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Exhibiting the End: Curatorial Scenarios of Burial, Contagion and Extinction

Abstract

This article examines curatorial strategies used to contextualise, dramatise and narrativise events that unfold over timescales far exceeding the individual human lifespan, sometimes involving life forms that are posthuman or other-than-human. The article advances the term ‘curatorial scenario’ to analyse and compare three specific exhibition projects from 2015, all explicitly framed and plotted around the actuality or possibility of disastrous events, involving bacterial contagion, nuclear contamination or rising sea levels. Informed by theorisations of ‘negative utopianism’ (Demos 2016; Jameson 2005) in art theory and science fiction, I compare three curatorial scenarios that seek to investigate the properties of human and non-human entities, encountered in the present, from vantage points that are imaginatively located the distant past or future. In *A Breathcrystal* Mihnea Mircan sought to manifest—without directly materialising—the fundamental unknowability of remote prehistoric entities (a group of cave paintings, infested by living bacteria), through embodied experiences in the gallery and cinema. *Riddle of the Burial Grounds*, curated by Tessa Giblin, deployed tightly sequenced lighting and projection cues to choreograph collective interactions with artworks, envisaged as monuments or markers of remote events, prioritising human-centred communication yet also revealing its limits. *Disappearing Acts*, curated by Matt Packer and Arne Skaug Olsen, used the material remains, social history and waterside setting of a former furniture showroom to stage scenes of posthuman emergence, against a backdrop of rising sea levels.

Keywords:

anthropocene; posthuman; science fiction; negative utopianism; hyperobjects

The term ‘anthropocene’ has been proposed by scientists as a way to periodize and publicly name the geological impact of human behaviour (Crützen and Stoermer 2000), appearing in humanities scholarship (Chakrabarty 2009), environmental journalism (Schwägerl 2014) and major exhibitions, including the Taiwan Biennial 2014. Naming the anthropocene has helped to articulate, and publicise, a profoundly destructive and disorienting fusion of human and geological timeframes. Yet a general focus on ‘anthropos’ as geological force has also been rejected by many¹ as deeply misleading, primarily because it obscures the fact that not all humans are equally culpable for, or equally vulnerable to, the consequences of anthropogenic climate change. Alternative names for this temporal convergence of the human and geological, including ‘Capitalocene’ (Haraway 2016), have been advocated, and even the category of the

'human' has itself been contested, with Rosi Braidotti proposing posthuman theory as 'a generative tool to help us re-think the basic unit of reference for the human in the bio-genetic age known as "anthropocene", the historical moment when the Human has become capable of affecting all life on this planet' (2013: 5). Braidotti calls for, and finds evidence of, a 'post-anthropocentric turn' extending well beyond philosophy and the humanities, to include 'science and technology studies, new media and digital culture, environmentalism and earth-sciences, neuroscience and robotics, evolutionary theory, critical legal theory, primatology, animal rights and science fiction' (2013: 57-58). Although 'art' is absent from Braidotti's list, it is clear that exhibitions and curatorial projects—such as *The Whole Earth*, (2013) and *The Anthropocene Project: A Report* (2014) at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin—are integral to the post-anthropocentric turn she describes, and there is a growing literature on both the museum's role in shaping 'natureculture' formations (Normand 2015) and contemporary art exhibitions engaging with the anthropocene.² I am specifically interested in analysing how curators have used exhibitions to re-think the human as the dominant 'unit of reference' in conceptualising life and time.

This article identifies and compares three different curatorial scenarios that are 'post-anthropocentric' in the sense that they seek either to challenge or defamiliarise human-centred concepts of life and time. My focus is on three exhibitions from 2015 that are framed (in textual materials, such as press releases, curatorial essays and other publications) as curatorial responses to events located in the distant past, unfolding at an other-than-human speed in the present, or projected to occur in the future. I use the term 'scenario' in order to situate these curatorial projects in relation to narrative forms that are plotted around sequences of actions and events, emphasising causality and consequence. The curators of these exhibitions are drawn toward dramatic scenarios—involving bacterial contagion, nuclear contamination, or rising sea levels—more usually encountered in science fiction³ and disaster films, or in documentaries and docudramas (such as, for example, Peter Watkins' 1965 nuclear war-themed television drama *The War Game*). Speculation on forms of life that are other than human is not, however, exclusive to science or science fiction, and has increasingly found its way into curatorial discourse. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's (2012: 30) introduction to the catalogue of dOCUMENTA(13), for example, alludes to a fragment of a meteor much older than Earth, which collided with the planet's atmosphere thousands of years ago, pulled by gravity. Wondering what it would be like to see the world from the meteorite's point of view, Christov-Bakargiev speculates briefly on the inner life of this other-than-human entity, yet she does not seek to develop a cohesive curatorial scenario premised upon the event of the meteor strike.

Although dOCUMENTA(13) included several artworks with ecological or environmental themes, it was very deliberately framed as 'an exhibition without a concept' (Demos 2016: 234). This lack of a concept was evidenced by the conflicting propositions in the artworks and by a vast proliferation of accompanying texts in the publication series *100 Notebooks*. T.J. Demos

notes a curatorial failure to address the contradictions produced by the exhibition's competing approaches to ecology, ranging from techno-utopianism to political activism. He argues that dOCUMENTA(13) as a whole, 'tended more toward the hybrid aesthetics of sci-fi than political engagement, even while it included voices that insist on politicizing ecology' (2016: 256). Demos is especially critical of the 'mega-exhibition' (2016: 256) as a forum for engaging with political ecology, calling for an entirely different model of curatorial practice, which might borrow from activist initiatives such as Occupy. Yet he does not fully address how strategies drawn from science fiction, which seek to visualise the present from a temporally distant vantage point, might be productively deployed by curators working on smaller-scale exhibition projects.

