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Museo Subacuático de Arte and the Eco-Aesthetic Gimmick

What can art do in the era of climate change? Answers are varied. Art can capture and document ecological crisis; it can build an archive of nonhuman vitality and anthropogenic damage. It can address suffering, render the invisible visible, and condense crises that are slow in the making. It can enact minoritized perspectives that scramble Western ontologies and epistemologies. It can articulate territorial relationality and deep time. Through these methods and others, art brings into focus how we make sense of and inhabit the planet, and how the planet has been remade by colonial capitalism.

Art is also a site of imagination and experimentation with ways of living otherwise amid environmental exhaustion. This approach to art as a socially engaged practice imbues it with an ethical responsibility to the planet that it aims to represent. This ethical responsibility has a self-reflexive dimension. As a creative practice grounded in materiality and with material impact, art intervenes in the world. Thinking about art as a material intervention leads to various queries. Should art have a minimal material footprint? Should it model the precepts of degrowth? Or should it be maximalist, intervening in ways that bring about tangible change?

These questions get at the quandary of living and making art in the Capitalocene, a geological epoch forged by the political economic system of colonial capitalism that approaches the planet and its inhabitants as resources in the service of endless accumulation (Moore 2016). The utilitarian logic of colonial capitalism does not ascribe value to life, but to life's ability to be transformed into surplus. Yet the desire for art not only to unmoor us from this utilitarian logic but also to provide "solutions" to this historical crisis is itself an expression of the neoliberal stage of the Capitalocene, which frames the responsibility to slow climate change as falling to individual actors, rather than to state governments or to coalitions that can push for systemic change.

One project that manifests the thorny entanglement between fine art and the logics of the Capitalocene is the Museo Subacuático de Arte (Underwater Museum of Art), best known by its acronym MUSA, located near Cancún, Mexico. The underwater museum, populated primarily with submerged sculptures by the British-Grenadian artist Jason deCaires Taylor, has been celebrated by scholars as an

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eco-aesthetic intervention that has helped mitigate reef exhaustion in the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef. Yet while scholars have rightly drawn attention to how Taylor's sculptures are cocreated by nonhuman corals, illustrate sea ontologies, and have helped draw tourists away from the more fragile natural reef, less attention has been paid to MUSA's material conditions and to the credibility of its instrumentalist claim that art can help solve environmental crisis.

In this chapter, I propose that analysis of MUSA as an aesthetic project must be accompanied by analysis that takes into consideration its status as a tourist attraction. A holistic approach to MUSA as an aesthetic project, tourist attraction, and ecological intervention brings it into view as what I call an "eco-aesthetic gimmick". The eco-aesthetic gimmick embodies the messy complexity of artmaking in the Capitalocene, in which a tenuous line is drawn between the aesthetic experience and the ethical experience, and in which the desire for art to solve climate change ends up positioning art as a substitute for regulation and political action.

Reef Exhaustion and the Eco-Aesthetic Fix

In 2009, the Director of the Parque Nacional Costa Occidental de Isla Mujeres, Punta Cancún y Punta Nizuc, Dr. Jaime González Cano, and his collaborator, Roberto Díaz Abraham, were faced with a dilemma. Global warming, hurricanes, ocean acidification, and tourist activity had brought areas of the marine park to near exhaustion. As part of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, the world's second-largest barrier reef, the marine park was experiencing mass coral bleaching and loss. Its coral cover was halved in 2005 by a severe hurricane season that compounded existing stressors (Wilkinson 2008: 10). According to the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network, warming waters, intensifying tropical storms, and local pressures have made it harder for reefs throughout the world to recover between bleaching events, and have catalyzed a shift from coral-dominated to algae-dominated reefs (Souter et al. 2020: 3).

Climate change is the main driver of this shift, but the tourist industry also poses a chronic threat to reefs because of development's correlation with coastal water pollution and eutrophication (an increase in minerals from land runoff that causes bodies of water to become more plant-dense and lose the oxygen needed by the reef ecosystem). On an individual level, tourists who are inexperienced divers have trouble stabilizing themselves in the water, and bump into the reef, disturbing it. So how should these pressures be alleviated, particularly when closing the reef off to divers – or regulating the number of divers who could access it – was dismissed as catastrophic for tourism in Cancún?

