Relative Autonomy in the Age of Climate Politics

Shannon Jackson

Scene Setting I: Earlier in Berkeley

Here I am in October in Berkeley, writing in anticipation of November in Berlin. Or trying to write. Along with the usual temptations to procrastinate – a slew of unanswered emails, list making – I have other obstacles that keep me from writing. Dry winds and hot fires spiral near me and my perch in Berkeley, California. PG & E – Pacific Gas and Electric – has serially turned off power in selected regions of Northern and Southern California. The threat to cut off service, the trees outside, the power lines outside, my daughter inside, my dog inside, the fiction of an inside and outside to the house I own, or think I own (with a bank); my work, my paralysis in the face of work – all conspire to produce a curious assemblage around me, with me, inside of me, occupying and preoccupying me.

My daughter and I braced ourselves, planning not to open the refrigerator, doing one last load of laundry, downloading documents that wouldn't be accessible when we lost Wi-Fi. But miraculously, and oddly, power kept not going out in our house – we were told it would go out in six hours, then 12 hours, then tomorrow. It was a curious state to be in, poised over a cooktop that would be turned off any minute; fingers lingering over keys on a computer that had a little time left. I thought I needed to be extra productive for my last few minutes of power, a last few minutes that kept on … lasting. I cooked, washed, and sometimes wrote with a strange sense of guilt, guilt that I could still do these tasks, guilt that I wasn't doing more. How could one procrastinate in a state of impending emergency? It was a curious kind of survivor's guilt; what would I do with the undeserved time I had, with my undeserved power. How could I not have the energy to work when I still had a supply of energy, undeservedly, from PG & E?

Scene Setting II: Even Earlier in Venice

The assemblage prompts me to recall another moment when I felt this odd mix of dread and guilt; of cosy pleasure inside sequestered from a harsh landscape out-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Figure 1: Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė und Lina Lapelytė, Sun & Sea (Marina), 2019

Opern-Performance, Litauischer Pavillon, Venedig-Biennale 2019, Foto: Andrej Vasilenko © Courtesy die Künstlerinnen

side, reproducing the fiction of inside and outside. It was upon entering a former military hanger in Venice, the eccentric site of the Lithuanian Pavilion's artificial beach, an artificial beach that invited the question whether and how we know a beach to be natural. Skilled singers lie prone on the beach, alternating between choral and ballad songs in International English. Part religious hymn, part gossipy aria, part sunscreen ad, part parodic climate science news, the libretto of *Sun & Sea (Marina)* (Barzdžiukaitė, Grainytė, Lapelytė, 2019) rose up to the rafters as an ode to a warming planet. I was one of many viewers who waited in a long line outside to watch this opera from above. Laconic relationality observed from on high, compounding the sanctioned voyeurism of the beach. *Sun & Sea* made climate politics disconcertingly palatable. An assemblage of bodies, song, props, set, stones and time, a happening at a high-end biennial, apart from but near Prada stores and Pinault foundations; adjacent to all the large cruise ships dripping oil in the sea under the sun. That feeling came up here at *Sun & Sea*, guilt and dread, threat and comfort; of time eroding and time stolen; of energy extracted, of energy withdrawn, energy wasted and energy undeservedly expelled. Insidious pleasure on the exhausted earth. My friend and I lingered for a long time, like everyone else who had waited hours to see this piece. I didn't cry, but I was moved. Others were cry-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

ing, sniffling, sighing around me. Later that afternoon, my friend and I kept our plan to go to the beach, to the Lido, lying amid a torrent of blue umbrellas so numerous it was hard to see the sand of that artificial beach. More insidious pleasure on an exhausted earth … But we felt bad about it.

Scene I: Now in Berlin: Autonomy and Functionality

I now carry both of these scenes with me to reflect with you about the paradoxes of autonomy and functionalization, where autonomy descends from a philosophical concept of self-governance, as opposed to the heteronomy of functional forms governed by external rules. This conjunction has connotations outside the realm of aesthetics, of course, in the lay conception of the autonomous individual, or rather the one who thinks she is autonomous, self-governing, property-owning of her own house (with a bank), with its insides and outsides, installed on the California land of the native Ohlone people with trees and streets, quakes and fires, and power – power outages and power lines, economic power and political power – all around her. Continuing on, we can then hear the conjunction of Autonomy and Functionality in the second, more aesthetic scene, the context of a historic blockbuster biennial that traffics fitfully around discourses of autonomous art, one that motors and is motored by the heteronomy of the art market's interest in buyable artwork, even if the biennial form, and certainly the forms at the Lithuanian Pavilion, showcase expanded art practices – i.e. biennial art – that are hard to hang on a wall. *Sun & Sea* is certainly hard to hang on a wall, and in such a context, an eight-hour performance installation seems relatively heteronomous in its expansiveness, and in the range of external rules it navigates.

