The Tree of Life
Curated by Claudia Hart

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By Charlotte Kent

Claudia Hart, *Timegarden 02*, 2005. Video (color, sound), computer, screen or projector, speakers, Dimensions variable, landscape orientation, 1 hour, loop. Courtesy bitforms.

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A digital art gallery like bitforms is well positioned to manage the COVID-19 pandemic's shift to online experiences. In *The Tree of Life*, the esteemed digital artist Claudia Hart

curated a show about how nature engages us amidst "the speed of time, history, archiving, memory, hard drives and resolution" that define our mediated lives. Her musings on how certain objects create moments and the way technology determines certain spans of time are thoughtful and thought-provoking, and they provide a context for the nine artists' works. The website, designed by Shi Zheng, imitates the graphics of timelines—images and memory being two things at the heart of Hart's opening essay written during the period of isolation.

Online exhibits provide a different viewing experience. If all these works were in the Lower East Side gallery, you might walk in, look around, occasionally watch one of the time-based works, perhaps put on headphones for sound, and meander to the next piece. The online configuration asks for greater engagement, something that surprises many by requiring a conscious commitment to the work. The viewer scrolls down the page, but has to click on boxes next to each artist's name to see the work. Many of these are slow, ranging from 49 seconds to an hour. To stop a work and move on, or speed it up to get to the end, requires an intentionality on the viewer's part that makes evident one of the primary concerns of the exhibit: how we frame our relationship to nature.

Shi Zheng, *Umwelt [sim]*, 2020. Video (sound, color), media player, screen or projector. Dimensions variable, landscape orientation, 7 min 13 sec, loop. Courtesy bitforms.

Shi Zheng's *Umwelt [sim]* (2020) is an AI simulation of an installation work that reconsiders nature through technology and offers a good introduction to the issues of slow (viewing) time, computer vision, and the mediation of nature. The way nature gets encapsulated and made worth our attention is further addressed in Mark Dorf's *Preservation* (2020), where fluorescent lit transparent boxes, each with a golden tree, scroll across the screen. An underlay of verdant tree tops scrolls in the opposite direction. It glitches and disappears occasionally, revealing the gray room that harbors the golden tree cases. In this bare office space lie long fluorescent light bulbs and scattered panes of

glass. The only space or nature that matters is that which has been made precious, entombed.

The final work also reveals how we value what is set aside. Claudia Hart's *Timegarden 02* (2005) presents a walled garden seen from an exterior tree. Over the hour, the sky changes from dawn to dusk, flowerbeds blossom and fade, winter trees begin to bud and leaves unfurl, eventually obscuring the secret garden. As leaves press against our view, we see them pixelated, as if gazing into their cell structure. Autumn arrives, the foliage wanes and we can see more clearly again. The work operates like the meditative gardens of the 18th century, where the labyrinthian landscaping fostered thought and nourished the soul.

Mark Dorf, *Preservation*, 2020. Video (color, sound), media player, screen or projector Dimensions variable, landscape orientation, 6 min 13 sec, loop.

In a similar move, Quayola's *Pleasant Places* (2016) separates each scene from the next with a ping reminiscent of a meditation bell. The diptych, based on 3D-scanned natural scenery, is an homage to landscape painting. The trees appear both hyper-realistic with the sound of wind through the leaves, and abstracted through the use of a computer model underscored by crackling noise like fire and an atonal ringing.

A narrow band of sky introduces Kurt Hentschläger's *Measure* (2014). A thin grid cross-sects it, and a white contrail appears, followed by another image. Halfway through, a cube of vibrating lines arises from the depths of the image to spread across the screen. So much of our connection to nature is now mediated through cultural artefacts—documentaries espousing climate change, nature videos online, social media clips, and digital photos of friends' and journalists' treks—that the dualisms of nature-culture and real-simulation are harder to parse. I know about plants through my digitally enabled

quests. I recognize species through an app on my phone. I've heard dynamic environmental arguments on podcasts. Our respect for nature occurs partly through these digital engagements.

Marina Zurkow's media work focuses on nature and culture intersections such as invasive species, superfund sites, and petroleum interdependence. The term mesocosm refers to a controlled environment designed to mimic an ecosystem under certain conditions and is used in ecology research as a way to forecast likely outcomes. Zurkow's *Mesocosm (Wink, TX)* (2012) is a hand-drawn animation focused on a sinkhole as humans in hazmat suits and birds appear, day and night, rise and fall with the industrial factories in the background, and the billboard reflects only the clarity of the sky. It's a 50 minute silent work, but mesmerizing.

Most of the works have eerie soundscapes, full of longing and danger. Sara Ludy's *Thuja* (2012)—a continuous panorama with slivers of blank condominium interiors, gravel lots and landscapes taken from online real estate listings—provides a constant hum, as if stuck in some air-conditioned development along the side of a highway in the middle of the desert. Its three minutes are deeply dismaying. The video artist Gary Hill included a 49-second work, *Sine Wave (the curve of life)* (2011) where his audible breathing provides a semblance of stability for a camera panning disconcertingly around a half full/half empty glass at the end of a plank amidst lush foliage.

Auriea Harvey & Michaeël Samyn, *The Endless Forest*, 2006/2020. Ongoing Online multiplayer game. Courtesy bitforms.

The Endless Forest (2005/2020 – ongoing) is a multiplayer online game designed by Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn that anyone can download and experience—highly encouraged. For *The Tree of Life*, they contributed a scene from the idyllic forest where players are deer, frolicking, with no rules or goals. The pleasure of the game is its lack of directed play. Enjoy.

Screens and science show us the Earth these days, but *The Tree of Life* presents the slower pace necessary to appreciate the way nature and culture are not binaries but flow together, for better and worse. The works raise questions about how we see the world. Make a date with a friend to enjoy the show and then find time to talk about it from a distance or by videoconference. Look out each other's windows, not only to see what the other sees, but how it's framed.

Contributor

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Charlotte Kent PhD is Assistant Professor of Visual Culture at Montclair State University. Her current research investigates the absurd in contemporary art and speculative design, often in relationship to issues of digital culture. She writes for *Artists Magazine, CLOT, Litro, Musée,* and regularly for the *Brooklyn Rail*, among others. She serves on the Board of Governors of the National Arts Club.