Cabbages, Crumble and Sky Talk: Environmental and Planetary Issues in Art—Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract
The article describes changed approaches to environmental art in the face of our changing environment. Susan Ballard's *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene: Planetary Aesthetics* (2022) and Janine Randerson's *Weather as Medium: Toward a Meteorological Art* (2018) propose that changed environmental conditions require, and are generating, new subject matter and new ways of making art. Their ideas are discussed in relation to an early example of public art, Barry Thomas's *Vacant Lot of Cabbages* (1978), and works chosen from the oeuvre of Marilynn Webb (1937–2021), who saw her art as acts of spiritual and political protection of the land. The writing of Bridget Reweti in the recent exhibition catalogue *Marilynn Webb: Folded in the Hills* (2024) casts new light on Webb's engagement with Māori understandings of the land.

Preamble

The role of art in generating and embedding changed understandings of the world is significant. Feminist thought challenged a major subject matter, the nude, demonstrating that its conventions supported and extended the subjugation of women. Landscape genres assisted colonial power. Today, anthropogenic changes to the physical environment are also altering understandings of the role of the human in relation to that environment, a concern increasingly found in artworks. Widely studied by art theorists, Michel Foucault's concept of the "episteme" has been applied to the emergence of the idea of the Anthropocene. Often described as an historian of ideas, Foucault, in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, proposed that systems of knowledge and their relations within a society become naturalised, until they seem to be "the pure experience of order and of its modes of being."[1] Foucault suggests that epistemic transformation therefore occurs through changes in the systems of knowledge that define the horizons of what can be thought and known. Today's climate destabilisation requires new ways of thinking about human relations with nature, particularly as these underpin economic, political and social systems. The notion that the term Anthropocene reflects the emergence of a new episteme is now common in many academic fields.[2]

In the early years of this century exhibitions focusing on environmental issues began to engage with climate change and art/science projects were given new relevance. By its second decade, the subject of climate change in the environmental arts and humanities was inflected with, or replaced by, the notion of the Anthropocene as understood within cultural theory, centred on challenges to the ontological distinction between nature and human culture.[3] These challenges resulted from the situation that the term Anthropocene was designed to describe: the irrevocable changes to planetary and ecological systems caused by human activity. As well as climate change, these include the prevalence of plastic, nitrogen, radio-active material and other pollutants, and the extinctions resulting from desertification, deforestation and the acidification of the oceans.[4] The association between environmental protesters and artists forged in the late 1960s and the 1970s led to new developments in the public and political roles of art. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the passage toward decolonisation entailed engagement

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between Pākehā and Māori systems of knowledge, particularly those associated with the environment and its care.

The Anthropocene as an Emergent, Interdisciplinary Concept

The Anthropocene is an interdisciplinary concept both in its development within the Earth Sciences and in its subsequent adoption within the Humanities.[5] In 1999, the already existing term was proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer to denote the change from the relatively stable climate of the Holocene—that is, the past 12,000 years—to a period of climatic instability.[6] Thereafter it gained increasing specificity in the field of stratigraphy, until the recent decision that no single demonstration of anthropogenic influence in the planet's crust was sufficient to identify it as a geological period.[7] Within the environmental humanities the cognate *anthropos*, or human, was challenged as too inclusive and questions of causality generated many alternatives. The two most commonly cited are Jason W. Moore's "the Capitalocene," recognising capitalism's dependence on and abuse of environment and social resources, such as wood and coal, as well as reproductive, domestic and slave labour, and Donna Haraway's "Chthulucene," which applied the concept of entanglement to hitherto distinct ontologies and species.[8] T.J. Demos and others argued that by celebrating the power of the human, the term Anthropocene licences destructive geoengineering.[9] Of particular interest to Aotearoa New Zealand, the concept of the Anthropocene has been critiqued as offering yet another generic and colonialist model.[10]

A relevant early curatorial project in Aotearoa New Zealand was *Among the Machines* at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2013, curated by Susan Ballard and Aaron Kreisler. Artists were asked to contribute an existing artwork and complement this with a new work that considered Samuel Butler's dystopian critique of the impacts of mechanisation in his novel *Erewhon*, set in the Southern Alps during the first years of colonisation.[11] This exhibition's purpose was to show works that interrogated the imbrication of technological development with changing notions of nature, encouraging the viewer to "rethink . . . our relationships with technology, fiction, land, animals, nature and each other."[12] Ballard's ongoing interest in the issues that informed this exhibition led to the publication of *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene: Planetary Aesthetics* in 2021.[13] Building on this growing bibliography, at the Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery, Ballard and Sophie Thorn curated *Listening Stones Jumping Rocks* (20 November 2021–27 March 2022) and *Folded Memory* (18 November 2023–24 March 2024), two exhibitions that locate Ballard's perspectives within the context of recent art in Aotearoa New Zealand, the first with a focus on geological memory, the second on new understandings of the sentience and community-building capacity of plant forms.[14]

Artist and art historian Janine Randerson, who engages more directly with an art/science approach and with public art, published *Weather as Medium: Toward a Meteorological Art* in 2018, after earlier publications in *Leonardo*, and ongoing art and research projects throughout Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere.[15] Randerson investigates the ways artists have worked with the direct and indirect experience of the weather that is our daily engagement with climate change through the technologies that record and measure it. She also maintains an active art practice, often in collaboration with communities dealing with the results of climate change. In *Ngā raraunga o te Mākū: te hā o Haupapa*, at Blue Oyster Project Space, Dunedin, in 2023, Randerson collaborated with sound artist Rachel Shearer, Māori narrator Ron Bull, scientist Heather Purdie and data visualiser Stefan Marks on a project in which live data from the Haupapa Tasman glacier acts on digital recordings of its movements and meltwaters to select and relay recordings relevant to the existing conditions. The artists see this process as conveying the voice of Haupapa.[16]

Importantly, for both Ballard and Randerson, the bicultural nature of Aotearoa New Zealand entails the requirement to acknowledge the cultural and spiritual understanding of the land as a living force, as recognised within Te Ao Māori. Recognition of the difference between the approaches to the environment within Indigenous thought and those within economic systems is a consistent thread in discussions of environmental change.

