**GARDENS OF
ARTIFICIAL DELIGHTS:
RESIDUAL MEMORIES
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... he was dreaming of another experiment. He wished to go one step beyond.
Instead of artificial flowers imitating real flowers, natural flowers should mimic
the artificial ones.

– Huysmans, *Against Nature*

Stan Brakhage's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1981) feigns a relationship to its prior alias, that of Hieronymus Bosch's triptych from 1490-1510. Whereas the latter portrays a harmonious nature replete with other-worldly constructs, the former renders this representational model in decline: Brakhage's *Garden* presses together once-alive stems, leaves, and other remnants of organic plant life between two celluloid rolls of film. Devoid of a camera, Brakhage's film captures a posterior optical projection, simulating a proximity to the mediated object itself; to be precise, one minute and 44 seconds of 2,496 celluloid frames on 16mm. Yet this is not an eerily idyllic or uncannily harmonious world narrated by biblical reason, as in the case of Bosch's *Garden*. As Eugene Thacker observes, in Brakhage's experimental films, things tend to dissolve, "human into non-human, body into environment, image into emulsions of gelatin, crystal, and camphor."¹ In Brakhage's *Garden* we find ourselves entirely textually immersed within proximity, and the transparency of the image is voracious, startling and horrific.

Fast forward to the present. Tamiko Thiel's *Unexpected Growth* (2018) and Clement Valla's *Surface Proxy* (2015) utilize new media technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and image mapping/print processing to broadcast a materialized image. Both Thiel and Valla exemplify new media art that hones in on formal proximity and immersion at a digital medium-specificity. Incidentally, both also deal in cyber-botanical terrain: Thiel's *Unexpected Growth* is an AR installation that presents an uncanny wilderness not exactly of this earth, but composed of its discarded waste products. Featured in the Whitney Museum's "Programmed: Rules, Codes and Choreographies in Art" exhibit, *Unexpected Growth* submerges its on-demand audience, through geocaching, to embed the viewer within a simulated landscape. Similarly, Clement Valla's *Surface Proxy* reconstructs a third-dimensionality based on flat and two-dimensional renderings of natural objects like plants and stones, effectively making previously organic forms of life synthetic. Oscillating between dimensionality, Valla reconstructs a scene wrapped in artificial imitations of real objects. Both installations are saturated in digital memory, yet crawl through an 850 million year old Precambrian, multicellular and photosynthesizing organic life. Both artists utilize digital tools (embedded interfaces, transcription and digital rendering) to present a vitalist materiality that is uncannily nonorganic; instead of the complete, 1080p reproduction of the image, its vibrancy and effervescence is lost.

1 Eugene Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night: Horror of Philosophy*, (London: Zero Books, 2015), 108.

Stan Brakhage, *In The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1981, film on 16mm, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kfn4AQibBc>

Like Brakhage's bombardment of botanical images, and Bosch's biblical hellscape prior, Tamiko Thiel and Clement Valla's artworks employ visual queue that effectively splinter reality, emphasizing the loss intrinsic to digital conversion. Each subsequent phase-shift in medium (from oil paints to celluloid film to code) annotates a further splintering of coherence, prefacing the question: What is lost in each subsequent transcription of its former repository? This paper asserts that what is retained, as well as what is lost, is digital memory itself. These artworks exhume digital memory as a mediated image replete with meaning, yet in each subsequent and iterative splintering, something (memory) is lost. As Bernard Stiegler prefaces his *Technics and Time* project, "...forgetting is inscribed"² - meaning, the exteriorization of memory itself renders memory loss contingent. But for Stiegler this is nothing uniquely new with regards to its origin source - instead, memory as a prosthetic and auxiliary device is an original condition. New media art, render this trajectory visible - that, in our anticipation of withdrawal from digital memory, our exteriorization to the outside becomes the condition of its return.

