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Online

CURATED BY
TINA SAUERLAENDER

ORGANIZED BY
THE MACKENZIE ART GALLERY

EXHIBITION DEVELOPMENT
CAT BLUEMKE AND JONATHAN CARROLL

***ECHOES FROM THE FUTURE : SPECULATIVE CREATURES
AND POST-HUMAN BOTANICALS***

Artist Tamiko Thiel with curator Tina Sauerlaender

Tina Sauerlaender: Hi Tamiko.

Tamiko Thiel: Hi Tina.

Tina Sauerlaender: Tamiko, in your interactive work *What You Sow* we encounter many little items that float around plastic, flip flops, bottles, cutlery, and yeah, they function as seeds and when we click on them, they grow into plants or into corals. What is your work about and how did you develop the idea for it?

Tamiko Thiel: I've been doing a number of, of pieces that deal with ocean plastic and, and using sort of a metaphor of, of plastic garbage transforming into corals. It started with in 2018 when I did *Unexpected Growth* as a commission for the Whitney Museum in New York. And the idea behind all of them is that there are places around the world where people are completely surrounded by plastic garbage. And in the in the, in the Clean West we say, well, it's because they don't have high standards of ecology. Or because they don't care. And then it was really a point in, in 2013 through 15 that I was in Southeast Asia, which is. Known to be one of the biggest sources of plastics in the oceans.

And again you know, people in the west saying, well, it's because they don't, you know, care about the environment. And we found that

there were. Pieces of plastic garbage from Europe, from the us, from from Japan, where, which are clean countries, and found out that really what happens is that only a very small percentage of plastics can be recycled.

And so what most places do is simply send them to poorer countries to get rid of them. And I wanted to, in these, in all of these works that deal with plastic waste, I wanted to bring the plastics that we ourselves throw into the environments often in by sending them to foreign countries. Bring them back so that you can experience what it feels like to have this garbage accumulate around you and surround you, and then specifically in what you sow.

It was because I wanted to make the piece interactive so that you are participating in creating these corals these plastic garbage corals. So on the one hand, this is an old trick of mine. On the one hand, it is to make the installation more engaging and fun to seduce people to come in and spend time with it.

On the other hand, it also makes you culpable. I mean, the whole point of interactivity is the feeling that you have agency. And so giving you agency, a playful agency that essentially makes you realize, I'm filling my world with garbage, is really the, so to speak, the point of the artwork.

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Tina Sauerlaender: Yes, that is, and that is such an important point, and I love how you use the different notions of agency interaction possibilities of the digital. Do you also hope that the, this will also influence the interactions of the people in, in real life, that they understand the this notion and that they change their relationship to plastic? The physical reality.

Tamiko Thiel: I certainly hope so. I mean, I think people might just sort of click around and then go away and say, oh, that was fun, and go to the next one.

But but you know, I do I do get feedback from people who use my different types of AR and vr plastic garbage installations that that basically it's, it's working that the, the colorful shapes and colors Bring people in. But then there's this sort of one-two punch effect where then they say, and then I look closer and I realize, oh my God, it's garbage.

And, you know, and becoming hyper aware of every time you pick up, a. Piece of plastic, you know, especially when you're traveling and you kind of have to buy these packaged foods. You know, and, and in the meantime, I travel with I travel with a set of cutlery and, and refuse to pick up more, but you still get containers.

So I think I have to add some clamshell containers to the next piece actually.

Tina Sauerlaender: Yes, that's a, that's a good point. And well, you're using mostly augmented reality as the medium for these interactive installations which means that you access the work on your own mobile screen and can

interact usually on the mobile screen with with your works.

Why did you decide to, to use this medium for most of the installations dealing with this topic?

Tamiko Thiel: Well actually most of the installations are in augmented reality and they're, the, the added value, if you will, is that. It's the environment you're standing in. So it's very much rooting the experience in your own physical lived experience.

Of course, the wonderful thing about being able to do it in, in virtual reality is that it really is then a surround installation. I, I always talk about ar as being you know, it's not a ar. AR is not an image in your smartphone. Rather, ar transforms the smartphone of the, or the tablet into a window into the world that surrounds you.

A layer of virtual virtuality that surrounds you in the real world. But but of course when you. I of often also say the difference between augmented reality and virtual reality is virtual reality has a background and augmented reality has the real world as its background. And, and at some level that's, that's really the only major difference.

So, of course the, the wonderful thing about virtual reality is then you really can't get away from it. You really are. Encompassed by it. It's not being, your field of view is not being restricted by the frame of a, of a smartphone or, or a tablet.

Tina Sauerlaender: Exactly. So your ideal form of presentation would actually be AR but with

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AR glasses.

Tamiko Thiel: AR glasses or AR contacts. Yes. And you know, we, we keep on hoping that they will actually come along and, you know, as the glasses wear myself then, then I think I would be willing, I don't know, would you wear glasses? Every day, day, all the time.

