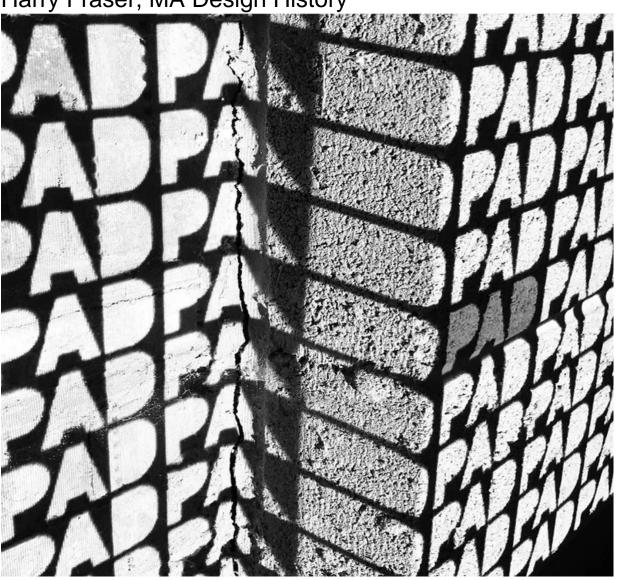




Queering Climate Action

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Introduction

This paper will explore the intersections between queerness and the climate; to elevate this research I will also be applying and presenting my research at the conference event The Northern Climate Conference hosted by The Northern School of Art as well as exhibiting a full solo show. *The Good, The Bad, The Sustainable* was a solo show I created within the institution to explore multiple sustainable techniques I had never used before within my practice as a queer artist.

Structurally, this paper will follow a three-part structure of introducing general ecological theories, creating a queer context, and finishing with the production of my solo show. Exploration of sustainable art techniques will be crucial to answer this question regarding queer climate activism as well as looking at other queer artists who use the climate as their inspiration.

Discussion of many queer artists working within this field is key to this investigation including contemporary artists such as Fenna Schilling, Gurjeet Singh, Nadja Verena Marcin, and Helena Hunter: deconstructing their respective artworks in conjunction with many environmentalist theories. Our current social and political climate ignores both the queer community and the planet: the intersectionality between these two issues will be explored fully within this paper.

The Industrial Revolution, which was fuelled by slavery and colonization, brought unimaginable wealth to the Global North, and in particular to a small minority of people living there. That extreme injustice is the foundation that our modern societies are built upon. This is the very heart of the problem. It is the suffering of the many that have paid for the benefits of the few (Thunberg, 2022 p.19)





Climate Action

Greta Thunberg is a Swedish climate activist who has been working within this field since the age of 16. Thunberg soared into popularity in 2019 with her iconic speech to the world leader at the U.N in New York City, Thunberg famously expressed:

You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying (Thunberg, 2019)

This seminal speech was Thunberg's response to the current social and environmental climate of the time in which she explores further in her 2022 publication *The Climate Book* which consists of multiple papers and speeches from herself and many other climate activists. 'It is the suffering of the many that have paid for the benefits of the few.' (Thunberg, 2022 p19)

Thunberg expertly explains the current social hierarchy, and influence of late-stage Capitalism within this statement and develops further on this issue later within the publication. Thunberg outlines a very real example of people effectuated by this mindset the majority has within the form of the refugee crisis:

Very, very few people abandon their home because they want to. Escape and flight are natural human instincts, and it is fair to assume that the vast majority of us would do the same thing if we were in their position. But I don't think many people whom we would define as climate refugees would call themselves that (Thunberg, 2022 p180)

Outlined here is the very real possibility of first world countries becoming evacuated due to the science of the current environmental climate. If the abuse on the planet continues it is reported 'With Current warming trends, 1.2 billion people could be forced to migrate by 2050,' writes Taikan Oki in his chapter. (Thunberg, 2022 p 180) writes Taikan Oki's in his chapter in Thunberg's book. Thunberg goes on to say; 'This is another one of those figures that you come across while reading about the emerging climate and ecological crisis.' (Thunberg, 2022 p 180) Here Thunberg

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discusses figures from Taikan Oki's paper *Water Shortages* (Oki, 2022 p.186) outlining the possible future water crisis that our planet is headed for.

So, who is to blame for the issues outlined? Annie Lowrey weighs up the possibility of consumerism in her article in *The Climate Book* named *The Cost of Consumerism* published from pages 281-284.

