Stages #11

Turning The Tide

Liverpool Biennial

Editorial

You Are Running Into Danger

James Harper

This 11th issue of Stages, Turning The Tide, adopts the recently unveiled artwork Merseyside Totemy by Alicja Biala as a focal point. The three totemic sculptures have been given a prominent location on Liverpool's waterfront, adjacent to the iconic Liver Buildings.

Merseyside Totemy brings together statistics around climate change aiming to visualize the issues Merseyside faces in terms of rising sea levels and flooding by situating them using local examples. Biala collaborated with Dr Jason Kirby and Dr Timothy Lane at Liverpool John Moores University and with designer Ola Sobczyk of Bjarke Ingels Group to visualize the data within the final artwork.

Kirby and Lane's research was integral to the development of Merseyside Totemy. Here they summarise their role in the project and contextualise the rate of change in sea level.

Previously Ola Sobczyk has researched the history and structure of Jewish communities integrated into Polish towns before the Second World War—known as Shtetls. She wrote an essay about how this symbiosis between Polish and Jewish communities led to the construction of wooden synagogues in the 16th and 17th centuries. With her research and design, Sobczyk wishes to create a spatial interference that reflects a cross-cultural dialogue. Her search for this dialogue led her to Canvey Island—its sea wall specifically.

Michael Truscello first contributed to Stages Issue #0, 'The Banff Report', in 2013. His essay 'Elevation and Cultural Theory' drew on the Capitalist stranglehold on our climate and its effects in the midst of the development of Liverpool's Deepwater Container Terminal at Seaforth. The terminal, Liverpool2, has since opened and undergone further expansion. Truscello was invited to revisit and respond to that text for Issue #11, and his essay 'What We Loved Was Not Enough' continues to highlight how our blind Capitalist agendas are overtly destroying our world.

Liverpool Biennial is aware of its role and responsibility in tackling climate change, making commitments towards environmental sustainability. There are many ways that this can be done through our day-to-day operations. Not only can we address how we transport art and artists around the world, we can also take responsibility through the type of work we display. Vid Simoniti's essay 'The Paradox of Ecological Art' ruminates on the impact that visual art can have on changing the perception of society and how long that change might take.

Meanwhile, Dr Christian Baars addresses the more practical concerns of how sea level rise and other changes in our climate will affect museums and collections, from damage caused by flooding to unemployment owing to closed galleries. The gallery and museum sector surely must react with more urgency to adapt to these changes.

Each of Alicja Biala's 4.5m totems features three ribbon flags pointing to three areas of Merseyside threatened by rising sea levels: Liverpool City Centre, Formby and Birkenhead. The flags reference international maritime signals. The title of this Editorial piece, 'You Are Running Into Danger', is one such signal given by the flags. The contributions to this issue of Stages serve to emphasize, if you were not already aware, that we are critically running into 'danger'. Action is being taken to ensure we can maintain a habitable world within which culture and heritage will remain and continue to inspire. This offers us hope for a positive future, but for this hope to become reality we must call on everybody associated with the sector, from audiences to workers, to act with us.

Alicja Biala, Process (Foundry) (July 2022). © Rob Battersby

Alicja Biala, Totemy – Liverpool (July 2022). © Rob Battersby

Sea Level: A View from the Past

Timothy Lane and Jason Kirby

Globally, average sea level has risen by around 24cm since 1880 and will continue to rise for the foreseeable future. The consequences of this are already impacting on coastal communities and ecosystems, causing flooding, erosion, and soil contamination. At present, some 267 million people live less than 2m above sea level. By 2100 that will increase to 410 million.

Much like climate, sea level has fluctuated in the past. At times, it has been much higher than present and at other times it has been much lower than present. In the last few million years, this pattern of sea-level change has been broadly controlled by the growth and decay of huge ice sheets across the Northern Hemisphere. However, these natural ice-age climate change processes have now been overtaken by climate change caused by human activity. Our reliance on fossil fuels for energy, industry and travel, as well as unsustainable farming practices, have resulted in a world that is 1.2°C warmer than pre-industrial levels.

This global warming has caused enhanced melting of ice sheets and glaciers across the world and thermal expansion of the ocean. In combination with the human modification of coastlines, this has led to a situation where the global mean sea level is not only rising, but is accelerating. In 1901-1990 sea level rose at an already alarming rate of 1.4mm per year. Now, it is rising at a rate of at least 3.6mm per year, a figure that is only going to increase, and that will lead to an increase of 0.5-1m in sea level by 2100. From the Greenland Ice Sheet alone, we're now committed to at least 27cm of sea level rise, regardless of how much we reduce emissions.

