**The Black Light at The End of the World**

Tina Rivers Ryan was invited by HOME to write a critical text examining the work of the Future 20 Collective.

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I'm standing in a twenty-first century urban plaza that is ringed by buildings of glass and steel. One of them bears a large neon sign reading HOME; its ground-floor windows are plastered with large posters displaying a beautiful woman's bandaged face and the word GREED in bold red letters. The plaza itself is encased by a rainbow-colored, coral-like scrim that blocks all the thoroughfares. A large bonfire of wooden pallets rages in its center, while construction cones and other barriers float in circles above the flames. It's not clear who set the blaze, as I don't see anyone around. In fact, I don't see any signs of life at all, except for a dark, denuded tree trunk, rising from the windswept ground like a skeleton's hand from the grave.

That's when I spot him: comrade Friedrich Engels, or rather, a heroic concrete sculpture of him. Arms crossed over his chest, he stares off into a future that is already in the past. The pedestal under him has partly collapsed, tilting him forward awkwardly, though not quite toppling him. I ponder his fate, and mine: we appear to be trapped alone together, here in this abandoned space that feels like the end of the world.

Someone else is here with us, though—even if only as a ghostly recording from another time. I hear his words over a rumbling percussive beat, his voice alternating between droning song and impassioned speech:

> *Beacon of man enlighten*
> *Black light don't be frightened*
> *Guiding down to New Eden*
> *Black light don't be frightened*

I look around again. There's nobody here but me and stone-faced Engels. Am *I* the lone survivor who is being called upon to follow this dark light towards a new paradise?

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Thus begins *Last Place On Earth* (2020), a twenty-minute, 360-degree digital experience produced by Future 20 Collective. Before the arrival of COVID-19, this multi-disciplinary group of young artists—working under the artistic direction of Ivan Morison as part of a year-long residency at HOME Manchester, a space for contemporary visual and performing arts—was aiming to produce an exhibition. In its wake, they shifted (like much of the art world) to virtual space, transforming

HOME into the departure point of a journey through a fantastical, post-apocalyptic landscape in the near future. The experience weds digital world-building with the arts of cinema, music, and poetry, and unfolds in five segments, each representing an element of nature. (In this, *Last Place On Earth* is reminiscent of Char Davies's *Osmose*, 1995, a pioneering VR world with twelve distinct, semi-abstract spaces including Forest, Clearing, and Cloud.) Like a film, *Last Place On Earth* is oriented around the perspective of a single "camera," which moves on its own through space; unlike a film, the viewer is able to freely pan or move this "camera" in any direction, simply by dragging a finger or mouse across the screen. In other words, it replicates the dynamic "first-person" perspective familiar from modern videogames, especially those known as first-person shooter (FPS) games. As in these games, this point of view positions us as the protagonist of the narrative, and not merely a passive witness to someone else's story.

Although the experience progresses without interruption, the segments are in fact distinct, and have been given their own names by the artists. The first, "Black Light," uses fire to suggest the ongoing ecological destruction of our world.[1] After passing through a kaleidoscopic time portal, we are ritually cleansed in the waters of "Bleak Sea," before traveling across the arid desert of "Surface Cloud," where a constantly shifting open-air structure of petrified bones suggests an equally open model of community. In "Soft Stone," a glass-enclosed tunnel that delivers us into an observatory reveals the beauty of earth, represented by a valley bounded by mountains under the aurora borealis. The final segment, "Nexus Valley," features eruptions of swirling abstract colors that recall the modernist tradition of "visual music," as well as the psychedelic light shows of the 1960s.[2] Here, we are immersed in the pleasant ether of a new utopia, having achieved the final stage of our rebirth.

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Since the 1980s, the term "Virtual Reality," or VR, has described the use of digital devices—originally headsets and data gloves, but now including smartphones and other hand-held instruments like Microsoft Kinect and Nintendo Wii—to insert the user into a virtual space that is navigated through the tracked movement of single or multiple parts of the body (such as the eyes, head, or hands). At one end of the VR spectrum are 360-degree films like *Last Place On Earth*, which offer viewers a modicum of immersion and interactivity. At the other end are fully-immersive worlds—such as those that use headsets to block out reality and data gloves to track hand movements—that offer viewers the ability to interact with virtual objects, or even avatars of other people. Unlike the illusory spaces offered by paintings and films, these VR worlds allow multiple people to experience the same hallucinatory

[1] As I write this, yet another wildfire instigated by a "gender reveal" stunt is ravaging California; *Last Place on Earth* exists against the backdrop of climate change as much as COVID.

[2] See, for example, *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900*, exh. cat. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005), and Christoph Grunenberg, ed., *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Publishing, 2005).

space through *physical actions* that have consequences, giving them a certain amount of control over their experience: to cite VR pioneer Jaron Lanier, VR can be described as the collective sharing of lucid dreams.[3] While it always has been haunted by its potential for abuse—Lanier himself describes a nightmare scenario in which VR becomes a tool for achieving new levels of social engineering through behavior modification—its essential promise is to make individuals *more* self-aware, active, and connected, not less. Most profoundly, it offers a way of holding a kind of mirror up to our consciousness, allowing us to not only "see," but viscerally *feel*, the way in which our mind transforms sensory input into reality.

