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Humanities/Art/Technology Research Center’s *Post-Apocalypsis*: Assembling and Describing the Post-Natural

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Assembly

The Anthropocene — an era defined by the catastrophic effects of human action upon the natural world — has been widely documented and extensively discussed across the environmental sciences and the environmental humanities. The crises that compose it are simultaneously global and geologic, implicating communities across the planet and impacting the deep histories of the earth. Its scale, in other words, is not only catastrophic but exceedingly difficult to grasp. Existential threats at the level of the planet tend not to feel like existential threats at the level of the person. As a result, there has been a grave mismatch between the magnitude of the problem and the flimsiness of the response. Indeed, with characteristic good humor, anthropologist and sociologist of science Bruno Latour once referred to the Anthropocene as “that mix up of all mix ups” (“Waiting for Gaia” 7).

For Latour, the key to sorting out this mismatch is scale — more importantly, how it works. In a 2011 lecture given at the French Institute in London, Latour asks how scale — understood as a rule-bound system of calibration — is produced using various techniques and tools of measuring and modeling (“Waiting for Gaia” 5). Because scale allows for commensurability between the very large and the very small, renewed attention to its

calculation promises to clarify and especially to fortify the urgent forewarnings of scientists and environmental researchers.

Though scale itself is organized and orderly, Latour has found that its production is piecemeal, patchworked, and rickety. Producing scale involves what Latour calls the "work of assembly" ("Waiting for Gaia" 7). Scale, he says, is something we compose using "*only local* views" ("Waiting for Gaia" 6). By "local views," he means the immanent alliance of satellites, software, institutional funding, doctoral students, principles of light, and so on, that generate a seemingly transcendental view from above when assembled all together. To be sure, Latour is not after a godlike gaze that masters the scene it takes in. Rather, he is after "a more and more realistic rendering of this true *theatre of the globe*," constructed through meticulous acts of mapping, deciphering, tracing, connecting, and comparing ("Waiting for Gaia" 7). A realistic account of the planet is, for him, a reliable account of the planet, one that — through the painstaking work of assembly — contains accurate descriptions of planetary crises and thereby equips us to face them.

Photo by Daed Baitz group

Post-Apocalypsis

The Humanities/Art/Technology Research Center's interactive performance installation *Post-Apocalypsis* (2015) takes on the work of assembly in its attempt to describe some of the tectonic shifts that ideas and experiences of agency and subjectivity have undergone during the Anthropocene. Founded in 2011 at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland, the Center produces projects and publications that mine the intersections of art and science. In 2014, it created *Emotional Urban Weather*, a workshop that mapped sounds and soundscapes in urban spaces, and a year earlier it presented *Transnature Is Here*, an exhibition that took its cues from biophilosopher Jakob von Uexküll's theory of *Umwelten*, which are the social and physical environments that organisms inhabit. A direct extension of the Center's ongoing investigations of ecology and technology, *Post-Apocalypsis* depicts a forest of human and nonhuman figures enmeshed in a buzzing swarm of cultural and meteorological networks.

The forest is literal: visitors to the gallery space encounter a sparse grove, or perhaps graveyard, of once-living trees, all reduced to logs. Several feet long, the logs hang lengthwise from a rhomboid metal grille of obtuse and acute angles. This structure is not a standardized architectural grid but a more haphazard canopy of irregular diamonds and triangles. Each log contains a ravel of metal rods that have been bored through the length of its trunk, extending vertically above like naked poplar branches and below like tentacular roots. Some logs are skewered at an angle, pierced through bark rather than through pith and sapwood.

The sight is mirthless, even morbid. In the vein of Gothic horror, the logs resemble corpses, monstrously truncated, clinically appended, and strung up like specimens. Perversely, they recall their irretrievable liveliness; each log flickers with the ghostly image of its former self. But this is not exactly a matter of haunting — the lumpen logs, in a state of decomposition that constantly threatens to win out against the pins and screws holding them upright, more closely evoke the terror of flesh reanimated. The logs uncannily comport themselves like living trees. Queer theorist Jack Halberstam writes that the monster of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* "throws humanness into relief" because it reveals how identity is fabricated from "bits and pieces" (Halbertstam 33, 36). Just as *Frankenstein* troubles the category of the human, the logs of *Post-Apocalypsis* trouble the category of the arboreal. What is a tree? What is merely tree-like? How do we recognize and negotiate the difference?

The striking visual elements of *Post-Apocalypsis* complement its ambitious sonic elements. The metal rods transmit sound, so when visitors press their bodies against the

trees, they hear poetry. Instead of passing through the air as most sound does, the recordings carve a more intimate, or even invasive, path through the body to the inner ear. Not unlike the deadened trees, the visitors themselves become physical conduits for poetic expression. Excerpting the work of Polish Romantics Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), Juliusz Słowacki (1809-1849), and Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821-1883), the poems are uttered in English by a young woman. She recites the poems slowly and haltingly, but the recording is textured with static and glitches, making it impossible to know whether the distortion is the result of human affectation, disordered speech, or digital processing. Either way, visitors must listen closely: her words are distorted in quality and jarring in delivery, and they compete with a raucous soundscape that fills the whole gallery space with amplified whizzes, whips, and whirrs. Live streams of weather data — drawn from eleven sites of nuclear conflict — are fed through a custom software program that translates the data into an abrasive score. Played in real time, the soundscape continuously reflects minute environmental fluctuations at each location. Visitors are invited interact with tablet screens to switch between the dissonant nuclear sites, as if tuning to different radio stations.

