

RIGHT RESEARCH



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MODELLING SUSTAINABLE



RESEARCH PRACTICES



IN THE ANTHROPOCENE





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Aesthetic Attunements

Natalie Loveless

We are living in a time of climate catastrophe, ecological genocide and, now, pandemic. Species are dying at unprecedented rates; hurricanes, tornadoes, fires and floods occur with increasing intensity; the economy is crashing, and most are (at the time of writing) isolating in place—to one degree or another. This is a time during which we—those who labour in the fields of art practice, criticism, history and theory—may legitimately, and in new ways, be asking ourselves ‘Why Art?’ The responses gathered together in this forum, implicitly or explicitly, work to shift the terms of this question from ‘why art?’ to ‘which art?’ Or, from what ‘art’ (as a category of expressive, interventionist or critical cultural attention) can do *in general*, to *which forms* of artistic practice *reattune* and *recoordinate* us and *how*. In this way, they grapple with the distinction raised at the beginning of this forum, that of ‘ecological form’.

Often, when I begin to talk about art that is *formed ecologically* I am asked whether I mean art with an activist or pedagogical approach to the environment and the human’s place within it, or whether the distinction ‘ecological form’ refers to something like a work of art’s carbon footprint or some other measure of ecological impact. My response is generally this: while I think that it is important—even crucial—that we pay attention to carbon use and environmental impact at the level of the conception, production and circulation of artwork, and that artwork that raises awareness about climate catastrophe is urgently needed at this historical juncture, both of these ways of thinking about ecological form, while necessary, are not, to my mind, sufficient. Not sufficient for art, and not sufficient for life.

By all means: recycle. Walk or take public transport instead of driving. Buy an electric car and get solar roof panels. Boycott institutions in bed with the fossil fuel industry. But as anyone who has started to research any one of these individual actions in any depth can attest to: before long we are down the rabbit hole of impossibility, unsure whether the energy used by the recycling plant or to produce the electric car fuel cell, in the final analysis, is actually ecologically sound or whether it

simply defers or distracts from the problem by offering a short term and ultimately short sighted solution. This is not to say: don't research and make the best choices possible at any given moment, as needed. It *is* to say: don't mistake such actions as carrying any guarantee. We simply do not know and cannot know what it will take to pull ourselves back from the brink of climate collapse. When it comes to the impacts of climate change, it is not *if*, but *when*. And that *when* (and *where* and *for whom*) ongoingly exceeds our predictive capacities.

What the future holds we cannot guess, nor do we want to; but what we *can* and *must* do is move forward, one conference, conversation and artistic project at a time, looking to support multimodal ways of working in and with the arts and humanities, attuned to human and more-than-human social justice. As Beier, my co-organizer for the panel on which this forum is based, evocatively argues, we must resist the complacency of a technophilic guarantee: the seduction of thinking that the aim is to maintain economic growth within the logics of late-stage capitalism; the idea that the problem is simply *what* we are using ('dirty' as opposed to 'clean' energy) rather than, additionally, *how* we are using it. While it matters that we pay attention to our carbon footprints, and think about what it means for a scholar or artist to have used about half a ton of CO₂ equivalent or more to fly from point A to point B to give a talk, or to consider the relative merits of the 55 or so tons expended for one of the Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* sculptures,²⁹ we must do so non-innocently. Tallying sustainability impacts and working to offset them without any attempt at degrowth is a mode of accounting that remains inside of the very system that got us into this mess in the first place.

Within the productivist and technophilic structures of our current economic system and worldview, art is understood as a cultural additive rather than a core value. The contributors to this forum challenge this perspective. "How might the world be shaped and organized differently?" is a question that matters urgently, and it is a question that art—particularly art attuned to social and ecological justice—asks. We need not only political, technological, and economic reorganization to help us move beyond our toxic ways of doing life

29 Information on Eliasson's 2018 installation is available here: <https://icewatchlondon.com/>.

under petro-colonial-capitalism, but social and cultural shifts—*shifts at the level of daily orientations and local practices*. Art, as a practice of aesthetic micropolitical re-attunement, encourages resilience and imaginative worlding, not by offering more facts but by finding ways, through aesthetic encounters and events, to persuade us to care, and to care *differently*. And while a creative, speculative, and multispecies model of care is far from the only thing needed in the context of climate justice and action, it is perhaps the most urgent.

We live in a world in which care practices are deeply undervalued, and, even when they *are* valued, too-often life is structured in such a way that there is (or seems to be) *no time* to really inhabit care as an ethics of being in-and-with-and-as the world. Care of things—attunement to things—that make no sense within a capitalist, consumption-driven, world view. We know the climate is changing. We know that the devastating effects that surround us will have consequences beyond our ken. More headlines and graphs aren't shifting—at a scale that matters—how we do human and more-than-human social and material life.

Given this, I stake my lot with art that works at the micro-political level of the here and now—art with both an aesthetic and an activist impulse. One of the quotes that I've been working with in this context is the following, by the feminist philosopher Donna Haraway: 'What is needed is action and thinking that does not fit within dominant capitalist cultures [... rather, we need] on the ground collectives capable of new practices of imagination, resistance, revolt, repair, and mourning and living and dying well'.³⁰ In developing such practices, she tells us a 'common livable world must be composed, bit by bit, or not at all'.³¹

This is key.

To take this quotation seriously is to argue for the need for new (artistic, pedagogical, institutional) strategies, strategies that force us to develop our artistic and academic research differently, responsively. Art that remakes relations. Work that asks us to render each other *capacious* and *capable* in our knowledge making-and-sharing practices; that asks us to negotiate the production of more livable and more just worlds, attentively, slowly... bit by bit.

30 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 51.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

In our given world, we romanticize the heroes. But real change doesn't happen at the level of the heroic, it happens at the level of the micro-political. It happens in the crevices. Yes, grand acts matter. They gather attention. They mobilize affect. They shift paradigms. But it is at the level of our everyday micro choices about how we move through the world that lasting change happens. Our temporal and material attunements form us. They shape us. And these shapes matter. To my mind, what art can contribute to the project of nurturing affective resilience and more-than-human social justice is this: local, situated, and care-filled attention to how *form makes worlds*.

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