Although there is a splinter of form from Bosch to Brakhage, memory retains a trace. Our recollection is similarly fractured in the digital present. Valla and Thiel challenge the artifice of memory as that which is replicant of its full rendering without any failure. In an era of on-demand interconnectivity, seamless noise reduction, and optimization of everyday life, media technologies absolve the difference in space and time, synthetically promoting an immediacy of the image. Nothing more than this conceited proximity to the image itself defines our relation to 'the digital.' The advent of transparent screens, infinite scrolls and direct

² Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 5.

information are digital values that have entered all forms of digital life. Yet, instead of attending to an accelerated speed of digital art that waxes between biotechnology and posthumanism, Thiel and Valla offer an inert stillness reluctant to immediate digitalization. Both artworks pierce and disrupt our understanding of 'the digital' and short-circuit digital characteristics like proximity and immediacy. Instead, they detour towards inertia and stillness while pausing to conflate seemingly incommensurable and overgrown substrates like the organic and artificial.

Yet these artworks are both less than and more than human: both illustrate the relation between digital memory and its withdrawal through nonhuman botanical life. The garden is a botanical taxonomy that represents an oftentimes inert yet also lively medium to which artists have historically relied on in order to convey vibrant, horrifying, and strange branches of nature. A garden also resists a humanizing impulse and avoids the personalization of a future present, which may tend toward nonhuman computation and algorithmic normalcy.

Clement Valla, *Surface Proxy*,
Inkjet on belgian linen over
CNC milled foam sculptures,
2015, [http://clementvalla.com/
work/surface-proxy/](http://clementvalla.com/work/surface-proxy/)

Tamiko Thiel, *Unexpected Growth*, Augmented Reality
installation, 2018,
[http://www.tamikothiel.com/
unexpectedgrowth/](http://www.tamikothiel.com/unexpectedgrowth/)

Another concrete form, what Christiane Paul has termed “neomaterial,” emulates, in both Thiel and Valla, the splintering shards of dead ferns, limestone sarcophagus, withered canvas, and bleached plastic. For Paul, neomatierality is “a residue of the digital process forming it or on the affective aspects of materials that are shaped by ‘human data’ and mirror and reflect us back to ourselves.”³ The neomaterial in digital art is a technique of conscription that makes visible an environment through familiar landscape design. At the same time, the neomaterial locates the nonhuman within the human, each of which is mediated by digital technology.

Thinking the material through the digital denotes the way in which new media art render visible their own coded materiality explicit in their design. Similarly, for Paul, neomaterial configurations oscillate between human and nonhuman environments - resolving the former incommensurability, and instead attending to a status of “biotechnology” that was never not. Or as Paul writes, “an objecthood that incorporates networked digital technologies, and embeds, processes, and reflects back the data of humans and the environment, or reveals its own coded materiality and the way in which digital processes see our world.”⁴ Continuing a lineage of the ‘immaterial’ in artwork, Paul hones in on residues of the digital that have not successfully been converted to the digital. Or, as Hito Steyerl writes “trash that washes up on the digital economies’ shores.”⁵ Thiel and Valla isolate botanical excess in the form of digital art that not only short-circuits any latent anthropocentric biases in the recreation of the digital, they also occlude the human to find a deeper temporal narrative device. Memories of the digital return to the scene fragmented and splintered from their original archival promise and these by-products have a larger relationship to disavowal and discontinuity than to immediacy and interconnectivity.

Before one considers the cyber-botanical new media art, one should stroll through a prototype of a decadent, although not-yet digital, garden: Marcel Broodthaers’ *A Winter Garden* (1974). Recreated at Hauser & Wirth in 2017, *A Winter Garden*, unhesitatingly, ditches art history for decoration. Broodthaers’ site is as much a gallery exhibit as it is a mausoleum: a room riddled with fake, yet vivaciously ferned palm trees sprout along the wall and form a circle in the center of the room. Alongside the exterior walls, display cases index long dead organisms. A closed circuit television (CCTV) monitor sits in a corner, pointing diagrammatically to the center of the room, where a bundle of palm trees crowd indiscreetly, transmitting feedback of a primal and voyeuristic scene. Hidden somewhere amongst ferns, the camera monitors the mundane pretenses of this artificial setting. The palm tree of colonialism’s past is a symbol of power, but no concrete fixture of a past imperialism is present here. Instead it is a power marked by a corpse of a prior regime of power. It is a rotting carcass signifying a colonialism that once was, “the potted palm, once an exotic symbol of power, by the mid-1970s had become the most commonly available type of decoration used everywhere from banks to cafes.”⁶ Although there are a few chairs arranged indeterminately in the center, their hospitality is uncertain.

