

A Resistant Gaze? 'RE/SISTERS: A Lens on Gender and Ecology' at London's Barbican Art Gallery

Lee Mackinnon

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The 'RE/SISTERS' exhibition at the Barbican set out to reveal how a woman-centred vision of nature has been replaced by a 'mechanical, patriarchal order that is organised around the exploitation of natural resources and the oppression of "othered" bodies'.¹ It is difficult to imagine what this original woman-centred vision of nature may have been: are we in danger here of imagining two implausibly virginal realms (woman and nature), from which all that can emerge are fairy tales? Grand claims and hot-button topics ensue in an orderly roll call of signalled virtues. 'Works in the exhibition explored how women's understanding of our environment has often resisted the logic of capitalist economies which place the exploitation of the planet at its centre.'² Indeed, the logic of the capitalist economy has long held women in the crosshairs of its sights: as repositories of free labour, as beneficiaries of man-made convenience, and as the idealised well-spring of nature's beneficence. The complexity of these relations may serve to hold the notion of an 'often resisted logic', in parentheses.

However, the notion that those identifying as women may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change has been well documented, arising from a range of factors, including lack of access to resources and land, poverty, and the fact that, while women produce 50–80 per cent of the world's food,³ they own less than 10 per cent of the land. For some critics, the

¹ From 'RE/Sisters: A Lens on Gender and Ecology', press release, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2023, available at www.barbican.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/2023-10/Barbican_RESISTERS%20press%20release_Oct%2023_0.pdf

² From the Barbican Art Gallery website information on the exhibition: www.barbican.org.uk/ReSisters

³ Balgis Osman-Elasha, 'Women... in the Shadow of Climate Change', from *UN Chronicle*, nos 3 & 4, vol XLVI, Special Climate Change Issue, 'To Protect Succeeding Generations...', 2009, available at www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/womenin-shadow-climate-change#:~:text=Consequently%2C%20women%20are%20less%20able,develop%20skills%20or%20earn%20income

coupling of women as specifically vulnerable, impoverished, and as having a particular affinity with nature may serve to subject women to the very exploitative logic this exhibition wished to highlight.

In a paper from 2013,⁴ Bernadette P Resurrección presents the argument that environmental care is often passed onto women, as though they have a special duty to the environment that men appear to be exempted from. The author explores why the ‘women-environment’ relationship persists, despite critical attempts to debunk it, often re-emerging in current climate change debates. Indeed, since the 1970s, essentialist debates have attempted to articulate gender difference as ‘innate and transcultural’,⁵ a point that is often seen to undermine the efforts of feminism to establish a truly global and inclusive movement. Subsequent ecofeminist ideas were predicated upon the notion that the domination of resources and women were of a kind.⁶ Indeed, in certain patriarchal contexts, women *have* been treated as a resource whose reproductive capacity must be controlled and regulated. Yet appeals to essentialism can make such claims appear to be self-evident. Essentialising narratives are likely to present women as inherently humanist and close to nature, while forms of rationality tend to be essentialised as masculine.⁷ Arguably, such notions have done much to ensure that women remain tethered to tropes of gendered subordination, perpetuating her relegation to *natural* healer of ills, that are not otherwise within her influence. Within such tenets, women are likely to be perceived as amenable to the task of cleaning up and repairing what is left behind, whether by extractivist corporations or patriarchal institutions. Resurrección points out that predetermined assumptions concerning the remit of women’s power can be counter-productive, isolating women from further networks of power and influence.⁸ At times, particular emphasis has been placed on women’s ‘special knowledge’ of the environment and ecological issues without investigating the origin of such ideas or indicating that more context-specific, nuanced understandings of women and resources are needed.⁹ The paper’s author goes on to suggest several reasons why the environment–women relationship persists, some being strategic, even facilitating women’s entry into arenas of policy change.¹⁰ While the characterisation of women as victims of climate change and its potential saviours is a means of letting corporations off the hook, it also ignores the complex underlying structural injustices that drive gender vulnerability: ‘It is far less cumbersome for institutions to relate with women in terms of impacted victims... And as agents of positive environmental action than to frame policy that addresses the complex drivers of

⁴ Bernadette P Resurrección, ‘Persistent women and environment linkages in climate change and sustainable development agendas’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol 40, September–October 2013, 2013, pp 33–43, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277539513000599

⁵ Ibid, p 34

⁶ See *ibid*, p 34

⁷ See *ibid*, p 35

⁸ See *ibid*, p 34

⁹ Ibid, p 35

¹⁰ See *ibid*, p 33

gender vulnerability and relations of power within which they are embedded.’¹¹ Such points remind us that over-simplification might simply reproduce forms of exclusion and facilitate the elision of further institutional responsibility.

