

Dialogues with Tomorrow

Dugal McKinnon
& Sophie Jerram

Sophie Jerram and Dugal McKinnon are both based in Wellington, New Zealand, though this conversation was carried out across distance with Dugal visiting Austria. In 2010 they co-initiated Now Future: Dialogues with Tomorrow, a two-year programme of public discussions about art's interface with issues of sustainability and ecology. The first year's series is now released as a publication and accessible at www.nowfuture.org.nz. Sophie is an independent artist, curator and writer, interested in interdisciplinary practice, and art's examination of the relationship between business and the environment. Dugal is a composer and sound artist, a writer on sound art and contemporary music, and a lecturer at Te Kōkī New Zealand School of Music.

Sophie Jerram

The smell of a burning planet was already intense only four years ago. In *Dialogues with Tomorrow*, Dugal and I were motivated to reintroduce into the public realm an artistic and humanities view on climate change. We wanted to investigate, from phenomenological and ontological perspectives, what climate change meant, and how we might think and act differently as a result.

Dugal McKinnon

One of the things that we were particularly interested in was – is! – the affective dimension of art, the ways

in which aesthetic experiences can bypass the rational and irrational codings of individuals and cut to their psychological quick, hopefully thereby prompting active responses to climate change. Of course, we're not the only ones interested in such an approach. Brian Holmes' *Affectivist Manifesto*, for example, although we came upon it after the second Dialogues event, resonated strongly with both of us.¹

SJ

Though the science of climate change has been known to climate scientists for 50 or more years, the non-scientific world has only comparatively recently begun to understand this phenomenon and sense it as a permanent rather than faddish threat to our way of life, and potentially, to our existence as a species. What we felt was missing was the approach to climate change from an emotional and reflective position, to complement the rational and mechanical suggestions being posed. We hoped this might be achieved by bringing artists and scientists together, and inciting dialogue, rather than using the more commonly proffered scientific statistics.

DM

Or, returning to the idea of affect, asking scientists and artists to enter into dialogue seemed a good way to introduce affect, in a conscious and constructive manner, back into the climate change 'debate'. After all, affect remains the domain of the arts, even if often at the fringes of what mainstream culture understands as affective (i.e. stuff concerning the creation and expression of feelings), while scientists involved in climate research still struggle to be heard and most certainly have strong feelings about the reality they

¹ See 'The Affectivist Manifesto' on Brian Holmes' blog, <http://brian-holmes.wordpress.com/2008/11/16/the-affectivist-manifesto/> (accessed 2 August 2014).

know to be around the corner. Hard data, it seems, doesn't scream loudly enough, so getting someone to do your screaming for you, might be a better way to go. (Here I imagine James Holden pairing up with Kusum Normoyle...)

SJ

Dugal and I met after a public event where he was talking about the sonic experience of Amy Howden-Chapman's *The Flood, My Chanting*, in October 2008.² We found common ground together and over a long series of conversations, and we began to proceed on a plan of public discourse, which became *Now Futures: Dialogues with Tomorrow*.

DM

And we've since continued our own dialogue, rather more sporadically than either of us would like, concerning further projects that would continue to deal with ecological issues via the arts and humanities. The hurdle to realising any further projects is, as ever, time and energy. Given the climatic context, though, really it should be the case that all one's time and energy goes into this.

SJ

What did we learn from *Dialogues*?

DM

We learnt a great deal I think. That scientists and artists often find common ground, but that they do speak very different languages and often struggle to understand the way the other side thinks. That there is value in trying to 'humanise' science and vice versa. That there is an appetite for addressing climate change,

2 For more on this project see the One Day Sculpture website: www.onedaysculpture.org.nz

but trying to activate and organise this is a mammoth task. The emergence of social media activism, or whatever one might call an organisation like Avaaz, is heartening in this respect. That – and this is perhaps what is most significant for me – we needed to be more risk-friendly in running the project. I think that for some members of our audience, the idea of an arts-science dialogue around climate change seemed rather abstruse, while for others it was just another talk-fest. Using the arts dimension of the project for much greater affective impact was what inspired us both in the beginning and it was a thread in many of our initial conversations. The realities of running the project, at least in terms of the particular funding context we were working in, meant we backed off – without really being aware of it – those aspects which might well have been most impactful, and which might have created the affectively driven experience we wanted. Given the magnitude of the impact that climate change is having and will have, we should have taken on this magnitude as an exponential multiplier for the project.

