

## Let the Future Burn by Vanessa Boni

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Julian Charrière, *Controlled Burn* (still), 2022. © Julian Charrière / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Have you ever been made to feel that taking a flight directly melts Arctic glaciers? Judith Butler's term "responsibilization"\* describes the neoliberal sentiment that societal problems—especially the climate crisis—need to be tackled primarily through individual action. Overconsumption is the preoccupation of news media received by paranoid publics, while governments continue to placate capital. It's all guilt, doom, and despair. But what is the escape from individual responsibilization? What would be its polar opposite? *Just let it burn?*

\* Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 103.

Julian Charrière's photographic series *The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories* (2013) confronts this conundrum quite literally. The artist appears as a lone figure wielding a blowtorch atop an Arctic iceberg. A dark reimagining of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), it renegotiates the themes of the iconic painting for troubled times. Faced with the sublime vastness of nature, human projects seem pathetic and inconsequential. Charrière's blowtorch ruse conveys the futility of individualistic approaches to environmental stewardship, or human-centric narratives of the living world. This work was presented in Charrière's recent solo exhibition *Controlled Burn* at the Langen Foundation in Neuss, Germany, and takes its name from the ancient practice of setting fire to areas of woodland to reduce the buildup of forest fuels. *Controlled Burn* contemplates fire not solely as a destructive force, but as a restorative tool for fostering ecological resilience (a topical theme, as wildfires currently ravage parts of southern Europe and Hawaii).

Charrière engages reparatively with raw, combustible materials—coal, petroleum, bitumen, carbon—that are popularly construed as inseparable from extractivism and the climate crisis. These materials are both the subject of many of the artist's research-

led inquiries and, naturally, their medium. One might expect an exhibition focusing on carbonous topics to lean into a moralizing take on ecological catastrophe. Charrière subverts this expectation. The installation *Panchronic Garden* (2022), comprising a set of floor tiles manufactured in coal, serves as a portal, transporting us back to the Carboniferous era some 350 million years ago. During this epoch, the Earth was dominated by lush forests of horsetails, ferns, and cycads, which are replicated here, under near-infrared light, as the living precursors of the carbon-rich materials that power modern civilization. By tracing the life cycle of coal from prehistoric plants to plant fossils to fossil fuels, Charrière reacquaints us with its biological origins and asks: What would its role be in a world without anthropogenic influence?

This reparative sensibility is echoed in *Soothsayer* (2021). An enormous lump of coal is repurposed as a sculptural seer. Suspended by a metal frame, the coal looms in space, acknowledging the heavy legacy of extractive cultures and their ecological impact while gesturing toward a shift in our relationship with this dense, black rock. A carved crater on its surface beckons visitors to submerge their heads into the recesses of deep sedimentary time. The coal—becoming a *material witness*<sup>1</sup>—bears testimony to its capacity for adaptation and renewal and encourages a meditation on our own possible reconciliation with combustible matter.

In the building's underground concrete shelter, Charrière continues to critically consider the visual realm as a contested site in relation to fossil fuels. Employing hydrocarbons in the process of image making is as old as photography. *A Sky Taste of Rock* (2016) draws directly on the heliographic process used to make the earliest surviving photograph, *View from the Window at Le Gras* (1826) by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, who coated a metal plate with light-sensitive bitumen to record the static vista. Charrière's images are obscure, psychedelic impressions in bronze and black of the tar sands in Alberta, Canada—a site of intense bitumen extraction—initiating a dialogue with the history of photography and its appropriation of natural resources. As with the coal works presented in the upper galleries, Charrière's artistic approach focuses on both the symbolic and the material transformations of substances that have played a significant role in the Anthropocene.

The reclamation of dirty materials is more than an aesthetic choice. By working intently with coal and petroleum and repurposing them, the artist reimagines the potential of these exploited materials. Projected opposite *A Sky Taste of Rock* is *Controlled Burn* (2022), a towering film installation stretching the entire expanse of the space. Anonymous extractive sites—a decommissioned oil rig, a rusting cooling tower, an open-pit mine—set the scene for an epic firework display that repetitively implodes, seemingly forever absorbing heat and smoke rather

than radiating outward into the atmosphere. A dreamscape of hypnotic red sparks dances into the past among industrial ruins to throbbing electronic sounds.

Above ground, a glass structure provides views of the defensive banks that wrap the entire building—a remnant of the former NATO missile base. The site, itself a legacy of the Cold War’s nuclear arms race, is resonant with Charrière’s photographic series *First Light* (2016), which captures Bikini Atoll’s landscape as it is now, a relic of US atomic bomb testing that led to ecological devastation and the displacement of the island’s inhabitants. The palms and beaches look purposefully cliché, but the vibrant colors and idyllic scenes are interrupted by what appear to be specks of white light created by radioactive granules of sand that the artist collected from the island and placed on the negatives during the developing process—a spectral imprint embedded in the deadly landscape’s surface.

Expressions of the world coming to an end by means of nuclear apocalypse ignited California’s 1960s counterculture movements. Mediating between conflicting visions of technological determinism and a hippie revolution, the attitude was: if we can’t stop the end of the world, we should come together in states of ecstasy, *toward a sustained seeking of pleasure*.<sup>2</sup> Charrière channels something of this abandon. *An Invitation to Disappear* (2018) is a series of large-scale photographic stills that record a rave set up by the artist in a palm oil plantation in Indonesia. The palm grove is vividly illuminated by flashing strobe lights and fog, but the absence of ravers makes it feel more like an exclusion zone than a party. Rather than being invited to disappear, perhaps we are being summoned to appear. To share common goals and rituals. To be socially responsible. To feel a raw, far-reaching connection with others and the environment. To heal psychic damage on the dance floor. And rave, together. *Until the end of the world*.<sup>3</sup>