Surely countries, industries and companies will need to change their practices if we are to save our planet. Yet such analyses absent the households and individuals responsible for buying what those corporations are selling and for electing such governments to office. (Lowrey, 2022)

Here Annie Lowrey discusses the theory of the of consumption within a capitalist society and how this system has been failing the planet. Lowrey places the blame on both industries and companies to sum up the point of not just the figurative cost of consumption but also the cost of the damage it has done on the planet. To clarify the point Lowrey addresses the common misconception that our behaviours as individual households are to blame 'To be sure, no single person or family no matter how rapacious and wasteful their lifestyle, is responsible for more than a miniscule share of the excess carbon in the atmosphere or the waste in our landfills or the plastic in our oceans' (Lowrey, 2022 p. 281)

The subject of over consumption of landfills, carbon and polluted oceans are one of many environmental problems within this system however, Lowrey understands that as individuals we are unable to reverse the damage done to the planet. Lowrey offers a compromise to this issue and places the blame on the governmental and corporate world which is the most obvious party to blame *'Given those dynamics, it will take governmental and corporate action to help heal the planet'* (Lowrey, 2022 p. 281)

Annie Lowrey was inspired by the statistics written in the publication *The Green Imperative* written by Victor Papanek (Papanek, 1995).

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Between 1981 and the end of 1994 major climatic changes have occurred all over the world. The summers from 1990 to 1994 were among the hottest ever recorded in northern Europe, with the autumn of 1994 in Sweden the warmest for two hundred and fifty years. (Papanek, 1995 p.18)

Providing the specifics; Papanek puts real fearful statistics into perspective especially since these statistics were dated 31 years before the current year, taking this into account: the situation has only gotten worse as we have direct evidence that the climate has deteriorated since that date.

Papanek uses a topical historical reference to the first recorded ecological crisis, obviously there would have been similar problems before this date however, the only knowledge we have is of what is dubbed the 'Little Ice Age.' Papanek puts forth:

The 'Little Ice Age' in western Europe lasted roughly from 1550 to 1700 and helped to shape the ways of living, farming, and, as a consequence artistic expression. More time spent indoors during the longer winters led to a flowering of the crafts that made life more comfortable, such as quilt-making, blanket and carpet- weaving, and pottery. (Papanek, 1995 p19)

Ironically within this. Papanek discusses the rise in commercialisation and creativity of the population due to an ecological crisis which is completely the opposite in today's current climate. 1550 would bring the popularisation of many things we would class as materialistic within today's society: quilts, blankets, pottery, and such. Materialism and Capitalism is what drives the current destruction of the planet and Papanek understands the irony of this history.

Papanek outlines the living conditions of the population during this time 'Conditions during the 'Little Ice Age' must have been very like those in the isolated, dark, and snow-bound farms in Finland during the 18th and 19th centuries.' (Papanek, 1995 p19)

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Thinking about this scene painted by Papanek as someone living in today's society, it parallels the current cost of living crisis which is reported to be only increasing as the economy continues. There are multiple areas of society that have triggered this economic crisis however, it is hard to ignore the coincidence that the time the planet is in its worse state is when the British public is choosing between eating and staying warm. The Tory government have been in power within the UK for the last 30 years which is when the planet and economy started crashing. The Conservative Party is well known for using a non-socialist governing style which makes sense due to these books being full of the theory that socialism would grant ecological utopia. Written in the House of Common's library is a paper titled 'Rising cost of living in the UK' that outlines the cost-of-living crisis on the back of Covid19 in 2021:

The cost of living increased sharply across the UK during 2021 and 2022. The annual rate of inflation reached 11.1% in October 2022, a 41-year high, before easing in subsequent months. It was 10.1% in March 2023 the seventh successive month of double-digit inflation. High inflation affects the affordability of goods and services for households. (House of Commons, 2023)

Papanek reflected on the societal system of the 1990s failing the employment market, due to the cost-of-living crisis it could be surmised that employment would be on the rise however, it has only fallen. 'In the mid 1990s, millions are unemployed all over the world; there are- for the first time since the 1920s- beggars on the street of two of the world's socially most advanced countries, Denmark and Sweden.' (Papanek, 1995 p.22).

Although the figures outlined here are those from 30 years earlier and from two completely different parts of the world it does inject fear in the current unemployment numbers of the world. Further fear comes from the idea that Denmark and Sweden are two of the world's most socially aware countries and the UK is far from being

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that: the economy isn't safe from even the most socially aware countries which shows reversible damage to the world's economy.

