



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Visual Culture Research Project, 20 credits
2023-2024

Bridie Gill

S2099082 / B182113

Storytelling, Fantasy, Speculative Fabulation
and Kin. Imaginative worldbuilding in
contemporary artistic practice as a hopeful,
intersectional means of addressing ecological
collapse.

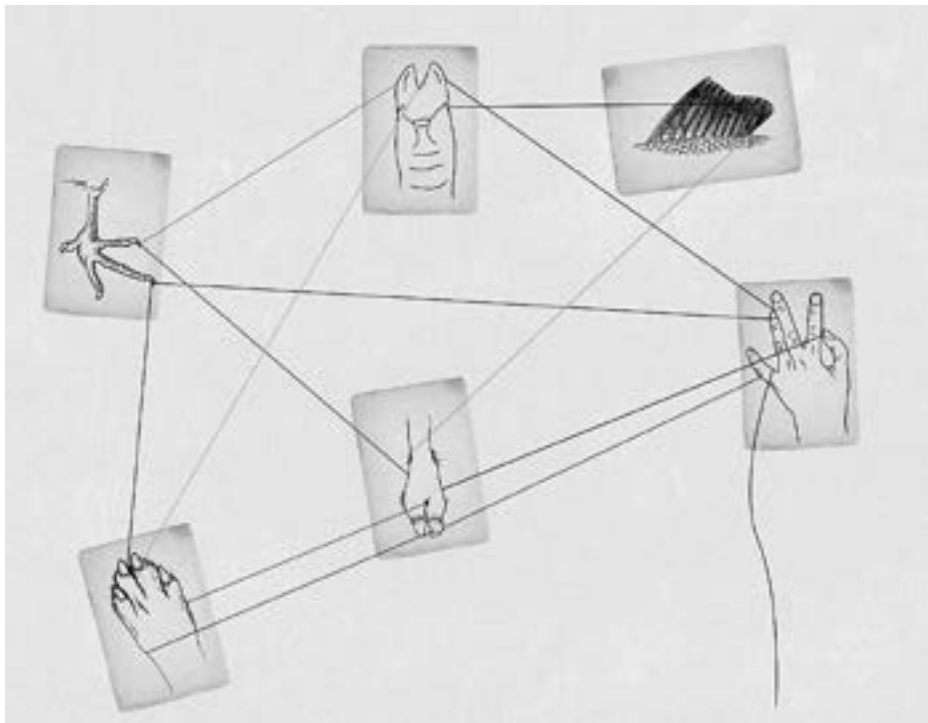
Word Count: 6481

Storytelling, Fantasy, Speculative Fabulation and Kin. Imaginative worldbuilding in contemporary artistic practice as a hopeful, intersectional means of addressing ecological collapse.

In 2024 the earth faces a myriad of ecological disasters. Global temperature rises threaten unpredictable and devastating consequences to human and non-human alike. Overconsumption under colonial capitalism rockets us toward a future of pillaged natural resources, polluted soil, air and waterways, and ever-growing landfills of discarded and unwanted products; our newly developed waste unable to compost and return to the land. Modern land-use changes and agricultural practices have led to great biodiversity losses, with some biologists speculating we may be headed for, if not are already within, a sixth mass extinction event (Begum & Collins, 2023 orig. 2021). The anthropocene has inarguably wreaked havoc on planet Earth - and is now tentatively spreading its impact across the rest of the solar system - and those humans who see and believe this are beginning to wonder what can be done. There are new advertising campaigns and reusable products, individualistic interventions and encouragements for the lower and middle class masses to cut their air miles, forgo their avocados, lower their “carbon footprints”. However, it is evident that what is really required to curb ecological devastation is a much more radical political and cultural shift. Vast systemic change; for not only the ultra-rich and powerful few to be held accountable for their parts in ecological destruction, but also for the systems that allow for such power to be accumulated and abused - namely capitalism, from colonialism and patriarchal white-supremacy, and from human exceptionalism - to be dismantled, learnt from, for the structure of economies and world relations to be rebuilt. No easy task, and fighting talk from someone who’s essay title seems to suggest that these complex ecological, social, political and economic issues can possibly be addressed by such naive cultural triflings as Art or The Imagination or Storytelling. But as Donna Haraway writes at the beginning of her groundbreaking text *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*;

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (Haraway, 2016)

As Haraway argues, context and frame of thought matter; the worldview and experiences with which you approach an issue impact how you go about working on it, or even what you define the issue as in the first place. There is no one certain way to see anything. Art as a cultural, philosophical and political medium for storytelling is uniquely positioned to contribute to these societal contextual frameworks and the discussions around them, often in a more accessible format than academic text and theory. Art can imagine and disseminate more equitable and ecologically-minded worlds; the first step towards building them.



Alt = "A line drawing of different species' hands playing string figures."

1. Nassir Mufti (2011), *Multispecies Cat's Cradle* [drawing]

Simultaneous Access Modes and Staying with the Trouble: Contemporary Materialist Ontological Thought

Trends towards posthumanism and new-materialism in western contemporary philosophy reflect a grasping need for alternative ontologies to re-organise our relations with other organisms in line with non-anthropocentric worldviews. What Graham Harman attempts with his Heidegger-esque *Object Oriented Ontology*, and Timothy Morton develops in their texts *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007), *Third Stone from the Sun* (2018) and *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (2017) (among many other works), is an understanding for the interconnectedness of all beings, and a basis for an appreciation that humans are not at the centre, nor are we the creators of this web of existence.

