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WATER ICE VAPOUR

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curated by John Gillett

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A Drop in the Ocean

digital photographs 2006-07

Photographs of some of the tens of the thousands of water bottles that are swirling around in the North Sea. Plastic bottles are an indicator for other types of litter and pollution, much of which is invisible beneath the surface.

Whilst, clean safe water means life or death for tens of millions of people, for us bottled water is an accessory. In the developed world of today, we choose what we consume and how we consume. The environment of the future will be shaped by how we chose to live our lives.

In the case of bottled water, as well as costing a thousand times more than tap water, it also has many unseen negative impacts. Typically, it is sourced, tested, purified, bottled, packaged, transported, distributed, refrigerated and retailed, before purchase, all of which consume energy and consequently have impacts on levels of greenhouse gasses. The plastics used to package water are a product of the petrochemical industry. Finally, after a drink of bottled water, we are faced with a dilemma. Is it okay to refill the water bottle? Do we toss the empty out of the car window? Should we send it away to be buried or recycled? Like virtually everything else, plastic water bottles are biodegradable, but only after several hundred years.

All the plastic bottles photographed in this series were found on the shoreline of the East Anglian coast, an area under threat from sea level rise caused by global warming.

Penguin

digital photographs 2008

Penguins are flightless birds that live in the cooler waters of the Southern Hemisphere. They are able to withstand extreme cold because they are very well insulated.

Whilst penguins and other creatures have evolved over millions of years to suit their environment, in recent years mankind has become unique in being able to make the environment respond to him.

It is thought that over 13,000 sq. km of sea ice in the Antarctic Peninsula has been lost over the last 50 years and the process is continuing and accelerating. The habitat of the penguin is under threat. It is likely that melting ice caps will be the largest contributor to worldwide sea level rises in the next decades - endangering human coastal communities.

Meanwhile, some of us maintain personal mini icebergs in our domestic freezers, an inefficient and unnecessary consumption of energy.

Blue Sky Thinking

digital photographs and text 2007-08

At the end of the 1968 film *The Thomas Crown Affair*, Vicki Anderson looks up and sees a vapour trail against a blue sky. It is symbolic. On the plane, Thomas Crown, the handsome and gifted millionaire and criminal genius, is making an elegant escape. She has made the wrong move; he has outsmarted her, and she is left behind with nothing.

In the space of a generation, plane travel has stopped being glamorous and has become mundane. Now we take flight for granted. Plane travel is a major and growing source of greenhouse gas emissions. It is time for a re-think. When we look up and see vapour trails, maybe we should stop wondering where they are going and start wondering why.

Street Level Recycling in China

digital photographs 2007

In 2007, I was awarded a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Travel Fellowship to visit China. My brief was to research recycling, at street level in China's cities.

China is undergoing a period of great transformation; it now manufactures goods for the global marketplace, but it does so at considerable cost. Resources and energy are consumed at a rapid rate and environments are polluted. There is an industrial revolution taking place and millions of people are on the move, abandoning life in the countryside to move into the cities. There is a strong conviction among the Chinese that the current period of economic liberalisation is bringing, or at least will bring, prosperity to all. For many who have recent memories of famine and drought, the environment is not a significant consideration.

Many who move to the cities have little by way of education or contacts, and trading recyclable materials like paper, card and plastic offers them a way to make a living. By our standards, the life of the recyclers is very difficult. For example, in Suzhou, a city on the Yangste river in Jiangsu province, men and women who collect corrugated cardboard will then make a six kilometre round trip to sell their finds to recycling depots for 30 yuan (£2), a day's work. In spite of this hardship, what struck me, time and again, was the good humour and dignity of people whose low income necessitates working seven days a week in all weathers. What I found at street level is that there is a massive amount of recycling, for which the Chinese receive no credit. The neighbourhoods where recyclers are most active tend to be vibrant, full of markets, with people chatting and playing cards on the street. Whist I don't imagine that these people have especially chosen a green way of life, they are pragmatic and independent, and are making the best of their situation.

As we become more concerned about the impact of global warming, it is notable that their way of life is sustainable and has a positive impact on the environment. Paradoxically, as development of new office blocks and apartments replace old low rise neighbourhoods, the recyclers are displaced by richer populations who consume unsustainably large amounts of energy and materials.

Street Level Recycling is a series of digital colour photographs documenting the lives of recyclers in Beijing, Hangzhou, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Suzhou, Tianjin and Xiamen.

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