

# Planetary Poetics Workshop 2017

## Abstracts

Rosi Braidotti (Institute of Advanced Studies Distinguished Research Fellow)

*“Are ‘WE’ in this together?”*

This lecture explores the re-compositions of a vulnerable sense of pan-humanity ('WE') in the context of Anthropocenic climate change discussion ('this'). It will focus on three main considerations: firstly the convergences around the posthuman turn and the shifting understandings of 'the human' in contemporary scholarship. Secondly the complex and internally contradictory effects of economic globalization as bio-political, information-driven system, that capitalizes on all that lives. Thirdly, the necro-political governmentality, that instils managed devastation and extinction, through wars and conflicts and the new forms of discrimination they engender on a planetary scale. The lecture explores different notions of planetary subjectivity and assesses their ethical and political implications.

Ann Elias (Sydney Environment Institute)

*The rapture of the deep: luminescence, affect, and the undersea*

The rapture of the deep' was coined by the ocean explorer, Jacques-Yves Cousteau, to describe an alteration of consciousness expressed through wild elation and crazy joy in undersea divers undergoing the effects of nitrogen narcosis. However, for the anthropologist, Alphonso Lingis, the 'rapture of the deep' was the perfect metaphor to evoke what takes hold when the human body in the undersea, surrounded by the luminescence of marine animals, abandons control of the ego, and searches for the look of the Other in the eyes of fish (1983; 9). This paper explores the affective dimension of the undersea, drawing particular attention to a searching question about human and non-human encounters that the deep raised for dreamers and thinkers in the twentieth century, including the artist Paul Klee: 'For what purpose these forms and colors, if no human being comes along?'

Julia Jordan (Department of English, UCL)

*Boxing Trees*

'My roots are threaded, like fibres in a flower-pot, round and round about the world.'

-Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

The ubiquity of urban street trees – their slightly uneasy status as 'street furniture' – is well noted: this paper will explore the sudden profusion of potted trees in outside city spaces. The boxed tree is an example of rather brutal governance of the arboreal by the human, because it makes explicit our treatment of a living thing as a simple object. As such it offers us an obvious metaphor for a tussle between human control of nature and an admission of its limits, or the attempt to curtail a tree's growth via the confinement of its roots. I want to think about the aesthetics of the potted tree, increasingly a feature of corporatized open space, and how controlling and containing the roots might speak to the things about urban trees we find troublesome, both materially and metaphorically, while their profusion suggests the paradoxical continued urban need for trees and all they represent. I want to think about the aesthetics of some specific trees; in this case the

boxed silver birches (*Betula pendula*) outside the Francis Crick Institute at King's Cross. To do this, I will draw on different disciplines, using poetic, literary, and artistic representations of curtailed and boxed arboreal life to work out why the potted tree is such a troubling idea, and suggesting that the answer lies in our imaginative response to what trees roots do, and how they function as responsive, conscious and communicative 'feelers'.

Killian Quigley (Sydney Environment Institute)

*Seascape as Ideal Landscape: William Gilpin and the Pelagic Picturesque*

In *Observations on the River Wye* (1782), William Gilpin wrote that "[nothing] gives so just an idea of the beautiful swellings of ground, as those of water." Gilpin claimed that if one could freeze the surface of the sea -- if it could be "arrested, and fixed" -- one would produce a perfect picturesque landscape. Gilpin also wrote extensively about the best ways to read landscapes -- to interpret them as symbols of narrative, of the passage of time, and so on -- and to produce landscapes well-suited for such reading. This paper looks to aesthetic treatments of the sea, by figures like Gilpin, John Ruskin, and Vija Celmins, to consider the picturesqueness of its surface, and the stories it has been made to produce.

Peg Rawes (The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL)

*Planetary Aesthetics*

This paper examines how Agnes Denes's 1970s map projections and Buckminster Fuller's energy slave maps (1940-1972) can be understood within a contemporary biopolitical discussion about aesthetics and ecology. Denes and Fuller's work has renewed historical and political valency since the development of energy technologies/technocratics in 1940s and 50s USA (including Fuller's designs), and since the 1960s political environmental movements with which Denes's work resonates. These mid twentieth century environmental contexts preview present-day research that investigates critical and poetic formations of human and non-human ecologies. In addition, their 'forecasts' are reappraised through questions of 'data', 'information' and rationalism, and by understandings of the aesthetics of data visualisation which examines spatial, social and biological understandings of 'life' in the humanities, architecture and the visual arts.

Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (The School of European Languages & Culture, UCL)

*Catastrophic Infrastructures and Submerged Genres in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) and Dave Eggers's *Zeitoun* (2009)*

In his recent non-fiction work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh explores the assumed inability of contemporary mainstream fiction to grasp the scale and violence of climate change. The climate crisis, Ghosh insists, "is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination." This paper will explore Ghosh's intertwined concerns with vulnerable urban and social infrastructures, and the (in)ability of literary genres to imagine and bear witness to catastrophic climate change. Through a comparative discussion of Dave Eggers's nonfictional post-Katrina work *Zeitoun*, which depicts the catastrophic infrastructures of a submerged, fearful and unequal America, this paper will explore an emerging cosmopolitan environmental imaginary in Ghosh's environmental mapping of waterscapes in Mumbai and the Sundarbans, and in Eggers's New Orleans and Syria.

Ute Eickelkamp (Sydney Environment Institute)

*Geostory from Central Australia : 'Our Kingdom of the World': Indigenous Reflections on Creation and Power from Central Australia*

In Central Australia, Indigenous perceptions of the ecology and human–non-human relationships have long interacted with Biblical truths and scientific perspectives. Yet there is little evidence for epistemic syncretism; rather there is measured judgment of diverse structures of plausibility, on a point-by-point basis. To illustrate, I discuss the different meanings associated with “wilderness” as these are emerging in reflective conversations with Anangu (Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara speakers) at the eastern end of the Western Desert. I will suggest that, while the Anangu episteme is fundamentally of a moral and political order that rubs up against soteriological hope in the postcolonial age, it is also deeply personal and charged with affect.

Haidy Geismar (Centre for Digital Anthropology, UCL)

*Planetary Collecting*

There are more than twenty billion photographs on Instagram. YouTube has over a billion users. In this talk I use social media to think about the act of collecting today and ask what the implications are for this on our understanding of archives and collections in planetary terms. Faced with the scale of this kind of cultural production is the era of the ethnographic collection, the museum genre that purports to salvage and preserve everyday life in all its holism, over or just beginning? What are the implications of considering Facebook or Instagram as the stuff of future museum collections? These questions expose tensions between national and transnational heritage regimes, private and public property, and the boundaries of the object world. Can theories of Big Data help museums deal with the planetary ambitions of social media? Or do we have to abandon all theories of collecting and the archive (which depend on forms of centralization, national identities, and territorial poetics)?

Cat Moir (Sydney Environment Institute)

*Natural History and the Art of Empire: Ferdinand Bauer's Images of Extinction*

From 1804 to 1805, the Austrian naturalist and scientific draughtsman Ferdinand Bauer spent eight months documenting the flora and fauna of Norfolk and Phillip Islands. Among the 100 or so drawings Bauer made were those of the plant *Strobilorrhiza speciosa*, of which he documented the last known fruiting specimen, and the Norfolk Island kaka parrot, which was already so endangered in Bauer's time that his drawing is believed to have been made from a captive bird. Bauer's images of species on the point of extinction highlight the ambivalent role that the visual has played in the entangled intellectual and environmental histories of colonialism. Scientific illustration expanded knowledge of the natural world considerably, contributing to the rise of what Richard Grove has called a 'global environmental consciousness'. Yet it also documents a process by which living beings thriving in their colonial environments were transformed into dead images and objects for display in the metropole. This paper uses the framework 'world-ecology' to conceptualise these dynamics, and invokes the concept of a dialectic of enlightenment to understand the role scientific illustration as an epistemological tool has played in the world-ecology of colonial science.

Mignon Nixon (History of Art, UCL)

'All Together in the Altogether'

*'In fact, no individual, however isolated in time and space, should be regarded as outside a group'.*

--Wilfred Bion, Experiences in Groups

*'Let's forget ourselves . . . and become one with the Absolute, all together in the altogether'.*

Yayoi Kusama, Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama

Belonging and non-belonging are structures of fantasy born of this psychic fact: one lives inside a group or groups, from which one may also feel profoundly alienated or estranged. Politics traffics in passionate fantasies of belonging and non-belonging that can be correlated, psychoanalytically speaking, with the life drive (the drive toward unities and connections) and the death drive (the drive toward the inorganic and the breaking of bonds). Crucially, these drives are intricately intertwined, not least in war. Starting from the proposition that any planetary poetics of belonging and not-belonging is bound up with anxieties of annihilation, this paper will consider artistic responses to the threat posed by atomic war, in which fantasies of planetary unity and planetary destruction converge. Using psychoanalysis to reflect on artistic interventions in the politics of atomic and nuclear war, it will argue that belonging and non-belonging are both at work in all of us, and that our desire for belonging is at risk not only from without, by external forces of fragmentation and destruction that ever increasingly threaten us, but also from within, by anxieties of alienation and the lure of death.

