



BIODIVERSITY AND THE ARTS

 Biodiversity Flyer-2 (240 KB)



Three things it is difficult to imagine

1. *The world and everything in it*
2. *How things go together*
3. *That things end*

How might art, and what people feel, be connected, in a meaningful way, to the questions posed by biodiversity? It can be argued that the two things meet through the imagination, and the limits of our imaginations. Biodiversity is threatened. We are living through, in our current Holocene epoch, a major period of mass extinction. It is clear that human activity is responsible for much of this process, making the current epoch different from those that came before in that some power rests in human hands to influence or address the situation. While all of this, and the urgency of the need to push back against this wave of extinction is well known, the wave, helped more than hindered by human activity, moves inexorably forward. Yet perhaps an aspect of the problem involves the possibility that while being known, we still largely fail to understand it.

Event details

Saturday 11 September, 2010

1pm-2pm: The 'Alive' Arena, Level 1, Australian Museum

Five Poets on Biodiversity

- [Robert Adamson](#)
- [Judith Beveridge](#)
- [Amanda Stewart](#)
- [Peter Minter](#)
- [Bonny Cassidy](#)

3pm-5pm: Theatre, Australian Museum

Five speakers on the difficulty of imagining

- [Alexis Wright](#) (novelist)
- [Bryan Gaensler](#) (astronomer)
- [Brett Neilson](#) (cultural theorist)
- [Nikolas Kompridis](#) (philosopher)
- [George \(Buz\) Wilson](#) (biologist)

The idea of 'biodiversity' let alone the fact of 'biodiversity' on this planet is difficult to imagine. This is true for biology, which in doing its best to map biodiversity has to date identified 1.4 million species, but remains open to the probability that the actual figure might be somewhere between 2 and 100 million. The number of particular living things on any given day on our planet can only be guessed from this necessarily imprecise starting point. It is equally true for the arts, which, faced with the extraordinary multiplicity of nature, can only create some sense of this plenitude through synecdoche, where small parts speak for an indefinite multiplicity of other small parts, which go together to make the one thing that is our planet in its diversity. It is also true for other disciplines from the sciences (such as cosmology or quantum physics) and the humanities (such as the social sciences and philosophy), which each in their own ways attempt to account for engage with these issues. Yet both the disciplines of science and the humanities need to strive to understand the realities of nature. Art, and other non-biological disciplines in pushing us to imagine what it is difficult to imagine, have an important role to play.

Perhaps something in the problem of how to respond relates to questions that are as important to processes of understanding as they are to the question of biodiversity: the question of the imagination, and the limits of the imagination. Are we incapable of imagining, truly imagining, the world we live in, in all its diversity? Or is this simply something that is very difficult, something that we could try better to understand by striving to imagine it, as artists and other thinkers have attempted in the past and continue to attempt.

If our imaginations are to help, they need to confront three things that limit understanding. Firstly, we have to imagine the idea of multiplicity itself. Every living thing is a window on the world. The imagination of the world itself is comprised of the sensations and perceptions of every particular living thing: each offers a particular understanding of the world; each in a sense, comprises a possible world. Art offers us one way of attempting to imagine. Art can imagine possible worlds that take us outside of the sometimes narrow confines of our own perceptions. So too, non-biological scientific disciplines encounter the problems of multiplicity in ways which might help us to understand the extraordinary complexity of the interaction between matter and life. Philosophy, history, political science, and many other disciplinary approaches also attempt to conceive of multiplicity.

Secondly, we have to imagine the idea of interconnectedness. Every animate and inanimate thing contributes to sub-systems within larger eco-systems that in turn comprise the planet as a whole and how it functions. In this way every thing on the planet, living or not, is connected, however obliquely, to ourselves. We have to imagine ourselves as part of this process of connection; we have to be made to feel how strange, unexpected connections reaching around the planet into any and all of its dark corners, touch our lives every day. Art can try and help us imagine. Art works through 'sympathy' as we are made to feel with things that are outside ourselves. The world, for its part, is connected through sympathy, as animals in their environments respond and interact through instinct. So too, non-biological science attends to and thinks through the nature of often oblique connections that determine how things interact and respond to one another. Philosophy, history, political science, and many other disciplinary approaches also attempt to conceive of interconnectedness.

Thirdly, we have to take seriously the idea that things end. Strangely it seems more natural to us to think in terms of infinity rather than the finite. We somehow imagine ourselves, and our planet, to be infinite. While there may be ways in which this is right, this feeling can encourage us to avoid the fact that things end: selves, people, places, environments, planets, solar systems, even universes. If we try and imagine that things end, try to truly imagine our own end, our planet's end, we might strive not only to further our own narrow interests, but the interests of all those things that sustain us, through the indefinite multiplicity that is our planet. Art can try and help: it allows us to consider endings, to understand through endings, to look the end in the face so as to better understand who and where we are. So too, non-biological science constantly comes into contact with questions of the limit, the threshold, and transformations. Philosophy, history, political science, and many other disciplinary approaches also attempt to conceive of endings.

Thursday September 9- Sunday September 12: The 'Alive' Arena, Level 1, Australian Museum

Audio-Visual Artworks

- [Roger Dean](#)
- [Hazel Smith](#)
- [Ben Denham](#)

Bookings:

[Australian Museum website](#) or phone bookings- call direct on (02) 9320 6225 to book. Tickets are \$25 for Museum Members or \$35 for non Museum Members. The ticket includes light refreshments in the Alive Arena before the panel event as well as entry to the Museum.

View [Biodiversity and the Arts Advertisement](#)

(Images Ben Denham, music 'PianoStones' Roger Dean)

Videos by Ben Denham

"For the "Biodiversity and the Arts" event Ben Denham has created a series of short films entitled "In Elements." These four films depict the process of coming to an embodied and ritualistic understanding of the elements, (wind, fire, water and earth), that have shaped the landscape and biodiversity of the Blue Mountains World Heritage area."

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