

JULY 17–SEPTEMBER 21, 2008

Public Programs

Saturday, August 16, 3 p.m.

The Visual Rhetoric of Environmentalism

New Museum theater | \$6 Members, \$8 General Admission

As scientific consensus about global warming gains traction with the public, this panel, with Brian Collins, designer of Al Gore's new "We Can Do It" campaign, and others, explores how such knowledge—and the environmental strategies it prompts—should be expressed visually. Moderated by Brian Sholis, editor of Artforum.com.

Saturday, September 20, 3 p.m.

New York: Past, Present, and Possible Future

New Museum theater | \$6 Members, \$8 General Admission

This panel will discuss New York's landscape at three distinct moments in history. Eric W. Sanderson, leader of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Mannahatta Project, will reflect on Manhattan Island in 1609; Matthew Coolidge, of the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), will speak about "Up River: Points of Interest from The Battery to Troy," CLUI's study of the "sculpted landscape" of today's Hudson River; and an up-and-coming novelist will read a short story set in an imagined New York of the future. Moderated by Brian Sholis, editor of Artforum.com.

This exhibition is organized by Massimiliano Gioni, Director of Special Exhibitions.

Curatorial Assistant: Jarrett Gregory

Extended labels written and compiled by Chris Wiley, Research Associate.

A 122-page catalogue, *After Nature*, accompanies the exhibition. It includes color reproductions of work by each of the artists in the exhibition, as well as an essay by Massimiliano Gioni.

"After Nature" is made possible by the Leadership Council of the New Museum.

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IMAGE: Bill Daniel, *NOLA Station Wagon* (detail), 2006. Digital print, dimensions variable

NOTE: 1. Werner Herzog, *Minnesota declaration: truth and fact in documentary cinema*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 30, 1999.

The New Museum is located at 235 Bowery (at Prince Street between Stanton and Rivington, one and a half blocks south of Houston).

HOURS	ADMISSION
Wed. 12–6 PM	Members FREE
Thurs/Fri . . 12–10 PM	General. . . . \$12
Sat/Sun . . . 12–6 PM	Seniors \$10
Mon/Tues . . CLOSED	Students . . . \$8
	18 and under FREE

Please visit newmuseum.org for detailed directions and information.

For information on exhibition-related programs at the New Museum, please visit newmuseum.org/events or call 212.219.1222 x261.

Free iPod Audio Tours are available for "After Nature" at the Visitor Services Desk in the lobby.

Visitors can participate in free, docent-led public tours of the Museum's current exhibitions Wednesday and Thursday at 2 p.m., Friday at 2 and 7 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday at 2 and 4 p.m. Spanish and Chinese tours are available on Saturdays and Sundays. For group tours, please visit newmuseum.org/learn or call 212.219.1222 x235.

Target First Saturdays For Families take place on the first Saturday of every month from 10–12 p.m. and are free to the public. Tickets are given on a first-come-first-served basis. For more information, please visit newmuseum.org/learn/school_and_youth or call 212.219.1222 x235.

After Nature



**NEW
235 BOWERY
NEW YORK NY
10002 USA
MUSEUM**

After Nature

In 1991, in the wake of the Gulf War, retreating Iraqi soldiers ignited nearly 700 oil wells across Kuwait. A result of Iraq's scorched-earth policy, the uncontrollable fires blazed for months, destroying approximately six million barrels of oil each day. During this time, German filmmaker Werner Herzog traveled to Kuwait with a small camera crew to film the landscape. Covered with glassy oil spills and geysers of fire, the terrain that emerges from Herzog's aerial footage is otherworldly, like surveillance video of a newly discovered planet. The result of this pilgrimage, *Lessons of Darkness*, is more science fiction than documentary: the Gulf War is reflected but never mentioned. Instead, the film describes a tortured world on the verge of disappearance, where natural order has been inverted and perverse creatures destroy their own resources.

Taking *Lessons of Darkness* as its inspiration, "After Nature" surveys a landscape similarly darkened by uncertain catastrophe. The exhibition assembles a collection of unusual images and forms—a cabinet of curiosities that pieces together a fragmented encyclopedia. In his 1999 manifesto, Herzog described a truth liberated from fact: a poetic, ecstatic truth that "is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization." ¹ The works in "After Nature" aspire to such: folding fact into fiction, they are part relic, part idol, part document. The exhibition can be read as a visual novel, a story of nature after a trauma, a retelling colored by mythology, religion, and distress. Temporally detached from any point of orientation, the exhibition emerges as a study of the present from a place in the future: a feverish examination of an extinct world that seems to be our own.

