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An Archival Art Project about Climate Change and Internet (In)Visibility

AARON KATZEMAN

Topics in Contemporary Art: Global Art Worlds
Mentor: Dr. Jaimey Hamilton Faris

Amy Balkin is a contemporary artist whose work often addresses issues surrounding anthropogenic climate change. Her recent project A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting (2012-present) is a crowdsourced collection of discarded remnants found in areas currently susceptible to changing climatic conditions. Through both the archive's physical and online existence, one becomes subtly aware of the connecting qualities between the internet and climate change, specifically the seemingly subdued role each plays in everyday life despite their respective magnitudes of importance. By examining the inherent traits of the internet—particularly its participatory nature and also its increasing expansion into offline realities—and comparing them to the “slow violence” of climate change and its often semi-hidden and obscure existence, the similarities between the two become more apparent. This essay sets up a dialogue between theories of the internet developed by other artists and the practical use of the internet, such as A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting. Balkin's work provides the impetus for this merging realization between climate change and internet (in)visibility, allowing us to ask specific questions regarding our relationship to these ever-present phenomena.

Introduction

There are arguably two global entities above all else which have proven the interconnectedness of the contemporary world, both—for better or for worse—outcomes of human technological inventions: the internet and anthropogenic climate change. At first thought, the two do not seem to have many shared qualities; one is a never-ending source of information,

articles, tweets, and memes, while the other is a product of capitalism and human mismanagement of finite resources, the effects of which include mass extinctions, the increasing quantity and strength of natural disasters, and deadly food shortages and heat waves. While these respective attributes may seem irreconcilable, there are, however, some shared characteristics between the internet and climate change that are worth analytical examination, specifically the increasing mundaneness and banality that each plays in the everyday lives of millions.



I recently graduated from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa with a degree in Art History and a certificate in Environmental Studies. I will be furthering my education at the University of California, Irvine's PhD program in Visual Studies, where I hope to continue researching the intersection between art and the environment. This paper was originally the final assignment for a class titled Topics in Contemporary Art: Global Art Worlds, which covered broad topics such as globalization, technology, and climate change and looked at how artists have responded to and interacted with these phenomena. The following essay is a summation of some of the larger themes discussed in the class.

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Artists have confronted these topics critically and practically, theorizing and using aspects of the internet as a means to address climate change.

Climate change has been called a type of “slow violence,” something which often goes unseen yet whose progression frequently proves disastrous.¹ Because of its lack of speed, it can be hard for the general public to discern exactly what the climate is doing on a day-to-day basis and how its variance is the ultimately cause of so many calamities. This incremental progression (regression?) renders the very idea of climate change as something abstract for vast swaths of science deniers. Even for those who acknowledge the reality of climate change, its physical presence is still sometimes hard to grasp.

Similarly, the internet has become so ingrained in everyday life that some have speculated we are now living in a “post-internet” age, where the existence of the internet is no longer a novelty but rather commonplace, a trivial tool readily available for use. This term was first expressed as “post-internet art,” coined by artist Marisa Olson in 2008 when talking about her own work which address “the impacts of the internet on culture at large.”² Artist Hito Steyerl has explored similar questions, specifically regarding the importance of media such as the internet and its active participation in society, no longer limited to solely being a detached record of events.³ These theories—that we have become so conditioned to the immense possibilities of the internet to the point where it is now both ingrained within culture and taken for granted at the same time—are similar to the slow violence of climate change and its seemingly hidden, but very real, presence.

Instead of accepting these maxims as unchangeable reality, San Francisco-based artist Amy Balkin has entered the larger discourse with her *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting* (2012-present) project, using the World Wide Web as a medium through which to record and document the impacts of global warming. This paper will explore how the qualities of the internet are similar to the slow violence of climate change, using *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting* as a single example project, specifically focusing on how Balkin takes advantage of the internet's built-in features in an attempt to expound the connecting universal impacts of climate change.

Qualities (and Quantities) of the Internet

The internet as a social institution thrives off utilitarian participatory behavior, and the nature of the internet is unlike any type of global communication before, tending itself to fast, collaborative efforts. Proof of this is most easily recognizable in the recent proliferation of memes, often hastily reposted

in various formats, featuring a wide span of topics from politics, comedy, and sports. Traditional aesthetic appeal is not of utmost value in these memes but rather the speed in which they can be posted in order to remain relevant to the most current events. According to writer Nick Douglas, “The ugliness of the amateur internet doesn't destroy its credibility because it's a byproduct of the medium's advantages (speed and lack of gatekeepers).”⁴ By focusing less on aesthetics and more on mass-produced content, the internet has become a place where anyone with access can participate in global discussions. In a country with no internet censorship, the web offers open access to the world.

