

# An Ecology of the Image: Amy Howden-Chapman's Re-creations

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At a time when the increasing tendency for celebrities to intervene in environmental concerns makes a farce of social conscience role models, it becomes ever more important to understand the oblique role contemporary art can play within this mediation. Deploying the ruse of the 're-creation', two works by Wellington based artist Amy Howden-Chapman have sought to examine the way environmental concerns can, and are, disseminated from within a fine arts context, by drawing attention to the dissipative and sensational flares of media-driven ecological indignation. Her first work to achieve this was the video documentation, *Save the Whale*, which Howden-Chapman made for the group show, 'An Introduction to the Theory of Everything', that was held at Wellington's Hirschfield Gallery in the summer of 2006 and 2007. Documenting a public event where Howden-Chapman enlisted roughly 50 people to recreate the concentric ocean currents that cause the sensational accumulation of plastic debris in the North Pacific Ocean, *Save the Whale* was also an acutely conscious piece of eco-chic manipulation. Running rife with its mock-fête, gala day rituals, Howden-Chapman's *Save the Whale* responded primarily to the way environmental issues are often understood as eruptive and yet all too banal flares, entirely indicative of the dissipative and apathetic vices of popular culture's insatiable appetite for novelty. That a subsequent work, *Ghost Net Recreation Mania (GNRM)*, shown as part of the group show 'As far as I know' at Christchurch's High Street Project (HSP) in May of 2007, has gone on to disrupt and perhaps even mock this dissemination model, further highlights the problem of effectively raising environmental concerns from within a gallery context.

## The Great Pacific Rubbish Patch

Created by the cooling air that descends from the Equator as it works its way towards the North Pole, the North Pacific Gyre is a wind pattern that causes a series of concentric ocean currents to mark out an area of the North Pacific Ocean as one of the largest tepid climates on earth. Roughly halfway between San Francisco and Hawai'i this area became infamous as the 'Horse Latitudes' when colonial stock transporters targeting the gold-rush market would come adrift for days on end in these waters. Today, however, the North Pacific Gyre has created one of the world's largest depositories of floating plastic debris. Almost twice the size of Texas, this rubbish pile is an epicentre of accumulation. Wryly dubbed 'the great Pacific rubbish patch', this is where the Pacific Ocean's plastic goes to decompose.

According to oceanographers like Curtis Ebbesmeyer and Charles Moore, every piece of plastic that has gone astray anywhere near the Pacific Ocean will eventually accumulate in the North Pacific Gyre.<sup>1</sup> Heightened by the lengthy decomposition time (it takes 450 years for plastic bottles to decompose and 600 years for monofilament fishing line to degrade, whereas an apple core will disintegrate in two months and a paper towel in about two to four weeks), the accumulation of plastic, especially in its photo-degraded form as increasingly smaller micro-filaments, has become a major ecological blight. Currently outnumbering plankton by six to one, the accumulation of this micro-plastic debris is a major impediment to the survival of bird, fish and turtle species who continually mistake the plastic particles for the brightly coloured food sources they were once so used to. This is also what makes the common name for the accumulation, 'the great Pacific rubbish patch', completely misleading. Sure there are notable patches centred around drifting ghost nets (more about these shortly), but the majority of the rubbish patch is the microscopic particles that, bobbing just below the ocean's surface, are almost impossible for the human eye to see, let alone account for.

## *Save the Whale*

Projected on the back wall of the Hirschfield gallery, *Save the Whale* showed a group of about fifty people running in formations that mimic the concentric ocean currents of the North Pacific doldrums. Filmed from a hillside above the park where the action took place, the video begins as a small formation of about six or seven people running in a tight clockwise circle. This group is then joined by four more subsequent columns, all slightly larger, and all running in alternate clockwise-anticlockwise concentric formations which achieve a mass-swirl about halfway through the film. Running at about eight minutes in length, the video takes four minutes for the formation to reach its accumulation point, leaving the remainder to focus on the group activity before being abruptly restarted without either resolution of the activity or an explanation of what is happening. Hence, the focus of the video tends to be the moment when the re-creation loosens from its purported role as an illustrative diagram to become instead a nuanced, albeit bizarre, gala day farce. This becomes only more acute when the actors begin to roll upon the ground and throw about costume trash hinting at the cabin-fever frenzy of the pointless enclosure, not only of the doldrums they mimic, but also the distancing effects of the re-creation model itself. This mimes an environmental



concern which is not only geographically remote from the scene of re-enactment, but conceptually as well, given that the participants are stand-ins for physical objects that are extremely difficult for the human eye to see.

