

Art

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Gardens Beyond Eden: Bio-aesthetics, Eco-Futurism, and Dystopia at dOCUMENTA (13)

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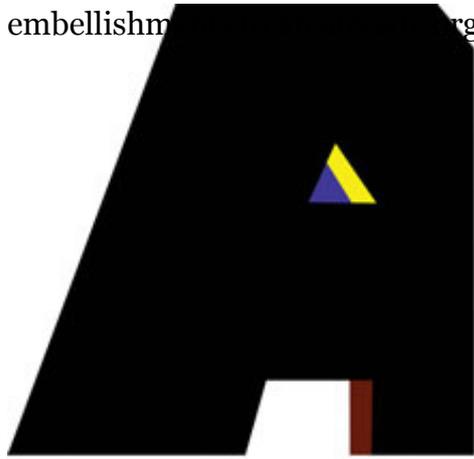
Given that “we live in a state of permanent crisis, a state of emergency and thus of exception,” according to dOCUMENTA (13) director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, it may seem surprising that she chose to respond to that state of crisis with numerous gardens in her exhibition.¹ Nonetheless, the show was overgrown with experimental planters and creatively landscaped areas, relating variously to agriculture, farming, and natural life forms, which made the 2012 iteration of the international mega-exhibition that occurs every five years in central Germany the most “eco” yet.

The garden-as-art included: Kristina Buch’s “The Lover,” an open-air butterfly micro-habitat installed in front of Kassel’s Staatstheater, comprised of plants ideal for indigenous varieties of the insect, some of which emerged from their chrysalises during the length of the show; Christian Philipp Müller’s “Swiss Chard Ferry,” a group of barges floating on one of the canals in the Karlsaue Park, filled with different edible varieties, realized in cooperation with the Department of Organic Agricultural Sciences at the University of Kassel in Witzenhausen; and Song Dong’s “Doing Nothing Garden,” a six-meter-high accumulation of rubble and organic refuse, sprouting grass and flowers and sporting neon signs reading “Doing” and “Nothing” in Chinese, found on the Karlswiese lawn in front of the Orangerie.

Gardens may seem irrelevant to our world of crises and emergencies—the specific circumstances of which Christov-Bakargiev neglected to identify—but in fact they concern the most urgent of global conflicts—including the corporate financialization of nature, realized by the patenting of genetically modified seeds by agriculture and pharmaceutical corporations; the production of greenhouse gas emissions, via a monoculture- and export-based agribusiness reliant on the fossil-fuelled transportation industry and chemical fertilizers; and the destruction of unions and small-scale farmers, displaced by the mechanization and monopoly ownership of the means of production.

About these various pressing emergencies the curators (including the director’s “core agent” Chus Martínez) had little to say,² and as such the various biotic artworks risked becoming mere green

embellishm



Al Held, "The Big A," 1962. Courtesy of the Al Held Foundation.

The Held Essays on Visual Art

Edited by Jonathan T.D. Neil

With the generous support of the Al Held Foundation, the *Rail* is pleased to present the following as one of the Held Essays on Visual Art, a series of texts that take on the state of our contemporary visual culture and take aim at the many received ideas that march under the banner of "art and politics."

science of gene research and bio-engineering.

"SF," for Haraway, extends to such meanings as "speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction, science fact, [and] science fantasy,"⁴ each exemplifying the joining of oppositions that her cyborg also signifies as "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction," one modelling and thus stimulating a world beyond the oppressive binaries of Western modernity (male-female, culture-nature, technology-biology, etc.).⁵ Haraway's conceptual presence was discernable in the exhibition's spatial dispersion—with its dozens of offsite locations comprising a rhizomatic display geography—and in its conceptual diffusion—where a hundred approaches eclipsed any single reigning theme. It was also perceptible in the "natureculture" and "intra-actional" aspects of the

organically adorned Baroque environment, especially given the Karlsruhe Park's 18th-century redesign as a landscape garden. Claire Pentecost's vertical gardens, for instance, adorned the Ottoneum's front grounds, rendering her eight-foot high dirt-and-plant towers extensions of the natural history museum's landscaped grounds, and suggesting an organic approach to sculptural decoration. Yet far from evident was the radical nature of her proposals, meant as prototypes for self-sufficient food production in land-poor urban areas, unless one dutifully read the exhibition's *Guidebook* or was already familiar with the artist's politico-ecological activities.

