



PROJECT MUSE®

“This Is a Picture Of...”

Andrew Mark

Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities, Volume 2,
Number 1, Winter 2014, pp. 122-129 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5250/resilience.2.1.011>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/583714>

"This Is a Picture Of . . ."

ANDREW MARK

It's really hard to make people care and listen. Because at a certain point, if your piece of art is just as good as a brochure, then, you should probably just make a brochure.

—Becky Johnson

This is important. My exposure to *The Great Immensity* immediately followed my taking in some of the Fry Street Quartet's collaboration with Dr. Robert Davies, *The Crossroads Project*, at the "Ecomusics and Ecomusicologies 2014" conference in North Carolina. During that weekend, full of nascent academic and artistic investigation into music and environment, an individual quietly whispered to me, "You know, I thought it [the conference] was going to be all about Timothy Morton and ecocriticism and doom. I mean, ecocritics no longer entertain the idea that books will save the planet, if they ever did. This has been a refreshingly optimistic weekend. People here actually believe that music can help. You know, to *do* something." Coming from flat Ontario, I drove to the conference through economically devastated upstate New York toward ecologically reclaimed Pittsburgh to pick up a carpooler. We then viewed West Virginia's wanton resource extraction, framed through my windshield in the heights of autumn leaves on the way down to mountainous Asheville. Driving back, I pondered how ecomusicology might have to grow to handle more cynical ecocritical perspectives, ones that appear deceptively mature. I thought, "The Fry Street Quartet and Davies need coaching from Becky Johnson [quoted above] on the efficacy of political art." Their immaculate performance had oozy HD graphics and digital art, with a kind of PowerPoint Steve Jobs TED Talk-like

delivery and an amazing avant-classical quartet for desperately needed intermissions; ultimately, they offered a rudimentary and humorless introduction to environmental thought. Had I been at a National Science Museum IMAX, a narrated and accompanied silent film? This is important. It was precisely in such a troubled and needy state of mind that I encountered *The Great Immensity* when I got back north.

The Great Immensity musical does appear to know how to preach to the converted. I imagine those involved in the performance do not assume that the musical is free from an ironic, jaded, informed, and knowledgeable gaze. Rather, they make an attempt at presenting old news through an interesting and engaging story, even if it is a bit stretched. They present characters that their most likely audience can relate to or have met elsewhere. The characters seem to be weary academics, intellectuals, environmentalists, artists, researchers, and activists. They spew out complex ecological information at every chance, and with fitting exhaustion. They are tired of imagining that with enough production value, enough exposure, the best technology possible, proper promotion, the right sequence of notes, the correct interpretation of the data, and the correct staging, somehow people will walk away from this musical, or any artwork, as if from a David Suzuki fantasy—his book talks famously included little paper pledge drives for personal impact reductions that would litter empty auditoriums after his departure—and make permanent changes to their environmental practices (or lack thereof). I mean to say, I am sure they would be delighted if people did leave their theater feeling empowered, but I was pleased to find they did not assume this would be the case. The narration does not lay out a nice linear presentation of the history of the planet and its fragile features that sustain us and are now threatened by J-curves; instead, it plops the audience into seemingly asynchronous Ernst Blochian moments, a la *Memento*, rich with information in need of digestion, reflection, and further research.¹ It does not all make sense, and why should it? The work is about how to deal with global environmental climate change, and this problem requires active puzzle-solving skills to piece together the entire story. This approach stands in contrast to conventions of force-feeding a grand arch that ushers the audience to the most logical iteration of anxiety-provoking response: *do* something already! The piece does not preach, thank goodness; it, instead, promotes rumination.

One really must experience the work to begin to make sense of any review; but instead of examining the entire piece, I am going to focus only on the second sequence of the work, the first song, which comprises about two and a half minutes of this two hour musical.

This song appears approximately two minutes into the musical and features a soloist in a simple dress. There is also an unlit and harmonizing team that joins in for the chorus. The piece begins with a mournful cello, a strumming guitar, and a voice that follows a descending chord progression. The title of the number might be “This Is a Picture Of . . .” The lyrical text is simply packed with information (see below), including a species and a geographic term I had to look up. The singer gestures in her singular spotlight with taught hands, almost claws, moving as one might when pleading with an audience. She narrates a series of images that keeps pace with the lyrics. The images are well above her in large, seemingly panoramic dimensions. She states that “this is a picture of a _____” (fill in the blank), but she does not point above her to the image. The lack of explicit direction for the audience from the singer leaves one to wonder where and what she thinks the image is, in relation to the audience. To whom is she speaking about the pictures she is not looking at or seemingly aware of? Are these pictures in her mind? These unanswerable questions are the cracks in the armor of standard environmental pedagogy that the musical exploits in this moment. This is where we might locate an advantage of environmental performance for communicating environmental issues and influencing change. I will return to this point shortly.

