Programs

Opening Reception
Fri, Aug 14, 2015, 6–8 PM
Youth Arts Lounge & Upstairs Galleries
Free with gallery admission

YBCA:You Exclusive and Young Artists at Work (YAAW)
Field Trip to Recology
Tue, Sep 22, 2015, 5–7 PM
503 and 401 Tunnel Ave., San Francisco / YBCA:You free

YBCA:You and Young Artists at Work (YAAW) members visit San Francisco’s recycling facility Recology to meet current artists in residence Jenny Odell, Chris Sollars, and Roger Ouirthique, and to see their exhibition. Through Recology’s residency program, these artists have scavenged materials from the dump over a period of four months to make art while promoting recycling and reuse. The galleries will be open from 5–7 PM, and a gallery walkthrough with the artists will take place at 6 PM at 503 Tunnel Ave.

YBCA:You Exclusives are FREE for YBCA:You members. Not a member of YBCA:You? Call 415-978-2787 or visit ybca.org/you to sign up!

The YBCA Young Artists at Work (YAAW) program is a paid, year-long, multidisciplinary arts-as-activism residency for Bay Area high school aged youth at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. ybca.org/yaw

YBCA Public Squares
Sat, Oct 10, 2015 & Sat, Nov 7, 2015
YBCA Campus / Free & Ticketed

YBCA’s Public Squares are an institution-wide celebration of culture making. They invite the public to collide with artists, thinkers, and creative instigators. From panel discussions to performances, the Public Squares will spur conversation, encourage connectivity, and hopefully, inspire social change.

Troublemakers: The Story of Land Art
By James Crump
Thu, Oct 29, 7:30pm & Sun, Nov 1, 2pm
Screening Room / $10

Architecture, landscape, sculpture, technology, archaeology and photography all converge in land art. Troublemakers unearths the history of land art, featuring a cadre of renegades who sought to transcend the limitations of painting and sculpture by producing earthworks on a monumental scale. Iconoclasts who changed the landscape of art forever, these revolutionary, antagonistic creatives risked their careers on radical artistic change and experimentation, and took on the establishment to produce art on their own terms. The film includes rare footage and interviews which unveil the enigmatic lives and careers of storied artists Robert Smithson (Spiral Jetty), Walter De Maria (The Lightning Field) and Michael Heizer (Double Negative).

Troublemakers (2015, 72 min, digital)

Trailer

ConVerse: Landscape in Flux
Thu, Nov 15, 2015, 5–8 PM
Grand Lobby, Screening Room, and Galleries / Free

In conjunction with Earth Machines and Won Ju Lim: Raycraft Is Dead,

ConVerse: Landscape in Flux will feature an artist talk with Won Ju Lim, as well as performances by local artists. The YBCA:ConVerse series is a free monthly public gathering featuring creative and generative art practices. ConVerse is where community and innovative multi- and inter-disciplinary arts practices come together in our free and public spaces in a fluid, interactive, experimental format designed to engage audiences.

About Yerba Buena Center
For The Arts

Founded in 1993 out of an expressed need for an accessible, high profile arts center devoted to contemporary art of all genres, YBCA presents contemporary art from the Bay Area and around the world that reflects the profound issues and ideas of our time, expands the boundaries of artistic practice, and celebrates the diversity of human experience and expression. YBCA is an integrated site for creative endeavor: a unique fusion of art, innovation, and ideas in a social environment. It serves as a curated platform for the dynamic convergence of artists, inventors, thinkers, producers, and the community, working together to sustain multiple levels of participation, propel short- and long-term social change, and ensure contemporary arts and living artists are vital to our society.

YBCA’s artistic offerings include a year-round exhibition program, two annual performance series, a celebrated year-round art film program, a community rentals program making YBCA performance spaces available to Bay Area performing arts organizations at affordable rates, and award-winning community engagement programming. Distinguished by its widespread support of local, national, and international artists in the performing, visual, and media arts, YBCA is also recognized for its innovative approach to audience-centered programs and for its partnerships with other arts and community organizations. Through its programming, YBCA invites exploration and risk-taking, quiet reflection, and active engagement.

Exhibition Credits

YBCA Exhibitions 15–16 are made possible, in part, by Mike Wilkins and Sheila Dugnan, Meridee Moore and Kevin King, and the Creative Ventures Council.

YBCA Programs 15–16 are made possible, in part, by The James Irvine Foundation.

Additional Funding for YBCA Programs 15–16: National Endowment for the Arts, Adobe, Gaia Fund, Grosvenor, and members of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts is grateful to the City of San Francisco for its ongoing support.

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Art Works


Alisa Baremboym
Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen
Spiros Hadjidjanos
Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe
Kevin McElvaney
Leslie Shows
Addie Wagenknecht

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts
701 Mission Street
San Francisco, CA 94103
415-978-ARTS
ybca.org

August 14–December 6, 2015
The interplay of cycles, both short- and long-term, is a dominant theme within this exhibition. From the vast e-waste site of Agbogbloshie documented in Kevin McElvaney’s photographs to the depiction of slow geological development in Leslie Shows’s paintings, Earth Machines questions how we visualize and manifest the cycles that power the chains of production essential for technological innovation. This movement from mine to factory to consumer to dump is obscured from the public, which usually only sees the finished commercial product.


