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Conveners: Kjetil Fallan, Finn Arne Jørgensen

Participants: Larry Busbea (University of Arizona), Kjetil Fallan (University of Oslo), Elena Maria Formia (University of Bologna), Yves Vincent Grossmann (LMU Munich), Nicole Heinzl (LMU Munich), Finn Arne Jørgensen (Umeå University), Michelle Labrague (Stockholm University), Ida Kamilla Lie (University of Oslo), Margot Lystra (Cornell University), Irene Maldini (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences), Christopher Neumaier (Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam), Jennie Olofsson (Umeå University), Gabriele Oropallo (University of Oslo), Ingrid Halland Rashidi (University of Oslo), Livia Rezende (Royal College of Art, London), Heike Weber (Bergische Universität Wuppertal)

Design and designers hold an ambiguous place in contemporary environmental discourse. They can easily be blamed for causing environmental problems, but also possess key competences for potentially solving those problems. Despite this long-standing centrality of design to environmental discourse, and vice versa, deep and systematic “environmental histories of design” are few and far between. While environmental historians have increasingly explored technology and material culture as active agents in discourses of environmental change, design is seldom explicitly addressed. At the same time, design history faces a major challenge in accounting for environmental concerns in the history of design discourse.

This workshop, hosted at the Rachel Carson Center in Munich and arranged by Kjetil Fallan and Finn Arne Jørgensen, explored the common ground emerging at the intersection of these two fields of inquiry. The workshop brought together 15 international scholars from different fields, including design history, fashion studies, history of technology, environmental history, and science and technology studies. Through the papers and subsequent discussions, we explored questions like: What can environmental history contribute to, and gain from, knowledge of design’s environmental

impacts? How can design history engage with issues of environmental controversies and sustainable development and thereby move beyond its conventional societal significance? Can engagement with the environmental histories of design enable more resilient futures?

The resulting meeting between disciplines was productive in many ways. Eleven pre-circulated papers with ample time for discussion allowed us to historicize visions of sustainability, both within and without the design community. Chronologically, a majority of papers focused on the period when modern environmentalism went mainstream, especially the 1960s and 1970s. This was a period where designers turned a critical eye towards their own profession. Exemplifying the longer chronology of the workshop theme, the papers also included discussions of cultural politics of raw materials in the late nineteenth century and of the contemporary material cultures of recycling and e-waste.

LARRY BUSBEA presented a fascinating study of the development of Soft Control Material around 1970, an experimental material technology that combined insights from cybernetics and psychiatry with environmental awareness. While it was patented, SCM never made it to commercial applications—it remained more idea than substance. **HEIKE WEBER** questioned the by now well-established story about the life cycles and planned obsolescence of consumer goods, challenging the traditional story that the life cycle of consumer items has become shorter and shorter in the twentieth century. Arguing that product lifespans need to be in the foreground of any environmental history of design, Weber suggested venues for deep empirical research into this subject. **ELENA MARIA FORMIA** took us deep into the meeting between the radical Italian design community and the environmental and countercultural movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Focusing in the reception of key international works such as *The Limits to Growth*, *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, *Silent Spring*, and others, Formia explored the establishment of the Global Tools design group and the role of design magazines in building an ecological awareness in Italy. **LIVIA REZENDE** directed our attention to the construction of rawness in natural resources through her study of World Fairs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Using Latin American wood as an example, she argued that nature and raw materials have been deprived of agency within design discourse. **MICHELLE LABRAGUE** examined the articulation of environmental values in the fashion industry through a study of the American sportswear brand Patagonia, in particular the company's early focus on "clean climbing." Using "slow fashion" to reframe and contextualize sustainable design, Labrague argued that modernism's idealism as a social experiment was transported and recodified within the environmental movement of the 1960s. **MARGOT LYSTRA** looked at how the development of new representational techniques in freeway design led to a reimagining of freeways as living infrastructures—hybrid natural/technological complexes of

interacting and unpredictable components. Here we returned to the idea of modernism, as Lystra demonstrated how 1960s environmental design gradually abandoned methods that engaged the agency of nature as something close at hand and intimate to the act of making. **CHRISTOPHER NEUMAIER** brought technological design into the discussion with his study of diverging design paths to “clean” diesel exhaust emissions in 1970s–1980s in the USA and Europe. Neumaier demonstrated how the ideas of the environmental performance of cars are thoroughly embedded in national cultures, as cars with similar technological solutions could be seen as “non-polluting” in Germany but not in the USA. The design of environmental technologies is linked to very specific historical and national contexts. **JENNIE OLOFSSON** explored the intricate and sometimes contradictory relationship between design, repair/reuse and recycling in relation to digital technologies, offering us different ways of thinking about current consumption patterns, obsolescence and subsequent measurements of discarding. **IDA KAMILLA LIE** examined Viktor Papanek’s interaction with Scandinavian design students in the last half of the 1960s, and how this pushed Papanek to refine his thoughts on the social responsibility of designers. **GABRIELE OROPALLO** presented us with some insights into how the environmental crisis manifested itself in design culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, focusing in particular on the Ulm school of design and the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design. Oropallo argued for the importance of further historicization of the interplay between historical trends in design culture, and the evolution of the environmental context. Finally, **INGRID HALLAND RASHIDI** provided us with a close reading of the Green Designer exhibition organized by the UK Design Council in 1986 and how the green designer embraced the idea of the green consumer shopping environmentally friendly products. Halland Rashidi encouraged environmental historians to use both exhibitions and designed objects as ways of studying and historicizing the human-nature relationship.

The workshop had no “mainstream” environmental historians as participants, which we think demonstrates the lack of attention to design questions among environmental historians. On the other hand, design historians have a tendency to focus on the internal development of the design profession, which in this case led to a strong emphasis on the 1960s and 1970s in many papers.

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— Finn Arne Jørgensen and Kjetil Fallan