Seven Conversations: An Introduction

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DISTANCE MOVES CLOSER

In the three years since we started working on The Distance Plan a lot has shifted – both in the everyday conversations around climate change, and in the rapidly moving science that propels these conversations. There seems to be a growing awareness that climate change is no longer a distant problem for the future, but one which is already reshaping our culture. Recent analysis suggests that a 'climate swerve' – a shift in the way people are thinking about climate change – is taking place. In large part this is caused by the mass profile of climate-related disasters, 'providing partial models for a devastating climate future.'[1]

This swerve is also representative of a broader understanding that climate changes are *already*

1 Robert Jay Lifton, 'The Climate Swerve', *The New York Times Sunday Review*, 23 August 2014.

occurring, and of the urgency around altering our present actions so they will not jeopardise a recognisable future.

This publication is intended as a place to record those shifting conversations. The texts that follow span a range of subjects, but each includes someone involved in the arts: writers, curators, artists, teachers. Our hope is that by cataloguing our communties' changing concerns when it comes to talking about climate change we can play the role of witnesses, help to sustain the momentum which already exists towards combating this problem, and motivate each other to move the discussion forward. These conversations also further The Distance Plan's wider agenda of drawing critical voices from different disciplines into the space of art discourse.

SHAPED BY CONVERSATIONS

Conversations are where ideas and provocations are aired, anxieties and reassurances made public. Conversations have the potential to be open, discursive, candid, and – importantly for this issue – they can be conducted, recorded, edited and printed quickly. Conversations acknowledge that things remain provisional and contestable:

they are an appropriate format to address the always-evolving subject of climate change.

We are interested in the breadth and diversity of the discussion about climate change, as it's currently occurring across the world. As we write from here in Auckland, New Zealand, we are aware of how similar issues are being talked about globally, yet with different emphases. The conversations here are each inflected by different local conditions. In recognition of the common ground they share, The Distance Plan sets out to use the lateral spread of its community to link ideas that might otherwise remain isolated.

Another intention behind this publication's format is simply to take account of these conversations in the forms and places they occur. Climate change is discussed in many of the situations that we and our friends and colleagues are in: at lectures, staff meetings, openings, bars. This issue takes shape partly as a document of how we talk about the subject, with the acknowledgement that in New Zealand – unlike many of the other places represented here – there is still some way to go in cementing climate change as *the* concern for public discussion. The phrase 'going on record' indicates both assuredness, and a willingness to reveal

publicly one's position on an issue; this publication is such a record.

WHY ART?

This journal has also allowed each of its contributors to discuss with peers a question that we are still working to find an answer to: how should contemporary art practice engage with climate change? Our conjecture is that art is particularly well situated to be able to talk about complexities of the issue – as a matter of cultural and social urgency, as well as a scientific reality. When climate change is discussed in mainstream media, it is typically in an incomplete form and sensational in tone. It's the more complex and sustained narrative that art can provide which allows people to respond in a considered way, and collectively, moving beyond one-off emotional reactions.

Art's various contexts, at their best, also have the ability to offset uneven trends in attention, provide constancy and keep the issue in the space of public discussion. As the terminology around climate change evolves, art and humanities research initiatives are among those tracking and monitoring the shifts. In recent years 'global warming' has become

'climate change'; 'climate destabilisation' is being reframed as 'climate chaos' (with related calls for 'climate justice'), and the era of the Anthropocene and its philosophical implications are gradually being digested. As wider political and social trends currently prioritising mitigation begin to include plans for adaptation, artists are among those whose skills will be valuable.

Art also provides the means to confront and communicate these issues in a new way. This is vital as discussions around climate change are often criticised for being repetitive and didactic. The Distance Plan challenges artists – whose craft is communication – to put into use the language that they spend so much energy refining. The alternative seems counterproductive: why not bring one's professional capacity to bear on a situation that has consequences on this scale? As artist Alex Monteith asserts in her conversation, 'If you have a platform and you are given a voice there is a responsibility to consider how you should be using that in the service of the environment. It might be in the capacity of bearing witness, showing up, doing something physical, or actually putting your artwork somehow into the middle of the fray and risking it all getting

co-opted. I take that view now. And I go along on all of those levels' (see p.64).