Relating these numbers back to ecology, similarly to the economy: all the damage done to the planet is not reversible however, with the right societal system we could reduce the amount damage done for future generations. Similar to Annie Lowrey, Papanek places the blame on consumerism as many theorists do 'Corporate executives and their politician friends are universally discredited by their greed and corruption'. (Papanek, 1995 p. 25) Although being in a more socially aware system can't reduce irreversible damage to environment and economy it is very obvious that it could help future generations. Being socially aware comes down to an equal societal system and an intersectional approach which globally hasn't been achieved; minorities are still discriminated. This paper puts forth that climate action should start with queer liberation. As queer people we are constantly abused and taken advantage of by the societal system similarly to the planet.





Queering the Climate



Figure 1: Verena Marcin, N. (2017) OPHELIA (Still 3) [Photographic background with projected box] Fridman Gallery: New York

Nadja Verena Marcin is a queer German-born artist working in Berlin to expand ideas of intersectionality of gender, feminism, socialism, and the environment. This piece is a reworking of the famous landscape painting *Ophelia* by John Everett Millais which he worked on between 1851-1852. Verena Marcin describes her practice as 'Addressing ecological and human rights concerns through an often absurdist, surreal, bold repurposing of relational imagery and source material from literature, history, philosophy, art, and pop culture to create thought-provoking encounters, her work calls attention to norm shifts and revaluates social constructs

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and predominant world models.' (Marcin, nd.) focusing on both the environmental aspect but also the activist aspect of her practice.

First seeing Verena Marcin's work within *Ecofutures*: an East London art festival focused on a queer, feminist and decolonial point of view to environmentalism., Marcin's work bridges climate activism and sustainable futures. Organised by the non-profit *Cuntemporary* which uses its platform to organise artist festivals similar to *Ecofutures* all taking a queer and feminist point of view of the theme for the festival (Ecofutures, 2019) Verena Marcin took part in Staring at The Sun exhibition, exhibiting alongside eight other artists.

Ecofutures ran from April 4th-19th 2019 and spanned over almost 10 venues within the area of East London, funded by the Arts Council England, it was solely focused around an ecological point of view. Alongside the 8 exhibiting artists there were multiple workshops, live performances, DJ sets and conferences to broaden the message of queer environmentalism. Pictured below (*Figure 3*) is a collage of photographs taken at the group exhibition *Staring at The Sun* it pictures multiple artists work including *OPHELIA* (*Still 3*) as well as its sister piece pictured first on the last row. The aim for this exhibition was definitely achieved, and it was hopeful and inspirational to see artists practicing in this way.





Figure 2: Anon, (2019). Staring at the Sun / CUNTemporary. [online] Available at: https://cuntemporary.org/staring-at-the-sun/ [Accessed 14 May 2023].













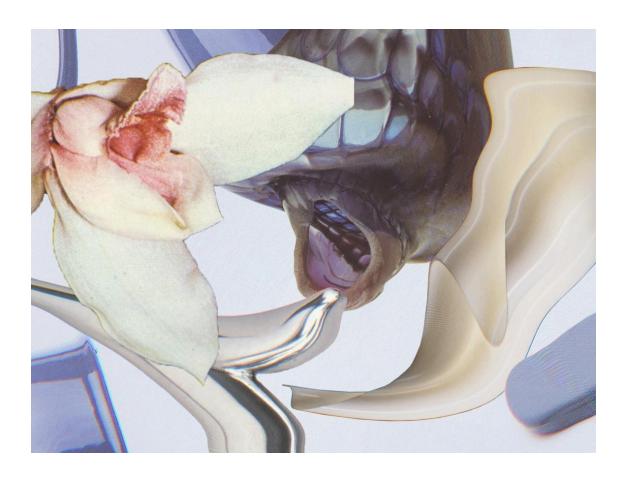


Figure 3: Schilling, F. (2021) Untitled [online image] Available from:

https://wepresent.wetransfer.com/stories/institute-of-queer-ecology [Accessed 18th May 2023]

Figure 4 is a digital collage produced by Fenna Schilling in conjunction with the Institute of Queer Ecology for an article on the art publication, WePresent (WePresent, n.d.) These digital collages are featured on both this article and Schilling's portfolio website: these collages stuck out to me specifically for the digital aspect whilst using these leaf-like shapes. The way the piece is shaped reminds the viewer of a 'snake plant' (Dracaena trifasciata) with the large sweeping triangular ended leaves. Looking deeper into Figure 4 the metallic and colder tones to these

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pieces echo a technological aspect which contradicts the natural shapes. Natural vs manmade is at the heart of many environmental activist's theories especially the queerer side of environment. Myra J. Hird and Noreen Giffney explore this idea within their publication *Queering the Non/Human* (Giffney and Hird, 2008) seen on the first few pages: 'Recognising the trace of nonhuman in every figuration of the Human also means being cognisant of the exclusive and excluding economy of discourses relating to what it means to be, live act or occupy the category of the Human.'