These figures are a global average which is exacerbated locally by tides, coastline management, and flooding due to storms. To a non-sea-level specialist, globally averaged numbers are often abstract and mean little at a national or community scale. A few millimetres a year, or a metre by 2100 do not feel like large increases, but for billions of people across the world they are. The catastrophic changes that we and, more importantly, the world are facing are so huge that they are impossible to accurately visualize or comprehend. As Andri Snær Magnason comments in On Time and Water:

> **We can comprehend the loss of something valuable, can comprehend when an animal is shot, when a project blows past its agreed-upon budget. But when it comes to the infinitely large, the sacred, to things that are fundamental to our lives, there's no comparable reaction. It's as if the brain cannot register at such a scale.**[1]

Whilst some of this cognitive dissonance is intentional, often it is accidental. Despite living in an increasingly globalized world, we often find it hard to relate to something as large as `global sea-level rise'. Instead, we need to find a way to remain linked to the local, and to view the potential local impacts and repercussions of a global phenomenon. As opposed to just shrugging in disbelief at upward trending lines on a graph produced by scientists, we can visualize rising sea levels in locations we have visited and developed memories, such as Birkenhead, Formby and Liverpool city centre. Alongside this, remaining linked to the local allows the public to think more deeply about sea-level change and its variable impact where they live. Liverpool is a city whose history is explicitly intertwined with the water. From the city's origin in the 12th century, named after the inlet flowing into the Mersey, to its major role in the transatlantic slave trade, to the (former) UNESCO World Heritage status of the docks, the link to the sea is unavoidable.

Despite our proximity and reliance on the sea, there remains an apathy to confronting the root cause of current and future sea-level rise. These totems will hopefully raise awareness and remind people of this issue. They are a visual reminder of where we'll be in 60 years, and the landscape we'll be giving to our children and grandchildren.

> **Your time is the time of the people you know and love, the time that moulds you. And your time is also the time of the people you will know and love. The time that you will shape.**
> **Andri Snær Magnason, On Time and Water**

Whilst the impacts of sea-level rise across Merseyside are likely to be damaging, they pale in comparison with what is already happening to lower lying areas of the world.

[1] Andri Snær Magnason and Lytton Smith, On Time and Water: A History of Our Future (London: Serpent's Tail, 2021).

Dr Timothy Lane *is a Lecturer in Physical Geography at Liverpool John Moores University, and Programme leader for the BSc in Climate Change.*

Lane's research primarily focuses upon glacial geomorphology, environmental change, and landscape development in formerly glaciated regions. In particular he is interested in the behaviour of the Greenland Ice Sheet and Greenlandic ice caps during the last glacial cycle. He uses a combination of field and laboratory techniques including: geomorphology, sedimentology, lake core analysis, and surface exposure (cosmogenic nuclide) dating.

Dr Jason Kirby *is the School Director for Biological and Environmental Science and a Reader in Geography.*

Kirby's research Interests include Holocene sea-level changes and coastal evolution, quaternary micropalaeontology (pollen, diatoms and foraminifera), sediments in coastal systems and vegetation history, palaeoecology, and the use of fungal spores as indicators of herbivory.

Rituals of Control: Tale of Two Walls

Ola Sobczyk

'Borders—observed as three-dimensional devices, as symptoms and results of the dialectic between the energies of flows and the enduring power of local identities'.[1]

In this sentence, Stefano Boeri refers not only to the border itself but also to the idea of the periphery—the area where rituals of control take shape.

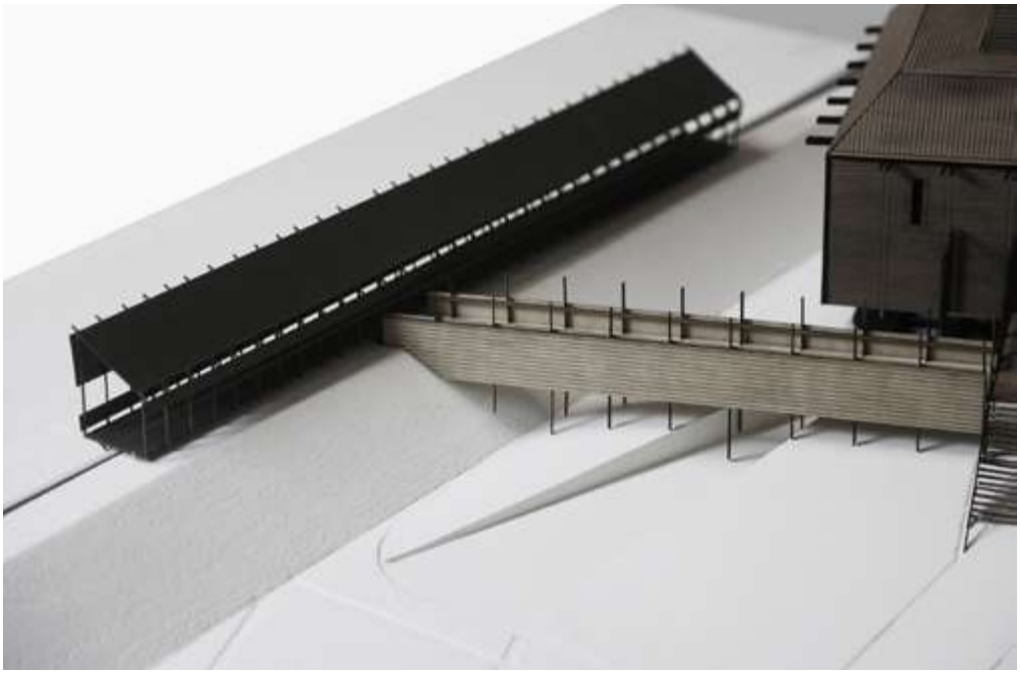
I travelled to the Occupied Territories in November 2019. I was studying architecture at the time and was interested in the language of security in space. The relation between the human body and the architecture of oppression. I've been connected to Jewish culture through my Polish heritage so I naturally chose the Israeli-Palestinian border as my first case study. I wanted to research all the issues mentioned above in the zone of the Israeli wall in Bethlehem. I called it the language of security in order to discover the extreme example of the boundary and periphery within Jewish community closely bound with oppression. I used a GoPro camera as a method of filming for crossing the periphery. I was trying to keep an objective eye, but shortly after I discovered the mechanisms of oppression and I managed to film the rituals of control performed by unconscious participants of this tragedy, with the Wall in the middle and me with the invitation to gaze. Digging further into the case, I needed to answer the question: Who is walling off whom? Is it the Israeli side trying to lock in the Palestinians or do the Palestinians want to protect themselves? In order to answer this question, I took a closer look on the Jewish community in Stamford Hill, London. The extraordinary feeling created by Eruvs[2] —the smooth delicate threads making almost invisible boundaries for the houses intended to escape the strict eye of God—caused the strange ambiance of exclusion. The very elusive nature of Eruv makes rituals of control quite vague here. This case study was chosen in order to consider the cultural aspect of spatial language of security expressed by elements closely related to the culture—objects of rituals. Again, I used a GoPro as a method of filming, close to the body. The feeling of exclusion was reinforced even more by the cultural differences resulting from the clothing, behaviour and customs of the Jewish people living in the area. The reception is neither negative nor positive—just feels a certain way, even for me—a person that knows and lives the culture. It is as if there is some invisible magnetic field pulling me away from the centre to the periphery. To observe, but not to participate. Just like in Bethlehem, Occupied Territories.

