

Spectres

by Sara Blazej

on Pierce Myers's
Acid Terraforming (2020)

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Pierce Myers, Acid Terraforming, 2020 (still), Digital video, 8:05 minutes. Courtesy the artist.

Image description: A large, brown cross is positioned on the stage of a digitally rendered church. Three human figures along with a large robotic figure are also on the stage. In the foreground, a masked person in scrubs reaches their arm towards lush vegetation that occupies much of the cavernous institution.

big window

Acid Terraforming

Pierce Myers's video *Acid Terraforming* (2020) is a series of eco-geo-political proposals for the future of a society that has, thus far, failed to imagine a way out of its own impending ecological collapse.

The late author Mark Fisher characterized the neoliberal period as a crisis of the political imagination, where alternative visions of the future have long been foreclosed. Today, we know two things that are simultaneously true but also in conflict: (1) climate catastrophe requires a total reorganization of mass society, but (2) there is seemingly no alternative to global capitalism.

Lifting its title from Fisher's unfinished text "Acid Communism," Myers's work responds with a suite of sixteen futures plotted along two axes: "Centralized Planning" to "Acephalic Adaptation," and "Eco Austerity" to "Renewable Acceleration." Here, the grid functions as a choose your own adventure game. The player's objective is to tour each scene and unpack the complex futures therein. Using the Unreal game engine, Myers creates lush, simulated realities that are immersive and rich with detail. The opaque, multi-hyphenate titles, bordering on the humorous or absurd, load each scenario with forking meanings and potentials. (The future-casting grid is itself an exercise designed to envision extreme or improbable scenarios.) With *Acid Terraforming*, Myers uses fiction and digital worldbuilding to jumpstart the political imagination.

Fortified IPCC Automated Ecology Zone

First in Myers's series is Fortified IPCC Automated Ecology Zone, a massive scale rewilding proposal wherein major swathes of continental land, previously ravaged by resource extraction, are depopulated, while plant growth simulators and eco-acoustic surveillance help to accelerate environmental revival. In this scenario, trees are implanted with solar powered listening devices. Developed by RFCx ([Rainforest Connection](#)), the acoustic sensors were initially used in logging prevention programs to detect the sounds of chainsaws. These devices safeguard the forest by listening for sounds associated with illegal logging and poaching, and responding to the threat in real-time. The technology has since been developed to hear animal and insect sounds and identify weather activity, effectively functioning as a biodiversity monitoring system.

In considering the political implications of a future like this, one wonders: What if the land in question were populated by humans? Would

such a reforestation effort require a forced migration? If so, how could that be equitably achieved, if such a thing is even possible? And, once revitalized, who then owns or governs this newly fertile land? In a recent conversation, Myers reiterates the likely unpopularity of a program like this—he isn't out to promote one scenario or another, but rather to push past our preconceived limits of eco-political discourse.

Cosmos and Chaos

The dreams of medieval alchemists, philosophers, poets, and kings had come true.... Artificial suns made of radium had already melted the polar ice caps, and at night electric moons cast a gentle glow over the earth.... Having woken on a luxurious bed made of platinum wires and aluminum, Fride took a quick shower, did his routine gymnastic exercises, put on his clothes woven from a light thermo fabric that emitted heat in the winter and kept the body cool in the summer, and ate a breakfast of nutritional chemical bars and an extract of processed wood fiber that tasted of Bessarabian wine... A tranquil and happy feeling of strength and health spread throughout his entire body...

Fride remembered that midnight would mark one thousand years since the discovery of human immortality. A thousand years! Almost in spite of himself, he began to take stock of his life.

- Alexander Bogdanov, “Immortality Day,” *Russian Cosmism*, ed. Boris Groys, pub. by e-flux: 2018.

In the second scene, “Orthodox Holy Trinity MegaChurch Ecosystem,” four men in black monastic dress are chanting. They stand, shoulder to shoulder, at an altar. A disembodied voice speaks of worldbuilding and Godbuilding. We see the aerial view of a crowded procession, followed by beautifully veiled parishioners, dutifully making signs of the cross.

Boris Groys, in his introduction to the collected writings on Russian Cosmism, refers to Friederich Nietzsche’s description of human culture as “dependent on the eternal battle between Apollonian and Dionysian forces, or in other words, between cosmos and chaos, order and anarchy.... Only two ways of reacting to the battle... are possible: the ecstatic embrace of chaos or an attempt to control the cosmos and secure its victory over chaos.” The deity-oriented option inspired the Russian

Cosmists, who hoped that technology would become a new kind of messianic force. Their primary agenda included human immortality, space travel and the resurrection of the dead.

The Godbuilders, part of the Russian Cosmists, believed that religion had a crucial role in constructing a communist society. They held that while divinical paradigms were false, the concepts and practices surrounding them (community, morality and faith) were useful to human life and should be incorporated into the communist experiment. In essence, the Cosmists sought to replace the immortality of the soul, guaranteed by God, with the immortality of the body, guaranteed by the state. Groys writes, “In our time... corporeal immortality remains the only chance of life after death. The promise of technology substitutes for the promise of divine grace.”

