

Degrowth and Progress



'internationale

L'INTERNATIONALE ONLINE

DEGROWTH AND PROGRESS

ed. **Sara Buraya Boned** and **Ida Hiršenfelder**

l'internationale

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EDITORIAL FOREWORD

Sara Buraya Boned and Ida Hiršfelder

Terrans tend to feel they've got to get ahead, make progress. The people of Winter, who always live in the Year One, feel that progress is less important than presence.

– Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)

Following the e-publication *Austerity and Utopia*, L'Internationale Online presents a second collection of interventions to think through two apparently distant concepts. Artists, thinkers and researchers were invited to reflect on a dissimilar pair of themes as fertile ground for thought and proposition. With this new issue of *Degrowth and Progress*, we would like to pursue a path of reflection to interrogate the ambivalence of a possible progression of degrowth, and attempt to stage a bastard/hybrid scenario of speculative thought and action. This collection draws upon the complexity of ethical, ecological and political frameworks and reveals other perspectives on the current crisis through critical essays, storytelling, science fiction, biomorphic design, audiovisual traces of artistic practices and allegorical maps. During the editing of this volume, humans have seen severe disruptions in the global narrative of what was understood as 'reality' and 'normality'. We have witnessed the downfall of democratic values, now stripped of diplomatic conduct they have been replaced by fragmented, isolated, and often fanatic dogmatism. At the same time, we have begun to deeply question our role on this planet, realising that we need to do nothing less than save the earth, its biodiversity, its habitable climate, its refined natural balance with humans, other animals and other beings. As Walter Benjamin reflected on the *Angelus Novus*, we clearly see the ruins of progress behind us.

Progress was the firstborn of modernity, a major promise of continuous development towards the perfection of

'humankind'. But progress in whose name? To whose benefit? With the exclusion of whom? Progress towards what kind of model? The notion of progress, besides being Eurocentric, and linked to colonialism, has been the ideological framework for liberalism itself. The ideal of a continuous, progressive and desirable advancement of civilisation has been reframed in recent decades with 'sustainable development'. But isn't sustainability a concept far too simplistic to be able to address real questions of poverty, exploitation, segregation, congestion, depletion of land, desertification, terraforming, or the mass extinction of species? Could we think in a different direction about *progress*?

With such thoughts in mind, this volume starts with an introductory text by a dedicated proponent of the degrowth movement, **Vincent Liegey**, who unpacks the idea of progress and delineates ecological thought from sustainable development, showing how development is a continuation of colonialism. Degrowth is a relatively new concept, and sceptics are concerned that the notion is Eurocentric and doesn't address the inability of certain regions in the world to afford degrowth – it is impossible if a country has not already been 'developed'. Liegey shows that it is colonial thinking that creates this divide in the first place and that decolonisation of the dominant imaginary is necessary, along with the West being held accountable for its history of colonial pillage.

The Empirical Effect (2010), a film by **Rosa Barba**, introduced by **Cristina Cámara**, shows the tensions between humans and the forces of nature, and how humanity has to live with the desire as well as the failure of controlling this relationship. The film creates a beautiful metaphor for the progressive destruction humankind has created by depicting the constant threat that Mount Vesuvius imposes upon inhabitants.

Four decades after the Club of Rome report *The Limits to Growth* (1972), we can state that the results of Capitalocene development have led to a state of climatic and social emergency, whose consequences have been made even more visible by Covid-19. During the pandemic we have been actors and witnesses in an unforeseen picture, which has momentarily paused the chain of production and consumption on a global scale. But it has also made all the more visible the unequal distribution of wealth, sustenance and power. The premise of *degrowth* as a political, economic and social movement, and school of thought departs from a thesis that was considered until now practically impossible: that is, following what Yayo Herrero synthesised about confinement, ‘to consume only what we need’ (Herrero 2020). But if the capitalist realism described by Mark Fisher could be reframed (Fisher 2009), even for a few months, new strands of prospective futures could, and must, be revisited.

In an interview, **Silvia Federici** analyses the deep roots to the changes we are currently experiencing to our social, ecological and reproductive roles, which goes far beyond the crisis of the pandemic. Federici describes the foundational relation between the bankrupt notion of progress of the Enlightenment, the plantation economies reliant on slavery, and the solidification of a global system of extraction and domination. Through the lens of reproductive work and its central role in feminist struggles, she also speaks of the current sexual and racial division of labour and how new forms of telework are transforming homes into factories.

Vladan Joler takes us to the point of no return, deep into the black hole of digital data mining he calls ‘new extractivism’, signified by an affinity to infinity, to endless growth. In his allegorical map he shows how new frontiers of colonial exploitation are drawn in the digital world. Joler’s allegorical storytelling is an interplay between artistic research and data

analysis, revealing the machinery of free/unpaid/slave digital labour. The bodies of each and every one of us are being colonised. We, as ‘dividuals’, are the final products being sold to advertisers. In this world, economy is no longer the trade of goods and services, rather it is the economy of the mind, such as the attention economy, the emotion economy, or the economy of beliefs. Joler’s map is written in the manner of speculative fiction, yet it is anything but. It is a realistic depiction of the echo chambers that produce radicalisation of the mind.

One of the incentives to produce this publication series was to better understand the economic structures that permeate every pore of our reality. On this note, **Ajda Pistotnik** shows international debt to be one of the main problems that keep whole countries bound to an agenda of unsustainable growth. The endless cycle of borrowing not only allows economies to grow, but forces them to grow even further in order to repay their debt, which inevitably leads to austerity measures and privatisation. In turn, she proposes strategies of debt resistance that could ensure at least partial cancellation of debt, resulting in political and social transformation which would promote the quality of life over the GDP.

Continuing with the thread of the critical essays, a conversation between **Monica Narula** and **Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez**, moderated by **Corina Oprea**, reveals some of the rigid structures in the system of art that propagate unsustainable and exclusive conditions. They ask difficult yet very practical questions related to travel (in time, space and mind), which challenge the mobility of contemporary artists and artworks, while revealing the deep inequality between different localities in the ecosystem of the arts. They speak about methods of intervening and modifying the existing infrastructure to introduce more open, just and emotional relationships between everyone involved in contemporary art.

1. Screened on L'Internationale Online www.internationaleonline.org from 17 February to 17 May 2021.
2. Screened on L'Internationale Online www.internationaleonline.org from 17 February to 17 May 2021.

The self documentary video produced for this e-publication by transfeminist artist and researcher **Paula Pin Lage**, *Degrowth makes me grow*,¹ is a first-person narrative that considers the art system shapes the living conditions of artists through the expectation of non-stop global travel in order to keep producing, while keeping one precarious. Her work, which resonates with

the writing of Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Lynn Margulis and others, has explored the possibilities of feminist biohacking labs, reappropriating knowledge extracted by scientific institutions to create emancipatory techno-bio-political tools that enable control over the body and beyond. After years of living in the precarity of artistic work, she decided to abandon the unliveable rhythm of that productivity and return to her birthplace, a tiny village in Galicia, to experiment with other methods of creation in nature.

Through a collaborative performance piece **nora chipaumire** and **Ari Marcopoulos** (featuring nora chipaumire, Shamar Watt, Dave Gagliardi, Attiyah Khan, Austin Williamson) are testing the methods of self-reliance, non-commercial art-making, non-complacency, destroying, re-purposing and hybrid (choreographic, sonic, visual) art forms to reclaim and give value to African contribution to the world of ideas. She is seduced as she says 'by the possibility that there is no future, that the future is in the present' (chipaumire, 2018).²

Recounted in a dystopian tone, curator and writer **Marta Echaves's** science-fiction short story *Precipitation* is a peek into a strange temporality where pandemics, diseases and synthetic drugs have become quotidian realities for humankind. Drones, pharmaceutical companies, hallucinations and collective

mourning assist Echaves in projecting a reality not as distant as we once imagined. We ask, is the nightmare of progress leading younger generations closer to the idea of human extinction?

3. Screened on L'Internationale Online www.internationaleonline.org from 17 February to 17 April 2021.

In stark contrast to such nightmarish prospects, we end on a brighter note to address progress, but as means for the advancement of civilisation. In a text on the science-fiction author **Ursula K. Le Guin**, we travel to exoplanets only to arrive at our current human condition. Her speculative social and political systems reveal the possibility of imagining a different world and suggest that to change the mode of progress we have to drastically shift our perspective and imagine relations radically different to those that we currently take for granted. She presents a decisive ethical stance, coupled with an uncompromising ambivalence when it comes to judgement or ideological conviction.

Degrowth and Progress continues the current moment of prospective thinking, of taking the time to look to both the past and the present, of finding ways to act and take collective responsibility for our future. Political movements such as feminisms, environmentalism, struggles of the commons, digital activism and artistic practices are spaces where we can seek certain answers and propose radical change. Going back to 'normal' is no longer an option for the survival of non-human and human lives. Neither is it an option for the lives that deserve to be lived.

This e-publication also contains works from the collections of the museums of L'Internationale, included with the desire to establish new connections between the authors' contributions, the artists and their works belonging to the museums of the confederation. On this occasion, the screening programme

of L'Internationale Online will show *The Empirical Effect* (2010) by **Rosa Barba**³, from the collection of Museo Reina Sofía, introduced by **Cristina Cámara** (Curator of Film and Video); another text by Ajda Pistotnik is accompanied by **Staš Kleindienst**'s painting *A Landscape with Stray Dogs* (2019) from the collection of Moderna galerija, Ljubljana.

REFERENCES:

- Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, John Hunt Publishing, UK.
- Herrero, Yayo. 2020. 'Antigones against the Monsters of Heartbreak: Imagine Everyday Utopias in Times of Pandemics'. Lecture in the framework of the online conference 'Glossary of Common Knowledge: Commons / Solidarity', organised by Moderna Galerija and Museo Reina Sofía: <http://glossary.mg-lj.si/related/yayo-herrero/630>.
- nora chipaumire. 2018. #PUNK 100% POP *N!GGA: <https://www.companychipaumire.com/currentwork>.



The *Survival Kit for the Anthropocene* installation is designed as an openly disassembled mobile survival kit. Formally it connects contemporary art with folklore and is a hybrid between a beehive and a Slovenian farm chest, whose egg shape is associated with the symbol of life. Its exterior in the spirit of a folk ornament is adorned with images of increasingly invasive species in the Slovene region: *Fallopia japonica*, *Heracleum mantegazzianum*, *Dreissena polymorpha* and *Harmonia axyridis*. The kit, which intertwines an autochthonous flax rope and pig bladders with invasive acacia and bamboo, is basically a water collector with impregnated pig bladders in which water flows through the water filters in a bamboo tube. The drawers contain basic aids for the apocalypse: from a radioactivity indicator and iodine tablets to a protective mask. A two-tiered wooden pitchfork has a removable wooden net attached to the top, and thus can serve as a shade or fish net, a pitchfork or crossbow. The mobile survival kit serves as a paraphrase of disappearing cultures and local economies that dissolve in the pool of modern capitalism, as well as a critique of ecology as an ideology that ‘solves’ climate change within global neoliberal frameworks, and therefore within the existing capitalist paradigms. The latter are often portrayed as a neutral, natural phenomenon, which is primarily associated with nature through one mechanism – that of the brutal survival of the most powerful.

– Maja Smrekar

CONVIVIAL DEGROWTH OR BARBARITY?

Vincent Liegey

1. Doillon, Jacques, Alain Resnais and Jean Rouch 1973. *L'an 01*, film, France.
 2. Illich, Ivan 2005. 'Le Genre vernaculaire', *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2. Fayard, Paris.
- Let's start with a metaphor, inspired by one of our icons, the snail. Of course, we French love the snail. To quote a common saying from the 1973 cult comedy film *L'an 01: On arrête tout, on réfléchit, et c'est pas triste* (We stop, we think, and we are not sad)¹. The snail invites us to slow down. And it also

underlines what the growth model forgot or denies, a sense of the limits:

'The snail constructs the delicate architecture of its shell by adding ever increasing spirals one after the other, but then it abruptly stops and winds back in the reverse direction. In fact, just one additional larger spiral would make the shell sixteen times bigger. Instead of being beneficial, it would overload the snail. Any increase in the snail's productivity would only be used to offset the difficulties created by the enlargement of the shell beyond its pre-ordained limits. Once the limit to increasing the spiral size has been reached, the problems of excessive growth multiply exponentially, while the snail's biological capability, in the best of cases, can only show linear growth and increase arithmetically' (Illich 2005)².

