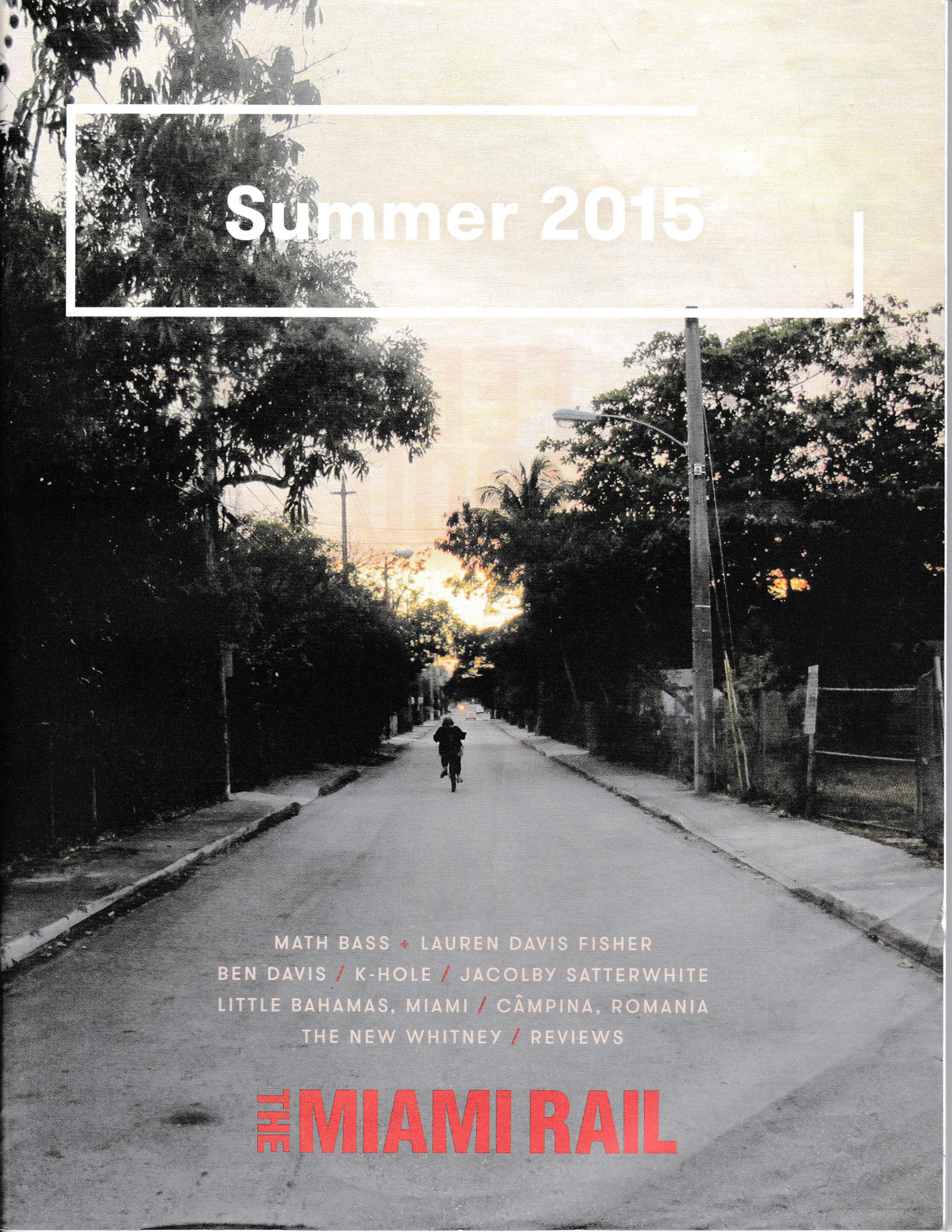

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ART AND THE ECOLOGICAL

BEN DAVIS

So recently culturally transformed, Miami will likely soon be transformed again, and more profoundly, by avenging nature. If the scientists' best guesses are true, the rising sea levels ensured by global climate change will leave the epicenter of the pop-up hedonism of Art Basel an underwater ruin—sooner rather than later.[1]

Neither art, nor the fitful, fickle affections of the global elite drawn by it, looks likely to stop this rising tide. Indeed, inasmuch as some of the fortunes on parade each December have been made by dumping carbon into the atmosphere, the fairs play a bit part in the destruction of their own island habitat.

