Ecofeminist World Building

Three artists respond to the urgent crisis of climate change

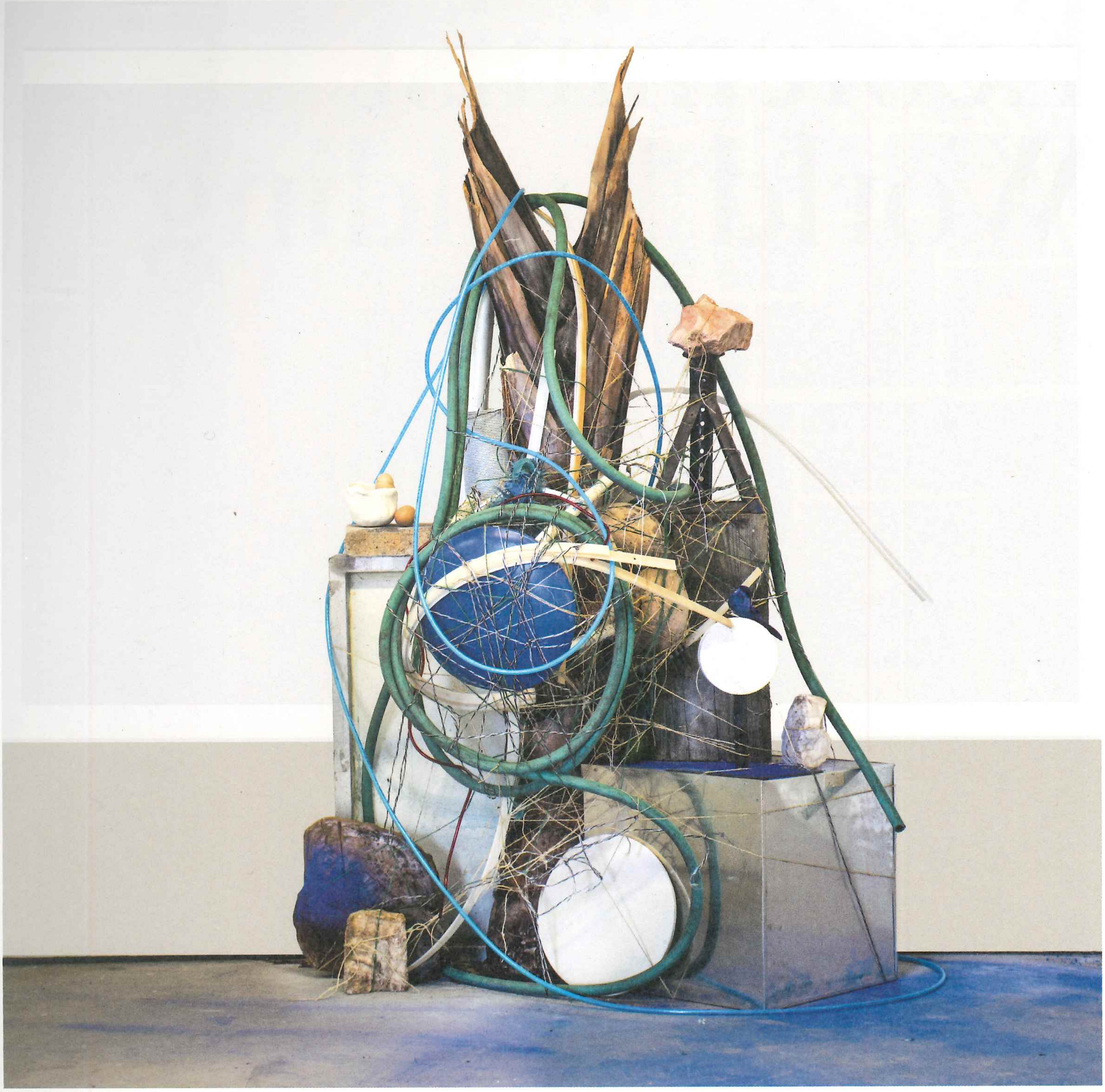
Eva Díaz

Undoubtedly the land, oceans, and atmosphere of Earth have been forever changed by human technologies, in ways that humans cannot roll back. For philosopher Michel Serres, this presents a paradox of ineffective power. As he once noted in a conversation with fellow philosopher Bruno Latour, "We are now, admittedly, the masters of the Earth and of the world, but our very mastery seems to escape our mastery.... Everything happens as though our powers escaped our powers—whose partial projects, sometimes good and often intentional, can backfire or unwittingly cause evil."

