

► Pawel Althamer, *Pawel and Monika 2002*. Straw, hemp fiber, animal intestine, wax and hair. Collection of Tony and Daniel Holtz. Photo by Benoit Pailley

# The Desire Called Apocalypse

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Jeff Kinkle



“No one is waiting any more for the revolution, only the accident, the breakdown, that will reduce this unbearable chatter to silence.”

Paul Virilio, *Art and Fear*

There is an oft-cited observation by Fredric Jameson that in the present period it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. This comment was made as a series of apocalyptic blockbusters were streaming out of Hollywood—*Independence Day* (1996), *Armageddon* (1998), *Deep Impact* (1998), etc.—and coincided with fears about the approaching millennium generated by the prospect of everything from a looming computing meltdown to the Rapture. These films by and large created a scenario in which an external threat—often literally from outside of this solar system: aliens, asteroids—forces humanity, nations, families, or romantic couples to unite to overcome the challenge to their very existence and/or realize an important lesson about life before being vaporized by aliens or engulfed by a gigantic tidal wave.<sup>1</sup> Recently, a second series of end-of-the-world films has emerged: *The Day After Tomorrow*, *The Happening*, *The Mist*, *Children of Men*, *I am Legend*, *Cloverfield*, *War of the Worlds*, *WALL•E*, etc. Without really going into any schematic depth we can say that while similar to the disaster films from the nineties in some respects, they are clearly colored by either the events of 9.11 and their aftermath or the growing consciousness of the climate crisis, often both.<sup>2</sup> Rather than positing some external, otherworldly threat to which humanity can respond heroically, the threat is often man-made,<sup>3</sup> and following events like the American state’s abject failure before, during, and following Hurricane Katrina, little hope is offered in our ability to emerge victorious. Even when the ending in these films is arguably “happy”—the hero makes it out alive—it is only after a tremendous amount of suffering has occurred and the world has been destroyed to such an extent that normality cannot possibly return.

This ubiquitous cultural vision of impending doom was the focus, or perhaps one should say was *in focus*, this past summer at After Nature, a show curated by Massimiliano Gioni at the New Museum in New York and featuring twenty-six artists over the museum’s three main floors. While the majority of the works came from contemporary artists, there were also works from August Strindberg, some early films from Nancy Graves, and so-called outsider artists Eugene Von Bruenchenhein and Reverend Howard Finster. In the introductory text the curator, together with assistant Jarrett Gregory, describes the show as “a cabinet of curiosities that pieces together a fragmented encyclopedia.” After Nature takes its title from the three part, book-length, prose poem by W.G. Sebald of the same name, and the exhibition catalogue is actually nothing but the Modern Library edition of the book with a new dust jacket and postcards of some of the works inserted between the pages like bookmarks. I found this disappointing at first when I picked it up in the bookshop, but when one conceives of the show as a fragmented encyclopedia one of its most rewarding elements is the way that it opened up onto a larger body of cultural works,

including the aforementioned films. Even many of the prints inserted between the pages of the book are of works not even included in the show and in the space, many works were complimented by a small text under their label: for example, a paragraph under Diego Perrone’s photo series of holes is the opening paragraph of Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Walking.”<sup>4</sup> These quotes are not attributed however and contribute to the feeling that the show is tapping into a much larger body of work: Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* is also quoted on a label and mentioned as an inspiration for example. The huge amounts of texts, films, and artworks dealing with the themes of the end of the world, disaster, and dystopia looms behind the show, but their mass does not so much as overshadow the works on display as much as it vitalizes them. The works stick to the general theme just enough, and even the works that do not necessarily make sense to me in relation to the theme of the show—like Tino Seghal’s living sculptures writhing around in slow motion on the floor or Roberto Coughi’s maps of so-called rogue states—are compelling.

The show, the curator reveals, is inspired by Werner Herzog’s film from 1992, *Lessons of Darkness*. The film features Herzog’s poetic narration over footage of workers attempting to douse the hundreds of burning oil wells the Iraqi army ignited throughout Kuwait during their retreat during the first Gulf War. In the wake of Saddam’s scorched-earth petrodollar potlatch, we see lakes of oil, the rusting shells of heavy machinery, and plumes of smoke darkening the cloudless sky. The landscape should be immediately familiar, especially as we are still in the midst of the second Gulf War, but Herzog’s poetic narration, detached from the war’s geopolitical reality and without mention of the ongoing human suffering, helps give the landscape an other-worldly feel, heightened by the sublime horror of the footage and the fact that all the oil workers are wearing masks.

