

ENVIRONMENT

Envisioning a More Just Future:
Feminist Activist Art, Climate
Change, and the Anthropocene

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We are living through an unprecedented acceleration of crisis-like climate events that have transformed our priorities in our scholarship and teaching as well as the kind of contemporary art we present in the classroom.¹ Focusing on the role of feminist artists-activists and their collaborators, the chapter explores activist art and film from outside the gallery/museum circuit of exhibition that takes advantage of animation technologies to engage the reality and severity of the climate crisis. The chapter concentrates particularly on how artists, through their focus on collaboration and activism, create different conceptions of possible futures, treating the climate crisis as an immediate emergency so future humans can survive and share an interdependent biosphere.²

Writing from an intersectional feminist perspective, the chapter insists on linking gendered, sexual, and racial discriminatory violence to wider environmental destruction. This approach brings together areas too often kept separate to question and complicate entrenchments that limit our imagination as mobilization to address the ways that socially and environmentally destructive practices intersect and interact. Absent an intersectional feminist perspective and an environmental justice framework, addressing the monumental changes wrought in our environment and perception will remain beyond our grasp.

The artists I discuss—Mollie Crabapple and the Wit and Wisdom art media collective—put more emphasis on the message-delivering aspects of the medium than on the formal concerns of object-based art. Seeking alternative networks for getting their work out during the pandemic, when most museums, art galleries, art schools, and universities were shuttered, their work is important to rethink what it means to be part of an arts community in the midst of a pandemic. Through the pandemic more collaborative and participatory forms of art and film emerged virtually, an expression of hope that changes spawned by these two crises will lead to the radical changes needed to avert catastrophe. Art and film on the climate crisis showed up in online news sites and journals as well as in activist programming for the climate movement, among other online venues.

of climate destruction. Each adapts painting and drawing methods of the handmade to create a popular form of dissent, drawing on a longer history of nineteenth-century political caricature and cartooning (Honoré Daumier 1808–1879), illustrating (Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec 1864–1901), and landscape painting (Jean-Francois Millet 1814–1875).⁵ Their work also recalls the collaborative spirit of mural paintings from the 1930s for the Works Progress Association funded by the New Deal and graffiti writing. These artists additionally share a common attitude toward process, action, and the building of images spatially and temporally that brings their work closer to other contemporary political artists who use animation in their work as a device for activism including Qiu Anxiong, Sadie Benning, William Kentridge, and Serge Onen.⁶

New networks linking issues routinely kept apart in climate change discourse are also emerging through and beyond the museum sector. A case in point is the work of artist Mollie Crabapple who, in collaboration with producer and co-writers Naomi Klein and politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, filmmaker Avi Lewis, and directors Kim Boekbinder and Jim Batt, produced a seven-minute animated film *A Message from the Future I* in 2019 hosted by the *Intercept*, a progressive online news organization. Klein explains that the film is a “thought experiment ... set a couple of decades from now, [that] is a flat-out rejection of the idea that a dystopian future is a forgone conclusion” (Klein, Crabapple, Lewis, and Ocasio-Cortez 2019).⁷

Turning to science fiction, the short film proposes a vision of a livable future made possible by the Green New Deal. Ocasio-Cortez recounts how the climate crisis happened and the ways that people around the world ended up in a very dangerous place thanks to their politicians, governments, and corporations. It goes on to present the other side of the process of what would happen if we chose to radically change course and save both our habitat and ourselves and build a better society out of these years of overlapping crises. Over seven minutes, the film follows the story of a fictional girl, Ileana, from the outer boroughs of New York City who grows up during “The Decade of the New Deal” and speculates about how a just transition of jobs, universal healthcare, Medicare for all and a total overhaul of the country’s energy system might affect her life as well as others in her community.

