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Panel 32: Visualising Climate

Title: **Artwash and Influence: Photography and Climate Change in the *Prix Pictet***

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The *Prix Pictet*, a photography prize that is in its sixth cycle, foregrounds multiple sustainability issues with a view to both showing the impact of various environmental concerns (including climate change) as well as addressing how new sustainable living patterns might emerge. The prize aims to be prestigious, drawing upon the expertise of notable international photography curators, written contributions of various notable writers and scholars, including Slavoz Zizek and Simon Schama, and prestigious photographers including Allan Sekula, Gideon Mendel and John Gossage. The *Prix Pictet,* then, can be seen to be negotiating complex territory. It addresses sustainability explicitly (although not rigorously) whilst also quietly ensuring social prestige for its creator. Pictet is a Swiss private bank and this prizes helps to raise awareness of its sustainability fund. This paper, then, aims to explore the potential effects and affects of such an exhibition, created and promoted as it is by the proliferation of international capital. Following Mel Evans, this paper will argue that the exhibition is as much for ‘special publics’ or ‘opinion leaders’ (those who have the potential to influence, governments, policy makers and other influential organisations) that sustainability issues are being addressed and supported by this part of the investment banking sector. Moreover, in utilising art that explicitly addresses sustainability, the suggestion is made that myriad other publics are also doing the same. Whilst the impact of such exhibitions is likely to be diverse there is a risk here of complacency in that something, *enough*, is already being done to address climate change.

**Keywords**: Prix Pictet, greenwashing, artwash, sustainability, photography, photography prizes

**Introduction**

The *Prix Pictet*, a photography prize that is in its sixth cycle, “aims to harness the power of photography – all genres of photography – to draw attention to the issues of sustainability” (Prix Pictet, 2014b) [show slide]. To date the prize has included work that engages with climate change, the impact of harmful consumption and extractive activities on both the environment and communities, as well as representing the impact of current unsustainable living conditions for many people around the world. The prize aims to be prestigious, drawing upon the expertise of notable international photography curators, writers, artists, photographers and international agencies such as the United Nations. The prize is also lucrative, awarding 100,00 Swiss Francs to the winner (approx. £70,000) and there is a further award of a commission to an artist to represent a place that Pictet is supporting through its sustainability fund. (Pictet is a private bank based in Geneva with offices around the world.) Whilst the publicity surrounding the prize is sometimes underwhelming, with the last London exhibition barely garnering notice from the art press and lasting just two weeks, the list of notable contributors makes it clear that this is a prize that is culturally prestigious. Whilst the contributions of say, Simon Schama, Slavoj Zizek[[1]](#footnote-1) and Kofi Annan, together with the notable names that have been nominated for the prize, help establish the prize’s credibility within the international arenas of art and culture, questions need to be raised about the prize, its financial underpinning and what the various supporters and contributors gain from associating with it.

So how might we conduct an analysis of such a prize? The question that I would like to ask in this context is: who the prize is aimed at, and, what kinds of meanings can we deduce from the activity of organising an exhibition, touring it internationally and producing a fairly lavish book to accompany it? What kinds of messages does Prix Pictet generate about sustainability? I would also like to briefly reference Mel Evans’ analysis of oil sponsorship in the arts as her work contains pertinent points that can be brought to bear on this cultural activity. Finally, I will argue that there is a risk that the prize speaks predominantly to special publics, I.e. to those with cultural influence. I am proposing that the kinds of messages that the prize creates about the world of the private banking sector and the world of arts, is that questions of sustainability and climate change are taken seriously; indeed, the bank, and the artists it represents through the prize are concerned about the people most affected by climate change and corporate greed. (Importantly, though, beyond the performance of the prize there is no need to demonstrate further action.) Indeed, many of the artists and photographers seem to care passionately about communities, places and environments that are being eroded or irrevocably changed by consumption. More sinisterly, though, the creator of the prize seems to be able to create cultural credibility and prestige for itself by associating itself with this prize and with the discourse around sustainability (although of course there is no in-depth definition of sustainability provided in the literature immediately around the prize). One of the big risks of this prize, then, is that it creates complacency around notions of sustainability and climate change. Indeed, it seems to be part of a increasing tendency in troubled commercial sectors: if there is a controversy around the excess of corporate capital or environmental impact then one solution seems to be to sponsor a photography prize (the chemical giant Syngenta also sponsors a photography prize on “key global issues”).[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Artists and Commentaries on Climate Change**

