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Networking in the Margins of Eco-Activism

The following is a co-authored paper about *Networking in the Margins of Eco-Activism* for the panel in ISEA of the same name. The speakers will show that a responsible attitude towards the definition of nature can be embodied within the margins of art and science. Networking between eco-activists from both fields also tends to create a more robust level of know-how transfer about the environment. The authors in this text will expand on the idea that both fields of art and science can no longer deny the state of the very world in which it exists.

Artists who “care” about ecology are interested in the social impacts of their roles in society and how scientific discovery can shed light on their opinions or reinforce their inspirations. Not only are these artists becoming more involved in the ethical and social debates generated by scientific discovery, scientists have also begun to question their own career stereotypes and scrutinize the ethical boundaries of commercialism. Furthermore, each discipline’s respective commercial industry tends to monopolize discoveries and attempt to control of the results. It is time for the public with its growing literacy to demand a de-marginalization from science as well as from art.

In the 60s during the Vietnam War, it was not very hard to neither drag artists out of their studios onto the streets nor find them in the role of “political story-teller” for the public. These artists still fondly talk about the responsibility to engage with the public and how this focus drew them together as an art community. Today, there are a number of reasons why the re-sharing of the

controversies about the environment with scientists might be beneficial. As we will indicate, the task to change is vast and challenging, but without new trans-disciplinary and community discourses about the nature and nurture debate, perceptions of realities cannot be shifted.

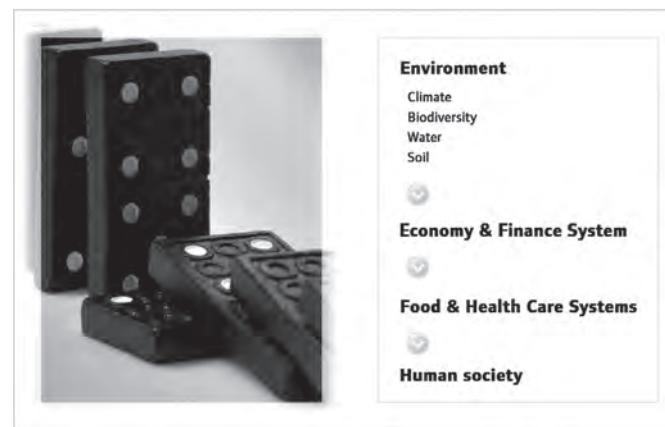


Fig. 1: Domino Effect Photo: Angelika Hilbeck

Ecologist, **Angelika Hilbeck** is interested in the role of the environmental scientist in the future. Within the last decade, she has questioned her own career stereotype and scrutinized the environmental boundaries of commercialism and the monopoly of her own discoveries by larger stakeholders. Her focus in the context of ISEA is about how public access to the Genetically Modified Food (GMO) debate is helped by the genre of documentary film.

"Modern times are characterized by disconnections in uncountable shades and shapes based on the mechanistic perception of the world to be "functioning as machine". While this has generated huge technological progress driven by the singular goal – profits – the global ecosystem now must respond to the totality of all anthropogenic impacts and introduced technologies. Today, this is manifested by the simultaneous decline of essentially all fundamental systems human societies are resting upon, e.g. climate, biodiversity, resources, economy, and food production. A giant self-reinforcing system has emerged over the past decades that, for the sake of profits, has increasingly caused people to be disconnected from their environment, the production of their food and their own bodies. These current decoupled systems also prove to be unable to remediate themselves even with the fact that the collective demise is in sight. Therefore, novel approaches and concepts for remediation must be conceived and implemented as fast as possible. The arts have a prominent – if not key – role to play in this state of emergency! The arts may be one of the last fields of practice left with a large degree of freedom to alarm, reveal, rebel, conceive, demand, provoke, promote and more. This freedom can be described by using examples from documentary film – a genre that has gained breath-taking popularity over

the past decade, just as the collapse of the decoupled systems began to manifest itself. The debate around GMOs and the restructuring of science to serve industrial interests can be illustrated through these films, proving that this attitude has lead to a totalitarian system of secrecy and control. Documentary films have taken on an increasingly important role in revealing the disconnections and the loss of the human dimension by portraying the profiteers and losers of this system and comparing their comments."