Jennifer Hamilton (Sydney Environment Institute)

*The Art of Necessity: Reading King Lear in a time of Environmental Crisis*

Shakespeare's King Lear is an archetypal apocalyptic tragedy where a king's error brings down an entire kingdom, and in the end a few survivors remain to survey the damage. It is reinterpreted in each generation to explore deep socio-political anxieties. My new book *This Contentious Storm: An Ecocritical and Performance History of King Lear* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017) traces the way in which the storm scenes act as a vehicle by which those ideas can be explored. For instance, in the mid-twentieth century the storm was most frequently figured as a metaphor for Lear's mad mind; this occurred at a time when the weather held little cultural significance, the human psyche was being charted and Freud's idea that even the human is not in control of their own psychic life proliferated. Today, however, theatre makers and critics are returning to think about the storm's literal presence, not as some adjunct symbol for some other theme, but as a material force in itself that has the capacity to shape and destroy human life and culture.

My paper will offer a reading of this canonical work of tragic socio-political apocalypse as a way into the thorny question of what is actually necessary to have a good life in the wake of climate change. After refusing to capitulate to his daughter's demands, Lear flees into the storm and finds himself literally exposed on a journey between a castle and a hovel. Neither dwelling was able to fit his demands; this paper takes Shakespeare's play as a way of asking what kind of dwelling could have provided Lear the necessary shelter from this apocalyptic storm? And, in turn, what kind of shelter is necessary for us in these tumultuous times?

Rye Holmboe (History of Art, UCL)

*Dreaming the Apocalypse: Mark Wallinger's Sleeper (2004)*

In 2004 Mark Wallinger spent ten nights in Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie dressed in a bear-suit. Forlorn, lost and ridiculous, the figure in *Sleeper* seems trapped in a nightmare from which he cannot awake. This paper will think about notions related to the apocalypse—trauma, temporality, aftermath, among others—and ask how the comic might form a point of resistance to dystopian, eschatological narratives.

Florian Mussgnug (School of European Languages, Culture and Society, UCL)

*Un/born: Human Procreation and Global Catastrophic Risk*

My paper explores conflicting attitudes towards human procreation in Twenty-First Century literature, film and philosophy, against the background of a widely shared sense of global threat and spiralling ecological devastation. I will investigate debates about sustainable population growth and reflect on the politics and poetics of antinatalism. My attention will focus on the newborn and the future child as figures of vulnerability, hope and fundamental openness to the other. These figures, I suggest, postulate a profound ethical demand that runs counter to the logic of risk management and that guides us towards a different understanding of the entangled future trajectories of the human and the nonhuman on a damaged planet. My examples will be drawn from recent narrative prose fiction and film, and may include works by Niccolò Ammaniti, Alfonso Cuarón, P.D. James, Liz Jensen, Clare Morrall, and Jane Rogers.

Vron Ware (School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Kingston University)

*Of War Time and Nightingales*

Addressing the idea that our lives are shaped by the fluctuating rhythms of 'war time' and 'peace time', I will think aloud about how to cultivate an ethics of intellectual inquiry that is shaped by paying closer attention to the world around us. For me, this new orientation includes being attentive to the movements and habits of birds including their song. What can the sound of the Nightingale tell us about the times in which we live?

Andrew Barry (Department of Geography, UCL)

*'The logic of abduction: between the particular and the planetary'*

The paper would focus on the way that many environmental political events are apparently local, and often involve what are taken to be acts of resistance to globalising logics. In the paper, I interrogate the way in which the relation between the particular and planetary is enacted and contested drawing on CS Peirce's analysis of the logic of abduction.

Iain McCalman & Kirsten Wehner (Sydney Environment Institute)

*Australia in the Anthropocene. Localizing the Global. A Multi-media project.*

To date explorations of the social and cultural environmental impacts of the Anthropocene have focused mainly on the northern hemisphere, yet its disorienting changes often unfold differently in different places and across varying time scales. This is especially true of Australia, due to the continent's fragile ecological conditions and related socio-cultural constructions and experiences, as well as our unique history of 50,000-60,000 years of continuous Indigenous habitation and

environmental management. Australia's exceptional ecological vulnerabilities and isolation in Wallacea also complicate the implications of the prevailing Anthropocene thesis..

