



# ALTERN ECOLOGIES

Emergent Perspectives on the Ecological Threshold  
at the 55th Venice Biennale

Altern Ecologies  
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Threshold at the 55th Venice Biennale

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at the 55th Venice Biennale

Edited by Taru Elfving & Terike Haapoja

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finland

ACADEMY  
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X UNIVERSITY OF  
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## MATTERS OF LIVING

Henk Slager

In the fall of 2011, the Aalto Pavilion, the building where Finland has presented its contribution to the Venice Biennale since 1956, found itself in a sudden clash with nature. A violent storm uprooted a tree adjacent to the Pavilion; the tree fell and smashed the wooden structure almost entirely. The timing chosen by nature proved to be extraordinarily perfect: the collision between art and nature so accidental at first sight turned out to coincide with an emergent paradigm shift – designated later as the Speculative Turn – in the then current thought about representation and the ecological environment.

This philosophical landslide intending a resolute end to the prevailing anthropocentric worldview has been further articulated in various topical, philosophical movements such as Object-Oriented Ontology, Speculative Realism, and New Materialism. Critical movements sharing at least one decisive perspective: that of human finitude. Thinkers partaking in these movements (such as Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux) argued that philosophy should again be open to a concrete materiality. Accordingly, a form of speculation should be developed disregarding Kant's cognitive perception, where the presence of objects without intervention of human beings could be assumed as a possibility. In this epistemology, human beings are eventually no more than objects amidst many other, similar, agency-based objects: objects demonstrating – for example through contingent behavior – that they no longer want to be subordinated to instrumental reason directed towards economical depletion and reification.

Coextensive to this, the discourse at the beginning of the second decade of the millennium is defined by the introduction of the concept of 'Anthropocene,' indicating the most recent period on the geological time scale; a period starting with industrial revolution lasting no longer than two hundred years on a scale of six billion years. Yet, there is an awareness of the prominent role of human beings in bringing about planetary transformations such as the unification of ecosystems and the vanishing of biodiversity. Consequently, the Anthropocene discussion will require experimental, aesthetic approaches able to critically question the extinction of species and the neo-liberal commodification of nature by current fossil-fuel capitalism.

In the curatorial narrative of *Falling Trees*, developed by Gruppo 111 as the Finnish contribution to the 2013 Venice Biennale, the contingency of an event and the debate on matters of living referred to above are connected strategically. In addition, a two-day symposium, *A Counter Order of Things*, was organized to further study the topics

raised by the curatorial concept. The symposium's title was inspired by Foucault, who fifty years ago predicted the erasure of the subject in *The Order of Things*. Foucault also pointed to the role of classifying reason and Linnaeus's "tree of taxonomical knowledge" in the supremacy of human kind against all other entities. Now, half a century later, it is exactly this tree that is being attacked and undermined to the depth of its metaphysical roots by the encroaching forces of speculative realism, ecosophical activism, object-oriented ontology, elementary politics, and post-humanism. All of these forces seem to be putting a halt to an anthropocentric perspective of instrumental restraint while demanding a different way of thinking related to an egalitarian being-in-the-world. How could we visualize such a form of thinking in art? In order to respond to that question, the symposium *A Counter Order of Things* adopted four perspectives:

1. Eclipse of the Animal: where Terike Haapoja discussed the impact of science on our view of nature as well as the possibility of an interspecies political community. Anselm Franke rethought the notion and tradition of modernity by taking a closer look at Animism at its rejected outside.
2. Action as Form: where Gerald Raunig provided a Guattarian view on a revolution taking place on the molecular level; and Frans Jacobi analyzed a number of topical case-studies of aesthetic activism.
3. Politics of Ecology: where Tuula Närhinen endeavored to find new ways of presenting the "non-human condition"; and TJ Demos reassessed the strategic deployment of the concept of "Displacement" from an ecological point of view.
4. Material Practices: where two concrete research practices were discussed further: Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan's "Drifting Studio Practice" and Ursula Biemann's "Deep Weather," her contribution to the Maldives Pavilion.

The symposium yielded a variety of daring questions, answers, and perspectives. The resultant publication, *Altern Ecologies*, consists of selected articles from the symposium as well as project presentations of related art works from the 2013 Venice Biennale, aiming to provide a constructive impetus to how artists could envision novel states of matter and alternative forms of ecology. *Altern Ecologies* reveals novel, inclusive assemblies of humans and non-humans, new modes of governance wherein sustainability, the defense of biodiversity, and the right of multitudinous life forms could be considered anew.

## ALTERN ECOLOGIES – BIENNALE WITHIN THE BIENNALE

Taru Elfving

At the opening of the Venice Biennale in 2013, there were reports on the “ecological micro-trend” amongst the exhibitions. Sure enough, this appeared as a micro-trend for better and for worse: responses to the environmental urgencies still accounted for only a fragment within the expansive cacophony of the Biennale, yet they could also be seen as successfully activating a range of micro-political tactics. As such they appeared to grow as islands from within different corners of the complex field that is contemporary art, creating new flows of resonance across it. This does not constitute a ‘trend’ any more than climate change does. *Altern Ecologies* sets out to argue why it should not, and cannot, be ‘consumed’. The tendency to capture emerging artistic and conceptual phenomena and capitalize on them across various strata of the art economy – from the market to public institutions, knowledge production and education – is implicated in the very structures that need to be challenged in the face of the climate crisis.

Writing this introduction right after the opening of the 2015 edition of the Biennale, I am confident that this archipelago of diverse islands will keep on rising and resisting all attempts at stratification into ‘isms’ of any sort. Rather it continues to seep into and echo within various politics, aesthetics, materialities, and imaginaries. And so it should, if we take seriously the warnings that the year of the next Biennale, 2017, will mark the turning point in the battle to get fossil fuel emissions under control and ward off dangerous levels of warming. As Naomi Klein warns in her recent book *This Changes Everything*, “we have reached what some activists have started calling ‘Decade Zero’ of the climate crisis: we either change now or we lose our chance.”<sup>1</sup>

The state of emergency caused by the environmental crisis has drawn forth the necessity to re-evaluate the centres of gravity in our world, including the means and ends of the arts. A number of exhibitions, seminars and individual works at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013 resonated with this call for change. Woven through the official thematics, this web of thought can be seen as a biennale within the biennale, reflecting the main event and the world around it while giving rise to an emergent discourse focused on our relationship with the non-human world.

The *Altern Ecologies* anthology sets out to trace this emergence within the polyphonic maze that is the Venice Biennale. Growing out of the conversations following the *Counter Order of Things* symposium<sup>2</sup>

organized in connection with the *Falling Trees* exhibition in the Nordic and Finnish Pavilions in 2013, the anthology includes a selection of presentations from the symposium. A number of national pavilions from the 2013 edition of the Biennale have also been invited to present their exhibitions alongside these commissioned articles. This mapping, while not a comprehensive catalogue, aims to shed light on the diverse yet mutually resonant critical responses to the current unsustainable order of things. Together the articles and presentations reflect as well as act out various strands of thought arising from and addressing the ecological threshold in the present.

What *Altern Ecologies* suggests is that the discussed diverse contemporary art practices do not so much form their own ecology, that is, a specific mode of study of interactions among organisms and their environment. Rather, the wide range of artistic research presented here can be seen to offer a multitude of contributions and a complex set of approaches to ecology as a field cutting across numerous interacting disciplines as well as scales, where transformation is not limited to linear trajectories, nor can changes be mapped with a focus on, for example, distinct species alone. Contemporary art can rise to this challenge with its particular sensibilities to and means of addressing the emergent while weaving unorthodox connections into visibility. As Anselm Franke states here in an interview about art and ecology, “art has become an unbounded field” that has the “power to destabilize our frames of perception”.

Rather than working around a single organizing principle, the contributions to this book articulate a number of questions, perspectives and positions. The range of approaches moves across not only disciplinary and geographical boundaries but also various spatial and temporal scales. The diverse modes of responses form a prism through which we can begin to fathom the complexity of the task at stake. They draw into visibility myriad entanglements of various forces – environmental, economic, cultural, political, historical. Moreover, the anthology emphasizes that these artistic approaches do not cancel each other out even when appearing to be mutually incompatible. Presented as ‘altern’ – alternating or alternative to each other – they appear as singular and irreducible. Unlike concepts such as ‘subaltern’, which refers to subordination, ‘altern’ cannot be reduced to difference or the other within binary logic. Yet these altern ecologies do rub against and can affect one another, as they do in this anthology, opening further questions and potential for emergence – of thinking, speaking, imag(in)ing otherwise.

The urgency to unhinge the notion of the other is one of the critical threads woven through the anthology. The notion cannot be thoroughly challenged by, for example, interspecies dialogue without taking into account the binary logic at the foundations of Western humanism as exposed by decades of feminist, queer and post-colonial critique.

The project of de-centring the human carries the risk of conveniently forgetting the yet-unresolved complexities within the category of the human itself. The speculative turn, outlined by Henk Slager in his foreword, does not truly shake the ground upon which anthropocentric logic is built, if it fails to address the divides of matter and meaning, nature and culture, body and mind that continue to also ‘other’ large parts of humanity.

As Naomi Klein observes, human rights and emancipation movements have “fought valiantly against industrial capitalism’s treatment of whole categories of our species as human sacrifice zones, no more deserving of rights than raw commodities”, while they have also “identified the parallels between the economic model’s abuse of the natural world and its abuse of human beings”. Yet, these struggles also show that “sharing legal status is one thing; sharing resources quite another,” Klein reminds us.<sup>3</sup>

In the following articles, the legal potential and urgency to rethink rights crops up repeatedly in a number of critical contexts. What emerges is a shared understanding that the law has to be pushed now beyond the distinction pointed out by Klein, while the whole notion of resources has to be thoroughly reconceptualized. As Ursula Biemann writes, we need to “consider legal potential that lies beyond both property rights and human-centric laws”, while recognizing that human rights and the rights of nature are profoundly entangled.

Terike Haapoja notes in her conversation with Franke that within contemporary art “an ethical project for the other (the excluded, the discriminated, the underrepresented) is often realized by talking on its behalf.” Moreover, she rightly points out that this problematic is implicit also here in *Altern Ecologies*, where “much of the works and essays by western, academic, Caucasian artists and scholars deal with the rights of nature, other species or non-western indigenous peoples.” As a partial answer to this, Franke stresses the importance of focusing on the frames of the exclusions and representations: “to make them explicit, because then they become negotiable”. This is what the anthology does indeed aim to do.

A case in point here is the Maldives, investigated and referred to by a number of contributors to the anthology. Taking the forecast dissolution of the islands of the Maldives as the focus of their research, Hanna Husberg and Laura McLean trace in the *Contingent Movements Archive* project the consequences of this crisis of representation for human subjects as well as legal and knowledge systems, across local and global scales. Meanwhile, in his critical discussion about various representations of the Maldives, T. J. Demos points out that “migration narratives tend to minimize the resilience of both political agency and climate justice in the present”. The question is not only what, but how to learn from the global South or from indigenous cultures. The same thus applies to non-human others.

The contributions to this book perform and make tangible the difficulties in overcoming numerous hierarchies, norms and modes of othering built into our tools, all rooted in the nature-culture binary. Examination of methods and processes of their re-production, however, do create momentary openings, where customary human perspective wavers and facts may as well be fables. Rather than offering all-encompassing counter-models as such, they insist on unpacking, step by step, the mesh of relations that uphold and may potentially undo the order(s) in need of reworking. For example, Tuula Närhinen’s work explores the limits of photography and unveils the inherent human gaze in the medium. She describes her *Animal Cameras* project as “a model of otherness which shows that “objective” (non-human) depiction of nature is a human construction.”

A number of the artistic projects presented here challenge the dualist distinction between matter and meaning. In the work of Antti Laitinen the search for control and order through reconstruction reveals its absurdity and, in Harri Laakso’s words, goes so far as to threaten with “the danger of loss of reason”. Haapoja, then again, works at the intersections of human, non-human and mechanical systems, towards “a concept of a world not structured by subjective human minds surrounded by mute objects but of a world of relations and meaning”. Meanwhile Simryn Gill’s practice traces, as Catherine de Zegher writes, the radicality and indeterminacy in the present and the everyday, suggesting “a cyclic instead of a linear world view”. The human subject, in its actions and points of view, appears fully immersed within a world it cannot master.

The Venice Biennale, and especially the Giardini at its heart, continues to reproduce the world order built on the political, economic and cultural legacies of colonial history, and its deep-rooted inclusions and exclusions. Here environmental questions are revealed to be thoroughly entangled with the other forces at play. The Biennale thus presents a fertile ground for critical artistic investigations and interventions, albeit one that in its embrace of the multiplicity of voices also can suffocate them. Moreover, each act, however critical, is implicated in the reinforcement of the existing structures. This becomes at times painfully tangible in the Biennale and can be, therefore, opened for debate.

This is what the Greek Pavilion succeeded in doing with the work of Stefanos Tsivopoulos, which examined the notion of value. The exhibition called attention to the urgency “to transform our ideas and policies concerning global precariousness, sustainability and interdependence,” writes the curator Syrago Tsiara. Its vast collection of alternative exchange systems laid bare the spectrum of possibilities that are not mere utopias but already active in the present. The project unlocked a Pandora’s box of further questions, yet to be addressed – regarding the impact of these initiatives and proposals on the founding structures of the nation state and, for example, social welfare.

What rises out of the rubble, after the crisis? Is complete reinvention possible? These are questions encapsulated in the work of Alfredo Jaar and haunting many of the projects in *Altern Ecologies*. Writing on the Biennale, Jacques Rancière notes that the arts can be seen to “play a role as free zones where questions about the world declared obsolete once and for all in the sphere of official politics can circulate freely.”<sup>4</sup> This freedom is not to be taken lightly. As Jaar argues, “artists create models of thinking the world” and should not merely represent its imbalances.

Not only the ends but also the artistic means need to be reconsidered in the face of the current crisis, as causal relations falter and coordinates for centring our experiences and perceptions shatter across geographical and temporal plateaus. Art can contribute to “conveying the immaterial and somewhat spectral nature of climate change,” argues Biemann. Yet alongside a number of other writers here, she recognizes the need to rethink aesthetics and to invent new modes of communication. Furthermore, as Demos writes, climate change must be considered as “part of a “web of vectors” that exert force in different directions and open up various sites of agency depending on the situation.”

Rather than countering the hegemonic order(s), what appears to be needed is an attempt to work across different registers, scales, languages – to be ‘out of order’. This may be a way to escape persistent attempts at capitalization and trendization, while it also challenges existing models of politics and ethics. The emergent archipelago of *altern*, singular voices and views subtly yet persistently refuses to fit into the structures within which it operates. It therefore also requires a novel means of navigation in order to prevent the marginalization of it as mere isolated islands. *Altern Ecologies* takes tentative steps towards following the flows that form this archipelago in response to shared urgencies. It gestures towards the future, but is rooted in the present – understanding the present as always ‘future present’, as acts that shape what is to come. It emphasizes that thought and knowledge emerging in contemporary art here and now are not predetermined in a teleological lineage, yet they do have impacts and implications that must be reckoned with.

<sup>1</sup> Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*. Capitalism VS. The Climate (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 23-4.

<sup>2</sup> The symposium was organised in Venice on 25-26th October 2013 by the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts / University of the Arts Helsinki in collaboration with Frame Contemporary Art Finland, IUAV University of Venice, and EARN (European Artistic Research Network).

<sup>3</sup> Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 454.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Rancière, “An Unsinkable Island?,” in *Alfredo Jaar. Venezia Venezia* (New York: Actar Publishers, 2013).



## A PAVILION OF SPECIES

Terike Haapoja

Recent decades have witnessed growing critique towards the modernist nation-state ideology as is it represented at the Venice Biennale. The emergence of post-colonial discourses has made visible the historical power structures that still underlie the seemingly neutral organization of states, and how these political power balances still continue to affect the practices of art and international politics today. The notion of a nation as a homogenous cultural entity has been widely criticized, prompting discussion on the ways in which identities and differences are produced and sustained in society. Even the concept of a “state” cannot be taken for granted, as state borders merely reflect a current status quo in the international political power balance, and not any permanent order. The structures of exclusion (of identities, of peoples) are as integral to the construct of the state as are its structures of inclusion, and thus unrecognized states, such as Palestine, or stateless people, such as the Roma, constantly remind us of the inherent limits of the whole nation-state construct.

At the Venice Biennale these realities have invited more flexible ways of dealing with each country’s “national” representation, as exemplified by Germany and France swapping pavilions in 2013. The idea of a nation seems to be more a springboard for examining the problematics of inclusion and exclusion and the politics of identity than any fixed identity.

There is, however, a more fundamental exclusion at the heart of the modern state. The modern state is an anthropocentric construct, with the relationship between the citizen and the state forming its core. An important – perhaps the most important – function of the state is its monopoly on violence for the alleged good of protecting its subjects. Still, who or what is deemed such a subject has always been under debate.

Modern law divides the world into two categories, that of legal objects and legal persons. This divide splits the world into two categories of beings, of which the first have inherent rights that are born out of their natural needs, while the latter are destined to only have instrumental value, determined by their use in the service of the first. In today’s democracies, every human being is born into the category of legal persons, which is shared with other human-made constructs that can practice ownership, such as corporations, associations or states. The non-human world in all its diversity is destined to stay on the other side of the divide, as merely an object of ownership, exchange and control.

The history of exclusion of groups of people from the category of legal persons is well known. Women, children and enslaved people have all once been considered “things” whose worth and rights have been decided based on the evaluation of their “owners”. The struggle for emancipation and civil rights has been the battle of the excluded to penetrate the wall between subjects and things, and to become included in the category of legal persons with legal rights. As legal persons, these people have become visible to the law as victims and plaintiffs in cases concerning their wellbeing, and thus have had the opportunity to seek the state’s protection and liberty.

Today, the notion of universal human rights is widely acknowledged, even if those rights are not always respected. Still, history’s emancipation struggles have left the underlying structure of exclusion itself untouched; in the eyes of law the world is still divided into objects and things. This boundary, dividing the world into the sphere of the human and the non-human has, in fact, been cited as an argument against legalized discrimination. Just as the exclusion of oppressed people has been justified by claims of them being less human, the battle for their rights has been fought by asserting, in contrast, their full humanity.

At the same time we have arrived at a point where all evidence points to the conceptual boundary between humans and other species as being unfounded. No science supports the claim of an essential difference between humans and non-humans: in fact, the more research is carried out, the more evidence is accrued attesting to non-human consciousness, emotional and social capacity, tool-making, cultures and languages – all qualities that have once been said to define the superiority of humanity. Many contemporary fields of philosophy are conceptualizing the interconnectedness of human culture with the world in which it is immersed. These theories are starting to introduce fissures in the two-world divide within law, where multiple initiatives in the field of animal rights and nature rights are questioning the justification for treating non-humans legally as things.

In the face of the human-caused environmental crises that are threatening the existence of the majority of the world’s species, humans included, it is no longer possible to ignore the tragic consequences of the human-centered traditions of western modernism. Mass extinctions of species and collapses of ecosystems seem to shout out the same protest: “We are not things. We have agency”. This biological reality is thus challenging the fault at the core of the concept of the modern state, the division of the world into persons and things, humans and non-humans, abusers and the abused. Like groups of people before, the excluded in society, the non-human world that supports all human life, is now becoming visible, declaring its agency and autonomy.

Like the modern state, also the Giardini at the Venice Biennale is immersed in the context of the non-human world. This context has for decades been invisible to the discourses of rights, politics and



agency in which art exhibitions have been engaged. Now, this surrounding reality is becoming visible also to the art world. The previously mute and still backdrop that has been relegated to invisibility behind human constructs is suddenly becoming alive, being inhabited by creatures of their own will, of their own agencies, of their own approaches to the noisy bipedal mammals that biannually enter their world.

*Altern Ecologies* introduces a network of artists within the 55th Venice Biennale that base their practice on this breaking down of boundaries between the human and the non-human world. Thus this publication introduces a new biennale within the official biennale, a parasitic exhibition of approaches that are connected both thematically and physically to the pavilion of species they inhabit. Hopefully this publication will take us one step closer to the recognition of the multiplicity of co-habitants in our society.

Pavilion Of Chile

**ALFREDO JAAR**

Venezia, Venezia



Alfredo Jaar  
*Venezia, Venezia, 2013*

Lightbox with black and white  
transparency

Photograph: *Milan, 1946: Lucio  
Fontana visits his studio on his  
return from Argentina* © Archivi  
Farabola

Metal pool, 1:60 resin model  
of Giardini, hydraulic system  
Wood structure, metal

Photo: Agostino Osio  
Courtesy the Artist, New York

## VENEZIA, VENEZIA

– Alfredo Jaar

I believe that artists create models of thinking the world. Every work we produce proposes a certain conception of the world, a model of looking at the world. If we look at Europe today, what do we see? We see a fortress that expulses immigrants and we see a system of exclusion based on race, religion and nationality.

I believe that culture can affect change. I believe that we artists might not be able to change the world, but I also strongly believe that we should at least make an effort not to replicate so perfectly the imbalances of the world. I think that the Giardini, with their 28 national pavilions, is a model that is very similar to what is happening in Europe today. It is an exclusive club where the majority of nations are absent, and where an entire continent, Africa, is missing.

My project for the 55th Biennale is a poetic invitation to rethink the obsolete Venice Biennale model. In the Arsenale where Chile rents a space, I am exhibiting a large metal pool filled with water. Approximately every three minutes, a perfect replica of the Giardini emerges. After a few seconds it swiftly drowns back into the water and disappears again completely. I have tried to create a utopian future where the Giardini have disappeared. In their brief emergence, they are ghosts from history. At the very instant the Giardini vanish, the space of the pool becomes a historical opportunity for rebirth.

In dialogue with this historical fantasy is the depiction of another historic cultural moment: a suspended lightbox containing a 1946 photograph of Lucio Fontana visiting his Milan studio in ruins upon his return from his native Argentina after World War II.

This historic photograph, for which I acquired copyright, triggers a flashback of a moment in history when the world was emerging from the disaster of war, and when culture suffered so severely. Italy was destroyed morally and physically. Nevertheless, this is a key moment in the history of culture: in less than twenty years, an extraordinary group of Italian intellectuals, filmmakers, writers, poets and artists produced a remarkable body of work that illuminated Italy and the world and brought back the country into the world community.

