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Dramaturgy of Extinction: Sentient Landscapes, Spectral Bodies, and Unthought Worlds in Kris Verdonck's *Conversations (at the end of the world)* and *SOMETHING (out of nothing)*

Joanna Mansbridge

Abstract

Among the challenges posed by the Anthropocene, perhaps none has been more central than redefining 'the human' that this epoch seems to name. It is no secret that the European liberal subject has been the directing force of the Anthropocene and the model from which a global humanity, and its globalising technology, has been envisioned. This essay begins by bringing together a diversity interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives to ask: does the Anthropocene mark the realisation of this homogenous human subject, or its end? Extinction seems constitutive of a climate narrative dominated by a Euro-American imaginary, wherein a fixation on endings suggests the anxieties – and the possibilities – of that imaginary coming to an end as a globalising worldview. Two recent performances by Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company, *Conversations (at the end of the world)* (2017) and *SOMETHING (out of nothing)* (2019), imagine extinction through scenarios depicting human figures displaced and overtaken by sentient landscapes. Composed of synthetic materials and activated by bio-technical forces, these landscapes scale down a computational planet, embodying an accumulated history of technological progress and human interventions in environments. Extinction, in these works, is not *the* end, however, but rather the slow dying out of a singular idea of the human subject, if not its singular narrative of technological progress

Keywords: intermedial dramaturgy; Anthropocene; landscape, extinction, intermedial dramaturgy, Anthropocene, landscape, extinction, Kris Verdonck

> I think there are really two fundamental paths. History is going to bifurcate along two directions. One path is we stay on Earth forever, and then there will be some eventual extinction event. ... The alternative is to become a space-bearing civilization and multi-planetary species, which I hope you would agree is the right way to go.[1]

> In the context of onrushing extinctions, extractions, immiserations, and wars, ... [t]here can be no environmental justice or ecological reworlding without ... nurturing and inventing enduring multispecies—human and nonhuman—kindreds. ... This kin making is crucial for imagining and crafting with each other still possible—barely possible—flourishing worlds, now and to come.[2]

This essay begins by taking seriously both of these visions as responses to the challenge of living in the Anthropocene. On one side is the colonising vision of Big Tech and its narrative of technological progress. Here, the human is the technical master whose agency is at once boundless and divorced from any context or consequence and whose destiny is to escape a doomed earth and become a 'multi-planetary species'. The 'we' here hails a homogeneous humanity and its homogenising 'civilisation', both of which are constituted through and saved by the technical wizardry of a ruling elite. On the other side is the utopian vision of academic discourse and its attempt to find a way out of the excesses of humanism through the compositional work of 're-worlding', which is not necessarily without its own colonising tendencies. Here, the human is a biological animal who relinquishes its claim to sovereignty and species superiority, recognises its dependence on nonhuman life forms, and participates in the making of multispecies communities. Agency in this scenario is not the exclusive property of humans, but rather, as Jane Bennett defines it, 'an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity'.[3] Both visions frame ecological crises as a matter of time – of futures outrunning histories, of time running out – and both propose solutions that involve nothing less than the creation of new worlds. Extinction seems somehow constitutive of both scenarios and, indeed, of critical debates surrounding the Anthropocene. More specifically, extinction seems constitutive of an Anthropocene narrative dominated by a Euro-American imaginary, wherein a fixation on endings suggests something of the anxieties – and the possibilities – of that imaginary coming to an end as a globalising worldview.

Questions surrounding the definition, place, and possible end of 'the human' have become central to discussions of the Anthropocene in the arts and humanities. These discussions inevitably confront the irony of the Anthropocene, which is that at the same time as it designates the human as a geological force, it also points to our potential demise. The confrontation between a planet indifferent to human survival and humans seeking ways to sustain their ways of life on it has sparked a wave of extinction thinking, which contemplates the end of humanity, as well as the extinction of

1. Elon Musk, 'Making Humans a Multiplanetary Species', *New Space* 5, no. 2 (2017), http://doi.org/10.1089/space.2017.29009.emu (accessed June 29, 2021).
2. Donna Haraway, 'Staying with the Trouble for Multispecies Environmental Justice', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 8, no. 1 (2018): 102–5 (102).
3. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 31.

a host of other species whose disappearance is a consequence of human activity.[4] Imagining human extinction is not new; however, unlike the apocalyptic imagination of the Cold War era, the end-time thought experiments inspired by the Anthropocene involve a planetary actor that, despite scientific attempts at prediction, management, and mitigation, exceeds human understanding and control.[5]

As perhaps the most anthropocentric and domesticated of arts, theatre has unique challenges staging this new planetary actor.[6] In the Euro-American tradition, plays have mainly revolved around the conflicts, psychology, and motivations of individual human characters interacting in static, domestic environments. How to make theatre that instead tunes into a planetary condition and the entanglements of more-than-human environments? How to make a non-anthropocentric theatre that responds to the contradictions and consequences of living in the Anthropocene? Before turning to two works that respond to these questions – Kris Verdonck's *Conversations (at the end of the world)* (2017) and *SOMETHING (out of nothing)* (2019) – it is helpful first to set the scene by examining how the Anthropocene challenges the sovereignty of the human actor and brings centre stage a planet that acts, thinks, and senses.