The show’s first floor is the most densely packed with works. Both times I visited a particularly bombastic bit of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*, part of the soundtrack to Herzog’s film, was playing as the elevator doors opened. The main space is dominated by Pawel Althamer’s sculptural portraits and various artifacts. The pale, relatively gaunt bodies appear chiseled by a combination of food scarcity and hard labor, and one can imagine them slowly wandering the ash-covered highways in McCarthy’s novel. On this floor we are also introduced to two prevalent themes in apocalyptic narratives: desertification and junglefication. In *Lessons of Darkness* or *The Road* humans unleash their destructive capabilities to block the sun, barren the landscape, destroy life.<sup>5</sup> In the opposing narrative—present to varying degrees in films like *The Happening*, *I am Legend*, *12 Monkeys*—nature reclaims the surface of the planet, thriving as our presence is minimized. Vegetation pokes through the asphalt and animals graze in the streets. The desertification of the American landscape from *The Road*, quoted on a label beside Bill Morris’ photo of New Orleans post-Katrina, is opposed by the photographs of William Christenberry that depict junglefication as kudzu overtakes derelict

buildings. The plant, which can grow at the rate of thirty cm, a day, has spread exponentially in the US south since having been introduced from Japan in the late 19th century and is nicknamed “the vine that ate the south.”

The most prominent piece on the third floor is Robert Kusmirowski’s replica of Ted Kaczynski’s cabin. Better known by the moniker “The Unabomber”, Kaczynski carried out a series of bombings, primarily via the mail, for a period of seventeen years before being turned in by his brother. His actual cabin is currently on display at the Newseum (Museum of News, not to be confused with the New Museum), in Washington, D.C. and Kaczynski has bizarrely sent a letter to the US Court of Appeals claiming that the publicity the exhibition is likely to create shows a lack of sensitivity towards his victims’ families. Berlinde De Bruyckere’s sculpture, housed in a casket-like glass case on a plinth, looks like the fossilized remains of the shape-shifting alien in John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982).<sup>6</sup> Eugene Von Bruenchenhein’s finger paintings of nuclear Armageddon from the 1950s both remind us that the fear of apocalypse is not unique to the present and lead one to think about a huge body of work inspired by the fear of nuclear weapons. While it was once geopolitical maneuvering and international conflict that was going to bring about the Armageddon, now it is humanity’s inability to collectively find a way of living that doesn’t destroy the earth. Von Bruenchenhein’s *Gold Tower*, thought to have been made during the seventies, reminds one of a cross between Tatlin’s Tower and the Tower of Babylon done in gold-painted chicken and turkey bones. Natalie Djurberg’s *My Name is Mud*, in which an anthropomorphic mud whose ‘appetite knows no bounds’ engulphs a village, felt particularly relevant as what was left of the same tropical storm that caused lethal mudslides in Haiti was hitting New York while I was at the exhibition.

The fourth floor is the sparsest and this amplifies the effect of Zoe Leonard’s dead tree, held up by steel cables and wooden crutches, and Maurizio Cattelan’s horse hanging several meters in the air with its head seemingly buried in the wall. Strindberg’s *Celestographs* present perhaps the most literal attempt to make an image after nature in the entire show. Strindberg left photographic paper under the stars at night, hoping to perfectly capture the night sky. The results were impressive and Strindberg apparently sent documentation of his discovery to the leading astronomers of his time only to later discover that the patterns, which do actually look like images of outer space, were actually formed by dust and drops of dew.<sup>7</sup>

