

**Title**

Precipitational Learning in the Hydrocene

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### **Title**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents one aspect of my research into the role of water as a metaphor and material matter in the field of contemporary art, pedagogy and the climate crisis. It draws on the thinking of Donna Haraway, Astrida Neimanis and bell hooks among other theorists, artists and writers. Specifically, the paper reflects on the ten-day summer course for teenagers, *And Forever And*, that was held in Stockholm in August 2018. The paper expands and reflects upon the neologism that emerged from the course, that is Precipitational (Participation + Precipitation) learning. The method attempts to use 'waters' as a metaphorical and material entry point into collective thinking with the climate crisis.

### **Biography**

Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris is a Swedish/Australian curator, writer and lecturer based in Stockholm. Bronwyn is a current Ph.D. student at the department of Art +Design at the University of New South Wales researching water and art in her thesis entitled *'Swallowing the Hydrocene: Watery thinking for artistic 'response-ability' to the current climate crisis'*.

Research interests are focused upon processes of ecology in contemporary art, water as social metaphor and feminist methodologies. Working with practical learning platforms, artistic research, publications, and exhibitions, she works internationally as a curator and lecturer. She is also the leader of Researcher Collaborations at Accelerator at Stockholm University and was previously Curator at Index – The Swedish Contemporary Arts Foundation. She is also sits on the Editorial Board for the international arts journal, Oberon.

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## **Precipitational Learning in the Hydrocene**

**Keywords:** Thinking with Water, Art, Engaged Pedagogy, Hydrocene, Precipitational Learning

### **Research framework**

The project *And Forever And* was a ten-day summer course for teenagers held in Stockholm, Sweden in August 2018. *And Forever And* is the case study for this paper, which situates itself in the research intersection of art theory, curatorial practice, socially engaged pedagogy, feminist post-humanist and environmental humanities studies. The course was held at Index – The Swedish Contemporary Arts Foundation. My role at the institution was Curator of Learning, and I was the curator of the course and corresponding exhibition. Integral to this course was the work of artist and Index producer Emmeli Person, with whom I designed and executed the course.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the findings from this pedagogical art experiment and to consider the consequences of this way of working with aesthetic based propositions. The paper considers the discourses of thinking with water, as explored by feminist post-humanist and environmental humanities scholars such as Donna Haraway and Astrida Neimanis. The paper also situates the co-learning of *And Forever And* as part of bell hooks' theory of 'engaged pedagogy' (hooks, 1994) and as part of the development towards artists and curators working with durational, critical and socially orientated pedagogical projects (Bishop, 2012; Bourriaud, 2002; Valberg, 2017).

The paper will examine two new terms that emerged from the process of co-learning in *And Forever And*. These terms engage with Donna Haraway's suggestions for 'autopoiesis' (Haraway, 2016) and the creation of newly formed terms that highlight entanglement and symbiotic thinking. The neologisms I am proposing, which arose out of the practice of thinking with co-learners of *And Forever And* and thinking with water, are: the Hydrocene and Precipitational Learning. These terms conceptualise the potential for watery ways of learning, that is the learning takes place in constant movement and flux between co-learners in a vital and vibrant setting.

How do young people make futures? The course *And Forever And* would attempt to answer this with a polyvocal choir of artistic propositions and the making of multiple livable futures. It was planned to be a co-learning situation and would be held in and around Index's gallery space on the island of Kungsholmen, Stockholm. The course was the starting point for a larger exhibition about futurity, entitled *And Tomorrow And*. As the curator of the exhibition and course, I planned to do things the 'wrong way' around. Along with my colleague Emmeli Person, we planned the learning as the core of the exhibition, rather than as an addition to the exhibition that comes once the exhibition has opened. We planned for the summer course to be a rich and fertile meeting ground for the young people to meet: each other, theory, complexity, criticality and art. Together we hope to offer the group some ways of thinking-with art to confront the climate crisis and build multiple livable futures together.



*And Forever And* in progress at Index, Stockholm, August 2018. Photo credit: Emmeli Person

### **Lära tillsammans**

Language has the capacity to shape cultural systems. In the context of *And Forever And* the Swedish language presented a term: 'lära tillsammans', which literally translates to 'to learn and to teach together'. Within this way of using 'lära' there is no distinction between student and teacher: instead it holds the multiplicity of learning and teaching within it. I found this a powerful offering from the Swedish language and

I used the term as a core part of my thinking around how to develop learning environments in this context.

