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Environmental Art and the Production of Publics:
Responding to Environmental Change

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Environmental Art and the Production of Publics: Responding to Environmental Change

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Abstract: Environmental crises around the world have inspired an outpour of creative response. As the effects of climate change increasingly manifest, environmental art is being politically and pedagogically mobilised for ameliorative strategies. The rubric that instrumentalist, techno-scientific approaches to environmental stress (and attendant social distress) cannot solely provide solutions to this challenge has found increasing acceptance. The concern of this paper, however, is the limited understanding of public art's capacity that is perpetuated by certain trends in environmental art in which the work is charged with communicative responsibility. Connected to the representational and instructive traditions of public art, this tendency is further informed by the influence of the 'information-deficit model' in environmental communication research: a concept that asserts a straightforward connection between information provision, individual awareness and collective action on a concern. The idea that public art can function as a conduit for knowledge, which in turn will inspire new moral positions and behaviours, absents the art work from the process of knowledge-making and the production of conditions that enable new practice. Arguing for a revised approach to the environmental possibilities of public art, this paper will propose that in thinking about environmental transformation as essentially unrepresentable, a different mode of public engagement with the issue is enabled.

Keywords: Public Art, Environmental Change, Publics

A S THE ECOLOGICAL pressures of climate change mount around the globe, there is an equally increasing imperative for humans to respond to the manifesting impacts of carbon-based economies. Governments and, more subtly, industry are fond of pointing out that this is a responsibility that devolves to all individuals, yet at the same time it is also generally accepted that there can be no hope for change and the redress of damaging legacies without collective effort. Climate change, after all, as well as resulting from the interactivity of non-human matter, is a product of culture – the ways on which humans have imagined, created and lived in their world. Climate change is thus a public concern: to draw insight from Latour, it is a phenomenon that gathers its actors together. As a political entity, it impels address from the *demos* and, as an ecological entity, from the many lives caught up in its making and manifestation.

The rise of environmental consciousness, in the Global North especially, in recent years certainly suggests the 'public-ness' of the cause, and in particular the ways in which efforts to address environmental change are frequently framed in terms of their public emergence or reception – something for people to 'be involved in'. This paper will discuss the work of public art as one site of emergent environmental awareness, and reflect on the future of environmental art in a public context, specifically its role in responding to contemporary environmental challenges. Public art is not a homogenic entity and can take many forms, but in its most common understanding the term references a range of poetic practices that materialise in public spaces. What I want to work towards in this paper is a critical appraisal of the limits embedded into the concept of what it means to make something public that environmentally-concerned public art traditionally employs. After Latour, I seek, instead, to develop an expanded understanding of publicness in public art that is profoundly connected to the art work's place in an unsettled network of human and non-human forces and concerns. It is the capacity of public art to operate in this network, bringing humans and environments into new and affective arrangements, that is potentially one of its most powerful functions.

The Work of Public Art

Public art occupies an ambiguous place in contemporary western culture. As Malcolm Miles points out, public art is in many respects the poor relation of art exhibited on gallery walls, where the possibilities to generate profits and make reputations are much more apparent (Miles 1). This status has been compounded by the commercial positioning of public art in a matrix of urban planning and corporate development. Criticism frequently mounted against the role of public art in large-scale inner-city developments particularly points to the neutralisation of art work in this context, blankly obscuring the issues

regarding public access and private interest that circulate in these spaces.

Yet the *public-ness* of public art work has meant that, outside the limits of urban development frameworks, it is also invested with a non-economic value defined by a strong social agenda and capacity for intervention. Historically, this tradition of public art as social good is again ambiguous, with political agendas and sometimes exclusionary, repressive politics hidden behind the claim of social instruction or representation (Miles 14). In a more recent incarnation of socially-concerned public art, however, the social agenda is pursued by forms of audience participation in the work itself. Rather than the unengaging public art works that adorn many urban centres (an inheritance, Miles reminds us, of the modernist aesthetic in which the art work is hermetically sealed from the world around it [Miles 12]), public art in this mode solicits responses from its audience and invites constitutive dialogue between the artist, the work and its publics.

