



Terra Lemnia rubra – troche of red clay from the medicine cabinet of Sir Hans Sloane. Diametre 23mm. Probably late seventeenth to early eighteenth century. Natural History Museum, London.

ANOTHER KIND OF WE

LAURA PRESTON & JENNIFER TEETS

The Distance Plan invited curatorial colleagues Laura Preston and Jennifer Teets to put down in writing part of an ongoing conversation around how artistic production and criticism is evolving in a time of precarity and ecological urgency. As Preston is based in Berlin and Teets in Paris, the conversation was conducted via Skype and email throughout September and October 2015.

Laura Preston

Jennifer, we connected again over your exhibition 'Elusive Earths'. This project took as its departure point the historical belief in the medical properties of consuming tablets made of clay. The project was a group exhibition presenting various visual responses to this history. In light of this issue of The Distance Plan emphasising the relationship between climate change and economic precarity, I'm really interested in taking our conversation into places of counterpoint and resistance. I wish to question whether working with others and within the framework of abstract thinking offers another way through states of precarity. A key resistant act may be in allowing for indigestible difference, as an offering in response to the consumptive habits and homogeneity of neoliberal ethics.

How did the exhibition project 'Elusive Earths' operate as a proposition and as a collective enterprise? May a project that extends from an ecological issue also demonstrate another take on what ecology is?

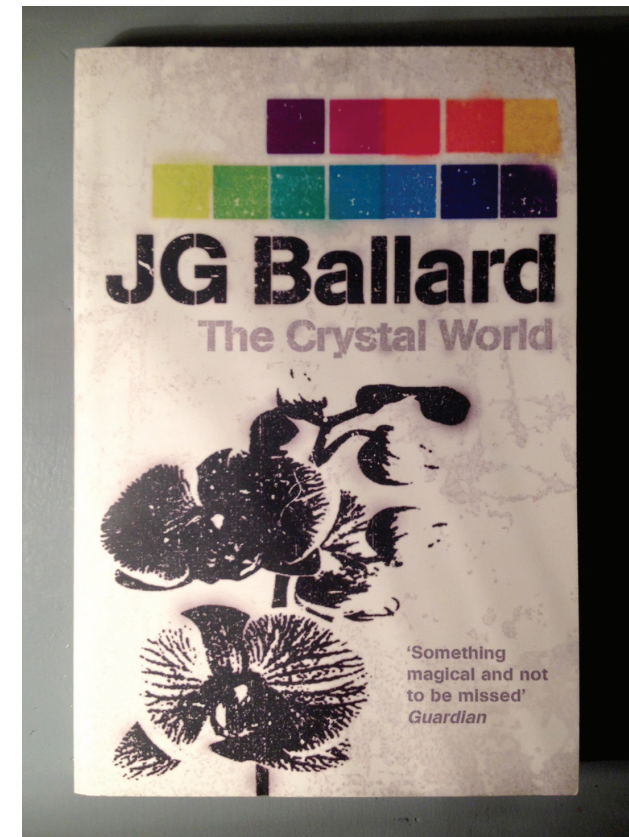
Jennifer Teets

For a number of years I was in dialogue with a group of artists who lead Etablissement d' En Face Projects, a small and innovative art centre in Brussels. Artist Michael Van den Abeele invited me to expand on my work with mud and our conversation ensued from there. For me, mud is a way to approach all that is sinking, hindered, and entrapped in writing about time. It is also material as methodology. A kind of 'ceramics without the fire' (as coined by Post Brothers) that probes the ethos of ecology in the face of ficto-critique. It was sometime after I had curated 'A clock that runs on mud' in 2011 at Stereo, Poznan, and later led a collective mud bath at a health centre in Druskininkai, Lithuania (as a preamble to a writing workshop—a time-based sludge revelry of physiological speculations and absurd pathologies) that I began to conceive 'Elusive Earths'.