In contrast to the massive programs brought into being by this new legislation, the sensuous illustrations of Mollie Crabapple communicates in a perpetual present tense the everyday changes this transformed future is made possible by the Green New Deal in Ocasio-Cortez’s neighborhood in Queens. By showing her own hands in the act of painting, Crabapple brings to life and makes familiar and intimate policy that would otherwise seem distant and abstract. Through her artwork (Figure 18.1) we can see the vibrancy of an

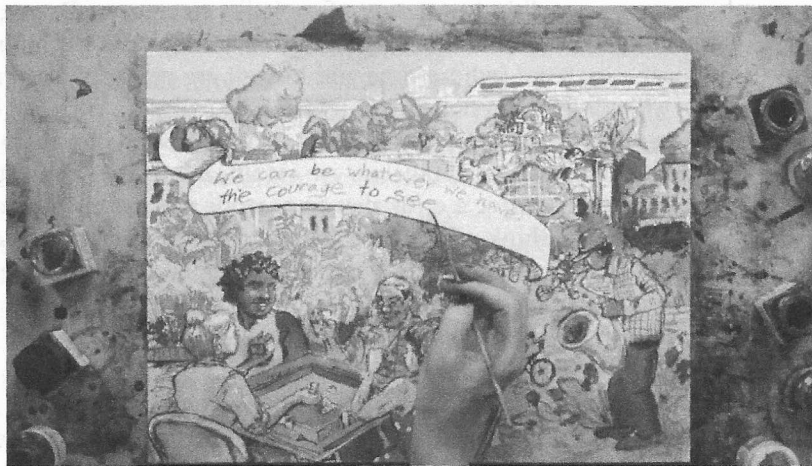


FIGURE 18.1 Molly Crabapple, “We Can Be Whatever We Have the Courage to See” (2019), still from a painting from the collaborative animated film by Boekbinder and Batt, *A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, 2019. Boekbinder and Batt 2019 / with permission from Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

environment that is now restored to health, showing working class people both young and old who are typically seen as innocent victims of global warming without agency thriving in their neighborhoods. A banner reading “we can be whatever we have the courage to see” captures not just the work involved in building a better society but also its pleasures. In this watercolor, Crabapple shows the contentment of elderly residents playing bridge and performing music in a flourishing neighborhood garden. Another image under the banner, “You Can’t Be What You Can’t See” links artistic and political representation, as she depicts Ileana along with other young girls inspired to enter politics by seeing women of color elected to the US House of Representatives in 2018—those same representatives who crafted the Green New Deal.

Much of this film was conceived shortly after the multi-racial group of children and youth involved in the Bay Area’s activist Sunrise Movement’s Youth versus Apocalypse organization showed up at the San Francisco Office of Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein in early 2019 to urge her to vote for the Green New Deal (see Goodman 2019). Angered by Feinstein’s dismissive response to the young activists, Ocasio-Cortez, a woman of Puerto-Rican descent who decided to run for Congress after participating in the indigenous-led struggle at Standing Rock, started working on this film with young people in her community.⁸ Throughout the film Crabapple paints portraits of actual children from Ocasio-Cortez’s multi-racial district of Queens, New York and puts them in the film as active participants in her message from the future. A drawing by Crabapple is presented of Ileana in the near future standing in a newly restored landscape, holding a shovel, and wearing a hard hat in the foreground as she prepares to restore wetlands that appear in the background (see Dunaway 2021). These colorful animated paintings are not evidentiary documents with claims to transparent truth. Rather, they are acts of envisioning how the future could look for ordinary citizens that she draws in the present. The labor of producing paintings and drawings for the animation is made visible and palpable by the repeated actions of Crabapple’s hands at work, which over time gives form to the illusion of movement in the animation. This added dimension of the passage of time in the creation of each drawing and painting by the artist sweeps up the viewer temporally and redirects attention to the handwork of the artist as she draws each scene that shapes the narrative.