Post-Apocaypsis's overwhelming collection of figures (human visitors, prosthetic trees), processes (mediation, sonification), technologies (sensors, satellites), and environments (nuclear hotspots, gallery spaces) assembles disjunctive times, spaces, species, agencies, and senses of the sublime side-by-side in a dense thicket of things, not only disrupting familiar categories of meaning and hierarchies of value, but also, as anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing puts it, "show[ing] us potential histories in the making" (Tsing 23). *Post-Apocalypsis* traces the relationships — both actual and speculative — between phenomena of wildly different scales and sorts, offering up a mosaic-like vision of global networks incorporating multiple systems and implicating human and nonhuman players alike. Radioactive sites around the world are rendered sensible to human museum-goers, and Romantic poetry is resurrected by trees which are themselves reborn as cyborg monstrosities; vast spaces are condensed, and cultural forms are transfigured across time; the *here* contains the *there*, and the *now* contains the *then*. For Latour, the conditions of contemporary life are not quite "posthuman" — rather, they are "*post-natural*," because the category of the human has hardly become obsolete, as the prefix *post-* would suggest; on the contrary, the "*anthropos*" is now "on steroids" in this age of the Anthropocene, while the domain of nature has been boiled away ("Waiting for Gaia" 3). If *Post-Apocalypsis* constitutes an act of assembly, then the account of the world that it draws is categorically post-natural.

Unlike much other contemporary performance work engaged with the environment, *Post-Apocalypsis* articulates a vision of ecological realities without advancing a normative program of ethics and politics. By contrast, American director Lars Jan's installation *Holoscenes* (2014) features actors rehearsing everyday activities like mopping and reading in a plinth-like tank that periodically drains and floods with water, inviting viewers to empathize with its drowning performers in order to jumpstart a sense of urgency around environmental issues; Pig Iron Theatre's devised performance *A Period of Animate Existence* (2017) offers sentimental meditations on the transience of organic life with a cast of actors who hail from elementary school, young adulthood, middle age, and retirement, asking audiences to adopt a simplistic sense of community with other people in the face of inevitable death and eventual extinction; and the New York-based theater company Superhero Clubhouse takes environmental justice as its very mission, pursuing what it describes as a "holistic approach to theater-making in which content, process, and production are tethered to complex environmental questions" ("What Is Eco-Theater?"). Each of these projects seeks a specific outcome in the sphere of environmental activism — if not greener laws and regulations, then perhaps more vigorous recycling habits, or, at the very least, a nagging sense of guilt about the steadily worsening state of the planet. *Post-Apocalypsis*, however, asks visitors neither to adopt more sustainable daily practices nor to agitate for more progressive environmental policies. Instead, it offers a portrait of present-day ecological circumstances that stops short of recommending what, if anything, should be done about them.

In order to account for its lack of ethical and political foreclosure, I suggest that *Post-Apocalypsis* might be understood as a *description* of post-natural networks, rather than as a *prescription* for how these networks ought to be navigated. Drawing on contemporary discussions in the humanities and social sciences on description as a critical method — and focusing in particular on literary scholar Heather Love's research into it — I venture a reading of *Post-Apocalypsis* as a work of description. To perform a descriptive reading of a text is to attend closely to the text's actual surfaces rather than to its implied depths; to notice how the text's use of description contributes to and even alters its overall meaning; and to consider how its descriptive operations function differently than other narrative and rhetorical modes, especially those that voice more explicit ethical and political positions. Textual practices of description, Love argues, stay close to their objects, handling them with care and achieving the detailed neutrality of documentary, ethnography, or ekphrasis. Description allows pictures of reality to emerge in ways that remain faithful to the reality they depict, with a minimum of alteration or adornment, so what is true can be seen as true — not in the sense of an *absolute* truth, but in the sense of *a* truth ("Close But Not Deep" 383-86). In this article, I offer

descriptions of *Post-Apocalypsis* in order to orient the reader to some of its qualities and characteristics, but my primary aim is to suggest that *Post-Apocalypsis* itself constitutes an act of description. As such, I spend less time examining how description operates as a method of criticism and more time asking how this particular piece goes about describing the world.

In order to more fully understand the fundamental scope and aims of *Post-Apocalypsis* — the contents of its descriptions — I begin my inquiry by looking at the installation's primary referent in Polish theater history, Jerzy Grotowski's 1969 *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris*. While a full account of *Post-Apocalypsis*'s relationship to Polish theatrical traditions, idioms, and preoccupations is beyond the scope of this article, it bears noting that the 2015 installation is a deliberate response not only to the exigencies of the Anthropocene but also to Grotowski's piece, which deals mainly with the figure of the human and the specter of the Christian divine. The main project of *Post-Apocalypsis* is, as its title self-consciously suggests, to present the ecological aftermath of the modern humanistic apocalypse presented in Grotowski's earlier engagement with the Christ myth. Tracking the key differences between these two pieces reveals how massive the shifts have been to the category of the human over the intervening decades. *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* throws *Post-Apocalypsis* into relief, illuminating in particular its disinterest in anthropocentric worldviews. At the same time, this comparison clarifies some of the more enduring aspects of humanness, such as its tendency to understand itself in relation to a nonhuman other, no longer the God of Christianity, but the global networks of power and technology that extend backwards and forwards into geologic time.

I go on to examine how *Post-Apocalypsis* articulates — or describes — its post-natural anxieties. With Love's scholarship in mind, I ask: Can her model of textual analysis be reapplied to the analysis of a performance installation? To what extent can the various elements of *Post-Apocalypsis* be said to offer descriptions of reality? Which elements veer away from description and toward interpretation and evaluation? Do its descriptions contain prescriptions for how reality ought to be managed? *Post-Apocalypsis* provides a helpful case study for thinking through the critical possibilities of description because it both leans into and away from a descriptive mode; while its use of weather data offers an empirical meteorological account of specific places, its cyborg trees seem to inhabit a space of dystopian allegory, figuring abstract concepts in concrete terms that depart from literal realities. Because its approach to depicting the complex interconnectivity of cultural formations and ecological conditions relies at least in part on metaphor, *Post-Apocalypsis* in some ways resists being read as straightforward description. Nevertheless,

the piece invites us to grapple with how to go about representing post-natural realities — as pressing a question as ever in the age of the Anthropocene.

