The Pensive Photograph as Agent: What Can Non-Illustrative Images Do to Galvanize Public Support for Climate Change Action?

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This essay examines the value of pensive, non-illustrative photographs in generating public sentiment for addressing climate change. The authors use their own work with the arts collective The Canary Project as a case study, with a particular focus on a photography project titled A History of the Future. They argue that a fundamental disbelief in the potential trauma of climate change is a greater impediment to political action than ignorance of the science. With reference to critical thinking on the nature of photography and art history, they describe the process by which the pensive photograph (and, by extension, other types of cultural production) can open a space for belief in such trauma within receptive viewers. They go on to describe how such cultural production can contribute to societal conceptions of what is normal, intolerable, possible, urgent, etc., and how this building of public sentiment, in turn, becomes the prerequisite to concrete political action. Their analysis bears both directly: on the question of visualizing climate change and indirectly: on the nature of art and activism in general.

1.

Our project, *A History of the Future,* consists of a set of photographic images, all landscapes, showing places around the world where scientists are observing the impacts of climate change. The basic method of scientific observation is measurement. However, these measurements are not visible in the photographs. The images are still images and singular (i.e. we took no time-lapse or before-and-after images).

In launching this project, we wanted to find out what could be seen of climate change in still landscape images but, more importantly, what could be conveyed through these images that might bridge the gap between scientific data and public understanding of the issue and also between public understanding and political will. We wanted to find out if photographs could make us or anybody else more seriously invest in the proposition that climate change is real, urgent and a serious risk to life.

The project consists of images, but is not the images themselves. The project is the display and distribution of those images. The images live many lives. They have been art objects, framed in a gallery with an edition number and the aura of secrecy and value. They have been pedagogical tools in science museums and classrooms, openly disclosing (delimiting) their content. They have been billboards and bus ads. They have been editorial content. In each case, we struck a different bargain between illustrating the facts of climate change (which is always contingent on captioning and context) and laying bare a state of disorientation and collapse of scale that seemed the only reliable opening into the trauma of climate change.

Figure 1: Exhibition installation view, Double Blind, Illges Gallery, Columbus State University, Columbus, GA, 2010; Figure 2: Billboards from A History of the Future series, Columbus, GA, 2010.

Our sense of what our images do best changed substantially in the course of the project that, in turn, produced a transformation in our understanding of what activist art or research-based art could be. In one of our more recent exhibitions of this work, we simply hung black fabric over the photographs; didactic text next to the cloaked images gave their context. Meanwhile, outside the gallery, we put the same images on billboards throughout the metropolitan area without any text or explanation whatsoever. Where there is normally seeing (the gallery

space) there would be only believing; and where there is normally believing (the advertising space) there would be only seeing. Why did we do that? What good was it?

2.

"Seeing is believing" is the general form of most justifications for the efficacy of photographs concerning climate change, the tacit logic being that photographs present evidence that you cannot deny. However, this logic is actually a muddle and based on false premises.

First of all, a photograph is not merely seeing. A photograph is captured sight that is also seen—an indeterminate status that accounts for its pensiveness. This pensiveness is a quality intrinsic to all photographs that can either be rendered subordinate to some textual content or given free reign. Jacques Rancière describes the state of being pensive as being full of thoughts but not necessarily the one thinking them. It is a state between active and passive. When applied to an image he writes: "It contains unthought thought, a thought that cannot be attributed to the intention of the person who produces it and which has an effect on the person who views it without her linking it to a determinate object."[1] This occurs precisely because photography is not simply seeing, it is seeing another's sight. A memory that feels like yours but is not. However, this intrinsic pensiveness of the photograph is defeated when the specificity of the thing seen is subverted or when the thought is too readily dispensed with and fails to permeate the viewer like smoke filling a room. Often, dispensing with the photograph's pensiveness is a crucial tactic, notably anytime where the efficiency of information delivery is paramount. Generally speaking, this is the case with the images of photojournalism, which tend to be illustrative rather than pensive for good reason: they need to communicate to the reader quickly and clearly. What we are at pains to describe here, however, is another type of image in which the intrinsic pensiveness overwhelms or outruns its immediate context.[2]

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1 Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator, 2009, 107.

2 We have chosen the term "pensive image" because it has more substantial critical precedent (notably Rancière, who is referenced throughout this essay, and Barthes). Nearly equivalent terms would have been contemplative image or indeterminate image. The pensive image has the tendency to be viewed as art. See section 7 of this essay for a more detailed discussion of the illustrative image as distinct from the pensive image.