Relating to the Anthropocene: Susan Ballard's *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene: Planetary Aesthetics* (2022)

Ballard says of the Anthropocene and its problematic dating: "It is not that any particular moment defines the Anthropocene, it is the uneven collectivity of the human that does it; the messy force of a species that has constructed an environment that is only temporarily suitable for habitation."[17] Extending Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's call to view our world in planetary rather than global terms, Ballard argues for art's place in this challenge.[18] She suggests that art's role might be to reflect a new "order of relations through which the art object reveals its multispecies and geological frame."[19] A disquieting instance of the order of relations such a position might offer is Trevor Paglen's *Trinity Cube* (2016), which melds Trinite, a radioactive by-product of the initial experiments with nuclear power in Arizona, with irradiated glass from the Fukushima Exclusion zone half a century later. The work registers the impact of the 2011 Fukushima earthquake and tsunami on the domestication of the nuclear power that had destroyed the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki soon after the Arizona tests.[20] This conceptual artwork, made of real things that enact its subject matter, cannot be experienced live; viewers see it via live-streaming from the Exclusion Zone, where it sits in a home that can never again be inhabited by its owners. Ballard says of it: "If natural disasters are never isolated events, but instead moments that form equivalences that create social, cultural and technological catastrophes; then this is where art needs to be."[21]

In her initial chapter on the Holocene, when nature was a relatively reliable backdrop to human flourishing, Ballard cites theorist Michel Serres's account of Francisco de Goya's *Duel with Cudgels* (1820–23). Serres describes Goya's painting in terms of its contrast between the preoccupations of human protagonists who ignore the natural world that will render their struggle irrelevant. Serres wrote:

> Yet quicksand is swallowing the duellists; the river is threatening the fighter: earth, waters and climate, the mute world, the voiceless things once placed as a decor surrounding the usual spectacles, all those things that never interested anyone, from now they thrust themselves brutally and without warning into our schemes and manoeuvres. They burst in on our culture, which never formed anything but a local, vague, and cosmetic idea of them; nature.[22]

By the time of the painting, coal-based industrialisation was already destabilising relations between labour and capital, and the limitations imposed by the natural world seemed to have been overcome. Yet Goya suggests otherwise. Emergent system change is subtle and, as this example suggests, attention must shift to the unobserved. Given that a prominent aesthetic trope for engagements with dramatic atmospheric conditions has been that of the sublime, Ballard suggests: "It seems the Anthropocene is possibly the right time to abandon our ongoing attachment to the generalising forces of the sublime and replace them with a concept of planetary aesthetics grounded in specificity of the order of relations, for to do so, we shift our assumed relations to nature."[23]

Ballard offers us examples of artworks in dialogue with Serres's "voiceless things," conceptual artworks that reconfigure found objects and systems to draw attention to their active role in our assumptions. She tends to choose installations that are designed for public consumption in galleries, rather than for private ownership. However, recent painted allegory is also present within her project. Bill Hammond's bird/human images, in the cool misty environments of the southern oceans, bind human and non-human together in the mythological forms that express relationships in less industrialised cultures and are untethered from the world of mere real things.[24] Ballard implicitly suggests that the Anthropocene is best engaged with through the digital technologies that are central to today's knowledge systems. So where does her argument leave the older arts? Her discussion of Hammond's paintings of bird/humans suggests an answer: their entanglement as both bird and human reflects a continuum from the earliest attempts to convey relationships between species, where the grief of extinction is experienced through the sense of relationship. Art that celebrates nature, mourns its destruction, allegorises or anthropomorphises its qualities and records its characteristics, generates, intentionally or otherwise, a sense of the human's ambiguous power within that relationship.

In her final chapter, Ballard describes artworks that engage with the turbulent movements of the earth itself, the zone that the sublime might have dealt with, in terms of the ways humans experience them. In her discussion of David Haines and Joyce Hinterding's *Geology* (2015), a work exhibited in Ōtautahi Christchurch after the earthquakes of 2010 and 2011, she describes how the "visitor stands on a circle of black carpet and, using exaggerated gestures and movements, read by a Microsoft Kinect motion controller, flies through the environment prospecting for minerals."[25] The visitor, who is more than a viewer because more senses than sight are engaged, activates field recordings of the aftershocks recorded "during the time the earth settled into patterns of movement."[26] The visitor thus gains, through sonic vibration and sight, a site-specific experience of the planet's geological expression that is experienced somatically as awe, a fundamental dimension of planetary aesthetics, and the reason why so much artwork dealing with climate draws on the notion of the sublime. Here, however, the viewer is drawn into the loop of the production of that experience, rather than being asked to step back and experience it from the position of the observer.

Art that engages with climate change is often seen as instrumental, that is, designed to produce a specific kind of action, and is commonly located in the context of museums, or science communication.[27] This can lead to a division of labour, where the work is understood as conveying cognitive material and its affect is simply a mode of persuasion. Ballard's primary concern, however, is to show how artists "intensif[y] the sensations of being part of the planetary system."[28] She does not draw political or epistemological conclusions from the artworks she has chosen, but rather emphasises their contribution to the developing relationships, emotions and affective impact produced by the experiences of climate change, extinctions and geological transformations. By adopting such tactics as ambiguity, the centrality of sensation and the creation of immersive situations, the artists she has chosen avoid the co-option of their work by political or other approaches.