Apocalypsis Cum Figuris and *Post-Apocalypsis*

Though Grotowski and his collaborators dwell primarily on the figure of Jesus Christ and the possibility of his return — while the Center demonstrates a more sprawling set of ecological concerns — *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* prefigures the loosely associative, physically felt, and thickly layered logics of *Post-Apocalypsis*. Grotowski's final professional production as a director, *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* opened to the public early in 1969 at the Laboratory Theatre in Wrocław, Poland, and it ran until the late spring of 1980, growing sparer, starker, and sharper the longer it played ("*Apocalypsis Cum Figuris*"). As philosopher Andrea Oppo points out, the piece is "apocalyptic" not just in theme but, more notoriously, in form: *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* breaks from familiar dramatic conventions of unified plot and psychologically-driven character, resists the authority of a scripted text, and pursues acts of pure presence, rather than acts of representation, in order to precipitate authentic encounters between spectators and performers (Oppo 225). *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* is, Oppo says, "above all an *experience*" (Oppo 226). With its commitment to what Grotowski calls in his theoretical writings "a total act" — an "act of extreme sincerity" solemnly gifted from an actor to an audience — *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* tries to stoke moments of genuine communion among its participants (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 124-5). The Center would later recapitulate this structure of engagement, activating its spectators as important contributors to the fulfillment of the interactive theatrical situation presented in *Post-Apocalypsis*.

In its search for pure and profound moments of connection, *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* espouses a stunning density of signification, as if by devising a field of splintered meanings it might make way for true revelations to rise up from the noise. Writing in 1970, Polish theater critic Konstanty Puzyna describes *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* as "a whorl of references" composed of a "haphazard jumble of quotations from the Bible, liturgical chants, Dostoevski, Eliot, and Simone Weil," with apparently "no linking thread" between all of its "vague associations" and "overlapping metaphors" that "flicker" — sometimes "dimly" and sometimes with "absolute logic and clarity" — throughout (Puzyna 36-7). Alternating between total opacity and powerful simplicity, *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* both invites and resists comprehension. Its "actions and meanings," Puzyna observes, are "snarled and enigmatic," "continually fading into each other," the effects not only of its ambitious intertextuality, but also of its energetic performativity: its "meanings are multiplied and telescoped," he says, because "an actor's face will express one thing, the

motion of his hand another, the response of his partner something else again" (Puzyna 37). For Puzyna, *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* is a work of "total" theater that meticulously deploys all manner of theatrical signification — "gesture and mime, movement and intonation, groupings and place-changes, inward reactions and counter-reactions" — to "arresting" effect (Puzyna 36, 37). Grotowski himself also describes *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* as a kind of "clash" ("On the Genesis of Apocalypsis" 51). His strategy was one of enthusiastic collecting and careful organizing. For him, the eclecticism of the piece's sources amplifies the "eternal biblical themes" around which it revolves: the sacred and the profane, the flesh and the spirit, Jesus the man and Jesus the savior ("On the Genesis of Apocalypsis" 51).

At its most straightforward, *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* depicts the Second Coming of Christ, underscored by notes of spiritual yearning and abject doubt. It asks, as Puzyna puts it, "*whether* God is dead" rather than asserting more definitively "that God is dead" (Puzyna 36, 38). However, "what is at issue," Grotowski says, "is not what is legendary, mythical, consecrated, formed" ("On the Genesis of Apocalypsis" 47). On the contrary, *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* dwells on "what is real in the presence of life" — that is, in "ordinary life," "everyday life," "bodily life" ("On the Genesis of Apocalypsis" 47). Though the piece shares its title — Latin for "Apocalypse with Pictures" — with German Renaissance painter Albrecht Dürer's 1498 series of woodcuts, which piously presents scenes from the Book of Revelation, Grotowski's version strays from these images of horsemen and angels and falling stars that mark the culmination of human life on Earth: "I thought: let it be without any connection to Dürer, almost without connection to the apocalyptic texts. After all, this is the apocalypse of life, of what is trivial, so to speak" ("On the Genesis of Apocalypsis" 49). One actor, for example, Stanisław Ścierski, approached his character John not so much as the Revelator or the Divine but as a "drunk" ("On the Genesis of Apocalypsis" 48). *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* depicts, in Grotowksi's words, "a miserable, little apocalypse" that is "pathetic" and "small," just "a stupid joke" ("On the Genesis of Apocalypsis" 51). Yet in so doing, they get at "something more"; as Grotowski says, it is as if *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* "were a representation of humanity" and his six actors "humankind" ("On the Genesis of Apocalypsis" 51).

Whereas Grotowski's apocalypse is decidedly human, the Center's vision of what comes after the apocalypse is decidedly post-natural. Fifty years separate Grotowski's experiment from the Center's response, and during that time a host of new theoretical frameworks have emerged, demonstrating how human identity and agency are multiply constituted and widely distributed. These recent intellectual approaches include: *the deconstructive turn* in environmental criticism, *speculative realism*, and *new materialism*,

each of which has given rise to further interventions in turn, such as *object-oriented ontology*, *object-oriented feminism*, *agential realism*, *posthumanism*, *feminist materialism*, and *vibrant materialism*. While these conceptual paradigms vary widely in their orientations and approaches, they all possess a trenchant skepticism of the coherence and centrality of human identity and agency. So, while *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* presumes the integrity of the human subject and a common, universal humanity, *Post-Apocalypsis*, by contrast, embraces Latour's vision of "*the multiplicity of* nature," of a "*pluriverse*" within which the human is mixed up with the nonhuman (*Politics of Nature* 40). The religious anxieties of *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* are aggravated in *Post-Apocalypsis* by interspecies horrors and atomic threats. In the years since Grotowski's work with his Laboratory Theatre, the terms of spiritual agony have dramatically shifted.

