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## HOSTS OF ANGELS

### Climate guardians and quiet activism

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The Australian Climate Guardians present a novel approach to political performance drawing on the power of the act of assembly for the purpose of public protest. Novelty and performative efficacy lie in the way in which long-standing techniques of site-specific activism are combined with the unexpected turn to religious iconography. Appearing together in public dressed as angels in long white robes adorned with large feathered wings, the Climate Guardians have an explicit intention to protest against the politics of climate change in Western countries.

The Climate Guardians trace their genesis to an activist intervention by Tasmanian environmentalist Allana Beltran, whose solitary angel figure appeared in the Weld Valley Tasmania in 2007 to protest the logging of an old growth forest. Dressed in a long white dress with large, hand-made feathered wings, Beltran harnessed herself to vertical and crossed saplings in a durational performance that lasted ten hours (Beltran). Consulting closely with Beltran, Liz Conor and Deborah Hart in Melbourne adopted the angel iconography for climate change action, extending Beltran's concept of a solitary stance to call for hosts of angels, who would gather at pre-determined sites and become known as the Climate Guardians (Conor 2016). The angel-activists are multi-age, volunteer women, and some men, numbering up to 60 or 70 at any one action, and include cultural feminists, peace advocates, green activists, artists, academics, historians, and scientists in a diverse assemblage of mixed ideologies, occupations, and backgrounds. The preferred mode of performance consists of hosting, gathering, or manifesting en masse in public spaces, the most spectacular of which was at the Eiffel Tower in Paris in December 2015 during the United Nations Climate Change Conference (see Figure 3). Australian performances have taken place at key political locations including the following: Parliament House, Canberra, to call out its failure to regulate carbon emissions; industrial sites known for excessively high carbon production such as the Hazelwood Coal Mine in Victoria, owned by French Energy Company Engie; and Newcastle Harbour in New South Wales, one of the world's largest ports that since 1799 has exported locally mined brown coal to Japan, Europe, Asia, and the Americas. The Climate Guardians have blockaded the entrances of corporate mining headquarters, including Engie in Paris; chained themselves to the revolving doors of the Melbourne Stock Exchange to call out BHP Billiton, the Anglo-Australian mining giant with coal mining assets in Queensland and New South Wales; stencilled the Climate Guardian logo onto city buildings; and descended on politicians' offices holding signage with the simple words 'Coal Kills'. In a midnight visit to the office of the Federal Minister for the Environment, Greg Hunt, the angels unfurled a banner on which were printed the words 'We have five minutes before midnight'. These words refer to the Doomsday Clock, initially developed by Atomic Scientists in 1947 to assess the threat of nuclear Armageddon, and now invoked to include the combined threat of nuclear war and climate change (Borger 2018). Mediating messages from scientists and schoolchildren about the future, the Climate

Guardians typically gather in silence, do not resist arrest, and appear and disappear peacefully. There is labour in the Climate Guardians work: the wings are large theatrical props made by the activists themselves and attached to the body by means of a harness. They are carried to public sites on public transport often in a surfboard or kayak bag. There is bodily risk when arrested and distress to families, children, and supporters. We can say that this mode of collective performance is enacted on behalf of the planet and constitutes an assembly, Judith Butler's term for 'acting in concert' in public spaces in an 'embodied form of calling [here the politics of climate change] into question' (2015: 9).

Focusing on the religious iconography of the good angel, the Climate Guardians exploit that which Chantal Mouffe refers to as 'the *moral register*', the recent shift in adversarial politics away from old affiliations to one in which 'we' identify the offending 'they' as the adversary in an agonistic confrontation; in this case around the politics of climate change (2005: 5, 29). Recognising that climate change activism is a slow game that presses on powerful lawmakers, the angel figures activate a politics of shame wherein the assembled angels expose the major contributors to global warming and provoke reflection on the harm they do to the biosphere. A banner held aloft at a Climate Guardians' appearance at the G20 Summit in Brisbane in November 2014, for example, stated simply to fellow citizens that 'our Prime Minister turned his back on the future by declaring his loyalty to coal'. The emphasis is placed on the human agents whose actions cause climate change and who have the capacity to do otherwise. The novel visibility of the angel actions often culminates in a publicity shot in proximity to an iconic symbol of the capitalist-industrial-carbon-producing order rendered as adversaries. These agonistic acts evoke the affects of shame while also offering the redemption of acting for the good of human civilisation.

