

Spring 2020

Earth 2020: we were here

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The untitled instrumental used in the video *#NATUREISMETAL* was created by the band Earth 2020. It was recorded and produced by Devin Kelly and Jacob Banholzer.

The song was also available on a 6" lathe cut record that was for sale as part of the *Merch 4 Earth* interactive work.

The record sleeves had the following information inside:

Produced by Vengaz

At Hoping Not To Wake Studios



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Imagine you have to make a choice. This choice is likely not a difficult one to conceptualize since you have probably had to make a similar decision recently. The choice is how you as an individual choose to consume. Which things do you decide to buy? Now imagine (again, probably not a stretch of the imagination) that one of the options available is a silk-screened t-shirt with an image of our planet on it. One of the options available contributes a percentage of its revenue to an environmental cause, maybe it goes towards the payroll of a national park staff. This choice is probably an easy one to make. In a time where the human species is becoming more and more aware of our collective impact upon our environment, the motivation to be a part of environmental conservation is increasing. The underlying paradox is that we are still consuming. Whether we are consuming Earth Day inspired t-shirts that proclaim our allegiance to the planet or cheap sunglasses to simply protect our eyes from the sun, we are consuming and therefore creating an impact. It is our structures of commerce and our very existence as a species that is dramatically altering the ecology of the planet.

Earth 2020:we were here is a visual exploration into the complex relationship humans have with the planet we live on. This body of work is an exploration of paradox, between one's individual human actions and the collective actions of our species in relation to the planet we occupy. Timothy Morton describes this in his book *Dark Ecology*: "Even when I am fully aware of what I am doing, myself as a member of the human species is doing something I am not intending at all and couldn't accomplish solo even if I wished it"¹. We are in a time characterized by global warming, mass extinction, and environmental mutation. These characteristics were caused by collective action and human enterprise. If conceptualized from a non-anthropocentric perspective, 2020 is a year the earth is experiencing the effects of the exponential growth of the human species. And yet from an anthropocentric perspective, 2020 is a year where the hottest trend is *environmental conservation*. This exhibition is an exploration of these complexities, the 'science-non fiction' of *Earth 2020*.

Personally, the year 2020 has always stood as a far off marker. A mysterious timestamp far enough away to hold unknown complexities. I imagined it full of advancements, fulfilled science fiction prophecies, fears. Now that the far off timestamp is here, many *collective* fears are beginning to be realized and the world has become exponentially complex. In this way, 2020 feels like a tipping point, tipping out of science fiction and entering into science non-fiction. This discussion relies heavily on the genre. I present science fiction as relevant to this exploration because it recognizes and depends upon actual scientific laws and principles as a structure for its characters and storyline to operate within². Sheila Schwarts describes it as literary fantasy which uses a scientific element as the basic point for orientation, to speculate on the results of actual or imagined scientific advances on society or individuals³. If we orient ourselves from a place of science fiction prediction and to the future ahead, 2020 can be seen as a threshold.

A common sci-fi premonition of the 21st century has been the human species' drastic negative impact upon a larger planetary ecology. Specifically the drastic negative impact of human derived structures which are unsuitable for planetary ecology. This is generally forecasted through environmental collapse and subsequent survival through mutation. Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin describe it this way:

Science Fiction could begin to exist as a literary form only when a different future became conceivable by human beings—specifically a future in which new knowledge, new discoveries, new adventures, new mutations, would make life radically different from the familiar patterns of the past and present⁴

Mutations in science fiction are often biological and correspond with drastic mutations of governing forces, socio-economic structures and cultural beliefs. In the 1972 film *Silent Running*, Freeman Lowell, a bleeding heart environmentalist maintains and preserves a biosphere greenhouse on a space station after botanical life on earth has ceased (figure 1). In one of the few dialogues in the movie, Lowell desperately tries to illustrate to his colleagues the ways that their fictional life set in 2001 on a spaceship supporting synthesized ecosystems is a stark mutation from what life once was:

It calls back to a time when there were flowers all over the earth. And there were valleys. And there were plains of tall, green grass that you could lie down in...

that you could go to sleep in. And, there were blue skies, and there was fresh air, and there were things growing all over the place, not just in some domed enclosures blasted some millions of miles out into space⁵

While the science-non fiction of 2020 is not cultivating massive biodomes on space stations, NASA is planning a permanent human presence on the moon within the next decade. Ironically the moon to mars mission motivations are not only to uncover new scientific discoveries but also to lay the foundation for private companies to build a lunar economy⁶. This is ironic because it projects our anthropocentric human structures beyond our planet earth. The consumption and production rituals forecasted throughout science fiction to dire ecological consequences might one day extend to the rest of our solar system.