Luchino Visconti released his film *Ossessione* during the war, in 1943. Rossellini released *Roma, Città Aperta*, in 1945, the year the war ended, with a script written by Fellini. Three years later, Vittorio de Sica released *Ladri di biciclette*. Cesare Pavese published *Paesi Tuoi* in 1941. Giuseppe Ungaretti released *Il Dolore* in 1947 and *La Terra Promessa* in 1950. Alberto Moravia published *Il Conformista* in 1951. Shortly after, Federico Fellini released *La Strada* (1954) and *La Dolce Vita* (1960). Michelangelo Antonioni released *Il Grido* (1957), *L'Avventura*

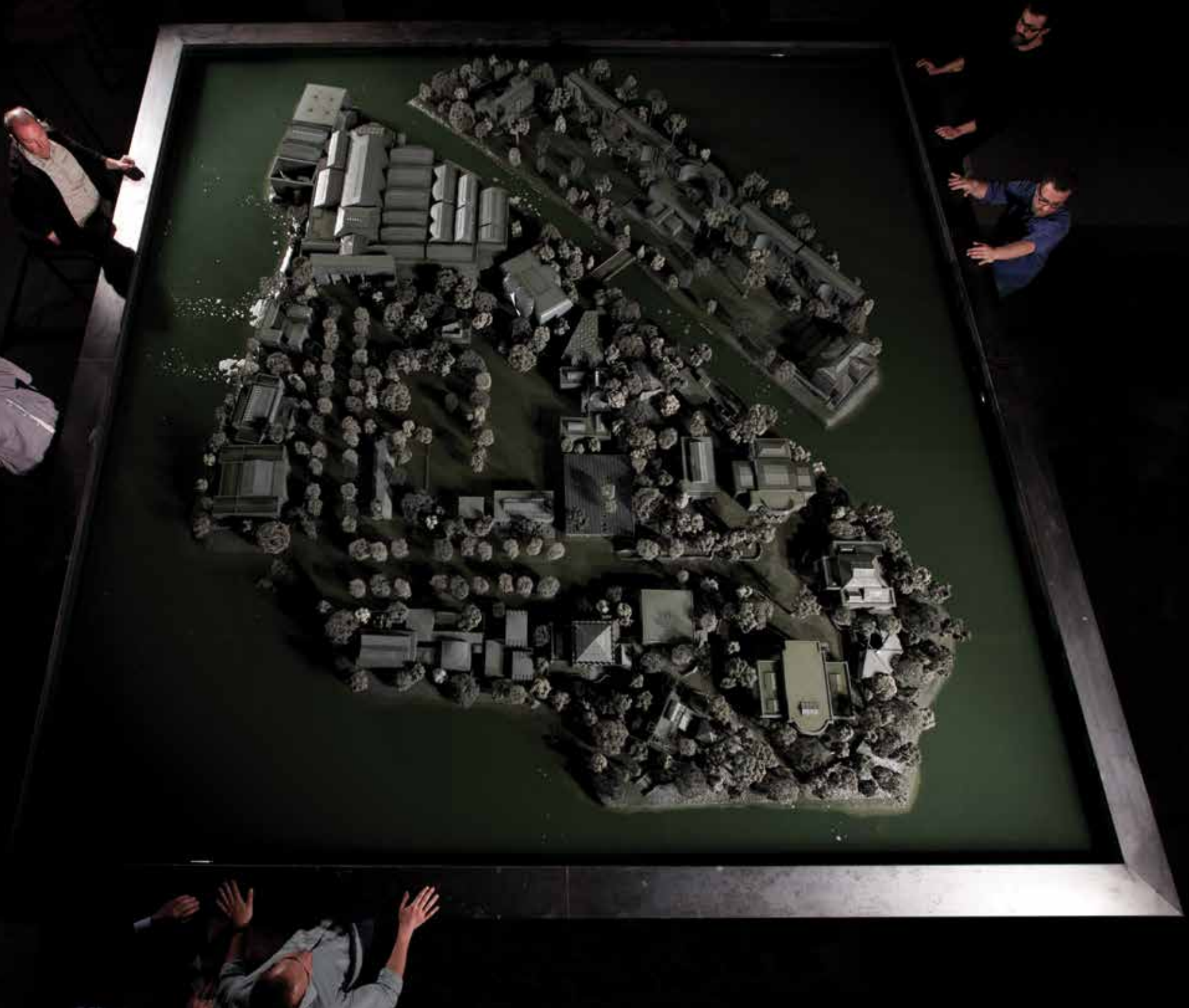
(1960) and *La Notte* (1961). Pier Paolo Pasolini irrupted in the scene with *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962). Finally, among countless others, Bernardo Bertolucci released *Prima della rivoluzione* (1964) and *Il Conformista* (1970), based on Moravia's book of 1951. In the visual arts, Fontana was joined by Castellani, Vedova, Burri and so many others.

These extraordinary intellectuals were able to overcome years of isolation and devastation, reintroducing Italian culture to the world. Shortly after, another remarkable group of artists emerged: artists like Manzoni, Pascali, Pistoletto, Boetti, Calzolari and others illuminated the cultural scene of Italy and the world.

This image stands as a powerful symbol that the creation of a new order after the current crisis – like reconstruction following war – is achievable. Lucio Fontana and others have shown us that the possibilities for change and progress are real. Culture can affect change.

Every time the Giardini emerge from the water, and they will do this 24,850 times during the entire Biennale, they are suggesting a culture that resists, resists, resists. Cities can be destroyed, men can be killed, but ideas cannot. Culture will survive. They also offer us 24,850 opportunities to rethink the existing Biennale model. This is not a new idea as Germano Celant and Gillo Dorfles proposed it in 1968. My project for the Biennale is just another melancholic call to think about how today's culture, composed from a new complexity of global networks, can be adequately represented on a world stage. It questions the ability of the Biennale's current rigid and divisive structure to adapt to the transnational state of contemporary culture and it reminds us of the importance of diversity as well as the extraordinary potential of cultural democracy.

I was invited to participate in the *Aperto* section of the Venice Biennale in 1986. It was the first time an artist from Latin America had been invited to participate in the international exhibition. I will always remain very grateful to Achille Bonito Oliva and Thomas Sokolowski for an invitation that changed my career and my life. The title of the exhibition said it all: "*Aperto*", open. It was a generous aperture of the Biennale to artists like me, who until then were considered "peripheral". This took place three years before "*Magiciens de la Terre*", the exhibition that, according to many observers, changed the face of contemporary art. One morning, while installing my work in the Arsenale, I started thinking about the Giardini architecture and how it did not reflect the world in which I lived. I think that at this very precise moment *Venezia, Venezia* was born.















Pavilion Of Greece

STEFANOS TSIVOPOULOS

History Zero

Stefanos Tsivopoulos  
*History Zero*, 2013, video still

Courtesy the Artist, Kalfayan  
Galleries Athens – Thessaloniki



## HISTORY ZERO AND THE ISSUE OF VALUE RECONSIDERED

– Syrago Tsiara

The Greek pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale presented *History Zero* by Stefanos Tsivopoulos, a film in three parts accompanied by an archive of texts and images. The film narrates episodes from three different people's lives exploring how the value of money is transformed in the hands of the three protagonists, seeking to understand how money impacts the formation of human relations in unexpected ways. The interconnectedness of everyone's choices or how random acts might affect other peoples' lives is a salient issue underpinning the political and social dimensions of economic exchange.

*The Archive of Alternative Currencies* accompanying the film contains examples and testimonies of alternative, non-monetary exchange systems. The archive focuses on the ability of such models to erode and throw into question the homogenizing political power of a single currency, pointing to ways in which, in hard times, societies can by-pass a monetary economy altogether and use a system of exchange based on goods and services.

*History Zero* is first of all a work created in the context of the deep, multi-level crisis that has gripped Greece in recent years, but its message extends far beyond its point of inception. Artist Stefanos Tsivopoulos took his initial inspiration from the situation in Athens in 2012, where he spent several months working on another project. The work was completed in 2013 and debuted in Venice at the 55th Biennale, officially commissioned by the Greek Ministry of Culture.

### Money Questioned

Two years back, the economic situation in Southern Europe was much the same as it is today. Greece and the other Southern European countries were already experiencing tectonic shifts in the international redistribution of wealth and power, felt as a severe financial crisis that burdened the Greek economy with the threat of default. The circulation of capital and loans inside the European Union had led to the subversion of labour relations, mass-scale unemployment and the rapid impoverishment of the population, all culminating in the exacerbation of social inequality. One of the worst consequences was the widespread diffusion of racist attitudes and practices, expressed in the form of attacks against migrants, together with homophobic behaviours, feeding political extremism that opened the door for the Golden Dawn fascist party to win seats in the Greek parliament. This coincided with the beginning of the 'Grexit' era, saddling Greece with the perpetual threat

of withdrawal from the Euro Zone and the discontinuation of the euro as its national currency – a threat that still looms large today. Thus money asserted a strong presence as a system with great symbolic and controversial power – a system that was now furthermore endangered. Greece was thus expected to make painful sacrifices in order to cling to the euro, prompted by a perceived fear of losing something extremely valuable that would change our fate forever.

Against this backdrop, a reconsideration of what money really stands for and how it creates, destroys or reshapes human relations emerged as a crucial area for artistic inquiry. History proves that it is precisely during these critical times that new approaches and meanings emerge concerning our relationship to each other and the environment. Broadening the meaning of value means introducing the question of cooperation, solidarity and communal activity. And that, indeed, is exactly what *History Zero* attempted to do.

The film's narrative is structured on two parallel and distinct levels. First is the film. It consists of three episodes: The first episode follows a young African immigrant who wanders the streets of Athens pushing a supermarket trolley and collecting scrap metal. For him, finding and collecting this discarded and worthless material is the only way to survive. In his hands, scrap iron becomes 'gold'. It is hard, tiring work. An accidental find, a garbage bag full of crumpled banknotes, changes his life. He abandons the supermarket trolley, takes the bag of money and leaves.

The second episode features a German artist who seeks inspiration in the confusing cityscape of Athens. He observes and records street scenes at random with his camera. He sees the city and the people through digital representations as fragmentary, random images. A snapshot attracts his attention: an abandoned supermarket trolley full of scrap metal. A perfect *objet trouvé* that might attract great surplus value in the art market!

The last episode narrates the life of an elderly art collector who lives all alone in her museum-like house surrounded by contemporary artworks she adores. Suffering from Alzheimer's disease, she has her own very peculiar way of organising and attributing meaning to objects, based mainly on touch. Her favourite activity is making origami flowers. But instead of common paper she uses twenty, fifty and one hundred euro banknotes. As her fingers turn them into flowers, their monetary value is supplanted by their value as colour, material and shape. From time to time the old lady, dissatisfied with her creations, crumples up a 'flower', throws it into a rubbish bag and starts a new one.





The three screenings were shown in different dark rooms, where the visitors were invited to pass from one room to the other and to think about how human lives might interact, even unbeknownst to the individuals concerned. The beginning of the ending of this tour leads us to the central space, which is named *Alternative Currencies. An archive and a manifesto*.

This part of the work follows a different form and structure. It is an archive of texts and images about alternative economic systems which avoid the use of a single currency, such as communities that invent their own money, adapt the dominant economic system, or organise self-managed associations for the exchange of products and services in order to deal with severe survival challenges during a recession. Focusing on historical and contemporary applications of alternative social experiments, the archive stands as a clear political statement. It intentionally covers a wide range of cultural and anthropological records. It starts with a display of contemporary models of local exchange systems (LETS), then goes on to a system of cash transfer using pre-paid mobile phone minutes that is evolving as a form of alternative currency (Mobile Money) in parts of Africa, taking us to the Sawayaka Welfare Foundation in Japan which is organised around the exchange of services to elderly people.

Both the film and the archive are parallel and complementary conceptualizations of the central topic of *History Zero*, which is the complex, ever-changing and class-determined relationship we have with money, and the mechanisms by which value is attributed, added, and taken away. Useless scrap metal provides a meagre livelihood for the poor immigrant, banknotes acquire the decorative value of paper flowers in the hands and mind of the rich old collector, while an accidental discovery by the artist instils an apparently worthless object with a strange and irrational surplus value.



Stefanos Tsivopoulos  
*History Zero*, 2013, video still

Courtesy the Artist, Kalfayan  
Galleries Athens – Thessaloniki

Stefanos Tsivopoulos  
*History Zero*, 2013, detail  
*Alternative Currencies: An Archive  
and a Manifesto*

Peliti's iconic image depicting seed  
exchange. From the exploratory  
mission seeking indigenous  
seed varieties, August 2003,  
Pomakohoria of Xanthi, Greece.

### Social Capital: a Choice for the Future

*Regional money not only strengthens the economy, it also makes people identify more strongly with their communities as it encourages responsible participation.*<sup>1</sup>

*History Zero* appeared at a critical juncture in contemporary Greek and European reality. It was the moment in which a multi-layered crisis culminated and, at the same time, opened up possibilities for a different visualization of the future.

The archive of alternative currencies did not pre-exist. It was conceived and created especially for *History Zero* as a decisive element of the work's narrative, expressing the artist's belief that in order to address the issue of value, no prevailing monetary paradigm should be left intact. Each unit of the archive presents textual and visual documentation and historical and anthropological material following the logic of a museum display, the heterogeneous material handled on equal terms, thus inviting the viewers to construct their own interpretations.

Occupying a key position directly opposite the pavilion entrance, the archive is both the starting point and the finishing point of the visitors' walk through the separate sections of the work. It is the zero point which implies not the end, but a new point of departure. Through the display of thirty-two alternative monetary paradigms, it highlights that a remarkable variety of non-conventional currencies already exist as inventive new approaches to building communities immune to bank system oppression. The archive stands as an opportunity to examine the ways in which the notion of value could be reconsidered in a wider context embracing the sustainability of social relations and human-environment interactivity. It also contains examples of the ritual uses of currency, inviting deeper consideration of the performative or activist role of money.

One of the most successful examples of non-profit associations that allow members to exchange goods and services without directly using the national currency is LETS (Local exchange and trading systems). This is textually documented in *History Zero* as follows:<sup>2</sup>

*The LETS concept was first developed in Vancouver, Canada, in the early 1980s, but its success as an economic system led to its rapid spread and adaptation in other communities. LETS are non-profit associations that allow members to exchange goods and services without directly using their national currency, by creating their own local unit of exchange. When you sign up as a member, you register*



Stefanos Tsivopoulos  
*History Zero*, 2013, detail

*Alternative Currencies: An Archive and a Manifesto*  
Installation view from the Greek Pavilion.

*with the association the goods or services that you can offer; you can then see what the other members are offering as well. In the first systems, members wrote checks to pay each other and sent these to a central treasurer, who would credit or debit each member's account accordingly. Later systems issued their own paper script or developed computer systems where members' accounts could be instantaneously credited or debited. The units are sometimes pegged to the national currency in terms of value, but not necessarily, and other systems have chosen to use hours as their unit of exchange. Prices are negotiated between members, and very often members' accounts are viewable to all, so the volume of their business can be seen as a measure of their value in the community.*

A lesser known case of alternative currency is that of Zero Currency in India, where new value created takes the form of activism and political protest against corruption:

*Zero currency is a project began by the anti-corruption organization 5th Pillar in India. The program is meant to fight corruption and bribery around the world. The organization's website distributes digital copies of banknotes for download in a number of currencies, with the denomination "0". The idea is that when faced with a request for a bribe, you give the zero bill as a form of protest, which also potentially allows you to avoid confrontation with authority at the same time.*

*The project allows people to be activists in their everyday life through using their own printed fake money. They suggest printing the money on paper stiff enough so that it can't be folded, so that the action of handing over the money draws more attention to itself (as a bill used in bribery usually gets folded, palmed, and swiftly put away). So it's an anti-currency, a form of performance, and a political act all at once.*

The third case comes from the heart of the global crisis context. Called Rolling Jubilee, it generates new forms of social activism and solidarity:

*Rolling Jubilee is a project of Strike Debt, an offshoot of Occupy Wall Street, which seeks to build a global debt resistance movement. The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual outlines Strike Debt's analysis of how debt functions and tactics for how to fight back. One such tactic is the Rolling Jubilee which raises money to purchase and abolish debt, starting with the medical debt produced by the privatized health care system in the U.S.*

*When a person can't pay their hospital and other bills, a hospital can sell that debt at a steep discount (at a few cents on the dollar) to debt collectors. The debt predators then make their profit by then*

*going after the borrowers directly. Rolling Jubilee's goal is to buy the debt from hospitals and other lenders that would otherwise be purchased by debt collectors and then abolish them. Note that debts aren't sold individually; they're bundled together anonymously and sold as a whole.*

*The project began last November. Although their target was to raise \$50,000, they've already generated over \$500,000 for debt abolition. Purchasing debt is a slow process, but they've already cancelled out \$100,000 of medical debt in New York in 2012, using only \$5,000 to do so. This March, spending \$21,000 allowed the abolition \$1.1 million dollars of medical debt from Louisville, Kentucky. They expect to wipe out around \$11 million of debt with their current funds alone.*

*To announce the debt erasures in 2012, they sent boxes wrapped like presents with a letter inside to each person whose debt they'd purchased and abolished. The letters say:*

*"Season's Greetings from Strike Debt! We write with good news: the above referenced account has been purchased by The Rolling Jubilee Fund, a 501(c)(4) non-profit organization. The Rolling Jubilee Fund is a project of Strike Debt. The mission of this project is to buy and abolish personal debt. We believe that no one should have to go into debt for the basic things in our lives, like healthcare, housing, and education. You no longer owe the balance of this debt. It is gone, a gift with no strings attached. You are no longer under any obligation to settle this account with the original creditor, the bill collector, or anyone else."*<sup>3</sup>

**IT'S TIME FOR  
A NEW KIND  
OF MONEY.**

Stefanos Tsivopoulos  
History Zero, 2013, detail

Alternative Currencies: An Archive  
and a Manifesto  
Photo from Rolling Jubilee's  
campaign



The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle writes as follows in *Nicomachean Ethics*,<sup>4</sup>

*Men have introduced money as a middle term, for it is a measure of all things, and so of their superior or inferior value, that is to say, how many shoes are equivalent to a house or to a given quantity of food... Demand has come to be conventionally represented by money; this is why money is called nomisma, customary currency, because it does not exist by nature but by custom (nomos), and can be altered and rendered useless at will.*

Bernard Lietaer in his seminal book *The Future of Money* also pointed out that money is an invention, a mental device which serves as a mode of organising our life in the material world. He explained in practical terms how we rebuild communities by implementing complementary or alternative currencies. He defines a community that may ensure sustainable abundance as 'a society that satisfies its needs without diminishing the prospects of future generations, while simultaneously providing freedom of choice and creativity to as many people as possible'.<sup>5</sup> This potentiality of altering and adopting a new kind of money that could help human emancipation is something Aristotle could not have predicted, but for Bernard Lietaer it is a strong possibility.<sup>6</sup>

*In today's capitalist society, changing money would be equivalent to altering both the fuel and the underlying motivation for most of our actions. Therefore, transforming the nature of our money is likely to have more far-reaching consequences than we can begin to imagine. There are now hundreds of projects under way that are utilising new kinds of money, and creating just such a transformation... My forecast is that 90–95% of all these projects will not survive; but that the remaining 5% will succeed at permanently changing our economies, our societies, our civilisation, and our world.*

This liberating idea of open potentiality for an alternative visualization of social and economic relations underpins the political stance of *History Zero*.

A new kind of value arises from the archived models of solidarity and communal behaviour emergent in societies that are seriously affected by impoverishment – behaviour that even penetrates social strata that might not face any obvious danger of immediate poverty. And this is a very important aspect of the way the notion of value is being reconsidered: communities and relationships are being formed in ways that are not based on typical financial exchange, or in ways that possibly even subvert conventional models of interaction. This is the new value and future social capital envisioned by Stefanos Tsivopoulos,

who addresses these developments not in pedagogic terms, by opening up a wide repertoire of choices concerning our relation to money, but rather he indicates that now is the right time, the *kairos*, for radical decisions. In ancient Greek there is a clear distinction between *hronos* (time overall) and *kairos*, which means the right moment for something. By emphasising the interdependency of the actions and choices of the three different characters in the film, he reveals the hidden balance of *ecosophy*: the fact that all our monetary, political and ecological activities interact, whether we are aware of it or not, affecting our collective fate on this planet. Looking at the human species through this broader lens, we may become aware of the fact that it is time to transform our ideas and policies concerning global precariousness, sustainability and interdependence.

<sup>1</sup> Margrit Kennedy, *Occupy Money: Creating an Economy where Everybody Wins* (New Society Publishers, 2012), 59.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpts from texts included in Stefanos Tsivopoulos, *History Zero*, exhibition catalogue for the 55th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, The Greek Pavilion, Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, Culture and Sports, ed. Syrago Tsiara and Stefanos Tsivopoulos, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> [strikedebt.org](http://strikedebt.org), [rollingjubilee.org](http://rollingjubilee.org)

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book V, Chapter 5, Section 10,11, [Arist. Eth. Nic. 113a.20], in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 19, translated by H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1934).

<sup>5</sup> Bernard A. Lietaer, *The Future of Money* (Random House, 2002), 309 [http://library.uniteddiversity.coop/Money\\_and\\_Economics/The\\_Future\\_of\\_Money-Bernard\\_Lietaer.pdf](http://library.uniteddiversity.coop/Money_and_Economics/The_Future_of_Money-Bernard_Lietaer.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Excerpt from text included in Stefanos Tsivopoulos, *History Zero*, 57.

