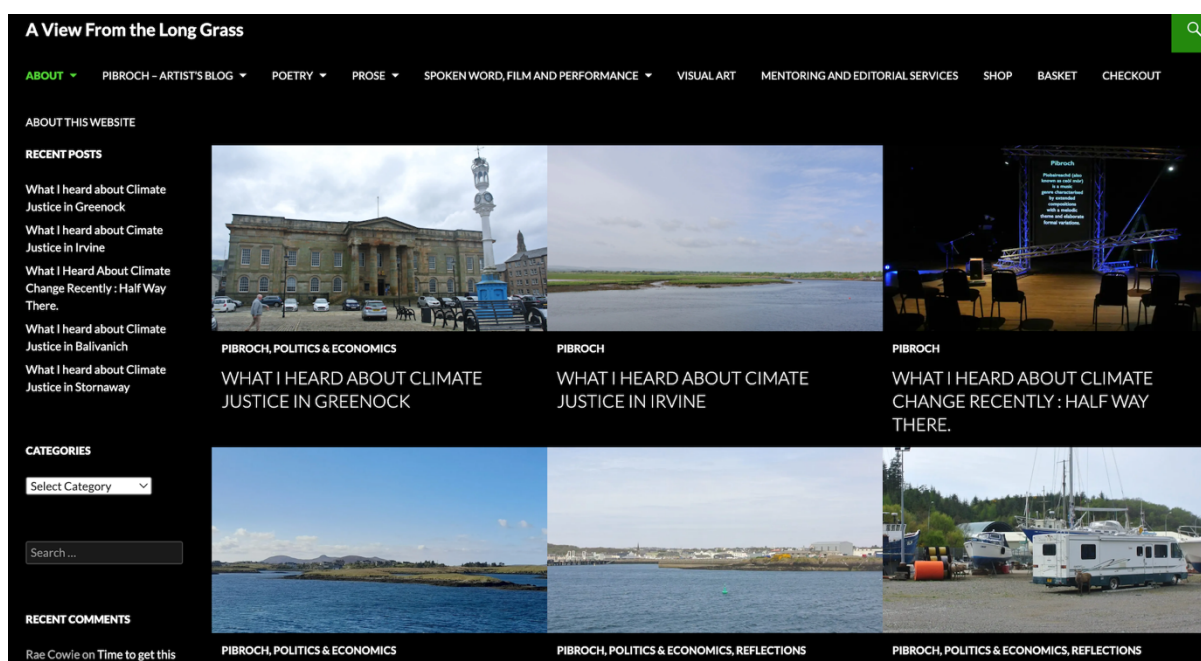


Climate Change – Dialogue through Scientific Activist Poetry Films

JOHN BOLLAND, climate activist, poet and erstwhile extractive scientist

in conversation with Sarah Tremlett

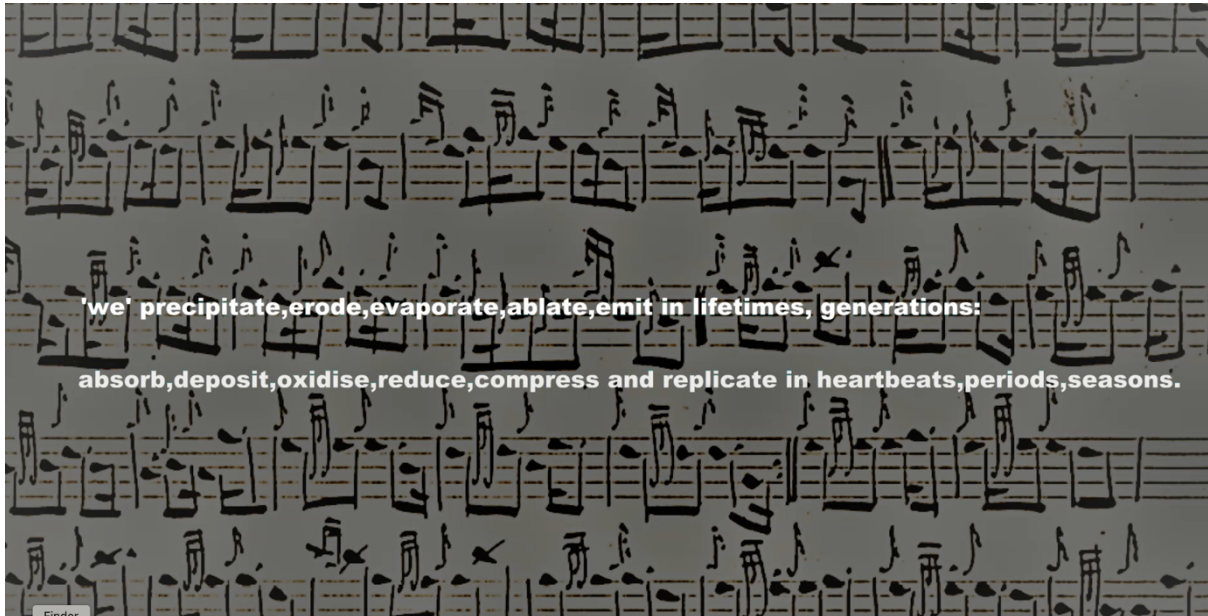
John Bolland based in North-East Scotland, is now known for his wide-ranging and prolific creative projects that include poetry, short story writing, painting and print, music, addiction recovery workshops, and particularly theatrical performances relating to climate change that include poetry films alongside audience questions. He is well suited to this role, as whilst being an activist with Extinction Rebellion, his main career was firmly entrenched in fossil fuels. As a graduate chemist, between 1989 and 2014 he was employed by the upstream oil and gas industry in research, design, and worldwide operational management.



John's highly climate active website: www.aviewfromthelonggrass.com.

His creative work explores the experience of working in the extractive industries and the issues of inter-generational responsibilities that arise from this experience. He has recently completed a novel, *Threads*, set in Angola, Scotland and the USA which explores themes of extractivism and neo-colonialism. John's geopoetry film *Blur Times* <https://vimeo.com/844589039> was created as part of his spoken-word project – *Pibroch* – combining scientific data with a series of geocouplets reflecting on the nature and experience of time. *Pibroch* is a poetry collection and spoken word performance which explores parallels between the (current) Climate Emergency and the Piper Alpha disaster which occurred in the North Sea in 1988 where oil workers were trapped on a burning platform. He says 'We are all, currently, trapped on this burning platform – and, as in 1988, we are continuing to pump hydrocarbons into the flames.'

I first encountered John in relation to the publication *Earth Lines: Geopoetry and Geopoetics* (Edinburgh Geological Society, 2021) ‘a compilation of poetry and essays – over forty poems on themes of stratigraphy, geological process, geologists at work, geo-identity and geopoetics, ... and the poetics of climate change.’



Geocouplets, *Blur Times*, John Bolland

Blur Times was featured amongst the poetry films accompanying the publication (where I was one of the editors, and in which I also had a geopoetic family history poem and film – *Firewash*). More can be found about the book and also a link for the collection of geopoetic films or digital poems at: <https://www.edinburghgeolsoc.org/earth-lines/>

John’s work fascinated me in his unusual combining of scientific data with poetic geocouplets; of stark, forbidding information, and a need to open up the terrible situation we are facing today through both a poetic and analytical response. As a scientist he says he is aware of parallel truths ‘As a trained physical scientist with a lifelong interest in geology I was aware of the urgency and vitality of life and the resilience and continuity of biophysical processes. This demanded a critical exploration of the experience and significance of time itself – questions of both its granularity – in moments, seasons, lifetimes, generations, kalpas – and its direction. The geocouplets in *Blur Times* attempt to challenge the vital urgency of the film-poems with an objective relativity.’