The Jewish community in Stamford Hill deals with higher and higher rents and their traditionally big families need more space. I learned from the community in London that they are slowly migrating to Canvey Island in Essex, where the River Thames meets the sea. This not so casual procedure was filmed by BBC in the documentary Canvey: The Promised Land by Riete Oord. [3]

'(…) far from being a clash of cultures, the Haredi and Canveyite communities are finding plenty of shared history.' [4]

I decided to design a synagogue for the dispersed Jewish community in Canvey Island. It is designed to be a ritual place and community centre and is created as a set of boundaries. It is a focal point of the community that they don't yet have there. I chose a secluded spot (by the River Thames and the sea) as the synagogues were placed like that traditionally.

Canvey Island is a small Essex town in East England. Geographically, it is not really an island—it was connected by a series of canals in the past, but now it is just a peninsula inviting the River Thames to the United Kingdom. Because of its position in a land depression, the town struggled with the sea levels for centuries. We can say that the whole town life circulates around flooding issues. In Roman times, Canvey Island served mainly as a large salt-making industry.



Ola Sobczyk, Jerusalem grid — Synagogue in Canvey Island, 2020.
Foam (CNC), oak wood (lasercut), cardboard (lasercut)

So-called 'Red Hills' provided a significant amount of the product.[5] Extensive archaeological research in the 1960s provided a historical sketch of the Romans who settled in the area and, using their salt industry, were also involved in cheese making and shepherding. In the 17th century there was a first ever recorded[6] attempt to protect the village from the sea, which also meant reclaiming the further flooded lands for agriculture. It is believed that the project was supervised by Cornelius Vermuyden, a Dutch engineer, and was built by around 300 Dutch men settled in the area. The very first system of dykes and sea defences was constructed with oak piling foundation, local chalk, limestone, heavy clay of the marshes, and faced with Kentish ragstone. The wall helped reclaim an area of around 15 sq km.[7] Moreover, the new seafront Esplanade was established and boosted Canvey Island's popularity from the Victorian era. The Dutch presence—people, architecture, Dutch cottages and language—helped to develop the tourism industry for visiting Londoners. Construction of the sea wall led to a peak in popularity in the 1920-30s.[8] The newly built East Esplanade hosted not only the walkway along the coast, but also attractions such as the Canvey Casino with amusement arcade, Labworth Cafe—a modernist building designed and constructed by Ove Arup (as the only existing purely architectural design by this established engineer), the Monico pub and hotel, and The Lobster Smack Inn, mentioned by Charles Dickens in Great Expectations.[9] In 1953 the great North Sea Flood hit Canvey Island, claiming the lives of 58 people, mostly tourists staying near the seafront. The only area of the village that survived was approximately 60cm above sea level.[10] The island is extremely flat, reaching 3m below mean high water level, so following the disaster, a new wall was erected, finally opening in 1982. It covers almost 75% of the perimeter (24 km) and is about 3m high. It is followed by a system of dykes and wetlands, flood sirens and emergency flood metal gates. The sea that gives opportunities to Canvey Island also takes what it wants. This love-hate relationship established the inseparable connection defining the town and its inhabitants.

Following my inquiry, I started my design with the objects of rituals in the synagogue.

