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Michael Wang by Louis Bury

Melding technological and natural systems.

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(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Extinct-in-the-Wild-Michael-Wang1.jpg)

Michael Wang, *Extinct in the Wild*, 2017, living organisms, lights, substrate, aluminum and glass enclosures, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

The conceits that animate Michael Wang's artworks are simple to describe and complex to ponder. *Carbon Copies* (2012–) offset the carbon emissions released in the production of works by artists including Marina Abramović, Anish Kapoor, and Richard Serra. *RIVALS* (2014–15) proposed literal and figurative mergers between corporate behemoths, such as Pepsi and Coca-Cola, whose competition with one another paradoxically benefits both company's market shares. *Extinct in the Wild* (2017–) cultivated and displayed flora and fauna that once existed in nature but now subsist only under human care. The artworks function as synecdochic case studies of systems so large and seemingly abstract as to exceed humans' ability to experience them whole in space and time.

Yet for all their headiness, Wang's installations are unexpectedly poignant in their material and spatial effects. For example, his exhibition at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Arts Center at Governor's Island, *Extinct in New York* (2019), displayed plants that once grew wild in New York City but no longer do. The varied, vanished flora were planted inside greenhouses that visitors couldn't enter; viewing them felt like peering through the window panes of an ICU. Such aesthetic effects evidence the fingerprints of Wang's architecture background in the way they render vast, complex systems at approachable, human scale.

—Louis Bury

Louis Bury
How do you understand the relationship between art conservation and nature conservation?

Michael Wang
Extinct in the Wild began with a fantasy image: an art conservation department tasked with the preservation of a species. I was thinking about the expanded range of media that conservation departments preserve—obsolete video formats, plastics, foodstuffs—and thought, "Why couldn't this be extended to living beings?" So while art conservation and nature conservation are currently separate, the category of "extinct in the wild" suggests that they could be merged. Doing so follows the logic of the ready-made as well as the mission of the historical museum or design museum where objects of everyday culture (here: horticulture, agriculture, the pet trade) become the subject of conservation practices and of curation in its original sense, meaning "care."

LB
What are the similarities and differences between conservation and care?

MW
Conservation is essentially, well, conservative, whereas care suggests nurture without constraint. Conservation seeks continuity with the past. Care looks to the future.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Extinct-in-New-York-Michael-Wang2.jpg)

Michael Wang, *Extinct in New York*, 2019, living organisms, lights, air and water circulation devices, substrate, aluminum, polycarbonate, and acrylic enclosures, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

LB

What other conservation possibilities haven't been realized but would be worth pursuing?

MW

Land art's merging of nature and artifice suggests possible reimaginings of ecosystem conservation. In the US, Land art often appropriated Indigenous architectures, which meant its forms emerged from worldviews other than the nature-culture oppositions of colonialist European thought. I'm interested in a history of Land art engaged with living systems. I'm thinking of precedents like Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* (1965–78–present), a fragment of woodland in downtown New York intended to represent a precolonial forest, or Agnes Denes's *Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule* (1992–96), which presented a living forest and its ongoing maintenance as a new kind of monument. But while many of Land art's most iconic examples focus on big gestures, I believe that Land art in the future will look at how large effects are produced from extremely small scales.

LB

That's fascinating. What makes you say that?

MW

In recent decades, especially through the work of biologist Lynn Margulis, we've learned so much about the microbiome's role in shaping the living and nonliving worlds. This unseen but crucial aspect of the living planet could be a substrate for a new kind of systems or bio-art. A focus on the microbiome could also challenge a species-centric view of conservation. Species distinctions are unknown among bacteria, and large, multicellular organisms depend on a multitude of microorganisms within their bodies. Their effects are global too, forming an almost unbroken skin across the earth's surface and impacting its atmosphere. These scalar relations are central to understanding issues of conservation and the potential for ecosystem collapse.

LB

How does your architecture background inform these views?

MW

I was drawn to architecture because it promised to bring art into the "real world," but ultimately I felt my concerns exceeded the traditional media of architecture. I wanted to work with all the forces that condition the built environment, the stuff that lives within, alongside, before, and after buildings.

LB

That felt more possible in art?