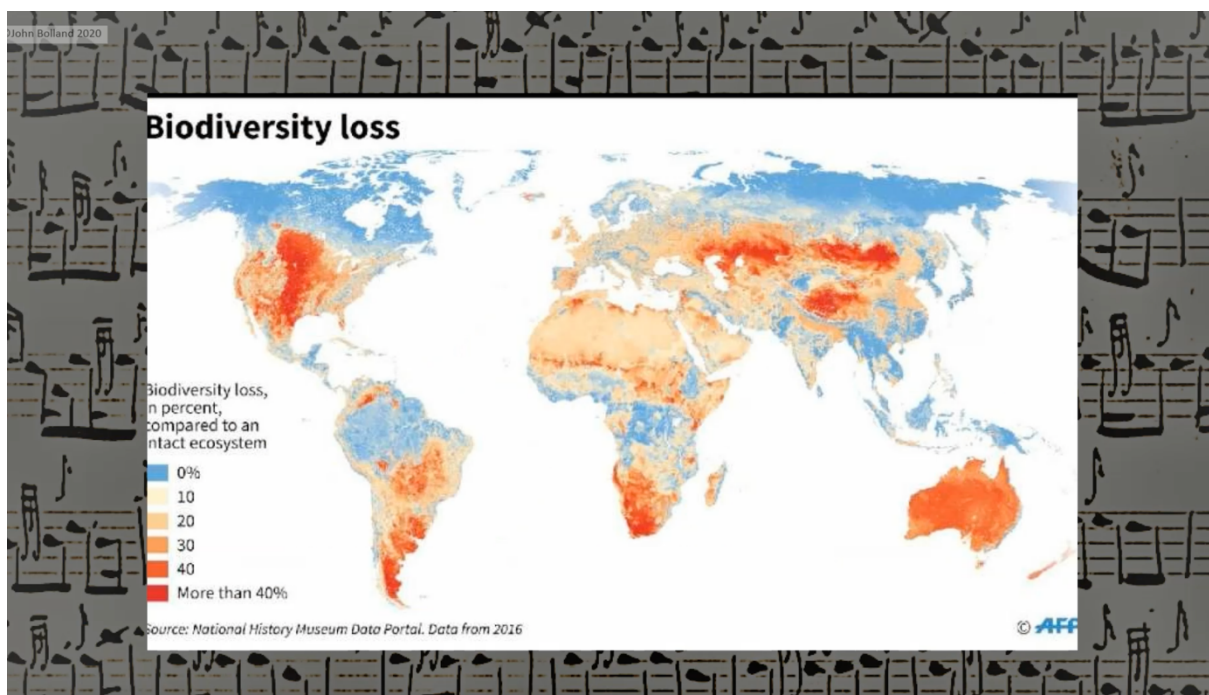
ST: *What do you think is the relationship between scientific information, poetry and climate change?*

JB: My starting point with poetry in this domain – and these days most of my work is in this domain – is that poetry is a fluid and can be a radically subversive genre. Public discussion around

a topic as vital and complex as climate change is disciplined by the need for accuracy (not precision) whilst subverted by various ‘knowledge controversies’ [See Material Politics by Andrew Barry] around the ‘meaning’ of the ‘facts’. Which renders it difficult to achieve actionable consensus or even ‘meaningful’ action.

I think poetry can be the petri-dish of meaning: its conventions allow it to tug at the seams of discourses whilst honouring its ‘expert’ substance, braid content and thereby create the potential for new synthetic meaning. Climate science and climate ethics cannot and should not be simplified within their own disciplined discourses [see also climate ‘economics’ and petro-anthropology]. But it can be reframed, taking poetic license to propose meanings which are essentialized and, perhaps, more actionable. These are only proposals: but they are ‘informed’ proposals.

And, of course, the techniques of poetry is full of mnemonic devices allowing both memorable kennings and whole texts to be created and repeated (in private and in public) which provides the signal with more persistence and engagement than (say) an IPCC Report.

