

The Story of The Time of Dust

Prelude

...and what shall become of us, you ask? I must admit, you children ask questions that bring a smile to my hearts. I'll answer your question with another question: How can I tell you a story of the Future when you know not whence the Future comes?

Our Great Goddess, Sēlah, gently reminds us: we have Patience and Time, and more Time, and more.

How far off will the 'far off' be?

Ah!--we shall not speak of the Future, for upon this primordial rock we call, "Beloved Sēlah," here we dance with our beautiful arms outstretched.

Plenty of other creatures, however – and I shall tell you of one presently – suffer from a disease called, "Chronophobia." Yes! They believe the past is behind us—can you imagine?

Kronos teaches us that we live adrift on the Great Sea of Time.

Time is generative, he says, not linear! That which lies ahead of the Present (what they call, "The Future") will bring about the Again-Present (what they call, "The Past").

Worry not about such things, sweet children! Today we honor the Society of the Dead! We wave our beautiful arms and dance around the fire with joy as we give praise and thanks to the Ancestors.

What's that? You wish for me to tell you a story? Yes, yes, stories are the soundest way to welcome the Society of the Dead and honor their sacrifices to us.

But be forewarned: you must choose your storytellers carefully! Stories are wondrous things, we all know, able to ward off illness and even death.

But a wise creature once advised that stories are also dangerous, for once they are set loose upon the world, there is no taking them back.

I know a story –shall I tell it? It's called "The Time of Dust."

Now it is not at all unclear, not even to a few, that The Time of Dust is a very old story. I imagine even the youngest among you have heard it before. It's well-known, yes, but a story like a slippery fish! Each time I hear someone tell the story of The Time of Dust, it changes somewhat. Perhaps in the telling, the storyteller adopts a tone.

There are storytellers who, verily believing its horrors, speak of the Time of Dust in hushed tones, a story too dangerous for wet ears like your own, a story that will spark fear in the hearts of even the bravest of creatures.

There are storytellers who decry the superstitious nature of such evils, and speak of The Time of Dust as blasphemy, cursing the Ancient Ones who preach such deceitful lies.

Perhaps in the telling, the storyteller changes the names. There are storytellers who begin with a character called homo sapiens, but there are some whose beginnings go a little further back.

There are storytellers who modify Sēlah's opponent. There are those who pit Sēlah against "Follis The Wind," but sometimes she must ward off homo economicus and sometimes, it is homo digitalis who plays the menace.

Yes, each time the story is told, it is a little different.

But in every version of the story I've heard, the Antagonist never lives, and Sēlah never dies.

But you are eager to get on with the story! Gather round, rest your little limbs, and listen to the story of The Time of Dust.

The Time of Dust

They say it all began with a Flood. They say that the heavens clapped and churned and the rains poured down for forty days and forty nights. They say that the mighty swell of the seas engulfed Sēlah's horizons, and that all the errors of the previous era were wiped clean. Sēlah was impregnated with grace; her mountainous belly rumbled and with undulating waves, she opened up like a bud. Sáydakah, Goddess of Charity, never left her sister's side, and in this way, the Sorcerers came into the world.

Like all her children, Sēlah loved the Sorcerers. She and the other goddesses gave them many gifts. Sáydakah opened up their heads and placed intellect and curiosity inside. Feronía, Goddess of the Humble and the Free, opened up their mouths and placed language inside. And their beloved mother, Sēlah, gently opened up their tiny fists and placed in the palms of their hands the gift of fire. The Sorcerers grew to be quite clever, and with the best intentions, they set out to putting their gifts to good use. Oh, how they loved to chatter on and on about knowledge and truth. They grew to love facts and figures and made much ado about nothing.

Most of all, the Sorcerers were fascinated by the gift of fire, and they created a great many things with it, including all the civilizing arts: writing, medicine, metallurgy, and mathematics; agriculture, architecture, and astronomy. They marveled over their own creations and fell deeply in love with them. They began to worship the gleam of fire that made it all possible, and in its honor, they fashioned idols of silver and gold.

These idols, Sádakah remarked, looked very much like the Sorcerers themselves! Each time the sorcerers bowed before their idols, they saw their own image reflected back to them. Somehow, though, they hadn't the eyes to see it. All they saw was the shine and glow of silver and gold reflected by the light of the fire. Sēlah watched, smiling.

