

# ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES: 'WAGENINGEN goes ARTS & DESIGN'

*A hands-on course to critically reflect on 'sustainability' and 'innovation' in an imaginative way*

## COURSE GUIDE

Elective course (Capita Selecta - Cultural Geography)

3 ECTS

5th period, 2013-2014

Meetings: Tuesday late afternoon, 17:15 – 19:00, Forum

Lecturer/contact person/registration: Clemens Driessen ([clemens.driessen@wur.nl](mailto:clemens.driessen@wur.nl))



Contemporary artists and designers are increasingly turning to themes such as nature, food, animals, poverty and the environment. In this course we will look at a variety of these works: from Christien Meindertsma's book on everything that is made from a pig, to Natalie Jeremijenko's interactive devices to communicate with urban wildlife and Renzo Martens's 'Enjoy Poverty' documentary. These types of artistic interventions have been actively discussed also beyond the contemporary art world, as they seem to emerge from and contribute to wider cultural experiences in which ordinary relations to food, animals and nature are no longer self evident.



## Environmental humanities

In five weekly meetings we will discuss these artworks in relation to fragments of older work in the environmental humanities: From Jonathan Swift's satire on hunger and Rachel Carson's literary description of marine ecology, to Franz Kafka's short story on a speaking ape. This, together with selected secondary literature, will allow us to deepen our understanding of the strategies of the artists and designers and help analyse the public responses their work generates. Thereby this course offers a particular take on the 'environmental humanities': the study of the ways in which environmental concerns are imagined, debated and engaged with in film, photography, literature, poetry, etc.



## Assignments and meetings

Each of the five weeks will be organized around a particular theme. Before the meetings we read the core text, the background text(s) and take a look at the artworks, designs or film clips listed in the outline. We will use the core text and the background reading to discuss these selected artworks and film fragments. During these discussions we think through the practical implications of the readings by using the outcomes of 'hands on' assignments which you prepared for the class. In addition you are free to suggest artworks you find interesting to discuss in relation to the theme of the week.

## Essay

During the course you will write a brief essay (4-5p A4) on a topic of your own choice within the various themes of the 'Wageningen' domain. For example: How could we communicate with soil life? Should we learn to eat insects? How should we relate to global poverty? How could we already experience climate change? What are we to think of invasive species?

In this essay you describe an issue or situation, to which you provide relevant background information and outline the complexities and concerns you believe to be important. Also you discuss two or three artworks/designs that you think are somehow relevant as examples of how (not?) to artistically engage with the issue that is the focus of the essay.

*(Depending on your disciplinary background or theme, you are free to add to your essay a laboratory set-up, a food ingredient, a computer model, a site in a landscape, a plant, etc, that you would like your artist counterpart to use as a starting point for their work.)*

### **Exchange with Rietveld Academy design students**

By the end of week 5 (Wednesday April 16, 15:30 – 17:15), students of the 'Design-LAB' department of the Rietveld Academy of Arts will visit Wageningen to learn about the topics we have prepared for them. You can briefly (2 minutes) present your proposal and there will be an opportunity to discuss it with your design student counterpart.

In week 8 (May 5 to May 9), we will pay a return visit to Amsterdam during which you can discuss with your designer what he/she is doing, allowing you to provide feedback and together develop further ideas. Since this is the exam week of the 5<sup>th</sup> period there will probably be two optional moments for visiting the Rietveld Art School.

After this visit you can extend your essay with max. 1p A4 (200-500 words) in which you indicate the way in which an artistic design might inform both public debate and scientific / innovation practice in relation to your topic.

Due date for the final version of the essay: May 12, 2014

Before the start of the Wageningen summer break, the outcome of the collaborative design project will be exhibited in Wageningen.

### **Assessment:**

- Assignments and class participation: 40%
- Essay: 60%

Both parts need to be at least 5.5 to receive a final mark.

Presence at the five weekly meetings is required to pass the course. If absolutely necessary and if indicated in advance it is possible to be absent during a single meeting, but that would require an extra assignment.

### **Learning Outcomes:**

After successfully finishing this course you will be able to:

- Reflect on the relation between science, technology and the arts, and analyse the forms of knowledge and types of cultural intervention explored in artistic design.
- Critically discuss the role of representation and experience within societal debates of environmental issues and sustainability.
- Understand how culture, creativity and the imagination may influence technological innovation.
- Appreciate the relevance of contemporary art for life in the 'Anthropocene'.

### Assignment:

Bring /email an image of a work of art or design that you find interesting and that somehow relates to one of the themes of the course

### Core text:

#### **Rachel Carson - 'Undersea' (1937) -9p-**

Originally intended as a brochure for the US bureau of fisheries, this text was rejected for being 'too literary'. The evocative description of interconnected marine life was then published in a popular magazine and became highly influential in spreading an ecological understanding of nature. Carson would go on to write 'Silent Spring', the book (a similar blend of evocative literary style and scientific description) that started off the debate on the environmental effects of pesticide use and led to the ban of DDT.