In *Third Stone from the Sun* Morton discusses the helpful and relatively simple premise of *Access Modes* in order to demonstrate a fundamental issue in human exceptionalist thinking, 'How we access a thing doesn't exhaust it' [...] 'no single access mode exhausts what a thing is.' [...] '—there is no way to discriminate between humans and nonhumans in this regard,' (Morton, 2018). Emphasis here is on the *we*, as in the *human species* - how we view other materials, people, creatures etc. can never be all that that thing is - infinite other entities have simultaneous access modes of their own. To suggest that the human experience of a thing is the only experience of it is akin to telling a caterpillar that a spider sees the world correctly - limited, false and totally absurd. This shift of mindset toward a radically more open definition and understanding of thing-relations has the effect of flattening the ontological topography, allowing for empathy and cooperation between now *ecological kin*.

Similarly, in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Haraway introduces a variety of specific terms and methodologies from which she approaches a non-anthropocentric world; such as SF 'a sign for science fiction, speculative feminism, science fantasy, speculative fabulation, science fact, and also, string figures' (Haraway, 2016), Terrapolis¹, and the Chthulucene. The latter of these concepts is defined as 'a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a

¹Terrapolis is a fictional integral equation, a speculative fabulation. Terrapolis is n-dimensional niche space for multispecies becomingwith. Terrapolis is open, worldly, indeterminate, and polytemporal. Terrapolis is a chimera of materials, languages, histories. Terrapolis is for companion species, cum panis, with bread, at table together—not "posthuman" but "com-post." Terrapolis is in place; Terrapolis makes space for unexpected companions. Terrapolis is an equation for guman, for humus, for soil, for ongoing risky infection, for epidemics of promising trouble, for permaculture. Terrapolis is the sf game of response-ability.' (Haraway, 2016)

damaged earth.’ (Haraway, 2016). The Chthulucene with its tentacular monsters, limbs outstretched, serves as a model for Haraway to describe thing-relations in the complex and boundaryless manner that her writing hinges on. She manages to convey an ontology that shifts and entwines itself, escaping rigid definition, so as to capture a feeling of the vastness of the actual world.

The Chthulucene does not close in on itself; it does not round off; its contact zones are ubiquitous and continuously spin out loopy tendrils. Spider is a much better figure for sympoiesis than any inadequately leggy vertebrate of whatever pantheon. Tentacularity is symchthonic, wound with abyssal and dreadful graspings, frayings, and weavings, passing relays again and again, in the generative recursions that make up living and dying. (Haraway, 2016)

By creating and defining their own philosophical terms and concepts, Morton and Haraway are engaging in a practice of worldbuilding - telling a story about how they imagine existence to be organised; a world furnished with its own structures, language and codes. Ecology is inherent to this, it *is* their world, and having a good sense of that is what makes their work so useful as a baseline understanding to then approach action on ecological collapse from.

While championing storytelling, Haraway’s is also a practice of practicality and responsibility, ‘In the face of unrelenting historically specific surplus suffering in companion species knottings, I am not interested in reconciliation or restoration, but I am deeply committed to the more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together. Call that staying with the trouble.’ (Haraway, 2016). Haraway’s writing is playful and political, philosophically complex and critically situated in contemporary ontological debate, but also full of creative, imaginative worldbuilding. She executes a simultaneously deeply-serious and sense-making, worldview changing piece of text with a playful descriptiveness that is perhaps what we need in modern philosophical prose. As with Morton, the air of anything-is-possible - the worlds going to shit - but the world is multiplicitous and beyond our (and our governments) capacity to even imagine, but here’s how you can try and imagine beyond anthropocentrism anyway (give it a go!), offers an inspiring and hopeful alternative to the dry, inaccessible texts of their classical counterparts. Ontology in Morton and Haraway’s queer, feminist hands is portrayed as powerfully perception-shifting, rather than a dusty and removed boys club.

The Ecological Other: Why Worldbuilding Must be Grounded in Intersectional Politics

Intersectionality is key to alternative worldbuilding. What happens when you allow the poor, the queer, the marginalised, displaced and persecuted to create their own worlds; the worlds are radically more inclusive of all - human and beyond. Without an intersectional basis for worldbuilding you will just end up with the exact same unsustainable plastic pile of shit; ecology is queer and refugee. Ecology is the Other to the imperialist power; a resource to be conquered, used and then thrown away; a background to man's achievements, or at best, a foe to be tamed and enjoyed for entertainment in the form of *Nature*. For this reason ecology is often feared or ignored, because to embrace it would be to undermine the idea of human exceptionalism, that is that man is king above all else. There is simply no room for mudcrabs and tardigrades, and much more important things to focus on such as profit, innovation and funding genocide. Or to be generous; why would we put our energies into insignificant other species when there is human hunger, human displacement, human suffering. I perhaps don't need to underline the obvious parallels with the fights for racial and gender equality and the struggle for the Other to be recognised as worthy of support, to be taken seriously, to be heard. But most of all, these arguments are of bad faith because ecology *is* human and human *is* ecology, on a base selfish level ecology is what supports, births and sustains human life.

Am I simply a vehicle for the numerous bacteria that inhabit my microbiome? Or are they hosting me? Who is the host and who is the parasite? The term "host" stems from the Latin *hostis*, a word that can mean both "friend" and "enemy."