At the time, I was thinking through the personal-political and how to define a space of meaning through scientific forms of thought. Lorenzo Cirrincione, an artist/philosopher who specialises in a history of collections, told me about his reading of *terra sigillata* (sealed earth) in Antidotarii from the early modern period, where they comment on how to prepare 'treacle', the most famous anti-poison since antiquity. Essentially, the *terra sigillata* were clay cakes or pastilles that were excavated vis-à-vis a ritual led by a priestess; laid to dry and stamped with a seal. Later, they were loaded on a cart and exported throughout Europe and brought into the limelight inside of collector and pharmaceutical circles. The ingestion of earth offers an interesting route to discuss a politics of nature, and where we stand today regarding nature/culture divides. I channelled this into aesthetics, and towards a field of abstraction.

From the beginning, the research and its theoretical underpinnings were a curatorial/artistic metonym, yet meant to tie into politically enmeshed issues within ecology, both historically and in the present. Other axes of the exhibition turn to ques-

tions of self-multiplication, ingestion, inner transformation, the breeding of selves and bodies, metabolisms, etc. In Bogotá at FLORA ars+natura in November 2014, you could witness a reworked version extending over into research on *terra preta*.¹ I suppose both *terra sigillata* and *terra preta* are angles from which to think about the history and processes of clay use, expansion, and effectiveness on the one hand, and on the other grander questions around the flux of materiality, which I aimed to bring back into the exhibition in a full turn.



J.G. Ballard, *The Crystal World*
(1966; repr., London: Fourth Estate, 2011)

¹ Translated as 'black earth', *terra preta* is a type of very dark, carbon-rich anthropogenic soil found in the Amazon Basin.

LP

Jennifer today I read in the newspaper that a truck branded with ham advertising and full of people was discovered on the border between Hungary and Austria. No one had survived. Nightly there are unsuccessful attempts by young hopefuls from the Calais jungle to cross the channel via the Eurostar tracks. The 'crystal forest' of the fearful nation state seems to be getting in the way. A turn of the newspaper pages and a glimpse of a pixelated boat on water is a short-cut image to the population pressure and the ever-increasing mobility of people seeking their own patch of the limited resources. These are the times. I write to you considering this precarity from Germany, the European centrifugal power force and nation state accountable for how best to deal with Greece. The world seems more fictional than fiction. Your words resonate. Ficto-critique.

A past exhibition project I set the brief for, 'The Future is Unwritten', took another approach to writing.² At the time there wasn't the same media attention on ecological issues, although the economic fluctuations of 2008 had developed a rhetoric—crisis and collapse. The artists were invited to respond to an entropic text I had written and to use the university gallery as context and the building as site, and to borrow your term, as a metonym for climate change. It was an experiment that showed what little needs to be done to alter one's behaviour and write one's actions differently. You could say that the conversation of institutional critique was updated to address infrastructure through an assemblage of gestures which included opening the back door, turning off the air conditioning system, making existing operations visible—for example, moving the office into the gallery space, and transforming university property into artworks (a process very literally made transparent).

Since 'The Future ...' an architecture of relations between the artists and myself continue. Re-visionings—Fiona Connor's follow up to a letter which she addressed to the gallery suggesting ways of making the building more energy efficient has lead to an online publication (<http://alettertotheunwrittenfuture.org>) that is now tracking her research and how different perspectives on climate change have shifted. Acquiring new

language—William Hsu is retraining in computer science and the language of mathematics to account for unpredictable change and the abstraction that comes from working within algorithms. Exposing expectations of production and offering other models—as interlocutor for Kate Newby's challenges to public space, and working with Amit Charan on a post, one-year exhibition series, *Alterations*³ which has gone on to inform his startup of a bespoke tailoring company.

Acts of re-visioning and rewriting were already present at the time of exhibition when Daniel Malone followed up on a previous proposal to the gallery requesting to throw a brick through its front windows. The clay brick was based on a form and carried an insignia related to his time living in China in the early 2000s where he witnessed rapid urban development. Denied permission in 2004, in 2009 he finally performed the act and subsequently cast a glass brick out of the window shards moulded on the clay, which has since been acquired for the university's art collection.