In this article, I examine strategies used by curators to dramatise, and materialise, the entanglement of human and geological timeframes, by plotting exhibitions around temporally remote events. I also consider how 'negative utopianism', which Demos locates in specific artworks, might operate in exhibitions. As theorised by Fredric Jameson (2005: 288), negative utopianism describes the process through which science fiction can counter the false techno-utopianism often underpinning dominant technologies—such as nuclear energy—and allow the present to become visible in new ways, potentially creating the conditions for action that might alter the future. Demos observes that dOCUMENTA(13) offered, in its selection of artworks, 'numerous visions of dystopian futures after an eco-catastrophe' (2016: 242). He distinguishes, however, between works that merely aestheticise (future) ecological catastrophes and those using the form of science fiction to explore actually existing situations of crisis, such as The Otolith Group's film *The Radiant* (2012). Demos observes that *The Radiant* focuses on the 'real corporate-science complex [involved in the production and promotion of nuclear energy] and its disastrous failure in the present, an actual scenario nonetheless worthy of science fiction' (2016: 246), demonstrating the continued critical potential of 'negative utopianism'.

In this article, I focus on three exhibitions from 2015 that were much smaller in scale than dOCUMENTA(13). Through reference to these examples, I consider how exhibitions can, through their distinctive dramaturgy, appropriate science fiction's capacity to 'defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*' (Jameson 2005: 286, italics in original). I examine how the curators of these projects, Mihnea Mircan, Tessa Giblin, Matt Packer and Arne Skaug Olsen, engaged with the popular imagination of catastrophe without aestheticising crisis, or succumbing to what China Miéville calls a 'contamination of utopia by apocalypse' (2015), expressed in 'deep ecological' visions of a world that has been cleansed of humans. Two of the examples discussed—*A Breathcrystal*, curated by Mihnea Mircan and *Riddle of the Burial Grounds* curated by Tessa Giblin—took place at Project Arts Centre in Dublin⁴, with Mircan curating a related screening programme at the Irish Film Institute (IFI). My third example, *Disappearing Acts* was curated by Matt Packer and Arne Skaug Olsen, and it formed part of the Lofoten Islands Art Festival (LIAF)⁵, a biennial based in an archipelago on the north west coast of Norway, inside the Arctic Circle. It should be noted that Mircan, Packer and Skaug Olsen

generally avoid using ‘anthropocene’—or any alternative term of periodisation. In contrast, Giblin (2015) repeatedly cites *The Anthropocene*, by environmental journalist Christian Schwägerl (2014) in the introduction to the gallery guide accompanying her exhibition *Riddle of the Burial Grounds*. Before turning to in-depth discussion of these curatorial projects, however, I want to look more closely at the imagination of human extinction, and the problem of conceptualising posthuman time.

Posthuman Time

Through their conception, design and materialisation, exhibitions can amplify phenomenological awareness of the human body, as an entity existing in time and space. Curators such as Tessa Giblin have used exhibitions to examine the changing media, practices and technologies through which (human) time is experienced and organised, for example by borrowing from older, yet relatively familiar, cultural forms such as the festival (Connolly 2012). Of the three curatorial scenarios discussed here, Giblin’s *Riddle of the Burial Grounds* is the most obviously human-centred. Yet, like Mircan, Packer and Skaug Olsen, she does not take human norms of time and space for granted, and instead demonstrates how these norms are placed under duress by the properties of nonhuman entities, including irradiated matter. To be ‘posthuman’ is to struggle with interconnecting problems of conceptualisation, bodily perception, dramatisation, and historical visualisation. It is to be caught between human and geological timescales, grappling with entities, such as black holes or biospheres, that are ‘massively distributed in time and space relative to humans’ (Morton 2013: 1). Being posthuman also involves rethinking established frameworks for the conceptualisation of history, frameworks that have been thrown into ‘deep contradiction and confusion’, because historical understanding in the wake of the anthropocene necessitates visualizing ‘a future “without us”’ (Chakrabarty 2009: 197-8). Significantly, in describing this problem of visualisation, Chakrabarty draws his terminology directly from a non-fiction bestseller, Alan Weisman’s *The Future Without Us* (2007), which argues for population control as a solution to environmental destruction. Although Chakrabarty does not endorse this remedy, he nonetheless claims that ‘this crisis cannot be reduced to a story of capitalism’ (221) and seems, by implication, to suggest that the causes and consequences of anthropogenic climate change cannot be addressed through a critique of capitalism.

A new role is emerging for exhibitions as cultural forms that support embodied sense-making, to challenge the normative practices and techniques through which (human) time is currently being organised. Theorising the ‘Anthropocene-aesthetic-capitalist complex of modern visibility’ (2014: 213-214), Nicolas Mirzoeff identifies a specifically ‘antiaesthetic’ component of modern visibility, whereby ‘the body can no longer make sense of what is presented to it’ (213-214). Exhibitions, as cultural forms that privilege embodied encounters with environments, objects (and other bodies), may offer specific opportunities to augment or bolster the sense-making capacities needed to grapple with anthropogenic climate change, and

understand forms of life and time that are other-than-human. Mirzoeff emphasises that the Anthropocene-aesthetic-capitalist complex specifically undermines attempts to conceptualise events unfolding on a timescale beyond the immediate and short-term (2014: 217). The operations of this complex are especially pronounced within the domains of visual culture (Demos 2017) and news media. As Rob Nixon observes, events such as floods can elicit widespread short term coverage—depending upon where they occur and which populations they affect—but the longer term actions and forces driving environmental disaster are more difficult to ‘turn into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment’ (2011: 3).

