Affective Poetics & Public Access: The Critical Challenges of Environmental Art

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At the beginning of the last century Franz Kafka proposed that art should work: 'like an axe, to break up the frozen sea inside us' (27 January 1904), a remark steeped in the legacy of romanticism in which the arts are regarded as powerful social agents with the capacity to transform hearts and minds. In the sphere of contemporary art, however, by the late 20th century the dominant critical consensus held such views to be essentially obsolete, despite the persistence of a countervailing tradition in which the legacy of romanticism was still evident in art itself. Though, perhaps ironically, Kafka's own works were being reassessed at the time for their ethical and political qualities (Deleuze & Guattari 1975), discourse on the arts, and especially critiques of contemporary visual art were in something of a postmodern cul-de-sac in which the idea of art as an agent of social change was seen as essentially naïve.

Notwithstanding the late 20th century anti-aesthetic tendencies in art privileging critique over affective poetics, in the context of a dominant late capitalist art market the fashion in art for ludic appropriations of mass media simulations did not seem likely as an agent of political change. There were, however, exceptions to these dominant critical and aesthetic positions, not least in the emergence of environmental art from the late sixties and early seventies. Nonetheless, environmental art was shaped by its historical and critical context insofar as it was imbued with a tension between what could be heuristically defined as a poetics of nature as against a more discursive critique of human relations with the non-human world. Such tensions have now been further complicated by the urgency of addressing global climate change and the attrition of biodiversity that have arguably become the most salient questions of our age, and have thus become tensions further exacerbated by a tendency to think of art as a means of proselytising the risks of ecological crisis.

Of course artists have long responded to the non-human world: from the cave images of prehistory, to broad successive legacies across most global cultures, including those of early modern Europe when landscape painting emerged in the art of the 17th century secular baroque and continued in romanticism and 19th century impressionism. Though 17th century landscape painting inaugurated a formal 'picturesque' aesthetic of the land it sought to represent, in turn, it has been argued, it also inaugurated culturally derivative views of nature that trivialised the nonhuman world itself (Callicott 137). One of the things differentiating contemporary environmental art from this tradition, however, is the way its artists often aimed to erode conventional distinctions between an essentially urban imaginary and whatever lay beyond it. Thus whilst nature was often represented traditionally as something which in Timothy Morton's phrase appeared, so to speak, 'over there' (Morton 2007), the tensions in environmental art began to reveal entangled connections between the human sense of 'here' and an imagined nonhuman 'there'.

Hence the traditional spatial model that first arose in Western classical antiquity in which the city as a civilisational core was defined in distinction from a peripheral world beyond was increasingly held up to scrutiny by environmental art (Williams (in press)). It has more recently begun to do this in ways that have contributed to a very gradual cultural shift towards an acknowledgement of how the world might be conceived as an interdependent global system incorporating both human and non-human ecologies.

Yet environmental art also continues to be bound by a critical dilemma in what for the sake of my argument I shall refer to heuristically as the 'slow art' of affective poetics, which is conflicted by the expediencies of a 'fast art' of public access, and hence to the aesthetic problem that I have identified as a major critical challenge to environmental art.

The Emergence of Environmental Art

Though the cultural origins of environmental critique clearly precede romanticism, the emergence of something like an environmental social movement was consolidated in the context of 18th and 19th century romanticism, particularly in England, Germany and America. During the 20th century environmentalism gradually gained social momentum, especially in America and Europe from the 1960s. And if the sociological origins of the environmental movement are too complex to pursue here, it is nonetheless clear that by the sixties and seventies especially, environmental art was a significant cultural agent in how the environmental movement gained a more central public role in the early 21st century.