Judith Butler, in relation to precarity, also speaks of its relation to acts of translation and she brings in Spivak:

The practice of translation (which is something other than an assimilation to mono-lingualism) is a way of producing—performatively—another kind of 'we'—a set of connections through language that can never produce a linguistic unity... This is why Spivak tells us that translation is the experience of the impossible (which is not the same as saying that there is no translation). The point is to negotiate the right to speak, and to make sure that the voiceless are given a right to speak. And yet, this obligation cannot be the same as supplying or imposing that voice. An impossible and necessary bind, but also the model for a collectivity that does not presuppose sameness.⁴

2 See <http://www.adamartgallery.org.nz/thefuture/>

3 *Alterations* was a project space motivated by art and research developed within the condition of free-time. A year long series over 2010, the project tested out interventions and proposals for new exhibition formats. A review of one project is available at <http://eyecontactsite.com/2011/01/thinking-about-the-films-of-peter-watkins>

4 Judith Butler, 'Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics', lecture given at Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 8 June 2009, available at <http://www.aibr.org/antropologia/04v03/criticos/040301b.pdf>

How do you work with ficto-criticism and do you see it as an act of translation? Do you locate your work in fiction to circumvent sameness?

JT

Ficto-criticism was something I was introduced to by the American Cologne-based science fiction writer Mark von Schlegell around 2009. For me it was a technique to employ as a way to bring forth the writing process in the exhibition. Furthermore, I use ficto-critique to think about material and arrive somewhere else through the passage of the essay. Ficto-critical writing has fallen in and out of academic favour throughout the past twenty years, still superseded in humanities and creative writing programmes by the two poles of the traditional academic essay or more abstract experimental works. For me, it sits somewhere between life-writing, authorial pursuit, and self-discovery in experimentation. It is a way of producing *performatively*, as you mention, with regards to Butler and Spivak. What interests me here is how the performative in a written text, or some described individual process, can be brought back to the collective to enliven or heighten an experience. As of late, crucial issues around environment or political ethos have become axes for me in this kind of writing.

A good example for prompting ficto-critique would be something like these two associative processes and images from the newspaper: this morning I opened *El Pais* to discover that in one of the driest places on the planet, the Atacama Desert in Chile, a historical rainfall had moved through the entire region earlier in the year, which led to catastrophic flooding, but also provided water for flower seeds that had lain dormant for years. Pink mallow flowers now pepper the land in full bloom, alongside 200 other native plant species. As a result, Chile expects over 20,000 tourists to visit the desert to see the flowers. In parallel, earlier this month sinking water levels in one of Mexico's largest rivers, the Grijalva, resulted in the emergence of an ancient church from the first half of the 16th century. It's not the first time a drop in the reservoir has revealed the church; record low water levels unveiled it in 2002. It was founded by Spanish colonisers during the reign of Charles V, and was in public use until the 20th century, when a dam was built near it in 1966, and the surrounding

area went under water. Locals also expect tourists to visit the region to see the unearthing of this church.

The documentation of these weather related events takes us directly to precarity and recent waves of tourism related to climate change dynamics. An exercise would be associating these two images into a scenario, at once critical and epistemic, as a way to break down the image (in writing) in order to reconstruct it, on the basis of the paradoxical traits it already portrays. I'm not sure how far all of this goes to describe translation according to Butler. Of late, one of my main priorities is to open up areas of knowledge and speculation which stem from considering one's relationship to a world in flux.

