

Sonny Assu  
Matt Browning  
Fiona Bowie  
Kelly Jazvac  
Genevieve Robertson & Jay White  
Weiyi Chang  
*An Absolute Movement*

*Today the cold panicky feeling of urgency creates the impression that 2050 is something like a deadline, after which it will be “game over.” But what is awaiting us is nothing like the big flash of a nuclear “apocalypse”; it is rather the continuation of what is already happening, the ongoing erosion, or brutal destruction of everything that we came to take for granted.<sup>1</sup>*

- Isabelle Stengers

The persistent threat of imminent ecological crisis presents an unusual paradox, oscillating between moments of hypervisibility and invisibility. On the one hand, the narrative of devastating calamity fills our lives, populating the media with stories of extreme weather patterns, melting permafrost, unprecedented carbon emissions, and dying coral reefs, haunting our actions with incessant reminders to minimize carbon footprints, limit consumption, and reduce waste. On the other hand, so much of the discourse is calibrated in metrics and abstractions, measured against historical patterns, forecast

in decades, in centuries, in millennia; the side effects of climate change appearing so slow, so vast, and so removed, that they are effectively detached from everyday lived experience.

The extended temporalities through which ecological change is discussed underscores a peculiar shift in perception. In Western philosophical traditions, time has traditionally been subordinate to movement and change, perceived sensorially through a shifting visual and material field. Yet the relative invisibility of environmental change has fractured

our capacity to perceive time's passage, interrupting a seemingly stable unidirectional flow. There has been a concurrent shift in our awareness of the disparate ways in which climate change and related environmental catastrophes unevenly affects different regions and populations, both human and otherwise. Moreover, the often-apocalyptic undertones that characterize much climate change discourse have severely delimited a once infinite future. As Isabelle Stengers notes, there is a sense that time is 'running out', that there exists some deadline on the horizon after which it will be too late.

The capitulation to geological designations that aim to affix and understand the present, like the Anthropocene, might be dismissed as a peculiar quirk or a linguistic trend—and yet the presence and repetition of the geological suffix commands a singular focus on the peculiarities of the living present, the past it carries and the future it precipitates. The Anthropocene proposes that humanity has become the primary geological force shaping the planet. The naming of this epoch, whose

origin date has been extensively debated yet usually located in the nineteenth century, effectively monumentalizes our destructive force; at the same time, it calls for human responsibility. The virality of the Anthropocene has yielded a multitude of critiques and counter '-cenes.' Less prolific but equally as potent, these epochal designations include the Capitalocene (Jason W. Moore), the Neganthropocene (Bernard Stiegler), the Chthulucene (Donna Haraway), the Homogenocene (Kieran Suckling) and others.

Stengers asserts, "To name is not to say what is true but to confer on what is named the power to make us feel and think in the mode that the name calls for."<sup>2</sup> The contest to locate an appropriate name for this epoch reflects an attempt to grapple with the temporalities of ecological crisis, to delineate its contours and flows, to situate and underscore the peculiarity of the present within the geological horizon. Such discourses are also undercut by their own predictions of radical change. For Moore, the impending collapse of the Capitalocene, or the epoch in which capitalism

re-structured the idea of nature in order to exert itself as an ecological force, may result in an epochal crisis necessitating a total transformation of capitalist society. This anxiety is shared by Haraway, who views the Anthropo/Capitalocene as a “boundary event” in the planet’s geological history, and argues that the task at hand is to ensure its brevity in order to minimize devastation. Stiegler’s concern with time calls for a fundamental re-orientation of labour time, which is facing increasing pressure as the onslaught of new technologies and predictions of rampant automatization threaten to usurp the centrality of wage labour in contemporary capitalist regimes.

While bordering on the often-apocalyptic undertones that ground much climate change rhetoric, these discourses strive to foreground the intangible changes occurring around us, to bring the invisible realities of ecological crisis into focus. Such portents lend weight to the sense that the present is a period of flux, a moment of unprecedented metamorphosis. Crisis articulates a present compressed, a liminal zone in

between an irretrievable past and a truncated future. The attempts to place the current epoch within a knowable terrain allude to the way in which time has become unfixed and unstable. The matter of time enters into these dialogues as a means of re-orienting our bearings, of coming to terms with rampant and unprecedented ecological violence.

The artworks gathered visualize and materialize the question of time, working within its passage and patterns to consider the entangled dimensions of past, present, and future, which are now woven together in the fabric of the Earth. They reject the socially and politically stultifying narratives of collapse in order to bear witness to an already damaged planet. Sonny Assu, Fiona Bowie, Matt Browning, Kelly Jazvac, and Genevieve Robertson & Jay White query time’s dislocation engendered by ecological crisis, using an array of techniques and materials to elaborate on a sense of time’s plasticity and malleability and, increasingly, its deformation in light of contemporary environmental issues.

