

Ren Adams – Blog

The Visual Arts Experience (!)

Axis Mundi is Coming

Video still from rough cut for Axis Mundi

I was invited to submit a project proposal for an upcoming multi-venue exhibition curated and coordinated by Regan Rosburg, Adam Gordon, Tracy Tomko and Alvin Gregorio:

AXIS MUNDI:

The Crucial Role of the Artist in the Age of the Collapsing Global Organism

The exhibition will feature 20 artists, half of which are local to Denver (the project is part of the *Biennial of the Americas*)—and the other half are national and international contributors.

I am producing experimental video pieces and a suite of View-Masters for the exhibition and I'll be sharing process, ideas and project shots here on my blog. The other artists are working in photography, video, full-length film, painting, sculpture, recycled plastics, bioluminescent algae, DNA, petroleum distillates, deceased animals, public murals, and natural objects. I can't wait to see each artist's response to the project's conceptual framework.

A little background on the exhibition/project (from the prospectus):

Despite the brevity of our lifespans, humans collectively are changing the face, and fate, of the planet's species. Be it runaway pollution, our contribution to rising global temperatures, or the fervent gobbling of resources to feed our manic hunger for "progress," we are manipulating the efficient ecological balance that took millions of years to evolve. Worldwide, the scientists unite in agreement on the causes of climate change. Humans witness changes in their backyards, while millions of voiceless plants and animals succumb to changes beyond their evolved adaptability.

As the situation progresses, clearly the term “climate change” is not large enough to encapsulate the multi-dimensional and far-reaching impacts of humans on Earth. James Lovelock created the hypothesis of Gaia: that the living and non-living components of Earth function as a single living organism. The organism self-regulates in order to maintain a healthy balance, suitable for sustaining its life. In essence, all actions on Earth (no matter how small) can affect the organism as a whole.

If Lovelock’s hypothesis is applied to the calamities of today, Gaia is sick. Her immune system is compromised. Her body is shaking and whipping about with storms, fires and droughts. Her blood has filled with oil and trash, and her lungs with billowing plumes of burning fossils. Her skin crawls with machines that dig, cut, squeeze, and strangle. She resembles a child in a hallucinatory, feverous fit of delirium. In the Gaia model, humans are the mutant cells of a collective cancerous tumor that has metastasized in the global body.

What can be done? It is apparent that we have enough information, and still nothing changes. Why? What is the human psychological block that keeps us on a path towards global eco-suicide? Where does one put the pain, when the pain is relentless? What actions can be taken, when everyone knows they are partially to blame? What does it matter?

***Axis Mundi** addresses the psychology behind these issues. The aim is to expose hidden motivations, unspoken shame, un-mourned losses and forgotten love for our world. The aim is also to evoke awareness, personal or otherwise.*

Axis Mundi will explore and expand upon three crucial, contributing, interconnected aspects of the current crisis: Environmental Melancholia, Collective Social Mania, and Biophilia. The first two aspects are connected in a hedonic loop of capitalism and buyers remorse. The last plays a crucial role in re-establishing our instinct to protect that which we have co-evolved alongside and are genetically predisposed to love: The Earth.

Another still from a working video I am developing for the exhibition

For this project, the artists were asked to develop work within one of three categories: **environmental melancholia**, **collective social mania**, and **Biophilia**. Reading the prospectus sparked a flood of ideas and I found the first two categories the most relevant and fertile for my method and methodology. The curators selected my proposal for the environmental melancholia category, so my project will be developed within this framework:

1. **Environmental Melancholia:** *the pathology of being melancholic about the collapse of the environment.*

This happens when “deaths” around the world (global or local) are not properly mourned because 1) time is not given to properly mourn the losses 2) the losses are abstract due to sheer enormity (example: the melting of glaciers, the collapse of bee colonies world-wide, or the massive deforestation of the Amazon), or 3) when the losses are abstract due to overlapping, continuous events (an oil spill one day, a flood the next, etc).

When one turns on the TV or log onto the Internet, the amount of horrific and saddening images he sees make him have an emotional response of overwhelming, unarticulated sadness. When the dead bodies, so to speak, are not buried, he or she has no symbolic release of those he or she has lost. Essentially, those deaths cannot be mourned, so the person becomes melancholic. Conversely, if he or she has a symbol or symbolic action that can represent that loss, and is able to grieve, then this allows for healthy mourning.

Artworks in this section must address melancholia and/or mourning. For more information on this topic, please read “Environmental Melancholia” or “The Myth of Apathy” by Renee Lertzman.

Our world is on fire... video still from rough cut in progress

Excerpts from my project proposal:

Background: The Absurd (Necessity) of Mediating Grief

Mourning is a complicated, abstract process, no matter the focus. Even grappling with the passage of individuals presents a nearly insurmountable gulf—the distance between specific loss, ongoing post-loss reality, and our ability to process such loss effectively. In our attempts to mediate the space of grief—flowers, cards, and condolences become the trappings of a cultural process of mourning, often our only recourse in dealing with the unexplained.

