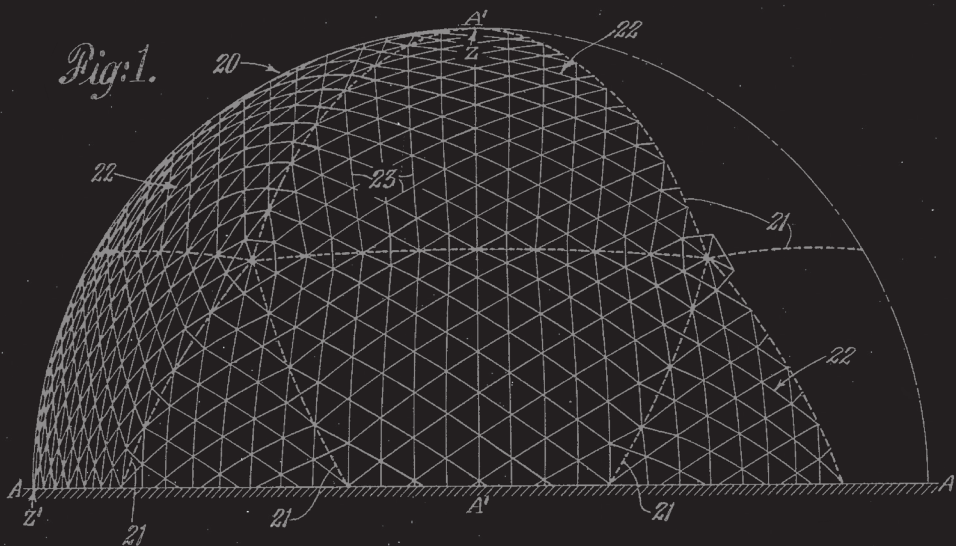


FROM REMOTE STARS

BUCKMINSTER FULLER, LONDON, AND SPECULATIVE FUTURES



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1946, R.B. Fuller, 2,393,676, Cartography, Figs. 1, 2, 7

1954, 2,682,235, Building Construction, Fig. 1

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MOTHERSHIP EARTH

Eva Díaz

Imperialism, capitalism, racism, and sexism are all too common, and their legacies of injustice, domination, and visible and invisible privilege will haunt future human societies on Earth or in outer space. In particular, the naïve adoption by many today of the language of a future human existence in outer space as a “frontier” fails to address the fraught nature of the historical project of colonialization. Nor does the notion of “penetrating” or “conquering” outer space account for the ways in which gender has been mapped onto the project of exploring of extraplanetary sites. This gendered, racialized conception of travel—of white, male-dominated societies that hunt for, discover, or perhaps even manufacture other worlds in order to exploit new resources—is glaringly evident when abandoning our planet to escape environmental degradation is portrayed, in contemporary New Space colonialist schemes, as not only inevitable but indeed as a heroic authoring of new life.

Returning to Buckminster Fuller’s concept of “Spaceship Earth” and his “We are all astronauts” rhetoric of engineered bodies and technologized nature can help us understand how the future of humanity has been taken up in contemporary art. Here I want to explore what the metaphor of the *mothership* rather than the spaceship might mean in terms of care and stewardship of the Earth; to instead consider our biological inheritance and interreliance on nature—“Mother” Earth—as the both the origin of creation and the sustaining gift of life that will provision any imagination of a better, more equitable future.

Undoubtedly the oceans and atmosphere of the Earth have been forever changed by human technologies, in ways that humans now cannot restore. For philosopher Michel Serres, this presents a paradox of ineffective power:

We are now, admittedly, the masters of the Earth and of the world, but our very mastery seems to escape our mastery. We have all

things in hand, but we do not control our actions. Everything happens as though our powers escaped our powers—whose partial projects, sometimes good and often intentional, can backfire or unwittingly cause evil. . . . Our conquests outstrip our deliberate intentions.¹

As cultural theorist Bruno Latour has written, one reaction engendered by this loss of mastery is to push for 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.”² Yet Latour calls out this compulsion to apply more technology 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 that does not mean it was conceived.”³

Multispecies theorist Donna Haraway’s concept of “staying with the trouble,” developed in her recent work on climate change, can help investigate the generative possibilities of welcome and nurturance (of the mothership), as opposed to the fearful language of flight, exile, and departure (in the spaceship).⁴ Haraway has challenged the sexism of narratives of technological progress that presume world-building as a masculine endeavor, thereby nudging science fiction into a hybrid and expanded category that includes speculative feminism.⁵ To Haraway the realms of fictional invention, imagination, and play fall “precisely outside the dictates of teleology, settled categories, and function” and represent zones of creation where recuperation from past injustices and inequalities can take place.⁶ Alongside Serres and Latour, Haraway critiques the language and deeds of technoapocalypse by masculinist “too-big players” that justify defeatism, panic, or arrogant irresponsibility against other beings on Earth. This pessimism strikes her as a “‘game over, too late’ discourse... in which both technocratic geoengineering



