A course with Ömür Harmanşah, Associate Professor of Art History
Meets Thursdays 3-6 pm in Henry Hall 303
Office Hours: Tuesdays 1:00-3:00 pm (and by appointment)
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“What is to be done with political ecology? Nothing. What is to be done? Political Ecology!”

Bruno Latour (Politics of Nature 2004: 1)

“Gravel—an aggregate formed by water—became the likely inspiration for this book, a collage of concerns about the ways intersect with nature in the arid Southwest. The humble gravel pit offers an entrance to the strata of place, suggesting some fissures in the capitalist narrative into which art can flow.”

Lucy Lippard (Undermining, 1-2)

**SEMINAR DESCRIPTION**

We live in very unusual, disturbing times. Debates on the onset of the Anthropocene (the new proposed geological epoch), climate change, and the global environmental crisis have brought to attention that we are at an important turning point in history of the planet earth, while in many places communities are increasingly denied basic rights to their environment, including access to water, land, clean air, biodiversity, and heritage. The social movements of ecological resistance experienced at the Dakota Access Pipeline, or during the privatization of water in Cochabamba, Bolivia, or the construction of the Merowe High Dam in the Northern Sudan, or the Sardinian resistance to the construction of a national environmental preserve speak to us as various local ecologies where the interests of global capitalism, nation states, and the indigenous communities come into conflict. Political ecology is a rapidly growing field of research and political platform concerning the place-based activism in coming to terms with
development projects, extreme resource extraction, military conflict, and the other effects of globalization and late capitalist world order. This graduate seminar will investigate key contemporary debates in and fieldwork methodologies of political ecology through the perspective of humanities and the arts, with a special focus on nature, place, and heritage. These three concepts remain at the core of artistic, literary, and architectural engagements with the environment in recent history and will form the main threads of discussion within the seminar. Case studies will feature examples of threats over architectural and natural heritage at sites of dam construction and resource extraction, destruction of archaeological and cultural heritage at sites of military conflict, genealogies of places and landscapes, debates on deep past and deep future, and ecologically conscious art practice.

The primary objective of this seminar is to build collectively a new and innovative way of approaching the politics of ecology from the specific, creative perspective of the humanities and the arts. What is the challenge of ecology and global ecological crisis and local politics of the environment to the humanities and the arts? Political ecology has long been a cross-disciplinary field, and derived its strength from the multiplicity of fields taking part in it, such as political science, environmental sciences, human geography, anthropology of social movements, etc. But what would an explicitly humanities and arts approach to ecology look like? Moreover, political ecology also aims to create platforms of debate not restricted to academic discourse, but are open to dialogue to other stakeholders outside academia. How would one address the challenges of ecological conflicts in various places in the world through an arts and humanities initiative? These are the core questions we will attempt to address in this seminar.

**Books Ordered at the UIC Bookstore:**

The following books are available for your purchase at UIC Bookstore. You are not required to purchase them, since all the readings will be posted as pdfs on Blackboard (see below) but we will read substantial portions of these books, so it may be simply easier to have them in your library.


Also, the Journal of Political Ecology is an open access journal. Please make sure to browse through what people are writing these days in the field:

[http://jpe.library.arizona.edu/](http://jpe.library.arizona.edu/)
Course Requirements

- **Class Participation** The format of this course is a graduate seminar and it requires the active participation of everyone in the class whether they are taking the class for credit or auditing. The collaborative character of this seminar in particular is then fully dependent on our ability to share the work, collaborate in projects, co-author texts, and produce results in a collective effort. Needless to mention, all participants are expected to complete the weekly readings listed below under each week **before the seminar**, come prepared to the seminar to participate. Ömür may circulate discussion points of questions prior to the meetings - but there will be room for each of you to share your own ongoing, challenging questions. Participation, active involvement in the discussions, and developing good habits of documenting shared/discussed thoughts are most vital aspects of this seminar.

Since this seminar meets only once a week, missing a class is a big deal. If you have an emergency or health issues that will cause you miss the class, please contact me and we can work out a way to make up what you have missed.

