

Letters From the Sky

COP17 CLIMATE TRAIN | LABIA CINEMA / THE BIOSCOPE / ARTSCAPE GALLERY



Sara Nuytemans and Arya Pandjalu (Netherlands/Indonesia), film still from *Treebute to Yogya*, 2010, 1 min

Last autumn, Kai Lossgott put out his first call for entries to artists and filmmakers around the planet to submit short experimental films that capture how they feel about climate change and the way it is affecting not just the world at large, but the environment as they experience it on their own back stoeps and balconies. “Millions of people and animals will lose their habitat due to extreme weather events like hurricanes, droughts or flooding. Daily, people around the world are observing evidence of climate change in plant, insect and animal life,” he wrote. “The earth is talking to us. Talk back. Send us your weather report from home.”

An artist who works across media to explore the more personal, subjective aspects of green politics, Lossgott curated *City Breath* in 2010 – an anthology of short films from four South African cities, which was screened at the British Film Institute in London before touring

internationally.

Now his idea was to “collect data” about people’s “inner and outer climate” and bring it together as a programme of short experimental films to be screened as part of a mobile arts festival on the Climate Train, which would make its way across South Africa, stopping in towns across the country en route to the COP17 Climate Change Summit in Durban in November. Featuring a mixed programme of film, performance, visual art and environmental education to get everyday people talking and thinking about climate justice, the train was one of the biggest social outreach projects in the history of COP.

With the call for entries having been published on Facebook, the *Art Review* website and elsewhere, the entries started rolling in from Dakar, Cologne, Montreal, Johannesburg, Hong Kong, New York, Rome and Taipei. By November, Lossgott had succeeded in bringing

together this panoply of short, sharp shots into a single programme – featuring films by forty artists from sixteen countries – that hung together with impressive unity of effect.

A few simple unifying devices proved very effective in consolidating all the diverse entries so that they read as part of a shared vision and cinematic programme. Firstly there is the appealingly contemporary logo and title sequence featuring filmstrips falling, like rain, from a black cloud. Then there is the standard sequence at the start of each film, featuring the white font of the title against a black screen and the voice of the filmmaker reflecting fleetingly, impressionistically on what he/she is trying to capture in the film. These unobtrusive aesthetic gestures lend coherence to a programme that varies so greatly in style and approach it could otherwise have seemed jumbled or offhand.

The collective title, *Letters from the Sky*, has an



ABOVE LEFT The COP17 Climate Train. Photo: Rafs Mayet **TOP RIGHT** Sojin Chun and Alexandra Gelis (Canada), film still from *Cooling Reactors*, 2010, 1 min 47 sec **ABOVE RIGHT** Doung Jahangeer (SA), film still from *Gyroscopic Horizon*, 2011, 3 min 56 sec

appropriately haiku-like quality that captures both the poetic spirit of the project and the notion that nature has agency and that it is possible to *read* something in the disasters and distress of the natural world, and to *respond*. The “correspondence” here is between the natural world and the individual filmmakers. There is also something apt about the fact that the programme takes its title from the name of a song by Civil Twilight, a three-piece rock band from Cape Town that made it big in Los Angeles and Nashville. Like the *Letters from the Sky* films, it is the band’s authentically local energy that has global bearing.

The anxiety of imminent doom pervades many of the films, but most succeed in achieving a kind of transcendence through humour, inventiveness or creative transformation (from performance interventions to graffiti, dance, animation and illustration). One of my favourites features a group of Indonesian greensters driving through the busy streets of Yogyakarta on scooters wearing helmets that have been fashioned into pot plants. At moments all you can see is a delicate forest of greenery moving through the traffic – supercute! Since this was an open-call project, there are a few films that need to be *sat through*, mired as they are in the kind of self-indulgent undergrad obscurantism that gives experimental filmmaking a bad name. Luckily

they’ll only rob you of four short minutes of your precious life.

Sadly, I never got to experience the screening on board the Climate Change Train, which must have triggered some thrilling flashbacks to the Bolshevik agitprop trains that made their way across Russia after the October Revolution in 1917, with artists and actors performing simple plays and broadcasting Soviet propaganda. (The closest I’ve come to experiencing what they were like was watching Dziga Vertov newsreels inside a life-size model of an agitprop train at the now defunct Museum of the Moving Image at London’s South Bank Centre. See: <http://london-tv.magnify.net/video/Soviet-Agitprop-train>.)

Rather than disseminating Soviet policies from a centralised state collective, each of the four-minute films screened on the Climate Change Train (as well as at the Labia Cinema in Cape Town, The Bioscope in Johannesburg and at Artspace Gallery and various hotel lobbies in Durban) grapples in an open-ended way with issues that make a joke of national borders, bringing together the voices of concerned individuals across the planet, regardless of ethnicity, class, gender or religious creed. Like the Occupy movement, the shared vision of environmental justice transcends geography and nationalism and, in this sense, captures the

unfolding transnational zeitgeist of the twenty-first century.

Some viewers might find it easy to deride some of these films or poke fun at the filmmakers’ earnestness. I found the intimacy of the filmmaking – the absence of irony or critical distance – a rare kind of balm. As a vegetarian, Thoreau-spouting member of Greenpeace and someone who found COP17 a solar plexus-twisting rollercoaster period of nailbiting hope and desperation, I find it deeply reassuring to know that there are people living in Taipei and Toronto – and right here in Cape Town – who are just as mystified by the resilience of nature as I am and just as cut up by what we human beings are prepared to do to other life forms – both plant and animal – in the name of development, progress and economic “growth”. *Letters from the Sky* affirms that this community of creative dissidence is alive and active across our tender planet.