Shifting Roles: The End of the Universal Human and Arrival of a Planetary Actor

The Anthropocene, the name itself, seems to identify its central protagonist but does so ambiguously, situating human existence as at once indelible and precarious. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty outlines the challenges posed by the Anthropocene: it requires translating the cumulative existence of Anthropos into the diversely lived experiences of humans; planetary forces into human definitions of power; scientific measurements into moral-political claims; and million-year carbon cycles into a human-scale history. Chakrabarty points out that the Anthropocene does not mark the arrival of the human as central agent of a planetary history; rather it emphasises the quickening pace of that agent *losing* agency within that story.[7]

It is no secret that the European liberal subject – meant here not to indicate an individual person or culture, but a way of being and thinking instilled by Western humanism – has been the directing force of the Anthropocene and the model from which a universal humanity has been envisioned. In 1966, Michel Foucault declared the death of *this* human – the sovereign, rational, bounded subject and product of eighteenth-century Enlightenment reason.[8] In his extended essay, *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World* (2020), indigenous Brazilian activist Ailton Krenak writes,

> The Anthropocene plays such a dominant role in shaping our existence, our collective experience, and our idea of what humanity means. Our

4. Elizabeth Kolbert, *Sixth Mass Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014); Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction*, Vol. 1 (London: Open Humanities Press, 2014); Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren, and Matthew Chrulew, eds., *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death, and Generations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017) are notable texts in the transdisciplinary field of Extinction Studies.

5. Imagining a specifically *ecological* extinction can be traced back to George R. Stewart's 1949 novel, *Earth Abides*, in which an epidemic wipes out most of the human species and a small group of survivors begins anew.

6. As Una Chaudhuri has put it, theatre is 'the least environmentally aware, most eco-alienated and nature-aversive of all the arts of the Western world'. Chaudhuri, *The Stage Lives of Animals: Zooësis and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 102.

7. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Anthropocene Time', *History and Theory* 57, no. 1 (2018): 5–32 (9).

8. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2012).

> adherence to a fixed idea that the globe has always been this way and humanity has always related to it the way it does now is the deepest mark the Anthropocene has left.[9]

Krenak defines the 'Anthropocene as an event that brought into contact worlds' through a colonial enterprise that left many 'worlds vanished without their disappearance being seen as an elimination'.[10] This history of unacknowledged extinctions has become our present deafness to the diversity of perspectives on what it means to be human and to participate in creating worlds. Krenak differentiates an 'expanded subjectivity' that incorporates the view 'that humans are not the only interesting creatures that have perspectives on existence' from the 'ersatz humanity' of the Euro-American imaginary.[11] For him, to be human is not to be progressing ever-forward, or upward into space; rather to be human is always to be falling, though 'we've fallen to different degrees and in different places across the planet'.[12]

In *Down to Earth*, Bruno Latour also directs our attention groundward. For Latour, the Anthropocene signals a 'new climatic regime', a geopolitics in which 'the climate question is at the heart of all *geopolitical* issues', from mass migrations to 'explosions of inequality'.[13] These are all, for Latour, part of the same crisis: a crisis of space, which is at once economic, ecological, and existential. There is, he writes, a 'feeling that the ground is in the process of giving way', 'a question of attachment, of lifestyle, that's being pulled out from under us, a question of land, of property giving way beneath us'.[14] But '*under* the ground of private property, of land grabs and the exploitation of territories, *another ground*, another earth, another soil has begun to stir, to quake, to be moved'.[15] He explains,

> As long as the earth seemed stable, we could speak of *space* and locate ourselves within that space and on a portion of territory that we claimed to occupy. But how are we to act if the territory itself begins to participate in history, to fight back, in short, to concern itself with us – how do we occupy a land if it is this land itself that is occupying us? The expression 'I belong to a territory' has changed meaning: it now designates the agency that possesses the possessor! If the Terrestrial is no longer the framework for human action, it is because it *participates* in that action.[16]

The Anthropocene announces not the realisation of the universal human subject, then, but his end, and the synchronous arrival of a terrestrial agent. The earth here is not a stage or surface on which the human drama plays out, nor a globe that unifies a common humanity, but rather an unruly actor reacting to us.

This planet is not only a biophysical actor, moreover, but a technological one as well. The earth is threaded through with a technological infrastructure that sustains most aspects of human life. A network of sensors embedded in transportation systems, building façades, and mobile phones, as well as in forests, crops, ocean floors, glaciers, and endangered species, enable humans to monitor, measure, and manage both human-built and

9. Ailton Krenak, *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, trans. Anthony Doyle (Toronto: Anansi International, 2020), 2.
10. Ibid., 68–9.
11. Ibid., 36–7, 38.
12. Ibid., 63.
13. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 3, 9.
14. Ibid., 8–9.
15. Ibid., 17.
16. Ibid., 41–2.

natural systems. Linked to the thousands of satellites orbiting earth, this network of sensors envelopes the planet like another kind of atmosphere. The making of what sociologist Jennifer Gabrys calls 'a computational planet' is guided by the logic that scientific measurement, human observation, and the accumulation of data leads to improved productivity and efficiency – of cities, populations, economies, and ecosystems.[17] Epitomised by such projects as IBM's Smarter Planet, this worldview positions the human as the conductor of a technologically instrumentalised earth programmed primarily to serve the needs of humans. However, this 'smarter planet' thinks at speeds and scales that far exceed the capacity of humans. Moreover, as biophysical and technological systems become increasingly entwined, they constitute a hybridised environment, 'a gigantic system' that philosopher Yuk Hui describes as the '"becoming organic" of digital machines on a planetary scale'.[18]

