

Tolerating mass murder: migration, diasporas, genocide and climate imperialism – an investigation by virtual migrants

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Climate change needs radical strategies, but also a re-writing from an anti-imperialist perspective. Imperialist socio-economic genocide has a parallel genocide of the environment and bio-diversity. In his book *Exterminate All The Brutes*, Sven Lindqvist directly links the mass industrial-style slaughter of humans during European expansion through Africa with both the German holocaust against the Jews and the creation of racist ideologies as developed and reinforced by key scientific thinkers, including, contentiously, Charles Darwin. These he links together as one historical process. Zygmunt Bauman links industrialisation and modernity with the abilities and ideologies that make mass genocide possible. As colonial, and then post-colonial states, have yielded ever more profits for the West, the minority elites of those states have also become areas segregated from our existence - hegemonic and complex mass exploitation camps - which remain disconnected from the experience of Westerners, except through distant and problematic media representations.

Now that debates on whether it is actually happening have almost ceased, the process of understanding the relatively 'new' threat of climate change seems simple, despite its grave consequences. Essentially, CO₂ created by human activity creates an atmospheric blanket which traps heat inside the planet. All of the proposed solutions require careful management of this 'human activity' which will hopefully avoid the worst predictions, but it's too late to avoid some degree of serious problems for which significant preparation is required.

However, lets consider another layer. The processes of industrialisation, which have led us to this juncture, have been at play for a considerable time, and these were the beginnings of the globalised world we know today. Critical to the development of industrial processes was the mass exploitation or extermination of large parts of the world, and the very creation of the 'third' world. During the development of this imperialism by industrialising countries, the ideologies of racism, which were

developed to justify the exploitation, went directly hand-in-hand with the development of museums and galleries, the high class culture of collecting artefacts for these institutions and the ways in which, at least the West now understands, the discrete specialisms of art, culture, science and history.

The increased access to knowledge about the world, however partial its nature, also led to a detached distance from the source of that knowledge and the processes which that knowledge described. This disconnection is at the heart of being able to rape both people and land while also making them behave in accordance with, or collude with, the rapist's preferred vision of them. In changing the way we are can we rest within the neat parameters of so carefully 'managing' our world towards sustainability - requiring the 'controlling' nations and elites to further their superiority over the global environment to do this? Even if this might be the most realistic chance for a way out of this mess, should there not be some voices that attempt to re-examine some fundamentals of humanity: the ways in which we and the systems we create and connect with and our understanding and valuing the world around us? Doesn't this also raise critical questions for those of us engaged in creating cultural or aesthetic meaning in a professional capacity, not only in terms of thematic exploration, but also in terms of the very nature of packaging our work in a world where packaging facilitates a disconnected consumerism?

We are increasingly confronted with statements attempting to instill urgency towards action, such as the following:

The situation is still within our grasp, but we must act now, we must act strongly, and we must act together. Individuals, companies, and governments across the globe must each do what they can to reverse climate change. We will never get a second chance.

Our familiarity with these kinds of Obama or Hollywood-style quotes is moving towards an overdose, and while they may reinforce an important message they equally well discourage deeper inquiry: the knowledge is there – it is only action that is lacking, so by doing 'something' you can do your bit. In a world of incredible media saturation, the supermarket metaphor of ensuring a feel-good experience with whatever is on offer for consumption becomes painfully accurate as we can buy-in to feeling that we can quietly participate in a solution - while our liberal silence and disconnection may in fact be part of the problem. The necessary changes will not

take place without civil disobedience and as Gramsci, the father of the concept of 'contradictory consciousness' said, 'The challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned.' The Yes Men (an artist-activist group) recently produced a spoof newspaper in which the leaders of the European Union thank the European public for having engaged in months of civil disobedience leading up to the Copenhagen climate conference. While clearly demonstrating worthy intentions, the fact remains that this level of civil disobedience is not happening in reality, and moreover, this neat consumer-oriented package may create an aesthetic feeling of moral outrage taking place as a substitute rather than a motivator for real outrage.

The strategies to tackle this disconnection using the language of commodification (managing the symptoms using tick-box solutions) is in opposition to holistic and 'connected' languages, values and cultural methods which have evolved over many years and still survive amongst less industrialised communities of the world. Critically reconnecting with such sets of values may be a radical step, yet the suppression of such possibilities due to those values having been deemed as inferior is a part of the same system of dominance which has brought about climate change. While the Chipko movement to protect trees (their 'maternal home') and livelihoods in India gained considerable respect and was seen as a landmark in 'third world' struggles for the environment, other strong and emotional relationships with the physical environment include those of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia or even the many small, agrarian communities in any of a number of countries. These value systems have little currency in the industrialised world where we will be signing up to an environmental solution of carefully managing human activities to a point just below the unsustainable threshold, carried out on our behalf by a joint effort between state machineries and various corporations to create a fully designed, fully controlled world.

The term 'climate change' as a cause of future problems must also be questioned. If climate change is a symptom of numerous power-greedy processes causing various kinds of environmental depletion, is it diversionary to use it as a cause? Decades of depletion have been affecting so-called Third World economies with raised levels of poverty, illness and mortality and such recipients of these effects are currently enduring what the West is contemplating. The West ignores the desertification caused by over-cultivation or unsustainable irrigation, and corporate mass poisonings such as Bhopal and the Niger Delta, yet the realisation of a symptom which affects

the entire planet and therefore the West themselves – climate change – then captures attention.

Predictions for global depopulation resulting from climate change are devastating: the possible extermination of three-quarters of the population and equally devastating levels of forced migration. The countries worst affected will be mostly from the global 'South' and while in the UK we may worry about the difficulties of tropical summers, we are largely deaf to the probable decimation of vast numbers of those 'others'. It is impossible to imagine what this will really mean; the levels of death, suffering and forced migration will be unprecedented. The actual direct causes will be the gradual accumulation of the results of industrialisation and the concomitant sets of values that underpin this - which can allow both mass consumerism and mass genocide while remaining distanced from the latter - just as people in the West have remained distant from these related facets for many decades.

The resultant prospect is, again, difficult to visualise but there are a number of precedents to draw on. Desperation to migrate will be incredible, and will be met by equally strong draconian measures to strengthen borders. Levels of crime and racially-based detention regimes will soar, while the concept of the prison-industrial complex (as discussed by Angela Davis) and its relationship to labour and profit will really come into its own with various land masses perhaps becoming effective and profitable prisons for certain categories of people. Climate change will create opportunities for greater climates of fear, fear fuels aggression and conflict, and imperialism has its last, most ghastly and hysterical laugh while various leading companies, states and elites find ever-new 'solutions' and ways to exploit the situation for gain.

For diaspora communities in the West, the generalised national dialogue of climate change along with its domination by western experts has undermined our connections with the environmental issues affecting our ancestral communities. This is compounded by more immediate needs to 'integrate', to fulfil economic ambitions and to deal with discrimination. However, there are possibilities of mobilising sections of such diasporas around climate justice and deeper contexts concerning global inequalities - along with potentials to nurture connections for the West - not simply with issues affecting 'developing' societies, but moreover with different sets of value systems and ideological affiliations which must be reintroduced, adapted and disseminated for a radically different social system to be possible.

Alongside an investigation into the issues from the perspectives outlined so far, digital arts group *Virtual Migrants* are developing a social art project using democratic dialogues towards a de-commodification of the issues, which will evolve over the next few years. The first step will precede the Copenhagen conference (autumn 2009 at The Arnolfini, Bristol, UK) as a part of a show about climate justice - curated by the artists' group *Platform* (London). It will involve cultural, artistic and educative approaches to connecting groups and individuals with activists and counterparts both in the UK and other parts of the world - using internet technology, including one-to-one intimacy between people across the globe - towards an engagement which can be emotional, social and ideological, along with a concomitant cultural production base to disseminate this process.

The work will focus on the aesthetics of words, spoken and written, emphasising immediacy and direct connection with the source of those words. Maintaining levels of intimacy and inviting local contributors to take some ownership of the work along with associated events will be critical to its operation. Activists will speak directly about current contexts, experiences, thoughts and activities, either in person or via an audio-visual Internet link accompanied by semi-improvised moving images, audio tracks and sometimes live music. This will constitute a deliberately raw and unperformed part of a performance or installation, minimising the interpretation that artists normally introduce to such work, and allow such non-performers and non-artists to become a part of work with integrated cultural, aesthetic and political meaning. The format will remain open enough to be able to hold an impromptu discussion or other verbal/textual interaction, before, after, during or within the work. This won't be a package - participation will be real and there will be provocation, inspiration, argument and discussion: armchair consumption and distance will not be an option.

There are many examples across the world throughout history where popular enjoyment of words - their depth of meaning as well as their beauty - has been an essential part of cultures which foster critical engagement with discussion. Not only will the issues in question be discussed both inside the gallery and outside in various communities, there will also be a subversion of the post-modern trend away from content and narrative to a revaluing of text-based knowledge including oral testimony and books. There will be a replacement of the imaginary and distant digital with the real and intimate human. This is the beginning of an exploration away from commodified and collectable work for art museums, institutions that emerged from

industrial hierarchies. It is also an investigation into imperialist and environmental genocide outside the segregated confines of the academic world.