

Potential Worlds 2: Eco-Fictions

October 24, 2020 – May 9, 2021

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 group exhibition *Potential Worlds 2: Eco-Fictions* follows up on the questions raised by *Potential Worlds 1: Planetary Memories* by laying out speculative projections of the web of relationships between humans and nature in light of today's ecological situation. The consequences of environmental devastation have made it plain that we need to understand humanity to be an integral part of rather than the center of the world. The first chapter of the exhibition series, *Potential Worlds 1: Planetary Memories*, turned the spotlight on the ways in which humans took possession of the natural world in pursuit of power and resources and the repercussions for nature as well as communities. Building on these insights, *Potential Worlds 2: Eco-Fictions* inquires into the potential worlds that might emerge from the ruins of humanity's making: What can we do with the detritus of contemporary life and the traces of destruction? Given the precarious situation in which the world finds itself, how can we begin to look for new ways of life? Which role can art as a technological, scientific, and social experiment play in this quest? The artists in the exhibition sketch visions of potential worlds and underscore that we need to imagine possible futures in concrete terms for alternative modes of life to come into being. They reflect on how we treat nature and craft ideas for novel forms of life on earth. We're sure you'll be inspired!

Jimmie Durham's (b. 1940) *Alpine Substance on Wolfsburg Construction* (2007) illustrates a central idea of the exhibition. The sculpture consists of a red VW Beetle whose roof has caved in under the massive weight of a boulder. It looks like the car, traveling at full speed, was hit by the falling rock. The work elicits uncomfortable reflections: How will nature react to climate change? Which price will it exact for what we have done? An emblem of a living nature that, no longer a passive victim of climate change, takes action against polluters, Durham's assemblage offers an incisive critique of the anthropocentric perspective, crediting nature with its own agency. Similarly, **Tue Greenfort's** (b. 1973) works *Horseshoe Crabs* (2017) and *Horseshoe Crabs, Companion Species YOUTUBE Series, I* (2013/2017) use the example of the titular species to question our human-centric approach to the environment, noting the urgent need for greater awareness of our interrelationships with other living beings and natural resources. The human impact on the environment and identifiable economic interests have created a situation in which horseshoe crabs, which have

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existed for around four hundred million years, are now on the brink of extinction. **Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige's** (both b. 1969) haunting photographic series *A State* (2019) demonstrates that humanity influences even geological processes; our actions have long-lasting consequences for our planet. The photographs show samples taken from an enormous garbage dump in Tripoli, Lebanon, at different depths below the surface. They illustrate that our waste is forming layers that permanently cover the soil beneath our feet and reveal how the irresponsibility of both the general population and political leaders leaves a permanent imprint on the earth's surface. **Anca Benera** (b. 1977) & **Arnold Estefán** (b. 1978) likewise investigate the question of how landscapes reflect political actions. The artist duo's laboratory-like installation *Debrisphere. Visible Manifestations of Invisible Forces* (2019/2020) homes in on fungi to examine nature's resilience and its forms of symbiotic coexistence. Microscopic images reveal that the sand from a beach in Normandy contains a 4-percent admixture of metal debris from the Allied invasion on June 6, 1944. The artists want to find out whether mycorrhiza can forge paths through this "metallic sand." Which new forms of life might be born amid such human-made ruins? Durham's, Greenfort's, Hadjithomas & Joreige's, and Benera & Estefán's works present paradigmatic examples of humanity's sustained impact on the natural environment while also pointing up some of the ways in which nature responds to this human influence, evidence that it has an agency of its own.

Artistic reflections seeking to outline a more conscious stance toward the environment are hardly a phenomenon of recent years, as works by the pioneers of the eco-art movement **Peter Fend** (b. 1950) and **Helen Mayer Harrison** (1927–2018) & **Newton Harrison** (b. 1932) show. As historians, diplomats, ecologists, and activists, they have been involved in collaborative projects since the 1970s, aiming to promote biological diversity and community development. In the works *Delancey Street Goes to the Sea* (1979) and *RAPID* (1999–ongoing), Fend explores potential alternative sources of eco-friendly energy. With his research projects and proposals, the artist aims to propel changes in the marketing of zero-emission energy and initiate real-world efforts. In his most recent research undertakings, *Towards a Better Use of the Dammed Reservoirs that Surround Dallas-Houston, USA and Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, for an Ecological Competition* (2020), Fend studies dams around the Caspian Sea, Trinity Bay, and along the Volga and proposes alternative practices that would allow for the regeneration of natural coves and functioning ecosystems. Helen Mayer Harrison & Newton Harrison's research project *The Lagoon Cycle* (1974–84) was dedicated to various ecosystems (from Sri Lanka to the Pacific Rim) and the interactions between food production and local watersheds. For convenience, the cycle was reproduced in a smaller format in the artists' book *Book of the Lagoons* (1974–1984/1986). The follow-up *The Second Lagoon* (1972)—the series is not chronologically organized—details the artists' research into the mangrove crab (*Scylla serrata*), an ecologically important species that is central to the diet of local populations. In 1975, the project was awarded the Scripps Institution of Oceanography's highly regarded California Sea Grant. Fend and the Harrisons have developed narratives that have set practical projects in motion and demonstrated that art can serve a vital function by visualizing alternative future scenarios.