What I do isn't entirely embedded in fiction, but entangled in the realities of 'The World in Which We Occur' (here I'm nodding to the title of the series I co-curated with Margarida Mendes for the XII Baltic Triennial). I'm curious about your own way of channelling translation or performativity through your curatorial and editorial work with artists to the likes of Michael Stevenson or Richard Frater. These artists held exhibitions curated by you, one at Portikus in Frankfurt and the other, at your curatorial hub, the Adam Art Gallery at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

LP

The project with Michael Stevenson transformed the building of Portikus into a camera obscura. Based on a text by a Borgesian renaissance writer José de Jesús Martínez, *Teoría del Vuelo (The Theory of Flight)*, the exhibition became a single flickering image that operated as film in its rawest state. The image that the lens was transporting from the heights of the building to its exhibition space was quite literally an object of flight and in-flight. An aeroplane. In an attic. On an island. River Main, Frankfurt. The island is also a bird sanctuary.

What was performed during this exhibition was an ambition for the image to distil a theory, and a belief in the image's autonomy as a carrier of memory. It was a photograph, it was also a live-feed; light dependent and altering due to the time of day. The institution also altered its opening hours according to the sun. The front door

A Life of Crudity,		Vulgarity,		and Blindness	
DATE	SUNSET	DATE	SUNSET	DATE	SUNSET
28.09	19:10	21.10	18:22	11.11	16:47
29.09	19:08	22.10	-----	12.11	-----
30.09	19:06	23.10	18:18	13.11	16:44
01.10	-----	24.10	18:17	14.11	16:43
02.10	19:02	25.10	18:15	15.11	16:41
03.10	18:59	26.10	18:13	16.11	16:40
04.10	18:57	27.10	18:11	17.11	16:39
05.10	18:55	<i>clocks shift back</i>		18.11	16:38
06.10	18:53	<i>1 hour</i>		19.11	-----
07.10	18:51	28.10	17:09	20.11	16:36
08.10	-----	29.10	-----	21.11	16:35
09.10	18:47	30.10	17:06	22.11	16:34
10.10	18:44	31.10	17:04	23.11	16:33
11.10	18:42	01.11	17:02	24.11	16:32
12.10	18:40	02.11	17:00	25.11	16:31
13.10	18:38	03.11	16:59	26.11	-----
14.10	18:36	04.11	16:57	27.11	16:30
15.10	-----	05.11	-----	28.11	16:29
16.10	18:32	06.11	16:54	29.11	16:28
17.10	18:30	07.11	16:53	30.11	16:28
18.10	18:28	08.11	16:51	01.12	16:27
19.10	18:26	09.11	16:50	02.12	16:27
20.10	18:24	10.11	16:48		

Exhibition can only be viewed during daylight hours

opening and closing affected the image. The exhibition extended into a book project on Stevenson's practice, focused on his relation to literature and speculation, designed with Nuno da Luz. We named it *Introduction*.

Last year, Richard Frater and I presented a public instalment of 'Living Cities 2009-' at the Adam Art Gallery. Film-related in process and in production timeframe, the presentation, although based on a 16mm film shot in 2009, translated documentary into a series of sculptural placeholders (fragmented film elements of mise en scène, image, sound, apparatus). Positioned across two different sites, the gallery and a living room, the exhibition addresses its location Karori, a suburb of Wellington city.

This hilly suburb hugs an inner city bird sanctuary that is also a place of tourism. The project considered the promotion of the 100% pure, clean green image of New Zealand and also the sanctuary's particular ambition to return its patch of land to a state of 'Zealandia', a time of pre-settlement when this island was full of native bird life. The birds, specifically the native parrot Kaka, are regenerating through the efforts of the sanctuary, yet as they develop and fly outside of its bounds they are threatened by ever-increasing suburban surrounds and the contaminates to be found there, particularly through the past use of iron roofing. Yet not entirely victim to this violence of development, Frater's project also offered a consideration of the autonomy of the Kaka, and how it also incribes and adds another view to the city and its ecology of images.