But Feronía objected; "They project a world in order to consume it!" Indulging in their new idols, and busy with accelerating the arts in their workshops, the Sorcerers became so busy that, little by little, they began to forget, their own creators. Truth be told, Sēlah and Sáydakah did not mind that much. They know how selfish children can be sometimes. They loved the sorcerers unconditionally, but worried after them, like mothers often do.

But not Feronía. She was unsettled. She did not approve of these idols; the sorcerers' handiwork was impressive, yes, but she wondered to herself at their growing perversions: "Now they are consuming themselves – the cannibals! Are they suicidal?"

Feronía had every right to worry. Soon, the idols took on a life of their own. Their heavy metals bled down, down, down, to infiltrate the underworld of tiny organisms who lived deep within Sēlah's rich soil. From this ungodly union between the metals and the mycelium, a new beast formed, slowly gaining in size and strength.

Hidden beneath the earth, these beasts remained invisible to the Sorcerers, who continued to busy themselves with their civilizing arts. Unbeknownst to them, the silent molecular world beneath them was spreading. It spread from deep in the soil, across the land and out to sea, back up and through all River's tributaries, into the mountains and down to the valleys, and finally, soaring up to the heavens. Silently and diligently, it surrounded the Sorcerers. These silent beasts slithered, encircling Sēlah's bosom and borders. Sēlah and her sister watched in alarm as the beasts worked- knitting and weaving a beautiful, invisible web in and through, warp and woof, surrounding the innocent Sorcerers, and lying in wait like spiders.

Sēlah became mad with worry: "The poor dears, they cannot see the invisible monsters! We must warn them. Feronía, go to them; warn them what is happening. Warn them that their idols have turned against them."

Feronía made haste to the land of Sorcerers. She lit a lantern and appeared among them, transfixing them with her glances. There in the marketplace, she, Goddess of the Humble and Free, pleaded with them. "I mean to tell you! Do you not see them? The beasts who encircle Great Sēlah and threaten your time here? I beseech you – remain true to Sēlah. Do not believe in those false idols – they are poisoners, and despisers of life. They will bury you with their own hands!"

Feronía went silent, giving pause as one does in the respectful naming of Sēlah. The sorcerers looked at her with surprise, and broke the silence with laughter. They turned their backs on her and returned to their work.

Greatly saddened, Feronía hastily returned to the sisters.

"They laugh," she said, "They do not understand me. I am not the mouth for their ears."

Sáydakah wondered, "Must one first shatter their ears to teach them to hear with their arms?"

The three goddesses watched helplessly as the Sorcerers accelerated their arts, and went on worshipping themselves blindly. They could not see the invisible beasts, and yet there were signs. The Sorcerers had begun to grow ill, and to fight amongst each other. Deceit and lies became common among them, they could no longer trust one another. In consolation, they intensified their trust and love in the idols.

They continued pecking at mere dust; they could not see the destruction that the Invisible Beasts had wrought upon them. They could not notice the disappearance of the other creatures who had lived among them; they could not see the waters dry up, nor the blackened air. The sicker they became, the more stubborn it seemed was their will to unsee that they were dying.

Sēlah's worry worked itself into a mother's frenzy. If the sorcerers could not see the Invisible Beasts, perhaps she could send them a message? They were so clever, she reminded herself, she hoped they could use their other senses or their intellect to detect the dangers growing up around them. Sēlah intensified the bitterness of everything they tasted. She choked them with her atmosphere. She sent violent storms to disturb them. She sent heat and disease to torment them. The sorcerers responded with thoughts and prayers for their idols of silver and gold.

Disturbed, Sēlah wiggled her toes, scratching lines like scars in the dust.

With pain in heart, Sēlah made one final attempt; she took away the sorcerer's children. If they were born at all, they died soon after.

Nothing changed.

Feronía exclaimed, "They have not eyes! They have not ears for me, nor arms for you! And as you can see, they have no heart for their own children! Whatever shall we do?"

Sēlah's seas had shrunk; she grew small and weary. She knew that the Sorcerers were leaving them no choice. On this, the three goddesses all agreed: The Time of Dust was upon them. It was time for Kronos to take the Sorcerers to the Society of the Dead. Let the sorcerers be gone, Sēlah proclaimed.

