

Towards a Multispecies Future

By *Stephanie Kang*

I. Introduction

Founded in 2010 by Lauren Boyle, Solomon Chase, Marco Roso, and David Toro, the collaborative project DIS began as a satirical lifestyle magazine that broke down current events and critical theories through a humorous, yet accessible language. Since then, the creative collective has expanded its practice, producing cinematic videos and installations that question what the future looks like for humanity. In 2018, it inaugurated a streaming platform, called *dis.art*, that uses entertainment as a means of education, a method of public outreach that DIS dubs “edutainment.” By incorporating recognizable entertainment and social media sources into its educational practices, DIS creates platforms that allow its audiences to critically reflect on the state of the world and its current crises. In its 2021 video *Everything But The World*, which can best be described as part historical documentary and part science fiction, DIS and its collaborators look back on lineages of human progress to call the very notion of “history” itself into question.

The opening scene of *Everything But The World* begins with a long shot of a vast and desolate desert. As the camera slowly zooms onto a mesa, a naked human becomes discernible as the only moving object within the landscape. Her body, covered and caked with dried mud, is camouflaged to replicate the arid desert in its textured materiality. The video intentionally does not provide any clues regarding her whereabouts, both temporally and geographically. Its setting seemingly exists out of time, making it uncertain whether she is meant to reside in a prehistoric past or an apocalyptic future. As she slowly travels across the barren landscape in a desperate search for shelter, the camera captures footage of a bird, an antelope, and a lone tumbleweed similarly traversing the environment. Like the human, they move from one edge of the desert to the other with no clear motivation beyond their own survival in mind. Through these visual juxtapositions, *Everything But The World* highlights the parallel movements between the human, animals, and foliage, insinuating that they are not so different from one another. By refusing existing narratives that

designate humans as the protagonists of global history, *Everything But The World* moves beyond an anthropocentric framework to reimagine the end of the world through the lens of a multispecies future.

While the first scene of *Everything But The World* seemingly takes place outside of the contemporary moment, the following clips incorporate the language of new media, including social media livestreams and online tutorials, to reframe the future, not as a utopian venture, but as a complex interplay between the past, present, and future. Lacking a clear, linear narrative, the video jumps between vignettes of a YouTube tutorial, a legal report, an archeological tour, and a daily vlog. While these scenes may seem like



DIS, Everything But The World, 2021. Courtesy of the artists.

they present disparate and unrelated stories, the video's narrator, voiced by the filmmaker Leilah Weinraub, uses quippy interjections that create clear throughlines within the video's critiques of humanity. For example, returning to its first scene, the human eventually settles in a location and struggles to build a small fire as the narrator exasperatedly states, "They always imagined that they were history's favorite customer...And then they died. Unforgiven. Dust. Dust."

Through the video's unusual and at times humorous narratives, *DIS* poses the following questions: how can we imagine radical alternative ways of living in the twenty-first century, a time in which a livable future seems potentially implausible? And what might a future that refuses to prioritize human survival look like? Rather than denouncing death and decay, which turn humans from living subjects into lifeless

things, *Everything But The World* proposes a new vision for the future, one in which humans can rescind their place on their planet and embrace a state of thing-ness. By adopting a stance that embodies what political theorist Jane Bennett calls "thing-power," the characters in *Everything But The World* allow all things to coexist as an interconnected web of "vibrant matter" (Bennett 3), de-hierarchizing the categories that separate the human from the nonhuman and the living from the nonliving. Essentially, if anthropocentric and presentist worldviews can only predict dystopian futures of economic precarity, climate crisis, and global warfare, then perhaps it is time to embrace the liberatory power of humanity's end. Rather than presenting this futural projection as a pessimistic outlook on the world, *Everything But The World* reframes thing-ness as a new means of multispecies connection that is worth consideration and celebration.

