

WHAT WILL BE

The visual and
performing arts for
a Safe Planet

United Nations
Framework
Convention on
Climate Change
COP16

November –
December 2010



SafePlanet

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Preface

Extreme weather disturbed the rest
Of hapless sleepers...

Christopher Edgar, *They in Themselves Like to Fire*

Climate change has far-reaching effects on the fate of hazardous chemicals.

Science has recently made significant strides in advancing our understanding of how these often hidden chemicals react to a changing climate. The consequences of the warming of our earth and oceans are becoming clearer and the emerging impacts more sobering with every year that passes.

Global warming it is emerging is increasing the volatility and the global transport of persistent organic pollutants (POPs), hazardous chemicals which are now found in every corner of the planet.

The increasing frequency and severity of tropical cyclones and flood events are increasingly putting at risk stockpiles containing thousands of metric tonnes of obsolete POPs pesticides and the low-lying agricultural communities where these chemicals are typically stored.

The accelerated melting of glaciers and the polar icecap is releasing POPs embedded in ice and snow back into the air and water, with potentially harmful consequences to wildlife and the human food web.

With the warming of temperate zones, new pathways of malaria transmission are opening up, widening the zone of demand for DDT, a persistent organic pollutant which the global community hope eventually to eliminate from the planet.

While science provides objective evidence of these mechanisms of exposure to hazardous chemicals and increasing risk to our health and the environment, art brings the message home and inspires us to act.

The Safe Planet campaign, an initiative of the United Nations and its three global chemicals and hazardous wastes treaties known as Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm in short, presents via the creative imagination new perspectives that can translate into transformative action.

The exhibition What Will Be connects the intertwined challenges of climate change and POPs and through the camera and canvas illustrates the human dimension of the problem. Its images of natural and unnatural disaster underscore the urgency of the need for global action.

A planet safe for all living things will be one where we continue to live with chemicals, while ensuring their production, use and disposal respect the health and livelihood of present and future generations – what we partners are calling the Green Economy.

On behalf of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization, I would like to thank the Mexican National Institute of Ecology and the Technological University of Cancun for their support for this unique artistic fusion of science and the creative imagination. And also thank the artists whose work raises awareness of the chemical consequences of global warming that have yet to receive the attention they so vividly and vitally demand.

Achim Steiner,
UN Under-Secretary General and
UNEP Executive Director

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Safe Planet is the United Nations Environment Programme and Food and Agricultural Organization-led global public awareness and outreach campaign for ensuring the safety of human health and the environment against hazardous chemicals and wastes. Supporting the campaign is the extraordinary reach and impact of the UNEP, the FAO and the Secretariats of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions. The three leading global chemicals and waste management instruments provide concrete measures, new initiatives and viable solutions to current and emerging issues related to hazardous chemicals and waste. Our need for a safe and sustainable planet is the ultimate goal which drives the work of the Safe Planet campaign.

By sharing responsibility, the campaign promotes the life-cycle approach to chemicals and waste management, recognizing that effective solutions to the challenges posed by toxic chemicals and wastes require action be taken by a wide variety of agents working at all levels of society, from Government, industry and educational institutions, to community-led initiatives, grassroots organizations, and the decisions of individual households and consumers.

Since its launch in February 2010, the campaign has used the influence of arts and culture to challenge our perceptions of hazardous chemicals and wastes and stimulate new thinking about how each of us must take responsibility for the safety of the environment and human health.

WHAT WILL BE is the second exhibition of contemporary artists, whose work responds to the Safe Planet issues through the visual and performing arts.

The first exhibition, *Substantialis Corporis Mixti* (Substantial Form of the Blended Body): the Synergies Exhibition of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, took place in May 2010, at the Bohemian National Hall at the Czech Center in New York City was curated by Mark Cervenka, University of Houston–Downtown. Produced on the occasion of the 18th session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, the exhibition brought together 10 artists from five countries, with works that sought to underline not only the tragedy of an unsustainable path, but the beauty of the natural world at risk from a failure to respond with intelligence and creativity. The exhibition was made possible through the generous support of the Czech Government.