- **Experiments in collaborative authoring: Blog essays:** In the first half of the semester and up to the Spring Break (March 20-24), **every other week** you will be asked to turn in a series of brief blog-style essays, addressing the past week's discussion (a total of 5 essays in 10 weeks). In writing these essays, we will experiment with collaborative authoring: how do two people come together and share thoughts in a collaborative authored text? This is common practice in academia and scholarly research, so I would like to encourage this collaboration in the form of short dynamic essays (1000-1500 words, supported by at least 2-3 images). This will give us a chance to sharpen our skills in writing frequently and collaboratively. The partners in such a collaboration don't have to be precisely like-minded individuals but preferably coming from different fields. Collaboration will also give us a chance to discuss political ecology matters in smaller meetings outside class hours. Essays will be mainly inspired by some aspects of your weekly reading, case studies covered in seminar meetings and the discussion that ensues it. Maybe an aspect of the discussion which we could not elaborate on and needs further inquiry. What is the most important thing you have taken away from the discussion? What can you contribute and perhaps take further on second thought? These papers will be shared on an internally shared platform on the Blackboard in order to create a collective record of the debate and substantiate our discussion. Here is a good example of such an essay:

- **Article Presentations:** Each student will have several chances to make brief presentations of selected articles or book chapters in class, to be determined ahead of time by Ömür or collectively. Your role in this presentation is to discuss the gist of the argument, highlight important case studies and to pose questions or discussion prompts from them. This is a way to share the load of reading. “Presentation” readings should be carefully/closely read and summarized for us by the volunteers while others may read or skim them as much as possible, or be familiar with them to be able to participate in the discussion.

- **Final Research project:** Every participant will choose a related research topic in collaboration with Ömür and turn it into a final research project. The project should involve a research problem, deriving from the theoretical concepts and issues relating to political ecology, adopt
an humanities and arts based approach and ideally choose a specific case study relevant to our seminar discussions. The choice of your case study in terms of period and geography is entirely open, whereas the theoretical framework must speak directly to the seminar. The research project’s requirements include a proposal (one paragraph + preliminary bibliography due March 31\textsuperscript{st} Friday), a 15-minute class presentation of the project (April 20\textsuperscript{th} or 29\textsuperscript{th}), and a 12-20 page final paper (due May 5\textsuperscript{th} Friday).

**GRADING WILL BE BASED ON:**

- Class attendance and participation (20%),
- Article presentations (10%),
- Blog Essays (25%)
- Final project (45%) [divided up as: Proposal 5% ~ Presentation 10% ~ Final Paper 30%]

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Students are expected to follow the University of Illinois’s ethical code of conduct and academic integrity, as described below. “Academic integrity means honesty and responsibility in scholarship. Students and faculty alike must obey rules of honest scholarship, which means that all academic work should result from an individual’s own efforts. Intellectual contributions from others must be consistently and responsibly acknowledged. Academic work completed in any other way is fraudulent. It is your responsibility to refrain from infractions of academic integrity, from conduct that may lead to suspicion of such infractions, and from conduct that aids others in such infractions. ‘I did not know’ is not an excuse. Ask instructors for clarification if you are unsure of their expectations.” Here are the links to the University’s Academic Integrity and Plagiarism information pages:

http://www.library.illinois.edu/learn/research/academicintegrity.html
http://www.provost.illinois.edu/academicintegrity/students.html
**WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

1. Introduction: Political Ecology as Practice

**WEEK 1. JANUARY 12.** Introduction: Defining a new field: Political Ecology as Practice. Perspectives from new debates on the Anthropocene, ruined landscapes of late capitalism, climate change and environmental crisis, conflicts over place, nature, and heritage.


**WEEK 2. JANUARY 19.** Living on land and living in a climate: Political ecology as a local/located practice. Politics of land use, and landscapes of extreme extraction as a primary concern for contemporary art. Politics and poetics of hybrid landscapes and capitalist ruins, not nature, not environment.