In the time-honoured tradition of activist and avant-garde movements, the Climate Guardians have a manifesto, entitled *Our Safe Climate Demands*. It states the following:

- 1 The paramount duty of government is to protect its citizens from grave threats
- 2 Rapidly accelerating anthropogenic climate change places the very future of human civilisation and the ecosystems upon which it depends at dire risk
- 3 Urgent action is required to avoid further damage and to restore a safe climate
- 4 The necessary action will require society-wide mobilisation of resources at a scale and speed never before seen in peacetime, failure is not an option (ClimActs: 'Safe Climate Demands')

The manifesto functions as a textual background to the silent performances, integral to the politics of performance but also distant from its enactments. The preference for silent presence over discourse draws primarily on bodies assembling in public spaces reaching out to the public with the urgency of action while warning adversaries that mobilisation is underway.

## COP 21

The most celebrated performances of the Climate Guardians were at the United Nations 2015 Climate Change Conference in Paris, or COP 21, attended by 150 Heads of State and over 25,000 accredited delegates. COP 21 refers to the 21st Conference of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol, an internationally binding agreement reached in Japan in 1997 to set carbon emission reduction targets. The prevailing circumstances in Paris at the time reveal further aspects of the angel-activist citizen strategy in what was clearly a tension-filled climate. The people of Paris were suffering from the impact of a series of coordinated terror attacks on 13 November in which 130 people were killed and hundreds wounded. COP 21 was a major global event in a city now on high alert and grieving. By December, a State of Emergency was in place in the city, enforcing a ban on public gatherings and street protests for the duration of the conference and after. Accompanying the conference was the Global Festival of Cultural Activity on Climate Change, a vast multi-arts event that ran from September to December 2015 involving artists from all around the world. The 12 Climate Guardians, who had travelled to Paris for the Cultural Festival, and to protest the Australian Government's inaction on climate change, were now confronted with a ban on their primary modus operandi, the outdoor street protest. By identifying as artists in costume and

not activists with hailers they were permitted to perform visitations at the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre, and attracted high-profile publicity that was later reconnected to their protest agenda. In secular France with a Catholic past, the angel-artists managed to get through the State of Emergency restrictions. In doing so, they divested themselves from banners in a performance whose meaning and intentions were unspecified, mysterious, and strangely compelling (see Varney 2018: 135–154).

### **Feminist ecocriticism**

The Climate Guardians give form to contemporary feminist ecocritical activism in a way that reminds us of the visionary Australian philosopher Val Plumwood, who argued that freeing nature from capitalist production was one of the four major goals of the liberation movement. Anticipating the intersectionality that brings the environmental movement into an assemblage with the politics of class, gender, and race, Plumwood wrote:

It is usually at the edges where the great tectonic plates of theory meet and shift that we find the most dramatic developments and upheavals. When the four tectonic plates of liberation theory – those concerned with the oppressions of gender, race, class, and nature – finally come together, the resulting tremors could shake the conceptual structures of oppression to their foundation.