Fully one-third of human milk, for instance, is not digestible by the baby; instead it feeds bacteria that coat the intestines with immunity-bestowing film. (Morton, 2017)

Writing in *Indigeneity and decolonial resistance : alternatives to colonial thinking and practice* (2018), George J. Sefa Dei and Cristina Sherry Jaimungal assert that 'We cannot decolonize our hegemonic ways of thinking and practice simply through dominant knowledge systems. We should look to counter (and offer oppositional) knowledges that offer different, contradictory, and frequently connected interpretations of our world and social realities.' (Dei & Jaimungal, 2018). If it appears in this text that I claim Haraway and Morton's ontologies as the be-all and end-all of intersectional ecological thought, I have failed. I find their writing to be particularly useful and inspiring, but the

wider point is that a breadth of imaginative practice is needed to learn and holistically grow a more equitable, sustainable vision of the future. Dei and Jaimungal go on to specifically credit Indigenous histories as foundational to a truly radically inclusive ontological model, with many Indigenous spiritual traditions forming the basis of what we currently see as social and environmental “good practice” in the west, decades later.

Western knowledge systems have often masqueraded as universal knowledges, shunning other ways of knowing, or appropriating such knowledges without due credit. Indigenous epistemologies offer a different way of reading our worlds and the constitutive social, cultural, political, and spiritual relations. Indigenous knowledge systems stress relationality, connections, reciprocity, community building, appreciation, sharing, humility, social responsibility, and generosity as key or essential components facilitating the “coming to know”. (Dei & Jaimungal, 2018)

In our new-found imagined worlds, then, we must acknowledge the complex histories of Other practices which have come before, which inform our theories, and which exist alongside us; we must allow their experiences to similarly shape our fresh becoming landscapes, on pain of implicitly inhabiting the role of Imperialist Man ourselves. Remembering the fact that there is no one universal truth is key to this: acting responsibly, collectively and from a place of intersectionality is our only option if we wish any worldbuilding project to be radically politically, socially and ecologically better.

Imaginative Ecology in the Mainstream: Fantasy Worlds seen in Contemporary Popular Culture

With high modern rates of literacy, the spread of affordable television and the internet, and increasingly secular populations (Haerpfer et al., 2022); ecologically and ontologically complex worlds have increasingly permeated contemporary pop-culture through fantasy novels and visual entertainment, building on the traditions of myth and legend before them. The massive and enduring success of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) fantasy series, for example, represents a popular interest in immersive worldbuilding; Tolkien's Middle Earth so brimming with descriptive detail in its landscapes, creatures and forces that one can (and many do) create endless spin-off realities all set within his imagined world. His fantasy creations of *Hobbits*, *Ents* and *Tom Bombadil* speak to a belief in the need for connection with ecology and the planet when faced with a violent and colonising force such as the *Orcs*, but also harken back to Romantic views on Nature, an undertone of religious morality present in the “good” characters strong connection to *the Shire*, and the “evil” characters destruction of the landscape. In this way you could perhaps argue that Tolkein’s portrayal of the world is less ecological and more in defence of the human concept of Nature, Tolkein himself describing *The Lord of the Rings*, in private correspondence, as a ‘fundamentally religious and Catholic work’ (Tolkein, 1953). However, I don’t believe that this context negates the achievements of the work in creating a rich, overlapping and interrelated imagined world, which ultimately promotes empathy and collaboration between species.



Alt = “A film still of the ent character ‘Treebeard’s’ face”

2. Peter Jackson et al., (2002) *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* [film still] © New Line Cinema

Elsewhere on the silver screen, the recent popular and critical success of Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's film *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* (2022), while not overtly ecological did prompt the viewer to consider the existence of multiple worlds, and destabilised the idea that any humans current experience is the only, or most truthful experience of living. Primarily this was achieved with its silly, sci-fi multiverse storyline, but the film was also a representation of the Asian immigrant and queer experiences in modern America, lived human worlds unknown to many.



Alt = "A colourfully drawn and visually busy vertical film poster"

3. James Jean (2022). Poster for *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once*, [film poster] © A24

In contemporary science fiction literature Jeff Vandermeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*, in particular the first novel of the series, *Annihilation* (2014), and its 2018 film adaptation of the same name, are brilliant examples of imaginative ecological fantasy worldbuilding. In *Annihilation* the narrator character of *the biologist* explores a strange landscape known as *Area X*, which is unpopulated by humans and half alien in its biological makeup. In their essay *On Monsters and Other Matters of Housekeeping*, Kim Hendrickx notes that 'the character of the biologist steers the reader away from "nature" and offers an entry point into ecology as a mode of attention, a form of thinking, and a way of being and evolving with other species.' (Hendrickx, 2022). *Annihilation* in its detailed descriptions of landscape and committed, emotional sense of place seems to introduce Area X as a character in its own right; with moods and whims, mystery and changing characteristics as the biologist wanders through its bodies. Vandermeer thus creates a truly ecological landscape, refusing to concede to the human concept of Nature which Hendrickx posits: 'works like a mirror: it is separate from us yet we see only ourselves in it.' (Hendrickx, 2022).

