

The Complete Entanglement of Everything

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Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic
Te Kura Matatini ki Otago, Dunedin Ōtepoti

The Complete Entanglement of Everything

Bridie Lonie

The world is changing around us in ways that are sometimes more, sometimes less evident or explicit. In Ōtepoti they are present, but far more so in megacities such as Kolkata, or Shanghai, low islands like Kiribati, or desertifying regions like the Murray-Darling Basin of Australia. Those changes are reflected in the term Anthropocene, a catch-all term used from the beginning of this century to indicate the transition from the stable climates of the Holocene period that had nurtured most human experience, to a far more dynamic climate caused by global warming. There are as many alternatives to the term as there are positions about what has caused the destabilization of our ecosystems, so the term is used here to open rather than close discussion.

Indeed, when earth scientists sought evidence in the planet's strata to ratify the term as a geological period produced by human behaviour, they found radionuclides, plastics and agricultural fertilizers. These, as much as climatic changes, have led to transformations in the ecosystems that were once regarded as more stable than anything humans could make. They are implicated in the cause of global warming: the emissions of greenhouse gases as a by-product of the energy required to fuel the economic system that most people now see as normal, natural and unalterable. Yet the irreversible changes in the planet's weather systems are caused by the exponential growth in the use of fossil-fuelled technology for a human population that has itself been growing exponentially. The growth of these technologies has quickened since the latter part of the eighteenth century, although the seeds were sown long before as humans developed industrialized systems for agriculture that were tied to commerce.

The complete entanglement of everything is a reflection on how this changing environment feels and is understood by artists, primarily from Ōtepoti. Donna Haraway sees this period as the Chthulucene, thinking of underground spiders, and of underlying connections. She uses the term 'entanglement' to help us to imagine different futures, where species might have more to do with one another, and where new engagements might offer new moralities. The Anthropocene is irreversible but might be mitigated if we humans change the ways we generate and use energy, the waste we produce, and the ways we share resources. It is a time for a new approach to caring for the non-human world, and a time to draw on the Indigenous thinking that still places kaitiakitaka, care for the world's resources, at the centre of cultural activity. It is a time for mourning, and a time to pay attention to the non-human entities both living and inorganic that have been ignored as being irrelevant to human flourishing, but on which we depend entirely.

Whether explicit or implicitly, the artworks here address the causes, the impacts and the ways forward even though they were made in in the context of the artist's everyday work rather than in the development of a theme. They reflect the shared concerns of the contemporary world, just as the preoccupations of the nineteenth-century middle classes that appeared in the artworks that we now enjoy as Impressionism reflected the concerns of that period. The themes of the Anthropocene are emergent: they are the felt life of the situation, held within artworks, because artworks hold the things we value and care about, and give us space and time to negotiate what we feel. Earlier, the need to translate the scientific

information to show what might come was paramount. Today it is already here, and artworks may help us feel, understand and deal with it. Artworks dealing with complexity can also help us recognise the value of the more complex, systems-focused sciences, that we continue to need.

If the kaupapa seems a little large, I suggest that you experience the exhibition first, find connections for yourself, and return to this text. The text does simplify the messages somewhat, but the artworks offer a deeper experience, so, in a phrase to those unfamiliar with experiencing such artworks: let the work itself do the talking.

The exhibition

Hermaahina Eketone's *He pōtiki whatiwahati toki* – a child who breaks the adze, draws from Māori thought to reflect the idea that a particular strength, the patu, has been broken, and the capacity to care for the world needs restoration. Eleanor Cooper's *Bō* is a means of performing that kaitiakitaka; it is a staff to be held while protecting sealions, and it stands by the podium of the symposium. Louise Beer reminds us of the night sky, the place from which we all come, made as we are of stardust. In another form of kaitiakitaka, Marion Wassenaar reminds us of the connection between the coalsack and the sandbag, each dependent upon the other: without the use of greenhouse gases for energy, we would not need to protect our low-lying areas with sandbags or dykes.

Marilynn Webb pointed out in the 1980s the risks involved in the then-Prime Minister Robert Muldoon's 'Think Big' projects. Her *Taste before eating* series is a pointed observation of the ongoing toxicity and resource depletion these entailed. The delicate balance between political action and information sharing can also be found in the Phantom Billsticker posters, created by, for example, Meg Brassell-Jones and Pam McKinlay draw on the artists working with scientists as part of an ongoing collaboration between Otago Museum, the Dunedin School of Art and the University of Otago. These works have been exhibited in Christchurch as well as in Ōtepoti,

and are the more public outcome of an art/science exhibition around issues to do with water and ocean health. Like all such projects, they both directly and indirectly reflect the concerns of the Anthropocene. Toothfish's graphic works will be familiar to many here in Ōtepoti, where they make explicit the position of the Extinction Rebellion. Neville Cichon's arguments for alternative energy sources give us a glimpse of an Australian viewpoint. Christine Keller's tea-towels that in their woven forms demonstrate the separate strands of the pollution of our waters are a daily reminder to care for what goes down the sink. Rob Cloughley's chronometer is another reminder of the difference between our assumptions of everyday continuity and what is actually happening as the planet warms.