In the post-modern art school education of the 60s and 70s, we were often taught that nature is a socially constructed idea, a scenario that now may or may not provide us with a considerable hope to re-build a sustainable future. We also learnt that the marketing of nature impinges on all factors of social reality and tends to construct nature as one that contains a certain set of human ideals and our relational place inside them. The general public also tends to treat the environment as "a given situation" and so an issue like climate change can shake their very perception of "the real". Art researcher and artist, Amy Lipton once coined the term "ecovention" by constructing it from "eco" and "invention", labelling it as strategy that artists can use to transform ecologies. But this definition also incorporates art projects that employ an inventive strategy to physically restore local ecologies on a very real landscape (Lipton, 2002) [1].



Fig. 2: WeatherStation Zurich
Photo: Andrea Polli

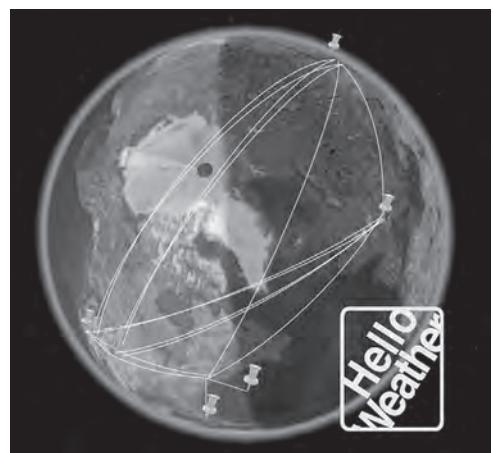


Fig. 3: WeatherStation network Photo: Andrea Polli

In this light **Andrea Polli** has focused her artistic work on interpretations about the collective potentials of the scientists to measure and model climate change. *"Weather and climate requires a joint venture of measuring and modelling by using information technologies. However, what are some of the current cultural understandings of weather and climate and how have physical and computational models affected these understandings? Are there structural aspects of computing (especially networked computing) that inform weather and climate understandings? From simple instrumenta-*

tion and physical models to satellite remote sensing, sophisticated computer models and counter mapping provide a historical basis for this research. By allowing the public to engage in environmental measuring and monitoring projects can provide a direct alternative to information available through official government and mass media sources. Such projects have created alternative pathways to understanding environmental issues. These projects have also acted as a driver or catalyst for changes in cultural or social practices.” Polli’s own community weather station network, Hello, Weather! [2] has been located at sites in New York, Los Angeles, Zurich and New Delhi. Public access to the weather has a long history, as Polli has explained:

“The first systematic weather observations in the American Colonies were taken by Lutheran Minister John Campanius Holm in 1644, and by the American Revolution, serious weather observation was a widespread practice of the elite including major political figures George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin. But despite the popularity of the practice among several early political leaders in the states, Ben Franklin was the first to publicly connect volunteer weather observation with the developing political and social theories of the new republic and with the growing myth of the American entrepreneurial spirit. He connected his political philosophy of the common good with the publication of atmospheric data paving the way for future developments in information sharing. This Almanack included weather data and he himself operated weather stations over time, weather data was most certainly a part of what he believed should be freely and generously shared.” This access to information and generation for common sharing is an important aspect to consider when exploring the expanding role of today’s “ecomedia” artists.