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II. The Power of Fossilization

Everything But The World's introductory scene is followed by a sequence that features a how-to channel hosted by Branch and Banter, fictional characters that are played by the artist duo Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch. Known for their multilinear narratives that mirror the frenetic nature of online culture, the longtime collaborators construct filmic worlds that host a peculiar cast of characters with fragmented and fluid identities. Playing upon the ironic and the unnerving, their works present a distorted reflection of reality that exposes the psychological effects of the contemporary condition. Recently, Trecartin and Fitch decided to return to their Midwestern roots, replacing their Los Angeles

locale with a 32-acre homestead outside of Athens, Ohio, which includes everything from a traditional farmhouse to a lazy river (that when empty can serve as a skate park). Since purchasing the property, they have worked with several artists and creators, like Telfar, Jesse Hoffman, and DIS, to create projects set in this rural environment. For *Everything But The World*, Trecartin and Fitch were specifically asked by DIS to contribute a scene to the video that parodies humanity's attempts at apocalyptic preparation.

In the video, the two "de-extinction enthusiasts" Branch and Banter give viewers a tour of the expansive farmlands. They roam about the property as they tend to the land, feed the cows, and gather chicken eggs. Filmed with a selfie-stick, the shaky camera movements give the scene a makeshift quality that contrasts the cinematic nature of the previous segment. Yet the amateur approach to filmmaking with fourth-wall breaks, aimless ramblings, and seemingly improvised conversations, intentionally mimics the familiar tropes of a YouTube vlog, which documents the creator's daily activities as they provide a commentary to their followers. Mirroring the language and actions of an Internet influencer, they meander throughout the farmlands and speak into the camera, directly addressing their audiences. After introducing themselves and welcoming viewers to their channel, they proudly announce the purpose of the video, stating, "This is your wake repurposed as a How To Channel." Lauren Boyle, one of the creators of DIS, describes the characters of Branch and Banter as "preppers," who are getting ready for a catastrophic disaster (Hindahl and Boyle). However, rather than stockpiling on weapons, food, and other supplies needed for survival, they attempt to teach their followers "how to become a fossil."

Looking into the camera, Branch asks his viewers, "Do you really, really want to survive?" Through this pointed question, the paleontological influencer reorients the question of "how do you survive" to "do you want to survive," insinuating that the future can (and perhaps must) be reimagined without humans. This point is further stressed by several shots of excavated human remains that are intercut with Branch's monologue. Through these montaged images of unearthed bones, *Everything But The World*

visualizes the inevitable fate of all living things that die and eventually transform into fossilized matter. The duo then proceeds to spout off a series of questionable facts, celebrating the possibilities of "fossil hood" as they call it. They use words like "thing" and "timeless" as positive descriptors of the fossil, encouraging their audiences to rescind their identities as humans and give in to the thing-ness of fossilization. In doing so, they reject human-centered projections for the future, suggesting that becoming a fossil isn't something that should be feared but welcomed.

Branch and Banter illustrate how reimagining the future requires a radical restructuring of all anthropological categories, which separate the human, animal, and object based on a hierarchical scale. According to anthropologist Alfred Gell, objects, like fossils, contain a social agency that allows them to be seen as more than just lifeless, dead things; they can have significant social relationships and power roles (123). Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed also emphasizes that these subject-object relationships are far from neutral, noting the potential for their reorientation. By exploring interactive distinctions between the subject and the object (for example, one's relationship to a table or a couch), she contends that a new politics of "disorientation" or "queer phenomenology" can disrupt the existing social relations that limit a human's ability to interact and engage with other entities in the world (Ahmed 54). In *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, gender theorist Mel Y. Chen builds upon Ahmed's theory on queer phenomenology, while also critiquing how it upholds the dichotomy between the deadened, inanimate object and the living, animate subject. Problematizing categories that separate the human from the animal or object, they ask, "What is lost when we hold tightly to that exceptionalism which says that couches are dead and we are live? For would not my nonproductivity, my nonhuman sociality, render me some other human's 'dead'?" (Chen 210). In their work, Chen emphasizes that these viewpoints that prioritize human exceptionalism are no longer viable or worth promoting when attempting to produce new and more equitable outlooks for the future.