It was only around five years ago that VR and the related practices of Augmented Reality, or AR, and Mixed Reality, or MR (which have been clustered together under the umbrella of "Extended Reality," or XR) became a major trend in mainstream contemporary art. With the emergence of consumer systems like Oculus Rift, Samsung Gear VR, and Google Cardboard, more artists began experimenting with the creation of immersive and even interactive digital worlds, building on the rising popularity of video and other forms of time-based media art. Around 2016, VR became the subject of endless media hype: *Hyperallergic* triumphantly announced that "The Virtual-Reality Future Is Here," while Artsy.net declared VR "the Most Powerful Medium of Our Time."[4] This swell of enthusiasm was soon followed by a seemingly endless wave of institutional exhibitions large and small. In Germany alone—and from only 2017 to 2018—these included *Unreal: A Virtual Reality Exhibition* at the NRW-Forum in Düsseldorf; *Perception is Reality: On the Construction of Reality and Virtual Worlds* at the Frankfurter Kunstverein; *Beautiful New Worlds: Virtual Realities in Contemporary Art* at the Zeppelin Museum, Friedrichshafen; and *Virtual Insanity* at the Kunsthalle Mainz.[5] The commercial sector of the art world took notice, too: in 2018, HTC Vive became the first "Virtual Reality Partner" of Art Basel, and in 2019, Frieze New York included a VR exhibition that was curated by Daniel Birnbaum, the director of the VR production company Acute Art.[6] Not unexpectedly, the backlash to the VR trend was immediate, with critics complaining that too many VR artworks are no more than glorified videos, and that these tend to privilege voyeurism and spectacle in problematic ways (represented most notoriously by Jordan Wolfson's *Real Violence*, which caused a scandal at the 2017 Whitney Biennial).[7] To many, using VR to make and experience art has seemed

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[3] See Jaron Lanier, *Dawn of the New Everything: Encounters with Reality and Virtual Reality* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2017).

[4] https://hyperallergic.com/268442/the-virtual-reality-future-is-here/ and https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-virtual-reality-is-the-most-powerful-artistic-medium-of-our-time

[5] Other notable examples of institutions focusing on VR include DiMoDA (The Digital Museum of Digital Art), which launched its first exhibition in 2015; the New Museum and its partner Rhizome, which inaugurated the series called *First Look: Artists' VR* in 2017; and the exhibition *Speculative Cultures: A Virtual Reality Exhibition*, presented at the New School's Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery in New York in 2019.

[6] See https://arts.vive.com/us/articles/projects/art-photography/vive_arts_for_art_basel/ and https://www.frieze.com/video/electric-partnership-lifewtr

[7] For example, see https://hyperallergic.com/385325/new-vr-arts-platform-launches-with-abramovic-eliasson-koons-and-a-whole-lot-of-hype/ and https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/art-tech/is-there-hope-for-virtual-reality-in-art-why-marina-abramovic-and-jeff-koons-are-not-the-answer-55318

like an answer in search of a question. As Jason Farago asked in his 2017 *New York Times* article, "Virtual Reality Has Arrived in the Art World. Now What?"[8]

Although VR has been anointed as a cutting-edge trend, in truth, artists have been experimenting with creating digital virtual worlds for decades. While VR can be a useful tool for exploring the virtualization of many aspects of our contemporary lives, it also can be a medium for addressing themes that recur throughout the history of art, such as our relationship to the environment and our need for community. (One could even argue that the desire to have immersive experiences transcends our specific historical moment, and that digital "VR art" is merely the latest iteration of an art form that includes Roman frescoes and nineteenth-century panoramas.)[9] For example, Matt Mullican's "Computer Project"—a computer-generated simulation of an abstract city that formed the basis of his 1989 solo show at The Museum of Modern Art in New York—is less about computing than it is an allegory of how we each construct our own (non-digital) reality.[10] Long before the crystallization of today's digital platforms—and the emergence of artists who challenge or reimagine how they structure our off- and online lives—artists like Mullican turned to VR to explore fundamental questions about mind and body, self and society, and nature and culture.

Viewed through the perspective of VR's longer history, *Last Place On Earth* appears to advance the humanistic project that has long been at VR's core. Arguably, its major theme is our relationship to the "natural" world (a topic that has fascinated many VR artists, such as Tamiko Thiel), and the way in which that relationship serves as the backdrop of our relationships to each other, and to history—as the toppled statue of poor comrade Engels reminds us. It thereby provides one answer to the question of why VR might be useful for today's artists, who are working in the midst of multiple ongoing crises of planetary proportions. Using multimedia immersion, it offers a collective dream of a new world—beautiful, sustainable, and communal—built from the ashes of this one. It is a New Eden built inside a technological system that itself promised to be a New Eden, where beacons of dark light signal not only endings, but also new beginnings.

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[8] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/03/arts/design/virtual-reality-has-arrived-in-the-art-world-now-what.html;

[9] See, for example, Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

[10] On the "Computer Project," see Tina Rivers Ryan, "Entering the Picture: Matt Mullican's Virtual Photography," in *Matt Mullican: Photographs Catalogue 1967-2018*, exh. cat. (Milan: Pirelli HangarBicocca, 2019), 33-44.