

Demos was recently appointed director of the forthcoming Center for Creative Ecologies at UC Santa Cruz. Until then he was a critic and reader in the Department of History, University College London. He writes on contemporary art and politics, and is the author of *The Migrant Age: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Change* (2013) and *Return to the Postcolony: Spectres of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (2013). Demos served as guest editor of a special issue of *Third Text* (no. 120, 2013) on "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology." He is currently working on a book on the same subject with Sternberg Press.

**T. J. Demos**

**Curating Against the  
Apocalypse**  
**Documenta 13, 2012**

"WE LIVE IN A STATE OF PERMANENT CRISIS, a state of emergency and thus of exception." So explains Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, director of Documenta 13, the most recent iteration of the major international contemporary art exhibition that occurs every five years in Kassel, Germany.<sup>1</sup> Calling to mind images of endless war in the Middle East, the retraction of civil liberties worldwide, and the generalized conditions of emergency law that philosophers like Giorgio Agamben have theorized and decried as the contemporary "state of exception," the recognition would seem to set the stage for an engaged curatorial presentation of agitprop political art. Thus, it was surprising that the curator of this high-profile production chose to respond to the alleged state of crisis with numerous artist-rendered gardens in what is undoubtedly the most ambitious mega-exhibition worldwide. Christov-Bakargiev's show was overgrown with experimental planters, creatively landscaped areas, and green installations relating variously to horticulture, farming, and natural life forms, which made the 2012 iteration of Documenta the greenest yet. As such, however, the exhibition was not without its conceptual challenges and unresolved contradictions: intentionally or not, the show itself presented a major crisis in terms of how ecology might be addressed within the curatorial and artistic realm.

The various models of the garden-as-art included Kristina Buch's *The Lover*, an open-air butterfly microhabitat installed in

front of Kassel's Staatstheater and comprised of approximately 3,000 plants ideal for indigenous varieties of the insect. The artist drew on 180 separate butterfly species, some of which emerged from their chrysalises during the show. Acknowledging that it is impossible to enclose insect life in the wild, Buch pointed to the infinite nature of her garden project: "Inherent in the work is the fact that you cannot really contain or control it. You can't own it. By nature it's boundless and ephemeral."<sup>2</sup> Nearby, Christian Philipp Müller's *Swiss Chard Ferry* presented a group of barges floating on one of the canals in the Karlsaue Park, each filled with sixty edible varieties of the leafy green vegetable. Müller realized the project in cooperation with the Department of Organic Agricultural Sciences at the University of Kassel in Witzenhausen and drew on various seed banks worldwide. Calling to mind the infrastructure of post-disaster relief aid—and visions of an emergency future plagued by food scarcity—the pontoons dated from the Cold War and were borrowed from the Federal German Technical Relief Organization for Water-Hazards.<sup>3</sup> There was also 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. The entropic mass dramatized the meaning of Song Dong's frequently-quoted Taoist-like saying: "That [which is] left undone goes undone in vain; that which is done is done still in vain; that [which is] done in vain must still be done."<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, these represent

2 Buch, cited in Aimee Walleston, "Kristina Buch's Constant Garden," *Art in America* (June 26, 2012), <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/kristina-buch-documenta-13/> (accessed August 12, 2015).

3 For additional description, see Christian Philipp Müller's website, <http://www.christianphilippmueller.net/cms/works/Swiss-Chard-Ferry> (accessed August 12, 2015).

4 Quoted in Einar Engström, "Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen: The Way of Chopsticks III," *Leap* (October 23, 2011), <http://leapleapleap.com/2011/10/song-dong-yin-xiuzhen-the-way-of-chopsticks-iii/> (accessed August 12, 2015).

1 As Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev wrote in "Letter to a Friend," dated October 25, 2010, in *Documenta 13: The Book of Books* (Ostfildern, 2012), p. 1.

only a small selection of the many green projects presented in the extensive group exhibition; nonetheless, they exemplify its overarching commitment to investigating ecology in an era of environmental crisis.