Many thinkers argue that Western philosophy does not pay enough attention to things in themselves, and that artworks can bring us back to a closer relation with the world that is consistent with the entanglements of cognition, emotion and experience. Alex Kennedy, Michael Morley and Michael Greaves ask us to pay attention to the molecular and elemental nature of the planet's materialities, in large and smaller scale. Charlotte Parallel invites us to listen to the sounds of the Harbour Basin as they play through the dense layers of material that form its substrate. James Robinson asks us to pay attention to the ways that the waste we leave behind can form palimpsests, archaeological layers, of everyday experience, and how the artist can use these to build new imaginings and new archaeologies. The slow contemplation of the patterns that objects both form by themselves and are formed by artists reminds us of the value that things we dismiss hold in themselves: their energy, their durability, their specificity. Madison Kelly maps and layers the changing habitats of the urban wild corners that can be found in every crevice of every environment. These include small wastelands that we must now value as conservation land, where the daily life of the non-human persists, largely overlooked but vital for the flourishing of all species. Kaitiakitaka applies in all environments.

Some things last far longer than anyone expected. Plastic is one such material and is a preoccupation for us in the Anthropocene. Esta de Jong's tall black guardians remind us that we chose to create something that would outlive us, as if we were making gods to redeem our behaviour. Kristin O'Sullivan Peren's slow burning colourful images were filmed from different groupings of waste, such as the remnants of a summer Christmas Dinner. Her *Rubbishleguim* parodies Joseph Banks's eighteenth-century *Florilegia*, designed to classify new products found by the colonizing explorers for the British Empire's emporium. Her bright swathes of colour are played on tired, obsolete computers that struggle to maintain the image, fade, and redeem themselves. They remind us also that the energy required to generate each Google search, each financial transaction, each digital moment, uses real energy and generates greenhouse gases. In another view of this, Jane de Wagt's plastic gleaners now collect not nourishment but the protection for their food sources. They also remind us that, as always, the essential workers are those at the bottom end of the food chain.

The biopolitical connections between inequality and the collection of data can be found in Johanna Zellmer's identity tags that meld indicators of citizenship and the technology used to test DNA. These tags and samples provide data that are used to deal with inclusions and exclusions based on the categorizations of sovereignty that either enable access to resources or result in whole classes of people without status or identity. Barry Cleavin is similarly concerned with data, particularly the hidden datamining that generates alternative currencies that are used to manage political events for the good of people far removed from the sovereignty of the state, but also require vast amounts of energy.

To generate that energy, habitat is destroyed, both deliberately and as an unintended consequence. The Anthropocene is awash with unintended consequences, but without action our responses are entirely irrelevant to the non-human inhabitants of the planet, who do not gain an increase in their standard of living through an

increase in the gross domestic product, but instead lose both habitat and species life. Michele Beevors wraps small knitted shrouds around forms based on the bones of more everyday species than those glamourised by earlier political art dealing with climate change. Today we do not wish to see starving polar bears but must still be reminded of the effects of climate change on small animals such as frogs, and whole habitats that have become plastic. Beevors, too, is concerned with the Enlightenment methods of categorization that detached species from their ecological niches to separate them out as product or curiosity, to be painted, drawn and measured. The common places we see a variety of species, namely the zoo and the supermarket or butcher's shop, are juxtaposed in Rachel Allan's work with the mythic and specific qualities of non-human sentient beings as they occur, in anthropomorphic form, for human use.

Yet certainly a focus on human community and collectivity is necessary. This can be seen in a dystopic way: Brendon John Philip's figures sheltering in a darkness resembling the inferno are wreathed in a kind of caring that acknowledges the sense of despair; as do Lucinda King's simultaneously luminous and dark gouaches that build on earlier histories of plagues and famines. Neil Emmerson's gentle reminders of the tragedies experienced by gay people in cultures that reject them point to the consistency of discrimination as a tactic of control, while Graham Fletcher's *Twin Moon* references the exploitation of the Pacific Islands, suggesting through its use of the sugar sack the practice of blackbirding, of detaching people from their homes to exile in slavery in the sugar cane fields of Australia.

