

# THINKING MATTER

Representational Breakdown at  
*The World in Which We Occur*

Jennifer Teets

1

K

1

7

4

1

7

1

H

1

Shall I be bold here and state that figurative artworks crumble under the weight of climate-change politics? No single or simple political aesthetic corresponds to the expressive face of planetary dysphoria. 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,” as Emily Apter has poignantly remarked.<sup>1</sup> And as the stability of nature gradually flips to an unstable state, the discourses of eco-aesthetics become untenable, and hence offer and demand for new figurations to come forth. Emily Eliza Scott, in her essay “Archives of the Present-Future: On Climate Change and Representational Breakdown,” advocates for perspectives that are highly situated yet move across registers and scales—both spatial (for example, the so-called local and global) and temporal (for example; historical time, evolutionary time, and media time).<sup>2</sup> Aligning herself with the position of anthropologist Anna Tsing, she notes that our attention must turn to “friction,” “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference.”<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, we have the linguistic geometry posited by sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour who was willing to attempt a new definition of aesthetics, that of “becoming sensitive.” For Latour, this era must become “real” (through the instruments of science), “present” (politically and socially), and “true” (with emotions and mental representations) for us to tackle representation.<sup>4</sup> Yet, becoming sensitive doesn’t exactly make the matter of an eco-political aesthetic explicit. We are now active, agential, and morphogenetic beings completely entrenched in the techno-natural sphere of new natures. How, then, are we transformed and deviated through

## JENNIFER TEETS

complex systems that have become the soundtrack to climate change? What is our new figuration?

Certainly we are bound to how climate change's unruliness is represented. For such a critical concern of collective impact, taking any less of a position would be a play on neutrality. Yet, when triggering critical thinking into being in the face of climate change, certain expressions of ecological art might be considered futile while at the same time fueling concerted action. The contemporary approach to nature has fallen into a similar dialogue as that used within political spheres. While the discourse on climate change is inextricable from politics, politics has yet to show it needs or, perhaps, truly desires to affect a reverse in its effects. So where now, what then, could be an alternative for this emergent sensitivity and sensibility in the arts (other than existing spectacular public artworks cornering the theme of ecological emergencies, material assemblages, or the restorationist eco-aesthetics that focuses on awareness) in an arrangement that might actually usher forth political affect?

A number of initiatives focusing on "knowledge production" have emerged in an attempt to challenge, describe, understand, and more consciously shape these complexities. This "epistemic drive" as I call it, lends itself towards the effort to "ecologize" museums and educational frameworks so as to produce knowledge, urge action, and shake up the passivity of political fatalism in the cultural milieu. The epistemic drive also creates the necessary procedures that make it possible to follow a network of *quasi objects* (time and space's way of drawing lines between hybrid human and nonhuman things) or to include proposals that take account for otherness.

## THINKING MATTER

Philosophically aligned with this turn toward knowledge production, the series of structured listening exercises I co-organize with Margarida Mendes titled *The World in Which We Occur* (TWWWO) provide a case in point. Employing a methodology I call “inquiry as form,” the goal of the exercises are to explicate one’s relationship within the current state of nature, in an era of erratic climatic behaviors. TWWWO is essentially framed around the question format. Speakers worldwide are contacted over the telephone in front of a live audience, where questions are put at the forefront of our discourse. Rather than characterizing climate change as a visual experience, in this format the voice is privileged as an attempt of alter-expression, to conveniently undermine our customary world of image dominant eco-aesthetics.<sup>5</sup> Thus, to reiterate my question; how, then, are we transformed and deviated through complex systems that are the soundtrack to climate change? I’d like to revisit some of the questions and thoughts proposed in TWWWO to offer insight into how we relate to the world and what we constitute as critical ecological subjects within the global environmental crisis. The subject matter at hand requires us to stop and consider the human and nonhuman body in the face of climate change. Especially since bodies fall into, at times, invisible categorizations—we cannot visually document the living system as coherently as we do, say, the earth from sky to ground with data visualizations. The conceptual extensions and linkages to bodies urge us to reframe our thinking, unpack the present, and to reflect on the material that it has incorporated or actively incorporates.