Presentation [Elizabeth]: Trevor Paglen, Experimental Geography (using the following article and extra information and visuals about the art project)

2. About The Anthropocene

WEEK 3. JANUARY 26. What is the Anthropocene and what does political ecology and climate change have to do with it? What is the (temporal/spatial/material) difference between landscapes of the Holocene and landscapes of the Anthropocene? Climate change and the unthinkable. Local and global perspectives on the planetary impact of Anthropocene, global warming and the emergent environmental crisis?


Further reading/presentations


WEEK 4. FEBRUARY 2. Deep past, deep future: New temporalities, new challenges in the writing of history, in thinking and writing about the deep past. Perspectives from the humanities and the social sciences.

Dipesh Chakrabarty’s Climate of History.


“In his 2009 essay The Climate of History: Four Theses, the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argued that anthropogenic climate change has signaled a fundamental shift in human history and human capacity. Once we have accepted the scientific evidence that human activities are re-shaping the Earth’s atmospheric patterns and geochemical cycles, he argues, we are compelled to recognize that human beings have,
collectively, become a geophysical force capable of determining the course of climate for millions of years.


- Introduction: Toward Reunion in History 1-11
- 1. The Grip of Sacred History 12-39
- 4. The New Neurohistory 112-156


Anthropocene Project: An Opening at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany, January 12, 2013


Further reading and some presentations from select articles from the dossier below:


2. About Nature

**WEEK 5. FEBRUARY 9. Facing Gaia: Bruno Latour, and perspectives from the science and technology studies on the environment, and “why political ecology has to let go of nature”**


- Chapter 2. How to Bring the Collective Together 53-90
- Conclusion: What is to be done? Political ecology! 221-228.


‘Those six lectures in ‘natural religion’ explore what it could mean to live at the epoch of the Anthropocene when what was until now a mere décor for human history is becoming the principal actor. They confront head on the controversial figure of Gaia, that is, the Earth understood not as system but as what has a history, what mobilizes everything in the same geostory. Gaia is not Nature, nor is it a deity. In order to face a secular Gaia, we need to extract ourselves from the amalgam of Religion and Nature. It is a new form of political power that has to be explored through a renewed attempt at political theology composed of
those three concepts: demos, theos and nomos. It is only once the multiplicity of people in conflicts for the new geopolitics of the Anthropocene is recognized, that the ‘planetary boundaries’ might be recognized as political delineations and the question of peace addressed. Neither Nature nor Gods bring unity and peace. ‘The people of Gaia’, the Earthbound might be the ‘artisans of peace’.

**WEEK 6. FEBRUARY 16. No class**

**FEBRUARY 18 SATURDAY Field Trip:** After Nature with capital ‘N’ or a new form of *nature* as the reality of postindustrial world: Infrastructure and technospheres: Petcoke Project, Chicago. Field Trip to... and engagement with Beate Geissler and Brian Holmes (Deep Time Chicago & the Anthropocene project)


"Petcoke:Tracing Dirty Energy features MoCP commissioned works by artists in response to the environmental and public health impact of petcoke, a dust-like waste product containing carbon, toxic heavy metals, and other dangerous compounds resulting from oil refining processes in the Chicago region and beyond. In addition to photography, the exhibiting artists use multi-channel video installations, sculptural objects and interactive maps to document and inspire action around the often-overlooked relationship between the growing petcoke industry and climate change.

Study: “The Anthropocene Project” at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt

**WEEK 7. FEBRUARY 23. Contested natures, animate worlds. Wild Sardinia and the Glaciers of the Yukon Peninsula. What does political ecology look like from an ethnographic and oral history perspective. Engagement with indigenous communities, colonial histories of landscapes. This we week we will divide the seminar into two teams, one team working on Heatherington’s *Wild Sardinia* and the other on Cruikshank’s *Do Glaciers Listen*.


- Introduction 3-28
- Ecology Altery, Resistance 29-55
- Envisioning the Supramonte 59-84
- Intimate Landscapes 85-106
- Hope and Mischief in the Global Dreamtimes 224-238.

- Introduction: The Stubborn Particulars of Voice 3-20
- Memories of the Little Ice Age 23-49
- Constructing Life Stories: Glaciers as Social Spaces 50-75.

