

Art, Ecology and Institutions

A Conversation with Artists and Curators

Steven Lam, Gabi Ngcobo, Jack Persekian, Nato Thompson, Anne Sophie Witzke and Liberate Tate

This conversation was conducted by email over July 2012. Gabi Ngcobo is an independent curator and scholar; Jack Persekian is Director and Head Curator of The Palestinian Museum; Nato Thompson is a writer and curator; Anne Sophie Witzke is a curator and PhD fellow at Department of Aesthetics and Communication at Aarhus University; Liberate Tate is an art collective exploring the role of creative intervention in social change especially in relation to the oil and culture industries; and Steven Lam is an artist, curator and Associate Dean at The School of Art at The Cooper Union, New York City; for fuller details on the participants refer to ‘Contributors’ Notes’ at the end of this issue.

Steven Lam Gabi and Anne Sophie, you have organized exhibitions timed in conjunction with large political events and climate summits in order to raise awareness of ecological issues formerly reserved for policy-makers or specialists. Can you speak of your practices in light of your regional contexts? What might an exhibition achieve when it comes to a show about ecology? What are some institutional, economic and disciplinary limits? What are the possibilities? What happens after these events or exhibitions are over?

Gabi Ngcobo When I was approached to organize an exhibition to coincide with COP 17 (the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), which met in Durban in November 2011, I had to consider a number of factors. The main one was the location, the city of Durban, my birth city and one that I left as recently as six years ago. The commission would allow me to be re-connected to the place by thinking about how to reflect on recent climate changes that have taken place there in relationship to the rest of the country and the monstrosity that is ‘The Continent’. Alongside the support given to me by the Goethe-Institut, my commissioners, was the freedom to be disobedient, so to speak. ‘There’s no need to be polite’ was the brief and immediately the

title of the exhibition was born in my head: DON'T/PANIC. The show featured more than thirty pieces, including work by South African artists David Koloane, Mlu Zondi, Clive van den Berg and Moshekwa Langa, Nigerian-born artist Otobong Nkanga, Eritrean-born artist Dawit L Petros, Nigerian George Osodi and Moroccan-born artist Batoul S'Himi.

Anne Sophie Witzke In 2009 I organized an exhibition on climate change in Copenhagen coinciding with COP15. 'RETHINK: Contemporary Art and Climate Change' was made in collaboration with the National Gallery of Denmark, Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art, the Nordic Culture Fund and the Alexandra Institute. We wanted to address global warming as a cultural and social issue, not just a discipline reserved for politics or science. Thus, the focus was more on cultural and social shifts and displacements than on concrete issues about energy and CO₂ emissions. In line with some of you I have been inspired by Félix Guattari, as well as by thinkers like Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers, who (despite their differences) see nature and culture as entangled.

It is difficult to summarize what effect the exhibition had in terms of public engagement. During COP15 there were myriad activities and events going on in Denmark, which implied the risk that a single activity would lose resonance. And to a certain degree I think this is what happened. Visibility of climate change issues turned into overexposure. However, my impression is that the discussions and activities during COP15 have contributed to generate a general concern about global warming. Also, a number of art projects dealing with political ecological issues have emerged in the wake of COP15. For me this longer lasting involvement is essential. Current ecological problems are deeply political and economic, and require a cultural transformation, which is not going to happen overnight. Long-term commitment is needed.

SL Jack, Nato, and Liberate Tate, your projects have opened the category of the ecological allowing for other issues to enter, such as human rights and democracy. Can you speak of your experience in curating and presenting these issues?

Jack Persekian I, like Anne Sophie, would support Guattari's definition of ecology, as he observes that nature cannot be separated from culture any more; nor, I would emphasize, from politics, the economy and social issues. Hence, my concern is not merely with climate change, but more importantly the changes imposed on land and territories, and the ethnic cleansing taking place in parts of the world today. I cannot simply accept the facts and realities created on the ground by the strong and dominant powers at the expense of the poor, the weak and the downtrodden. In this context I don't only see art as an agent for change but more importantly as a powerful catalyst for political activism and resistance.

Had I been more careful in observing the trends formulated by artists in the Arab world in their work in the last decade and a half, linking them to what should have been perceived as the pulse of the street, acknowledging their ability to mirror what society is burdened with and what it aspires for, and truly believing in the role of the artist as 'the soul of

her/his society', I and others should have at least indicated some time ago that the Arab street's impulse has dramatically changed and people aren't the docile horde anymore, hopelessly and helplessly submissive to their potentates.

