

Potential Worlds 1: Planetary Memories

March 7, 2020 – October 11, 2020

Monira Al Qadiri, Maria Thereza Alves, Alberto Baraya, Ursula Biemann, Carolina Caycedo, Cooking Sections, Mark Dion, Mishka Henner, Reena Saini Kallat, Kiluanji Kia Henda, Jakob Kudsk Steensen, Almagul Menlibayeva, Katja Novitskova, Tabita Rezaire, Zina Saro-Wiwa, Himali Singh Soin

Potential Worlds 1: Planetary Memories is the first in a series of two exhibitions that will explore the relationship between humans and nature. The works on view in both exhibitions scrutinize the human impact on the planet and sketch potential future scenarios for life on Earth. Climate change and other phenomena are evidence that human activities are affecting the planet; the repercussions are visible and tangible. Faced with this urgent concern, we need to question our own actions and ways of thinking. That is the point of departure for the art on display in the exhibition *Potential Worlds 1: Planetary Memories*. The works shed light on forms of the appropriation of the natural world in the pursuit of power and resources. They point up the consequences for the environment as well as the social fabric and question conceptions in the natural sciences that were developed in the course of the power-driven appropriation of nature. Incorporating critical analysis, wide-ranging research, and creative solutions, they also underscore the potentials for coexistence on our planet and show that it is possible to devise and enact a new form of communal life on Earth.

The dynamics of the appropriation as well as destruction of the natural environment are one recurrent theme of the exhibition. The works undertake an acute critique of these dynamics and point up potential avenues of resistance. One major concern is the industrial processing and exploitation of natural resources, as in oil production. In this connection, **Ursula Biemann** (b. 1955) examines the global ramifications of climate change. Her video *Deep Weather* (2013) combines footage shot in tar sand landscapes in Canada from which petroleum is mined with material showing Bangladeshis building a levee to protect their land from flooding. Reflecting on some of the causes and effects of climate change, the artist's work draws attention to interconnections between the planet's ecosystems and raises awareness of the political responsibilities. **Monira Al Qadiri** (b. 1983) studies the impact of the oil industry on the culture of the countries along the Persian Gulf. Her sculptural abstractions of oil drilling heads visualize the displacement of the region's pearl fishers by oil production.

The artists **Zina Saro-Wiwa** (b. 1976) and **Carolina Caycedo** (b. 1978) explore forms of resistance and reactions to the destruction and privatization of the natural environment. In her video installation *Karikpo Pipeline* (2015), Zina Saro-Wiwa turns the spotlight on the extraction of oil from the ground beneath the Niger Delta. Oil production began in the 1950s, with dramatic consequences for the environment and the area's people, the Ogoni, who were

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given no say on the regulations governing the oil industry's drilling operations. The oil pipelines crisscrossing the Ogoni's land serve as the setting of the video installation. Dancers and acrobats perform on the pipes. Their movements and masks are derived from the Karikpo dance, a traditional form in Ogoni culture. *Karikpo Pipeline* examines how people live with the debris left behind by ecological destruction and calls for forms of interaction with the environment rooted in cultural traditions. Carolina Caycedo's project *Be Dammed* (2012–) highlights the devastating effects of hydroelectric dams on rivers and the way the privatization of water has ravaged communities and ecosystems. The artist's focus is on the environment along rivers in Latin and North America and the political and performative activism of advocates for an environmentally and socially conscious use of hydroelectric power.

Like the resources that humans exploit for energy generation, the ecological impact of agriculture is a major area of concern in the exhibition. **Mishka Henner's** (b. 1976) prints visualize the impact of industrialized architecture and resource extraction. They are based on satellite photographs the artist found online and show large feedlots as well as oil fields. Yet they also bring abstract paintings to mind: Henner's works illustrate how abstract and inconceivable the dimensions of agriculture and the industrial use of land have become. Agrarian culture also figures prominently in the work of the artist duo **Cooking Sections** (2015–). Its point of departure is the French colonization of Algeria and the competition between the two countries' winemakers. The artists scrutinize the labels under which cheeses and wines are sold and the classification of products as «natural» or «national». **Reena Saini Kallat** (b. 1973) addresses territorial conflicts: her art visualizes a landscape in which nature serves as the symbolic model of a world that has overcome national borders and interstate conflicts over resources. Each work unites two animal or plant species that are considered national symbols in states separated by disputed boundaries.

In light of the human appropriation of nature, the works in the exhibition inquire into ways to gather and disseminate knowledge of nature when humans believe themselves to be in a position of dominance. In his installation *The Library for the Birds of Zürich* (2016/20), **Mark Dion** (b. 1961) has gathered assorted books on ornithology in a large cage. The library is indeed one for the birds, and so live zebra finches and canaries flit about. The books are complemented by bird-hunters' implements. The artist shows that the history of the natural sciences is inextricably intertwined with the history of man's dominion over animals. At the same time, his work reveals the idea of making a gift to birds of the knowledge that humans have accumulated about their origins to be an absurd and presumptuous endeavor: the birds inhabit the cage in accordance with the laws of their own existence. **Kiluanji Kia Henda's** (b. 1979) humorous video *Havemos de Voltar/We shall return* (2017) portrays the giant sable antelope, which is also the national symbol of Angola, and lends it a voice. The video shows the animal, whose species is critically endangered, coming to life in an Angolan archive. It yearns to break free, return to nature, and escape its «fate» as a foil for human projections and object in a historical exhibition. This desire is framed in analogy with a poem by Angola's first president after the downfall of the Portuguese colonial order, in which he expresses his fervent wish for genuine independence. The artist **Alberto Baraya's** (b. 1968) project *Herbario de Plantas Artificiales* (*Herbarium of Artificial Plants*) (2001–) is concerned with the figure of the traveling explorer and botanist as well as botanical classifications. It takes inspiration from itinerant scientists of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, whose voyages of discovery in the name of science served to legitimize