Farhiya Jama, from *The Guardians/Cave* series: *trio of destruction*, 2019

fixes and wallowing in despair seem to coinfect any possible common imagination.”⁷

In contrast, Haraway returns to feminist models of what she terms tentacular thinking, in which “earthly worlding is thoroughly terran, muddled, and mortal.”⁸ The autopoiesis of “self-forming and self-sustaining system fantasies,” of technologies without mothers, or even of futures without physical matter, is counterposed to what she terms “sympoiesis”: “a yoke for becoming-with, for staying with the trouble of inheriting the damages and achievements of colonial and postcolonial naturalcultural [sic] histories in telling the tale of still possible recuperation.”⁹

The masculine orientation of space travel, coming as it did out of military programs utilizing male fighter pilots as astronauts, has been challenged by women artists in recent years who are calling for feminist futures on Earth and in outer space. This is showcased with clarity in the *From Remote Stars* exhibition, which highlights among other practices those by female and Indigenous artists producing work in dialogue with Fuller’s obsessive techno-optimism and futurism. In particular, works in the show by Christina Battle, Gillian Dykeman, Farhiya Jama,

and Skawennati mount a critique of masculinist techno-utopianism by practicing models of world building akin to Haraway’s vision of speculative feminism, while also drawing upon Afrofuturist visions of the future emerging out of histories of violence against racial minorities. These artists posit the equitable readdress of practices of domination on Earth as the precondition for any conjectures about humanity and remote stars. As Haraway writes: “Actual places, these are worlds worth fighting for.”¹⁰

For Farhiya Jama, an artist of Somali heritage based in Toronto, the notion of Black female space voyage calls to mind precedents in 1960s and 1970s Afrofuturist space imaginings: of musician and impresario Sun Ra’s travels from Saturn with the Arkestra, and George Clinton and his band Parliament Funkadelic’s (P-Funk) concept of the “mothership connection.” In promoting a vision of African-American culture as interplanetary, anti-capitalist and technologically-savvy (Ra), and as a euphoric and funky alien party connecting African culture to the New World beyond the trauma of the Middle Passage (Clinton), Ra, Clinton, and their bands turned the function of Black music and culture, traditionally exploited as entertainment,



Sun Ra, from *Space is the Place*, 1974

into a conduit for advancement beyond white domination and as an edifying source of cosmic knowledge and mind expansion. In Jama's case, her digitally collaged photos put Black Muslim women at the forefront of space exploration. Referring to her work as digital painting, Jama creates fantastical scenarios in which women wearing hijabs become mysterious guardians of cosmic places, their faces or eyes sometimes rendered as galactic swirls or starry constellations. In works where the subject's faces are turned away from the viewer, the women's robed silhouettes stand out against alien landscapes, as though they form an advance party of an interplanetary mission. The frequent presence of children in the works, and the hybridization of the women's faces and bodies with astronomical elements, presents an alternative vision of intrepid feminine explorers becoming one with their new environments, not

the colonialist vision of a violent imposition of Western male values on existing spaces.

In Skawennati's *She Falls For Ages* (2017), the notion of a futuristic society that depends upon female invention is explored in a twenty-minute film retelling of a Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) creation story. Skawennati, an artist of Mohawk descent living in Quebec, depicts Otsitsakáion, or Sky Woman, as a fearless astronaut who leaves her technologically sophisticated civilization and its dying Celestial Tree to begin a new society on Earth. In the machinima film, which was created in the online animated community Second Life, the "Sky World" Otsitsakáion must abandon is a community populated by god-like humanoids living in geodesic domes. As the Sky World culture, where advanced technology and supernatural powers like telepathy, telekinesis and foretelling of the future coexist in harmony with nature, begins to dim at the end of its 3,000 year life cycle, the pregnant Sky Woman volunteers to birth a new civilization by means of a daring leap into the void of space. Falling to a young Earth as yet without land, she seeds the planet with the help of birds and water animals who help her create the first island. By combining Indigenous storytelling with science fiction elements and futuristic white-clothed Second Life avatars, Skawennati's *She Falls For Ages* casts a woman in the role of heroic adventurer upon whose initiative a new civilization is created.



Like Skawennati, Gillian Dykeman, an artist of European descent living in New Brunswick, makes work imagining a futuristic, female-centered society. Her contribution is composed of two films collectively titled *Dispatches from a Utopian Feminist Future*. The first, a two-and-a-half minute work made in 2012, presents an image of the moon projected onto a globe, accompanied by a number of voices speaking in unison, reciting a text from their present, the year 2112. The crowd, whose unanimity resonates like a kind of hive speech, proclaims it has employed 1960s and 1970s Earthworks, which they call "an abandoned alien technology hidden in plain sight," as "tools that have helped us to bring humanity and the Earth together through feminist social justice." The group claims these "appropriated technologies have served our purpose," and have therefore been rendered obsolete. To dismantle these devices is a "dismantling the very infrastructures of patriarchy." One can imagine Earthworks as an imposition on the topography of the western United States, and the removal of these works, according to the transmission from the future feminist utopia, would result in "the decolonization of the landscape in tandem with the decolonization of the self."

