

And the Earth Sighed a Case Study **Julianne Pierce, Leon Cmielewski, Josephine Starrs**

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Abstract

A tipping point is a critical threshold at which a tiny change can dramatically alter the state of development of a system tipping past a point of no return. Exploring these thresholds through artworks provides an experience for the audience that encourages engagement and contemplation on the catastrophic effects of climate change. Human beings form bonds with the landscape in which they live, but losing a surrounding landscape while we still live in that same place creates a form of homesickness for which we had no word until recently. A new term was coined by Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2005) after interviewing citizens living in farming areas surrounded by encroaching coalmines. The term “Solostalgia” means an emplaced or existential melancholia experienced with the negative transformation of a loved home environment. “Solostalgia is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at ‘home’”.

This state of mind is being reflected in a new global genre of artworks. “and the earth sighed” is an immersive media art installation that re-imagines the relationship between nature and culture by presenting aerial views of landscapes dynamically manipulated in ways that reveal their underlying fragility. The artists filmed landscapes and seascapes using drone technology and used post production techniques to create large-scale visual and sound environments.

Keywords

Climate, Land, Landscape, Sea, Seascape, Tipping Point, Solostalgia, Video, Installation, Drone.

Introduction

Land art is a form of practice that could be seen as slow art, embodying a long-term relationship and response to the heritage of land and landscape. It embraces longevity and evolution over time and encourages contemplation and stillness. Starrs and Cmielewski have made this the focus of their work with landscape and have embarked on an approach to life and art that defers to ecological thinking and the environment, being involved in long term tree planting projects and slowly witnessed the return of birds and native fauna back to the land. It was

also a small contribution to offsetting emissions through planting trees to sequester carbon, help reduce soil salinity and combat wind and water erosion.

Solostalgia

Connection to place is a universal human experience that comes with a life lived in a home environment, but Albrecht (2005) contends that this connection can be extrapolated to a global scale through media:

I claim that the concept has universal relevance in any context where there is the direct experience of transformation or destruction of the physical environment (home) by forces that undermine a personal and community sense of identity and control. Loss of place leads to loss of sense of place experienced as the condition of solostalgia. The most poignant moments of solostalgia occur when individuals directly experience the transformation of a loved environment. Watching land clearing (tree removal) or building demolition, for example, can be the cause of a profound distress that can be manifest as intense visceral pain and mental anguish. However, with media and IT globalisation bringing contemporary events such as land clearing in the Amazon basin into the lounge room, the meanings of ‘direct experience’ and ‘home’ become blurred. I contend that the experience of solostalgia is now possible for people who strongly empathise with the idea that the earth is their home and that witnessing events destroying endemic place identity (cultural and biological diversity) at any place on earth are personally distressing to them.

The Artworks

The artists’ connection to land is continued through their artworks over the last ten years, predominantly focused on video and audio installations, capturing and manipulating images of the landscape to talk

about human impact. Works such as *Seeker* 2007 (fig. 1) comprised of three large projections and interactive touchscreen to explore migration, territorial boundaries, conflict commodities and human displacement, while *Incompatible Elements* 2010 (fig. 2) configured the land as active, to imagine it being able to speak and comment.

As an artistic duo, Starrs brings to the partnership her background as a photographer and Cmielewski his skills as an accomplished animator. Their desire is to bring these elements together in a way that encourages a very personal and intimate relationship with the photographic image. They seek to capture imagery of the land and manipulate it so as to bring it to life as a living entity, organism or body.



Figure 1. *Seeker* 2007



Figure 2. *Incompatible Elements* 2010

And the earth sighed is the current iteration of their long term project of imaging and re-imagining landscape. Presented at Arts House, North Melbourne Town Hall, as part of the PSi22 Performance Climates conference in July 2016, (figs. 3, 4, 5) this large-scale audio video installation invites the audience into intimate contact with projected landscapes.

The installation is arranged into two parts. For the first part, the audience are invited to ascend a staircase to a three-metre high platform where they look down on projections of arid land, ocean and Australian scrub. The landscapes are video and photographed aerial views, shot in high resolution from a drone. The audience then move down a second staircase into the installation space, where they can walk across the images, sit with them or lie flat and blend into the projected surface.

The artists are deeply concerned with our human impact on the environment and do not present these images lightly. They are born from long periods of research and residency with scientific agencies, where data has been gathered and lengthy discussions with experts on climate change have informed how the landscaped is filmed, manipulated and represented. Each landscape presented in the work has been chosen for its degree of threat, erosion or irreparable damage and the process of capturing the image is as significant as the final Artwork. It is a three-year project which has taken the artists to locations around Australia including Lake Eyre, Lizard Island research station, Great Barrier Reef, Western New South Wales, Western Victoria and the Mallee District.



Figure 3. *And the earth sighed* 2016

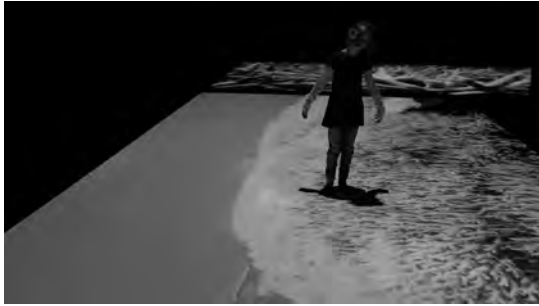


Figure 4. *And the earth sighed* 2016

And the earth sighed is made up of two twelve-minute video projection loops and accompanying soundtrack by sound designer Alex Davies. Both video tracks are comprised of imagery, which has been shot by the artists with additional photography of the Great Barrier Reef supplied by the Australian Marine Conservation Society. The predominant theme is to explore the tipping points in these ecologies, the point of no return caused by flood, fire, drought and coral bleaching.