Each prize, which is awarded approximately every 18 months, has a theme to which invited curators on the international arts scene, can nominate artists that they feel have made a relevant contribution to the discussion at hand. The six prizes so far have been themed as Water, Earth, Growth, Power, Consumption, and Disorder. [show slide] Finalists who have expressly addressed issues of climate change have mainly featured in Water (2008), Power (2012) and Disorder (2015). The subjects have included melting glaciers, communities and infrastructure affected by flooding (both coastal and by rivers), and the impacts of devastating weather events – notably Hurricane Katrina (Water, 2012). [Show slide] Interestingly, Joel Sternfeld’s project *When It Changed*, also featured in the Power cycle (2012); this project depicts the delegates at the 11th United Nations Conference on Climate Change in 2008, many of whom express despair or boredom. The topics included in the prize, however, are not limited to questions of climate change and overall the prize, and its exhibitors, creates a significant statement about consumption and its impact – both environmentally and on people – in the first decades of the 21st Century. Many of the submitted artworks are expressly aimed at the art market and are presented to a large scale with high production values (that is, the artworks are expensive commodities in their own right). Many of the cycles, though, have included, if not foregrounded, more humanitarian and traditional types of documentary photography, but few of these humanitarian projects have expressly tackled climate change and its impact on people.

Looking more closely at the the two projects from *Water* [show slide] both projects represent melting landscapes and icebergs from Antartica and Greenland – a subject that has become something of a cliché within photographic practices on climate change. More recently, Gideon Mendel in the *Disorder* (Prix Pictet, 2015) cycle represents couples, children and families standing in their flooded homes [show slide]. Whilst flooding is clearly caused by numerous factors Mandel has expressly framed his work with reference to climate change (Mendel’s work has also been published in journalistic contexts as well as art contexts). None of the prizes, to date, have been awarded to photographers working on climate change as their subject.

There are few social studies that aim to measure the impact of such exhibitions on its visiting publics, either in terms of attitudes or in changes of behaviour. Indeed, the presentation of the Prix Pictet is usually both conservative (in that it is a conventional exhibition) and highly polished, either using or mimicking the spaces of elite art institutions and their blank walls which facilitate aesthetic as well as conceptual appreciation of the artworks. Nevertheless, I think it is important to note that such artworks can create compelling messages about the state of our worlds and communities and whilst I have no proof that such messages reach beyond the publics educated to ‘read’ such messages, I think there is potential here in terms of creating discussions about the impact of our ways of living on the wider world. The books, free pamphlets etc. that accompany the exhibition, and the exhibition itself, certainly demonstrate the desire of the artists to create dialogue on some of the problems that our world faces. With such potential, though, it is important to question whether full opportunity is made of this desire to create dialogue and opportunities for change, so with this in mind I’d like to take a closer look at the framework of the prize to see what kind of cultural work it is that the prize performs.

**Arts Sponsorship and Elite Publics**

Mel Evans, in her book *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts* (2015) argues that arts sponsorship brings large corporations, especially oil companies, many benefits. Evans’ focus is on the impact of art sponsorship for notable, easily identifiable institutions such as Tate and the British Museum, but I argue that the benefits also apply to less identifiable institutions, such as a private bank. Evans’ notes that public relations and brand management are important to global and transnational corporations and that sponsorship “offers a pretence of corporate responsibility for the callous profiteer; and becomes an illusionary act of cultural relevance for outmoded industries”(p. 8). Indeed, such sponsorship opportunities enable such corporations to lobby, stymie efforts for climate change and even places “restraints on imagination” (p. 8). Arts sponsorship enables such companies to “perform the role of the corporate citizen”, effectively performing, pretending and disguising so that one thing may be done “in order to distract from another” (p. 13). Evans goes on to say:

But it is more than this too. The wash is made possible in the act, the performative moment in which companies take on a thoughtful, refined, cultured persona designed for an audience of special publics - opinion-formers occupying influential positions in the media and politics. Not only does art cover up the negative attributes, but the company re-performs its brand in a new disguise…The performance of Corporate Citizen is a necessary act to maintain a guise of social acceptability (pp. 13-14).