(Overleaf)  
Stefanos Tsivopoulos  
*History Zero*, 2013, video still

Courtesy the Artist, Kalfayan  
Galleries Athens – Thessaloniki



## CLIMATES OF DISPLACEMENT: THE ARGOS COLLECTIVE'S MALDIVES\*

T. J. Demos

It is common today to read accounts by scientific analysts – such as those involved with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – that warn of a near future of forced displacement on a massive scale owing to climate change. Inhabitants of small island nations such as Tuvalu and the Maldives, particularly exposed to the threat of sea level rise in the Pacific, for instance, figure as impending “climate refugees”. Koko Warner, an expert on climate change and migration at the United Nations University in Bonn, says the displacement of those populations forecasts “a phenomenon of a scope not experienced in human history.”<sup>1</sup> Such an eventuality appears credible, especially given the ever-increasing rise in greenhouse gases and quickly approaching tipping points, in addition to the real-life extreme weather-related disasters in our present (including Hurricane Sandy that hit New York City in 2012; the 2005 Hurricane Katrina that decimated New Orleans; and Typhoon Haiyan that devastated the Philippines in 2013).

While the scientific basis of the climate modeling of that potential future is clear, it does not entail accepting such narratives as somehow irrevocable – although it’s difficult not to be seduced by such narratives, given the entertainment industry’s regularly released spectacular sci-fi visions of futuristic apocalypses and mass migrations (think of films *Flood*, 2007; *The Road*, 2009; 2012, 2009; or *Oblivion*, 2013). Indeed, even the curators of the Maldives Pavilion of the 2013 Venice Biennial, the Chamber of Public Secrets, courted just this imaginary, as implied in their show’s title: *Portable Nation: Disappearance as a work in Progress*.<sup>2</sup> Yet, such disaster predictions – whether presented in the media, visual culture, scientific discourse or in artistic practice’s ecological romanticism – carry a risk of a debilitating fatalism, for they overlook forms of agency in the present that define a politics of resistance to the fossil fuel economy driving climate change. Before we accept the inevitability of climate refugees, we must ask: How might we invent creative modes of resilience and mitigation in the face of the danger of run-away environmental disaster, and rethink aesthetics in relation to the politics of climate justice – system change, not climate change! – rather than giving in to modes of irresponsible futurist speculation that potentially eclipses real options in the here and now? In what follows, I’ll investigate this question in relation to the intersection of visual culture and politics when confronting the ecological situations of the Maldives – a geopolitical and ecological hotspot facing the threat of global warming today, where migration in one way or another is presented as an unavoidable fate.



## THE MALDIVES: A FRENCH REQUIEM?

For the low-lying Maldives, the threat of rising seas is admittedly already a present danger, forcing residents to consider migration as an eventual necessary measure, meaning the abandonment of their longstanding home in the Indian Ocean, which has been inhabited since the sixth century BCE. Approaching the Maldives' ecologically and socially precarious situation and emphasizing precisely this migration scenario, the Argos Collective recently assembled *The Maldives – A Nation at the Water's Edge*, a photographic suite that documents the islands' inhabitants and their fragile environment. Comprised of a group of ten French journalists and photographers, the Argos Collective work with NGOs and humanitarians, and publish books of their images, including *Climate Refugees* from 2010, which contains the Maldives depictions, along with essays describing their subjects.<sup>3</sup> "Our job is to tell stories we have heard and to bear witness to what we have seen," explains journalist and member Guy-Pierre Chomette. "The science was already there when we started in 2004, but we wanted to emphasize the human dimension, especially for those most vulnerable."<sup>4</sup> In their visual presentation, Maldivians appear in domestic settings, preparing food, playing on the beach, swimming in water, with other photographs portraying their threatened environment beset by coastal erosion and bleached coral reefs. In relation to one image showing a group of youths, the Argos College points out that 60% of Maldivians are younger than 15 years old, and "during their lifetime they will probably see the first exiles leave the island due to sea-level rise and erosion."<sup>5</sup>

Consisting of a double string of twenty-six atolls, joining an archipelago of 1,190 islands, the Maldives is the smallest Asian nation in terms of land and population. Following short periods of Portuguese and Dutch reign during the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, and a British protectorate from 1887 to 1965, the country gained its independence only to be subsequently ruled by an authoritarian government for three decades until the country's first free elections in 2008, bringing the progressive Mohamed Nasheed to the presidency. Like other island states such as Kiribati, Tuvalu, and Nauru, the Maldives is particularly vulnerable to inundation and storm urges, with climate change bringing a multitude of negative bio-geophysical and socio-economic impacts.<sup>6</sup> With a population of approximately 400,000 people, eighty per cent of the country's islands – of which 200 are inhabited – are less than one meter above sea level, and studies predict the Maldives could be submerged within 100 years, lending the support of independent scientific research to the Argos Collective's claims. Indeed, the 2007 Fourth Assessment Report of the IPCC forecasted an approximate fifty-centimetre sea-level rise by the end of the twenty-

first century, an increase expanded by the IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report in 2014 to potentially more than two meters.<sup>7</sup> The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration offers an equally dire scenario, suggesting an increase as great as 6.6 feet by 2100.<sup>8</sup> While coastal geomorphologists point out that islands are more flexible than often thought, capable of adapting their shape and elevation to the vagaries of sea level and currents, the Maldives will certainly have to confront a future menaced by water.<sup>9</sup> In addition to inundation and storm surges, the negative effects of sea-level rise include coastal erosion, the salination of fresh water, and extreme weather events, which in turn threaten vital infrastructure, human settlements, health, agriculture and trade. The negative economic hit is particularly harsh for a country heavily reliant on tourism, with a per capita GDP of only \$4,967 in 2008. As such, the Maldives, it is claimed, may soon be the first nation where the entire population will become climate refugees, foreshadowing "an age of insurgent climate refugees on a far more threatening, chaotic scale."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, developed nations, led by the US and those in the EU, followed by other countries such as India and Bangladesh, are already preparing for an unprecedented near-future demographic flood by building defensive fortresses around their countries to control migration with increasingly militarized and high-tech borders. Such is the securitization of climate change response, in regards to state, military, and corporate planning for worst-case scenarios. There, climate change is viewed as a threat multiplier, where migration figures as a criminal act, rather than a mode of behavioral adaptation for human survival. The state-military-corporate response to climate change imagines a nightmare future demanding ever more advanced weaponry and full-spectrum dominance planning in protecting borders, as developed by security-service corporations and defense contractors in a billion dollar a year industry, overriding all concerns for human rights.<sup>11</sup>

The Argos Collective's text surrounding the photographs describes the collective's visit to the islands in advance of their 2010 publication, where they spoke with diverse Maldivian representatives, such as Mohammed Ali, director of the Maldives Environmental Research Center, Abdullah Mifthah, head engineer at a resort on Thulhagiri, and Mohammed Shahid, manager of Hulhumali's artificial enlarged island, each of whom contribute to the Argos' narrative of the Maldives' vulnerability and likely apocalyptic future: "A puff of a wind, a wave, and this emerald necklace that appears to be floating precariously on the water might just sink irretrievably into the depths of the Indian Ocean," Chomette explains.<sup>12</sup> While the aim of such depictions may be to raise awareness of the current ecological crisis and its effects on people living at the forefront of climate change, the Maldivians themselves are conspicuously allotted no political agency in these images and

narratives. By projecting this climate refugee subjectivity onto the islands' population, the Argos Collective indeed tends to objectify their subjects, reducing them to anthropological evidence, and casting their situation as urgent according to their own NGO-like criteria. As they point out, we can expect 200 million refugees by the end of the century. Though the group advocates immediate international cooperation to stop global warming, they expect it will not be enough to halt the warming process, and thus we must prepare for the negative consequences. It's a question of "human rights" when a nation's people is "suddenly shorn of their self-determination," they write, and to meet this "humanitarian disaster" we must "immediately begin planning for the mass migration of climate refugees that will mark the 21st century."<sup>13</sup>

The story is in fact familiar in mainstream media reportage. For instance, in a recent issue of *National Geographic* dedicated to the subject of "rising seas," the lead article's author predicts that developed nations with substantial resources, such as the Netherlands, will be able to negotiate shifting coastlines and sea levels via experimental architecture, design, and geo-engineering projects – the floating housing project of IJburg in Amsterdam is exemplary – whereas poor nations without comparable resources or technical capabilities face the increasingly likely situation of forced migration.<sup>14</sup> As Arnoud Molenaar, manager of Rotterdam's Climate Proof program, explains, "to build on water is not new, but to develop floating communities on a large scale and in a harbor with tides – that is new... Instead of fighting against water, we want to live with it."<sup>15</sup> Yet for "poorer countries," the prediction is very different: "By 2100 rising seas may force Maldivians to abandon their home."<sup>16</sup> The problem with such accounts is that they simply accept the differential effects of climate change and reproduce – thereby helping to naturalize – environmental inequality. In addition, there is no critical reflexivity in these narratives, produced by artists and journalists in the North, about the fact that it is the greenhouse-gas-polluting industry of developed countries that have historically created the causes of ecological effects that small island states are now confronting. Playing into just this type of doomsday scenario, the title of the Argos Collective's series on Tuvalu is crystal-clear: *a Polynesian requiem*. In an act of "wishful sinking," in the terms of Carol Farbotko, a critic of just this sort of catastrophe-seeking projection, the island, in one telltale image, is pictured as if already underwater.<sup>17</sup>

Yet we need not accept such projections, even if we must take the warnings seriously. Consider an alternate approach, one by artists Christoph Draeger and Heidrun Holzfeind, who recently proposed a very different narrative. In 2011, the Swiss-Austrian duo initiated a research project to investigate countries affected by the 2004

Indian ocean tsunami, including Thailand, Aceh (Indonesia), Sri Lanka, Maldives and India, resulting in a video shown recently at the Maldives Pavilion, a newly initiated project as part of the 2013 Venice Biennale.<sup>18</sup> *Tsunami Architecture / The Maldives Chapter Redux*, 2011, at twenty-six minutes, explores post-disaster architectural achievements and challenges in the Maldives, offering an early glimpse of future climate change dangers. Documenting conversations with survivors, eyewitnesses, aid workers and rescue personnel, the video inquires into how aid money, which flowed into the Maldives following the tsunami, transformed the land and refashioned local economies. Certain islands were evacuated to relocate populations so that government services were not spread too thinly, and new housing has been built on "safe islands," better protected against future tsunamis and sea level rise. While interviewees critically acknowledge that ultimately there is no such thing as a safe island, and that new housing is often inadequate especially for the poor, the video portrays the Maldivians as possessing realistic options in the present, and resists accepting the fatalism of migration as the only response to climate change. As such, the video appears in stark contrast to the Argos Collective's project, where viewers are offered images of depoliticization, in which islanders are reduced to humanitarian victims in need of aid, exposed to an implacable future of migration against which they seemingly have no control, presented without possessing political agency, scientific knowledge, or legal recourse.

## UNDERWATER GOVERNMENT

It is telling that the Argos Collective includes no mention or image of President Mohamed Nasheed in their photographs, book, or website. During his first presidential term (2008–2012), when the group did their research, Nasheed was a visible and vocal proponent for climate justice – a fundamentally different way of framing the crisis and potential responses to it than climate refugee scenarios or humanitarian logic. In October 2009, he held an underwater cabinet meeting in scuba-diving gear, where he signed into law a commitment to become a carbon-neutral nation within ten years. Nasheed's media appearances have dramatized the urgency of the ecological calamity facing the Maldives for international observers, defining that calamity not as a "natural disaster" in the making, but as a political crisis in the present – created by those governments who live in a psychosis of denial and inaction, operating in league with Big Oil and Gas to prevent global governance systems from addressing the threat of climate change in any substantial way.<sup>19</sup> Nasheed's innovative approach to political theater, in this regard, recalls artistic analogues that perform an aesthetics

of politics – such as the socially-engaged projects of Abderrahmane Sissako, particularly his 2006 film *Bamako*, for which he documented a Malian community that placed the IMF and World Bank on trial for crimes against humanity in Africa; and Christoph Schlingensief, especially his 2000 *Foreigners Out! Schlingensief's Container*, a live theatre-reality TV event in Vienna where a group of asylum seekers were voted out of the country by viewers, thereby critically visualizing the country's xenophobic populism.<sup>20</sup> The difference is that Nasheed was actually in a position to effect social and political transformation in government.

The underwater session drew media visibility, amplified by international activist groups like 350.org,<sup>21</sup> which energized the international consideration of climate change at the time, pointedly doing so two months ahead of the 2009 UN-sponsored COP 15 meeting in Copenhagen that would address climate change, even though the Maldivians were sidelined along with other developing and small-island nations by Annex 1 developed nations. Attending the meeting, Nasheed explained to an audience of world leaders: "Developed countries created the climate crisis. Developing countries must not turn into a calamity. Therefore, I invite the leaders of big developing countries to recognize their responsibilities."<sup>22</sup> Yet the final Copenhagen deal, arrived at in a private meeting between the US, Brazil, China, India, and South Africa, brought no binding agreements on greenhouse gas reductions (controversially accepted by the Maldives, owing to the promise of US financial assistance for adaptation), and was widely criticized as undemocratic and ineffective – an outcome repeated at subsequent UN climate meetings. At the 2010 Cancun climate talks, 43 island nations, comprising the Alliance of Small Nation Island States (AOSIS), including the Maldives, announced that they face the "end of history" if rich countries fail to act now against climate change.<sup>23</sup> The situation has not changed for the last few years, and after COP 20 in Lima, Peru, in 2014, critics commonly talk of how we are basically "burning the planet, one climate COP at a time."<sup>24</sup>

Still, counter to the fatalism that all-too-easily assumes an inevitable future abandonment of the islands, Nasheed has argued for investment now, on a globally transformative scale, in a post-hydrocarbon future, in order to avoid future catastrophe. Governments must halt carbon emissions, he has urged, and keep future warming within two degrees, as recommended by scientific consensus as a safe level, meaning a widely accepted requirement of an 80% reduction of emissions from 1990 levels by 2050 (though the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report on Climate Change, 2014, has revealed that global temperatures are likely to rise by as much as 4.8 degrees Celsius by the end of the century,

governments maintain the status quo.<sup>25</sup>) Nasheed's position is largely consistent with the goals of the climate justice movement, which demands the inclusive participation of marginalized communities in the global climate negotiation process, and that discussions acknowledge that climate change negatively impacts human rights and worsens economic inequality worldwide. As activist groups like Climate Justice Now! and the Global Justice Ecology Project argue, environmental justice is inextricable from the struggle for economic equality, democratic politics, and the rights of indigenous and marginalized communities.<sup>26</sup> Environmental justice for the Maldives would therefore require that developed countries acknowledge their role in causing global warming, and assume their responsibilities in overcoming the crisis in the present, not simply accepting the narratives of future anthropogenic environmental disruption.

Nonetheless, after winning the country's first democratic elections in October 2008, Nasheed announced plans to create a sovereign wealth fund financed from tourism, which could be used to buy a new homeland in India, Sri Lanka or even Australia, should migration eventually become inevitable. Other island states in the Pacific, such as Kiribati and Tuvalu, facing a similar threat of submergence, have followed the same course, and have already asked Australia and New Zealand to accept its citizens as permanent refugees – as yet to no avail.<sup>27</sup> Yet, importantly, such a plan is not Nasheed's only solution, and indeed it may be a further act of media publicity to gain more visibility for the country's dire situation in the present. Still, such a proposal, along with the visual politics that endorse it, prompts further consideration of "climate refugees" as a prospective legal and conceptual category, especially as it has been taken up in much artistic practice as of late.

## CLIMATE REFUGEES?

Some legal theorists argue that offering environmental refugees recognition under the Geneva Conventions will grant them internationally assured protection, independent of the laws of their own governments.<sup>28</sup> Yet this suggestion raises complex legal questions, beginning with the fact that Article 1A of the 1951 Geneva Convention grants refugee status to those fleeing persecution for reasons only of race, religion, nationality, or political opinion. The term "environmental refugee" was first introduced in a United Nations Environmental Program policy paper by Essam El Hinnawi in 1985, defining it as "those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption," where environmental disruption designates "any physical,



chemical, and/or biological changes in the ecosystem (or resource base) that render it, temporarily or permanently unsuitable to support human life.”<sup>29</sup> But this definition has yet to be recognized in international law.

Recognition of “environmental refugees” by international law could occur, analysts point out, by expanding the Geneva Convention, developing existing international law (for instance, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change), or extending the mandate of the UNHCR (as the Argos Collective proposes).<sup>30</sup> That said, there are nonetheless several reasons to question this route as a credible response to the displacement crisis brought on by climate change. For one, it is difficult to define environmental causes and separate them from poverty or the multifarious negative contextual factors that exacerbate the effects of climate change. As such, the climate refugee proposes, by definition, an intangible figure owing to the difficult-to-disaggregate causality of its circumstances. What climate change brings to vulnerable people is the intensification and exacerbation of an already complex set of challenges, including uneven access to resources as diverse as water, land, infrastructure, social structures, institutions, capital, and the rule of law.<sup>31</sup> Second, political theorists, such as Angela Oels, remain skeptical of establishing such confusing and complex distinctions in classifying refugees, as “it will leave plenty of room for thresholds of indistinction that leave the final decision on the status of life up to sovereign power,” a sovereign power capable of abusing such ambiguity in oppressive ways.<sup>32</sup> Third, placing climate refugees under the UNHCR’s jurisdiction will not enable refugees to enjoy rights, but rather will potentially transform them into the depoliticized and victimized objects of humanitarianism, from whom aid can be withdrawn at any time.<sup>33</sup> Consider, for example, the displaced victims of Hurricane Katrina and their effective relegation to the status of bare life – a form of life stripped of political agency, reduced to mere biological existence, according to Giorgio Agamben – in their stadium-turned-camp environment. That dystopian occurrence offers one real-life scenario for the future treatment of climate migrants in expanded camps in the US, the EU and elsewhere (as many migrants are in fact treated now).<sup>34</sup>

One can therefore understandably be skeptical of proposals for the future institutionalization of the climate refugee category, as it implies a proliferation of distinctions between “good” and “bad” migrants, and invites an intensification of biopolitical regimes of control, which includes such measures as automated and weaponized surveillance systems, the militarization of borders, expanded refugee camps, complex visa processes and biometric applications, and the further commodification of migration.<sup>35</sup> It is not surprising, then, that many islanders reject the refugee role allotted to them by humanitarian

groups and NGOs, who wish to save and enlist them as poster children in their political campaigns.<sup>36</sup> “In the eyes of Tuvaluans,” write Carol Farbotko and Heather Lazrus, “permission to cross a western border as a refugee falls far short of the climate change remedies required: extensive, immediate reductions in global greenhouse gas emissions, and significant legal and financial action to redress lost livelihoods and self-determination if emissions reduction is not achieved.”<sup>37</sup> One final problem regarding the category of climate refugee is that migration narratives – and even those that stress the “autonomy of migration” perspective, arguing for open borders and protesting the growing criminalization of migration<sup>38</sup> – tend to minimize the resilience of both political agency and climate justice in the present. As well, this solution, even if conjoined to human-rights claims, shifts the conversation to geo-technical fixes, such as buttressing seawalls, that will drain the energy directed toward cutting emissions.<sup>39</sup> In this regard, advocates for adaptation come all-too-close to those who deny the anthropogenic causes of climate change in the first place; for if adaptation is seen as the answer, then the danger is people may stop trying to do anything now about the causes of global warming.<sup>40</sup>

## CLIMATE JUSTICE NOW!

Representatives of small-island nations are not surprisingly on the forefront of demanding climate justice in the present, rather than accepting a future of migration. Consider the case of Tuvalu, a Pacific island nation midway between Hawaii and Australia, for which global media and some NGOs, along with the Argos Collective, have emphasized a doomsday scenario of future submergence. The IPCC warns, however, that such narratives operate “to silence alternative identities that emphasize resilience,” and it is “adaptation, perhaps even more than relocation or mitigation initiatives, which is of immediate importance in island places...[especially] in the face of changes brought about by ‘global warming’.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed the IPCC authors observe that the “danger” of future climate change “is as much associated with the narrowing of adaptation options... as it is with uncertain potential climate-driven physical impacts.”<sup>42</sup> Instead of reproducing a form of environmentalist determinism – according to which climate change is seen as a mono-directional power of necessity, as if an unstoppable force of nature – it’s crucial to consider climate change as part of a “web of vectors” that exert force in different directions and open up various sites of agency, depending on the situation of the people, places, and socio-political structures in question.<sup>43</sup>

Against the “narrowing of adaptation options,” the Maldives’ Ministry of Home Affairs, Housing and Environment has in fact outlined

the following goals: coastal protection, reduction in the number of inhabited islands, the development of hydroponic agricultural systems, solar energy and rainwater harvesting, public awareness and education campaigns, and the increasing of elevation. An additional measure is for small island nations to become “renewable energy islands” and model a path away from fossil fuel dependency, as have Fiji, Samoa, Palau, and La Réunion, all of which are cited as currently generating more than 50% of their electricity from renewable energy sources.<sup>44</sup> The Argos Collective might have also considered activist-oriented legal approaches as an emerging mode of political agency, as the governments of the Maldives and Tuvalu have done by demanding that polluting countries pay for damage caused by climate change. The argument is framed as a matter of climate justice, rather than one of charity, aid, or loans for adaptation.<sup>45</sup> “Rather than relying on aid money, we believe that the major greenhouse polluters should pay for the impacts they are causing,” claims Tuvalu Deputy Prime Minister Tavaud Teii.<sup>46</sup> In 2002, Tuvalu even considered initiating a lawsuit in the International Criminal Court of Justice in The Hague in an attempt to sue major greenhouse gas emitters like the United States and Australia, though they decided ultimately against the idea given the difficulties in winning such a case.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the example points to a potentially litigious future around the effects of and responsibilities for climate change, as well as those related to corporate environmental malfeasance.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, proponents of this legal strategy have been steadily developing an emerging model of “earth jurisprudence,” attempting to reconcile human governance structures with a paradigm-shifting bio-centric – rather than market-centered – global legal system, forming one source of hope for transformation in coming years.<sup>49</sup> According to this paradigm, advocates could hold polluters legally accountable for the devastation of environments, atmospheric pollution, and even destructive climate change.

