

Nature as Filtered Through a Screen

How do we experience eco-art online and what might it suggest about the nature of the digital gallery experience?



Louis Bury June 27, 2020



Elizabeth Schwaiger, "Flooded Springs" (2019), oil, acrylic, ink on canvas, 39 x 48 inches

It practically goes without saying that most people prefer to view visual art in person rather than online. Virtual exhibitions have been necessary proxies for firsthand experience during the time of social distancing, but they can't fully convey sensorial qualities such as texture, scale, and light. What's more, looking at art in person is about more than just aesthetic experience. It can also be an occasion to spend time with friends, dialogue with gallerists, schmooze with acquaintances and strangers at an opening, get some light exercise, visit a neighborhood or city,

or, for the influencers among us, snap some art selfies. The viewing experience was bound to feel diminished when shunted entirely online.

Dealing with the alienation born of secondhand knowledge may be a new phenomenon for the art industry but it has long been a core concern of eco- and climate-themed art. Because climate change occurs across vast tracts of space and time, an example of what eco-philosopher Timothy Morton calls “hyperobjects,” humans only experience it in glancing, piecemeal ways. Instead, we know climate change mostly through mediation: a graph depicting atmospheric carbon dioxide levels over time; a bird’s-eye-view map of arctic ice loss; before and after photographs of a receding glacier. One way eco-art and its cognates have addressed this epistemic disjunct is to render it palpable, as when Agnes Denes planted her infamous “Wheatfield — A Confrontation” (1982) next to the lower Manhattan skyline.

Whatever their efficacy, such aesthetic gestures raise eco-consciousness in a unique, embodied way. They give artistic form to complex, abstract-seeming phenomena — the food supply chain; commodities markets; ecological waste — and, in so doing, can make those phenomena easier to apprehend, more tangible. Most artistic media are well-suited for this ontological alchemy but depend on physical presence to achieve their full effects. It’s the difference between seeing a photograph of a painting and seeing the painting in person, the difference between seeing an image of a wheat field and feeling wheat stems crunch underfoot as bugs swirl around you in the earth-scented air. What happens, then, to the viewer experience of eco-art when shifted online and what might it suggest about the nature of the online gallery experience?



Squeak Carnwath, "Go to the Sea" (2018), gouache and graphite on polypropylene, 29.3 x 29.3 inches

Absence makes the heart grow fonder

The directive "Go/ To THE SEA," written in teal blue gouache, enjoins the text, "to See/ the BLuE of The WATER/ touching the SKY." This poetic instruction in Squeak Carnwath's wistful painting "Go to the Sea" (2018) serves as an apt entry into Jane Lombard Gallery's attractive online exhibition *In Celebration of the Natural World*, organized in response to New York City's COVID-19 stay-at-home orders. Similar to how the viewing room serves as a digital surrogate for the inaccessible gallery, "Go to the Sea" gestures toward an experience that can't occur within the painting itself.

Carnwath is well aware of painting's limitations and possibilities. Instead of trying to provide a plausible mimetic substitute for the juxtaposition of water and sky blues, she incorporates into the work one of her signature color grids — associative daubs of a loose color family, in this case blue — to highlight the difference between a painter's palette and color as it exists beyond the frame. An explanatory note embedded in the grid of green and brown daubs atop her painting "How Many Greens" (2018) also emphasizes the disjunct between art and life: "from memory of direct observation (of mostly growing things & plant life)."

Just as Carnwath's paintings embrace their own artifice rather than feign verisimilitude, online exhibitions are better off focusing on the medium's strengths than trying to replicate the gallery

experience. *In Celebration of the Natural World* has the same features as most commercial galleries' online viewing rooms: images of individual artworks, each with a button for purchase inquiries, along with snippets of explanatory text. If the viewer isn't familiar with the work, as was the case for me with Elizabeth Schwaiger's beguiling oil paintings of hallucinatory floods, it is hard to know what the secondhand experience might occlude.

Still, keeping things simple seems preferable to trying to mimic the gallery experience in virtual space. For example, *Artificial Ecologies*, an online exhibition curated by Isabel Beavers for CultureHub's Re-Fest, showcases work by four eco-artists (Richelle Gribble, Maru Garcia, Julian Stein, and Beavers herself) in a pixelated 3D environment whose spare, blocky architecture recalls first-person 1990s computer games such as *Myst*. The exhibition's soundscapes were compelling but its spatial environment was difficult to navigate and visually reductive. When I followed the link to Julian Stein's artist website to watch an embedded Vimeo of his eerie generative sound installation, "the wind repeats itself: blue grama" (2017), the return to a plain interface felt welcome.

All that's solid

Artist Julia Christensen's concept of "upgrade culture" — the belief that new digital technologies need constantly to replace old ones — offers a big-picture perspective on questions of replaceability in both art and life. Her excellent artist book from Dancing Foxes Press, *Upgrade Available*, as well as an eponymous online exhibition at ArtCenter College of Design, explore the material consequences of upgrade culture's consumerist logic. Christensen's project is the synthesis of nearly a decade of applied artistic research, encompassing visits to e-waste processing plants in India, a residency in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Art+Technology Lab, an ongoing collaboration with scientists at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab (JPL), and a self-inventory of her private archive of family images and videos.

How audiences absorb the results of such a heterogeneous project depends in no small part on its method and medium of presentation. ArtCenter's online exhibition — a brief medley of image and text for each of the project's major components — wisely doesn't pretend it can do much more than provide a sampler menu for the postponed gallery exhibition. The book, on the other hand, showcases the project in its full depth and breadth. It includes images, thematically organized essays by, and conversations with Christensen (her conversation about e-waste with Indian artist Ravi Agarwal is particularly eye-opening). It would be hard to overstate how consistently Dancing Foxes Press develops this type of ambitious art project into an appealing, context-rich book; its catalogue, now almost a decade old, sets a high standard for what an artist book can be and do.

