

THE DISTANCE PLAN

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Metaphor as Manifesto

There is a thin thread, sturdy but slight, which is running from here (right here, tied around my thumb) to there. It is spooling out, coiling out—out there into the future, the distant future. The thing is, the thread is hard to see. This thread is a plan, but it is a pale plan with details so subtle they are translucent, almost imperceptible. It becomes much easier to perceive The Plan if you place an image behind it and objects next to it. With context, The Plan becomes solid: context by way of exhibition, context by way of discussion. With such a backdrop, The Plan flicks into focus, the scale of The Plan becomes perceivable, the mass of The Plan becomes visible, its coiled strands begin to offer finer details.

Distance occurs to me as an immaculate idea, but a plan has a much messier conception. Plans begin in muddles and are argued out into clarity. Distance denotes

what is remote, but plans consist of practical considerations, beginning now. The Distance Plan is not another scribbled utopia, not another modelled future but a diligent diagram of the causation between current actions and what is coming. There in the distance, but gradually materialising as it starts to impinge on life today, is climate change. With this issue, diagramming is a disorientating task. Our current actions will have consequences largely outside our life spans. The aim of The Distance Plan is to show how necessary it is to conceptualize the effects of this apparently distant phenomenon.

The Distance Plan is also a catalogue of existing projects which engage in related theoretical pursuits. As its first point of departure, The Distance Plan represents works that successfully engage in the practice of thinking across vastness, bringing together work and writing that deals with the challenge of thinking across vast space and vast time. Having these works exhibited together in one room allows them to be turned over in talk. Continuing the planning process

acknowledges that talk can become solid, that visualisation can become protocol. Anchoring the thread of action must begin in this moment. The Distance Plan is a collection of tools, timelines and knowledge beginning now, strung through distance, coalescing into a plan.

Thoughts Across Vastness

Awareness and training is required in order to be able to think through vastness. Michala Paludan's work 'Africa is Real' 1995/2010 is an example of such a practice. A series of projected white phrases appear in black space, each phrase the transformation of a family photograph into text, and together the texts, circling on a slide carousel, become narrative. The original photographs chronicle ethnographic field work undertaken by Paludan's mother in Sudan in the mid-1990s. Rather than re-illustrating this experience, the strategy of presenting texts in place of photographs engages the viewer as the generator of a new image. The viewer is the mechanism by which imag-

es of distant experience are brought into the present. It is through this conceptual manoeuvre that the work reveals its true project. Can I imagine what Africa looks like? Not easily. To me Africa is not real, it is faraway, complicated and impenetrably vast. If I cannot imagine a place, how will I engage with the issues of the place, aesthetic, political or otherwise? I must practise filling the vastness.

The inferential strategy adopted in Paludan's work is used in the service of thinking into the past and across geographic distance. This mechanism can also be used to think forward. Climate change is an issue of class and inequality, and currently its impacts are largely felt 'elsewhere'. Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are particularly vulnerable to climate change given their high levels of poverty, poor infrastructure and dependence on rain-fed agriculture.

The effects of climate change will become increasingly damaging and disruptive. In principle, the economic resources of the First World's rich will be able to

temper these effects, for example allowing greater mobility in the case of extreme weather events, and rebuilding destroyed infrastructure. As temperatures rise, so will the areas where infectious diseases are prevalent, a change which will have a greater impact on those with less access to medical care. The consequences of climate change are distributed unequally between the First and the Third World. Within countries like the United States, the distribution is again unequal between the rich and the rest. To illuminate the future impacts of climate change across space is to illuminate the effects of inequality.