Theorising Artists' Engagement with the Weather: Janine Randerson

In *Weather as Medium: Toward a Meteorological Art*, Randerson articulates a changed approach to the subject matter of weather by artists who use the technologies that measure it to produce performances, new media and conceptual artworks. She presents an argument for climate change as a call for a closer relationship with weather, in a way already present in the Indigenous thought she brings frequently to the conversation, augmented by the ever-increasing use of digital technology. While she does not centre her discussion on the idea of

the Anthropocene, Randerson is, nonetheless, deeply concerned with climate change and its causes, and with the necessity to re-think the colonial narrative. Discussions of climate change are inextricable from the development of the digital systems that can record and predict weather changes locally and daily across the planet, and across millennia. Notwithstanding, she cites Isabella Stengers, who argued that, in Randerson's words, "science is less a transcendent 'truth' than a body of competing interests that are constantly in negotiation"; and that "a more widely defined set of values, such as spirituality, should be taken seriously by scientists, and not merely 'tolerated.'"[29]

Randerson also draws on the philosopher and social theorist Hannah Arendt who argued that "to understand physical reality seems to demand not only a renunciation of an anthropocentric or geocentric world view, but also a radical elimination of all anthropomorphic elements and principles, as they arise from the world given to the five senses or to the categories inherent in the human mind."[30] By enlisting the weather as a medium that in itself offers aural, visual and temporal phenomena, artists generate relationships with weather that are performative rather than representational. Randerson articulates this model in an active dialogue between the "hard" sciences and an acknowledgement of Indigenous and spiritual approaches to meteorology that often use the mechanisms of anthropomorphism to frame connections.

Randerson describes representations that are also analytical documentation of clouds and storms, in the works of Leonardo da Vinci, William Hodges and John Constable. From here, she, like Ballard, focuses on how conceptual, digital and performance art offer artists new ways of engaging with their subject matter. Her historical discussion reflects the acceleration during the past thirty years of the science of climate change, while throughout she explores the ethical and ontological issues generated by science's concerns with objectivity. In subsequent chapters, the complexity of systems becomes the subject matter, though the need to resist the production of climate change remains: "The micropolitical yet globally implicated work of artists and activists maintains climate on the political agenda in the face of suppression of scientific and community cries for action."[31]

In discussing technologies that measure the weather in order to predict and anticipate it, Randerson draws attention to the early technology of the manu tukutuku (kite), tethered to its holder, which generates navigational information from the wind and is alive with Māori understandings of that wind as Tāwhirimatea, who "does not want to separate from his mother, Papatūanuku."[32] Randerson also notes that Len Lye's interest in bodily engagement with weather systems led to his *Weather Wands* with their demonstration of feedback systems; an image shows him struggling to set one up in New York in 1960.[33] Moving into the digital technologies that now produce meteorological data, Randerson describes artists who transmit data in real time directly to galleries or public spaces, and perform in spaces subject to weather. Transduction, the movement of information/data between one modality and another, is almost synonymous with the use of meteorology as a medium. To use an example from Aotearoa New Zealand, Randerson describes how the sound artist Rachel Shearer (Ngāti Kahungunu) uses solar-powered sound to convey the wiri, the hand gesture called the "tremble of life" that signifies the heat of the sun.[34] Randerson explains the movement as "an acknowledgement of Tānerore—the shimmering heated air that rises from the ground on a hot summer's day, personified as "te haka o Tānerore" (the dance of Tānerore)."[35] Tānerore, son of the sun god Tama-nui-te-Ra, is the god of the dance, who also personifies the constant dialogue between weather and land. Shearer's work shifts the modality of gesture to that of sound, but enlists the artwork's subject, the sun's heat, in its production, to produce aural vibrations that focus the participant's attention.

Randerson continues: "Shearer's sense that the natural world is 'trembling' resonates with anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli's argument that former modes of human governance of non-life are becoming unstuck, or are 'trembling,' as exploitation of resources can no longer be sustained." [36] As this example demonstrates, for weather to be a medium, it must be directly or indirectly (i.e., relayed digitally) present, active and temporally transformative in the works. The kite must fly; the cloud forms must change in real time. The sensory experience embeds increasing understanding, on the part of the viewer, of the changes entailed by climate change, within the rhythms of the body, enabling an internalisation, a recognition, and an acceptance. In the works Randerson describes, such as those by Andrea Polli, distinctions between inside and outside are frequently subverted by the relays between global and local weather patterns and the exhibition space, whether gallery, public space or, for instance, location in a research outpost, as in such sites as Antarctica.[37]

Theorising the Role of the Artwork within Activism: Janine Randerson

Randerson's approach to the question of instrumentality, or art's place as agent in the public realm, is that art in this context should offer a place for the individual to gain understanding in order to contemplate action, as discussed further in this article. Like Ballard, she selects works that evade the art market, though they may be funded by public or private sponsorship. The central tenet of the idea of the Anthropocene is that planetary systems are not immune to human agency but are irrevocably tied to the political and economic systems that have led to their altered behaviours. Randerson agrees with Arendt, who "finds that the artwork prepares the ground for political action, rather than shouldering the weight of becoming politics itself."[38] Preparing the ground entails understanding the data, that is, knowledge and the processes through which it is gained. Randerson writes:

> I take heart from Arendt's observation: "What usually remains intact in the epochs of petrification and foreordained gloom is the faculty of freedom itself, the sheer capacity to begin, which animates and inspires all human activities and is the hidden source of all great and beautiful things." [Arendt] is less concerned with the agent of the miraculous act, whether it be human or an act of nature, than with "the process in whose framework it occurs and whose automatism it interrupts."[39]

Climate change knowledge is grim and public and corporate resistance has led to significant inaction. Randerson finds the public space particularly important where data baffles and alienates people. Abby Cunnane and Amy Howden-Chapman, in the performances, exhibitions and publications that they called "The Distance Plan," experimented with the ways data is understood.[40] Randerson describes how they asked the audience to respond to the presentation of data with panes of glass coloured with the range of pinks and purples of a litmus test, indicating "likely, very likely, virtually certain, exceptionally unlikely," and so forth, the performance fulfilling the function, through the presentation of subjective judgement, of Arendt's desire to "[interrupt] the automatism."[41] The use of art to engage in such interruptions is now familiar, but it is also relatively new.

