

Art, Theory and Practice in the Anthropocene

Edited by
Julie Reiss

Series in Art



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Until Deceased Black carbon tattoo pigment, skin. Courtesy of the artist.

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Introduction

Julie Reiss

The artist's arm extends out, straight enough to clearly reveal the thin unbroken line of black ink that rises from wrist to shoulder, trending upwards (cover image). At first glance the gesture calls to mind *The Creation of Adam* (c. 1508-1512), Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel, showing the hand of God passing the spark of life to the hand of Adam, a monument to man's direct lineage with the divine. Justin Brice Guariglia takes up the position of God, now held by man, and instead of passing life, the line on his arm is a tattoo of a graph charting the average temperature of the earth's surface over the last 136 years. This increase in temperature and the resulting consequences, including rising sea levels, flooding, ocean acidification, and species extinction, are what we will pass on, and what indelibly marks us, as we cannot separate the rise in temperature from industrial activity. Guariglia's tattoo, a visceral connection between art, culture and global climate change, dates from the moment in 2016 when geologists at the 35th International Geological Congress in Cape Town, South Africa officially adopted the term Anthropocene to describe the current epoch, in which humans have been recognized as a geological force that is permanently changing the environment. There has been a lack of consensus among scientists regarding the date of its inception, and some scientists are still uncertain whether it will ultimately represent a geological rupture from the Holocene. However, as Australian scientist Jeremy Baskin states, "the Anthropocene does not need to be an object of scientific inquiry by geologists and stratigraphers, or even a formally-recognized geological epoch, in order to have an impact."¹ The term is in use in spheres outside the sciences, and there is an array of attitudes associated with it that can be recognized in current cultural production, particularly visual art.

Art is an important channel through which people encounter issues related to the Anthropocene. Within the museum, gallery or in outdoor public sites, artists exhibit work that addresses the environment in ways that range from the intuitive to the data-driven, exposing problems or offering solutions. This interdisciplinary engagement is not limited to the art world. From their recent actions, it is evident that members of the scientific advocacy community also consider contemporary art an effective tool for communication. For several years, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) has partnered visual artists with

scientists, and some of the resulting exhibitions have enabled visitors to make their voices heard on environmental issues in their own communities through signing policy petitions. The number of petitions signed at the exhibition sites provides a quantifiable metric on how art can raise awareness and spur action.² In addition, NRDC scientists learn from artists, and both groups become part of a shared social network addressing environmental problems. In 2018, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) issued their first call for artists to create art that generally highlights the importance of science, the resulting commissions to be presented in public spaces.³ Anthony Leiserowitz, director of the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, has discussed the important role art can potentially play in his organization's mission.⁴

These joint efforts are needed because the vast repercussions of global climate change are difficult to grasp for most people, and individual artistic responses can effectively break it down to a more comprehensible scale. I date my heightened awareness of the environmental crisis to my visit to the 2013 Venice Biennale. Some of the island nations represented there, including the Maldives and Tuvalu, were exhibiting art that addressed the immediate threat of rising sea levels to their nations and citizens, and the disproportionate environmental impact of the most economically powerful countries. I subsequently presented a selection of these artworks in a lecture to students at Bergen Community College in Paramus, New Jersey, in conjunction with "Sandy: Artists Respond to a Once and Future Super Storm", an art exhibition curated by Suzaan Boettger and Marriott Sheldon that marked the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Sandy. It seemed circuitous to have travelled to Venice to come back to New Jersey to talk about flooding, but my roundabout journey served to illustrate the scale of the crisis. The visual responses to rising sea levels created by geographically distant artists facilitated a deeper understanding of the connected plight of different parts of the world.

The immediate genesis of this anthology was a panel titled "Art and Sustainability in the Anthropocene" that I was asked to chair at the 2017 conference for the Council for European Studies in Glasgow, Scotland. Most of the other sessions at the conference were focused on issues such as Brexit, technology, and immigration rather than art. Yet there was a good turnout at the panel, an indication of how intertwined art is with the discussion of the social and economic issues affecting the environment. The attendees clearly shared a passionate interest in issues related to global climate change, and wanted to learn more about art's capacity for effecting public awareness and policy. Through their thoughtful questions after the papers were presented, it became evident that there was a need for more conversations around the role of art in the environmental crisis, and that those conversations should include a range of voices. To that end, I invited curators, artists, art historians and crit-

ics, scholars from other sectors of the humanities and advanced graduate students to contribute to this volume. Three of the essays included here originated as papers at the Glasgow panel (Chang, Costantin, Schwendener).