In New York, we got a foretaste of our own version of this story during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Storm surge decimated working-class communities in Coney Island and the Rockaways. It also inundated the blue-chip gallery nexus of Chelsea. Images of dealers salvaging sodden canvases and mucking the sludge from their ravaged spaces were like allegories of the impotence of art before the massiveness of environmental change.

We live, it seems, in the prologue of an inexorably arriving dystopian scenario. Hope for some change of course of the political-economic order that might save us is urgently needed, but out of vogue—understandably, perhaps, given the literal flood of bad news.

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1 "Climate change is no longer viewed as a future threat round here. It is something that we are having to deal with today." Ben Kirtman, quoted in Robin McKie, "Miami, the Great World City, Is Drowning While the Powers That Be Look Away," *The Guardian*, July 11, 2014.

Yet in the contemporary art context, I also find this lacuna somewhat ironic. "Utopia," of course, means "no-place." And "no-place" is what the white cube of the gallery is meant to evoke, a space of liberated potential, a plastic, malleable space to plant our dreams in.

In the wake of Sandy, I found one of the most powerful images to be of the sodden white walls of a gallery bearing a grimy bathtub ring showing exactly how far the terrorizing waters had risen. This ring rendered visible the normally invisible infrastructure, and thus the foundational bracketing of contemporary art from the concrete world outside. The sight made me think that making visible art's history of relating—or not relating—to the environment could be a way to begin to imagine what productive role it might play in the present.

The Radical Future of the Radical Past

Indeed, for European art, understanding its relationship to a changing sense of nature in the early modern period is key to grasping its dynamics.

For the philosopher Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), aesthetic experience primarily *was* the experience of nature; the beauty found in human art was merely a derivative subset. When the canon of the "fine" or "beautiful arts" was first being formulated, giving a philosophical foundation to the separation of elite culture from the more common crafts of ordinary people, one common denominator proposed for capital-*A* Art was the "Imitation of Beautiful Nature."[2]

The contemplative nature cult offered by European romanticism and American transcendentalism in the nineteenth century was a direct reply to the grubbiness and ruthless character of early industrialization. Traditional agrarian ways of life were being transformed into urban manufacturing societies by the vortex of an expanding capitalism. The resultant loss of a traditional connection to nature produced as its corollary a heightened artistic mythification of the environment's vanishing purity.

Niagara (1857) by American landscape painter Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900) is a classic image of the unalloyed sublimity of nature. What you do not see in Church's panorama of heaving water—what is deliberately bracketed out—is evidence of the substantial tourist infrastructure that had already begun to litter the falls' surroundings. The encroachment of culture on nature is the other side of culture's romanticization of nature.

Across the Atlantic, in the same era, the Pre-Raphaelites were mythologizing the chivalry and artisanry of the medieval as their own rejection of the smog and avarice of Britain's industrial empire. Among them, William Morris (1834–1896) is probably best remembered as the father of the Arts and Crafts movement, touting a healing investment in the handmade in an increasingly machine-manufactured world as a form of craft politics. But his case also shows the seeds of an earnest and constructive anticapitalist impulse nested within the romantic tradition.

At age fifty, Morris discovered Karl Marx, and became a comrade of Friedrich Engels in London. He wrote and lectured voluminously on how art, labor, and nature alike were victimized by a voracious capitalism. From his unique vantage point, Morris was attentive to forms of politics that radicals—let alone society at large—had not yet caught on to, helping, for instance, to found the world's first society for preservation of historical buildings in 1877. His writings have been rediscovered as a resource for contemporary environmental activists in search of radical lineages.