Dr. González Cano and Díaz Abraham were charged with coming up with a solution (Santamaría Arroyo 2016: 138)[1]. González Cano suggested creating a diversion, a place to lure visitors away from the natural reef. He proposed an underwater garden composed of artificial reef ball technology, modeled on one in nearby Sac Bajo. But after visiting the site, his partner Díaz Abraham vetoed the idea, noting that the microsilica concrete balls that had been dropped to the ocean floor five years ago to attract new corals were still bare and unremarkable. Studies of reef ball technology back this observation, showing that it is effective at increasing fish biomass and protecting shorelines from storms, but less effective in terms of coral reef restoration, the success of which is "judged to be limited" (Meesters/Smith/Becking 2015: 5). Díaz Abraham intuited that tourists would be dissatisfied with this option and would continue to visit the more visually interesting yet fragile natural reef. His pragmatic response signals that the success of the intervention would be based on its ability to appeal to tourists, rather than based on its ability to protect coastal communities or to attract coastal marine life.

Upon further research, Dr. González Cano suggested another model: the Molinere Bay Underwater Sculpture Park in Grenada. Made up of seventy-five underwater sculptures by Jason deCaires Taylor, the underwater sculpture park was commissioned by Grenada in the wake of extensive reef damage caused by Hurricanes Ivan and Emily in 2004–05. Taylor designed sculptures made with pH-neutral cement and rough textured surfaces that would attract coral polyps. The sculptures are life-size casts of human figures, modeled on local residents. Over time, the submerged figures are colonized by corals, which obscure the static form of the human body, producing an aesthetically striking interspecies amalgam that is in constant flux.

Inaugurated in 2006 as the first underwater sculpture park in the world, the Molinere Underwater Sculpture Park was a success, drawing in so many snorkelers, divers, and tourists in glass-bottomed boats that the government of Grenada decided to designate it a marine protected area. Ticket sales to the underwater park continue to fund the area's park rangers. Its most well-known piece is *Vicissitudes* (2007), which depicts a ring of children holding hands and facing outward in a defiant, united stance. Taylor conceptualized *Vicissitudes* to communicate the importance of protecting the ocean for future generations. Given its location in the Caribbean and the use of Black Grenadian models for the sculpted forms, *Vicissitudes* has also been widely interpreted as a comment on the countless lives lost to the Middle Passage (DeLoughrey 2017: 39; Loichot 2020: 144).

1 My account of the events leading up to MUSA's founding are based on a 2016 interview with Roberto Díaz Abraham, MUSA's founder, conducted by Natalia Anahí Santamaría Arroyo.

This was exactly the sort of tourist-oriented aesthetic solution to reef exhaustion that Díaz Abraham and González Cano had in mind. After several conversations with Taylor, they offered him $20,000 to move to Cancún for six months and begin work on three statues while they applied for a federal grant of $200,000 to support the creation of two hundred additional sculptures (Santamaría Arroyo 2016: 139). The state awarded the project's requested funding as well as a permit to eventually submerge up to 1,500 statues in twelve different sites, a scale that eclipsed that of Molinere Underwater Sculpture Park. The project was named MUSA or Museo Subacuático de Arte (Underwater Museum of Art), and it became the world's first underwater museum or significant collection of submerged sculptures.

MUSA opened as a nonprofit in 2010 with two primary sites in Manchones (geared toward diving) and Punta Nizuc (snorkeling and glass-bottomed boats). Its tagline is "the art of conservation". It currently contains about five hundred statues mostly designed by Taylor, who collaborated with local fishers to cast them for the series. Some of his best-known works at MUSA include *Anthropocene* (2010), a sculpture of a submerged VW Beetle with a child fearfully crouched on its windshield, *The Bankers* (2011), a series of men kneeling with their heads buried under the sand, *Inertia* (2011), an obese man watching TV while consuming a burger and fries, and *The Last Supper* (2012), a table adorned with a bowl of fruit mixed with hand grenades.