*(Plumwood 2003: 1)*

Since her death in 2008, Plumwood has remained an influential figure in Australian environmental philosophy and the political action it inspires (Stevens et al. 2018: 13). Her work lives on as the impact of global warming on human and non-human life has become more urgent. In the face of inaction at the political level, Sherilyn Macgregor has linked climate change inaction and denial to the ‘post-political condition’, the effect of decades of neoliberal deregulation that has neutered democratic politics and replaced it with either authoritarian or consensual administrations and governance (Macgregor 2014: 618). However, as indicated in the discussion so far, the Climate Guardians evoke the assembly, theorised by Butler as an expression of a shared understanding of an acute situation in which ‘showing up, standing, breathing, moving, standing still, speech and silence are all aspects . . . that put livable life at the forefront of politics’ (2015: 18). Moreover, Mouffe’s notion of ‘collective identities’ resonates with the assembly while affirming the return of adversarial politics, of the opposition between ‘we’ and ‘they’ within environmental activism whose allegiances to the left and right of politics have less prominence (Mouffe 2005: 48). As an assembly, the host of angels can also be understood as an alternative to that which Luce Irigaray refers to as the dangerous individuation of the post-Enlightenment world. In moving away from and beyond individuation, the Climate Guardians’ collective action discards both leftist identity politics and neoliberal individualism (2011: 195). Macgregor, following Mouffe, endorses ‘the need for an agonistic approach to politics’ that ‘can best be realized through acting in public, in local political spaces, as *citizens*’ (2014: 633). These political commentaries enable an understanding of how the Climate Guardians wrest the discursive power from vested carbon-producing interests towards citizens whose message appears to be empowered by celestial intervention. That is, they add a fifth tectonic plate of sorts, constituted by the otherworldliness and performativity of the long white robes, and the large angel wings. This fifth plate evokes the performative power of the silent committed assembly of women. It is as if they are indeed symbolic imaginative beings witnessing, warning, and suggesting that a global assembly is forming in multiple sites. Here celestial and global merge in the figure of the human-angel.

### **Angels in history**

Angels belong to Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions and are traditionally male. The popular image of the gown and wings can be traced to the visual appropriation and embodiment of the angel by Christian artists in Rome around the 4th century. Influenced by mythical figures Nike and Eros, these artists added the wings through which angels continue to be identified (Jones 2011: 16). The angel’s capacity

for theological transcendence is by means of biblical and Koranic roles as the mediator between deities and the human world. Angels belong to the extra-judicial, extra-political more-than-human world and are free from human juridical and political interventions. Their more-than-human figuration – seeming human but with wings, their capacity to appear, remain visible, and then fly and swoop – places them symbolically in a unique relationship with nature and the environment. Like metaphysical and mythical beings, and figures from folk tale, they typically inhabit heavenly spheres, eternal gardens, thick forests, and deep pools.

Angels were feminised in Western European art in the 19th century when they came to be associated in the late Romantic imagination with the non-rational and hence reactionary anti-Enlightenment figures. As feminist theorist Michelle Le Doeuff notes drolly, by then the category of angel had been devalued and lost its theological, philosophical, and intellectual associations (2003). The Climate Guardians avoid this kind of idealised femininity through the actions of showing up and standing in public spaces, far away from the domestic and the heavenly to evoke the political potential of agonism.

### Angels of modernity

We can see that angels have returned, curiously, as potent symbols of anti-modernity to mark what the world has lost or that has become endangered. 20th-century art, literature, film, as well as theatre and performance feature these immaterial/material beings as harbingers of a world at risk of self-destruction, of apocalypse, or of detaching itself from the lessons of history. Walter Benjamin's apocryphal reading of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, Wim Wenders 1988 film *Wings of Desire*, and Deborah's Warner's *The Angel Project* are but three examples. *The Angel Project* was presented in London and Perth in 1999–2000 and New York in 2003, and featured actor-angel figures in multiple site-specific city locations transforming buildings and city spaces into angel sites (see Carlson 2004; Wescott 2004).

As angels of anti-modernity, the Climate Guardians perform politically in non-political ways. They utilise feminist, modern, and citizen forms of protest while engaging with the dynamic, curious, and unexpected power of the material/immaterial world.

Embodying the angel figuration, they give form to the transcendence of traditional lines of opposition in political struggles, that is, the party politics that stymie attempts to combat climate change. Appearing in prominent public spaces has the effect of marking out the common ground on which humanity stands and posing the simple question of whether one is for or against the ecosystem that supports life on earth. There is considerable risk in this passive approach to protest. The novelty of the angel can be easily dismissed, the female stereotypes can appear regressive and the appropriation of religious figures can play into the hands of traditionalists, yet the Climate Guardians have the capacity to side-step the antagonism of party politics while providing an opportunity to give 'agonistic form' to the political debate about climate change.

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