COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa

FIVE

2018

Presenting it, proclaiming it: Using art to present place-based climate knowledge

Amy Howden-Chapman

THE PROCESS OF identifying climate risks, analysing their severity, sharing that knowledge throughout the affected community, and planning for ways to mitigate and adapt to such risks produces an array of complex cultural knowledge. Art and design strategies, such as exhibitions, can be used to frame this complex knowledge, making it understandable and setting out pathways for future climate action. This essay explores how such strategies can be employed, using the example of the Kei Uta Collective and their Wai o Papa/Waterlands exhibition first held at Victoria University of Wellington and later retitled *Whakatairangitia, rere ki uta, rere ki tai* (Proclaim it to

the land, proclaim it to the sea).[1] These exhibitions documented a process of wetland regeneration and the related climate adaptation plans centred around Kuku and Waikawa, a coastal farming area in the south-west Horowhenua region. The exhibition's content was developed through innovative, transdisciplinary-based practices centred around mātauranga Māori. Drawing on my conversations with Dr Huhana Smith, a member of the Kei Uta Collective, I reflect on how these research strategies, and the visual communication of the research in Whakatairangitia, rere ki uta, rere ki tai, connect to broader trends in effective climate change communication.

Smith (Ngāti Tukorehe, Ngāti Raukawa ki Te Tonga) is an artist and academic. Through a long-term collaboration with the landscape architects and urban planners, Penny Allen and Martin Bryant, and together with her community at Tahamata Incorporation Farm—a coastal farm in Horowhenua where Smith is mana whenua—Smith has helped develop a series of initiatives that seek to raise climate awareness and enable adaptation to more sustainable practices.[2] The initiatives take multiple forms, from providing tools and procedures for documenting land-use history to identifying how global climate trends will cause local impacts. What these processes share is a goal of bringing together mātauranga Māori with Western science and creative practices. Guided by the methodological approach of participatory action research, these initiatives are centred around three main activities: collecting whakapapa (genealogy),

1 The Kei Uta Research Project team includes Huhana Smith, Penny Allan, Aroha Spinks, Moira Poutama, Martin Manning, Jane Richardson, Derrylea Hardy, Murray Patterson, Abdallah Richards, Yota Kojima, and Jo Bailey. Kei Uta also acknowledges the generous assistance from iwi and hapū members of Ngāti Tukorehe and Ngāti Wehiwehi

2 Martin Bryant, Penny Allan, and Huhana Smith, 'Climate Change Adaptations for Coastal Farms: Bridging Science and Mātauranga Māori with Art and Design,' *The Plan Journal* 2 (2017): 497.

kōrero tuku iho (oral narratives), and hikoi (walking the land). As Smith describes it:

> We'[d] been doing a lot of walking on the whenua throughout a previous research project called Manaaki Taha Moana; so a lot of engagement happened there. We built on the findings of Manaaki Taha Moana research project when we set up a bicultural design studio with the Master's students at Victoria [University of Wellington]. We ran wānanga and hui, we had hīkoi, many hīkoi. Literally people walking from Ōtaki to Hōkio, and then all around Kuku and on the coast.[3]

Through these site-centred approaches to research, a wealth of information was gathered from members of the farm's board, other iwi and hapū members, and geomorphologists and ecological economists who were invited to visit and participate in studying the farm and surrounding area. The resulting exhibition, *Whakatairangitia, rere ki uta, rere ki tai*, was made up of maps and photographs of the region. These were layered with text and graphic information from the various disciplines involved in the research. The exhibition was first presented in a series of disused dairy sheds at the Tahamata Incorporation Farm; later it went to the Dowse Art Museum in Hutt City, as one element of the larger exhibition *This Time of Useful Consciousness—Political Ecology Now*.

The *Whakatairangitia, rere ki uta, rere ki tai* exhibitions were innovative in bringing together diverse stakeholders to produce and digest complex climate knowledge. Information was not delivered to the community; rather, it was generated and shared as part of an ongoing and active debate about how to best move forward with climate adaptation strategies that are ecologically

3 Huhana Smith interviewed by Amy Howden-Chapman, September 25, 2017.

sound and ensure that the land will remain economically productive in a climate impacted future. As Smith notes:

> It's all about the active dialogue or constant dialogue—always having hui, always having meetings, bringing specialists (including scientists) to the farm land or the board meetings . . . having the climate change scientist come to those hui; having the ecological economist talk to the board chairperson; running wānanga at the marae for the community and shareholders to come to; and trying to do things as visually as possible so no one was bombarded with a whole bunch of data. Eventually the data was visualised so that you could see, for example, what increased wet regions might look like on the whenua. You could see on the map; you could see it in banners. Getting the climate change scientists or the ecological economists to talk to the data, as to what it means, was key.[4]

Through linking climate action to specific geographic sites, bringing together knowledge from a range of disciplines, and illuminating the clear social and economic benefits of taking action, these exhibitions, and the research processes underlying their production, address some of the starkest challenges in communicating effectively about climate change. These challenges fall into two broad categories: first, overcoming the temporally abstract nature of climate knowledge—the fact that, although we are already feeling some climate impacts, the effects of a warming planet will be felt most intensely by future generations; and second, motivating decisive action once climate risks are better understood. I expand upon how the work of the Kei Uta Collective addresses these two issues in the remainder of the essay.

