



# THIRD TEXT

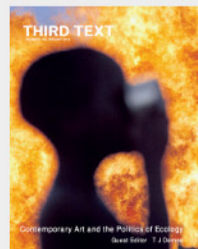
NUMBER 120 JANUARY 2013

Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology

Guest Editor TJ Demos



## Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology 1-9 Demos, TJ



## Post-Media Activism, Social Ecology and Eco-Art 10-16 Brunner, Christoph and Nigro, Roberto and Raunig, Gerald

In his late works Félix Guattari emphasizes the concept of ecology as tool for analysis and pragmatic proposition for contemporary societies. In *The Three Ecologies* he outlines three tendencies as mental, social and environmental ecologies. All three ecologies play a crucial role in what Guattari conceives as the nucleus for the transformation of society: the production of subjectivity. This article starts from Guattari's ecological conception of aesthetic practices, which he calls eco-art, to further investigate contemporary forms of activism and their techniques. Through a close reading of the 'human microphone' and early footage from Zuccotti Park, the Occupy movement provides the ground for a re-actualization of Guattari's ecological project. Asking how contemporary technologies integrate into the ecologically open production of subjectivity the authors develop an account of activist eco-art as part of a 'post-media era'. They propose such a post-media era where technologies as ecological techniques for the production of subjectivity transform the political and social context in which we live.

## Beyond the Mirror 17-28 Horton, Jessica L and Berlo, Janet Catherine

Across disciplines, scholars are overturning objectivist approaches to the environment in favour of theorizing the agency and liveliness of matter. The ecological promise of these 'new materialisms' is to invite dialogue among a wider host of agents, raising the possibility of an ethics that binds humans to the material entities upon which our livelihoods depend. However, any vision of global environmental justice is incomplete without engaging longstanding indigenous philosophies of materiality. The authors devote the first portion of this essay to an analysis of why it has been difficult for the 'new materialisms' to incorporate indigenous intellectual traditions into discussions of non-human agency, focusing on contemporary arts discourse. They then turn to a discussion of recent works by Native North American artists Jimmie Durham, Rebecca Belmore, Will Wilson and Jolene Rickard, which incorporate indigenous understandings of material with an acute awareness of the contemporary, global challenges of co-habitation.

## Against Internationalism 29-32 Durham, Jimmie

This text is an artwork meditation on the question of what constitutes 'Indigenous People' in a world defined by nations, nationalities and states. Across the media these appear to be 'people who need help', such as the Ainu in Japan, Aboriginals in Australia, Sami in Scandinavia, Negritos in the Philippines and so on. The author reports on his work in the 1970s at the Human Rights Commission of the UN headquarters in Geneva, where his brief was intended to be a twenty-year project investigating Europe's invasions and colonization of the peoples of North and South America. He concludes that the real 'world problem' is not indigenous people but boundaried nations, so often created against stateless peoples, and asks, what if we had a world law against the buying and selling of land; if the earth is the earth and not a commodity?

## Ought We Not to Establish 'Access to Food' 33-43 Banerjee, Subhankar

Can we establish public policies to ensure access to food? Deciding this basic moral question assumes that we have a proper understanding of the relationship between access to food and survival - a relationship made more complicated by the human-made, climate-ravaged Anthropocene age in which we now live. This article focuses on three stories of projects concerning access to food - two from the Arctic and one from the desert. These investigative projects attempt to build frameworks of resistance to habitat-loss and the revitalization of 'land-as-home' that can provide home and food to all the species with whom we share the earth.

## Entangled Earth 44-53 Ahmed, Nabil

The 1970 Bholá Cyclone in Bengal remains a paramount example of the entanglement between ecological violence and history of the state. This article claims the cyclone as an actor in the national liberation of Bangladesh. Continuing with the idea that nature has voice in political ecology, the aim of the article is to examine environmental activist practices in Bangladesh. Fields examined include cyclone shelters, the shipbreaking industry of Chittagong, where the object of capture is iron, and the deep sea gas blocks in the Bay of Bengal contested by India, Bangladesh and Myanmar, where the space of cyclone doubles as a resource for global capital. By recognizing the entanglement of objects such as cyclone, iron and gas in environmental activist practices the article attempts to bring the agency of nature to humanitarianism-led environmental politics in Bangladesh, and to a renewed political ecology of the global south.

## Activism Rooted in Tradition 54-64 Golou, Berin

As a rapidly developing Asian country, Turkey suffers from a lack of education about environmental issues and the absence of a widespread environmentalist movement that might exert pressure on the government to conserve its diminishing natural resources. Artists and cultural producers are trying to fill this gap by making works that speak to the issues threatening Turkey's environmental health. Rather than limiting environmental awareness to the country's educated urban elites, effective change can only be achieved at a mass level by involving the country's rural populations and recent urban immigrants, and by recognizing them as active agents in environmentalist struggles. An appeal to more far-reaching historical perspectives, traditional modes of knowledge and indigenous modes of subsistence may be required to build a coalition that can bridge ethnic, class and geographic divides. This article looks at the works of some Turkish contemporary artists and film-makers, including the *xurban\_collective*, Hail Altınder, Rüya Koksall, Osman Sisman and Özlem Sanyıldız, whose works engage such strategies.

## Environmental Challenges and Eco-Aesthetics in Nigeria's Niger Delta 65-75 Sunday Nnamdi, Basil and Gomba, Obari and Ugiomoh, Frank

The effects of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region in Nigeria have attracted serious concern on a global scale, largely thanks to the initiative of Ken Saro-Wiwa. In spite of the activities of environmental activists the region remains an epitome of environmental disaster. This has given rise to an impressive body of work by poets and visual artists enunciating the environmental challenges in this oil-rich region. The authors examine the common thread that is shared in this corpus within the larger context of education in eco-aesthetics and social responsibility, considering the relationship that currently exists between oil-producing communities and the multinational oil corporations. This position is anchored on the insights offered by current thought in eco-ethics and eco-aesthetics. Previous efforts to ameliorate these effects failed; what is now required is a strong synergy between aesthetic/environmental education and social function.

## From Supply Lines to Resource Ecologies 76-94 Biemann, Ursula and Mörtenböck, Peter and Mooshammer, Helge

Supply Lines is an international media, art and research platform that investigates contemporary resource ecologies. The project brings artists, architects and photojournalists with substantial research experience on globalization together with theorists working in the areas of geography, art history and cultural theory. It aims to generate new audiovisual media, texts, and cartographies, as well as to debate this material in a series of symposia, exhibitions and publications, all of which will culminate in a web-based platform to be launched in spring 2013. The compilation of short texts and visuals for this special issue expands the notion of natural resources - or 'commodities' as traders call them - from hitherto geophysical and economic-industrial contexts toward the aesthetic-philosophical arena. The ambition of this collaborative effort is not to mimic a false mastery of the structure of contemporary resource ecologies but to instigate a rethinking of the interrelatedness of concerns, subjects and matters.

## Delicacy and Danger 95-107 Flores, Patrick D

This article presents various tendencies in contemporary artistic practice in Asia that responds to the political implications of the ecological. It maps out certain co-ordinates of practice in the region that is invested in the problematic of ecology and the place of the aesthetic in that procedure. Such an effort proposes trajectories of intervention in the political gesture of the cultivation of land; the re-intuition of the city as an ethnoscape within a planet in peril; the conjuncture of the multispecies zone; the gathering of art in processual platforms not necessarily confined to the exhibitionary; and the potential of craft as a vector of the tropic and the social.

## Three and a Half Conversations with an Eccentric Planet 108-114 Media Collective, Raqs

This meditation around the themes of Sand, Salt, Tears and Art draws on conversations in a graveyard of aeroplanes in the Mojave Desert, on the shores of the Dead Sea, and in the Baltic Archipelago Sea. It proposes that the interesting task is now for the human species and for art to think of ways out of lamentation. It is not a matter of protecting some people and attacking others, because epidemics, drought, storms, melting ice caps, floods and nuclear meltdowns do not choose to discriminate between their victims, even if the rich and powerful of today choose to fantasize that they do. The only way out lies in the human species (as a species) imagining infinitely different possibilities of how it might produce and exchange. The moment we enter the domain of desire and the imagination, we also simultaneously find ourselves in the realm of the aesthetic. What is art if it is not a tightrope strung between what exists and what we dream about?

## After Hans Haacke 115-130 Skrebowski, Luke

Tue Greenfort has made several works dedicated or self-consciously indebted to other artists, but within this body of his work he has turned most frequently to Hans Haacke. This can be seen most explicitly in several works entitled 'After Hans Haacke'; Greenfort's indebtedness to Haacke is also manifest in numerous other works. How should we understand Greenfort's rearticulation of Haacke's work? What does it mean to work 'after' Hans Haacke in this way? The extent and depth of Greenfort's engagement indicates that there is more at stake than polite homage or the artworld pressure to conform to patrilineal legitimation. Greenfort works in the space opened up by Haacke's particular form of conceptual art, but negatively, acknowledging that the historical position embodied by his source is no longer tenable. Greenfort goes beyond Haacke by drawing environmentalism into the immanent problematic of the institutionally critical artwork. As such Greenfort's work can be considered an example of eco-institutional critique.

## Planetary Dysphoria 131-140 Apter, Emily

Planetary dysphoria is the term coined by the author to capture the geopsychoanalytic state of the world at its most depressed and unruhig, awaiting the triumphant revenge of acid, oil and dust. The article considers practices giving expression to this emergent planetary aesthetic, informed by a newfound sensitivity to the real and imagined processes of the earth's destruction and the end of life as we know it. No single or simple politics corresponds to its various expressions; the author draws on examples ranging from W G Sebald's poem *Nach der Natur* to Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia*, and from Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia* to Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound*.

## Art, Ecology and Institutions 141-150 Lam, Steven and Ngcobo, Gabi and Persekian, Jack and Thompson, Nato and Witzke, Anne Sophie and Tate, Liberate

The discourse of ecology and sustainability has gained critical traction in recent years. But how are these concepts framed within the space, language and idea of the exhibition? This panel discussion, moderated by Steven Lam and conducted by email in July 2012, sought to unpack the claims and limits of the ecological, looking specifically at various international case studies, within the practice of curatorial and exhibition studies. The discussion begins with a reflection on 'DON'T/PANIC' in Durban and 'Rethink - Contemporary Art and Climate Change' in Copenhagen, exhibitions that were organized in conjunction with the climate summits, and provides examples of various anti-oil sponsorship actions and interventions by artists and activists. Panelists include curators Gabi Ngcobo, Jack Persekian, Anne Sophie Witzke, Nato Thompson and the artist collective Liberate Tate.

## The Art and Politics of Ecology in India 151-161 Demos, TJ

This roundtable discussion with artist and activist Ravi Agarwal and film-maker and photographer Sanjay Kak, moderated by TJ Demos, explores the politics of ecology in the Indian context. The conversation considers, among other works, Kak's film *Words on Water* (2002), which looks at the issue of big dams and their negative social-economic effects in the Narmada valley; and Agarwal's photographic installation *Extinction*, which examines the disappearance of vultures on the subcontinent owing to the development of animal pharmaceuticals used to maximize milk production. The conversation critically examines the introduction of neoliberalism in the Indian economy and political context, and the anti-democratic activity of multinational corporations, in relation to the destruction of the natural environment, the growth of economic inequality, and the dispossession of tribal peoples via the governmental-corporate development of mega-dams and industrial mining projects. The discussion revolves around the aesthetic approaches artists have used in addressing such ecological emergencies.

## Corporatocracy, Democracy and Social Change (in Mexico and Beyond) 162-171 Abaroa, Eduardo and Cuevas, Minerva

Mexican artist Minerva Cuevas and Eduardo Abaroa describe some of their artworks in a discussion ranging from social ecology and the role of human beings in the destruction of the natural environment, to the contrast between Mesoamerican and Western Civilizations and the development of science and industry. Cuevas opens with the provocative statement that life is overvalued and questions the concept of human civilization, promoting an exchange between the obsolescence and her project *Not Impressed by Civilization*. Abaroa cites his works *Destrucción Total del Museo de Antropología* and *Amphibian-Alphabetic* and holds that the development of science is necessary to confront ecological crisis. Cuevas criticizes the current industrial processes and their global effects and proposes a more democratic option, one in which art is a catalyst for real social change.

## Contributors 172-175

The journal is published in print and online by Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

# Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology

## An Introduction

TJ Demos

This special issue of *Third Text*, dedicated to contemporary art and the politics of ecology, investigates the intersection of art criticism, politico-ecological theory, environmental activism and postcolonial globalization. The focus is on practices and discourses of eco-aesthetics that have emerged in recent years in geopolitical areas as diverse as the Arctic, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Europe and Mexico. The numerous contributors address new aesthetic strategies through which current ecological emergencies – including but not limited to the multifaceted crisis of climate change – have found resonance and creative response in artistic practice and more broadly in visual culture.

Numerous key questions motivated our investigation: If ecological imperatives are frequently invoked by governments, corporations and certain strands of environmental activism in the name of a post-political ‘green’ consensus for which nothing less than the life of the planet is at stake, how might critical art contribute to an imagination of ecology that addresses social divisions related to race, class, gender and geography in the North and South alike? How might the concept of biopolitics, as elaborated by figures ranging from Bruno Latour to Vandana Shiva, enable a rethinking of hitherto articulated discourses of eco-aesthetics, especially as regards the relationship between ecological art and eco-feminism, or the art and ecology of democratic political composition? How might cultural practitioners contest the financialization of nature by neoliberal globalization, as analysed in Marxist approaches to political ecology, and how might they provide alternatives to the economic valuation of nature or promote a new articulation of the commons against its corporate enclosure? To what extent are recent philosophical writings associated with the so-called ‘speculative realism’ movement (for instance, those of Robin Mackay, Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Timothy Morton) pertinent to contemporary endeavours in rethinking ecology and activism, considering nonhuman environmental agency, or positing experimental



aesthetic approaches to species extinction? How have recent international exhibitions and environmental summits represented sites of conjunction for the innovative investigation of art and ecology? And lastly, how have critical artists engaged an expanded field of ecologically oriented media activism, encompassing websites, documentary films, protest activities, academic research, political forums and various combinations thereof? Such a list of queries comprises an admittedly ambitious (and no doubt impossible) set of research goals for a single issue of a journal to satisfy; equally impracticable has been the commitment to research an inclusive global coverage of practices – still, the impressive results presented in these pages address more than a few of these pressing matters of concern.<sup>1</sup> Representing a number of distinctive initiatives that exceed any single approach, the articles commissioned for this special issue from leading and emerging artists and scholars at the cross-section of art and ecology are exemplary of some of the new and innovative ways of conceptualizing and responding to these questions.

The term ‘political ecology’, as employed herein, identifies multiple competing approaches to the environment, agency and social composition. These approaches nonetheless share the common ground of a scientific-cultural interdisciplinarity and a philosophical criticality, which, when brought together with contemporary art, indicates an eco-aesthetic rethinking of politics as much as a politicization of art’s relation to the biosphere and of nature’s inextricable links to the human world of economics, technology, culture and law.<sup>2</sup> To begin, the issue acknowledges the signal legacy of Félix Guattari’s political ecology, as developed in his texts *The Three Ecologies* and *Chaosmosis*, the influence of which is felt equally in contemporary politico-ecological theory and eco-aesthetics. As Guattari explained:

Rather than remaining subject, in perpetuity, to the seductive efficiency of economic competition, we must reappropriate universes of value, so that processes of singularization can rediscover their consistency. We need new social and aesthetic practices, new practices of the self in relation to the other, to the foreign, the strange – a whole programme that seems far removed from current concerns. And yet, ultimately, we will only escape from the major crises of our era through the articulation of: a nascent subjectivity; a constantly mutating socius; and an environment in the process of being reinvented.<sup>3</sup>

The ‘transversal’ approach of Guattari’s ethico-aesthetic paradigm – according to which he insisted on thinking ecologies simultaneously across subjective, social and environmental registers – has extended a mandate to artistic practice that has yet to be fulfilled. Nonetheless, his insistent rejection of the separateness of ‘nature’ (a nature that much 1960s and ’70s earth art and environmentalist practices isolated and thereby reified in their otherwise well-intentioned attempts to rescue ecosystems from destruction and restore degraded habitats) remains an increasingly important, if underexploited, theoretical resource for current approaches to ecologically concerned art.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Guattari’s integrated network-based approach directed against the commodification of nature by ‘world integrated capitalism’ anticipated the Marxist-inspired and postcolonial-allied anti-corporate globalization strand of eco-activism of the last decade and a half.

1. Further contributions to this special issue can be found in the online supplement. See <http://www.thirdtext.com>.
2. Political ecology possesses a varied and complex genealogy, articulated at the intersections of cultural geography, human ecology, anthropology, environmental studies and political economy over the course of the twentieth century. In general, it examines the unequal distribution of costs and benefits of environmental changes according to social, cultural and economic differences and in relation to their political implications. For overviews, see Raymond L Bryant and Sinéad Bailey, *Third World Political Ecology*, Routledge, London, 1997; and Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2004.
3. Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, trans, Athlone, London, 2000, p 68; and *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis, trans, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 1995
4. For an overview of environmentally engaged art since the 1960s, see TJ Demos, ‘The Politics of Sustainability: Art and Ecology’, in Francesco Manacorda and Ariella Yedgar, eds, *Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet, 1969–2009*, Koenig/Barbican, London, 2009, pp 17–30.



Bringing together the diverse strands of this legacy here, Christoph Brunner, Roberto Nigro and Gerald Raunig's article 'Post-Media Activism, Social Ecology, and Eco-Art' deploys Guattari's ecologies to explore the relations between creative media and activism as exemplified in the political, social and cultural engagements of the Occupy movement. In addition, in 'Art, Ecology, and Institutions: A Conversation with Artists and Curators', moderated by Steven Lam, participants Gabi Ngcobo, Anne Sophie Witzke, Jack Persekian, Nato Thompson and Liberate Tate reflect further on the significance of Guattari's theory for contemporary curatorial practice concerned with interlinked categories of art, environment, art institutions and economics.

Bruno Latour's 'politics of nature' constitutes a second modelling of political ecology, giving further contemporary theoretical impetus to Guattari's position. According to Latour, it is politically imperative to do away with the concept of nature altogether, given its ideological function that sanctions a 'factual' and depoliticizing scientific discourse. Rather than positioning political ecology as the protection of 'nature', Latour defines its aim as the progressive composition of a common world, beginning with an epistemological critique of the very assumptions of scientific authority that could lead to a democratic politics. Exchanging 'matters of fact' for 'matters of concern', Latour envisages new inclusive assemblies of humans and nonhumans, offering creative ways of thinking about alternative modes of governance wherein ecological sustainability, the defence of biodiversity and the rights of multitudinous life forms and environmental objects could be newly considered.<sup>5</sup>

Latour's proposals for an egalitarian political ecology are directly or indirectly taken up here by various contributors: World of Matter, comprising an international group of artists and researchers including Ursula Biemann, Peter Mörtenböck and Helge Mooshammer, among others, have contributed a self-selected portfolio of texts and images from their newly established media, art and research platform, which aims at contesting the anthropocentric domination of the Earth and the assumption of the paramount role of human agents, and supporting a more horizontal and sustainable approach to resource distribution, investigated via open-access media and aesthetic presentation. Meanwhile Nabil Ahmed, in his article 'Entangled Earth', explores the intertwinement of human and non-human actors in Bangladesh in relation to cyclones, iron and gas – what he, after Michel Serres, calls 'earth objects', those that wield a planetary geological force – linking them to the country's corresponding anti-capitalist struggles for climate justice.

Marxist cultural geography, particularly that of the late Neil Smith, provides a third approach to political ecology, one that shows how Latour's version remains incomplete, particularly by its failure to address the recent commodification of nature in corporate practice under neoliberal governmentality. According to Smith, 'capitalized nature', 'nature banking' and 'ecological commodities' were first introduced in the 1980s, the beginning of green capitalism (the legatee of the environmentalism of decades past), with the invention of 'debt-for-nature' swaps and, eventually, carbon offset credits.<sup>6</sup> The financialization of nature, whereby biotic forms and Earth's resources are subjected to an economic calculus, Smith points out, is integral to the larger project of neoliberalism.<sup>7</sup> Dedicated to creating

5. See Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Catherine Porter, trans, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004; and Bruno Latour, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public', in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds, *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2005, pp 14–41.

6. See Neil Smith, 'Nature as Accumulation Strategy', in *Coming to Terms with Nature*, Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, eds, *Socialist Register* 43, Merlin, London, 2007; see <http://neil-smith.net/vectors/nature-as-accumulation-strategy>.

7. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005. On recent artistic practices that critically engage and challenge the financialization of nature (such as the work of Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway, Tue Greenfort, Amy Balkin, and Nils Norman), see T J Demos, 'The Post-Natural Condition: Art after Nature', *Artforum*, April 2012, pp 191–197.

8. Smith reiterates Donna Haraway's conclusion made in the late 1990s that 'life itself is a capital-accumulation strategy', in *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan©\_Meets\_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*, Routledge, New York, 1997, p 65; and references Cindi Katz's observation that 'nature' is also an accumulation strategy for capital, in 'Whose Nature, Whose Culture? Private Productions of Space and the Preservation of Nature', in Bruce Braun and Noel Castree, eds, *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*, Routledge, New York, 1998.
9. Smith, op cit, p 19. In some ways, Latour theorizes 'a truly democratic production of nature'; one wonders what Smith's response would be.
10. 'The Corporate Control of Life' is the title of Vandana Shiva's contribution to Documenta 13's *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts* publication project, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, Germany, 2011. That Shiva was commissioned to write this text by an international art exhibition speaks to the promising growing concern for political ecology within the cultural realm. Among Shiva's many other important contributions, see *Ecology and the Politics of Survival: Conflicts Over Natural Resources in India*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, California, 1991; John Vandemeer and Yvette Perfecto, *Breakfast of Biodiversity: The Political Ecology of the Rain Forest Destruction*, Food First, Oakland, 2005; and *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability and Peace*, Zed, London, 2005.
11. Shiva, *The Corporate Control of Life*, op cit, p 4
12. See also Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*, South End, Cambridge, 1997.
13. See Shiva, 'The Corporate Control of Life', op cit, pp 12–20.
- new fields of capital rather than protecting natural reserves, neoliberalism constitutes the key political-economic driver of the globalization of fossil-fuel capitalism that is responsible for anthropogenic climate change, environmental despoliation and the worldwide growth of socio-economic inequality, especially since the mid-twentieth century. The externalization, domination and production of nature – for instance, in relation to biotechnology and geo-engineering – comprises what Smith terms 'the real subsumption of nature', applying equally to instrumentalized nonhuman life forms and the increasingly modified biology of human nature.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, nearly all of the discussions in this issue resonate in one way or another with this analysis, showing that the struggle against corporate globalization is central to the politics of ecology in contemporary art. Smith's analysis is therefore of crucial import, but disappoints readers by leaving his concluding question – 'If the production of nature is a historical reality, what would a truly democratic production of nature look like?' – unanswered.<sup>9</sup>
- Supplying one response to Smith's query, and a fourth definition of political ecology, is the climate justice activism around the 'rights of nature' pitted against its 'corporate ownership', as exemplified by Indian scientist and environmental campaigner Vandana Shiva, who speaks for an indigenous ecology allied with eco-activists of the Global South.<sup>10</sup> 'Life in all its variety and diversity is rapidly becoming the "property" of corporations through patents and "intellectual property rights"' she writes, detailing the workings of 'free' trade as set up by the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund.<sup>11</sup> These global economic arrangements, Shiva charges, underwrite 'biopiracy' committed by corporations operating in a global and deregulated economy that have greedily patented natural resources and created monopolies of seeds and natural medicines, otherwise used and freely shared by indigenous communities for generations.<sup>12</sup> On a positive note, she points to the recent successes of grassroots activist campaigns against the practices of such enclosure, including the legal battle in 2005 against the United States Department of Agriculture and chemical conglomerate W R Grace, which claimed to have 'invented' the use of the neem tree for controlling pests and diseases in agriculture; the successful legal campaign by the Research Foundation and Greenpeace against Monsanto's patenting of wheat plants; and a four-year drive to overturn Texas-based RiceTec's patent claims to genetically modified basmati rice, a grain grown for centuries on the subcontinent.<sup>13</sup> Despite these few promising advances for environmental justice, the battle continues against multinational corporations with billion-dollar budgets and high-level political connections that seek to control life and produce nature for profit.
- One can add to these ongoing struggles Nigeria's Movement of the Survival of the Ogoni People, protesting against the ransacking of their environment by oil companies (in particular Shell) and demanding reparations, a contested terrain examined in these pages by Basil Sunday Nnamdi, Obari Gomba and Frank Ugiomoh in their essay on 'Environmental Challenges and Eco-Aesthetics in Nigeria's Niger Delta'. The correlation between social-justice environmentalism and artistic practice is also taken up in my discussion with film-maker



Sanjay Kak and artist Ravi Agarwal regarding the manifold ecological crises facing India today, particularly in relation to the country's implementation of an undemocratic neoliberalism and the resulting conflicts when corporate interests take priority over tribal rights vis-à-vis mining and mega-dam projects. This artistic-activist campaign against corporate globalization also finds resonance in the Turkish context as examined by Berin Golonu in 'Activism Rooted in Tradition: Artistic Strategies for Raising Environmental Awareness in Anatolia', and in Latin America as explored in the dialogue between artists Eduardo Abaroa and Minerva Cuevas, 'Corporatocracy, Democracy, and Social Change (in Mexico and Beyond): A Conversation on Art and Life'.

In one sense, Latour's eco-philosophy and the climate justice programme of activists like Shiva might seem opposed; for Latour defends a post-natural politics,<sup>14</sup> while Shiva campaigns to establish the rights of nature in recognized courts of law – an emergent legal formalization exemplified in the Bolivian 2011 'Law of Mother Earth' and the 2010 Ecuadorean lawsuit filed by a group of environmentalists (including Shiva) against BP following the Deepwater Horizon disaster, an action mandated by Ecuador enshrining the rights of nature in its constitution.<sup>15</sup> In this issue's curatorial roundtable, the activist-artist collective Liberate Tate discuss how and why they have joined the battle by targeting oil giant BP's corporate sponsorship of major arts institutions such as the Tate Museums and the British Museum (as well as mass-spectacle events like London's 2012 Olympics as a 'sustainability partner' – where corporate greenwashing could not be more crass!). Extending the logic of recent activism's legalistic strategy here, the photographer and activist Subhankar Banerjee asks 'Ought We Not to Establish "Access to Food" as a Species Right?', discussing his proposal in relation to the precarious political ecology of the Arctic and the conflict over prospective oil drilling and resource exploitation that pits governments and corporations against the protection of biodiversity, the rights of animals and those of increasingly politicized indigenous peoples.

Yet, while seemingly opposed theoretically, both the post-natural and the rights-of-nature parties remain committed to inventing a new ecology of politics that would redistribute agency, rights and representation so that environmental decisions are made by a more inclusive, egalitarian collective. Both lend support to a different, more equitable organization of global governance, sloughing off hierarchies between technocrats, experts and corporate elites, on the one hand, and disenfranchised laypeople and marginalized populations on the other. Further complicating the discourse of political ecology is the potential antagonism between those who acknowledge the role of nonhuman agency in environmental processes (for instance, non-Western knowledge systems, Actor-Network Theory, or 'new materialisms' philosophy),<sup>16</sup> and critics attendant to the dangers of an anthropomorphizing fetishism, a renaturalized ontology, or of unwittingly forgiving human irresponsibility when nonhuman causality is affirmed.<sup>17</sup> As it is by no means simple to overcome or quickly settle this discord, perhaps the necessary recourse is to introduce the epistemological and ontological divergences within the very

14. See also Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p 24, which explains: "Ecology without nature" could mean "ecology without a concept of the natural". Thinking, when it becomes ideological, tends to fixate on concepts rather than doing what is "natural" to thought, namely, dissolving whatever has taken form. Ecological thinking that was not fixated, that did not stop at a particular concretization of its object, would thus be "without nature".

15. On the aesthetico-forensic elements of the lawsuit against Shell's destruction of Ecuador's environment that relies on the country's 'rights of nature' laws, see Paulo Tavares, 'Murky Evidence', *Cabinet* 43, fall 2011, pp 101–105.

16. See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2010; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005; Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2010; and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed, *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*, Verso, London, 2007.

17. See Andrea Whittle and André Spicer, 'Is Actor Network Theory Critique?', *Organization Studies* 29, 2008, pp 611–629; and Hal Foster, 'Post-Critical', *October* 139, winter 2012, pp 3–8.

18. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, 'Ideologies of Environmentalism', in *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India*, Routledge, London, 1995, p 98. The authors explain that the 'environmentalism of the poor' in the Indian context includes: the moral imperative of checking overuse and doing justice to the poor; the need to dismantle the unjust social order; the emphasis on habitat reconstruction via technological means; and the revival of community-based management systems. These diverse commitments, which operate under different ideological regimes, can also enter into conflict with each other.
19. Rob Nixon, 'Environmentalism and Postcolonialism', in Ania Loomba et al, eds, *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2005, p 238. Also see Ramachandra Guha, 'Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation', in A Brennan and N Witoszek, eds, *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Næss and the Progress of Ecophilosophy*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland, 1999, pp 313–324; and Rob Nixon, 'Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the Poor', in Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers, eds, *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa*, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, 2011, pp 257–286. On the Ahwahneechee eviction, see Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West*, University of California, Berkeley, California, 1999, pp 215–385.

formation of a politics of ecology, meaning acknowledging them as yet-to-be resolved differences to be addressed by the new composition of a common world of which Latour speaks.

Still, nonhuman actors – cyclones that cause havoc and alter the weather patterns of national politics; soil that bears witness in courts of law to past environmental crimes; and errant stones that seek postcolonial justice – make an appearance in several contributions here. While human activity is increasingly understood as taking on agency in relation to geological developments – some scientists claim we have entered the 'anthropocene' era when humans, for the first time in history, become the principal driver of geological change – the participation of nonhuman objects, life-forms and forces is also allotted an ever greater determinative role by analysts of the environment. See in particular in this issue the discussion of indigenous knowledge systems and Native American eco-aesthetics in 'Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous Ecologies and "New Materialisms" in Contemporary Art' by Jessica L Horton and Janet Catherine Berlo; and 'Against Internationalism' by Jimmie Durham.

Beyond investigating these complex developments in political ecology, *Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* responds to a commitment to move beyond Euro-American environmentalism, toward a concerted engagement with the postcolonial South and East. In so doing, it adopts the imperative to avoid the exclusivity of what Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha have termed 'environmentalism born of affluence', which historically privileges conservation and natural purity over social justice and political engagement in questions of the differential effects of climate change and environmental destruction and the historical responsibility for their causes. Consequently, this issue remains attentive to 'the environmentalism of the poor' – meaning the rights, political demands and matters of concern of those who have least contributed to climate change but who are due to pay its greatest costs.<sup>18</sup>

The distinction raises the subject of the longstanding conflicts between environmentalism and postcolonialism. In the North American context, past environmentalisms have frequently swung toward a Jeffersonian agrarianism, defined by a romantic, transcendentalist primordialism, one unconcerned with and even hostile to the concerns of postcolonial studies with social justice and anti-colonial struggles. Environmentalism's preservationist celebration of wilderness, leading at times towards an eco-nationalism, has typically opposed the focus of postcolonialism on hybridity, migration and cross-culturation. A key question, as Rob Nixon asks, has therefore become: 'How to draw on the strengths of bioregionalism without succumbing to ecoparochialism?', in relation, for instance, to Shell and Chevron's exploitation of the oil fields in Nigeria's Ogoniland, or the lasting effects of Agent Orange on one million Vietnamese people, or the repressed memory of the eviction of the native American Ahwahneechee people from Yosemite Valley during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to fulfil its mythology as pure wilderness?<sup>19</sup> Far from outdated, similar stakes are confronted today in relation to the Arctic, which pro-drilling campaigns self-servingly frame as a barren wilderness awaiting exploitation, to which activists respond that it is actually a



20. See Subhankar Banerjee, 'From Kolkata to Kaktovik En Route to Arctic Voices: Something Like an Introduction', in Subhankar Banerjee, ed, *Arctic Voices: Resistance at the Tipping Point*, Seven Stories, New York, 2012, pp 1–22.
21. The philosophy of 'climate justice' emerged in 2000 with the Climate Justice Summit in The Hague, shadowing the Sixth UN conference on Climate Change (COP 6), and has since been advanced by activist groups such as Climate Justice Now! and the Climate Justice Action Network, and supported by indigenous peoples' organizations such as the 2010 World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. As the Global Justice Ecology Project explains, climate justice demands the inclusive participation of marginalized communities in the global climate negotiation process, and that negotiations reflect the understanding that climate change jeopardizes human rights and exacerbates socio-economic inequalities worldwide. Environmental justice, therefore, is inextricable from economic equality, democratic politics and the human rights of indigenous and marginalized communities. See <http://globaljusticeecology.org/>.
22. For an important precedent that brings together the fields of contemporary art, eco-aesthetics and postcolonial concerns, see Rasheed Araeen, *Art Beyond Art: Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the 21st Century*, Third Text, London, 2010.
23. For the best articulation of this notion of aesthetics, see Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Gabriel Rockhill, trans, Continuum, London, 2004, p 85. In this regard,

vibrant ecosystem home to numerous species, migrating animals and indigenous peoples.<sup>20</sup>

The emergence of the climate justice movement in 2000 has helped to begin to overcome Euro-American parochialism as well as its ecology of affluence, by asserting that climate change is a rights issue founded in an ethico-political commitment to considering how the causes and effects of ecological change relate to concepts of social, economic and environmental justice. From this basis follows the assumption that climate change cannot be stopped without transforming the neoliberal corporate-based economy – bringing together an anti-capitalist politics with a rights-to-nature ecology.<sup>21</sup> Broadly speaking, then, the present and ongoing challenge is to reunite a critical environmentalism with an ecologically attendant postcolonialism, engendering a political ecology based on the commitment to environmental sustainability, biodiversity, social justice, human rights, economic equality and democratic practice – which identifies the overarching criteria for consideration of the artistic practices and critical positions considered in this issue.<sup>22</sup>

As we have seen, the positions of Guattari and Latour reject the isolated status of 'nature' in favour of an emphasis on transversal connections between emergent subjects, newly conceived democratic social collectives, and de-financialized and singularized environments. In similar fashion, environmentally concerned artistic practice relinquishes the privileged position of its autonomous and exceptionalist positioning, and joins a widening of its aesthetic parameters to visual culture at large that engages the environment. In other words, the aesthetics of political ecology, as represented here, brings about a blurring of the divisions between activist visual culture, artistic forms and the appearance of non-human agents of environmental change. Aesthetics in this sense designates the mode of appearance that 'parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world', and reaches a moment of politicization when conventional categories of and separations between the seen and heard versus the forgotten and overlooked are challenged and redistributed.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as Yates McKee writes, 'The new biopolitical artist', the one concerned with an environmentally defined politics of survival:

... must now be understood as a contingent location within an open-ended – though not necessarily egalitarian – field of aesthetic participants, including media strategists and investigative journalists, photographers and videographers, Web and graphic designers, charismatic spokespersons and ordinary movement members, organizers and demonstrators.<sup>24</sup>

Such is an accurate picture of many of the hybrid practitioners of eco-aesthetics discussed in these pages, whose work includes documentary practice in film and photography; community-based activism; neoconceptual investigations of site and eco-institutional critique; site-specific public interventions and sculptural projects; legal and forensic research; construction of alternative archives; new or 'post-' media aesthetics; and indigenous approaches to earth objects. While all the articles in this special issue speak to this development of politico-ecological aesthetics, the contributions of Patrick D Flores, 'Delicacy and Danger', surveying Asian art and ecology; Raqs Media Collective, 'Three and a Half Conversations with an Eccentric Planet'; and Luke Skrebowski's 'After Hans Haacke: Tue Greenfort and Eco-Institutional Critique', are particularly pertinent

Ranci re identifies the aesthetic implications and conditions of Latour's definition of political ecology as 'the progressive composition of the common world' in *Politics of Nature*, op cit, p 18.

24. See Yates McKee, 'Art and the Ends of Environmentalism: From Biosphere to the Right to Survival', in Michel Feher with Ga lle Krikorian and Yates McKee, eds, *Nongovernmental Politics*, Zone, New York, 2007, p 557. Thanks are due to Yates McKee for collaborating in the early stages of planning this special issue.
25. See Anthony D Barnosky et al, 'Approaching a State Shift in Earth's Biosphere', *Nature* 486, 7 June, 2012, pp 52–58.
26. See Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*, Nation, New York, 2011; Gwynne Dyer, *Climate Wars: The Fight for Survival as the World Overheats*, Oneworld, London, 2010; and Mark Hertsgaard, *Hot: Living Through the Next Fifty Years on Earth*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York, 2011.
27. Barnosky et al, op cit, p 57
28. Naomi Klein, 'Capitalism vs the Climate', *The Nation*, 9 November 2011, online at: <http://www.thenation.com/article/164497/capitalism-vs-climate>
29. See Greenpeace, 'After Rio + 20 – Is there Hope for Change Left?', 22 June 2012, online at: <http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/blog/forests/after-rio-20-is-there-hope-for-change-20120622>; and George Monbiot, 'Rio + 20 Draft Text is 283 Paragraphs of Fluff', George Monbiot's Blog, *Guardian* website, 22 June 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/>

to its critical analysis and innovative conceptualization in the global present.

A recent issue of the scientific journal *Nature*, dedicated to climate-change science to date, warns of the growing risk of a 'critical state shift' in the Earth's biosphere. The planetary tipping point, which could push us into unpredictable and therefore all-the-more-likely catastrophic conditions, scientists explain, is being forced by human activity around population growth, resource consumption, habitat transformation and fragmentation and greenhouse-gas-driven climate change.<sup>25</sup> With atmospheric carbon dioxide levels a third higher than pre-industrial levels and growing unchecked, the world faces a near future of intensified global warming, desertification, acidification of the seas and the precipitation of a mass species extinction event, the intensity and scale of which has not been witnessed in sixty-five million years. Our current predicament looks ahead to a world of massively reduced biodiversity, rising heat waves and environmental disasters including stronger storms, more disease and pestilence, increased drought and less frequent but more intense precipitation events, more wildfires and lower crop yields. These eventualities are likely to spark further wars and conflicts for precious energy resources and food, military counter-insurgency against rebellious populations, and the further entrenchment of fortress communities of the politically elite and wealthy, separated from the rest of humanity worldwide.<sup>26</sup>

Giving expression to this gloomy forecast are practices considered in this issue by Emily Apter, who investigates what she terms 'Planetary Dysphoria' – an emergent planetary aesthetic consumed by melancholy, suffusing economic, social and cultural life, that is informed by a new-found sensitivity to the real and imagined processes of the Earth's destruction and the end of life as we know it. While no single or simple politics corresponds to the various expressions of this aesthetic (as Apter points out), let us hope that such a consciousness works to further stimulate the energies of activism and artistic engagement that will help to avert future catastrophes, and will do so by making visible to what degree any future world of ecological sustainability and democracy must be founded on an awareness of the current claims and historical sensitivities of climate justice.

For the scientist-contributors to *Nature*, the solutions to prevent the disastrous effects of climate change include reducing world population growth and per capita resource use; rapidly increasing the world's energy production supplied by sources other than fossil fuels (such as solar, wind and hydro power); elevating the efficiency of existing means of food production and distribution instead of converting new areas; and enhancing efforts to manage and cultivate areas of biodiversity and ecosystem services in the terrestrial and maritime realms.<sup>27</sup> While productively raising climate change awareness, *Nature's* technocratic prescriptions appear perilously devoid of climate justice considerations. Environmental justice activist Naomi Klein fills in some of the blanks and summarizes what needs to be done on the social, political and economic fronts to meet such goals:

We will need to rebuild the public sphere, reverse privatizations, re-localize large parts of economies, scale back overconsumption, bring



georgemonbiot/2012/jun/22/rio-20-earth-summit-brazil. On the compromised discourse of sustainability, see Demos, 'The Politics of Sustainability'; and Janet Kraynak, 'The Land and the Economics of Sustainability', *Art Journal*, vol 69, winter 2010.

30. As articulated in, for instance, the Kari-Oca Declaration, 'Indigenous Peoples Global Conference on Rio + 20 and Mother Earth', 13–22 June 2012, published on <http://www.indymedia.org.uk>.
31. On the London Occupy movement's relation to political ecology, see the 'environment' category of *The Occupied Times*, at: <http://theoccupiedtimes.co.uk>, including such essays as Melanie Strickland, 'Earth Injustice: Why Our Legal System is Failing the 99%', 22 January 2012; Liz Gallagher, 'Exposing Our Exposure: How Energy Companies Are Risking Our Future and Their Balance Sheets', 12 July 2012; and Ragnhild Freng Dale, 'Get the Shell Out!', 18 June 2012. For US perspectives see Nick Mizroeff, 'Occupy Climate Change!', at <http://nicholasmizroeff.com/RTL/?p=353>; and Talib Agape Fuegoverde (aka Yates McKee), 'Occupy Criticism, Occupy Spring', *The Brooklyn Rail*, 2012, at <http://brooklynrail.org/2012/03/art/occupy-criticism-occupy-spring>.

back long-term planning, heavily regulate and tax corporations, maybe even nationalize some of them, cut military spending and recognize our debts to the global South.<sup>28</sup>

Of course these sensible recommendations could not be further removed from the economic priorities of the international governing community, as assembled in the recent UN-convened conferences on climate change. While *Nature* was cautiously optimistic in anticipation of Rio + 20 – entitled 'The Future We Want', coming two decades after the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 – the UN conference was soon derided by environmentally engaged civil society as one that 'takes us nowhere'. Indeed, in what has become a tragic ritual of anti-democratic obstructionism, the US representatives saw to it that any mention of rights, equity, common but differentiated responsibilities, and phrases like 'unsustainable consumption and production patterns', were summarily deleted from the final document. No agreement on cutting greenhouse gases was made; instead, economic growth was delinked from the use of natural resources, and 'sustainable development' overwrote sustainable ecology.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the meeting that best approximates what a global forum would be for legislating action on climate change ended in a massive failure – expressive only of the 'we' that represents corporate interests – bringing charges by activist groups that the continued Washington-promoted consensus around the 'green economy' is nothing short of a 'crime against humanity and the earth'.<sup>30</sup>

It is rather the counter, grassroots summit meetings that have defined the greatest realization of democratic dialogue, political inclusivity and the negotiation between environmental imperatives and climate justice – such as the Peoples' Summit at Rio in 2012, the Klimaforum09 that shadowed COP15 at Copenhagen, as well as the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba in 2010, which gathered activists, NGOs, indigenous peoples, farmers, scientists and governmental delegations. In addition, the international Occupy movement has recently added to the energy around environmental activism and the creative reclamation of the commons.<sup>31</sup> The challenge remains how to channel such collective commitment to environmental justice into large-scale transformation, one drawing on all the resources of eco-aesthetics and political ecology, to rescue our future from the increasingly likely scenario of 'planetary dysphoria'.

# Post-Media Activism, Social Ecology and Eco-Art

Christoph Brunner, Roberto Nigro  
and Gerald Raunig

In his essay *The Three Ecologies* published in 1989 Félix Guattari invents an ‘eco’-art (*art de l’éco*).<sup>1</sup> This concept can be misunderstood in several ways. First, one might think of eco-art as ‘green art’, as art of the Green movement or a Green party. Conceiving of such art simply as an effect of a new ideology constitutes a problematic and instrumentally restricted relation between art and (environmental) politics – be it green politics as a single-issue case or as holistic mythologies of nature. Second, another possible problem resides in a specific form of *oiko*-logy, connoting the domestication, the domestic capture of artistic praxis. And, third, there is the danger of an art-life cliché following on from the bumpy genealogy from Richard Wagner to Joseph Beuys. Inherent to all these misinterpretations of the Guattarian *eco-art* is an identitarian or moralistic projection of a full, complete and uniform community.

By contrast, Guattari’s concept of ecology aims at an opening towards a very broad ethico-political plane of immanence. According to the three-fold scheme (or metamodel) of *The Three Ecologies*, Guattari points out three (ecological) fields leading towards an expanded definition of subjectivity: the emergence of subjective factors at the heart of the major political and social transformations of the 1980s, the increasing development of machinic forms of subjectivation, and finally the growing amplification of relevant ethico-aesthetic perspectives throughout the 1980s. Guattari addresses these three tendencies as mental (‘nascent subjectivity’), social (‘a constantly mutating socius’) and environmental ecology (‘an environment in the process of being reinvented’).<sup>2</sup> The emergence of ecological issues goes hand in hand with the development of mechanisms of decentralization, de-multiplication of forms of antagonisms, and processes of singularization. Ecosophy is the name indicating new ways of imagining and analyzing production; the mode of thinking, living, experimenting and struggling in another way. In other words, it concerns not the attempt to unify dispersed forms of antagonisms but the invention of new modes of being, new ways of living in the molecular space of

1. Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, Ian Pinder and Paul Sutton, trans, Continuum, London, 2008, p 35, p 36

2. *Ibid.*, p 19, p 20, p 38, p 45

existence, within urban spaces, family, relationships, work, etc. What is at stake here is a functional multicentrism going against universal projects of society and abstract syntheses. From a molecular point of view each attempt at ideological unification is a reactionary operation.

Eco-art avoids unifying the three ecological perspectives. It rather implies the possibility of ‘opening up processually from a praxis that enables it to be made “habitable” by a human project. It is this praxic opening-out which constitutes the essence of “eco”-art.’<sup>3</sup> Guattari attempts to expose intrinsic antagonisms between the three ecological perspectives. This leads to a chaotomic mode of recomposition, as Guattari affirms in his last collaboration with Gilles Deleuze: ‘Art is not chaos, but a composition of chaos that yields the vision or sensation, so that it constitutes, as Joyce says, a chaosmos, a composed chaos – neither foreseen nor preconceived.’<sup>4</sup>

Art constituting a chaosmos becomes an ecological practice, not in the simple manner of connecting many things, but by itself being of an intrinsic ecological and cosmological quality. As ecological process it resonates with a milieu or habitat (*oikos*).<sup>5</sup> As cosmological event, it ties in ‘incorporeal Universes of value’ and folds potential becomings into its own processual unfolding.<sup>6</sup> In that respect the eco-aspect does not define domestication but allows for ‘giving existential consistency to new pragmatic fields’.<sup>7</sup> Guattari also uses the term *existential territory* pointing at the complex (if not chaotomic) relational process of a production of subjectivity interlacing milieu, socius and incorporeal ecological dimensions.<sup>8</sup> He underlines throughout his writings that a pragmatics of existence lies at the heart of his politics, where pragmatic means not a generalized utilitarian method but an internal and ‘local’ operation according to what happens. Accordingly, therefore, the main concern resides less in hermeneutic closure (domestication) through the deterministic use of concepts than in foregrounding the potential ‘mutation of environment for praxis’.<sup>9</sup> Each praxis moves in resonances with its milieu, pragmatically figuring out what is happening and what belongs to the process.

How do such ecologies evolve, mutate and activate their potential for relation? For Guattari these processes have to move through ecological registers of existence, always investigating the production of subjectivity as the main territory for constitutions of power-relations and the resistance thereof. A crucial aspect in this processual outline of subjectivity is the need for operations of co-composition and concrete expression (enunciation). As a consequence relational concepts such as transversality take on a central role. Each singularity is given by objectives which are not only local but which themselves expand steadily until they define points of trans-sectoral contact at transnational levels. The processual nature of the production of subjectivity problematizes how things might become (as we do not know yet what they can do) instead of just defining their being.

Considering social ecology, besides mental and environmental ecology, Guattari emphasizes the importance of a reappropriation of mass-media-infused communication:

An essential programmatic point for social ecology will be to encourage capitalist societies to make the transition from the mass-media era to a

3. Ibid, p 35

4. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, trans, Columbia University, New York, 1994, p 204

5. Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, op cit, p 95 note 52

6. Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm*, Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis, trans, Indiana University, Indianapolis, 1995, p 9

7. Félix Guattari, *Soft Subversions: Texts and Interviews 1977–1985*, Sylvère Lotringer, ed, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2009, p 304

8. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, op cit, p 6

9. Félix Guattari, ‘On Contemporary Art, Interview with Olivier Zahm’, in *The Guattari Effect*, Eric Alliez and Andrew Goffey, eds, Continuum, London and New York, 2011, p 47



*post-media age*, in which the media will be reappropriated by a multitude of subject-groups capable of directing its resingularization. Despite the seeming impossibility of such an eventuality, the currently unparalleled level of media-related alienation is in no way an inherent necessity.<sup>10</sup>

Within this context, and also in relation to his conception of the machine, Guattari develops an understanding of the relation between social ecology and media that thwarts the dichotomy between techno-euphoria and culturally pessimistic demonization of new media. The matter of concern is based rather on overlapping social and media developments, leading us away from mass media capture and towards completely different machinic ecologies of relation. What does it then mean to talk about a *post-media age*? In a first step, Guattari's claim for a post-media era addresses the anaesthetizing effect of mass media in contrast to a renewed democratization of media technologies for creative purposes. Already in the late 1980s Guattari outlines four crucial points against the ubiquitous fatalism of mass media:

- (1) sudden mass consciousness-raising, which always remains possible;
- (2) ... room for [new] transformative assemblages of social struggle;
- (3) the technological evolution of the media and its possible use for non-capitalist goals, in particular through a reduction in costs and through miniaturization;
- (4) the reconstitution of labour processes on the rubble of early twentieth-century systems of industrial production, based upon the increased production – as much on an individual basis as on a collective one – of a 'creationist' subjectivity (achieved through continuous training, skill transfer and the re-tooling of the labour force, etc).<sup>11</sup>

Considering that these four points still sound surprisingly contemporary, how would an actualization of them look twenty-three years later? We propose to investigate this question through the scope of the Occupy movement, following two major lines of post-media activism: the mediality of social organization and the social ecology of new media. What comes to be termed post-media describes a general transformation away from media as mere technological entities. Opposed to mass-media technologies of the twentieth century, post-media emphasize the modular and open process of the production of subjectivity at the heart of each media-inflected process.

The *human microphone* is one of the Occupy movement's most discussed praxes. It was deployed as a technique in a specific situation, the juridical situation at Zuccotti Park in September 2011. The occupants had to deal with the paradoxically blurring boundaries between private and public: Zuccotti Park is a public place in private property. Under these circumstances the use of microphones, megaphones or any technology for amplification was not allowed. As a consequence the occupants began to repeat each speaker's words during the General Assemblies, chanting each sentence collectively. The function of these repetitions was to make the speaker's voice audible to hundreds of people in a large open-air setting.

Perceived through YouTube videos and other media representations, this practice seems close to a priestly strategy. On the one side the croaky voice of the preacher, on the other side the zealous affirmation of the masses. Between shepherd and flock there is the pastoral relation

10. Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, op cit, p 40

11. Guattari consciously uses quotation marks for the word 'creationist' in the French original. Guattari seemed to have been aware of other uses of the term, pertaining to Christian discourse on evolution. In contrast, his use of the term aims at a different production of subjectivity as a processual and open mode of existence and becoming.

of governing the whole and the individuals – *omnes et singulatim*. In such a setting singularities vanish in a simultaneously homogenizing and individualizing process. And at the same time the empathic repetition does not bring about the conscious appropriation of the spoken content through the crowd. If it comes to trance or exhaustion, this appropriation is made impossible: after several repeated sentences one can observe a certain automatism. Accordingly, the mechanical reproduction of finely separated blocks of linguistic content could be also considered as practising a governmental form of (self-)subjection.

Addressed from this perspective the human microphone appears as a technique that homogenizes multiplicity. Nevertheless we want to foreground its potentiality as a form for multiplicity and polyvocality. The chanting crowd is not reducible to a euphoric or automatic affirmation of the principal speaker. From this point of view the human microphone is neither ‘human’ nor a ‘microphone’. It is not a microphone, since its operation is neither electric regulation nor a precise transmission of a signal with a minimum of noise. On the contrary, it produces new noise, it aims at the multiplication of voices. It is not a mere reproduction of linguistic content, but a continuing bifurcation of enunciations.

The human microphone is not human because reducing its practice to humanness would overlook the social-machinic relations from which these collective enunciations emerge. The multiplication of voices also modulates the spoken content into a polyvocal murmur; not a single homogeneous content but a swarm of expressive lines at the same time singular and transversal. The dislodging of mere content and its ‘ideal’ transmission also amplifies the potential of collective assemblages of enunciation as ecological composition. In the beginning it appears as though the many voices try to amplify the one. But the procedure does not concern the combination of individual voices becoming a choir. It rather describes a blurring of author and audience in relation to a schizo-competence, an inventive ‘creationist’ subjectivity engendering the multi-tasking between reception, repetition and development/enunciation of one’s own position. It is this assemblage of enunciation that allows hearing, repeating and positioning oneself at the same time.

There is the potential for the choir to repeat the same content but actually to become radically polyvocal and differentiated. One voice supports the speaker with hand gestures. The next, while repeating the last sentence of the speaker, expresses its dissensus gesturally. And a third turns its back towards the speaker to better amplify his/her voice to the others. From this perspective the praxis of the human microphone is not unifying at all and does not lead toward a uniformity of multiplicity. The micro-amplification supports singularities and their different forms of organization, assemblage and reterritorialization.

Writing in 1986, Guattari perceived a general rift between ‘deterritorializing revolutions linked to scientific, technical, and artistic development’, and ‘a compulsion toward subjective reterritorialization’.<sup>12</sup> What he attributes to a capitalist drive might in his eyes be reworked for ecological ends through the shift of a post-mass-media era. Through new technological advances he foresees ‘new emancipatory social practices and, above all, alternative assemblages of subjective production

12. Guattari, *Soft Subversions*, pp 292–293

capable of connecting – on a mode different than that of conservative reterritorialization – to the molecular revolutions of our era'.<sup>13</sup>

The social ecology of the human microphone actualizes media not as 'conservative reterritorialization', not as a container or entity. It performs a leap into the gestural realm. In a similar way recent media works around the Occupy movement have adopted a gestural 'style' of making expression felt not through signs, signifiers and languages but through varying camera angles, live video streams and giant projections on public buildings. The seeming flat- and hollowness of the most pertinent phrases such as 'We are the ninety-nine per cent' or 'We are unstoppable, another world is possible' are not a unification of opinions or the general label of a new all-encompassing social movement. They function as expression of collective assemblages of enunciation. The question raised by Guattari concerning eco-art as ecological affair receives a potential extension or modulation through new media technologies. Hence, the terms social media or media of sociality require a careful reconsideration. As much as the human microphone is neither human nor a mere technological device, social media are neither social nor media in the conventional sense of the terms. Guattari's concept of the machine gets closer to the open relaying of relations moving through social, technical, material and abstract layers of existence.<sup>14</sup> Post-media outlines techniques much more than it defines a technology. As a technique, post-media praxes engage with the potential of technological advancement without disregarding the technology's own mode of existence. A medium here is a relational platform interlinked in transversal processes of creation. The use of hand-cameras capturing actions on the ground of the Occupy movement, which are relayed through live-video-streaming around the globe, is one way of interlacing struggles at the same time singular and collective. What becomes shareable is not only valid information for another politics of representation (ie the violent acts of the police at UC Davis) but also a multiplicity of sensations, through voices, sound and movement.<sup>15</sup>

The mini-documentaries of Iva Radivojevic and Martyna Starosta of the early days of Occupy Wall Street emphasize less the talking-head model of investigative journalism than capturing atmospheres and their underlying assemblages.<sup>16</sup> The utterances of people blur with the visual and audio expression of the films. Posters, kitchenware, sleeping bags, laptops and other cameras receive as much attention as the people making statements about the movement. The use of the camera mirrors the openness of the early days of the movement, the ambivalence of something happening without knowing what it might become, a kind of open-range feeling of potential. The media are not just there for mediation but take on an immediate and orgic quality.<sup>17</sup> Their role is defined less by 'doing their work' than by becoming platforms of immediation – ecological 'existential operators' of assemblages/assemblies of collective enunciation.<sup>18</sup> As platforms these technologies are not defined by their boundaries as closed entities (ie interfaces) but rather actualize their potentials ever anew depending on the underlying situation. The immediate character underlines the sheer 'situatedness' under which such acts become sensible across different techno-social bodies. Platforms for immediation are therefore as much concretely plugged into a situation as they are yielding beyond this situation through the immanence of

13. Ibid, p 293

14. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, op cit, p 34

15. Guattari, 'On Contemporary Art', op cit, p 40

16. See <http://eipcp.net/n/1318231860>.

17. Gerald Raunig, 'eventum et medium, Event and Orgiastic Representation in Media Activism', in *Third Text* 94, vol 22, no 5, 2008, pp 651–659, online at: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0707/raunig/en>, accessed 15 April 2012; Christoph Brunner, 'Immediation as Process and Practice of Signaleitic Mattering', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 4, June 2012

18. Guattari, *Soft Subversions*, op cit, p 300



future potentials in this very immediate experience of the situation. The role of new media technologies in the case of the Occupy movement moves beyond its representational realm. They are no longer means to an end but become themselves part of the techno-social assemblages. They weave unprecedented webs of horizontal machinic production. Projections, recording devices, live-streaming cameras not only have an impact in terms of what they can do but are vital components of social ecologies. Instead of describing or representing facts, they produce real facts. It is the gestural aspect that enables these collective enunciations. The gestures of humans, materials and technologies take their immediate role in the assemblages of the Occupy movement.

