

‘Expo 1: New York’ at MoMA, New York

WHAT’S BAD FOR EARTH IS GOOD FOR ART

According to its press release, ‘Expo 1’ is a ‘festival-as-institution’ enabling people to explore ‘ecological challenges in the context of 21st century economic and socio-political instability.’ This statement indicates MoMA-PSI’s neoliberal delusion, since ‘instabilities’ rather mitigate ‘ecological challenges.’ Consider Europe’s diminished car sales since 2008. Greater stability typically invites capital investments and development, which deplete natural resources and animal habitat, while intensifying climate change, flooding, desertification, and groundwater contamination. Consider the BRICS nations, whose swelling ecological challenges reflect their expanding ecological footprints.

Sue SPAID

‘Dark Optimism’ which assembles 35 solo exhibitions, is the satellite around which ‘Expo 1’ revolves. The curatorial team (more than twenty collaborators) has also organized a school (50+ Triple Canopy events), kitchen garden (for M. Wells dishes), colony inhabiting cultural agents, cinema, ‘ProBio’ (mini-expo), community center (VW geodesic dome sited in Rockaway to showcase relief shelters and 25 proposed climate-change survival plans), and ‘Rain Room’. As compared to Olafur Eliasson’s magical ‘Your strange certainty still kept’ (1996), the high-tech ‘Rain Room’ adjacent MoMA eradicates wonder. The metaphorical approach of the smaller exhibition ‘ProBio’ fails to uncover anything remarkable as compared to works by dozens of artists who explore technology’s actual impact on human bodies.

The curators claim that the presence of so many simultaneous activities enables PSI to experiment with social practice, yet none of the invited artists are especially known for sparking conversations or engaging unsuspecting spectators. Absent merry makers, ‘social practice’ is reduced to ever more festival spectacles and educational programs. Of the fifty artists, filmmakers, and novelists invited to lecture and/or lead discussions in response to Triple Canopy’s suggestion, only Ruth DeFries, Agnes Denes, Mary Mattingly, and Merle Laderman Ukeles confront ecological issues. This dearth of eco-personnel further deviates this festival’s stated goals.

CATASTROPHE ART

Opposing ‘Dark Optimism’ is ‘The Politics of Contemplation’, fifty dramatic Ansel Adams photographs from 1932 to 1968. Shot mostly in Yosemite National Park, Yellowstone National Park, and the San Mateo County Coast, they record nature’s fragility and majesty. One might say that ‘Dark Optimism’ ‘surveys a landscape of wilderness and ruins, darkened by uncertain catastrophe. Humankind is being eclipsed and new ecological systems struggle to find a precarious balance.’

However, I am quoting the New Museum’s 2008 press release for ‘Against Nature’. As a trilogy, ‘Against Nature’, September 11’ (2011), and ‘Dark Optimism’ launch a new genre: ‘catastrophe art’.

Exemplary of stability’s role in augmenting ecological challenges, Olafur Eliasson’s ‘Your waste of

time’ (2006/2013) presents twelve glacier chunks transported from Vatnajökull (Iceland’s largest glacier) and displayed in a solar-powered refrigerated gallery. Equally cynical is Cynthia Marcelle’s video depicting a bulldozer performing crazy stunts atop an already flattened field. Equally over-the-top is Adrián Villar Rojas’ ‘La inocencia de los animales’ (2013), an indoor amphitheater whose colossal scale evokes Berlin’s Pergamon Museum. With its simultaneous references to antiquity and post-apocalyptic Earth, ‘La inocencia’ seems straight out of ‘Planet of the Apes’. Absent bathers, Meg Webster’s reconstructed ‘Pool’ (1998/2013) makes promises but negates possibilities, which is this exhibition’s leitmotif.

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manmade catastrophes, ‘Dark Optimism’ overlooks artists’ endeavors to prophesy or alleviate preventable disasters. Rather than exhibit any of the novel ecological solutions that dozens of ingenious artists working on every continent have

implemented – over the past forty years – the curators present artworks that merely react to our planet’s terrible situation, leaving Earth’s ill-health as yet another arena for appropriation. Colonization offers a better description. In this context, Agnes Denes’ ‘Wheatfield: A Confrontation’, which presaged Wall Street’s ascendancy and global food shortages, is less a testament to human potential and more a nostalgic monument to pre-9/11 innocence. Once a clever solution, Gordon Matta-Clark’s ‘Fresh Air Cart’ (1972) is now a sign portending doom. One leaves thinking, ‘What’s bad for Earth is good for art’ as if disaster photographs now provide artistic in-



Anna Betbeze, ‘Chamber’, 2012, acid dyes, watercolor on wool, 123 inches in diameter, Private collection, courtesy of the artist and Kate Weble Gallery, New York, photo Arthur Evans, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art

spiration. Peter Buggenhout’s three fascinating sculptures evoke mind-encrusted metal structures, while Anna Betbeze fabulous wall hangings hint at acid-stained or flood-ravished carpets.

POSSIBILITY

The curators claim that ‘Dark Optimism’ reflects the future that is, “if you want it to be there”, yet few artists here glance forward and most treat catastrophes too lightly. Given wolves’ moose diets, Mireea Cantor’s short video ‘Deeparture’ (2005) proved to be incredibly scary, as I envisioned the wolf devouring its lone cohabitant. Belfiring Lynchings, Mark Dion’s ‘Killers Killed’ (2004-2007) features nine tarred and lynched predators. As remarks on consumer excess, Klara Liden’s nine trashy trashcans and John Miller’s gold-plated recyclables feel trite.

No ‘catastrophe art’ exhibition would feel complete without Chris Burden’s model Titanic ships

balanced on the Eiffel Tower, Latifa Echakhch’s shattered tea-glass installation, Mitch Epstein’s menacing power-plant photographs, Pawel Althamer’s outer space zombies, or Pierre Huyghe’s staged battle between elegant arrow crabs and a hermit crab inhabiting Brancusi’s ‘Sleeping Muse’.

Premised on utopia’s twin promises of harmonious nature and technological liberation, ‘catastrophe art’ actually distracts us from Earth’s generosity, leaving us unwilling to face our destructiveness fully and practically. Only Ugo Rondinone’s sensorial soundscape and Dan Attoe’s intriguing paintings rise above this exhibition’s passivity towards disaster, precisely because they invite possibility. Attoe’s hidden messages warn people to pay attention to past mistakes, and remind us, “This world has everything that you could ever want.”

Expo 1: New York: ‘Dark Optimism’ until September 2 at MoMA
PSI: ‘Rain Room’ until July 28 at MoMA, West Lot; ‘School’ until July 28 at MoMA PSI. www.moma.org