Children's animation has proved itself another popular and unexpectedly rich area of ecological ontological thought, with series such as *Steven Universe*, *Gravity Falls*, *Adventure Time* and the effervescent Studio Ghibli films pushing the bounds of non-anthropocentric storytelling within pop-culture. This form of media inherently lends itself toward fantasy worldbuilding through the practical abilities of animation to go beyond the physical bounds of the "real-world", and into a wacky, colourful and mythic drawn universe, the limits of which have more to do with network guidelines and economically feasible timelines than physical "reality". Examining the non-human relations, use of queer chosen family and political stance of nonviolence in *Steven Universe* in their essay *Planetary Thinking, Queer Identities, and Environmentalism* (2022), Aneesh Barai comments on the concept of *Fusion* used in the show as 'a DeLuzian becoming-mineral or becoming-planet, which emotionally connects viewers to non-human, mineral and hybrid lives, and encourages us to see the planet itself as vibrant with nonhuman life that we are connected to and should care for.' (Barai, 2022). *Steven Universe* utilises the sci-fi fantasy trope of casting the colonising, planet-destroying force as the Other to be contended with, in this case through the character of *White Diamond*. However, unlike other media in the genre *Steven Universe*'s protagonist chooses to contend with this force through the approach of love and communication, frequently shown attempting to make kin with the enemy, with his magical power literally creating a shield rather than a weapon. Barai notes that '[The protagonists] story embodies life not as an individual or individualist, but as always already connected with others.' (Barai, 2022).

This portrayal of the power of empathetic and collective action when faced with environmental

destruction can also be seen in the films of Japanese animation company Studio Ghibli under the direction of Hayao Miyazaki. Many of their films, such as *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) and the pre-Ghibli Miyazaki hit *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) are philosophically grounded in Shinto, Buddhist and Daoist themes of a return to and deep connection with the natural world (Thompson, 2021), and a rejection of human exceptionalism in their foregrounding of non-human characters. Ghibli films also often contain anti-war narratives, showcasing both the human and ecological impacts of violent conflict, and frequently feature realistic and non-sexualised female protagonists; a feminist departure from the majority of popular anime products.



Alt = "Film still of a character in a blue suit with a test tube looking at a glowing spore"

4. Hayao Miyazaki (1984). Still from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, [animated film] © Studio Ghibli

Popular culture appears to be on a somewhat ecologically minded turn - some children's animation even ahead of this curve due to its inherent abilities to effectively communicate imagined landscapes via rich, colourful and beautiful visual stories. It depends what you personally define as art, but to me the examples of literature, film and animation discussed in this passage define contemporary artistic practice and its hopeful worldbuilding capabilities just as much as the examples seen in the next section, discussing Fine Art in the gallery institution.

Ecology Reaches the Institution: Intersectional New-Materialist Ontologies as seen within Recent Group Exhibitions in Contemporary Galleries

In more classical *Fine Art* contexts; worldbuilding, ecology and storytelling have all made their way onto the exhibition circuit of late, albeit often separately and from human oriented perspectives. In this section we will discuss three examples of group exhibitions shown in mainstream Fine Art institutions, all of which reflect on themes of post-anthropocentric ecology and intersectional ontologies to varying degrees of success.

Hinterlands

The group exhibition *Hinterlands*, on display at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Newcastle 2022-23, was a recent example of the meshing of ecological and anti-colonial interests in a gallery setting. The artists chosen 'reflect[ed] on ideas of rootedness and belonging, human and more-than-human relationships, boundaries, land and time in the era of the climate emergency' [...] 'considering land and place as a complex layering of relationships' (no listed author, Baltic Archive, 2022), and work shown was in a kaleidoscope of mediums from assemblage to video game, textiles, sculpture and collage. A particular highlight was Laura Harrington's film *Fieldworking* (2020); a collaborative work with six artists, two filmmakers and an ecologist, documenting their trip to, and subsequent interactions with, the site of a scientific field station in Moor House-Upper Teesdale National Nature Reserve (no listed author, The NewBridge Project, 2022). The film, the event it documented and the field recordings produced were raw, sometimes funny, and most of all playful in their approach to the stones, bogs, landscape with which the collaborators were interacting. Sat in the little room which housed the large screen on which this film was shown, I'll admit to becoming lost in the piece, invested in observing as the group became gradually freer in their methodology, as the mildly awkward human dynamics shifted and melted and the focus became on everything else - because once encouraged to see everything else there was simply so much *to see*. The film was wonderfully playful ecological fun, and I enjoyed Harrington's commitment to allowing the location to steer the group, rather than imposing any rigid notion of outcome on the exploration. However, overall I found that the works and presentation methods chosen for the exhibition as a collective were a little too one-note for my taste; the whole thing bearing the apparently ubiquitous visual branding of

Environmental Art. Mud browns and greens, images of trees and grass and skies, and a sculptural piece made with branches - not only does this aesthetic range get a little dull, it is also not the multiplicitous overlapping exploration of ecology that it could and should be, leaving us with a rather visually standard human-centric take on the whole matter. The exhibition guide promises 'Reflecti[on] on the idea of 'hinterlands', or what lies beyond the visible or known' (no listed author, Baltic, 2022), but this sense of freedom was missing for me; what made Harrington's work stand out perhaps being that here alone this depth was reached, possibly in the collaborative nature of what she presented, or again perhaps in her ability to relinquish narrative control and allow the landscape to co-create its own story.



Alt = "An installation view of a film on a screen directly ahead with a semi-circular bench behind. The screen shows a river and grassy bank."

