

## The Black Light at The End of the World

Tina Rivers Ryan was invited by HOME to write a critical text examining the work of the Future 20 Collective.

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I'm standing in a twenty-first century urban plaza that is ringed by large buildings of glass and steel. One of them bears a large neon sign reading HOME; its ground-floor windows are plastered with large posters bearing a beautiful woman's bandaged face and the word GREED in bold red letters. The plaza itself is encased by a rainbow-colored, coral-like scrim that blocks all the thoroughfares. A large bonfire of wooden pallets rages in its center, while construction cones and other barriers float in circles above the flames. It's not clear who set the blaze, as I don't see anyone around. In fact, I don't see any signs of life at all, except for a dark, denuded tree trunk, rising from the windswept ground like a skeleton's hand from the grave.

That's when I spot him: comrade Friedrich Engels, or rather, a heroic concrete sculpture of him. Arms crossed over his chest, he stares off into a future that has already passed. The pedestal under him has partly collapsed, tilting him forward awkwardly, though not quite toppling him. I ponder his fate, and mine: we appear to be trapped alone together, here in this abandoned space that feels like the end of the world.

Someone else is here with us, though—even if only as a ghostly recording from another time. I hear his words over a rumbling percussive beat, his voice alternating between droning song and impassioned speech:

*Beacon of man enlighten  
Black light don't be frightened  
Guiding down to New Eden  
Black light don't be frightened*

I look around again. There's nobody here but me and stone-faced Engels. Am I the lone survivor who is being called upon to follow this dark light towards a new paradise?

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Thus begins *Last Place On Earth* (2020), a twenty-minute, 360-degree digital experience produced by Future 20 Collective. Before the arrival of COVID-19, this multi-disciplinary group of young artists—working under the artistic direction of Ivan Morison as part of a year-long residency at HOME Manchester, a space for contemporary visual and performing arts—was aiming to produce an

exhibition. In its wake, they shifted (like much of the art world) to virtual space, transforming HOME into the departure point of a journey through a fantastical, post-apocalyptic landscape in the near future. The experience weds digital world-building with the arts of cinema, music, and poetry, and unfolds in five segments (which the artists have identified and named, although the titles don't appear in the work itself), each representing an element of nature. The first, "Black Light," uses fire to represent the ongoing ecological destruction of our world. (As I write this, yet another wildfire instigated by a "gender reveal" stunt is ravaging California.) After passing through a kaleidoscopic time portal, we are ritually cleansed in the waters of "Bleak Sea," before traveling across the arid desert of "Surface Cloud," where a constantly shifting open-air structure of petrified bones suggests an equally open model of community. In "Soft Stone," a glass-enclosed tunnel that feeds into an observatory reveals the beauty of earth, represented by a valley bounded by mountains under the aurora borealis. The final segment, "Nexus Valley," features eruptions of swirling abstract colors that recall the modernist tradition of "visual music," as well as the psychedelic light shows of the 1960s. Here, we are immersed in the pleasant ether of a new utopia, having achieved the final stage of our rebirth.

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It was only around five years ago that the concept of "Virtual Reality," or VR (along with the related experience of "Augmented Reality," or AR) became a major trend in mainstream contemporary art. With the emergence of consumer systems like Oculus Rift, Samsung Gear VR, and Google Cardboard, more artists began experimenting with the creation of immersive and even interactive digital worlds, building on the rising popularity of time-based media art. As early as 2016, VR became the subject of endless media hype: *Hyperallergic* triumphantly announced that "The Virtual-Reality Future Is Here," while Artsy.net declared VR "the Most Powerful Medium of Our Time."<sup>1</sup> This swell of enthusiasm was soon followed by a seemingly endless wave of institutional exhibitions large and small. In Germany alone—and from only 2017 to 2018—these included *Unreal: A Virtual Reality Exhibition* at the NRW-Forum in Düsseldorf; *Perception is Reality: On the Construction of Reality and Virtual Worlds* at the Frankfurter Kunstverein; *Beautiful New Worlds: Virtual Realities in Contemporary Art* at the Zeppelin Museum, Friedrichshafen; and *Virtual Insanity* at the Kunsthalle Mainz.<sup>2</sup> The commercial sector took notice, too: in 2018, HTC Vive became the first "Virtual Reality Partner" of Art Basel, and in 2019, Frieze New York included a small VR exhibition that was curated by Daniel Birnbaum, the director of the VR