How might curators mobilise the negative utopianism of science fiction to engage with these problems and failures of conceptualisation, visualisation and even dramatisation? Darko Suvin, a theorist of both dramaturgy and science fiction (extensively cited by Jameson, 2005), has analysed the temporal dynamics of Brechtian aesthetics, identifying a complex dialogue between different moments in time, in which the present is often observed from a point located in another epoch, such as the past or an imagined future. According to Suvin, the Brechtian strategy of the ‘backward look’, from the imagined future towards the present, creates a ‘tension between a future which the author’s awareness inhabits, and a present which his audience inhabits: this tension is at the root of the most significant values of Brecht’s work’ (Suvin 1984:124), paralleling the dynamics at work in ‘negative utopianism’. The key point is that these temporalities are brought into proximity yet also remain, to some extent, distinct from each other. Here it is useful to reference Beatrice von Bismarck’s analysis of the continuities between theatre and the exhibition form. She frames both as constellations of relations that are always *in motion*, noting that in both contexts ‘what has been assembled always remains in the state of “becoming”’ (2010: 52). Is it possible for curators engaging with imaginative scenarios of extinction to use this quality of ‘relations in motion’ as a way to generate a productive tension between the embodied ‘present’ of the exhibition and events that are conceptually and physically remote, slow-moving, and so microscopic or massively-distributed that they cannot be readily grasped? How might a backward look from a projected (and increasingly precarious) future be manifest in the dramaturgy of an exhibition, allowing the present to be sensed in new ways?

Exhibitions are recognised as a ‘means of rethinking and reimagining history, subjecting it to revision in a process of constant refining’ (von Bismarck et al 2014: 9). Yet the process of constant refining is not necessarily limited to the past and, echoing the Brechtian logic of the backward look, I would argue that exhibitions can also operate as means of rethinking the *future*, to the degree that they (in keeping within the logic of negative utopianism) bring temporally remote vantage points to bear upon the embodied present. Exhibitions have been theorised as comparable to narratives, with Bruce W. Ferguson observing that the exhibition ‘sublimates [the work of art] to its own narrative ends as a minor element in a major story’ (1996: 183). But in the examples I discuss, the ‘story’ very clearly extends beyond the time and

space of the exhibition, where the work of art is located. Instead, the 'story' includes events that are spatially and temporally remote from the physical site of the gallery. In the three case studies I discuss, exhibitions function as constellations of relations involving actions, events and entities that, by virtue of their distribution and scale, cannot be easily organised or ordered within a shared time and space. Ferguson also suggests that it might be possible to identify a 'typology of vocal or filmic genres' in the 'speech' of the exhibition, which could share the characteristics of familiar narrative genres, such as the 'sitcom, the detective story, the news, the soap opera' (183). The narrative genre most relevant to my discussion is clearly science fiction, since all three exhibitions share a thematic concern with catastrophic events widely narrativised in science fiction cinema and literature, such as bacterial contagion, radioactive contamination or societal collapse due to anthropogenic climate change. This common thematic focus on catastrophe and disaster is significant. But it is more important to emphasise that science fiction (unlike the disaster film, which tends to be linear in structure) routinely permits the radical reconfiguration of conventional temporal and spatial order, allowing (for example) multiple timelines to coexist or intersect. While disaster films are overtly human-centred, science fiction literature and cinema can involve the plotting of events that precede, extend beyond, or narratively sidestep, the existence of humans. While science fiction might not be cited directly by the curators of *A Breathcrystal*, *Riddle of the Burial Grounds* or *Disappearing Acts*, they have all devised scenarios that share elements of its conceptual expansiveness, and its explicit engagement with other-than-human forms of life and time.

Mihnea Mircan, Tessa Giblin, Matt Packer and Arne Skaug Olsen all explore entities, forces and relations existing in the present from vantage points that are imaginatively located in the distant past or future. In *A Breathcrystal*, Mircan sought to demonstrate the fundamental unknowability of a group of cave paintings that are infested (and also reproduced) by colonies of living bacteria, while also extending this quality of unknowability to much more mundane entities, emphasising both embodied experience and material absence in both the gallery installations and an accompanying screening programme. In *Riddle of the Burial Grounds*, Tessa Giblin deployed tightly sequenced lighting and projection cues to create the spatio-temporal conditions for shared (human-centred) interactions with artworks, evaluated as the physical evidence or residue of temporally remote events. Giblin was specifically motivated by research on the use of markers at the 'burial grounds' of nuclear waste, which might serve as warnings to future generations. Finally, *Disappearing Acts* is similarly expansive in its engagement with time, but more focused on the coexistence of temporalities. Packer and Skaug Olsen aim to mobilise the material architecture and social history of commodity circulation through their choice of exhibition site – a former furniture showroom, located in a waterside area undergoing redevelopment as a tourism destination. Visibly vulnerable to rising sea levels, this multi-level structure was presented as both a relic of excess consumption and the setting for intersecting narratives of posthuman emergence and mutation.