5. Laura Harrington (2020). Installation view of *Fieldworking* [film], at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Newcastle UK, © Baltic Credit Rob Harris

Science Friction: Living Among Companion Species

A more successful group exhibition on the subject of ecology and human-non-human relations, in my opinion, was *Science Friction: Living Among Companion Species* shown at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB), running from June to November 2021. The exhibition text begins:

Is it possible to imagine other earthly stories? Can we conceive of other ways of living among different species? This exhibition explores these issues with the help of a selection of works of art and popular science. It proposes a change of mentality and sensitivity that questions the supremacy of the human species, opting for a view of the world understood as an ecosystem where all the planet's species coexist. (no listed author, CCCB website, 2021)

If the implicit theoretical links to Donna Haraway's writing aren't obvious enough from this introduction, the text goes on to specifically cite her as one of two main philosophical wells, alongside biologist Lynn Margulis, with which the artists and curators drew upon when co-creating the exhibition. There is a focus on storytelling and imagined possibilities in this exhibition; curator Maria Ptqk reportedly choosing work for its ability to 'explore interspecies relationships and persuade us of the urgency of inventing other science f(r)ictions and fabular and speculative stories that expand the imaginable and help us place ourselves in the emerging interspecies paradigm' (no listed author, CCCB website, 2021). This direction is reflected in work such as Gustafsson & Haapoja's *The Museum of the History of Cattle* (2013-2021), and Pinar Yoldas' *Ecosystem of Excess* (2014), both of which utilise the medium of museum display to lay out alternative, imagined, non-human histories.

The Museum of the History of Cattle (seen in figure. 6) upon first impression appears to be a dry, wall-mounted textual history lesson, accompanied by two grey-painted and glass-box-topped podiums containing some sort of disinterested, antiquated farming instruments. On closer inspection, the piece weaves together an entirely imagined account of history from a bovine perspective in such an engaging, storytelling manner that as a viewer you feel drawn along in the story of their plight; the recognisable human manner of informative museum presentation allowing you to lay behind species differences. Touching on this appropriation of the bovine voice on their website, Gustafsson & Haapoja write;

The history of the cattle is one of many unwritten histories. Unlike that of the human groups

that have been silenced, bovine history, in a number of ways, is beyond writing. The entire concept of history is derived from human culture. Cattle use their tongue to touch, not to transfer history to future generations. We lend our tongue and our language to them and speak on their behalf.

Speaking on behalf of someone else is always a possessive gesture. We can't and don't want to claim that we know what the history of cattle has been like and how they have experienced it. However, we do know for sure that they have been present and that there is a yet untold perspective to our common history. With this in mind, we can attempt to imagine and give shape to the space that lacks their voice, the space from which they, even now, witness our world. (Haapoja & Gustafsson, 2013)

I appreciate the artist's ability to recognise the issue of human appropriation of other species' stories, which is implicit to this piece of work, own that that is the case and provide an argument for continuing to do so. And frankly I agree with their use of this; in order for humans to attempt to grasp other species' lives and the harm our exploitation of them causes we must, to some extent, translate this into recognisable human terms and contexts. Their choice of presentation being a fairly typically dry museum-esque display also simultaneously adds gravity to their claims while satirising and critiquing the museum institution, drawing to attention their frequently biased human lens - which is often colonial, patriarchal and heteronormative.

In their text *Science Fiction Worldbuilding in Museum Displays of Extinct Life* (2022), Verity Burke and Will Tattersdill compare popular methods of museum display to fictioning, where they argue that:

Museums [...] build worlds: worlds that are putatively similar to the one we live in but can just as easily be fictitious. The fact/fantasy boundary is almost always more porous than our shared impressions of museum authenticity typically suggest. (Burke & Tattersdill, 2022)

The article comments on three case studies of fictitious displays shown in natural history museums, including the *Creation Museum* in Kentucky, USA (figure. 7); arguing that their use of science fiction isn't necessarily a bad thing, with the view that science fiction can often reveal elements of the world that are otherwise unreachable except in imagination, 'We understand sf as something always connected to the actual world, often intensely in dialogue with it—and inventing things in order to bring parts of it into sharper and surprising relief. Museums are the same.' (Burke & Tattersdill, 2022). However, I would argue that in their analysis they are not critical enough of the lack of transparency which many museums demonstrate, using fictioning tactics to display media that they either do not

have enough contextual information on, or that they are purposefully trying to recontextualise for their own ideological benefit. As they assert in the quotation, 'The fact/fantasy boundary is almost always more porous than our shared impressions of museum authenticity typically suggest.' (Burke & Tattersdill, 2022); many people take museum displays as authoritative work, based on scientific fact, and are unaware that any aspect of human imagining - which can be biassed and politicised - is involved in the curation of displays.

While I wholly agree that imaginative worldbuilding can allow us to reach elements of the world otherwise closed off, this is a highly political practice that if unchecked can allow for fascist and extremist groups to present their biassed and often discriminatory worldviews as reality. Perhaps then, worldbuilding is best left within artistic contexts, where viewers are aware that while it may reveal truth, they can take the work with a pinch of salt, in the knowledge that aspects of it are based on human imagination? Or perhaps museums should take responsibility for becoming more transparent with the role of fiction in their displays, as very often "truth" is saturated with bias, and even widely agreed upon historical and scientific beliefs can originate from shaky colonial beginnings. Once again, worldbuilding must be grounded in an intersectional, equitable politics in order to provide meaningful and transformative truth.



Alt = "A room in a gallery with text connected by red lines on the wall to the left, two mid-height cabinets in the centre and an unrelated sculptural work to the right."