MW

Art felt open-ended: I could choose to work with whatever media I felt warranted aesthetic consideration. Some of my early works focused on very small media (a project with invasive Japanese beetles) or invisible media (the air). At the same time, I wanted to work with media that operated at a global scale. The challenge was to give these non-art systems a new aesthetic legibility. Recently, someone at an architecture event introduced me as "an architect working as an artist," which seemed somehow appropriate. I do borrow ways of thinking that are indebted to, if not architecture proper, then to landscape architecture, urban planning, or infrastructural engineering.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Drowned-World-First-Forest-Michael-Wang3.jpg)

Michael Wang, *First Forest*, 2018, Polypodiopsida, Cycadopsida, and Araucariaceae species installed in coal gas plant; irrigation system; steel viewing platform. From the series *The Drowned World* (2018). Courtesy of the artist.

LB

What's your approach toward working in a particular site?

MW

Site is extremely important to my works, as is displacement, in a way that resonates with Robert Smithson's concepts of "site" and "non-site." Some of my works merge with their sites, almost parasitically or symbiotically. For example, *First Forest*, part of my series *The Drowned World* (2018), re-created a forest of the Carboniferous period within the ruins of a coal gas plant. The work consisted not only of the newly planted forest but also the aging hulks of the site's gasometers. Carboniferous forests were the first forests on earth; today, their remains comprise the majority of the planet's coal reserves. I saw the work as the completion of a three hundred million year cycle in which my forest recaptured and grew out of the ancient carbon burned at this site.

LB

How do you balance conceptual, aesthetic, and logistical concerns as you design a given work?

MW

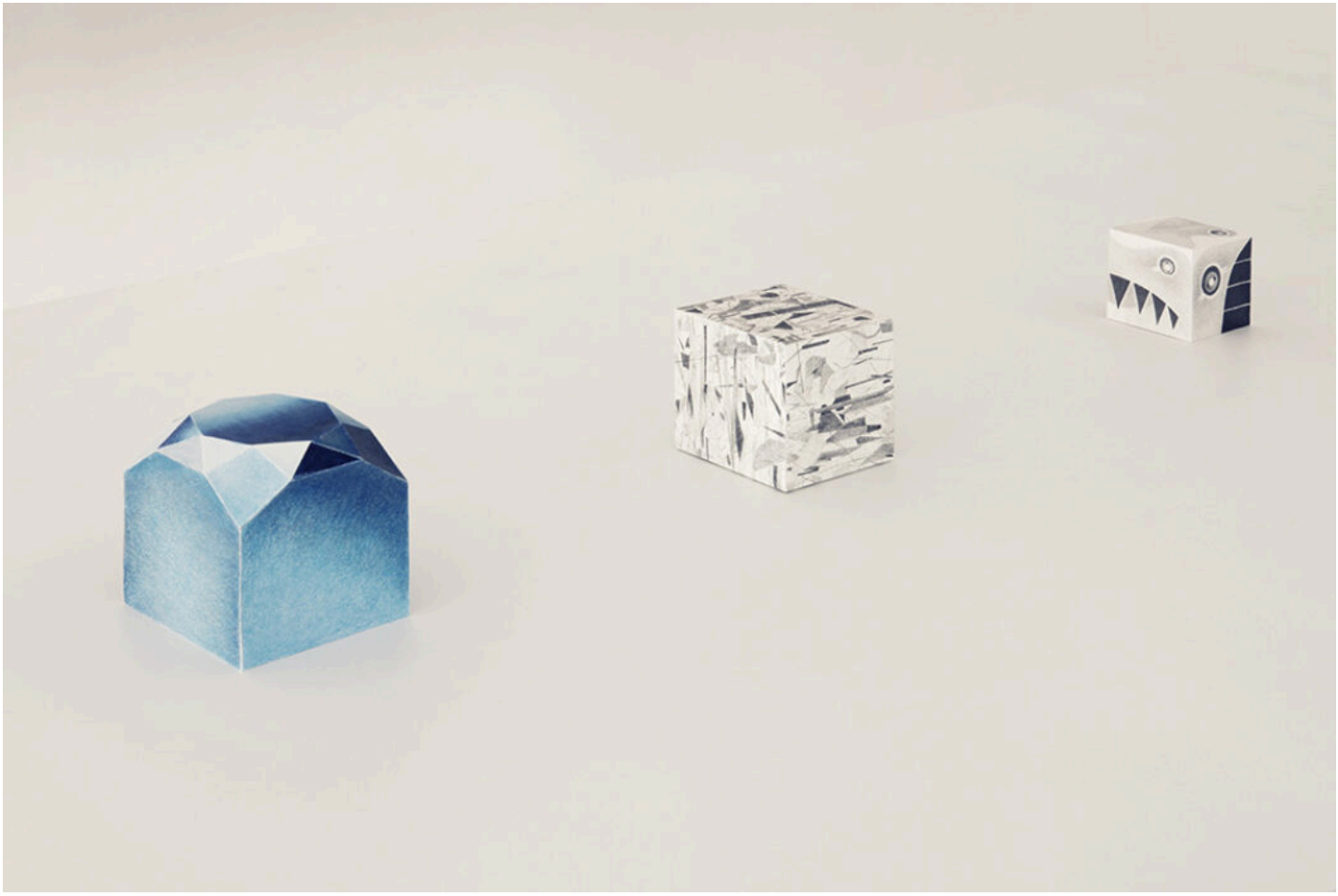
Ideally all these factors are synthesized. The challenge is to remain true to the concept through its realization. Because I'm concerned with the messiness and complexity of reality, I welcome practical considerations as part of the process. I'm more interested in an aesthetics of "is-ness" than an aesthetics of "looks like." The works are determined by the faithful carrying out of an action or a material instantiation. That said, I can use all kinds of more traditional representational media —photographs, drawings, video, or text—to elucidate this core gesture.

