Intermédialités
Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques
Intermediality
History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies

Sculpting Nostalgia: Daniel Arsham, Alicja Kwade, and Kathleen Ryan

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Number 39, Spring 2022

retourner (la nostalgie)
returning (nostalgia)

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1093768ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1093768ar

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Publisher(s)

Revue intermédialités

ISSN

1705-8546 (print)
1920-3136 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Ahn, J. C. (2022). Sculpting Nostalgia: Daniel Arsham, Alicja Kwade, and Kathleen Ryan. *Intermédialités / Intermediality*, (39), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.7202/1093768ar

Article abstract

This article examines how the pace of technological progress has continued to accelerate the pace at which nostalgia is conjured and commodified. It undertakes a comparative study of sculptures by three contemporary artists, Daniel Arsham (USA, b. 1980), Alicja Kwade (Poland-Germany, b. 1979), and Kathleen Ryan (USA, b. 1984). While these three artists create and theorize in discretely different modes, their intermedial strategies are thematically linked in their shared leveraging of archaeological praxis and geological materiality vis-à-vis the temporal structure of nostalgia. Their sculptures are important case studies to unpack how nostalgia is culturally mobilized in this specific moment of technological acceleration and the resulting ecological perils of this progress.

Sculpting Nostalgia: Daniel Arsham, Alicja Kwade, and Kathleen Ryan[1]

J. Cabelle Ahn

> In its (post-) contemporary form, this replacement of the historical by the nostalgic [...] is of course at one with the disappearance of historicity from consumer society today, with its rapid media exhaustion of yesterday's events and of the day-before-yesterday's star players.[2]

> Typically the island inverted the geologist's maxim, 'the key to the past lies in the present.' Here, the key to the present lay in the future. This island was a fossil of time future [...][3]

'Nostalgia [...] saturates the press, serves as advertising bait, merits sociological study, expresses modern malaise," wrote David Lowenthal in his 2015 revisitation of his iconic text, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985).[4] Lowenthal's assertion highlights the instantaneous fetishization of the past that in turn cultivates temporal rarity over material rarity—nostalgia thus operating as a capitalist tool. In this longing of the bygone, technology has often

1. Acknowledgements: I'm deeply grateful to André Habib, Suzanne Paquet, Carl Therrien, and Gabrielle Pannetier Leboeuf for guiding this edition of *Intermédialités*. I thank studios of Daniel Arsham, Alicja Kwade, and Kathleen Ryan and galleries François Ghebaly, i8, Perrotin, Kamel Mennour, and Karma for their assistance with obtaining image permissions. This article profited from invaluable feedback from the peer reviewers, Jeffrey Fraiman, and Tim Schneider.

2. Fredric Jameson, "Progress Versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future? (Progrès contre Utopie, ou: Pouvons-nous imaginer l'avenir)," Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London, New York, Verso, 2005, p. 285. Originally published in *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1982, p. 147–158.

3. J. G. Ballard, *The Terminal Beach*, London, Gollancz, 1974, p. 183.

4. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country – Revisited*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 31.

served as the prime marker of time. However, the rate of technological progress has continued to accelerate the pace at which nostalgia is conjured and commodified. New hotels inside shells of 1930s Airstream trailers and 1950s jet planes, the resumed production of the once-briefly obsolete Polaroid camera, and thumb drives sold in the guise of cassette tapes—these temporally disordered sites and objects push against the drive for optimization and convenience in the modern era and are instead emblems of collective social nostalgia.[5]

This article explores a facet of this techno-nostalgia in contemporary art by undertaking a comparative study of the work of three ultra-contemporary artists, Daniel Arsham (b. 1980), Kathleen Ryan (b. 1984), and Alicja Kwade (b. 1979).[6] While these three sculptors create and theorize in discretely different modes, their practices are thematically linked in their shared leveraging of archaeological praxis and geological materiality vis-à-vis the temporal structure of nostalgia. Their sculptures are important case studies to consider how unpacking the geological components of technological progress can address both how nostalgia is culturally mobilized in this specific moment of technological acceleration and the resulting ecological perils of this progress. Through their works, we may not only examine the phenomenon of what Jameson called the "replacement of the historical by the nostalgic"[7] (as cited in the epigraph) but also aim to recenter nostalgia away from its previous roots within eighteenth-century medical history, or even within individual psychic history**,** and instead expand the timeline of reminiscence from the individual to the geological.

Nostalgia's Limitations and the Archaeological Turn

My focus on the "temporal frame" of nostalgia through a geological and archaeological lens derives from a desire to complicate the theoretical and temporal paradigm of the

5. For specific examples see the TWA Hotel and Bar in New York; Camp Silver in Texel, The Netherlands; CampV in Naturita, Colorado; and USB Mixtapes sold by Milktape (founded in 2012).

6. Ultra-contemporary is a term used by Artnet News and Artnet Price Database. The term is applied to artists born from 1975 and was adopted as a necessary way to establish economic visibility to a younger crop of artists in secondary markets (i.e., comparing Georgia O'Keeffe, Kahlo, and Andy Warhol to contemporary sales of Hank Willis Thomas and Avery Singer obscures insightful economic trends), Tim Schneider & Julia Halperin, "'Contemporary Artist' Means Everyone from Andy Warhol to Avery Singer. Here's a New Category for the Art of Our Time," *Artnet News*, 21 March 2019, https://news.artnet.com/market/ultra-contemporary-explainer-1493983 (accessed 12 October 2021).