4 Ibid.

Site specificity as a solution to the geographic and temporal complexity of climate change

The abstract nature of climate change has, to date, been one of the most intractable conceptual hurdles in communicating about the climate crisis and motivating action against climate change. Rob Nixon has argued that it is the 'slow violence' of environmental disasters that makes climate communication so difficult. Nixon notes that when communicating the effects of slow violence, 'the representational challenges are acute, requiring creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long term effects'.[5] Conceptualising climate change as 'attritional' in nature, 'a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive', with 'repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales', means that identifying occasions and sites that can be meaningfully engaged with is especially important.[6]

By considering a specific site, the *Whakatairangitia, rere ki uta, rere ki tai* exhibitions bridge the psychological gap so often present in representations of climate change. When we consider where climate change occurs, its reality as *everywhere* is often transformed through a process of denial to *nowhere* (or nowhere near me). By placing the first incarnations of the exhibitions on a site where future and significant climate impacts have been mapped as inevitable, the overwhelming *everywhere* was transformed, for the viewer, to a more understandable *right here*. Further, the occasion of the exhibition and the specificity of place were used to link 'mātauranga Māori and the science of climate change'.[7] Bryant, Allan, and Smith describe this as show-

5 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), 10.

6 Ibid.

7 Bryant, Allan, and Smith, 'Climate Change Adaptations for Coastal Farms,' 497.

ing the 'potential for culturally specific methodologies and values to create a framework for collaboration [by] developing a set of culturally aligned research practices, bridging the gap between worldviews, and facilitating productive research with local Māori communities'.[8] Through the hīkoi, wānanga, and hui, observations and reflections on the sites past and present were collected. This laid the groundwork for contemplations of how sea level rise and other climate impacts would affect the site.

A second challenge to climate action is that climate change is often considered a problem of overwhelming scale. Although no single community can solve the climate crisis, all communities of all scales need to be engaged in order for sustained emission reductions to be achieved. Given that climate change is often a problem that is interpreted as too vast for any one person or community to address, prompting action is difficult unless the benefits of that action can be related back to something experienced on an individual level. As such, for people to feel adequately motivated and empowered, the ability to respond to the risks posed by climate change has to be within the capacity of the community.[9] By presenting images of how Kuku and Waikawa will look when affected by the projected sea level rise, residents were able to see the benefits of adapting farming practices so that the anticipated flooding will have less devastating impacts on sites that have ancestral significance or provide the economic livelihood for a community.

It is intuitive that climate change knowledge can be more effectively understood and acted upon when it can be linked to an affected community or place. It follows that if elements of that knowledge are generated, in part, by a community—for

8 Ibid., 498.

9 Ainka Granderson, 'Making Sense of Climate Change Risks and Responses at the Community Level: A Cultural-Political Lens', *Climate Risk Management* 3 (2014): 55–64.

example through citizen-science initiatives or participatory action research—then they can be more broadly understood and acted upon. As Shelia Jasanoff writes, given that 'Climate facts arise from impersonal observation whereas meanings emerge from embedded experience. . . . Living creatively with climate change will require re-linking larger scales of scientific representation with smaller scales of social meaning'.[10] This can be achieved through strategies where climate facts are not presented to a community, but rather are generated or co-produced by them. As climate change communications researchers such as Simon Bushell have noted, 'who conveys a narrative is vital' as members of the public are far more likely to 'believe people that they perceive as being like themselves'.[11] As such, this approach also increases the chances that climate knowledge will be trusted and affecting.

The research methods of Smith and her colleagues illuminate the interdependence between cultural, economic, and ecological issues of the land by exploring practical, culturally appropriate, adaptive, and diversified land-use practices. This is done with an end goal of preparing the community-owned land for a type of farming that is better suited to changing climate conditions. Smith has noted that 'current farming practices will exacerbate these impacts because rather than recognizing [for example] the inherent benefits of wetlands and dunes as climate change buffers, farmers tend to see them as antithetical to efficient farm management and actively seek their removal'.[12] Through exhibition form, the viewer is invited to consider a wider narrative, one in which they consider the implications of climate change for New

10 Sheila Jasanoff, 'A New Climate for Society,' *Theory, Culture, and Society* 27, no. 2–3 (2010): 233–53

11 Simon Bushell et al., 'Strategic Narratives in Climate Change: Towards a Unifying Narrative to Address the Action Gap on Climate Change,' *Energy Research and Social Science* 28 (2017): 39–49.

12 Huhana Smith interviewed by Amy Howden-Chapman, September 25, 2017.

Zealand industries and question how they should be developing in order to build long-term sustainability and resilience. Further, the work of the Kei Uta Collective brings to the fore the importance of framing climate action in a manner that highlights co-benefits—the concept that there can be a range of benefits produced through fighting climate change, from improved health to creating sustainable jobs.

Integrating a rich understanding of climate change and its impacts into climate communication frameworks can leave communities more prepared and engaged to adapt to coming climate risks and can also help generate public support for mitigation strategies. In cases such as that presented in the *Whakatairangitia, rere ki uta, rere ki tai* exhibitions, localised, embedded knowledge of the current effects of climate change can help build broader public understanding around the need for rapid reductions in global carbon emissions. Further, the embedded experiences of negotiating adaptation processes may alleviate the temporal isolation that has, to date, often denied the connection between climate action and wider socio-political processes. Through 'applying concepts of subjectivity, knowledges, and authority to the analysis of adaptation',[13] attention can be directed towards understanding and confronting the 'slow violence' of climate change. This will enable communities to avoid decision-making structures that reproduce vulnerability over time.

13 Siri Eriksen, Andrea Nightingale, and Hallie Eakin, 'Reframing Adaptation: The Political Nature of Climate Change Adaptation,' *Global Environmental Change* 35 (2015): 523.

If you like what you have read, please subscribe or donate.

COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa

© Copyright Counterfutures 2018