



Writing the climate

JAKE HOLMES

The Guildhouse Collections Project
Flinders University Art Museum
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Anthropogenic
Relating to, or resulting from the influence of humans.



Bee
pollinators of plants including food crops. Environmental changes due to climate change have a direct impact on bee development.



Coal
The burning of coal is one of the largest contributors to anthropogenic climate change

WRITING THE ABCs FOR A SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTAL FUTURE

After meeting Jake Holmes to discuss his response to the The Guildhouse Collections Project, he will leave from the Art Museum at Flinders to collect his infant from childcare. Following that, he'll meet his partner to watch the film *IT* at the drive-in theatre; they've realised their baby is *gently* rocked to sleep when driven around in the early evening traffic. A night drive ending at the cinema strikes me as a clever way to combine family time with the precious hours parents have to also treat themselves to some entertainment. This is a 'life hack' I quickly relay to my sister-in-law as a possible means of adjusting to early parenthood and the strenuous demands it places on the newly-initiated.

I cannot think of many actions braver than raising children in a political, social and economic climate such as we presently face. To cite Brexit, Trump, the Coalition government, civil war in Syria, apartheid in Palestine, Facebook's threat to democracy, Jeff Bezos's approach to human labour, and the fact U2 still make music is to identify the symptoms of problems facing the world that throw our social, political and economic institutions into disarray.

Yet all pale in comparison to the existential crisis of climate change.¹

At key moments in history, critical theorists – notably Antonio Gramsci² and Nancy Fraser³ – have argued for critical political action to address the global community's apparent listless drift when faced with crisis. This is what Gramsci in the interwar period and Fraser in contemporary times have referred to as *interregnum* – the past is dead or dying but the future is not ready to be born.

Present inaction on climate change at a national and global level is due in large part to repeated failures of the political class to act on the democratic will of citizens. Arguably, inaction has much to do with the fact that action would place constraints on a minority of recalcitrant billionaires seeking unprecedented profits at the expense of a sustainable social, political and environmental future for all. As a result, our leaders – many benefiting from inaction because it keeps them wealthy and powerful too – are intractable to acting to prevent the planet literally burning in the places it should be raining, like the Amazon and Queensland forests.

At present, the past – and the non-solutions offered by most governments – is dead, but the future – one whereby our political institutions become vehicles for democratic action – is not ready to be born. And so as children are brought into a world threatened by irrevocable climate catastrophe, artists like Holmes – with a significant investment in a future that offers hope for their children – become some of our most important voices. Political activism once again finds urgent and timely expression in political art.

For The Guildhouse Collection Project presented in partnership with Flinders University Art Museum (FUAM), Holmes immersed himself in the issues of an earlier time of

interregnum in the world and in Australia. Revisiting the environmental activism art movement of the 1970s and 1980s for inspiration, he sifted through the Australian Political Poster collection housed at FUAM to find earlier political inveighs against the neo-liberal forces entrenching inequality during this period. This body of work echoes through time, reminding us that the political struggle to sustain the environment is not new. However, Holmes' work emerges from this rich legacy to rewrite political poster-based activism to draw our attention to the kinds of impacts only now visible to us after 40 years of unsustainable political-economic transformations forced upon society and the environment.

Much of the work in FUAM's Australian Political Poster collection Holmes refers to foregrounds the voices of those hurt most of all by political and economic decisions made in an area far removed from their impacts. The coincidental dismissal of women's equal treatment to men by white male politicians in government offices and cabinet meetings is highlighted in Progressive Printers Alliance's screenprint *International women's day: women's march for liberation* (1979), a poster half taken up by a nowhere near exhausted list of reasons women demand social, political and economic justice. *Youth homelessness* (1986) by Garage Graphix draws our attention to the social impact of the changing political-economic conditions throughout this era, personified by the included quote. But in other cases, Holmes has been influenced by works that reveal the voices of nature itself. In *No 4 (Franklin protest)* (1983), nature is superimposed over the proposed Franklin dam, contrasting two narratives about the possible future and demonstrating what is possible when dissenting voices – of people and of nature – become a focal point upon which to rally empathy and translate it to political action.

Politically and economically, the post-war years of the 1970s and 1980s reflected the growing hegemony of neo-liberalism: a doctrine claiming that abundance and freedom can only be created by unshackling the animal spirits of capitalist growth from political, social and environmental restraints. But today, it is increasingly obvious that the notion of presenting unfettered capitalist free markets as the only path to economic growth, freedom and abundance has delivered for the environment little more than record temperatures, deforestation and flash floods; and for society record inequality, loss of jobs through de-industrialisation and a festering political alt-right.

Despite instances of victories for the environment, the altering neo-liberal narrative has largely removed economic policy shifts from the scope of critical analysis, much alike the way government inaction on climate change today seems largely immune to the critique of democratic institutions. It is therefore important that Holmes' work focuses on climate change because, as the artist himself recognises, it is at the forefront of concerns for environmentalists today. To this observer, it also represents the cumulative impact of capitalist production's plan for the planet: an environment approaching the point where it can no longer be restored – all so billionaires can add more zeros to the ends of their bank accounts.