The sense of helplessness Serres writes about can easily become a kind of inertia. How to act in the face of the continuing corporate-driven exploitation of Earth, happening at a pace and on a scale that countercollectives of environmentalists, scientists, and the everyday you or me have done little to abate? Artists are in a particularly challenging position with respect to climate change: giving form to these largely invisible forces of capital and their effects can be difficult. And if they do produce work "about" climate change, the almost impossibly complicated matrix of long-term planetary shifts—global warming, rising seas, species extinction, environmental degradation—can make it seem that imaging destruction is yet another elegy for Earth.

In their recent work, three American artists—Shana Moulton, Mary Mattingly, and Connie Samaras—approach human-authored climate change as intertwined with artistic responsibility. They work not merely to provide visual evidence of how climate change manifests itself in often catastrophic ways; these artists act self-reflexively, exploring the role of image making at a moment when humans have perhaps made too many images. Investigating the edges or margins of places, they produce works that fracture and reassemble, more than embody, the effects of human-altered ecologies in what one could term an ecofeminist spirit. In this, they dismantle the gendered notion of "mastery" over Earth to provide alternative visions of the planet, speculating on worlds to come that are often as dystopian as they are optimistic.

For Shana Moulton, this means exploring the dissolving edges of the human and natural. Her film *Whispering Pines 10* (2018) is a thirty-five-minute fantastical journey made in collaboration with musician Nick Hallett. It follows the misadventures of a woman who identifies, to the point of psychic dislocation and death, with tree sitter Julia Butterfly Hill, notorious for camping in the high limbs of a redwood in Northern California for two years to prevent old-growth logging in the region. In the film, Moulton plays the character Cynthia, who appears in many of the artist's works. Cynthia lives alone in the Sierra Nevada mountains in California and is prey to many real and perceived illnesses that she fretfully views as forms of environmental toxicity. She constantly turns to