Although the Anthropocene and a computational planet defy theatrical representation, landscape is a scale suited to exploring ecological questions on stage. The linear perspective that gave rise to landscape painting in the seventeenth century also gave rise to proscenium staging, an architectural design in which an arch frames the stage and scenery 'is constructed and painted in illusionistic perspective and in naturalistic proportion to the actor'.[19] Landscape and theatre have since shared an aesthetic that positions a human observer at a distance from a framed scene. In painting, landscape has conditioned a way of seeing and has powerfully shaped ideas of nature as a realm separate from the human world of politics, culture, and society. However, as founder of cultural landscape studies, John B. Jackson puts it, 'a landscape is not a natural feature … but a synthetic space, a man-made system of spaces superimposed on the face of the land'.[20] Both landscapes and theatre are artificial constructions of place. Theatre's artificiality can activate landscape not as a static scene or reified image of nature but as a 'synthetic space' that endures beyond the span of an individual life or generation and that changes according to both the slow time of geology and the accelerated pace of human development.

So, although landscape and theatre have both historically reinforced anthropocentric perspectives that view space as something made, claimed, and inhabited by humans, they can also be used in theatre to scale down planetary phenomena and home in on how humans act on their environments and how those environments *act* and act *on us*. Using an aptly theatrical metaphor, Latour points out,

> Humans have always modified their environment, of course; but the term designated only their surroundings, that which, precisely, encircled them. They remained the central figures, only modifying the décor of their dramas around the edges. Today, the décor the wings, the background, then whole building have come on stage and are competing with the actors for the principal role. This changes all the scripts, suggests other endings. Humans are no longer the only actors.[21]

17. Jennifer Gabrys, *Program Earth: Environmental Sensing Technology and the Making of a Computational Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

18. Yuk Hui, 'Machine and Ecology', *Angelaki* 25, no. 4 (2020): 54–66 (57); Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 2.

19. Graham F. Barlow, 'Introduction', *Theatre* (Oxford Art Online, 2003), https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T084345 (accessed June 29, 2021).

20. John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 8.

21. Latour, *Down to Earth*, 43.

Sentient Landscapes: The Performative Environments of Kris Verdonck

In their collection *Land/Scape/Theatre*, Una Chaudhuri and Elinor Fuchs argue that 'Landscape names the modern theatre's new spatial paradigm'.[22] Identifying an aesthetic and directorial approach in the theatre work of Gertrude Stein, Robert Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Samuel Beckett, in which a stylised scenic design takes centre stage and displaces plot and character, the collection shows how an emphasis on landscape, either in the staging or reading of a performance, reconfigures *what acts* onstage and challenges the active human figure-passive ground composition that landscape painting depicts and that proscenium staging mimics.

Brussels-based Kris Verdonck and his A Two Dogs Company can be situated in this lineage of landscape dramaturgy. Verdonck's focus is specifically oriented towards two of the twenty-first century's pressing concerns: globalising technologies and ecological collapse, and the impact of both on human existence. His landscapes are not representations of a reanimated nature but rather orchestrations of bio-technical ensembles that enmesh and envelope human actors. Trained in theatre, visual arts, and architecture, Verdonck works between the theatre stage and the gallery cube, disorienting the anthropocentric, and specifically vision-centred, modes of perception that have been conditioned by western art history and theatrical realism. Running through his oeuvre is a flattening of distinctions between machines and humans, objects and subjects, animate and inanimate. Machines dance, suffer, and sometimes die, and human actors appear alternately as dolls, ghosts, or objects. Verdonck's former dramaturg, Marianne van Kerkhoven, calls them *figures*. These figures unravel what Giorgio Agamben calls the 'anthropological machine', the elaborate apparatus in Western thought designed to differentiate the human from the animal, on the one hand, and the human from the machine, on the other.[23] In Verdonck's works, technical objects possess a life of their own, while the agency of the human is circumscribed by their involvement in/as human–machine ensembles. Kristof van Baarle explains that, in Verdonck's work, '[r]eplacing human performers by robots and objects is a decentring of the human and presents a post-anthropocentric world'.[24]

Verdonck's post-anthropocentric dramaturgy treats technology as a co-actor and co-creator of the performance. Peter Eckersall, Helena Grehan, and Edward Scheer describe Verdonck's aesthetic as an example of New Media Dramaturgy (NMD). As the authors define it, 'NMD is the product of an aesthetic "flat ontology" in which the making of the work depends as much on non-human as on human agency, an agency that operates through – or often mobilises collaborations between – artists and things'.[25] They identify a decisive shift in NMD, which can be 'characterised as one in which the human sense of what occurs, the overt anthropo-scenography of our traditions, is gradually diminished in favour of an object-oriented scenography informed by what the technology itself seems to want to say'.[26]

22. Una Chaudhuri and Elinor Fuchs, 'Introduction', in *Land/Scape/Theatre*, eds. Una Chaudhuri and Elinor Fuchs (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 1–10 (2).

23. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

24. Kristof van Baarle, 'The critical aesthetics of performing objects – Kris Verdonck', *Performance Research* 20, no. 2 (2015): 39–48 (41).

25. Peter Eckersall, Helena Grehan, and Edward Scheer, *New Media Dramaturgy: Performance, Media and New-Materialism* (London: Palgrave, 2011), 4.

26. Ibid., 23.

More recently, Verdonck has been creating performative environments, in which objects and elements once considered scenery assume a life of their own as sentient landscapes. In *Conversations (at the end of the world)* (2017) and *SOMETHING (out of nothing)* (2019), a computational planet is scaled down to automated landscapes. Composed of synthetic materials and activated by mechanical forces, they embody an accumulated history of technological progress and human interventions in environments. It is towards this actor that Verdonck directs our attention – towards the sensing, expanding landscapes of the Anthropocene. Both works use an intermedial dramaturgy composed of mechanised forces, discordant sounds, and textual fragments to explore a world in which human figures are displaced, lost, and eventually consumed by landscapes that loom and grow and seem to possess their own intentions.

Verdonck's exploration of extinction in these works avoids the affective repertoire typically provoked by extinction thinking: anxiety, panic, rebellion, melancholy. Neither elegiac nor apocalyptic in tone, *Conversations* and *SOMETHING* are, instead, contemplative, quiet, yielding, and at times comic. In both works, moreover, the end has already happened, or is happening; they take place in an abstracted present, which feels familiar and yet looks alien. In his essay, 'End-time Attitudes: Performing the Last Part', van Baarle characterises Verdonck's recent work as showing 'an increased attention and search for ways to give shape to a condition and temporality *after* the end, in order to explore attitudes towards [a] state of being emblematic for the world today'.[27] Extinction, moreover, is not *the* end in these works, but rather the slow dying out of the liberal human subject and its colonising modes of existence.[28]

Killing time, leaving space: Conversations (at the end of the world)

> When a being, human or nonhuman, dies, what goes out of the world? What is lost to the world? And what world are we left with?[29]

The premise of *Conversations (at the end of the world)* is simple: four actors (Johan Leysen, Jan Steen, Jeroen van der Ven, and José Kuijpers) and a pianist (Marino Formenti) have their final conversations.[30] They take turns reciting stories, telling jokes, and playing a melody. Most of the text is borrowed from Russian absurdist writer Daniil Kharms (1905–1942), whose brief, plotless stories, or incidents, include characters that disappear, fall, and shatter, or turn out not to be characters at all. Spoken by the actors here, the language evades meaning and performs instead its failure. *Conversations* is reminiscent of Beckett: the mound that buries Winnie in *Happy Days*, the stark environment and stasis of *Waiting for Godot*, and the resigned acceptance of Hamm in *Endgame* that 'the end is in the beginning and yet you go on'. Verdonck extends Beckett's de-idealization of nature, experiments with technology, and reduction of humans to 'a thing among things'.[31] Although *Conversations* appears, on the surface, like a realist play, the characters lack psychological depth, the dialogue refuses to make sense, and the décor evokes, at once, a desert

27. Kristof van Baarle, 'End-time Attitudes: Performing the Last Part', in *Machine Made Silence: The Art of Kris Verdonck*, eds. Peter Eckersall and Kristof van Baarle (Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2020), 152–62 (152).

28. My interpretation of these two works is based on productions I attended in 2020: *SOMETHING (out of Nothing)* on 10 January at De Meervaart theatre in Amsterdam and *Conversations (at the end of the world)* on 14 January at De Warande Cultuurhuise in Turnhout, Belgium.

29. Cary Wolfe, 'Foreword', in *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death, and Generations*, eds. Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren, and Matthew Chrulew (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), xiii.

30. *Conversations (at the end of the world)* premiered at Rotterdam Theatre on September 16, 2017.

31. David Llyod, *Beckett's Thing: Painting and Theatre* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 122.

landscape or middle-class living room. The stage space is dominated by a mass of grey particulate matter, suggesting toxic snow or dead soil. The ambiguity and agency of this landscape is the focal point of the piece.

As the audience comes into the theatre to take their seats, the characters are already sitting on low stools spaced several feet apart. There is a sense that they have been there for a long while. They seem aware of their imminent demise, but the mood is calm, upbeat even. As van Baarle writes in his dramaturgical note, they 'remain positive even though the situation is hopeless, as if their certain end paradoxically liberates them from the yoke of rationalism and progression'.[32] Their attempts at meaning are poignant and familiar. In 'Thinking Materially: Verdonck in the Anthropocene', Carl Lavery describes how Verdonck's work evokes 'an atmosphere of something we can't quite put our finger on, or speak' and registers 'the uncanniness of an aftermath that is already here'.[33] For Lavery, Verdonck's theatre and installations are 'clinical *and* critical'; they diagnose 'the unspoken condition of the Anthropocene, [and] the failure of the will and reason to transcend the earth', while at the same time providing 'a kind of tonic, a palliative'.[34] The palliative is, paradoxically, in the quiet contemplation of and submission to an end already underway.

