

The Relentless Memorial: Environmental Melancholia and Collective Social Mania

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript, per the author, will explain “Environmental Melancholia” and “Collective Social Mania,” and describe how they are connected in a hedonic loop of capitalism and buyer’s remorse. This manuscript will also explain the role of symbolism and symbolic acts in healing one’s grief, and the connection it has to art. The materials used in the artwork, Relentless Memorial, reference the unyielding pollution and mass production of goods created by the petroleum industry, as well as creating a dichotomy between a clean, white, virgin plastic to an ever-increasingly polluted, contaminated world. The formal presentation of Relentless Memorial as an installation is intended to provide a place of contemplation and mourning. Furthermore, the presentation of the installation as a panorama is related to the phenomenon of panoramas of the nineteenth century, and the onset of environmental pollution during the industrial revolution of that time. It invites a layered investigation into how that industry has influenced the environmental melancholia felt by society today.

KEYWORDS

Art, Ecological Collapse, Environmental Stewardship, Freud, Greif, Hedonistic Loop, Installation, Lesley University, Materialism, Memorial, Mylar, Painting, Renee Lertzman, White Doves

INTRODUCTION

What [the artist] aims at is to awaken in us the same emotional attitude, the same mental constellation as that which in him produced the impetus to create (Sigmund Freud, 1914/1955, p. 212).

My artistic interest situates itself at the intersection of the natural and the man-made world. There, I experience a deep reverence for the Earth’s limitless diverse species and interwoven, highly evolved ecological environments. I also experience grave concern from witnessing environmental exploitation, pollution, and lack of conservation. I am not alone in this sentiment. At this time in history, humanity’s single most relevant, under-examined, overarching dilemma is the collective global ambivalence and grief caused by widespread habitat loss. My work investigates the psychological responses we have to notions of a worldwide ecological collapse, which was recently given a name by psychosocial researcher and writer Renee Lertzman. Lertzman calls the devastating contemporary

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ailment environmental melancholia (2015, p. 6). Rooted in human psychological theory, environmental melancholia is an arrested state of mourning related to overlapping events of environmental destruction.

Among artists, activists, and conservationists today, a feeling of disappointment and confusion is prevalent. In an interview between contemporary American artists Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman, Dion (2014) confessed that he once believed that environmental issues were simply “information problems,” and that people would “opt for environmental sanity over ecological suicide” (Dion & Rockman, p. 1). He eventually concluded that although there is plenty of information available, people (including himself) still continue to degrade the environment “to suicidal extremes” (Dion & Rockman, 2014, p. 1). News outlets provide frightening tidbits of information from all corners of the world, as well as apocalyptic warnings that will result from inaction. Yet tragically, in spite of a constant stream of information, the ecological collapses around the planet have been getting undeniably worse.¹

After countless discussions with all kinds of people about environmental collapse, I began to notice a pattern. People would discuss the unsettling reality of environmental changes (whether on the other side of the world or nearby) with gravel in their voices, fear, and anxiety. Then there would be silence, often followed by a shrug. My work changed when instead of asking people to see the horror, I realized that they indeed had seen it, but were responding by locking that horror away somewhere inside themselves. I wanted to know where, and why. My work changed from following the path of didactic visual portrayal to behavioral inquisition.

As the new conversation about environmental melancholia continues to percolate around the globe, I count myself among the contributing scientists, psychologists, activists, and artists who are adding invaluable research and social commentary. While some artists are portraying glorious homages to our world’s dwindling species, others are responding by graphically showing the threats to humankind and ecology. Both are valuable contributions and both help to frame one another. My approach is to plant a psychological seed using both a layered visual entry and a conceptual sensibility that contains more than one meaning. As such, my thesis artwork, *Relentless Memorial*, is a synthesis of complex themes relating to human psychology, environment, nature, aesthetics, activism, and grief. This paper argues that the urgency of our collective human response to ecological collapse can directly be mediated with artworks such as *Relentless Memorial* (see Figure 1).

Environmental Melancholia, Collective Social Mania, and the Loop Between Them

So, by taking flight into the ego, love escapes extinction (S. Freud, 1917, p. 257).

This process is made easier when there is a tangible way to subject the lost love to the test of reality (i.e., seeing the dead body of her deceased relative, or having a conversation that ends a romantic relationship). Unfortunately, sometimes this is not possible. If, for whatever reason, she is unable to properly mourn the loss (lack of a body, lack of closure, traumatic separation from the loved object) then her ego is instead tethered between love and hate, between desire and aversion, and between confusion and certainty. Freud argued that this un-reconciled loss and ambivalence is what leads her to the damaging pathos of “melancholia” (1917, p. 251).

Melancholia is not limited to love relationships, or dying relatives. In fact, I believe that it directly correlates to the mass deaths in the environment (species, ecosystems, natural resources and people), and that humanity is exhibiting a social behavior of what has been recently named “environmental melancholia.” Environmental melancholia is caused when loss and mourning related to ecological deaths are unattended to (Lertzman, 2015, p. 6). As the ecological collapse reaches epidemic proportions, so grows the pervasiveness of environmental melancholia.

Does one’s love for the environment translate into action? Surely love can overcome melancholia? Unfortunately, this is not the case.

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