

Looking for Neutral Ground in the Polarised Field of Contemporary Ecological and Social Crises

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It is claimed that art opens the mind to new possibilities. My own experience supports this claim. Through a personal narrative this paper will follow my transformation in the last six years from a narrowly focussed technologist to a broad minded and successful artist who is considering the state of the world and how to transform it. The paper will be structured against a backdrop of artworks that trace the development of my practice as an artist and researcher and will reflect on progress towards the goal of influencing the beliefs and actions of others through art. At its most fundamental, this progress is marked by a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of all social and ecological issues and art's possibilities and limitations in effecting social change. It is hoped that these reflections will be of assistance to other artists and art educators.

All artists reflect their personal experience, personality and interests through their art. For mature age artists, like myself, who arrive late to the art world these traits develop without a means for expression and my life as a father and 30-year career as an industrial metallurgist in the steel industry had not intersected the art world in any way. In 2008 my job was made redundant and by 2012 my interest in photography as a hobby and my growing passion for climate change had converged at the beginning of a visual arts degree. Six years later I am a recognised artist with multiple awards and have started doctoral studies into art strategies for sustainability.

My home is the city of Newcastle, just north of Sydney in Australia. It was once known as the steel city and while the steelworks closed in 1999, many related industries remained. When I started work in 1976 my company employed 3000 people and when I finished there were 100. That is the story of the manufacturing industry in many Western countries over the last 40 years. Although I didn't realise it at the time, I had become a victim of globalisation. Newcastle has been fortunate, however, in that as the steel industry declined, the coal industry grew to meet the needs of the growing Asian economies. The massive social disruption of industrial decline evident in the USA was largely avoided for us.



Figure 1: From the *One Percent* series, 2013. Digital photoessay

The coal industry now dominates Newcastle and the nearby Hunter Valley. The 10's of thousands of coal employees are mostly on contract to foreign companies who pay minimal tax and have little obligation to the people and places where they operate. These communities live a precarious existence.

The image from the photoessay *One Percent* (Fig. 1) is a ship passing through the harbour channel of the port of Newcastle and was made in my second year of study. The time-blurred motion of the ship symbolises its ubiquity and invisibility to the people of Newcastle. Today the ships that pass through this channel carry more coal than any port in the world; coal that ultimately produces nearly 1% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. On this topic there is almost complete silence in the public and private discourse; it is something not to be talked about — as if the ships and the coal are invisible.

My goal at this time was to make the local communities aware of their impact on climate change and while I desired to change their behaviour, I recognised that many livelihoods and families depended on coal. The underlying motivation was to prepare them for changes in the economic and social structure of the region when the world no longer wants coal — to start conversations about this future. Like many artists, no doubt, I started with the belief that if people only understood what was happening they might think and act differently.

In my third year of study I realised that with my background in technology, computers and D.I.Y. I could make a different form of art that adopted an aesthetic of light, motion, scale or sound to connect with different audiences in a different way to traditional media. This new approach was first used in *Signal Station* (Fig. 2) and has formed the basis for most of my ongoing practice. There are nine coal-loading berths in the Newcastle port and nine flags on the artwork. Each flag swings when there is a ship at the corresponding berth and the semaphore symbols encode the words: people, planet, and profit. A similar idea was used in *Melting Point* (2016) where the activity of the coal port was reflected in the intensity of slow-motion water



Figure 2: *Signal Station*, 2014. Data driven kinetic sculpture

drops in a pre-recorded video.

The installation *The Bell Buoy* (Fig. 3) marks the end of this ‘raising awareness’ period. A small piece of spot lit coal rotates on a shaft while being observed by a video camera that zooms in and out on the coal. Installed in a dark space the coal video is projected on one screen and appears to be tumbling silently towards us like a disaster movie asteroid, but, unlike the Hollywood version, the disaster never seems to arrive . . . 30 years in the making and still yet to register in our collective conscious. While this work won a national award the attention it received only appeared to drive a conversation about the work itself or my own history rather than a conversation about the work’s message.