Julian Charrière's (b. 1987), **Louis Henderson's** (b. 1983), and **Cao Fei's** (b. 1978) works shed light on the material reality of contemporary technologies and offer critical reflections on the consequences of their use for the environment and local populations. Julian Charrière's series *Metamorphism* (2016)

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was inspired by the artist's expedition to the Bayan Obo Mine in China, which accounts for 95 percent of the global annual output of rare-earth metals, a fundamental ingredient in many modern technological devices. The artist reduces the equipment—computers, smartphones, hard drives—to its elemental form by melting it down to obtain an artificial lava he casts into multicolor magmatic sculptures. The man-made rocks embody the way in which the processes underlying the production of digital communication technologies have a violent effect on geological developments. Louis Henderson's video collage *All That Is Solid* (2014) interweaves pictures of an illegal goldmine in Accra and an electronic-waste dump in Agbogbloshie, deconstructing the capitalist myth of the immateriality of digital technologies. Comparing the emerging underground economy of Accra's e-waste industry and the repressions of illegal goldmining, Henderson also scrutinizes the significance of these novel waste landscapes in the context of resource extraction with its ecological and social repercussions. Cao Fei's video *Rumba II: Nomad* (2015) shows the work around the demolition of a neighborhood on the outskirts of Beijing. The few remaining residents look lost amid the vast ruined landscape: what will become of them? Fei offers a poetic analysis leavened with humor of the innovations in urban construction that have become an everyday sight in metropolises. China's urbanization policies require millions of people to abandon their homes and agricultural land to make room for modern high-rises and business parks. Her work paints a critical portrait of the fixation on economic progress and the implications for the people swept up in it. Charrière's, Henderson's, and Fei's works call on us to think more carefully about the responsibilities entailed by the manufacture, use, and disposal of modern technologies and illustrate that the digital transformation is leaving a visible imprint on our planet.

Korakrit Arunanondchai's (b. 1986) videos *With history in a room filled with people with funny names 4* (2017) and *Painting with history in a room filled with people with funny names 3* (2015), meanwhile, shed light on interfaces between spirituality and technology and the entanglements between humans, the environment, and technical devices. Animism and artificial intelligence as well as collective and individual memories play central roles in the artist's work. The series draws on his personal archive of images for a probing reflection on how history is written and memories are created. In this way, Arunanondchai charts a hybrid androgynous and bionic space in which Western and Eastern philosophies converge. What will the future of history bring? Which agents will shape its course? And which events will be remembered?

Dora Budor's (b. 1984) and **Adrián Villar Rojas's** (b. 1980) works are time capsules of a sort, compacting references to the past and present as well as the future. Dora Budor's sculpture *Origin III (Snow Storm)* (2019) is based on an ecological test chamber used in factories to study the effects of aging and the weather on products. Inside the glass case, dust and paint particles are stirred up at regular intervals by the sonic frequency patterns of a construction site in the museum's vicinity. The atmosphere inside the chamber brings the paintings of J. M. W. Turner to mind; the title alludes more specifically to his *Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842), which is said to be the first work in the history of art to capture the visible thermodynamic changes to the earth's atmosphere that are attributable by industrial pollution. In this manner, Budor's work strikes a retrospective note, seeming to bring the era before the industrial revolution back to life while also asking discomfiting questions concerning the future. In his work *From the series The Theater of Disappearance (XIV)* (2020), Adrián Villar Rojas investigates the significance of water. The artist presents

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the vital resource in frozen form, in an icebox whose formal design suggests by turns a museum display case and a futuristic laboratory apparatus. The mode of presentation elicits divergent associations. On the one hand, the block of ice might contain a mummified instant from the past; on the other hand, it prompts a meditation on the future: Which microorganisms does it preserve? Which role will water play in the future? As billions of people are affected by water scarcity and quality issues and their daily lives revolve around access to it, water has already been labeled the “oil of the twenty-first century”. Seen in this light, the work summons the beholders to cherish this indispensable resource every day. The staging of the freezer with the intensely luminous blue wall and the floor painted the same color gestures toward the work’s origin. It is part of the series *The Theater of Disappearance*, which goes back to the exhibition of the same title held at MOCA, Los Angeles, in 2017.

