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**HotHouse Symposium,
the Launch of the National
Institute for Experimental Arts
(NIEA),** Utzon Room, Sydney Opera
House, July 20-21 2010

Environment and climate change concerns have led to what is almost a new genre of public art; art that makes visible data regarding climate change and the impact of that data on the public domain, material and conceptual. But artists may also imagine new ways of dealing with these issues and thereby perform a more integrated role within public life. With this in mind, Sydney's University of New South Wales launched its new research institute, the National Institute for Experimental Arts, with a two-day symposium at the Opera House in July. NIEA's website offered the following synopsis:

HotHouse brings together artists, designers, curators and creative thinkers in a quest to develop models for sustainable environmental change. This "collective experiment" calls upon art and design to offer practical means of transforming spaces, environments, and even cities in ways that are enduring and energising, and that, most importantly, engage all sectors of the community.

Speakers include design thinkers such as **Bruce Mau** (live from Chicago) who has spearheaded community-driven projects for large-scale sustainable change in both North and South America, **Tony Fry**, Director of Team D/E/S and founder of the EcoDesign Foundation, and **Adrian Parr**, University of Cincinnati; artists/designers **Janet Laurence**, **Dan Hill**, **Jennifer Turpin**, **Allan Giddy**, **Mathieu**

Gallois, **David Trubridge**, **Richard Goodwin**, **Carbon Arts**, **Makeshift** and **Digital Eskimo**; new media writers such as **Mark Pesce**, one of the early pioneers in Virtual Reality and co-inventor of VRML; and international curators such as **Hou Hanru** (San Francisco Art Institute), pioneer of exhibitions that operate in everyday city spaces, and **Michaela Crimmin** (former director of the UK RSA, Art & Ecology Centre), leading independent curator specialising in art for the public domain.¹

And from the Institute's website:

NIEA's priority is to produce **internationally leading research** that addresses national priorities and global problems, including frontier technologies, environmental sustainability, health and well-being, Indigenous culture and intercultural relations.²

The symposium was strategically located in a room named for the visionary architect of the Sydney Opera House. Utzon's design for the Opera House was subverted by methodological clashes between an inspired architect and a cautious bureaucracy. Differences between aspirational design thinking and the material impact of what governments have already provided for the planet similarly complicated the conference. While resilience if not optimism was a leitmotif, there was little to mitigate the sobering nature of the data and the task. Prof. Jill Bennett, the Director of the National Institute for Experimental Arts, argued that art plays a central role in paradigm change and that the urgent need to rethink urban structures ecologically presents a moment where art may be a catalyst for forms of knowledge transfer. An ethic of care remains, at least etymologically, within the notion of curation; the role of the Sydney Biennale, as an example of an international event of relatively short duration, was questioned. Could a new model of curation that extended the already existing model of public art occur? What would a more sustainable model of public art be and entail?

The conference ensured local relevance by asking its participants to address Sydney's 30/30 strategies for the future.³ The audience included designers, artists, curators, town planners and representatives from city councils. Held just before a federal snap election, climate change policy was

a constant motif. In the first keynote address, Tony Fry, whose work on rethinking our approach to time and our place in it forms the basis of several contemporary design curricula, moved between philosophy and design theory as he argued that we “have been educated into unsustainability” and that we must think our way out of this by changing what we value. For him, urban structures were the source of increased vulnerability and a more dispersed and flexible societal environment is necessary. Building on his early construct of sustainability, his recent writing argues for the redirection of resources and a rethinking of humanity’s chronophobia, or fear of temporality; the EuroAmerican inability to come to terms with the fact that the planet’s future is already full of the material we have produced.

Adrian Par’s hard hitting “To be or not to be thirsty” was the most graphic, information- and theory-rich illustration of the challenges facing the world. Like Fry, she argued that a positive attitude was necessary rather than utopian, even though only just possible. She cited Elinor Ostrom’s more distributed, commons-based structures as a more workable politics.

However, there was an underlying friction between advocates of centralised urban spaces and those for whom the city itself was the problem. I would like to have seen more thinking on different kinds of social and urban spaces. Arguments for the insertion of creative thinking into the design of the infrastructure, rather than decorating the existing one, tended to revert to the production of more humanised spaces or more visible evidence of climate change.

The visualisation of new paradigms and consequent paradigm change are hard calls and the symposium clearly positioned itself as a starting point, even-handedly presenting conflicting positions. Implications of greenwash floated around discussions of local public art projects as strategies for urban design and methods of measuring carbon footprint were subverted by other presentations. The subtexts of corporate capitalism were awkwardly present in Bruce Mau’s arguments for the need to change the consumer into the citizen and for designers to recognise that designs endure and that the market itself is a

designed space and therefore capable of being rethought. He presented some projects that were in a sense non-commercial; for instance, a celebration of community advocates in Guatemala designed to encourage other similar events. I felt that his primary function within the symposium was to demonstrate that multinationals can at least work to mitigate the impact of their production, but his position was that it remains necessary to create economic growth. A blog debate began after the conference around this.⁴

Most presentations were pragmatic, with new theoretical models presented contextually. We saw artworks doubling as data feedback about water quality, air quality and human behaviours. Similarly, graphics showed the ways that transfer of electronic information via cellphones and Wifi reconfigure urban space usage. There was a significant emphasis on models for calculating carbon footprints and the ambiguous roles of local, federal and corporate approaches to making visible attempts to alleviate this. Art in this context adopted the methodologies of science, making visible the unseen elements that affect the quality of the environment and monitoring the changes. Information was presented in forms that cleanly conveyed data, or considered the exchange of information within a context something like that of relational aesthetics. Natalie Jeremijenko, for instance, provided recordings of a project moving between the faux and the actual as people brought water samples to her raft of plastic bottles floating on the Hudson River. The raft, *The Plastiki*, constructed of plastic bottles and recently returned from its exploration of the vast areas of plastic waste in the oceans, was conveniently moored at Darling Harbour.⁵

Not many artworks dealt with affect. The most notable was Janet Laurence’s recordings of endangered animals breathing; no eyes, no faces, just moving skin and sound. This mimicry of phatic communication worked, as at least this listener’s own breath-rate responded to those she was hearing.

Contradictions and gaps were intrinsic to the subject matter. I felt that there was too little acknowledgement of the problematic place of the digital realm in the production of an increased

carbon footprint. Of course, the symposium performed its subject matter; global/local issues were a subtext, as some presenters skyped and others flew in. However, the even-handed nature of the symposium set a precedent for debate and engagement in a field that can be deeply divided. Australia's National Institute for Experimental Arts has chosen to position itself first as a resilient and optimistic community and, as several speakers argued, without those qualities there will be no new paradigms.

- 1 *HotHouse Symposium* (April 2010), <http://hothouse.unsw.edu.au/> [accessed 9 Oct 2010].
- 2 *The COFA Blog* (April 2010), <http://blog.cofa.unsw.edu.au/?cat=6&tag=staff> [accessed 10 Oct 2010].
- 3 City of Sydney, *Sustainable Sydney 2030* (2010), <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/2030/> [accessed 10 Oct 2010].
- 4 *HotHouse Symposium Blog* (2010), <http://hothouse.unsw.edu.au/blog/> [accessed 20 Oct 2010].
- 5 "Adventure Ecology," *The Plastiki Blog* (2010), <http://www.theplastiki.com/> [accessed 20 Oct 2010].