Aptly—but, in my view, not flatteringly—described as an exhibition without a concept by the director in the run-up to the show, dOCUMENTA (13) largely outsourced the definition of the show's conceptualization to its impossibly multiple and sometimes internally conflicted "100 notebook" publications.³ While that overwhelming panoply provided little immediate service to visitors at the show, the publications do open up fertile territory for considerations of certain pressing environmental matters (when one has the time to read them). The series assembles short essays by a range of artists and theorists, including some of the ecological, such as Donna Haraway, which suggest numerous productive, if competing, ways to approach the exhibition's gardens. Let's start with Haraway's Documenta "notebook," *SF: Speculative Fabulation and String Figures*, which rehearses the terms of an aesthetic of techno-organic hybridity, familiar in her well-known work on cyborgs, which finds inspiration in the

“becoming-with”-ontology of the gardens, suggesting environments that both play a role in organizing, and provide socio-aesthetic support systems for, human life.

Yet mobilizing Haraway as a model for eco-aesthetics is tricky, especially when placed in relation to the many political garden practices at dOCUMENTA (13), such as that of Ayreen Anastas, Rene Gabri, and their collective AND AND AND, which embraced an “anti-capitalist,” organic, and localist character, and whose garden kiosks sold regional food and produce on the exhibition grounds.⁶ The political ecology implied here is perhaps best articulated by Indian eco-activist Vandana Shiva—another of the exhibition’s “notebook” authors—known for her struggle against the patenting of indigenous knowledge of seeds and plant life by multinational pharmaceutical and agribusiness corporations.⁷ While Haraway too opposes the patenting of life-forms, her postmodern aesthetic of eco-feminist science-fiction ultimately crosses Shiva’s anti-corporate globalization climate-justice activism, leading to a conflict of global visions. For Shiva, “living organisms, unlike machines, organize themselves” and “cannot be treated as simply ‘biotechnological inventions,’ ‘gene constructs,’ or ‘products of the mind.’”⁸ Against corporate “biopiracy,” Shiva insists we must fight to protect the legal sovereignty of non-commercialized knowledge systems and the free and universal access to the life processes that comprise humanity’s shared heritage.⁹

Haraway’s cyborg, conversely, “does not dream of community on the model of the organic family,” and “would not recognize the Garden of Eden,” as s/he is “wary of holism, but needy for connection.”¹⁰ For her, the “lively area of transgenic research worldwide”—giving rise to such hybrids as “the tomato with a gene from the cold-sea-bottom-living flounder, which codes for a protein that slows freezing, and the potato with a gene from the giant silk moth, which increases disease resistance”¹¹—inspires visions of new forms of emancipation. Haraway, moreover, remains suspicious of activist positions that oppose corporate science with the values of the local and organic: “I cannot help but hear in the biotechnology debates the unintended tones of fear of the alien and suspicion of the mixed. In the appeal to intrinsic natures, I hear mystification of kind and purity akin to the doctrines of white racial hegemony and U.S. national integrity and purpose.”¹² Yet, with Shiva’s politics in mind, one cannot help but hear in Haraway’s enthusiasm for G.M.O.s a questionable support for corporate practices like Monsanto’s, with its global threat to the livelihood of farmers, indigenous eco-knowledge, and human health itself.¹³

There was thus a profound divergence within dOCUMENTA (13)’s discursive positioning of its gardens—between Haraway’s postmodern constructivist approach to biotechnological hybridity as a model of creative liberation on the one hand, and Shiva’s postcolonial commitment to an ecological justice opposed to corporate property claims on organic resources pilfered from the Third World on the other.¹⁴ The problem is that this clash of positions—which concerns pressing global conflicts over food production and the status of the natural world—was not explicitly engaged in the exhibition’s framework (only by individual authors and artists). As a result Christov-Bakargiev’s project betrayed a (non)position of uncommitted pluralism, a tendency familiar in the liberal milieu of contemporary

art, happy to allude to crises and emergencies but take no clear stand in relation to them.¹⁵

The exhibition also included numerous artistic visions of potential dystopian futures, such as *News from Nowhere* (2012), by South Korean artists Moon Kyungwon and Jeon Joonho. An example of sci-fi aesthetics, the multi-media project comprises a film, installation, and a publication, and builds on a scientific iconography of genetic engineering and biotechnology that resonates with Haraway's cyborg-poetic eco-futurism. In this regard, it reveals further ways to consider the relations between science, nature, and advanced capitalism in contemporary art.

