



Art in the age of an ecological emergency

In the Anthropocene epoch, when our planet faces unprecedented environmental threats, artists are driven to find ways to imagine and create innovative solutions to the threat of climate change. Sue Gardiner reports.

Our imaginations can help save the world. A bold statement? Not according to artists addressing the issue of climate change nor to high profile UK economist Nicholas Stern. In a report welcomed just a few months ago by President Obama and other world leaders such as Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary-General, Stern calls on ambition and imagination to help reduce the risk of climate change to the world.

We're bombarded with facts and figures about climate change but are often slow to act or change as individuals. This is partly due to our perception of the issue, indeed to our inability to imagine change for the future. Studies show that the lack of concern among many about climate change may partly be because people perceive it's a distant issue that will affect us some time in the future, even though it's actually happening now.

Art can bridge that sense of distance. With artists and scientists collaborating more than ever, it's valid to ask what art can do in the Age of the Anthropocene, our current epoch which is marked by a significant and unprecedented impact of human activity on the Earth's climate and ecosystems. Humanity is now influencing the Earth on a scale akin to the great forces of nature.

Curator Abby Cunnane and LA-based New Zealand artist Amy Howden-Chapman are seeking answers to why contemporary art practice should engage with climate change. In their project, *The Distance Plan*, which has resulted in two publications, an exhibition and a seminar, held between 2012 and 2014 in Los Angeles and New Zealand, they note that art can create "a wider spectrum of possible actions for the individual". Howden-Chapman, whose father was part of the New Zealand delegation for the Kyoto Protocol



Left: Caroline Rothwell, *Weather Maker*, 2014. Bronze, rope, aerosol can, digital print on PVC, motion-sensor operated fan, approx 400 x 160 x 160cm (background *Composition 3*, 2014, aluminium on PVC). Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney. Photo: Jessica Maurer

Opposite page: Anne Noble, *Dead Bee Portrait, #6*, 2014, from the exhibition *No Vertical Song*, Two Rooms Gallery, Auckland, Festival of Photography June 2015

– an international treaty aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, acknowledges that people are suffering from ‘climate fatigue’, saying that they don’t want to be ‘lectured’ about it. “I think in this sense artists can simply present the issue in a new way. Art can provide sustained and nuanced attention to this issue that can balance the short flashes of attention it is given in mainstream media,” she says.

These discussions have been central to Howden-Chapman’s art practice over the last ten years. “From my first project around this issue, I’ve asked questions about how art might bring discussion of climate change into the public realm. *The Flood, My Chanting*, Wellington, 2008, was about sea level rise, and a 2013 work I made in Los Angeles, *The Sea’s Acidity*, was about ocean acidification but in general I’m most interested in climate change communication and how political pressures, economic interests, philosophical quandaries and emotion all further complicate and obfuscate the message.”

Her performance work *Uncertainty Italicized* considered the role language plays in progressing the public debate around climate change and her McCahon House Residency exhibition, *They say ten thousand years*, at Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Art Gallery, Titirangi, in late 2014, investigated the history of the anti-nuclear movement in New Zealand and its parallels with today’s movements to stop catastrophic climate change. “I find it inspiring that so many New Zealand artists from that era were willing to publicly talk, fight and make art for their political beliefs,” she says.

The “ten thousand years” in Howden-Chapman’s title refers to the time that scientists have said nuclear waste will remain dangerous, as well as the period of climate stability which has led to the development of our civilisation. In a time when that stability is seriously threatened, she explores the visual imagery and insignia associated with protest: flags, banners and signs which mobilise people to act. In a series



Left: Jasmine Te Hira, *Lost Content*, 2014, video still. Courtesy of Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust

Below: Amy Howden-Chapman, *Colour Schemes for Screaming Pyramids*, 2014, from the exhibition *They Say Ten Thousand Years*. Photo: Sam Hartnett



called *Colour Schemes for Screaming Pyramids* she made four pyramid-shaped banners, using colourful fabric strips assigned with symbolic meaning such as 'damage green,' 'survival blue' and 'future black'. There's an orange that refers to warning signs for nuclear waste amid a rainbow of protest colours.