Drawing widely on the multi-disciplinary expertise of environmental humanities scholars, environmental artists and museum curators, we are undertaking a substantial project funded by the Australian Research Council to investigate how Australian communities and environments are responding to past, present and anticipated Anthropocenic changes through the prism of what we call 'Everyday Futures'. This global and local focus includes Torres Strait and Pacific Islander groups who are already having to move from their homes because of the salination of fresh water and rising sea levels; Western Australian farmers grappling with the collapse of rainfall levels in the south-west of their state; Victorian rural communities whose houses and livelihoods are threatened by increasingly rampant bushfires, and the galloping degradation of the Great Barrier Reef with its consequent threat to coastal livelihoods.

Our project interrogates and narrates objects, sounds, and stories from multi-disciplinary perspectives so as to generate fresh understandings of local and global environmental impacts. Through an exhibition with the National Museum of Australia and an associated website, arts festival and scholarly book, we intend to show how poetic environmental perspectives can bring into focus diffuse phenomena such as global atmospheric changes that can only be 'seen' and 'felt' through their expression in the immediate material world.

Astrida Neimanis (Sydney Environment Institute)

*Water, A Queer Archive of Feeling*

A key challenge of the Anthropocene is grappling with our entanglement in environmental issues that thwart the deictics of here/there, now/then, self/world. Drawing on feminist and queer cultural theory, this paper suggests that figuring water as a queer archive of feeling helps us come to grips with this torqueing of scale. As a queer archive of feeling, water proposes a planetary imaginary of remembrance, dispersal, dissolution and non-linearity. I explore this notion via thick descriptions of three postindustrial, postmilitary and postextractive bodies of water, and consider how these archives—deeply affective but also always material and situated—are thus nonetheless inextricably implicated in questions of accountability and justice.

Jennifer Robinson (Department of Geography, UCL)

*The Urban "Now": Planetary, Scale and conceptualization*

This paper will explore how theorizing the urban might speak to a transgression of the concept of "scale" in planetary perspective. I take inspiration, firstly, from Walter Benjamin's idea of "now-time" – to capture the sense of "now", various elements of the past, he suggests, need to be blasted out of the course of positivist history in which time is seen as continuous, and realigned in a constellation of "now"-time – a dialectics at a standstill, provoking an interpretation bringing different elements of the past and present crashing together, and in which temporality itself is immanent. In relation to the urban, together with his wider speculative method, best known through the concept of "afterlives" of cultural productions, constellations of an urban "now" would involve potentially blasting elements from cities and places distant in both time and space, with leaps of explanation and connection reaching back in time as well as across to other places to constitute the immanent interpretive space-times of globalizing urbanism. This resonates with a "virtual" urban, inspired by Deleuze. Both empirical outcomes and interpretations of different cities are intimately interconnected, thus any specific urban outcomes – singularities – stand in relation to the infinity of possible urban outcomes, which, to perhaps put this in the more familiar idioms of

urban studies, are multiply interconnected through many shared circulations and mutual inhabitations. “Scale” evaporates in a Deleuzian-style singularity, in which distinctive urban outcomes, can be thought of as one amongst a multiplicity of possible inter-related outcomes within a virtual field of the urban. Empirically, then, the highly interconnected processes generating a multiplicity of urban outcomes across the globe, produce the repetitive but differentiated format of many urban phenomena (gated communities, high-rise housing, waterfront developments, transport systems...). And however the “planetary” urban might be conceptualised, its multiplicity and interconnectedness indexes an a-scalar spatial imagination.

Briony Fer (History of Art, UCL)

*A History of Detail*

From the small-time disasters of his early paintings – little apocalypses of falling spam cans, olive jars or exploding glasses – through to his equally vivid focus on more gradual processes of decline and disintegration of all kinds, Ed Ruscha’s preoccupation with time looks now like a life-long project. And the question that he invites us to consider is: how can time appear in the image and what might it look like? Although we know a great deal about the techniques art uses to articulate space – we know relatively little about the techniques used to make time, in its manifold but invisible difference, visible: what I want to call its chrono-technics. Most attempts to discuss Ed Ruscha’s spatial geographies have focused on the iconography of a Californian landscape: this paper suggests instead that iconographical tropes like skies and sunsets – painting’s very own ‘special effects’ – are deployed in order to dramatize different and often conflicting temporal modalities, invoking projective futures as much as deep geological time.