



IMAGINATION IN AN AGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

“Though we know about climate change, we don’t know about it. It hasn’t registered in our gut; it isn’t part of our culture,” wrote the writer and journalist Bill McKibben in 2005. The statement remains almost as true then as it does today. We remain overwhelmed by the problem, but there is a way in, and it involves each of us playing our part.

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Drawing by Lauritz Meier Andersen

Nature talks to us. And for the past few decades she has been screaming in endless ways, telling us things we have not necessarily wanted to hear. So we came up with the bland name for what's been happening: "climate change" – a phrase incapable of conveying the enormity of what's in store. Meanwhile, we hear and see snippets of environmental accounts, activist mobilisations, scientific evidence and inspiring talks alongside snatches of doublespeak by climate deniers. We go about our daily lives in this parallel world of ecological dread and uncertainty, and impotent disquiet at the huge ethical issue posed by democracy and globalisation.

As a privileged person in the wealthiest part of the world, I don't feel the devastating change, yet. Global changes reach me by mainstream media, dramatized, bite-sized and with an agenda determined by the news industry's compliance with political power. I am troubled by my Western world view and have to keep reminding myself to look at the bigger picture, to keep trying to understand the structures underpinning climate change. And though I know the effects of climate change are not evenly distributed, it still demands conscious effort to identify and confront my own ignorant ideas, and to remember that visions of a sustainable future are necessary for any kind of change. The question is: how do we understand what is happening and prepare for the new world that is emerging?

"Though we know about climate change, we don't know about it. It hasn't registered in our gut; it isn't part of our culture". In 2005, in an essay titled "What the Warming World Needs Now is Art, Sweet Art," 350.org founder Bill McKibben asked: "Where are the books? The poems? The plays? The goddamn operas? (...) We can register what is happening with satellites and scientific instruments, but can we register it in our imaginations, the most sensitive of all our devices?"

Fortunately, art soon got involved. Artists the world over have increasingly taken climate change as a subject. It pops up in literature, music, theatre, performance art, slam poetry, hip-hop and visual art. And as issues of gender, race and sexuality earn the attention they have long been denied, mainstream audiences are also becoming

aware of the works of artists of every imaginable ethnic and sub-cultural background in addressing climate change and exploring alternatives to modern capitalism.

For a while now, I have been curating artistic and cultural initiatives concerning the future, transformation and climate change. My Tumblr page (newverbalizing.com) has become a strange mood-board mosaic of heroes, villains and new perspectives on post-capitalist society that either address and negate humanity's potential dark future or confirm it. Its job is to keep me awake and help me understand the human condition in its current form, which of course is nigh impossible.

Science-fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson does, however, appear to have come as close as just about anyone to such an understanding, and has written a number of richly imaginative books on time travel, global warming and ecological sustainability. According to Robinson: "We're already in it [climate change], we've already started it, and we're going to be living with it for the rest of our lives and beyond our lives into generations to come", a view shared by many scientists and researchers. "We're all in a science fiction novel that we're all writing together", he concludes. The situation of a civilisation changing so fast through the impact of new technology and that of 7 billion people on a planet that, at the current rate of consumption, can only sustain half as many is a plausible premise for science fiction. But Robinson argues that when you write science fiction, you're writing realism.

Science-fiction writers typically offer their readers a perspective on the world that they, the readers, might not have imagined. Their books describe the future and the present simultaneously. For instance, in Stanley's Robinson's latest novel, *New York 2140*, the author explores the themes of climate change and global warming by imagining life in a city now half-submerged. His treatment evokes the massive devastation suffered by the city in the wake of Hurricane Sandy in 2012. And yet, after the rough hundred years that had brought the city to its current condition, a period in which each episode of flooding was "a complete psychodrama decade, a meltdown in history, a

breakdown in society, a refugee nightmare, an eco-catastrophe, the planet gone collectively nuts", life is flourishing once again, and being the ever adaptable and endlessly innovative creatures that we are, no one bats an eyelid when a character describes semi-submerged New York as "fashionably hip, artistic, sexy, a new urban legend".

I would argue that what Robinson uncovers is what we all feel instinctively these days: that reality has become a very slippery concept, to the extent that no one really knows what is real. For artist James Bridle, known for his life-sized outdoor outlines of military drones, this fact vs. fiction divide is still in its early stages, and he predicts, for 2018, "The complete collapse of consensus reality, which is already breaching at multiple points." He notes that "Reality has never been stable or consensual, but its instability is now visible, and inescapable," and calls this the new Dark Age.

If we accept that a) truth is now a slippery concept, b) reality has collapsed, and c) real life has acquired the properties of fiction, then the next stage, the only possible next stage, is about imagining and realizing bold ideas. What is required are new modes of thinking that reshape global power structures and strategies for achieving new social and environmental justice. According to the editors of *Re-Imagining Climate Change* (2016), well-meaning people, organisations and governments – referred to in the book as "Climate Inc." – have so far lacked the imagination to tackle climate change in meaningful ways and "creatively visualise alternative trajectories that can help us cognitively and emotionally enter into alternative climate futures", and add that: "The world becomes more tone-deaf when the language switches to, for instance, questions of social justice, the distortions of capitalism, moving beyond mitigation and adaptation, and critically assessing modernity."

In one of the book's essays, "Imaginary Politics: Climate change and making the future", Manjana Milkoreit, an assistant professor from the department of political science at Purdue University, writes that "The presence (and past success) of capitalism makes it seemingly impossible to conceive of a post-capitalistic or non-capital-

istic world, especially when considering the failure of other models, such as the planned economy. Where are alternative models supposed to come from? Whose mind is capable of constructing them?" She then explores a new conceptual framework and introduces the idea of "socio-climatic imaginaries", which she deems highly necessary because "transformations require the capacity to collectively envision and meaningfully debate realistic and desirable futures. Without such a collective imagination capacity and active deliberation processes, societies lack both the motivation for change and guidance for decision-making in a certain direction of change."

Browsing online while ruminating on the above, I came across a quote that resonated with me: "*Nonfiction reveals the lies, but only metaphors can reveal the truth*" – Anonymous. My generation – and yours – have inherited a chaotic information universe of useful material mixed with multiplying political and social falsehoods, to which we've added our sense of personal guilt ('I must do something'), and it is up to us to imagine a different future and create the infrastructure necessary for bringing this about. By definition, such infrastructure must facilitate community-building, future thinking, fiction and non-fiction, activism, entrepreneurship, policy-making, science and journalism in revealing the truth. It must create the environment for art to yield the metaphors necessary for recognising truth and freedom, and allow us to function, immediately and unimpeded, according to our agency. Our vision must encompass the Earth, and we each have a role to play, whatever we are, wherever our talent lies, be that in the shaping of words, in art, in creation of whatever sort, or in community building. I find myself overwhelmed sometimes, frozen helpless by the enormity of climate change, but perhaps I'll learn to repeatedly find my entry point in the contemplation of this new infrastructure for collective imagination. And perhaps this entry point could be yours too.