A Message from the Future I has been viewed more than twelve million times, was nominated for an Emmy award, and became a centerpiece for the Sunrise Movement’s 250-city *Road to a Green New Deal* tour in 2019. Aimed at a popular audience, it exploits the belief that the visual has the power to expose truth. Yet, the need to see it to believe it can also be a route to a politically effective messaging strategy enabling us to think about how to propose a redrawing of our future. Positivism and its overreliance on tangible proof may work best in reverse; that is, as an alternate future, or vision. It taps into a more direct approach to how vision works, counter-intuitively suggesting the unseen potential of the visual, especially for politics. The film shows a future world, one that resembles the familiar present, but now illustrating the collaboration of politics and art through an artistic vision that engages and even seduces the viewer to see the potential for a broad civic response to climate crisis.

After artist Mollie Crabapple created the animated paintings for *A Message from the Future I*, she started painting portraits of essential workers and projecting them on the sides of buildings in New York City during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Crabapple 2020). Her artistic work in 2020 was also the catalyst to create a second futurist film *Message from the Future II* (Klein and Crabapple 2020). The film’s narrative was shaped by the pandemic, a notion of what a human-to-human care response might look like, and what models might be invoked in the process. It is told from the perspectives of frontline organizers and activists about their experience with COVID-19, explaining to viewers that another world leading to a tangibly better life is possible and the seductive beauty of Crabapple’s animated paintings make us see and feel the many ways that life is worth fighting for.

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This nine-minute online film features a high-profile cast of international narrators from around the world, including Emma Thompson, Gael Garcia Bernal, Black Lives Matter co-founder Opal Tometi, and the Nigerian poet and activist Nnimmo Bassey. Rather than discussing how the climate crisis happened as was narrated in the first film, the second film presents the other side of the process: how societies can come together across racial, ethnic, religious, and gender divides to heal the planet. This better world is visualized in “The Years of Repair,” an image of two workers, one black and one white, from the future whose backs are turned to the viewer but whose hands are linked as they walk with determination toward the future together in a thriving field of green foliage and bees (Figure 18.2). This is a different notion of nature as us, as inside us, and around us, rather than encasing reality in capitalist dualisms that separates nature from society. These kinds of images communicate to wider audiences by hijacking the global media, while at the same time creating affective solidarity by presenting the unity and heightened visual and sensual experience of shared purpose and solidarity in a world where humanity and society are no longer separated.

In the film, the pandemic acts as a magnifying lens that instructs humanity in a series of lessons both about exchange value and human labor as problems of late capitalism but also how the binary of nature/society is implicated in the violence, inequality, and oppression of the modern world. In the film we see specifically the way the pandemic compounded pre-existing crises organized around profit. The virus lays bare the depleted character of a society that cut the public health infrastructure and treats frontline workers as disposable emphasizing the compassionate work that frontline workers are doing to keep us alive in a segment featuring close-up images of the hands of workers. “The hands were all of us,” explains the narrator. “We are entangled. Keeping each other alive. One of the lessons of COVID-19 was that the virus showed us what is truly essential” (Klein and Crabapple 2020).

In the film, systemic racism and sexism is presented as an assault on the body. It depicts the risks of sending human beings to do the most dangerous of jobs in for-profit assisted living facilities, meatpacking plants, and “fulfillment centers,” and the cruelty of warehousing people in prisons and immigrant detention houses. In such sequences the film expanded the meaning of Black Lives Matter by showing us how Black and Brown women and queer health workers undertook frontline jobs in disproportionate numbers based on economic