The second floor sets the tone for the exhibition, assembling a group of works that explore the human place in history and within nature's hierarchy. It opens onto Roberto Cuoghi's intricate and luminous maps, painted on glass and charting the countries that George W. Bush deemed the "axis of evil." Drained of objectivity, the illuminated cartography reads as a series of imaginary landscapes mapping a state of paranoia. Nearby, a sequence from *Lessons of Darkness* is presented in a new re-edited version. In an adjacent room, Paweł Althamer's portraits and artifacts populate the space, from a bodysuit of skin to a self-portrait as a fetus. By recuperating ancient sculpture techniques using animal intestines, straw, and other natural materials, Althamer creates puppets and deities that could be interpreted as effigies built to preserve the image of a race on the brink of annihilation. He shares this neo-primitive vocabulary with other artists in the exhibition, including Huma Bhabha, whose statuary figure combines the language of contemporary sculpture with ancient ruins and pagan myths. Using found objects, Bhabha builds a totem that is both rough and fragile. William Christenberry's crisp photographs document the rapid spread of kudzu, quick-growing vegetation that seems to erase all traces of humans, while Allora and Calzadilla invent a new ecological system in which Jenny Holzer's artwork is used to keep a staghorn fern alive. Exhibited near Erik van Lieshout's catastrophic travelogue, the early films of Nancy Graves adapt the format of nature films and documentaries to express a sense of cosmic stupor.

The third floor of "After Nature" resembles an ethnographic museum, where ominous works, like Robert Kusmirowski's replica of Theodore Kaczynski's cabin, and animate figures, such

as Tino Sehgal's living sculptures, are contained, as if under quarantine. Thomas Schütte's ceramic heads on steel posts and Berlinde De Bruyckere's wax figures suggest the existence of strange beings that used to move around the earth, their energy blotted out for the sake of preservation. Along the back wall, Diego Perrone's series "The Thinkers of Holes" was created when the artist dug and burned holes into the earth with the help of his father, and then photographed local men interacting with these mysterious geological forms. They read like a series of enigmatic encounters with nature: obscure rituals in which the memory of Arte Povera and Land art seems to be combined with magic traditions. Artur Żmijewski's video is a striking documentation of a symbiotic, or perhaps parasitic, relationship that can be read as a forecast of humanity. The visions of a new world order also surface in Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's vibrant finger paintings of a splendid apocalypse, and in Dana Schutz's portrait of a self-eating creature. On the third floor, and throughout the exhibition, outsiders, professional artists, and cult figures are presented side by side, their works united by a similar prophetic intensity.

The fourth floor is where Zoe Leonard's crutched tree is salvaged, but separated from its native earth by a height of seventy feet. Maurizio Cattelan's equestrian statue highlights the cathedral-like space; instead of celebrating a heroic victory it reads like an image of surrender and loss, a monument in reverse. Accompanied by a hypnotic soundtrack, Fikret Atay's film *Any Time Prime Time* documents a ritual that may be fictitious, while Roger Ballen's black-and-white photographs portray individuals and children caught in a haunting world. August Strindberg's gem-like *Celestographs* are dwarfed by the white expanse of the walls. The photographs were made in 1894 when Strindberg, a renowned writer, left photographic paper out on his windowsill at night, believing that the light of the stars could be captured on paper, as if the sky would magically impress itself upon it with no mediation or human intervention, in a perfect communion with nature.

Many of the artists directly engage with extreme images that might be found at the end of the world or at the edge of civilization. From Berlinde De Bruyckere's cadavers, to Thomas Schütte's impaled heads, the artists envision a wild humanity brought to its knees. Reverend Howard Finster's hallucinatory sermon cards discuss war, sex, and religion, punctuated with threats of fire and brimstone. In the back staircase, Nathalie Djurberg's stop-motion video narrates an environmental catastrophe from the point of view of nature itself, while Klara Liden creates a refuge, that is both shelter and confinement. From Micol Assaël's audio piece that captures the screeches of a trapped and panicking bird, to Bill Daniel's luminescent image of New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina, the artists imagine a dystopian society that is painfully similar to our own.

Finding its inspiration not in the model of the essay but rather in that of the novel, "After Nature" refuses to adhere to one genre or stylistic hierarchy, searching for similar intensities rather than for a conclusion. Attempting to learn from the art that it presents, the exhibition itself acts as a machine for producing myths by inventing stories, even lies. Extended captions and short texts—sometimes appropriated, other times written or found—are presented in the exhibition next to the artworks, suggesting new possible keys for their misinterpretation. It is an attempt to blur the distinction between artworks and documents, once again following Herzog's intuition that facts only create rules, while fictions can lead to new ecstatic truths.

—Massimiliano Gioni and Jarrett Gregory