
RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT

as dangerous as their manmade counterparts?

Probably not, says Hammond, *Science Impact Letter* editor. While some "naturally occurring chemicals are toxic," he argues, their cancer-causing potential is probably lower than chemicals made by man.

Bruce Ames, a biochemist at the University of California, Berkeley, studied the effects of naturally occurring carcinogens. He concluded that an eight-ounce glass of wine is thousands of times more likely to cause cancer than either DDT or ethylene dibromide (EDB), because alcohol is known to cause about three percent of human cancers resulting from cirrhosis of the liver. According to Ames, peanut butter, basil leaves, and comfrey herb tea all contain compounds at least 100 times more carcinogenic than DDT.

Ames's research, however, is contradicted by a recent report from the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). An NAS study calculated that if residue from all 28 government-sanctioned pesticides accumulated in food to the maximum amount allowed under law, even the most dangerous food (tomatoes) would, at worst, only cause 8.75 cases of cancer for every 10,000 Americans exposed over a lifetime.

Hammond argues that both Ames's research and the NAS report have too many flaws to be absolutely reliable. Ames's data, for example, is derived from experiments with laboratory rodents, yet "no one knows how well such data predict a chemical's effect on humans." The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) only checks a small number of food samples for pesticides; in 1982, for example, the FDA checked 14 oranges from the two billion pounds sold in the United States that year.

"The real risks from pesticides," Hammond concludes, "are probably not very high." At worst, pesticides might cause 20,000 cancers a year, one-sixth the number caused by smoking. While the cancer-causing threat of pesticides is not great, he argues, it is still "probably more than negligible," and the Environmental Protection Agency should enact tougher standards, aimed at reducing the risk from pesticide residue to no more than one additional cancer case per million people per year.

ARTS & LETTERS

Decaying Art

"The Trouble With Modern Art" by Catherine Barnett, in *Art and Antiques* (Oct. 1987), 89 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10003.

Most 20th-century painters and sculptors have rebelled against the conventions of the past. This rebellion, says Barnett, *Art and Antiques* senior editor, has led artists to use such unconventional materials as cigarette ashes, yogurt, chocolate, and live crickets as part of their paintings or sculptures. One result: works of art that are difficult to preserve.

"Cheap materials, odd combinations, and untested techniques," Barnett says, "have caused many of the masterpieces of modern art to alter irrevocably."

ARTS & LETTERS

Artists have been transforming ordinary objects into art for over 70 years; during his Dada period, Marcel Duchamp created art from bicycle wheels and other household items. During the 1950s, American artist Robert Rauschenberg extended Dadaist ideas by creating art deliberately designed to change over time. Rauschenberg argued that his assemblages, made from beds, stuffed birds, garbage, and dirty laundry, were designed to capture "the smell, and the feel of our total environment."

Rauschenberg, argues Barnett, "opened up the path for art with built-in obsolescence." His successors include Christo, the Bulgarian artist who wraps bridges, cliffs, and islands in cloth, and the German artist Joseph Beuys, who creates sculptures from felt, honey, and slabs of fat to symbolize "decay and the inevitable passage of time."

Museum conservators must decide if work meant to self-destruct *should* be restored, as restoration might conflict with the artist's intent. Because modern artists are so eclectic in their choice of materials, conservators frequently preserve blemishes (such as insects) that would be removed from the art of earlier centuries. For example, a conservator left a cigarette butt embedded in one of Jackson Pollock's paintings because he believed that Pollock "must have purposely worked it into the paint."

While most artists still use longer lasting materials in their work, others are indifferent to preservation. Rauschenberg, for example, believes that decay makes art more closely resemble life. "There is nothing wrong," he says, "with the joy of living with a cherishable perishable."

The BOMC Lives

"Seven Hundred Pretty Good Books" by Terry Teachout, in *The New Criterion* (Oct. 1987), 850 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10019.

Three decades ago, critic Dwight Macdonald, in his essay "Masscult and Midcult," argued that the Book-of-the-Month Club was the quintessential middlebrow American literary institution. The club, Macdonald claimed, "has been supplying its members with reading matter of which the best that can be said is that it could be worse."

Was Macdonald right? Teachout, a *New York Daily News* editorial writer, argues that deteriorating standards and changing methods of book distribution augur a steady decline in the club's selections and influence.

The Book-of-the-Month Club was founded by Harry Scherman in 1926. In those days, books were poorly distributed outside large cities; in 1930, for example, 32 percent of Americans had "no direct access" to a bookstore. Scherman proposed to bring these Americans "new light upon their troubled but wonderful world" by selling them mail-order books. Scherman's greatest innovation: asking a panel of distinguished literary figures, such as *Saturday Review of Literature* editor Henry Seidel Canby and critic Christopher Morley, to choose the main selections.

The club was an early success; membership increased from 4,750 to 110,588 in the club's first three years (1986 membership, including subsidiaries, stood at 2.5 million). Yet the selection board's insistence on consensus votes meant that many novelists were not chosen by the club until late in their careers. William Faulkner was ignored by the club for 36 years