I would like to think about these scene settings, these sun-shining and sun-setting scenes, next to a larger question of what happens when climate politics, climate art, the erosion of the planet is placed next to the long debates on autonomy. If, as the invitation to join this collection suggests, our "aim is to recombine complex and in-process conceptions that have historically developed into a dynamic theoretical structure and to relate the developments in Berlin to those in other places," how do climate discourses figure in this process of recombination?[1] As someone working on the ideas of assembly and re-assembly of late, I find myself wondering about the effects of recombination, especially since climate scholars increasingly use the language of assemblage to name ecological recombination. And

1 "Aim of the Research Project," https://www.udk-berlin.de/universitaet/fakultaet-gestaltung/institute/institut-fuer-geschichte-und-theorie-der-gestaltung/forschung/autonomie-und-funktionalisierung/about/projektbeschreibung/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

if furthermore, we seek "to convey philosophical-aesthetic theory with art historical, sociological, urbanistic and artistic perspectives, each with its own understanding of autonomy and functionalization,"[2] how does the climate question interface with the effort to explore different sectors – the cultural, sociological, urban, political, economic, etc? If many of us have come to feel that conventional concepts of autonomy no longer do justice to the interdependent nature of contemporary art projects, then we need to evolve some new concepts, even if, as one philosophical genealogy would have it, the notion of thinking interdependently about autonomy is a contradiction in terms. That same genealogy would question the phrase "Relative Autonomy" in my title. My attempt is to evolve a contingent scheme for navigating the autonomy/functionality dialectic, even if it sounds to some philosophers that I (and others appearing in this collection) are seeking to have our cake and eat it too.

My plan is to continue (still) with our scene in Berlin to explore the autonomy/functionality dialectic. From there I will share a survey and critique of key thoughts in climate aesthetics and the relevant discourse. And then I'll return to *Sun & Sea* to place these philosophical and planetary puzzles into conversation.

1) Now (Still) in Berlin: Autonomy and Functionality
2) Climate Aesthetics: Making and Thinking Assemblage
3) Sun & Sea: The Relative Autonomy of Dysphoric Performance as well as other assemblages to see if we can evolve a relative interdependence for the autonomy/functionality dialectic, and more precisely, to suggest that a relative autonomy is exactly what we need from climate art under conditions of climate erosion.

So, let's continue to consider the proposal that the autonomy/functionality dialectic is differently understood in various fields that descend from cultural studies, art history, philosophy, conceptual art, archaeology and sociology. Let me share some propositions about the variables that compose the relativity of a relative autonomy, at least from my perspective.

Autonomy/Heteronomy

1) Epistemological Detachment
2) Formal Variation of the Medium
3) Socio-Political Placement

2 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

First, we might start by considering how autonomy and heteronomy are understood under the barometer of epistemological "detachment." This relative detachment undergirds much of what we receive from Theodor Adorno's aesthetics, where the art form's capacity as art is measured by its resistance to intelligibility, its distance from normalized understandings of the world, and its necessarily "uncommitted" or "de-committed" stance toward political practice and social functionality.[3] Adorno's pivotal arguments are often undergirding much of what passes as modernist art criticism, and they sound again in the ears of any practice, conversation or criticism in the space of socially and politically engaged art now. Into this domain of relative detachment, we might also place the aesthetic and philosophical tendencies of abstraction, the non-representational, non-figurative, non-literal, non-referential mediation of the world. This domain might also include past and contemporary a-moral, ironic styles and sensibilities, modes of doubt and scepticism that distrust received ethical positions, dismissing moral assumptions that might pre-determine the rightness or wrongness of a proposition or solution. In this domain, too, we find scepticisms that question assumptions about the perceived "reality" or "pragmatism" of any call to functionality. Sometimes this detachment is philosophically rigorous; sometimes it just feels like an artworld style. While we might credit or blame Adorno for its genesis and ongoing legitimation, we might also remember that many critics and artists have found it aesthetically and even politically necessary to adopt such a position. To take just one example, let's recall post-colonial critic Edouard Glissant's, *Poetics of Relation*, wherein he argued for "the right to opacity."[4] Moreover, he did so not only as an artist and philosopher but as a post-colonial subject navigating his relationship with an ever contradictory but powerful West. From within that conflicted position, opacity offered, not so much un-committed political practice, but a heuristic from within which options could emerge. Said Glissant, "it prefigures reality, without determining it a priori… the thought of opacity saves me from unequivocal choices and irreversible actions."[5] That such a critic and poet felt that abstraction, opacity, and relative epistemological detachment were necessary for the project of de-colonialization unsettles the assumption that autonomy is only something a privileged, white, male German philosopher could believe in. We might then consider whether Glissant's position helps us understand the role of the autonomy/functionality dialectic in the decolonial politics of a warming planet as well.

Next to a philosophically inspired debate on relative autonomy, we can locate a somewhat differentiated domain that focuses on the dynamics of form, or the

3 Theodor W. Adorno: "Commitment", in: Andrew Arato, Eike Gephardt (eds.): *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, New York 1982, pp. 300-318.

4 Édouard Glissant: *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor 1997.

