

EYEBEAM

Inner Climate Change: Interview with Marina Zurkow



Weights and Measures (animation), by Marina Zurkow, courtesy of bitforms gallery, nyc

Alum Marina Zurkow’s research-based work treats future ecological crises, and it does so with through a lens that is equal parts alarm and wonder. In advance of her exhibition at the Nasdaq Entrepreneurial Center—the first in a series of three that Eyebeam will be programming for the San Francisco non-profit—we spoke to her about the weird, machine-like thing we call nature in the context of climate change.

Let’s start with the basics. How do we talk about art and technology today?

Every form of art requires tools to communicate, from fire to clay to mycelium to software. I use technologies of various sorts to explore our relationships with the world. Sometimes software and animation seem like the best means—it’s a seductive, recombinant, refined, candy-like tool set. Other times, serving a handcrafted dinner that explores ecology and millions of years of geologic time is the best means. These things—the concept and its mode of transmission—should be integrated and well-considered. But no content and its technological pairing necessarily go hand-in-hand.

Your upcoming show at the Center features works that address climate change. What is the role of an artist in shaping public thought and opinion?

Art has an important place in the conversation about climate change, as it has a role in fostering

more complex, emotional dialogues about all forms of justice and equity without being didactic. Art insinuates itself on an emotional level, rather than presenting “the facts,” the “shoulds,” or asserting a political position. Art connects dots—it can point out relationships on a systems level, folding science, social science, psychology, aesthetics, and poetics into its orbit.

I can't generalize about art's role in environmental discourse because there are so many registers at work. There's activist work, geared towards enacting local or policy change. There's the work of bringing communities together to rise up against environmental and social injustice. There are people working in mindfulness, or what some of my collaborators and I call “inner climate change,” which addresses the role of the imagination in rethinking our relationships on this earth. There are people attending to policy. And a lot of work being done currently on the falsely perceived division between what we call “nature” and what we call “culture.” And so on.

I'm personally interested in creating new poetics—a multimedia language that makes climate change interesting, that sparks curiosity, and embraces the unstable or insecure aspects of living on earth.

This exhibition is being held at the Nasdaq Entrepreneurial Center as part of Eyebeam's partnership with them. Artists now have to operate with new forms of creativity. Do you see yourself as an entrepreneur?

I see myself as an entrepreneur, but not necessarily or solely in the interest of money. Money is of course part of it—getting adequate funding, having reach, supporting my studio and collaborations. I'm not as interested in scaling up as in extending this work's lateral reach.

I've been thinking about generosity models. Sharing, having room for many, and even fostering competition are all good things. Scarcity is unfortunately the model that artists and the institutional structure of art cultivated in the 20th century. The 21st century recognizes more alternatives—what constitutes creativity and for whom. There are a lot of other ways to make art and to form communities—to innovate and have influence. Those include collectives, teaching, interdisciplinary research, and new distributed production models.

The wrap-up: what do you hope viewers will take away from this exhibit?

There's no single message that I want people to walk away with from this work. The pieces in this exhibit are not message-driven, but rather ask questions about how we organize the world into our mental models. In these particular works, I was interested in challenging certain divides—between nature and culture, and between above/below ground or inside/outside constructed boundaries of ecology, time, and emptiness.

I hope people will want to spend time connecting some dots to see themselves inside of problems that are as much conceptual as they are physical.