Considering these consumption and production rituals brings the conversation back to the most important theme of *Earth 2020*, paradox. A paradox is a self-contradictory statement that at first seems true⁷. In this exhibition, the paradox I am illustrating is one in which humans use consumer products in order to promote environmental stewardship and even to combat climate warming. This is the root of the paradox because as Timothy Morton describes in *Ecology Without Nature*: Even forms of rebellion against consumerism, such as environmentalist practice, fall under the consumerist umbrella⁸. This paradox is a root complexity of our lives on *Earth 2020* and a focal point of the visual exhibition. Through the visual work of *Earth 2020* accompanied with this supporting document I am asserting that science fiction's predicted future demise from unsustainable structures is the science *non-fiction* of today. With re-branded aesthetics, science non-fiction of 2020 perpetuates these structures under new deceptive titles of green-consumption.

The first artwork which acts as a preface to the exhibition is *Bright Future (Sunglasses)*. It introduces a slightly futuristic even otherworldly temporal framework and, both symbolically and literally, provides a dark lens from which to perceive the work. The performative preface is staged at the entrance of the exhibition. Physically it is a gallery shelf which holds stylistically sci-fi alien sunglasses with an accompanying

text: WARNING BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD SUNGLASSES REQUIRED UPON ENTRY. The alien stylization of the plastic sunglasses brings forward the science fiction theme and ties into other space alien elements in the show. The text is also an ode to the Timbuk3 song *The Future's So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades* released in 1986 and commonly considered to be the one hit wonder of the group. An interesting complexity lies in the common misconception behind the song itself and hence its metaphorical use. In an interview with Pat Macdonald of Timbuk3 in 2011, the songwriter reveals that the song is actually not meant to render an optimistic outlook though it is often misconceived as doing so⁹. The ringing dance anthem that has now evolved into a common cultural metaphor is rich with misunderstanding. *Bright Future (Sunglasses)* uses this cultural reference to sharpen a focal point within the exhibition which is: future. Like the song, the playful plastic sunglasses are the consumer product equivalent to a dance anthem proclaiming a message that has a dark and un-sunny outlook. Through this interactive element the exhibition is literally seen through a dark, plastic, disposable lens. Through a disposable consumer product. An object that is singularly meaningless but collectively a contributor to the un-sunny future ahead.

An interesting intersection of sci-fi premonitions of the future and perpetuating human structures can be extrapolated from the film *Soylent Green* (figure 2). A 1972 Sci-fi film which is based in the year 2022, features a dystopian earth that is overheating and overpopulated. In the film, 'soylent green' is a utilitarian product rationed and distributed to the dystopian population for nutrition, as non-processed food sources are no longer viable. In a truly cruel reflection of life imitating art, *Soylent*, introduced in 2014 by Rosa Foods is now an actual product, a meal replacement beverage (figure 3). The name pays strange homage to the dystopian eco sci-fi film. This consumer product offers busy silicon valley neo-liberals the *freedom* to cut down on time wasted preparing and purchasing food. The website reads: In a world with a rapidly growing population, and rapidly diminishing resources, we all need access to nutrition that is cost-effective and easy to consume. We're pro-GMO, pro-sustainability, and ready to change how the world thinks about food.¹⁰ The picture painted here is almost too well rendered. A

science fiction film which predicts overpopulation and environmental collapse, inspires a consumer food industry to make synthesized nutrition products. A consumer product that is a variable within a structure that is the root cause for climate warming and environmental crisis. This science fiction inspired beverage and non-fictional product solution to overpopulation and unsustainable structures now ships anywhere in the US and Canada.

