

How can we get our bearings in transitional eras such as this one when the old order isn't entirely over and the new order hasn't yet transpired? Bringing together the photographs of Clara Lacasse and a science-fiction short film by the collective Primordial Dismemberment, the exhibition *Had We but World Enough, and Time*¹ explores this question by drawing our focus to our relationship to "nature" as a human fantasy of reproducing an unchanged world.

The works are based on apparatuses designed to create *backup copies* of "nature": Lacasse documents the Montreal Biodôme during a recent renovation²; Primordial Dismemberment creates a fiction about a biodiversity reserve set up on the extrasolar moon Calaïs in mid-twenty-first century, which is monitored by an artificial intelligence named Sadovnik ("gardener" in Russian).

In both cases, these refuges for the living have been abandoned. Humans only appear phantom-like in old photos taken from the archives of the Biodôme's Resource Centre, or in the station's log written by the invisible crewmembers of the Calaïs mission. "Eventually, I suspect that we will reach a point when all of human history will be seen as a mere preamble," one of the journal entries states.

The soundtrack of the sci-fi short fills the gallery with the resonance of cavernous spaces ruled by rumbling machines. A melancholic sense of humanity's obsolescence is further reinforced by a series of intentionally dated references, ranging from the retrofuturism of the former velodrome built for the 1976 Olympic Games, to the choice of technological markers such as the use of black and white, the leitmotif of the cathode ray tube, and the geopolitics of the Cold War evoked by *Sadovnik*.

Yet there is also life in the artificial ecosystems of Lacasse and Primordial Dismemberment. Through the scaffolds, nets, and protective tarps of the Biodôme

work site, through the flow charts and surveillance cameras operated by the AI Sadovnik, many images sneak through—of greenhouse tropical plants, fish and turtles in an aquarium, penguins on display, and above all, the archival image reproduced by Lacasse in large format and titled *Naissance (Birth)*, which shows the black silhouette of a baby dolphin emerging from its mother's body.

This image allegorizes the entire exhibition. For these artists, birth does not constitute an originating moment. It represents the infinitely more ambiguous time of transition, of one body becoming two, or, in the case of Sadovnik, an entity "re-writing itself each time" and ultimately becoming uncontrollable. Birth is always equivocal. It merges the ideas of reproducing the same, harping on the old, materializing the dissimilar, enacting the drama of the *Coupure (Cut)* (title of another photograph by Lacasse), the "primordial dismemberment" embodied by the name of the collective formed by Thomas L. Archambault and Manolis Daris.

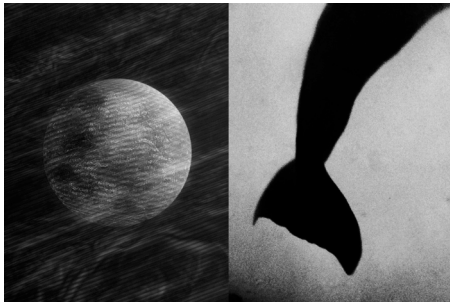
The crew in *Sadovnik* has fled Calaïs. The public of the Biodôme is temporarily denied access. It is precisely here, away from prying eyes, that the artists have chosen to set up their recording devices, perhaps with the fantasy of identifying—as in a crime scene—the cruel evidence of an impossible fusion with Mother Nature.

¹ The title of the exhibition comes from the first line of Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress" (1681).

² Several works in the exhibition have already been presented as part of Lacasse's first solo exhibition at Galerie d'art Desjardins in Drummondville (2021), as well as in the virtual group exhibition *Temps longs* (2021), curated by Bénédicte Ramade at Galerie de l'UQÀM.

- Ji-Yoon Han is an independent curator, arts writer and researcher, who lives and work in Montréal/Tiohtiá:ke/Mooniyaang.

- Translated from French by Oana Avasilichioaei.



Had We but World Enough, and Time is an exhibition that brings together photographs by **Clara Lacasse** and a short film by the **Primordial Dismemberment** collective.

Lacasse's photographs document the renovation of the Montréal Biodôme. In highlighting the artificiality of the space and questioning the significance of this renovation in light of the accelerating ecological crisis, the artist underlines the urgency to rethink our conception of nature.

In the short film *Sadovnik* by Primordial Dismemberment, similar spaces, including the Jardin Botanique de Montréal and the Marie-Victorin Herbarium, serve as the backdrop to a science fiction story depicting a future in which life can only exist under a protective dome. The nostalgia for Earth expressed by the film's astronauts elicits our own nostalgia for a natural world untainted by human influence, like the one presented at the Montréal Biodôme.

In creating a dialogue between documentary and speculative approaches, the exhibition reflects upon the way in which our present time is haunted by idealized conceptions of the past and future, while affirming the relevance of science fiction as a tool for interpreting the contemporary world.

Clara Lacasse is interested in the construction of narratives related to history, nature, science and the collective imagination. Through work focused on the photographic image, she supports a critical reflection on visual culture and on the image as an instrument of knowledge and power.

Primordial Dismemberment is a video art duo founded in Montréal in 2019 by Thomas L. Archambault and Manolis Daris, both studio arts graduates at Concordia University. In their science-fiction short film, *Sadovnik*, artificial intelligence becomes a fantomatic relic of the Earth and of humanity, in a future where both their fates are uncertain.