
‘Life Without Humankind’

– queer death/life, plastic
pollution, and extinction in
An Ecosystem of Excess

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Pinar Yoldas’ *An Ecosystem of Excess* (EOE) (2014) as an example of the potential of eco-art projects to queer normative readings of death and life. Making use of feminist posthumanities and new materialism, the article addresses the artist’s affirmative way of tackling issue of plastic pollution, which is inspired by new scientific discoveries of life forms that can feed on plastics. Departing from my reading of the art project as depicting a future without humankind, I argue that the artwork presents what I refer to as ‘queer death/life’, given that it unsettles normative readings of death by embracing the deadly aspects of plastic pollution as generative of new modes of life. Moreover, I will offer a close analysis of the artwork by engaging with queer readings of plastics as ‘living dead’ matter that is indebted to the compressed bodies of dead ancient nonhuman beings – the petroleum. Finally, in the last section, I will discuss how the artwork space, which is reminiscent of a natural history museum, engages affirmatively with the future, enabling interesting connections between evolution, extinction, and the museum space, considering it as an institution dedicated to immortalising history.

KEYWORDS

Pinar Yoldas; Eco-art; Plastic Pollution; Queer Death; Feminist Environmental Humanities

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Future, present, and past are conceptual divisions of time that guide one's perceptions about the world, conducting one towards possibilities, allowing one to look forward to a tomorrow that allegedly will bring new opportunities. In fact, the idea of future in and of itself is already fictional since at the very moment it 'happens', it is not the future anymore – it is the present. Envisioning the future is something that plays with perception in a way that lets one expand horizons; it is a space and time where hope is situated, making one think of the present with an eye toward what the future might entail. Since early in her career, Pinar Yoldas, a science and technology studies scholar and artist, uses the future as an inspiration to rethink past and present, highlighting the negative consequences of plastic pollution. In her artworks, Yoldas blends art, biological sciences, and digital media technologies to 'futurecast' the biological effects of human-caused impact on the environment (Mauk 2015).

Inspired by the discovery of the Great Pacific garbage patch, a plastic vortex in the open ocean, Yoldas designed the project *An Ecosystem of Excess (EOE)* (2014a) – a naturecultural bestiary that is anchored in her ability to blend speculative art with scientific discoveries. According to Yoldas, the inspiration for the project comes from questioning how the current situation of plastic pollution is similar to common narratives regarding the origins of life itself: "If life started today in our plastic debris filled ocean, what kind of life forms would emerge out of this contemporary primordial ooze?" (Yoldas 2014a). Departing from these questions posed by Yoldas, this article will offer an affirmative and transversal exploration of *EOE* as an example of how contemporary eco-art¹ projects have unsettled the concepts of death, life, and extinction within the context of overex-

ploitation of the Earth's ecology that places the environment's future in jeopardy; a context which is often framed as 'the Anthropocene'.

The *EOE* "introduces pelagic insects, marine reptilian, fish, and birds endowed with organs to sense and metabolise plastics" (Yoldas 2014a). In this artwork, Yoldas presents these specimens as if in 'a natural museum of the future' (Pangburn 2014) where scientific data and speculation are employed to explain their ways of living in the Plasticsphere. Following this natural museum inspiration, the artist presents a new lexicon to address her reality-inspired zoo-art-organisms, offering a taxonomy of the *EOE*. The Stomaximus is a digestive organ with tiny little chambers designed to metabolise plastic with the cooperation of bacteria specialised to digest different kinds of plastic. The P-Plasticceptor and the E-Plasticceptor are sensory organs that can detect and examine plastic within its bulbous structure. The PetroNephros is the organ responsible for filtering the toxic additives that are metabolised during the plastic digestion. The Petrogestive system is the digestive system of the coloured birds that are able to digest hard plastics, such as bottle caps, and incorporate the plastic colour into their feathers following the Pantone colour scheme. The Plastic Balloon Turtle is an adaptive species that survived the balloon plastic pollution by incorporating the balloon's flexibility into an elastomer that enables them to float when they need to rest after swimming for several hours. Finally, the Transchromatic Eggs are marine reptile's eggs that are laid at the bottom of the ocean, where 60% of the ocean plastic debris is, and that can change colours according to the environment they inhabit (Yoldas 2014a).

