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# Failure of Systems

A text by Fiona Fullam written in response to the ideas contained within the work of Anna Macleod's exhibition, *Systems Failure*.

**Systems**, scheme, organisation, arrangement, classification, structure, coordination, organism, method, technique, procedure, routine, practice, usage, approach, orderliness, regularity, order, logic.

*n.* 1. complex whole, set of connected things or parts, organised body of material or immaterial things; *the* established political or social order; 2. (Phys.) group of associated bodies moving under mutual gravitation, etc.; 3. (Biol.) set of organs or parts in animal body with common structure or function; 4. method, organisation, considered principles of procedure, (principle of) classification; body of theory or practice pertaining to a particular form of government, religion, etc.

**Failure**, breakdown, stoppage, malfunction, crash, collapse, disappointment, letdown, not a success, catastrophe, fiasco, closure, bankruptcy.

*n.* failing; non-occurrence, non-performance; running short, breaking down; (Med.) cessation or impairment of vital function; lack of success; unsuccessful person, thing or attempt.

The title of Anna Macleod's exhibition of work refers in part to the phrase 'Systems Aesthetics', the title of an essay by Jack Burnham, published in 1968<sup>1</sup>, which attempted to formulate a theory, to inscribe coherency into a variety of diverse art practices with certain tendencies, which were emerging at that time. Many of these practices were attempts to deal with social conditions; attempts to challenge the traditional plinth or frame and art-as-object; or were explorations of systems theory and analysis, or new technologies including cybernetics and information technology. All were very likely to have been influenced by developments in science and quantum physics,

where the emphasis had shifted towards looking at natural phenomena as a 'whole', rather than as relatively autonomous parts. Burnham was not alone in attempting to map the new directions art-making was taking during this period. Lucy Lippard wrote about what she called the 'dematerialised' art object, essentially charting the move from the single art-object towards a work of art, which related to its various environments, locating its meaning in this relationship. Art could become an idea or concept, a text or even a walk. The late sixties was characterised therefore by, as Burnham put it, a "transition (...) from an *object-oriented* to a *systems-oriented* culture. Here change emanates, not from *things*, but from the *way things are done*."<sup>2</sup> Burnham had been influenced

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by the writings of Ludwig von Bertalanffy contained in his General System Theory<sup>3</sup>, which very briefly summarised, could be said to consider phenomena, not as discrete, local or isolated occurrences or trends, but rather as interrelated, integrated and unified.

'Systems aesthetics' then could be said to recognise 'system' as a medium in which, about which and from which, art could be made. It allowed for art as process, for art as interdisciplinary, for art in context.

M.J.Bijvoet writes that, as context, Burnham "not only defined the immediate literal art space, but also the larger space of social, political and technological contacts and collaborations with which the artist had to deal"<sup>4</sup>. The emergence of systems aesthetics gave rise to a critical discourse around these kinds of work, which up until then had been unnamed. This expanded notion of work allowed art to become a vehicle or catalyst

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for ideas, for questioning the status quo, or for the public reassessment of attitudes towards various accepted norms, towards for example, human ecologies or landscape ecology. It also allows art to become a platform for new thinking or for knowledge production, which is increasingly becoming a characteristic of larger exhibitions and long term art projects world-wide. Contemporary philosophers such as Marcus Steinweg also speak of the importance of attempting new ways of thinking, pushing at the edges of what we think we know. Crucially for Steinweg, any attempt to get outside or beyond thought, how we think, the Symbolic Order, is doomed to fail. Nevertheless he emphasises the importance of making the attempt.<sup>5</sup>

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relationship humans have with their natural environment, the balance, or lack thereof which exists between human and natural ecologies. *Water Conversations*, which will continue in India in March 2010, attempts to bring local concerns about water management into a global context by looking at commonalities which are universally manifested. Macleod recognises a massive infrastructural breakdown in how humans operate in regard to fragile ecosystems and climate change and this is the failure referred

