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# frieze

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## Nicholas Mangan's exploration of raw materials and social change *by Max Andrews*

George Kubler's influential 1962 book *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* proposes a novel form for an art history that pauses from analyzing the symbolism of individual objects in order to address their place in a morphology of time. Kubler portrays an unfurling of sequences and traits, needs and problems: beautiful, hopeful or useless things that form patterns akin to germinal life or the evolution of a language. Australian artist Nicholas Mangan puts his projects together as if he's drifting through Kubler's notes, seemingly trying to reconcile art-making with the speed of fossilization, or to comprehend the blink of human invention alongside climate cycles or incremental terrestrial processes. His complex works often approach film in an essayistic and sculpturally calibrated way and deal with subjects that comprehend time in a precise and sometimes extravagant manner: mineral exploitation and island geopolitics, climate science and neo-imperialism – theories of economy as much as paleoecology.

Mangan's projects seem, at first, to align with the popular concept of the Anthropocene, according to which humankind's innate abuse of the Earth has summoned a new geological epoch of climate catastrophe. Yet, the artist's focus on specific places and times provides plenty of evidence for the speciousness of the narrative that we are universally culpable. His works often allow a glimpse at the more plausible drivers of catastrophe – capital, together with the behaviour of an elite minority – yet, in a sense, Mangan could be described as a landscape artist in the guise of a researcher or a wayward environmental auditor. He depicts the raw materials that comprise the Earth's crust by signalling the economic and social cost of their extraction. His work is attentive to the consequences of industrial mining – Australia's abundance of fossil fuels and its powerful mining lobby is well known – and yet, on a completely different scale, is also accountable to how a projector showing his films might be powered. A fascination with the flow and conversion of energy is the common factor.

Since 2009, Mangan's art has been largely preoccupied by three long-gestation projects that form a loose trilogy of film-centred investigations. Recently presented at 'Surround Audience', the 2015 New Museum Triennial, the video essay *Nauru, Notes from a Cretaceous World* (2009) and its companion sculpture, a table, *Dowiyogo's Ancient Coral Coffee Table* (2009–10), centre on the South Pacific island of Nauru, a tiny nation



*Dowiyogo's Ancient  
Coral Coffee Table (detail), 2009–10,  
coral limestone  
from the island of Nauru,  
120 × 80 × 45 cm*

Courtesy  
the artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne,  
Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, and  
LABOR, Mexico City





**Landscape Artist**



*Mangan evokes a gonzo strategy that works against objectivity and disputes an easy moral history.*

that is presently notorious for its brutal Australian-run, asylum-seeker detention centre, the latest accretion of the site's dystopian biography of exploitation, both human and geological, which Mangan explores. The video comprises black and white archival photographs and sequences shot in Nauru of other-worldly rock craters and towers; rusting cranes and conveyor belts lurch into the Pacific Ocean and satellite dishes gaze out from palm-fringed beaches. Mangan's narration circles around Nauru's recent history like an apocryphal travelogue, which describes the ravaged island interior as the legacy of the rapacious mining of phosphorous-rich rock. This mineral was once abundant alongside the island's coral limestone – white deposits of ancient seabird excrement intermingle with fossilized marine life. The phosphate rock was long-known to be unusually pure and straightforward to dig out of Nauru and, following the country's independence in 1968, the Nauruan government began to accumulate an immense fortune by trading and investing the income from this white gold, which was exported for use as a fertilizer on antipodean crops and pastures. Such was their wealth that, during the early 1970s, Nauruan citizens reportedly had the greatest income on Earth. However, by the 1990s, Nauru's central plateau was almost completely gone; the island-rock had been all but monetized. The trust that had been set up to supposedly ensure long-term prosperity was mired in excess and misadventure; the nation nosedived into bankruptcy and dubious schemes to try and save itself from ruin.

In 2001, Nauru accepted the building of the Australian detention centre in exchange for aid. In 2004, Nauru House – the tallest building in Melbourne when it was completed in 1977, at the peak of the island's wealth – was repossessed. The building's name was erased along with three coral limestone monoliths that had been brought from the island to stand at its entrance. Mangan

prudently does not overwork the elemental and almost operatic narrative of Nauru's rise and fall; he assembles and catalyzes rather than explains. His evocative shots of frigate-birds hanging in the sky like ominous winged dinosaurs already cast the island's ecocide as a story from a lost world. With *Dowiyogo's Ancient Coral Coffee Table*, the sculptural companion to the film, which comprises three tables made from the very substance of Nauru, Mangan implicates his own actions with in the morphology of the island. The artist tracked down and acquired one of the coral monoliths that had once stood outside Nauru House. Slicing it into salami-like rock-slab tabletops, which mimic the atoll's coastline, Mangan manifested the absurd proposition made by the late Nauruan president, Bernard Dowiyogo, during a diplomatic visit to Washington. Dowiyogo had envisaged a new economy based on cutting and polishing the limestone pinnacles from Nauru's lunar interior to make coffee tables that could be sold on the American market. Mangan's coffee tables redirect the monoliths' commemorative intent, and the landscape's dissolution into economic capital as a souvenir, or an invention that is ironically exploitative. He evokes a gonzo strategy that works against objectivity and disputes an easy moral history of Nauru. The tables are singular composites of fossilized sea life and social history. They could be conversation pieces or, indeed, altars that somehow offer a setting for reconciling the Nauruan boom-and-bust with the extremely 'slow happening' of evolution or rock formation.