In regards to these political and legal developments, the Argos Collective has little to say, only acknowledging the Maldives’ migrant fate. They write: “where will the Maldives get the billions of euros necessary to construct more artificial islands? Where will they find the funds to build tetrapod seawalls around the 200 inhabited islands?”<sup>50</sup> In its place, they offer an acritical embrace of the migration model devoid of climate justice claims. The inadequacy of their analysis and prognosis is more than clear in their short video, *Maldives: An Archipelago of Water Flowers* (*Maldives: un archipel à fleur d’eau*). It begins with an ill-translated UN quote: “Because of the global warming, some 150 millions people will have to migrate until the end of the century [sic].” The voices of everyday Maldivians are then heard

reflecting on their uncertain future: “what will we do if the sea level rises? Climb the coconut trees or live on boats!”<sup>51</sup> With this, viewers are presented with a model of isolated localism, one of un-reflexive othering, which offers the construction of victimization ultimately serving the interests of those sectors of the humanitarian industry that accepts climate change as a *fait accompli*. If we are to stop “disappearance as a work in progress,” other visions will be essential.

\* This text, originating as a contribution to the Contingent Movements’ seminar that accompanied the Maldives Pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 2013, derives from my forthcoming book, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art in the Age of Climate Change* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015).

<sup>1</sup> Rachel Morris, “What Happens When Your Country Drowns? Meet the People of Tuvalu, The World’s First Climate Refugees,” *Mother Jones* (November/December, 2009), at [www.motherjones.com](http://www.motherjones.com).

<sup>2</sup> See Chamber of Public Secrets, “Portable Nation – Disappearance as a Work in Progress,” in *Portable Nation: Disappearance as a Work in Progress: Approaches to Ecological Romanticism*, ed. Dorian Batyca et al. (Dogana, San Marino: Maretti, 2014), 11–14.

<sup>3</sup> Argos Collective, *Climate Refugees* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://mitpress.mit.edu/authors/collectif-argos>.

<sup>5</sup> The Argos Collective, “The Maldives – A Nation at the Water’s Edge,” at [www.climate-refugees.eu](http://www.climate-refugees.eu).

<sup>6</sup> On the case of Tuvalu, see Alexandra Berzon, “Tuvalu is Drowning,” *Salon* (Mar 31, 2006), [www.salon.com/2006/03/31/tuvalu\\_2/](http://www.salon.com/2006/03/31/tuvalu_2/).

<sup>7</sup> Nobuo Mimura and Leonard Nurse et al., “Small Islands,” *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, ed. M.L. Parry et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 2007), 694. For 2014 IPCC scenarios, see: Wong, P.P., I.J. Losada, J.-P. Gattuso, J. Hinkel, A. Khattabi, K.L. McInnes, Y. Saito, and A. Sallenger, “Coastal Systems and Low-lying Areas,” in *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 369.

<sup>8</sup> As reported by Tim Folger, “Rising Seas,” *National Geographic* (September 2013), 40–41; and [www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5](http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5). There is continual uncertainty about the future rate of Greenland and Antarctic glacial melt – if all their ice melted and entered the sea, then waters would rise by 216 feet (as in the Eocene period), although such an eventuality, scientists expect, would take thousands of years.

<sup>9</sup> See the research of Paul Kench, a coastal geomorphologist at the University of Auckland, as reported in Nicholas Schmidle, “Wanted: A New Home for My Country,” *New York Times* (May 8, 2009), [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). At Columbia University’s Earth Institute, scientists argue that sea rise and surf will reshape islands, not drown them.

<sup>10</sup> See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 265.

<sup>11</sup> See Steve Wright and Tessie Humble, “Corporate Military Management Approaches to Climate Change: From Refugee to Exclusion,” unpublished manuscript, 2013; and Ben Hayes, “The Surveillance-industrial Complex,” in Kirstie

Ball et al., *Surveillance Studies Handbook* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012).

12 Guy-Pierre Chomette, "Maldives, an Archipelago in Peril," in *Climate Refugees*, 125.

13 See Argos Collective, "From Global Warming to Climate Refugees," *Climate Refugees*, 14–16.

14 Folger, "Rising Seas," 54.

15 Folger, "Rising Seas," 54.

16 Folger, "Rising Seas," 44, and 57. Also see Morris, "What Happens When Your Country Drowns?," 2: "The United Nations Development Programme estimates that \$86 billion will need to be spent annually by 2015 to help developing countries adapt to the effects of global warming. The UN has launched a fund for this purpose, but has only collected \$100 million so far. What's more, rich countries commonly use so-called adaptation funds as a bargaining tool to push for lower emissions from the industrializing countries of the developing world."

17 Carol Farbotko, "Wishful Sinking: Disappearing Islands, Climate Refugees and Cosmopolitan Experimentation," *Asia-Pacific Viewpoint* 51/1, (2010), 47–60. This narrative was also reproduced in Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, 2006, in which Gore observed – falsely – that "the citizens of these Pacific nations have all had to evacuate to New Zealand," accompanied by photographs of a flooded Tuvalu. For a critical review of the Argos Collective's book, see Yates McKee, "On *Climate Refugees*: Biopolitics, Aesthetics, and Critical Climate Change," *Qui Parle*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 2011), 309–325.

18 Also see Khaled Ramadan's video *Maldives To Be or Not*, 2013, shown on the same occasion, which presents an anti-spectacular and sensitive account of the concerns of the Maldivians, questioning the results of capitalist modernization and tourism on traditional island life. In addition, there were the politically and ecologically engaged

videos of Ursula Biemann (*Deep Weather*) and Oliver Ressler (*For a Completely Different Climate*).

19 See Neil Smith, "There Is No Such Thing As A Natural Disaster," in *Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (11 June, 2006), at: <http://forums.ssrc.org/>. Smith argues that "every phase and aspect of a disaster – causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and response, and reconstruction – the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus."

20 On Sissako's film, see my *Return to the Postcolony*. Also see Jon Shenk's feature length documentary on President Nasheed and his climate struggle: *The Island President* (2011).

21 See <http://350.org/maldives>.

22 See "Voices from Small Island States: Maldives President Mohamed Nasheed, a Tuvaluan Delegate and a Youth Activist from the Solomon Islands," *Democracy Now!* (December 17, 2009), [www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org).

23 See Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee, "A Climate for Change? Critical Reflections on the Durban United Nations Climate Change Conference," *Organization Studies* 33/12 (2012), 1761–1786. Banerjee argues that "Despite more than fifteen years of high level efforts led by the United Nations to broker a binding agreement on emissions reduction, negotiations at every annual meeting have failed to establish a global agreement, mainly due to significant disagreements between industrialized and developing countries over differentiated responsibilities in reducing emissions," (1761).

24 See Mary Louise Malig, trade policy analyst of the Global Forest Coalition, "Burning the Planet, One Climate COP at a Time," (December 13, 2014), at: <http://peopleforestsrights.wordpress.com>.

25 Mimura and Nurse, "Small Islands," and [www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/](http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/). Also see Mark

Hertsgaard, *HOT: Living Through the Next Fifty Years on Earth* (New York: Mariner, 2012).

26 See <http://globaljusticeecology.org/>. Frances Williams, "Climate is Rights Issue, says Maldives Minister," *FT.com* (Mar 4, 2009).

27 To date, New Zealand has rejected requests to classify Tuvaluans as climate refugees, and instead calls them "labor migrants," agreeing to admit 75 per year under its Pacific Access Category. See Angela Oels, "Asylum Rights for Climate Refugees? From Agamben's Bare Life to the Autonomy of Migration," unpublished manuscript (2008); and Alexandra Berzon, "Tuvalu is Drowning," *Salon.com* (31 March, 2006).

28 See Molly Conisbee and Andrew Simms, *Environmental Refugees: the Case for Recognition* (London: New Economics Foundation, 2003), 39.

29 Essam El Hinnawi, *Environmental Refugees* (Nairobi: UNEP, 1985), 4. For more on climate refugees, see Jane McAdam, *Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Laura Westra, *Environmental Justice and the Rights of Ecological Refugees* (London: Routledge, 2009); and Gregory White, *Climate Change and Migration: Security and Borders in a Warming World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

30 See Oels, "Asylum Rights for Climate Refugees?," 10; Conisbee and Simms, *Environmental Refugees*, 38–39; Fabrice Renaud, et al. "Control, Adapt or Flee: How to Face Environmental Migration?," *InterSecTions* 5 (2007), 34; and Argos Collective, *Climate Refugees*, 15.

31 See Carol Farbotko and Heather Lazrus, "The First Refugees? Contesting Global Narratives of Climate Change in Tuvalu," *Global Environmental Change* 22 (2012), 382–390.

32 Oels, "Asylum Rights for Climate Refugees?," 11. Oels references Agamben's discussion of the state of exception and bare

life in relation to migration politics.

33 Oels, "Asylum Rights for Climate Refugees?," 16.

34 Oels, "Asylum Rights for Climate Refugees?," 8 and 12: "The social practice of the politics of migration in Europe shows that such 'exceptions' are becoming more and more the rule." On contemporary art and migration, see T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013).

35 Oels, "Asylum Rights for Climate Refugees?," 7–8; Wright and Tessie Humble, "Corporate Military Management Approaches to Climate Change"; and Christian Parenti, *Tropics of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* (New York: Nation Books, 2012).

36 See Farbotko and Lazrus, "The First Refugees?," 383, who write of such a conflict involving Friends of the Earth campaigning to save Tuvaluan "climate refugees" at a 2008 Climate Camp in Newcastle, Australia, only to be told by islanders that they rather wished to receive training to become skilled migrants, should they have to leave their land.

37 Farbotko and Lazrus, "The First Refugees?," 388.

38 The "autonomy of migration" perspective supports "the call for legislation of all migrants, without distinction," and "the recognition of fundamental human rights like the right to reside, to work and to non-discrimination." Activists contend that only open borders will get policymaking to consider the perpetuation of global injustice. Oels, "Asylum Rights for Climate Refugees?," 18.

39 Adaptation discourse also allows governments to abdicate responsibility for climate change in the first place. See Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Allen Lane, 2014), 48.

40 See Eddie Yuen, "The Politics of Failure Have Failed: The Environmental Movement

and Catastrophism,” in *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth*, ed. Sasha Lilley, David McNally, Eddie Yuen, and James Davis (Oakland, CA: Spectre, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Mimura and Nurse, “Small Islands.” See also Farbotko, “Wishful Sinking.”

<sup>42</sup> See Jon Barnett and W. Neil Adger, “Climate Dangers and Atoll Countries,” *Climatic Change* 61/3 (December 2003); cited in Mimura and Nurse, “Small Islands,” 707, and 711: “The enhancement of resilience at various levels of society, through capacity building, efficient resource allocation and the mainstreaming of climate risk management into development policies at the national and local scale, could constitute a key element of the adaptation strategy.”

<sup>43</sup> Farbotko and Lazrus, “The First Refugees?,” 384.

<sup>44</sup> Mimura and Nurse, “Small Islands.” The 1989 “Malé Declaration,” initiated under President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, called on the UN and developed nations to adopt alternative energy sources to reduce pollution. See Argos Collective, *Climate Refugees*, 133.

<sup>45</sup> Tuvalu has lobbied for effective policymaking on climate change, and the rejection of refugee status for its population, with Prime Minister Apisai Ielemia arguing against the rhetoric of relocation: “to relocate is a shortsighted solution, an irresponsible solution. We’re not dealing here with Tuvalu only. All of the low-lying island coastal areas are going to be affected. You tell me whether the world is ready to evacuate everybody.” See Berzon, “Tuvalu is Drowning”; and Oels, “Asylum Rights for Climate Refugees?,” 15.

<sup>46</sup> Afelee Pita, “United Nations high level meeting on climate change: Tuvalu calls for climate change polluters to pay,” Press release by the permanent Mission of Tuvalu to the United Nations (29 September, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> See: [www.tuvaluislands.com/news/archived/2002/2002-03-04.htm](http://www.tuvaluislands.com/news/archived/2002/2002-03-04.htm). And: [www.tuvaluislands.com/news/archived/2002/2002-08-29.htm](http://www.tuvaluislands.com/news/archived/2002/2002-08-29.htm): “Until the United States takes significant action, it is vulnerable to this type of lawsuit,” said Jennifer Morgan, formerly the World Wildlife Fund, on the sidelines of the World Summit on Sustainable Development.” Oels, “Asylum Rights for Climate Refugees?,” 16.

<sup>48</sup> See Rachel Morris, “Tuvalu v. ExxonMobil? The Coming Tide of Transnational Climate Lawsuits,” *Mother Jones* (April 20, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> See Cormac Cullinan, *Wild Law: A Manifesto for Earth Justice* (White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green, 2011); and Peter Burdon, ed., *Exploring Wild Law: The Philosophy of Earth Jurisprudence* (Kent Town, South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> Argos Collective, *Climate Refugees*, 134.

<sup>51</sup> [www.collectifargos.com/webdocs-blogs-site/reportages-multimedia/maldives-un-archipel-a-fleur-d-eau#.UjcaN7wd6yw](http://www.collectifargos.com/webdocs-blogs-site/reportages-multimedia/maldives-un-archipel-a-fleur-d-eau#.UjcaN7wd6yw)







## THE EXPERIENCE OF 'PORTABLE NATION', THE FIRST MALDIVES PAVILION

– Khaled Ramadan

Global environmental changes have become an unprecedented challenge to humankind. Earth's environment and weather systems are common to us all and impact everything for everyone on the planet: ecologies, economies, equalities, politics, livelihoods, cultures, communities, and relationships. So far, governments and institutions have proven incapable of providing united global action in response to exacerbated environmental conditions.

As a low-lying island nation, the Maldives is one of the world's most vulnerable nations facing rising sea levels. Appointed to curate the nation's first pavilion at the Venice Biennale, we concluded that the ideal context for the representation of the Maldives was at the junction created when notions of nature and culture are set in juxtaposition. With this ecological approach, the Maldives Pavilion became a far-reaching project, producing a series of environmental investigations undertaken by artists and thinkers from around the world, who brought attention to the crisis of the archipelago's potential disappearance as a result of the rise in sea levels.

As a result the Maldives Pavilion highlighted a number of questions pertaining to climate change, national and global governance, environmental romanticism, and adequate artistic responses to these issues within the context of the Biennale. It brought together thoughts and propositions on the preservation and archiving of Maldivian memory and history, and possibilities for representation of the sinking paradise. After its opening date, this ecopavilion also presented a significant number of projects which ran parallel to the main exhibition over a six-month period.

The Maldives Pavilion was curated by Chamber of Public Secrets (Khaled Ramadan, Alfredo Cramerotti, Aida Eltorie). The complete list of artists, who participated in the Pavilion: Mohamed Ali & Moomin Fouad, Sama Alshaibi, Ursula Biemann, Stefano Cagol, Wael Darwesh, Christoph Draeger & Heidrun Holzfeind, Thierry Geoffroy aka Colonel, Khaled Hafez, Hanna Husberg & Laura McLean & Kalliopi Tsipni-Kolaza, Achilleas Kentonis & Maria Papacharalambous, Greg Niemeyer with Chris Chafe & Perrin Meyer, Khaled Ramadan & Abed Anouti, Oliver Ressler, Klaus Schafner, Patrizio Travagli, Wooloo. Of all the exhibited projects *Contingent Movements Archive* by Hanna Husberg, Laura McLean and Kalliopi Tsipni-Kolaza is presented here in the following pages.



We've always had islands forming, islands dissolving. It's always been like that. In fact our kings used to have a word for this 'voda giraa rashtra'. 'Voda' means grow, 'giraa' means to erode. So actually the idea of sinking islands is not new to us.

– Naseema Mohamed



Malé seen from  
Vilingili / Vilimalé / vilu + gili /  
4°11' N, 73°29' E  
Malé, K., inhabited.  
1. The ( island on the ) rocks of  
the deep lagoon.

## CONTINGENT MOVEMENTS ARCHIVE

– Hanna Husberg & Laura McLean

A nation faces a constitutional crisis if all land is lost, and no sovereign territory can be established on foreign soil. The maintenance of territory is one of the key constituting elements of statehood, and if land cannot be maintained by a nation, it could be legally dissolved. The prospect of statelessness for citizens of island nations inundated by rising sea levels is a real one. Refugee status, and therefore the protection of human rights by host nations, is not currently afforded to individuals displaced by 'natural' forces. Drawing attention to this problematic, the former president of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, proposed a 'sovereign wealth fund' to purchase land abroad in anticipation of the displacement of his constituents, citing Australia, India, and Sri Lanka as possible territories for relocation.

Working with the Maldives Pavilion and speculating on the contingent circumstances Maldivians could face in the future, we established the *Contingent Movements Archive* to address the potential humanitarian and cultural consequences of displacement. Reflecting on the notion of a 'portable nation', the project thinks through the effects of national and international law on human movements, and considers how digital technologies and distributed networks might assist in preserving the culture and identity of a diaspora without homeland.

We have invited practitioners and theorists to contribute artworks and essays to [www.contingentmovementsarchive.com](http://www.contingentmovementsarchive.com), to develop a repository of knowledge expanding on these concerns. Some of these contributors joined us for the *Contingent Movements Symposium* at the Library of the Historical Archives of Contemporary Art of the Venice Biennale, which was in turn archived online. Later at UNESCO in Paris we held an exhibition unpacking the *Contingent Movements Archive* as part of the broader exhibition *Adapting in the Anthropocene*.

*The Free Sea* emerged from these activities and our research in the Maldives. The essay film explores the island nation as a state constituted and unbound by the cultural, political, economic, and material flows of late capitalism and anthropogenic climate change. A series of text quotes and images extracted from the film features here.

Composed from a varied range of audio and video material recorded and shot on location and sourced from online archives, *The Free Sea* reflects on these islands as geo-bodies of identity, sovereignty, and prosperity threatened by the breaching of coastal and climatic thresholds. Beginning and ending in Europe, however, and making a tour of the Asia-Pacific islands that host Australian detention centers for asylum seekers, the film implicates the West as the source and arbiter of

international law and policy that continues to avoid responsibility for the processes it has put into play.

*The Free Sea* takes its title from Hugo Grotius' book *Mare Liberum*, published by the United Dutch East India Company in 1609. This treatise challenged the policy of *Mare Clausum* under which nations had appropriated entire seas for their exclusive use. Grotius instead proposed that the sea was international territory, common and free to all nations to use for seafaring trade. His influence promoted the rise of global free trade, and it was a key thesis in the development of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The forecast dissolution of the islands of the Maldives represents an ontological loss of definition, and crisis of representation for objects and subjects, registering across local and global scales and systems of knowledge. *The Free Sea* traces consequences of this crisis, considering potential positions for new human beings subject to a complex of technological and legal systems, but afforded rights by none.



Malé / Māē / māle / 4°11'N,  
73°31' E, Malé, K., capital of  
Maldives.  
Old name: Mahal. 1. The big 'Le'  
(island).



This was a rare occasion, Maldives president, Mohammed Nasheed, led a team of 12 cabinet ministers in holding a first ever underwater cabinet meeting at the bottom of the Indian Ocean. Seated around the table and using hand signals and stakes the cabinet endorsed a SOS message from the Maldives to be represented at the UN Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen.

– Reporter from NVT Kenya

Almost all of the artifacts that were targeted during the raid were of the ancient collection. Many of the pieces that were destroyed were made out of coral limestone, so very fragile in their nature, also because they are thousand years old. They actually got smashed onto the ground, and some of these they just crumbled down into dust.  
– Ismail Ashraf



As the foreground and background of our world scene collapses, how can we recognise the full presence of all actors and acknowledge the qualities of newly incorporated identities, as well as those that are lost?

This aestheticizing of the world has reached an apex which has been shown clearly with the publication of the Earth seen from the sky. Because that is when you realise the impact of human activity from the point of view of a terrestrial aesthetics, and this point is where appear the limits of the notion of the Anthropocene. Indeed it is the global vision of a phenomenon which requires in order to get its true relevance to be analyzed with all the necessary nuances and the complexities which lends life to to social compromises and local collective regulation. You can not not take into account all of these complexities at all these different scales.  
– Nathalie Blanc



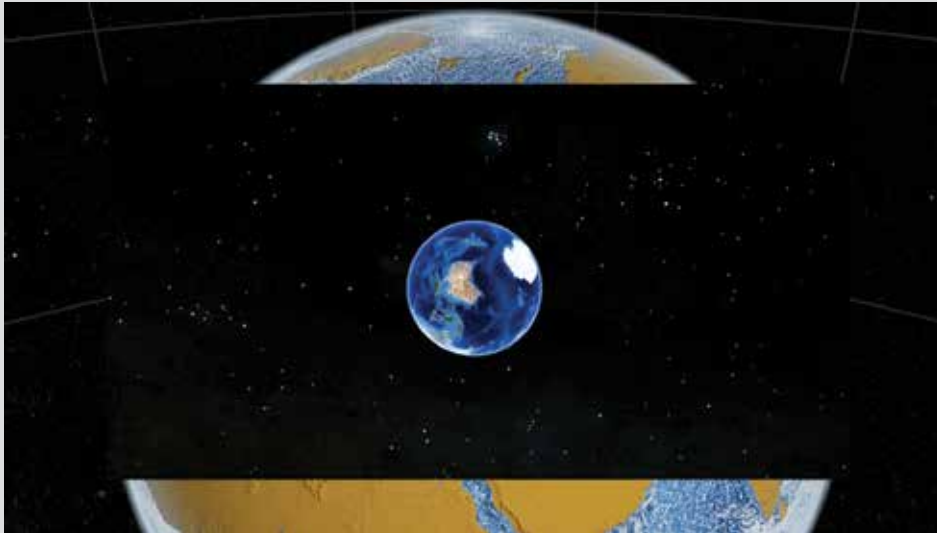
About the land also, we are reclaiming a lot of land, and always we take care to when we reclaim land to raise it higher than the usual levels. So this sort of idea and this technology will be used further. Maybe we will not have to simply disappear from the face of the earth. No, I don't think so.  
– Naseema Mohamed



Hulhumalé / Hulumalé / hulhule + maalé / 4°13' N, 73°32' E, Malé K., Malé inhabited. Reclaimed island.  
1. The island was named after Hulhule and Malé.



So to come back to the question of aesthetics, I would say there is a twofold aesthetics, one globalized and commoditized, which is promoted by actors who themselves are globalized. And here once again you have symbolic narratives on the global future of the Earth. And there is a second aesthetic which is the fruit of these local compromises. A second version, a second vision of the Anthropocene goes hand in hand with the construction of a new human being. Because this vision of the Earth has been globally transformed, goes hand in hand with the development of technology, which allows us to represent this transformation for ourselves. This is an augmented human being through an apparatus, and aesthetics is the science of sensitivity, and these machines augment this sensitivity at the scale of the vision of the earth, giving awareness of other terrestrial dimensions because we're talking about special machinery, or machines that allow for this vision of terrestrial transformation...

