

CONTEMPORARY CLIMATE CHANGE ART AS THE ABSTRACT MACHINE: ETHICO-AESTHETICS AND FUTURES ORIENTATION

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Abstract

The fusion of visual art and climate science to produce something new to mediate the urgency of the climate change issue is explored in relation to Simon O'Sullivan's conception of contemporary art invoking Deleuze and Guattari's ethico-aesthetics and futures orientation. The question considered is: Can and does climate change art crystallize a different subjectivity within viewers? Conclusions are that the visual art considered in this article does have the prospect of connecting viewers with some realization of future climate change implications.

Keywords: climate change, contemporary art, abstract machine, ethico-aesthetics, futures, subjectivity, O'Sullivan, Deleuze, Guattari.

Climate change art has emerged as a distinct area of contemporary art practice over the last decade. It overlaps with science-art and environmental art where the cultures of science, art and nature are brought together. However, the developing field of climate change art is an entity on its own. It is examined here in relation to the thinking of artist and art theorist, Simon O'Sullivan, who has looked at contemporary art beyond the "horizon of the signifier" or postmodern or post-postmodernist "crisis in represen-

tion" [1]. He draws on deliberations of Deleuze and Guattari [2] and also Guattari in "The Three Ecologies" [3] on ethico-aesthetics, futures orientation and ecology to explore aspects of the "expanded field of contemporary art" and art's political role via an "aesthetic paradigm" [4].

The question considered in this article is: Can and does climate change art crystallize a different subjectivity within viewers to search within their own thought processes and emotional responses—to summon within them a personal response to the work, some realization of future implications of climate predictions and impending impacts and the intergenerational ethics of inaction?

One of the drivers of climate change art has been the ineffectiveness of recent United Nations (UN) climate negotiation conferences in Copenhagen, Cancun, Durban and Doha, which have achieved little diplomatic progress, with countries having differences over the precautionary action needed to mitigate climate change impacts. Yet recent evidence of global warming impacts is forceful [5], e.g. Hurricane Sandy in the USA, floods in Queensland, Australia, and accelerating Arctic ice depletion. Climate scientists predict further impacts as inevitable unless carbon mitigation limits additional warming to several tenths of a degree Celsius by the end of the 21st century [6].

As a response to scientific concerns, contemporary artists have been exploring future climate impacts on humans and the natural environment. Artists' foci have covered polar melting, coral

bleaching, ecosystem and species extinction, rising sea levels, drought, heat-waves, bushfires, floods, tropical cyclones and hurricanes. Also the role of politics and the barriers to collective global action have been expressed visually. The art created via collaborative art projects and individual efforts has been exhibited in themed group shows and the exhibitions of individual artists. Climate change art is new, different and exploratory. It is a cultural response to the global phenomenon and a creative intervention.

Aspects of contemporary art that O'Sullivan discusses—aesthetics, affect, the production of subjectivity, futures orientation and the abstract machine—can be used to think about climate change art from projects such as the *Cape Farewell* [7] and *TippingPoint* [8] ventures.

The collaboration of artists and scientists in a project on the scale of *Cape Farewell* is a phenomenon little seen in the art world. The eco-political focus and future orientations of the works and installations is fundamental. The project, underway for over a decade, has established global outreach via new media outlets including an extensive webpage, YouTube videos and blogs (e.g. SWITCH Cape Farewell Youth Poetics). Also the project has launched local public art events such as the SHIFT Festival at London's Southbank Centre in 2010 as well as exhibiting conventionally in art museums.

Creative output from the Cape Farwell project is driven by expeditions of predominantly visual artists and scientists but also composers, writers and poets to climate change 'hotspots'—places of climatic extremes—including the High Arctic, Greenland, the Andes, the Peruvian Amazon, and a more recent focus is the Scottish Islands. David Buckland is originator and curator of the project. The trans-disciplinary experiences of local environments and vulnerability to climate change are essential to the creative process. A series of high profile exhibitions, including *U-n-f-o-l-d* [9], which has toured extensively since 2010 and was last seen in the CAFA Art Museum, Beijing, in May-June 2013, have followed. Works in *U-n-f-o-l-d* such as Buckland's *Discounting the Future* (2008) and Colburn's *Up from Under the Edge* (2009) (Fig. 1) "rupture...habits of 'spectatorship'...opening us up to other perhaps more unfamiliar but more productive economies" [10]. Colburn's installation, first shown in *Earth: Art of a*

Fig. 1. Adriane Colburn, *Up from Under the Edge*, 2009, installation, Earth: Art of a changing world, Royal Academy of Arts, London, paper, aluminum, inkjet prints, video, mylar and mirrors, 11 feet x 18 feet. (© Adriane Colburn)



Changing World at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in parallel with the UN COP15 Climate Conference actualizes the impact of oil exploration and drilling, as well as illegal mining in the Peruvian Amazon. Images in hand-cut metal and paper together with videos draw spectators to focus on fragile ecosystems.

