. I further hope to use these artists to discuss the multiple routes to solving global warming, routes that in the aggregate could make a substantial difference.

On Writing

Like many who take this faculty workshop on writing, I must admit to some degree of fatalistic dread when I contemplated the time I would devote to the project. Imagine my chagrin as each hour in the workshop I faced the reality that my writing assignments had become rather boring and traditional. Following the age-old methods of college and graduate instruction I received, I had clung to the research paper as the standard assignment. I still value the research paper's ability to elicit a number of important outcomes. First, it allows a student to pursue a topic of their own choice, offering freedom outside the constraints of a syllabus. Second, it exposes students to the real character of a discipline and thus prepares students pursuing graduate work in the field. Third, I appreciate the

manner in which the assignment develops research skills which I hope will make our students better prepared to locate information when the need arises in their own lives.

Therefore, I will continue assigning a research paper in the upper division courses in my own field, but I admit a certain delight in the fact that this workshop led me to discard its use in my CORE class.

Our graduate educational system does a fine job of preparing us as scholars, yet in truth, the effort given to preparing us as educators leans towards a lackluster apprenticeship system with little in the way of direct engagement of educational strategies. Many of us succeed nevertheless, but as I found in the workshop, it is an exciting revelation when we have the opportunity to tune up our approaches through the exposure of concrete suggestions. Case in point, I found the text, *Engaging Ideas* an incredibly useful tool. Certainly one could critique the text because its attempt to offer suggestions for a myriad of fields makes many examples inappropriate for some disciplines; however, I truly appreciated the format of the text. Written in a succinct manner for busy people, the organizational strategy of theory followed by concrete examples provides a wealth of ideas for those designing assignments. I further appreciated the text's efforts to encourage creativity and openness in the assignments. I can sincerely state that it was a personal revelation to realize that I had become a bit boring in my assignments. It forced me to see how the interesting questions I routinely pose in the classroom can be more effectively extended into the written assignments. The workshop let me better put into perspective that these students will not be majors in my field, so we can use the class as a place to enjoy significant conversations, both oral and written, about an issue which we all have passionate opinions.

Given this wonderful opportunity to expand my writing assignment repertoire, let me explain how I plan to institute some of these lessons in the upcoming CORE class. Overall, I intend to incorporate much more variety in the types of assignments I assign. In the workshop I came to respect that the inclusion of different types of writing leads to an expansion of the students' horizons and facilitates the emergence of

various students' strengths. The elimination of the long research paper will permit me to include more, but shorter, writing assignments which will, in turn, give the students more opportunities for feedback.

Another aspect of the workshop I found helpful is that it was focused on the one specific course each instructor would teach, and Doug Hesse designed our assignments so we could create real projects that we could actually use in class. One such project will serve as the first assignment I will use in my CORE class. On this day we will have read Smithson's essay about *Spiral Jetty*, and we will also watch the film he made about the earthwork in class. In the midst of discussion, I will give the students the following informal, write-to-learn assignment.

You are driving across the wilds of Utah with your parents when your mother sees a sign reading, *Spiral Jetty*. Knowing that you took a class on environmental art, she veers off the road, and after miles of bumpy road you and your family arrive at the promontory overlooking the artwork. Dumbfounded, your parents look to you with questioning eyes, appealing to you for some insight. You decide to explain the meaning of the color red in this work and in Smithson's writings and film. Take fifteen minutes and write what you would say to your parents.

This assignment asks the students to explain a narrowly defined issue, but its purpose in the class is manifold. First, it asks the students to use the information from their readings and the film to recognize a persistent theme that exists in both sources. Secondly, it has been my experience that questions like this often result in little response during class discussions, as the students have missed such themes. It is my hope that by giving them time to quietly process the question and pull their thoughts together, the exercise will promote better, more substantial discussion. Finally, this assignment will begin the process of helping students to use description as evidence, a necessity of particular importance to art history. I will include more of these fifteen-minute, in-class assignments, but this one serves as an example.

Apart from readings on the art itself, the course will have an interdisciplinary aspect, including readings from scientists, historians, and literary figures on the environment and global warming. The class is certain to contain students with a variety of opinions on climate change, so it is critical to let them voice their opinion on this issue. After having read and discussed two articles on opposite sides of the climate change issue, I will ask students to write a two-three page paper where they defend or refute the proposition that climate change poses a real danger. This assignment will let students freely express their opinion and diffuse any possible tensions that may have come from the discussion. It will also require that the students present a clear thesis and offer supporting evidence for their position.