The later 2016 film, using the same audio technique of multi-tracking voices, claims that Walter De Maria's land art work, *Lightning Field* (1977) is an ansible, a speculative telecommunications device invented by writer Ursula K. LeGuin. It also describes Robert Smithson's Earthwork, *Spiral Jetty* (1970) as a "psychic vibe generator." Interestingly, Nancy Holt's work *Sun Tunnels* (1973-76) is featured in Dykeman's film without being named as a specific "tool" the emissaries of the future employed in bringing about their successful feminist revolution. Holt's work is shown at the conclusion of the film emanating a blazing channel of light as a female figure climbs in one of its concrete cylinders. A work made by a female artist, *Sun Tunnels* appears to be the final conduit terminating this movement between the future and the present. The voices in the first film end their speech by stating that "the tools for all possible futures coexist within the present," implying perhaps that *Sun Tunnels* was *already* a potential tool for a feminist utopian future in its time, insofar as the high degree of participation of women in the 1960s and 1970s Earth Art movement represents a moment one could describe as feminist utopianism.



Left: Skawennati, *She Falls for Ages*, 2017, video still; Above: Gillian Dykeman, *dispatches from the feminist utopian future*, 2016



Christina Battle, *are we going to get blown off the planet (and what should we do about it)*, 2022, video still

Like Dykeman’s films, Christina Battle’s video installation “*are we going to get blown off the planet (and what should we do about it)*” (2022) relies on a kind of futuristic prolepsis, this time using Buckminster Fuller’s own words from the 1968 London, Ontario lecture from which the *From Remote Stars* exhibition draws its inspiration. (Battle is a Black Canadian artist living in Edmonton who was until recently based in London, Ontario, and the recovery of Fuller’s over fifty-year-old speech was the impetus behind commissioning her work). The work employs a mix of collaged images—mostly those from nature, such as sunsets, lightning storms, flowers, and rocks, though the hallways of server farms are seen too—that seem drawn from the hashtagged taxonomies of Instagram or of stock image databases. Battle’s silent film intersperses these images with video footage of butterflies and bees, and aerial and aquatic topographies sourced from Google Maps. Animated models of various polyhedra occasionally float by, and arms are shown reaching into the frame. Among this glut of images, Battle intersperses all caps textual intertitles of quotes from Fuller’s speech, such as “Try and stay in a place,” “Information from very remote stars,” “Hard to see if we have gone past the point of no return,” and “Opening

up the future.” Battle contrasts the sometimes unspecific soothsaying of Fuller’s prolix lecture with specific experiences of life on Earth. She grounds in the actual materiality of the Earth the generalities of Fuller’s cosmic optimism, whose engine of progress was the faith in an ability of (men’s) technological innovations to solve the world’s problems. The very notions of mastery and domination are questioned when the diversity of nature is enumerated as something outside human invention, as an archive we can attempt to organize but without ever presuming to author.

Aeronautic, climate control, and other technological tools employed for the betterment of the human condition have had terrible effects on the Earth’s ecology. The impulse to flee a scorched Earth is often presented as the only solution to climate change, especially by those individuals who have the greatest responsibility for alleviating the suffering caused by capitalism, racism, and sexism and their destructive exploitation of natural resources.¹¹ Rather than fantasizing that we created the technology of “Spaceship” Earth and now find ourselves poised to junk it when it no longer suits us, can we instead imagine humanity as part

of a “Mothership” Earth, part of nature, while recognizing that in our dominant role on Earth humans need to be stewards for the planet’s both human and non-human dwellers?

There is no better time for reckoning with technology than the present, given its uses and abuses in the hands of the powerful. But those speculations need not be fearful; there is immense awe, respect, reverence, and joy still available to us about what the Earth provides. While heeding Sun Ra’s warning that “the space age is here to stay. Ain’t no place that you can run away,” it is also worth remembering, as P-Funk’s most popular album ecstatically proclaimed, that it “ain’t nothing but a party... Citizens of the universe, I bring forth to you the good time on the Mothership.”¹²

Notes

- 1 Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995) (originally published in French in 1990), 171.
- 2 Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 12. Emphasis in original.
- 3 Ibid., 96.
- 4 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 5 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2.
- 6 Ibid., 24.
- 7 Ibid., 56.
- 8 Ibid., 55.
- 9 Ibid., 125.
- 10 Ibid., 98.
- 11 See Bruno Latour’s *Facing Gaia*, 2017, particularly Chapter 6 on modernity as catastrophe, apocalyptic thinking, and the rush to “end times.”
- 12 Sun Ra, lyrics to “Rocket Number Nine,” 1968, John F. Szwed, *Space Is The Place: The Lives And Times Of Sun Ra* (Boston: da Capo, 1998), 261. Parliament Funkadelic, lyrics to “Mothership Connection (Starchild),” 1975, released by Casablanca Records.