

Art Education Research No. 21/2021

Barnaby Drabble

3 Questions for: Barnaby Drabble

*For his latest book, *Along Ecological Lines: Contemporary Art and Climate Crisis* (2019), Barnaby Drabble traveled across Europe by bicycle, in order to investigate various projects and initiatives by artists that engage with ecological issues in different ways. Here, the author, curator, and researcher answers three questions that each offers insights into his journey, reflecting on the potential of art education and artistic research to play an important role in the debate around the climate crisis. Beyond this, the focus is also on the potential for cultural institutions to support transformative art practices by opening themselves up to collective, activist, or “grassroots” approaches.*

You travelled through Europe by bike to visit climate art projects and initiatives. This resulted in the book *Along Ecological Lines - Contemporary Art and Climate Crisis* (2019). What criteria did you use to select the projects from the growing field of climate art that you visited, and what attracted you to them?

I selected a relatively small number of projects by artists and curators for inclusion in the book, focusing on only six projects in total. Yet, this selection represented a tiny minority of the artists who I met on my travels, and the many practices I became acquainted with during the three years of research preceding the publication. In this final iteration of my research, I quite consciously sought to avoid a survey and my selection was guided by a wish to draw attention to a specific shift that I saw in the field of contemporary art during that time. In my work as a curator and writer, since the end of the 1990s, I have always been interested in questions surrounding the social importance of art. In the introduction to the book, I describe how the projects I selected can be observed operating in the space which has opened up, where socially engaged practices have become unavoidably confronted with their environmental and ecological contexts. This is what I call a reframing; “an expansion of the ‘social’ in social engagement to include the non-human.”

Whether in the form of a boat trip down the Danube, a school for shepherds in the Pyrenees, a collection of rocks taken from a

river bed in Northern England, or a series of watercolours depicting changing coastlines, the projects I look at all involve sites, practices and dialogical processes. I was interested less in artists whose works depict, represent or symbolise crisis, and more in sited, often embodied, enquiries into the unescapable entanglement of the human and the non-human. I am specifically attracted to these kinds of practices because they are generative and interconnected rather than reductive and singular. These practices introduce us, often quite pragmatically, to ways of imagining our world differently, invoking what the artist David Haley terms 'capable futures.'

What contribution do you think art education and artistic practices can make to the climate debate?

As someone who has worked in further education in the arts for many years, I can't help but realise the huge potential for art education to be a seed-bed for new generative and interconnected practices similar to those I refer to above. Indeed, it is little surprise that the artists and curators featured in my book are all, in some way or another involved in educational projects, from the Translocal Institute established by Maja and Reuben Fowkes to Ursula Biemann's current collaboration on an Indigenous University in Colombian Amazonia. Questions of access to education, knowledge regimes and (un)learning, underlie any 'debate' about how we understand our relation to the planet's climate. Art Colleges and Universities are home to rich traditions of counter-cultural, student-led and collective learning, and as such they are promising spaces for the development of understanding and action on climate issues.

The question remains whether contributing to the debate is really the aim for artists at the present moment. If we ask ourselves on whose terms the debate is being conducted, contributing to it may be synonymous with acceptance of its essentially anthropocentric agenda and of its lack of imagination about how to invite non-human stakeholders to the table. I departed on my journey asking quite generic questions about Art's role and contribution in the face of the climate crisis and I came back asking humbler questions about art/life practices of resisting, witnessing, commoning and being present. I believe that artistic practices operate best from within a space of care and awareness of implication. These sited, detailed, timeful activities focus

on ways of 'being in the world,' before making any claims of being able to save it.

The projects presented have different institutional frameworks; for example, they see themselves as "para-institutions". From your perspective as a curator, where do you see the future development of cultural institutions, museums and galleries in this context?

In the introduction to the book, I write about the difficulty discussing the potential of environmentally engaged art practices, when the economic models and institutional frames they operate within "clearly contribute to climate change and ecological collapse rather than mitigating it." I state this without apportioning blame, because the artworld, for the most part, behaves no different to many other globalized business sectors, which operate with a clear indifference to environmental concerns. Of course, from my perspective, I wish this to change. Self-organisation, institutional critique and activism within the art field are good places to look for strategies of how this change can come about.

It is Fernando García-Dory, who describes his ongoing project INLAND as a 'para-institution' and, in the interview with Andrea Phillips published in the book he describes why he uses this term. "The para-institution" he writes "is not genre or a final form; it is more a stage in a process of transformation. The goal is to be able to create the conditions... for a transformative art – an art that breathes and has a sense of those specific contexts' practice, not just a representation. A system of local bounds and reality, not of global dispersion and figuration." It is vitally important to recognize that the most interesting artists and curators working in this field are themselves deeply critical of the values of the system they work within, while fighting for the transformative potential of the practices they engage in. In this sense they are activists.

As García-Dory explores with INLAND, in order not to be fully instrumentalized by the institutions his work is exhibited in, he creates a space within that space (a parasite), a vehicle for another set of practices with the goal of creating conditions, rather than accepting existing ones. There is nothing new in this. Artist-run initiatives, alternative spaces, free schools and critical curatorial collectives have worked for decades with similar strategies and goals. For me, any future development of our cultural

institutions has to entail a movement from a position of indifference and 'business as usual' to a clear alignment with collective, grassroots and activist production. Art institutions could do worse than aim to 'create the conditions... for a transformative art.'

CV

Barnaby Drabble (PhD), is a writer, editor, and educator with a background in curating contemporary art. His work focuses on issues of ecology and environmentalism, activism and social movements, community and sustainability, and exhibition practice and artistic research. His recent books and research projects include *Along Ecological Lines: Contemporary Art and Climate Crisis* (2016–19).