

## COMPLEXITY AND ENTANGLEMENT IN EXHIBITING CLIMATE CHANGE

Bridie Lonie

In September 2020 the Dunedin School of Art hosted two events: the exhibition “The Complete Entanglement of Everything,” and the symposium “Mapping the Anthropocene in Ōtepoti /Dunedin: Climate Change, Community and Research in the Creative Arts.”<sup>1</sup> The exhibition articulated the conclusions of my doctoral thesis, “Closer Relations: Art, Climate Change, Interdisciplinarity and the Anthropocene.”<sup>2</sup> In that study, which began with the convergence of cybernetic thinking, conceptual art and the onset of serious recognition that the planetary systems were heating because of the increase in greenhouses in our atmosphere, it became clear to me that there were some 50 years already of artworks engaging with climate change, but that they also anticipated and intersected with the attributes of the Anthropocene as articulated in the first decade of this century, and that they might demonstrate that such understandings were both emergent and necessarily interdisciplinary.

My seven case histories were designed to capture different approaches, though most in some way drew on conceptual art and each in its way was a collection of some kind. The first case study, *The Lagoon Cycle* (1985), exhibited at the Johnson Museum at Cornell University and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, was an extensive sequence of images, maps diagrams and texts from a decade of experimentation by the two American artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison on the subject of the production of food from estuarine areas and the implications of sea-level rise.<sup>3</sup> The second chapter considered the breadth of activist and curator Lucy Lippard’s project *Weather Report: Art and Climate Change* (2007).<sup>4</sup> With 51 participating artists/artists groups, Lippard proposed that her exhibition would make intelligible the “vast” amount of data on climate change; the exhibition was held in Boulder, Colorado, in 2007, where, in 1965, the first forum on climate change was held. A chapter on the artists Andrea Polli, Natalie Jeremijenko and Frances Whitehead considered how the subject entailed practices that worked across disciplinary boundaries. Su Ballard and Aaron Kreisler’s curatorial project *Among the Machines* (Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2013) was a study of contemporary art in Aotearoa/New Zealand that juxtaposed the impacts of colonisations and the technological era through the mechanism of Samuel Butler’s parody of the aspirations of technology in his book *Erewhon, or, Over the Range* (1872), set in the foothills of Canterbury at the time of their colonisation for sheep farming. My final chapter argued that the subjects of climate change and the Anthropocene were endemic in art here and had been for some time.

Doctoral theses are anxious projects and I had made an expansive argument that I felt needed further articulation. The next stage of that articulation took the approach that climate change and the Anthropocene were already existing, long-time emergent themes in the art of Ōtepoti/Dunedin, and I sought to demonstrate this by a selection of works that, to my mind, and for the most part to those of the artists, investigated the complex network of cause and unintended effect that is the Anthropocene.

Human transformation of the planet’s ecosystems is now generally accepted, but even when I began the thesis in 2013 this was not the case, and critical response to the earlier exhibitions I described had been cautious, seeing them either as too instrumental or didactic. Indeed, the first work on climate change that I could identify, Newton Harrison’s painstaking articulation of the likelihood, as seen from 1974, of either global warming with rising sea levels or a nuclear winter, was presented in the form of a map surrounded by text set out as a theorem, called *San Diego*

as the *Centre of the World* (1974), a copy of which is held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Its syllogistic conclusion – that as the possibility for each existed, though the scales might tip either way, it was important to act now – was received as an example of an eccentric artist telling scientists that they did not know their own minds. Nothing could have been further from the case, and the Harrison Studio has gone on to work with governments on visualisations that demonstrate large-scale understandings of the interpenetration of political and geographical landscapes and the dangers of limited, nation-based thinking.

The Dunedin School of Art's Art+Science projects commenced in 2011, curated by Peter Stupples, an art historian who had worked at the University of Otago and the Dunedin School of Art and who saw the value of bringing together the two approaches to knowledge. While the University of Otago has a programme in science communication that has also led to rich interactions, the art+science approach is broader than that of communication. It can be seen rather as parallel play. Scientists explain their research and artists think about the broader implications, including the potential for emotional response, and contextualise and articulate these. In a nutshell, the sciences must demonstrate clearly the empirically robust evidence they have for their hypotheses, while artists receive that material as citizens invested with the need to absorb, assimilate and manage their lives on the basis of what the scientists propose.