The summer course was also designed around principles of bell hooks' 'Engaged pedagogy' (hooks, 1994). hooks tasks teachers with 'self-actualisation', meaning that teachers of engaged pedagogy actively commit to; empowering students, undertaking radical listening, caring for the souls of the students and also growing as people themselves. We employed elements of this holistic model of learning in *And Forever And*. The course was developed around difficult and sensitive material, such as ecological catastrophe, interconnected planetary ecologies and what young people demand of this future. With these sensitive issues at play, it was important to employ a pedagogical setting that was caring, responsible, energetic, open and able to create an environment where all participants – such as visiting artists, interns, teenagers, Index team – worked collectively as co-learners. We attempted to move beyond singular authorship. This was an experimentation in the practice of 'lära tillsammans'.

### **Examples of socially engaged pedagogies of art**

This type of artistic pedagogical experiment sits in the fields of social practice and relational aesthetics. *And Forever And* was informed by artists' projects such as Annette Kraus, *Sites for Unlearning* at CASCO (Kraus, 2014). This long-term collaborative and participatory project sits in the intersection of daily life, art, theory and politics. It also draws on intersectional feminist and environmental activism such as the work of eco-sexual artists and activists Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, whose films were exhibited in the course and exhibition. The work of *Open School East* in Margate, UK which started in 2014 and artist Tania Bruguera's *Hannah Arendt International Institute of Artivism*, in Havana, Cuba, which started in 2015, are both excellent examples of projects that delve into the socially engaged pedagogies of art. Another example is the art and community research project in Norway called *Being-with*, led by Tony Valberg, which traverses some similar territory to *And Forever And*. Valberg summarises the shift over the last twenty years towards artists breaking away from making things, into making things happen, with the seismic shift in artistic practices moving from 'what is reflected to what is produced' (Valberg, 2017).

### **The co-learners in *And Forever And***

To participate in the course, people aged 16-21 were invited to respond to an open call. The open call explained that the course was ‘Led by the Index learning team and visiting artists, the course will question how young people see the future...the course examines themes of political ecology, science fiction, climate justice and intersectional futures.’ (Bailey-Charteris, 2018b) It was free to participate and was funded by Index’ ongoing public funding and as part of a special grant from the Swedish inheritance fund, Allmänna Arvsfonden. There were around 40 applications, mostly from Stockholm based young people who were previously involved with Index’ youth-centered learning programs.



*The Urge, The Echo: Reverberations of Learning Practices* in progress at Index, Stockholm, November 2018. Photo: Emmeli Person

The course began on August 1 2018. Over ten days, through artistic experiments we attempted to collectively dissolve the boundaries of student and teacher, nature and culture, hope and grief. Each day we followed the same pattern of meeting an artist or artwork in the morning, cooking and eating lunch together, and then performing artistic experiments in the afternoon. With text and language as a central focus of the course, the participants developed collective performance and text based pieces. The model drew on the philosopher Isabelle Stengers offering of ‘reciprocal capture’ (Stengers, 2011) which presents knowledge exchange as a state of reciprocity, in

which a process of encounter and transformation find ways of coming together. The state of 'reciprocal capture' was a central way of working in the summer course. The course led into a large exhibition and extensive public program, *And Tomorrow And*, also held at Index from August 25 to November 25, 2018. It also eventuated in a three day seminar for artists and educators, called *The Urge, The Echo: Reverberations of Learning Practices in Art*. The seminar tested out the methods that we had co-developed with the teenagers for thinking through climate and art entanglements.

### **The Young Are At The Gates (and this time the gates are burning)**

When we met on the first day of the summer course, August 1 2018, Sweden was on fire. Sweden was experiencing the hottest summer in 262 years and fires spread from the Arctic Circle to the south (Watts, 2018). On this first day we gathered and spoke about the fires for a long time. It was all that we could speak about. It was the same fires and Sweden's hottest summer on record, which also inspired Swedish teenage activist Greta Thunberg to strike. She first sat outside the Swedish parliament, which is about a 10 minute walk from Index, on August 20, 2018. This hot summer and the unprecedented fires were the catalyst for the young people in *And Forever And*, for Greta Thunberg and for myself as a curator, to say it is time to act. The passion of the young people in the group reminded me of a poster I had seen from the Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Monument in Washington is a hand sewn banner, neatly stitched on a cream background, it reads: 'The Young Are at the Gates'. In 1917 Suffragist and poet Lavinia Dock created and carried the banner. Now 101 years later, the fires and the passion of the young people in *And Forever And*, showed me that The Young Are At The Gates, again, and this time the gates are burning. For myself, the embodied experiences of feeling the climate crisis firsthand had set in motion purposeful practices to link art, artists, theory and the climate crisis together through curatorial strategies.