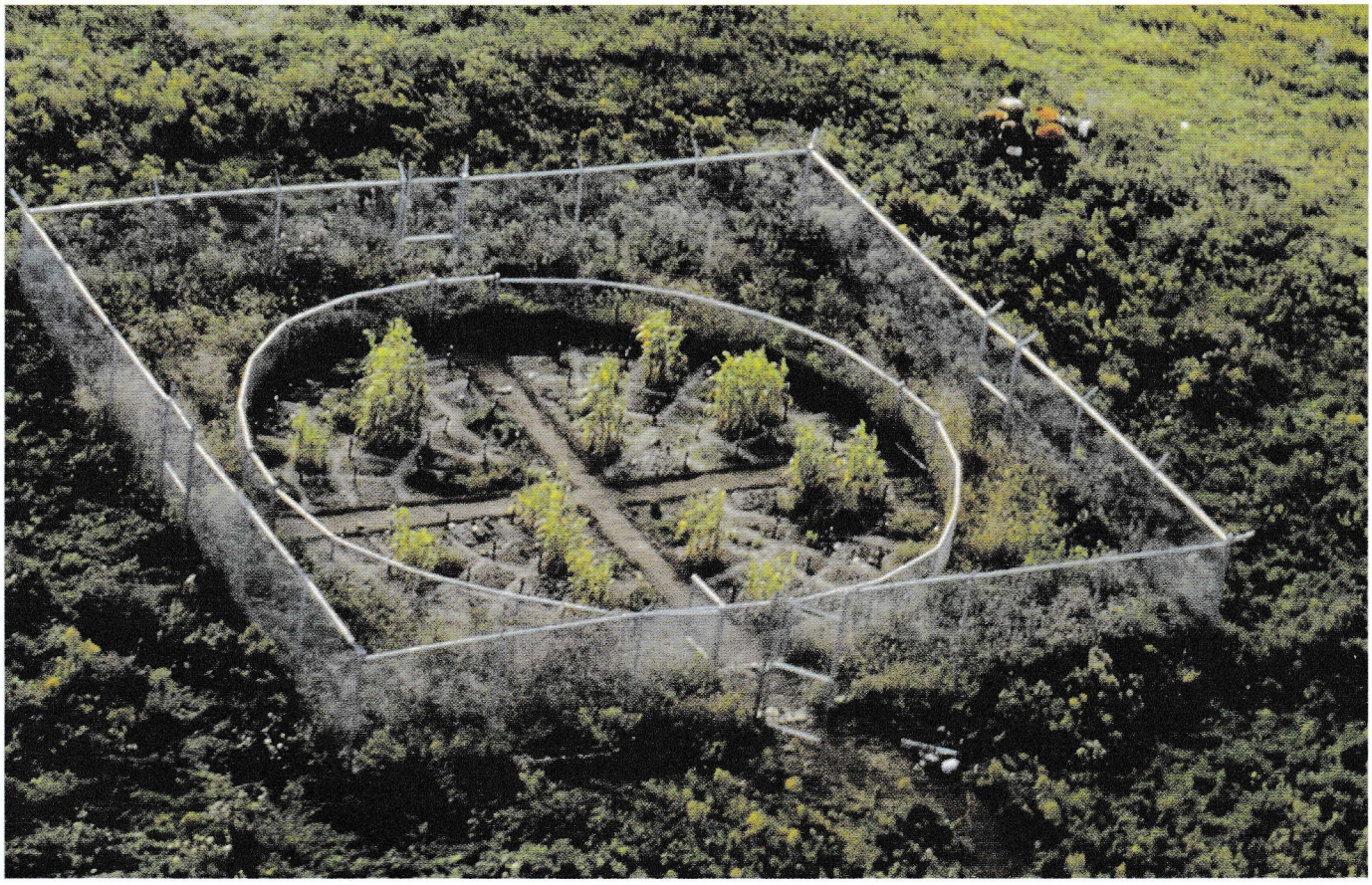
Importantly for my argument, Morris was also the author of visionary works of what was effectively utopian science fiction. His *News From Nowhere* (1890) was framed as a political Rip Van Winkle tale, depicting a man who wakes up in the year 2102 to discover a society transformed for the better by revolution. The inspiration for the book, in fact, can be read as

2 See Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 82–83.

Frederic Edwin Church, *Niagara*, 1857. Oil on canvas, 106.5 x 229.9 cm. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund

"YET IN THE CONTEMPORARY ART CONTEXT, I ALSO FIND THIS LACUNA SOMEWHAT IRONIC. 'UTOPIA,' OF COURSE, MEANS 'NO-PLACE.' AND 'NO-PLACE' IS WHAT THE WHITE CUBE OF THE GALLERY IS MEANT TO EVOKE, A SPACE OF LIBERATED POTENTIAL, A PLASTIC, MALLEABLE SPACE TO PLANT OUR DREAMS IN."