In both content and context, Taylor's work at MUSA tackles the damage wrought by capitalist exploitation and wasteful consumerism. In his analysis of the series, John Levi Barnard explains that it equates the capitalist production of "cheap food" with the explosive violence of the hand grenade (Barnard 2017: 873). The series' dystopian contrast between children fearful of climate change and passive, apathetic adults is heightened by its underwater placement, which invokes a speculative future in which the world has been swallowed by rising seas. The sculptures' to-size scale enhances divers' uncanny experience of visiting a mimetic world in watery ruins: a portrait of contemporary Western society that has been recontextualized and estranged through its appropriation by marine life.

Taylor's dystopian thematization of human behavior is paired with a utopian belief in art's ability to serve the nonhuman. As Adrian J. Ivakhiv points out, Taylor's sculptures are designed to welcome nonhuman refashioning. In addition to the use of pH neutral cement that facilitates the growth of corals, the VW Beetle in *Anthropocene* is bored through with holes that fish can swim through to breed in the sculpture's protected interior and contains pockets where lobsters can seek refuge. This design, Ivakhiv explains, makes the sculptures at MUSA "not just an interpretation of the world, that is a medium for-us, but rather an artwork acknowledging our large-scale presence that also seeks to heal the world's depleting

reefs – a medium for-them" (Ivakhiv 2014). Taylor's series is conceptualized to appeal both to tourists and to sea life. This multivalent design foregrounds the ability of art not only to critique ecological exhaustion, but to intervene generatively in situations of exhaustion to provide a refuge for nonhuman life and even the conditions for its flourishing.

The Eco-Aesthetic Fix as Tourist Attraction

In 2013, Taylor left the project at MUSA after the federal grant ran its course and was not renewed. After several years of financial crisis, MUSA was acquired by AquaWorld, a for-profit organization in Cancún that offers water sports, tours, fishing, and boating excursions. MUSA remains a nonprofit entity that is funded and maintained by AquaWorld. Currently MUSA hosts around 400,000 annual visitors and continues to add new sculptures to its collection designed by five Mexican artists: Karen Salinas Martínez, Roberto Díaz Abraham (MUSA's founder), Rodrigo Quiñonez Reyes, Salvador Quiroz Ennis, and Elier Amado Gil. Some of these works are being submerged at a third site in Punta Sam that is currently in development. Other new sculptures are temporarily sited in prominent locations in the Cancún hotel district, promoting MUSA on land before their eventual submersion.

According to Díaz Abraham, who became MUSA's founding president, the project has successfully met its goal of diverting divers from the more fragile natural reef. In an interview, he estimated that tourist demand to dive at the natural reef has been cut in half thanks to MUSA (Santamaría Arroyo 2016: 143). Echoing Díaz Abraham's claims, Taylor's website similarly touts MUSA's success as an eco-aesthetic intervention. It explains that "visitors to the [Cancún] Marine Park now divide their time between the museum and the natural reef, providing significant rest for natural overstressed areas" (Taylor n.d.-a). Díaz Abraham attributes MUSA's popularity with divers to the Cancún Tourism Board's promotion of the site as one of Cancún's two iconic attractions along with the whale shark. He explains that the diving industry uses MUSA as a place to take beginner divers where there is less risk that they will harm the reef.

MUSA advertises three different experiences for divers who are not certified in diving. After a brief introduction to the basics of diving, participants dive up to a depth of thirty feet at Manchones Gallery to see works by Taylor such as *Anthropocene* and *The Bankers*, as well as sea turtles and fish. The promotional material for this experience notes that "MUSA attracts all types of living creatures, many of [which] were thought to be already in danger of extinction" (MUSA, n.d.-a).

To recapitulate, Díaz Abraham and Taylor hail MUSA as a successful conservationist intervention based on two claims that are frequently repeated by scholars. First, MUSA reduces the number of tourists who visit the fragile Mesoamerican Barrier Reef by offering them an attractive alternative experience. Second, MUSA provides an artificial ecosystem that is appealing to coral polyps and endangered sea life. So how do these claims hold up to scrutiny?