Precursors

The following sections respond to the art historical question of the relevance of earlier artworks to the frameworks presented by Ballard and Randerson. The first example is Barry Thomas's public art project, *Vacant Lot of Cabbages* (1978). The project's breadth and inclusivity brought into play many of the concerns later coalesced into the idea of the Anthropocene. The second example is the development of Marilynn Webb's creative practice as she moved from an initial interest in the dialogue between geology and meteorology, through a series of works

arguing for the protection of the land from its consumption by big business, toward an explicit portrayal of the land as understood within Māori thought.

Barry Thomas: "Interrupting the Automatism" in the Activation of Public Space

Barry Thomas's *Vacant Lot of Cabbages* (fig. 1) exemplifies Randerson's conception of the role of art as an agent in the public realm. An early public art project that used tactics of intervention and inclusion to generate debate about the use of public land, conservation and food production, Thomas's project is significant in establishing in Aotearoa nNew Zealand the notion of a forum, an *agora*, in which ideas are debated, as in itself an act of art.[42] Thomas has argued that this work should be included in histories of the Anthropocene in New Zealand art because it offers a model for public engagement now used by many artists addressing the various crises and transformations that characterise the current geological age.[43]

In 1978, provoked by the ongoing neglect of a block of land in central Wellington, Barry Thomas brought a tip truck full of soil into the city centre, cut the wire fencing, deposited it on the land and planted 180 cabbage seedlings in the form of the word "cabbage." Thomas, who was a filmmaker, was also involved in political street theatre. When interviewed about *Vacant Lot of Cabbages*, he said to the press: "whether they [the public] just leave them, steal them or run them over with motorbikes, it's part of the art because it's a reflection of our culture. . . . It's a unification of nature with the culture of our society."[44] Yet the nature that arrives comes via a dump-truck of earth to be planted with rows of cabbages: an anthropogenic, agricultural and industrialised nature that is returned to the community, then busy reading *The Whole Earth Catalogue* and establishing food co-operatives.[45]

Figure 1. Ans Westra, *Gathering of People at Barry Thomas's* Vacant lot of cabbages *Public Art project*, 1978. Black and white original negative, cellulose acetate roll film. National Library of New Zealand. Image courtesy of Suite Tirohanga.

Thomas was not the only artist interested in cabbages. The art photographer and activist Fiona Clark, in her project *Cabbage Enterprises* (1972–75), generated multiples of cabbages in resin and on screen-printed surfaces that were also used as labels.[46] Clark, brought up in a farming environment, tested the cabbage in terms of its function as commodity. The cabbage was the most common green vegetable of the less than imaginative "meat and two vegetables" of the first course meal of the period, but it indicated good nutrition: minerals and fibre, as well as industrialised food systems. Culinary skills were usually focused on desserts and baking, as could be seen in the recipes of Aunt Daisy, a popular radio personality of the period, but the primary produce the country preferred for domestic use and export had to be of good quality. Indeed, Māori market gardeners and traders had shipped cabbages to Sydney as early as the 1820s.[47] At the end of Thomas's project, the cabbages were harvested, made into coleslaw and served to an audience at a gala day entailing the public funding that indicated the city's acceptance of Thomas's renegade project. Yet it was not simply a carnival: the garden was planted in the context of the anxiety about lead levels in urban soil that led to the reduction of lead in the production of petrol, while his tip truck is the symbol of construction, demolition and urban waste. This element was offset by the use made of the space by conservation groups.

Thomas's kaupapa was one of building community by enlisting various networks and communities, in part derived from his interest in the American theorist Jack Burnham's concern with systems theory.[48] This connects his project with the artists Burnham wrote about, such as Hans Haacke, Robert Smithson and perhaps more particularly the Harrison Studio. The latter focused on the sustainability of increasingly industrialised and globalised modes of food production highlighted in 1972 by the publication of *The Limits of Growth*, which suggested that the planet's resources might not feed its inhabitants.[49]

In 2011, proposing *Vacant Lot of Cabbages* as his first example of a category he called "event-specific art," Harry Davidson, in his MA thesis, argued that this work met his criteria because it was "transmedium, generated public participation, was temporary, and operated via a set of networks" that "engage with the media specific to its time."[50] The work was certainly significant in its education of the Wellington public, signalled by its adoption by the Values Party as a model for public engagement, its use as a performance space for diverse events (fig. 2) and the way its neighbours cared for it, to the point of watering the cabbages. Thomas was a primary figure in the development of the Wellington Artists' Co-op. Here too it seems important to point out the developing interest in public art of what was then called the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand, and, in particular, the contribution of the curator James Mack, before he moved to the Dowse Art Museum, where he commissioned Marilynn Webb's "Taste Before Eating." Increasingly, public arts funding enabled a wider engagement with the arts than the previous discipline-based approach, supporting identarian projects and the developing idea of the artist as public intellectual and political activist.

