The New Earthwork
Art Action Agency
Edited by Twylene Moyer and Glenn Harper
Why (does it matter)?
1. The discourse of climate change has replaced disciplinary-specific models of ecological action with a meta-disciplinary, systemic understanding. The culturally based behaviors that drive these deeply interconnected problems will not be changed by technological solutions alone. Climate change adaptations are changing our cultural future.

2. The four-pillar model of sustainability adds culture to the “triple bottom line” of “social, economic, and environmental” criteria for evaluating sustainability. First described in 2001 and recently adopted by UNESCO, the key insight is that a broad cultural “framework,” not a cultural “sector,” is essential for the achievement of a sustainable society.

3. Understanding culture in this expanded way requires artists to work “upstream.” We must act throughout all sectors and disciplines to integrate cultural expertise into wider decision-making, in situ, revealing that culture is everywhere.

4. Systemic thinking brings the relation of ethics and aesthetics into high relief. If a new aesthetic is to be had, it is a systemic one, beyond appearances, a diverse aesthetics evolved to address more than human factors.
5 New forms of cultural expression will be generated that account for the logics, epistemologies, and ontologies of the future, the necessary emergence of a new metaphysic.

6 While there is an ideology at work, the research into forms and instantiations is only beginning. The long-theorized “both/and” model opens a space not only for ethics + aesthetics, but also for art + science, art + design, art + community.

7 It is also pragmatic. The expertise of artists, their cultural literacy and imagination, is required for survival. This is an opening, an opportunity to remodel culture at all levels and to evolve new practices and outcomes.

8 It is vital to our collective future that artists step up. What will be sustained and who will decide? How will these vital cultural decisions be made without our participation? Herein lies the urgency, our call to arms.

How (do we get there)?

9 There is no opting out of climate change.

10 Perceptions and strategies to the contrary are a function of the persistent myth of artistic autonomy, which ultimately limits art, culture, activism, resistance, subversion, agency, praxis, and culture change. All models that divide knowledges and essentialize “culture” exclusively into “artworks” should be examined. Disciplinary autonomy further limits what we can contribute; even collectively largely maintains specializations of labor, knowledge, and practice.

11 The mindset of specialization obscures our deeper agency, our ability to identify conditions of receptivity. The symbolic economy of art, operating alone, has limited agency. What agency might be found by combining the symbolic with practical action?

12 Operating as cultural experts and innovators, artists can claim not only the cognitive and dispositional status of creativity, but also disciplinary knowledge. We must develop a new epistemology of art practice, one allowing a knowledge claim based on inquiry, expertise, and disposition.

13 Claiming knowledge, innovation, and creativity is not enough. We must perform our claim by moving beyond critique. Critical capacity is an invaluable tool, but critique alone is not going to deliver solutions.

14 Our alternative visions demonstrate our synthetic skills. Here, we differentiate our knowledge and methodologies from anthropologists—artists both produce and evaluate culture—and from designers—artists both design and execute the work.

15 Our collective situation is fraught with “moral hazards,” but we must act anyway. We cannot claim creativity if we cannot deliver models for the future.

16 Connecting the dots is at the core of our work. Artists are adept at creating multi-criteria works that negotiate different audiences and points of access, that navigate the tangible and intangible. These skills can be used to integrate cultural aspects into all projects.

17 Artists possess the key skill of “not knowing”; we admit limitations. Climate change has precipitated a renewed interest in “wicked problems,” problems paradoxically unsolvable by the expertise that created them. We must be suspicious of reductivist forms of expertise, including our own. Artists give themselves permission to intervene in any system without invitation. This strategic irreverence is not merely cultural mischief—we must also look inward.

18 As we understand the systemic nature of climate impacts, we must evolve new ways to integrate artistic expertise, to move away from specialization toward dynamic and adaptive models. We must redirect art practice.

What (do we do)?

19 Emerging from evolutionary biology, complexity science is becoming a key influence on public policy and climate action. The ability to think in whole systems, especially closed looped systems, dynamic and metabolic, is crucial.

20 Understanding cities and their bioregions as complex adaptive systems forms a core competency for the future and opens possibilities for conceptualizing new modes of cultural activity—new sites and opportunities for engagement.

21 Adaptation and evolutionary innovation favor diversity of all kinds: a diversity of approaches creates alternative perceptions and feedback, more innovative systems, and additional complexity.

22 Comprehension of these interconnections foregrounds the need for legibility beyond visualization. The complexities
at work in the world are outside the scope of any single discipline. The traditional role of the artist, to make the invisible visible, takes on new dimensions, re-cast as “seeing systems.”

23 Much like the multi-level artwork, a “radically multi-functional” approach that solves more than one problem at a time is required for problems that lie at the intersections of interdependent sub-systems.

The promise of “relationality” or of the “expanded field” is not yet manifest. We must join our colleagues from all communities of practice at the collective table.