The large-scale projection also known as the Bat Signal becomes an ecological event during the day of the eviction of Zuccotti Park when thousands of protesters are marching across Brooklyn Bridge. Similar to a possible framing of the human microphone as unifying practice, the projection could be considered a universalizing representation of a global movement. While people are marching, speaking through the human microphone and lighting candles, a giant projected circle appears on the wall of the Verizon building. The main slogans of the movement are thrown against the façade, people are modulating the visual content directly into vocalizations, partly repeating and partly adding their own responses to the projections through another human microphone. The polyvocality becomes a poly-gestural expression with neither a unifying line, nor a universalizing theme.

Emphasizing the importance of collective assemblage of enunciation for the production of subjectivity and its resingularization Guattari actually extends the threefold ecology by adding what he calls a *virtual ecology*:

Beyond the relations of actualised forces, virtual ecology will not simply attempt to preserve the engendered species of cultural life but equally to engender conditions for the creation and development of unprecedented formations of subjectivity that have never been seen and never felt. This is to say that generalised ecology – or ecosophy – will work as a science of ecosystems, as a bid for political regeneration and as an ethical, aesthetic and analytic engagement.<sup>19</sup>

Guattari's conceptualization of a post-media era not only addresses the technological capacities of making new connections felt but actually aims at engendering new practices of sensation. Rendering sensations shareable happens at the level of virtual ecology. Not necessarily a pre-figuration of possible perspectives or experiences to be actualized but an attraction of sensation felt as an intensity through experience. From that point of view 'social' means not just inter-human relations but an entire unfolding of multiple ecological layers and their mutual entanglement. The mediality of social practices and the sociality of media are after-effects of a more diverse and differentially actualizing virtual ecology where assemblages of enunciation give shape to singular productions of subjectivity. The video footage, U-Stream broadcasting (which in the case of Occupy juxtaposes live-stream video broadcasts, enabling cross-witnessing of different sites of action at the same time), the projections, posters and voices contribute equally through their gestural potential, proposing new transversal forms of organization,

19. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*,  
op cit, p 92

aesthetic expression and micro-politics. They are components of subjectivation, multiple semiotic components forming assemblages that constitute the world. The web of transversal enunciations cannot be reduced to a general theory of communication, to a simple question of quantity of information that is transmitted. It implies the question of new spaces of liberty, of new alliances between movements transforming the political and social context in which we live and minoritarian becomings transforming our desire, struggling against dominant conventionality. That is the reason why ecology cannot but be mental and social, since it involves the reinvention of new ways of being *with* the world and new forms of sociability. Alliances, assemblages against the common enemies who sadden our life and decrease our power, but also strategies, alliances against the *internal* enemies emerging in our family, in our relationships, in our groups, in ourselves, in every game of power. The ecological crisis is a political, cultural and social one, calling for an ecology as well as an eco-art, as a political, social and cultural revolution able to reorient the objectives of production, the forms of organization, the ways of being together.

# Beyond the Mirror Indigenous Ecologies and 'New Materialisms' in Contemporary Art

Jessica L Horton and  
Janet Catherine Berlo

1. A Irving Hallowell, 'Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View', in Stanley Diamond, ed, *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, Columbia University, New York, 1960, p 24

*Since stones are grammatically animate, I once asked an old man: Are all the stones we see about us here alive? He reflected a long while and then replied, 'No, but some are.'*

Anthropologist Irving Hallowell, 1960<sup>1</sup>

2. Jimmie Durham, 'They Forgot that Their Prison is Made of Stone, and Stone is Our Ally', *Columbus Day: Poems, Drawings and Stories About American Indian Life and Death in the Nineteen-Seventies*, West End, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1983, p 85

*The stones say, 'Friend, does your chest hurt? Your friends are with you.'*  
Jimmie Durham, 1983<sup>2</sup>

3. In alphabetical order, some of the most relevant sources are: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2010; Bill Brown, ed, *Things*, University Of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, 2004; Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2010; Anselm Franke, ed, *Animism*, Sternberg, Berlin, 2010; Sabine Folie, Anselm Franke and Maurizio Lazzarato, eds, *Animism: Modernity Through the*

Material is in motion across the academic disciplines. In the past decade and a half, Bill Brown challenged literary and visual studies with 'thing theory'; scholars ranging from literary critic N Katherine Hayles to political scientist Francis Fukuyama heralded the cyber- and bio-technological era of the 'posthuman'; political scientists Samantha Frost and Diane Coole pointed to the transdisciplinary rise of a host of 'new materialisms'; in contemporary art history, citations pile high for sociologist Bruno Latour's haunting title, *We Have Never Been Modern*; most recently, curator Anselm Franke critically revisited the term 'animism' in a two-part exhibition and book.<sup>3</sup> This diversity of work shares a basic conviction that matter – whether in the forest or the lab – has agency, can move, act, assume volition, and even enjoy degrees of intelligence often assumed to be the unique domain of human subjectivity. The revolutionary character of this recognition lies precisely in its challenge to an anthropocentric post-Enlightenment intellectual tradition in which philosophical and scientific divisions between subject and object, culture and nature – what Latour calls the 'Great Divide' – ensured the primacy of people among beings both inert and in motion.<sup>4</sup> Such categorical divisions authorized the foundational capitalist imperative to own and control nature. This has engendered crisis as floods, oil spills, extreme weather and elements from an out-of-balance biosphere talk back. The ecological promise of these 'new materialisms' is to invite a dialogue among a wider host of agents,



*Looking Glass*, Walther König, Cologne, 2012; Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, Picador, New York, 2003; N Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999; Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Catherine Porter, trans, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993.

4. Latour, op cit, p 12
5. Vine Deloria, Jr, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, Putnam, New York, 1972; Jolene Rickard, 'Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol 110, no 2, spring 2011, pp 465–486; Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford University, Oxford, UK, 1998; Hallowell, op cit; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'Perspectivism and Multinaturalism in Indigenous America', in Pedro García Hierro and Alexandre Surrallés, eds, *The Land Within: Indigenous Territory and the Perception of the Environment*, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Copenhagen, 2005
6. By 'European', we refer more generally to post-Enlightenment cultural developments which spread throughout the globe through colonial and imperial endeavours, yet never wholly upended other philosophical traditions.
7. Following the writing of this essay, two major exhibitions of contemporary art incorporated indigenous artists and discussions of material agency to an unprecedented degree: 18th Biennale of Sydney: 'all our relations', co-directed by

imaging a profoundly relational world in which humans interact with, rather than act upon, others. Indeed, we maintain that grasping multiple forms of liveliness has implications for questions of global environmental justice in raising the possibility of an ethics that binds not only affluent and poor, colonizer and colonized, but also the material entities upon which all our livelihoods depend.

Nonetheless, in this essay we are concerned with those humans who are too often left out of the conversation. Indigenous scholars and scholars of the indigenous will attest to the survival of alternative intellectual traditions in which the liveliness of matter is grasped as quite ordinary, both inside, and at the fringes of, European modernity.<sup>5</sup> Once we take indigenous worldviews into account, the 'new materialisms' are no longer new. Modifiers such as 'new' and 'post' suggest a European developmental schema that permits the detection of non-human agencies in a contemporary period of crisis.<sup>6</sup> Even Latour, who eschews this problematic temporal schema, does not intend the 'we' in *We Have Never Been Modern* to be *globally* self-reflexive. Latour is concerned with turning the anthropological gaze abroad back upon Europe in order to reveal transgressive impurities long hidden under the mask of rationalism. The radicality of this move remains stymied by the absence of indigenous voices *in* and *about* the mutually affecting spread of modernity. As Franke interprets Latour to reflect upon the exhibitionary complex of contemporary art, his conception of animism as a 'mirror' excludes while it reflects.

We devote the first portion of this article to an analysis of how and why it has been so difficult for the 'new materialisms' to incorporate indigenous philosophies into discussions of non-human agency when focusing on contemporary arts discourse. We then turn to the question of what lies beyond the mirror, touching on the work of several contemporary Native American artists working with materials that disobey the precincts of geographical, political, cultural and intellectual borders. By drawing upon intellectual traditions in which material agencies have historically been integrated *with* notions of the human, (as opposed to threatening or superseding the human, as suggested by recent discourses of the 'posthuman'), such works can point the way towards a truly global conception of ecological justice.

## EUROPE'S REFLECTION

The two-part exhibition and book project, *Animism*, inaugurated by Anselm Franke in 2005, offers the most rigorous analysis to date of the development of 'new materialisms' in the field of contemporary art.<sup>7</sup> Franke owes a large debt to Latour, revisiting animism as a category of fallacious and irrational belief that Europeans ascribed to 'primitive' societies. Like Latour, Franke wishes to turn the lens that anthropologists and artists trained on their colonized subjects back onto the 'moderns'. Thus, in the first sentences of *Animism Part I*, he issues a disclaimer:

For most people who are still familiar with the term 'animism' and hear it in the context of the exhibition, the word may bring to mind images of fetishes, totems, representations of a spirit-populated nature, tribal art, pre-modern rituals, and savagery. These images have forever left their imprint on the term. The expectations they trigger, however, are not

Gerald McMaster and Catherine de Zegher, and Documenta 13, directed by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev.

8. Franke, *Animism*, op cit, p 11
9. Edward W Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage, New York, 1979
10. Franke, *Animism*, op cit, p 11
11. See, for example, Hal Foster's critique of the 1984 exhibition, "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art, in 'The "Primitive" Unconscious of Modern Art', *October* 34, autumn 1985, pp 45–70; William Rubin, ed, *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984.
12. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' and her articulation of the (male) postcolonial critic's complicity in patterns of domination he seeks to dismantle remain relevant to this discussion. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois, Chicago, 1988, pp 271–315
13. Franke has published two different versions of this argument: 'Autonomy and Mirrors', in *Jimmie Durham: Essence*, de Pury and Luxembourg, Zurich, 2007; and 'Untying the Modern Knot', in Fabrice Hergott, ed, *Jimmie Durham: Rejected Stones*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris/ARC, Paris, 2009, pp 30–35.
14. Coole and Frost, 'Introducing the New Materialisms', in *New Materialisms*, op cit, p 37
15. TJ Demos, 'The Politics of Sustainability: Contemporary Art and Ecology', in Francesco

what this project concerns. *Animism* doesn't exhibit or discuss artifacts or cultural practices considered animist. Instead, it uses the term and its baggage as an optical device, a mirror in which the particular way modernity conceptualizes, implements, and transgresses boundaries can come into view.<sup>8</sup>

Postcolonial theory has strongly influenced Franke's framework. His mirror obliquely references what Edward Said's *Orientalism* made explicit: that when Europeans attempt to represent the other, what they produce most accurately is an image of the self.<sup>9</sup> Coined by nineteenth-century anthropologists, 'animism' is best understood as a constellation of European desires that enacts the very fetishism it purports to identify.

What meanwhile, of those 'artifacts or cultural practices considered animist'? Franke goes on to argue:

An exhibition about animism that upholds a direct signifying relation to its subject is doubly impossible: Animism is a practice of relating to entities in the environment, and as such, these relations cannot be exhibited; they resist objectification.<sup>10</sup>

While Franke allows that legitimate animistic modalities exist in the world, he maintains that they are unrepresentable in a European exhibitionary complex – one that can only harden the handiwork of others into a fantastical projection. Here, too, postcolonial critiques of museology and 'primitivism' have left their mark; there can be no 'affinity of the tribal and the modern' because the tribal is *already* a modern construction.<sup>11</sup> While Europe transgresses the boundaries of its own making, the Native appears to be left on the other side.<sup>12</sup> Here Franke reifies the nature/culture binary he set out to overcome: indigenous practices of animism are relegated to the 'environment', a space distinct from Europe, separate from modernity and outside of representation.

The above formulation begs the question of what creative possibilities are available to the contemporary indigenous artist who wishes to maintain a connection to cultural practices while self-consciously engaging modern art institutions. Franke's writings on the work of Jimmie Durham offer some clues. Durham, who is the most internationally recognized Native North American artist of the past three decades, was included in the two 'Animism' exhibitions. In writings published elsewhere, Franke champions the artist's canny use of the category of savagery as a force of subversion. He argues that Durham's work with materials cast off or overlooked in European value hierarchies possesses 'strong negativity' – that is, it disrupts those categories, wreaking havoc on them, as when nature's stones come to rest upon the crushed frame of a car or aeroplane. Through 'strategies of humour, irony, and other differential shifts in the semantic, and symbolic field', Durham can harness negativity to 'pull aside the rationalist veil' that colours Europe's image of the other.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the indigenous artist can enter Europe's framework to hold up the mirror. Wielding the deconstructive toolkit of postcolonial theory, he cracks its surface.

We recognize that dismantling the discursive foundations of colonialism is an important step towards inviting a wider, more equitable range of indigenous and material relations. Our concern is nonetheless that after some thirty years of postcolonial critique, indigenous intellectual and

Manacorda and Ariella Yedgar, eds, *Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969–2009*, Koenig/Barbican, London, 2009, p 24

16. This is a condensed form of a longer argument elaborated by Horton in an essay, 'Storied Stones: Jimmie Durham and the Limits of Identity Discourse', currently under review.
17. Jimmie Durham, '1000 Words', *Artforum International*, January 2009, p 189
18. Hergott, op cit
19. Carolyn Dean, *A Culture of Stone: Inka Perspectives on Rock*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2010; Jimmie Durham, *Jimmie Durham: Between the Furniture and the Building (Between a Rock and a Hard Place)*, Kunstverein München; Berliner Künstlerprogramm DAAD, Munich, Berlin, Cologne, 1998, p 103; Hollowell, op cit, p 25; Stephen C Jett, 'Cairn and Brush Travel Shrines in the United States Northeast and Southeast', *Northeast Anthropology* 48, 1994, pp 1–67
20. Hollowell, op cit. Notably, within the last two decades, some eco-philosophers have embraced Hollowell's argument for indigenous relationality in which the category of 'persons' includes 'other-than-human persons'. See, for example, David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, Vintage, New York, 1996; Charles S Brown and Ted Toadvine, eds, *EcoPhenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, SUNY, Stony Brook, New York, 2003; Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, SUNY, Stony Brook, New York, 2011. Recent anthropological literature

artistic activities are still relegated to deconstructing the foundational binaries of Europe, even as scholars recognize the urgent need to develop a new politics of ecology. We have focused on Franke's work due to its relevance to contemporary art. But it is possible that the omissions of the 'new materialisms' may relate more generally to the ambivalent legacies of postcolonial theory. The barrier of a reflection helps to authorize the 'new' in 'new materialisms' and the 'post' in 'posthuman'; Europe is left to unearth the liveliness of matter on its own terms, in its own time. We maintain that by importing an intellectual boundary into reconsiderations of environmental relationships, this schema is an inadequate answer to the contemporary challenges of living-in-tandem. Global equity, the political promise of recent materialist trends, calls for a transcultural engagement with indigenous actors *on their own terms*. Material might act as a bridge, instead of a mirror. When Diane Coole and Samantha Frost introduce the 'new materialisms' as sharing

... a radical reappraisal of the contours of the subject, a reassessment of the possibility and texture of ethics, an examination of new domains of power and unfamiliar frames for imagining justice, and an exploration of the sources, quality, and dimensions of agency

they could well be describing the works by contemporary artists that we will discuss in the remainder of this article.<sup>14</sup>

## BEYOND THE MIRROR

Many Native North American artists working today do not accept the terms of ongoing negativity. Recent works by Durham, Rebecca Belmore, Will Wilson and Jolene Rickard share a concern with the liveliness of matter that can provide the grounds – at times quite literally – for looking beyond the mirror. While there is evidence of the indigenous philosophical precepts that inform the work, the artists locate their practices in an extensive and shared contemporary landscape that includes the space of exhibition, thus short-circuiting a romantic gaze that might locate indigenous art or bodies in nature somewhere else. Their works issue an invitation to a wider audience – including us, a pair of non-Native, English-speaking scholars writing this article – to seriously consider the relevance of indigenous intellectual traditions to the contemporary global challenges of co-habitation.

Certainly, the four artists' work dovetails with a wider trend in eco-art that TJ Demos describes as 'comprehending ecology as a field of interlinking systems of biodiversity and technology, social practices and political structures'.<sup>15</sup> But a systems approach to the environment can still support forms of anthropocentrism, so long as humans are treated as privileged arbiters of the future. In each of the four projects we discuss, artists grant environmental entities the agency to push back, to punish or reward human activity, to remind people of their precarious position in a relational world where allies are essential to flourishing, as the quotes that open this article emphasize. In lieu of an exhaustive account of these works, we focus on a single material agent in each project, tracing its complex forms of movement and affiliation into spaces of exhibition. Seeking to bind viewers into a shared fate with material friends





Jimmie Durham, *Encore Tranquilité*, stone and aeroplane, 2009, installed at Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, photo: Jessica L Horton, courtesy of the artist

on such issues is immense. See, for example, Nurit Bird-David, "Animism" Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology', *Current Anthropology* 40, supplement: *Culture. A Second Chance?*, February 1999, pp S67-S91.

21. Durham, *Columbus Day*, op cit, p 85

22. Ibid, p 7. Note that this linguistic specificity presents problems of translation for both the artist and non-Sioux

and foes, the following works raise the possibility of an ethics premised on mutual recognition and shared livelihood.

In *stone*, a substance that is indigenous to every place on the globe, Durham has found a material ally to match the mobility of contemporary art and commerce.<sup>16</sup> In *Encore Tranquilité* (2009), the artist staged an encounter between a giant boulder and single engine aeroplane in an abandoned airfield outside Berlin. In a widely published story, the antiquated ex-Soviet plane was deemed unsafe by European standards and was slated for sale in Africa, tying its fate to the ethical failures of the neocolonial marketplace.<sup>17</sup> The boulder came out on top, nearly splitting the plane in two. The implied buoyancy of substrate worked against European metaphors that link it to inertia: 'stone dead', 'stone faced', 'stone cold'. While Franke reads Durham's many works with stone as staging the disruptive force of Europe's repressed 'other', we emphasize an equally affirmative strain:

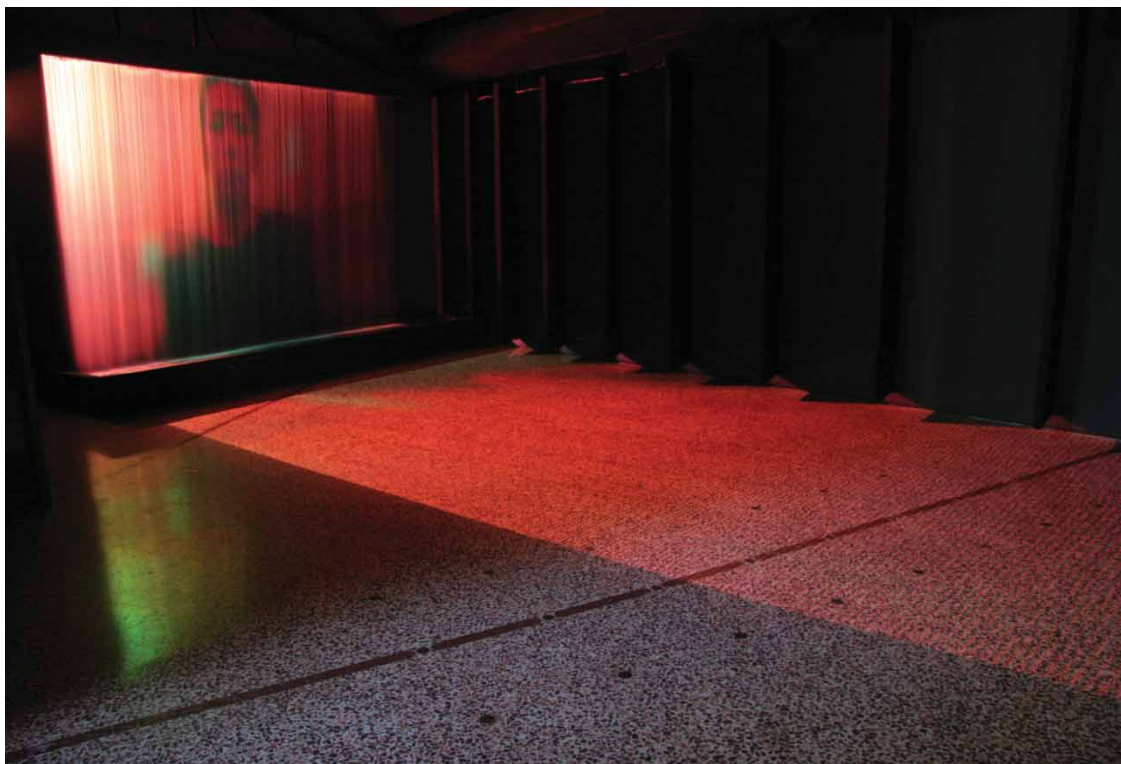
reader, since English was the common language of AIM and most of Durham's subsequent interactions with indigenous communities.

23. The political significance of this shift is discussed at length in Horton's essay, 'Storied Stones', op cit.
24. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan, trans, Knopf Doubleday, New York, 1977
25. See Jessica Bradley and Jolene Rickard, *Rebecca Belmore: Fountain*, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, 2005; Richard Hill, 'Built on Running Water: Rebecca Belmore's Fountain', *Ruse*, vol 29, no 1, 2006, pp 49–51; Lee Ann Martin, 'The Waters of Venice: Rebecca Belmore at the 51st Biennale', *Canadian Art*, vol 22, no 2, 2005, pp 48–53; Charlotte Townsend-Gault, 'Rebecca Belmore and James Luna on Location in Venice: The Allegorical Indian Redux', *Art History*, vol 29, no 4, 2006, pp 721–755. The following argument is drawn from a longer article by Horton, 'Alone on the Snow/Alone on the Beach: "A Global Sense of Place"', in *Atanarjuat and Fountain*, *Journal for Transnational American Studies*, special forum on Charting Transnational Native American Studies, vol 4, no 1, 2012, pp 1–25, available online at: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/54p2f9pq#page-1>
26. As we write, in the spring of 2012, a number of these themes are eerily echoed as an unmanned fuel-containing boat, a vestige of the tsunami in Japan, floats towards the Canadian shore. 'Japan tsunami "ghost ship" drifting to Canada', *BBC News*, 24 March 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-17500008>. According to the BBC, between four and eight million metric tonnes

the lively rock acted as an unexpected ally in a tale of global injustice, a potential saviour of countless undervalued human lives that demanded acknowledgement for its intervention before the eyes of viewers. When stone and splintered plane were relocated to the foyer of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris for Durham's 2009 retrospective, 'Rejected Stones', the materials indexed an encounter that took place in the past.<sup>18</sup> Visitors could only scan the scene for clues: Did the stone fall from above or sail through the air? Was it local to Europe or a hit man from Africa? Was the plane it targeted in motion, empty, defunct? Here, material evinced not only liveliness and ethical orientation, but also the ability to *know* things, marking the limits of viewers' capacities to control their surroundings. Durham lets stone tell its own part in the story.

While relating to Durham's work does not necessarily depend upon recognizing indigenous influence, highlighting such connections across the intellectual boundaries we have described can certainly enhance an understanding of its philosophical and political dimensions. Personified stones are a well-established feature of indigenous landscapes across the Americas, appearing at travellers' shrines, in sentient architecture, or as people temporarily stilled: Durham has written of Indian pilgrimages to the sanctuary of Chalma in Mexico, during which 'those who give up or try to stop or turn back become stones', awaiting new life via the decisive kick of a future pilgrim.<sup>19</sup> In a famous 1960 essay that we quote in the epigraph, anthropologist A Irving Hallowell likewise recounts Anishinabe peoples' understandings of stone as 'other-than-human persons' whose animate potential can be latent or active. Anishinabe language grasps stones in a state of *becoming* – a concept communicated wordlessly in *Encore Tranquilité*, where resting stone threatens to spring back into action.<sup>20</sup> Durham (who is Cherokee, but widely intellectually engaged with transnational indigenous materialities) articulated a political role for animate stone under colonial conditions in a poem published in 1983, following his involvement in the American Indian Movement (AIM). 'They Forgot that Their Prison is Made of Stone, and Stone is Our Ally' was inspired by the incarceration of AIM leader Russell Means.<sup>21</sup> In it the stones spoke 'the language of the Sioux; what other language could a South Dakota stone speak?'.<sup>22</sup> Conversing with the walls allowed the jailed man to forge sustaining networks of communication and alliance, thus keeping objectification at bay. While Durham's early poem described the stones' address in English, his work since the late 1990s foregrounds a materialist language of collision and debris – one in which the agency of stones no longer needs linguistic translation to be 'read' by international visitors.<sup>23</sup> If befriending stone could help humans shed their shackles in what Michel Foucault deemed the quintessential architecture for modern surveillance, the prison, then why not also in the neocolonial marketplace – and the modern museum?<sup>24</sup>

While stones travel into viewers' space in Durham's work, the remaining projects we discuss share a concern with implicating viewers in the fate of faraway bodies – those of both land and people. In her video installation, *Fountain*, made for the Canadian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2005, Rebecca Belmore employed ubiquitous, unbounded water as her Venetian translator.<sup>25</sup> A sheet of falling liquid acted as a projection screen for a two-minute video loop. The initial sweep of the



Rebecca Belmore, *Fountain*, 2005, video installation at the Canadian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, photo courtesy of the artist and Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery

of debris from the tsunami were washed into the ocean, much of it drifting towards northern North America.

27. See Leslie Macmillan, 'A Difficult Choice on Water', on 'Green: A Blog about Energy and the Environment', *New York Times*, 6 April 2012, <http://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/06/a-difficult-choice-on-water/>, accessed 24 April 2012; and 'S.2109: Navajo-Hopi Little Colorado River Water Rights Settlement Act of 2012', govtrack.us website, <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/s2109>, accessed 24 April 2012.

28. Drew Sully, 'Protest: Diné and Hopi water rights at risk, protestors gather on Navajo Nation', Climate Connections: Global Justice Ecology Project

camera established a landscape alive with human and transhuman agencies: a plane flew overhead and heaps of discarded logs burst spontaneously into flames. Only a small group of viewers in Venice would have recognized Iona Beach in Vancouver, sacred Musqueam land that is today a poisoned regional park, marking the convergence of Canada's logging industry, sewage treatment ponds and the flight path of an international airport. Even without this geographic specificity, the sombre images conjured multiple forms of global material circulation: the watery voyages of Europeans to the Northwest Coast, the oceanic transport of commodities appropriated from First Nations lands, ubiquitous contemporary air travel and the unbounded toxicity resulting from such multiple intrusions.<sup>26</sup> Visitors then witnessed the artist struggling with an unknown burden offshore of a polluted industrial beach. Here the visible particularities of land and of Belmore's indigenous female body elicited the unevenness of these systems which subject certain people and places to undue environmental violence.

Still, as an Anishinabe from Northern Ontario, Belmore's connection to former Musqueam lands in British Columbia was no more intrinsic than that of her global audience. She wilfully took on its burdens in *Fountain*, her struggles in the frigid water suggesting that they were too much for any one body to bear. As cool drops of water falling in the Pavilion gave physical form to pixel records of Belmore's distant watery struggle, visitors were invited to identify sensually with the events on 'screen'. The



website, 6 April 2012, <http://climate-connections.org/2012/04/06/protest-dine-and-hopi-water-rights-at-risk-protesters-gather-on-navajo-nation/>, accessed 24 April 2012

29. 'Sheep is Life', *Diné bé Iná: The Navajo Lifeway*, <http://rezkid.net/dbi2/press>, accessed 24 April 2012. An annual 'Sheep is Life' festival is held on the Navajo Reservation every June.
30. See Cyril Mychalejko, 'Ecuador's Constitution Gives Rights to Nature', *OpEdNews.com*, 26 September 2008, <http://www.opednews.com/articles/Ecuador-s-Constitution-Giv-by-Cyril-Mychalejko-080925-102.html>, accessed 24 April 2012; Andrew C Revkin, 'Ecuador Constitution Grants Rights to Nature', 'Dot Earth' blog, *New York Times*, 29 September 2008, <http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/09/29/ecuador-constitution-grants-nature-rights/>, accessed 24 April 2012.

camera cut close to her and wavered as she floundered and grunted. The grey water appeared alive, pulling her and camera into a struggle registered via thrashing figure and frame. Finally she emerged triumphant with a red bucket in hand. She advanced towards the stilled camera and, with a mighty grunt, heaved its contents onto the lens. For viewers now acclimatized to the translucent water in the pavilion, its sudden transformation into vivid red came as a shock. The gesture viscerally united far-off beach, wet body and physical space of the pavilion, as if by reaching through a fountain of blood it might actually have been possible to touch Belmore's faintly visible face. This could be dismissed as a clever projection trick, but it demanded a different sort of reckoning when entwined with the colonial and capitalist evocations that we described above. *Fountain* assaulted visitors both bodily and cognitively. Even as the work invoked human mediation of materials as they are inscribed in uneven systems of global exchange, tactile blood-water pushed back against these boundaries. It established an unnerving trans-continental proximity between polluted beach, faraway body, and the fluids coursing through visitors' own veins.

Belmore's treatment of water calls to mind Dine'é (Navajo) and Hopi people's recent resistance to an instrumentalist approach to water politics in the American Southwest. Proposed Arizona bill S.2109, the Navajo-Hopi Little Colorado River Water Rights Settlement, requires tribal governments to permanently waive rights to unbounded water resources in rivers and aquifers – that are in high demand by the Peabody Coal Mining Company and other corporations – in exchange for receiving drinking water delivery services in three of their communities.<sup>27</sup> Indigenous protestors in Tuba City responded on 5 April 2012 by chanting 'let the water flow', and 'water is life'.<sup>28</sup> Their words transformed what many might grasp as a commonsensical relationship, water *sustains* life, into an identity: water *is* life, that is, materially and philosophically inseparable from humans and other living things. Nor is this equation



Will Wilson, *Auto-Immune Response no 5*, 2005, archival pigment print, 44 x 79 in, photo courtesy of the artist



31. See Janet Catherine Berlo, "Will Wilson's "Post-customary" Explorations: Beads, QR Codes, and "Augmented Reality", Eileen Braziel Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2011, <http://eileenbraziel.com/pdf/Janet%20Berlo%20editorial.pdf>, accessed 24 April 2012; Jennifer Vigil, "Will Wilson: Fellowship Artist", *Diversity and Dialogue: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art*, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, 2007, pp 98–106.
32. Maureen Schwarz, *Molded in the Image of Changing Woman: Navajo Views on the Human Body and Personhood*, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 1997, p 92
33. In addition to his own family's relationship to these issues, Wilson studied with photographer Patrick Nagatani while at the University of New Mexico (MFA, 2002) and credits him as a major influence. Berlo and Horton in conversation with Will Wilson, Santa Fe, 18 December 2011. Among Nagatani's best-known work is his *Nuclear Enchantment* series. See Patrick Nagatani, *Nuclear Enchantment*, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1991; Michele Penhall, ed, *Desire for Magic: Patrick Nagatani 1978–2008*, University of New Mexico Museum of Art, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2010
34. See Donald A Grinde and Bruce Elliott Johansen, *Ecocide of Native America: Environmental Destruction of Indian Lands and Peoples*, Clear Light Books, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1998, p 211; John W Sherry, *Land, Wind, and Hard Words: A Story of Navajo Activism*, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 2002, p 9.

unique to water; another phrase in Dine'é translates as 'sheep is life'.<sup>29</sup> The logic of environment-as-identity is fundamentally at odds with the legislative imperative to divide 'natural resources' into discrete units and assign them commodity values. Life cannot be contained at a single point in time and space as it is constitutively in motion. If water is life, does it still make sense to argue about which groups have rights to water? Or must we begin to talk, like an unprecedented new constitution in Ecuador, about the *rights of nature*?<sup>30</sup> Such issues are writ large in the context of a deepening global water crisis in which local interactions with dynamic systems are felt far from their sources.

Will Wilson's multimedia installation, *Auto-Immune Response* (2004), hints at another more ominous environmental equation.<sup>31</sup> In ten huge digitally altered photographs, a man whose hair is gathered in a *tsiyeel* (traditional Dine'é hair bun which indicates disciplined thought) wanders in a post-apocalyptic landscape of shimmering liquid pools, arid mountains and remnants of fences.<sup>32</sup> His bloodshot eyes, substance-smearred white shirt and futile gas mask suggest invisible poisons in the environment, evident only through their corporeal effects. The unseen agent we focus on here is uranium which, after seven decades of government and corporate mining within Diné'tah (the Navajo Nation), has literally irradiated the ancestral homeland of the Dine'é. Family members of Wilson's grandmother's generation died from nuclear-waste poisoning on the reservation, an issue that remains at the forefront of Dine'é activism.<sup>33</sup> Today, living water, as well as four sacred mountains understood to be close kin to the Dine'é and to share their fate, embody some of the gravest environmental pollution in North America.<sup>34</sup> Some Dine'é people evocatively personify the yellow uranium in the mines as a 'monster' or 'big snakes'. Their stories emphatically advise that this sleeping serpent with a 4.5 billion year half-life was meant to go undisturbed by humans.<sup>35</sup> As is often true of the science fiction genre that influenced Wilson's vision, the uncertain fate of his futuristic Dine'é character is a reflection upon political and ecological monsters unleashed in the present.<sup>36</sup>

The character in the photographs refuses to fall victim to toxic agents. In an act better characterized as philosophical reckoning than pragmatic response, he draws upon the timeless precepts governing Diné'tah to battle the awakened monster. In the final frames, he is shown building a *hogan*, a Dine'é home, out of recycled metal tubing and other found materials. The traditional hogan is both metaphor and metonym for Diné'tah, its wood and packed-clay form oriented in synchrony with the four mountain relatives. But Dine'é philosophy also holds that every hogan stands at the centre of the universe, articulating a vision of habitus integrated with a larger system that extends across space and time to the very edges of understanding.<sup>37</sup> Thus, as the retooled hogan from Wilson's photographs was installed in museums in Phoenix, Indianapolis and New York, where the project travelled from 2005 to 2006, it remained part of a Dine'é geopolitical framework. Visitors were invited to enter a space reminiscent of a laboratory and lie on a chair made of identical tubing. A glow of neon light pulsed through the entire installation, emulating the transit of water through pipes or blood through veins. *Auto-Immune Response* offered anonymous audiences a concrete material connection to the futuristic time and space of Wilson's Dine'é protagonist,



Jolene Rickard, *Corn Blue Room*, 1998, photographs, corn, photographic CD projections, collection of Denver Art Museum

35. See Anna Rondon, 'Uranium, the Pentagon, and the Navajo People', *Metal of Dishonor, Depleted Uranium: How the Pentagon Radiates Soldiers and Civilians with DU Weapons*, International Action Center, New York, 1997, p 94. An interview with George Tutt about the 'big snakes' from Oak Springs, Arizona appears in Navajo Uranium Miner Oral History and Photography Project, *Memories Come to Us in the Rain and the Wind*, Red Sun Press for the Environmental Health Policy Information Project, Tufts School of Medicine, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, 1997, p 16.

36. Berlo and Horton in conversation with Will Wilson, op cit. Latour also refers to the 'proliferation of monsters' in *We Have Never Been Modern*, op cit, p 12.

ensuring that they could not read the hogan as simply sheltering the character from a threatening landscape. The open-frame structure was an invitation to dwell inside a material manifestation of Dine'é ethics of connectivity and cohabitation. Lying in the middle of *Auto-Immune Response*, one was asked to imagine a 'home' that extended well beyond jurisdictional borders of the Navajo reservation: one where monsters as well as humans live and demand reckoning.

*Auto-Immune Response* hints at a realignment of indigenous understandings of political sovereignty away from Western legal definitions, made explicit in the writing of numerous Native intellectuals.<sup>38</sup> We end with the question of sovereignty by revisiting Tuscarora artist Jolene Rickard's multimedia installation, *Corn Blue Room* (1998) in light of recent materialist trends. *Corn Blue Room* first travelled with a landmark exhibition of contemporary Native American art, 'Reservation X', organized by the Canadian Museum of Civilization in 1998, and is now permanently installed at the Denver Art Museum.<sup>39</sup> The core imagery of the piece is a cascade of enormous ears of Tuscarora White Corn that hangs from the ceiling, bathed in an otherworldly blue glow. Encircling the corn are easels that define a space in the shape of a traditional Haudenosaunee (Six Nations or Iroquois) longhouse, displaying photos of glistening corn kernels, a power line, generating stations and political marches.<sup>40</sup> The images juxtapose manifold forms of power, ranging from the industrial energy generated by the Niagara Mohawk Power Authority (which in

37. Janet Catherine Berlo, 'Alberta Thomas, Navajo Pictorial Arts, and Ecocriticism in Diné'tah', in Alan C Braddock and Christoph Irmscher, eds, *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 2009, p 240; David McAllester, *Hogan: Navajo Houses and House Songs*, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, 1980
38. Taiaiake Alfred, *Wasase: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*, University of Toronto, Higher Education Division, Toronto, 2005; Deloria, Jr, op cit
39. Paul Chaat Smith, 'Jolene Rickard, Corn Blue Room: Unplugging the Hologram', in Gerald McMaster, ed, *Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art*, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec, 1998, pp 122–131
40. *Corn Blue Room* has not yet been given the deep reading that it deserves. Here we focus principally on its ecological aspects, but the work also presents an abbreviated history of the artist's family's involvement with issues of sovereignty and resistance going back more than a century.
41. See, for example, Brazilian artist Eduardo Kac's *GFP Bunny* (2000), which has been followed by a host of other genetic art projects. Marvin Heiferman, ed, *Paradise Now: Picturing the Genetic Revolution*, Exit Art, New York, 2000; Carol Becker, 'GFP Bunny', *Art Journal*, vol 70, no 3, fall 2000, pp 45–47.
42. 'White Corn Inventory Project', Haudenosaunee Environmental Task Force, <http://tuscaroraenvironment.org/index.php/programs/tuscarora-soil-survey/78-white-corn-inventory-project>, accessed 13 April

1957 flooded one-third of Tuscarora land) to the tradition of protests that sustain Haudenosaunee self-governance. Ultimately, however, *Corn Blue Room's* multifaceted political engagements centre on an ancient collaboration between humans and 'Sister Corn', as well as the other two of the foundational Three Sisters of Haudenosaunee life (Beans and Squash), for sustenance. Haudenosaunee women have a reciprocal responsibility to tend these plants in perpetuity.

The installation invites reverence for the caloric and cultural power of these ancestral strains of corn kept and nurtured by countless generations of Tuscarora horticulturalists. The blue glow calls to mind contemporary artworks invoking the ultraviolet light under which the GFP – green fluorescent protein – gene is rendered visible for engineering.<sup>41</sup> An aura of technological know-how is certainly deserved. Tuscarora women have carefully maintained a variety known as Tuscarora White Corn for size, flavour and nutrition; its kernels have as much as fifty per cent more protein than mass-marketed corn and a lower glycaemic index.<sup>42</sup> Today, these ancient, indigenous strains of corn are constantly threatened by the genetically modified corn hybrids ubiquitous in American agribusiness. In order to avoid contamination, Native horticulturalists time their plantings so that their corn pollinates at a different moment from the commercial corn planted nearby. The corn is not in a position to be objectified by the blue light; rather, it seems to emit a ritualistic glow from above, enveloping viewers who stand close and gaze up. The robust swags, so foreign in appearance to supermarket varieties of corn, attest to an indigenous environmental wisdom that trumps the profit-driven applications of contemporary GM technologies. Corn, in turn, becomes a powerful visual justification for the continued relevance of Haudenosaunee principles of governance based in material collaborations, rather than manipulations; a directive to begin, in Rickard's words, 'taking seriously a civilization that has been thousands of years in existence'.<sup>43</sup>

In a recent essay, Rickard reiterates Taiaiake Alfred's call for an interpretation of sovereignty that is detached from its current Western legal meaning in favour of longstanding indigenous understandings of governance.<sup>44</sup> She asserts:

We simultaneously appropriated the European word sovereignty and rejected a U.S. legal interpretation of it while creating a uniquely Haudenosaunee understanding... that embodies our philosophical, political, and renewal strategies.<sup>45</sup>

Critical to her ancestors' formation of sovereignty is a notion of human responsibility to sustain those environmental agents who share the physical and intellectual space of Haudenosaunee lives. Leadership entailed not unmitigated rights of access but rather a responsibility to 'prevent the abuse' of both humans and other-than-humans in an environment of peace.<sup>46</sup> *Corn Blue Room* expands this discussion to incorporate the role of gender and ancestry into themes of governance. In this framework, Haudenosaunee women's 'right' to tend the corn emerges from the fact of a familial relationship, as matrilineages establish corn as a founding ancestor. Since each depends on the other for sustenance in perpetuity, Sister Corn could also be said to have a reciprocal right to the proper governance of her female caretaker. Such a biological basis for female claims to power presents a challenge to core tenets of Western feminist theory

2012; 'Iroquois White Corn Project', Rochester Institute of Technology, Center for Imaging Science, <http://www.cis.rit.edu/node/642>, accessed 13 April 2012

43. Rickard, op cit, p 466
44. Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*, Oxford University, Oxford, 1999, pp 54–55
45. Rickard likewise reminds her readers that the Haudenosaunee 'played a critical role in the formation of concepts of democracy in the emergence of the United States and are today leaders in the forum on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples'. Rickard, op cit, pp 466–467. See also Iris Marion Young, 'Hybrid Democracy: Iroquois Federalism and the Postcolonial Project', in *Global Challenges: War, Self-Determination and Responsibility for Justice*, Polity, Cambridge, 2007, pp 15–38.
46. Rickard, op cit, p 469
47. For further reading on the sticky relationship between indigenous and Western feminisms, see Devon Abbott Mihesuah, *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska, 2003 and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2003. For a recent exploration of global feminism in relation to First Nations art, see Elizabeth Kalbfleisch, *Bordering on Feminism: Home and Transnational Sites in Recent Visual Culture and Native Women's Art*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Program in Visual and Cultural Studies, University of Rochester, 2009.

that emphasizes the constructed and performative nature of gender roles as a cultural constant.<sup>47</sup> Such a situation prompts us to consider that some legislative boundaries have an ongoing role to play in protecting differences, even as other principles of Haudenosaunee governance translate readily across political and cultural borders.

The 'we' in Rickard's text is not the same 'we' in Latour's – and that is precisely why they need to talk. Staging encounters with lively and often demanding materials, the projects described in this article share with proponents of the 'new materialisms' a determination to avoid a purely instrumentalist approach to a politics of the environment. In a world where Western legal systems continue to hold sway, this certainly does not entail indigenous peoples relinquishing the land and resource rights they have lost or stand to lose and for which they have struggled for centuries. But to assert such claims without rooting them in an alternative materialist philosophy can perpetuate colonial terms of ownership. Artists such as Rickard help strengthen legal claims to self-determination by framing them in an indigenous intellectual tradition and displaying the relevance of its precepts to a larger transnational community. She joins Durham, Belmore and Wilson in contributing to a larger critical project of grasping human and non-human entities as agents in a mutually affecting relationship. It is precisely through such a retooled vision of shared, collaborative power that we begin to identify tenets for an equitable geopolitics that loosen the grip of anthropocentric nationalisms and devastating neocolonialisms. We suggest that the emerging vision is not a borderless utopia, but rather a geography of crossing paths, marking points of convergence between equals – indigenous and European persons, human and other-than-human agents – whose livelihoods are always already inextricable. There is a certain intellectual generosity in the works we have discussed, an invitation for human cognition to move across the same boundaries that stone and water traverse with ease. Instead of a mirror, they offer a meeting ground. Accepting the invitation is certainly a human choice. But material may be the ultimate judge of our ethics.

---

The authors acknowledge the generosity of artists Will Wilson and Jimmie Durham, as well as colleague Richard Hill, in the formulation of this article.

---



# Against Internationalism

Jimmie Durham

The reason I am writing this way is that this is meant as an artwork.

Are the Sami people reindeer herders? The bosses of the Soviet Union once moved the Nenets into the area around Murmansk, then moved them out again because of nuclear weapons testing. (If I have the story straight.) I was up in that area a couple of times, and wrote a poem about the Nenets and about our collective contemporary predicament.

My hosts and friends were always Sami. Some had been basically fishermen before, some reindeer herders, some reindeer hunters. One guy explained that it was all contingent – on what restraints and opportunities arose. None of it was definitional.

But the world ‘knows’ that the Sami are reindeer herders.

I have been thinking about ‘Indigenous People’ – if one looks on the internet one finds a site: ‘Indigenous Peoples – how you can help’. We are, it seems, people who need help. Just last week I read in the newspaper that the actor Colin Firth was pitching in to help some indigenous people in the Brazilian Amazon. ‘The most endangered tribe’, the newspaper heading declared, and I could imagine how British people loved the idea.

I wondered why Mr Firth did not ask for NATO or the UN to intervene, as they did in Kosovo. Why is the Brazilian government not arrested, I have often wondered, and all of the governments of North and South America? Why is this continued genocide so pleasing to Europe?

I have been thinking about nations. They look like, act like, the only reality. The press welcomed Southern Sudan as ‘the newest nation’ as though delighted at the newest birth in a family.

In the 1970s I worked at the United Nations. Most people then and now see it as an autonomous organization – it is not, and the nations are not united. They came into being against each other.

Nationhood and nationality are not a natural progression. More like the complicity of gangsters welcoming other gangsters into the fold because they have been forced to. The old European nations are just a few years older than the newer ‘post-colonial’ nations. I mean, they are not part of some natural law.

There used to be a Human Rights Commission of the United Nations at the Geneva headquarters. I would go there three or four times a year to make reports. If, after I reported, a delegate from a member state responded, I could then continue to speak. Once the delegate from Syria responded to my report. At the next day's session another delegate spoke against some situation in Syria. You cannot imagine the theatrical indignation from the Syrian side. He said, with a practically religious fervour, that the matter in question was an internal matter. It is, in fact, a hard-and-fast rule of the United Nations that the members will not attempt to interfere in each other's 'internal affairs'. At the turn of the century the Human Rights Commission, which during the time I was there was chaired by Sean McBride and then by Leopold Senghor, was downgraded to become a council instead of a commission.

In those days I received letters at least once a month from people seeking help. Ainu prisoners in Japan, Aborigines in Australia, Sami in different Scandinavian countries, Roma ('Gypsies') from various countries, Kurds and even Afro-Americans from the US. I kept no files and tossed the letters away as I got them.

My brief was specifically to present the case of Europe's invasion and colonization of the peoples of North and South America to the United Nations for action or at least condemnation. (We saw that as a twenty-year project, coupled with concerted actions in the various countries where we had member organizations, such as Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Canada, the US.)

We wanted our colonization to be seen as that: to be considered politically.

The UN, with its nation-protecting protocols, needed us to be considered as problems internal to some of its member states.

It was necessary, we were told, to first approach the colonizers through the Organization of American States (OAS). (Hence our strategy of knocking at the back door – the Human Rights Commission.)

Although I tossed the letters away I was not callous. I remembered and I maintained a few contacts.

Even earlier I had made a fairly extensive and unfortunate tour of the Philippines. (Unfortunate because I was in the US military.) There I met many people whom we must describe, for lack of adequate vocabulary, which is a main concern of this article, as 'tribal' or 'indigenous'. I also met 'Negritos' in almost every area I visited and bought knives from them that they had made. They are quite small, beautiful people. I asked everyone about them and the general knowledge was not much, but 'they have always been here'.

Have you heard of the Vedda in Sri Lanka? They are a small people closely related to the Negritos of the Philippines, who have always been there, and to the Bushmen or Pygmies of Africa. They have been in Sri Lanka for about twenty thousand years. Longer, we might say, than the ruling classes who are so vicious towards the Tamils in a nationalistic war.

In the 1960s and 1970s one of the people I most admired was Julius Nyerere, the liberator of Tanzania from its colonial past as Tanganyika. He looked for ways in which his nation could survive without falling into dependence on the European colonizers. He wanted his various 'tribal groups' to be equal internationally with 'the West' (in his case, 'the North').

To admonish people to be more modern he had signs in public places: 'Don't be like the Hadzapi [Pygmies] – wear shoes!'

Well, I have been telling these stories and examples in several places during the last few years. I do not mind the repetition; about art Gabriel Orozco said, 'Show a work until everyone has seen it'.

Much more, it is as though, having seen, and been witness, it is my responsibility to give evidence.

Look now at what I saw in Siberia: I saw wise people for the first time in my life. The Republic of Yakutia, like all of Siberia and its various 'semi-autonomous republics', is still tied as a colony to Russia. Russia needs Siberia for its national myth in exactly the same way in which the US needs the 'West'. Hardly an excuse to exist without those myths.

But in the 1930s Stalin's gang of Russians (but maybe the gang members were Ukrainian or Georgian or Uzbek; Stalin's programme was genius at enlisting people into Russian gangsterism) methodically killed all the Shamans they could find in the area.

The people resisted by becoming scientists. The double tradition, science and resistance to Russian oppression, has remained, so that this truly vast semi-autonomous republic (more than five times the size of France with no railroad anywhere) seems filled with scientists and with science. They have a perfect laboratory for any and every experiment in all of the earth-related sciences. Japanese, American and European scientists go there for research.

The main problem is Russians. If a bear comes upon some delicate apparatus in the wilderness, it may accidentally trip something up, but a Russian will tear it to pieces, I was told.

The hard times for these peoples (Yakutia has three main 'tribal groups') are not yet over, because they are still under Russia and must find ever new ways of resistance.

Because of the history of the area, however, many of them still want a union of Soviet Republics. One without Russian dominance.

In the 1970s, when we in the US defined our fight for sovereignty over our own lands as a fight for national independence, I often thought that the US could defeat us utterly simply by withdrawing and allowing the existence of independent American Indian nations – sit back and watch us struggle with borders, taxes, 'development' and its international debt, fiscal and currency problems – an army for each nation also, of course. Those attributes that 'real nations' have.

I think we knew, though, that what we really needed was for the colonial nations to disappear; not for ours to rise up.

I have been trying to imagine a way of thinking about our situation away from the vocabulary and ensuing mindset that the nations have set so heavily upon the world.

What might we say that 'indigenous peoples' of the world have in common? The general romantic idea is that we are all somehow closer to nature. That is an astounding phenomenon, if it is true in any way, but I do not want to dismiss it too quickly because of that.

I lived in Geneva, Switzerland from 1969 to 1973, and had the privilege of knowing Michel Porret and his family in a small village in Canton de Vaud. Michel still spoke and wrote in Vaudois. His family had lived on the little farm plot for about a thousand years and, according to him, a family of foxes had lived up in the forest on the hill for about the same

span, stealing the odd chicken from time to time. 'I guess everyone likes chicken', Michel said.

His cousin operated a small trout farm in the stream until a tractor company bought up a bunch of land on the other side of the stream and caused such pollution that the trout all died.

Shall we be against tractors and their companies? And their work for us? With a tractor one can farm better and easier have more leisure time to read books and make enough money to buy a few books.

There is a way in which we must say that the trouble is, the tractor company is not indigenous. That is, its decision to buy the land across the stream had no known connection to the stream, the trout or the Porret family. Had to do only with the national and 'local' legal requirements, deeds, taxes and so forth.

For about forty years now we have all come to know of the wickedness of the multinational corporations, larger than many nations, beholden to none, as though they were supra-national. Yet these monsters were born and have evolved in nations, in the strict controls of nationalism.

They could not exist, could not operate without the nations; they depend upon them.

The nations, in turn, are never indigenous. The government of France must always be Not-Provence, Not-Pays d'Oc, Not-Savoie. Its decisions must always be in favour of something else. When we get to the Americas, the situation becomes constantly critical. Brazil must ultimately be in favour of de-forestation. The Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Land Management in the US must ultimately maintain their positions as destroyers in favour of cattle and petroleum industries.

The real common denominator of indigenous peoples is that we are stateless peoples. Stateless peoples with no chance of having states of our own in this world gangsterism. (Will there exist a Hadzapi Republic?) Because in almost every instance the states were created against us.

The holiness of states ought to be immediately suspect. Treason against the state is automatic death practically everywhere. To be against your own country! Worse than hating god. 'Vive La France!' they shout before the firing line.

Holy Mother Russia (and so on). Don't you love your own country? (I suppose Turkish Kurds are asked).

We, whoever 'we' are, the United Nations, public opinion or something, must demand that the states protect and grant rights to their indigenous populations. This is to imagine that there really is a world indigenous problem. The world has a problem, alright, but we are not it; it is nationalism. The states are the problem.

For a long time Canton de Vaud was colonized by Canton de Berne. After heroic fights it was not allowed to be free but to become part of Switzerland instead.

Would the people of Puglia stop making good wine and cheese if there was no Italian state or any other to take over?

We need a world government without nations, wherein everyone is equally protected. That we are not capable of such is our major problem, but that makes it no less a necessity.

What, for example, if we had a world law against the buying and selling of land? If, as so many stateless peoples say, the earth is the earth and not a commodity?



# Ought We Not to Establish 'Access to Food' As a Species Right?

Subhankar Banerjee

Species are becoming extinct from our earth at an unprecedented rate. We know this. And now a recent comprehensive scientific study by an international research team says, 'Ecosystem effects of biodiversity loss rival climate change and pollution'.<sup>1</sup> With all that in mind, I begin with the supposition that all animals, including humans, want and need to eat to survive. If that indeed is true, then the basic moral question before us would be: ought we not to establish access to food as a species right? Here I am interested in the question, 'ought we not?' rather than the prescription 'we should'.

Posing the issue as a prescription would mean that we had a good understanding of the relationship between access to food and survival, and that consequently we could establish public policies to ensure access to food as a species right. But our understanding of that relationship is limited, it has become more complicated, and the goal a moving target in the human-made climate-ravaged Anthropocene in which we now find ourselves.

