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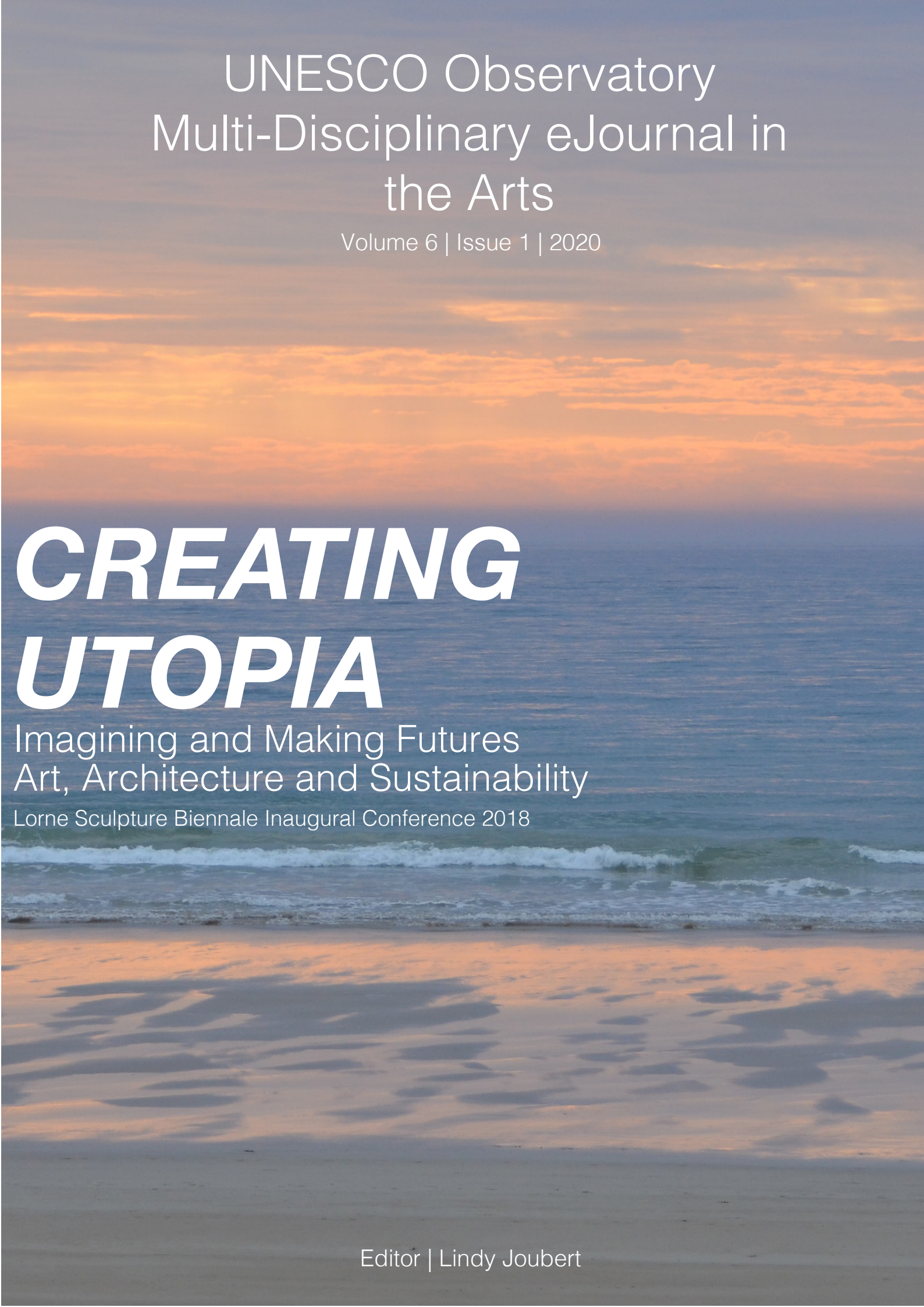

CREATING UTOPIA

Imagining and Making Futures
Art, Architecture and Sustainability

Lorne Sculpture Biennale Inaugural Conference 2018

Editor | Lindy Joubert

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ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal that promotes multidisciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence. Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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COVER IMAGE

Leon Walker
Photography at
The Lorne Sculpture
Biennale 2018

EDITOR'S LETTER

The sixth Lorne Sculpture Biennale, March 2018, was a vibrant festival celebrating the best of Australian and international sculpture. The stunning Lorne foreshore became a picturesque pedestal for a curated landscape of sculptures, presented alongside an exciting program of events devoted to pressing global issues of nature and endangerment, under the distinguished curation and visionary direction of Lara Nicholls, curator at the NGA Canberra. The inaugural conference, Creating Utopia Imagining and Making Futures: Art, Architecture and Sustainability was held at Qdos Gallery, Lorne, as part of the Biennale's curatorial theme of 'Landfall, Nature + Humanity + Art'. Keynote and invited speakers – conservationists, visual artists, architects and academics – reflected on issues and processes of social and environmental degradation, transformation and regeneration. The presentations came from a diverse and thought-provoking range of viewpoints offering innovative, and well researched future directions to the world's mounting problems.

