

19 Capturing the air

Care in the field of measurement

Jessie Boylan

I look at how understanding an environment as something composed of connectivities and sustained by intimacy may extend feelings of proximity which can lead to respect and care for the more-than-human world across the globe.

– Kate Wright (2016)¹

Introduction

Slow emergencies are forms of harm and damage that are not acute but occur gradually and imperceptibly to most of us—like climate change, environmental pollution and radiation. Despite remaining largely unseen over time, the effects of slow emergencies are palpable, their relative invisibility rendering the harm they wreak all the more entrenched and difficult to address. Changes in air quality and changes in human and nonhuman health are interdependent, yet the pervasive, slow and violent effects of climate change and global warming are still largely perceived as if they are yet to come or may never arrive. Drawing on the author's processes while developing new creative works about slow climate emergencies at the Baseline Air Pollution Station at Cape Grim, lutruwita/Tasmania, this chapter examines how history, landscape and science work together in the formation, collection and analysis of air and the ways in which global changes in this seemingly invisible matter affect all lifeforms. Through journal entries, field notes, academic inquiry and positions that shift in time and space, this chapter foregrounds the many ways air is fundamental for existence and explores how a focus on care practices inherent in scientific research. Aboriginal cultural knowledge and environmental art can help us engage and make-with our uncertain times.

SSW 57kmlh. 05 January, 2021: kennaook/Cape Grim, lutruwital/Tasmania.

An in-breath.

I'm here... standing uneasy amongst the tussock grass, just a few metres from the edge of the volcanic cape, looking out at the Southern

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Ocean and watching the waves rolling and breaking. Everything feels as if in slow motion. The air has a clear presence, sharp as it touches my face. To my right is Koindrim, “the Doughboys” and Taneneyouer, “Suicide Bay”. To my left is Valley Bay and behind me is the Cape Grim Baseline Air Pollution Station. The wind has picked up, the skylark’s constant call flows between the sound of water hitting the rocks below. It’s hard to keep the tripod still while I’m filming, everything is shaky. The 10-metre inlet is sucking in tiny particles of air, ready to be analysed, having already travelled so far to get here.²

I am time travelling.

Air, art and slow emergencies

Air: a seemingly invisible phenomenon, yet fundamental for survival. Formless, yet with form. Too little air and we can’t breathe, too much might cause us to panic or faint. The wind can wreak havoc on our nervous systems. Polluted or contaminated air can make us sick, or even kill us. Air creates breathability, it holds colour and carries light and transmits sound through air to reach us. Air contains spirit and energy. Fresh air renews space. Air holds history and stories. Australian art theorist Jill Bennett argues that air “is the baseline for micro-sensory experience, but also for the macro productions of atmosphere, weather, climate (of global warming and climate change).”³ Air is “the baseline for aesthetics, for the investigation of sensory perception and the body’s interface with a living environment [...] the (back)ground for human activity.”⁴ Yet, we cannot seem to care for something so necessary for existence: the slow emergency⁵ of the ongoing contamination of the earth’s air through burning fossil fuels is progressively causing us to kill ourselves.

Air: 2020 was the year of the air. In January, we couldn’t breathe because of bushfire smoke, thick with the ash of three billion dead animals and 18 million hectares of scorched land. Then, we became fearful because each person’s air was potentially contagious to the next. Then, an agent of the state knelt on George Floyd’s neck until he couldn’t breathe anymore. Then, windows were shut. Then, masks became an everyday necessity. Stay inside in order to breathe, march down the street calling for a right to breathe.

This introduces the beginnings of an art-science research project which uses video, sound and photography to find ways of deciphering the slowness by which humans respond to the emergency of climate change and environmental destruction. The works developed during this research period, *The smallest measure*, use sonic and visual modalities to encourage ecological awareness through observational processes of air capture, storage and analysis. The works draw on sensation and perception through the use of multi-layered sound and multi-channel video works, prompting a slow, patient engagement with time, place and space. What does it mean to breathe in air that has travelled across continents, absorbing and

embodying natural and anthropogenic traces along the way? What does this air represent, theoretically and biologically, in the body and in the earth's atmosphere? I'm interested in how art can address slow climate emergencies through the study of air, and through the observation of both site and scientific practice which so carefully and meticulously collects, stores and analyses tiny particles that are so significant to our world.

