

Janine Randerson on art, space and climate change

Isaac Davison

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Janine Randerson, lecturer in digital art theory at Unitec, recently attended the Expanding the Space Conference <http://www.expandingthespace.net/> in Valencia, Spain. The conference presented a confluence of presentations on space, science and art. Janine presented a paper on "climate change" that challenges the separation of art and science cultures, and highlights the role of art practice in climate change discourse. Janine spoke to the Big Idea's Isaac Davison.

The Expanding the Space Conference held in Valencia in October 06 addressed intersections between space, science and art. The conference also shared several speakers from the International Astronautical Conference that was on concurrently.

Isaac Davison: Have you always sought a middle ground between science and art?

Janine Randerson: I got involved in science through an interest in technology. I have always been interested in the wonder of the science exhibit, and interactive science displays, and I wanted to take a lateral take on these through art practice. It is the technology and systems of scientific observation that I'm interested in.

I studied intermedia at ELAM and my tutor Phil Dadson was interested in out of studio experiments, like getting students on top of Mt Eden with homemade instruments, and relating sounds to the environment. So he provided some of the backdrop for what I am doing now. Some time after completing a Masters at RMIT University in Melbourne, I curated an exhibition called "The Greenhouse" in Germany which focused on technologically mediated nature. What I do is not necessarily environmental activism, but more an interest in the way we perceive nature through technology.

Isaac D: But can art mobilize people on climate change?

Janine R: I make no grand claims for art being the best medium for political action. But I think artists can enter the discourse on issues such as climate change. The work that I was examining in Valencia was artists who were mainly provoking discussion about climate change. The Australian collective, Out of Sync's (who I met in the SCANZ residency at Taranaki earlier this year) was stimulated by the "sheer terror" generated by the media about climate change. Art can intervene and help to understand this "terror". Alternative media can challenge the dominant media and ask "what are we really being told?"

Art can respond to not just the practicalities of environmental issues (like recycling) but work on a more human scale. It can ask questions like "How are we feeling about this?", "What is happening inside the psyche?"

Isaac D: What was the connection between the artists and the Astronautical Conference? Is space science conducive to artists?

Janine R: Artists are interested in the unknown and new developments in technology, and space science is exploring the limits of the knowable. I'm personally interested in the way vision is technologically mediated, so I investigated how satellites are an extension of vision and how they work as an apparatus that extends the way we know the world.

I am interested in how digital technology mediates natural phenomena and the environment, and that was how

I ended up starting this micro-meteorological project (Anemocinegraph™)

Isaac D: Can you explain for us your recent paper on climate change in Valencia?

Janine R: I discussed my recent installation Anemocinegraph, generated as part of the digital art residency at the University of Waikato earlier this year. The material side of the installation consists of round screens, with slowly animated satellite imagery of the Waikato region. I downloaded NOAA-17 satellite images every four hours with permission from Landcare ResearchNZ and I animated them together in a slow sequence. It also featured imagery of micro-meteorological eddies – the image of water cycles or clouds turning back on themselves. The idea here was to use the eddy as metaphor, turning around and thinking back on the relationship between nature, human beings and technology.

The sound pulse in the installation is the sound of carbon emissions being measured through wind speed data at Torehape Weather Station. Anemocinegraph is a conceptual instrument, based on a description of a lost historical instrument called an anemocinegraph, which documents the speed of wind. So I recorded carbon emissions through wind speed data.

In the seminar I drew on the Herbert Marcuse essay Nature and Revolution™, which argues that sensation is a process to generate a radically different relationship with nature through the senses rather than through rational discourses. Marcuse discusses how art practice may be a way of –getting the know the world – in which nature is not objectively exploited - it becomes a subject in its own right.

Isaac D: Why do you think science needs art?

Janine R: Roger Malina, who is editor of Leonardo magazine and was very involved in the conference, suggests that artists can provide the –questioning principle™: science is often understood as a body of knowledge which is very self-confident and positivist, and apparently scientific discourse can make sense of the world. Art is capable of throwing all of this –understanding™ into question. It is good for scientists to be challenged on what they think are relevant areas of knowledge to pursue and for artists to be challenged by science.

I also think that art and science as –separate cultures – are not that separate. The experimental nature of both science and art have similarities, especially in method. Scientists often do not know what they are looking for, and have an open-ended quest, and art practice often has this approach to research.

One of my objectives was to break down the idea that science is rational and art is subjective and intuitive. Artists are capable of using scientific method and sometimes science is quite subjective: the issues which are identified as being important for science are not necessarily given and art can suggest alternative possibilities.

I think art doesn't™ just play on the emotional understandings. Art sometimes takes on scientific principles and subverts them so that you have to look at an issue in a different light and engage different parts of the community. Instead of tackling issues like climate change through facts and figures, it can be a more open-ended, social engagement.

Isaac D: So there is a slight hint of activism in this?

Janine R: I wouldn't™ deny that. But compared to, say, Al Gore, it is on a micro scale. There is much current discussion on Nicholas Bourriard's™ ideas about –micro-utopias™. Bourriard claims that artists are intervening in social discourse by questioning the modernist idea of the –universal utopia™, and initiating local scale social projects. Climate change affects many areas of human interaction – it is transdisciplinary – so an artist's™ contribution to climate change discourse may be considered as relevant as a scientist's™.

Isaac D: What were the most stimulating presentations in the conference?

Janine R: Roger Malina talks about science in terms of how much we don't know or perceive - about all the dark matter that surrounds us. His approach seemed different to other scientists that were there for the Astronautical congress. Some scientists invented amazing technology, but were not considering the cultural logic of, say, space colonization or robot villages on the moon in the same way an artist might. They were not as interested in discussing the social dimensions, like how space would be divided up, or which country could claim parts of the moon, or the military involvement in space colonisation.

Malina was interested in the space for artists to affect the direction techno-science could take in future, and claimed it was an open field. It was encouraging to hear this from someone of his standing - he considers the Hubble space telescope as an extension of his own body, and is an inventor of scientific instruments.

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