Degrowth is an invitation to reflect on the 'wisdom of the snail', an invitation to question the physical limits to growth for society – more does not necessary mean better. Sometimes it can even be 'worse', 'destructive', or 'devastating'. The only desirable and sustainable growth is degrowth.

Degrowth – Birth of a Word

Even if based on old ideas and thoughts, cultural or even spiritual traditions, degrowth as a term and as a movement began in France relatively recently, in the early 2000s. Two groups of people met. The first, the Adbusters of Lyon. They organised civil disobedience actions and published newspapers to alert society about marketing manipulation – advertising infantilises, plays with fears and frustrations to make people desire useless stuff. Debate on climate change and biodiversity was also slowly starting to appear at this time. The Adbusters immediately understood that the system would try to co-opt these raising debates; it has since become known as 'sustainable development'. They met with the second group in 2002 at UNESCO in Paris. This group of academics and activists from the global south and the global north had organised a large conference entitled *Défaire le développement, refaire le monde!* (Unmake development, remake the world!). The conference offered a critical understanding of development as the continuity of colonialism: development is nothing but a tool for imperialism, which imposes a Western model of civilisation on the rest of the world and justifies the exploitation of the planet and that of minorities. Both groups cooperated on a special issue of *Silence, La décroissance* – degrowth appeared for the first time as a term for the decolonisation of the growth imaginary:

'To survive or endure, it is urgent to organise *décroissance*. When you are in Rome and you want to go to Turin, and if you are on the train to Naples by mistake, it is not enough to slow down the train, to brake, or even to stop, you must get off and take another train in the opposite direction. To save the planet and guarantee an acceptable future for our children, it is not enough to moderate current trends,

3. Latouche, Serge 2002. 'A bas le développement durable! Vive la décroissance conviviale!', *Silence*, no. 280 (February): pp. 8–11. Unless otherwise stated, my translation.

we must directly escape development and economism. Enacting décroissance means, in other words, to abandon the economic imaginary, which is the belief that more equals better' (Latouche 2002)³.

4. Latouche, Serge 1998. *L'Autre Afrique: Entre Don et Marché*. Albin Michel, Paris.

The word 'décroissance' is not about decline but about 'dé-croire' (de-believe). Its negation was chosen on purpose to protect it from co-option by

the dominant system. And its provocation deconstructs implicit beliefs around toxic concepts: capitalism, consumerism, development, economism, materialism, patriarchy, productivism, techno-scientism.

Decolonisation of the Dominant Imaginary

Degrowth is about the physical limits to growth: infinite growth on a finite planet is just not possible. But even if it were, we would still need to question whether it makes sense? Work more to produce more to consume more ... like a hamster in its wheel. So is degrowth an invitation to re-evaluate what really matters? If so, what are our basic needs and how shall we fulfil them in a sustainable way?

Degrowth is also an invitation to take a journey back into history: How did Western civilisation end up producing such an environmentally destructive, productivist system that exploits humans too? This re-evaluation requires learning from past civilisations and the global south. Consider: 'In an attempt to translate "development" into Eton - or Itón, a Bantu language spoken in Cameroon - the closest approximation was "the white man illusion"!' (Latouche 2004)⁴. Such anecdotes invite

Western culture to rethink our beliefs and to be more modest.

'The colonial pillaging of effectively 'under-Westernised' countries persisted due to what alter-globalist Aminata Traoré (Mali's ex-Minister of Culture and Tourism) has called a "rape of their imaginary". Illuminated in works such as Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, the extraction and exploitation of resources from Africa, Asia and Latin America were secured and organised to support incredible economic progress in Europe. This is how the period 1945 to 1975 became known generally as the Golden Age of Capitalism, the Glorious Thirty years in France, the post-Second World War economic boom for most countries of the Global North' (Liegey and Nelson 2020)⁵.

- 5. Liegey, Vincent and Anitra Nelson 2020. *Exploring Degrowth: A Critical Guide*. Pluto Press, London.
- 6. Liegey, Vincent, Stéphane Madelaine, Christophe Ondet and Anisabel Veillot 2015. 'Ni protectionnisme, ni néolibéralisme mais une "relocalisation ouverte", base d'une nouvelle internationale', *Basta!*, November.

Liberated from such dominant developmentalist but also patriarchal and economic imaginaries, we can start to construct new worlds based on other principles, including conviviality, ecofeminism, autonomy, the commons, libertarian municipalism, self-organisation, care, non-violent communication, and open relocalisation (Liegey et al. 2015)⁶.

The First Principle of Degrowth

As Oxfam International stated in late 2020: 'The richest 1 percent of the world's population are responsible for more

7. Oxfam International 2020. Press release, 21 September.
8. European Environmental Bureau 2019. 'Decoupling Debunked', report, 8 July.
- than twice as much carbon pollution as the 3.1 billion people who made up the poorest half of humanity during a critical twenty-five-year period of unprecedented emissions growth⁷. There is no space for self-determination in the global south without a radical re-

duction of the environmental footprint of the world's richest, which would mean a decrease in resource and labour exploitation. Growth has always been used to justify raising inequalities – 'we produce more so you too will be able to enjoy the way of life of the richest'. But there is no growth anymore and such conspicuous consumption is no longer desirable.

Green growth, based on the belief of decoupling from consumption, is a fake: scientific evidence shows that there is no economic growth possible with the reduction of energy usage, nor is there any environmental impact (European Environmental Bureau 2019)⁸. Rather 'frugal abundance' is the only coherent solution to ensure basic needs are securely met for all. Degrowth can only ever be frugal: it reverses the overconsumption and poverty of capitalist growth economies. Hence, degrowth proposes an unconditional autonomy allowance. Such an allowance would be given to all, from birth to death, unconditionally. It is like the universal basic income, but it is also partially de-commodified. It consists of a mix of unconditional services (free access to basic needs) and income (ideally in local currencies, or via reciprocity) to secure accommodation, food and water, energy, clothes, basic tools, education, health, culture and information, coupled with a maximum income. This would mean that the first principle of degrowth is the reduction in inequality.

Open Relocalisation towards Pluriversalism

Degrowth is an invitation to re-localise our economies, production and exchange. It makes sense from an energy and environmental point of view to get rid of this craziness of always using more transportation. The Covid-19 pandemic has also alerted us to the potential breakdown of supply chains when placed under pressure. But it is even more important from a cultural and symbolic perspective. It is about appropriating the tools for conviviality to slow down our production (Illich 1973)⁹. Small is beautiful (Schumacher 1973)¹⁰ – make it local, as craft, with organic, low tech. It is also about getting out of the everyday banality of evil (Arendt 1963/2006)¹¹. If you produce locally, you would become more aware of the environmental impact and human exploitation behind the stuff you buy? Would you still buy a new smartphone every year if you had the cobalt mine in your garden, for example? And if you met the children working in such mines every day? Open relocalisation is about becoming conscious of our choices and understanding their direct impact. It is about responsibility and citizenship. It is an invitation to question our basic needs. It is about the commons and a new democratic system based on questioning what we produce – How? And for what use?

However, relocalisation does not mean protectionism, nor the closing of borders. On the contrary, we speak about relocalisation with openness, solidarity, and cultural and linguistic exchange. In such a globalised economy, which only faces more and more environmental catastrophes, we need solidarity. Everywhere around the world local initiatives are emerging

9. Illich, Ivan 1973. *Tools for Conviviality*. Harper & Row, New York.
10. Schumacher, E.F 1973. *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as If People Mattered*. Abacus, London.
11. Arendt, Hannah 1963/2006. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Penguin Books, London.

12. Kothari, Ashish, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria and Alberto Acosta 2019. *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*. Tulika Books, New Delhi.
13. Klein, Naomi 2007. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Knopf Canada, Toronto.
- to produce, exchange and care for one another. All of these good practices can be shared through open source, from permaculture to low tech. The enjoyment of life is about cultural exchange after all. Degrowth through open relocalisation and pluriversalism is about saving, respecting, caring and recreating diversity in a globalised world that seeks a way to secure universal rights and overcome Western colonialism (Kothari et al. 2019)¹².

Shock Doctrine or Pedagogy of Catastrophes?

Our Western civilisation is reaching its energetic but also cultural limits. A major collapse due to the acceleration of climate change and biodiversity loss is already happening; inequalities are exploding, democratic institutions are shrinking, an oligarchy took control of our imaginations through the media, advertising and the algorithms behind social networks. The 'shock doctrine' with its ever-increasing authoritarianism is flourishing (Klein 2007)¹³. We have a lot of good reasons to be depressed.

Yet, a cultural change against this system and towards degrowth principles does not seem impossible. The polls are showing more and more rejection of capitalism and green growth. Surveys are underlining behavioural change towards consumption. And local initiatives around the world are inventing and implementing alternative ways of life based on conviviality, care and sustainability.

Are we ready for a 'pedagogy of catastrophes' (Dupuy 2004)?¹⁴ Do we see catastrophe as an opportunity for change? The shock doctrine of the last decades has served a neoliberal political agenda. Could the current world shock of the pandemic produce other dynamics? Convivial degrowth or forced and barbarian recession, that is the question. Degrowth invites us to consider what really matters – decolonise our growth imaginary, liberate creativity, ensure solidarity.

14. Dupuy, Jean-Pierre 2004. *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé: Quand l'impossible est certain*. Éditions du Seuil, Paris.

AFTER
THE
CATASTROPHE,
I WILL BE
REBORN

Cristina Cámara

In the past year of the global pandemic produced by COVID-19, the dependence on technology and digital devices which now characterise our way of living and relating has become increasingly evident. During the enforced confinement we have related to the world, and lived, through screens, including our access to culture. We have visited online exhibitions and even viewed certain films through so-called 'exhibition cinema'; films that were created for an immersive experience – if it be through the analogue quality of the image, the use of a projector, a focus on the haptic – are now being viewed in digital format and on individual screens. The very same artworks that question the idea of progress through an emphasis on technological obsolescence have been 'translated' into ones and zeros.

Some artists – though few – agreed, unusually, to show a selection of their film works online, in particular those works that are less reliant on the physical exhibition space. This is the case for Rosa Barba and her film *The Empirical Effect* (2010) from the collections of Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid, which despite being filmed on 16 mm was conceived to be shown in digital format at museums and movie theatres. On the suggestion of her gallery Vistamarestudio in Milan, Barba authorised the online presentation of the work for the Italian public. This turned out to be a wonderful experience to reach new audiences such as the relatives of some of the actors who appear in the film, and who later wrote to the artist, excited and grateful for having been able to see their family on screen years later.

It is stemming from this exceptional circumstance that *The Empirical Effect* is now being shown in the context of this ePub, dedicated to two apparently antithetical concepts – Degrowth and Progress. Barba's film offers a vision for another pair of concepts that appear throughout her filmic work, Nature and Technology – with some links that point to this

debate. Through various lines of enquiry, from exploring the desert as a nuclear garbage dump (seen in *Bending to Earth*, 2015, also in the Museum's collection), considering the cosmos, or melting glaciers, the artist confronts us with the ways in which human beings have made use of natural resources and the capacity of nature to preserve a record of this relationship. Her proposals function as a metaphor that causes us to think about the mechanisms that articulate our time.

The Empirical Effect starts with a warning. A serious voice, as serious as the facts it conveys, warns us of the danger of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, whose natural resources (silver, nitrate and spring water) remain hidden. The voice reminds us that it has erupted more than twenty times throughout its known history. The warning puts us in a state of alert for what we are supposed to see, but that will never appear on the screen, in the same way that the inhabitants of the so-called 'red zone' who live out their day-to-day in a constant fear to a danger that never happens.

Archival footage, shots of abandoned spaces and images of obsolete earthquake gauges resonate like post-apocalyptic residue of an earlier eruption. Vesuvius, the film's protagonist, appears imposing on screen, but so does the city of Naples and its neighbouring towns, which grow excessively and colonise the mountainside, occupying areas near the crater in an attempt to colonise the object of their own threat.

The Vesuvius observatory, built near the crater in 1845, is now in disuse, but its memory is preserved in many documents. Living memory, which survivors of the last eruption of 1944 treasure, is shown to us for its amazing capacity for adaptation. '*There is a continuous interaction between the people and the volcano, the volcano and the people who live there. A kind of curse, and, at the same time, a blessing, because the*

1. Balsom, Erika. 'Historical Projections: The Art of Rosa Barba', *Artforum*, September 2017, p. 273.

microclimate is perfect. But it is very strange that after such horrible destruction, you can see written on the Torre del Greco: "Posta fata resurgo". After the catastrophe, I will rise again. This way of thinking cannot be found anywhere

else.' The survivors laugh, and sing, and observe and dance erratically, as if alienated by the effect of the tension and the volcano, but they overflow with life and community. Barba reminds us, there is hope.

