

Geological Pasts, Speculative Futures: A Conversation with Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann

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Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann are Chicago-based artists and educators whose interdisciplinary work has evolved over the course of two decades. Working across diverse media - from photography and video to performance art - their thematic focus is as expansive as their choice of mediums. Their recent work, titled *How Does the World End (for Others)?*, is a prominent inclusion in the 2023 exhibition *Everybody Talks About the Weather*, curated by Dieter Roelstraete at the Fondazione Prada in Venice.

How Does the World End (for Others)? is an interdisciplinary project with multiple components and iterations. Central to this work is what the artists describe as a 'score', a text structured as two distinct timelines. The first, titled "The Deluge", commences with a scriptural citation to *Genesis* 6-9 and unfolds into a chronologically-arranged vertical timeline of geological and planetary milestones. This account of planetary geo-history includes the sections "Deep History", "Explosion of Life (Cambrian Period)", "The Holocene", "Modernity", and "The Great Acceleration". Notable entries include, for example, a point marked "4.44-4.41 Ga BCE", which annotates the moment when "Water vapor enters the atmosphere, creating oceans (potentially resulting from volcanic gas emissions or ice from comets)"; or another point when "1520s-1530s Iberian transatlantic slave trade from Africa to the Americas begins". With the emergence and development of human societies, the timeline diversifies to encompass seminal literary works - ranging from *The Odyssey* and the Icelandic Sagas to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island*, just to name a few. It also includes indicators of the impact of human activity on the planet's geophysical strata - such as "1900: CO2 levels rise to 296 ppm, surpassing Holocene variability" and "1984: The Bhopal pesticide plant releases 30 tons of toxic gas, considered the world's most severe industrial catastrophe".

The latter section of the score, titled “Fragments”, consists of a curated compilation of excerpts, summaries, and citations drawn from 47 literary and cinematic works that project the reader into 47 different future worlds. Predominantly anchored in the genres of science fiction and cli-fi (climate fiction), this segment features an array of influential works. Films such as Richard Fleischer’s *Soylent Green* (1973), George Miller’s *Mad Max* (1980), Roland Emmerich’s *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), and Zhenzhao Lin’s *Restart the Earth* (2021) are included. Likewise, the section integrates literary texts, featuring Neville Shute’s *On the Beach* (1957), Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993), Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), and Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* (2014). Through the artists’ meticulous arrangement, these selected texts adhere to a unique form of chronology of futures. The timeline commences in the year 2022, as represented in *Soylent Green*, and culminates in the year 2393, the chronological setting of Erik M. Conway and Naomi Oreskes’ *The Collapse of Western Civilization* (2014). The chronological arrangement employed by the artists cultivates a sense of narrative progression and urgency that immerses the reader or viewer in a temporally-extended contemplation of futurity. It fosters a palpable sensation of moving through time, exposing the audience to evolving notions of planetary degradation, social upheaval, and existential risk as they are conceived in each text. Consequently, it engenders a meta-narrative where the real-time unfolding of these speculative and fictional futures serves as a mirror to contemporary anxieties and debates, thereby collapsing the temporal distance between the now and the *not-yet*. This provides a compelling counterpoint to more static or non-linear methods of presentation, enacting its own form of storytelling about how contemporary societies imagine, dread, or anticipate futures conditioned by our present actions.

The interplay between the two timelines – planetary geo-history and speculative futures – offers a diachronic inquiry into human agency and its imbrications with natural history. The first timeline, studded with geological milestones and markers of human impact, serves as an evidentiary backbone that underscores the gravity and scope of anthropogenic interventions within the planet’s *longue durée*. It functions as an archive, positioning the human within a lineage of Earth’s transformative events, thereby emphasising both the entanglements and the magnitude of industrial activity in geological time.

Contrastively, the second timeline moves into speculative futures, transitioning from history to imagination, from empirical markers to narratives of potentiality. It introduces the element of futurity as a significant variable in understanding human-nature relationships, urging the viewer to confront not just the historical facticity but also the imaginative possibilities of impending scenarios.