The actors' stasis is punctuated by the increasing agency of the environment that surrounds them. Halfway through the 90-minute piece, more grey snow begins to fall (Figure 1). The material used for the snow is EPS pearls, a rigid cellular plastic used primarily for packaging seafood and electrical goods and for insulating buildings. The material itself gestures to the underground resources that have been extracted and transformed for human consumption and habitation. Verdonck describes the amount used in the production as 'an irresponsible quantity', perhaps pointing to theatre's extravagant use of materials and its complicity in a culture of consumption.[35] The accumulating grey mass matches the actors' grey and black formal dinner attire, suggesting, from the start, the indistinguishable boundaries between the human actors and the environment that envelopes them.

As the snow piles around them, the actors' conversations and appearance become increasingly nonsensical. One actor (van der Ven) asks, 'Shall I imitate a fly?' [*zal ik een vlieg nadoen?*], while the others listen earnestly to his buzzing sound. The pianist (Formetti) reveals, 'I like only soft-haired dogs' and muses, 'Isn't it funny that crocodiles are born out of eggs?' Then he plays a tune while the others listen. These reflections are interrupted by long periods of silence. The lack of narrative in *Conversations* suggests the limits, futility even, of turning catastrophes into stories and expecting purposeful action to follow. Van Baarle characterises the 'attitude' in *Conversations* as one of exhaustion, the exhaustion of intention, meaning, and attachments to outcomes. He writes, 'The non-acting and void time and space of the performance convey a sense of exhaustion, not in terms of fatigue of the performers, but rather an exhaustion of all options without the hope or connection to any goal, or meaning'.[36] This exhaustion of intention is a potent

32. *Conversations (at the end of the world)*. Projects. A Two Dogs Company/Kris Verdonck. https://www.atwodogscompany.org/en/projects/conversations-at-the-end-of-the-world/ (accessed June 29, 2021).

33. Carl Lavery, 'Thinking Materially: Verdonck in the Anthropocene', in *Machine Made Silence: The Art of Kris Verdonck*, eds. Peter Eckersall and Kristof van Baarle (Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2020), 68–78 (69).

34. Ibid., 75.

35. See interview with Verdonck: 'NEW SETTINGS #7 | Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company, "Conversations … at the end of the world". YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRuPRH6KyCA (accessed June 29, 2021).

36. van Baarle, 'End-time Attitudes', 159.

Image 1. *Conversations (at the end of the world)*. L to R: Jan Steen, Jeroen Van der Ven, José Kuijpers, Johan Leysen, Marino Formenti. Photo: © kurt van der elst | kvde.be.

counterpoint to the frenzied productivity and fetishized efficiencies of techno-capitalism.

As attempts at conversation deteriorate, the actors don black masks that transform them into anonymous bodies and heads without faces (Figure 2).[37] The effect is cartoonish and unsettling. The four faceless figures walk into the landscape and sit, while Formetti pounds out a loud, discordant 'song' during a five-minute blackout. The erasure of human features and absorption of characters into the landscape urges attention to the landscape itself, to its agency as a bio-technical system. As Verdonck explains, the seemingly simple scenario of snow falling and a landscape growing is the result of 'enormous technical set-ups', which he deliberately keeps 'hidden'.[38] The machine that produces the snow remains offstage, much like the digital infrastructures that animate environments and sustain lives and livelihoods. In this way, Verdonck finds a way to stage, in abstract microcosm, the technological processes and assemblages that have displaced the human from its central role as autonomous actor. In an essay reflecting on Verdonck's earlier posthuman experiments, Maaike Bleeker points to the ways in which 'technological developments confront humans with being implicated within larger technological ecologies whose modes of operating remain to a great extent outside human awareness'. Verdonck's work, she suggests,

37. The actors recall Gilles Deleuze's description of the faceless figures in Francis Bacon's portraits: 'the Figure, being a body, is not the face, and does not even have a face. It does have a head, because the head is an integral part of the body'. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (New York: Continuum, 1981), 20.

38. Peter Eckersall, Kristof van Baarle, and Kris Verdonck, 'Interview', in *Machine Made Silence: The Art of Kris Verdonck*, eds. Peter Eckersall and Kristof van Baarle. (Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2020), 33–47 (39).

Image 2. *Conversations (at the end of the world)*. Photo: © kurt van der elst | kvde.be.

emerges from a contemporary situation in which 'technology can no longer be understood as a set of tools used by humans and instead has become an ecology, or infrastructure, in which humans participate'.[39] It is precisely this situation that *Conversations* stages, using a minimalist dramaturgy that mimics that technological apparatuses with which we are enmeshed but which remain largely inaccessible and out of view.

When the lights come up, the actors are buried up to their necks. Lacking both individuality and autonomy, they are indistinguishable from the environment and resigned to stillness. As Lavery puts it, 'They have become mere things in a landscape of things, remnants of an earth that will outlast them'.[40] The final lines, spoken by José Kuijpers, are from Kharms' poem 'Notnow': 'This is that. That is this. Here are this and that. But where is now?' One by one, each figure sinks underground and is swept away by the mass. Bright lights come up to illuminate the snow so that it appears not grey, but stark white and stunning against the black backdrop. Several minutes of this image and the soft sound of falling snow conclude the piece. The effect evokes an hourglass, but without the glass to contain the grains of sand. Time turns into space, theatre becomes installation, and a toxic human-centred landscape is replaced by a pristine machine-made environment. The final tableau acts as a metonym of an automated planet whose rhythms are accelerated by technological forces that interweave the historical time of humans and the slow time of geology with the recursive flows of computation.