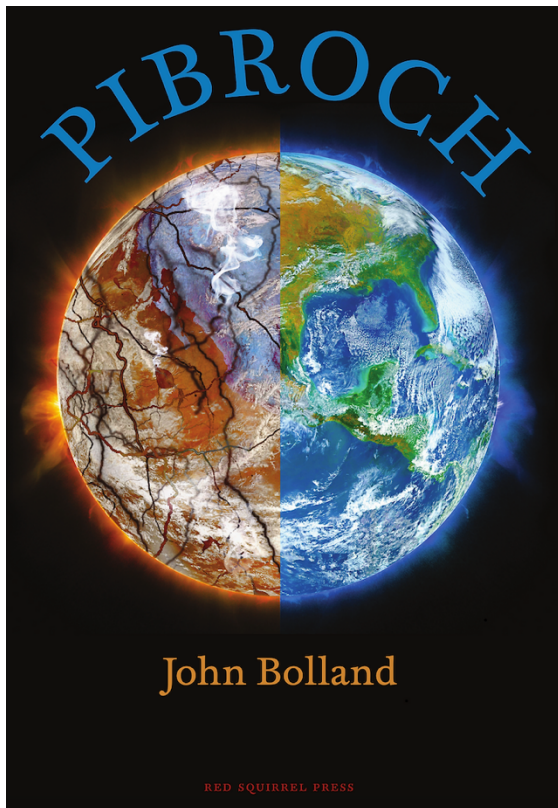


Blur Times, John Bolland

ST: Tell us more about your approach to climate change activism through poetry, and how it gels with your background in chemistry and the oil and gas industries?

JB: Climate Activists are often at the bleeding edge of the knowledge controversies over Climate & Societies. It is an intersectional community of interest with varied foci – from conservation to restorative justice, anti-capitalism to nimbyism. Each individual and group bias within the whole represents a specific human perspective which requires address with compassion and

understanding. Demonstrations are both an engine to affirm solidarity and a means of provoking reflection. But, while necessary, the compassion and understanding is often blunted by the scale of the mobilization.



Poetry – performed, filmed or on the page – offers an opportunity for a more intimate and compassionate engagement – packaged with a degree of entertainment (music, imagery humour). It can also, to an extent, be relatively audience specific. Some of the elements of *Blur Times* are central to my last collection – *Pibroch* – and the current touring show of the the same name. The show blends words, music and projected imagery – much like *Blur Times* – but is performed in specific spaces and places. The format is a 50-minute performance followed by a 50 minutes (usually more) audience discussion exploring individual responses to the show and the issues around Climate Justice. The discussions to date have always been site-specific and individual – surfacing the many knowledge controversies, solidarities and concerns that exist.

Pibroch can be found at: <https://www.redsquirrelpress.com/product-page/pibroch-john-bolland>

Discussions and site-specific research are written up after each show as blogs on his website.

Poetry, then, is the starting point of engagement and discussion – theatre is perhaps the pre-eminent public art form. Ongoing engagement with blogs and with the book and performance sustain persistence. The poetic delivery is rich but rewards another reading or listening (or viewing). Some audience members have returned to see the show again. Copies of the book have found their way to the USA, Sweden, the Netherlands.

