





Futurity Island

September 6–26, 2019

Co-presented by Blackwood Gallery and
MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology

Walker Memorial – West Lawn
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, MA



We are disturbing the earth and making it quake.

—Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*









Futurity Island

Futurity Island is an architectural structure conceptualized as a space for acoustic experimentation by Gediminas & Nomeda Urbonas in collaboration with Indrė Umbrasaitė, Nicole L'Huillier, and Tobias Putrih. It serves as an infrastructure that hosts sound compositions and performances that open space for learning.

Pipe is the primary structural and symbolic unit of the *Island*, referencing the material that has facilitated worldwide land reclamation throughout the modern era. Once used to drain swamps, pipe becomes a metaphor for a human-centered ecology, an infrastructure of environmental domination and one of the prime symbols of the Anthropocene. In *Futurity Island*, a network of pipes becomes an artificial skeleton that employs sound to channel what we used to call “nature.” *Futurity Island* builds a sound infrastructure that brings humans and non-humans into a more symmetrical, collaborative relationship, aiming to transmit and to hear the silenced voices of this planet.

By installing sonic transducers within the structure, the artists create an organic, reverberating object that creates space for swampy mediations and acoustic experiments—using sound as a quaking force that destabilizes both architectural space and the human misconception that we are “builders of the environment.”

First presented at *The Work of Wind: Air, Land, Sea* in September 2018, *Futurity Island* was disassembled into individual pipe sections, and repacked into a single 53' Musket Transport Ltd. trailer to be trucked from Mississauga to Cambridge, MA. With *Futurity Island*'s “swamp” making a cross-border transit, the work moves through geographies and infrastructures shaped by human restructuring of natural space—at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *Futurity Island* will be reassembled to

animate the local environment alongside the Charles River. At a new site following its first presentation near Lake Ontario, *Futurity Island*'s pipe serves as a conduit to amplify and reverberate the cultural and environmental histories of each location.


Futurity Island builds on the legacy of MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies' Charles River Project, a program held in the early 1970s aimed at connecting the campus to riparian environmental concerns. In engaging this history, *Futurity Island* calls for creative solutions for climate change adaptation, and highlights the challenges and opportunities for future life on and with the water.





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The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him.

—Bertolt Brecht, “The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication”




On Sympoietics

Inspired by discussions on radical imagination, Indigenous thought, collective intelligence, and plural ecology, *Futurity Island* invites participants to develop new habits of thought in this era of environmental crisis. It is a space to speculate on the usefulness of the concept of “sympoiesis” for imaging and working together in radical interdisciplinarity toward desirable futures.

In the utopian regime, the moment of future is transformed into a representable topography of space. Future is a place—an island—a defined location that is better than ours. It is characterized both by separation and distancing. The geography of a utopian island is manipulatable, as well as conceivable at a glance; it is contained within its limits and is almost transportable as an architectural model or pavilion.

The whole systematicity of the swamp rejects utopian logic, as it cannot be modelled properly within the complexity of symbiotic relationships. Tracing back the dialectics of island and swamp reveals the genesis of radical creativity, *creatio ex nihilo*, which was described by Cornelius Castoriadis. He conceptualized this process by offering