Being Contaminated: *A Breathcrystal*

A Breathcrystal was framed by its curator as an exploration of ‘contamination, cross-bred categories and hybrid modes of sense-making’ (Mircan, 2015). It evolved from a larger research project, titled *Allegory of the Cave Painting*, which included a substantial interdisciplinary reader (Mircan and Van Gerven Oei, 2015) as well as two exhibitions in Antwerp. In this article, I frame *A Breathcrystal* as an extension of the curatorial scenario developed in *Allegory of the Cave Painting*, plotted around two different scenes of (ongoing) contamination that have attracted the attention of archaeologists, anthropologists, evolutionary theorists and forensic scientists. One of these events concerns the prehistoric Gwion Gwion paintings in North-Western Australia, which are difficult to date with any precision, because they have been colonised by vividly coloured symbiotic bacteria and fungi causing original pigment to be continually replaced. The authorship of the Gwion Gwion paintings is disputed, and their distinctive form (composed of unusually fine lines) means that they are objects of sustained and unresolved speculation. The second event of contamination referenced by Mircan is much more recent, involving the Lascaux cave paintings, which became infected by micro-organisms carried in the breath of modern human visitors. Following the closure of the Lascaux caves in the early 1960s, visitors were directed to a life-size replica nearby, but it too succumbed to bacterial infestation.

These various events of contamination, and the specific problems of authorship and classification posed by the Gwion Gwion paintings, provide the ‘plot’ of *A Breathcrystal*. The remoteness and physical inaccessibility of the cave paintings is integral to the ‘speech’ of the exhibition, which emphasised both the importance and difficulty of embodied experience. Many of videos and other objects actually installed in the gallery involved relatively minimal material traces of events or actions that occurred elsewhere. Yet the exhibition also functioned as a scene of embodied experience, inviting the imaginative or literal transgression of boundaries between bodily interiors and exteriors, and between human and non-human life forms. Phillip Warnell’s video *Outlandish: Strange Foreign Bodies* (2009), features a performance by Jean-Luc Nancy, who reads from his essay ‘L’Intrus’ (*The Intruder*), reflecting on his own heart-transplant, his subsequent treatment for cancer, and philosophical concepts of the foreign. The other main performer is an octopus that pushes against the walls of glass tank half-filled with water, carried upon the open deck of an otherwise deserted small boat at sea. Interweaving close-ups of Nancy in his office, manipulating a Moebius strip made from paper, with scenes of a living organ being manipulated by surgeons, and shots of the boat at sea, *Outlandish* offers a haptic, vivid exploration of boundaries.

As a more-than-human protagonist, the octopus-organ occupied the physical heart of the gallery space, but a focus on boundaries and their transgression was also reiterated in Katerina Undo’s *W/HOLE* (2014), which required visitors to interact directly with the gallery walls using their mouths. This work draws upon 19th century research into the development of a

prosthesis intended to enable the deaf to experience sound through the transfer of air vibrations into the body, via a device clenched between the teeth. Exhibition visitors were instructed to insert a metal rod into a hole in the gallery wall and, on reaching the end of the hole, to bite the rod while closing their ears, activating their own heads as acoustic chambers. The sound ‘heard’ through this technique is the text of Artaud’s censored radio play, *To Have Done With the Judgement of God* (1947), identified as an important influence on the development of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the body without organs.

Mircan’s interest in material absence was made even more explicit by the inclusion of *Route Sédentaire* (2001/2015) by Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan. This work is structured around an action performed in 2001, in which van Brummelen dragged a plaster copy of a classical figurative sculpture of Hermes from Amsterdam to Lascaux. The traces of this action were recorded in a film with a running time of 270 minutes, which exists as a single copy that deteriorates with each screening. The project was represented in *A Breathcrystal* only by small postcard-style photographs, placed on shelves, rendering the absent film as an object of speculation. If *Route Sédentaire* frames the ‘human’ as a series of marks upon the surface of the road (or the world), the *De-extinction* by Pierre Huyghe (13 min, sound 2014)—included in the exhibition’s screening programme at the Irish Film Institute—effects an even more pronounced decentring of the human, through its focus on a wholly nonhuman form of preservation. Using microscopic and macroscopic cameras, this anamorphic film navigates the interior of a piece of amber, dramatising what Jeremy Millar (2014) calls ‘a slow form of catastrophe’, revealing two insects ‘caught at their most vital, at the point of copulation’. While Huyghe effectively uses cinematography and materiality to expand imagination of time, Susan Schuppli focuses on events that are so massively distributed they seem to evade dominant modes of visibility. Informed by an expanded understanding of forensics, her film *Can the Sun Lie?* (2014) explores a conflict between scientific research and Inuit storytelling with regard to the changing appearance of the sun on the horizon. Mircan’s screening programme extended, and intensified through its immersive audio and large-scale projection, *A Breathcrystal*’s exploration of objects—both tangible and remote—as catalysts for embodied experience.

Communicating Across Time: *Riddle of the Burial Grounds*

While Mircan’s curatorial scenario was fundamentally post-anthropocentric, plotted around the ongoing action of microscopic protagonists, Giblin’s was self-consciously human-centred, in both its thematic concerns and formal realisation. Installed across three different exhibition spaces within Project Arts Centre—including two black box spaces generally used for performance events—*Riddle of the Burial Grounds* was very tightly choreographed. Giblin used timed spotlights to illuminate objects, and audiovisual cues to sequence the playback of videos, direct the attention and bodies of visitors as they move around the gallery, assembling in front of different projections, and also commissioned sculptural works that changed slowly over the

course of the exhibition. These strategies were used to draw (human) bodies together in time and space, temporarily constituting collective audiences, in keeping with Giblin's stated objective to engage 'our' imagination. Her curatorial essay describes the exhibition as a gathering of 'artworks which measure themselves against geological and human time [and] give speculative forms and images to [...] vast, unknowable expanses of time that help us to look outside of ourselves and the worlds we inhabit and, in so doing, attempt to stretch the possibilities of human imagination' (2015: 8). Rather than proposing a neutral vantage point on the consequences of contamination, *Riddle of the Burial Grounds* was framed as a polemical response to the conceptual, and societal, problems posed by nuclear waste and other human-made waste, which will remain hazardous for thousands of years.