For Unitec Art and Design student Jasmine Te Hira, art provides opportunities for wider meanings. "Art can facilitate expanded conversations through audience engagement and I'm pleased it's not all about me making a finite work with a finite meaning." Her video work *Lost Content* is featured – along with that of six other New Zealand-based, Pacific Island art students – in an innovative online exhibition called *The Drowned World*, curated by Daniel Michael Satele in 2014 for the Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust. The exhibition explores the intimate connection between human life and water. "As the twenty-first century promises rising sea levels and diminishing supplies of drinkable water, negotiating humans' relationship with this crucial resource will become an increasingly urgent task for societies and individuals," writes critic and academic Satele.

Water takes on many meanings for Te Hira. "Water hugs our country as well as isolates us," she says. In *Lost Content*, 2014, water in the form of ice literally hugs her body. She filmed a heavy bracelet of ice suspended from her wrist until it melted, dropping from her arm about two hours later. The impact on her skin is increasingly obvious as it reddens and she starts to shake. During the slow melting process imbedded fragments of hair, fingernails and pearls drop out of the bracelet. Each small object reflects a sense of grieving for the dead, drawing on both Victorian mourning jewellery traditions and Maori notions of the tapu (sacredness) of the bodies of the deceased. Interestingly, the work has also prompted in audiences a sense of grieving for the planet, the melting icecaps and the awareness of human frailty.

Janine Randerson, artist and AUT Programme Leader in Media and Performance Art, also highlights the role of art practice in climate change discourse. We talk in her Auckland office in mid-December amid a heavy thunder storm. "Unusual storminess is one of the predictions for New Zealand's future!" she reminds me. Randerson knows what she's talking about – she completed her PhD in 2012 on the topic of "Weather as Media" and has spoken on the issue for international conferences with a focus on a new closeness between art and science. In this context she says artists have different ways of working that engage the senses and intuition as well as logic and rationality.

"Over time artists have responded to big issues in different ways – from the creation of the spectacular to activism to abstract sound and visual interactivity which draws people in to more complex layers of information. As an artist I'm interested in responding to levels of tacit knowledge, working locally with projects that tie into the global discussion," she says.

One of those local projects, *Other Waters – Art on the Manukau*, involved Randerson and a group of artists (including Lisa Reihana, A.D. Schierning, Judy Darragh, Ruth Watson and the Local Time collective) responding to the Manukau Harbour. The group exhibited at Te Tuhi in Pakuranga and held a series of performances and screenings around the old Mangere Bridge area itself, in November 2014 where Randerson's work, *Until it Runs Out, (Portal)*, 2014, was screened on the Holcim silos at the Onehunga port. Then at Te Tuhi, in an expanded format, the work was re-presented as two simultaneous views of the Manukau Harbour area – the bridge structures, the extensive redevelopment of Onehunga beach, and foreshore birdlife and vegetation. "The Manukau, often seen as 'other' in the Auckland imaginary, is one of our most abused harbours," she explains.

In June 2015 Randerson joins other New Zealand artists working in performance and spatial practice to address the creative influence of weather in this era of climate change at The 2015 Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and

