

art/new media

"Janine Randerson's *Weather as Medium* inventively maps out the newly forming field of meteorological art. Working across contemporary art, environmental science, indigenous theory, and activism, this study compellingly demonstrates how weather has become a multiform aesthetic medium for capturing our present atmospheres and future climates."

—JENNIFER GABRYS, Professor of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London, author of *Program Earth: Environmental Sensing Technology and the Making of a Computational Planet*

"Paint, ink, stone, and photographic emulsions are familiar artistic media. In *Weather as Medium*, Janine Randerson shows us that all things familiar and unfamiliar—bodies, machines, electrons, pollution—are the new media of a new efflorescence of evocative, kinetic, and performative meteorological art. It's your atmosphere, and the new media artists play vital roles in recalibrating our relations with it."

—JAMES RODGER FLEMING, Dana Professor of Science, Technology, and Society, Colby College

"Addressing the entrance of weather as media into art, Randerson provides a compelling account of the historical and contemporary diversity of creative practices that negotiate between global meteorological systems and ground-truth perspectives in a world of changing climates, when weather matters like never before."

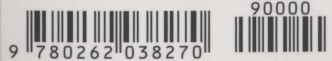
—T. J. DEMOS, Professor of Visual Culture at UC Santa Cruz, and author of *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology and Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*

"Amid increasing evidence of climate change, Janine Randerson's *Weather as Medium* offers a timely catalogue of the varied ways that artists have addressed and interpreted meteorological effects. From artworks that focus on the subtle motion and feel of wind, to the evanescent drama of lightning, to the calamitous breakup of icebergs, Randerson shows how meteorological art translates the abstractions of vast data sets and 'complex systems' science, reconnects it to our immediate sensorial and spiritual experiences of weather, and creates an alternative framework for critically articulating the anxieties of climate change. By considering the works of indigenous art practitioners alongside those of Western artists, Randerson draws a dynamic map of the vortices within this field of artistic exploration."

—JANET ABRAMS, artist and coeditor of *Else/Where: New Cartographies of Networks and Territories*

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Weather as Medium
Toward a Meteorological Art
JANINE RANDERSON



Weather as Medium

Toward a Meteorological Art

JANINE RANDERSON

The Paris agreement made during COP21 was a quasi decision that only goes part-way toward addressing the mammoth task we face in reducing emissions (Latour 2016). The aspiration to keep temperatures below two degrees was thwarted by the current emissions targets submitted by participating countries, which are predicted to cause a dangerous rise of at least three degrees. This points to the disturbing fact that the dominant political regimes have not yet learned from past environmental injustice; in Arendt's words, remembrance is one of the most important "modes of thought", yet there is "no mind to inherit and to question, to think about and to remember" (2006, 6–7). Although all entities human and nonhuman have equal agency insofar as they act on other entities, we humans are the preeminent species to have accelerated global warming. The irrefutable fact of climate change due to anthropogenic forcing remains our legacy for future generations.

Artists faced with the climate issue confront Adorno's perennial question—"What is to be done?"—in times of political crisis. The answer, Adorno says, should not be an automatic reflex before the political thought is fully comprehended, nor should it emerge from a "blind praxis" (2005, 276). We feel our way through the current situation of political inertia. Despite what we know from the IPCC reports and media coverage, and the real experience of severe weathers that are the effects of the changing climate, many politicians, industrialists, and citizens engaged in their immediate daily life would rather forget about climate change for the short term. Stengers addresses "all of us who are living in suspense" by acknowledging that there is a "quasi-stupefying contrast—between what we know and what mobilizes us" (2015, 22–23). We know we ought to do something, and only a small push might be necessary to join the growing tide of people who are prepared to work out what that something is. The scientific community's attempt to spur government action by rendering data transparent through reports, policy guidelines, and visualization processes is not producing the necessary changes in politicians. Therefore, the artist's task is not so much consciousness raising as it is signaling to "others out there" that they are part of a community of concern and willing to keep the climate issue in the foreground. Art, I will argue in this chapter, finds ways to do this through inventive material, language-based, and performance practices.

