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Art and Environment in American Culture

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Ecology Through Creation

When going back into my Week 1 discussion, I was worried that it wouldn't help me in this essay since I did not remember if what I wrote made any sense. However, I was pleasantly surprised with my response to Timothy Morton's introduction to *The Ecological Thought* and the role art history plays within environmentalism. Art can be a powerful platform for understanding the human/nature relationship and history is a lens that can be utilized. The past provides us with perspectives and interpretations that are helpful to future environmentalists. Starting the semester off with Morton's essay set a wonderful tone to the rest of the class and made me think of nature in ways I hadn't before. Nature is not something to be "experienced" but is a part of how we function as beings on this planet. A major setback combatting the environmentalist movement today is the attitude that the majority of people have towards nature. Consumerism and Capitalism do not mesh well with ecological thinking and it would take redefining our relationship with nature in order to make a difference. This idea really did reframe the way I think about the earth and our environment, which had already been a huge part of my life. I recently bought Timothy Morton's book *All Art is Ecological*, and once I finish Patti Smith's memoir, it's next on my list.

As nature has been alienated, it has also been idealized. Kept at an arm's length away from the rest of human existence, "suspended afar, shimmering and naked behind glass like an expensive painting" (Morton, 5), the romanticism of nature has contributed to our idea of it

today. To me, this was a major theme of Unit One. Nature and industry were becoming more and more separate due to the Industrial Revolution and wilderness became a space outside of human civilization. *The Fate of Wilderness in American Landscape Art: The Dilemma of Nature's Nation* by Angela Miller and the landscapes we discussed in class brought these ideas to life. During this time, undeveloped wilderness was a “means of grounding the abstractions of nationhood” (Miller, 87). The emotionally satisfying pristineness of the landscape became a commodity that The United States and Europe could sell. Emphasized by Tomas Cole's paintings, *The Oxbow* really speaks to the opposition between wilderness and modern industrial life. The message seems straightforward to me as the painting is split in two by the storm clouds that create an impending doom over the “wild” side while small indications of industry are scattered throughout the farm lots. Also, the bending river below creates a shape that could easily be interpreted as a question mark. There is so much unknown, from the wilderness itself to the effects that industry would have on modern life, however, the message does not take away from the site's overall beauty.

History tells us nature has been greatly affected by industry and colonization but there are people who show it is possible to have a personal relationship with the earth. I really was moved by all of our discussions about Indigenous land-art and being able to hear from the voices that have been erased. One reading that really stood out to me was *Skywoman Falling* by Robin Wall Kimmer. The story of creation is more crucial than most people think as it has so much power over humans' relationship with nature. Skywoman's story shows the responsibility that is between humans and the earth as well as the value in its materials. From the Sweetgrass to Buffalo hides, nature was a material to learn from, being as it already knew how to live on Earth. Buffalo was not just for food but materials for life, art, and substance. Kimmer spoke about how

his ancestors' relationship with Earth is “material and spiritual” and I think that is what’s missing from the discourse around the environment today. The Western creation story teaches not to embrace the Garden of Eden but turn against it and find salvation elsewhere. As we are in an age of anthropocene, humans have done more damage to the Earth than they have helped it. The big question is, where do we go from here? Personally, I am not exactly sure, but it is clear to me that studying the patterns of humans and nature is very important for changing the future.

Moving into Unit Three, the responses of all these theories and ideas were submerged in contemporary art and activism. For me, this brings up the debate of EcoArt and after our discussions and readings, I’m not exactly sure what qualifies as EcoArt but I have come up with my own definition. To me, EcoArt is a visual language that acknowledges the anthropocentric ways of the world. Personally, I would say that Walter de Maria’s *The Lightning Field* falls under this category. As Linda Weintraub was describing why this work was not EcoArt in *Eco Art is Not*, I could only see how it was. Although the grid of the poles are representative of human thought, they exist for the lightning. I don’t think the stainless steel materials take away from the relationship that is being emphasized by the nature of the piece. The preservation of the land greatly contributes to this idea as well. Ana Mendieta’s *Siluetas* series (1973-78) also highlights a human/nature relationship. She speaks about the earth like it is a womb, the mother of all life. Her body becomes a vessel for the earth and nature that was already a part of her. With over 200 works, each one is an individual as it collapses the line between her body and the earth. Each one is the earth. Although I only highlighted some of my favorite parts from this class, I really enjoyed the discussions, readings, and artworks we looked at all semester. It will have a lasting impact on me as I study more Art History and environmentalist works. Ecological thought truly is the first step to rethink the way humans interact with their environment and make a difference.



Thomas Cole *The Oxbow*



Native Buffalo hide art



Walter de Maria *The Lightning Field*



Ana Mendieta *Siluetas* series