**ART AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

**Ackroyd & Harvey 2015**

Just over a century ago, the Futurists blazed a trail into the sedate world of the arts denouncing Mythology and the mystic muse of the Ideal, whilst fervently embracing the rise of modern technology and the speed of city life. The Futurist Manifesto published in 1909 in the French newspaper Le Figaro glorified aggressive action and exalted the beauty of speed in the delirious form of a racing automobile, ‘its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath…a roaring motor car which seems to run on like machine-gun fire.’

Spearheading the movement was F. T. Marinetti, an Italian poet intoxicated with ‘the love of danger, the rush of energy and rashness’ who declared “Art, in fact, can be nothing but violence, cruelty and injustice.”

The Futurists reveled in the seductions of machine dynamism: *the lissome flight of the airplane, broad-breasted locomotives*; in short, they craved the adrenalin rush of pure unadulterated *speed.*

In the space of a century, speed gathered thrust andtore through the sound barrier, ignited imaginations, placed a man on the moon, Donald Campbell’s Bluebird at the bottom of a lake and in the words of scientist James Gleick “accelerated just about everything”. Speed-dating, social acceleration, supersonic flight, fast-moving consumer society, fast internet-connection, fast food, drive-through funerals – all and more the Futurists dream!

Fast forward to 2009 and the eve of the 15th UN Conference of the Parties on Climate Change and one can only imagine Marinetti’s malevolent mischief relishing the maelstrom of carbon atoms flooding the air and wreaking havoc; parching lands, failing harvests, collapsing glaciers, acidifying oceans, melting ice, lashing storms. A planet in the throes of an extinction spasm of a magnitude not seen since the last mass extinction event of the dinosaurs and elevated to roughly 1,000 times the so-called average background level seen in the fossil record, one suspects would be music to Marinetti’s ears.

‘We are on the extreme promontory of centuries! We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive act of the libertarian, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women.’

Tempting as it may be to lay waste to Marinetti and his fascist ideologies it has to be acknowledged that Futurism took the momentous developments in science and technology at the beginning of the twentieth century as signaling a new historical era, demanding correspondingly innovative art forms and language. The tactics of the Futurist artists sought to provoke, agitate and scandalize the public. Art critic and philosopher, Boris Groys describes how ‘Futurism tried to create a total, even totalitarian, space – a space that one cannot escape’ effectively making the neutral position of the spectator impossible by ‘excluding the possibility of being outside’.

It could be argued that anthropogenic climate change by its nature excludes ‘the possibility of being outside’. From waking breath to sleep lives are shaped and served by a seamless stream of fossil fuel, and in an ever-growing global community, fates are shared by the switch of a light, rev of a car engine, production of steel and manufacture of concrete. Apart from water, concrete is the most widely used material on earth and the second largest emitter of carbon dioxide gas. Carbon cemented into the atmosphere as heat-trapping CO2 molecules has cumulated in a record-breaking 400 parts per million of atmospheric gases in 2013, a grim fact widely recognized as without precedence in human history. ‘A perfect storm’ is how author and analyst Mike Berners-Lee describes climate change, ‘the most multi-layered and intriguing problem in history’.

In the late 1980’s NASA scientist James E. Hansen put his head up above the parapet and declared his certainty that the world was warming from burning fossil fuels – the words ‘the greenhouse effect’ never seemed far from people’s mouths that sultry summer. Yet, the words seemed to disappear from view, lost from conversation over the following years - not that the summers became any cooler.

Perhaps an apocalypse fatigue set in as the cold war slipped away and the pleasures of balmy summer evenings, chilled pinot grigio and increasing consumer wealth anaesthetized the nagging words of scientists.

Perhaps, as Ross Gelbspan pointed out in his 1997 book *The Heat Is On*, “other forces had quickly swept it away”. The coal and oil industry took up the work of disinformation in earnest, finding a few scientists and scientific hangers-on to write Op-Ed pieces and appear on talk shows to provide a “balanced” view. Journalism proved unequal to the task of separating scientific consensus from minor or trivial dissent and, an obligatory statement of denial of climate change accompanied almost every story about global warming.

Perhaps, as described by climate scientist Mike Hulne, the uncomfortable reality that none of the global deployments of science, economics, international relations, diplomacy and politics have yielded the breakthrough needed on the global stage, needed to be faced:

“Perhaps this particular way of framing climate change (as a mega-problem awaiting, demanding a mega-solution) has led us down the wrong road. By constructing climate change as the ‘mother of all problems’ – perhaps we have out-manoeuvred ourselves.” *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*

Lucy R. Lippard, writer, art critic and activist talks of art as a ‘framing device for visual and/or social experience’ and describes how artists ‘slip between the institutional walls to expose the layers of emotional and aesthetic resonance in our relationships to the world’. She points out how the immensity of the topics being faced today require the space or place for encounter to be redefined, to present a set of multiple views.