Creating Utopia examined the green revolution – greater than the industrial revolution and happening faster than the digital revolution. The speakers were introduced by the inimitable Design Professor, Chris Ryan, whose elegant and thoughtful comments to each presenter added a distinctive contribution. Mona Doctor-Pingel, an architect from Auroville, India delivered her keynote address, 'Journeying to Oneness through architecture in Auroville, South India', discussing the natural and built landscapes found in the unique, social utopia that is Auroville, with an emphasis on experimental building techniques using local materials and craft principles, inspired by biology. I would like to thank all the presenters for their valuable contributions and this issue, volume 6, issue 1 of the 'UNESCO journal, multi-disciplinary research in the arts' www.unescoejournal.com is testament to their important research and life's work.

The conference was considered by all who attended to be a wonderful success. Inspired by the beautiful setting amidst the gum trees and singing birds surrounding the Qdos Gallery. Sincere thanks to all who attended, the excellent list of speakers, the team - Graeme Wilkie OAM for his overall, tireless support; Lara Nicholls the LSB curator for her helpful ideas and professionalism; Gillian Oliver for the superb food; Laurel Guymer, the behind the scenes angel of 'La Perouse' at Lorne who managed the bookings and accommodation and our diligent rapporteur, Jeremy Laing. The excellent Deakin intern student managed all computer glitches, problems and presentation hurdles. A very sincere thankyou to Evelyn Firstenberg who generously and professionally edited all the conference papers and most importantly, a very special thankyou to Seraphina Nicholls who has tirelessly and superbly designed and managed the collation and publication of this special issue. These people and others, the LSB committee and particularly Deakin University who gave generously for the LSB Education Program, enabled the 'Creating Utopia' conference to make a significant contribution to issues relating to climate change, environmental and global futures and the
role of the arts and sustainable planning.

Lindy Joubert

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New Approaches to Nature: Contemporary artists take over natural history museums

Paula Llull

ABSTRACT

Now more than ever, Nature is at the core of artistic creation. The inclusion in art of ideas like ecosystems, natural environment or extinction requires a medium that minimises the distance between the artwork and the spectator. The state of the art on ecology demands Nature be incorporated, not subordinated to, the creative process. Due to its hybrid character, installation art is the most appropriate means to create a new vocabulary around the idea of Nature that transits smoothly between the descriptive and the non-representational attributes of art. The work of Janet Laurence is one of the most remarkable contributions to this current. In particular, her installation Deep Breathing. Resuscitation for the Reef illustrates the commitment of the artist in communicating with feeling the threats such as global warming and its resulting acidification of oceans on particular natural environments.

KEYWORDS

Installation Art | Janet Laurence | Art and Science | Nature | Aesthetics | Great Barrier Reef

In 1859, landscape painter Frederic Edwin Church presented in New York his latest work, The Heart of the Andes, a breathtaking idealised panorama of the mountain chain on a canvas of 1.5 x 3m. Seen from an undefined place somewhat elevated, the exuberant tropical vegetation is represented, so meticulously in the foreground that it allows us to identify each one of the lichens, ferns and trees of the forest. A river is also thoroughly represented and so it is the impressive mountain range that stands out in the upper half of the painting. The vanishing point of perpetual snows is portrayed with such precise brushstrokes, like those in the foreground forest. Overall, the painting is a lesson on the diversity of landscapes in the South American tropics, propitiated by the presence of the Andes mountain range.