Of the show the curator Gioni writes: “The exhibition can be read as a visual novel, a story of nature after a trauma, a retelling colored by mythology, religion, and distress. Temporally detached from any point of orientation, the exhibition emerges as a study of the present from a place in the future: a feverish examination of an extinct world that seems to be our own.” In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, Walter Benjamin argues that the Social Democrats’ adoption of a teleological conception of history that focuses on a progressively better world—

an ideology that “thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations”—“made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.”<sup>8</sup> This temporal prism is also in opposition to a work that I immediately thought of while at After Nature, Gerald Byrne’s captivating video work *1984 and Beyond* (2005–7), a re-enactment of a series of conversations between a group of sci-fi writers that took place in 1963. The writers, including Arthur C. Clark, Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, and Theodore Sturgeon, discuss and speculate on the future of the space race, lunar colonization, and the Cold War in a manner that feels unimaginable today. Their discussion is so obviously taking place within a discourse of development that sees history moving relatively linearly with steady historical and technological progress. There seems to be a common assumption that humanity will respond ingeniously and admirably to any and all challenges, whether it be in space exploration or feeding the world. In After Nature we are faced with a reverse scenario to the one diagnosed by Benjamin, in which we imagine ourselves enslaved, or at least miserable, oppressed, or constrained, in the future, looking back upon our present, liberated existence. Despite the curator’s intentions, this ambitious, perhaps impossible, aim of casting a backwards glance upon the present is precisely what the show is unable to accomplish—to its benefit. In the past, a dystopian scenario was often set so far in the future that the work could serve as a warning of what could happen if humanity did not change its ways. What is striking about the current crop of works is that the collapse has either already begun or is imminent and inevitable. It is the palpable inability of everyone involved—artists, curator, spectator—to even imagine a future, let alone reflect back on the present from this imaginary space, that gives the show its power and relevance.

The inability to think the future seems intimately tied to an inability to understand the present. To paraphrase Guy Debord, all usurpers do everything in their power to make us forget that they have just arrived. But it seems trite to point out that capitalism, and particularly its present hegemonic form, is not going to be with us forever, that there have been and will be other economic systems and forms of government in the future. As Fredric Jameson has pointed out, “Most of human history has unfolded in situations of general impotence and powerlessness, when this or that system of state power is firmly in place, and no revolts seem even conceivable, let alone possible or imminent. Those stretches of human history are for the most part passed in utterly non-utopian conditions, in which none of the images of the future or of radical difference peculiar to utopias ever reach the surface.”<sup>9</sup> John Gray has argued that the re-emergence of the belief in imminent apocalypse in contemporary culture is connected to the death of these utopian visions.<sup>10</sup> The consequences of this re-emergence are greater than just the dominance of a moribund outlook as religious Millennialists have emerged as an active force in American



▲ Zoe Leonard, *Tree*, 1997. Wood, steel, and steel cables. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Gisela Capitan, Cologne. Installation view, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

politics, influencing America's stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict, the war on terror, and even climate change.<sup>11</sup> As Gray makes clear, apocalypse here is not simply opposed to utopia: "In common speech 'apocalyptic' denotes a catastrophic event, but in biblical terms it derives from the Greek word for unveiling—an apocalypse is a revelation in which mysteries that are written in heaven are revealed at the end of time, and for the Elect this means not catastrophe but salvation." In this sense apocalyptic fantasies are more utopian than they might first appear.

According to the curator, "After Nature surveys a landscape of wilderness and ruins, darkened by uncertain catastrophe. It is a story of abandonment, regression, and rapture—an epic of humanity and nature coming apart under the pressure of obscure forces and not-so-distant environmental disasters." In Rosa Luxembourg's famous *Janius* pamphlet, written in 1915, there is only one hope for humanity: socialism. It is class struggle and the socialist movement that can save the world from barbarism, from the horrors provoked by the domination of capital and its crises. The enemy was clearly established and the remedy, while arguably vague, could be envisioned. In May, 1843 Marx famously wrote to Arnold Ruge, "You won't say that I hold the present time in too much esteem; and yet if I don't despair of it, it's on account of its own desperate situation, which fills me with hope". It is precisely this feeling that things are getting so bad that a positive change must be imminent which is exactly what seems to be missing from the contemporary imagination. It seems as though in "the degraded utopia of the present", a moment when the choice of socialism or barbarism has already been made, with utopia impossible, the contemporary culture has difficulty imagining anything other than oblivion. Jameson has said that this is to be expected in a period in which a given power structure is firmly in place, but what is strange about the present mood is that our times are in fact relatively tumultuous. The "end of history" thesis has been passé for well over a decade, and I am writing this during the greatest financial crisis since 1929. If this crisis is not likely to destroy capitalism (or Integrated World Capitalism, or Empire), it could potentially be the final death knell of its neo-liberal variant and signal the death of the current hegemony of the world system, as Immanuel Wallerstein has argued.<sup>12</sup>