Intended as ‘the wake up call’ so often spoken of by political leaders these early works

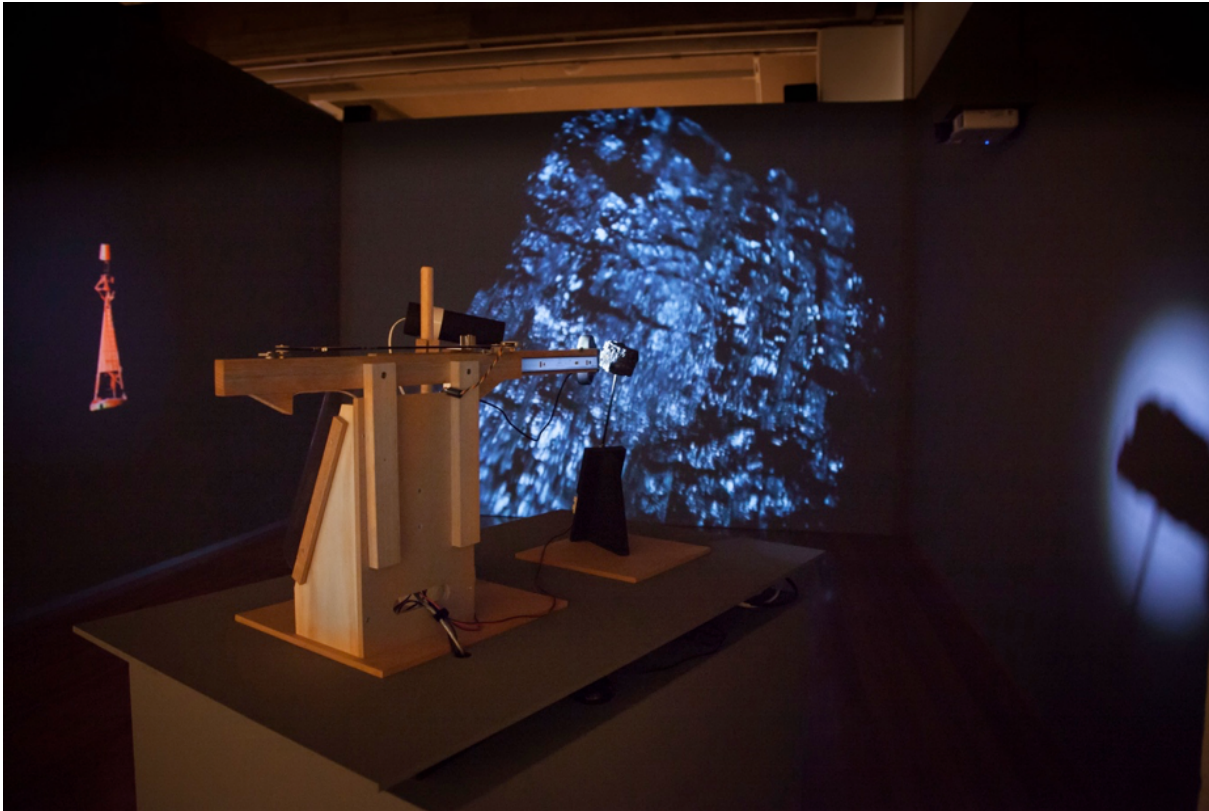


Figure 3: *The Bell Buoy*, 2014. Coal, kinetic sculpture and 2-channel video installation

fall into the category of the ‘apocalyptic sublime’. Are they effective at waking us up? As theorist Joanne Nurniss frames it, they act as ‘a sort of a *catharsis* [but] wash over us only to be promptly forgotten’¹. And while they can invoke a sense of fear or loss they do not identify who is responsible — they don’t identify an enemy. In fact, as we are the ones doing the damage it is us who are the enemy and this can only leave us with a sense of guilt, rather than empowerment. Certainly, in these works the true catharsis is for the artist — myself — releasing a built up anger over the inability of society and politics to address the growing crises.

The graffiti artist Banksy is reported to have said that art has two functions: to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable. But what if the outcome is to disturb the disturbed?

¹Joanne Nurniss, "Visual climate change art 2005-2015: discourse and practice," WIREs Clim Change (2015).