Tina Sauerlaender: Me, yes. Yes. I could do it again. I used it before I wear lenses, but yeah, it, it's really exciting to see how the world changes and also now with the new glasses by by Apple and I, I think.

It won't be like you will wear them all time, all day, but you will use them from time to time as in addition to the real world. I think so.

Tamiko Thiel: You, you won't have them all the time if you're carrying around this, this thing. We'll, we'll find out. We'll find out. Out. We'll see.

Tina Sauerlaender: We'll see. Exactly. But then in general, you are really working with so many different digital media for yeah, basically decades and yeah, depending on the content of your work or the topic you, you choose.

If you work with AR or with VR, maybe you could discuss a little more the. Advantages and disadvantages of bringing your works in these different worlds. So also doing virtual exhibitions in contrast to physical exhibitions. Well, that's the second question. I will ask it again afterwards.

Tamiko Thiel: Yeah, certainly.

As, as mentioned, the thing I really like about

AR is, is that you can really root it in the site and for 15 years I was only creating virtual reality, but showing them as large projections because because the helmets were not in a state where you would really want to wear them. Everyone got sick after about 10 minutes, but but the.

Being able to play off a site is very important to me. In those three earliest VR experiences beyond Manzanar travels of Mari Horo and Vir, the maa Reconstructing the Wall all dealt with specific sites. There were site specific virtual reality installations. And so site has played a very strong role in, in my work for a very long time.

Being able to be in a virtual exhibit like this, of course it's, it's, you know, it really is a way. I think actually, especially Curatorially, where the curator can make a much stronger statement because they can control the environment that the pieces are in, in a way that is hard to do.

You know, in real life you're very much constrained by the physics and by the physical space. So, so I think the the interesting thing is being able to create really a a fully rendered out of the, out of an exhibition in a way that, that you, that you can't in, in real life. In when I'm showing aR in a gallery, then I'm, I'm, I try to get an AR live stream, a large projection, or at the very least, a very large monitor that's running the AR app. And where when you come into the space, you immediately see yourself in that virtual world. But again, that's of course just, that's still a 2D surface, so you don't have the sort of surrounding effect.

And for that, we always provide an iPad so that. You can look around and see that it's in an environment and not as an object. So, so those

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are, you know, those are concerns. There are pieces that I do in, in VR because I want to create. The background. Also, I want to be able to control everything.

And that's really why I started working with virtual reality in 1994, is being able to really create a world of my own where I can control everything. But but you know, being able to almost immediately, you know, within maybe even just a couple of hours, create a new artwork that then as an AR piece, draws on a real site the history of that real site, your physical experience of that real site.

For one thing that, that save some. Marvelous amount of time. Each of my three vintage VR pieces took five years to make. Hmm. And my fastest AR is, is, you know, under two hours. So, so it's, it's increased my output tremendously, which, which also means I can react to, to current events current discussions rather than have to deal with a five year timeline where I kind of have to ignore everything and just sort of say, okay, at some point in the future, I will bring out the peace and then I can maybe adjust the discussion to what's happening. But I, there's five years where I haven't been able to participate in the discussion because the work is not finished. Yeah, exactly.

Tina Sauerlaender: That's, it's really such an important point. Yeah. It's great to see how your ideas stay the same and the technological surroundings basically help you to fulfill these ideas even better or, yeah. Right. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I love how you use the digital possibilities to discuss this contemporary topics, very contemporary and current topics.

And yeah, immerse the, the users or the viewers in the work by rendering them present in the work, in the physical installation or virtual installation. And in of them, their Interactivity with the impact. Mm-hmm. They have on the installation, they, they create right. Yeah. In the end. Right. Well, and this maybe also brings us back to the title of what you Saw.

Maybe you can explain the title.

Tamiko Thiel: Yeah. You've probably pointed out in the materials that it's a citation from the Bible. What you reaps so shall you what you sow, so shall you reap you reap what you sow. This a number of variations on it. And, and that's of course saying, you know, if you are, if you're throwing plastic into the environment, then at some point it's going to come back to haunt you as it is already when we know that plastic is in every living system and creature from the North Pole to the South Pole, we're, you know, giving it to our babies through our, through our milk. We are you know, every plastic water bottle you use to drink from, you're adding more plastic to your system. And And, you know I think researchers are also starting to see explicit effects of that on, on the human body as it's as it becomes an irritant in the system.

You know, inevitably, I suppose it'll produce cancers because because basically environmental irritants to the system usually manifests that way. But we certainly also know the photographs of, for instance, the, the, you know, the dead animals, the dead sea animals or birds that are filled with plastic because they can't tell it apart from their real living food.

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And so they ingest it and die because they're completely blocked up with plastic. But that's the thing about art and that, you know, these really horrible. Photos of real animals that really are dying of plastic. I think it's very necessary to publish them. They've got to be seen, they've got to be looked at.