### **Oceans of Ocenés workshop**

One of the core workshops in the course was *Oceans of Ocenés*. The workshop was informed by the cacophony of theorists and writers who have been actively critiquing the term Anthropocene as a limited, human centric term that did away with the complexities of more-than-humans, capitalism or colonialism, for example. Art historian TJ Demos articulates these concerns precisely in his short book, *Against the Anthropocene* (Demos, 2017), as does prominent author Naomi Klein in her 2016 Edward Said lecture, *Let Them Drown* (Klein 2016). Donna Haraway articulates her

objections to the Anthropocene as a term to think with, when she states, 'The myth system associated with the Anthropos is a setup, and the stories end badly. More to the point, they end in double death; they are not about ongoingness' (Haraway, 2016). These thinkers provided an entry point for the collective artistic experiments for *And Forever And*. Across these texts there was a repeating call for artists 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016) and to complicate the naming of the Anthropocene. There seemed to be a call to use the methods and tools of artistic practice to trouble the term. The workshop, *Oceans of Oceans*, was one of the most direct 'troubling' tools of the course.

We began by sharing a selection of artworks and texts that are concerned with questions of naming and language, such as artist Uriel Orlow in his five channel audio piece *What plants were called before they had a name* which was first shown at the 2017 Sharjah Biennale (Orlow, 2017). Orlow is a well-established international artist who has been dealing with ecological issues in his extensive artistic research since the 1990s. For the summer course, the artist generously allowed us to share this work in the course (even when that work has never been shown in Sweden). The audio work has a chorus of voices reciting an oral plant dictionary of indigenous South African languages including Khoi and isiZulu. It is powerful to hear the voices recite the Indigenous plant names that were replaced through harsh colonial structures by Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus' system of classification. Alongside listening to this work, we collectively read the 1985 short story, *She Unnames Them*, by Ursula Le Guin. Le Guin fabulates a world where animals and creatures retire their collective names. No more 'dogs', 'cows', 'blow fish'. She writes that some creatures such as whales, dolphins, seals and otters 'consented with particular alacrity, sliding into anonymity as into their element' (Le Guin, 1985); however, the yaks take considerable time to agree. A critique of the Linnean method of categorizing appears in this work as well when the insects, fish, cattle and swine break free from the 'Linnaean qualifiers that had trailed along behind them for two hundred years like tin cans tied to a tail.' The audio work and text together presented powerful occupations of a place where names are able to operate outside the rigid and colonial boundaries set by the Linnean method of categorisation. Sharing these works with the group opened to a collective thought experiment in what Deleuze and Guattari call 'depersonalization' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

The second stage was a set of word-based experiments, where I introduced some terms of the Anthropocene – anthros, -ocene, technocratic, capitalocene, pyrocene,

anthropocentric thinking, chuthulecene and cyborg. In this exercise we divided and multiplied words and tried to look at the fleshy qualities of the terms. It was an experiment in understanding how words emerge and connect to political and ethical concerns. For example, the colonialist erasing of Black histories in the Anthropocene, as expressed by Kathryn Yusoff in her book, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*: 'The Anthropocene as a politically infused geology and scientific/popular discourse is just now noticing the extinction it has chosen to continually overlook in the making of its modernity and freedom' (Yusoff, 2018). The word-based experiments that took place in this part of the workshop attempted to play with sympoiesis and unfold new combinations of existing words. We were making a glossary for multiple futures.

The third part of the workshop was led by Emmeli Person and artist Ulla-Britta Westergren. Inspired by Jane Bennett's book *Vibrant Matter: A Political economy of things* (2010) we went out into the streets and collected different materials. We then worked through a process of what Annette Kraus calls 'unlearning' (Kraus, 2012) by decategorisation. The participants carefully 'unlearnt' what each material seemed to be – through cutting, mixing, mashing and moulding. Over a matter of days, new components were added such as yoghurt or moss to different mixtures. Collectively we as a group then tried to recategorize the new materials together into new symbiotic and lively arrangements. These new categories offered a certain agency to the non-human, seeing these materials as part of Bennett's entwined web of vibrant matter, where 'to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself. Such an enlightened or expanded notion of self-interest is good for humans' (Bennett, 2004).

The final stage of *Oceans of Ocenec* was to bring the different streams of experimentation with matter and language together. The newly entangled materials met the newly constructed words, and together we playfully named the materials. We were grand in our intentions and chose to see the compost of words, ideas and materials as part of a new geological era we were in the process of describing. A new layer of deep time sediment.