Not coincidentally, the international eco art site, Curating Cities, celebrated the entry of Thomas's archive into the collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in 2012, quoting this work as a precursor of Wellington's Letting Space projects, in which Sophie Jerram and Mark Amery took a public/private approach to positioning art projects within shopfronts in the urban environment.[51] Letting Space itself directly influenced the setting up of the Urban Dream Brokerage mechanism in both Pōneke Wellington and Ōtepoti Dunedin, which frequently funds short-term public art projects that generate public engagement in re-imagining urban spaces.[52]

Figure 2. Ans Westra, *Gathering of people at Barry Thomas's* Vacant Lot of Cabbages *Public Art Project*, 1978. Black and white original negative, cellulose acetate roll film. National Library of New Zealand. Image courtesy of Suite Tirohanga.
This image shows a Red Mole theatrical performance, *Coleslaw Party*, in front of a cottage on wheels designed by Ian Athfield, built by Barrie McIntyre to promote native forest restoration (edited text from notes by Ans Westra).

In Thomas's approach to public art we see resonance with Randerson's ideas. In retrospect, the work interrupted the normal flow of urban design and provided sustenance for new ways of engaging with the public. Like Burnham, Thomas's desire for artists to work within and extend existing systems is reflected in the duration of *Vacant Lot of Cabbages*, as it moves from the maverick trespassing onto a fenced site, the dumping of the earth and the planting of the cabbages (the soil tested and indicated lead-free and therefore fit to produce food), to the final, publicly funded artistic performances that marked its completion. Its ongoing presence embedded the relationship between artists and socio-political life. In its openness, it gathered early instances of themes later to be coalesced into the more urgent and articulated preoccupations represented by the term Anthropocene. Thomas has continued to act in this space, as filmmaker and as public artist.

Landscape as the Provider of New Eyes: **Marilynn Webb's Movement from Representation to Protection**

The practice of Marilynn Webb (1937–2021) illustrates why both Ballard and Randerson acknowledged the cultural and spiritual understanding of the land as a living force, as recognised within Te Ao Māori. Webb, who was of Māori (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Kahu, Te Roroa) and Pākehā descent, was active from the later 1950s until the teens of this century. The trajectory of her work has been made visible and coherent in the 2023–24 Dunedin Public Art Gallery retrospective *Marilynn Webb: Folded in the Hills*, bringing together for the first time works from throughout her career, with its constant concern for and love of the land. In the accompanying exhibition catalogue, the artist and writer Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi) provides a new evaluation of her work in terms of a "whenua derived authority," a "kaupapa" focus and Moana Jackson's notion of a "constitutional frame," positioning Webb within Māori critiques of the colonial mindset that continues to obstruct attempts to redress the impacts of environmental damage.[53]

Over the trajectory of her work, Webb developed a gestural approach that might be called semi-abstraction, emphasising relations between land and sky through broadly drawn forms and intense colour. Webb was committed to the forms offered by the print tradition, sometimes characterised, because of its reproducibility, as a decorative or craft art. The use of series allowed her to play between the timescales of geomorphology, represented by the contours of the land, and meteorology, represented by the transient effects of weather. This interest in the dialogue between timescales can be found in the Anthropocene curriculum cited earlier. Webb's emotional attachment to whenua is central to her practice. Reweti describes how Webb's use of the hand both as a visual symbol and as a tactile practice expresses her role as its protector.[54]

Land and sky relationships are about weather: Webb called this "sky talk." In the first 20 years of her working life, Webb focused almost entirely on land/sky relations, and returned to them frequently thereafter. She drew and later photographed cloud forms, and the different kinds of light in the landscapes she represented, in linear form. Storms, clusters of cumulus cloud, cirrus, the impact of wind on willows and water, all gave specificity to her generic printed landscape forms. In Aotearoa New Zealand, "sky talk" can be understood as the sky god Ranginui talking with his partner Papatūanuku. From the 1980s Webb began to generate more abstract, symbolic images that she sometimes called "protection" works. Reweti sees these works as "a land-based rather than a landscape practice," confirming Webb's commitment to what she called "land power." Reweti points out that this power stems from the whenua, the land itself, and under the foundational agreement between the Crown and a significant number of Māori iwi or tribes, the right to protect is constitutional.[55] From the 1980s, this sense of the artwork's role in both protection and the political activism that requires, underpins Webb's practice.

The series "Taste Before Eating" (1982) can be seen as a precursor to the systemic thinking that is intrinsic to the idea of the Anthropocene, in its demonstration of the careless consumption of the land's resources by corporatised industrialisation. The monoprint and type-set series was exhibited at the Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, as part of a larger exhibition on the theme of food.[56] "Taste Before Eating" approaches this kaupapa with a new energy, in large scale images of cakes and puddings in the form of landscapes, accompanied by recipes typeset by the poet and publisher Alan Loney at Hawk Press.[57] The prints were on "double elephant" paper (813 x 1226 mm, though the sizes vary) and in the initial exhibition the texts were placed adjacent to the images. A book (22 pages, 430 x 330 mm) was also produced, with

smaller images printed above each recipe. I was accustomed to see the series in terms of its sardonic comments on the hospitality offered by the government to tourists, industrialists and extractive corporations. Yet the retrospective taught me that the series offsets destruction with images of beauty, while its use of names and terms drawn from Māori, Celtic, Pasifika and other Indigenous communities addresses these communities specifically. Indeed, the works followed the unification of artists and activists in the successful resistance to the proposal to raise the level of Lake Manapouri to generate electricity. They were made in the context of the "Think Big" large-scale industrialised agricultural, power and mining projects initiated by a succession of governments but tied in particular to that of Sir Robert Muldoon, Prime Minister from 1975 to 1984.

