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Climate Aware Creative Practices: Towards a Collective Pedagogy

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Introduction

This paper presents the preliminary research of the Climate Aware Creative Practices (CACP) working group, formed within the Fine Art Department at Monash University in 2021. The group comprises Tara McDowell, Helen Hughes, and Terri Bird, with research assistance from Lauren Burrow and Grace Slonim, and advice from Peta Clancy, Associate Dean Indigenous in Monash's Faculty of Art Design and Architecture, regarding Indigenous ways of knowing and caring for Country. Between us we bring to this project experience of teaching across practice-based, curatorial, art historical and theoretical courses, as well as research interests in the material, social and historical forces that bear on creative practices. This paper draws on the primary research we have undertaken over the course of 2021 and 2022 in the form of interviewing a number of art and design school educators from Australian tertiary institutions about whether and how they are embedding climate justice values in their curricula.

Our shared motivation in undertaking this research is to develop ways of responding to the growing anxiety experienced by students—but also staff—grappling with the challenges of living with increasingly extreme environmental changes and the destruction of ecosystems. While we are not in a position to offer tangible pathways to improving planetary health, nonetheless we feel it is incumbent on us to provide students with ways to understand these challenges and to foster practices that respond to the multiple impacts of climate crisis.

The challenge of developing climate-aware creative practices was brought into focus for us by Kate Hill, a PhD candidate in Fine Art at Monash University who is investigating the entanglements of soil in her ceramics-based practice. While the answer to the question of a material's origin is relatively straightforward, in terms of tracing the source of the clay to a quarry or mine, whether it be in South Australia or elsewhere, the problematics of asking the question is not. As Hill quickly realised, simply asking 'where does the clay come from?' raises a whole suite of further

questions, including: whose land did it belong to, what impacts did it shed as it passed through its supply chain, and where will it end up after it has served its current purpose?

Art practices are necessarily intertwined with the deployment of material accumulations—of what is beneath our feet, what is extracted from it, and how it is mobilised. At its most basic, the use of any material exposes the unequal distribution of both the benefits and costs arising from the mobilisation of matter. It is not enough to address the effects of climate crisis without also reflecting on the conditions that have given rise to it. As such we recognise the climate crisis as an amplification of the intersection of the legacies of colonisation, resource extraction, and consumption patterns driven by overproduction at the core of capitalism. Philosopher, anthropologist, and member of the Karrabing Film Collective, Elizabeth Povinelli goes to the heart of this problem by examining the modes of human sociality that are underpinned by an uneven distribution of all that is necessary to sustain human forms of life, an injustice which First Nations and colonised peoples have been suffering for centuries (Povinelli 2021). Her argument is based on the recognition that a continuance of the so-called good life for some has been based on the dispossession of others. What Povinelli foregrounds is the importance of understanding and acknowledging history in comprehending the sedimentation of relationality. In making this argument, Povinelli reflects similar ideas expressed by the Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood in the late 1990s and early 2000s, notably her 'Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling' (Plumwood 2008), which encourages a 'multiple place consciousness' (p. 147).

While there is nothing new in highlighting the uneven distribution of opportunity, wealth, or freedom, it is important to reiterate different perspectives that testify to the continuing and growing divide. The exploitative nature and deeply catastrophic effect of industrial capitalism on the Indigenous peoples of the world is also noted by celebrated Australian Indigenous author and activist Tony Birch. He writes, 'The Anthropocene grew out of rapid industrialisation coupled with the rise of capitalism and global colonisation. It was made possible by the exploitation of particular societies and cultures—Indigenous people and peasant cultures, to name two—by those seeking to expand and profit at the expense of others' (Birch 2015). The challenge for creative practices is to grapple with the uneasy relationships that underpin the long and complex histories that sustain a symbiosis between capital and power, at the same time as excluding First Nations' sovereignty and equality.

As non-Indigenous academics, working within an institution premised on the production and distribution of knowledge, we appreciate the need first and foremost to rethink our practices of inquiry. For some time, Indigenous scholars have been calling for a transformation of research methodologies practiced in academic institutions (Martin 2017). For example, Kombu-merri Elder, philosopher and academic Mary Graham underscores the custodial ethic underpinning Indigenous research methods. The theoretical model that emerges from this approach, she writes, ‘stresses the moral nature of physicality (especially land) and the need for relationality and interconnectedness with all life forces’ (Graham 2009 p. 71). Graham argues for the need for multiple knowledge systems to overcome the residues of universalism in Western approaches to inquiry, in which inquiry predominately precedes place and produces knowledge that is indifferent to different times and contexts. Contrary to this approach, foregrounding place gives importance to context and interaction in the production of knowledge. As Graham writes, ‘For Aboriginal people, Place is epistemologically and ontologically central to notions of action or intent. Not only history but meaning arises out of Place, whether Place is geographically located or an event in time’ (Graham 2009 p. 75). Emphasising Place as that which ‘defines and supersedes inquiry’ situates Place as ‘a living thing’ for Graham (Graham 2009 p. 72). It also provides a basis for thinking about the materials mobilised in art practices.