39. Maaike Bleeker, 'Posthuman Landscapes', in *Machine Made Silence: The Art of Kris Verdonck*, eds. Peter Eckersall and Kristof van Baarle (Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2020), 92–100 (94).

40. Lavery, 'Thinking Materially', 72.

Verdonck's critics invariably speak of the human/posthuman in his works in universalising terms, as though his productions and its actors and audiences are removed from specific contexts and representative of a generalised 'humanity'. However, it is worth noting, even if it risks stating the obvious, that he is critiquing a theatre and depicting the end of a human rooted in European humanist thought and its related realisms. The characters in and the theatrical form of *Conversations* is perhaps the clearest example of this. Likewise, the world that has ended in *Conversations* is not a universal, timeless existence shared by all humanity, but an uneven human-made system vulnerable to decline and demise. As Lavery suggests, 'it is possible to say that Verdonck sees hope in dissipation, in affirming the disappearance of a world – a capitalist world – that has run out of ideas and that lives on a perpetual life-support machine, vampirically sucking the life out of anything new'.[41] *Conversations* stages not *the* end, then, but the end of one kind of world and one kind of human – the rational, sovereign subject with its linear narratives of expansion and progress.

41. Ibid., 74–5.

Worldless bodies and unthought worlds: SOMETHING (out of nothing)

> Can we imagine a mode of reading the world, and its anthropogenic scars, that frees itself from folding the earth's surface around human survival? How might we read or perceive other timelines, other points of view and other rhythms?[42]

42. Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman*, 23.

If *Conversations* takes place at the end of a world, *SOMETHING (out of nothing*) is situated in a liminal space between that end and the emergence of something else.[43] This piece has five performers – Mark Lorimer, Ula Sickle, Edward Lloyd, Sophia Dinkel, and Clinton Stringer – and a musician – cello player Leila Bordreuil, whose dissonant strains play over the drone of an automated drum. Whereas *Conversations* works within the conventions of theatre to show the dissolution of language and the subjectivities it constitutes, *SOMETHING* is a dance piece that deploys a choreography in which movements breakdown and lose their meaning, and subjectivities are absent from the start. As in *Conversations*, the landscape in *SOMETHING* is the central actor.

43. *SOMETHING* premiered at Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels on May 22, 2019.

Van Baarle's dramaturgical note poses the question of this work: 'What is the place of the human in a world in which ecological catastrophe and technology are fundamentally challenging our position in the world as we've organised it?'[44] The 'we' in this question becomes the 'you' in the prologue that begins the 45-minute piece. A female voice (Tawny Anderson) implicitly addresses the audience: 'You. That urge of yours. That urge of progress. You will grow. You will do it. Frightening, that will of yours. That wind of progress pushing you forward, toward the stars'.[45] Recalling both the Musk quote that begins this essay and Walter Benjamin's ninth thesis in 'On the Concept of History', the prologue resonates in a time of unquestioned technological development and competing claims on the future. Directly after the

44. *SOMETHING (out of nothing)*. Projects. A Two Dog's Company/Kris Verdonck. https://www.atwodogscompany.org/en/projects/something-out-of-nothing/ (accessed June 29, 2021).

45. Kris Verdonck, '*SOMETHING (out of nothing)*', in *Machine Made Silence: The Art of Kris Verdonck*, eds. Peter Eckersall and Kristof van Baarle (Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2020), 165–75 (168).

prologue, a large object – made of flame retardant muslin, the material used for backdrops in theatre – descends from the ceiling and begins to inflate. As the object grows, it protrudes onto the stage, dwarfing the cello player. The 'will' to grow is expressed in this obscene landscape turned upside down, while the '"becoming organic" of digital machines' is felt in the discordant duet between the cellist and synthetic drum.

The sculpture recedes, and four dancers meander onto the stage. Two female dancers are dressed in pink silk dresses with a foliage pattern, and two male dancers wear beige linen suits. Underneath, they wear black velvet leotards and black masks that transform them into ghostly figures deprived of both individual personhood and sensory perception. The costumes characterise the performers as liminal creatures that retain traces of their former human selves. Wandering aimlessly, they begin to improvise gestures. They hop, leap, and skip, as if trying to recall a lost vocabulary or devise new techniques suited to their existential state. The mood is comic and oddly poignant. They take turns performing famous death scenes, for example Anna Pavlova's *The Dying Swan*, as if re-enacting their fate in order to make sense of it. They watch each other's performances.

The dancers perform one gesture repeatedly, both individually and as an ensemble: standing with arms outstretched to the side, they drop to their knees, then fall forward onto all fours. With faces turned to the ground, their velvet-covered hands clench and release, take hold, then let go. Then, they settle into a child's pose. The gesture suggests attachments slipping away, a grasping for stable ground, and a submission to a new existential condition.

The choreography of *SOMETHING* is inspired by two types of extinction: the first occurs when there is a 'reduction of a species to such low abundance that, although it is still present in the community, it no longer interacts significantly with other species'.[46] The second occurs when a species produces something – a fruit or pollen – that other species in an ecosystem no longer need. These ecologically extinct species remain like ghosts, somewhere between life and nonlife, active yet no longer needed for the ecosystem's survival. Biologists are increasingly studying not the extinction of individual species but the extinction *of relations* among species and between species and environments.[47] Life is located not in isolated species, after all, but emerges from 'synchronized lives'. As Anna Tsing et al put it, 'we both live and die in entanglement with others'.[48] Out of sync, the dancers search for movements to correspond with their new habitat, but seem to fail.