In the essay "Commitment" ([1977] 2007), Adorno cites the long-running controversy between "committed art" and "autonomous art," which he believes are at odds with each other, mustering Sartre and Brecht's plays to his argument. Socially committed art can run the risk of functionalizing art as a mouthpiece of science or institutional politics; on the other hand, artists who avoid political content altogether abdicate their responsibilities as political citizens. He writes, "A work of art that is committed strips the magic from a work of art that is content to be a fetish, an idle pastime for those

who would like to sleep through the deluge that threatens them, in an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political" (Adorno [1977] 2007, 177). Autonomous works of art, or "art for art's sake," is a "spiritual catastrophe" in Adorno's eyes. He is equally cautious about conspicuously political artworks, on the other hand, in which "for the sake of political commitment, political reality is trivialized." The danger is a reduction of the political effect ([1977] 2007, 184–185). Taking these pitfalls on board, artworks that attend to the issue of climate change directly run the risk of becoming didactic or unsubtle expositions. Yet, for the climate activist, conceptual art strategies may seem inadequate for the urgent task of social change.

I argue, nonetheless, that when artists use creative strategies such as playfulness, inference, or evocations of the atmospheric conditions that envelop us, art is working politically. As I work through the perennial question of the political value of art, Arendt's view that *we cannot act in isolation* is vital. Adorno observes how the "bourgeois coldness" of social and ecological inequity has become accepted as a "law of nature" (2005, 274). Yet, against all odds, Adorno and Arendt go on searching for a better political future after the trauma of the holocaust. Many artists today also foster attentiveness to others, both human and nonhuman, beyond our immediate, individual demands by offering alter experiences to media or scientific reporting of climate affairs.

Practicing Collaborative Language

Art publications and events are critical platforms to resist the neoliberal drive for progress—less as reactive dealings with the ecological "crisis" than through the forging of sustainable relations over a longer period. For Amy Howden-Chapman (Aotearoa New Zealand; United States), performance events, installations, videos, and printed publications are means to engage with the language of climate politics. The Distance Plan Press (which produces a journal, among other publications) is curator Abby Cunnane (New Zealand) and Howden-Chapman's publication platform. *The Distance Plan* journal was launched in Wellington, New Zealand, in 2010, as a connective forum for people engaged with climate politics from infrequently crossed discipline boundaries. Essays, page works, and interviews are invited from a diverse range of contributors, including urban planners, environmental researchers, pedagogues, migration lawyers, indigenous activists, and artists, all to try to "figure out what art can do" to counter the numbing effects of the climate crisis. By connecting artists to other fields of knowledge, *The Distance Plan* tests "what specific ways art, as a field of practice, can contribute to addressing the problem of climate change, and what can be achieved through 'companionship' with those in other disciplinary fields" (Cunnane 2016). Communities of

care are sustained in the journal by returning to a core group of artists as their work evolves over time.

Cunnane describes the journal as “a working model of a way of worrying at a problem together” by practicing the often-complex languages of science and other areas of discipline expertise in an art context. *The Distance Plan* orients itself away from the academic elitism of much climate discourse and toward the everyday. Often, Cunnane suggests, climate change art obscures the intersections between environmental well-being and social justice for vulnerable communities. Instead, Cunnane and Howden-Chapman ask what climate change means for everyday life and socialize these ideas through exhibitions and the online readership of *The Distance Plan*. For Cunnane, the publicness of the platform invites a collective processing of what is possible and what can be voiced on the climate issue in a socially accountable form.

To use art’s capacity to speak “immediately of the immediate” (Adorno 2002, 15), Cunnane and Howden-Chapman have developed a lexicon that connects climate warming to governance, the refugee crisis, materialist feminisms, the impact of technologies, and financialization of life-worlds; this lexicon is intended to operate alongside the specific language of environmental scientists. *Art & Climate Change: A Lexicon* brings together a broad range of invited writers to generate new or recognize existing terms and to provide descriptions as a focusing device to understand the climate crisis. Terminology in the lexicon ranges from brute force infrastructure, citizen science, deni-holism, climate debt, climate hostage, and precautionary principle to social tipping points, among others. In the editorial for the 2016 issue of *The Distance Plan*, containing *Art & Climate Change: A Lexicon*, Cunnane and Howden-Chapman write: “Through proposing neologisms and promoting less well-known terms, we wish to propel interdisciplinary discussion, and by extension accelerate the pace of action. Through this lexicon we propose that the science around climate change is developing so rapidly that we need new language to articulate its processes and effects. The lexicon is also based on the recognition that evolving science produces evolving policy, and politics must be commensurate with this” (Cunnane and Howden-Chapman 2016). Artwork is a means to punctuate indifference and silence by galvanizing the imagination, in service of the political statement that “climate change is now” (Howden-Chapman 2016). Joint publication is a key mechanism to put collaborative language into action.

