

No Art on a Dead Planet

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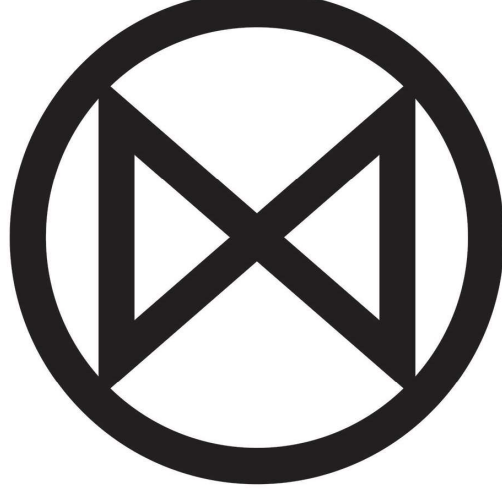
The temptation to look for a silver lining in artistic responses to the disaster of climate chaos should be resisted, as there is no upside to ecological downfall. Even when artists conceive of ecological alternatives to the dystopian present, such as by making visible the fragments of a new society glimpsed in the creativity of social movements, they tend not to lose sight of the fragility of collective visions of cosmopolitical democracy and environmental justice. Artistic engagement with ecological activism should also be seen as part of a wider transformation of the art world, in which curatorial and institutional innovations also play an essential part, with exhibition-making and institution-building as constitutive elements of artistic practice. There might be parallels here with the tendency for the line between the work of professional artists and the generalized creativity of hybrid collectives to become blurred, with, for example, artists insisting less on the singularity of artistic methods and their contribution to the tactics of protest movements. If we are indeed witnessing a step change in social attitudes, with environmental protests gaining momentum and winning support in the face of coordinated campaigns of cynical disinformation as the effects of climate chaos really begin to bite, then how is this new sense of urgency manifest in the art world and artistic practice? And at what stage will it become clear that the challenges posed by climate disorder are of such gravity as to oblige institutions and artists to abandon business as usual?

Art institutions have followed cities and national governments in declaring a climate emergency in recognition of the fact that it is no longer possible to continue blindly along the same path while the world drifts into irreversible ecological disaster.¹ As with political structures that were shaped in the age of fossil capitalism, the process of responding to the

far-reaching implications of making such declarations meaningful has only just begun. In the UK, the substance of the pledge of the Tate in July 2019 to put climate emergency “centre stage” lies in measures to reduce the institution’s carbon footprint by 10 percent by 2023, to offer more sustainably sourced and vegan food in its restaurants and cafés, and to adopt a “train-first” policy for artist and curatorial travel.² In formulating a proportionate response to the urgency and scale of climate breakdown, the Tate also made the “long-term commitment” to face the “hard truths” about the energy consumption of large museums, whose *raison d’être* lies in attracting millions of international visitors, preserving national collections, and making “art globally accessible.”³ The discrepancy between the immediate action demanded by an emergency situation and the incrementalism of long-term promises, as well as the reluctance of major art institutions to divest from the corrupt sponsorship of polluting corporations, raises serious doubts about their willingness and ability to change. While single-issue art activist groups, such as Liberate Tate, have for example used performative interventions to successfully campaign for Tate to cut its ties to the oil conglomerate BP,⁴ the path to fully extricate art museums from the infrastructures of fossil fuel capitalism is far from clear.

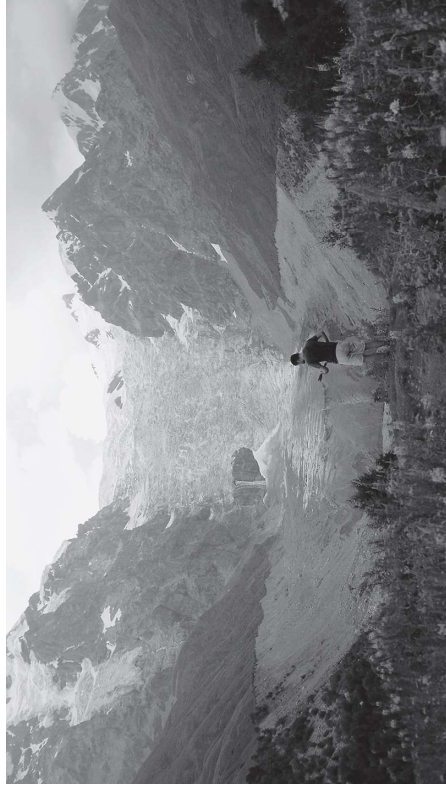
It is at the scale of smaller institutions that are less implicated in the mechanisms of the carbon economy and more responsive to the impetus of social movements and art activism that radical and experimental approaches can be observed. Another affiliate of the international movement to declare a climate emergency in art and culture, the Jindřich Chalupský Society in the Czech Republic, is attempting to support the demand of new activist movements that net greenhouse gas emissions be rapidly reduced to zero by demonstrating how such aims could be achieved in the art world. Justifying the revamped format of the annual exhibition of young artists shortlisted for the Jindřich Chalupský Award, the curators stated that it was “in response to the current climate situation” that the decision was made “to supply the whole exhibition with energy from alternative sources and to use the occasion to calculate, and think about, its approximate energy demand and carbon footprint.”⁵ They also suggested that the competitive model of the art prize itself also needs to change, stating that the insights offered by the participants into “the possibilities and limits of their own position as artists, activists, parents and cohabitants of this planet” are of far greater significance than “deliberations as to which artistic output is ‘better or worse’ and who should win this year.”⁶

