

# Performing Climate Precarity: Recalling Fire, Life Boats and the Transfrontier Elephant

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# PERFORMING CLIMATE PRECARITY: RECALLING FIRE, LIFE BOATS AND THE TRANSFRONTIER ELEPHANT

**Janine Randerson**

Blasting hot winds on my skin, the taste of smoke. It is winter, and temperatures would once have been freezing in a predictable Holocene climate. I am filming floating shards of glacial ice in an alpine lake, unaware that an uncontrolled fire rages nearby in a mountain tussock at Lake Ohau, Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>1</sup> As icy vestiges of Haupapa glacier dissolve to water before my eyes, farmed grasslands and homes burn in a sudden wild fire.

From November 2019 to January 2020, performance artist Alicia Frankovich found herself unable to breathe freely, surrounded by fire on all sides in Canberra, Australia. Three overwhelming wild fires blazed around the city and she relied on her gas mask and household air quality (AQI) monitor. Vast swathes of desert vegetation burned, the flames incinerating any creature in their path, melting metal, searing the roots of plants deep underground. On the coastline residents waited for lifeboats to carry them to safety by sea as the roads were blocked by walls of fire. In countries far away, skies turned yellow from the smoke of the fires that burned across multiple Australian states.<sup>2</sup> This lived experience catalyzed Frankovich's *AQI2020*, a performance installation in a smoke-filled container at the Auckland Art Gallery from late October to early November 2020.



**Alicia Frankovich, *AQI2020***, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, commissioned 2020. Supported by the Contemporary Benefactors of Auckland Art Gallery. Performers: Fa'asu Afoa-Purcell, Christina Houghton, Xin Ji, Rana Hamida, Kristian Larsen, Yin-Chi Lee, Olivia McGregor, Janaina Moraes, Adam Naughton, Sophie Sutherland, Briar Wilson. Sound composition: Igor Kłaczyński. Assistant Choreographer: Zahra Killeen-Chance. Curator: Natasha Conland. Live performance, acrylic and steel box, inflatable boat, hazer, chairs, chilly bins, blankets and assorted items.

Filmmaker artist John Akomfrah stood in Accra, Ghana, a city “at political and ecological boiling point.”<sup>3</sup> He was creating a trilogy of film installations around climate and migrant politics, including the most recent *The Elephant in the Room – Four Nocturnes* (2019) for the inaugural Ghana Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale. In this three-screen installation, elephant and human migrants trek wearily through a desert scarred by barbed wire, while storms rage above. Critical artworks tackling climate-induced ecocide often start with fundamental revisions of human-centered narratives. In recent interviews, Frankovich and Akomfrah both signal the agency of the atmospheric phenomena and nonhuman biota in their performance and installation artworks.<sup>4</sup> Through sensorial means such artworks show us, as Peter Sloterdijk states; “We are condemned to being-in, even if the containers and atmospheres that we must allow to surround us can no longer be taken for granted as being good in nature.”<sup>5</sup> We increasingly encounter unwelcome weather of anthropogenic origin wherever we live.

## WEATHER AS ART MEDIUM

While atmospheric energies have long been part of cultural practices and weather painting traditions, in the 1960s and 1970s, the science of indeterminacy and meteorological feedback loops caught the imagination of international avant-garde artists including Hans Haacke, Fujiko Nakaya and David Medalla. They each generated live weather in artworks made for galleries or outdoor sites. By foregrounding our sensory exchanges with the atmosphere, they prefigure the eco-aesthetic concerns of Frankovich and Akomfrah. Haacke experimented with live wind and water media in floating, tipping and condensing environmental sculptures. This body of work is documented in a co-publication by Jack Burnham and Haacke,<sup>6</sup> and was recently profiled in the retrospective *Hans Haacke: All Connected*, at the New Museum, New York (2019–2020). Stable categories of natural and biological phenomena began to give way to a discourse of non-linearity, interrelation and complexity, expressed in the emergent fields of meteorology and General Systems Theory. Haacke's *Condensation Cube*, also known as *Weather Cube* (1963–1965), proposed a climate responsive system and a disruptive vehicle to institutional and sculptural stasis.

As a free, animated agent, condensation in Haacke's Perspex cube is set in motion by a small amount of water introduced to the base of the cube that condenses to form trails on each surface. In Haacke's words, "The image of condensation cannot be precisely predicted. It is changing freely, bound only by statistical limits. I like this freedom."<sup>7</sup> The atmospheric conditions of the art gallery and the gathering condensation perform with the breath of the gallery-goer and warmth or coldness of the room.

