Artists’ Platforms for New Ecologies

Emily Eliza Scott

…it is an obligation to acknowledge that we are, as it were, social beings from the start, dependent on what is outside of ourselves, on others, on institutions, and on sustained and sustaining environments…

Judith Butler

A host of recent artworks and exhibitions have addressed real world ecological issues including anthropogenic climate change, natural resource depletion, mass species extinction, genetically modified seeds and neocolonial land grabs, while at the same time seeking to advance ecological discourse itself. Such endeavours often emphasize the social, political and economic dimensions of seemingly ‘scientific’ matters, thereby calling for more critical (ie, self-reflexive and politicized) forms of environmental thinking and action. Several exhibitions have staked out polemical discursive positions in their very titles: ‘Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies’ (Contemporary Arts Center Cincinnati, 2002), ‘Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art’ (Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, 2006), ‘Green-washing: Environment, Perils, Promises and Perplexities’ (Fondazione Sandretto Rebaudengo, Turin, 2008), and ‘Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969–2009’ (Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2009). These shows and the works they highlight might be considered relative to a spectrum of ecological and environmental art from the 1960s to present which has ranged from quasi-spiritual to ameliorative to interventionist in tone and, likewise, in the degree to which it has perpetuated as opposed to interrogated dominant environmental paradigms (eg ‘wilderness’ in the 1960s or ‘sustainability’ now). Much new work furthermore builds on a rich lineage of collective practice in eco-art formations from the 1980s and 1990s and even earlier. Today, however, a quickly-changing institutional landscape of art and ecology – reflected in the rapid proliferation of symposia, MFA programmes, artist residencies, research centres and museums devoted to this intersection – is also at play, not to mention a more general and related ‘educational turn’ in the art world.

This essay focuses on artist-generated research platforms as one emergent phenomenon wherein self-organized groups probe complex, cross-disciplinary ecological subjects through the development of structures for sustained investigation, exchange and production. These entities not only address (political) ecological matters but also forge ‘ecological’ modes of art-making – based in and on intricate yet durable relations. The Arctic Perspective Initiative (2008–), for instance, is a ‘transnational art, science, and culture work group’ founded by media artists Marko Peljhan (Slovenia-US) and Matthew Biederman (Canada), ‘to direct attention to the global, cultural, and ecological significance of the polar regions’. More specifically, it is an agglomeration of individuals and organizations engaged over extended periods of time with various indigenous communities in the high Arctic to facilitate the creation of open-authored media and communications circuits. Here I am interested in exploring how API and other groups are performing...
research that bridges disparate disciplines as well as academic and non-academic, art and non-art arenas – in line with theorist Brian Holmes’s concept of ‘extra-disciplinary’ practice. And, moreover, how their own methods of production and reproduction, based on social exchange – on common knowledge and knowledge commons – represent a potent alternative to those under capitalism.

At the crux of much of this work is indeed an insistence that the ecological and the economic are inextricably linked. The shift from ecology to political ecology, as this special edition of Third Text illuminates, involves a certain ‘de-naturalization’, or attention to ‘ecological discourse as a system of representations forged at the intersection of power and knowledge’. As far back as the 1960s, in fact, a critical strain of ecological art underscored the social dimension of nature, pushing against Romanticist notions of something apart from and unspoiled by humans, with certain artists taking up industrial and otherwise visibly impacted landscapes to do so. The contemporary work I will consider often foregrounds the extent to which environmental issues manifest differently and unevenly across different socio-spatial registers. As such, it is resonant with, if not at times directly participatory in, the environmental justice movement which has for many years waged an incisive, if under-represented, critique of the failure of Western mainstream environmentalism to acknowledge adequately issues of social inequality; for example, the extent to which climate change has already begun to disproportionately impact poor regions and communities. In a recent article in The Nation, author and activist Naomi Klein cites ‘globalization, deregulation and contemporary capitalism’s quest for perpetual growth’ as ‘the blindingly obvious roots of the climate crisis’. Reversing the familiar rhetoric that climate change is best approached and mitigated via economic measures, she argues that the baseline solutions for climate change – namely, a dismantling of free-market ideology and the global implementation of its growth economy, and a vast dispersal of power to the community level – also point the way to a ‘more enlightened economic system’. Only a radically changed mode of sociality, in other words, one ‘embedded in interdependence rather than hyper-individualism, reciprocity rather than dominance and cooperation rather than hierarchy’, might steer us safely and justly out of current crises.

The kinds of research platforms examined in this essay relate to the economy, and the economic, in highly specific ways: emphasizing not only social relations but also human and non-human interdependencies; modelling empowered positions from which to study, learn and act; and/or deploying self-organization as a counter-economic strategy. They actively promote healthier and more equitable ecologies, we might say, beginning with their own.

