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The limits of liberal climate politics

“Eco-Visionaries”, a new exhibition at the Royal Academy, is a lesson in how not to curate the climate crisis.

BY

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win > < win by Rimini Protokoll

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The first time I saw a jellyfish, it looked like a pizza – circular, rubbery and pale, with four coloured loops at its centre that, at a distance, resembled tomato sauce. I was on a boat off the Yorkshire coast, aged eight or slightly older, and began spotting jellyfish floating on the crests of waves as we juddered through the water, bloated and translucent, with the nerve-wracking potential to inflict pain.

Jellyfish are an “indicator species”, a group that conveys the general wellbeing of its surrounding habitat. Scientists compare them to a canary in a coal mine. They flourish in polluted and warming water and their polyps grow on the hard, artificial surfaces of coastal constructions. They can withstand oxygen levels that would be deadly to fish. Viewed in an aquatic tank, drifting through illuminated water, jellyfish are transfixing. But their blooms are a signal that something is drastically out of balance.

There’s a certain bathos to the likelihood that a species with no brain and a watery bag of a body will outlive humans – the sense that we’ve become too advanced for our own good, or that amoeba-like stupidity could prove more useful to survival. In a new exhibition at the Royal Academy, “Eco-Visionaries”, Rimini Protokoll’s 2017 installation *win > < win*

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reveals itself to be a jellyfish tank. Through the screen, you realise that there are other people, in an identical auditorium, having the same experience to a different time sequence. You're forced to reflect on the fact that humans, whose brains consume far larger amounts of energy, are likely to last only a fraction of the time that jellyfish will endure on this planet.

The piece is clever, but like many of the exhibits in "Eco-Visionaries", it's an instance of lachrymose hand-wringing that fails to meet the political urgency of the climate crisis. The Royal Academy has long offered a window onto the cultural worldview of liberal Conservatism. With *Eco-Visionaries*, the establishment takes a stab at climate politics. Greeting you on entry is *Domestic catastrophe No3: La Planete Laboratoire*, a 2018 installation by Helen Evans and Heiko Hansen who together form the duo HeHe. A globe is suspended in a grainy blue aquarium cube and turns slowly on its axis. It's set to the melodramatic wail of a theremin.

The globe's slowly clouding frame captures a self-flagellating sense of despair about ominous climate forecasts. Its label laments a crisis is of our shared making: "Human-made pollution is devastating our home, planet Earth", it reads. Which humans, though? The exhibition makes liberal use of the word "we", oscillating between a gesture at universalism – we all made this, and we face it together – and the "we" who benefit from an economic system premised on environmental plunder. Though "Eco-Visionaries" claims to be "confronting the planet in a state of emergency," it appears more concerned with the elegiac sensitivities of a comfortably Western "we". Exhibits like *Domestic catastrophe* tell climate change as a parable of moral failing. In reality, environmental breakdown is a story of corporate power and unevenly distributed harm.

In *A Film, Reclaimed*, a 2015 piece by Ana Vaz and Tristan Bera, cinema clips – of a steamship dragged through a jungle, a killer whale being slaughtered and cell membranes – are interspersed with the sounds of rain and phrases spoken in French: "should we speak of globality" / "nature is a construct"; "we are the disaster" / "a return to the true polis: polysemy". After the earth has been mined, it seems, the climate crisis will be pillaged for poetic narratives and profundities. *The ice is melting – isn't that deep?* This tone of foreclosed tragedy runs throughout the exhibition and makes the climate crisis into an opportunity for affected commiserations. In reality, a collective narrative hasn't yet been written. Significantly different outcomes await societies if they proceed towards the 1.5C of warming prescribed by the IPCC, or, as currently seems more likely, 4.1 – 4.8C.

changed future, reminiscent of Star Wars or J G Ballard: of glass biomes, floating structures and desertified landscapes. Yet the future will more likely be a worse version of the present, where existing divisions of race and class are amplified as competition over scarce resources intensifies. Occasionally, we catch glimpses of political analysis in “Eco-Visionaries”: Carolina Caycedo’s 2017 *Serpent River Book*, a map printed with birdseye topography and first-person testimony, investigates the effects of dam-building on indigenous people in Colombia, Brazil and Mexico. A 2016 film by Unknown Fields explores Bolivia’s part of the lithium triangle, the area that contains more than half the world’s supply of battery element, and its significance to indigenous Bolivians.

The most effective pieces are those which respond to the exhibition’s wistful brief with actual sadness. Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg’s *The Substitute* is a powerful, artificially intelligent animation of the northern white rhino, extinct but for two females. The CGI creature anxiously stomps around the confines of its abstract white box, grunting and screeching and flickering into a pixelated version of itself. But I left the gallery feeling that “Eco-Visionaries” displayed the same melancholic indulgence common to liberal commentators turned climate catastrophists, prone to writing obituaries for political action: *the world is burning – how beautiful, how tragic*. Take Jonathan Franzen’s recent essay in the *New Yorker*, for example: “Call me a pessimist or call me a humanist, but I don’t see human nature fundamentally changing anytime soon” / “in not one [scenario] do I see the two-degree target being met.”

These accounts of environmental breakdown have a blunt futility to them, much like the signboard worn by Homer Simpson declaring: “The End is Near”. What do you say to oblique statements that refuse inquiry? Faced with imminent collapse, the tendency is to recede inwards, substituting political action with individual absolution: were you using a Keep Cup as the planet burned? After I finished the exhibition, I visited the gallery’s cafe for a drink of water and noticed a label next to its plastic receptacles: “these cups are eco-friendly”. Is this really the best we can do?

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