It could be further observed that practical measures to mitigate against climate chaos are inseparable from the emergence of more ecological outlooks, while technocratic solutions that maintain patriarchal and capitalistic hierarchies will not bring the necessary transformation.



It is becoming harder to separate out the artistic component of social protest, as movements spontaneously develop tactics that appear to be inspired by artistic strategies and artists are fully immersed in collective struggles. As methods and rebellious logics have crossed over from art to activism, often leaving the orbit of the institutional art world and becoming invisible to it, they have been absorbed into and have transformed the practices of social movements. On the other hand, curatorial attempts to survey the field of art activism, such as the 2014 exhibition “Disobedient Objects” at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, have in effect downplayed the involvement of artists in social struggles by focusing on the artifacts of protest.⁷ An even more overt attempt to artificially separate the visibility of protest from the multilayered engagement of artists in political movements took place at London’s Design Museum with the exhibition “Hope to Nope: Graphics and Politics 2008–18,” which adopted the narrow framework of the role of graphic design and technology in “dictating and reacting to the major political moments of our times.”⁸ In a sign of the times however, more than thirty participating artists resisted the appropriation and neutralization of their art activism by withdrawing their work from the show in protest, at the museum hosting a private event for the arms trade.⁹ Months later, the same institution faced a boycott from Extinction Rebellion, which refused to allow its celebrated hourglass graphic to be shortlisted in an annual design show. The group criticized the museum for trying to artwash the activities of its insurance company sponsor that was deeply implicated in providing cover against political and environmental risks, releasing a press statement under the headline “no awards on a dead planet.”¹⁰

The starkness of the realization that there is no future for the reassuring paraphernalia of art awards, biennials, private views, art fairs, magazine write-ups, and blockbuster shows if the temperature on Planet Earth continues to rise and the diversity of the natural world is lost has transformed the debate around art and ecology. The question is no longer confined to a niche concern of environmental artists, nor does it seem enough to narrowly calculate the carbon footprint of artworks and solemnly promise to be more sustainable in the future, or to make a programmatic decision to communicate environmental issues to wider publics. It has now become an obligation and responsibility for artists to take sides and, like the many scientists, academics, and informed citizens who have heeded the call of radical movements such as Extinction Rebellion, to stand up and commit to taking direct action in order to halt the spiral toward ecological catastrophe. This intensification of art activism can be strongly felt in Oliver Ressler’s series “Everything’s Coming Together White Everything’s Falling Apart” (2016–19), which foregrounds the resoluteness and confident



Oto Hudec, still from: Concert for Adishi Glacier, 2017.

determination of the climate justice movement in carrying out acts of civil disobedience that disrupt the mechanisms and logic of petro-capitalism. A line has been crossed as the notion crystalized that for three decades politicians have failed to take action to reverse anthropogenic climate change, despite the fact that it has long been clear what needs to be done. Ressler's films follow activists across Europe and their substantive and more than symbolic interventions to shut down a lignite mine in Germany, block the building of a new airport in France, and halt deliveries of coal at a port in Holland.

