Deep Weather

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In many of my video essays, the movements of people and resources in a rapidly globalizing world converge into complex human geographies; my focus has been on the social reorganization of these geopolitical spaces. More recently, I have turned to transformations that have been playing out in the background of these scenarios all along but which I hadn't paid much attention to, that is the changes occurring in the physical and chemical composition of the Earth due to the massive geo-engineering that has been going on in the last decades. *Deep Weather* (2013) is among my recent video essays exploring the ecologies of forest, oil, ice and water, which in many ways form the undercurrent narrations to current environmental dynamics. The attempt is to connect on the same visual plane minutely observed local ecologies with larger planetary dimensions.

As we scoop out fossil and mineral matters from deep geological strata into the daylight and out into the atmosphere, climate change makes us think in deep time. In this short text about the shortest of my video essays, I will address the long temporalities of the planetary scale that *Deep Weather* (2013) evokes. The video does this by depicting two remote sceneries: first, the aerial images of the extraction sites of heavy tar sands in Northern Canada, and second, a delta community in Bangladesh stemming the rising sea levels—two remote and simultaneously occurring scenes connected through their atmospheric chemistry.

The contradiction inherent in tackling dimensions of geological time by means of a medium universally used for instant video messages and breaking news clips is one of the troubling conditions of this time. The short paced social and journalistic video practices engulf us in an image world that is instantly in the making. Slow and subtle processes don't register. Yet climate change has evolved in a creeping temporality. Timothy Morton defines global warming as a hyperobject, imperceptible as a whole yet legible through the many imprints it leaves behind. In phasing in and out of human timeframes, global warming appears eclipsed from our field of visibility. The claim for authenticity is challenged by the difficulty of precisely localizing causal effects. In the absence of mental tools that would truly make us comprehend these invisible forces and extra-large timeframes,

global warming is commonly rendered by scientists in time-lapse sequences, a mode of imaging that translates slow and hardly noticeable processes for the reception of the metropolitan mind always pushed for time. The advantage of this technical type of encoding of the image is that it makes a threatening reality look more manageable. In their bewildering beauty, the fast motion visualizations of gathering storms or melting ice keep us at a safe distance from any visceral and bodily experience of climate impact. At the other aesthetic extreme, we encounter the sad lingering images of destroyed landscapes and flushed away neighborhoods of a bad social realist variety. This made me think about how realism would have to be redefined in times of global warming. In response to the postmodern dissipation of labor and materials across the globe, the central realist figure has been the worker's body and later the migrant's body. One could conceivably turn now to the citizen fronting natural disasters, like the Bangladeshi communities in *Deep Weather* who are building mud embankments in large-scale social action. For sure, this new figure effectively embodies the uneven geographies of global warming as a subject of climate justice. But this shift in focus cannot be the full answer to the issue at hand, for it would remain firmly in the human-centric regime of representation. A more fundamental question needs to be asked, namely what realism we want to construct now that the human is decentered from its privileged position and the social no longer the prime subject of reference. In this post-humanist realism, what relationship do we want to build between the audiovisual text and the transforming physical world?

Unlike a natural realism that wants to be a direct imprint of the world, this realism entails a process of construction. Neither a utopia nor a simple projection into the future, this constructive endeavor articulates localized realities with the Earth system in a cosmopolitical motivation to build a common sphere. I'm with Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour here who assert that this cosmos, this common world, does not already exist but needs to be fabricated. Beyond the complexity of a global social and economic reorganization, this realist project attends to the scale of intra-biospheric dynamics. In many cases, this process moves along the outer rim of representability.

Resource extraction generates a two-directional movement. Fossil and mineral materials, in order to be converted into exchangeable commodities, are stripped of the context within which they occur both in terms of their social histories of labor and displacement, and their natural histories of local ecologies and consumed landscapes. They experience the homogenizing time of commodity exchange. Hence to tie the materials back to their multiple histories and reveal the intractable character of raw materials is an effective aesthetic intervention in these trends. Moreover, *Deep Weather* turns to a second dynamic that is playing out not at the extractive but the exhaustive end of fossil fuel production that part which goes up into air at the short moment of consumption and that creates a lasting if undesirable future on its own. The view abruptly jumps from the tar sands to Bangladesh. There, the rising sea level and progressively violent cyclones demand of delta communities the hard manual labor of building protective infrastructures. We cannot represent climate change, but we can read it videographically through such sceneries. The crucial gesture here is to link the two remote sites through the atmosphere that is driving greenhouse gases around the planet. It is the voice-over that draws the otherwise invisible causal connection between the sites of extraction and the effects of exhaustion, a whispered voice breathing the narrative scraps into the air, intimate and visceral, diffusing with the atmospheric chemistry. The open questions documentary viewers might have about labor conditions or social realities of first nation communities in Alberta or populations in the Ganges delta remain unanswered. The vistas on these vast construction scenes are just that, sites of global warming at the far ends of a planetary relation. *Deep Weather* aspires to the recalibration of our sense of cause and temporalities in view of attuning

to such remote causalities. For what becomes increasingly evident is that the passage from a diffused soft cause to hard consequences is what defines the contemporary planetary condition.

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        Minnesota Press, 2013.
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BIOGRAPHY

Ursula Biemann is an artist, writer and video essayist based in Zurich. Her artistic practice is strongly research oriented and involves fieldwork in remote locations where she investigates the ecologies of oil and water. Biemann published several books, her video installations are exhibited at international art biennials and museums worldwide and she is part of the collective art and media project World of Matter. www.geobodies.org