In juxtaposition, the two timelines create a dynamic tension between what has been empirically verified and what exists in the realm of speculative foresight. This duality sharpens the discourse on the Anthropocene by blending the empirical and the imagined, the factual and the speculative, into a dialectic that stretches from the primordial past to the dystopian and utopian futures. The juxtaposition acts as an epistemological challenge: it insists that understanding our position in planetary history requires both a rigorous account of the past and an imaginative grasp of the possible futures that are imagined by literature, cinema, and the arts.



Figure 1 Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann, *Untitled*. 2013. Photograph accompanying the score and the installation *How Does the World End (for Others)?*, digital photograph. Courtesy of the artists

EMILIANO GUARALDO I'm curious to know more about your artistic trajectory and how your work evolved to include environmental concerns.

BEATE GEISSLER We met while studying photography in Munich. Over time, we found ourselves drawn to a range of subjects like the influence of the military-industrial complex in global politics, gaming culture, and the role of technology in human life. Our approach has always been rooted in research, and gradually, we started incorporating elements of dramaturgy and scriptwriting into our work.

Our work has consistently been multidisciplinary, combining studies on the military, financial, and chemical industries. We have especially explored the financial industry in depth, a venture that put us face to face with the coercive power of big capital, which was an eye-opening experience for us.

EG It seems that you consider these different sectors - military, financial, chemical - not as disparate entities, but rather as nodes in a broader matrix of systemic logics, and maybe as manifestations of the same epistemological foundations that perpetuate power relations and structural inequalities.

OLIVER SANN Precisely, these sectors are not as discrete as they might initially appear. The confluence of finance, military industrial ventures, and chemical industries can often be considered facets of a more extensive network. A sort of capillary system that feeds into the larger architecture of contemporary capitalism and governance.

BG The framework may differ but the underlying principles often do not. Our personal transition from Europe to the United States really heightened our understanding of capitalism as not just an abstract term, but a palpable, omnipresent force. In Chicago, we *felt* capitalism; it's an entirely different encounter when you are in its locus.

And it's in these epicentres that one understands how systems of finance become a sort of 'remote control', not only governing internal mechanisms but also exerting influence on a global scale. It's a network that manages to permeate national boundaries, and this remains a focal point of our artistic practice.

Our focus on environmental issues became more pronounced after our engagement with Haus der Kulturen der Welt's Anthropocene Curriculum (AC) and our residency at the Max Planck Institute. We began our collaboration within the AC with a video trilogy called *Hoplum Economy*, which examined planetary processes through the lens of addiction. The residency at the Max Planck Institute gave us the opportunity to weave together these diverse threads - capital, technology, and human agency - into a more focused conversation on the Anthropocene.

EG The collaborative aspect appears crucial, particularly within the context of the Anthropocene Curriculum, or its new incarnation as Anthropocene Commons. This initiative has pioneered the transdisciplinary and creative approach towards understanding planetary transformations where different types of knowledge production intersect and collaborate.

OS The experience of working within this interdisciplinary research framework was transformative. We weren't confined by the commission-based models that often restrict artistic agency. This newfound freedom led to a fusion of realms, where artists and scientists could genuinely learn from one another. This isn't only supplemental; it's a transformative, dialogic process, breaking away from older paradigms where artistic contributions were limited to merely illustrating scientific discourse.

BG Interdisciplinary collaboration allows us to delve deeper into reflecting on methodologies and hierarchies that often go unquestioned. It's

an intellectual togetherness that challenges the conventional value systems ingrained in both the arts and the sciences. And in that shared space, artists contribute by asking questions that others might not – whether through a social critique or even a monochrome painting. It's an alternate way of interrogating our co-existence within this shared ecological space.

OS This is a significant cultural shift. Artistic research is now being received as being complementary to scientific endeavours. And this recognition allows us to focus on generating substantive content, not merely contributing to the 'hipness factor' that sometimes pervades exhibitions concerned with environmental issues.

EG Have you observed a growing focus on environmental and planetary issues within the contemporary art system? Is this rising attention primarily driven by the marketability of these themes, or is it a manifestation of the underlying anxieties the public holds regarding the current environmental crisis?

OS Contrary to what one might think, I haven't found that the art world has universally embraced genuine environmental awareness. However, the number of exhibitions addressing these issues is indeed increasing.