The artist duo **MOON Kyungwon & JEON Joonho**’s (both b. 1969) two-channel video *El Fin del Mundo* (2012) addresses these questions concerning the future through a contrast between two stories set in a post-apocalyptic world in which humanity has been all but eliminated and all beliefs and social structures that were long taken to be self-evident have become obsolete. MOON & JEON adopt the perspective of the future to reflect on urgent concerns of the present and prod us to imagine alternative ways of life. In the ongoing project *Algaculture* (2010–ongoing), the artist duo **Burton Nitta (Michael Burton & Michiko Nitta)** (founded in 2009) expand on related themes, asking how humanity will feed itself in the future and produce enough energy to weather the current age, with all the harm we are doing—environmental pollution, resource scarcity. What will bodies need to adapt to in order to survive? Which abilities will our organs need to develop? Taking their cue from cutting-edge biotechnology, the artists envision a future in which humans enter into a symbiotic relationship with algae and evolve the capacity for photosynthesis. **Pinar Yoldas**’s (b. 1979) project *Ecosystem of Excess* (2014) is another exercise in speculative biology. Inspired by the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” a gyre of waste in the North Pacific that covers an area roughly equal to central Europe, it features organisms and fantastic creatures that live in symbiosis with an altered habitat dominated by synthetic materials, having developed the ability to ingest the plastic particles and harness them for their biological needs. Among Yoldas’s imaginary animals is the “Plastic Balloon Turtle,” a marine species that feeds on balloons as the raw material for an inflatable shell. In *The Kitty AI: Artificial Intelligence for Governance* (2016), the artist imagines another kind of fantastic future creature. After the utter human as well as ecological disaster wrought by the dominant political systems, artificial intelligence in the guise of an animated kitten—thus Yoldas’s vision of the future—has risen to world domination.

Which role might novel technologies play in our efforts to cope with the environmental crisis? How should we deploy modern engineering in our interactions with nature? **Carl Cheng** (b. 1942) has explored the interface between nature and technology since the 1960s, using the latter to emulate the former’s forces and effects in order to produce vivid visualizations. Set in a greenhouse, his installation *Erosions and Environmental Changes* (2020) models a laboratory designed to conduct a comparative study of humans, technology, and nature. With a view to the contemporary climate discourse, the works raise questions concerning future developments: how do we envision the landscapes of the day after tomorrow? **Mary Maggic**’s (b. 1991) sculpture *Plants of the Future* (2013/2020) takes up similar themes. To create it, the artist immersed herself in a new plant cultivation method known as aeroponics that promises

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location-independent and efficient crop growing. Looking at her vegetal-technological hybrid sculpture, we cannot but wonder about the ethics of a “post-natural” existence. Is this how we imagine the landscapes of the future? Maggic challenges us to question the ways we exploit the natural environment, which threaten plant diversity and the habitats of many species, and to consider the rosy promises of technology-based visions of the future with a critical mind.

Mileece*'s (b. 1978) and **Zheng Bo**'s (b. 1974) interactive works champion an alternative sensory engagement with the fauna around us. Mileece* takes an interest in the systems of communication and organization that plants have evolved. To illustrate that plants are living and communicating beings and respond to their environment, she has developed a biofeedback system (called electrobotani-graph, or EBG for short) that replicates the bioelectric currents produced by plants and humans and translates them into electronic sound or light landscapes. The installation *i Oracle: Dreaming in the Future Ancient* (2018/2020) presents a hybrid soothsaying system: visitors can ask a bonsai questions and receive answers based on Mileece*'s EBG and the principles of the ancient Chinese divination text *I Ching*. The point of departure for the installation is the debate on ethical questions around artificial intelligence. In programming the latter, the artist argues, we would do well to learn from nature's methods. In her work, she endows a bonsai with the ability to interact directly with modern technology—what would a world look like in which AI-controlled systems were programmed with the aid of plants? Zheng Bo's works similarly introduce visitors to unwonted perspectives on the world of plants. In his video series *Pteridophilia* (2016–ongoing), the artist models an unusually intimate approach to ferns: he stages an act of sexual intercourse between humans and plants in order to draw attention to how we use nature today. The interactive installation *Fern as Method* (2019) prompts visitors to draw ferns as a way to encourage them to make a careful study of the plants' formal characteristics. Zheng and Mileece* enrich the discourse on ecological concerns with physical experiences in order to question our everyday encounters with the vegetation that surrounds us and make us more aware of it.

With their diverse visions, the artists make a signal contribution to the faith in a better future. The works gathered in the exhibition present visually compelling projections of new forms of communal life involving all living beings on earth and spur a new way of thinking. Building alternative worlds begins with creative imagination—which potential worlds do you wish to live in?

The exhibition, a cooperation with YARAT Contemporary Art Space, Baku, was curated by Heike Munder (director Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst) and Suad Garayeva-Maleki (former director YARAT Contemporary Art Space).

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 is available.

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