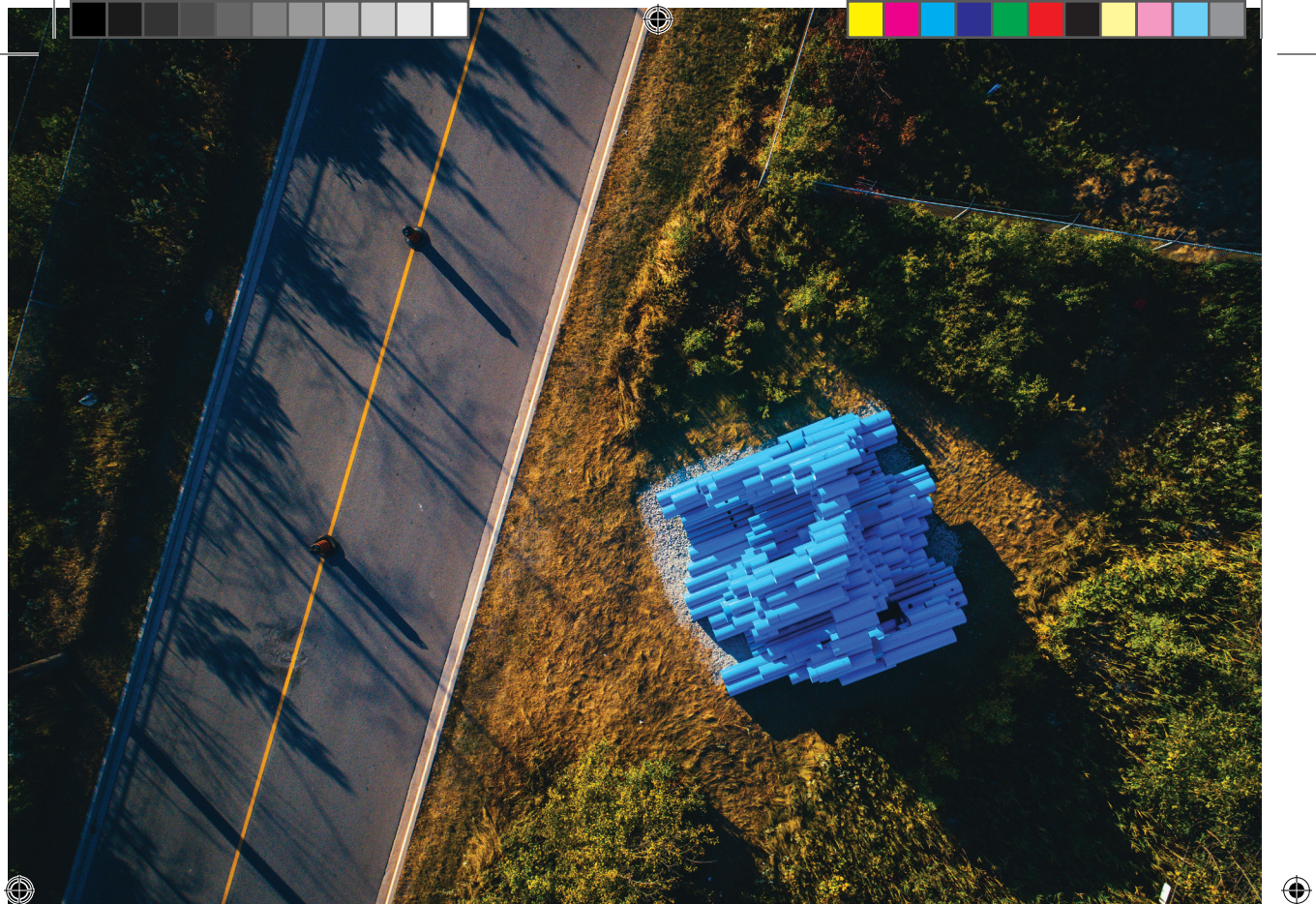


the idea of radical imagination and conceiving it as a generative power, which, preceding every reality, grants a primordial access to materiality.

A swamp is an environment that questions imaginary separation; it is a milieu without solid ground and clear limits. Its lack of complete determination is the source of its power, signalling an urgent need for interdependency. It is an opposite to the geometrical space of a utopian island, which can be disassembled into its constituent parts. Fragmentation, the removal of one element, runs the risk of unbalancing the whole system. Thus, all types of wetlands cannot be thought of as collections of ontogenetic individualities; they exist as constant surplus productions by means of mediation among them.

The radical imaginary of the swamp stems from a critical procedure to question its representations and roles. How can we co-live with the swamp? How can the figure of the swamp dissolve the boundaries of our islands of individuality? How can its sympoietic potential be expanded?

—Gediminas & Nomedas Urbonas, *The Swamp School Manual(s)*





The Island assumes other islands. Continents reject mixing, whereas archipelagic thought makes it possible to say that neither an individual's identity, nor a collective identity, is fixed and established once and for all. I can change through exchange with the other without losing or deluding my sense of self.

—Édouard Glissant, *Poetic Intention*






Imagine yourself stepping onto this soft, spongy-form surface. Feel it yielding to your tread. Listen to the squelching, sucking sound as you raise your foot. See the imprint that you leave behind slowly filling with water and fading. Now stop and bend close to the ground. Let the dank smell that comes off the peat invade your nostrils. Plunge your hands below the layer of plant growth and down into the brown-black, liquid-solid indeterminacy that lies beneath—a mixture of water and plant and animal remains, built up over hundreds or thousands of years. Feel its texture surrounding your fingers as you move them. Register on your skin the simultaneous contrast and permeability between the overgrown surface and the sticky, amphibious goo beneath. Do you find yourself wondering: what's down there?