Broodthaers’ *A Winter Garden* not only points to a vacuous currency that unites the art world, but to a permafrost of value across heterodox station. Not only is the role of the viewer ubiquitous, networked through an antiquated CCTV monitor, but currency in general deflates. *A Winter Garden* points to the inefficacy of the museum-encrypted object, and instead looks towards environmental installation sites, saturated with non-artistic meaning, even divorced from minimalist/conceptual modernisms at the time. As Rosalind Krauss writes in her extended essay on Broodthaers’ art practice, his provocation forecloses the rigidity

3 Christiane Paul, “From Immateriality to Neomateriality: Art and the Conditions of Digital Materiality,” (Vancouver: 21st International Symposium on Electronic Art, 2015), 1.

4 Paul, “From Immateriality to Neomateriality,” 2.

5 Hito Steyerl, “The Wretched of the Screen,” (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 32.

6 Hauser and Wirth, “Marcel Broodthaers Un Jardin d’Hiver” (Hauser & Wirth: 2017), accessed November 11, 2020. <https://www.hauserwirth.com/hauser-wirth-exhibitions/6143-marcel-broodthaersun-jardindhiver>

of a formal aesthetic trope as “medium-specific” and instead sequesters a “medium-generativity” – or, how the medium invokes a “recursive structure” which reproduces the rules that generate the structure itself as a form of technique. Krauss continues, drawing the contours of a post-medium condition of art:

The redoubling of art as theory, then, delivers art (and most particularly the art for which it is the theory) to exactly those sites whose function is promotion, and does so without what might be called a critical remainder. And it does so without a formal remainder, as well. In the inter/media loss of specificity ... every material support, including the site itself ... will now be leveled, reduced to a system of pure equivalency by the homogenizing principle of commodification, the operation of pure exchange value from which nothing can escape and for which everything is transparent to the underlying market value for which it is a sign.⁷

Krauss understands the post-medium era in terms of its disjunctive refrain, how it cuts through the layers of connective tissue and “open(s) that immediacy to its real temporal destiny.”⁸ Documentation is arbitrary when the medium incriminates itself as a sight of prolonged mediation. The site multiplies intentions, and cross-pollinates as proximity becomes smooth, connective, transparent and stainless – or, afterimages of the rigidity of the pictorial frame, preludes to the digital. A climatological immersivity inaugurates the stage of the digital. Exchange becomes flatlined under a ‘pure equivalency’, cross-pollinating between mediums, species and artifice.

Marcel Broodthaers, *A Winter Garden* (1974), installation.

⁷ Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on The North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

Indexical systems, although products of a past enlightenment rationality of organization, taxonomy and category, have adamantly crept into our digital present. Broodthaers' cynical parody is not only the logic of post-medium art, but that of the digital: nonstandard art forms, such as *A Winter Garden*, barely require a gallery, if even a roof, to operate. This functionality operates according to digital principles, whereas transparent technological limits. Both render visible the mechanics derivative of the digital and also subsequently transcribe the digital to a tangible materiality – or, the arrival of the neomaterial into physical space.

