

## **Starrs and Cmielewski — *incompatible elements, version 02***

### **Opening talk by Bec Dean**

I June 2013 at The Cross Art Projects for ISEA 2013

I would like to start by acknowledging the Gadigal people of the Eora nation on whose country we are gathered today and to pay respects to elders, past and present.

Thanks to the Cross Art Projects for inviting me to speak today at the opening of this exhibition by Josephine Starrs and Leon Cmielewski. My name is Bec Dean and I am the Co-Director of Performance Space. Josie and Leon did some development for this work with us in 2009, as well as premiering *Incompatible Elements* in 2010 as part of our program. It's really wonderful to be able to engage with the work again.

I will continue by reading three stanzas of *South of My Days* by Judith Wright

### **South of my Days**

South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,  
rises that tableland, high delicate outline  
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,  
low trees, blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite-  
clean, lean, hungry country. The creek's leaf-silenced,  
willow choked, the slope a tangle of medlar and crabapple  
branching over and under, blotched with a green lichen;  
and the old cottage lurches in for shelter.

O cold the black-frost night. the walls draw in to the warmth  
and the old roof cracks its joints; the slung kettle  
hisses a leak on the fire. Hardly to be believed that summer  
will turn up again some day in a wave of rambler-roses,  
thrust it's hot face in here to tell another yarn-  
a story old Dan can spin into a blanket against the winter.  
seventy years of stories he clutches round his bones,  
seventy years are hived in him like old honey.

During that year, Charleville to the Hunter,  
nineteen-one it was, and the drought beginning;  
sixty head left at the McIntyre, the mud round them  
hardened like iron; and the yellow boy died  
in the sulky ahead with the gear, but the horse went on,  
stopped at Sandy Camp and waited in the evening.  
It was the flies we seen first, swarming like bees.  
Came to the Hunter, three hundred head of a thousand-  
cruel to keep them alive - and the river was dust.

### **Talk**

*Incompatible Elements* by Josephine Starrs and Leon Cmielewski draws together a number of contradictions across art and science, creating a space in which to contemplate – from a removed perspective – a poetic vision of global environmental change. For *Incompatible Elements*, the artists have turned to perhaps one of the most distantly sourced yet accessible

of global mapping technologies; the conglomerate of satellite imagery and aerial photography that is Google Earth, to create this screen-based exhibition.

As with most applications that find their way onto iPhones and other forms of converged media, Google Earth has been adopted so seamlessly and intuitively into the daily life of its users, that it has made near-redundant its analogue counterparts; the road-map, the atlas or the idea that one needs to understand directions in order to reach a destination. The question that Starrs and Cmielewski pose through *Incompatible Elements* in relation to climate change, is that with this personal agency, this powerful ability to see the earth so extensively and in such detail, why are we conversely incapable of effecting change to extend the life of humanity that has colonised it – as if we can only watch our growth and extinction play itself out in detailed slow-motion?

*Incompatible Elements*, environments and ecologies that are hanging in the balance; from the Ganges Delta to the Coorong in South Australia, are rendered as aerial landscapes that sweep slowly by. Embedded in these scapes are texts that emerge from the manipulation of pixels representing vegetation, earth and water – and so Starrs & Cmielewski engage in a kind of digital geochemistry, terraforming new waterways and barren patches of sand that tell stories in winding, cursive script. The texts that they have used are variously referenced from the works and words of poets, songwriters and activists, and etched into the land as if they were prophetic, inevitable. In one view of the parched Murray Darling River system, part of Judith Wright's famous poem *South of My Days* materializes from sand and scant flora; "and the river was dust." This poem, written by one of Australia's foremost literary figures and environmental activists is strikingly resonant of the extremities of the Australian climate, from seemingly endless winter frost in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales, to punishing drought. In this installation however, there is no hint of seasonal shift, no relief, only the endless repetition of this paradox; a river without water.

As with much of the collaborative works of Starrs & Cmielewski, a desire to communicate through translation from the analogue to the digital, and the "physical to the virtual" is evident in *Incompatible Elements*, although the work is not interactive, and requires no act of participation – beyond seeing and hearing – on the part of the viewer. Instead, the artists work with these texts; from song, written poetry and oral interview as the analogue element, which transforms these aerial, landscapes – the digital earth from space, this thing that we so passively view – into a series of messages. While thinking about writing this text, I stumbled on a gruesome factoid, that Google Earth rapidly updates satellite imagery of disaster zones. And whilst this has been instigated at the behest of the USA's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration<sup>2</sup>, the voyeurism that is granted to ordinary users, all around the world, sits at odds with their ability to engage in advocacy and decision-making for change.

One of the environmental activists that the artists have quoted regarding the local effects of climate change is the late Tom Trevorrow of the Ngarrindjeri people who, on the steps of the South Australian Parliament in 2009, described the Coorong in South Australia as "a living body".<sup>3</sup> This quote is manifest in the artists' digital landscape of the Coorong, emerging from sand dunes, as if the vegetation were being slowly dusted away. The Climate Action Network Australia reports that anticipated degrees of climate change in Australia will affect all of Australia's river systems, resulting in less water flow, and an increase in drought conditions and ultimately the death of this "living body".

Conversely, the Ganges Delta, another complex river system encompassing much of Bangladesh and one of the most fertile places on the planet, is at risk from other extreme of climate change. It will (and frequently does) flood, displacing millions of people that have made their homes there, and destroying vulnerable ecologies. Lyrics from John Lennon's *Strange Days* wind through the delta's rich mangroves. Lennon's upbeat song cites

contemporary dichotomies like “Everybody’s talking and no one says a word. Everybody’s making love and no one really cares.” Drought or deluge, the incompatible and equally devastating extremes of climate change, are drawn together in this exhibition.

An ‘incompatible element’ in geochemistry is a term used to describe certain mineral properties within the earth’s crust and the igneous rock of which it is comprised. This is weighty territory for contemporary art, inscribing language into the crust of the globe, like a digital version of ancient land-art or UFO flight pattern. In *Incompatible Elements*, words flow like water, culture collapses into nature as if it were a part. And of course, it is. This dissolve of Cartesian demarcation has never felt so apparent as it seems to at this moment. Much has been made recently of cognitive dissonance, and of the psychological impacts of climate change, in terms of our ability to accept the truth of the science behind global warming. Starrs and Cmielewski do what artists can do in the face of enormous, often incomprehensible crises; like Wright and Lennon, they draw these issues into narratives, and into evocative, poetic and graspable forms.

I wrote these words in 2010. After I was asked to open this exhibition, I was thinking about whether my attitudes about personal agency in relation to climate change had shifted over the last few years. I think I was more hopeful back then. At the conference *Tipping Point*, held in Canberra on Wednesday this week, Greens leader Christine Milne addressed the room of artists, creatives and scientists about the inefficacy of the Green’s facts-based climate change campaign, its failure. She talked about the need to reach people on an emotional level. Firstly I wanted to ask Josie and Leon about these ideas, about what art and artists can do in the face of extraordinary challenges, and hopefully get a discussion going around the room.

Response from Josephine Starrs