



Ecotopia

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Ecotopia

BGL | David Brooks | Dagmara Genda | Rodney Graham | Isabelle Hayeur
Tristram Lansdowne | Maude Léonard-Contant | Lynne Marsh
Lisa Sanditz | Jennifer Steinkamp | T & T | Kate Wilson
Curated by Amanda Cachia

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Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
S7N 5A2



Second Nature

Amanda Cachia, Exhibition Curator

Cicero called nature “second nature” or nature transformed by the human hand.¹

The country and the city are traditional opposites: the rural landscape is spacious, flowing, totalizing, and spiritually uplifting; the cityscape is crowded, sharp-edged, fragmented and morally corrupting. That tradition is being challenged. The city, more and more, is understood as an ecosystem, and the country is allowed corruptions and constructions of its own. Neither could exist without the other, and understanding their deep connectedness makes it harder to uphold the polarity.²

We didn’t just invent the ideal of beauty; much of what we consider beautiful we shaped ourselves.³

Ecotopia explores environmental conservation, destruction and the discordant combination of architecture and decay in our technological age.⁴ Very simply, this exhibition is about the confluence of nature and human intervention that has both glorious and profoundly dispiriting qualities. These seemingly contradictory elements are captured in the title of this exhibition, for the word “ecotopia” can be either utopian or dystopian, where a vision for a world is either ideal or nightmarish.⁵ These jarring notions are brought into conversation in the work of twelve artists who offer alternatives for postmodern living that enable a harmonious coexistence of nature and technology rather than environmental havoc. The artists also ponder the expressionistic grandeur of nature, and how this has become

suffocated and overlaid with layers of city debris and decaying architecture. Visitors will come across sculptures, paintings, works on paper and video installations that address various aspects of history, technology, geography, Canadian national identity, politics, urbanization and ecology. The artists approach the natural and built environment with anxiety, humour, irony, amazement and terror.

Architectural and cultural theorist and historian Anthony Vidler has developed numerous relevant discourses around the origins and affective consequences of modern spaces:

Fear, anxiety, estrangement, and their psychological counterparts, anxiety neuroses and phobias, have been intimately linked to the aesthetics of space throughout the modern period. Romanticism, with its delight in the terrifying sublime, saw fear and horror lurking in landscapes, domestic scenes, and city streets. Modernism, while displacing many such spatial fears to the domain of psychoanalysis, was nevertheless equally subject to fears newly identified as endemic to the metropolis...calculating its modes of representation according to the psychological disturbances of an alienated subject. Space, in these various iterations, has been increasingly defined as a product of subjective projection and introjection, as opposed to a stable container of objects and bodies.⁶

This “second nature” is suspect; it is manipulative, beautiful and horrific all at once according to the projections of the

1. Ginger Strand, “At the Limits: Landschaft, Landscape and the Land,” in *Badlands: New Horizons in Landscape*, ed. Denise Markonish (North Adams, MA: MASS MoCA, 2008), 82.

2. *Ibid.*, 86.

3. *Ibid.*, 82.

4. “Eco” is from the Greek word *oikos* (household or home) and “topia” is from the Greek word *topos* (place). Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston* (Berkeley, CA: Banyan Tree Books, 1975).

5. The term was originally developed by ethnographer E.L. Anderson and popularized by the late American writer Ernest Callenbach in his novel of the same name, where *ecotopia* became a subgenre of science fiction. The society described in the book is one of the first ecological utopias and was influential on the counterculture, and the green movement in the 1970s and thereafter. It was a protest against consumerism and materialism, among other aspects of American life.

6. Anthony Vidler, “Introduction” in *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 1.



7. United Nations website, <http://www.un.org/en/events/iyof2011/> (accessed December 3, 2012).

artists in this exhibition regarding the inhabitation of our contemporary space. Any boundaries crossed by the artists create discomfort that moves and stirs the viewer to understand that what is at stake is not simply what we think of as "beauty" but our way of moving forward in our flawed world.

The genesis for this exhibition was the 2011 International Year of Forests, declared by the United Nations as "a global celebration of people's action for sustainable forest management."⁷ For many people, the icon of the tree symbolizes nature and the environment in its totality. It also represents the rehabilitated landscape for which we yearn. Indeed, the environment and our landscape is a construct of the mind, memory and political will as much as the physical configuration of natural and built spaces.