Also, we humans are very far from giving any serious rights of survival to non-human communities, especially if giving such rights would conflict with the convenience of our own needs and wants. For example, the US Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Marine Mammals Protection Act (MMPA) are often compromised to support industrial development. Shell's drilling ships *Nobel Discoverer* and *Kulluk* have already sailed from Seattle to Arctic Alaska in the hope of beginning exploratory oil drilling in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas – arguably the most dangerous form of drilling, as no one knows how to clean up oil from underneath the ice in the harsh environment of the Arctic. Any major spill from Shell's drilling would certainly compromise the ESA and the MMPA that now protect the estimated 10,000 'endangered' bowhead whales and several thousand 'threatened' polar bears of Alaska's Arctic Ocean.<sup>2</sup> While the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

1. 'Ecosystem Effects of Biodiversity Loss Rival Climate Change and Pollution: First Comprehensive Effort to Compare Biodiversity Loss to other Human-caused Environmental Changes', National Science Foundation Press Release 12-083, 2 May 2012, online at: [http://www.nsf.gov/news/news\\_summ.jsp?cntn\\_id=124016](http://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=124016)

2. Subhankar Banerjee, 'BPing the Arctic?', in Subhankar Banerjee, ed, *Arctic Voices: Resistance at the Tipping Point*, Seven Stories, New York, 2012

acknowledges, ‘In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence’, the broader ‘access to food as a species right’ is a philosophical question. Which species? What food? What kind of access?

I will share three stories about access to food – two from the Arctic, my ongoing project of twelve years; and one from the desert, a project that I started in 2006 and ended in 2010. I will share a few words before I get to those stories, first about absence and then presence of non-human communities in photography.

In the past few decades there has been an explosion of human portrait photography – photographers taking pictures of themselves or other people to explore many issues of culture. As I write these words in New York City, the Museum of Modern Art has a massive and wonderful Cindy Sherman retrospective and also an exhibition of Taryn Simon; later this summer, the Guggenheim Museum will present a retrospective of Rineke Dijkstra. In 2010, the Walker Art Center presented an exhibition of Alec Soth; in 2008, the Guggenheim presented a massive retrospective of Catherine Opie, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art an exhibition of Philip-Lorca diCorcia. In 2006, the Art Institute of Chicago presented a wonderful group exhibition ‘so the story goes’ with photographs by Tina Barney, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Nan Goldin, Sally Mann, and Larry Sultan. The 2003 Thomas Struth touring retrospective included his well-known group portraits; and both Thomas Ruff and Fazal Sheikh have produced celebrated portrait series. The list of contemporary human portrait photography seems endless.

What about exhibitions of portraits of animals? That number would be close to zero. In my essay for the 18th Biennale of Sydney catalogue *all our relations*, I wrote about photography’s silence on non-human communities.<sup>3</sup> There has been an exception or two from here: Robert Adams – and over there: Jean-Luc Mylayne. In 2010, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid presented Mylayne’s retrospective, ‘Into the Hands of Time’ – four decades of photographs of common birds. And ‘The Place We Live’ – a currently touring retrospective of Robert Adams presented by the Yale University Art Gallery accompanied by a massive three-volume catalogue – shows clearly how Adams’s photography has explored the American West for more than four decades, primarily through the changing relationship of humans to the environment, but also at times through pictures of animals. In a handwritten letter to me, dated 5 July 2008, Adams wrote:

As it happens, this spring as my wife & I walked the beach to enjoy the sight of the birds going north – something we eagerly await each year – I twice photographed Brant (just in b&w, with my old Nikon), & we agreed it would be wonderful to see where they went. Now we have, thanks to your beautiful & important work that wish is answered. It’s wonderful . . . we can even see the young!

There are several aspects of Adams’s note that are worthy of our attention. *Excitement* – ‘we eagerly await each year’. There are others who also eagerly wait, as writer Debbie Miller pointed out;

For centuries, the return of the yellow wagtails [from the Arctic] has signaled the Kelabit [people of Borneo] to plant their rice. The Kelabit calendar revolves around the planting month, known as *Sensulit mad’ting*, meaning the month of the yellow wagtail’s arrival.<sup>4</sup>

3. Subhankar Banerjee, ‘Photography’s Silence of (Non)Human Communities’, in Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster, eds, *all our relations*, 18th Biennale of Sydney catalogue, Sydney, June 2012

4. Debbie Miller, ‘Songs from Around the World’, in Stephen Brown, ed, *Arctic Wings: Birds of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*, Mountaineers, Seattle, 2006

*Curiosity* – ‘it would be wonderful to see where they went’ – perhaps we have always wondered: where do they come from, and where do they go? And *interconnectedness* – ‘birds going north’ – of human and nonhuman communities, from here to there.

The photograph Adams refers to – ‘Brant and Snow Geese with Chicks’, which I had taken in July 2006 in the Teshekpuk Lake wetland in the central Alaskan Arctic – represents the largest wetland complex in the entire circumpolar north. But why do the Brant [or Brent] Geese travel all this distance from the Oregon coast to the Arctic for a sojourn that lasts about three months? The primary reason is that access to food in the Arctic is abundant (the birds can feed round the clock beneath the midnight sun); they also nest there and raise their young, then return south before snow begins to fall. But gaining access to food in the far north for these long-distance migrants is becoming harder and harder; Arctic warming and ever-expanding resource extraction projects – for oil, gas, coal and minerals – are having a significant negative impact on the bird habitats of the far north.



*Brant and Snow Geese with Chicks, Oil and the Geese*, 2006, Teshekpuk Lake wetland, Arctic Alaska, 68 in x 86 in, photo: Subhankar Banerjee



### *SPECIES VULNERABILITY*

There is another Oregon migrant – the Pacific Loon – that Bob Adams probably doesn't get to see, as the birds winter offshore in the Pacific Ocean and return north to build their nest in the Arctic tundra, adjacent to large deep lakes, in Alaska, northern Canada and eastern Siberia.

I spent the winter term 2009 as Artist-in-Residence at Dartmouth College. There, with plenty of free time, I dug through my archive and presented a selection of some thirty photos of the loon, spread across three large white walls in my office-studio, creating an immersive



*Loon on Nest, Oil and the Caribou*, 2002, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska, four images from a larger set, each 12 in x 12 in, photo: Subhankar Banerjee



space. Each photo shows a Pacific Loon on a nest. I had taken the photos over a two-week period in June 2002, in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. In these bird portraits we do not get much information about their natural history but instead a psychological state of being-in-the-land. The loon sleeps briefly, then wakes up, and rotates its head to look around. I had known that when resting outside its breathing hole on the ice a seal would use a sleeping-waking-looking method to protect itself from polar bears, its predator. I surmise that the loon (besides being curious) was keeping an eye out for predators, like the Arctic fox, that would try to get the eggs – at times the fox wins. Whether it was a clear day with the temperature at about forty degrees Fahrenheit, or a day when snow fell incessantly with temperatures around twenty degrees, the loon sat on the nest and rotated its head. There were breaks too – an exchange, as both male and female bird share nesting duties, giving each other breaks to go and feed. Did my presence impact on the loons' behaviour? Quite possibly, but they did sleep in my presence too.

Loons have done well so far. They are among the oldest surviving species on Earth, having been around for more than twenty million years. However, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology website on the Pacific Loon states, 'Spring migration counts in California showed a sharp decline between 1979 and 1996, but these numbers have not been substantiated by surveys of breeding birds'. And the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology webpage on the Pacific Loon states, 'Recent studies are looking into the magnification of chemicals in the loon's body due to pollutants being added to the ecosystem'. Moreover, since oil and gas lie underneath all major Arctic river deltas and the adjoining tundra, development projects to extract those resources only exacerbate the decline of the loons.

Loons critically depend on large deep lakes – both for access to food and as transportation corridors. They are unable to take flight from land and require 'about thirty to fifty meters of open water to take flight, flapping and pattering across the surface'. A nesting pair can either feed (on fish and other aquatic life) in the lake next to the shore on which they are nesting, or take off from the lake to feed in another nearby lake, or in a nearby coastal lagoon. In the Arctic, access to food and large deep lakes are connected for the survival of Pacific Loon. Now imagine this scenario: a loon pair have arrived in the Arctic tundra, but the lake they use for breeding and nesting is dry, and so are the nearby lakes; I would call this a special vulnerability because there is nothing the loons can do to deal with this situation, unlike predation. Arctic lakes are disappearing rapidly due to warming – permafrost is thawing and the water is draining away, leaving the lakes dry. Beyond the tundra there is no more land or lakes, only ocean, all the way to the North Pole. Loons cannot go any further north than they currently go to nest.

### ***RIGHT-TO-FOOD CLAIM***

In 2007, in the exhibition 'Weather Report: Art and Climate Change' curated by Lucy R Lippard, I presented for the first time one

large photograph of pregnant caribou migrating over a frozen river and four smaller photographs of Gwich'in hunters butchering caribou on the snow, and wall text, with the intent of making visible the coming together of ecological and human rights issues in the most contentious public land debate in the US. The question of whether to open up the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil and gas development, or to protect it permanently, has been raging in the halls of the US Congress for more than four decades. The central argument presented by the conservationists is that the coastal plain is the core calving area of the Porcupine River caribou herd, and that oil development will have a significant impact on the herd; the caribou have become the poster child of this debate. On the other hand, the Gwich'in Nation – fifteen villages across north-east Alaska and north-west Canada – have argued that oil development in the caribou calving ground is a human rights issue for the Gwich'in. The Gwich'in people have relied on the caribou for food, cultural and spiritual sustenance for many millennia. In his historic testimony to oppose oil development in the caribou calving ground before the US Congress on 7 July 1988, Jonathan Solomon, late Gwich'in activist and founding board member of the Gwich'in Steering Committee, said:

Congress has the power, but no one has the right to deny the Gwich'in our own means of subsistence. This principle is clearly stated in the International Human Rights Covenants, and is recognized by civilized nations everywhere. Make no mistake, this is our life at stake here – the life of a modern hunting culture that is alive and healthy and growing.<sup>5</sup>

To downplay caribou's reliance on the coastal plain, pro-oil politicians have used various means, including gagging federal scientists and manipulating major scientific reports.<sup>6</sup> Despite repeated attempts by various administrations to open the area, the Arctic Refuge continues to remain free of oil development while the debate continues.

I would suggest that 'access to food as a species right' has been the core of the argument in this ongoing battle. In April and May pregnant female caribou make an extremely long and arduous journey over high mountains and frozen rivers to arrive at the coastal plain by the end of May. They give birth during the first few days in June. But why do the caribou make this difficult journey to the coastal plain? The primary reason is access to food. When caribou arrive at the coastal plain, a type of nutrient-rich cotton grass returns to life after the long winter. The caribou feed on it, build up milk, nurse their calves, and slowly begin their return migration.

The Gwich'in call the caribou calving ground 'Ilzhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit' ('The sacred place where life begins'). However, the coastal plain is *not* part of the Gwich'in traditional homeland. Instead, it is the traditional homeland of the Inupiat. The Gwich'in do not inhabit the coastal plain, they do not go there to hunt, they do not even walk there, and yet they are making a claim for its protection. For all these reasons, I would call this a right-to-food claim; by making this claim they are fighting to protect access to food for human and non-human communities – caribou for the Gwich'in, and cotton grass for the caribou, during calving time.

5. Jonathan Solomon, Sarah James and Trimble Gilbert, 'We'll Fight to Protect the Caribou Calving Ground and Gwich'in Way of Life', in Banerjee, *Arctic Voices*, op cit

6. See Banerjee, 'BPing the Arctic?' op cit, and Pamela A Miller, 'Broken Promises: The Reality of Big Oil in America's Arctic', in Banerjee, *Arctic Voices*, op cit.



*Caribou Migration I, Oil and the Caribou*, 2002, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska, 86 in x 68 in, photo: Subhankar Banerjee



*Gwich'in Caribou Hunt: Jimmy John, Near Arctic Village, 2007, 18 in x 24 in, photo: Subhankar Banerjee*

## HABITAT LOSS

In 2011, the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas presented an exhibition of my desert series, *Where I Live I Hope To Know*. In the Arctic I have been looking at the far-away, in the desert it was the near – for four years I walked in a five-mile radius around the home where I lived. One of the themes I engaged with was the issue of dead piñons – New Mexico’s state tree.

Sadly, as I continued my photography, I began to realize that the old-growth piñon forest in New Mexico is mostly dead due to recent climate change. Between 2001 and 2005, *Ips confusus*, a tiny bark beetle, killed 54.5 million piñons – ninety per cent of the mature piñons in northern New Mexico. When healthy trees become stressed from severe and sustained drought, they become subject to attack: the beetles drill into their bark, lay eggs along the way, and kill their host.<sup>7</sup>

I was not interested in taking portraits of dead trees, however. Instead, through the walks, I wanted to get close, first to cholla cactuses, and then to dead piñons, to understand the often overlooked but complex interconnected ecology of the desert. This engagement eventually led me to the politics of ecology rooted in the local and connected to the global; climate change is killing trees all over the world.<sup>8</sup>

7. Subhankar Banerjee, 'Where I Live I Hope To Know', in *Subhankar Banerjee: Where I Live I Hope To Know*, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, 2011

8. Craig D Allen, et al, 'A Global Overview of Drought and Heat-Induced Tree Mortality Reveals Emerging Climate Change Risks for Forests', in *Forest Ecology and Management*, vol 259, issue 4, February 2010





*Scrub Jay in the Midst of Many Dead Piñons, Where I Live I Hope to Know*, 2009, New Mexico piñon-juniper woodland, 30 in x 90 in (oblique), photo: Subhankar Banerjee

Here I will share the story of access to food with one particular photo, *Scrub Jay in the Midst of Many Dead Piñons: On My Way to the Powerline*, 2009. Something terrible had happened; so I presented the photo not straight on but from an oblique angle. However, the angle is not forced. I used the natural slope of the hill while taking the photo, keeping the horizon line straight. Several dead piñons lie on the ground, each tree perhaps 500 years old, or older; the junipers are green and alive, and have berries on them; a Scrub Jay rests on a dead branch, while the sun begins to set. Scrub Jays eat piñon nuts which are very rich in protein. Its cousin the Piñon Jay critically depends on piñon nuts for sustenance. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology webpage on the Piñon Jay states:

A highly social bird of the lower mountain slopes of the western United States, the Pinyon Jay is specialized for feeding on pine seeds. Each jay stores thousands of seeds each year, and has such a good memory that it can remember where most of them were hidden. Pinyon Jay social organization is complex, with permanent flocks that may include more than 500 individuals.

Piñon Jays not only eat piñon nuts but also serve a very important role in the regeneration of piñon woods. A typical flock of fifty to 500 birds can cache more than four million piñon seeds in a good year in New Mexico, and uneaten seeds result in new trees. For Native American communities of the desert South-West, the piñon tree has been of immense cultural, spiritual and economic importance for many millennia. The nut is extensively harvested throughout its range. It has been a staple for a long time and continues to be eaten and used in cooking today.

Caching on this massive scale and a strong recall for the later retrieval of nuts from the stored caches are a survival mechanism that the Piñon Jay has mastered; it is necessary since piñon trees produce nuts

only once every four to seven years. Also, the piñon is perhaps the slowest growing tree of the American Southwest – it takes nearly 300 years to mature (other pine trees take about seventy years) and lives up to 1000 years. With the death of more than ninety per cent of mature piñons, what vanished at the same time was access to food – for non-human and human communities. This loss has made the Piñon Jay’s caching–retrieval survival technique useless, and in that sense I would call this a severe habitat loss. I did not see a single Piñon Jay flock during my four years of walking, so I photographed a Scrub Jay instead.

With my Arctic and desert series so far, I have been attempting to build a framework of habitation, resistance-against-destruction and revitalization that I call *land-as-home* – land that provides home and food to our species and all other species with whom we share this earth. By asking ‘ought we not to establish?’, my hope is that we will ask many more questions about ‘access to food as a species right’ that may lead us toward understanding and then fighting for the survival of non-human and human communities, in the rapidly transforming Anthropocene. In 2009, during the UN Climate Change Conference, COP15, I went to Copenhagen with Gwich’in elder and activist Sarah James to present our work in a group exhibition ‘(Re-)Cycles of Paradise’, organized by ARTPORT in partnership with the Global Gender and Climate Alliance.<sup>9</sup> Our effort was part of Klimaforum09, ‘the global civil society counterpart to the UN conference’. Activists from all over the world were hopeful that something good would come out of COP15, but as the days went by our hope faded away into disappointment, and then a kind of resolve to continue fighting began to take shape. Most importantly COP15 gave birth to the Climate Justice Movement.<sup>10</sup> The following year in April, on the invitation of Bolivian President Evo Morales, the historic gathering World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth took place in Cochabamba, attended by about 30,000 people from over 100 countries. The same year, on 28 July, the UN declared access to clean water and sanitation ‘a fundamental human right’ – 122 nations voted in favour, none against, with forty-one abstentions, including the US and Canada.<sup>11</sup> Pablo Solón Romero, then Ambassador of Bolivia to the United Nations, played a crucial role. In June, in something of a surprise move, he had introduced the resolution at the UN General Assembly, forcing a UN vote the following month. While the water campaign resulted in success, the story of the climate change campaign is quite different. The recent Rio+20 UN Summit has made it clear that addressing climate change through the UN process has not only turned into a political farce, but worse, it has successfully been hijacked by the most powerful and destructive corporations under the banner of Green Economy and Sustainability. But the work of activist communities all over the world goes on. Ecophilosopher Vandana Shiva ended her op-ed, ‘The great Rio U-turn’ in *Al Jazeera* with these words:

I treat Rio+20 as a ‘square bracket’ (UN jargon for text that is not agreed upon and often gets deleted). It is not the final step, just a punctuation. Democracy and political processes will decide the real outcome of history and the future of life on Earth. Our collective will and collective actions will determine whether corporations will be successful in

9. Sarah James and Subhankar Banerjee, interview with Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now!*, 8 December 2009, online at: [http://www.democracynow.org/2009/12/8/we\\_are\\_having\\_a\\_hard\\_time](http://www.democracynow.org/2009/12/8/we_are_having_a_hard_time)
10. Yates McKee, ‘Of Survival: Climate Change and Uncanny Landscape in the Photography of Subhankar Banerjee’, in Henry Sussman, ed, *Impasses of the Post-Global: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, Open Humanities, University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 15 May 2012, available online at: <http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/impasses-of-the-post-global.html>
11. ‘In Historic Vote, UN Declares Water a Fundamental Human Right’, *Democracy Now!*, 29 July 2010, online at: [http://www.democracynow.org/2010/7/29/in\\_historic\\_vote\\_un\\_declares\\_access](http://www.democracynow.org/2010/7/29/in_historic_vote_un_declares_access)

12. Vandana Shiva, 'The great Rio U-turn', *Al Jazeera*, 2 July 2012, online at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/06/20126279180725959.html>

privatizing the last drop of water, the last blade of grass, the last acre of land, the last seed – or whether our movements will be able to defend life on Earth, including human life, in its rich diversity, abundance and freedom.<sup>12</sup>

Access to clean water for humans has been recognized. Let us now talk about access to food, for all species, and build on Shiva's call to action.

# Entangled Earth

Nabil Ahmed

This article tells a story of the entanglement of human and non-human actors in contemporary practices in Bangladesh. It claims the agency of nature in shaping geopolitical forces, which in turn encroach on nature itself. It adopts an ecological perspective, viewing ecology as a pluralistic practice that permeates the earth's minorities and socialities with catalytic energy. It attempts to decentre a humanist narrative in favour of earth-objects as a way to engage a politics of entanglement with things.<sup>1</sup> Tracing this history will present the conditions under which current anti-capitalist struggles in the environmental regime in Bangladesh occur.

The three objects discussed in the article are cyclone, iron and gas. In Cyclone I tell a history of a state that forms from within the liquid motions of powerful spiralling winds. Iron is the metal undergoing transformation from the hulls of ships in which the material history of oceanic flow of capital is blowtorched into national infrastructure. Natural gases in very large quantities, trapped inside hydrate deposits in geological systems, form part of a deep-sea ecology where symbiotic relationships amongst bacteria, hydrocarbons and ice warmings are about to be entangled in a global natural gas hydrate race.

Human population is an important actor within this natural-political assemblage, in which Bangladesh has been seen by Western neoliberal hegemony for several decades now as a Malthusian time bomb already detonated, whose shrapnel is migrant bodies. Although the friction between human population and nature is always already present, the article proposes that this friction is made explicit in points of contact, such as natural disasters and epidemics.

This article is not an attempt to present a survey of environmental art in Bangladesh. Rather I will articulate in each case an aesthetic regime operating within contemporary political ecology. In the case of Cyclone, it is the humanitarian-architectural form of cyclone shelters and meteorological infrastructure networks that continuously survey the coastal zones; while the ship-breaking industry has transformed the low-intensity beaches of Chittagong into a spectacular scenography for nature-labour exploitation. The Gas section then proposes to cast open the environmental activist struggles whose political work takes on

1. This thesis is indebted to the work of Bruno Latour and Michel Serres among others.





Existing cyclone shelter, Rangabali, photo: Lindsay Bremner

complex multiple dimensions which, in traversing the theoretical, legal-scientific matrix, has included using highways and television as mediums of democratic social technology.

‘Aestheticized geology’ is a term used by Mike Davis in his discussion of the role of photographs, drawings and narratives in the invention of a new science, geomorphology, as encountered by surveyors of the Colorado plateau in the nineteenth-century United States. A landscape of ‘strange spires, majestic cliff facades, and fabulous canyons’ was brought within the scientific realm through the work of artists and photographers whose work supplanted the technical reports of the surveyors.<sup>2</sup> Thus image-making can not only facilitate science in its ‘specificity’ but also constitute a scientific practice. This line of constructivist inquiry, which Isabelle Stengers calls an ‘ecology of practices’, can be a valuable conceptual tool for the purpose of this article, as it allows for earth-objects, social movements and art to co-produce the word-order global south, particularly as strange attractors in defying hegemonic power.<sup>3</sup>

2. Mike Davis, *Dead Cities and Other Tales*, New Press, New York, 2002

3. Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, Robert Bononno, trans, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2010

## CYCLONE

The contemporary history of Bangladesh is one of the starkest examples of the politicization of natural disasters; part of this can be traced from Bhola cyclone, which devastated its coastal zones in 1970.

Bengali nationalism, from colonial rule onwards, takes the form of a social movement in the province of East Pakistan. The cyclone spanned a political movement from a social movement and thereafter armed conflict. Although the liberation war (*Mukti Juddho*) of 1971 remains central to the political imaginary of every Bangladeshi and post-colonial history, this article proposes a revisionist history in which the cyclone is an actor in a national liberation. Such environmental historiography challenges the dominant nationalist historiography that has also marginalized non-Bengali populations and led to a decades-long separatist struggle of indigenous tribes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It responds to an atrophied, communalist and militarized nationalism that devalued the role of the left and peasant movements in the liberation struggle.<sup>4</sup>

On the morning of 8 November 1970, six hundred kilometres to the south of the port city of Chittagong, an area of low pressure formed in the central Bay of Bengal and intensified into a severe cyclonic storm on the morning of the 11th. Taking a north-easterly course it crossed the coast of East Pakistan during the night of the 12th.<sup>5</sup> The ocean was a dark mass of turbulence. As the storm made landfall, it caused a seven-metre-high storm surge. A population of at least 300,000 along the coastal areas drowned in their sleep in one of the most devastating natural disasters in history. In the following days and weeks the ruling government in West Pakistan was deeply incriminated in its failed humanitarian efforts, mismanagement of relief funds and sluggish disaster response. The decision to hold general elections in the last weeks of 1970 spelled political suicide for Pakistan as the Awami League, the main opposition party in East Pakistan, which already had massive popular support, won by a huge margin. The positive and negative feedback of the cyclone fed into a social-political movement for

4. See also Ranabir Samaddar, *In the Time of Nationalism: Political Essays on Bangladesh*, University Press, Dhaka, 2002 and Mohammed Sajjadur Rahman, 'Politics of Nationalism in the post-71 Bangladesh', in *Peace Audit: Interrogating Partitions, South Asia* Forum for Human Rights, 2010.

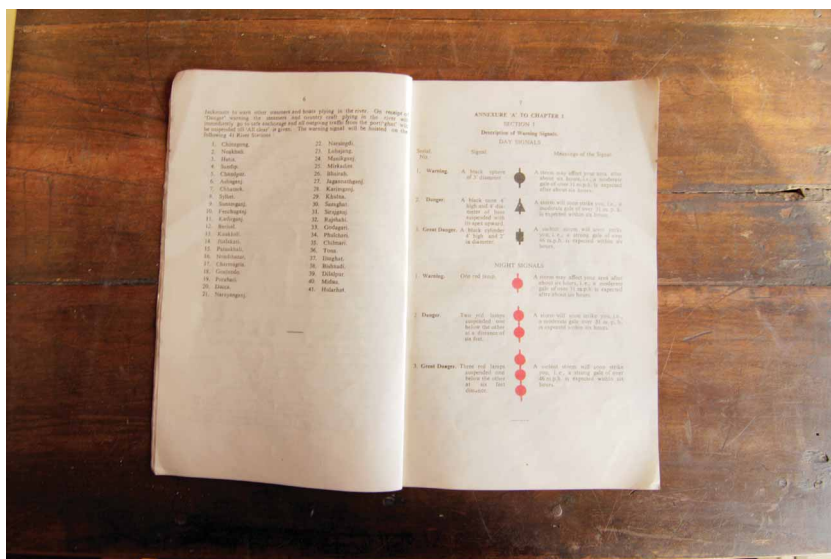
5. 'Storms and Depressions', from *Indian Weather Review, Annual Summary: Part C, Indian Meteorological Department, 1970*



Proposed cyclone shelter design by Lindsay Bremner and Jeremy Voorhees for the village of Rangabali, photo: Lindsay Bremner

6. The precise numbers of dead are not known and no war crimes tribunal was ever set up; Pakistan denies committing genocide. Bangladeshi figures place civilian casualties at three million although this is contested. In 2010 a local initiative to investigate alleged war crimes by Bangladeshi collaborators was established by the Awami League government. For further reference on the topic see W Akman, 'Atrocities Against Humanity During the Liberation War in Bangladesh: A Case of Genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol 4, part 4, 2002, pp 543–560. Also a useful comparison is Mahmood Mamdani's fascinating account of the complex politics of body count in Darfur, in Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics and the War on Terror*, Pantheon, New York, 2004.

7. The term 'development' is first specifically used in the case of newly independent postcolonial countries after the Second World War to address the issue of integrating pre-capitalist economies into the capitalist system. Foreign aid was the main way of providing capital and expanding government and governmentality. Abdul Bayes and Anu Muhammad, eds, *Bangladesh at 25: An Analytical Discourse on Development*, University Press, Jahangirnagar, 1997, pp 47–48.



Storm warning signals in East Pakistan, 1969, photo: Nabil Ahmed

self-determination. Pakistan refused to give up power to the democratically elected party, leading to a guerrilla war for liberation and genocide perpetrated by the Pakistani armed forces and their Bengali-Islamist collaborators.<sup>6</sup>

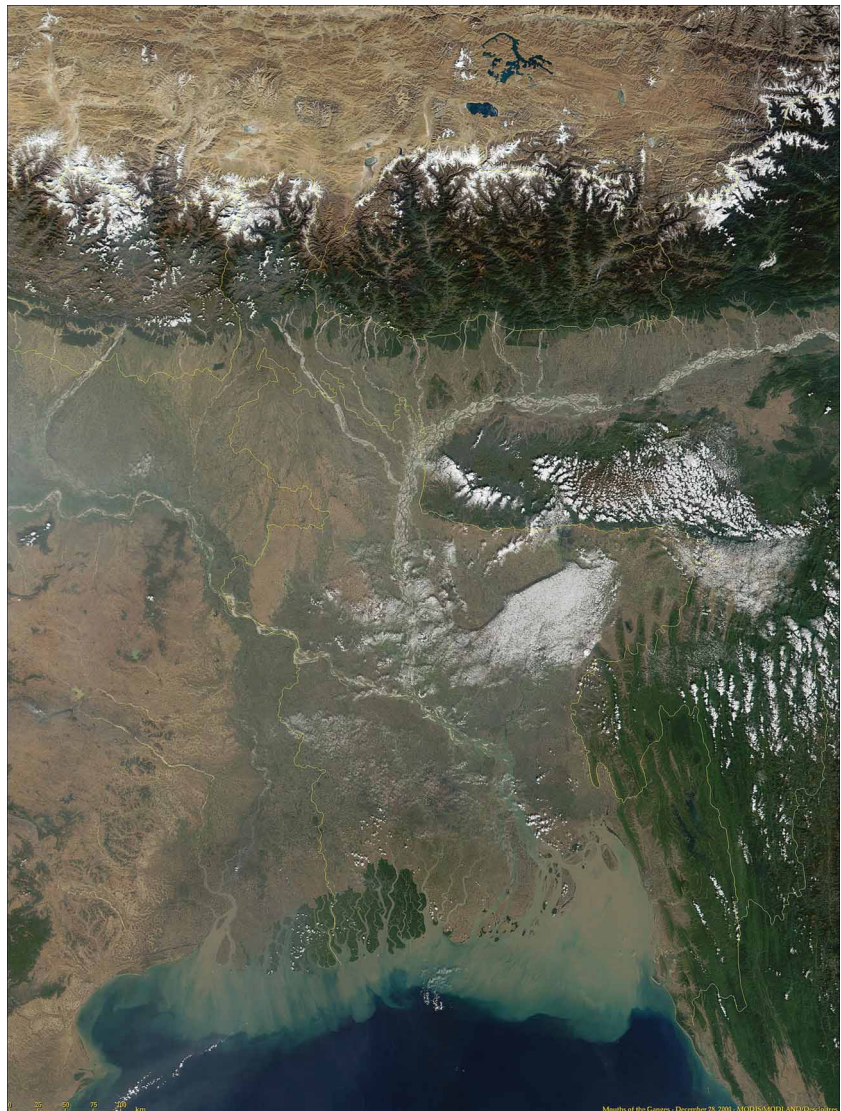
After gaining independence in 1971, one of the mandates of the fledgling Bangladeshi state was to develop an infrastructure against catastrophes and to rationalize the space of disaster. In the building up of this infrastructure over the next decades lies the story of development aid and neoliberal policies, ushered in and mixed in equal parts, under the autocratic rule of Hussein Mohammad Ershad in the 1980s. As Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries facing 'climate change' in the Anthropocene, government policy and rhetoric has shifted considerably from humanitarian response to risk reduction and disaster management inscribed within a wider development paradigm, but at the same time acting to protect the interests of foreign investment and stabilize national political forces.<sup>7</sup> Infrastructure funded through intergovernmental development agreements, such as meteorological stations, embankments and cyclone shelters, attempt to bring within a scientific order the sea and its storm systems, and at the same time to governmentalize coastal territories.

This is manifest particularly in the cyclone shelters that mineralize the coastal zones as part of the building up of infrastructure, displaying a stark modernism in their visual language. Made of reinforced concrete, they are shaped like two sides of a triangle, facing into the wind. People can climb into the structures from stairs at the back. Each shelter can house between 700 and 1500 people, depending on their size. The first cyclone shelters were built in the 1950s. However, a real awareness of their effectiveness only emerged with the 1991 cyclone, which claimed over 140,000 lives. Over the next two decades more than 2100 shelters were built between land and sea, a major infrastructural achievement. Structurally these modernist architectures



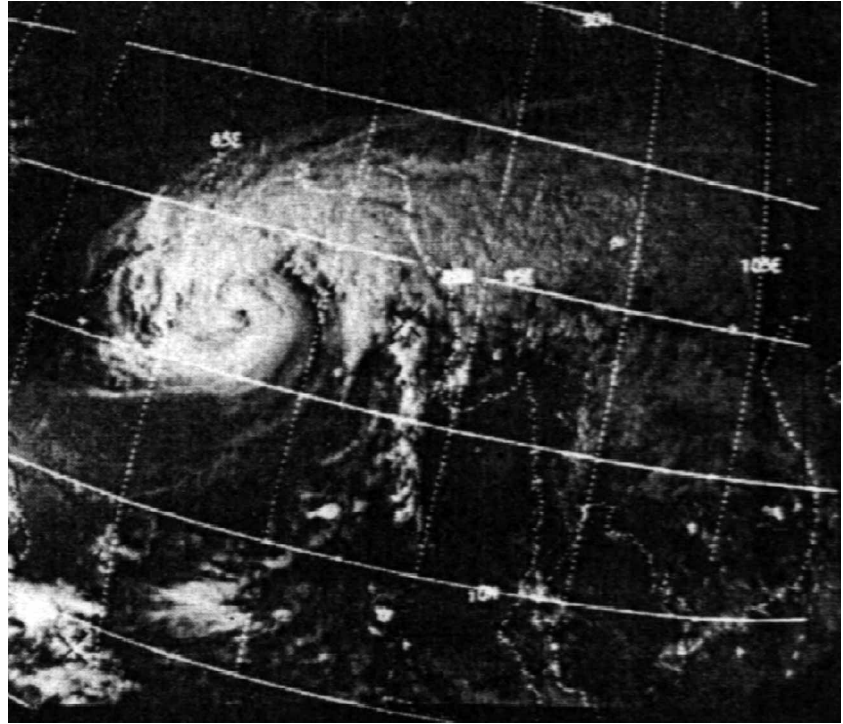
share a common characteristic of being at least two storeys off the ground, like bunkers in the air. This is mainly for protection against storm surges when the sea enters the land. The shelters are usually multi-purpose and used as community centres or schools.

In 2010 the Service Civil International Japan devised an International Design Competition for a cyclone shelter in Rangabali, a small village in the Patuakhali district of Bangladesh. Among the entries, the proposal by architects and writers Lindsay Bremner and Jeremy Voorhees presented a new conceptualization of a shelter, in the form of a boat-building. This brings into relief experimentation with architectural form and ecological thinking and draws on two local sea-faring typologies: the boat and the



Ganges delta, satellite photo: NASA





Bhola cyclone, 11 November 1970, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

landing ghat.<sup>8</sup> Designed for people to assemble in its hull (made of bamboo and reinforced concrete), which resists floodwater, it proposes the radical idea that during a cyclone the shelter would actually be half-submerged in water, responding to the unique characteristic of the delta region and the constant shifting of land and water. Thus, by designing the first underwater cyclone shelter, Bremner and Voorhees challenge the relationship between safety and being-in-the-air. Their design made it into phase two of the competition, which took Lindsay Bremner on a journey to Rangabali as part of a public consultation process, but where the village elders duly rejected the plan. For them a shelter that would be submerged in water during a storm was against convention. She then asked why the women of the village were not present and some were hastily assembled.<sup>9</sup> Although the women present were in favour of the underwater cyclone shelter design, the men did not approve it. As a piece of speculative infrastructure, it tells how architectural practice allows us to invert concepts of safety and belonging which carry differential gendered implications in local culture.

8. Alison Furuto, 'Cyclone Shelter/Lindsay Bremner and Jeremy Voorhees', 27 January 2012, ArchDaily, online at: <http://www.archdaily.com/202268/cyclone-shelter-lindsay-bremner-and-jeremy-voorhees/>, accessed 23 April 2012. The article describes the design in greater detail.

9. Conversation with Lindsay Bremner, London, February 2012

## IRON

*The conduct of life today is utterly dependent on the sea and the ships it bears, yet nothing is more invisible.*

Michael Taussig<sup>10</sup>

Sixty per cent of iron used in the construction business in Bangladesh comes from the ship-breaking industry, earning the state-capitalist apparatus annual revenue of US\$900 million. It employs 30,000 people directly and 250,000 people indirectly. Yet the labour laws in the sector are not applied to protect the workers from grievous injury. In the last decade 250 workers have died and more than 800 have been handicapped for life.<sup>11</sup> Hulking steel remains of ships that took part in maritime trade across the earth's ocean spaces in the last century undergo radical transformation, reverting from ship back to steel. The process of breaking down the massive ocean liners uses a mixture of acetylene and muscular power. Within the rusting structural frames lie the secrets of steel reclaiming its form. Here is the inverse of the shipyards of northern maritime powers, where steel, through the power of capital infrastructure, was reshaped into objects that would produce the conditions for capital to reorganize itself. The long stretching beach and the bay provide the scenography as the labourers struggle to dismember rusting leviathans in the oily mud.

The bosses of the ship-breaking yards of Chittagong have an appalling human rights record despite global media coverage and impose a notorious no-photography rule. Yet the yards attract legions of amateur and professional documentary photographers, and more recently documentary film-makers from around the world, whose often clichéd images connect neither to the politics of the area nor to the ecological regime. The stuff of mud and the oil that seeps through it are ignored. The beach, it seems, is still all-too-human. This complex ecology is addressed in the work of photographer and artist Edward Burtynsky in whose *Oil* series the ship-breaking yards themselves become the subject of the 'end of oil' or the place where the nefarious talismans of petro-capital completely subsume labour power. Burtynsky draws profitably from the New Topographics, the maverick landscape photographers of the American West who developed the photography of human influence on nature as central to their practice.

In the field of documentary film, recent notable works include Shaheen Dill-Riaz's *Iron Eaters* (2008) and Park Bong-Nam's *Iron Crows* (2009). Both films employ stunning cinematography and focus on human toil (men making a living) against the massive backdrop of the ghostly ships and the sea. While Dill-Riaz's film attempts to open up the complex labour relations taking place between workers and the management, Bong-Nam's tearjerker focuses solely on the human suffering. However, neither film actually connects to the longstanding environmental legal activism pioneered by organizations such as the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), which has been actively working on promoting environmental justice since the early 1990s and was the first in setting the precedence for Public Interest Litigation (PIL) practices within human rights law in Bangladesh.<sup>12</sup> In 2009 BELA, led by Supreme Court lawyer Syeda Rizwana Hasan, successfully campaigned to regulate the industry through a court ruling that stipulated conditions relating to the decontamination of foreign ships of toxic chemicals and the safety of workers. The

10. Michael Taussig, *Walter Benjamin's Grave*, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, 2006

11. Ain o Salish Kendra, *Janaswarthey Mamla*, ASK, Dhaka, 2010

12. *Ibid*

problem of accountability and compliance, however, remains as the images of the shipyards and their workers continue to circulate.

## GAS

In March 2010 the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the claim of Sugata Hazra, the head of Oceanography at Jadavpur University, Calcutta, that a tiny uninhabited island (New Moore/South Talpatti), long an object of border dispute between India and Bangladesh, had disappeared under the Bay of Bengal due to rising sea levels. Appropriating statements made by the oceanographer, many newspapers then published the story and made it seem that global warming had resolved what political negotiation could not. South Talpatti is thought to have appeared in the aftermath of the Bholā cyclone. The dispute over the island lay dormant for decades until natural gas was discovered in the Bay of Bengal in 2003. Under the spell of the disappeared island, suddenly maritime boundaries in the Bay of Bengal entered the legal imaginary in India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The Indian Ocean world is once again the object of re-territorialization. The dispute in effect intensified, with India and Myanmar claiming maritime boundaries from both sides of the bay, encroaching into what Bangladesh considers its own territory. Bangladesh and Myanmar were close to entering a conflict situation when the Bangladesh Navy sent battleships near the disputed waters as Myanmar attempted to start drilling into the seabed. The matter has since been taken to the International Tribunal for the Laws of the Sea (ITLOS) in Hamburg, the first maritime boundary case to be settled by the tribunal in its history.

Natural gas hydrates are found in two geological settings, 'onshore, in and below areas of thick permafrost and offshore, in the marine sediments of the outer continental margins'.<sup>13</sup> Clustered in subsurface fields, congealed within strange crystalline forms, are familiar hydrocarbons which are freed through the technical practice of extraction. Remote-sensing technologies, first developed as part of Cold War oceanology, are mobilized to locate oil and natural gas, cutting vertically through ocean spaces. Deep sea gas blocks DS-08-10 and 11 in the Bay of Bengal are rectangular lines that draw out the great infrastructure politics of South Asia. In 2009 the government of Bangladesh placed an international tender for the exploration of the deep-sea natural gas. Both offshore gas blocks were awarded through a production-sharing contract (PSC) to the energy giant ConocoPhillips, which was given the provision to export the liquefied form of the gas. A Wikileaks cable revealed that James Moriarty, the then US Ambassador to Bangladesh, insisted the contract be given to the US multinational corporation (MNC).<sup>14</sup> The PSC allows exploration of the undisputed part of the blocks that cover an area of 5158 square kilometres. The contract allows Bangladesh access to twenty per cent of the explored gas, while the company can export the remaining eighty per cent.

This set of events offers a stark contrast with the acute energy shortage in the country and has led to actions of anti-capitalist environmental activism unlike any seen previously. Leading a sustained campaign against neoliberal energy imperialism, the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports (NCPOGMRPP), a radical

13. J Marcelle-De Silva, R Dawe, 'Towards Commercial Gas Production from Hydrate Deposits', *Energies*, vol 4, no 2, 2011, pp 215–238

14. Sourcewatch, 'Bangladesh and Coal', online at: [http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Bangladesh\\_and\\_coal](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Bangladesh_and_coal), accessed 23 April 2012

environmental activist group, has called for the ConocoPhillips deal to be scrapped. The group was established in 1998 and came to prominence through its activist work, spearheading the counter-hegemonic Phulbari movement, against the controversial open-pit coal-mining project proposed by Asia Energy Corporation, a wholly owned subsidiary of UK-based energy company GCM Ltd. The deal would have displaced hundreds of thousands, including indigenous communities, with far-reaching impact on the local ecology. After the police killed three villagers during a peaceful protest in Phulbari in 2006, the movement found its spark, compelling the government to ban Asia Energy from doing business. NCPOGMRPP, the key organizer and ideological facilitator, is certainly not alone but part of a wider social movement, as it brings together many smaller groups as well as the population of Phulbari. Since then the movement has been continually vigilant in keeping Asia Energy out, the most recent support coming from the office of the Special Rapporteurs of UN Human Rights in February 2012.<sup>15</sup>

From their continuing work on the Phulbari movement, to campaigns against the ConocoPhillips contract, NCPOGMRPP deploys a set of practices ranging from theoretical writing to protest action such as mobilizing long marches, *Hartal* (strike action as a form of civil disobedience) and *Gherao* (encirclement). Since the privatization of television channels in the late 1990s, broadcast television has become an important political forum in Bangladesh and several political parties have opened their own ideologically aligned television stations. As a bottom-up environmental activist group, albeit one without the legitimacy of a political party, the National Committee is successful in using television as a platform via communiqués, commentary and expert opinion, while its direct actions continue to gain wide television coverage.

Despite the protracted efforts of the NCPOGMRPP, ConocoPhillips succeeded in leveraging the production-sharing contract. On 14 March 2012, ITLOS declared a judgment whereby both Bangladesh and Myanmar made gains in relation to their maritime boundary claims.<sup>16</sup> One of the legal-scientific arguments in favour of Bangladesh centred on its concave coastline, which would extend its delimitation claims in the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf. The MNC is already seeking to take control of six more deep-sea gas blocks along that border. We might see the alliance between civil disobedience and a recalcitrant Indian ocean deepen.

15. UN News Centre, 'Open-pit Coalmine Project in Bangladesh Threatens Human Rights', 28 February 2012, online at: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=41398#UKfXWYthWBA>, accessed 23 April 2012

16. Sharif Bhuiyan, 'ITLOS Judgment: An Analysis', *Daily Star*, Tuesday 17 April 2012, online at: <http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=230381>, accessed 23 April 2012

## CONCLUSION

In the most densely populated delta in the world it is not possible to differentiate between land and river, human populations, sedimentation, gas, grains and forests, politics and markets. Human habitations are superimposed on an even more dense river system, which is a constantly shifting, soggy planet. Sequenced with this pulsating beat are flows of capital and technology, both of which are problematized within a development paradigm. Here the call for climate justice can be articulated in the idea that technology transfers from the West to the East, such as dead ships made of iron or the petro-capitalist technical practice of extraction, are not equitable with the flow of legal accountability for



their human–nature costs.<sup>17</sup> This articulation has found the strongest voice in activist practices all over the global south, and in the work of groups such as the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association and the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports. In this article I have tried to bring some of the social activism, science, law and cultural production into dialogue with the contested earth-objects in the context of Bangladesh.

In November 2007, the number of deaths of up to 10,000 from cyclone Sidr was considered a success in humanitarian terms, thanks to a supporting global network of weather satellites, local early warning systems and volunteers, supercomputers and cyclone shelters. Yet Professor Anu Muhammad points out that the government and international development should give more credit to the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest on the planet, which stood directly in the storm's path and absorbed much of the cyclone's intensity.<sup>18</sup> The forest transforms as it recovers, while demographics rise and fall to an infradian rhythm as, through immense struggle, human activity resumes at a virulent rate in the disaster zones.

Here I want to draw a parallel with W G Sebald's retelling of the phenomenal rate at which both vegetation and social life renewed in German cities after firestorms produced by Allied bombings during the Second World War. Sebald asks:

If the Morgenthau Plan [*to pastoralize Germany through de-industrialization*] had ever been implemented, how long would it have taken for woodland to cover the mountains of ruins all over the country? Instead, and with remarkable speed, social life, that other natural phenomenon, revived.<sup>19</sup>

This dual propensity for revival in nature-culture indexes a mechanics of resilience in the cosmos. As a task of counter-hegemonic environmental activism, the act of translation is to explicate this cosmic resilience fearlessly in material culture.

17. I am indebted to Sheila Jasanoff for this insight. See her reflections on the Bhopal Disaster, in Jasanoff, ed, *Learning from Disaster: Risk Management after Bhopal*, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1994. The same can be said on the question of epistemology, in which Western science considers non-science, magic, and indigenous knowledge as (a) void. On this subject see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Another Knowledge Is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*, Verso, London, 2007 and João Arriscado Nunes, 'Rescuing Epistemology', *RCCS Annual Review 1*, September 2009.

18. Interview with Professor Anu Muhammad, Dhaka, December 2011

19. W G Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2003, italicized text added

# Activism Rooted in Tradition

## Artistic Strategies for Raising Environmental Awareness in Anatolia

Berin Golonu

1. For an overview of the factors and policies contributing to human-induced environmental change in Turkey, see Adaman Fikret and Murat Arsel, eds, *Environmentalism in Turkey: Between Democracy and Development*, Ashgate, Burlington, Vermont, 2005.

2. The article shares statistics stating that only 5.1 per cent of Turkey's land is under protection (as opposed to the global average of thirteen per cent) and only 1.2 per cent of this land is under 'strict' protection. Now the government is conducting a legislative review of even these strictly protected natural areas, which puts them in danger of being tampered with and developed. Çağan H Şekercioğlu, Sean Anderson, Erol Akçay and Rasit Bilgin, 'Turkey's Rich Natural Heritage Under Assault', *Science* 23, December 2011, pp 1637–1639, DOI: 10.1126/science.334.6063.1637-b

3. Biologist Çağan Şekercioğlu quoted in an article about Turkey's

As Turkey's economy grows at dizzying speed, so do its energy needs, its population count and its rapid urbanization process. Combined, these factors are placing insupportable pressure on the country's environmental health.<sup>1</sup> Citizens living in crowded urban centres make up roughly seventy-five per cent of the country's population. They now find themselves facing a host of environmental problems such as air and water pollution, and insufficient waste management. Turkey's race to meet its growing energy needs is also transforming its rural landscape, displacing its rural populations and contributing to the disappearance of forests and rare species of wildlife in regions that support some of the richest biodiversity in the world. In a recent letter to *Science Magazine*, a group of biologists working in Turkey explain that Turkey's environmental laws and conservation efforts have continually been eroded to reach a point of crisis.<sup>2</sup> The letter states that in an atmosphere in which economic development has trumped all other environmental concerns, the government has been modifying existing environmental laws and passing new ones to remove any obstacles to the construction of dams, mines, factories, roads, bridges, housing projects and tourism developments on formerly protected lands.

Without environmental education, and suffering from enduring economic inequality, the Turkish population lacks awareness or concern about the impact of development on the country's long-term environmental health.<sup>3</sup> Although environmental organizations such as Greenpeace Turkey and TEMA (Türkiye Erozyonla Mücadele, Ağaçlandırma ve Doğal Varlıkları Koruma Vakfı, or Turkish Foundation for Reforestation and Combating the Erosion of Soil and Habitats) have been in operation since the 1990s, significant concern and support for environmental causes only occurs when familiar modes of existence and ways of life are threatened. Rural populations whose livelihoods are being eradicated and whose villages are being demolished by the government's unsustainable development initiatives have staged some

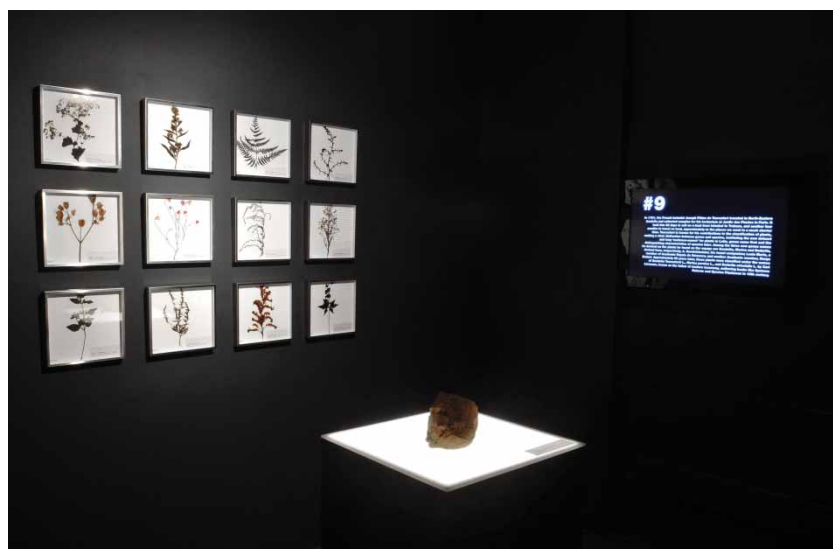
disappearing biodiversity states that only 1.3 per cent of Turkish citizens see environmental issues as a major concern. Jeremy Hance, 'Turkey's Rich Biodiversity at Risk', *Mongabay*, 28 March 2012, [http://news.mongabay.com/2012/0328-hance\\_turkey\\_biodiversity.html#](http://news.mongabay.com/2012/0328-hance_turkey_biodiversity.html#)

of the most vocal protests. Even then, there is a lack of mutual identification amongst those who have been displaced or those who have lost their livelihoods that might bring their individualized goals together in a unified environmentalist movement. Enter the artists and independent film-makers who take it upon themselves to contextualize, amplify and draw linkages between these voices of dissent in the hope of articulating the greater losses at stake in Turkey's environmental crisis. The projects profiled here take the beauty of Turkey's diverse geography as a backdrop against which they frame some of the most controversial development projects altering the country's landscape, its biological makeup and its demographics.

Comparative studies of environmentalist movements in Asian countries have shown that Asian environmentalism tends to be culturally indigenized. Religious discourses and cultural values play as important a role in environmentalist struggles in Asian countries as the teachings of secular nationalist environmentalism adopted from European and North American countries.<sup>4</sup> Sociologist Gabriel Ignatow believes that for developing countries the future health of the planet will depend less on secular nationalist environmentalism and more upon hybrid environmental movements that combine ethnic and religious identities with environmental concern by utilizing transnational support, high technology and mass media and communication strategies. In case studies that focus on Islamic environmentalism and ethnic environmentalist struggles in Turkey, Ignatow highlights local groups who gained a sense of empowerment from their ethnic or religious ties to challenge the authority of the state and to contest government-backed (or sponsored) development projects.<sup>5</sup> Projects that similarly embody the hybridized characteristics of Turkey's environmentalist struggles are profiled here in order to illustrate how public support for conserving the region's diverse heritage and its

4. See *Asia's Environmental Movements: Comparative Perspectives*, Yok-shiu F Lee and Alvin Y So, eds, M E Sharpe, Armonk and London, 1999.

5. One of Ignatow's case studies focuses on the Alevi population of the Aegean town of Bergama and narrates their efforts to shut down the Ovacik gold mine, which poisons their drinking water with the large amounts of cyanide it uses for mineral extraction. Gabriel Ignatow, *Transnational Identity Politics and the Environment*, Lexington, Plymouth, 2007



xurban\_collective (Hakan Topal and Güven Incirlioğlu), *Botany Carcinoma*, mixed media, installation, 2010

cultural traditions can be linked to a belief in the need also to conserve its diverse habitats.

Güven Incirlioğlu and Hakan Topal, two artists who make up the xurban\_collective, visited Turkey's north-eastern provinces, a region classified as one of the world's thirty-four 'biodiversity hot-spots' because it supports a tremendous range of species, some very rare.<sup>6</sup> A project titled *Botany Carcinoma* (2010) grew out of these travels.<sup>7</sup> It catalogues the region's botanical specimens, rocks and architectural ruins in photographs and videos arranged in installations that are interspersed with quotes from historians and theorists such as Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault and Eric Hobsbawm. The videos interweave micro- and macro-cosmic views of the landscape, as close-up shots of wildflowers in a valley, or water rushing across stones in a mountain spring, cut to long shots of mountain ranges and fields dotted with the ruins of abandoned villages. The textual excerpts that accompany the photos and video footage speak to people's ties to land, as well as the writing of histories that either legitimize or sever these ties. 'Can continents have a history as continents?' enquires Hobsbawm. 'Let us not confuse politics, history and geography, especially not in the case of these shapes on the pages of atlases, which are not natural geographical units.' Taking inspiration from Hobsbawm, xurban\_collective poses the question: 'Can one write a history of Asia Minor?'<sup>8</sup>

'Anatolia' is the more common term used to describe the subcontinent of Asia Minor, most of which is encompassed by the Turkish Republic. To write a history of Anatolia would mean hearkening back to periods of ethnic and cultural diversity that predate the rise of the nation-state and the division of peoples on different sides of newly drawn borders. A 'heterochronic' view of history, as termed by Foucault, would compress disparate pasts from different time periods together, so as to legitimize their existence on the same site.<sup>9</sup> Xurban\_collective's writings make reference to the Roman historian Strabo, who wrote about the diversity of peoples in Anatolia more than 2000 years ago. One need only look back a hundred years, however, to get a glimpse of how many different ethnic tribes and cultures recently called Anatolia home. Ethnographic studies of the region, such as one commissioned by the Ottoman government for the 1873 Vienna World Exposition, profiled dozens of different ethnicities in the chapters devoted to Anatolia, many of the groups particularized by different religions, languages, customs and ethnic dress.<sup>10</sup> The following statement by the xurban\_collective conjures a vision of this bygone diversity:

For the people of Anatolia, these plants had a totally different calling, each in his/her native language, intertwined with daily life often signifying the plants' qualities in folk medicine, color, looks and their overall benefit for humans... these species of wild plants spread across national borders under different names, just like the mountains and the rivers. Before national borders and nation-states, a diverse linguistic pattern possibly held true in Anatolia, Caucasia and the Middle East, each folk had their own names for rivers, mountains, plants, trees and indeed villages and towns.<sup>11</sup>

A parallel is drawn here between the disappearing biodiversity of the region today and the impoverishment of its cultural diversity over the

6. Turkey's biodiversity supports 9000 plants (one-third of which are found only in Turkey), 150 amphibians and reptiles, and 500 species of birds, not to mention many large carnivorous mammals such as wolves, bears and lynx. Hance, op cit
7. *Botany Carcinoma* was originally commissioned for the exhibition 'Blind Dates', which explored Turkish/Armenian history and relations, and was on view at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery in New York from November 2010 to February 2011.
8. Xurban website, <http://xurban.net/scope/botanycarcinoma/>, accessed 14 April 2012
9. Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, vol 16, no 1, spring 1986, pp 22-27
10. Osman Hamdi Bey and Victor Marie de Launay, 'Les Costumes populaires de la Turquie en 1873', *Levant Times and Shipping Gazette*, Constantinople, 1873
11. Xurban's website, accessed 14 April 2012, <http://xurban.net/scope/botanycarcinoma/>





Halil Altındere, still from *Oracle*, video, 10 mins 20 secs, 2010

past century. The monocultures that have been imposed upon these lands through processes of industrialization are decimating the region's variety of plant and animal life. Hence xurban\_collective's ominous use of the word 'carcinoma' in their title to conjure visions of a deathly toxicity. In a similar manner, the monolithic national identities imposed upon a disparate Ottoman citizenry in the years leading up to and after the formation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 negated the local people's tribal affiliations, ethnic traditions and individuated spiritual practices. Imposing the identity of the modern nation-state upon this diverse citizenry forced them to abandon their rural, agrarian ways of life, their ties to land, and the codes of conduct that had arisen from those agrarian traditions in order to capitulate to national constructs of authority. Industrialization had been a cornerstone of Turkey's modernization project and was a key to the growth of the nascent nation-state in the twentieth century. Since the 1980s, however, the country has veered towards a path of unchecked neoliberal growth, with little regard for sustainable development or conservation, and paying mere lip-service to social and environmental justice.<sup>12</sup> The question worth posing here is whether xurban\_collective's vision of permeable borders transgressed by plants, rivers and people, drawing on Foucault's notion of a heterochronic history,

12. For an account of neoliberal policies in Turkey's modernization and industrialization programme, see Fikret Şenses, ed, *Recent Industrialization Experience of Turkey in a Global Context*, Greenwood, Westport, Connecticut, 1994.

could encourage Turkish citizens to question the state's programme of unchecked neoliberal growth and unsustainable development, and produce a shared investment in the health of the Anatolian soil.