Filipino/British artist David Medalla (1942–2020) also explored weather dynamics in cube-shaped and tubular Plexiglas forms in the *Cloud Canyons* series. Cloud-like bubbles frothed and spilled from these mechanized containers into gallery environments. In one of his early exhibitions at Signals gallery in London in 1964, castles of foam generated by a bubble machine spread over the gallery's tiled floor and cascaded from sculptures placed on the roof, mirroring the clouds above. In this artist-run gallery and associated periodical *Signals Newsbulletin*,<sup>8</sup> he brought new scientific discoveries together with anti-Vietnam war, Russian constructivist and revolutionary Latin American politics. These performing, aleatory foams anticipate Sloterdijk's poly-dimensional "thought-image of foam," as proliferating, collective expressions of social being, in resistance to mono-cultural norms.<sup>9</sup>

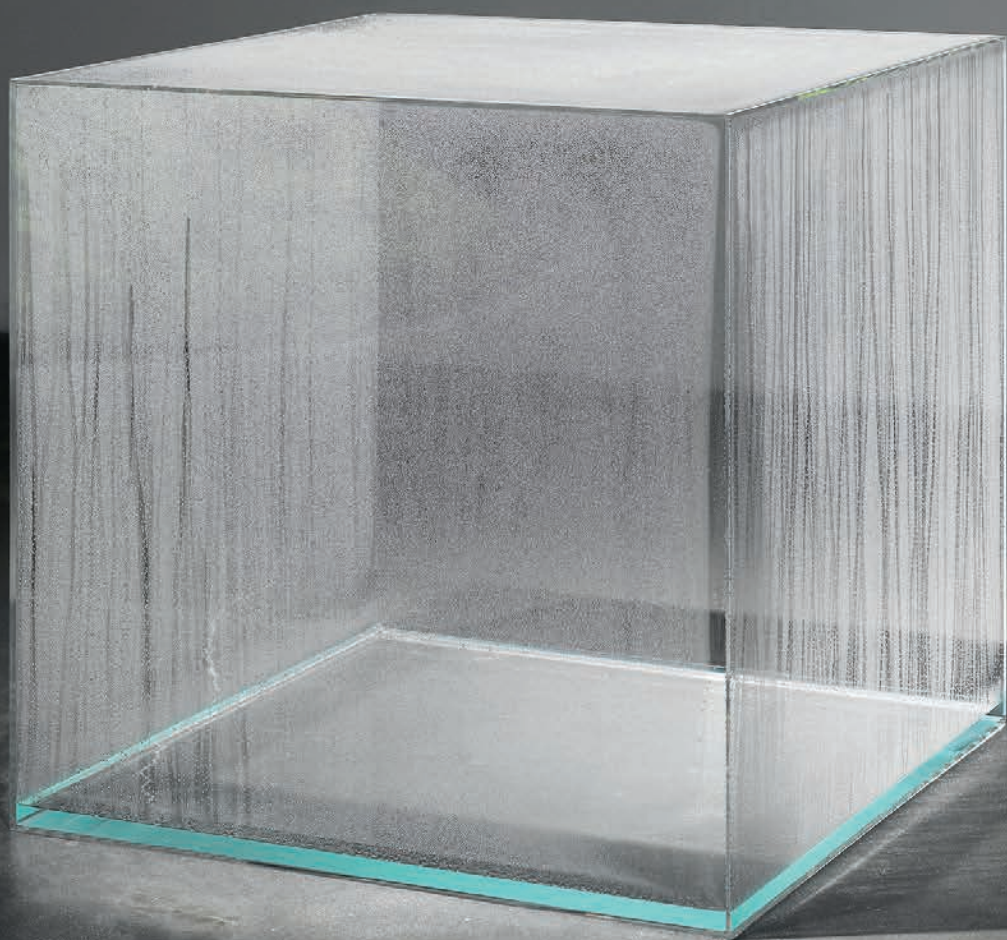
Live fog is created in Japanese/American artist Fujiko Nakaya's artwork *Fog Sculpture #94925: Foggy Wake in a Desert: An Ecosphere* (1976). The fog installation still operates daily in the desert climate of the sculpture garden at Australia's National Gallery in Canberra, the same city where Frankovich conceived *AQI2020* over forty years later. A water-based fog produced by engineered spray-mechanisms bathes a garden of native trees and shrubs that conceal a small lake emplaced with mossy stones. Nakaya carefully attended to the atmospheric microclimate, including the amount of heat stones produce and the movement of bodies that causes the fog to hover or disperse in prevailing winds or subtle changes in the breeze. An animist sense of the interaction between atmosphere, water and living biota pervades the garden. When I visited this place in dry summer heat, a crimson rosella bird was bathing in the spray of one of the fog-release nozzles, an other-than-human beneficiary of the artwork.<sup>10</sup> While Nakaya's fog diffuses in the atmosphere of the garden, in Frankovich's *AQI2020* smoke collects and engulfs the performers in the confines of a glowing yellow acrylic box.