To some, gardens might seem irrelevant to our world of crises and emergencies, the specific circumstances of which Christov-Bakargiev neglected to identify. But in fact gardens, and more broadly, farming and agriculture, concern the most urgent of global conflicts—including the controversial financialization of nature, realized by the patenting and commodification of genetically modified seeds by multinational agribusiness and pharmaceutical corporations; the dangerous production of greenhouse gas emissions, advanced by a monoculture- and export-based farming economy reliant on chemical fertilizers and the fossil-fueled transportation industry; and the destruction of unions and small-scale subsistence farming, displaced by the mechanized technology of transnational agricultural production. In these different cases, it becomes evident that life itself has become subject to capitalist ownership, exploitation, manipulation, and destruction.<sup>5</sup> Yet about these various pressing crises and emergencies, the curator and her team of assistants had nothing specific to say in their many catalogue essays and public announcements.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the various biotic artworks risked becoming mere green embellishments to an already organically adorned Baroque environment, especially given the Karlsaue Park's eighteenth-century redesign as a landscape garden.

A case in point was Claire Pentecost's vertical gardens, which adorned the Ottoneum's front grounds (the natural history museum is not far from Documenta's main venue, the Fridericianum). For her contribution, the Chicago-based artist collaborated with designer and philanthropist Ben Friton of the foundation Can YA Love to create a series of structures that

5 See Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology & Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle, 2008).

6 See Documenta "core agent" Chus Martinez's tellingly titled essay, "Unexpress the Expressible," in *Documenta 13: The Book of Books* (see note 1).

responded to her motivating inquiries concerning the intrinsic value of soil as a medium of organic life and its relation to the urban context: "Can soil be distinguished from real estate?" she asked. "If people can make soil from organic waste but they have no land, what are the options for growing food in limited space?" Pentecost's proposal took the form of a number of pillar-like vertical planters made out of metal, "simple and inexpensive and easily adapted to dense urban spaces where people are land-poor."<sup>7</sup> However, their placement at Documenta suggested that her eight-foot-high dirt-and-plant towers formed extensions of the natural history museum's lush exterior, as if her project were an organic-aesthetic approach to landscape decoration. Far from evident was the radical nature of her creations, meant as prototypes for self-sufficient food production in gardenless urban areas, as well as conceptual proposals for delinking arable land from commercial property—that is, unless one was already familiar with the artist's politico-ecological commitments.

### From SF to the Corporate Control of Life

Described somewhat cunningly as "an exhibition without a concept" by Christov-Bakargiev in the run-up to the show—in order to de-instrumentalize and singularize the inclusions, visitors were told—Documenta 13 largely outsourced the definition of the show's conceptualization to its impossibly multiple and at times internally conflicted 100 Notes-100 Thoughts series.<sup>8</sup> While this overwhelming panoply provided little immediate service to visitors at the exhibition, the publications do open up fertile territory for considering the pressing environmental matters raised in the exhibition, even while these matters were never explicitly identified or linked to the show's individual artistic contributions. The series assembles short essays by a range of artists and theorists,

7 All quotes from Pentecost's website: <http://www.publicamateur.org/?p=85> (accessed August 12, 2015). See also Pentecost's "Notes from Underground," in *Documenta 13: The Book of Books* (see note 1).

8 On Christov-Bakargiev's lack of a concept, see Martin Conrads, "Of Dogs and Humans: Documenta 13 in Kassel," <http://www.goethe.de/ins/cn/en/lp/kul/mag/bku/9556034.html> (accessed August 12, 2015).

including those with an ecological focus, such as Donna Haraway and Vandana Shiva, that suggest numerous productive, if competing, ways to approach the exhibition's gardens, and more broadly, the artistic inclusions' diverse approaches to the environment.