This first meeting we will start to discuss the relations between the arts and the sciences. Why was Carson's work considered 'too literary'? What does it mean to be evocative, or scientific? Is there a special kind of 'knowledge' associated with contemporary artworks? How do these compare with literary description? And how does ecology as a science relate to artistic and political ideas.

### Background literature:

Ursula Heise (2006) The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism, PMLA 121.2 pp. 503–16.  
An overview of the ways in which the science of ecology has influenced political thought, and v.v.; How could we imagine and experience global environmental concerns such as climate change that seem intangible and abstract?

### Arts & Design:

Eleanor Morgan, 'sticky things' (filmclip) featuring the artist engaging in a risky form of interspecies immersion.

<http://www.eleanormorgan.com/files/movies/stickythingsmall.mov>

In another work she performs a mating ritual with a female spider

Andy Goldsworthy – (photos and film clips) fragile structures built from natural materials (driftwood, leaves) carefully crafted to be washed away by sea, blown away by wind; leaving distinctly human traces but no permanent marks. Land art as performance art?,

Natalie Jeremijenko – several interactive installations to communicate with urban wildlife, aiming to achieve a more symmetrical relation to animals rather than control; As part of efforts to realize (political) representation of the non-human world and an experience of a shared environment

Beatriz da Costa – 'Pigeon Blog'. A project in which pigeons are equipped with GPS trackers and pollution sensors. Does this variant to the 'canary in the coal mine' add to a sense of shared vulnerability? [www.artelectronicmedia.com/artwork/pigeon-blog](http://www.artelectronicmedia.com/artwork/pigeon-blog)

Henriette Waal – 'Outdoor Brewery'. An installation to brew beer on location from local (surface) water, promoting 'taste' as a way to connect to a site and creating a direct experience of water quality.

## Week 2 – Hunger, Poverty and Global Justice

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### Assignment:

Come up with a 'modest proposal' on a topic of your own choice, e.g. by proposing an existing situation – or a radical extrapolation of it - as a policy.

### Core text:

#### **Jonathan Swift – 'A Modest Proposal' -7p-**

Satirical pamphlet by the author of 'Gulliver's Travels', meant as a protest against poverty and starvation in Ireland by proposing to feed the children of the poor as a delicacy to the rich. Detailing recipes for children ragouts, it aroused a moral outcry, while satirizing the seemingly neutral learned style of policy debate that refrained from moral commitment and prevented political debate.

### Arts & Design / background reading:

'The Yes Men'; a documentary film by activists claiming to be corporate representatives. Critique of the role of multinational corporations with regard to issues of poverty, environmental pollution, and labour conditions. <http://theyesmen.org/>

Susan George, 'the Lugano Report' (1999). [Excerpts]

A pastiche report of a hypothetical meeting of global experts with cynical proposals to deal with global problems. Critique of international policy making and economic expertise.

Renzo Martens 'Enjoy Poverty'.

Extreme and rather cynical documentary, features the artist teaching locals how to exploit imagery of suffering in Congo, as the main economic resource of the country accessible to them. Critique of NGOs and the common genre of media coverage.

A review of the project: <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/enjoying-poverty-congo>

## Week 3 – Animals

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How do we relate to animals in captivity, and how could this be re-imagined in a way that somehow involves their active presence?

### Assignment:

'Animal news', bring a recent newspaper story featuring an animal

### Core text:

#### **Franz Kafka – 'Report to an Academy' -8p-**

A short story on a primate who is captured in the wild, teaches himself to speak and is summoned to defend his case for an academic board. Deals in a literary form with a series of philosophical and ethical questions on human-animal relations.

### Background literature:

John Berger (1977). Why look at animals? In J. Berger (Ed.), About looking. New York: Pantheon, (1980). (pp. 3-28).

Essay by the art historian, novelist and poet Berger who discusses the 'disappearance of the animal' in the modern world. 'Only pets and carcasses remain', is a line from one of his

poems, by which he laments how we can no longer relate to animals in the way pre-modern peasants did.

#### **Arts & Design:**

Christien Meindertsma – PIG05049. A graphic overview of everything that in our industrial society is made from pigs; See also her 'flax project' and 'one sheep sweater'.

MVRDV - 'Pig City'. A radical extrapolation of existing intensive farming in the Netherlands, proposing to house millions of pigs in a series of gigantic high rise facilities in the Rotterdam harbour.

TINKEBELL – 'Looove Tinkebell'. A controversial artist who turned her cat into a handbag, and collected the public (private) responses to this work.

The 'Playing with pigs' project, establishing relations between consumers and farm animals via digital media. [www.playingwithpigs.nl](http://www.playingwithpigs.nl)

#### **Week 4 - Nature / landscape**

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What ideas of nature and the role of humans operate in the background of the language we use; and how do different styles of nature photography and documentaries evoke particular natures and cultures? How do these relate to conservation science and policy making?