In a study that interrogates notions of gender vulnerability, Seema Arora-Jonsson questions assumptions that link climate change with the poverty of women, leading to the potential ‘feminisation of poverty’.¹² Furthermore, Resurrección highlights how vulnerability as a quality can tend to be treated in positivist terms, as a measurable quantity that is inherent in being a woman.¹³ Vulnerability might better be understood as indicative of historically and culturally specific processes and inequalities. It is these processes that require mitigation, not women themselves.¹⁴ Resurrección claims no wish to disparage woman–environment links, nor the merits of a politics based upon social difference, only to draw attention to the dangers of oversimplification that inhere in essentialisms and that may be reproduced in policy. She advocates, rather, nuanced, contextual understandings of the complex relationships between gender, resources and sustainability, highlighting how women may become scapegoats for more structural failures. Whilst it may not be possible for an art exhibition to resolve these complex, ongoing debates, setting out such ideas may help us to understand what is at stake in some of the claims being made.

The exhibition was sub-divided into six sections: ‘Extractive/ Exploding Economies’, ‘Mutation/Protest and Survive’, ‘Earth Maintenance’, ‘Performing Ground’, ‘Reclaiming the Commons’ and ‘Liquid Bodies’. These categories were intended to group together works on related themes, but they also underlined the somewhat ungainly range of issues and ideas referred to, that, at times, did little more than illustrate problems they drew attention to. It seemed, to this viewer, that the exhibition functioned to highlight the problems that attend *mediating* the current ecological crisis, whether inadvertently or not, and that we might consider what artworks want from this crisis. What do they bring us as viewers of this unfolding and unequal global situation? The answer is as multifarious as the definition of ‘woman’ that hovers uncertainly in the wings. Many of these works take a documentary stance, undoubtedly aimed at highlighting the global inequities associated with climate change, while others document activist approaches, yet others – and to my mind, the most engaging – attempt to awaken us from our remoteness with appeals to the very materials that are woven into art objects.

The exhibition began with a grid of nine large glossy C-type prints, *Eyes and Storms*, by Simryn Gill (2012), depicting Australian open-pit mines from above and which reminded me of the highly aesthetic abstract images of Edward Burtynsky and Louis Helbig. That these

¹¹ Ibid, p 35

¹² Seema Arora-Jonsson, ‘Virtue and Vulnerability: Discourses on Women, Gender and Climate Change’, *Global Environmental Change*, vol 21, issue 2, May 2011, pp 744–751, p 746
www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0959378011000069

¹³ See Bernadette P Resurrección, ‘Persistent women and environment linkages in climate change and sustainable development agendas’, op cit, p 39

¹⁴ See ibid, p 39

Canadian behemoths are so reliably evoked at signs of environmental distress had not been adequately vanquished from this selection. They remained, in spirit, at least, while the gallery text attempted to make the familiar extractivist aesthetic disappear ‘... the images resist what Macarena Gómez-Barris calls the extractivist viewpoint: an aerial perspective that reduces the representation of living things... into commodities’. These injunctions to understand what we see as other than it appears, seemed further characteristic of the gallery texts, which, rather than elaborating on the materiality of the works presented, tended to tell viewers what to think about what they were looking at. In the particular case of Gill’s images, the sense of detachment, the scale and troubling beauty of these images confirms what we are encouraged to ignore. Such images themselves constitute a real estate in the context of the gallery: they are beautiful, collectable abstractions, equally distant from the means of their own production, as from the production of the mines we look down upon. Again, such contradictions beg the question of what it is that we want from an exhibition that deals with the climate crisis, and whether/how the materials that represent them are, or should be, adequately accounted for by artists and exhibiting institutions.