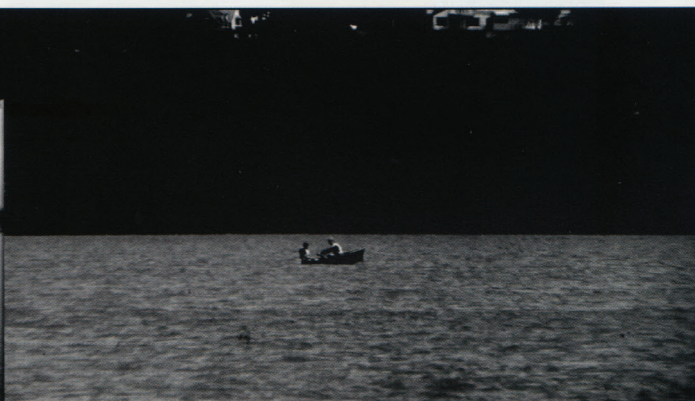
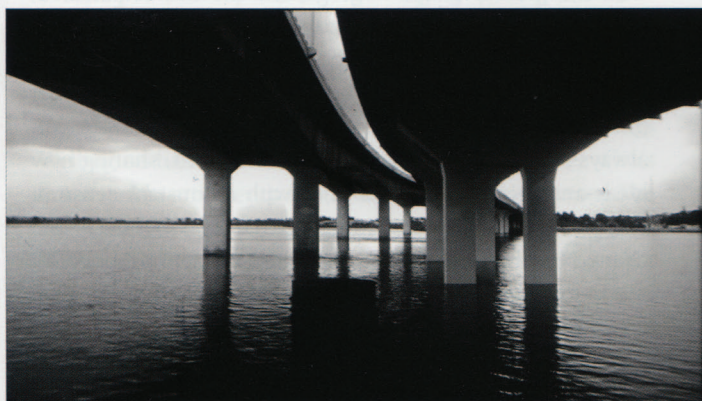
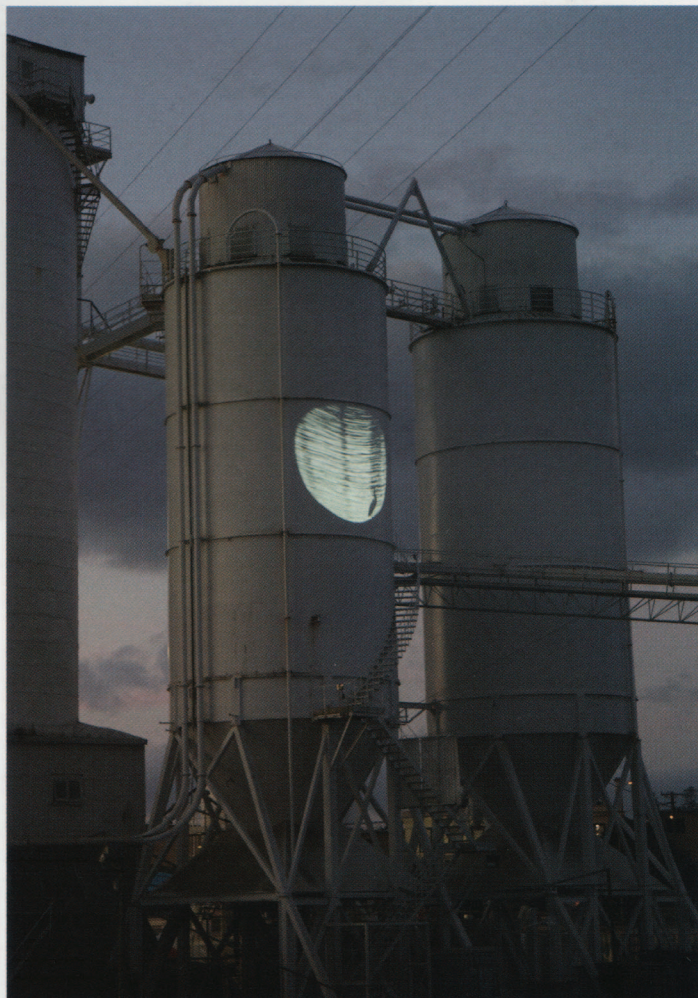
Right: Janine Randerson, *Until It Runs Out (Portal)*, 2014, projection on Holcim concrete silos, Other Waters Event, November 2014, black and white 16mm film transferred to HD video