It's fitting that *Upgrade Available* works well as a book, considering its misgivings about technological obsolescence. It works so well in part because Christensen is an insightful writer — with a penchant for neologistic concepts such as “upgrade culture,” “technology time,” and “institution time” — and in part because the project itself, brimming with narrative and conceptual complexities, is perfectly suited to written discourse. The book format left me especially curious to experience the artworks in person. While a photographic series such as *Technology Time* (2011-ongoing), which depicts forlorn piles of outdated e-waste, translates successfully to book and website images, a sculptural installation such as *Burnouts* (2013) — projections of celestial constellations no longer visible due to light pollution, which use discarded iPhones as the installation's only light source — seems dependent on firsthand viewer experience.



Julia Christensen, antenna tree model (Mt. Wilson), digital photograph, dimensions variable, from “Tree of Life” (2019-ongoing)

Dynamics of presence and absence, distance and proximity, are crucial to *Upgrade Available*'s as-yet-unbuilt capstone project, *Tree of Life* (2019-ongoing). In an effort to think far beyond the time horizon of planned obsolescence, Christensen and her NASA JPL collaborators are developing a satellite that will orbit earth for 200 years and communicate with a tree whose trunk and branches are outfitted with donut-shaped antennae that loosely resemble rings hooped around ring toss pegs. Data about both the tree's and the satellite's environmental health will be translated into audible sonic frequencies that can be transmitted via radio to comprise a metaphorical “200-year duet.” Like British composer Jem Finer's 1,000-year-long song, “Longplayer” (2000-ongoing),

Christensen's *Tree of Life* is designed to exceed the spatial and temporal bounds of individual experience. The question is whether an artwork that is itself a hyperobject is best suited to address the epistemic disjunct inherent to the human experience of other hyperobjects.

If a tree falls in the forest

Meteorological Mobilities, an online exhibition curated by Marianna Tsionki for what was planned as a gallery exhibition at New York City's apexart, contemplates this question by bringing it back down to earth. The exhibition's four artworks depict the human displacement that is already occurring in different places around the globe as a result of climate change. This quietly powerful show suggests not only aesthetic strategies for addressing eco-alienation but also curatorial strategies for addressing the alienation viewers experience with online exhibitions. In particular, the online version of apexart's explanatory brochure provides contextual ballast without taxing the viewer's attention span.



MAP Office, *Learning from the Gypsies: Ghost Island* (2019), digital video, 40 min (still)

Another thing that makes *Meteorological Mobilities* effective is that three of its four pieces are videos, an artistic medium that works particularly well in the online environment. For example, MAP Office's fictional 40-minute film *Learning from the Gypsies: Ghost Island* (2019) portrays, with almost no dialogue or dramatic conflict, the quotidian fisherman's life for Gung, a member of the southeast Asian Urak Lawoi' tribe. Gung lives in a "Ghost Island," a waterlogged latticework architectural hut that MAP Office's artistic duo of Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portefaix have installed at exhibition sites around Asia. The contrast between the structure's

impracticality as shelter (it's entirely porous to the elements) and Gung's survivalist routine points up the benefits of MAP's lightly fictionalized approach. The film, along with its accompanying mock-touristic postcard series ("*Greetings From Ghost Island, Thailand!*"), never pretends to be pure anthropology and, as a result, achieves surprising poignancy and watchability.

Kivalina: The Coming Storm (2014) manages to be even slower paced and less action-filled than *Ghost Island* yet just as engaging. Produced by a cadre of artists for a project, *Modeling Kivalina*, begun under the umbrella of Forensic Architecture (Andrea Bagnato, Daniel Fernández Pascual, Helene Kazan, Hannah Meszaros Martin, and Alon Schwabe), the non-fictional video chronicles the plight of the Iñupiat village of Kivalina, which is situated on a barrier island along Alaska's northwest coast and imperiled by rising sea levels. As residents recount in voiceovers their tribe's embattled past (in 1905 the Bureau of Indian Affairs forced the Iñupiaq to settle in Kivalina), the camera remains fixed on a vantage of the ocean's horizon as seen from the shore. No humans, or human-made things, appear on screen for the video's 35-minute duration, just waves lapping against the shore, at first calmly, then with increased agitation.

It's no coincidence that these two videos from *Meteorological Mobilities* have been the most powerful visual art I've experienced since museums and galleries went online in March. Both use aesthetic understatement to convey a sense of how viewers can be physically disconnected from, yet still somehow implicated in, a phenomenon much larger than themselves. There's a real sense — with consequences our species has only just begun to endure — in which existentially threatening hyperobjects such as climate change and the coronavirus pandemic feel unreal to the humans who undergo them. Indeed, such objects call into question what it even means to speak of encountering them first- or secondhand. Online exhibitions of eco-art can't definitively answer that question but they can allow viewers to feel the extent to which they're alienated from a crucial aspect of their own experience.

In Celebration of the Natural World *is currently online at Jane Lombard Gallery.*

Artificial Ecologies *continues online at Culture Hub's Re-Fest through June 30.*

Julia Christensen: Upgrade Available *is currently online at ArtCenter.*

*Upgrade Available by Julia Christensen is published by Dancing Foxes Press and is available online and **from indie booksellers.***

Meteorological Mobilities *is currently online at apexart.*