

Towards Eco-logical footprinting.

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This presentation aims to expose the horror of these questions and concerns as we enter a new dark age, wherein technology claims to answer all our questions, yet answers in a language we can never fully comprehend, interpret or even grasp. This haptic distance alienates us from the places we live in and the people we live with and also from the places we touch without ever going there, and the people we do harm to, without ever even seeing them. It is full of contradiction, futility and hope, and hopefully manages to contradict futility.

Initially I would like to apologise to you the audience, because I am going to read from a script. But subsequently I must also apologise to the script because I am probably not going to stick to it. I just like having something to push against. I have also however, and somewhat contradictorily, become fascinated by a line from Gertrude Stein, who once stated, I know what I think when I see what I say. So this is a scripted talk that leaves room for that certain uncertainty that exists within us all, as the human tellers of stories that we are, to break into the room.

Initially then, who on earth am I and why on earth am I here, talking to you... Fair question. In the schedule it denotes that I am a Dr., and that I am going to be talking about something that is referred to as eco-logical footprinting. It feels only fair to initially point out that I do indeed have a PhD, from the University of the Arts London, that I do have some sort of specialism in some sort of something. But, well, it's probably not in what you were expecting it to be in. I confess, its complicated, doctorates should be, the short hand answer is that I have a practice based PhD in Fine Art, more particularly in walking, writing and performance. I am here because Falmouth University tasked me with enquiring into the ecological impact of festival sites, and they wanted me to do it using digital technology, but they didn't want me to enquire into the ecological impacts

of digital technology, they wanted me to use it as though it all, all these things, ran on fairy dust and were brought into being just for us by magicians or some such. I suddenly felt a bit like Dr. Malcolm in Jurassic Park, as I sat there for a moment and declaimed quietly to myself, you're all so busy with this digital technology, busy trying to figure out whether or not you could, you never stopped to think whether or not you should... and so it goes on.

So, *eco – logical footprinting*. That hyphon in the conference schedule, that hyphon on the title page behind me, just there, this one, is not a typo, nor an error, nor an outcome of printing and auto-format, it has intent, indeed deeper, more philosophical intentions for I am a Doctor of Art, and more specifically a Doctor of performance, installation and writing.

And what that hyphon is doing is highlighting the bleeding obvious, the stuff that is so obvious we forget it is even there. That words are technology, and that for the most part they are usually made up of other words by other people, and that the best way to try and understand what one is doing when one is using words to talk to someone else about anything, is to pick those words apart, to check in with just exactly what on earth we might be talking about when we are talking about something like the ecological.

The best way to try and understand a word, is often to translate it. To break it apart and find out what is buried in the strata of its meaning, in the thousands of years and mouths and voices that echoed it down unto you over the ages.

Eco then, is from the Greek *Oikos*, a word for home, or dwelling place. So when we talk about ecology, we are not quite playing the field right because we still use words like ecology and nature primarily as a device for

othering, for talking about something that is over there, that is not me or us or you, but other, beyond. The Oxford Dictionary of Ecology for example doesn't have an entry for Human that talks about it as a creature, in those scientific terms humans exist only as agents responsible for things like *Carbon Cycle Perturbation, Management strategies, Ecosystem health impact, and Species invasion management*. No, this is not that, the sort of eco-logical thinking I am aiming to talk about requires us to acknowledge that there is no picture frame surrounding this thing we call nature, that there is no boundary between us and it, that there is no us and no it, no here and there no gap but the synaptic cleft between ideas, fizzing away toward connections we have yet to notice, leaps of understanding we have yet to make, and conventions of collective being that we are yet to grasp. Now,

*I know that I am not a category, a hybrid specialization,*

*I am not a thing – a noun.*

*I seem to be a verb –*

*an evolutionary process –*

*an integral function of the universe,*

*and so are you, and so are all these people.*

Myles Allen : Heleen de Coninck : Opha Pauline Dube : Daniela Jacob : Kejun Jiang : Aromar Revi : Joyashree Roy : Drew Shindell : William Solecki : Petra Tschakert : Henri Waisman... I must confess I edited the list to make all the names a bit more sayable, I am not a Radio 4 news reader and some words for sub-Saharan Africa simply deserve more time than I have had to learn how to say them out loud.