In this article, I will conduct an analysis of Yoldas's *EOE* by highlighting the importance of her eco-art in the processes of

queering death, life, and extinction in the Anthropocene. The project of 'queering' Yoldas's artwork is grounded in the idea of 'queer' as a non-normative and non-linear understanding of concepts, in this case, death, life, and extinction. This political reading of the potentials of 'queerness' comes from Michael Warner's work in which he presents 'queer' as a political perspective that:

rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-*representation in favour of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal* (...) The insistence on 'queer' – a term defined against 'normal' and generated precisely in the context of terror – has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalisation, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence. (Warner 1991, 16, emphasis added)

In this sense, I argue that queering death, life, and extinction will come from this resistance to the hegemonic representations of them in which the human experience prevails. In fact, I claim that part of my 'queer' reading of death and life in *EOE* comes from its play of temporalities, since I see it as reframing the normative rendering of human extinction as the marker for the end of the world, suggesting a future ecosystem "without the human" (Yoldas 2015, 359).

In *EOE*, Yoldas proposes a fictional zoo-centred ecosystem that reconfigures death and life by examining how human actions are threatening the existence of life through overconsumption and plastic pollution. I argue that, within this imagined ecosystem, Yoldas is queering death and life through grounding her artwork in an understanding of a new nonhuman life that emerges from the possibility of human extinction due to plastic pollution. As she describes it, her eco-art work "[starts] from excessive anthropocentrism" and "reaches anthropo-de-centrism by offering life with-

out humankind" (Yoldas 2015, 359), which I see as a suggestion of human extinction. In this sense, following Claire Colebrook's posthuman take on extinction, I suggest that Yoldas "thinks about extinction beyond species fetishism" since she "[thinks] of other modes of existence – that might survive what 'we' can only imagine as the end of the world – as the beginning of new worlds" (Colebrook 2018, 153).

I contend that, in *EOE*, the suggestion of human extinction is used as a narrative tool that queers death and life, especially regarding teleological and human-centric arguments that equate the end of the world with the end of human life. Yoldas is artistically engaging with the question of "[imagining] a mode of reading the world, and its anthropogenic scars, that frees itself from folding the earth's surface around human survival" (Colebrook 2014, 23). As mentioned by Colebrook, the "thought of human extinction (...) entails the sense of 'us' as a species; while the preliminary mourning and panic that accompanies the thought of human extinction indicate a fetishized and supreme self-regard" (2018, 151). Therefore, Yoldas tries to depart from an anthropocentric approach to life, presenting a new zoocentric ecosystem that comes into existence through evolutionary processes following a series of contemporary scientific discoveries (Zettler, Mincer and Amaral-Zettler 2013; Goldstein, Rosenberg and Cheng 2012), which she uses to envision a future in which plastic is the energy source that sustains life (Yoldas 2014a).

On the aesthetical level, *EOE* is a probing project that resorts to a scientific ambience to suggest a futuristic environment. By using glass containers to enclose the organs and some of her 'species', just like in natural sciences museums, Yoldas is playing with the boundaries of 'hard sciences' and art – showing in a material way her interdisciplinary understanding of art practices

and their wide range of political impact. The project space is a Foucauldian heterotopic territory in which reality conflicts with the narrative of *EOE* since the project space is a place that is “different from all the sites that [it reflects] and speak[s] about” (Foucault 1984, 2). For example, the fact that humans are visiting a sort of ‘natural history museum of the future’ that narrates the world ‘without them’ is an interesting aspect that converses with this idea of heterotopic ‘counter-space’ where it is “at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through” an artistically mediated perception of its milieu (Foucault 1984, 2).