Spiros Hadjidjanos


Kevin McElvaney

Kevin McElvaney (b. 1987, Solttau, Germany), based in Hamburg, is a self-taught freelance photographer, working since 2013. His photographs have appeared in the Guardian, Al Jazeera, Fox News, Stern, Die Zeit, De Standaard, Daily Mail, and Dazed & Confused.

Addie Wagenknecht


Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen

Twenty-Two Theses on Nature
Steven Shaviro

1 We can no longer think of Nature as one side of a binary opposition. In an age of anthropogenic global warming and genetically modified organisms, not to mention Big Data and world-encompassing computing and communications networks, it makes no sense to oppose nature to culture, or a “state of nature” to human society, or the natural to the social. Human beings and their productions are not separate from Nature: they are just as “natural” as everything else.

2 We must think Nature without any residual anthropocentrism: that is to say, without exempting ourselves from it, and also without remaking it in our own image. Human beings are part of Nature, but Nature is not human, and is not centered upon human beings or upon anything human.

3 Above all, we must avoid thinking that Nature is simply “given,” and therefore always the same—as opposed to a social realm that would be historical and constructed. Rather, we must recognize that Nature itself is always in movement, in process, and under construction. We need to revive the great 19th century discipline of “natural history,” practiced by Darwin, Wallace, and many others. Evolution (phylogeny) and development (ontogeny) are both historical processes; they cannot be reduced to the study of genomes as synchronic structures.

4 Nature is all-encompassing, but it is not a Whole. It is radically open. However far we go in space, we will never find an edge or a boundary. There is no way of adding everything up, and coming up with Nature as a fixed sum. There is also no way of subordinating Nature to some Theory of Everything.

5 Nature is radically open in terms of time, as well as space. The future is always contingent and unpredictable. It cannot be reduced to any calculus of probabilities. As Keynes and Meillassoux have both shown us, the future is intrinsically unknowable. It exceeds any closed list of possibilities. The radical unknowability of Nature is not an epistemological constraint: it is a basic, and positive, ontological feature of Nature itself.

6 In the 19th century, thinkers as different as Schelling (with his Naturphilosophie) and Engels (with his Dialectics of Nature) tried to define an overall “logic” of Nature that included—but that was not reducible to—human developments and concerns. In the 20th century, such projects were abandoned. Instead, humanity was either given a special, transcendental status (phenomenology), or else reduced to its non-organic presuppositions (scientism). Today, in the 21st century, both of these alternatives are bankrupt. We need to return to a project of thinking Nature directly—even if we reject the particular antiquated terms that thinkers like Schelling and Engels used for their own attempts.

7 Schelling and Engels both tried to conceive Nature in ways that were grounded in, but not reducible to, the best natural science of their own times. Our task today is, similarly, to conceive Nature in ways that are grounded in, but not reducible to, the best contemporary science.

8 Nature is neither a plenum nor a void; rather, conditions or states of affairs within Nature may tend either towards plenitude or towards vacancy. Usually, however, neither of these tendential extremes is reached. Things generally fluctuate in an intermediate range, between fullness and emptiness.

9 However, we are still on safer ground if we consider that Nature comprises something rather than nothing. We know from modern physics that quantum fluctuations happen even in a vacuum. In this sense, Nature is better understood in terms of more rather than less, or surplus rather than deficiency. Nature will never be finished, never be shaped and structured once and for all; but it has also never been “without form and void.”

10 Nature is not formless, and not simply homogeneous: it is rather “metastable,” in the sense defined by Gilbert Simondon. All-encompassing Nature is traversed by potentials and powers, or by energy gradients and inherent tendencies. At any moment, these may be activated and actualized. The most minute imbalance or the most fleeting encounter can be enough to set things into motion, and there is generally more to the effect than there is to the cause. The consequences of these imbalances and encounters tend to be orders of magnitude larger than the incidents that set them into motion.

11 The result of any disruption of Nature’s metastability is what Simondon calls “individuation”: the emergence and structuration of an individual, together with those of its associated milieu. Examples of this process include the precipitation of a crystal out of a solution, and the emergence and growth of distinct tissues, organs, and parts from an initially undifferentiated embryo.

12 Nature thus comprises multiple processes of individuation. These must all be understood in two distinct ways: in terms of energetics, and in terms of informatics.
Nature involves continual flows of energy. Energy (or, more precisely mass-energy) can never be created or destroyed, but only transformed from one state to another (the First Law of Thermodynamics). And yet this also means that energy is continually being expended or dissipated, as gradients are reduced, and entropy is maximized (the Second Law of Thermodynamics). As Eric Schneider argues, complex organized systems (from hurricanes to organisms) tend to form because they can dissipate energy more efficiently and on a vaster scale than would otherwise be possible. Such “dissipative systems” are internally negentropic; but this is precisely what allows them to discharge so much energy into their environments, thus increasing entropy and reducing energy gradients overall.