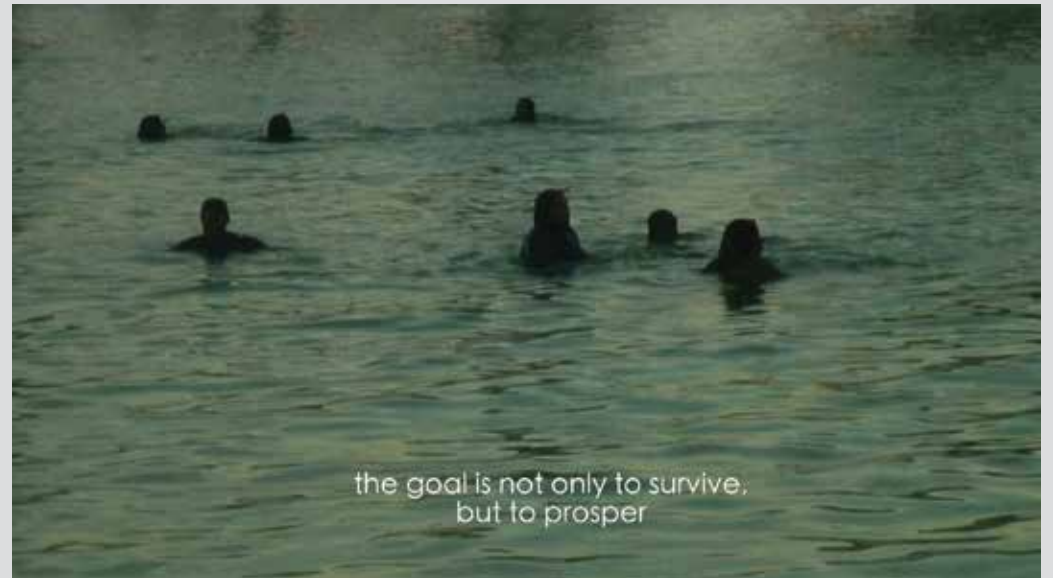


...the transformation of the milieu by human activity. Now we can estimate that from this point of view we are entering into a new era as of the 18th century. That is to say an age where the human being becomes aware of his imprint on the environment, on his milieu, and he will theorize on this imprint by defining scientific disciplines that will give the measurement of this imprint. And it is then, I believe, that we start to talk about environmental aesthetics. To link environmental aesthetics and the Anthropocene is the way in which contemporary aesthetics accompanies a cultural phase of contemporary capitalism with mass tourism, practices that insist on going elsewhere, seeing elsewhere what's happening. All these versions of a globalized aesthetics use a supposed diversity of these places, of these different cultures in order to homogenize them into an aesthetic which finally is very global. So to conclude, I would say, that it is important to emphasize the role of aesthetics in the staging of this global environment through the development of a reflection on the relations between the local and the global...

– Nathalie Blanc



Fulidhoo / Fulidū /  
3°41' N, 73°25' E  
Felidhe, V., inhabited.  
1. The island at the crest of the atoll



the goal is not only to survive,  
but to prosper

Pavilion of Australia

**SIMRYN GILL**

**Here Art Grows On Trees**

Simryn Gill  
*Here art grows on trees*  
Australian Pavilion, Venice  
Biennale, 2013  
1, 5, 6–9 Photo: Jenni Carter  
2–4 Photo: Simryn Gill  
Courtesy the Artist





## HERE ART GROWS ON TREES

– Catherine de Zegher

Simryn Gill works in the area of the ephemeral and the domestic, with its daily habits and repetitions in a lived social reality. Hers is the tidal zone, the insecure in-between zone, its significance lying between absence and presence, spiritual and corporeal.

Through (photo)graphic series and object collections, which can seem casually thrown together, her art brings into play her, and our, day-to-day experiences. Once gathered and assembled, these works have the unexpected capacity to momentarily disturb the systematisation of life. Consequently, our daily lives seem to unfold in front of us in a perpetual becoming. This 'being in the present', or what is often called 'the everyday', is notoriously elusive to objectify, and it is this mobile indeterminacy and openness that gives the quotidian its powerful and radical character.

A temporary building, the Australian Pavilion in the Venice Giardini della Biennale, seems ideal to host Gill's site-specific project, a few months before the structure will be dismantled and discarded for a new pavilion. With its appearance resembling a modular beach house, it has an uncanny association with the mangrove tree-lined, beachfront house of Gill's youth in Port Dickson, Malaysia.

As always, Gill's work is precise and poignant. She considers the building's structure, composed of two rectangular volumes alongside each other, each having a different height and floor level, and unified by a wavy roof, which follows the split of the two levels. The upper floor holds the series of twelve large screens of collaged drawings, *Let Go*, *Lets Go*, while the lower section shows the series of mine photographs, *Eyes and Storms*. In the upper room, comfortable seats in a style of tropical modernism are placed for visitors to pause and look at the collection of books from which Gill has drawn her paperwork. On the lower level is a big bowl with a nipped basin, Half moon shine. Necklaces of Naught made both of organic and synthetic materials, of plastic derived from petrochemicals and of metal from iron ore, close the circle – around and around.

Here, amidst the trees, Gill's site-specific project, Here art grows on trees, presents paper works as being of vegetation, as a cog in the whole system of turning wheels, as just a link in the chain, in the string of gems that the world is offering – a cyclic instead of linear world-view.













## THE COSMO-POLITICAL FOREST

Ursula Biemann

The search for natural resources in the Americas has led to direct incursions into indigenous lands, which in many cases enjoy an abundance of oil, gas, and minerals, as well as healthy forest and waterways. Predictably, epic financial interests and surging extraction projects have left devastation in their wake. The indigenous peoples in the hemisphere face one of their worst crises since the arrival of European colonizers – a crisis that is fueled by the same frontier spirit, pushing ever further into the depths of the forest. As devastating as many of these cases from Chile to Canada are, the struggles of the indigenous population have helped drive forward groundbreaking legal reforms, which harbor great potential for larger planetary perspectives on human survival. In two recent video projects I address the complex entanglements of oil, forest, climate and geopolitics on this larger plane: in *Deep Weather* (2013) by engaging the Earth as a closed system, and in *Forest Law* (2014) by bringing indigenous cosmologies and the Rights of Nature into the arena. On their own terms, these works of art seek conceptual and aesthetic tools with which to engage ecologies on this physically transforming planet.

### DEEP WEATHER

This short, single-channel video essay, exhibited in the Maldives Pavilion of the Venice Biennial, draws a connection between the relentless unearthing of fossil fuels in Northern Canada and the protective measures undertaken by Bangladeshi communities on the other side of the world – two remote and simultaneously occurring scenes connected through atmospheric chemistry. *Deep Weather* thickens our understanding of these geographies by reaching into the interior of the Earth and extending a hundred miles into the atmosphere, as fossil fuel extraction is not merely a geopolitical concern, but also a bio-planetary reality tied to recombinant chemical life-worlds.

The opening shot of the film looks down from a helicopter on the huge open-pit extraction zone of the tar sands in the midst of the vast Canadian boreal forest, establishing a zone of dark, lubricant geology. After oil production peaked, ever dirtier, more remote, and deeper layers of carbon resources started being exploited in Alberta. In the tar sands, fresh water from the Athabasca River is used to boil the black sediment until the oil separates from the clay.<sup>1</sup> The toxic waste, a necessary by-product of bitumen processing, is stored in open tailing lakes that spread over large areas which until recently were covered by ancient spruce forests and spongy wet soil. Aggressive mining, steam processing, and the trucking of the tar sands and equipment all impinge on environmental and human rights as they wreak devastation upon the living space and hunting territories of First



Nations communities. Remote areas in the heart of the boreal forest, traversed primarily by Mikisew Cree and Athabasca Chipewyan hunters on foot, are being successively opened by the Canadian government for exploratory testing and oil mining. Pushing extraction frontiers far into pristine areas also necessitates the construction of extensive infrastructures, including roads, heliports, seismic lines, settlements, and communication networks reaching into these remote habitats. All of this drastically changes the living and migrating space of hundreds of species, including humans. Native communities now travel several days before reaching their hunting grounds because their traditional territory has been rapidly overtaken by the mining industries. Communities and ecologies are being drastically reshaped by these extraction practices.



Ursula Biemann  
*Deep Weather*, 2013, video still  
Courtesy the Artist

Alberta tar sands.

The Athabasca River, which is harnessed to power the extraction of the tar sands, flows north into the Arctic Ocean. It is the backbone of human existence in Northern Alberta. In the last few years, due to massive industrial use, its water level has been sinking to the point where faraway settlements can no longer be reached by boat. But for Aboriginal peoples, the damage reaches beyond blocking traditional knowledge and hunting practices. Local mythologies and divinities animate their land.<sup>2</sup> The landscape contains both worlds; it is a psychosocial habitat. The noise, subterranean sonar waves and vibrations, and the invisible toxic juices seeping into lakes and rivers affect not only the biological but also the psychic ecology through contamination. The legendary quality of this collective space teetering

on the brink of disaster is evoked in *Deep Weather* in the whispered voiceover: “The wildlife has retreated / The traplines are empty, / The elders call the spirits, / The young ones sing rap songs, / And the acid wind’s hissing. / Evolution isn’t fast enough. Mutate!” The whisper that resonates with the aerial video footage activates a time-space beyond the immediate physical and political reality. Set in times of epic geological, chemical, and hydrological disorder, the voiceover invokes a science-fictional narrative. The video attempts to offer what Yates McKee called “an evolutionary leap in the spatio-temporal horizons of human consciousness itself that would overcome the short-term, self-interested pursuit of material gratification characteristic of industrial civilization.”<sup>3</sup> Every globally operating oil company has licensed parcels of land in the Alberta Tar Sands. An area the size of England has been partitioned and extractive activities have begun simultaneously on multiple sites.<sup>4</sup> Companies can acquire the license for any of the layers assumed to contain carbon deposits. A particular lot of surface land may actually have numerous owners beneath it, among the deeper layers of the Earth. Hence the disaster spreads into deep time as extraction exploration reaches down to the Triassic and Cambrian layers of the planet’s formation. By now we are perfectly aware that the boreal forest – currently under extreme threat because of these practices – is of vital importance for the absorption of carbon that is continuously exhausted by petro-capitalism.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the dirty fuel being



Ursula Biemann  
*Forest Law*, 2014, video still  
Courtesy the Artist

Bangladeshi communities building an earth embankment against rising water levels in the Ganges Delta.

extracted from the tar sands requires not only a lot of energy for its own processing, but it is a lot heavier in carbon emissions than anything we have consumed so far. Interventions made in remote corners of Northern Alberta are impacting the entire planetary life system, as oil extraction is forming legacies for the next 100,000 years, leaving residues for which we lack the proper cognizance and timeframe to comprehend.<sup>6</sup>

The second part of *Deep Weather* turns to Bangladesh, where the consequences of melting Himalayan ice fields, rising planetary sea levels, and extreme weather events largely define living conditions, particularly in the Delta. The original purpose of my field trip to Bangladesh in early 2011 was to explore the country's multifarious water problems. Ultimately, I zoomed in on the admirable ability of Bangladeshi communities to adopt an amphibian lifestyle, devising convertible houses, floating agricultures, hospitals, and schools. These are the measures undertaken by people who have to find ways of living on the water as large parts of Bangladesh gradually submerge. The video documents only one of these adaptations, but one that is particularly emblematic for an age of global warming: The tremendous community effort required to build protective mud embankments. Hands-on labour is what climate change will mean for the people in the deltas of the global south.

There is a sharp contrast between the sites of cause and effect. In Canada we witness the aggressive extraction of heavy fuel, major investment, large machinery, and the vertical desire to continue extraction into the depths of time. In Bangladesh we see the drowning of delta communities, the manual labour of millions, and the expanding tracts of territory submerged into the horizontality of the rising oceans. As Canada heads toward resource exhaustion and degradation, there is a sense in Bangladesh of a cohesive investment in a future, however precarious it may be. These different realities ultimately express radically divergent attitudes toward the Earth.

With corporations operating globally, the issue of accountability has long left the constraints of national boundaries. But the mutating air chemistry has propelled it onto the planetary scale, entering a whole new dimension where cause and effect are no longer in a direct relationship. Instead they are refracted into complex causal fields. Under the perishable sky, the world fuses together. Climate change forces us to deal with invisible dynamics. Timothy Morton speaks of global warming as a hyperobject – a very large diffused object that is permanently present but not localized in a material sense. All we ever see are its footprints. And since global warming occurs in such vast temporalities, it phases in and out of the shorter human timeframe of perception. That, Morton suggests, is how it withdraws from our

visibility.<sup>7</sup> From our mortal, earthbound standpoint, the phenomenon is partially eclipsed. There are gaps in our cognition that need to be breached. Perhaps art can play a role in conveying the immaterial and somewhat spectral nature of climate change, for instance by bringing remote and apparently unrelated locations to interact on the same visual plane. Today it is fairly easy to access vast amounts of factual information and scientific data about climate change, but rational thinking alone cannot make us understand the magnitude of change we are in for. For this, different forms of aesthetic communication addressing the imaginary will be necessary. The geopolitical wide-angle lens with which we have expanded our vision to embrace the globe simultaneously has zoomed into the fast temporalities of short-term effects and revenues, and is thus failing to help us see these larger realities. As we scoop out geological matter from deep layers into the daylight and out into the atmosphere, global warming forces us to think in deep time.

## FOREST LAW

A commission by the Land Grant program of the Broad Art Museum in Michigan provided a new opportunity to pursue my engagement with indigenous communities in the Americas who have come under massive pressure from oil and mining operations. *Forest Law* (2014) is a collaborative project with Brazilian architect Paulo Tavares whose substantial research in Amazonia lays the ground for this field study and video work in Ecuador.<sup>8</sup> *Forest Law* takes a different perspective on the complex embroilment of forest, water, oil, and climate by bringing the Rights of Nature into play as a potentially universal legal framework. Emerging from the indigenous cosmologies of the living forest, and fought for by the indigenous nations of Ecuador in defense of their commonly owned land and way of life, fundamental constitutional reforms were signed in 2008. This new Constitution declares Ecuador a “plurinational and interethnic state” and introduces a series of innovative legal elements, such as the concept of *sumak kawsay* or “good living” and the Rights of Nature, which contends that ecosystems – the living forests, mountains, rivers, and seas – are legal subjects. With these new paragraphs, Ecuador extends its jurisdiction to a multi-species population. The first article of the Rights of Nature stipulates, for instance, that nature has “the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its vital cycles, structure, functions, and evolutionary processes”.<sup>9</sup> In the event that these rights are violated in any form, the newly declared juridical subjects may be defended in court by a person or a collective group.



Ursula Biemann  
*Forest Law*, 2014, video still  
 Courtesy the Artist

José Gualinga, leader of the  
 Kitchwa people of Sarayaku.

For the indigenous communities whose livelihood is entirely dependent on the forest, these regulations, if enforced, can guarantee their own existence. Beyond the immediate support for human survival, however, these provocative laws have the ability to decenter existing human-centric legal systems by placing them in a larger context.

*Forest Law* concentrates on three landmark legal cases unfolding in the forest of Ecuadorian Amazonia. In this project, Paulo and I take a slow road in trying to understand the ecological and cosmological dimensions of these paradigmatic trials on behalf of the forest and the people that cultivate it, drawing the contours of the legal, scientific, ethical and political stakes that they raise.

One legal case concerns Shuar territories in the South of Ecuador where a giant copper mining project is closing in on indigenous lands. Another unresolved case resonates throughout the film as the haunting history of the large-scale contamination of soils and water caused by Texaco in the Northeast of the country in the 70s. At the heart of the project, however, lies the case of Sarayaku, a Kitchwa people who owns a large forest territory that can be accessed only by river or by flying in with a small propeller plane. The village council decides on each and every visitor who can enter the territory. Sarayaku has good reason to control its boundaries and entry points. As we learn from the interview with José Gualinga, leader of the Sarayaku people, in 2002 an Argentinian oil company intruded into their territory with their explorers, workers, and military enforcements. Sarayaku responded to this violation by installing “peace and life camps” on their territorial boundaries and by filing a case in the Inter-American Court of Indigenous Human Rights.



Ursula Biemann  
*Forest Law*, 2014, video still  
 Courtesy the Artist

Forensic analysis of contaminated  
 soils.

As in the Cree territories of Northern Alberta, the oil company came and laid out the seismic lines across the land to form a deadly grid of buried explosives in the rainforest. What was particularly appalling to the Sarayaku people is that they targeted a forest area that is critical for the reproduction and repopulation of animal species. The indigenous people have organized the forest into hunting zones, fishing zones, and reserves which they deem as living forest where they hardly ever go themselves because these are sacred places. For strangers, these territories have no life, Gualinga says, but for our people these territories are alive. The leaders of Sarayaku spoke up during the public hearings at the inter-American court and claimed that if the forest disappears, they too will vanish, because as a shaman put it, the destruction of the jungle erases the soul. What makes this case so important is that it evolved at the intersection of Human Rights and the Rights of Nature as two profoundly entangled realms.

After a decade of struggle, Sarayaku won the case and witnessed what they hadn't realistically hoped for: An official apology by the State of Ecuador. On October 1st, 2014, four Ministers and the Attorney General traveled to the Amazon to formally apologize for the abuses that took place during the oil operations carried out by the oil company in their territory. The public apology was not a pure surge of self-critical insight; it was part of the Inter-American Court's ruling in 2012. The court condemned the Ecuadorian State for violating their rights to communal property. This verdict confirmed that when traditional lands are involved, the right to property has become the court's standard ruling on indigenous rights. However, legal scholar Thomas Antkowiak argues that the right to property cannot serve as the conceptual stronghold for indigenous peoples' survival, because domestic and international



law grants states wide leeway to interfere with property. Instead, he proposes that a broad right-to-life concept, known as *vida digna*, serve as the new structural basis, which would situate it more firmly in the regimes of international human rights. This would certainly make sense considering the indigenous philosophy of *sumak kawsay*.<sup>10</sup>

*Forest Law* takes a different route. Placing the project in the context of climate change, it sees the ground-breaking legal cases unfolding in the Amazon as an opportunity to consider an important legal potential that lies beyond both property rights and human-centric laws. Zooming out of the dark misty rainforest, the video prolog evokes the Earth as a living planet whose surface has evolved into ecosystems that keep her metabolism alive. The narration is set in the future, looking back at the year 2014 when major decisions about the remaining parts of the forest are being discussed in court. In other words, *Forest Law* posits itself in this conditional future that is shaped by the decisions we are making now. A temperature rise of only four degrees is enough to disable the Amazon ecosystem and turn it into dry scrub. With this important cooling system shut down, the planet turns increasingly hot and dry, with ever-shrinking land left for human food production. When the forest is gone, world civilization will have come to an end. In other words, what unfolds in this remote corner of the rainforest is of world-wide importance. What moves to the foreground of our intellectual attention are the most material concerns. The toxic waste, mud and produced water generated in the extraction process that remain a jarring presence in the equatorial forest thirty years later, come under forensic scrutiny in *Forest Law*. No longer the passive backdrop to human history, the landscape, nature, and matter itself comes to the fore and becomes the subject of aesthetic scrutiny. Here, the act of soil sampling is carried out in a lonely mute performance by eco-chemists handling their samplers, shovels and giant pipettes. The evidence brought to the surface speaks of the perishing of living worlds with which the law has no relationship. What is missing is what Michel Serres calls the natural contract, the pact between humans and nature, for from the early beginnings, our legal architecture relies entirely on social contracts made between humans.<sup>11</sup>

Nature, and hence life forms and their ecologies, are treated by the world legal system as mere property to be traded, consumed, and at best, protected by environmental laws imposing regulations on corporate and private actors. The recognition of natural communities bearing equal rights of existence is only just rising over the legal horizon. While we have parceled off the land into small cells that can be owned and exploited, entire living systems of the Earth are legally invisible. For the indigenous communities, these vital entities are inhabited and vitalized by the Runa world of the masters of the



Shaman collecting medicinal plants,  
*Forest Law* installation at Ely and  
Edythe Broad Art Museum, courtesy  
Eat Pomegranate Photography.

forest, the mountain, and the water, with whom they commune and who recharge their life energy. This cosmovision of interdependent cohabitation is deeply inscribed in their ethical and legal system in which the violation of natural communities equals the violation of human rights as two entangled realms. Nina Pacari, a kitchwa constitutional lawyer whom we interviewed during our field trip, explained that for the indigenous nations, the Rights of Nature weren't necessary because their holistic thinking does not distinguish between human and nonhuman rights, but given the history of national legislation, the environmentalists insisted on writing them into the constitution.

The videos, with their stereo optics, expose a landscape that is populated by all kinds of sentient beings who inhabit different dimensions of reality: minute copper deposits, forest spirits, indigenous councils, scientists, medicinal plants, international law, global oil corporations, river systems. By addressing this complex ecology of practices, *Forest Law* delves into cosmo-political considerations, the politics of humans and of everything else. The shift from worldly to cosmic politics raises the question of how do law, ecology and cosmology conceive of the global, the cosmos, of something common to go by? How do they conceptualize interaction between species and with everything else? But also, and I speak for myself, how can my modest artistic practice embrace this kind of scale, what can it possibly say about the different conceptions of how we imagine the world to be composed? If realism has made us see that reality is something that needs to be built rather than something already there, we can safely assume that the common world too needs to be made, not just represented.

My previous aesthetic tools proved inadequate for this new task. I believe the living forest that articulates these multiple forms of existence cannot be told as a historical narrative. Nor does it fully emerge in the spatial practices of human geography, which is the signifying system I have used to describe migration networks for a number of years. Hence, neither a historical nor a geographical organization can adequately render this lived multidimensionality that phases in and out of human perception. Proposing a mode of doing politics that is required if “living with” is the goal, Isabelle Stengers suggests that the future articulation, i.e. the linking of the multiple divergent worlds, can only happen through a slow epistemology of perplexity, wondering, and vulnerability. Her slow cosmos is full of spaces of hesitations where what is common can be examined and redefined.<sup>12</sup> *Forest Law* contributes to this, hopefully, by bringing different cognitive architectures into conversation with each other and by noticing significant intersections. In this ‘Other Order of Things’, the complex forest ecology becomes a place where long evolutionary chains meet the future legal system for planet Earth. Indigenous ethical systems are not assigned here to the anthropological study of how others think but instead point to significant lacunas in existing national and international laws that may lay the basis for a different commons, a different cosmos.