Returning to After Nature, the question of course is whether or not the forces that are making humanity and nature come apart are indeed obscure. While the causes behind capitalism's latest crisis are undoubtedly complex, the situation is not inexplicable. And even if there are people like Sarah Palin who refuse to acknowledge the sources of climate change, the rest of us do not find it particularly mysterious. What is additionally relevant about the current crisis is that, despite its severity, no one is really demanding systematic change. The only people that seem to think this means the end of capitalism are rightwing libertarians who see the semi-nationalization of banks, buying up of mortgages, and the election of Obama as the first steps towards communism. Viewed most cynically,

there seems to be a danger that the ubiquity of apocalyptic fantasies acts as a replacement for any serious engagement with the problems of the present and the possibilities for real change, which would likely involve a tremendous amount of work, or that they allow the post-historical subject to maintain a degree of excitement following the end of history, a period—as Fukuyama originally claimed—that is "a very sad time". After all, the end of the world would probably be considered by most to be the biggest event since the start of the world. To end on a more optimistic note however, and one closer to the feeling I actually had at After Nature, the current mood is not dominated by resignation, but a melancholic acceptance of the world we have inherited and are still creating. The damage that has already been done and the dangers faced are palpable, but a fascination remains. Like the giddy octopus dancing in the polluted waters of Marseille referenced by Felix Guattari, there is a need to immerse oneself in this degraded utopia.<sup>13</sup> "Men resemble their times more than their fathers" as the proverb has it, and just as the octopus shriveled up and died within seconds of being placed in a tank of clean seawater, any attempt to return to a less despoiled perspective by artists, activists, or theorists would be pathetic. By focusing on our enthrallment with the end, shows like After Nature allow us to start to think about what might come next. ●

After Nature  
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#### Notes

1. Zizek's observation that in the majority of Hollywood disaster film's the disaster serves to unite a family or romantic couple is relatively trite, perhaps with the exception of *Deep Impact*, where that romantic couple is a father/daughter. That being said there is something odd, both incestuous and homoerotic, about the Ben Affleck, Bruce Willis, Liv Tyler triangle in *Armageddon*, which during the same lecture was said to be one of Alain Badiou's favorite films. Zizek Masterclass, Birkbeck College, London, Feb. 20th, 2008.
2. In the underrated *The Happening* (2008), what is initially suspected to be a terror attack turns out to have actually been perpetrated by nature itself.
3. Even when it is alien (*Cloverfield*, *War of the Worlds*), it stands for fears created by decidedly planetary antagonisms.
4. The quote is unattributed. I was interested in where it came from so I googled it afterwards.
5. For more on desertification, particularly in relation to Jihad, see Reza Negarestani, "Petrodicy: A Petro-punk Dialogue", *SITE* 20. 2007.
6. *The Thing* is first film in Carpenter's *Apocalypse Trilog*y.
7. See Douglas Feuk, "The Celestographs of August Strindberg," *Cabinet*, 3, 2001.
8. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations* (Schocken, 1969), p. 260.
9. Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia", *New Left Review*, 25, 2004, p. 45.
10. John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.
11. See Gray, pp. 107–45.
12. Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Depression: A Long-Term View". ([www.binghamton.edu/fbc/243en.htm](http://www.binghamton.edu/fbc/243en.htm)) See also Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power* (WW Norton & Company, 2003).
13. Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (Continuum, 2008), p. 28–9.