Inspired by the eponymous 1890 story of a future agrarian worker society by socialist artist William Morris,¹⁶ Kyungwon and Joonho's presentation visualizes a post-apocalyptic time to come when humanity, owing to a series of catastrophic "major climate changes," is reduced to an endangered species, and survivors are left to reconsider their philosophies of life that now lie in ruins. Referencing utopian socialism and science fiction, the film, "El Fin del Mundo" (The End of the World), portrays a late-21st century earth permeated with radioactivity and hazardous waste, where raised sea levels necessitate floating settlements and the corporate giant Tempers rules over all. Those seeking citizenship, including the film's male and female protagonists, volunteer to collect samples in the surrounding toxic environment, without realizing their real mission is to serve as living research specimens exposed to atmospheric contamination. The accompanying archival installation, "Voice of Metanoia" (2011 – 12), assembles an array of futuristic products such as clothes and tools that, created collaboratively with other artists, designers, and architects, are presented as if they come from the film's fictional corporation.

As such, the project makes apparent a further risk of Haraway's model—in this case, a sci-fi poetics that aestheticizes crisis but establishes no political traction. Much like the "speculative fabulation" of pop-cultural variants like *Star Trek* or *Avatar*, the piece sidesteps critical knowledge about the present, opting more for visual gratifications of our desire for futurist fantasy. Indeed, it pays mere lip-service to the failures of the present, without identifying the causes of—or better, providing alternatives to—the "major climate changes" that serve as its fiction's generic foundation. Seduced by futuristic style, a corporate-scientist social order, technological redemption, and the imagery of a transfigured posthuman cyborg-body, the film and installation construct a problematic utopian imaginary within our otherwise catastrophic circumstances.

A counter-model is offered by the Otolith Group's "The Radiant" (2012), which exchanges Moon and Jeon's dystopian futurism for a focus on the real existing corporate-science complex and its disastrous failure that is itself worthy of fiction.¹⁷ The approximately one-hour long film takes March 11, 2011 as its point of departure, when the Great Tohoku Earthquake occurred off the Pacific coast of Japan, triggering a tsunami that left more than 15,000 people dead, and caused a catastrophic nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant. Mixing appropriated historical media reports and live footage of interviews with scientists and locals, the film joins the erstwhile promise of nuclear energy to the coming threat of a radiation-ruined environment, forming an explosive

equation that opens critical rifts in the forsaken present. Resonating with the premise of “El Fin del Mundo,” the evacuated Japanese villages and untouchable plant life within the contamination zone serve as an experimental laboratory in which elderly volunteers expose themselves to what the Otolith Group calls “the necropolitics of radiation” served up by the global nuclear regime for scientific research, exemplified by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

“The Radiant” thus exemplifies what Fredric Jameson calls “negative utopianism,” one that “transform[s] our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come.”¹⁸ And that future doesn’t look pretty. Rather than giving itself over to the sci-fi seductions of some future biotechnology, this work finds the future immanent in specific conditions of our present. The result is that the future projected by “The Radiant” works like a mechanism to make the present different than it appears, sparking a political energy to resist what is already occurring.

dOCUMENTA (13)’s concept-less exhibition tended more to the bio-aesthetics of sci-fi, even a neo-surrealist-inspired futurism (given its inclusion of a group of paintings by Salvador Dalí). As such it failed to engage the philosophical and political controversies surrounding the status of life today, let alone position itself within them.¹⁹ Still, it remains significant in that it opened paths for artists to explore the biopolitics of nature, the mixed economies of food production, and the contested modes of environmental governance, present and future. These questions lie at the heart of contemporary debates over what kind of world we want to live in, how it will be organized, and what role art might play in its creative imagination, representation, and realization. With each passing day, the stakes of those debates only continue to grow more momentous.²⁰