A Slow Start

Some say the catastrophe is already unrolling. In May 2013 a long-feared milestone was passed as carbon dioxide reached an average concentration in the atmosphere above 400 parts per million, well above the 350 parts per million considered by many to be a safe limit. The

Distance Plan seeks to map the relation between current actions and their consequences, both remote and impending. However, it is also clear that we have already waited so long to act. If we are to even begin to combat the most detrimental effects of climate change, a more ambitious plan must be immediately implemented. Here in 2013 we have gathered around us a whole history of inaction, as well as a growing awareness of climate change's present effects. Climate change is already causing deaths and diminishing the global economy. Decades of drought can now be linked to increases in global temperature, as can heat waves and other extreme weather events in the United States, such as California's ever-worsening forest fires and Superstorm Sandy. Such tragedies coupled with slighter effects—such as temperature increases lowering productivity in the work place—when extrapolated out on a global scale confirm that “climate change now costs more than the emissions cuts that are needed to tackle global warming.”¹

Global procrastination has led to a stark narrowing of the ‘time of useful consciousness’—the phrase Lawrence Ferlinghetti uses to describe the preciousness of our current moment. Originally an aeronautical term, the ‘Time of Useful Consciousness’ is those few moments between when you’re deprived of oxygen and when you pass out. In that brief period you have an opportunity to do something to save yourself, or, to extend the metaphor, save the delicate balance of the atmosphere.

For almost a quarter of a century we have been collectively dragging our feet. Speaking to the United Nations in 1989, Margaret Thatcher, whose training as a chemist gave her a unique understanding of the issue, stated:

What we are now doing to the world by degrading the land surfaces, by polluting the waters and by adding greenhouse gases to the air at an unprecedented rate—all this is new in the experience of the earth. It is mankind and his activities which are changing the environment of

our planet in damaging and dangerous ways. . . . The environmental challenge which confronts the whole world demands an equivalent response from the whole world. . . Those countries who are industrialised must contribute more to help those who are not. 2

Thatcher's reaction on being briefed about the facts was to immediately begin coordinating a global plan of action—to address the UN, one of the most powerful institutions of global cooperation. Sadly, in later life Thatcher reneged on her position, stating that climate change was “a marvellous excuse for worldwide, supra-national socialism.”³ In this example, as in so many others, we see global action held hostage to short-sighted political goals. The influence of transnational corporations with their desire for business-as-usual profit, despite its contribution to global warming, is in part the subject of Amy Balkin's work *Public Smog*.

Public Smog proposes a redefining of the common-pool resource that is the

atmosphere, and highlights the economic barriers and bureaucratic challenges that block much-needed environmental regulation. The work includes information and graphics, correspondence and conversations concerning two provocations. The first is the development of a park in the atmosphere, created when emissions offsets are purchased through emissions trading markets. ‘Public Smog is an attempt to buy back your rights on an open market,’ declare grey, slightly translucent words against a blue sky. Once she had purchased these emission rights, Balkin withheld them from being re-traded—thereby preserving a small ‘smog free’ zone of the atmosphere.

The second provocation is Balkin’s attempt to have the atmosphere added to the UNESCO World Heritage list. A written reply to an enquiry Balkin has made states:

...under the operational guidelines, it is not possible to nominate an essential element of the global environment such as the earth’s atmosphere unless all territo-

rial states concerned agreed... In the case of the atmosphere all states are affected and should therefore be involved in the process of nomination. So, the nomination could be possible only if all parties agreed to propose the inscription based on the assumption that the atmosphere is a part of the general environment of “outstanding universal value” and that its conservation is essential to the conservation of the “territorial” environment of every state. 4

The deep ironies that are revealed by Balkin’s attempts echo the lack of success of international treaties such the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the controversial Kyoto Protocol, a largely successful first step, despite being undermined by the US and Canada, to mitigate the effects of ever-increasing amounts of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases being globally expelled into the atmosphere.⁵

As public awareness of climate change increases, a key question arises - how to create images of the all-encompassing

amorphous climate system and its varied regional impacts. Media theorist Judith Williamson argues that we have a very specific and limited repertoire of imagery currently at our command to signify climate change. Such images largely consist of melting ice, retreating glaciers and the stranded polar bear, all of which are relevant to an extent, but ignore the impacts already in evidence in hotter parts of the world. Williamson concludes that “looking at endless ice-scapes has diverted our imaginations from the geography, both human and physical, of the rest of the world, from the majority of its surface and population.”⁶