"Taste Before Eating" begins with the recipe for *Ngauruhoe Snow*, a round sponge cake with meringue and ice-cream finished off thus: "Remove mountain from oven, pour over the chocolate sauce to look like molten lava coming out of the crater."[58] The recipe was that of the radio personality Maud Basham, known as Aunt Daisy, whose brisk half-hour broadcasts entertained New Zealand audiences from 1928 until her death in 1963.[59] In the 1980s many viewers would have remembered Aunt Daisy's broadcasts on commercial radio, talking of anything she was interested in "at the incredible speed of between 175 and 202 words per minute, clearly articulated and precisely spoken."[60] She stood for the home as a place of care, propriety and comfort, a comfort subverted by implicitly feminist comments. In Webb's version of her recipe, the volcano becomes a circle of dynamically slumping forms, a geology in movement. Throughout "Taste Before Eating," and with surreal humour, Webb extends Basham's imaginative transformation of the land into edible form until the land is shown as a commodity, a raw material at the service of human desires. Webb's broadly brushed visual language suggests themes common to artists at the time, such as the challenge to abstraction's reticence offered by pop art, and the American artist Philip Guston's gestural return to representation. In addition, she references the free forms painted by the children whose work she had fostered using a Jungian approach to self-expression.[61]

"Taste Before Eating" expresses a geology under threat from the globalism that Spivak was to challenge two decades later. Of the recipes, the most celebrated are the explicitly political ones: *Mining Crumble* (fig. 3), *Tordon Bleu*, *High Country Flambe* [sic], *Drowned Clutha Pudding*, *Miners Memento* and *Aramoana Soup*. The works refer to: the mining industry's disregard for remediation, as well as its intrinsic destructiveness; the production of pesticides in Taranaki; burn-offs of tussock and other habitats to generate pasture; the destruction of the confluence of the Clutha and Clyde rivers, with their distinct mineral colours, one green, one blue, mixing at Cromwell, in the building of the Clyde Dam; the miners, again; and the proposition of a second smelter for the country at Aramoana, the wetlands at the mouth of Otago Harbour.[62] This last work includes the ocean within the worldview of the series, a subject that Webb was to return to later in her works around Murihiku, the southernmost part of the South Island. The Aramoana recipe, with its toxic ingredients, was made as a public performance outside the Dowse Art Gallery.[63]

The text for *Mining Crumble* reads:

> Slice fruit and nuts, add herbs, flowers, plants, small pieces of gold leaf, silver cashews, coloured pebbles, glitter, fortune cookies, crushed quartz, agates, copper, antimony, etc, into a pie dish. Pour over ¾ of a cup of silica and sugar until it is crumbly. Sprinkle it on top of ingredients. Make deep ridges over the top and form tracks, peaks, scars and craters. Finally arrange broken biscuits in the valleys and indiscriminately poke them

over the top of the dessert. Bake 4 hours at 550' [sic]. Arrange it on a sea blue or grass green dish. When serving, pour a pale lumpy custard with great force over the pudding. This should create more dents and be allowed to run freely over the covered dish. This simple dish could be served at a variety of functions, including small dinner parties for multinational companies paying informal courtesy calls on New Zealand.[64]

Figure 3. Marilynn Webb, *Mining Crumble*, 1982. Monotype, 612 x 920 mm. Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

In Aotearoa New Zealand we are familiar with the terrain left by the mining industry, including its habit of "cleaning up" by flattening river valleys to plant them in grass. In the 1980s, reparation was rare, and mining sites were left to restore themselves, in a state of sloping, ridged surfaces, which had been sluiced of its topsoil. Webb's transmission of the language of sustenance to the language of consumption accords with the thinking of Jason W. Moore, who argued that the correct term for the Anthropocene was the "Capitalocene," because industrial profit depended on the depletion of what he called "cheap nature."[65] Extractive technology and explicitly contracted labour were paid for, while the raw material of the land and all its support systems often were not. "The genius of capitalism—from the global conquests that commenced in 1492—has been to treat the work of nature as a 'free gift.'"[66]

In "Taste Before Eating," the life-affirming properties of whenua balance the images of its destruction. In a photograph taken at Webb's home by Adrienne Martyn in 2021, Edwardian dessert and casserole dishes are set out in a shelved bay, their blue and white elegance countered by a cadmium red glass vase.[67] Webb's personal life was built around manaakitaka.

She is remembered for her gift of hospitality, of sharing food and wine in good company. The text of *Mahinerangi Water Ice* reads: "Collect the perfume of elderberry blossoms, some summer snow . . . a small lenticular cloud, perhaps . . . foxgloves, a tussock flower or two, and some willow leaves. Encapsulate them in bright ice. Pour over some soft peat water, add the ice and let it dissolve. Drink it with your eyes. Then take your new eyes to the sunset, and watch the edge of the day."[68] The edge of the day is what we see as the planet rolls away from the sun. Similarly, in Webb's later pastels, the point of view of the traveller, passing through at ground level, seeing height diminish into the distance, is superseded by the sense of a traveller no longer bound by the habits of perspective, but drawn into a planetary vortex. This is particularly evident in, for example, *Mataura* (1995, fig. 4), in which the forms express the movements of the planetary atmosphere, its aerial and its earthly waters in formal reciprocity, connected by the sun's light.

Figure 4. Marilynn Webb, *Mataura Valley Suite No. 4*, 1995. Soft chalk pastel on paper, 570 x 750 mm. Eastern Southland Art Gallery, Gore.