Regarding the first claim that MUSA relieves the natural reef from tourist traffic, it is equally possible that MUSA expands the capacity of the diving industry in Cancún[2]. As part of AquaWorld's portfolio of attractions, MUSA serves as a training ground for uncertified divers who would otherwise be unable to dive at the natural reef. At $120–165 dollars per session, these experiences are out of reach for locals, and are therefore bringing more tourists into the water, regardless of their certification status. Moreover, MUSA does not always deter visitors from the natural reef. Some of its excursions advertise experiences for snorkelers that combine visits to MUSA's underwater galleries with visits to the Mesoamerican Reef. Finally, at a macro-scale, by expanding maritime attractions in Cancún, MUSA ultimately compounds the harms generated by tourism that afflict the natural reef, since development projects serving tourists produce water contamination and run-off that negatively impact coral.

Also unclear is whether Taylor's sculptures at MUSA are effective at the second part of their environmentalist aim to provide new habitats for coral reefs. Taylor finishes his sculptures with a rough surface in pH-neutral concrete that is appealing to coral polyps. In the most stunning images of his work, coral binds to the statues, cocreating them in ways that "signify beyond authorial intention as multispecies habitats" (Jue 2020: 143). But as the scholar Melody Jue observed after her visit to MUSA in 2014, in contrast with the coral-adorned statues featured in photographs on MUSA's and Taylor's websites, and in MUSA's on-land exhibit in the Kukulkan Mall (now located in the Galeria Villa Roda-MUSA), the statues she viewed while diving were bare of coral life and covered instead in algae (Jue 2020: 149). This is because underwater sculptures are not immune to the broader changes affecting natural reefs in the Caribbean. Since MUSA's inauguration, there have been several mass bleaching events that killed coral off its installations. MUSA has occasionally intervened to clean algae off its statues in response to customer complaints (Santamaría Arroyo 2016: 142, 147). Such measures indicate that MUSA prioritizes maintaining itself as an anthropocentric aesthetic experience of how reefs should

2 Melody Jue briefly mentions this possibility but does not expand on it. Jue's is the only scholarship that I have encountered that expresses skepticism about the environmentalist claims of Taylor's work (Jue 2020: 148).

look (pristine, exotic) more than as a pedagogical experience about the changes enacted on reefs by global warming. Díaz Abraham has stated that the team at MUSA would love to have the resources to employ a scientist who could gather data and monitor these processes, but they do not.

It is clear then that a scientific approach to reef conservation is not Aqua-World's priority, but rather that incorporating MUSA into its corporate portfolio allows them to brandish their environmentalist credentials while also providing a structural solution to the problem of where to take uncertified divers. The eco-aesthetic "fix" that MUSA provides is more about its ability to provide a unique aesthetic experience and a physical space that diverts some tourists from the natural reef than to create new reefs, to serve the flourishing of nonhuman life, or to educate visitors about the causes of coral reef exhaustion.

In parallel fashion, while some of Taylor's statues thematically gloss the structural causes of coral reef exhaustion, such as *The Bankers* who bury their heads under the sand and stand in for the negligence of international finance in buoying carbon-intensive industries, others perpetuate misunderstandings about environmental crisis. *Inertia*, a sculpture of a fat man lounging in front of the TV, eating a burger and fries, surrounded by a dozen discarded soda bottles, symbolically equates obesity with unbound consumerism. The title *Inertia* puts the onus on the individual man for his fatness and excessive production of plastic waste, which occludes the fact that obesity and plastic waste are symptomatic of the unjust influence that transnational companies like Coca-Cola exert in Global South markets like Mexico (Gómez 2019). *Inertia* is even more troublesome in the context in which it is viewed. The faulty symbolic equivalence that it draws between obesity and environmental harm is consumed by fit, able-bodied, relatively wealthy divers. A contrast is established between the sedentary, overweight body of the shirtless man, modeled on a Mexican local, and the active, privileged, non-Mexican divers who perceive him; a contrast that likely produces a sense of moral superiority and distance in the divers rather than a sense of identification or recognition. *Inertia* encourages the judgement of fat, poor, racialized others rather than self-reflexive engagement with the carbon footprint and waste production of the tourist's own lifestyle.