Anna Macleod's work in *Systems Failure* is part of a larger body of work and is informed to some extent by her ongoing project *Water Conversations*, the first component of which took place in Ghana in the Summer of 2009. However Macleod's practice has been concerned with landscape studies and water management in particular, for some time. *Rain Catcher* (2008) began an investigation into the systems used to collect, clean and distribute water, exploring simultaneously the

to in the title of the exhibition. The writings of Burnham have been influential in her thinking, as have contemporary readings of the resonances between work from the 1960s and art making today. Macleod therefore sees the artist's potential to create discursive spaces and expand knowledge fields, understanding intuitively the connectedness and interrelations between systems, both those of art and of ecology.

The titular piece in this exhibition contains two elements, one of which is a print of attempted spirographs, each done by hand, each unique, each failed. This child's toy is designed to create something which looks like it has been generated by a machine, but is extremely difficult to get right: repeated attempts, repeated failures. Referencing the optimism around science in the 1960s, this work exposes the dialectic of a force which can be both benign and malignant. The second component of this work also uses materials which refer to the intersection between technology and hand-made: welding rods, hand-made springs. This piece was inspired by satellite imagery of centre-pivot irrigation at Al Khufrah in Libya, made possible by aquifers, a legacy of a time when the Sahara was not so arid. Springs. *Systems Failure* explores the relationship between humans and their endeavour to use science and technology to control, manipulate and exploit their natural environment.

Materials are important for Macleod, referencing different systems at work and at play. In *Congress of Creatures* the graphite powder used to stain these creatures is not only an art material, but also an industrial lubricant. The creatures themselves are machine cut, but are designed to be put together by hand. *Polar Tension* also uses materials to direct our thinking. The compressed magnets speak of geological time and balance. This piece is easily disrupted, could collapse. The title refers to other tensions, power struggles, friction and conflict, which are also the subject of *Water Wars*, a spiralling book containing drawings drawn from strategic maps of battles, wars over the control of various bodies of water: trading routes; estuaries; sea passages giving access to landmasses or control of land. These maps contain lessons, warnings from the past. To what degree have circumstances changed? In Francis Fukuyama's

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article entitled “The End of History”,<sup>6</sup> essentially what he expounded was that our understanding or appreciation of history and change is really a question of perception, and that in fact the transition from past to future doesn’t take place at all. While we are in transition we are in the present. However when we look back at a transition, it is in the past, and furthermore this transition, this past could be then be viewed as an artwork or artefact, examined and assessed from a distance. In essence these same or similar battles are still being fought. It is also possible that as water becomes less plentiful, that the battles of the future will continue to be fought over water, albeit for different reasons. This endless repetition referred to by Fukuyama is reflected in the form of this piece.

Macleod has referenced various ‘systems’ through her use of materials and titles. These references nonetheless serve to enhance and expand our readings of the work and pertain either to the systems she is critiquing or to the methods she herself uses in this criticism. This is consistent with what Rosalind Kraus called the ‘post-medium condition’, where she redefines medium as the ‘technical support’ for a work of art, which can be interpreted as a series of historically placed practices, such

as those referenced in this exhibition.<sup>7</sup> Macleod sets out in *Systems Failure* to demonstrate and explore the interrelatedness and connections between water, habitation, war, migratory patterns, climate change and considers also the entropy of these systems in the landscape. She uses this interconnectedness to create a discursive space and question preconceived ideas in a playful way, with the intention of continuing this investigation in new work, which may go on to propose alternative ways of living with water as a finite resource.

