

ART IN THE AGE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

Jonathan Garfinkel

In *Eve 2050*, Montreal-based choreographer Isabelle Van Grimde proposes an answer to the question, “What can a body do?” By drawing on prosthetic and cyborg imagery, she challenges us to imagine the future body. The result is an ambitious, rich and provocative triptych. *Eve 2050* had its premiere online as a web-series in spring 2018. Later that year it was presented as an interactive installation with performance at Agora de la Danse in Montreal, and finally in 2019 as a stage production. I had the privilege of seeing the web series as part of the art exhibition *Dyscorpia 1.0* in Edmonton, Alberta, and was amazed by the bodies Van Grimde choreographed against the backdrop of desert, the dancer’s gender-ambiguous movement, of the physical body hybridized with technology in fascinating and challenging ways.

In his two companion films, *The End of the World* and *The Birth of the World*, artist Brad Necyk initiates a conversation with Van Grimde’s *Eve 2050*. Working with footage that did not make it into Van Grimde’s project, Necyk cut, contrasted and spliced, juxtaposing Van Grimde’s choreography with footage he filmed on Vancouver Island. The ensuing dialogue between Van Grimde and Necyk raises several questions: how do we make art in the Age of the Anthropocene? As we sit on the brink of collapse, what is the responsibility, morally and aesthetically, of artists? Necyk – in dialogue with Van Grimde – proposes a possible answer to these questions.

The End of the World starts with lush images of the West coast rainforest. These slow initial shots – of mist and ferns, alien-like trees and their shadows – evoke a sense of the primordial, an ancient rhythm reinforced by Gary James Joynes’ droning, haunted soundscape. Yet almost right away we are aware that we are watching from a distance, as though to remind us that we are not quite there. Playing with perspective, Necyk “projects” his forest imagery onto the far wall of a warehouse-like space. Moss grows through the cracks, denoting decay and abandonment. The room itself echoes the rain forest, and worlds flow into each other in strange and surprising ways: a spherical orb floats in a corner, and the impossibility of water contained by itself rises and falls, a lone surf. Are these “supernatural” images suggesting a defiance of nature, or an evolution in ecology? Is this space a place of magic, or nightmare? In this heightened state of ambiguity, the result is beautiful, haunted disorientation.

When images of the dancer Sophie Breton from Van Grimde’s *Eve 2050* appear, it does not feel imposed or foreign; it speaks the same language as Necyk. Breton dances around an ark of trees, as though movement has grown out of the rainforest itself. Perspective shifts; suddenly the images are projected onto a side wall. Later Breton and dancer Justin de Luna don technical augmentation; spinal cords on the exteriors of their backs; projections of screen and LED light on their bodies. So we are led into the uncanny future via the porthole of Van Grimde’s choreography, but always back to ourselves, to the body, to the forest we’ve neglected.

I first became familiar with Necyk’s work at the University of Alberta, where his PhD research-creation dissertation exploring mental health (he received his PhD in Psychiatry), was featured as an art exhibition. *Telling Stories Otherwise* (2019) was an ambitious journey from the personal to the other; this included aspects of his own struggles with bipolar disorder. Using various mediums, including interviews, paintings, 3D rendered photography and video, his research took him from the Centre of Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto to Iqaluit, Nunavut, where he held artistic workshops with Indigenous youth on the subject of suicide. *Telling Stories Otherwise* is an expansive, multi-dimensional work that documents the struggles of mental health, but also suggests opportunities for healing.

Since his PhD exhibition, Necyk has evolved in both focus and aesthetic, turning his concerns from mental health to that of the ecological catastrophe of our times. His film *Joshua Tree* (2019) reflects this. Describing it as a “building off of evolving themes of the Anthropocene by directly witnessing landscapes at risk of annihilation, acting as an archive, a memorial”, Necyk contrasts stark imagery of Joshua Tree National Park in California with a 3D-rendered sandstorm video sculpture. As the storm worsens, the chaos that envelops the space suggests a devastation that is both overwhelming and inevitable.

The End of the World and *The Birth of the World* continue Necyk's concerns with the ecological. While watching these two films, there were moments I felt uncomfortable, that I was forced to watch too closely, witness to something I did not wish to see. Yet as my discomfort grew, I felt Necyk was creating some kind of eulogy to a passing era. It is a mourning, perhaps, that many of us would rather not face. Contrasted with Breton dancing, and her own body morphing, I wondered, what devastation will our children endure as we are catapulted into Van Grimde's techno-utopian future?

While Van Grimde proposes the possibility of a human body coupled with technology in beautiful and surprising ways, Necyk forces us to meditate on ecology and loss, created through imagery of the slow wafting through. Together, they weave a song about end times, which is also a beginning. At the conclusion of *The Birth of the World*, Necyk shows us a long, single shot of a sun hovering, slow, stark and cold. A reminder: the earth will outlive us. In our passing, what is our responsibility and prayer? Van Grimde's *Eve 2050* suggests that our bodies, like our planet, will evolve. Necyk proposes a similar healing, along with a heavy gaze. In witnessing the present-past comes awareness, and through that, the possibility of change.

Jonathan Garfinkel is an award-winning poet, playwright, journalist and novelist whose work has been translated into twelve languages. His novel, *The Truth-Tellers*, is forthcoming with House of Anansi Press in 2022. Currently Garfinkel is doing a research-creation PhD in Medical Humanities at the University of Alberta, where he is writing about diabetes and the DIY Artificial Pancreas movement. He lives in Berlin.