According to Jane Rendell, the socially-focused functionality of design practices such as architecture has been a source of inspiration for some public artists. Working against the idea that art functions on an aesthetic register alone, participatory, or what is also termed, 'new genre public art', has a determined agenda to address a certain concern, or service a particular need. Public art in these terms acts to 'fix... things that are broken' (Rendell 44), employing, as Miles writes, 'practices of participation which are not received as artworld "lectures"', but instead as 'catalyst[s] for empowerment in place of liberal reform' (Miles 103).

Over recent years, what has floated to the fore of popular consciousness as in certain need of fixing is the environment. Public art has found a focus in the environmental cause with an increasing number of public artworks commissioned and curated, not as part of a development brief, but rather as a tool for communicating new messages and inspiring new practices to address the challenge of climate change, water shortages, and other environmental transformations that are threatening ecological well-being around the globe. Environmental art – as a nameable movement – has been around since the 1960s, but as environmental concern reaches new levels, more and more environmental art projects are being envisioned with an overtly instructive and socially engaged purpose.

So it is that environmental art, as part of a field of correlate socio-political concerns inspiring new public art practice (for instance, mental health and well-being, social marginalisation and postcolonial relations), is seen to break the pervasive secondment of public art to inequitable urban development interests. But exactly how is environmental art, in this context, conceived? Overwhelmingly, it seems, environmental art is understood by *what* it does: that is, it is defined by the critical or generative function of the art work. This is in keeping with the role attributed to new genre public art in general that, as Rendell describes, asks questions rather than provides solutions to a problem. 'Public art', she writes, 'should be engaged in the production of restless objects and spaces, ones that provoke us, that refuse to give up their meanings easily but instead demand that we question the world around us' (Rendell xv).

The *work* of the art work is thus to facilitate this questioning in an ongoing way and to intervene socio-politically via a mobilisation of new interests, groupings and responses. New genre public art relies upon participation and participation, in turn, is thought to catalyse change. A survey of literature concerning recent environment art confirms this reading: as it draws in its public, environmental art is roundly invested with an inspirational or revelatory *mediatory* function. That is, it brings its audience into new relationships with the world that can motivate new practices and inspire micro and macro-level change. In this rendering, the audience, and the material world, come together differently because of the work of the art.

Mel Gooding writes, for instance, that environmental art – alongside ecologists and natural historians – can take credit for the 'transformations [in] consciousness' that have challenged anthropocentric renderings of the self-in-the-world in favour of a networked, decentred understanding (Gooding 14). Miles refers to works that communicate 'ecological messages' by prompting self-critique and 'moments of individual recognition' amongst their audience (Miles 184; 172). This idea of environmental art work inspiring new subjectivities – of *working on the self* – and of generating more sustainable practices on the level of the individual is a widely-mobilised concept in this genre of public art. Baile Oakes, discussing artist Dominique Mazeaud's performance work *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande* – a well-known example of new genre public art – exemplifies this approach when he writes: 'the simple act of doing' in Mazeaud's work, of collecting rubbish from the ailing Santa Fe River, 'clearly demonstrates the difference an individual can make in healing the wounds of our planet' (Oakes 194).

Echoing Mazeaud's project, Australian artist John Dahlsen constructs works from piles of non-degradable rubbish he collects from the country's East coast beaches. While exhibited in a gallery space, Dahlson's curator Brett Addlington argues for the public nature of these works because they have intervened in a public space (the coastline) *and*, to quote Addlington, have 'made an impact on the psyches of the people who have seen his work' (Addlington

69). Dahlsen has subsequently been engaged as the official artist of 'Clean up Australia Day' and 'Clean up the World Day'. Geraldine Burke similarly argues that work attempting 'to relocate the artist and viewer from observer of nature to participant in it' must 'promote... the individual's connection to the environment as primary' (Burke 14). Her own work as an environmental artist utilises what she terms 'immersive pedagogy', in which individuals take part in a program of mentored workshops, walks, sculpture-making and other forms of 'tactile engagement' with a particular site.