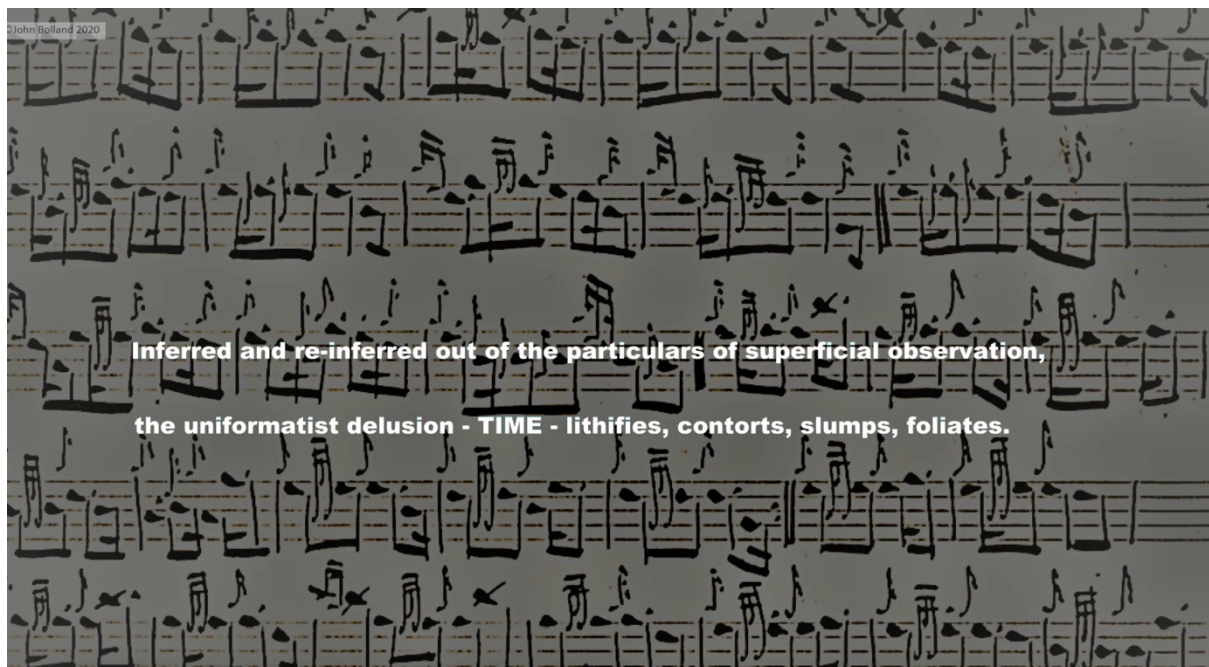
And then there is my ‘other life’ – educated due to the post-war dispensation, working class with restricted ‘cultural’ opportunities, educated in the sciences and experienced in both engineering and petro-economics. A controversy exists in the ‘spoken word’ genre (as indeed with ‘page poetry’) that it is now expected to be a ‘confessional’ form...the poet is expected to bring herself – his authentic self – to the page or stage. So, the poet is often struggling with issues of personal confidentiality, egotism and artistic intent.

My scientific training and industrial experience – in a sector which is both geopolitically problematic – to put it mildly – and ‘offshore’ – often working at the frontiers of scrutiny and

experience – allow me to contribute something distinctive to the mix. A particular register in the poet-activist chorus. It is not the only register. Other forms of Geopoetics and Climate Poetics have their solos and their ensemble roles.

ST: *Can you talk about time in relation to your work and how poetry films help the cause.*

JB: The question of Climate is a question of time. But, as reflected in the quotes from Carlo Rovelli's work, time (at the quantum level) does not really 'exist' (i.e. it's not necessary to make the maths work). Similarly, the future individuals and animals which will be most harmed by our current actions do not yet 'exist' (unless all time is present in etc...) And much of the damage getting to 450ppm was done by ancestors who no longer 'exist'. Who can't be held responsible or dunned for compensation.



Blur Times, John Bolland

Intergenerational ethics – and the subversion of the idea that 'now' is in any way normal or stable – has to lie at the centre of the knowledge controversies and therefore of Climate Poetics. Otherwise the doors are wide open to fatalism or passing the buck back or forth over generations. And of course, acknowledgement of inter-generational moral responsibility leaves the Colonial Powers open to moral claims in the present for past actions. So time is a critical component of my work: the matter is urgent but the timescales are 'unimaginable' in our current imaginary: se we need a new imaginary.