One lesson that we have learned via TWWWO is that climate change is inadvertently and directly related to

JENNIFER TEETS

colonialism with a degree of conflict imbedded in the equation. Thus, unpacking the problem is to unpack systemic violence as an effect of (post)colonialism. The questions of who decides, who controls, where, how, and what for, need to be asked. In one of the sessions dedicated to the pharmakon, artist and activist Carolina Caycedo urges us to think about *body as territory*, rather than *landscape as apparatus*. “What is territory?” she asks. “What are the mechanisms of re-appropriation of that body, of decolonization, and if that process entails a re-appropriation of physical territories, like rivers, forests, and other ecosystems where I inhabit?” “In thinking about biopolitics,” and by extension, “is the colonization of my body a form of necropolitics?” The composite of meanings implicit in the pharmakon is implied here. Toxic materials are considered in the way that they move through the body and express their elements as well, as an idea plane where theoretical constructions form and emerge. For a number of years, Caycedo has actively protested against dam construction in Colombia and has engaged with Indigenous groups, the people of the Wayuu, who inhabit northern Colombia and northern Venezuela, a group who exists between borders, and at the moment are experiencing high mortality rates due to environmental deterioration because the water they drink is poisoned by tailings from open pit coal mines. The Wayuu people are subject to a violence that subverts territory; the territory of water, landscape, of the body, of the tailings from privatized endeavors and capital that opens the earth and extracts material, and along the way, generates toxicity and immerses whole cultures in a venomous environment.<sup>6</sup>

In synch with Caycedo’s thinking, researcher and artist Nabil Ahmed asks, “How does poison produce an idea of

## THINKING MATTER

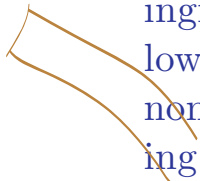

movement in the dead body? Can the idea of movement be assigned to the ambivalence that we are living in and experiencing today? How can we heal the partition in the modern age and within our crisis with nature?"<sup>7</sup> Ahmed's thoughts refer to the dualist relationship between remedy and poison and how they counterbalance one another.

His forensic research points out how arsenic poisoning in Bangladesh and Papua, "moves vertically in both directions from the territory into the body through a complex assemblage of the body of an activist mid-flight, the rural poor, mangrove forests, rivers, and the emancipatory dream of an indigenous people."<sup>8</sup> Ahmed informs us that the entanglement of natural and political processes of violence has reached a point where it is difficult to differentiate between their causalities because territorial poisonings can be seen as unintended consequences of development.

Both Caycedo and Ahmed speak from a growing field of artists and thinkers dedicated to postcolonial ecocriticism that countervails anthropocentric visions accounting for relations of power, with forms of alterity. When I say alterity here, I'm referring to the nonhuman other and how it commingles with nuanced injustices of growing complexity. What perpetuates this form of *othering* are the dangerous material agencies (such as the toxins, tailings, and arsenic poisoning) that infiltrate bodies and jeopardize them. Thus, the reading of the body can be seen as a *material text* in which cultural practices, social and political decisions, and environmental processes are intertwined with issues of rights, health, and ecology.

Another speaker in the series, artist Pedro Neves Marques, considers the body differently. Reaching beyond the focus on an ingestion of toxins to the surface of the

earth itself, he asks, “What is it to inscribe, to mark, to carve, to perforate and punctuate, basically to draw in nature but also let nature be marked from the outside?” “Is there a difference between marking the body (the human body) and marking the body of the earth?” He uses these questions to describe position and gender symmetry between humans and nonhumans, and within an animist ontology between humans. Furthering his theory, Neves Marques throws a wild metaphor into motion, “Could one imagine the plant regrowth caused by the genocide of the Conquest and subsequent mass migrations and tropical wars that have covered the geoglyphs, and literally erased them from modern history, burying them underneath forests?” He assures us that if we hold the metaphor true, then genocide would have surprisingly contributed to many ingrained anthropological beliefs about the people of the lowlands—again we come into contact with this idea of non-monumental, non-urban societies. With the recent dating of the Anthropocene, which is traced to the colonial genocide of the American conquests, comes the speculation that the conquest was so genocidal that it produced marked geological layers and could have changed the atmospheric cycle of the sixteenth century. In a way, this was the biggest genocide ever registered within members of the same species. It is, perhaps, comparable to what’s happening nowadays with the extinction of animal and plant life.<sup>9</sup>



Neves Marques’ speculations cast us into thinking about the contingencies of bodies and earth matter across micro and macro scales, an uncanny interconnectedness across cultures. These different stabs at scaling take us to recall the way Emily Eliza Scott positions registers as material markers of scale, both spatially and historically.