NOTES

1. As Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev wrote in *Letter to a Friend*, dated 25 October, 2010, which set out her ideas for dOCUMENTA (13). The letter is published as one of the “notebooks” in *Documenta 13: The Book of Books* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2012).
2. See Martínez’s tellingly titled publication, *Unexpress the Expressible* in *Documenta 13: The Book of Books*.
3. The number 100 plays off the exhibition’s traditional hundred-day run. On Christov-Bakargiev’s lack of a concept, see Martin Conrads, “Of Dogs and Humans: Documenta 13 in Kassel,” <http://www.goethe.de/kue/bku/kpa/en9556034.htm>. A recent *e-flux* announcement for the closure of dOCUMENTA (13) added this “clarification”: the “exhibition could be thought of as a pre-reflexive consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without itself” (September 8, 2012).
4. Haraway, *SF: Speculative Fabulation and String Figures*, in *Documenta 13: The Book of Books*, 4. Haraway also served on the exhibition’s “honorary advisory committee.”

5. “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important critical constructions, a world-changing fiction [...] Contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs—creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted. Modern medicine is also full of cyborgs.” Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991), 149-50.

6. The artist-run initiative, AND AND AND, which formed part of dOCUMENTA (13), investigated the notions of the common(s), and non-capitalist life in gatherings and seminars across the world—from the US Social Forum in Detroit, Michigan, to workshops in Tunis, Yerevan, and Buenos Aires—during the two-year period preceding the exhibition. The group also organized events over the show’s 100 days. However, unless one was physically present, the meetings’ proceedings have been largely inaccessible, relayed via short online descriptions, with few archival transcripts and little video documentation. One exception is the more extensive archive for event 13, when the group, in alliance with The Compass of the Midwest Radical Culture Corridor, placed the Monsanto corporation on trial for ecological and economic crimes in Carbondale and Chicago, IL, and Iowa City, on January 28, 2012. See <http://andandand.org> and www.midwestradicalculturecorridor.net.

7. See Shiva’s notebook entitled *The Corporate Control of Life* in *Documenta 13: The Book of Books*.

8. Shiva, *The Corporate Control of Life*, 7.

9. Shiva, *The Corporate Control of Life*, 8 and 12. For further discussion, see T.J. Demos, “Art after Nature: The Post-Natural Condition,” *Artforum* (April 2012), 191-97.

10. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 151.

11. Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 88.

12. Haraway, *Modest_Witness*, 61.

13. On the dangers of GM foods, see Jeffrey M. Smith, *Seeds of Deception: Exposing Industry and Government Lies about the Safety of Genetically Engineered Foods You’re Eating* (Totnes: Green, 2004); Marie-Monique Robin, *The World According to Monsanto: Pollution, Corruption, and the Control of the World's Food Supply* (New York: New Press, 2010); and Robin’s 2008 film of the same name.

14. Of course there are still more positions to consider, such as Pentecost’s *Notes from Underground* in *Documenta 13: The Book of Books*, but I focus on these two particularly dominant voices to focus my argument here.

15. Similarly unengaged is the relation between the exhibition’s ecological sensibility (I hesitate to use the word “commitment”), and its globalist attempts to place different geopolitical contexts in relation, including Kassel, Kabul, Cairo and Banff, both in the exhibition, and via its program of preparatory seminars.

16. Morris' story *News from Nowhere* is told by the fictional narrator William Guest, who, after falling asleep upon returning home from a meeting of the Socialist League, wakes up in a future world where society is organized around the common ownership and democratic control of the means of production. The agrarian culture has no system of authority, money, legal courts, prisons, or class system—only the shared pleasure in work and nature.

17. On the corporate-science complex, see Alan Rudy, Dawn Coppin and Jason Konefal, *Universities in the Age of Corporate Science: The UC Berkeley-Novartis Controversy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), which reviews the growing collaboration between industry and academe, using UC Berkeley's Plant and Microbial Biology Department's multi-million dollar ties to Novartis, the international pharmaceutical and agribusiness conglomerate, as a case study.

18. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 288.

19. Perhaps these issues were addressed on September 10 and 15 (after this essay was written), when Documenta held "On Seeds and Multispecies Intra-action: Disowning Life," "a two-day public conference that takes as its starting point DOCUMENTA (13)'s ecological perspective, building on a global alliance between different forms of research and knowledges that is actively being developed in a variety of fields." The event included Vandana Shiva, among others, and a video presentation by Donna Haraway.

20. For further consideration of these issues, see the forthcoming issue of *Third Text* (January 2013) that I guest-edited and which is dedicated to the subject of "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology."

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