

NCAH special session, "ECOART: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Sustainability."
College Art Association 98th Annual Conference, February 10-13, 2010
Saturday, February 13, 2010, from 12:30 to 2:00 p.m.,
Grand CD South of the Hyatt Regency Chicago

Session Chair:

Anthony Raynsford, Assistant Professor,
Art History and Visual Culture, San José State University

Presenters:

"Governing Geometries: Buckminster Fuller's Sumptuary Aesthetic,"
Jonathan Massey (Syracuse University);

"The Solar House in the 1950s: Aesthetics Politics and Research in Architecture,"
Daniel Barber (Oberlin College); and

"Andy Goldsworthy: An Aesthetics of Sustainability,"
Stuart Kendall.

Abstracts [active link using text below; please set in html]

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NCAH Special Session: "ECOART: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Sustainability"

Session Chair: Anthony Raynsford, San Jose State University

The current wave of interest in the concept of “sustainability” calls for reflection on the specifically aesthetic implications of this wider social movement. This panel seeks to historicize and theorize the intersections between aesthetic practices and such ethical imperatives as environmental responsibility, ecological balance, biological diversity, recycling of waste, and environmental justice. What are the historical precedents for such intersections? How can one begin to discuss the aesthetics of sustainability beyond “content” for art or “function” for design? Is the aesthetic merely a means to an end – raising “awareness” or drawing consumers toward “eco-friendly” design – or can a more structurally necessary connection be established between particular forms of aesthetic experience and particular modalities of sustainable practice? How might one begin to distinguish an aesthetic of sustainability from an aesthetic of consumerism or commodity fetishism?

“Governing Geometries: Buckminster Fuller’s Sumptuary Aesthetic “
Jonathan Massey, Syracuse University

In reshaping resource use, sustainability elaborates a new form of sumptuary regulation, the regulation of consumption in the service of particular social and political goals. While much of

this sumptuary regime operates through legislation, it also works by aesthetic means. We can see a form of Schillerian “aesthetic education” at work in the domain of architecture by examining the case of R. Buckminster Fuller, the designer, philosopher, and educator who established one of the main streams of sustainable design. The regular geometries Fuller used to optimize the performance of structures and machines also lent them a distinctive beauty geared toward convincing investors and consumers to finance and buy them, and so to enlist in a voluntaristic social reform project. Fuller’s strategy provides a key to reading the segment of the sustainability movement that today emphasizes changing consumer behavior as a solution compatible with liberal governance and market economies.

“The Solar House in the 1950s: Aesthetics, Politics, and Research in Architecture”

Daniel A. Barber, Oberlin College

This paper explores the brief but significant development of solar architecture in the 1950s for the relationship between the formal analysis and architectural design of the passive solar house and the technological development of active solar heating. Anxiety over resource scarcity after World War II is summarized; it led to industry and government analyses of energy resources. Most were quite bleak, and a turn to alternative sources was seen as the only way to sustain economic growth. Through institutional and architectural experimentation, involving the work of Richard Neutra, Paolo Soleri, and Hugh Stubbins; houses built by the MIT Solar Energy Fund from 1936–1958; and the architectural competition ‘Living with the Sun’ in 1957, the solar house became an important example of techno-cultural research in this regard. The conclusion will explore the relevance of these experiments to the environmental culture of the 70s and the concern over sustainability in the present.

“Andy Goldsworthy: An Aesthetics of Sustainable Living”

Stuart Kendall

Andy Goldsworthy’s work is provides a new paradigm for aesthetic production in an era concerned with sustainability. His works and working methods model an ethos of sustainable living as well as sustainable aesthetic production. His art shows us how to be on earth, not through a representation but in the act. His work in many ways transcends the sphere of contemporary aesthetic production and consumption, treading ground that might be understood on older models as mythological or religious. Yet for all this Goldsworthy’s work is also instructive and inspirational for those of us who are interested in living in a sustainable way. His works might thus be considered as simply representative works of art, in the flattened sphere of art historical or critical reception, but they also serve a far more vital purpose as touchstones for a sustainable culture.