25 Multi-, trans-, and in-disciplinary collaborations that deploy a participatory model hold the greatest potential for systemic innovation.

26 Artists are expert in qualitative assessment—how cultural values are represented and embodied—and in navigating subjectivities, activities largely eschewed in quantitative civic processes. Previously unaccounted-for intangible valuations can lead to policy formation and adoption of new methods.

Frances Whitehead, David S. Graham, and A.P. Schwab, SLOW Cleanup: Designed Civic Experiments with Phytoremediation, 2009–ongoing. A whole-systems approach to cleaning polluted sites in Chicago, using plant-based phytoremediation. Piloting the use of ornamental, flowering, and fruiting plants, the project aims to increase the plant palette for this technology. Interpretive materials increase awareness of the interconnectivity of natural and cultural systems in urban ecology.


27 This participatory model redirects disciplinary territory and subverts conventional artistic practice, the “cultural quo.”

28 Operating both inside and outside our disciplinary expertise, both inside “culture” and (possibly) outside “art,” is required to build an alternative platform for new cultural futures. We must be willing to violate our own taste in favor of the truly experimental.

29 Those who contribute to the task of re-imagining the future will become comfortable with the discomfort of participating in the unknown.

Where (does it happen)?

30 In an interconnected systemic paradigm, there is no privileged location, so start where you are. This adage offers a simple, but profound answer to the apparent enormity of the tasks ahead.

31 But this statement also reveals a transferable method. Extrapolating laterally from the locavore logic of the Slow Food movement, food miles and foodshed beget culture miles and culture shed, a radical re-localization.

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32 Resistance to globalized, commodity culture and its anesthetizing sameness is coupled with a reduction in the carbon footprint of transportation, signaling a future for alternative, place-based practices.

33 These new cultures of “place” will be geospaically interconnected (g)local hybrids, both/and/here/there. New spatial literacies are required for these practices.

34 We will learn to work at all scales, micro and macro, as we map practices of time, space, and system.

35 Sustainable cultural futures will be built on bioregional realities. Eco-migration and resettlement will demand the creation and demonstration of situated knowledge and practices, especially in areas not previously seen as cultural.

37 Inventive climate mitigations and adaptations can be found that increase the quality of life and reduce impacts, replacing the quantitative economy with a qualitative one.

38 Research into “temporal discounting” in economics reveals a biological and cultural tendency to value the present over the future. This “hyperbolic” or “exponential” discounting limits our perception, creating a present-biased “temporal myopia” an invisible valuation that must be brought into consciousness.6

39 The inability to comprehend the present-ness of the future, which arrives every day, or the impact of decisions that inscribe some cultural futures and preclude others, has evolved into the shorthand method, “Work from the future backwards to the present.”7

40 The realities of climate change are beyond debate, but questions of timing, impacts, and strategy remain. As artists, we must learn to imagine the cultural policies and challenges of the future. We are running out of time.

36 The dynamics of the natural world extend to the metabolic ecology of cities, the understanding of which must be approached with equally dynamic strategies. Comprehension in long time frames, coupled with the ability to work with scientific and social-cultural “uncertainty,” is required.9

41 The designation of “artist” may not always be useful as we collectively re-make the world to achieve sustainability.8

42 Working in the culture at large may necessitate strategic identity shifts as a dimension of our role as “change agents.”

43 We will operate both inside and outside “art” and other worlds as double agents (or triple or quadruple)—an ontological project.

44 We bring the proactive, critical practices of art-making to tasks and disciplines not associated with activism, making (art) with purpose.9
The prescription against artist as problem-solver becomes the art of systemic problem-finding (problem articulation).

If we are able to adopt these frameworks and bring our knowledge to this systemic task of world-making, we will find ourselves at home in the future, creating new, currently unimaginable art forms.

In this philosophical space of ethics and aesthetics, the artist’s focus on intentionality remains critical. How to operate in this space is not clear. The “habitus” of art-making is a part of the problem. “Normal art,” a parallel to Kuhnian “normal science,” as a conservative and static impulse will be subverted.

This is where an experimental artist’s ability to operate laterally, to boundary hop between disciplines and discourses, models the innovative outcomes that can arrive by practicing in public.

Admitting that we do not have the answers, and that we might find them through conversation with unlikely partners and collisions of disparate expertise, makes a case for the professional amateur.

The legacy of the avant-garde has positioned artists as key experts in idea development and innovation. We are professional producers of new knowledge, even though this dialect is not ours and we stand critical to its assumptions.

As both critics of and producers of new knowledge and contemporary culture, who hold agency and ability to change culture, we must join others in visionary redirection toward the sustainable. Climate change = culture change.

Notes

9. For more information on Make Art with Purpose (MAP), see <http://makeartwithpurpose.net>.