The Safe Planet campaign is participating in the UNFCCC COP16 in response to the specific relationship between climate change and the work of the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants or POPs. This group of toxic chemicals share particularly hazardous properties and can be found virtually everywhere on our planet in measurable concentrations, including in our bodies. Climate change increases the planet's vulnerability to POPs, by increasing exposure and heightening toxic effects on humans and the environment.

WHAT WILL BE is co-curated by artist Barbara Benish and arts producer Eileen Haring Woods, with shared interests, creative practices and methodologies brought together by the Safe Planet campaign.

WHAT WILL BE is conceived as a statement, a question and a challenge. The ongoing silent destruction of our earth, our seas and all life forms is not always visible on the surface. Deadly chemicals in our bodies, our food, and our landscape are difficult images to illustrate. It is traditionally the work of the artist to bring to reality, that which is unreal. We work in the realm of the unconscious, the invisible, the other. Through the arts, we challenge our perceptions of hazardous chemicals and wastes and stimulate new thinking about how each of us must take responsibility for the safety of the environment and human health.

In the nine months since the launch, the Safe Planet campaign has gained partners and champions around the world, rapidly propelling the campaign issues into mainstream media, fusing the energy and commitment of international leaders in arts, culture, sports, science, education, business, faith and politics to motivate governments, industry, communities and individuals to respond to the urgent need for action in our interdependent world.

The Art of Stewardship

Where once painters offered allegories of nature's power and its seemingly limitless reach, artists today often reflect a more contemporary awareness of humanity's deleterious impact on the natural environment. Awe and a sense of wonder are replaced by apprehension about the dangers posed by technology and development, exploitation of limited natural resources, oil dependence, climate change and other acts of man. WHAT WILL BE is an exhibition of work by eight artists that highlights the lasting and burgeoning effect of often imperceptible accumulations of toxic chemicals and consumer byproducts on our fragile ecosystem.

The artists in this show approach this subject in a variety of ways. Some use art to sound the alarm about environmental threats. Others seek innovative solutions in a partnership of art and technology. Yet others address the need for international cooperation and a global vision in addressing these problems. Together they point ahead to our urgent need to forge a new relationship between humanity and nature.

In the first category are figures like Mexican artist Marcela Armas. Whose works deal with industry, the costs of energy consumption and the geopolitics that surround the production and distribution of oil. Her works frequently use elements drawn from this realm, including oil, electrical currents and in the work here, automobile exhaust. Her video, Exhaust offers a humorous but unsettling demonstration of the amount of exhaust produced by the internal combustion engine. Cars are attached to a huge inflatable balloon that, when filled with their exhaust, inflate a full size bridge support. With this work, Armas offers an unforgettable image of the larger system that supports our transportation technology – literally tying together the individual cars, their effluents and the intricate highway system that has been designed to accommodate them.

The installation by Pakistani-born artist Anila Agha suggests how so called "natural disasters" are tied to human caused climate change and reminds us that these situations cannot be solved in isolation. Agha is a fabric artist and in her hands, this medium, more often associated with femininity, domesticity and decorative crafts, becomes a potent political tool. In My Forked Tongue III, shown here, is reflected the beauty of three linguistic communities which illuminated her life in Pakistan. The new work, being created on site for Safe Planet entitled A Flood of Tears, is inspired by the effects of the recent earthquake in Haiti and the floods in Pakistan, both catastrophes arguably caused or exacerbated by human caused changes in natural patterns. Needles and thread create a rain of metallic filaments that refers to both the pain experienced by individuals and families whose lives have been upended by these events and the need for "re stitching" the social fabric that has been so demolished.

South African born artist Gideon Mendel approaches the same problem from another perspective. As a leading contemporary photographer, engaged with advocacy and collaborative projects, often involving a mix of photography and video, he is well known for his work on HIV/AIDS in Africa. He has recently turned his attention to the impact of climate change on the world's poorest people with his series of portraits of flood victims, in the context of their personal calamity. Here he reveals the human impact of the floods in Pakistan, Haiti and India, on members of the society least able to bear the costs. The unsettling gaze of his subjects is a profound challenge to the viewer.

