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**UNIVERSITÄT  
BERN**

Philosophisch-historische Fakultät  
Institut für Kunstgeschichte  
**Kunstgeschichte der Moderne  
und Gegenwart**

**Art and Media Ecologies in the Anthropocene:  
Critical Infrastructures and Materialist Contamination**  
(Working title)

**Call for Research Partners**

The first goal of the project is to apply for a start-up UniBE ID Grant in autumn 2016, which would allow a Post-Doc researcher to work for 12 months on the application for a Sinergia project or Agora Grant. According to the framework conditions of the UniBE ID Grant such an application should be organized on an interdisciplinary and interfaculty basis with at least two academic fields and at least two faculties. The following project sketch is intended as a call for research partners from ecology, geography, plant sciences, development and environmental studies, economic law, agricultural economics or sociology that might be interested in a collaboration and exchange with art historical methods and approaches from the humanities. Parallel to this application we would propose a seminar on “Art and Ecology”, which could be recognized by both institutions. Hoping our proposal meets with your interest and research, we are looking forward hearing from you to discuss everything else in detail in a personal conversation.

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## **Background**

The central hypothesis of the *Anthropocene* theorem is that we live in “a world of our making, but not of our choice” (George Monbiot, in: *Guardian*, 4th February 2015). The *Anthropocene* in other words names the geologic era marked by the irreversible impact of human activity and technology on the earth. As such the concept has been widely approached but also profoundly criticized by different scholars from the humanities and environmental sciences as nothing but an ideological construct. The climate change—just to name the most pertinent and most generic contention—has in recent years been perceived as the ultimate alarming signs in a global, irreversible ecological crisis. The art world has been sensible for this planetary change at an earlier point in the history of critical thought. Still, the relevance of art in debates on ecology was often only explained with the classical argument on a certain “freedom” of the artist’s practice and politics; that in fact “artists dare to tread where scientists, politicians, environmentalists and other specialists do not” (Heartney 2014). Art history played a decisive role here, not least as a critical as well as distanced mediator. While some authors of contemporary art criticism proposed in the wake of “speculative realism” rather pessimist readings of the current global situation (Avanessian et al. 2015), other scholars have emphasized the political dimension of sustainability in the art discourse (Demos 2009). Ecological issues, concerning catastrophic scenarios as well as the possibilities of sustainability were addressed within the art world but also to the social context in which the artist’s work has to stand.

## **Scientific Questions**

Since the early modern period visual arts and artistic creativity were conceived in close relation to processes in nature. For different artists from Leonardo da Vinci up to Paul Klee and Joseph Beuys the genesis of art was unquestionable present *in analogy* to nature. The *true artist* was indeed he who can bring this potentiality out of nature. Since the 1960s and

1970s conceptual earth or land art have put this relation into question. Today we might even argue if it is rather necessary to overcome the distinction between nature and culture (Descola 2005), if it is politically imperative to do away with the concept of nature altogether (Latour 2004) or if we should just think of the ethical and political impact of art in accordance to an “ecology after nature” (Morton 2008).

In the intersection of art criticism, politico-ecological theory, environmental and climate studies as well as postcolonial perspectives on globalization and the “global south”, the research project thus aims to foster dialogue on the formation of art and the specificity of eco-aesthetical media. The general goal is to think ecologies simultaneously across social and environmental registers to thereby extend the perspective on the singular artwork or the subjective artistic practice.

From an art historical perspective it immediately suggests itself to observe those fields where the *Anthropocene* theorem and its correlated eco-aesthetical phenomena are initially shaped. These are 1) curatorial projects, 2) key studies of singular artistic practices and procedures as well as “artistic research”, and 3) the analysis of specific media and materials.

### 3.1. Curatorial Projects

Exhibition such as *Artificial Nature* (Deitsch/Friedman 1992), *Fragile Ecologies* (Matilsky 1992), *Vanishing Ice. Alpine and Polar Landscapes in Art, 1775-2012* (Matilsky 2013) or the most recent *Textures of the Anthropocene* (Klingan et al. 2014) have shaped our knowledge on the relation of art and ecology, but they also partake in problematic politics of representation. The main question would thus be to ask how ecological issues are displayed, visualized and represented in artificial spaces such as museums or galleries, but also in conference venues or in academies institutions as well as in the more “virtually” form of publications or talks (e.g. El Gore’s TED talks on the climate crisis).

### 3. 2. Ecological Artistic Research: A Perspective on Practices and Procedures

Besides institutionalized curatorial strategies, individual artists such as George Steinmann, who received a honorary doctorate from the University Bern in 2011, have addressed questions which cannot be answered by art itself but need further historical, sociological and scientific investigation: How has art itself shaped ideas about sustainability? What is the role of the artist and art collectives in science-based environment? How do artists cooperate with institutional partners without being captured by their sometimes quite contrary agendas? The project could here also incorporate the discourse around “artistic research” and discuss its viability for ecological investigations on a methodological level. When, thus, is artistic practice “scientific” and how is the ethical dimension of scientific research articulated?

### 3.3. Eco-Media: Materials and Media in-between Art and Ecology

The perspective on art and ecology demands a different analysis of the “contamination” of materials as matter or substance of art. While the most widely received methods on material studies in art history (Wagner 2001) have primarily focuses on the immanent iconography of artistic production, “contaminated materials” point on the other hand to a symbolical uncertainty and transcend the realm of the art world. Genetically modified grains and seeds, chemical and “natural” medicines were used as materials or metaphors in artistic installations and performances. Nabil Ahmed’s analysis of “geological forces” of cyclones, iron and gas and Michel Serres’ “earth objects” have been successfully translated to material processes in the arts (Demos 2013). The intersections between science and art could thus also lead to an insightful comparative analysis, which could reveal how media and materiality are classified, explored and visualized under ecological categories.

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