So these people, as you can tell, are the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, you can see them here announcing the publication of their highly readable and jovially titled *Special Report on the impacts of Global Warming above 1.5.C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways*. At the time, last October, between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> of October when the news went global for the briefest of moments, before everyone got on with their lives again, I was in a field dealing with some similarly awkward titles, *Transparent Modular Specifics: Eco-logical Footprinting: the National Productivity Investment Fund: the National Trust South West Great Outdoors Festival: Deep Adaptation*.

So lets start with that first one. *Transparent Modular Specifics* so that I can introduce you to a field in Devon before we flit between there and a conference room in Korea with the aid of technology so elaborate not a single one of us could either explain it or recreate it for another.

- *Transparent Modular Specifics* (TMS) is a *performance installation*. This is a distinct thing from either a performance or an installation, an amalgamated form of presence over time, of the space between me and you and how we co-create it, forever anew. Housed in a modular, timber-framed geodesic dome clad in opaque plastic, it features an assembly line of performers making moulds and plaster casts. An audience interface enables visitors, staff, crew and itinerants at the festival to input their data into a solar-powered tablet. The data is then processed by a bespoke algorithm that generates a number representing the physical cost in CO<sub>2</sub>e (CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent) of each individual participant.

- This algorithm has been designed by myself in collaboration with someone much more switched on than I, a programmer using research from Defra and numerous tables and databases, all stuffed full of caveat

conditions about their assumptions, terms and conditions, and takes into account how they arrived, where they arrived from and the rather more abstract question: What have you come here to do? Each question triggers calculations of approximation and discord, the hidden secrets of the new dark age.

- The assembly line staff take a physical imprint of each participant's footprint and use this to make a plaster cast. Staff then embed into the plaster cast a native sapling for planting after the festival. The species chosen will be pegged to the individual's cost as produced by the algorithm. The higher the ecological impact of an individual, the higher the carbon sequestration capacity of the tree species embedded in their footprint.

- TMS aims to be a work engaged with aesthetics in a binary with their opposite *anaesthetics*. To be aesthetic is to be engaged with all the interconnected aspects of one's being and its only presence, that of being amongst others: from the impact of your shit, to the strength of your convictions, to the burden of your server space; and your presence in a web of delicate and ultimately unfathomable interconnections across space and through time. To be engaged in *anaesthetics* is to be dead to the world.

I am not an expert, at least not in ecological impacts: it is good to be clear about things, the project title foregrounds the *Transparent* for exactly this reason. However, the dome is clad in opaque horticultural polythene to introduce an intentional quantity of contradiction, to confess to my uncertainty, my lack of expertise in a world where 'more information does not correspond to more understanding [...] rather, it confuses and

conceals, becoming a spur to further complexity'(Bridle, 2018: 184). I have, however, undertaken a postdoctoral fellowship under the umbrella of the National Productivity Investment Fund (NPIF) working with the National Trust in order to explore whether creative practice can engage festival audiences in ideas around the ecological impacts of the festival they are attending, using digital technology as a medium. The purpose of the NPIF by the way, £7billion pounds invented by Michael Gove, the horror, the horror, to improve Britain's competitive edge in the supposed forthcoming digital age.

To begin with, the basics: how do we carbon-footprint a festival? What would you need to measure and account for? When talking about ecology Timothy Morton talks of the mesh to describe the delicate interconnectedness of everything. Morton goes on to suggest that 'if everything is interconnected, there is less of everything. Nothing is complete in itself' (Morton, 2012: 33).

In other words, there is no way of extracting an individual thing from its environmental conditions and fully accounting for its physical being; there is no way of extracting an individual thing from its environment and fully accounting for its carbon output, or for its ecological impact, so how on earth should I know.