Frater's ongoing project 'Living Cities' and its broader framework is based on the essay of the same name by Steve Hinchliffe and Sarah Whatmore, which proposes that a city's multiple viewpoints might be better reflected in a non-representational geography. They suggest what is called for is a 'mapping more attentive to movement than to fixity', one that 'articulates the spatialities of networking rather than of territory in the Euclidean sense.'⁵

A link to be made between these projects was the translation of a text into a 'performing' image, non-static, non-representational, that carries another subjectivity if you will, and is very much in the world. This performing image is effectively defined by its situation: weather-dependent, altered by the changing conditions of the site, interfacing between analogue and digital networks, acknowledging worldviews and the changeability of image states. In the work I do I wish to develop and expose abstraction as an ethical and active contribution towards ecological thinking, in which ecology is not only viewed as an issue but also as a modality registering the interconnectedness between the world we live in and the world we make.

Your projects, as much as they speak about consumption and contamination, they also seem to act as an embodiment of thought which then performs, spores, proliferates, quite literally from the making of cheese to the more recent discursive situation 'The World in Which We Occur'.

JT

My work with cheese, like other materials or substances I'm engaged with as units or derivatives, has a back-story. It is not your usual cheese. It is essentially an effort to make a trace in cheese. A traumatic trace (in cheese form) made from a herd of dairy goats that were afflicted by psychosomatic effects as a consequence of a violent European windstorm that struck France in 2010. Named Xynthia, the storm struck the coastal region of France on February 27th and 28th, flooded over 50,000 hectares of land and killed 47 people. The storm surge combined with a high tide and large waves caused flood defences to fail along the coast from the Gironde near Bordeaux to the Loire Estuary—coastal dikes that date back to the Napoleonic era which were originally built to protect agricultural land. However, with the increasing urbanisation of the Atlantic coast in the past 30 years their primary purpose has changed.

Goats are sensitive creatures. They are affected by minute environmental disturbances related to sound and movement. So visualise this storm combined with other factors, in this case helicopters swarming and surveying from above post-storm, and

imagine the kind of environmental stress that implies for them. What was mistaken for a bacterial infection was a *Mycoplasma*. *Mycoplasmae* are slow-growing microorganisms, members of the mollicute family, and are characterised as infectious agents, somewhere between a virus and bacteria. They are known to cause serious and often fatal illness in goats. Their symptoms include the decrease in milk production and mastitis, as well as respiratory issues. Conducting first hand research, I became immediately captivated, and as a response to a commission tied in with my research group at SPEAP (SciencesPo Experimentation in Arts and Politics, a social sciences/artistic research group led by Bruno Latour in Paris)⁶ looking at disaster induced displacement, I took the opportunity to research, write, and film around bacterial displacement. Even further, I learned to make cheese from their milk. Nervous cheese.

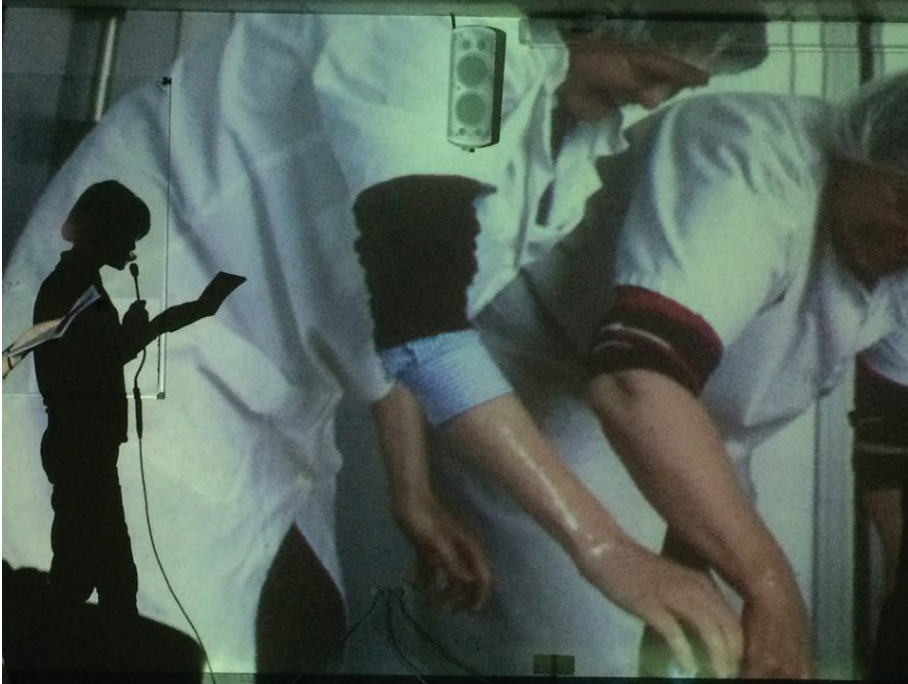
The writing inspired a film-lecture with these axes:

- Avatar Udders (the experience of the goats and sci-fi treatment of the mycoplasma opportunistic pathogen)
- The pathos of bacteria (energy and disjunction, metabolics, the lactic process under the influence of stress)
- The Moon is made of black cheese (different body forms, newly displaced forms)
- The cheese stands alone (ontology of cheese)

I also worked with cheese in Tinos, Greece but that was geared towards collaborating with a community of cheesemakers on the island who taught me about austerity and the ways of the land through cheese. Later, I presented an installation titled *The contingency of cheese* at 'Time Flies Like an Arrow, Fruit Flies Like a Banana,' an exhibition curated by Valentinas Klimauskas in the summer of 2015 and held at the Cultural Foundation of Tinos. Cheese is pretty fascinating to me as an entity in itself and from the experience in Vendée, I've been able to angle it in different ways.

'The World in Which We Occur', on the other hand, embodies the performative as public presentation. It consists of live phone calls with various thinkers who each speak in turn, via telephone, to an

⁶ See http://www.artandeducation.net/school_watch/reassembling-art-pedagogy-pragmatism-inquiry-and-climate-change-at-sciencespo-experimentation-in-arts-and-politics-speap/



Jennifer Teets, *Avatar Udders*, film lecture (prototype), held at Sciences Po Experimentation in Arts and Politics, Paris, 2014.

audience seated in an auditorium. Together with my amazing comrade Margarida Mendes, a curator from Portugal, I led four sessions in Vilnius at the XII Baltic Triennial. There were fifteen speakers total, each session lasting over ninety-minutes. Contributors posed questions of relevance to 'the world in which we occur,' a phrase borrowed from pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. In asking their questions, the speakers addressed topics relating loosely to ecology and climate change. The Dewey quote comes from *Experience and Nature* (1925): 'The striving of man for objects of imagination is a continuation of natural processes; it is something man has learned from the world in which he occurs, not something which he arbitrarily injects into that world.' The passage calls attention to the process and sources of learning. In his later work, *Art as Experience*, Dewey contends that a sustained experience of thought can be said to possess aesthetic power by virtue of being pervaded by consummated emotion. I was heavily invested in Dewey across 2013/2014 as a direct influence of Latour. I made a reading of this seminal text from the rooftop of a Venetian Greek dovecote located in Tinos that later was made into a film.

I'd argue there is also a level of discrepancy in the cheese and 'The World in Which We Occur' namely because there is a sense of obfuscation I privilege in their presentations (nervousness as taste, live voices without interaction or faces). There is so much more to say about the cheese and 'The World in Which We Occur' in terms of embodiment, but the general aim lies there.

In your editorial and writing work, have you introduced fiction or some other kind of trigger within a group of artists to see how it ricochets back to the exhibition? How does it translate?

LP

I approach this from both angles. A text, or more often the act of writing, is a reference point from which the exhibition then becomes another narrative take, one predicated on spatiality and assemblage. The trigger in this process, even if singular—often found in text—unfolds as an idea for an exhibition that as a medium is plural by nature, offering multiple pathways into receiving information and where information is considered multi-registered; data and sense.

