The night sky may never have looked as disturbingly different as it did in Black Shoals Stock Market Planetarium, 2001/2004, for which the London-based artists Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway projected an array of otherworldly constellations onto a planetarium-style dome. Each astral body corresponds not to nature but to a publicly traded company, as a computer program translates the real-time financial activity of the world’s stock exchanges into glistening stars. At Tate Britain in 2001, the piece connected to a Reuters news feed; at the Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center in 2004, it was wired to the local stock exchange. Stars flash brightly whenever their stock is traded, gathering into clusters.
Nothing else—not bodies, social life, religion, or aesthetics—matters. The fact that the “creatures” have repeatedly rendered themselves extinct during the running of the piece propose that, at its most extreme, the project be taken as a dark allegory—and a stark warning—for our precarious existence as a species whose actions are panning it very visibly at risk.

Picturing a life-world merged with capital, Augean and Portway’s starry sky presents the anatomy of the stock market via a technology of evanescence, showing just how artificial the financial systems is—and revealing the vulnerability of life exposed to a purely economic rationality. The work thus counters the idea that “the market is our human nature,” a proposition that Fredric Jameson once said “cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged,” arguing that the construction of this ideology—the idea that the market is our second nature, a given, a biological fact—is “the most crucial terrain of ideological struggle in our time.”

Jameson was mostly concerned about the naturalization of finance, but around the same time, coinciding with the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, there emerged the first glimmerings of the awareness of the neoliberal doctrine: the financialization of nature, which threatens to be even more consequential. According to this logic, the environment is no longer a natural entity but an existential model for predatory liberal economics. Its invisibility and abstract quality of atmospheric carbon dioxide and, indeed, of climate change can neither be seen nor exist in any stable state—mirroring the invisibility and abstract quality of atmo-sphere under advanced capitalism, within a zone where nothing else—not bodies, social life, religion, or aesthetics—matters.

Adding to this existential picture of anthropocentric complexity, the artists introduced digital creatures into the human-nature ecosystem. Evolutionary algorithms designed by the artificial-life researcher Cefn Hoile program these creatures to feed on the energy of the stars, growing into complex beings and reproducing in order to burst in this strange media ecology. When there’s a market downturn, they experience famine and die out, overcome by the darkness.

But this extraordinary ecosystem is also, point-edly, devoid of natural life. The title of Augean and Portway’s project puts on the so-called Black-Sholes stock market. Evolutionary algorithms designed by the artificial-life researcher Cefn Hoile program these creatures to feed on the energy of the stars, growing into complex beings and reproducing in order to burst in this strange media ecology. When there’s a market downturn, they experience famine and die out, overcome by the darkness.

Black-Sholes stock market is an existential model for predatory life under advanced capitalism, within a zone where nothing else—not bodies, social life, religion, or aesthetics—matters.

As Hoile says, “The creatures’ relationship with their artificial world of stars is a mirror of our relationship with the financial markets—they strive to survive, competing with each other in a world whose complexity they are too simple to fathom.” In this regard, Black-Sholes’ creatures are nothing but a partial expression of self-entrepreneurship approximating what Michel Foucault, in his later writings on bio-politics, called Homo economicus: the subject of neoliberalism. The piece is not just an attempt at visualizing abstract data but an existential model for predatory life under advanced capitalism, within a zone where nothing else—not bodies, social life, religion, or aesthetics—matters. The fact that the “creatures” have repeatedly rendered themselves extinct during the running of the piece propose that, at its most extreme, the project be taken as a dark allegory—and a stark warning—for our precarious existence as a species whose actions are panning it very visibly at risk.

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That has led to real-life suffering and disasters. As Hoile says, “The creatures’ relationship with their artificial world of stars is a mirror of our relationship with the financial markets—they strive to survive, competing with each other in a world whose complexity they are too simple to fathom.” In this regard, Black-Sholes’ creatures are nothing but a partial expression of self-entrepreneurship approximating what Michel Foucault, in his later writings on bio-politics, called Homo economicus: the subject of neoliberalism. The piece is not just an attempt at visualizing abstract data but an existential model for predatory life under advanced capitalism, within a zone where nothing else—not bodies, social life, religion, or aesthetics—matters.

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That these ideas are taking on greater significance in the art world is evident in the growing number of exhibitions, catalogues, and critical texts dedicated to the topic of art and environment. For instance, the 2007 Stern Review, titled “Still Life: Art, Ecology and the Politics of Change,” explicitly focused on such practices, filtering them through the Gulf state’s many contradictions, including its reliance on a fossil fuel economy of spectacular real estate development and its support of a biennial that, more than most, generates huge costs in terms of flight transportation. Responding to the biennale’s broad concepts, Tate Greenfort produced “Exceeding 2 Degrees,” a work that involved a thermo-hydrograph (which measures both temperature and humidity) of the Stern Review, the British government-sponsored report (extracts of which had been fabricated from Malaywood wood in Japan before being sold to Dubai). This incarnation of the conditions of globalized production was one part of Greenfort’s modeling of an innovative expository critique, however. The other part altered the temperature of the entire museum by two degrees Celsius—the entered set as a plausibly but now seemingly unreachable goal in the fight against global warming in the Stern Review, the 2006 British government-sponsored report (extracts of which were also on view here). Another aspect of Greenfort’s work involved utilizing the money saved on air-conditioning to protect an area of rain forest in Ecuador via the Danish environmental organization Nephron. Some two square miles of rain forest were purchased for around four hundred dollars. This was hardly presented as a solution—rather, the piece, in an act of critical negation, revealed the daunting complexity of the problem addressed by extending itself into its paradoxes. However, although it has raised only a tiny plot of land, Greenfort’s work successfully demonstrated the connections between economic, ecological, and institutional systems.

