

M. Acuff & Nicole Pietrantonio

ITL: *Art & The Anthropocene*

Report, May 2019

Our ITL proposal consisted of three goals which we accomplished over the course of the summer 2018.

The goals from our initial proposal were:

1. Create a shared syllabus for the new “Art in the Anthropocene” class, a 300-level studio-seminar course designed to bridge current scholarship in Environmental Studies and Art.
2. Plan and execute a river trip on the Wallowa/Grande Ronde River.
3. Consult with Art History (Matt Reynolds) and ES (Eunice Blavascunas) on specific curricular content and objectives.

Over the summer of 2018, Professors Acuff and Pietrantonio held 6 meetings at 3 hours each to discuss readings, review existing syllabi from peer institutions with similar programming, design the syllabus and course goals, and begin building the ES-Art Major. (Attached is a copy of our draft syllabus.) We conducted substantial research into how artists conceptualize, engage and respond to the concept of the Anthropocene. Thinking of the Encounters “shared drive” model, we created a number of different projects, reflection prompts, and activities to integrate into the course that could be used by either faculty member teaching this class.

River trip

The river trip was orchestrated over the October Fall Break, timed with a potential slot in the syllabus, and accounting for the flow of the river itself. During the summer the river flows were simply too low to make the river navigable. Because water level is unpredictable and contingent on weather, even the fall run of the Grande Ronde happened under less than ideal conditions, e.g. the water was minimal and made for arduous, rocky, or in river parlance, “boney” passage. We spent most of the daylight hours simply muscle-ing our way down the river. This left little time to actually think about the river, the impacts of the Anthropocene, and to conduct research in the field. A retrospective cost benefit analysis has led me to put the river trip on hold as a feature of the class. The river trip is logistically time consuming, unpredictable in terms of viability, and also not totally in line with how I’d like to engage students with the region and its history. In other words, in response to the question, “Where is the Anthropocene? How can it be visualized, or made evident”, WE were the Anthropocene.

Consulting with people outside Art

Over the summer we met with Matt Reynolds and Tim Parker to discuss our draft syllabus and brainstorm about possible outings and potential overlaps in course content.

Along with the work planned in our original ITL grant, we are happy to report that our new course *Art and the Anthropocene* was officially approved by the curriculum committee and faculty in February of 2019. The first official iteration of this course will be taught this fall 2019 by M. Acuff. The new ES-Art Major was also approved and we are in the process of planning a reception and information session for students this fall.

Art & The Anthropocene

Draft Syllabus
Fall 2019

INSTRUCTOR: M. Acuff and Nicole Pietrantonio (alternating years)
CONTACT: macuff@whitman.edu / pietran@whitman.edu
OFFICE LOCATION: Fouts Center for the Visual Arts, Sculpture Studio / Book Arts Studio
OFFICE HOURS: TBD
COURSE MEETINGS: TBD (meets twice per week, 1 hour, 50 minutes each), Fouts

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course takes as its subject the tangled web of relations--aesthetic, ecologic, and political--at the center of the concept of the Anthropocene. An idea first pronounced by geologists but now embraced more broadly, the Anthropocene articulates the ways in which human activity (economic, material and behavioral), has achieved planetary scale and effect, resulting in changes to the earth and its climate. This course examines the methods, practices and discourses employed by artists to address the following subjects: how climate change takes shape visually; how ideas about nature are culturally produced and ideologically situated; how representation of the natural world is situated vis-a-vis power relations. This is an advanced, studio art, practice-based seminar; all projects will be realized in various visual media, aligned with faculty areas of specialization and interest. When taught during the fall semester, this course will include a 4-day canoe trip on the Wallowa River. This course is, at its heart, an interdisciplinary inquiry, incorporating scientific analysis and cultural criticism in service of artistic production.

COURSE GOALS:

- Understand the history and trajectory of art practice as it relates to environmental issues and representations of nature/the natural.
- Learn about the history and use of the concept of the anthropocene, as well as arguments against its usage
- Develop a vocabulary for analyzing and critiquing works of art through readings, discussion of historic and contemporary works of art, and class discussions and research presentations
- Learn a variety of artmaking strategies for realizing creative projects, interventions, and actions, capitalizing on art's unique rhetorical, expressive and communicative tools
- Understand the necessity and benefits of using a variety of lenses through which to critique/subvert/reframe/ behold climate change (scientific, philosophical, aesthetic, political, etc.)
- Be able to locate and engage manifestations of the Anthropocene in local and global phenomena

COURSE STRUCTURE & REQUIREMENTS

This is a hands-on studio course. Class time will be used for discussion of readings, collaborative projects, demonstrations, looking at art, individual mentoring and consultations, critiques of work, and discussions of readings.