I have been interested in the potential harm of invisible substances since I became involved with the anti-nuclear movement in Australia at the age of 19, when I joined an environmental tour into the South Australian outback to learn about Australia's dark atomic history.⁶ I'm not sure if seeing my father's anti-nuclear stickers around the house growing up had an impact, but I distinctly remember the "radioactive-free zone" ones stuck to the fridge, which no doubt cemented the existence of such a *zone* into my young mind. Learning from Aboriginal elders and nuclear veterans about the ways in which atomic fallout, radioactive contamination and desecration of land and bodies has affected, and continues to affect, their lives, physically, psychologically and culturally, prompted my ongoing enquiry to find ways to "make visible" such destructive yet "invisible" events and substances.⁷ Hence my current interest in studying air quality as a barometer for global health through my creative practice. In early January 2021, I travelled to Cape Grim Air Pollution Station in Tasmania to begin a case study of scientific care practices responding to climate emergencies and to explore how art-science collaborations can create "response-ability for powerful and threatened places and beings."⁸ Through spending time with the scientists, observing and documenting their processes as well as the environment, I sought to capture how air is fundamental for survival, how it flows through all things and is the baseline for the "mingling of matter"⁹ and the future of our existence.

The site: Cape Grim

SSW 57kmlh. 05 January, 2021: KennaooklCape Grim, lutruwital Tasmania

To be amongst the air, to breathe it in, perhaps the cleanest in the world, is to imagine being here minus 130ppm CO₂ (back to pre-industrial times), to imagine a future ecology that tasted different to this. Even forty years ago, when they started capturing air here, they knew things were not heading in the right direction.

Said to be one of the cleanest air sources in the world, Cape Grim is located on the remote and windy north-west tip of Tasmania, overlooking the vast, deep waters of the Southern Ocean. It was chosen as the site for a baseline air pollution monitoring station because the air that arrives there is free from local or recent terrestrial and human influences and is considered "baseline"¹⁰, that is, it represents background atmosphere and thus grants

insights into the driving forces behind anthropogenic climate change. Since 1976, the Cape Grim science program has been jointly managed by the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), with scientists based at both Cape Grim and the CSIRO Oceans and Atmosphere station at Aspendale, south of Melbourne. The program was initiated with a long-term vision in mind, employing “slow science” practices on site and ensuring the quality, consistency and continuity of data records are maintained.¹¹ This slow science has been continually building “a long-term history of how the composition of the atmosphere, and hence driving forces of climate change, has changed over time.”¹² The program is integral in the World Meteorological Organisation Global Atmosphere Watch Programme and the measurements collected there report Australia’s greenhouse gases to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Cape Grim, Kennaook in the Peerapper language, has been home to the Peerapper and Parperloihener people for many thousands of years and traditional practices of care for country were blatantly interrupted as a result of colonisation. In 1828, during the colonial frontier wars in Australia, Kennaook was the site of a devastating massacre, where around 30 Aboriginal people, mostly men, were ambushed, shot and pushed off the cliff by four Van Diemen’s Land (VDL) company shepherds, into the offensively named Suicide Bay, or Taneneryouer as it was originally called. Tunnerminnerwait, who became an Aboriginal resistance fighter, witnessed the massacre as a young man.¹³ The brutality and pain of the massacre, the beauty of the landscape and the function of the science program at Kennaook are in constant interplay, palpably present while I was there.



Figure 19.1 Jessie Boylan, Filming from the Cape Grim Air Pollution Station, Tasmania, 2021. Photograph: Jessie Boylan.

At Cape Grim, every two months air is captured for storage and archiving. The “air archive” at Aspendale, Victoria dates back to 1978 when atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration (as measured at Cape Grim) was 332.5 ppm. We are now at 410.7 ppm,¹⁴ a level scientists warned many years ago would create catastrophic and irreversible environmental damage and species collapse.¹⁵ Using a range of bespoke instruments, and measuring “substances as low as parts per trillion [the smallest measure] and particles smaller than the wavelength of light,”¹⁶ the dedicated scientists at Cape Grim and Aspendale measure greenhouse gases including carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide; stratospheric ozone depleting chemicals, such as chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs); concentrations of natural and anthropogenic aerosol particulates; reactive gases; radon and solar radiation; wind speed and direction; rainfall, temperature, humidity and air pressure; and solar radiation, including harmful UV-B radiation. The instruments installed at Cape Grim work 24/7, while all else comes and goes; the ongoing work feeds into the long-term gathering of knowledge related to human-driven climate change. This gathering of data requires great care “and detailed knowledge of the physics and chemistry of the atmosphere: a task on which the success or failure of the project depends.”¹⁷