At the time of the opening, Church was one of the most outstanding representatives of a landscape painting that, as von Humboldt proposed, had the capacity to show to the public the exuberant diversity of the tropical world 'in a manner equally instructive and agreeable' (von Humboldt 1849: 74). In the second volume of its emblematic compendium of physical Geography, Cosmos, the naturalist points to literature, landscape painting and the cultivation of exotic plants and gardens as the most suitable means to transmit the knowledge of, and the appreciation for nature. Under the chapter 'Incitements to the Study of Nature', von Humboldt assesses landscape painting as a key instrument to disseminate the image of the tropics in South America, and gives the reader a series of suggestions to bring it in tune with the scientific advances of the moment, namely notes and colour sketches taken on the spot to serve as a basis for further work in the studio. Von Humboldt also encourages artists to make paintings of large dimensions, and does not elude, but extols, the importance of the imagination in obtaining an image both attractive and convincing [1]. He goes even further in his reflections on how to convey the image of these unknown landscapes to ordinary citizens, and proposes new forms of exhibition; not only would a detailed and large painting be the appropriate format, but also one in which the viewer could penetrate in some way into the landscape and be abstracted into contemplation detached from any external influence. This way, this experience would produce some impressions in the spectator who, years later, would remember them as 'natural scenes actually beheld' (von Humboldt 1849: 91).

The staging for The Heart of the Andes at the artist's studio was the culmination of the 'heroic painting' (von Humboldt 1849: 86) that proclaimed the naturalist. He was not the only one, with the painters of the School of Düsseldorf in Germany also known for being followers of von Humboldt's writings[2]. But in the case of Church, he created the ideal atmosphere for many public who attended the opening and left the studio with a feeling of having really contemplated the breathtaking view through the window of a mansion located in an Andean village. The artist granted a great importance to the exhibition space.

As frame, the artist designed a structure that was exquisitely worked in black walnut, reminiscent of an imposing window frame of a manor house, bevelled by the four sides to reinforce the feeling of depth, and with some curtains, also carved in wood, falling on it in a way that seemed to facilitate the view of the outside. Overall, frame and moulding reached a height of 4 metres. Light was a key element of the presentation, and Church boasted an innovative design which impacted all who visited the piece [3]. Inside the gloomy room, with the walls covered in black fabrics, the painting seemed to radiate its own light as if the light really came through that false window, even though it was actually from a source of hidden illumination. Every detail of the staging was perfectly studied to create an atmosphere, and invited people to immerse in it. The spectators did not contemplate a tableau, there was not a fourth wall, they were immersed in the space of the room, and even they were obliged to adopt a particular attitude using the binoculars that were included in the price of the entrance (Avery 1986: 58, 65). The contemplation of the painting through the binoculars served two objectives at the same time: on the one hand, it allowed a more detailed appreciation of the work, and on the other, it contributed to eliminating the boundaries of the framework and created the illusion of observing a real landscape.

As a complement, a leaflet invited the spectator to the aesthetic appreciation of the painting, although its authors also included some descriptions as if it were a traveller's guide that contributed to this 'immersion' in the scene. Finally, if we assume the comment made by the painter Whittredge (Avery 1986: 53) on the presence of palm leaves in the room (not unlikely, taking into account the avidity with which the artist followed the observations of Humboldt), the presentation of The Heart of the Andes put into practice in a single space the three areas of the creative world identified by Humboldt (1849) to stimulate the appreciation of nature. The reviews on this painting were directed more to the 'installation' than to its quality. Frederic E. Church had crossed the boundaries of painting by mixing scenography resources with others of a sensory kind that directly involved the public, and reinforced the natural element of the work.

Certainly, a painting or a sculpture can be very powerful visually, but they struggle between the representation or the self-referentiality which provokes that being 'outside' of the time of which it spoke Lyotard (in Blistène 1985: 32) and situates the spectator in a different plane. When we add the notion of nature into the human act of artistic creation, it immediately introduces a requirement to look for a new format that reduces this distance as much as possible, that integrates spectator and artwork in this process without subordinating it. As the artistic experimentation in (and with) Nature itself is increasingly questioned, the hybrid character of the installation appears as the most suitable means to create a new vocabulary around the natural that transits comfortably between the descriptive and the non-representational.

The art of the installation is free of the bonds of the canons, its flexibility allows it to confront materials and employ very diverse means. In this way, it is rich in references and allusions, and gives place to complex readings. An installation is unrepeatable, in each exhibition it adapts to its context and even though it uses the same materials it offers different images.

Geczy (2001: 2) describes the installation in intangible terms, 'an activity that activates a space. It is less a style than an attitude, trend and aesthetic strategy'. It could be explained, as with the sculpture, from its lack of definition, but it would not be fair to pigeonhole it in the 'anything goes'.