Ola Sobczyk, Jerusalem grid — Synagogue in Canvey Island, 2020.
Foam (CNC), oak wood (lasercut), cardboard (lasercut)

I chose to design the Aron Hakodesh—the case for the Torah rolls, the Bima—a stage for the Rabbi in the centre, and the decorative ceiling. I am organizing those elements in the space according to the boundaries and rituals, acting like a set designer working with stages, walls and openings, with regards to the local community, the materiality and the characteristics of Canvey Island in order to create a modern shtetl based on the symbiosis between the cultures.

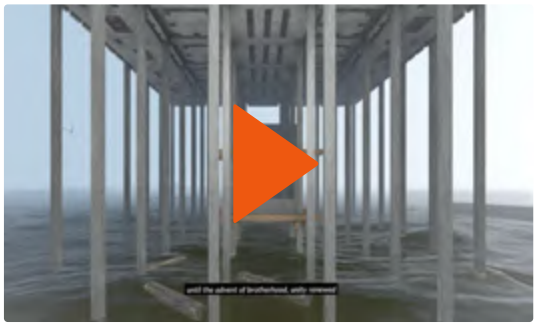
So when we are back to Canvey Island, we are in the exact location where the River Thames meets the sea and where the infamous Lobster Smack tavern is situated. As mentioned before, the area is very flat. It lies below sea level. I chose this exact place for its emptiness and beauty. As the most significant element of the surroundings is the sea wall, I chose a grid for designing my project in order to shape the synagogue as a systematic element as well. I use an overlay of the grid turned towards Jerusalem and the one along the wall. It creates the matrix of contextualism. Something from the Jewish, something from Canvey Island. The wooden synagogue with the three elements inside is connected by a passage to the viewing terrace that inhabits the wall. Its interior is dominated by the granite ceiling in which the numbers of openings refer to the important numbers in the Bible. The spatial layout follows the synagogue schedule that I designed in order to involve the local community in its activities, for example, designing with oysters on Thursday afternoon or communal gardening on Sundays. The foundations can be accessed through cut landscapes in the bottom. The viewing terrace is open to the public and sits on the Canvey Island grid in contrast to the synagogue that turns towards Jerusalem. It serves also as a lapidarium—an exhibition space of the rocks and artefacts found in the water. The overall design strategy focuses on the permanence and temporary motive related to the fact that Canvey Island is below the sea level and will become completely flooded in 200 years. The mentioned elements—the Aron Hakodesh, the Bima, the decorative ceiling, made from blue marble—will survive as the relics of the Jewish community on this land. Three stone elements will survive the ultimate flooding of Canvey Island, remaining like a ruin after the traditional wooden synagogue, its passage and viewing terrace are washed out. Standing as a

monument to the Jewish community that once existed in this land and the climate change that overtook Canvey Island.

This story raises important issues about the lesser-visible cultural implications that rising sea levels have, as well as the environmental effects. A nostalgic generation born on the lost land, the ideas of the void and aether, the Atlantis tale that suddenly becomes true. We tend to value our physicalities more than mentality. Paradoxically, we live in the digitized world but it is the tangible that occupies us first when an emergency arises. The recurring physical elements in this tale are only the walls—the strongholds of the mentioned societies—but in the end, they both fail. They fail humanity and what stays is the symbol for the future, the monument of what once existed here. It commemorates the people, but also the temporality. The effect is maximized in this project, but we need to be ready to see those 'monuments' more often as soon as the climate dramatically changes and sea levels rise, wiping out the whole communities. In this particular case of Canvey Island, the whole design approach is based on failure. It only works as predicted if the catastrophe comes. It is rare to find the notions of failure in a design process. Quite the opposite, they are usually cleverly omitted. Should we design for failure? As we continue to accelerate climate change, maybe we should shift to this design process.

'Those shtetlen are no more, vanished with a shadow, and this shadow will intrude between our words.' [11]

Click for video



Click for video

1 *'An Eclectic Atlas of Urban Europe'*. The lecture delivered in Vienna by Stefano Boeri with Francisca Insulza and John Palmesino was based on issues developed in the following contribution, parts of which were previously published in Stefano Boeri, *'Notes for a Research Program'*, Mutations. Rem Koolhaas Harvard Project on the City, Stefano Boeri Multiplicity, Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, Hans Ulrich Obrist. Barcelona: Editorial Actar. 2001, pp. 356-377, www.documenta-platform6.de/an-eclectic-atlas-of-urban-europe/#block-87.

2 *'The eruv is a boundary that allows observant Jews to carry needed things in public on Shabbat (..) Having an eruv does not mean that a city or neighbourhood is enclosed entirely by a wall. Rather, the eruv can be comprised of a series of pre-existing structures (walls, fences, electrical poles and wires) and/or structures created expressly for the eruv, often a wire mounted on poles. In practice, then, the eruv is a symbolic demarcation of the private sphere, one that communities come together to create.'*
www.myjewishlearning.com/article/eruv/ [last accessed on 19 August 2022].

3 *Canvey: The Promised Land*, dir. by Riete Oord (BBC and Spring Films, 2018).

