

# TITLE MAGAZINE



## Right Here, Out There (Nowhere) at the Vox Populi

Posted: March 6, 2016

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Lovingly alien is the all-seeing gaze in *Right Here, Out There (Nowhere)* (2010), a video installation by Nadia Hironaka and Matthew Suib. This is the first work to grace Vox Populi's newly renovated performance space, and the video's content is greatly aided by this setting. Although it may be viewed in full on the artists' website, its current spacious presentation emphasizes its unearthly and meditative quality in *No Wave Goodbye*, a group exhibition of work by past members of Vox Populi. The experience is not unlike that of a sensory deprivation tank – the darkness leaves you swimming in the abyss, alone with the hauntingly lush soundtrack and the slow promenade of tiled, virtual landscapes.

The looping video opens with the total blackness of the projector, and a lone animated figure glides across the frame. With a lazy and regular pace, the camera pans through a landscape of images, videos, and animations of varying sizes. Each more-or-less conforms to the rectangle, and they are stacked atop one another like the stitching of a panorama through disparate photographs, magnetically clinging to a single horizon. The selection is like the opposite of results from a Google search. They are purposeful and thematic selections, referencing algorithmically generated results, yet tied together by a deliberate, subjective hand. The individual images mostly depict landscapes of a fantastical or sci-fi genre, although the few that are tethered closer to home receive a strange and unearthly context from adjacent ones. Amongst the selections are clips of black-and-white early cinema, the red-and-cyan renderings of anaglyph 3D, and landscapes reminiscent of the palettes of mid-century science fiction illustrations and backdrops.

The cool, penetrating, and unbiased gaze of the panoramic camera plays to the tender melody of a soundtrack by Espers, a Philadelphia band. The video opens with a woman's voice and the soft declaration, "you shine so pretty through your window/how I'd hold you," Hironaka & Suib's thesis perhaps, for the quiet odyssey to follow. For though the camera is unblinking and unfeeling in the face of the sublime and the fantastical, the voice proclaims the impossibility of such indifference. The language of the soundtrack is voyeuristic and its delivery soothing. The effect fluctuates from empathetic to jarring, especially in relation to the violence of several animated sequences – glowing projectiles land upon the surface of the landscape. They are perhaps asteroids or drone warfare; the objective eye does not know and does not judge, and the voice continues to croon.

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Slowly unfolding across this digital vista is the adventure of an ambiguous figure – a small fleshy humanoid wrapped in multicolored, cloud-like garb. The character travels alone, disappearing into the void at the beginning of the video, and reappears in two places. The next time we encounter the character, it zips around the frame, a fluctuating mass of limbs encased in a red, translucent cube. It is not until several moments of watching this motion that I realized it had found a companion. The two figures seem to engage in an embrace that is simultaneously sexual but not pornographic. We view their encounter through the objectivity of the robotic eye – it feels about as illicit as a wildlife documentary. It's like atoms colliding in the primordial soup. There is an incredible cosmic randomness to their encounter, and a kind of justice to the notion that our itinerant astronaut has beat the odds. The next time we see the figure, it is a tiny, translucent mass of bodies, as if the character is multiplying in number, only to be vaporized by a stray bolt of lightning, reduced to a lovely puff of blue smoke.

In the strange universe of this video, there are distant dirigibles blasting each other out of the sky with the playful, mock-violence of fiction, and savage geological ruptures, amoral by nature. The other recurring character of the video is a UFO. It glides and weaves through the images, either a device of surveillance or discovery. It is mobile, while we are stationary; it has an agenda, and our gaze does not. The last character in the video is a human figure, miniscule in relation to the frame, who stands upon a precipice, gazing into the void, like Friedrich's Monk by the Sea. Perhaps he too is speculating to the nature of the universe, dreaming of fictional worlds and scenarios that are unlikely but impossible to disprove.

Right Here, Out There (Nowhere) addresses the similarities between science fiction as a historical form and our experiences as denizens of digital space. The digital space of the Internet or the landscape of the video game is unbound by physical limitations, and the mind and body are severed through this experience. Somehow through this, we have rediscovered the romantic notion of exploration. As space travel is quickly becoming a reality, historical science fiction seems increasingly relevant with both prophetic and premonitory value. Hironaka & Suib's video comments on the strangeness and curiosity of being at all – of simultaneously being the watcher and the watched, the astronaut and the science fiction writer, the camera and the lonely figure at the end of the world who wonders.

As someone born in the mid-1990s, I struggle to remember a time before the gridded display of an image search. There is a devaluing of the images I see – they are presented in a fashion devoid of context and seem drowned by the deluge of sheer quantity. Right Here, Out There (Nowhere) speaks to this strange alienation we face in the digital era. We become the passive observers of information by proxy, physical beings seduced by the intangible algorithms powering our sight. Hironaka & Suib insist in the value of the strangely Cartesian duality of the digital self.