Following the lead of our Indigenous colleagues working in the Wominjeka Djeembana Research Lab, including Brian Martin and Peta Clancy, we have begun by reflecting on what connects us to the place where we live—a grounded placemaking, as Clancy puts it. Relations of connectivity open up ways of understanding how we came to be where we live and the ongoing legacies of that arrival, how this place sustains us in terms of the human and more-than-human assemblages, and how we do or can care for this place and its ecology. In the context of the classroom this investigation is focused on how art, art historical, and curatorial practices enable these questions to be asked, explored, and reflected upon.

It is also our intention to acknowledge the affective dimension of both the unsettling dimensions of climate collapse and the potential ways of responding to that collapse. Recognising the emotional entanglements of living with climate crisis, we draw on the recent research of Blanche Verlie, who advocates for the importance of *feeling*

climate ‘as a serious and powerful mode of engagement’ (Verlie 2022 p. 2). Verlie highlights the embodied and visceral character of living with climate that is inherently affective—experienced as forces and intensities. These feelings combine the guilt and fear induced by this existential crisis that also hold the potential for transforming anxiety into action.

Research process and findings

In our approach and goals, we have been inspired by three precedents. First and foremost, Monash’s Wominjeka Djeembana Research Lab, led by Brian Martin, who was also MADA’s inaugural Associate Dean Indigenous. With the help of colleagues, such as Desiree Ibinarriaga Hernandez, Martin implemented faculty-wide staff training in MADA on how to add Indigenous recognition, content, and ways of knowing to our curricula. Following this training, which included discussions with Indigenous scholars from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand who shared their approaches and experiences of art making, staff were invited to review their units and consider how their learnings could be incorporated. Martin is also one of the authors of The Australian Indigenous Design Charter, which aims ‘to help facilitate accurate and respectful representation of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in design and associated media’ (Kennedy et al., 2016 p. 7). We are interested in drawing on both of these models—teacher training and a collectively authored, ‘live’ charter—as potential tools for supporting the teaching of climate-aware creative practices in art schools around Australia.

The second example is MADA’s own cross-departmental Climate Action Taskforce, which has been working since 2020 to devise and implement action plans addressing the climate crisis across four areas: research, education, operations, and engagement. A key lesson of this taskforce has been to learn from the work and experiences already undertaken by colleagues in other institutions. Hence our invitation at the 2022 ACUADS conference to colleagues in other Australian art schools to share how they foster climate awareness amongst our various creative practices. Our third inspiration is the Climate Literacy and Action in Architecture Education project undertaken in 2021 by the Association of Architecture Schools Australasia (AASA). The project was specific to architecture education, as ours is similarly focused on fine art or visual art education (including curatorial practice and art history and theory, given that these practices are often linked and overlap). Yet there are translatable outcomes within the project which we find compelling. These include: 1) a student and staff survey; 2) presentation of findings via a webinar and

report; and 3) an eventual project website for sharing resources, findings, and a teaching toolkit.

Recognising that within MADA's Fine Art department there were no climate-specific research groups, teaching groups, or even course offerings, we began by conducting Internet research on art schools in Australia and internationally, in order to understand what climate-aware pedagogy was already on offer elsewhere. This initial scan of the field led us to conclude that while precedents do exist, climate-related content is still not thoroughly integrated across creative degrees in an Australian context. Next, we began a series of interviews with interested colleagues at other Australian art schools, in order to understand—beyond what was presented on an outward-facing website—what work was being done, in research or teaching, around climate-aware creative practices. To date, we have conducted interviews with staff at the Australian National University, RMIT University, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, Charles Darwin University, University of New South Wales, Queensland College of Art, and the University of Tasmania. We will continue to conduct interviews as the project unfolds—particularly with schools based overseas, such as Jan van Eyck Academie in The Netherlands, which hosts a Futures Material Lab; and Goldsmiths, University of London, with whose Critical Ecologies research stream MADA collaborated in 2022 on the hybrid symposium *Conversations with... Extractivism*.