4 Joanne O'Connor, *'Shalom, Canvey! Welcome to the promised land'*, The Observer, 8 October 2017.

[5] Warwick J. Rodwell, *The Excavation of a 'Red Hill' on Canvey Island*, 1966, www.canveyisland.org/history-2/archaeology-on-canvey/the-excavation-of-a-red-hill-on-canvey-island [last accessed on 19 August 2022].
[6] Ian Yearsley, *Islands of Essex* 2nd edn, (Romford: Ian Henry Publications, 2000), p. 15.
[7] Yearsley, *Islands of Essex*, p. 17.
[8] Yearsley, *Islands of Essex*, p. 26.
[9] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), Chapter 54.
[10] Yearsley, *Islands of Essex*, p. 29.
[11] Antoni Slonimski, *Elegia do małych miasteczek*, trans. by Jennifer and Stuart Robinson www.writingtheholocaust.blogspot.com/2011/08/elegy-for-shtetlen.html.

Ola Sobczyk *is a Polish architect, designer and artist based in London, UK. She currently works at BIG—Bjarke Ingels Group and mentors architectural students at PBL Lab, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Stanford University.*

Ola graduated at Warsaw University of Technology in 2016 with Bachelor of Engineering and Royal College of Art, London, in 2020 with Master of Art in Architecture. She collaborated with many designers and artists including Alicja Biała, Pauline Batista, Kawaii Agency, RICH. LONDON.

Her particular interests are in cultural relationships and their mirror in society, rituals, history, design, human body and its parts, sexuality, digital and tangible crafts.

The paradox of ecological art

Vid Simoniti

Last summer, some friends of my boyfriend came up to Liverpool to see the Liverpool Biennial art exhibition and to show us their new baby. With the Covid restrictions eased, we sat down in a beer garden to enjoy some burgers. I don't know much about babies, and I was surprised when the mother pinched off a piece of the burger patty and placed it into the child's mouth. Do babies eat meat?

At that moment a certain nausea came over me. It wasn't just that the baby regurgitated the beef, and had to have the flesh-crumbs removed with a moistened napkin. It was a nausea of a more philosophical kind, if you like. I already knew, of course, that among the foods, beef is disproportionately responsible for climate change. But seeing that merry little mouth chew and spew made this fact tangible. The baby was eating its own future. All of us were eating it. We were like parts in some grinding machine, consuming flesh and expelling fumes that would eventually suffocate this very child.

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Such morbid visions did not exactly interfere with my quality of life back in the summer of 2021. But they were occurring disturbingly often. In part, this was because I was preparing to teach a course on art and ecology in next semester. Climate crisis weighed heavily on my mind, and so did our cultural responses to it.

Environmental art, also known as eco-art, is a contemporary genre that focuses on ecological themes. It often involves direct interventions into nature. A straightforward example is a work such as *Ice Watch*, by the Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing.[1]

Ice Watch consisted of 12 gigantic blocks of ice, carved off a melting glacier in Greenland and transported to Europe. The work has been shown several times, in Copenhagen, Paris and

Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing *Ice Watch*, 2014
Supported by Bloomberg. Installation view: Bankside, outside Tate Modern, 2018
Photo: Justin Sutcliffe. Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin;
Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

London. Each time some 80 tons of ice were arranged in a circle, illuminated by dramatic lighting and allowed to slowly melt. The documentary photographs of Eliasson's installation show children and adults in winter clothes hugging the gleaming ice blocks: perhaps to protect them; perhaps to say goodbye.

Ecological art has its origins in the 1970s, but today it exists in many forms.[2] To raise awareness, artists uproot majestic trees and exhibit them in museums; others show extinct animal species in videos or in installations. Some artists have sought to repair degraded landscapes; this has become known as 'reclamation aesthetics'. For example, the Hungarian-American artist Agnes Denes reforested an entire disused quarry in Finland to create a geometrically perfect virgin pine forest. Still others foster a sense of connectedness with Earth's flora and fauna. In his exquisite videos, the Chinese artist Bo Zheng shows naked men wondering around a rainforest, seeking sexual intercourse with the plants.[3]

From eco-horror to eco-erotics, ecological art reshapes the viewers' relationships with the natural environment. In art criticism, the dominant view is that such art creates empathy with nature. On the BBC Radio 3 *Free Thinking* programme in June 2021, you might have heard curator Hans Ulrich Obrist arguing that eco-art can create an emotional connection with the Earth, which scientific data alone cannot secure. As he put it, 'images have an impact on dreams, and dreams have an impact on actions'.[4]

Indeed, we find similar strategies present in mainstream cultural production. In David Attenborough's documentary *Blue Planet II* there is an interplay of horror and erotics of sorts: we fall in love with the marvellous creatures inhabiting our oceans, and we despair as they are suffocated by floating plastic bags.

Undoubtedly, such cultural production has created empathy with nature: if by 'nature' we mean oceans, forests, polar caps, and their inhabitants. Yet, as I contemplated the beer garden that summer, full of happy, culturally sensitive people eating beef, I could not help but wonder whether our eco-sensibilities might not be developing in the wrong direction.

But are we asking too much of cultural production anyway? What attitudes can art change?