In America the new land art of the 1960s was often constructed in deserts or old quarries a long way from urban centres, yet also came to the attention of people in big cities as artists presented their work through photo-documentation in galleries or publications. An example of such artists, and one of the most prominent of the time, was Robert Smithson who saw art as a way of reminding people of what he called 'the more infernal regions' on which the cities depended, and hence also a way of undermining the old notion of the urban as something arising in isolation from an uncivilised rural periphery. The 'slag heaps, strip mines, and polluted rivers', Smithson thought, were invisible to people in the cities because of:

> the great tendency toward idealism, both pure and abstract, society is confused as to what to do with such places. Nobody wants to go on a vacation to a garbage dump. Our land ethic, especially in that never-never land called the "art world" has become clouded with abstractions and concepts. (Holt 133)

Because Smithson's works were so distant from urban centres, and in any case were constructed on a massive scale that required a certain measure of distance to take in their entirety, they were usually seen from an aerial, photographic perspective from which viewers could make an imaginative leap into the vastness of rural space. There were also other clues to the works such as Smithson's comments on the facile abstractions of the art world that provided viewers with the cognitive connections between urban galleries and the materiality of the site-specificity of the artworks. Yet though the semiotics of photography opened an indexical connection between image and site, it could not be

experienced by the viewer as anything other than a kind of deferment of the material site itself. And if, on the one hand, this deferment could be seen to work in Smithson's interest in alerting the viewer to their distance from the rural contexts on which the cities depended, it also ran the risk of participating in the inevitable abstractions of representation to which the works were putatively opposed.

In Europe the leading example from this early period of environmental art was the German artist Joseph Beuys, a highly influential pioneer in the field of environmental aesthetics and one of the founders of the German Green party, who in the 1970s especially promoted the idea of the transformative power of the arts into what he called 'social sculpture': an emphasis on the kind of personal engagement with art that could, and he felt, should, reconfigure existing social and political relations. Despite his romantic view of art as a performative instrument of social transformation, however, there can be little doubt that Beuys' work became influential through its own peculiarly eloquent form of poetry that spoke most persuasively to artists and the cultural elite rather than the masses. Nonetheless, the notion of art as a process of social transformation was also an important premise of other post-war European art movements such as *Arte Povera* and *Fluxus,* and continued sporadically in the eighties, and even into the nineties when the critical persuasion that art was at best a fairly self-contained system of cultural appropriation was at its height.

In Australia there were several pioneering environmental artists in the late 1970s who worked with varied artistic strategies to convey a concern with the developing threats to Australian ecology. Some, such as Peter Dombrovskis chose landscape photography as a means to remind a largely urban Australian population of the forests and rivers most of them had never seen, and which were now often at risk. In particular, Dombrovskis' iconic photograph of *Rock Island Bend* in the Tasmanian Franklin River was the kind of image that could be adapted as 'fast art' used to great strategic effect by the environmentalist movement. First, as the image chosen by activists to prevent the damming of Tasmania's Franklin River by the Hydro-Electric Commission, and second, as the image chosen by the Australian Labor Party representing the need for electoral change to the kind of federal government that would protect the environment.[1] Domvroskis' photo was pivotal to both campaigns, and was a persuasive public environmental image that made a substantial contribution to saving the Franklin River, and which left its indelible mark on the political campaign that brought about a change of government.

If Dombrovskis' work was unusual to the extent that it played quite a direct role in a campaign for change in the political sphere, the work of other Australian artists such as Bonita Ely is still working its way more slowly into the public imagination. In 1980 Ely performed a work called *Murray River Punch*, designed as a 'homely' cooking demonstration in a city gallery when she boiled up a brew of the polluted components of the Murray–Darling River and asked her audience to try it. Though none in her audience was game enough to taste the stinking concoction, the central point about the risks to a river system crucial to millions of Australians was clear enough. Furthermore, the performative turn in her work, with its direct request for audience participation, introduced a shrewd way into the viewer's imagination and memory. Nearly three

decades later, Ely returned to photograph the Murray–Darling, and then later exhibited the images of its palpable deterioration, including in some instances the frightening imagery of near to complete ecological collapse.[2] Eventually in 2012 a Plan for the Murray–Darling Basin was signed into law by the federal government. And though in this case Ely's photographs did not contribute directly to the revaluation of a river system largely invisible from the perspective of the city, they do serve as an effective social document from the last thirty years that has tracked how gradual the response from the cities has been to the serious deterioration of a vital river system.