The Distance Plan asks how contemporary art, in all its forms – gallery-based exhibition making, social practices in a broader field, writing and critical discourse – might practically and conceptually engage with climate change. In their conversation Isobel Cairns and Abby Cunnane discuss how psychology and use of language affect our ability to think about climate change, and how shifts in the climate change debate might be processed through the acts of reading and writing. Cunnane proposes that writing and visual art can 'make available ... a wider spectrum of possible actions for the individual' (see p.53).

Art's potential to expand the space of social and political possibility might be considered through the work of an artist such as Tino Sehgal, who employs both radical production methods and the final performance output to model different types of economic exchange and public interactivity, accepted reason and decision-making processes. In his work *This Progress* (2010, Guggenheim Museum, New York), visitors were met by a child who asked: 'What is progress?' Walking

the museum's spiral ramp, they met progressively older 'interpreters' who continued to discuss and complicate the idea of progress. Best known for these constructed situations, shaped by live encounters between people, Sehgal's work performs a widening of the spectrum of possible actions. Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist has characterised his work as being 'deeply optimistic.... It believes in change, in the production of reality, and that engagement produces consequences.'[2] Sehgal's immaterial practice may also be read as anti-materialist; his critique of the efficiency or sustainability of making yet more 'stuff' evident in a conceptual approach that is object-free.

Analysis of the way social relationships and human well-being are affected by capitalism has long been the territory of social practice. As Scott Berzofsky states in his conversation with fellow artists and teachers Hugh Pocock and Katie Bachler, 'One thing that motivates us in the social practice class is preparing students to enter this economically precarious life' (see p.105).

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2 As cited by Lauren Collins, 'The Question Artist: Tino Sehgal's provocative encounters', *The New Yorker*, 6 August 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/06/the-question-artist (accessed 14 August 2014).

Climate change preparedness has a place in all contemporary educational frameworks; in the case of Maryland Institute College of Art where Berzofsky, Pocock and Bachler work, this means asking questions: What might making art in an unstable climate mean? How should young artists best be trained to deal with future circumstances? It is increasingly acknowledged that climate change is an issue of inequality, affecting impoverished communities and primary economies most harmfully. Institutions that reduce inequality, such as universally accessible education, are advocated for by many researchers working across disciplines. French economist and author of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013) Thomas Piketty writes of the urgent need 'to increase our educational capital and prevent the degradation of our natural capital', undeniably a challenge, given 'climate change cannot be eliminated at the stroke of a pen (or with a tax on capital).'[3]

WHERE WE ARE AND WHY IT MATTERS

As we write this New Zealand is weeks out from a general election. With the conservative

3 As cited by David Hodgkinson, 'Thomas Piketty, climate change and discounting our future', *The Conversation*, 12 August 2014, http://theconversation.com/thomas-piketty-climate-change-and-discounting-our-future-30157 (accessed 20 August 2014).

National Party leading dramatically in the polls, it looks like three more years of lip-service toward climate problems and a continued delay in meaningful political action. This deferral is nothing new; Alister Barry and Abi King-Jones' recently released documentary film *Hot Air* (2014) catalogues how climate change denial has for decades been imported into New Zealand by the Business Roundtable and other conservative groups. This has been incrementally gaining momentum since National took office in 2008, with many existing publicly funded initiatives phased out, including the 'retirement' of the www.sustainability.govt.nz website (see p.124), amendments that weaken the Resource Management Act, a diminishment of the jurisdiction of the Environment Court, and a hollowing out of the Emissions Trading Scheme.[4]

In this election there has been a notable shift in framing and language employed by the New Zealand Green Party. Traditionally the active voice on this issue, the Green Party has in this campaign made considerably less visible use of the term climate change,