But, at the conflux of art and media, full immersivity is prone to a series of syntax errors as the proximity between the thing of mediation and the medium itself magnifies friction under the digital. The CCTV in *A Winter Garden* captures the formal emulation of the fake palm trees, rendering their falsity as quotidian of their own shadow play. This sweeping, capturing gaze approaches a new emergence of indeterminate artifice - via its false representation - relational to the conditions of possibility of the generative apparatus of the medium. And the transcription from Broodthaers to Valla's *Surface Proxy*, as Christiane Paul recounts, is sometimes prone to botanical error, "While scanning one of the original architectural fragments in the Cloisters, a plant unavoidably was captured, too. Rather than wrapping a 3D print of a plant, Valla decided to exhibit an actual plant next to the relic and to display the unfolded version of the wrap generated from the virtual model of the plant on the wall next to it. Living nature thereby resists presenting itself as iconic."⁹

The plant is splintered from the digital transcription, left out of the conversation in another dimension, and breathes on the floor. Yet this oversight is not merely accidental, but also incidental to the sweeping conversion techniques of digital media and its tendency towards static, noise, and delay - all relegated to neomaterialism and its botanical excess. It is a necessary byproduct of optical reception of inert objects, which are in this situation disturbingly active in Valla's scanning technology. The regression to the real via the digital's omittance of the actual by the digital is disturbingly uncanny of machinic computation. Like the ongoing genetic modification of plant life, artificial degeneration too approaches code with subliminal returns. Valla responds, and comments on his interest in the missed inputs, blurred lines and error screens of today's digital technologies - specifically, how the precise calculation of algorithmic life ruptures at its own seams. Counter to the accidental rate of these glitches, Valla iterates the accelerated over-layering of space as the "absolute logical result of the system."¹⁰

Valla's *Surface Proxy* is a strategy of deception redoubling upon itself. Ruminating stone sculptures of remains of built architectural remains are initially converted to digital 3D models as an embedded trace of their past aesthetic function. Then, Valla prints this conversion onto a cloth using industrial printing, and then wraps the printed and imaged cloth over what conceitedly could have been their original model. A disillusionment then occurs through the exhibition space, layering materials further the instantiation of the false as they inscribe a conceit. As Christiane Paul continues, "The objects are relics in more than one sense."¹¹ The vast plurality of relic, ruins and remnants are visible throughout *Surface Proxy* – traces of fragmentation are splintered through a cloth that lies adjacent to their origin, replicants copying a fake. Working within the ordering and processing of machinic perception by fragmenting formerly smooth 3D models, these computational interventions extract formal elements of parts, to construct a whole.

Valla's play of representation is first simulation, then forgery, and then dissimulation: it fakes a hidden truth of a past relic through its imprint on a canvas sheet, by revealing how a 3D model creates the image it then lays stagnant on top of, an unknown material object, faking what was once not there a real and true representation. By transcoding typically analogue objects to the digital, and then re-printing this transcription as a supplementary layer is both un-grounding and re-grounding, yet caught in this moment of ossification.

9 Christiane Paul, "Surface Proxy: Reskinned Relics and Architectures of Mediation" (XP0 Gallery: 2015), 10.

10 Clement Valla, "Leaders in Software and Art Conference" (New York: 2013)

11 Paul, "Surface Proxy," 10.

Surface Proxy invokes both fragmentation and splintering in the same instance, deriving from an oscillated status of the digital in real space. Deployed as a disturbance or irritation to the real, *Surface Proxy* is not only a simulation of hyper-perception via machinic systems, but a commentary on the attributed value of ruination - the onset of the conditions of visualizing the past via present-future technologies. Yet this is all grounded, seemingly digitally smooth - but unintentionally perceptively analog (and even so constructively digital). It is as if one can kinetically feel the layers of the digital within the exhibit - natural shadows, curves and wrinkles all assist in the artifice that is the real in this exhibition space: The splintering of *Surface Proxy* is a residue of the digital in its material form - holding the discarded conceit that the plant in the center of the installation is real. This residual image is more of a conspiracy than of a reality, as Jean Baudrillard reminds us: "as long as art was making use of its own disappearance and the disappearance of its object, it still was a major enterprise. But art trying to recycle itself indefinitely by storming reality?"¹²

The transition from post-medium to neomateriality sequesters the role of terminal memory, vague patterns, and bad transcriptions. Memory is intrinsically linked to the digital, as imprints of the past become possible conduits of an immediate recall. The default save function of the digital eclipses back upon itself as a hyper-dependent reality of the human. Culturally encoded, memory becomes packaged with internal promises and interior solutions. The compulsion to record, in order to not forget - or what Yuk Hui has called the "original default" is the structurally overburdened, yet endowed with technological surplus, which haunts the human and the subsequent aftermath of its deficiency.¹³ Remembrance of things past is moreso an auxiliary supplement to memory itself, able to be called-forth and re-collected with increasingly digital promises.

