HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews Weekend

Coping with Climate Change

The gallery NURTUREart has been transformed into a government bureau to help citizens negotiate climate change's psychological and logistical challenges.

Louis Bury May 11, 2019

Allison Rowe, "Emotional Labor Specialist"(2019), installation view (all images courtesy NURTUREart)

The first thing you'll likely notice in ***The Department of Human and Natural Services***, a group exhibition curated by Mariel Villeré at NURTUREart, is an office cubicle in the center of the gallery floor. Its white plastic desk, metallic rolling chair, and felt-covered grey partitions are as unremarkable as those of any other cubicle. The office supplies and decorations atop the desk are also standard: there is a stapler, a memo pad, a tin of writing implements, an office phone, a calculator, and a fake plant. Come closer, though, and you'll notice the cubicle's engraved nameplate states, "Emotional Labor Specialist/Dial 5 for the Climate Change Support Hotline." Closer still, you'll see a handwritten note on the memo pad inviting you to call the hotline and

leave a voice message, or to make a drawing about climate change using the materials provided. The conceit of Allison Rowe's installation *Emotional Labor Specialist* (2019), as well as the larger exhibition — also including artists Li Sumpter, Nancy Nowacek, and the Environmental Performance Agency — is that the gallery has been transformed into a government bureau to help citizens negotiate climate change's psychological and logistical challenges.

The premise may sound farfetched but its smart, well-measured execution proves plausible and effective. Villeré works for the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation as the Manager for Programs, Art and Grants at Freshkills Park, a 2200-acre park under construction on the site of Staten Island's infamous former Fresh Kills Landfill. As part of her role, she co-curates with artist Dylan Gauthier the Freshkills Field R/D artist residency program, which functions as a small artistic laboratory for the ecological imaginary. It's unsurprising, then, that Villeré's exhibition would be a proposition for an alternative government climate bureau. What's surprising is how feasible this proposition is and how much it resembles the imaginative work of her actual government office.

Rowe's excellent *Emotional Labor Specialist* demonstrates that psychological support systems designed to cope with climate change are not only achievable but needed. Her unusual invitation to discuss our feelings about climate change asks us to reflect on abstract and overwhelming issues that can be easy to repress or ignore. The dynamic is further complicated because the performance takes place by phone and Rowe requires the visitor to leave an introductory voice message. The experience of leaving an emotionally candid voice message for a stranger evokes prayer, in that both express deep-seated feelings to an absent, unknown audience.