7. Jameson, 2005, p. 285.

concept. Scholars, Lowenthal included, have nearly universally traced the etymological origins of nostalgia to Johannes Hofer, a seventeenth-century Swiss medical student. Outlined elsewhere in the issue in depth, Hofer is believed to have coined the term in 1668 as an amalgam of *nostos*, meaning a return to native land, and *algos*, meaning pain, and formulated it as a physical and psychological disease.[8] Nearly a century later, Fredrich Schiller helped transform nostalgia from a "malignant pathological trauma" to "pleasurable therapy" by "curing" a colleague through a prescription of exercise and poetry in a pastoral environment.[9] By Erasmus Darwin's time, nostalgia was understood as a "disease of volition."[10]

There are, however, key limitations to turning back to Hofer to address manifestations of nostalgia as it not only centers the concept in Eurocentrism and Western medicine but also within a military industrial complex since Hofer coined the term in relation to Swiss soldiers. Instead, a way to consider nostalgia as a universal phenomenon may be to focus on its temporal structure, which is that of ever-evolving and undulating glances at the past. That is: remembering, rewriting one's own recollections, and memorializing one's own altered reminiscences—like a game of *Telephone* within one's own mind—is a process widely shared by humans across cultures and geographies (consider the untranslatable Japanese word *Natsukashii* (懐かしい) and the Portuguese concept of *Saudade*) and, some researchers would argue, even by animals.[11] Concentrating on the temporal configuration of nostalgia and how similar paradigms emerge in other practices—namely, archaeology in my case—we may arrive not only at a more expansive working understanding of nostalgia but also simultaneously address the personal and ecological stakes behind the material culture of nostalgia.

Recently, there has been a particular "archaeological turn" in contemporary art, which Peio Aguirre identified as resulting from "profound scepticism about

8. The words are also traced back to *The Odyssey*: nostós and alghós, Homer, *The Odyssey* [1614], London, New York, W. Heinemann, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1919. The word for nostalgia is translated as *Die Schweizerkrankheit* in German or *Mal du pays* in French, Lowenthal, 2015, p. 43; Linda Marilyn Austin, *Nostalgia in Transition, 1780-1917*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2007, p. 4–6.

9. Lowenthal, 2015, p. 47.

10. Erasmus Darwin, *Zoomania; or the Laws of Organic Life*, vol. I, London, J. Johnson, 1801, p. 82.

11. Carl Safina, *Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel* [2015], London, Souvenir Press, 2020.

the nature of historical time itself."[12] In recent years, exhibitions such as *The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology* (MCA Chicago, 9 November 2013–9 March 2014) and artists such as Mark Dion, Julian Charrière, Ilana Halperin, and Katja Larsson (in addition to those examined in this essay) have embraced the "archaeological imaginary."[13] Archaeology in theory and in practice is not only a way to consider how value is formed (i.e., canons of modern art, histories of civilization) but is linked to extraction politics, as archaeology is, in essence, a type of extraction of the historical—which is often a kind of cultural imperialism—while mining is a type of extraction of the geological for capitalist gains. Lowenthal has additionally problematized the nationalist aims of archaeology and identified how the renewed salience of the practice is embroiled in issues of "identity and possession."[14] Owing to this, the recourse to archaeology has been a way to defamiliarize and decolonize narratives, best embodied by the exhibition *Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art* (6 March–18 May 2008) at the Barbican in London in which archaeology was adopted as the very curatorial logic itself. Inspired by Thierry de Duve's *Kant after Duchamp* (1996),[15] it was staged under the conceit of an exhibition curated by-and-for Martians from the future as a way to offer an alien perspective that would "turn the dominant Euro-American art tradition into the 'other.'"[16] While the installation displayed works from an expansive and illustrious roster of artists, including George Brecht, Christo, Tacita Dean, Cai Guo-Qiang, Sherrie Levine, and Andy Warhol, the exhibition didactics and

12. According to Aguirre, these manifestations of archaeologies of the future in recent art are not only results of new non-synchronic and globalized forms of communication of the modern period, but are essentially legacies of Jacques Derrida's conception of hauntology formulated in the latter's *Specters of Marx* (1993) in which the "present remains haunted by ghosts of the past, which continuously erupt," Peio Aguirre, "Semiotic Ghosts: Science Fiction and Historicism," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, vol. 28, Autumn/Winter 2011, p. 125–134.

13. Examples of exhibitions include: *Mark Dion: Misadventures of a 21st-Century Naturalist*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 4 October–31 December 2017; *Mark Dion: Theatre of the Natural World*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 14 February–13 May 2018; *Future Fossil Spaces*, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, 31 October 2014–11 January 2015; *Concentrations 63: Julian Charrière, Towards No Earthly Pole*, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, 2 May–8 August 2021; *Ilana Halperin: Physical Geology*, Manchester Museum, 15 March–1 June 2008; *Katja Larsson: Myth/Machine*, Aicon Contemporary, New York, 17 March–23 April 2022; *New Neo Classics*, Cecilia Hillström Gallery Stockholm, 19 May–18 June 2022.

14. David Lowenthal, "Archaeology's Perilous Pleasures," *Archaeology*, vol. 53, no. 2, March/April 2000, p. 62–66.

15. *Kant After Duchamp*, Cambridge, London, The MIT Press, October, 1996.