5 Ibid, p. 192.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

formal variations of an art work's structure. This would ally it with mid-century modernist criticism of "medium-specificity," where of course Clement Greenberg and disciples argued for the specificity of painting as a uniquely – and flatly – self-regulating medium. It sparked Michael Fried's parallel screed against the theatricality of Minimalist sculpture.[6] Within a discussion of formal variation, we can also foreground discourses that focus specifically on the materiality of the artwork, and whether a work's coincidence with its own materiality makes it integrally autonomous or more inter-dependently heteronomous. Further, within this domain of formal variation, we can place the role of the receiver/spectator as a dynamic variable. Whether an artwork understands itself to incorporate or depend upon the presence of the receiver, whether it shuns or disavows a receiver (whether or not we think an artwork gets to decide whether it gets to shun and disavow) – these are all spectatorial questions whose answers change, literally, depending upon the eye of the beholder. Recall that Minimalism's perceived dependence upon the receiver was, for Fried, also what made the work scandalously medium-unspecific, i.e., theatrical. But we can also note here something that I have made a habit of noting many times elsewhere, that the beholder-dependent judgements of formal variation also undergird cross-disciplinary debate and misrecognition across artistic disciplines such as painting, sculpture, cinema, dance, theatre and architecture. The perceived variation of different artistic forms – image, story, flatness, embodiment, time, melody, dissonance, space and spectatorial engagement – all contribute to different disciplinary judgements about whose art form is more autonomous than whose. Performance, from a visual art stance, is already beheld heteronomously, largely because its forms look to be "externally governed" relative to the self-governing flatness of painting. Later on, we might have more to say about the implications of that cross-disciplinary dynamic for the scene of climate aesthetics.

Finally, a third domain for gauging relative autonomy and heteronomy would fall under the general category of the socio-political, or the social position and placement of artistic practice. Here we confront a wider network of layers and scales of institutional heteronomy, say the dependence of the work on a circuit of galleries and museums, or a circuit of agents, festivals and theatres, or a circuit of donors, granters, investors, collectors and patrons. This domain would also include the institutions of labour that support the aesthetic apparatus, and the political institutions of the state that support – or don't – the cultural sector.

As I have argued in a number of other publications, the socio-political domain pushes the autonomy/heteronomy dialectic into territory where it becomes harder to sustain a pure conception of aesthetic autonomy, but it has also provoked a

6 Michael Fried: "Art and Objecthood", in: *Artforum* Summer (1967): pp. 12-23.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

range of art projects and performances that incorporate the world of policy, economics and the built environment as a kind of artistic material. When heteronomous systems are avowed to be inside rather than outside the art event, our received understandings of the artwork's boundaries are jostled as well. We might note that this conceptual jostling is in fact a challenge to traditional patterns of aesthetic intelligibility; that is, we might note that this heteronomous expansion also propels a resistant mode of apprehension, meeting the goals of autonomous thinking via heteronomous avowal. Within all of the above, however, we might once again ask what a climate imagination does to this conception of socio-political placement. What happens when we place the materiality of the medium and its built environment – its stones, its paints, its ice, its oil – within an environmental awareness of planet degradation? What happens when the dependence of all of the above is set on a precarious bed of planetary fragility, a fragility that is under us, around us at the broadest scales of geologic change but also inside us amongst the most intimate dynamics of life and living? What do we do in this place where we feel most badly?

Scene II: Climate Aesthetics: Making and Thinking Assemblage

Let's start a new scene then, one that is admittedly inseparable from the previous one, by trotting through some of the key turns and key sites in an ever-expanding discourse of climate aesthetics, environmental art, eco-art. In the United States, T.J. Demos is a leading figure in making and remaking a genealogy of practice and thinking.[7] He often starts with the American context in the 60s and 70s, including Hans Haacke's *Grass Grows*, 1969; Newton Harrison's *The Slow Birth and Death of a Lily Cell*, 1968; and Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape of New York City*, proposed in 1965 and realized in 1978. A pivotal exhibition moment came in 1969 at Cornell University's gallery, one that included land art by Haacke, Robert Smithson, Dennis Oppenheim and Robert Morris. Such art practices coincided with discursive practices, including those that joined reflections on the earth's life systems with critiques of US government policies on Vietnam, race relations, gender relations such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, 1962, and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, 1968.[8] Most of this making and thinking engaged in a kind of "restorationist eco-aesthetics," art that attempted to repair damaged habitats or to revive degraded ecosystems. In Sonfist's *Time Landscape of New York City* (1965–present); the Harrisons' *Portable*

7 T.J. Demos: *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Berlin 2016; T.J. Demos: "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology", in: *Third Text* 27, no. 1 (n.d.): pp. 1-9; T.J. Demos: *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*, Berlin 2017.

8 Rachel Carson: *Silent Spring*, Boston 1962; Paul R. Ehrlich: *The Population Bomb*, New York 1968.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

Orchard, 1972; Haacke's *Rhinewater Purification Plant*, 1972; Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*, 1982; Joseph Beuys's *7000 Oaks*, 1982; and Mel Chin's *Revival Field*, 1990, each of these pieces variously attempted to rescue natural environments from polluted conditions. Demos credits Gregory Bateson with complicating a discourse that threatened to objectify or romanticize a threatened nature in his 1972 book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*.[9] There, Bateson argued that ecology is natural, but also social and technological, wherein ecological "health" is understood to be dependent on civilization. We might note on the side that Bateson is also a key socio-anthropological interlocutor for the field of performance studies, a reminder that perhaps our field has been growing a tacit climate discourse for some time.