I am relating this quote to the response to *Figure 4*, and it really outlines the irony of Natural vs Manmade as there are many examples of society needing materialistic items to survive due to the nature of its build. Looking at the usage of the *'Human'* and *'Nonhuman'* it really simplifies the split between the natural and manmade and forces the reader to look inward for the answer due to the nature of the language. The idea of ourselves as having nonhuman elements to our being whilst also needing those to survive and *'Be'* sounds daunting. Relating this back to the current ecological system it reminds the reader that our society is the same: it is doomed as the *'Nonhuman'* is needed to survive. The irreversible effects of the planet so far are a perfect example of this theory within practice so there must be something wrong with the Human. 'Queering' as seen in the title of this paper is something many queer activists use to describe a queer side of something that isn't at face value obviously queer. *'Queer is employed here as a collection of methodologies to unpick binaries and reread gaps, silences and in-between places'* (Giffney and Hird, 2008 p.5)

Giffney and Hird were discussing how the phrase queer is used in their publication and it feels somewhat similar to most queer studies papers: "collection of methodologies" representing the inherit politicalness of being queer. Unpicking binaries brings the scientific aspect to this quote and discussing this idea of the nonhuman as well as being open to non queer methodologies such as an

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environmentalist one. 'For a second intersection between sexuality and nature, we move to a consideration of the politics of natural space and the ways in which developing sexual politics, institution, and practices have had an effect on the organisation and regulation of nature as a socially produced set of places, and vice versa.' (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 2010 p.12)

Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson discusses the idea of the intersectionality to queerness and introducing the topic of sexuality and nature. Queer intersectionality has a strong place within nature and environmental activism, as well as introducing the idea of "natural space" being queer. The intersectionality to the planet literally as well as figuratively is outlined with the introduction of natural queer space. "Queer ecology suggests, then, a new practice of ecological knowledges, spaces, and politics that places central attention on challenging hetero-ecologies from the perspective of non-normative sexual and gender positions." (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 2010 p.22).

Obviously Giffney and Hird have a very similar point of view to the quote above as it is the general census of queer ecology and describes an opposing ecology of "hetero-ecologies". This idea of heterosexual ecology is the preconceived idea that the planet doesn't matter unless its functioning for the cis-het population. Bringing the conservative party back into this as an example, the current system we live in caters to the wealthier and the governing style of today's politics favours cis-het population to govern. Evidence is not needed to understand that the current system ignores the queer community and equal rights in general: Section 28 introduced by Margaret Thatcher has been abolished but the attitude never really went away.

...that said, if we were to judge from television shows such as Queer As Folk and The L-Word, we would hardly nominate gay men and lesbians as such as the world's best nature stewards. Quite the opposite, in fact: gay culture, in the mainstream, is extraordinarily tied to lifestyle consumerism, particularly for the white urban gay men but also increasingly for urban "lifestyle" lesbians as well". (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 2010 p.21)

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Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson make the point of popular queer media is often very misrepresented of the community and really reflects through its materialism of the characters Section 28 still lingers. Thinking about both series' it makes sense that both would be wrong within its queer ecological representation as both aired within the early 2000s: *Queer as Folk* being 1999-2000 and *the L-Word* being 2004-2009. The outdated nature of these dates makes sense for the characters obsession in both shows with materialism due to the influx of designer millennials. Viktor Papanek knew about the dangers made to the planet within the 70s so why should queer media be any different?

The issue here is really misrepresentation and both Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson understand that due to the irony of using the phrases "the white urban gay men" and "urban "lifestyle" lesbians" as these are the majority within a minority. To achieve equal representation the heterosexual population need to acknowledge not just the majority of the LGBTQ+ community but also the minority (bisexuality, trans, and individuals outside of the binary) This new queer media was the start of the acceptation of cisgender queer people, evidenced by the legalisation of gay marriage in July of 2013 (GOV.UK, 2013) We are not anywhere close to equal rights for the queer community and we are seeing an attack on the trans+ population which becomes increasingly more terrifying day by day.

All the points within this section have outlined the reasons for queer ecology and how misrepresentation is destroying the planet, economy, and equal rights: and irreversible damage is unfixable however, a change in the system could conserve the environment for older generations.