Another example of the muddled messaging of some of Taylor's work at MUSA is *Anthropocene*, a to-scale sculpture of a VW Beetle with a child crouched fearfully on its windshield. As mentioned by Ivakhiv above, the piece is designed to be hospitable to sea life, with cavities in the replica's interior that provide refuge to fish and crustaceans. Thematically, *Anthropocene* alludes to the role of car culture in perpetuating the values of individual consumption and private mobility at the expense of the commons, a discourse that has consolidated the car into a problematic ideal of "what constitutes the good life" (Urry 2007:

117). Yet the use of a VW Beetle – a vehicle that is more commonplace in Mexico than in the United States – seems to point fingers at Mexican car drivers, rather than engaging the visiting tourist.

Statistical estimates find that Mexico bears responsibility for only 1% of global cumulative carbon emissions; by contrast, 24% of global cumulative carbon emissions are attributed to the United States, the likely MUSA visitor's country of origin (Our World in Data, n.d.). Thus, while Taylor's sculptures at MUSA thematically treat some of the causes that lead to reef exhaustion, they do not do so in a way that gets at the structural causes behind climate change, nor do they promote self-reflexive engagement on the behalf of the visiting tourist. Indeed, we might say that in this sense MUSA is symptomatic of the exploitative structures that characterize the Capitalocene: it is an aesthetic experience of a dystopian future designed as an attraction for privileged subjects, garbed in the rhetoric of conservation.

Despite these critiques, there is a lot to like about Taylor's work, which has been rightly praised by scholars. Scholars have celebrated the sculptures as examples of human and nonhuman collaboration and as illustrating more-than-human timescales as they transform over time. Elizabeth DeLoughrey praises how the sculptures enact "the erosion and transformation of matter", and knit together "issues of temporality, place, multispecies life, and sea ontologies" (DeLoughrey 2017: 40, 38). Similarly, Philip Hüpkes and Gabriele Dürbeck write that Taylor's artworks "allow recipients to experience how anthropomorphic sculptures are folded into the temporal becoming of submarine ecologies" (Hüpkes/Dürbeck 2021: 416). Melody Jue, for her part, argues that this constant transformation of the artwork scrambles normative ideas of museums as "a stable archive of history, static over time" (Jue 2020: 145). These scholars also note that Taylor's work importantly connects longer human histories of colonialism and slavery with the ongoing experience of climate change.

I agree with these claims, but I also want to insist that the underwater museum demands to be thought about not only as art, but also as an experience packaged for external consumption. The fact that scholars have only discussed the individual pieces as artworks and for their individual aesthetic qualities – and have not broached the tourist ecosystem or economic infrastructures that frame MUSA – reveals a pitfall of ecocritical analysis. A central fallacy that underlies scholarship in ecocriticism is the assumption that the aesthetic experience necessarily correlates with an ethical one. Put differently: ecocriticism tends to assume that artistic representation is inherently moral. What if, instead, we attended to the tensions and contradictions that arise between ethics and aesthetics, or between aesthetics and sociohistorical context?

MUSA captures the contradictions at the heart of our cultural moment: the spectator's desire for art to respond to, or solve, ecological exhaustion and yet, at the same time, the spectator's desire not to change any of the structural patterns of consumption that might assuage it. MUSA gives viewers the feeling that they have had some sort of ethical experience of the reef through MUSA's stated mission of "[decreasing] the tourism overload on natural coral reefs, [continuing] our ongoing research in reef conservation… [and provoking] social awareness towards the conservation of natural environments and ecosystems" (MUSA, n.d.-b). Nevertheless, this feeling of having participated in and monetarily supported "the art of conservation", does not address how the act of tourism itself contributes to the underlying causes of coral bleaching.

Like the car in *Anthropocene*, tourism is fundamentally about mobility and consumption – and the fantasy that this mobility and consumption carries with it no ethical or environmental costs. The air travel that brought the visitor to MUSA and the tourist infrastructure that makes their stay in Cancún possible both contribute to the structural climatic and environmental changes that have brought the Mesoamerican Reef to near exhaustion. In parallel fashion, the desire to replace the Mesoamerican Reef with an alternative aesthetic experience of the reef that theoretically provides the necessary conditions for the flourishing of coral is reminiscent of a technofix fantasy that posits that climate change can be addressed through individual acts of consumption rather than through collective political action.