Several works continue a *National Geographic* aesthetic. Vast, glossy, highly produced vistas on multiple LCD screens across which figures and landscapes drift, often from great heights, perhaps filmed from drones or cranes. The scale can be epic. While the stories they tell may be critically important and inclusive of voices woefully excluded from prior institutional attention, figures within these stories can themselves appear as digital abstractions, navigating multiple displacements that are contextual, structural and aesthetic. The exhibition resonated with a sense of gravitas: the deep resonant bass of digital sound systems could be heard and felt throughout the vast exhibition space, a sound that was itself a sort of architectural awe. Today’s media systems are characterised by a sublime hyper-sensory mediation that records every intake of breath as a seismic event. Indeed, the current standard measurement of a second is divided according to the billion vibrations of a caesium atom.¹⁵ We live by mineral time that delivers the world to our fingertips, to be scrolled into an abyss of CO² production.

There is certainly a tension arising from works claiming to expose and contest extractive colonial practices, presented in a manner that is entirely conversant with the bourgeois reality of the European art museum, a reality that often indicates so little about the materiality of works that it displays. Indeed, it is not difficult to ascertain that exhibiting institutions in general often wilfully mask the labour and material excesses of the art market. Thus, the existential dread that accompanies contemplating climate-related issues is exacerbated by a sense of despair about the

¹⁵ Since 1968, the so-called ‘international’ system of units (SI) has defined a second as a duration of nine billion, one hundred and ninety-two million, six hundred and thirty-one thousand, seven hundred and seventy cycles of radiation that correspond to the transition between two energy levels of the ground state of the caesium-133 atom (SI, p 169). Caesium is an alkali metal that is largely mined from the zeolite mineral, pollucite. See Lee Mackinnon, ‘Mineralogy: A Digital Account’, *Technologies of Romance, Science Museum Group Journal*, issue 12, 2019 <https://journal.sciencemuseum.ac.uk/article/mineralogy-a-digital-account/#introduction>

material excess that categories of ‘representation’ in expensive largescale exhibitions surely engender. For example, sitting on a bean bag to watch Anne Duk Hee Jordan’s *Ziggy and the Sea Creatures* (2018), a film exploring the sexuality of sea life, I was preoccupied by thoughts that those same polyester beans may one day languish in the ocean to be ingested by the very colourful, exotic creatures upon the screen. We are invited to watch a small, jewel-like projection of luscious, unearthly underwater life engaged in various reproductive pursuits: the sensuality of embracing octopi; the interstellar beauty of unnamed marine life and its array of signs and signals that exclude us. The film does not, arguably, require allusions to a 1970s porn film soundtrack, or injunctions to ‘play’ indicated by the skateboard ramp architecture and soft furnishings. A hanging sateen blob furnished with pieces of orange acetate is reminiscent of the tacky, toxic decorations in a nightclub. A stray toy prawn finds its way into my hand in the half-light, covered in a furry fabric that sets my teeth on edge. Nearby, some children lounge in hammocks that sway with a slowness imitating the underwater languor, as well as the sense of casual violence of the surroundings. Where will all this stuff end up? Perhaps these are specially designed recyclable artefacts – but there is no available information about the materials. This is the same hope that attends me when putting out the recycling: despite the fact that I know only a tiny percentage of plastic is actually recycled, the momentary belief that my own waste may constitute this percentage helps me to deposit it regardless, abandoning it to some other agency. That is the feeling I have here: perhaps I can trade my anxiety about waste materials for a momentary hope that someone else has already seen to it: that this fleeting thought alone may absolve me from further concern.

Today, we live by a spectacular disavowal of our own actions. A cataclysmic disconnect between our actions and their result, between cause and effect. It might be surprising that such an issue did not seem to feature in this exhibition. Neither did the cataloguing of materials used in the works or where they are sourced. Is this important in an exhibition that claims to have ecological concern and activism at its heart? An installation by the ‘People’s Archive of Rural India’ interestingly records and reproduces songs sung by women at the *jāte*, or grinding stone. Why the walls and seating of this room were covered in cork, or its close simulacra, was neither clear nor stated.

melanie bonajo’s *Night Soil Trilogy-Nocturnal Gardening* is an interesting documentary film about four women who embrace alternative ways of being than those dictated by capitalist values. However, the collaborative installation with Théo Demans and Clemence Seilles was designed to ‘reflect[s] the concerns of the film, providing a complete sensual and bodily experience’. The result was an intense, saturated and artificial environment that utilised vivid colourful felt, surgical curtains on rails, neon lights, and what appeared to be a sort of textured brown paint covering numerous objects. None of the invigilators could tell me what this paint was. The contrast between activist voices and the eternal sunset of neon orange was curious and somewhat disembodiment. And while all this is interesting enough, such curatorial omissions leave a lot of guesswork for the materially curious. While many of the artworks are fascinating

