



Object Gardens

Curatorial Essay by Andrew Bailey





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Object Gardens

Peter Burr, Anna Eyler, Nicolas Lapointe, and Jakob Kudsk Steensen

Curated by Andrew Bailey

In an early exploration of her concept of the Chthulucene, feminist philosopher Donna Haraway argues that it is “just barely” possible to take the exterminism, apocalyptic panic, and trash of the Anthropocene and rewrite its rules into a “much better SF game.”¹ Furthermore, Haraway also posits that it is in the possibility space of this new game where one can chip and shred and layer like a “mad gardener” to “make a much hotter

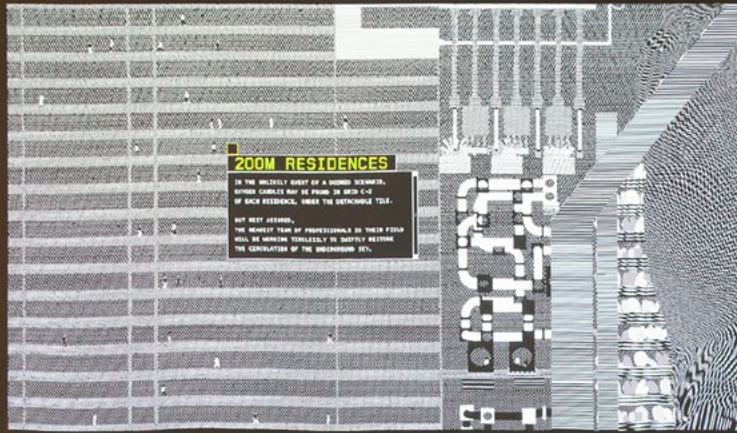
compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures.”² All the artists in *Object Gardens* playfully embody the role of Haraway’s mad gardener through their shared use of digital world-building technologies and game development tools to imagine sci-fi visions of humanity’s relationship with the planet. With work that engages with such varied and vast themes as scientific exploration, virtual tourism, architectural ruin,



climate change, deep time, nonhuman perspective, and human absence, *Object Gardens* also theoretically envisions what ecocritical philosopher Timothy Morton's calls a "hyperobject," a term they use "to describe events or systems or processes that are too complex, too massively distributed across space and time, for humans to get a grip on."³

Peter Burr's *DIRTSCRAPER* (2019) is perhaps the piece in the exhibition that most explicitly visualizes the complexity and unknowability of the hyperobject. The large-scale wall projection utilizes Burr's iconic densely patterned black-

and-white animation style to depict a generative simulation of an AI-controlled arcology. A portmanteau of "architecture" and "ecology," an arcology is a theoretical architectural design that is meant to be self-sustainable and combine agricultural, commercial, and residential space into one enclosed structure. Within *DIRTSCRAPER*, the artificial intelligences that keep each aspect of the arcology in balance are at war with one another and, as the simulation progresses and one begins to overtake the others, will eventually slide into a state of unsustainable entropy. This process is slow and, for some viewers, might



potentially be obfuscated by the piece's seductively glitchy aesthetics; however, *DIRTSCRAPER*'s emergent systems and dense structure provide a novel perspective on urban ecologies and the life that flows through them.

Examining the debris and detritus that is left over after these kinds of urban ecologies fail and fall to history, Anna Eyler and Nicolas Lapointe's 3D animation *La Fable d'OxA 21965* (2019) functions as a perfect illustration of Haraway's temporal compost pile referenced earlier in this essay's introduction. Produced during an artist residency in Spain, the work is largely composed of 3D scans of heritage sites such as the Coves Prehistòriques de Serinyà and the Cathedral of Saint Mary of Girona. These scans have been stitched together alongside models of fossilized commodity items such as water bottles and cell phones—non-biodegradable objects that will survive long into the

future after their original owners have passed on. Together these artifacts of human history, in combination with the predominantly cavernous landscape, ask questions about how we might envision what our everyday environments will look like through the lens of geological time. How will our past, present, and future fossilize, calcify, and/or crystallize across a span of years that exceeds direct human perception?

With a similar focus on geological forms and nonhuman perspectives, Eyler and Lapointe's second work in *Object Gardens* is an interactive installation titled */lick* (2023). The piece consists of a large artificial rock that has been mounted to the gallery wall and connected by way of a series of bright red cables to three tripod-affixed computers. All of these computers have been heavily customized and modified to look like portable retro-futuristic consoles that could be quickly

deployed on an expedition, research site, or field hospital. Each of their screens depicts an interactive 3D representation of a microbial lifeform and interfacial prompts to attempt communication via a series of basic chat commands that are commonly found in many MMORPG video games. Conceived of and produced during the pandemic, */lick* prompts audiences to reflect on how we choose to navigate between the ethereal worlds of the microscopic and the digital and to contemplate how these often invisible spaces inform our understandings of the human and the nonhuman.

The perspective of the nonhuman is also a significant element of the final work of this exhibition. Jakob Kudsk Steensen's *Primal Tourism: Walk-through* (2016) is a 3D animation of the island of Bora Bora, a popular tourist destination in French Polynesia with a long history of colonial conquest and settlement. Pulling from the terminology and aesthetics of videogame culture, throughout the 22-minute video, the camera switches repeatedly from the first-person perspective of a human to that of local wildlife, such as a snake and a mosquito. During the "walkthrough" of the island, scenes of abandoned, overgrown buildings are frequently encountered, as are newer sites where the island's tourists seemed to have just dropped everything and fled. Bora Bora has a well-known monsoon season with violent storms that are a likely explanation for these spaces of human abandonment and absence, but the video also contains frequent references to climate change and rising sea levels—increasing dangers for the island that result in its eventual disappearance.

Peter Burr, Anna Eyler and Nicolas Lapointe, and Jakob Kudsk Steensen

all toil away within their respective practices to produce artistic gardens full of hyperobjective worlds and playful perspectives. Although all four of these artists use gaming technologies to craft their environmentally-charged work, they do not approach their subject matter lightly but instead use the unique affordances and limitations of video games as world-building technologies to imagine alternative pasts, presents, and futures. As ecocritical game studies scholar Alenda Y. Chang argues, video games, through the "shadowy source/sink dynamics" of their materiality and manufacturing and their ludic relationship with waste, disorder, and excess, provide a particularly useful viewpoint from which to examine the forces of entropy and time.⁴ Each of the works in *Object Gardens* deals with these two ruinous processes in their own way, and, collectively, they form a space to reflectively ponder new rules for the future to ensure the game of life is one that can continue to be played.

Notes

1. Donna Haraway. "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene." *e-flux*, Journal #75 - September 2016. <https://goo.gl/EBMFqU>
2. *ibid*
3. Timothy Morton. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press. 2013.
4. Alenda Y. Chang. *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games*. University of Minnesota Press. 2019.

Images

Page 74: Anna Eyler and Nicolas Lapointe, */lick* (detail), sculpture installation and digital media, 2023.
 Page 75: Jakob Kudsk Steensen, *Primal Tourism, Walkthrough*, video installation, 2016.
 Page 76: Anna Eyler and Nicolas Lapointe, */lick*, sculpture installation and digital media, 2023.
 Page 77: *Object Gardens* installation view. (left) Peter Burr, *DIRTSCRAPER*, 2019. (right) Anna Eyler and Nicolas Lapointe, *La Fable d'OxA 21965*, (2019)
 Page 78: Peter Burr, *DIRTSCRAPER*, software (evolving video), 2019.