16. Francesco Manacorda, Lydia Yee & Tom McCarthy, *Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art (Martian Encyclopaedia of Terrestrial Life)*, London, Merrell, 2008, p. 9. Similarly, Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska's *Museum Futures: Distributed* (2008) imagined a conversation with the hypothetical director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in the year 2058 to critically interrogate the future of museums.

catalogue speculated what contemporary art movements might have meant to twenty-first century humans by the "Martian" curators and anthropologists, thus removing cultural nostalgia from this fictional archaeological undertaking. Similarly, I argue that unpacking the interface of archaeology, geology, and techno-nostalgia in future technological fossils by Arsham, Ryan, and Kwade extends this decentered approach to nostalgia itself, removing it from the Eurocentrism of the Hofer model. If "history got recycled as nostalgia almost as soon as it happened,"[17] the recourse to geology of their sculptures claims continuity lost in the accelerating meter of time.

Daniel Arsham's *Future Relics of Nostalgia*

One of the most prolific experimenters and innovators of techno-nostalgia by recourse to archaeological and geological time is Daniel Arsham, best known for his "Future Relics" (2013–2018), which are products of what he calls "Fictional Archaeology."[18] Initially a student of architecture, his mobilization of nostalgia in art history, technology, and consumer culture as "advertising bait," as Lowenthal suggested, has made him an art market favorite.[19] The paradox of the term "Future Relics" operates by commodifying nostalgia. They are one-to-one copies of objects ranging from obsolete media objects, icons of technological progress (such as a DeLorean, the Sony Walkman, or a Polaroid Camera), musical instruments, sporting goods, and most recently, original casts from the storied Atelier de moulage de la Réunion des musées

17. Bevis Hillier, *Austerity Binge: The Decorative Arts of the Forties and Fifties*, London, Studio Vista, 1975, p. 187–189.

18. The very phrase "Fictional Archaeology" has been co-opted as a title of one of Arsham's monographs published by Perrotin, Ryan Waddoups, "10 Questions With... Daniel Arsham," *Interior Design*, 4 September 2018, www.interiordesign.net/designwire/10-questions-with-daniel-arsham (accessed 12 October 2021); Daniel Arsham, Fictional Archaeology, Paris, Éditions Dilecta, 2015.

19. Lowenthal, 2015, p. 31. Arsham's production additionally demonstrates that he is among the most prominent artists vying to evolve the Warholian model to its full twenty-first century capacity. He co-founded Snarkitecture in 2007 (with Alex Mustonen), collaborated on stage designs for Merce Cunningham, works as the creative director of an NBA team (Cleveland Cavaliers, and is the first artist to be appointed to such a position in the league), and collaborated with brands ranging from Christian Dior, Virgil Abloh's Off-White, Supreme, Adidas, the Pokémon Company, Porsche, Disney, and Tiffany's & Co. Arsham has even reproduced Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (2020) and made his own copies and labels of Heinz Tomato Soup cans (2020).

nationaux (RMN).[20] These copies are often cast in volcanic ash, glacial rock dust, sand, crushed marble, or hydro-stone (a brand of plaster) and are artificially eroded, displaying lesions replete with fragments of semiprecious minerals such as obsidian and rose quartz. This is a type of a reverse-engineering of archaeology, transposing an alternate future into the present, where contemporary objects have been transformed into artifacts discovered by a future civilization. He compounds this logic in his exhibition titles such as *Paris 3020*, *Time Dilation* (Perrotin Paris, 11 January–13 March 2020) and *3018* (Perrotin New York, 8 September–21 October 2018) wherein he adopts the conceit that his copies of pop culture relics, classical statues, and aging media objects are being exhumed a millennium later.[21] This is Arsham's iteration of a common science fiction technique of exploring the present by projecting it into the future (i.e., Orwell's *1984*[22] as a commentary on 1948), and through this, he simultaneously creates a kind of a fictional future that holds nostalgia for our contemporary moment. The overall effect interweaves the commodification of nostalgia that drives the art market into our present by the way of recourse to the future.

Take for example his *Ash Eroded Polaroid*[23] (see Fig. 1), which is a prime example of how shared techno-nostalgia and the commodification of it inform his sculptural praxis. In fact, cameras were one of the first objects that Arsham produced as a fictional relic, cast with volcanic ash from Easter Island.[24] The camera as a device is already inherent to the contemporary conception of nostalgia as it is itself a guardian of memory. Susan Sontag wrote in 1977, half a century before the invention of Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram, that "it is a nostalgic time right

20. The Atelier is located in Saint-Denis, a suburb of Paris. This collaboration is discussed in-depth in J. Cabelle Ahn, "Paris 2440/3020: Excavating Daniel Arsham's *Fictional Archaeology*," *Thresholds 50 "Before/After"*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2022, p. 143–159. See also Bente Kiilerich, "Material Transformations of Antique Sculpture in Contemporary Art," *CLARA*, special issue no. 2, 2021, https://journals.uio.no/CLARA/article/view/9177 (accessed 5 May 2022).

21. This strategy of looking over a millennium is echoed by other artists such as David Claerbout, whose work *Olympia (The real time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic stadium over the course of a thousand years) (2016–3016)*, HD animation, two channel real-time projection, color, silent, 2016–, captures in real-time how the Berlin Olympic stadium would slowly decay without any human intervention.

22. George Orwell, *1984*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949.

23. Daniel Arsham, *Ash Eroded Polaroid*, volcanic ash, shattered glass, hydrostone, unique, 15.5 cm x 13.5 cm x 15.5 cm, 2013, unique. © Perrotin.

24. The camera model was a Canon 35 mm. Arsham's interest in archaeological time was sparked by a visit to a dig at Easter Island in 2010 where he witnessed archaeologists unearthing tools left behind by a previous team of excavators next to a Moai statue.

now, and photographs actively promote nostalgia."[25] For Sontag, photographs are "memento mori: to take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability."[26]

Fig. 1. Daniel Arsham, *Ash Eroded Polaroid*, volcanic ash, shattered glass, hydrostone, 15.5 cm x 13.5 cm x 15.5 cm, 2013, unique.
Reproduced with the kind permission of the Artist and Perrotin.

