

ELEPHANT

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By Charlotte Jansen

Artists on the Verge of an Ecological Breakdown

Over the years, many artists have proven themselves to be staunch supporters of environmental campaigns, making work to question the way we treat the world around us and collaborating closely with the scientific community to highlight potential ways forward. But, asks Charlotte Jansen, does the means of production always match the message?



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND AUDEMANS FIGUET

Environmental issues have never felt more urgent. Thanks to groups and individuals such as Extinction Rebellion, David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg, the eco agenda is being pushed glaringly into public view—in spite of politics—and we can no longer ignore the grave consequences of human activity. Contemporary artists have been concerned with environmental and ecological issues for some time; after the 1973 oil crisis, for instance, the impact of fossil fuels and pollution became a concern for artists and designers alike. Now, as we enter a global state of emergency, a new cohort of eco-focused exhibitions are of-the-moment. The Fondation Cartier in Paris is presenting *Trees* (until 5 January 2020), which brings together explorations by a community of artists, botanists and philosophers. The foundation also brought *The Great Animal Orchestra*—a captivating installation by soundscape ecologist and musician Bernard Krause and art collective United Visual Artists (UVA)—to 180 The Strand in London this autumn. Garage MCA launched Russia's first major environmentally focused exhibition earlier this year; London's Design Museum has explored consumption habits in *Get Onboard: Reduce. Reuse. Rethink* and the Royal Academy recently opened *Eco-Visionaries*. But are these shows truly choosing eco-friendly art? In other words, are they promoting practices that don't use toxic materials and consume minimal resources? And do these shows create environmental damage, even as they raise awareness?

"I think, like most people in recent years, we have become more conscious about the impact we have when making art," says Matt Clark of UVA. In its collaboration with Krause, the collective has drawn from his extensive archive of thousands of wildlife sounds to create a monumental artwork, which was shown at 180 The Strand, and a show of the same name at Fondation Cartier in Paris in 2016.

At 180 The Strand, audiences were enveloped in Krause's soundscape and UVA's installation, which translated sounds into data and then reimagined this information in light (using LED technology, deliberately chosen for its energy efficiency). The idea is to reconnect urbanites with the far-off natural locations the sounds represent, by hearing how animals communicate within complex biophonies (the collective sound all organisms in a given habitat produce at one moment in time). It's an emotive and visceral experience, and one that reminds us of what's at stake in our world.

Clark agrees that, while "artists have a responsibility to reduce their environmental impact, just like any other vocation", it is a challenge to be 100 per cent carbon-free. "To bring a creative idea into reality, at some point you will need to use resources of some sort." Clark adds that over 70 per cent of climate-wrecking emissions come from just one hundred companies; there's no doubt that the wealthy hold the power. In this context, "If art can offer a significant social impact for change, then perhaps the energy used to create it is a price worth paying."

Krause, who is now entering his ninth decade, went back to school to do a PhD in bioacoustics after a turbulent stint working on the score of *Apocalypse Now*. "I've been recording outside ever since," he says. "I'm always aware of the effect of my presence in the wild. Otherwise that disturbance, if there is any, would be reflected in the biophony."

Krause's colleagues were initially sceptical about his theories on the "acoustic niche hypothesis", which posits that biophonies from undisturbed tropical habitats comprise signals unique to each species, and that they vocalize in relationship to one another much like instruments in an orchestra. Although he first presented visual materials to illustrate his sounds—in the form of spectrograms—at the University of California in 1988, it was only in 2016, when the opportunity with UVA came along, that Krause was able to fully activate his data, transforming it into an audiovisual work that everyone could access and understand.

While Krause is now able to convey his message about Earth's sonic beauty and the urgent need to protect it on a much larger scale, he admits that his research has a footprint. Getting to locations to record, the fuel used for transportation and "all of the incidentals we had to incur getting to those places and doing our work" have their impact. At the same time, he notes, "none of our rationale points to a perfect solution. But then, neither does the publication of a beautifully curated magazine with all the resources that medium requires." I can't argue with that. We all have to ask how we're offsetting what we do—and if the damage we do is worth it. "At this end, we do our best and live small."

Producing less doesn't have to mean you can't be influential. Jana Winderen is a Norwegian sound artist who, like Krause, has learned to listen. Norway has one of the highest carbon footprints in the world, but the country is situated in Scandinavia, where some of the most

innovative eco-culture stems from. In Helsinki, for example, the municipal government launched a new service for low carbon footprint culture this summer, whereby residents and tourists can check the sustainability of the museums, restaurants, galleries, monuments and other attractions they want to visit. Transparency and the art world aren't easy bed fellows, but when it comes to the environment, we need candour if we are to make the right choices.

Winderen grew up next to Lake Mjøsa, Norway's largest, which is the main source of drinking water for locals. In the 1970s, the lake was dying, strangled by algae overgrowth. "As a child, that was a very scary thought," she explains. She has been concerned with environmental issues ever since: "It has been continuous throughout my whole life and practice." In the 1990s she went to London to study art at Goldsmiths, where she made a major decision: "It didn't make sense to make objects that would later become landfill. I didn't want to participate in that any more. So, in 1992, I decided not to create more physical objects."