The Aesthetic-as-Experience

Another aspect of Taylor's underwater museum concept that has gone unaddressed by scholars is its replication in different sites throughout the world. When the Mexican state withdrew funding from MUSA in 2013, it was going through a financial crisis. This ended Taylor's participation in the project, but not his involvement with the concept of the underwater museum. He went on to serialize the idea, fulfilling commissions to create underwater museums in the following locations: the Lanzarote Atlantic Museum in the Canary Islands, in 2016; the Museum of Underwater Art in Australia's Great Barrier Reef, in 2020; the Cannes Underwater Museum, in 2021; and the Museum of Underwater Sculpture Ayia Napa in Cyprus that same year. In addition to these large-scale projects, Taylor has been commissioned to create numerous submerged and tidal statues in other locations. For each site, Taylor makes pieces inspired by the specific location and uses local models for his sculpted figures.

While each site is distinct, the replication of the underwater museum concept illustrates how contemporary conceptual art has increasingly moved toward providing an immersive experience, in this case literally so. Because art has become easier to access online, to attract in-person audiences, museums have turned to exhibits that facilitate bodily interaction with the work, activate the senses beyond the visual, and are readily photographable. Other examples of artists whose work fits the category of the aesthetic-as-experience include Anish Kapoor and Yayoi Kusama, as well as the more blatantly commercial phenomena of the Van Gogh "Immersive Experience". The phenomenon of the aesthetic-as-experience promises the spectator not just an encounter with art, but an experience that is also a product: a souvenir in the form of a selfie in a highly aestheticized setting that can then be shared on social media.

In describing this phenomenon, I do not intend to deride the value of the aesthetic as an experience, but to underscore that the aesthetic experience in these examples is not also presented to spectators as an ethical experience, in the way that MUSA tells viewers that their participation in the underwater museum experience is also an experience of "the art of conservation". This distinction feels important to maintain, as it helps stress that aesthetics and ethics perform different work. One can appreciate how MUSA provides an immersive aesthetic experience of the ocean, while also recognizing that the ethics of this experience are not clear-cut. It is an experience of the sea that, like other forms of ecotourism, is "packaged and commodified for consumption by an external audience", and reinforces neocolonial dynamics and inequalities between visitors and local territories and peoples (Duffy 2002: xi). These dynamics are not without broader impact. Tourist demand for an immersive experience of reef aesthetics influences domestic policy, such as a reluctance to implement regulations on divers' access to the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef or on development projects on Mexico's coastline.

As Taylor's international success has grown, his projects have drifted further afield from their initial mandate to relieve natural reefs and create new habitats for coral. There are no coral reefs to reseed in the French Riviera or in Cypress. There, his artworks are designed to attract sea life, but perhaps most importantly, to attract divers and snorkelers. While these sites are still described in environmentalist terms on his website, which details how the cordoning off of a section of the Cannes coast from boats aids "in the prevention of further damage caused by anchors to the seagrass meadows" (Taylor, n.d.-b), the evolution of Taylor's underwater museums away from artificial reef technology signals how the underwater museum is primarily a tourist attraction that responds to demand for an immersive aesthetic experience of an abundant and flourishing sea, even in the face of its exhaustion.

The Eco-Aesthetic Gimmick

Thinking about Taylor's underwater museums as both a work of art and an iterable tourist experience brings into focus several takeaways for the field of the environmental humanities. In addition to deconstructing the problematic tendency to collapse ecological aesthetics with ecological ethics, it is essential to question how eco-art intersects with the demands of capitalist production and consumption, and to consider how it is financed, maintained, and marketed. Such considerations allow us to hold space for the contradictions and complexities of fine art, such as how it can both effectively speak to the environmental ills of consumerism and simultaneously further a consumerist logic. Along similar lines, it is crucial that we not only analyze the artist's locus of enunciation ("the geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks"; Grosfoguel 2011: 4), but also consider the audience that the work engages and how their geo-political location influences the work's reception. In other words, the field has talked a lot about who is doing the creating when it comes to eco-art, but less about who they are speaking to. This is why I have argued elsewhere that it is important, for example, to reckon with the fact that Latin American ecocinema circulates on certain festival circuits in the Global North and is funded by transnational funding entities, and that these material conditions also frame how the artwork speaks (Fornoff 2022).

