Fluid Futures

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BY NADIA CHRISTIDI

In 2020, the Point examines how our cultural and sociopolitical systems are implicated in climate change, and what actions the arts industry can take. Below, Nadia Christidi discusses what artistic imaginaries can contribute to climate-change solutions.

Over the past five months, I have been studying water planning in Dubai. I have considered the potential impacts of climate change on water and the future of the resource as it is being imagined and prepared for by policymakers, engineers, and scientists, while also grappling with proposals and perspectives from the arts. In this process, a number of things have become clear to me about the effects of climate change on knowledge production.

First, climate change has the potential to alter preconceptions of where knowledge comes from. Regions with similar climates will likely turn to each other as solutions become necessarily more climate-specific. We might expect to see new zones of knowledge exchange and production, including in the Global South. We already have glimpses of this in the Arabian Gulf's massive uptake of water desalination and the significance of this for the industry's development. Today, around 70 percent of the world's desalination plants are in the Middle East, and cities such as Dubai are building up their research and development capacity in anticipation of further industry growth. Unlike conventional resources such as groundwater and surface water, which are dependent on precipitation and therefore significantly impacted by climate change, desalination is less climate sensitive and more reliable. Thus, chances are desalination and cities like Dubai will play an increasingly significant role in the future of water.

Second, climate change has the potential to shift the timeframes that we derive knowledge from. We are seeing a return to the premodern era as a source of information. An example is artist duo Cooking Sections's *Becoming Xerophile* (2019–), a garden of sand and rock mounds sourced from construction rubble that stimulate condensation from humidity and water absorption in ways inspired by ancient cultivation techniques. These mounds perform "watering without water," according to the duo, and are used to grow 40 desert species, some of which were consumed in the United Arab Emirates historically, challenging modernist assumptions of the desert's barrenness.

Third, and finally, climate change has the potential to reconfigure perceptions of what disciplines constitute knowledge and who produces knowledge. Works such as *Becoming Xerophile* make clear the potential of art as a source of scientific information and inspiration for alternative visions. *Becoming Xerophile* is run like an experiment. The nine mounds in the garden are sized and angled differently and the garden will be monitored until 2021 to see which mound-form is ideal and which plant species fare well. Although one *could* imagine a future in which mound gardens become ubiquitous in Dubai, these types of projects are far from present policy orientations, which favor turf for landscaping and vertical, hydroponic, and closed-loop agriculture. While turf is irrigated with treated waste water in Dubai, such a reorientation would free up that water for other uses.

The recognition of art as a field of knowledge production brings us to the question of what utilitarian artistic proposals like *Becoming Xerophile* can do that corporate technoscientific solutions in the innovation economy cannot. Cooking Sections describe their project not as a solution, whether to water scarcity or food insecurity, but an approximation. While approximation emphasizes open-ended experimentality, process, and an embrace of success *and* failure in their different forms as useful conclusions, solutions tend to emerge from particular distributions of capital that invest in research and development with the aim of extending the status quo; the form of what a useful conclusion looks like is somewhat already known and its range of possibilities circumscribed. While not lying outside the circuits of capital, art nonetheless has the potential to do more radical reimagining. This will be all the more necessary as the climate changes and we find ourselves facing totally different circumstances for which the solutions of the current zeitgeist will not be enough.

So, can works such as *Becoming Xerophile* become policy? Should they? As we move forward, there is a lot of potential for artistic proposals and policy to become more aligned. However, there are certainly obstacles to this, including the tendency for policy in the innovation economy to favor the status quo. Artworks like *Becoming Xerophile* also don't have the image that sells in today's race to become the next hotbed for science, technology, and innovation that cities such as Dubai are heavily invested in. Yes, knowledge of and from the past will likely play an increasingly significant role in our future, as we see in how the paleobotanical record is being used to predict which species might survive higher global temperatures, or how rain barrels and cisterns are making a comeback. But there is still a hypervaluation of science-fiction-esque technologies in places like Dubai, against which the low tech is pitted; this high-tech emphasis is key to Dubai's utopian vision and its bid to become the next innovation hub.

That is not to say there is no room for artworks to become more valued through an expanded understanding of what innovation means and looks like. But the danger is that artworks become valued in image, that they become captured by the innovation economy *as it is*, and that they become an extension of city branding projects as art has sometimes done in urban renewal—or, gentrification—initiatives. What a missed opportunity that would be!

ILLUSTRATION BY JULIE LAI