In his series of photographs of wood offcuts, *Longing* (2011), Sonny Assu channels the lived histories of other-than-human entities in order to question the anthropocentrism that gives rise to the ongoing appropriation of the natural world. Collected from a logging site leased by the We Wai Kai Nation in Cape Mudge, B.C. to a log home manufacturer, Assu photographs the offcuts as roughly hewn masks. Echoing the ethnographic photographic practices of Edward Curtis (1868-1952), their uncanny resemblance to human faces, their seriality, and their visual economy engages with the historical representation of Indigenous peoples, yet their materiality belies the distinction between the human and non-human, nature and culture. The wood itself bears a material history that indexes the entwined processes of capitalism and colonialism, as the growth rings that etch the surface of the wood are literally cut short by the chainsaw.

British Columbia's history of logging and lumber extraction finds reverberations in Fiona Bowie's selection of video excerpts from her public art installation, *Surface* (2010-

2013). Bowie's videos capture the underwater world of False Creek, Vancouver—a region that was decimated by the arrival of industrialisation on its shores. Sawmills and factories rapidly polluted the once vital waterway and extirpated the local wildlife. Recorded via a camera mounted on the underside of a water taxi, the videos are murky and non-descript, brooding over long stretches of water before being occasionally interrupted by frenzied, unidentifiable specters that dash across the screen and fade back into the depths. These ghostly encounters echo the multitude of life that once thrived below the surface, their haunting presence carrying forth the lost lives and histories that were disrupted by industrialisation. Bowie resists narrativizing the footage, which might foreground its documentary style; instead, the artist leaves the video excerpts undated, instead allowing the underwater realm to gradually unfold along indistinct and overlapping timelines.

The ghostly apparitions haunting Bowie's films are echoed in Matt Browning's *Untitled* (2017) silk and

linen embroideries, which, through their formal affinity to ammonite fossils and their handmade production, operate on both geological time scales and the scale of labour time under capitalism. Browning literally and metaphorically entwines the labour of the artist with the invisible labour of silkworms, whose bodies are often sacrificed in the pursuit of the luxury commodity. Silk has played a significant role in the global development of capitalism, yet its biological origins are often forgotten in cycles of luxury production. The weavings echo early earthworks, like Robert Smithson's iconic *Spiral Jetty* (1970). Yet where early Earth artists operated on an industrial level, Browning's weavings are unassuming in scale, the conditions of their production querying the historical gendering of domestic labour and craft. Their spiral form and the gradual process of accretion reflects the passing of time imbued in the offcuts of Assu's photographs, with each layer requiring an exponential increase in the amount of time required to complete the cycle. Their blunted, unfinished edges intimate a gradual and ongoing process of growth.

Kelly Jazvac's *Plastiglomerates* (2013) are aggregate objects, composed of sand, stone, coral, and shell blended with plastic detritus that had washed up on the shores of Kamilo Beach, Hawaii. Jazvac and her colleagues, geologist Patricia Corcoran and oceanographer Charles Moore, suggest that the stones might become 'markers of the Anthropocene,' demarcating a geological stratum inscribed with the impact of human activity on the earth.<sup>3</sup> The stones are post-consumer readymades, the inadvertent product of illegal beach bonfires that amalgamated natural and artificial material into a new type of stone. The stones index the rhythms of production and consumption, bringing the cycles of petro-capitalist economies into a dialogue with planetary flows of energy and matter. Juxtaposing the ephemerality of plastic with its enduring chemical lifespan, estimated to be one hundred thousand years, the stones work within a tension between notions of disposability in consumer capitalism and permanency on a geological scale.

Genevieve Robertson and Jay White's pinhole camera images, *Watchers* (2015), document the proposed route of the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain Pipeline in Burnaby, B.C. The artists note that authorities have detained citizens for photographing the route; the images thus participate in a kind of counter-surveillance, a tactical intervention that subverts the collusion between industry and state. These minimally legible photographs rebuke idyllic representations of the landscape. Instead, the photographs yield an image of the world that has been scarred and re-shaped by human intervention. Installed over a period of six weeks, the resultant images flatten and layer the passage of time, marking the rotation of the earth by the sun with a subtly shifting urban environment.

<sup>1</sup> Isabelle Stengers, "Autonomia and the Intrusion of Gaia," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 2 (2017): 388.

<sup>2</sup> Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, trans. Andrew Goffey (Lunenburg: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 43.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Corcoran, Charles J. Moore, and Kelly Jazvac, "An anthropogenic marker horizon in the future rock record," *GSA Today* 24, no. 6 (2014).

## Artist Biographies

Sonny Assu is Ligwilda'xw of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nations. Raised in North Delta, BC, Assu currently resides in unceded Ligwilda'xw territory (Campbell River, BC). Assu's artistic practice is diverse, spanning painting, sculpture, photography, and printmaking. His work negotiates Western and Kwakwaka'wakw cultures as a means of exploring his family history and the experiences of being an Indigenous person in Canada. He received his BFA from the Emily Carr University (2002) and was the recipient of their distinguished alumni award (2006). He received the BC Creative Achievement Award in First Nations art in 2011 and was long-listed for the Sobey Art Award in 2012, 2013 and 2015. Assu received his MFA from Concordia University (2017) and is a Laureate for the REVEAL - Indigenous Art Awards (2017). Currently showing at The Reach Gallery Museum (Abbotsford) and the McMaster Museum of Art (Hamilton), Assu has also exhibited at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Open Space (Victoria), and Malaspina Printmakers Gallery (Vancouver).