The Northern Climate Conference



Figure 4: Fraser. H. (2023) The Good, The Bad, The Sustainable [Squares of cowboy comic papers and denim] The Northern School of Art: Hartlepool, UK



Figure 5: Fraser. H. (2023) The Good, The Bad, The Sustainable [Set of 6 screen prints on backed comics] The Northern School of Art: Hartlepool, UK









Figure 6: Fraser. H. (2023) The Good, The Bad, The Sustainable [Illustration prints] The Northern School of Art: Hartlepool, UK



Figure 7: Fraser. H. (2023) The Good, The Bad, The Sustainable [Homemade paper mounted on square] The Northern School of Art: Hartlepool, UK







Figure 8: Fraser. H. (2023) The Good, The Bad, The Sustainable [Denim collage built in pink frame] The Northern School of Art: Hartlepool, UK





Responding to this topic; I presented my research at *The Northern Climate Conference*: *The Northern Climate Conference* was a student and faculty led conference event that I co managed with Alyson Agar who is part of our institution's scholarly research department. The aim for the event was a similar the SARDG conference event the year earlier on the 6^{th of} April 2022 named *Toward a Feminist Future* which tackled the theme of gendered equality, I presented a paper *Subverting the [Heterosexual] Matrix in The Wachowski Sister's Matrix Trilogy* in which I deconstructed scenes from the trilogy and applied theories from Judith Butler and the general trans experience.

This year's presentation was named *Climate Action Through a Queer Lens* where I created a presentation as pre-research before writing this paper, this presentation explored the relationship between the queer community, the art world and sustainability as a form of eco utopia.

Sister to this presentation was the solo show *The Good, The Bad, The Sustainable* which was an exploration of reappropriation of kitsch western imagery as a part of queer representation whilst being ecologically conscious. I wanted to have a body of work alongside this presentation, I wanted to use specifically queer imagery within a sustainable context. I am interested in representations of masculinity and realised these cowboy comics utilise the natural rural space. I am aware of the politically grey area of the western style however, I made sure to not include any of the comic strips that would trigger the audience. Reclaiming this imagery as a queer landscape was really interesting and although these times were rooted with toxic masculinity and misogyny it has been queered throughout pop culture: *Brokeback Mountain* (*Brokeback Mountain*, 2006) Orville Peck (Recording artist), Trixie Mattel (Drag Artist), to name a few.





Figures 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 are all photographs taken by me of the works all mounted on the wall and I think it would be beneficial to talk through each piece one by one. Figure 5 (top left) is a long tapestry piece where I cut squares of 4x4 of cowboy comic strips, denim and pink fabric and sewed them back-to-back to create a long piece of thin fabric. I experimented with presenting Figure 5 landscape however, I liked the idea of it trailing the floor almost to give it a more conceptual effect. Figure 6 is a wider look at Figure 1 with all its sibling pieces within a line, due to the nature of screen printing I had the ink jet film left and I felt I could overlay the somewhat ruined practice piece. They were placed in an order where the print bleeds through gradually with all following a similar blueprint.

Figure 7 is a set of prints I created for *Spilt Milk Issue 11: Non-Threatening Cowboys* which was published in May 2023. *Spilt Milk* is an independent zine showcasing artists in Newcastle and the surrounding Northeast, using mostly queer artists although it is not limited to only queer artists. *Figure 8* was my attempt at homemade paper using the cowboy comics and pink paper to create an interesting pattern on the paper, the technique I used was not traditional and I ended up keeping the scraps too big which is why it has a visual crumbling effect. If I was to repeat this technique, I would invest more time into researching the multiple ways to make paper and invest in a professional paper net.

To conclude *Figure 9* was an older piece I created in the second year of my undergrad and personally I really love it: the blue jean denim associated with American culture was repurposed as a sustainable anchor point, bridging together cowboy cultures, and commenting upon the environmental crisis; this worked alongside the rest of the work within the solo show. To construct this piece, I collaged scraps of denim and stuck them directly into a pre painted pink frame and finished the work with fine liner hand drawn cowboy imagery.

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Conclusion

To conclude this paper, it is important to reflect on the questions raised about the climate and come up with an action plan for future generations. The overall simplified version would be queer liberation and overall equal rights would ensue a domino effect to the way the societal system works which in turn would change attitudes to the planet for future generations. As stated, the damage already done is irreversible however, the aim is to reduce anymore damage done for future generations. Sustainable living is difficult but as I have explored within this paper it is almost impossible to make a difference to the effect to the planet underneath the current governing style and overall consumerist lifestyle, we are programmed to live in.

Abolishing capitalism could be a suitable alternative however, this would be hard for a complete shift and our bodies have evolved for a capitalist society. Queer ecology is needed to create this balance between consumerism and being socially educated to reduce the effects on the planet. To end this paper on a happier note I feel queer liberation is very achievable and will eventually be achieved if the planet lasts however, it is a very real chance that the next generation will not see a full life due to the abuse on the environment.

Figure List

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