Other Australian environmental artists of this early period such as Jill Orr or John Wolseley also went out beyond the cities to engage imaginatively with the land, and then returned to exhibit their work in city museums and galleries. A recent study has shown that museums are rated very highly as institutions evoking public trust, ('Interconnections' 2008) and in the case of environmental art, museums and galleries have been essential as conduits of conveying the kind of poetic art less suited to urban space. The powerful images of Orr's *Bleeding Trees* performances, or the works on paper that John Wolseley had allowed to blow around and interact with the arid region of the Mallee are major works of art in the public realm, but are not public art as such. Nor do they provide a *fast art* track to public access. Rather they are early Australian examples of the kind of *slow art*, that though often intensely affective, has a less immediate, and less traceable impact than environmental public art that is unequivocally clear in its aims. Such artworks from, so to speak, the more poetic edge of the aesthetic spectrum then usually require the gallery or museum as the context of meaning, which for all the respect accrued to museums largely leaves them at the margins of the vast field of visual spectacle and powerful call of popular culture, which arguably constitutes a viewer with a more limited attention span than one engaged in the extended temporal values required of imaginative reflexivity.

The tensions between the countervailing cultural tendencies of affective poetics and public accessibility, which I have referred to heuristically here as slow as against fast environmental art, are in many ways commensurate with the wider questions of the benefits of public art as against the kind of art acquired by private ownership. The public museum plays a kind of intermediary role in such tensions, but as advocates of public art are often quick to point out, galleries are more the preserve of the middle class or cultural cognoscenti—and hence to those with the means to collect art, whereas public art addresses the domain of the street and the commons.

In order to become widely understood, or even publicly acceptable, however, public artworks often suffer from becoming lost in translation and are thus at risk of being reconfigured as readily decipherable public icons rather than primarily works of imagination or vision. It should also be kept in mind that such works are often recommended by the kind of commercial or civic committees which are far from averse to appealing to the lowest common denominator. This is evident from the many dubious examples of culturally 'enriching' objects so beloved by city councils as visible signs of the presence of the kind of 'creative class' which is now seen as crucial to sustaining economically successful cities (Florida 2005). In the context of environmental art,

however, the countervailing tensions of affective poetics and public accessibility have become more problematic since the question of the need for a public response to rapid environmental change is becoming unavoidable. Hence, we now face a cultural climate in which on the one hand, there is the kind of publicly accessible environmental art that speaks clearly to a wide range of people, but is often subject to didacticism or well-intentioned banality. And, on the other, the more aesthetically sophisticated works of the poetic imagination, which are nonetheless sometimes seen as eliding the ethical imperatives of publicly communicating the findings of science in an age of heightened environmental risk.

As many have argued, the main critical focus of contemporary art of the last decade has been focused on whether the aesthetics of cosmopolitan and migratory cultures can provide imaginative alternatives to the socio-economic imperatives of globalisation (Harris 2011; Belting 2011, Philipsen 2010). In this so-called turn to 'relationality' in art, it is argued that the artist is no longer at the centre of the work, but instead prioritises the viewers or participants. Leaving aside the validity of such critical claims, these artworks have largely focused on media such as film or web-based communications, and more recently on the cosmopolitan impulse in art responding to issues of human social justice such as global inequalities, itinerate workers or refugees (Papastergiadis 2012).

In one sense of course, art has always been socially relational, and it has been observed that Bourriaud's model of relationality underpinning such contemporary art discourse (1992) was theoretically quite limited (Bishop 2004, Martin 2007). What is less often noted, however, is that discussions of relationality in art constituted an almost exclusively anthropocentric discourse, and like the art associated with it, addresses globalisation from a cultural and socio-economic perspective rather than an environmental one (Williams (in press)). Environmental art on the other hand, like ecocriticism, at least attempts to move beyond the relentlessly anthropocentric debates of globalisation to engage with the communication of climate science and is shifting the critical ground towards the nascent cultural concept of shared human and nonhuman global ecologies.

To return to the question of the rhetorical and semiotic tensions within environmental art itself, there are certainly recent examples of art where environmental didacticism and a fairly formulaic approach to the 'communication' of science has been effective. The Harrison Studio's *Greenhouse Britain* 2007-2009 ('Harrison') for example, or the American *Watershed* Exhibition in 2011 ('Lampert') and *Green Patriot Posters* ('The Green Patriot') convey more graphically affective versions of the important, if dry, numerical data and climate graphs provided by science.