I just know that I and other people cannot constantly look at that day after day. But if we can create artworks that engage people and that have some component that draws them in, then we can engage people with the theme. Day after day as this exhibit will do for the length of the exhibit. And, and, and, and, you know, people might come back, you know, they won't say, oh my God, this is so horrible, I can't deal with it.

They'll, they say, oh, it's playful, you know, is a little bit weird. But but you know, they'll bring their, their friends and hopefully they'll post about it and, and they'll say, oh, look at this. You can play with plastic garbage and turn them into environments. So, Again, through social media, through reposting from people describing the installation.

Each of those is a small viral component to, to keeping the theme in the public eye, even though it only pops up every once in a while in the papers, because you know, people are going like, oh my God, I can't, you know, Let's turn the page and find out what's happening in the war zones, because I can't deal with, you know, more information about how my, my plastics are killing the ecosystem.

Tina Sauerlaender: Yeah, exactly. I think that's really an important point to run these things.

Persistent also, you know, because Yeah. Speaking of echoes from the future, right? You have now the birds dying from plastic in the organisms. Then also humans can, will just die from it too at some point. So we shouldn't forget about this too, right?

Tamiko Thiel: So the exhibit is showing where we are going. It is it is very much an echo from the future. From the present and more so from the future.

Tina Sauerlaender: Exactly. Tamiko, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts about your work. It was a pleasure talking to you as always.

Tamiko Thiel: It was a pleasure working with you, Tina, and being involved in your ideas and, and and your strategies for art. And thank you for the invitation to participate.

Tina Sauerlaender: Thank you. Bye.

Tamiko Thiel: Ciao.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Tamiko Thiel was awarded the 2018 SAT Montreal Visionary Pioneer Award for over 35 years of politically and socially critical media artworks exploring place, space, the body and cultural identity, evoking layers of memory, history, myth, fantasy and desire to give visual form to these invisible levels of meaning. Artworks in museum collections include AI supercomputers in MoMA NY and the Smithsonian Institution, a VR artwork in the San Jose Museum of Art and AR artworks in the Whitney Museum NY and the Kunstsammlung Roche Basel, plus 2D and 3D print works in private collections.

/p is a German media artist and software developer working on web based projects and VR since 1994 and collaborating on AR and VR artworks with Tamiko Thiel since 2018.

tamikothiel.com

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Tina Sauerlaender (she/her) is the co-founder and co-director of the exhibition platform and international [collective](#) of independent curators, [peer to space](#) (since 2010). She has been curating and organizing large-scale group exhibitions like [Resonant Realities](#) (Exhibition of the VR ART PRIZE by DKB in Cooperation with CAA Berlin, Haus am Lützowplatz, Berlin, 2021), [The Unframed World. Virtual Reality as Artistic Medium for the 21st Century](#) (HEK Basel, 2017), or initiated and co-curated [SPECULATIVE CULTURES. A Virtual Reality Art Exhibition](#) (Kellen Gallery, Parsons/The New School, New York, 2019). She focuses on the impact of the digital and the internet on individual environments and society, on virtual reality in visual arts, and on exhibition making in [virtual realms](#). She is also the artistic director of the [VR ART PRIZE by DKB in Cooperation with CAA Berlin](#). She is co-founder & CEO of [Radiance VR](#) (since 2017), an international online platform and research database for virtual reality experiences in visual arts that includes the [Radiance VR App](#) for VR Art for Meta Quest headsets.

She holds a PhD from The University of Arts, Linz, Austria. The title of her dissertation is *PERFORMING IDENTITIES. Self-Representation in Art from the Renaissance to Virtual Worlds*. In conjunction with her PhD she curated the online exhibition [performingidentities.net](#). She is a lecturer for Digital Art History at the University of Applied Sciences in Bielefeld, Germany. She gave talks on Virtual Reality & Art at re:publica (Berlin), ZKM (Karlsruhe), New Inc (New York), Kunsthalle (Munich), University of Applied Arts (Vienna), Digifest (Toronto), Technical University (Prague) or Roehrs & Boetsch (Zurich).

She is the founder of the [SALOON Berlin](#), the initial branch of the [SALOON Network](#), an international network for women working in art.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Echoes from the Future: Speculative Creatures & Post-Human Botanicals

Disruptive human activity threatens the Earth's ecological balance, eradicating biodiversity and shared resources. *Echoes from the Future*, curated by Tina Sauerlaender (peer to space), highlights artists working across diverse media to preserve nature, reveal environmental devastation, and speculate on future life forms. The virtual exhibition features work by artists Aviv Benn (ISR/UK), Laura Colmenares Guerra (COL/BE), Reiner Maria Matysik (DE), Sarah Oh-Mock (DE), Bianca Shonee Arroyo-Kreimes (CAN), Sabrina Ratté (CAN), and Tamiko Thiel (US/DE). In rendering current environmental issues visible within a virtual reality landscape, *Echoes from the Future* immerses audiences in alternative post-anthropocentric futures and speculative ecologies.

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