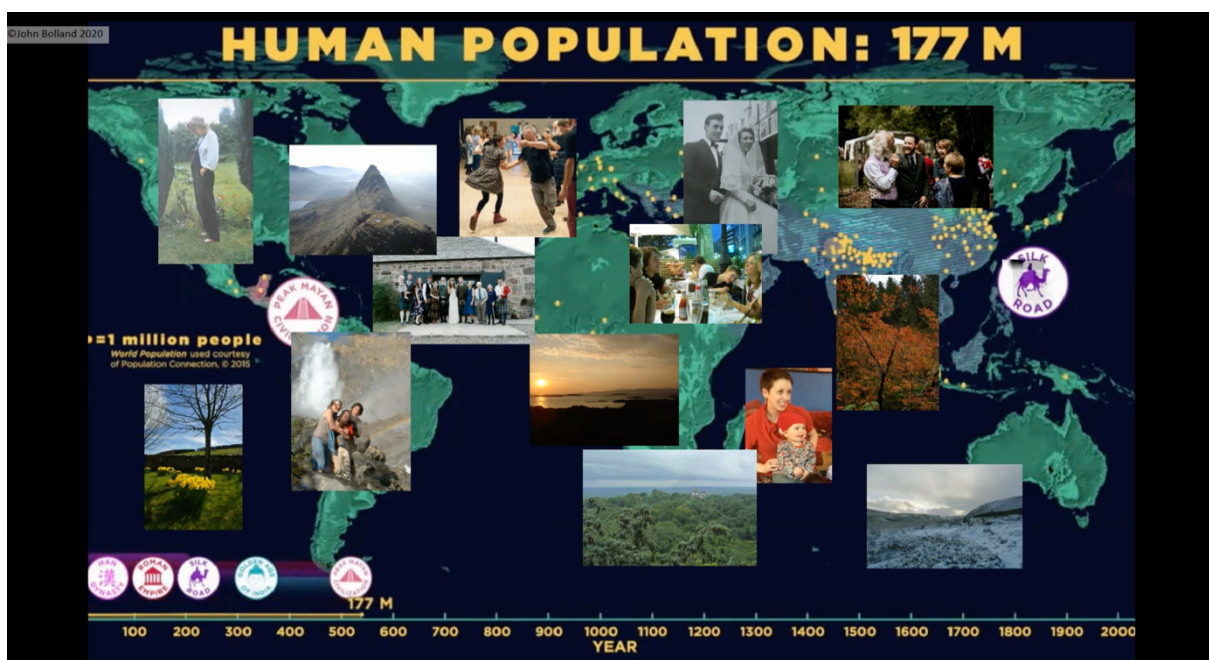
Film poems enable us to blend registers and content more richly than on the page and less expensively (and more asynchronously) than theatre performance. The essentialized 'reasoning'

(or invocation) of the text can be scaffolded by complementary or discordant imagery, both informing and provocative. They clearly have a role in my practice.

Experience on my recent tour, however, have also underlined the importance of performance or screening to larger audiences (as has been done recently by Platform and FOE(S) in *The Oil Machine* and *The Future s not F****d*. Theatre managers are remarking that they are experiencing pressure to 'just stream' performances, which reduces the public theatrical dimension to 1-2-1 consumption of content. My experience of the last 6 months is that the promotion of dialogue, leading to collective action and collaborations, is vital to the project so publication of a film-poem as just another cultural artefact has limitations.

ST: *The despondency, fear and depression caused by global warming is surely partly because we feel the governments and major oil companies aren't taking the responsibility to show what they are doing to arrest the situation. What do you feel your role is in this?*

JB: It is not easy to feel upbeat about current prospects. I feel it's unlikely that we'll stay much below 3 degrees. Governments and major oil companies aren't showing us what they are doing because, in essence, they are doing nothing (effective). As Stephen M Gardiner points out in *A Perfect Moral Storm*, the evidence of behaviour suggests that most countries' de facto strategy is "Accept and Endure"; systemic change is in the 'too difficult' box. Climate change is baked in to the Nation State.



Blur Times, John Bolland

So: I read (widely), I discuss (as widely as my carbon budget with allow) and currently feel my current role as a poet and performer is to a) propose that current systems of governance are not fit for purpose b) that the current expectations of the WEIRD (Western Educated Industrialised,

Rich & Democratic) are not sustainable c) that change will come and change has occurred before: communities and individuals need to develop agency and a willingness to change and be changed by evolving circumstances. I think the fundamental issues around Climate Change are moral and political – they are about values and agency and a more **informed and intuitive** sense of what we owe the future and ourselves.

ST: Thank you so much John, for sharing your thoughts and ideas.

Within this remit to inform, creative and aesthetic works are burgeoning that are leading the field of poetry film and videopoetry. Ethics are fully inhabiting creative methods of meaning. On one side the immersion into a natural world that is brought to us via the screen, on the other a call to arms and arresting us with how we must be caretakers for the future.

I do not like the term 'climate change'. It feels passive, as if 'the climate' is responsible not us. We have been manipulated into a situation caused by the oil and gas industries and were sold these types of energy without knowledge of their devastating outcomes. Today, by now, we should be only speaking of the Solar and Wind Age and the death of the Age of Oil – if we allow a future to look back at us with any certainty.