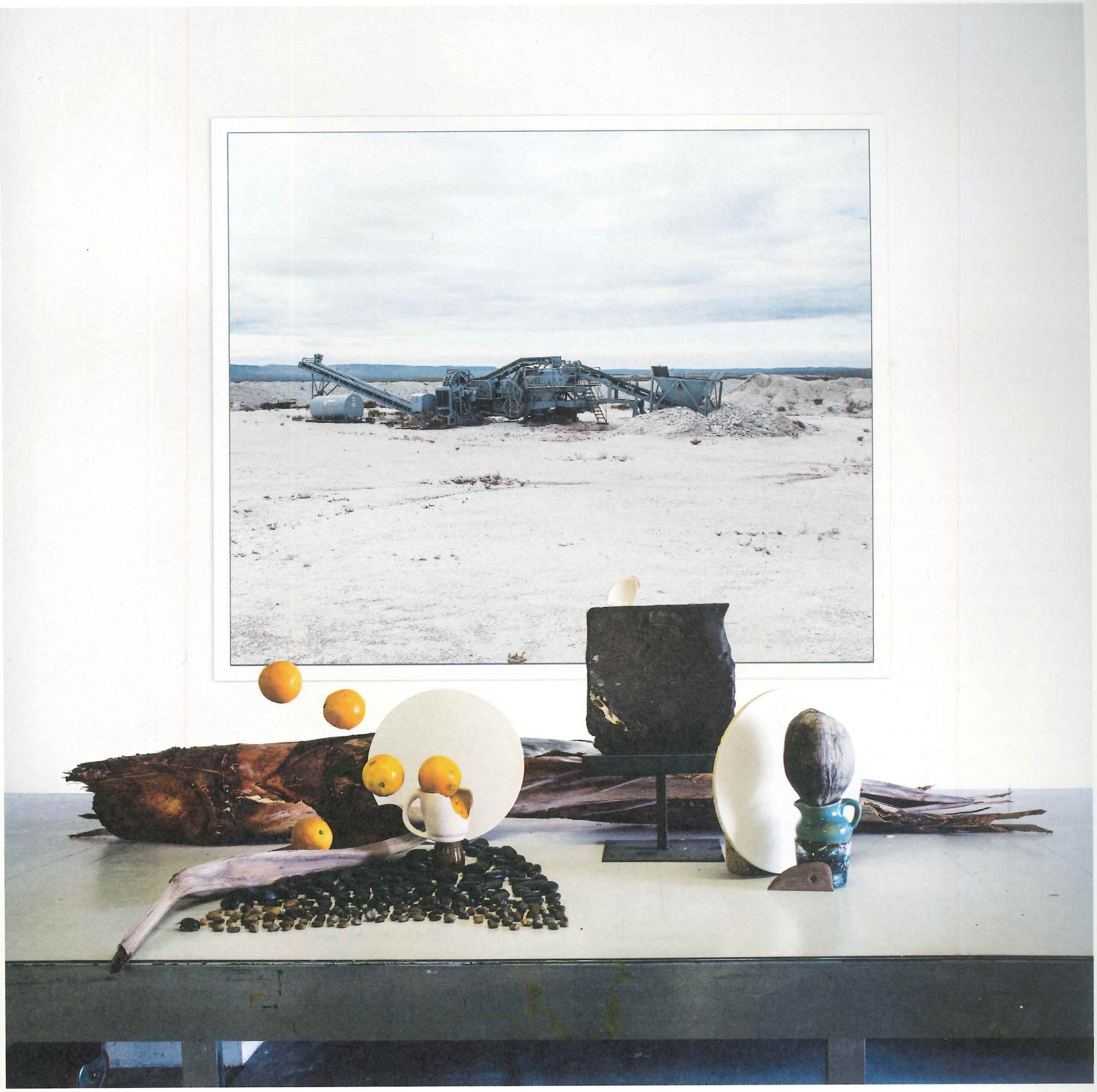


new age remedies drawn from a purified vision of nature—crystals, sound baths, herbal tinctures, and the like—to heal her.

In *Whispering Pines 10*, Cynthia feels overwhelmed by anxiety about climate change and environmental collapse. As Moulton told me, Cynthia "yearns for some way to be practical in the world," yet is paralyzed about how to do so. In the film, as in all of Moulton's work, there is a kind of unboundedness in Cynthia's relation to her surroundings, with objects around her becoming animated as a dancing corps de ballet of hippie paraphernalia. Early in the film, Cynthia awkwardly follows an instructional yoga video, cowed by the grace and flexibility of her TV counterparts. She soon enters a reverie in which a new face appears on the TV screen. It is Julia Butterfly Hill, played by Katie Eastburn, standing before the tree named Luna in which she conducted her two-year vigil. She calls to Cynthia in song while a butterfly painted on her face begins to flit about the screen in a whimsical dance. In a soothing tone, Hill sings a libretto by Hallett drawn from speeches she once gave:

> What is your tree? And what I mean by that is I lived in an over one-thousand-year-old ancient redwood tree in California for over two years without touching the ground to keep this redwood tree from being cut down. And when I ask people, What is your tree?, it doesn't mean like, What tree will you climb? but, What it is in your life that calls you to be bigger than what you think is possible for yourself and your world? What is it that calls you to stretch beyond what's comfortable into the places that are uncomfortable and then to realize you are more powerful and magical than your mind could ever have believed?

Cynthia finds herself transported to the redwood forest, and, in a series of fanciful events combined with song, she climbs Luna only to fall, be resurrected, and then die once again when her body is picked apart by cartoon birds. Called to build a better world by Hill, Cynthia in the end feeds her body to animals in a sacrifice that is



Page 36:
Shana Moulton and Nick Hallett, stills from *Whispering Pines 10*, 2018
Courtesy the artists

Opposite and this page:
Mary Mattingly, *Cobalt*, 2018; *Holding Not Having (After Robin Messing)*, 2018
© the artist and courtesy Robert Mann Gallery, New York

Mary Mattingly's work explores the ways in which raw materials are mined in the name of geoengineering.

both pointless and poignant in its new age–y prostration to a nature she struggles to understand, let alone "save."

In his 2017 book *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, Bruno Latour notes that one reaction engendered by the loss of mastery discussed by Serres is a push for ever-greater human control of the environment: "And there they are, seized by a new urge for total domination over a nature always perceived as recalcitrant and wild. In the great delirium that they call, modestly, *geo-engineering*, they mean to embrace the Earth as a whole." Yet Latour calls out this compulsion to apply more technology to solve climate change as a fallacy that presumes human authorship of nature: "It is obvious that technological metaphors cannot be applied to the Earth in a lasting way: it was not fabricated; no one maintains it; even if it were a 'space ship'... there would be no pilot. The Earth has a history, but this does not mean that it was conceived."

Mary Mattingly's work explores the ever-more-invasive ways in which raw materials are mined in the name of geoengineering, seeing in this headlong compulsion to extract everything of value from the planet not only greed and poor long-term resource management but veiled geopolitical aims such as military domination. For her project *Because for Now We Still Have Poetry* (2016–18), Mattingly made pilgrimages to far-flung locations in the United States to investigate how photographic materials are mined and produced. Creating photographs about the supply chain of the medium, Mattingly combines these images with artifacts she brings back from often ecologically devastated places to create enigmatic installations. "Real contradictions exist when you're using materials," Mattingly told me recently. "Photography, like writing, can be a form of social justice, but at the same time, there are forms of injustice that go along with its production."