JAKE HOLMES

Writing the climate is a new body of work developed from my research into Flinders University Art Museum's Australian Political Poster collection. A large amount of posters addressed environmental concerns, be they water security, nuclear power or deforestation. I was particularly taken by the *Talking Poster Project*, a series of posters created by Garage Graphix for the International Youth Year in 1986. These works feature quotes from interviews with youths affected by various issues. In my opinion the voice of younger generations is frequently overlooked when it comes to issues that require large societal change. Yet these voices are currently the loudest when it comes to calling for action, for example recent international movement of school strikes for climate change.

Writing the climate aims to re-contextualise 1980's environmentalism for our current time. While there are many concerns for today's environmentalists, climate change is at the forefront. I've utilised the alphabet to illustrate some key factors contributing to the increase of climate change and its impact. Fundamentally, the alphabet allows the communication of complicated ideas with just 26 simple symbols. It is central to education and these characters are passed from one generation to another and in my opinion they represent the relationship between older and younger people. In my work each symbol becomes an individual poster which allows the work to be rewritten and recreated to emphasise different voices and perspectives.

For this project, I adopted Garage Graphix's approach by conducting interviews with tertiary, secondary and primary school students. "No one's gonna care about my ATAR when the planet's dying" stemmed from a conversation with a secondary student. Their quote captures the emotional, nihilistic anxiety felt by today's youth towards their uncertain futures. The reference to the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is particularly poignant within the educational context of Flinders University. *Writing the climate* brings together individual posters to simultaneously convey a quote, a slogan, a war cry, whilst also evoking the protest banner as a symbol of change and defiance – a tool to give voice and to be heard.

Biography

South Australian artist Jake Holmes holds a Bachelor of Visual Art and Design (2010) from the Adelaide College of the Arts. He co-founded contemporary art space Tooth and Nail Studio Gallery (2011–2018), where he oversaw operations and the exhibition program.

Holmes has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions across Australia. Notable projects include *Propaganda* with the Australian War Memorial at the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, Victoria (2018), *C'mon Aussie C'mon* Australia-wide poster campaign (2016), and *South Australia Illustrated* with the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide (2012).

Holmes has undertaken several public art commissions in Australia and residences in Darwin, Northern Territory and Rajasthan, India. His work is held in the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; Australian War Memorial, Canberra; Mornington Peninsula Gallery, Victoria; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; and private collections nationally and internationally.

It is in this context that *Writing the climate* focuses on the consequences of the malaise of greed and apathy spread throughout our political and economic institutions despite the global economy and the natural resources that support it are facing devastating collapse. Where Holmes utilises the alphabet to draw the viewer's eye to key aspects of human activity contributing to climate change, a far more complex picture emerges as fact: each letter resembles just one of 26 individual symptoms of an economic system that harvests life from the planet and incinerates it for profit or chokes it in processes of commodification. And in projecting a future built on the continuation of this system, the secondary school student's quote featured by Holmes is metaphor: the alphabet becomes a political-economic system which, rather than offer hope, narrates more readily the hopelessness and despondence school-aged children already experience when envisaging the climate costs they are innocent of producing but will nevertheless be their inherited environmental debt.

In a recent article for *The Outline*, Tom Whyman argued that parenting a child 'is a gamble: one stakes oneself in it, and also the world, and also one's own child. But given how things are, this wager seems necessary if we are to hope to transform our world for the better.'⁴ In *Writing the climate*, Jake Holmes makes this argument in his own unique way. Holmes pours into his art not just his politics, but his belief that a future in which he – and many brave others – have invested must be fought for and won by addressing the complexity of climate change; perhaps hoping his child will be able to assemble the alphabet into a more hopeful message when their time comes to fight for the future.

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¹ Perhaps with the exception of U2's ongoing success.
² GRAMSCI, A. 1971. *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith (eds), London, UK, Lawrence & Wishart.
³ FRASER, N. 2019. *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born*, London, UK, Verso.
⁴ WHYMAN, T. 2019. It is perfectly moral to bring children into a shitty world: We will not defeat climate change by having less of a stake in the future. *The Outline* [Online]. Available: <https://theoutline.com/post/7966/having-babies-climate-change-birthstrikes>.



Helen Printer
Australian (active 1980s)

No 4 (Franklin protest) 1983
screenprint, colour inks on paper
edition 9/20
61.1 x 43.2 cm

Collection of Flinders University Art Museum 2879.006
Gift of the Australian Experimental Art Foundation
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The Guildhouse Collections Project delivered in partnership with Flinders University Art Museum provides extraordinary opportunities for artists to delve into one of the largest and most idiosyncratic university art collections in the nation. Through inviting artists to research, study and collaborate with the Art Museum to create new work, the Collections Project demonstrates the value of creating new and ambitious environments for artists, collections and audiences to coalesce.

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