One standout was Haraway's contribution to the series, "SF: Speculative Fabulation and String Figures." The short text develops the aesthetic terms of techno-organic hybridity, familiar from the feminist techno-science theorist's well-known work on cyborgs, and finds a creative political inspiration in the science of gene research and bioengineering. For Haraway, "SF" bears multiple meanings, and extends to such terms as "speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction, science fact, [and] science fantasy."<sup>9</sup> Each generates a range of valences and bridges complex hybrid categories in ways reminiscent of her cyborg model and its joining of otherwise conventional oppositions, defining "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction," one modeling and thus stimulating a world beyond the oppressive binaries of Western modernity (male-female, culture-nature, subject-object, technology-biology, etc.).<sup>10</sup> Haraway's contribution to Documenta was not merely theoretical; her conceptual presence was also discernable in the exhibition's spatial dispersion—with more than fifty offsite locations comprising a rhizomatic display geography—and it was also perceptible in the show's conceptual diffusion, in which a hundred approaches eclipsed any single reigning theme. Her influence was also felt in the "natureculture" and "intra-actional" aspects of the "becoming-with"-ontology of the gardens—all terms of Haraway's—suggesting hybrid mediums that play a role in both organizing and providing socio-aesthetic support systems for human life, a theoretical framework that significantly opens up the conceptual potential of the artists' work with gardens, particularly those of Buch, Song, Müller, and Pentecost.

Yet mobilizing Haraway's insights as a model for eco-

9 Haraway, "SF: Speculative Fabulation and String Figures," in *Documenta 13: The Book of Books* (see note 1), p. 4.

10 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London, 1991), pp. 149–50.

aesthetics proved tricky in this context, especially when placed in relation to the more explicitly political garden practices at Documenta 13, such as that of Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri and their artist-run collective AND AND AND, which embraced an explicitly "anti-capitalist," organic, and localist character, and whose several garden kiosks sold regional food and produce on the exhibition grounds for the duration of the show. AND AND AND also formed part of Documenta 13's research team, and in that capacity 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 to workshops in Tunis, Yerevan, and Buenos Aires—during the two-year period preceding the exhibition. Exemplary was "Event 13," when, acting in alliance with the Compass of the Midwest Radical Culture Corridor (a collective of some fourteen artists, including Claire Pentecost, based in the American Midwest), they held public hearings on the practices of the Monsanto corporation in Carbondale, Illinois, on January 28, and in Iowa City, Iowa, on April 21, 2012.<sup>11</sup> In addition to supporting such off-site events, AND AND AND ran a space located near the back of the Kassel railway station during the exhibition, where the group hosted and organized an open and experimental public program, inviting artists, activists, farmers, students, thinkers, residents, and visitors from Kassel and beyond to participate in daily discussions over the show's hundred days.<sup>12</sup>

The political ecology implied here is perhaps better articulated by Indian eco-activist Vandana Shiva—another of the exhibition's 100 Notes–100 Thoughts authors—known for her struggle against the patenting of indigenous knowledge of seeds and plant life in India by multinational pharmaceutical and agribusiness corporations like Monsanto.<sup>13</sup> Though Haraway also explicitly

11 See <http://andandand.org/events.htm> and <http://midwestcompass.org/monsanto-hearings/> (accessed August 12, 2015).

12 Unless one was physically present, however, the meetings' proceedings have been largely inaccessible, relayed via short online descriptions, with few archival transcripts and scant video documentation.

13 See Shiva's essay, "The Corporate Control of Life," in *Documenta 13: The Book of Books* (see note 1).

opposes the patenting of life forms, her postmodern aesthetic of techno-feminist sci-fi ultimately crosses Shiva's anti-corporate globalization climate-justice activism, leading to a notable conflict of ecological visions. For Shiva, writing in a notebook much less playful than Haraway's, entitled "The Corporate Control of Life," "living organisms, unlike machines, organize themselves," and "cannot be treated as simply 'biotechnological inventions,' 'gene constructs,' or 'products of the mind.'" <sup>14</sup> Against what she indicts as corporate "biopiracy," Shiva places her emphasis on the fight to protect the legal sovereignty of non-commercialized knowledge systems and free and universal access to the life processes that comprise humanity's shared heritage. <sup>15</sup>