...and they say that the heavens clapped and churned and the rains poured down for forty days and forty nights. Sēlah's seas began to return, and then to churn. They say that the mighty swell of the seas engulfed Sēlah's horizons, and that all the errors were wiped away in the Flood. Impregnated with grace, her mountainous belly rumbled and then with undulating waves, she opened up like a bud. Sáydakah, Goddess of Charity, came to her sister's side, and in this way, We, my children, the Tentacled Ones, came into the world. And oh, how Sēlah loves us.

Epilogue

So why have I told you this story? Why do I throw myself at your feet and beg for a hearing? Of course, I worry that you think that I am lecturing, or that find my story irrational, too emotional. You imagine I am sounding false alarms? Perhaps I awaken a primordial anxiety in you? Perhaps you've become overly concerned with finitude? It's not like that. If you have listened carefully, you needn't worry; Sēlah loves you. She will grant you a place if you so desire it. But you must know that you will serve her in a different form than you ever imagined. Praise be to Sēlah and also to the Ancestors.

On Names

Sēlah: Hebrew סְלָה = “pause, and think of that”. *Selah* is the musical mark used in the Book of Psalms to indicate a pause for reflection. Sometimes considered an alternate to *Amen* “so be it”. *Selah* is a homonym with the word *sela*, סלע, “like a rock”, “firm”. *Selah* is also used in the Rastafarian faith, at the end of a song or a sentence to accentuate the magnitude of what has been said.

Feronía: Latin, *ferus*, “wood” + *onia*, “dangerous state”. Roman goddess of wildlife, health, and abundance. She is also the goddess who grants freedom to slaves, and thus was especially honored by the humble people. The etymology of her name suggests that she assists humans in avoiding the damage wrought by wildness and excess.

Sādakah: Arabic صدقة = “voluntary charity”. *Sadaqah* appears many times in the Qur’an, refers to voluntary giving and seeks no return. It is not reserved to alms, but includes all types of charity, including a kind word and smile, removing an obstacle from one’s path. The goal of *sadaqah* in Islam is to aid in human flourishing and enhance faith.

“The Story of the Time of Dust” is a tapestry woven from threads deriving from eons of human achievements in philosophy, religion, and storytelling. The narrative is drawn from myriad time periods, peoples, locations and traditions, drawing them together into this joyful celebration.

The Homeric Greeks believed that breath is life (ψυχή /psyche), and that breathing the names of the dead brought them back to life. Here are the names we breathe:

David Abram
Aeschylus
Karen Armstrong
Aristophanes
Avatamsaka Sutra
Margaret Atwood
Roland Barthes
Jane Bennett
The Bible
Octavia Butler
Lewis Carroll
Anne Carson
Hélène Cixous
Eduardo Viveiros De Castro
Gilles Deleuze
Jacques Derrida
Philippe Descola
Emma Donoghue
Euripides
Vilém Flusser
Peter Godfrey-Smith
W.K.C. Guthrie
Byung-Chul Han
Donna Haraway
Martin Heidegger
Hesiod
Brooke Holmes
Homer
Luce Irigaray
Franz Kafka
Thomas King
Michele LeDoeuf
Bruno Latour
Audre Lorde
H.P. Lovecraft
Leslie Marmon Silko
China Miéville
Toni Morrison
Friedrich Nietzsche
Andrea Nightingale
Todd R. Ochoa
Ovid
Clarissa Pinkola Estés
Plato
The Qur’an
Seneca
Socrates
Starhawk
Isabelle Stengers
Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing
Paul Veyne
Alfred North Whitehead
Froma Zeitlin

Citations

And the gods' own herald put a voice in her,
and he named her Pandora,
because all the Olympians donated gifts to her, and she was sorrow
for hard-working men.

~Hesiod, *Works and Days*, "Why Life is Hard" [95-100]

Mythology should take us to rapture, even in the face of death and despair. If a myth ceases to do that, it has died and outlived its usefulness. If mythology works, it forces us to change our minds and hearts, and gives us new hope, and compels us to live more fully.

~Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*

I will tell you something about stories
they aren't just entertainment
don't be fooled
they are all we have, you see
all we have to fight off
illness and death. You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.

~Leslie Silko, *Ceremony*

Grandiose guilt will not do;
we need to learn to notice that we were
blind to a humble but difficult art.
[L]earning this art also means
allowing oneself to be touched and
induced to think and imagine by
what touches us.

~Isabelle Stengers, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*

It is worse, much worse, than you think. The slowness of climate change is a fairy tale, perhaps as pernicious as the one that says it isn't happening at all.