—Stuart McLean, “BLACK GOO: Forceful Encounters with Matter in Europe’s Muddy Margins”






Following túngara frog calls around the City of Knowledge on my bicycle, I found large groups of frogs in ephemeral rainwater ponds sitting in parking lots. They were also thriving in gutters and ditches built decades earlier by the Army Corps of Engineers. Some frogs were strategically positioning themselves in drain pipes and other acoustically enhanced infrastructure that noticeably amplified their calls. Bringing my casual observations together with information I had gleaned from scientific archives, I surmised that túngara frogs had been constantly moving among multiple elements—living on earth and in water, choosing among environmental worlds and human architectures. In short, these frogs had become ontological amphibians. Alongside *Ectatomma* ants and agoutis, túngara frogs were flourishing alongside people, within architectures designed with the well-being of others in mind. Switching from one element to another, these native animals had become adept at invading and occupying emergent worlds.

—Eben Kirksey, *Emergent Ecologies*





The multiplicity of life forms found within spaces of the extractive zone complicate the relation between self and other, nature and culture, human and the nonhuman, and exist beyond the grasp of the monocultural and extractive divide. Beneath the surface, where digital technology scans for earthly resources, and outside of the conversion of nature into monetary exchange, something else emerges. Namely, the dream of “another-world” is not merely a future-oriented utopia but it is already in motion, teeming with the alternatives we desire. Seeing the muck, dwelling in it, and finding ways to make it visible become important antidotes as present-past ways to recognize and strengthen these alternatives.

—Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*

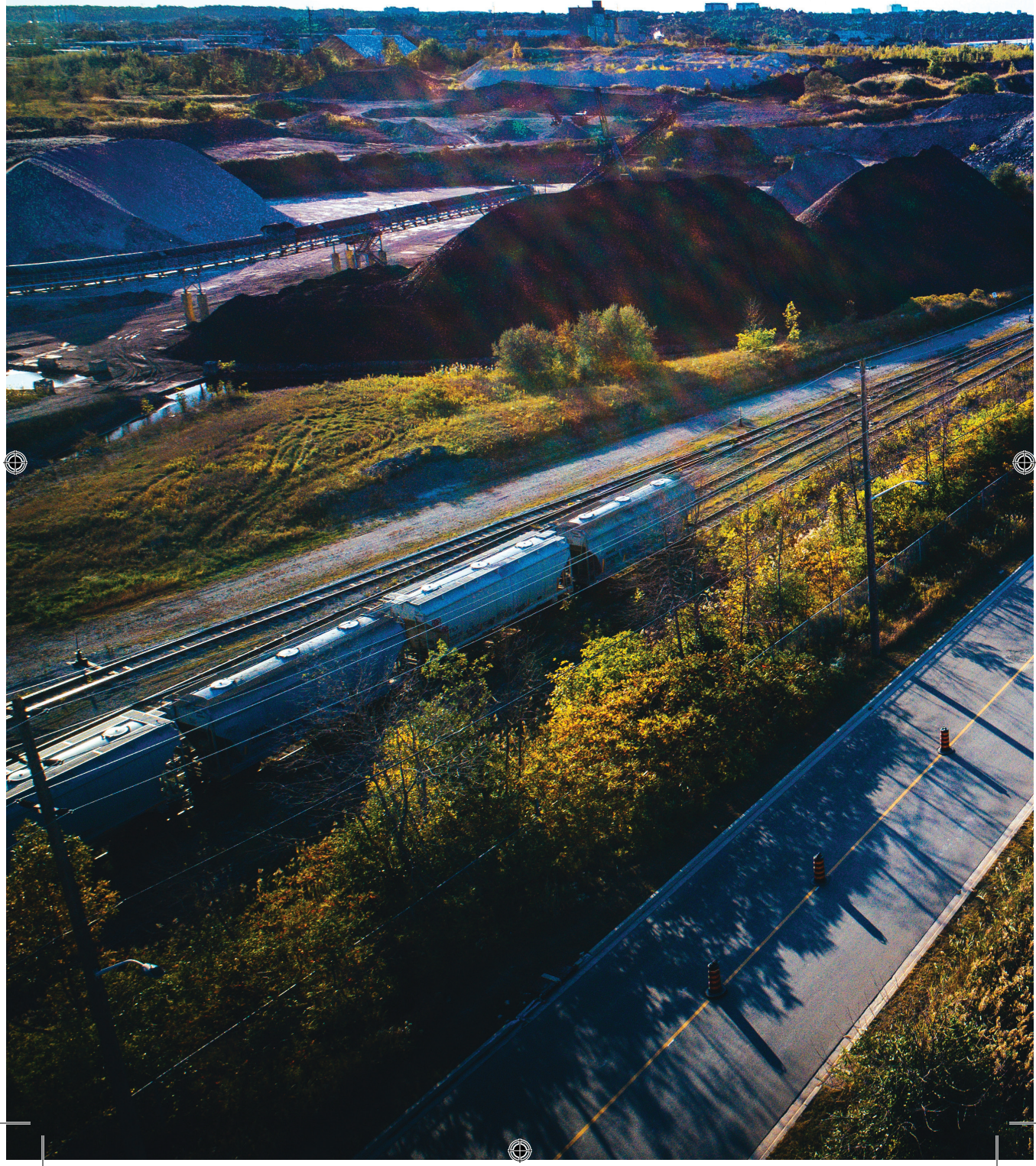


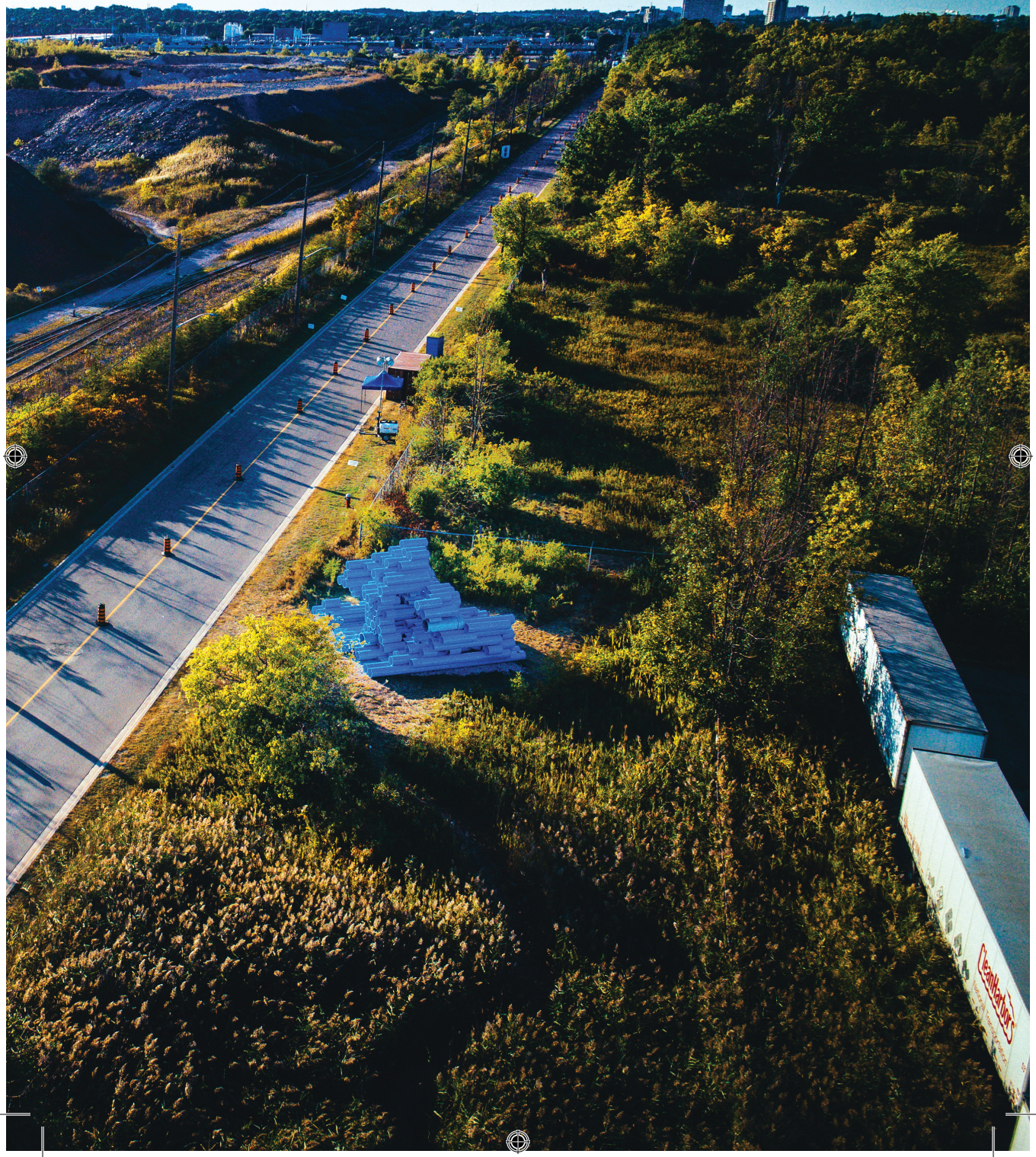
The thought of Trembling [*la pensée du tremblement*] surges up everywhere, music and forms suggested by the peoples of the world. Soft and slow music, deep, brisk music. Beauties that cry out. It protects us from thoughts of system and systems of thought. It presupposes neither fear nor the irresolute. It extends infinitely like an innumerable bird, wings speckled with the earth's salt. It gathers us into absolute diversity, in a whirlwind of encounters. Utopia that never settles and that opens tomorrow, like a sun and a fruit both shared. Trembling [*tremblement*] emphasizes the instinct, moderate or immoderate, for this diversity.