Amongst cameras, the Polaroid has a particularly nostalgia-driven object history. Once a coveted icon of technological progress, the Polaroid camera turned obsolete in 2008 when the manufacturer ceased production of analog instant films. Following its obsolescence, the immediate nostalgia for its filmic materiality followed—for example, when Instagram launched in 2010, one of the earliest image filters simulated a Polaroid's frames and degraded colors. This digital reconstruction of a bygone product contributed to a contemporary techno-nostalgia that Tim van der Heijden identified as a "double mnemonic process—i.e., the memory

25. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977, p. 15.
26. *Ibid*.

construction by the media technology and the reminiscence of the media technology itself."[27] Driven by this digital commodification and dissemination of material nostalgia, Polaroid was revived in 2020, no longer an object of futurity, nor of rarity, but an object whose value lies in the recognition of a shared fetishization of nostalgia.[28] In fact, Arsham's *Ash Eroded Polaroid* (see Fig. 1) has been recast from a Sun 660 model (first released in 1981) that he specifically sourced from eBay in order to stress the undercurrent of shared cultural nostalgia, asserting, "when I am looking for a Polaroid camera to cast, I'm going to be looking for *the* polaroid camera that we all remember. [the author emphasizes]"[29]

Beyond recirculating an emblem of shared cultural nostalgia, Arsham's *Polaroid* is among works that particularly transpose the cycle of nostalgic desire with the circular process of archaeological excavation. In this case, his casting process destroys the 1981 original and preserves Arsham's sculpture as the future copy. This process thus enshrines certain models and artifacts into cultural mythology—the cast Polaroid turning as canonical as the *Laocoön* or the *Apollo Belvedere*.[30] Through this, Arsham's meticulously reproduced cameras temporally complicate how these devices participate in nostalgia, as the age of the materials (such as volcanic ash and quartz) puts in context the transience of the evolutionary timespan from the analogue to the digital and the triviality of contemporary techno-nostalgia.

The archaeological underpinning of Arsham's cultural commentary was staged at a particularly monumental scale in *Welcome to the Future* (2015, see Fig. 2), a project that he described as the "first instance in which I created an archeological object within

27. Tim van der Heijden, "Technostalgia of the Present: From Technologies of Memory to a Memory of Technologies," *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies,* vol. 4, no. 2, 2015, p. 104.

28. Polaroid ended instant film production in 2008, but the Impossible Project took over Polaroid in 2017 and rebranded it as Polaroid Originals. Rob Beschizza, "Polaroid Ends Instant Film Production", *Wired*, 13 February 2008, https://www.wired.com/2008/02/polaroid-ends-i/ (accessed 2 November 2021).

29. Alexandra Cunningham Cameron, "Daniel Arsham," *The Miami Rail*, 1 December 2014, https://miamirail.org/winter-2014/daniel-arsham/ (accessed 2 November 2021).

30. *Laocoön and His Sons*, marble, 208 cm x 163 cm x 112 cm, Vatican Museums, Vatican City; *Apollo Belvedere*, white marble, 224 cm, Vatican Museums, Vatican City, AD 120–140. Arsham has also made his own versions of *Laocoön* and *Apollo Belvedere* from the RMN molds.

Fig. 2. Daniel Arsham, *Welcome to the Future*, volcanic ash, glacial rock dust, obsidian fragments, rose quartz fragments, steel fragments, pulverized glass, sand, crushed marble, hydrostone, metal, 670.6 cm x 670.6 cm x 457 cm, Perrotin, Locus Projects, Miami, 2015, unique. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Artist and Perrotin.

a fictional archeological site."[31] There, he cut a twenty-two-foot diameter hole in the floor of Locust Projects in Miami and filled it with 12,000 pounds of obsolete media objects, the evident detritus of technological upgrades, such as record players, boom boxes, radios, VHS and cassette tapes, corded telephones, and payphones.[32] Like the Polaroid Camera, these objects were cast indexically with molds taken from the original devices and were reformed in volcanic ash, sand, glacial rock dust, obsidian, crushed marble, rose quartz, and other geological materials. The formal presentation is further evocative of the "Atari Games Dump," when thousands of Atari game cartridges from the 1980s were excavated from a pit in New Mexico in 2014, a well-known example of "electronic fossils."[33] These cartridges not only impacted the geological composition of the soil, but also served as a palpable threat to the modernist fantasy of technological progress by offering the very recent past as a fossil, a memento mori of the inevitable expiration date of every technological innovation.

Beyond form, the materials in Arsham's "Future Relics," freshly excavated through his "Fictional Archaeology," intervene in the temporal structure of nostalgia to relocate it from the personal to the global and the universal. The artificial crystal erosions embedded in Arsham's calcified technological effigies, on the one hand, emphasize the semiprecious minerals that power smartphones and radios and how this progress is rooted in antediluvian materials. The geological and mineral materiality of his sculptures formally compete for attention with the sculptural form itself and thus subject the cult of acceleration wrought by the age of technological progress and globalized communications, as outlined by Paul Virilio, to the atemporality of

31. Daniel Arsham & Ludovic Laugier, "Conversation between Daniel Arsham and Ludovic Laugier (January 2020)," Daniel Arsham & Ludovic Laugier, *Paris, 3020*, Paris, Perrotin, 2020, p. 43. Scholars, and Arsham himself, often locate his fascination with ruins and fragments in his early witnessing of the destruction of his house by Hurricane Andrew from the inside in 1992, an experience he refers to as "architectural dismemberment," as cited in Steven Matijcio, *Daniel Arsham: Remember the Future*, Cincinnati, Contemporary Art Center, 2015, p. 2. See also Daniel Arsham & Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Parallel Realities: Daniel Arsham in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist," Daniel Arsham, Virgil Abloh, Steven Matijcio & Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Arsham*, New York, Rizzoli Electa, 2018, p. 120–127.

