



Heritage out of Control: Today's utopia tomorrow's waste?

Fouad Asfour
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Exploring how beliefs and spiritual dimensions of inequality turn today's realities of waste into future heritage and (invisible) monuments

When I read about the conference *Heritage out of Control: Waste, Spirits, Energies*, I contacted [Vibha Galhotra](#) to ask whether she was interested in a collaborative paper, and she agreed. [After presenting our performative lecture at the conference](#), I want to reflect about the dialogue between Vibha's work and [my](#)



[writing](#).

When I first encountered Vibha's work, stories by Philip K. Dick came to my mind, such as *The Impossible Planet* and *The Defenders*. Both deal with the psycho-geography of humanity after the destruction of planet Earth. Vibha asks further questions in her work through specific choices of material, conceptualisation and performative contexts. When she told me about a new series of works, based on the story of a survivor who roams the planet that was destroyed by an ecological catastrophe, I was reminded of Derrick Bell's paper [Xerxes and the Affirmative Action Mystique](#). Bell uses storytelling to present the independent view of an alien not only to argue for a case, but to present it in a performative way to the reader.

How could we communicate the thought that humans have ensconced waste as invisible monument and accepted it as heritage?

We worked on different versions of a fictional story, trying to exemplify the spiritual dimension of Vibha's work and how it relates to social justice. In her short video, a figure dressed in biohazard protective clothing walks through a landscape devastated by waste and pollution.

https://allegralaboratory.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Vibha_video.mp4

The work asks not only how a possible ecological catastrophe has become part of our lived reality, but points out that the imagination of this possibility is limited. The survivor appears disconnected from the now uninhabitable world, having destroyed the house they lived in. As this world cannot sustain their life, the human has turned into an alien. We then asked ourselves, what would happen if an alien or future human would visit and present details of an impending apocalypse. How could we communicate the thought that humans have ensconced waste as invisible monument and accepted it as heritage? In the process of working on different framings of this story, we witnessed how it changed into a



complex narrative about waste, spirituality and heritage when placed in context of the visual artworks.

We re-enacted fable-telling so as to illustrate false consciousness around consumption, waste and pollution.

The lecture was part of this longer conversation about material realities of consumption, and how conceptual eco-feminist work could evoke imaginations that cause the audience to reconsider their everyday behaviour. In this online paper, we present a short fictional story and a series of fables. Our work is informed by epistemologies from the South, where knowledge is not only lived reality, but an empowering process fuelled by self-critical reflection, world-building and play. We enjoyed imagining our encounter with the alien visitor, finding ourselves acting irrationally as we rehearsed the story over and over again. We also decided to re-enact performative storytelling practice used by Critical Race theorists, borrowing from Aida Hurtado's 1999 paper [*The Trickster's Play: Whiteness in the Subordination and Liberation Process*](#). Hurtado draws on Toni Morrison who stated that when reading a text, the reader participates in the re-enactment of violence of that text. Hurtado elaborates how fable-telling exposes unspoken rules of power in language: "Through the use of this fable, I hope to bypass the pitfalls of our 'genderized, sexualised, wholly racialized' language to submit the dynamics of power to closer scrutiny" (Hurtado 1999: 228). As Hurtado's fables unmask white privilege, we re-enacted fable-telling in context of Vibha's work, so as to illustrate false consciousness around consumption, waste and pollution, to the extent that it appears to have turned into an invisible monument.

If you met an alien visiting from the future, what would you say?

On the June 31, 2044, the WHO holds a gala to celebrate the end of a pandemic which had started 25 years earlier. Two guests stroll down towards the southern tip of Roosevelt Island outside the [*Smallpox Memorial Hospital in New York*](#) where an art exhibition is about to be opened. Our protagonists chat about the



exhibition and how to continue their collaboration.

They know what it means when the economy dictates for things to go back to normal: warnings about the impact on climate change will continue to be ignored. Just as they are about to return from their walk, they find themselves in an extraordinary encounter.

An alien disembarks from a spaceship that resembles a 1962 [Airstream Tradewind](#) floating in the East River and announces without any preliminaries: “I am supposed to meet you at 2100 hours at the coordinates 40.749550, -73.961540, and present this message:”

“Planet Earth is on the brink of destruction. Five years from now, the ecosystem of the planet will be beyond recovery. This encrypted folder tells you how the planet could be saved.”

When we think of social processes as invisible monuments, that does not mean that we understand anything.

A heated discussion ensues, the alien is asked to verify their identity, suspecting a kind of surveillance mission, participatory artwork, or worse. The alien refuses to comply and insists on handing over the encrypted message. Insults are shouted, threats mixed with alcoholic drinks, spiked with paper umbrellas, and glitter is thrown.

Taken aback, the alien checks their mission records, but the unruly humans appear to be the legitimate recipients of the message: visual artist Vibha Galhotra and writer Fouad Asfour.

The visitor pleads for calm.

At the same time, the gala’s exhibition opens with Galhotra’s multimedia installation that is broadcast on vidscreens and 4D sound across the island:



“For 90 days and 90 nights I travelled this planet on dry ground. There is no water left. We were unprepared. I am standing right now on the midpoint between Paris and New York. Twenty years ago, this spot was covered by ocean water, 8000m deep. It is a desert now. In 2015, climate change models estimated this apocalypse was 5 billion years away. 50 years later it happened. Over the past three months, I crossed not only the Atlantic, but the entire world several times, on dry ground.”

“So you knew all along!”, the alien shouts in shock, “but why did humans continue to fill the planet with waste? Instead of using the available technology to reduce pollution and improve the lives of everyone?”

“Duh, we thought you’re here to tell us?” The visitor’s empathy had exposed the despair at the bottom of their rage. “All the time we are convinced art could change the minds of people and make them rethink their actions,” they shout, “and now you come with fancy new schemes. Please keep your message and just do something, will you?”

“Perhaps,” the alien points at a hologram that lights up from a device on their left arm, displaying intricate graphs and statistical data, “take a look at the data from the encrypted folder? This clearly shows a correlation between the rise in social inequality and increased waste and pollution.”

“No. We won’t look at your data, you need specialists for that. In my work, I explore how beliefs and spiritual dimensions of inequality turn today’s realities of waste into future heritage,” Vibha replies, wiping lime wedges from her boots. “My works don’t explain a thing. I think it’s impossible to simply link cause and effect.”

“But that’s why I was sent to meet you,” the alien’s pleading tone slightly less annoying now, “you raise these issues in your work, and this knowledge is supported by reports published much later! Can you tell us a bit more about your work, so we in the future could learn from it?”



“I don’t think so,” Fouad takes another cocktail. “When we think of social processes as invisible monuments, that does not mean that we understand anything.”

The alien shifts slightly to the side, eyeing the drink cautiously, “But there must be something that you would send to the future if you could?”

“But it’s simple, go and look at my work that’s exhibited here,” Vibha scoffs, “it would be great to get a review published in the future, after the apocalypse.”

Fouad laughs. “Great idea! Let’s take a walk through the show, and tell fables which show how people think, like Derrick Bell did in his *Xerces* article. We’ll start with the first fable that is told by Chicana theorist and Professor of Psychology, Aída Hurtado, in her paper, *The Trickster’s Play: Whiteness in the Subordination and Liberation Process.*”

Five fables and five artworks



Trick number 1 : The center of the universe – naturalizing whiteness

“If I am not the centre of the universe, you do not exist. If I am not the central actor in the drama, I will not listen to you, I will not acknowledge your presence, and I will remove myself from the situation.

My absence will highlight my centrality to all actions. I will not acknowledge your presence; my ability not to see you is my power. If I do not see you, you do not exist. If you only exist at my will, you are nothing without my attention. I am, therefore, the one that controls who is real and who is not.”



The Final Feast.
The work is a satirical presentation of contemporary times, the latter increasingly plagued by social, political, economic, and especially ecological chaos. The Final Feast is a play on Leonardo da Vinci's renowned painting "The Last Supper", and depicts an allegory of human greed that has taken over the world, leaving it in shreds and pieces, just like the cake in the performed photographs.

With transnational corporations controlling the commons, the access to cultural and natural resources (air, water, and a habitable earth) as human right of all individuals has been hollowed out.

The unbridled growth of economic activity during late capitalism has led to a few individuals holding the financial power that surpasses the gross national product of some nation states.

Hurtado, A. 1999. "The trickster's play: whiteness in the subordination and liberation process". In *Race, Identity, citizenship: a reader*. Edited by Torres, R. D., Minor, L. F and India, J. X. 229-236. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Staged photowork, 60" Dia 2019-2020



Trick number 2: Building a world

All information is available to me. I don't need to take action. It is enough that I know about something that is wrong, or to make others aware about it.

I don't need to take up an issue and become active. My technological innovations have surpassed the corruptible body and technical objects have turned into living beings.

I have the right to invent machinery which extract energy and precious metals from the ground, to pollute soil, air and water for the higher cause of my creation.



Beyond The Blue, Exhibition, 2020

This exhibition imagines the looming catastrophe on earth as the planet's resources are depleted, and the questions of survival and interplanetary escape. Together, they act as a warning, imparting a sense of urgency before environmental displacement forces the population into space.

The artist's practice centers on environmental concerns and the consequences of industrialization and globalization. Offering a counter to the conventional approach to environmental studies, Gaihotra seeks to expand the discourse to include history, theory, political intervention, economy, tradition, and culture when considering the current state of environmental degradation.

The first part of the exhibition presents works from the series 'Wounded' in molded paper that imagine the earth's landscape after its resources have been exhausted, offering a picture of the consequences of our perpetual denial and refusal to forgo the perceived comforts of development and capitalism. In working with paper, an inherently delicate material, Gaihotra meditates on the ephemerality of the planet's resources and the fragility of our existence.

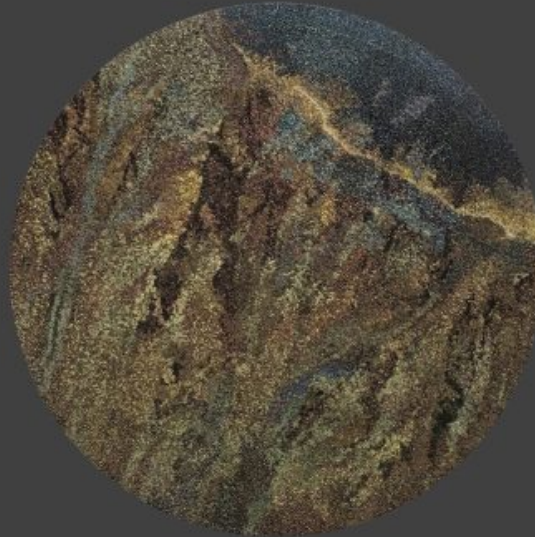
From the Series 'Wounded'
Constructed Korean Hany Paper 60" dia x 5", 2019



Trick number 3 / Ownership and naming

I can use language to name and divide land, to invent classes, structures systems. I determine what technologies benefit the future of humanity. I will invent new skills and sciences, independent of our ontology which is based on our bodies, and our organisms are in a biological relation with our existence. I create invisible monsters which will inhabit and haunt this technology.

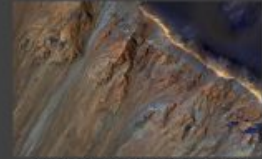
They call for us to extract oxygen from Mars so that the machines possessed by spirits can colonise the planet. I will continue to plough the spiritual land of technologized futures as a dwelling ground for my invisible monsters. I will erect invisible monuments in language for them to dwell in and to be worshipped.



Beyond The Blue. Exhibition, 2020

Comprising eight large tonnes from her current series *Life on Mars*, the second part of the exhibition offers a vision for the future of civilization in response. The speculative image of Mars proposes a new theory of colonization, holding the question of whether a future habitat will be built on the same hierarchical orders that destroyed the earth.

Galhotra also seeks to highlight the absurdity of our times, where we use advancing technology to search beyond ourselves rather than to conserve and invest in the planet's resources. As progress takes the form of avoidance and escapism, Galhotra instead urges us to embrace the wounded, fragile planet. Amidst hope and despair, reality and delusion, the essential question remains one of survival.



Reference from NASA's Mars Exploration Image Gallery Reconnaissance Orbiter

From the series 'Life on Mars' | L -7,750" | L 86,044"
Ghungroos, fabric, wood & steel 72" dia x 3", 2019



**Trick number 4:
Worshipping consumptions
and production of waste, the
ideology of dematerialisation**

I worship the spirit of the technological progress. I want humanity to move forward. I will follow the rituals it demands, and will sacrifice everything on the altar for the infinite improvement of technology.

I greet its increasing and suffocating production of waste and pollution as my religious ordinance. I accept that my ritual worship of production, consumption and the market has culminated in the fourth industrial revolution which sends wares across the globe in one direction, and waste in the other.

I am both the master and recipient of this ecstatic circle of an eschatological culmination in destruction. I have the right to conjure up technological spirits which will inhabit waste and pollution as our invisible monument. I worship waste.



Breath by Breath, 2016-17

Breath by Breath allegorises the element Air or Vayu. While air pollution levels in most urban areas in India have been a matter of serious concern, the data generated through the National Ambient Air Monitoring Network does not cater well to understanding the air quality a common person breathes. The performance was staged at those air monitoring sites in the city to satirise the living situation in the new capital driven urbanity.

The work is also a comment on commodifying natural resources and the inequality that it generates. The neo-colonial realities increase the division of class, where the poor do not have access to clean water or air, while the air purifiers and specially treated water is sold to the ruling class.

Breath by Breath. Staged photowork. 48" x 96", 2016-17



Trick number 5: The modification of organic nature

I own the world and carve out the optimal distribution of natural resources among my powerful peers. I am the master of nature, in spite of natural processes improving growth and reproduction of plants and animals over millions of years. I know what needs to be changed in the genetics of plants to yield more crop, in animals to grow more meat, and to modify insects to stop spreading diseases.



Sediment and Other Untitled....

The Yamuna River is a sacred source of life that flows through the city of New Delhi and is in a critical state of exploitation and pollution. The water of the Yamuna is not simply a medium in this work, but a material visual actor speaking on the contradiction of its image of holiness and its reality as a contaminant dying body of water. In this work, the black sludge of the River is splashed across canvases, emulating the look of the use of India-ink.

Sediment and Other Untitled...., River Yamuna, sediment on wood board, 72" x 48", 2011-2015

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