When Lucy Lippard curated *Weather Report: Art and Climate Change*, she argued that the artform best suited to the presentation of data was conceptual art, a form she had herself 30 years before theorised. Conceptual art involves real-world materials re-assembled in the form of presentations, assemblages and installations, so that while concepts might be juxtaposed, they arrive in their own clothes, as it were, unmediated by the actions of the artists. At least, that is what seems to be the case, though any form of re-presentation necessarily re-contextualises the material. Conceptual art can seem impersonal, didactic and unfriendly to those who want their art to offer something that takes them out of the everyday. A favourite example of mine is Gabriel Manglano-Ovalle's *Iceberg (r11i01) Beyond the Irish Sea* (2005), a model of an iceberg placed on top of two containers. To some, the work appears mute, until the inevitable vanishing of the modelled iceberg, when the relationship between the production of greenhouse gases through international trade and the container emerge in the viewer's understanding, at which point the work becomes a monument to something that has passed.

However, more traditional artforms can also demonstrate the complexity of intersecting systems, and curatorial projects that juxtapose artworks can also perform those connections. The point is to enable the viewer to put those things together. My first curatorial project was an exhibition, "Women and the Environment," held at the Women's Gallery in Wellington in 1981, where we held a symposium on ecological issues – at that time very much around conservation and the reduction of waste – and held workshops throughout the time of the exhibition. That model was the basis of the Women's Gallery's feminist approach to the value of art as the property of all: not an exclusive zone for the market, or the professional artist, but an apparatus for investigating and experiencing the world both as maker and viewer.

Peter Stupples left the Dunedin School of Art in 2018 and Pam McKinlay took over his role. Pam is also an art historian, has a track history of work on sustainability and has been the co-ordinator of the regional organisation for electric vehicles. She was making artworks about the melting of the glaciers in association with scientists and researching the ways that the extractive petrochemical industries used major institutions of art to assist their marketing through sponsorship and collaborative projects. We began to talk, and the 2020 exhibition and symposium grew out of those conversations and drew on some of the works that had been exhibited in the art/science collaborations.

I had initially hoped to include a literal mapping project on climate change in Ōtepoti/Dunedin. I was aware of the focus on South Dunedin as New Zealand's 'postcard' for climate change, but even in Dunedin there were many other areas that were at risk from rising sea levels and meteorological changes. The Otago Regional Council's Hazard Identification presentations in 2016 had made this very clear;<sup>5</sup> and I had attended a meeting where an elderly woman spoke anxiously of the diminished value of her capital and the implications for her care when she

became unable to live independently. In 2014, at the meeting of the South Dunedin Action Group, I had presented visual material suggesting new wetlands be established in South Dunedin and was met with an angry growl. In 2021, such options have been socialised and seem even possible, while the scientific investigation has demonstrated the subtlety of the terrain throughout the city and the complexity of the solutions required.

When Newton Harrison showed the difficulties involved in predicting which was the most probable of two possible outcomes for the planet's climate, the complexity of earth systems was a relatively new concept. Today, such notions as tipping points and the variabilities involved in planetary systems are better understood. Debates around the notion of the Anthropocene have helped, as the stratigraphers who wish to demonstrate that the planetary systems have been impacted by human behaviours found increasing numbers of impacts and moved from simply speaking of the weather to including radionuclides, nitrogen, plastics and other more quantifiable constituents of the planet's crust. But complexity remains a problem, as the cognitive security afforded by the notion that the sciences can predict certainties, and that each discipline has definable boundaries, remains alive in the wider public. The problem here is not fake news, but the workings of predictability. However, they are too often aligned.

Yet the Anthropocene is already upon us and has been for millennia, according to some who see early agriculture or even human hunting as its initiator.

So what does it feel like, to be entangled in this new and uncomfortable era? The expression entanglement comes from Donna Haraway, whose work on interspecies and inter-category relations led to the term "cyborg," or cybernetic organism.<sup>6</sup> The term entanglement was originally used to reference the weirdness of quantum mechanics, a weirdness that has been transposed to our experience of the Anthropocene by many writers. Haraway asks us to embrace the messy entanglements that we currently experience, but she also points out that we must focus our minds: arguing that it is important which questions are asked. She points out that science fiction has already offered models for these scenarios. Her work intersects with many other philosophers and thinkers in this area – perhaps, in particular, Bruno Latour and Timothy Morton<sup>7</sup> – but she adds a liveliness and perhaps the hope that we need as the strange becomes stranger.