One of the most iconic images in Public Smog is that of the negative space of a white cube. The shape has been removed from a sweltering sunset skyline with silhouetted buildings. The geometric white gap suggests clarity and possibility in an otherwise smoggy landscape. Other Public Smog images show serene skylines of blues, overlaid with emboldening phrases such as ‘Public smog is no substitute for direct action.’ The proj-

ect clearly asserts the emergent danger of continuing to proceed with ‘business as usual.’ Public Smog represents how deeply the impediments to change are built within economic and political systems – to the extent that the most symbolic structures for environmental preservation, such as UNESCO, are unable to act.

Right, right I understand that and I have one last question, but, say however, that we destroy the atmosphere and can’t live, then that would really take out the entire, the entire value of having World Heritage at all, if we had environmental collapse, which would affect multiple properties. 7

Taking a cue from Public Smog, The Distance Plan is a call for the whole atmosphere to be recognised as a public good and protected as such. The Distance Plan is a call for something close to the supra-national socialism of which Thatcher was so afraid - at least, comprehensively reinventing the socialism that Thatcher rejected, in a way that pro-

protects the global commons and enables a sustainable, steady state economy. Prevailing capitalist ideology dictates the privatisation of profit gained from the extraction of fossil fuels with the socialisation of the risks associated with climate change.

Loss in Cycles

Bjarki Bragason's work catalogues what we have already lost. Bragason presents small fragments collected through correspondence with a botanist at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu. The fragmented and broken specimens are each displayed in small trays made from a sheet of folded paper and labelled with their name. Each reflects the relationship between land development, history and ecology.

This archive of destruction lays out small yet emotive fragments, and their tomb-like display in a cabinet reminds us, by line, by row, by level, of loss. The subti-

bles in their categorisation become especially poignant. It is in the small distinctions in the labelling of each specimen, between those that are rare, those that are endangered and those that are extinct, that it is still possible to act. Before endangered becomes extinct, before conclusions become forgone.

Uselessness is the last form love takes—so liquid till the forgone conclusion — here we are, the forgone conclusion. 8

In these lines, the poet Jorie Graham captures the vulnerable state which inaction creates. Graham also manages to express the philosophical complexity posed by thinking beyond normal human timeframes. Rephrasing resistance by promoting a culture that values acting ‘for free’ or with ‘generosity’ in relation to our need for results, she states that we must be “more willing to act without a sense that the action has an outcome”. 9 This statement is based on her apt observation that the consequences of our current actions in relation to climate change exist beyond our lifespans. She has a

refreshing take on the important role of notions such as love, and “the transmission from generation to generation of a capacity for hope.” 10 She brings back nuance to issues which are increasingly reduced to their most skeletal framework of economic implications. Graham asks:

How do you ask the generation coming behind you to hope for something that they will not see the outcome of, until they themselves have passed ? We’re being asked to inhabit a different sense of time and a different notion of history, and we’re being asked to be immensely generous. 11

Sources

In her work *Sources*, Louise Menzies considers how different notions of historical change are constructed, favoured, and then superseded. Menzies uses as her primary source the French historian Fernand Braudel’s system for presenting social change within a number of environ-

mental cycles. Menzies re-photographs a page of the contents section of Braudel's first and most influential book, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, published in 1949. Part Two of the book deals with 'Collective Destinies and General Trends,' including 'Distance, the First Enemy.' It is here that Braudel describes the difficulty of coming to terms with an ever fluctuating notion such as distance.

Today we have too little space, the world is shrinking around us. In the sixteenth century there was too much and it could be both an advantage and an obstacle... However man tackled the obstacle of distance, splintering the oars of close manned galleys, driving the post horses to death, or apparently flying over the waves under a full wind, he always met with passive resistance and distance took a daily revenge for his most strenuous exploits.¹²

Braudel outlines how civilisation's accomplishments could be judged in relation to how easily distance is conquered.