3. About Place

**WEEK 8. MARCH 2.** What is place? Romantic notions of place as a sheltered spaces of cultural meaning and memory (the so-called “anthropological place” of Marc Augé), versus place as a site of political conflict, negotiation, and resistance.


- Introduction 1-26
- Place 27-68
- Capital 69-110

“Escobar analyzes the politics of difference enacted by specific place-based ethnic and environmental movements in the context of neoliberal globalization.

Based on his many years of engagement with a group of Afro-Colombian activists of Colombia’s Pacific rainforest region, the Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN), Escobar offers a detailed ethnographic account of PCN’s visions, strategies, and practices, and he chronicles and analyzes the movement’s struggles for autonomy, territory, justice, and cultural recognition. Emphasizing the value of local activist knowledge for both understanding and social action and drawing on multiple strands of critical scholarship, Escobar proposes new ways for scholars and activists to examine and apprehend the momentous, complex processes engulfing regions such as the Colombian Pacific today.”

Presentation


**WEEK 10. MARCH 16. Ruins of Modernity, Ruins of Late Capitalism: is life possible in the ruins of late capitalism?**


“Walter Benjamin’s insights can be put to use by paying greater attention to the spatiotemporal dynamics of capitalism’s creative destruction, to the social life of ruins, and to projects that challenge the linear divide between modernity and antiquity. Releasing anthropology from progressive time necessarily entails a reintegration of the subfields and a direct engagement with recent ruins.”


- Prologue. Autumn Aroma 1-9
- Arts of Noticing 17-25
- Contamination as Collaboration 27-34
- Some Problems with Scale 37-43
- Interlude: Smelling 45-52
- After Progress: Salvage Accumulation/ Working the Edge 57-70.

“Matsutake is the most valuable mushroom in the world—and a weed that grows in human-disturbed forests across the northern hemisphere. Through its ability to nurture trees, matsutake helps forests to grow in daunting places. It is also an edible delicacy in Japan, where it sometimes
commands astronomical prices. In all its contradictions, matsutake offers insights into areas far beyond just mushrooms and addresses a crucial question: what manages to live in the ruins we have made?"


“Imperial Debris redirects critical focus from ruins as evidence of the past to "ruination" as the processes through which imperial power occupies the present. Ann Laura Stoler’s introduction is a manifesto, a compelling call for postcolonial studies to expand its analytical scope to address the toxic but less perceptible corrosions and violent accruals of colonial aftermaths, as well as their durable traces on the material environment and people's bodies and minds.”

**March 20-24 Spring Break**

4. About Heritage

**Week 11. March 30.** “Heritage is of the present in the present” What is heritage, what is cultural heritage? Discourse on heritage as resource. Defining heritage in the post-colony.


APRIL 10. Opening of “Earth will not abide” Exhibition at Gallery 400. Artists included: Ryan Griffis, Brian Holmes, Sarah Lewison and Duskin Drum, Alejandro Meitin, Claire Pentecost, Sarah Ross

“The Earth Will Not Abide is an aesthetic response to a world in which seeds and soil are reduced to financial abstractions and where humans disappear into mechanized supply chains. While specifically focusing on the cross-continental relationships between the grain fields of the US, Brazil, and Argentina, this exhibition will question the ecological and social viability of this system while exploring both traditional and emerging alternatives. is a documentary project is an aesthetic response to a world in which seeds and soil become financial abstractions and humans become elements in mechanized supply chains. The exhibition specifically focuses on the cross-continental relationships between the grain fields of the US, Brazil, and Argentina--geographies reshaped by automation and global trade. The Earth Will Not Abide questions the ecological and social viability of this system while exploring both traditional and emerging alternatives.”


Week 15. April 29. Individual Project Presentations II.

Please note that Ömür will be out of town on Thursday April 27th, so this meeting will be held on Saturday April 29th at 3-6 pm in Henry Hall 303 (Location to be confirmed). Please let Ömür know if you have a conflict ahead of time.

Final Research paper due May 5th by 5 pm, hard copy in Ömür’s mailbox (in Jefferson Hall Art History office). Please also email Ömür a digital version (word or pdf).