Atmospheric and climate scientists are acutely aware of the likelihood of massive shifts in the climate over the next 50 to 100 years, of the role they play in documenting and alerting us to the dangers. Responsibility and competence are at heart of the care ethics of scientists at Cape Grim, whose holistic thinking and capacity for future imaginings place interconnected and interwoven species relations at the centre, with humans entangled within all lifeforms. To do this kind of work takes deep, embodied and strongly held practices of “response-ability”. “Response-ability” as Donna Haraway states, is “that cultivation through which we render each other capable, [...] it’s the cultivation of the capacity of response in the context of living and dying in worlds for which one is for, with others.”¹⁸ The long-term, rigorous and careful processes in action at Cape Grim embody this kind of “response-ability” and recognise what Gregory Bateson asserted (1972) is the basic unit for survival: organism plus environment.¹⁹ Sadly, “We are learning by bitter experience that the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself.”²⁰ Caring is relational and care practices are bound up in reciprocity. The carer and cared-for are both invested in the future of the relationship and for one another’s future hopes and plans.²¹ This mutual re-engagement breaks down binary notions of “carer” and “cared-for” as one depends upon the other for existence. When applied to human and more-than-human relations, care ethics and practices shed hierarchies of power and activate a reciprocal interplay. The location, data and history of Cape Grim represents the agency of human and nonhuman lifeforms at play on site: organism plus environment. The agency and vibrancy of matter feed the “flows and intensities of affect”²² and of the interdependency of all living things. The affective capacity of the elementally rich landscape, the micro-level scientific gestures and macro-level effects at Cape Grim disrupt

notions of inanimate and passive nonhuman bodies and allow a more interwoven intimate encounter between the multiple presences embodied there.

Layers of History

SSW 57kmlh. 05 January, 2021: kennaookl/Cape Grim, lutruwital/Tasmania

Wind picked up. Camera shaking madly, can't keep it still. All the footage is shaking. I feel unprepared even though I've been preparing for a year. Covid changed last year and now I'm finally here, but I don't have a tripod that can withstand this wind. Wind. Wind. Ocean. Clouds part and patches of sunlight hit the ocean. It is so hard to film. It is so shaky. The wind-turbines on the cliff across the bay are spinning.

The multiple layers of history circle wildly at Cape Grim. It's a place where the invisible particles of progress are captured, where past and present life are caught in cross-continental slipstreams. Eve Tuck and C. Ree observe that, "Social life, settler colonialism, and haunting are inextricably bound; each ensures there are always more ghosts to return,"²³ or as Anna Tsing et al. put it, "The vestiges and signs of past ways of life [are] still charged in the present."²⁴ Cape Grim is charged with these past and present ghosts, signals of our current and future existence, ghosts that are carried on the "winds of the Anthropocene."²⁵ The Anthropocene can be seen as a continuation of the practices of colonisation, and many argue that the term "continues a logic of the universal which is structured to sever the relations between mind, body, and land."²⁶ To centre these relations as inseparable is to value the interdependency of all organisms and their environment as reciprocally entwined.

In embodying that interdependency, Indigenous people have been well ahead of Western science when recognising and responding to a changing climate.²⁷ As author, academic and activist Tony Birch argues, "For Indigenous people, the impact of climate change is not a future event. It has occurred in the past, and it is occurring now."²⁸ Indigenous peoples have been caring for the earth and atmosphere for thousands of years yet are largely ignored when it comes to governmental policy and decisions on how best to manage and care for the environment. For example, in *Fire Country* (2020), Victor Steffensen outlines how Aboriginal traditional knowledge of burning practices could have helped prevent major wildfires in Australia (such as the Black Summer fires of 2019/2020):

Indigenous knowledge systems continue to be suppressed under Western control, unable to fully demonstrate their values right across the board. The effects this has had upon Aboriginal cultural responsibilities and aspirations are obvious to see. It's quite a scary situation, not only for Aboriginal people, but for non-Indigenous people as well.²⁹

For Steffensen, the warning signs have been ringing for some time on how to better care for country and for the future.