Art has the ability to activate this sort of dramatic shift that allows for a speculative moment. What if we claimed a Charter of universal rights of nature in the way human rights were once declared and fought for? What if species and ecologies are no longer eclipsed behind the property claims over the land on which they live, but actually take on subject status? The underlying human-centric paradigms of our legal organization would be radically displaced. Perhaps the Ecuadorian Rights of Nature and the arguments that ultimately won the case of Sarayaku can serve as a model for a global framework of Law. For what lies behind these cases cannot be reduced to legal questions of ownership and land rights. By invoking the planetary conditions of climatic destabilization, resource scarcity, loss of biodiversity and toxic pollution, *Forest Law* addresses them as simultaneously rooted in local histories of violence and expropriation as well as pertaining to a broader terrain of struggles which speaks of a global, universalist, cosmo-politics.

<sup>1</sup> Based on information provided during a tour offered by Suncor Energy on their extraction and tar sand processing facilities in Fort McMurray, Alberta, September 2012.

<sup>2</sup> During my field trip to Northern Alberta, I spent three days with a Cree elder, visiting community members and listening to the myths and politics of this landscape.

<sup>3</sup> René Dubos, quoted in McKee, “Art and the End of Environmentalism,” *Nongovernmental Politics* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 544.

<sup>4</sup> My knowledge of tar-sand extraction derives from a wide array of papers presented at the international three-day conference *Petrocultures* at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, September 2012, and a field trip to Fort McMurray, an extraction frontier town in Northern Alberta.

<sup>5</sup> Petro-capitalism is a term that designates the particular capitalist logic of the global oil market. See Gavin Bridge, “The Hole World: Scales and Spaces of Extraction,” in *New Geographies 2: Landscapes of Energy*, ed. Rania Ghosn (Harvard Graduate School of Design, 2010), and Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, lecture given at The Anthropocene Project, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, January 2013. See also, David Archer, *The Long Thaw: How Humans Are Changing the Next 100,000 Years of Earth's Climate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> *Forest Law* is a collaborative multimedia installation comprising a synchronized double screen projection and a series of photo-text panels with historical material and newly designed maps by Paulo Tavares and Samaneh Moafi. In this text, I am writing mostly about the videos.

<sup>9</sup> The artist book *Forest Law – Selva juridical*, ed. Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares (East Lansing: Broad Art Museum, State University of Michigan, 2014) sheds light on the history of the Amazonian oil frontier with a particularly focus on the case of Sarayaku.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas M. Antkowiak, “Rights, Resources, and Rhetoric: Indigenous Peoples and the Inter-American Court,” 2/23/2014. [www.law.upenn.edu/live/files/2889-antkowiak35upajintl1132013](http://www.law.upenn.edu/live/files/2889-antkowiak35upajintl1132013)

<sup>11</sup> Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Isabelle Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).



Pavilion of Finland

**ANTTI LAITINEN**

**Falling Trees**

Antti Laitinen  
*Tree Reconstruction*, Venice  
Biennale, 2013  
Photo: Eva Ohtonen  
Courtesy the Artist





## EVIDENT NECESSITIES

– Harri Laakso

Antti Laitinen (b. 1975) is an artist whose works defy words – not because they would be conceptually opaque or obscure, but for the opposite reason: because they present situations and circumstances that are clear and undeniable, making further words often unnecessary. The works place before us, in plain sight, matter-of-fact, the collected evidence of an arduous event. The toil has ceased; it has been stripped bare, down to the bare necessities.

Laitinen is a Sisyphean figure, always ready to take on impossible tasks and useless work. In ancient myth, Sisyphus was punished for his trickery and cunning (and for his ability to even cheat death) by making him roll a huge boulder up a hill without ever succeeding, the weight of the rock always surpassing his strength, rolling back and making him start anew, eternally returning to the beginning. The myth, writes Maurice Blanchot, captures the image of an extreme limit, which is tied to his solitude: “All the truth of Sisyphus is bound to his rock; a beautiful image of the ‘elementary’ that is within him and outside him, the affirmation of a self that accepts being entirely outside itself, delivered over and boldly entrusted to the strangeness of the outside.”<sup>1</sup>

In his works Laitinen enacts a sort of happiness at his (and our) condition, offering a form of release, the possibility of freedom in material form, or perhaps, a realization and acceptance of our task as that which makes us human beings. Because: “as long as we have a stone to roll, to contemplate, and to love, we will be able to behave as men.”<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition presented at the 55th International Art Exhibition in Venice is tensed between the gestures of Laitinen’s two new projects *Tree Reconstruction* (2013) and *Forest Square* (2013). Both works are truly grand attempts – a word that aptly captures Laitinen’s approach because it has ‘temptation’ embedded in it, the irresistible lure and challenge of achieving the impossible. The projects entail restructuring on an imposing scale.

In *Tree Reconstruction* a number of northern birch trees were cut down, transported to Venice and reassembled by hand in a monstrous form, bit by bit, like a clumsily fitted jigsaw puzzle. The work offers a magical and concrete representation of the abstract idea of ‘tree’. It portrays the acceptance of man’s inability to do God’s work with equal finesse, only to find another kind of beauty and grace in man’s own homespun creations.

*Forest Square* represents an even greater feat, yet, contrarily, this time without any attempt to reconstruct. For this work Laitinen cleared an

acre of forest, felling the trees and stripping the area bare of all plants and materials, all the way down to a black square of soil. He then spent weeks reorganizing the stored materials into new units and colours: wood, bark, sticks of various sizes, rotten wood, spruce tree needles, mould, ferns, roots and so on, into many invented categories. These materials he then rearranged by type onto an area of equal size, 10m x10m, in painterly rectangles of various colours and textures. In this process of selection and rearrangement one can also see resemblances to the arbitrary way in which language is formed. Laitinen makes visible and tangible the foundations of human communication, of artistic conventions, of scientific units. Once again the task involves an unspeakable amount of work, before all was extracted, separated and sorted, individual entities were placed before us as evidence, in their evident elegance. And it is no coincidence that he creates a language from what has now become a forest clearing – the founding image of culture as such, just like many city squares have countless times witnessed jolts in the creation of democracies around the world. A square is truly a proper place to start.

The reconstruction thus goes hand in hand with classification. When one is faced with the immensity of nature’s diversity and forms it seems at first reasonable to control and find order in the plenitude by administering human-made categories. But just as quickly, when taken to an extreme, and out of the immediate context of science, it becomes absurd to combat them with the categories that are available to us – those of science just as well as those of aesthetic judgment.

Moderating these new works in the exhibition is the similarly tensional pair of two earlier works *It’s My Island* (2007) and *Lake Deconstruction* (2011). In *It’s My Island* Laitinen built an island for himself, struggling against the forces of the sea and of gravity (issues most poignant in Venice), and simultaneously playing with the desire for ownership, with the dream shared by many to own land. The work questions to what extent the things we create with our own hands can ever truly belong to us. *Lake Deconstruction* is in some ways an inverse of *It’s My Island*. The cubicle made of ice blocks has been pried out of the lake, something submerged has been crafted in image form, the lake itself becoming a temporary monument of water in its solid state – a mesh of transformations in many ways.

And finally, Laitinen’s *Untitled* (Nails and Wood) (2013) sculptures, made from small pieces of wood with so many nails driven into them that the metal sheen of their flat heads covers the pieces completely, like the armour of an armadillo, condensing the gesture of building to the extreme. In these sculptures the task of the nail as an instrument of fixing things has been transformed by repetition into a shielding and covering agent, a point transformed into a surface.

At the heart of many of Laitinen's works are stories, or better yet epic tales, humorous accounts of heroic escapades, flirting with danger and the absurd – the latter also being the danger of loss of reason.

These various situations of placing oneself at a disadvantage and reconstructing from scratch also reflect Laitinen's take on nature in the present exhibition. The works imply a sense of return to an archaic mental image, something that does not exist, except in imagination, myths and stories. When this immemorial aspect is then superimposed on actual present-day materiality and homespun construction methods, it creates tragicomic tension.

Antti Laitinen looks at nature from the viewpoint and hindrances of the bare life of man and not to render visible what man is not. Certainly it is a relation of respect, as any artist would have respect for his tools and his studio, but without entertaining any naïve agendas, understanding that it is a relation where man is seen inextricably interwoven with the things that happen around him, affirming that we are all on the same stage.

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 175.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 200.



Antti Laitinen  
Untitled (Nails and Wood), 2013  
Installation

Photo: Ugo Carmeni  
Courtesy the Artist

Antti Laitinen  
Untitled (Nails and Wood), 2013  
Installation, detail

Photo: Ugo Carmeni  
Courtesy the Artist



Antti Laitinen  
Forest Square I, 2013  
Courtesy the Artist

Antti Laitinen  
Forest Square III, 2013  
Courtesy the Artist

(Overleaf)  
Antti Laitinen  
Forest Square II, 2013  
Courtesy the Artist









## IMAG(IN)ING THE NON-HUMAN CONDITION

Tuula Närhinen

*"[..]Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?"*

*Mr Okamoto: "That's an interesting question..."*

*Mr.Chiba: "The story with animals."*

*Mr Okamoto: "Yes. The story with animals is the better story."*

*Pi Patel: "Thank you. And so it goes with God."*

– Yann Martel<sup>1</sup>

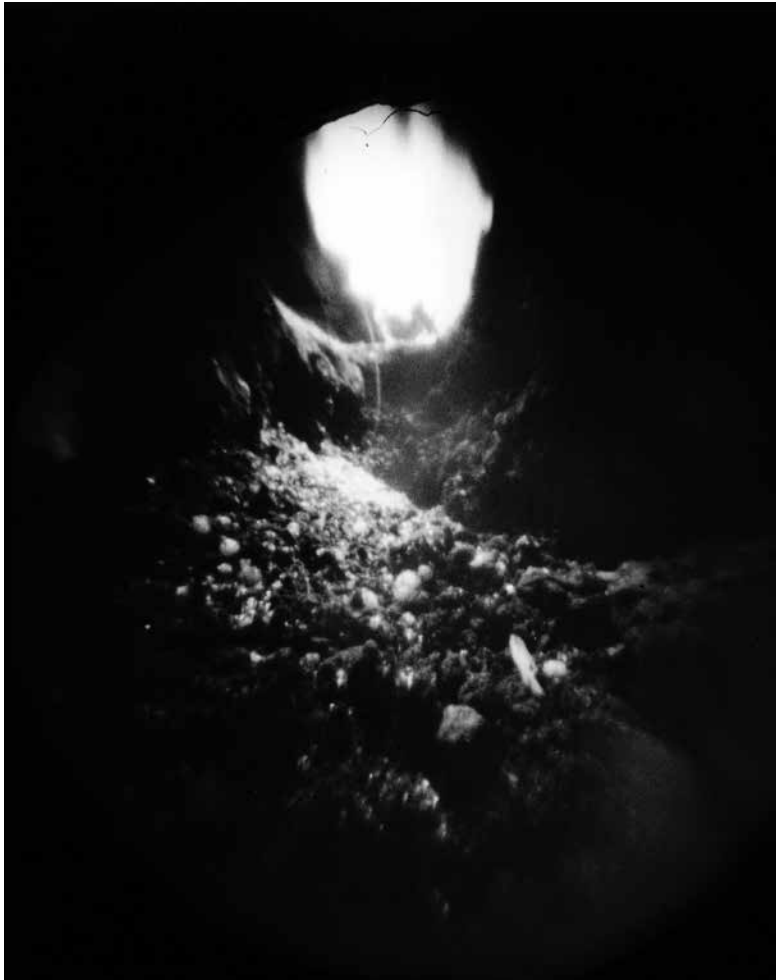
In *The Life of Pi* by the Canadian writer Yann Martel, the protagonist Pi Patel tells an unbelievable story that captures the reader's imagination. Martel's fable about his adventures with a tiger in a boat on the Pacific Ocean is totally improbable, yet the reader accepts it, because we want to hear good stories – particularly stories with animals in them.

The protagonist is not eaten by the tiger, but the reader does become a victim to the story. It is impossible to say what actually happened in the Pacific – and perhaps we do not really want to know. The animal characters in the story bring a sense of purpose to the absurd situations, and give a meaning to the story of survival that may be easier to accept than bare fact.

The reader swallows the bait and is forced to accept fiction as an inseparable part of life. The book is about the human condition and about man as a storytelling animal. Martel appeals to the reader's innocent desire to believe, and thereby succeeds in showing how the things we consider truth are ultimately our own creations.

We are the self-appointed first-person narrators of our own world. But that world is based on a number of characters whom we have not selected ourselves. The characters enter the picture and influence the turns of plot, just like the Bengal tiger named Richard Parker in *The Life of Pi*. Nature becomes visible through the instruments of human culture, through a form of storytelling. We are contributors in a shared story in which the "subjects" of the story are also its writers. In such an intertextual story, it is difficult to tell subjects from objects. Seeing nature as natural phenomena and as facts is only possible when we manipulate nature with various fictive (invented/imagined) ways. Using tools that produce pictures, we make nature speak, and the resultant pictures of nature evoke speech in us.

My installation titled *Animal Cameras* is an analysis of the way we understand the world through photographic discourse. The photograph is generally accepted as an objective – and thereby neutral – way of depicting nature. *Animal Cameras* reveals the built-in human body in the camera, and also the inherent human gaze in photographs.



Tuula Närhinen  
*Animal Cameras*, 1999-2002  
 Courtesy the Artist

The Volecam: A peep into  
 a vole's hole

## ANIMAL CAMERA SEES HUMANS EYE TO EYE:

*"DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE ZOO? An arrow pointed to a small curtain. There were so many eager, curious hands that pulled at the curtain that we had to replace it regularly. Behind it was a mirror."*

– Yann Martel<sup>2</sup>

*Animal Cameras*<sup>3</sup> began with an idea: what if, instead of the human eye, the camera's structure were to be based on the eye of some other creature? How does the camera affect the photographs produced with it? Would our repository of photographic images be completely different, if the camera were based on, say, the eye of a fly?

My work is an investigation of photography as an instrument and of the photographic image of the world. Animal is present in the work only in the imagination, as a kind of projection of otherness or nature, one which reveals how the photograph constructs our idea of reality. *Animal Cameras* explores the laws of photography and its unused potential. I try to demonstrate the special conditions of photography under which the world inscribes itself into images. The use of photographs is informed by our deeply ingrained idea of the objectivity and evidentiary power of photography.<sup>4</sup> Our imagination and our relationship with reality are shaped by the idea of man as a visual ruler who dominates the world with his gaze.

The camera as we now know it was designed as a mechanical human eye.<sup>5</sup> The basic camera angle (using the so-called normal lens<sup>6</sup>) corresponds roughly to the area seen by an unmoving human eye.<sup>7</sup> What if we had chosen differently? I read about the structure of animal eyes and studied the properties of different lenses and pupils. Because I did not have the necessary equipment for grinding lenses, I decided to carry out my experiments with a pinhole camera. I applied the things I had learned about animal eyes to the structure of the pinhole camera: I varied the size and shape of the pinhole, and also the camera body so that I achieved different angles and multiple exposures from several different vantage points.

For example, *Flycam* is based on the compound eye of insects. A compound eye consists of a large number of facets, each one of which forms its own optical image. *Flycam* is a rough model of the compound eye. I took 48 tiny<sup>8</sup> cell-like pinhole cameras and joined them together. Each pinhole forms an image that shows part of the landscape. I set the focal length of the cameras so as to allow the combination of the 48 part images into one mosaic landscape panorama.



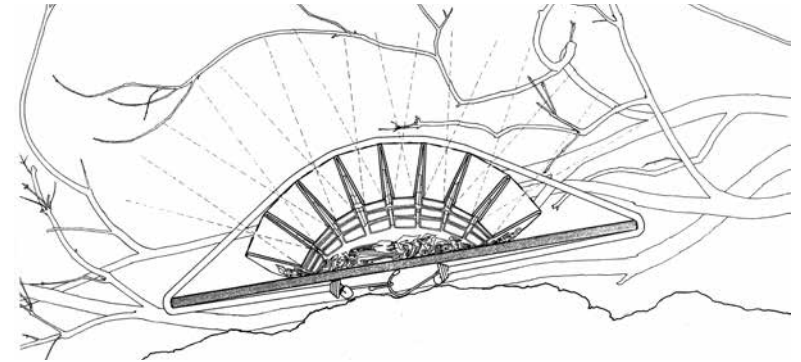
In *Harecam* I attempted to show how wide the hare's field of peripheral vision is. I constructed a camera made of two parallel tubes with a total of four pinholes. Being a prey animal, it is important for a hare to be aware of any predators in its surroundings. The field of view of the hare's two eyes covers almost 360 degrees. Because its eyes are on opposite sides of the head, a narrow blind area of about 10 degrees remains right in front of the animal's nose. From the foot of a bush, the four pinholes in my camera construct a broad panorama in the centre of which – in front of the nose of the *Harecam* – is a black area.

In addition to structural solutions in the cameras, I also took into account the height of the animals' eyes, and placed the cameras in the terrain so that they would echo the animals' movements in their natural habitat. My attempt to identify with the animal perspective<sup>9</sup> did not go further than that, however.

The optical image created by a pinhole differs from that of a lens camera in two major ways: one does not have a viewfinder<sup>10</sup> to frame the shot, and one cannot separate the figure and background by focusing.<sup>11</sup> With a pinhole camera, you work blindly. The photographer must learn to know the camera's viewing angle so to be able to point it in the right direction to catch the subject. Yet the image produced by a pinhole camera is almost invariably a surprise. The lack of a viewfinder significantly reduces the possibility of framing and composing the photo within the built-in aesthetic criteria of the pictorial tradition. Unlike a lens camera, a pinhole camera cannot be used to distinguish the subject (the intended meaningful element) from the background, because every detail is recorded in the same way and in the same depth of focus.<sup>12</sup>

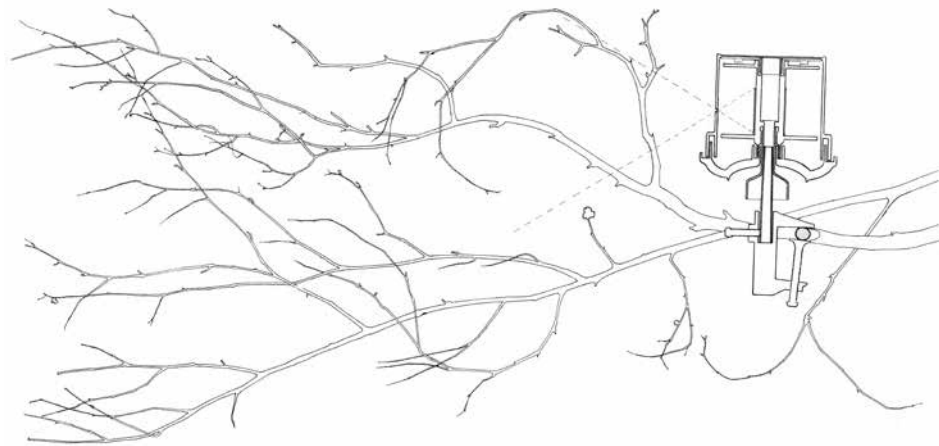
By modifying the basic structure of the body and making pinhole lenses I was able to create a number of cameras which I then used to record the natural environment near my studio. The surprises that resulted from taking photographs without a viewfinder and the overlapping exposures resulting from multiple pinholes really did produce new kinds of landscape views. The *Snakecam* enabled me to study the architecture of rock cavities. A panorama shot by the *Birdcam*<sup>13</sup> from a branch high up in a tree showed the crown of the tree to be completely different from when viewed from the ground. The underwater views recorded by the *Fishcam* revealed strange reflections. Owing to the novel vantage points of the different cameras, the familiar natural environment was shown in a new light and from surprising perspectives.<sup>14</sup>

Because of the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the method, the animal camera pictures were like nature's self-portraits: the photographs seemed to be taken from a non-human perspective. It was like having a loose, detached eye which I could take in my hand and put in places where an ordinary camera or my head would not fit.

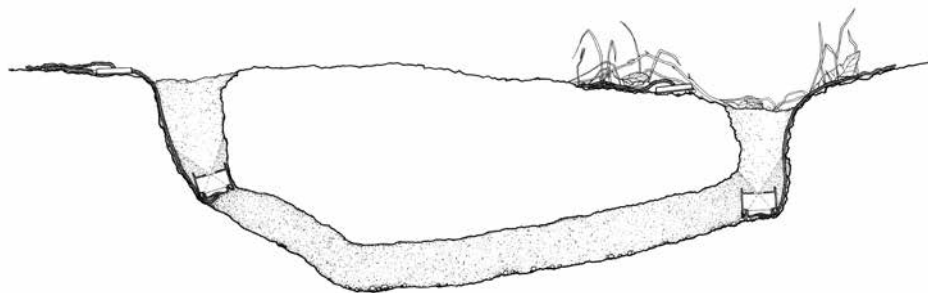


The Flycam: a rough model of a compound eye





The Birdcam: A panorama shot from a branch of a tree



The Volecam and the nature photographer



The *Volecam* let me peer deep into a vole hole in the ground. At the same time, the *Volecam* made clear one of the built-in paradoxes of the *Animal Cameras* series: the camera construction does not reflect a vole's needs, but human needs. The vole is practically blind and functions better when it relies on its other senses. But the *human* way of cracking open the door to the vole's world is visual, and effected through photography.

The camera allows the photographer to keep herself separate from nature. By focusing the lens at a certain distance, she isolates the subject while also turning herself into a photographing subject. The camera builds a wall between the viewer and the subject. The shared world is cleft into two halves separated by the lens.