Howden-Chapman suggests that the onus on artists is not to solve the problems of climate change alone, but to imagine things differently by bringing social narratives to bear on ecological problem-solving. *All the News I Read about Climate Change in 2014* (2015) is a printed publication published by Distance Plan Press that encapsulates Howden-Chapman’s research-based art practice. In a thick, black ring binder, a

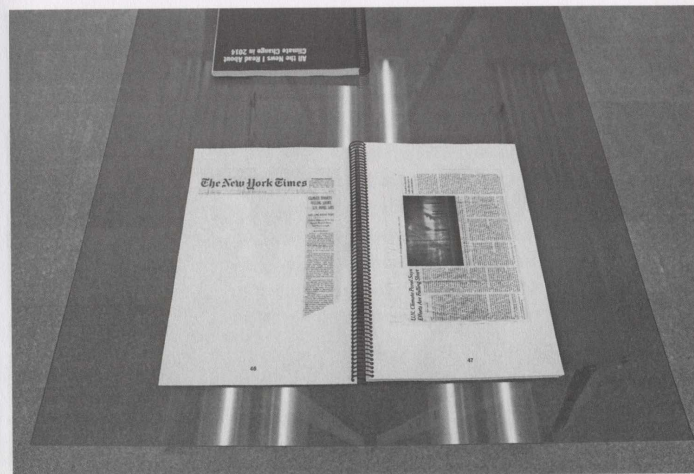


Figure 6.1

Amy Howden-Chapman. *All the News I Read about Climate Change in 2014*. 2015. Artist book. Image courtesy of the artist.

vast number of newspaper clippings are cut from the papers and arranged in pointed juxtaposition. The IPCC committee summarizes all published scientific literature on climatology and related issues in biology, hydrology, and oceanography based on peer-reviewed research, Howden-Chapman, on the other hand, collects climate-related clippings on a smaller, domestic scale, from a vast array of journalistic news sources. This potted newspaper collection, however, reveals some societal trends: for instance, an increase in lifestyle articles that report on the economic impacts of climate change, such as ski areas closing or the problems retailers have selling winter clothes. The absurdist task of keeping abreast of the overwhelming number of reports evidences one citizen’s full-time attempt to process the realness of climate change, producing a sense of futility that many of us will recognize. Howden-Chapman operates through an (almost) obsessive level of research into the projects she launches, a relentless search for patterns in the language of the public debate around climate change.

In the performance *Uncertainty Italicized* (2013–2014), Howden-Chapman responds to the cautious use of a scale of “likelihood” in the predictions made and conclusions



Figure 6.2

Amy Howden-Chapman. *Uncertainty Italicized*. 2013–2014. Performance image at 2201 Gallery, Los Angeles, 2013. Image courtesy of the artist. [See color plate 13]

drawn by the IPCC reports' scientific contributors. *Uncertainty Italicized* was first performed at 2201 Gallery, Los Angeles, and then again in 2014 at YNKB Artspace, Copenhagen, Denmark. The piece is based on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's guidance note (released in 2013) asking scientific contributors to the fifth assessment report to maintain consistency by adhering to a "likelihood scale." The performers in this event are Howden-Chapman's friends, performance artists and actresses, and people roped in—in a mobilization of her immediate community around a shared matter of concern. In the prologue to the piece, Howden-Chapman is in the spotlight, dancing to fast Spanish music. At first, she dances in a state of apparent abandon, perhaps in a last dance of freedom in the carbon-fueled economy. Then, as the intense orb-like spotlight grows larger, she begins running on the spot more anxiously, even desperately, running as if there is an internal conflict that she can't escape from. She tries to run both backward and forward simultaneously, trapped; the movements are an attempt to "embody" the unknown atmospheric future. She comes to rest and reads aloud from a piece of paper, at which point the tone of the performance changes,

becoming more sober. "Uncertainty exists so that it is possible to see certainty, that is, alternatives" is the last line Howden-Chapman reads.