What remains constant between these pieces is that very capacity for agony, especially as articulated through a frantic syntax of excess and fragmentation. Both *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* and *Post-Apocalypsis* evince a sense of ceaseless longing for confirmation and, as if against all odds, connection. Grotowski's humiliated characters spitball biblical leitmotifs in their journey to ascertain the return of Christ, and the Center's similarly debased trees express their angst in the midst of a post-nuclear din. In an essay on his practice, Grotowski recalls Antonin Artaud's directive that "Actors should be like martyrs burnt alive, still signalling to us from their stakes" (*Towards a Poor Theatre* 125). *Post-Apocalypsis* shares with *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* a fascination with the sheer torment of communication. As *Post-Apocalypsis* shows, the domain of the post-natural is, like its humanist forerunner, a site of desperation, confusion, and anguish, as well as, occasionally, of meaningful contact. Just as Grotowski's audience turns toward Antoni Jahołkowski, the actor playing Szymon-Piotr, willing to receive tatters of "The Grand Inquisitor," visitors to the Center's installation lean closer to the strange trees, ready to listen.

Post-Apocalypsis **as Description**

Apocalypsis Cum Figuris helps to clarify the post-natural scope of *Post-Apocalypsis*, which asserts the indivisibility of nature and culture as an actual and consequential quality of the contemporary world. Yet instead of evaluating the post-natural, *Post-Apocalypsis* merely makes it visible. In other words, *Post-Apocalypsis* engages in an act of description, offering a diligent account of global networks and their shapes and silhouettes but stopping short of prescribing a specific ethical or political attitude toward them.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, applying Heather Love's theory of description to *Post-Apocalypsis* is not a straightforward or unproblematic task. After all, performance installations do not

"describe" the way that novels do. In a reading of *Beloved*, Love suggests that Toni Morrison "conveys the horrors of slavery not by voicing explicit protest against it but by describing its effects," arguing that readers might understand the novel to be "registering the losses of history rather than repairing them" ("Close but not Deep" 386). The text, Love says, engages in acts of description that do the work of condemning slavery without relying on the covert communication of a pat political message. For example, Love looks at how *Beloved* describes an act of infanticide with a "documentary aesthetic," using flat, exterior, neutral language to pursue a sense of objectivity that "makes legible material processes of dehumanization" ("Close but not Deep" 386). But *Post-Apocalypsis* does not use a text-based system of signification. If the installation can be said to offer descriptions at all, it offers them in terms that are visual, aural, and tactile, unfolding in space and over time. In what follows, I try to make out what in the piece does and does not lend itself to being read as description. As I do so, I take my cues from Love's 2016 article in *Representations*, co-authored with Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, which argues that description involves a responsiveness to its objects and an awareness of the difficulty of capturing these objects, due both to the "the protean qualities of what we describe as well as the uncertainty of any descriptive procedure" (Marcus, et al. 13). *Post-Apocalypsis* tackles the project of description with both diligence and flexibility, a strategy that suits the complexity of its objects.

The extent to which the various elements of *Post-Apocalypsis* constitute description varies. If description, as Marcus, Love, and Best argue, "can take many forms, including lists, case studies, sequences, taxonomies, typologies, genealogies, and prevalence studies," and if it "involves many actions, including observing, measuring, comparing, particularizing, generalizing, and classifying, using words, images, and numbers," then the aspect of *Post-Apocalypsis* that is most assimilable to a descriptive framework is its atmospheric sound installation, which gathers and inscribes meteorological data (Marcus, et al. 2). Visitors to the gallery space enter what theatre scholar Agnieszka Jelewska — the director of the Center and the curator of the Polish national exhibition that presented *Post-Apocalypsis* — calls an "audiosphere," an immersive soundscape that takes weather data as the basis of its composition (Jelewska). The installation scrapes data on temperature, humidity, wind speed, and air pressure from sites that have hosted major crises of, or debates over, nuclear energy: Chernobyl, Ukraine; Fukushima, Japan; Dauphin County, Pennsylvania; Nuuk, Greenland; Astana, Kazakhstan; Los Alamos, United States; Żarnowiec, Poland; Kent, Great Britain; Hubei, China; Sochi, Russia; and Crimea, Ukraine. Custom software written in the programming language MaxMSP translates the data into sound, allowing *Post-Apocalypsis* to incorporate eleven far-flung nuclear hotspots into the immediate sensory space of the installation.