Mel Chin, *Revival Field*, 1990–ongoing. Plants, and industrial fencing on hazardous waste landfill, an ongoing project in conjunction with Dr. Rufus Chaney, senior research agronomist, USDA



proto-environmentalist: it was a response to another political fable, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888), which Morris deemed to be too celebratory of the industrial side of progress, not attentive enough to the pastoral.

The specifics and plausibility of these competing visions are less important to me than the simple fact that this kind of speculative Utopianism was, at one time, a resource for political debate and inspiration. This is a resource that the political misadventures of the ensuing century have depleted.

The Environment of Contemporary Art

The "art world" as we know it dates from the 1960s, when the rise of the art scene, the art industry, and the various innovations that became the lingua franca of the present international style of contemporary art came together. This is an era that also, it so happens, saw the birth of modern environmental consciousness, often dated to the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. But the year 1964 marks a particularly important crossroads.

In that year, American art critic Arthur Danto published his essay "The Artworld," credited with giving the idea of an art world its modern articulation.[3] Danto was responding to seeing Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* at the Stable Gallery in New York, declaring that these sculptures marked the end of traditional narratives of art—imitation of nature among them—and signaled that contemporary art could only be understood in relation to the cultural "world" within which it was embedded.

The same year plays a key role in present-day ecological thought, specifically in the recently trendy theory of the Anthropocene—essentially, that humanity's influence on the Earth has grown to be so significant that it justifies being conceptualized as an entirely new epoch. From the point of view of the geological record, 1964 marks the moment when there was enough accumulated radioactive isotopes in the Earth's crust, due to nuclear testing, to make it possible to read mankind's new supremacy in the rocks themselves.[4]

Danto thought of the new sensibility he pinpointed in the 1960s as principally conceptual, the result of certain philosophical ideas of art being taken to their limit. From the distance of a few generations, however, we might also think of it as being the logical side effect of the new preponderance of the artificial world over the natural. Pop art aestheticized the overwhelming presence of advertising and consumer culture; Minimalism aestheticized the industrial and the machine-made; Conceptualism aestheticized the new insinuation of information and media into everyday life.

As for art's relation to nature, it is no surprise, perhaps, that the same era also saw artists propose new strategies for relating to the environment, as well, attempting to escape the gallery and museum space via the various forms of Land art. Much like Church's landscapes, this new artistic incursion into nature bore the stamp of the very urban realities it was trying to vision an alternative to; the monumental engineering of Land art, particularly in its more macho varieties, was (and is) heavily criticized for representing the human will to dominate nature rather than embodying a holistic celebration of it.[5]

The brilliant, mercurial Robert Smithson (1938–1973), who coined the term "Earthworks," proved remarkably prescient with writings like "A Tour of the Monument of Passaic, New Jersey" (*Artforum*, 1967). In that seminal essay, Smithson set out to describe the white elephant infrastructure projects and machines littering his deindustrializing hometown as if they were art, providing a knowing, sci-fi-inflected update to the romantic sensibility for a present where the meaning of "landscape" had fundamentally changed.

Visionary for its time, the tenor of Smithson's postindustrial flânerie has radiated out and become an undertone in the culture at large. The echo of his Passaic can be found in multiplying art projects and online slideshows dwelling on "ruin porn," all those dead malls and withered factories offering the dark, intuitive thrill of a transmission from a dying future. Once again, our present-day aesthetic sensibilities are inflected by dystopia.

Imaginative Despair

Ecologically, the threats of Smithson's day were still of relatively localized catastrophe. The possibility of global climate change that gathered pace since the 1990s was not yet on the radar. How, then, has art reflected this shift?