In their instructional video, Branch and Banter reorient these social relations towards an alternative methodology that questions the

boundaries between the human and the fossil. Rather than trying to hold onto the human's position as the prioritized living being, they embrace the fluidity of a material nature, which continually fluctuates in its molecular form and status. In doing so, they emphasize the limitations of anthropocentric thinking, which defines "who" or "what" is bestowed the designation of human. To help break down these categories, the following segments of *Everything But The World* provide glimpses into humanity's constant searches for progress, highlighting not only the insignificance of human civilizations but the cataclysmic harm that they have caused throughout history.

III. The Failures of Human Progress

For centuries, fantasies of a new future have emphasized the role of human progress, whether it might be scientific, technological, or moralistic. For example, in his book *After the Future*, political theorist and media activist Franco "Bifo" Berardi looks to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* as an emblem of these ideals. Published in 1909, the same year that Henry Ford first initiated the use of the assembly line in his Detroit automobile factory, the *Futurist Manifesto* outlines eleven points that celebrate the advents of industrialization, one of which states, "We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath...a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace" (Berardi 21). Under these modernist notions of progress, the cultic value placed on speed reoriented the machine as the model of productivity, causing labored time to be accelerated towards its maximum operations. As a result, human bodies became synchronized, both physically and psychically, to the machine's continuous, uninterrupted work rate. Describing these conditions as a "24/7 environment," art historian Jonathan Crary argues that it "has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness" (9). Essentially, while futurists like Marinetti

idolized machinic speed as the marker of human advancement, it has in actuality perpetuated harmful systems of exploitation.

Additionally, capitalist modes of accelerated production and consumption have resulted in dire ecological conditions, a reality that was emphasized by David Spratt and Ian Dunlop, members of the National Centre for Climate Restoration, when they observed, "Climate change is now reaching the end-game where very soon humanity must choose between taking unprecedented action, or accepting that it has been left too late and bear the consequences" (3). In short, the world is currently undergoing a crisis, in which the planet may no longer be able to withstand the harmful effects of the Anthropocene. However, in *Beyond the World's End*, art historian T.J. Demos questions current conceptions of apocalyptic disaster, particularly its presentist assumptions. He writes, "Current fears of the world's end are...importantly contextualized by Indigenous voices that view them as a mode of settler anxiety, haunted by those centuries-old histories of colonial violence, climate-changing brutality, and genocide-directed militarism—forces that have long disrupted fragile ecologies integral to native lifeworlds and continue to do so in the present" (9). He continues, "Much the same could be said of the world-ending, and equally world-transforming, event of the centuries-long transatlantic slave trade for those of African descent" (Demos 10). As Demos argues, many worlds have already undergone many ends under the violence of colonialism, militarism, and capitalism. Therefore, pursuing misguided hopes for the future and its continual progress has resulted in humanity's ultimate failure—the destruction of the planet and its inhabitants.

In *Everything But The World*, DIS and its collaborators represent the dangers of capitalist exploitation and how they create anti-social attitudes of complacency that prioritize the human, and more specifically the self, above all else. In one of the video's final scenes, a "zoomer" records herself engaging in one of the contemporary period's most innocuous tasks—waiting in a drive-through line. At the beginning of the segment, she switches the video's viewpoint to a vertical portrait mode, indicating that she is recording and sharing the video for her social