It is important to note that there is something deceptive about the illustrative image when it comes to climate change. While all photographs are, in a sense, evidentiary, what they verify is fundamentally limited only to what can be seen in the image without textual or con-textual supplement. (The context simply tells you where to place the thing verified, into what proposition). The expansive formulation of this thought is: the photograph is proof of the past and of something specific existing in the past (no more than this, but also no less). This truth claim resides solely in the image, but does not rest in the printed image's relationship to the thing photographed (i.e. its indexicality). Each photograph also asserts absolute presence (space) and absolute absence (time). The pensive image stands in an uncertain relationship between this absolute specificity and the necessary context of each image within the larger of system of images. As Rancière says, "an image never stands alone."[3] We will return to this thought below in our discussion of the semiotics and phenomenology of the photograph, as it bears directly on the key questions of this publication.

Moreover, the language of evidence suggests knowledge, but knowledge and belief are not the same—even if we frequently mistake one for the other. We commonly say "I know this" or "I know that", and yet as Duchamp pointed out, "In general, when one says 'I know' one doesn't know; one believes."[4] Knowledge implies the possibility of verification, whereas belief does not. Belief can only be tested internally and is a function of the relative presence or absence of doubt. Belief is involved with a system of assumptions and determines how we see the world and how we function within it. Duchamp was right about the frequency of our using "know" when we really mean "believe" because it is much harder than it seems (if not impossible) to provide a clear criteria for verification. The difficulty of objective verification obviates the sort of knowledge assumed by the statement "I know," but we don't acknowledge that in common speech. "I know" often means, "I am certain (without a doubt)," which has everything to do with belief and nothing to do with the possibility of objective verification. So, "seeing," which is empirical, cannot be "believing," which is not empirical. Seeing is actually closer to knowing, in part because both can be construed as a process rather than a state. Wittgenstein on this point: "'I know' has a primitive meaning similar to and related to 'I see' ('wissen', 'videre') […] 'I know' is supposed to express a relation, not between me and a proposition (like 'I believe') but between me and a fact. So that the fact is taken

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3   Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator, 2009, 99.

4   de Certau, The Practice of Everyday Life, 1984, 177, citing Duchamp, Duchamp du signe, 185.

into my consciousness […] This would give us a picture of knowing as the perception of an outer event through visual rays which project it as it is into the eye and consciousness."[5]

Lastly, and most fundamentally to the topic of this essay, climate change cannot be seen in order to believed. At the end of the day, it must simply be believed. That is because climate change is a proposition and not a fact (no matter how empirically grounded that proposition might be). In the words of our editors, climate change is an "abstract, statistically created, long-term research object." Needless to say, you can't exactly photograph such a thing.

3.

So what *did* we photograph for our project? A mountain, a stick with numbers on it, an aqueduct, a church in snow, a fallen water tower, etc. If these things were not "climate change" (because what is an image of a proposition?), then were they at least impacts of climate change? Not exactly that either.

Our method was as follows: First, we conducted research into what changes are occurring on the planet that: 1) had been attributed, at least in part, to climate change on the basis of two or more peer-reviewed articles in relevant journals; 2) were visible to the human eye and thus ostensibly photographable with a non-specialized camera and lens.

We then interviewed experts about these changes and where they were most evident or likely to be evident in the near future. We selected 13 locations on five continents (we didn't make it to Australia); and five categories of impacts (glacial, permafrost and icecap melting; fires and droughts; sea-level rise; extreme weather events; and disrupted ecosystems). We then developed partnerships with local experts who could guide us in the field. These experts showed us around on location, pointing to this and that. We photographed what they showed us in solitude, either forcing a break in the tour or returning later in better light. Initially, we were completely focused on impacts—on what could be seen of climate change—and we expected our project to be more or less documentary in this sense, even if we often gave in to the time-honored trick of shrouding the image in the golden light of early morning and evening.

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5   Wittgenstein, On Certainty, 1969, 13e-14e.

Figure 3: Glacial, Icecap and Permafrost Melting XLVII: Cordillera Blanca, Peru, 2008, archival pigment print, 40 x 50 inches.

Figure 4: Glacial, Icecap and Permafrost Melting XXXVI: Bellingshause Base, King George Island, Antarctica, 2008, archival pigment print, 40 x 50 inches.