6. Gustafsson & Haapoja (2021) *The Museum of the History of Cattle* [installation], at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Spain © CCCB, 2021 La Fotogràfica



Alt = "A museum display with the text 'WHO ARE LUCY'S RELATIVES? THE GREAT APES' above a chart depicting the evolution of apes, in the foreground nine ape skulls on pedestals and centre-right a stuffed ape with bones laid out vertically behind it."

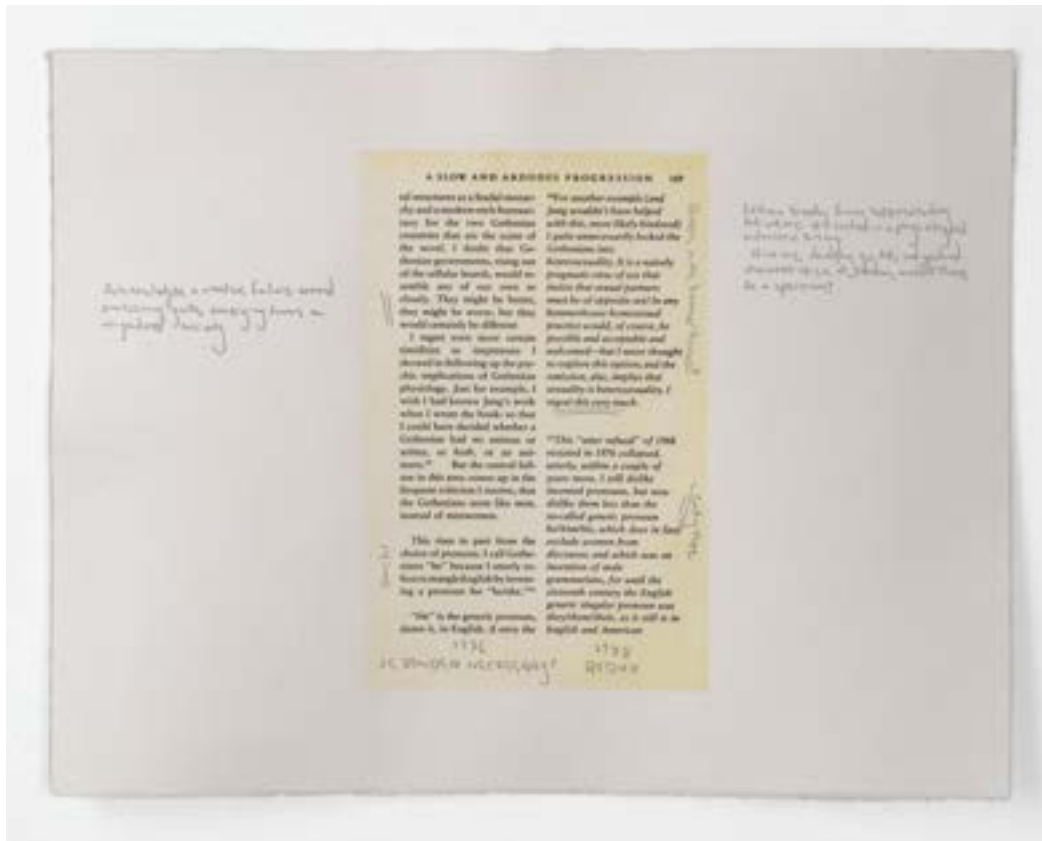
7. Answers In Genesis (2023), Exhibit at *The Creation Museum*, Kentucky USA, © Answers In Genesis

Seized by the Left Hand

The group exhibition *Seized by the Left Hand* shown at Dundee Contemporary Arts (DCA) 2019-2020 was a particularly successful example of an intersectional basis for ecological worldbuilding within the arts. Work shown responded to the science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin, a feminist text set on the imaginary planet *Gethen*, the inhabitants of which notably continuously change gender throughout their lives. The exhibition text reads:

Seized by the Left Hand seeks to champion artists, performers and writers who, much like Le Guin was, are engaged in the vital act of radical imagining: crafting alternative spaces and worlds that hint at ways in which we all might better live, love and care for one another. (Dara & McAleese, 2019)

The exhibition takes *The Left Hand of Darkness* as its inspiration and jumping-off point, with many of the works included critical of Le Guin's limited views on gender and sexuality in the novel - her characters still represented by binaries despite their radical transgressions of identity and class politics in other areas - as well as further works moving away and beyond Le Guin's capabilities, particularly in the area of queer narratives. Tuesday Smillie, a trans-feminist artist, presents a collection of meticulous watercolour and gouache paintings alongside framed written work by both herself and Le Guin, drawn from a wider body of research titled *Reflecting Light into The Unshadow* (2016-2019). The textual work includes handwritten annotations by the artist, added into the margins of two further essays published by Le Guin in 1976 and 1988, addressing feminist critiques of *The Left Hand of Darkness* following its publication. Smillie's scrawled, informal notes showcase a personal and humanising touch to the trans & queer perspective, and praise Le Guin to an extent for her ability to candidly reflect on and develop her views as the definitions and boundaries of gender and sexuality broadened. Smillie also provides an 'unlimited' take-away print for visitors to come away with, 'resembling a page torn from a 1980 paperback edition of *The Left Hand of Darkness*.' (no listed author, DCA, 2019), a nice touch which to me hammers home the multiplicitous readings possible with this (and indeed any) text. The page chosen focuses on a description of the *Unshadow* 'a dull yet all-encompassing atmosphere in the snowy wilds of Gethen where one becomes unable to perceive anything beyond a 'whitish-gray' void for miles around.' (no listed author, DCA, 2019). Smillie thus encourages the audience to go away and recreate the setting described within their own imaginations, a landscape therefore transformed and multiplied, a world selectively built in the mind.