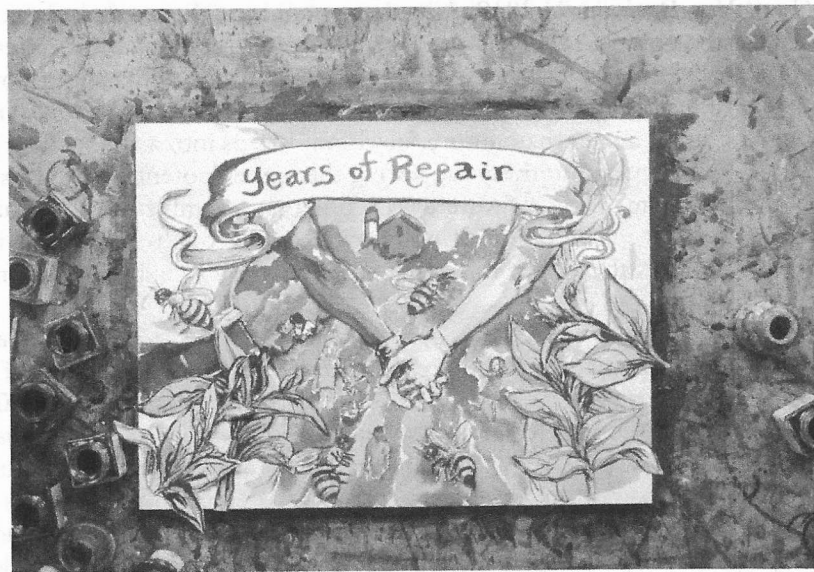


FIGURE 18.2 Molly Crabapple, “Years of Repair” (2020), still from a painting from the collaborative animated film, *Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair*. Molly Crabapple.

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class, and consequently were more vulnerable to infection and death. In *Message from the Future I*, Ocasio-Cortez is the star; in this second film, it is rank-and-file organizers and activists who rise up and topple the authoritarian rulers to create *Message from The Future II*. In both cases it is not one or two individual movements but a convergence of activists involved in labor and climate issues as well as the empowerment of feminist, queer, and indigenous peoples. In their collective work, the state that aligns itself with capitalism is not an ally but the target of their demands for universal healthcare, police reform, and a sweeping Green New Deal.

Message from The Future II includes lessons about the essential labor that makes life possible and enjoyable and yet has been so persistently discounted. In the new future imagined by the film, the environmental ethics of “care” is a basic function that sustains life and grants us our common humanity, rather than positioned within capitalism where labor power depends on competition not collaboration and is only for profit. Care is not intentionally aligned with conventional gender roles nor united in an emphasis on a woman–nature affinity. Rather, as a nod to Donna Haraway’s Chthulucene, the new “care” workers in the “years of repair” include even “winged pollinators and the leafy oxygen makers” from the more-than-human world. The creators’ notion of care is not only a female prerogative in the face of masculinist science but also an environmentalist response that points to the limits of capitalism and the way it has been seen as the only way of organizing nature. In the utopian future created by Crabapple, and her collaborators, actions include: funding public schools so that bloated budgets for prisons are no longer needed; building a digital commons to “vaccinate” society against disinformation; dismantling the oil, coal, and gas industries and using their profits to clean up the mess and prevent the climate from further destroying the planet; establishing a truth and reconciliation commission to address colonial violence and conquests of the past that had shaped our world; and returning previous stolen land to the indigenous who will collaborate with others on saving a degraded planet.

No Healthy Lives Without a Healthy Planet: Wit and Wisdom and the Global Climate and Health Alliance

A short animated-video poem created in 2021 by the independent television company Wit and Wisdom in collaboration with the Global Climate and Health Alliance speaks on behalf of forty-six million of the world’s healthcare workers.⁹ Titled, *Our Handwriting May Be Bad, But Our Message Is Clear* and also known by the hashtag #climateprescription, the video offers a more international perspective than the one presented in *Message from The Future II*. This short film featured on the progressive news and radio show *Democracy Now*, focuses specifically on how the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic helped make visible the global health aspects of climate change and pollution. Funded and launched by the Global Climate and Health Alliance, and subtitled in different languages, the film bridges transnational environmentalism and grassroots activism striving to develop forms of belonging for doctors in an era of globalization, COVID-19, and climate crisis.