Bateson's ideas of "systems ecology" echo those of others who have developed climate discourses and climate art practices that join the technological, political, natural, cultural and scientific into eco-aesthetic interventions. Indeed, one can start to plot a tangled genealogy of climate practice that increasingly pulls and pushes vectors of power and sectors of practice, pulling and pushing what may appear to be discreet and autonomous disciplinary practice into new combinations. Such combinations juxtapose social issues like migration with geological trends such as rising sea levels; such combinations remind us, as Kathryn Yusoff says in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, that the institution of slavery and the widespread practice of resource extraction share the same origin moment.[10] Whether in matters of housing, transportation, labour policies, gender relations, generational relations, it is increasingly understood that climate is part and parcel of every identifiable social-political issue, undergirding it, surrounding it, inside it. This is where the language of assemblage starts to appear – not only to mark the assembly of media and perspective–but also the assemblage of sectors and the collapse of perceptual divisions between background and foreground, up and down.

Since we are all interested in re-combining – sectors, disciplines, objects, people, power – let's press further on how climate discourse and eco-art engage in hyper-practices of recombination, using the word "assemblage" now with a 21st century tuning of what that might mean. Assemblage is a word loosely associated with new materialism and bio-political critique, often used in contexts critical of neoliberalism and climate destruction. It signals a dispersed relation, a molecular aesthetics, a condition of involuntary and voluntary political horizontality and a lateralized network of connection amongst things, species, systems and the sentient entities often still known as "humans." Let me share here some reductive but teachable frames that I use to convey aesthetically the conceptual shift such

9 Gregory Bateson: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, San Francisco 1972.

10 Kathryn Yusoff: *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Minneapolis 2019.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

assemblages might entail. One would be to focus on the critique of the Anthropocene and the formal upheaval such a critique implies. Briefly, if a critique of the Anthropocene seeks to de-centre the human as the central figure in a frame, it has the cascading effect of un-hinging and dispersing all conceptions of ground. The figure/ground relation has explicitly, but more importantly implicitly, structured our capacity for apprehending the culture/nature relation, the human/planet dialectic. When that thought structure dissolves, what else dissolves with it?

Another teachable way of framing this thought structure, and its un-structuring, is to remind ourselves of pseudo-phylogenetic trees showing "The Ascent of Man". Arguably, this absurd hierarchy undergirds our perceptions of reality, which is to say that it undergirds our perceptions of what it means to engage with the world, what it means to be pragmatic and committed, what it means to be "functional" in the world. And yet, what do we do when this tacitly experienced hierarchy dissolves and disperses underneath us, around us, inside of us? We will likely need artists, and thinkers, and organizers, and everyday citizens to imagine a lateral rather than hierarchical relationship amongst the elements of what can no longer be a tree. What does it mean to make art from – and a daily life from – an imagination that sees the previously feted human in a lateral relationship with the insects? To see the monkey next to, not above, the spread of lichen? What happens when we take all of these vaguely sentient and lively elements of the planet and elevate them, as we have long done ourselves, to the realm of the angels? Let's imagine placing an ant next to an angel for a re-calibrating, re-assembling conversation. If this is the re-calibration of reality that a climate politics requires, then eco-art might provide the shifting ground for imagining that conversation.

And indeed, when we turn to the philosophical discourses of climate and eco-art from the late 20th to the 21st century, we see a constant lateralizing of all that we thought hierarchical, horizontalizing all that we thought vertical. We could start with Felix Guattari and his near neighbour Bruno Latour. We could remind ourselves that in Guattari's *Three Ecologies* of 1986, he imagined re-assembly as transversality. Guattari perceived a general rift between "deterritorializing revolutions linked to scientific, technical, and artistic development," and "a compulsion toward subjective reterritorialization."[11] Through new technological advances, he foresaw "new emancipatory social practices and, above all, alternative assemblages of subjective production capable of connecting – on a mode different than that of conservative reterritorialization – to the molecular revolutions of our era."[12] It was in this text that Guattari referred to a concept of a "generalized ecology." And then, of course, we have Latour at his side, winning new accolades in that supporting

11 Félix Guattari: *Soft Subversions: Texts and Interviews 1977-1985*, Sylvère Lothringer (ed.), Los Angeles 2009, pp. 292-293.

12 Ibid, p. 293.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

role, to elaborate the concept of The Thing, where a thing is described as, multiply, both "those who assemble because they are concerned as well as what causes their concerns and divisions." The Thing for Latour is that which convenes, and therefore levels, "mortals and gods, humans and non-humans."[13] Latour has more recently asked us to dissolve the ideological and geological perspective that we feel and see when we continue to imagine our Earth as a blue sphere, a flat blue sphere, and to realize that this functional, pragmatic visualization of our world is, actually a 2D abstraction. Latour has asked for a different abstraction of our planet to do the very belated work of repairing it.