As in the 1960s, an ambiguous celebration of the technological present is the implicit subject matter of a lot of the trendiest art today. The so-called post-Internet craze assumes delirium at the perils and potentials of consumer gadgetry and the endless plentitude of imagery online as the fundamental reference points for an art that feels of the present.

The best articulations of this sensibility do more than just surf atop the climate of technophilia. Josh Kline's recent installation *Freedom* (2015), for instance, features towering Teletubbies clad as storm troopers, and sinister videos of police officers reading out scripts based on hijacked social media feeds.

Such a work amounts to something like a critique of the culture of techno-distraction, but from the point of view that makes it feel like a no-way-out, nightmare scenario. Hope appears—Kline includes a video featuring an image of president Obama, made, through an act of digital puppetry, to deliver the optimistic policy prescriptions that progressives might have hoped he would deliver—but only to highlight its actual absence.

At the same time, as in the 1960s, new forms of relating to nature through art form a counterpoint to the intensifying

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3 Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy*, October 15, 1964: 571–84.

4 I agree, however, with much critique of the Anthropocene idea that it is an extremely apolitical lens through which to address the problem of contemporary ecology. See Andreas Malm, "The Anthropocene Myth," *Jacobin*, March 30, 2015, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/03/anthropocene-capitalism-climate-change/.

5 "[T]he most significant implication of art as land reclamation is that art can and should be used to wipe away technical guilt. Will it be a little easier in the future to rip up the landscape for one last shovelful of a nonrenewable energy source if an artist can be found (cheap mind you) to transform the devastation into an inspiring and modern work of art?" Robert Morris, "Notes on Art as/and Land Reclamation," *October* 12 (Spring 1980): 87.

obsession with art and technology. "Eco-art" has recently crystallized into a fully branded discipline of its own. The forms that this genre take are too complex to taxonomize exhaustively here, but I will mention two in turn to see what their stakes are.

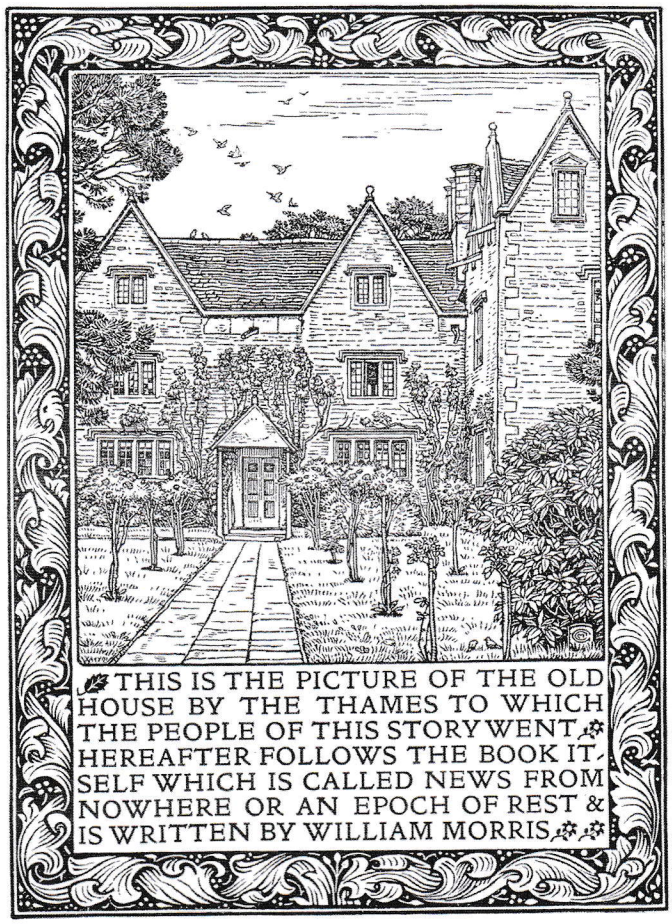
At one pole you have the "alarmist" strain, which positions itself as righteously calling attention to the threat of climate change by picturing immanent disaster. A particularly effective version might be the collective Superflex's video *Flooded McDonald's* (2009), featuring the titular fast-food restaurant slowly swallowed up by rising waters.