Therefore, I am particularly drawn to Yoldas’s artwork because of her use of the project space as a locus of the future, in which plastic is not the cause of death, as in current environmental issues, but the source of new modes of life – queering death and life through a speculative future. In fact, considering the theoretical perspectives to be entangled in this article, I argue for an intra-active perspective (Barad 2007) of life and death, revealing the active and interactive relationship between both, which makes it impossible to separate them. The recognition of the entanglements between life and death, or animation and cessation as pointed out by Sara Franklin and Margaret Lock (2003), has already been discussed under a feminist lens by other authors (see Franklin and Lock 2003; Lock 2001; Squier 2004; Roosth 2017). The contributions of a feminist perspective to this issue have been important to point out the transformation of knowledge regarding life and death as an indicator of the social embeddedness of scientific innovation. Thus, my considerations regarding life and death in *EOE* follow the pathway paved by these feminist scholars who mapped and analysed the changes in the manipulation of life and death in life

sciences, having in mind the cultural, technical, economic, and political implications of it.

Moreover, inspired by Marietta Radomska’s ‘non/living’, which is an attentive approach to describing what is usually conveyed as ‘life’ in a “more suitable way to articulate the dynamics and necessary entanglement of the processes of living and dying and growth and decay”, I will use ‘death/life’ to indicate this intra-activity, placing death first in order to also convey the productive aspects of a concept that is usually connected to negativity and dead ends (Radomska 2017, 380). Indebted to Barad and Radomska’s use of the slash (‘/’) to “[emphasise] this entanglement and processual dynamics at work”, I use it in ‘death/life’, like in ‘non/living’, to “[show] that living and non-living (and life and death) are not binary opposition, but are intra-active, dynamic, and enmeshed with one another” (ibid.). Death is not the end of life. Rather, it is a resurgence of matter that in the context of *EOE* will be used to generate new modes of life. I argue that *EOE* is one example on how to queer death/life by affirmatively reading it while focusing on nonhuman survival, rather than on human – accounting for those who are actually the ones who suffer more from the violence of plastic pollution. It presents the scars left by humanity in a perspective that promotes an ethic of re-purposing plastics and toxicity (Chen 2012; Davis 2016).

Thus, in order to argue for a ‘queer death/life’ within *EOE*, I will, firstly, explore the materiality of plastic as a queer aspect that reveals the connections between the art project and current environmental issues when it comes to criticising the idea of the Anthropocene and how it is related to normative understandings of death/life. Secondly, I examine Yoldas’s work in order to question the queer aspects of creating a ‘natural museum of the future’, exploring the possibilities of engaging differently with

future species and the connections between evolution, extinction, and the museum as an institution dedicated to immortalising history. I argue that *EOE* offers speculative art as a philosophical intervention that can “move [one] beyond the horizon of the present” (Grosz 2012, 15), making humans feel unsettled by the provocation to think death and life differently through a narrative that does not subscribe to an apocalyptic understanding of the world without humans, which contributes to the formulation of a ‘queer death/life’ perspective that does not separate both, seeing a productive consequence from this intra-active entanglement.

ESCAPING THE LIFE AND DEATH BINARY: QUEER DEATH/LIFE IN A POSTHUMAN WORLDING

When closely analysing plastic’s materiality, one intriguing aspect of it is its origin story: how it comes to matter via transformations of carbon-based and other chemical substances, especially petroleum (Davis 2016). In fact, one of the ‘queer’ aspects of plastics is exactly its composition, since it is indebted to the compressed bodies of dead ancient nonhuman beings, a decomposing and composting process that happened for thousands of years, forming what is currently known as petroleum, an expensive and largely used fossil fuel. What I have suggested as the queer aspect of plastic is how it embodies death through the resurgence of dead biological matter that is now pivotal to the continuity of a deadly ‘petro-capitalist system’ that is accountable for several environmental disasters ranging from air pollution to oil spills (Davis 2015b; 2016).

