

# Imagining the Impossible

BY LUCAS IHLEIN AND KIM WILLIAMS

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*In 2020, the Point examines how our cultural and sociopolitical systems are implicated in climate change, and what actions the arts industry can take. For this issue, we invited Lucas Ihlein and Kim Williams to reflect on the process of helping the Biennale of Sydney review its environmental practices.*

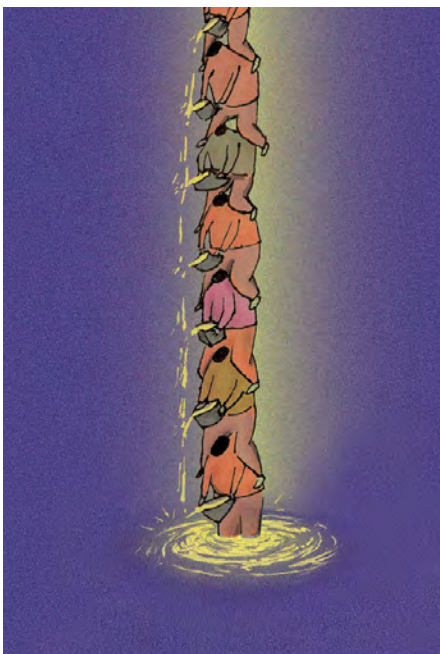
At times, as artists, we have to convince ourselves that we have something valuable to contribute to environmental justice. We find ourselves asking: Is what we do in any way comparable to direct environmental activism, or remediation, or public education? Can we do all these things and still call them art?

These questions arose while we were collaborating on the socially engaged art project *Sugar vs the Reef?* (2015–19) in Mackay, Queensland. Over four years, we worked intensively with sugarcane farmers experimenting with regenerative agriculture methods. We devised ways to broaden the wider community's knowledge of regenerative agriculture. One approach that we found useful was to bring diverse cultural communities into contact with the world of sustainable agriculture. Many of the groups we worked with—including the Australian South Sea Islander community, Yuwibara Aboriginal peoples, and the Italian and Maltese communities—played important roles in the formation and development of the sugar industry in Australia.

We were invited to participate in “NIRIN,” the 2020 Biennale of Sydney (BoS), on the strength of *Sugar vs. the Reef?*. Artistic director Brook Andrew asked us if we could help rid BoS of plastic. *Plastic-free Biennale (2020)* grew out of this invitation to achieve the impossible. We interrogated the priorities of BoS as an organization and festival, and by extension, the priorities of the global art industry. We wondered about the tensions between artistic and environmental concerns. Our investigation has been guided by the question of how the art world can model better environmental practices, and thereby play its part in mitigating the climate crisis, in which it is complicit.

Market forces carry a surging tide of plastic into the world's oceans and waterways. In the art industry, vast swathes of bubble wrap are frequently used to package works, and disposable plastics support the physical mounting of exhibitions. Plastic originates from fossil fuels, and produces greenhouse gases at every point of its life cycle. It is an obvious and visible target, but there are many other processes that boost the art world's environmental footprint, such as international flights by curators, artists, and directors, and professional museum standards that demand strict air-conditioning and humidity controls. Is this model sustainable or responsible? We think not. Is it time to rethink this model? We think so. Is it easy to make these changes? Not in the least.

We decided that our project should engage with BoS on several levels. The first is an ongoing “infiltration” into the Biennale organization itself. A series of low-key gatherings and discussions



with staff members over the course of a year unearthed some of the organization's environmental issues, along with its desires for and barriers to change. Our presence as witnesses and as listeners emboldened the staff to identify and begin to implement some of those changes on personal and organizational levels. Individuals began reducing their plastics in the office, and the procurement team began to purchase supplies with environmental impact in mind. At “NIRIN,” paper labels on reusable wooden clipboards were used instead of foamcore wall labels, and sheets of corrugated iron replaced rolls of black plastic for darkening video installations. We also prodded the Biennale towards a more proactive overhaul of its environmental policies. Currently, the focus is on achieving carbon-neutral certification. To do this, we are linking BoS with other arts companies that have already reached this milestone, to learn from their experiences.

These are small steps. Our process of revamping the practices of a leading arts organization reflects the global pace of change: everything happens slowly in relation to an unfolding ecological disaster that demands quick, decisive action. Nevertheless, the Biennale offered us a public platform to shine a light on contemporary art-world conventions more broadly. One of the works in our installation for “NIRIN” on Cockatoo Island dramatizes the binary between a “business-as-usual” biennial and an imaginary model of a “Plastic-free Biennale” based on principles of environmental stewardship and social responsibility.

Just how much do we value artistic freedom? At what cost? What if an artist proposes a work with powerful aesthetic and social impacts, but with a devastating environmental footprint? Does working in an environmentally responsible way necessitate a less professional-looking exhibition? How can a biennial bring together the best artistic practices from around the globe if the director's international travel budget is curtailed in order to reduce carbon emissions? These are some of the questions posed in our work, and we hope that audiences visiting the installation are prompted to take up the challenge to rethink the standard model for large-scale contemporary art festivals.

But as we write, it seems that external forces will prove far more transformative than any art-based critique. In March, shortly after its launch, the 2020 BoS was closed due to Covid-19, as were all museums and galleries in Australia. The Biennale has since reopened for an extended run, but with international and interstate travel restrictions in place, only a local audience will get to physically experience the works. Across the cultural spectrum, creative producers are scrambling to reorganize programs so that the show can go on, but differently. Now is the time to build environmental stewardship into the DNA of future biennial models.

ILLUSTRATION BY TIFFANY TAM