The research of artist and scientific communicator, **Juanita Schläpfer-Miller**, is also concerned with transdisciplinary measuring systems for the value of bio-diversity and human culture on common grounds. In this case: common land. Using agrofuels as a prime example she writes:

“A research project involving media artists and agro-biologists, could examine the questions raised by the sharp increase in the production of agro-fuels, as a means to mitigate climate change. The CO₂ emissions caused by the burning of fossil fuels and the prospect of reaching peak oil production has led governments to mandate the introduction of bio or agrofuels. There is already evidence that these fuels bring their own set of problems, such as food crops being used for fuel and marginal land being planted with mono-crops, which create local eco-system imbalances. Despite many experts voicing concern that agrofuels are not long-term solutions, vast tracts of arid and so-called wasteland in India, China, and Tanzania, for example, are being planted with crops such as oil palm and jatropha. This introduction of green technologies raises a host of questions: Who defines what wasteland is? What or how do we value common land? Who and what gets sacrificed for the “common good”? Can we determine a scale to value biodiversity or human culture? By applying the law of energy conservation, this project compares the energy balance of using a 10 Hectare “wasteland/woodland”



Fig. 4: Tanzania Photo: Juanita Schläpfer-Miller

site in Tanzania for growing agrofuels versus maintaining it as “Village Land”. While villagers apparently make low-intensive use of such land, it may be an important source of sporadic grazing, medicine, fuel, and gathered food; moreover, it may also be of spiritual and cultural significance to the indigenous people concerned. Central to this research is the idea of providing villagers with the opportunity to document their own lives and how they use and value their land. In Tanzania, there is 80% illiteracy rate, therefore it is important to develop audio-visual tools for non-literate populations and documentation skills to give communities their own voice. While attempting to lessen CO₂ emissions, agrofuels are being introduced under the existing paradigm, including mono-cropping and liquid fuel distribution. Many artists and activists have argued for a paradigm shift. Media projects by Platform London called Burning Capital [3] and Unravelling the carbon web [4] are commendable illustrations of this shift. Another example could include the potentials of bio-gas such as the group, Superflex [5] who has developed a portable biogas system or Amy Balkin who has devised eco-actions for the reduction of CO₂ emissions”[6].

Thus as Juanita, Angelika and Andrea suggest, art and media can contribute, even in small interdependent local ways, not only to the raising of awareness about the environment, but perhaps even offer some unique solutions. In relation to the scale of such an enormous problem such as climate change, each one of the above authors have chosen to focus on interdependent parts of the problem, food, weather monitoring and local culture. This strategy is perhaps the only responsible tactic to take, given that many small incremental steps can create a unity of strength. Organizations like the Green Museum.org [7], know this and their collections of artists working on “nature” is truly remarkable. But as French theorist Bruno Latour [8] suggested the danger is that we are blundering and rolling into the future

of technological progress, without a glance backwards in order to be critically reflective. He recommends that we drop out of the ideology of technical progress, which is “like a state of fumbling in the dark,” and instead talk about teams for a new trans-disciplinary “composition” in the future. Such a trajectory may also help modern culture with its divided mainstream and grass roots histories to be rethought! The group that constitute this panel, share an interest in moving beyond the boundaries of the “me” generation and the post-modern dilemma, into a role where art and media can shed light on more controversial issues and become a larger part of every day life. Perhaps when artist and scientists join forces, they can be creative and reflective enough to filter, process and tackle the ecological issues of social and ethical responsibility with paradox, irony and satire for the general public. Nature it seems is still being assembled and reduced through decay but can she still wait so patiently to be better understood and reintegrated back into our lives?

References

- [1] Lipton. A Ecovention, as cited in Spaid, S. 2002. Ecovention: Current art to transform ecologies. Contemporary Art Center. Cincinnati. USA
- [2] <http://www.eyebeam.org/hello-weather>
- [3] <http://www.carbonweb.org/burning/capital/>
- [4] <http://www.carbonweb.org/>
- [5] <http://www.superflex.net/tools/supergas/>
- [6] <http://www.publicsmog.org/>
- [7] <http://www.greenmuseum-org/>
- [8] Extracted from a recent interview by Jill Scott, with Bruno Latour during the conference at the Swiss Museum of Transport, Lucern 2010 entitled, The Large, the Small and the Human Mind, Swiss Biennial on Science, Technics + Aesthetics. http://www.neugalu.ch/e_bienn_2010.html