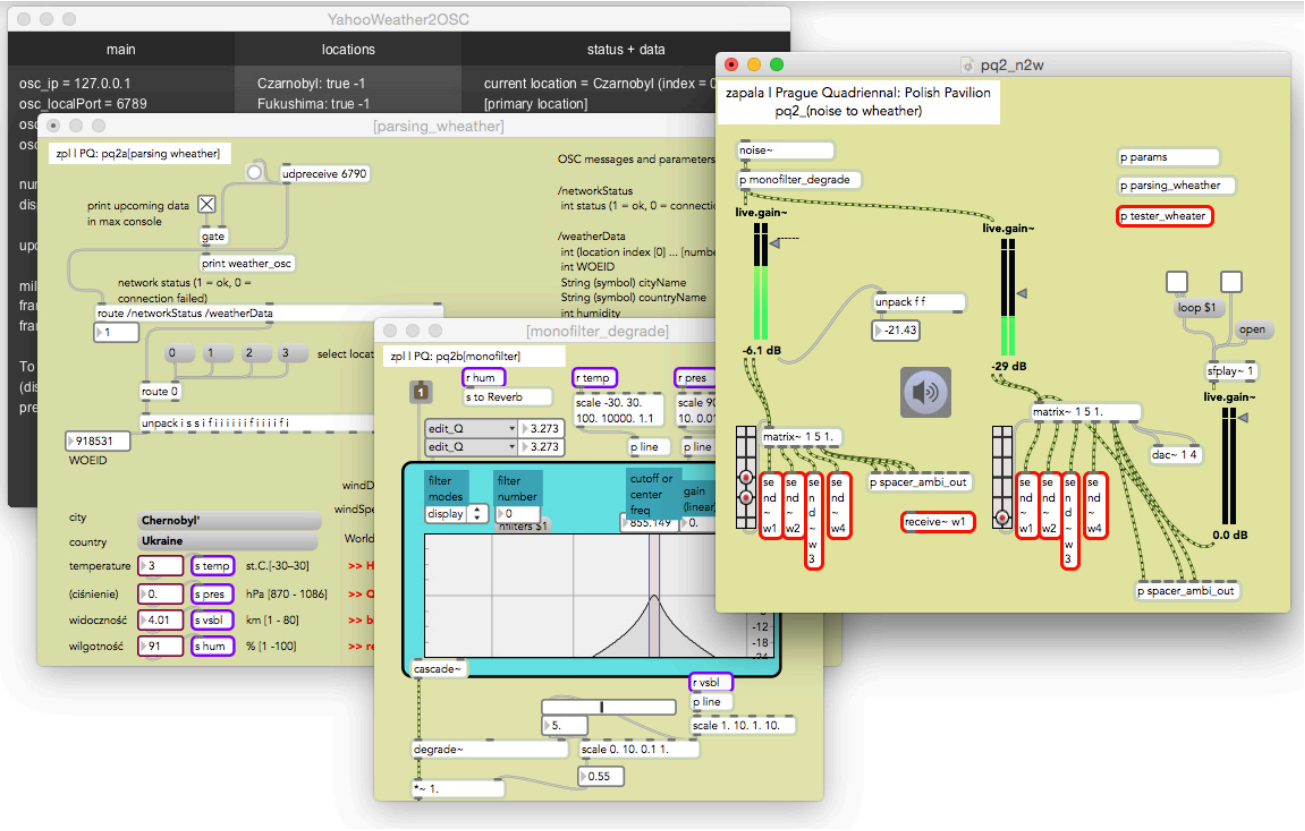


Photo by Daed Baitz group

Post-Apocalypsis's collection and reproduction of data constitutes an act of description in the sense that Marcus, Love, and Best lay out. The installation registers the eleven nuclear sites with a high degree of accuracy — that is, with a deep sense of fidelity to the actual conditions of each site, whatever they might be. As Jelewska and Michał Krawczak, the installation's experience designer, explain, the experience of the soundscape "depended on the data" — it "could be very quiet at one moment (as a soft white noise)," while at other moments it became "suddenly very loud and glitchy" (Jelewska and Krawczak 6). The installation exhaustively integrates each site's temperature, humidity, wind speed, and air pressure, including aberrations; its relationship to reality is indexical, literal, commensurate. *Post-Apocalypsis* stays close to its objects — the meteorological conditions of each nuclear site — in the way that the needle of a record player picks up on a record's grooves and scratches. While *Post-Apocalypsis*'s transformation of the data into sound might seem like a departure from its objects — or like an intrusion of interpretation that breaks with the rules of good description — this is not the case. By sonifying the data, *Post-Apocalypsis* makes an intervention not on the conditions themselves but on the symbolic systems usually used to communicate them: the audiosphere is simply a sonic, rather than numerical, inscription of the weather.