Creating this book as a multi-author anthology allowed for a range of critical and often-interdisciplinary frameworks that can serve as touchstones for further inquiry. No two authors in this volume use the same approach, yet there are themes that repeat: the need for decentering the human; an acknowledgement of interconnectivity and interdependence; and perhaps most importantly, the potential for art to help us imagine other worlds and possible futures, to reshape consciousness and create new narratives. There are over thirty artists included in this volume, and the diversity of their art is indicative of the wide range of expression related to these themes.

The theory in the book's title refers to broad questions about the relationship between humans and the earth as applicable to contemporary art. Eva Horn in "The Anthropocene Sublime" redefines the aesthetics of the sublime in relation to the destruction of the Anthropocene, focusing on the aerial photography of Justin Brice Guariglia, who has flown with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)'s Oceans Melting Greenland Mission to photograph melting glaciers. In "Art, Theory and the Anthropocene," Martha Schwendener employs *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, a "para-biological" text by the Czech-Brazilian philosopher Vilém Flusser, as an entry point for the work of contemporary artists who have engaged in related critiques, suggesting that fantastical models originating as art works could be in the vanguard of finding viable solutions for recuperation. David Haley, in "Art as Destruction: an Inquiry into Creation," considers the Anthropocene in terms of repeated patterns of creation and destruction. Using the concept of creative destruction as an ecological necessity, he demonstrates its transformative potential through his experience working with flood survivors in the English town of Cockermouth to create an ecological art project.

Practice in this volume refers to the work of both artists and curators. Curators work in the space where art meets the public, and play a significant role in shaping and framing those encounters. I have included a reprint of "Imaginative Engagements," a chapter from Julie Doyle's prescient 2009 book, *Meditating Climate Change*, in which she explores how art exhibitions can facilitate or hinder people's understanding of global climate change. Through comparing exhibitions at two different venues, Doyle demonstrates the importance of context for determining relevance, and the challenge of making climate change meaningful to people's individual social realities.

In "Ecological Art: Origins, Reality, Becoming," Paul Ardenne discusses a host of strategies and practices that artists have used to create "eco-art" since

the 1960s, and tracks the gradual increase in art related to environmental concerns. Jennifer McGregor is the curator of exhibitions at Wave Hill, a public garden and cultural center in the Bronx with a mission to connect people to nature in an urban environment. In “Charting Urgency and Agency,” a series of interviews with artists whose work she has exhibited, she addresses the role of environmental activism in their practice, and how they have found their art to be most effective.

Both man-made and organic materials function as important carriers of meaning in art related to the Anthropocene. At the 2016 conference of the College Art Association, I presented a paper on artists who use glacial ice, a ubiquitous symbol of global warming, as a medium. An expanded version of that paper is included here in “Terra Incognita: Exhibiting Ice in the Anthropocene.” María Patricia Tinajero in her essay “Ethical Ground: the Aesthetic Action of Soil,” focuses on the metaphysical meanings of soil as an artistic medium in the work of Mel Chin and Claire Pentecost, where soil becomes a means of understanding the intersection between independence and interactivity. In “After Nature and Culture: Plastiglomerates in the Age of Capital,” Weiyi Chang investigates the hybrid detritus, plastiglomerate, as a marker of the flow of capitalist commodities and a readymade for the “Capitolocene” in Kelly Jazvac’s art. Patrizia Costantin contributes “Curating Digital Decay: *machines will watch us die*,” expounding on an exhibition she curated that featured artists whose practices engage with media technology. Through their work, she explores notions of decay, deep-time, data loss and planned technological obsolescence.

Alice Momm’s contribution, “A Poem – A Leaf,” shares feelings of helplessness in the wake of the political climate created by the 2016 US presidential election, and her attempts to heal through an artistic gesture on a small scale. Activism on a larger scale is relayed in Aviva Rahmani’s essay “Blued Trees as Policy,” which presents her ongoing art project, *Blued Trees Symphony*. Working at the intersection of art and activism and directly challenging the legal system, Rahmani has worked to prevent the practice of fracking. “Students Being Transformed into Trees,” Margaretha Häggström’s essay on transformative learning demonstrates how art can reconnect future generations with the natural world, as she recounts an interactive art project for young students that successfully created empathy for nature by “turning” the students into trees.