## OPEN DYNAMICS IN ENCLOSED SPACES

The open dynamics in 1960s auto-creative and meteorological art presage the confluence of images in Akomfrah's multi-screen film *The Elephant in the Room – Four Nocturnes*. The mobile audience at the Venice Biennale encounter a non-linear narrative drawn from archival and nature documentary scenes, including migrating elephants, intercut with directed performers in a desert-scape. Architect David Adjaye designed the "Ghana Freedom" pavilion to house the work of six artists from different generations. The rooms are elliptical, in reference to the earth houses built in the villages such as Sirigu in Ghana. The spaces share fragile neighbouring walls like Sloterdijk's abutting "foams." Akomfrah's screens are set in a shallow curve in darkness to enclose vast desert, sea and cloudscapes, thus heightening our sensitivity to the atmosphere.

Enclosure is also a device in Frankovich's *AQI2020* in which the six live performers are subsumed in a cube full of manufactured "smoke" along with an assemblage of objects including a lifeboat, water bottles and fire-retardant blankets. The New Zealand-based performers, some dancers, some non-professionals of different ages were directed remotely by Frankovich in Australia while the Covid-19 pandemic sealed borders between nations. With assistant choreographer Zahra Killeen-Chance on site in Auckland, the performers rehearsed choreographic "loops" that they later performed for five hours daily for over two weeks in Auckland Art Gallery. The choreographed actions were based on highly-circulated media images and statements from news reports about the Australian bush fires, including a tweeted image of inhabitants evacuated to Bateman's Bay awaiting rescue by life boat.<sup>11</sup> The performers moved slowly but constantly, sometimes coalescing into multi-bodied *tableaux vivants*. One gesture mimicked a fire fighter's rejection of the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's handshake. Another assemblage of bodies turned survival blankets into hoses as the performers roped themselves together. In an affecting movement, the performers collectively swayed side to side like a roiling sea. The audience seemed isolated from the performers' bubble, unable to make contact, yet on approach one performer suddenly changed speed and held a newspaper report about the fires against the pane.