In exploring the extraction of materials that are used for art and photography, as well as for industry, Mattingly wondered why so many minerals are being mined in the U.S. once again, after a period during which cheaper labor pools and less restrictive environmental regulations in other nations were exploited. She came to see links between the opening up for mining of U.S. national monuments, like Bears Ears, in Utah, where she photographed, and the political volatility of nations like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in which those same materials are also mined. Her research revealed that the U.S. military consumes over 60 percent of the world's high-grade cobalt. It is therefore considered a strategic asset that the U.S. government does not want processed by China Molybdenum, the company that operates one of the world's largest cobalt mines in Congo. Her project took her to a mine in Michigan that also harvests cobalt, as well as a site in Florida that extracts phosphate. In these materials, used for fertilizer, lithium batteries, ceramic glazes, paint pigments, and photography, Mattingly sees a challenge to the notion of image production as creation; perhaps such image making is also a replication of the contradictions of human geoengineering. As Mattingly explained to me in an email:

> Most immediately, photography is a record of a moment that has been able to enter a physical realm; a construction, fiction, fabrication, or truth, it represents what was (seen or unseen). I need it as it is a lens with which I can create worlds. Upon closer examination, photography connects me to complexities and contradictions of a life largely removed from the supply chains that make it up: full of toxicities that I usually do not readily see but may feel the aftermath of, such as its impact on health and the connection photography has to mapping, colonization, militarization, and security. The medium slides precariously in and out of ethical arguments—it can at once illuminate social injustices while simultaneously exaggerating them.

Connie Samaras is likewise interested in the potential for photographic world building, using the archives of one of the great world builders of speculative fiction, Octavia E. Butler, to ground explorations of how to produce work in the era of accelerated climate change. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) envision life in a near-future Los Angeles devastated by climate change and made a hell of segregated gated communities pillaged by racist and sexist marauders. In Samaras's ongoing series begun in 2016, *The Past Is Another Planet*, she superimposes Butler's handwritten notes and journals on photographs of the gardens of the Huntington Library, in San Marino, California, where Butler's papers are held, subjecting their manicured landscapes to Butler's speculations about how human violence is connected to abuse of the environment.

For Samaras, Butler's archive presented particular problems of access that in some ways mirrored the author's work on the foreclosure of public space in an imagined dystopian future. Samaras

mounted a three-year campaign to be allowed admission to the Huntington Library to see Butler's papers, denied at first because she did not hold a PhD in literature (though she was a tenured professor at a University of California campus). After eventually being granted permission to view the archives, Samaras was also allowed, through her research pass, to visit the renowned gardens surrounding the library when they were not customarily open to visitors, and she eventually began photographing them. These gardens are themselves a kind of human-created no-place of artificiality and unorthodox juxtapositions; for example, a Japanese tea garden, created in the early twentieth century using plants bought from a nearby Japanese restaurant, abuts desert vegetation taken illegally from northern Mexico. Photographing in the early morning, Samaras painstakingly double exposed her images, first shooting the gardens and then holding up Mylar gels with Butler's writings printed on them to capture a palimpsest. (In one work, Samaras overlays an excerpt from Butler's journals that reads, "Los Angeles was dying. Much of the world was changing—changing rapidly, involuntarily blundering through vast climate change.") Because of vicissitudes in the light conditions and glare upon the Mylar, Butler's words become ghostly and fragmentary, interweaving with the surroundings in mysterious ways.

Samaras notes that Butler's papers contain forty years of writings on climate change. While Butler's two *Parable* books portray events that follow from destructive human manipulation of Earth—resource scarcity and environmental damage—they present corporate greed and wealth inequality as the reasons the effects of climate change fall so harshly on the poor and minorities. Though the world building of the novels is often quite dire, Samaras says that she was drawn to the "gritty optimism of Butler, a vision not necessarily about the future, but holding a different kind of vision that you're told you can't have."

Like Serres and Latour, in her recent book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), Donna Haraway criticizes the apocalyptic language that is used to justify defeatism, panic, or arrogant irresponsibility against other beings on Earth—"the 'game over, too late' discourse I hear all around me these days, in both expert and popular discourses, in which both technotheocratic geoengineering fixes and wallowing in despair seem to coinfect any possible common imagination." To Samaras, Butler's work is a powerful corrective to this lack of "common imagination," and she sees in even the conflicted beauty of the Huntington Gardens a sense of hope amid uncertainty. "We are in such dire times," she says, "and I guess the question becomes, How does one survive such things? I share Butler's outlook that it's a collective endeavor and not everyone survives. But the point is that it's collective."

Previous spread and this spread: **Connie Samaras, *Huntington Shakespeare Garden, San Gabriel Mountains, and OEB 7252, Octavia Butler research photograph for Xenogenesis, Huayna, Picchu, Peru, July 1985,* 2016; *Huntington Cacti Garden and Octavia E. Butler Archive Item 1723, Novel Fragment from Parable of the Sower,* 2016. Both photographs from the series *The Past Is Another Planet*** Courtesy the artist

Eva Díaz is associate professor, History of Art and Design Department, at Pratt Institute.