The paradox here is this while the participatory ethic of such environmental art seeks to dissolve human-constructed binaries between nature and culture – and which privilege the latter – their focus is trained on the individual and the *capacity* of that individual to institute change. The work of art *itself* is not accorded agency: this remains invested in the human whose interior spaces – the realm of imagination and emotion – are the centralised site of transformation which in turn, inspires changing habits, practices and new ways of thinking in the world outside. What is being put forward in this discourse is the idea that art most powerfully operates on an immaterial register – on the things that we can't see and feel. All the material work, out in the world, is done by us. Yates McKee points to Bill McKibben's essay 'Imagine That' (subtitled 'What the warming world needs now is art, sweet art') as indicative of this reading of environmental art. McKibben's appeal to the role of imagination in addressing environmental crises is explained by McKee as a an oppositional supplement to the 'technical indices of environmental dynamics' which 'fail to generate what [McKibben] calls "cultural meaning" or a dramatic "plot" that would be affectively or spiritually compelling for a general public' (McKee 542).

This expectation of the artwork has a genealogy in art history but it also has one in the traditions of environmental discourse and communications theory. What is discernable in this dominant framing of environmental art is a kind of discursive accountancy, correlate with, and arguably inspired by, the 'information-deficit model' of environmental communication. Before I go onto to discuss this model, let me elaborate in this way: for all McKibben's critique of the rationalisation of environments through scientific and technical frames, his own approach to the work of art employs a similar logic, where human/environment relations are reduced to a chain of cause and effect. This is a decidedly deterministic approach to process and outcome: we receive environmental messages, we internalise them, and we act accordingly.

The 'information-deficit model' emerged as a common explanatory frame for the lack of public response to environmental concerns – and climate change in particular – in the late 1980s. Its focus is the individual, and the modification of individual behaviours which in turn are understood to propel market transformations and government policy. Crucial to the achievement of this goal, the model posits, is the provision of 'appropriate information' (Blake 260) – a translation of policy imperatives, scientific findings and political appeals. Embedded in here is the idea that individuals need to feel empowered to 'make a difference' in the face of overwhelming statistics, competing facts, and the materialising evidence of environmental change: an approach that has been taken up across the board by popular commentators on environmental concerns.

There is no issue, of course, with the intention to increase environmental and political literacy on the topic of climate change, and it is surely preferable to offer people hope rather than despair when considering their future. However, my concern with the information-deficit model rests with both its form and its function: how it abstracts the individual – as the site of action – from a public milieu; its simplistic and linear link between individual awareness and collective response; and how it delimits what counts as information, rendering it a neutral and objective flow of 'fact'. The ongoing and multifarious constitution of environmental concerns is confined to calculable terms. This is demonstrated in the interactive multimedia artwork *Wetland*, by Australian artist Michael Harkin, which employed sonic feedback of local water-use data provided by regional water authorities to generate its soundscape. As the artist describes, '"participants"' everyday actions at home [such as flushing the toilet or turning on the tap] shape how the work behaves', and he warns: 'unless our attitudes and consumption patterns change, it may mean that in the future, the only way to experience water will be through data' (Harkin 30).

'Figures' or 'facts' do not themselves communicate, and Harkin's work acknowledges this, positioning the art work in the role of poetic translator, bridging the gap between two material realities: our practices in the home and the life of water. It is an attempt to represent the human/water relations that lie behind the data for the purpose of instructive warning. Yet this is not all that is at play when someone somewhere flushes a toilet. In the transactions between water and human in the bathroom a host of other forces, entities, materials and stories assemble – the technologies of drains, the bacteria in the water, the plumber who installed the toilet, the cleaner who cleans it, water policies and moralism, ocean outfall, and the irrigators whose water allocations dwarf the volume of domestic water consumption in Australia. The impossibility of capturing this

network of actors through the metrics of measurement and its corresponding notations is the shadow behind this art work.

Producing Publics

Bruno Latour's differentiation between 'matters of fact' and what he calls 'matters of concern' is helpful for considering what is lost in the privileging of calculation in practices of representation, interpretation and communication (Latour, 2003). His view of how we come to knowledge refuses the translation of fact into reality; it captures what falls away from an algebraic approach to the world. For Latour, facts participate in the gathering of reality, but they do not capture it. Instead, facts assemble with a range of histories, specialties, lay perspectives, feelings, visions, and interests to produce a 'matter of concern' – species loss, for example, or the impact of climate change on farming communities – which therefore we can never know, or capture, in a single way. Understood like this, the environment – and our relationship to it – is not calculable, however much our modes of representation tell us that it is.