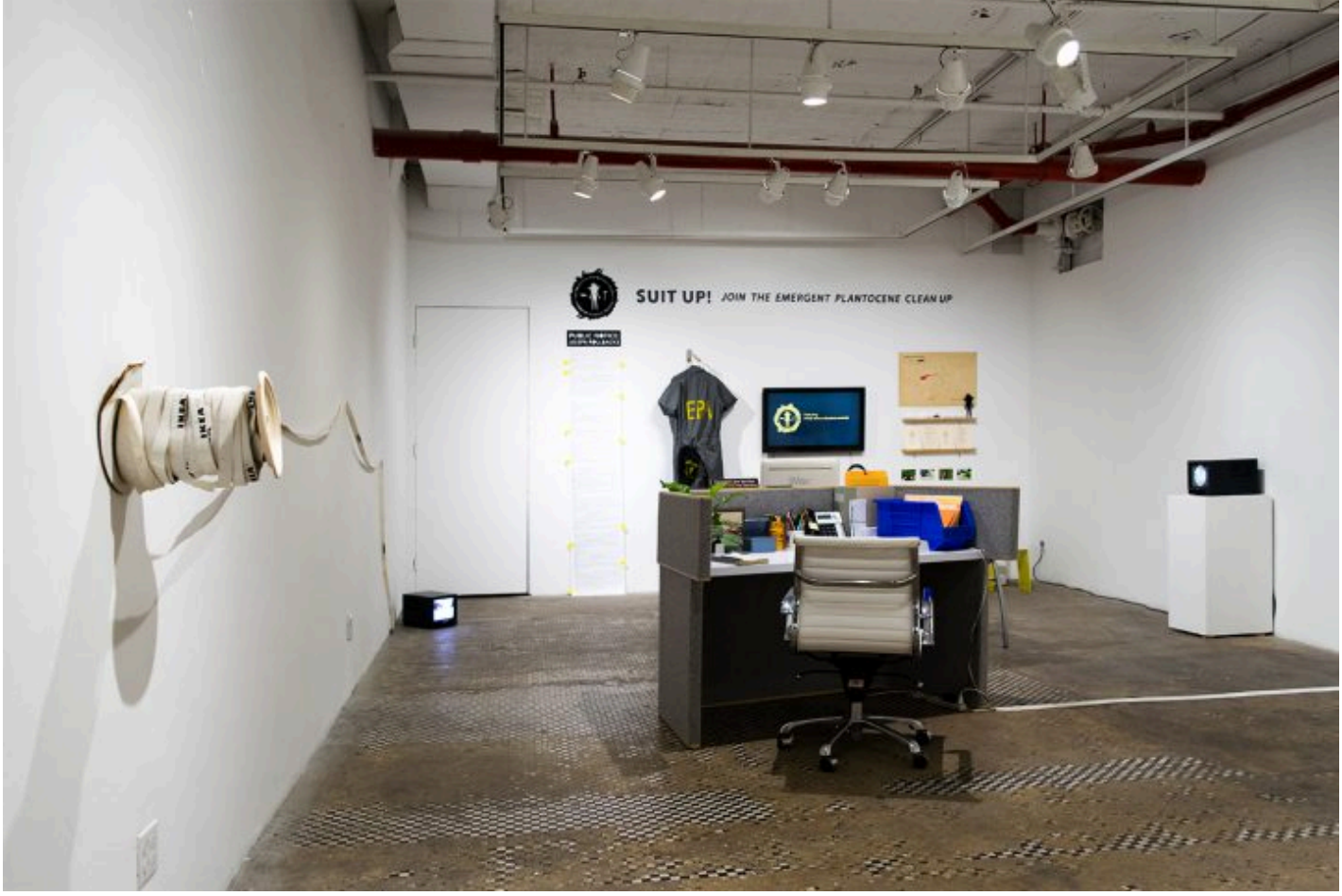
Yet the artwork's interpersonal distance also allows for unguarded exchange, in the way that strangers can feel free with one another because they might never meet again. Rowe's present and considerate telephone persona facilitates such an exchange. When we spoke, she expressed surprise at how willing hotline callers had been to share their sense of vulnerability about climate change; in her face-to-face 2018 project, *Trying to Talk to Climate Change Researchers About the Future and their Feelings*, her interlocutors maintained a wary, professional reserve. However forthcoming the participants, Rowe's artistic talk therapy contributes to a growing body of work, including Marina Zurkow's and Una Chaudhuri's *Dear Climate* project, that grapples with climate change's affective implications.

Nancy Nowacek utilizes Conceptualist strategies of documentation and measurement to register frustration with bureaucracy's Kafka-esque tendencies. Her *Citizen Bridge* project (2012-ongoing) proposes the construction of a pedestrian walkway over New York City's Buttermilk Channel, thereby connecting Governor's Island — currently accessible only by ferry — with Brooklyn. A spool of 100 Ikea measuring tapes attached to form one long measuring tape, "1200 foot measuring tape," and a Warholian short film shot from a stationary, ground-level vantage

point, *Running 1200 Feet* (both 2012), dramatize how regulatory impediments can make Buttermilk Channel's relatively narrow, 1,200-foot width feel impossible to bridge. Ephemera atop an office desk — a Record Book; an extensive file of business cards; and, especially, a video of Nowacek's dragging face while on a conference call (*Typical conference call*, 2014) — capture the tedium of behind-the-scenes organizational labor.

EPA Embodied Scientist Training, Suit Up: Join the Emergent Plantocene Clean-Up.

