

Islands, climate change, and young people's artistic explorations of resilient place

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This world is one of islands—43 island nation-states, many hundreds of island jurisdictions, many thousands of smaller islets and rocky outcrops. In a warming world, island topography matters—here are lands completely surrounded by water and smaller than continents. In a warming world, the topological relations of islands also matter. In their apparent isolation islands function as refugia for unique species. Even so, isolation does not preclude connection, and in their connectedness islands also give effect to splendid variability—take Darwin's finches, for example.

Not surprisingly then, islands are often encapsulated by the (contested) idea of vulnerability—for example, in terms of dependence on limited natural resources or disadvantaged terms of trade and reliance on outside authorities. On islands scale becomes manageable and their relative smallness of size makes them ideal sites in which to test the local effects of global changeⁱ. That such testing has too often reduced islanders to the status of lab rats or canaries is a matter on which I do not dwell but feel compelled to note in passingⁱⁱ.

Submerged, islands afford no protection.

Carol Farbotko's work on Tuvalu is telling in this regard. Farbotko uses the neologism the *islograph* to describe "shared, non-static imaginations of islands, mediated through words, images and symbols". In her work on Tuvalu, Farbotko observes "In a significant discursive moment in which climate change is being defined ... as a global environmental crisis, Tuvalu is taking on new meanings that command documentation and critical analysis. Such meanings are tied to an extant and remarkably strong presence of islands in Western discourses". Farbotko argues that there are two key characteristics of Western islographs. "First, islands are *paradoxical spaces* and second,

islands are *imaginative geographies*, mechanisms of relational identity construction that paradoxically function as mirrors of the self and a means of identity construction in relation to distant and different others”.

One of the ways in which it is possible to engage with people is to consider their sense of identity in place and their mobilities between places in terms of perceptions, and art enables that expression. In addition, environmental art—and more specifically, climate change art—may be a profoundly important vehicle by which to engage and enable. In this regard, the work of New Zealand artist Janine Randerson is noteworthy. Writing in *Leonardo* in 2007, Randerson describes her engagements with climate change and draws on the work of Herbert Marcuse. For Marcuse, radical transformations of our relationships with nature are integral to radical transformations of society, and he sees the inner and outer worlds as integrated, suggesting that “sensation is the process that binds us materially and socially” to that worldⁱⁱⁱ

The sensory world is also captured in Jill Orr’s work, *Southern Cross*, a signature piece at an international art and climate change exhibition and symposium called *Heat*, which premiered in Melbourne in 2008. For curator Linda Williams, the exhibition in *toto* exemplified how the arts are critically important in cultural translations of scientific knowledge and in radical transformations of our relationships with nature.

Transformation also of our relationship with space, place, and each other, and I see resilience as one such domain of cultural translation: a domain often positioned as antidote to the putative vulnerability constituted around both climate change and islands.

Neil Adger and his colleagues have suggested that “Resilience reflects the degree to which a complex adaptive system is capable of self-organization ... and the degree to which the system can build capacity for learning and adaptation”^{iv}. I take it as read that resilience is a contested means by which to understand and adapt to change. Certainly, in island scholarship, the term is much debated given that climate change and associated sea-level rise will affect the face of places, borders, and lives. Nonetheless, it is generally accepted among island scholars and policy makers in island places that resilience is enmeshed with the psychological and the transformational, and that it is

critical for empowerment among those who are marked—or who mark themselves—as vulnerable to cultural upheaval, broadscale habitat loss, or full displacement.

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My choice to engage in studying such matters was not simply coincident with either my residency on an island or with Tasmania’s status as an area of land surrounded completely by water and smaller than the Australian continent—itsself an archipelago of some 8,222 islands, according to Geoscience Australia. An island scholar, I work in the borderlands between cultural geography and political ecology to coproduce spaces in which people envisage rich and rewarding lives informed by ecological principles. Ecology, of course, is from the Greek word *oikos* meaning house or household. Earth is where we live, our home. For 550 million island peoples—10 per cent of the global population—that address is likely compromised by projections of sea-level rise at the coastline, among other influences. In common with continental areas, such changes on islands include warming alpine zones, warming oceans, species migration and depletion.