As a speculation upon future encounters with things (and forces) rendered strange by time, *Riddle of the Burial Grounds* echoes one of the foundational texts of modern science fiction, H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), which features a pivotal scene in which a time traveller encounters a collection of alien objects displayed in dusty glass cases. Revealed as 'relics of our own future' (Jameson 2005: 100) these artefacts—like the half-buried Statue of Liberty encountered in the closing minutes of *The Planet of the Apes*—disclose their full meaning only to the time traveller. Giblin's project was, however, more directly informed by Peter Galison & Robb Moss' investigation of the storage of radioactive waste, and the techniques of marking and storytelling that might be used to communicate danger to humans in the distant future.⁶ In terms of subject matter, *Containment* closely parallels an earlier film, *Into Eternity* (2010) by Michael Madsen, but while the latter documents an ongoing process of construction, interviewing engineers and other specialist workers at Finnish waste storage site, Galison and Moss are more interested in the experiences of less enfranchised communities. So, in addition to referencing government-funded research, they consider the perspectives of activist groups embroiled in debates around waste storage (in Yucca Mountain, Nevada) and those affected by the accidental release of radioactive material (in Fukushima and elsewhere in Japan).

Riddle of the Burial Grounds also alludes to other, earlier, forms of disenfranchisement through the inclusion of Matthew Buckingham's *The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, in the Year 502,002 C.E.* (2002). This work articulates a pointed, and highly influential (Godfrey 2007), critique of colonial practices of memorialisation and narrativisation. Its main component is a timeline, composed of dates relating to the history and (imagined) future of a mountain range known to the Sioux Nation as the Six Grandfathers, which is also the location of Mount Rushmore. Buckingham's text outlines the Sioux claim on this land, noting that the monument to the U.S. presidents (initiated in 1927 and ongoing until funds ran out in 1941) was created by a sculptor who belonged to the Ku Klux Klan, but it also positions this narrative of colonisation within a temporal framework that extends for millennia into the past and future. The wall text is presented alongside a digitally altered photograph that depicts an imagined moment when the

human features carved onto the face of the mountain will have eroded beyond all recognition. Through this relatively simple conjunction of text and image, which is not unlike the Brechtian 'backward look', Buckingham creates a tension between temporalities of past, present and imagined future.

Buckingham's timeline graphically articulated the expansive temporal scope of Giblin's curatorial scenario, providing generous boundaries for conceptual projection forward and backward. But she also sought to dramatise, and materialise, the exhibition's progression towards its own end, by commissioning three sculptural busts by the artist Stéphane Béné Hanly. Sculpted from unfired clay and submerged in tanks of water, they were installed in the various spaces of the exhibition, where they slowly but steadily dissolved. These works were clearly framed, through their titles and in Giblin's curatorial essay, as monuments to the limits of scientific achievement and, by extension, techno-utopianism. *Length of a Legacy (Thomas Midgley)*, 2015 depicts a refrigeration scientist who was also the unwitting inventor of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), while *Length of a Legacy (Robert Oppenheimer)*, 2015 and *Length of a Legacy (Alexander Parkes)*, 2015 refer, respectively, to the invention of the atomic bomb and plastic. In its repurposing of monumental form, *Length of a Legacy* parallels Buckingham's subordination of human biography to the time of matter, but also indexed the exhibition's own ephemerality.

Riddle of the Burial Grounds tested the capacity of objects to communicate meaning across time, with or without textual supplements, revealing the limits of at least some objects. Rosella Biscotti's *Title One: The Tasks of the Community* (2012), installed next to Galison and Moss' film *Containment*, consists of an arrangement of lead plates originally utilised as a radiation shield at Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, Lithuania. This provenance is integral to the affective force (and meaning) of *Title One*; the objects alone cannot disclose their association with a nuclear power plant, requiring a human agent (the artist) to vouch for their provenance. Although Giblin's curatorial scenario was integrally focused on human protagonists, the exhibition did allude to the possibility of communicating with entities that are not human. In an echo of Mirca's research, excavations and naturally-occurring caves figured prominently in the two works that most clearly signal a move beyond anthropocentric time and life. Mikhail Karikis and Uriel Orlov's video *Sounds from Beneath* (2010-11) features a wordless performance by the members of a former coal miners' choir in Kent, filmed in the remains of the mine where they used to work. In this space, which has acquired the form of an amphitheatre through the labour of mining, the men vocalise the sounds of an earlier industrial era, evoking past events, processes and techniques, including explosions, alarms and machine noise, through the action of their bodies and breath. Their performance could be read as a nostalgic attempt to recover a lost human communality, rooted in (male) labour, yet their collective voices also articulate a more ambiguous affective attachment to matter and the machines that mediated their relationship to the earth.

Other works in the exhibition were less easily located in time. Dorothy Cross's video *Stalactite* (2010), projected on a monumental scale in the final gallery, suggested an orientation toward a future, in its conjunction of the human and nonhuman. The video depicts a male soprano—his voice close to breaking—singing non-verbal sounds in a cave that is more than two million years old. The acoustics of this space are determined in part by the presence of another growing thing, the seven metre long 'Great Stalactite' that hangs from the ceiling. This monumental object, which has been forming over 500,000 years, exists in a timeframe utterly different from that occupied by the boy, so although the video clearly brings biological and geological timeframes into proximity it also registers their separateness. Ultimately, by dramatising the problem and the limits of human-to-human communication over millennia, *Riddle of the Burial Grounds* disclosed the specificity and strangeness of human time.