As such, the internet itself is also interconnected as a whole. Douglas says, “In addition to being a broadcast tool, the internet is home to many forms of one-to-one and small-group communications. But with few exceptions, anything created in those small groups is easily shared with different groups or the internet at large.”⁵ Thus, not only can the internet connect individuals in one place—be it a forum, social media site, or live streaming service—but these isolated instances are easily shared across various other places. For example, a screenshot of a conversation on Facebook can easily make its way onto Twitter, where a new screenshot of the reply to the initial conversation can be posted on an Instagram meme account with millions of followers. Along the way, an innocent online dialogue between two people is spread worldwide, providing laughs or raising insightful questions to populations who were not necessarily the intended receiver but who received the content nonetheless.

In her essay “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” artist Hito Steyerl attempts to illuminate the modern-day role of the internet and speculate its future potential if (and when) the internet's many unique characteristics become fully realized and applied to society as a whole. According to Steyerl, the internet is not literally going to expire and disappear; on the contrary, she argues the internet as an independent and individual entity is over. Similar to the idea of post-internet, Steyerl believes there is already a merging of life and internet; the internet is no longer a solitary “thing.” Its immediacy and impact has proliferated enough to become fully ingrained as just another aspect of life. Being “offline” is becoming a blurred condition, as the internet's impact and distinct qualities have begun seeping into and altering the shape of real world experiences. Likewise, the theory of climate change is becoming more and more universally accepted, while its physical manifestations also become more noticeable. Therefore, Steyerl argues that qualities inherent on the internet, including the concepts of postproduction, circulationism, and open access, can be (and are) extrapolated to life. Equal opportunity and the ability to alter and distribute are already options online; these

1 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.

2 Debatty, “Interview with Marisa Olson.”

3 Steyerl, “Too Much World.”

4 Douglas, “It's Supposed to Look Like Shit,” 315.

5 Ibid, 330.

same qualities are a cause and symptom of global warming. Individuals and corporations still have drastically too much leeway and means of polluting, à la “open access.” At the same time, the circulationism of climate change means it is free to disseminate around the globe, often unequally affecting those who did not play a large role in its creation.

Artists like Steyerl have made use of the internet since its invention, usually under the umbrella genre of new media, a purposefully vague term that includes any type of digitally-produced art, from computer graphics and animation to 3D printing.⁶ Although the exact medium often varies, new media art usually contains some sort of viewer-involved participation. As technology has advanced, so have the available methods of art-making. But new media art is frequently more about literally using new forms of media in artistic practices as opposed to exploring the sociocultural effects and impact of the media, essentially lacking a kind of self-awareness.

Perhaps this where the term *post-internet* is helpful. In his essay “The Image Object Post-Internet,” artist Artie Vierkant defines the post-internet era as “a result of the contemporary moment: inherently informed by ubiquitous authorship, the development of attention as currency, the collapse of physical space in networked culture, and the infinite reproducibility and mutability of digital materials.”⁷ Vierkant continues, suggesting that “culture post-internet is made up of reader-authors who by necessity must regard all cultural output as an idea or work in progress able to be taken up and continued by any of its viewers.”⁸

While this art still falls within the paradigm of new media, it differs most notably in what Vierkant describes as the “collapse of physical space.” In a post-internet society, events, objects, and things exist more in the digital realm than the physical. That is, it is more likely for people to come in contact with a reproduced image of something than for them to experience the actual image itself. This raises questions of authenticity and representation, specifically if it really matters whether someone encounters something in person or online. Steyerl says, “Far from being opposites across an unbridgeable chasm, image and world are in many cases just versions of each other.”⁹ There now lacks a quantifiable difference between image and world; an image or object is no longer any less “real” when viewed online as opposed to viewing its physical counterpart. Comparatively, an image is more impactful the more it is spread, regardless of the “authenticity” of its depiction.

These qualities of the internet—from how easily information is available and spreads across it to the abstract merging of online and offline—make the internet prime real estate for anyone with a message. The idea that the internet is no longer

an extraordinary feat of human accomplishment but is now regarded as just another ordinary aspect of the everyday is not a negative. Instead, with a base audience encompassing most of the globe, the internet’s conventionality opens the door for inquisitive insight on the most pressing topics, one of which is no doubt anthropogenic climate change.

Pasts, Presence, Futures

If the current normality of the internet is a good thing, the similar feeling toward climate change is anything but. This ambivalence toward the climate is partially because of climate change’s temporal condition, a kind of “slow violence” as first suggested by professor Rob Nixon. Nixon explains, “By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”¹⁰ He continues, describing this as “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive.”¹¹

While it is true that natural disasters such as hurricanes, increasing in severity due to warming temperatures,¹² are anything but a type of slow violence, it is the actions leading up to them that are slow. Although Pacific islands sinking due to rising sea levels is a visible, slow process, the increasing level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that indirectly causes sea level to rise is mostly invisible. The temperature does not rapidly increase on a day-to-day basis, but it is the slow increase that eventually reaches a tipping point which leads to more destructive events. Therefore, although harder to discern, it is the slow violence that we must become more aware of if we are to eventually stop the more destructive events and climate change as a whole.