Such perturbations require that we ask how to govern? How to solve problems? How to stay resilient? For me it is imperative to ensure that from the challenges of climate change come opportunities for conversations, engagements and actions that galvanize, cheer and empower. For me, these conversations must include young islanders; indeed, young people in any location. In this regard, most recently I have been interested in research by Hopkins and Alexander reported in the geographical journal *Area* in 2010. Their research aims to “mainstream young people’s geographies into ... political geography in particular ... [and to] consider the ways in which young people are implicated within and shaped by political and economic systems”^v. In the same volume, and by reference to residents of the Caribbean, Tracy Skelton makes the point that young people “clearly have a place in participation and engagement with discourses and taking action designed to change life situations (political, economic, social and cultural practices)”^{vi} and are not political subjects-in-waiting. Let me ground this discussion now with reference to real engagements with young islanders in Tasmania.

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Woodbridge is a small coastal village 30 minutes south of the capital city, Hobart. There, at a week-long workshop in July 2010 on climate change, islands and resilience, a ten-year old from the local school wrote the following.

Trees cut down
Turned to paper and planks
Fish caught
Then wasted.
Forests cleared
For cities to be built.
Oil mined
To be used on cars that pollute.
Global Warming.

Aiden is one among nearly 100 young Tasmanians who have brought colour and life to an idea born of a most rewarding collaboration among academics, artists and writers, community cultural development workers, and educators. Known as *Fresh! A Map of a Dream of the Future*, the project had as its central purpose authentic and respectful engagement with young islanders, inviting them to explore the possibilities for resilience in the face of a future whose climate has changed. It was one of a number of partnerships associated with a larger program known as Webbing the Islands which, by the end of the United Nations Decade for Sustainable Development (2004-14), we hope will be internationally recognised as the premier creativity-based education program focused on the challenges and opportunities faced by island peoples.

Fresh! gained momentum in 2006, first as a conversation about a children's art festival with Tasmanian-based theatre director, Neil Cameron, and then in 2008 with Angela Barrington from Tasmanian Regional Arts, with whom was crafted a successful joint grant application to the Tasmanian Government through Arts Tasmania. *Fresh!* was then endorsed by UNESCO's Australia Commission and provided with additional funding from an anonymous donor; by Arts Tasmania; the Australian Government's Regional Arts Program; and the Tasmanian Climate Change Office. Led by me and managed by Paul Jenkins and colleagues at Tasmanian Regional Arts, we were assisted by an interdisciplinary project advisory group drawn from across Tasmania, including King Island. With their aid, *Fresh!* was launched in March 2009 with a public forum led by Tasmanian science and climate writer, Peter Boyer, and involving new media artist Nic Low, Green Cross ambassador Kristin Warr, and community cultural development

advocate Anna Pafitis. At that event, we tested various ideas on how to involve young islanders in what became a complex and ambitious project.

Over the intervening period to August 2010 myself, Nic Low , educational coordinators Josie Hurst and Kate McDonald; , writer Heidi Douglas and graphic designer Nadine Kessler developed an education kit that was sent to every Tasmanian primary school, and used in a series of workshops in select schools and regional galleries. Work with participating students informed the creation of a virtual world and arts installation created by Nic Low and featured at the *Junction 2010* national regional arts conference in Launceston (Plates 1a, b and c).