Figure 5: Extreme Weather Events XV: Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, 2005, archival pigment print, 40 x 50 inches. (→ color plate 16)

However, once in the field, we received a series of unexpected shocks. The shock was not some apparent violence being done to the land. On the contrary, the shock was the indifference of nature to such putative violence. Our shock was the silence in these places, not the noise. Our shock was the invisibility of the impacts to the human eye and not their glaring visibility. A glacier is melting? But actually, this is too slow to see in process without the aid of some technology. A tree is burning? Well, what made it burn? A coral reef is "bleached?" But it looks so beautiful. A water tower has been crushed? But, where is that storm now and did climate change actually cause it? We traveled to all these places that scientists had identified as harbingers of catastrophe and found them devoid of any clear sign of danger. The land was just there, imperceptibly changing. Paradoxically, this shock strengthened, rather than diminished, our belief in the proposition we set out to investigate: *that anthropogenic climate change, as benign and boring is it may sound, is real, urgent and of grave threat to life on the planet*. We could see only the footprints and not the beast walking. This hardly made the beast seem less threatening.

The various images we settled on to articulate this experience have one central underlying quality. Within the areas demarcated by our expert guides, we shot whatever made us feel, rather than understand (believe, rather than know), that a change was truly beginning—i.e.: that the history of the earth is long and the history of humans infinitesimal; that time is irreversible; that unimaginable

forces are constantly erasing and writing the land; that there is a life outside of ourselves; that this thing referred to as a "climate change impact" could translate into suffering; that the real exists beyond our symbolic order; that seeing the past is seeing the future, etc. In short, we photographed what, to us (in the field, in real time) seemed to manifest not the facts of climate change per se, but its trauma.

4.

Treating trauma of any sort photographically is a vexing issue, in part because of the oversaturation of images in contemporary culture, in part because the seeing of a photograph is never commensurate with direct experience, and in part because, as Errol Morris and Susan Sontag observe in different ways, believing precedes the seeing of a photographic image and always mediates it.[6] With respect to climate change, these problems are compounded by the fact that its impacts, in addition to being putative, are not directly experienced, and therefore have only an uncertain claim to trauma. We ought, therefore, to define more closely what we mean by trauma in this instance and in what sense this became the governing principle of our project, both in terms of the images we decided upon and their various modes of exhibition. To do so, we must first return to the subject of belief vs. knowledge.

Belief refers to a relationship between myself and a proposition and carries with it no possibility of absolute verification, whereas knowledge refers to a relationship between myself and a fact and does hold forth the possibility of verification. Yet, curiously, we speak of certainty in regard to both knowledge and belief. With respect to knowledge, we say we are certain in order to describe a knowledge is total, with no chance of error (if this is indeed possible, as some dispute), i.e. we reference the exterior. With respect to belief, we say we are certain to describe a mental state without doubt, i.e. we reference the interior.

Certainty is not absolute. There are degrees of certainty, as evidenced by how we use the word. We say of a belief that it is strong or weak depending on the degree of certainty. Thus, we say "I am fairly certain," "I am totally certain," etc. Accordingly, it is important to note that belief in something (for example climate change) can be strong in one respect (for example confidence in

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6 See: Morris, Believing is Seeing, 2011, and Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 2003.

the science) but weak in other respects (for example that "the flow of everyday reality can be perturbed" to the extent predicted by the science[7]).

Michel de Certeau usefully defines belief as an investment in a proposition. For de Certeau that investment is exhibited in action.[8] Whatever our strength of belief concerning the science of climate change, we exhibit a very weak belief overall, as evidenced by our lack of action. The Lacanian Slavoj Zizek diagnoses this as follows: "Our attitude here is that of the fetishistic split. 'I know very well (that global warming is a threat to the entire humanity), but nonetheless […] (I cannot really believe it). It is enough to see the natural world to which my mind is connected: green grass and trees, the sighing of the breeze, the rising of the sun […] can one really imagine that all this will be disturbed?'"[9]

Zizek's evocation of fetishism here is telling. A fetish develops as a response to trauma, specifically when that trauma is too great to be assimilated into life as we have come to expect it, i.e. our symbolic order. A break occurs, a rupture. The experience of trauma is one of profound dislocation and disorientation.

With respect to climate change, this fetishistic split is particularly vexing, because the only thing that can cause a rupture in our sense of normally proceeding life (sun rising and falling, snow falling and melting) is belief itself and not anything that can be directly experienced. This is the case in the first instance because even if a traumatic event can be attributed to something called climate change, we require a belief in that very attribution in order to link the direct experience of the event to this larger proposition. Furthermore, we must link this disturbance to the more unimaginable proposition that such events will cease to become disturbances at all, but the normal stuff of life. This, too, requires belief and everything mitigates our holding onto that belief in any real way for very long. Our bodies and minds will not permit it. In other words, we return to Zizek's conclusion: we can very well know climate change, but we cannot believe it. To truly believe it (and act accordingly) requires a rupture, a trauma, and this trauma must override our direct perception of the world.

Such a belief extends beyond a mere acceptance of the soundness of the science we are told about but cannot independently verify. More significantly, this belief requires certainty that such a rupture is even possible, that there is a precedent for it: some firm ground to think it could happen and what that would

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7   Zizek, End Times, 2011, 445.