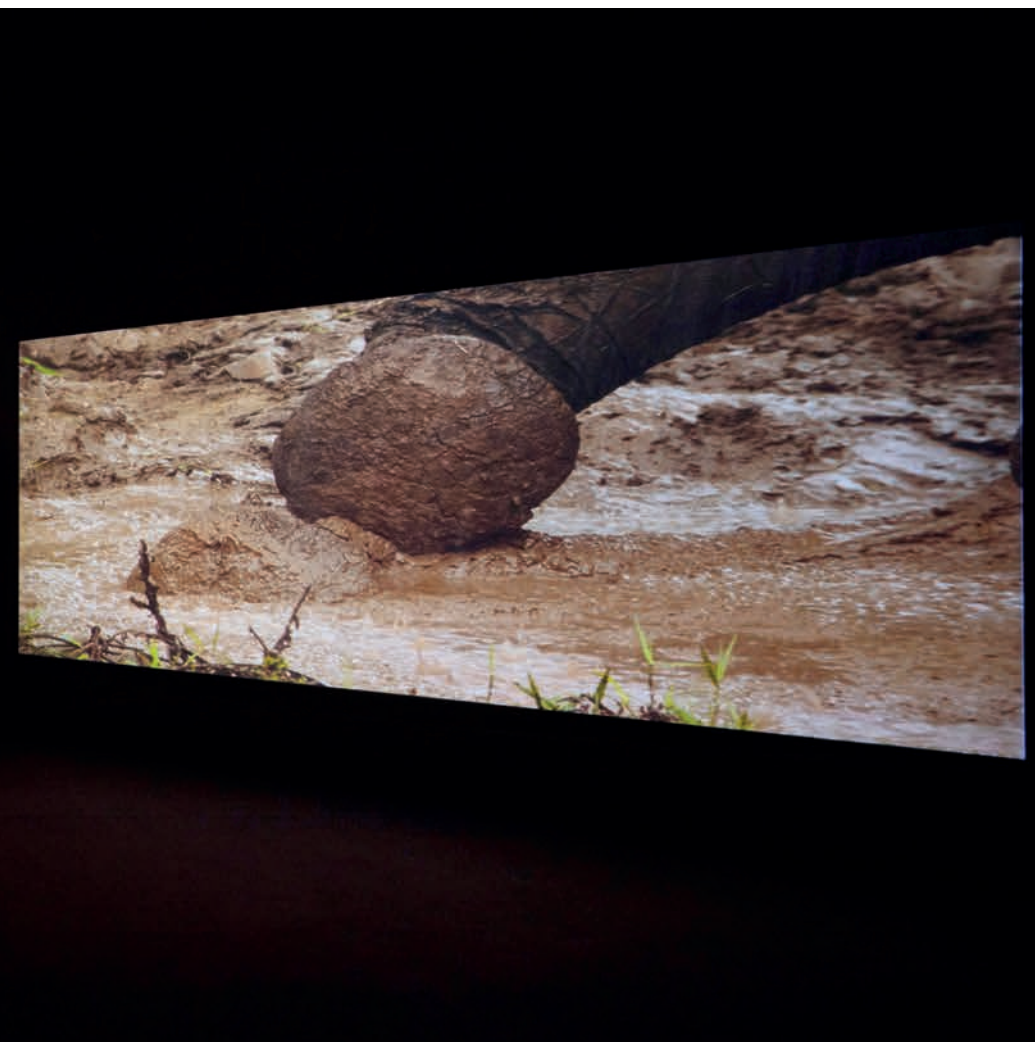






**John Akomfrah**, *Four Nocturnes*, 2019. Stills of the three channel HD colour video installation, 7.1 sound. Courtesy of Smoking Dogs Films and Lisson Gallery. © Smoking Dogs Films.





**John Akomfrah**, Installation view of *Four Nocturnes*, "Ghana Freedom", curated by Nana Oforiatta Ayim and designed by David Adjaye, Ghana Pavilion, 58th Venice Biennale, 2019. Courtesy Bolton & Quinn and Lisson Gallery. © Smoking Dogs Films.

## MIGRANTHOOD: HUMAN AND NONHUMAN

The climate migrant is a haunting twenty-first century figure, who flees from fire, drought, flood, sea-level rise and the conflicts that result from anthropogenic climate disruption. Akomfrah and Frankovich address simultaneous human and animal migrations in different hemispheres. Much of Akomfrah's *Four Nocturnes* tells a converging story of human and elephant exodus in West Africa. He uses the familiar object of a red and blue plaid zip up tote-bag in several of his multi-screen installations as a trope for a migrant. Interspersed with these travellers we see "transfrontier elephants" migrating in families across West Africa, their ranges divided by roads, railways and settlements into isolated fragments. Dense human populations surround their habitat, and climate warming amplifies this threat, so their long-term survival depends on linking forest reserves in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire through elephant corridors. While the journeying people and elephants in a desert landscape at first seem to be separated, at one point in Akomfrah's narrative they come starkly together. Elephant heads on human bodies jolt the two species together in a spiritual and biophysical amalgam.

Frankovich also pays homage to animal victims of the Australian fires. One live performer in *AQI2020* embodies the part of a rescued koala, fed by a human caregiver from a water bottle, an arm stroked tenderly in inter-species reassurance. The precarious wait for rescue boats on smoke-filled beaches recalls Christian Parenti's phrase, "the politics of the armed lifeboat" in which he predicts authoritarian forces in developed countries will keep climate refugees at bay while protecting their own resources, by "arming, excluding, forgetting..."<sup>12</sup> The Australian government sends many of the asylum-seekers who arrive by boat from South-East Asia to detention islands, yet these "coal fires" have now turned Australian citizens themselves into climate refugees. This is the catastrophic result of Australia's free-market sanctioning of carbon emissions from coal mining to the detriment of present and future life-worlds. Ghana, on the other hand, hosts the largest refugee population in the West African sub-region, and almost half of Accra's population are migrants. Akomfrah describes the conditions of "migranthood" as a precarious navigation of "the corridors of uncertainty," where the destructive extremes of weather converge with humanitarian conflict and religious extremism often results in persecution and death.