32. Alpesh Kantilal Patel, "Critics' Picks: Daniel Arsham: Locust Projects, 3852 North Miami Avenue November 15, 2014–January 30, 2015", *Artforum*, https://www.artforum.com/picks/daniel-arsham-49696 (accessed 2 November 2021); Arsham, Abloh, Matijcio & Obrist, 2018, p. 18.

33. Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, p. 115; Jennifer Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2013.

geological time—the lifespan and half-lives of fossils and minerals overtaking and decentering individual memory and longing.[34]

Kathleen Ryan and Techno-Nostalgia's Domestic Facet

Arsham's approach in addressing techno-nostalgia takes a more universal approach by assuming that a Polaroid, a Delorean, or a boombox will have a uniform mnemonic resonance from one person to another, thus presuming all cultures partake in the same pursuit of relentless technological consumption. By comparison, Kathleen Ryan explores the gendered aspect of technological progress vis-à-vis geological time to consider how nostalgia has been commodified for women in mid-century America.

Ryan, whose work is informed by her study of archaeology in college, creates oversized sculptures of decaying fruits such as watermelons (see Figs. 3 and 4) and lemons (see Fig. 5) that are entirely studded with semiprecious gemstones, glass, and plastic beads as well as with found objects such as fishing rods, gardening tools, and even parts of Airstream trailers. Unlike the Polaroid, Ryan's fruits prove more elusive in their allusions—which in turn expose our own selection biases within shared cultural nostalgia. Ryan directly draws on the tradition of the beaded fruit kits once mass-produced by companies such as Walco Bead Co. that were marketed to female homemakers in postwar America. These immensely popular sets were often comprised of Styrofoam-core balls, sequins, and plastic beads and generated popular interest in fruit replicas for tabletop decoration from the 1940s through 1970s. Ryan's fruits are essentially scaled up versions of these kits and remain faithful to the morphological origin of the fruit kits in both form and technique. This strategy echoes earlier interrogations of everyday objects by artists such as Claes Oldenburg and Charles Ray and echoes her earlier role as a project coordinator for Jeff Koons.[35] However, by slyly incorporating technological references and semi-precious materials that enable technological advancements, she alludes to the untold story of modern technological progress in America.[36]

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34. Paul Virilio, *The Great Accelerator*, Cambridge, Polity, 2012.

35. For recent exhibitions on Oldenburg and Ray see: *Charles Ray*, Bourse de Commerce, Paris (16 February–6 June 2022); *Charles Ray: Figure Ground*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (31 January–5 June 2022); *Claes Oldenburg: The Street and The Store/Mouse Museum and Ray Gun Wing*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (14 April 2014–5 August 2013); *Claes Oldenburg: The Sixties*, The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, (22 September 2013–12 January 2014).

36. Ali Subotnick & Kathleen Ryan, *Bad Fruit*, New York, Karma, 2020, p. 7.

Fig. 3. Kathleen Ryan, *Bad Fruit*, François Ghebaly, Los Angeles, 2020, installation view, photography by Ian Byers-Gamber.
Reproduced with the kind permission of the Artist and François Ghebaly Gallery.

Take the *Bad Melon* series (2020, see Figs. 3 and 4), for example. Here, she adopts the shell of an Airstream trailer as the "watermelon" rind. The Airstream is a still-produced, commercial brand of trailer and comparable to the Delorean as one of the icons of twentieth-century technological promises. The company was founded by Wally Merle Byam, and the caravan was designed by William Hawley Bowlus in 1934 and initially conceived of as a box on a Model T chassis with the exterior inspired by the airplanes of the era. It has persisted as a commercial symbol of Americana, and beyond a mode of transport and travel, it embodies a certain lifestyle, with Ryan identifying it as a "symbol of idealized American freedom and leisure and pleasure," adding, "the airstream is [...] nostalgic, and it represents the American dream that maybe my parents' or grandparents' generation had [...]. There's a trendy nostalgia for the Airstream that's interesting but also problematic."[37] Ryan's comment highlights an overall conscription of nostalgia in the postmodern era and the multifaceted ways

37. *Ibid*., p. 24.

in which outmoded technological devices and nostalgia for them become embroiled in more sinister politics. Lowenthal again stated that with Gen X "nostalgia ceased to be benign [...] in America, it became a political insult."[38]

Fig. 4. Kathleen Ryan, *Bad Melon (Moldy Slice)*, cherry quartz, rose quartz, agate, amazonite, jasper, aventurine, rhodonite, rhodochrosite, labradorite, smoky quartz, quartz, Botswana agate, carnelian, horn, citrine, glass, cast iron and brass flies, steel and stainless steel pins, polystyrene, aluminum Airstream, 58.5 cm x 160 cm x 53.5 cm, François Ghebaly, Los Angeles, 2020, photography by Ian Byers-Gamber.
Reproduced with the kind permission of the Artist and François Ghebaly Gallery.