The work *Merch 4 Earth* is an interactive artwork that implicates the participant and opens a discussion about the paradox of green consumption. Physically this work stands as a merchandise booth under a banner reading: Merch 4 Earth. On display are 3 items: an earth 2020 t-shirt, a reusable earth tote and an earth 2020 lathe cut record (figure 4). The merchant at the table is covered in a green full body space alien costume and features the same stylized sunglasses from the *Bright Future (Sunglasses)* piece. The work is activated through the consumption of these products, which ambiguously proclaim an alliance to the earth. The consumers of the products are implicated through their consumption. Just as soylent is an insufficient consumer product answer to a growing population and overheating planet, *Merch for Earth* is equally inadequate. Participants in the artwork are individually consuming earth day inspired merchandise. The collective repercussions of these actions however, is a statistical environmental footprint upon the actual earth.

Naomi Klein's recent book *On Fire: The Burning case for a Green New Deal*, recognizes the paradoxical complexity of individual vs collective action and confronts it. "After years of recycling, carbon offsetting, and lightbulb changing, it is obvious that individual action will never be an adequate response to the climate crisis. Climate change is a collective problem and it demands collective action"¹¹. Through a metaphor Klein describes how an environmentalist in denial paints a picture of global warming armageddon and then assures us we can avert catastrophe by buying "green" products and creating clever markets in pollution¹². While *Merch 4 Earth* is not intended to be cruel, it does implicate the participants as environmentalists in denial, individuals with intentions that don't align with their collective results.

Merch 4 Earth is aimed at highlighting the shortcomings of our current green capitalism. How the climate crisis demands not mere green products and marketing-based resolutions, but a completely rethought civilization paradigm¹³. While certain product solutions offer smaller environmental footprints than that of other products, footprints are still accumulating. To use a tacky and painfully relevant analogy: we cannot fight fire with fire. It is illogical to use the climate crisis as a marketing tool to ultimately produce more products that contribute to the crisis. Klein describes climate change as a message, a message revealing the non-viable nature of many of western culture's ideas¹⁴. It is not what kind of eco-friendly products we individually purchase from Amazon. It is the fact that we operate in a socially and economically structured system where Amazon can exist.

This poetic quote from the anarchist, environmental sabotage novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* describes how deeply cherished and deeply embedded our western culture is to the systems that are harming our planet:

...and all that heartbreaking insult to land, and sky, and human heart and for what? All that for what? Why, to light the lamps of phoenix suburbs not yet built, to run the air conditioners of San Diego and Los Angeles, to illuminate shopping center parking lots at two in the morning, to power aluminum plants, magnesium plants, vinyl chloride factories and copper smelters, to charge the neon tubing that makes the meaning (all the meaning there is) of Las Vegas, Albuquerque, Tucson, Salt Lake City, the amalgamated metropolis of southern California, to keep alive that phosphorescent putrefying glory (all the glory there is left) called downtown, night time, wonderland, U.S.A.¹⁵

In our current structures, the act of consuming often creates the meaning of our lives. However by extension, creating said meaning within our known structures is to harm the planet we live on. These items in *Merch 4 Earth* have an environmental price. The typeface of the merchandise is "hobo" which is commonly associated with the hippie movement of the 60's in which environmental awareness was a defining focal point. This typeface reinforces the paradox theme of the exhibition. Even "earth" themed products have an environmental footprint. There is an environmental footprint associated with virtually all endeavours. While the idea of purchasing a t-shirt to

commemorate earth day, or a memento that supports the preservation of a nature park, is not in itself malicious, it is complex. Complex and ultimately part of the infrastructure that is contributing to the 'hyperobject'¹⁶ of global warming.

In the work *Bumper Sticker*, a Subaru Forester is mounted to a black tunnel-shaped backdrop. Visually the vehicle is poetically entering darkness ahead bringing forward a sense of anticipation. There is one bumper sticker on the vehicle which reads "exist responsibly". A sense of the individual is created through the type of vehicle and its bumper sticker, a characterization that many of us can relate to: someone who makes an effort to consume responsibly, makes an effort to be environmentally aware. Someone who desires to "exist responsibly". A contradiction is created when the viewer steps closer to the vehicle. The rear window of the car is slightly illuminated, allowing the viewer to peer in on an ecosystem of synthetic and organic materials. Plastic debris, chemical residue and garbage line the inside of the vehicle, like a cross-section of an unregulated landfill and a visual analogy of our current ecology with the planet.