Reliant on the goodwill of participants to realise her social-sculpture project, Howden-Chapman was forced to garner a willing audience well before she could present a work dealing with the dissemination of ecological concerns from within an art gallery context. As a result, Howden-Chapman found herself launching an informal campaign to raise awareness of the danger presented by the accumulation of micro-filament plastic debris in the North Pacific Ocean. Using posters and flyers, which charismatically appealed for participants to 'come and be trash', Howden-Chapman's re-creation was always likely to be reliant on an established network of concerned citizens, especially through collegial and familial connections. This became more than apparent when her leaflets triggered a complaint from a local primary school that prides itself on community involvement and ecological awareness. Chiding her junk-mail pamphleteering, Te Aro primary instead offered Howden-Chapman a free advertisement in their local newsletter to minimise waste and extend her distribution network into a more targeted and appreciative audience. Thus the day of the re-creation was always likely to be an 'activist day out', seemingly less a moment of protest, than a spurious celebration of community endowment as eco-aware citizenry.

Alert to the compromises such a self-valorising activity would entail, Howden-Chapman's use of the re-creation model borrows heavily from the banal deployment of re-creations in the heavy

handed, suspense lured, sermonising of television 'current-affairs' programmes like *60 Minutes* and *20/20*. In fact, one might even suggest that Howden-Chapman's re-creation is entirely reliant on the audiences' familiarity with this very model, relying on its neutrality from such melodramatic signposting to separate performer from intent, eco-aware celebration from discursive diagram. Hence Howden-Chapman makes use of the long-shot, filming the re-creation from a remote hillside to situate it at a remove, as though it is an unexplained phenomenon, reinforcing the inexplicable quality of a phenomenon incredibly difficult to understand both in scope and in suitable forms of redress. Howden-Chapman continued to reinforce such logic through the final presentation of the video at the Hirschfield gallery. The video appears largely in isolation from its accompanying archive Filofax that tells how Howden-Chapman gathered her actors. However, in being marginalised from this explanatory glossary, the video, on first witnessing it, comes across as little more than an elaborate and frustrating decoy leading you into the shallow waters of the recent infatuation in contemporary art discourse with Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, as entropic diagram par excellence, or worse yet, appears as an elaborate and endlessly embarrassing office bonding session. This though creates a balance of mediation in which *Save the Whale* appears as both exaggerated farce and sleeve-worn eco-concern working nicely to off-set the audience's double-take, purposefully leaving them somewhere between ecological indignation and chided embarrassment before such obvious 'social-conscious' manipulation. However, her titling, 'Save the Whale', which borrowed the late 1980s sloganeering of Greenpeace, who pandered to an oblivious audience through charismatic mega-fauna and neotenic seals, ought to have been a giveaway that such redress was always in play.

### Towards an Ecology of the Image

Sporadically appearing from one flare-up to the next, the disaster, like the celebrity, has become an emotive force rigged for expediency and blatantly treated as interchangeable sensations by global media franchises. However, as Alex Wilson has noted of the Exxon-Valdez oil spill, the sensational mediation of these ecological flares, especially as 'disasters', often obscures a range of surrounding issues.<sup>2</sup> As Wilson points out, the Exxon-Valdez's spill was one of a series of similar accidents within the region that had spilled almost eight million litres of oil into the Prince William Sound during the prior twelve months, all relatively unnoticed. Likewise, Wilson notes that the sensationalism of the disaster's impact on the 'pristine' environment of Alaska seemed to conveniently ignore the fact that Alaska's oil ports are some of the most heavily industrialised environments anywhere in the world. Similarly distracting is the evidence Wilson points to that suggests the equivalent amount of oil is being spilled by home car mechanics down drains and into vacant lots every two and a half weeks. Such discrepancies lead Wilson to suggest that Exxon-Valdez's cargo was always destined to be pollution in one shape or form and that really the ecological spectacle of the disaster only seems to allay any sense of public accountability by serving up the familiar culprit of multi-national corporate greed. In fact, realising this, Exxon-Mobil, the company responsible for the incident, seized the opportunity to display their credentials as an earnest environmentally conscious company by immediately taking responsibility and 'voluntarily' acting to clean up the spill. Never mind that their clean up produced ten tons of toxic garbage for every ton of oil that was mopped up.