While Arsham's works explicitly take the language of archaeology, Ryan's works capitalize on geological extraction and the materialization of value in nostalgic objects. Take *Bad Lemon (Sour Blush)* (2020, see Fig. 5), which Ryan has identified as embodying multiple connotations: a historical embodiment of luxury and exoticism, a false friend, a metaphor for an unfortunate situation, or even for a used car.[39] Like

38. Lowenthal, 2015, p. 51.
39. Subotnick & Ryan, 2020, p. 15.

Fig. 5. Kathleen Ryan, *Bad Lemon (Sour Blush)*, aventurine, smoky quartz, rhodonite, calcite, quartz, labradorite, green line jasper, kambaba jasper, pink opal, citrine, amethyst, rose quartz, agate, serpentine, pink lepidolite, malachite, mother of pearl, freshwater pearl, bone, glass, acrylic, steel pins on coated polystyrene, 71.1 cm x 49.5 cm x 47 cm, Karma, New York, 2020. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Artist and Karma.

Arsham's "Future Relics," her heavily encrusted Styrofoam fruits are visibly decaying: rind turning to rot. However, just as Arsham's casted works replace the "original" and flip the hierarchy of values, Ryan too flips the traditional construction of value by intentionally using inorganic materials (glass and plastic) for the "fresh parts" and semi-precious gemstones mined from the earth for the decaying areas, a structural rational that she identifies as "using the wrong parts."[40] This reversal of commodity

40. *Ibid*., p. 9; Alice Newell-Hanson, "The Sculptor Making Massive, Moldy Fruits From Gemstones," *The New York Times Style Magazine*, 13 September 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/13/t-magazine/kathleen-ryan-artist.html (accessed 1 November 2021); Jenelle Porter, "Kathleen Ryan: Rot," *Karma*, Viewing Room, (accessed 3 November 2021).

values in Ryan's fruits question the systems by which exchange value is generated. They interrogate Georges Bataille's discussion of the opposition between the symbolic value of jewels and base material in *The Notion of Expenditure* (1933), where he writes, "jewels must not only be beautiful and dazzling (which would make the substitution of imitations possible): one sacrifices a fortune, preferring a diamond necklace; such a sacrifice is necessary for the constitution of this necklace's fascinating character."[41] In this, the semiprecious *Penicillium italicum* that chromatically corrode into her oversized fruits are doubly inspired by classic vanitas motifs used in Old Master still lives (such as by Pieter Claesz and Willem Kalf). First, as a shorthand for the transient nature of life, time, and wealth, and secondly, by the use of minerals and gemstones for pigments (i.e., the historical use of malachite, lapis lazuli, and vermillion).[42] It additionally alludes to the deterioration of memory itself—how generational nostalgia becomes unreliable and spoiled over time.

The additional strategic layer in Ryan's fruits is the question of excavation and extraction and how objects attain value not only through their historical, but also via their material values. For example, the recourse to gemstones is indissociable from the problems of their extraction, i.e., the discovery and exploitation of resources and labor. This in turn engendered economic and technological developments that facilitated the expansion of America and the American West and the subsequent consumption of freedom and leisure (such as the time and money to make and display beaded fruits) that remained privy only to a certain social and racial class. The sheer breadth of geological bounty in Ryan's works is apparent in the material list for one of her *Bad Melon* pieces, *Moldy Slice* (2020). The materials include the following: cherry quartz, rose quartz, agate, amazonite, jasper, aventurine, rhodonite, rhodochrosite, labradorite, smoky quartz, quartz, Botswana agate, carnelian, horn, citrine, glass, cast iron and brass flies, steel and stainless-steel pins, polystyrene, and aluminum Airstream. The very names of these semiprecious stones are rooted in a history of

41. Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927–1939*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985, p. 119. Bataille echoes Georg Simmel's views on adornment that value comes from both elevation and extension of the ego, Georg Simmel, "Adornment,", David Frisby (ed.), *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, London, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1997, p. 206–210.

42. Ryan first turned to fruit in 2015 after being inspired by Hendrick ter Brugghen's *Bacchante with an Ape* (1627) at the Getty (oil on canvas, 102.9 cm x 89.2 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 1627), Subotnick & Ryan, 2020, p. 5; Nigel Larkin, "Painting with Stone," Andrew W. Moore, Nigel Larkin & Andrew B. Smith. *Art at the Rockface: The Fascination of Stone*, London, New York, Philip Wilson, 2006, p. 11–17.

European imperialism that celebrated geographic explorations essentially funded by exploitation of indigenous and enslaved peoples and their natural resources. In this, the semiprecious gems that specifically compose the rotten areas and the mobilization of nostalgia in the sculptural form comment on the insidious aspects of the commodification of the past. Thus, the mid-century nostalgia that Ryan problematizes is transposed into a geological nostalgia, and the geological timescale of these objects—like the volcanic ashes and quartzes piercing Arsham's sculptures—are comparable to the temporal paradox of nostalgia: both eroding and forming, remembering and forgetting.

Alicja Kwade's Techno-Fossils

Mining for materials has been central to technological progress, and Alicja Kwade's sculptures explicitly stress the vertical extrapolation and raw excavation of resources in relation to the geological materiality inherent in present day techno-nostalgia. Kwade's works to-date have tackled grand themes such as the scientific operations of the universe, sculptural materiality, and spatial perception. While scholarship on her work has largely centered on her 2017 Venice Biennale multi-gallery installation[43] and on *Para Pivot* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 16 April–27 October 2019), a commission for the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I spotlight three understudied, small-scale works that encapsulate how she has grounded the amorphous value of technological objects in geological time.