Following the prologue, seven performers enter, dressed in pastel shades, and stand in two rows, one on each side of the room. The spotlight glints off glass panes they each hold up and momentarily blinds the audience. A male voice reads out a measure of certainty, taken from the likelihood scale of the IPCC guidance notes. Each time the narrator reads a scientific fact, using a qualified term to indicate the level of scientific agreement, one of the seven performers steps forward, holding a pane of colored glass aloft that is etched with the same word or phrase. The precarious nature of ornamental glass, etched with melted metals, lets light through yet may shatter; the soft pinks and blues of the glass suggest the fragile results of a litmus test. The narrator announces each performer by name. The following is an excerpt from the script:

It is Mireya: *Very likely* that there has been an overall decrease in the number of cold days and nights and an overall increase in the number of warm days and nights.

It is Scott: *Likely* that anthropogenic influences have led to warming of extreme daily minimum and maximum temperatures at the global scale.

It is Scott: *Likely* that there has been an increase in coastal high water related to increases in mean sea level.

It is Scott: *Likely* that anthropogenic influences on increasing coastal high water due to an increase in mean sea level.

It is Sarah: *Virtually certain* increases in the frequency of warm daily temperature extremes and decreases in cold extremes will occur in the twenty first century at the global scale.

It is Tyler: *Exceptionally unlikely* that the global pattern of warming can be explained without external forcing. That is human action.

It is Gracie: *Unlikely* that emission growth rates will be significantly moderated during the coming decades.

The pragmatic descriptiveness of the qualified scientific language somehow intensifies into an affective cry as the layers of text mount up. To conclude the performance, each performer lines up silently in turn, holding the glass sheets high once more. In silence, the performers take one step forward, then take one step backward, and then file out of the room. Victoria Wynne-Jones likens the performers' collective movement to "a colourful human wave, an ebb and flow of certitude" (Wynne-Jones 2013, 3), whereas I feel as if I have witnessed a sensory, ritualized form of protest.

In the likelihood scale of the IPCC, the italics leap out as recurrent notes of caution in the scientific findings. Howden-Chapman explores the complex attempt to quantify greatly differing opinions by using qualifiers. The Fifth IPCC Summary for Policymakers

states that a level of confidence is expressed using qualifiers: very low, low, medium, high, and very high, and it notes that “assessed likelihood should be typeset in italics, e.g., *very likely*.” Howden-Chapman’s script mirrors this language for assessing the likelihood of an outcome on a scale extending from “virtually certain 99–100% probability” all the way down to “exceptionally unlikely 0–1%” (IPCC 2014). The Fifth IPCC Summary also acknowledges a human lack of motivation, in many cases derived from a lack of agency, which means we are slow to act: “Inertia in many aspects of the socio-economic system constrains adaptation and mitigation options (*medium evidence, high agreement*). Innovation and investments in environmentally sound infrastructure and technologies can reduce GHG emissions and enhance resilience to climate change (*very high confidence*). [4.1]” (ibid.). These observations reveal the social dimensions of climate change that the IPCC contributors are beginning to consider. Such statements, we might note, also have high agreement outside of the scientific community, where art performs the distribution of complex information through the senses.

Howden-Chapman describes *Uncertainty Italicized* as an attempt to “embody uncertainty” through patterns of color, language, and movement. The work is part of an ongoing investigation of human decision-making—specifically, how a series of smaller choices leads to larger, collective decisions (Howden-Chapman 2016). Howden-Chapman has a keen sense for the ways in which language becomes more or less flexible in different cultural spheres and how such flexibility is signaled and controlled. A secondary processing of language takes place in scientific writing that is obtuse to those outside the world of science and policymaking. The omniscience of the hundreds of scientific voices and the now-hidden processes of evaluation of underlying evidence and agreement behind the IPCC report are countered by the naming of specific participants in *Uncertainty Italicized*. To make complex information easier to understand, each statement read is associated with a real person and with visual clues of color (Wynne-Jones 2013). Each performer’s character or a color (of the glass, the costumes) can help us hold information about a likelihood that we may not be able to mentally process in the details of the IPCC document.