This video is part of a larger protest campaign that included an open letter to heads of state around the world, as well as every nation’s lead climate negotiator, calling for urgent climate action to protect people’s health.¹⁰ More than 450 organizations together with over 3,400 individuals from 102 different countries have been involved in this effort. In recent years the Global Climate and Health Alliance has been involved in actions around the world including protests by its members, in conjunction with the activist group Doctors for Extinction Rebellion at COP26 in Glasgow at the time the video was released on November 21, 2021 to the presidencies of both COP26 in Glasgow and COP27 in Egypt, 2022.

The opening line of this video poem invokes solidarity among healthcare workers and doctors around the world, emphasizing what they have already collectively witnessed. As one

unidentified doctor says offscreen: "I have seen rising rates of heat exhaustion; depression; double the normal number of asthma exacerbations; heart disease, heart attacks, stroke; problems with kidneys, hearts, and lungs ... and the worsening of psychiatric illnesses."¹¹ Many of the doctors and healthcare workers in the video speak about climate-related health impacts on their patients, and are angry about the negligent institutional responses to it. The statements are put in the first person but are emerging from processes and values of interconnectedness and interdependence to assert that elusive "we." Dignifying and memorializing the DIY aesthetics to underscore their value and enduring relevance, we see a hand-drawn aesthetic using the many signatures to both draw the fury of a tsunami or the form of a lone figure attached to an IV drip contending with depression and a worsening health condition exacerbated by the harsh realities of climate breakdown (Figure 18.3). Wit and Wisdom stresses the dignity of these patients and evokes the style of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century figurative drawings that elevated the working classes in the work of artists Honoré Daumier, Francisco de Goya, and Käthe Kollwitz, among others. Yet their work employs erasure as a necessary and central transformational act, drawing from the melding of images associated with gestural handwork and the durational qualities of cinema.

Accompanied by expressive animated drawings that are always in movement in the animation, the doctors use simple statements of fact, and more specifically the emotional affectivity of their many voices and languages, to express the psychological distress and declining health of their patients. The drawings are constantly in motion but each new image retains a temporal trace of the previous image to add textural density to these images that connect our worsening health and safety to yet another extreme climate event. Producing drawings of rising sea levels and frequent heat waves brings these histories into the present. As one doctor says: "When the category 4 typhoon made its landfall, the hospital's basement flooded. Heat waves close to 50 degrees (centigrade); the unprecedented droughts and locus infestations; more frequent, longer and hotter heat waves are making my patients sicker."¹²

The forthright acknowledgment of the health problems already existing from climate change invites many different affective responses from the millions of viewers of the video poem. These are uncomfortable feelings often denied in neoliberal culture, but ones to which we must be attend. All this emotional direct address is matched by the dynamic imagery of the handwriting in constant motion like swirling currents, morphing unpredictably like global warming itself. Like climate change, the dynamic visuals unsettle the viewer and welcome them to protest the status quo.

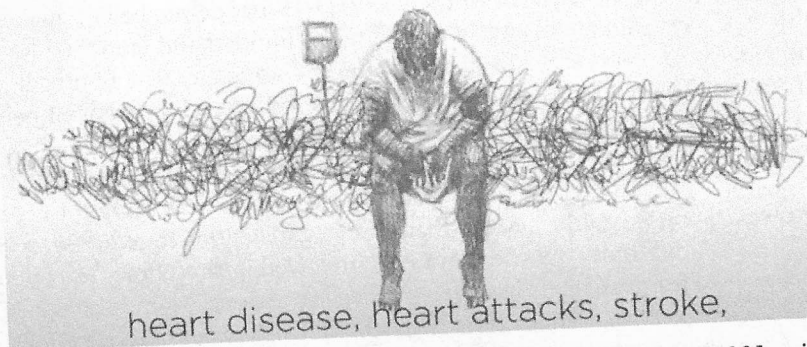


FIGURE 18.3 Wit and Wisdom, "Heart Disease, Heart Attacks, Strokes," 2021, still from a drawing from the collaborative animated film by Wit and Wisdom and the Global Climate and Health Alliance. Courtesy of Lisa Bloom.