The subaru can be seen as a stand-in for the planet in our current time, a portrait of the contradiction between individual values and collective consequence. As proposed earlier, 2020 is a year reaping the effects of the exponential growth of the human species. Remnants of human technologies, materials, and enterprise are now a geological force contributing to the anthropocene. Since 1945 the geological contribution by humans has drastically increased¹⁷. This is anthropocentric waste and mutation represented visually by peering inside the cab of the vehicle. The bumper however preaches "exist responsibly", a message that, like the vehicle, is both metaphorically and literally 'full of shit'.

Another artwork that riffs on cultural nuance is the video work titled *#Natureismetal*. This piece consists of first person video footage with loud repetitive audio. The footage was filmed in the upper foothills area above Boise Idaho on January 25, 2020, it portrays a snow-covered landscape and unsteady moving video. The title is a literal riff to the social media hashtag #natureismetal. Social media participants can

tag, search and explore images that link *nature* (or natural systems) that embody *metal*. To be specific, this correlation seems to link the brutality of natural selection and evolutionary development with the subgenre metal: which is generally characterized by aggressive and violent music and imagery. The audio which is stylistically 'metal' is rendered from the particular subgenre of 'doom-metal' which is often characterized by a very slow tempo, and is meant to evoke a sense of foreboding, dread, and impending doom¹⁸. Adding to the theme of the exhibition, the doom metal audio blurs in and out of focus building a sense of anticipation in the viewer interrupting the contemplative imagery.

While developing this work I was particularly influenced by the work *The Bell, the Digger, and the Tropical Pharmacy*, a video piece in which sound is an important variable to the viewer's experience. *The Bell the Digger, and the Tropical Pharmacy* (figure 5) is a work by the duo Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla. I was fortunate enough to see this piece while it was on display at the Portland Art Museum in September 2019. I was drawn to the way sound was used to disrupt the viewers experience of the work both conceptually and viscerally. The work shows an excavator machine that has been modified to a large cast-iron bell rather than a bucket or hydraulic claw. The meditative imagery is interrupted by the sonic digger, when it smashes into the building and claws away the architecture¹⁹. This tension between contemplative simple imagery disrupted by intense violent sound is a strategy implemented in the *#Natureismetal* piece. The loud audio, violently pulls in and out of one's awareness as viewers move through the landscape. The loud doom-metal plays to the video and creates a foreboding soundtrack for the entire space, like a tense reminder blurring in and out of focus, building anticipation and dread for the forecasted doom ahead.

The final work to discuss is *Ice Ice Baby*, a cubical assemblage form arranged on a plinth-like square. The mass consists of ice cast landscaping blocks filled with plastic baby figurines and various consumer plastic. An influential work and reference for this piece is Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube* (1963-65). *Condensation Cube* is a fully enclosed plexiglass cube roughly 30 centimeters squared, containing about a

centimeter of water. Mostly understood within an art history context as a work of institutional critique, *Condensation Cube* illuminates the infrastructure of the museum, the failures and the contradictions of preservation²⁰. Conceptually, *Condensation Cube* is most relevant due to its unique relationship to the presence of physical human bodies. *Condensation Cube* illustrates the heat and humidity that human bodies bring into a physical museum space.

Ice Ice Baby also changes due to the physical presence of human bodies. The ice blocks are atop a wooden and wire square armature which represents the problematic structures discussed in the exhibition. The ice blocks are layered with various plastic consumer products and over 200 plastic baby figurines, presenting an entanglement. As the exhibition is open the plastic debris and small quarter inch baby figurines are the only things left sitting on top of the wooden structure and floating in the plastic pool. What begins as a roughly 13 inch by 13 inch assemblage of plastic infused cast ice blocks, slowly disintegrates during the show.

This work reinforces the complication surrounding the paradox of “existing responsibly”. much of the exhibition conversation surrounds consuming as being the underlying problem which negates a possibility of consuming responsibly. The cast ice blocks are slowly melting as the exhibition is open, eventually leaving only layers of plastic baby figurines and various plastic objects. Out of all the works in *Earth 2020*, *Ice Ice Baby* is the least hopeful. As human bodies enter the exhibition space, their heat contributes to the melting. Just as the geological force of the anthropocene cannot be pinned on any small human action but is the hyperobject of collective action. Each visitor is a tiny cut which contributes to the work’s eventual expiration. The repercussion of viewing the cube is destroying the cube. A bittersweet analogy that can be applied to our relationship to our environment.

