WE WON'T FLY FOR ART: MEDIA ART ECOLOGIES

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The insights of American anarchist ecologist Murray Bookchin into environmental crisis hinge on a social conception of ecology that problematises the role of domination in culture. His ideas are becoming increasingly relevant to those working with digital technologies in the post-industrial information age, as big business daily develops new tools and techniques to exploit our sociality across high-speed networks (digital and physical). According to Bookchin, our fragile ecological state is bound up with a social pathology. Hierarchical systems and class relationships so thoroughly permeate contemporary human society that the idea of dominating each other and the environment (in order to extract natural resources or to minimise disruption to our daily schedules of work and leisure) seems perfectly natural, in spite of the catastrophic consequences for future life on earth (Bookchin, 1991). Strategies for economic, technical and social innovation that fixate on establishing ever more efficient and productive systems of control and growth, deployed by fewer, more centralised agents, have been shown to be both unjust and environmentally unsustainable (Jackson, 2009). Humanity needs new strategies for social and material renewal; it also needs to develop more diverse and lively ecologies of ideas, occupations and values.

In the culture of critical media art, where artistic and technical cultures intersect, alternative perspectives are emerging in the context of the collapsing natural environment and financial markets; alternatives to those produced, on the one hand, by established 'high' art-world markets and institutions and, on the other, the network of ubiquitous user-owned devices and corporate social media. The dominating effects of centralised systems are disturbed by more distributed, collaborative forms of creativity. Artists play within and across contemporary networks (digital, social and physical), disrupting business as usual and the embedded habits and

attitudes of techno-consumerism. Contemporary cultural infrastructures, institutional and technical, as well as their systems and protocols are taken as the material and context for artistic and social production in the form of critical play, investigation and manipulation.

This essay presents *We Won't Fly for Art,* a media art project initiated by the artist Marc Garrett and I in April 2009, in which we used online social networks to activate the rhetoric of Gustav Metzger's earlier 2007 protest work, *Reduce Art Flights,* in order to reduce art-world-generated carbon emissions (Furtherfield, 2009). In this reprise we pledged not to fly for art if others joined us and themselves propagated the pledge. *We Won't Fly for Art* is described here in the context of the Furtherfield *Media Art Ecologies* programme (running since 2009) of review, debate, exhibitions, events, and infrastructural interventions that focus particularly on the networked context of artistic process and production.[1] It pays attention to the dynamic interactions, connectedness and interplay between entities and environments: artist, viewer/participant, distributed materials and material and social contexts (Bascompte, 2007). This project links with others in the field and demonstrates both a particular approach to collaborative working and some shared theoretical and artistic processes.

Gustav Metzger's *RAF* (*Reduce Art Flights)* campaign, first introduced at Sculpture Projects Münster in 2007, and reiterated several times at international arts biennials and festivals, critiqued heedless art-world denizens for measuring their status on the international scene by the speed and frequency of their world tours. Metzger suggests that:

> the 'reduce, reuse, recycle' mantra of environmentalism be transformed and integrated into a more radical spectrum of consideration of humanity's destructive potential... [inviting] voluntary abandonment – a fundamental, personal, bodily rejection of technological instrumentalization and a vehement refusal to participate in the mobility increasingly endemic to the globalized art system. (Andrews, nd)

We Won't Fly For Art, our networked remix of *RAF*, explored how the rhetoric of Metzger's manifesto might take effect in the social and material domains using artists' social networks to propagate its

ideas. We hoped that, in turn, it would change behaviours, bringing about a reduction in flight-related carbon emissions. Garrett and I published our manifesto in Pledgebank, a website that allows users to set up pledges and then encourage other people to sign up to them. The manifesto functioned as a simple participatory algorithm, a pyramid pledge for exponential growth which, if successful, could change how the contemporary art world felt and operated for millions of art workers on the ground.[2]

The pledge begins:

> We will not take an aeroplane for the sake of art. For the next 6 months we will find other ways to visit and participate in exhibitions, fairs, conferences, meetings, residencies. We will not fly for inspiration, nor to appreciate, buy or sell art. But only if 6 others will do the same AND replicate this pledge.
>
> This is a public art experiment in the de-escalation of carbon-fuelled, high altitude, high velocity, global art careering. For six months we choose to cover less physical distance, move more slowly between destinations, to look future-ward with more attention to the view from the ground, the network, and ways to connect with others around the world. (Catlow & Garrett, 2009)

The manifesto goes on to suggest that art workers would start to transform and shape established art world values by disrupting the flow of market functions, cultural funding and bureaucratic processes at the ground level. They would each personally campaign with HR, hospitality and marketing departments, college deans, curators, gallerists and finance directors, for the inconvenience, greater expense and longer journey times associated with overland travel; or the disorientating and unsatisfying (or impossibly expensive) video conferencing alternatives. They would use more inventive and unorthodox ways of networking, exchanging, trading and sharing and so frustrate the smooth operations of the art establishment machine.