Webb uses print and pastel to represent, in a symbolic and emotional way, the systems in which we are entangled. One series of works, unusual in that they depict the body, clearly allegorises this. Webb draws floating women through whose bodies flow energy lines that are also the interference patterned shadows of the willows of the Central Otago rivers, now congested and depleted by the dairy industry. Here the sense of the land as Papatūanuku, the female principle of the land in Māori thought, is insistent. While Webb's early use of goddess imagery was buttressed by both her Welsh maternal ancestry and the exploration of that mythos in Robert Graves's writing on the "white goddess of birth, love and death," it seems to flow more freely as she brings her Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Kahu, Te Roroa genealogy into the slipstream of her

identity.[69] I read this work also in Ballard's sense as a planetary awareness engaged through specificity: place and person are tied to larger systems.

Figure 5. Marilynn Webb, *Floating Shadows and Dark Water*, 1988. Pastel on Saunders and Moulin de Gue paper, 825 x 993 mm (framed). Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongawera.

Conclusion

The writers and artists discussed here are concerned with art's role in enabling responsible and responsive relationships with nature in the face of human-induced environmental change. For Ballard, the less instrumental the artwork, the more effective it is in enabling the viewer to remain open to the epistemic transformations required for the conditions brought together by the term Anthropocene. For Randerson, art also provides a specific and tangible engagement with verifiable data that supports the possibility of direct political action. Thomas's *Vacant Lot of Cabbages*, in its inclusivity and its ambiguous politics, presented an exemplar for the use of art as a space for dialogue with the subjects of community, food production and conservation. It aligns with the political position Randerson adopts, and through its loose connections with systems theory anticipates art's response to data. Webb's approach to landscape can be understood within the broader terms of Ballard's planetary aesthetics, experienced through the expression of the meteorological sensibility foregrounded in Randerson's practice, but it frames these primarily through notions of whenua and rangatiratanga described by Reweti. The sensory range of Webb's work is also in alignment with Ballard's valuing of the role of art's immersive qualities. Conceptual art and performance enable a wider sensory experience more closely connected to the subject matter, while representational forms retain their power to engage the viewer's emotions and visualise spiritual and non-empirical dimensions. For this art historian, these precursors suggest the differences between emerging concerns with anthropogenic change in the 1970s and 1980s, and the increasing specificity of aesthetic

responses in the contemporary context, as the developing episteme of the Anthropocene entails greater understanding of the operations and value of planetary systems and the order of our relationships with them.

[1] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970; reis., New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1994), xxi.
[2] For examples from the fields of law and literary studies, see Rakhyun E. Kim, Catherine Blanchard and Louis J. Kotzé, "Law, Systems, and Planet Earth: Editorial," *Earth System Governance* 11(January 2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2021.100127; Margrit Talpalaru, "Extinctathon: Margaret Atwood's Urge for an Immanent Episteme in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*," *Canada and Beyond* 3, nos. 1–2 (December 2013): 243–265, https://doi.org/10.33776/candb.v3i1-2.3044.
[3] See for example Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, revised and translated by David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
[4] Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," *Nature* 519 (2015): 171–180, https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14258.
[5] See Julia Adney Thomas, Mark Williams, and Jand Zalesiewsicz, eds., *The Anthropocene: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Books, 2020).
[6] The first peer-reviewed article was Paul Crutzen's "Geology of Mankind," *Nature* 415 (3 January 2002), https://doi. org/10.1038/415023a.
[7] David Adam, "Ditching Anthropocene, Why Ecologists Say the Term Still Matters," *Nature*, 14 March 2024, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-00786-2.
[8] See Jason W. Moore, "The Rise of Cheap Nature," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capital* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016); Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
[9] T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (London: Sternberg Press, 2017).
[10] See, for example, Andrew Baldwin and Bruce Erickson, "Introduction: Whiteness, Coloniality, and the Anthropocene," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38, no. 1 (2020), 3–11, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775820904485.
[11] Samuel Butler, *Erewhon or Over the Range* (London: Trübner & Co., 1872).
[12] Susan Ballard, Exhibition statement, *Among the Machines*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 6 July 2013–3 November 2013, accessed 27 January 2024, https://dunedin.art.museum/exhibitions/past/among-the-machines/.
[13] Susan Ballard, *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene, Planetary Aesthetics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021). See also Susan Ballard and Liz Linden, "Art Writing and Allegory in the Anthropocene," *October* 175 (2021): 88–108.
[14] *Listening Stones Jumping Rocks*, 20 November 2021–27 March 2022, accessed 28 January 2024, https://www.adamartgallery.nz/exhibitions/archive/2021/listening-stones-jumping-rocks; *Folded Memory*, 18 November 2023–28 March 2024, Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, accessed 28 January 2024, https://www.adamartgallery.nz/exhibitions/current/folded-memory.
[15] Janine Randerson, "Between Reason and Sensation: Antipodean Artists and Climate Change," *Leonardo* 40, no. 5 (2007): 442–449; Janine Randerson, Jennifer Salmond and Chris Manford, "Weather as Medium: Art and Meteorological Science," *Leonardo* 48, no. 1 (2015): 16–24; Janine Randerson, *Weather as Medium: Toward a Meteorological Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018).
[16] *Ngā raraunga o te Mākū: te hā o Haupapa*, Blue Oyster Project Space, Dunedin, 15 September–28 October 2023, accessed 4 March 2024, https://blueoyster.org.nz/exhibitions/nga-raraunga-o-te-maku-te-ha-o-haupapa/. The exhibition consisted of a "new iteration in a series of artworks that emanate from the Haupapa Tasman Glacier." Collaborating artists included Ron Bull (voice); Stefan Marks (programming); Janine Randerson (video); Rachel Shearer (sound); Heather Purdie (glaciologist and scientific advisor).

