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# Worldbuilding: A Criteria and a History

By Andrew Paul Woolbright

Over the last few years, artists have grown increasingly interested in the concept of worldbuilding—referencing it in the ways that they contextualize their work and defining it as a major influence. It has already influenced the work being made over the last decade, with artists like Cao Fei, Naudline Pierre, Jacolby Satterwhite, Anicka Yi, and many others ascribing to its language; it promises to affect aesthetics and the way that artists approach their work in the years to come. With particular significance since the pandemic, in studio visits and in MFA programs, worldbuilding has become a way of reengaging with some of the modalities of participatory art while applying them to the fractured attention of a permanently scrolling audience. Recent exhibitions relevant to worldbuilding exercises are Trenton Doyle Hancock’s *Torpedoboy and the Revisionist Mystery* at James Cohan (2024), Juliana Huxtable’s *Heads & Tails in The Struggle for Iconicity* at Project Native Informant (2024), Sin Wai Kin’s *It’s Always You* at the Buffalo AKG Art Museum (2024), Candice Lin’s *Lithium Sex Demons in the Factory* at Canal Projects (2023), Shana Moulton’s *Meta/Physical Therapy* at MoMA (2024), Wangechi Mutu’s *Intertwined* at the New Museum (2023), and Pieter Schoolwerth’s *Supporting Actor* at Petzel (2024).

The Democratic Party’s recent and resounding electoral defeat very well could accelerate this inclination, as artists are drawn to explore parallel worlds instead of dealing with the material circumstances of our own. Which leaves the question: what is worldbuilding a reflection on and what is it a symptom of? Is worldbuilding an act of avoidance? A way of engaging with the methods left to artists by Dada and Surrealism without evoking their histories? And maybe most urgently, how then can we develop language for when worldbuilding produces unnecessary escapism, and when it critically is used to better understand the world we are left with?

A brief history:

But how far back does this history go? Could Niki de Saint Phalle's *Tarot Garden* (1998) or the work of Belkis Ayón be predecessors? Certainly, there could be a connection drawn to *gesamtkunstwerk*, but could the *Parco dei Mostri* [*Park of Monsters*] (ca. 1552) or the scale and immersion utilized in the Baroque period be early examples? If a type of immersion as a strategy is all that is really suggested by the term worldbuilding, then it quickly can extend back centuries. But the way that worldbuilding is used now among artists feels like it owes more to virtual environments. It is a term that first originated in more narrative-centered disciplines: writers' workshops, theater, cinema, and eventually game design. An early hesitancy on my part in engaging with it as a form in itself was the suspicion that the narrative languages of entertainment and storytelling from other disciplines were now overtaking the specific criteria of aesthetics. It is still a critical concern that art is giving up on abstraction, on visual poetics, and out of a desperation of not knowing how to speak about the unspeakable, is now turning to the interdisciplinary criteria of literature and narrative film for answers.

In many ways, ambitious installation and the terminology of worldbuilding overlap. The expansion of sculpture into installation in the expansive way that it came to be known in the nineties feels significant to acknowledge. It is hard to imagine the possibility of worldbuilding without the work of artists such as Matthew Barney, Cai Guo-Qiang, Paul McCarthy, and later David Altmejd and Sarah Sze, who adapted sculpture to address systems and respond to the scale of filmmaking, theater, and the internet. Sculpture ceased being approached in-the-round and came to be a surround within the gallery. Daniel Birnbaum's curation of the 2009 Venice Biennale *Fare Mondi*, or *Making Worlds*, is an early usage of worldbuilding language within curation that seemed to address this overlap with installation. Birnbaum used it as a way of delineating multiple immersive installations by artists that explored personal narratives and bordered on self-mythology. Particularly relevant to worldbuilding as we now know it were Pascale Marthine Tayou's *Human Being*, Chu Yun's *Constellation No. 3*, and Nathalie Djurberg's *Experiment* (all 2009).