In this sense, and returning to the initial reflection, we are left to ask ourselves: 'What will survive the storm of progress? Digitisation may have quickly pushed photochemical film into mass-cultural obsolescence, but as a preservation medium its stability remains unparalleled. Archivists fear the unreliability of electronic formats will lead us into a digital dark age, but film will last. Perhaps we will, too, if we can find ways to cooperate and live together.'¹

3 February 2021



Rosa Barba, *The Empirical Effect*. 2010. Still image, 16mm film transferred to digital, color, sound, 22 min. Screening on the Internationale Online from 17 February to 17 May 2021.

Interview with Silvia Federici by Sara Buraya Boned

Recorded on Zoom between Madrid and
New York on 18 December 2020

Sara Buraya: The pandemic has made the injustices of the capitalist way of life for the majority of people all the more visible. It has shown up the crisis of the system, in both its material and symbolic accumulation, its exploitation of human and non-human lives and its brutal consequences. In March 2020, during confinement, there was the illusion that the capitalist machine of production and consumption had stopped. In that initial disruption and confusion, capitalism had to reinvent ways of operating, and us, new ways of articulating in the present context of social distance (that is, the damage to social bonds and new ways of weaving the communitarian fabric) had to be found. Do you think we are living through a change of paradigm? And if so, in what direction are we going?

Silvia Federici: I do not think that we are changing or that we are experiencing a change of paradigm. The paradigm that is governing the transformation of the economy and social life, and the changes that we can anticipate are part of a long process that has been typical of all the neoliberal phases of capitalism: the constant erosion of the policies which give security and promote people's lives, people's reproduction. What we are witnessing is a continuation, and intensification, of the kind of attack that has been taking place for many years now. Consider, for instance, the famous mortgage crisis and the housing crisis of 2008, which involved a major transference of wealth from below to rescue the capitalist class. What we are seeing is a capitalism that is trying to reduce and undermine the services and resources available for our reproduction, and introduce more exploitative forms of work.

Clearly, many jobs will be reorganised on a home basis as this will reduce costs. And much of the cost of production will be carried by the workers themselves. We also see a trend towards sending many women back into the home. For years now social services have been cut or underfunded, and women now have to take care of children. So many will be working from home, adding telework to domestic work. The home will become a really full factory, where women will be doing housework, caring of the children and helping with their schoolwork, while, at the same time, carrying on a job outside the home through telework. This is an escalation of a crisis that women have already been experiencing, being charged with multiple jobs, as wage earners, care workers, educators.

Women have been facing a constant impoverishment, a constant dispossession for some time, as the jobs they find are very poorly paid. The Covid crisis has had disastrous effects. In the United States, an increasing number of people do not have enough food, are unable to pay their rents and risk eviction. But these trends were already there. In the streets of New York, for years now, there have been homeless people, begging for money. These are young people, old people, people who are homeless, but still have jobs. This crisis has been here for a long time, but it is intensifying.

SB: Thinking about political proposals that have reflected on this capitalist escalation, we believe that feminisms in history, as both theoretical proposals and activist proposals, have created different strategies to contest and face this idea of progress. The idea of progress was foundational to the project of modernity and liberalism. What has been the role of female/

feminised labour in the development of progress as the ideological framework of capitalism?

SF: The concept of progress is bankrupt. It is part of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy, which proclaimed that capitalist development would bring prosperity to the world. Behind the idea of progress there was the assumption that social life, beginning with economic activities, would be organised according to rational, scientific principles. The child of the scientific revolution was industry, which opened up immense resources and was supposed to improve all the tasks necessary for our reproduction. This involved a complete devaluation of the past. Improvement was conceived as only occurring in the future; past knowledges, customs were totally devalued.

We have all internalised this idea that somehow it is the future that brings all improvement, new ideas, better forms of life. But what has been hidden are the knowledges that were acquired and produced by people in the past. The devaluation of the past has also concealed the destruction that capitalism has made of previous cultures, of previous social systems, of previous systems of knowledges.

We can see the lies sustaining the idea of progress just by looking at the conditions of women. The history of capitalism (as I have written and said many times) begins with two centuries of witch-hunting. The eighteenth century, which is the century of the alleged great democratic revolution, is a period in which women had no rights, and in both France and England this continued into the nineteenth century, especially

for married women. In England, married women weren't legal persons. You had the system of *femme couverte* (covered woman) – she is covered because she's represented in front of the state by a man, a family member, a tutor. She could not go to court directly, like women in the Middle Ages. She became a kind of minor and she had to be under the tutelage of a man.

Women, as Virginia Woolf and others feminist writers have denounced, have always been excluded from democracy. This of course was even more true for black women, black men. The age of progress was the age of slavery, it was the time when millions of Africans were enslaved. The American plantation, with its slave-based economy, is the essence of progress. As C.L.R. James has pointed out in *The Black Jacobins*, the promoters of the French Revolution were bourgeois entrepreneurs who had built fortunes with the slave trade and in the process had gained the confidence to confront the aristocracy and demand their share of power. So 'progress' is a concept we have to reject and unmask as it has a very destructive history.

SB: Following that line of thought, we have seen how paid or unpaid work is based on a very complex mechanism of hierarchies. How, in your terms, have feminisms shown that up, or how have they redefined established hierarchies by challenging the idea of progress?

SF: Like scholars/activists speaking from the viewpoint of the colonies, or from the history of slavery and institutional racism, feminists have shown that capitalism has not advanced the social position of women. If women over the last two centuries have

gained any rights this is because of the struggles they have made, not because of the ‘enlightenment’ of the capitalist class. The very fact that capitalist development begins with conquest, colonisation, the slave trade, two centuries of witch-hunting makes any idea of progress, for women or any other population, an absurdity. Add the devaluation of reproductive work, the plunder of the environment, a policy of constant warfare and the creation of labour hierarchies and differential labour regimes that have reproduced, coerced, unfree labour in many different forms. Also add the immense efforts the capitalist class has made to isolate people, individualise exploitation, foment a culture of distrust where the other is the enemy, which all contribute to our political paralysis.

In feudal Europe, the serfs provided labour services for the landlords, they were a subjugated population, but, at the same time, they received as their compensation the use of land and other customary rights that gave them direct access to means of reproduction, land and resources. It is only with capitalism that we begin to see a separation between production and reproduction, and the appearance that reproductive activities are not essential, ‘women’s work’, of so little value for the community as to not deserve any compensation. Also, the community that emerged because of collective forms of work and reproduction has continuously been destroyed.

With the rise of capitalism, the reproduction of life, the reproduction of workers and the production of goods have become the carriers of different social relations – reproductive work has become feminised, while production (with exception of the first phase

of the Industrial Revolution) has mostly become a male area. With the rise of capitalism, you have a new division of labour which separated men and women, that separated production and reproduction, in a way which introduced into the community of the oppressed a whole set of hierarchies and divisions and dependencies. Women have become more and more dependent on men, and this has been one of the causes of the increase of domestic violence, as dependence has been trapped in the home. This is the system I have defined as ‘the patriarchy of the wage’.

So, when we look at the idea of progress and capitalist development, we can see that women actually in the transition to capitalism, have lost their autonomy (limited as it was – in the late Middle Ages in Europe and in Latin America, I should say Abya Yala, before the conquest). This is what I have argued in *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Clearly, we have to be careful with generalisations. In the case of Black women, for instance, they have never been able to rely on the male wage and have had no choice but to accept the most exploited jobs, like paid domestic service. This is why in the struggle of domestic workers today, many of them make the connection between this work and slavery.

As we well know, even when women have had a job outside the home, it has always been something marginal, underpaid, often an extension of housework, which did not give them real autonomy benefits, no vacations, no social services to rely upon. The devaluation of the woman as social subjects, has been continuous throughout the history of capitalism and in many ways continues today, and to a great extent it is rooted

in the devaluation of reproductive activities. Despite the celebration of women's emancipation through participation in the job market, in reality the majority get jobs that are so poorly paid they cannot make do, unless they take on loans. In the US, this explains why women who have paid jobs carry the highest debt burden; they have to use their wage as collateral for loans, which are always at very high interest rates. So, they work and work and never have the kind of security and autonomy they are seeking. The way progress is sold is very far from the actual experiences of women.

As I mentioned, since the beginning of Covid two million women in the US have lost their jobs, mostly because they did not have access to childcare. They had no choice, they had to be there, and also help with schoolwork. Now they have to use the internet to carry on with their employment - that's another cost for the families. First, they have to buy a computer, then they have to get access to the internet. And somebody has to help the children, with schooling and also to cope with depression. Almost every night on TV we have some programme about children being traumatised: hearing about people dying, people's fear, wearing the mask, and, above all, being stuck all day, week after week, at home; not being able to go to school, meet their friends, be with other children. Imagine the work that women have to do: keeping up with their job, doing the domestic work, now amplified because you have to wash and clean, wash and disinfect, all the time. And then there is the emotional work.

This is a time when women should take action, launch a debate about what is to be done. We cannot expect - contrary to what some feminists so often told us - that

going out of the home, getting a job and joining a union is going to solve the problem.

SB: I agree, completely. Now, in confinement, reproductive work - work that was invisible - is at the centre. While planning this ePub, we as editors acknowledged that there is no way that reproductive work and care can degrowth. Indeed, it has had to increase on so many levels during the pandemic. But in this particular moment, when care is at the centre, we are seeing how the vocabularies and reflections about care developed in the last decades by feminist movements and theorists like yourself are being overused and overexposed publicly by neoliberal governments and big companies. What are for you the risks with these 'rhetorics of care' that are emerging?

SF: What we see today is an escalation of what was already there, just intensified. The language of care that has become very popular in the feminist movement is not helpful. What we need is not a glorification of the tasks we do, but a change in the material conditions of our lives. We have to say, 'reproductive work is essential work'. But with nurses, retail workers, teachers, applauses and words of thanks are not enough. We need to see a change that liberates women's time, expands the resources to which they have access, creates more cooperative structures so that reproduction is not just a woman's job. Unfortunately, this work has been concealed, marginalised and degraded even in the rhetoric of the left. They always looked at housewives, women who only worked in the home, as backward women, that it would be impossible to organise them. We have to reappropriate the discourse of 'care' and reproduction to show who is benefiting from it and

how much wealth is actually being accumulated at our expense.

What would the capitalist class do if they had to provide the infrastructure to enable millions of people to go to work outside of the home every day? How much investment would they have to make? They save billions because women are at home doing all this work – preparing people for their jobs, sending them out fresh to be consumed again by the labour process. They come home and they have to be patched together, emotionally, sexually, etc. And then they go and come back again, consumed, exhausted. I think it's time to break this cycle.

And, also to say, that hiring other women to do the work is not a solution. We should fight so that no woman has to leave a country and the people she loves to support herself and her family. Clearly, we need to struggle so that migrant domestic workers obtain better conditions of work, and to establish that their struggle is our struggle as well. But this cannot be a solution, as it also creates hierarchies among women and a situation of 'coloniality', given that many domestic workers today are migrant women, who come from countries which have been impoverished due to the expansion of capitalist relations and the recolonisation of their countries.

I look forward to a movement of women in which those who are doing work for pay and those who are doing work without pay struggle together for a common cause. The Covid crisis can be such an opportunity. We have to create spaces where women can come together and discuss what to do. To decide what we

need and what kind of organisational effort to force a rechannelling of the social wealth, away from war, militarisation, prisons, for instance. We need to re-direct what they are currently using for destructive objectives and put it at the service of our reproduction.

SB: Indeed! My next question has to do with these movements of organised domestic workers that have emerged recently with great strength in different countries. We have seen you collaborating with some of these groups and supporting domestic and care workers. For example, in the recent event organised by Museo Reina Sofía, *¿Quién cuida a la cuidadora? Capitalismo, reproducción y cuarentena* (Who cares for the carers? Capitalism, reproduction and quarantine), in which different representatives of these groups from Honduras, Colombia and Spain debated and exchanged within the scope of building up an international network of domestic workers. What are the main challenges for these political organisations of care workers? And what alliances do you imagine for these movements?