Fiona Bowie is a Costa Rica-based Canadian installation and sound artist from Vancouver. She uses film, video, photography and sculpture, and is known for making immersive environments. Often working with superimposition of time/still-based media and mix-media/sculpture, Bowie's work emerges from an interest in time and divergent scales or environs in relation to consciousness. This ongoing theme is borne from a desire to broaden and deepen attention to the complexities of temporal and structural relations with other organisms in otherwise regulated, habitual human structures. Bowie has created a number of public art installations, including *Flow* (2009-ongoing), and her work has been exhibited at Western Gallery (Bellingham); Charles H. Scott Gallery (Vancouver); Vancouver Art Gallery; grunt gallery (Vancouver); and Yukon Arts Centre (Whitehorse).

Matt Browning is an artist whose work concerns time, latency, and the selective and hierarchical valuation of actions and materials. He is a member of the Seattle-based research collective Autonomous

University and has co-organized exhibitions throughout the US and Canada as a member of the curatorial collective Tarl. He received his BFA in Fibre Arts from the University of Washington (Seattle) in 2007, an MFA from the University of British Columbia in 2017, and will begin pursuing a PhD at the University of British Columbia in the fall of 2017. Recent exhibitions include the Frye Art Museum (Seattle), Western Gallery (Bellingham), the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York).

Kelly Jazvac is a London, Ontario-based artist who also works with an interdisciplinary team of scientists, writers and artists to research plastic pollution. Jazvac's recent exhibitions include *Sharp* and *Numb* at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba (Brandon); *Song of the Open Road* at the Contemporary Art Gallery (Vancouver); *Atmospheres of Form*, Parisian Laundry (Montreal); and *A Strati-graphic Fiction* at The Philip and Muriel Berman Museum of Art (Collegeville). Her work has been written about in *e-flux Journal*, *Hyperallergic*,

*C Magazine*, *The Huffington Post*, *Magenta Magazine*, *Border Crossings*, *Canadian Art*, *artforum.com*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*. She has upcoming exhibitions at Fierman Gallery (New York).

Genevieve Robertson's drawing-based interdisciplinary practice explores the material around the body and under the feet: water, oil, wind, silt, flora, fauna and mineral. Her work is informed by a personal and intergenerational history of resource labor in remote forestry camps on the west coast of British Columbia. Through recent research in the Salish Sea region and the Fraser and Columbia rivers, she has engaged with the complex relationships that are at stake when relating to land and water in the age of the Anthropocene and the context of settler-colonialism. Robertson's work has been exhibited at Touchstones Museum (Nelson); Charles H. Scott Gallery (Vancouver); and The New Gallery (Calgary).

Jay White lives on Nəxwələxəm / Bowen Island. His family home is the town of St. Bernards, Ktaqamkuk / Newfoundland. Fatherhood has deepened



White's sense of responsibility in keeping the world healthy and livable for future generations. In his work, animals, plants, stones, anthropogenic detritus and other entities offer lessons in more-than-human relations. Jay's intimate interactions with these beings are shared through oral stories, films, illustrations, photography and installations. His work and films have been exhibited internationally, including the Istanbul Design Biennial; National Arts Centre (Ottawa); and the University of Glasgow.

*List of Works*

*Longing #10 (The We Wai Kai, Warrior #1)*, 2011

Sonny Assu  
Photography  
15" x 19.25"

*Longing #13 (The Bureaucrat)*, 2011

Sonny Assu  
Photography  
15" x 19.25"

*Longing #16 (The Harbinger)*, 2011

Sonny Assu  
Photography  
15" x 19.25"

*Surface (Eels)*, 2010

Fiona Bowie  
Video  
7:23

*Surface (Little Fish)*, 2010

Fiona Bowie  
Video  
2:52

*Surface (Tiny Things)*, 2010

Fiona Bowie  
Video  
6:26

*Untitled*, 2017

Matt Browning  
Silk and linen  
2.75" diameter x 0.2" depth

*Untitled*, 2017

Matt Browning  
Silk and linen  
2.75" diameter x 0.2" depth

*Untitled*, 2017

Matt Browning  
Silk and linen  
2.75" diameter x 0.2" depth

*Untitled*, 2017

Matt Browning  
Silk and linen  
2.75" diameter x 0.2" depth

*Plastiglomerate*, 2013

Kelly Jazvac  
7 works; stone, shell, coral, sand,  
plastic  
Variable dimensions

*Watchers*, 2015

Genevieve Robertson and Jay  
White  
Epson archival gicleé print  
40" x 33"

*Watchers*, 2015

Genevieve Robertson and Jay  
White  
Epson archival gicleé print  
30" x 33"



Weiwei Chang  
An Absolute Movement

This text accompanies the exhibition of the same name curated by Weiwei Chang at the Or Gallery from June 17 to July 22, 2017.

<http://www.orgallery.org/an-absolute-movement>

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