Repair, my goodness, that sounds quite functional. Would we even know what that could be? Probably not yet, but for now, and in the midst of a necessarily short lecture, we can list an abridged inventory of the many conceptual moves made by climate philosophers who have evolved an assemblage imagination, a domain in which autonomous systems converge and where intelligible modes of apprehending it are dispelled (once again, heteronomous practice propels the goals of autonomous thinking). What words do critics give to a dispersal of forms in lateral rather than hierarchical relation? We find Mike Davis calling for an aestheticized geology, in *Dead Cities: and Other Tales*; Isabelle Stengers, discussing an "ecology of practices" in *Cosmopolitics I*; Manuel DeLanda rebuilds political theory as "assemblage theory and social complexity"; Jane Bennett builds a new career as a political scientist preoccupied with the "assemblages" of Vibrant Matter; Nabil Ahmed opines on the entanglements of an "Entangled Earth"; Timothy Morton offers "Mesh" as a netted metaphor in *Ecological Thought* that lateralizes that phylogenetic tree; and Gustav Metzger recalls the experiments of the '60s and '70s in a new form to propel a repertoire of "auto-destructive happenings".[14] All of these metaphors take the idea of assemblage to new heights, or new lows, or new axes for imagining dispersal and re-combination; reality re-ordered.

That dispersal and recombination informs aesthetic practices as well – and it has for a while. Dubuffet, the painter known for formal variations of assemblage painting, used to call his pieces texturologies, aspiring to paint with the weather. As we explore eco-art practiced throughout the world – often supported by international air travel – the forms mix hemispheric conversations with local ones, mixing media and foregrounding the heteronomous conditions of material. Ice, of course,

13 Bruno Latour: "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public in Making Things Public", in: Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel (eds.): *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Karlsruhe 2005, pp. 14-41.

14 Mike Davis: *Dead Cities: And Other Tales*, New York 2003; Isabelle Stengers: *Cosmopolitics I*, Minneapolis 2010; Manuel DeLanda: *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage theory and Social Complexity*, New York 2006; Jane Bennett: *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, NC 2010; Nabil Ahmed: "Entangled Earth", in: *Third Text* 27, no. 1 (2013): 44-53; Timothy Morton: *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge, Mass. 2012.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

is a favoured material, appearing to disappear in eco-art around the world, and a genre featured to blockbuster effect in Olafur Elliasson's *Ice Watch* (2014) at COP 21. Oil is also a favoured material, saturating and motoring global art institutions like the Tate, a condition made visceral by Liberate Tate's *Floe Piece* (2012) or *Licence to Spill* (2010). Ursula Bieman's collaboratively conceived platform exemplifies the medium-unspecific swirl of climate re-assembly. In *World of Matter*, she and her collaborators seek to produce a database of cases, media clips, and cartographical combinations, ensuring that "video clips … can be reconfigured and interlinked to one another, rendering new insights into relations between seemingly distinct resource issues and locations."[15] In this "intricately entangled ecologies of things, places and species interactions," *World of Matter* tracks the forces and tendencies and re-combinations of a world working against itself.[16]

In taking the temperature, literally, of these warming, rising climate discourses, Emily Apter has to my mind created the most lucid, if ironically under-played, attempt at a literature review, one that forces a geologic review. Apter adopts the phrase, "planetary dysphoria" to describe the linguistic proliferation, the mix of metaphors, and the grammatically de-familiarized sentences that accompany descriptions of environmental assemblage and re-assemblage.[17] Upending figure and ground amid the choking life of a dispersed phylogenetic tree, she finds in these tendencies a habit of joining the inter-scalic disciplines of the geologic with the intimate inter-personal disciplines of the psychoanalytic. She surveys a range of philosophical genealogies, especially German ones, to find a tacit climate discourse awaiting explicit revelation. From German Romanticism through to Germany's contemporary leading philosophical lights, she finds this insidious glow, reminding us of Kant's master's thesis on fire, the twists and turns of Naturphilosophie, Peter Sloterdijk's "psycho-cosmology," Thacker's *Ungrund*, undergroundedness, Brassier Nihil's "vital eschatology" in *Unbound*, and other leading non-German lights such as Lyotard and his anticipation of "solar catastrophe," Derrida on "Geo-psycho-analysis," Land's "geocosmic theory of trauma," and Mackay's idea of "geo-trauma" as well.[18] The idea of planetary dysphoria describes the effects of a kind of geological melancholia, a splitting of insides and outsides at various scales, of psychic splintering that coincides with the material splintering of rock and the leak of oil. Indeed, says Apter, "Planetary dysphoria captures the geo-psychoanalytic state of the world at its most depressed and *unruhig*, awaiting the triumphant revenge of acid, oil and dust. These elements demonstrate a certain agency: they

15 Ursula Biemann, Peter Mörtenböck, Helge Mooshammer: "From Supply Lines to Resource Ecologies: *World of Matter*", in: *Third Text* 27, no. 1 (2013): pp. 76-94.