Barbara Benish and Chris Jordan extend these concerns to the denizens of the natural world whose potential extinction we so blithely court with our destructive lifestyles.

Jordan, who is an American artist, here presents works from his series, Midway: Message from the Gyre. He offers photographs of dead albatross chicks drying in the sand. Strewn with feathers and skeletons exposed to the sun, these carcasses somewhat resemble the remains of ancient civilizations unearthed in archeological digs. Here however, it is our own culture under the lens. Jordan's photographs document the tragic effect of human consumption on the natural world. Mingled in with the organic remains are scattered bits of plastic refuse that these birds mistook for food. Fed to them by their parents, these indigestible accumulations ultimately caused their deaths.

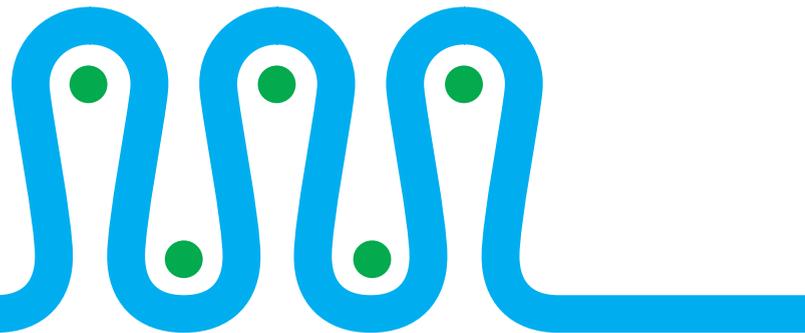
Benish, an American born artist who has settled in the Czech Republic, similarly dramatizes the effects of chemical and plastic pollution on marine and sweet water life. She paints on photographs of plastic toys of sea animals, ornamenting them with bright patterns of unnatural colors that recall the toxic chemicals and plastics that litter the world's beaches and waters. Here her subject is the crab, a creature with a long mythological pedigree that has historically been associated with regeneration and rebirth. In the contemporary world, however, regeneration appears as a wishful fantasy, as the freshwater crab's survival as a species is threatened by chemical pollution. There is a further irony in Benish's use of plastic toys, because, of course, these same objects that serve to familiarize children with the natural world are also potentially toxic.

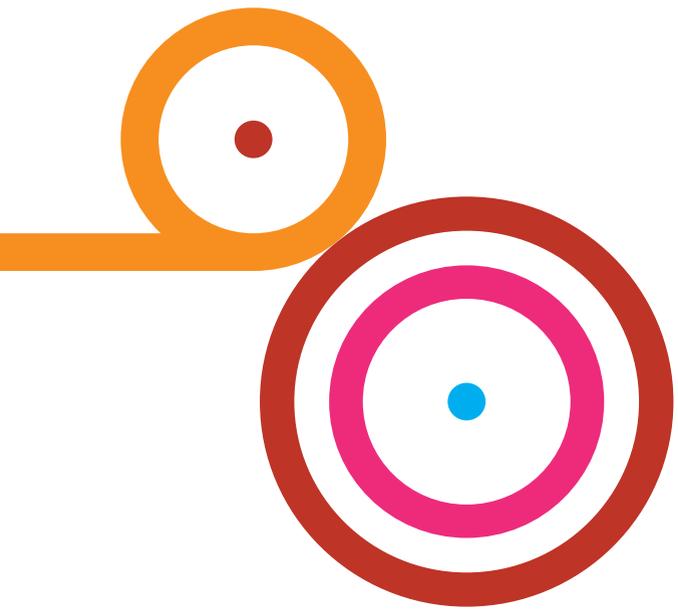
Mexican artist Gilberto Esparza reverses this dynamic, creating robotic urban plants that run on bacteria found in industrial waste. This tongue-in-cheek enterprise is designed to highlight a key aspect of human survival and evolution. Like these plants, flourishing in a hostile environment, humans have learned to adapt to even extreme circumstances. Here a new "species" is the byproduct of industrialization. In other words, humans now assume the role of, in the artist's words, "antibodies on the planet", no longer the object, but the agent of evolution. With this work, Esparza reminds us that nature is an ever changing ecological system and that we exist within it, however much we may like to think of ourselves as external to its processes.