#### **Assignment:**

Bring a photo (made by yourself or found on the web) of 'nature in the Anthropocene': How does your image relate to historical shifts in thinking about nature and wildlife?

**(This week has no historical text)**

#### **Background literature:**

William Cronon (1995). The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature, in: *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Pp. 69-90.

Description of the cultural character of ideas of (pristine, wild) nature, their origin in the US and historical transformations in relation to aesthetic theory, literature and visual arts. We will focus on (artistic) representation of nature in different kinds of landscape painting, photography (Ansel Adams) and wildlife films (The New Wilderness; Green).

Bouse, D. (2000) Wildlife Films. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. [Excerpt chapter 1, especially p14-15]

So called 'blue chip' wildlife documentaries tend to refrain from promoting political action while sticking to timeless 'feel good' narratives. A different type of nature documentary instead aims to evoke sadness and outrage, hoping to inspire viewers to take action and help conserve the last remaining sites of spectacular biodiversity. In preparation of this week's meeting we will view fragments of either genre.

**Art & design (photography and film):**

Ansel Adams landscape photography

'The New Wilderness' Dutch blockbuster nature documentary on the 'Oostvaardersplassen' nature reserve (2013) [fragment]

'Green', a documentary on deforestation in Borneo, focusing on an Orang Utan being displaced. [www.greenthefilm.com](http://www.greenthefilm.com) [fragments]

**Week 5 – Food**

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**Assignment:**

Bring something edible that is normally not considered to be food

**Core text:**

Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*. Doubleday, 2003 [Excerpts]

We will read selected fragments of this recent 'science fiction' novel which features a form of 'in vitro meat' ("ChickieNobs"). These excerpts will be the basis for exploring the current and possible meanings of meat and meat substitutes, generating ideas on the role of culture and the imagination in processes of innovation and societal change.

**Background literature:**

Jane Bennett (2007) *Edible matter*. *New Left Review* (May/June) pp. 133–45

Theoretical discussion of ways to take the material character of foodstuff seriously, using a series of examples and dealing with food related issues such as obesity.

Jovian Parry (2009) 'Oryx and Crake and the New Nostalgia for Meat'. *Society and Animals*, 17, pp.241- 256

**Art & designs:**

Luis Bunuel - 'Le fantôme de la liberté' [scene of this film]

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6boxoksi3U>

By inverting everyday practices, central cultural norms are revealed as to contingent and open for reinterpretation.

Peter Menzel and Faith D'Aluisio – *What I eat: around the world in 80 diets*

A series of portraits of families from across the globe depicted together with their weekly food consumption. Again, an example of 'neutral' representation of a state of affairs which in fact brings out a series of food related issues.

Centre for Genomic Gastronomy <http://genomicgastronomy.com/work/>



## Course summary

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Language of instruction: English

Study load: 3 ECTS

Capita Selecta – Cultural Geography

(In case a student already is taking a (3ECTS) Capita Selecta course with the Cultural Geography participating in this course can be administratively arranged, but please contact the teacher.)

Components of the credits:

Classroom meetings 14 hours (0,5 ects)

Self study / preparing assignments 28 hours, (1 ects)

Writing essay 42 hours, (1,5 ects)

Period/ time: Period 5 (March - May)

Meetings: 5x Tuesday late afternoon/early evening (March 18 – April 15)  
1x Thursday afternoon meeting with design students (April 16, 15:30-17:00)  
1x Afternoon visit to Rietveld Academy Amsterdam (week of May 5)

Course materials: Texts, (links to) filmclips and imagery will be provided in advance

Deadline paper: Draft version to send to Rietveld Student – April 18  
Final version that will be graded – May 9

Contact person, lecturer and examiner:  
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Examination: Course participation and assignments (40%)  
  
Paper final version: maximum 2,500 words including references (60%)

Assumed knowledge: None

Continuation courses: None

**For more information and registration, contact the teacher: [Clemens.Driessen@wur.nl](mailto:Clemens.Driessen@wur.nl)**

Clemens Driessen is lecturer at the Cultural Geography chair group of Wageningen University. He was trained as a philosopher (University of Amsterdam) and an engineer (TU Delft), and has published on the role of the arts and design in relation to agriculture, animals, nature and food. He is a guest lecturer at Utrecht University (Philosophy Department), the Rietveld Academy Amsterdam (Design LAB) and the Utrecht School of the Arts (HKU – Art, Media and Technology) and he has experience in collaborating with designers, e.g. for his human/pig video game project '[www.playingwithpigs.nl](http://www.playingwithpigs.nl)' and recently at a live cooking show around 'in-vitro meat' [http://v2.nl/events/test\\_lab-art\\_meat\\_flesh](http://v2.nl/events/test_lab-art_meat_flesh).