To read more about *Letters from the Sky*, visit the Facebook page or blog: <http://letters-from-the-sky-project.blogspot.com/>

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Film-makers' take on climate change

'LETTERS FROM THE SKY': Experimental film festival raises important questions

FORTY international artists have joined forces in *Letters from the Sky*, an international experimental film festival for the COP17 climate-change conference in Durban.

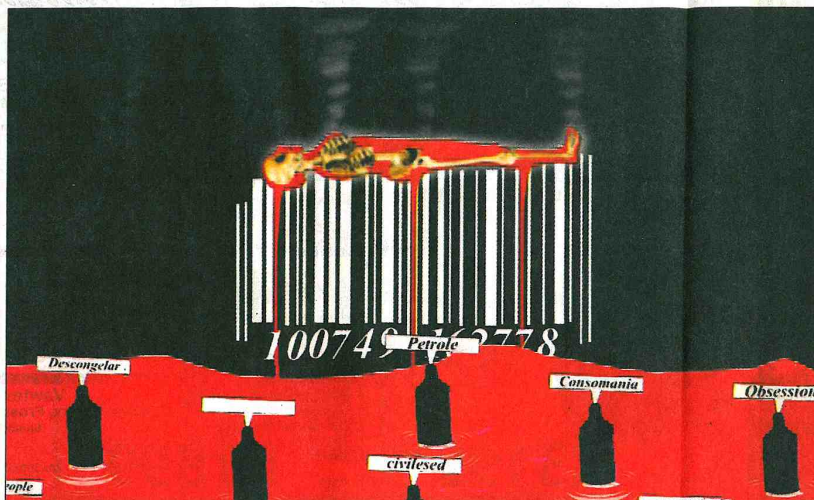
The festival, curated by Cape Town-based Kai Lossgott, showcases a series of film messages from artists and film-makers who were briefed to present personal responses to the effects of climate change on their communities, families and lives.

"We've been chatting to artists in Brazil, Argentina, the United States, Germany, the United Arab Emirates, Sweden, France, Portugal, Italy, Hawaii, Indonesia, Canada, the United Kingdom, China, India, Australia, Malawi, Senegal, Nigeria and here in South Africa," says Lossgott. "Artists and film-makers have been interpreting what's happening in their backyards, what they have seen on their travels, or the challenges their nations face with climate change."

"The Earth is speaking to us. It's time we spoke back. We all need to be part of the conversations around climate change, not just the global leaders who have disappointed us year after year at COP by failing to reach an agreement on international laws which will force polluters to clean up their act. It's a fact that many big polluters play sugar daddy to the political networks that are keeping them in power."

"But it is also a fact that people all over the world are getting together and saying 'No!' to corrupt power systems. It's very old-fashioned to sit in a corner and say nothing. For me, being alive today is about speaking up, and knowing that together, we are making a difference."

As temperatures rise all over the world, millions of people and animals will lose their habitat due to extreme weather events like hurricanes, heatwaves, droughts and flooding. Mass migrations will also



PHOTOS: SUPPLIED

'Consumo', by Samba Fall (Dakar/Oslo) was the winner of the best African video at the 'Letters from the Sky' film festival. With dark humour and a sense of playfulness, which evokes the aesthetics of video consoles or computer games' and outlines a terrifying world of consumers of all ethnicities and societies.



'Cooling Reactors', by Sojin Chun and Alexandra Gelis (Canada), won the Green Conscience Award at the 'Letters from the Sky' film festival. Three nuclear generators pollute the waters of Lake Ontario with radioactive and heavy metal contaminations, and two more are proposed.



'Custom', by Terry Westby-Nunn (Cape Town) won the Top Video Award at the 'Letters from the Sky' film festival. Overpopulation places a huge demand on the earth's resources, resulting in accelerated climate change. In the light of the bleak reality, the artist makes a startling decision.

place more strain on densely populated areas and can be expected to lead to conflict.

Human lives, particularly low-income and indigenous communities, are already being affected by heat-related illness and death, respiratory illness, infectious diseases, unaffordable rises in energy costs and extreme natural disasters.

"Many of us feel powerless about the destruction of the planet and grim predictions for the future. But it is not all bad news," Lossgott continues. "Climate change is the one social movement that touches all of us, regardless of ethnicity, gender, class, age or creed. Climate change is the youth movement of the 21st century."

Filmgoers can see documentary, animation, experimental film, artist's film, video art, screen dance or video poetry during the festival. "Artists' moving images are often open-ended, requiring active participation and mentalisation, in the same way as we read poems or short stories," says Lossgott.

"Many of these films defy easy classification. Some of their authors define themselves as artists, some as film-makers. Too experimental to find a place in the commercial-film world, yet not always an easy match with the video-art tradition, this selection is sure to raise genre-bending questions not only about climate change but about trans-media art today."

— Arts Editor

• *Letters from the Sky* is at artSPACE durban until December 14 between 9 am and 5 pm, Monday to Friday and from 9 am to 2 pm tomorrow. The films can also be seen at The Climate Train, Durban Train Station tomorrow. Inquiries: www.letters-from-the-sky-project.blogspot.com/
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