The latest film in this series, "Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: Limity jsme my" (2019), is shot from inside the blockade by climate activists of the Břlina coal mine in the Czech Republic and focuses on the severity of the police response in kettling and then arresting the non-violent demonstrators. Over footage of the ruined landscape taken from inside a police van taking the protestors away, a semi-fictionalized female voiceover makes the point that "it's no longer enough that our movements fight climate change, because we are already living inside it; we need movements ready to fight a runaway catastrophe." She also voices the view—characteristic of a new phase of activist struggle, in which opposition to the social effects of capitalism and solidarity with the non-human suffering it causes are intertwined—that "capitalism is the Sixth Extinction embodied." The film raises the question of whether it is inevitable that the full oppressive apparatus of the state, clothed here in the bionic black uniforms of modern-day fascist stormtroopers, will be directed against all who dare to peacefully disrupt the smooth functioning of the extractivist system. On the one hand, the ingenuity of the trans-artistic creativity of the movement, exemplified by the Hong Kong protesters' tactics of "be water"¹¹ which itself replicates the non-human agency of the river, gives protesters the ability to stay one step ahead of the authorities. On the other hand, as the translation of the Czech language title of Ressler's film suggests, the claim "we are the limits" also carries the idea that activists are the last line of defense for the planet against the onslaught of the dead weight of the extractivist military-industrial oligarchic order.

The assumption that activism is primarily concerned with advancing Anthropocentric social and political agendas no longer holds. The momentousness of the Sixth Extinction, and the correlation between the experience of climate refugees from the Global South and the fate of non-human species that are forced to migrate or perish as local ecosystems break down and become unlivable, means that it is now almost impossible to think, speak, or act in terms of a narrowly human understanding of the social. Going forward, all activism will be cosmopolitical, in the sense that it seeks to take into account the rights and interests of all living and non-



Oliver Ressler, still from: *Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: Limity jsme my*, 2019, 4K video (color, sound), 10'.

living beings, forms, and phenomena of the planet. Activism has at the same time extended in meaning and range, integrating protest and direct action within a diversity of creative practices that have as their goal the transformation of attitudes toward the natural environment.

Slovak artist Oto Hudec has combined highly personal practices around empathy with natural phenomena—such as performing a musical composition to a melting ice sheet in the “Concert for Adishi Glacier” (2017)—with politically engaged and community-based works of social solidarity, which for example address the plight of the Romany minorities and climate refugees. When asked about how artists might respond to the climate emergency, he made a distinction between “promoting an artist name and brand through activism and active citizenship,” favoring the collectivism of the latter to the individualism of those forms of art activism that are addressed primarily to the art world.¹² Writing about the sheer magnitude of the change that is needed to face up to ecological crisis, he notes that “art occupies a secondary position,” posing the rhetorical question “in a time of climate chaos what place will art take anyway?”¹³ Turning to an uncertain future, Hudec looks forward to a time when, after a civilizational shift has taken place and the puzzle has been solved, “we as artists can also return to our artwork.”¹⁴



Liberate Tate, Licence to Spill, Tate Britain, June 2010. Courtesy: Liberate Tate.

- 1 See, for example, the website of Culture Declares Emergency: <http://cultureddeclares.org>.
- 2 "Tate Directors declare climate emergency," press release, July 17, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/tate-directors-declare-climate-emergency>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 "Tate is Liberated from BP by Liberate Tate," press release, March 2016, *Liberate Tate*, <http://www.liberatetate.org.uk/performances/tate-is-liberated-from-bp-by-liberate-tate/>.
- 5 See the press release for the Jindřich Chaloupecký Award 2019 on the website of Moravská Galerie: <http://moravska-galerie.cz/moravska-galerie/vystavy-a-program/aktualni-vystavy/2019/cjch-2019.aspx?lang=en>.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon, *Disobedient Objects* (London: V&A, 2014).
- 8 Description on the website of Design Museum London: <https://designmuseum.org/exhibitions/hope-to-nope-graphics-and-politics-2008-18>.
- 9 See, for instance, Jasmine Weber, "Artists Protest London's Design Museum As They Retrieve Works from Hope to Nope Exhibition," *Hyperallergic*, August 2, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/454036/artists-protest-design-museum-retrieve-works/>.
- 10 "NO AWARDS ON A DEAD PLANET: Extinction Rebellion UK refuse shortlisting in the Design Museum's Beazley Designs of the Year 2019," press release, May 30, 2019, on the Extinction Rebellion website: <https://rebellion.earth/2019/05/30/no-awards-on-a-dead-planet-extinction-rebellion-uk-refuse-shortlisting-in-the-design-museum-beazley-designs-of-the-year-2019/>.
- 11 See, Antony Dapiran, "'Be Water!': seven tactics that are winning Hong Kong's democracy revolution," *New Statesman*, August 1, 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2019/08/be-water-seven-tactics-are-winning-hong-kongs-democracy-revolution>.
- 12 Email interview with Oto Hudec, July 11, 2019.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.