In the pews of Myers’s Megachurch, parishioners, clad in hazmat suits, applaud a nimble, but towering, dancing soldier. Two figures in T-pose mirror the cross on the altar, the focal point of the temple. Their pose is significant here—as the default avatar stance, it suggests a futility or lack of agency, an offering of their collective bodies for control by a higher governing power. As the soldier dances on, it becomes rapidly spliced with footage of a robotic arm harvesting spinach. Is the overblown freestyling defense unit a harbinger of a coming fusion between the church and military apparatus? Is its proximity to robotics an indication of the mind-uploaded perma-existence in store for humanity?

Adorning the walls of the church, we see a California Republic flag and recall the Cosmist’s quest to solve death, now manifest in the life-extension projects of Silicon Valley transhumanists. The Cosmists’s ideas—cryogenic freezing, space exploration and rejuvenating blood transfusions—live firmly in today’s reality, but through the dreams of tech billionaires, not the work of state projects. But, what if they were state projects? Is there a scenario in which it is a governmental imperative to extend farming into the solar system and accelerate the search for longer, stronger human lifespans? Could their messianic vision be reclaimed for public, rather than private, good—as it was intended? In the Megachurch, surgeons toil, harvesting leafy crops near the pulpit.

Choices

POV: You are an independent seasteader in a society eighty years in the future that has developed a seaweed cultivation industry as a means

of carbon removal. It's going well, endangered species are beginning to flourish. Your job is to perform repairs on kelp-harvesting drone farms, a low pressure gig you opted for so you could spend some time alone. After a long workweek, you dock your boat at your go-to spot, Ghost Bar. The business floats on a platform, complete with an algae biocrude heating system, living quarters, and a vegetable garden. You sip your cocktail and catch up with the friendly Ghost Bar owner-operator.

Later on, as you both reminisce about life on land, a nearby storm gains strength. It forces the floating community to quickly disperse. You evacuate, autopilot through the night, and anchor at an island to the south. When you get there, you debrief with others on the damage and learn that Ghost bar and the bartender were tragically, violently, engulfed by the storm.

The scene above outlines a chapter in Holly Jean Buck's "After Geoengineering." Throughout the book, speculative green initiatives are explored as narratives, or sketches. In the case above, this generation's great-grandchildren live and work in a sustainable aqua-cultural society still weathering the effects of climate change. Sure, the reefs are being restored, but the volatile environment continues to claim human life with shocking regularity. Through fictional scenes like Ghost Bar, Buck allows us to understand the subjective experience and human cost of climate catastrophe in a way that quantitative data and charts are unable to capture.

Pierce's work is in dialogue with matrices of artists who incorporate subjective worldbuilding into their visual and discursive practices. Joshua Cittarella crafts elaborate scenes interweaving fringe online political ideologies and real-world applications. [Fully Atomized Side Gig Precariat](#) (2021) is composed of a lifesize, digitally composited photographic scene, set in the not-too-distant, vaguely dystopian future in which a delivery worker, commuting through extreme weather, is pinged by a mobile device and dispatched to a new work assignment. Buck's scholarship and Cittarella's work demonstrate the effectiveness and demand for critical design and narrativity, or, as Myers [terms it](#), "smart visual culture—ways of folding bigger and bigger ideas into emergent aesthetics."

The methods of futurecasting used by Myers, Cittarella and Buck, are not new, nor are they an invention of the Internet. Scenario planning goes back to the 1950s; its origins are with the RAND Corporation, a think tank extension of the US Military. Scenario planning is a strategic method for creating flexible but long term plans that are capable of accounting for

many variables. Today, it's used to navigate geopolitical conflict, plan corporate strategy, coordinate supply chains, allocate carbon budgets and numerous other consulting projects.

Scenario planning is a strategy, but in these artworks it's also a meme. At first, the breathless taxonomizing of increasingly ridiculous scenarios seems irreverent and troll-ish. But, as with all good memes, we find ourselves haunted by the idea. What initially reads as hyperbole (or irony) is the temporary deferral of a profoundly sticky concept. We are ironically poisoning ourselves into imagining a future beyond neoliberalism. Today, the ecological and geopolitical conditions created by neoliberal dominance have become so untenable that we are forced to return to the ideological drawing board.

Just as Fisher's "Acid Communism" pushes readers to rethink the processes that led us here and try to regain political optimism, Myers's *Acid Terraforming* prompts us to re-examine the ways we can intervene in the climate crisis—beyond "green consumerism" and compostable straws—at a technological level that is planetary in scale. These solutions might involve any number of unpopular or unconsidered directions explored in the grid: nuclear energy, huge walled off zones of the Earth, mega densification of cities, floating seasteads, extraplanetary mining. What's needed is a full scale solution that may present us with a new and unfamiliar version of reality.