

INCOMPATIBLE ELEMENTS

Leon Cmielewski & Josephine Starrs

Incompatible Elements is an ongoing project that evolved during an artist residency at Performance Space, Carriageworks, Sydney. The media art installation explores ways of representing the relationship between nature and culture, embedding poetic texts into animated satellite images of global landscapes at particular risk from climate change.

AUTHOR(S)

The failure of nations to reach an agreement to curb carbon emissions has highlighted the huge gap between the scientific consensus and public perceptions of climate change and its effect on our planet. Responding to climate change in ways that are mythical, biblical and chemical, Josephine Starrs and Leon Cmielewski's media artworks question the urban perception that we exist apart from or outside of nature.

Commercial interests often co-opt nature, using images of animals, landscapes and seascapes to sell their products. Telecommunications companies consistently use wildlife, such as eagles, lions, and primates to promote their communications and IT products, but there is no acknowledgement made of the wildlife they are exploiting. In response to this trend, filmmaker and photographer Gregory Colbert attempted to create the Animal Copyright Foundation to enable advertisers to donate to conservation. He calls it "renegotiating our contract with nature." [1] More recently, Bolivia is about to pass the world's first laws granting nature equal rights to humans. [2] In the same way that advertisers exploit nature, the IT industries have also usurped words like 'web' and 'surf' from nature in which to dress their new products, the most recent being the word 'cloud', that ephemeral space where million of people now store their music and data. The cloud that Silicon Valley alludes to is in reality a network of massive data centres consuming enormous amounts of electricity, which in turn generates vast amounts of CO₂, negatively affecting the real clouds and atmosphere.

In the visual media field, re-rendering the familiar in new ways is a strategy to encourage audiences to reconsider cultural assumptions. For example, an Australian's familiarity with the map of their country was challenged by Norman Tindale's 1940 Aboriginal Language Map of Australia. [3] Here was an astounding re-rendering of the familiar, with the display of so many indigenous language groups, far more than our limited education had lead us to imagine. It was enlightening to see one's country divided up in such an unfamiliar way, where those comforting but arbitrary boundary lines between Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia & Victoria had been erased by a very different set of boundaries, where people had a more profound difference than the brand of beer they drank: the difference of language.

In our previous artworks *Seeker* and *sms_origins*, visualisation and mapping are critical devices used to explore the impact of globalisation in relation to issues of diaspora, community and nationalism. Our current project *Incompatible Elements* is a media art installation that attempts to re-present the relationship between nature and culture, by embedding poetic texts into animated satellite images of landscapes suffering from the stresses of climate change. There is a long tradition of artists combining text and image to communicate ideas and concepts, and we source texts from local custodians or appropriate works of literature.

Only relatively recently have the general public had access to the god's eye view of satellites, which has been democratised by the flourishing of the likes of Google Earth & Google Maps. This previously specialised tool of government planners and the military allows us to visualise what the earth might say if it could speak back to us. The intention is to configure the land itself as active, not neutral; to imagine it being able to speak and make a comment about the impacts of climate change. This form of personalisation of the land has been further developed by working with indigenous people who generously provided their own perspectives about land as invested with cultural and spiritual attributes. For example working with Maori elders in New Zealand to incorporate Maori language into aerial photographs of Aotearoa.

Using a bird's eye view as a representation highlights the way the land often is embedded with a cultural imprint. This is evident in the NASA aerial imagery from Agricultural Patterns from Space [4] that show ways in which human inhabitation leaves particular traces and patterns on the landscape. For example, the circular forms of large scale irrigation farming compared to settlements in Peru where each farm plot is a radial slice of land focused on a small village. We can see that the land is shaped by human activity in a variety of ways depending on cultural attitude and technological intention. In *Incompatible Elements*, the words "days like these" (lyrics from John Lennon's song "Nobody Told Me") are embedded into an image of the Ganges Delta, where the land is being inundated due to sea level rise resulting from global warming. In an area in South Australia called the Coorong, a world heritage wetlands at the mouth of the Murray River, we have embedded and animated the text 'a living body'. This is a quote from Tom Trevor, a Ngarrindjeri elder who is a custodian of this land. He spoke these words on the steps of the South Australia Parliament house at a public rally protesting the destruction of the river. [5] The Ngarrindjeri people see no difference between land and sea, perceiving the river systems as a living body and are concerned about the degraded state of the Coorong.

In early 2011, we attended SCANZ (Solar Circuit Aotearoa New Zealand) spending three days in the local Marae at New Plymouth/ Taranaki, NZ, where we met Maori Elder Dr. Te Huirangi Waikerepuru. After showing him our previous work he granted permission to use Maori poetic texts to incorporate into aerial photographs of Aotearoa. We experimented with embedding the words WAI O TAPU (sacred water) in the area around the Tasman Glacier, which is melting and retreating due to climate change.

Through consultation with locals, we learnt of the erosion problems and landslides effecting Mt Taranaki, the majestic conical mountain that dominates the landscape in New Plymouth, New Zealand. Local people described hearing the sound of boulders and rocks crashing down the mountain at night. In a satellite image of Mt. Taranaki, we embedded the words PUWAI RANGI PAPA or 'waters of radiant sun and earth mother'.

...when permission is granted by an elder of the region for a story to be told and te reo (Maori language) to be used, the artists are provided with a place from which to transmit important messages across cultures. If settler cultures can shift from conceiving landscape or weatherscape as inert matter 'to-be-looked-at' to living bodies encompassed in Maori terms such as 'mauri' then we come closer to ecological reconciliation. Puwai Rangi-Papa could signal an important shift in articulating a reconfigured political ecology where Western environmentalism and indigenous cosmologies might join in restoration and care of the land. [6]

The videos in the installation are projected onto the floor to reinforce the god's eye view when looking at satellite images. The light boxes on the floor show close-up images of degraded riverbeds where mud

has turned to acid and has taken on a fluorescent red/rust appearance. Sydney artist Alex Davies created the surround soundscape alluding to sounds of water, dust, chemical reactions and satellite static.

As Performance Space curator Bec Dean wrote of *Incompatible Elements*, “Starrs & Cmielewski engage in a kind of digital geochemistry, terraforming new waterways and barren patches of sand that tell stories in winding, cursive script.” [7]

References and Notes:

1. Jeff MacIntyre, “Animal Copyright,” *Toronto Star*, June 18, 2006, <http://jeffmacintyre.com/articles/animal-copyright-toronto-star> (accessed June 1, 2011).
2. John Vidal, “Bolivia Enshrines Natural World's Rights with Equal Status for Mother Earth,” *The Guardian*, April 10, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/apr/10/bolivia-enshrines-natural-worlds-rights> (accessed April 10, 2011).
3. South Australian Museum’s Official Website, “Speaking Land,” <http://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/online/gallery/aacg/speakingland.htm> (accessed June 1, 2011).
4. NASA Website, “Agricultural Patterns,” May 30, 2006, <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/IOTD/view.php?id=6605> (accessed April 1, 2011).
5. Tom Trevor, “Our Water, Our Rights,” October, 10, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C599xNBGaCM> (accessed June 1, 2011).
6. Janine Randerson, “Critical Flows: Climates & Peoples,” *RealTime*, no. 104 (2011): 39.
7. Bec Dean, *Incompatible Elements (Catalogue)* (Sydney: Performance Space, 2010).