Plastic is a ‘living dead’ matter (Davis 2015a, 352) that unsettles questions of temporality and life and death binaries when it comes to exploring the natural, socio-political, and economic aspects of plastics and their participation in death/life in-

tra-actions of entangled nonhumans, humans, and environments. Plastic is a recalcitrant matter that has a life-span of hundreds of thousands of years (depending on its chemical structure), making it a force of geological scale regarding time and its composition. For example, due to chemical reactions and photodegradation, plastics enmesh themselves with rocks forming ‘plastiglomerates’, which are emblematic matters of how impossible it is to disentangle nature and culture from one another in the context of the Anthropocene (Alaimo 2016). Moreover, due to its fast spreading and diverse ways that it can be embodied, plastics have become a ubiquitous subject that “infiltrates so many aspects of our daily lives that its presence is easy to take for granted and also hard to fathom” (Davis 2015b, 349).

In this sense, following plastic’s presence in the conceptualisation of Yoldas’s *EOE*, I offer in this section a queer reading of death/life through her eco-art posthuman ecosystem, in which these undead and nearly immortal characteristics of plastics are pivotal to argue for its capacity of queering normative readings of life and death, contrasting the *EOE* with the current environmental issues in which plastic related toxins are penetrating nonhuman and human bodies through the food chain, contaminating and changing their bodily functions (Liboiron 2013).

Plastics are illustrative of the ridiculousness of drawing a hard line between life and death. Plastic matters are bringing back to the surface a new version of dead matters that were forgotten and now are developing new material engagements with other organisms. In *EOE*, the zoo-plastivore lives are embracing this embodiment through ingestion, shifting plastics from a life-taking matter to a life-supporting one. This turn from a deadly to a vibrant conception of plastics exposes the affirmative affective connections between plastics and life, queering the normative perspectives on

pollution and toxins (Chen 2012; Davis 2016). In a way, Yoldas is not trying to justify or promote plastic pollution, rather, she is exploring new forms of seeing life without having the human as a reference point. As a matter of fact, Yoldas has imagined the *EOE* based on nonhuman capacity for productively engaging with plastic, e.g. bacteria that are capable of feeding on it and the fact that thousand of different microscopic species were found living on microplastics in the open ocean (Goldstein, Rosenberg and Cheng 2012; Zettler, Mincer and Amaral-Zettler 2013).

Queer death/life is present at the microscopic level of ingestion. The capacity of digesting this ‘living dead’ matter is what makes the *EOE* stand out when it comes to unsettling the purposes of plastics and their history. In the past, “the invention and proliferation of plastics was driven less by a need to develop new technologies (...), than to simply replace the objects we already had – but at a price and in a quantity that helped to instantiate a middle class defined by consumption” (Davis 2015a, 348). Plastic was made to replace the daily-use objects, and in the *EOE* it is exercising a similar function – plastic is replacing the food source of marine species which in the artwork’s past were endangered by plastic pollution. Turning plastic from waste, the excess of consumerism, to a life-sustaining source of energy opens up a space for philosophical inflexions that change death from the absence of futurity to a representation of the starting point of a new onto-epistemological approach towards the deep connections between life and death in nature.

In the *EOE*, Yoldas tackles this layer of excessive plastic consumption when she includes in the project a new reading of the iconic image from LIFE magazine article, from 1955, called *Throwaway Living: disposable items cut down household chores* (Yoldas 2014a), which was a celebratory piece of the culture of one-use things that

opened the gates for mass consumption and human dependency on this ‘substrata of capitalism’ (Davis 2015a, 349). Unlike the rest of the artwork in the *EOE*, the reprinted image on a bubble wrap is not an organ or a species that adapted to the plas-tisphere. Rather, it is a reminder of the dangers of overconsumption, setting the tone for what the excess means in the *EOE*. The bubble-wrap picture is a remembrance of those who threw away their existence along with their plastic possessions. Yoldas illustrates how imagining a future in which freedom is brought through disposable plastics have influenced human excessive consumption, especially because most of the plastic that now composes the Pacific Trash Vortex comes from disposable items that were popular during the 1960s (Yoldas 2014a).