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." <sup>16</sup> 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" <sup>17</sup>—inspires visions of new forms of emancipation from essentialist identities and cultural-ontological purities. Haraway, moreover, has acknowledged being 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

14 Shiva, "The Corporate Control of Life" (see note 13), p. 7.

15 Shiva, "The Corporate Control of Life" (see note 13), p. 8 and p. 12. For further discussion, see T. J. Demos, "The Post-Natural Condition: Art after Nature," *Artforum* (April 2012), pp. 191–97.

16 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (see note 10), p. 151.

17 Donna Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan\_Meets\_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York, 1997), p. 88.

hegemony and US national integrity and purpose." <sup>18</sup> Yet, with Shiva's politics in mind, one cannot help but hear in Haraway's enthusiasm for genetically modified organisms a questionable aesthetico-political imagination that unintentionally corresponds to corporate practices like Monsanto's, with its global threat to the livelihood of farmers, biodiversity, indigenous eco-knowledge, and human health. <sup>19</sup>

There was consequently 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 "Third World" countries, on the other. While the exhibition productively raised this very conundrum by its inclusion of these assorted theoretical voices in notebook publications, the clash of positions—which concerns pressing global conflicts over food production, capitalist economy, and the status of the natural world—was never explicitly engaged in the exhibition's framework, only by individual authors and artists. As a result, Christov-Bakargiev's project, considered as a curatorial approach, risked the (non)position of uncommitted pluralism, a tendency familiar in the liberal milieu of contemporary art, which is always happy to allude to crises and emergencies—and even to aestheticize them—but does not take a clear stand in relation to them.

Not that opportunities were in short supply. For instance, there was no better time to address the discrepancies between Shiva's and Haraway's respective political ecologies than when Documenta held "On Seeds and Multispecies Intra-action: Disowning Life," a two-day public conference taking as its starting point, in the words of the publicity statement,

18 Haraway, *Modest\_Witness* (see note 17), p. 61. Also see Alicia H. Puleo, "From Cyborgs to Organic Model and Back: Old and New Paradoxes of Gender and Hybridity," *Comparative Critical Studies* 9 (2012), pp. 349–64.

19 On the dangers of genetically modified foods, see Jeffrey M. Smith, *Seeds of Deception: Exposing Corporate and Government Lies about the Safety of Genetically Engineered Food* (Totnes, UK, 2004).

"DOCUMENTA (13)'s ecological perspective, building on a global alliance between different forms of research and knowledge that is actively being developed in a variety of fields."<sup>20</sup> Although Shiva and Haraway both participated as keynote speakers in the conference, there was no discussion that addressed the relations and conflicts between their disparate approaches, nor was there public consideration of the larger stakes of their positions. While Documenta 13 can be credited with opening up ecological discourse in productive ways and confronting visitors with a variety of different positions, it also exemplifies the failure to do anything about the very issues it raised—as if mere knowledge production releases us from any responsibility for doing things differently at the curatorial level. At the very least, the organizers could have placed their theorists in critical relation to one another. Taking a position would require critiquing the political economy of sci-fi aesthetics (of the kind Haraway supports) and positioning that critique in relation to social justice activism (of the kind Shiva advocates). The point is not to dismiss these garden practices, but rather to problematize their discursive positioning by considering the intersection of art and ecology at this crucial historical moment in exhibition-making. The problem is that the curatorial discourse of Documenta tended to displace crucial questions of political and economic differences between speculative fabulation and environmental justice, opting instead for a conflict-free aestheticization of nature without a clear sense of the important stakes of these theoretical positions.