Braudel was writing at the close of the Second World War, in an era of accelerated technological advance. At the same moment Heidegger was grappling with similar questions. What are the moral consequences of distances shrivelling due to technology? Heidegger concluded that a dangerous nonchalance had pervaded attitudes about the difficulties previously posed by distance:

All distances in time and space are shrinking. Man now reaches overnight by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel, he now receives instant information by radio of events he formerly heard about only years later, if at all... What is happening here when as the result of the abolition of great distances everything is equally far and equally near, what is this uniformity in which everything is neither far nor near... Everything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness. How is not this uniform merging of everything into this distanceless not more unearthly than everything bursting apart?¹³

Within Menzies' photograph, a printed version of a scanned page of the index to Braudel's book is laid on a counter. The counter is one more layer of reproduction. It appears to be marble but is only a painted rendering of marble. On top of the index page, which is on top of the painted marble, lies a final layer—a German water label. Peeled from the contours of a bottle and laid flat to be photographed is a graphic of crisp clean beads swelling before smudgy green bushes and the looping script of 'Naturell.'

Menzies' image highlights the manner in which idealised notions of 'the Natural', ubiquitous in capitalist culture, have entirely eclipsed alternative constructions of the natural world. In the ancient Mediterranean of which Braudel writes, population growth was constrained by what a society could produce from its environmental resources in a pre-industrial age.

Similarly, Political Organisation Aotearoa argues in *Key Words 2: Is there an Environmental Politics?* that the conception of what is 'natural' is a social con-

struct – it is more often yearned for with nostalgia than freshly imagined.

Environmentalists call for action only insofar as they're terrified something is being lost—something that must be preserved at all costs. We need to ask, then, if environmentalists are incapable of imagining a better future, only a worse one; or, if they do imagine a better one, why does it end up looking like (a fantasy of) the past: a pastoral idyll of small, 'sustainable'

TJ Clark has referred to the terrible fiction of 'nature' as invented in the modernist era, 'nature' which is inherently defined by class and the ideology of a capitalist society. 15 Nostalgia for an idealised 'natural' past limits what can be agreed upon to begin to combat climate change.

And as the natural world becomes conveniently separated from the world of commerce and politics, 'environmentalists' are pitched against 'job creators'. Such a simplistic and inaccurate dichot-

omy is specifically promoted by people such as Charles and David Koch, whose business profits would be directly affected by tighter regulation on CO2 emitting industries. The scope of the Koch brothers influence on how climate change conceived both by a broad American public and in government is astounding. Koch Industries was recently named as one of the top ten air polluters in the United States. Similarly, a Greenpeace report identified Koch Industries as a “kingpin of climate science denial.”¹⁶ In her comprehensive tracking of the scope of their influence journalist Jane Mayer has noted that:

From 2005 to 2008, the Kochs vastly outdid Exxon Mobil in giving money to organizations fighting legislation related to climate change, underwriting a huge network of foundations, think tanks, and political front groups.¹⁷

The power that cultural and educational institutions have in influencing the debate around climate change has long been understood by the likes of the

Kochs, for whom increased doubt about anthropomorphic climate change is directly related to continued profits. Hence the investment in the The David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. The exhibit is a:

multimedia exploration of the theory that mankind evolved in response to climate change... Only at the end of the exhibit, under the headline "our survival challenge," is it noted that levels of carbon dioxide are higher now than they have ever been, and that they are projected to increase dramatically in the next century. No cause is given for this development; no mention is made of any possible role played by fossil fuels. The exhibit makes it seem part of a natural continuum. The accompanying text says, "During the period in which humans evolved, Earth's temperature and the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere fluctuated together." An interactive game in the exhibit suggests that humans will continue to adapt to climate change in the future. People may build

“underground cities,” developing “short, compact bodies” or “curved spines,” so that “moving around in tight spaces will be no problem.”¹⁸

Simin Davoudi echoes POA and Clark when she writes that climate change forces us to face our interdependencies with nature, while making clear the “fallacy of the modernist assumption”¹⁹ that humans can tame and order nature with few consequences.