Halil Altındere, a Turkish artist of Kurdish heritage, addresses a long-standing environmental battle between the Turkish government and Kurdish villages in his videos *Mirage* (2009) and *Oracle* (2010). The videos are set in the south-eastern region of Turkey where Kurdish villages have been flooded and villagers displaced by the building of dams and hydroelectric power plants (HEPPs) over the past two decades. This is fallout from the Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi (GAP), a sprawling series of dams built by the Turkish government to generate electricity and supply irrigation for the large-scale agricultural farms it is developing in this arid region. According to the objectives listed on GAP's website, the project sounds progressive from a social and economic standpoint; they are to enhance the presence and influence of modern organizations and institutions in order to remove those traditional ones which impede development; to support family unity and strengthen democratic patterns of intra-family relations by considering changes triggered by development; to reduce the rate of unemployment in the region, which is above



Halil Altındere, still from *Mirage*, video, 7 mins 20 secs, 2009

national averages; to encourage women's participation in the labour force; to bring infant and child mortality and fertility rates closer to national averages; to take relevant measures to identify and prevent health problems that may follow the expansion of irrigation in the region.<sup>13</sup> Upon closer reading, however, the reader starts to discern the potential complications that are being covered over by this marketing speak. For example, what exactly does it mean to remove 'traditional' institutions in order to have the populations better comply with 'modern organization'? What types of time-honoured modes of subsistence or cultural identity markers may be lost in the process? And what kinds of 'health problems' are going to result from the expansion of irrigation in the region, either from the widespread use of pesticides on large-scale farms or new diseases introduced by humidifying what had once been an arid climate?

*Mirage* and *Oracle* see past the GAP's greenwashing practices to tell a different story – that the construction of HEPPs is providing large profits for private interests while permanently altering the area's local populations and its soil. The dams will maximize return on the area's natural resources over the course of their lifespan, which is an average of fifty years, after which this region's younger generations will inherit losses from the environmental degradation wrought by the dams. Both videos include scenes that bring together the odd pairings of Kurdish traditions with visions of landscapes that have been drastically modified. In *Mirage* we are greeted with the uncanny apparition of a bulldozer speeding across a parched plain, its bucket filled with Kurdish men praying to the heavens in synchronic movement, ostensibly for rain. In another scene, men kneel and pray on equally parched ground, as they are baptised from a bottle of Evian poured onto their heads. In yet another scene, a man tries to resuscitate a drowned pregnant woman as her body lies prone beside a dammed lake. Such symbols equate the disruption of the natural course of the rivers' flow with the disruption of the lives of people who have drawn their sustenance from these rivers for centuries.

*Oracle* opens with the surreal image of a village that has been submerged, save for its minaret, which emerges from the middle of a lake. This is the Kurdish village of Halfeti, flooded in the 1990s when the Euphrates River was directed into the Birecik Dam (part of the GAP project). Halfeti is one of several ancient cities in the region whose Greek and Roman architectural treasures were submerged in the flooding.<sup>14</sup> *Oracle* then turns its camera onto Harran, another picturesque and ancient settlement in south-eastern Turkey that was first settled 5000 years ago and is known to have housed one of the first universities in the history of Islamic civilization. Altindere situates his Kurdish protagonists inside Harran's striking indigenous architectural dwellings made of mud-brick and resembling giant beehives. In one scene, we see a mother standing in front of these structures in a defensive pose, holding a child in one arm and a gun in the other. In another, an older woman sits inside the dwellings, reading coffee grounds to tell a fortune. One would need to be able to speak Kurdish to be able to understand her premonitions, but one can presume that they contemplate and lament the future fate of these lands. Altindere's use of female protagonists in *Oracle* functions as a reminder that Anatolia

13. Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi website, <http://www.gap.gov.tr/about-gap/objectives-of-gap>, accessed 10 May 2012

14. The antique city of Zeugma was also flooded by the Birecik Dam. Hasankeyf, another antique city that lies further east and is now a village settled by Kurds, is also slated for destruction by the construction of the Ilisu Dam. The non-profit Turkish environmental organization Doğa Derneği has worked in tandem with Hasankeyf villagers to launch a protest campaign to stop the building of the dam.



may have once been settled by matriarchal cultures, a history that is reflected in the Turkish translation of the Greek-derived word Anatolia: ‘Anadolu’, which in Turkish equates female fertility with the fertility of the soil. By casting contemporary Kurdish villagers in the remains of these ancient civilizations, Altindere illustrates the Kurds’ indigenous ties to this soil to further underscore the injustice of their displacement from their ancestral homelands. In the spirit of their matriarchal traditions, he casts the Kurdish women as the oracles, storytellers and fighters who struggle to preserve their traditions and land rights.

In a manner that recalls Ignatow’s study of religious and ethnic minorities, Altindere appeals to the Kurdish people’s indigenous sovereignty to halt the pillaging of their natural resources by the private sector. Yet the spiritual rituals that feature in both *Mirage* and *Oracle*, such as the oracle telling a fortune or the prayer for rain, are not specifically Kurdish traditions. They are pan-indigenous references that point towards a global ecological history, drawing links between how colonizers seized and transformed indigenous lands in previous centuries, and how national governments and the private sector continue to enact similar land-grabs today. White-collar businessmen also make an appearance in *Oracle*, attempting to exploit the recreational possibilities of the new artificial lake they have constructed. In one scene, a man swims across the lake in his suit. In another more absurd scene, he attempts to surf its waveless waters atop an ironing board, perhaps an allusion to the poor planning techniques, faulty infrastructures and unfeasibly optimistic projections for the tourism industry that are guiding dam development projects. Yet at the end of *Oracle*, the man in the suit appears to have been subdued – we see an image of him buried up to his shoulders and ‘planted’ into the ground by the locals.

The sad reality, however, is that the private sector has not been so easily subdued by civic initiatives in Turkey. Two recent documentaries that survey the construction of hydroelectric power plants in Turkey’s Black Sea region demonstrate the imminent crisis that these and other development initiatives pose to Turkey’s environmental health. *İşte Böyle (Damn the Dams)*, directed by Osman Şişman and Özlem Sarıyıldız, and *Bir Avuç Cesur İnsan (A Few Brave People)*, directed by Rüya Arzu Köksal, were recently screened at the 2012 Istanbul Film Festival, followed by a panel discussion about the environmental degradation wrought by the building of the dams.<sup>15</sup> Many HEPPs are being erected with faulty infrastructure and shoddy construction to maximize short-term profit and gains, often at the expense of ensuring the long-term sustainability of the region’s natural resources. Clips of interviews with public officials included in the films divulge the frightening fact that within twenty years the government plans to divert the entirety of the region’s abundant rivers and springs into dams to harness them for hydroelectric power.

Taking stock of all that there is to lose, both films include ample footage of the lush Black Sea region. It consists of green hills, alpine plateaux and forest-covered mountains whose highest peaks lie under cloud cover. Mountain springs have carved paths through each of its valleys and villages have mushroomed beside these streams. The villagers earn a livelihood from working the fertile land, and a rich local agricultural

15. A third film, *Against the Flow*, directed by Umut Kocagöz and Özlem Işıl, was also screened on 13 April 2012, before the panel discussion at the Istanbul Film Festival. I was unable to access this film for this article.





Rüya Arzu Köksal, *Bir Avuç Cesur İnsan* (A Few Brave People), film still, 2011; the sign reads: 'they don't care about us, they only want our water'

economy supports small-scale fisheries, organic farms and husbandry. Harnessing these streams for hydroelectric power will dry out the forests and pastures, exsiccate orchards and farms, and annihilate the livelihoods of local populations. It will also accelerate the shift Turkey has been undertaking from a once agricultural economy towards an industrial one – agricultural products are now on Turkey's list of imports, whereas in the past it was always able to produce a high and diverse yield of agricultural products to feed its own population. In *İşte Böyle*, we see a villager reading aloud an angry letter she wrote to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, criticizing him for his edict that every Turkish family has a duty to bear at least three children in order to contribute to a young and lively labour force. She asks how she is supposed to support three children when her mode of subsistence has been eradicated. Another villager in the same film proclaims: 'If my village dries up, what use is a nation or a government for me?' It becomes clear that leaving their village would be a death sentence for these people; there is no other kind of life they are prepared to lead. The documentary footage mirrors Altındere's fictional narrative, as some of the villagers most vehement in opposing the rape of their valleys by the developers are the women. It suggests that the agrarian

feminism visualized in Altındere's videos is not a nostalgic fabrication but a powerful force that has the potential to be directed towards a more expansive environmentalist movement. Footage of elderly women throwing themselves in front of bulldozers is juxtaposed with their rough handling by government security forces, only to intensify the villagers' anger at their mistreatment.

Whereas the film by Şişman and Sarıyıldız focuses on the inhabitants of one particular village and documents their isolated struggle, Köksal's film starts with a similarly pinpointed focus but gradually expands to survey the coalitions these villagers form with other opposition struggles in the region. In the beginning, their protests seem hopelessly meagre: a handful of people are seen marching with placards down the main street of their village as their neighbours look on with disapproval. Over the course of the film, however, the populations of different villages come together to form a coalition called 'The Brotherhood of Rivers', and their protests culminate in a massive march against HEPPs in Istanbul. Köksal explains that this movement did not grow out of ties to one single ethnic community, although ethnic ties did help. A good segment of this opposition movement is ethnically Laz – a minority group native to the Turkish and Georgian Black Sea coast whose ties to the region date back to ancient Greece. But equally large portions of the movement include people of differing backgrounds such as the Hemshin peoples of Armenian heritage, and many others who are ethnically Turkish.<sup>16</sup> Rather than sharing a common ancestral heritage, these people share the common need to derive sustenance from their farms and the desire to maintain their agrarian ways of life.

After offering an optimistic vision of this growing environmentalist movement, Köksal's film ends with some terrifying statistics: of the sixty dam projects that were taken to court by locals, thirty-nine of them were stopped by the courts after successful arbitrations; yet the



16. Rüya Köksal, email message to the author, 24 April 2012

Rüya Arzu Köksal, *Bir Avuç Cesur İnsan (A Few Brave People)*, film still, 2011



Osman Şişman and Özlem Sarıyıldız, *Işte Böyle (Damn the Dams)*, film still, 2012; a local fishery owner talking about factors affecting his business

state's vision for the year 2023 is to reach 4000 HEPPs in total. These statistics reveal just how unsustainable the government's growth plans are – if water sources are tapped at such speed and on such a scale, what sort of regenerative potential will there be for this country's soil and water? Moreover, some of the main environmental problems that accompany the building of hydroelectric dams – such as waterlogging, salinization and increased seismic activity – may unleash unprecedented environmental catastrophes in years to come. These figures also divulge just how large an opposition movement is needed to derail the government's nightmarish vision for the future.

The projects profiled here contain the hybridized modes of collaboration and communication that Ignatow believes are necessary for effective environmentalist movements in developing countries. They attempt to build a bridge between the environmental awareness that has been passed onto Turkey's educated elite from developed societies such as Europe and North America, and the knowledge and traditions that are intrinsic to the people of Anatolia, to modes of life and ways of being that are closely tied to its rural, agrarian past. For the *xurban\_collective*, transgressing state indoctrination to draw upon the history of Anatolia as a continent is about accepting a heterogeneous heritage that is constituted by the variety of peoples and civilizations. For Altındere, gleaning wisdom from past civilizations, including one that was home to the first university in the Islamic world, can encourage a preservation of rural livelihoods while enabling members of urbanizing Kurdish populations (such as the artist himself) to stay connected to their ethnic roots. The resistance struggles launched by the rural populations profiled in films such as *Işte Böyle* and *Bir Avuç Cesur İnsan* draw strength from their own cultural resources while collaborating with those from outside their region, such as the lawyers who help them wage their legal battles and the delegates of international environmental organizations who offer them strategies to keep their land. Their willingness to speak openly with

documentary film-makers such as Köksal, Şişman and Sarıyıldız enables them to spread word about their struggles to broader audiences who can contest the unsustainable development projects steered by flawed leadership.

Turkey's environmental problems, including an impending energy and food crisis, do not come with easy solutions. Although the public cannot be expected to solve these problems on their own, they should feel emboldened to voice their opposition when the government sells out for short-term solutions that take too high a toll on the health of the environment. Those who are most vocal about protecting the well-being of their land are the country's poorest rural populations. Educated urban residents often discriminate against the rural migrants in their midst, seeing them as the cause of overpopulation, pollution and a host of other urban environmental problems. They need to understand the forces of industrialization that are increasingly dispossessing rural populations of their livelihoods in the country and forcing them to migrate to the cities. An ability to put aside class and ethnic divides long enough to sympathize with the grievances of Turkey's rural populations may perhaps reveal a shared fate; for the country's rapid economic growth and development are taking a high environmental toll from which no one is exempt.



# Environmental Challenges and Eco-Aesthetics in Nigeria's Niger Delta

Basil Sunday Nnamdi,  
Obari Gomba and Frank Ugiomoh

*No eye ever saw the sun without becoming sun-like nor a son  
see beauty without becoming beautiful.*

Plotinus<sup>1</sup>

The environment has become a keystone in Nigerian art and discourse since the activism of Ken Saro-Wiwa. Saro-Wiwa, who was a writer, remains the most important articulator of the Niger Delta condition. The Niger Delta is at the heart of economic prosperity in Nigeria as much as it is a charged space of contention. The indigenes realize this but are unable to fathom the abject neglect and poverty they are subjected to, in which a repressive state apparatus is implicated. This region lies in Nigeria's tropical region where the River Niger empties into the Atlantic Ocean, creating the largest delta in Africa, an area unique for its enviable biodiversity. It also boasts of one of the most biologically unique terrestrial freshwater and marine habitats in the world. It covers an area of 112,110 square kilometres and is inhabited by thirty-one million people according to the 2006 census. Its rural population density is one of the highest in the world with 276 inhabitants per square kilometre. The region confronts a conspicuous menace on a daily basis: its biosphere is being diminished due to a lack of environmental considerations in the business of oil prospecting and extraction. While agitations to right such infractions initially remained largely internal to Nigeria, Saro-Wiwa became one activist who tore the mask off the crude face of profiteering and industrial abuses. And the world was let into the knowledge that, in the oil-rich Niger Delta, the environment and its human populations are victims of one of the world's greatest ecological tragedies.

Saro-Wiwa appeared in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, now known as the Earth Summit, which argued for 'Environmentally Benign Industrial

1. Plotinus, *Enneads*, vol 1 of seven, A H Armstrong, trans, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989, p 261

Development'. Saro-Wiwa took the case of his Ogoni homeland to the international arena and he complained about the nihilistic processes of resource extraction coupled with the reckless habit of naked power. Saro-Wiwa's action drew the ire of the then Nigerian Military Head of State, General Sani Abacha, who two years later, on 31 October 1995, approved a death sentence passed on Saro-Wiwa and eight of his Ogoni kinsmen. General Abacha and his cohorts found their pretext in a trumped-up murder charge. Even the latitude for appeal was denied and the trial process was globally condemned. Saro-Wiwa was hanged on 10 November 1995, alongside Barinem Kiobel, John Kpunien, Baribor Bera, Saturday Dobe, Felix Nwate, Nordu Eawo, Paul Levura and Daniel Gbokoo. In spite of the outcry from global communities, concerned for ecological safety in Nigeria's Niger Delta region and for the sanctity of life, Saro-Wiwa and his comrades were executed.

As exemplar, the execution was intended to re-establish the might of government and to serve as a warning signal to other incubating uprisings in the region. This strategy of oppression confirms that 'there is an inseparable connection between the assault on the environment and the assault on human rights' in the region.<sup>2</sup> Yet the design of state repression has failed to cow the people. Several persons and groups have since then risen in the region to confront the state. The hordes of armed groups in the creeks of the Niger Delta until recently operated under the umbrella of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which confronts state terror with terror. By contrast, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), which Saro-Wiwa led, has remained intellectual and employs non-violent resistance in seeking a change in the way the region is administered.

This situation has been depicted with increasing commitment in diverse forms, especially by poets and the artist community, in protest against the failure of justice and ecological stewardship in the region. Of note here is the collection of poems entitled *For Ken, for Nigeria*, a feisty harvest of protest poems edited by Epaphras Osondu in 1996.<sup>3</sup> The process that gave birth to *For Ken, for Nigeria* started in the heat of the crisis that attended the execution of the Ogoni Nine. Osondu has described it as an anthology of poems that focuses 'principally on the meaning of Saro-Wiwa's meaning', as deconstructing the contradictions in the drive 'that was the Nigerian Dream at Independence in 1960... in calling for entries, contributors were enjoined to send poems on Saro-Wiwa, the environment and minority rights'.<sup>4</sup> The book features ninety-two poems by some sixty-six poets, mostly of the younger generation, who were the first to publish a barrage of protest poetry in the wake of Saro-Wiwa's death. Some representative voices among them will receive mention here. We note the likes of J P Clark, Wole Soyinka, Tanure Ojaide, Ibiwari Ikiriko and Ogaga Ifowodo who in the past have focused on the same subject. The motifs of their creative works have found kinship with the visual arts of photographers like George Osodi, Timi Amah and Akintunde Akinyele, whose images extend in visual form the words of the poets. The environment is key to their aesthetic tenor. Both creative media call on society to take the baton from Saro-Wiwa and his comrades who sealed a testament of revolt against environmental degradation. We can take the works here as trajectories through which the broad issues of the environment in

2. Al Gedicks, *Resource Rebels: Native Challenges to Mining and Oil Corporations*, South End, Massachusetts, 2001, p 41

3. E C Osondu, ed, *For Ken, for Nigeria: Poems in Memory of Ken Saro-Wiwa*, Service and Service, Lagos, 1996

4. Ken Saro-Wiwa, *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary*, Safari, Channel Islands, 1995

Nigeria's Niger Delta can be explicated. It is pertinent to note that in the continued agitation to right the parlous state of the Niger Delta, Osodi, Amah and Akinleye have shown these photographs previously at the Forum Stadtpark in Graz, Austria, in 2009, and in Munich in March 2012; Osodi's work was first shown at Documenta 12.

At root, these works not only interrogate the abandonment of ecological stewardship in the Niger Delta by oil-prospecting bureaucracies and the Government of Nigeria, but also, in our view, extend to the context in which Heinz Paetzold considers the position of 'art and technology and the perspective of an aesthetic nature':

Today we experience the consequences of man's interaction with nature as disastrous, and increasingly feel the necessity for a thorough reevaluation of the idea of scientific/technological progress and the state of the techno sciences.<sup>5</sup>

Bruno Latour, in the same line, is concerned about the construction of unnecessary hybrids in what he refers to as the paradoxes that undergird the dichotomy between nature and society.<sup>6</sup> This is the root of environmental issues and discourses that have been brought to the front burner of contemporary global intellectual concerns. A welcome development, yet there is much to be done in terms of practical steps by individuals, corporate bodies and governing institutions in ensuring the sustainability of the global life-support system. Many a serious mind cannot help but wonder why innumerable talks, conferences and seminars seem to have failed abysmally to proffer hope for environmental sustainability in the near future. Thus, the future of human society and planet Earth, in terms of sustainability through maintenance of nature's life-support system, remains very bleak. This predicament ought to be unsettling to any well-meaning government. But there exists abundant evidence of gross negligence among global communities. Nigeria is a clear example, as can be seen in its oil-producing Niger Delta area.

Paetzold and Gernot Böhme hold that the above problem centres on environmental stewardship, and they redirect action to the tenets of a philosophy of nature.<sup>7</sup> A central system of belief in the philosophy of nature is 'grounded in the idea of an anthropology of pragmatic intention'. In this regard, they recap the advocacy of philosophers, from the ancient up to Immanuel Kant, who require that humanity cease its assault upon the nature of which it is part. This is a call for a shift of attitude towards dedicated environmental stewardship. Paetzold is drawn to the agency of the artist and his or her avatars, and the aesthetic tenor through which they can bring about this attitudinal shift, thereby assisting humanity to reconsider its relation to nature. In every work of art, therefore, what is encountered is the birth of what we can call communal icons in aesthetic propositions. In this direction, aesthetics, as Jack Elliott suggests, becomes an indirect way of knowing through empathy.<sup>8</sup> Elliott highlights the phenomenological foundations of our experiences and the way they can shape our relationship to the environment. The caveat here is that an indirect way of knowing through empathy may turn out to be inadequate, as aesthetic propositions require some legibility. Aesthetic propositions that enunciate pain, arising from disasters, are known to inspire pity – which numbs action – unless they are made intelligible in critical elocution.<sup>9</sup>

5. Heinz Paetzold, 'Art and Technology and the Perspective of an Aesthetic Nature', *Issues in Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics* 1, 1995, p 31

6. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Catherine Porter, trans, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993

7. Gernot Böhme, 'Of an Aesthetics of Nature', *Issues in Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics* 1, 1995, pp 37–48

8. Jack Elliott, 'Reconciling Eco-ethics and Aesthetics in the Practice of Design', *Journal of Design Philosophy Papers* 2, 2004, online at <http://www.vivo.cornell.edu/individual/236492>, accessed 30 November 2011

9. Frank Ugiomoh, 'Niger Delta Seen through George Osodi's Lens', in George Osodi, *Delta Nigeria: The Rape of Paradise*, Trolley, London, UK, 2011, calls attention to Ann Kane's 'Reconstructing Culture in Historical Explanation: Narratives as Culture, Structure and Practice', *History and Theory* 39, 2000, pp 311–330, with regard to the power of narratives to legitimize the image.

The Ogoni uprising has hinged on Ethnic Autonomy, and Resource and Environment Control, but is only a microcosm of the Niger Delta condition.<sup>10</sup> It thus provides a stimulus for art, politics, discourse and the extremely destabilizing agitations backed by armed conflicts against government. For instance, Saro-Wiwa's travail has, in the hand of the artist, become contextualized within the frame of national tragedy in *For Ken, for Nigeria*. Nnimmo Bassey's poem in the anthology is entitled 'Burnt River'. He adopts the Ogoni tragedy as a platform for interrogating Nigeria, and laments that it is a country where the 'hatred of nature/Is the beginning of factories'.<sup>11</sup> In Bassey's 'For Saro-Wiwa', the persona speaks of the motivation of the Ogoni uprising. Their environment is under terrible assault by oil extractors who profit at the expense of the environment and its native owners:

In flared midnights  
In charred sunspots  
You lost count of eventides.<sup>12</sup>

The traditional bond between the people and their nativity is hurt: 'Bound to... swamps by blood/The sludge took over your smile'.<sup>13</sup> M S C Okolo's 'Fumes of Decay' reiterates the point. Before the rise of oil exploration in 1956, the environment was stable and supportive of the simple lifestyle of the communities, 'before the termites were introduced into the green fields'.<sup>14</sup> The 'termites' are the destroyers of the environment, the nihilists against whom Ogoni, the land, is depicted as arising in Sanya Osha's 'In the Heart of Ogoniland' to say NO to 'her' despoilers: 'she gathered her dark brown water/In both hands'.<sup>15</sup> And she calls attention to her condition: 'Come and watch the land/As she bleeds through the disgorged belly...'.<sup>16</sup> This clarion is known to have thrown the 'jackboots into panic'.<sup>17</sup> 'Jackboots', the state's might, which provides a shield for the destroyers of the environment, is thrown into panic as the land rises.



Gas flare pollution, photo: George Osodi

10. Gedicks, op cit

11. Osondu, op cit, pp 8–9

12. Ibid, pp 10–12

13. Ibid, pp 14–15

14. Ibid, pp 4–5

15. Ibid, pp 1–2

16. Ibid, pp 48–49

17. Ibid, p 12





Charred mangrove vegetation, photo: Timi Amah

The role of Saro-Wiwa in this mobilization is enunciated in Ezenwa Ohaeto's piece. Ohaeto's single entry, 'A Village Owns the Voice of the Cock', puts Saro-Wiwa's activism into proper context. The poem states that his activism goes beyond 'the storm/In a teacup of oil', implying that Saro-Wiwa's activism, although focused on his native Ogoni land, has a pan-Nigerian colouration.<sup>18</sup> 'One house owns a cock/A village owns its crowing voice... lies at the core of the above creed.'<sup>19</sup>

I will think of your voice  
As the crowing question mark  
On the question of the land.<sup>20</sup>

The import of Ohaeto's lines is that Saro-Wiwa's death is a subject that speaks to the paradox of the Nigerian state. Where do the resource-bearing communities stand considering their contributions to the nation's economic well-being? Why is there a consistent brew of discontent? Saro-Wiwa is depicted as a crowing cock. He has merely used the Ogoni/Niger Delta platform to stir up suppressed truths. This is the salient point that binds the poems in *For Ken, for Nigeria* together, each with its own particular slant.

Ademola Babajide's 'Arise' goes beyond a reiteration of the value of Saro-Wiwa's struggle. It calls for more action from the oppressed. It calls on them to shake off their grief:

Arise! O silent mourners – arise!  
Arise to renew the cracked columns of the heart –  
To strengthen deep the castle of the soul...<sup>21</sup>

The clarion challenges the victims to stand tall in the face of oppression:

Wake and stand firm O grieving ones –  
Wake to rout the stalking garrisons of waste,  
Wake to doom the dim veterans of vice.<sup>22</sup>

18. Ibid, pp 19–20

19. Ibid, pp 30–31

20. Ibid, pp 32–34

21. Ibid, pp 25–27

22. Ibid, pp 30–32

A people under oppression are often prone to despair. The poem urges the mourners to rise, to brace up and stand up, to confront their oppressors, to keep up the fight. At this point, anything will do but surrender. Even the model of the persona in Medus Deekor's 'Blood and Oil', who adopts words as weapon, is preferred to the ones who are crippled by grief. Deekor's persona gives vent to his grief and anger, rains imprecations on the officers of the Nigerian state and Shell, and curses the 'oil/Which snakes through endless pipes/Across door ways...'.<sup>23</sup> In one photograph, George Osodi presents an ironic image. Oil-bearing pipes snaking through doorways become mega toys for children to play on. Denunciation is deployed as a veritable strategy against a crass system in which brokers run oil pipes through human settlements, flare gas in human settlements, release toxic waste into homelands, farmlands and rivers, hang dissidents and militarize peaceful communities. In fact, Deekor and his fellow poets in this anthology are driven by a mixture of anger and grief. This thread runs through the poems by Deekor, Babajide, Ohaeto and the rest of the *For Ken, for Nigeria* 'brigade'. The tone of the poems is charged, and the accompanying illustrations foreground the reason for this state of anger. This is understandable for poems which were honed in the heat of their moment, a fact which has become the strength and calling card of every poem in the *For Ken, for Nigeria* project. As Osondu states: 'Between the conception and the first call for entries, at the annual convention of the Association of Nigerian Authors', a span of a mere three days, 'the sentence [on Saro-Wiwa and his kinsmen] had been transmuted into an execution by hanging'.<sup>24</sup> The contributors to the project must be credited for unwittingly setting the stage for other poets to follow. Individual poets have since then released books of poetry that are either wholly or partly committed to the subject of oil and eco-ethics.

As Al Gedicks says, 'there is an inseparable connection between the assault on the environment and the assault on human rights' in Niger Delta Nigeria.<sup>25</sup> Gedicks is but one among many from the global



*Oil spill 1*, aerial view, photo: Ogoni Akinleye

23. Ibid, pp 7–9

24. Ibid, p 71

25. Gedicks, op cit



Prince Woko, *Sculpture of a Militant*, a work evocative of the identity of MEND youth fighters, located in the University of Port Harcourt sculpture garden, photo: Uniport



communities who have been drawn by the monumental ecological damage in this area. The spotlight has been cast on the environmental condition through various means and media such as presentations at international conferences, catalogues and vivid pictures. All these buttress the facts behind the scenarios of destruction which the poets address, offering legend to the visuals grounded in the same concerns. Evidence abounds that establishes the collaboration between the Nigerian government and some multinationals of Western provenance resulting in the persistence of the sordid ecological state in the Niger Delta Region. Poetry and visuals lend their voice to civil protests and other forms of civil disobedience which are launched to sensitize and elicit international sympathy and support for the demand for a clean and healthy environment for the citizens of the Niger Delta. Oil exploration in the Niger Delta must conform to global best practices. Consider this advertisement by Shell in the UK captioned: ‘Would you protest if Shell ran a pipe through this countryside? They already have!’<sup>26</sup> Beside this caption and another quote to follow is a serene and beautiful landscape photograph:

When Shell proposed a pipeline from the North East coast of Anglesey to Stanlow refinery, seventy-eight miles away in industrial Cheshire, people were worried.

The line would run through part of the Snowdonia National Park and have to pass under rivers Conwy, Elwy, Clwyd and Dee.

What scars would remain?

It is five years since the line was laid and as I fly along the route today, even I can see no sign of it.

On the ground, the course of the pipe can be followed by a series of unobtrusive markers. Apart from these, there is nothing to tell you that the top of a pipeline runs one metre beneath your feet.<sup>27</sup>

This text is a testimony by Tom Allen, Shell horticulturist, who explains the extreme care Shell UK took to restore the ecosystem in the UK



26. David Ogilvy, *Ogilvy on Advertising*, Vintage, New York, 1985, pp 174–175

27. *Ibid*

Shell Oil pipeline through Okrika, photo: George Osodi





Bruce Onobrakpeya, *Hanging the Ogoni Nine*, painting, 2001, photo: Bruce Onobrakpeya

communities which its oil-bearing pipelines traversed. According to Allen '[e]very foot of the way was photographed before digging started, and the vegetation restored the way the record showed it... even to the exact varieties of grass'. David Ogilvy discusses this advert put out by Shell as 'perhaps the most disarming corporate advertisement ever created'.<sup>28</sup> Shell has gone to a great length here to save its own native environment, in conformity with environmental laws about which people are well educated. Why does it do otherwise in Nigeria? According to the idea

of best practice in environmental ethics, Shell's modus operandi remains a paradox in Niger Delta Nigeria; like other multinationals, it has repeatedly got away with environmental assault on the region. Even the global outcry against industrial nihilism has not forced Shell and its kind to change their attitude in the Niger Delta. While it may sound hyperbolic to demand that the international community declare a state of emergency with regard to the environment, this would be a realistic and useful step. But it is very difficult, because of lack of commitment on the part of Western industrialized nations that profit from the degradation of the globe. With the United States of America dragging its feet over signing the Kyoto Protocol, it is hard to enlist its support against the environmental abuses in poor nations. Moreover, the governments of the so-called Third World countries turn their eyes away from the urgent need to rescue and preserve their own environment. Nigeria exemplifies such nations. The evidence of environmental abuse is there for all to see in the Niger Delta and signals the gross complicity of the government.

Whereas governments have failed at local and international levels, poets and artists have stood in the trench for the crusade of eco-ethics. As John Cairns Junior observes, eco-ethics is the indispensable groundwork on the basis of which sustainable use of the planet becomes rational. Such groundwork must consist of value-laden decisions to which humanity should give unswerving allegiance.<sup>29</sup> Eco-ethics demands human responsibility for the preservation of nature, for the survival of all species. Poets and artists have keyed into this purpose-driven creativity. Arts serve a function here: to call the Nigerian government and its accomplices out of error. It is deplorable that the Nigerian government has not taken any practical steps towards an effective solution to the environmental abuses in the Niger Delta. When a government fails in its social contract with the people, the people are provoked to stand up for themselves in the form of civil disobedience.

According to a civilized ethos citizens should bring pressure to bear on the government by exercising their human and civil rights of civil resistance. The aim is to persuade government to take the necessary positive steps to arrest situations that are inimical to a sustainable environment. However, the Nigerian government has always read such acts of social activism as an affront to state power. In confronting civil protesters with brutal force, the Nigerian authorities have failed to realize the limitation of force in guaranteeing meaningful and lasting peace. Government has often manifested its incapacity to differentiate between the necessity of the use of power and the destructive effect of the use of force.<sup>30</sup> This failure of insight has heightened the pain in the Niger Delta. Oil-bearing communities have been brutalized. Force begets force, and the government's repressive strategies have failed to end resistance. Blood calls for blood. And there has been no serious sign of peace in the Niger Delta.

Environmental education is one sure way of maintaining environmental sustainability. The beauty of the environment has to be preserved. Therefore, individuals and groups should be educated to join the vanguard for humanity's common good. People ought to know that beauty and bounty are allied factors. In other words, aesthetic appreciation can prove an effective tool in sensitizing the diverse stakeholders to

29. John Cairns Jr, 'A Declaration of Eco-Ethics', *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics*, 2002, pp 79–81, accessed 8 June 2012, currently available at <http://www.int-res.com/articles/esep/2002/E21.pdf>

30. Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, Harvest/HBJ, New York and London, 1972, is a collection of Arendt's writing on the themes of civil obligation and civil disobedience.

environmental issues. By aesthetic education, we mean ‘Education that recognizes the interconnectedness of body, mind, emotions, and spirit.’ It is such an education that would facilitate people’s capacity for sensual perception. When the citizens are able to appreciate beauty in nature and the environment, then they can understand any possible distortion of the equilibrium of the planet. Aesthetic education and eco-ethics go hand in hand. Through a proper aesthetic education, life will be balanced with economic value to the benefit of the natural environment and of humanity, and this will curb the human propensity to act against nature. Humanity will come to see itself as a part of nature. This will also influence the policy of government in the long run. For instance, the Nigerian government may come to reconsider and reject its former obsession with the oil dollars that fund the detriment of the environment.

In summary, aesthetic education has two major roles in guaranteeing justice and eco-ethics in the Niger Delta. One, aesthetic education can bring about a change of attitude in the citizenry. Two, aesthetic education can bring pressure to bear on the government to do what it must as a matter of environmental stewardship. Government and people have to see themselves in nature and become one with it. Plotinus’ dictum, cited as the epigraph of this essay, reinforces the truth that we live what we experience. In another text from the aesthetics of Plotinus, the sun provides that radiant energy from which matter derives life, while the eye, like the sun, is considered as a window to the soul that illuminates the body.<sup>31</sup> The eye then, without doubt, is the organ that allows us to appreciate our awareness of things around us. Here is the logic that sustains aesthetic education: the beautiful is sought after and domesticated. We all must come to that point where the only option would be not to distort nature in the name of profit. The advertisement posted by Shell raises some questions. It shows the sensitivity of a people to an eventual distortion of their environment and their effort to enthrone propriety through a careful process of running crude oil-bearing pipes within large community settlements. Why is Shell so reckless in the Niger Delta? It must be that Nigeria has allowed industrial nihilism to thrive in its territory. This, then, is what makes it mandatory for environmental activists in Niger Delta Nigeria to descend from their Olympian height and idealistic world and strongly advocate for change. One sure way for aesthetic education to flourish is to cultivate the ecological values presented to the people as communal icons by the artists of the community; this should drive the people to demand the fulfilment of the social contract between governments and the people. It appears that the Nigerian government cannot be a free-willing agent of change; it has to be pushed by the electorate via diverse forms of agitation and civil disobedience.

31. Plotinus quoted in Leo Steinberg, ‘The Eye is a Part of the Mind’ (1953), in Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontation with Twentieth-Century Art*, Oxford University, London, 1972, p 299

# From Supply Lines to Resource Ecologies

World of Matter

## INTRODUCTION

Ursula Biemann, Peter Mörtenböck  
and Helge Mooshammer

World of Matter is an international media, art and research platform that investigates contemporary resource ecologies. The project brings artists, architects and photojournalists with substantial research experience on globalization together with theorists working in the areas of geography, art history and cultural theory.<sup>1</sup> It aims to generate new audiovisual media, texts and cartographies, and to debate this material in a series of symposia, exhibitions and publications, all of which will culminate in a web-based platform, expected to launch in spring 2013.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on the development of innovative and equitable approaches to resources, World of Matter considers the provision of visual source material a valuable instrument for education, activist work, research and raising general public awareness, particularly in light of the ever-more-privatized nature of both actual resources and knowledge about the powers that control them.

An important strand in this endeavour to invite wider participation in the production of resource knowledge is to employ the destabilizing and reframing qualities of aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> This underlies the emphasis placed by World of Matter on integrating an archive of media files into the quest for a new resource discourse. The following compilation of short texts and visuals (as well as a contribution by Uwe H Martin and Frauke Huber to be found in the online supplement of this special issue of *Third Text*)<sup>4</sup> – resource ‘files’ like those comprising the forthcoming World of Matter database – echoes this process of producing, undoing, rearranging and retagging. The ambition of this collaborative effort is not to mimic a false mastery of the structure of contemporary resource ecologies but to instigate a rethinking of the relationship between discursive practices and the material world.

Humans have come close to exhausting virtually all known resource deposits on the planet and are heightening efforts to locate yet

1. The core group includes Mabe Bethônico, Ursula Biemann, Lonnie van Brummelen, Elaine Gan, Uwe H Martin, Peter Mörtenböck, Helge Mooshammer, Emily E Scott and Paulo Tavares.
2. <http://www.worldofmatter.org>
3. For a thorough elaboration of the politics of aesthetics, see the seminal work of Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, Steve Corcoran, trans, Continuum, London and New York, 2010.
4. ‘Land Rush – Ethiopia’ by Uwe H Martin and Frauke Huber is a visual investigation into the changing landscapes of Gambella in Western Ethiopia, where vast areas of virgin land, formerly allocated to the Gambella National Park, have been transformed into plantations for sugar cane and palm oil by foreign-owned agribusiness ventures. Please refer to <http://www.thirdtext.com>.



undiscovered and untapped reserves. Large-scale mining is penetrating ever deeper layers, multi-national land grabs are advancing to remote corners, and the race is on for the neocolonial division of the seabed. In the last sixty years more natural resources have been raided by humanity than in all previous centuries together. The frantic rhythm of this ‘progress’ has thrown up images of crisis and doom while firing the competitive rush for new frontiers.

With growing consciousness of the global limitation of vital resources and the unsustainability of the current patterns of their consumption, we believe there is urgent need for new discourses and modes of representation that will shift resource-related issues from a market-driven domain to one of engaged public debate. First and foremost, the very assumption that everything we encounter is automatically a resource for human consumption can no longer be made; this human-centred vision has been the motor for many environmentally and socially disastrous developments. There are many hints of a shift from an economic to an ecological paradigm, something World of Matter intends to drive forward.<sup>5</sup>

Since early 2010 a core group of nine researchers has come together for a series of week-long research meetings in London, UK, in Zurich, Switzerland, and in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, to develop common ground for the project. One of the first declared tasks was to expand the notion of natural resources – or ‘commodities’ as traders call them – from hitherto geophysical and economic-industrial contexts toward the aesthetic-philosophical arena, within which it has scarcely been broached. Yet we are aware that if we attempt merely to ‘culturalize’ the discourse on the ecologies of natural resources by multiplying images or forging new terminologies, we fail to address a deeper problem. If we are to speak about the non-human world, it will not suffice to build a socio-cultural vocabulary through a discourse that has been traditionally human-centred, conceiving of the Earth primarily as a provision, object of scientific research, or sphere of human perceptions, experience and control. To de-centre such anthropocentric perspectives, a more radical shift in thinking is needed.

Our collective response to the dominant resource paradigm and its crisis-generating strategies is to confront the flourishing politics of austerity and an all-encompassing culture of greed with a supply of open source material. All contributors to World of Matter have pledged to share material from their current work on an open access archive that connects different files, actors, territories and ideas. Essentially an entanglement of empirical studies and critical-aesthetic reflections on this same research, the digital platform will offer users myriad potential entry points and navigational trajectories, resisting any overarching narrative structure. Rather than full-length videos, all media will be edited into a multiplicity of documents and video clips that can be reconfigured and interlinked to one another, rendering new insights into relations between seemingly distinct resource issues and locations. By connecting a visual document about illicit gold mining in the Amazon basin with a video file of the Nigerian Delta oil states or Egyptian land-use politics, we suggest a variety of possible readings about global connectivity among these sites. More importantly, we are interested to see what might arise in the gaps between different sites once conventional frameworks are removed, and what new landscapes of resource flows may emerge.

5. The term ecology here refers to the compositionist state of existence and means the non-hierarchical neighbouring relationships of heterogeneous orders that may include technological and nonhuman ones. At the heart of the ecological order lies the radical reconfiguration of the relationship between subjectivity and exteriority. Erich Hoerl, *Die technologische Bedingung*, Suhrkamp, Berlin, 2011, pp 23–43.

Individually, each of the World of Matter participants has developed his or her own methodology for intervening in existing discourses. The structure of the website, however, as the backbone of the project, is a collective effort. Selecting and organizing the keywords for our media archive has become an important aspect in conceptualizing our intended contribution to resource discourse. The forthcoming World of Matter web platform and the compilation of short texts and images in the following pages propose diverse processes of producing, undoing and relinking existing narratives to ignite a rethinking of the relation between materials and discourse. More broadly, our project seeks to advance a deeper understanding of resources as intricately entangled ecologies of things, places and species interactions.

## **EGYPTIAN CHEMISTRY**

**water, agro-ecologies, pollutants, land reclamation, revolution**

**Ursula Biemann**

Exploring hybrid water ecologies in Egypt, *Egyptian Chemistry*, 2012, a multi-channel video project, takes a keen interest in the instance of water coalescing with other organic, social or technological entities. Water vigorously shapes Egyptian life as it merges with land-use politics, crop cycles, nitrate industries, soil chemistry, farmers' collectives, irrigation technologies or hydropower. These entities, and their variable interactions, constitute a significant part of Egyptian reality. Yet when it comes to explanations of the current realities of change in the country, we see an overemphasis on political forces and an erasure of the multiple components that shape the complexity of contemporary Egypt. *Egyptian Chemistry* takes a close look at long-term and continuous transformations of Egypt's physicality, some of which have political consequences, others not.

While I saw great benefit in pursuing an artistic analysis of geospatial relations and spatial experiences (migration, containment) with a view to building critical human geographies, I feel that, in its flatness, the spatial model proves inadequate in rendering moments of great depth, of inner thickness. Instead what I propose as coordinating principle and narrative organizer is to take chemistry as a conceptual tool that enables us penetrate to the internal relations of objects and come to grips with the mechanism of attraction and bonding between human and non-human, organic and technological components; but also, most significantly, between signifying and a-signifying ones. In other words, *Egyptian Chemistry* enters the molecular level of Egypt.

Egyptians have long built large-scale engineering projects and launched huge land reclamation ventures capable of reallocating water across time and space for communities and entire ecosystems. While humans were able to have a great impact on the hydraulics of the Nile by regulating its velocity, gauge, volume and seasonal flows, the water quality per se – meaning its salinity, acidity, oxygen content, its mineral composition, nutrient systems, organic pollutants, suspended particles and the silt it carries – all these vital physical properties seem to escape human control, no matter how much they are monitored.



*Egyptian Chemistry*, video installation, 2012

The ordering system could be deliberately changed, not so the water properties and its organic composition. I will mention just two of the many mutations in the river ecology set in motion when the hydraulic regime of the Nile was altered by the High Dam and a series of barrages built in the last century. The migration of fish that formerly circulated from Ethiopia through the Mediterranean into the Atlantic and back came to an end. These high-performance species, which thrive in fast-running waters, disappeared and in moved large, lazy tilapia. And, with the diminished supply of oxygen that used to speed up the decay of organic pollutants, these have now turned into biochemical combat units, infecting pools and reaching land through the billions of irrigation canals. On the other hand, by managing water through engineering projects, Egypt was able to embark on an ambitious programme of desert development and begin to push industrial export agriculture. Sidelined by neoliberal government policy affecting credit lines, fertilizer and water supplies, small farming in the Nile Valley has become unprofitable and the young generation has moved to the cities seeking day labour. The urban centres where the revolution was sparked in January 2011 were full of people from the villages who had experienced a continuous deterioration in their livelihoods.

The entanglements described above imply forces generated by a combination of natural, technological and social processes, a combination that brings about new realities. Altered water chemistry transforms soil quality and entire agro-ecologies, interacting with land management, peasants' desires, urbanization processes and food supply chains. Yet all these components neither line up in a causal chain of reactions, nor are they subject solely to an economic paradigm. They synthesize into dynamic interactive clusters, into hybrid ecologies equipped with



*Egyptian Chemistry*, video installation, 2012

agency, in which desert developers and tiny pollutants unfold equally effective actions. Engaging with these sensitive ecologies, without allocating to political processes an omnipotence they do not deserve, is the goal this video project sees as worth striving towards in these formative times in Egypt.

### ***POLITICS OF SCARCITY***

resource scarcity, ecosystem management, rare earths

#### **Peter Mörtenböck**

Global resource investments, the movement of capital and the rise and fall of stock markets have long been seen as reasonable performance indicators for defining economic prosperity and growth. Trapped in a matrix of consumer economies, we have nurtured a belief in a feedback system based on share values, mortgage financing, asset concentration and credit derivative swaps. As the Western economy now flatlines and the economic crisis collides with long-term problems such as food and energy scarcity, overconsumption and physical depletion, more and more people have begun to lose trust in the sustainability of this feedback mechanism. What prevails is scarcity and with it the profound crisis of our time: nothing threatens to hamper consumerist habits more than the prospect of tightening resource constraints. But the concept of scarcity is by no means an unbiased framework for grappling with the gradual loss of ready access to natural resources. From Thomas Malthus' late eighteenth-century *Essay on the Principle of Population*<sup>1</sup> to the Club of

1. Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993



Rome's 1972 *Limits to Growth* report and resurgent concerns over a diminishing resource base for humans, the ideology of scarcity points to a conclusion shared by many diagnoses of resource crisis, namely that we will have to accept rationing of some sort if we are to survive on a limited planetary surface.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s, visionary architects such as Paolo Soleri and Mike Reynolds transformed the intellectual and ecological paradigms of resource scarcity into experiential spatial laboratories with their designs for eco-cities that leave only a small footprint on the Earth. These concepts were formulated in a time that saw the emergence of neighbourhood action initiatives, free-thinking groups and eco-communes intent on producing new narratives of self and relatedness and on radicalizing political and environmental thinking. Based on a philosophy of simple, low-tech environmental principles, Arcosanti, perhaps the best-known experiment of this kind, was conceived for a population of 5000 inhabitants. Forty years later, it has a population of only sixty. But more recently Soleri and his generation of 'archological' urban designers have attracted increasing interest from municipalities and groups of developers.<sup>3</sup> The current revival of an alliance between the scarcity paradigm and the search for ecological solutions is different in the sense that it is taking place in the context of post-millennial concerns over climate change, peak oil and the loss of biodiversity, one in which resource depletion has become increasingly entangled with the affective regime of late capitalism and its expansion of commodity space.

The nature of this complicity is epitomized by the current race for rare earth elements, minerals that are critical components in modern electronic devices and 'green' technologies ranging from hybrid cars and flat-screen displays to low-energy light bulbs and generators used in wind turbines. Leading the way is the Bayan Obo Mining District in Inner Mongolia, with almost forty per cent of global production.<sup>4</sup> The fact that rare earths are scattered in small quantities within soil makes mining these minerals cost-intensive and ecologically harmful. The environmentally taxing aspect of this enterprise is skilfully softened by an aesthetics of slick elegance and luxury. Rare-earth compounds are displayed in on-site showrooms in which minimalist-but-luxurious style outshines the glamour of iconic artworks such as Damien Hirst's well-known *Pharmacy* installation (1992) with its display of cabinets full of mysterious substances or his recent sculpture of a diamond-encrusted human skull (*For the Love of God*, 1997). These parallels are anything but accidental. Like the art world's fusion of market and aesthetic assets into long-term value, resource value has in a sense become dependent not only on the idea of scarcity but on its ostentatious celebration. Scarcity has been transformed from a threat into a stage-act.

In his book on *Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, Manuel DeLanda describes how resource distributions never exist in an abstract space but are always related to concrete spatial entities, such as communes, markets or interpersonal networks.<sup>5</sup> Resources can be seen as the emergent properties of such entities, be they physical resources such as oil, water, cotton or rare earth metals, or conceptual ones such as solidarity, mutuality, legitimacy or trust. Obviously, there is a connection between these tangible and intangible assets that needs to be explored further to fully understand the nature of the crisis in which

2. Donella H Meadows, Dennis L Meadows, Jørgen Randers and William W Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, New York Universe, New York, 1972

3. Archology, combining 'architecture' and 'ecology', is a term coined by Paolo Soleri to characterize large-scale structures that supply all resources for a comfortable life for large populations.

4. Lee Levkowitz, 'China's Rare Earths Industry and its Role in the International Market', research paper, 2010, available online at: <http://www.uscc.gov/researchpapers/2011/RareEarthsBackgrounderFINAL.pdf>

5. Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, Continuum, London and New York, 2006

6. This thinking comprises not only the management of resource crises but also economic techniques and repertoires such as the emissions trading schemes used by airlines, or the outsourcing of environmentally hazardous businesses to the global south.

we feel immersed, as we are becoming more and more aware of the workings of a dominant economic model that is not just bolted on to this structure but skilfully woven into the *thinking* of our resources and what we consider as today's 'resource crisis'.<sup>6</sup> I am not sure whether the connection lies with a remodelled attachment to the ecologies that we inhabit or whether these feelings have now entered new and complex circuits of cross-contamination, but what is clear to me is that there is a loose thread running through the various fields of crisis, one that has to do with a changing relationship between the individual and the collective – between *individual forms* of understanding losses and gains and a *collective structure* that is needed to engage productively in a situation of crisis.

## CO-OPERATIVE OF THINGS

commons, externalization, thingness, imagination

Helge Mooshammer

While the many different files of World of Matter cover fairly distant sites and quite specific local constellations, one characteristic they tend to share is that of a conflictive confrontation between on-site conditions and trans-local dealings, the socio-ecological fabric on the ground and the demands of a global market. This conflict not only stems from antagonistic self-interests, but is underpinned by wider philosophical concerns about how we can make sense of our collective being in the world. The urge to find a theoretical framework more apt for the complex interplay of human and non-human forces has surfaced in parallel to a growing recognition that the multiple crises of today cannot be overcome purely by readjusting the settings of old-school economic operations. It is here that we find the call for a new ecological understanding coalescing with the call for a new political economy.

At the heart of these contentions lies the demand to break with capitalism's tendency to externalization. Affected parties are pressing increasingly hard for current resource exploitation to take into account all the things and costs that the market economy has so far succeeded in excluding from its expenditure and profit calculations. An important strand of research into the possibilities of a more inclusive understanding and use of resource environments has been the recent focus on co-operative structures. Elinor Ostrom's 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics for her research on economic governance and the United Nations declaration of 2012 as International Year of Co-operatives, among other things, have drawn attention to the capacity of co-operatives to stake out a middle ground between the extremes of over-regulation through centralized authorities and total liberalization of a privatized market.<sup>1</sup>

Within this ideological struggle around the limitations of humanity's dominion over the world a new stream of thinking has been gaining increasing popularity: the discourse on the social life of things. Promoted by philosophical circles from liberal institutions exploring the idea of speculative realism, it has the air of a radically new vision in which thingness might become a cathartic object of critical enquiry.<sup>2</sup> Indeed,

1. Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990

2. See for instance the voices gathered in Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, eds, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, re.press, Melbourne, 2011.

it would seem vital to recognize that the conceptualization of natural resources as commodities is only one of many options in the life-cycle of objects that, over time, appear in different constellations and are thus put to use in different ways and in line with different value regimes.

While the patterns of argumentation and rhetoric deployed by speculative realism seem to promise scope for transgressing the limitations of human-centred interactions with the material world (and resource exploitation is a key example of such interaction), we also have to be careful not to throw out the baby with the bath water. It is, of course, significant that the rise of this new fashion coincides with the recent cycle of ‘value-adjusting’ crises in the market economy exemplified by the 2008 credit crunch and the ensuing austerity politics. Could it be that this recurring focus on the independence of the life of things merely serves as means of obviating human responsibility for what is happening to the world we live in? Moreover, the vehemence that this narrative has taken on in the art world, instantiated most recently by Documenta 13, raises the question of whether the new aestheticization of objects and their material qualities might actually conceal a certain fetishization of tradable objects, precisely in times of volatility.<sup>3</sup> Is this rehabilitation of the thing allowing a purified market of exchange in through the back door, as it were, one that is again managing to exclude all potential externalities from its calculations? Again, the crucial question is how critique relates to the amalgamation of the art market where connoisseur art critics and stock exchange brokers coincide in their preference for measurable material quantities rather than having to deal with the messiness of relationalities.

In discussing the creation of the urban commons, David Harvey, the seminal voice of counter-geography, is certainly very clear about the commons being not a thing but an issue of social practice,<sup>4</sup> which in turn allows for many things to be conceived in a multitude of ways. The challenge for World of Matter is based on the commitment to join, on the one hand, the ecologies of things to, on the other, the manifold human relations that develop around them. The point here is to expand the imaginary of possibilities. Perhaps it is time to start thinking about a co-operative of things.

## MINERAL INVISIBILITY

accessibility/distribution, archive, extraction, mining, actors

### Mabe Bethônico

The primary economic activity of Minas Gerais, the second most populous state in Brazil, is announced in its name. Although mining occupies vast expanses of land in the region and profoundly impacts on air and water supplies as well as human health and livelihoods, it remains largely invisible to a majority, including those who live in its shadow. Only in the last couple of years – as Chinese investors have become involved beyond the realm of mineral importation, now acquiring large tracts in Minas Gerais and thereby control over extractive operations – has mining surfaced in the daily news.

Despite its massive economic role, the subject of mining remains strangely absent from public debate. A collective amnesia, or rooted

3. As Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, artistic director of Documenta 13, states, the 2012 programme of Germany’s most important international art festival ‘is dedicated to artistic research and forms of imagination that explore commitment, matter, things, embodiment, and active living in connection with, yet not subordinated to, theory... This vision is shared with, and recognises, the shapes and practices of knowing of all the animate and inanimate makers of the world, including people’. See <http://www3.documenta.de>. Other recent examples include the 2011–2013 programme on ‘Thingness’ at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics in New York, and the widely noted book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University, Raleigh, North Carolina, 2010, by Jane Bennett.

4. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, Verso, London and New York, 2012



Images from inspection reports compiled by the Brazilian Ministry of Work and Employment: workers' transport and accommodation, Minas Gerais, Brazil



disinterest, persists in the cultural field. Minas Gerais holds little trace of its mining history. In public archives, museums and libraries, isolated material can be found, but only rarely and always de-contextualized. Images of mineral production are strictly controlled using arguments of industrial secrecy, perpetuating invisibility and abstraction. Mining companies have recently proposed that cultural institutions devoted to their industry be established. By financing, for instance, a museum of mining and metals in a public building they enforce their own perspective on this history. These enterprises are no more than entertainment centres, or publicity machines, devoid of (ie voiding) reference to issues of labour, environmental damage, historical legacy and political context.

The aim of my research project is to give visibility to this context of mining in both its historical and contemporary manifestations – contributing to the circulation of information through the production of images and content. At the start, under the pretext of researching women workers in the mines, I was granted access to visit and take photographs. I was aided by the perception that I was harmless as an artist, but also by the mining companies' common belief that female employees give a positive image to their endeavours. In fact, these women are largely happy with their jobs; the major companies are internationally targeted for health and safety regulations and apparently have good standards for overall working conditions.

As for the small mines, geographically scattered and often illegal, the conditions in these are of another kind. They are regulated by the Ministry of Work and Employment (Setor de Fiscalização da Mineração do Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego), which has limited means for carrying out inspections and is operated by insufficient numbers of ill-equipped workers. They produce photo reports and written analyses of each inspection, constituting an archive. It is an X-ray of the mines beyond 'the great industry', in which women are in fact largely absent. The images show where workers in the mines live and eat, where and how they work, their toilets, how they eat, drink and rest during work hours, their machines, transport and tools. Kept in an administrative office, whether available for public consultation or not, department officials have been eager to have their material shown through my own project. The entire photo archive, a record of official inspections from 2000 to the present, has been made available for my project, raising in itself questions of public versus private information, and visible versus invisible resources in this field.

The project 'Invisibilidade Mineral' also comprises dialogues with professionals in different fields concerning the lack of imagery and information. Why is it not possible to provide evidence that mining towns have a quality of life inferior to that in places with no major mining activity? Why is there an ongoing absence of representation of mining and its history in Brazilian artistic production, in contrast, for example, to Mexican and Colombian art? What strategies are used to suppress the workers' side of the story in Minas Gerais' new Mining and Metals Museum? Why is mining still being taught at schools through maps only and rarely through photographs? Why have local miners' unions not gained more visibility in recent years? Based on field trips and conversations, 'Invisibilidade Mineral' produces texts, videos, photographs, publications and posters which are then circulated in the form of

a campaign – non-aggressively and with an awareness of the general lack of interest in the subject. Still, interest is slowly growing and the project is becoming an important source of information.

### ***MAPPING RICE/MAPPING TIME: SUBSISTENCE, SUPERHEROES, SYNCHRONIES***

rice, time, political ecology, multispecies commons, biodiversity

**Elaine Gan**

Rice drives the most resource-intensive agricultural systems – sites of relentless productivity and rationalized exploitations that feed half of our human population.<sup>1</sup> In early 2008, rice prices more than doubled from US\$393 to US\$1020 per metric tonne. Resulting food shortages, particularly in the Philippines, were linked to rapid-fire futures trading and long-term structural adjustment programmes – not grain supply.<sup>2</sup> Hunger induced by bookkeeping.

One of six humans today is starved. In response, agricultural sciences ramp up genetic modification and precision-breeding contracts to deliver ‘elite’ strains of rice that grow faster, produce higher yields, and consume less water, land and labour. Superhero seeds for better incomes: over seventy-five per cent of rice planted today was developed by research institutes.<sup>3</sup> But these capital-driven ‘solutions’ are tethered to histories of colonial accumulation and neoliberal dispossession. Superhero seeds obscure backdrops of slow, unspectacular deaths. Working with farmers in India, Vandana Shiva powerfully links unprecedented

1. Francesca Bray, *The Rice Economies: Technology and Development in Asian Societies*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p 12

2. Walden Bello, ‘Creating a Rice Crisis in the Philippines’, in *The Food Wars*, Verso, London and New York, 2009, pp 54–67

3. J L Maclean, D C Dawe, B Hardy and G P Hettel, eds, *Rice Almanac: Source Book for the Most Important Economic Activity on Earth*, third edition, CABI, Wallingford, in association with International Rice Research Institute, Makati City, et al, 2002, p vii



Pondfield terraces before planting season in Batad, an Ifugao community, photo: Wanda Acosta, 2010

species exterminations to seed biopiracy by transnationals, particularly Monsanto, and the criminalization of indigenous exchange.<sup>4</sup> Agribusiness breeds new transgenics while committing others to extinction. Practices of shifting cultivation that sustained centuries-old mountain provinces are declared illegal, even as industrialized rice production becomes the largest source of methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Seed-banks such as Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway freeze varieties *ex situ* as cost-effective archives for future synthetics, severed from communities cultivating them over generations.

How might we navigate through deadlocks of neoliberal scarcity and genetic obsolescence? To map rice is to unpack time as durational synchronies, contingent intensities and simmering futures of multispecies cycles. Marx's labour theory of value is grounded in socially necessary labour time. Sites of exploitation cannot be considered solely in terms of place or discrete location. They must be considered as technologies of temporal coordination, or the standardization of 'differential patterns of mattering'<sup>5</sup> into calculable units of homogeneous market time. Counter-hegemonic practice must propose methods for mapping temporalities through which multiplicities emerge and endure. In short, we need new clocks.

Highly adaptable lineages of grass, there are hundreds of thousands of varieties of wild and domesticated rice. Taste, aroma, colour, grain size, seed shattering and consistency index site-specific biocultural entanglements. At different stages and forms (variously seed, monocot, food, memory, derivative, genetic code), rice interacts with different partners. Germination, growth, reproduction, dormancy, mobility are enacted through iterative encounters with wind, light, heat, water, soil, gas, plants, animals, insects, microbes, and, as of roughly 9000 years ago, humans. These are neither random nor autopoietic events, but polychronic coordinations among incommensurables.<sup>6</sup>

Comparison of indigenous *tinawon*, annual varieties indigenous to Ifugao communities in the north-western Philippine Cordilleras, and commercial IR36, for instance, defines contrasting temporal relations. Tinawon cycles through approximately 210 days in pondfield terraces constructed by hand over centuries, along steep mountainsides at altitudes of 2500 to 5000 feet. Anthropologist Harold Conklin's lifelong studies of Ifugao rice describe a complex system of hydraulic engineering that binds symbolic, biotic and abiotic forces with interlocking durations and shifting seasonalities.<sup>7</sup> Water irrigation and drainage are organized along miles of bamboo poles linking to rivers and springs. Depending on monsoon rains, rice season begins in December to March, when panicles are planted in seedbeds and then transplanted to fields. Harvest arrives in late June to July, bringing with it a climax of celebratory feasts and rituals in the Ifugao year. Over generations, seed selectors store the best seeds for forthcoming plantings.

Commercial semi-dwarf IR36 has a 110-day growth cycle in lowland irrigated fields. Developed by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in Los Baños, Philippines, it was bred from thirteen elite and wild varieties from six countries in 1976.<sup>8</sup> By 1981, 2.73 million hectares or seventy-eight per cent of Philippine ricelands were planted with high-yield varieties, ninety per cent of these with IR36. By 1982, it covered eleven million hectares of Asian ricelands, becoming the 'most widely planted variety in history'. But accelerated cropping cycles, fertilizer sat-

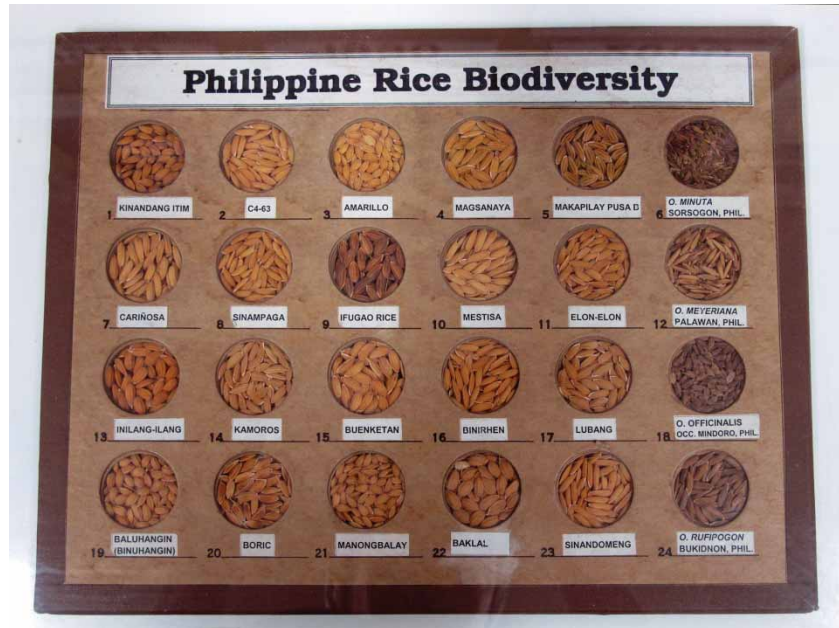
4. Vandana Shiva, *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*, South End, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2000, pp 9–13, pp 79–84. To get involved in Navdanya, a growing movement founded by Shiva to save and share seeds, practise chemical-free agriculture, and safeguard biodiversity, go to <http://www.navdanya.org>.

5. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina and London, 2007, p 180

6. Research is ongoing, growing in dialogue particularly with anthropologist Anna Tsing.

7. Harold Conklin, 'Ethnographic Research in Ifugao' (1974), in *Fine Description*, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 2007 and *Ethnographic Atlas of Ifugao: A Study of Environment, Culture, and Society in Northern Luzon*, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1980; R F Barton, 'Ifugao Economics', in *American Archeology and Ethnology*, vol 15, no 5, 12 April 1922, pp 385–446.

8. The Rockefeller and Ford Foundations opened IRRI in 1961. Within a few years, IRRI scientists developed the first 'miracle rice', IR8, a high-yielding, fertilizer- and pesticide-dependent variety that triggered the Green Revolution throughout Asia, drastically altering rice landscapes and economies from the late 1960s on.



Display case of a few varieties at IRRR's International Rice Genebank in Los Baños, Philippines. No 9 is labelled 'Ifugao rice', one of over 300 varieties cultivated by Ifugao communities, photo: Elaine Gan, 2010

uration and shrinking biodiversity altered valences, eventually triggering mutations of insects such as brown planthopper and viral diseases such as grassy stunt that deform grain and destroy yields. IR36 proved unsustainable and was replaced within a decade.<sup>9</sup>

9. Donald L Plucknett, Nigel J H Smith, J T Williams and N Murthi Anishetty, *Gene Banks and The World's Food*, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, 1987, pp 171–185

How to represent these dynamics? Much is at stake in attempting new clocks, temporal cartographies that mediate and provoke critical modes of synchronization. To study seeds as emergent manifolds constituted through multispecies temporalities is to jolt – and radically open up – calendars and quarterly reports of profit extraction that compress ecosystems into financialized supply chains.

## WASTE

land, (in-)visibility, contamination

Emily Eliza Scott

Like 'wilderness', its ancient etymological twin, 'wasteland' derives from the Old English *westen*, a term denoting remote or barren regions, those stubbornly recalcitrant to human development. Already in the Middle Ages, wasteland signified 'a landscape and a relation of men to their natural environment characterised by depopulation, the infertility of nature, and a crisis of social order'.<sup>1</sup> Today, places which bear the imprint of, or become body to, various environmental-social dilemmas – at times, to the point of being *rendered by humans* uninhabitable or infecund – are ever more prevalent: deserts from over-grazing and farming; seas depleted of recently intact ecosystems; the now iconic

1. Howard R Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages*, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, 1986, p 200



trash heaps of worldwide mega-slums; suburban subdivisions with row upon row of foreclosed homes; monumental pits from mineral excavation; acutely contaminated sites cordoned off behind barbed wire. Historian of science Peter Galison puts forward the hybrid notion ‘waste-wilderness’ to draw attention to the affinities between these seemingly dichotomous categories as well as the ideologies that give rise to them. As ‘twin zones of exclusion’, or places where humans are deemed somehow foreign or no longer at home, he argues, they prompt a radical re-thinking of our contemporary relation to the land.<sup>2</sup>

World of Matter seeks to de-familiarize understandings of natural resources, taken not as discrete entities but rather in terms of complex human and non-human ecologies. The various investigations constituting this multi-year collaborative project, while elucidating the movement of goods through globalized networks, simultaneously attend to the peculiarities of individual brute substances, embodied actions, legal and political machinations, and sites on the ground (many of which have been ravaged by resource extraction or production, moreover out of common view). We are interested in the potential of visual images, and critical-aesthetic practice more generally, to orient and disorient – to convey information while at the same time unsettling the informational in order to catalyse more nuanced and democratic forms of ecological thinking and action.

One of our tactics for *contaminating* neatly packaged discourse and imagery is to litter our own web-based platform with residue from our research process. Reflecting our commitment to transparency about how concepts and images are built within World of Matter, the database will, for instance, include media files representing a spectrum of stages from raw footage to processed documents. It will moreover entail a meta-archive – indices of our collective labours: material typically dissipated beyond the meeting room, accumulated in email trash bins, shed on the studio floor, subsumed into final works and obscured from view. Rather than a figurative brushstroke registering our presence, this gesture is primarily meaningful for its operational potential, including the potential to act as a resource for kindred practitioners. The New York-based Center for Urban Pedagogy – an organization that creates ‘visually-based educational tools that demystify urban policy and planning issues’, describes its belief in the value of amplifying the often mundane processes by which policy is shaped and shapes:<sup>3</sup>

... we resist the abstraction of bullet points... Instead of presenting information systematically linked to a cohesive structure, the structure itself is magnified to reveal the discordant information that composes it, the material specifics of abstraction: the coffee spill at the public hearing. The concretization of abstraction, pointing towards the permeability of the idealised control system, opens the door to rethinking oneself as the agent.<sup>4</sup>

Not unlike the coffee spill at the public hearing, material ruptures and potentialities occupy the foreground in many World of Matter investigations. Paulo Tavares, for instance, traces the story of tainted Ecuadorian mud – extracted from deep below the Earth’s surface to bear witness to the unreported seepage of toxins by the American oil giant Chevron, which has effectively undone the corporation’s self-projected (and false) image of environmentally sustainable and socially responsible drilling.<sup>5</sup>

2. ‘Waste-Wilderness: A Conversation with Peter L. Galison’, posted online 31 March 2011 at: <http://fopnews.wordpress.com/2011/03/31/galison>
3. Center for Urban Pedagogy’s website, <http://welcometocup.org/>, accessed 23 September 2011
4. Center for Urban Pedagogy, in Nato Thompson and Independent Curators’ International, eds, *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism*, Melville House, New York, 2008, pp 80–81
5. His recent essay in an issue of *Cabinet* profiles the highly publicized transnational legal dispute that resulted in Chevron being subjected to unprecedented fines (which have yet to be paid), owed to local communities in 2011 for the contamination of soil and water around Lago Agrio, a petroleum frontier town in the Ecuadorian Amazon. It centres on the extraction of in situ evidence from makeshift laboratory-courtrooms in the jungle, and how the murky earth itself was relayed into the legal arena and made to speak. Paulo Tavares, ‘Murky Evidence’, *Cabinet* 43, 2011, pp 101–105

How might we, and others, develop practices that intervene into top-down flows and abstractions, thereby contributing to widened public debate and opening onto thorny (political) ecological issues with due attention to questions of justice, human and otherwise?

**AMAZON FRONTIERS: NOTES ON THE ‘AMAZON INSURGENCY’, PERU, 2009**

enclosures, regulation, land, nature

Paulo Tavares

*The robbery of the honey and the robbery of our safety, the robbery of communing and the taking of liberties have gone hand in hand.*

Peter Linebaugh

**Supply Ruptures:** at least thirty-three people died on 5 July 2009 when security forces moved to break down a road blockade sustained by more than five thousand Indians and peasants at a place known as the Devil’s Curve, a precarious road bend that links the Andean highlands to the Amazon in Peru, near a frontier town named Bagua, some thousand kilometres north of the capital, Lima. More than half of these security forces were police officers. In the previous two months state repression had been escalating in response to the well-orchestrated demonstrations and infrastructural disruptions that took control of practically the entire Peruvian Amazon. Protests had thus far been peaceful, but not inconsequential. Marches were reported in many towns across the



The Great Enclosure: the lines of the state of emergency declared by the Peruvian Government in May/June 2009

1. The protests were led by AIDSESEP – the Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana (Inter-ethnic Association for Development of the Peruvian Jungle) – the Peruvian national coalition of indigenous movements, which published day-to-day reports on the mobilizations; see <http://www.aidesepp.org.pe>. Several local and international NGOs also monitored the protests. See AmazonWatch, *Day 50 of Indigenous Protests in Peru*; World Rain Forest Movement, *Peru: Amazon Peoples, Bastions of Resistance*, and Amnesty International, *Peru: Baguá Six Months On*, 2009. Among the corporations operating in the affected regions are the national oil company Petroperu, Spanish Repsol and Argentinian Plurispetrol, which reportedly halted production. Protests were also directly related to conflicts around mining sites operated by Chinese gold-mining firm Zijin, the Canadian consortium Dorata and British-owned Monerico Metal.
2. The Free Trade Agreement was signed in December 2005 by former presidents George W Bush and Alan García. After a long process of legal-technical negotiations, it was finally ratified in December 2007, the same month the Peruvian Congress approved the exceptional mandate to swiftly enact its implementation. Decree 1090, which was published on 28 June 2008, contends that de-forested areas in the Amazon should be no longer legally considered as part of the inalienable patrimony of national forests but regulated as agricultural land according to a commodity-based regime. The law thus effectively legitimizes environmental destruction as the means by which private property is produced on the ground. Activists claimed that it would stimulate the

jungle and demonstrators held position for more than fifty days straight at various strategic points such as refineries and airports, gas and oil pipelines, river routes and roads, cutting virtually all the supply-lines coming from resources extraction sites located in the Amazon.<sup>1</sup>

**Legal Enclosures:** spatially dispersed but politically articulated, the protests embodied a common claim against ninety-nine laws put forward by the federal government under a special mandate that allowed bypassing of parliamentary debate and ruling by decree issues related to the implementation of the free-trade agreement signed with the United States. This new legal agenda was aimed at preparing the ground for a radical transformation of land-zoning and proprietary regimes in order to remove barriers for private capital investment in agribusiness and heavy mineral extraction in the entire country, most importantly in the Amazon, where the subsoil contains large reserves of yet untapped hydrocarbon and mineral resources, and wherein indigenous populations remain with relative territorial autonomy in relation to state control. Most fiercely opposed by the indigenous movement was decree 1090, otherwise known as the ‘Forest Law’, which enabled the legal re-coding of land previously designated as ‘forest’ into ‘idle and unproductive agricultural lands’. If this law were enforced, large tracts of the Amazon, most of which form part of (non-titled) commons held by indigenous nationalities, would be excluded from the National Forest Heritage and become available for trading in the global market.<sup>2</sup>

**Political Enclosures:** the empowerment of the Peruvian government with a legislative mandate that would allow the imposition of a wide neo-liberal agenda on the Amazon without public debate was followed by the radicalization of popular mobilization, which shifted towards direct action. In turn, the government enforced a sixty-day state of emergency in almost all the Amazonian districts, enclosing the entire forest in a large siege zone. Articulated at the same time in Congress and on the ground, an exceptional state was employed as a legal-political mechanism through which the reorganization of an entire ecology could come into force. The curtailing of political rights and the erosion of the rights to communing operated mutually to reinforce each other.<sup>3</sup>

**Epistemic Enclosures:** in order to let materials *flow freely* to global markets, it was necessary to promote territorial enclosures that were anticipated and projected through legal mechanisms and backed up by means of political containment. Enclosures were not only political and territorial, but properly ‘epistemic’, ruling out other ecological practices that are in excess of the imperatives of commoditization of nature. More than a set of codes, the Forest Law operates as a powerful cartographic device that encircles socio-ecological diversity into means and ends that can be recognized and appropriated by market mechanisms. The legal re-framing of Amazonian soils not only represented a change in proprietary regimes, but in fact projected an entire ‘environmental’ transformation which, while eliminating socio-ecologies historically rooted in collective-based systems of managing resources, completely re-organizes human–non-human relations over the area it rules.<sup>4</sup>



penetration of slash-and-burn agricultural frontiers into forested areas, contributing further to expanding illegal land-grab into indigenous territories. Another highly contested law was Decree 1064, which eroded indigenous rights in relation to resources by eliminating the requirement to obtain 'informed consent' from local communities before launching mining and oil drilling projects in their lands, thus clearly violating the ILO-169 Convention. For a detailed analysis of the Forest Law, see the report of the NGO Derechos, Ambiente e Recursos Naturales (DARN), *Hechos y Aspectos Vulneratorios de Los Decretos Legislativos 1090 y 1064*, June 2009.

3. This is the crucial point of the much needed manifesto written by Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*, University of California, Los Angeles, 2008.

Linebaugh recalls that the elaboration of 'The Great Charter of the Liberties of England' in 1215, the landmark medieval law that limited the monarch's power over his or her subjects, was accompanied by the formulation of another law named 'The Charter of the Forest', which guaranteed access to the common forests of the kingdom. The former provided political rights, the later limited material expropriation: the right to the practice of communing was integral to minimize state power over people; it was a freedom guarantee. Hence Linebaugh's conclusion that one and the other are mutually constitutive and, conversely, that enclosures have been historically related to the erosion of civil and political liberties. Conflicts around resource extraction operations carried out by large corporations in indigenous territories have been escalating in the last years in many countries in Latin America, chiefly in Peru, where the recent high index of GDP growth is heavily dependent on raw



Lamalito (Little Mud). Along the newly built Trans-Andean highway at the margins of the Madre de Dios River, western Amazon, Peru, migrants have been illegally occupying large areas of forest with improvised dwellings, set up to extract gold. These are typical frontier towns: stateless and lawless micro-polities that grow fuelled by intensive labour, alcohol, prostitution and private guns. While the mineral becomes scarcer in the surface of the Amazonian soils and its price continues to climb on the global market, the mining cities move to more gold-rich strata, opening up land that later will be occupied by capital-intensive extraction and plantation activities. Designed to be un-built and re-built as fast as financial ups and downs hit the market, they configure an archetype of the resource frontier-architectures of our present time, when labour has become flexible and the materiality of gold remains a secure resource amidst a sea of economical instabilities, cloudy political forecasts and environmental scarcity.

**Politics/Ecology:** the violent mishandling of the demonstrations, arbitrary imprisonment and juridical persecution of key protesters that characterized the 'Amazon Insurgency' – as this episode came to be known in Peru – led to reactions both locally and internationally. Soon after the violent clashes at the Devil's Curve the government was forced to cede, and revoked the Forest Law. Besides expressing the continuous resistance against land dispossession and erosion of customary rights of the indigenous people of the Amazon, the conflict rendered visible the disagreement over the monolithic notion of nature that was being inscribed through the law. If ecology can be



earth exports. In turn, resource-extraction sites have become more securitized and militarized, while protests are constantly dealt with using exceptional political measures. Recently, in May 2012, a thirty-day state of emergency was again imposed on the region of Cuzco after violent clashes erupted during indigenous protests against the Swiss mining-corporation Xstrata plc.

4. For the Amerindian populations of the Amazon, the Forest Law, more than a threat to territorial autonomy, was a menace to cultural and social survival, since the decrees could potentially disrupt the institutional and material assemblages upon which their life-world is cultivated. At a strict legal-scientific level, the battle was fought over the very 'natural' condition of the Amazon as a forest. Critics pointed out that regulating deforested forest areas by agriculture-oriented legal regimes was unconstitutional, and that the new law was ill-defined because it limited the notion of 'forest' to the characterization of the surface-cover, whereas it was necessary to consider the entire bio-ecology of those areas. 'The forest as a natural resource embraces a set of elements like the climate, the soil, the vegetation, water, fauna and other elements', scientists and lawyers argued, and therefore the legal/natural definition of 'forest' could not be given only by the characterization of the earth surface. Instead they promoted a geological argument based on the examination of 'the conditions of the vulnerability of the soil, that goes well beyond the presence or not of the trees', and argued that according to the Peruvian national geological index, the soils of the Amazon differ from the soils of land with agricultural potential, and therefore should be regulated by a forest-oriented legal regime. See DARN, op cit, p 4.

a politics, it is one that is less concerned with the ethical imperatives of 'saving' or 'protecting' nature than with the necessity to destabilize the very hegemonic notion of nature itself that is being actualized through the recent neoliberal enclosures. In a sense, the crucial conflict fought in the Amazon was not so much to defend 'land rights' as to resist the imposition by law and state force of a concept of land that would erase the political and ecological foundations of peoples' liberties.

## ***A UNITY OF BODIES, SPACES AND SPOKEN WORDS*** actors, materials, sites, fieldwork

### **Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan**

Less than an hour's drive from Amsterdam lies an oxymoronic area, consisting of reclaimed land inhabited by migrant-farmers and a former island housing an old fishing community. We were curious to find out how these farmers and fishermen, who pass their skills from father to son, hold on to tradition while adapting to new circumstances. Therefore the area became the field of our artistic inquiry.

The so-called North-East Polder is a 180-square-mile section of former seabed that was drained and added to Dutch land during a period in which overseas colonies became independent.<sup>1</sup> Geometrical parcelling created an isotropic plane: a homogeneous surface optimized for standardized production and distribution of crops. Every farmer



Still from a 35 mm film, *Aolen in Boeten*, 2013, made by the authors in collaboration with the people of Urk; Urker fisherman reciting scripted conversation derived from a recording while mending nets

received a house with a prefabricated barn. Even the social composition was decided upon from above. Migrants invited to the newly created land were selected not only for their farming capabilities but also for their aptitude to form a new community.<sup>2</sup> This may be the reason why every town in the North-East Polder still has a drama club. The island of Urk was incorporated into the reclaimed land and the inland sea where its fishermen had fished for generations was closed off.<sup>3</sup> Although the government had amortized the local fishery, Urk's fishermen managed to improve their boats and exchanged their nearby fishing places for pitches far out in the North Sea. Nowadays, the once secluded and traditional fishing community owns large parts of Europe's fleet and fishing rights and hosts Europe's largest fish auction.<sup>4</sup> It has become avant-garde in experimenting with sustainable fishing methods and is testing on-board anaesthesia to reduce fish suffering.

Dominant debates in Europe tend to focus on the contribution of producers to employment and export surplus, but in the conversations with farmers and fishermen we recognized another discourse in which respecting nature, religion, generosity and exchanging ideas is equally as relevant as livelihood. This multifaceted perspective connects to an intuition in our work that various modes of being, such as living and inanimate objects, power struggles and the mythical, share the same landscape.

As artistic fieldworkers we are used to evaluating our actions. During our research we found out that many of the farmers and fishermen to whom we spoke were engaged in similar processes. The global upscaling of the market and an increased critical public perception cause them constantly to re-narrate their story, reconsider their practice and reshape their self-image. This reshaping and rephrasing takes place as a collective performance of the community, an ongoing dialogue into which we, as artistic producers, were welcomed.

How could we bring across this dialogical process of reshaping ourselves in a multiverse? As a first experiment and in dialogue with our fellow producers from the trades of farming and fishing, we asked them, together with members of local theatre groups, to recite dialogues addressing these concerns on suitable locations. We recorded their performance in situ as a unity of space, body and spoken words. Dialogue is here a research method, a structuring device for the scenario and our approach to film-making. It seems a proper medium to convey how meaning is produced through exchange and collaboration, since in a dialogue the words spoken are inspired by the words of the other.

1. Preparations for the reclamation started in 1936. The process of draining, cultivating the land, building infrastructure and distributing the land lasted until the end of the 1950s. In 1962 the North-East Polder officially became a municipality of the Netherlands.
2. These migrants came mainly from Friesland, Noord-Holland, Brabant and Zeeland, areas they had, in many cases, been forced to leave because their land was used for industry or infrastructure.
3. The salt water became fresh and only eel survived the transition.
4. Urk is nicknamed 'little Brussels'. More than sixty per cent of the English fleet and fish quota for the North Sea is owned by Urkers.

# Delicacy and Danger

Patrick D Flores

1. The term ‘Philippine’ is to be distinguished from the name of the country that is the Philippines. It references this country, but exceeds the discourse of nation-state identity or even nationalism to take in the trope or trace or figure, or better still, the figurine of the archipelago of around seven thousand islands named after the Prince of Asturias, who later became King Philip II. The term, therefore, is some kind of miniaturization or diminutive that speaks of intimacy and affection as well as possession.

2. Stephanie Syjuco, online at: [http://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/p\\_bodydouble.html](http://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/p_bodydouble.html)

3. Greg Bankoff, ‘Storms of History: Water, Hazard and Society in the Philippines 1565–1930’, in Peter Boomgaard, ed, *A World of Water: Rain, Rivers and Seas in Southeast Asian Histories*, NUS, Singapore, 2007, p 153

4. José Lezama Lima (1910–1976) was a Cuban writer and poet. This quote is from Lezama Lima, ‘Baroque Curiosity’, in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup, eds, *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation,*

The contemporary artist Stephanie Syjuco recognizes the Philippine in *Apocalypse Now* and other Vietnam films like *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill* and seeks to recover the locale by deleting that which has infringed it, that is, that which the film has contrived as the scenography of an elsewhere that is Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> In the three-channel work *Body Double* (2007), she reverses the ethnographic sublime and restores, as it were, the natural via a montage of the elements: silent, uninhabited, picturesque, the ecology of the Philippine (the diversity of which is one of the highest in the world) that is redeemed in the moving image as miniature atmosphere. As Syjuco confides:

This video project ignores the original filmic narrative to focus on my own attempts at discovering my place of birth – a kind of reworked ‘home movie’. The resulting videos look like ambient, minimalist imagery of landscapes and close ups of flora and fauna.<sup>2</sup>

This terrain, while lush and abundant, happens to have a precarious life. The tropical is blessed by profuse parturition, on the one hand, and it is a site of calamity and ruination on the other. The Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters reports that since 1900, the ‘Philippines has experienced the most events defined as requiring international assistance’.<sup>3</sup> Between 1900 and 1991, there was an average of eight disasters a year, making the country the hardest hit by natural disasters in ninety years. This is another condition of the ‘apocalypse’, the destruction of the natural world, the decimation of population, the devastation of heritage. Such a feeling of transience is key in grasping the Philippine mood for the otherworldly: migratory or millenarian, ‘errant in form but firmly rooted in its essence’ to borrow a phrase from the philosopher of the baroque José Lezama Lima.<sup>4</sup> The confluence between species and milieu, biologies and natural histories, in what the anthropologist Aihwa Ong calls ‘biopolitical assemblages’, bears on how global economies continue to colonize conditions of vital survival and how this very survival valiantly tries to frustrate it. As she elaborates: ‘Sheer life in the tropics is becoming an ethical exception to the global cartography mapped and sustained by the biocapital regime.’<sup>5</sup>

*Counterconquest*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2010.

5. Aihwa Ong, 'Scales of Exception: Experiments with Knowledge and Sheer Life in Tropical Southeast Asia', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 29, 2008, p 7

This modest reflection maps out certain coordinates of practice in Asia that is invested in the problematic of ecology and the place of the aesthetic in that procedure. Such an effort proposes trajectories of intervention in the political gesture of the cultivation of land; the re-intuition of the city as an ethnoscape within a planet in peril; the conjuncture of the multispecies zone; the gathering of art in processual platforms not necessarily confined to the exhibitionary; and the potential of craft as a vector of the tropic and the social. Limning the contours of these tendencies that require elaboration in future work, we glean that the delicate and dangerous state of nature is treated by artists with a mix of aesthetic dispositions; from the sentimental regard for the bounty of land and the inalienability of the entitlements of people to it, to the interventive documentation of the destruction of the ground on which the failure of civilization and modernity stand. In these interactions, there is always a desire to critique and reconstruct, to communicate across sensibilities, disciplines, histories, and even species. The previously preferred term 'hybridity' may have been surmounted in this process, not exactly to diminish its theoretical valence but to nuance its signifying potential to index and robustly evoke the intersubjective agencies at work in the remaking of nature in light of the overinvestment in culture and history. The current lexicon may yield words like 'multitude' or 'swarm', 'sheerness' and 'tropicality', and they all inflect the ecological emergency of the moment and inspire us to revisit the virtues of reciprocity between 'persons and things'. Finally, this piece dares to nominate a 'region' that is Asia, another vexing rubric of geography and geopolitics, if only to heighten the critical awareness of the lineage of colonization as well as trace the radiation of current economic power in the world.

In the work of Po Po from Burma (Myanmar), the impulse of the artist is to revisit the condition of agriculture as a method of communication in a rather restrictive society. In one of the most extensive surveys



Po Po (Hla Oo), *Terrace*, 2009, installation display, dimensions variable





Christian Boltanski, *No Man's Land*, Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, 2012, clothes, crane, heartbeat sound, speakers, twenty tonnes of clothes piled up to approximately nine metres, photo courtesy Osamu Nakamura

of the contemporary art of his country in Singapore in 2010, he proposed *Terrace*. The initial moment of this proposition makes reference to his native clearing and locates him in the social world as well as in the art world of exceptional inequities. Both emplacements enable him to act on the 'issue of isolation versus internationalization', the ostracism by the international democratic world of Burma as an aberration or anathema and the hierarchies of the global market of art. This self-awareness crosses the gaps through the sharing of 'nature' and the reciprocity inhering in the conversation. He creates an 'indoor terrace by placing styrofoam lunchboxes of rice plants' and 'sets up a system of exchange with the audience'.<sup>6</sup> The latter can acquire a lunchbox of seedlings with three leaves from their own plants; the purchase comes with the artist's instruction for care. Such a scheme reveals an environment of uneven distribution in the social world of art and in the social life of things and artists. This is in itself an ecology that subtends the aesthetic: it conjures the climate of production and circulation. In the peculiar instance of Burma, which has been considered a pariah in the world order and dismissed as retrograde within the regime of human rights, a subtle intervention like this is acute because it coordinates the tilling of earth, the sowing of seed, and to some extent the 'redistribution of the sensible' that is both 'country' and 'art world'. It is curious to note that, in spite of recent reforms in the government, Burma persists in being viewed as 'lagging' at the same time as its art

6. Isabel Ching, 'Art From Myanmar: Possibilities of Contemporaneity?', *Third Text* 111, vol 25, no 4, 2011, p 444



Atelier Bow-Wow + Tokyo Institute of Technology Tsukamoto Lab, *Boat Shed*, Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale 2012, wood, photo courtesy Osamu Nakamura

world may be characterized as ‘leapfrogging’ from a limited engagement with modernity as we know it, to a possible integration into contemporary art or contemporaneity, which reinscribes globality in the deed of making ‘art’ and partaking of it with others in time but across discrepant origins.

Po Po’s endeavour carves out a parcel of land and re-charts its routes. In China, Ou Ning similarly foregrounds a feeble continent of one man’s residence in the frenetic ambience of city-making. He cedes the arena of contemporary art and social theory to Zhang Jinli, a resident of Meishi Street in Beijing, who had raged against the ruthless tactics of demolition and relocation with unjust compensation. The artist-curator chanced on him in September 2005, eight months after the process of practically flattening the district had begun. As he relates:

All you could see around you were crumbling walls and rubble. With his neighbours all moved away, Zhang Jinli’s house looked like an





MIKAN + Sogabe Lab, Kanagawa University, *Gejo Thatch Tower*, Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale 2012, wood, thatch, old tools and furnitures etc, approx 12m tall, floor space 8 square meter, photo courtesy Osamu Nakamura

7. Ou Ning's blog, online at:  
<http://www.alternativearchive.com/ouning/article.asp?id=52>

island rising out of a sea of ruins. In order to obtain relocation compensation, he was put under enormous psychological pressure, and stayed alone in an almost emptied world. Deprived of the bustling atmosphere of bygone days, his daily life at No. 117 Meishi Street was like being exposed naked to the world, as if a layer of skin had been peeled off.<sup>7</sup>



Yayoi Kusama, *Tsumari in Bloom*, Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale 2003, cast aluminium, paint, 4100 × 5070 × 5210 mm, photo courtesy Osamu Nakamura

Ou Ning's use of the phrase 'exposed naked' is cogent; it intimates a trope of compromised but persevering agency in our time. To fully flesh out the prospect of this tenuous constitution of the human, Ou Ning equipped him with a technology of documentation, a mode of narrating his story:

We gave him a digital video camera (Sony DCR-TRV10E) and invited him to shoot his own life and protest actions with great enthusiasm. From the footage he had already shot, we saw Zhang Jinli on a more global level: his energy and vitality, wisdom and tenacity, feelings and convictions.<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to note how Ou Ning would translate such presence through the camera as an instantiation of globality in the context of the destruction of a neighbourhood and the rise of China as the world's premier superpower. Perhaps his description of Zhang Zinli's face-off with the authorities is instructive in what may well be a ludic dimension of this insinuation into the public sphere:

8. Ibid



When the staff of the Community Committee and the officers of the local police station started to take down the horizontal banner on his rooftop, he pointed the camera lens at them. As soon as he saw the car of the government officer who was coming to inspect the demolition area on Meishi Street, he started singing 'Without the Communist Party, There is No New China'. Although he had put down the camera, he had left it turned on, and recorded the sounds. He also set up the camera in a position to shoot himself writing banners and petition materials and in the end, he made a gesture of 'victory' to the camera lens.<sup>9</sup>

Against the rapid and ravenous rate of city building in China today, Ou Ning seeks to recover the life of the city through activist strategies that poignantly record the brutality of late capitalism as well as the poetic ramifications of the vanishing scapes of a metropolis.

The fatigue of contemporary art and society has led some artists and their colleagues to renew their ties with community and inevitably with land. In Thailand, Chiang Mai has proven to be a very fertile setting for this kind of introspective activity. Two cases may be explored to discuss the implications of this foray. First is the Chiang Mai Social Installation that has transformed the streets of the city into a laboratory, classroom and workshop. Beginning in 1992, artists organized the project to realise the possibility of figuring reality as socially installing and cooperative in the everyday life of the city and its people. In 1996, they wrote in their statement 'Seven Collective Principles from Friends':

Chiang Mai Social Installation is an annual Cultural festival open for all disciplines in society that wants to 'rouse' an atmosphere and stimulate activities on a Contemporary Cultural level. The capitalist market economy does not encourage such activity, but rather promotes egotistical greed, competition, exploitation and commercial entertainment.<sup>10</sup>

Second is The Land (1998), a locus of the gathering of artists convened by Rirkrit Tiravniya and Kamin Lertchaiprasert. It is a tract of land on which various projects from the country and elsewhere could be organized. From these two examples in Chiang Mai, we realise that heritage or patrimony, terms so fraught with the typifications of culture, intersects with the natural in the performance of an event of art, or an instantiation of aesthetic practice within a latitude that breaches the boundaries of the already reflexive category of 'contemporary art'. The theorist Claire Bishop, who has been keen on debates surrounding the ethic of collaboration, describes Thailand as 'the "spiritual home" of relational art' and states that The Land is 'one of the most frequently cited examples of a socially engaged "relational" project' by curators like Hans Ulrich Obrist and Daniel Birbaum. It is curious, however, to learn that after her visit she felt that The Land was falling into a state of entropy, which she curiously found endearing:

Tobias Rehberger's pavilion was made with Swedish wood for a show at the Moderna Museet, and is now rotting in the tropical climate. Philippe Parreno's Battery House, which is supposed to generate its own electricity through an 'elephant plug', has never worked. The building was supposed to fulfil Kamin's request for a meditation hall, but the concrete floor is curved, and punctuated by many struts, and cannot be used for this purpose. The ratio of water to land on the farm is organised according

9. Ibid

10. Ray Langenbach, 'Through the Keyhole', *Art and AsiaPacific*, vol 3, no 3, 1996, p 88

to the principles of a Buddhist agriculturalist, Chaloui Kaewkong, but this too isn't really working: the water is stagnant rather than flowing. Ironically, all these 'failures' really endeared the project to me.<sup>11</sup>

The scholar Janet Kraynak, however, paints a more sanguine assessment of this experiment, linking it up with the sensitivity toward sustainability in contemporary art which encompasses architecture and design. It is in this trope of the 'sustainable' that we find solace as it surmounts the aporias and reifications of what she calls 'critical negation' or even activist art.<sup>12</sup> What might be contemplated here is an 'open space' of sustainable technologies and economies and communities of bricoleurs in which the appropriation of 'land' as a location recedes, in the words of Rirkrit, into 'another condition', a nomadic, archipelagic flux within an aesthetic of re-assembly elsewhere/everywhere.

The Japanese curator Yuko Hasegawa, for her part, sifts through the sedimentations of culture in the United Arab Emirates in the Sharjah Biennale (2013) via the physicality and metaphor of the 'courtyard' as both a concrete locality and a condition in which that locality is shaped through conversations. Sharjah is refunctioned as a nexus of exchange and its biennale animated by the resources of Islamic architecture. She believes that any contemporary biennale elicits anticipation of newness, of art that will arrive. The sphere of intersubjectivity in this instance is the fountain in the square: 'The fountain is generous. It is hospitable. But it is not uncritically open. To derive knowledge and practice from this fountain one must have discipline. Discipline inevitably asks, "Do you know how to use this?" "Do you know why?" "Are you using it for the purposes of life?"'<sup>13</sup> We can say as well that the biennale 'excites' in the conduct of hospitality; it is an 'ex-position' or an 'ex-citation' in the way it manifests and displaces people from their origins or conveniences. It may seem then that the 'garden' is exemplary of a translocal, migrant, exciting, exposing 'sudden vicinity of things'. The writer Robert Pogue Harrison in a thoughtful meditation on the Garden School of Epicurus negotiates the line between Hannah Arendt and Epicurus; so dexterous is the gleaming of the tension that he revives the human without overinvesting in its prowess:

Arendt asks, 'To what extent do we remain obligated to the world when we have been expelled from it or have withdrawn from it?'... Epicurus instead asked: 'to what extent do we remain obligated to our humanity even after the world that comes between has betrayed or disfigured it?'... Epicurus's obligation was to the human, not to a world that had turned infernal. His Garden School did not presume to come to the world's rescue and save it from its own inferno. Its ambition was far more modest and finally more efficacious: to make room for the human in the midst of the inferno by giving it soil in which to grow.<sup>14</sup>

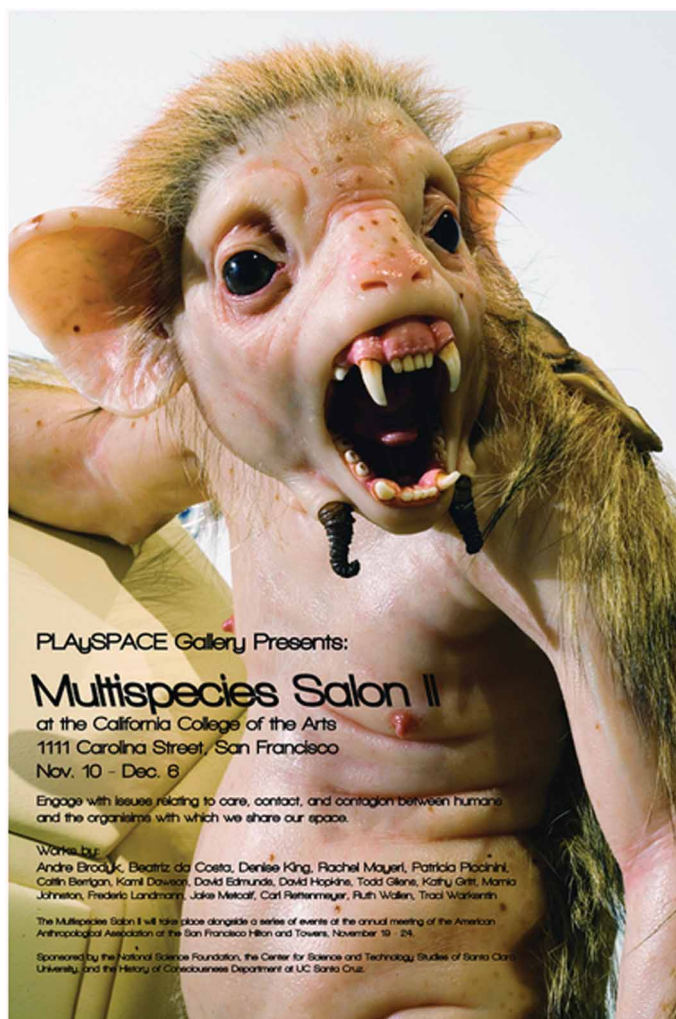
This soil of nurturing, this garden staked out by a collective community, might be the vein or instinct guiding the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (2000–), a different paradigm of exhibition-making, or better still, 'art field'-making that is summoned by the Japanese expression: 'In summer, cultivate the fields; in winter, cultivate the mind.' It encompasses specific areas across Tokomachi City and Tsunan Town in the Niigata Prefecture in Japan. It is administered by a triennial committee headed by local officials and by the Tokyo gallery Art Front. In this congregation

11. Jennifer Roche, 'Socially Engaged Art, Critics and Discontents: An Interview with Claire Bishop', Community Art Network website, 2006, no pagination, [www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2006/07/socially\\_engage.php](http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2006/07/socially_engage.php)

12. Janet Kraynak, 'The Land and the Economics of Sustainability', *Art Journal*, vol 69, no 4, 2010, pp 16–25

13. Email correspondence with Yuko Hasegawa, 7 July 2012

14. Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, 2008, pp 81–82



Poster for 'Multispecies Salon II' showing Patricia Piccinini's work *The Bodyguard for the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater*, 2004, silicon, fibreglass, leather, plywood, hair, 150 × 40 × 60 cm

of art from all over the world, pieces could be found 'across approximately 200 villages rather than displayed in a single center', which the organizers, along with advisors, feel is an "absolutely inefficient" approach deliberately at odds with the rationalization and efficiency of modern society'.<sup>15</sup> They contend that in Echigo-Tsumari:

... artists have no choice but to create their artworks on someone else's land, requiring interaction with locals. The artists' passion and openness to learning moves local people, and they engage with artworks not as spectators but as collaborators.<sup>16</sup>

There are several strands of themes that may be teased out in this venture: relationality, empathy, local economy and globalization, tourism, and the notion of the 'rural' as a revitalizing force.<sup>17</sup> How this 'rural' dissipates

15. <http://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/eng/about/>

16. Ibid

17. The independent curator Zara Stanhope is pursuing an extensive account of the Echigo-Tsumari project for her graduate studies at the Australian National University in Canberra.

into the national and the global calibrates the mood of Charles Lim's video practice that discloses how 'Singapore's national imaginary – and its impressive built environment – are in fact structured by a hydrosphere and maritime geography that have been erased from everyday experience'.<sup>18</sup> In this moment of the history of global exhibitions, the locale is the central rubric of curation; it tracts the energy of art in relation to the liveliness of the everyday however it is grasped: as a political economy of survival or as the affect of sensing the natural. It is the 'space', which is surely broadly conceived, that becomes the problematic of the event, something that may be related to the lineage of conceptualist architecture in Japan.<sup>19</sup>

This common habitat or habitation is what preoccupies artists like Patricia Piccinini, who comes from Australia in a region that may be opened up and hyphenated as Asia-Pacific. She took part in an initiative called 'Multispecies Salon', which formed part of the meetings of the American Anthropological Association in 2006, 2008 and 2010. It was a series of panels, round tables and events in art galleries. S Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich thought of this encroachment on academic territory as a 'paraethnographic field where anthropology and anthropologists and their interlocutors came together to discuss matters of common concern'.<sup>20</sup> Piccinini's work titled *Bodyguard (for the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater)* was the main image on the poster for the salon's second edition. The artist describes the silicone creature as 'genetically engineered' and ready to 'protect [the honeyeater] from exotic predators' and as having 'powerful jaws that allow him to bite into trees, to provide the birds with sap'.<sup>21</sup> It is said that this humanoid was meant to protect a small colourful bird of Australia that is on the verge of extinction. In this contact zone of nature and culture, persistence and perpetuation, 'lively potentials' and 'deadly consequences' mingle, prompting the theorist Donna Haraway to remark that Piccinini's uncanny figures are 'unsettling but oddly familiar critters who turn out to be simultaneously kin and alien colonists'.<sup>22</sup> The artist and her art site – that trembling lacuna between 'eden' and 'apocalypse'.

Finally, in the meditation on the ecology of the current world, it might be productive to return to 'craft', the labour of the 'native' who is 'born elsewhere' and therefore contemporary, not as a reification of tradition or the mastery of certain privileged skills or ways of making things, but as ornament. Matthew Rampley in his reading of the work of the anthropologist Alfred Gell comments that to be discerned in the ornament is a 'resistance to formal or logical closure', which may be construed as an analogue of 'social relations'.<sup>23</sup> Using the lime containers of the Iatmul as cipher, he states:

First, as decorative schemas that are never exhausted, they communicate the open-ended nature of personhood – it is in some sense incomplete. Second, as mediators of *social* relations these and other objects are indicators of the incomplete nature of the social.<sup>24</sup>

As Alfred Gell points out:

The essence of exchange, as a binding force, is the delay, or lag, between transactions which, if exchange relations are to endure, should never result in perfect reciprocation, but always in some renewed, residual,

18. David Teh, 'Sea State: Notes on Video Art in Singapore', paper presented at the symposium 'Time Flowing into the Pacific from the Amur', Hongik University, Seoul, 2012, organized by Asia Curator Network and Loop Gallery.

19. Two exhibitions in 2012 in Japan intimate this tendency: Mori Art Museum's 'Metabolism, the City of the Future: Dreams and Visions of Reconstruction in Postwar and Present-Day Japan' and Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo's 'Architectural Environments for Tomorrow'.

20. S Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, 'The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol 25, no 4, 2010, p 547

21. Ibid

22. Ibid

23. Matthew Rampley, 'Art History and Cultural Difference: Alfred Gell's Anthropology of Art', *Art History*, vol 28, no 4, 2005, p 534

24. Ibid. The lime containers of the Iatmul people of Papua New Guinea serve practical and ceremonial functions.





John Frank Sabado, *Bontoc Warrior*, 2012, pen and ink on paper, 76 x 58 cm



imbalance. So it is with patterns; they slow perception down, or even halt it, so that the decorated object is never fully possessed at all, but is always in the process of becoming possessed.<sup>25</sup>

This ethic of possession or the bedevilment of what the Philippine patriot José Rizal would call ‘el demonio de las comparaciones’, this phantasm or spectre of affinities, relates to a certain fascination with the miniature, the figurine and, co-extensively, with the diminished and replenishing Philippine; it may be read as an allegory of intimacy, of being intimate with the world, in the intricacy of its mestizaje. In the work of the Philippine artist John Frank Sabado on the pillage of Northern Philippines and the valiant struggles of what he calls ‘eco-warriors’, the rivers and mountains are rendered very patiently like threads of textile or particles of soil in mesmerizing pen and ink. It is after all a fragile landscape, at once teeming and defiled. But the figuration of its details does not only refer to what we see as natural history, it alludes to how it is marked or inscribed; the vision of the process of its shaping, like the intuition of the land or the logic of intuiting it, is translated in another material vessel or vehicle like weaving, with fibre from flora becoming fabric

25. Ibid



Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Rice Field*, 2000, fibreglass sculptures, steel, stainless steel, paints, etc, 2800 x 8400 x 500, 2899 x 4500 x 500, 3000 x 5500 x 500 mm, (text screen) 5400 x 4350 x 3400 mm, photo courtesy Osamu Nakamura

that, while miniature, imagines vastness and preponderance, the continuity of line's filament, the texture of the inordinate grain of ground. Or finally to how the life of the person, who makes the condition possible and hews his/her place in relation to this process, turns out to be a vital articulation of so-called nature, his/her *naturaleza*, the constitution of the mindful body, its vulnerable well-being, and the vital agency of this importuning thing called art – the ethnographic sublime of a surviving craft and country.

# Three and a Half Conversations with an Eccentric Planet

Raqs Media Collective

## 1 SAND

Somewhere off a highway that skirts past Joshua Tree in the Mojave Desert in California, there is a graveyard of aeroplanes. Hundreds of giant steel birds sit silently hatching the eggs of oblivion in the desert – aeroplanes grounded by mothballed dreams of mastery, jumbo jets sinking in the sand. One of our conversations with the planet began there.

A desert gifts you a horizon, a big sky, a simultaneous sense of openness and limitation. The clarity it brings makes for thoughts as big as planets, and as small as the specks that planets are in the universe.

The earth is an eccentric planet. A lump of wet, igneous rock adrift in space, not exactly spherical in shape, elliptic in its orbit, drawn to a middle-aged sun, shadowed by a barren moon. As of now, we know no other home.

As far as we know, the universe has just us – a 150,000-year-old species of naked bipedal primates – to speak for itself, for all of its possibly 13.75-billion-year-old history.

The earth in Greek is *oikos* – oikos – homestead, hearth, host, house – root for everything from ecology to economics that pertains to the care and upkeep of our base-camp in the stars. The earth is our ark, our Eden, our anchor. We know now that this garden could also be our cemetery.

Ludwig Wittgenstein said, ‘The world is all that is the case’. We could add a comma between ‘all’ and ‘that’. The world is all, that is the case.

Does it make sense today to speak of life, its future, or even of the end or deterioration of life, of the bios, in terms other than the planetary? If capitalism and other tsunamis, if El Niño and La Niña and locust swarms and the H1N1 virus do not think in other terms when they do their work, how can we? What kind of art can have a conversation with an eccentric and ailing planet?

What does it mean for us to eavesdrop on and whisper to the earth?

It rained that year in the Mojave Desert. Apparently it had last rained at that intensity eighteen years before. Overnight, there were flowers. The





Brazen

seeds of rare desert flora that had been lying in wait for years suddenly sprouted around, over and between the detritus of the global aviation industry. That morning, while the sun rose, while the sky cleared, while we shot our footage, the earth fought back, flower by flower. It was instructive to be amongst and inside aeronautical skeletons, arrayed on the desert floor like the remains of steel dinosaurs in a vast open-air museum of un-natural history. The rhythm of a once-in-eighteen-years desert blossoming won a momentary victory over the combined pace of the timetable of a dozen airlines. It seemed as if the planes had finally run out of fuel.

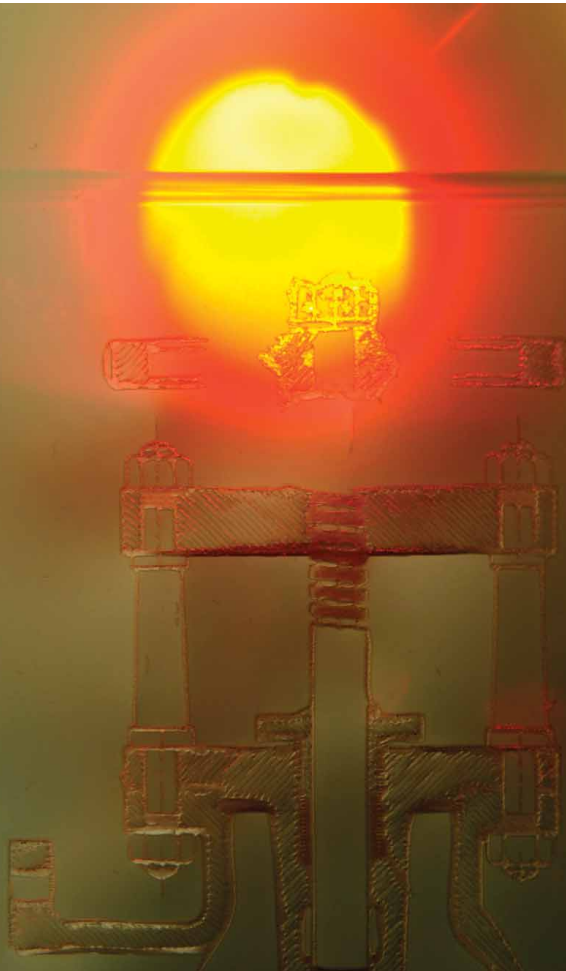
The political and economic reality of our connected global moment is tied to a relentless thirst for hydrocarbons and heavy metals. Acceleration and accumulation, which are the key to the way we live now, enable not just people but, even more crucially, food, to cross vast distances in the belly of planes and ships and trucks. While acceleration makes faster rates of production possible, accumulation eats away at anything that stands in the way. Capitalism's need for speed and its necessity to manipulate the future requires quicker harvests and transgenic life forms that ripen more swiftly, grow more thickly and inhibit their own reproduction with terminator seeds. Along with this, it requires speculation on the future status of food, water, space and air – basic necessities – not as resources that make life possible, but as 'derivatives' rising out of the bets placed on the future rates of production, consumption and exchange.