16 Ibid, p. 78.

17 Emily Apter: "Planetary Dysphori,", in: *Third Text* 27, no. 1 (2013): pp. 131-140.

18 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

are sentient materials even if they are not fully licensed subjectivized subjects."[19] Taking these effects back to the subject of our conference, we might suggest that the heteronomy of planetary catastrophe undoes forms on which a theory of autonomy does not always know it depends. At the same time, an aesthetic theory of autonomy questions received patterns for understanding the world that climate science does not always know it needs. Notably, Apter turns to Mackenzie Wark for a final image of the planet's finale. Referencing Wark's equally de-familiarizing notion of *Cyclonopedia* (which he borrows from Negarastani), she focuses on what, for the purposes of this conference, I will call the non-functional aesthetic qualities of our climate's functional future. Says Wark, "Our permanent legacy will not be architectural, but chemical. After the last dam bursts, after the concrete monoliths crumble into the lone and level sands, modernity will leave behind a chemical signature, in everything from radioactive waste to atmospheric carbon. This work will be abstract, not figurative."[20] Note here that our future will not be imagined or even enacted as an intelligible or referential representation of a destroyed world. Rather it will have the "abstract" look, the abstract look that only a "chemical signature" – composed at the end of human time – can provide.

Scene III: Sun & Sea: The Relative Autonomy of Dysphoric Performance

With that inconvenient thought in mind, let's go back to the beach, the space of laconic pleasure and of gossipy denial, where the sand artificially lies in drifts beneath the bodies of hired performers, mixed with the occasional volunteer. Up above, viewers/voyeurs find pleasure and pain in the bodies flattened below. They sniffle in ambiguous grief; they walk devoutly from one side of the balcony to another with a vaguely liturgic gait.

This opera-cum-installation-cum-happening was first developed and shown in Lithuania in 2017 in the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius. The work then travelled to Germany, where it was shown in a former movie theatre as part of the Staatsschauspiel Dresden theatre's repertoire. As a piece that moved from gallery to theatre to site-specific biennial, it is thus one of those kinds of performance pieces that most interest me formally, i.e., one that is de- and re-contextualized by the venue (visual art or theatrical arts) in which it is housed. The key artists are Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, a filmmaker and theatre maker who serves as director and scenographer for this piece; Vaiva Grainytė, who serves as composer, and Lina Lapelytė, the librettist. Their earlier hybrid work – *Have a Good Day!* (2014) – staged a supermarket in New York and other places, focusing on the performance of customer service. Each artist

19 Ibid, p. 140.
20 Ibid, p. 140.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

has solo projects too; in fact, Barzdžiukaitė's next project is a film on cormorants; we can see if she decides to stage the ants in song with the angels.

In *Sun & Sea*, those sentient beings called humans do the singing, alternating amongst solo ballads and choral ensemble scores as this beach day unfolds. Different characters inhabit the beach: curious children, romantic couples, fighting couples, wealthy bourgeois women, entitled male baritones. There are also two dogs; one well-behaved and one not. A summary in a *Frieze* review is as good as any for giving you a sense of the arc and variation:

> They sing of passing thoughts, personal tribulations, lovers' conversations, and prophetic warnings of climate change's toll on the earth. … "What a relief that the Great Barrier Reef has a restaurant and hotel!" she sings. "We sat down to sip our piña coladas – included in the price!" … Their songs of cocktails and sunscreen soon become laced with threat and tragedy: the woman singing her 'Song of Complaint' wonders at the lack of snow over Christmas, while a man caught up in a 'Philosopher's Commentary' reflects on the Chinese factories that have produced the swimming suits they wear. A pair of identical twins cry over the disappearance of coral life, the extinction of the fish and bees, and muse over the possibilities of a 3D-printed future. Operatic lightness blooms into a transcendental final chorus, bleeding with fantastical imagery and ecological anxiety: "This year the sea is as green as a forest. Eutrophication! Botanical gardens are flourishing in the sea. The water blooms. Our bodies are covered with a slippery green fleece. Our swimsuits are filling up with algae."[21]

While taking in the sun and sea of *Sun & Sea (Marina)* from high above, more intrigue unfolded in the so-called background, that is, the heteronomous domain of the socio-economic. As a piece installed outside of a theatrical venue this time, its artists were required to supply a theatrical infrastructure on their own. That infrastructure included set and lights but also the bodies, musically trained bodies reclining on the ground. Unlike the paint, wood, stone, screens, wires, frames and pedestals of other biennial art, these embodied materials needed housing, needed food, and needed a basic wage to compensate them for their time. With no funding to support these sentient bodies, the team did what any institutionally autonomous artist group does in our neoliberal era: they started a crowd-funding campaign. Circulated on Indiegogo, the pitch differentiated their work from the biennial's visual art focus, that is, they foreground the formal variation of the autonomy/heteronomy dialectic:

---

21 En Liang Khong: "How a Beach Opera at the 58th Venice Biennale Quietly Contends with Climate Change Catastrophe", in: *Frieze*, 17 May 2019, https://frieze.com/article/how-beach-opera-58th-venice-biennale-quietly-contends-climate-change-catastrophe.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

