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## A Project of Disjunction and Conjunction

On the Aesthetics of Climate Change

### A project of disjunction and conjunction – the aesthetics of climate change

In a way it is all a matter of aesthetics. In a way climate change is all a matter of sense perception. Whether talking about changes in the level of CO<sub>2</sub>, variations or deviations in the Earth's orbit, mountain-building, continental drift or solar radiation, the question about what to do implies a clear understanding of what is happening. That question is a question of aesthetics, that question is a question for art.

But if climate change is a matter of and for aesthetics, then what kind of aesthetics? What sort of aesthetics does art use to either establish connections or destabilise already fixed notions of sense perception when we talk about climate change? Are we talking about an aesthetics of the sublime, such as the one that has been proposed by the historical and neo-avant-garde for decades through their experiments with effects of shock, alienation or acts of detournement, or are we talking about an aesthetics of the beautiful, of that which doesn't break with logical forms, notions of symmetry and delivers by providing the much needed constructed whole?

As proposed by Rancière, as part of his work on analysing the general distribution of the sensible in art and society, the question of which aesthetics becomes anything but simple and anything but innocent. It is a question about something more than just taste. If aesthetics can be seen as a foray into "the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience" as a "delimitation of spaces and time [...] the visible and the invisible [...] that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (Rancière 2004), then the interesting question here is, what kind of distribution of visibility and power is being foregrounded by the climate art of recent years. Without answering this question (in scale it would go well beyond the scope of this paper), I would however like to propose two possible readings of two quite different projects for dealing with the aesthetics of climate change.

### Climate art as a project for an aesthetics of the sublime

Nuage Vert, a piece set up in Helsinki in 2008 by the French-German artist group HeHe, is a city scale light installation that projects green light onto the smoke emissions of a power plant – the ultimate symbol of both progress and pollution. In their own words the project aims to alert the public, generate discussions and "persuade people to change patterns of consumption"

Interesting is here not only how the installation in a simple gesture frames, points to and questions that which in the everyday life is otherwise considered insignificant and unnoticed in the urban public (i.e. smoke from a factory), but also, the strange relation between the real and the projected it produces. Instead of delivering a clear attack on pollution and emission by just highlighting what is otherwise unnoticed, it sets up an inverse relation: The more smoke, the less green light and vice versa. With this gesture Nuage Vert inserts itself into the project of emphasizing the gap between represented and representation. What you are confronted with when seeing the ominous, full blown projection of green light at its peak, is a level of CO<sub>2</sub> at its lowest possible level.

### Climate art as a project for an aesthetics of the beautiful

"What is a climate artist?" asks the astrophysicist Roger Malina in his short article Rethinking Art as Intimate Science: Climate Art as a Hard Humanity, published as part of the Rethink Climate exhibition in Copenhagen in the fall of 2009. For one it is someone who is capable of navigating the rather complex and diverse discursive formation around the question of climate change. This discourse has no clear answers – scientific, political, economical and ethical perspectives on climate change doesn't of and by themselves form a whole. This problem is caused by a disconnect of modern science and the broader public. In the words of Malina:

The projects of the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution are incomplete. Scientific knowledge is not culturally appropriated. In many ways science has become a cargo cult. Many people use the cell phone for daily survival but could not explain the difference between a photon and an electron. One reason may be that common science does not make common sense. (Rethink 2009).

The problem at hand is here primarily that the highly specialized nature of scientific research where the reading of the data material provided by scientific instruments requires a familiarity unattainable by most people without the proper educational background. There is from this perspective a grave need for experiments with new forms of visibility, capable of mediating these data and thus providing the insight one would gain from hands on experience.

Two projects for art, two projects for climate art: The project of disjunction and the project of conjunction. The real question here is not which of the two is better suited for the task at hand, but rather how and in what way both projects can be combined? If 'making visible' sets the requirement of representation to fit the represented, then surely this 'making visible' can never be 'new' without also representing the expected in manners unexpected.

### References

- Malina, Roger. In Witzke, A. S. & Hede, S. (2009), Rethink - Contemporary Art & Climate Change
- Rancière, Jaques (2006), The Politics of Aesthetics, New York: Continuum