The frame of life on earth is being rapidly redrawn and the need for multiple views is paramount. With a coolly distant nod to the Futurists welding of art, science and technology, a number of British based cultural organizations have astutely drawn these disciplines together to manage a space where mutual dialogue can happen and where creative outcomes to the conundrum of climate change can be explored and shaped by artists with a wealth of expertise in a place of equal participation.

In the UK, organisations such as Platform, The Arts Catalyst, Cape Farewell, TippingPoint, the Royal Society of Arts, eco/art/scot/land, Artsadmin and Invisible Dust have initiated events, exhibitions, programmes, performances, festivals, symposiums and expeditions where artists, activists, academics, writers, theatre-makers, filmmakers, choreographers, geographers, scientists, engineers, ecologists, energy experts, technologists, politicians, philosophers, psychologists, economists, lawyers, marketing men and women have come to the table to redefine the space for artistic encounter and present an astonishing array of multiple views.

In early autumn of 2005, under the dreaming spires of Oxford, two intensive days of discussion and debate (without, it must be noted, a single power point presentation), launched the first incarnation of TippingPoint under the title ‘Changing the Climate’. The Environmental Change Institute at Oxford University hosted the ‘open space’ styled event attended by over fifty participants to raise cultural awareness about the threat of climate change. In the following years over 1,500 individuals have participated in one of sixteen TippingPoint gatherings, from New York to Cape Town, Tate Britain to Kaaitheater. TippingPoint acts as a kind of chemical bed inspiring dialogue, actions and events across the arts.

Cape Farewell, an international not-for-profit organisation based in London and Toronto, pushes the physical boundaries of encounter with invitations to artists, scientists and educationalists to travel to the glacial extremes of the High Arctic, the dew saturated cloud forests of the Amazon and remote islands of northern Scotland. Instigated in 2001, the genius of Cape Farewell is to take the energy of artistic enquiry, the methodology of scientific research and the spirit of adventure and place it in landscapes that are bearing the brunt of escalating climate change.

The first Cape Farewell voyage to the High Arctic was mounted in 2003 aboard a Dutch-manned schooner, the Noorderlicht; twenty cabin mates drawn from across the arts and oceanographers from Southampton University combatted four days of force 7 winds and grueling sailing across the Barents Sea from Tromso in Norway towards the Svalbard archipelago. Here, visions of midnight sun, dream-like landscapes, turquoise-blue glaciers, polar bear tracks, walruses, narwhales and luminous plankton, fed imaginations and enquiry, research and late-night conversation. The physicality of being outside in sub-zero temperatures reduced the need for too much introspective thought. Walks across the tundra were hours of slipping into another reality where everything laid eyes upon was unto itself, phenomenal and intriguing. The Noorderlicht, a vessel full of warmth, food and light has sustained crew and cabin mates over nine expeditions, including two youth expeditions that Cape Farewell led to the Arctic between 2003 and 2010.

‘We intend to communicate through art works our understanding of the changing climate on a human scale, so that our individual lives can have meaning in what is a global problem.’ Cape Farewell

The ‘global problem’ plays out in a myriad of forms, touching on every aspect of life. The line between climate change, conservation, ecology, and economics is fine, a tightrope of interdependence where rising emissions threaten species, habitats and people through flooding, desertification and unconstrained urbanization.

The year 2009 was notable in the British cultural climate change calendar. In the summer, the *Radical Nature* exhibition opened at the Barbican in London, The RSA Art & Ecology Centre initiated online campaigns with the aim of amplifying activities around the arts and environmental change in the UK and abroad, both to portray how much was taking place and widen the audience and possibilities of connection, and as the year drew to a close, *Earth: Art of a Changing World* opened at The Royal Academy of Arts as the most influential politicians in the world gathered in Copenhagen for the 15th UN Conference on Climate Change (COP15) to thrash out some sort of agreement over reducing global carbon emissions.