SF: I've been very inspired by the organisation of domestic workers, beginning with *Territorio Doméstico* in Madrid. These are women I admire and always learn from. They show that without this work nothing else can take place. And in a way they have continued the feminist struggle over reproduction that many feminists abandoned in the 1980s to concentrate all their efforts on gaining access to male-dominated work sectors. The feminist movement then owes a great debt to domestic workers' organisations, because they are opening up a space that is crucial for every woman. They have reopened negotiations with

the state and with the employer on the question of domestic work.

Ideally, the feminist movement will support their struggle and see it as *our* struggle; see it as an important moment for redefining domestic work, and turn the tables on the employers to show them just how much they owe all the women who have made it possible for them to continue their economic activity. I think this is fundamental for the feminist movement today: to join and support this struggle and to see how we can articulate a broad programme that revalues reproduction, not by words, but by changing its material conditions in such a way that increases our autonomy and breaks the isolation in which this work today is performed. We need to go beyond the symbolism of Mother's Day, which has never changed women's lives.

I must stress that when I speak of 'revaluing reproduction', I don't mean glorifying domestic work, especially as it is now. I mean that to place the focus on reproduction is to embrace a different logic from that which moves the capitalist system. It is a logic that places our well-being at the centre of our lives, at the centre of social action. It means to revalue our lives and refuse to subordinate them to the accumulation of capitalist wealth. It is a strategic move in a feminist struggle, which is not interested in equality with men or getting a better foot in the capitalist system. It is about changing power relations. And, most crucially, seeing that reproduction is far broader than domestic work. Reproduction connects the home to the fields, housework and agriculture, child-raising and caring for the environment, the work of healthcare

and the work of fighting against the poisoning of the soil and the waters.

SB: Finally, throughout this conversation you have addressed tangentially other ways of thinking. Degrowth thinking is a way of looking to the future of our society and its relationship with technology and nature. Do you think it is possible to look back into history/herstory to find other ways to inspire a progressive degrowth?

SF: There is no return to the past. At the same time, we need to confront some very important realities. For instance, when we look at the technology presently used, including the internet, we see it has an enormous cost for the natural environment, as well as the social environment. The massive programmes of land expropriation that are taking place across the world, especially in the so-called global south, is carried out by mining companies extracting minerals necessary for digital technologies. The coltan, the tungsten, etc. So, what are we going to do in terms of transforming our society? Is it conceivable that we continue to have this kind of exploitation of nature in a non-capitalist world? Not to mention the inequalities it creates.

We have to redefine our needs, keeping in mind the cost of the activities we engage in for the natural environment and for other people across the planet. Marx imagined a day when much of the labour necessary for our reproduction would be done by machines, so that we could be free for higher types of activities: philosophy, poetry, music ... But, I ask, 'who will take care of the children? Machines?' The idea that the world expansion of technology will be a key element of a

non-capitalist, socially just society is troublesome. We need technology, so the question is what type of technology? But we cannot imagine that we can mechanise all reproductive activities. We must also consider that many forms of work once liberated from the constraints that capitalism puts on them can actually be creative. The work of reproduction can be a creative activity, when it is not carried out in conditions of misery, of constant repetition, of total isolation. A debate on these questions has to be part of the process of social transformation.

SB: And because the idea of sustainable development is no longer believable. It has become a contradiction in itself. There is no way development in capitalist terms can be sustainable. In relation to your considerations on connectivity, the Cloud as an immaterial space is a fiction. We only have to think of all the cables around the world and across the oceans and the immense storage and buildings of servers. They have a completely material existence, but are hidden from the general public.

SF: Yes, they're promising that we can have constant growth and green growth, and that's absurd.

SB: L'Internationale has been working through different projections of this in the previous issue, *Austerity and Utopia*. And how the use of these terms is sometimes tricky.

SF: Yes, we don't want utopia to be a process of impoverishment. On the other hand, we must redefine what is 'wealth'. For instance, we see today in the US that the people dying from Covid-19 are mostly those who are breathing polluted air. An area of high Covid mortality

in New York is the Bronx, which for years has been a disaster place in terms of air pollution. The children born there, most of them Black children, suffer from asthma. So, a pre-existing condition is racism; social inequality and the destruction of the environment are 'pre-existing conditions'. In fact, it's one-to-one between the places that are most polluted on Earth and the places where people who have been systematically devalued, degraded, are forced to live. In the Bronx, children have for years been suffering from asthma, and now people are dying because of Covid.

We can see the continuity between social injustice and environmental degradation. It cannot continue. Today so much of our technological development is made at the cost of what they call 'sacrifice zones'. They actually have the courage to speak of 'sacrifice zones', areas that have the highest rate of contamination, where life is consciously destroyed, sacrificed. But these are also areas in which people are living – it's not that the sacrifice zones are in the desert. They are highly inhabited. It is the murderous nature of this system that forces people to live in places where their health is destroyed daily.

We need to make this moment a moment of change. There's no normality to go back to. We must fight for significant, qualitative change and create something opposed to the logic of capitalist relations, where, in different ways, the life of most people is considered 'sacrificable'.



nora chipaumire, Ari Marcopoulos. #PUNK 100% POP *N!GGA. 2018.

Performance photos and audio recording SIDE B, 16:37 min. Screening on the Internationale Online from 17 February to 17 May 2021.

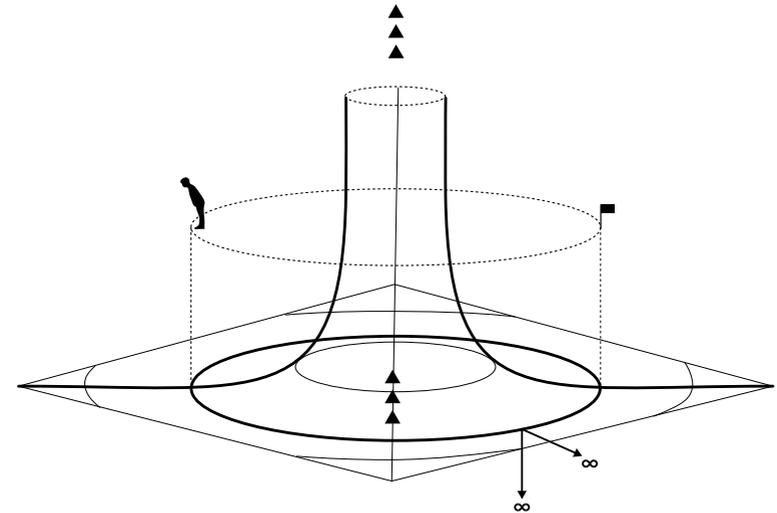
NEW
EXTRACTIVISM.
ASSEMBLAGE OF
CONCEPTS AND
ALLEGORIES

Vladan Joler

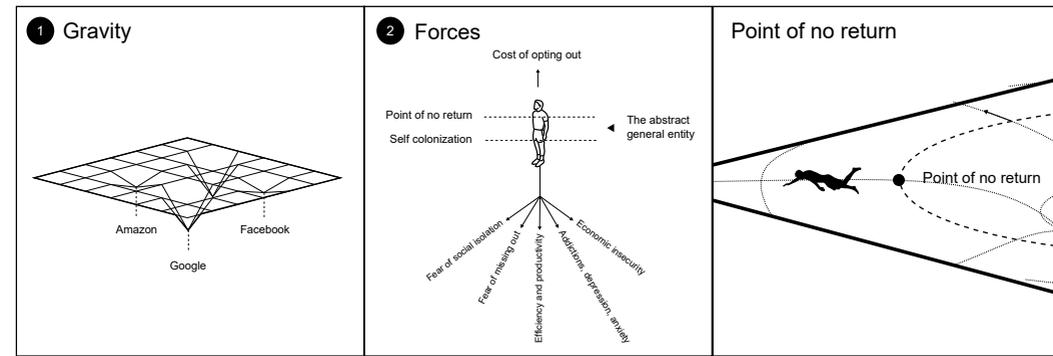
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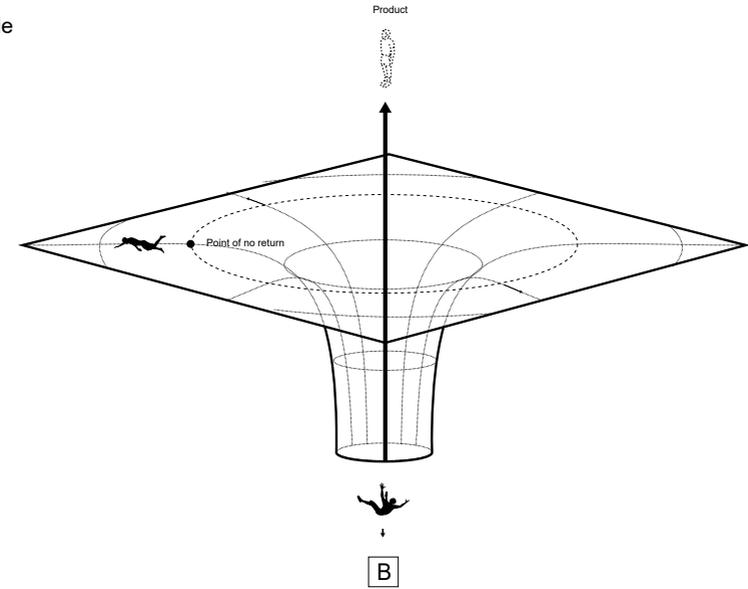
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GUIDE



3 Black hole



This is an assemblage—an assemblage of concepts and allegories.

The word “assemblage” is usually understood as a collection or gathering of things or people, a machine or object made of pieces fitted together, or a work of art made by grouping together found or unrelated objects. This map and accompanying footnotes are precisely that: one big messy assemblage of different concepts and ideas, assembled into one semi-coherent picture or let us say a map, a world view.

The concepts presented are mostly represented here visually in the form of allegories. Dictionaries define allegory as a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one. All of these allegories and concepts together, joined in the form of an assemblage, create together a blueprint of a machine-like superstructure, or a super allegory. In that sense, what we have here is an almost fractal allegorical structure—an allegory within an allegory within an allegory.

This work takes three forms that hardly can function independently.

Map - that attempts to present the superstructure or overall view;
 Guide - that deals with the individual concepts and allegories;
 Footnotes - textual descriptions of the presented concepts.

1 Gravity

French artist Louise Drulhe¹ introduces the notion of gravity in thinking about the topography of the internet. Like Einstein's theory of relativity, massive objects curve the space and time of this virtual universe proportionally to their weight, defined by the number of their users and content, curve the space and time of this virtual universe. So we can think of massive monopolies and conglomerates such as Google and Facebook as enormous black holes that, with their gravity, create a field so intense that it attracts and swallows the content and users.

2 Forces

We can claim that many other potential vectors and social forces contribute to that gravitational force. The fear of social isolation and missing out; economic and professional insecurity; unrealistic expectations of efficiency and productivity in the adapt-or-die environment; tailored addictions, depression and anxieties; reputation economy systems. These are just some of the other vectors that constitute social forces that keep us, with or without our wish, attached to those platforms. Opting out has become a privilege that requires a supernatural human being who can economically afford to opt-out and exist at the level of nirvana-like strength and peace to overcome all of those challenges. “The social cost of opting out has become so high that opting out is essentially a fantasy”(Brunton and Nissenbaum).²

3 Black holes

Our imaginary hero, or what Federico Campana will call the abstract general entity (AGE),³ is swimming against one of those platform's gravitational force. As s/he floats along, imperceptibly, the stream gets faster and faster even if they can't see the hole yet. They could swim to safety until, without even noticing it, they cross the point of no return. As they glide towards the singularity defined by the mass of these giants, users and content pass beyond the event horizon, the imaginary boundary in time/space, beyond which there is no return to the outer part of this universe. The event horizon defines the line after which the social and economic price of leaving those platforms is becoming too high. No matter how fast they try to swim now, the stream will pull them towards the center of the black hole. Without even noticing, this story's actor is now falling towards the hole into a new allegory—the cave.