Nato Thompson As with Jack, climate change isn't an issue I have foregrounded in exhibitions or commissions, but it is related to the main trajectory of much of the socially engaged work I have been involved in. The questions of engaging with community, considerations of media, considerations of affect on local, national and international levels, the potentialities of unlocking loaded political issues from their compartmentalized forms of dialogue, and finally the consideration of political efficacy, are all part of a growing ecology of artwork and political practice.

Gauging efficacy in this mire of sloppy process is no easy task. One method that I have been working on with Creative Time is growing the base for forums of social justice, cultural work to develop a shared language and methodology of critique. In particular, the work on climate change has found numerous practitioners who arrive at cultural forms from numerous disciplines such as architecture, urban planning and, of course, environmentalism. The language of how to shape culturally geared projects is new, but those doing this kind of work are exponentially growing. Finding platforms for discussing efficacy in its broadest sense is, at this point, helpful.

Liberate Tate We are an art collective that explores the role of creative intervention in social change. We aim to free art from the grips of the oil industry. We primarily focus on Tate, the UK's leading art museum, and its sponsorship deal with the oil company BP. We believe Tate is supporting BP rather than the other way around. Given Tate's relationship with a corporation engaged in socially and ecologically destructive activities, in our view, every exhibition at Tate and other oil-sponsored public cultural institutions is part of the creation of climate chaos through the construction of a social licence to operate for oil companies. Our practice involves illuminating this process at the culture wellhead through interventions and artworks created in Tate galleries. All of our performances are completely unsanctioned, so as far as institutional or professional limits are concerned, Liberate Tate makes work explicitly outside of any limits a museum might seek to impose. We situate our interventions in the growing wave of desire for citizens to reclaim public space: a gallery should be a place to enjoy great art, not a site where an art museum makes visitors complicit in the ecological destruction of its corporate partners.

SL The natural can be seen as a smokescreen, even an obstacle at times. How does one create a critical language of the environment, a critical eco-aesthetics, without relying on an essentialized and purist Romantic fiction that posits Nature as an object, a static and fixed entity outside of culture?

ASW Roughly speaking, nature and culture in the Western world have been established as opposites. In discussions about environmental issues this has brought about a polarization between different groups. On the one hand we have the eco-romantics, who view nature as a sacred,

purified entity, and they want to abandon civilization. And when related to developing countries and their wish to improve their standards of living, the romantic approach can be particularly problematic. Conversely, there are (in Bruno Latour's terms) 'the moderns', who view Western history as an evolutionary progression where ecological problems can be solved through technological advances. Here, issues like climate change, land degradation, water scarcity are often discussed in apolitical terms such as 'resource scarcity' or 'modernization', when they are in fact deeply entangled in political and social issues. Therefore, in order to tackle environmental issues we cannot solely focus on the environment as an isolated area.

In the case of the 'RETHINK' exhibition many of the art projects were working with diffuse borders between the natural, the cultural and the social. In the installation *Biospheres* Tomás Saraceno took a metaphorical approach to serious subjects like the earth's overpopulation and climate change. His works are often based on structures found in nature, like clouds, bubbles and spider webs, and can be described as models for new types of social spaces and human habitats that respond to environmental challenges. In *Biospheres*, which consists of a number of floating inflatable globes containing plants, air, water and people (the audience could enter the largest of the globes), Saraceno attempts to establish a new relation between culture and nature where humans and non-humans share habitats and coexist. Another contribution, more ironic and neo-conceptual in approach, was *Safety Gear for Small Animals* by Canadian artist Bill Burns. The project is staged in the form of an enterprise – a manufacturer of safety equipment for small animals, eg safety vests, helmets and protective goggles scaled down to suit birds, mice, frogs, etc. Burns foregrounds the absurdity of the various protective measures we devise in order to safeguard ourselves against environmental changes, and shows how deeply the biological non-human sphere is entangled with cultural and technical ecologies.

GN For me, to create an exhibition was not necessarily an opportunity to say something profound about ecological issues in any scientific lingo – I had none – but rather to allow a variety of artistic gestures to be in conversation with one another, to clash, to allow tensions to emerge, relationships to be formulated only to be broken again. After all, I also subscribe to Guattari's enabling definition of ecologies as detailed in *The Three Ecologies*. I wanted to consider many aspects of climate changes within the political landscape of Durban – the economic, educational and artistic climates – and to find works and interventions that trigger questions which can directly impact on how we think about the spaces we inhabit, and the images we are confronted with. No new work was commissioned because I did not want the exhibition to be 'greenwashed', nor did I want to burden artists to respond to these questions based on their urgency, which in this instance was also connected to an international event of a global scale.