Attending to the relation of technology and art, M. Beatrice Fazi and Matthew Fuller conceive of memory in a multivalent sense - while digital memory acts upon computation, it also acts upon ourselves. Fazi and Fuller open the aesthetic potential for logging, restaging, analyzing yet also reversing or irreversing future actions. They note the rate at which memory can suspend its own withdrawal and invoke delay and storage.¹⁴ This differential calculus responds to the problem of digital memory loss with a recursive feedback loop narrowing in on a dynamic structural logic of computational memory patterns. Whereas human memory feeds forward the possibility of future signification, what does an inert plant disclose? Plants, whether artificial or organic, are often the deposit of aesthetic imports. Charles Ryan John asks what a plant becomes when "incorporated into an artwork as a biological interface between human participants and the digital apparatus of the work?"¹⁵ Plants, in this intermediary context, have historically been saturated in procedural notions of expressions of a natural and sublime harmony - or, "aesthetics qualities in itself."¹⁶

There are overgrown exceptions to the innate sublimity of nature. Tamiko Thiel's site-specific Augmented Reality (AR) installation *Unexpected Growth* (2018) combines elements of time-based art, surrealist landscapes and the geologic Anthropocene. Stationed to the outside sixth floor terrace of the Whitney Museum, *Unexpected Growth* was codified to a museum application that displays a parallel landscape on a user's mobile devices. Augmented Reality (AR) - or the superimposition of an encoded and external layer mediated through media technologies - attends to a speculation innate to the work of art, yet materialized and constructed through digital information. Cached to a specific physical area, information is extracted via digital queues by the artists and able to be received by widespread accessibility via mobile devices. AR quite literally brings art to life via artificial emerging technologies.

12 Jean Baudrillard, "The Conspiracy of Art" (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), 27.

13 Yuk Hui and Pieter Lemmens, "Reframing the Technosphere," *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* (2017).

14 M. Beatrice Fazi and Matthew Fuller, "Computational Aesthetics" in *A Companion to Digital Art*, ed. Christiane Paul (London: Wiley Blackwell), 293.

15 Charles Ryan John, "Plant-Art: The Virtual and the Vegetal in Contemporary Performance and Installation Art," *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* (2015), 43.

16 Ibid, 40.

Yet *Unexpected Growth* is not exactly sublime. *Unexpected Growth* portrays a diverse ecosystem with heterodox plants not necessarily of familiarity. As one starts to inspect each individual plant, one notices heterodox assemblages of synthetic material: Plastic debris, nonbiodegradable waste, bleach-toned ferns and other remnants of digital economies all participate in this environment. Instead of the welcoming solace of contemplative gardens, viewers are absorbed in a dimension of flowering decay and overgrowth. Thiel's horticultural project is that of incorporating the disposed synthetic and artificial waste back into our so-named natural environments. As Thiel comments on her art, "Perturbations in the natural order have torn the fabric of the space-time continuum, and unexpected growths are seeping into our world - perhaps from our own future."¹⁷ Her vision is as revelatory as catastrophic, both vague memories of our present inheritance.

Not unlike the rate of memory, which tends towards intrinsic loss, *Unexpected Growth* also emits entropy – tendencies towards the emulation of waste. *Unexpected Growth's* own growth cycle virtually acclimates to the pollutants during a 24-hour cycle, and starts to corrode and decay towards the end of the day, dependent on the amount of human views. The human footprint becomes visible, and anthropocentric interference in natural environments results in a surreal landscape. Once again, conceitedly claiming a 'natural' auspice to artificial and digital art. This formulation of digital memory against the silicon promises of digital memory as immediate withdrawal and infinite storage is predicated on cloud-based metaphorical bias. In *Unexpected Growth*, one is confronted with a 'natural' transition from an organic-botanical to an artificial and surreal landscape, recombinant of its waste products, internal mineralization and geologic depressions.

