SUPER TOXIC TERRARIUMS. SPERIMENTAL SCENARIOS FOR TOXIC LANDSCAPES

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Terrariums are typically designated to display a controlled and captivating micro-ecosystem within a small environment, which can include soil, plants, and even specimens of amphibians, insects, and reptiles.

Moving from the Victorian age, the era in which this instrument became known to transport and preserve botanical specimens, to more recent reinterpretations, the terrarium has not lost its evocative power and still represents a powerful gateway for imagination or, at least, a means of "collecting manias" of an entire era[1].

For example, a window-greenhouse reproducing a fragment of Tintern Abbey appeared as an illustration for the second edition of *On the Growth of Plants in Closely Glazed Cases* (Ward 1852, p. 15), effectively expressing Ward's romantic idea of nature and embodying the bourgeois gothic aesthetic of his time. More recently, the blown glass containers evolved into biomorphic objects hosting delicate tropical gardens, as the ones proposed by the New York artist and landscape designer Paula Hayes,[2] or into the immersive biospheres created by Vaughn Bell,[3] that allow for a close sensorial experience of soil, moss, ferns, small living creatures.

SUPER TOXIC TERRARIUMS

In contrast with the flourishing ecological focus of the above-mentioned terrariums, a sealed display-cabinet holding a strange interweave of polyurethane, acrylic, and nylon was spotted at the Görlitz station, in Germany, during the summer of 2016. In particular, the *Super Toxic Terrarium* (Nadine Baldow 2016) was part of a series of images and artifacts resembling corals and lichens growing on a conglomeration of plastic waste, that were spread throughout the city. According to the author, they prompted consideration of the need, for living beings, to adapt to the impact of plastic, microplastics and widespread polymer invasions, and highlighted the agencies of synthetic and chemical matters, as well as the inner strength and vitality of living beings that inhabit the Earth.

A radical change of perspective thus occurs. Ward's original experimental terrariums held imported botanical species that, thanks to proper care, survived and flourished in contrast with a heavily polluted environment (the nineteenth-century industrial city of London), seeking for a sort of recovery of an Edenic harmony and shaping an image of a pristine, "exotic" idea of nature.

Baldow's disquieting compositions, made of polyurethane,

acrylic and nylon, instead exalt the vibrant matter of inert materials and rather resemble a collection of Plastiglomerate living sculptures,[7] recalling the famous pieces of rocks and plastic found by geologist Patricia Corcoran and artist Kelly Jazvac on a Hawaiian beach in 2012[8].

The magma of harmful materials therefore moves away from the reassuring perfection of manicured lawns and tropical species, and alludes to the pervasive contamination of lands. It implicitly stresses the idea that toxicity is present in all human, animal, and plant porous bodies, as well as in the environment that surrounds them, suggesting the urgent need to rethink and study new possible "toxic ecosystems," as well as to reframe their aesthetic character.

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

On the one hand, Baldow's terrariums project us toward an idea of "toxic sublime"[9]. Bilious green pieces of plastic and deep black fragments of foam mixed with rocks earn our attention and transport us into vast geological temporalities, that are otherwise hard to grasp and comprehend. Indeed, as noted by Kirsty Robertson, the Plastiglomerate physicality can "makes the familiar unfamiliar" and can bring together "the human with the currents of water; with the breaking down, over millennia, of stone into sand and fossils into oil; with the quick substration of that oil into fuel; and with the refining of that fuel into polycarbons—into plastic, into garbage"[10].

From a socio-political perspective, toxic terrariums moreover help viewers to become conscious of what might otherwise be difficultly imaginable landscapes: visually enjoyable micro compositions no more refer to a peaceful nature of idyll, but rather are linked to ecologically devastating macro scenarios, and unfamiliar processes of alteration of soil, water, air and food.