SL The performance and sculptural interventions by Liberate Tate have consciously worked with iconography that not only evokes, but relies on an invasion of the natural into the pristine and sterile walls of a museum. Can the collective speak about the specificity of these references in your actions?

LT Bringing natural materials into the Tate galleries is a decision to return what is repressed in Tate's relationship with BP to the gallery spaces of the Tate itself. In a haze of ecological schizophrenia, Tate is pushing its museum credentials as a flagship for sustainability, while at the same time taking money from a company that is damaging our ecosystems. *Floe Piece* (January 2012) is a performance which incorporated a block of ice brought back by scientists from the Arctic. The melting block of ice in *Floe Piece* was exhibited on the steps of Saint Paul's Cathedral at Occupy London, before we carried it on a stretcher, like a dying patient, to Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, where the assembled audience ritually watched over the ice before leaving it there to melt. In museums we are used to seeing representations of landscape in a painting, photograph, video or sculpture. However, seeing this type of Arctic ice for the first time was an emotional experience for us all as the performance enabled us to express the grief and loss felt at that viewing. The people and natural habitats currently affected by climate change are often so far away – the Arctic, the Maldives, Bangladesh – and it felt incredibly significant to bring something tangible from one of those sites into the gallery and to say to Tate, 'Here is some melting Arctic ice, deal with it'.

Additionally, two earlier performances were made in direct reference to the Gulf of Mexico Oil spill and used oil-like substances as a reminder of the ongoing effects of the spill. *Licence to Spill* was an intervention at the Tate Summer Party in June 2010. As BP was spilling oil in the Gulf of Mexico, Tate and BP were celebrating the twentieth anniversary of their sponsorship. Wearing black, our faces veiled, we carried vats of black liquid with BP's notorious sunflower logo stuck to them. We appeared, as if from nowhere, to spill hundreds of gallons of what was actually molasses on the entrance steps of Tate Britain before disappearing as quickly as we arrived.¹ Nearly a year later we made *Human Cost*, a durational performance marking the anniversary of the Gulf of Mexico catastrophe. The performance lasted eighty-seven minutes, echoing the number of days it took BP to stop the gush of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.²

Our choice to use or allude to certain raw materials could be said to be Beuysian because the fluid ingredient of an oil-like substance plays a key role, almost like a performer itself. While the presence of these materials may suggest 'the natural', it also highlights how that presence is a performance, similar to how the brick of a building is considered natural. The work functions along the lines of Donna Haraway's cyborgs; they remain referential to the natural *and* the synthetic in one continuous spectrum, rather than as opposing forces.

SL Many of you cite critics who have provided an expanded vocabulary of the ecological, arguing that human and non-human agents are so deeply enmeshed it has become difficult to separate one from the network of political, economic, industrial institutions that exist today. Certainly this is a crucial theoretical starting point, but I wonder how it manifests in artistic/curatorial practice. How does one translate or enact this theory of entanglement into the site of an exhibition?

ASW In 'RETHINK' our curatorial approach to the idea of 'entanglement' wasn't based on a strictly defined philosophical vocabulary. We worked with a broad approach based on the view that climate change

1. As part of the same performance two members of Liberate Tate assumed the identities of 'Bobbi' and 'Toni', parallel personae to Bob Dudley and Tony Hayward, the current and former CEOs of BP, and performed a mini spill inside the gallery. The two women carried ten litres of molasses into the Tate under the bouffant of their floral dresses and released it during champagne and canapés in the middle of the party.

2. In the performance a male body (often read as female within the context of the exhibition 'Single Form' which contained numerous sculptures of female bodies) was covered in oil by two veiled figures, each pouring from a petrol can embossed with the BP helios logo.

is linked to our social life, and can only be solved through cultural change. The theory of ‘entanglement’ as a basic condition for humans as well as non-human actors was reflected in the artworks and in the curatorial themes we worked with (one theme was ‘relationships’). Tue Greenfort’s piece *There isn’t a frog, a fowl, a fish...* consists of a large bed of crops used in modern large-scale agriculture. Due to the spread of agricultural crops, an increasing amount of Danish species are being endangered, because they no longer have access to their natural habitats. As in much of Greenfort’s work he links animals and the natural environment with science, policy and industry – in this case the Danish agricultural and environmental policy and global issues of soil depletion due to the growing demand for food in the world. By making these relationships explicit one could say that Greenfort formulates a concept of ecology that parallels Guattari’s notion of ‘transversality’ (between the different ecologies of the subjective, the social and the environmental) or Latour’s notion of ‘a thing’ (where a thing is described as a collective or assemblage of relations, interests, values and human, as well as non-human actors).