Voices, gestures, and signs are special forms of praxis in the *bios politikos* that sustain the political function of the polis (Arendt 1958, 13); such events draw a community together to collectively absorb the implications of scientific findings. *Uncertainty Italicized* also acts like an artist’s bulletin, interpreting the IPCC reports from a tangent to work through these foundational documents of our time. Howden-Chapman’s willingness to “linger with the particular”—in this case, the humble italic—has an affinity with Adorno’s strategy to combat brutality, whether in language or the ecosystem with particular detail. His last hope for thought is a gaze that is “averted from the beaten

track,” from which fresh concepts might surface, “not yet encompassed by the general pattern” (Adorno [1951] 2002, 67–68). In art as well, this indirect gaze might find a means to communicate otherwise.

Nonhuman Rights

The art practices in this chapter can be located along a spectrum of tactics from direct and unmodified communication of science fact to a more abstract or conceptual engagement. At one end, we might place the theater piece *2071*, directed by Katie Mitchell; at the other, Layne Waerea’s *Free Social Injunctions*, which speculates on cultural understandings of fog and air. *2071*, a theater performance at the Royal Court in London, consisted of a monologue from climate scientist Chris Rapley, cowritten with dramaturg Duncan Macmillan, that focuses on the link between fossil fuels and climate change. The climate scientist’s own words, subtly crafted by the screenplay writer, carry the weight of the performance. The *Guardian* gave *2071* a five-star review and rated it as a “compelling” vehicle calling for urgent collective action through the calm and factual delivery of a scientist seated centrally on the stage (Billington 2014).

The mere presence of a scientist, firmly ensconced within the cultural sphere, had a sobering and even a politicizing effect among the theatergoers. For performance theorist Peta Tait (2016), this work raised the following problem: When there are so many means for the arts to communicate about climate change beyond merely giving information, what else can performance do? On the other hand, the simple displacement of a scientist into a theater appears to connect a new audience to climate politics. The voice of a scientist, responsible for the “real” analysis of our physical world yet placed in a cultural forum, invites different stakeholders to invest in climate-mitigating action. Adorno’s politics encourages reflection from within practical action: “Thinking has a double character: it is immanently determined and rigorous, and yet an inalienably real mode of behavior in the midst of reality” (Adorno [1969] 2005, 261). We are brought head on into an encounter with climate science from which we cannot easily walk out or switch off in the theater context.

American artist Amy Balkin’s video *Reading the IPCC Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers* (2008) is also a direct conduit for scientific findings reframed within a nonscientific art context. The video work was shot in one continuous take; with a clear pedagogical intent, the artist carefully enunciates each sentence with appropriate gravity to the IPCC document. Like political philosopher Noam Chomsky in artist Cornelia Parker’s video *Chomskian Abstract* (2007), Balkin is spotlighted against a studio-black background. The looped video (38 minutes, 53 seconds) is a direct appeal

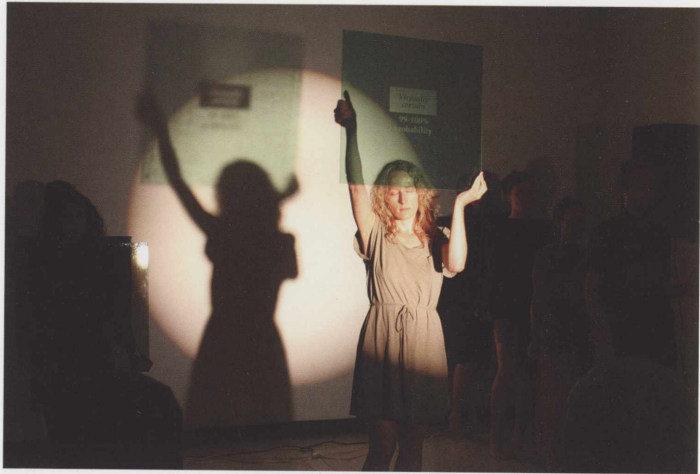


Plate 13
Amy Howden-Chapman. *Uncertainty Italicized*. 2013–2014. Performance image at 2201 Gallery, Los Angeles, 2013. Image courtesy of the artist.



Plate 14
Layne Waerea. *Bruce Pulman Park, Papakura*, 2014. 2014. Part of *Chasing Fog Club* (est. 2014). Image courtesy of the artist.