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hyperallergic.com/268442/the-virtual-reality-future-is-here/> and <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-virtual-reality-is-the-most-powerful-artistic-medium-of-our-time>

<sup>2</sup> Other notable examples of institutions focusing on VR include DiMoDA (The Digital Museum of Digital Art), which launched its first exhibition in 2015; the new series called *First Look: Artists' VR*, debuted by the New Museum and its partner Rhizome in 2017; and the exhibition *Speculative Cultures: A Virtual Reality Exhibition*, presented at the New School's Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery in New York in 2019.

production company Acute Art.<sup>3</sup> Not unexpectedly, the backlash was immediate, with critics complaining that too many VR artworks are essentially glorified videos, and that these tend to privilege voyeurism and spectacle in problematic ways (represented most notoriously by Jordan Wolfson's *Real Violence*, which caused a scandal at the 2017 Whitney Biennial).<sup>4</sup> In short, using VR to make and experience art has seemed like an answer in search of a question. As Jason Farago asked in his 2017 *New York Times* article, "Virtual Reality Has Arrived in the Art World. Now What?"<sup>5</sup>

In truth, artists have been experimenting with VR for decades—not only as a means of exploring our increasingly technological everyday reality, but also as a tool for addressing some of the most fundamental themes of art, such as our relationship to the environment, our need for community, and the subjective nature of our perception.<sup>6</sup> (Some even posit that what we think of as "VR art" is merely the latest stage in the evolution of immersive environments that span from Roman frescoes to nineteenth-century panoramas and beyond.) While the precise definition of VR can vary, it typically involves the use of digital tools—originally headsets and gloves, but now including smartphones and other hand-held devices like Microsoft Kinect and Nintendo Wii—to insert the user into a navigable virtual space, especially one where they can interact with objects or even avatars of other people. Unlike other illusory artistic mediums, such as painting or film, VR allows multiple people to experience the same hallucinatory space in a visceral way (through the tracked movement of their eyes and head, if not also their bodies): to paraphrase VR pioneer Jaron Lanier, VR can be described as the collective sharing of lucid dreams.<sup>7</sup> While it always has been haunted by its potential for abuse—Lanier himself describes a nightmare scenario where VR becomes a tool for achieving social control through behavior modification—its essential promise, first articulated in the 1980s, is to make individuals *more* aware, active, and connected, not less.

Viewed through the perspective of VR's longer history, *Last Place On Earth* appears to revive the humanistic idealism that characterized its origins—thereby providing an answer to the question of why VR might be useful for today's artists, who are working in the midst of multiple ongoing crises of planetary proportions.

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<sup>3</sup> See [https://arts.vive.com/us/articles/projects/art-photography/vive\\_arts\\_for\\_art\\_basel/](https://arts.vive.com/us/articles/projects/art-photography/vive_arts_for_art_basel/) and <https://www.frieze.com/video/electric-partnership-lifewtr>

<sup>4</sup> For example, see <https://hyperallergic.com/385325/new-vr-arts-platform-launches-with-abramovic-eliasson-koons-and-a-whole-lot-of-hype/> and [https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews\\_features/art-tech/is-there-hope-for-virtual-reality-in-art-why-marina-abramovic-and-jeff-koons-are-not-the-answer-55318](https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/art-tech/is-there-hope-for-virtual-reality-in-art-why-marina-abramovic-and-jeff-koons-are-not-the-answer-55318)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/03/arts/design/virtual-reality-has-arrived-in-the-art-world-now-what.html>;

<sup>6</sup> On these early artists, see, for example, Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Frank Popper, *From Technological to Virtual Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); and Tina Rivers Ryan, "Entering the Picture: Matt Mullican's Virtual Photography," in *Matt Mullican: Photographs Catalogue 1967-2018*, exh. cat. (Milan: Pirelli HangarBicocca, 2019), 33-44.

<sup>7</sup> See Jaron Lanier, *Dawn of the New Everything: Encounters with Reality and Virtual Reality* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2017).

Using multimedia immersion, it offers a collective dream of a new world—beautiful, sustainable, and communal—built from the ashes of this one. It is a New Eden built inside a technological system that itself promised to be a New Eden, where beacons of dark light signal not only endings, but also new beginnings.

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