Another major climate change exhibition, RETHINK [11], also shown in parallel with COP15, opened in Copenhagen and subsequently toured Scandinavia in 2009-10. Contributing artists included Bright Ugochukwu, Olafur Eliasson and Tomás Saraceno among others.

Water and atmosphere are explored by Ugochukwu in *Acid Rain* (2009) and by Eliasson in *Your Watercolour Machine* (2009). Walking into a conventional art museum room space where dozens of Ugochukwu's *Acid Rain* transparent plastic bags of carbon and water are hung from the ceiling drives a perceptual experience and subjective interpretation in spectators. A break is made with the normal invisible presence of carbon dioxide in the air we breathe and the apparent transparency of rainwater. An allusion can be seen to increasing oceanic acidification as well as the petrochemicals used and the carbon and other pollution created in the making of plastic. Eliasson also probes the clarity of the Earth's atmosphere with his breaking down or rupturing of white light into the colors of the spectrum. Sensory inputs lead to cognition. The subjective experience for viewers arguably contrasts with the incessant political debate and polarized discussions about climate change and the impacts of greenhouse gas emissions [12]. Here, through the experimentation of the artist, the spectator's interaction with the artwork's combination of effects creates a break with the typical or dominant paradigm—or in Guattari's [13] words—an “immanent evaluation”. O'Sullivan remarks about such assemblages that: “Artists offer up new compositions of affect...It is this that differentiates art, as a specific form or thought, from mere opinion...art practice does not necessarily communicate anything” [14].

Also in RETHINK, Saraceno's suspended inflatable acrylic ‘biosphere’ transparent globes embodying preserved ecosystems—some large enough for one or two viewers to climb into to experience the plant life and atmosphere as well as the feeling of an enclosed ecosystem—draw the viewer's attention from different levels in the gallery. The



Fig. 2. Roslyn Taplin and Stephanie Tighe, video still of *Gondwana Sensitivities*, 2013, installation, shown at Balance-Unbalance, Central Queensland University. (© Roslyn Taplin and Stephanie Tighe)

installation components in the National Gallery of Denmark were suspended in a three-story high verandah annex space—the museum's architectural intervention attached to the original building. The juxtaposition of the old and new built environment with the systems of plants and moisture of the modules strongly conveyed human influence on nature.

New materials of expression and universes of reference [15] are revealed in the work of these artists who tackle the issue of climate change. These provide a starting point for the production of different subjective views about the issue in spectators. O'Sullivan asks about contemporary art, “Is there something different in these newer practices?” and “What indeed constitutes contemporary art's political effectivity?” [16]. He identifies the employment of critique, multiple regimes of signs both asignifying and signifying and exploration of different space times but says there is also a difference in “our attitude as participants with such art” [17].

My own studio practice is also directed toward the issue of climate change. In *Gondwana Sensitivities* (2013) (Fig. 2), the fragile and transient nature of the biotic and abiotic elements of ecosystems are juxtaposed with the call by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to cease anthropogenic interference. The installation work intersects the cultures of art, science and diplomacy, bringing together video, text and sound.

The projects, exhibitions and works of art considered in this article arguably do have the prospect of crystallizing a different subjectivity in viewers. Climate change art as “...the diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but constructs a real that is yet to come, a new

type of reality”—it “operates on the cusp of any given present and the future” in Deleuze and Guattari's terms [18]. Climate change art thus takes its place in O'Sullivan's contemporary art paradigm where “practices are not made for an already existing audience as it were, but in order to call forth—to invoke—an audience” [19].

References and Notes

* This article is based on a paper presented at the 3rd Balance-Unbalance International Conference, 31 May-2 June 2013, Noosa, Queensland, Australia.

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18. Deleuze and Guattari [2] p. 142.
19. O'Sullivan [1] p. 200.