1. Louise Drulhe, Critical Atlas of Internet, <https://louisedrulhe.fr/internet-atlas/>

2. Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum, Obfuscation: A User's Guide for Privacy and Protest (2015)

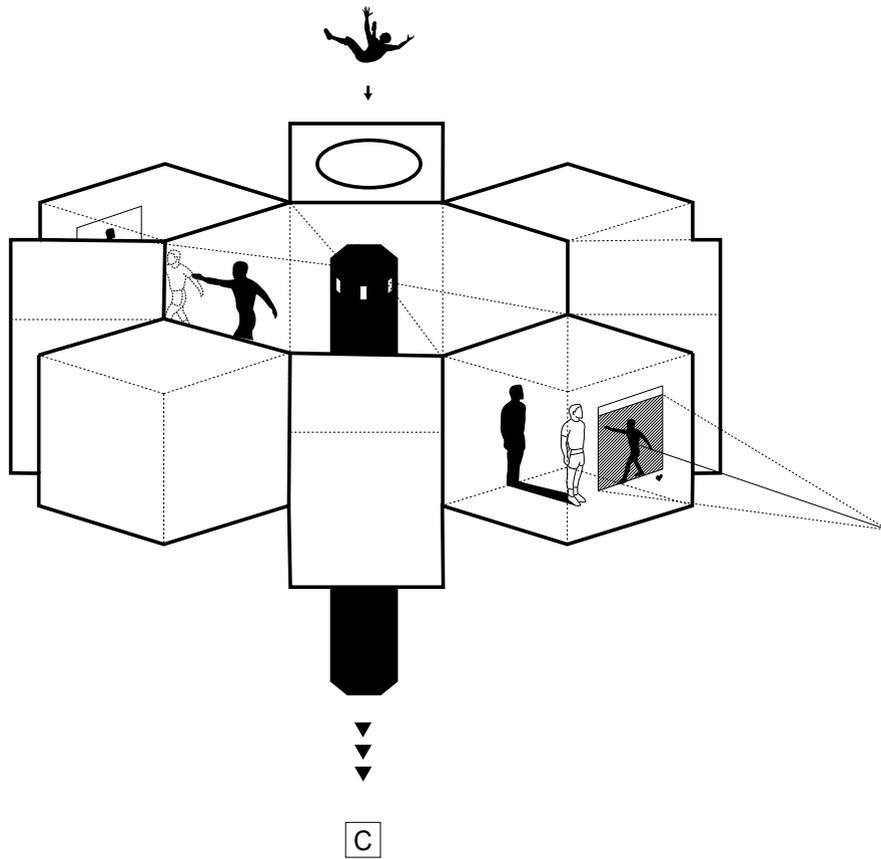
3. “The crumbling of subjectivity under Technic is accompanied by the emergence of a new existential figure: the abstract general entity (AGE)” Federico Campana, Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality (2018)

4 Allegory of the cave

A

5 Platopticon

B



4 Allegory of the cave

What takes place at the bottom of this metaphorical black hole can be described through Plato's allegory of the cave.⁴ Plato describes a group of people who spend their entire life chained to cave walls looking at a blank wall. These people are watching the shadows of real objects projected on this wall, giving them names and meanings. In our story, the script and directing of this performance of shadows are entrusted to human-algorithmic machines that regulate, filter, censor and moderate the projected content on the walls of the cave. The existing elements and content that exist outside this cave and horizon of events create an information flow, a theatre of shadows. Or, what Guy Debord⁵ will describe as: "an immense accumulation of spectacles consisting of images, sounds, text, emotions and meanings. All that once was directly lived has become a mere representation".

4. Plato, The Allegory of the Cave, Republic, VII 514 a, 2 to 517 a, 7
 5. Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (1967)
 6. Jeremy Bentham, The Panopticon Writings (1787)

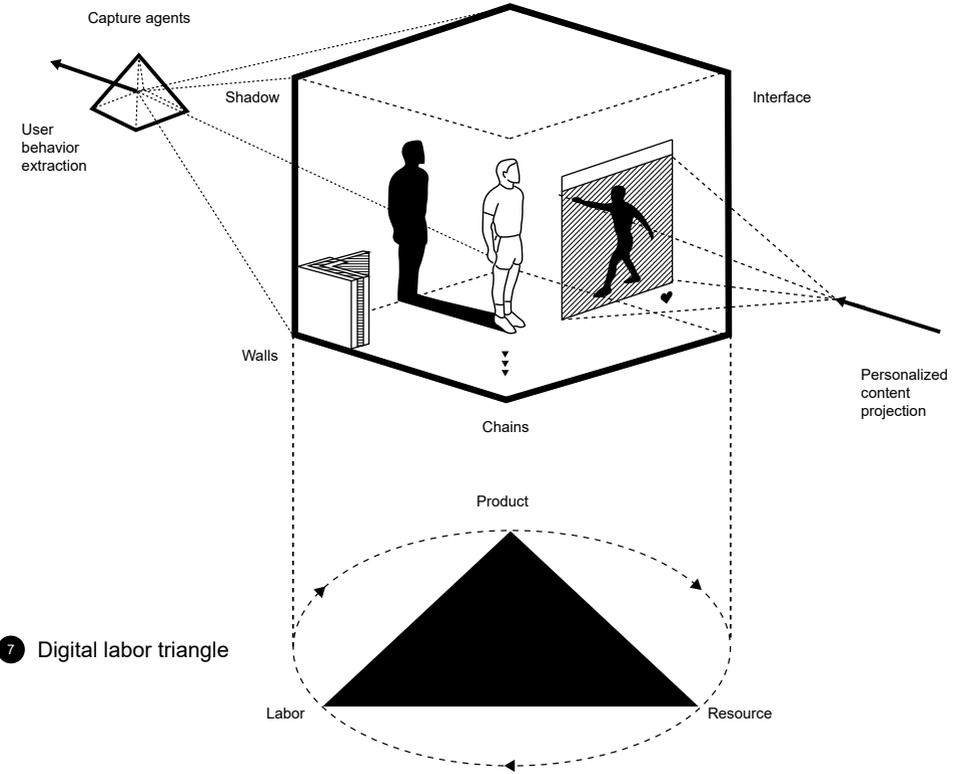
5 Platopticon

However, this is not a single play, but a multitude of simultaneous and different performances. The gravity of these techno giants hold billions of users/workers/products at the bottom of those caves. Each user detained in their own cave is exposed to a designed play adapted only to them. This self-centered personal space is filled with images and meanings selected by algorithms partly with respect to its affective and cognitive reactions. The user is in a specific closed circle, communicating with oneself in a particular form of self-stimulation and exposed to a constant flow of spectacle. Therefore, this cave or prison cell is a place of pleasure from which, as in Plato's cave, the prisoner does not even have the will to come out.

In this assemblage of allegories, millions of caves or prison cells form the unique and invisible panopticon⁶ structure. The central tower of this structure has two main functions: (1) to project the content on the walls of the caves and (2) to surveil and capture the digital shadows of the prisoners reflected on the opposite wall.

6 Cave Architecture

Cave



7 Digital labor triangle

6 Cave Architecture

The cave and tower walls are constructed of multiple opaque layers and built mostly by ghost work⁷ or invisible labor. The bricks of this structure are made of black boxes, closed code and hardware, glued together with the invisible network infrastructure. They are covered with layers of corporate secrets, patents and copyrights.

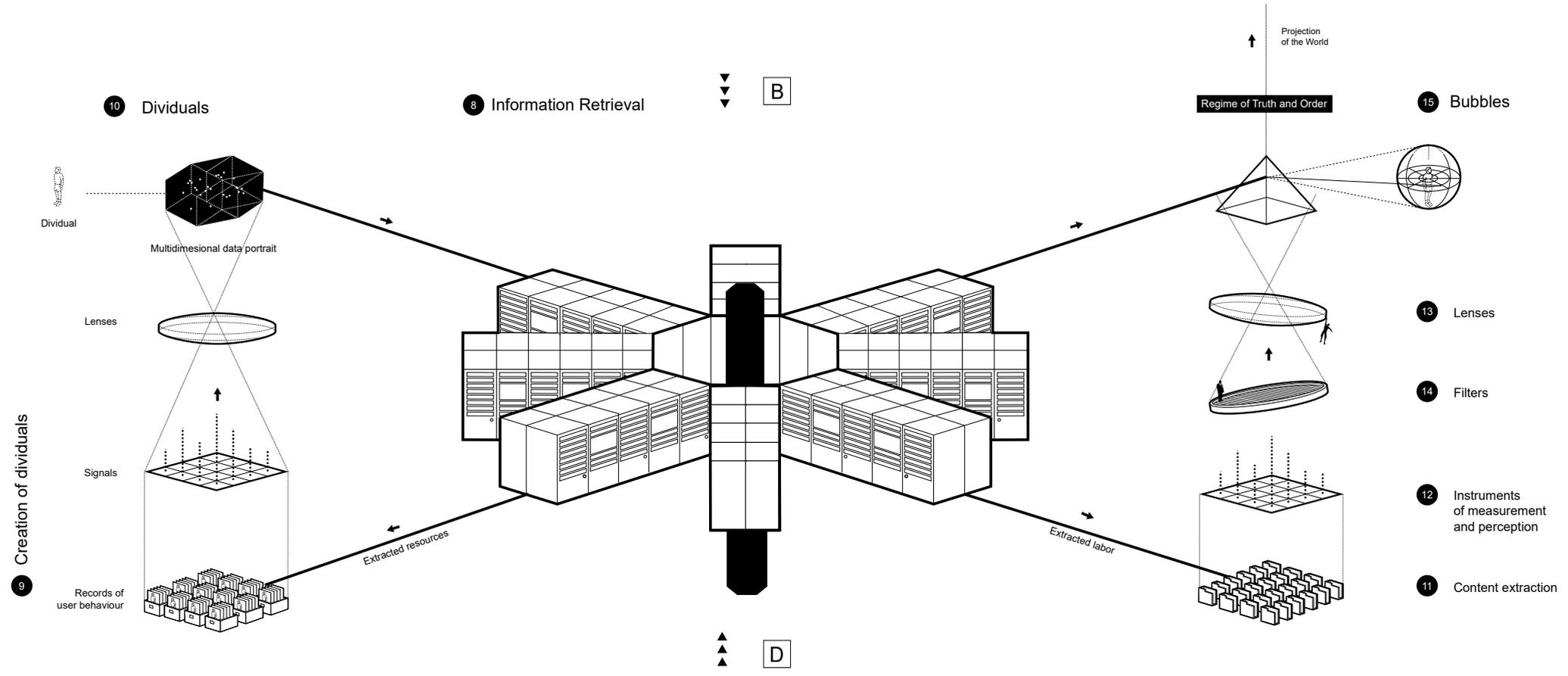
The prisoner is standing in the middle of the cave facing the interface. Interfaces are framing and structuring the projected algorithmic spectacle of images. The interface is the office cubicle of immaterial labor. Even though they are a direct manifestation of rules, regulations and taxonomies, they successfully obscure what is hidden beneath them. They define directly or indirectly what we can or cannot do. They are both tools and discursive frames. They are instituted as an order of discourse and embodiment of the discipline power of the platform.

The spectacle of a constant flow of information projected through the interface creates a digital shadow on the opposite wall of the cave. The projected digital shadow on the wall is a resource field where thousands of capture agents, tentacles of the rhizomatic surveillance complex, extract information.

7 Digital labor triangle

This cave is not only a panopticon prison cell, but it carries out the function of a factory hall and a resource extraction apparatus. The prisoner/worker performs their three-fold function as a worker, a resource and a product⁸. Cave prisoners constantly attached to digital platforms carry out different forms of mostly immaterial and rarely paid labor such as scrolling, liking, sharing, commenting, or creating content (labor side of this triangle). At the same time, every movement or emotional reaction is being recorded continuously. This data is becoming a resource for different forms of exploitation. Finally, by consuming the content projected on the walls of the cave, this user is ultimately a final product sold to the advertisers.⁹

7. Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri, Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass (2019).
 8. Christian Fuchs, Digital Labour and Karl Marx (2014).
 9. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media (1988)



8 Information Retrieval

From each cell-cave and through the core of the panopticon tower, streams of information are flowing into one of the central structures of this image—the data bank. In the Orwellian universe, this structure is known as the Records Department within the Ministry of Truth.¹⁰ In Terry Gilliam's Brazil¹¹—Information Retrieval. The data bank is not just the engine room, but the power itself.

From here, we are examining three processes crucial for this story. On one side, extracted, stored and analyzed personal data is shaping the multidimensional portrait of the individual. On the second, all the products of the user's labor are being stored, analyzed and ranked, to form the information spectacle of images, meanings, and reputations.

Furthermore, in the third one, this structure lies upon the top of the exploitation of human minds, bodies and nature.