Regional Relationships (RR), founded by Illinois-based artists Ryan Griffis and Sarah Ross in 2009, provides a means and flow for research on the entangled relationships, sites and matters entailed in the Midwestern United States. Based on a subscription model, the fees from low-priced annual memberships support the commission of new research works which are then distributed to members twice a year through the mail. The project’s mission statement encapsulates its core aim of establishing a framework ‘to re-imagine the spaces and cultural histories around us’ and see what becomes possible by ‘juxtaposing spaces and narratives that are usually kept apart’. Griffis and Ross, for example, are currently developing a series
of videos with urban planner Faranak Miraftab (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) on rural Beardstown, Illinois, which supplants any lingering sense of simplistic ‘small town America’ with the portrait of a place ever more characterized by multinational corporations, high-tech farming and non-white residents from around the globe. Region is taken up as a scalable category which conveys both cohesion and porosity. ‘Applying a regional lens,’ Griffis and Ross clarify, ‘encourages us to think more expansively about the disparate geographies that might exist within the space of one small town or across continents and oceans’.

RR’s inaugural commission, Matthew Friday’s *A Map Lacking Boundaries*, focuses on the ‘new ecosystem’ resulting from a century and a half of coal mining in Southern Ohio. In particular, it considers the impact on regional watersheds of abandoned mines in which bacterial colonizers speed the release of remnant sulphur, leading to toxic acid mine drainage.

The centrepiece of Friday’s distinctly do-it-yourself mail-out is a diagram charting the complex interactions among a diverse assemblage of actors (eg phosphorus, rainwater, regulatory agencies, wilderness seekers) accompanied by a paintbrush, quill pen, self-addressed and stamped envelope, and small tube of iron oxide pigment produced from remediated acid mine drainage, with which users are invited to create and submit their own diagram ‘that locates and mobilizes new collectives within [their] region.’
Above: Matthew Friday, *A Map Lacking Boundaries, 2009–ongoing*, detail of mail package produced by Regional Relationships, courtesy the artist; below: Matthew Friday and spurse, *A Map Lacking Boundaries, 2009–ongoing*, detail of ecological systems diagram, silkscreen, acid mine drainage pigment on 20 x 30 inch archival paper, courtesy the artists
Another project, *Greetings from the Cornbelts*, by Chicago-based artist Claire Pentecost, traces the migration of transgenic maize over the last decade, from the American Corn Belt to Mexico, and its multifold repercussions. Brief texts aback a series of five postcards depicting genetically deformed corn plants explain how Aventis’ StarLink® brand and other corporate-patented seed varieties – many of which have been deemed suitable for animal feed only but have nevertheless leaked into human food chains – arrived in rural Mexico via the ‘import of unsegregated and unmilled maize’.
This material flow has instigated other migrations: as small-scale farmers in Mexico are ever less able to compete on an international post-NAFTA market, labourers increasingly travel north seeking work in reverse direction from the cheap industrially-produced corn exported southward. Pentecost’s piece frames this as a case of ecological and cultural contamination whereby local agricultural practices, indigenous identities and financial autonomy have been deeply eroded in affected Mexican communities. The genetic modification of crops is particularly ominous because of its uncontainability: as with radiation, its full consequences only become clear once largely irreversible.15

Regionalism represents not only the content and lens for Regional Relationships but also its makers’ community. For the project arose out of, solidifies and expands Griffis and Ross’s already strong regional creative-intellectual-activist social network. They credit RR’s origins to longstanding conversations within another organization of which they are part, the Midwest Radical Cultural Corridor, an alliance of ‘critical groups, political projects, radical communities and experiments in alternative existence’ that calls for ‘longer, slower, deeper connections between the territories where we live’.16 A number of MRCC efforts have engaged ecological issues, including mappings of the coal and corn carbon economy in the Midwest region and a series of public events called the ‘Monsanto Hearings’, for which people gathered in Iowa City to share testimony about the impacts of biotech giant Monsanto on agriculture in that state and beyond.17 Involvement in a constellation of intersecting groups, as well as the tendency for one such entity to spawn others, is commonplace (for instance, Friday is a core member of the collective spure and Pentecost has collaborated on multiple occasions with Critical Art Ensemble).15 In many cases, individuals come together because of a shared desire to dwell on relevant material, in exchange with others, over the course of many months or years (a duration rarely supported by traditional arts venues and funding cycles) – what theorist Irit Rogoff describes as ‘small ontological communities propelled by desire and curiosity, cemented together by the kind of empowerment that comes from intellectual challenge’.19 Dialogue around a particular subject, in other words, becomes the basis and adhesive for community formation. Sometimes, these communities span and link diverse geographies, as in the case of World of Matter (2010–), a visual research project on natural resource ‘ecologies’ with core participants hailing from Europe, the United States and Brazil, and research tentacles extending yet elsewhere.20