The experience is designed as a journey, to initially view the landscapes from a height, followed by a more close-up encounter. Central to creating this immersive experience, the artists continued experiments with aerial photography and imaging. They have an ongoing fascination with aerial landscapes, as seen from an aircraft or from a cliff top or eyrie as a “god’s eye” view. A long distance view that becomes abstract and reduced to shapes and patterns, is followed by a discovery of the detail as a progressively more intimate experience. This relationship with landscape is for the artists an exploration of the concept of “affect”, where the body and mind experiences something before it is more fully comprehended.



Figure 5. *And the earth sighed* 2016

The sense of affect is created by manipulating the original footage of the land and seascapes in postproduction. As a work about climate change, there is an urgency in the consideration of the rapid destruction of Australian landscapes and reefs and the viewer is confronted with a flood surge over a desert landscape, dead and dying coral or the burnt remains of a bushfire. The soundtrack heightens the sensation of landscape in distress; it is at times eerie and foreboding and at other times a low rumbling scream bubbling below the surface. The viewer is a witness to the scanning of a body of landscape, like a surgeon scanning flesh to find the right area of skin to make a cut or incision. But instead of blood or tears flowing out from the land, words emerge as if speaking or crying out in anger. From under the surface of the desert landscape the words AS THE DARK FLOOD RISES emerge formed from water. Taken from the D.H. Lawrence (1932) poem “The Ship of Death”, this is a powerful poetic phrase that speaks of the deluge to come. Written in 1930, the same year that Lawrence died, it is used by the artists as a portentous omen of a dying planet:

And everything is gone, the body is gone
completely under, gone, entirely gone. The
upper darkness is heavy as the lower,
between them the little ship
is gone
she is gone.

It is the end, it is oblivion.

From an Australian landscape, eroded and besieged by noxious weeds, the words THE DESERT OF THE REAL emerge as a quote from Jean Baudrillard spoken by Morpheus in the film *The Matrix*, as the devastated world is revealed to the protagonist Neo. It is a

contemporary reference that speaks to how the human species is deluded, living in a fantasy world, which we believe is real and abundant but actually faces an unknown and uncertain future.

The use of footage taken from a drone is essential to the artists' current project and is an extension of their long-term interest in how military technologies are adopted and adapted into the mainstream. In the words of the artists "... if we think a technology is scary then we want to play with it." In works such as the short video *a.k.a.* 2001 they looked at surveillance and CCTV footage and in *Trace* 2002/2003 explored how governments collect digital data from citizens through means such as passive recording of people's presence using simple video surveillance through to forced extraction of biometric data by saliva or tissue sampling.

For *and the earth sighed* the artists have worked with two types of UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) to capture video and photographic records. The first is a quadcopter, a small helicopter-like video capture device that gathers aerial footage and is freely available to purchase without a licence. The second vehicle is an autonomous fixed-wing drone supplied through project partner C-Astral Systems, an aerospace enterprise and solution provider based in Ajdovscina, Slovenia. Founded by Marko Peljhan, C-Astral extends his interest and research into surveillance, unmanned systems and the conversion of technology from the military to the civilian field. As a project partner, C-Astral connected the artists with another company, Synergy Positioning Systems, based in Queensland and New Zealand) to provide both the UAV drone system and a pilot. The advantage of using the drone is that it can be programmed to fly for up to two hours taking multiple high-resolution images. The quadcopter is very versatile and easy to use, but can only carry a small camera or go-pro resulting in limited low-resolution imagery. In contrast, the drone is operated by a pilot who instructs the aircraft to take high-res image scans of the same area of landscape, creating a dense and layered image which the artists can control in the post-production phase.

With their interest in aerial photography, The artists bring home the everyday consumption and normalisation of the earth viewed from above. The Google project, to capture natural and built environments in 3D as maps and satellite imaging, makes the world continually available through technologies that have been develop

Executive Producer of Blast Theory from 2007 to 2012, based in Brighton in the UK. She is currently Creative Producer at The Art Engineers who specialise in producing unique 'theatrical adventures' that cross art forms.

Leon Cmielewski and Josephine Starrs are Sydney artists whose long-term collaboration is concerned with the relationship between humans, machines and nature.

Starrs and Cmielewski's media artworks are situated at the juncture of cinema, information visualisation, and data mapping, playing off the tensions between the large and small screen, and between information and sublime landscape.

Over the last five years they have focused on exploring how artistic practice can have a relevant and meaningful dialogue around ecological concerns. Their current work and the earth sighed was shown at Arts House Melbourne in July 2016 was supported by a Creative Australia grant from the Australia Council.

Their other recent project with dancer Alison Plevy explores human responses to drone technologies, recording site specific performances in natural and industrial locations. Dancing with Drones was performed Liveworks, Performance Space, Carriageworks 2015, at Siteworks Bundanon in 2014 and was shown at ISEA 2015 in Vancouver Canada.

Their previous work has been widely exhibited, including at the Maldives Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2013, Museum of Contemporary Art, Taiwan 2012; Guangzhou Triennial, China; Ars Electronica, Austria; Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne; Seoul Media Art Biennale, Korea; Transmediale, Berlin; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Videobrasil, Sao Paolo; Pompidou Centre, Paris; Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney and Performance Space, Sydney.

They have won awards for their work including an Award of Distinction for Interactive Art from Ars Electronica, Austria, and they are both a past recipients of New Media Art Fellowships from the Australia Council.

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