and spectacular, the long tradition of questioning the means by which artistic statements are made and how they relate to the ends that they serve were often disappointingly absent. This tendency was countered by works deploying more structural means to deliver a powerful reflection upon materiality, sometimes by exposing and featuring the means of production as part of the process of representation. Minerva Cuevas's *A Draught of the Blue* (2013) shows two divers on the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System, holding banners adorned with protest slogans underwater – apparently for the benefit of the sea life, as well as ourselves. Because we are on eye level with the divers and the fish, there is a sense of our own immersion. Moments when fish nibble the camera lens, seeming to investigate its presence, make the scene more strange – we are asked to occupy the same space and consider the '1%', alongside those deemed to be 'In Trouble'.



Xaviera Simmons, *Red (Number One)*, 2016, colour photograph, 48 x 60 in, courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery

Xaviera Simmons's *Red (Number One)* (2016) is a complex conceptual proposition that invites us to interpret intersections of image, artists' presence, and certain deliciously crude styles of presentation. There is no sense of illusory perspective here; reality is comprised of a shifting collection of images, carried by the artist to a destination and seemingly assembled on the spot. An amateur portable tripod holds a series of repeating photographs: the moon; a moving vehicle; earth from out of space; women carrying baskets who move toward the camera. A second board is covered in red sheets of A4 paper held in place by clear tape. The artist stands between this and a third board showing screenshots of a Jamaican dancehall –

what might be dancing or something more explicit; bodies moving, interacting, overlapping. The American desert is an arid and dry backdrop by comparison. There is a sense of mapping co-ordinates that do not correspond with the unfertile ambitions of the American frontiersman. We witness and are caught between improvised collections of various technical and visual regimes, for which the racially divisive American West provides a troubled backdrop.

In *Speaking of Mud* (2019), Mabe Bethônico explores one of the largest ore extracting companies in the world, 'Vale', based in Switzerland. Vale's mining operations were responsible for two environmental disasters in Minas Gerais, Brazil, where efforts to contain the waste led to floods that distributed 12 million m³ of earth and water, covering land, people, animals and rivers. The artist states that indigenous communities consider land an extension of the body rather than a commodity. Interestingly, these details relate to the excision of all text from the sheets of newspaper that comprise the work: skeletal paper frameworks are held together by the narrow borders of articles and images of the disasters. It is as though language has been subsumed back into the matter from whence it came – the suffocating event of the disaster's mediation and the reality that it reports upon, have been cut away, like diseased tissue that can no longer sustain its own account. What remains of the newspaper sheets sagged and bowed away from the wall, where they hung like carcasses suspended behind a transparent screen.



Mabe Bethônico, *Speaking of Mud*, 2019, photo by Nrishinro Mahe, courtesy of Revista ZUM, Instituto Moreira Salles, São Paulo

Otobong Nkanga's *Tsumeb Fragments* (2015) comprises a multimodal installation that brings together performance with mined materials such as Galala limestone, copper, cement, malachite and azurite, taken from the Namibian site of a former copper mine known for its wealth of mineral and copper deposits. Sustainably mined by the Ovambo people for generations, the site was subject to German colonisation and subsequent aggressive industrial extraction. What was once a naturally occurring hill of green oxidised copper ore became a deep cavity. Nkanga is shown singing and balancing on the edge of the man-made crater, positioning stones upon her head that emphasise the fragility of her position. Using reverse edits, some of the rocks seem to fly out of the crater and position themselves upon her head. The video was displayed on one of several tables, alongside minerals and images backlit on acetate. Mineral agency interacts interestingly with the agency of the video as it renders uncanny the relation between body and object, which move about one another like planets adjusting to the gravitational pull of their satellite bodies.

The exhibition raised many interesting questions about the role and responsibility of the arts in a time increasingly defined by resource scarcity and anxiety around resource use. In a time of environmental sensitivity, do we, as artists and curators, have a responsibility to list materials and their origin? Do we have a responsibility as creatives to foreground sustainability in the culture industry? It is likely that these questions will shape the discourse of the arts in the coming decades of material scarcity that, for some, has long been the case.

Lee Mackinnon is a senior lecturer working in the departments of Photography and Film at the University of the Arts, London. Her writing has featured in numerous publications, including *eflux*; *Umbigo Contemporary Art and Culture*; *Science Museum Journal*; *Photography and Culture*; *Theory, Culture and Society*; and *Leonardo*.