

BROWSERS' GUIDELINES TO *NEW COAL*

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Morphing investigative journalism with art-making, Tegan Bristow challenges browsers to interact with her intentionally disruptive comparison of the fate of two world heritage sites, both valleys cursed with coal.

Lush riverine bush on both sides, we come hurtling around a bend and it flattens into black. That's it, just the vast black flatness of coal. Twice when driving past the Thuli Coal mines on the Zimbabwean side of the Limpopo Valley something extraordinary has happened. On rounding that bend, rather than the bustle of mine workers on the flat black surface, it's just still – as if someone has hit a pause button – the only motion, an elephant bull blustering slowly over the black black coal.

It is this moment that initially inspired this investigative artwork. The impetus for actually making it: simultaneous invitations from Lara Allen to make a work for *The Salon* that would comment on the Vele coal mine threat to the Mapungubwe Valley, and to present a paper at the 16th International Symposium on Electronic Art, ISEA2010, being held in the Rhur Valley, Germany.

The introduction to the piece on the works' site explains the bizarre congruency between these two world heritage sites. Briefly, the artwork draws on online sources to explore the history of the Rhur Valley in Germany, which had been mined for almost 200 years. The Valley's inhabitants are now



Photo courtesy Tegan Bristow

making a desperate attempt to create a 'cultural capital' on the ruins of a decimated industrial landscape. In my artwork, this highly politicised history is compared to that of Mapungubwe Valley in the far north of Limpopo Province, South Africa, which is at this moment being seriously threatened by the Vele coal mine. Most importantly the work examines a projected future for the Mapungubwe Valley based on what has happened in the Rhur Valley. Will the Mapungubwe Valley suffer the same sad fate? And why is a thousand year old cultural and natural heritage site considered less important than a coal mine with a comparatively tiny, but inversely destructive, 40 year estimated life span?

[The Valley's inhabitants are now making a desperate attempt to create a 'cultural capital' on the ruins of a decimated industrial landscape.](#)



Photo courtesy Tegan Bristow

A graphical timeline is the base and central navigation facility of this investigative artwork. On this timeline I have indicated key time periods for each region. These periods pertain either to a period of cultural growth or to mining growth. Gaps between these periods indicate times during which there is either no development, or a decline before the next set of events gets set into motion. The comparison is not direct: the areas are distinctly different, but it is this that makes the work relevant. Notice how the Mapungubwe landscape has been almost untouched for nearly a thousand years, and how rapidly depleted the Rhur region became.

For this particular piece I have drawn from a tradition of Internet art that is disruptive in its viewing; a form termed 'the aesthetics of failure' by Michelle White in her book *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship*. In the

aesthetics of failure approach, web standardisation rules are broken and a non 'ordinary web' experience is planned in order to 'waken' the viewer into addressing the content in a different light.

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I have chosen to use an excess of pop-up windows that move around the screen and load new content as one clicks through the base timeline. This allows me to create a disruptive experience as well as load a great deal of content into the work. I have adopted this strategy in order to refer conceptually to the fact that there is a problem. Similarly the cutting into pieces of real estate: the screen real estate is a metaphor for the threatened landscape. This method additionally refers to how information is understood and digested in the Internet age, allowing me to compose and 'draw' with comparison and analysis of bits and pieces of already formatted data.

Finally, the joy of online artworks is that the viewer can choose to spend time with the content, or simply browse through at their own pace. Further, as the Internet is an interactive communications medium, viewers can comment and contribute to the artwork. I have therefore included a 'contribute links' button from which browsers can add links or comments to the piece.