In addition to a project like RR being a platform for its producers – an internal resource, so to speak – it is, of course, also meant for others. Knowledge is built to serve as a catalyst or jumping-off-point for further inquiry and public discussion. As such, ‘militant research’ endeavours like this question the power dynamics that often characterize traditional educational institutions and media, whether news sources, documentary films, government agencies or the higher education system.21 The notion of radical ‘pedagogy’ directly taken up by many artists today differs from ‘education’ in its emphasis on learning as a practice-based two-way process (as opposed to a hierarchical transfer) as well as the potential political empowerment that comes through knowledge acquisition. Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), for instance, has for nearly two decades encouraged those who participate in its performances to actively confront and resist omnipotent contemporary forces – eg corporatized agriculture, reproductive biotechnologies, intensified surveillance in
the age of ‘homeland security’ in the US – by summoning people to engage in hands-on learning about these pervasive yet largely mysterious industries. At the root of many of these practices is a belief in the exponential capacity of knowledge itself. Artist Stephan Dillemuth, in a recent issue of Texte zur Kunst devoted to the topic of artistic research, succinctly notes, ‘As opposed to other resources that are exhausted when used, the opposite is true of knowledge. The more knowledge is used, the more knowledge is produced. Its dissemination increases its fertility.’ Artist-led research platforms enact this concept that knowledge is an inherently sustainable resource. Moreover, they point to the vital connection between ‘commons’ as a shared resource (whether material or immaterial, as in the case of knowledge), sustained communities and ‘common-ing’ as an act or process.

Arctic Perspective Initiative (API) quite literally designs ‘communications and dissemination infrastructures’ with the aim of enabling the ‘sustainable development of autonomous culture, traditional knowledge, science, technology and education opportunities for peoples in the North and Arctic regions’. As one example, the non-profit organization has advanced prototypes for mobile live-work field stations that can withstand extreme Arctic conditions while providing state-of-the-art technology for a range of users, from environmental scientists and film-makers to subsistence hunters and students. Furthermore, these units – the plans for which were spurred by an API-sponsored international design competition – are meant to minimize any associated ecological footprint even in the remotest of locations.
Whereas the circumpolar region has experienced acute technological colonization by military, industrial and scientific sectors over the past century (picture windblown landscapes strewn with Cold War equipment), API aspires to redirect technology to socially and politically emancipatory ends. It is crucial to note that – through a combination of ongoing collaborations, working groups, field excursions and historical scholarship – API builds upon autonomous production already in place. It has worked, for instance, in connection with Igloolik Isuma Productions (1990–), Canada’s longest-running independent Inuit, community-based film, television and internet production company whose mission is ‘to preserve and enhance Inuit culture and language; to create jobs and economic development… and to tell authentic Inuit stories to Inuit and non-Inuit audiences worldwide’.  

If one primary objective of API is to fortify and multiply scaffolds for self-determined cultural exchange in the Arctic, another is to relay the knotted urgencies facing this part of the globe to audiences afar. A series of API books, exhibitions and conferences have explored this increasingly ‘strategic environment’ as a site of intense financial and geopolitical speculation as well as ecological and cultural transformation. Among other things, the Arctic region – which includes parts of northern Canada, Alaska, Greenland, Russia, Iceland, Norway, Finland and Sweden – is the epicentre of anthropogenic climate change: the place where its effects are most clearly manifest and magnified, and a locus of related scientific research. Already known to many, the dramatic loss of sea ice in recent years has opened new access ways to oil and gas reserves as well as year-round international trade routes, which threaten to sharply exacerbate environmental imbalances. The Arctic is referenced regularly in the mainstream news in this context, often by way of now-iconic imagery of polar bears atop melting ice floes (the contemporary correlate to spectacular photography in 1960s Sierra Club calendars which also pictured Edenic-seeming wilderness on the brink of peril). By contrast, API approaches the Arctic as a contested ‘cultural territory’, seeking to foster representations and discourses that reflect myriad perspectives and open onto nuanced, often irresolvable questions.
An enterprise like API underscores the crucial value of trans-disciplinary and ‘extra-disciplinary’ inquiry for navigating political ecological subjects. Indeed, how could one specialist, or even one discipline, effectively broach a topic as vast as ‘Arctic geopolitics and autonomy’? Since its inception, API has brought together a heterogeneous ensemble of individual contributors (eg media artists, anthropologists, film-makers, community activists and planners, architects, subsistence hunters) and institutions (eg art museums, independent media groups, academic departments). At the risk of overstretched analogies, I think it is worthwhile to revisit a basic definition of ‘ecology’ as the branch of biology dealing with organisms’ relations to their habitats, including other beings. One fundamental principle of this scientific field is that biological systems are strengthened by diversity. Along similar lines, I want to argue that contemporary ecological issues – which entail intricately interconnected systems – demand robust epistemological environments comprising diverse constituents and moreover expanded forms of inquiry that reach beyond specific disciplines and well-worn institutional models. Brian Holmes has theorized new research practices by artists that ‘don’t exhaust themselves inside [the art circuit], but rather, extend elsewhere’, in terms of ‘extradisciplinarity’. Such investigations, he argues, are almost always propelled by ‘political engagement’ and involve a heightened disciplinary and institutional reflexivity. He casts this development as a third phase of institutional critique which is no longer directed primarily at the art world but instead involves ‘occupying a field… and then radiating outward from that specialized domain, with the explicitly formulated aim of effecting change’ in the spheres of art, cultural critique and leftist activism.