BG Indeed, the proliferation of such exhibitions is an observable fact. This leads to the question of how we can foster connections between these institutions and facilitate knowledge sharing, thereby cultivating a dynamic and intellectually enriching discourse. At the present, it appears that environmental themes are gradually garnering a much-needed recognition within the arts, predominantly in response to the pressing demands of our contemporary world.

This prompts us, once more, to consider how research-focused engagement can both underscore the importance of these environmental issues and drive inevitable transformational changes through collaborative efforts in our world.

BG and OS There appears to be a tendency to approach the subject from what might be considered a fashionable standpoint, rather than a critically-engaged, research-oriented perspective. But even so, any form of engagement is essential, because the urgency of the environmental crisis mandates collective action. We appreciate any initiative aimed at addressing these issues, as it adds to a multitude of voices advocating for changes that are urgently required. The broader the participation, the more likely we are to effect substantial and meaningful change.

EG How do you see artistic practices contributing to producing and disseminating ecological knowledge?

BG There is no doubt, the arts possess a reservoir of untapped creative potential, especially when it comes to presenting heterogeneous narratives around ecological crises. Artistic research is not simply about generating artworks, but an all-encompassing ecosystem of creative thought and expression. Most artists, unlike many other producers of knowledge, can afford failure more readily and are therefore not paralysed by fiasco. As a result, art is not afraid of failure. On the other hand, artistic outreach does not initially need to provide explanation and can therefore rely more on empirical freedom and experimentation. Innovativeness allows us to venture into experimental terrains,

making our work both cerebral and visceral. In this way, the arts can indeed act as a nexus for diverse knowledge transfers, emotional engagements, and critical thought, challenging societal expectations while also enriching all layers beyond what is considered art.

EG Your project *How Does the World End (for Others)?*, as I perceive it, relies on the duality of performance and the exhibited object, treating them as equal constituents in the overall economy of the artwork. The dialectic between the two forms seems to embody a sort of parable, whereby the two are interconnected and interdependent, contributing to a single, unified narrative.

OS This is especially true in the context of the installation at Fondazione Prada in Venice. This particular iteration of the artwork accentuates its temporal dimensions. If you engage with it walking along and reading it, you traverse multiple temporalities. It creates a peculiar experience of time-jumping that, when, for instance, shared between two visitors, offers a sense of dislocation and new possibilities.

BG We faced a choice: should the presentation be linear or embrace a more chaotic form? I'm pleased that we ultimately chose a linear presentation, as it provides a pathway towards greater clarity and interpretive coherence, or at the very least it pretends to do that.

The timeline not only projects you into the future but collapses distinctions between past, present, and future into a sort of eternal present. What has grown increasingly compelling for me is the narrative structure that emerges. The repetition of stories, whether it's a catastrophic flood or a biblical account, raises the question: Is the essence of these narratives in their unique details or in the recurring structural elements that they share?

EG The motif of floods carries potent symbolism in the context of Venice. I see a strong resonance between your work and other pieces in the exhibit. Your work dialogues with Theaster Gates' video *The Flood*, and it aligns with Giorgio Andreotta Calò's probe into the geological temporality of the Venetian lagoon with his *Carotaggi (Core Samples)*. Your timeline serves as an intellectual and physical bridge between these thematic explorations, inviting audiences to contemplate the cyclical and linear dimensions of geological time, existential disaster, and situated experiences of planetary time.

OS It did indeed harmonise well with the surrounding artworks. There are two co-existing modalities in our timeline. One leans into the archetypal, capturing universal narratives like floods, while the other taps into the unprecedented realities we're collectively steering towards. It's this dichotomy that enriches our understanding of the piece and the exhibit as a whole. To reside in the Anthropocene is to dwell within a labyrinth of paradoxes. On the one hand, we encounter phenomena that were previously unfathomable, breaking the boundaries of what we understood to be "natural". On the other hand, this epoch also prompts a reexamination, a plunge into the sedimented layers of culture and civilisation that have shaped our understanding of the environment.

EG This tension also materialises in the discourse around climate science, particularly in the public sphere. Even as we endure exceptional heat waves, public discussions often trivialise them as merely another hot summer. In this respect, climate fiction serves as a counter-narrative by depicting dystopian futures where Earth's habitability is irredeemably compromised. What guided your selection of the texts and films that comprise your body of work on this subject?

