

CEGU 24503/34503 ARCH 25014, ARTH 25014, ARTV 20045

Combustion Aesthetics

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Autumn 2026

Tu/Th, 3:30–4:50pm

Gates-Blake Hall, Room 321

Course Description

Fire has been central to architecture for millennia, but combustion-derived materials including concrete, steel, glass, insulation, adhesives, and plastics have shaped far more of the built environment than the chimney alone. In parallel, the sounds of power plants and combustion engines have inspired whole new schools of musical practice, from Futurism to Blues to Metal. Meanwhile, the increasing proliferation of petrochemical art materials has dissolved their historically uneven quality and availability, empowering such Modernist universalisms as color theory and grid systems. These aesthetic transformations persistently, elusively, quietly—and sometimes more overtly—seep back into professional standards for building safety, efficiency, and comfort, policy discussions about transportation infrastructure and energy resilience, and consumer decisions about what to buy, make, use, repair, modify, replace, or discard.

As fossil economies are increasingly challenged for their role in climate change and biodiversity loss, do their accompanying aesthetic paradigms also need to be rethought? Should sustainability initiatives simply attempt to replicate petroaesthetics in a less harmful way or should new forms of aesthetics (or very old ones) be encouraged to (re-)emerge? To grapple with these questions, we will produce both analyses and imaginings—in text, image, sound, and object—that exemplify, problematize, and counteract combustion aesthetics as a cultural inheritance.

Assignments

Imaginings

Throughout the quarter, we will keep a journal of reflections and imagings, inscribing by hand in a provided notebook to encourage an approach that is both offline (no AI!) and multi-sensory (writing, drawing, collage, and more are all welcome!).

Each class meeting will focus on a particular group of materialities, phenomena, and/or sensations. In preparation, reflect using one page of your notebook on where you've seen it, felt it, what you've felt about it, whether it's meaningful to you, why it might be meaningful to others, how you want to see it evolve in the world, and so forth.

References to specific artworks, objects, buildings, or texts are welcome if you find them helpful, but are not necessary. You can focus on a very narrow approach or work to unite a diverse spread of things or experiences. These assignments are intended less as academic or conceptual exercises than as a seeding of deep contemplation and perceptive experience. Be as concise and concentrated as possible—poetics, drawing, collage, and other artistic practices are very much welcome, though you are also welcome to stick with more conventional written reflections.

Insofar as language is involved, please restrict yourself to a maximum of around 250 words. Each entry will be due at the start of class on Tuesdays.

Week 2 (due October 6): **Iron**

Week 3 (due October 13): **Color, Pigment, Dye, Earth**

Week 4 (due October 20): **Wood, Pitch, Sap Fruit**

Week 5 (due October 27): **Stone, Clay, Brick, Lime**

Week 6 (due November 3): **Warmth, Damp, Sunlight, Comfort**

Week 7 (due November 10): **Fuel, Smoke, Steel, Resonance**

Week 8 (due November 17): **Texture, Smoothness, Purity, Plastics**

Week 9 (due December 1): **Fresh Air**

Projects

We will complete two larger projects over the nine weeks of this course. These will ask you to reflect either through artistic practice or through academic writing on themes—materialities and/or sensory experiences—addressed in our readings and discussions.

As we introduce ourselves in week one, I'll ask each of you to decide whether you'd like to pursue these as an artist or as a theorist—remembering, of course, that this distinction is never precise. If you have a background in art (drawing, painting, photography, publication design, poetry, creative writing, music, pottery, theatre, etc.) I'd strongly encourage you to pursue the artistic path. If you are more comfortable with scholarly writing, the theorist option will be excellent.

The prompt for each project is the same regardless of your chosen path, but the form will be different:

Artist: Produce a substantial work within your chosen medium and provide a brief (50–100 word) exhibition label and longer (~250–500 word) artist statement introducing and/or contextualizing the work for a public readership.

Theorist: Write a substantial paper (3,000–5,000 words each) referencing several texts, artworks, and other examples discussed in class.

The project prompts are as follows:

Midterm Project (proposal due October 8, project due October 29): Choose a material, style, or work; unpack its connection to combustion.

Final Project (proposal due November 5, project due December 3): Choose a classmate's midterm, bring it into dialogue with your own research and/or practice.

The week each project is assigned, a written proposal will be due on Thursay. On each project's due date, we will present our work to each other in class.

Grading

Daily Attendance: 18 points

In-class discussions are an essential component of this course. As such, you will be expected to attend every class meeting. That said, I understand that life happens and sometimes you need to miss a day or two. If you let me know in advance of any class meeting that you will not be able to make it, I will not deduct points for up to three days missed. If you miss class without letting me know, I will deduct one point per day missed. If you have missed or will miss three or more days (with or without letting me know) please reach out to discuss options.

Weekly Imaginings (Journal Entries): 16 points

Because their format is decidedly open-ended and they are intended primarily to spark ideas, our weekly journal entries will be graded for completion only. If you submit a photo or scan of your journal page on time and it demonstrates reasonable effort, you will receive two points.