Perhaps a different path ahead can be forged, if Aboriginal people and the currency of their knowledge are respected and listened to. How we can broaden this conversation to include all voices, especially those who might know how to respond? The language of climate change is abstract and distant; it tends not to speak to people who are deeply connected to the land and water for survival. As author Ellen Van Neerven suggests, “We need new ways of speaking about uncertain futures.”³⁰ What new language can we find in the bringing together of art, science and traditional knowledges? How can artists respond to these various forms of learnings and teachings, and how can science and policymakers learn from Traditional Owners about the best ways to care for country?

The smallest measure

At Cape Grim, I took a site-responsive approach, observing, watching, listening, feeling and waiting. I stuck my microphones to all objects, tools, instruments, anything they would attach to, anything that made a sound, and things that didn’t as well. I put my geophone in the ground and waited for what might be happening out of the range of human perception. I wondered how to envisage the invisible, yet again. But my approach was more a documentation of observations, a collection of sounds, a witnessing and an exploration of place, time and history. I took my body and my various technical interfaces to attempt to sense, perceive and absorb whatever I could while on site.



Figure 19.2 Jessie Boylan, *The Smallest Measure*, 2021, installation, Goods Shed, Castlemaine Festival. Photograph: Jessie Boylan.

**06 January, 2021: kennaookl/Cape Grim, lutruwital/Tasmania.
SSW 74kmlh.**

A very windy day. Air tastes like sunlight. Wild crashing ocean. Grass blowing patterns everywhichway. Can't keep car doors open. Can't film. Shaking camera again. You brace. You hide behind walls, behind your car. You get blown around. You try to lodge your feet in the ground. You listen to the wind. You record it. Blowing through all the human-made structures and through the plants, the grass, up and across the cliff faces, across the top of the breaking waves. Contact mics on the tower, a metal banging inside. Mics on all the measuring instruments. What do they tell us? What are they doing? What do they know?

I was greatly affected by the wind. The first day I arrived, it was blowing SSW 57km/hr, the next it was SSW 74km/hr, the day after that was decidedly still, just SW 43km/hr. I know I am affected by wind. The "ill winds" are a real thing: they cause havoc. Wind fills "all space from the beginning, with every particle of matter rushing apart from every other particle."³¹

At Cape Grim I didn't feel anxious, I just wanted somehow to capture the intensity of this powerful force. I filmed, recorded, watched. It's all I could do for the time being. The grass adjacent to the station blew around wildly, forming beautiful patterns across the field, left, right, back up, down, as if carpet being vacuumed in all different directions. The wind travelling through the 75-meter air inlet attached to the Telstra communications tower created a deep whistling sound, the weather station's anemometer wind vane blew around maniacally, the waves crashed loudly, and plants lost their stability: the power of wind made visible. Elsewhere, the air just persists, constantly passing through, circling around, getting caught or continuing on its journey.

The recordings collected from both Cape Grim and Aspendale resulted in an observational work of both landscape and machine, human and more-than-human interactions: first a 2-channel, and then a 3-channel video piece with a soundtrack made up of recordings, manipulated sounds and a musical component, made in collaboration with digital media artist Linda Dement and musician Genevieve Fry. In the exhibitions, other elements were included: weather balloons, an atmospheric measuring device used instead as a surface for projection, and slag from the Broken Hill mining operations that served as a reminder of the perpetual extraction of resources and the abandonment of that which we disregard. Drawing influence from other sound and video artists dealing with endangered ecologies, I hoped to show the presence of the inherently invisible, to relay our complicity in the crisis, to place us within the world, to ask us to "pay acute attention to that which surrounds us, and which might soon slip away."³²

My hope is that the video and sound works will supplant the usual language used to communicate about climate change, exuding the power of the natural world and the ineffability of the damage we have caused to it. That,

by linking science, Indigenous knowledges and artistic practice, they might begin to develop new ways to speak about our climate crisis and our changing world. For, in entanglement, these three ways of knowing are rooted in an ethic of care, with the power to convey our “response-ability”, our interdependency and reciprocal relations, together *with*, and not separate from, the world in which we inhabit.