Between acts one and two, the stage goes black and the voice describes a post-nature world in which endings have happened, are happening: 'There are almost no insects left. Butterflies, bees, moths, went before everything else', she tells us. She describes an environment that speaks and senses, a place where 'walls have ears and rocks have mouths. The land is changing you. Irreversible time. Nature has become a nightmare'.[49] Importantly, there are no visual images projected onstage to accompany these descriptions, only a voice. Like

46. James A. Estes, David O. Duggins and Galen B. Rathbun, 'The Ecology of Extinctions in Kelp Forest Communities', *Conservation Biology* 3, no. 3 (1989): 252–64 (253).

47. See for example Alfonso Valiente-Banuet, 'Beyond species loss: the extinction of ecological interactions in a changing world', *Functional Ecology* 29, no. 3 (2015): 299–307.

48. Anna Tsing et al., *The Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 141.

49. Verdonck, *SOMETHING*, 168.

a disembodied witness from an unfolding present we are unable to see, she describes, and we imagine, scenes of straw falling from the sky, lakes on fire, black snow. The voice's authority is juxtaposed with her vulnerability. She tells us, 'I am afraid of the rain, I am afraid of the air, I am afraid of the soil', adding ominously, 'What is done cannot be undone'.[50]

50. Van Baarle, 'End-time Attitudes', 171.

After these scenes of toxic, technologically managed landscapes, the figures come back onstage for act two, appearing even more ghostly and less individuated. Dressed in generic grey button-up shirts, they search this time for ways of performing as an ensemble. They arrange themselves in a sculptural tableau à la Busby Berkeley, then disperse and wander around the stage. Devoid of purpose and unable to relate to each other or their surroundings, they drift uselessly in the alien landscape. After several attempted choreographies, they exit, untheatrically, and more inflated landscapes descend from the ceiling and dominate the stage for the rest of the performance.

Van Baarle characterises the 'attitude' of *SOMETHING* as a loss of intimacy. He writes, 'SOMETHING precisely points out how in our appropriation of the landscape and the earth system through apparatuses of consumption and control we have lost our intimate relation of familiar[ity] and unfamiliarity with the environment that we are part of. We have lost our intimacy with the world'.[51] The loss of intimacy between the figures and the landscape might itself be the spectral remnant of Romanticism, which has instilled an idea of the solitary human observer who seeks refuge in or inspiration from a nature with which he has lost his innate connection. The loss of intimacy in *SOMETHING* seems instead to be found in the dissolution of the homogenous 'world' that 'we' once thought we possessed and that now 'possesses' us.

51. Ibid., 160.

Between acts two and three, the voice narrates images of climate catastrophes, which are more fragmented and surreal than the previous monologue. In a passage loosely based on Beckett's 'Lessness' and Benjamin's angel of history, the human will to progress encounters its consequences in the form of global warming, mass migrations, and extinctions. This is a world

> out of scale. no refuge. out of scale. heated earth. birds whisper. in reverse. blackened feathers. heated storm. silenced noise. mountains. water. piled up. heated earth. drowned bodies. piles. as the earth. sky. wreckage upon wreckage. nearly upright. soft touch. out of scale. heated earth. heated sky. as one. all sides. endlessness.[52]

52. Ibid.

The images of ecological disaster mirror the fragmented collective in the previous act, who wander in a world that no longer supports their survival.

In act three, the dancers return wearing only black leotards and white-feathered masks. These are multispecies creatures existing somewhere between life and nonlife. The choreography here consists of a series of stylised duets. The abstracted movements and spectral bodies are inspired

by Noh drama, which often includes a ghost figure (*shite*) and relies on symbolic abstraction, rather than the representational mode of western realism. The turn to Noh here is not simply an aesthetic appropriation; it is a turn toward a different cosmology, a cosmology that understands the worlds of the living and non-living, permanence and impermanence not as separate states, but rather as co-constituting conditions of existence. *SOMETHING* gestures to Noh drama as another episteme, with its own techniques and ways of organising the world.

In the final tableau, the dancers sit in solitude, facing away from one another, while the synthetic landscape looks on indifferently from above, like an inflatable god or monument to technological progress. The figures, in contrast, assume a posture of acceptance and humility. *Humility* derives from the Latin adjective *humilis*, or 'lowly' and noun, *humus*, or 'ground'. *Human* can also be traced through this etymology: creatures of the ground (as distinguished from the gods). The figures here are un-homed and overpowered by their environment; they are creatures searching for a language, gestures, and ways of relating suited to their new existential state. These ghosts of geological history are not blown into the future by the storm of progress but grounded amid the catastrophe. At the same time, they are ungrounded from their sovereign position on a stable ground. Reversing the figure-ground composition of landscape, with its idealised images humans seeking refuge in nature, *SOMETHING* stages landscapes that are 'occupying' humans and reminding us that ours is not the only point of view.