The tree has also been of great inspiration for contemporary artists around the world. In 1982, the German Fluxus and performance artist Joseph Beuys began a large-scale seminal project in Kassel, Germany as part of *documenta 7* entitled *7000 Oaks*. His plan was to plant 7000 saplings throughout the city of Kassel, and it took over five years to complete, concluding with the opening of *documenta 8* in 1987. Beuys meant for his project to be just the start of an ongoing tree-planting effort extended throughout the world as part of a global mission to affect environmental and social change on a mass scale and to raise ecological consciousness. Within the city of Kassel itself, Beuys wanted to make a gesture toward urban renewal. German artist and author Johannes Stüttgen said that "the planting of seven thousand oaks is thus only a symbolic beginning...



The intention of such a tree-planting event is to point up the transformation of all of life, of society, and of the whole ecological system.⁸ Beuys felt an urgency to act out his anxiety regarding environmental issues by merging visual art, social practice and environmental activism. *7000 Oaks* was his utopian vision of a social sculpture that was designed to provoke revolution, permanence and longevity.

Interspersed throughout *Ecotopia* are multiple and diverse representations and readings on trees. Each one suggests the adaptive potential and resilience of trees in the wake of this “second nature” we live in. For example, BGL’s artificial tree is made up of machine-cut plywood with plastic leaves (some hole-punched as though eaten by worms) spinning in a circle caused by the wind from several electric fans (*Pinocchio*, 2009);

David Brooks’ sculpture includes two small palm trees that seem to have emerged from the sidewalk, now caked in concrete and lying desolate on their side (*Unfinished Section of Sidewalk with Two Palms and Rebar*, 2012); Tristram Lansdowne’s watercolour paintings of trees are life and death personified—lush, velvet, green leaves devouring a building in one image; spindly, dried up branches in a desolate grey landscape in the other (*Envelope*, 2012 and *The Nurse*, 2011); finally, Jennifer Steinkamp’s computer-generated trees and leaves constantly orbit across a black space and mutate from shape to shape, colour to colour, evoking seasons, and more profoundly, change (*Orbit 6*, 2010). What has life become if we are now mesmerized by the movement of plastic trees or those we watch on a television screen instead of a genuine breeze flowing through real trees in our parks and forests?

8. Johannes Stüttgen, *Beschreibung eines Kunstwerkes* (Düsseldorf: Free International University, 1982), 1.



Ecotopia

Bill
David Brodie
Dugan Gault
Robby Gordon
Isabelle Hays
Tristan Lantieri
Mark Leonard-Catlett
Lynn Nork
Lin Nordin
Jennifer Scholten
TAT
Kate Wilson



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Small text block, likely a description or artist information.

Small text block, likely a description or artist information.

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Rodney Graham suggests that perhaps the world—and perceived romantic notions of nature, also touched on by some of the artists—has been turned on its head, as evoked in his upside-down Ponderosa Pines (*Ponderosa Pines, Princeton B.C./ CAT hi-way yellow*, 1992).

If Cicero called nature “second nature” or nature transformed by the human hand, then why and how do we recreate and mediate nature? Predominantly, we live in abstract spaces and manufactured environments where nature has become fabricated—consider the tightly manicured lawns and rows of young trees that mark most cookie-cutter housing developments, for instance. Using a variety of strategies and materials, some of the artists in this exhibition point out the absurdities, excesses and challenges to these situations, and the amnesic response our population has taken up to these new falsehoods—these ecotopias. Other artists suggest that while our world may be topsy-turvy, there might be a beauty of decay. For example, the new and decaying structures that we have created have a suggested beauty in themselves, where objects, monuments, and sites that have been overtaken by weeds, graffiti, rabbit holes or worms are in fact a new archaeology for future generations. With its ability to perplex and entice in equal measures, *Ecotopia* unsettles comfortable notions about dominion and progress.