# The 50 Moons of Saturn: the Second Torino Triennale

Sinziana Ravini

The tragedy of Western thought can possibly be reduced to one single moment—Faust gazing at the diagram of macrocosm and realizing that he cannot penetrate into the mysteries of the universe, that his metaphysical speculations are in vain. The more Faust wants to know, the more his melancholy intensifies. He has sacrificed a lifetime in exchange for nothing—for knowing that he cannot know. Faust sees no other exit out of this *docta ignorantia* than suicide. But before it's too late, Mephisto arrives and gives him an offer he can't refuse: the knowledge of the world through the senses, youth, love, and unlimited pleasure. The alchemical drama begins and Faust passes all the spheres of human existence—from the darkest to the lightest—in a rite of initiation in the mysteries of human life. The only thing he has to fear is satisfaction. The moment he will feel like saying to the passing moment, "stay a while, you are so beautiful", will be the moment he will have to surrender his soul to the devil. The desire for the suspension of time becomes thus the greatest sin of all, something that the devil, the symbol of progress and dissatisfaction, cannot handle.

The suspension of time, introspection, melancholia, the desire for knowledge, as well as the desire for desire, are all central elements in the Torino Triennale curated by Daniel Birnbaum and entitled *The 50 Moons of Saturn*. The exhibition is assembling artists that are under the cosmic influence of Saturn, the star of melancholy. But as Birnbaum declares in the catalogue text the saturnine mind is not only gloomy and depressed but also rebellious and highly productive, giving the feeling that "a radical transformation is possible despite everything. It is the state of mind of inspiration." In this sense, Birnbaum has created a show in a Neoplatonic sense that sees the saturnine, dark forces of the mind as something entirely positive, as the very condition of artistic activity. The show can also be seen as a *coincidentia oppositoria* of Birnbaum's latest books: *Chronology* and *As a Weasel Sucks Eggs: An Essay on Melancholy and Cannibalism*, written with the Swedish literary historian Anders Olsson. The links between curiosity, hunger, desire, insanity, and melancholy are elegantly woven since they all deal with the loss of the mean—with the malicious, slippery object of desire, whether it's a time, a place, a human being, an object, or a memory. The exhibition is organized as the landscape of a labyrinthine mind, with long curtains, grayish walls, shortcuts, passages, and long corridors, displaying forms that have broken both with time and rationality,

thus offering glimpses of a both comfortable and uncomfortable *Weltschmerz*.

#### Saturnalia and saturation

The planet Saturn has a large number of moons that are difficult to discern, since it's almost impossible to draw a distinction between a large ring particle and a tiny moon. The moons thus come "to life" through the act of name-giving—a perfect allegory of the curator and fifty identified artists turning around his orbit. Traditionally, most of Saturn's moons have been named after the Titans of Greek mythology, which fits very well with the romantic notion of the artist as a demiurge, a genius who both negates the creation of God by creating out of nothing, who is refusing mimesis, and continues the divine creation by adding to it, ameliorating, revolutionizing its old structures. When it comes to Saturn—the Roman God of Agriculture, equated by the God Uranus that devoured his children in an act of despair and was later toppled by Zeus—we are dealing with a revolutionary figure. In the Roman Saturnalia, during the celebrations in the temple of Saturn, the order of things were reversed for a day, during which the slaves were served by the masters. As a result the slaves could criticize their masters for being enslaved by their passions, pretending thus that they would give away some of their most precious possessions. Saturn functioned in other words as the incitement to generosity, fearlessness, and forces of reversal. The saturnine aspects of Birnbaum's show have everything to do with those aspects, with generosity of means, with cultural cannibalization and myth dissemination. One has only to look at Benjamin Saurer's carnivalesque paintings of hermetic rituals of sadism and cannibalism. For Freud, the melancholic is orally obsessed—a cannibal who tries to symbolically devour the lost object to the extent of identifying with it. Anna Galtaross' remote controlled belly dancing mountain or Pascale Marthine Tayou's cultural reconstructivism play both on the strings of identification and cultural assimilation. Also Gert & Uwe Tobias' synthezation of Romanian folklore and Russian constructivism, naivism and futurism, has a reconstructivist touch to it. This cannibalization of cultural fetishes, which wrenches items from their cultural origin and casts them into a post-cultural limbo of forms, a wrenching that is both a dismantling and leveling of cultural hierarchies, is nevertheless a saturnine reversal of the social order of aesthetics forms. What they all have in common is the production of saturated images, heavily