

# BULLSHIT BINGO: DESIGNING A RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE DENIALISM IN CRITICAL STUDIO PRACTICE

Shaun Wilson, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

## Abstract

The recent public discussions about climate change have brought forward two key points of important discourse. The first is the resistance by climate change denialism to accept science as a means of fact-based validation into the effects of human interference within the natural world and the second is the debate on actions to reduce carbon emissions and global warming. This paper will explore the role of climate change denialism through my critical studio practice as a means of social commentary with discussion informed by the artefacts located in the series 'Failed Design Experiments of Climate Change Denial Machines' (2018) exhibited as part of the National Gallery of Victoria's *Melbourne Design Week 2018* and 'The Rise' (2019).

Keywords: Contemporary art, climate change, climate change denialism

## INTRODUCTION

This paper speaks to the future of both of my young daughters, and to that of their generation's future, now greatly impacted from the looming effects of climate change. It's conversation is framed as a parent concerned for their lifelong welfare inasmuch as it speaks as an artist, protective of their right to live in a society whose cultural fabric is governed to the basic foundations of clean air, clean soil, clean water, and clean food. Yet in recent times, the resistance of this expectation has been brought forth into a public context by governments, corporations, capitalist systems, and media personalities to condemn the actions of those who wish to protect the natural world and to take action on climate change to prevent global warming. This crisis of reasoning would be, even ten years ago, foreign to me, comparative to believing in, say, for example, flat earth theory, yet a surmountable disbelief in even the most common sense of approaches to live in harmony within the natural world now seems to be at odds with the motivations

of those who subscribe to the opinion that scientific fact is subject to ridicule simply because we might not agree with it.

I am reminded of the birth of modernity in the twelfth century with the dialogue between the poets of the Moderns and the Ancients centred around the controversy of the Basilica of Saint Denis, constructed in what was first understood as ‘French Style’ and later to be known as ‘Gothic’. As with the Modern’s perspective, which looked to create a new way of understanding aesthetics primarily detached from pagan beliefs, the Ancients feuded with the Moderns within scholastic communities over the proceeding centuries on issues of aesthetics and reason but were compelled to fall back on traditional sensibilities founded from pre-Christian beliefs, built on a platform of mysticism and a tendency to hold a praxis based on territorial nationalism considered by the Moderns to be unreasonable and narrow minded.

These same kinds of arguments in the twenty-first century can be thought of in context to the current commentary on climate change nonetheless exacerbated by Donald Trump who claimed on Twitter that ‘the concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive’ (Trump, 2012) followed by ‘is our country still spending money on the global warming hoax?’ (Trump, 2014) Of recent dialogue, the hostile reaction towards climate activist Greta Thunberg from predominantly white, middle aged, male opponents who defend ‘the Promethean idea of the conquest of nature by man, in a world specially made for men’ (Nelson, 2019) reveals a division by those who acknowledge climate change validated by science and those who do not through the disbelief of climate science altogether. Australian media commentator Andrew Bolt described Thunberg in the Herald Sun as a ‘deeply disturbed messiah of the global warming movement’ (Bolt, 2019) as other commentary subscribed to the same opposition such as ‘Sky News commentator Chris Kenny [who] labeling Thunberg as a “hysterical teenager” who needs to be cared for’ (Nelson, 2019) just as both the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison who ‘suggested [that] climate change fears were a type of pathology’ (Nelson) and ‘Sebastian Gorka, who worked in the White House briefly under President Trump, wrote on Twitter that Ms. Thunberg’s remarks were “disturbingly redolent of a victim of a Maoist ‘re-education’ camp.” (Zraick, 2019). While these examples are drawn from a wider negative critique of Thunberg’s message to act on climate science, a surmountable wave of attack against Thunberg supports the case that, firstly, there is no need to take action on climate crisis because it does not exist, and second, that people ought not to acknowledge climate scientific facts to suggest rather that a climate crisis is indeed a global hoax. However, as Jennifer O’Connell highlights in the Irish Times, ‘they can’t dismantle her arguments, because she has science – and David Attenborough – on her side’. (O’Connell, 2019) As this paper brings such denialism to the forefront, it seeks not to

understand or come to terms with the presence of the said mass skepticism - albeit, a frustrated gaze towards climate change denialists is represented in the motivation of the said artwork - but rather, as a means of how to respond to such disbelief by using my critical studio practice as a device enabled by meta-tonic design from and within a socio-political commentary.