Andrew Ross has sought to constrain the dissipative understanding of disasters as a disparate and sensational string of ‘mistakes’. Complaining that ecological spectacles have been strung along an escalating scale of devastation, from Chernobyl to Exxon-Valdez, to the deliberate sabotage of the Kuwaiti oil fields during the first Gulf War, Ross complains that we have been deceived by a ‘psychology of comparison’, which pits ‘each new ecological disaster’ against the other through purely ‘statistical dimensions’.<sup>3</sup> Highlighting this sensational preoccupation with the ‘disaster’ of environmental degradation, Ross laments the lack of an everyday sense of scale and has called instead for understanding of how the ‘production and consumption of images is a central element in our relationship to our social habitat’.<sup>4</sup> Pointing out that we now have a standard stock of environmental clichés, those ‘belching smokestacks, seabirds mired in petrochemical sludge, fish floating belly-up, traffic jams in Los Angeles and Mexico City and clear-cut forests’, Ross has suggested that these tend to validate that fanciful safeguard where ‘Nature’ is mistakenly separated as a ‘redeeming repertoire of pastoral imagery, pristine, green and unspoiled by human habitation’.<sup>5</sup> Refuting such dichotomies, Ross has instead called for re-ordering of ecological images into a complex, interrelated continuum that refuses the simplistic logic of a hapless ‘Nature’ continually beset by the ongoing domination of an aggressive Western culture.

#### *Ghost Net Recreation Mania (GNRM)*

Like Cliffs Notes for novels, the saturation of an image-centric mediation, especially in its ‘star’ turn, has little hope of effecting any form of long-term engagement with environmental problems. Howden-Chapman’s work, *Ghost Net Recreation Mania (GNRM)*, has picked up on this, building upon the momentum *Save the Whale* gained as fashionable eco-art icon to highlight a range of problematic issues dealing with the dissemination of environmental concerns within such mediated contexts. Drawn to an image of ghost-net debris – basically clusters of abandoned fishing net and ocean flotsam – Howden-Chapman opted to rework the recreation platform of *Save the Whale* by calling upon participants to join her in a night-time re-enactment, whereby, taping cell phones to their foreheads and forming entangled formations, the actors were to mimic the luminescent accretions of ghost nets in the depths of the Pacific Ocean. Failing however to generate a satisfactory visual record of the event, Howden-Chapman instead opted to realise a text-based wall work, which adopted a retrospective and yet highly anticipative form of address that reworks the contextual gloss *Save the Whale* relied on for its distancing effects.

Written in a prose form, Howden-Chapman’s *Ghost Net Recreation Mania (GNRM)* parodied the earnestness of *Save the Whale*, glibly ghosting the audience’s susceptibility before fashionable causes. Parodying the dislocation and emotive effect of a sensational language that is designed for sound-bite empathy, *GNRM* deploys a range of purely emotive language, even sarcastically using capitals to accentuate the pleasure we take in a predisposed, culprit laden ‘horror’ scene. The text begins, ‘No one saw it coming’, referring less to the eco-disaster-phenomenon itself than to the activist swarm Howden-Chapman will later focus on, before castigating the ghost nets as, ‘PERPETUAL KILLING MACHINES’ which ‘entangle sea creatures, then become food for other creatures who in turn get entangled ... snowballing in size, as they collect octopuses, crabs, dolphins and the occasional diver’. Reduced to its easy-spread acronym and peppered with

slogan-filling statistics, *GNRM* spirals away from the reader in a tumultuous cadence, building its own momentum, frantically embedding its own dissipative energy as eco-shock into a neat conceptual twist:

No one in particular planned it, but mania is mania, and as the *GNRM* spread, entanglement, such a threat to life in the sea became, once recreated on land a pleasure for humans. The pleasure was passed on. *GNRM* became an uncontrollable phenomenon ... Everyone was doing it, some because they wanted to, others because they saw others doing it, first on YouTube, then on the corner, then on the corners between home and work, and soon there was no choice but to join in. It was like The Beatles, a continuous scream of delight. Like the Cricket World Cup, like the death of Princess Diana with more flowers, more flowers up against fences and cellophane and ribbon, slightly less death.

As a text-based artwork, *GNRM* operates by turning on the reader. What at first begins as an emotive moment of eco-concern becomes instead a social farce in which eco-consciousness becomes mere social ploy. Tellingly, Howden-Chapman seizes on peer pressure, ‘everyone was doing it’, to insidiously mock the recreational delight of an eco-pride that often proves incredible easy to manipulate. In fact, as Jason Stella’s exposure of ‘astro-turf activism’ traces, multinational corporations are increasingly realising that by establishing ‘grass-roots’ organisations, they too can consolidate their appeal within an increasingly ‘green-savvy’ marketplace.<sup>6</sup> Thus, ‘GNRM’ also works to remind us that environmental avocation is often little more than a token of goodwill branding, whether for multi-national corporations or even everyday citizenry-based affiliated networks. Sure, branded images like ‘line-caught tuna’ or ‘carbon neutral’ products may have a slight connotation of good will attached to them, but they are increasingly embroiled in a huge, messy network of social choice and peer pressure that needs to be acknowledged if not navigated.

#### Conclusion

When I first saw Howden-Chapman’s *Save the Whale* I was not quite convinced that the phenomenon was real. I thought perhaps it was a re-enactment based on fiction not fact. These days I care little. Surely it doesn’t still matter. Surely, by now, simulation has staked out its permanent claim to the surface and then here, incongruous as it was, was a recreation of a phenomenon you can’t find on Google Earth. I mean, what is it for people to be running in formation, looking every bit like a gala day activity, and then to be a supposed representational stand-in for the thousands of plastic microfilaments that are accumulating just below the surface in the North Pacific Ocean’s doldrums? This isn’t exactly a phenomenon you can easily see, let alone easily understand. However, in delaying its contextual gloss and embedding the re-creation in a community of likely candidates, Howden-Chapman not only sought to address a major ecological-problem of our times but also situated its further mediation in a model that addresses the compromised mediation of environmental redress at large within a wider, media dominated, public forum. Likewise, Howden-Chapman’s follow up work, *Ghost Net Recreation Mania (GNRM)*

skilfully used the acronym overload to remind us how easily we fall for such easy-fix solutions which do little more than alleviate a guilt that would have settled soon enough anyway.

Never one to let images, or issues, resolve into complacent settings, Howden-Chapman's work is entirely conscious of Andrew Ross's warning that 'just as the technological over-production and over-consumption of raw materials can wastefully exhaust the capacity of an ecosystem to sustain itself, so too a similar tendency in image production and image consumption' also continues to diminish 'our capacity to sustain a healthy balance of life in the social world of our culture'.<sup>7</sup> Concerned not only with raising awareness about ecological problems but also, and perhaps more importantly, how these issues are and can be represented, Howden-Chapman's practice is indicative of the role contemporary art can play in the wider dissemination and understanding of ecological concerns that affect today's society.

1 Donovan Hohn, 'Moby-Duck, The Synthetic Wilderness of Childhood', *Harper's Magazine*, January 2007, 45.

2 Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1992), 184-7.

3 Andrew Ross, *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society* (London, New York: Verso, 1994), 185

4 *Ibid.*, 173.

5 *Ibid.*, 171.

6 Jason Stella, 'Astroturf: How manufactured grassroots movements are subverting democracy', in ed. Zadie Smith, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 273.

7 Ross, 173-4.