—Édouard Glissant, *La Cohée du Lamentin*











I offer the following commentary of our still uncharted and newly terrifying meteorological era, following the wind that, soon after the meltdown of the nuclear reactor at Fukushima on 11 March 2011, swept a radioactive cloud toward Tokyo, from Michaël Ferrier's *Fukushima, récit d'un désastre*:

Rain falls, but it is no longer rain, the wind blows, but it is no longer wind: it bears along with it cesium rather than pollen, whiffs of toxins rather than perfumes. The sea, while continuing to howl, becomes mute with terror. It dilutes as best it can these deadly residues. Impossible to flee. The day is already uninhabitable. Night arrives without bringing forgetfulness, just the fear of new dreams, each one more somber and fetid than the last. Horror is an atmosphere: lost particles, powdery clouds, dubious radiation. We have arrived—or returned—to the meteorological stage of our tale: we confide our destiny to the wind and the waves.

Such ill winds are what we now breathe, speak, and sing. There need be a room in the *Atmosphere* exhibition devoted to this latest transmutation of the natural world into an exhausted universe:



“Dystopic Atmospheres.” Perhaps—like the rooms devoted to the wind in the pines, the ringing cowbells, and an ocean tempest—it will be a sonic chamber where we shall hear nothing but the minimal, anxious clicks of a Geiger counter.

—Allen S. Weiss, “Cold Wintry Wind,” *The Work of Wind: Land*



Programs

The opening of *Futurity Island* at MIT is marked by two days of discursive programming, including performances, talks, and panel discussions. Invited speakers and performers engage the work's ecological themes, bringing perspectives informed by Indigenous environmental movements and cosmologies, studies of logistics and infrastructure, design, urbanism, multispecies ecology, and the environmental humanities.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6

7–8pm

Performance

Walker Memorial — West Lawn

Opening land acknowledgement
Sadada Jackson (Nipmuc),
Harvard Divinity School, MTS '19

Performance: *The Amphibian Song*
Nicole L'Hullier, MIT Media Lab

Performance: *Earthling*
Erin Genia (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate),
MIT ACT'19

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 7

12–5:30pm

Discursive Event

ACT Cube
20 Ames Street
Lower Level, E15-001

12:00–12:30pm

Reception: Wiesner Building (E15),
Lower Level

12:30–2pm

Panel 1: *The Work of Wind: Air, Land, Sea*

Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas,
MIT ACT

Christine Shaw, Blackwood Gallery,
University of Toronto Mississauga

Etienne Turpin, Philosopher, Berlin

Discussants: Nicole L'Hullier,
Indrė Umbrasaitė (Die Angewandte),
Tobias Putrih (MIT ACT)