Future solutions in present infrastructure

The city is one realm in which ‘the future’ is continually and creatively being re-imagined. Since we cannot turn back towards an idealised pastoral past, we must consider what is ‘natural’ about mass transit and dense housing and employment coupled with reserved green space that are the cornerstones of sustainable, liveable cities. To reduce carbon emissions there must be a move away from present infrastructures that rely on fos-

sil fuels, such as highways, and towards public transport and the critical mass of population that makes public transport efficient in cities.

Cities, it has been noted, have all the ecological potential that villages lack: population density makes public transport, walking and cycling genuinely efficient; apartment living means shared heating and a reduced per capita building skin; waste can be centrally processed and used to generate energy and recycled water; and so on. 20

Questioning the tangibility of local action, Joe Hoyt's minutely rendered depictions of the newly opened first phase of Los Angeles' Exposition Line chronicle the slow economic and political response of the existing urban infrastructure to climate change. Using stippling—thousands of tiny dots that combine to produce an image—Hoyt's works present refined fragmentary images of infrastructure. Hoyt glorifies this mundane but vital transformation of a city with his own act of patience.

Bill McKibben outlines the connection between cultural production and sustainability, noting that this moment - when it has become more important than ever to stem our consumption of energy - is also the time when the Third World is developing fast, and reshaping their cities. "One of the gravest questions," states McKibben, "for the time ahead, is which way China and India bend. If they bend in the direction of Europe or New York - dense energy efficient cities, with high rate of public transport, or American cities, of sprawl and private car ownership."²¹

The role of cultural production becomes relevant when McKibben points out that one of the United States' biggest exports is television and motion pictures, and that it is through the influence of these media that industrialising nations shape their notions of how the future should be built. McKibben believes that if the cultural information that is being consumed reflected different environmental aspirations, then perhaps the desire to consume energy would diminish.

Los Angeles is depicted over and over in popular culture as a car-dominated sprawl where only the poor use public transport, forced through lack of choice. The 2004 film *Crash* is one such hyperbolic study of dynamics of class and race played out over city transit. Two characters riding the bus discuss the negative connotation of using public transport.

You have no idea why they put them great big windows on the sides of buses, do you?

Why?

One reason only, to humiliate the people of color who are reduced to ridin' on 'em.

Although there is some truth to this stereotype, Los Angeles also contains within it a multitude of walkable neighbourhoods, and increasingly largescale public projects like the Exposition Light Rail line that connect these neighbourhoods. Through his studies Hoyt celebrates and chronicles the start of a slow transfor-

mation of the depiction of Los Angeles from a web of freeways to a system that signals a different set of civic priorities.

A Partisan Plan?

As late as the mid-1990s in the United States, climate change was approached as a largely bipartisan issue. This issue has now become starkly divided along party lines. Primarily, this shift has been driven by Republican Party activists in collaboration with fossil fuel interests and conservative think tanks, such as those sponsored by the Kochs, who have successfully associated the acceptance of global warming science with ‘liberal views.’ Increasingly, reaction to any attempts to slow emissions is seen by many on the right as an attack on their way of life, and thereby can be seen as an extension of the culture wars. “Now one can make a good guess at an American’s opinion on global warming by identifying their views on abortion, same-sex marriage and gun control.”²²

For The Distance Plan exhibition, Steve Kado presented a sculpture you could drink. His was a work that acknowledges that lifestyle is political, and also that a prerequisite for political progress is that you get together with friends and drink about it. The beer is warm, warming is what is happening all around us, and art is a language we can use to speak about it to each other.

The beer was hidden by a blurry background that you were invited to reach behind. The crumpled plastic image was printed in the manner of billboards, but not hung like outside advertising; instead, inside, slouched and low, trailing onto the floor. The image is that of light hitting a wall, a streaky abstraction. Here, as in many of Kado's works, light and longing collides with fooling around.

