



HAL
open science

**Devouring the Green: fear of a human planet.
Anthology of New Writing. Ed. Sam Witt. Artist
Vincent Dussol**

► **To cite this version:**

Vincent Dussol. Devouring the Green: fear of a human planet. Anthology of New Writing. Ed. Sam Witt. Artist. Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines, 2017, 2016/2 (147), pp.119-120. hal-04354703

HAL Id: hal-04354703

<https://hal.science/hal-04354703>

Submitted on 21 Dec 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

Devouring the Green: fear of a human planet. Anthology of New Writing. Ed. Sam Witt. Artist Christopher J. Arabadjis. Seattle, Hong Kong, Boston: Jaded Ibis Press, 2015. 600 p. Print.

That there may one day be no more nightingales to write odes to, is one legitimate but unoriginal cause for environmental concern. But that human beings' frantic race towards forms of actual immortality renders obsolete the core subject of Keats's poem (the human being's acceptance of death) and could be largely instrumental in what finally brings about the extinction of not just nightingales, gives food for thought. That is the theory set forth by editor Sam Witt in his introduction to an anthology he put together against the mid-21st century horizon created by futurologist Allen Kurzweil's predictions: Witt contends that poets have a critical role to play in our technologically-obsessed world and must occupy this public space where what defines a human being's limits is fiercely and increasingly debated. His choice to identify the main issues related to such a definition and to break them down into short lists of questions ("How does technology limit or enhance our sense of self?") and instructions ("Define what constitutes the term 'natural'") that he submitted to poets' judgment and inspiration determines the seven-part structure of the anthology. But the gnomic titles of these parts ("That We Are All the Forest and Full of Gods") indicate the editor's laudable wish not to partition the subject too strictly. Each section opens on a black page with an "Execute program" command at the top and, underneath it, the questions to be addressed in this particular subdivision of the book. The not-to-be-ignored-at-the-cost-of-irrelevance impinging of new technologies on poetry is suggested by a bottom-of-page margin filled in with a barcode.

The work gathered in this anthology is a true reflection of its title. The green must indeed have largely been devoured; "unalloyed" nature-writing never existed (Thoreau's is encyclopedic in the awareness of science and technological advances that it displays) but the poems in *Devouring the*

Green massively testify to an unprecedented level of complication of the poet's rapport with the natural world to the point where the occasional relatively straightforward environmental poem feels both like a breath of oxygen and an outdated genre. These are no times for the pastoral. Their heads turned windward, the apocalyptic elegist, the future-inebriated cyborg-poet, the hard-headed and hard-hitting politically-radical Ginsbergian bard are shown to be standing side by side to try out exploratory modes of addressing ecological concerns.

That is the first way the book breaks new ground in many directions at once. Secondly, the editor bravely stuck his neck out: with the notable exception of Jerome Rothenberg and two or three others, most of the poets anthologized are unlikely to be familiar to the "average" reader, especially this side of the Atlantic. Six hundred pages is a massive infusion of new names. It should be added that, as the poems themselves include few references or obvious allusions to widely-known poems or poets (this writer found twenty in 600 pages), the feeling of navigating uncharted waters is all the more vivid, doubling the challenge of assessing the value of the poetry on one's own. Thirdly and resulting from the editor's future-orientated questions, the contributors were led to widely tap the scientific and science-fictional lexicons and it is not one of the least pleasures afforded by the reading of the anthology to say that, rather than a solid grounding in poetry, comprehensive reference works (online or otherwise) are indispensable companions in order for one not to feel out of one's depth or cruelly *passé* when reading the poems. This leads to the fourth, more problematic, type of innovation: how far from "home base" can poetry fictionally be transported the way of bots and cyborgs until it stops feeling like poetry i.e. a live wire of a text, setting something aquiver in the reader? "Help me, 22nd century, you're going to be singing a lot of bad songs," John Gallaher exclaims (48). What if the 22nd century was already contaminating the present? Fortunately, the stimulating work largely outweighs the boringly experimental: "If enough hymns are sung, one of them/ will contain the password to life on earth." (Kerry Shawn Keys 181)

To partly offset the inconvenience of collecting work by so many different authors, quite a few of them have poems in different subsections; sometimes it is different parts of the same poem (or collection) which are distributed among the seven subsections. Other times, a string of poems

making a suite is found in succession within the same section. All these make natural paths both to familiarize oneself with, and wander around, this dense forest of a book the scope of which, it should be noted, extends to a few poems in translation (from the Russian and the Slovenian). It may not be by chance that these “serial” inclusions constitute some of the, to this reader, most memorable work of the collection: Bernard Horn’s “Ashmedai, King of the Demons, Solomon; King of Israel, and the Shamir Who Split Rocks,” excerpts from Ewa Chrusciel’s *Dybbuk of Angelus*, Jerome Rothenberg’s *Divagations* or Jane Summer’s *Erebus*, Elizabeth J. Colen’s risky and risqué “Edge Effect,” and the poems by Cecilia Llompart or Sam Witt.

One of the blurbs describes the anthology as “harrowing and ultimately energizing.” It is true. To this double characterization, other pairs can be added: exhausting and stimulating; challenging and, slightly fictitious to take up Marc Chénétier’s bon mot about science fiction; very demanding but finally rewarding. Only once the reader has spent sufficient time with the book will they be able to grasp the ecological concern of its editor. It is about the whole “house of man.” “With words people create their homes” (J/J Hastain & T Thilleman). That is why science, sexuality, spirituality, technology and much else are given equal representation with the natural world in the anthologized poems. The visual arts complete the picture with C. J. Arabadjis’s drawings that celebrate the geometrical beauty of natural patterns under the microscope.

Importantly, some of the most challenging poetry in the anthology reads aloud extremely well. That by itself should partly disqualify the occasional impatience this reviewer let himself show with some aspects of a book which he in fact devoured to the last morsel. “*Be afraid, reader. Let these poems lift you into the new world*” (Witt 571).