This ongoing quest to dominate distance and duration relies on the socially mobilized capacity to dig, drill, dam, hold and burn, at a global scale. The destruction of forests and habitats, the disappearance of species, cultures, languages and life-worlds are the collateral damage of this war on space and time.

Oil, coal and gas are the by-products of the tears of dead forests. Radioactive elements like uranium and other heavy metals that enable us to synthesize nuclear energy are the ghosts of dead stars. The resources extracted today out of ancestral forests and extinct supernovae (if left to the whims of capital) will in their turn haunt the future with the poison in their residues. Like a fleet of dead aeroplanes in a desert, the future may be grounded in the name of the effort to make it fly.

## 2 *SALT*

Many years later on the shores of the Dead Sea, at the lowest and saltiest point on earth, we witnessed another encounter between aeroplanes and the landscape. A sortie of Israeli Air Force fighter planes flew overhead, breaking the sound barrier as they completed a routine exercise





Grab the Wind

patrol along the Jordanian border. This is the occasion of the second conversation.

It is well known that sound travels faster in saline water. This is due to the fact that the bulk modulus (susceptibility of a substance to uniform pressure) of salt water is higher than that of sweet water, and since the saltiest water on earth is at the Dead Sea, the sound of jets breaking the sound barrier in the air above travels faster therein than it does anywhere else. Not surprisingly, it seemed that day as if the salt crystals in the water were cracking under the enormous and sustained impact of the jets passing overhead. (Salt subjected to the cymatic pressure of high-frequency sound waves does disperse at higher rates, so this was not an unwarranted sensation to experience or imagine.) That afternoon, the planes defeated the earth around the Dead Sea as they broke the sound barrier, as they must have every time they flew overhead in search of real or imagined wars. More salt dissolved into the Dead Sea, making it more difficult for water to evaporate, reducing the moisture content of the atmosphere, increasing the thrall of the desert on the land and of the salt in the sea.

With salt, as with everything else, the crucial question to ask is, how much? 'How much' is the most important question in ecology and biology. How much rain? How much nitrogen? How many predators? How much room? How many antigens? How many species? How much food? How many trees of which kind? Normal and healthy processes turn toxic or pathogenic when an element either exceeds beyond or diminishes below its necessary concentration. There is nothing that there cannot be too much of in nature. Ecology is all about balance and concentration.

In the end, we are beings made up of carbon, water and salt. The salt in our bodies is an indication of how much the earth courses through our blood, sweat and tears. But it is also indicative of ratios and proportions. Because the earth and we are made of the same things, can we get an instinctive understanding of the question of proportion?

How much salt should there be in the sea? And how much in our tears?

### 3 TEARS

The third conversation takes place in the Archipelago Sea, a branch of the Baltic abutting the south-western coast of Finland. A marine biologist begins talking to us about the impact of global warming on a precarious and unique ecosystem generated by the eccentric salinity of the Baltic Sea.

The conversation leads to a desire to inscribe the sea into our work, and to write on water. We make a work called *More Salt In Your Tears*.

*More Salt In Your Tears* reads the sea, weighs tears and tastes the feeling of what it means to be close to the sea. It connects body fluids like tears in a precise and intimate way to large natural water bodies and draws attention to the ways in which we all respond at a subliminal level to the presence of water.

Seen at a distance, the work appears as a reflecting interruption on the water whose shapes also resolve into letters and words. Up close, and when the sun strikes the surface of the letters and the water at the right angle, the work can appear as if it were a sign written in letters of fire. The letter-forms are a set of polished surfaces, gleaming like mirrors as



they emerge above the water and across the surface of the sea. The forms mirror the horizon, the sea, reflecting the changing sunlight, and aspects of anything that sails or swims past. The clear surface changes colour as the sea, sky and sunlight themselves vary over the course of the day. In this way, the work acts as an index of the alive, changing surface of the sea, the seasons and time itself.

*More Salt In Your Tears* requires the undertaking of a journey in order to be viewed. It may also be accidentally spotted by anyone positioned in the right place on a passing vessel. Sailing to see a sign in the water and seeing such a sign by accident, while sailing – as one would see a rock, an island, a partially submerged shipwreck or a reef – suggest a ‘transport’ of the senses, a moment of fluid epiphany.

This is heightened by the startling realization that our tears have more salt than the Baltic Sea. Central to the work is the notion that the Baltic Sea (which being a virtually inland river-fed water body) has less salinity in comparison with our tears. In recent years, climatologists and oceanographers have expressed the concern that global warming may increase the salinity of the Baltic Sea and by doing so cause irreversible damage to the unique ecosystem of this marine environment. (Under a different set of climatological conditions, excess rain and freshwater runoff leaching into the sea may also lead to a sharp and excessive decline in salinity, endangering the fragile ecosystem of the Baltic in other ways.) In that sense, *More Salt In Your Tears* is a paradoxical statement of hope and optimism, for although tears are universally understood to stand in for sad tidings, the maintenance of a precarious balance of life sustained by a specific level of salinity in the water is a reason for optimism. The day there is more salt in the Baltic Sea than in our tears will indeed be an occasion for mourning.

### 3.5 ART

It is easy to mourn for an ailing earth. The more difficult, and interesting, task is to think of ways out of lamentation, or to imagine ways of living and inhabiting the earth that will not require us to commiserate with the future in advance.

The future cannot be protected only by replacing some or even all the people in power, or by writing off debts, ending wars and the monopoly of banks, or even only by inventing better and cleaner ways to make things. All these measures can and must play their part, but they alone cannot heal this broken planet.

In the end it is not a matter of protecting some people or advancing their interests and attacking others, because epidemics, drought, storms, melting ice caps, floods and nuclear meltdowns do not choose to discriminate between their victims, even if the rich and powerful of today choose to fantasize that they do. Not even all the wealth and power in the world can insulate those who rule and their descendants from the overall consequences of global warming, at least not for very long.

The only way out lies in the human species (as a species) imagining infinitely different possibilities of how it might produce and exchange. It lies in generating a set of evolving global consensuses on curtailing

growth and consumption, not to set in place a new regime of abnegation, denial and impoverishment, but to inaugurate a different imagination of what we mean when we use words like desire, fulfilment and abundance.

This means we have to look not just at needs, but at desires, differently. We have to desire other needs, and need other desires. As we realized in the Mojave Desert – there has to be a change of plan if the planes sink into the desert sand. We need a different route map, a different itinerary, a new flight path.

Along with the task of general transformation of the global economy and the end of politics as we know it – as the pursuit of power – we find ourselves face to face with the necessity to remake and recalibrate the relationship between need and desire. We have to learn to distinguish between the way we want something, because that is how we have habitually hankered for it, and the way we may desire something because we know and are prepared for the consequences of seeking what we hope for.

The moment we enter the domain of desire and the imagination, we also simultaneously find ourselves in the realm of the aesthetic. What is art if it is not a tightrope strung between what exists and what we dream about? Who is the artist? Only a tightrope walker who negotiates the tensile strength of the line suspended between freedom and necessity. Think about this in terms of the freedom to live and reproduce, and the necessity to consume the resources that underwrite life and reproduction in the future.

Here, now, we need at least half a conversation about the fact that art (because we have left magic behind us) is the only compass we have at hand to navigate our way through the kingdom of the senses. How can we begin to talk about growth, speed, power, strength, force and sustenance in different ways? Must they always be ends in themselves? Can there be other ends? Other goals? Other ways of reaching the same and different ends?

Without a recalibration of the senses, at the level of our global species-being, without at least half a conversation to understand, and then attenuate and nuance our desires and needs, we cannot conceive of another mode of production, another set of social relations, another ethic of husbandry between ourselves and the earth.

That is why we send pictures from deserts and write words on water, that is why we make earthworks that stand on the landscape of the mind. That is why we listen to the whispers of an eccentric planet. So that it can listen to us in turn, and keep wanting us, and our children, and their children, around.

The world is all, that is the case.

# After Hans Haacke

## Tue Greenfort and Eco-Institutional Critique

Luke Skrebowski

A sealed transparent cube sits in the gallery space. It contains a small amount of water, amounting to perhaps one tenth of the volume of the overall cube. Water droplets, deposited by the processes of evaporation and condensation, cling to the sides of the cube. Every now and again a droplet swells under the pull of gravity, overcomes the tension holding it in place and streaks down a face of the cube, gathering speed as it draws other droplets into its downward race.

It is not 1965. The work is not Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube* (1963–1965). It is 2007. The work, titled *Römerquelle Condensation Cube: After Hans Haacke 1963–65* (2007), is by the Danish artist Tue Greenfort and it is being shown at the Secession in Vienna. The cube is made from real, rather than Plexi-, glass and the water inside the cube, as the work's title alerts us, is Römerquelle, a renowned brand of Austrian mineral water. Römerquelle translates as Roman spring or source and, according to the firm's website, the water's name is no mere marketing ploy since water from the source from which the brand is drawn has been pumped since the beginning of the first millennium.<sup>1</sup> The water has, however, only been commercially bottled since 1948 and only sold under the brand name of Römerquelle since 1965, making the commercial brand, appropriately enough, coeval with Haacke's original *Condensation Cube*. In 2003 Coca-Cola HBC Austria GmbH took a controlling interest in Römerquelle. How should we understand Greenfort's contemporary re-articulation of Haacke's celebrated work? What does it mean to work explicitly 'after' Hans Haacke in this way?

### *AFTER HANS HAACKE*

In English the word 'after' carries a wide series of senses indicating both straightforward chronological succession ('subsequently, at a later time, afterwards'); logical sequence ('subsequent to and in consequence of');

1. [http://www.roemerquelle.at/rq\\_neu/de/unternehmen/geschichte.php](http://www.roemerquelle.at/rq_neu/de/unternehmen/geschichte.php)

deference to an authority ('following as one follows a leader or guide; in obedience to, in compliance or harmony with') and a relation of artistic indebtedness or direct copying ('after the manner of, in imitation of').<sup>2</sup> All of these senses seem to operate in Greenfort's 'after' and the artist himself has acknowledged his understanding of the work in similar terms: 'I think you have a certain responsibility to know how your project is placed within a history of art and to make the meta-experience an active part of the production.'<sup>3</sup> How, then, does Greenfort justify an apparently epigonal or even derivative relationship to Haacke as part of the 'meta-experience' of the work?

In order to address this issue it is necessary to rehearse the stakes of Haacke's original *Condensation Cube*. Although part of a wider series of condensation objects (including towers, walls and cones) and demonstrably informed by Haacke's engagement with the work of the Zero group, Haacke's cube is most regularly discussed in terms of its relation to Minimalism. Haacke critiqued the belief that Minimalism had evacuated internal relations from the work and externalized and made them a function, in Robert Morris's celebrated phrase, of 'space, light and the viewer's field of vision'.<sup>4</sup> The water hermetically sealed inside Haacke's Plexiglass cube moved through cycles of evaporation and condensation as the gallery temperature fluctuated with the time of day, the number of people in the space and the heat of the lights, in the process revealing new types of internal relation, we might even say composition (albeit aleatoric), that were ultimately of the institution's, rather than the artist's or particular viewers', making. *Condensation Cube* made visible an issue hitherto of interest primarily to conservators, namely the way in which the institutional environment impacts on the work it shows. From here it was a short step to considering the broader range of determinations to which the institution subjects the artwork and *Condensation Cube* can thus be seen to anticipate the full-blown critique of institutions for which Haacke's practice remains best known.

Greenfort's remake introduces subtle but telling differences to Haacke's original: the use of plate glass (summoning Larry Bell's sheeny cubes from the mid-1960s) evokes Minimalism's affinity with 'corporate furniture' (in Anna Chave's controversial phrase), and this association is deliberately compounded by the conspicuous inclusion of branded mineral water from a company owned by a major multinational.<sup>5</sup> In this way, Greenfort points to the way in which Haacke's work is implicated within Minimalism's rhetoric of power even as it critiques it. However, one might respond that Haacke's 'homeopathic' approach – in Fredric Jameson's terms – has long been well aware of this complicity.<sup>6</sup> More originally then, *Römerquelle Condensation Cube* argues against the ongoing critical efficacy of the presuppositions marking Haacke's original piece: in a period characterized by the increasing commodification of natural resources previously a part of the commons, water itself, just as much as the white walls of the gallery space, is not neutral and cannot simply be bracketed out of the investigation into the institution that enframes the artwork.

Such a critique has more force than the insistence on ethical 'provenance' that defines today's discerning consumer, rightly pilloried by Slavoj Žižek.<sup>7</sup> Rather, Greenfort's piece argues that under contemporary historical conditions Jameson's celebration of Haacke's work as (at least

2. All definitions are from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition, 1989.

3. 'Interview between Tue Greenfort and Zoe Gray on occasion of Greenfort's solo exhibition "Photosynthesis" at Witte De With, 2006', online at: [http://www.johannkoenig.de/1/tue\\_greenfort/texts.html#](http://www.johannkoenig.de/1/tue_greenfort/texts.html#)

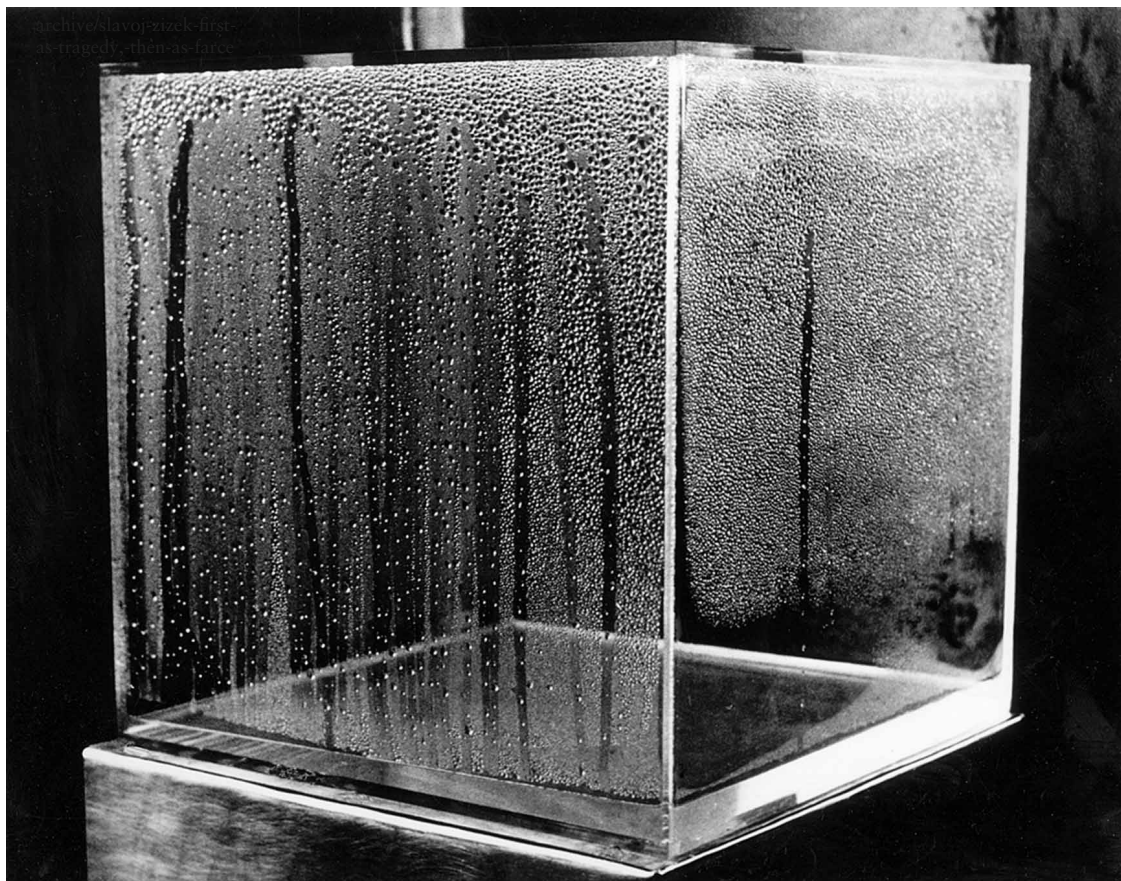
4. Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture', part II, *Artforum*, October, 1966, pp 20–23, p 22

5. Anna Chave, 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power', in Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris, eds, *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, Phaidon, London, p 276. Chave uses this phrase with reference to Donald Judd's work and does not discuss Larry Bell in her piece. Bell's work used Plexiglass to fashion the pedestals for his glass cubes. Greenfort's work thus re-establishes the implicit hierarchy of materials deployed by Bell, a hierarchy that Haacke had inverted.

6. See Fredric Jameson, 'Hans Haacke and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernism', in Brian Wallis, ed, *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1986, pp 38–50, pp 42–43.

7. See, Slavoj Žižek, 'First as Tragedy, then as Farce', online at: <http://www.thersa.org/events/video/>





Hans Haacke, *Condensation Cube*, 1963–1965, clear acrylic, distilled water, climate in area of display, 12 x 12 x 12 in (30.5 x 30.5 x 30.5 cm), © Hans Haacke/DACS, courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

potentially) ‘political and oppositional’, an egregious but emphatically postmodern exception to postmodern art’s otherwise affirmative character, can no longer be straightforwardly sustained.<sup>8</sup> Haacke’s art, for Greenfort, must acknowledge its own implication within capitalism: the social relations embedded within artworks at the level of their facture and materials – and *a fortiori* postminimalist ‘fabricated’ artworks – are just as questionable as those embedded within consumer products and should therefore be subject to the same types of activist critique. If de-skilled, post-conceptual art does not, at a minimum, reflect on the sourcing of its materials and acknowledge the working conditions of the makers of these materials (not to mention the makers of the fabricated artworks themselves) it risks embodying lower ethical standards than the product lines of any greenwashed corporation; that is, it risks ethically underperforming the very commodities it tenuously differentiates itself from as a condition of its going on as art.

More broadly, Greenfort’s *Römerquelle Condensation Cube* reflects on the fate of Haacke’s particular form of politicized conceptual art in light of what Jeff Wall has described as conceptual art’s ‘failure’ and the ‘economic and social ascendancy of Pop’ from the mid-1970s

8. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, p 159

- onwards.<sup>9</sup> Such is the reach and penetration of corporate capital, for which Coca-Cola stands as an archetypal artistic metonym (from Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol to Cildo Meireles and onwards), that even the water inside *Condensation Cube* has now to be understood as commodified. Greenfort acknowledges the fact that with the ‘triumph’ of neoliberal capitalism and the parallel development of a contemporary art industry, the artwork increasingly conforms to the general logic of the market. In fact, he deliberately courts this risk in order to highlight it. *Römerquelle Condensation Cube* is one of a series of remakes of *Condensation Cube* (all fabricated using ‘local’ mineral water brands ultimately owned by the Coca-Cola corporation) which also includes *Chaufontaine Condensation Cube: After Hans Haacke* (2006) and *BONACQUA Condensation Cube: After Hans Haacke* (2005). Greenfort’s remakes of *Condensation Cube* take the same form as the skilfully franchised product, taking on just enough ‘localization’ to ensure ‘site-specific’ success. Greenfort brings the artwork uncomfortably close to the logic of the Maharaja Mac.<sup>10</sup>
- Greenfort’s multiple *Condensation Cube* remakes are, however, only one aspect of his engagement with Haacke’s work, which is one of the most sustained engagements characterizing his practice. Although Greenfort acknowledges many artistic influences and has made works dedicated or self-consciously indebted to other artists and designers such as *Cell Structure: DIY after Victor Papanek* (2006) and *Bio-Wurstwolke: After Dieter Roth 1969* (2007), it is to Haacke’s work that he returns again and again.<sup>11</sup> This can be seen most explicitly in those works entitled ‘After Hans Haacke’ including the previously mentioned *Römerquelle*, *Chaufontaine* and *BONACQUA Condensation Cubes* as well as *Plant Oil Circulation: After Hans Haacke 1969* (2007).<sup>12</sup> But Greenfort’s indebtedness to Haacke is also manifest, albeit more allusively, in numerous other works: *Closed Biosphere* (2003) crosses *Condensation Cube* with Haacke’s ecosystem works such as *Bowery Seeds* (1970); *PET Flasche* (2008) performs a similar awareness-raising gesture to Haacke’s *Monument to Beach Pollution* (1970) but radically condenses it; *Exceeding 2 Degrees* (2007) expands Haacke’s *Recording of Climate in Art Exhibition* (1969–1970); *Diffuse Einträge* (2007) invokes Haacke’s *Rhine-Water Purification Plant* (1972).<sup>13</sup>
- The extent and depth of Greenfort’s engagement with Haacke’s work indicates that there is more at stake here than polite homage or the art-world pressure to conform to the demands of patrilineal legitimization.<sup>14</sup> Greenfort works in the space opened up by Haacke’s particular form of conceptual art just as Haacke worked in the space opened up by Marcel Duchamp’s practice.<sup>15</sup> In both cases, however, the artists work *negatively*, in the full knowledge that the historical position embodied by their source work or works is no longer tenable in the present. An appropriate conceptual figure to encapsulate the relation might be the ‘reboot’, a term borrowed from commercial film production (itself borrowed from IT jargon): in a reboot an unsuccessful or tired film franchise is re-launched under the direction of a new creative team (hence the analogy to restarting a computer after a crash). Greenfort’s goal is not, of course, Hollywood-style commercial success, but rather the inverse, the attempt to resuscitate a fragile critical project under intensified con-
9. Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel*, Art Metropole, Toronto, 1991, p 22
  10. The mutton-based Maharaja Mac was successfully developed by McDonalds Inc in order to open up the beef-averse Indian market.
  11. ‘A whole range of artists are of great importance to me: Asger Jorn, Constant, Robert Smithson, Mierle Lademan Ukeles, Andrea Fraser, John Knight, Martha Rosler, Nils Norman, Thomas Bayrle, The Copenhagen Free University (Jakob Jakobsen and Henriette Heisse), Simon Starling, Lawrence Weiner, Hans Haacke, Douglas Huebler, Robert Barry, Dan Peterman, Dan Graham, Adrian Piper...’; quote from ‘It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves: An Interview with Tue Greenfort by Francesca Pagliuca’, online at: [http://www.johannkoenig.de/1/tue\\_greenfort/texts.html#](http://www.johannkoenig.de/1/tue_greenfort/texts.html#)
  12. Here Haacke’s *Circulation* (1969) was re-made so that it circulated pure plant oil (an alternative to bio-diesel) rather than water. This work relates to Greenfort’s *A Whiter Shade of Pale* (2005) where the artist had a bus converted to run on plant oil.
  13. The last two pairings are developed more extensively below.
  14. See Mira Schor, ‘Patrilineage’, *Art Journal*, vol 50, no 2, summer 1991, pp 58–63.
  15. In this sense Haacke is to Greenfort as Duchamp is to Haacke in his *Broken R.M.* (1986) and *Baudrichard’s Ecstasy* (1988).



Tue Greenfort, *Römerquelle Condensation Cube: After Hans Haacke 1963–65*, 2007, glass, silicone, Römerquelle mineral water (since 2003 part of Coca-Cola Company), 45 x 45 x 45 cm  $17\frac{3}{4} \times 17\frac{3}{4} \times 17\frac{3}{4}$  in, exhibition view: 'Tue Greenfort: *Medusa*', Secession, Vienna, 2007, courtesy of the artist and Johann König, Berlin, photo: Tue Greenfort

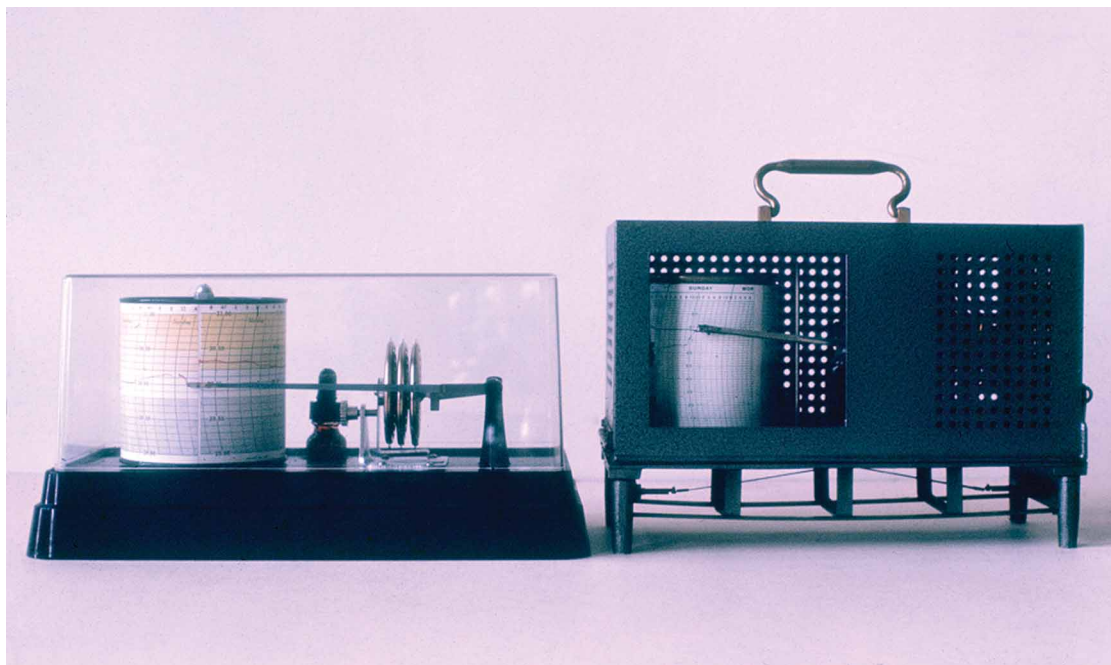
ditions of commodification in the contemporary art world and in fuller knowledge of art's implication within the environmental degradation that is the consequence of untrammelled development. As such, Greenfort's work participates particularly intensively in a broader speculative impetus to retest conceptual art's potential, which Blake Stimson has discussed as a question of 'Whether. . . [conceptual art's] legacy as the art of 1968 will be to pass its inherited ideal forward through neo-conceptualism and on to a future moment when avant-gardism might once again be viable, or whether it will mark a point in the history of modernism when that ideal passed into irrelevance. . .'.<sup>16</sup>

### ECOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

Greenfort's work attempts to reboot Haacke's work as a resource for contemporary critical practice. In order to address how this works in more detail I will turn to another pair of related works: Haacke's *Recording of Climate in Art Exhibition* (1969–1970) and Greenfort's *Exceeding 2 Degrees* (2007).

16. Blake Stimson, 'The Promise of Conceptual Art' in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, pp xxxviii–lii, xlvii, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999

Haacke's work, first shown at 'Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects' (1970) at the New York Cultural Center, comprised a working hygrothermograph, barograph and hydrograph (the finely calibrated tools used by the conservator to monitor atmospheric conditions in the museum) which recorded the climate in the exhibition in real



Hans Haacke, *Recording of Climate in Art Exhibition*, 1969–1970/2009, hygrothermograph, barograph and chart paper chart paper: measuring at seven day increments and pinned to the wall each week of exhibition, hygrothermograph: 11 3/4 x 13 1/8 x 6 3/4 in (29.8 x 33.3 x 17.1 cm), barograph: 11 1/2 x 12 1/4 x 5 1/2 in (29.2 x 31.1 x 14 cm), © Hans Haacke/DACS, courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York





Tue Greenfort, *Exceeding 2 Degrees*, 2007, thermo-hydrograph (meteorological instrument), coffee table, Malaysian rubber wood, glass, human hair, plastic membrane, photography, climate diagram, certificate, map, format variable, exhibition view: 'Still Life: Art, Ecology and the Politics of Change', 8th Sharjah Biennial, Sharjah Art Museum, Sharjah, 2007, courtesy of the artist and Johann König, Berlin, photo: Tue Greenfort

time. The work can be understood in terms similar to those which I have already used to discuss *Condensation Cube*, namely as a work of proto-institutional critique, a condensed and elegant invocation of the museum's function as the preserver of artworks' capital value (both financial and symbolic).

Greenfort's *Exceeding 2 Degrees*, first shown at the Sharjah Biennial, invokes *Recording of Climate in Art Exhibition* by similarly displaying the distinctive tools of the conservator (here a thermo-hydrograph unit combining the functions of thermograph and hydrograph). In this work, in contrast to his treatment of *Condensation Cube*, Greenfort departs more markedly from his model. The table on which the thermo-hydrograph sits is as significant as the device itself within the work's mise-en-scène. Fabricated from Malaysian hardwood by Japanese craftsmen and bought cheaply by Greenfort in Dubai before being assembled and exhibited in Sharjah, the table embodies contemporary industry's globalized conditions of manufacture, distribution and consumption.<sup>17</sup> As a self-reflexive and ostensibly compensatory gesture for the work's own participation within these circuits of production and exchange – albeit as a specialized sub-section of the luxury market – Greenfort set the air conditioning of the gallery space two degrees centigrade higher than would normally be considered optimal, mildly jeopardizing the longevity of his work but in the process saving money on the

17. Greenfort states of the table that it was 'really easy to install and cheap, almost like an Asian version of IKEA'; see [http://www.johannkoenig.de/inc/index.php?n=2,1,1&art\\_id=1&bild\\_id=1085](http://www.johannkoenig.de/inc/index.php?n=2,1,1&art_id=1&bild_id=1085).

cost of the show. Greenfort calculated the approximate amount of money that would be saved on air conditioning during the exhibition and used this sum to purchase and protect an area of rainforest in Ecuador, using the Danish environmental organization Nepenthes as an intermediary. A further layer of significance was added to the project by the fact that the *Stern Review* (authored by economist Nicholas Stern for the British Government) – copies of which were distributed around the show – states that if no concerted global action is taken on carbon dioxide emissions, there is more than a seventy-five per cent chance of global temperatures rising between two and three degrees over the next fifty years.<sup>18</sup> Greenfort's *Exceeding 2 Degrees* evokes Haacke's *Recording of Climate in Art Exhibition* but only in order to complicate its own ambivalent critical character by foregrounding its complicity with the contemporary conditions of globalized production and their associated ecological impact.

Some of Haacke's work from the early 1970s had evinced a concern with ecology and the environment – developing from an earlier body of work exploring the incorporation of biological systems within the gallery such as *Grass Cube* (1967) and *Grass Grows* (1969) – as Michael Corris has observed:

... it is the notion of an ecosystem that is most relevant to Haacke's projects of the early 1970s, imparting a sense of structure and coherence on works such as *10 Turtles Set Free* (1970) and *Goat Feeding in Woods, Thus Changing It* (1970). *Beach Pollution* (1970) – a pile of driftwood and other rubbish that had been collected on a Spanish seafront – not only signals Haacke's concern with environmental issues, but also initiates a dialogue with the anti-formalism of the late-1960s... what distinguishes Haacke's work is not its physical composition as a pile of scavenged rubbish; rather, its conceptual relationship to *the exogenous cultural space of the emerging environmental movement*.<sup>19</sup>

Yet what Haacke conceived as an *exogenous* conceptual relationship between the artwork and the environmental movement Greenfort reconceives as *endogenous*, drawing environmentalism into the immanent problematic of the institutionally critical artwork to demonstrate that art itself is not environmentally neutral and that both artist and artwork are not external to the art system that they subject to critique. As such, as TJ Demos has observed, Greenfort's work might be considered an 'innovative eco-institutional critique' wherein the artistic critique of the institution of art is reminded of its own negative ecological impact and dubious carbon footprint.<sup>20</sup> However, as Demos has also noted, *Exceeding 2 Degrees* in no way presents a solution to the problem it discloses; rather it intensifies the shortcomings inherent to carbon offsetting and thereby 'in an act of critical negation' reveals the 'daunting complexity' of the problem it addresses 'by entangling itself in its paradoxes...'.<sup>21</sup>

Greenfort's work is consequently thoroughly and self-consciously 'entangled' in the structural paradoxes attending so-called third-generation institutional critique – most thoroughly thematized in Andrea Fraser's artistic and theoretical work – wherein the artist and the artwork are held to be completely internal to that which is subjected to critique. Greenfort has acknowledged Fraser as an influence on his practice and,<sup>22</sup> glossing her own artistic genealogy, Fraser, like Greenfort,

18. 'At a Glance: The Stern Review', on the BBC website at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/6098362.stm>

19. Michael Corris, 'Systems Upgrade (Conceptual Art and the Recoding of Information, Knowledge and Technology)', *Mute*, vol 1, no 22, online at: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/systems-upgrade-conceptual-art-and-recoding-information-knowledge-and-technology>, emphasis added

20. TJ Demos, 'Art After Nature', *Artforum*, April 2012, pp 190–197, p 194

21. *Ibid*, p 194

22. See note 11.

23. 'Beyond the most encompassing list of substantive spaces, places, people, and things, the "institution" engaged by Haacke can best be defined as the network of social and economic relations between them.' Andrea Fraser, 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', in John C Welchmann, ed, *Institutional Critique and After*, JRP Ringier, Zurich, 2006, pp 122–135, p 124
24. See Andrea Fraser, 'Why Does Fred Sandback's Work Make Me Cry?', *Grey Room* 22, winter 2006, pp 30–47
25. Fraser, 'From the Critique of Institutions', op cit, p 124
26. 'Interview between Tue Greenfort and Zoe Gray on occasion of Greenfort's solo exhibition "Photosynthesis" at Witte De With, 2006', online at: [http://www.johannkoenig.de/1/tue\\_greenfort/texts.html#](http://www.johannkoenig.de/1/tue_greenfort/texts.html#)
27. Isabelle Graw, 'Beyond Institutional Critique', *Institutional Critique and After*, pp 137–151, p 139
28. Andrea Fraser, 'L'1%, C'est Moi', *Texte zur Kunst*, vol 21, no 83, September 2011, pp 114–127, p 124
29. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Gregory Elliott, trans, Verso, London, 2005, p 468
30. This in part being due to the way in which the *practice* of the critique of institutions was transformed into the *genre* of Institutional Critique. It is the so-called 'third generation' of theorist/practitioners who develop institutional critique as a distinctive genre of artistic work and no one has been more influential in this effort than Fraser herself. Such a situation, as the artist readily admits, leaves her in an ambivalent position: 'And so I find

identifies Haacke as a central influence, claiming that Haacke was the pre-eminent exponent of the more sophisticated understanding of the 'institution' from which her practice has developed.<sup>23</sup>

In Fraser's work, however, in contrast to Greenfort's, the art system and its 'network of social and economic relationships' is not related to the 'environmental systems' within which it inheres. If Greenfort expands institutional critique's reach externally – *ecologically* – then Fraser extends it internally – *psychologically*.<sup>24</sup> That Fraser does not address ecological questions in her work should not be construed as a shortcoming as such: Greenfort does not focus on the issues of artistic subjectivity that Fraser has foregrounded in her more recent psychoanalytically informed work such as *Projection* (2008). Both positions, however, are attempting to move beyond the same problem. Fraser states:

Today, the argument goes, there no longer is an outside. . . How, then can we imagine, much less accomplish, a critique of art institutions when museum and market have grown into an all-encompassing apparatus of cultural reification?<sup>25</sup>

Greenfort claims:

[T]here can be no such thing as an autonomous work. The cultural and institutional framework is what constitutes the artwork.<sup>26</sup>

Isabelle Graw has suggested that recent examples of institutional critique risk becoming reactionary:

. . . it seems necessary to analyse how the artistic competencies usually associated with institutional critique (research, teamwork, personal risk-taking and so on) actually feed, sometimes quite perfectly, into what sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have described as 'the new spirit of capitalism'.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, Fraser has seemed to concede as much recently:

Any claim that we represent a progressive social force while our activities are directly subsidised by the engines of inequality can only contribute to the justification of that inequality – the (not so) new legitimization function of art museums.<sup>28</sup>

Consequently, Boltanski and Chiapello's broader challenge to contemporary artists and theorists acquires a particular timeliness:

. . . perhaps the artistic critique should, to a greater extent than is currently the case, take the time to reformulate the issues of liberation and authenticity, starting from the new forms of oppression it unwittingly helped to make possible.<sup>29</sup>

Given both artists' focus on the 'institution' invoked by institutional critique, and the impasse this has brought them to, the question presents itself as to whether there might still be resources to discovered in 'critique' in its strong philosophical and historical sense as an emancipatory critical project, notwithstanding the suspicion that has been directed toward critique in recent theory.<sup>30</sup> My contention will be that taking up Boltanski



myself enmeshed in the contradictions and complications, ambitions, and ambivalence that Institutional Critique is often accused of, caught between the self-flattering possibility that I was the first person to put the term in print, and the critically shameful prospect of having played a role in the reduction of certain radical practices to a pithy catchphrase, packaged for co-optation.' Fraser, 'From the Critique of Institutions', op cit, p 127

and Chiapello's challenge will involve revisiting the historical origins, and limitations, of critique in Immanuel Kant's work, specifically the way in which his account of aesthetic judgement was understood by Friedrich Schiller to model, but not to realize, the promise of freedom embodied in aesthetic experience as communicated by the sensation of the free play of the faculties. This issue, as we will see, is addressed in Haacke's work, albeit obliquely, and can be recovered through a careful re-reading of its terms, contrasting his practice to the broader history of conceptual art. Such a reading of Haacke's work is intimated by, but not ultimately realized in, Greenfort's attempt to reboot Haacke's practice.

### *A RENEWED POLITICS OF AESTHETICS?*

A final pairing of works: Hans Haacke, *Rhine-Water Purification Plant* (1972); Tue Greenfort, *Diffuse Einträge* (2007). In Haacke's work, originally presented at the Museum Hans Lang in Krefeld, a series of chemical



Hans Haacke, *Rhine-Water Purification Plant*, 1972, colour photograph c-print, 20 x 30 in (51 x 76 cm), © Hans Haacke/DACS, courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



agents and filters were used to purify polluted water from the Rhine. The purified water was then let out into a large tank on the gallery floor filled with goldfish and the survival of the fish throughout the duration of the exhibition attested to the quality of the water so treated. An outlet hose carried the excess water that overflowed from the oversized goldfish tank out to the garden of the museum where it seeped into the ground, returning to the broader ecosystem outside the gallery. Haacke's work carried a particular political charge because at the time it was produced the city of Krefeld was a major polluter, releasing forty-two million cubic metres of untreated household and industrial waste into the Rhine annually, a fact Haacke addressed in his companion work *Krefeld Sewage Triptych* (1972).<sup>31</sup>

Greenfort's work focused on another polluted body of water, the Aasee in Munich. Swimming in the lake is prohibited even though it is located in a park that is a popular recreation area for the city's residents. A high concentration of phosphates enter the lake as runoff from the intensive farming industry that surrounds Munich and these phosphates stimulate algal blooms which produce a substance that makes the lake water poisonous to humans. Keen to address the problem, the city established a scientific committee dedicated to returning the lake to recreational use and it proposed that introducing iron(III)-chloride into the lake would reduce the flowering of algae by chemically binding and thus neutralizing them. However the iron(III)-chloride solution would have to be continually introduced into the water or the process of eutrophication would begin again. Greenfort's *Diffuse Einträge*, presented at Skulptur Projekte Münster in 2007, produced a micro-realization of the scientific committee's proposal consisting of a modified manure spreading machine on top of which sat a 100-litre tank of iron(III)-chloride feeding in to the main tank of the machine. A water fountain connected to the front of the main tank sprayed the mixture of water and iron(III)-chloride into the lake.

While Haacke's work presented itself as at least potentially curative – the fish lived, the purified water was returned to the wider ecosystem – Greenfort's work, in contrast and similarly to *Exceeding 2 Degrees*, self-reflexively troped the futility of the solution it proposed – the volume of iron(III)-chloride introduced by Greenfort was manifestly inadequate to the task of rendering the lake safe to swim in. At one level Greenfort's piece parodies the emerging discipline of geoengineering, which proposes various 'solutions' to the problem of anthropogenic environmental degradation and global climate change by means of large-scale environmental interventions.<sup>32</sup> At a more philosophical level, however, Greenfort's work criticizes the instrumental rationality marking contemporary technoscience in general, a rationality that can only conceive technocratic solutions to problems of technocratic society's own making. Such a point famously finds its antecedent in T W Adorno and Max Horkheimer's account of the 'dialectic of enlightenment' in which the social promise of enlightenment rationality – encapsulated by Kant's critical injunction 'sapere aude' ('dare to know') – has led to a paradox wherein 'the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity'.<sup>33</sup>

Greenfort's *Diffuse Einträge* thus operates at the tail end of the trajectory of conceptual art as influentially described by Benjamin Buchloh in

31. Here I am indebted to TJ Demos's discussion of both these works by Haacke. Demos also compares *Rhine-Water Purification Plant* with Greenfort's *Diffuse Einträge*, a comparison I develop below. See TJ Demos, 'The Politics of Sustainability: Art and Ecology', *Radical Nature*, pp 16–30, pp 21–22, p 27.

32. Geoengineering has developed various techniques focused principally on either carbon dioxide removal (CDR) or solar radiation management (SRM).

33. Immanuel Kant, 'What is Enlightenment?', Mary C Smith, trans, available online at: <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>; Max Horkheimer and T W Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Edmund Jephcott, trans, Stanford University, Stanford, California, 2002, p 1



Tue Greenfort, *Diffuse Einträge*, 2007, modified manure spreading machine, 100-litre tank filled with iron(III)-chloride, water fountain, format variable, photo: Roman Mensing, artdoc.de

terms of a development from an ‘aesthetic of administration’ that unconsciously mimicked instrumental rationality to a ‘critique of institutions’ wherein instrumental reason was self-consciously turned back on itself and the social institutions from which it was held to emanate:

Paradoxically, then, it would appear that Conceptual Art truly became the most significant paradigmatic change of postwar artistic production at the very moment that it mimed the operating logic of late capitalism and its positivist instrumentality in an effort to place its auto-critical investigations at the service of liquidating even the last remnants of traditional aesthetic experience. In that process it succeeded in purging itself entirely of imaginary and bodily experience, of physical substance and the space of memory, to the same extent that it effaced all residues of representation and style, of individuality and skill. That was the moment when Buren’s and Haacke’s work from the late 1960s onward turned the violence of that mimetic relationship back onto the ideological apparatus itself, using it to analyse and expose the social institutions from which the laws of positivist instrumentality and the logic of administration emanate in the first place. These institutions, which determine the conditions of cultural consumption, are the very ones in which artistic production is transformed into a tool of ideological control and cultural legitimation.<sup>34</sup>

34. Benjamin Buchloh, ‘Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions’, *October* 55, winter 1990, pp 142–143

Yet, as we have seen, the limitations of this strategy have become apparent in the impasse besetting third-generation institutional cri-

tique where the attempt to turn instrumental reason against itself seems to have run aground, whether that be in Fraser's fragile hopes for a psychological institutional critique (where critical artistic subjectivity seeks to make a virtue of its historical capture by the institution) or, as is the primary focus here, in Greenfort's ecological institutional critique (where the necessity and the impossibility of an art-immanent ecological expansion of institutional critique is dialectically staged).

Part of the reason for the seemingly entrenched nature of this impasse lies in the ongoing legacy of conceptual art's 'Kantianism' and the implications that this has held for the contemporary framing of questions concerning the ontology of art and the nature of aesthetic experience. While conceptual artists rejected Clement Greenberg's aesthetic formalism, they inherited elements of his idiosyncratic interpretation of Kant wherein reason's task of establishing its legitimacy by setting its own proper limits through rational self-criticism was *transposed* to art, such that advanced art's task was held to lie in establishing its own proper limits by means of self-criticism. Conceptual artists rejected Greenberg's insistence that art's self-criticism was obliged to proceed through medium-specificity (also overturning Donald Judd's liminal category of the specific object) but held on to the notion that rational self-criticism was the proper means of ontological self-grounding for art. Such a position resulted in a cognitivism: conceptual art insisted on the priority of art's cognitive value, seeking to divorce art from its historical association with an aesthetic dimension. There were of course strong reasons for this development: conceptual art turned against 'traditional aesthetic experience' (Buchloh) and the traditional art forms that were held to be its occasion (painting, sculpture and relief), not only as a local rejection of Greenbergian formalism but also as a broader gesture rejecting the affirmative character of culture.<sup>35</sup> Yet in jettisoning the issue of art's relation to aesthetics, conceptual art also rejected the connection – always provisional, even in Kant – not only between art and aesthetics but also thereby between art and the promise of freedom embodied by the aesthetic response. And although conceptual art's attempt to *absolutize* its anti-aestheticism is widely acknowledged to have failed, its broad anti-aesthetic impulse has proved enduringly influential, as evidenced by critical postmodernism's long history of 'anti-aesthetic' conviction, comprehensively set out by Hal Foster and echoed by Greenfort over twenty years later, when he claims that 'aesthetics is a cultural construction'.<sup>36</sup>

What, though, if we were to try to move beyond what Jameson has appositely described as the 'limited and Kantian project of a restricted conceptual art' and its ramified legacy?<sup>37</sup> Jameson's incisive critique of 'restricted' conceptual art was occasioned by his discussion of Haacke's contrasting achievements:

In Haacke it is not merely with museum space that we come to rest, but rather the museum itself, as an institution, opens up into its network of trustees, their affiliations with multinational corporations, and finally the global system of late capitalism proper, such that what used to be the limited and Kantian project of a restricted conceptual art expands into the very ambition of cognitive mapping itself (with all its specific representational contradictions).<sup>38</sup>

35. Marcuse considers traditional high culture to have an affirmative character because the aesthetic experience of the free play of the faculties that it occasions (and therein the intimation of freedom) finds no adequate means of social actualization and thus functions predominantly as a *consolation* and thereby a means of reconciliation to the status quo. See Herbert Marcuse, 'The Affirmative Character of Culture', *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, Jeremy J Shapiro, trans, Allen Lane, London, 1968, pp 88–133.

36. Hal Foster, 'Introduction', in Hal Foster, ed, *The Anti-Aesthetic; Essays on Postmodern Culture*, New Press, New York, 1998, ix–xvii, xvi–xvii; 'Interview between Tue Greenfort and Zoe Gray', op cit

37. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, op cit, p 158

38. Ibid



39. 'The final departure of Haacke's work from the limitations of a systems-aesthetic approach really occurs in 1969 when – beginning with his Polls – he transfers his interests from biological and physical systems to social systems that implicate the spectator in an immediate interaction.' Benjamin Buchloh, 'Hans Haacke: The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment', in Hans Haacke, *'Obra Social'*, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 1996, p 49
40. See Luke Skrebowski, 'All Systems Go: Recovering Hans Haacke's Systems Art', *Grey Room* 30, winter 2008, pp 54–83.
41. TJ Demos, 'Art After Nature', op cit, p 194, emphasis in the original; 'Interview between Tue Greenfort and Zoe Gray', op cit
42. I discuss this issue at length in Luke Skrebowski, 'The Artist as Homo Arbitrator Formae: Art and Interaction in Jack Burnham's Systems Essays', Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagen, eds, *Practicable: Audience Participation in Contemporary Art and New Media from the 1950s to the Present Day*, CNRS, Paris, forthcoming 2013. For an account of Burnham's relation to a wider discourse relating art to systems ecology in the same period, see Demos, 'The Politics of Sustainability', op cit, pp 21–24.
43. Burnham, *Art in the Marcusean Analysis*, Pennsylvania State University, Philadelphia, 1969, p 9
44. Marcuse makes this point clear in his own discussion of the stakes of the ecology movement: 'The ecology movement reveals itself in the last analysis as a political and psychological movement of liberation. It
- However, in valorizing Haacke's expanded critical project as an exercise in 'cognitive mapping', Jameson moves beyond 'restricted' conceptual art's idiosyncratic 'Kantianism' but not its cognitivism. If we are to understand what it means to work 'after Hans Haacke' today we must revisit our understanding of the character and achievements of Haacke's practice. We need to understand Haacke's work not, with Jameson, as characterized principally by its ambitious project of cognitive mapping, nor, following Buchloh, as split between an early uncritical phase characterized by a misguided adherence to Jack Burnham's theory of 'systems aesthetics' and a later critical one marked by his abandonment of this position.<sup>39</sup> The reading of Haacke's practice that proves salient in the present recognizes his work as characterized throughout by adherence to a systems aesthetics, a theoretical position that subtends all of his investigations of increasingly complex systems, from organic elements, through plants, animals, and finally to human beings.<sup>40</sup> If Fraser adheres to Buchloh's orthodox reading of Haacke's work, then Greenfort is surely closer to Burnham's. As Demos points out, 'Greenfort's work successfully demonstrated *the connection between* economic, ecological, and institutional systems' and the artist has stated that 'the idea of art itself as an ecosystem is very interesting'.<sup>41</sup>
- Yet while the 'systems' component of Burnham's theory of systems aesthetics has been well discussed in the scholarly literature, the theoretical character of its 'aesthetics' remains less remarked.<sup>42</sup> There was a specifically aesthetic character to Burnham's work – in the strong philosophical sense of the term – one that derived from his (problematic) adoption and adaptation of Herbert Marcuse's work. In his little-known pamphlet *Art in the Marcusean Analysis*, Burnham proposed that postformalist art should adopt Marcuse's Neo-Schillerian project to overcome the opposition between instrumental and aesthetic reason: 'A fusion of artistic and technical reason is inevitable once art ceases to function as illusion and ideal appearance.'<sup>43</sup> However, Burnham had misunderstood Marcuse's speculative claims for the potential *sublation* of technological rationality by aesthetic rationality, mistakenly arguing for the possibility of *synthesis* between incompatible rationalities. Nevertheless, influenced by Marcuse, Burnham's work set out the wider possibilities of an aesthetics conceived along Neo-Schillerian lines, one that was missed by the 'restricted' and 'Kantian' form of conceptual art but that was picked up in Haacke's ecological works, which use art to model a non-exploitative relation to nature and thereby to model liberation itself.<sup>44</sup>
- By reconsidering Haacke's legacy in terms of its manifestation of a systems aesthetics we can discern a way for contemporary art to feel its way beyond the impasse characterizing third-generation institutional critique's attempts to deploy instrumental reason against itself. Here Schiller might once again serve as a model. In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* Schiller famously seeks to realize the freedom intimated in Kant's account of aesthetic judgement (the free play of the subject's faculties in aesthetic response) as social freedom by means of aesthetic education of the populous. As Jacques Rancière has summarized Schiller's project, 'the "gratuitous" activity of play can simultaneously found the autonomy of a specific domain of art and the construction of forms for a new collective life...'<sup>45</sup> Schiller is no panacea of course,



is political because it confronts the concerted power of big capital, whose vital interests the movement threatens. It is psychological because (and this is the most important point) the pacification of external nature, the protection of the life-environment, will also pacify nature within men and women. A successful environmentalism will, within individuals, subordinate destructive energy to erotic energy.' Herbert Marcuse, 'Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Journal of Socialist Ecology*, vol 3, no 3, September 1992, pp 29–38. The article is a transcription of a talk given by Marcuse in 1979.

45. Jacques Rancière, 'Aesthetics as Politics', in Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Steven Corcoran, trans, Polity, Cambridge, 2009, pp 19–44, p 29

46. Gayatri Spivak, 'Introduction', in Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2012, pp 1–34, p 12

and Rancière's own influential remobilization of Schiller to produce an account of 'art in the aesthetic regime' has also proved contentious. Of specific significance here is the fact that Rancière's account does not acknowledge the ontological challenge to art in the aesthetic regime that was mounted by conceptual art. Addressing the shortcomings of Rancière's account would involve mediating his salutary revivification of the emancipatory ambition announced in Schiller's post-Kantian aesthetics *with the history of conceptual art*.

Such a project is suggested by Greenfort's attempt to reboot Haacke's practice as a ground for his own. Furthermore, in his ecological expansion of institutional critique, Greenfort has broadened the practice's geographical scope. *Exceeding 2 Degrees* self-reflexively acknowledges that it is a locational practice, that its site is determined by its relation to multiple other sites, and that it intervenes in and interlinks numerous geographies by means of the diverse social relations that crystallize in its production and circulation. Although such a claim is not made equally clearly in every work, Greenfort's practice insists that the critique of the art institution cannot be decoupled from a critique of the broader globalized circuits that allow such a critique to be enunciated and enable it to circulate. In this sense Greenfort moves beyond the Western parochialism of much institutional critique – notwithstanding its postcolonial inflection in the work of Renée Green, Fred Wilson and others. But he does so while also heeding Gayatri Spivak's injunction – made in the course of her own project to redeploy Schiller under contemporary globalized conditions – that simply 'proposing alternative non-European epistememes is a variant of the old anthropologism'.<sup>46</sup>

Yet despite its sophisticated expansion of the field of critical production, Greenfort's work ultimately remains within the paradigm of institutional critique: while it frames the problem of the 'institution' in a richer, more geographically extensive manner – just as Fraser frames the practice in a richer, more psychologically intensive manner – it does not model an alternative to art's institutional capture, that is, it does not suggest a way to abolish art *by* realizing it, which would be consistent with a (Neo-)Schillerian aesthetics. Greenfort continues institutional critique's project to challenge instrumental reason but does so by self-consciously foregrounding the insufficiency of this gesture. In so doing he might seem to risk a cynicism, but this aspect of his practice might better be understood as the deliberate cultivation of cognitive dissonance: cognitive mapping is amplified to the point at which the promise and the limit of (this form of) artistic critique are entertained at the same time. In Greenfort's work institutional critique has to be understood as internal to the ecological crisis brought about by the instrumental rationality that it would challenge. In so doing, his work produces a sophisticated conceptualization of the problems inherent to the critique of institutions, when a clear distinction between the social and the natural can no longer be sustained in such a way as to bracket the art system. Such an emphasis on the hybrid imbrication of the social and the natural produces a sophisticated ecological expansion of the critique of institutions that is productive for the wider project of a critical eco-art today (Greenfort's art remains productively suspicious about any merely local form of activism). Ultimately, however, Greenfort recovers the systematic but not the aesthetic element of a systems aesthetics

from Haacke via Burnham: instrumental rationality is turned against itself but not overturned. In a work such as *Diffuse Einträge* the limitations of instrumental reason are clearly demonstrated but the potential of aesthetic reason to sublimate it is not seriously entertained. Aesthetic affect does not operate as beautiful consolation, in the manner of traditional aesthetic art, but nonetheless aesthetic reason remains subordinated and disempowered, reduced to a mordant form of decoration for critical art in the expanded field. Ultimately the work exhibits a scepticism about the power of art to enact a profound revolution of the sensible, which is a corollary of its realism, its anti-utopianism. In negating the fragile ecotopian moment of Haacke's *Rhine-Water Purification Plant* in the name of a legitimate scepticism about the limits of single-issue politics, *Diffuse Einträge*, and Greenfort's work more generally, also forecloses on the moment of aesthetic liberation that was embodied in Haacke's modest (with hindsight, all-too-modest) gesture of restorative ecology.

