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# Introduction to "Art & Environment in Oceania"

This special issue of *Pacific Arts* considers the role of artistic production in relation to climate change in Oceania. Anthropogenic environmental degradation has emerged as a key theme for many scholars within the Pacific Arts Association (PAA). At the sessions of the PAA-North American chapter at the College Art Association Annual Conference, the PAA panels have recently focused on art and environmental issues in Oceania. For instance, Carol E. Mayer chaired the "Fragile Balances: Contemporary Arts, Cultural Integrity, and Environmental Change" session in 2017 and Henry Skerrit organized the session on "Mining the Colonial Imaginary: Art, Materiality, and Ecological Critique in Contemporary Oceania" in 2020. The April 2021 general assembly of the PAA-Europe chapter was organized around the exhibition *A Sea of Islands: Masterpieces from Oceania* at the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, which engaged with environmental issues in its focus on the role of water in Pacific cultures. This exhibition featured George Nuku's installation *Bottled Ocean 2120*, which considers the vast amount of plastic currently polluting the world's largest ocean. The most recent PAA International Symposium, "Resilience: Sustaining, Re-activating, and Connecting Culture," held in Brisbane in March 2019, focused on creative and hopeful responses to new, often traumatic, circumstances, such as sea level rise, pollution, and threatened cultural heritage.

The proliferation of work on this topic comes as no surprise considering Oceania is on the "frontlines" of anthropogenic climate change as one of the world's regions most threatened by rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and warming atmospheric temperatures. Phenomena most often associated with "climate change" in Oceania are pollution and waste, including water contamination from agriculture, resource extraction, and urbanization; species extinction and dwindling biodiversity; freshwater salinization; coastal erosion; drought; and large-scale fires. In her contribution to this volume, Marion Struck-Garbe introduces two artists from Papua New Guinea–Laben Sakale John and Gazellah Bruder–whose powerful paintings address these pressing concerns about ocean pollution, habitat loss, and extreme weather events at both a local and global level. Across Oceania, events such as these create food and water shortages; increase diseases, chronic illnesses, and cancers among

populations living with massive pollution; force people to move from their homes; and threaten cultural practices and ways of life.

In the face of such ecological crises, artistic production and creative expression are a crucial means by which people in Oceania and its diaspora are fighting for climate justice. Environmental activists are mobilizing cultural heritage in their protests against fossil fuels and resource extraction. The Pacific Climate Warriors and 350 Pacific, for instance, blockaded the Newcastle coal port in 2015 using traditional canoes from across Oceania. Cultural festivals across the region are increasingly dedicated to ecological issues, such as the King Tides Festival in Tuvalu. More and more art exhibitions are dedicated to issues of climate change and ecological justice, for instance the recent show *Inundation: Art and Climate Change in the Pacific* curated by Jaimey Hamilton Faris (2020) at the University of Hawai'i Mānoa Art Gallery. Other exhibitions and biennials, while not necessarily curated around an ecological theme per se, include an increasing number of artists whose work engages with climate change. Artists such as Latai Taumoepeau, Taloi Havini, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, and many others help to raise awareness, inspire the public to act, and hold accountable those most responsible for anthropogenic climate chaos.

The present issue features the work of artists and visual studies scholars who address climate change and focuses on contemporary art and recent exhibitions that engage with environmental issues and their intersections with colonial histories, Indigenous sovereignty, and global capitalism. The contributions take a climate justice perspective, which considers the way climate change is the product of systemic and infrastructural inequality that upholds imperial formations in the past, present, and future. Jacqueline Charles-Rault, for example, analyzes a series of works by Natalie Robertson, a Māori photographer who grew up alongside the Tarawera River near the Bay of Plenty and whose iwi, Ngāti Porou, is located near the Waiapu River on the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. Robertson's work reflects on the history of settler and industrial expansion that led to major pollution of the Tarawera River, the complete destruction of Lake Rotoitipaku, and deforestation due to pastoralism that rendered the Waiapu river vulnerable to erosion and flooding. In her contribution, Charles-Rault, who co-curated the 2015 exhibition *Pacifique(S) Contemporain* that included Robertson's work, discusses Robertson's thoughtful attention to the impact colonial history has had on Māori lands and waters.

Bodies of water also figure largely in the work of Angela Tiatia, who responds to the catastrophic, fatalist, and disembodied consideration of rising sea levels that pervades much climate change discourse. Jaimey Hamilton Faris considers Tiatia's video work *Lick* (2015) as an Indigenous feminist critique of the way "sinking islands" of Tuvalu are represented. By putting the work in conversation with other feminist environmental performance art in Oceania, such as Yuki Kihara's *Taualuga: The Last Dance* (2002), and building on Caroline Caycedo's practice of "geochoreography," Hamilton Faris argues Tiatia uses daily, intimate gestures in and

with the Pacific Ocean as a form of critical, Indigenous feminist survivance in relation to climate upheaval.