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Western claims to territorial rule; colonial structures conversely subsidized their research. Baraya collects artificial rather than living plants, classifying his specimens in handwritten notes. With his artificial flowers, the artist offers an ironic take on the heroic figure of the adventurer, whose ostensible scientific objectivity he calls in question. **Himali Singh Soin's** (b. 1987) video takes the viewer to the Arctic and Antarctic regions and their mythologies, ecology, and history for a reflection on the widespread fear in nineteenth-century England that an ice age was imminent. Suffused with a magical atmosphere, the work combines documentary and historic footage with an imaginary world in which a figure is seen wandering through barren icebound sceneries.

The exhibition raises the question not only of how and in which contexts knowledge about nature was generated—but also of how much nature has to say about humans. The artist **Maria Thereza Alves** (b. 1961) retraces the trajectories of plants that merchants and slave traders unwittingly transported to new habitats on their ships, propagating them across the planet as witnesses to human migration. Her installation presents a collection of geographical ephemera as well as plants that found their way from European ports to New York. Where Alves's work lets plants attest to human history, **Tabita Rezaire** (b. 1989) conceives of the ocean as a repository of memories of human action. Her video *Deep Down Tidal* (2017) traces the submarine cables that were laid across the ocean floors to tie the entire world together in a single network—and, as it turns out, follow the routes of the erstwhile transatlantic slave trade. The artist shines a light on the history and geography of technological infrastructures that sprawl over the planet and become part of the environment.

One question that is pervasive in the exhibition is how humanity's presence becomes imprinted on the Earth—and what the long-term consequences may be. The works also asks how past histories of the environment will be narrated and recalled in the future—and which forms of life might yet come into being. In his virtual-reality installation *RE-ANIMATED* (2018–19), the artist **Jakob Kudsk Steensen** (b. 1987) brings the Kaua'i 'Ō'ō, an extinct bird, back to life as a digital avatar, releasing it into the wild on a replica of the Hawaiian island of Kauai that visitors are invited to discover using VR goggles. The artist designs a virtual world in which we can digitally reconstruct and recollect lost and destroyed formations of nature, envisioning nothing less than the reanimation his title proclaims. Where Kudsk Steensen replicates nature and lends it new form, **Katja Novitskova** fabricates creatures inspired by biotechnology and science whose nature remains to be determined. **Almagul Menlibayeva** (b. 1969), meanwhile, uses the urban planning of Kazakhstan's capital Astana (recently renamed Nur Sultan), a rapidly growing city surrounded by steppes, as a springboard for an investigation of technological and architectural visions for the future. Her work transposes footage exploring the urban fabric of Nur Sultan into a new thematic context by combining it with images from the cosmodrome in the Kazakh town of Baikonur. The spaceport and the rockets that lift off from it result in space debris that damages the environment. Devising a distinctive futuristic visual idiom, the artist examines the pollution generated by aeronautics while also speculating that our planet may become unlivable, its land surfaces blighted with human structures.

The works in the exhibition shed light on histories and a possible future of the web of relationships between humans and nature, prompting searching reflections by asking: How do we perceive nature with our senses, and which means do we have to describe it? How do we live up to our responsibility for the

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planet? How do we imagine we will coexist on it? The second exhibition in the series, titled *Potential Worlds 2: Eco-Fictions*, will build on these questions in a speculative exploration of novel forms of life and community and the constantly shifting roles that humans play in an age of cutting-edge post-human technologies.

The exhibition was curated by Heike Munder (director Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst) and Suad Garayeva-Maleki (director YARAT Contemporary Art Space). The show will be on view at YARAT Contemporary Art Space, Baku from November 13 until February 21, 2021.

An accompanying publication with essays by Benjamin H. Bratton, T. J. Demos, Suad Garayeva-Maleki & Heike Munder, Reza Negarestani and Jussi Parikka, as well as short texts by Milena Bürge, Anna Fech and Rabea Kaczor will be released in the summer of 2020.

Potential Worlds 2: Eco-Fictions

October 23, 2020 – February 21, 2021

Curated by Heike Munder (director, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst) and Suad Garayeva-Maleki (director, YARAT Contemporary Art Space), the exhibition *Potential Worlds 2: Eco-Fictions* will present works by Korakrit Arunanondchai, Anca Benera & Arnold Estefán, Dora Budor, Burton Nitta (Michael Burton & Michiko Nitta), Cao Fei, Julian Charrière, Carl Cheng, Jimmie Durham, Peter Fend, Tue Greenfort, Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, Helen Mayer Harrison & Newton Harrison, Louis Henderson, Mary Maggic, Mileece, MOON Kyungwon & JEON Joonho, Adrián Villar Rojas, Pinar Yoldas, Zheng Bo. The exhibition will be on view at the YARAT Contemporary Art Space, Baku, from March 19, until June 13, 2021.

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