The images are projected onto a corrugated tin or iron backdrop that is part of the tall stage. As the song progresses, the singer becomes increasingly distraught, rapidly spitting out her lines. A piano joins in with force around her mention of sharks and ocean gyres, soon taking up and amplifying the guitar’s eight-note soft-loud off-beat pattern that lends a sensation of increasing mechanical speed and frantic disaster until the singer reaches, “Detroit,” almost gasping for breath. Suddenly the singer’s accompanists drop away at this juncture, perhaps emphasizing her profound loss, the emptiness of Detroit, and her inability to begin a new series of cogent observations, gesturing to pictures that march on until the chorus joins her again to close the piece.

Before reading further, take a moment to glance over the lyrics. You are bound to find some of your own memories here.

VERSE:

This is a picture of Staten Island, November 2012.
The water hasn't quite receded yet.
You can't tell where the sea ends and where the land begins,
Pieces of cars, pieces of people's lives lie scattered in the mud.

But already, things are growing here,
Tall invasive grasses, a triage station by a fallen tree,
A sea-soaked teddy bear looks out like a widow
Watching waiting for a ship to return across the sea.

CHORUS:

And the world is wide,
And the world is so small,
And so we ride,

(Soloist)
On our little leaky sinking boat of hope,
Across the hot world to come.

VERSE:

This is a picture of a jellyfish, the *Aurelia aurita*.
This is a nuclear reactor in Sweden.
A swarm of thousands got in the cooling pool.
The plant went to code red.
They've never come this far north before.

And this is a picture of an island sinking down into the sea,
After lasting for 200 million years.
And to catch the world's attention, they hold meetings under water,
And their ministers make votes in scuba gear.
This is a picture of a polar bear, in Churchill, Manitoba,
The polar bear capital of the world.
And this is a shark from a special on the Nature Channel,
And this is a gyre of plastic debris the size of Texas in the Pacific.
There are two of them or seven, we don't know,
But we know that this one exists,
A floating pile of garbage somewhere in the ocean,
And the jellyfish replacing all the sharks,

The polar bears are waiting hungry as
Containerships go by en route to Sweden
To the nuclear reactors where the waters have all opened up
Because the ice is melting, Sahel is drying up,
And Staten Island is full of water.

This is a picture of the Philippines after Haiyan.
This is New Orleans after Katrina.
This is the Great Barrier Reef.
This is the Three Rivers Gorge.

This is my hometown,
Detroit.
They used to build cars here that made the country rich,
With all the oil from . . .
This is a picture of . . .
A picture of . . .
A picture of . . .

CHORUS:

And the world is wide
And the world is so small

It might seem the academic convention of using a quality picture to frame a discussion via PowerPoint should be beyond pedagogical reproach. I much prefer it to a screen with only text if an orator is not very good. Some of my mentors disdain technical accoutrements. I use such devices with the notion that images aid all my students with better information retention and memory recall through associative cybernetics. And yet “This Is a Picture Of . . .” softly mocks me. With a little reflection, I can bring to mind so many instances of individuals putting up a picture, describing the picture for a moment (or not), and somehow assuming that by virtue of the picture, by virtue of whatever sublime capacity it can carry in representing a cause, a devastating image of tar sands exploitation, child labor, or a collage of violence, the mere showing and seeing provides some kind of authentication of a will to change—an assumption that people have done something in their viewing. These images are knowledge, but what are they really? “This is a symbol of . . .” Because show-and-tell does not cut it, folks. I mean, this is what Facebook slactivism is all about, right? Sharing a

bunch of images with a few choice framing words. This is what was so desperate about *The Crossroads Project* for me; even if the stories were rich, the audience never had to question the images as tools, the media as the message. If I never see another humorless Chris Jordan image from his work *Midway* of a dead albatross with plastic innards without some deeper consideration of the image's possibilities, meanings, and becomings, beyond, "See, this is what we've come to, for shame," this life would be better for the absence.² At a Society for Ethnomusicology conference, themed after "sound ecology," I found Jordan's work plastered in the terrible Los Angeles public-transit system, haunting me with statistics turned into aluminum can works of art before I'd have to enter the Wilshire Grand Hotel. These images have become like so many memes. They are even badges of identity: an unquestionable environmental positivism. I love what they do, but I question how we use them. I do not question their importance or efficacy, but I do wonder what we really think these pictures mean about the real world when they are deployed. The nightmare for me is that people keep discovering these images, appear genuinely surprised, and then ask me if I've seen them and essentially go back to business as usual.