The video's conclusion takes the form of a "climate prescription," which is a direct call to world leaders to accept action as a cure to the climate crisis. They conclude with the following collective statement as presented by Jeni Miller, director of the Global Climate and Health Alliance:

I prescribe healthy air as a right for all children. I prescribe the rich nations to make the biggest cuts in emissions; to fund climate-health adaptation projects; to invest in reversal of the negative impacts; to build resilience; and tackle health and social inequalities; and stop investing in fossil fuels. Climate change is a health emergency, and it is my ethical duty to speak about it. We have a crisis (Goodman 2021).

Creating Alternatives to Repair the World

One of the most important challenges facing artists, activists, and scholars is how to offer creative alternatives and suggest ways to remake and repair the world. In the online films discussed, the boundaries between art and activism dissolve to generate a genre appropriately called "climate art." With these animated works, the art amplifies actions as is the case with the #climateprescription and infuses them with wit, wisdom, and poetics that slows down the viewer to take in the message. Each piece becomes part of a global conversation through visual means making dissent accessible to its viewers. All three present a direct approach to how vision works, counter-intuitively suggesting the unseen potential of the visual and the importance of art to create substantive meaning and heightened emotionality of shared purpose for climate politics globally.

Though the reconceptualization of the Earth in the Anthropocene informs all three works, in the case of Wit and Wisdom, humans have to consider the planetary nature of climate risk to health and how they are coupled with both local and global environmental problems. The perspective of having an environmental world citizenship, what Ursula Heise (2008) calls an "eco-cosmopolitan" framework, supports the artist-activists and doctors claim to visibility in *Our Handwriting May Be Bad, But Our Message is Clear*. But the lack of specificity in #the climate prescription's video can also flatten the global "we." On the one hand, as a transnational protest piece, it intends to represent more than simply inundation or melting from climate change, but the invisibility of the deteriorating health of communities around the world. Inequalities, the distinction between rich and poor nations and national differences are evoked by the inclusion of different languages spoken by the doctors and health workers participating in the video. Drawing augmented by the voices of health workers becomes a way to materially insist upon the importance of more inclusive histories of those already suffering medical conditions from climate change around the world. At the same time, the global "we" of the video poem and the protest letter puts much needed international pressure on the presidencies of both COP26 in Glasgow and COP27 in Egypt in their hopes for making a better future in the face of a health crisis that is exacerbated by the worsening climate crisis. Targeting seasoned policy makers, the Wit and Wisdom video is extremely clever and sophisticated in its reference to traditional drawing methods that transforms the viewer to empathize with those patients at greater risk.

By contrast, the animated paintings by Mollie Crabapple are also meant for a wide audience, but in this case, it extends to young adults and children and the style is appropriately friendly and highly accessible to millions of young viewers. Her animated paintings use seductive beauty to create an immersive experience for the viewer and the progression of her works with the narration keeps the viewer engaged. All three films use art to create an environmentalist empathy to present new collective forms of being in the world. At the same time they also engage the severity of the Capitalocene and create new understandings of inequalities by also bringing attention

to extractive views and the political impact of the frameworks of oil and gas corporations. *Message from the Future I* in particular dwells on fossil fuel companies such as Exxon-Mobil that, in the past and present, enable governmental policy by seeking to hide or “greenwash” the evidence of their environmentally destructive behavior (for more on extractive views, see Gómez-Barris 2017). *Message from the Future II* explores the possibility of a politics beyond individual rights and liberties and toward the promotion of the well-being of others, including nature, with whom we are in relationship. In both *Message from the Future I* and *II*, witnessing becomes embodied, and Crabapple, Klein, et al. show that feminist, queer, Black, and indigenous perspectives are central to formulating livable futures. Both these works call attention to the work of activist artists who use strategies of science fiction while incorporating scientific fact to link climate change to its socioeconomic roots in fossil-fuel capitalism and colonialism. Both reframe the climate crisis, providing generative art that identifies hidden realities and sparks alternative futures in the hope of influencing the non-fictional planet.