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4 See Environment and Conservation Organisations of New Zealand press release, 8 July 2012, http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO1207/S00095/widespread-concern-over-proposed-rma-changes.htm (accessed 1 September 2014).

despite maintaining significant mitigation policies. In their conversation Sophie Jerram and Dugal McKinnon discuss how recent shifts in the political atmosphere have affected the profile of climate change discussion in New Zealand: ‘The very phrase “climate change” in 2014 has come to be associated with an extreme state of affairs, a rather hysterical, unmanageable event that lurks ominously but is hard to identify specifically’ (see p.122). Whether this is a consequence of perceived ‘climate change fatigue’, or compromise for another reason, it does highlight the difficulty of the sustained action this issue demands.

One consequence of the relative passivity on the part of political parties is that in the cultural arena, institutions in New Zealand have to spend more energy just bringing the issue into public discussion, and have less scope to develop conceptual thinking around it. Dissatisfaction with this local variant is expressed in a number of conversations in this issue. The sometimes problematic relationship between the art world and protest culture is discussed by Alex Monteith, Louise Menzies and Amy Howden-Chapman. Menzies comments, ‘It’s that tension between the symbolic and the practical that you come up against with art and political

action all the time. Like how effective is it to put a political message in a gallery? I think that's an important question. Sometimes it's effective – sometimes it isn't' (see p.73).

Māori hīkoi, a primary element in New Zealand's oppositional culture, is considered by Biddy Livesey and Dayle Takitimu, a discussion echoed in the photographs of Jos Wheeler.[5] Takitimu states, 'I no longer have a romantic view of protest. It pisses me off, no end, that… when other people get to do stuff that is uplifting for them and their families my family has to go out and protest to save my tribe from being slaughtered by this government; we're under siege all the time – whether it be encroachment on our traditional territories, attacks on our indigenous lifestyles, [or] forced assimilation' (see p.90). Wheeler's photographs document the ongoing struggle that our tangata whenua have to make in order for their authority to be appropriately recognised in decisions about New Zealand's economic future.[6]

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5 In this context, a hīkoi is a protest march, often over an extended period. The best known hīkoi was the 1975 Māori land march the length of the North Island, from Cape Reinga to Parliament in Wellington, organised by Dame Whina Cooper.

6 Tangata whenua: 'local people, hosts, indigenous people of the land – people born of the whenua, i.e. of the placenta and of the land where the people's ancestors have lived and where their placenta are buried. The tangata whenua are the people who have authority in a particular place.' Māori Dictionary, http://www.maoridictionary.co.nz (accessed 2 September 2014).

INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONS

Through discussions around planning The Distance Plan sets out to address concerns for the future in the here and now, but also to consider those aspects of the future we still have some control over, in our cities, or on a more manageable scale, in our local arts institutions. In New Zealand, publicly funded and educational institutions are an essential place in which contemporary art is developed, viewed and critically discussed. For those in governance roles in such institutions there is a responsibility to be accountable to the existing legislation; for example, Auckland Council has recently launched a 'Low Carbon Auckland' policy which has aspirational targets for all its subsidiaries.[7]

An interesting parallel might be seen in artist Fiona Connor's project *A letter, office move, and book* (2009) at the Adam Art Gallery in Wellington, which initiated an energy assessment of the gallery considering categories such as air-conditioning, lighting and transport. In a letter introducing the project the artist

7 See Auckland Energy Resilience and Low Carbon Action Plan, Auckland Council website, http://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/EN/PLANSPOLICIESPROJECTS/PLANSSTRATEGIES/THEAUCKLANDPLAN/ENERGYRESILIENCELOWCARBONACTIONPLAN/Pages/home.aspx (accessed 4 September 2014).

writes, 'Dear Adam Art Gallery… I hope to instigate permanent changes that make the gallery as energy efficient as possible, and move it towards an environmentally conscious operation.'[8] Connor revisited the project five years later to evaluate the extent to which the recommendations had been implemented.