Greenfort's work is highly cognizant of the 'new forms of oppression' that Boltanski and Chiapello point out, that the art of the 1960s 'unwittingly helped to make possible' but has not yet managed to 'reformulate the issues of liberation and authenticity'. Finding a way out of the impasse of third-generation institutional critique might involve mediating Greenfort's ecological approach with Fraser's psychological approach, which is to say in finding a new way to connect 'nature' and the 'subject' – a founding ambition of Kant's Third Critique and thus the modern philosophical tradition – *after the self-evidence of both categories has been lost*.<sup>47</sup> Such might be the grounds of a renewed critical artistic project to come.

47. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant argues that we must assume nature's purposiveness for the subject's cognitive faculties.

# Planetary Dysphoria

Emily Apter

Cities phosphorescent  
on the riverbank, industry's  
glowing piles waiting  
beneath the smoke trails  
like ocean giants for the siren's  
blare, the twitching lights  
of rail- and motorways, the murmur  
of the millionfold proliferating molluscs,  
wood lice and leeches, the cold putrefaction,  
the groans in the rocky ribs,  
the mercury shine, the clouds that  
chased through the towers of Frankfurt,  
time stretched out and time speeded up,  
all this raced through my mind  
and was already so near the end  
that every breath of air made my  
face shudder.<sup>1</sup>

This extract from W G Sebald's poem *Nach der Natur* (1988), published in English in the wake of his untimely death in a car accident, makes full use of the Romantic absolute (particularly Friedrich Schlegel's conception of art as the completion of philosophy), updated for modern-day ecological disaster.<sup>2</sup> A ghostly slick of chemical pollutants coats each urban form. 'Light twitches', as if emanating off things that are themselves in the last spasms of violent death. Piles of industrial effluvia 'glow' radioactively. In German the expression *nach der Natur* suggests a naturalist credo of 'painting from nature' (versus the aesthetic imitation of art), but it can also be construed to mean 'post-nature', or 'running after nature', as if trying to recoup Nature's creative force or forestall its dissolution.

Sebald's terrestrial imagery is symbolically overcoded, culled from historical events and their epic cultural scripts. The city of Frankfurt has entered a phase of planetary eclipse that reaches referentially back in time to the Renaissance, and specifically to Matthias Grünewald's painting of the 1502 solar eclipse. There are allusions to primeval lagoons and bogs that plunge the narrator 'into a quasi/sublunary state of deep/melancholia'; biblical lands beset by plagues, desolate alpine peaks on which

1. W G Sebald, *Nach der Natur* (1988), from the translation into English by Michael Hamburger, *After Nature*, Random House, New York, 2002, p 113

2. On the concepts of Romantic and aesthetic absolutes, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester, trans, SUNY, Albany, New York, 1988. This text is a considerably abridged version of the French original, *L'Absolu littéraire*, Seuil, Paris, 1978.

Arctic explorers perished, battlefields laid waste by conquering armies (Alexander the Great's), ravaged vestiges of Frankfurt's medieval peasant revolts, pogroms and the death-camp at Sachsenhausen; wastelands of environmental bio-hazard.<sup>3</sup> Given this pageant, little wonder that Sebald's poem served as the titular pretext for a show at the New Museum curated by Massimiliano Gioni in 2008. Gioni, we learn:

... is as confident of Sebald's Pied Piper appeal, as he is of Werner Herzog's – the director's gorgeous and dire film on the aftermath of the Gulf War, 'Lessons of Darkness' (1992), excerpts of which are loop-projected on the first of the show's three floors, is another touchstone. Gioni also cites Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel, 'The Road' (2006), writing of a rising sensibility haunted by 'the destabilizing sensation of having come upon the remains of our own civilization after its extinction', transfixed by 'offended sceneries and scorched earth', and hankering for qualities of the 'pure, distant, and extreme' in 'a sphere that is, if not religious, at least sacred or obscure, like a mystery cult'.

The publicity circular continues in this idiom of the religious blockbuster: The exhibition:

... surveys a landscape of wilderness and ruins, darkened by uncertain catastrophe. It is a story of abandonment, regression, and rapture – an epic of humanity and nature coming apart under the pressure of obscure forces and not-so-distant environmental disasters.

The artists are said to:

... share an interest in archaic traditions and a fascination for personal cosmologies and visionary languages. A requiem for a vanishing planet. 'After Nature' is a feverish examination of an extinct world that strangely resembles our own.<sup>4</sup>

The show included several works by under-recognized artists that exemplify a planetary aesthetic; one that has arguably been around since artists began painting the zodiac, scenes from Genesis and extraterrestrial mythology, but which took on new guises in the context of telescopic imaging and post-atomic technologies. Eugene von Bruenchenhein's *Atomic Age* (1955), an oil painting set in an Edenic dystopia congested with undulating vines and dragon tentacles; films by Nancy Graves, known for early career displays of fossils and taxidermy, as well as delicate gouaches of celestial cartography (*VI Maskeyne Da Region of the Moon*, 1972); and the photographs of August Strindberg, dubbed 'Celestographs', produced in 1894 by setting glass plates bathed in saline solution under the night sky. Douglas Feuk notes of Strindberg's art made in absence of the artist:

The surfaces not only look weathered with an atmospherically-created patina, but even seem to have been made in physical collaboration with the weather... the photographs often look like nocturnal celestial scenes. But you could just as easily see gravel or dust, a close-up of worn asphalt, or a patch of dark soil. Actually, the pictures are not totally unlike the topographical earth studies that much later, in the 1950s, engaged Jean Dubuffet, which he named texturologies. The greatness of Strindberg's photographs lies precisely in that they offer this double view, where starry sky and earthly matter seem to move within and through one another.<sup>5</sup>

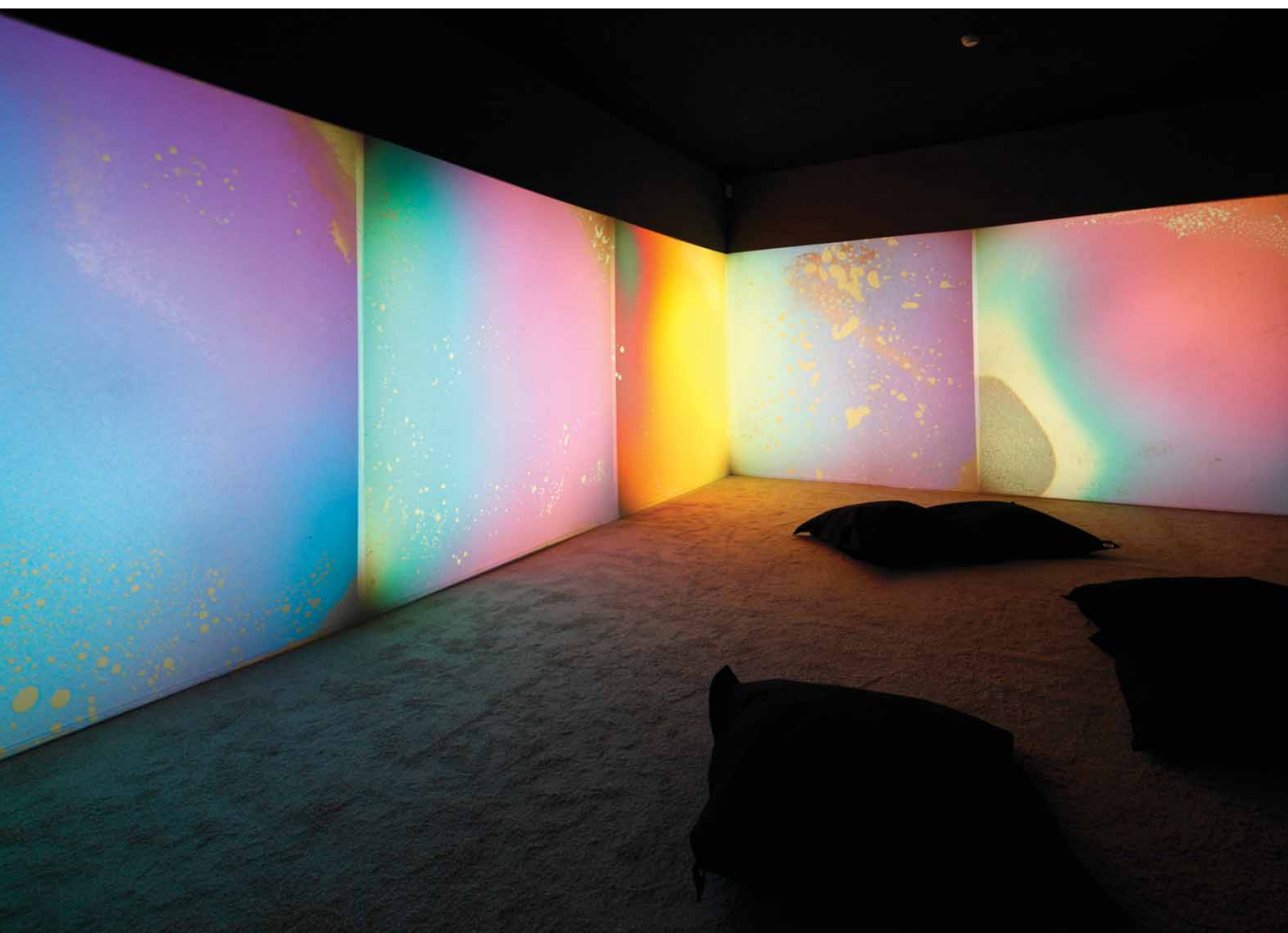
3. Sebald, op cit, p 99

4. See 'After Nature' in the digital archive at <http://www.newmuseum.org/>.

5. Douglas Feuk, 'The Celestographs of August Strindberg', *Cabinet* 3, summer 2001, Birgitta Danielsson, trans, online at: <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/3/celestographs.php>



The motifs vary – swirls of dust and atmosphere, combusive, atomic infernos, blistered ground and an unsettling indistinction between earth and cosmos – but they set the terms, albeit from radically different political and artistic positions, for a range of works exceeding the show that explore a cosmic end-of-times consciousness. These might include: Roberto Matta's *M'onde* (1989), a painterly study in chaosmosis; David Alfaro Siqueiros's *Cosmos and Disaster* (1936); a 1955 *conchetto spatiale* by Lucio Fontana (which resembles earth rent asunder by an asteroid, its torn edge allowing the oceans to spill out into space); Michael Heizer's *Nine Nevada Depressions*, a painting from Anselm Kiefer's series *Himmel auf Erden* (1998–2004); Gustav Metzger's auto-destructive acid pieces on nylon (1959) (generated politically by the Nuclear Disarmament Movement) and psychedelic light projection, *Liquid Crystal Environment* (1965–1966); or a Metzger-inspired work



Gustav Metzger, *Liquid Crystal Environment*, 2005, slide projectors, liquid crystals, collection: Tate, London. From the exhibition 'Gustav Metzger: décennies 1959–2009', Musée départemental d'art contemporain de Rochechouart, 2010, photo: David Bordes, courtesy the artist

6. Heizer is an obvious choice for this medium, but I could have mentioned any number of earthworks featured in 'Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974', a recent show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles curated by Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon.
7. Gabrielle Decamous, 'Nuclear Activities and Modern Catastrophes: Art Faces the Radioactive Waves', in *Leonardo*, vol 44, no 2, April 2011, p 127
8. Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2010, p 29, p 30, p 36
9. Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics*, vol 1, Robert Bononno, trans, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2010, p 33
10. 'We are no longer mostly dealing with information that is transmitted from a source to a receiver, but increasingly also with informational dynamics – that is with the relation between noise and signal, including fluctuations and microvariations, entropic emergences and negentropic emergences, positive feedback and chaotic processes. If there is an informational quality to contemporary culture, then it might be not so much because we exchange more information than before, or even because we buy, sell or copy informational commodities, but because cultural processes are taking on the attributes of information – they are increasingly grasped and conceived in terms of their informational dynamics.' Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*, Pluto, New York, 2004, p 7
11. See, for example, Philippe Morel's discussion of the 'distributed paradigm', which relies on 'grid computing', as a protocol aimed at rendering 'the classical concept of

like *Radiation Burn* (2010) by the American collective Critical Art Ensemble.<sup>6</sup>

Gabrielle Decamous remarks that Metzger's auto-destructive happenings show that 'galaxies constantly engage in creative and destructive processes but [that] we have now internalized these processes'.<sup>7</sup> As such, planetary aesthetics – especially Metzger's process-based actions and installations – could be seen to embrace a 'systems' concept of environment emphasizing dynamical interactivity among orders of material, economic, technological and social forms. Timothy Morton's notion of 'mesh' (in *The Ecological Thought*) aptly describes much of what falls under the rubric of 'systems' environmentalism. Mesh is characterized by interconnectedness, concatenation, weaving and computing, 'infinite connections and infinitesimal differences', lichen, fungus, bacteria, endosymbiosis or symbiosis within organisms, envelopes and filters.<sup>8</sup> It complements 'process' which recurs to thermodynamical systems (emergence, conservation, entropy, percolation). For Isabelle Stengers, process takes into account:

... the consequences, for a given milieu, of the appearance of a new technical practice just as it does for the consequences of climate change or the appearance of a new species.<sup>9</sup>

She underscores an adaptive notion of system centring on the technical milieu, theoretically indebted to Georges Friedmann, Gilbert Simondon, Bernard Stiegler and Tiziana Terranova (who coins the expression 'informational milieu' to refer explicitly to digital telecommunication systems).<sup>10</sup> Biomedical environments – a medium of choice for much internet-based art – fix on patterns of emergence, individuation, hylo-morphism, transduction, metastability, assemblage, dissipation, dispersion etc. 'Environment' in architecture increasingly refers less to protocols of sustainability and more to the computational dynamics of distributed systems and informational swarms.<sup>11</sup>

While an aesthetics of planetarity might well draw on the technics of this 'systems' environmentalism, drafted from the material sciences, cybernetics, network theory and distributive computation, its specificity and impetus also come, at times, from a different place, namely the convergence of *Naturphilosophie*, nihilism, the psychoanalytic soma, speculative materialism and recent ecological science that claims that we are living in the midst of a mass extinction event during catastrophic climate change. From Kant's 'physical geography' lectures (which followed his Master's thesis of 1755, *On Fire*, and foreshadowed his meteorological treatises of the 1790s), to Félix Guattari's concept of the Universe as an autistic, subjectively destituted territoriality and to Eugene Thacker's cthonic divinations of bio-horror, the planet is conceived of as an environmental death-trap afflicted by radiation, pandemics, dust and stellar burnout.<sup>12</sup> In the *Sphären (Spheres)* trilogy Peter Sloterdijk proceeds 'psycho-cosmologically', attributing to the post-Enlightenment 'shattering of celestial domes' (induced by Copernican heliocentrism, the loss of faith in God, the relinquishment of immunological protection from the bubble of the universe), the condition of humanity's subjection to 'cosmic frost', 'stellar coldness', and the sensation of 'shelllessness in space'.<sup>13</sup> Quentin Meillassoux cedes the human cognition of a world to an ancestral time of rocks and arche-fossils and a cosmic order of

singular and autonomous intelligence obsolete' and which takes as points of departure: 'ideas of industrial production, post-human networks or disappearing cities in reference to bionetworks and the multitude'. 'Computational Intelligence: The Grid as a Post-Human Network', *Architectural Design*, September/October, 2006, p 100, p 101. See, in the same issue of *AD*, the extension of feedback to 'responsive design networks' in work by the design collaborative 'servo', 'Parallel Processing: Design Practice', p 81, as well as Benjamin Bratton and Hernan Diaz-Alonso's description of a foray into fashioning an environment grafted from the plural 'post-Oedipal' family, through a prosthetic projection designed 'to exacerbate, accommodate and confound intimate social economies', 'Treatment 1: Notes from an Informal Discussion on Interinstitutional Design Research and Image Production', p 110.

12. I refer here to Peter Fenves's chapter 'Revolution in the Air; or the End of the Human Regime on Earth', in his *Late Kant: Towards Another Law of the Earth*, Routledge, London, 2003, pp 136–161; to Félix Guattari's *Chaosmose*, Galilée, Paris, 1992; to Eugene Thacker's *After Life*, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, 2010; and his *In the Dust of this Planet*, vol 1 of *Horror of Philosophy*, Zero, Alresford, Hampshire, 2010; and Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*, re: press, Melbourne, 2008, p 238.

13. Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres I*, Wieland Hoban, trans, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2011, p 22, p 24

*après-finitude*.<sup>14</sup> Jane Bennett's recourse to 'a materialism in the tradition of Democritus-Epicurus-Spinoza-Diderot-Deleuze' that privileges vitalism and 'vibrant matter' supports her conviction that 'the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption'.<sup>15</sup> Thacker meditates on the mystical call of ungroundedness (*Ungrund*) to ponder the question:

... can there exist today a mysticism of the unhuman, one that has as its focus the climatological, meteorological, and geological world-in-itself, and, moreover, one that does not resort to either religion or science?<sup>16</sup>

And in his *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, Ray Brassier, faulting vitalist eschatology for evading 'the leveling force of extinction' invokes 'the cosmological re-inscription of Freud's account of the death-drive', Nietzschean nihilism, and Lyotard's 'solar catastrophism' to underscore extinction's inexorable 'truth'.<sup>17</sup> Brassier is interested in nihilism that decouples thinking from the life of the planet, prompting questions like: 'How does thought think a world without thought? How does thought think the death of thinking?'<sup>18</sup> Such queries arise from Jean-François Lyotard's concept of 'solar catastrophe', which occasions the destruction of thought's 'terrestrial shelter'.<sup>19</sup> 'With the disappearance of earth', Lyotard wrote, 'thought will have stopped – leaving that disappearance absolutely unthought of'.<sup>20</sup> The fixation on the extinction of extinction *as thought* – which is to say as the ultimate fulfilment of philosophical nihilism's remit – sets this strain of catastrophism apart from past traditions of Christian eschatology (end-of-the-worldism, end of days); as well as from the old Cold War fear of mutual annihilation or the particular terrors associated with geological mass extinction events and nuclear energy accidents on a scale far surpassing Chernobyl and Fukushima.

In these speculative materialist analyses there is a consistent oscillation between geophilosophy and psychoanalysis that recalls Derrida's essay "Geopschoanalysis. . ." And the Rest of the World' (1991). In addition to attacking the depoliticized, culturally restricted world map of the International Psychoanalytical Association (whose 1977 Constitution presumed a parochially divided world distributed between North and South America and 'the rest of the world'), Derrida makes the intriguing if abstruse claim that 'psychoanalysis has an earth':

I am sure it will come as no surprise to you that my speaking of 'geopschoanalysis' – just as one speaks of geography or geopolitics – does not mean that I am going to propose a psychoanalysis of the earth of the sort that was put forward a few decades ago, when Bachelard evoked 'The Earth and the Reveries of the Rest' and 'The Earth and the Reveries of the Will'. But as inclined as I may be today to distance myself from such a psychoanalysis of the earth, as likewise from the more recent and more urgent theme of an anti-psychoanalysis of territorialization, it is nevertheless upon the earth that I wish to advance – upon what the psychoanalysis of today considers to be the earth... For psychoanalysis has an earth, sole and singular. An earth that is to be distinguished from the world of psychoanalysis.<sup>21</sup>

Psychoanalysis 'has an earth' in the sense of having a geography bounded by the institutional milieu of its practice, and in so far as it maintains a

- mission to propagate its theories abroad. Derrida cites correspondence between Freud and Ernest Jones that shows Jones playing the image-doctor; counselling Freud to keep the sketchier areas of his thought – the writings on telepathy and thought-transference – under wraps for reasons of sound ‘foreign policy’. All this is to say that when, in this essay, Derrida asserts that ‘psychoanalysis has an earth sole and singular’, he is *not* putting forth a theory of something on the order of ‘geotrauma’ that would marry ecology and psychosis. Yet his very coinage of the term ‘geopsychoanalysis’ moves tantalisingly in this direction.
- Referring to a ‘geocosmic theory of trauma’ attributed to the mysteriously vanished cyberpunk theorist Nick Land – author of *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (1992) and a co-founder (with Sadie Plant) of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) at the University of Warwick in the 1990s – Aidan Tynan defines geotrauma as an ‘attempt to give the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious its full materialist extension’. The encryption of trauma within phylogeny and ontogeny results from what Tynan calls a ‘calamitous maladaptation’:
- Geotrauma repositions the unconscious relative both to the individual, interpersonal and social sphere *and* the bio-organic one. It is only in terms of the earth itself, its geological and cosmic genesis, that we can account for the radical decentring of consciousness suggested in Freud’s discoveries... It is thus precisely not the adaptation of the organism to its environment that gives us the immanence of the inorganic and the organic, but its calamitous maladaptation, which necessitates a takeover of other already adapted structures that are then re-engineered via dramatic and obsolescing changes in conditions. This is why catastrophes are important for the geotraumatic account of evolution.<sup>22</sup>
- Robin Mackay’s ‘A Brief History of Geotrauma’ thickens this definition as it riffs off a Landian/Deleuzian pseudo-science of earth-think that coaxes readers to speculate on the mysteries of authorship surrounding the book *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (2008), Reza Negarestani’s occult treatise on oil ‘polytics’ and ‘Tellurian insurgencies’.<sup>23</sup> With its glossary of arcana and genre-mixing narration of ecological nihilation as told from the vantage point of the earth, this text realizes a new naming opportunity for the encyclopaedic form as a ‘pedia’ hit by a ‘cyclone’. (‘Cyclones,’ Nick Land writes in *The Thirst for Annihilation*, ‘are atmospheric machines that transform latent energy into angular momentum in a feed-back process of potentially catastrophic consequence’).<sup>24</sup> In *Cyclonopedia* there is a curious confluence of geological combustion and Oedipal revolt apparent, for example, in this definition of the word *Naft*:
- Naft* (Arabic and Farsi word for oil). According to the classic theory of fossil fuels (ie excluding Thomas Gold’s theory of the Deep Hot Biosphere), petroleum was formed as a Tellurian entity under unimaginable pressure and heat in the absence of oxygen and between the strata in absolute isolation – a typical Freudian Oedipal case, then... Petroleum is able to gather the necessary geo-political undercurrents... required for the process of Erathication or the moving of the Earth’s body toward the Tellurian Omega – the utter degradation of the Earth as a Whole... Xerodrom is the Earth of becoming-Gas or cremation to Dust.<sup>25</sup>
14. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, Ray Brassier, trans, Continuum, London, 2008
15. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University, Raleigh, North Carolina, 2010, p xiii and p ix respectively
16. Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet*, op cit, p 133, emphasis in the original
17. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2007, p 227 and p 204 respectively
18. *Ibid*, p 223
19. *Ibid*, p 225
20. *Ibid*, p 10, citing Lyotard, *The Inhuman*
21. Jacques Derrida, “‘Geopsychoanalysis...’ And the Rest of the World”, Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans, in Christopher Lane, ed, *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, Columbia University, New York, 1998, p 66
22. Aidan Tynan, ‘Geotrauma, towards a concise definition’, online at: <http://violentsigns.wordpress.com/2012/03/30/geotrauma-towards-a-concise-definition/>
23. Negarestani, op cit, p 4
24. Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*, Routledge, London, 1992, p 106
25. *Cyclonopedia*, op cit, p 17



Negarestani is quite possibly the pseudonym of a collective (which probably includes Mackay himself) that has created a *roman à tiroir* centred on the recovered manuscript of one Dr Hamid Parsani, author of a book banned after the Iranian Revolution called *Defacing the Ancient Persia: 9500 Years Call for Destruction*. In labelling this curious meta-fiction of planetary neurosis ‘geotrauma’, Mackay insists that trauma theory itself was always ‘a materialist cryptoscience’; a ‘crypto-geological hybrid’ predicated on the geologists’ view of the earth’s surface as ‘a living fossil record, a memory bank rigorously laid down over unimaginable eons and sealed against introspection’ yet vulnerable to a broken encryption that brings humiliation in its train.<sup>26</sup> Trauma involves ‘an ecology radical enough to take in these solar eschatologies’; a terrestrial ‘embrace of the perishability of the earth, and its implication in the universe, beyond the local economics of the relation between the sun and the surface’.<sup>27</sup> For Mackay, geotrauma entails ‘a perennial *boring* or a vermicular inhabiting of the organic by the inorganic’.<sup>28</sup> This geophilosophy cum chemophilosophy, telegraphed in Negarestani’s geopoetics of oil and dust, engenders an anticapitalist planetary politics because it indicts the global corporate interests of Big Oil. The deadly fallout of energy extraction is traced deep down below the earth’s surface where traumatic blows to the core are rarely exposed to public scrutiny or made subject to revolutionary insurgency:

The time of trauma is altered. Geophilosophy was always a chemophilosophy: just as it needed to explode the constricted space of the individual and escape to the political surface of the earth, and just as it was then necessary to understand the apparently stable surface as an arrested flow and to penetrate to the depths, the cosmic theory of geotrauma now needed to pass through the core of the earth only to escape its inhibited mode of traumatic stratification and to carry its interrogation further afield, or rather according to a new mode of distribution.<sup>29</sup>

26. Robin Mackay, ‘A Brief History of Geotrauma’, in Ed Keller et al, eds, *Leper Creativity: Cyclonopedia Symposium*, Punctum, Brooklyn, 2012, p 16

27. Ibid, p 31

28. Ibid, p 33

29. Ibid, p 34

30. Ibid, ‘Glossary’, online at: [http://www.ccru.net/id\(entity\)/glossary.htm](http://www.ccru.net/id(entity)/glossary.htm)

31. Ray Brassier, ‘Accelerationism’, transcription from a Backdoor Broadcasting Company recording, online at: [moskvax.wordpress.com/2010/09/30/accelerationism-ray-brassier/](http://moskvax.wordpress.com/2010/09/30/accelerationism-ray-brassier/)

32. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, op cit, p 204

Mackay channels the planet-talk of the *Cyclonopedia*, as well as the pseudo-serious CCRU glossary definition of geotrauma as:

... a polymathic hypertheory of the terrestrial machinic unconscious, which refuses the distinction between biology, geology, linguistics and numeracy. Geotraumatics processes the becomings of the earth as intensive products of anorganic tensions, especially those compacted from archaic xenocatastrophes.<sup>30</sup>

Catastrophism, always a staple of sci-fi, emerges now as a wildly neologistic demotic of choice, demonstrating a tendency to move beyond the assumption of earthly sentience, and the contingency of humans within a continuum of co-creating materialities, into registers of cthonic psychopolitics.

A co-editor of Nick Land’s selected writings (*Fanged Noumena*, 2010), Ray Brassier picks up on Land’s shift from geophilosophy to geopschoanalysis which credits him with swapping a ‘Bergsonian vitalist phenomenology’ for ‘an unconscious thanatropism’.<sup>31</sup> In *Nihil Unbound*, he resizes Freud’s theory of the death-drive from germ plasm, individual psyche and civilization, to the scale of a cosmically proportioned ontic subject.<sup>32</sup> Roger Caillois’s psychasthenic reworking of the repetition compulsion, where adaptive mimicry is taken to the extreme of an

‘assimilation to space’, (dehiscence), becomes the basis for Brassier of ‘mimicry’s non-adaptive *thanatosis*’.<sup>33</sup> Brassier’s text culminates in a *Gotterdammerung* moment when philosophy sloughs off meaning, sense, experience and purpose in favour of the ‘intelligibility of extinction’. Sooner or later, he warns:

... both life and mind will have to reckon with the disintegration of the ultimate horizon, when, roughly one trillion, trillion, trillion (10 to the 1728th power) years from now, the accelerating expansion of the universe will have disintegrated the fabric of matter itself, terminating the possibility of embodiment. Every star in the universe will have burnt out, plunging the cosmos into a state of absolute darkness and leaving behind nothing but spent husks of collapsed matter. All free matter, whether on planetary surfaces or in interstellar space, will have decayed, eradicating any remnants of life based in protons and chemistry, and erasing every vestige of sentience – irrespective of its physical basis. Finally, in a state cosmologists call ‘asymptopia’, the stellar corpses littering the empty universe will evaporate into a brief hailstorm of elementary particles. Atoms themselves will cease to exist. Only the implacable gravitational expansion will continue, driven by the currently inexplicable force called ‘dark energy’, which will keep pushing the extinguished universe deeper and deeper into an eternal and unfathomable blackness.<sup>34</sup>

Like Brassier, Eugene Thacker writes with the chiaroscuro of Goth spiritualism. In *After Life* he positions ‘dark pantheism’ against theological pantheism (‘for which an anthropomorphic God still serves as sovereign Creator and Source’), imputing to it ‘*the challenge of thinking under the sign of the negative*’ and of ontologising ‘life beyond its physico-biological reduction’.<sup>35</sup> Arguing in an implicitly Latourian vein (which is to say, from the position of a political ecology that assumes a level playing field between human and non-human forms of life), Thacker would seem to revel in a possible world uncognized by humans and steeped in doomsday naturism:

The world is increasingly unthinkable – a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction. . . The aim of this book is to explore the relationship between philosophy and horror, through this motif of the ‘unthinkable world’. . . the means by which philosophy and horror are related to each other is the idea of the ‘world’. But the world can mean many things, from a subjective experience of living in the world, to the objective, scientific study of geological conditions. The world is human and non-human, anthropocentric and non-anthropomorphic, sometimes even misanthropic. Arguably, one of the greatest challenges that philosophy faces today lies in comprehending the world in which we live as both a human and a non-human world – and of comprehending this politically.<sup>36</sup>

It has often been alleged that the speculative materialists – many claiming a pronounced allegiance to Marxism and antiglobalist activism – pay only lip-service to politics, but there is arguably a political edge to their hyperbolic evocations of a planet in the grip of revolutionary *ressentiment*: sullen, wounded and ready to retaliate against the hubris of humans who ‘forget’ that their own psychic fates are tethered to the earth’s distressed crust and depleted mineral veins. In Nick Land’s vision of ‘nihilism as nakedness before the cyclone’, the:

33. Ibid, p 34

34. Ibid, p 228

35. Thacker, *After Life*, op cit, pp 229–230

36. Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, op cit, p 1, p 2

... human animal is the one through which terrestrial excess is hemorrhaged to zero, the animal destined to obliterate itself in history, and sacrifice its nature utterly to the solar storm.<sup>37</sup>

It is this excess of planet that enters the human bloodstream, transmuted philosophically into a molten liquid nihilism.

Drafted from solar nihilism, from the neo-Romantic return to F W J von Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* (as exemplified by Ian Hamilton Grant's 'transcendental geology'), and from geopschoanalysis, this dark ecology may be further unpacked through a construct that I will call 'planetary dysphoria'; a variation on Melanie Klein's 'depressive position' suffusing every aspect of economic, social and terrestrial life. Dysphoria, from the Greek δύσφορος (*dysphoros*), means to endure that which is difficult. It denotes an unpleasant or uncomfortable mood: sadness, a downer moment, anxiety, restlessness, irritability, spleen, manic swings, withdrawal (from addictive cravings), and the total evacuation of euphoria.<sup>38</sup> It qualifies as an economy contoured more and more by a recessionary drive and by subjects of melancholia. For Freud, there was in fact a planetary dimension to melancholia: 'In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.'<sup>39</sup> Melancholia extends the sense of the world as 'poor and empty' to the ego. In melancholia, as Freud saw it, the ego was in the grips of:

... a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.<sup>40</sup>

This internalization of anger against self – masochistic and suicidal at its most extreme – jives with Peter Sloterdijk's civilizational diagnosis of repressed *thymos* (literally 'spiritedness', a term whose Platonic ascription refers to manifestations of pride, indignation, shame and bellicosity). He charts a shift in the Greek psyche from a phase of testosterone-fuelled 'heroic militancy', to one extolling 'civic excellence' in which rage is downgraded as a 'charismatic affect' to mere 'enthusiasm'.<sup>41</sup> In a predictably Nietzschean vein, Sloterdijk sees the modern politics of the general will, pluralism and liberal consensus-building, as well as therapeutic culture in general, as symptoms of thymotic deprivation. The sole reprieve comes intermittently, either in the form of vulture capitalism ('creative aggression') or as capitalism turned against itself, which is to say, revolution ('the furious resentment against property') and radical movements that provoke 'huge releases of rage, resentment, and fantasies of extermination... a chain of *thymos* catastrophes... the organization of a novel economy of rage'.<sup>42</sup>

Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia* (2011), the title of which refers to the name of a rogue planet that crashes into earth, and whose lowering approach on the horizon tugs at the latent suicidal inclinations of people in depression, is a thymotic tragedy in precisely these terms. The division of the film into two parts, titled 'Justine' and 'Claire', creates a neat division between day and night, two phases of the moon, a blue planet (Earth) and a red planet (Melancholia), euphoria and depression. Justine (played by Kirsten Dunst) is blonde, exuberant and wilful, and Claire (played by Charlotte Gainsbourg) is dark, recessive and controlling. But as we approach the midpoint of Justine's wedding celebration,

37. Land, op cit, p 119

38. Ian Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling*, Transversals: New Directions in Philosophy series, Continuum, London, 2008

39. Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), Joan Riviere, trans, in James Strachey, ed, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 14, Hogarth, London, 1995, p 246

40. Ibid, p 244

41. Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation*, Mario Wenning, trans, Columbia University, New York, 2010, p 12

42. Ibid, p 25, pp 33–35

there is a decided mood-swing, with Justine starting her free fall into cataplexy and Claire opening up to the exquisite anticipation of extinction. The thymotic tipping point comes when guests at the lavish party pass from assurances of Justine's happiness ('How's your wonderful night going?'), to scenes of rage, starting with Justine's mother who remarks at the toast, 'I don't believe in marriage', and climaxing with Justine's public denunciation of her boss ('I hate you... you are a power-hungry little man, Jack'). By the time we reach Part II, all traces of Justine's animal high spirits have vanished and she is like someone shot, where the path of the bullet has entered and exited her body, pulling her psyche into the slingshot orbit of the planet Melancholia proceeding on its course closer and closer to Earth. Taken into this cosmic force-field, Justine becomes a planetary avatar. In one shot, the viscous water of the stream in which she floats reclaims her body; she morphs into Ophelia, with a baleful stare fixed on an unseen extraterrestrial Hamlet. In another sequence, she moves arduously across the greensward wearing a wedding dress from which skeins grow into moss-like tendrils that act as restraints, restricting her movements and tethering her to the ground as if in cthonic servitude. Yet another scene fixates on Justine naked on the rocks at night, her body radioactively luminescent, communing directly with her planet in a pantomime of Brunnhilde (whose funeral pyre would come to destroy the world in Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*). There are also searing moments when her hands become conductors of lightning, and the sky, sensing her moods, rains down dead birds, freakish hail and rain, and clouds of insects. Throughout von Trier relies on ecological embodiments of the death-drive, conscripting the devices of pathetic fallacy with no apology. And while the film may fall short of Brassier's full-on *solar* posthumanism – there is humanist redemption in Justine's caring preparation for death, easing the way for her sister and nephew – it is arguably just as dysphoric in its lunar *clinamen*, the way the film swivels into position as an allegory of cosmic self-destitution.

Planetary dysphoria captures the geopschoanalytic state of the world at its most depressed and *unruhig*, awaiting the triumphant revenge of acid, oil and dust. These elements demonstrate a certain agency: they are sentient materials even if they are not fully licensed subjectivized subjects. Mackenzie Wark, with reference to the *Cyclonopedia*, underscores the 'abstract' look of the world's 'chemical signature' at the end of human time:

Our permanent legacy will not be architectural, but chemical. After the last dam bursts, after the concrete monoliths crumble into the lone and level sands, modernity will leave behind a chemical signature, in everything from radioactive waste to atmospheric carbon. This work will be abstract, not figurative.<sup>43</sup>

Whether abstract or figurative, each of these examples, from Sebald to von Trier, from Negarestani to Brassier, involves a thanotropic projection of how a planet dies. As Brassier's opening quote from Nietzsche's *Will to Power* reminds us: 'Since Copernicus, man has been rolling from the center toward X.'<sup>44</sup>

43. Mackenzie Wark, 'An Inhuman Fiction of Forces', in Keller, ed, *Leper Creativity*, op cit, p 40

44. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, op cit, p x, quoting Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Walter Kaufman, trans, Vintage, New York, 1967, p 1



# Art, Ecology and Institutions

## A Conversation with Artists and Curators

**Steven Lam, Gabi Ngcobo, Jack Persekian, Nato Thompson, Anne Sophie Witzke and Liberate Tate**

This conversation was conducted by email over July 2012. Gabi Ngcobo is an independent curator and scholar; Jack Persekian is Director and Head Curator of The Palestinian Museum; Nato Thompson is a writer and curator; Anne Sophie Witzke is a curator and PhD fellow at Department of Aesthetics and Communication at Aarhus University; Liberate Tate is an art collective exploring the role of creative intervention in social change especially in relation to the oil and culture industries; and Steven Lam is an artist, curator and Associate Dean at The School of Art at The Cooper Union, New York City; for fuller details on the participants refer to ‘Contributors’ Notes’ at the end of this issue.

**Steven Lam** Gabi and Anne Sophie, you have organized exhibitions timed in conjunction with large political events and climate summits in order to raise awareness of ecological issues formerly reserved for policy-makers or specialists. Can you speak of your practices in light of your regional contexts? What might an exhibition achieve when it comes to a show about ecology? What are some institutional, economic and disciplinary limits? What are the possibilities? What happens after these events or exhibitions are over?

**Gabi Ngcobo** When I was approached to organize an exhibition to coincide with COP 17 (the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), which met in Durban in November 2011, I had to consider a number of factors. The main one was the location, the city of Durban, my birth city and one that I left as recently as six years ago. The commission would allow me to be re-connected to the place by thinking about how to reflect on recent climate changes that have taken place there in relationship to the rest of the country and the monstrosity that is ‘The Continent’. Alongside the support given to me by the Goethe-Institut, my commissioners, was the freedom to be disobedient, so to speak. ‘There’s no need to be polite’ was the brief and immediately the

title of the exhibition was born in my head: DON'T/PANIC. The show featured more than thirty pieces, including work by South African artists David Koloane, Mlu Zondi, Clive van den Berg and Moshekwa Langa, Nigerian-born artist Otobong Nkanga, Eritrean-born artist Dawit L Petros, Nigerian George Osodi and Moroccan-born artist Batoul S'Himi.

**Anne Sophie Witzke** In 2009 I organized an exhibition on climate change in Copenhagen coinciding with COP15. 'RETHINK: Contemporary Art and Climate Change' was made in collaboration with the National Gallery of Denmark, Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art, the Nordic Culture Fund and the Alexandra Institute. We wanted to address global warming as a cultural and social issue, not just a discipline reserved for politics or science. Thus, the focus was more on cultural and social shifts and displacements than on concrete issues about energy and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. In line with some of you I have been inspired by Félix Guattari, as well as by thinkers like Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers, who (despite their differences) see nature and culture as entangled.

It is difficult to summarize what effect the exhibition had in terms of public engagement. During COP15 there were myriad activities and events going on in Denmark, which implied the risk that a single activity would lose resonance. And to a certain degree I think this is what happened. Visibility of climate change issues turned into overexposure. However, my impression is that the discussions and activities during COP15 have contributed to generate a general concern about global warming. Also, a number of art projects dealing with political ecological issues have emerged in the wake of COP15. For me this longer lasting involvement is essential. Current ecological problems are deeply political and economic, and require a cultural transformation, which is not going to happen overnight. Long-term commitment is needed.

**SL Jack, Nato, and Liberate Tate**, your projects have opened the category of the ecological allowing for other issues to enter, such as human rights and democracy. Can you speak of your experience in curating and presenting these issues?

**Jack Persekian** I, like Anne Sophie, would support Guattari's definition of ecology, as he observes that nature cannot be separated from culture any more; nor, I would emphasize, from politics, the economy and social issues. Hence, my concern is not merely with climate change, but more importantly the changes imposed on land and territories, and the ethnic cleansing taking place in parts of the world today. I cannot simply accept the facts and realities created on the ground by the strong and dominant powers at the expense of the poor, the weak and the downtrodden. In this context I don't only see art as an agent for change but more importantly as a powerful catalyst for political activism and resistance.

Had I been more careful in observing the trends formulated by artists in the Arab world in their work in the last decade and a half, linking them to what should have been perceived as the pulse of the street, acknowledging their ability to mirror what society is burdened with and what it aspires for, and truly believing in the role of the artist as 'the soul of

her/his society', I and others should have at least indicated some time ago that the Arab street's impulse has dramatically changed and people aren't the docile horde anymore, hopelessly and helplessly submissive to their potentates.

**Nato Thompson** As with Jack, climate change isn't an issue I have foregrounded in exhibitions or commissions, but it is related to the main trajectory of much of the socially engaged work I have been involved in. The questions of engaging with community, considerations of media, considerations of affect on local, national and international levels, the potentialities of unlocking loaded political issues from their compartmentalized forms of dialogue, and finally the consideration of political efficacy, are all part of a growing ecology of artwork and political practice.

Gauging efficacy in this mire of sloppy process is no easy task. One method that I have been working on with Creative Time is growing the base for forums of social justice, cultural work to develop a shared language and methodology of critique. In particular, the work on climate change has found numerous practitioners who arrive at cultural forms from numerous disciplines such as architecture, urban planning and, of course, environmentalism. The language of how to shape culturally geared projects is new, but those doing this kind of work are exponentially growing. Finding platforms for discussing efficacy in its broadest sense is, at this point, helpful.

**Liberate Tate** We are an art collective that explores the role of creative intervention in social change. We aim to free art from the grips of the oil industry. We primarily focus on Tate, the UK's leading art museum, and its sponsorship deal with the oil company BP. We believe Tate is supporting BP rather than the other way around. Given Tate's relationship with a corporation engaged in socially and ecologically destructive activities, in our view, every exhibition at Tate and other oil-sponsored public cultural institutions is part of the creation of climate chaos through the construction of a social licence to operate for oil companies. Our practice involves illuminating this process at the culture wellhead through interventions and artworks created in Tate galleries. All of our performances are completely unsanctioned, so as far as institutional or professional limits are concerned, Liberate Tate makes work explicitly outside of any limits a museum might seek to impose. We situate our interventions in the growing wave of desire for citizens to reclaim public space: a gallery should be a place to enjoy great art, not a site where an art museum makes visitors complicit in the ecological destruction of its corporate partners.

**SL** The natural can be seen as a smokescreen, even an obstacle at times. How does one create a critical language of the environment, a critical eco-aesthetics, without relying on an essentialized and purist Romantic fiction that posits Nature as an object, a static and fixed entity outside of culture?

**ASW** Roughly speaking, nature and culture in the Western world have been established as opposites. In discussions about environmental issues this has brought about a polarization between different groups. On the one hand we have the eco-romantics, who view nature as a sacred,

purified entity, and they want to abandon civilization. And when related to developing countries and their wish to improve their standards of living, the romantic approach can be particularly problematic. Conversely, there are (in Bruno Latour's terms) 'the moderns', who view Western history as an evolutionary progression where ecological problems can be solved through technological advances. Here, issues like climate change, land degradation, water scarcity are often discussed in apolitical terms such as 'resource scarcity' or 'modernization', when they are in fact deeply entangled in political and social issues. Therefore, in order to tackle environmental issues we cannot solely focus on the environment as an isolated area.

In the case of the 'RETHINK' exhibition many of the art projects were working with diffuse borders between the natural, the cultural and the social. In the installation *Biospheres* Tomás Saraceno took a metaphorical approach to serious subjects like the earth's overpopulation and climate change. His works are often based on structures found in nature, like clouds, bubbles and spider webs, and can be described as models for new types of social spaces and human habitats that respond to environmental challenges. In *Biospheres*, which consists of a number of floating inflatable globes containing plants, air, water and people (the audience could enter the largest of the globes), Saraceno attempts to establish a new relation between culture and nature where humans and non-humans share habitats and coexist. Another contribution, more ironic and neo-conceptual in approach, was *Safety Gear for Small Animals* by Canadian artist Bill Burns. The project is staged in the form of an enterprise – a manufacturer of safety equipment for small animals, eg safety vests, helmets and protective goggles scaled down to suit birds, mice, frogs, etc. Burns foregrounds the absurdity of the various protective measures we devise in order to safeguard ourselves against environmental changes, and shows how deeply the biological non-human sphere is entangled with cultural and technical ecologies.

GN For me, to create an exhibition was not necessarily an opportunity to say something profound about ecological issues in any scientific lingo – I had none – but rather to allow a variety of artistic gestures to be in conversation with one another, to clash, to allow tensions to emerge, relationships to be formulated only to be broken again. After all, I also subscribe to Guattari's enabling definition of ecologies as detailed in *The Three Ecologies*. I wanted to consider many aspects of climate changes within the political landscape of Durban – the economic, educational and artistic climates – and to find works and interventions that trigger questions which can directly impact on how we think about the spaces we inhabit, and the images we are confronted with. No new work was commissioned because I did not want the exhibition to be 'greenwashed', nor did I want to burden artists to respond to these questions based on their urgency, which in this instance was also connected to an international event of a global scale.

SL The performance and sculptural interventions by Liberate Tate have consciously worked with iconography that not only evokes, but relies on an invasion of the natural into the pristine and sterile walls of a museum. Can the collective speak about the specificity of these references in your actions?



LT Bringing natural materials into the Tate galleries is a decision to return what is repressed in Tate's relationship with BP to the gallery spaces of the Tate itself. In a haze of ecological schizophrenia, Tate is pushing its museum credentials as a flagship for sustainability, while at the same time taking money from a company that is damaging our ecosystems. *Floe Piece* (January 2012) is a performance which incorporated a block of ice brought back by scientists from the Arctic. The melting block of ice in *Floe Piece* was exhibited on the steps of Saint Paul's Cathedral at Occupy London, before we carried it on a stretcher, like a dying patient, to Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, where the assembled audience ritually watched over the ice before leaving it there to melt. In museums we are used to seeing representations of landscape in a painting, photograph, video or sculpture. However, seeing this type of Arctic ice for the first time was an emotional experience for us all as the performance enabled us to express the grief and loss felt at that viewing. The people and natural habitats currently affected by climate change are often so far away – the Arctic, the Maldives, Bangladesh – and it felt incredibly significant to bring something tangible from one of those sites into the gallery and to say to Tate, 'Here is some melting Arctic ice, deal with it'.

Additionally, two earlier performances were made in direct reference to the Gulf of Mexico Oil spill and used oil-like substances as a reminder of the ongoing effects of the spill. *Licence to Spill* was an intervention at the Tate Summer Party in June 2010. As BP was spilling oil in the Gulf of Mexico, Tate and BP were celebrating the twentieth anniversary of their sponsorship. Wearing black, our faces veiled, we carried vats of black liquid with BP's notorious sunflower logo stuck to them. We appeared, as if from nowhere, to spill hundreds of gallons of what was actually molasses on the entrance steps of Tate Britain before disappearing as quickly as we arrived.<sup>1</sup> Nearly a year later we made *Human Cost*, a durational performance marking the anniversary of the Gulf of Mexico catastrophe. The performance lasted eighty-seven minutes, echoing the number of days it took BP to stop the gush of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>2</sup>

Our choice to use or allude to certain raw materials could be said to be Beuysian because the fluid ingredient of an oil-like substance plays a key role, almost like a performer itself. While the presence of these materials may suggest 'the natural', it also highlights how that presence is a performance, similar to how the brick of a building is considered natural. The work functions along the lines of Donna Haraway's cyborgs; they remain referential to the natural *and* the synthetic in one continuous spectrum, rather than as opposing forces.

SL Many of you cite critics who have provided an expanded vocabulary of the ecological, arguing that human and non-human agents are so deeply enmeshed it has become difficult to separate one from the network of political, economic, industrial institutions that exist today. Certainly this is a crucial theoretical starting point, but I wonder how it manifests in artistic/curatorial practice. How does one translate or enact this theory of entanglement into the site of an exhibition?

ASW In 'RETHINK' our curatorial approach to the idea of 'entanglement' wasn't based on a strictly defined philosophical vocabulary. We worked with a broad approach based on the view that climate change

1. As part of the same performance two members of Liberate Tate assumed the identities of 'Bobbi' and 'Toni', parallel personae to Bob Dudley and Tony Hayward, the current and former CEOs of BP, and performed a mini spill inside the gallery. The two women carried ten litres of molasses into the Tate under the bouffant of their floral dresses and released it during champagne and canapés in the middle of the party.

2. In the performance a male body (often read as female within the context of the exhibition 'Single Form' which contained numerous sculptures of female bodies) was covered in oil by two veiled figures, each pouring from a petrol can embossed with the BP helios logo.

is linked to our social life, and can only be solved through cultural change. The theory of ‘entanglement’ as a basic condition for humans as well as non-human actors was reflected in the artworks and in the curatorial themes we worked with (one theme was ‘relationships’). Tue Greenfort’s piece *There isn’t a frog, a fowl, a fish...* consists of a large bed of crops used in modern large-scale agriculture. Due to the spread of agricultural crops, an increasing amount of Danish species are being endangered, because they no longer have access to their natural habitats. As in much of Greenfort’s work he links animals and the natural environment with science, policy and industry – in this case the Danish agricultural and environmental policy and global issues of soil depletion due to the growing demand for food in the world. By making these relationships explicit one could say that Greenfort formulates a concept of ecology that parallels Guattari’s notion of ‘transversality’ (between the different ecologies of the subjective, the social and the environmental) or Latour’s notion of ‘a thing’ (where a thing is described as a collective or assemblage of relations, interests, values and human, as well as non-human actors).

LT Our actions demand that wider connections be drawn between the institution’s sponsorship deals and the dispersant contaminating the gulf, in an entanglement of so-called (and as such divorced from one another) ‘natural’, ‘synthetic’ and financial forces. We think that the network of relations in sponsorship arrangements such as Tate and BP exemplifies this web and thus makes the gallery a suitable site of intervention. Tate is an appropriate target not only because it models itself as politically savvy, but because it has a sustainability policy that was approved by its board in 2008. In the policy Tate states its intention to embed sustainability into its work environment; to take a lead in museum sector sustainability; to inspire change in its networks and visitors and to support the changes needed to move toward a more sustainable society. While commendable, this is actually a very narrow and limited view of its carbon footprint or ecological impact, because it does not take into account its relationship with big oil.

NT We must understand that certain ecological realities are transforming the ontology of the general public into an awareness of the instability of the category of nature. It need not be a complicated theoretical issue, as people need only see a melting glacier to understand that we are deeply manipulated by global forces. There are starting points to move toward the more complex interconnectivity and entanglements that push past culturally defined categories of human/not human, singularity/complexity, natural/unnatural.

However, there has been a sort of wilful insouciance in the critical contemporary art community to eschew communicability for the sake of theoretical acumen. I would almost call it a hypnotism, as I find that many artists and curators who become entranced by an entire new set of theoretical tools set sail for an entire new land of semiotics far removed from the complexity of publics without access or knowledge of their coding. A gap opens up and in general it is a rare exhibition or artistic project that is able to close that gap enough to make something, dare we say, pedagogic occur. So the task, to be simple, is to untangle

the romanticism of the language of theory from its political power to communicate across a diversity of audiences.

I worked with a group called Spurse on a compelling installation back in 2004 where they tried to prove that this small town of North Adams, Massachusetts, was the same place as Mexico City. Through a series of walking drifts through each city, in a randomized pattern, they picked up detritus, conducted interviews with strangers and took laboratory samples of the earth. In a sense, they were attempting to flatten all categories of data, making human, natural, soil, trash, communication and ecological all on the same playing field of data. It was a manner to move toward a flattening of forces to highlight their equal influence. The visiting audience was encouraged to sift through the materials and participate in the laboratory to consider the equivalence of Mexico City and North Adams. In all honesty, I found Spurse's language far too theoretical for our public, but the methods of shaking up cultural expectations regarding categories of the ecological I found extremely poignant and noteworthy.

ASW I think Nato makes an important point. The way we communicate is central. It seems that we still lack a proper language when we talk about ecological art. In that context there's another tendency, which I believe is also obscuring the field: the idea that interaction and participation by definition leads to engagement and understanding. This simplistic equation is found in many art projects today without being qualified. Interacting does not necessarily lead to a deeper understanding or change in behaviour. We have to consider what kind of participation an art project is facilitating, and – borrowing the term 'structured participation' coined by media artist Natalie Jeremijenko – how this participation is structured.<sup>3</sup>

In my current research on ecological art practices involving digital technologies and media, I am preoccupied with these challenges. Some of the projects I find most interesting use micro science, citizen science and other DIY strategies to enhance civic, cultural and institutional engagement in ecological concerns. They provide ordinary people with concrete tools they can use in response, for instance, to air pollution and climate change. Sympathetic towards the open source ethos, many projects attempt to democratize environmental science and knowledge by involving citizens in the production of new environmental data or by making already existing data accessible to the general public. Another example is Jeremijenko's playful project *The Environmental Health Clinic* (2007–), which offers solutions to New York City's environmental diseases. Individuals with asthma, allergies and other environmental-related diseases can consult the clinic and receive treatment. But instead of medication, treatment consists of 'action prescriptions' with instructions on what the patients can do to improve their local environment. For instance, patients might be ordered to collect environmental data using digital sensors, plant green vegetation in their neighbourhood or be responsible for other kinds of urban interventions that can produce material change. By facilitating an open-ended, community-based knowledge that puts 'empirical evidence in the public sphere', the project can push citizens to actively explore complex environmental issues and help restructure the way they participate in them.

3. See Benjamin Bratton and Natalie Jeremijenko, *Suspicious Images, Latent Interfaces*, Architectural League of New York, New York, 2006; and Danielle Siembieda, 'Natalie Jeremijenko Ignites a Fire Under the Seats of CADRE Students', in *Switch 24*, online at: <http://switch.sjsu.edu/v24/features/jeremijenko/>.



Bill Burns, above: installation view of *Safety Gear for Small Animals*, 1994–2012, vacuum formed Perspex and plywood, L 230 x W 115 x H 110 cm, photo: Bill Burns; below: Dust Mask, from *Safety Gear for Small Animals*, 1994–2012, vacuum formed plastic, elastic, 3 x 3 x 2.5cm, photo: Bill Burns



SL It would be a missed opportunity not to hear the others respond to Liberate Tate's actions. As artists, Liberate Tate certainly has flexibility in operating outside the institution, but where is the agency for curators in launching their critiques, especially if the institution that employs them is sustained by the oil-industrial complex or operates within an economic infrastructure built on exploitation and socially unjust foundations?

ASW I don't have any concrete experience with the oil industry. When we did 'RETHINK' we discussed what kind of partnerships it would be relevant to establish. We were interested in collaborations with companies and public institutions that acknowledged climate change as a problem.

NT The critique of oil funding at the Tate is absolutely impressive to watch from a distance. The phrase I hear over and over again from folks in these institutions is that, in the end, it is all money of sorts. It is very difficult to tease out the good money from the bad. I'm very protective with overt corporate branding because often I think it dilutes the meaning of the art and generally it lessens the public's trust in what we do. I realize that the questions are hazy, but in general, I would say one has to take a stand at times. It is difficult to know when is the right time, but an alibi of 'it's all very complicated' doesn't work well. It ruins the integrity of the work we do to simply sit back and be complacent.

SL And finally, to the rest of the panel, what are the dangers when ecology loses its critical traction by losing its specificity?

ASW Sustainability has been hijacked by various discourses, and used for greenwashing purposes. By adding green colour and using eco-friendly materials, projects with no real substance get attention. Here sustainability becomes an ornament, as Rem Koolhaas has pointed out. So yes, there is a risk that ecology loses its criticality and becomes an empty formula. We need to maintain a focus on the subversive aspect of ecology.