> The Biennale usually features static art works (sculptures, paintings, drawings, videos or installations), which require thorough preparation before the opening, and then stay as they are. Our case is different. We are working with a team of over than (sic) 30 people and the performers are already learning and practicing their parts. With your support they could sing live at the pavilion from the opening of the Biennale in early May to the end of October.[22]

As funds came in, the pitch became more refined, further ironizing the financialization by calculating the cost of each languishing minute:

> We have calculated that one minute of appearance of *Sun & Sea (Marina)* costs $3 (€2,65), not including the rent of the Pavilion, technical assistance and preparatory expenses. If the equivalent of a cup of coffee would turn into a support by 12,000 people, it would secure the salaries for the singers throughout the duration of the Biennale.[23]

Time-based art has a different kind of pricing; time is money after all. By the time the biennial opened, they had secured enough funds to be able to perform the opera one day a week; every Saturday, the artificial beach included a cast of singing bathers. Upon winning the Golden Lion award, they and a broader public found no small irony in the fact that a blockbuster success could only be experienced in full once a week, so the Indiegogo campaign started up again, eventually allowing them to add a Wednesday performance to the run. Moreover, they found other ways to populate that beach without recourse to extra cash, using another neoliberal move of an experience economy by inviting volunteer visitors to be part of a "participatory" art event. The invitation read like this:

> If you'd like to be implicated even more literally, you have the chance to participate in the production, … organizers are inviting the public lay (sic) on the beach alongside the performers. All you need to do is fill out a registration form, select a three-hour time window, and show up with a bathing suit and towel… "We will provide free WiFi and good reading light," the website advises… "You are welcome to bring your kids and pets along."[24]

For the rest of the run, trained singers languished next to volunteer performers with their suits and towels. Every other day of the week, the beach was quiet.

So why was this climate performance piece the climactic success of the Venice Biennial? And what does that "success" have to say back to the themes of auton-

22 "Sun & Sea," Indiegogo, https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/saule-ir-jura-sun-sea#/

23 Ibid.

24 Julia Halperin: "It's Hard to Make Good Art About Climate Change: The Lithuanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale Is a Powerful Exception", in: *ArtNet*, May 10, 2019, https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/lithuanian-pavilion-1543168

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Figure 2: Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė und Lina Lapelytė, Sun & Sea (Marina), 2019

Opern-Performance, Litauischer Pavillon, Venedig-Biennale 2019, Foto: Andrej Vasilenko © Courtesy die Künstlerinnen

omy and functionalization, as they implicate and are implicated by the dysphoria of environmental politics? Let's start by looking at the dynamics of its reception. First off is how often the piece was lauded for not adhering to the perceived conventions of climate art, or more specifically for not capitulating to the literalizing functionality of climate aesthetics. Reviews contrasted this piece with "ecologically oriented art [that] tends to amplify our sensations in order to enable us to hear more sharply and see more clearly the scale of the climate crisis and ecological collapse," celebrating its orientation toward "the quotidian, the banal".[25] An explicitly and directly titled review made the case for this work's implicit and indirect aesthetic sensibility: In "It's Hard to Make Good Art About Climate Change: The Lithuanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale Is a Powerful Exception," the reviewer opined: "So much art about climate change is bad. It's preachy, literal, unimaginative, and hung up on aerial shots of floods or topographical maps. By contrast, Lithuania's pavilion at the Venice Biennale, titled *Sun & Sea (Marina)*, is a revelation […]. Unlike

25 Inesa Brasiske: "Sun and Sea in Venice, Lithaunia's Prize-Winning Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale", in: *CAA News*, July 25, 2019.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

most works about climate change, which attempt to scare you into action but often simply paralyze you with the vastness of the problem, this performance sinks in by focusing on the mundane."[26] In other words, this piece was lauded because of its re-commitment to being un-committed, to refusing the apparent intelligibility of classic eco-art pieces – we might recall the work of the Harrisons – in favour of oblique aesthetic effects. The piece's curator, Lucia Pietroiusti, who is also head of the Serpentine Gallery's climate platform, General Ecology, emphasized this effect, recalling an Adornoian discourse by stating that aesthetics offers a welcome and essential "non-moral" sensibility into what can otherwise be a didactic climate discourse.[27]

Interestingly, though, next to that un-committed allegiance to the steely legacies of aesthetic autonomy, the stories of this piece's reception were emotionally ebullient, sighing, sniffling, weeping, crying, keening in operatic tones that bespeak the attachment, not detachment, of receivers invested in the piece. Lucia Pietroiusti was struck by that as well, amidst the laconic, ironic performance of non-commitment, audience members were curiously, affectively committed. "Oh my gosh, the art world is having a nervous breakdown," said Pietroiusti. "Why is everyone coming out crying?" And then she and others began to elaborate on what might be undergirding this breakdown: "And then I started to think, 'What do we hold stuck at the back of our throats so close to being released that the tiniest gesture brings it all out?' …Why do we hold so much, so close to tears? … It's a testament to what art can still do in staying with the trouble, what art can still do in terms of bridging gaps of understanding, gaps of cognition."[28]

Understanding the reaction to this piece must mean understanding this peculiar form of "breakdown." The mix of affect and detachment, of anxiety and pleasure, of sonic resonance next to cognitive dissonance. Recalling the conceptual tendencies of an assemblage imagination, we might frame *Sun & Sea (Marina)*'s affective landscape as the explosion of geo-trauma, a place where planetary systems and psychoanalytic systems met at the back of the throat. Following Emily Apter, the work and the work's participants found themselves splintered, enduring the breakdown and re-assembly of psyche, stone, hearts and dust that afflict those living with planetary dysphoria.