## THINKING MATTER

Specifically, human interference with the support systems of global life requires the development of policies and practices that could usher forth political affect that prevent more scalar problems from occurring. Another twist on scaling is Anthropologist Stefan Helmreich's positioning of microbes. He asks, "Why microbes now?" and "How is it that microbes have become such popular figures for thinking about everything from food politics, to astrobiology, to climate change, to new kinds of pharmaceuticals?" Microbes colonize our imaginations more and more. Microbial social theory is so fashionable today that even, an "anthropology of the microbe" has been considered. Helmreich is fascinated by the 10 percent microbial cell ratio in the human body and what makes us into what he has termed *Homo microbis*; an arresting title, which leads to questions rather than answers. The debate about "what a human is" is a huge question and Helmreich considers wrongheaded the idea that microbes may answer for it—overturning the notion of the planetary human species as being, "the human more than human." It is then, he suggests, that biology does not speak for itself, for humans or nonhumans, but rather "the biological is more than biological."<sup>10</sup>

The complexity of nature-cultures and collectivity leans on how oppositions between nature and culture, mind and matter, the human and nonhuman produce action and meaning when breaking them down and binding them together. When thinking about climate change and bodies then, it is crucial to think across scales so as to define a kind of thinking materialism, as an offering to climate-change politics and aesthetics. The minor, the middle, the space of human and nonhuman bodies, and how very small and large scales connect us to, say, mesoscale problems of

## JENNIFER TEETS

weathering, can tell us more about the parametrization of life. It is here where unleashing the numbers, settling into the fact that colonialism and climate modification are inextricable, helps us unlock potential avenues for conceptualizing inequities and making numeracy meaningful for transformation. It is then we could build a system of social and political values that yield results for the uncertain future ahead and the modes of representation associated with those values.

### Notes

1. Emily Apter, "Planetary Dysphoria," *Third Text*, vol. 27, no. 1 (January 2013) 140.
2. Emily Eliza Scott, "Archives of the Present-Future: On Climate Change and Representational Breakdown," *The Avery Review*, no. 16. Accessed October 6, 2016, <http://www.averyreview.com/issues/16/archives-of-the-present-future>.
3. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) 4.
4. Bruno Latour, "Live Coverage: SPEAP/Bruno Latour's Paris Climat 2015/Make it Work, May 29-31," *e-flux conversations*, May 1, 2015. Accessed October 6, 2016, <http://www.conversations.e-flux.com/t/live-coverage-speap-bruno-latour-s-paris-climat-2015-make-it-work-may-29-31/1795>.
5. *The World in Which We Occur* is an event series co-led by Margarida Mendes and myself, Jennifer Teets, that takes place live over the telephone, and is formulated around questions addressed by speakers across the world. Embarking on modern-day issues rooted in the history of materiality and flux, as well as pertinent politically enmeshed scientific affairs shaping our world today, the series' premise is one of

## THINKING MATTER

interrogation and epistemic search. Loosely inspired by, and set in the legacy of hybrids growing out of artist James Lee Byars' 1969 *World Question Centre*, TWWWO underlines the necessity for inquiry over an assertiveness of responses. "Could you offer us a question that you feel is pertinent in regards to your own evolution of knowledge?" asks Byars at the end of the line. TWWWO series unveils incentives or queries so as to generate further questions to build upon. It also aims to open up other areas of knowledge and speculation stemming from the core exercise of explicating one's relationship within the current state of nature, in an era of erratic climatic behaviors. As a curation of voices, each session departs from an assisted dialing room set in an auditorium and is shared with an audience of listeners. The sessions are outsourced in the form of a growing archive.

6. "The World in Which We Occur: Session 1," audio recording, *TWWWO Voice Archive*, recorded September 5, 2015. Accessed October 6, 2016, <http://www.archive.org/details/TWWWOsession1>.
7. "The World in Which We Occur: Prototype Session," audio recording, *TWWWO Voice Archive*, recorded November 29, 2014. Accessed October 6, 2016, <http://www.archive.org/details/TWWWOPrototype>.
8. Nabil Ahmed, "The Toxic House," in *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) 632.
9. "The World in Which We Occur: Session 1," <http://www.archive.org/details/TWWWOsession1>.
10. "The World in Which We Occur: Session 2," sound recording, *TWWWO Voice Archive*, recorded September 6, 2015. Accessed October 6, 2016, <http://www.archive.org/details/TWWWOsession2>.

h

C

h

h

h

h