But perhaps the most outstanding recent example of simple, yet effective public environmental art was *Nuage Vert* at the Salmisaari urban coal burning power plant in Helsinki by Helen Evans & Heiko Hansen: the French artists He He ('Gravity'). During February 2008 the He He artists illuminated the toxic vapour cloud from the Helsinki plant with a powerful, bright green laser light that gradually grew less intense as it tracked how the public responded to the light by decreasing their electricity consumption and hence 'reducing' the green cloud of emissions. The ecological message of the

brilliant green laser was unequivocally clear for all to see since the unusual location of the plant in Helsinki's urban centre meant that everyone in the city could witness it. This was perhaps one of the most savvy examples of how artists can encourage a shared public response to pollution and environmental decay. The artwork was a visibly active conduit to the public imagination that eventually led to a more environmentally responsive approach by the energy company running the plant.[3]

Yet it should also be noted that there is some evidence to suggest that the cultural capacity for what environmental planners call 'ecological modernization' is stronger in Northern Europe than in many other places, since several cross-national surveys suggest that it is a region characterised by 'a widespread lay respect for science and extensive public endorsement of environmental protection' that are regarded as conducive to the 'cultural potential to pursue ecological modernization' (Cohen 149)[4]. Ecological modernisation is a highly variable and contestable field shaped significantly by its specific socio-political context (Christoff 1996), and like the disseminating scientific information on climate science itself, is hardly discursively neutral (Cavello 2007). So while public art as a social conduit of environmental awareness in developed European countries is clearly worthwhile especially if it leads to the kind of mitigation strategies evident in Helsinki, the environmental impact of carbon fuel consumption on the global poor will be more immediate and profound than populations in wealthy countries. And this is as much an issue in the developed countries as it is elsewhere since 'those who contribute least to global warming are both facing the most severe consequences and have the least capacity to cope' (Burgmann & Baer 3).

This global perspective is particularly evident in Robin Eckersley's emphasis on the field of 'secondary injustices' produced by market-based mitigation strategies such as carbon trading or offsets. Eckersley acknowledges that 'only the state can tackle the ecological myopia of the market' (Eckersley 82), yet she also sees that all nation states are committed to growth in ways that are bound up with international capital, and these are the crucial 'contradictory imperatives' that prevent decisive action on the global mitigation of climate change (Eckersley 102).

This kind of political conundrum has been one of the motivations behind environmental public artworks with a global perspective such as in 2010 in the 350° eARTH *Art for the Sky* ('Dancer') project in 16 countries across the world ('eARTH') which is part of the 350.org organisation led by Bill McKibben. Though the largely collaborative works for this project could hardly be described as great works of art, they managed nonetheless to engage thousands of people round the world in effective community arts action to raise awareness about global climate change. The artworks in the 350° project were photographed from satellites in space before being installed on the project website, hence providing a visual global perspective in response to the call from the IPCC to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to 350 parts per million as the safe upper limit. To put this into perspective, if we take Crutzen and Stoemer's notion of the late 18th century as the advent of the anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoemer 2000), the CO_2 levels then were 275 parts per million, whereas now it appears we will shortly exceed 400 parts per million.[5] The artworks in the *Art for the Sky* project engaged the participation of

children organised in formation to depict images read by the global satellites. In Puerto Rico for example, children formed the outlines of a house overcome by the ocean with an alarmed figure calling for help: a simple enough message, and one with enough factual basis as a viable future scenario to make quibbling about its aesthetic limitations seem critically parsimonious. Yet it does raise the question of why art with wide public appeal, as against the qualities we recognise as necessary conditions of significant art, need be mutually exclusive.

I am not attempting to go out on philosophically thin ice here by seeking to define axiomatic aesthetic qualities constituting art in the Kantian sense of an abstract category beyond any kind of social use value, but simply asking why art recognised as critically significant need necessarily be less publicly persuasive than art forms more or less commensurate with the language of advertising insofar as they are primarily merely vehicles for a targeted message.