From seemingly pristine island in Arctic Alaska, where local communities are exposed to high levels of persistent organic toxic chemicals that remain in the earth's crust for many years, giving shape to new, sculptural landforms, to the giant blob of oil that viscously soaked into the ground in Greenpoint, north of Brooklyn, a number of toxic landscapes and altered grounds indeed are scattered across the globe, giving rise to hotspot of pollution or to unnoticed "sacrifice zones."[11]

In this sense, the *Super Toxic Terrariums* become powerful tools of advocacy, raising awareness towards the otherwise hidden and geographically distant destructiveness of the global cycle of extraction, manufacture, disposal and of the related colonial histories.

Super Toxic Terrarium, terrarium in Görlitz Station.
Photo by Nadine Baldow, 2016.

On the other hand, looking at these contemporary terrariums one could observe how stunning and, in parts, fragile invasive species appear to have made room for themselves, testing their ability to survive perturbations and bringing forth the promise of possible new forms of relationality, interactions and life.

The emerging dystopic scenario, which could also be read as part of a narrative that does not include humans, indeed stages the potentiality of alien-communities to combine each other in new, composite versions, and to be able to survive on a damaged and wounded Earth.

In this regard, story of "ecological redemption," or of a cross-species medley of different embodiments and alien plant species that are able to survive, to adapt and to restore the "new wild" of forests and oceans, comes to mind[17]. But also, the emergent properties of microbial communities, as described in Haraway's vision on tentacular systems made by chthonic creatures, "that are monsters in the best sense of the word: they demonstrate and perform the material importance of earth processes and of all the creatures"[18].

> In times of climate crisis and ecological turbulence, many of us are indeed tempted to believe that the problem lies in constructing a safe, protected future, with the idea of avoiding any events that could threaten over tomorrow, and with the need to clear away both the past and the present in order to create new futures for generations to come [19].

Super Toxic Terrariums, on the contrary, bring us back to the present, redefine human's role toward responsive, cooperative, evolutionary change and are able to speak about mutations, contaminations, and about the synergy between organism and environment, between living and inert matters.

[1] M. Flanders Darby, *Unnatural History: Ward's Glass Cases,* in "Victorian Literature and Culture", 35, 2007, p. 647.

[2] N.B. Ward, *On the Growth of Plants in Closely Glazed Cases,* John Van Voorst, London 1852, p. 15.

[3] See the exhibition *Nocturne of the Limax Maximus*, Moma Museum of Modern Art, New York 2010-2011.

[4] See the exhibition *The Village Green*, MassMOCA Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, Northhampton 2008.

[5] The term "Plastiglomerate" precisely refers to a multi-composite material made hard by agglutination of rock outcrops and molten plastic or at the combinations of basalt, coral, shells, and woody debris with grains of sand in a plastic matrix. See K. Robertson, *Plastiglomerate*, in "CSPA Quarterly. Queer Ecologies", 19, 2017/18, pp. 38-44.

[6] Describing the work of Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Peepls uses the definition "toxic sublime" to evidence how the captivating aesthetic of his photographs could help in facing difficult landscapes and in counteracting the feeling of alarm and unease. See J. Peeples, *Toxic sublime: Imaging contaminated landscapes*, in "Environmental Communication", 5, 2011, pp. 373-392.

[7] K. Robertson, *Plastiglomerate*, in "CSPA Quarterly. Queer Ecologies", 19, 2017/18, p. 41.

[8] The definition quotes the research by Steve Lerner: "the label sacrifice zones comes from 'National Sacrifice Zones,' an Orwellian term coined by government officials to designate areas dangerously contaminated as a result of the mining and processing of uranium into nuclear weapons.... I have chosen to highlight 'sacrifice zones,' in the title of this book because it dramatizes the fact that low-income and minority populations, living adjacent to heavy industry and military bases, are required to make disproportionate health and economic sacrifices that more affluent people can avoid." S. Lerner, *Sacrifice Zones. The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass, 2010, pp. 15-16.

[9] See F. Pearce, *New Wild. Why Invasive Species will be Nature's Salvation,* Icon, London 2010.

[10] D. J. Haraway, *Chthulucene. Sopravvivere su un Pianeta Infetto.* Nero, Roma 2019, p. 32. Translation by the author.

[11] *Ivi,* p. 85.