9 Creation of Dividual

In his famous essay "Postscript on the Societies of Control", Deleuze¹² envisions a form of power that is no longer based on the production of individuals but on the modulation of dividuals. Individuals are deconstructed into numeric footprints, or dividuals, that are administered through "data banks". Our online behavior is captured, processed, and deconstructed into statistical vectors, clusters, patterns and anomalies. Each move we make is carefully analyzed by thousands of mathematical functions, algorithms and machine learning systems. This system does not see us through linear narratives emerging from our browsing behavior, metadata, or movements in physical space but as n-dimensional statistical projections. Each and every one of our clicks sharpens the resolution and complexity of this abstract and constantly changing statistical portrait or data body.

10 Multidimensional portraits

This multidimensional data portraits of the individual, consisting of millions of data points in hundreds of dimensions, can be seen as what Deleuze will name dividual. "A physically embodied human subject that is endlessly divisible and reducible to data representations via the modern technologies of control".¹³ The Critical Art Ensemble is describing this data body as "the fascist sibling of the virtual body, a much more highly developed virtual form, and one that exists in complete service to the corporate and police state".¹⁴

The full picture of our dividual being or data body is not centralized in one place but is spread across hundreds of data centers in the rhizomatic assemblage of the surveillance economy and government actors. This non-heterogeneous and dispersed assemblage portrait exists through the system of data dealers, the official and unofficial exchange of data in constant flow.

As described by Marco Deseris in The Politics of Condi- viduality "...dividual is always open to interaction, always ready to be detached from and attached to other dividuals. Thus, as compared with the individual—which prides itself of its unique properties—the dividual has the advantage of being combinable with other divisible beings that share some properties with it."¹⁵ In the words of Matteo Pasquinelli, "The dividuals do not simply describe an atomized subject but make possible the posthuman consolidation of collective agents as condividuals, or as superjects."¹⁶

11 Content extraction

All products of digital labor (comments, texts, books, images, videos) are being harvested by content platforms and a multitude of different capture agents. Each web page or other piece of content that is being captured "in the wild" is rendered and analyzed. This content is being extracted into hundreds of different signals processed through the algorithmic lenses that will later determine the position and role of this page in their Order of Things and their Projection of the World.

12 Instruments of measurement and perception

Collected content and extracted data become a permanent corporate resource for creating multidimensional, dynamic, complex topologies in which every piece of data becomes an object that is contextually linked to other objects. Within this map, this new meta-territory, crawl hundreds of different mathematical functions, algorithms, and neural networks that we can call as in the Nooscope¹⁷ diagram and essay: "Instruments of measurement and perception".

13 Lenses

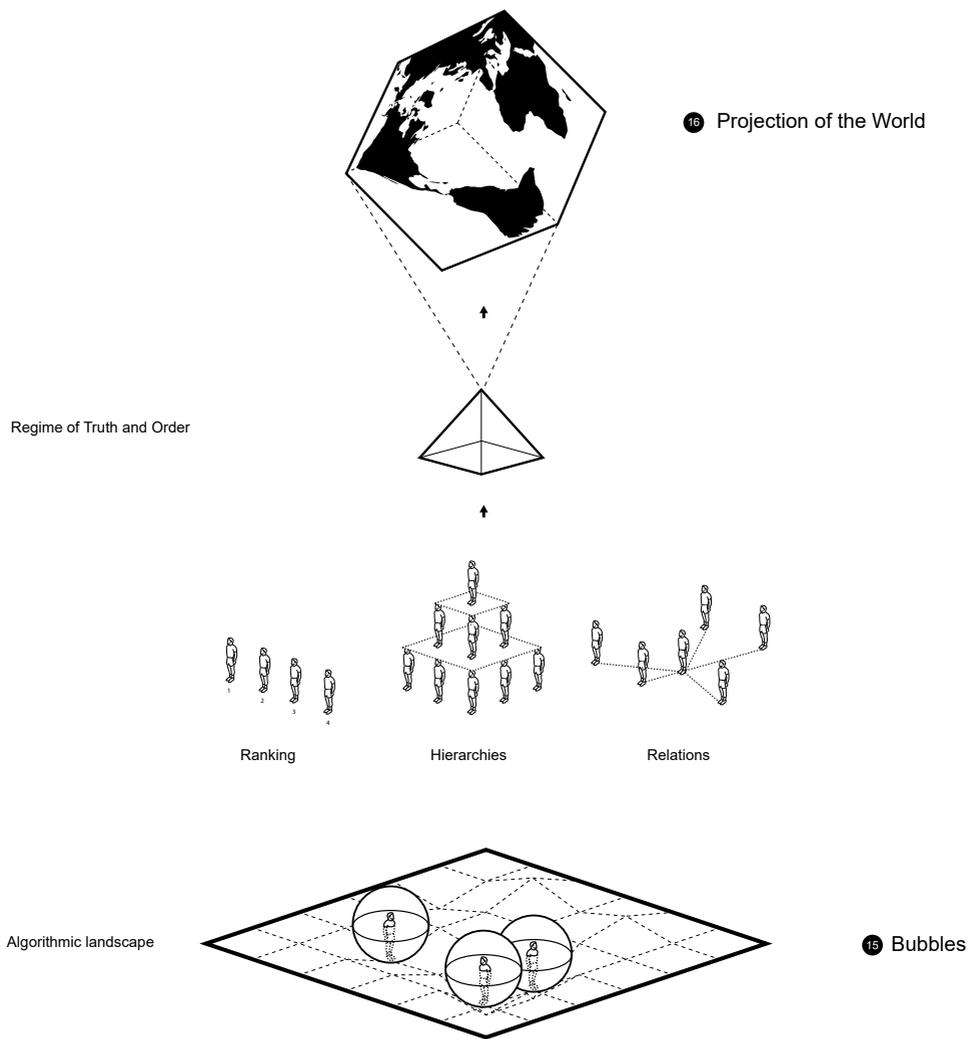
"Instruments of measurement and perception always come with inbuilt aberrations. In the same way that the lenses of microscopes and telescopes are never perfectly curvilinear and smooth, these logical lenses embody faults and biases. To understand machine learning and algorithms and register their impact on society is to study the degree by which social data are diffracted and distorted by these lenses."¹⁸ The shape of the algorithmic lenses is carefully crafted to project the image that is in accordance with the platform's financial interest and political goals and values.

14 Filters

Aside from instruments of digital truth and order embodied in their algorithms and neural networks, platforms often imply direct rules and regulations. They have direct power of regulation of what can be seen or said, what kind of content can and cannot exist in their universe. Here we are visually representing those rules and regulations as filters. Similarly to the algorithmic lenses, the fabric of those filters is crafted according to the platforms' financial interests and political goals and values.

10. George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949)
 11. Terry Gilliam, Brazil, (1985)
 12. Gilles Deleuze, Postscript on the Societies of Control (1992)
 13. (Ibid.)
 14. (Ibid.)

14. Critical Art Ensemble "Flesh Machine: Cyborgs, Designer Babies, Eugenic Consciousness." (1998) <http://www.critical-art.net/books/flesh/>
 15. Marco Deseris, The Politics of Condi- viduality (2018)
 16. Matteo Pasquinelli, "Metadata Society", keyword entry in: Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (eds) Posthuman Glossary, London: Bloomsbury, 2018.
 17. Matteo Pasquinelli and Vladan Joler, "The Nooscope Manifested: Artificial Intelligence as Instrument of Knowledge Extractivism", visual essay, KIM HfG Karlsruhe and Share Lab, 2020. <http://nooscope.ai>
 18. (Ibid.)



15 Bubbles

The flow of the spectacle is not a single stream but billions of personalized streams of images, sounds and meanings. Based on the multidimensional portraits of the individuals, algorithms, and neural networks are carefully directing personalized plays for each user. In this simulacrum,¹⁹ our main actor is a center of a small universe in which his or her opinion and attitude matters. Users trapped in their bubbles/caves are positioned within different algorithmic and statistical territories. The mountains and valleys of those multidimensional ever-changing invisible landscapes are clustering individual bubbles and creating new relations, taxonomies, and ontologies.

19. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981)

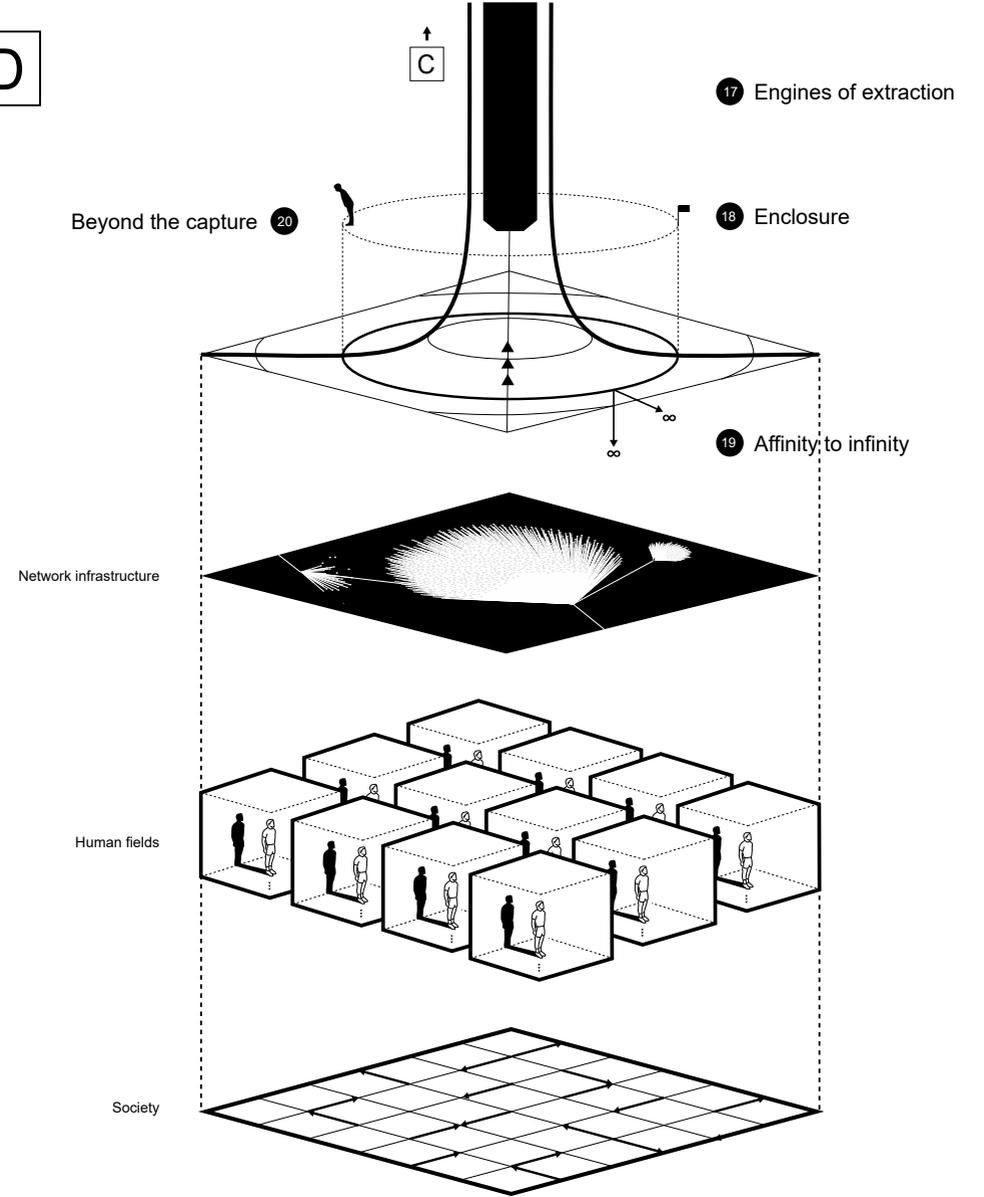
20. "Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" Foucault, in Rabinow (1991)

21. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967)

16 Projection of the World

Instruments of measurement and perception are ranking defining hierarchies and relations between content, users and meaning. They define the digital regime of truth and order.²⁰ This regime is a prism through which the world is projected in the form of the constant stream of spectacles²¹ on the walls of the caves.

