

Exhibition Review

***Tout Contre La Terre*, Museum of Natural History, Geneva, Switzerland, 14 October 2021 – 25 June 2023**

In the last decade, the number of exhibitions devoted to the ecological crisis around the world has grown exponentially. In the face of the urgency of the situation, museums have drawn creatively on their collections and worked across object taxonomies and disciplines to create innovative exhibitions interweaving scientific specimens, archaeological findings, ethnographic artefacts, artworks, and scientific data illustrating the extent of the ecological damage.

The emotions engendered by the crisis have, however, remained largely unexplored. Some recent exhibitions on ecological topics have addressed emotions in a tangential, indirect manner. This is the case, for instance, of *Human Nature* at the Museum of World Culture, Gothenburg (2019-20), which included areas where visitors could engage with the emotions they experienced during their visit (Arfvidsson and Follin 2020). Similarly, *Our Broken Planet* at the London Natural History Museum (2021-22) featured events where climate psychology researchers and environmental activists addressed eco-anxiety among young people. Several exhibitions, such as *Climate Action: Inspiring Change* at the Peabody Essex Museum (2022-23), leverage visitors' emotions in order to motivate environmentally responsible behaviour. Very few exhibitions, however, have ventured beyond indirect acknowledgment, to fully address the emotional dimensions of the ecological crisis and ask: what emotions do we experience in the face of the ecological crisis? Why are we doing so little? Can a better understanding of our emotions help us explain ingrained resistance to taking environmental action?

These are the questions raised by an innovative, transdisciplinary, thought-provoking and, literally, emotion-provoking exhibition entitled *Tout Contre la Terre* (meaning 'very close to the earth') held at the Museum of Natural History in Geneva, Switzerland, until June 2023. As stated by the museographic and scenographic team, the exhibition wants to be an invitation 'to examine people's emotions and behaviour to better understand their impact within and in the face of the environmental crisis'.¹ The exhibition is connected to a broader institutional re-orientation towards underpinning science with affect; in the words of the director Arnaud Maeder, the goal of the museum is to 'produce scientific knowledge, sensitize and engender emotions' (Bourg 2021: 19). In line with this ethos, the exhibition *Tout Contre la Terre* is the result of a collaborative curatorship across sectors and disciplines. The museographic committee (including the exhibition project leader, Hervé Groscairet, and several 'médiateurs culturels', professionals who 'mediate' the exhibition's content across science, art and the public at large) set the foundational principles of the exhibition, which were then discussed and developed together with a multi-disciplinary scientific committee (including a philosopher, a psychologist and a linguist) and in collaboration with artists and natural scientists (evolutionary biologists, entomologists, mammalogists, mineralogists, ornithologists). What is noteworthy is that these experts have not been invited as mere consultants, but rather have been involved in the exhibition set up as co-curators, some of them carrying direct responsibility for specific sections of the exhibition. Another point worth highlighting is the extent to which concerns about environmental sustainability permeated the curatorial approach: from prioritizing recycled scenographic elements and sustainable or low carbon footprint materials, to opting for a miniature 'exhibition catalogue' on recycled paper. Interested visitors will find rich documentation available online,² including the mini-catalogue, a 46-page pedagogical guide for teachers, English transcriptions of exhibition texts, media coverage and links to

participant artists, as well as an engrossing podcast series where the themes of the exhibition are deepened through discussions with experts. The display interweaves a wide range of object typologies: drawings, cartoons, sculpture, art installations, photographic material, interview extracts, literary quotations and poetry are set into dialogue with each other and with the museum's natural history collections. The scenography and layout aim to 'combine the immersive, the aesthetic, the witness and the information';³ the result might have easily slid towards cacophony and confusion, but the clear exhibition narrative effectively drives the visit and gives coherence to the various exhibition components.

Multiple audiences are addressed; children are invited to walk through the exhibition in the company of two animal characters acting as 'guides'. Adult visitors with a special interest in science will find plenty of scientific data and statistics quantifying and visualizing the current ecological situation. It is sadly clear, however, that scientific knowledge alone is not able to move us to action. This is the demanding task left to texts and artworks. Both rise to the challenge in this exhibition: the impact of deeply affective artworks and installations is amplified and deepened by rich, thought-provoking and emotionally stirring exhibition texts.

The exhibition path develops linearly, with individual exhibition rooms (each set up by a participant curator) connected by a corridor to create a large 'L' shape. The entrance to the exhibition is from a rotunda where panels draw on scientific data to illustrate the extent of the depletion of the planet's resources. After an introductory area, the visitors walk through a series of exhibition rooms curated by contemporary artists. Among the most impressive artworks are drawings of individual dead bees by artist 1011. Each bee is named after the most popular name in the countries that, in 2018, were the top consumers of pesticides – a key cause in the dramatic reduction of bee colonies worldwide. The attention and compassion exuding from these large scale, hyperrealistic and ultra-detailed drawings are nothing less than arresting. Most viewers will realize they have never really *seen* a bee before. We can only begin to empathize with, and take care of someone or something, if we acknowledge their existence; these drawings are a powerful step in that direction.