### The End of the World

While the curators neglected to systematically address these conflicts, some artists in the exhibition posed related questions in their work, such as: How do futurist imaginings of corporate biotech experimentation correlate with present-day political conflicts over land use, energy resources, and GM technology? What kind of political unconscious is implied in post-apocalyptic aesthetics? In fact, Documenta 13 included numerous artistic

visions of potential dystopian futures, which occupy the dark side of the eco-catastrophe that the exhibition's experimental gardens were so intent on forestalling, and I would like to examine them as well. Consider *NEWS FROM NOWHERE* (2012), by South Korean artists Moon Kyungwon and Jeon Joonho. An example of sci-fi aesthetics, the multimedia project comprises a film, installation, and research 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 additional ways to consider the relationships between science, ecology, and advanced capitalism in contemporary art at Documenta 13.

Inspired by the eponymous 1890 story of a future agrarian worker society by socialist artist William Morris, Moon and Jeon's *NEWS FROM NOWHERE* visualizes an apocalyptic time to come when humanity, owing to a series of unspecified "major climate changes," is reduced to an endangered species living in a biologically hostile environment, and survivors are left to reconsider their philosophies of life now that the Earth lies in ruins. Referencing utopian socialism and science fiction alike, the installation's subject is set in a late twenty-first century Earth permeated by radioactivity and hazardous waste, where raised sea levels necessitate floating settlements and the corporate giant Tempus rules over all. According to the project's sci-fi scenario, as shown in the featured film *El Fin Del Mundo*, those seeking citizenship, including the film's female protagonist, are obliged to volunteer to collect samples in the irradiated exterior and test them back at the laboratory. This is their only chance to gain security, though the subjects don't realize that their real mission is to serve as living research specimens exposed to atmospheric contamination for the benefit of corporate science. As such, the project makes apparent a further risk of a sci-fi poetics that aestheticizes crisis, which is that it establishes little political traction in the present. Much like the "speculative fabulation" of pop-cultural variants like *Avatar* or *Oblivion*, the piece sidesteps critical environmental knowledge, opting instead for the visual gratification 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, pro-

20 See <http://d13.documenta.de/#/research/research/search?q=on%20seeds> (accessed August 12, 2015) for archival videos.

viding alternatives to—the “major climate changes” that serve as its fiction’s generic foundation (much like Documenta’s curatorial position). Seduced by futuristic style, a corporate-scientist social order, technological redemption, and the imagery of a transfigured post-human cyborg-body, the film and installation construct a problematic utopian imaginary within our otherwise catastrophic circumstances.<sup>21</sup>

### The Necropolitics of Radiation

The Otolith Group’s *The Radiant* (2012) offered a counter-model, exchanging Moon and Jeon’s dystopian futurism for a focus on the existing corporate-science complex and its disastrous failure—itsself worthy of fiction. The approximately hour-long film takes as its point of departure March 11, 2011, when the Tohoku Earthquake occurred off the Pacific coast of Japan, triggering a tsunami that left more than 15,000 people dead and causing a catastrophic nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant that continues to contaminate land, air, and maritime environments to this day. Mixing appropriated historical media reports and live footage of interviews with scientists, activists, and locals, the film joins the erstwhile promise of nuclear energy expressed during the plant’s post-war construction to the future threat of a radiation-ruined environment, forming an explosive equation that opens critical rifts in our forsaken present. Resonating with the premise of *El Fin Del Mundo*, but all the more scary for its realness, *The Radiant*’s evacuated Japanese villages and untouchable plant life within the contamination zone serve as an experimental laboratory in which elderly volunteers—who are called “abandoned people” by activists—willingly expose themselves to what the Otolith Group terms “the necropolitics of radiation,” a governmentality of death administered by TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company) in collusion with Japan’s political elites, and more broadly with the global nuclear regime of scientific research promoted by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

21 Also see Moon Kyungwon and Jeon Joonho, eds., *News from Nowhere—A Platform for the Future & Introspection of the Present*, exh. cat. National Museum of Contemporary Art, South Korea (Seoul, 2013).

