

Building a Planetary Imaginary: Information design, contemporary art, and environmental politics

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Charts, plans, tables, graphs, and diagrams are foremost in the dissemination of scientific data and knowledge. These types of information design are 'knowledge generators' (Johanna Drucker) as much as representations of existing states of affairs, which help to think systems, correlations, and future scenarios across scales, from the microbial to the planetary. As they make complex global ecologies legible and consequential to the public, they are central to the everyday politics of our current climate regime. With the renewed urgency of this knowledge today, this session investigates how contemporary artists and curators have used information design to build, challenge, and expand a planetary imaginary in the face of ecological disaster. Whereas photographs of the planet in its entirety mobilised the previous generation of environmental art and politics, the planetary now emerges in complexes of data and information. We therefore ask: How has information design expanded into a set of artistic and curatorial strategies that engage the epistemology and function of science? How do contemporary artworks, projects, and exhibitions use information design to think through planetary complexities and contingencies in the public domain? What methods can we use to analyse information design in contemporary art and how do these compare to those for other types of visual art? By connecting information design and a planetary imaginary, this session seeks to re-orient toward environmental politics current debates about the diagrammatic and the informational as major tropes of contemporary art.

Speakers and Abstracts

No Art Allowed: Seeing space in the Rose Center for Earth and Space, NYC

Alexis L Boylan (University of Connecticut)

After a \$210 million-dollar renovation, the Rose Center for Earth and Space opened to great fanfare in 2000. A flashy architectural space that features a glass enclosure for the planetarium, the renovation was heralded as the premiere educational and scholarly site to confront the cosmos and was understood as the beginning of a larger reimagining of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York as it entered the new millennium – an attempt to distance itself from its long and problematic history with science, race, and its collecting/expedition histories. Few critics seemed to note that with this renovation was an almost total removal of all imagery that was not photographic/video based – everything that looked like 'art' was removed from view.

This paper considers the reasons and impact of the 'policy' concerning visual objects in the Rose Center. In fact, the original Hayden Planetarium (which the Rose Center replaced) featured some of the most innovative contemporary visual art seen in any natural history museum and pushed the boundaries between contemporary art, scientific imaging, and knowledge creation. What does it mean that modernisation for the AMNH meant the banishing of certain kinds of visual objects? How does authorising the digital as the *only* visual knowledge which can sustain dialogues about the cosmos shift perceptions and the science about space and time? This paper uses the Rose Center as a case study to consider the tensions between contemporary visual culture and planetary/cosmic knowledge production.

Enfolding Systems: The dissipation of Spaceship Earth

Paul Goodfellow (University of Northumbria)

This paper considers art's engagement with the socio-ecological systems in operation in the world. Drawing from both environmental and art history, the paper employs the Deleuzian concept of the fold to suggest three overlapping periods of ecological systems awareness within culture. The paper demonstrates how we have shifted our attention from a material engagement with earth systems to a primary engagement with simulations of these systems.

The 'Primary Systems' fold, (1960-1980) witnessed the emergence of holistic systems thinking, in particular the concepts of the ecosystem, Gaia and Spaceship Earth. These ideas were demonstrated in the ecosystem-simulation sculptures of Hans Haacke, Allan Kaprow's 'environmental' installations, and the earthworks of Robert Smithson. The 'Open Systems' fold (1981–2001) marked a shift from material transfer within systems to information transfer, and a period of openness and reflexivity. Culture experienced an openness during this period that technology and information afforded. Meanwhile, the shift to information was demonstrated in science with the turn towards the gene and within culture, through the multiple textual reading of the artwork. Finally, the current 'post-system' condition (2002–present) marks the shift from critically engaging with simulations of Spaceship Earth to being enfolded within the hyperreality of the simulacrum. This shifts our intellectual, emotional and affective attention from information concerning the operations of Spaceship Earth to an algorithmic world, divorced from reality. The paper concludes by asserting that this shifts the role of the artist from systems communicator to systems disrupter.

Three Routes of Reference in Eco-Geological Art

Stephanie O'Rourke (University of St Andrews)

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In contemporary art, concern with the geological has abounded, encouraged by the aesthetic and informational possibilities of mapping and diagramming demonstrated by sciences of earth and climate, and the possibility such material offers for direct engagement with urgent ecological questions. Standard theoretical paradigms of representation in art history, however, are not well placed to deal with such material. Rather than close engagement with multiple forms of reference, art historians have tended to stress conventionality and the 'crises' of representation that inevitably result from the presumed gap between image and thing.

In this paper, we aim to offer a new analysis of the 'geological' in contemporary art by invoking some very different ways of thinking about reference. Taking up the work of artists such as Ilana Halperin as examples, we look first at Eduardo Kohn's idea of a nonhuman semiotics that could ground an anthropology 'beyond the human', second at Bruno Latour's model of 'circulating reference', and finally at the concept of 'image structure' found in approaches to scientific imagery by philosophers such as John Kulvicki. Rather than argue for the primacy of one theory over another, we attempt to show how all three ways of approaching referentiality can come together in contemporary eco-geological art.

Discussion