It is my intention that this anthology will join the increasing number of platforms where discussions about the relationship between art, art viewing, activism and the environmental crisis are taking place and offer multiple trajectories that can be further developed.

Notes

¹ Jeremy Baskin, "Paradigm Dressed up as Epoch: The Ideology of the Anthropocene," *Environmental Values* 24, no. 1 (2015): 12. <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/whp/ev/2015/00000024/00000001/art00003>.

² Interview by the author with Elizabeth Corr, Director of Artistic Partnerships for the NRDC, January 8, 2018. An example was an exhibition in which the NRDC partnered with the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago to mount an exhibition about petcoke, a byproduct of the oil refining process, and then remounted the same exhibition at a public library and YMCA situated on the Southeast side of Chicago, a community directly affected by the issues represented in the exhibition.

³ "Submit Art for Science Rising," Cision PR Newswire, April 19, 2018, accessed June 22, 2018. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/submit-art-for-science-rising-300633328.html>.

⁴ "Can Art Change the Way We Think About Climate Change? An Interview with Anthony Leiserowitz." *GIA Reader*, 27, no. 3 (2016), accessed March 23, 2018. <https://www.giarts.org/print/5452>.

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Notes on the contributors

Paul Ardenne is a Professor at the University of Amiens. He is a recognized specialist in contemporary art, aesthetics and architecture and the author of *Art, l'âge contemporain* (1997), *L'Art dans son moment politique* (2000), *L'Image Corps* (2001), *Un Art contextuel* (2002), *Face to Face* (2003), *Extrême* (2006), *Art, le présent* (2009), *Heureux, les créateurs?* (2016). He is also a novelist (*Belly le Ventre*, 2016), and has participated in curating several international exhibitions including *History is Mine!* (Printemps de Septembre, Toulouse, 2012), *Aqua Vitalis* (2013) and *Économie Humaine* (2014).

Weiyi Chang is a curator and writer whose research addresses questions of ecology, language, and time. Currently Curator-in-Residence at the Or Gallery, she has previously held positions at documenta 14, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, SFU Galleries, and Griffin Art Projects. Her writing has been published in *CMagazine*, *Canadian Art*, and *Luma Quarterly*. Chang received an MA in Art History (Critical Curatorial Studies) from the University of British Columbia and a BA in Art History and Philosophy from Western University. She is currently based in Vancouver.

Patrizia Costantin is a final-year PhD Researcher in Curatorial Practice and an Associate Lecturer (Contextual Studies) at Manchester School of Art (Manchester Metropolitan University), Manchester, UK. Her PhD explores what a material turn in curatorial practice would bring in relation to exhibiting artworks critically concerned with digital materiality. She recently curated *machines will watch us die* at the Holden Gallery, an exhibition which explored digital decay as a form of material agency. She currently holds an MA in Curatorial Practice from PAHC (Postgraduate Arts and Humanities Centre - MMU). She is also research assistant to artist and Professor Alice Kettle.

Julie Doyle is Professor of Media and Communication, University of Brighton, and Director of its Centre for Spatial, Environmental and Cultural Politics. Her research examines how visual media, communication and culture shapes climate change understanding, engagement and action. Associate Editor of *Environmental Humanities* and author of *Mediating Climate Change* (Routledge 2011) she has published widely on climate activism, climate science communication, celebrity veganism, climate arts and creative approaches to youth climate engagement. Professor Doyle has worked collaboratively with visual artists, and provided consultancy for NGOs, government, and the sustainability communications sector on best practice for climate and environmental communication.

Margaretha Häggström is a doctoral student in pedagogy at the faculty of education at the University of Gothenburg. She began her PhD work in 2015 after four years of teaching at the teacher education program, six years of teaching in high school and twelve years in preschool. Her subjects are visual arts and Swedish. She has a multimodal perspective on teaching and learning and her research focus on aesthetical values in relation to students' experiences of being surrounded by natural settings. She is also currently editing a book that addresses multimodality and visual knowledge as teaching and learning tools in all school subjects.