Image: 'Drawing 'Sakura' by artist 1011. Courtesy of the Museum of Natural History, Geneva.

In a similar vein, since 2017 artist Gabriel Ruta has been producing detailed drawings of animal specimens featuring on the IUCN (*International Union for Conservation of Nature*) *Red List* of species threatened with extinction. Upon entering Ruta's exhibition room the visitor is overwhelmed by the sheer visual impact of the more than 2,000 minute animal drawings covering the walls, whilst on the ground, gravestones signal their imminent disappearance. If the bee portraits elicit compassion for the animal as an individual, Ruta's work forces us to face the magnitude of the loss. Incidentally, it is interesting to note how displays addressing biodiversity loss and decline tend to deploy museographic registers and display strategies reminiscent of holocaust and war museums.

The second section of the exhibition – including areas curated respectively by a psychologist, a philosopher, an artist-anthropologist and a linguist – provides a balancing contrast to the visual and artistic tone of the first part. Words, texts and ideas characterize this second section; indeed, here words turn into artefacts, made special because they are 'given material expression in the graphic treatment of the scenography' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2015: 229) but also, crucially, because they are charged with affect. And so emotions materialize as scenographic elements and become a forest-like physical background to psychologist Tobias Brosch's engaging reflections on why we are not worried enough about the ecological crisis, what links emotions and (environmentally responsible) decision-making, and how positive emotions can engender environmental action through the 'warm glow', the positive feeling we experience after a pro-social gesture. Set against the drawings of anthropologist-cartoonist Alessandro Pignocchi, the reflection continues with philosopher Dominique Bourg, who puts his finger on key collective assumptions and beliefs about technology and development at the roots of our troubled relationship with the other-than-human world. The exhibition closes with linguist Cristina Soriano who invites us to reflect on the power of language to engender emotions and, in this way, to affect our perception of ecological issues. The section includes an 'emotions wheel' that visitors can activate in order to bring into sharper focus their own emotional responses, whilst also leaving a track record of those responses, which contributes to the organic development of the display.

In this second section, the curatorial approach is more conceptual and slightly more demanding on visitors, who are confronted with longer texts (a refreshing alternative to Twitter-style exhibition panels) and intellectually and ethically compelling questions, rather than ready-made answers. The transition between the two exhibition sections works in large part because the visual, powerful affective charge of the first section has most likely shaken off visitors' apathy and made them receptive to the denser content of the second section. One might dream of mixing things up and pushing the transdisciplinary collaboration even further, bringing for instance artists, philosophers, biologists, linguists, psychologists etc. to co-create artworks, co-author exhibition texts, and co-curate the same exhibition space. *Tout Contre la Terre* indicates this is an achievable goal.

All in all, this is a multivocal, multifaceted exhibition that allows visitors multiple entry points into what is arguably a difficult theme: it may be easy to enthrall visitors with the mesmerizing colours of a butterfly collection, but much more challenging to tackle anxiety, anger or despair for the state of our planet, and be confronted with the deep reasons of our collective inaction. This is a brave collective project that substantially advances transdisciplinarity and reveals the potential of affect and emotions to empower scientific communication of ecological topics as well as the museum medium itself.

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Notes

- ¹ Muséum Genève, 'English Texts of the Exhibition: *Tout Contre La Terre*', 2021, 3. Available from <http://institutions.ville-geneve.ch/fr/mhn/votre-visite/agenda/tout-contre-la-terre/>, accessed 12 September 2022.
- ² See <http://institutions.ville-geneve.ch/fr/mhn/votre-visite/agenda/tout-contre-la-terre/>. Please note that this page and the related documentation are in French; however, the exhibition itself is bilingual, French and English.
- ³ Muséum Genève, 'Dossier de presse. *Tout Contre La Terre*: Une exposition temporaire du Muséum d'histoire naturelle', 13 October 2021, 6 (author's translation from French). Available from <http://institutions.ville-geneve.ch/fr/mhn/pied-de-page/pied-de-page/presse/dossiers-de-presse/>, accessed 12 September 2022.

References

- Arfvidsson, H. and Follin, A. (2020) 'Connectedness, Consumption and Climate Change: The Exhibition Human Nature', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 35 (6) 68496.
- Bourg, D. (2021) *To Reassure*, mini exhibition brochure, *Tout Contre La Terre*, Geneva: Atar Roto Press.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (2015) 'Inside the Museum: Curating between Hope and Despair', *East European Jewish Affairs*, 45 (2–3) 215–35.

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