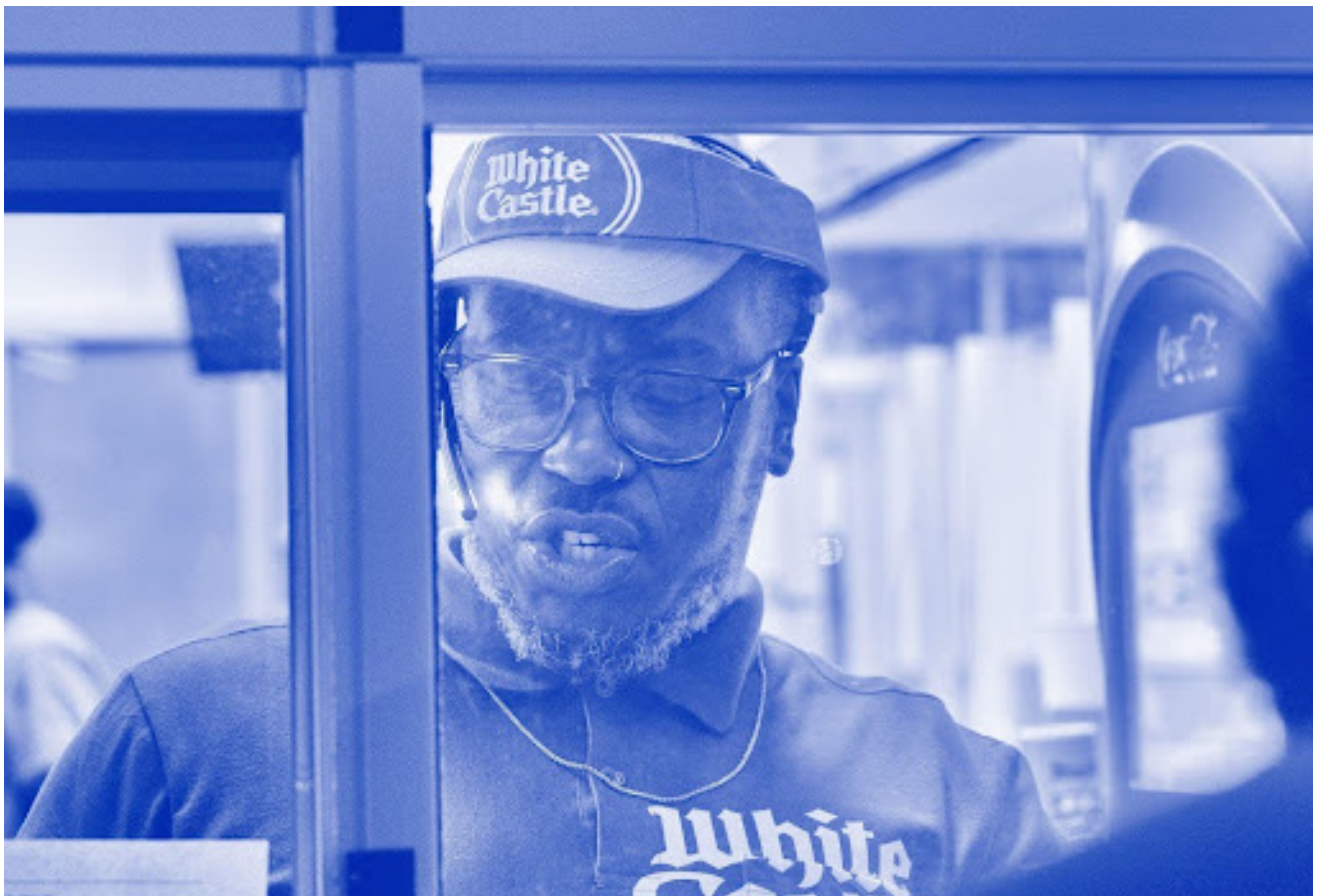
media followers, an assumption that is further verified as she poses for the camera, rolling her eyes and sticking out her tongue. She speaks directly to her audience, sharing her frustrations about the long wait at the White Castle. While she attempts to assuage her boredom, she records the facade of the White Castle, zooming onto its illuminated logo and “Open 24 Hours” sign.

