

Mariana Cunha

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Mediating climate visualities: Notes on Meteorological Mobilities

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In *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton remarks that

ecology isn't just about global warming, recycling and solar power – and also not just to do with everyday relationships between humans and non-humans. It has to do with love, loss, despair, and compassion. (...) It has to do with capitalism and with what might exist after capitalism. (...) It has to do with ideas of self and the weird paradoxes of subjectivity. It has to do with society. It has to do with coexistence.[1]

Morton's articulation of ecological awareness and a crisis in critical thinking calls for, as Joanna Zylińska argues, a new ethics for the Anthropocene, which means a 'return to critical thinking, for a reparation of thought'.[2] In addition, an ecological and ethical thinking for our coexistence in an uncertain present and future demands of us narratives that reimagine the impossibilities of experiencing a world in crisis.

From this perspective, the virtual exhibition *Meteorological Mobilities* (<https://apexart.org/tsionki.php#amybalkin>) moves us to confront the relationship between climate change and human displacement. Curated by Marianna Tsionki,[3] *Meteorological Mobilities* was exhibited from 28 May – 1 August 2020 on the *apexart* website, which is a not-for-profit arts organisation in New York. The *apexart* programme of exhibitions is selected through a seasonal open call for artists and curators, judged by a public jury. Originally programmed to be shown in the space of the gallery, *Meteorological Mobilities* had to be adapted to the lockdown measures imposed by the Covid-19 crisis and was presented online. If, on the one hand, the adaptation to a virtual gallery increased accessibility for a much larger number of viewers, it also brought to the fore questions regarding how these works are now

mediated. Indeed, this shift is arguably a calling to rethink the effects on our experience of new mediations of art.

Tsionki's curatorial vision is, indeed, compelling in its effort to envisage how to create new images and narratives to imagine forms of survival in times of accelerated climate catastrophe. Further, it challenges us to expand our perception of places and peoples – in the present, past, and future – which continuously produce nomadic geographies, thus reinventing new forms of inhabiting our world. Tsionki's clear-cut curatorial approach brings together a group of works that offers up ways to transcend a perspective of desolation and climate anxiety. As the curator herself puts it, 'Contrary to mainstream visual representations of vulnerable communities at risk, this exhibition is urging a radical re-thinking on the ways we act collectively upon climate change as planetary citizens.'^[4] As we enter the virtual exhibition, the group of works presented restores a sense of solidarity and collective action, enabled also by their mode of display. Indeed, it is possible to have an overview of the exhibition with a quick scroll down through the webpage. Each artist's or collective's names divides up the sections and, as we scroll down, films, maps, photographs, as well as written documents compose the page.

As we start to navigate Amy Balkin et al.'s puzzle-like archive of contributed objects, titled *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting*,^[5] we are confronted by images of items collected since 2012, grouped by country of origin: Brazil, Cape Verde, Mexico, Nepal, Panama, Peru, Senegal, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu, Russian Federation, Australia, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Venice, Netherlands, United Kingdom, parts of the United States of America (Kivalina, Alaska, California, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, New Orleans, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Antarctica), which amounts to 187 slides. Accompanying the slides are a *Political Map of the World* (2019) and a Glossary of Terms from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Annex Party, according to which the objects are classified. Each item featured in the on-going archive comes from a place threatened by disappearance due to climate change, and together they make up a future-reference catalogue, which includes objects as diverse as an empty toothpaste tube, notes, photographs, grains of beach sand, postcards and traveller's information pamphlets, confetti, and seaweed samples. The more we return to the objects in the slides the more fascinating the archive becomes, as we sense the storytelling power of organic and inorganic material that make up the

collection and the impulse of the contributors to build a memory of these disappearing places through the agency of matter.

The next work on display, *Deep Weather* (2013, digital video, 8 min.), by Ursula Biemann, portrays two stories from different regions and realities. It continues with the theme of disappearance, but this time, engaging with the idea of extraction and submersion, and the causes and consequences of ocean warming and rising sea levels. In the first part of the film, *Carbon Geologies*, we see aerial images of the rugged landscape of the Athabasca River, Alberta, Canada. The film narrates the effects of mining and extraction in the region. While we see no visible human presence in the landscapes, Biemann's eerie whispered narration informs us of the technicalities of oil mining and its impact on the wildlife, boreal woods, and indigenous communities. In the second part of the film, *Hydrogeographies*, Biemann moves to images of people, this time in Bangladesh, where communities have been heavily affected by cyclones. Like a colony of ants, people come together to construct a human-made embankment to prevent inland flooding. Biemann's split-screen images display portraits of men and women, with their standing bodies framed up to the neck, their faces hidden, alongside footage of the embankment as it is being constructed. The incredible collective human effort to redesign the landscape exposes the instability of the land, while also reminding us of our human inability to escape environmental change. Indeed, it is no longer *terra firma*, but, as Biemann describes it, 'little more than a constantly fluctuating mobile mass', in which water is the 'territory of citizenship'. What will become of the land on earth, we wonder, when we hear the filmmaker's ghostly murmur: 'Evolution isn't fast enough. Mutate!' Poignantly, the film evidences the intensifying effects of climate change on the increasing speed with which land is becoming submerged.

