

# Performing Arts Activating Climate Change Awareness

Hyphenated Thinking in *Common Dreams—Flotation School*

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The complexity of current ecological crises, such as climate change, calls for new modes of knowledge production. *Common Dreams—Flotation School* (2017) by the Portuguese, Brussels-based artist Maria Lucia Cruz Correia is a construction site and a pedagogical prototype that challenges the linear transfer of knowledge in scientific research. In this long-term performance project, the participant-spectator is invited to engage in what I call “hyphenated thinking” in an art-science-activist worlding, as conceived by Donna Haraway (2016), a thinking in between art, science, and activism. Correia’s *Flotation School* produces a particular modulating kind of knowledge, expanding the transfer of knowledge to a relational imparting of knowledge (Raunig 2013). Activating climate change awareness with the participant-spectator in a very embodied and implicated way, this long-term performance project also moves beyond the moralist practice of ecology movements that are still burdened by an ideal image of “Nature,” cultivating instead practices of “ethical differentiation” (Raunig 2013:59).

## Impossible Climate Change Whodunit

To write a climate change whodunit is an impossible assignment. The ecological disaster of climate change does not follow a neat logic of crime and punishment. The producers of the climate disaster are not as easily and unambiguously traced and categorized as was the case with, for example, the ocean incineration in the 1980s. In the summer of 1987, Greenpeace could locate the pollution activities on the incinerator ships and could blame specific entities for burning large amounts of waste at sea. Militant activists chained themselves to the chimneys of the furnaces and successfully prevented what they call the “polluting, nature-unfriendly entities” from proceeding with their activities. In the end, and under public pressure of what these same activists refer to as the “caring, nature-friendly entities,” the Spanish government revoked a permit allowing the ship to burn its cargo off the northern coast of Spain. The activist protest was considered a huge success.

But where to start when dealing with the ecological disaster of climate change? It is impossible to delineate a polluting “they” from a climate-friendly “us,” the ecologically aware trying to save the planet. The “we” of climate activists also belong to “them,” those who are to blame. There are numerous, interconnected producers of the disaster. In the Climate Science Special Report (CSSR) of November 2017, the whole species of *Homo sapiens* is considered the dominant cause of climate change.

Performance scholar Una Chaudhuri similarly observed that the logic of climate change is a very complex one, having no clear spatial boundaries and not even a spatial logic. It is dependent on numerous choices in many different parts of the world simultaneously (Chaudhuri 2013). Those who are “to blame” therefore take on the condition of “tangled beings, forming rhizomes and networks” (Latour 2004:24). Identifying the producers of the ecological disaster and formulating solutions via causal deduction is no longer possible, as all human beings are in a way implicated. Solutions are hence undecidable from one perspective. Pushing the logic of crime and punishment to its extreme limits, Bruce McConachie puts it rather cynically when he writes that “probably the best way to save nature would be to kill off humanity” (2012:92). How can art activate climate change awareness, one wonders then, beyond the logic of crime and punishment, without ending up in a nihilist deadlock?

Correia’s *Common Dreams—Flotation School* is a pedagogical construction site where new modes of knowledge production tackle the complexity of the current ecological crisis of climate change. This means reinventing the ethos of mastery at work in positivist and observational-empirical knowledge production.

### *Flotation School* as Continuous Construction Site

Elsewhere, I have written about Latour’s understanding of nature as discursively constructed and fabricated by the “Modern Constitution” (Stalpaert 2018). In her study on the politics of epistemic location in ecological thinking, philosopher Lorraine Code similarly observes the obsessive need for control and the “ethos of mastery” in positivist-empiricist epistemologies (2006:48). Positivist knowledge, she says, is gathered along a “narrow path of linear connections” (48). In my view, this linear transfer of knowledge is incompatible with the rhizomatic constellation

*Figure 1. (previous page) Students from the MEDS Network building the raft for the first edition of the Common Dreams—Flotation School in Ghent (2017). (Photo © Maria Lucia Cruz Correia)*

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Figure 2. MEDS Network students develop the raft for the first edition of the Common Dreams–Flotation School in Ghent (2017). (Photo © Maria Lucia Cruz Correia)

and the transgenerational time scales of climate change. Besides, it generates very anthropocentric thinking, as monologic knowledge claims universal validity to secure “a rationalist determination over nature by humans” (Code 2006:104).

In *Flotation School* Correia cultivates another kind of knowledge production. Since 2017, several survival climate schools have been erected in the context of her long-term performance project, which she herself prefers to call “a fabulation of an environmental social service” (Correia 2022). Several “islands” have been constructed with different partners and on different territories, housing “a mobile prototype” of a survival climate school (Correia n.d.). It is mobile, as the school is swiftly adaptable. It can travel to other cities and can easily adjust to other collaborative alliances with local universities, art institutions, and sustainable organizations. It is a prototype, as the survival climate school deliberately remains an early sample and its productivity is rather limited—as far as measurable output and impact is concerned. *Flotation School* is too situative, too delicate, and too speculative to ever be considered for mass production.