On this note I think it is important to look a little further at what Pictet is, and what it is that they are gaining by creating a photography prize on sustainability.

**Pictet**

In similarity to Big Oil, banks have something of a reputation problem. Associated with vast profits, inappropriate lending, the selling on of loans, and putting savers’ money at risk, banks are sometimes the brunt of pertinent criticisms about the neoliberal economy in which we live, especially as they directly benefit from decreased regulation around money, yet usually do not have to bear the responsibility of their mistakes. In addition to that, their investment practices, and their drive for growth, connect them to widespread social and financial inequality as well as the environmental impact of growth. At the very least, banks enable the deposits of money made from many questionable trading practices (Big Oil has to put its money somewhere!).

Banks also fundamentally assist in money laundering, that is, they are seen (or not seen) to be handling dirty money. Money laundering is where money changes hands either because it is associated with a morally questionable business practices, or as is increasingly common, with assistance of the avoidance of paying tax on trading profits through the use of shell companies. Countries such as Switzerland, where Pictet is based, is one of the countries strongly associated with money laundering and tax avoidance opportunities. As a tax havens, or as Nicholas Shaxson sometimes refers to them, ‘secrecy jurisdictions’, Swiss banks are able to operate beyond the lens of the law: there is no scrutiny of where money comes from, how it is used or traded, what it is invested in. Indeed, secrecy jurisdictions are often used to enable companies who not only avoid paying tax, but who exploit local populations, enforce or enable military rule and enable or encourage other types of national and international crimes (Shaxson, 2015, p. 18). Countries such as the US, the U.K. and Switzerland enable these kinds of financial activities to take place as a means of facilitating revenue to enter their countries; they work because they enable the investors a high degree of secrecy around their dealings, and they also enable large quantities of money to enter national economies.

“Tax havens are about escape from the rules and responsibilities of societies elsewhere. They offer escape (or ‘freedom’) from taxes, from transparency and disclosure, from financial regulations, from inheritance rules, from law and order and the police, from rules about pornography or gambling, from corporate accountability and rules about good governance – and plenty more. You take your money elsewhere – offshore – and you can escape those rules that you don’t like” (Shaxson, 2015, p. 72). These kinds of freedoms are only available to the very wealthy and privileged – partly because the structure of hiding the money, transactions and profits, needs to be very complex and is likely to be stretched across multiple countries and companies.

Authors such as Nicholas Shaxson and Sebastien Guex, have noted the connection between the high degree of propriety countries such as Switzerland and the U.K. outwardly demonstrate, whilst also providing services for the laundering of money. The Financial Secrecy Index, for example, ranks Switzerland as the world’s largest and most threatening tax haven (Shaxson, 2015, p. 141). It operates on a high degree of trust (Swiss banks won’t steal your money) but you can also trust Swiss Banks (or other tax havens) not to look at where your money comes from (Shaxson, 2015, p. 147). Importantly, the Swiss banking sector invests in making a clean image for themselves, including smoke screens, spin and what Shaxson calls a ‘theatre of probity’ (p. 147); this is where problem banks are shown to be rotten apples or isolated incidents that can be weeded out, rather than part of a wider, endemic problem.

Pictet is a private bank in Geneva, with offices around the world, and they describe themselves as ‘one of the leading wealth and asset managers in Europe’ (<https://www.group.pictet/corporate/en/home.html)>. In its 2015 Annual Review the bank reported that it had 437 billion Swiss Francs under management and made a profit of 452 million Swiss Francs – that’s just over £314 million. Their company profile distances themselves from investment banking, but it is clear that they have funds to invest in, including their sustainable energy fund (which has won awards from the banking sector). Part of their activities, including wealth management, hints at tax avoidance, although, as the bank is private, there is no way of knowing whether it encourages tax avoidance or not, unless one has money to approach the bank with.