In 2005, Bill McKibben's article 'What the warming world needs now is art, sweet art' laments that 'art, like religion, is one of the ways we digest what is happening to us' (McKibben, 2005) none the more evident than in Isaac Cordal's public sculpture 'Electoral Campaign' from 'Follow the Leaders' as part of an 'ongoing street art project entitled "Cement Eclipses" (Sullivan) that 'was meant to draw attention to the faceless businessmen who run our capitalist global order' (Sullivan) yet '...after going viral online, a photograph of this sculpture was baptized "Politicians talking about climate change" by social media users.' (Sullivan) If McKibben's perspective on art is to consider it as a means of coming to terms with what we as thinking creatures experience throughout our own immediate agency, then Cordal's artwork described by the artist himself as a '...collective inertia that leads us to think that our small actions cannot change anything... But I believe that every small act can contribute to a big change' (Dougherty, 2014), was a starting point in consideration of my own practice in developing a position for climate change denialism as a means to voice dissidence into the absurdity of disbelieving science for the sake of maintaining both the status quo and the capitalist system it controls at the blatant expense of ecological extinctions.

One might argue that Cordal's work transcends a metamodernist appraisal of embodiment within the subject in context to 'a meta version of itself [by] giving rise to speculative oscillation while at the same time bringing forth the possibility within its condition to consider the role of embodiment' (Wilson, p.3) as a key indicator of the artwork's communication. By this means, the oscillation, understood as the artist's intent of commentary about capitalism and the impact that the subject has on audiences viewing images of the artwork online, bring an association of a meta-narrative by which, in the case of it's emergent change of title by social media anointment, used the internet to recontextualise the message behind the artwork to then understand it as an oscillation between what the artist intended the work to be about and the actuality of the work as an embodiment in the space of collective socialisation once documentation of the artwork was published and subsequently redistributed online. Inasmuch as the act of retitling an artwork simply because we can, something which until the age of the internet was frowned on as an affordance of curatorial vandalism, brings into question the allowance of changing facts to suit our own purposes of truth comparative to the picking and choosing of science and corporate-sanctioned anti-global warming pseudoscience from climate change denialists themselves, opens up another dialogue for

art in that its meaning can change in time due to popular beliefs which can, as this instance has demonstrated, manifest art into meta-narratives thus separating the artist from the art at an entirely new level of departure.

To expand these ideas into my practice, the artefacts developed in two distinct series of work engaged the key points of ‘oscillation’, ‘matter’, ‘post-irony’, and ‘climate change denialism’ into a framework constructed around the application of meta-tonic design that considers enabling a process by which new knowledge can be drawn from in a way to address both denialism and science data informed by NASA and the CSIRO together as an instrument capable of attesting the indicators of a significant way to think about and come to terms with climate change in a critical studio context.

## SERIES 1: FAILED DESIGN EXPERIMENTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE DENIAL MACHINES

An example in my practice is comparative to the Cordal sculpture whereby I created a series of scaled sculptures titled ‘Failed Design Experiments of Climate Change Denial Machines’ manufactured from recycled plastic model kits in a process known as ‘kitbashing’, that were painted, weathered and mounted in clear blocks of resin to represent an invented narrative of rising sea levels which ultimately forced such machines to stop working and become extinct. These works were then exhibited in the National Gallery of Victoria’s *Melbourne Design Week 2018* at MARS Gallery, a commercial gallery located in Melbourne, Australia, by placing all of the works on the floor of the gallery toilet with the intent of first, using climate change as a central thematic to raise dialogue about people who deny its existence, and second, displaying the miniatures in an alternative method to challenge the way an audience traditionally witnesses contemporary art thus raising dialogue about how spaces of public exhibition are either considered to be sanctioned or taboo to draw parallels of challenging denialist’s beliefs of climate change who view science by the same approach - that is to say, an option to consider climate change science as a taboo because it may conflict with their own religion or personal beliefs just as audiences who saw the exhibition were bothered by its locative display because it conflicted against their own beliefs of how art should be displayed in a commercial gallery.

As the exhibition opened for over the course of a week in February 2018, audiences were polarised on the intent of the work as represented in over two dozen emails received by the gallery from people complaining about why the gallery staff had placed an artist’s work in the toilet and moreso, the motivation behind such a perceived devaluation of art which became the main public focus of the exhibition. This of course

entirely negated the contextualisation of the artwork's thematic that gave rise to the oscillation between a devaluation of the artwork's status in the mind of the general public even though an explanation of why this was so was available in clear view as an A4 sized artist statement outside of the toilet door, and the embodiment of the artwork's premise of machines, which don't exist, subjective to the intended fictive meta-narrative of their prescribed function in becoming extinct by a condition of the natural world that destroyed its activity by which the machines where built to deny ever existing in the first place.