Consuming and Emerging: *Disappearing Acts*

Tourism, like contemporary art, is clearly implicated in what Mirzoeff describes as capitalism's drive to 'extract the last moment of circulation for itself, even at the expense of its host lifeworld' (215). As the invited curators of *Disappearing Acts*, an exhibition realised within the context of a biannual festival located on a remote Norwegian island, Matt Packer and Arne Skaug Olsen sought to contextualise as well as dramatise this 'last moment of circulation'. Almost all of the works in *Disappearing Acts* were installed in a former furniture showroom located close to the water's edge, on a site earmarked for high-rise residential development. The Jern & Bygg furniture business operated from the 1940s until 2010, a period that encompassed Norway's post-war reconstruction, its subsequent emergence as a petro state, literally fuelling mass consumption on an unprecedented scale, eventually producing a backlash against consumerism in the form of a growing environmental consciousness. The Jern & Bygg building was extended many times during this period, gradually subsuming many neighbouring business premises, resulting in a labyrinthine interior layout. Although the exhibition was framed partly as a staging of disappearance (in the sense of a magic act), it also insisted upon the bodily action—and material consequences— of consuming images and things.

In their introduction to the project, the curators invoke a specific conjunction of swallowing and swimming, citing an essay from 1934, titled *Techniques of the Body*, in which Marcel Mauss recalls that swimmers were once taught to swallow water and spit it out again, imagining themselves as human steam boats (Packer and Skaug Olsen 2015: 11). Expanding upon this confusion of bodies, engines and environments, Packer and Skaug Olsen draw together a range of practices attuned not only to the collapse of boundaries between human and other bodies, but also to conceptual entanglements involving objects. Their exploration of permeability and viscosity is also very specifically informed by Timothy Morton's writing on 'goo':

In a sense, all objects are caught in the sticky goo of viscosity, because they never ontologically exhaust one another even when they smack headlong into one another. A good example of viscosity would be radioactive materials. The more you try to get rid of them, the more you realize you can't get rid of them. [...] If you bury them in Yucca Mountain, you know that they will leach into the water table. (Morton 2013: 36).

Echoing the breadth of Morton's analysis, Packer and Skaug Olsen are not simply interested in mountains as geological formations to be mined, or turned into burial chambers for hazardous waste. Instead, the exhibition engages with the Lofoten Islands as sticky image-objects, describing the archipelago as 'a pictorial fantasy', where 'image technology and geological form seem to perform each other in a perfect post-human conspiracy' (Packer and Skaug Olsen 2015: 14).

Disappearing Acts was sequenced as a journey from a human-centred realm toward a waterside scene of posthuman emergence. Visitors entering the exhibition via the former main entrance of the retail showroom encountered environments and images associated with human ritual (ancient or everyday), including installations constructed onsite, using the material leftovers of the building's lighting, flooring and interior walls, before proceeding to the basement and glass fronted waterside spaces, inhabited by evocations of nonhuman entities. The curators intensified the spatial disorientation created by Jern & Bygg's partially interconnected floors, retaining the carpets and wall-coverings in certain rooms to heighten differences in acoustics, and ambient temperature. Contextualising their approach to the building, Packer and Skaug Olsen's curatorial essay proposes a comparison between the mutant form of the showroom and that of Frankenstein's monster, brought to life through the fusion of electricity and harvested body parts. There are obvious connections here with Latour's (2011) text 'Love Your Monsters', which similarly invokes Mary Shelley's literary creation. Latour uses the figure of Frankenstein's monster to advance a disturbingly theological (and paternalistic) approach to human invention, arguing that even if science often produce terrible effects, it still offers the primary (and perhaps only) means of addressing the problem of environmental destruction.

Disappearing Acts included several works exploring mythologies of creation. Three wall-length, luridly-coloured backlit digital prints by John Russell, located close to the building's main entrance, featured computer-generated images, recalling museum dioramas in their proportions and composition. These images depicted dramatic assemblies of naked humans, animals and fantastical creatures, as though gathered for some ritual purpose. Nearby, Tue Greenfort's sculptural installation *Flambant Neuf* (2010) presented a modern-day scene of ritual action. This work included a large circular structure constructed partly from plaster gypsum, a material by-product of thermal recycling that is widely used to build temporary walls in galleries, among other spaces. This circular structure served as a kind of mini-auditorium for a

video originally presented (and shot) in König Gallery, Berlin, in which Greenfort scours the gallery storeroom for flammable materials and then proceeds to teach both the gallerist and his young son how to make fire from scratch. Transposed from white cube to former furniture store, the meaning of *Flambant Neuf* no longer functioned as a commentary on the circulation of energy in art, instead directing attention toward more everyday dynamics of display and consumption, figuring *Jern & Bygg*'s as a kind of strange theatre of material and social assembly.