LT Our actions demand that wider connections be drawn between the institution’s sponsorship deals and the dispersant contaminating the gulf, in an entanglement of so-called (and as such divorced from one another) ‘natural’, ‘synthetic’ and financial forces. We think that the network of relations in sponsorship arrangements such as Tate and BP exemplifies this web and thus makes the gallery a suitable site of intervention. Tate is an appropriate target not only because it models itself as politically savvy, but because it has a sustainability policy that was approved by its board in 2008. In the policy Tate states its intention to embed sustainability into its work environment; to take a lead in museum sector sustainability; to inspire change in its networks and visitors and to support the changes needed to move toward a more sustainable society. While commendable, this is actually a very narrow and limited view of its carbon footprint or ecological impact, because it does not take into account its relationship with big oil.

NT We must understand that certain ecological realities are transforming the ontology of the general public into an awareness of the instability of the category of nature. It need not be a complicated theoretical issue, as people need only see a melting glacier to understand that we are deeply manipulated by global forces. There are starting points to move toward the more complex interconnectivity and entanglements that push past culturally defined categories of human/not human, singularity/complexity, natural/unnatural.

However, there has been a sort of wilful insouciance in the critical contemporary art community to eschew communicability for the sake of theoretical acumen. I would almost call it a hypnotism, as I find that many artists and curators who become entranced by an entire new set of theoretical tools set sail for an entire new land of semiotics far removed from the complexity of publics without access or knowledge of their coding. A gap opens up and in general it is a rare exhibition or artistic project that is able to close that gap enough to make something, dare we say, pedagogic occur. So the task, to be simple, is to untangle

the romanticism of the language of theory from its political power to communicate across a diversity of audiences.

I worked with a group called Spurse on a compelling installation back in 2004 where they tried to prove that this small town of North Adams, Massachusetts, was the same place as Mexico City. Through a series of walking drifts through each city, in a randomized pattern, they picked up detritus, conducted interviews with strangers and took laboratory samples of the earth. In a sense, they were attempting to flatten all categories of data, making human, natural, soil, trash, communication and ecological all on the same playing field of data. It was a manner to move toward a flattening of forces to highlight their equal influence. The visiting audience was encouraged to sift through the materials and participate in the laboratory to consider the equivalence of Mexico City and North Adams. In all honesty, I found Spurse's language far too theoretical for our public, but the methods of shaking up cultural expectations regarding categories of the ecological I found extremely poignant and noteworthy.

ASW I think Nato makes an important point. The way we communicate is central. It seems that we still lack a proper language when we talk about ecological art. In that context there's another tendency, which I believe is also obscuring the field: the idea that interaction and participation by definition leads to engagement and understanding. This simplistic equation is found in many art projects today without being qualified. Interacting does not necessarily lead to a deeper understanding or change in behaviour. We have to consider what kind of participation an art project is facilitating, and – borrowing the term 'structured participation' coined by media artist Natalie Jeremijenko – how this participation is structured.³

In my current research on ecological art practices involving digital technologies and media, I am preoccupied with these challenges. Some of the projects I find most interesting use micro science, citizen science and other DIY strategies to enhance civic, cultural and institutional engagement in ecological concerns. They provide ordinary people with concrete tools they can use in response, for instance, to air pollution and climate change. Sympathetic towards the open source ethos, many projects attempt to democratize environmental science and knowledge by involving citizens in the production of new environmental data or by making already existing data accessible to the general public. Another example is Jeremijenko's playful project *The Environmental Health Clinic* (2007–), which offers solutions to New York City's environmental diseases. Individuals with asthma, allergies and other environmental-related diseases can consult the clinic and receive treatment. But instead of medication, treatment consists of 'action prescriptions' with instructions on what the patients can do to improve their local environment. For instance, patients might be ordered to collect environmental data using digital sensors, plant green vegetation in their neighbourhood or be responsible for other kinds of urban interventions that can produce material change. By facilitating an open-ended, community-based knowledge that puts 'empirical evidence in the public sphere', the project can push citizens to actively explore complex environmental issues and help restructure the way they participate in them.