Today, thanks to our computing technologies, we tend to think more commonly in informational terms than in energetic ones. Physicists propose that the universe is ultimately composed of information; cognitive scientists tend to see biological organisms as information-processing systems. I fear that our excessive concern with informatics has gotten in the way of a proper understanding of the importance of energetics.

Information, unlike energy, has no “in itself,” for information only exists insofar as it for some entity (someone or something) that parses it in some way. This might make it seem as if information were inessential. But nothing is altogether devoid of information; nothing exists altogether on its own, outside of all-encompassing Nature, entirely self-subsistent and without ever being affected by anything else. The transmission and parsing of information, no less than the transfer and dissipation of energy, is an essential process of Nature.

We might link information to perception, on the one hand, and to action on the other. Perception is how we obtain bits of information; and the parsing or processing of information issues forth in the possibility of action. A living organism gathers information by perceiving its environment, and it uses this information in order to respond flexibly and appropriately to whatever conditions it encounters. This is not just the case for animals, or entities with brains. A tree discerns water in the soil, which it draws in with its roots; it discovers insects feeding on its leaves, and releases a noxious chemical to repel them. Information processing thus mediates between perception and action.

Information processing involves—and indeed requires—at least a minimal degree of sentience. But we should not confuse sentence with consciousness; for the former is a far broader category than the latter. Organisms like trees, bacteria, and slime molds are probably not conscious; but they are demonstrably sentient, as they process information and respond in ways that are not stereotypically determined in advance. Even when it comes to ourselves, most of the information processing in our brains goes on unconsciously, and without any possibility of ever becoming conscious. Consciousness is most likely only sparsely present in Nature. But sentence is far more widely distributed.

Perception is only a particular sort of causality. When I perceive something, this means that the thing in question has affected me in some way, whether through light, sound, touch, or some other medium. But if I am affected by something, then that something has had an effect upon me. It has altered me (however minimally) in some manner or other; and this process cannot be confined to perception only: I am often affected by things without overtly perceiving them. I feel the symptoms of a cold, but I do not sense the virus that actually causes me to fall ill. I feel an impulse to buy something, because my mind has been subliminally primed in some way. I lose my balance and fall from a height, pulled by the Earth’s gravitational field even before becoming aware of it. I turn over in my sleep, responding to some change in the ambient temperature. In all these cases, something has caused a change in me; it has given rise to an effect. Information has been processed in some manner, by my body if not my mind.

Nature involves a continual web of causes producing effects which in turn become the causes of further effects, ad infinitum. This need not imply linearity or monocausality: there are many causes for every effect, many effects arising from every cause, and potential causes may interfere with and block one another. But just as energy is continually being transformed, so information is continually being processed, even on what we might consider a purely physical level. This is why information, no less than energy, is a basic category of Nature.

Within all-encompassing Nature, the difference between the “physical” and the “mental” is only a matter of degree, and not of kind. To a modest extent a thermostat is an information processor, and therefore we should agree that it is at least minimally sentient—if not, as David Chalmers suggests, actually conscious. That is to say, the thermostat feels, although it does not know anything, and it is not capable of self-reflection. We can make a similar claim for a stone which falls off a cliff, or even for one which lies motionless on the ground. Gravity pulls the stone to the Earth, and the information associated with this process is what the stone feels.

Nature is not itself a particular thing or a particular process, although it is the never-completed sum, as well as the framework, of all the multitudinous things and processes—transformations of energy and accumulations of information—that take place within it. How, finally, can we characterize it? All-encompassing Nature stands apart from every particular instance. And yet it is not anything like a Kantian transcendental condition of possibility for all these instances, since it stands on the same level, within the same immanent plane, as they. Nature is neither outside history, nor the totality of history, nor a particular datum of natural or social history. It is rather what all these particular instances, all these transformations and accumulations, have in common: it is what places them all in a common world.

I will conclude by taking a hint from Alfred North Whitehead, who articulates this commonness more rigorously than I can. Whitehead translates the ancient Greek physis not just as “Nature” (as is customary), but also as “Process.” And he equates this physis with the narrower technical term (from Plato’s Timaeus) hypochope, the “receptacle,” Nature, or the Receptacle. Whitehead says, “imposes a common relationship on all that happens, but does not impose what that relationship shall be... (it) may be conceived as the necessary community within which the course of history is set, in abstraction from all the particular historical facts.”


Steven Shaviro is DeRoy Professor of English at Wayne State University, Detroit. He is the author of several books, including Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics and Connected, or What It Means to Live in the Network Society (Minneapolis, 2003).

Front Image: Leslie Snows, Face K (detail), 2011, Courtesy the artist and Haines Gallery

Inside Images:
1. Addie Wagenknecht, Cloud Farming, 2014, Courtesy the artist and bitforms gallery
2. Spiros Hadjidakos, Displaced (Smartphone), 2014, Courtesy the artist and Dr. Mathias Boerhinger
3. Kevin McElvaney, Aqgogglischen: john Mahama, 2015, Courtesy the artist