Finally, we need to parse the things that art can and cannot do and not overgeneralize. We should take care to differentiate between art's ability to enact nonhuman ontologies – as in how Taylor's statures are coproduced by the sea – and art's ability to "solve" environmental crisis. In turn, these are distinct lines of inquiry from art's ability to model the principles of environmental justice such as degrowth (the scaling down of unnecessary forms of production and consumption) or expanding equitable access to healthy coasts. Evaluating MUSA on the basis on these different levels of assessment provides a more complete panorama of the project and counteracts the facile conclusion that eco-aesthetics are inherently ethical.

So where do these faulty premises come from? The ongoing defunding of the humanities throughout the United States and Europe has produced an understandable need to prove that what we are doing matters, and to make the case that art has value and purpose in a crisis like the Capitalocene. But in the haste to argue against the exhaustion of the humanities, the claims made by environmental humanists can be overblown, conflating for example, an artwork's ability to perform a theory of knowledge or take on a life of its own through interaction with its environment (both of which MUSA does), with its ability to be a vehicle for environmental justice or environmentalist politics (which MUSA does not). Ultimately, a more effective solution to reef exhaustion is grea-

ter domestic regulation of the tourist industry, and greater international regulation of Global North oil and gas corporations. By touting MUSA as a solution to environmental exhaustion, we fall into the neoliberal trap of outsourcing ecological care from the state onto individuals. So let's celebrate art's ability to critique and to imagine other ways of living on the planet, but not treat art as a replacement for regulation and collective action.

Instead, I propose that we embrace MUSA as an eco-aesthetic gimmick. With the word "gimmick" I refer to the classic definition of the gimmick as "a trick or device used to attract business or attention", as well as its definition as a verb: "to alter or influence by means of [...] an ingenious and usually new scheme or angle" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). MUSA does both. It is both an augmentation of the natural reef through a novel aesthetic scheme and a device that aims to draw attention to itself as an attraction that is designed to peel tourists and clumsy inexperienced divers away from the natural reef.

The gimmick has been robustly theorized by Sianne Ngai, who finds it to be a paradigmatic capitalist form. Ngai describes the gimmick as defined by its relationship to labor: it promises a short-cut that will save us time (Ngai 2020: 2). She explains that we are allured by and attracted to the gimmick, but also deeply suspicious of its claims. Ngai's book does not engage with ecological questions, but her assessment of the anxieties that the gimmick awakens about how value is measured under capitalism can be easily extended to our reluctance to embrace the market-based solutions to anthropogenic climate crisis peddled by green capitalism.

So how might we read MUSA as an eco-aesthetic gimmick? At first, I was unsure whether MUSA mapped onto Ngai's approach, because labor is not part of its core premise. To the contrary, visiting MUSA is not a time-saving device; it is an exercise in leisure. But in another sense, the underwater museum does promise to save time. It promises an ethical experience of the reef that does not require anything of us. It does not ask us to change our consumption habits, to alter our tourist itineraries, or to collectively advocate for different policies. Indeed, it promises an experience of the ocean that is also an experience of art and of conservation, a three-for-one deal. In this way, we might say that the eco-aesthetic gimmick embodies the foolhardy yearning for a quick, consumable solution to reef exhaustion, a crisis that is centuries in the making, when what we really need is more regulation.

To call MUSA an eco-aesthetic gimmick is not to say it is unworthy of scholarly attention or praise, but rather, to the contrary, to double down our efforts to examine the friction between art and ethics. It is to question the logic that insists upon culture's instrumentalization, in which art is charged with coming up with solutions to the weighty problems of our era. It is to reckon with the fact that there is no easy or ready solution to coral bleaching that does not require a mas-

sive rethinking of capitalist forms of production. It is to embrace art that leaves us in turmoil, without the reassurance of comforting closure. MUSA can be read in this way, as an immersive experience of the sea for privileged tourists that records the impact of warming waters through its failure to fulfill its purpose to seed new coral reefs. MUSA's failures are just as notable as its promises. The failure of the eco-aesthetic gimmick to deliver on its promise to save the planet tells us about the limits of what art can do in the Capitalocene.

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