There is a field of psychology that has developed around climate change and it largely concludes that it is anxiety — individually and socially — that has frozen us into inaction. Norwegian psychologist Per Espen Stoknes describes five mental states that include the low priority we give to such a distant problem; the subconscious cognitive dissonance that is provoked when we consider the magnitude of the required change to our lifestyle; and the outright denial when our ideological beliefs are threatened². Stoknes describes this as a kind of ‘knowing but not knowing’ while others liken it to the difference between knowing and believing. To use Banksy’s framing, what is probably best described as disturbing art feeds into an already conflicted and disturbed mental state. It cannot be effective, and, in fact, some studies suggest it may reinforce negative views, causing further polarisation. And yet this is the form that many contemporary climate change artists choose to adopt without questioning its agency.

While we can make art that is affective there is no guarantee that it will contribute to any change. This is not to deny that this form of art can have an effect, as art operates at a different psychological level to the hard facts and numbers of climate change or images of starving polar bears. To the already converted and concerned citizen it can reinforce their belief and it may serve to nudge those on the edge of belief. However, we must question whether there are better ways of engaging the broader community in such a deep-rooted concern.

With this in mind I considered the question of our disconnection from each other and Nature. Pursuing these to their inevitable conclusion takes us back to the Enlightenment belief that man is above Nature and to question the individualism, consumption and endless growth models that are the founding principles of free market capitalism and neoliberalism. These underlying concerns are themselves common to the many other social issues that we face so perhaps it is better to address all of these issues collectively at this more fundamental level.

One approach for doing this, suggested by Stoknes, is to address climate change by re-

²Per Espen Stoknes, *What we think about when we try not to think about global warming : toward a new psychology of climate action* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2015).

framing the problem as a reconnection with the air around us as the air is the living climate. In response to this I curated an exhibition in my final undergraduate year with 8 artists and 3 scientists that considered the theme of air and breathing. The ideas explored included blown glass vessels formed from the breath of 25 volunteers; a mask that filtered out the air of those the wearer disliked; works on paper that considered air as the liminal space above the land; and a rock climbing climate scientist's poetic reflection on the air as he scaled the cliffs above the Irish Sea. Feedback on this exhibition was extremely positive with the diversity of interpretations of the theme connecting in different ways with different people. Many people reported that it caused them to think about their breath in a new way.

The exhibition was both an exploration of the potential for curation as art and the inspiration for two works which operated at the extremes of air and breathing.

At an intimate scale, the work *Catch Your Breath* (Fig.4) is a tank of water and a high-speed photographic system. Participants use a tube to blow a bubble in the tank that is then captured and projected on a large screen. The work renders our breath, something that is taken for granted, as both visible and tangible. The bubble image captures the participants breath and its form and beauty is a complete surprise and unique for each breath. The interpretation of the work is left to the participant and the 'art' of the work is in the personal experience. The work aims to show the uniqueness of each individual via a personal experience that hints at a beauty that is common to everyone.

Catch You Breath is now part of a national touring exhibition and the social experience has been reinforced by various options which allow the participant to see the images of other participants; one option allows them to 'meet their match' by finding a breath of similar appearance within the archive and revealing the location of their match. To date the system has caught 15,000 of an anticipated 25,000 breaths during the 3-year tour. A version of the system is also being developed for use in a hospital environment by children with cystic fibrosis — a disease