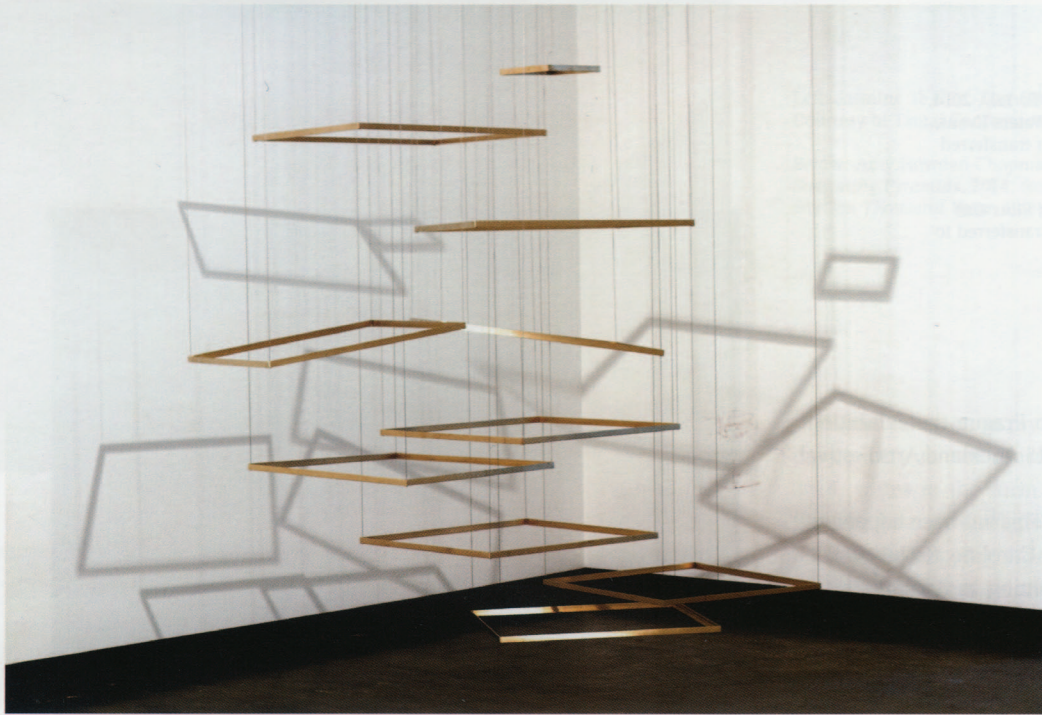
Below: Janine Randerson, stills from *Until It Runs Out (Portal)*, 2014, black and white 16mm film transferred to HD video

Space (PQ15). Before it heads off to Prague the exhibition, *Ahua o te Rangi*, is included in the 2015 Auckland Arts Festival (7 to 15 March) at AUT University.

Can the weather be manipulated? This has been happening for some time, Sydney-based artist Caroline Rothwell tells me. "Cloud seeding has been happening in Australia since the 1960s and was used during the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing so it wouldn't rain during the opening and closing ceremonies. The development of geo-engineering – the science of manipulating the earth's climate in order to control global warming is an area of research that fascinates me. My artwork has developed over many years looking at colonisation, and now as I move into thinking about the colonisation of the atmosphere and the stratosphere, I see it as the next big quagmire we're in."