Performance: Nicole L'Hullier

2:30–3:30pm

Panel 2: *Remote Sensing, Storytelling, Translating*

Glorianna Davenport, MIT Media Lab

Brian Mayton, MIT Media Lab

Caroline A. Jones, MIT HTC

Performance: Erin Genia

4–5:30pm

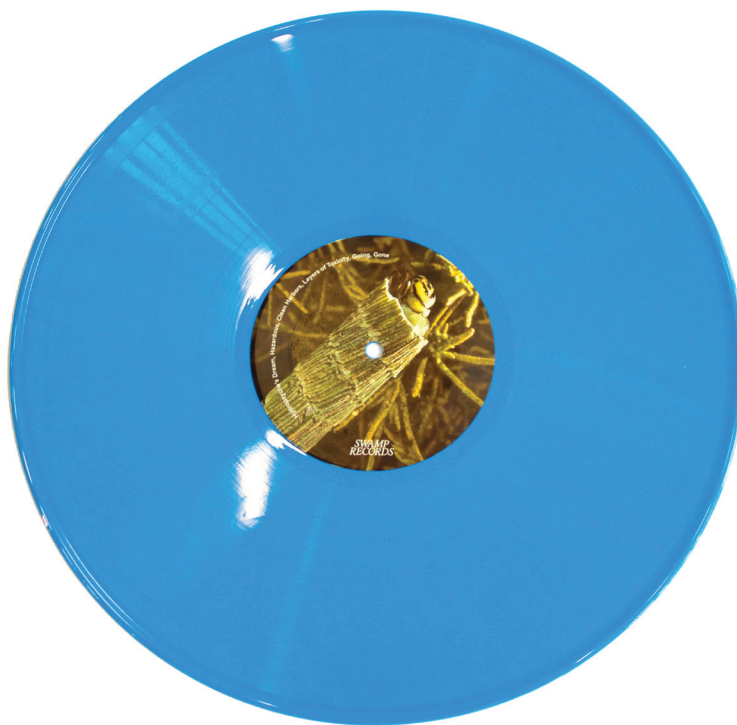
Panel 3: *Submerged Perspectives, Amphibian Ontologies, Decolonial Futures*

Macarena Gómez-Barris, Pratt Institute

Eben Kirksey, Alfred Deakin Institute,
Melbourne

Discussants: Lorena Bello, Brent D. Ryan,
Christine Shaw, Nomeda & Gediminas
Urbonas

Amphibian Songs



The exhibition of *Futurity Island* at MIT also marks the launch of *Amphibian Songs*, a 12in vinyl LP conceived by Gediminas & Nomeda Urbonas with audio by Nicole L’Huillier. L’Huillier’s composition amplifies the story of the site where this work was first installed—Mississauga’s Southdown Industrial Area—and explores how nature

and toxicity relate to each other. In the composition, the sonification of environmental data collected by the Blackwood Gallery’s Joy Xiang—chronicling the toxification of the soil, the components affecting the land, and the whistling winds—create an amphibian song of a distorted land.

Biographies

Lorena Bello is an architect and Visiting Lecturer at the Department of Architecture at MIT where she teaches students the fundamentals of the design of the built environment, ranging from the scale of the object and buildings to that of the city and larger territories. Lorena's research focuses on large-scale territorial implications of infrastructure and urbanization as catalysts for design. She is also the founder of TER-RALAB, in association with MIT's Center for Advanced Urbanism.


Glorianna Davenport is a trustee of Tidmarsh Farms, founder of *Living Observatory*, and former faculty member, Principal Investigator, and co-founder of the Media Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At MIT, Davenport's research focused on evolving new digital platforms for documentary media. As trustee of Tidmarsh Farms, Davenport led the Schulman family effort to restore and conserve a 600-acre former cranberry Farm in Plymouth, a property which today houses the largest freshwater restoration project in Massachusetts. In parallel, Davenport established *Living Observatory*, a non-profit collaborative organization focused on documenting, interpreting, and inviting scientists and the public to explore the long-term story of ecological change across restored wetlands.

Erin Genia is a member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota Oyate and descended from the Little River Band of Odawa. As a graduate researcher in the Art, Culture and Technology program at MIT, she has focused on creating a powerful presence of Indigenous epistemologies in the arts, science, and technology with a goal of fostering an evolution of thought and practice in societal instruments that are aligned with the cycles of the natural world and the potential of humanity. She has also worked as a community organizer and cultural worker in her communities. Her work has received attention from diverse audiences, and been exhibited nationally and interna-

tionally, most recently at the Harvard Museum of Natural History, and the Museum of Northwest Art. Genia was awarded the AAF/ Seebacher Prize for Fine Arts in 2018 and received her first public art commission for *Resilience: Anpa O Wicahnpi* from the City of Seattle Office of Arts and Culture.

Macarena Gómez-Barris is the author of *Where Memory Dwells: Culture and State Violence in Chile* (UC Press 2010), *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Duke University Press 2017), and *Beyond the Pink Tide: Artistic and Political Undercurrents in the Americas* (UC Press 2018). She is co-editor with Herman Gray of *Towards A Sociology of a Trace* (University of Minnesota Press 2010) and co-editor with Licia Fiol-Matta of *Las Américas Quarterly*, a special issue of *American Quarterly* (Fall 2014). Her new book project is *At the Sea's Edge*. Her essays have appeared in *Antipode*, *Social Text*, *GLQ*, *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* as well as numerous other venues and art catalogues. She has been a Visiting Professor at New York University and a Fulbright Scholar and Visiting Professor at FLACSO-Quito. She publishes on decolonial praxis, space and memory, and submerged perspectives. She is founder and Director of the Global South Center, a transdisciplinary space for experimental research, artistic, and activist praxis, and Chairperson of the Department of Social Sciences and Cultural Studies at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York.