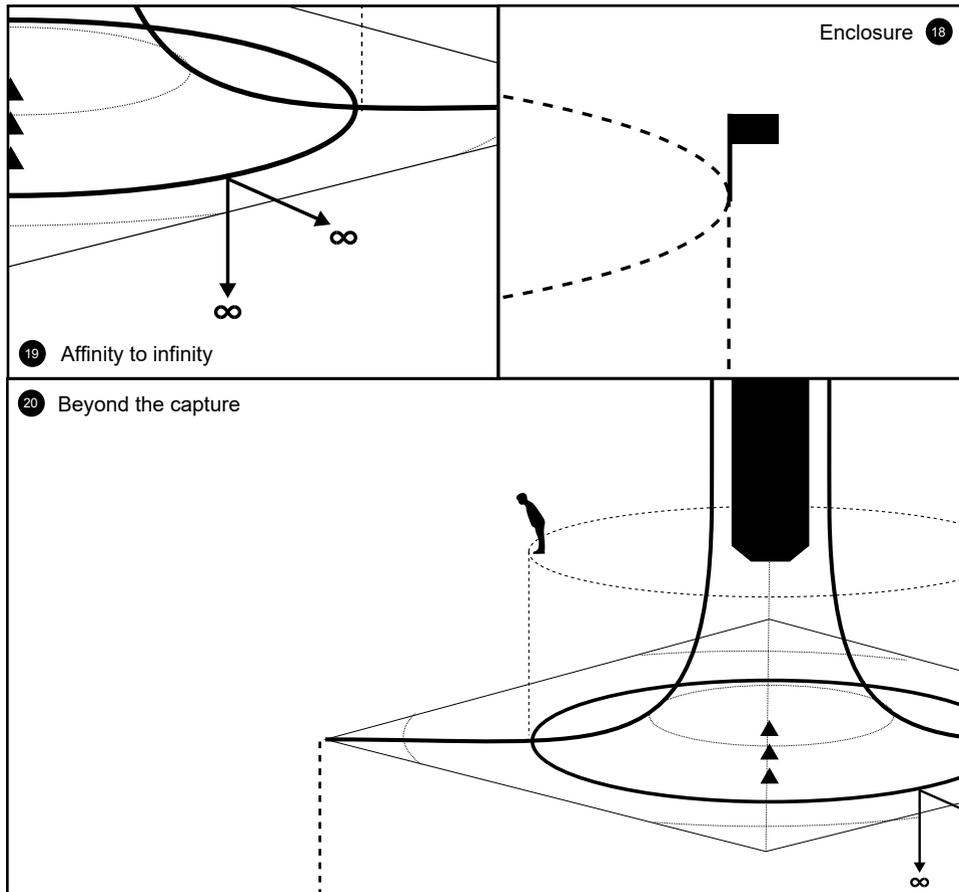
D



17 Engines of extraction

Empowered by the digital extractivism tools of the information age, everything becomes a potential frontier for expansion and extraction. From the depth of DNA code in every single cell of the human organism, to vast frontiers of human emotions, behavior and social relations, to nature as a whole—everything becomes the territory for the new extractivism. As we point out in the *Anatomy of an AI*, at this moment in the 21st century, we see a new form of extractivism that is well underway: one that reaches into the furthest corners of the biosphere and the deepest layers of human cognitive and affective being. Thousands of corporate and government actors compete to stick their flags into the uncharted territories of our behavioral, emotional and cognitive landscapes, invading deeper and deeper into our bodies and minds. Once the territory is invaded, the process of enclosure and exploitation is established.

22. Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler, "Anatomy of an AI System: The Amazon Echo As An Anatomical Map of Human Labor, Data and Planetary Resources," AI Now Institute and Share Lab, (September 7, 2018) <https://anatomyof.ai>



Enclosure 18

19 Affinity to infinity

20 Beyond the capture

18 Enclosure

"The 'enclosure' of biodiversity and knowledge is the final step in a series of enclosures that began with the rise of colonialism",²³ Vandana Shiva explains. However, new forms of extractivism are expanding into the territories far behind the biodiversity and knowledge enclosure. This is why we are not speaking anymore just about the knowledge economy but about the attention economy, emotion economy, and many other "new economies" being born from the invasion of new territories of extraction.

19 Affinity to infinity

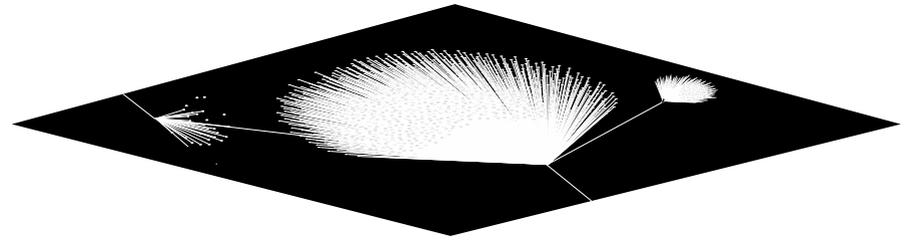
In his essay "Presenting The Unrepresentable: The Sublime",²⁴ Jean-François Lyotard introduces the phrase "affinity to infinity." In his view, the fields of contemporary art, techno-science and capitalism have the same aspiration: to push boundaries towards a potentially infinite horizon. In the transition to the information age, capitalism was given a chance to satisfy its affinity for infinity, to form and conquer an infinite number of new territories, to create new mechanisms for the accumulation of capital within these new spaces and to formulate new forms of exploitation. Here we see a contemporary embodiment of the story "On Exactitude in Science,"²⁵ written by Borges in 1946. Whether we talk about indexing of the entire online world, digitizing all the books that have been printed so far, mapping the entire globe or mapping people through their profiles, we talk about the tendency of those companies, in their affinity to infinity, to create the maps that cover the entire Empire.

20 Beyond the capture

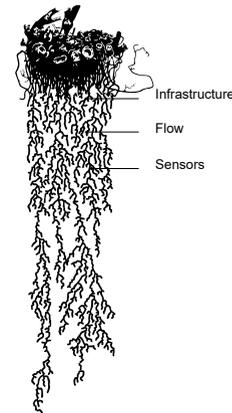
We are standing at the imaginary edge and looking into the land beyond the limits of extraction. The land outside their capacity to capture, conquer and commodify. Is there any word or meaning that is not captured by this gigantic meta-structure and the millions of synthetic spiders and sensors recording multiple aspects of reality? How can we investigate but not harm those fragile words or meanings that somehow escaped the capture process? How can we speak about them without exposing and capturing them? How do we care for and cultivate ecologies that exist beyond the border of capture?

23. Vandana Shiva, *The Enclosure and Recovery of The Commons: Biodiversity, Indigenous Knowledge, and Intellectual Property Rights* (1997).
 24. Jean Francois Lyotard, "Presenting the Unrepresentable: The Sublime," *Artforum*, April 1982.
 25. Jorge Luis Borges, *On Exactitude in Science* (1946)

Network



21 Rhizomatic surveillance



Rhizome



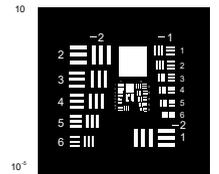
Network of entangled surveillance systems

21 Rhizomatic surveillance

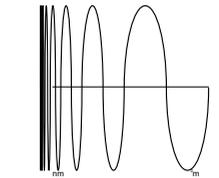
The planetary scale surveillant assemblage²⁶ is one of the critical infrastructures behind new extractivism practices. Thousands of corporate and government actors are independent of each other, collecting information about us. Through the invisible network of data dealers, public and not public partnerships, those pieces of information are in a constant flow forming one functional entity. Surveillant assemblage can be seen as a rhizomatic structure described by Deleuze and Guattari.²⁷

26. Kevin D. Haggerty Richard V. Ericson, *The surveillant assemblage*, (2003)
 27. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980)

22 Anatomy of a capture agent



Resolution

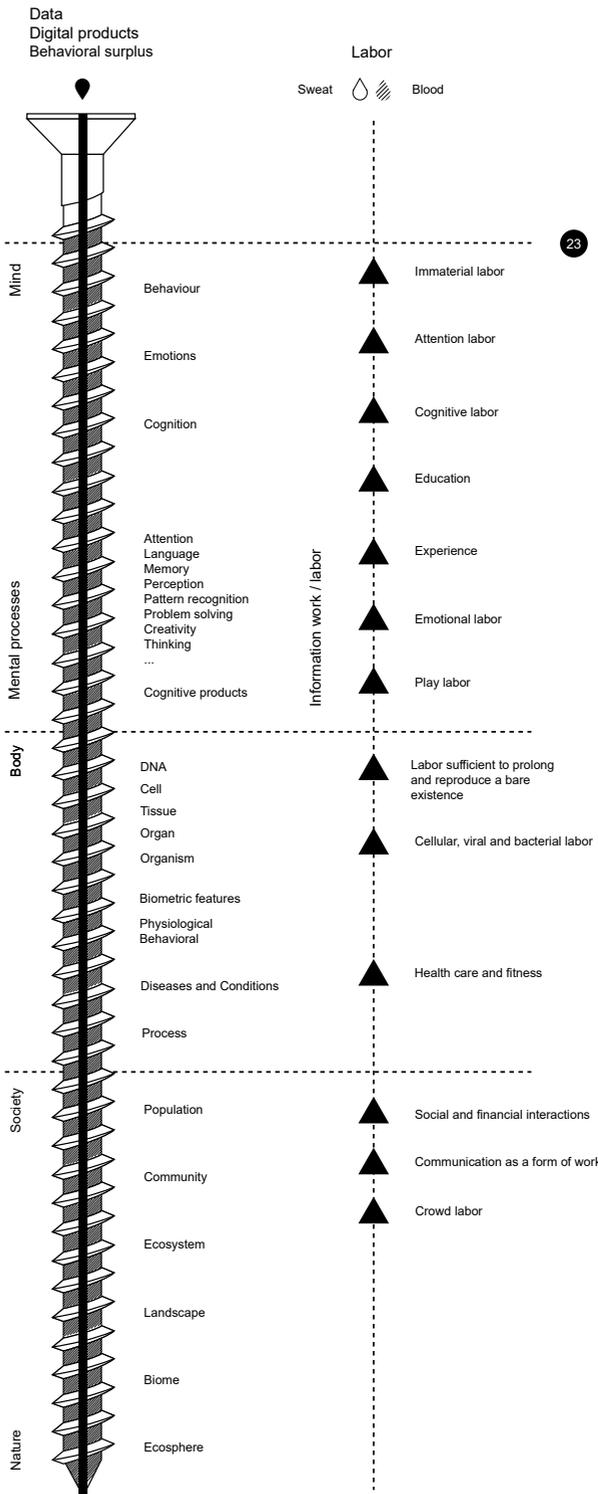
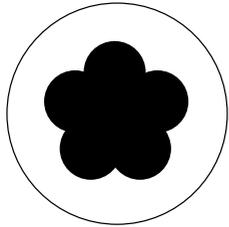


Spectrum

22 Capture agents

At the end of each of the rhizome's roots, the tentacles of the planetary surveillance rhizome, there are one or many sensors. These capture agents can take many forms and sizes. From the tiny pieces of code, crawlers that wander the web collecting information about each web page, over the sensors catching heartbeats and surveillance cameras capturing our faces, to the complex network of satellites orbiting Earth and locating devices. They can see reality through a full range of the electromagnetic spectrum: from gamma rays and x-rays, through infrared and visible light, to micro and radio waves. They can be invisible like a Facebook pixel or massive like a 500m wide radio telescope.

Data extraction

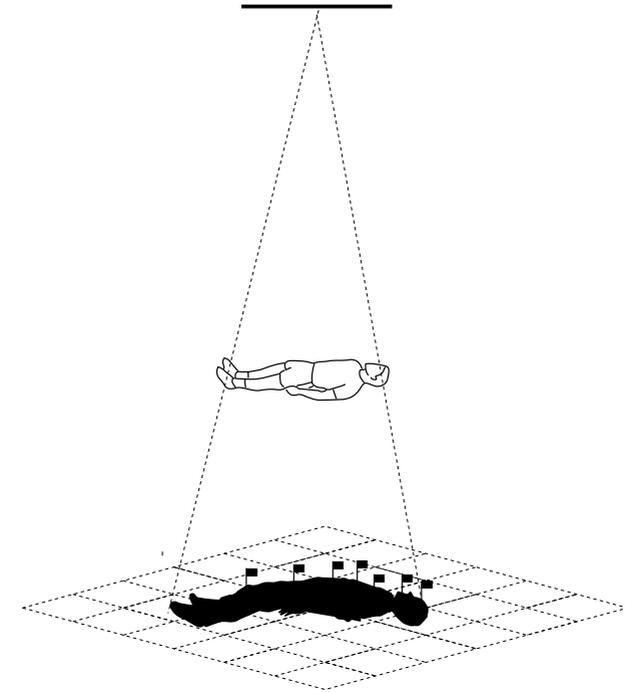


23 Body and mind as territory

In our anthropocentric world, the territory of the human body and mind is one of the most explored and exploited extraction stratum. The process of quantification is reaching into the human affective, cognitive and physical worlds. Every form of biodata—including forensic, biometric, sociometric and psychometric – are being captured and logged into databases for AI training, psychological profiling, nano targeting and many other forms of data exploitation.