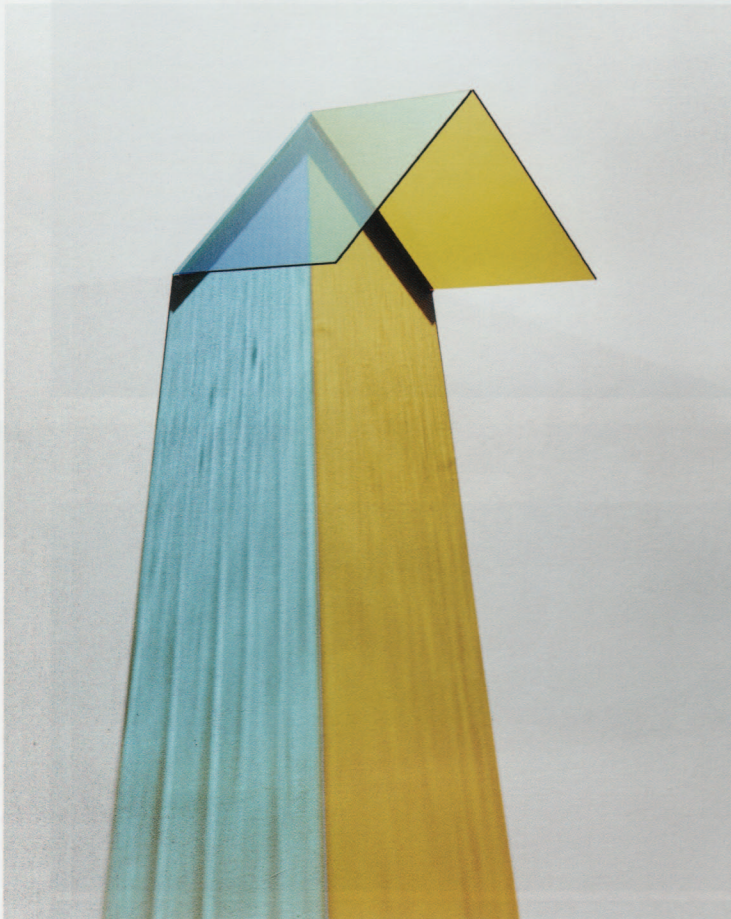
In 2014 Rothwell was included in the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: *Dark Heart* at the Art Gallery of South Australia, and had her first solo exhibition at Roslyn Oxley Gallery in Sydney. In that exhibition she showed sculptures such as *Weather Maker*, a bronze figure of a little girl holding a large PVC balloon connected to motion sensors – her own interactive weather station. Responsive to the movement of viewers in the gallery, the work implies that human interaction, as well as technology, will affect change in the





Left: Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, *Ten Parts Whole #3*, 2014, brass, stainless steel wire

Below: Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, *Subtle Field #1*, 2014, glass, brass, blue, yellow, 90 degree angle, one light source. Both works from the exhibition *Field Work*, 2014, Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne, 2014



future. “There are many international exhibitions happening around climate change at the moment. The artist’s voice is important in this contemporary conversation, not as a didactic statement but engaging in the conversation, making work that speaks to the ‘right now’, and what’s going on around us. In Australia we’re seeing extraordinary things happening like Prime Minister Tony Abbott declaring coal is good for humanity. It’s a strange space to be in at the moment,” concludes Rothwell.

Being ‘in the moment’ is also a strong motivating factor for artist Sarah Smuts-Kennedy. “I don’t want to talk *to* the problem anymore, to use language that addresses some narrative ‘out there;’” she says as she reflects on how she recalibrated her art practice significantly after completing a Masters of Fine Arts at Elam in 2012.

“In previous work, made here and in Australia, I was trying to deal with big issues – coal mining, deforestation, CO2, the world wide economy, and the problems were too big. I needed to pull back, to simplify and to focus literally on the space I’m in right now; to become an active generator in my own projects and in the same space as the viewer,” says Smuts-Kennedy.

Much of her invigorating thinking has developed in sync with the growth of the large garden she has established, using biodynamic and permaculture principles, at Maunga Kereru north of Auckland. “I see the non-linear principles of biodynamic gardening as being strongly linked to my art practice – it provides ways to feed back into the present, always seeking how things are interconnected, sharing new ideas and reconfiguring old ones with a constant sense of energy. We can’t change anything like the big issues of climate change if we don’t get how connected we are in the world, then engage our intellect and our imaginations and push forward into the world.”

Smuts-Kennedy is interested in developing a language that allows her to respond to and transform invisible energy/form existing in space and in creating strategies for the viewer to experience it.