Another of Kado's vinyl banners presents the image of the view out a Los Angeles window, palm trees on the horizon and the golden light of sunset hitting the side of a building. This scene was originally hung outside a gallery window in

Auckland, New Zealand. Looking out a New Zealand window you saw a view of a flat Los Angeles. Later the banner was shipped to Toronto where it hung with temporary red tape to the artist's studio wall while it was re-photographed for the postcard which eventually sat quietly in the corner of a Los Angeles gallery.

To think about distance it is useful to imagine objects and their stories moving between countries— images printed large and folded down small to post. To understand distance it is useful to imagine strands pulled through terrain and history, connecting that time to our time. To make plans is to begin by asking why governments have so far failed to protect their citizens from the impacts of climate change, and failed to implement plans to reduce future impacts. It must be asked why the special interests of a few are being heeded at a cost to the many.

The Distance Plan is not a call for raising cities above sea level, and rebuilding after the flood. The Distance Plan calls

for plans to stop the activities - our consumption as well as the corporate profit-making - that will cause future floods. The social and physical structures that perpetuate the climate change denial and nihilism - the fuel of inaction - must be replaced. Art has an inherent ability to project and evoke. Art can be used to bridge the distance between current actions and what is forthcoming - to chronicle, to discuss, and put a Distance Plan into action.

- 1 "Climate change now costs more than the emissions cuts that are needed to tackle global warming. Such cuts would cost 0.5 per cent of global GDP, whereas the cost of climate change will be 3.2 per cent of GDP by 2030." Marshall, Michael, 'Climate change already harming the global economy', New Scientist, September 2012.
- 2 Hertzberg, Hendrik, 'The Thatcherist', The New Yorker, April 22, 2013
- 3 *ibid*
- 4 Text excerpted from Amy Balkin's 'Public Smog (Flash loop document: 2004-2010)
- 5 For example, the EU will overachieve its Kyoto goals: See European Commission, 'EU overachieved first Kyoto emissions target, on track to meet 2020 objective' European Commission on Climate Action, October 9, 2013. See: ec.europa.eu
- 6 Williamson, Judith, 'Unfreezing the Truth: Knowledge And Denial in Climate Change Imagery,' Now Future Dialogues with Tomorrow 2010 Series. See: dialogues.org.nz
- 7 Text excerpted from Amy Balkin's 'Public Smog (Flash loop document: 2004-2010)
- 8 Graham, Jorie (2000) 'Underneath (13)', Swarm, Ecco Press/Carcanet.
- 9 Jorie Graham in conversation with Michael Silverblatt, on Bookworm, March 2006. See KCRW.com
- 10 *Ibid*.
- 11 *Ibid*
- 12 Braudel, Fernand, The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, 1949, p. 355 & p. 369.
- 13 Heidegger, Martin 'The Thing' in Poetry, Language, Thought Translated by Albert Hofstadter, 1971, Harper and Row.
- 14 Political Organization Aotearoa, Keywords no.2: 'Is There an Environmental Politics?' See: poa.org.nz
- 15 Clark, T.J. 'The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers, p xxvi, revised edition 1991, Alfred A. Knopf.
- 16 According to a 2010 study released by the University of Massachusetts at Amherst's Political Economy Research Institute, as quoted in Mayer, Jane, 'Covert Operations: The billionaire brothers who are waging a war against Obama', The New Yorker, August 2010.
- 17 Mayer, Jane 'Covert Operations: The billionaire brothers who are waging a war against Obama.', The New Yorker.
- 18 *Ibid*, Mayer, Jane (2010)
- 19 Davoudi, S. (2012). 'Climate Risk and Security: New Meanings of "the Environment" in the English Planning System.' European Planning Studies, 20(1), pp.49-69.
- 20 Political Organization Aotearoa, Keywords no.2: Is There an Environmental Politics? See: poa.org.nz
- 21 McKibben, Bill 'Deep Sustainability—Building Communities that Actually Work,' A Lecture at the Architecture League of New York, April, 2006. See: archleague.org
- 22 Hamilton, Clive 2012, 'What History Can Teach us about Climate Change Denial, in Engaging with Climate Change; Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Edited by Sally Weinrobe. 2012, Routledge.