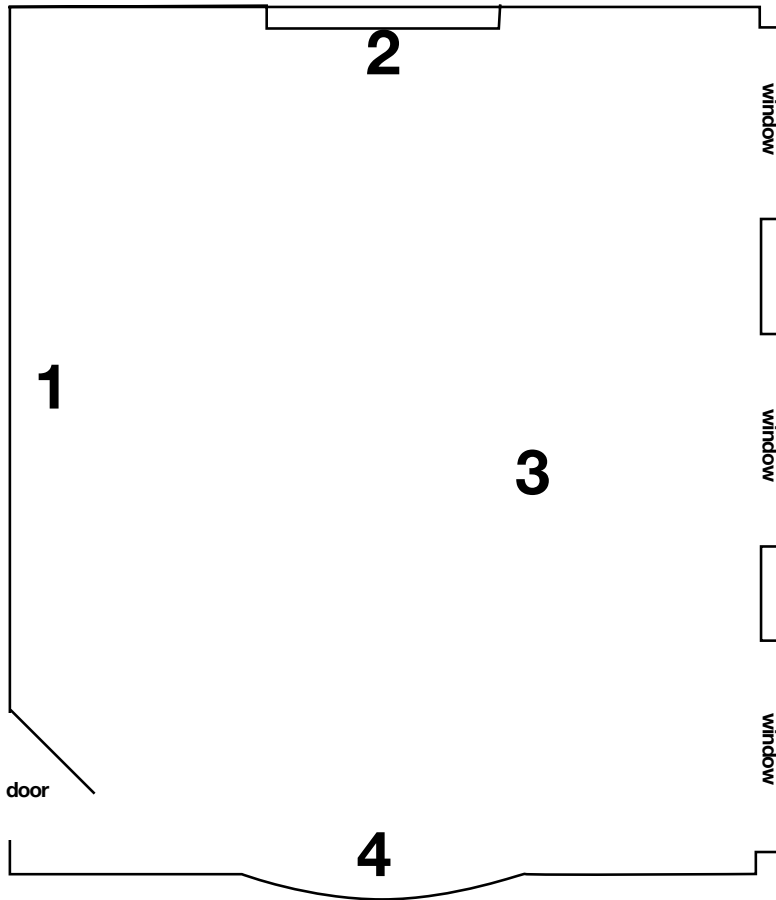
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#### Endnotes

1. Jack Burnham, “Systems Esthetics”, *Artforum* (September 1968); reprinted in Donna De Salvo (ed.) *Open Systems: Rethinking Art C. 1970* (London, Tate, 2005) pp. 166-169.
  2. Jack Burnham, “Systems Esthetics”, *Artforum* (September 1968); reprinted in Donna De Salvo (ed.) *Open Systems: Rethinking Art C. 1970* (London, Tate, 2005) pp. 166-169, p. 166. Italics in original.
  3. Ludwig von Bertalanffy, “An Outline of General Systems Theory”, *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (August 1950), pp. 134-165. See also <http://www.jstor.org/stable/685808>
  4. M.J.Bijvoet, “Art as a set of Relations – Critical Theories”, Chapter 3 in M.J.Bijvoet, *Art As Inquiry*. [http://www.stichting-mai.de/hwg/amb/aa/art\\_as\\_inquiry\\_04.htm](http://www.stichting-mai.de/hwg/amb/aa/art_as_inquiry_04.htm)
  5. Marcus Steinweg, speaking at a lecture at IADT, Dun Laoghaire, Dublin, on 5th December 2006. This lecture was part of a series entitled ‘Visual Arts Future’ curated by Sinead Hogan. See also <http://www.artnews.org/artist.php?i=2955> (accessed 03/09/2008).
  6. Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?”, This article is based on a lecture presented at the University of Chicago’s John M. Olin Center, and is available online at <http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm> (accessed 22/11/2009)
  7. Rosalind Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Winter 1999).
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# Gallery Plan



1. ***Polar Tension***  
Mild steel, N42 Neodymium magnets.  
Dimensions variable.
  2. ***Water Wars***  
Book of 15 drawings, variety of media.  
21 x 14.5 cm x variable dimensions.
  3. ***Congress of Creatures***  
Wooden construction kits; Crab E010, Lobster H003, Frog M044. Graphite powder.  
Dimensions variable.
  4. ***Systems Failure***  
Sculpture: Mild steel, mirror, brass welding rods, pipettes, thread.  
96 x 84 x 61 cm.  
Serigraph, German etch mounted on aluminium. 106 x 38 cm. Edition of 5.
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