Survivance is also a key theme for Healoha Johnston, whose contribution situates the work of five contemporary artists in Hawai'i in the long fight for Hawaiian sovereignty dating back to the Hawaiian Renaissance of the 1960s and 70s. Each of the artists engages with the relationship between kānaka maoli (Native Hawaiians) and 'āina (the land)–a relationship that demands care and responsibility in the face of climate change. From Imaikalani Kalahele's "Manifesto" as a form of aloha 'āina to Abigail Romanchak's visualization of scientific data that documents the declining native bird population, Johnston urges us to recognize how the potent and critical work being produced today around climate justice is indebted to the work that Kanaka 'Ōiwi artists and activists produced in the second half of the 20th century.

Aaron Katzeman similarly historicizes contemporary art in Hawai'i, considering Sean Connelly's *A Small Area of Land (Kaka'ako Earth Room*) (2013) in the context of the land art movement in North America of the 1960s and 1970s. Katzeman complicates an easy reading of Connelly's work as a site-specific, material exploration of "earth" and "land" as defined by a Euro-American sense of purity, stasis, and minimalism. By comparing Connelly's piece to Walter De Maria's *New York Earth Room* (1977-present), after which the installation is named, and Helen and Newton Harrison's *Making Earth* (1970), Katzeman argues Connelly is much more politically engaged and uses his artistic practice to consider the role of colonial dispossession, commodification, and Indigenous onto-epistemological relationships to place.

Carol E. Mayer's contribution takes a curator's perspective on contemporary art and climate change in Oceania, reflecting on her decades-long relationship with artists on the island of Erub in the Torres Strait. Mayer recounts how she came to commission a number of 'ghost net' sculptures made with industrial fishing nets that are polluting the shores of Erub and other islands in the Torres Strait and threatening endangered ocean life. Mayer provides an intimate view of the work curators can do to bring these issues to light and to foster creative engagements with pollution or other ecological issues.

Alongside contributions by curators, this volume also includes an exhibition review and three artist features. Halena Kapuni-Reynolds reviews *Nā Māla: Layered Landscapes of Kona Coffee Heritage*, a recent exhibition at the Donkey Mill Arts Center in Kona, Hawai'i. Kapuni-Reynolds notes in particular the "layers" of history, memory, identity, and embodied relationships to Hawaiian ecologies. Lani Asuncion's exhibition *Duty-Free Paradise* is the subject of a photo-essay by the artist which explores the military and tourism industries that continue to shape the way Hawai'i is imagined by the United States public. Like Johnston and Katzeman, Asuncion's work foregrounds the historical process of dispossession by the United States when considering the intimate relationships between people and place in Hawai'i. Another artist featured in this volume, Chenta Laury, further complicates these relationships by sharing her own experience as an African American who grew up in Hawai'i. By combining tapa

(barkcloth) construction with other techniques adopted from her Finnish and African-American backgrounds, Laury explores the often fragile nature of identity construction and the role of natural materials in forging one's sense of belonging.

Lastly, the volume features a series of posters by the Madang Art Maniacs (MAM), a group of Papau New Guinea artists founded by Robert Banasi, who recently formed the collective to celebrate local cultures and inform the public about urgent issues. The series included in this volume demonstrates the important work MAM has done to raise awareness about the COVID-19 pandemic, which is hitting the country especially hard. The photographs show public murals, billboards, and posters with messages in Tok Pisin such as "Stand one metre away from me" and "Wash your hands with soap." While not readily associated with climate change, the pandemic intersects with the other health issues and precarity disproportionately felt by people in Papua New Guinea and "the global south." Those communities most affected by climate change are the same communities without access to healthcare, without the option to stop working, and excluded from the services necessary to survive this unprecedented health crisis. As many activists are now saying, "COVID justice is climate justice."

From the U.S. occupation of Hawai'i to the problematic framing of rising seas in Tuvalu, and from the COVID-19 crisis in Papua New Guinea to the display of ghost net sculptures in Vancouver, this volume provides a snapshot of the *vast* amount of work on climate change and its intersections with Indigenous sovereignty, localized relationships to place, and the ongoing fight for justice and decolonization. *Pacific Arts* anticipates and looks forward to significant growth in arts scholarship and creative work in this area as environmental conditions become increasingly acute.