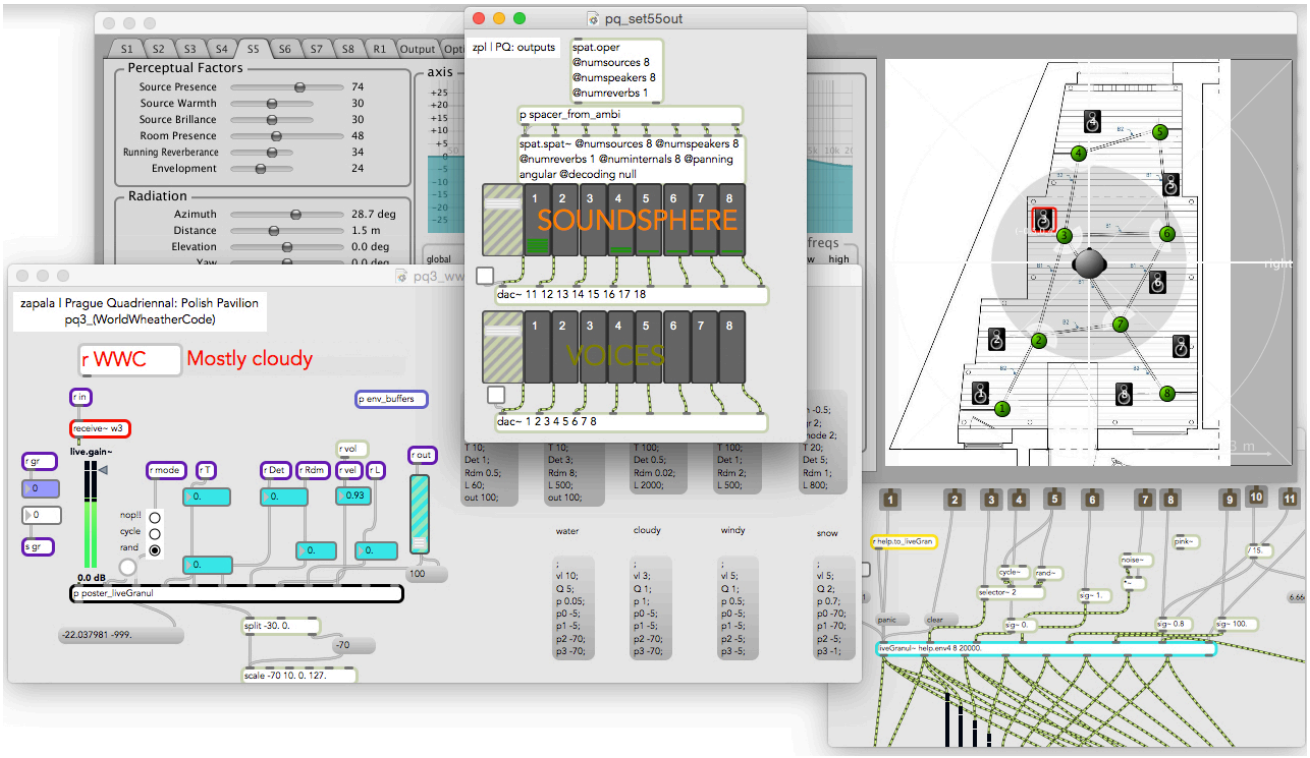
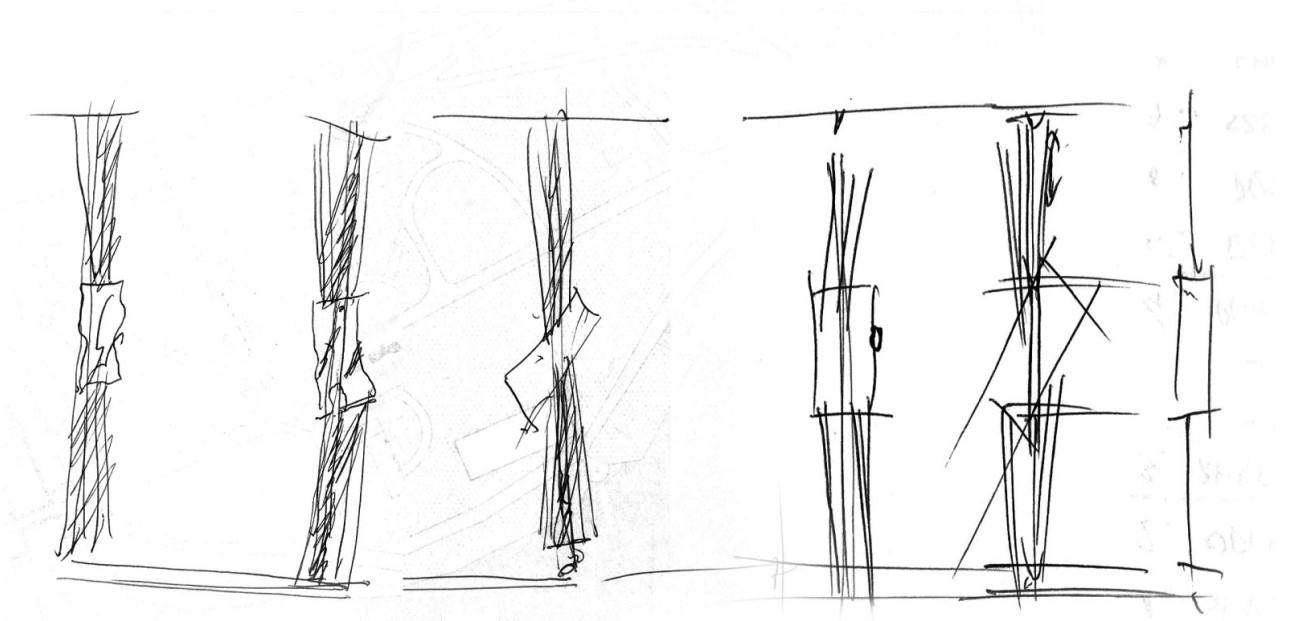


Photo by Daed Baitz group

The other elements of *Post-Apocalypsis* are somewhat more difficult to understand as acts of description. The physical installation in particular reads less as a literal description of the real world than as a metaphor or allegory of it. Particularly with its cyborg trees, *Post-Apocalypsis* seems to adopt the logics and idioms of science fiction and fantasy, veering away from a neutral mode of presentation and into a more partial mode of representation.



Sketch by space designer Jerzy Gurawski

However, as Marcus, Love, and Best show, neutrality and objectivity are not prerequisites of description. Pointing to the work of Nancy Hartsock, Donna Haraway, and Mary Louise Pratt, as well as to Latour, the authors argue that "the neutrality that many associate with description denies the embodiment, social position, and investments of the observer" (Marcus, et al. 4). Total neutrality is, in other words, never quite possible; its achievement would require a transcendental subject. Objectivity, too, depends on false claims of complete detachment and perfect disinterest. Description, therefore, is a practice that is necessarily enacted from a specific perspective or even from multiple specific perspectives. The recognition that description is inherently subjective creates room for it to depart somewhat from the rule of exactly reproducing its objects. Like translation, description involves some degree of transformation. The fantastical aspects of *Post-Apocalypsis* do not, therefore, immediately disqualify the installation from qualifying as a kind of description.

If *Post-Apocalypsis* can be said to describe anything, it describes, with great specificity: a sense of the animacy, intelligence, and creativity of nonhuman nature; a sense of the significance of embodiment and interaction, both of which are prerequisite to experiencing the fragments of poetry; and a sense of the inability, or unwillingness, to distinguish humanity from nonhumanity, the organic from the inorganic, the living from the non-living. With its dynamic sound design and cast of cyborg actors, *Post-Apocalypsis* stages the hypotheses of contemporary theories of science, nature, and society — especially those that in some way trouble the category of the human, such as philosopher Jane Bennett's theory of the vitality of matter. In *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Bennett examines what she calls "thing-power," the qualities of aliveness and independence that all entities possess. According to her theory of the vibrancy of matter, humans and nonhumans constantly collaborate to produce reality; the electrical power grid, for example, enlists the participation of "electrons, trees, wind, fire, electromagnetic fields," as well as humans and their various "social, legal, linguistic" systems (Bennett 24). *Post-Apocalypsis* demonstrates Bennett's theory of thing-power not by reproducing her example of the electrical grid but by staging a fantasia of speaking trees and sound waves. In other words, it describes the vitality of matter by conjuring a science fictional world where matter *is* vibrant. The trees possess sentience, subjectivity, and pathos; their reanimation is brought to fullness by the depth of their feeling and their ability to express it with ardor. By showing us this illusion, *Post-Apocalypsis* exercises our ability to grant the spark of liveliness more liberally than we are wont, to the nonhuman, the inorganic, and the postnatural.