The interpretations on the physical involvement of the spectator from the point of view of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the perception (2012[1945]) are still valid. In the case of installations, when their content includes elements of our natural environment, they transport us to a very specific context in the real world, expanding our perceptual experience and critical capacities in parallel to the sculptural field.

Three strategic factors (the relative absence of form, the dissolution of limits; and the mixture of materials that invade the space) enable the incorporation of new themes or, at least, the refinement of some of them. In this sense, installations that deal with ecology and nature have found in these three elements a particularly inclusive medium. We all agree that the presence of installation art in museums no longer draws attention, and that theatricality as defined by Michael Fried fades away at the time that the installations incorporate the museum or gallery stage as part of its meaning. The incorporation of specific elements of the museum include the presence of other works in the same room or the systems controlling temperature and illumination, even the organisation of activities around the work. These elements respond to the artist's concern for the role of Art and its institutions in relation to one of the great issues that affect humanity. In the cultural context of the museum the confrontation of non-artistic materials, whether directly from nature or the result of laboratory research, is a new phase in the constant evaluation of the relationship between culture and nature. Once recoded as artistic objects, they play a double role: on the one hand, we identify them individually as what they are, objects belonging to an area that we know to a greater or lesser extent, but in any case, we suggest a set of intrinsic ideas and relationships. On the other hand, the meaning of the non-artistic materials is even more evident in the disposition of these objects that represent themselves in the context of the installation, and their confrontation with other artistic and museographic elements. In this double function of the object, the interference of the spectator is essential as he or she interacts with the work, transferring his/her experience to the real world. This very same process has happened in exhibition designs since the 1980s, when new ways of curating broke with the tradition of 'linear' displays in favour of an exhibition of 'ideas' (from German Gedankenaustellung)[4] that creates discussion areas on relevant issues from very diverse perspectives, ecology and environmental protection being two of the fields that have most benefited from this curatorial model. The combination of all these elements, both in exhibition and in the exclusive space of the installation itself, gives room to an experience of great aesthetic and critical impact.

Since the 1990s, there has been a debate on the need to update the aesthetic framework of Nature and to reflect on the implications of living in an era called Anthropocene. The artist, paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, is compelled to present the natural element not as an object, but as a dimension of our being.

This current of thought agrees that understanding Nature as a social construct of romantic references is a view of the past, and relocates the notion of ecology as an inalienable entity of our individuality and of the political and economic processes, in the line of Guattari's The Three Ecologies (2000[1989]). Consilience, the bridge between the different areas of knowledge, especially between humanities and science, is at the base of the interdisciplinary artistic projects in which social action often has a preponderant role. In this network of interconnections, the subject of nature definitely becomes ecology, and artistic practice is one step away from activism. Biennials, Triennials and global events prioritise the collective beyond the individual and they promote participatory strategies in the form of discussions, workshops and community art.

However, why do some artists with these very same concerns believe the space provided by museums is necessary to present their work? The museum, whatever its theme may be, is an institution that is always questioned: either it is up-to-date or remains anchored in the nineteenth century model. The museum remains the only space that allows individual reflection while promoting social relationships. Nicolas Bourriaud (2002[1998]) highlights the exhibition as the only cultural format that encourages an immediate expression, in contrast to the individual experience of reading, or contemplation in performing arts and cinema, which postpones the conversation to the end of the show.

As with Bourriaud's relational art, art installations and all their components, especially those coming from nature, also transform the social space. These elements, which can be either specimens or natural objects transferred to the interior of the museum, do not have a documentary character related to an action or intervention made by the artist outdoors. They are not 'displacements' like Robert Smithson's non-sites. They are the proof of what is on the outside, they are fragments of the hyper objects that we all inhabit and are unable to apprehend because of their magnitude (the biosphere, for example). Its relocation in the 'sacred' space of the museum offers an alternative perspective to those participatory strategies, which does not mean it is less political, but for a moment it isolates us from the gibberish of virtual relations, from the saturation of slogans about new habits to save the environment that risk being less and less effective.

In this context, the analysis of Janet Laurence's installations allows us to draft a rhetoric of the natural environment and the natural phenomena that, in some way, continues the existing dialogue between environmental aesthetics and hermeneutics, between activism and contemplation, or between art and science. To some extent, Janet Laurence's installations are, at the same time, the result of ecological awareness and the fruit of the consilience that comes out of the collaboration between different disciplines to disseminate knowledge around the complexity of our environment. Her work exemplifies the role of the artist as a bridge between aesthetic reflection and the recognition of a new paradigm in our perception of ecology.