8   De Certau, The Practice of Everyday Life, 1984, 177–189.

9   Zizek, End Times, 2011, 445–446.

mean.[10] It is the difficulty in appreciating the latter that best accounts for the gap between scientific understanding and public sentiment or political will. Plenty of people know about climate change, even know that it is a valid proposition, but few really believe it. There is a circularity here: you have to believe your way into the trauma that is necessary to truly believe. In this sense, the subject of the photographs in *A History of the Future* is not real trauma, or even vicarious trauma.[11] It is more the intimation of trauma and can never be wholly grasped. To become receptive to this intimation of trauma (literally "wound" in the original Greek), we need an opening, a piercing. What we want to say is that this piercing certainly can come from a photograph (and, by extension, other media that we may want to call art), yet no photograph can guarantee it, for it also depends on the viewer.

5.

At some point, we began referring to our photographs for this project as blank stares. That is how they came across to us when viewed individually. Was the landscape looking at us, or were we looking at the landscape? This effect of an eerily vacant but relentless gaze was produced by one of two things: 1) the discrepancy between the neutrality and apparent indifference of the landscapes in contrast to their presumed meaning as harbingers of catastrophe, and/or 2) the simultaneous intimacy and distance (presence and absence) we felt when looking at something particular, which we were only doing in the formalized manner of the project because some expert had told us to be where we were.

Another way to describe this is that the actuality of the landscapes themselves was so much stronger (so much more present) than the discourse surrounding

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10 Climate change activists often suggest that catastrophic weather events are needed to rupture the collective sense of normalcy. While events like Hurricane Sandy bring communities together and rally civic pride, researchers suggest that people usually form opinions in keeping with their cultural group, so as not to drive a wedge between them and their peers. Kahan, "Why we are poles apart on climate change," 2012, 255.

11 The notion of vicarious trauma, however, is pertinent to the argument of this essay, because if accepted it shows that trauma does not have to be experienced directly to be felt. We have not made a survey of the professional literature on the topic, but are aware of its extent. McCann and Pearlman, "Vicarious Traumatization," 149.

climate change that had brought us there in the first place. We then faced an essential choice, which we have articulated elsewhere as follows[12]:

1) Dramatize the landscape in some way, such as indulging in a myth about damaged earth, in an effort to activate feelings of indignation, disgust, wonder or dismay (whether or not this motivation is frankly admitted or not)
     or
2) Confess to a feeling of incomprehension, disorientation, loss of scale, seduction and panic.

Figure 6: Extreme Weather Events XV: XXIII: Coney Island, NY, 2012*, archival pigment print, 40 x 50 inches. (→ color plate 17)*

One is a gesture of mastery and the other of submission. Most photography dealing with environmental themes employs some version of the former. You can see this technically in the color saturation, the single-minded themes, the

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12 Morris and Sayler, "Blank Stare," 2012.

bold compositional choices which preference symmetry and an elevated perspective that is dehumanizing and gives the impression of omniscience. You can also see it in the way the work is framed and discussed, usually in the vein of heroism. In other words, most landscape photography has still not escaped the long shadow of landscape photographer Ansel Adams.

Adherence to the lofty formal techniques of Adams is not incidental; it is part and parcel of a philosophical outlook that regards nature as transcendental, "a religious idea," to quote Adams himself.[13] Most contemporary landscape photographs tend to be more self-consciously ambiguous in their statements of purpose than Adams, yet still operative is the underlying dogma that nature and man are opposed and that, as such, we are damaging nature. This leads to a simplistic symbolic order, which is often evident in the compositional structure of their photographs. More significantly, it also leads to adamant disavowals of any political intent or responsibility. Such work creates a (visual) sanctuary and a locus of mourning that dispenses with any need to act; in part because of the certainty and conventionality of the underlying beliefs and in part because the mere act of viewing is held to be sufficient. Such work assumes no future or, at best, longs for a future that is conservative—a future where wild places are preserved with only privileged access.

Against this tendency, we felt a perverse attraction to the following idea of nature that is even older and more out-of-vogue (from Rilke):

"To see landscape thus, as something distant and foreign, something remote and unloving, something entirely self-contained, was necessary […] For we began to understand Nature only when we no longer understood it; when we felt that it was the Other, indifferent towards men, which has no wish to let us enter […]"[14]

Whatever this romantic perspective lacks in terms of sensitivity to humanity's position as part of an ecosystem or foreknowledge that we would come to call this era the Anthropocene, it is perspicacious and intellectually rigorous on one point: the supreme indifference of the inorganic world.