Students are responsible for:

- A collaborative project
- A final project
- Reading assignments
- Group critiques and discussion
- One-on-one critiques and evaluation of your work with the instructor
- Presenting research on a contemporary artist
- Maintaining a clean studio environment and serving as Shop Monitor for at least 1 class session
- Attending two lectures by visiting artists this semester

This course requires a substantial amount of work and time spent outside of class. Projects cannot be completed satisfactorily during class time alone. Plan to spend **at least five to six hours outside of class time** working on assignments each week.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1

- **Welcome & Introduction to Art and the Anthropocene**
 - Overview of course and expectations
 - Safety tour
- **The Aesthetics of the Anthropocene**
 - [Elizabeth Kolbert, "Enter the Anthropocene: Age of Man"](#)
 - [T.J. Demos, "Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today", pp. 7-23](#) and pp. 59-81
 - Slideshow: analyze and critique contemporary visualizations of climate data: data from NASA, *Welcome to the Anthropocene!* Website, disaster images such as Edward Burtynsky, Richard Misrach, Louise Heilberg, Antigua Powerpoint
 - **Activity:** understanding content/form, break up into three groups and perform an analysis of visual rhetoric, develop common vocabularies (science and art) chasing questions about the components, character and limits of each.

Week 2

- **History of Art and Ecology - survey**
 - [Andrew Brown, "Art and Ecology Now,"](#) introduction
 - Slideshow: from early 16th C landscape painting to 1960's
 - **Activity:** in depth interpretation of 3 different works from text (
- **Contemporary Approaches**

- [T.J. Demos, “Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology”](#), introduction and Chapter 1
- [David Joselit, “American Art Since 1945,” Chapter 5: Art as Information: Systems, Sites, Media”](#)
- Slideshow: Fragile Ecologies: artists of the 60’s, first eco art= “restorationist eco-aesthetics”, Systems Ecology: mid 70’s
- Material/Conceptual Study: bag of earth

Week 3

- **Contemporary Approaches: 90’s to now**
 - [Rasheed Araeen, “Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century”](#)
 - Amy Balkin, *Public Smog*, Pedro Reyes, Diana Thater, Trevor Paglen, Kate Orff + Scape
 - Watch Art 21 videos for Diana Thater, Trevor Paglen and Pedro Reyes
 - Jenny Price/LA Urban Rangers, Mark Dion, Midway Atoll, Canary Project, watch Art 21 episodes with Jenny Holzer, Krystof Wodisco

Week 4

- **Engaging the Local**
 - [Lucy Lippard, “The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society”](#)
 - **Activity:** sculpture walk on campus, downtown Walla Walla
 - **Project:** intervention of text/object with local sculptures/monuments (video projections, text or material)

Week 5

- **Land and Power: Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity in Ecological Conversations**
 - [Simon Schama, “Landscape and Memory”](#)
 - [WJT Mitchell, “Landscape and Power”](#)
 - Kyla Rapp’s Thesis (how narratives about nature endorsed by the landscape of Whitman College and Outdoor Program underwrite and perpetuate white supremacy.)
 - How to think about the river and environs as source material. What tools we can use to record our experiences and how do our identity positions affect our making.

Week 6

- **Photography and the Anthropocene**
 - [Susan Sontag, “On Photography”](#)
 - [Teju Cole, “What does it mean to look at this?” New York Times, May 24, 2018](#)
 - [Rod Giblett and Juha Tolonen, “Photography and Landscape”, everyone reads: p.15-66.](#) Discussion groups to discuss Ch. 5 American Landscape and Wilderness Photography, Ch. 10 Wastelands, and Ch. 11 Nuclear Landscapes
 - Project: digital photography

Week 7

- **Artists’ Tours**

- [Sarah Kanouse, "Critical Day Trips" from the book "Critical Landscapes: Art Space and Politics"](#)
- [Sarah Kanouse, "A Post-Naturalist Field Kit: Tools for the Embodied Exploration of Social Ecologies"](#)

Week 8

- Project: artist tours (collaborative project)
- Project: artist tours (collaborative project)

Week 9

- Project: artist tours (collaborative project)
- Project: artist tours (collaborative project)

Week 10

- Project: artist tours (collaborative project)
- Project: artist tours (collaborative project)

Week 11

- Student Presentations and Final Projects
- Student Presentations and Final Projects

Week 12

- Student Presentations and Final Projects
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Week 13

- Final Critiques & Installation of Final Exhibit
- Final Critiques & Installation of Final Exhibit

Week 14-15: **Course Wrap-up, Final Exhibition** in Fouts Gallery, open to public