The Environmental Performance Agency (EPA) — an artist collective founded in 2017 and currently consisting of Catherine Grau, andrea haenggi, Ellie Irons, and Christopher Kennedy — responds to bureaucratic stagnation with a playfully serious take on the US government's EPA. Their multimedia installation, *Suit up! Join the Emergent Plantocene Clean-Up* (2019), contains instructions and equipment for visitors to go outside and clean plants growing on or among waste in the shadow of Transit Mix Corp.'s nearby cement plant. The installation has a whiff of the absurd: for example, the instructional video, in which a work-suited EPA agent wipes pollutant residue off a plant's leaf with a cotton swab, recalls an after school special. Yet, an informative accompanying pamphlet, "Emergent Plantocene Plant Guide," makes clear that this EPA is earnest about reparative plant care.



The Environmental Performance Agency (EPA), “Suit up! Join the Emergent Plantocene Clean-Up” (2019), installation view

More than just small gestures of remediation, however, the EPA’s performances develop bodily rituals to help humans acknowledge, even honor, climate change’s bleak realities. The instructions for “SUIT UP: Pushback to the Rollbacks,” for instance, read like yogic directives:

> Take an EPA Suit and Suit Up!
>
> Locate the scroll of US EPA policy rollbacks on the left of the wall.
>
> Take several steps back. Roll your head from left to right, relax your shoulders … breath
>
> deeply. Walk up to the scroll and read as many rollbacks as you can take in before going numb.
>
> Take several steps back. Shake your whole body until it begins to vibrate … Walk up to the scroll and bear to read one more rollback – read it out loud!
>
> Take several steps back. Where in your body do you feel the burden of this information?

The instructions’ curious tonal mix — at once impish and empathetic — encapsulates the collective’s aesthetic. Aspects of their performances might seem silly or strange, but that’s in part because the very idea of ritualistic climate change performance is uncommon enough to feel odd,

whatever its guise. Rituals can help humans cope with adversity, yet few rituals have been developed to address climate change's profound disturbances.

Li Sumpter, installation view

Of all the work in the exhibition, Li Sumpter's most directly addresses such disturbances. Half a dozen artworks, encompassing a range of media, such as film, installation, and graphic art, are arranged to form a survivalist reading nook in one corner of the gallery. Visitors can peruse the small shelf of books, which includes titles like *Prepper's Home Defense* and *The Zombie Survival Guide*, or read one of Sumpter's own textual creations — such as her zine, *The Escape Artist Mixtape*, or excerpts on posters from her Afrofuturist graphic novel, *Graffiti in the Grass* — while sitting on stools (*Boom 4 Real Escape Pod* (2019)) that double as storage spaces for emergency supplies.

In all of her work, Sumpter makes the case that the African-American experience offers a crucial perspective on whatever climate disturbances the future holds. *Pop Prophecy* (2017), a trailer for a film of interviews conducted with "Philly urban growers and [the] extended Black Farming Community," not only lends human warmth to a chilling topic but also points up the fatalism in mainstream apocalyptic imaginings. In the film, Chris Bolden-Newsome, Co-Director of Philadelphia's Farm at Bartram's Garden, argues that resilience has been a historical necessity for black survival: "I come from a people who have gone through disaster after disaster after disaster, with no help coming, as my mother used to say." This perspective informs Nykisha Madison's

belief that “the end is not a bad thing,” as the Community Markets Manager of Philadelphia’s Urban Tree Connection considers the end to be less a complete destruction and “more like if you take a house and remodel it.”

As a blueprint for imaginative change, *The Department of Human and Natural Services*’s remodel gets the specs so right it can almost make you a climate optimist. The show succeeds as an art exhibition because its conception is sharp and coherent, its realization compelling and restrained. It succeeds as a government agency, albeit fictitious, because its psycho-social services actually work. In the way Villeré undertakes feats of organizational remediation akin to those of the artists she curates, she could easily call her *Department* a work of art in its own right. But there’s no outsized curatorial ego here, nor idle postures of virtue. Villeré is interested in art as a laboratory for climate design, and as a Trojan Horse for implementing that lab’s most promising and practicable results. It’s a service so ingenious and essential you hope other curators and government employees can figure out ways to provide it.

The Department of Human and Natural Services, *curated by Mariel Villeré, continues at NURTUREart (56 Bogart St, Bushwick, Brooklyn) until May 19.*