Greenfort’s work points to the inherent flaw in the logic of offshoring, which involves trading environmental damage here for protecting nature there. As critics have noted, thinking fails to take into account the impossibility of exchangeability within biodiversity. Offshoring depends on the theory of history as a commodity, which is the tool in the path of those who argue that life as a commodity, overlooks the fact that life forms are embedded in singular knots of local relations. The world’s largest rain forests or its great coral reefs cannot ultimately substitute for Persson’s Gulf air quality. Greenfort’s work also helped to reclaim eco-critics such as Timothy Morton, who has recently proposed to think in collaboration with Baudrillard’s “ontology without nature,” arguing that the very idea of nature has become too ideologically compromised to warrant continued conceptual and aesthetic usage of the term. This doesn’t mean, of course, that there isn’t an environment filled with life forms; rather, it assumes that “nature” can’t be objectified as separate and external, because living and nonliving objects are embedded within a “mesh” of social, political, and phenomenal relations. Exceeding 2 Degrees, like Public Smog, visualizes all three aspects of this network.

In this regard, these projects stand in marked contrast to the idea of nature in projects by some of the 1970s pioneers of anti-art, which tended to produce nature as a separate realm of purity needing protection from industrial degradation, pollution, and economic exploitation. This defense, however, often had the effect of objectifying nature—a strategically and problematically paralleling the very objectifications of industries. Some artists have successfully resisted the transparent labeling of GM products. While the piece offered “a means to visualize the material reality of theories of global trade,” as the artists explained, it also demonstrated how scientific detection techniques can be utilized by nonspecialists, dramatized by the T-shirt-clad artists appearing behind tables filled with intimidating equipment. Yet such cases also reveal a complication of the postnatural condition: Proponents of non-GM food by necessity maintain a nostalgic belief in the natural and defend it as a sphere in need of protection. Indeed, just as some eco-critics wish to put nature to rest theoretically, environmental activists such as Shiva take recourse to “the rights of nature,” which they have defined in courts of law willing to use “universal juridicality” to protect against the encroachments of corporate globalization. If art cannot match such performative legal action, it can unravel some of the aporia and critical myths on which “the natural” rests. Works such as Greenfort’s, CAE’s, Balkun’s, and Autogena and Poicary’s use the visualization of environmental, technological, and economic processes as a means of comprehension. In each case, if to varying degrees and with rarer emphasis, the artist grapples with abstractions and normally invisible externalities on which both finance and global ecology depend. Yet these visualizations—according to which, appearance represents a complex order of institutional determinations and significations—is not simply mimetic but also points transformations and deformations of the systems...
As nature can no longer be understood as a pristine and discrete realm apart from human activity, art’s autonomy is all the more untenable when faced with ecologic catastrophe. More than simple eco-gardening, Norman’s project offers an experimental approach to agro-urbanism—a test case in how to think differently about the link between ecology and economy. Norman chose permaculture as a test system because it unites itself into inclusive social processes, taking into account local weather, soil conditions, geography, and collective subsistence farming—all ingredients for a sustainable society. Indefinite to historical utopian models of social and economic life, such as 1960s San Francisco anarchist collective the Diggers, Norman’s plan is no less ambitious but infinitely more pragmatic. It is based on the idea that changing the ways energy, food, and site design are organized will in turn alter social organization and economic distribution systems.

Although Norman’s activism here takes place within an art context—the Edible Park was sponsored by Stroom Den Haag, a foundation devoted to art and architecture—it is an outdoor, public project that is a considerable departure from the assumptions of art-institutional practice. (Conversely, its “artistic” categorization allowed the project to be realized in an area whose zoning restrictions normally preclude agriculture.) In his proposal for the project, Norman notes: “A grassroots, biosystemic dynamic that comes out of a utopian tradition opens city-wide, become pragmatically precluded in the city’s existing planning processes and possibly eventually replace them?” Or, as he continues, “Is this in itself a naive and misplaced utopian idea?” In fact, the naive and misplaced utopian idea would not be so very different from institutional critique (and the art and life—the union of which long glimmered in the dreams of the neo-critical artists)—one familiarly new terrain that is not only social but more specifically biopolitical and eco-financial. Just as nature can no longer be understood as a pristine and discrete realm apart from human activity, art’s autonomy is all the more untenable when faced with ecologic catastrophe. Or so some artists are now demonstrating. By far the best example of utopian critique (and the eco-institutional critique of, say, Guattari’s work) and one of the explicitly activist and interventionist practices, one that leaves no Eden, no virgin territory that is not only social but more specifically biopolitical and eco-financial. Just as nature can no longer be understood as a pristine and discrete realm apart from human activity, art’s autonomy is all the more untenable when faced with ecologic catastrophe.
NOTES


6. See Amy Balkin’s website, which includes links to critical literature, including Tamra Gilbertson and Oscar Reyes, Carbon Trading: How It Works and Why It Fails (Uppsala, Sweden: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2009), http://publicsmog.org.


9. This is the title of Vandana Shiva’s contribution to Documenta 12’s “100 Notes—100 Thoughts” publication project (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2011).

10. Among the pertinent examples here are the Bolivian 2011 “Law of Mother Earth” and the 2010 Ecuadoran lawsuit against BP following the Deepwater Horizon disaster.