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Consider a painting that also hangs in Liverpool, not far from the spot where my friends and I had our lunch. David Hockney's *Peter Getting Out of Nick's Pool* won the John Moores Painting Prize in 1967, and still hangs in the Walker Art Gallery here. The young man is shown hoisting himself out of the water; his tanned back and buttocks are in the very centre of the composition, just above the electric shimmer of the swimming pool, painted in Hockney's trademark white and red squiggly lines. The homoerotic charge of the painting was clearly at odds with social views in Britain at the time. 1967 was the same year that homosexuality was partly de-criminalized; but, of course, it was far from being broadly accepted.[5]

Over the following 50 years Britain and many other countries have seen an incredible shift in attitudes towards homosexuality. Now, it would be insane to attribute that shift to any particular artwork, or even to the arts collectively. But if we want to study the influence of the arts on social attitudes, the great shift of views regarding gay sex may be informative. Here, the painting *prefigured* social change: art contained a kernel of a future sensibility. In the ensuing decades, the relaxed acceptance of queer desire that we see in Hockney's canvas spread through mainstream media. By the time of my own teens, I could see acceptance of homosexuality signalled in TV shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or in videos by George Michael. And as culture changed, so did the laws. Indeed, over in the USA, Joe Biden, when

still Vice-President, attributed the wider acceptance of homosexuality to daytime sitcoms such as *Will & Grace*.

So, here's a theory. Unlike propaganda, the arts do not address political beliefs explicitly. An artwork instead offers a new way of organizing experience. Philosophers have called this by different names: Nelson Goodman called it 'worldmaking'[6], Jacques Rancière 'the distribution of the sensible'[7], and the critic John Berger a 'way of seeing'.[8] Hockney's picture contains no argument for the acceptance of homosexuality. But it organizes the perceptible world in such a way that gay desire appears salient and normal.

Art creates a new sensibility. Mass culture can spread it. Once that sensibility is in place, new laws and policies become acceptable, or even demanded. Art prepares the ground for the law.

In reality, of course, the arrow of causality is never quite as straightforward as this sketch suggests. But let's take it as a working model. Now, can we apply it to eco-art today? Can we say that artists like Olafur Eliasson create empathy with the natural world, which might then lead to political demands? Can we claim, as curator Hans Ulrich Obrist suggests, that art leads to dreams, and dreams to actions?

It's an attractive thought, but on reflection it seems wrong when applied to most environmental cultural production today.

It's well known that the climate catastrophe does not simply require an empathetic response from some imaginary public at large: it requires radical changes to the economy of fossil fuel-emitting nations. Areas such as construction, agriculture, transportation, trade, will have to change. But in the cultural imagination, these activities are separate from images of nature. Boarding an EasyJet flight for a holiday occupies a different part of our sensibility to emotions about forests and icebergs. We might *know* they are connected, sure. But they don't inhabit the same 'way of seeing'. This is quite different from the political situation of queer people—as well as other minorities—whose political fates have been directly constituted by how they are portrayed and seen.

Paradoxically, then, ecological politics does not demand that we should change our attitudes to nature. Indeed, art about nature might be only tangentially related to the politics of climate change, because empathy with nature largely targets the *effects* of the climate crisis. But what needs to change are sensibilities around the everyday activities, which are its cause.

And there, the cultural change may have to be dramatic. The citizen-consumers of the global North might have to accept such measures as severely reducing beef consumption, or paying for mass-replacement of water boilers with heat pumps, or unprecedented green investment into developing nations. Taxing beef consumption must begin to seem as ordinary as limits on smoking.[9] Spending public money to help South Africa close coal power stations must become as unremarkable as spending it to fix public roads here.[10] Yet, such interventions today largely seem as far-fetched, or difficult, or unimportant as gay marriage seemed in 1967. What aesthetic forms would transform these sensibilities? A storyline in Eastenders about loft insulation? A neo-Futurist painting extolling the beauties of the wind turbine? How to change our way of seeing these things, without moralism or recrimination, is very much an open question. But it might be that the great eco-artwork still to come must tackle a subject as mundane as a heat pump, rather than the glories of nature.

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After that sunny lunch with burgers, my boyfriend, his friends, their child and I finally go to the Liverpool Biennial, showing at Lewis's, a long disused department store in the city centre.

There is one work on the ground floor which captures the baby's attention. It is called *Inflation*, by the Argentine artist Diego Bianchi. This is an installation of human-sized forms, made of flesh-coloured resin and solidified foam. They look like gloopy, vaguely human body parts, wrapped in cables, headphones, batteries, and other digital detritus. The boy coos happily at the sculptures—I make a mental note that at eight months, babies don't yet grasp the concept of the uncanny.

I think back to that vision I had at lunch. There is a resonance of sorts. Bianchi's sculptures look as if a spell has momentarily fallen off the everyday; we see the grotesque cost of all those plastics and rare-earth metals. The effect is humorous, rather than moralistic. In accompanying videos, we see dancers clown about clad in that same fleshy foam. It looks as if toxic waste had been cross-bred with *The Muppet Show*.