The environment (like the matter of concern) is a never-finalised assemblage of entities, energies, discourses, materials, stories, facts and bodies. Informed by this view (which lends itself to challenge the managerial discourse that infuses environmental imperatives and suggests modes of participatory governance instead), 'the task of the new environmental art', as McKee explains, 'would be to unsettle the self-evidence of "environment" itself, addressing it as a contingent assemblage of biological, technological, economic and governmental concerns whose boundaries and agencies are perpetually exposed to conflict' (McKee 557).

This has implications for how we configure the environmental artist, no longer a 'visionary' or critic who holds a mirror to our follies (and thus stands outside, despite their rhetorical inclusion 'in' nature), but as caught up in an open-ended network of participants in a matter of concern. Considered in this light, the work of art emerges from and is always implicated in an assemblage of real world s, both human and non-human – its milieu is at once socio-technical, material, political, poetic, and aesthetic, and thus no single interest can determine its meaning and effects. Importantly, what is also suggested by this networked approach to the work of art is the capacity of the work to *intervene* in what assembles. This is the final point of issue that I want to make in relation to current trends in environmental art. While the work is commonly interrogated for *what* it can do, rarely is it asked, *how* does it *do*?

To conclude with a proposition of what could be an alternative vision for environmental art, one that is tied neither to the demands of development nor pedagogy, I need to briefly return to the question of what it is that puts the public into public art? I previously outlined a commonly understood definition of public art as a range of poetic practices that are in some way publicly situated, either materially or ephemerally. The concept of 'public' in terms of public art has widely been contested: in 1988, Patricia Phillips 'attacked the assumption that "this art derives its 'publicness' from where it is located", arguing that the "the public dimension"' to a work of art "is a psychological, rather than a physical or environmental, construct"' (Miles 99). I argue that even this definition of the public nature of public art requires reconsideration. In the understanding of public art that I want to advocate, 'publicness' is not simply a passive element in the work – for example, its geographic location or its place in the public realm – rather, 'publicness' relates to the capacity of an art work to *produce* publics. This could be an answer – and of course not the only one – to the question '*how* does the work *do* its work'?

To think about an art work as actively generating publics is a very different scenario to that posed by the definitions of new genre public art which confine its role to asking questions or inspiring responses. Instead, an environmental art work is conceived of *as* a producer, and not just as produced. Alternative concepts of environmental art in these terms can be found in the work of the UK-born artist Paul Carter, who has lived and worked in Australia for close to thirty years. I will now outline two of his public art projects that I believe constitute an important shift in how environmental art is conceived and operates.

Hamlet's Mill is a public artwork planned for installation by the banks of the River Thames in London in 2012. It is intended as a publicly-situated response to climate change that also seeks to produce its public of response. *Hamlet's Mill* takes the form of a mobile giant pivot or gate post sited by the river. The design will engage passers-by in a story of human and non-human engagements that are both narrated and enacted. This story is continuously (re)materialised via LED text ribbons that run across the work displaying constantly updated data on carbon emissions and sea-level rise, garnered from various monitoring sites across the globe. The ribbons don't represent anything but rather act as analogues of environmental processes and change: the agency of non-human matter is recalled through the kinesthetic relation between the changing data and the movement of the pivot or gate. While material and real in its many manifestations, climate change will not be captured by semiotic form or a single narrative account. The impossibility of representing climate change is thus a guiding poetic for the art work.

In contrast to the use of data in Harkin's wetland, which asserted a direct connection between individual practices and environmental effects, *Hamlet's Mill* assembles participants in the process of environmental change. Communication in this context is not a straightforward process of transmitting and processing information: the data display will notate environmental change rather than 'translating' environmental conditions into a certain meaning. *Hamlet's Mill* will generate its public via an always gathering and never settled story composed by the movements of global matter — tidal changes, Gulf Stream currents, temperature changes, human bodies, and the rotations of the pivot or gate. This is communication of a different sort, where new meanings emerge as we re-enter the story in which we are already a part.