With a stated emphasis on aesthetics over issues, the Earth exhibition played out to a background debate as to whether the enormity of what lay before humanity transcended the notion of ‘issue’. Public comment and critical review singled out different works of art within the group show as articulating something pertinent or effective - the ‘issues’ admittedly expressed in a highly aesthetic and possibly overly polite way. If critics and commentators had turned their attention to the 100 DAYS Art & Activism season at Arnolfini in Bristol just weeks earlier, they would have found London based Platform and “C Words” and less-than-polite artists/activists provoking and challenging how society and art structures a response to the complexity and pervasiveness of climate change. Marking the countdown to COP15 with homage to the hugely influential German artist Joseph Beuys, the Arnolfini presented 100 days of exhibitions, performances, screenings and debates around the issues of climate change, social justice and the contested relationship between art and activism. Platform and their collaborators proposed a two-month investigation into carbon, climate, capital and culture, based on Platform’s twenty-five years of research, art and action. C Words cross-examined the landscape and looked to the next two decades. ‘How did you get here? Where are we going? Who's deciding? Who's made invisible? Whose future matters?’

Questions continue to be asked. ‘What is broken in our world and what can we do to mend it?’ The Two Degrees arts festival produced by Artsadmin in 2013 took climate, consumerism and community and encouraged the audience to actively engage in how the future can be changed.

The future is contentious, politicized and polarized between those who advocate a massive downscaling of fossil fuel dependence and those who advocate continued exploitation of fossil fuels. For many an industry leader, the future is fracking in the name of energy sovereignty.

*Fracking Futures* was an experimental indoor fracking site with boreholes, pools of waste-water, chemical treatments, earth tremors and flares installed at FACT in Liverpool in 2013, co-curated by The Arts Catalyst. Using humour, lighting and atmosphere as essential tools of excavation into hydraulic fracturing and high-pressure shale gas extraction, the art installation by artist-engineers HeHe opened up the space for the individual to experience the proximity of technology and sounds and sensations in a setting both eerie and otherworldly. By inducing a connective tissue to the contentious issues, debate was provoked.

From the Futurists to the Frackers, in the carbon congested space of a century the addiction to combustive fossil fuels has not abated. Greenhouse gases are still growing, fossil fuels contributing 78% between 1970 and 2010 to total carbon emissions. Undoubtedly, humanity and the myriad of multi-species that inhabit this bewitching and bewildering world exist between a rock and a melting place. Yet, (here the intake of breath is audible), it is not too late. The IPCC’s WG111 report issued in April 2014, says if substantial cuts in anthropogenic GHG emissions are made by mid-century through large-scale changes in energy systems and land use, it will be possible to limit warming to less that 2 degrees centigrade or less.

Contemporary British art, as pithily observed by artist potter Grayson Perry in his recent Reith Lectures series, has set the stage for gallery and bar room brawls between the ‘worthy activists’ and the ‘ironic market sellouts’.

It brings to mind how oil oligarchs adorn their walls with must-have multi-million dollar artworks whilst art activists pull rip chord skirts unleashing gallons of brown stuff on oil sponsored gallery floors.

From direct action and activism to collaborative cross-disciplinary artworks, across the globe from Iceland to the United Arab Emirates, Australia to Antarctica, a multitude of artists, activists, curators, galleries, museums, and commissioners have seized the cultural ground opened up by climate change and bio-diversity devastation, revealing how artistic intent is rich and varied - a cultural diversity where ethics is laced into aesthetics.

Gustav Metzger, a near nonagenarian artist, vigorous political activist and founder of the auto-destructive art movement, says it is a duty for the art, architecture and design world to be at the forefront of the struggle against the decimation of nature and erasure of species. In his Facing Extinction 2014 exhibition Metzger evokes the ‘joyful and vulnerable’ presence of the daisy – a summer flower linked and pierced into memories of pastoral childhood games. He describes how a ‘daisy chain’ is a term used for connections and exchanges, for multiple linkages in electronic devices and he calls for the daisy to become a widely used symbol in the struggle against extinction.

The ‘daisy chain’ analogy of interlinked long strands of singular flowers brings to mind the long stable chains of a singular chemical element that over billions of years has given rise to the exquisite ever-evolving complexity of life and the profound soul-searching of our contemporary age – carbon.

Perhaps living life on the precipice of a warming planet, close to the edge of midnight, feeling every molecule of being captured in a single glacial drip, seeing a common thread running from bacterium to elephants, through the whole of biological existence, where every living creature as described by Charles Darwin is “a little universe, formed of a host of self-propagating organisms, inconceivably minute and as numerous as the stars in heaven”, maybe this is the naked exposure as described by Lippard to the emotional and aesthetic resonance in our relationships to the world that some artists hold true to.

In the words of Gustav Metzger, a child survivor of the Holocaust, now an old man reaching the end of his life:

“Humanity has moved through extreme crises in the past:  *time and speed is of the essence*.”