It is clear that artist-organized research groups do not operate in an institutional vacuum. To the contrary, they reflect and produce a changed institutional habitat within and beyond the art world. Many such entities
mimic official institutions, whether to performative or practical ends (for instance, the financial and legal avenues afforded by establishing non-profit status). To varying degrees, they may rely on existing art, academic or activist institutions for support (such as funding, networking, logistics, visibility). Should we consider them to be pseudo-institutions, para-institutions, counter-institutions or something else all together? What kind of new institutional species are we dealing with exactly? And, furthermore, what to make of the thorny paradox that the ascendance of artistic research practices coincides with the widespread academicization of art, including the unprecedented imposition of educational standards and assessment measures on art in general (e.g. in association with the Bologna Process and/or recent austerity measures in many European countries) – a trend, moreover, directly tied to neoliberal capitalism?

I want to close by touching on the notions of durability and adaptability, with passing reference to two final examples. The UK-based Platform (1983–) works across disciplines for social and ecological justice with a unified target, albeit one on a sublime scale: the transnational corporation. In its own words, the organization ‘combines the transformatory power of art with the tangible goals of campaigning, the rigour of in-depth research with the vision to promote alternative futures’. Halfway across the globe, Sarai (1998–) is a Delhi-based coalition of researchers and practitioners that works to expand ‘the discourse on development, especially with regard to South Asia’. Now enmeshed with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, one of India’s foremost research institutes, Sarai sprang from the aim to cultivate ‘a lively public space where research, media practice and activism could flow into each other’ as well as a form of ‘research-practice that is public and creative, in which multiple voices express and render themselves in a variety of forms’. Platform and Sarai have each operated for well over a decade (three decades in the case of the former), a temporality that supports a kind of deep, collective, issue-specific knowledge that is clearly unachievable over the course of one exhibition, book or symposium. It furthermore allows these groups to build wide and diverse publics, forge working protocols aligned with their core ethical values, learn from inevitable failures along the way, and develop resilience against instrumentalization by the very forces and enclosures they seek to resist. A certain steadfastness is coupled with a keen alertness to contemporary art world structures and broader institutional frameworks. Like coyotes and other highly adaptable species, the kinds of artists’ platforms surveyed in this essay are agile and resourceful, moving into new territories, responding to swiftly changing conditions and filling crucial gaps. Rather than remaining trapped within reductive paradigms, they draw attention to the intricate and inextricable relations between the social and ecological. Beyond this, they respond to the kind of ‘obligation of social being’ to which philosopher Judith Butler speaks, modelling a form and ethics of sociality that acknowledges life itself as fundamentally comprising interrelations with others and environments. And precisely through this complexity, a more radical, just and sustainable ecological politics becomes imaginable.


3 Examples of collaborative eco-artists and groups from the 1980s and 1990s include Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison, *Ocean Earth* (initiated by Peter Fend) and the Center for Land Use Interpretation. Even as ‘pioneers’ of ecological, environmental and land art from the 1960s and 1970s including Hans Haacke, Robert Smithson, Joseph Beuys and Agnes Denes are known by their individual reputations, many operated in close connection with and/or even collaboratively with others.