Our understanding of the term “landscape” has become more complex over time. The tradition of landscape painting, for instance, has evolved dramatically since the days of bucolic, colonial scenes of sheep grazing in meadows amidst the grandeur of nature. American writer and novelist Ginger Strand captures this evolution in the following statement:

No one believes in landscape anymore. As a self-contained genre, pretty vistas and sublime

*scenes feel compromised. There's a shadow moving across those sylvan fields, the shadow of ideology..Landscape masqueraded for several centuries as objective, a window onto the natural world. That's all over now. Today, like so much else, landscape has been unmasked.*⁹

The work of Dagmara Genda and Maude Léonard-Contant touches on the essence of this quote, for their works allude to how the pretty vistas in Canadian national parks are actually constructed through particular ideological frames or windows of a now compromised landscape. For example, Dagmara Genda's *Panorama* (2012) is a 360° paper mural of Canada and is made from collaged images sourced from nature books and travel brochures. The artist says, “The work refers to signs and regulations in national parks and spots where people come to enjoy the wilderness of Canada and I am interested in the ‘ownership’ of wilderness and how that has become a cultural commodity.”¹⁰ In Maude Léonard-Contant's *Creeper* (2012), *Cacti* (2012) and *Coco-fesse* (2011), the artist says that she is “exploring strategies of simulation and camouflage, blurring the boundaries between fake and real, between interior design and landscape architecture.”¹¹ What kind of aesthetics come into play, then, in the constructed environments revealed in the work Genda and Léonard-Contant? Perhaps it is “ruins aesthetics”? UK-based writer and critic Brian Dillon says that in recent years, many artists have turned to themes of destruction and decay in their works, with a particular focus on the remains of buildings and landscapes that seem like relics of the past century. He says that “the ruin appears in its material specificity as an allegory for global or regional political forces, as an aesthetic trope that condenses images and ideas from different genres, as an invitation to thought and as the site of a sublime...haunting.”¹²

9. Strand, “At the Limits: Landschaft, Landscape and the Land,” 81.

10. Dagmara Genda artist statement, 2012.

11. Maude Léonard-Contant artist statement, 2012.

12. Brian Dillon, “Introduction: A Short History of Decay,” in *Ruins (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art)*, ed. Brian Dillon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 11.



13. Ibid., 14.

14. Magali Arriola, "A Victim and a Viewer: Some Thoughts on Anticipated Ruins," in *Ruins (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art)*, 176.

Like the paradoxical term "ecotopia," the ruin also embodies a set of temporal and historical paradoxes. The ruined building is a remnant and portal into the past, and its decay is a reminder of the passage of time. And yet, despite being a ruin, it somehow survives and outlives us, representing who and what we are at any given moment for future generations to uncover and decipher. To adopt a term from the Land Art artist Robert Smithson, "ruins in reverse" is where ruins are caught in a dialectical state between being built and falling into disuse and decay.¹³ Within this peculiar state, ruins slowly accumulate signs of transformation in the urban landscape over time, as if they are markers or time capsules for events. For example, tourism transforms and further degrades famous sites containing important ruins, such as Machu Picchu in Peru or the pyramids in Egypt. There has even been talk of re-building some of the

architecture at the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. What are the ethical and social implications of re-building a ruinous site?

Visiting and revisiting ruins and sites of decay gives viewers the opportunity to place new significance on the stratification of remnants and recover narratives that inhabit these spaces of the past in order to engage their present life and function.¹⁴ In the context of the exhibition, Lynne Marsh's *Plänterwald* (2010) and Kate Wilson's *Untitled* (2012) large-scale ink drawing reference places that have become undone over time, either through natural forces or man-made constructions. Marsh has filmed on the site of a former German Democratic Republic amusement park built in 1969 and abandoned after unification. Its rollercoaster and Ferris wheel sit motionless at the edge of the city of Berlin. Wilson has depicted a frightening



scene where a botanical swirl is caught up in a hurricane-like wind, sucking up nearby architecture and other structures and elements in nature that line the horizon. What do the markings of these spaces reveal about those who currently frequent or even live in them?

