

## Exhibition Essay

“Simple tourniquets can be made out of anything...” A calm voice instructs us while on screen a series of men shake hands as though sealing a deal, “You will need something sharp to cut through the tissue, and another tool that is sharp, yet strong enough to cut through the bone.” The handshakes are stock images, generic clips of angled sunlight, clean cuffs, and firm grips from the likes of Getty Images or Shutterstock. “Try to be as efficient in your cuts as possible to reduce the amount of time the subject will have to endure the pain.”

Is this how it's going to be? Business as usual? Men in suits agreeing on triage arrangements that affect millions of people, probably far away from the deal cutting? No, in fact, this is how it is. Now. The effects of global warming are already being felt, primarily by those who are least equipped materially to survive a “natural” disaster made more frequent and ferocious by the increased CO2 in our atmosphere. Will the sorting prioritize certain people's property over other people's survival?

Climate change has confronted us with a proposition: even just to slow down the catastrophic warming our activities have set in motion, something must be sacrificed, probably something we don't think we can live without. Clearly many of us will want to deny this necessity, rage against it, bargain with it.

David Buckel was prepared to make an ultimate sacrifice. Before light on a Saturday morning in April 2018, Buckel pushed a shopping cart to a spot in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, doused himself in gasoline and lit himself on fire. He was 60 years old, healthy and actively working on environmental issues after a highly successful career as a lawyer who helped achieve the right of same sex couples to marry. In the shopping cart found at the scene he left a note: “Most humans on the planet now breathe air made unhealthy by fossil fuels, and many die early deaths as a result — my early death by fossil fuel reflects what we are doing to ourselves.” The possibility buried in Buckel's death: that living with the urgency may be harder than a total surrender in the hopes of breaking the spell of fossil-fuel driven comforts.

We might say that Buckel succumbed to acute solastalgia, a condition of psychic or existential distress in response to changes in one's environment. After retiring from Lambda Legal, Buckel spent the last few years of his life as the senior organics recovery coordinator with the NYC Compost Project. He spent those last few years drawing close to the cycles of life and death. Researchers who have studied solastalgia have found that the closer one is to the natural world, the more severe will be the disorientation, accompanied by any combination of numbness, anger, and melancholy.

Carolyn Lambert's *Solastalgia* trilogy unfolds very much in the spell of everyday observations, anxieties and routines. An audio track of buzzing insects, spoken um's and mechanical hum's hypnotizes the camera and almost hypnotizes us as well. The relation of what we hear and what we see is oblique, even deflective. Woven through the videos there is a sense of slow-motion derangement or anesthetized despair, occasionally waking to an urgency that passes soon after it arrives. We have run right up against our own defenses, the barriers that save us from living in constant agitation. The next step, the one deferred the longest, will be a full-hearted grieving. But not past the limits of endurance, not so far that life loses meaning and ending it seems the most useful thing to do.

In these works, Lambert poses a question in all but words: how do we deal with a crisis that has no end? The secret, she implies, is in tenderness toward ordinary details. As we pass through the predictable responses to loss, the pleading voices and the hesitant voices and the hums of a summer day pass through us. In the face of a diminished world, we continue in the fullness of life, living as though what we do matters. The secret we might then imagine is in our attachment to life.

- Claire Pentecost  
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