In the video, the abandoned landscape, eerily ornamented with toxic flowers, appears deathly quiet, suffused only with the creepy sounds of birds and insects heard in playgrounds and shopping streets now empty of human activity. These images and sounds emerge without explanatory voice-over, with the effect that the shots are decontextualized, stripped of clear references, which in turn invites the viewer’s conceptual speculation: What do we make of a world suddenly evacuated of humanity? For Slavoj Žižek, such a “pure disembodied gaze observing our own absence”—like the protracted fixed-frame shots presented in *The Radiant*—“is the fundamental subjective position of fantasy: to be reduced to a gaze observing the world in the condition of the subject’s non-existence.”<sup>22</sup> Yet here it is not a matter of fantasy, but rather a reality that is also a prefiguration of human extinction in the end times. One could surmise that, given the Otolith Group’s longstanding interest in speculative realist philosophy, *The Radiant*’s post-human environment confronts the post-anthropocentric condition as considered by theorist Ray Brassier—especially when he writes, in a way reminiscent of Žižek, of a “mind-independent reality, which, despite the presumptions of human narcissism, is indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, an environment indifferent to humans, with all of the eeriness such a condition implies, appears to be exactly what we witness in *The Radiant*.

Brassier’s book *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (2007) attempts to comprehend the logical consequences of the Enlightenment’s disenchantment of the world through reason, and refuses to defend against the threat of nihilism by safeguarding the experience of meaning. But rather than positioning nihilism as the heroic conquering of metaphysical thought or as an act of empty negativity that represents a “calamitous diminishment” of the world’s significance when deprived of human values—as do philosophers like Nietzsche and Heidegger—Brassier turns it

22 Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London, 2010), p. 80.

23 Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (London, 2007), p. xi.



into what he terms a “speculative opportunity” for philosophical inquiry into the meaning of extinction when none will be around to think it.<sup>24</sup> It is nevertheless striking that Brassier’s text makes no ecological reference, even though *Nihil Unbound* was written at the time when certain scientists were suggesting that we are currently living through the Earth’s sixth mass species extinction event; the fifth, known as the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event, occurred sixty-six million years ago and wiped out seventy-five percent of all species.<sup>25</sup> Owing to a combination of climate change, environmental destruction, and the spread of human activity worldwide, we could see the die-off of roughly half the world’s plants, animals, and birds in the next seventy years. Such an eventuality poses questions, such as what our world would be like without its vibrant biodiversity, and ultimately, if that biodiversity were essential to sustaining human life, what the world would be like without us.<sup>26</sup> Going beyond Brassier’s reluctance or refusal to locate his extinction theory in current ecological terms, the Otolith Group joins present-day geopolitics with an otherwise de-historicized and de-politicized speculative-realist philosophy. As such, *The Radiant* exposes the ironic implications of the so-called Anthropocene—that just as human beings come to be recognized as the central drivers of the Earth’s current geological epoch, they are also potentially becoming agents of their own extinction.

*The Radiant* entangles the future enchanted gardens of the posthuman in the political conflicts of the present, implicating us all in the necropolitics of radiation. In this sense the video’s appropriated footage of the now famous pointing man—the Fukushima worker who stood for ten minutes pointing his finger at a security camera at the power plant just after its meltdown—can be read as more than simply a protest act that was meant to articulate workers’ rights claims against TEPCO management, as the man

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> See Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (London, 2008).

later explained on his blog.<sup>27</sup> If the video went viral on the Internet in the days after the meltdown, and received such reception in the Otolith Group’s video, then it is because that resonant gesture unleashed an explosively charged index of the meeting point of present and future, when the origins of the potential catastrophe of post-human extinction is seen to be firmly rooted in our own world, not in some sci-fi speculation. And by including reference to Vito Acconci’s video (*Centers*, 1971)—a reference made first by the pointing man himself, Kota Takeuchi, a twenty-nine-year-old Japanese artist who worked at the plant—the Otolith Group locates video art’s so-called aesthetic of narcissism (as Rosalind Krauss once read Acconci’s video) and retools it as a defiant sign of popular accusation against necropower in a new media world of spectacular political gesture.<sup>28</sup>