4 Inke Arns, Matthew Biederman and Marko Peljhan, eds, ‘Arctic Perspective Initiative,’ in Andreas Müller, ed, *Arctic Perspective Cahier No. 1: Architecture*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, Germany, 2010, p 9. One key outcome of API is a series of four ‘cahiers’ (although only the first two have been completed): the first on Arctic architecture, the second on Arctic geopolitics, the third on technologies entailed in Arctic survival and habitation, the fourth on API itself.


6 Demos, op cit, p 18


9 Ibid

10 Ibid

11 Regional Relationships website, http://regionalrelationships.org/


13 Friday produced this project in collaboration with spurse, Dr. Guy Riefler, Dr. Bernhard Debatin, Rural Action, Sunday Creek Watershed Group, Department of Environmental Protection, Little Cities of Black Diamond and the Ohio University School of Art; funding came from Ohio University and the State University of New York at New Paltz.

14 Friday’s diagram is the outcome of a public dialogue between ‘the consultancy organization, spurse, the students, faculty, and staff of Ohio University, and regional citizens’, we learn from an inscription at the bottom.

15 For more on the wide-ranging and devastating social and environmental impacts of corporatized agriculture, see Vandana Shiva’s *The Corporate Control of Life*, notebook 12 from the *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts* series, Documenta 13, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, Germany, 2012, as well as documentation of a two-day conference at Documenta 13 in which Pentecost, Shiva, Indian artist Amar Kanwar and many others participated, ‘On Seeds and Multispecies Intra-Action: Disowning Life’, http://d13.documenta.de/#programs/events-and-
The prevalence of collaborative and collective practice within socially engaged art has been widely discussed by art historians including Grant H Kester (in terms of ‘dialogical aesthetics’), Claire Bishop (in terms of ‘participation’) and Gregory Sholette (in terms of ‘dark matter’). Key references on the subject include Grant H Kester, Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art, University of California, Berkeley, California, 2004; Claire Bishop, ed, Participation, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006; Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, eds, Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2007; and Nato Thompson, ed, Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2012. In their excellent book, Group Work, the Chicago-based collective Temporary Services interviews numerous groups about the actual process of working together. Resonating closely with Naomi Klein, the editors declare their intent to dismantle the ‘hyper-individualism, upon which so much of the art world relies… we subscribe to an alternative, which is more open, and non-exclusive, and strives to be honest about both the human costs created as a result of the production of art, and about the existence of underlying power structures within all our relationships’.

Temporary Services, Group Work, Printed Matter, New York, 2007, p 8

Irit Rogoff, ‘Turning’, e-flux, November 2008, no pagination, at http://www.e-flux.com/journal/turning/. She goes on to say that she believes the ‘notion of “conversation”’ has been ‘the most significant shift within the art world over the past decade’.

See the separate contribution to this issue in the print journal by and about World of Matter, a group with which I am directly involved.

The art historian Tom Holert characterizes those artistic research practices that seek to build ‘autonomous publics’ and ‘spheres of emancipation’ in terms of ‘militant research’. Tom Holert, ‘Artistic Research: Anatomy of an Ascent’, Texte zur Kunst 82, June 2011, p 55


I draw here from political economist Massimo De Angelis’ responses during an interview with the editors of the Berlin-based journal An Architektur in which he conceptualizes the commons in terms of three crucial aspects: ‘First, all commons involve some sort of common pool of resources, understood as non-commodified means of fulfilling people’s needs. Second, the commons are necessarily created and sustained by communities… the third and most important element in terms of conceptualizing the commons is the verb “to common” – the social process that creates and reproduces the commons.’ ‘On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides’, e-flux 17, June/August 2010, no pagination, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-the-commons-a-public-interview-with-massimo-de-angelis-and-stavros-stavrides/

Arctic Perspective Initiative website, http://arcticperspective.org/

For more on the ecological politics of the Arctic, see Subhankar Banerjee’s contribution to this issue in the print journal.

Michael Bravo and Nicola Triscott, ‘Introduction’, in Bravo and Triscott, op cit, p 15. In June–October 2010 API’s activities formed the basis of an exhibition at Hartware MedienKunstVerein (HMKV) in Dortmund, Germany. The project has received funding from a variety of international sources, including the Culture Programme of the EU, Arts Council England, the Cultural Ministry of Slovenia, Arts Catalyst (UK), and Zavold Atol (Slovenia).


Arctic Geopolitics and Autonomy being the title and subject of API’s Cahier No. 2, op cit.


Holmes, op cit, no pagination

Ibid

Art historian Yates McKee takes up the subject of new forms of artist institutions in his essay ‘Specters of Art’, Art & Education Papers, 2011, no pagination, http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/specters-of-art/

Platform website, http://platformlondon.org/

Sarai website, http://www.sarai.net/

Ibid

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