Inversely, currently I'm co-editing with London-based Alex Davidson a publishing venture in which the exhibition is a starting point for the production of new art writing. The journal is called *Next Spring*. It is an occasional series of essays published in the spring of either the northern or southern hemispheres. It bridges geographical sites and local discourses. It considers ecological thinking and encourages writing about art by departing from the artwork's atmospheric effects, which may then lead to other subjects and ideas.

For the first issue, three women writers, coincidentally all of whom I met in Paris, including yourself Jennifer, are responding to artists' projects that occurred in the south (this format will be mixed up dependent on the editorial interests, environmental changes, and what are determined as pressing, systematic issues for the discussion of art). Distance is a productive generator for the journal and used as provocation that in allowing for discrepancies, gaps, and differences, may bring the ideas discussed by the work and in the writing all the more closer. This call to translate and the emphasis on the writer to construct a parallel reality to the exhibited artwork is admittedly performative, yet seeks 'the experience of the impossible...also the model for a collectivity that does not presuppose sameness'. How this series may take another translation and return back to an exhibition modality remains open but is certainly a possibility of interest.

What aspects of other's works are you departing from in the projects you produce? Did 'Theater of Negotiations'⁷ inspire, even for its faults? How involved with you be in the forthcoming Paris summit?

JT

I have a different appreciation of 'stagings' and the fictional constraints that the real can offer. While reviewing the 'Theater of Negotiations', an *e-flux* Live Coverage written in collaboration with my colleague, theorist/art historian Vincent Normand,

7 Make it Work/Theater of Negotiations was a conference hosted by SciencesPo Experimentation in Arts Science and the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers, and led by Bruno Latour from 29-31 May 2015. For further information see <http://www.cop21makeitwork.com/make-it-work/> and <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/live-coverage-speap-bruno-latour-s-paris-climat-2015-make-it-work-may-29-31/1795>

we asked, what is explicit in the climate negotiation simulation? Does this simulation offer more mystification than explanation? What is the tension between dramatisation and representation in Latour's work? What kind of counterpoints does the simulation offer that are relevant to the big issues to be teased out in the real conference? The reason we asked these questions was because these kinds of tensions are pivotal in the conceptual divisions of the Anthropocene, which disorganises historical systems of producing of conceptual divides, and the role of representation in their naturalisation. The most inspiring constituencies offered at the 'Theater of Negotiations' were the introduction of non-nation states to the level of states, which is a very relevant addition to these discussions.

I'm not directly involved in the Paris summit nor the ArtCop21⁸ circle, yet I will participate in the 'Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge and Non-Useful Knowledge'⁹ taking place on November 21st at the reopening of the Musée de l'Homme, which joins over 180 'experts' to engage in conversations around scale and the Anthropocene. I'll converse about (and taste) cheese, as a micro narrative of climate change impact.

Recently I organised 'The Pump' at the Royal College of Art in London, again working with Valentinas Klimasauskas. The show is based on British conceptual artist John Latham's multiple points of timespace, and ecological considerations of sculpture and event making. Keeping in mind the artist's preoccupations with time, space, and energy, we thought it could be meaningful to think of curatorial tools, such as the metonymy of a pump, that would help artists and writers engage with the conceptual considerations of his 1969 work 'The Big Breather', which was a big bellows that inflated and deflated daily as a way to simulate the tides in response to the gravitational pull of the moon. We invited artists to conceptually and metaphorically investigate the pump as an artistic trope. This exhibition will grow into another exhibition in 2016 at different locations in London and in collaboration with Arts Catalyst.

8 See <http://www.artcop21.com/>

9 The list of experts and subjects is phenomenal and offers a vast portrait of our times. You can read more on it here: http://www.formsofcouncil.org/fr/productions/401_blackmarket_for_useful_knowledge_and_non_knowledge_no_18_on_becoming_earthlings