Two recent projects demonstrate her thinking about this interconnectedness between culture and nature in the Anthropocene. Last year Smuts-Kennedy applied her divination skills to plot electro-magnetic fields in the space at Sophie Gannon Gallery in Melbourne for an exhibition, *Field Work*. The revealed grid structure then determined the placement of her sculptural installations such as *Ten Parts Whole #3*, which is a series of lightweight brass frames suspended from wires. The frames look like divining rods with their minimal, grid-like form, delicately giving shape



Will Ngakuru, *Tilt*, 2014, installation view at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photo: Bryan James

to the invisible energy in the room. Other works like *Subtle Field #1* affect changes in the space through the intersection of light. The exhibition title infers a scientific expedition but also brings to mind the 'field' as a concept belonging to minimal abstraction.

Smuts-Kennedy is also working on a collaborative project titled *The Park* with artist and writer Taarati Taiaroa. In 2014 they installed six beehives and bee food gardens in Victoria Park, Auckland, and some more 'pasture paintings' (designated plots of land planted with specific pasture plants) further afield, aiming to generate food for bees throughout the city. "There's an amazing line being drawn between the bees and us; there are invisible connections on many levels," says Smuts-Kennedy.

The public can participate by lodging 'pollen hotels', or information about safe sources of food for bees online and the project will culminate with a honey harvest from the different sites in April this year.

"Enlivening connections is one of the roles of art," says Wellington-based artist and beekeeper Anne Noble, who's interested in art-science crossovers. She recently chaired The Royal Society of New Zealand's seminar "Re-integrating Art, Design and Science for a Future World", which asked what new future might be created if artists, scientists, designers and engineers worked collaboratively to create innovative solutions to urgent issues. She sees links between the science lab and the artist's studio but advocates for artists to bring a different perspective. "Artists are not there to engage in science communication. That's not why art is interested in science. Art sits as a bridge across different realms of discourse," she says. "Bringing an expansive understanding about what it means to be fully human in the world. Art can be better than any other discipline for this."

Noble has worked with bees as her subject for some time. During a recent Fulbright residency at Columbia College in Chicago she researched, photographed and lectured about the decline of the honeybee. "Bees are being impacted by reduced biodiversity, and I believe that what we're seeing happening to the bees is happening also to us – bees act as indicators."

But there was a problem. Noble became severely allergic to bees and couldn't handle them. She's improving with treatment but it meant that during her time in Chicago she had to work with dead bees. "Local bee clubs helped me out with a supply and I made dead bee portraits using microscopic imaging devices. I then rendered the bee images back into three dimensions using a 3D printer. They became like imaginary sculptures of a species that perhaps no longer exists."

Noble has a busy year ahead with experiments underway for new bee works and exhibitions planned at Bartley + Company Art in Wellington and at Two Rooms in Auckland. In April this year she will undertake a residency at Abbaye de Noirlac in France.

Climate change is also threatening the kauri tree and *The Kauri Project*, created in 2013 by Ariane Craig-Smith and Chris McBride, uses art as a tool to raise awareness about the much loved tree. Craig-Smith explains: "According to our advisor Dr Nick Waipara, who is Principal Advisor for Biosecurity at Auckland Council, global warming has caused an acceleration of the kauri dieback disease as soils are not getting cold enough over winter to knock the disease back."

Craig-Smith and McBride have developed a series of art and education projects around the future of the kauri. The latest project is *A Delicate Balance*, at Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Art Gallery in Titirangi (5 March until 19 April 2015) and includes work by A.D. Schierning, Ava Seymour, Ian Clothier, Phil Dadson's Kauri Choir and Will Ngakuru's series of connected diorama-like boxes which provide glimpses into forests as taonga, revealing the interconnected nature of all things.

So artists are making a difference by imagining our future. In the words of Sophie Jerram, curator of *Now Future – Dialogues with Tomorrow*, an interdisciplinary public forum about art and ecology: "I predict the artistic voice will continue to emerge... as a more staunch and militant one in New Zealand... artists who are unafraid to give voice and perspective to alternative positions can only become more important." (from *The Distance Plan #2*, Distance Plan Press, St Paul St Publishing, AUT University, 2014).