Many artists are financially sustained by institutions through teaching, as technicians, or are involved as students themselves. In these positions artists have relative agency within institutions, both as inheritors of the history of Institutional Critique in practice, and in more ordinary everyday ways. More recently, the will towards institutional change is evident in the New Institutionalism of the early 2000s, and in ongoing critical discussion around the institutional condition of the art world.[9] The human constituency of the institution is increasingly acknowledged as its core and reason for being. Maria Lind, Director of the Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, a curator whose practice has focused on contemporary art and its institutional meth-

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8 See *The Future is Unwritten* (2009), Adam Art Gallery website, http://www.adamartgallery.org.nz/thefuture/connor/ (accessed 24 August 2014).
9 See, for example, *On Curating*, Eds. Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger (Zürich: Dorothee Richter), iss. 21, Dec 2013.

odologies, writes, ‘Today, the immaterial and communication-based infrastructure is as important as the architectural one.’[10] Certainly, it’s easier to make change on the scale of individual institutions than at a governmental level, in the knowledge that a country is made up of multiple institutions.

The Diakron project is an attempt to establish a new institution, one which rather than simply reflecting on climate change, structurally embodies the discussion in its design. In the conversation between David Hilmer Rex and Aslak Aamot Kjærulff, two of Diakron’s founding members, Hilmer Rex asserts, ‘The way in which climate change has been dealt with in the arts is a good example of its inefficacy as an official narrative or discourse. [It has] been experienced as external to us and maybe for that reason has been dealt with on a representational, symbolic and thematic level within the arts, without substantially changing what an artistic practice could be when faced with a such complex distributed phenomenon as climate change’ (see p.33). Martin Nowak, Harvard Professor of Biology and Mathemaics, identifies the impulse to privilege our present

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10 Ibid., ‘An interview with Maria Lind: We want to become an institution’, p.32.

institutions over our future ones: 'Even if you want to cooperate with the future, you may not do so because you are afraid of being exploited by the present.'[11] The Diakron project proposes that climate change must be built into all our institutional structures, this being the only way such institutions can simultaneously serve their present and future users.

With the majority of the world's population now living in cities, contemporary urban planning is of unprecedented ecological and political significance. Philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre's typology of cities is widely rehearsed: 'The earliest cities were political, organised around institutions of governance.The political city was eventually supplanted in the Middle Ages by the mercantile city, organised around the marketplace, and then by the industrial city, finally entering a critical zone on the way to a full absorption of the agrarian by the urban.'[12] We must now consider what shape the city should take in the age of the Anthropocene.

11 Martin Nowack, as cited by Peter Reuell, 'Tomorrow isn't such a long time: Research uncovers a path to future-conscious decisions', *Harvard Gazette*, 26 June 2014.

12 Henri Lefebvre, as paraphrased by Martha Rosler, 'Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism', Part 1, *e-flux*, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/culture-class-art-creativity-urbanism-part-i (accessed 4 September 2014).

Jym Clark and Joe Hoyt use their discussion of New Lynn, a small urban centre in Auckland, New Zealand to consider how the current and future city might evolve. Formerly a light industrial centre surrounded by suburban residences, New Lynn is becoming increasingly urbanised, and its connection with downtown Auckland improved. The discussion around New Lynn's development ultimately leads back to the question of political organisation on a local level. The economic concept known as 'path dependency' projects that once built, infrastructure is costly and politically difficult to change. This makes it urgent that we prioritise alternatives to motorways and suburban development, to avoid becoming locked into lifestyles based on carbon consumption.

Hoyt's practice as an artist is concerned with depicting sites in which civic infrastructure and the privately built environment reveal different ideologies. New Lynn is one such site, where the suburban dream is slowly being reshaped by a vision for urban sustainability; the redevelopment is a practical way of dealing in the present with the pressures facing the future city.