SJ

What we didn't bargain on, after the second series in 2011, was the disappearance of climate change itself from the agenda. The very phrase 'climate change' has in 2014 come to be associated with an extreme state of affairs, a rather hysterical, unmanageable event that lurks ominously but is hard to identify specifically.

DM

Indeed. Though as extreme weather events become the norm, and the idea of climate change is replaced by that of climate disruption, I hope that this makes

the situation concrete enough for more people to understand the significance of the issue and just how perilous our situation is. It is hard to see the extent of something that's mostly over the horizon, even if what we can see is clearly linked to our present way of living. And as this way of living is so comfortable, why should we give it up? Who wants to believe that life is going to be extremely uncomfortable in the near-ish future? (Not forgetting that life is already not very comfortable for the global majority.) Maybe a few more climate bombs are needed to shake us out of our comfort? But can we, as artists, contribute to the shake-up? Certainly I felt we could when we started the Dialogues project, but in a culture with an appetite for aestheticised catastrophe it's increasingly difficult to see a way forward for the arts in this respect. The recently released film *Snowpiercer*, for example, should be understood for what it is – a cinematic metaphor for the awfulness of the world and its post-climate change future – but I imagine it is more likely to be enjoyed as another dark thrill.³

SJ

Instead (in New Zealand) we are faced with campaigns about cleaner rivers, public transport and lower waste. These are useful tactics but do not enquire about the principles behind our wider human approach. And such tactics are very easily overridden. For example, whilst working in 2006–08 for the New Zealand Sustainable Business Network I had been part of a process of populating the 'sustainability' space with digital case studies of businesses and individuals making changes to their practices which reduced carbon, aimed at zero waste and created local sustainable procurement strategies for

government.⁴ The government of the time championed the efforts of the household, business and public sectors through www.sustainability.govt.nz. These good intentions didn't last long. Most of the government initiatives were closed after a new government was elected in 2008. The [sustainability.govt.nz](http://www.sustainability.govt.nz) website was retired in March 2009. Gone was the idea of New Zealand becoming 'the model sustainable nation of the world' (Sustainable Business Network's vision in 2007).

In this island nation it still seems to be only 'good intention' that drives the political taste for sustainable behaviour. Sustainability, at least in New Zealand, is not regarded as the need for the correction of consumption patterns, but instead as a political view, or at worst, a metaphor for the financial sustaining of one's own organisation.

DM

Yes, though I do think all this is specific to the New Zealand context, which doesn't make it any less disheartening. But in Austria and Germany, where I'm temporarily based, the idea of tackling climate change at the level of public policy is very much in evidence. While it is hard to know how deep this goes, that fact the Vienna's web portal for public transport tells you how much CO₂ you've saved by using public transport is great to see. And as my wife recently observed, the same rural conservatives (in

4 The six programmes were:
1. Helping households towards sustainability.
2. Business partnerships for sustainability.
3. Eco-verification: demonstrating sustainability of goods and services.
4. Government to buy sustainable goods and services.
5. Public service takes lead in becoming carbon neutral.
6. Towards zero waste.

Only the business partnerships programme and zero waste still exist, each in a modified version.

the German-speaking part of the world) who were deeply anti-Green ten or so years ago are now installing solar panels and driving e-cars. I hope this means things are getting better, and that the lag one often observes in terms of New Zealand's sociopolitical relationship to the rest of the (progressive) world will start to shrink. Ideally, of course, we'd be leading rather than following, which to me always seems possible in theory, given that we're a country with a population the size of a largish city!

SJ

Yes, I'm keen to have a taste of living in a country that takes these things seriously from a macro-economic perspective. My family and I are going to Denmark shortly to investigate options for living there, where resource use and carbon effect are part of the consciousness of society. It does feel like New Zealand is seriously lagging behind in accounting for the invisible impacts of our lifestyles. I predict the artistic voice will continue to emerge, especially after this last election, as a more staunch and militant one in New Zealand. And as the news media landscape becomes homogenised, artists who are unafraid to give voice and perspective to alternative positions can only become more important. In the meantime, opportunities to directly impact and support the work of those already working for the public good are manifold. There are plenty of ways to keep the shift happening at home, without governmental assistance. Since the early Dialogues, I've found myself digging into my very local geographic community and asking how we can share resources, spaces and our time better. It doesn't feel like we're doing much for the wider picture but it feels important to be building sharing communities now.