The *Finallyfound* series (2016–present) offers objects ranging from hubcaps, keys, bottles, iPads, and MacBooks embedded in schist, a geological term for medium-grained metamorphic rock. For example, *Finallyfound* (*Powerbank)*[44] (2019, see Fig. 6) is a small boulder with a section removed to display a profile of an external electronic battery, which transforms this modern fuel into a fossilized fuel source, ready to fuel future innovations. These technological ammonites replace once organic matter (i.e., flora and fauna from the Carboniferous Period) as markers of geological time. The sculpture reinstates the previously mined semiprecious elements used in electronic devices to the geological matrix while subjecting its nondegradable components to

43. Alicja Kwade, *WeltenLinie* (2017) in *Viva Arte Viva*, La Biennale di Venezia, 57th International Art Exhibition, Venice, 16 May–26 November 2017.

44. Alicja Kwade, *Finallyfound (Powerbank)*, schist, glass, wood, brass, with glassbox, 12 cm x 42 cm x 20.5 cm, Kamel Mennour, Paris, 2019.

a type of synthetic geology. At the same moment, the formal qualities of Kwade's powerbank-fossil juxtaposes archaeology and extraction with techno-nostalgia. The moment of recognition by the viewer catalyzes the very moment of technological obsolescence. In that cognitive moment, the work projects the viewer into the future and manifests a type of built-in nostalgia by materializing the temporal schism. In fact, the power bank and its USB port are presently in the process of being outmoded, especially with the European Union advancing USB-C as the universal future electronic charger.[45] The work thus materializes the inflection point that the speed of progress outpaces consumer adaptation.

Fig. 6. Alicja Kwade, *Finallyfound (Powerbank)*, schist, glass, wood, brass, 12 cm x 42 cm x 20.5 cm, with glassbox 165 cm x 47.5 cm x 26 cm, Kamel Mennour, Paris, 2019, photography by Archives Kamel Mennour, © Alicja Kwade. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Artist and Kamel Mennour.

45. Sonya Gospodinova & Federica Miccoli, "Brussels Pulling the Plug on Consumer Frustration and e-Waste: Commission Proposes a Common Charger for Electronic Devices," *European Commission*, 23 September 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_4613 (accessed 3 November 2021).

Due to the central role that geological materials have had on technological innovations, collective techno-nostalgia is indissociable from the geological past. Jussi Parikka in *A Geology of Media* (2015) has highlighted how "geological insights, and geophysical affordances" have driven scientific developments over the last two centuries.[46] Taking the iPhone as an example, he writes that they are "'geological extracts' drawing from the planet's resources and supported by a multiplicity of infrastructures," and that "analysis of dead media should also take into account this aspect of the earth and its relation to global logistics and production."[47] The anthropologist James Smith has contended that heat-resistant tantalum powder used for capacitors in mobile drives that are mined in Eastern Congo are a "prism for understanding…people's violent and unpredictable relationship to global capitalism, which many experience as violent temporal dispossession, or the inability to plan, predict, or build futures in an incremental way."[48] Similarly, our analysis of how "dead media" become commodified and fetishized through nostalgia is also embroiled in this conflict, and techno-nostalgia is revealed to be far from benign.

The iPhone is a particularly rich example to conclude my discussion of technological acceleration and mnemonic deceleration. Both an object of nostalgia and of progress, Kwade has worked with the iPhone extensively in her work, such as in *Medium Median* (Whitechapel Gallery, London, 28 September 2016–25 June 2017), which, as a mobile consisting of twenty-four iPhones programmed to show the live positions of the stars, was a contemporary take on a medieval astrolabe.[49] However, the recognizable contour of the smartphone is completely absent in *iPhone* (2017, see Fig. 7),[50] which is instead evocative of a kylix without handles. The small bowl is reformed from a ground iPhone and is part of a series from 2017 where she pulverized personal technological objects such as her Power Mac and then mixed the powder

46. Parikka, 2015, p. 137.
47. *Ibid*., p. 46.
48. James Smith, "Tantalus in the Digital Age: Coltan Ore, Temporal Dispossession, and 'Movement' in Easter Democratic Republic of Congo," *American Ethnologist*, vol. 38, 2011, p. 17.
49. Alicja Kwade, Iwona Blazwick & Daniel F. Herrmann. *Alicja Kwade: Medium Median*, London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2017, p. 75.
50. Alicja Kwade, *iPhone*, ground iPhone, epoxy resin, glass, brass, 139.4 cm x 28.1 cm x 28.1 cm, i8 Gallery, Reykjavik, 2017.

with resin to cast new forms that have the identical volume as the original objects.[51] Returning to Lowenthal, he underscored that objects such as "USB keyboards masquerading as typewriters, iPod docks dressed as juke boxes," are attempts "to overcome reluctance to surrender tired-and-true devices," and that "nostalgia segues into sagas of progress."[52] In this vein, Kwade's deliberate references to Ancient Greek pottery glazes them with historicity and pushes "sagas of progress" further back in time, converging the materialistic desire for the iPhone with the insidious legacy of archaeology and the exploitation of natural and human resources.

Fig. 7. Alicja Kwade, *iPhone*, ground iPhone, epoxy resin, glass, brass, 139.4 cm x 28.1 cm x 28.1 cm, i8 Gallery, Reykjavik, 2017 Reproduced with the kind permission of the Artist and i8 Gallery.