While it is wide ranging in approach, worldbuilding often blends together virtual and physical experiences, relating the body as an interface that is able to extend across mediums and pass between image and the information network it connects to. Often it utilizes ways of displaying and projecting video work within sculptural environments and employs narrative, voice-over, and scripts to build highly aestheticized and poetic anthropological archives. It is the ism of a generation of artists who grew up in chat rooms and wrote fan fiction; who read Margaret Atwood, Octavia Butler, and other speculative fiction; who grew up online and in massively multiplayer worlds; and still find relevance in the intricate and dense worlds of Medieval art, Hieronymus Bosch, and Henry Darger. It takes place on Blender and Unreal Engine, where there is the ability to download and incorporate exterior files to form enmeshed grotesques of virtual pastiche. It is freeware that offers artists ways to operate through persona and explore mythic new archetypes while inputting the fast circulation of mainstream culture and larger systems of knowledge.

It is hard to think of someone more connected to this way of making than Cao Fei. Specifically, her interest in archetypal persona, online platforms, and the performance of virtual identities feels like a substantial beginning point for the term being used in relation to an artistic practice. It is significant to establish that before Fei began work on *i.Mirror* (2007), in which she created a documentary in *Second Life* through the digital character China Tracy, she got there through an interest in persona and LARPing in her work *Cosplayers* (2004). Unlike Bill Viola's work *The Night Journey* (2007–18), his collaboration with the USC Game Innovation Lab, Fei took on the role of a fictional director instead of embracing virtual space as an open system of possibility. While both feel like important and early examples of worldbuilding, the split between the two philosophies still feels crucial. On the one hand, there is the worldbuilder that is drawn to it to free themselves from the role of the author, so as to allow the development of scenarios for the audience to participate within. On the other, you have the artist actively participating as an avatar, director, or archivist in their world.

While worldbuilding could be connected to a much longer history that goes back centuries, it feels like a much more recent and unique form of aesthetics. The most direct lineage of worldbuilding seems to be the product of the aesthetics of Post-Internet art coalescing with the history of artists that adopted personas to create work, when virtual aesthetic interfaces adopted the attitude of artists such as Eleanor Antin, Jen Catron and Paul Outlaw, Redd Ekks, and Ryan Trecartin. Projects like Lynn Hershman Leeson's creation of the persona Roberta Breitmore (1973–); Bruce Charlesworth's video work of the eighties that adopted soap operas as a format; Ann-Sofi Sidén's performances as the Queen of Mud during the eighties and nineties and the fictive museum she developed to document the persona's life; Mike Kelley's "Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction" (EAPR) series (2000–11) that extrapolated scripts and narratives from found yearbook photos; and Kalup Linzy's videos of the character Jada Braswell, who the artist developed and used for their video soap opera series "Conversations wit de Churen", together each offered ways for artists to interrogate the limits of genre to define new narrative and performative identity roles that feel like antecedents to worldbuilding. For his show *Painting With History In A Room Filled With People With Funny Names 3* at the Palais de Tokyo in 2015, Korakrit Arunanondchai adopted the persona of a Thai denim painter to make and develop work that also channeled the voices of his ancestors. It was criticized at the time, as it was seen to be an avoidance of critique, but it represented the inclination of an artist to engage in what Marie de Brugerolle would later define as Post-Performance painting.

Criteria:

Most artists that I've spoken to that welcome the language of worldbuilding in their practice reference its ability to generate a new method of storytelling with aesthetics that remains exterior to known historical forms. Worldbuilding comes at a time when we are seriously questioning the framework imposed by the canon, and it may represent a major break from the continuity of aesthetics. These days, it seems that the artists interested in worldbuilding prefer thinking of their studio as a server—as a way to host an open system that has the potential to expand to an open world. Worldbuilding implies a level of repetition that is used to generate recognition: whether it is the development of a language of symbols that are continually used, like the sankofa design in mosie river's work, or a repertoire of characters that get recycled until they are familiarized to the viewer, like in Sin Wai Kin's characters of *The Universe*, *The Storyteller*, *The One*, and *Wai King*. What this feedback loop offers is a way to unlearn histories, to refuse to accept or reject the terms of Western Modernism while not fully deauthorizing the artist's identity, as postmodernist strategies might prefer.