Figure 1 - *Failed Design Experiment of a Climate Change Machine #1*, 2018, recycled plastic model kit, polymer paint, oil paint, glue, resin, 150mm x 90mm x 170mm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 1 '*Failed Design Experiment of a Climate Change Machine #1*' illustrates the initial prototype artwork which was created at the beginning of the series, exemplifying the quintessential depiction of industrial machinery derived through an attention to mechanical realism. In doing so, the machines depict effacements of what a functioning generic machine might look like in the real world, complete with a central combustion engine, exhaust funnel, handrails, suspension units, plumbing networks, manifest paneling and an operator's seat. Drawing from cinematic production design references from Lawrence Paull's post-industrial *Blade Runner* (Scott dir, Warner Brothers, 1982) and John Barry's kitbashing vehicles designed by Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) for *Star Wars: a New Hope* (Lucas dir, 20th Century Fox, 1977) which both developed a centralist trope of worn looking industrial aesthetics, Figure 1 replicates these said design approaches to build an artwork capable of engaging an oscillation between the

visual items that we know - that is to say, using recognisable components of other source materials joined together - with the form of what we do not know, thus being the totality of the assemblage - yet still evident to invest in an inkling of familiarity without being able to individualise exact referential points of the subject through other represented forms.

As in other works later discussed, the methodological considerations for this artwork locate these familiarities into a context which plays into a collective zeitgeist that concerns itself with a meta-tonic design approach drawn from an analysis of adaptive and responsive design behaviour to result in 'the condition of merging these two differentiated design approaches into a singular space.' (Wilson, p.5) The beauty about using this approach is that meta-tonic design holds an advantage over other methodologies I have employed in my studio practice such as, for example, design thinking, in that meta-tonic design is built as a conceptual process which allows for opposing ideas to independently work together and inform the artwork without dilution of the other's presence or resultant effect. By this, the oscillation informs the artwork in such a way as to invite a method of working which contributes to a visual process enhanced by the allowance of the artwork's ideas to form a symbiotic relationship of building a machine from an intentional function to deny science while at the same time, using this denied science to defunct its centralist objectivity.

Likewise, Figure 2 '*Failed Design Experiment of a Climate Change Machine #2*' is a more complicated machine, comprised of elaborate cogs, wheels, pulleys, and piping to infer a factory orientated machine researched from instances of millinery contraptions used in England throughout the early nineteenth century juxtaposed with machinery built for industrial steam factories in Germany during the 1840s. The later specifically expands an observation of the German working environments of the time which gave rise to Marx and Engels critique of early capitalism and, specifically, Marx's concerns - as opposed to, arguably, Engels disinterest in environmentalism - for environmental degradation through the unsustainable work practices of a capitalist framework. Socialist author Per-Ake Westerlund comments that Marx 'warned of the effects of the disruption in the relationship between humanity and nature' (Westerlund, 2015) which in itself, if viewed from the Marxist metaphysical perspective of 'matter', one might argue as a subsequent approach, aligns the artwork to function in a Marxist perspective when considering that 'matter' infers a reasoning to symbiotically interlink human activity and the natural world together where, as Harrison Ford argued at the Global Climate Action Summit 2018, 'nature doesn't need people, people need nature.' (Ford, 2018)

