

Particular Planetary Aesthetics

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and from near Walyalup/Fremantle on Whadjuk Noongar Boodja

The theme of this issue, *Particular Planetary Aesthetics*, has its origins in *Ngā Tūtaki – Encounter/s: Agency, Embodiment, Exchange, Ecologies*, the 2019 conference of the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ), held in Aotearoa in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in early December. From opposite coasts of Australia, we convened four panels for this cross-Tasman event under two titles: “Affective Encounters, Shadow Traces, and Resonant Naturecultures in the Anthropocene: Particular-planetary aesthetics in the feminist ecosocial turn” and “Encounters with and within the Anthropocene: Speculating on Particular-Planetary Aesthetics.”

The call for papers had begun with the night calls of the Southern Boobook Owl whose elegiac refrain reminded us that the work of art in the Anthropocene was under interrogation by contemporary artists, theorists and historians. We argued that new collaborations were emerging across the open-field of the arts and humanities, creating alternative critical frameworks to engage with: that the human is more-than-human and the social is an eco-social domain in this age of extinction and accelerated climate change.

In proposing the panels, we were energised by the resonance of the many-stranded theme of *ngā tūtaki—encounter/s*. At the intersection of art and the environmental humanities, ours were to be broadly based on ‘ecologies’, a key conference thread. We asked these questions: How are artist researchers in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand responding to the push and pull—the effects, affects and implications—of the Anthropocene-in-the-making?¹ What were contemporary practitioners and thinkers doing, making, speculating on, or activating via creative investigations in the capricious spaces of attunement? Connected with this line of thought, we highlighted our interest in exploring the mode of the *affective encounter* as a rich waymaker of art praxis and action.

Our call for papers generated over a dozen responses from contemporary artist researchers, scholars and writers, leading to twelve of us meeting in person in Aotearoa. Lightly touched on here for the purposes of introduction, the panel abstracts may be read in full in the conference programme.² In June 2020 we proposed bringing the responses together in a guest edited issue of *Swampben*.

Adopting an aesthetic-scholarly approach, this issue of *Swamphen* is therefore a collection of encounters and reflections that sought to feel the pulse of the planetary moment of climate and ecological crises via the localised attunements, experiences, voices and critical perspectives of participants from both sides of the Tasman. Our project's defining call for the panels at Tāmaki Makaurau was to explore these translated encounters in a new frame as *particular planetary aesthetics*: moving from the particular, bodily or affective encounter to trace, reveal or refigure planetary connections, relations and concerns. An emphasis of the issue is therefore on artistic responses as embodied, affect-engaged practices in conversation with the provocation of the Anthropocene-in-the-making.

