

Art History

ART HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BERN

The University of Bern's [Institute of Art History](#) investigates and teaches art in its entire historical and geographical breadth, from the early Christian era to the present. Main objects of study are the art forms of architecture, painting, sculpture, and the decorative arts (with a special focus on textile arts), their various genres, as well as photography and new media. Topics include the historical and social conditions of artistic practice, as well as the cultic, social, and aesthetic functions of works of art and architecture, their forms and types, their contents and meaning, and their artistic and literary reception. The critique of canonical art historiography – questioning interpretations of the past – is at the core of how the discipline has positioned itself, and a reason for art history's trailblazing position within the environmental humanities.

How is art history linked to sustainable development, and how has this influenced practice?

Sustainability-related questions have led to a paradigm shift in art history. Artworks and exhibition projects have begun to explore issues such as climate change, examining it in its global dimension or from a local perspective. The increasing attention paid to material aspects (during what has become known as the "material turn") – has highlighted the importance of sustainable materials, the history of production and processing of particularly durable materials (e.g. porphyry) or pigments (e.g. lapis lazuli), and the handling of contamination (e.g. mercury) or of reuse (e.g. *spolia*, recycling) [1].

The commitment to (cultural) sustainability determines central debates about the Anthropocene. Art History at the University of Bern explicitly takes a stand in this discussion, for example within its research project on "Mediating the Ecological Imperative", and by acting as a leading discipline within the environmental humanities [2,3].

As a humanities discipline oriented towards the visual sciences, art history includes the study of iconography, producing knowledge which helps us to understand how, for example, our idea of landscape has transformed. A

central theme of sustainability is how to transcend the classical dichotomy of nature and culture: models for doing so can be provided by the history of art of the Middle Ages and of early modern times (a key term in this respect is mimesis, or the "imitation of nature"). From the history of images, we learn to better understand utopian as well as dystopian visions of contemporary climate images (of paradise lost, the end of the world, the apocalypse, etc.) [3]. Cinematographic perspectival and montage techniques have allowed film and video art to portray catastrophic scenarios and dystopias in all their complexity [4]. We find the earliest examples of an ecological aesthetic in 19th century landscape painting, in the terminology of Romantic art criticism, and in the attitudes of the Land Art movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

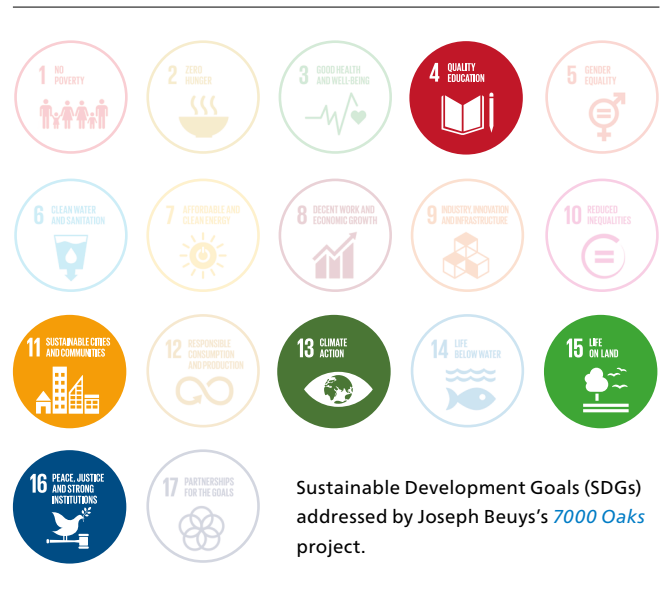
More recently, art history has also explored the field of "artistic research". Synergies are being tapped between art history, science history, the experimental approach of art, and the mediating function of curatorial practice – leading to insightful results. Exhibitions such as *Rockslide as Preparation* (Chur Museum of Fine Arts, 2012), *Our Water. Six Models for the Future* (Alpine Museum, Bern, 2016–18), or *The Anthropocene* (HKW, Berlin, since 2013) have contributed to bringing art and science closer together and to using curatorial concepts to promote reflection on ethical norms – issues which are highly important for sustainability.

In basic research, the links between art history and sustainable development are established primarily through case studies. Art history scholars analyse how artefacts (objects, works, performances, films) and formats of curatorial practice and conservation (exhibitions, archives, collections, catalogues) address, represent, stage, document, and communicate concrete environmental problems. This includes the question of the sustainability of specific materials (e.g. marble, precious woods, plastics, conflict raw materials in digital media), the problem of (waste) production and recycling in elaborate art projects (e.g. "Percent for Art" projects in Germany, incorporating art into state construction projects) and major exhibitions (e.g. Venice Biennale, documenta). The concept of sustainability in art history is also closely linked to the general cultural question of how we must deal with tradition, with the preservation and conservation of culture, and with

the restructuring of entire museum systems so that they themselves are sustainable. Art history takes the lead in conceiving and deciding how museums, collections, archives, and our ideas of “cultural heritage” can and should develop more sustainably in the future.

Example: 7000 Oaks – City Forestation instead of City Administration

Joseph Beuys is one of the best-known artists to have incorporated environmental, social, and economic concepts of sustainability into his work. In his 7,000 Oaks project, 7,000 oak trees were planted in a collective public work over several years, each paired with a basalt stone. Beuys thus combined his interest in monumental sculpture (basalt stone) with an expanded concept of landscape art, as part of his ideas about art as “social sculpture”. Amid increasing urbanization, the project was an extensive artistic and ecological intervention (**SDG 15**) that aimed to sustainably change and regreen the urban living space. The idea of “social sculpture” involved developing cultural awareness on-site (i.e. through the artwork) (**SDG 4**) combined with environmental and social engagement. Beuys was a committed advocate of direct democracy and a founding member of the German Green Party, which in Europe was an early proponent of integrating a responsibility-focused concept of cultural sustainability ethics into its politics. Beuys considered trees as artistic material that has its own subjectivity (**SDG 13**), but lacks “rights”. The much-discussed 7,000 Oaks project has decisively shaped and changed the cityscape and thus the public space in Kassel (**SDG 11**), with the preservation and maintenance of the trees financed by various local actors (**SDG 16**). Beuys’s idea of “social sculpture” also influenced later actions in the field of environmental sustainability, for example urban gardening and the work of the Bernese artist George Steinmann, who was also a climate activist and recipient of an honorary doctorate from the University of Bern.



Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) addressed by Joseph Beuys’s 7000 Oaks project.

How does the University of Bern’s Institute of Art History incorporate the topic of sustainability into research and teaching?

Since 2015, the University of Bern’s Institute of Art History has conducted research on the “Ecological Imperative”, which examines the visual politics of climate change, the role of ecological issues in art and literature, and social engagement with the environment in indigenous cultures. Results of this research are regularly integrated into teaching, for example in main seminars, during excursions, and in introductory courses. One aim is to establish this research focus at the Institute in the long term. From 2021–2024, it is being funded as a Sinergia project of the Swiss National Science Foundation, entitled “Mediating the Ecological Imperative: Formats and Modes of Mediation” [5].

References

URLs last accessed on 24 August 2022. Sources listed in German are not available in English.

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