Frankovich's live assemblage of performers in *AQI2020* resonates with Akomfrah's grouping of performers of differing ages and genders across the desert sands. Both artworks slowly form collective images that are held just long enough to leave an impression before dissolving into movement. They sensorially lure us through successive layering of images and sounds—a perceptual overload at times. Akomfrah's montage weaves traumatic archival footage of persecution and slaughter of humans and elephants alike under colonial rule, with more joyous imagery. In an uplifting scene cavorting elephants swim in water, their trunks and massive limbs suddenly weightless. Another vignette celebrates Ghana's triumph in 1957 when Kwame Nkrumah, a Ghanaian politician and revolutionary advocate of pan-Africanism, became the first president in the year of Akomfrah's birth. While Akomfrah has lived in Britain since he was four years old, his experiential sequences reflect oral creation stories, such as the Ashante cosmology where agential forces of weather, water bodies, mountains and forests are central. Of natural phenomena, Akomfrah asserts: "I'm interested in them not because they help us. I'm interested in them in their own right."<sup>13</sup>

## REMEMBERING THROUGH THE SENSES

The first part of Akomfrah's title "The Elephant in the Room" is a familiar metaphorical idiom, pointing to the neglect of lives outside the Anglosphere and the other-than-human. We know that our fossil fuel, plastic and farming industries are causing the mass extinction of many species. Familiar images and gestures arranged in new amalgams allow us to see and feel anew from an unlikely axis. Akomfrah refers to an unmasking of what is already in full view. In a highly mediated world, the artist's task is no longer consciousness-raising about the steady decline and displacement of human and animal lives, but rather to unsettle the interment of our shared plight through public acts of remembrance.

Through Akomfrah and Frankovich's artworks we recollect searing experiences of weather extremes through our senses. Both artists create immersive spaces of perceptual encounters with other species and the elements: the dryness of deserts, the choking smoke of fires, the fragility of elephants transmuted through performing bodies. The dynamic environments of Haacke, Medalla and Nakaya also coax out new weathers, transforming matter to foreground our climate envelope. Remembrance, after Arendt,<sup>14</sup> is a vital mode of thought to resist the rapid relegation of catastrophic events to the recent past, even as we are in the midst of ongoing crisis. Art creates rare moments of sensorial knowing, of spatial enclosures to remember our multi-species neighbours as we struggle to act on the mutating climate.

1. I was close to New Zealand's worst wild fire in forty years at Lake Ohau in October 2020, just before I encountered Frankovich's artwork *AQI2020*. See Eric Frykberg, "Lake Ohau fire: Former firefighter says he warned DOC for years over potential blaze," *RNZ*, October 9, 2020. [Online]: [bit.ly/2LMYWS2](https://bit.ly/2LMYWS2).
2. By January 7, 2020, the smoke from the Australian fires of late 2019-2020 had moved approximately 11,000 kilometres across the South Pacific Ocean to Chile and Argentina. 400 megatonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions were reported. I witnessed yellow skies in Aotearoa, New Zealand. See Claudia Baldwin & Helen Ross, "Beyond a tragic fire season: a window of opportunity to address climate change?," *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2020: 1-5.
3. John Akomfrah in conversation with Elvira Dyangani Ose, Artes Mundi 7, National Museum Cardiff, British Council, 2019. [Online]: [bit.ly/2MWLGLo](https://bit.ly/2MWLGLo).
4. Alicia Frankovich, interviewed by Auckland Art Gallery senior curator Natasha Conland, Auckland Art Gallery video materials, December 2020. Several details are also drawn from a conversation with Christina Houghton, a live performer in *AQI2020*.
5. Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 108.
6. Jack Burnham and Hans Haacke, *Hans Haacke: Wind and Water Sculpture* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1967).
7. Hans Haacke, "Condensation Cube," *Leonardo*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2003: 265.
8. Eleven issues of *Signals* appeared between August of 1964 and March of 1966. See John A. Tyson, "Signals Crossing Borders: Cybernetic Words and Images and 1960s Avant-Garde Art," *Interface*, no. 38, 2017: 65-103. [Online]: [bit.ly/3pkHgeh](https://bit.ly/3pkHgeh).
9. Peter Sloterdijk, translated by Julie Di Filippo, "Foam City," Excerpted from *Sphären III*, *Log*, no. 9, Winter/Spring 2007: 64.
10. Nakaya also worked with performers to develop the work *Opal Loop/Cloud Installation #72503* (1980) with the Trisha Brown Dance Company, inviting interaction with fog as a co-performer.
11. See "Evacuation at the beach, Bateman's Bay," an image first posted on Twitter by Alastair Prior. While Australia burned, Prime Minister Morrison was infamously holidaying with his family in Hawaii. [Online]: [ab.co/2ZgsH0A](https://ab.co/2ZgsH0A).
12. Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* (New York: Nation books, 2011).
13. "John Akomfrah in Conversation with Zoé Whitley," *Frieze*, October 13, 2020. [Online]: [bit.ly/3ajNvuK](https://bit.ly/3ajNvuK).
14. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Penguin: London and New York, 2006 [1961]), 5-6.

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**Fujiko Nakaya**, *Foggy wake in a desert: An ecosphere*, 1982. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, initial version purchased in 1977. © Fujiko Nakaya.