A case in point of the type of fast 'message' art that in my view at least simply fails to be imaginatively compelling is Paul Bonomini's public sculpture *WEEE Man* 2008 (Waste Electric and Electronic Equipment). Located at the Eden Project in Cornwall, UK, it is made entirely of the electrical waste products estimated as commensurate with those used in the life of an average British household. Weighing 3.3 tonnes and standing seven metres high, the figure looms over the viewer like an oversized reject from the Terminator film franchise, or possibly more like a robot rejected from casting. That this gormless figure is the antithesis of humanist values of beauty and proportion is, of course, the main point; since it is difficult to imagine anyone not put off by the grotesque smile comprised of computer mice. He looks both stupid and mean, so how can we prevent such monsters of waste from invading our world? Simple, says the artist, stop buying cheap products, recycle them, or better still fix them ('WEEE'). The message can be glimpsed in a second, and though recycling spent equipment is clearly a good idea, the question still remains whether this big ugly object has the power to resonate in the mind, or more to the point: to encourage recycling or to persuade people to buy more expensive goods, or even less likely, to inspire people to learn enough about electronics to fix their broken appliances.

This is not to suggest that art needs to be complex or 'difficult' in order to succeed, as is clear from artist John Quigley's collaboration in the Arctic with Greenpeace *Melting Vitruvian Man 2011* ('Giant') a massive reconfiguration of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (1490) bearing the unequivocal message that the humanist image of man as the measure, and measurer, of all things is being eroded by global climate change. Yet though the message is direct, it is visually compelling whilst leaving a reflective space for implied narratives. The same holds for a photographic work by the American artist Chris Jordan's *Message from the Gyre 2009* ('Jordan') which actually proclaims itself as a message.

Yet the message comes to the city from the distant Pacific gyre, or more accurately from the massive islands of plastic rubbish in the gyre. The messenger, as such, is a nonhuman agent: the corpse of a young Laysan albatross with a belly incongruously full of plastic

objects. Hence the message recorded by Jordan is at once silent and powerful, and again leaves open a slower space for reflection than the initial shock inaugurated by the incongruousness of the image.

Both these examples came into the media and gallery spaces of the cities from distant parts of the earth, though a third example of environmental messages through art requiring the context of city galleries or media access responds to sites within cities themselves. The international art collective Superflex made the video *Flooded McDonalds* in 2009, which like *Melting Vitruvian Man* or *Message from the Gyre,* makes its point directly enough, though it is sustained in a 20-minute narrative video loop buoyed along by its humour ('Superflex'). It is the gradual duration of the unexpected: the flooding of the ubiquitous fast-food outlet that allows the viewer to gradually draw inferences between consumption, climate change and sea-level rise (Williams 2012). And whilst neither *Flooded McDonalds* or *Message from the Gyre* are as explicitly didactic as the monumental compilation of waste in the WEEE man, they arguably offer a more effectively subversive means of undermining faith in conspicuous consumption.

If more sophisticated environmental artworks still remain in the relatively exclusive social domains of contemporary art galleries, from the early 21st century there have been a number of major exhibitions that have gradually drawn greater public attention to what could be called the *slow art* of imaginative persuasion. That is to say, towards art that is perhaps slow to reach a wider public, yet resonates for some time in the mind and feelings, and hence may have longer, and deeper, effects. The tensions between such 'slow' art and the escalating temporal imperative to communicate the implications of climate change, in short: the question of which public is being served, and for which purpose, are crucial for ecocritics and cultural ecologists alike. *Slow art* leaves illustrative or didactic responses to environment and ecology far behind, and has stimulated a more serious body of ecocritical reflections and cultural critique. This includes published responses to a growing number of significant exhibitions of environmental art that have arisen in recent years.

In the USA, major exhibitions were held in Cincinnati (2002), Chicago (2005), and Colorado (2007). In Europe similar exhibitions were held in Oslo in 2007, and in London in 2009 when the Barbicon Gallery showed *Radical Nature: art and architecture for a changing planet 1969-2009*. This was followed by *Earth* at the Royal Academy in London, where the *Cape Farewell* project continued to be the most innovative collaborative project in the international context ('Buckland'). In Norway *RETHINK: contemporary art and climate change* was exhibited to coincide with the 2009 international climate summit in Copenhagen. In Australia, the first such exhibition of this kind *HEAT: Art and Climate Change* at RMIT Gallery in 2008 had a significant public impact, and was followed by *The Ecologies Project* exhibition at Monash University in the same year. Like the HEAT exhibition in Melbourne, in 2010 *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World* showed at the MCA in Sydney and also had a considerable public impact, while in the same year a number of environmental issues were raised in major Asian exhibitions such as *Talks Between Trees* in Shenzen, *Going Green* in Taiwan and *Sensing Nature* in Tokyo. As this brief survey of the development of recent environmental

art in galleries indicates, by the second decade of the 21st century environmental art has developed significant global momentum as an effective cultural response to the imperatives of global climate change and loss of biodiversity. Such exhibitions are also the keystones of affective spatial poetics, and it is by no means a simple matter to bring them out of the gallery and into the wider public sphere.

