

Artist's statement – Kate Foster

My artistic practice is about finding routes into looking at the enormity and complexity of our global environmental crisis. Investigations lead from specific things – such as a temperature gauge in an aquarium; a bird-skin; a desire to fly to South Africa with a swallow. The work unravels aspects of uncertainty, seeks spaces where there is possibility for action - but avoids simplifying issues and acknowledges complicity. “Mean sea level” is not a fixed point, which is why I use it to describe my artwork¹.

Realising that anthropogenic climate change is undeniable, I was led to work alongside biologists and geographers, drawing from a supportive network of environmentalists and artists. A series of collaborative cross-disciplinary works developed - ongoing work called “BioGeoGraphies” about the entwined lives of animals and humans in an era of species loss, and the complexity of people’s relationships to environment, both technically and ethically. We have reworked the unique history of specific zoological specimens in time and place, using their past as a means of talking about futures². Wanting to extend my practice outwith office and archive, recent work has been ‘drawing in the field’ – creating annotated sequences of images by working alongside farmers and field biologists.

So - pursuing areas of uncertainty as an artist, my first step is to seek different ways of knowing about something and to work between boundaries of knowing. Assisted by a Leverhulme residency at Glasgow University, I learned, as an artist, to hold my own purpose clear: an artist has exceptional licence to roam and I use this as I can. Crossing occupational boundaries inhibits self-referential habits, and asks awkward questions about what your work means in other contexts. But such practice requires its own version of rigour, external markers of success do not apply³. I ask of my work that it contributes to my own and others’ sense of ecological interconnectedness.

I also learned to balance the construction of knowledge-based arguments with making visual work that engages undisciplined senses, complex and not necessarily pleasant. Visual routes can deflect easy interpretation and polarised thinking. A point arises in my investigations where things need to be said visually. Outcomes are various and depend on context. My approach has parallels with strands of non-representational human geography⁴, using a “make-do” approach – adapting local resources and materials, working on local connectedness⁵. In art discourse, my work sits in an extended field of practice, perhaps identifiable as ‘new genre’ public art⁶.

Projects at “mean sea level” should work as “conversation pieces”⁷ that offer space for reflection – bringing together disparate viewpoints and making concerns feel more worth acting on. This can feel like a painfully slow kind of politics in an era with urgent need for action but is trouble worth taking. This work is set alongside my appreciation of other forms of art as activism, and making changes across all aspects of my life.

¹ See www.meansealevel.net

² For a fuller description, see Merle Patchett and Kate Foster: “*Repair work: surfacing the geographies of dead animals*” in special issue of *Museums and Society*: ‘Constructing nature behind glass’. Online at <http://www.le.ac.uk/ms/museumsociety.html>

³ This is discussed in more detail in: Kate Foster and Hayden Lorimer. *Cultural geographies in practice: Some reflections on art-geography as collaboration*. *Cultural Geographies* 2007;14:425

⁴ Lorimer H. (2008) ‘*Cultural geography: non-representational conditions and concerns*’, *Progress in Human Geography* 1-9.

⁵ A working paper about how this practice developed is available at: <http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/subjects/ontheedge2/workinginpublicseminars/pdflist.html>

⁶ Lucy Lippard, cited in D. Harding with P. Buchler, *Decadent public art – contentious term and contested practice* (Glasgow: Foulis Press, page 9)

⁷ G.H. Kester, *Conversation pieces: community_communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004)