For final consideration regarding *Earth 2020*, I return to Morton: “Even when I am fully aware of what I am doing, myself as a member of the human species is doing something I am not intending at all”²¹. So where does this leave us, the humans reading this document, and experiencing these physical metaphors? What is the attitude one

should have when they warm the melting future while viewing it? Again I will quote Naomi Klein: “Climate change is a message, one that is telling us that many of western culture’s most cherished ideas are no longer viable”²². It is not individual actions within a system but rather an introduction of a new system that can shape an optimistic science-future. While this should not validate irresponsible individual actions, it also does not prescribe individual accusation. Maybe understanding our individual actions as part of a larger structural problem reaping collective consequence should create a space of understanding, forgiveness and compassion. Maybe there is something bittersweet and comforting about understanding our paradoxical relationship to the planet, even if the realizations are not in our favor.

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24. (Figure 2) "Soylent Green." IMDb. (IMDb.com.) Accessed February 10, 2020. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070723/mediaviewer/rm2435618561>.
25. (Figure 3) "Soylent Drink Cacao," Soylent, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://soylent.com/products/drink-cacao>
25. (Figure 4) Devin Kelly, *Merch 4 Earth*, interactive artwork, Thesis Exhibition, Boise State University 2020
27. (Figure 5) "Jennifer Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla," Portland Art Museum, accessed January 5, 2020, <https://portlandartmuseum.org/exhibitions/bell-digger-tropical-pharmacy/>

Figure 1



Figure 2



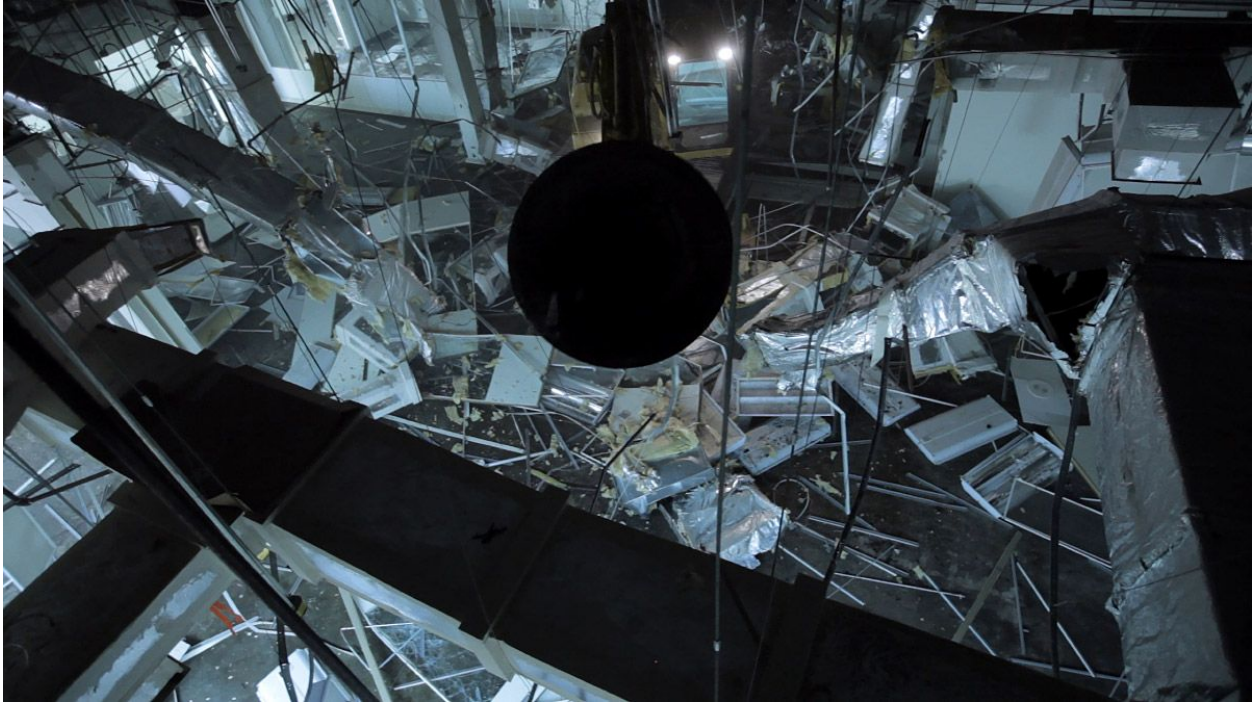
Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



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