One could say that *Flotation School* is a continuous construction site and has no intention or desire to become a pedagogical institution. The performance project is an ongoing, traveling survival climate school, but the participant-spectators start from scratch in every new location where Correia is residing. In fact, the island is literally constructed from material found in the neighborhood, with local collaborators, and together with the participant-spectators. In every edition of the school, the construction site evolves differently, depending on the particular location and collaboration. It can take the form of a floating raft in a harbor, or on a river (Ghent, 2017), or on a lake (Geneva, 2020); in a tent in the forest (Geneva, 2020); or it simply can take the form of interventions in a public space (Brussels, 2020).

Elise Mensaert designed the island for the first edition in Ghent, while the raft was built by young students of the MEDS Network (Meeting of Design Students). Mensaert’s knowledge and





Figure 3. The raft as a social object and meeting place at the first edition of the Common Dreams–Flotation School in Ghent (2017). (Photo © Maria Lucia Cruz Correia)

skills as a designer were aligned with the experience and design practices of the MEDS Network, a nonprofit organization and international network where young professionals and students from diverse design backgrounds promote interdisciplinary and cross-border collaboration in design.

The Design Workshop of MEDS that took place in Ghent in 2017 focused on the concept of urban haven for the design of the Ghent *Flotation School*. This particular starting point attracted Ghent local collaborators such as DOK (a creative space), Jonge Dokken (representing the community of boat inhabitants), Buurderij (a local network of farmers and consumers), Thuishaven (a local service center), Noah (an event space on the water), BOOOT and DOKano (two recreational boating companies)—each having their particular stake in the neighborhood of the river Lys, the river Scheldt, and the harbor of Ghent. Considering the history of shipping, the harbor, and textiles, the stakeholders’ interests range from heritage matters, to gentrification and local housing. DOKano, for example, developed their Clean Water Project: they lend out free canoes in exchange for a bucket of floating garbage. Jonge Dokken, on the other hand, represents the interests of the boat inhabitants in the area. Eventually, the raft became a meeting place for the boat community, who were never given a space by the city of Ghent. It became a shared “social object” (Correia 2022).

Collaborating with the different stakeholders in the area, *Flotation School* fostered what Code would call an ongoing and “attentive concentration” on “local particulars” (2006:223). Being infused with the situative knowledge of the particular area, *Flotation School* is also a construction site in a figurative sense, in a way that it attributes qualities of undecidedness to a particular rendering of space:

When you are guided to any construction site you are experiencing the troubling and exhilarating feeling that things *could be different*, or at least that they could still fail—a feeling never so deep when faced with the final product, no matter how beautiful or impressive it may be. (Latour 2005:89)

*Flotation School* does not consider space as something that is given, but as something that is negotiated and permanently contested. Obviously, the involved local collaborators all had different stakes in the continuously evolving gentrification area. Structuring templates existed in this construction site, but “movements and displacements come first” (204).

Translating this notion of space as a construction site to the realm of site-specific performance also reshuffles the function of interactive theatre as “a complex entanglement of interactions” (Latour 2005:65). Correia does not present herself as the director or main performer interacting with the participant-spectators; she calls herself the founder and artistic coordinator of *Common Dreams—Flotation School*, but the bulk of the credits go to the collaborators and activators.

### ***Flotation School* as Pedagogical Prototype**

*Flotation School* is a collaborative project—with local institutions of higher education, art institutions, and sustainable organizations—that exceeds the workshop format. For example: the first edition took shape over the course of the academic year 2017/18 and was developed in collaboration with University College Ghent (HoGent) and KASK & Conservatorium, Kunstencentrum VIERNULVIJER vzw, the city of Ghent, and MEDS Network; the third version of *Flotation School* (2020) was developed in collaboration with the Head School of Arts (Haute École d’Art et de Design) in Geneva, Switzerland, in the context of the far° festival des arts vivants Nyon; and the sixth edition was developed with LEAST and the College Sismondi in Geneva (2022).

In all editions, *Flotation School* is “an attempt to rethink our notions of survival in relation to geopolitical earthly resources” (Correia n.d.). It offers performance workshops to the participant-spectators, with a focus on strategies of survival, addressing climate change in the Anthropocene era. The workshops entail general issues such as Climate Grief, Building an Island, and Crafting at Dusk. All questions tackled are problem-driven and situative or specific to the context.

The *Flotation School* in Ghent sought to cocreate and (re)collect strategies for survival in a floating society. Due to climate challenges such as rising sea levels, heavy rainfall, and extreme flooding, the global population living in coastal areas are at risk. In Bangladesh, homes and livelihoods are destroyed frequently because of cyclones, but an extreme flooding disaster also took place in Belgium in the summer of 2021. Currently, several institutions of higher education are investigating the potential of resilient floating homes that would enable families to survive in the aftermath of extreme flooding while producing food, water, and energy, and also provide sustainable ways to make a living during a flood.