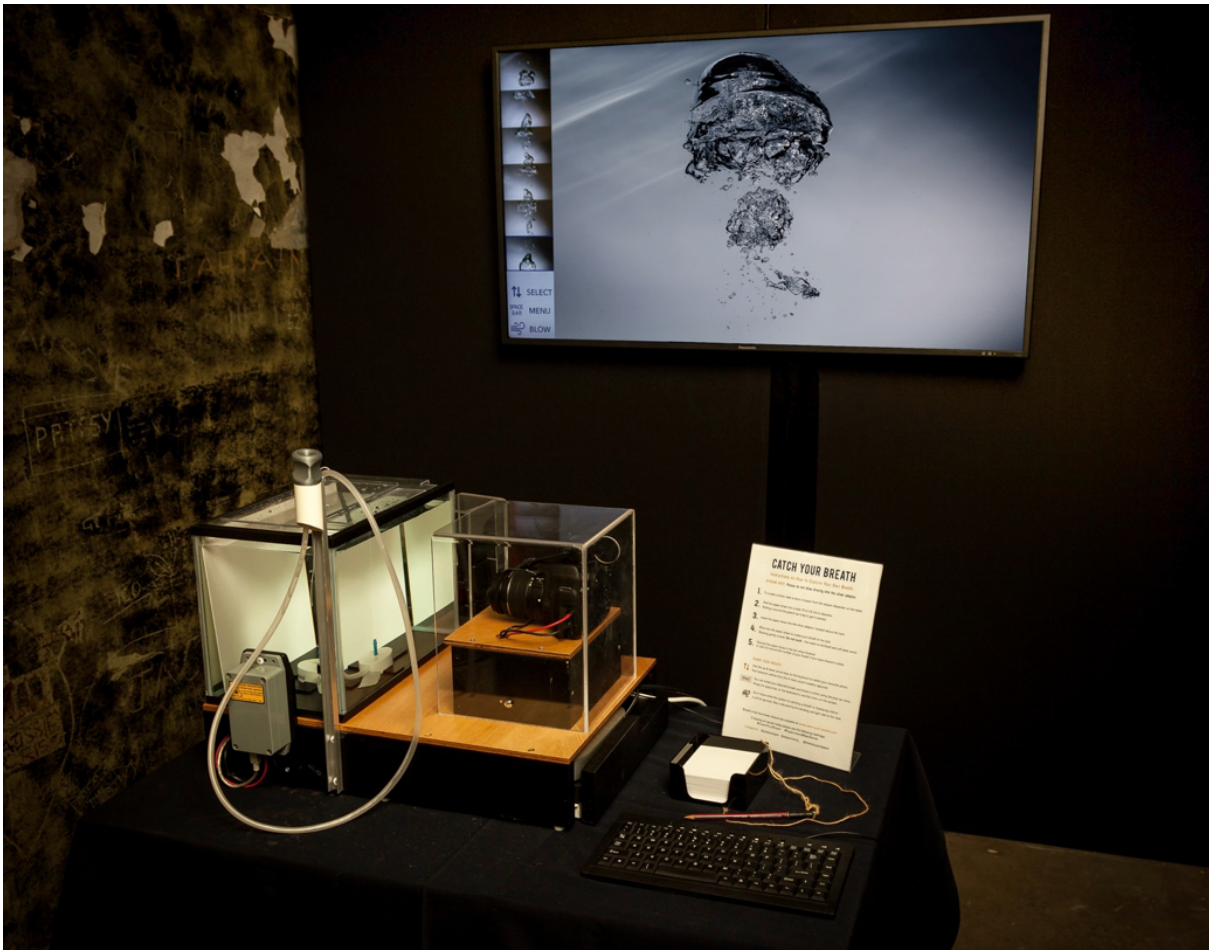


Figure 4: *Catch Your Breath*, 2016. Interactive photography and digital archive.

where the breath is certainly not intangible or taken for granted.

The second work, *Life Support System*, (Fig.5) attempts to deal with Timothy Morton's claim that the world and its systems are of too large a scale for any individual to grasp³. The work presents a model of the relationship between the dominant global systems of nature, humanity and economics at a human scale. As in the real world the systems share a common air supply, with each represented in the model by an inflated vessel: the internal gold and silver

³Timothy Morton, "Hyperobjects and Creativity," ed. Timothy Morton, Laura Copelin, and Peyton Gardner, *Hyperobjects for Artists* (The Creative Independent, 2018), <https://thecreativeindependent.com/library/hyperobjects-for-artists/>.



Figure 5: *Life Support System*, 2016. Data driven inflatable sculpture.

vessels — nature and humanity — inflate and deflate independently with rhythms suggestive of the cycles of nature and human breathing. The outer 3.0 m diameter sphere is the economy and its pressure influences the ability of the internal vessels to breath. It is controlled by real-time stock market data. Behind the object, and not visible on entering the gallery, is a display that mimics a medical monitor and shows the operating parameters and air flows within the system.