An interesting contemporary case in point of attempts to bring this momentum in *slow* environmental art out of the gallery and into public space is the Australian based project: *Spatial Dialogues: Public Art and Climate Change.* This international art project was funded by the Australia Research Council (ARC) and two high profile companies: *Grocon* (Australia's leading private construction and development company) and *Fairfax Media* (Australasia's leading print and online digital media company with *The Age* newspaper as its flagship publication).

The project aims to initiate environmental and aesthetic dialogues between Australian and Asian artists on the social and cultural significance of water in three major cities in the Asia–Pacific region: Melbourne, Shanghai and Tokyo. It is an ambitious project with a local team of three artists and three cultural theorists, and well-funded by the ARC and the two companies that were interested in the kind of art that reflected their own green business agendas. Yet from the outset the artists encountered many of the challenges of bringing environmental art into public space.

Fig. 1 Spatial Dialogues Project: Dominic Redfern video Fairfax Media House, Melbourne, 2012

The project was aimed initially to provide artworks for the large public screen on the headquarters of *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne's CBD. *Media House* was constructed by Grocon in 2009 with a five green star rating. Grocon were generously supportive of what they saw as the kind of sophisticated environmental and Fairfax was also generous in its commitment to offer the project 5% of the screen time for videos, sound art, and some possible sculptural components near the screen. The 5% time allocation however, came in short bursts of 'media time' rather than a concept of time better suited to art, which the main video artist on the project, Dominic Redfern, soon realised was not well-aligned with his approach to environmental art. Redfern's videos were diverse, some were sequences of life on rivers in the three cities, some of floods, and other more improvisational works in which the lens slowly scrutinised small patches of earth or water. They aimed at the kind of visual poetics that require time and reflection, hence to find that the media company's sense of generosity with time meant a five to fifteen second 'gap' in the screen's content, sometimes outside business hours when the CBD was quiet, left the project's team with the question of entirely reshaping the art to fit the site, or thinking of alternative strategies.

Fig. 2 Spatial Dialogues Project
Sonic Artists Philip Samartzis and
Haco, Yarra River bank,
Melbourne, 2012

Fairfax's schedule for the screen also had an impact on the evocative sound works by Philip Samartzis, which were planned to be accessible to the public via mobile phones in tandem with the video works on the screen. Though screens have been active in providing new forms of social networks, the short and relatively disconnected moments of media time common to screens large and small, also arguably constitute viewers with a more limited attention span than those engaged in the extended temporal values required of imaginative reflexivity. And though the Fairfax screen was not an advertising space, its images are not essentially at odds with screens typically replete with images of nature as a means of manufacturing desire for objects of consumption: a vibrant semiotic field which environmental art must acknowledge, if only by default, as a point of departure. In the *Spatial Dialogues* project videos and images did appear on the public screen, but only in very short sequences which severely curtailed the time available to synchronise the sound with the videos, and from there to social network systems.

Hence, despite the goodwill of the industry partners there was a clear mismatch between the mode of spectatorship expected of a public screen owned by a major media company and the more ambient claims of art. An alternative to the screen was developed as an interdisciplinary public artwork by the Yarra River: *Drowned Worlds,* in which a range of video and sound equipment afforded the flexibility needed by the artists, including a major sound artist from Tokyo, Haco. The sound compositions drew on recorded sounds from the three major rivers in Melbourne, Tokyo and Shanghai, thus forming an acoustic confluence drawing attention to the water that effectively forms a silent 'background' to urban life in the region.

Fig. 3 Spatial Dialogues Project *Drowned Worlds* Sand Bag installation by Simon Perry, Yarra River bank, Melbourne, 2012

As the liquid sound reverberated along the Yarra riverbank, Dominic Redfern scooped out objects floating on the surface of the river, recording them in minute detail with magnifying lenses in a stream of imagery unfolding simultaneously on a portable screen brought to the riverbank.