~David Foster-Wallace,

The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene

Keep holy your highest hopes!

~Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra : A Book for All and None*

Life up your hearts, high, higher!
And do not forget your legs!
Lift up your legs, you fine dancers!

~Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra : A Book for All and None*

Come my friend, I shall bury you with my own hands.

~Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra : A Book for All and None*

It is invisible hands that torment and bend us the worst.

~Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra : A Book for All and None*

Project Overview

Pandora's Box is an installment of the Synthetic Times series: a collaborative and iterative project conceived by Conny Groenewegen (fashion designer and material researcher), Maurizio Montalti (design researcher and hybrid designer), Adam Nocek (philosopher and design researcher), and Stacey Moran (feminist philosopher and writer).

The installation critiques and reimagines human and nonhuman timescales in relation to past and future technologies. In its current iteration, Synthetic Times invites the participant to "open Pandora's Box" in order to discover a mixture of complex temporalities and mythologies that evoke fascination, wonder, dread, and hope. The ancient Greek myth of Pandora describes the weaknesses of human behavior and the misfortunes of the human race. Given a box and told never to look inside, Pandora cannot control her curiosity and opens it, unleashing evil on the world. Hesiod's version of the Pandora myth explains where evil comes from, or as he tells it, "why life is hard." The entirety of *Works and Days* is written as a lecture, cautioning humans to obey laws of both gods and men – or else.

However, others tell Pandora's story differently; she was not at fault; she was merely a pawn in the fight between Titans and Olympians. Pandora was fashioned as a punishment for Epimetheus and his lack of foresight. Tasked with giving all the creatures on earth tools for survival, Epimetheus failed to reserve a gift for the human creatures. Prometheus loved the humans, and he knew that his brother's oversight would surely end in disaster for the human race. In order to save them, Prometheus went against Zeus' wishes, and stole fire from the gods, saving the human race.

But still Epimetheus did not learn his lesson. Even though Prometheus warned his brother not to accept any gifts from the gods, Epimetheus was enchanted by the beautiful Pandora and took her as his wife. Pandora tried gallantly to tame her curiosity, but one day, overcome with curiosity, she opened the jar. At once, all the illnesses and evils escaped the jar! As soon as she saw what she had done, she closed it as fast as possible, but not fast enough. Only Hope remained.

The story of Pandora's Box is marked by Epimetheus' lack of foresight. Today the phrase, "Pandora's box" means "a source of troubles."

It is a metaphor that suggests we don't know what we're getting ourselves into. Our actions today have consequences tomorrow, but we cannot know precisely how they will affect our future. As an exhibition, Pandora's Box explores the nature of unheeded warnings, of the unknown consequences of our actions. It unfolds this myth with our attempts to technologically dominate the material world, and suggests that—as our era of extreme climate change warns—these attempts may very well bring about human extinction. Pandora's Box allows humans to glimpse their own extinction, and invites them to view "Hope" as embodied by Pandora herself. Pandora's very existence, as a sentient being, has emerged from their hard work. Pandora reserves Hope for humans, even in their impending absence.

Specifications

To explore this mythical space of both dread and hope, the installation invites participants to engage in a speculative archeology. Through mythical fabulation and physical engagement, participants are asked to investigate how their actions may not only bring about their own extinction but also pave the way for the emergence of a new species, a new and unknown form of sentience, that may one day inquire into its ancestral origins: namely, humans.

Pandora's Box anchors this examination in a mythological retelling of the past and future of human mastery and domination of the material world through its hands and arms. These human limbs are conceived of as technologies that allow humans to grasp, engineer, and transform the world. In this playful history, we conceive of the "arm-hand" as an entangled physical and symbolic system that enacts strength, dominance, and efficiency. It is a technology that enables *Anthropos* to at once grasp (physically and intellectually) and make use of the world for its own purposes. This embodied technics makes it possible for humans to design the world in their

own image.

As Martin Heidegger writes in his essay, "What is Called Thinking," thought is a form of "handiwork" (*Handwerk*). Responding to this provocation, Jacques Derrida explains that, "the hand," for Heidegger, "is *monstrosité*, the proper of man as the being of monstration (i.e., both the monstrous and the demonstrative). This distinguishes him from every other *Geschlecht* ('species'), and above all from the ape. The hand cannot be spoken about without speaking of technics" (Derrida, "Geschlechter II: Heidegger's Hand," 169). According to Derrida, the hand, human thought, and technology are inextricably bound together. Pandora's Box freely plays with this proposition, and explores the technological world that the hand, in close proximity to the arm, makes possible, and also thinks carefully about the future of this world, and whether there is place for the human within it.