Yet when she finally drives up to the speaker box and tries to place her order, a White Castle employee named Mark interrupts her, beginning a three-minute-long monologue that holds her hostage in the line. Clearly alarmed and made uncomfortable by this bizarre interaction, she looks around in confusion, attempting to still place her order despite the employee’s disinterest. Speaking over the customer, Mark continues to rant to her about the existential crises that are currently facing humanity, saying, “The invention of the clock was the origin of wage labor but only some people had access to time. They controlled it and manipulated time. Isn’t that how they snatch your time and space up under you?” As he delves further and further into his diatribe, the camera

slowly zooms onto the speaker box, insinuating a connection between the technological apparatus and Mark’s disembodied voice. His speech is then juxtaposed with montaged clips of faceless White Castle employees frantically taking food out of the fryers, flipping sliders on the grill, bagging up orders, and counting money from the register. By speaking extensively on topics of time, labor, and colonialism to the customer at the drive-through, he forcibly slows down the assembly line of the fast-food industry, reversing capitalist power roles between the worker and the buyer.

DIS, Everything But The World, 2021. Courtesy of the artists.

Designating himself as the “god” of the drive-through, Mark orders his captive audience to consider contemporary time constraints, which are organized around these histories of capitalist exploitation. Describing this scene as a confrontation of “time denialism,” DIS member Lauren Boyle explains how these modernist notions of speed and constant productivity have become ingrained



DIS, Everything But The World, 2021. Courtesy of the artists.

into neoliberal structures that organize our world, making them dependent on constant economic growth and consumption (Hindahl and Boyle). However, rather than creating a route to a liberatory future for humans as futurists like Marinetti had once hoped, the cult of speed bound us within its systems. Modernist modes of constant productivity have thus been weaponized towards a vision for the future that is centered on inescapable cycles of capitalist manipulation and colonialist warfare. As Mark poignantly articulates to his befuddled audience, “White settler colonialism gave birth to the industrial revolution, which sowed the seeds of why we have drive-through restaurants in the first place.”

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It is important to note though that humans are not the only ones affected by these processes. As the camera zooms into the illuminated menu advertising White Castle’s chicken rings, Mark announces that 32 billion chickens are killed daily for human consumption. Voicing his frustrations through the speaker box, he declares, “In a million years, the last lasting fossil records will be chicken bones. Future archeologists will find like ka-trillion-billion chicken bones everywhere and be like ‘what the fuck?’ These people were godless savages.” While Branch and Banter previously described fossilization as a means of liberation, Mark’s empathy for the millions of chickens that he is forced to prepare for human consumption also raises a question regarding agency in the transition from living being to deadened object.

Essentially, who is given the choice to become a fossil and who is forced into this category of thing-ness? In this scene, *Everything But The World* reveals how harmful modes of capitalist production have made “thing-power” seem undesirable to the human mind. However, through characters like Branch and Banter, who praise the possibilities of fossilization, and the unnamed narrator, who continuously roasts the failures of humanity, DIS and its collaborators allow new imaginative potentials of thing-ness to emerge.

IV. Conclusion

In the final scenes of *Everything But The World*, the video’s narrator concludes her assessment of humanity, stating, “Ok, it’s weird that I’m even covering sapiens. They weren’t that famous. Check the ratings. The humans weren’t a disaster, they were a whimper, a hardly audible sneeze.” In *Everything But The World*, DIS proposes that desolation and death do not lead down the path of no future, as one might be led to believe; rather, they can become platforms for renewal. By reimagining thing-ness as a source of radical power, the video demonstrates that the future is not just a human-centered project, but one that demands justice for all living and nonliving entities alike. As the creators of DIS state, “If we realize that this is not *the* world, but a world among many possible, what worlds might we see come, after the end?” (DIS). Through its worldbuilding projects, DIS reorients hope for the future towards de-hierarchical connections and interplanetary equity, bringing the elsewhere of a new future one step closer into view.

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