Next to the videos and sounds of the river, the sculptor Simon Perry mobilised a team to construct a massive chevron of sand bags as a sign that as global sea levels rise a time would come when the river would exceed its banks.

During the performances by the river a video of a slowly dripping drop of water on the Media House screen nearby suggested melting ice.

Fig. 4 Spatial Dialogues *Drowned World* Sand Bag installation by Simon Perry, Yarra River bank, Melbourne, 2012

This combination of dramatic sculpture, sounds and detailed imagery was highly effective collaborative artwork that reflected on human relations with the life of rivers whilst also responding to their non-human agency. Yet it was also clear that the poetic intensity and performative spontaneity of *Drowned Worlds* would have been out of place on the public screen of leading media company.

In Shanghai, the project found access to public screens difficult since they are almost entirely devoted to commercial advertising, and any exceptions to this requires formal permission from the Communist Party of China which is difficult for outsiders to access. So alternative strategies for an art event near a river are being planned with a team of artists from Shanghai University.

The Communist Party of China fully acknowledges the problem of climate change and has serious concerns about environmental pollution, and this has been reflected in their recent encouragement of environmental art. In 2009, for example, the Party gave permission to a major environmental artwork by the Chinese artist Yong Liang Yang, who adapts traditional *Shan Shui* landscape painting in contemporary works exploring the impact of pollution and global climate change. These works were developed to form the basis of an animated film version played on a big public screen at People Square Subway Station in Beijing, where air pollution is visibly present. The work may now be accessed on handheld screens along with other examples of 'virtual' *Shan Shui* accessed globally on *You Tube*. Meanwhile the *Spatial Dialogues* project continues to engage with strategies to address the tensions of what I have been referring to as *slow* art as against the public accessibility of *fast* art in Melbourne and Shanghai, and most recently with video, sound and performance art emerging from a shipping container in central Tokyo.

In all of these recent innovations, however, it is clear that art of any imaginative depth, range or reflectivity required of the poetic must first come to terms with the intransigent contingencies of urban space before entering the public imaginary.

Perhaps one of the next significant challenges for environmental artists is the question of how to reach a global public without compromising what Kafka recognised as the

capacity of art to transform the way we see the world. Most of us now live in cities, including the massive global cities that continue to inflict serious damage on regional and global ecologies and which, in turn, push the cities closer to crises in the supply of natural 'resources'. Hence another significant challenge for environmental art lies in whether artists might find pathways through the deep cultural misconception that human cities, like humans themselves, may flourish as something that is somehow independent of complex global ecologies. As David Harvey is surely correct to observe, there is now nowhere in global space that is not subject to regimes of late capitalism (Harvey 2006), so in this sense, environmental art is at the cutting edge of that crucial social space where the kind of quotidian shifts in subjectivity shaped by cultural values meets the politics of social change.

While affirming the contemporary significance of ecological art, this paper concludes with a consideration of one of the most difficult challenge it faces, namely the development of strategies for confronting the relentless anthropocentrism of climate change discourse. It has recently begun to do this in ways that have contributed to a slow, and very gradual cultural shift in how the world might be conceived as an interdependent global system incorporating both human and non-human ecologies. There are no fast track answers to how environmental art might best engage with the discourses of climate change, but outlining some of the cultural challenges at least begins to define the problems artists are likely to encounter, and the critical grounds for further debate.

NOTES

[1] Ro*ck Island Bend* was published in *The Herald* just before the federal election of 1983 with the caption 'Would you vote for a party that would destroy this?' The leader of the Australian Labor Party, Bob Hawke, had made an electoral promise that the Franklin River would be saved if a Labor government was elected, a promise ratified following the party's electoral success.

[2] Ely's pioneering early works were exhibited alongside her recent works in '*HEAT: art & climate change*' at RMIT Gallery, 2008: the first major international exhibition of its kind in Australia.

[3] *Helsingin Energia* is now at the forefront of energy companies responding to environmental concerns by providing updates about energy consumption on-line.

[4] Cohen draws his data from the Euro-barometer, a survey interviewing c.13,000 people in 12 EU countries in November 1992; The World Values Survey of 1995-1997 (55 countries), and the 1993 iteration of the International Social Survey Programme (Environment).

[5] The US National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration records an increase in parts per million from 393.72 in June 2011, to 398.58 in June 2013.

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