The descriptive reading of *Post-Apocalypsis* can be extended to the installation as a whole, which — as a hodgepodge of mechanized trees, Romantic poetry, turbulent noises, and the specter of nuclear crisis — offers a vision of reality characterized by discontinuity, simultaneity, and interconnectivity. As Jelewska writes in her official introduction to the national exhibition, *Post-Apocalypsis* articulates "a precise contemporary vision of the networked and global world," and it does so most clearly through its formal structure of collage (Jelewska). In *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet*, literary scholar Ursula Heise examines the role of form in representations of reality. The task of "imagining a global ecological and cultural environment," she says, is "as much a question of linguistic and visual form as a matter of particular thematic issues" (Heise 64). Heise looks at how science fiction novels like John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968) and David Brin's *Earth* (1990), as well as the mesostic poetry of John Cage in pieces like "Overpopulation and Art" (1992), deploy a "collage structure" — which collects things that are ordinarily scattered across contexts, discourses, and scales into a unified conceptual space — in order to portray "global systems that are both heterogeneous and connected" (Heise 90). *Post-Apocalypsis* enacts a similar operation, superimposing multiple networks in a condensed time and space in order to picture connections and intersections that might otherwise go unnoticed or unremarked. Within the kaleidoscopic project of the installation, for example, wood meets metal; conduction via air competes with conduction via bone; and nuclear politics collide with Romantic poetics. Through its myriad juxtapositions, it demonstrates a longing to incorporate a wide array of phenomena, as well as an understanding that these phenomena cannot logically be assimilated *except* through collage. Its formal structure describes a post-natural reality that is wildly variegated but intricately and intimately interlinked.

Post-Apocalypsis goes further in its description of post-natural realities by acknowledging that even outdated ideas of nature remain a fundamental part of contemporary ecological thought. As philosopher Kate Soper argues, "sneering" at the "deluded romanticism" of what she calls "lay" visions of nature — nostalgic visions of a capital-N "Nature" encompassing such sites as "the nature reserve and the unprotected 'wild', the sylvan glade and the impenetrable jungle" — cannot constitute the endpoint of serious environmentalism (Soper 181, 197). Scholars in the environmental humanities have exhaustively diagnosed the insidious aspects of lay visions of nature, which often omit or repress the painful histories of the particular places they capture. But, as Soper points out, "it is one thing to expose the myth-making," and it is another thing to completely "dismiss" those mythologies of "Nature" on the basis of their reactionary pastoralism or utopianism (Soper 200-1). To throw away "Nature" — harmful ideologies and all — is to throw away too much because it contains important information about

what it was like to confront the onslaught of environmental change at particular points in history; in other words, Soper says, “Nature” plays a part in “what it is to be alive in the present” (Soper 201).

Photo from the official press materials of the Polish National Exposition at the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space 2015

While other works of art have shown more disdain for the lay visions of nature that have become obvious targets in much environmental criticism, *Post-Apocalypsis* follows Soper’s line of thought by allowing its portrait of post-natural realities to incorporate a cynicism of *and* a fondness for a romanticized natural world. *Post-Apocalypsis* resists the tendency to squash, as Soper puts it, “all conditions and periods of agricultural labour” into “a single image of rustic ‘simplicity:’” the very sight of the robotic trees — inorganic and artificial — puts the myth of a pristine and eternal natural world under duress (Soper 192). The installation recognizes, however, that this myth is endlessly compelling: the trees themselves profess profound longing for Edenic and Arcadian images of a lush, abundant, and mysterious land. “Nature” is terribly hard to shake. One poem included in the installation, Słowacki’s “Hymn at Sunset” (“Hymn o zachodzie słońca”), features a speaker who thinks himself the sole witness of nature’s beauty and bounty — the resplendent rainbows, seas, skies, and stars appear as if for him alone but remain tragically aloof to his existential anxieties about nation, nature, and mortality. Instead of

rejecting these lay visions of nature outright, *Post-Apocalypsis* strikes a modest compromise by burying the antiquated Romantic imaginaries deep inside multiple frames of representation. Like a play within a play, the Polish poetry is tucked into a strange scene between bionic trees and human visitors — a performance that is itself mounted inside a cacophonous sound installation in an urban gallery setting. Soper's lay visions of nature are both at the heart of the piece and held at arm's length, treasured but also alien. With both sincerity and irony, *Post-Apocalypsis* manages to render a post-natural world that contains within it distant memories of former ways of seeing. Its description includes the dissonance of past and present habits of environmental thought.

The Gains of Description

The awkwardness of suggesting, as I have so far done, that *Post-Apocalypsis* — with its scrupulous data-scraping *and* its strange arboreal dreamscape — is a work of art that dutifully describes reality betrays some of the limitations of the descriptive model. If representations rife with metaphor and allegory can count as description, then perhaps the category of description has opened too wide. Of course, in their article on the critical value of description, Love, Marcus, and Best argue that description need not exactly capture the world it attempts to reproduce (Marcus et. al. 10). In fact, description *cannot* exactly capture the world it attempts to reproduce; there *can be no* one-to-one correspondence between the world and its description because description, as with any act of representation, necessarily leaves room for transformation. *Post-Apocalypsis* offers us a chance to consider how far that gap between the world and its description can stretch — and whether such an understanding of description has a role to play in environmental thinking.

Within the academy, the question of what description can and cannot do brings up heavily embattled issues of reality and representation, knowledge and power, value and purpose. While many of these debates tend to revolve around critique and the character of the critic — and therefore, as Love points out, have mostly to do with "the state of the contemporary university" ("The Temptations" 52). Latour has suggested that description is an important way of engaging with "what used to be called 'nature'" not just within the university but beyond it as well ("Waiting for Gaia" 8).