The work proposes the contemporary real-world relationship between these systems: humanity heedless of its dependence on nature and both subordinate to the economy. To give a sense of control to the visitor the model provides a playful mechanism for adjusting the breathing parameters of the humanity vessel, attempting to achieve harmony with nature. As a last

resort, a 'big red button' is provided that will suspend the stock market.

As I commence my doctoral research I have reflected on what I have learned from creating art that sits in traditional art institutions. There is no doubt in my mind that the strategy behind these recent projects has the capacity to engage the audience in broader issues; the concern is that if I wish to change a community then I need to be able to reach that community. Traditional art institutions generally do not do this, they have a select audience who are not necessarily representative of the entire community and will often already agree with the ideas being proposed. To have the broadest influence art needs to operate within the community — to be socially engaged.

And is it also true that human psychology is the only consideration? If we look at any issue society faces today one would expect a distribution of opinions and beliefs. This distribution is not uniform, however. It may be the psychology of facing difficult issues; the social media filter bubble; the privilege of colour, class or wealth; or simply that it is difficult for many just to survive. . . . these all hinder the open discussion that could inform sound opinions. Often the loudest voices are the minority at the extremes who drown out or silence the rest. Additionally the democratic process does not give us the leaders who would normally provide clarity, discussion and vision; they actually appear to reduce most issues to black and white choices for short term political gain. Psychologist Renee Lertzmann and others call the group that is caught between the vocal extremes the ambivalent masses. This is the bulk of the population that is too afraid or conflicted to speak up but is easily swayed by short term promises or populist arguments that seek to return to the past or lay blame for problems on other groups. Adding to this mix, sociologist Kari Noorgard identifies the power of social and cultural norms in suppressing open discussion on difficult subjects⁴.

These things may not be true everywhere, but they certainly apply in the US, and increas-

⁴Kari Marie Noorgard, *Living in denial : climate change, emotions, and everyday life* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011).

ingly Australia, Britain and Europe.

I am endeavouring to address these issues in my research and a concept that seems to summarise my objectives is ‘protopia’. We can all agree we don’t want dystopia, but we probably cannot agree on what the opposite — utopia — might be or even know when we have reached it. Protopia is the precursor to utopia; it is the state in which we are constantly considering questions such as: what makes a good society; how can we connect with nature and stop acting as if we are not part of it; and how do we build diversity of inclusion and ideas. These principles do not directly tackle the issues we face, rather they attempt to create a neutral ground between the loud polarised extremes: aspiring to give voice to the silent majority.

In a practical sense this means working within my limitations and skills to develop strategies for applying this approach in the region where I live. I have developed the following goals:

- Identify and work within a field of knowledge that is based on a natural system, is relevant within the context of the crises we face, and can be applied across all levels of a community. An example is solar energy, not just as a source of electricity but as the source of all energy;
- Develop or curate artistic and expressive approaches that can be applied at an individual and community level to explore that field of knowledge; and
- Identify and explore intersections between this work and other social and environmental activities, in order to promote diversity of ideas.

In conclusion, I hold art responsible for the transformation of my life over the last 6 years. Like many artists I am often asked where my ideas come from. My belief is that creativity comes from a sense of curiosity and the ability to ‘connect the dots’ of our lifetime of experiences in new ways.

Over the last few years I have added many dots to my life in many new disciplines. From a small base of family and career and a curiosity about how the physical world works, my exploration of art has expanded my concerns far beyond climate change. I have added dots in the disciplines of politics, psychology, sociology and the understanding of art itself — both my own art and that of others.

Art is not unique in enabling this cross-disciplinary thinking, but it does make it easier. Art gives us licence to speculate; to propose ideas across disciplines without necessarily being expert in those disciplines. We do not need to be polymaths — a somewhat overused word — but we should be wide ranging generalists. Educators, I am sure, already encourage diversity amongst their students. As artists we need to encourage this amongst ourselves and ask whether we are reinforcing an ideology or promoting diversity and how our particular message and ideas fit within the broad scope of the problems faced collectively by society.

My ongoing challenge is to encourage more dots in the lives of those in the communities where I work as it will be diversity of ideas and conversations that will foster a neutral ground fertile for creative solutions that will help them withstand the present and looming challenges. I encourage all artists and educators to do the same.

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