The symposium was designed to connect discourses and communities, in the context of this bicultural country. Its sessions were inclusive: "Land, waters and place;" "Backyards;" "Action in the Capitalocene;" "Wayfinding amongst the institutions;" and "Feeling the Anthropocene." Presentation subjects included education, art+science processes and architectural solutions. We were honoured to have initial presentations from Ron Bull on the first day, on Kai Tahu approaches to the lands of Kai Tahu in which the events were held; and on the second day, Professor Huhana Smith from Massey School of Art and Design spoke of regenerative practices for harakeke, the plant harvested for textiles in her own lands at Otaki, and also in the approach taken by her institution. We began and ended with different kinds of returns to the earth: Ranui Ryan spoke of "Pōuri Pai: good grief," offering alternative burial practices such as earth burials and shrouds woven of harakeke. The final session engaged with the grief experienced as we acknowledge extinctions and the difficulties of witnessing, documenting and making art about vanishing habitats.

The question of the value of art in this context is ongoing. Lesley Brook undertook an impact study that involved interviewing visitors to the exhibition. Her findings are currently in press, but in a recent presentation she quoted participants as acknowledging that the experience of the exhibition did contribute to a sense of connectedness. Some participants felt encouraged that there was such a large community of local artists addressing environmental issues, which they felt part of. The artworks succeeded in emotionally engaging participants and were able to represent the variety and complexity of people's thoughts and feelings about the Anthropocene.

Pam and I were joined by Marion Wassenaar for the final curation, which occurred through the opportunity to use a new building before it became classrooms. The exhibition opened just after a Covid-19 level change, but was designed to operate with social distancing.

Forty-nine artists exhibited across the Dunedin School of Art buildings. The breadth of their vision can be seen in the Instagram images and the catalogue documentation.<sup>8</sup> Works were grouped, not by similar subject matter, but rather by the connections that a viewer might make between them. Clearly it was necessary to signpost the relevance of each work for the main theme, and this was done in a catalogue essay that was deliberately made accessible, at the risk of over-simplifying more layered meanings.<sup>9</sup>

Audiences are mixed, and for many in this city art still means a painting, even though the city is home to a significant number of contemporary artists and a rich collection of conceptual art in its public gallery. If one wants art to fulfil its capacity to enable the negotiation of difficult questions, then the forms deployed can be those that most effectively reach their destination. Each artist had thought through the elements relevant to the exhibition in their own way and through their own practice. For some artists the issues were central to their practice, while for others they were the background to the new normal in which we all operate, but are also always discovering: an expression of grief, rage, comfort; or the entanglement of each. Artworks, commonly the index of culture's attempts to negotiate with the as yet undecided, are an ideal vehicle for the expression of, and research into, emergent understandings of the Anthropocene.

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- 1 Dunedin School of Art and Otago Polytechnic/Te Kura Matatini ki Otago, *Mapping the Anthropocene in Ōtepoti/Dunedin: Climate Change, Community and Research in the Creative Arts, Ōtepoti/Dunedin*, 26-27 September, 2020, <https://www.op.ac.nz/assets/Mapping-the-Anthropocene-2020-ABSTRACTS-FINAL-SEP-2020.pdf>. For the conference programme, see pp. [5]-[7].
- 2 Bridie Lonie "Closer Relations: Art, Climate Change, Interdisciplinarity and the Anthropocene" (PhD thesis, Department of History and Art History, University of Otago 2018).
- 3 Helen Meyer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Lagoon Cycle* (Ithaca, NY: Office of University Publications, Cornell University, 1985).
- 4 Lucy Lippard, "Weather Report: Expecting the Unexpected," in *Weather Report: Art and Climate Change*, ed. Marda Kim (Boulder, CO: Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art in collaboration with EcoArts, 2007), 4-11.
- 5 Michael Goldsmith and Alex Sims, *Coastal Hazards of the Dunedin City District. Review of Dunedin City District Plan – Natural Hazards* (Dunedin: Otago Regional Council, 2014), <https://www.orc.govt.nz/media/1664/dunedin-city-coastal-communities-hazard-summary.pdf>.
- 6 Donna Haraway, "Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W Moore (Oakland, CA: PM Press 2016), 34-76.
- 7 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Posthumanities, Vol. 27, ed. Cary Wolf (Minneapolis, MN, and London, UK: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
- 8 Dunedin School of Art, *The Complete Entanglement of Everything*, [https://issuu.com/dunedinschoolofart/docs/the\\_complete\\_entanglement\\_of\\_everything\\_exhibition](https://issuu.com/dunedinschoolofart/docs/the_complete_entanglement_of_everything_exhibition).
- 9 *Ibid.*, [2]-[6]. Bridie Lonie, catalogue essay.