While what we might call the 'environmental' agenda of *Hamlet's Mill* is evident, an already-installed art work of Carter's, in the centre of Melbourne's CBD, suggests to me the difficulty of determining generic — and particularly instructive — characteristics of environmental art. This work that sits somewhere between public art and landscape design is titled *Nearamnew*, and constitutes the plaza surface of Federation Square in Melbourne: 7500 square metres of sandstone, arranged in sculptural form. Since its construction, Fed Square (as it is now commonly known) has become the most visible and significant public gathering place in Melbourne, with the gently undulating forms of *Nearamnew* and its stepped gradation down towards street level opening out to those who choose to linger or pass across it, tracing their feet over its carved surface.

Nearamnew is indicative of an environmental art that does not announce itself as such. Indeed, in none of the literature written about the work is it ever named in these terms. But I would argue that it is, or at least that it occupies a place sympathetic to the ethical ambitions of what is generally understood as new genre public art. What it does however — and counter to the trend in art work that positions the human and the environment as distinct entities (via its mediatory role) — is to recollect the tangled wed of human and non-human stories that have gathered at this place, the site of Federation Square, and in doing so create the conditions for publics to emerge in contact with both temporally and geographically distant, as well as proximate, environments. These local stories are recollected in the design form itself — a tripartite structure referencing the local, regional and the global. The first two are conveyed in a series of nine irregular boxes of poetic text, dispersed across the plaza, in which the text is neither complete nor immediately decipherable.

The stories that Carter weaves into his design are all stories of local creativity: the pre-settler ecology of nearby Yarra River's creeks and tributaries; the post-war arrival of migrants to Melbourne; diplomatic encounters between early settlers and the local Indigenous clans of the Yarra Valley. The global register of *Nearamnew* is the plaza itself which takes the form of Lake Tyrrell — a large saline lake in the Mallee country in the north-west of Victoria that is currently suffering extreme degradation. It was derived by Carter from an Aboriginal bark etching collected in the Lake Tyrrell area during the late nineteenth century, and depicts the Lake in flood — an all but impossible event these days. Now rendered in sandstone, the whorls of a flooded Lake Tyrrell become the ground-map of Federation Square. The presence of Lake Tyrrell in the heart of Melbourne makes a statement about the poetic lives of places as always connected to elsewhere, *and* catalyses the production of a public, generated in the temporal gathering of histories, environments, bodies, materials, technologies and visions that assemble around the emergence of this currently damaged place, in the heart of Melbourne.

According to cultural theorist Michael Warner, publics are called into being by acts of address: they are discursively produced (Warner 2005). His analysis of the fundamentally poetic nature of publics puts an emphasis upon the capacity of narratives to materially intervene in the gathering social and political world. Crucially, however, publics are also placed — they form because of common environments, not necessarily geographically defined. These common places are materialised in stories, and they emerge when a public finds its shared interests rather than responding to a brief that is already prescribed. Like *Hamlet's Mill*, *Nearamnew* doesn't represent anything, but recollects traces of local ecological knowledge in marks and incomplete stories, that connect to, and are dependent upon, a network of other times and places. These stories are anecdotes, or secret histories: they are the stuff that is left over after calculation, what Foucault has termed 'the silent remainder', and they can arrange us in new and powerful ways (in Mckee 577).

Environmental art is problematic when its obscures the human from view in its concept of 'environment'. There is no environment *and* human as much as there is no art *and* nature: all emerge from entanglements of human, non-human, material and ephemera — and their separation into calculative elements perpetuates a logic that sustains a fantasy of human ecological dominance. *Nearamnew* and *Hamlet's Mill* suggest that we reconsider the instructive or 'mediatory' expectations that are often put upon works of environmental public art. They also ask that we expand our understanding of public-ness, to reframe the concept of individual responsiveness and the role of information within this in terms of our capacity to act and to be acted upon as part of

an ever-shifting, ever-re-narrated public. Beginning from the position that the work of art actively *does* rather than passively transmits expands the possibilities of what, as well as how, *it can do* in the world.

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