But how do we do that if the slow violence is so mundane? Artist Amy Balkin’s work explores various possibilities, generally addressing aspects of environmental justice and how the processes and policies of law alter and affect the world on a global scale. She often takes advantage of digital methods to create, complete, and spread her eco-conscious work. One of Balkin’s more ambitious works is *Invisible-5* (2006-present), a collaborative project with other artists and environmental organizations. The group created a self-guided audio tour along California’s I-5 corridor between San Francisco and Los Angeles, its purpose being to bring awareness to the many (mostly invisible) pollutants which border the interstate as drivers pass by, including pesticide drift, hazardous waste dumping and incineration, and groundwater contamination, among others.

Similarly, Balkin’s *Public Smog* project (2004-present) is

6 Widewalls, “The Serious Relationship.”

7 Vierkant, “The Image Object.”

8 Ibid.

9 Steyerl, “Too Much World.”

10 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.

11 Ibid.

12 Walsh, “Changes in Hurricanes.”

the geopolitical production (or spatial politics) of precarity and slow-onset dispossession.”¹⁷ If this era of human life were every to be studied by future anthropologists and archaeologists, the archive is meant to be a nondiscriminatory record.

Furthermore, in her description of the archive, Balkin uses the future perfect tense in the verb phrase “will have been,” indicating something that will be completed at some point in the future. However, does “completion” regard the archive or the entire species of *Homo sapiens sapiens*? The archive can only ever realistically end under one of two conditions: either we convert to clean, sustainable energy practices and slow growth on a global scale, stopping the onslaught of anthropogenic climate change and the resulting sinking and melting of land masses, or we continue to release greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, eventually rendering the planet virtually uninhabitable for a wide range of organisms, possibly even humans. The archive is a collection of the past, revealed by the present, and a warning about the future.

It is also worth noting that the online archive is hosted on a Tumblr site. Tumblr is a self-described “micro-blogging” platform, popular among multitudes of different fandoms but also as mood board of inspirational quotes and gorgeous photos, frequently used by teenagers and more arts-inclined people. Individual posts spread throughout Tumblr by getting reblogged, sometimes setting off a chain reaction which can quickly result in a post getting thousands of notes, a cumulation of reblogs and likes. For a post to reach a wider audience, participation is key, as it is in the larger concept of the internet as a whole, as suggested by Douglas, Steyerl, and Vierkant.

Balkin could have chosen to host the digital archive on Tumblr for multiple reasons: the site is free and comes with countless pre-designed themes, its display is user-friendly and easy to customize, or perhaps because of the sharing possibilities within Tumblr. Any post, if reblogged by the right account, could spread across the entire platform, and—like Douglas described—eventually make its way off Tumblr and into other realms of the internet.

Conclusion

Ambivalent attitudes toward the internet and climate change are respectively exciting and discouraging. On one hand, the internet—arguably the single greatest coalition of knowledge—has been appropriated and streamlined into society, an everyday instrument and facet of contemporary living. Likewise, we have long been warned about climate change and its pending disasters, with documentaries, articles, and news reports often showing the worse of what has happened and explaining what is still to come. Yet, if one is not directly affected, what motive do they have to change their ways and act for the greater good

¹⁷ Balkin, “Sinking and Melting.”

of the earth? Nixon believes, “We need to account for how the temporal dispersion of slow violence affects the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social afflictions . . . in particular, environmental calamities.”¹⁸

But this is still hard to grasp, especially in a culture where things cycle through the news and online conversations on a daily basis. Paradoxically, the internet is arguably the biggest part of our contemporary information society, which itself relies on the same capitalist infrastructure largely to blame for climate change. While this paradox should be addressed, this essay instead chose to focus on the shared traits of the two entities as they occur in the social sphere rather than the material foundation which allows them to exist in the first place.

In pondering the impact of the internet on society and culture at large, Steyerl asks, “If images can be shared and circulated, why can’t everything else be too?”¹⁹ Balkin’s work takes the opposite approach. If climate change is going to be (and already is) shared and circulated globally, how can one best make its vastness visible and noteworthy enough to draw attention to the issue that lasts longer than the few seconds it takes your finger to scroll down the page? In such an image saturated world, in lieu of trying to create a lone, all-inclusive image of climate change (like polar bears on melting ice), Balkin attempts to put together a survey of individual objects, which, “like the human subjects who have ushered them into this unlikely fold, each stands as a fragment within a larger, not at all smooth context.”²⁰ The archive presents a strength in numbers mentality.

In an interview with art historian T.J. Demos, Balkin was asked about using the “melancholy aestheticisation of our own destruction” as a way to call for political action. Balkin responded, “Perhaps the simultaneity is a response to the doubling of temporal perspectives I’m attempting to engage and asking of participants to consider: to think forward in time and look back.”²¹ The strength of Balkin’s archive, then, rests in its temporal subjectiveness, for it does not discriminate against people or objects or the past, present, and future, instead using them all to forecast global anthropogenic climate change and coalescence a history of what will have been. And with what better medium to do so than the internet, itself an archive of historical information, a report on the contemporary moment, and home to futurist pondering, both technological and environmental.

¹⁸ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 3.

¹⁹ Steyerl, “Too Much World.”

²⁰ Scott, “Archives of the Present Future.”

²¹ Demos, “The Law of the Land.”

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