From the interviews we have undertaken to date, we have observed a keen interest in the broad field of climate crisis on the part of fellow lecturers, who report a huge appetite amongst students as well. For the educators we have spoken with, climate crisis—and how to respond to it through teaching—is urgent, deeply felt, and overwhelming. At the Australian National University, colleagues spoke of working in or around campus buildings seriously damaged by two supercell hailstorms and still only partially repaired. Simultaneously, workshops that are considered high energy use (such as glass, bronze casting and ceramics, which require large amounts of energy to operate kilns) are considered under threat. Many lecturers feel that they are making up climate-aware pedagogy as they go along, often driven by students' concerns or individual staff research interests. At the Victorian College of the Arts, students have been active in driving collective climate discussion, bringing to that discussion a keen awareness of the need for material practices to have a more-than-human awareness embedded into them. And at RMIT University, the student union is applying pressure on the school to declare a climate emergency. Pedagogical

content is often being developed at the unit or course level, but with little overarching or coordinated effort across art schools, or dialogue with other vital disciplinary areas of knowledge. This can feel at odds with the fact that many universities have declared climate crisis as one of their central strategic research focuses for the decade—which is the case at Monash University. Across the board, there is a sophisticated understanding of climate crisis as linked to colonisation and capitalism, both historically and currently, and of pedagogy needing to reflect the deeply enmeshed nature of extractive, consumptive ideologies that govern our institutions and ways of being in the world. A common concern across all the schools is mental health, or what we might call eco-anxiety, primarily students experiencing anxiety but also a kind of creative paralysis over how to be a maker (how to have a practice) in a world with few good or ethical choices.

Future Plans

Building on this research and looking toward the future, there are four main objectives that we aim to achieve through the Climate Aware Creative Practices project.

The first is to develop a network, initially Australia-wide, of climate-aware educators working in art schools or in courses within related programs. Until very recently, we have been the connective spoke in all of our Zoom interviews with colleagues from other art schools where we have discussed approaches to climate-aware teaching. Accordingly, all the information from these diverse art schools flows towards us. We feel it is important to share this information and these experiences laterally across all the relevant institutions in a network. A network will help facilitate an Australian-wide conversation from which everyone can benefit and develop.

The second objective, which builds on the first, was to hold a workshop in February 2023 in which representatives from interested art schools can come together (in-person and on Zoom) to discuss the challenges and potentials of teaching climate-aware creative practice at the tertiary level. Over thirty participants from fourteen art and design schools from around the country participated. We invited the Indigenous poet, writer, and researcher from the Victorian College of the Arts, Tristen Harwood, to give the keynote lecture. Titled 'Sustainability is Colonialism: land trauma and settler futurity in environmentally conscious art', Harwood's lecture critiqued settler modes of sustainable practice that are not consistent with anti-colonial activism. His keynote

grounded, informed, and guided the subsequent conversations in the workshop by encouraging all participants to think about the question: what exactly are we sustaining when we practice 'sustainably'? And, to extend a metaphor that Harwood deployed in his lecture: will we green our prisons, or abolish them?

A key objective going into the workshop was to collectively co-author with the network a charter for best practice in teaching climate-aware creative practice. To do this, we sought the help of an experienced facilitator, artist and academic, Lucas Ihlein from the University of Wollongong, who led focussed group work and a discussion of the findings. We had planned to develop an initial draft document at the workshop, to be circulated amongst the network for feedback and refinement in the weeks and months following the workshop. Instead of drafting a charter, however, we revisited the priorities of the newly established CACP national network as a group, rather than having the CACP instigators dictate the terms of the network's engagement in advance. Through these discussions, the network developed three working groups, each with their own specific foci. The themes of these groups related to: i) resource sharing; ii) university garden and land management projects; and iii) the evolving research methods of CACP.

The third objective is to utilise the network as a means for sharing resources pertaining to teaching climate-aware creative practice across Australian art schools. We want to avoid reinventing the wheel: that is, investing time and resources into developing strategic plans specific to one art school or faculty, where a similar plan already exists at another. Templates—such as NAVA's recent addition of a 'Climate Adaptation and Environmental Action' section to its Code of Practice—can easily be shared and adapted for different contexts. Similarly, a climate-aware teaching module could be developed collaboratively and made available nation-wide. In addition to saving time and resources, collaborative work such as this will help enact the principle of collective action that is central to the climate justice movement. CACP network member, Katie Lee from Deakin University, has set up a Microsoft Teams group for the network, where we have begun sharing resources.

Thanks to Lauren Burrow, we have an archive of transcriptions of our interviews with each of the Australian art schools. Our fourth objective is to analyse these interviews and summarise our findings for publication. The purpose of this paper is to share findings across the network and beyond.

The Climate Aware Creative Practices project can only ever be as strong as the degree to which it is constituted of multiple and diverse voices from around the continent. We are pleased to report a very positive response to the inaugural workshop that took place at Monash University and online in February 2023, and we look forward to continuing to grow a strong network of colleagues invested in climate-aware teaching going forward.

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