51. Kwade's work has been analyzed in relation to a reassertion of presence and solidarity following Marshall Berman's analysis of the vanishing subject as a result of modernity, Alicja Kwade, Pol Capdevila & Pedro Torres, *Glances*, Barcelona, Blueproject Foundation, 2019, p. 158; Minik Rosing, Marie Nipper & Arja Miller, *In Aporie*, Berlin, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2019, p. 96; Sylvia Martin, Beate Ermacora, Andrea Brauckmann, Malcolm Green & Stephanie Rupp, *Living in the Material World*, Cologne, Snoeck Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2014, p. 129.

52. Lowenthal, 2015, p. 53.

Kwade's *iPhone* (2017, see Fig. 7) is an extension of her earlier practice from 2014 (see Figs. 8 and 9) when she crushed items such as her radio and mantle clock to the standard grain of sand (0.2 mm) and re-displayed them in glass display cases.[53] Kwade has stated that she sees her works as commenting on how the mineral value of smartphones (made of rare metals themselves, such as copper, gold, palladium, platinum, scandium, and yttrium) has been reduced to banalities.[54] At the same time, the resulting work further alludes to the dangers wrought in the life cycle of technological progress. That is, how dust resulting from mining has caused harm to miners (i.e., silicon dust) and how the current pace of technological acceleration and accompanying consumption of artifacts of techno-nostalgia will too eventually decompose into grains of sand and irrevocably pollute the landscape.[55]

Fig. 8. Alicja Kwade, *Radio (Alicja R-603)*, mixed media, Kamel Mennour, Paris, 2014, photography by Roman März.
Reproduced with the kind permission of the Artist and Kamel Mennour.

53. Kwade's project is comparable to Studio Drift's *Materialism* series (2019) in which they separate out materials that compose our daily lives, from a Big Mac to a lead pencil to a Starbucks cup, and compress them into minimalist blocks. Rosing, Nipper & Miller, 2019, p. 35–36.
54. *Ibid*., p. 36.
55. Parikka, 2016, p. 100.

Fig. 9. Alicja Kwade, Detail of *Radio (Alicja R-603)*, mixed media, Kamel Mennour, Paris, 2014, detail, photography by Roman März.
Reproduced with the kind permission of the Artist and Kamel Mennour.

The works examined in this essay all seek to accelerate the geological and the archaeological process in order to offer a multifaceted take on how the speed of technological innovation has invited near instantaneous valorization of the barely obsolete moment. They also draw attention to the ecological and cultural stakes of this resulting techno-nostalgia. They may be understood additionally under the rubric of Timothy Morton's "Hyperobjects," which he described as objects that "are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" and are involved in "profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to."[56] He argues that "the notion that we are living 'in' a world—one that we can call Nature—no longer

56. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013, p. 1.

applies to any meaningful sense, except as nostalgia."[57] By considering the geological stakes and the archaeological processes that fuel techno-nostalgia, we may begin to question nostalgia beyond its original status as a pathology, and rather ask to whom it belongs, who has leveraged it, and at what expense.

This article has sought to analyze intermedial and transtemporal dimensions of nostalgia dialogically with the strategy of mythmaking invoked by geological materiality. Rather than making "time-based" art (a term traditionally used to refer to durational media, including video, film, digital media, and performance), the works of these three artists argue that time itself is too elastic to be depended upon for consistency and rigid structure. Christine Ross in *The Past is the Present; It's the Future Too* (2012) traced this "temporal turn" in contemporary art, defining it as a strategy that sought to keep the "past *as long as possible* in the present to influence the future [the author emphasizes]," thus making the present interminable.[58] In this, the temporal operation of nostalgia is revealed to be fraught in itself, a manipulation that sees what happened before as important only insofar as it can be used to redefine what happens now, and through this, the techno-nostalgia of the present is revealed to also be embroiled in a complex high-stakes agenda of media materialism.

57. *Ibid*.
58. Christine Ross, *The Past is the Present; It's the Future Too: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art*, New York, Continuum, 2012, p. 204.

Sculpting Nostalgia: Daniel Arsham, Alicja Kwade, and Kathleen Ryan

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Abstract:

This article examines how the pace of technological progress has continued to accelerate the pace at which nostalgia is conjured and commodified. It undertakes a comparative study of sculptures by three contemporary artists, Daniel Arsham (USA, b. 1980), Alicja Kwade (Poland-Germany, b. 1979), and Kathleen Ryan (USA, b. 1984). While these three artists create and theorize in discretely different modes, their intermedial strategies are thematically linked in their shared leveraging of archaeological praxis and geological materiality vis-à-vis the temporal structure of nostalgia. Their sculptures are important case studies to unpack how nostalgia is culturally mobilized in this specific moment of technological acceleration and the resulting ecological perils of this progress.

Résumé :

Cet article propose d'examiner la manière dont le rythme du progrès technologique a accéléré celui de l'évocation et de la marchandisation de la nostalgie. Pour ce faire, nous entreprendrons l'étude comparative d'une sélection de sculptures dues à trois artistes contemporains, les Américains Daniel Arsham (né en 1980) et Kathleen Ryan (née en 1984), ainsi que l'artiste polono-allemande Alicja Kwade (née en 1979). Alors que ces trois artistes ont chacun un processus de création et une lecture théorique de leurs œuvres bien différenciés, leurs approches sont thématiquement associées par le recours à l'évocation de l'archéologie et de la matérialité géologique, en rapport avec la

structure temporelle de la nostalgie. Leurs œuvres constituent ensemble un cas d'étude important pour comprendre comment la nostalgie est culturellement assimilée par la société moderne, à un moment d'accélération technologique et de péril écologique intrinsèquement lié à cette progression même.

Biographical note:

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