The plastics that form the Pacific Trash Vortex are considered to be things that are of no-use, and, in *EOE*, the plastivore diet represents a new type of life that unsettles the previous harmful meaning of consumption and its relation to self-destruction. *EOE* grounds itself in an ironic reading of the consequences of plastic pollution, exhibiting life in a way that demonstrates its vibrancy towards death. The organisms that are presented by the artists can incorporate plastic not only as a source of energy but also on an aesthetic level such as the Pantone Birds and the Transchromatic Eggs who incorporate the colours that come from the plastic that in a previous time-frame would contaminate and kill them. In a similar line of artistic engagement, Chris Jordan’s series of photographs, *Midway: Message from the Gyre*² (2009), depicts in a ghastly way the deadly impacts of plastic pollution on nonhumans. In one of the famous pictures from his series, a decomposing marine bird is featured with its stomach open, revealing colourful bottle caps and other pieces of plastic that probably led to its death. As put by Stacy Alaimo, “there is something uncanny about ordinary human

objects becoming the stuff of horror and destruction; (...) a tiny bit of plastic can wreak havoc on the ecologies of vast seas” (Alaimo 2016, 130).

From a queer death/life perspective, the *EOE* presents an affirmative reading of the future, highlighting the nonhuman capacity of ‘fixing’ this havoc by consuming the remnants of human existence, the ‘fossils’ of an era of excessive consumerism and middling interspecies empathy. Eco-art works like *EOE* create an affective impact that generates a queer relationality with the environment. This queer ecology standpoint is capable of building effective ecological values that are based on queer values that promote “[care] not (just) about the individual, the family, or one’s descendants, but about the Other species and persons to whom one has no immediate relations” (Seymour 2013, 27). In *EOE*, death/life intra-action is fertile – there are no ends without new beginnings. A ‘world without humankind’ is framed as an extinction that instigates a new understanding of humanity under lenses that capture the nuances of the imbalances of the affects and effects of humanity towards the environment. It is important to be attentive to matter and its performative agency (Barad 2007). Instead of rendering plastics as passive, it is necessary to recognise its agency and capacity of decentring the human as an autonomous entity, showing how “matter might participate in generating new associations and ethics” (Connolly 2010, 137).

The *EOE* is an eco-artwork that fleshes out this queer aspect of plastic, reframing it in a positive reading that does not take in the Western metaphysics of accepting death solely as the end of carbon-based life forms. Escaping the teleological perspective of life cycles based on human experiences that presumes that the end of life on Earth is equivalent to the end of human life, *EOE* suggests a world ‘without humankind’ that takes place after the advents of the petro-capitalist impacts of the world. The ‘plasti-

sphere’, this contemporary primordial ooze, is a queer figuration that reframes the human origin story to actually account for its disappearance from Earth. *EOE* is a form of eco-art that involves ecological and political thinking regarding the duality of excess in the world – nature’s excessive life forms that defy life and death boundaries, and the human excessive consumeristic desire.

The zoo-plastivores are illustrative of a queer interpretation of the next steps in the line of evolution in the plastisphere. I argue that Yoldas’s ecosystem ‘without humans’ is a suggestion of human extinction, because of the primary question that the artist poses to the viewer: if life started today, what life forms would thrive in the plastisphere? Having in mind the scars humanity has left on Earth and the scale of human actions on the environment, e.g. the massive amount of plastic polluting the oceans, I find it difficult to think about an ecosystem that has not been affected by human existence thus far. Therefore, by situating the question in the present time and affirming the lack of humans in this ecosystem, I see *EOE* as an artistic engagement with the current environmental issues, by speculating about a post-Anthropocene era.

The *EOE* is a speculative artwork that tries to bring closer a representation of death/life issues that are entangled to non-human lives that are constantly dismissed and erased from politics due to the fact that the relationship between humanity and the oceans is commonly mediated by distance and disinterest, forgetting the ‘primordial soup’ that enables life on Earth (Alaimo 2016). In this sense, in the next section, I will engage with the project’s heterotopic space, raising questions regarding the politics of natural history museums and how *EOE* queers their strategy of immortalising an evolutionary narrative that serves human’s purposes of self-fulfilment and exceptionalism.