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13 Adams, On Our National Parks, 1992, 113–117.

14 Hass, Introduction to The Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, citing Rilke, "Concerning Landscape," 1989, XXV.

6.

So if the photographs from *A History of the Future* on their own were blank stares born of disorientation, expressing sublime indifference to the implications of climate change, what application did they have to the original, essentially activist, premise of the project? We need to open up our understanding of "activism" to answer this.

Paul Chan, a self-described activist and artist, is often quoted for his firm distinction between his own artistic and activist impulses. He speaks to it in many places. Among the more succinct is this quote from an interview in Bomb magazine:

"Collective social power needs the language of politics, which means, among other things, that people need to consolidate identities, to provide answers […] to make things happen. Whereas my art is nothing if not the dispersion of power […] And so, in a way, the political project and the art project are sometimes in opposition."[15]

The implication here (fleshed out elsewhere by Chan) is that:

• Activist — Singular, constructive, affirmative, un-nuanced, instrumental, common, contractual and with demands
• Art — Manifold, deconstructive, interrogative, nuanced, purposeless, unique, free and unending

Chan's oppositional dichotomy between art and activism is still a broadly shared bias in the art world and beyond. If one wants to attack Chan's dichotomy, one usually chooses to joust with the definition of art (cf. Nato Thompson and others[16]). That is a fair game, but not the battle we want to fight here. In fact, we think this definition of art is a very useful description of the way it (often) functions. There ought to be a word reserved in our language for a cultural product able to hold apparently contradictory ideas in balance. There should be a special semantic place for things we read and view that have claims to negative capability or that are able to speak to our moral intuitions rather than our reason, that blossom questions faster than they shed answers. We believe the old standby, art, serves for this purpose. Another word we might use when speaking

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15 McClister, "Interview with Paul Chan," 2005, 26.
16 See Thompson, Living as Form, 2012 or Seeing Power, 2013. As one of many examples, see Enwezor, "The Artist as Producer in Times of Crisis," 2005.

of a photograph in this context is the word we have used throughout this essay: pensive.

On the contrary, what is objectionable to us about Chan's oppositional duality is his far too restrictive definition of activism.[17] Chan's definition of activism holds true only if we restrict the term to those actions that are exclusively in the service of immediate political goals and appreciable, near-term change, which, as Chan indicates, does in fact require consolidation of identities around a central reductive argument. However, the current use of the word activism does not necessarily imply any such restriction. Interestingly, dictionaries, which always lag behind actual usage, are divided on this point. From a survey of online and offline definitions, we find:

1) Many, including the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), do not even have a definition of activism outside of a reference to an obscure early 20th Century philosophical theory that "assumes the objective reality and active existence of everything." Further, there is no entry in the OED for the word "activist" at all!

2) Those dictionaries that do have a definition of activism in the more contemporary sense often assume the necessity of vigor, militancy and/or direct action. For example, this definition from freedictionary.com: "a policy of taking direct and often militant action to achieve an end, esp. a political or social one."

3) In our very quick and anecdotal survey, Wikipedia alone offered a definition that conforms more closely to the way the word is actually used today: "Activism consists of efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, or environmental change. Activism can take a wide range of forms […]"

Activism is concerned with effecting change in a society, full stop. Militancy is not required. For doesn't change happen in many different strata of society and at many different tempos? Isn't the formula for change partly direct political action, meaning specific advocacy for specific policies, and partly cultural,

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17 It is especially aggravating that this narrow view of activism continues to hold such sway over the art world—a sort of modernist hangover that makes fools of many artists who talk out of both sides of their mouth, espousing Guatarri to burnish their intellectual bona fides, and at the same time promoting a version of art that is merely the "portrayal of bourgeois self-understanding." (That final delicious phrase is from Burger, The Negation of the Autonomy of Art, 1984).

meaning the establishment of what people think is moral, important, normal, intolerable, possible, etc.? Don't artists make culture?

In reference to enacting legislation, the much-mythologized Abraham Lincoln said: "With public sentiment nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed." In other words, there has to be sufficient popular acceptance of an idea for legislators to act (or to even be in office in the first place). Take the gay rights movement, for example. We have recently had Don't Ask Don't Tell and Gay Marriage on the legislator's docket in the U.S., but how long was that in the making, and what happened to get to that point? People needed to start regarding gay people as just people. Well, how did that happen? The notion of being gay entered the culture, first radically, and then gradually became normalized. And how did it enter the culture and how did it become normalized or gain wider acceptance? Are we to believe that Robert Mapplethorpe (or Gran Fury) had absolutely nothing to do with that? Or that Ansel Adams, Elliot Porter, Joseph Beuys or Agnes Denes had nothing to do with environmental legislation or reforms? Or that Martha Rosler, Judy Chicago and Barbara Kruger had nothing to do with progress on equal rights for women? Etc., etc. etc.: the list is virtually endless.