Flambant Neuf was just one of several works to engage both materially and conceptually with the history of the venue and its prior function. Elsewhere, in a semi-autonomous mezzanine space, Sam Basu's installation *The Actual Possibility of Escape*, 2015, integrated *Jern & Bygg*'s vaguely psychedelic carpeting and grid-like metal light fittings into a display of hanging tapestries and lacquered vitrines, incorporating filmic and sculptural models of ancient monuments. Basu's work was proposed as the 'scenography' for an unperformed and unscripted theatrical play about a real-life encounter between Eldridge Cleaver (a leader of The Black Panthers) and Timothy Leary (a research known for his advocacy of psychedelic drugs) in the 1970s. This meeting ended disastrously, with Cleaver taking Leary and his wife hostage, but Basu speculates on the possibility of an alternative history, in which disparate strategies for achieving social change and political justice might somehow have been reconciled. It is possible to identify connections between Basu's use of the monument and ideas explored in *Riddle of Burial Grounds*. But while Giblin emphasised cohesive spatio-temporal sequencing, *Disappearing Acts* presented multiple co-existing temporalities, materialised on different floors of the building. Located on a mezzanine at the physical heart of the former showroom, *The Actual Possibility of Escape* functioned semi-autonomously, as an exhibition within an exhibition organised around an imagined future.

As an entity composed of multiple parts, *Disappearing Acts* offered conflicting perspectives on the human as 'a basic unit of reference', to use Braidotti's terminology. Juha Pekka Matias Laakkonen's sculptural installation *Visitation Rights*, 2015, proposed simple objects—employed or made during his journeys to the nearby uninhabited island Lille Molle—as materialisations of human time. A moss-green cloth bag was presented alongside a small bowl-like object. The bowl was made from pine resin and moose dung, gathered on Lille Molle and cast directly from the peak of the island's highest mountain, which was visible through a window in the exhibition space. *Visitation Rights* manifested a deep sensitivity to the island ecology, but it was also self-consciously human-centred. In contrast, Fabien Giraud & Raphaël Siboni registered, through very different means, an inexorable displacement of the human body as measure, through their three video projections *Untitled (La Vallée Van Uexküll, 720 x 576)*, *Untitled (La Vallée Van Uexküll, 1280 x 720)*, *Untitled (La Vallée Van Uexküll, 1920 x 1080)*. From 2009 to 2014, they shot a succession of sunsets with what was then the latest available video equipment, recording the sun's own slowly diminishing rays directly onto the camera sensor, rather than the lens. Through this process, they sought to register the moment at which

the sensor surpassed the capacities of the human eye. A relativisation of the human body, and its capacities, was equally evident in various works installed on a lower floor, closer to sea-level. But these works, particularly when understood collectively, seemed to materialise the emergence of a nonhuman 'body'. Katja Novitskova's *Pattern of Activation (Loki's Castle)* 2015 featured an assemblage of customised electronic baby swings in relentless stealthy motion, metallic towers bearing cameras and tiny video screens, interspersed with cables, and photographic cut-outs depicting details of human eyes and fantastical undersea caves. The space and its mechanical inhabitants were animated by disembodied voices, emanating from speakers, communicating the possibility of new life evolving within the Arctic hydrothermal vents of an undersea domain known as Loki's Castle.

Metaphors of birth and emergence were even more pronounced in Elizabeth Price's video installation, *West Hinder*, 2012, which also featured nonhuman voices emanating from within the ocean. Price's work was prompted by the sinking of a ship transporting luxury cars in an area of the North Sea, known as West Hinder, which is subject to multiple territorial claims. Price imagines a scenario in which these objects, equipped with 'intelligent' high-tech interfaces, acquire a collective voice and begin to articulate an ambiguous yet profound relation to a world that includes, but is no longer organised around, humans. They communicate through synchronised actions, images and phrases culled from hyperbolic advertisements, their 'voices' interwoven with fragments of (almost) familiar music, reconfigured from the Genesis song 'Follow you, follow me'. The creatures brought to life in *Pattern of Activation* and *West Hinder* recall the human-engineered monsters that Latour seeks to acknowledge, Packer and Skaug Olsen use the alien vantage points offered by these emergent entities to investigate the causes and consequences of human desire and fantasy.

These fantasies were integral to Roderick Hietbrink's darkly funny video *Slime is the Agony of Water*, 2015, part of a larger project involving the temporary deposit of sculptural objects into the Lofoten seas. Recovered after several months, bearing the traces of their underwater storage, the sculptures were displayed in a plastic lined pool of water in which Hietbrink, clad in a metallic spandex bodysuit, performed on the opening night of the festival. In this performance, *The Slimy is Myself, or How I Want to Be a Pigeon*, 2015, Hietbrink introduced the damp sculptures as his 'emotions', obsessively covering them with damp cloths while proclaiming: 'I've got to keep them wet, keep them wet'. Through its spectacular dramatisation of object-oriented anxiety and desire, staged within a structure that acquired its form over multiple decades, in response to the demands of domestic consumption, the performance captured the absurdity, as well as the viscosity, of entangled bodies, objects and environments. This was not a communication addressed to the future. Instead, the performance, like many of the works in *Disappearing Acts*, insisted upon the strangeness of actions, desires and forces that belong to the present.

Exhibiting the End

The exhibitions discussed here are not the first to grapple with problems of sense-making and conceptualisation presented by the Anthropocene-aesthetic-capitalist complex. Demos (2016: 256) identifies a failure in dOCUMENTA(13) to acknowledge the contradictions between disparate artistic positions, implying that distinctions between techno-utopianism and political ecology were either ignored or obscured. He argues that the negative utopianism of The Otolith Group's *The Radiant*—whereby science fiction counters the false utopian ideology that often underpins dominant technologies, making the present visible in new ways—is missing from the curation of dOCUMENTA(13). This criticism does not hold true, in my view, for *A Breathcrystal*, *Riddle of the Burial Grounds* or *Disappearing Acts*, primarily because technology is never framed by the curators, or by the artists in these exhibitions, as a solution to the consequences of environmental destruction. Artists such as Huyghe, Schuppli, Warnell, and Giraud & Siboni all focus attention on specific aspects, or processes, of scientific and technological investigation. But instead of producing answers, they tend to heighten uncertainty, generating rather than resolving problems of conceptualisation, bodily perception, dramatisation, and visualisation associate with the posthuman. Of all the artists discussed, Novitskova and Price are perhaps the most interested in the capacities and properties of future technologies. Yet, at the same time, the forms of organic life and inorganic intelligence encountered in Novitskova's *Pattern of Activation (Loki's Castle)* and Price's *West Hinder* are clearly extrapolated from events that have either already occurred or are continuing to unfold. As such, both works make present-day economies and processes of consumption and exploitation visible.