JP Unfortunately, we are witnessing now a situation where banks, companies and rich people have usurped the notion of clean, green, eco-friendly environments in their communications to promote and sell their merchandise, real estate, and mostly things people don't really need. It is very evident that people in general are manipulable as those industrialists seek to beguile their dreams and desires, say for a dream home in a new, unpolluted environment made possible with easy loans, and a new electric car bought with borrowed money. Meagre-salaried individuals and families are submerged in debt and their whole lives are held as collateral by these financiers. The promise of happiness erodes with the heavy liability of repaying the loans and debts, and life just passes by with little hope for deliverance.

LT It is equally a concern if ecological issues are seen as divorced from social ones. The very 'specificity' of ecology implies that environmental damage is the only concern, which lets the oil companies off the hook for numerous human rights violations. We are asking that Tate's ideas

about sustainability are held accountable, not just measured with a graph or statistics (for example carbon auditing), but in the way which it is involved in shaping social meaning.

Survival is called into question by ecology – the survival of BP towards the end of oil production, the survival of cultural and educational institutions beyond an oil-rich economy, and the survival of all institutions, bodies, systems that are tied to dependency. It is difficult to maintain a critical or effective relationship when there is also a sense of reliance or dependency. We are proposing that Tate as a cultural institution has a particular agency within this situation, whereby they might cut themselves free from oil sponsorship and rethink how they might grow alongside and within other supportive networks.

NT The concerns of the ecological are of no small portent. The world is crumbling around us. Even Karl Marx didn't realize that the thing that would confront capitalism most dramatically would be its own obsession with surplus against the finite resources of the earth. This is to say that there remains an urgent imperative to all this work that makes communicability an ethical responsibility, not simply a methodology. And with that, making space for action to occur by using this work to move across the political landscape, highlighting where points in power are vulnerable, so that audiences can be engaged enough with ecological concerns to translate pedagogic value into social power.

# The Art and Politics of Ecology in India

## A Roundtable with Ravi Agarwal and Sanjay Kak

TJ Demos

This email conversation took place over the spring and summer of 2012. Ravi Agarwal is an artist, environmental activist, writer and curator. Sanjay Kak is an independent documentary film-maker whose recent work investigates ecology and resistance politics. Both are based in Delhi.

**TJ Demos** Sanjay, you've made several films that engage ecological and political crisis, the resistance and creativity of disempowered tribal peoples, and the undemocratic collusion of corporate and state interests in India. There's *Jashn-e-Azadi* (2007), which investigates the deadly conflict in Kashmir; *Words on Water* (2002), which looks at the issue of big dams and their negative social-economic effects in the Narmada valley; and *In the Forest Hangs a Bridge* (1999), which documents the community-based construction of a suspension bridge in the forest hills of the Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh. What aesthetic approaches have you employed with these works, and how do they address the various crises?

**Sanjay Kak** In the film on the Narmada valley the aesthetic choices were dictated by my immersion in what was a remarkable people's movement, a mobilization that involved Adivasi tribals, mid-level peasantry, urban intellectuals and students. There was a constant flow of people around us, protests, demonstrations and rallies, and the image-making was a response to that. It was not unmediated, obviously, because in India we have a long tradition of 'activist' film-making that reflects precisely such events. (The Narmada movement alone has been the subject of at least six films before I made *Words on Water*!) And sometimes being immersed in the flow also meant being temporarily marooned in a still backwater, stuck in a remote village, cut off by the waters of the monsoon-swollen river; there was then time for the quieter, more reflective image-making.



Sanjay Kak, still from *Words on Water*, 2002 (The rising waters of the dammed Narmada river drown the fields of Jalsindhi village, 1999)

In the case of the Kashmir film, an approach was perhaps imposed on us by the conditions themselves, in what is a very disturbed situation, an oppressively militarized context, where fear was a very real part of the landscape. How does one use the tools of documentary verité in a world where speaking truth carries so much danger? Boxed in by these circumstances, we found ourselves moving towards an abstract style, in both the visualization and the structuring of the film. We arrived at a form that uses certain visual codes and repetitions to evoke the moment, to evoke the fears and the suppressed history of Kashmir. Most importantly, there was a deliberate decision to take Kashmir's fabled landscape – you know the trope: if there is heaven on earth, it is here! – and turn it into a burden. So that when you do – sometimes, rarely – have to face that landscape, the audience should want to turn away from it.

**TJD** You also recently provided a series of photographs that were used to illustrate Arundhati Roy's recent book, *Broken Republic* (2011), which investigates the Adivasis' quest for social justice and democratic process in relation to the state's attempts to transfer land to corporate interests in the state of Chhattisgarh.<sup>1</sup>

**SK** The still images taken in *Broken Republic* are very different in their origins. Shot in central India, in Bastar, they were taken with a tiny digital compact which, with almost no telephoto capabilities or viewfinder, imposes its own limitations on the kinds of pictures you take, on the relationship with the people you are making images of. But those limit-

1. See Arundhati Roy, *Broken Republic: Three Essays*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2011.



ations also give a certain coherence to the pictures. The lens and the technology are only part of what goes into the response to a situation. One is reading into the material, trying to understand it, even as you are walking and shooting and making images of it.

**TJD Ravi**, what do you see as the central environmental emergencies or matters of ecological concern facing India today?

**Ravi Agarwal** There is so much happening and trying to create an overview is complicated, maybe even impossible. India is on an economic growth path (to which all major political parties subscribe). It has been growing its GDP between seven per cent and nine per cent over the past twenty years, up from the earlier three per cent. This entails many changes, such as the conversion of land use from agricultural to industrial, concentration of investment in urban clusters, a massive demand for energy, air and water emissions and pressure on groundwater and river systems. The official goal of this change is poverty reduction. While economic poverty has arguably fallen during this time, it has also led to massive displacements of people, violence, and growing inequalities and an intolerance of any form of dissent. China is often seen as the ideal, and in many quarters democracy is seen as a bottleneck to growth.

In this situation, environmental resources are being privatized in the name of efficiency and productivity, since the public sector has failed to deliver on these counts. The environmental crisis has been precipitated



Sanjay Kak, *Red Bhumkal*, from *Broken Republic*, 2011 (Against a backdrop of images of the martyrs of the guerrilla army, an Adivasi of the People's Militia, his hand-made gun in hand)



Ravi Agarwal, *After the Flood*, 2011 (The remnants of silt left behind by the receding monsoon flood waters in the river Yamuna in Delhi)

by the new capital-led growth in the country. Examples are many: mining permits in protected forests as well large-scale illegal mining – practised through a corporate–politicians nexus, with businessmen often becoming politicians; police violence to quell any form of protest against nuclear and steel plants; permits to build ports in protected coastal areas, introducing massive changes to existing conservation laws; corporatization of agriculture with a marginalization of small farmers, leading to farmers’ suicides; groundwater crisis in urban clusters; a several-fold increase in car density and an astronomical rise in urban land prices (inward migration in cities like Delhi is actually on the decline owing to the high cost of living); an immense pressure on river systems, leading to moves to carry out destructive interbasin transfers through an interlinking of rivers, etc.

SK Ravi’s summary of the multiple environmental emergencies we face in India is an accurate one. I would like to add a further framework. This new phase of capital expansion has its origins in the colonial model. In the nineteenth century what Britain needed most from Central India was timber for the rapid expansion of the colonial railway system, and labour to clear the undergrowth for the empire. This current phase of rapid growth and unprecedented accumulation is also only possible when there is a colonial hinterland that allows massive and unchecked extraction. It’s not a coincidence that the fastest growth and greatest profits are coming from those



Sanjay Kak, still from *Words on Water*, 2002 (A protest rally by the fisherfolk and farmers of the Narmada river welcomes anti-dam protesters for the ‘Rally for the Valley’, 1999)

elements in the Indian economy that are directly linked to extraction: mining and minerals, iron ore, bauxite, coal. And these are the sectors with the heaviest toll on the environment. This is the case with China too, is it not? It’s just that its more avowedly authoritarian structure has done a better job of concealing the fact that its incredible growth is being paid for by a huge toll on its ecology and by its poorest people. While the people in Mumbai and Delhi can’t get their eyes off the glitter of Shanghai and Guangzhou, it’s left to the people of the Narmada valley, where a series of big dams have destroyed a river valley, to look towards the implications of the Three Gorges dam in China.

**TJD** You mention the practice of ‘unchecked extraction’ by industry – isn’t that one key to the politics of ecology (as for example articulated in Indian physicist and environmental activist Vandana Shiva’s recent notebook for Documenta 13, *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts, No. 012: Vandana Shiva: The Corporate Control of Life*), as it brings out the undemocratic relation to land use in India where multinational corporations – whether Indian or transnational – are granted mining rights without regard for the social and economic implications of the tribal peoples living in these areas, putting profit before people? In this sense, neoliberalism is colonialism by another name, and we can see the exploitative results of globalization here.

**SK** Colonial extraction continues into the present day, it’s just that it wears different robes. In our times, with the flows of global capital



being what they are, what's the difference between a 'foreign' multinational, and an 'Indian' multi-national? Take Vedanta, the mining giant that is currently involved in an epic battle against the Adivasis in the Niyamgiri hills of the state of Odisha, in eastern India. It's a multibillion dollar company, owned by the billionaire Anil Agarwal (no relation to Ravi!), a company registered in London, and with businesses all over the world (Mr Agarwal is worth \$6.4 billion). Or the Tata group, worth \$100 billion, based in India, involved in a major stand-off with the people of Kalinganagar, again in Odisha. (They also own Rover and Jaguar and Tetley Tea.) Or steel giant Arcelor-Mittal, registered in London, but owned by the Indian billionaire Lakshmi Mittal (worth \$20.7 billion). We also have Essar and Jindal. We could make a long list of so-called Indian companies involved in mining and metals, all of which are part of this process of unchecked extraction. That doesn't mean that the global mining conglomerates are absent – we also have Rio Tinto, De Beers and AlCan who've been around for a long time, just keeping a low profile, and letting the 'Indian' compatriots do the spadework for them!

**TJD** How can one respond to such ecological emergencies artistically, especially when up against such huge corporations and private–public collusion?

**RA** In some ways it has to become personal. I've had a long engagement as an activist, trying to speak about irresponsible corporate power and people's vulnerabilities, and also having to endure long and exhausting court cases against me. As part of my art practice I try to address some of these urgent concerns, for example, through my work on the river in Delhi (eg *After the Flood*, 2011, and *Alien Waters*, 2004–2006), and on the farming of marigolds (*Have You Seen the Flowers on the River*, 2007), and in the documentation of labour in Gujarat (*Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism*, 1997–2000), which is locally situated but reflective of the global capital flows and new global imaginations. I see these as deeply interconnected, not caused by some 'foreign hand', but as an internalization of the idea of a global identity. *Have You Seen the Flowers on the River?* deals with the idea of sustainability, documenting the journey of the marigold from the small farmer fields of the river Yamuna in Delhi to the 200-year-old farmers' market in Old Delhi where until recently they were sold daily. (The market moved in December 2011 owing to the city's new 'beautification' drive.) Through photographs, field notes, videos and an installation, over a period of four years (2007 to 2012), I attempted to show a sustainable life in the middle of a densely populated city. The farmers' land is now being slowly acquired for new development, owing to exorbitant land prices caused by the recent 'globalization' of the city, even as the city works under the banner of 'sustainability'. The work questions if sustainability is only found through creating 'new markets' or if it already exists in people's lives and is more about an idea and way of life. And 'sustainability' is being interpreted by all (corporations, governments, NGOs) for their own uses. Both through my activist and artistic involvements, I am inter-



ested in it from a ground-up perspective of equality and rooted in the question of ‘what is a good life?’.

TJD Sanjay, in terms of developing a complex view of ecology, *Words on Water* offers a powerful example, and also works from the ‘ground up’. It does so by showing the lives affected by the great dam projects in the Narmada valley, presenting the flooded lands of tribals, physically locating their villages that are now submerged under water, and then placing those scenes in confrontation with shots of politicians such as L K Advani, India’s Deputy Prime Minister at the time, who is shown defending the building of the Sardar Sarovar dam from a pro-environmental position, and interspersed quotes from Supreme Court decisions that defend corporate development against tribals’ rights. You intervene at this point with a critical voiceover that is slowly articulated to stress the gravity of the situation, which says: ‘Words, trying to cement the fissures in this brittle hymn of progress that sings of benefits and is silent about costs. This is a dam that will submerge 248 villages and displace more than 400,000 people. Only half of them will officially count as displaced, and even they don’t really count.’ Can you talk about the intervention you see the film making in weaving together the differential ecologies of politics, economics and social life?

SK I see the struggle against big dams in the Narmada valley as a centrepiece in the development of a major strand in contemporary Indian politics, with a significance beyond that particular valley, or those thirty-odd dams. The success or failure of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement) in actually stopping the dams is important, but it’s not everything. From the mid-1980s the NBA was at the forefront of excavating a way of looking at issues of ecology, politics and economics, as if they were all interconnected, and they managed to do this with a very open platform, where people from all kinds of backgrounds were able to participate and contribute to the articulation of this argument. And, almost from the beginning, Indian documentary film-makers were engaged with mirroring these arguments and playing a part in how they were perceived. You have K P Sasi’s *Narmada: A Valley Refuses to Die*, 1990; Ali Kazimi’s *Narmada: A Valley Rises*, 1994; Simantini Dhuru and Anand Patwardhan’s *A Narmada Diary*, 1995; Anurag Singh and Jharana Jhaveri’s *Kaise Jeebo Re?*, 1997. These films provide such a fascinating account of a nation beginning to have a conversation with itself about development, power and justice.

To answer your question about *Words on Water*, whatever else it did, it certainly brought up to speed our collective understanding of the world in which the struggle was being waged, and reflected on what systems of justice were open to the poor and disadvantaged in India. For me, it began to reflect the growing disillusionment with the space available for Gandhian satyagraha as a weapon for the weak, and place a question-mark on the long-hallowed tradition of non-violent resistance in India. I think more than anything else the fulcrum of the film lies in the way the Supreme Court turned the people of Narmada valley away in 2000. Remember, the film was finished in the aftermath of 9/11, and it did suggest that we think about the consequences when ‘reasoned

non-violent protest is turned away’, again and again. It questions the idea – and possibilities – of justice in our times.

**TJD** What kind of effectiveness do such films have in the wider debate?

**SK** The last two decades have been a very good time for the Indian documentary, and here I’m talking about the rapid construction of an audience for these films. It’s not a conventional Western model of ‘distribution’ or built around TV sales, but there has been an explosion in the number of screening venues and the kinds of audiences that documentaries are reaching. And although the so-called ‘activist’ film seems to have an edge in terms of the speed with which it reaches its audience through political activists, every kind of film has its own carriers. All kinds of groups, including the student community, are part of this culture of screening docs, almost as if it was a part of the politics, not just a mediation. I certainly think that *Words on Water* was widely circulated, and was part of the debate, both in India and internationally. Effectiveness? Who can say...

**TJD** Ravi, the issue of sustainability was also part of the ‘48°C Public.Art.Ecology’ show in Delhi in 2009, which assembled a number of art projects addressing climate change and ecology in public sites in the city (the show was named after the area’s highest recorded temperature to date). What do you see as the exhibition’s accomplishments, its lasting effects and limitations?

**RA** I think the project had two levels of impact. Firstly it helped open up the idea of public art and public space. Before the show, there was suspicion in the minds of the government about what this would be all about – would there be paintings in public, would there be direct critiques, etc. The show helped deepen the idea of contemporary public art (from sculptures and murals) as the artists explored different aspects of the city and used the idea of ecology in a broad sense. Secondly ‘public space’ itself was temporarily opened up, from being totally controlled and owned, to one where people could stop, see, talk and engage with the presentations and other people. However, this will take continuous work to change, for the tendency is to slip back to the older art gallery paradigm.

**TJD** Your project for ‘48°C’, *Extinction*, concerned the near extinction of vultures in India, which are endangered, owing to the development of diclofenac, a painkiller drug for animal livestock used to maximise milk production, which enters the food chain of vultures through cow carcasses (as we learn from your piece). The drug clearly violates the basic principle of ecological precaution stipulating that if the effects of an alteration to the environment are uncertain, then it shouldn’t be done.<sup>2</sup> As such, this ecological conflict has seen industrial farming and pharmaceutical production irresponsibly imposed on non-human systems. As a result over ninety-five per cent of vultures – a life-form that goes back some 100 million years – have died out on the sub-continent, forming one of ‘the largest mass extinctions ever known in the recorded history of mankind’, as you write in a note. For the exhibition, your project comprised photographic images and projections of images of vultures.

2. On the precautionary principle as part of a project of ecological sustainability, see John Cavanagh and Jerry Mander, ‘Ten Principles for a Sustainable Society’, in *Alternatives to Economic Globalization: A Better World Is Possible: A Report by the International Forum on Globalization*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, 2004.

Can you talk about the workings of this documentary project deployed in public space?

**RA** I wanted to confront the city with what it had lost and what was absent. I think most people did not even realise that Delhi had a huge vulture population. Alongside I organized a public discussion on ‘extinctions’ and talks. I think this is a story of our times – when our footprint leads to stomping out other life forms. It’s a story of power and leading an unaware existence. I had many interesting encounters during the project, with cops, passers-by, taxi drivers, hawkers, etc. Many of them talked about the vultures they had in their villages and how they were not there any more. I think that such a project raises such an issue more publicly than say a gallery show or the media would. It has much potential if done with sensitivity and in a non-preaching way.

**TJD** How does ‘bearing witness’ within art and activist film and photography – which you’ve both practised in different ways – intervene in the general media culture, governmental positions and civil society in India?

**SK** I think the idea of ‘bearing witness’ sometimes casts us in a slightly confined role, as observers whose role is to record, and then carry away the images and sounds and words. My ideal relationship with the ideas that intrigue me is more fluid. That said, there is a word in Arabic, *shahid* or *shaheed*, which means both ‘witness’ and ‘martyr’ – and ‘beloved’. That’s the kind of complex relationship that I would suggest, where bearing witness also makes you a martyr to what you have seen, and where what you are martyr to is also the one you love!

**RA** Bearing witness is looked down upon as ‘only talking of the dark side in a rising nation-state’, but is also taking evidence of the ‘other side of the growth story’. In both cases the issue is peripheral as one which needs to be ‘resolved’, but there seems to be no space left for a real challenge to the central tenets of the current trends. The media, especially the powerful English-speaking media, is now increasingly controlled by corporate money – such as CNN/IBN (recently invested in heavily by Reliance, the largest corporation in the country), the *Hindustan Times*, one of the most influential daily newspapers (owned by the Birlas with large diverse business interests), and SUN TV (owned by the main political opposition party in Tamil Nadu). It supports solutions within the framework of ‘development’, but not outside it. Hence better water management will be supported, but anti-dam proposals will not be, or only in a perfunctory manner. The point is that everyone has bought into the idea of ‘development’ as the solution, and often has a stake in that model.

**TJD** What about the significance of alternative media cultures to contest this increasingly global society of control?

**SK** I have no doubts that the ‘alternative’ media culture is a very real thing in India. Of course its reach is still miniscule compared with the overwhelming power of mainstream media. But it’s able to goad and provoke the much more powerful beast, and affect public thinking in important ways. As the crisis becomes more pronounced, the validity and relevance of ‘activist’ intervention is enhanced. It starts by

embarrassing the mainstream by confronting its lies and obfuscations, and that creates a crack through which other broader solidarities can emerge. Arundhati Roy once likened the role of the alternate to the bees around the ear of the buffalo – the buzzing can drive the beast crazy, they don't even have to sting! I can see many issues that are central to our times where the juggernaut is being slowed down by ideas that first came out of the fringe.

There is an amazing diversity at work here: the internet, film-festivals, the little magazines, and now even Facebook and Twitter: people are using everything they can. Although the net was initially a sort of English-language domain, which has its own limitations, the past few years have seen a big push in the Indian languages, Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Odia. As a documentary film-maker I can say that India has probably one of the richest film screening cultures: there are dozens of activist groups and



Ravi Agarwal, *Extinct*, Delhi, 2008, photographic installation showing vultures found in abundance in Delhi until recently, which have now disappeared from the city and are almost extinct in South Asia



film-festivals that screen documentary work, organize highly charged political discussions, and they do all this without giving in to the pressures of being absorbed into the funded, over-aestheticized world of 'film festivals'. Perceptions of the situation in Kashmir, for example, were hugely influenced by the way young Kashmiris started using blogs and Facebook and Twitter to tell the world what the mainstream corporatized media were not willing to, goading and provoking and shaming them into lifting the lid somewhat.

**TJD** Can you discuss the significance of working between artistic and activist contexts, in different sites of reception and with alternative media sources?

**RA** Artistic practices for me are informed by the same ideas that also inform activist interventions, though they may acquire very different forms. Artistic practices work in a frame of creating 'objects', which then become free-floating. Activist practices are rooted in specific issues and have an agenda of making an impact. For me artistic practices have the space for contemplation and reflection on complex issues and can evoke a different set of responses than activist work. I do not see artistic practices as 'functional' but as expressions. For me, both forms are very important and intermingle in subconscious ways.

The sites of reception have become more complex, with art/activist work intermingling in different spaces. My artistic work has found itself in galleries, museums, public spaces, etc. When I have engaged with public art as an artist or as a curator, I have attempted to think of the idea of 'publics' and the 'site' as a political location and to address specific discourses around the 'site'. For example, for the '48°C' show, my project *Extinction* was located outside the Natural History Museum. In a more recent curatorial venture, the *Yamuna – Elbe Project*, in October/November 2011, held in Hamburg and Delhi, the idea was to consider the relationship between progress and ecology in relation to the two rivers where both these concepts are present in different, yet similar ways. In many ways there is an institutional belief (held by engineers and planners) that progress will answer the question of ecology (the dirty Yamuna will become like the clean Elbe), but it misses the deeper current debates around de-engineering the Elbe to restore its ecology.

**TJD** How has the art world reacted to ecology in India?

**RA** That part of the artistic community which is interested in such an engagement seems largely passive, a little distant from the 'moment' and possibly more interested in the circulation of their work. I feel that many artistic practices which claim social engagement remain unrooted (or superficially rooted) in the actual social discourses and only float on the surface. Unfortunately there is often little real 'reading' of this by some curators/critics, where art as aesthetic is still the main concern rather than an 'informed' or 'engaged' aesthetic. It's almost as if ecology gives the art world some 'relevance'. I personally do not think this relevance is required by art, since I do feel it is relevant on its own, but it may be that the art world desires such relevance in a world which is so politically active and socially challenged today. I think there is room for a wider cross-disciplinary conversation in the domain of art.

# Corporatocracy, Democracy and Social Change (in Mexico and Beyond)

## A Conversation on Art and Life

Eduardo Abaroa and  
Minerva Cuevas

**Minerva Cuevas** I would like to begin this conversation with what might seem like a harsh statement: Life is overvalued. Reflecting on this allows me to question the intrinsic moral values that are usually connected to environmentalist discourse and practice. And this statement also allows me to take the necessary distance to evaluate human civilization.

I would state as part of this evaluation that society tends to equate the natural environment with beauty, and catastrophe with death, but in the *natural sphere* they are part of a single process.

It is necessary to assess how and to what extent human economic systems have become a cancer in the ecology of the planet, both social and environmentally; how the balance–imbalance of life has been disrupted by *homo sapiens*. We value human life more than life. The anthropocentric perspective seems naive and retrograde these days; the idea of ‘our’ planet is an arrogant fantasy that is leading us to extinction.

In that sense I wonder whether your recent project *Destrucción total del Museo de Antropología* (2012) deals with some of those moral considerations. It appears to me that it transcends the moral conditions and appreciation of the museum, especially the museum of anthropology, and distances itself from a respectful regard for civilization.

Do you agree? And as part of that project what were your thoughts about the artefacts displayed in the museum?

**Eduardo Abaroa** For *Destrucción total del Museo de Antropología* I consulted with a demolition company to figure out what it would take to demolish the Anthropology Museum in Mexico City. The engineer described a series of processes: recycling, the use of excavators, hydraulic

hammers, expansive cement, etc. Then I made some sculptural props that illustrated each of these processes. I also commissioned an architectural model of the museum and produced a video in which a famous monolithic idol exploded. And there was a heap of concrete and marble rubble with fragments of prehispanic ceramic and stone sculptures, broken objects similar to those included in the ethnographic displays, crumpled museum brochures, etc.

Many people cherish this award-winning museum as an example of architectural and cultural excellence. My idea was to demolish it and all of its contents. The plan is not to destroy the building as a terrorist would, but to do it using controlled, legal means.

It seems a bit out of place to relate this violent project to environmentalist discourse, but the motivation of the work is the disaster that many indigenous communities in Mexico face today. The neoliberal capitalist model and the environmental devastation that comes with it have considerably worsened the life of indigenous peoples in the last two decades or so. The irony here is that the national narrative of Mexico relies heavily on its prehispanic heritage. With the destruction of the museum I was essentially saying, 'If our society does not care about the living cultures of Wixaritari, Rarámuris, Tzeltales, etc, why do we need this museum?'

I don't feel I've learnt enough to have a full understanding of the ideas that the Wixaritari have about nature, but this was my way to support or at least think about their ongoing defence of their sacred places from Canadian mining companies. The Wixaritari feel that if these companies destroy the desert, it will also be the end of their culture. They consider it their responsibility to take care of the desert and of the whole of nature, so they have started a national campaign to get the government to withdraw the mining concessions, which are truly preposterous. It may sound corny, but their respect for what they call 'mother nature' seems much more valuable than our destroy-for-profit tradition.

The problem today is how to make contemporary civilizations less destructive, and I think that the attitudes of some non-Western cultures might be an option. Can this question be related to your history of civilization in *Landings* (2008)?

MC I think it is precisely for those reasons that I could relate the *Destrucción* project to ecology. Relationships between people and nature are complex. The environmentalist discourse tends to be superficial and only pays attention to 'problems' that are merely the symptoms of a violent system. By contrast, in the framework of social ecology the causes of the ecological crisis are located in relations of domination between people. To quote Murray Bookchin: 'the very notion of the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human'.<sup>1</sup>

A constant in my work is the questioning of contemporary notions of progress and civilization using diverse formal solutions. One of them is my sixteen-millimetre film *Landings*. It is an illustrated journey through what we are taught to recognize and value about human civilization. It is composed of 400 illustrations taken from a collection of postcards from the end of the 1960s, accompanied by original music. It is projected as a loop but shows the classic 'THE END' as a flash remark after a fifteen-minute voyage through the solar system and prehistory. We witness the Aztec and Mayan civilizations preceding the Romans, early

1. Murray Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, AK, Oakland, California, p 109



Minerva Cuevas, *Nation State*, 2003, acrylic paint on two walls and fruit salad, courtesy the artist and kurimanzutto gallery

science and inventions, the natural world, technology, aviation, war, spaceships and satellites. The last image is meant to depict the possibility of a moon landing. This album was assembled so as to appear to be didactic material, but it deceives us; it is a fantasy of the past and future.

Indeed the attitudes we can still find in some indigenous cultures allow us to see a communitarian use of natural resources rather than their exploitation. When my work refers to the Mayan civilization, for example, it is in terms of their advanced scientific knowledge. Community opposes the most precious asset of capitalism: the individual. In native languages, the grammatical first person is less present in use and some concepts, like waste (trash), do not exist.

I just reviewed one of your projects that relates to the Latin alphabet and frogs. How did you start working on that? How did you come to make a link between the two?

EA First I would like to comment on your *Landings* piece. What is great about this work is the way in which you target the arrogance of Western civilization as it understands itself. It would seem that the only possible way to progress is through Western technology. The view that spaceships and satellites are going to be part of a better future is bizarre today for many of us, given that every new step on the path taken by that science has brought a new menace. When we speak about Western civilization we should of course think primarily of the huge technological and scientific developments that allow it to dominate or at least influence the whole world. *Landings* is also about the ideological function of representation. Day-to-day science is a tedious activity, a process that is difficult to



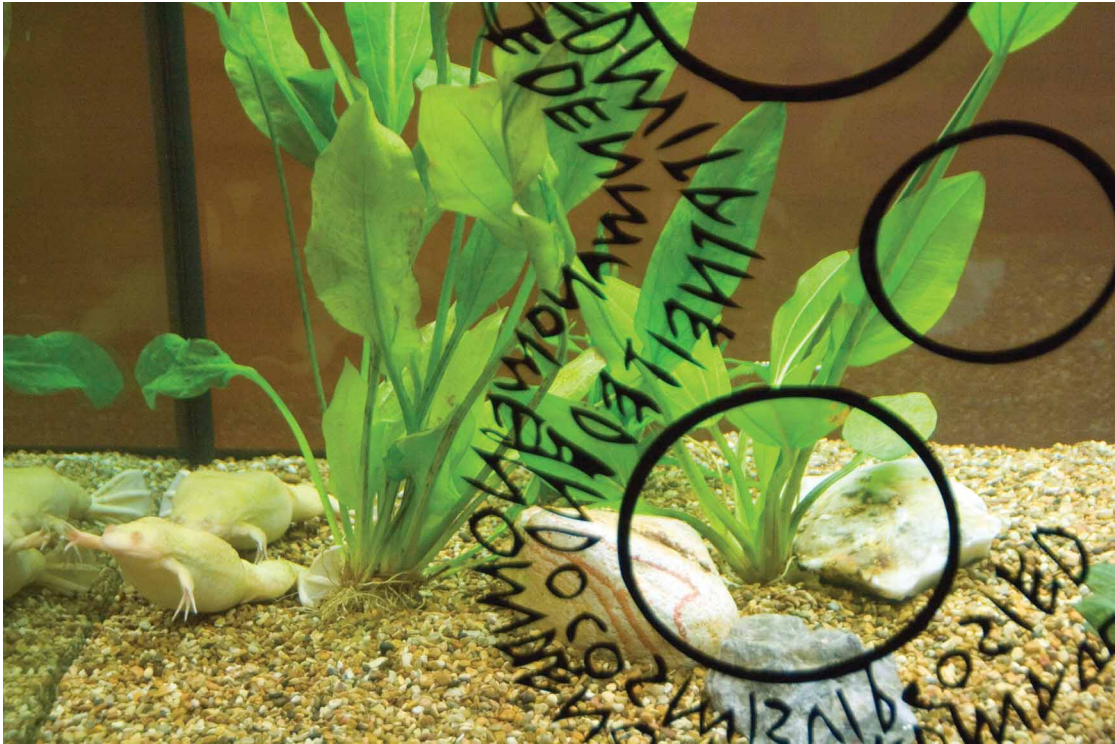


Minerva Cuevas, *Biorepair Project (plastic eating bacteria)*, 2010, installation, plastic bags, bacterial growth, laboratory equipment, documents, map, courtesy the artist and kurimanzutto gallery

conceive for non-experts. But its achievements bring with them a neat iconography that somehow manages to make it exciting. The innocence of the child's encyclopaedia masks the despicable paranoid impulse of, say, Robert Oppenheimer or Monsanto. *Landings* is the portrait of a monstrous process that somehow manages to appear beautiful, elegant, or charming. I think that many of us have internalized scientific visual discourse into our sense of taste and visual harmony. But you seem to be very conscious of this influence and turn it to your advantage.

But in the end it inspires a question: is this the only civilization? We know there are many disguised options. Mexico is the meeting point of two civilizations: Western and Mesoamerican, which had a completely different set of values. In many indigenous communities to accumulate resources is antisocial, and people are expected to work with others to ensure their place in a community. Knowledge belongs to the people. They survived in similar conditions for centuries. In Western civilization the drive is to privatize everything, even plants and animals. They patent the DNA of people, they rip off native medical knowledge; there's a drive to inscribe, to mark everything compulsively.

My work with the Latin alphabet and the clawed African frog, *Amphibian-Alphabetic Proliferation* (2008), deals with how knowledge and science spread around the world. It is not a beautiful, elegant piece, like *Landings* – it's even a little bit gross. It consists of a water tank with some live frogs and a print of early examples of the Latin alphabet. My idea is to call people's attention to two different seemingly unrelated processes, one of them very well known: the evolution and worldwide expansion of the Latin alphabet, which is of course a history of imperial dominance. The alphabet is one of those events that has constituted Western civilization since the Romans, and even today it has this ambivalent effect on different cultures. Some very ancient languages are disappearing because they do not use a writing system, so people start writing down their oral traditions using the Latin alphabet. On the



Eduardo Abaroa, *Amphibian-Alphabetic Proliferation*, 2009, live frogs, water tank, text, courtesy the artist and kurimanzutto gallery

other hand, its generalized use is making other alphabets obsolete. The movement towards knowledge is ambivalent also in the case of this species of African frog. This is a creature that has spread around the world because it has great potential in the laboratory, it is used widely to study genetics, and some of them were even sent to outer space. Unfortunately some of these frogs were released by irresponsible people and they are thought to carry a disease that is killing native frog species all over the world. It seems that its proliferation has put the whole amphibian population in crisis. My purpose is to question the catastrophic effects of the search for knowledge, in particular scientific knowledge. I guess in this our works are related, don't you think?

The criticism of that mentality is what makes your work so powerful. But what I really like is that, like *Landings*, or the work about Del Monte Company (*Del Monte*, 2003), it is always very elegant. How do you think these pieces operate within the contemporary art field, in comparison with the internet projects or the street in the *Egalité* project (2001) or the Ronald McDonald alter ego (*Donald McRonal*d, 2003)?

MC Capitalist discourse makes us see every scientific process as positive, when in reality we need to evaluate it in complex ethical equations. Early scientific inventions and the development of missiles would need to be presented on a very different basis. Indeed if that series of images in the *Landings* film had extended to the present day, we would see genetic modification and nuclear weapons become part of it. Capitalist



Minerva Cuevas, *The Greatness of a Nation*, 2004, acrylic paint on four walls, dirt, lamp and kangaroo skeleton, courtesy the artist and kurimanzutto gallery

discourse has effectively installed a lack of reflection on concepts like progress and civilization; that is why every urbanization process is now presented so that we perceive it as linked to the concepts of development and modernization, which is absurd. But that's the way it happens today, and meanwhile we have already reached a point of no return.

In installation works I have used old scientific instruments to refer to the early desire for knowledge, in contrast with the fact that all scientific research is now driven by private industries. Profit, not knowledge, directs science these days. I think that this, along with patents, might lead us into an era in which the positive course of science and, ultimately, the generation of knowledge linked to culture as we have known it are held back. That is indeed in notable contrast with Native American cultures in which the transfer of knowledge has been vital for survival and for which the notions of diversity and randomness are of great importance. In a performance piece I directly refer to Thathánka Iyothánka's (Sitting Bull's) defence of Native American land and costumes. *Not Impressed by Civilisation* (2005) offered a translation of this statement into an action. I was in the area of the Rocky Mountains in Alberta, Canada, and decided to abandon the safety of the place I was staying and spend one night in the wilderness. Despite real dangers (encountering





Eduardo Abaroa, detail of *Destrucción total del Museo de Antropología (Total Destruction of the Anthropology Museum)*, 2012, multimedia installation, courtesy the artist and kurimanzutto gallery

wild animals like bears and a temperature of minus four degrees centigrade that night) the experience was peaceful and liberating. I think that when you face a vast natural area alone, you are led to take a more humble position in evaluating our relation with nature.

The presence of human beings on the planet is insignificant. If we consider how long humans have existed on the planet, taking the age of Earth as 4.55 billion years and the time full behavioural humans have inhabited it as about 50,000 years, we are like the last word printed in an encyclopaedia of 500 volumes.

I have learned to see the formal solutions of my works as part of an equation in which the intention in all of them is to coincide. They might look totally different and have been created for diverse exhibition situations, but they end up linked through references and research. One of the more difficult projects to exhibit was the one for the 'Residual' exhibition at MUCA (Museo Universitario de Ciencias y Arte, Mexico, 2010). The premise for participating artists was the development of a project that at the end would leave some permanent influence. Given that the main focus was on residue, or trash, as a problem in Mexico City, that seemed like an impossible condition for creating a work. My strategy was to originate and promote specific research at the National University of Mexico related to bacteria that could break down polyethylene plastic



bags found in landfills. Gallery presentation of this kind of project presents a challenge.

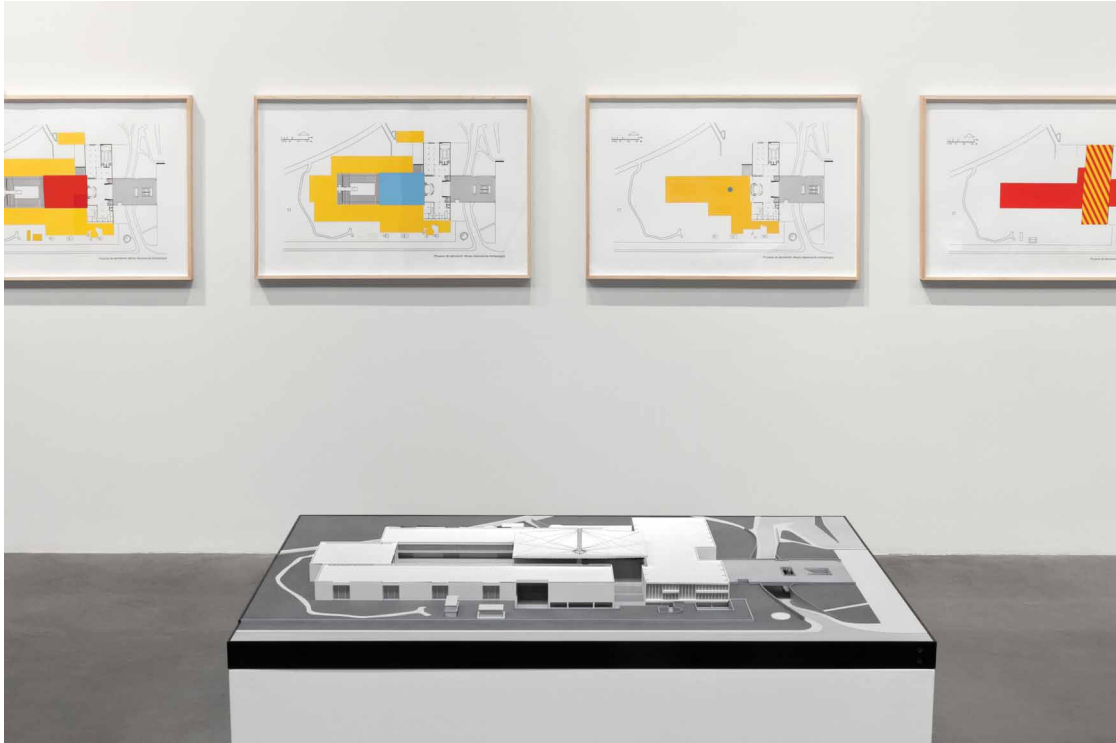
I think that your project, *Garbage Parade* (2010), generated a spectacular social situation. The parade of sculptural works made of recycled material, which integrated and gave recognition to the labour of the refuse collectors while they took part in the parade, made a real connection between these workers and a wide sector of society that witnessed it.

EA Since the parade was intended to promote a better policy regarding trash, I thought that the city's cleaners would look interesting as a substitute for the military. The spectators, who were basically passers-by, cheered the workers, who were quite happy and festive. A good result. There was a bit of censorship though, because they didn't show a sign I had made which read, 'Companies and Governments: Do Your Part'. It was quite naive, but the organizers censored it.

Your piece for 'Residual' makes me think that the objective of such criticism is the development of a better science and not the abandonment of it. Science is essential for the survival of the environment and the massive population increase of humans in the twentieth century. Would you agree? Perhaps the real objective is to devise a science and an industry in the service of the people, a motive that recurs frequently in the Marxist tradition. Sadly today we find almost the exact opposite all over the world, from Fukushima to Pennsylvania, from the Chihuahua desert to Nigeria. MC I do not think science is essential to the survival of the environment, if we are talking about the industrial scientific research done these days. I think that it would take tight regulation or even the eradication of industries to slightly change the course of the current crisis. But again I find it problematic to use benefit to people as the only measure, because it means reverting to the anthropocentric perspective; and in fact the main justification for the most damaging policies has been that they are of benefit to people.

A fair economic and social system would mean a respectful relationship with indigenous communities; consequently their agricultural methods would halt the use of pesticides engineered by an industry that has systematically impoverished and killed peasants. The so-called Green Revolution of the 1960s is credited with saving a billion people from starvation by developing and using high-yielding varieties of cereal grains, modernization of management techniques, distribution of genetically modified seeds, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides. But the so-called benefit of high yields from GM seeds has not been long-lasting. The pests kept ahead of the pesticides, and there were plenty of negative social and economic consequences – probably the worst being the widespread chemical contamination of food and crops that is now linked with a steep increase in cancer rates. Today we can also see that result as a geopolitical strategy to secure social stability and weaken emerging communist insurgency in different countries. In countries such as Mexico, India and the Philippines, technological solutions were planned as an alternative to expanding agrarian reforms, linked to socialist politics.

EA But isn't it true that you need science just to know what's going on, regardless of the technologies applied after your assessment of facts? To do away with science seems quite pernicious in cases like global warming. Isn't it true that we cannot just accept at face value superficial interpret-



Eduardo Abaroa, detail of *Destrucción total del Museo de Antropología* (*Total Destruction of the Anthropology Museum*), 2012, multimedia installation, courtesy the artist and kurimanzutto gallery

ations, but that we have to take into account the complexity of interactions that only contemporary science can grasp in detail? On this point I think that to be guided only by traditional knowledge would be risky, at best.

MC Technology is irreversible, and as I understand it what needs to be halted is the industrial processes. We have access to a great number of scientific assessments and evaluations of the ecological crisis, and of global warming specifically, but governments do not take the proper measures to limit industry. They stay on the side of economic power. In fact, a new kind of industry is born, the green industries that do not always represent a real change in consumerism. It's not about substituting packaging with eco-packaging when whole cities are being designed to promote the use of fuel. And hydroelectric projects like the construction of the Belo Monte Dam in Brazil are being planned. This dam would divert most of the flow of the Xingu river through artificial canals, flooding over 600 square kilometres of rainforest. It would also dry out a 100-kilometre stretch, home to hundreds of indigenous and riverine families. While being sold to the public as 'clean energy', Belo Monte would generate a huge amount of methane, which is twenty-five to fifty times more potent than carbon dioxide.

The way right-wing lobbyists campaign against the theory of global warming is quite outrageous. Recently, the Heartland Institute – a despicable 'think-tank' – put up a billboard featuring a photo of convicted

‘Unabomber’ Ted Kaczynski and the slogan, ‘I still believe in global warming. Do you?’. The billboard appeared in Chicago for twenty-four hours before being pulled down due to the controversy. If this is an example of the public position of an organization financed by large corporations that influence government decisions, how can we believe in the goodwill of their new industries? The stage we have reached with global warming presents a grim scenario; the worst part of this forecast is that the damage done is irreversible, and even if the whole planet decides to take ecological measures for transformation to a low-carbon economy, seventy per cent of living species might be lost in sixty years.

**EA** The irony here is that the most important democracy in terms of scale has developed most of the science and technology that is ruining the world. With this in mind, do you think that democracy can help stop global disaster? Do you think that art is a first step towards a better option than science for understanding the world? Can it really help us put the message across?

**MC** I would put it differently. I think that the concept of a democratic state and the practice of capitalist industries stand in opposition to each other. Science and technology have been developed mostly by the war industry, which means private interests. Capitalism generally promotes undemocratic principles. As markets expand more freely, all political parties become more right-wing in terms of their economic policies. Governments are systematically destroying unions and privatizing key national industries, such as those related to energy, and real power is becoming concentrated into corporations in which the shareholders do not take decisions based on public interests and are not publicly accountable. The principle of democratic rule ‘by the people, for the people’ doesn’t apply to the most powerful institutions, such as huge corporate banks. We have seen how the public sector has been paying for the excesses and corruption related to the capitalist system, for instance, through tax cuts for companies and public service cuts for most of the population. The decisions of world organizations are also undemocratic: the World Bank for example has adopted a policy of complete water privatization across the world, leading to corporations (again, unelected, having no desire to serve the public good) building empires from this vital natural resource. I think that what all this amounts to is that we live with façades of democratic states. Real democracy would mean more balanced interactions with natural resources, the foundation for the justice and security of humanity.

After a brief look at our contemporary scenario, your question about the role of art strikes an insignificant note if we relate it to the magnitude of the crisis, but I think that it is in fact in these kinds of practice, in which results cannot be measured or their social impact controlled, that there exists a space of freedom and autonomy which can lead to positive social change. Through the use of unlimited creative resources and interdisciplinary connections art can not only generate unique sensorial, scientific and technological exercises but also build a stronger sense of community. Art being part of culture can influence the way societies are shaped. It’s to be hoped that it influences society not only to associate the natural sphere with beauty but also social justice with something essentially aesthetic.

# Contributors

**Eduardo Abaroa** is an artist and writer working in the fields of sculpture, installation and live action. He has shown his work in major museums in Mexico and internationally, most recently in the solo exhibition ‘Total Destruction of the Museum of Anthropology’ at kurimanzutto, Mexico City. He directed the 9th International Symposium of Art Theory and is Course Director at Soma, Mexico City. His book *Ensayos sobre el público (Essays on the Public)* was published in 2012.

**Nabil Ahmed** is a Bangladeshi artist based in London. His work has appeared on Resonance FM, no.w.here, the Centre for Possible Studies and SAVAC in Toronto. He is co-founder of Call & Response, a sound art collective. He is a member of the Roundtable Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London.

**Emily Apter** is Professor of French and Comparative Literature at New York University. Her book *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* was published in 2012 and she is co-editing with Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood the forthcoming English edition of the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles (Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon)*. She is the author of *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (2006), *Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects* (1999) and several studies dealing with fetishism. Her articles have been published in numerous journals.

**Subhankar Banerjee** is an Indian-born American photographer, writer, and activist who for the past decade has worked for the conservation of ecoculturally significant areas of the Arctic and with issues of indigenous human rights and climate change. He is editor of *Arctic Voices: Resistance at the Tipping Point* (2012). He has held academic posts at Princeton and Fordham Universities, lectured and exhibited widely, and participated in the 18th Biennale of Sydney. He has received numerous environmental awards and was named an Arctic Hero by the Alaska Wilderness League.

**Janet Catherine Berlo**, Professor of Art History and Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester, writes most frequently about Native North American art. Her recent publications include *Jose Bedia: Transcultural Pilgrim* (co-authored with Judith Bettleheim), essays in the Smithsonian journal *American Art*, and the exhibition catalogue for Peabody Essex Museum *Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art* (2012).

**Christoph Brunner** works in the Department of Art and Media at Zurich University of the Arts. He deals with questions of collectivity and ecologies of relation in aesthetic practices. He is member of the SenseLab (Montreal) and part of the editorial collective of *Inflexions: A Journal for Research-Creation*. His book *Practices of Experimentation: Research and Teaching in the Arts Today* was published in 2012.

**Minerva Cuevas** lives and works in Mexico City. Her artistic practice is characterized by socially engaged and site-specific actions that take place across a variety of media and settings and examine the potential of informal and alternative economies. She has exhibited at biennales internationally and has had solo exhibitions at the Museo de la Ciudad de México (2012), Whitechapel Art Gallery (2010), Van Abbemuseum (2008), Kunsthalle Basel (2007) and Vienna Secession (Austria 2001).



**TJ Demos** is a Reader in the Art History Department at University College London. He writes widely on modern and contemporary art and is the author, most recently, of *Return to the Postcolony: Spectres of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (2013); and *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (2013).

**Jimmie Durham** is an artist, activist, essayist and poet currently resident in Europe. He was active in the US Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s; later he was political organizer with the American Indian Movement (AIM), which he represented at the United Nations. He has participated in numerous exhibitions internationally; in 2012 these included Documenta 13 and the major solo retrospective 'A Matter of Life and Death and Singing' at the Museum for Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA).

**Patrick D Flores** is Professor of Art Studies at the Department of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines, Curator of the Vargas Museum in Manila and Adjunct Curator at the National Art Gallery, Singapore. He was a curator for the 2008 Gwangju Biennale 'Position Papers' and on the Advisory Board for 'The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds After 1989' (2011) at ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe. His many publications include *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia* (2008) and a special issue of *Third Text, Contemporaneity and Art in Southeast Asia* (2011), co-edited with Joan Kee.

**Obari Gomba** is a lecturer in Literature and Creative Writing at the Department of English Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He recently gained his doctorate in Philosophy from the department with the thesis *Oil and Conflict in the Poetry of Tanure Ojaide*. He is the author of the collection of poems *Pearls of the Mangrove*.

**Berin Golonu**, born in Istanbul, is a doctoral student on the Visual and Cultural Studies programme at the University of Rochester, New York, completing a dissertation on the history of landscape painting in the Middle East. Her articles and reviews have appeared in publications including *Afterimage*, *Aperture*, *Art in America*, *Art on Paper*, *Art Papers*, *Frieze*, *Modern Painters*, *Sculpture* and *Zing Magazine*. She co-edited a book project, *Recipes for an Encounter*, released in 2010 and presented as an exhibition at the Dorsky Gallery, Long Island City.

**Jessica L Horton**, doctoral candidate in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester, New York, and Wyeth Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts and the National Gallery of Art, is completing her dissertation, *Places to Stand: Native Arts Beyond the Nation*. She has recently written for *The Journal of Transnational American Studies*, *Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art*, *e-misférica*, *caa.reviews* and *Blackwell Companion to American Art*.

**Steven Lam** is a curator, artist, educator and Associate Dean at The School of Art at The Cooper Union. He has taught performance and sound theory at the School of Visual Arts, New York. Recent curatorial projects focusing on geo-zones outside Euro-America have included the Third Guangzhou Triennial; those in New York include 'Tainted Love' with critic Virginia Solomon at La MaMa Galleria; 'For Reasons of State' at the Kitchen; and 'Free as Air and Water, The Crude and the Rare, and Ruptures: Forms of Public Address' co-curated with Saskia Bos at The Cooper Union.

**Liberate Tate** is an art collective exploring the role of creative intervention in social change, especially in relation to the oil and culture industries. They have a focus on Tate, the UK's leading art museum, and its sponsorship deal with BP. Multiple Liberate Tate performances have taken place at Tate Modern and Tate Britain, also the sites of their Tate a Tate Audio Tour, available at [www.tateatate.org](http://www.tateatate.org).

**Gabi Ngcobo** is an independent curator, the co-founder of the Johannesburg based independent collective platform, the Center for Historical Reenactments (CHR) and a faculty member at the Wits School of Arts, University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Recently Ngcobo curated 'DON'T/PANIC', an exhibition at the Durham Art Gallery commissioned by the Goethe-Institut that coincided with COP17, the United Nations conference on Climate Change.

**Roberto Nigro** works at the Institute for Critical Theory of the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) and is Programme Director at the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris. He has taught at universities in Italy, France, Germany and the USA. His research and publications mainly focus on poststructuralist theories.

**Basil Sunday Nnamdi** is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He holds B Phil, Lic Phil and D Phil from the Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana, Rome, where he wrote his doctoral dissertation *Political Obligation and Civil Disobedience in Hannah Arendt* (1994). He has published extensively on eco-ethics and the obligation of government in Nigeria.

**Jack Persekian** was born in Jerusalem, where he currently lives. A curator and producer, he is the founder and Director of Anadiel Gallery, the Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem. His many curating projects have included three editions of the Sharjah Biennial. He is now the Director and Head Curator of the Palestinian Museum.

**The Raqs Media Collective** was founded in 1992 by Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta. They make contemporary art, have made films, curated exhibitions, edited books, staged events, collaborated with architects, computer programmers, writers and theatre directors, and have found processes that have left deep impacts on contemporary culture in India. Raqs remains closely involved with the Sarai programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies ([www.sarai.net](http://www.sarai.net)), an initiative they co-founded in 2000.

**Gerald Raunig**, is a philosopher who works at the Zurich Art University and at the eipcp (European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies). His book *A Thousand Machines* was published in 2010 and *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity*, is forthcoming in 2013; both were translated by Aileen Derieg.

**Luke Skrebowski** is University Lecturer in History of Art at the University of Cambridge. He is co-editor of *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art* (2011) and is currently at work on a book project entitled *The Politics of Anti-Aesthetics: Conceptual Art After 1968*. His work has appeared in *Art History*, *Grey Room*, *Manifesta Journal*, *Tate Papers* and *Third Text*.

**Nato Thompson** is a writer and curator. Previously a curator at MASS MoCA, he is currently working as Chief Curator at Creative Time. Thompson's writing has appeared in numerous journals and he received a College Art Association award in 2004. His book *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Age of Cultural Production* was published in 2012.

**Frank Ugiomoh** is Professor of Art History and Theory at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He is also a sculptor and print maker. He has published extensively on the historiography of art history and art criticism, and recently has been concerned with the environmental issues in Niger Delta Nigeria. He is a consulting editor to *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, and *Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture*.

**Anne Sophie Witzke** is a curator and PhD fellow at the Department of Aesthetics and Communication at Aarhus University in Denmark. Witzke co-curated the Nordic Exhibition of 2009–2010,

‘RETHINK – Contemporary Art and Climate Change’; she has also co-curated exhibitions on new media art. Her current research focuses on the relationship between new media art and ecology.

### World of Matter

**Mabe Bethônico** is an artist and professor at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil, working with material from institutional archives. Exhibitions include the 27th and 28th São Paulo Biennials (2006, 2008), the Encuentro Internacional de Medellín (2007) and *Telling Histories* at Kunstverein Munich (in collaboration with Ana Paula Cohen, Maria Lind and Liam Gillick, 2003).

**Ursula Biemann** is a video artist and theorist based in Zurich. She directed the art and research projects *Black Sea Files* and *The Maghreb Connection* and has published several books including the monograph *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field*. Her research is based at the Zurich University of the Arts.

**Lonnie van Brummelen** and **Siebren de Haan** have collaborated since 2002, producing films, writing and exhibition projects. They are represented by Motive Gallery, Brussels, and have shown their work at venues including Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Kunsthaus Zurich; Argos, Brussels; Extra City, Antwerp; and the Shanghai and Gwangju Biennales. They have taught at Utrecht Graduate School of Visual Art and Design (MaHKU), the University of Amsterdam, Master Film, the Sandberg Institut Amsterdam and other institutions.

**Elaine Gan** is an artist-researcher in digital arts and new media at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) and sits on the advisory committee for Interdisciplinary Arts at New York Foundation for the Arts. Gan studied critical art practice on the Whitney Independent Study Program, digital media at UCSC and architecture at Wellesley College.

**Peter Mörtenböck** is Research Fellow in the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is also Professor of Visual Culture at the Vienna University of Technology. His recent books include *Networked Cultures: Parallel Architectures and the Politics of Space* (2008), *Space (Re)Solutions* (2011) and *OCCUPY* (2012).

**Helge Mooshammer** is a theorist of visual and spatial culture, whose research is concerned with changing forms of urban sociality, processes of transnationalization and newly emerging regimes of governance. Based at Goldsmiths, University of London and the Technische Universität Vienna, his current research *Other Markets* engages a worldwide collaboration on an atlas of informal markets.

**Emily Eliza Scott** is an interdisciplinary scholar focused on artistic practices that illuminate-interrogate pressing ecological and/or geopolitical issues. Engaged in postdoctoral work in the architecture department at ETH (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule) Zürich, she is currently co-editing a volume on contemporary art and land use politics. She is co-founder of the Los Angeles Urban Rangers (2004–) and holds a doctorate in Art History from the University of California, Los Angeles.

**Paulo Tavares** is an architect and urbanist who graduated in Brazil. For the past four years Tavares has taught on the MA programme of the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths, University of London, where he also contributed to the Centre’s Mara-Stream digital platform. He currently teaches architecture at the Catholic University of Ecuador in Quito.