The point is not that hordes of people came into contact with, or were directly influenced by, these works. The point is that these works manifestly changed the cultural landscape and opened up cultural spaces. At minimum, this opening up was seized upon by taste making youth in urban centers, then popularized in the media, and then taken up more broadly by consumers of that media across the country and globe. This is how culture works. Once more people became sympathetic to a given viewpoint (because such a viewpoint had become part of their social identity), then, and only then could the issue be taken up politically in terms of changing the law of the land, etc.

Video artist and critic Tom Sherman has a way of explaining this process by employing the rubric of "memes." As Sherman defines them: "memes are cultural building blocks, the message forms and contents at the base of our cultures."[18] Artists, in Sherman's opinion, make "a-typical memes" that provide a vision or aspiration for an entirely new culture.[19] If memes make up the cellular structure of our culture and a new, a-typical meme is introduced into that structure, then the entire composition of the culture has changed, no matter how minutely. What happens next is anybody's guess. It depends on the life force of

18 Sherman, "Memory and Hope," 2006, 190.

19 Sherman, "Prosthetics and Memetics," 2006, 207.

these new cultural cells. Sometimes they get sick and die; sometimes they spread and mutate.

Or we might turn Chan against himself. Chan beautifully defines the art he is interested in as "critical thinking in sensuous form."[20] But what critical thinking is innocent of persuasion? Even if concerned with deconstruction, the thinking piece walks a reader/viewer into and through a point of view that productively alters her understanding of the world and thus her belief system.

We can also say it this way: art makes a space for belief and belief makes a space for change. To map this formula explicitly on the argument we made above: art produces ways of thinking and seeing that open a path toward the accumulation of public sentiment (through the creation of subjectives sensitive to this or that issue), which in turn can precipitate political change. Is this activism? If we want to reserve the word activism for a description of those activities that seek some direct, leveraged outcome and depend on the "vigorous" mobilization of masses of people, so be it. In that case, we propose to re-purpose the old term "constructivist" to describe any art that is able to strengthen belief (in whatever manner and no matter how diffusely). Either way, the duality proposed by Chan disappears and art can be seen for what it is: a (potentially) productive force in society or else a luxury commodity.

If we must go to such lengths sketching how a non-rhetorical, non-instrumentalist art might still function as activism (or at least constructivism) that is because it is not very easy to see. When you get right down to it, not many people see or know about art, and those that do tend to be pretty progressive anyway. So of course, it is much easier to see how an African-American sitting down at a segregated lunch counter in 1960 has an impact. Our argument is not that art is better at changing the world than direct action. What we are saying is that art contributes to the necessary work of laying the cultural foundation (public sentiment) for this more apparent direct action to take hold. Art is good at this because it opens rather than closes thought. Yet, even making that slight claim invites a pretty decisive reconsideration of the nature of artistic practice.

7.

With respect to climate change and photography in particular, we make an additional and more specific claim: that certain photographs of climate change —those that we might term art because they have the indeterminate nature

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20   Chan, "What Art is and Where it Belongs, " 2009, 6.

requisite to art as defined by Chan and others—can strengthen belief in the potential trauma of climate change. This is important because, as already discussed, a lack of conviction in the possibility of such trauma is a far more serious impediment to political will than ignorance of the science.[21]

In giving special treatment to the pensive image (what we are calling art only on account of convention, as a sort of shorthand) we are distinguishing it from another image type: the illustrative.[22] There are many ways that we could understand the differences between these two modes, most of which are fairly self-evident or easily deducible. The illustrative image is speedy and delivers information. It depends for its efficacy on the unique truth claim of the photograph (THIS was THERE THEN), but makes quick work of it—employing it to gain our trust but then steering that trust towards a statement (journalistic, scientific or rhetorical). The image, in this instance, is subordinate to text, and therefore, the crushing specificity of the captured image is not allowed full unfolding (lest it distract us). The illustrative photograph is useful in strengthening a belief in the scientific justification of climate change, but less so the trauma. Particularly potent examples of the illustrative image are the before-and-after comparison photographs of melting glaciers (Balog, Arnold, Braasch and others), which are able to depict, and thus in a sense to verify, an actual measurement (even if the general proposition drawn from the measurement must still be supplied). Climate change certainly becomes more real to the public through the dissemination of this sort of image. The science becomes easier to believe because we must travel less distance to accept its premises, i.e. we are presented with a verification of the empirical propositions upon which the more general proposition is based. If this is not immediately self-evident, consider what the state of public acceptance of climate change would be without such illustrative photographs.