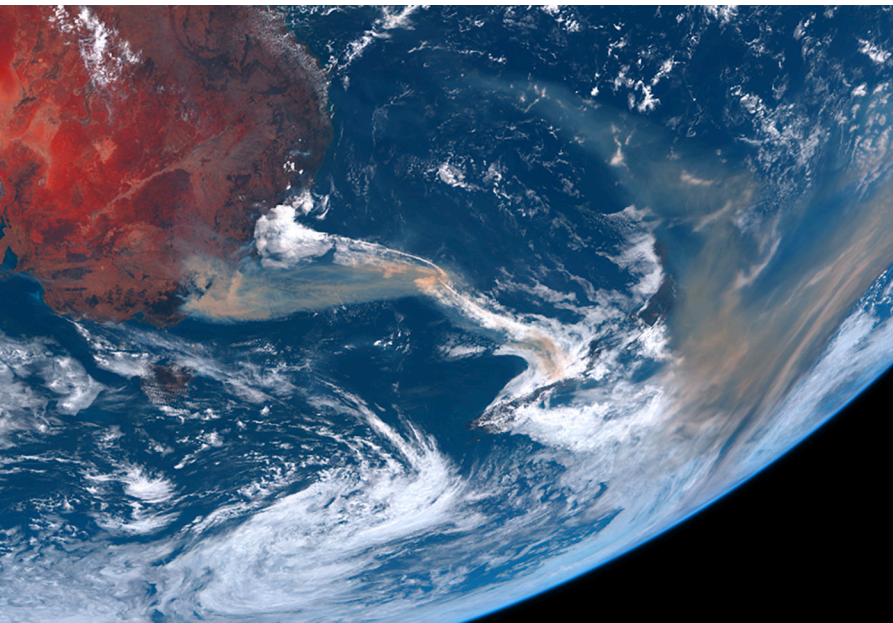


Fig. 1 Satellite view of the devastating Currowan megafire experienced in southeastern Australia from late December 2019 to mid-January 2020. Clouds of smoke and particulate ash stream across the Tasman Sea to Aotearoa New Zealand's Te Waipounamu/South Island, visible right. Bespoke screenshot created from the Himawari-8 livestream, 2 January 2020 at 12:10 p.m. by Louise Boscacci in the fireground. Source: Himawari-8 Real-time Web (NICT), <https://himawari8.nict.go.jp/>. Photo © Louise Boscacci

The divergence: before/after...

For the papers presented here, we encouraged all participants to take a creative critical approach to their topic, and in keeping with the original conference material, to include other media as fitting: images, sound, video. However, *during* the conference we noticed the sky tinted with yellow due to high-level smoke above Auckland, and shortly *after*, reports began to emerge from Wuhan about a highly infectious flu-like virus. Due to these rolling and radical changes to environments and communities, all presenters were then invited to develop a postscript to complement their 2019 position at the end of June 2020: after catastrophic fire and deluge on Australia's east coast, and after the public 'lockdown' restrictions of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic were lifted in affected states in Australia. 'The 'worst', it seemed *then*, was over. At the same time, international border closures meant that our colleagues in Aotearoa and Australia were separated once again on

different oceanic islands, even if we could connect or communicate in the virtual spaces of email and Zoom.

This differentiation into a ‘before’ and ‘after’ response to what seemed apocalyptic alterations of eco-social systems and lives was translated differently by all. Some researchers have detailed mainly their initial response, whereas others have deeply considered ‘before’ and ‘after’ pieces. Several concentrate on an ‘after’ or a post-conference response. Papers were expected to make a scholarly contribution that engaged, extended or questioned current thinking and literature, especially at the intersection of the contemporary environmental humanities and art. Stepping sideways from a usual academic paper structure, however, we made space in the format of the ‘after’ response, in particular: to be either critical or reflective in articulating how or what had been affected or even transformed, if at all, in practice.

Fig. 2 High level bushfire haze observed, en route (*and blazing carbon miles*) Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland to Naarm Melbourne, 16 December 2019. Photo © Perdita Phillips



The papers

We present eleven separate papers in our peer review group from nine author participants. In company with these is a Creative Practice Focus set of editor-refereed papers by three artist researchers from our conference panels. These shorter contributions are unapologetically practice-led pieces; our intention, here, is to value the voices and knowledge making of creative researchers, whose vocabulary is worlded in more than words as a ‘first language’: in paint, performance, drawing and the interdisciplinary spaces of visual and material practice. Unsurprisingly, we took particular care in design to give prominence to the visual (and auditory) aspects of all papers.

Perdita Phillips opens our issue with *Seeping, maintaining, flooding and repairing: how to act in a both/and world* in which she describes the experiences of an artist in residency called *Follow the water* in Kinjarling/Albany, Western Australia. This socially engaged project exemplifies “the complications of thinking through water stories using artistic means,” and she writes of working through the “impurity of caring” towards a new aesthetics of action in “porous repair.” There is some listening to do, as listening itself has multiple cadences. Porous repair includes “small acts of continuing care across, in and through boundaries and membranes.” It works *with* the many voids of the unknown in eco-social systems.