British born artist Jason deCaires Taylor currently lives in Mexico. He is also interested in harnessing natural processes to ameliorate our impact on the natural environment. Having spent much of his childhood in the coral reefs of Malaysia, he has become a sculptor of artificial reefs designed for habitation by threatened marine life. His sculptures use figurative forms installed on the ocean bottom where they become hosts to colorful marine organisms. These creatures "resculpt" the figures as if clothing them in fantastical, brightly colored raiment. Sited in shallow waters where snorkelers and passengers in glass bottom boats can observe the interaction of art and nature, his works offer a lesson in the positive interaction of man and nature.

As part of the Safe Planet campaign, this exhibition offers dramatic and thought provoking visualizations of the need for a more nature centered approach to industry and technology. With these works, artists add their voices to the growing chorus warning of the fearful consequences of unchecked consumption and heedless exploitation of natural resources.

Eleanor Heartney,
Contributing Editor to Artpress and
Art in America and author of Art and Today





Chris Jordan (USA)

Midway: Message from the Gyre
Seattle, October 2009

www.chrisjordan.com



Anila Quayyum Agha
(Pakistan/lives in USA)

A Flood of Tears
A new installation for
Safe Planet at Cancun
Shown here:
My Forked Tongue III, 2010
7' x 12' paper, metallic threads,
beads, wax and dyes.
www.anilaagha.squarespace.com

Jason deCaires Taylor
(UK/lives in Mexico)

La Evolución Silenciosa
(The Silent Evolution)
400 life-size figures. Depth 9m
Cancun/Isla Mujeres, Mexico
Vicissitudes
26 life-size figures, depth 5m
Grenada, West Indies
www.underwatersculpture.com





Barbara Benish
(USA/Czech Republic)
Chemical Crabs
Collage and painted photographs
www.bbenish.net

Gilberto Esparaza (Mexico)
Plantas Nómadas
Video and photographs
www.plantasmomas.com
www.gilbertoesparza.blogspot.com



Marcela Armas (Mexico)
Exhaust
Automobiles, bridge,
gasoline, plastic container,
gas combustion 2009
Video and photographs
www.marcelaarmas.blogspot.com

They in Themselves Like to Fire

There must have been some other way in
In the way that things start to begin
As shadows of everyday things
Seen each day in the water

Like a conversation overheard
Something she said was in the water
Winding slowly through the narrow channels
From the divide merging towards the centre

Telling the other bodies when to proceed
To jettison certain aspects and not others
To toss a dart beyond the focal point
To stop the javelin or stand aside to let

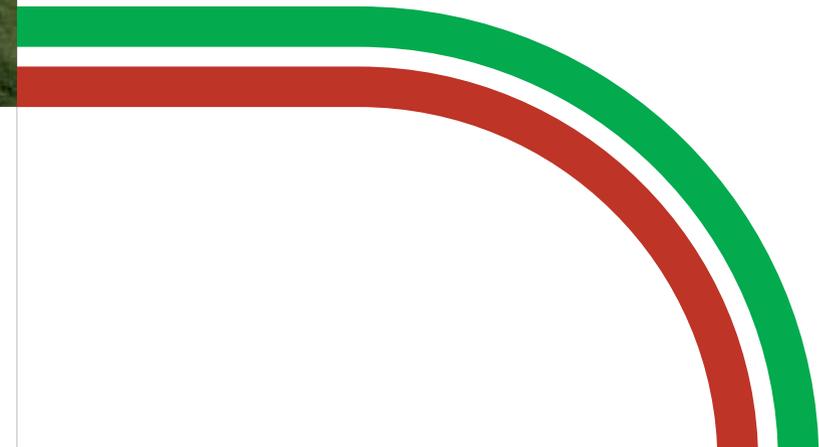
The wind yield equally to the cedars
In a medium of corn and rust and salt and rain
A patch of heaven made of smoke and sunlight
Raging over the fields of the Sicilians