Sadada Jackson, MTS, MEd, RYT, is a student of practice who lives in her body and vacations in her mind. She is as a freelance educator who works with leaders and decision-makers in education and the healing arts/practices to embody and curate ethical practices, structures, and relationships in their work. She holds a BA in Theatre with a minor in English, an MEd in Secondary Education from UMass Boston, and a MTS in Indigenous traditions from Harvard University. She is a certified 200-hour yoga



teacher and a teacher trainer at 4 Corners' Yoga and Wellness Yoga Teacher Certification program. She is Natick Nipmuc.

Caroline A. Jones is Professor in the History, Theory, Criticism section of the Department of Architecture at MIT. She studies modern and contemporary art, with a particular focus on its technological modes of production, distribution, and reception, and on its interface with sciences such as physics and biology. Jones has also worked as a curator, notably at MIT's List Visual Art Center: *Sensorium* (2006), *Video Trajectories* (2007), and *Hans Haacke 1967* (2011). Her publications include *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (1996/98, winner of the Charles Eldredge prize), *Picturing Science, Producing Art* (co-edited, 1998), *Sensorium: embodied experience, technology, and contemporary art* (as editor, 2006), *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (2005/08), *Experience: Culture, Cognition, and the Common Sense* (co-edited, 2016), and *The Global Work of Art* (2016). Her current research collaboration with historian of science Peter Galison examines patterns of occlusion and political contestation in seeing and unseeing the Anthropocene.

Eben Kirksey is an American anthropologist who is perhaps best known for his work in multispecies ethnography—a field that situates contemporary scholarship on animals, microbes, plants, and fungi within deeply rooted traditions of environmental anthropology, continental philosophy, and the sociology of science. Duke University Press has published his two books—*Freedom in Entangled Worlds* (2012) and *Emergent Ecologies* (2015)—as well as one edited collection: *The Multispecies Salon* (2014). Currently he is finishing a new book for St. Martins Press about the scientists, lobbyists, entrepreneurs, and activists remaking the human race with the gene editing tool called CRISPR. The Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, is hosting Kirksey in the 2019-2020 academic year, where

he is conducting research on gene editing, the innovation economy, and social inequality.

Nicole L'Huillier is transdisciplinary artist from Santiago, Chile, currently based in Boston, Massachusetts. Through installations, performances, sculptures, compositions, and multiple transductions, her work explores human and non-human performativity, rituals of membranal and resonant architectures, as well as vibration and sound as construction materials for spaces, identity, and agency. She works at the intersection of music, art, architecture, science, and technology to challenge perceptual conventions and to open the possibility of new imaginaries. As part of the MIT Media Lab Space Exploration Initiative, Nicole explores the experimental forms and implications of art, expression and culture in outer space. She is also an experimental musician, drummer, synth lover and one-half of the space pop duo *Breaking Forms*. Nicole is currently a PhD candidate and research assistant at MIT Media Lab, Opera of the Future group, she also holds a Master in Media Arts & Sciences (2017) from MIT Media Lab.

Brian Mayton joined the MIT Media Lab in 2010 and is currently working towards his PhD. His research interests include connecting ubiquitous computer technology to the physical world through sensing and actuation, and how networked sensors can change the way we interact with and experience the world around us. In his current research project, he has networked and instrumented a large outdoor site with wireless sensor nodes to capture and document the transformation as the site is restored from a former cranberry farm to natural wetland.

Tobias Putrih engages 20th-century avant-gardes, particularly utopian and visionary concepts of architecture and design, through a range of conceptual and materially ephemeral projects. From makeshift architectural modifications of public spaces—cinemas, a library, galleries—he con-

structures temporary environments and objects through precise handling of everyday manufactured materials like paper, cardboard, and plywood. The works are products of precisely specified processes while also responding to their sites; some are problematized as furniture to be moved and inhabited, privileging play and bodily engagement over vision. Artworks become proposals, maquettes, or models—exploratory assertions of radical possibilities in which the idea of the object is reconceptualized as something momentary and experimental. Tobias Putrih is lecturer at MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology.

Brent D. Ryan is an urbanist, Head of the City Design and Development Group, and Associate Professor of Urban Design and Public Policy in MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning. His research focuses on the aesthetics and policies of contemporary urban design, particularly with respect to current and pressing issues like de-industrialization and climate change. Ryan's current research projects in China examine coastal landmaking, the threat to urban villages, and a case study in the transfer of development rights.