First shown at Sutton Gallery in Melbourne and, later, at the 9th Mercosul Biennial, Porte Alegre, *Progress in Action* (2013) revisits resource politics and wealth generation through the study of another conflicted, isolated island in the orbit of Australia. Geographically part of the Solomon Islands, Bougainville Island was the site of a bloody civil war from 1988–98. Indigenous revolutionaries fought for independence from

a Papua New Guinea backed by Australia and a share of the wealth being stripped out of the colossal Panguna deposit which was, at the time, the world's largest copper mine. Controlled by the multinational Rio Tinto, the mine was vitally important to the Papua New Guinean economy and, aided by Australia, the government laid brutal siege to the island for eight years. Thousands of civilians died due to a lack of medical supplies. Yet Bougainvillians devised an ingenious power source during the blockade: the island's bountiful supply of coconuts was refined into a fuel that could run generators and the engines of commandeered mine-company trucks. Mangan's film installation is an appropriately raw, dirty and noisy machine that draws on this fraught history; the projector showing the four-minute video is powered by coconut oil and the thunder of a modified diesel generator creates an intense soundtrack. Having researched documentaries and news reports about the conflict, Mangan edited library footage around human gestures and sculptural actions. A prospector's hand circles a map. A pick strikes a rock. A contract is signed; money is handed out; a coconut is cut open. Mangan's film reanimates existing documentary sources in an analogy of the sieged islanders' extraction of wealth from the coconut resources that were already present on Bougainville. The rhythmic, percussive edits align what has been coined the 'coconut revolution' with 1920s Soviet constructivist cinema and its electrified montages of industrial infrastructure, compounding deeds, acts and events. Yet, *Progress in Action* is neither driven by ideological impulses, nor does it especially advocate the resistance of the Bougainville revolutionaries. Instead, the electricity powering the projector allows the conveyance of moving pictures and sound that are, in a sense, portraying copper and coconut as agents of social sculpture. The film and the projector together create an assemblage that is itself 'sabotaged' – the 'misuse' of a diesel







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generator is nonetheless dependent on the copper coil at its core to produce voltage.

In July, Mangan will have a solo show at London's Chisenhale Gallery for which he is preparing *Ancient Lights* (it was co-commissioned with Sydney's Artspace and will travel there in September). This installation of videos will orbit around the ultimate source of Earth's energy – the sun – as if powered by the differential between climate and economic metaphors: good harvests and prosperity, fluctuations and cycles, investment and expenditure. When we met in Melbourne in 2014, Mangan was immersed in the theories of Alexander Chizhevsky, a subversive Russian scientist who, in the 1920s, proposed that sunspot activity and the 11-year solar cycle not only influence the weather and harvests, but also correlate with the volatility and revolutionary excitability of entire peoples. Mangan has devised an off-grid, two-screen scenario comprising a video projector powered by energy from solar panels installed on the gallery roof. One screen features high-speed footage of a spinning coin, a Mexican ten-peso piece minted with an image of the Aztec Sun Stone. This carving is central to our understanding of the Aztec calendar and the civilization's belief that human sacrifice was necessary to the ongoing life of the sun. For the companion film, Mangan has shot ranks of mirrors tracking the Andalusian sun (at a solar facility where heat is stored in salt to ensure constant energy production) and travelled to Arizona to film tree rings (dendrochronology studies

data related to the growth of trees). The work promises to meld NASA data with spending and sacrifice, current and currency, as if scorched by Georges Bataille's *The Accursed Share* (1949). The writer's feverish call for necessary and extravagant expenditure of wealth and energy presented a cosmic view of economics founded on the belief that Aztec mythology and solar radiation are the ultimate gifts to humankind.

Mangan is no new-technology artist or, at least, no more so than anyone whose work involves editing software and display devices. His work appeals to a more geologically tuned sense of economy, periodicity and social change: embedded in it is an emergent notion of 'media archeology'. Developed by theorist Jussi Parikka and others, the idea proposes that, concurrent with the urgent need to disinvest in carbon and keep 'coal in the hole', the supposedly clean future of energy and information technology also begins with the excavation of the earth's crust. New-generation screens and photovoltaics, for example, necessitate deep-earth elements and a new mining geopolitics. If Mangan's portrayal of highly specific situations in Nauru and Bougainville seem to swirl around a macro-economy of modernity and mining – with Bougainville suggesting a kind of jerry-rigged coda of sustainable resistance – the third part of his prospective trilogy promises to open out into a kind of lavish next-energy-economy exuberance, at once timeworn, vital and – to some – costly. ♦♦

Max Andrews is a contributing editor of *frieze* and, with Mariana Cánepa Luna, runs *Latitudes*, an independent curatorial office based in Barcelona, Spain.

Nicholas Mangan lives in Melbourne, Australia. Earlier this year, his work was included in 'Surround Audience' the 3rd New Museum Triennial, New York, USA. His solo show 'Ancient Lights' runs from 3 July to 23 August at the Chisenhale Gallery, London, UK, and, titled 'Other Currents', from 24 September to 1 November at Artspace, Sydney, Australia. His work will be included in the group exhibition 'Riddle of the Burial Grounds' at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, Ireland, from 11 June to 1 August. In 2016, Mangan will have solo exhibitions in Australia at the Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, and at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.

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Ancient Lights, 2015,  
HD video still

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Progress in Action, 2013,  
HD video, provisional coconut oil  
refinery, converted diesel generator,  
coconuts, installation view at the 9th  
Mercosul Biennial, Porto Alegre

Courtesy  
1 the artist, Chisenhale Gallery,  
London and Artspace, Sydney • 2 the  
artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne,  
Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, and  
LABOR, Mexico City