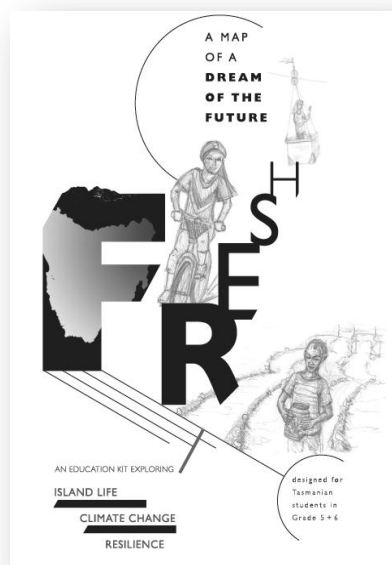




Plate 1a – Fresh! Educational Kit

Plate 1b – Young islanders working on Fresh! ideas

Plate 1c – A Map of a Dream of the Future – Nic Low, artist

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There is no doubt that our collective engagement in *Fresh!* was challenging. Simultaneously, we garnered number of insights that may interest those for whom (and for any number of reasons) islands are meaningful spaces.

First, place-based identity both constitutes and is constituted by environments and spatial relations. In this case, young Tasmanians have a sense of who they are and who they might need to be that is influenced by their understanding that environments will change, and that choices (their own and others) will influence how they live in the future.

Second, place-based identity is not static; it is performed in relation to human and non-human others. We were really intrigued by the empathy that the young people felt towards migrants, for example, despite divisive national debate about boat people. We were also very interested in young islanders' understanding of how things in nature are linked. They understood the connections among cars, pollution and climate change, or among drought, water supply and food security; and they had inventive and generally optimistic approaches to these dilemmas. 'We can solve this' seemed to be the overwhelming feeling and spirit. Such resilience and energy might better be valued if we took Tracey Skelton's advice, noted above, and engaged with young people not as

political subjects-in-waiting but as having a role *now* in determining how we take action designed to change life situations.

Third, it is apparent to me that young Tasmanians do see islands as *paradoxical and imaginative geographies*, even if they might not express this in such terms. Recalling my earlier comments about Herbert Marcuse and his views on how radically transforming our relationships with nature is integral to radically transforming society, the writing and art generated by young Tasmanians working on *Fresh!* suggests that artistic expression helped them understand complex socio-natural problems and explore their own identities and their relationships with place.

These various insights are at least partly captured by young people's writing and drawing (Plates 2a and 2b).

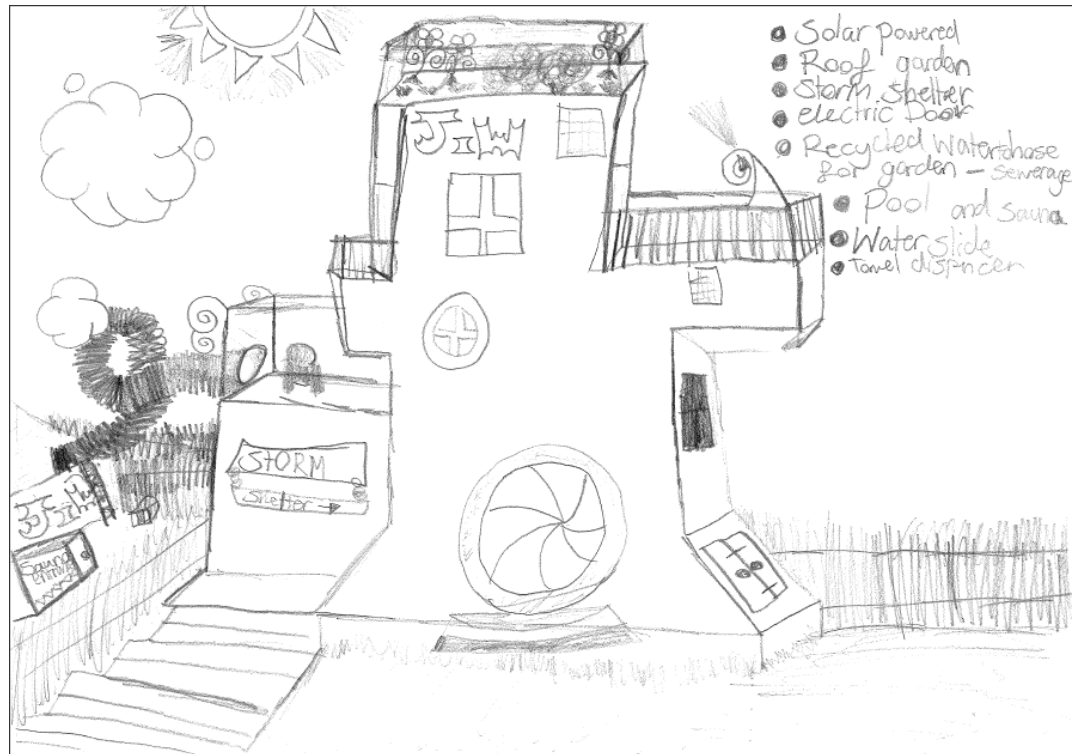
HOPES, FEARS AND DREAMS:
HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT ISLANDS AND CLIMATE CHANGE?