The title of the exhibition is 'The Stomach and the Port', and most of the artworks in some way interrogate trade and consumption.[11] There are sculptures that look like mouldy fruit, but are made from semi-precious stones; and drawings of sea creatures in an inky medium that mimics crude oil. There is a thoughtful video by Alberta Whittle, which draws links between the changing climate in the Caribbean and the visual memories of the Transatlantic slave trade.

Much of the art here interrogates the systemic and economic bases of the ecological catastrophe. My friends point out that these works are experimental and ruminative, and sometimes hard to grasp. But perhaps, like with the David Hockney painting in 1967, the role of contemporary, avant-garde works is to create kernels of a future way of seeing, rather than to convey clear messages. I wonder what kind of politics might become possible in a culture where this sensibility would become widespread: where mainstream films, music, TV, Netflix series treated extractivist consumption with the same suspicion that we see in Diego Bianchi's sculptures.

Diego Bianchi, *Inflation*, 2021.
Installation view at Lewis's Building, Liverpool Biennial 2021.
Photography Stuart Whipps

After we wave goodbye to our friends and their beautiful child, my boyfriend and I walk home. On a quiet street we briefly hold hands. It took some 50 years after that David Hockney painting for this to become a conceivable thing to do. What ecological crisis asks of cultural production now is a much greater shift in perception. Let's see how long it takes.[12]

This text first appeared as a BBC Essay in May 2022, while Vid Simoniti was a New Generation Thinker on the scheme run by BBC Radio 3 and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0c9gy38.

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12 I am grateful to Charles Ogilvie, Director of Strategy for COP26 at the Cabinet Office, for talking to me about climate policy in ways that have informed this essay—but any misconceptions are mine alone.

What We Loved Was Not Enough: Sea Level Rise and the Matter of Letting Go

Michael Truscello

There is a scene in the 2018 documentary *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* in which Chinese workers attend to the Shengli Seawall and reveal that its purpose is to protect oil production.

While the filmmakers do not comment on the contradiction of building a seawall to protect the industry that is primarily responsible for sea level rise, presumably most observers will note the grim paradox. The implications of this infrastructure reinforce the argument I made in my 2020 book, *Infrastructural Brutalism: Art and the Necropolitics of Infrastructure:* not only is global capitalism protecting the brutal infrastructure that serves as the arteries for an ecocidal economic system that is the primary cause of the sixth mass extinction event, but capitalism is also in some cases accelerating the expansion of fossil fuel extraction and consumption. The Shengli Oil Field Seawall reminds us that some carbon-intensive assemblages should not be protected from sea level rise. In fact, because climate science dictates that most of the remaining fossil fuels must remain in the ground,[1] any fossil fuel production threatened by sea level rise should immediately be decommissioned.

Video stills from the documentary *ANTHROPOCENE: The Human Epoch*

The 'infrastructural brutalism'[2] on display in the film *Anthropocene* might be considered progressive by some, since sea walls are often framed as necessary and beneficial forms of adaptation to climate change. But this often presumes the low-lying territory being defended against sea level rise contains life-affirming assemblages or human populations that cannot be moved. When I wrote about 'elevation and cultural theory' in this journal nine years ago, I was contributing to a cultural studies discourse on 'the power differentiations created by elevation'.[3] In the case of the Shengli Seawall, the elevation achieved by the wall serves to protect oil production, an industry that must be abolished soon if we are to avoid catastrophic climate change. In the example of Miami Beach, capitalism continues to invite people to reside in a territory that is, in the long term, doomed to erasure by flooding.

So far, what gets abandoned to the onslaught of natural disasters is being determined by colonial and capitalist relations. Capitalism and the state form will protect its material interests, while the poor and their concerns are flooded, buried, paved over. What about mutually beneficial concessions? What about a potential exodus from shoreline urban developments that are doomed by inevitable sea level rise? Instead of protecting property values for the doomed beaches of Miami, Florida, how about mercilessly taxing the rich and using the revenue to pay for low- and middle-income residents to relocate? Instead, Miami Beach bourgeoisie are currently being offered by the city US $20,000 grants to protect their houses and businesses, 'to help fund flood prevention projects that can include raising homes and lifting sea walls'.[4] These desperate attempts to protect capital are happening in Miami, one of the most at-risk coastal cities in the world, in a state that already suffers from tropical storms more than any other US state. As Mario Alejandro Ariza writes, 'There is an inescapable truth about life in South Florida: This low-lying region is set to be swallowed by the sea.'[5] Ariza puts the coming floods into perspective:

> **Some scientists say that another 6 inches of sea level rise could very well arrive by 2030, and infrastructure planners are bracing for 2 feet by 2060. Five to 6 feet of sea level rise by 2100 is likely, and likely catastrophic: An inundation of this magnitude would physically displace some 800,000 residents of Miami-Dade County—nearly a third of the current population—and render a large portion of the city uninhabitable.**

The calculation by capital is clear: protect the investments at all costs, and let the proles fend for themselves. Worse than allowing existing residents to fight the ocean in a few decades, Miami Beach actually encourages low-income earners to sign up for a First-time Homebuyer Program.[6]