Flooded McDonald's might be thought of, in fact, as a post-postmodern update of the old romantic obsession with portentous ruins. It is such a convincing depiction of possible catastrophe that, during Hurricane Sandy, a still from it was widely circulated as actual news.

At the other pole, falling broadly within the crunchy genre of art-as-community-organizing known as "social practice" is what is sometimes called the "remediationist" strain of eco-art. Ditching the idea of representing politics, such projects seek to actually solve environmental problems directly.

An influential precedent is Mel Chin's 1990 commission for the Walker Art Center, *Revival Field*, for which the Houston artist worked with scientists to sow plants that would suck toxic heavy metals from the soil of a contaminated lot in St. Paul.

These kinds of ameliorative initiatives have inspired many artists. Yet faced with the global scale of the challenges of climate change, they also feel untenably modest. And, too, there is a way that a recourse to such localism can dovetail or even enforce a sense of fatalism about the kind of large-scale economic reorientation that would be needed to actually cancel the apocalypse.[6]



William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 1890

Bad Utopias

In her recent book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (2014), Naomi Klein offers the following insight: When it comes to the climate crisis, there are no nonradical solutions remaining. This "inconvenient truth," she argues, is the intellectual starting point of any honest environmental politics. Once you have accepted the science, you are impelled to admit that dramatic, large-scale change *of some kind* is not just necessary but inevitable. Failing to propose a "people's" vision of what a future that responds to the challenges of climate change might look like, therefore, cedes the terrain to futures that replicate and accentuate all the worst features of our present political-economic setup:

> What I am saying is that the science forces us to *choose* how we want to respond. If we stay on the road we are on, we will get the big corporate, big military, big engineering responses to climate change—the world of a tiny group of big corporate winners and armies of locked-out losers that we have imagined in virtually every fictional account of our dystopic future, from *Mad Max* to *The Children of Men* to *The Hunger Games* to *Elysium*. Or we can choose to heed climate change's planetary wake-up call and change course, steer away not just form the emissions cliff but from the logic that brought us careening to that precipice. Because what the "moderates" constantly trying to reframe climate action as something more palatable are really asking is: How can we create change so that the people responsible for the crisis do not feel threatened by the solutions? How, they ask, do you reassure members of a panicked, megalomaniacal elite that they are still masters of the universe, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary?[7]

Building on Klein's point, my case is that, worthy as they are, the mainstream articulations of eco-art mentioned above

6 Speaking at a show in Los Angeles of design proposals for a changing climate, curator Frances Anderton stated this presupposition plainly: "There's a lot of talk in this climate change conversation about mitigation—and that usually involves big ambitious projects with lots of money thrown at them. But what you see in these is the exact opposite. It's people saying that we can't assume that there will be governmental commitment or resources to do a Netherlands scale of [sea wall] building. So, instead, they come up with other simple and ingenious solutions. There is an elegance to them." Quoted in Carolina A. Miranda, "'Sink or Swim': L.A. Photo Show Looks at How Design Responds to Disaster," *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 2015.

7 Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 59.

implicitly participate in the logic of moderation. They are able either only to sound the alarm about incipient disaster, adding to the dystopian image gallery (the "alarmist" strain), or imagine small-scale solutions (the "remediationist" strain).

This predicament is particularly significant in that, whereas artists are stereotyped as impractical lefty dreamers, it is currently the right that is pushing its agenda through big-picture reimaginings of society. Consider the far-out proposals of the Seasteading movement, a contemporary faction of libertarian Utopianism that has actually received funding from Silicon Valley types. Declaring that the government is the enemy of cultural and political progress, Seasteading proposes to build future cities on the sea, using the legal freedom of international waters to experiment with new governments on custom-designed luxury islands.

It doesn't take any particular political acuity to see that, actually implemented, Seasteading would quickly turn into a nautical-themed neo-feudalist nightmare. It is easy to ridicule. But at least its images and propositions offer a vision of a radically altered but articulable future, soaking up conversation, inspiring designers, and stimulating argument about what is possible in the present.