Laurence's Deep Breathing. Resuscitation for the Reef is an installation that illustrates the potential of artistic interventions, when they take over the realm of sciences, to reach wider audiences beyond the art sphere.

Deep Breathing was exhibited in two different sites, both of which are natural sciences museums. In 2014-15, Janet Laurence was the artist-in-residence of the Australian Museum in Sydney, where she conducted her research. Later, the installation was opened at the iconic National Museum of Natural History of Paris during the most high-profile event on climate change at this time, the UN Conference on Climate Change held in Paris in October 2015. A few months later, back in Sydney, a smaller version was shown at the Australian Museum.

She decided to research the ecosystem of the Great Barrier Reef because it is the epitome of the environmental crisis we live in and, at the same time, reveals the difficulty for governments to maintain a series of sustainable actions in the fields of economy and industry even in developed countries like Australia, her own country. Current research predicts that coral reefs will be the first ecosystem which will disappear due to the climate change in a bit less than 100 years (Kolbert 2014: 130).

During her residency at the Australian Museum, Janet Laurence researched the specimens at the collection of malacology, and travelled to the Lizard Island Research Station on the northern end of the Great Barrier Reef. Once on the island, she was updated on the current research streams on coral resilience, and she visited the observation areas where researchers follow up the progress of those species affected by bleaching. After that first-hand experience, the artist acknowledged that in observing the researchers work she could recognise patterns on her own work as an artist.

In order to transfer this scientific information to the public sphere, Janet Laurence adopted the metaphor of a hospital to communicate the severity of the situation of the Great Barrier Reef and to create empathy for it. She used medical language to inspire confidence in its recovery. Janet translated to her own visual vocabulary the intensive care that she witnessed on Lizard Island. She arranged the characteristic lab material of her works in a way that referred to different actions taken to reanimate the Great Barrier Reef. The natural elements of the installation were gathered as assemblages according to their ‘vital condition’. There were sea creatures skeletons; shells specimens arranged by sizes; fragments of bleached coral connected to tubes that infused colour; dead organisms wrapped in gauze; thermometers to monitor water temperature; and specimens in glycerine jars. Next to the perspex cases where all these assemblages were kept there was also a video projection of her own manipulated subaquatic footage.

By focusing on the decline of the ecosystems, Janet Laurence shapes the characters of a new aesthetic that features the anthropogenic stray as defined by Barbara Creed (2017). Whether human or animal, this kind of stray succumbs to the harmful effects of human activity. They (and we) lose habitats and families, they (and we) have to emigrate or live in places that they (and we) do not recognize anymore because the places do not fit the role of a shelter.

Janet Laurence’s Deep Breathing tells us about all this in the space of a natural history museum which is endorsed by scientific research. The collaboration between art and science constitutes a productive way to disseminate the knowledge of our natural environment.

A lot has changed in terms of research methodologies since the times of von Humboldt, but it seems that the need of artists who translate scientific data into an empathic language is more present than ever. In this task, the museum provides that space for immersion and isolation claimed by the naturalist 150 years ago. Today, the museum is an interstice, a space where ideas and connections take place at their own pace, different from the rest of the world. Now the challenge is to embrace within this very place the aesthetic contemplation and the analytical observation in a way that builds a better understanding of the world in which we live.

NOTES

1 ’Landscape painting, though no merely imitative art, has, it may be said, a more material substratum and a more terrestrial domain: it requires a greater mass and variety of direct impressions, which the mind must receive within itself, fertilize by its own powers, and reproduce visibly as a free work of art’, in von Humboldt, A. (1849). Cosmos: Sketch of a physical description of the universe. London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans and John Murray, p. 86.

2 In particular, one of its members, Eugene von Guérard, participated in several scientific expeditions in Australia and painted precise landscapes of Victoria where he lived between 1852 and 1881. His view of Tower Hill deserves special mention. Tower Hill (1855) was used in the 1980s by the Ministry of Environment of Victoria as visual documentation to restore the vegetation in that area near Melbourne.

3 Kevin J. Avery describes thoroughly the reception received by this painting in New York and the subsequent travelling exhibition to other American cities in Avery, K. J. (1986). The Heart of the Andes exhibited: Frederic E. Church’s window on the Equatorial world. American Art Journal, 18(1) Winter, 52-72.

4Les Immatériaux, an exhibition curated by Jean-François Lyotard in 1985, set a precedent when it addressed the lack of artistic objects, the immateriality, establishing the concept of ‘exhibition of ideas’

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