Midterm & Final Projects: 33 points each

Both projects will be graded using the same rubric, but the rubric will be slightly different depending whether you're working as an artist or a theorist:

Artist

- Submitted Proposal: 5 points
- Insightful and Well-Made Artwork: 13 points
- Substantive and Compelling Artist Statement: 10 points
- Completed Presentation: 5 points

Theorist

- Submitted Proposal: 5 points
- Insightful and Well-Written Paper: 13 points
- Thorough and Correct Citations and Bibliography: 10 points
- Completed Presentation: 5 points

Late Work

Any work submitted up to one day late will have one point deducted. Any work submitted up to one week late will have 50% of possible points deducted. No work will be accepted beyond one week late without prior written agreement.

Course Outline

Week 1—Petrocultures and their Outside: Clean Oil, Dirty Oil

Reading

Leigh Michael Harrison, “Factory Music: How the Industrial Geograpy and Working-Class Environment of Post-War Birmingham Fostered the Birth of Heavy Metal” (2010)

Luigi Russolo, “The Art of Noises” (1913)

Piet Mondrian, “The New Plastic in Painting” (1917)

Tuesday—Overture and Introductions

Thursday—Clean Oil, Dirty Oil: Metal and Plastic

Week 2—Early Resistance: Historicism

Midterm Proposals due Thursday at 3:30pm!

Reading

John Ruskin, “The Work of Iron” (1859)

William Morris, “The Revival of Handicraft” (1888)

Vicky Albritton and Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, “Introduction” in *Green Victorians: The Simple Life in John Ruskin’s Lake District* (2016)

Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, “William Morris, Extraction Capitalism, and the Aesthetics of the Surface” (2015)

Tuesday—Ruskin, Morris, and The Arts and Crafts Movement

Thursday—Arnold Dolmetsch and the Historical Performance of Music

Week 3—Color, Pigment, Dye, Earth

Reading

Heidi Gustafson, “Biogenic Ochre,” “Lodestone,” and “Bone Dust,” in *Book of Earth: A Guide to Ochre, Pigment, and Raw Color* (2023)

Michael Rossi, “Small Lies for Big Truths: Standards, Values, and Color Terms,” in *The Republic of Color: Science, Perception, and the Making of Modern America* (2019)

Tuesday—Color as Refracted Light

Thursday—Color as Nature and Culture

Week 4— Wood, Pitch, Sap, Fruit

Reading

Daniel Ibañez, Jane Hutton, and Kiel Moe, *Wood Urbanism: From the Molecular to the Territorial* (2019) (excerpts tba)

Christopher Wilk, *Plywood: A Material Story* (2017) (excerpts tba)

Peter Follansbee, *Joiner’s Work* (2019) (excerpts tba)

Tuesday—Wood Supply and Commodification

Thursday—Traditional Woodcraft

Week 5—Stone, Clay, Brick, Lime

Midterm Projects due Thursday at 3:30pm!

Reading

Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture: A Material History* (2012) (excerpts tba)

Anna Heringer, Lindsay Blair Howe, and Martin Rauch, *Upscaling Earth: Material, Process, Catalyst* (2020) (excerpts tba)

Tuesday—Concrete and Culture

Thursday—Midterm Presentations

Week 6—Interiorization: Climate Control, Plastics, and Industrial Waste Products

Final Proposals due Thursday at 3:30pm!

Reading

Octave Perrault, “On Architecture in the Age of Renewable Electricity” (2025)

Daniel A. Barber et al, “After Comfort: A User’s Guide” (2023–) (excerpts tba)

Tuesday—A Brief History of the Interior

Thursday—After Comfort

Week 7—Mechanization: Valorizing Precision, Stability, Homogeneity, and Noise

Reading

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *The Manifesto of Futurism* (1909) (excerpts)

L'Ebe Bugatti, *The Bugatti Story* (1967) (excerpts tba)

Thomas Patteson, “‘The Joy of Precision’: Mechanical Instruments and the Aesthetics of Automation” in *Instruments for New Music: Sound, Technology, and Modernism* (2015)

Andreas Malm, “‘No Government but Fuel’: The Derivation of Power from Coal in Bourgeois Ideology” in *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (2016)

Tuesday—The Noisy Future of the Past

Thursday—More Recent Forms of Petromasculinity

Week 8—Standardization, Mobility, Universality

Reading

Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (1934) (excerpts tba)

Carolyn F. Strass (ed.), *Slow Technology Reader: A Tool for Shaping Divergent Futures* (2025) (excerpts tba)

Tuesday—Combustion and the Abstraction of Time, Space, and Matter

Thursday—Slow Technology

Week 9—Fresh Air

Final Projects due Thursday at 3:30pm!

Reading

William Morris, “Art and the Beauty of the Earth” (1881) and “Art and Socialism” (1884)

Owen Holland, “Where Are We Now?” in *William Morris’s Utopianism: Propaganda, Politics, and Prefiguration* (2017)

Tuesday—Art and the Beauty of the Earth, Art and Socialism

Thursday—Final Presentations