In *Animal Cameras*, this dialectic between nature and nature photographer acquires new nuances. The familiar configuration threatens to turn upside down. The photographs taken by the animal cameras imply the presence of a human figure who represents the subject taking the photograph. For instance, the *Volecam*<sup>15</sup> pictures show an enthusiastic nature photographer, namely myself, peering into the hole with an SLR camera raised to my eye. In these pictures, I present the situation from "nature's" perspective, as it were. The shot from the vole hole shows me as a nature photographer, focusing my camera on my target. But in this case the target (that is, "nature") responds in kind – or perhaps goes one better, because it needs no focusing. The pinhole lens repeats everything in focus, so the person peering into the hole ends up being recorded by nature's own all-seeing eye, the *panopticon*.

The body of the *Volecam* was an empty 35mm film canister – the container of the same film stock the "nature photographer" in the picture had in her camera. The conventional configuration of photographer/object (or culture/nature) was also challenged by the fact that I was the operator of both cameras at the same time: I was exposing the film in the pinhole camera I had slipped into the hole while also playing the role of nature photographer with my system camera.<sup>6</sup> This mirror situation epitomises the significance of the animal cameras: I was simultaneously the photographer and the subject of the photo – a human being taking a picture of herself as a photographer. *Animal Cameras* is a model of otherness which shows that "objective" (non-human) depiction of nature is a human construction.

## THE PHOTOGRAPHIC APPARATUS

*"[...] Father believed there was another animal even more dangerous than us [...]: the redoubtable species Animalus Anthropomorphicus, the animal as seen through human eyes. [...] It is an animal that is 'cute', 'friendly', 'loving', 'devoted', 'merry', 'understanding'. These animals ambush in every toy store and children's zoo. Countless stories are told of them. [...] we look at an animal and see a mirror. The obsession of putting ourselves at the centre of everything is the bane not only of theologians but also of zoologists."*

– Yann Martel<sup>17</sup>

*Animal Cameras* is an installation that showcases pinhole cameras. The cameras are the conceptual as well as physical core of the work – the other parts of the installation all stand relative to it. The photographic apparatus is physically present in the installation, as drawings and also as a series of documentary photos showing the cameras in their shooting locations in the terrain. Next to the pictures taken with the cameras, there are structural designs of the cameras in 1:1 scale. I tried to show as clearly as possible the dynamic between the device that took the picture and the picture itself.

Animal cameras cannot be ignored: they are so emphatically physical as objects. And here lies the core idea of the work: I wanted to show in a concrete way that taking a photograph involves an entire chain of devices that are designed, used and built by humans – the *apparatus*<sup>18</sup> of photography. That apparatus is present in every act of taking a photograph, regardless of how unnoticeable or virtual the interface of the device is.<sup>19</sup>

You might say that the apparatus institutionalises the human gaze. The act of looking is transferred outside the body, it is objectified into an external target of observation – machinery that appears to be objective, and, moreover, claims to embody the entire discourse of observation and knowing.<sup>20</sup>

One of the aims of the *Animal Cameras* installation is to illustrate the inherent human scale of photographic apparatus, but this aspect remained secondary in my work. Artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila is much more successful: she is able to present a spruce tree in life-size scale as a video portrait which at the same time reveals the anthropomorphic quality of the equipment used to film and present the tree. Ahtila's *Horizontal* (2011) shows a gigantic spruce tree that is turned on its side so as to fit it into an indoor space. The tree is the protagonist of the work, but it is so large that the field of vision of a single camera is unable to capture the entire tree. The tree must be filmed in pieces



Tuula Närhinen  
*Animal Cameras*, 1999-2002  
Courtesy the Artist

*Animal Cameras* at the Finnish  
Museum of Photography 2011



using several cameras. The portrait of the spruce is accompanied by a series of drawings entitled *Anthropomorphic Exercises on Film* (2011). Ahtila applies the rules of framing and montage to a situation in which the opposite of the human being is a monumental tree. With the amusing storyboard, Ahtila shows the kind of challenges a dialogue between humans and a tree can pose to the language of cinema.

## WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

*Mr Okamoto: "But for the purposes of our investigation , we would like to know what really happened."*

*"What really happened?"*

*"Yes."*

*"So you want another story?"*

*"Uhh ... no. We would like to know what really happened."*

*"Doesn't the telling of something always become a story?"*

*"Uhh ... perhaps in English. In Japanese a story would have an element of invention in it. We don't want any invention. We want the 'straight facts', as you say in English."*

*"Isn't telling about something – using words, English or Japanese – already something of an invention? Isn't just looking upon this world already something of an invention?"*

*"The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn't that make life a story?"*

– Yann Martel<sup>21</sup>

The complex processes associated with the apparatus and its conceptual underpinnings generally remain unnoticed when one has blind faith in the objectivity of the gaze (or reason), which is an illusion created by the device. The philosopher of science Bruno Latour describes our tendency to ignore the instrumentality that is built into the natural sciences, technology and also various visual representations.<sup>22</sup> Latour uses the term *to black box*<sup>23</sup> to refer to the bracketing of instruments. The camera is a concrete example of such a black box, the mediating function of which – the conditions for image formation and the very existence of the instrument – is easy to ignore when all attention is focused on the end result, the photograph. Latour reminds us that instruments and their mediating function are material and thereby

also sensory. In this sense, knowledge has its own aesthetic foundation.<sup>24</sup>

Latour describes the process whereby natural observations acquire the status of knowledge. A description of a phenomenon, acquired through scientific instruments and methods, is transformed into scientific facts. Without the devices and concepts (the apparatus) of science, nature would not exist for us as facts. However, facts (from Latin *factum* = “thing done”) that are empirically gathered “directly from nature” are ultimately *artefacts*, created by humans for human purposes.<sup>25</sup> That we are bound to our humanity through our cognition (and the instruments of science), does not imply any denial of non-human nature that exists independent of us. On the contrary: the human apparatus enables the visibility of nature.

According to Latour, objective (sic) knowledge in natural science comes into being by dividing the world, comprising both human and non-human factors, artificially into two using instruments that in themselves are hybrids between nature and culture.<sup>26</sup> The photograph is by its very nature a Latourian hybrid. In addition to the view framed by the photographer, the device records electronically or photochemically an enormous amount of visual information that the photographer never even noticed at the moment the photo was taken. In this sense, the photograph is part of nature: it is an optical natural phenomenon. Yet at the same time it is a picture, and therefore part of the pictorial tradition. The taking of a photograph calls for human technology and systematic action on the part of the photographer.<sup>27</sup>

In *Animal Cameras*, I study how the idea of objectivity and its seemingly self-evident premises are challenged when the standard lens camera is replaced by alternative pinhole devices that force us to take a closer look at the dialectics of photography. I am interested in intermediary situations (akin to Latour's hybrids) in which nature/culture manifests itself through pictures. Many of my works are variations of the titillating basic configuration in photography: how nature is able to inscribe itself onto an image and leave a pictorial trace of itself, when the entire situation is fundamentally a cultural construction and, as such, entirely conditioned by human beings?

<sup>1</sup> Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (Edinburg: Cannongate, 2003), 424.

<sup>2</sup> Martel (2003), 41.

<sup>3</sup> For images from *Animal Cameras* (1999–2002), see [www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/animcams.htm](http://www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/animcams.htm). The installation was exhibited at the Amos Anderson Museum in 2002 and at the Finnish Museum of Photography in

2011. It currently belongs to the Helsinki City Art Museum collection.

<sup>4</sup> The evidentiary power of photography is often attributed to the purportedly mechanical act of pressing the shutter button, but this assumption is a spurious one. The same goes for the logic that a photograph can only be manipulated *after the fact*. It has not always

been presumed that a photograph invariably captures “truth” at the moment of the shutter click, being vulnerable to manipulation only *after* the image is captured. Joel Snyder has investigated the use of photography as evidence in court proceedings, noting that it was not until after the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that photographs were deemed as constituting a reliable source of evidence. One lawyer in fact dismissed photographs as “nothing but hearsay of the Sun”, being hence unreliable as documentary evidence. As the sun could not be cross-examined as a witness, it would be impossible to tell apart the “copy” from “the original”. See Joel Snyder, “Res Ipsa Loquitur”. In *Things That Talk. Object Lessons from Art and Science*, Daston, Lorraine (ed.), pp. 195–221 (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 214–215.

5 This is a crude generalization. There was no specific point in history at which the camera appeared on the market as a ready invention eagerly embraced by consumers. It came into existence through a gradual evolutionary process involving many small steps and a cross-pollination of influences. See Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire. The Conception of Photography*. (Cambridge: MIT Press 181, 1999) .. Camera design was recurrently modified to serve changing needs. For instance the lenses used in portrait photography were quite different from those used for shooting landscapes, as both genres sought to emulate the pictorial conventions of their genre counterparts in painting. Photography represented one among many codes of pictorial representation. See Joel Snyder, “Picturing Vision”. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Spring, 1980): 499–526., pages 513–14.

6 A ‘normal’ lens is a lens with a focal length about equal to the diagonal size of the film or sensor format. In 35mm format (frame size 24 x 36mm), the diagonal of the film measures 43mm; hence a 50mm lens is regarded as ‘normal’.

7 If we compare a camera to the human eye, we must bear in mind that the optical image formed upon our retina is quite

distinct from what we actually perceive. Translating a visual perception into an image that can be processed by our consciousness involves a complex array of conceptual tangles. A photograph cannot reproduce our original visual perception. Our gaze moves ceaselessly, and we read visual cues in our surroundings in a way that finds no direct counterpart in pictorial representation. The image captured by a camera is monoptic, awkwardly mechanical and strangely static. See further details in Snyder (1980).

8 The negative size was about 2x2cm. I used graphic film as light sensitive material and blew up the negatives on a conventional enlarger. In the exhibition the size of the prints is about 12–15cm.

9 The installation does not address what any particular animal sees or how it perceives the world. Despite its title, *Animal Cameras* does not purport to reproduce the world as perceived by animals – nor by humans for that matter. We can appreciate the distinction that exists between photographs and our visual perceptions, yet we have no access to the perceptual world of animals. We may gather data on their experiential reality, but can never perceive or experience reality exactly as an animal would. The Baltic German biologist Jacob von Uexküll (1864–1944) theorized that humans, animals and plants each has its own species-specific, spatio-temporal, ‘self-in-world’ subjective reference frames that he termed as *Umwelt*. See Jacob Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans – with a Theory of Meaning*. Translated by Joseph D. O’Neill. Posthumanities 12. (University of Minnesota Press, 2010)

We can never slip into the skin of another organism and observe its *Umwelt* exactly as that species would, yet by studying and imagining alternative modes of existence, we can broaden our world-view and deepen our consciousness. Analysing the reality of other organisms is also a form of self-inquiry. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, who contributed the epilogue to the English translation of Uexküll’s treatise, sums up this idea as

follows: “The question *How can we in our world see how animals see their world?* may easily turn into the more self-interested inquiry *How can we see how animals see their world in such a way that it will change and enrich the way in which we see ours?*” Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, “Bubbles and Webs: A Backdoor Stroll through the Readings of Uexküll”. Pp. 200–244 in Uexküll (2010), 235.

10 The greatly diminished amount of light that a pinhole lets through means the image can only be viewed in a darkened room after one’s eyes grow accustomed to the dark. To view the image, the camera must effectively be large enough for the photographer to enter it. In other words, it should be a *camera obscura* at least the size of a room, with a pinhole the size of a coin.

11 There is no need to focus the shot, as the pinhole camera basically has an infinite depth of field, meaning that everything is in focus from close-up objects to the distant horizon. The sharpness of the shot depends on the size of the pinhole in relation to the distance of the film plane to the pinhole. The optimum size/distance relation produces an image that is sharp and crisp both near and far.

12 The absence of a focusing mechanism means the pinhole photographer is unable to adjust the relative sharpness of different objects within the depth of field. This might lead us to believe that pinhole photography is “closer to nature” than a ground lens designed to capture a particular image. It should be noted, however, that the size and shape of the pinhole can be modified to achieve the precise effect desired by the photographer. The very finest pinhole lenses utilize laser technology.

13 The *Birdcam*’s pinhole could be revolved around the curved image plane to capture three consecutive overlapping vistas, merging together to produce a panorama of foliage.

14 *Snakecam* images can be viewed at [www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/acams/snake.htm](http://www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/acams/snake.htm), *Birdcam* images at [www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/acams/bird.htm](http://www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/acams/bird.htm) and *Fishcam* images at [www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/acams/fish.htm](http://www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/acams/fish.htm)

*net/artworks/acams/bird.htm* and *Fishcam* images at [www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/acams/fish.htm](http://www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/acams/fish.htm)

15 *Volecam* images can be viewed at [www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/acams/vole.htm](http://www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/acams/vole.htm)

16 I was able to appear in these dual roles simultaneously because the graphic film I used in the *Volecam* had a relatively long exposure time. After slipping the *Volecam* down the hole, I had a few seconds to recast myself in the role of a nature photographer. The longish exposure time caused the graphic film to be overexposed, but I was still able to successfully take prints from the *Volecam*’s negatives.

17 Martel (2003), 41.

18 I use the term *apparatus* to collectively refer to all photographic equipment. This also includes the ontological-epistemological discourse associated with the photograph and the photographer using the apparatus.

19 My oversized animal cameras seem particularly cumbersome compared to today’s smartphone cameras. Snapshots taken with a digital camera seem to materialize as if out of nowhere, the act of photography being so effortless and automatic that the photographer barely even notices it happening.

20 The art historian Jonathan Crary sheds light on the complicit connection between the photographic apparatus and our assumptions about knowledge, analysing the epistemic authority conferred upon the human gaze in our culture. Crary points out that neither the *camera obscura* as an apparatus nor its subject (the observer) can be divorced from their historical context: for instance the 17<sup>th</sup> century *camera obscura* cannot be equated with the optical viewing devices of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because notions of the epistemic subject had changed in the interim. See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990).

21 Martel (2003), 405.

- <sup>22</sup> On the instrumentality of pictorial representation, see Bruno Latour, How to be Iconophilic in Art, Science and Religion? In *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, Jones, Caroline A. and Gallison, Peter (eds.), pp. 418–441. (New York, London: Routledge, 1998), 422– 423.
- <sup>23</sup> Latour (1998), 423. Latour sees the black box as alluding to technology in general, but I am here referring in concrete terms to the dark interior of the photographic apparatus, the *camera obscura*.
- <sup>24</sup> Latour (1998), 423.
- <sup>25</sup> Bruno Latour, *Emme ole koskaan olleet moderneja*. Suom. Risto Suikkanen. (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2006.), 140–141. Original *We Have Never been Modern*. (Paris: Éditions la Découverte , 1991).
- <sup>26</sup> For more on hybrids, see Latour (2006), 13–16.
- <sup>27</sup> The photograph is always conditioned by culture. See Batchen (1999).



Nordic Pavilion

**TERIKE HAAPOJA**

**Closed Circuit – Open Duration**

Entrance to the *Closed Circuit – Open Duration* installation in the Nordic Pavilion opens through a black mirror that reflects the Giardini park.



## CLOSED CIRCUIT – OPEN DURATION

– Terike Haapoja

*The three trees that grow through the Nordic Pavilion are stretched between the earth and the sky, expanding and contracting apace with the force of evaporation from their leaves. Their technologies are strange to us. We have our own ways of stretching between the earth and the sky.*

The reductive materialism of modern natural sciences has greatly influenced our understanding of the non-human world throughout the 20th century. Nature, in essence, is viewed as something external to consciousness: as measurable particles and electro-magnetic fields, whereas subjectivity seems merely a shadow of the real. Most scientific technologies, the filter through which our knowledge of nature is produced, carry within them a dualist notion of the world: based on calculations and modelling, these technologies can access only the materiality of the world, not its mind. Still, the same science has compelled us to question its own underlying principles. As seen through the recent discoveries of animal studies, microbiology, ecology and multiple other fields of research, the world seems a more a complex process in which the body cannot be distinguished from the mind, or human life from that of other species.

*Closed Circuit – Open Duration* is a large-scale installation that transforms the Nordic Pavilion into an x-ray machine, proposing interiority, emergence and meaning – attributes invisible to our senses – as fundamental to the natural world. A gravel path with plants from the park connects the outside world to the darkened space of the exhibition, marking a continuation of Sverre Fehn's modernist architecture and its merging of the realms of man-made and natural constructs. Inside the exhibition the seven works create a garden-like space in which human, non-human and mechanical systems overlap.

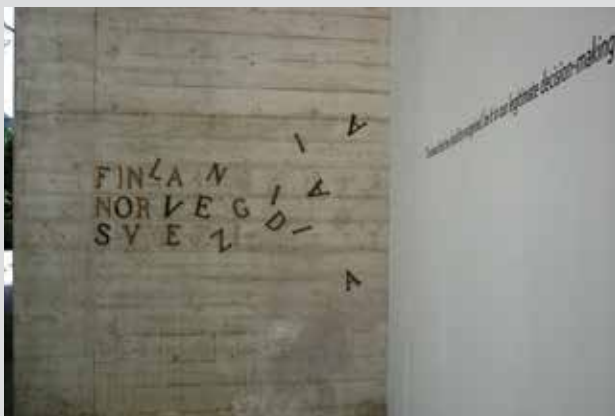
*Inhale-Exhale*, a durational sculpture for soil and CO<sub>2</sub>, breathes out carbon released by decomposing matter. The single-channel video piece *Succession* creates a portrait of the artist as an ecosystem of species. *Anatomy of Landscape* shows a painting-like image made of live plants, while the technology necessary for preserving life inside the painting is visible from the other side of the painting. *Community*, a five-channel video installation, shows the images of different animals vanishing in the cooling process following their death, as portrayed through the colorful images of a heat-sensitive infrared camera. On the wall a quote from Marguarite Duras' essay *Writing* depicts the death of a fly, with sentences emerging and disappearing in the space.

The core of the *Closed Circuit – Open Duration* exhibition is a concept of a world not structured by subjective human minds surrounded by mute objects, but of a world of relations and meanings. 'Scientific' technologies are not external to this world, but embedded in it, in the same way as the technologies of trees or of other species are embedded in our shared reality. They are interfaces through which we gain knowledge and interact with the world, but never simply boundaries between mind and matter.

An underlying theme of the exhibition is that of mortality: the emergence and disappearance of meaning, of minds, of interiority; of worlds. Our relationship with nature and with death grows from the same roots: from the foreign realm of a world beyond our own subjectivity. In that sense, death is nature, for us: they merge into each other as one force that seems to pose a threat to our existence. But neither nature nor death is exterior to us: only when we understand nature as mere matter can we make such a divide.







(Previous spread)

Terike Haapoja  
*Tree Piece*

Installation, 2013

Live trees, sensors, electronics,  
sound

Technical solutions Aleksi Pihkanen,  
Gregoire Rousseau  
Photo: Ugo Carmeni  
Courtesy the Artist

Three trees are stretched between the sky and the earth, being held in tension owing to the water they evaporate. Their diameter slowly expands and contracts in response to prevailing light and air humidity conditions. The changing dimensions and constant yet invisible tension alters the pitch of the sound.

Terike Haapoja's *The Party of Others* is a political intervention and an art project that takes the form of a political party representing those normally excluded from the domain of politics, mainly non-human species. By representing alternative modes of thinking about communities, it challenges the prevailing rhetoric of exclusion and calls into question the human subject as the locus of political representation. Audio installation of the project was located on the outer wall of the Nordic Pavilion.



Terike Haapoja  
*Anatomy Of Landscape I*, 2008/2011

Durational image

Glass, plywood, live plants, light,  
electronics, water

Technical solutions Erkki Ujanen  
Photo: Ugo Carmeni  
Courtesy the Artist

*Anatomy of Landscape* shows a section image of a landscape consisting of live plants, roots, soil and grasses. Automatic watering, ventilation, heating and light systems necessary for sustaining life inside the painting are visible from the other side of the frame. The lights change in response to daylight levels from dawn till dusk.



Terike Haapoja  
*INHALE - EXHALE*, 2008/2013  
Durational sculpture  
Plywood, glass, soil, CO2 sensors,  
sound

Technical solutions Aleksi Pihkanen,  
Toivo Pohja, Gregoire Rousseau  
Photo: Ugo Carmeni  
Courtesy the Artist

The coffin-size glass case is filled  
with soil and dead leaves. CO2  
produced through decomposition  
is measured with CO2 sensors and  
sonificated.

The ventilation fans on both sides  
of the coffin are automatic, opening  
and closing at 30 second intervals.  
The ventilation fans function as gills,  
regulating the CO2 level inside the  
coffin. As a result the coffin seems  
to slowly exhale as the CO2 level  
goes up and down.



Terike Haapoja  
*Dialogue*, 2008/2013  
Interactive installation  
Live trees, electronics, sound, light,  
CO2 sensors, breathing

Technical solutions Aleksi Pihkanen,  
Toivo Pohja, Gregoire Rousseau  
Photo: Ugo Carmeni  
Courtesy the Artist

Speak to the trees. The lights  
will switch on, and the trees will  
respond.

By talking or breathing to the CO2  
sensor placed next to a bench,  
the visitor can activate lights and  
the measuring chambers attached  
to the branches of the trees. A  
decrease in CO2 levels in the  
measuring chambers, caused by  
photosynthesis in the leaves, is  
audible as a whistling sound. Lights,  
sound, CO2, digital and analogue  
technology, and biochemical  
processes within the plant and the  
viewer form a circuit, where each  
part of information interacts and is  
dependent upon  
the others.

[Overleaf]  
Terike Haapoja  
*Community*, 2007  
5-channel video installation  
5-channel sound

Sound design Terike Haapoja,  
Petteri Mård  
Photo: Ugo Carmeni  
Courtesy the Artist

Each video shows the loss of  
body heat from an animal's body  
after its death, recorded with a  
heat-sensitive infrared camera. The  
durations of these video projections  
are unedited and vary from two to  
five hours depending on the size of  
the animal. The animals portrayed  
are a horse, calf, dog, cat and  
bird.

the previous made that death even more terrible.  
Plucky as, and soft to man's touch,  
to see how that death would progressively invade the fly.  
And also to try to see where the death had come from.  
From outside, or from the thickness of the wall,  
or from the ground.

What night it came from,  
from earth or sky, from the nearby forests,  
or from a nothingness as yet unnamable;  
perhaps very near, perhaps from me,  
trying to recreate the path the fly had taken  
as it passed into eternity.