Before the dancers leave the stage for the final time, they remove their masks so that they appear like moving shadows, spectres. Spectrality is not the end, however, but rather the persistence of the once-living and a recognition of the intermingling of evolutionary histories and present life forms, life and non-life, visible matter and invisible forces. Like *Conversations, SOMETHING* concludes with a tableau of sound and image. The inflated sculptures fill the stage, and the cello-drum duet grows increasingly louder to the point of being nearly unbearable. (We were given ear plugs before entering the theatre.) Vibrations ripple through the body, like the deafening voice of the Anthropocene. In *The Great Derangement,* novelist Amitav Ghosh wonders how 'our surroundings think through us'. He suggests that 'the Anthropocene has become our interlocutor, that it is indeed thinking "through" us'.[53] For Ghosh, to think the Anthropocene is to become literate in a vocabulary of images, sounds, and the patterns of nonhuman worlds, as opposed to the linear, linguistically driven narratives of realist theatre and fiction. The end of those narratives, implied in *Conversations*, opens onto the inchoate, unthought world evoked in *SOMETHING*.

In *Unthought*, N. Katherine Hayles brings together recent discoveries in neurosciences to draw attention, in the humanities, to the cognitive nonconscious – the unthought – which are 'the cognitive processes inaccessible to conscious introspection but nevertheless essential for consciousness to function'.[54] This cognitive function is not exclusive to humans but is common to animals, plants, and machines. Hayles suggests that 'environmental devastation results from deeply held beliefs that humans are the dominant

53. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 83.

54. N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1.

species on the earth because of their cognitive abilities' and calls for the need to recognise 'the cognitive capabilities of other life-forms'.[55] Specifically, she examines how humans and technical systems interact and form 'cognitive assemblages' – such as those found in urban transportation systems or the trading algorithms of finance capital. Humans have become dependent on 'technical cognitions … designed specifically to keep human consciousness from being overwhelmed by massive informational streams so large, complex, and multifaceted that they could never be processed by human brains'.[56] These 'nonconscious cognitive assemblages' are rapidly transforming in speed, scope, and scale to such an extent that 'biological and technical cognitions are now so deeply entwined that it is more accurate to say they interpenetrate one another' and constitute a '*planetary cognitive ecology*'.[57] Tuning into this 'planetary cognitive ecology' is radically different from 'getting in touch with nature'. However, 'Once we overcome the (mis) perception that humans are the only important or relevant cognizers on the planet, a wealth of new questions, issues, and ethical considerations come into view'.[58] Verdonck's work opens up these questions, but, importantly, does not answer them.

55. Ibid., 3.
56. Ibid., 11.
57. Ibid., 3, 11.
58. Ibid., 11.

Conclusion: Learning to Fall in the Anthropocene

Extinction has become central to an Anthropocene narrative shaped by artists, academics, climate activists, techno-utopians, and politicians alike.[59] What does a focus on extinction make possible, and what does it eclipse? Almost by definition, extinction thinking forecloses on any future; when considered as a singular event, extinction evades more difficult questions about how we might change how we live in favour of a simplistic, self-defeating fantasy, in which the slate is wiped clean and we get to start again. Extinction is meaningful if it jars us into a way of thinking beyond the span of an individual life, culture, or generation; if it stretches our understandings of time beyond the linear trajectory of human history; if it distributes value and agency to life forms other than our own; and if it takes into view *multiple* endings as the condition of other beginnings. But ultimately, as Colebrook writes, images of the end 'are unsustainable; they – like the thought of extinction itself – will always be *for* us, and are always co-opted by the narrative lures they fragment'.[60]

The singular narrative of technological progress depends on the survival of the liberal human subject, who is in command of his technological tools and confident in his capacity to control, or escape, the planet. This subject's exclusive claim to rational thought and autonomous action is challenged by technological and planetary systems that think and act and that together constitute a dynamic system that exceeds human control. Confronted by a world created for our own use but over which we no longer reign as sovereign masters, we are, unsurprisingly, preoccupied with (our own) extinction. And yet as Krenak points out,

> There's still a whole constellation of little groups of people who dance, sing, make it rain. The kind of humanity we're being asked to join can't

59. In his remarks to the climate summit at the 2021 COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned his audience, 'We are digging our own graves', *Guardian*, November 1, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/video/2021/nov/01/digging-our-own-graves-world-leaders-open-cop26-with-climate-crisis-warning-video (accessed November 29, 2021).
60. Colebrook, *The Death of the PostHuman*.

> bear so much pleasure, so much fruition in life. So they holler on about the end of the world in the hope of making us give up on our dreams.[61]

Dreams, as Krenak explains, are understood here 'not as mere oneiric experience, but as a discipline related to our formation, to our cosmovision, to … self-knowledge, and awareness of life, and the application of that knowledge in our interaction with the world and other people'.[62] Perhaps dreaming is the right cognitive register for tuning into unthought worlds and for learning how to fall. Krenak suggests that, instead of 'trying to dodge our vocation for falling', we could start making more 'colourful parachutes to slow the fall'.[63] As a technology of sorts, parachutes offer an image not of controlling the planet or conquering space but of living gracefully with the gravitational pull of being bound to earth and finding softer ways to land. Learning to fall, in the Anthropocene, means letting go of the stable ground and sovereign self some of us once thought we possessed. Indeed, 'The end of the world might be just that, a brief interruption in a state of ecstasy we can't bear to lose'.[64]

61. Krenak, *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, 34.
62. Ibid., 56.
63. Ibid., 63.
64. Ibid., 61.

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