Together in this process we arrived at many new names for the current epoch, including:

Industriocene, Stressocene, Avocadocene, Technocene, Googleocene, Flightocene, Youtubeocene, Egocene, Tempocene, Disconnectocene,





*Ocenes of Ocenes* workshop in progress at Index, Stockholm, August 2018. Photo: Emmeli Person



*Ocenes of Ocenes* workshop in progress at Index, Stockholm, August 2018. Photo: Emmeli Person



Installation view from exhibition, *And Tomorrow And* at Index, Stockholm, August, 2018. Photo: Johan Wahlgren

### Forming the Hydrocene

Through this collective workshop of *Oceans of Ocenés*, I myself experienced what bell hooks calls 'self-actualisation' in the context of engaged pedagogy. hooks writes 'a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process' (hooks, 1994). While hooks writes about the teacher, I experienced this growth as a curator. Following *And Forever And* I returned to the terms we created together such as Avocadocene, Emergocene and Egocene, and found solace in the new 'ocenes' as the unfolding climate crisis escalates.

Following the workshop *Ocean of Ocenés* I created the neologism of the 'Hydrocene'. The term is understood as a noun and a verb. The Hydrocene offers a framing of a specific curatorial practice that recognises the connection between artistic practice and the climate crisis, through thinking with water. The Hydrocene emerged as a name for the watery connections among bodies, artists, intersectional feminism, the climate crisis, collaborators and co-learning. The Hydrocene is one of the many *Oceans of Ocenés*. It does not ask to be the only 'ocene', nor does it want to be. It is part of what Astrida Neimanis calls 'hydro-logics' in her 2017 essay, 'Water and Knowledge' (Neimanis, 2017b). The Hydrocene is a way of understanding

curatorial practice through water. The Hydrocene acts as water does – relational and collaborative.

As a curatorial tool the Hydrocene is both materially and metaphorically made by and with water. The Hydrocene can follow waters logic of ever shifting states. The Hydrocene can follow the links between artists, their work and the complex watersheds who sustain them both. The Hydrocene is a way of understanding curatorial practice within broader urgent social and political questions of the climate crisis and extreme weather. In announcing the Hydrocene as a watery name for these times, I aim collectively to examine cyclical and recurring ways of thinking and being in art and learning practices. The Hydrocene gestated in the *Oceans of Ocenés* workshop and the vibrant co-learning environment of *And Forever And*.

### **Precipitational Learning in the Hydrocene**

As the gestational milieu of *Oceans of Ocenés* led to the formation of the Hydrocene, it also led to the development of a second term, Precipitational learning. A coming together of participation and precipitation. The term proved useful for understanding the intimate connection of art and knowledge in engaged pedagogical settings. The word departs from a troubling of the term ‘participation’. From the 1990s onwards there was a shift towards social practice in contemporary art (Bishop, 2012; Bourriaud, 2002). Participation was often celebrated as the highest merit of these kinds of art projects. However, Claire Bishop in her book *Artificial Hells* from 2012 critiqued the concept of ‘participation’ as part of the complex and dynamic power structures within these types of practices. With Bishop’s critique in mind, in *And Forever And*, participation was always in co-habitation with other ways of being and knowing.

These other ways of knowing are vast. One such area of study is the term ‘thinking with water’. Thinking with water exists across many fields including Indigenous studies, feminist post-humanist studies and environmental humanities. This tide of thinkers is turning towards water as a way of understanding social, political, ethical, metaphorical and material questions about the times we are living in (Chen et al, 2013). Eloquently described by Astrida Neimanis, she explains ‘Water has other manners of being and becoming, other movements and ways of organizing bodies, from which we might also learn’ (Neimanis, 2017). She describes these aqueous modes as ‘planetary hydro-logics’ and lists communicator, conduit, memory-keeper, lover, scribe, alibi, genealogist and saboteur as possible hydro-logics that water can

teach us. Beyond the metaphorical ideas of what water can teach us, Neimanis insists that hydro-logics are embodied and visceral through daily interactions with (and as) living bodies of water.



*The Urge, The Echo: Reverberations of Learning Practices* in progress at Index, Stockholm, November 2018. Photo: Emmeli Person

Thinking with water shared its thinking to *And Forever And*. This is where the connection to rain, and the term precipitation arrives. The rain was missing in Stockholm that hot summer. The rain was not experienced by the group. The lack of rain was experienced emotionally, politically and artistically within *And Forever And*. Without the rain, the group had a collectively heightened awareness of the unfolding climate crisis and their bodily connection to it. In this way, participation and precipitation led to an embodied experience of hydro-logics for the group. With a certain generosity from everyone involved, the course become a home for Precipitational learning. Precipitational learning is a hopeful act, a method for thinking collectively and with waters.

The Swedish wildfires of 2018 set in motion a set of unlikely thought processes and actions. For teenage activist Greta Thunberg it meant striking for futures, alone at first and then followed by millions (Taylor, 2019). For myself, they led me back to the

water, back towards a watery collective – a place where it might be possible to ‘lära tillsammans’ towards more livable futures.

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