Others look to the value of small-scale resilience and opposition. Jenna Packer celebrates small communities, placing them in an alternative future where small stand-offs and familial protection seem the best alternative to the operations of corporate business. Her stadium, constructed of the bones of the cattle-beasts that have led to the degradation of our water systems, awaits the floating of its ark-like form, at the edge of the harbour a hundred metres from where you

are standing. Packer also plays in a light-hearted way on the siege mentalities, spaghetti western-like home-made tactics that might offer both resilience and resistance. Tim Barlow also looks at the possible alternative futures of opportunities left behind in the past but now perhaps ripe for re-use, celebrating the technologies and skills that might support different pathways. Mandy Joseph reminds us of the Japanese knowledge of climate change in records of the flowering of the sakura, the cherry blossom, across centuries. Thomas Lord, Blair Thomson and Sue Pearce use the properties of paint to consider the intermingling of materials, allowing paint to play out the complexities that are so important in the understanding of feedback systems and engagements between the organic and the inorganic.

Ruth Evans's game *Go Mine* forms community as it trains its players to negotiate the legislation around resource consents and mining rights. Simon Swale's armour of the banana box of global trade and the sailcloth of the past might offer a different kind of resistance. Similarly, the pervading sense of the twinned significance and insignificance of the individual's role is played out in Jane Venis's and Hannah Joynt's parodic micro-tactics.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Anthropocene plays out in a landscape until very recently celebrated for its pristine qualities and now largely polluted and increasingly less predictable. Zero 1 New Zealand Arts Incubator's Living Map indicates the city's vulnerability to sea level rise. The country's larger systems impinge on Ōtepoti. Pam McKinlay's weaving demonstrates the complex structures of glacial ice as it moves toward meltwater, indicating the connections between snow and glacier for the land beneath and beyond, as the waters move to the coast. Janine Randerson looks at the implications of North Island kauri dieback for those of this species in the southern regions, considering the properties of healthy kauri in their molecular aspects. Our harbours and estuarine areas are mapped by Becky Cameron, who reminds us that we can still navigate these areas even though they are changing. The swelling seas of such archetypal marine images as those by Steev Peyroux were

once the province of most children but now the surfer's everyday knowledge of wave patterns may be necessary for anyone living on the coast.

Flooding is a theme for the city as a whole, though the research on South Dunedin has taken centre stage. The full scale of the flow of waters is conveyed by Adrian Hall, as he leads us to imagine the tired sadness of mud-covered flats after all variety and life distinction have gone for them. Flooding destroys both human playground and ecological habitat. Scott Eady's image of the impact of this flooding for schoolchildren reflects the impossibility of the collectivity of school sports in this area, but Janet de Wagt juxtaposes Macandrew Bay with Constable's *The Hay Wain*, suggesting the regular inundation of the Taieri plains, once the food basket of Ōtepoti, now focused on the global marketing of the cattle and dairy industry. Peter Nicholls protests the destruction of the braided streams and landscapes of the Waitaki basin to generate markets for milk products in areas that have hitherto existed perfectly well without them.

That global connection is constant. Our imaginations are preoccupied with the complex dialogues between the protagonists in global politics. David Green compares the rhetorical, combative and politicized stance of the Trump administration with the need for measured analysis as the world makes difficult choices about the Covid-19 pandemic. Andrew Last's protection work, the hand sanitizer as an amulet against the transmission of disease, indicates the double-edged sword of the global connection that gives us free trade and the ongoing economic development that bring us the Anthropocene.

This is a world that seems upside down. The unintended consequences of the human desire for self-improvement undercut the planet's very capacity to deliver it, while the centring of human flourishing on the development of new products has replaced the non-human world with concrete, plastic and a connectivity that ignores the locatedness of any particular body. Pete Wheeler's child averts his eyes from what he does not know, while Mark Bolland's empty swimming pool/ark

awaits the unlikely possibility of replenishment from dry mountains. Sharon Singer's child takes a bolder path, setting off with his pet to another planet, though we imagine he will also be taking himself.

In their very early dialogue on rising sea levels, the protagonists of Helen Mayer Harrison's and Newton Harrison's *The Lagoon Cycle* (1974-84) made this commitment: "And...you will feed me when my lands can no longer produce/ and I will house you /when your lands are covered with water". This exhibition asks its viewers to ask themselves "What nourishment do we need? What experiences are most valuable? What can we do without, so that we take care of our own environment and therefore of others?" And, ultimately, "What must we have to live?"

Bridie Lonie

The literature in this field grows daily, in the sciences, in the humanities and in the visual arts.

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Lagoon Cycle*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University 1985.

The term Anthropocene was tested rigorously first in Crutzen, P. Geology of mankind. *Nature* 415, 23 (2002). <https://doi.org/10.1038/415023a>,

Ongoing work on the concept In the earth sciences can be found here:

<http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/>

Jason W. Moore's *Anthropocene, or Capitalocene? Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism* Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016, draws together the subsequent decade of alternative and counter-proposals, including Donna J. Haraway's "Staying with the trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Cthulucene" (34-76). Haraway uses the terms entanglement, tentacular, and assemblage, arguing for the importance of myth and fairy tale in imagining alternative futures where we need "a much better SF game, in non-arrogant collaboration with all those in the middle" (60).

Thank you to all the artists and to those who lent works for the exhibition.

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