Against the aesthetic model of escapist fantasy, the film exemplifies what Fredric Jameson calls “negative utopianism,” one that “transform[s] our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come.”<sup>29</sup> Rather than giving itself over to the sci-fi seductions of some future biotechnology set in some final day of reckoning, this work finds the future immanent in the specific conditions of our present. The result is that the future intimated 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. That is, even as the video shows protesters contesting Japan’s irresponsible and media-spun response to the disaster—especially the government’s decision (in cahoots with TEPCO) to distribute irradiated soil throughout the country to shield itself against future liability lawsuits by destroying control groups of forensic samples, and valuing corporate profits over people by repeatedly raising the accepted risk levels

<sup>27</sup> See <http://pointatfuku1cam.nobody.jp/e.html> (accessed August 12, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *October* 1 (Spring 1976), pp. 50–64.

<sup>29</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London, 2005), p. 288.



of radiation exposure.<sup>30</sup> The Otolith Group thereby seizes “the speculative opportunity” of a post-extinction environment to reveal our own necropolitical regime. While it provides witness to a world without us, haunting in its calm and peacefulness, it also inspires the agency of political resistance.

### Documenta as Sustainable?

As we have seen, Documenta 13’s “concept-free” exhibition tended more toward a dispersive bio-aesthetics of science fiction than political engagement, even while it included voices that insisted on the politics of ecology. That being the case, its curators missed an opportunity to address these relevant issues and position themselves within the philosophical and political controversies surrounding the status of life on Earth today. What would be the ramifications of taking seriously the ecological insights of Haraway and Shiva at the level of curating? Is it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of the unsustainable mega-art exhibition? Shows like Documenta are resource-consumption engines, likely unviable from an eco-perspective, with production, shipping, and transportation of visitors all amounting to a serious form of environmental despoliation.<sup>31</sup> The question remains: Where does the exhibition leave us vis-à-vis ecological imperatives? How might it be otherwise? How do we internalize within Documenta’s realization the ecological externalities of its very production, its carbon footprint, its exploitation of fossil fuel-based resources? And in recognizing the crisis situation of climate change, how might the show work critically within that framework, acknowledging its contradictions directly?

In the present age of crises and emergencies, we need bold proposals, not the fuzzy rejection of guiding concepts. Consider

30 See Satoko Oka Norimatsu, “Fukushima and Okinawa: The ‘Abandoned People’ and Civic Empowerment,” *truthout* (November 28, 2011), <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/5210:fukushima-and-okinawa-the-‘abandoned-people’-and-civic-empowerment> (accessed August 12, 2015).

31 See Julian Stallabrass, “Radical Camouflage at Documenta 13,” *New Left Review* 77 (September–October, 2012), p. 132.

what the significant symbolic effect would be if such a high profile exhibition decided that it was unviable for environmental reasons and canceled itself, or did something sustainable in its place. What curatorial strategies might it employ? One modest proposal was offered on the front lawn of the Fridericianum: the Occupy tent city, a token inclusion to be sure, and no match for a mega-exhibition, but it did figure as an alternative paradigm of a local formation with minimal ecological footprint, one that is socially inclusive, free and unticketed, and anti-elitist, an event for which it makes no sense to travel great distances, but which was rather geared toward people who live in the area. Occupy offered a generally unacknowledged, radical alternative, largely invisible to the conventional art world, in the looming shadow of Documenta 13—one that, if taken seriously as a model, would transform the contemporary art exhibition into something most likely unrecognizable from today’s perspective. Whatever the case, we need to encourage such ecological imperatives to be taken up in forceful, bold, ambitious conceptualizations, so that emergency conditions are not simply addressed at a distance, through artworks, representation, and discourse. Nevertheless, for all its shortcomings, Documenta 13 opened paths for artists to explore the bio-politics of nature in its current guise, the mixed economies of food production and experimental gardens, and the contested modes of environmental governance in an age of nuclear threat, 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 these debates only continue to grow more momentous. ■

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