

Upcoming Course: Women in Art & Design > Feminisms > Feminist Artists and Activists

IN PROGRESS

LESSON PROGRESS

5% COMPLETE

## FEMINIST ARTISTS AND ACTIVISTS

By Lisa E. Bloom, independent scholar and researcher

Living through both the current coronavirus pandemic and the climate crisis we have to reconfigure what it means to be part of a community internationally at a time when most museums, art galleries, art schools and universities have been shuttered for months (at the time of writing, November 2020). As we face a smaller, more isolated and constricting art world, I'm interested in how women artists respond to and create a sense of community in their online art projects during COVID-19 as they orient us toward a more just and resilient world in the era of the Anthropocene. That is the name of our geological era when human induced climate change is transforming our world, offering a prominent challenge of our time, with a warming planet becoming both a present-day reality as well as a future threat.

This text focuses on two women artists from the United States – Mollie Crabapple and Judit Hersko – who place climate art and activism into conversation with new scholarship in feminist art, connecting debates on science and the environment with gender, sexuality, race, and the relation of the human to the non-human. Their approach insists on linking racial, sexual and gendered discriminatory violence with wider environmental destruction. Both artists use the genres of science fiction and speculative fiction to inspire our imagination and influence humanity's non-fictional future.

Energised by the belief that societies can be rebuilt in more just ways, Mollie Crabapple, in collaboration with author and activist Naomi Klein, filmmaker Avi Lewis, and narrated by US politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, produced the short film *A Message from the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez* in 2019. Naomi Klein explains why they produced the film:

*Set in the future a couple of decades from now, the short online video is a flat-out rejection of the idea that a dystopian future is a foregone conclusion. Instead, it offers a thought experiment: What if we decided **not** to drive off the climate cliff? What if we choose to radically change course and save both our habitat and ourselves?*<sup>1</sup>



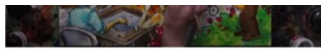
*A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*

The Intercept, 18 April, 2019

A series of climate disasters in real life, including Hurricane Sandy in New York (2012) and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico (2017) provided the catalyst for the short film creators to imagine what a future US society could look like if new legislation was introduced that tackled both climate change and economic inequality.<sup>2</sup> The creators of the video believe that the biggest challenge to implementing the transformative policy known as the Green New Deal is overcoming widespread skepticism that humanity could ever carry out something so costly at the scale and speed needed.

In the video, Ocasio-Cortez speaks from a future when the Green New Deal has been implemented, saying how implausible this political and economic transformation seemed in our present, compared to how its goals – massive public investment in clean energy, universal healthcare, secure clean air and water – have become the new normal in her *future present*. The film's closing statement – 'We can be whatever we have the courage to see' – emphasises the role of artistic imagination in constructing a new reality in which we do not merely survive but transform.



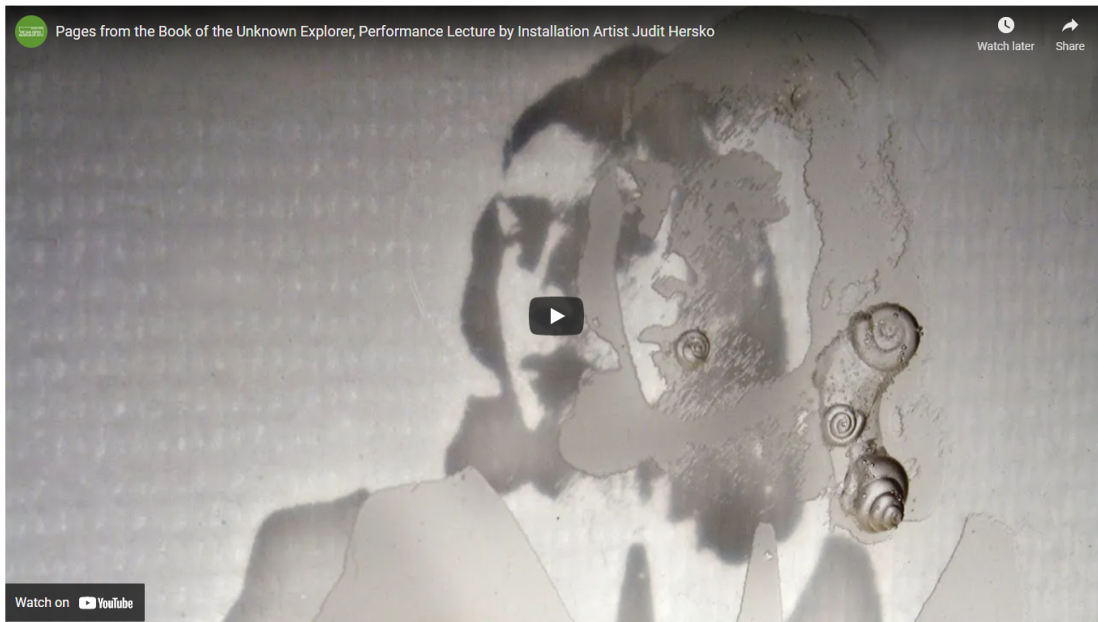


Still from *A Message from the Future* with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 2019.



Still from *A Message from the Future* with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 2019.