A recent report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 'projects ocean levels along the U.S. coast will rise an average of 10 to 12 inches by 2050. Researchers say that amount of sea level rise over the next 30 years is equal to the total increase over the past 100 years.'[7] Flooding will occur 10 times as often as it does today by the year 2050, and inland flooding will subsume farmland and impact septic and freshwater systems. A 2020 study examining sea level rise on a global scale estimates that as much as 20% of global gross domestic product (GDP) could be negatively affected by flooding by the end of the century.[8] The authors of this study interpret their results to recommend fortifying coastline barriers and other forms of adaptation.[9]

I am proposing something akin to Mike Davis's article, 'The Case for Letting Malibu Burn', in which he outlines the reasons Malibu is under perennial threat from wildfires and concludes, 'Two kinds of Californians will continue to live with fire: those who can afford (with indirect

public subsidies) to rebuild and those who can't afford to live anywhere else.'[10] The case for abandoning coastal cities is obviously more severe: There will be nothing to rebuild. For now, in coastal cities there are those who can afford to finance temporary forms of adaptation to sea level rise, and those who cannot afford to live anywhere else.

Finally, there are applicable lessons for a more equitable and life-affirming response to sea level rise in Rhiannon Firth's recent book, *Disaster Anarchy: Mutual Aid and Radical Action*. While I do not have space here to summarize the book's entire argument, it does include a chapter on the responses to Hurricane Sandy in New York City in 2012, and the overall argument of the volume advocates for an anarchist response to disasters instead of funnelling resources and lives into capitalist and state recuperation. Since capitalism and the state form are the principal culprits responsible for the sixth mass extinction event, committing resources to these social forms only enhances a social order that is inherently ecocidal. Firth notes, 'Since [Hurricane] Sandy we have seen a growing trend for the state to rely on spontaneous community responses to compensate for its own incapacity and indifference...'[11] Contrary to neoliberal responses to sea level rise and other disasters, 'anarchist relief efforts offer more than simply an effective practical form of relief that can be recuperated back into neoliberal policy. Rather, they operate as an ontological break, prefigurative utopias, autonomous expressions of agency and solidarity, and as mechanisms of consciousness-raising and pedagogy against the inequalities that lie at the heart of the ongoing disaster of capitalism.'

Thus, instead of framing human communities retreating from coastal cities because of anthropogenic sea level rise as some kind of defeat, we should understand such mobilizations as necessary and equitable, and we should respond to current and future disasters using strategies that elevate life over property.

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Climate change resilience of museum collections

Christian Baars

What were previously predictions of climate models are being felt in earnest now, and not only in far-away places affected by retreating glaciers or on low-lying islands becoming submerged in rising seas, but also, and very acutely, in the UK. 2022 saw the joint hottest summer on record, the driest summer on record, and the highest temperature on record.

Museums have statutory and conservation obligations to protect cultural heritage collections from deterioration. Deterioration comes in many forms, including inappropriate humidity (too damp—mould; too dry—brittleness), light (fading pigments), air pollutants (chemical deterioration). Some of these 'agents of deterioration' are managed by controlling environmental conditions in collection stores and display galleries. Stable conditions of relative humidity and temperature are frequently maintained with the help of air conditioning systems.

Whilst the presence of air conditioning means that some museums are energy-hungry beasts—something the sector is addressing urgently by modernizing and reducing energy demand as part of climate change mitigation—it also makes museums vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The discussion about power cuts as a result of heat waves has not quite reached the UK, but museums in other parts of Europe have been warned already to anticipate interruptions to their electricity supplies specifically as a consequence of the impact of climate change. This, combined with searing temperatures, would result in loss of environmental control and, as a result, almost certain damage to cultural heritage collections. In addition, the roof drains of historic buildings were not designed for high-volume rainfall, frequently resulting in flooding.

The impacts of climate change may be direct, as above, or cascading and compound —such as drought affecting urban water infrastructure, energy production, food production, financial services and governance. The combined effects of interacting stressors may affect the ability of individuals and institutions, including museums, to adapt in time, before widespread damage occurs.

For the sake of business continuity, and collections' management and care, this is something that museums must address urgently. Risk assessment approaches are familiar to every conservator—we assess and mitigate as far as possible the risks posed to collections by the 10 'agents of deterioration'. We now need to include the compound effects of climate change in these risk assessments, followed by the incorporation of these risk management strategies into our existing operational and emergency plans. This task is new to the museum sector, yet is incredibly urgent and will require a steep learning curve that can only be achieved effectively in collaboration with competent partners. National Museums Liverpool is currently planning a climate change risk assessment on which to base an adaptation strategy, and we are talking to academic institutions about ways of achieving this. We are only at the beginning of this journey, but we have taken the first steps.

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Colophon

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About The Artist

Alicja Biala *is a Polish artist working across a range of different media and scales. Biala initially gained attention with her large-scale public paintings, followed by her politically charged Polish Cut-Out series. She has since worked across multiple scales, ranging from architectural sculptures to large interior sculptural lighting, etchings, paintings, and more.*

Her work incorporates a mixture of pagan themes that bring the political and personal spheres of contemporary life into close proximity. She has received widespread press, multiple awards, and is in numerous private and national collections. Biala is currently studying at Royal College of Art and Royal Drawing School in London.