AFTER DOING THESE EXERCISES ABOUT ISLANDS AND CLIMATE CHANGE,
WHAT ARE THREE THINGS YOU HOPE FOR THE FUTURE?

1. That people do things more environmental friendly.
2. I hope we have new technologies to reduce climate change.
3. I hope refugees are happy about coming to new countries and are treated well.

AFTER DOING THESE EXERCISES ABOUT ISLANDS AND CLIMATE CHANGE,
WHAT ARE THREE FEARS YOU HAVE FOR THE FUTURE?

1. That Tasmania will be flooded!!
2. I fear that there will be some new law that will change how we live
3. That refugees will be treated poorly.



Finally if—as Neil Adger and his colleagues would have it—resilience *is* enmeshed with the psychological and the transformational, and if it is critical for empowerment among those who are marked—or who mark themselves—as vulnerable, then it seems to me that a role for island scholars is to more often, and more energetically and more creatively, work with colleagues in the arts community and draw in colleagues from the science community, inviting them to join us in engaging with young islanders to serve their needs into the future.

There remains much to do in trying to understand this project and its effects; more time to mull over the children’s writing and drawings; to reflect on whether we succeeded in a participatory exercise that did not reduce our collaborators to lab rats or canaries but which sought to show respectful engagement with their ideas. In the meantime, we are left with demanding questions. What might it mean to more vigorously inscribe island status into the learnings for island children and young people? Indeed, these questions are also pertinent for continental children whose communities may be subject not only to their own challenges to provide water, food, shelter and housing but also to hosting environmental refugees from islands whose coastlines have retracted, whose water sources have been rendered saline, or whose habitation has been compromised beyond viability. And how might we as islanders contribute to a more nuanced thinking about

islands, one that avoids charges of environmental determinism or reductionism, and one that enables resilience and engaged politics to be part of the conversation with young people?

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ⁱ Streeten, P., 1998, Islands and sustainable development. In: Baldacchino, G. & Greenwood, R. (eds.) *Competing Strategies of Socio-Economic Development for Small Islands*, Institute of Island Studies, Charlottetown, University of Prince Edward Island.

ⁱⁱ I am indebted here to work by Carol Farbotko, reported in her unpublished doctoral dissertation, at the University of Tasmania, entitled *Representing Climate Change Space- Islographs of Tuvalu* (2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ Randerson, J., 2007, 'Between reason and sensation: Antipodean artists and climate change', *Leonardo*, 40, 442–448, at page 443.

^{iv} Adger, W.N., Hughes, T.P., Folke, C., Carpenter, S.R. & Rockström, J., 2005, 'Social-ecological resilience to coastal disasters', *Science*, 309, 1036-1039, at page 1036.

^v Hopkins, P. & Alexander, C., 2010, 'Politics, mobility and nationhood: upscaling young people's geographies: introduction to Special Section', *Area*, 42, 142-144, at page 142.

^{vi} Skelton, T., 2010, 'Taking young people as political actors seriously: opening the borders of political geography', *Area*, 42, 145-151, at page 147.