Louise Boscacci expands on particular planetary aesthetics, writing as a more-than-human wit(h)ness in the unfolding of her shadow country project, *Zinland*. In her connected paper, *Relationships of Extinction, and More Life: Zinland to Zealandia*, she invites readers into restorative relationships of the multinatural as the affective trace leads to “more life.” There is a lingering exchange with a swamphen, and with Gayatri Spivak on planetarity, and she discusses planetary aesthetics as expressed in the inimitable work of the World of Matter artist collective and the words of art writer and thinker, Krista Lynes. Boscacci thinks and enacts aesthetics as an open-field of sensory encounters and embodied energies that are translated in a lyrical essay of wit(h)nessing that wants more than a story of complicity and damage.

In *Serpents, Tsunami Boulders and Lightning* Janine Randerson explores how more-than-human cosmologies, as expressed in contemporary art practice, “present a plane for sensing and feeling the extent of the ecological strain on our planet.” In her companion piece, *Kāpia: fossils and remedies: more-than-human survivors*, she writes of more than human geologies and presents an eponymous video work as a story of kāpia, a relic of an ancient forest commonly called Kauri gum by the settler-colonists in Aotearoa. Randerson invites us, her readers and audience, into a project of making sense of “the now” by “reaching back into our collective human and more-than-human histories in the fossil archive.”

In their essay *Re-materialising: considering dominant understandings of value and systems of production within industrial plastics and the plastic arts*, Raewyn Martyn and Heather Galbraith consider how systems of art production are changing in response to climate crisis, and how artists are re-materialising extractive materials such as plastic. Writing from Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Martyn’s investigation and creation of alluring biopolymer forms brings focus to the potentials of circular economies and aesthetics that complicate any “art ecology” within the “wider transition away from petro-hegemonic culture.” They show how te ao Māori and international Indigenous-led art and research are influencing Pākehā and tauīwi work within science and arts collaborations.

Christopher Houghton writes of his imperative to “articulate a practice of relational photography over one that objectifies its subjects” in the essay, *Photography with/in a Broader Humanity*. He wonders about the common ground between First Nations and non-Indigenous or settler coloniser notions of Country and argues that his practice is part of “a reconciliatory act motivated by the desire to decolonise my own thinking.” As a photographer, he thinks about decolonisation as a “disinvestment in colonial hierarchies, binary thinking and practices of anthropocentrism.”

In her essay *Cultivating Chlorophilia: Exploring connections with nature through co-operative and participatory art projects*, Heather Hesterman examines “how exchanges between humans and plants, mediated by art, can result in emergent states that escape the bounds of the predictable.” Exploring “connections with nature through co-operative and participatory art projects” this visually rich piece connects to her companion essay and video *Walking in Merri Circles*. Here, she responds in practice to lengthy COVID-19 ‘lockdowns’ in Melbourne in 2020 when she was returned to a five-kilometre radius of movement around her home and conspired with other “photosynthetic ones.”

The **Creative Practice Focus** carries the work of three artists, Maria O’Toole, Robert Kettels, and Nicola Dickson. Our intention is to let their voices speak through the visual, material and performative works they invite us into. O’Toole’s *Drann Chorus* makes an encounter space between humpback whales met in the waters of Cook Strait/Raukawa Moana and Tonga, anthropogenic underwater noise, and embodied drawing practice. Kettels converses and stands with ancient geologies in Wajarri Country in Western Australia in *Abiotic perspectives? Painting in Ngunnawal Country after the summer of fires*, Nicola Dickson in *Present Pasts* renders exquisite paintings of endemic Australian birds “around me: local, heard, seen, treasured.”

In *Tender Places: The Claypans Diaries, Part 1 and 2*, Kelly Lee Hickey walks and thinks with the Ilparpa Claypans, a site of personal significance in Arrernte Country on the outskirts of Mparntwe/Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. She writes about this creative research project as “engaging the settler body in reflexive dialogue with theory in and through place, to explore moral responsibilities of settler descended peoples in the time of ecological breakdown.”

We close this issue of Swamphen in Aotearoa with the lush unmappings of Leighton Upson, painting and speculating in *Encounters with Indigenous Forest and Intuitive Painting*. From a remnant forest place not far from Ngāmotu/New Plymouth, with acknowledgement of his local iwi, Te Ātiawa, he paints “alongside a group of centuries-old kohekohe” and other survivor trees. This is a deepening of his art

practice as *kotahitanga*: practising “togetherness with forest.” His essay ends asking resonant questions about the work of art, shared colonised places, and the lost ancestral forests of Aotearoa New Zealand.

