

ROB LA FRENAIS ON ART THAT MIGHT OUTLIVE THE HUMAN RACE

As the reality of climate change comes into sharp focus, what does it mean for long-duration artworks by artists such as Robert Smithson and John Latham or Katie Paterson and Bebe Williams – and does it matter that no one may be around to see them?



John Latham
Niddrie Woman
1975-76 © The
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One-point-five to stay alive! That was the motto chanted by the South Sea Islanders at risk of losing more of their land and low-lying islands to rising water levels if the increase in global warming was not kept to 1.5°C. The 2009 Copenhagen Climate conference, COP15, stalled at such an ambitious target, later replacing by it the far more modest target of below 2°C set at 2017's COP21 in Paris. Now the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, simply entitled *Global Warming of 1.5°C*, released in October 2018 and compiled by 91 scientists from 40 countries, drops the bombshell: in stark terms, unless we keep to the original 1.5°C, the planet will probably be uninhabitable in the lifetime of our grandchildren.

In the face of this, US President Donald Trump, Brazilian President-elect Jair Bolsonaro, the new prime minister of Australia, Scott Morrison – who, in 2017, brought a large chunk of coal into Parliament in an infantile bid to show that it wasn't something to be afraid of – and others are ripping up even the modest Paris Agreement. Meanwhile, the latest UK budget made absolutely no mention of climate issues, yet the government – distracted with ideological turf wars over an unnecessary Brexit – continues to massively subsidise air travel with tax-free aviation fuel. (Ironically, though Brexit may help to slow climate change with its massive disruption of the car and transport industries.) The climate emergency is here, now, and we are still in denial about it.

Given that many mainstream media outlets interpret the IPCC report as 'we are all doomed' – at least our families are – and as this article is a feature on deep-time art, let us go the darker route of imagining a planet with no more people (in spite of our best efforts, we probably won't