Not millions but 26 people signed up to the pledge officially and the surrounding debate exposed the enormity of practical, ethical and psychological difficulties that people faced in both participating and

in the wider search for strategies for coordinated action towards a more ecologically aware society.[3] Four main categories of controversy arose:

- Practical considerations such as weighing one form of environmental harm against another - how can we know that video conferencing is less harmful when ICT emits as much carbon as the aviation industry and around 125 million computers per year end up in landfill? (Fossbox, nd)
- Personal geographical ones - it was much easier for city-dwelling artists from an international metropolis to consider taking the pledge than someone working from a village in rural Iceland or even a small town in Texas.
- Ethical objections to a strategy that focused on personal action - consumer power - rather than political change, lobbying states or corporations to take responsibility for coordinating action against man-made climate change.
- Aesthetic and psychological – flying is still associated with glamour and status. A revolt against the perceived puritanism of the manifesto was often followed by waves of confessed guilt and then more backlash from people who confessed that they 'knew' they were part of a wider ecological problem but who, for many reasons, could not imagine how to extricate themselves from the game.

We Won't Fly For Art was exhibited at the Bash Sustainable Art Awards in London with the RSA Arts and Ecology Centre: the pledge icon, the manifesto and a selection of 100 objections and arguments, comments and responses were printed out onto a 5m paper scroll.

In September 2009, I took an overland trip to the Eclectic Tech Carnival (and art biennial) in Istanbul. Breaking my journey for the Linz Ars Electronica festival, I was joined by friends and blogged and documented the journey with unglamorous tools, namely, a recycled computer and an old mobile phone (Furtherfield, 2009b).

My blog recounts that:

> Seven days of train travel impressed upon me – with passing views of endless pylons, power cables, tracks, trains, roads, cars, fences, signs, scrap heaps, cement, concrete, glass, steel,

> factories, billboards and graffiti – the way that the symbolic and material infrastructures, that our civilisation has in place for the provision of shelter, communication, sustenance, heat and light, embed the social and economic values of early industrialisation into our futures. We are not going to change easily now or in the next 150 years. (Furtherfield, 2009b)

In common with the other projects in the *Media Art Ecologies* programme, *We Won't Fly For Art* is a grass-roots response to global problems seen through the lens of art-world excesses and experienced through local conditions - local, in the sense that it arises from the experience of a particular community. *We Won't Fly For Art* is also parasitical of that same art-world system's surplus energies and infrastructures. The work does not (cannot) assume a virtuous distance, adopt or generate utopian ideologies for a clean escape from the problems we face. Instead, it moves us closer to the ground to get a more intimate feel for, and knowledge of, the currents and controversies that are shaping our social ecologies.

The Furtherfield *Media Art Ecologies* programme has included exhibitions such as *Feral Trade Café* by Kate Rich, *If Not You Not Me* by Annie Abrahams, and workshop programmes such as *Zero Dollar Laptop* workshops (in partnership with Access Space in Sheffield). It has supported research projects such as *Telematic Dining* by Pollie Barden, and developmental artists residencies such as *Make-Shift* by Helen Varley Jamieson and Paula Crutchlow. *We Won't Fly For Art* has a number of things in common with these projects and practices:

- They work with the metaphors, tools, cultures and processes of networked culture in the context of environmental collapse;
- They are led by artistic sensibilities (rather than utilitarian or theoretical concerns); they generate unruly and provocative relationships between symbolic meanings and material effects;
- They are 'metalogues'[12] – their content and their structures are in a conversation with each other, expounding and resonating with their subjects. Their ends and means are well aligned (Bateson, 1972: 1).[4]

It is also important, in the context of this special issue of *Culture Machine* especially, that they demonstrate a resistance to the commodification of human capacities of attention. Technology is both expected and required by capitalism to increase the efficiency and productivity of its workforce and to offer consumers smooth and seamless tools for convenient and swift exchange. In this age of sociality, consumers trade convenience of social exchange for personal data; that data in turn provides invaluable intelligence to the strategists and drivers of our consumer society. The systems and behaviours modelled and/or inspired by these art-world projects reverse these norms. By engaging with the projects the artists, viewers and participants involved become less efficient and productive across material and informational domains as they explore and generate new disruptive interplays and freedoms for themselves. New, decentralised, growth-resistant, alternative worlds start to be articulated and produced as participants share and exchange new knowledge and subjective experiences provoked by the work.

Ecological media artworks turn our attention, as creators, viewers, and participants, to connectedness and free interplay between (human and non-human) entities and conditions. This points to the deep promise of participatory democracy: not its illusion in thin, isolating and ennui-producing contexts that we see in the monitored interfaces of corporate owned social media; but the parallel universe of FOSS skills sharing and commons-based peer produced artworks and media.

Notes

[1] Marc Garrett and I are co-founders of Furtherfield, an artist-led organisation for art, technology and social change.

[2] The pyramid pledge format was used later that year by 'People Speak for The Planet Pledge Pyramid', http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/tps/planet-pledge-pyramid.

[3] The debate took place across a number of email discussion lists: Netbehaviour, Nettime and Spectre. A selection of edited comments are collated on the Furtherfield community blog, http://www.furtherfield.org/blog/ruth-catlow/100-responses-we-Won't-fly-art.

[4] 'Notably, the history of evolutionary theory is inevitably a metalogue between man and nature in which the creation and interaction of ideas must necessarily exemplify evolutionary process'.

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