Christine Shaw is Director/Curator of the Blackwood Gallery and Assistant Professor, Visual Studies, at the University of Toronto Mississauga. Her commitment to collective cognition, compositional strategies, and social resilience has been applied to exhibition-led inquiries including *I stood before the source*, a group exhibition traversing various scenes of accumulation (2016); *Take Care*, a project series involving over 200 artists, activists, careworkers, curators, and researchers critically engaging the crisis of care (2017–19); and *The Work of Wind: Air, Land, Sea* (2018–20), a curatorial and editorial series designed to open perspectives on environmental crisis through artistic practices, transdisciplinary inquiry, and political mobilization. She is co-editor of *The Work of Wind: Land* (K. Verlag & Blackwood Gallery, 2018) and co-editor of *The Society for Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* (Blackwood Gallery, 2018–2019). She was co-founder

and curator of Toronto School of Creativity & Inquiry (2005–2010) and Letters & Handshakes (2012–2017), and is a Research Fellow of Advanced Practices in the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Etienne Turpin is a philosopher living and working in Berlin. Previously, he was a co-founder and CEO of User Group GmbH, an office for design research, software development, and digital strategy, and a co-founder and Director of PetaBencana.id, a platform for community-led disaster management and response in Indonesia. He has also worked in the Higher Education Industry as a Research Scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a Vice-Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellow at Australia's SMART Infrastructure Facility, and a professor of advanced design research and theory at the University of California Berkeley, the University of Michigan, and the University of Toronto. Turpin is the author of numerous essays on philosophy, design, and environmental politics; co-editor of the *intercalations: paginated exhibition* series in the context of Das Anthropozän-Projekt (K. Verlag & Haus der Kulturen der Welt), *The Work of Wind: Land* (K. Verlag & Blackwood Gallery, 2018), *Fantasies of the Library* (MIT Press, 2016), and *Art in the Anthropocene* (Open Humanities Press, 2015); and, editor of *Architecture in the Anthropocene* (Open Humanities Press, 2013).

Indrė Umbrasaitė is a Lithuania born architect based in Vienna, Austria, where she has been teaching at Studio Kazuyo Sejima, University of Applied Arts Vienna (*Die Angewandte*) for the past four years. In addition to art studies at the National School of Art, Indrė studied History of Culture and Anthropology followed by studies in Interior Design in Lithuania and Finland. She received her professional degree in architecture at the Vilnius Academy of Art and the masterclass of Zaha Hadid in Vienna. Since a few years, Indrė is working as an independent architect on projects encompassing architecture in relationship with art, design and curatorship, following spe-



cial interests in body and space. Indrė curated public events (e.g. Sliver Lecture Series in Vienna from 2016-2018), and edited several publications in architecture and education (e.g. *Island, City, Village, River*, loA Vienna, 2019). Her work has been exhibited internationally, most recently at the 16th International Architecture Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia 2018.

Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas are artists, educators, and co-founders of the Urbonas Studio, an interdisciplinary research practice that facilitates exchange amongst diverse nodes of knowledge production and artistic practice in pursuit of projects that transform civic spaces and collective imaginaries. Their work has been exhibited at the São Paulo, Berlin, Moscow, Lyon, Gwangju, and Busan biennales, and Folkestone Triennial; at the Manifesta and Documenta exhibitions; and in solo shows at the Venice Biennale and the MACBA in Barcelona among others. Gediminas Urbonas co-edited *Public Space? Lost and Found* (MIT Press, 2017) an examination of the complex interrelations between the creation and uses of public space and the roles that art plays therein. The Urbonases curated the *Swamp pavilion*, a future learning environment at the 16th Venice Architecture Biennale 2018. Gediminas Urbonas is Associate Professor and Nomeda Urbonas is research affiliate at the MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology.

Acknowledgments

Artists

Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas

Collaborating Artist

Tobias Putrih

Collaborating Architect

Indrė Umbrasaitė

Collaborating Sound Artist

Nicole L'Huillier

Curator

Christine Shaw

Project Manager

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Thistle Printing Ltd.



Presented by MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology and the Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto Mississauga and sponsored by Musket Transport. Funded in part through the Canada Council for the Arts' New Chapter program. With this \$35M investment, the Council supports the creation and sharing of the arts in communities across Canada.

This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology, the Center for Art, Science & Technology, the School of Architecture and Planning, and IPEX.

Futurity Island, 2018 was commissioned by Blackwood Gallery for *The Work of Wind: Air, Land, Sea*, curated by Christine Shaw.



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