Because the course participants will have strong opinions on the issue of climate change, I have chosen this assignment for peer review. I particularly liked Eliana Schonberg's suggestions for peer review, and frankly, I am going to use her model which gives the reviewer clear instructions for a first and second read-through. After revising this paper using their reviewer's comments, students will turn the paper into the instructor.

Later in the class we will discuss the overt beauty of Andy Goldsworthy's art and the temptation to fetishize the environment. We will consider the seductiveness of beautiful art and the value of art for art's sake. Turning the tables a bit, we will look at some of Goldsworthy's work that might be considered irresponsible in a world of environmental footprints and sustainability. This assignment will capitalize on this discussion.

A friend of yours went to an Andy Goldsworthy exhibit and came back gushing about this artist's work. As he talks to you, he says that Goldsworthy is the perfect example of an environmentally sensitive artist. You, on the other hand, know that not all of Goldsworthy's art is especially friendly to the environment, and the two of you get into an argument, ending when your friend storms out, slamming the door behind him. Write a one- to two-page essay where you try to explain

your position to your friend in a more calm and rational manner.

Another write-to-learn assignment, it should let students consider how art can be viewed through the lens of sustainability. Unlike the previous assignment, it directs the student to take a particular position; however, they certainly can acknowledge the other side of the coin as they write.

The next assignment will again ask students to take an issue from class and apply it to something from their own world, thereby extending the ideas beyond the limits of the classroom. This is a formal writing assignment of a greater length.

In the fourth chapter of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* the author explores examples of well intentioned human actions that have resulted in a cascade of environmental and health issues. Think of an example from our own world where something once thought beneficial has emerged as toxic or harmful. Write a four- to five-page essay where you either defend the continued use of the substance or recommend the cessation of its use. Your argument should include background information about why the toxin was first introduced and what the possible detrimental effects are.

To complete this assignment, you will have to do some research to find key facts about the issue, but you do not have to conduct the comprehensive research necessary for a full-blown research paper. You will need to include citations (the in-text method discussed in class is fine) and a bibliography. In class we will discuss the types of sources I would like you to use.

Developed during the workshop, this assignment benefitted greatly from the comments made by participants during discussion. Apart from making the course material more relevant to their lives, the assignment directs the students to take a position and develop a clear thesis. To complete

the assignment, they must also find and marshal evidence to successfully make their point.

The last formal writing assignment will develop skills that are more directly related to art history. In particular, it will ask students to use art and the description of art as supporting evidence, a skill with which students particularly struggle. Some in-class short writing assignments and class discussion will prepare them for this assignment.

Choose one artist discussed in class who directly explores issues surrounding environmental degradation. Write a six-page paper where you argue whether this artist's attempt to combat environmental problems is effective. You should use specific works of art created by that artist as evidence to support your case. Make sure you describe these works of art, and use this description as evidence.

Like many of the other assignments in this class, this paper pulls directly from class discussions, thereby integrating the writing fully into the class.

In addition to the assignments above I will be using short, in-class writing or think-pair-share to both encourage careful reading of the course materials and to better facilitate class discussions. Some examples of these will include:

—Take five minutes to talk with a partner about whether Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* is morally justifiable.

—Take fifteen minutes to jot down your thoughts about the difference between Michael Heizer's mounds and those of an archaeological culture.

—Take five minutes to discuss with a partner what Goldsworthy's art really is. Is it the actual object, the photograph, or something else.

—Make a list of five ways Peter Erskine's work educates the viewer about environmental art.

—Take fifteen minutes and write down whether you think Christo’s *Over the River* project should be made in Colorado. Use specifics about the work and back up your ideas with specific evidence.

These examples exemplify how the writing workshop not only urged me to vary the writing assignments themselves, but also how the discussions encouraged me to incorporate more short writing assignments and directed discussion to assist with comprehension of the material.

Finally, the writing workshop encouraged me to alter the way in which I approach grading. I have always been a thorough grader on writing assignments, but evidence provided by Doug and Eliana persuaded me that such extensive commentary may overwhelm a student and not result in the help needed. Therefore, I will be

using rubrics for at least some of the assignments in the class. Again, the text and the workshop facilitators provided some fine examples of rubrics from which to work. I am still in the process of refining my own rubrics, using those examples as models, but I have every expectation that students will more clearly receive my suggestions.

In sum, I found this a professionally satisfying experience, and I hope to participate in similar workshops in the future. In very real terms the workshop modified the way I will teach the class and gave a sense of reinvigoration to my concept of teaching. The assignments I have developed are more thoroughly integrated into the class, and I hope that they better engage the students on the issues.