Returning earthbound transmission: Bernard Stiegler problematizes the underlying assumption of digital memory as such: If digital memory is that which is necessarily exteriorized through auxiliary devices, which plan and forecast its future recall, then what uniqueness lies in that of interior and/or human memory? What Stiegler itemizes as "Disorientation" accrues a newfound scale at the scene of new media art. Stiegler: "If the event is never more than its captured data, and if these data are never more than their dissemination and reception, just as a text does not exist independently of its reading, and what that text says does not exist outside of the text before its reading...it can only appear as delay, an after-effect of the rift..."¹⁸ To forefront a theory of loss¹⁹ embedded within digital memory would respond to the ephemerality of the digital with, as Mark Hansen describes, "the idea that technical developments simultaneously disable and enable, that they bring new capacities which somehow make up for their destabilizing impact on human forms of life."²⁰ Plants are not merely glitches or relics in a linear sense, instead they provide an ambiguity of the world as it seems to nonhuman life sources. Similarly, Wendy Chun frames the side effects of a newly digital theory of memory:

Software - as instruction and information (the difference between the two being erased by and in memory) - not only embodies the always already here, it also found it. It enables a logic of "permanence" that conflates memory with storage, the ephemeral with the enduring. Through the process of constant regeneration, of constant 'reading,' it creates an enduring ephemeral that promises to last forever even as it marches toward obsolescence/stasis.²¹

¹⁷ Tamiko Thiel, "Unexpected Growth" accessed on <http://www.tamikothiel.com/unexpectedgrowth/>

¹⁸ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 2: Disorientation*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 117.

¹⁹ Stiegler continues the traversal of memory through deeply sedimented ecologies, even invoking anterior scale lifeforms: "that memory could be maintained beyond the body through organization of the inorganic, up to and including the current disorganization and re-organization of the organic, having passed through neolithic refinements and emphasizing the transformation of conditions through 'the pressures of selection' - already molecular biology's axiom has been suspended. What we call "human," the technical, is but suspensions deriving from the archi-suspension, the default of origin." Stiegler, *Technics and Time 2: Disorientation*, 160.

²⁰ Mark B.N. Hansen, "Saving Libidinal Capitalism: Bernard Stiegler's Political Gambit" (*Critical Inquiry*: 2016).

²¹ Wendy Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 137.

For Chun, digital memory is marked more by its ephemerality than by its silicon promises of always already on-demand - an understanding of digital memory as fleeting and discontinuous, against its silicon promises of always already on demand. Thiel's artificial garden as digital art is subject to the same temperate climate as organic gardens, both recipient of torrential storms, acid rain and industrial debris. A primal ambiguity crawls forth: Thiel's object of artificial and botanical life, mediated through an AR device, latent in digital memory, presents a disorienting scene. *Unexpected Growth* short circuits our reliance on future-present digital modes of memory by relying on inert and nonhuman forms of memory - such as botanical and artificial forms of life. Scaling in on the changing geologic epoch that is the Anthropocene, Thiel sources her version of memory to a deeper ecology of plant life yet remains uniquely contemporary in her deployment of emerging technology. One does not find immediate remedies for the all too human problem of memory loss at the sites of *Surface Proxy* and *Unexpected Growth*. Instead, one finds half-rendered relics and overgrown weeds of memory - not of ours, but of sedimentary and botanical life.

Memory proceeds differently at divergent time scales. The relics of *Surface Proxy* and the overgrown landscapes of *Unexpected Growth* point to errant tendencies of analogizing the digital with stalled, cursed even, renderings. Instead of virtual landscapes, they point to inert and still rhythms that cross variations of organic life, mediated through artifice. Although the botanical often reminds us of a time prior to civilization, linked to a digital apparatus it furthermore indexes a time yet to come: both *Unexpected Growth* and *Surface Proxy* gather digital memories, embedded in a botanical future, while reminiscent of a future world without us.

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