



Artists put energy in a new light

A new movement is questioning our use of fossil fuels, writes Alice Audouin

What place does energy have as a theme in contemporary art? Nuclear energy has influenced artists ever since the bombings of the second world war, but fossil fuels and renewable energy have been much less present. Since the 2000s – over 10 years after the first IPCC report on climate change – the visibility of environmental issues, in particular global heating, has changed this. The exploitation of fossil fuels, oil above all, is increasingly a target of criticism, with artists pointing to its immense political, environmental and social consequences. The theme also allows space for the investigation of ‘deep time’ in a geological perspective, which stands in contrast to our own relatively short time

on Earth. As for renewable energy sources, these open new ethical debates as well as new mythologies. Solar energy, for instance, brings the relationship between humans and the sun into a new light.

Solar

Haroon Mirza studied design at Goldsmiths, University of London, before switching to fine art at Chelsea and then beginning a career as a sound artist, winning the Silver Lion for the most promising young artist at the Venice Biennale in 2011. Solar energy entered his practice by accident, as an improvised solution following the absence of an electrical outlet in an exhibition space. This experience had a profound influence on

his work, through the use of solar panels both as an energy source and as a sculptural element. In 2018, in Ballroom Marfa, Texas, his solar-powered sound and light installation *Stone Circle* was accompanied by full moon rituals and the promotion of renewable energy among the local population. The title of the installation refers to prehistoric monuments such as Stonehenge and invites us to invent a new relationship with the cosmos at a time when solar energy puts our star in the spotlight. Aware of the major role the sun will play in the post-carbon future, Mirza not only investigates its place in the collective unconscious, but also raises ethical questions associated with its use as energy. His latest work, *Dyson Sphere* (2022) is inspired by



Left: *Stone Circle*, 2018 by Haroon Mirza, 9 stones, LEDs, speakers, solar panel. Dimensions variable. Photo: Emma Rogers © Haroon Mirza. Courtesy of Ballroom Marfa and Lisson Gallery
Above: *Dyson Sphere* by Haroon Mirza. Exhibition view, Novacène, curated by Alice Audouin and Jean-Max Colard, Gare Saint Sauveur, Lille Photo: Jerome Mizar

the scientist Freeman Dyson’s proposal, imagined in the 1960s, of a megastructure capable of surrounding the sun or another star in order to harness its energy. Mirza interprets this idea by creating a sun surrounded by solar panels, which are themselves surrounded by musical and organic works in space. The piece is both spectacular and philosophical, questioning humanity’s obsession with technological progress and its hubris. Are we a parasitic species that will absorb all a planet’s resources, Mirza asks, or can we live in symbiosis with the rest of Nature and the biosphere? For Mirza, this question is at the forefront of many climate and energy issues. The dystopian threat invites us to choose his utopia, a world where solar energy becomes a source of both conviviality and sobriety.

Oil

Whilst contemporary artists who work on the theme of the environment often deny being activists, this is not the case for the Mexican artist Minerva Cuevas, who does not draw a line between her life and her work. Oil occupies a major place for her, and she examines it through its devastating social and environmental effects. She chooses to confront the world of art history and classical landscape painting with that of oil in a decidedly kitsch way, dipping her oil-painted canvases into *chapotote*, the Nahuatl term for tar, commonly found in Mexico in petroleum by-products such as tarmac. Her beautiful landscape paintings are immersed just a few centimetres into the tar in order to still be able to distinguish the rest of the image, and the bottom of the frame drips. The final image offers a metaphor of the invasion of fossil fuels into the landscape, hidden in the subsoil. Cuevas’s numerous investigations, including



Top: Overseas, 2015 by Minerva Cuevas

Above: From the series *Hidrocarburos*, 2007 by Minerva Cuevas

Both images courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto
www.kurimanzutto.com

the series *Hidrocarburos* (Hydrocarbons), are focused on oil exploitation in the Yucatán region and major accidents such as the oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico. Here she chooses everyday objects such as a cell phone, a packet of string, and a block of pavement, and this time she covers them almost entirely with tar. By engulfing consumer items, most often made from petroleum derivatives, in tar, the artist calls for a public awakening to this climate and social injustice.

Tipping point

Pioneers in the field of art and climate breakdown Mats Bigert and Lars Bergström have collaborated since 1986, when they were students at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm. In their 1994 work *Climate Chambers*, the audience experiences different kinds of extreme weather conditions, the chambers becoming platforms for discussion, in which global heating has been central. In 2015, with their installation *The Freeze: Rescue Blanket for Kebnekaise*, Bigert & Bergström climbed to the top of a snow-capped Swedish mountain to roll out a reflective blanket that would delay its melting. In 2012, they installed a piece, *CO2 Lock-In*, in various locations in Stockholm. The visitor locks themselves into a 300kg iron ball and chain, representing an average Swede's CO₂ emissions over 10 days, so that they can no longer move and cannot harm the environment any more. The use of humour is integral to Bigert & Bergström's approach. "The Earth machine is broken and we are trying to fix it with art, using a kind of absurdist humour," explains Bigert. In June 2022, they exhibited a monumental kinetic sculpture, *Tipping Point*, in Stockholm during Stockholm+50, an event that marked the 50-year anniversary of the 1972 Stockholm Conference. The installation comprises various rotating arms on which platforms and counterweights are hung. The platforms are then occupied by actors, whose movements set the mobile rocking. Their



CO₂ Lock-In, 2012 by Bigert & Bergström Photo: Charlie Drevstam
bigertbergstrom.com

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bodily energy drives the sculpture – electricity provides energy for some other parts of the installation – and determines whether CO₂ is emitted and how much ice in one of the counterweights is melted. "I think art can help to embody abstract quantities related to climate change and make people really feel these in new and different ways," says Bigert. "We wanted the visitor to get into the debate and to dive into climate justice."

Materials

A key question arises about the production process of the artworks: can an artist create and exhibit a work that denounces fossil fuels without using them? The materials used all have an energetic weight: acrylic paint is a derivative of petroleum, digital works or certain installations consume energy, and when the works have value or must travel far, they are often transported by plane. If zero CO₂ is utopian, reducing its impact is now part of the approach of several artists. The not-for-profit organisation Julie's Bicycle

accompanied Studio Olafur Eliasson to measure and reduce as much as possible the carbon impact of the famous *Ice Watch* installation in Copenhagen, Paris and London between 2014 and 2018 (featured in Issue 317). The artist Tomás Saraceno is experimenting with a new mode of 'zero fossil fuels' transportation that he has named Aerocene, which intends to supplant our current thermo-industrial civilisation. An environmental awareness linked to energy is finally infusing the art market itself, with movements such as Gallery Climate Coalition and Galleries Commit, and announces a new artistic movement that is to be more organic and less petrochemical. **R**

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