LB

That reminds me of how you've described yourself as "more interested in using synecdoche than metaphor" in your work.

MW

I strive to work with "things themselves." Synecdoche—the use of a part to represent a whole—takes on a material dimension in my work, such as when I use pigments made from the bedrock of cities to paint those cities' portraits (*Terroir* [2015–]). I think of material presence as carrying a representational charge, similar to the presence of living bodies in performance art. This is distinct from theater, where the performer's body is a mimetic stand-in for a character.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Carbon-Copies-Michael-Wang4.jpg)

Installation detail of Michael Wang, *Carbon Copies*, 2012–, mixed media, certificates, negative tons CO2. Courtesy of the artist.

LB

How does your foregrounding of part-whole relationships relate to questions of scale?

MW

I see my works as extending into the larger systems with which they engage. Even a very small-scale work can be understood as a component part in a much larger system. *Carbon Copies* (2012–), for example, consists of paper sculptures that model the carbon footprints of well-known contemporary artworks at a scale of 1:5,000,000. When these "copies" are sold, the proceeds are used to purchase offsets equivalent to the carbon footprints of the artworks they represent, enacting an intervention in the atmosphere.

LB

I love your awareness that an artwork about climate change is necessarily also implicated in it.

MW

While many people have read *Carbon Copies* as strictly ecological critique, my intent was to say: "Look, all artists are already atmosphere artists." The work was an effort to create space for a more considered artistic practice. Climate change registers the effects of energy technologies across the planet, confounding the boundaries between the technological and the natural. These technologies (or their opposite: for example, techniques of carbon sequestration) could become, also, artistic tools. Artists have long appropriated emergent technology for artmaking. While I'm certainly interested in new technologies as potential tools for art, I am even more interested in how technology reshapes our sense of the world. In the Anthropocene, the melding of technological and natural systems is for me the most urgent site for artistic exploration.

LB

What can art help audiences see or understand about complex systems?

MW

We live in a world defined by complexity and interconnection. Donna Haraway calls this state the Chthulucene: a period defined by the interconnection of the human and the nonhuman in shared earthly precarity. Art can help elucidate those connections. But complexity can be a source of obfuscation or confusion. That's why, within each work or series, I select just one or two key threads as a conceptual backbone, so as to balance complexity and comprehension.

Michael Wang's work can be seen in the group exhibition Vulnerable Critters (https://www.lacasaencendida.es/en/exhibitions/vulnerable-critters-13607) *at La Casa Encendida in Madrid until September 18.*

Louis Bury is the author of *Exercises in Criticism* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2015) and *The Way Things Go* (punctum books, forthcoming). He is Associate Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY, and contributes regularly to *Hyperallergic* and *Art in America.*

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