There are more obvious reasons as to why world building has become prominent as a way to identify and contextualize work: our felt disinheritance of a world and its future, and the ways that this haunts our culture with hyperstatic nostalgia. We now look backwards towards past styles without the possibility of seeing the futures they may produce. Beyond worldbuilding, the art world feels in many ways behind the times. Rather than art attempting avant-garde positions through transgressive and unpopular approaches, most art feels like it is trying to contend with the acceleration of mass culture by being popular. Compared to the art of the nineties, which played a significant role in introducing the world to feminism, queer theory, iconology, and postcolonial theory, artists now often lag behind the culture developed on social media, reproducing and reminding an audience of what they already know.

In its attempt to counteract the fracturing of attention brought about by the infinite downward scroll of our phone, artists are scaling their work to the size of a closed world as a way of reacting to the immersion of the algorithm and the addictive jump cuts of Instagram Reels and TikTok. In some ways, worldbuilding runs the danger of accelerating this dilemma of popularizing aesthetics, while also incorporating the problematic notion that the artist is unique and able to transcend the issues posed by society through their individuality. The danger is that this extends the liberal humanist need to display interiority past a breaking point into uncritical self-celebritizing that implies that the artist is able to critique the issues of society without being implicated in the process. It privileges what is interesting, and has the danger of only being accessed by artists (or celebrity influencers) who are best positioned to get their message out to their following.

What is crucially being lost by so much of worldbuilding is the self-doubt and the ability to involve the viewers' sense of world within the work. Beyond this, it represents an almost complete reversal of the practice of demystification of the nineties and the aughts, of the work of Phil Collins, Renee Green, and Walid Raad that produced friction, even negation, on their way to finding meaning. There are interesting examples of worldbuilding that take a pataphysical approach to anthropological research. Candice Lin's *Lithium Sex Demons in the Factory* at Canal Projects merged Aihwa Ong's studies on the effects of lithium extraction on Malaysian

women with the artist's own dreams. The result is complex and often absurd. By examining the way that technology is implicated in the disastrous effects of postcolonial mineral mining, Lin layers and parallels her own personal embarrassment and sense of exposure, almost as a kind of reciprocal sacrifice to balance the workers' vulnerability. Emmanuel Louisnord Desir's practice is a dense layering of time that enfolds Abrahamic narratives with ironic prophecy. Cole Lu similarly binds together historical reality, propaganda, and myth as Lu explores the fictional cosmos of Geryon. Sedrick Chisom's last exhibition at Clearing ...*And 108 Prayers of Evil* opened with a paragraph of speculative fiction that could have been the opening scroll of a video game or sci-fi film. The exhibition is a continuation of Chisom's ongoing apocalyptic visions of a future forever haunted by the Civil War, which externalizes the gratuitous violence of segregation in a way that allows us to confront it.

But there is often little or no self-reflexivity. Much of worldbuilding, unfortunately, is done without any sense of irony or the ability for the researcher to change their opinion in their world. It misses the complication of early worldbuilding practices. The message of world building often doesn't feel like it is trying to diagnose a symptom within culture, or carefully approach it through psychoanalysis and critical deconstruction, but instead is suggesting "play this game instead," or "follow me instead." In many cases, the artist has gone from apostate to wannabe guru. The recent work of Shana Moulton, Jacolby Satterwhite, Pieter Schoolwerth, and Theo Triantafyllidis offer a significant contrast to this issue, as each has found ways to investigate deeply personal narratives while avoiding self-valorization or mythology in interesting ways. In Schoolwerth's case, worldbuilding is turned into a kind of formal tautology, using works to produce other works on the opposite side of the gallery, accessed through a tunnel carved into the shared wall. It is a hall of mirrors and self-reference, built around the banal event of the artist's leaking ceiling tile. There is also Theo Triantafyllidis's *Pastoral* (2019), a video game that turns the spectacular language of high-resolution rendering and graphics into an ultimately boring but strange experience. Triantafyllidis allows you to play the character of a muscular Ork who can endlessly roam a field of wheat. These examples all involve an uncertainty within the scaling of the world, returning to earlier forms of demystification while ironically entangling its strategy within fully spectacularized experiences. As Jota Mombaca stated in a conversation back in 2021 at the Guggenheim, "this relation with uncertainty can also provide us with a collective process of world building. Any world-building process needs to make room for uncertainty—not just as something that [propels] us to imagine, but as the condition for our imagination to escape the limits of what the world has presented as possible."