Alt = "A display showing a printed page written by Le Guin in the centre, annotated with handwritten notations by Smillie."

8. Tuesday Smillie (2016), *A Slow and Arduous Progression* [Print on paper, polymer plate, watercolour], Image taken from presentation of the work at *Reflecting Light into The Unshadow* at PARTICIPANT INC, New York

Another particularly exciting work shown in the exhibition is Andrew Black's *Revenge Fantasy* (2019), a short film specially commissioned by DCA, which reflects on Le Guin's handling of ecology and class in *The Left Hand of Darkness* from a contemporary queer perspective; weaving together a fantasy narrative set on the Isle of Skye, on the West coast of Scotland.



Alt = "A sunny mountainous landscape in the background is overlaid by blue painted text reading TICKS in the foreground."

9. Andrew Black (2019), *Revenge Fantasy* [film], screenshot taken from Dundee Contemporary Arts (2019) Curators Eoin Dara and Kim McAleese on *Seized by the Left Hand* [youtube video interview]

Revenge Fantasy is one of those artworks that immediately captured me from the first glimpse I caught of it on the DCA website. The film appears wild, sexy, fantastical, mucky and grounded in the material realities of the beautiful landscape it is set in. The DCA exhibition text on the piece describes it as 'a deliberately 'grubby' work, where the artist wishes to draw our attention to the messy, complex reality of this place, and not simply focus on some impossibly pristine and untouched fiction of the land offered up for consumption by privileged holiday makers.' (no listed author, DCA, 2019). This is right up my alley(!), and entirely in-keeping with the vision of overlapping, indefinable and endlessly rich composting worlds that Donna Haraway and Tim Morton describe. Black is unapologetic in his use of erotic descriptions of queer sexual acts and abject visuals of animal feces, the work refusing to concede to mainstreamed depictions of the Scottish West coast as - Experience Gorgeous Family-Friendly British Getaway Retreat Airbnb Holiday - instead imagining a world of queer ecology where the otherwise unwanted inhabitants of the space, i.e. ticks, flies, dung, are given as much agency as himself. His storytelling, in conversation with Le Guin's work, criticises capitalist privatisation of the land, and this film hands back a small part of that ownership to the untamed collective of the ecological mass, and to our imaginations.

Abel Rodríguez, whose native name is Mogaje Guihu, an elder from the Nonuya ethnic group in the Colombian Amazon, presents two moving series' of drawings depicting the flora and fauna native to his homeland, an area he became displaced from in the 1990's, due to guerilla action by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and capitalist interest from parties invested in the exploitation of the regions natural resources (Pound, 2020). The drawings are therefore all created from memory; each piece in the two series' displayed capturing seasonal differences in the chosen areas. Works in each series show small differences, as though Rodríguez is attempting to perfectly reproduce the intricate details of every species in as much accuracy as possible, so that they may not be lost to him, or the world at large, in perpetuity.



Alt = "A hand drawn image of flora and fauna in green, brown and grey, showing the plants in great detail."

10. Abel Rodríguez (2007), *Ciclo anual en las altas terrazas de la selva tropical (Annual cycle in the high terraces of the rainforest)* [ink on paper], © Abel Rodríguez and Tropenbos International Colombia

Rodríguez began drawing as a scientific pursuit, for the practical aim of cataloguing and thus preserving the homeland he had become estranged from. The project was initiated when Rodríguez, then Guihu, was approached by Tropenbos International, a Dutch NGO 'whose mission is to study and protect the tropical rainforest' (Pound, 2020), but Rodríguez has since split from them, instead now producing work by request for collectors and museums, at a price. It is interesting how Rodríguez is

criticised for this pivot, as if Indigenous artists should be held to a “higher moral standard” than their western counterparts, staying clear of traditional economic success in the art world, implicitly barred from making money from its institutions - many of which have themselves been built upon colonial histories. This brings up wider questions around why some galleries may choose to platform Indigenous artists, while quietly remaining complicit in ecological destruction, stolen works and artifacts, and even genocide through their investments and tax-evading benefactors. It is imperative to remember that progressive exhibition titles and well-placed acquisitions maketh not the institution; and while imaginative stories in art can help us get to a point, it means little if the next step of radical action is never taken.

Seized by the Left Hand greatly benefits from its intersectional political position, showcasing work from a variety of perspectives and lived experiences. Queer, disabled, trans and Indigenous voices are represented; with work presented in a breadth of mediums and styles - the worlds built and examined are vast and varied in their scope. I particularly enjoy the visual language of this exhibition, it doesn't overtly attempt to cajole or shame the viewer into empathy for our dying planet via heavy-handed environmental art aesthetics, yet its overriding message of the need for a more equitable and ecologically-conscious society is clear. Overall, the presentation and content of these three group exhibitions excites me; art institutions/curators seem to recognise the need to platform this kind of practice, and there appears to be many artists working toward and contributing to the global dialogue on ecological ontology in imaginative, hopeful new ways. However, ultimately we must keep the pressure on these institutions to match their public faces to their private dealings, and continue to hold ourselves accountable for the scope of our own participation in the many less-than-transparent Art World systems.