For Latour, description is the way to build more reliable, more durable, and more precise accounts of the world — a matter of great political importance in the face of ecological catastrophe. In his widely-read essay "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" (2004), Latour asks whether the familiar resources of critique — foremost among them the contributions of Marx, Derrida, and Foucault — have

nursed too thoroughgoing a skepticism toward scientific truth, at a moment when precisely what is needed, now, in the age of the Anthropocene, are empirical accounts of the world. Contemporary criticism in the humanities and social sciences, Latour observes, has largely gone the way of poststructuralism, with its emphases on the indeterminacy, instability, arbitrariness, and hiddenness of meaning. Poststructuralist critics know that there is "no sure ground anywhere," that there are "powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly," and that "you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say" because what they say is surely divorced from their "real motives." ("Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" 227-8). Latour himself has spent much of his academic career examining the "*the lack of scientific certainty*" in scientific facts, particularly through his work in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) since the late 1970s ("Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" 227).

But, as he explains in the article, Latour detects "something troublingly similar" in these "sophisticated" techniques of deconstruction and in the paranoid logics of conspiracy theorists and climate deniers: a cynicism toward, and even distrust of, empiricism ("Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" 227-8, 231). Scholars have resisted science on the basis of its tendencies to veer into positivism, masculinist rationalism, and political neutrality, while the conspiracists and deniers have resisted science on the basis of its alleged susceptibility to divisive economic and political agendas. However, Latour says, "the structure of the explanation" — rooted in disbelief and distrust and resulting in the acid corrosion of truth rather than in its cultivation — is the same in both cases ("Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" 229). If critics have found methodological allies in those who would call global warming a hoax, perhaps critique's spirit of disenchantment "has sent us down the wrong path"; Latour suggests that it was a "mistake" for members of the academy to have believed "that there was no efficient way to criticize matters of fact except by moving *away* from them and directing one's attention *toward* the conditions that made them possible" ("Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" 231).

The enterprise of criticism, Latour says, needs to course-correct. Critique ought not to "get *away* from facts but *closer* to them," embracing a "*stubbornly realist attitude*" by "renewing" empiricism instead of barbarously "fighting" it ("Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" 231). For him, the task of the critic is no longer "to debunk" but rather "to protect and to care" ("Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" 232). Latour thinks there is much to be gained not only by developing sensitive accounts of the world, as scientists do, but also by rigorously tracking how these accounts are both made and made to stick: what good is critique if those who practice it can't also appeal to the legitimacy of gravity, evolution, or human-caused climate change with at least a little confidence?

For Latour, conceding some sort of baseline objectivity without giving in to positivism, and continuing to practice deconstruction without sacrificing all of the concreteness of the real world, comes down to a question of methods. If the aim is to stake out claims to truth without predetermination, overstatement, foreclosure, or debilitating skepticism, then the humanities might adopt some of the procedures developed by the sciences, particularly its practices of observation and description. In order to sift together relatively sturdy accounts of reality, Latour suggests not only that we attend to our objects of critique with great "care and caution," like scientists handling their materials, but also that we treat each object as a "gathering" or "thing" or "arena" maintained by an open-ended number of "participants" or "ingredients, nonhumans as well as humans" ("Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" 246). His suggestions here carry the imprint of his actor-network-theory, which understands the world as a vast network of empirically observable relationships and interactions; and, at the same time, these suggestions prefigure his thinking in *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013), which examines the diversity of conditions for truth in various domains of knowledge, moving beyond science to other "modes of existence" such as law and politics.

Ultimately, the challenge of understanding the global scales of the ecological crisis — and of understanding the position of the human therein — dovetails with the challenge of fielding climate skeptics. What the skeptics fail to see is the basic reality of the catastrophe, confusing scientific claims for political ones: in a 2018 interview with Lesley Stahl on CBS's "60 Minutes," President Donald Trump responded to a report on the worsening climate by saying, "You'd have to show me the scientists because they have a very big political agenda" (Friedman). Given this, Latour's insistence on the importance of being able to come to agreement about certain unassailable features of reality — global warming being just one of them — is on point. To this end, he offers the idea of *assembling*; of trying to find the points of contact and the points of tension between different kinds of knowledge and different methods of knowledge production; of making careful observations about bits and pieces of the world and producing equally careful descriptions of them; in short, of *composing*, as he proposes in his 2010 manifesto, instead of *deconstructing*.

While the debates over critical and postcritical methods — the "method wars" — are primarily taking place in literary and cultural studies, they are also, I argue, of considerable importance for ongoing conversations in the environmental humanities. Critical methods do have a part to play outside the university — and though practices of description may touch only a few texts and perhaps even fewer readers, especially beyond the academy, an ethos of creating, collecting, and building seems like something

worth cultivating in the face of stalwart skepticism. The composition that *Post-Apocalypsis* puts together ranges across multiple organisms, apparatuses, processes, and networks: part human, part tree, part aural environment, part nuclear environment, part software, part hardware, part local, part global, and part combinations of all these parts. If good description, according to Marcus, Love, and Best, "faithfully capture[s] [. . .] the world's messy profusion of stray details," the installation's embrace of collage, science fiction, and data inscription would appear to court such messiness (Marcus, et al. 11). Through these varied strategies of description, *Post-Apocalypsis* takes up Latour's call for assembly, not only doing the work of collating reality into a unified but heterogeneous aggregation of entities but also inviting visitors to draw unfamiliar connections across received categories. Description — understood as straddling multiple modes, ranging from more or less literal to more or less metaphorical — signifies an important tool for faithfully capturing the world; and *Post-Apocalypsis*, which offers a wild portrait of contemporary ecological anxieties, demonstrates the importance of asking whether faithfulness can look like more than just an exact copy of the world.

Photo by Daed Baitz group

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