There is also the issue of fantasy: how it is perceived and how it is intended, but also how that fantasy is often mistranslated. I've long suspected that Wangechi Mutu's work harbors a specific kind of sadness within it that is often, unfortunately, overlooked. It is a sadness that remains specific and inaccessible to some of us; that as we are pulled in by the richness of her world, we are also apprehended by how much work goes into building a future of decency and pleasure for the artist to imagine herself within. Afrofuturist sentiment is particular, and part of its effect is all of the labor that is required to envision and enact possible futurity. In its steep approach and pathos, it builds the audience's recognition of its absence in the present world. Aureia Harvey's character Minoreia, Skawenatti's AbTeC Island, and others make future worlds that hold our

own accountable in this way. There is a danger in artists from different backgrounds co-opting the Afrofuturist aesthetic and the worldbuilding of Indigenous artists to achieve their own fantastic worlds, and equal danger in misunderstanding the complex affective tones that they operate within.

Trinh T. Minh-ha's concept of "speaking nearby" provided a way for artists of the 90s to investigate complex systems of oppression while also addressing communities and experiences they couldn't claim as their own. Mario Garcia Torres was able to speak about US intervention in Afghanistan in this way, by exploring the practice of the artist Alighero Boetti and the hotel that he built in Kabul. It feels like artists have now adopted more of what Saidiya Hartman refers to as "critical fabulation," a mode of dealing with what isn't there, and creating form in the spaces where there is significant historical absence and erasure. For the past decade, Marisa Williamson has been performing as Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson's slave of whom we know very little. By developing new events as Hemings, Williamson is able to give a person in history the subjectivity that has been long denied her by pointing back to her erasure from the historical record through Williamson's over-exaggerated acts of production. Firelei Baez begins with the racialized histories of colonization and the taxonomic drawings of the Caribbean by Carl Linnaeus as a ground, before inputting and re-presenting the mythical figure of the ciguapa as a dimensionalized individual. In doing so, Baez is able to give new story and meaning to the mythical subject of the ciguapa while drawing attention to the problematic depictions that came before. Similarly, Sanford Biggers' Chimera-Shimmer hybrid has been described by the artist as "an object for future ethnography," implying it is intended to resimulate the past, producing a critically engaged simulacrum of history to project forward into the future.

Outside of these instances of critical fabulation, that situate worldbuilding as a way of restoring lost narratives, there is the concern that world building can be used as a way for artists to justify their disinterest in forming relationships to other practices. In A\$AP Rocky's most recent music video "Taylor Swift" (2024), we see a world of atomized actors, loudly and intensely affected and responding in sensuous but arcane actions. The richly defined individuals in the video are specific and expressive, but also seem incapable of recognizing the person immediately next to them. The danger of worldbuilding is we all become loud and enigmatic to each other, and give up on the ability to find mutual language to approach aesthetics together. A positive interpretation is that artists are attempting to leave this world so as to see our own more clearly, allowing us to see the atmosphere and bend of the earth from the deep space beyond it. This is worldbuilding that denotes Kathleen Stewart's worlding refrain, a way of "scratching on the surface of rhythms, sensory habits, gathering materialities, intervals, and durations." It attunes us to the sensorial events and connections around us, while reminding us of all of its frailty. It is a world-scaled memento mori, an elegy of what we are losing ahead of us. In Jason Bahbak Mohagheh's theory of omnicide, if we are truly approaching the end of things, we have only one logical response, which is mania. In the face of climate disaster and the real threats posed by the failures of international democratic systems, all we have left is the secret of Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights*—to tell myth after myth, endless myth, so that the night can never end.

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