LIFE AFTER HUMANITY:
EXTINCTION AND QUEER DEATH/
LIFE IN *AN ECOSYSTEM OF EXCESS*

In *EOE*, the plastivores zoo-art-organisms are the focus of the project, giving the viewer some pointers of what happened to the human species in the described plastisphere as they probably succumbed to the effects of plastic pollution and its large-scale environmental impact. In the worlding of the exhibit, nonhumans have evolved into a new species with the demanded organic physiology to survive in a new ecosystem dominated by plastic trash that was left by the human species. Though not directly showing humanity, the artwork articulates a considerable amount of ideas about it, which relates to Claire Colebrook's questions concerning human extinction and how "would it not be better to start to look at the world and ourselves without assuming our unquestioned right to life[?]" (Colebrook 2014, 22).

Before disappearing, the human species had a way of life based on excess and accumulation, and this led to the aftermath depicted in the project. The world created by Yoldas is the future of what Davis and Turpin (2015, 3) called a "homolithic earth" – "a world 'going to pieces' as the literal sediment of human activity". This means that *EOE* shows what happens after the human exploitation of the environment reaches a tipping point. Yoldas's artwork evokes the idea of humanness through its absence; it is a piece that addresses nonhuman and human struggle and suffering not by showing it as it is in the present, but by exploring the human non-existent future and the adapted physiology of the nonhumans in a post-Anthropocene era "where it is imagined (...) that our [humans'] scar on the earth would be readable for something like a future geologist" (Colebrook 2014, 24).

EOE exposes how humanity did not manage to keep up with its own greed and how other organisms found their way out

of the negative human imprint on the Earth's surface. Yoldas presents an eco-art piece that embraces, to a large extent, Colebrook's take on a world 'without humankind' in which:

imagining this world after humans we are reading what is not yet written or inscribed (...). One can only open up to this post-Anthropocene point of view if we start to view this world beyond the bounds of climate, and see climate as one expression – among many – of broader time and broader (inhuman) life. (Colebrook 2014, 24)

In other words, having in mind Yoldas's focus on nonhuman lives, I argue that *EOE* is articulating through the speculative narrative of human extinction a broader understanding of time and space, which consequentially affects readings of life and death as mentioned in the previous section.

Yoldas's project of criticising the Anthropocene through the decentralisation of the figure of the human is in line with the different layers of artistic engagement with environmental change suggested by Davis and Turpin (2015). According to them, the Anthropocene can be visually perceived as "a sensorial phenomenon of the experience of living in an increasingly diminished and toxic world" (Davis and Turpin 2015, 3). New technologies that helped the construction of a world imagery based on data analysis, climate models and satellite images are part of a mediated process that enabled new conceptions of the relations between humans and the environment. In this context, art has been pivotal, given that it provides:

a non-moral form of address that offers a range of discursive, visual, and sensual strategies that are not confined by the regimes of scientific objectivity, political moralism, or psychological depression. (Davis and Turpin 2015, 4)

In *EOE*, the toxic perspective of humanity is exposed through the plastisphere narrative and the sensorial aspect of being immersed in a space that presents the new zoo-ways of living in a post-damaged world. Yoldas's project is a post-mortem heterotopia in which temporality, death, and life are queered, enabling a less human-centric affectivity with the environment to surface. I see the *EOE* as part of what Colebrook described as a new modality of geological reading, one that "imagine[s] a viewing or reading in the absence of viewers and readers, [doing] this through images in the present that extinguish the dominance of the present" (Colebrook 2014, 28).