Even these guys are notoriously uncertain, the full paper, I won't say its name again as I'm short on time as it is, is available on line and each page declaims "do not cite, quote or distribute", scientists are never ready to be as certain as we expect them to be, artists however, are excessively willing to go into battle with uncertainty, certain that they can beat it. In brackets the paper occasionally says (High Confidence), (Medium Confidence) and

all these opinions are battled out. For decades the IPCC has been overtly conservative with its announcements, but it was deemed by global media to have finally gone for it in October. We woke up that Monday, exhausted from a weekend of making plaster casts of footprints and explaining to people that server space totally counts as an impact of a festival site, and no the internet doesn't run on fairy dust.

The algorithm at the heart of TMS was based on a DEFRA paper, 20205 to be precise, that offers companies solutions for carbon footprinting their product. So I appropriated this and suggested that, if my product were a festival what might I need to account for. It is the act of taking a stupid question seriously, ladies and gentlemen, which is what most art projects set out to do. And taking it very literally at that. I have consulted with Mike Berners-Lee, Tim's brother, the internet inventor, about how one might carbon footprint absolutely anything, and the excess of approximation I have come across in the data has convinced me that data is never the whole story, and that story telling is what we, as human beings, are really good at, is what we really require, is what we need in order to be able to do what we do, that we tell each other stories in order to live.

So, here's a story.

I used to work in a factory, a pyjama factory to be precise, in Snowdonia of all places, when I found this activity particularly bleak, the midwinter periods where I only saw the sunset if I stepped out of the warehouse before my shift ended, I told myself I was keeping the nation warm at night, and that made me feel a little better about it. But whilst there, in the throbbing rattling monotony of arrival and storage and relocation, I used to wonder. I am using a tool here, it has been made in a factory, and that factory, must be full of tools, made in other factories and that those

factories, must, yes, you guessed it, be full of other things, made in other factories out of other tools. It is quite simply, so hard to find the beginning, or rather it is so hard to find the beginning, and not wish to go further back. In order to carbon footprint something where do you draw your lines, and if you draw them here, or there, then you have to admit that lie, somewhere in the fine print usually, in the 'assumptions' in the 'terms and conditions'... assumptions and terms and conditions, never in all my years as an artist have I spent so much time in excel staring at assumptions and the outcomes of terms and conditions. Let's not kid ourselves, and yet that is all Defra paper 20205 seems to want to do. Draw your lines, cradle to gate, cradle to grave. Don't worry about what is outside them, not your responsibility. For every footprint, there is all of this everything to consider, and then there is time, and time is endless.

So what might you need to consider when cataloging the carbon footprint of a festival. Well there's all the POWER!

There's all the Google Docs. Yes, this didn't just happen over night we planned this!

But we've got a Carbon Neutral Website.

The food the organisers ate. They had takeaways! Twice!

They drank beer so surely the transportation and delivery and production of beer to fuel the idea...

The single-use plastic wrist bands oh my god, we've all got one!

The tunes you listened to and everything that needed to happen to let you do that...

But we're an eco Concious Site, we've got ethics.

All the me emailing you, & you, emailing me, every attachment another cigarette on the pile of our addiction,

What exactly is the ecological impact of a few people, sitting in a pub, thinking... *shall we put on a festival?*

Oh No! We got take-away for tea... shit food, air miles, the poor deliveroo driver, destabilising social conditions and labour rights.

All those instagram posts!

What electricity supplier should we use?

Cheap Sunglasses that our friend Dave bought us so we could have a groovy time, the poor chinese migrant workers.

Local bands? Foreign bands? Planes....