The work by the artists in this exhibition can be considered a type of resistance against the regulation and homogenization of public architecture and spaces in our environment. Artists such as Isabelle Hayeur (*Ascendance*, 2005-2008, and *Losing Ground*, 2009), Lisa Sanditz (*Lamp City*, 2009, *Sock City*, 2005, *Tang Factory I*, 2008 and *Tower of Babble*, 2009) and T&T (*Wilmont Trail*, 2003) examine how local suburban and rural realities are increasingly marked by identical housing developments, retail complexes, shopping arcades and urban villages. In doing so, they

aim to reveal how the dominant forms of urban planning and development are often in conflict and incongruence with nature. Curator Magali Arriola says that such spaces become “conflicted and contested arenas that simultaneously contain traces of their aspirations as they carry the marks of their failure.”¹⁵

Furthermore, the artists are creating and inhabiting new spaces of geographic “otherness” that French philosopher Michel Foucault termed “heterotopias.”¹⁶ According to Foucault, a heterotopic space could be simultaneously physical and mental, such as the moment you see yourself in the mirror or the space of a phone conversation. While many of the post-apocalyptic “places without places” evident in the artists’ works are fueled by the imagination, each artist has also been effected by the sights they behold in their daily routines

15. Ibid.

16. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Vintage, 1980).



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and travels or images they come across in the media or the internet. Within such heterotopic spaces, there is room for escapism, fantasy and play and maybe even hope. Art critic and curator Patrik Andersson said of T&T (which also applies to the other artists in *Ecotopia*) that they "refashion their own potential future in a way that addresses our environmental crisis without letting go of cultural habits born out of urban and suburban modernization."¹⁷ In other words, despite creating places of otherness, ruins in reverse or spaces in between, the artists are still grounded in inescapable everyday living. The twelve artists featured in *Ecotopia* capture the spirit of a world that is changing definitions on multiple levels: terms such as "landscape," "ecosystem" and "nature" evolve as climate change impacts our environment. Nature and city meet to form a vocabulary for modern-day living that makes the world an equally exciting and daunting place to live. What will the world be like for future generations? Will we find ourselves in a world like the one depicted in Dr. Seuss' children's book and film of the same name, *The Lorax*?¹⁸ Will there still be seasons and forests, or even trees? What will be the next big natural disaster and how will the world respond? Will the ruins of the future bear a resemblance to the great ruins of our past, such as Stonehenge in England, or the Colosseum in Rome? Is it possible that failed, abandoned architecture could be rebuilt to create ecologically sustainable spaces? Brian Dillon states that "the ruin is not of melancholy or mourning but of radical potential—its fragmentary, unfinished nature is an invitation to fulfill the as yet unexplored temporality that it contains."¹⁹ It is thanks to the artists and their own ecotopian visions of our world that we can begin to imagine some of the possibilities that may thrill, threaten and shake us.

Amanda Cachia is an independent curator from Sydney, Australia and is currently completing her PhD in Art History, Theory & Criticism at the University of California, San Diego. Her dissertation will focus on the intersection of disability and contemporary art. Cachia completed her second Masters degree in Visual & Critical Studies at the California College of the Arts (CCA) in San Francisco in spring, 2012. Her MA thesis, entitled *What Can a Body Do? Inscribing and Adjusting Experiences of Disability in Contemporary Art* formed the basis of an exhibition curated by Cachia and hosted by Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery at Haverford College, PA in fall, 2012. Cachia received her first Masters in Creative Curating from Goldsmiths College, University of London in 2001. She held the position of Director/Curator of the Dunlop Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada from 2007-2010, and has curated approximately 30 exhibitions over the last ten years in London, New York, Oakland and various cities across Australia and Canada. Her writing has been published in numerous exhibition catalogues, *Canadian Art* magazine and upcoming issues of *Disability Studies Quarterly* and she has lectured and participated in panels and conferences widely, including the National Gallery of Canada, Winnipeg Art Gallery, University of California (Berkeley, Santa Barbara and San Diego), Paul K. Longmore Institute at San Francisco State University, Portland State University, de Young Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Graduate Center at City University of New York. Cachia has been the Chair of the Dwarf Artists Coalition for the Little People of America since 2007.

17. Patrik Andersson, "Doubt/Hope," in *T&T: Onward Future* (London: Museum London, Oakville, ON: Oakville Galleries with Trapp Editions, 2008), 12.

18. *The Lorax* is a children's book written by Dr. Seuss and first published in 1971. The environment is in jeopardy in this story as there are no trees left in the world thanks to the greed of humanity, particularly the central character, Once-ler. The Lorax fights for the trees, the environment and against Once-ler. The film of the same name was released by Universal Studios and Illumination Entertainment in 2012.

19. Dillon, "Introduction: A Short History of Decay," 18.