However, illustrative photographs do not get us very far with the more significant challenge of imagining the potential trauma of climate change with a

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21 What will obviate the need to lay this ground is the clear, unquestionable presence of the trauma, for example, multiple Hurricane Sandies, but at that point it will be too late. In the meantime, art can help us understand the implications of events like Sandy, as per the HighWaterLine project, which our organization The Canary Project helped produce. This project was predominantly illustrative in nature, but had some contemplative elements, notably in the performance of a lone person marking 80 miles of coast with a warning.

22 Here, we are following the lead of Ulrike Heine and her presentation at the conference that led to this publication, see article by Heine in this volume.

force sufficient to infuse belief. For example, it is telling that the illustrative image in no way curtails the skeptic's point of view that glaciers are melting as part of a natural cycle. Such an image doesn't forebode anything, etc. For some intimation of the trauma and a statement of its plausibility, we must turn to the pensive image.

8.

What makes the pensive image function in this regard, and how is it distinct from the illustrative image? Clearly, the pensive image is not utterly void of context and thus some form of textual inscription. No image is innocent in this way (as Barthes disingenuously maintains in *Camera Lucida*[23]). However, the point is not its purity, but its indeterminacy, or un-fixedness. Paradoxically, the indeterminacy of the pensive image depends for its efficacy on the unique value of the truth claim (THIS was THERE THEN), just as much as the determinacy of the illustrative image. In the case of the pensive image as opposed to the illustrative, the truth claim is not choked off and made subordinate, but instead allowed a full unfolding. This opening is essential to a depth (rather than an accuracy) of feeling.

All photographs are tied to propositions (i.e. have a context), but the truth claim of the photograph (i.e. what can be verified by it) is independent of any such relationship. The truth claim resides in the image itself and as stated before is simply the claim THIS was THERE THEN. This is often referred to as the photograph's inherent indexicality, i.e. it points to (index finger) something actual in the world. However, as art historian, Tom Gunning has argued, this language of semiotics is insufficient to an understanding of the photograph's truth claim, because a photograph does not merely point to (re-present) the actual, it physically *presents* it.

As Gunning points out, referencing Bazin and Barthes, we must move past a semiotic analysis of the photograph to a phenomenological description to appreciate this, because semiotics only sheds light on the mechanism for recording the real and not the presentation of it in the printed or digitally manifested photograph. As Gunning writes, "whereas signs reduce their reference to a signification, I would claim the photograph opens up a passageway to its subject, not as a signification but as a world, multiple and

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23   Barthes, Camera Lucida, 1981.

complex."[24] Barthes refers to this opening up as an emanation. It has to do with the materiality of the photograph, the fact that we are not merely signifying, we are *actually seeing* what was once seen by somebody else and is now being seen by us *at a different time*. We are looking at something that absolutely was but will absolutely never be again. We are looking at both presence: the literal shining forth of a person or object in the world (the quality of space), and absence: the disappearance of that thing (the quality of time). This hovering between presence and absence, familiarity and unfamiliarity, death and life, present and past, the self and other is completely contingent on a full activation of the specificity of an image tearing away from its ever-present context. Our way to this opening is blocked (partially or wholly) if the specificity of the image is subsumed by a generality, as in the illustrative photograph. Simply put: there is no space in such a photograph, because its content is (over)determined.

A coming-to-terms with the potential trauma of climate change depends on sensitivity to a number of truths that emanate from this sort of forced contemplation of specificity, particularly in reference to a landscape as opposed to a portrait. A partial catalog might include:

- The discrepancy between geologic and human time
- The irreversibility of time
- The insignificance of human history against the scale of geologic history
- The indifference and independence of the inorganic world
- The existence of the real beyond our symbolic order

These abstractions would remain remote if not for the discomfort produced by the fissure in our spatio-temporal understanding. It hardly seems incidental that the language of photography is the language of violence ("shoot," "take," "dodge," "burn," "crop"), as Matthew Thompson and others have noted.[25] We rip the object from the flow of time—a blade across the eyeball, "an instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another world, into another kind of time."[26] Whatever was in the image is no more and can never be again. It is in this sense that every photograph is a death mask (for Bazin),[27] a

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24 Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index?" 2004, 39–49.

25 Thompson, "The Object Lost and Found," 2011, 71. This entire paragraph borrows ideas from this essay.

26 Ibid, citing Metz, "Photography and Fetish," 83.

27 Ibid, citing Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 1960, 4.

catastrophe (for Barthes).[28] In other words, photographs can help us get closer to the trauma of climate change when their own inherent traumatic properties are given fuller realization, as in the pensive image.