Fun... fun is so expensive,

What is the appropriate technology for your kind of fun? Appropriate technology is a term that used to be bandied about by the green movement, but has somehow fallen out of fashion. Under its definition technology is pretty much anything that enables one to extend out from oneself and into the world. Language is a technology, a pencil is a technology, What appropriate technology simply aims to suggest is that one needs to spend a little time considering the underlying purpose of ones activity before undertaking it, to discern what it is you really want to do, and how therefore might it best be done. Wendell Berry wrote an article in the late 90's entitled 'Why I will not buy a computer' in which he highlighted that, in ecological terms, the most efficient, and therefore appropriate technology for his writing, would not be a computer. I think he goes on to point out the most appropriate technology would be his 1956 Royal Standard typewriter, followed by his wife and a typewriter, followed presumably sometime thereafter by Penguin and Random house, and a computer, and the entire machinations of the globalized corporate grind of the publishing industry.

So eco-logical footprinting is so often about where you choose to draw the line that is barely worth having a conversation until you've drawn some circles in the sand, and subsequently accepted that they'll be washed away by the rising tide before your next debate on the subject. By which I mean to say you have to perpetually rephrase and reconsider your actions in relation to your recent steps. It cost me 21.8kg CO<sub>2</sub>e to get here from my house on thursday for example, and that's just out of the back of the train, subsequently since I got here I have eaten a mezze platter from a Lebanese restaurant, some Swedish oat milk, muesli, guatemalan coffee, and more biscuits than I would like to recall, I have been to the toilet 7 times, and used the shower once, and may even have drunk some Coca Cola... All of these things, given to me by Advanced technologies have a distinct tendency to create dependency, and they have a distinct ability to create dependency on strip mining, on colonialism, on abstracted and distant forms of pollution, subjugation and humanitarian disaster, on others and othering, the exact same othering that eco-logical is attempting to turn us away from. So let's turn momentarily to the anthropocene to conclude this exploration into TMS, that will end its days as a forest, on the side of Howton Down on Dartmoor in Devon, some one thousand years from now...

The anthropocene is fundamentally both a thought experiment and an indefatigable reality. That we are transitioning into a new global epoch, a new period of geological time, is not really in question in most geologic circles, but it is also beyond categoric proof due to the nature of deep time. So what do you choose to do with that piece of information, that you have, unbeknownst to you, and without your consent been roped into significantly changing the temporality of the planet so much so that an alien being 3 billion years from now would be able to see the change our

species has had upon the strata, but also in the depths of that, this alien being would find flints next to skyscrapers, it would not find a single trace of a particular you in the geological record. How then, in the light of this information, do you choose to spend your time. How do you find something worthwhile. To what shreds of the tattered map of civilisation do you cling to as vital new forms of generative myth and matter. What do you grasp and what do you let the wind in the deserts of the west whip from your hand. How do you have a conversation; about home, about life, about death and personal responsibility, when you have to take on the banality of social media, the juggernaut of mass entertainments, of social media riddled with fake accounts and trolling stooges, of distractions and updates, and free upgrades to levels of technology that none of us really need but many of us are convinced that we want.

But still, don't worry, this is just a story, all I can say is that you owe it to the world to do what you do best, but I'll leave the tricky part, of figuring out exactly what the fuck that might be, to you.

As for all of us at Transparent Modular Specifics, come and find us in a field, we'll be happy to approximate you a figure, and make a cast of your footprint, and we will embed within your footprint a tree, a native British tree sapling that will grow over time and absorb some of that carbon your enjoyment and your existence has expunged into the atmosphere, and we will plant that tree on Dartmoor, and you will be able to go and visit your tree, and sit beneath its shade in years to come, and think about what you've done, and maybe feel a little better about all of this, and about all of that.

Bram Thomas Arnold is an artist who started with walking and kept going into performance, drawing, installation, ecology and radio broadcasting. He is currently an honorary fellow in Digital Arts and

Ecology at Falmouth University where he is also Associate Lecturer in Fine Art, alongside this he is currently Creative Fellow in the Environment and Sustainability Institute at Exeter University. He has a practice-based PhD in walking, writing and performance from University of the Arts London and this morning he walked here from Roath.

Bridle, J., 2018. *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*.  
Verso Books, London ; Brooklyn, NY.

Morton, T., 2012. *The Ecological Thought*, Harvard University Press,  
Cambridge, Mass.; London.