Extreme weather disturbed the rest
Of hapless sleepers enclosed in brackets
Their goals covered over by sleep
The same illustration travelled mind to mind

Mixed in their eyes as other editions
Was it the same resolved in flames?
Not really say the tribes of wild beasts
Breathing the common air

As spring finally came to the allotment gardens
Leading all his thoughts turned to her
In and of themselves hardly the same
But in their way becoming similar

Christopher Edgar
(Canada/lives in France)



Gideon Mendel
(South Africa/lives in UK)
Photography and video
www.gideonmendel.com

Haji Sharif, Kando Khan
Bozdar village

Haji Sharif stands in the floodwater outside his home in Kando Khan Bozdar village. "Last night the flood came. It was very frightening, and we decided to send our children to somewhere safer. My house has fallen down. I'd built it myself with a lot of effort, and now I can't live in it. As for the future, we don't know at all what we will do. We are just sitting here waiting, relying on God's mercy. It will take almost two months for the water to start receding. We will face food shortages because the fields won't be able to produce any crops."



Barbara Benish

is the Director of ArtMill, International School of Creativity and Sustainability in the Czech Republic. Her international practice includes work shown at PS.1 Museum in New York, U.N.E.S.C.O Headquarters in Paris and the Venice Biennale. Barbara is represented in public and private collections around the world including the Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Stadtgeschichtliche Museen in Nurnberg, Germany.

www.bbenish.net
www.artmill.eu

Eileen Haring Woods

is the Artistic Director of Haring Woods Studio, a London based international team of artists, designers, entrepreneurs, political and cultural consultants working collectively to respond to social, economic, and environmental challenges through the arts and culture. The Studio produces large scale arts and environment events and initiatives with international artists, public and private sector partners and the media.

www.haringwoods.com

The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal
Secretariat of the Basel Convention
sbc@unep.org
www.basel.int

The Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade
Secretariat of the Rotterdam Convention

pic@pic.int
www.pic.int

The Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants
Secretariat of the Stockholm Convention

ssc@pops.int
www.pops.int

For more information on the Safe Planet campaign:

Mr. Michael Stanley-Jones
Public Information Officer
Joint Services of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
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11-13 Chemin des Anémones,
Châtelaine
Geneva, Switzerland
SafePlanet@unep.org

For more information on the arts and culture initiatives for the Safe Planet campaign:

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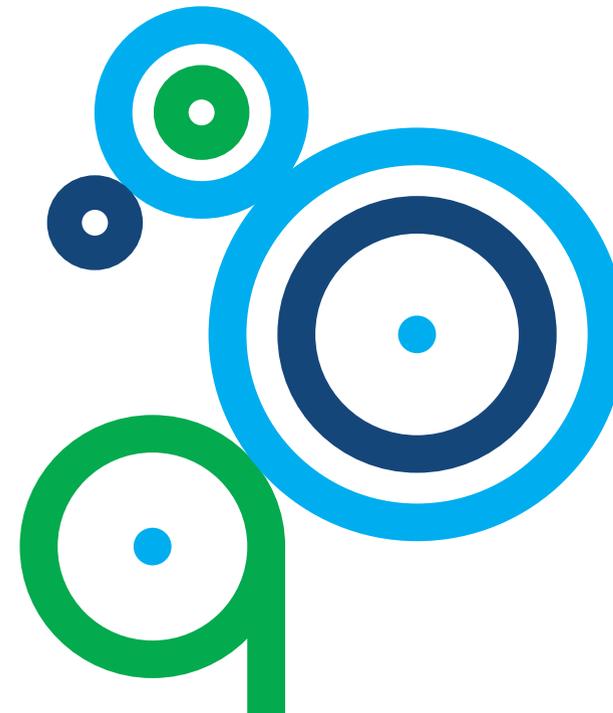
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