The participant-spectators camp on the floating island for 12 hours to tackle related research questions. They are asked to bring food that would last on an island for a long time and that they can share with others. They can bring along water for one day, and one item that they would take from their home if there were a catastrophe, and present it during the workshop as survival gear equipment: a fishing gear, a knife, a mug, pen and notebook, a raincoat... During the Crafting at Dusk workshop led by curator and (performing) artist Ingrid Vranken, the participant-spectators survive during the course of time spent on the water and have an experience close to what life could be as a floating society.

If the time is now, are you ready? How will you build your home? What would be the economic, social and political outcomes of a floating society? What would be the values for the community? What would bring people together? A fire, a story, a source of drinkable water, a fish, a way to produce energy [...] How to recover archaic knowledge? Who would you have on your island? What would be the necessary skills, props and devises? How do we experience time? What stories will we leave for the future generations? How to create a shared intergenerational knowledge? (Common Dreams: Flotation School 2017)

The *Flotation School*—continuously under construction—is in that sense also a pedagogical prototype that challenges any utilitarian use of knowledge production. The survival kit, the skills



desertion as instituent practice” (27). Desertion here does not refer to military desertion, or to inner withdrawal and retreat from the world, but to a defection from the dead-end situation of the institutional practice of productive knowledge transfer.

Second, the collaborative alliance at work in *Flotation School* creates a modulating university in the sense that knowledge production *outside* the university college is reinvented, “founding alternative formations of knowledge production” (Raunig 2013:28). There is a “complicity between the inside and the outside of an institution” (53). The collaboration of university institutions with sustainable organizations, local stakeholders, and the city of Ghent generates “local and situative knowledge” (28), but also knowledge that primarily concerns matters of self-formation and self-control in times of crisis. It is “a desertion as instituent practice” that creates a (little) more future-proof world by means of an interdisciplinary gathering. After all, as Raunig claims, “Desertion does not mean praise for fleeing from the world, but rather creating worlds” (53).

## Interdisciplinary Art-Science-Activist Worlding

Several philosophers developed alternatives for the production of knowledge in scientific research. Haraway, for example, proposes the vital model of “science art worldings” (2016:64).<sup>2</sup> This demands a scientific inquiry into our becoming *with* the world rather than our being *in* and in control *of* the world. It is an attitude that defies any form of human exceptionalism and entitlement. Building on Haraway’s vital model of art-science-activist worlding, I propose my own concept of hyphenated thinking. In this hyphenated thinking, knowledge is not situated in one individual or in one privileged center, but resurges from the hyphens in-between thinking entities, with thoughts evolving in perpetual modulation. A relational imparting of knowledge is at stake, “moving along a relationship (or multiple posited relationship) without fixing the production of knowledge in a firm center” (Raunig 2013:58). Not moral conduct, but “ethical differentiation” is at stake here “as a movement between various positions. These positions [...] are not at all the same, but [...] they are in the same boat with all their differentness, in the same situation, sharing specific preconditions” (59). It is “insinuating a mode of investigation, which leads people to take care of themselves” (59).

Here knowledge is no longer embodied in a static center, captive, brought to a standstill. Knowledge production lies precisely in the movement from the inquirer to those who are guided by the inquiry to exercise self-care, to give account of the coherence between rational discourse and manner of living. (59)

In his *Politics of Nature*, Latour argues that the idea of “Nature” as a comprehensive unity that is part of reality, lying in a dual relation with culture, is “but *one* idea about nature, an idea that is fabricated by the Modern Constitution” (2005:254). He rejects the dependence on matters of fact in “mononaturalism” because this kind of ecological thinking exhausts “the diversity of opinions, thanks to the unified certainty of the facts of nature” (2004:130). He prefers operationalizing “matters of concern” above consolidating matters of fact (2005:114). Latour suggests a “progressive composition of one common world” (254). In his terms, political ecology must *negotiate with* the ever-ongoing constitution or composition of the world as nature-culture.

This is exactly what the first part of the title of Correia’s performance promises to do: to progressively compose *Common Dreams* for the (precarious) future on a shared island, negotiating strategies of survival, sustainability, climate adaptation, climate grief, and loss of landscapes. The approach is a transdisciplinary collaborative process in dialogue with art students and/or with experts from the fields of political ecology, sustainability, economy, agriculture, holism, activism, science, and architecture (Correia n.d.). Rather than finding solutions to climate change problems, the workshop

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2. Haraway talks about “science art worldings” as “an alternative to the experimental laboratory” (2016:64) and about “art science worldings” as “sympoietic practices” (67), swapping places between art and science (69). “Science art activist worldings” (71, 76) are “science art worldings for staying with the trouble” (71).



performances in *Common Dreams—Flotation School* truly became what Haraway coined “art science activist worldings.” Haraway introduces this term in different ways throughout her book *Staying with the Trouble*. Occasionally, she uses the concept “art-science-activist worldings” with hyphens (79). I particularly prefer the hyphenated term, as it indicates that these worldings do not refer to an interdisciplinary scientific methodology. It requires a resurgence of knowledge in relationality, in tentacular thinking. Knowledge is no longer produced in one of the fields of the arts, or science, or activism, with the other field functioning as an auxiliary science. It is in the hyphens that knowledge resurges, activating climate change awareness and entangled self-care.

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