In one reading, as a whole the papers share broad artistic strategies of responding through multispecies enquiries and conversations, utilising “undoing” and “unsettling,” bringing current entanglements to our attention, or entwining matters in new combinations and connections. The particular problematics of belonging and eco-social change are addressed by some. As symptoms and becomings of anthropocenic times, the impacts and injustices of extraction, unsustainability, new extinctions and eco-catastrophe are deeply latent, as are the inherent centrality of Country and the complications and incomplete nature—the “ongoingness”—of decolonisation.

And yet. What of the *affective* register? What might be the lexicon of encounter and exchange that simmers beneath or surfaces and sparks from the practices and voices translated here? This would be another type of ‘reading’ of the particular planetary aesthetics with which we engage in this issue. We invite readers, listeners and viewers now to encounter this assembly of papers in their own embodied ways.

Peer Reviewers

We are immensely grateful to those twenty colleagues across a spectrum of contemporary art, art theory and history, decolonising feminist environmental humanities, cultural geographies and ecocritical literary studies in Australia, Aotearoa, the UK and USA who so generously participated in the peer review process for the papers in this issue. We value their critical reviews, and kind, brilliant work in this issue’s worlding. We are most grateful to eminent First Nations’ colleagues, artists and academics who met our editorial outreach with goodwill and generosity when we sought advice on questions that arose when particular Indigenous knowledges were referenced or embodied into practice by settler artist scholars. We all are learning together.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge and recognise all First Nation peoples in Australia and Aotearoa who read the papers we are honoured to introduce here. As a first principle, we acknowledge Country. Here, Perdita is writing from Walyalup/Fremantle on unceded Whadjuk Noongar Boodja; Louise from beautiful Gundungurra Ngurru (Country), New South Wales. We continue to pay respect to all Elders past and present as we acknowledge that these home lands, waters and skies were never ceded. Always was. Always will be.

We acknowledge and thank Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei as mana whenua, the iwi and hapū who have authority and a kaitiakitanga (stewardship) role over the land on which the University of Auckland city campus is located. There, at the Te Noho Kotahitanga Marae, we and the other participants were honoured to be introduced and welcomed to this place for the conference ngā tūtaki in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

As volume eight of the journal, *Particular Planetary Aesthetics* follows on from *Grounding Story*, the theme of volume seven. We are delighted with this serendipity. Each of us had also travelled to Armidale in Anaiwan Country to participate and present at the memorable 2019 ASLEC-ANZ *Grounding Story* conference.

We thank the *Swamphen* Collective for their generous support of this special issue from its inception when we could never have predicted the challenges soon to be wrought on best laid plans by a globe-trotting virus. We are most grateful to each and all members of the collective for their editorial advice and oversight, critical feedback and careful attention along the way.

We also thank Sally Ann McIntyre for her participation and artistic contribution to the formulation and organisation of our jointly proposed *Ngā Tūtaki – Encounter/s* conference panels—before, during and after our collective gathering in Aotearoa—and her valuable contribution to the initial peer review process for this issue of *Swamphen*.

WORKS CITED

- Ngā Tūtaki – Encounter/s: Agency, Embodiment, Exchange, Ecologies Conference Programme*. 3–6 Dec. 2019, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ), 2019, https://aaanz.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/FINAL-Full-Programme-of-Abstracts-and-Biographies-AAANZ-2019_Dec1.pdf.
- Yusoff, Kathryn. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. U of Minnesota P, 2019.

NOTES

- 1 The “Anthropocene-in-the-making” is a recalibration of the putative new “white” geological epoch of the Anthropocene by the feminist inhuman geographer, Kathryn Yusoff in her work, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.
- 2 The panel abstracts are found on pages 12-13 and 38-39 of the *Ngā Tūtaki – Encounter/s: Agency, Embodiment, Exchange, Ecologies* conference programme (referenced above).