David Haley is an Ecological Artist and a Visiting Professor at Zhongyuan University of Technology. He is a Director of Chrysalis Arts Development, Vice Chair of the CIWEM Art & Environment Network, Advisor/Mentor (founder) of Futures' Venture Foundation, a member of the ecoart network, UK Urban Ecology Forum, the Society for Ecological Restoration, Ramsar Culture Network Arts Steering Group and National Association for Fine Art Education Steering Group. Haley publishes, researches, educates and makes artworks, internationally, with ecosystems, communities, poetic texts, walking and installations on questions of 'capable futures', climate change, species extinction, urban development and transdisciplinarity.

Eva Horn is a professor of cultural theory and modern German literature at the German Department of Vienna University. She has published on political secrecy and modern fiction, disaster imagery, and, more recently, on the discourse history of climate change. She is currently working on a book on the Anthropocene from a perspective of the Humanities (forthcoming 2019), and on a cultural theory of climate (forthcoming Fischer 2020). She is the author of *The Secret War. Treason, Espionage, and Modern Fiction* (Northwestern UP, 2013), *The Future as Catastrophe. What Disaster Fictions Tell Us About the Present* (Columbia UP, 2018).

Jennifer McGregor is Wave Hill's Senior Director of Arts, Education & Programs, a public garden and cultural center overlooking the Hudson River in the Bronx. Exhibitions, concerts and programs, both indoors and out engage visitors in a dialogue with nature, culture and site. Prior to reinvigorating the arts at Wave Hill, she was the first director of the NYC Percent for Art Program, where she implemented the program guidelines and supervised 60 artist's projects in the public realm. Concurrently, she had worked nationally on public art commissions, exhibitions, and planning projects through McGregor Consulting.

Alice Momm is a Harlem based artist whose work has been inspired both by her immersion in and longing for nature. Her ephemeral and sculptural works have been exhibited most recently at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Central Park It's Happening!, the Flux Art Fair in Harlem, ODETTA Gallery in

Bushwick, as well as at venues such as Wave Hill in the Bronx, Islip Art Museum in East Islip, NY, Stone Quarry Hill Art Park, NY, and Hambidge Center, GA. In the summer of 2018, Momm participated in the Kjerringøy Land Art Biennale in Kjerringøy, Norway.

Aviva Rahmani earned a PhD from the University of Plymouth, UK and her Masters from the California Institute for the Arts. She is an Affiliate with the Institute for Alpine and Arctic Research (INSTAAR) at the University of Colorado at Boulder for her webcasts, *Gulf to Gulf* viewed on line from over eighty-five countries. Her work is exhibited and written about internationally. Her current project, *The Blued Trees Symphony* has received fellowships from A Blade of Grass (ABOG) and the New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA), been written about extensively, and presented at venues in China, Korea, the UK as well as numerous locations in the USA.

Julie Reiss earned her PhD in Art History from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She directs Modern and Contemporary Art and The Market, an accredited MA program at Christie's Education, New York. A pioneering scholar in the field of installation art, she is the author of *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (MIT Press, 1999), as well as numerous essays and reviews. Her recent essays include "The Moving Image as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age," published in *Exhibiting the Moving Image* (JRP Ringier, 2016), and "From Margin to Center Revisited" in *A Pintura Contemporânea No Barco de Teseu, Vol. II: Instalar e Habitar Picturalmente o Mundo*. Lisboa: Associação dos Arqueólogos Portugueses, 2017. She has presented papers and chaired panels on issues related to art and climate change at conferences including the College Art Association and the Conference for the Council for European Studies.

Martha Schwendener is a Visiting Associate Professor at New York University, Steinhardt School of Art, and an art critic for The New York Times. Her criticism and essays have been published in *Artforum*, *Bookforum*, *Afterimage*, *October*, *Art in America*, *The New Yorker*, *The Village Voice*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Art Papers*, *New Art Examiner*, *Paper Monument*, *Flusser Studies*, and other publications. She is working on a book, based on a dissertation completed at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, on Vilém Flusser's philosophy and its relationship to art.

María Patricia Tinajero is a visual artist and a PhD candidate at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in Visual Art Philosophy. Her creative research puts emphasis on place and community through social justice and environmental awareness; Currently, her academic research explores the crossroad of aesthetic and environmental practices to create intersections for philosophical and environmental practices that urge critical and sustainable responses. She

has co-authored several publications in the field of ecological sound composition which include the essay “Ecologically Grounded Creative Practice” part of the *III International Music Symposium in the Amazon, Vol. 2*. Manaus AM: Editora da UFAM. Tinajero received an affiliate fellowship from the American Academy in Rome (2010).

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