All three films discussed reflect an investment in the politics of visibility through the optics of a figurative style that punctures the status quo of climate denial. They conjoin issues routinely kept apart in climate change, drawn from a diversity of vantage points, and united by the desire to reimagine a more just world. Each offers a collective and more forward-looking alternative or even a revolutionary vision by foregrounding the necessity of social change and foregrounding healthcare. But at the same time the specificity of their different aesthetics is part of their different political strategies to energize and mobilize particular audiences. In each case, the artists immersed in the climate activist scene as insider-chroniclers propel social change forward utilizing visual and sensual experiences as an energizing force to social movements. Such experimental and generative art plays a fundamental role in connecting and empowering the transnational climate movement. It also broadens our understanding of climate breakdown with its focus on planetary survival to create new knowledges and networks, which I hope will support old and recent forms of collaborative, participatory, and activist climate art.

Notes

- 1 Thanks to El Glasberg for her invaluable feedback on the first half of the article. and to Robin Clark, Sarah Thornton, and Milly Williamson—members of my writing group for 2021–2022 at the Beatrice Bain Center in the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies, University of California, Berkeley—for their wonderful editing suggestions on this chapter. The work builds on research from Bloom (2022a). Also see my earlier article Bloom (2022b).
- 2 More attention is starting to be given to artistic responses to protest art in university art museums and galleries. See the groundbreaking exhibition curated by Betti-Sue Hertz, *The Protest and the Recuperation*, held at the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University in New York from June 12 to August 14, 2021: York. Available at: <https://wallach.columbia.edu/exhibitions/protest-and-recuperation>. Also see the related publication Hertz and Premnath (2022).
- 3 What I propose is similar to what Haraway calls *naturalcultural*; a term she uses to signal the false binary that separates these otherwise inseparable contact zones of origins and becoming. See Haraway (2007).
- 4 Joshua Clover’s provocative formulation of the Capitalocene is even more broadly descriptive of the role of economic systems: “ecological despoliation of humans is a consequence not of *humans* ... as the name Anthropocene suggests, but of Capital ... with its compulsion to produce at a lower cost than competitors for profit” (Clover 2021).
- 5 The artists in this chapter also participate in a rich art historical tradition that focuses on the environmental conditions in which we are collectively immersed dating from the beginning of the industrial revolution. This trend is visible in the efforts of John Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), John Constable (1776–1837), Theodore Rousseau (1812–1867), and Claude Monet (1840–1926), among others. For more on this trend, see Thomas (2000).

- 6 For more on the work of the curators.
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- 6 For more on animated painting as a form of contemporary art, see the related publication on the works of Qiu Anxiong, Sadie Benning, William Kentridge, and Serge Onen in the exhibition curated by Betti-Sue Hertz, Buchan, Hertz, and Manovich (2007).
- 7 For the follow-up short online film from 2020 that addresses COVID-19, see Klein and Crabapple (2020).
- 8 On Ocasio-Cortez's experience at Standing Rock, see Paiella (2018).
- 9 The two-minute long online poetic video by Wit and Wisdom in collaboration with the Global Climate and Health Alliance, *Our Handwriting May Be Bad, But Our Message is Clear*, is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-AcFYIFb_H4, accessed on May 10, 2023.
- 10 For the transcript of the Global Climate and Health Alliance climate letter, "Healthy Climate Prescription," see Goodman (2021). A full list of the letter's signatories is available at: <https://healthyclimateletter.net>, accessed on May 18, 2023.
- 11 For an interview with Jeni Miller, director of the Global Climate and Health Alliance, and the transcription of the full video text, see Goodman (2021).
- 12 The entire video text as it appears transcribed in English is available at: https://www.democracynow.org/2021/11/12/climate_health_pollution_decarbonize_cop26, accessed on May 11, 2023.

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