To this end, the installation features a variety of playful and interactive components. Each of them invites the participant to explore different mythical frames for how hands, arms, and technologies collide in human history. Perhaps most noticeably, there are two wheels featured in the exhibition space. The large wheel on the left operates like a hamster wheel with a mirrored interior. A combination of walking, grasping (with the hands), and pulling (with the arms) propels the wheel. But as the wheel turns, what the participant sees is only herself, expressing the way in which humans have historically regarded the material world as "standing reserve" (*Bestand*) for their own use and disposal.

Again, here's Heidegger: "the impression comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct...It seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself" (Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 27). The mirror does not offer a faithful reflection, however. The images are distortions (like funhouse mirrors). The participant begins to realize that she is using her arms and hands to make distorted images of herself, images that she no longer recognizes as herself. This misrecognition of the role of the human in its own productions reflects media theorist Marshall McLuhan's interpretation of another ancient Greek myth. According to McLuhan, Narcissus, the beautiful boy who fell in love with his own image, reflects our own relation to technology. It is indicative of our "narcotic culture" to mistake our own creations for something outside ourselves. In the end, just like Narcissus, the work one does to turn the wheel, only reflects back

the material world in a distorted form.

As the wheel on the left is made to turn, the wheel on the right turns in the opposite direction. The latter wheel resembles a giant petri dish where human-engineered plastic and organic matter mix together. The living and the non-living, the biological and the synthetic, are combined to create something new. Thus, while the participant works to turn the wheel, she gazes at her distorted image and unwittingly produces a dangerous and toxic recipe (her distorted, Frankensteinian image). Together, the wheels express how human ingenuity and design engender a technologically engineered material world that is a distorted reflection of human desire. And this distortion will prove to be suicidal.

The mythical space of the installation does not end with bitter warnings and finger wagging, the all-too-familiar rhetorical frame for the so-called Anthropocene. Instead, there is a kind of perverse hope that pervades the work and is exemplified by the haunting audio, which presumably originates from an unknown, future species who tells the story of its own origin: the cunning and destructive force of human "handiwork." The human participant is invited to listen and experience the mythical retelling fabricated by the species-to-come. However, this is a retelling that defies standard genre conceits, since it is experienced as simultaneously etiological (myth of origin) and eschatological (myth of finality). This blending of mythical genres creates a temporal complexity that does not resolve neatly into linear timelines: the human event is experienced as both an ending and a beginning at the same time.

The physical space of the exhibition is designed to reflect this temporal complexity. It is as if the installation were the physical manifestation of the myth. The playful and even whimsical layout encourages participants to see themselves, indeed their own history of "handiwork," from the perspective of what is not human. And yet, this is a non-human perspective that humans have had an essential hand in designing. For this reason, humans are able to faintly recognize themselves in this future: a mutant species whose nervous system is at least as complex as the human's, but is located primarily in its arms and hands, and not its brain. This (cephalopodic) distribution of hand-arm intelligence is reflected in every aspect of the installation, and it is by means of it that humans are invited to mythically reframe human history, and as Sēlah's musical name suggests, to pause and think on that.

Acknowledgements

Concept and development

Conny Groenewegen (Fashion Machine)
Maurizio Montalti (Officina Corpuscoli)
Adam Nocek & Stacey Moran (Center for Philosophical Technologies)

Project management

Babette Zijlstra
Charlotte Corstanje

Video Work

Hanne Valle
Wim van Egmond

Financial support

Het Nieuwe Instituut
Center for Philosophical Technologies at Arizona State University

With thanks to

Mediamatic, Hanna Valle, Wim van Egmond, Guus Beumer, Flora van Gaalen, Babette Zijlstra, Lea Berner, Peter Betner, Hendrik-Jan Hunneman, Hans Jansen, Bouwko Landstra and his extraordinary team, Manon Bachelier, Frans-Pieter Vonk, Wieland Textiles, Verbruggen Paddestoelen BV... and the enthusiasm and support of all volunteers and everyone else that we should have mentioned.