To Conclude: Where Can We Go From Here?

Art, to me, is not magic. It cannot, and likely will not solve the number of ecological and social issues that the planet Earth and its occupants face. Systemic change is needed - as individuals we do not have the power to content with these environment destroying forces at large, it is only by collective action that we can (and must) build better worlds. Art does however have a power, as Patricia Goldblatt writes in my personal favourite summation of its potential: 'Insights facilitated through art connect previously unrelated elements, catalyzing new knowing as a shock of recognition: "a self not consciously known"'(Goldblatt, 2006). Artists have the power to weave stories of kinship, imagine and give form to a knowledge that myth and legend, Indigenous peoples and children have long been keenly aware of, and that colonial capitalism urges us to forget: we are all interrelated beings, becoming and unbecoming in constant relationship with each other and *everything*. That is not to say that Art is the one tool to rule them all, but rather that this is what I define Art as, regardless of the form or context it inhabits. The answer to the question 'Where can we go from here?' then is not so much about the extent of our imaginations, which we have proved to be wonderful and diverse in their worldbuilding capabilities, but rather related to what we can (and again must) now put into physical practice, utilising this vast and hopeful ontological framework to create and sustain material change, for ecological and social prosperity for all.



Alt = "A pile of brown compost under a blue sky."

Malcolm Beck (1997), Image from *The Secret Life of Compost* © Acres U.S.A.

Bibliography

- Barai, A. (2022) 'Chapter 17. "The Earth is my home too, can't I help protect it?": Planetary Thinking, Queer Identities and Environmentalism in The Legend of Korra, She-Ra, and Steven Universe', in *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*. London, Great Britain: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 116–129.
- Begum, T. and Collins, K. (2023) *What is mass extinction and are we facing a sixth one?*, *Natural History Museum*. Available at: <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/what-is-mass-extinction-and-are-we-facing-a-sixth-one.html> (Accessed: 12 January 2024).
- Burke, V. and Tattersdill, W. (2022) 'Science fiction worldbuilding in museum displays of Extinct Life', *Configurations*, 30(3), pp. 313–340. doi:10.1353/con.2022.0019.
- Dara, E. and McAleese, K. (2019) *Seized by the left hand*, Dundee Contemporary Arts. Available at: <https://www.dca.org.uk/exhibition-archives/archive-detail-page/seized-by-the-left-hand/> (Accessed: 08 February 2024).
- Dei, G.J.S. and Jaimungal, C.S. (2018) *Indigeneity and decolonial resistance: Alternatives to colonial thinking and practice*. Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press.
- Goldblatt, P. (2006) *How John Dewey's Theories Underpin Art and Art Education*. Education and culture (Iowa City, Iowa). [Online] 22 (1), 17–34.
- Haapoja, T. and Gustafsson, L. (2013) *How to write the history according to cattle, THE MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF CATTLE*. Available at: <https://www.historyofcattle.org/about/> (Accessed: 18 January 2024).
- Haerpfer, C., Inglehart, R., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano J., M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen (eds.). (2022) *World Values Survey: Round Seven - Country-Pooled Datafile Version 5.0*. Madrid, Spain & Vienna, Austria: JD Systems Institute & WWSA Secretariat.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016) *Staying with the trouble : making kin in the Chthulucene / Donna J. Haraway*. Durham ; Duke University Press.
- Hendrickx, K. (2022) 'Chapter 33. On Monsters and Other Matters of Housekeeping: Reading Jeff Vandermeer with Donna Haraway and Ursula K. Le Guin', in *Fantasy and Myth in the*

Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media. London, Great Britain: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 221–232.

Jackson, P., Rhys-Davies, J., Boyd, B. & Monaghan, D. (2002). *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* [film] New Line Cinema.

Morton, T. (2017) *Humankind : solidarity with nonhuman people / Timothy Morton*. London ; Verso.

Morton, T. (2018) Third Stone from the Sun. *SubStance*. [Online] 47 (2), 107–118. Available at: <https://web-p-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=9c6ac0dd-e861-477c-b74e-e1026704da07%40redis>

No listed author, Dundee Contemporary Arts. (2019) *Seized by the left hand - dundee contemporary arts* Available at: <https://www.dca.org.uk/whats-on/event/seized-by-the-left-hand> (Accessed: 04 October 2023).

No listed author, CCCB. (2021) *Exhibition: Science Friction Living Among Companion Species* Available at: <https://www.cccb.org/en/exhibitions/file/science-friction/234907> (Accessed: 18 January 2024).

No listed author, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art. (2022) *Hinterlands, Baltic Archive*. Available at: <https://archive.baltic.art/#/exhibition/hinterlands-ex295> (Accessed: 17 January 2024).

No listed author, The NewBridge Project. (2022) *Fieldworking by Laura Harrington: Film screening* Available at: <https://thenewbridgeproject.com/events/fieldworking-film-screening/> (Accessed: 17 January 2024).

Pound, C. (2020) *Abel Rodríguez recreates the rainforests he used to call home - artsy*, Artsy Editorial. Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-abel-rodriguez-recreates-rainforests-call> (Accessed: 09 February 2024).

Thomson, J. (2021) *The philosophy and magic of Hayao Miyazaki's Studio Ghibli*, Big Think. Available at: <https://bigthink.com/high-culture/studio-ghibli/> (Accessed: 17 January 2024).

Tolkein, J.R.R. (1953) 'Letter 142'.