Notes

- 1 Kate Wright, “An Ethics of Entanglement for the Anthropocene.” *Scan Journal of Media Arts Culture*, Volume 11 Number 1 (2014). <http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/vol11number1/Kate-Wright.html>.
- 2 These sections are the author’s journal entries from January, 2021, Cape Grim, Tasmania.
- 3 Jill Bennett, “Atmospheric Affects,” in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, edited by Marta Zarzycka and Bettina Papenburg (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 102–117.
- 4 Bennett, “Atmospheric Affects.”
- 5 In “Slow Emergencies: Temporality and the Racialized Biopolitics of Emergency Governance” (2019), Ben Anderson posits that “The concept of slow emergencies points to those situations of harm and suffering that question what forms of life can and should be secured by Emergency governance” (Anderson et al. 622).
- 6 Since the 1980s, Friends of the Earth has taken hundreds of concerned people from all over Australia into the South Australian outback to learn about the impacts of the nuclear industry on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and the environment; from the British nuclear tests in South and Western Australia in the 1950s and 1960s to the ongoing displacement and degradation of land and the environment because of uranium mining across the country, as well as the links to nuclear reactors and nuclear proliferation overseas.
- 7 I have written in more detail about radioactive colonialism and art addressing nuclear legacies in “Grievability and Nuclear Memory” (*American Quarterly*, 2019) and “Atomic Amnesia: Photographs and Nuclear Memory” (*Global Change, Peace and Security*, 2015).
- 8 Donna Haraway, “Symbiogenesis, Symptoiesis, and Art Science Activisms,” in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, edited by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), M25–M50.
- 9 Bennett, “Atmospheric Affects.”
- 10 Zoe Loh, “Atmospheric Pressure: Studying the Make-up of the Air We Breathe,” *Griffith Review* 71 (2020), <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/atmospheric-pressure/>.
- 11 Loh, “Atmospheric Pressure.”
- 12 Sam Cleland, Bureau of Meteorology, Officer in Charge, Cape Grim, email exchange with the author, 5 March, 2020.
- 13 Lorena Allam, “The Forgotten War That Led to Port Phillip’s First Public Executions,” *Hindsight*, ABC Radio, accessed: 16 February, 2021. <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/hindsight/a-forgotten-war/5926302>.
- 14 Cape Grim greenhouse gas data: <https://www.csiro.au/greenhouse-gases/>.
- 15 Elizabeth Kolbert, “The Climate Expert Who Delivered News No One Wanted to Hear,” *New Yorker*, June 22, 2009. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/06/29/the-catastrophist>.
- 16 Sam Cleland, Officer in Charge, Cape Grim, email exchange with the author, 5 March 2020.

- 17 Baseline Atmospheric Program (Australia), History and Recollections, 40th Anniversary special, Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO Oceans and Atmosphere, 2016, p. 5.
- 18 “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene: Donna Haraway in conversation with Martha Kenney,” in *Art in the Anthropocene, Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, eds. (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 255–270.
- 19 Wright, “An Ethics of Entanglement for the Anthropocene.”
- 20 Wright, “An Ethics of Entanglement for the Anthropocene.”
- 21 Gordon, Suzanne, Patricia Benner, and Nel Noddings, eds. *Caregiving: Readings in Knowledge, Practice, Ethics, and Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 21.
- 22 Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, eds. “Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment.” (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 8.
- 23 Eve Tuck and C. Ree, “A Glossary of Haunting,” in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, edited by Stacey Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis (Left Coast Press, 2013), 642.
- 24 Tsing, “Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet.”
- 25 Tsing, “Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet.”
- 26 Heather Davis and Todd, Z. (2017). On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 16(4), 761.
- 27 Ellen Van Neerven, “The Country Is Like a Body,” *Right Now, Human Rights in Australia*, October 26, 2015. <https://rightnow.org.au/essay/the-country-is-like-a-body/>.
- 28 Van Neerven, “The Country Is Like a Body.”
- 29 Victor Steffensen. *Fire Country: How Indigenous Management Could Help Save Australia* (Sydney, Hardie Grant Publishing, 2020), 98.
- 30 Van Neerven, “The Country Is Like a Body.”
- 31 Steven Weinberg, quoted in *Heaven’s Breath: A Natural History of the Wind* by Lyall Watson. New York Review Books, 1984, 11.
- 32 Saskia Beudel, “Site and Sound: Sonic Art as Ecological Practice”, *Artlink*, 12 March 2021, accessed 10 April, 2021. <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4892/site-and-sound-sonic-art-as-ecological-practice/#footnote-2>.

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