The relationship between infrastructure and natural environment in the New Lynn context has also been considered in local projects such as the Muddy Urbanism Studio which was part of the 5th Auckland Triennial in 2013. Bringing together artists, urban designers and architects, the Studio considered the Whau River running through New Lynn as a local case study for an expanded model of practice which responds to existing urban policy, infrastructure, architecture and zoning rules. For this project, Studio members Kathy Waghorn, Teddy Cruz and Esther Mercredy began with the idea that architects 'can be designers not just of form but of political processes.'[13] Integrated into existing planning structures and working for both conceptual and functional sustainability, the project subverted purely representational or symbolic logic.

A CHALLENGE OF SITE AND SCALE

International collaborations within the art world have the capacity to model the diversity of responses that tackling climate change requires. These responses need to be both global in their awareness, and alert to localised

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13 See Muddy Urbanism Studio blog, http://muddyurbanismlab.wordpress.com/about/ (accessed 16 September 2014).

effects. In her ongoing project *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting*, artist Amy Balkin invites people living in places threatened with disappearance because of climate change to contribute local items to an archive she maintains. Balkin has said, 'Although I'm interested in the potential for contributions to stand in for the recognition of the stakes by their contributors, the exposure of individual participants to the economic and political impacts of climate change varies greatly.'[14] This project has particular relevance to the cultural and social impacts that will be increasingly felt in New Zealand. Positioned as we are in the Pacific region, the situation of affected countries such as Kirabati and Tuvalu will almost certainly lead to an influx of refugees into New Zealand.

A recent immigration case in New Zealand presented the first instance of 'climate refugee' status being granted here. Though climate change was just one of a range of factors, it was a significant one in the ruling. The decision paper states: 'Life became increasingly more difficult in Tuvalu due to the effects of climate change and overpopulation.

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14 Amy Balkin, as cited by Dana Kopel, 'What Will Have Been: Interviews on A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting', *The Brooklyn Rail*, 5 June 2014.

The husband's home island of X became increasingly more vulnerable to inundation by sea-water as a result of sea-level rise.'[15] While the economic impact of further migration will arguably be within New Zealand's capacity to absorb, at least initially, the social impacts of the arrival of collectively traumatised communities is one that we can't fully anticipate.

One pre-emptive response to these major social upheavals is shoring up the political autonomy of publicly funded arts institutions in the public discussion around climate change, especially given the large amount of money still circulating to finance climate denial.[16] French philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour sees fragmentation of public discourse as central to the problem: 'There is no single institution able to cover, oversee, dominate, manage, handle, or simply trace ecological issues of large shape and scope. Many issues are too intractable and too enmeshed in contradictory interests. We have problems, but we don't have the publics

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15 See court decision paper: Appellants AD (Tuvalu), NZIPT 501370, https://forms.justice.govt.nz/search/IPT/Documents/Deportation/pdf/rem_20140604_501370.pdf (accessed 18 July 2014).

16 See Suzanne Goldberg, 'Conservative groups spend up to $1bn a year to fight action on climate change', *The Guardian*, 20 December 2013.

that go with them.'[17] Latour suggests that the collective effect of humans on the natural environment is now on a scale we previously considered only mythical beings capable of: 'The sublime has evaporated as soon as we are no longer taken as those puny humans overpowered by "nature", but, on the contrary, as a collective giant that... has become the main geological force shaping the Earth.'[18]

Speaking at 'Projections and Preservations', a roundtable discussion hosted by The Distance Plan last year, designer and artist Peggy Weil faced the audience of artists: 'I think an interesting challenge is communicating the very large, the very small, the very slow and the very fast, because climate change is happening on each of those scales.' Continuing to be active and present in conversations – of all scales – about the future is vital.

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17 Bruno Latour, 'Waiting for Gaia: Composing the common world through arts and politics', a lecture at the French Institute, London, 21 November 2011.
18 Ibid.