3. See Benjamin Bratton and Natalie Jeremijenko, *Suspicious Images, Latent Interfaces*, Architectural League of New York, New York, 2006; and Danielle Siembieda, 'Natalie Jeremijenko Ignites a Fire Under the Seats of CADRE Students', in *Switch* 24, online at: <http://switch.sjsu.edu/v24/features/jeremijenko/>.



Bill Burns, above: installation view of *Safety Gear for Small Animals*, 1994–2012, vacuum formed Perspex and plywood, L 230 x W 115 x H 110 cm, photo: Bill Burns; below: Dust Mask, from *Safety Gear for Small Animals*, 1994–2012, vacuum formed plastic, elastic, 3 x 3 x 2.5cm, photo: Bill Burns

SL It would be a missed opportunity not to hear the others respond to Liberate Tate's actions. As artists, Liberate Tate certainly has flexibility in operating outside the institution, but where is the agency for curators in launching their critiques, especially if the institution that employs them is sustained by the oil-industrial complex or operates within an economic infrastructure built on exploitation and socially unjust foundations?

ASW I don't have any concrete experience with the oil industry. When we did 'RETHINK' we discussed what kind of partnerships it would be relevant to establish. We were interested in collaborations with companies and public institutions that acknowledged climate change as a problem.

NT The critique of oil funding at the Tate is absolutely impressive to watch from a distance. The phrase I hear over and over again from folks in these institutions is that, in the end, it is all money of sorts. It is very difficult to tease out the good money from the bad. I'm very protective with overt corporate branding because often I think it dilutes the meaning of the art and generally it lessens the public's trust in what we do. I realize that the questions are hazy, but in general, I would say one has to take a stand at times. It is difficult to know when is the right time, but an alibi of 'it's all very complicated' doesn't work well. It ruins the integrity of the work we do to simply sit back and be complacent.

SL And finally, to the rest of the panel, what are the dangers when ecology loses its critical traction by losing its specificity?

ASW Sustainability has been hijacked by various discourses, and used for greenwashing purposes. By adding green colour and using eco-friendly materials, projects with no real substance get attention. Here sustainability becomes an ornament, as Rem Koolhaas has pointed out. So yes, there is a risk that ecology loses its criticality and becomes an empty formula. We need to maintain a focus on the subversive aspect of ecology.

JP Unfortunately, we are witnessing now a situation where banks, companies and rich people have usurped the notion of clean, green, eco-friendly environments in their communications to promote and sell their merchandise, real estate, and mostly things people don't really need. It is very evident that people in general are manipulable as those industrialists seek to beguile their dreams and desires, say for a dream home in a new, unpolluted environment made possible with easy loans, and a new electric car bought with borrowed money. Meagre-salaried individuals and families are submerged in debt and their whole lives are held as collateral by these financiers. The promise of happiness erodes with the heavy liability of repaying the loans and debts, and life just passes by with little hope for deliverance.

LT It is equally a concern if ecological issues are seen as divorced from social ones. The very 'specificity' of ecology implies that environmental damage is the only concern, which lets the oil companies off the hook for numerous human rights violations. We are asking that Tate's ideas

about sustainability are held accountable, not just measured with a graph or statistics (for example carbon auditing), but in the way which it is involved in shaping social meaning.

Survival is called into question by ecology – the survival of BP towards the end of oil production, the survival of cultural and educational institutions beyond an oil-rich economy, and the survival of all institutions, bodies, systems that are tied to dependency. It is difficult to maintain a critical or effective relationship when there is also a sense of reliance or dependency. We are proposing that Tate as a cultural institution has a particular agency within this situation, whereby they might cut themselves free from oil sponsorship and rethink how they might grow alongside and within other supportive networks.

NT The concerns of the ecological are of no small portent. The world is crumbling around us. Even Karl Marx didn't realize that the thing that would confront capitalism most dramatically would be its own obsession with surplus against the finite resources of the earth. This is to say that there remains an urgent imperative to all this work that makes communicability an ethical responsibility, not simply a methodology. And with that, making space for action to occur by using this work to move across the political landscape, highlighting where points in power are vulnerable, so that audiences can be engaged enough with ecological concerns to translate pedagogic value into social power.