Figure 7: Exhibition installation view, The Canary Project Works on Climate Change 2006 - 2009, Grunwald Gallery, Indiana University, Indiana. In this exhibition, the photographs from A History of the Future series were paired with objects from various of the university's collections to suggest a contemplation of human versus geologic time.
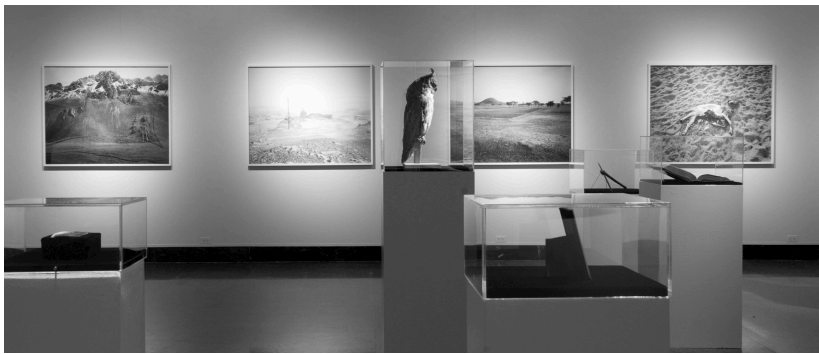
Since all these effects derive from a full unfolding of the truth claim which resides solely in the image, and since the illustrative image chokes off the truth claim by making the image subordinate to text, the illustrative image does not have the same opportunity for piercing the viewer and opening a space for a belief in trauma as the pensive image.

9.

Of course, there is no question of success here. One always fails. That also sets the pensive image apart from the illustrative—there is no mark to hit. What the viewer does with the experience of contemplation, or even whether she accepts the invitation, is, of course, up to her (and her responsibility). As Rancière has pointed out there is no "straight line from the intolerable spectacle to awareness of the reality it was expressing; and from that to the desire to act in order to change it." This is the central fallacy of much "activist" art and presumably the

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28 Ibid, citing Barthes, Camera Lucida, 1981, 96.

reason why Paul Chan needed to make the distinction he made between art and activism. It is also why the making of art (in this case pensive images), however necessary and however efficacious in the production of spaces for new(found) belief, is not enough when it comes to issues of justice and survival such as climate change.

In our own practice, we produce work as photographers under the name Sayler / Morris, but simultaneously direct a collective, The Canary Project, to which Sayler / Morris is but one of more than 100 contributors. The Canary Project produces artworks and media that foster a contemporary ecological consciousness with a particular focus on deepening public understanding of climate change. Projects range from a poster and public messaging campaign called Green Patriot Posters to educational initiatives such as workshops, to the type of art-making discussed in this essay. But even this is not enough, we also engage, as citizens, in protests, collaborative work with the organization 350.org, social media advocacy, and last but not least, we vote.

Unwilling to disown our activism or be plainly disingenuous about it (as many artists are), we began mentally dividing our projects per Chan's definition: this one is direct activism (consolidation of voice and power); this one is art (diffusion of voice and power). Or to put it in a way that avoids Chan's problematic dichotomy: this one is about direct advocacy and collapses complexity in exchange for broad impact and specific cultural leverage; this one is about something we cannot adequately describe but which nonetheless feels necessary to express and which has a more speculative cultural impact. If our exhibition strategies for works like *A History of the Future* became more and more abstruse to the point of blacking out the photographs all together, it was not in order to create a self-aggrandizing aura around the work. It was to create the type of opening up we have discussed at length here. Such work stands beside and not in front of our more directly activist projects.

Other professionals involved in the struggle to address climate change (if not create a new, more sustainable society) have it even tougher than artists. For artists, advocacy creates a barrier to the work, but this barrier can be transcended. For scientists, on the other hand, advocacy threatens to undermine the very foundation of their credibility. Lynda Walsh has shown how in making probabilistic statements about the future impacts of climate change, scientists are put in the position of prophets and are interpreted as making value judgments.[29] This situation is obviously exacerbated when a scientist like Jim Hansen

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29 Walsh, "Ethos and Stasis," 2012.

likewise takes a very public position as an advocate for a specific policy (such as vetoing the Keystone Pipeline). Yet, what is the alternative? Are we meant to hope that sentences like the following get us where need to be: "Most of the observed increase in global average temperatures since the mid-20th century is very likely due to the observed increase in anthropogenic GHG concentrations."?[30]

A profound sadness frequently washes over us during conferences or professional discussions of climate change. A dispassionate tone of analysis (even bordering on professional delight) seems to preside. All professionals working on this issue must find ways to overcome the decorum and limitations of their field and to articulate the catastrophe lying in wait amid the numbers.

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