---

26 Julia Halperin: "It's Hard to Make Good Art About Climate Change: The Lithuanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale Is a Powerful Exception", in: *Artnet*, May 10, 2019, https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/lithuanian-pavilion-1543168

27 Melanie Gerlis: "How do art fairs contribute to the climate crisis?", in: *Financial Times*, June 6, 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/c8f21a30-8386-11e9-a7f0-77d3101896ec

28 Guy Mackinnon-Little: "Interview with Lucia Pietroiusti", in: *TANK Magazine*, Issue 80, Autuym/Winter 2019, https://tankmagazine.com/issue-80/talks/lucia-pietroiusti/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Well, maybe. At the very least, the piece occasioned the mix of metaphors, affects, critiques and behaviours that seem to appear when a climate consciousness undoes our cognitive mapping, mocking our inherited tools for apprehending the world. In so doing, such forms of eco-art navigate the autonomy/heteronomy dialectic in 21st century form, deploying art's ability to stay "close with the trouble" and detached from the trouble in the same gasping breath. Of course, before indulging in what Apter calls the "Goth spiritualism" of such a rhetorical moment, we might also remind ourselves that such a reaction is still dependent upon the epistemological, formal and institutional conditions in which the work is produced. Recalling my arguments above, we might consider how the mix of form and medium produces such site-specific effects, especially the siting of a performance ecology in an art ecology. By placing an endurance performance in the midst of an art biennial that "usually features static art," *Sun & Sea* created the medium-un-specific conditions of heteronomous rupture. Indeed, perhaps the relative heteronomy of the performance, sited materially and psychically in a scene of historical, laconic detachment, in fact produced this geo-traumatic ebullience. In doing so, it rides a new habit of art world celebration as the art biennial grapples with this mixture; this has happened before – in biennials and museums around the world where the embodied, temporal, collective, and emotional forms of performance are received as novel, exceptional, sacrificial. Two years earlier in 2017, the Golden Lion went to Anne Imhoff's German Pavilion, one populated with dancers who crawled and jumped above and below audience members, receivers who waited in long lines to be undone. Now in 2019 at the Lithuanian Pavilion, the enactment of geo-trauma is made possible via medium-un-specific juxtaposition; arguably, medium heteronomy underwrote the perception of this work's strength, lending that strength to the sensitizing goals of climate art.

Moreover, this piece is saturated by the motors of neoliberal economics, including those motoring the large cruise ships docked in the Venice harbour nearby. The volunteer labour of its own participatory aesthetics is right in line. Inviting participants to "implicate" themselves by voluntarily performing as beach-comers, the piece extracted free labour, offering the thrill of participation with the dread of self-implication in order to sustain the performance event. And we were welcome to bring our kids and pets along.

Finally, without over-celebrating or over-critiquing, without romanticizing or raining chemical rain on this parade, the eruption of bodies, affects amid the stones of a military hanger bespeaks the geo-psycho effects of eco-art's assemblages. Offering another case study in the long, Wagnerian and Brechtian debates about culinary and critical effects of a Total Work of Art, the piece also offers us the chance to think more deeply about how the autonomy/functionality dialectic operates on different registers in the scene of a warming planet. After all, the eco-imagination here and in the practices and discourses I glossed above, does reframe patterns of intel-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

ligibility. Conceptions of dysphoric assemblage are undoing perceptions of up and down, figure and ground, inside and outside, and much more through different re-organizations. We might understand climate assemblages as the heteronomous undoing of that which we thought was autonomous. They replace apprehend-able conceptions of time and origin with geological temporality; they unhinge received divisions between figure and ground, self and world. They challenge, à la Latour, the spherical visualization of a planet that humans only recently learned to think was round. They deploy a sentient abstraction and a geologic opacity within these re-arrangements, thereby enacting the epistemological promise of aesthetic autonomy in eco-forms responsive to the opacities and hyper-objects of an eroding planet.

Finally, and to repeat, the heteronomy of planetary catastrophe undoes forms on which a theory of autonomy does not always know it depends. At the same time, an aesthetic theory of autonomy questions received patterns for understanding the world that climate science does not always know it needs. This is a needing, this is a keening, that erupts as we approach the abstraction of the chemical signature, where bad feelings coincide with guilty pleasures coincide with sentient dust. All of it, all of us, hurdle around, atop and inside a no-longer round planet, producing run-on prose like the prose I'm offering to you now where subjects and predicates flow into non-grammaticality. Lie on the beach that lies on you, a beach that is always already lying to you. Feel badly about it.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452233-005 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND