

An Invitation to Disappear
or
The Year without a Summer and a Year without a Winter

by Stefanie Böttcher

“The explosions were extremely violent and very frequent, and resembled the discharge of mortars. It commenced on Wednesday the 5th in the evening with repeated explosions, and ceased about 8 o'clock. It again commenced on Monday night [10 April]... and continued extremely violent until a late hour the next night. Yesterday [13 April] the ash fell so thick that it was quite uncomfortable walking out as it filled our eyes and covered our clothes.”¹

This was how an eyewitness in Solo, Central Java, described the events of 1815. Between 5 and 15 April of that year the world experienced the largest volcanic eruption since records began when the Indonesian volcano Tambora exploded, covering not only the surrounding region but also much of the world in an ash cloud. As a result the temperatures plummeted as far away as Europe and North America. The year 1816 went down in history as the year without a summer. The volcanic winter extended until 1819 and brought in its wake torrential rainstorms, failed harvests and famines. Not only social upheavals were associated with the incident, but also technical innovations such as the draisine (also known as the handcar or rail trolley). The eruption of Tambora influenced the art world too, inspiring Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W. Turner to create their renowned paintings of the skies.

Although this dramatic event took place several centuries ago, its effects can now be felt in the present day thanks to Julian Charrière's exhibition *An Invitation to Disappear*. Since 13 April 2018, 203 years to the day after Tabora first erupted, the explosions have been booming out once more in Kunsthalle Mainz. Although somewhat quieter and less dangerous, they permeate the silence and make for an intense exhibition experience. The ear-splitting noise of the generator, complete with intermittent bangs and rattles, fills the first room of the exhibition. In the second it is replaced by more uniform but no less rhythmic sounds—the hard electronic beats of a rave, set in a south-east Asian palm-oil plantation.

But how are the Tabora eruption and a palm-oil plantation connected? Julian Charrière and *An Invitation to Disappear* or the location and climate. The idea for the exhibition and the project of the same name took shape while Charrière was hiking through Indonesia on his way to the volcano, accompanied by American climate philosopher Dehlia Hannah. The Swiss artist has often come up with ideas for his works while travelling through countries and across bodies of water. One expedition frequently leads to another. Scientific findings, materials and historical facts about places and events are collected, culminating in elaborate research processes that incorporate experts, researchers and practitioners. Nonetheless, personal discoveries and first-hand experiences form the critical components, the constitutive elements that lead to the genesis of a new work. Julian Charrière and Dehlia Hannah trekked for days on end until they reached the base of Tambora and walked around its crater, deep in conversation about the climate and how it changes, and about natural and artificial ways of influencing this development. The knowledge that Tambora's eruption triggered a natural means of lowering temperatures—as is evidenced by the legendary year without a summer—leads on to the idea of a manmade year without a winter, which we might be forced to deal with as a consequence of the greenhouse effect.

The idea arose as follows: on their way to the volcano Dehlia Hannah and Julian Charrière made their way through huge expanses of artificially planted oil palm trees, densely packed in a strict pattern. The oil palm plantations, which are found endlessly throughout entire swaths of south-east Asia, are as large as some small countries. Above the fields the star-shaped

treetops can be seen wafting rhythmically, while wandering through those same fields reveals seemingly infinite rows of trunks, always exactly the same distance apart. This manmade seriality of a plant which has existed since the Cretaceous period both shocked and fascinated Julian Charrière. In order to create space for the palms, tropical rainforests are constantly being destroyed. Practicing slash-and-burn or deforestation in these ancient forests hastens climate change, contributes to the greenhouse effect, and reduces biodiversity in favour of the monocultural planting of oil palm trees. Palm oil, which can be extracted from the pulp, is a raw material now found in one in every two supermarket products. From margarine to chocolate, from lipstick to skin cream, from candles to washing powder, the fruit of the oil palm tree forms the basis for many consumer goods. Although this material is used almost everywhere, very few people know much about how and where it is extracted, and what consequences are associated with its production.

In *An Invitation to Disappear* Julian Charrière expresses this fascinating contrast in a specially developed site-specific dramaturgy. When visiting the exhibition you first cross three successive rooms where temperature, light, sound and materiality form the constitutive categories. What awaits you as you make your way through the rooms is a new experience for the senses, flanked by a volcano and palm oil, oscillating between hot and cold. Step by step you follow rhythms and sounds, plunging ever deeper into settings concealed by wafting mist until you get to the very heart of the exhibition. The route kicks off by reviving industrial production, culminating in a dystopian futuristic scenario. First you land in the limbo of early industrialisation. This cold, somewhat dismal and hazy space has the air of a cooling chamber—industrial, sterile and subdued. From time to time a diminutive fog machine spits out a small amount of cool, damp condensation. It is powered by a huge, clattering generator, powered by palm oil. The ridiculously small output in the form of a sparse miniature cloud stands in stark contrast to the enormous input needed in terms of fuel, energy and apparatus. The application reveals the palm oil to be a natural form of fuel. But precisely the material that it directly creates—the fog—is of special interest for the exhibition. In the first room its moist, cooling qualities can be experienced. It blurs the contours of the room, transforming it into a billowing chamber that recalls the exhibition's title: *An Invitation to Disappear*. In the two rooms that follow, the connections to fog or mist, or the processes of becoming misty, are presented very differently. More about this below.

Opposite the fog machine and its generator, metal shelving extends almost the complete length of the room. The shiny rack bears dozens of pinkish palm fat blocks. Some have fallen to the floor, deformed and melted. They are presented in various stages of viscosity. Even though the palm fat is produced on a mass scale and is therefore uniform, the natural fat provides a contrast to the industrially produced shelving. Their position, stored in the zinc coated heavy-duty shelves, several metres in height, makes reference to the modern industrial usage of this natural product, as does the generator, which requires palm oil in order to function. And so at this point a production chain begins: portioning, forming, processing and storage.

The film shown in the following part of the room initially takes you one step backwards; the topic of palm oil is once more the focal point. A film collage presents visual material from the turn of the century to the present day. The motif is always the same: tree after tree is felled. What we see on a loop is not the tree landing, and then that moment of calm and stillness, but rather the moment the tree actually falls. For centuries mankind has been fiddling round with nature, shaping it to conform to their expectations, rendering it serviceable. *Ever since we crawled out*, as this work is called, once again makes clear reference to the continual exploitation of nature, whose origins are based in the birth of mankind.

A grey security door seals off this section. Behind it both the temperature and light immediately become warmer. A lamp spreads warm, yellowish-orange light around the room. Red bubbles sink slowly in the viscous mass. When palm oil is warmed in water, it moves through a glass cylinder like fiery lava. The heat comes from the grow lamp that is situated beneath

the filled receptacle. The lamp recalls not only the volcanic eruption from approximately two centuries ago, but also represents growth, change and life itself, forming a contrast to the black-and-white wall piece opposite. *To observe is to influence* consists of millions of tiny ash particles. The ash, which comes from Tambora and the cleared rainforest, embodies lifelessness. Yet this, too, is not how things end, for ash is widely reputed to make exceptionally fertile soil. The wall piece depicts a forest scene of dense shrubbery—palms, bushes and floor-covering plants—covered with washes. It is almost as if heavy rainfall has befallen the greenery, blurring its sharp focus. They are variations on and combinations of assorted prints by Alfred Russel Wallace, a British nature researcher who explored the Malay Archipelago from 1854 to 1862.² During this trip he discovered that a biogeographical boundary, now known as the Wallace Line, existed between the Indonesian islands Borneo and Sulawesi (Celebes). He was also one of the first writers to comment on people's influence on nature, detailing the complex interactions between vegetation and climate and warning of the dangers of tree clearance and soil erosion, particularly in the rainforest. Julian Charrière's wall piece makes reference to Wallace and the current relevance of his findings, while also alluding to a further manifestation of fog: an ash cloud similarly obscures the view, allowing individual details to appear suddenly and briefly before they are once more veiled by a dense blanket. The proximity of growth to decay; extracting a new raw material at the expense of another resource; disappearance as a process—all these themes become particularly evident in this room.

“The sunset to the west was like a conflagration burning bright for miles around; yellow, violet and red lights flickered here and there,”³ was how Heinrich Bechtolsheimer described the sky in the Rhine Hesse region of Germany in October 1816. In *An Invitation to Disappear*, colourful lightning illuminates the dusk falling over a densely packed palm field. Hard, electronic rhythms on a loop cut through the calm of the gigantic field of trees. A palm-oil plantation is shaken by light and sound. The fog spreads out slowly, engulfing the field in mist. The scenery fluctuates between tempting and threatening, linking exoticism with dystopia. The eponymous video consists of a single tracking shot. Its images and sound already fill the previous room, carrying you along as you move through the exhibition. The trip leads deep into the oil palm plantation. At first the twittering birds, chirping crickets, and croaking frogs dominate the room, but as darkness falls homogenous electric sounds overpower these natural sounds and become dominant. You find yourself in a rave. Pulsating sounds induce you to become fully absorbed in where you are and what you hear. A state of intoxication brought about by the music goes hand in hand with the excessive depletion of natural resources. It represents a collective experience that is expressed both in the music that your ear consciously “takes in” and in the unknowing consumption of palm oil. Its ubiquity is analogous to our absence of interest in its extraction; the obverse of the physical absence of people from the video is the omnipresence of human actions in real life.

Just as the volcanic eruption linked continents two centuries ago, the consumption of palm oil links people across the globe. The same is true of raves, which conjure up collective trances and shared experiences beyond space and time. *An Invitation to Disappear*—the literal translation of “Tambora”—stands for processes, materials, developments and states of being that are as secret as they are public, and as communal as they are global. The individual merges into the mass, into the moment, in a particular place. Total autonomy is a fiction: everything is contingent on everything else ...

STOP PRESS! In the winter of 1816 the Abruzzo region of Italy experiences the “heaviest snowfall of all time”.⁴ The snow is yellowish-red in colour.

STOP PRESS! That same winter a blizzard rages in Hungary. It is accompanied by snow ranging from brown to flesh-coloured.

STOP PRESS! The mist spreading out in the Kunsthalle since April 2018 changes in colour. First it is greyish-white, then goes through sequences of black, brownish-beige and ultimately reddish-brown.

STOP PRESS! 16 June 1818 at the Mauvoisin Dam: the continual advance of the Giétroz glacier leads to the Lac de Mauvoisin reservoir filling up and ultimately bursting through the dam. The resulting flood is catastrophic, submerging numerous villages.⁵

STOP PRESS! 16 June 2018 at the Mauvoisin Dam: Julian Charrière reveals photos of a rave. It is taking place in a palm-oil plantation—in far-distant south-east Asia.

STOP PRESS! 1816 is a year full of rain. An eclectic circle of young literary figures with Lord Byron at their core gather at a castle on Lake Geneva. Their number includes Mary Godwin, who later becomes Mary Shelley. Accompanied by dramatic scenery and weather, she comes up with the setting for her new novel, *Frankenstein*.⁶

STOP PRESS! June 2019, MASI Lugano art museum in Switzerland: Julian Charrière's film *Towards No Earthly Pole* is being shown. It has been shot in the Arctic—the region where Dr. Frankenstein pursues his monster, where he later finds sanctuary on a ship, and where he dies soon afterwards.



It Was Hard Not to Be Preoccupied by the Fire and the Nightfall, 2018 / diesel engine, power generator, palm oil, fog machine

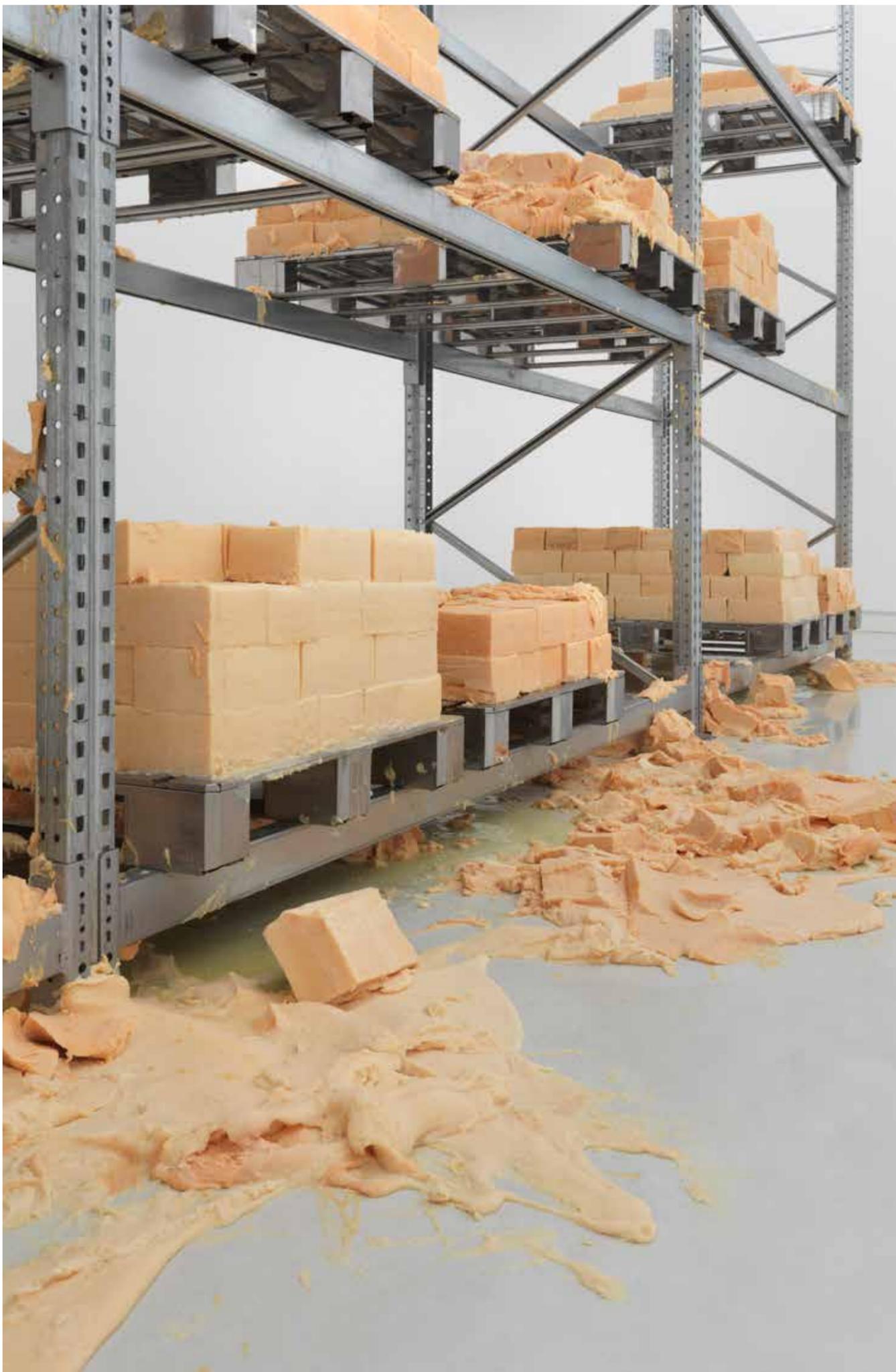


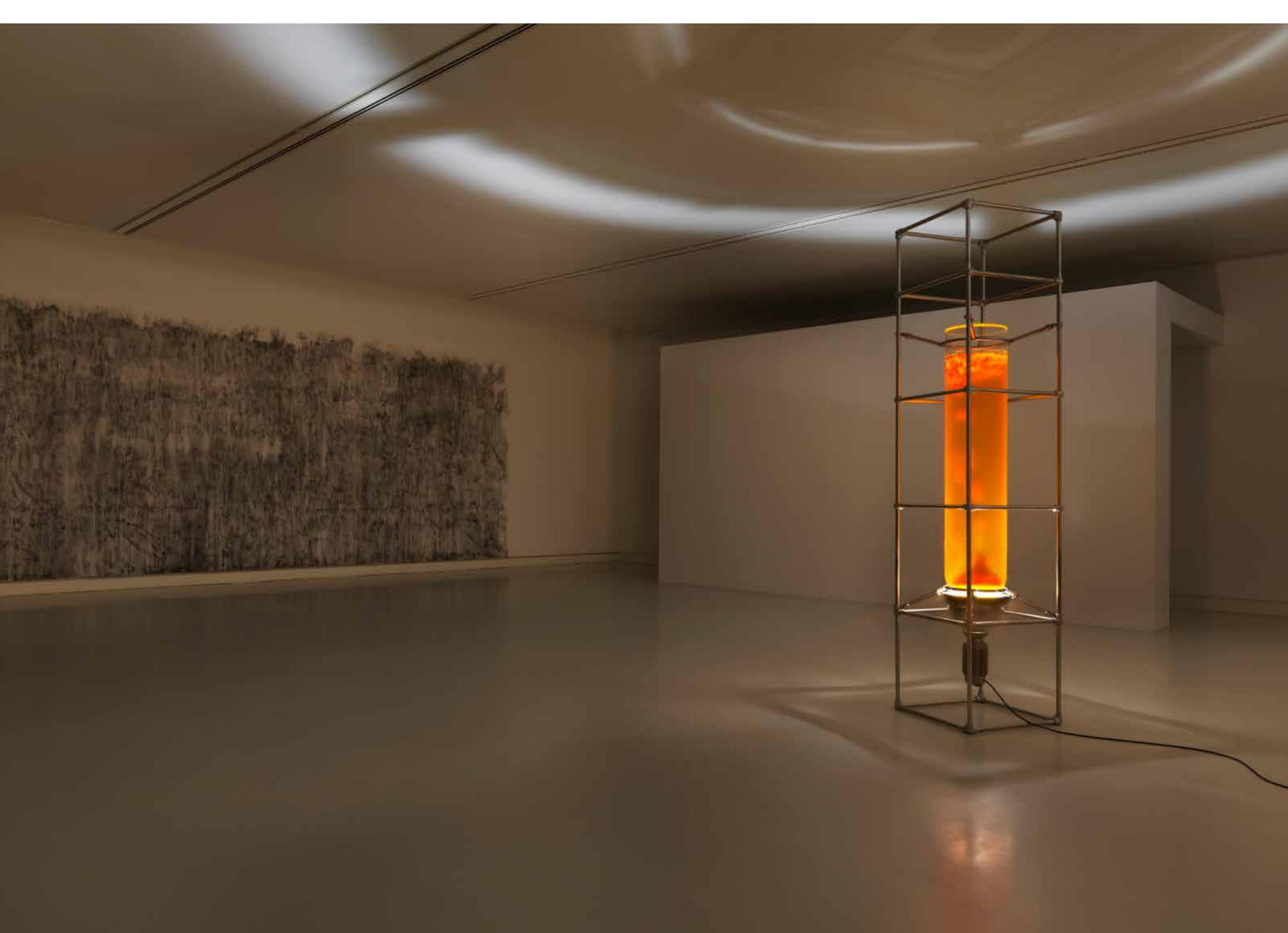
Notes

1. Behringer, Wolfgang: *Tambora und das Jahr ohne Sommer: Wie ein Vulkan die Welt in die Krise stürzte*, pp. 22–23.
2. Here and below, see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Russel_Wallace
3. Bechtolsheimer, Heinrich: *Das Hungerjahr*, 2nd ed. Alzey 1977, p. 95.
4. Here and below, see Behringer: *Tambora*, pp. 36–37.
5. *Ibid.*: pp. 265–66.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 259–62.



The Other Side of Eden, 2018 / heavy duty shelf, stainless-steel pallets, palm fat





To Observe is to Influence, 2018 / ash from rainforest, volcanic ash, spray-glue

Love-In, 2018 / borosilicate glass, stainless-steel, lamp, palm oil, distilled water



Field Philosophy



by Dehlia Hannah

After many hours of climbing we entered an ethereal fog. Given a taste of a cloud, the natural response is to breathe deeper, to sample its color, its smell, its density, and to discern its composition. The first breath calibrates the quality of the second. Moist air, with a faint and sweet scent, sustains curiosity; with it, one opens oneself more fully to sensation. As we become accustomed to it, a welcome cloud becomes imperceptible—an ambient condition that affects our mood without our noticing it. If the air quality is sharp, a short shallow breath follows. Our receptive senses tighten and our eyes focus in an attempt to discern whether the cloud is toxic or merely unpleasant. An irritating smoke, a foul organic odor, or a hazardous chemical taste: each demands a filter—which may be as basic as covering one's face with one's hand—and repels the body towards safety. Seen from a distance, a cloud holds shape, but encountered up close, it eludes our grasp, refuses the gaze a place to rest. Light penetrates it unevenly, bouncing off water droplets and particles moving with the currents of invisible gases.

A cloud draws one in.

Julian Charrière and I were drawn to the slopes of Mount Tambora, on the Indonesian island of Sumbawa, by events that took place here two centuries ago, on April 12, 1815, when the once enormous peak of this mountain exploded into a cloud of dust, ash, and superheated gases. Propelled into the stratosphere by the force of the eruption, the largest of the last ten thousand years, this cloud swept around the world, obscuring the sun, and wreaking havoc on weather patterns worldwide. Over the next three years, global mean temperature was reduced by several degrees, while the cause of the events that followed remained unknown. Local devastation was extreme, with whole communities around Tambora inundated and the mountain stripped bare of trees, whose carbonized remains are still visible on the island's beaches. Throughout the southern hemisphere, the cloud disturbed the monsoon rains, leading to drought, flooding, and the spread of epidemics across Asia and the Indian subcontinent. In the northern hemisphere, unseasonably cold and wet weather compromised harvests, compounding social unrest and religious fervor in an already turbulent era. 1816 entered historical memory as “the year without a summer.” At the same time, the Arctic regions warmed inexplicably, melting sea ice and luring explorers north toward the pole. It wasn't until the late twentieth century, when similar effects were observed after the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991, that interrelation between these events came to be understood.

The Swiss Alps were the site of some of the most tragic events of the Tambora period as well as the most powerful artistic reactions to this mysterious climate crisis. During the summer of 1816, the young Mary Shelley visited Lake Geneva, where she weathered incessant rains and fearsome thunderstorms in the company of fellow poets Percy Shelley and Lord Byron. Inspired by a collection of German ghost stories they discovered there, and perhaps the spirits with which they experimented, Byron proposed a competition to write the best horror story—a playful challenge today remembered as “the dare.” In this atmosphere of terror, Shelley conceived the story of *Frankenstein, Or: The Modern Prometheus* (published in 1818), while Byron wrote *Darkness*, a speculative poem that imagines the fate of the planet in the embers of a dying sun. “*Happy were those who dwelt inside the eye of the volcano...*”

As these Romantic tourists and their fictional protagonists gazed at the sublime peaks of Mont Blanc, the Alpine glaciers were also feeling the effects of the global climate cooling crisis. In the Canton of Valais, the Giétro Glacier’s regular pattern of melting and freezing was unsettled, allowing the glacier to grow through the summer season. The Lac de Mauvoisin’s water levels rose dangerously, threatening to deluge the inhabitants of the valley below. Although the threat was understood and a valiant effort was mounted to drain the waters, the lake overflowed its banks in 1818. Today the lake is a reservoir regulated by the vast Mauvoisin Dam, where Julian accepted a commission to create an exhibition on the bicentennial of the debacle. In doing so, he joined me in a thought experiment that I have been conducting in relation to the bicentennial of the Tambora eruption, which asks, what art and literature might be produced during the climate crisis that we face today, which might be remembered as “*a year without a winter*”?

During our climb, Julian and I learned that the name “Tambora” can be translated as “an invitation to disappear.” As we made our way through the thick fog that shrouded the mountain on August 16, 2017, we considered the possibility that we might not even see the crater once we reached the top—or that we might just fall right into it. At first, we were frustrated by this prospect, but eventually we embraced the fog, playing at disappearing into the distance and testing how far we could go before we could no longer orient ourselves by the sound of voices. When we suddenly emerged at Tambora’s summit, the clouds swept upwards along the crater’s edge, forming an opaque wall where the heat from the active volcano met the cool, humid air. We carried with us on our climb an aesthetics forged centuries ago, in mountains on the opposite side of the world. Painted in 1818, in the same year and the same landscape as the debacle of Mauvoisin and Shelley’s novel, Caspar David Friedrich’s famous painting of the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* is a paradigmatic expression of the aesthetics of the sublime. It depicts a lone gentleman from behind as he stands atop a mountain peak, gazing over an expanse of clouds. Our experiences on Tambora offered a striking contrast to this phallic image of man elevated by his physical and moral triumph over nature. The painting portrays a sea of fog crisp and clear, but in retrospect we can infer that Tambora’s efflux suffuses the air, filters the light, and blocks out the sun. Although he appears to wander *above* the mist, we were conscious of the fact that we wander *within* it. And we do not wander alone.

We find ourselves within a troubled atmosphere, a place which grants us no distant vantage point or innocent birds-eye view. Driven by rising carbon dioxide levels, the burning of fossil fuels, and the destruction of carbon sequestering landscapes, anthropogenic climate change is a problem of shifting proportions of gases in the atmosphere. Clouds permeate us, and we are excessively conscious of how we have permeated them with our emissions. How can we understand the interconnections between processes taking place at different temporal scales, across vast geographical distances, and entangled ecologies and economies? On a planet transformed by intentional and unintentional experiments, we are haunted by the specter of Frankenstein. In Shelley’s novel, Victor Frankenstein has a moment of temporary amnesia while climbing Mont Blanc. For a moment, he forgets to be haunted by the monster he has created and gives himself over to the delight afforded by the scene. Exactly at this moment, the creature appears, having followed his creator to the spot to hold him accountable for his actions.

The fog that blinded us on the last leg of our hike was one of many layers of the atmosphere and history that we passed through on our way to and from Tambora. There were trash

fires that burned on the roadsides, cooking fires where we camped, and clouds we descended through on the many flights we took to reach the island of Sumbawa, leaving a trail of carbon dioxide in our global wake. There was the cloud of ash and sulfur dioxide that came from the volcano two hundred year ago and spread around the world, casting mysterious cold and darkness over the northern hemisphere. There are clouds of chemicals that will soon be sprayed into the air in geoengineering experiments designed to mimic the effects of volcanic eruptions, in the hopes of mitigating some of the worst effects of climate change. In recent years, a heavy smoke has blanketed Southeast Asia each year due to the burning of vast swaths of jungle and peatland to make way for the planting of oil palms. As Julian and I stood at the top of Tambora all of these clouds rose to meet us. I imagined Friedrich’s wanderer stepping off his mountain pedestal and descending into the clouds that swirl ominously and seductively around our increasingly troubled world.

The moment of oblivion makes possible the reckoning that follows.

“The first explosions were heard on this island in the evening of the 15th of April... The noise was in the first instance almost universally attributed to distant cannon. On the following morning, however, a slight fall of ashes removed all doubt as to the causes of the sound... the sound appeared to be so close that in each district it seemed near at hand; it was attributed to an Eruption from the Marapi, the Gunung Kloot or the Gunung Bromo. From the 16th, the sun became obscured: it had everywhere the appearance of being enveloped in fog, the weather was sultry and the atmosphere close and still; the sun seemed shorn of its rays, and the general stillness and pressure of the atmosphere foreboded an Earthquake.”

—Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, *Narrative of the Effects of the Eruption from the Tomboro Mountain in the Islands of Sumbawa on the 11th and 12th of April 1815, 1816*

The sound that escapes when enters the gallery is almost enough to make one slam the door closed. Accompanied by a gust of cold wind, the impression of trespassing into a dangerous situation warrants an immediate step backward. Perhaps a ‘Do Not Enter’ sign should have been placed on the door, yet one can’t allow it to close without a glimpse inside. The scene there is no more assuring; soft bricks of creamy apricot-colored material are stacked on enormous metal shelves. Some have fallen and lie smashed, melting and dripping onto the floor. Opposite, the source of the horrendous sound: a giant rumbling motor of the roughest utilitarian variety, from which a long metal exhaust pipe protrudes and snakes around the room, through the wall, and to the outside. Arriving at the museum, one most likely missed the dark cloud of smoke pumping from the gallery, but it is not to be avoided on the way out. A tall glass vessel of reddish fluid provides a blood transfusion for this guzzling machine. The fleshy color of the melting bricks takes on a certain violence: a scene of industrial assault on the senses. Careful not to slip, I make my way through the room as quickly as possible; while at the same time, steeling myself to endure it long enough to take in all of its horrific connotations. This is the industrial revolution that Marx wrote about—the factory labor conditions that chain the human body to the logic of capital and render its limbs appendages of machines. But here it runs on palm oil.

Only when a puff of white smoke emerges from a small metal canister and gradually fills the room—softening it visually and appearing to dampen the intolerable sound—does the sense of being immersed in a world come together. It feels inescapable, smothering, like being imprisoned in a dream. As I climb the broad flight of stairs at the back of the gallery, a hopeful escape route, motion catches my eye on the right side of a landing. One after another, giant trees tumble to the ground amidst rainforests, jungles, and old growth forests. The camera focuses on the base of the tree where the cut is made—pornographic episodes of ritual castration culled from found footage. Straining to hear the crash of the trees over the rapid tapping,

pounding of the engine, the irregular sound of destruction is appealing by contrast. An escape from an industrial hell to the environmental hell that powers the former, this retreat into history offers relief but no consolation.

Moving into the next room, one enters a dark, cave-like gallery, illuminated only by a large glass cylinder slowly bubbling with red and gold liquids. The oversized lava lamp casts agreeable shadows on the walls and ceiling, giving the room a gentle glow. On one soot-covered wall, a pattern gradually comes into focus—the outlines of palm trees, orchids, birds, and other plants—teasing the eye with treasures to be hunted in the jungle. In the play of shadows cast on the wall by the illuminated oil appears a collage of botanical drawings derived from Alfred Russel Wallace’s natural historical investigations of the Malay Archipelago. In the ashes of their burned remains, we glimpse the rain forests that once covered the region. Continuing on into another darkened room, we finally enter the heart of the exhibition, leaving behind the sights and sounds of a vanishing historical landscape.

An Invitation to Disappear is a filmic expedition into the heart of a lush dystopian landscape symptomatic of the current global derangement of ecological thinking. Entranced by a vague sense of promise, the camera slowly traverses a turbulent haze, which gives way to reveal row upon row of oil palms, heavily laden with fruit, and spreading out in every direction. As the waning light of dusk penetrates the forest’s thick canopy, the grid cast on the ground by the sun’s last flickering rays is replaced by flashes of light deep in the distance. Blending with the sounds of the forest, a low rhythmic techno beat is felt before it is heard, inducing a sense of direction within the nauseating infinity of the grid. Drawn steadily towards a dark mirage by the rising sound, the camera moves slowly through the darkness until it happens upon a scene of jubilation. An enormous sound system is illuminated between flashes of strobe light. In the conspicuous absence of people, a party rages with mesmerizing intensity. Riveted by the scene, the camera moves slowly straight through the row of palms in a seemingly interminable shot, broken only by the smothering effects of gusts from seemingly autonomous smoke machines. As the night wears on, delirium sets in; the base pounds relentlessly upon the deaf ears of the monoculture plantation, endlessly deferring an implied climax of collective consciousness. The dim light of dawn finally cuts through the palms fronds, blinding the camera momentarily in a swirling mist, through which the expedition resumes in an infinite loop.

The visual quality of the film is inspired, in part, by the clouds we traversed on the historical and geographical path between Tambora and the Alps, between 1818 and 2018. Set in an oil palm plantation at an unmarked location, a nowhere that could be virtually anywhere, in Indonesia or Malaysia—where almost 90 percent of the world’s palm oil is now produced—the film stages a disturbing confrontation with the conflicting promises of two global monocultures. Juxtaposing industrial agriculture with rave culture, *An Invitation to Disappear* explores the subjection of some of the world’s most diverse rainforest ecology to the ravages of deforestation, burning, mono-cropping, and soil depletion in the short-term interests of consumer pleasure and economic profit. Global demand for palm oil fuels forest fires that burn annually during the late-summer dry season, blanketing a vast area of the Asia Pacific region in a toxic haze and destroying an important carbon sink. A highly saturated vegetable fat that remains semi-solid at room temperature, palm oil melts in your mouth, giving snack foods their rich and silky texture. Typically appearing on ingredients lists simply as “vegetable fat,” palm oil is an anonymous omnipresence in almost half of all packed foods sold worldwide, as well as cosmetics, moisturizers, and cleaning products. Furthermore, due to its high crop yields, palm oil is increasingly popular as a biofuel, promoted as a sustainable source of renewable energy. To separate this abstract festival from a concrete location would be the real violence. Instead, in search of a vision of collective joy and agency within this world we have made—from which there is no escape—we sought to immerse ourselves in the ecology of our entanglements in this Anthropocene landscape.

18:30 The grid of the Baumarkt’s vast warehouse and the eternity of waiting for gear to be selected, purchased, and packed up seems to presage what’s to come once we arrive at the palm plantation tomorrow. We’re here for a sec-

ond day, shopping for everything we need to stage a rave in an industrial agricultural site. The banality of the store is enough to warrant having a rave right here, where we could pull everything we need right off the shelves. Suddenly it strikes me as absurd how much of a *Materialschlacht* this party for no one is turning out to be—how labor intensive it is to disappear.

One theory is that Tambora might have been a term of abuse, like “get lost”! I’m beginning to feel that the invitation to disappear is an unwelcome demand. Of course, the Germans have a word for it—this carnage of gear! Philosophy doesn’t require much gear.

19:00

I delight at the thought of running my computer off a generator.

“The gardens being planted in even rows, running parallel, and at right angles with each other, their symmetrical appearance is very beautiful, and rendered more striking by the contrast they exhibit to the wild scenes of nature which surround them. In highly cultivated countries such as England, where landed property is all lined out and bounded and intersected with walls and hedges, we endeavour to give our gardens and pleasure-grounds the charm of variety and novelty by imitating the wildness of nature, in studied irregularities. Winding walks, hanging woods, craggy rocks, falls of water, are all looked upon as improvements... This difference of taste is not merely the effect of caprice, nor entirely of refinement, but results from the change of circumstances... A pepper-garden cultivated in England would not in point of external appearance be considered as an object of extraordinary beauty, and would be particularly found fault with for its uniformity; yet in Sumatra I never entered one, after travelling many miles, as is usually the case, through the woods, that I did not find myself affected with a strong sensation of pleasure. Perhaps the simple view of human industry, so scantily presented in that island, might contribute to this pleasure, by awakening those social feelings that nature has inspired us with, and which make our breasts glow on the perception of whatever indicates the prosperity and happiness of our fellow-creatures.”

—William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra: Containing an Account of the Government, Laws, Customs and Manners of the Native Inhabitants, with a Description of the Natural Productions, and a Relation of the Ancient Political State of That Island*, 1783

22:00

After days of selecting equipment, wrangling wires, and negotiating prices, we’re finally here, at a little hotel next to the plantation, camped out in its driveway and testing out color filters for the spotlights. Low and behold, they work like a charm—attracting all manner of insects and prompting assiduous applications of repellent. Perhaps there would be more of them in a real jungle—but there are plenty to keep us busy swatting and spraying. The lizards are here to party. We don’t need to offer them refreshments because, first off, its pouring and, second, the lights have brought abundant moths and bugs for them to eat. They’ll be stuffed before the night is over. All of this bodes ominously for what will happen on the plantation, when we manage to light it up with all the spots, strobes, neons, disco balls, and fire crackers that we’ve collected. Julian confides that he’s worried it’s too wild. I assume he means the party, but he means the plantation.

09:00

The crew is busy setting up a truss for the cable cam, so that we can fly the Gimbal slowly through a straight row of palms. But we face a little problem. This plantation is older and rather more irregular than the dystopian monoculture that we envisioned. The palms are planted in diagonal rows, so that four palms form a diamond, which is the most efficient use of space. In fact, the whole plantation suffers from missing trees, and opportunistic plants sprouting between rows. The ground also slopes at a slight angle, with a mess of miscellaneous debris littering the forest floor. Here and there, huge ant hills rise up, amid dry palm fronds. I shudder to think who or what is buried beneath them.

We spend all morning scouting the perfect row, eventually deciding to stage the film's climax at a spot where the trees are a bit higher, older, and more tidily pruned, and where the fallen fronds have been neatly arranged in little mountain ranges. Here is the industrial Eden we've been looking for. In spite of Benny's concern that it will be hard to light with the leaf canopy so high, we decide that the orderliness of these trees, festooned with epiphytes and moss, make for a perfect contrast between natural and artificial. All of this bodes well, until we learn that this part of the plantation is the only area that is owned by another company. It makes sense—obviously, this area is being maintained by a different team. Finally, another row is selected, according to the parameters of color, depth of field, vegetation, etc. The only problem is that the forest floor is at an angle. The plan is to correct this in post-production. A dialectic emerges between correcting the images in post-production, selecting the best landscape view, and pruning the palm fronds, so that the camera can traverse unimpeded. All this takes place against the background of a landscape already subjected, entirely, to utilitarian purposes, in a region where palm oil cultivation is expanding at a healthy rate of about ten percent per year.

We came to make a film about monocultures, but as we approach this highly cultivated, perhaps tragically un-chaotic, un-wild forest, with our massive profusion of gear, Werner Herzog's voice echoes through the film crew's collective unconscious like the name of the Father. *The jungle reeks of chaos and death... it gets under your skin, drives you insane...* How many Germans does it take to tame the jungle? To make it safe for a rave; an opera; a chaos of our own making? We will find out tomorrow. Provided it doesn't rain.

11:30

In range! The first image on my Instagram feed is a de Gournay wallpaper of palm trees. It's a delightful irony, one curated, most likely, by Instagram's algorithm. I wish Julian would do a palm plantation wallpaper.

"Marsden, in his description of Sumatra, comments that the wild beauties of nature there surround the beholder everywhere, so that there is little left in them to attract him; whereas, when in the midst of a forest he came upon a pepper garden, with the stakes that supported the climbing plants forming paths between them along parallel lines, it charmed him greatly. He concludes from this that we like wild and apparently ruleless beauty only as a change, when we have been satiated with the sight of regular beauty. And yet he need only have made the experiment of spending one day with his pepper garden to realize that, once regularity has [prompted] the understanding to put itself into attunement with order which it requires everywhere, the object ceases to entertain him and instead inflicts on his imagination an irksome constraint..."

—Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, 1790

In a memorable passage from the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant bolsters his contention that wild nature offers greater aesthetic pleasure than cultivated gardens. He does this by making reference to the naturalist William Marsden's *History of Sumatra*. Exemplifying a theory of beauty propounded earlier, by Frances Hutcheson, who characterized this quality as the balance of "uniformity amidst variety," Marsden praised the appearance of black pepper gardens that he encountered while surveying colonial territories. The sight of one was, he opined, a welcome relief from the unruly wilderness which he regularly encountered. For his part, Kant countered that Marsden need only have lingered one day in the garden to have discovered that its regularity would soon bore him.

That Kant should have made recourse to the cash crop of eighteenth century Sumatra, in defending the beauty of wild nature, is striking, when we consider that we have returned to this region to encounter the landscape through an aesthetic logic in part developed here two centuries ago. Our presence here for over two weeks, in another garden, "*planted in even rows, running parallel,*" is also an opportunity to perform the experiment that Marsden did not—to consider whether the regularity of the plantation could sustain the aesthetic imagination over a long period. In fact, the political and ecological stakes of taking pleasure in such a landscape appear far more complex to us than they did to our eighteenth-century predecessors, whose tropes of nature nonetheless inform our encounters with environments today.

While Kant and Hutcheson's considerations were limited to the formal aesthetic quality of cultivated landscapes, Marsden was, in fact, more attentive to the pleasure afforded by a recognition of the traces of human industry and, we might suspect, profit in nature. Today we might ask, for whose profit, and at whose expense—human and nonhuman—parallel rows are planted? The way we answer this question helps us orient ourselves politically in the landscape. Whereas Kant would have considered such questions irrelevant to pure aesthetic judgments, our interest is in finding new ways to relate aesthetically *and* politically to the condition of nature as we find it.

22:00

Tonight, after dinner, Julian and I had a chance to talk and work out a summary of the film. The plan is to revise it every day, working out particular details. This will serve as a reference for the project's evolution. It's fascinating to do an *ekphrasis* in advance rather than in retrospect—to consider how to plan, and to observe the extent to which the desired effects are achieved in the film. The first six minutes of the film speed up the sunset period, moving from warm yellow light to the blue period, when only the sounds of the plantation are heard. Chirping insects, the odd bird and rustle of leaves. Every minute is accounted for, how fast the camera moves over particular distances, in order to stretch the appearance of time.

Filming means thinking at different rates and distances, about light, sound, depth, and movement. Each person has their expertise and is concentrating on their own task, their own gear. Only Julian and Johannes can keep track of the big picture as details change, adaptations are made to the idiosyncrasies of the technology and the terrain. My German vocabulary is expanding rapidly and I'm trying my best to follow. I realize that this is the only way I could ever know whether aspects of the film—of any artwork—reflect intentional creative decisions or accidents of production.

"Flexibility and opportunism is the name of the game for both species, who shape each other throughout the still-ongoing process of co-evolution."
—Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, 2003

09:30

This morning I'm chatting with Felix about the sound of the palm plantation. I ask whether its sonic landscape suggests less biodiversity than a normal jungle. He says yes; that it sounds like mostly one kind of cricket. The sounds of the generator, planes flying overhead, and the nearby highway make it almost impossible to record here, so he's always looking for ways to capture a quiet moment. Now he's got a zip-line set up and asks me to stand behind a tree and speak softly so he can test the sensitivity of a microphone as it zooms by. As I slip behind the trunk I think of a Russian philosopher I'd once seen lecturing to penguins, in Antarctica, and thought about what I'd say to the palms...

"What do you think of the fact that so many other species have been displaced to make room for you? Are you willing to share this forest with other creatures who, of course, will arrive in time? Birds and bugs are already colonizing the bark of your trunks. Can you imagine a future when this place is overgrown; when you have to share it, again, with the trees that were chopped or burned down to make room for you?"

I looked up and saw big pods of shiny red seeds. And I thought of Donna Haraway's argument that humans didn't domesticate dogs, but that it was early wolves who domesticated us, by hanging around eating our garbage and convincing us to help take care of the pups. So, I asked the palms:

"Have you tricked us into perpetuating your kind? Are you looking down at us, triumphantly, thinking that the joke is on us? Have you seduced us with your sweet and oily fruit and domesticated us as your companions? Are you proud of yourself for getting us to do your reproductive labor?—getting us addicted to a thing that you produce so easily; convincing us to replant a huge part of the world's surface with your kind? Have you enrolled us as mercenaries in your competition, your war, with other species?"

It's laughable, really, to think about you looking down from the canopy at us running around, tidying up the forest floor, pruning your coifs. And now we artists and philosophers, here to contemplate the world in your image. Are we merely workers and consumers of your goods? But you too may fall prey to your own rapacious desire to take over the world if you stretch our capacity to enjoy you too thin. It is possible for us to revolt, you know. Organize. Withdraw our desire."

20:45

After picking up dinner we attempt to take a shortcut through the plantation and end up quite lost, bouncing over bumpy dirt roads in the truck, listening to a new version of the crescendo that has just come in from Ed. The music superimposes itself on my memory of bouncing over the slope of Tambora in the ancient jeep that lost a wheel halfway up the mountain, all the anticipation of the climb and distilled into a rave, I'm doubly present.

01:00

I accompany Julian, Johannes, and Benny to the site that we set up this morning. It is meant to be the center of the party where the rave reaches its climax, before the film blurs to white and loops at daybreak. The first photo shoot will happen before dawn. I follow Julian, silently, as he paces through the rows of palms, searching. Being the only one without a headlamp on, he doesn't notice me. I thought he was looking for the perfect angle, but as I get close to him I realize that he had just wandered far enough away from the crew to take a piss in relative darkness.

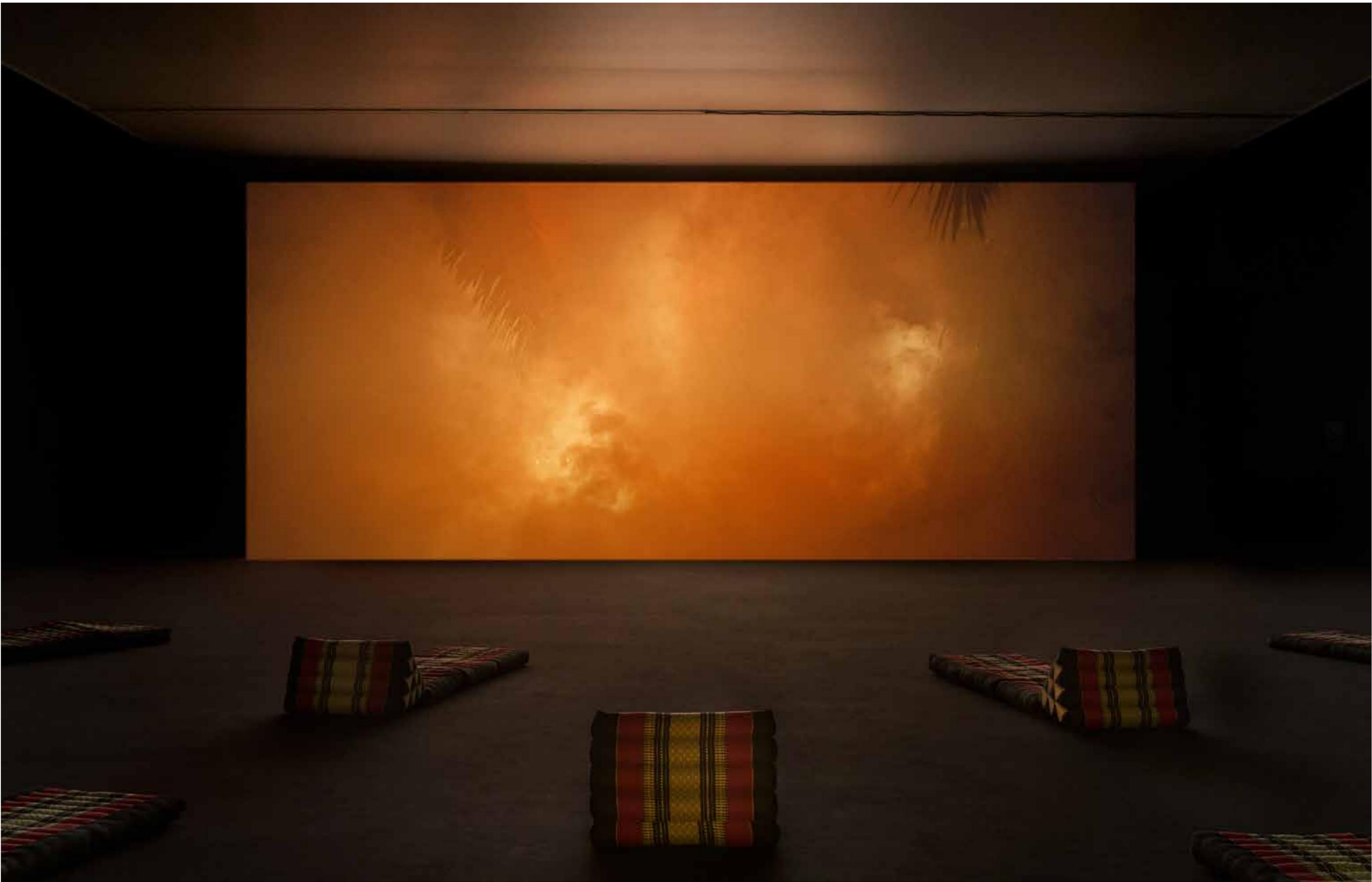
It strikes me as a good opportunity as well: as I learned this afternoon, the diagonal rows of palms make this place a Panopticon. While it is easy to lose track of your location—it feels like a labyrinth—it is also quite possible to see and be seen from every direction for quite a long distance, making it

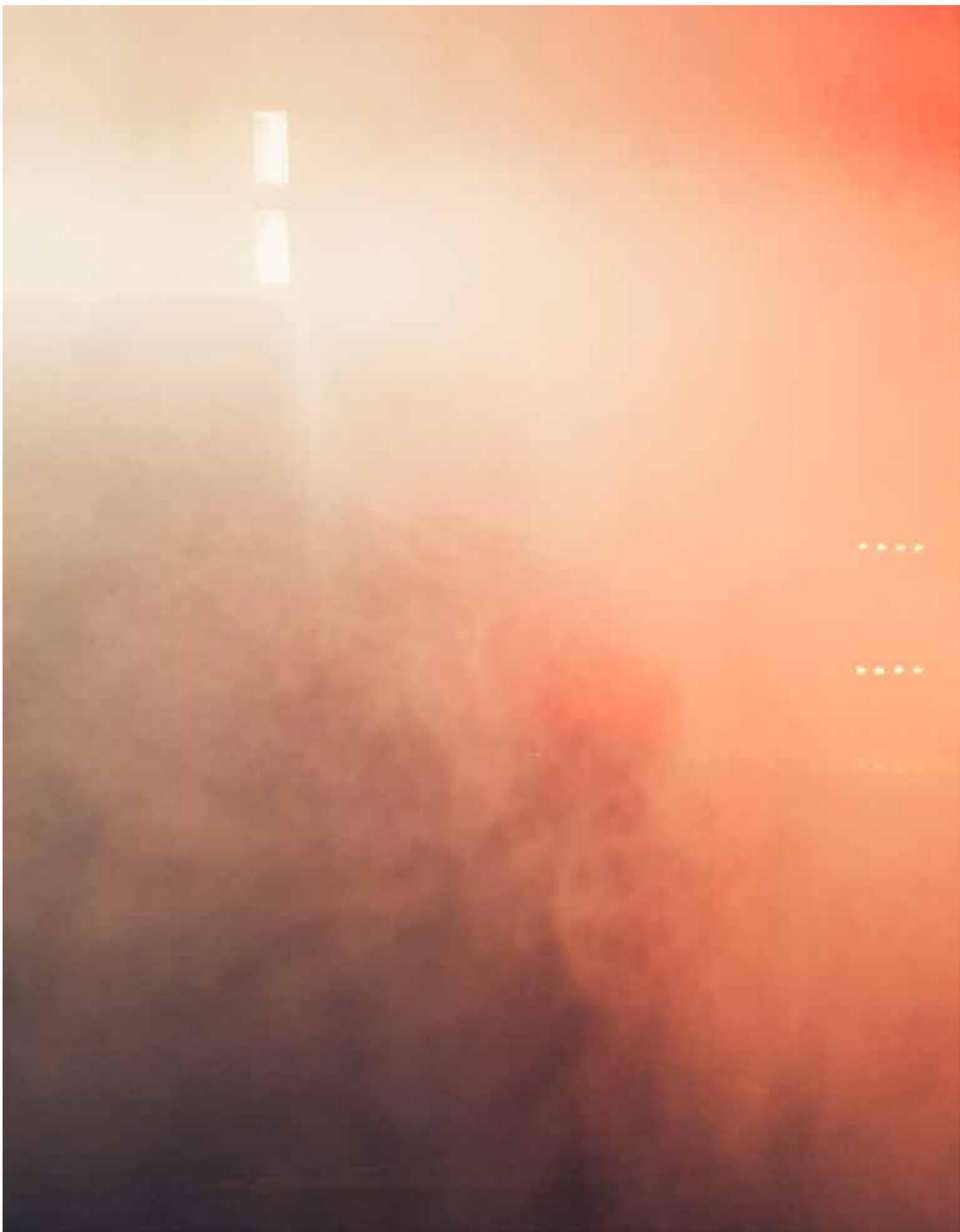




An Invitation to Disappear, 2018 / single-channel video installation, 4k color film, Ambisonics 3D-soundscape, soundtrack by Inland







difficult to stay out of the gaze of people and cameras alike.

I make my way back to the site and take up position on a ladder, to watch as they set up the pyro. A hiss at my feet startles me almost off of my perch, and before I can figure out what horrible animal might be approaching, fog fills the air. I appear to be sitting on top of the smoke machine.

“Wake up! You’re a ghost in the darkness!” Julian yells, what could be a metaphor for our absent presence in this whole world.

I’ve fallen asleep in the car during the photo shoot, watching the trees get wrapped in pink cotton candy in the colorful spotlights, smoke, and artificial fog. As my eyes begin to focus, an utterly magical scene unfurls. I’m transported back to the countryside in Quebec—a childhood memory of seeing green lights sweeping across the night sky and begging my father to take me to the fair. He tried to explain that they were natural; the Northern Lights, I later understood. If anyone notices the reddish glow we’re creating here night after night, they might wonder if there’s a fire, perhaps even a lava flow.

We return to the tent, exhausted, and I pull a chair a few meters out into the darkness so I can write under the stars—the faint outline of palms above. The one thing that’s truly incredible here is the lack of light pollution. I haven’t been anywhere this dark in ages. It might be too noisy for Felix, the sound man, but there are no lights along the highway and the endless palm plantations provide acres of darkness

A classic historical study by W.H. Mathews (1922) identifies five essential features of labyrinths. First of all, a labyrinth proper must be a work of artifice—though the term is applied metaphorically to a vast array of intricate, confusing, and amazing phenomena—from caves to bureaucracies to philosophical conundrums. Second, “there shall be an element of purposefulness in the design” and, third, a high degree of complexity. Fourth, “the path must be continuous.” In other words, although there may be detours and dead-ends along the way, it must be possible to traverse the entire labyrinth without becoming ensnared in dark rooms or having to leap over hedges. Finally, “there must be communication between the interior and the exterior” such that the labyrinth has the quality of a world unto itself, the exit or entrance into which is loaded with significance. In all of these respects, the palm plantation would seem to count as a labyrinth; and yet the grid, which discloses all information transparently, would seem to be the very opposite. In this respect, the palm plantation offers a compelling metaphor for the labyrinth of our contemporary environmental crisis. In the Tambora moment, information about the cause of climate disturbances was restricted by the slow pace of global communication and the absence of global meteorological forecasting infrastructure. Today it is increasingly common to find ourselves in possession of ample data and predictions, but still paralyzed by the difficulty of locating ourselves within global problems and deciding where to turn and how to act within them. Labyrinth stories typically concern dangerous journeys. But modern interpretations imply that the journey is never over—that danger is never over; that a safe position can’t be achieved; that a position apart from the labyrinth, or above it, from which danger might be construed as sublime, is unavailable.

Whereas labyrinths may wind forever, a maze has a center from which there is a definite return. The film’s loop repeatedly leads us back into the plantation. Although the camera seems to move, slowly, in a straight line throughout—an illusion established by painstaking pre- and post-production—one has the constant sense that the center of the action might be off somewhere else, in the distance; a turn might have been missed. One also has the impression that someone, or something, might be lurking in the darkness. A center is promised—implied, visually, audibly, and geographically—yet its apparent location constantly shifts. When we are finally deep within the imagined party planet, a stage and speakers come into view, the only built objects in the entire film—artifacts which stand in stark contrast to the artificiality of the plantation’s arrangement. Being at the center of the maze is pure delirium. Here we are,

transported, into a state of collective consciousness promised by music and drugs: to Berlin; to Berghain. We forget where we are. We might turn in any direction, following the radiating lines of the plantation. Unlike Theseus, we never want to leave. The maze is a refuge, and our entrapment in it is a delight.

15:25 It is innovation hour on set and Julian is touting the benefits of Swiss engineering, German design, international quality control standards. A wooden platform has been rigged up on a tripod. Apparently, the Gimbal is supposed to sit on top of it. But Julian looks a little underwhelmed with this prosthesis mediating between two very expensive pieces of equipment and he tells our handler from the production company that if it doesn't work out he'll use it as a sculpture—put some bird seed on top and it will be a perch for a very large bird. He asks if I'm writing about his innovations in engineering. As the mosquitoes swarm out for their evening meal (us), some humor and cohesion sets in among the crew. Sweat breeds love, it seems.

17:48 This is the hour when it gets hard to be here. The bugs become increasingly loud and aggressive, and the air feels incredibly heavy. As it cools down it feels like it is condensing around me, onto me, closing me in. My visual field becomes dense with small flying insects, some of which bite, some of which just fly too close and inspire a slap at the air. Everything itches and tingles. *And this is a palm oil plantation.*

As we settle in for the night the smell of diesel becomes oppressive. Or is it the toxic mosquito repellent that we've doused ourselves in? Yesterday our handler from the production company that is overseeing our permits was on set, and I asked whether she'd ever filmed in a palm plantation before. "Many times," she said. She explained that it was a popular location for jungle scenes, even though it's not a jungle. Although beaches are even more popular, palm plantations look intriguing and ominous so people put them in action films. This is a very small production by her standards. She complained about the mosquitoes and said that, normally, for bigger productions, they spray the entire plantation prior to filming.

Still, I'm starting to like the plantation, that's the truth of the matter. Electronic music mixing with forest sounds make for a near constant soundtrack of live jungle techno. The trees are beautiful, even the seed pods. I have to remind myself how much of a scourge these trees are, insofar as they displace old growth tropical forests where people and animals used to make their homes, forests that foster more biodiversity and sequester more carbon.

18:05 Arriving on set, the cable is hanging too low and Johannes has to saw off the stick that's stabilizing the Gimbal before the sun sets. It's the first time that I've seen a hint of panic in him, anger. Desperation. We're already a day behind schedule, and we need to get this dusk shot for the loop. He returns with the apparatus and we set up again. I'm ready with the radios and cell phones, to say when to run the lights and the smoke bombs. I'm impressed by how much trust Julian places in his crew, especially Johannes, who's choreographing a lot of men and machines. We start moving in the last light, just in time, but something else is wrong... Darkness falls and a darker mood follows.

Back at the tent, it turns out to have been a problem with the app that communicates with the camera. The rain comes in earnest. I'm getting tired of the damp, and I know the night is only half over. We're all camped

out under a tent, on muddy ground. It has been swamp-like all day, but not enough to interrupt our work. Mr. Bomb offers Julian a little bag. Now I understand how Julian and Johannes are able to stay up all night.

Troubleshooting accomplished, we return for one of the night shots gross beyond words, all our clothes wet, smelling horrific. A light has just caught on fire and the forest reeks of burning plastic. While we're shooting, we're pretty sure we hear gunshots in the distance. I don't mean to complain, but I want to remember the waves of affect that make up such experiences, lest they seem only to build towards the peaks, the stuff of jealousy-inspiring, epic tales.

05:40 The roosters crow, a glimmer of pink comes through the trees, telling me which direction is East. There are no lights: the generator has run out of fuel. Someone knows we need it on immediately. Julian is nowhere to be found, maybe on a coffee run, on his scooter, which I won't ride with him at this hour, distrusting his driving and my ability to hold on. We can't miss this shot. He calls.

"Are we shooting already?"

"No."

"Ok—good."

They're still fixing the Gimbal. He arrives with coffee, light button-down shirt glowing white in the darkness—both prince and servant of the scene, reviewing his minions, who are giving their absolute all to realize his dream. The generator starts. Daylight rises, and I feel our luck is turning. It must be. It has to. This is when the world cooperates—and no sooner. Only when you go to the wall for your vision, your love, your delusion... Smoke machines start, strobes work, and this, I realize, is why I do this—to be there for the moments when we go so far that the world spins for us, takes our axis.

It's time. Julian is running around with a smoke bomb.

"Raus, Julian!" yells Johannes.

It's funny that Julian's got the least technical job now. I've got nothing to do, but am following in case something comes up.

"Dehlia, noooooo!!!" Julian yells.

I've walked into the shot.

16:30 All afternoon spent camouflaging palm trees. We've had to wrap them with strips of red felt beneath the black straps that hold tall metal trusses in place. Julian has paid an extra deposit against damaging the trees, and the felt is protection—but it can't show in the film. The trusses hold up the cable that the camera hangs from, and it is meant to move with absolute stability, in a straight line. The cable cam experts, David and a second Benny, are making a valiant effort to make it work in these difficult conditions—a change of scene from the sporting events they're used to filming. Julian doesn't want me up five meters high on the bamboo ladder. He's working on the horizontal part of the U-shaped truss, balancing with several huge, heavy palm fronds. He sends me down the row to look and say exactly how to position them. The sight of him up a tree with a saw procuring a fresh frond is hilarious.

My job is more tedious, and less dangerous.

"Take the fur from other trees and use it to cover the red," Julian says.

The fur, what a charming way of describing the moss and epiphytes that cover the palms, evidence that they're quite capable of hosting at least some biodiversity. They do tend to grow in bands, so camouflaging the horizontal wraps isn't entirely in conflict with their natural look. But it involves pains-

takingly wrapping the trees in long green and brown leaves and worn bits of palm bark to hide the red, and then sticking more loose foliage over the green line to hide its regularity. In the end, I'm quite pleased with the result on the bottom, but not excited about the uppers, which would require getting high up on a ladder. Mr. Bomb comes to help, bringing a can of green spray paint, which would have been appreciated earlier. By this time, I've discovered the best way to camouflage a palm tree, which is by pulling whole epiphytes off another tree and sticking them over the red—replanting them, basically. After Mr. Bomb sprays the upper levels of red felt I hand him a few plants and the work is done. Meanwhile, the rest of the crew has done an admirable job covering a giant generator with a black tarp and an outfit of dried palm fronds, so it looks like a little hut. They flash devil ears at me from the top.

21:00 If there's anything I would invite to disappear, it's that fucking generator.

21:45 One of the trusses I spent all day disguising will be left up and disco balls will be hung from it for a photo shoot in the morning, but there's a new one being set up for more filming. Camouflage duty is both difficult and dangerous at night and the crew is becoming less cooperative. Julian is back up on the ladder maniacally sawing a palm frond and I'm expressing safety concerns. He hands down the saw and yanks on a vine that's in the way of the camera, and starts ranting in a heavy German accent—"The jungle is full of obscenity... Nature here is vile and base. I don't see anything erotic here! I see fornication! And asphyxiation! And choking and fighting for survival and... growing and... just rotting away. There's a lot of misery... The trees here are in misery, and even the *birds* are in misery..."

He comes down safely. In search of loose epiphytes to cover the new truss, we scout a beautiful tree with dead fronds hanging down around the trunk like a long tutu. Julian calls it the ballerina. Perfect for a tree portrait. We plan to photograph it tomorrow at dusk, the blue hour, the worst hour for bugs.

I am sweaty and dirty beyond words, but it's ok. As long as you're busy you don't notice. I don't notice the spider webs I'm walking through in the dark, don't think too much about what falls on my hair or down into my rubber boots when I pull a big leaf or a whole plant, roots and all, off a tree above me.

At the stage, the center of the party, lights shine from above and below, illuminating the trees beautifully, allowing their detail to stand out for just a moment. All day and night I've been thinking about the appeal of a clearing in the forest. An illuminated spot, where some regularity, some hint of cultivation is present, always seems cozy, homely, safe, and comfortable. And even in the dark, on a palm plantation, illuminated by a profusion of gear, the fleeting appearance of a clearing under a roving spotlight has the desired effect. One wants to go and be in the light spot, make oneself at home there, as though it was made just for human comfort. Wandering through the woods alone at night, the only woman around, I enjoy this spectacle thoroughly.

23:19 *Menschen, das ist alles Kunst bier!*

In a context where our days and nights are devoted to the arrangement of lights in the plantation, a particularly enigmatic statement from Martin Heidegger's (1927) *Being and Time* comes to mind: "In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing [eine *Lichtung* ist]." Heidegger plays here with the double meaning of the German word for clearing, *Lichtung*, which also means lighting. A clearing is at once a place, in the sense of a clearing in the woods, and an occurrence brought about by means of lighting, as when the sun cuts through the trees and illuminates a particular location, conferring upon it a sense of place. In this illuminated place, new things come to light; other beings—flying bugs; dust particles dancing in a sunbeam—and other modes of being. In the spirit of Enlightenment, itself the legacy of lessons learned from Plato's allegory of the cave, encounters with light allow latent truths and new ideas to emerge. As a philosophical trope, a clearing in the woods is always a stage for the penetration of illusions, an invitation for being(s) previously unseen in the darkness to disclose themselves.

Another translation for "Tambora" is "to appear and disappear," as, we may infer, a mountain does under the cover of clouds—or by exploding its peak into the sky. *An Invitation to Disappear* considers this possibility as an imperative and complicates our relationship to the idea of the clearing in the woods. We do not come upon a clearing by happenstance. There are a few places here where a road or a dead palm disrupts the rigid pattern of diagonal rows, allowing sunlight to penetrate irregularly between the trees. But our aim is to capture on film the sense of an opening *within* the grid, and that is accomplished through quite a labor-intensive process. Whatever Heidegger meant by *Lichtung*, it was surely not high-tech lighting design, with trees illuminated from below by roving spots, lasers, and strobe lights—the open place created by smoke bombs and fog machines filling visual space. If our lighting operation accomplishes its purpose, what it will allow to come to light is a new idea or encounter with the industrial monoculture planted upon a clear-cut forest—a clearing in the woods that illuminates a clearing of the woods.

02:07 The weather is strange; clouds follow us everywhere. The shoot has been extended by one day. Everything is behind schedule. Jo and Jules persist—tired but determined, with seemingly infinite energy. Johannes is a wonderful DJ, playing ambient electronic, old show tunes, Tropicalia... music with just enough of melody to keep us gently awake; a low bass that makes the sleepiness of the evening seem cinematic, romantic, auspicious...

This tension is at the center of the work: Ominous and auspicious, requiring attention and hope. It's something that keeps me out here in the middle of the night, oblivious to the mosquitos. Jo's music is lulling me, not into complacency, but into real belief that things are alright—that being out here in the woods, in the middle of the night, with a bunch of strange men makes sense. The fact that we're here taking pictures of smoke bombs, throwing a party for nobody—and everybody—or, rather, documenting the party that everyone's already having, is its own kind of drug. The question is, how bad is it? Shall we go to the party, or is it taboo? In Berlin, the party seems darker, harder, less hopeful.

That moment, the beginning and end of the film, when the screen fills with light, and the music stops and the sound of the crickets fill the air... I can picture the bugs flying past in the warm yellow air, dust particles dancing in a humid beam of light. The purity of it all—that's what has been there on all of our best nights; the best parties. Julian always brings beauty to darkness—to places that *are* dark. This must be why the world loves him, and why he trusts himself—there's a purity to his vision, always stopping with a bird in mind. It would be easy to see it as naiveté, as aestheticizing the disaster zones he visits. But I'm convinced. Red, pink, and orange hued light, and smoke, fills the forest. I listen to the techno score and let my eyes lose themselves in an inferno of strobe and billowing mist.

15:00 An unfamiliar environment plays tricks on the mind. We've hardly left the plantation and it's starting to feel familiar, cozy, homey. Jungle, wilderness, garden, arcadia, colonial dystopia, industrial Eden, post-apocalyptic survivalist movie—we're cycling through "nature" filters and they're all blurring together. And the question of our presence here and absence from the film is becoming even more complex.

It was a crucial decision for this to be a rave with no people. Initially, we discussed whether they should be there, dancing, or whether it should look like people had just been there, the forest floor trampled and strewn with trash. In the end Julian took these traces of human presence out. Partly, it was an aesthetic decision, and it works to make our absence even more conspicuous—at least until you finally arrive (in the film) at the center of the action and see the speakers. Still, there's no DJ, nobody running this show, it's as if it runs itself. It could be an automated sonic fertilization system, pumping a constant cycle of low techno beats through the roots, with occasional burst of light stimulating the plants; the fog machine, a crop duster, emitting pesticides or fertilizers...

On the other hand, one can readily imagine a future visitor arriving at an oil palm plantation, overgrown, and devoid of caretakers—their detritus long since absorbed or hidden beneath the underbrush, some trees having fallen, opportunists having taken root between the neat diagonal rows, and taking this environment for wilderness once more. The pattern of the trees might well look natural, or, we might imagine that their regularity is the result of some symbiotic relationship with a critter that walks, flies, or slithers along, leaving seeds in its regular track.

But it's so much trouble to keep our bodies out of the camera's frame. Despite our filmic invisibility, our obtrusive, fleshy, presence in the jungle is making a mess. Just by being there, eating, shitting, we're making a mark. The process of staging our absence from the scene makes our actual presence so much more real. Usually we're sucking the palm oil out of here with a long straw, but now the wrappers and chip bags are piling up around us.

17:40 We're becoming some kind of Anthropocene jungle tribe. For the last time, we're setting up the lights and the big sound system for the climax of the rave, and by now everyone seems have an intuitive grasp on what needs to be done, their role in the crew. I see Felix's lighter has fallen out of his pocket onto the ground. We're always losing lighters, and it's a problem. The smokers, I realize, are keepers of fire, an important role in the tribe. Felix is smoking a leaf of some kind filled with tobacco. He offers me the spliff, it has a wonderful earthy taste. We're becoming botanical, eating and smoking the plants that grow between the palms, and meals cooked in palm oil. As we get to know the place, the forest has what we need to handle the experience. *Are we getting back to nature the right way?* Felix loses the lighter again and I pick it up and keep it, knowing we'll soon need it to light the smoke bombs.

17:55 Now, with music, there's pure joy. It's the difference of night and day. This must be why our ancestors invented music, to dance in the woods... Ed's score, which we've been listening to all week in the car, on headphones, in snippets, is finally pounding and resonating through the trees. I'm dancing all out with these huge dried palm fronds, that I've got to drag over to cover all the wires and make a little stage for sound system. The beat puts the tiredness in my body into rhythm and I'm feeling that endurance trance of a long night out. For a moment, the rave is all in one piece and I'm transported.

Berlin and the plantation merge. Just for a split moment I feel connected, like I've walked the whole length of the labyrinth and never want to leave. A guy from the crew hands me a leaf. Mr. Bomb says it contains a natural Amphetamine. Horrible bitter taste... Let's see if it works, if I can swallow it without puking.

Julian is here to film and I'm here to write, but at the same time I have the sense that being there, itself, constitutes a type of theatre. All along I had the expectation that, at some point, we would actually have this party—that there would be some period in the filming when the crew (of how ever many we were) would transcend our production agendas and inhabit the spectacle we were creating. I was sure that, at least briefly, we would indulge the implied crassness, the apocalyptic realism, of having a rave here in the conceptual and geographical heart of the monoculture—not just pretend to have one, for the camera. It was a measure of the environment's revolt that we never found time. I think I was the only one who, for those, maybe, five precious minutes, gave myself over to the music. It was a moment when no one was filming, an accidental break. It was a beautiful moment. Then, almost immediately, it started to pour down rain.

When the first few drops started falling, on my hot, dirty arms, I reached up towards the sky in delight. Moments later, I felt a weight of moral judgment descend upon me, for daring to pursue that moment; for having the luxury to indulge this reverie. Nobody can stand another night of rain. The shoot is ruined. Instead of the warm gold hued glow of the sun, setting at an angle closing with the ground, the clouds cast a flat grey pall over us. The speakers, only half covered in tarps, left to weather the moisture for their last night of duty. When the music crescendos and stops, it's bleak.

As I lowered my arms, reluctantly, unsuccessfully trying to strike the giddiness from my mind, I realized that I was the only one who had attended the party—and that it was almost my fortieth birthday. As oily smoke rose up through the sheets of rain, towards the sky, and as sparkling rivulets of water ran down my hands, I knew that I had been queen of this phantasmagoria for a minute or two.

So much effort and contortions of desire, put towards producing this scenography. It's a matter of principle to enjoy this party even when Julian is so stressed that he can't really be here himself, in this magic that he's created. An elaborate spectacle had been put on for the eye of the camera, but no one except me was able to pull my eyes away from its viewfinder. It was an experience that was explicitly designed to have no one in the frame. In a way, this gesture was both ventured in order not to point a finger, and to blame *everyone*. In my decadence, I assumed the guilt.

18:30 Rained out. Everyone back at the tent chewing leaves.

"By imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit."

—William Cronon, *The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*, 1996

After two weeks in the plantation, we've run through all the tropes of nature available within our collective imaginary. They're beginning to run together into a tragi-comic mashup. Here we can anticipate a future rehearsal of William Cronon's argument that the idea of wilderness is based on a grave mistake. When Europeans arrived in the Americas, they failed to rec-

ognize a human touch on woodlands and prairies that were actually carefully tended by the continents' indigenous inhabitants. As deforestation has exposed once heavily forested landscapes, especially in South America, the enormous scope of former civilizations has become evident in the marks left upon and beneath the earth's surface, including buildings, complex irrigation systems, and agricultural land use patterns. Failing to recognize wildfires as acts of controlled burning, the stampede of hunted buffalo as a mode of tilling the soil, settler-colonists developed an idea of wilderness that doubled conveniently as a sense of entitlement to the land. The yearning to return to this idyllic state of nature deeply underwrites environmental protectionism, and yet, Cronon argues, the disavowal of our human agency within nature issues in all sorts of deleterious effects. Above all, the aestheticization of wilderness offers an ideological balm through which to absolve ourselves of responsibility for the environments we actually inhabit in the close company of others.

There is perhaps no more perfect parable of the travesty of wilderness than the blockbuster Hollywood film *The Beach* (2000), which tells the story of a beach so pristine and beautiful that the global elite surmount deadly challenges to reach its secret location in Thailand. When they arrive, they attempt to form a self-sufficient community with peculiar rituals and division of labor. The film's morality tale concerns failings of human nature, but its greater failing is arguably the aesthetics of nature that it enthusiastically espouses. Nearly two decades later, the stunning coves near Phi Phi Island, where the film was shot, have been closed to visitors in order to allow the environment to recover from the destruction wrought by the film industry itself and the fan-based tourism that followed. By cutting a narrative and visual path to Tambora we too are aware that we are fueling a fledgling tourism industry that will bring economic opportunities along with prospects of exploitation, displacement, and environmental destruction. Travelers cross great distances to visit sunny beaches, virgin rainforests, historic sites. We watch action films made in ominous plantations. Would it be more ecological, or at least honest, to vacation at the source of our sunscreen? If a rave in a palm oil plantation troubles us more than the jungle parties advertised across the tourist regions of Southeast Asia, it is perhaps because *An Invitation to Disappear* amplifies these deeply conflicting intuitions regarding our place nature.

In Tambora's aftermath, the weather itself was an agent of globalization, spreading the volcanic cloud more quickly than the speed of communication across imperial trade and transportation routes. Today the rate of media transmission outpaces the global circulation of the atmosphere, spreading cultural trends, music, memes along the same routes used to communicate severe weather and tsunami warmings. A global scientific infrastructure makes it possible to project the catastrophic impacts of anthropogenic climate change, but political and cultural consensus will be required to respond to that knowledge. In December 2015, the landmark Paris Agreement was reached, with one hundred and ninety-five nations promising measures to keep the rise in global mean temperature below two degrees Celsius. Despite the fanfare of good intentions, close analysis raised a serious question: *was the Paris Agreement premised upon a fictitious technology?*

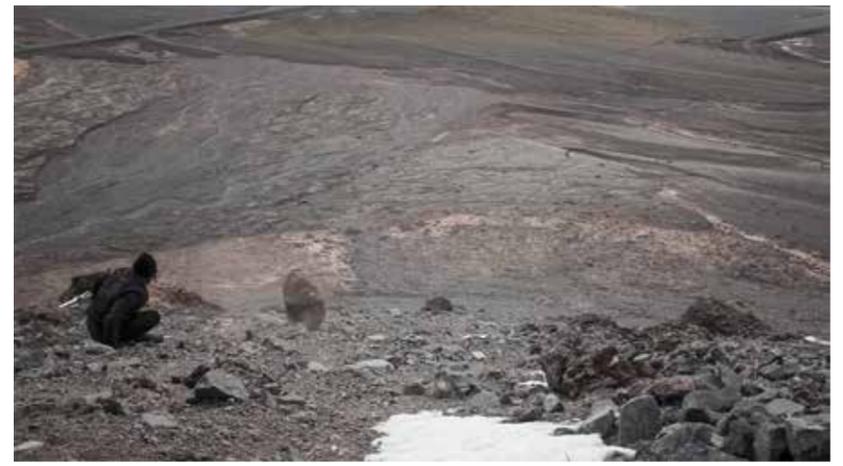
All of scenarios modeled by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change assume "negative emissions"—in other words, not merely cutting emissions, but also sucking carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. This can be done by technological means or naturally, by allowing forests to sequester carbon, but in either case it must happen on a vast scale if there is any hope of staying within the global carbon budget. Currently, carbon dioxide can be captured directly from burning fuel—this is the idea behind "clean coal"—but no mechanism exists to remove it directly from the air. Disposal also remains a problem. The main mode of disposal is to pump carbon dioxide into depleted oil wells, which is considered economically viable because it causes the remaining oil to rise to the top for easy extraction. Insofar as technologies of negative emissions have been developed, demand has been driven not by sustainability concerns but by the imperative to extract more fossil fuel. Yet if Cronon is to be taken seriously, these bitter ironies are not to be dismissed but confronted. And palm oil is rife with contradictions.

The most promising option for carbon capture, assumed in almost all of the IPCC scenarios, is a technology termed "bioenergy with carbon capture and storage" (or BECCS).





Tambora, 2018 / belt-sander, abrasive-belt made from minerals from mount Tambora









We Are All Astronauts, 2014 / 9 found globes made of glass, plastic and paper; dust from globes' surface and international mineral sandpaper



Plants incorporate carbon into their tissues as they grow, thus serving as natural carbon sinks. BECCS would involve growing crops in huge quantities and then burning them to create energy, thus replacing fossil fuel with biodiesel. The carbon emitted through this process would be captured directly and disposed of in some way, yet to be determined. But even if BECCS can be perfected technologically, it is estimated that it would require an area twice the size of the Indian subcontinent to be planted with such a crop, monopolizing arable land presently used to grow foodstuffs. Today, palm oil is the fastest growing source of biofuel, as well as a popular food ingredient and cosmetics additive. Clearing jungle and burning peatlands is a clear environmental travesty, causing enormous carbon emissions and habitat loss for numerous species, including human communities. Yet, in defense of palm oil, it is argued that oil palms sequester far more carbon than rice paddies or soy plantations, and if grown sustainably (a big if), offer higher yields of renewable fuel. If there is a crop that is a candidate for covering half the world's arable land, it is at least plausibly oil palm.

We have not come here to get back to nature or to mourn its death. We have come to enact a politically explosive contradiction and endure the aesthetic dissonance it generates—a capacity aided, as Berthold Brecht recommended, by a veil of smoke through which to view the spectacle. By layering one form of monoculture into the physical and sonic space of another, the film stages our omnipresence within a global landscape of desire, profit, and possibility as a psychic absence from the real landscapes planted in answer to consumer demand. Our bodily absence from the visual frame is rendered conspicuous by an endless barrage of seductions. The siren call of a party in the distance echoes from different directions in the soundscape, while the complex techno score entices us with the prospect of discovering a secret, underground music scene of universal appeal. Clouds of fog and smoke gust through the frame in rhythmic succession as though they spewed forth from high fidelity speakers, which come into view for just long to assert that this is not a dream. The illusion is not of a party taking place here in the palm oil plantation—which is very real—the illusion is that the party isn't raging everywhere that profit and pleasure are extracted. *An Invitation to Disappear* harnesses the utopian aspirations of rave culture, which valorizes transcendence of individuality and experiences of collective consciousness, in the service of an image of ecstatic presence deep within this landscape. Whoever 'we' are—a collective, universal subject, flattened and homogenized as consumers of monocultures—palm oil, techno—we might as well be auditioning for the role of Anthropos, the species-agent of the Anthropocene.

19:00

To stay for the last few days of the now prolonged shoot I need to do a visa run, so I set off on a round-trip out of the country for the day, eager to enjoy a few hours of climate-controlled environment—at the airport, on a plane. Descent, through the clouds, towards a runway in the middle of another palm plantation—which appears to stretch, in every direction, until the horizon. Exit; turn around; check in. A delicious new snack, also made with palm oil, then a few hours of profane succor in the departures hall, steeling myself for the vagaries of the week ahead, before boarding another flight right back to where I came from.

Arriving back at the camp later that evening I am, shamefully, in a better mood, which is more than can be said for Julian. When I left this morning, it was drizzling. Now that I have returned, it is pouring torrents. Increasingly stressed by the deluge, which threatens the sensitive film gear, and the bitter irony that this location was chosen because it is, apparently, dry season, his promethean ambitions are being punished. We're all interested in climate change and the destabilization of the seasons. In fact, this what we're here to picture. In this moment, however, reality appears to be impeding the process of its representation. *Après moi le déluge...*

Try as I might, though, I can't join in cursing the rain. Being surprised by the weather delights me, I reflect, while considering my ongoing Grand Tour of the apocalypse: Arizona; Antarctica; Cape Town; here...

06:30

The photo shoot is complete and everyone is happy. Packing up, cleaning out the car. Half the crew has left already. We're in sync. I think we might eventually get to sleep. Benny and Felix make off towards the stage again, and my eyes roll back inside my head. No more! Moments later there's an immense crash. The big truss, with all the lights for the party planet on it, has tipped over onto the wall of speakers, instantly breaking their shoddy construction. I run over, my old paramedic training switches onto autopilot. Thankfully, nobody is hurt, but many of the lights are destroyed. Some don't look too expensive, but others, the ones that Benny goes for first, evidently are. Felix laughs, a little. It's too ridiculous not to. Everyone starts trying to remove lights from the underside of the truss, half of which is on the ground, half leaning precariously against a tree, but I'm more worried about the wiring.

"Shouldn't we kill the generator?" I ask.

"Yes," says Johannes, but nobody pays attention.

We're we all holding onto bits of bent metal over wires snaking into puddles, as the rain keeps pouring. Again, I say it, this time more forcefully, and finally it seems to hit home. Julian backs away and looks at me with a blank expression. I hold both my hands up in the air, open palmed, my yellow fluorescent gloves like a white flag in a war zone, or a stop sign—

"The generator. I would kill it. Now."

"Ja... but I don't know how to turn it off..." he says.

I rush off. Finally, a green light to do what I've been wanting to do all night, all week really. I would have done it sooner, but I trusted that if all these guys who work with gear like this aren't worried about being electrocuted then maybe they know something that I don't. But maybe they're just tired. Or idiots. Maybe they have a Robert Smithson death wish, to die making art. I survey the scene of carnage. *Why stop now?* I would have stopped a long time ago, too soon, probably.

An hour later, Benny still can't quit. He thinks it's his fault; he was up the ladder trying to cover them from the rain when the whole thing fell. Maybe he pushed the last domino, but they were all lined up. He's still trying to save his precious lights. Instead of rallying his troop, Julian's passed out, on a matt under a baby palm next to the generator. Whether the result of stress, or accumulated lack of sleep, it's a swoon so deep he doesn't register the mosquitoes feasting on him.

09:25

I feel like I've washed off a whole layer of the atmosphere.

I'm sitting in a beautiful gallery space overlooking an industrial area in Mainz, Germany. It's a perfect white cube, including the floor and the flat greyish white clouds that fill a wall of windows on the top floor of the museum. On the wall, a machine is whirring loudly, spinning a belt of sandpaper covered in black, grey, brownish red, and lurid sulfuric yellow sand in an endless loop, colors I recognize from Tambora. In contrast to our foggy ascent, on our climb down Tambora the sun was blinding. The ground sparkled and shimmered, leaping up at me as I walked, as though I was stepping in glitter. In the frenzy of trying to bottle a vision, I scooped up handfuls of this gleaming rubble in plastic water bottles, stuffing my pockets until my pants bulged and threatened to fall down. Each shade of dirt seemed more beautiful than the next. I drank and drank in order to make room for more stones, wondering all the while if the optical illusions were caused by dehydration. In the gallery's grey light, watching this former mountain spin by so fast, evading my grasp and my gaze once again, the mineral intensity that I saw that day was just out of reach. Ground down and flattened out, the flashing colors stimulate a yearning to return to the hallucinatory dust of Tambora's slope.

A small forest of miniature tropical plants is randomly arrayed across the gallery floor,

petite pineapples, coconuts and birds of paradise peeking from cream-colored plastic pots. They have been shrunken to fit inside a home or office, like tea cup poodles, still beautiful, but domesticated, in some cases, to the point of becoming ridiculous. A few of the plants appear to be normal in size, as though their destiny could naturally be fulfilled in a pot. Like the ash mural of the burned jungle that forms the horizontal plane of the exhibition in the galleries below, the scale of the forest has been homogenized to reflect our interests—smaller plants, bigger birds. The effect is intensely pleasant. A meditation cushion in a palm oil shade of orange completes the picture. It disturbing how calming sanitized biodiversity can be, the variety of the plants tempered by the uniformity of their pots, and the broad tracts of clean white floor space between them. Nothing of the vines and rotting leaves that snaked beneath our feet in the plantation, maybe even snakes themselves. Even the hum of the sand paper machine quickly becomes white noise. A worker arrives to paint over a few dirty spots on the white wall, sterilizing the jungle room even further. He tells me that usually you have to tell people not to touch the walls of the gallery. Now they'll get wet paint on their clothes. The only way we'll learn is if the walls bite back, like the environment itself, I muse.

This room feels like *The End* of an old movie. It's a welcome reprieve from the oil rig pounding away below, as though the best of the rainforest had been harvested and saved in a minimalist botanical garden. Up here, with the blank sky outside, we might be in an airplane or even a space station, surrounded by as much biodiversity as we ever really needed, in a clean environment where we can enjoy it. The loud motor, an inescapable feature of this exhibition, doesn't seem out of place, for surely something must be powering this specially reserved space for contemplation. This, the most serene representation of the Anthropocene, is also its bleakest. In an effort to reduce global mean temperature and thereby avoid some of the most dangerous and irreversible effects of climate change, engineers are now considering mimicking the cooling effects of volcanic eruptions by spraying sun-reflecting gases into the upper atmosphere. Tambora's dust, hurtling past my eyes at a speed just below the threshold of a blur, gestures towards future geoengineering experiments even as it evokes memories of the year without a summer.

Descending through the vertical axis of the exhibition, one discovers that sand paper has already exercised its effects on a set of globes, which hang suspended above a table like a model of the solar system—except that each one represents Earth. Under each sphere, the ground is dusted with a layer of fine blue, green, and brown particles. The globes have been rendered translucent. Mined; exploited; overrun by human hands and machines; their atmospheres have been scrubbed off, their rock strata exposed. In resurfacing the world, Julian consolidates within himself the ravenousness of Anthropos, of Capital, of Empire, the progress fantasies of the industrial, chemical, and green revolutions. With the enthusiasm of a child jumping into a puddle, blind ambition mixes here with innocent greed and blundering curiosity, which happens upon miracles as readily as it plunges its bearer and everyone else along with them into catastrophe. As is Julian's virtue, brutality mixes, here, with a gentle sense of beauty. There's no space for cynicism, for taking sides in the contradiction. The impulse to create something beautiful shares its wellspring with that of destruction.

Downstairs a level further, in a darkened theater, we watch from a strange angle, as stones tumble down a slope in a volcanic landscape, licked by the icy tongue of a glacier. A dark clothed figure, seen only from behind, emerges from the left side of the screen and scrambles down the slope a short way before and positioning himself behind a large stone. He pushes. The film captures a single gesture. He sits down to watch, as does the camera, as the stone tumbles down, and down, each bounce marking out the edge of what now comes into mental focus as a deep crater. This action, like the one upstairs, is a simple expression of a desire to make a change, to intervene, hear the sound of one's own voice; to mark territory. Here it is as explicit as it is harmless. It is not aestheticized; there is nothing to hide. A boyish prank and a grand gesture at once, it is the most minimal act of land art, remarkable only because it is staged for the camera. Then, like anyone who has kicked a pebble down the road, Julian turns to face the camera and gets up and leaves. The loop resumes.

Ascending the tower, the difficulty of the Anthropocene motif rises in tandem with the beauty of the installation, until finally, emerging from cave-like darkness through institu-

tional dimness, we enter into the combinatory brightness of abundant natural and fluorescent light, a brightness mirrored in the dark and shiny green leaves of tropical plants nourished by artificial light. Photosynthesis turned up to maximum. The cynicism of this paved paradise exists only to the extent that I have enjoyed it. Realizing this, I suddenly feel asphyxiated by the filtered air. I am not so much bored by the regularity of this potted jungle as I am horrified by the pleasure afforded by sanitized wilderness. I yearn for the pounding beat, the tangled logics, and the mists of ambiguity that drew us deeper and deeper into the labyrinth.



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An Invitation to Disappear – Sulawesi, 2018 (cover)
An Invitation to Disappear – Nagan Raya, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Bengkayang, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Perak, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Tenggara, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Sorong, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Surat Thani, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Pakang, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Kubu Raya, 2018

video stills from *An Invitation to Disappear*, 2018

An Invitation to Disappear – Kalimantan, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Sandakan, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Aceh Tamiang, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Tarwan, 2018

video stills from *An Invitation to Disappear*, 2018

An Invitation to Disappear – Tanab Grogot, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Kinabatangan, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Johor, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Kotawaringin, 2018
An Invitation to Disappear – Rawa Tripa, 2018





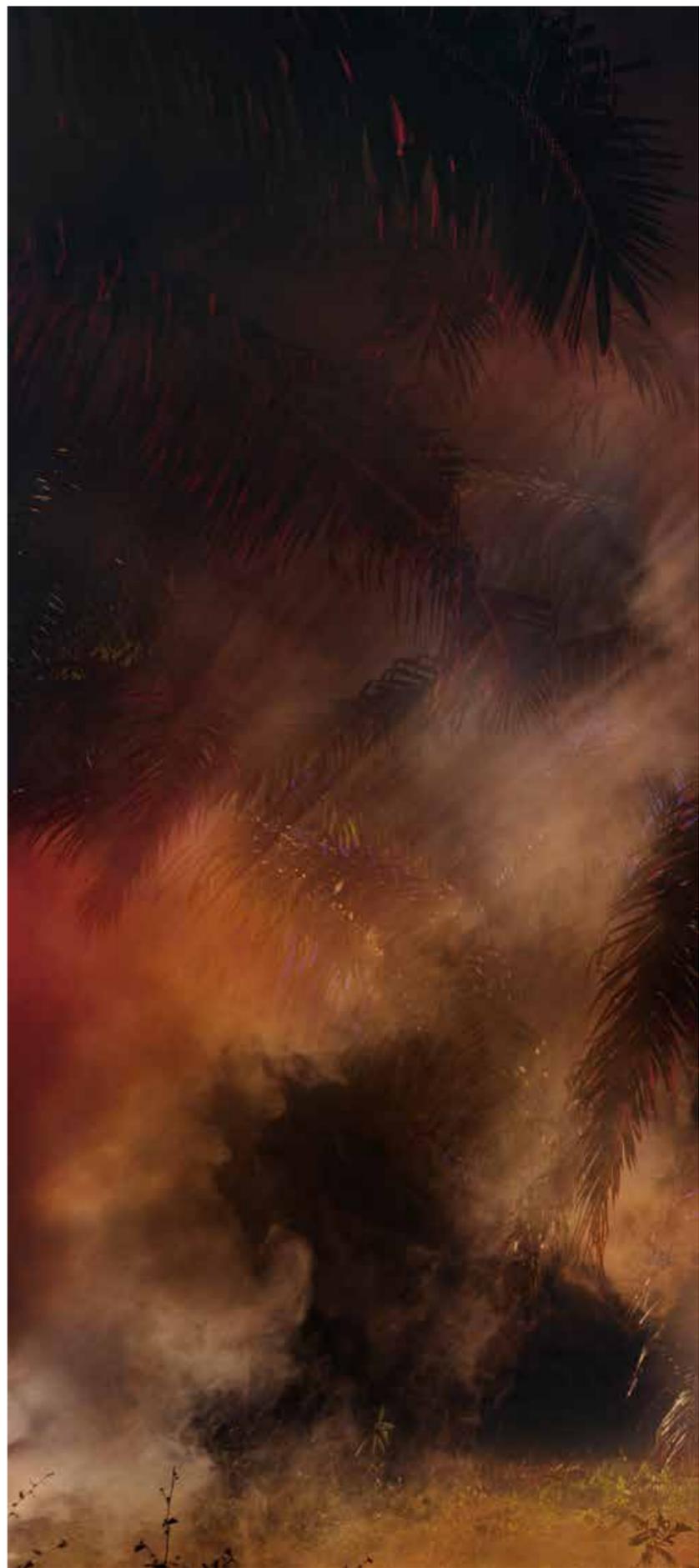








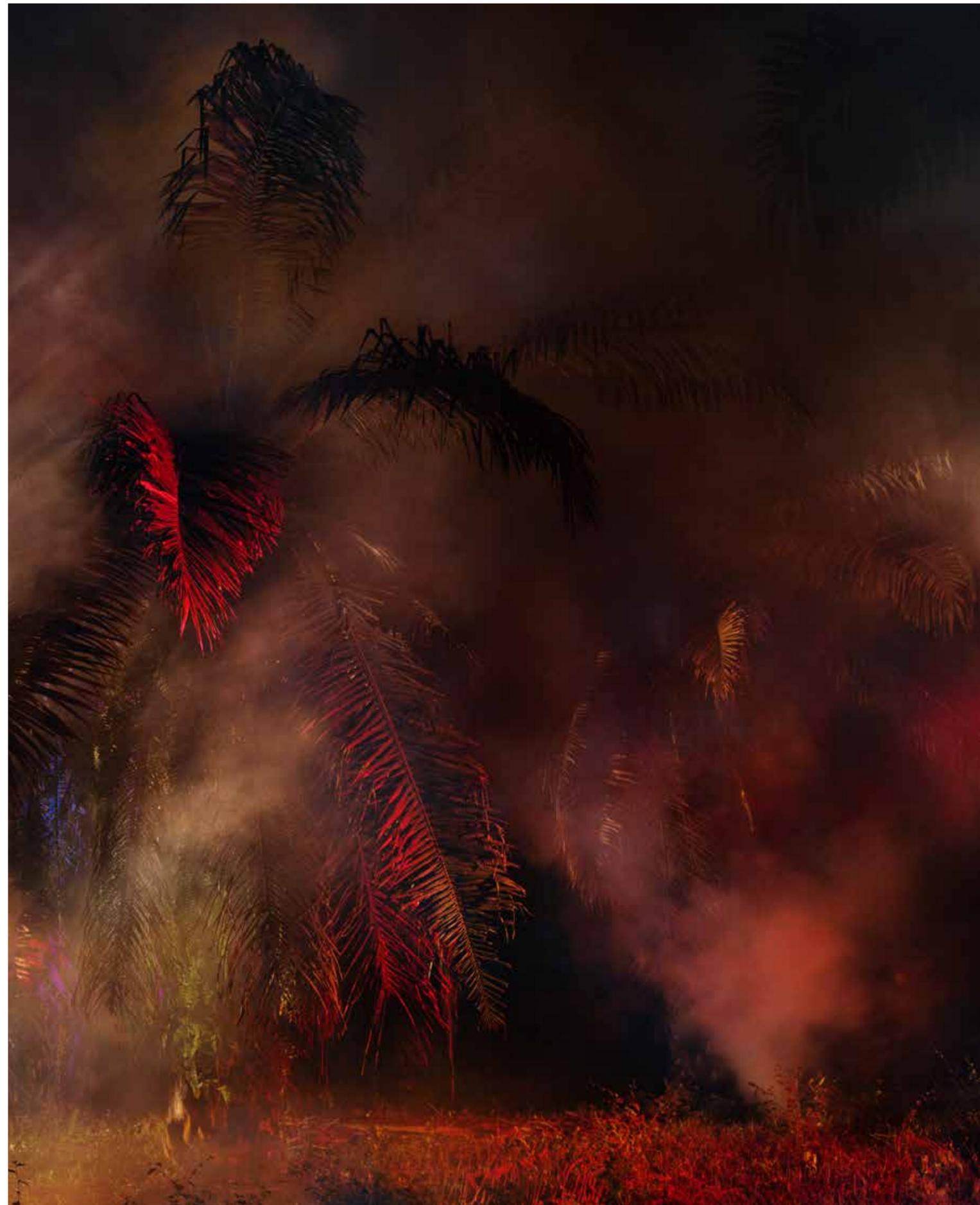
















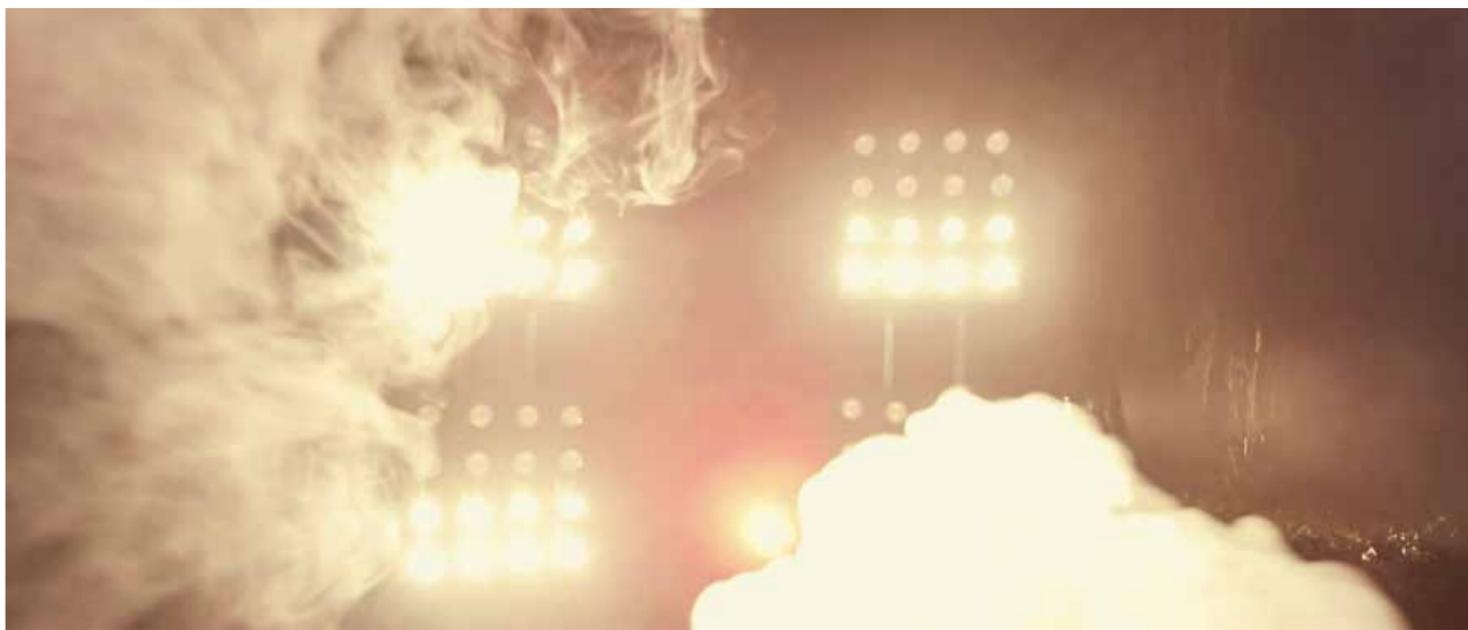
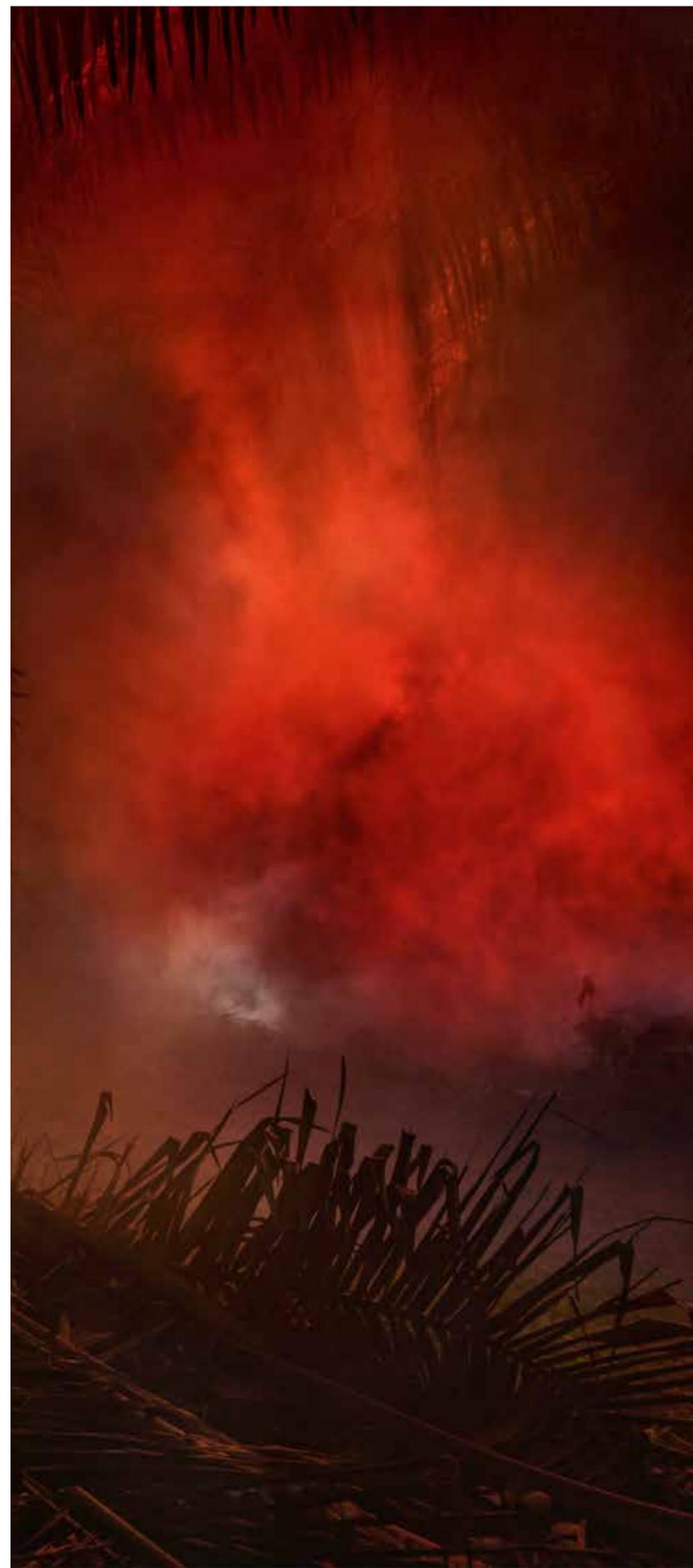
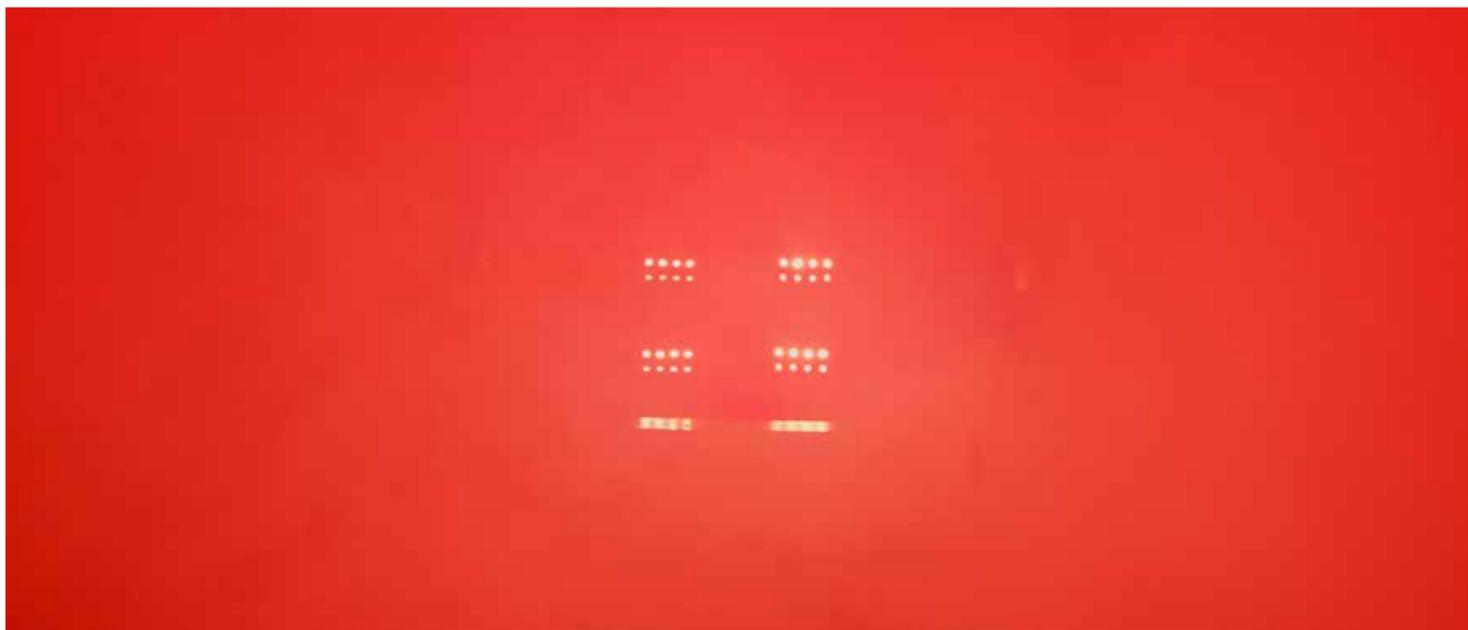










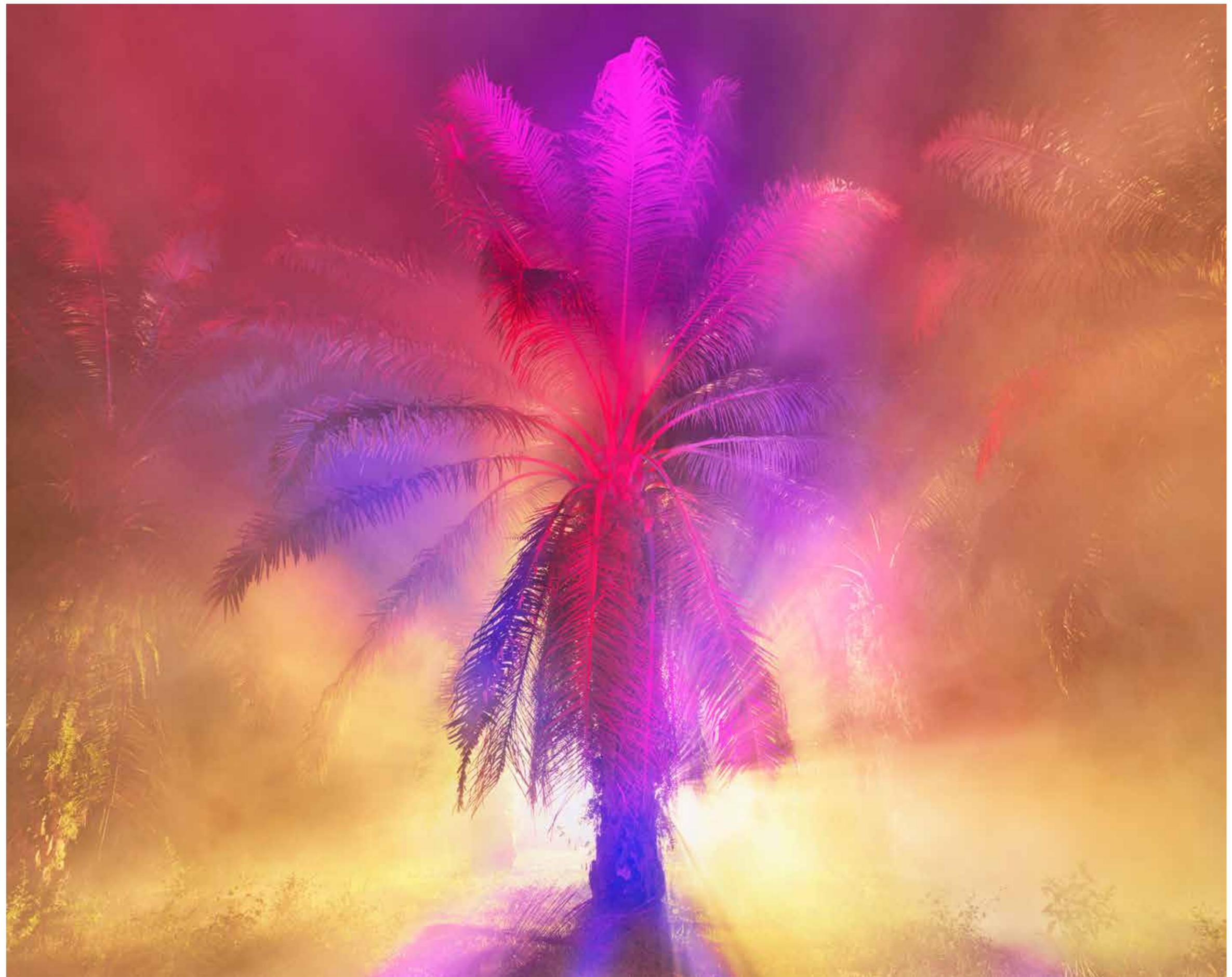












Crops presented at the dam of Mauvoisin (frontside billboards)



Crops presented at the dam of Mauvoisin (backside billboards)



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