Pictet are clearly proud of their photography prize and their Annual Review includes information on the prize in a section on responsibility. Pictet claims that they have a wider responsibility to “society and the wider world in which we live” (<https://annualreview.group.pictet/#responsibility-a>, accessed, 22nd May 2016) and relates sustainability both to the ongoing profits of their clients and to the environmental sustainability of the planet. The report also features a quote from Stephen Barber, the Chairman of the Prix Pictet and Managing Director of Pictet et Cie: “In the energy exchange of life on Earth the natural world maintains a delicate balance between order and disorder. We ought to be more conscious of how our actions upset this balance” (<https://annualreview.group.pictet/#responsibility-c>, accessed 22nd May 2016). [show slide] Valerie Belin’s photograph, *Still Life with Pearls* (2015) is one of the few illustrations in the Review and is featured in the section on corporate responsibility.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Each prize has been toured internationally to locations including Zurich, Geneva, London, Paris, Arles, Amsterdam, Luxembourg, Dubai, Dublin, Brussels, Tokyo, Mexico City, New York and Los Angeles, amongst other places. Some of the exhibitions are short lived, with an opening time lasting only two weeks (which is fairly unusual in the art world; temporary exhibitions often last 4 weeks, sometimes longer). The locations, of course, are interesting, with many of the locations offering audiences who might be interested in private banking or the arts (or both at the same time). Many of these cities have notable galleries and art scenes and therefore have the kind of special publics, and investors, who might be interested in the prize, its topic of sustainability, and opportunities for wealth management.

**Some tentative conclusions**

Unearthing the workings of a private Swiss bank is no easy task, especially as Swiss banks maintain privacy for their investors and privacy around their own operations. I’m not able to state, as a fact, that Pictet is laundering money or facilitating large-scale tax evasion, but the method of their operations avoid questions of accountability. Their sustainability activities, especially the photography prize, therefore look like attempts to build credibility with special publics and is certainly a performance of corporate social responsibility; as an audience member in this performance I am not able to tell how credible or damaging this performance is – it certainly looks worrying. The Prize certainly performs a commitment to notions of sustainability and probably helps to create credibility both for the bank’s message about sustainability and the sustainability fund in particular. It also makes the bank look invested in the long term health of the planet and of the people who live there, all without the partners of the bank actually revealing their personal politics or the methods of their trading. To the special publics who visit such institutions, who may well be avoiding asking the harder questions about growth, sustainability and the realities of climate change, the exhibition is an assurance that other people are asking some questions about how the world and its communities are treated.

Art’s, especially photography’s, relationship with the environment is notably complex. Resource heavy (in terms of equipment, materials and energy usage) it is not a practice that can easily labelled, or turned into, something that is environmentally friendly, or even made easily sustainable. Yet many of the artists and photographers entered for the award harbour genuine concern for communities, places and environments and some have expressed concern about climate change. Whilst many practices are to some extent complicit with the machinations of capital or other forms of exploitation, there is a possibility that this prize turns the concern of photographers into a performance that benefits the bank long before real questions about climate change or social justice are addressed.

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1. Zizek’s essay for the *Consumption* cycle is an extract of his book *First as Tragedy, then as Farce* (2009). The essay was also syndicated to the Guardian to publicise the prize when it was exhibited at London’s V&A Museum. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Syngenta, a chemical giant that provides specialised services to the agricultural industry, has run a prize which is now in its third cycle. In difference to more famous photography prizes, such as the Deutsche Borse, both Syngenta and Pictet created their prize rather than sponsoring an already existing institutional activity. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nadav Kander also shot the photographs of the partners for their annual review. Belin’s photograph is, in itself, very interesting. As an exhibited object it is large, has high production values, and is worth quite a lot of money. The photograph performs both a critique of consumption (in an excessive, disordered way) whilst she also being an object of fetishised consumption. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)