The project's format, which is reminiscent of natural history museums, converses with the use of spaces of authority, like museums and laboratories, as enablers of non-human exploitation and the reinforcement of a narrative of human exceptionalism. Over the past centuries, nonhumans have been used as resources in the human quest to understand and dominate nature in order to make human life on earth easier. For example, nonhuman testing in scientific research has gained more attention and received more criticism over the past years, having in mind the ways in which pharmaceutical and natural sciences market this exploitation as part of a project to give hope for a better human life (Stanescu 2012). Conversely, *EOE* also refers to the way nonhumans are exploited as objects of material history through preserved specimens and taxidermies shown in natural history museums. In analysing the socio-political aspects of such practices, Donna Haraway argued that the nonhumans in museums are used as the treasures for the fulfilment of 'manhood', serving the purpose of preserving and producing permanence of the power and domination of the human species (Haraway 1989, 22).

Technology and secularism are employed as representational tools to strengthen so-

cial norms while appearing to be objective, authoritative, and scientific. Museums and artworks about evolution and nature rely on heterosexist gender binaries and perpetuate conservative beliefs about sexual reproduction, gender roles, and sexuality as a way to limit and direct social understandings about nature (Haraway 1989, 52; Levin 2010, 201). In *EOE*, this question is taken even further, as two authoritative spaces are conflated: the museum and the laboratory, since both are part of a hierarchical project where minorities are overseen and exploited.

On the other hand, by creating a 'natural history museum of the future' that excludes the human (Pangburn 2014), Yoldas is queering evolutionary narratives and unsettling the political strategies of science museums when it comes to exoticising and immortalising 'the others' who appear in the history of civilisation. As suggested by Sloterdijk:

museumology is a form of xenology; museum science belongs to the phenomenology of the cultural strategy of dealing with what is strange. This explains the deeply rooted ambivalence of the word museal; if the museum per se is a xenological institute, it inevitably has a stake in the double meaning of the unfamiliar (...). As the site of the display of the ugly, unfamiliar, the museum is tied to the xenophobe spectrum, with defensive reactions against the not-I, with contempt, antipathy, and repulsion against the dead, the unassimilated, the dissimilar. (Sloterdijk 2014, 442)

Differently from usual natural history museums, *EOE* does not dedicate itself to immortalising death through constructing a teleological narrative that goes from past to future, displaying the bodies of ancient species. In *EOE*, Yoldas presents the liveliness of surviving organisms, rather than exhibiting the dead humans. In a sense, Yoldas is creating an alternative evolution-

ary narrative that is tied to telling different stories and better futures that do not belong to humanity evolutionary narratives. Yoldas resorts to the same natural history museum medium as a way to ironise this teleological narrative of human evolution that constantly erases the nonhuman existence and importance.

Moreover, regarding the heterotopic aspect of the space of the project, *EOE* is interesting in its mixed media approach and how it plays with the fact that both spaces – natural history museum and laboratory – are dependent on a sense of sterility in order to ensure ‘good results’. Cleaning chambers, bodysuits, and other highly technological laboratory and museum technologies render the organic life as dirt, protecting the exhibited pieces and experiments from nonhuman and human interference. In the museum and in the laboratory, human organic particles (skin, hair, and fluids), bacteria, and other organisms/entities can badly affect the artwork or the experiment since they escape the ‘control’ that is exercised upon bodies under surveillance in those spaces (Halpord and Philip 2000).

In a sense, because of the phantasmagorical presence of the extinct human species in the project, I consider *EOE* as a materialisation of a feeling of freedom from humanity, bearing in mind that, as I previously argued, human’s extinction enabled this new mode of zoo-life in the plastisphere by polluting the oceans and making themselves extinct from Earth. There is this ambivalent feeling towards humanity. It has had a negative influence on the environment, but at the same time, it has offered the source of the environment’s last chance, the last source of energy to keep the stream of life going – the plastics. Following the suggested interpretation of *EOE* as an artwork about life after humankind, the plastics that are reminiscent of human extinction become the beacon of life in this new ecosystem. In a sense, the

extinct human species serves as a memory that highlights the source of its end: the alleged pleasure that resides in the excess of consumption, exploitation, and accumulation.