The idea of disappearance, sinking, and submersion draws a remarkable response in the articulation of the next film in the exhibition, *Learning from the Gypsies: Ghost Island* (2019, digital video, 40 min.). Created by MAP Office, a multidisciplinary practice based in Hong Kong and founded by artists Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portefaix, the work is composed by a map of the archipelagic territory of the Krabi province in Thailand, hemmed in by the Andaman Sea, as well as by a set of 12 4.7 x 7 inch postcards. *Ghost Island* is an installation built from ghost fishing nets salvaged from the reef around the Krabi province; it was originally exhibited as part of the 2018 Thailand Biennale.[6]



Fig. 1: Ursula Biemann, *Deep Weather*, 2013, digital video, 8:58 min (still). Image courtesy apexart.



Fig. 2: MAP Office, *Learning from the Gypsies*, 2019, digital video, 40 min (still). Image courtesy apexart.

Built together with a group of environmental activists, the wooden structure shell is modelled on the characteristic karst landscape of the province, with its solitary rock formations emerging from the sea as tides retreat. In a slow-paced rhythm, the video offers an ethnographic portrayal of Gung, a member of the Urak Lawoi' tribe, whose ecological and local knowledge was the basis for the MAP Office installation and map. Gung's interpretation of life on the ghost island introduces us to the way different tribes survive and live in the region drawing on the sea for their livelihoods, and reveals a radical proposition in how to adapt to the archipelagic shift imposed by climate

change. Gung's aquatic life and portrayal of carrying out his daily chores, such as cooking and washing, with his body half-submerged in water, remind us of Tracy Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality at sea. She writes: 'Trans-corporeality is a new materialist and posthumanist sense of the human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments.' [7] Gung's amphibious performing self and adaptation to the ebb and flow of the tide recall Deleuze's notion of a liquid perception of images: 'water is the most perfect environment in which movement can be extracted from the thing moved, or mobility from movement itself.' [8] There is a truth, he argues, that cannot be found through an earthly visuality, because it provides a different

state of perception: a more than human perception, a perception not tailored to solids, which no longer had the solid as objects, as condition, as milieu. A more delicate and vaster perception, a molecular perception, peculiar to a 'cine-eye'.

Our involvement with the film occurs, thus, due to its gesture towards an ecological interconnectedness, to rescue Alaimo's notion, and also in the opening up to new possibilities of experiencing the world and of inhabiting it. It could be argued that this is also reflected on our own sense of interconnectedness as viewers within this new spectatorial model of virtual exhibitions, which relies considerably on the ideas of global network and connectivity. [9]

If the MAP Office film echoes the idea of losing *terra firma*, the final video of the exhibition, *Kivalina: The Coming Storm* (2014, digital video, 36:36 min.), urges us to think about the acceleration of climate change and the impact of rising sea levels on indigenous communities. Directed by Andrea Bagnato, Daniel Fernández Pascual, Helene Kazan, Hannah Meszaros Martin, and Alon Schwabe, the video reconstructs the plight of the Alaskan Iñupiaq people and is narrated through voice-over testimonies from local residents, political representatives, and climate experts. As we listen to each person speak, the image frames the sea from the beach, where, at the bottom of the screen, we can see a seawall built from large rocks. We learn that the villagers were forcibly removed and settled in Kivalina in the early twentieth century, and are now trapped both by the encroaching erosion of the barrier island and by cumbersome bureaucracy, as they do not hold the rights over their land. As Hierro and Surrallés argue, the law resulting from a colonial vision of territory often distorts 'indigenous territorial vision', whereby territory and natural resources are 'the extension of a relational fabric' and thus the perspective of

ownership becomes a force of ethnocide.[10] Over the duration of the film, the camera remains motionless. Fixed in its position, it records the rising of the tide, and, as one of the interviewees tells us, the ocean is getting angry. In fact, we learn that the speed of the coastal erosion will result in the disappearance of land within an astonishingly short period of time. Questions surrounding the rights and sovereignty over indigenous land, the bewilderingly complex relationship between colonial occupation and the heavier environmental impact on marginalized communities, point to the urgency of acting for eco-justice. At the risk of becoming a ghost geography, exhausted by the effects of climate change, Kivalina confronts us with the dwindling alternatives to inhabiting a disappearing world, in which loss and precarity are now 'the condition of trouble without end,'[11] as Anna Tsing poignantly contends.

As we explore the images displayed during the current global health crisis, where policies on isolation, border closures, and restriction of movement have been in place either for a prolonged period or intermittently, questions surrounding mediation and experience of art gain a fresh perspective. If, on the one hand, an adaptation to a virtual gallery made the works displayed accessible to a much larger number of viewers, it also brought to the fore questions regarding how these works are now mediated. This concise exhibition with its selection of poignant works also demands of us a rethink of its effects on our experience of new mediations of climate visualities. What will our experience of the world be in the future? Even if unable to find answers to such a question, Meteorological Mobilities moves us to reconsider what stories can be rescued and what future narratives can be created for a 'collaborative survival in precarious times'.[12]

Mariana Cunha (Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil)

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Notes

- [1] Morton 2010, p. 2.
- [2] Zylinska 2014, p. 20.
- [3] Senior Curator at CFCCA in Manchester (UK).
- [4] Press release of the exhibition, available at: <https://apexart.org/images/tsionki/tsionki.pdf> (accessed September 2020).
- [5] The archive is available on: <https://sinkingandmelting.tumblr.com/> (accessed September 2020).
- [6] A detailed description of the installation can be found on the MAP Office website: <http://www.map-office.com/exhibitions/ghost-island-thailand-biennale/> (accessed September 2020).
- [7] Alaimo 2012, p. 476.
- [8] Deleuze 1986, p. 77.
- [9] Ibid., p. 80.
- [10] Hierro & Surrallés 2005, p. 18.
- [11] Tsing 2015, p. 2.
- [12] Ibid.