[17] Ballard, *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene*, 158.
[18] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Imperative to Re-imagine the Planet," in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 338. Cited in Ballard, *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene*, 8, 56, 72, 79.
[19] Ballard, *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene*, 160.
[20] Ibid., 128. Trevor Paglen, *Trinity Cube* (2015–2020), irradiated glass from Fukushima Exclusion Zone, Trinitite, 200 x 200 x 200 mm, exhibited at the 2020 Sydney Biennale in *A Walk in Fukushima* by the curatorial collective Don't Follow the Wind, accessed 4 March 2024, https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/participants/dont-follow-the-wind/.
[21] Ballard, *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene*, 129.
[22] Michel Serres, quoted in ibid., 160.
[23] Ballard, *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene*, 60.
[24] Ballard, *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene*, 73–77.
[25] Ibid., 153.
[26] Ibid.
[27] See Aafke Fraaije, Marjolein G. van der Meij, Frank Kupper and Jacqueline E. W. Broerse, "Art for Public Engagement on Emerging and Controversial Technologies: A Literature Review, *Public Understanding of Science* 31, no. 6 (2022): 694–710, https://doi.org/10.1177/09636625221093213.
[28] Ballard, *Art and Nature in the Anthropocene*, 146.
[29] Randerson, *Weather as Medium*, xx.
[30] Ibid., xxi, quoted from Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 260.
[31] Randerson, *Weather as Medium*, 185.
[32] Titiri and Tuhi, (Ngāpuhi), *Manu Tukutuku (Māori kites)*, c. 1800, Auckland City Libraries/Tāmaki Pātaka Kōrero, Sir George Grey Special Collections, GNZ MMSS147, reproduced in Randerson, *Weather as Medium*, xiii.
[33] Randerson, *Weather as Medium*, 5.
[34] Ibid., 99.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., 67, 83–84.
[38] Hannah Arendt quoted in Randerson, *Weather as Medium*, 136.
[39] Randerson, *Weather as Medium*, 186.
[40] The Distance Plan, 2016, accessed 4 March 2024, https://thedistanceplan.org.
[41] Randerson, *Weather as Medium*, 186.
[42] "Vacant Lot of Cabbages—Barry Thomas, Wellington New Zealand, 1978," eco-publicart.org., accessed 28 January 2024, http://eco-publicart.org/vacant-lot-of-cabbages/.
[43] Barry Thomas, in a series of emails to me, suggested that this work should have been included in my PhD thesis, "Closer Relations: Art, Climate Change, Interdisciplinarity and the Anthropocene" (University of Otago, 2018).
[44] "Vacant Lot of Cabbages—Barry Thomas."
[45] *The Whole Earth Catalog* was a magazine published from 1968 to 1998, featuring reviews of products reputed to be ecologically-oriented and encouraging sustainability as a lifestyle.
[46] "Cabbage Enterprises," accessed 24 January 2024, https://fionaclark.com/portfolio-item/cabbage-enterprises/.
[47] Maggy Wassilieff, "Market Gardens and Production Nurseries," 8 November 2008, *Te Ara—the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, https://teara.govt.nz/en/market-gardens-and-production-nurseries/page-2.
[48] Jack Burnham, "Systems Esthetics," *Artforum* 7, no. 1 (September 1968): 31–38, https://www.artforum.com/features/systems-esthetics-201372/.
[49] Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits of Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972). The authors of this report used computer modelling to suggest that existing food resources would not sustain the planet's growing population.

[50] Henry William Davidson, "Event-specific Art in New Zealand: A Visual Culture Analysis of One Day Sculpture and Selected Case Studies" (MA thesis, Massey University, Wellington, 2011), 37, https://mro.massey.ac.nz/items/e0152067-d840-44b5-ad43-00e06d87de58.
[51] "Vacant Lot of Cabbages—Barry Thomas," Curating Cities: A Database of Eco Public Art, accessed 4 March 2024, http://eco-publicart.org/vacant-lot-of-cabbages/.
[52] Urban Dream Brokerage, accessed 4 March 2024, https://www.urbandreambrokerage.org.nz/.
[53] Bridget Reweti, "Kia Mātau te Whenua," in Lauren Gutsell, Lucy Hammonds and Bridget Reweti, eds., *Marilynn Webb: Folded in the Hills* (Dunedin: Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2023), 159–71; Bridget Reweti, "To Recognise Whenua," 172–185, in Gutsell et al, eds., *Marilynn Webb*, 172–85.
[54] Reweti, "Kia Mātau te Whenua"; Reweti, "To Recognise Whenua."
[55] Reweti, "Kia Mātau te Whenua," 163; Rewiti, "To Recognise Whenua," 176.
[56] Gutsell, at al., *Marilynn Webb*.
[57] Alan Loney (b. 1940) is a New Zealand poet, letterpress printer and publisher noted for his typographical innovations and style.
[58] Gutsell et al., *Marilynn Webb*, 134.
[59] Peter Downes, "Basham, Maud Ruby," in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography/Ngā Tāngata Taumata Rau*, first published 1998, *Te Ara—The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, accesssed 28 January 2024, https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4b11/basham-maud-ruby.
[60] Downes, "Basham, Maud Ruby."
[61] Gutsell et al., *Marilynn Webb*.
[62] Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).
[63] Bridie Lonie and Marilynn Webb, *Marilynn Webb: Prints and Pastels* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2003), 42.
[64] Gutsell et al., *Marilynn Webb*, 145.
[65] Jason W. Moore, "The Rise of Cheap Nature," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History and the Crisis of Capital*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016), 99. For a full explanation of his position, see Moore, "The Rise of Cheap Nature," 78–115.
[66] Ibid., 112.
[67] Author's personal collection.
[68] Gutsell et al., *Marilyn Webb*, 148.
[69] Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948).