Through designing an ecosystem not *of* the human but *after* the human, Yoldas is giving the viewers an opportunity to rethink their own politics regarding the environment by situating themselves in a space – the project space – that denies their existence, showing how their relationality to the other might lead to a future that does not involve them. In addition, Yoldas’s zoo-art-organisms are part of her speculative future that would be more accessible to those who are usually excluded from normative fields of politics: the nonhuman subjects. Thus, *EOE* represents the zoo-art-organisms that are outside the realm of normalcy; they are queer organisms and organs that do not serve the demands of the economic liberal market as it would be expected in a human-inhabited environment. These zoo-art-organisms are digesting their inheritance from the long-gone humankind and are reconfiguring death/life to the extent that what was a threat in the past, is now a necessity. In *EOE* life is literally plastic.

This artwork reflects how the effects of human activity on the nonhuman world are marked by an ethical paralysis making the human – or in the case of the project, the visitors – the witnesses of the aftermath of social and environmental catastrophes. As suggested by Colebrook:

for awakening public affect, perhaps the focus on hope needs to give way to mobilisations of fear, whereby we learn to ‘hug the monster’, in order to shift from inertia and quiescence to action. How is it that the human species (...) has conveniently forgotten its own self-extinguishing tendencies? (Colebrook 2014, 11)

The heterotopic space created by Yoldas

contributes to this public awakening through exhibiting of the exuberance of nonhuman life even in a damaged world.

EOE subtly places an ethical call for action that is based on an idea of deep connectivity that recognises that "in a multi-species, multicultural world of life, dialogue is not a single species project" (Rose 2013, 9). *EOE* functions as a strong reminder that existing is a collective action which cannot be realised through mutual consumption. Instead of seeking freedom in participating in the capitalistic system, humans and nonhumans could practice it through questioning and challenging the limits imposed on their existence. Life and death are unsettled, no one lives or dies alone.

Thus, keeping in mind the fact that the concepts articulated in *EOE* not only produce forces of domination but also forces of resistance, eco-art has an important part in the project of expanding horizons through creativity and inspiration. Speculative worlds, such as the one created by Pinar Yoldas can help understand that:

history, the past, is larger than the present and is the ever-growing and ongoing possibility of resistance to the present's imposed values, the possibility of futures not unlike the present, futures that resist and transform what dominates the present. (Grosz 2004, 254)

CONCLUSION

By employing her imagination aligned with onto-epistemological criticisms regarding the relationship between nonhumans, humans, and the environment, Yoldas offers an inspiring new ecosystem that modifies normative understandings of death/life by queering and animating entanglements not only on a conceptual level but also within the eco-art project *per se*, where the visitor is invited to witness a future 'after humankind' that suggests the necessity of a

reconfiguration of the interspecies relationships in the present. *EOE* is about queering death/life and temporality, given that it animates non-obvious affinities through deep philosophical questionings of the boundaries drawn between nature and culture, and human and nonhuman.

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NOTES

1. Throughout this article I will be using the term eco-art as in Linda Weintraub's work *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (2012) which recognises that eco-art comprises artworks that are "experimenting with varied proportions, introducing new recipes to accomplish the ongoing tasks of survival within conditions that are morphing rapidly, intensively, concurrently, and ubiquitously" (Weintraub 2012, 16). The prefix eco- in eco-art highlights the entanglements between ecologists and artists in current environmental theories and how, like in the *EOE*, new scientific discoveries are being made at the intersections between arts and science, nourishing the ongoing expansion of eco-art.

2 This series of photographs is part of Chris Jordan's ongoing project that started in 2009. In *Midway*, he depicts how "the detritus of our mass consumption surfaces in an astonishing place: inside the stomachs of thousands of dead baby albatrosses". Jordan explores the issue of plastic pollution and nonhuman life by highlighting the ways plastics are endangering marine bird species "who mistake the floating trash for food as they forage over the vast polluted Pacific Ocean" (Jordan 2009).

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