Much more alarming is that, as Klein's book lays out, once far-out ideas like geoengineering are gaining traction as mainstream solutions to the climate crisis. The idea that we might inject the atmosphere with reflective sulfates to "dim the sun" as a brake on global warming, simulating the effects of a supervolcano eruption that darkens the sky—in effect courting man-made disaster to stave off man-made disaster—is now being touted as a solution to the present-day predicament with a straight face.

The nineteenth-century utopian socialist Charles Fourier (1772–1837) earned himself the glory of eternal ridicule by saying that in his proposed future, humanity's mastery of the environment would turn the seas to lemonade. In a dystopian Fourierist echo, contemporary geoengineers propose proactively changing the chemical composition of the seas as a climate-change solution.

Such pragmatic nightmares are evidentially more plausible than the obvious alternative: a reorientation of the economy that challenges the logic that puts corporate interests above ecological sanity. This astounding fact about the present intellectual debate, finally, shows the environmental crisis is also a crisis of the imagination—which may be where artists have a role to play.

Radical Rorschach Blots

In previous times, utopian dreaming was a specialty of left politics, and a left-wing art more specifically, in William Morris and beyond. Recovering the contribution of Morris, E. P. Thompson once argued that, among other things, in its stridency to appear "scientific," the orthodox Marxist left erred in dismissing all positive speculation about the future as woolly "Utopianism."

Fantasies of a better future such as Morris's *News From Nowhere*, Thompson argued, need not be thought of as concrete plans pursued as an alternative to movement-building in the present; they can be invitations to dream and debate about what we are fighting for in the first place, opening up the space to speculate how, in changed circumstances, we could actually live differently and better.[8]

In an Earth Day address last year at the University of Wisconsin's Nelson Institute, contemporary sci-fi author China Miéville proposed just such a position:

> We should utopia as hard as we can. Along with a fulfilled humanity we should imagine flying islands, self-constituting coraline neighborhoods, photosynthesizing cars bred from biospliced bone-marrow. Big Rock Candy Mountains. Because we'll never mistake those dreams for blueprints, nor for mere absurdities.
>
> What utopias are are new Rorschachs. We pour our concerns and ideas out, and then in dreaming we fold the paper to open it again and reveal startling patterns. We may pour with a degree of intent, but what we make is beyond precise planning. Our utopias are to be enjoyed and admired: they are made of our concerns and they tell us about our now, about our pre-utopian selves. They are to be interpreted. And so are those of our enemies.[9]

The fatal inability to envision alternatives to the dominant future offered by our compromised present is not limited to artists; as Klein writes, it infects the political culture at large, to its detriment. But this also offers an opportunity. Often, radical artists attempt to use art to solve problems that are better solved through activism—but here is a problem where culture, through its very distance from practical realities, might fill a hole.

Dystopia is cool; it is the default contemporary mode of imagining the future. Utopia is not. This is an aesthetic state of affairs that is also the sedimented result of a history of political defeats and compromises that has led to cultural demoralization. Imagining what a better future would look like, making it cool to believe that there is a future worth fighting for again, is in some ways a very modest task. It is the beginning of something, the necessary but not sufficient condition of inspiring action in the present.

But you have to start somewhere, and the future is a fine place to do so. MR

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8 It is significant that Klein opens *This Changes Everything* with a quote from the science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson, whose *Mars Trilogy* series represents one of the rare instances of positive utopian thinking in literature: "In my books I've imagined people salting the Gulf Stream, damming the glaciers sliding off the Greenland ice cap, pumping ocean water into the dry basins of the Sahara and Asia to create salt seas, pumping melted ice from Antarctica north to provide freshwater, genetically engineering bacteria to sequester more carbon in the roots of trees, raising Florida 30 feet to get it back above water, and (hardest of all) comprehensively changing capitalism." Kim Stanley Robinson, quoted in Klein, *This Changes Everything*, [page number].

9 China Miéville, "The Limits of Utopia," Salvage, http://salvage.zone/mieville_all.html.