She began to work with sound, making recordings of the Thames. Over the years this has evolved as she enters new environments and fine-tunes her ears to the natural world. Her practice in essence is the art of listening—something Winderen believes we have forgotten how to do, and she sees that as a fundamental part of the problem. "I am now able to hear things before I see them: insects, birds, fish in the water. You sensitize your hearing over the years." She has immersed commuters on Park Avenue in the sounds of lapping waves, and has recorded trees: her work *Du Petit Risoud aux Profondeurs du Lac de Joux*, a symphonic collage exploring what she refers to as the "disharmony" between the audible and the visible, encompasses the indigenous sounds of the Vallée de Joux, including the 300-year-old slow-growing spruce trees of the Risoud forest. Winderen's unique skills mean that she is regularly invited to collaborate with others, including fellow sound artists, composers and marine biologists.

While Winderen hopes to make an impact on the visitor, it is just as important that her art leaves no trace. "I try to do as little damage as possible to each environment I go into—but, of course, often I go by boat, and it's not always without an engine. I think about this problematic issue more and more, and try to consider whether I really need to travel [in this way], or if I can get there slower."



COMMISSIONED BY FONDATION CARTIER POUR L'ART CONTEMPORAIN, PARIS WITH UNITED VISUAL ARTISTS. PHOTO BY JACK HEINS



COMMISSIONED FOR THE EXHIBITION AFTER THE END OF THE WORLD, CURATED BY JOSÉ LUIS DE VICENTE. PRODUCED BY CCCB IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH FACT, LIVERPOOL, THE BLUECOAT AND RIBA NORTH © CCCB, CLAUDIA PM SANTIBÁÑEZ, 2017

At this year's Art Basel Miami Beach she is creating a sound installation (commissioned by Swiss luxury-watchmaker Audemars Piguet) using recordings made on the Florida and Caribbean coasts, with long-time collaborator Tony Myatt, professor of sound at the University of Surrey. The work explores the consequences of the rising sea level in the Miami area—like all of Winderen's works, she has been researching the terrain in depth, and will also make further investigations on the ground. The installation inhabits an English rotunda in the park. "I have asked that we don't construct anything but rather clean the space," she tells me. "I try to use as few materials as possible, and there has to be a plan for any material I do use, as to how it can be reused afterwards."

So, what is the role of curators in all this? Should putting on eco-friendly exhibitions be top of the agenda? "The question of the environmental impact of my work as a curator is a great question and one I struggle with—as is the question of the environmental impact of my life as a whole," says Richard Klein, curator of *Weather Report*, a new group exhibition at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (until 29 March). It features work by Barbara Bloom, Andy Goldsworthy, Bigert & Bergström and Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle. "It's a mistake to isolate 'environmental impact' as an issue from the universe of what I consider to be urgent progressive issues such as income inequality, racism, sexism and education," he continues. "In the long run, they are all related and I'd like to think that my actions overall urge society in a positive direction."

All of the exhibited artists deal with the environment in different ways, exploring everything from satellite imagery to the effect of wind. Although Klein was also thinking about the show's footprint, it wasn't a filter in selecting the works. "The question of eco-friendly is difficult to answer. For instance, is the work of a video artist such as Jennifer Steinkamp intrinsically eco-friendly because it doesn't physically exist? A video work does require hardware, which is energy-intensive to produce, and does actually use energy in its presentation."

While we might see traditional artworks, such as paintings and sculptures, as having obvious carbon footprints, Klein says that "in many cases it's very hard to know how one's actions are specifically translated into carbon dioxide. This issue is something that we are all trying to figure out—not just artists, but all of us who wish to live in a way that minimizes our impact on the environment."

The role of a curator, in what can feel like an overwhelming and impossible situation we're facing, is piecing everything together so we can comprehend where to go next. "One of the problems humans have as a species is the tendency to fragment knowledge and understanding of the world; a situation that leads to us not seeing the whole," Klein muses.

Last year, the Royal Academy founded a sustainability task force to review ways to reduce its carbon footprint and improve sustainability. Now its major eco-focused exhibition of art, architecture and design seems aligned with its goals to improve the way it puts on exhibitions.

Pedro Gadanho, co-curator of the show, explains that "the primary focus of *Eco-Visionaries* was not on the central, current need for CO₂ emissions mitigation, but precisely to show how diverse and complex the climate crisis actually is." The exhibition examines issues from climate change to extinction and resource depletion, exploring humankind's impact—and solutions—beyond the mainstream idea of what sustainability means. The line-up includes Virgil Abloh, Olafur Eliasson, Tue Greenfort and Unknown Fields.

The academy's approach mirrors that of Klein's at The Aldrich. "We were more driven to show artists investigating and researching different, less visible issues, so as to offer viewers a broad sense of urgency, rather than dwelling on artists' individual responsibility towards the mainstream perception of one specific issue," he adds. "Because, let's face it, as science is telling us, really impactful emissions mitigation will have to be done at a collective global scale, namely through political action that effectively bans carbon emissions—for example, that bans all

air travel or private transport or, on the other hand, funds innovative research on carbon dioxide sequestration."

We're all accustomed to the potentially grim view of our future. It might seem as though art is simply an inadequate response that moves at a glacial pace—inefficient when icecaps are melting. Neither Klein, nor Gadanho, sees it that way. It is not, Gadanho writes, entirely hopeless: "One can suggest that artists, architects, scientists and policy-makers who research environmental problems across the globe are not tourists, and not even 'disaster tourists'. If there is a slight chance that one of them offers critical or visionary insights into possible solutions for our current problems, then the negative cost of their carbon footprint will be amply compensated by the benefits their research may bring."

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COURTESY THE ARTIST. VISUALIZATION BY THE MILL



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JERALD MELBERG GALLERY, NORTH CAROLINA

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COURTESY THE ARTISTS. PHOTO BY JASON EVANS