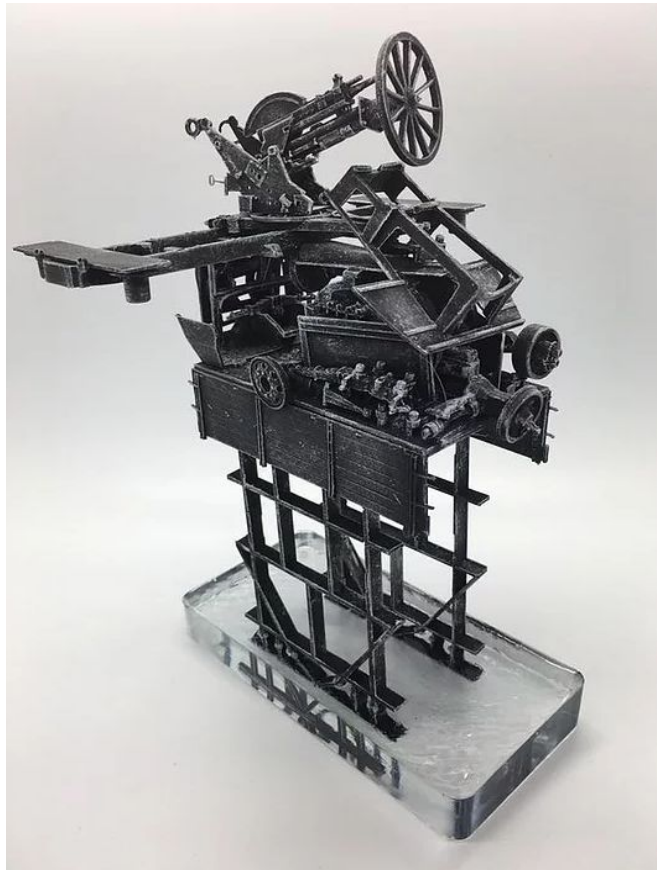


Figure 2 - *Failed Design Experiment of a Climate Change Machine #2*, 2018, recycled plastic model kit, polymer paint, oil paint, glue, resin, 240mm x 180mm x 310mm. Image courtesy of the artist.

If these two key points of matter and oscillation are taken into review towards the understanding of the artworks, this paper suggests that the premise of the series has then established a method of inhabitancy for both of these terms by which, firstly, the significance of the methodology enables the integration of meta-tonic design in determining the structural relationships as defined through oscillation and, secondly, the agency implied by matter, both derive an outcome to prompt the measurement of impact brought about by the presence of new knowledge. Insofar as the indicators to attest such knowledge are considered to be important, most notably from a Marxist metaphysics, what this series has generated not only defines these instances as a new way of thinking about climate change through contemporary art but further, provides the foundation as to the next series titled 'The Rise', which takes these considerations into a formalist approach of how a response to climate change denialism can change the form of the subject while still inclusive of the same type of methodology and perspectives which surmount its predecessor series within my studio practice.

## SERIES 2: THE RISE

Reflecting on the Cordal sculpture, the proceeding series used the motif of water as a central part of the artworks in similarity of the allure of *Electoral Campaign*, visually centred on the relationship of the perceived waterline in contrast to the characters who are submerged within it. To this end, *The Rise* (2019) series portrayed existing structures of familiarity by way of representations of decayed and damaged buildings partially submerged to such an extent that a perception of natural waterline marks are disrupted to make each tableau overtly pronounced through rising sea levels in the presence of melting ice caps. In doing so, rising sea levels become the main conceptual focus of the artwork to demonstrate the effects of GMSL (Global Mean Sea Level) data collected by the Australian national science agency CSIRO.

Figure 3 *The Rise #1* (2018) responds to such data and other predictive analysis climate maps which demonstrate the representation of eroding coastal boundaries born by the effects of global warming, and in particular, the melting of the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets. One useful reference in creating these works was a recent modelling study conducted by the Geophysical Institute at the University of Alaska Fairbank, published in *Science Advances* in June, 2019, where scientists ‘used data from NASA’s Operation Icebridge airborne campaign... the world’s largest airborne survey of polar and sea ice’ (Merzdorf), to construct a climate map emulating the impact on predictive conditions based on comparisons between 2012 and 2018 satellite data using ‘three possible future climate scenarios [to include] low, medium, and high emissions out to the year 2300.’ (Merzdorf) By using this visual data, I was then able to consider the catastrophic scenario effects of rising sea levels to then inform the artwork based on attention to current climate science data and also, to respond to the rhetoric from climate change denialists who claim that ‘the long, slow rise of sea levels since the end of the Little Ice Age has not been significantly affected by man-made global warming said to have occurred in the last half of the last century.’ (Bolt, 2012)

The resultant sculpture was made by creating intricately crafted chunks of ice floating on top of an extended waterline, manufactured from manipulated resin poured in layers on top of each other in the shape of a cube where the surface was fashioned through the application of a heat gun and the gouging into this layer from an ultra wide flat head screwdriver used to texturise the resin surface. This of course differs from the untextured resin effects used on the mounting blocks of the climate change denial machines where the focus of attention was otherwise crafted towards the machines themselves as a primary thematic device.