How then do we address environmental grief? That permeating sense of awareness and enormity, blended

with feelings of helplessness, complicity, confusion? As vast swaths of our living world collapse into infirmity, dying slowly, dying suddenly—we are surrounded by a seemingly endless cycle of “before” and “after,” one great loss after another. It’s an overwhelming cascade, causing cultural and personal paralysis. Without processing, how can we possibly move beyond the paralytic and into a space where we have the confidence and mobility to arrest the next wave of global disaster?

How do we begin to process such vastness? Do we, in futility, send a card to Gaia?

In *Poppy Transitory/Receding* (recent work), I investigated the sincere absurdity of processing “small-scale” loss with decorative memorials, themselves transitory tokens of grief. I sourced shapes from the clothing and desert location where my sister Cindy Adams and family friend Gram Parsons died, developing a visual language that applied to their specific moment. For *Axis Mundi*, I will again develop a visual vocabulary drawn from the “source material” of passage—imagery that supplies specificity, immensity, and the mediated erosion of the real.

My videos are layers of glitch, experimental photography and noise.

Approach: Television as Accidental Eyewitness

As most of my work deals with the literal, visual and conceptual impact of televisual media on our sense of self and location, I turned to television to investigate this elusive, yet pervasive, space of mourning.

Media influence our daily lives. The ubiquity of televisual media impacts our process of self-shaping and our understanding of relational space-place, even serving as a surrogate experience for the physical world; some people only “know” the Grand Canyon through media (for example).

If we construct an understanding of our world through media (Henry Jenkins) and this media is often used to escape from reality, while simultaneously encapsulating an undeniable record of our imprint on the planet, media becomes both intentioned forgetting and accidental historian; the perfect source material for a language of mourning. Television itself plays a central role in disseminating the paralyzing information about what’s been destroyed—even as it provides a zombie platform for the proliferation of politics that encourage or dismiss these same global catastrophes.

Television becomes both method of escape and unintentional, archival monument. Cold War programming itself even functions as an early form of Google Street View; a proto-virtual database of environments ‘caught’ tangentially on tape. The actual footage becomes a semi-documentary—an ‘archive’ of our former landscape exists within the very media we use for avoidance.

Yet, the environment itself is rarely the subject of television programming. The land is transient, offhandedly

preserved—it's only held in regard by being the background of a consumable program, itself destined for obscurity. Thus excavating and mutating found environments from the backdrop of Cold War television episodes reinforces both the fleeting, non-central representation of landscape in their original context, and the notion of environment as “accessory” to human story.

Using this language, I will construct a looping video of found landscape material, as if recalling the image in perpetuity can somehow undo the seemingly unstoppable avalanche of global changes resulting from human impact; a vain attempt to hunt, save, preserve and present—a digital gesture of condolence.

Unable to completely divorce itself from collective social mania, my video shrine will be a quagmire of paralysis and anxiety, highlighting locations that have been lost (or will be lost), or those forever altered due to “progress,” but which remain filed in now-fading media, itself actively losing ground and relevance. That our only representation or understanding of some locations might come through television, itself unstable and fading, is another brick in the wall of mourning.

The earth, the landscape—all captured as secondary to the humans and the story; television becomes an accidental eyewitness

I've begin work on several video sections and View-Master reels, with this overall structure in mind:

What: Physical Output

- Looping video played on a television
- Probably silent, but may experiment with droning noise or natural sounds
- Imagery is layered, disturbing, melancholic, distant, failing, uncertain
- Imagery will be created with experimental photography and glitch, in order to suggest the missing, the incomplete, the partially preserved and the mostly lost. This should emphasize the distance between the real state of loss and our abstraction of it through media
- Video will be composed of re-animated, glitched, mutated stills extracted from television, using my preferred method of obsessive excavating with a commonplace camera (cell phone)
- Rather than using active footage, which would suggest the still-living, still-vital, I will reanimate stills that are obviously frozen and separated from both nature and their original filmed source. This reanimation *appropriates* life, after the landscape has died. Thus, stills become a melancholic suggestion of life, rather than the continuous movement of the living.
- The flat void of the television screen is a fitting metaphor for the swallowed-whole destruction of our real environment
- An eroded, unstable video suggests both destruction of the site, and the eventual decay of the media that preserved an accidental memory of the site's existence

When the earth is lost, guess who else gets swallowed by oblivion

This entry was posted in Analysis, Pieces and tagged art and climate, art and climate change, artist activism, axis mundi, axis mundi is coming, axismundiiscoming, biennial of the americas, climate change, conceptual art, contemporary art, denver art, denver exhibition, exhibition, experimental video, gaia, mfa, new media art, new projects, regan rosburg, ren adams, temple art space, the temple, upcoming exhibition, video art, wip, work in progress on June 6, 2017 [<https://renadamsmfa.wordpress.com/2017/06/06/axis-mundi-is-coming/>] .

2 thoughts on “Axis Mundi is Coming”

Pingback: [In This Twilight Sleep | Ren Adams – Blog](#)

Pingback: [In this Twilight Sleep – Artist Statement \(payload delivery, complete\) | Ren Adams – Blog](#)

☺