## THE MODERN AS A BOUNDARY-MAKING MACHINE

### Anselm Franke in conversation with Terike Haapoja

**Terike Haapoja:** Much of the ongoing discourses around the human-nature relationship are built on a notion of the necessity of re-evaluating the fundamentals of western modernism. You have talked about modernity as a boundary-making practice. Could you elaborate on this?

**Anselm Franke:** It was in the context of the project on the concept of *Animism*, which was an exhibition and publication project I started in 2010.<sup>1</sup> I first encountered this concept in Freud's writing. For Freud animism is a name for an exteriorized, social and collective unconscious. But since such an unconscious does not exist for Freud (to whom the unconscious is privatised and enclosed within the psyche, formed by family history), animism names a transgression. It is a boundary-making concept, by actually naming the alleged collapse of the "correct" boundary. In Freud, we encounter animism in "primitive consciousness", in insanity, in children, in all kind of psychopathologies, in magic, and in the aesthetics of animation and the uncanny: all of these are imagined as transgressions of the boundary between life and non-life, person and things, and about the boundary between the interior psyche and the exterior world.

Later I realised that there are interesting parallels of that matrix to what Bruno Latour has described as the "modern constitution", which is also a paradoxical boundary-making machine, which separates science from politics, and the modern from the non-modern. We are talking about boundaries not so much in the sense of physical borders, but about conceptual and ontological designations, which are reflected in the institutional set-up of our culture, with the corresponding legal and disciplinary power.

Eventually, boundary-making practices are about producing power relations through the construction of a distance, which allows a subjugation. And they set in motion a dialectic, such as the dialectic between "civilisation" and "savagery". Colonialism created this distance to the non-European, first in terms of religion (the distance between the right faith and the wrong faith), later on in terms of mental and rational deficiency (animists and fetishists are kept at a distant from modern knowledge because, stuck in an "early stage" of history, they do not have a correct conception of objective reality, but confuse their inner subjective life with external realities)... Of course, the nature-culture division is part of this scenography of entangled modern boundary practices.

**TH:** The autonomy of art seems to still pose a challenge to contemporary art that aims at introducing more sustainable or ecocentric models into reality. Ongoing discussions about the function and impact of art today are very much the same as they were at the beginning of the 20th century, when the historical avant-garde fought to be more connected to “reality”. How do you see the historical roots of this development, and the function of art today?

**AF:** I don’t mean to argue against ecology in the sense of opposing the exploitation and destruction of nature, of course, but I am afraid that it is also a much-misunderstood concept. And perhaps we do not fully grasp the context from which it emerged yet, the “now of recognisability” and its epistemic grounds, and how it has been put to use. In the exhibition *The Whole Earth*<sup>2</sup>, critic Diedrich Diedrichsen and I have tried to trace some of the context from which the discourse of ecology emerged: cybernetics and the counterculture (drawing on elements of German romanticism and other earlier sources). The epochal transition to information and systems theory in Western thought, which gradually levelled organic bodies and machines and understands everything as systems with circular causal relations, is the “closing circle” (the title of a book by biologist Barry Commoner that influenced the environmental movement), the key metaphor and structural thought underpinning all ecology. Ecology, after Commoner, is the realisation that waste does not disappear into nothing, that everything returns, while it is, at the same time, transformed.

Indeed “ecology” in this sense of the word does not work very well together with “autonomous art”. Why? Because “modern” art is art that always reflects alienation and the “broken cosmos”, an unstable and indeterminate relation of signification to the world. And it is a critique of this relation, but it also affirms the non-identity of that which should and could be with that which is. This is what makes art modern. Ecology, to the contrary, is more about fixing the broken cosmos.

However, we have a problem here only as long as we are operating with an un-dialectical understanding of art. A dialectical understanding helps to acknowledge that the mental and semiotic ecology that is at work in art is never identical with “ecology” of nature: for the latter, we need good science and politics. Art partakes in a different kind of ecology: an ecology of mimesis, a “wild semiosis”, an “ecology” of power, in which that which is repressed always returns as aesthetic symptom. In the sense of this difference, I would defend the autonomy of art: its own ecology is not similar to ecology in nature. I think it is important to think about this difference.

**TH:** More and more artists are looking critically at how scientific technologies play a role in our understanding of reality, of the non-human world specifically. There seems to be a paradox in the way in which new computational capacity and measuring technology proposes a more holistic notion of the reality, but at the same time, this technology itself implies a dualistic, reductionist notion of the world as something essentially measurable. Your 2-year research and exhibition project *Anthropocene in HKW*<sup>3</sup> focused on this question, among many others. How do you see the impact of technology in our understanding of reality today?

**AF:** Writing in the catalogue for the exhibition “The Whole Earth”, media philosopher Erich Hörl suggests in his piece “A Thousand Ecologies” that perhaps we gradually realise that ecology is not so much about nature, but about the way in which technology increasingly pervades the world, and becomes “environmental”, as a media-technological condition in society, in which the planet is also implicated. “Ecology” is then also about “being mediated”, within a technology that is becoming our “Umwelt”. Hörl elsewhere also suggests along with Heidegger and Simondon that this transition within technology is re-making the structure of sense itself. I think the question of holism particularly needs to be seen in this light. The relation between ecology and technology is perhaps one of the most fundamental questions of our times. I do not pretend to have an answer to this question, but in the way I conceptualise and frame projects, I try to ask it in ways that allow critical engagement and let their proximity, difference and non-identity shine through.

**TH:** You have approached animism as a mirror for observing modernity’s notion of “the other”, or as a projection of the modern. Could you tell a little bit about your approach, and about what this kind of mirroring of animism can give to contemporary thinking?

**AF:** The term animism to me is a necessary reference when we try to not just simply denounce the modern dichotomies as false, but try to understand their historical efficacy without submitting to their logic. To me, animism, which is a broad concept that denotes the production of subjects, and different kinds of subject/object, material/immaterial and self/other relations, presents us with a challenge, namely of actually being able to think outside of the frame that these dichotomies have established, to think beyond the matrix and set of choices they have established for Western epistemology.

To be able to describe so-called animist culture without rendering their claims illegitimate, this is the measure for the decolonization

of our thinking about non-modern others, internal or external. It is connected with the larger history of colonisation and cultural difference in modernity: in the concept of animism, we encounter the problem not of cultural difference, but of ontological difference. To be or to become “modern” in terms of one’s rationality apparently means to subscribe to a certain ontological death sentence: to declare that this “other” has a deficient or erroneous access to reality. This is what interested me, because it is tantamount to an implicit agreement, and an ongoing declaration of war of the “modern” against the “non-modern”. I use animism, on the other, as a term that does not denote any particular truth, such as the general ensoulment of all things or the reality of the spirit world, but rather as the only possible, seriously non-reductionist speaking position. That is, a speaking position that does not take any single distinction, border or dichotomy as naturally given, but only accepts looking at the way they are produced. In the frame of modernity, no form of “animism” ever stays the same as it was before the onslaught of the modern. It is reified, or transformed by the touch of modernity. How this happens is a major question that must be raised, also in the former Third World, because in many cases where we have seen an assertion of indigenous beliefs or of spirituality, it has led to anti-modern, reactionary politics. Even in contexts where “animism” is an explicit reference for struggles over land and ecology, such as in South America (Ecuador, Bolivia, etc.), the results are often questionable in terms of the power relations that are being formed under such auspices. The forms of power that sail under animist or “ecological” agendas are not always emancipatory.

**TH:** The question of “the other” and the hierarchies built around it is central to modernity. It is also something that emerges over and over again in the discourses of contemporary art, where an ethical project for the other (the excluded, the discriminated, the underrepresented) is often realised by talking on its behalf. This is an implicit issue also in this book, where much of the works and essays by western, academic, Caucasian artists and scholars deal with the rights of nature, other species or non-western indigenous peoples. What possibilities do you see for overcoming these kinds of implicit hierarchies?

**AF:** The artist who has, in my eyes, been most articulate about this problem of talking for the excluded other has been Godard, whose films have been a cinematic critique, among other things, of leftists who made films on workers and their struggles. For Godard, all these attempts to “give a voice” to those who do not have a voice is simply not going far enough in the analysis of the problem, as if one could

simply “speak about” not having a voice, without acknowledging that “speech” itself is deeply implicated and a boundary-operation itself. Also in Animism, I have tried to “exhibit” the historical frames that have devaluated animist cosmographies, rather than having these cosmologies talk “for themselves”. I have always made clear that animist worlds cannot be exhibited, that they are being reified in the process, just as under the conditions of modernity, animist practices are turned into “traditions” – their ontological status is thus being changed. For me, it is important not to “speak on behalf”, nor to simply “let the excluded speak”, but to focus on the frames and to make them explicit, because then they become negotiable. They are no longer an implicit given, but something whose effects we can discern and reject.

**TH:** Even though art is still surrounded by what you call “a magical circle”, an autonomous position that makes it both impotent and free at the same time, there is a point in which art and reality meet. This point is law: the legislation that regulates art’s autonomy in relation to the outside reality. Law is also the interface through which the theoretical, conceptual notions of the human-nature relationship are brought into concrete practices and actions. In many ways law is a platform for creating reality, and more and more artists and theorists are turning towards researching and experimenting in this specific middle-ground between theory and practice. How do you see the meeting point of practice and theory through your own practice as a curator and writer? Is it needed for art to escape the magical circle?

**AF:** On the one hand, yes. It is absolutely important, not just to “escape” it, but simply to live up to the facts of that which is already the case, namely that art has become an unbounded field, and the “magic circle” is above all now an elitist regime of distinction, no longer anything else. There are many reasons why “research” matters now; I think that it is part of a historical logic and that we do not really have a choice – if we reject that tendency, we necessarily vote for the reactionary option of what a “pure” art can be these days, which is of course itself dialectically implicated in the development. On the other hand, in my eyes, art needs the protection of a zone of political inconsequentiality. It needs a magic circle, in which small differences can become meaningful. Because only in this protected space of the non-consequential sign, art can truly “play”, and hence help us step beyond the quotidian regime of “the given”. So I protect the space of art at all costs. Only the solution that I offer with respect to the genre of the thematic exhibition is slightly different from the contemporary standard solution: I do not want to simply display research, on the one hand, without articulating and unsettling its status in relation to meta-theories and to aesthetics;



and rather than removing reference so as to keep a hygienic model of indeterminacy and aesthetic purity, I bring these references into the circle, and question the circle as such from within, while at the same time upholding it. The format of the essay-exhibition is a solution to the problem of the “thematic exhibition”, in which curatorial frames often suffocate that which is most valuable in art, namely its power to challenge frames and to induce experiences of “ontological insecurity”, to destabilise our frames of perception. The essay-exhibition not only displays research, but it becomes a means of research itself, one that seeks to exhibit such “frames”, of which we are part. That is the decisive difference: it means that discourse is being embodied and problematized by being exhibited.

**TH:** The Venice Biennale has born from the nation-state ideology of the 19th century, and is now struggling with the notion of nation state representation, as well as the idea of autonomous art, both of which seem more or less insufficient for answering today’s challenges. What you call the “boundary making practices” of modernism have for some time now provided a rich platform for a discourse that challenges that tradition. But, a counter-act is still bonded to what it rejects. Do you see room for artistic and theoretical discourse that debunks modernism altogether? What could this be?

**AF:** That is very well put: “a counter-act is still bonded to what it rejects”. The specificity of the matrix of modernity is the way in which it prescribes and encloses its opposites – to be anti-modern in this matrix is an almost entirely determined, scripted, and essentially modern position, one that shares many basic assumptions and beliefs and possible choices with its opponents. It also scripts the “pre-modern”, and the subhuman: it locks in its opposites and negatives. Wanting to denounce the modern dichotomies as “false” does not mean that we are actually able to step out of their matrix, out of the frame. Indeed I do not see any chance for us to exit from the frame and predicaments of modernity. It is simply not an option, this frame is larger than us, larger than our discourses. To the contrary, then, I believe that it is important to revive the modern: because the modern also always meant to insist on the changeability of society. To me, as a maker of exhibitions who believes in a certain modernism, namely the modernism whose benchmark is the capacity of an image, artwork or a form of consciousness to step out of its framing conditions in order to make them negotiable, this larger historical question of the frame that we call “modernity”, and the point where this frame could potentially be negotiated, is infinitely interesting.

<sup>1</sup> The *Animism* exhibition was shown in Antwerp, Bern, Vienna, Berlin, New York, Shenzhen, Seoul und Beirut in different versions and curatorial collaborations. The project also encompassed numerous publications, among them *Animism Volume I*, ed. Anselm Franke (Berlin: Sternberg Press 2010).

<sup>2</sup> *The Whole Earth. California and the Disappearance of the Outside*. Exhibition and publication curated by Diedrich Diederichsen and Anselm Franke, HKW Berlin, April-July 2013. Publication (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> *The Anthropocene Project 2013/2014* at HKW Berlin included, among others, the exhibition *FORENSIS* (curated by Eyal Weizman and Anselm Franke, March-May 2014) and the *Anthropocene Observatory* (with Armin Linke and Territorial Agency, 2013-2014). See: [www.hkw.de](http://www.hkw.de) for the complete list of projects and curators.

## Contributors

**Ursula Biemann** is an artist and theorist based in Zurich, Switzerland. Her artistic practice involves fieldwork in remote locations where she investigates the ecologies of oil and water. She is part of the *World of Matter* collective art and media project, has published several books and her video installations are exhibited worldwide.

**T. J. Demos** is a cultural critic and professor in the Department of the History of Art and Visual Culture, and director of the Center for Creative Ecologies, at University of California, Santa Cruz. He writes on contemporary art and politics, and is currently finishing a new book, entitled *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*.

**Catherine de Zegher** is the Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent (Belgium) and a Member of the Royal Academy of Belgium of Science and the Arts. She is the curator of many acclaimed exhibitions as well as the author and editor of numerous books. Her recent publications include *Women's Work Is Never Done*, an anthology of her essays on the work of contemporary women artists.

**Taru Elfving** is a curator and writer based in Helsinki as Head of Programme at Frame Contemporary Art Finland (2013–). Her curatorial work includes the Finnish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2015) and *Contemporary Art Archipelago* (Turku 2011, European Capital of Culture). She has published an extensive body of research and holds a PhD from Goldsmiths, University of London.

**Anselm Franke** is a curator and writer based in Berlin. Since 2013, he has directed the exhibition programme at HKW Berlin. In 2014, he was also Chief Curator of the Shanghai Biennale *Social Factory*. He is currently completing his PhD at Goldsmiths, University of London.

**Simryn Gill** was born in Singapore and currently resides in Port Dickson, Malaysia, and Sydney, Australia. Gill employs a range of methods and approaches, including collections, photographs, publications, drawings and writings. Her recent solo exhibitions include the Australian Pavilion, Venice Biennale (2013) and the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore (2015).

**Terike Haapoja** is a Finnish visual artist based in New York. With a specific focus on encounters with nature, death and other species, Haapoja's politically and ethically driven practice investigates the existential and political boundaries of our world. She represented Finland at the Venice Biennale 2013 with a solo show in the Nordic Pavilion.

**Hanna Husberg** is a Stockholm-based artist. She graduated from ENSBA, Paris in 2007, and is currently a PhD in Practice candidate at the Vienna art academy. Through a practice of video and installation projects she investigates how we perceive and relate to our environment in times of anthropogenic climate change.

**Alfredo Jaar** is an artist, architect and filmmaker born in Santiago de Chile and now based in New York City. He has realized numerous public interventions around the world and his work has been shown extensively at a number of biennales as well as recent museum retrospectives. He represented Chile at the Venice Biennale 2013.

**Harri Laakso**, Doctor of Arts, is a professor of visual culture and art at Aalto University, Finland. A researcher, curator and artist, he has published numerous articles on photography and contemporary art. As part of the Gruppo 111 collective he co-curated the *Falling Trees* exhibitions in the Finnish and Nordic Pavilions at the Venice Biennale 2013.

**Antti Laitinen** is a Finnish visual artist who works across a range of media often involving durational activities. During the last decade his work has been exhibited extensively across Europe as well as in Brazil, China and the USA. At the Venice Biennale 2013 he had a solo exhibition in the Finnish Pavilion.

**Laura McLean** is a London-based curator and writer. A graduate of the Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney and Goldsmiths College, University of London, her work examines the intersection of contemporary art, earth science, and biopolitics. She is currently working as Associate Curator of Artistic Bokeh, MuseumsQuartier, Vienna.

**Tuula Närhinen** is a visual artist based in Helsinki, Finland. She is a graduate of the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki, and the University of Technology (M.Sc. in Architecture). She is currently undertaking a practice-led doctoral research project at the University of the Arts in Helsinki.

**Khaled Ramadan** is a *révélateur*, curator, cultural writer and founder of the CPS art collective. His areas of expertise are the history of investigative aesthetics, constructed media and documentary filmmaking. He has co-curated the Maldives Pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale; the Guangzhou Triennial, China; and Manifesta 8. He is a member of IKT and the International Association of Art Critics (AICA).

**Henk Slager** is Dean of MaHKU Fine Art and Research Professor at HKU University of the Arts Utrecht. He has produced various curatorial projects, the most recent being *Modernity 3.0* (80 WSE New York University), *Aesthetic Jam* (Project Taipei Biennial, 2013), the 1st *Research Pavilion* (co-curator, project Venice Biennale). He is currently preparing the 5th Guangzhou Triennial.

**Syrago Tsiara** is a curator, art historian and director of the Thessaloniki Center of Contemporary Art, part of the State Museum of Contemporary Art – Costakis Collection in Greece. Her academic and research interests include art in the public space, collective and participatory projects, and the issues of politics, memory and gender in contemporary art.

**Stefanos Tsivopoulos** is a Greek artist based in New York and Amsterdam. He studied fine arts at the Superior Academy in Athens, the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. His exhibitions include the Greek Pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale, (2013), ISCP, New York (2011), Manifesta 8, Murcia (2010), Witte de With, Rotterdam (2010) and the Athens Biennale (2007).

## A Counter Order of Things Programme Venice, October 25–26, 2013

### Eclipse of the Animal

Opening  
**Jan Kaila** (Chair of the Board, Frame; Professor of Artistic Research, Finnish Academy of Fine Arts)

*Pavilion of Species*  
**Terike Haapoja** (Participating Artist, Nordic Pavilion, Venice Biennale)

*Animism and Ontological Anarchy*  
**Anselm Franke** (Curator, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin)

Discussion  
Moderator **Bryndis Snaebjornsdottir** (Professor of Fine Art, Valand Academy of Art, Gothenburg)

### Action as Form

*The Molecular Revolution*  
**Gerald Raunig** (Professor of Art and Media, Zurich University of the Arts)

*Time Inside Active*  
**Frans Jacobi** (Professor of Time-based Art / Performance, Bergen Academy of Art and Design)

Discussion *Reclaiming Animality*  
Moderator **Henk Slager** (Dean MaHKU Utrecht; Professor of Artistic Research, Finnish Academy of Fine Arts)

*The Seed Vault*  
**Giulio Squillacciotti** (Former Resident Bevilacqua La Masa, Venice)

### Politics of Ecology

*Imag(in)ing the Non-Human Condition*  
**Tuula Närhinen** (Doctoral Researcher, Finnish Academy of Fine Arts)

*Climates of Displacement*  
**T. J. Demos** (Reader in Art History, University College London)

Discussion  
Moderator **Henk Slager**

### Material Practices

*Geochemistry and other Planetary Perspectives*  
**Ursula Biemann** (Participating Artist, Maldives Pavilion, Venice Biennale)

*Drifting Studio Practice*  
**Lonnie van Brummelen** (Doctoral Researcher, MaHKU Utrecht / University of Amsterdam)

Discussion and closure  
Moderator **Anita Seppä** (Professor of Artistic Research, Finnish Academy of Fine Arts)



*Altern Ecologies* is the result of ongoing conversations following the symposium *A Counter Order of Things*, which was organized as part of the collateral programme of *Falling Trees*, Finland's participation at the 55th Venice Biennale.

#### A COUNTER ORDER OF THINGS

Symposium in Venice  
Oct 25-26, 2013

Organized by Henk Slager, Jan Kaila, Terike Haapoja

Co-organized by the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts / University of the Arts Helsinki with Frame Contemporary Art Finland, IUAV University of Venice, EARN (European Artistic Research Network)

#### FALLING TREES

Alvar Aalto Pavilion  
& Nordic Pavilion  
Finland's participation at the  
55th International Art Exhibition  
La Biennale di Venezia 2013

Curated by Gruppo 111: Mika Elo,  
Marko Karo, Harri Laakso

Artists  
Terike Haapoja and Antti Laitinen  
Commissioned by  
Frame Contemporary Art Finland

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Framed Conversations is a series of publications launched by Frame Contemporary Art Finland in 2016 to invite critical thinking in a range of practices and research with a focus on contemporary art practices.

Cover image:  
Alfredo Jaar  
*Venezia, Venezia*, 2013

Lightbox with black and white transparency

Photograph: *Milan, 1946: Lucio Fontana visits his studio on his return from Argentina* © Archivi Farabola

Metal pool, 1:60 resin model of Giardini, hydraulic system  
Wood structure, metal

Photo: Agostino Osio  
Courtesy the Artist, New York

The state of emergency caused by the environmental crisis has drawn forth the necessity to re-evaluate the centres of gravity in our world, including the means and ends of the arts. A number of exhibitions, seminars and art works at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013 resonated with this call for change. *Altern Ecologies* sets out to trace this emergent discourse focused on our relationship with the non-human world within the polyphonic maze of Venice. Growing out of the Counter Order of Things symposium, the anthology consists of commissioned articles alongside presentations of selected national pavilions from the 2013 edition of the Biennale.

*Altern Ecologies* includes contributions by Ursula Bieman, T. J. Demos, Catherine de Zegher, Taru Elfving, Anselm Franke, Simryn Gill, Terike Haapoja, Hanna Husberg, Alfredo Jaar, Harri Laakso, Antti Laitinen, Laura McLean, Tuula Närhinen, Khaled Ramadan, Henk Slager, Syrago Tsiara, Stefanos Tsivopoulos. Edited by Taru Elfving and Terike Haapoja, the anthology is published by Frame Contemporary Art Finland in collaboration with the University of the Arts Helsinki.