Figure 3 - *The Rise #1*, 2019, detail, carved and moulded plaster, polymer paint, antique book, and resin 310mm x 270mm x 300mm. Image courtesy of the artist.

The same water surface process was used in Figure 4 - *The Rise #2* (2019) over a series of light resin pours where some of the final layering was painted on using a thicker batch of resin pliable enough to set into shape once heated with the same heat gun process and manipulated with the end of a screwdriver blade. Once completed, the resin was cast in the shape of a cube and presented as a resin brick encapsulating the diorama and it's submerged, scaled locality. Using this technique allowed the resin to become a centrepiece mechanism to create a space for the next key point, post-irony, to bring about a consideration of the dichotomy between denialism and scientific facts in a way that positions the role of post-irony as distinctive from, say, a postmodern context of irony. Moreover, if irony was thought about in a postmodern framework in relation to *the Rise #2*, then the response would be limited as relativism through postmodernism cannot function in the presence of the absolute beyond making a copy of itself in order to understand it's former through the manifestation of irony beyond the approach of cynicism. Yet, through a metamodernism framework of post-irony, the notions of confinement are relinquished because irony itself can be infused onto the artefacts without any relativist limitations as what is found in, for example, the Jenksian perspective of irony because the ironic in post-irony is not considered to have dark humour to instead be understood as a serious critique without the less serious values as to what we find in the use of postmodern irony.



Figure 4 - *The Rise #2*, 2019, detail, carved and moulded plaster, polymer paint, antique book, and resin 350mm x 260mm x 300mm. Image courtesy of the artist.

With regards to matter, one might argue that post-irony provides a more sobered platform to interrogate a contemporary reading of the term, especially in context to matter's inclusiveness of unification. When taking this into account as the sum of all parts interlinking with each other through dependency, it becomes apparent that matter is a pertinent component of the reading into the artwork, argued by this paper that the social commentary surmounting the project's thematic is more sustainable for the artwork's premise to host an oscillation of the opposing instances than it would be if matter was understood differently from meta-tonic consideration or removed entirely altogether. Herein lies the problematic context of the artwork bound solely to post-irony as it simply would not be able to exist in its current understanding if post-irony was, for example, understood from other perspectives such as post-analytical philosophy which would delineate a different reading through the primary understanding of the artwork's objective truth, or even other interpretations of post-Kantian philosophy which have recently become popular as a way to explain the meaning of contemporary arts throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

## CONCLUSION

The process of manufacturing these artworks have represented a better understanding of how climate change denialism can be thought about in critical studio practice. It has positioned the key points of oscillation from a metamodernism perspective to drive the

first series of artworks and then further develop these findings into the second series with an attention to matter as a contemporary reading of a Marxist perspective and a secondary investigation of oscillation, by reflecting in both series the data from climate change maps drawn from research collected by NASA and the CSIRO to be visually represented in the artworks inasmuch as the notions of climate change denialist commentary drawn from a selection of political leaders and other prominent media personalities have also been considered through oscillation and post-irony. In doing so, the practice based methodological process has developed a new approach for artists to consider metamodernism in finding new knowledge from the wider implications of this paper's thematic and position the significance of such as a means to further investigate the impact of this knowledge on the ways in which we ought consider and come to terms with the artefacts developed through both the series of artworks.

As I now look to my children, young people and all future generations hereafter, I ponder at the thought of how their history will judge us in years to come; if our societies will be branded as reckless, accountable for irreversible climate damage and incalculative humanitarian crimes of unimaginable proportions as the oceans and atmosphere continue to warm past a tipping point born from unsustainable human activity. I ask how many young people's futures will be destroyed in the age of climate impact long after the congo line of white, middle aged men who sanctioned climate inaction will long be dead to leave a new future society judging climate change denialism in the same way as we now judge those of the past who sanctioned black slavery and the burning of witches. I ask how we as a society can function in an era of ignoring science simply because we might not agree with it, how we can continue to view governments and corporations with a level of confidence and credibility when many of our leaders place their faith in religion and 'fairytale of eternal economic growth' (Thunberg, 2019) instead of acting through sobered judgement on the findings of climate science, and watch in full scale as the solutions available to stop global warming are condemned and halted by those who have the power to reverse it's pending onslaught. I will continue to develop further dialogue and artefacts as a means to contribute new knowledge in the field and defend the virtue of climate science through my practice as a testament to the fact that, inevitably, 'we're shit out of time.' (Ford, 2018)

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