But *The Great Immensity*, in its first minutes, repeats this taken-for-granted public-speaking gesture of plastering a white screen with an LCD projection of Microsoft PowerPoint slides, what frequently constitutes a voyeuristic "think piece" presentation of nature's subordination as capturable and consumable to the human eye. *The Great Immensity* does this so rapidly, with increasing speed, that the act reveals its own absurdity. In other words, I applaud how *The Great Immensity* subverts, with a corrugated backdrop, exactly what *The Crossroads Project* attempts in HD realism. "This Is a Picture Of . . ." reinserts human and more-than-human agency and subjectivity into the way these images are used too often as visual facts by Greens. The work does so with humor: "There are two or seven of them, we don't know," and I find myself stifling laughter. I can just see the water-soaked teddy bear looking out the window on Staten Island, morose, and it's funny. The musical pulls this off with the kind of details an informed environmentalist is so conversant with. That the gyre in the Pacific is "the size of Texas" rings so true for me. How many times have I read and heard this fun fact? It's this attention to detail that tells me the playwright feels my pain. What is this fact doing for or to us in conjunction with images of floating sea

trash? If the gyre were the size of Australia, would it matter? Has anyone been to Texas? Is it the size of Texas because Texas has oil? Republicans? What if it were the size of five New Englands?

The Great Immensity is best understood as a necessary step forward in the world of ecoperformance, precisely because it offers a more iterative and reflexive response to the problems of climate change. And looking back, it doesn't tell us what to think: it creates a gap in what can be such a positivist bland story of anthropogenic greenhouse gases, too many cows, the thermohaline circulation pattern, volcanoes, and the albedo effect. By imagining and animating environmentalist archetypes, it demonstrates the unique opportunities that performance offers to reevaluate the modes of environmental information communication. On the one hand, as with any performing art, human skill will always be a prerequisite to achieve a baseline authenticity and appreciation. As with any work of this kind, in measuring success, an audience will rarely pay attention to the message if the delivery by the actors isn't on. I'll leave this debate to the actors: were they "on"? Well, they worked for me. Though there were times at which I felt some characters were unconvincingly distressed, others appeared quite comfortable and believable. The use of technology—including cameras, projection, lighting, and sound, a difficult set of relays—was seamlessly handled and quite effective as an augmentation to the actors. The songs did not pander to a popular sensibility, but they also didn't inspire movement for me, though tragic music rarely does.

Thinking about where I would like to see ecoperformance go generally and what we can learn from *The Great Immensity*, I would like to see greater focus on the details of one object or issue or person's narrative in addition to attempts to take on what is the huge intersectional discourse of climate change and violence. This musical, in a utopian fashion, tries to tie together disparate linkages within the chaos of climate change. The work is a zeppelin really, quite an achievement. We might ask ourselves how we can also foster and dig deep into singular narratives that offer detailed instances of environmental dilemma. If *The Great Immensity* sits at the beginning of larger trends of interest in environment and performance and music, going forward, let's see if we as environmentalists, activists, academics, and artists can produce and catalog a range of attempts to tackle the amorphous challenge of climate change and see what is working for us and why, just as I have attempted to do above with "This Is a Picture Of . . ."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Mark is an ABD PhD candidate with the faculty of environmental studies at York University, where he earned an MA in ethnomusicology. As an active musician who ultimately chose the McGill School of Environment to complete his undergraduate degree, he finds loyalties to environmental thought and performing arts in ecomusicology. His dissertation concerns the importance of music-making for sustaining the rural community of Hornby Island in British Columbia, Canada. Andrew has publications with themes that relate to music and globalization, Gnawa music, mbira music, ecoperformance, ecomusicology, mourning and melancholy in the environmental movement, and podcasting and ecocriticism as well as forthcoming work on North American Zimbabwean music. Andrew is a cofounder of the Society for Ethnomusicology's Ecomusicology Special Interest Group; a board member of the Ecomusicology Newsletter; an editorial collective member of *Undercurrents: The Journal of Critical Environmental Studies*; and a coproducer of *CoHearence*, the podcast series.

NOTES

The epigraph comes from an interview the author had with Becky Johnson, referenced in Andrew Mark, "Refining Uranium: Bob Wiseman's Ecomusicological Puppetry," *Environmental Humanities* 4 (2014): 69–94, <http://environmentalhumanities.org/arch/vol4/4.4.pdf>.

1. Cf. Ernst Bloch, "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics," trans. Mark Ritter, *New German Critique*, no. 11 (1977): 22–38; and Christopher Nolan, *Memento*, dir. Christopher Nolan (Los Angeles CA: Newmarket Films, 2000).

2. Chris Jordan produces astonishing works of art in many media that seek to capture the immensity of human impact on our environment. For example, his drawing "Silent Spring" (2009) includes 183,000 birds on the canvas, the estimated number of daily bird deaths related to agricultural pesticides in the United States. I love his work; I do not appreciate its use as a blunt tool, because I find that such use rather dampens discourse and injures the viewer. Some kind of clear guidance and purpose is needed for dealing with Jordan's work, in my opinion. See more of Chris Jordan's work online under "Artworks," on his official website, *Chris Jordan Photographic Arts* (<http://www.chrisjordan.com>).