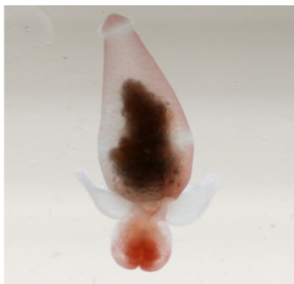
Judit Hersko's July 2020 online lecture, *Pages from the Book of the Unknown Explorer*, is also inspired by utopian feminist thought.<sup>3</sup> She utilises two key methods to approach this performance piece. The first is her introduction of a fictional, unknown Jewish female explorer and biologist who studied planktonic snails in Antarctica in the late 1930s. She is brought into real historical events and past scientific quests to create a narrative that reflects on the absence of women from the history of Antarctic exploration and science. The second approach lies in her presentation of art objects to address the climate crisis, to summon us to think about the ocean and the dangerous impact that climate change has on the beauty and interconnectedness of microscopic aquatic nature through her focus on the same snails that the unknown explorer studied in the 1930s.



*Pages from the Book of the Unknown Explorer*  
San Diego Museum of Art, 23 July, 2020

Hersko's fictitious character Anna Schwartz, masquerading as a white man, 'appears' on Admiral Byrd's 1939 expedition to Antarctica and thus becomes the first woman to work as a biologist and photographer in Antarctica. By its very choice of dates, Schwartz's trip to Antarctica also alludes to the 1939 Nazi invasion of Poland when Eastern European Jews, like the character Schwartz, were sent to concentration camps and millions of Jewish people died as the result of genocidal acts. In this respect, by juxtaposing Antarctica in the late 1930s and the contemporary debates around climate change today, Hersko's narrative raises questions about how she connects the present to the past through visions of traumatic catastrophe.

One way Hersko does this is to focus on the sheer fragility of the Southern Ocean's ecosystem as evident by the nearly invisible, transparent planktonic snails, the *Clione antarctica* (sea angel) and the *Limacina helicina* (sea butterfly) that she studies so passionately.



Judit Hersko  
*Sea Butterfly*, 2011  
Courtesy of the Artist

In the *Unknown Explorer*, Hersko's transparent sculptures of these fragile creatures appear out of place, but are tightly connected to her fictional character Schwartz, and clarify Schwartz's decision to disappear to Antarctica to escape the Holocaust. She's a refugee scientist from the margins who makes visible the barely detectable but profound shifts in our expansive ocean ecosystem.





Judit Hersko  
*Silicone Portrait of Anna Schwartz with Pteropods (from the scientific notebooks of Anna Schwartz), 2008*  
Courtesy of the Artist

Moving between the historical narrative of the past and our present, Hersko makes clear that these pelagic snails were plentiful in her 'unknown' woman explorer days, but now due to the effects of ocean acidification their shells are dissolving and this constitutes a key indicator of catastrophic climate change. Her highly aestheticised and sensuous photographic images of these elusive creatures introduce us to these otherwise unfamiliar and invisible pteropods. By making these fluid and fragile creatures visible, Hersko shows us how their decline is entangled with the violent changes due to the effects of ocean warming.

For both artists, visualisation is an essential part of their art practice which expresses their feminist politics. While Crabtree uses it to turn to the near future to imagine an alternative present, Hersko creates an alternative past to confront traumatic climate change. Both show how feminist artists can expand how we see and what we know.

For Crabtree, visualisation helps us see a more socialist-feminist trajectory of politics, which through new legislation will redress systemic environmental and political injustices and transform the lived experience of women. Hersko uses visualization as an occasion to draw our attention to microscopic creatures like the sea angel and the sea butterfly to warn us of imminent climate destruction.

Crabtree also responds to the horrors and despair of climate destruction by drawing from a rich vein of women's critical utopian thought. By making the near future more tangible and relatively relatable Crabtree enables us to imagine that another world is not only possible but represents a beautiful alternative worth fighting for.

When the climate crisis and COVID-19 has forced us to confront inequality, unjust history and humanity's destruction of nature, women artists are creating new ways of seeing and thinking, as social-natural crises continue to pile on top of each other. These works can bring us closer together and inspire us to interrogate the futures we are creating and how we might change course to achieve an altogether different, more just and resilient outcome.

## References

1. See the online statement on the Intercept site by Naomi Klein: <https://theintercept.com/2019/04/17/green-new-deal-short-film-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/> For the follow-up short online video from 2020, Message from the Future II, The Years of Repair that addresses COVID see: <https://theintercept.com/2020/10/01/naomi-klein-message-from-future-covid/>
2. Judit Hersko's performance lecture was inspired by Ursula Le Guin's (1982) short story 'Sur', a utopian feminist fictional account of an exploration in which a party of South American women reach the South Pole two years before the official arrival of the real exploration teams of Amundsen and Scott. See: Ursula Le Guin. 'Sur' in *The Compass Rose*, Harper & Row, NY, 1981. It is also reproduced in *The New Yorker*, 1 February 1982.
3. The Green New Deal is US legislation proposed in 2019 to address climate change and economic inequality. For more detail on the Green New Deal see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green\\_New\\_Deal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_New_Deal)

[< Previous Topic](#)[MARK COMPLETE ✓](#)[Back to Lesson](#)[Next Topic >](#)

## Contact us

[onlinecourses@ngv.vic.gov.au](mailto:onlinecourses@ngv.vic.gov.au)

## Subscribe

Subscribe today to stay updated on NGV Courses

## Follow the NGV



## Privacy

[Privacy policy](#)

[Privacy statement](#)