OS Our method of selection was less deterministic and more explorative. We were led from one text to another, drawn by their respective articulations of climate-related themes.

BG One thematic arc that resonates with me is that of dreams - or perhaps, the loss thereof. The collapse of the imaginative space for future possibilities is, I believe, an urgent narrative that we must integrate into our broader conversations about climate change.

OS The storytelling aspect brings forth an additional layer of complexity. Most narratives, by their structural imperative, must conclude - either on a note of doom or hope. However, the unending, ever-escalating nature of the climate crisis disallows such closure, problematising how we engage with it through art and literature.

EG I see you've also incorporated films into this ecology of narratives. How does the practice of scriptwriting, as a unique form of storytelling, intersect with your scholarly interests?

BG Our professional leanings have predominantly been toward performance art and theatre, not scriptwriting per se. However, the performative aspect exists in all these forms, and it's a domain we've navigated in our past works. Our project remains in flux; it's an ongoing dialogue rather than a definitive statement. While we initially contemplated concluding with a more sombre work, Erik Conway and Naomi Oreskes' bleak vision of the future, we opted instead for *Ecotopia* - a narrative that offers alternative lifestyles as sites of resistance and hope in an otherwise dispiriting landscape.

EG This dichotomy is evident in art forms engaged with the climate crisis. We often observe a paralysing apocalyptic vision that potentially serves to justify inaction. But there is also a more proactive corpus that seems to propagate a message of agency, encouraging alternative lifestyles and engagement with the planet. Does this tension manifest itself in the narratives you have curated and the dialogues you have been a part of?

OS Most certainly, the tension you articulate is something we have been deeply mindful of, particularly given the ethical complexity of ecological discourse. We made a conscious decision to eschew simplistic moral or ideological finger-pointing. The literary landscape on this issue is surprisingly vast, dwarfing even mainstream cinema, and varies widely in its ideological stances. To allow the works to speak for themselves and interact with each other in a non-prescriptive manner, we opted for a chronological arrangement. This methodological choice unveiled a third narrative dimension, one characterised by temporal intersections that generated novel meanings and interpretations.

EG Your chronological ordering struck me as a potent intervention in how we encounter these narratives. It appeared as if this arrangement manifests a new narratological function, transforming climate fiction into something altogether different. The works didn't just exist in isolation; they were part of a larger dialogue that only became apparent through your ordering.

BG and OS: Yes, and what's fascinating is that this effect does not necessitate reading the entire collection; even a partial engagement alters the reader's interpretative framework. It's similar to the experience one has when reading a choral novel. Our intention was to place these divergent narratives in conversation, allowing for a multiplicity of emergent meanings.

EG Alongside the timeline, you have also integrated images of what can only be described as techno-vegetal hybrids.

OS Conventional timelines, especially the more recent ones, often integrate pictorial elements to illustrate key historical or speculative moments. In a way, we wanted to subvert that tradition, introducing images of hybrid beings that don't exist but feasibly could, at least within the confines of the technological imagination. These visuals act less as illustrations and more like enigmatic entities that disrupt linear understanding, making them a riddle unto themselves.

BG We also view these elements as integral to the project's overall 'score.' There's notable potential in the hybrid methodology, which gains a sort of 'character-like' potency within the work. Our aim is to explore various archival forms - serving both as keepers of time and custodians of history. These elements function like visual footnotes, creating a point of convergence for historical and chronological aspects, thereby adding another layer of meaning and interpretation to the images.

EG It has been said that plants offer a counter-narrative to the anthropocentric capitalist models that have precipitated the climate crisis. Unlike the competition-driven ethos of capitalism, plants embody a more collaborative model of existence, rooted in symbiosis and mutualism. Thus, in the speculative ontology of your artwork, plants serve as both a critique and an alternate model for planetary futures. This resonates with certain science fiction genres like solarpunk, which seek to envision a future characterised by a harmonious relationship with natural energy sources - plants, after all, have been harnessing solar energy since their advent on Earth.

OS and BG Absolutely, our intention was never to represent anything "real" or "existing", but rather to engage in a form of radical imagination. We used the medium to ponder alternate narratives, to stretch the boundaries of what could be rather than what is. Your observations validate the speculative utility of the artwork, its ability to participate in multi-discursive debates around ecology, technology, and futurity.

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