If these three exhibitions assert a distance from techno-utopianism, they are also slightly detached from activist practices that seek to politicise ecology. Activism is certainly referenced, through the inclusion of works by Susan Schuppli (a member of Forensic Architecture), Lonnie van Brummelen & Siebren de Haan (members of the collective World of Matter) and Tue Greenfort, all of whom are cited, either directly or indirectly, by Demos (2017) for their involvement in activist practice. On the whole, however, activism has a relatively low visibility in *A Breathcrystal*, *Riddle of the Burial Grounds* and *Disappearing Acts*. Some works (including Schuppli's *Can the Sun Lie?* and Buckingham's *The Six Grandfathers*) are attentive to the knowledge and lived experience of those who are most exposed to the worst effects of the Anthropocene-aesthetic-capitalist complex. Yet it would be fair to say that all three exhibitions place equal, if not greater, emphasis on the conceptual challenges—particularly concerning the imagination of time and the posthuman—faced by relatively enfranchised communities grappling with the hyperobject of climate change.

These case studies demonstrate that curators are using the exhibition form to grapple with the conceptual, as well as eco-political, challenges presented by the Anthropocene-aesthetic-capitalist complex of modern visuality. It is clear that curators are adopting and reconfiguring strategies of plotting and sequencing found in cultural forms such as

cinema, literature and theatre, using these strategies to script and structure embodied encounters with material environments, objects and moving images. As a contribution to curatorial scholarship, these case studies show that curatorial scenarios can incorporate, and mobilise, actions and events that occur outside the spatio-temporal frame of the exhibition as a narrative form. Curators can bring the imagination of remote, and massively distributed events, to bear upon the embodied experience of artworks. In addition, these case studies indicate that exhibitions, as relations of matter and objects in motion, can yield new forms of embodied knowledge, revealing the strangeness, and the destructive consequences, of concepts of life and time that are exclusively human-centred.

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Biography

Maeve Connolly co-directs the MA in Art & Research Collaboration at Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dublin. She is the author of *TV Museum: Contemporary Art and the Age of Television* (Intellect, 2014), on television as cultural form, object of critique and site of artistic intervention, and *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen* (Intellect, 2009), on aspects of the cinematic turn in contemporary art. Her recent publications include contributions to the anthologies *Workshop of the Film Form* (Fundacja Arton and Sternberg Press, 2017), *Extended Temporalities: Transient Visions in the Museum and in Art* (Mimesis International, 2016), *Great Expectations: Prospects for the Future of Curatorial Education* (Koenig Books, 2016), and *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015). She is currently researching the relationship between art practice and the materiality of infrastructural change.

¹ See Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016; Demos 2017; Mirzoeff 2014.

² See Demos 2016; Dickinson 2015; Franke and Turpin 2015; Razian and Petrešin Bachelez 2016.

³ The three exhibitions I discuss in depth all evoke science fiction quite obliquely. In contrast, Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* is referenced very directly by the curators of *La Zona*, an exhibition exploring cultural and political practices of zoning in relation to the environment, urban development and nuclear power. *La Zona* was curated by Sandra Bartoli, Michael Danner, Silvan Linden, Florian Wust, at NGBK, Berlin (28 April–3 June 2012).

<https://archiv.ngbk.de/en/projekte/la-zona/> [Accessed September 2017]

⁴ These exhibitions were realised through an informal exchange between Mircan (who was then director of Extra City Kunsthall, Antwerp) and Giblin (who was then gallery curator at Project Arts Centre, Dublin), and both were presented in multiple iterations. In *A Breathcrystal*, (24 April–30 May 2015) Mircan expanded upon ideas explored in the exhibitions *Allegory of the Cave Painting* at Extra City Kunsthall (20 September – 7 December 2014) and *Allegory of the Cave Painting: The Other Way Around*, at Braem Pavilion, Middelheim Museum, Antwerp (26 October 2014 – 29 March 2015). Giblin curated the first iteration of *Riddle of the Burial Grounds* Project Arts Centre (11 June – 1 August 2015) and the second iteration at Extra City Kunsthall (26 March – 7 July 2016), which included works by several artists—Jean-Luc Moulène and Lonnie van Brummelen & Siebren de Haan— featured in *A Breathcrystal*. Giblin also curated a subsequent related exhibition titled *Hall of Half Life*, (27 September 2015–11 January 2016) as part of the Steirischer Herbst Festival in Graz, Austria.

⁵ Disclosure: my partner Dennis McNulty participated in *Disappearing Acts* (28 August – 27 September 2015) and I reported on my own experience of attending LIAF 2015 in Maeve Connolly, 'Letter from North Norway: Disappearing Acts', *Art Monthly* 390, (2015) p. 40.

⁶ In their exploration of markers, Galison and Moss reference a report published by Sandia National Laboratories in 1993, titled *Expert Judgment on Markers to Deter Inadvertent Human Intrusion into the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant*. <http://prod.sandia.gov/techlib/access-control.cgi/1992/921382.pdf>