This crusade is not just about the quantity of data but also about the quality and diversity of data in order to achieve a full spectrum of color and resolution in our multidimensional portraits that they are painting. Furthermore, as Pasquinelli²⁸ pointed out, the process of extraction of “analytical intelligence” from the most diverse forms of human labor and the transfer of such intelligence into a machine is another crucial part of the process.

28. Matteo Pasquinelli and Vladan Joler, “The Nooscope Manifested: Artificial Intelligence as Instrument of Knowledge Extractivism”, visual essay, KIM HfG Karlsruhe and Share Lab, 1 May 2020. <http://nooscope.ai>



24 Digital labor

In 1750, Diderot and d’Alembert published the first volume of the *Encyclopédie*,²⁹ which set out to cover each and every branch of human work. Two hundred thirty years later, that kind of endeavour is much more difficult since labor is nowadays being obfuscated, hidden behind layers of transparencies and complexity. As elaborated in Christian Fuchs’s book “Digital Labour and Karl Marx”,³⁰ different forms of labor and relations are part of the contemporary production of digital technology. Slave work in mineral extraction in Congo, primitive accumulation and absolute surplus-value production at Foxon in China, body shopping of Indian ICT workers, an army of ghost micro workers behind Mechanical Turk platform, Amazon distribution center workers in the cage, unpaid users and the Google labor aristocracy are all part of the evolved triangular trade system within the planetary scale factory. Those and many other forms of labor are needed to produce and operate this planetary-scale extraction system.

29. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, (1751)

30. Fuchs, Christian. *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. New York: Routledge (2014)

31. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019)

32. Kristian Lukic, *Colonization with Love*, Share Lab (2016) <https://labs.rs/en/colonization-with-love/>

25 Behavioral surplus

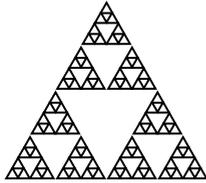
As Shoshana Zuboff³¹ points out, surveillance capitalism renders behavior so that it can be parsed as observable, measurable units. Once it is rendered as behavior, it is turned into data. This is what she calls “behavioral surplus”. Since our bodies, minds, and behavior are one of the ultimate resources for the new extractivism, every segment of our existence can be seen as a form of direct or indirect labor producing data as a behavioral surplus. When we breathe, walk, or sleep, every single emotion that we feel, our attention, our body temperature, or diseases that we have—everything can produce a behavioral surplus if being captured by this giant surveillance apparatus. In that sense, even our bare existence can be seen as labor.

26 Digital identity labor

As pointed out by Kristian Lukic in the essay “Colonisation with Love”³², freelancers, self-employed, unemployed and all those grey areas in between that now constitute the world of labor need to spend more and more hours maintaining their profiles and offering in (directly) their expertise, experience, success stories, opinions and documentation of their works and activities, in a similar fashion to sex workers in the windows of red-light districts. It takes a lot of privilege and financial and psychological stability to not participate in the reputation economy systems moderated by those platforms. Digital identity labor is the forced labor of the 21st century, and as we mentioned before, opting out is essentially a fantasy. This creates an auto-disciplinary society specialized in the detection and targeting of human anomalies. When each anomaly is detected, it would calculate risks and decide on individual liquidities.

Labor

26 Fractal supply chains



Sierpinski fractal

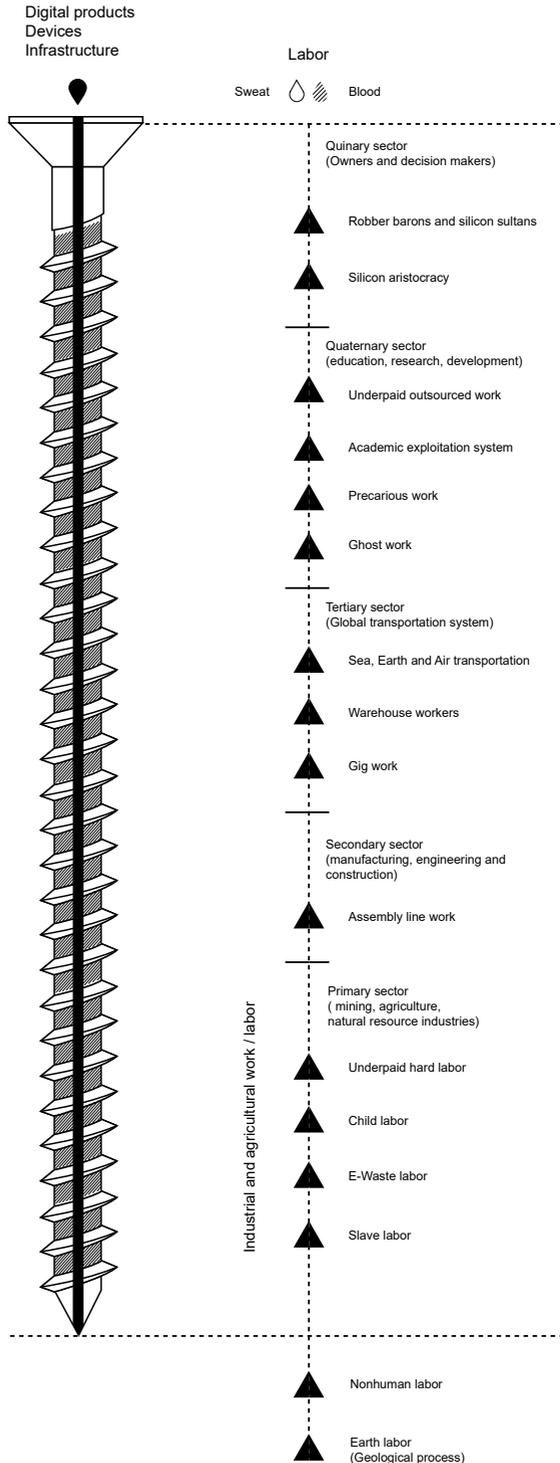


Carboniferous plants

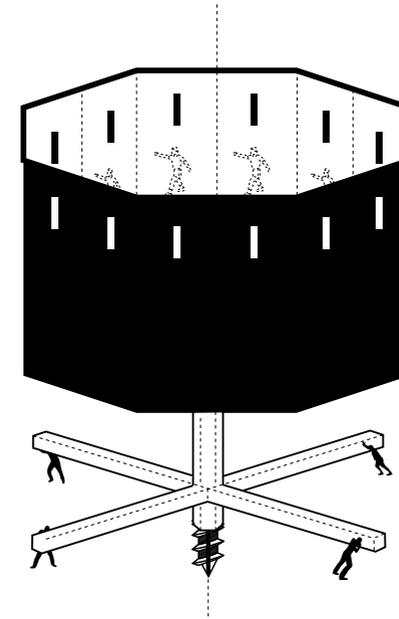
27 Nonhuman labor

It is important to try to come out from an anthropocentric point of view and try to think of non-human labor as a part of the overall mosaic. We can zoom out into deep time and consider the labor of prehistoric plants and animals embedded in the formation of carbon that is being burned as a fuel for the data centers, infrastructure and our devices. Millions of years of nonhuman labor have been burned for just two hundred years of industrial spectacle. Even further, we can think of the geological process as a form of Earth labor or the process of element creation as a form of Universe labor. Nevertheless, we don't need to go so far into the past, and we can try to observe all the labor existing within the microbiome of our bodies.³³

33. Paul Vanouse, Labor <https://www.paulvanouse.com/labor.html>



Projection of the World



Exploitation of natural resources

29 Heteromation and ghost labor

28 Fractal supply chains

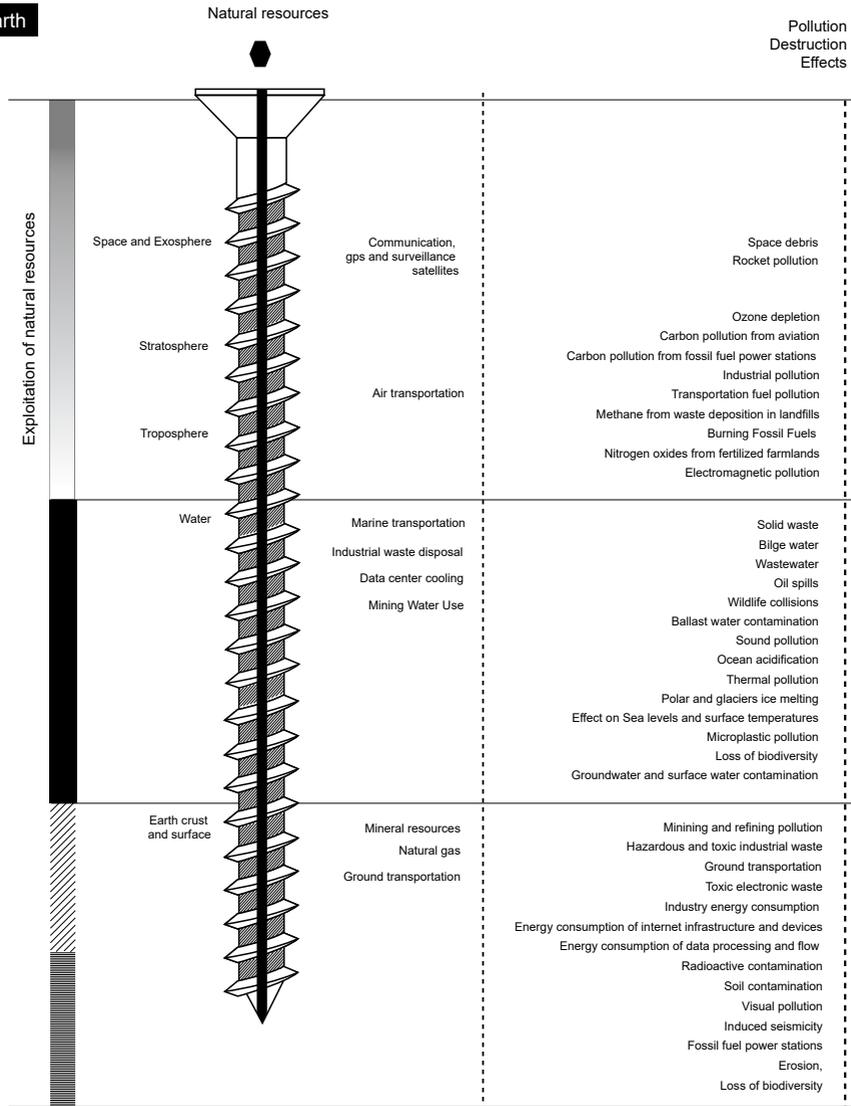
Supply chains hidden behind the engines of extractivism are black boxes as much as neural networks or algorithms hidden behind interfaces. Californian ideology presents itself in the form of colorful, playful offices filled with all-year-long Silicon Valley sunshine, where digital bourgeoisie enjoy in playbor³⁴ and free five-star food. Analysis of the invisible layers of digital infrastructure and product supply chains tell us a different story. In the "Anatomy of an AI System", we used the image of the Sierpinski fractal to illustrate the complexity of supply chains and the process of exploitation embedded in those processes. Each triangle of this fractal represents one phase in the production process, from birth in a geological process, through life as a consumer product, and ultimately to death in an electronics dump.

34. Julian Kücklich, Precarious playbour (2015)

29 Heteromation and ghost labor

Within the fractal supply chain, we see a perpetual dance between human labor, nonhuman labor, earth labor and automatization. As pointed out in the Nooscope by Matteo Pasquinelli, Automation is a myth, because machines, including AI, continuously call for human help. Hamid Ekbia and Bonnie Nardi call this kind of participation "heteromation."³⁵ Another term for this invisible human labor embedded in almost every phase of the production process is—ghost labor.

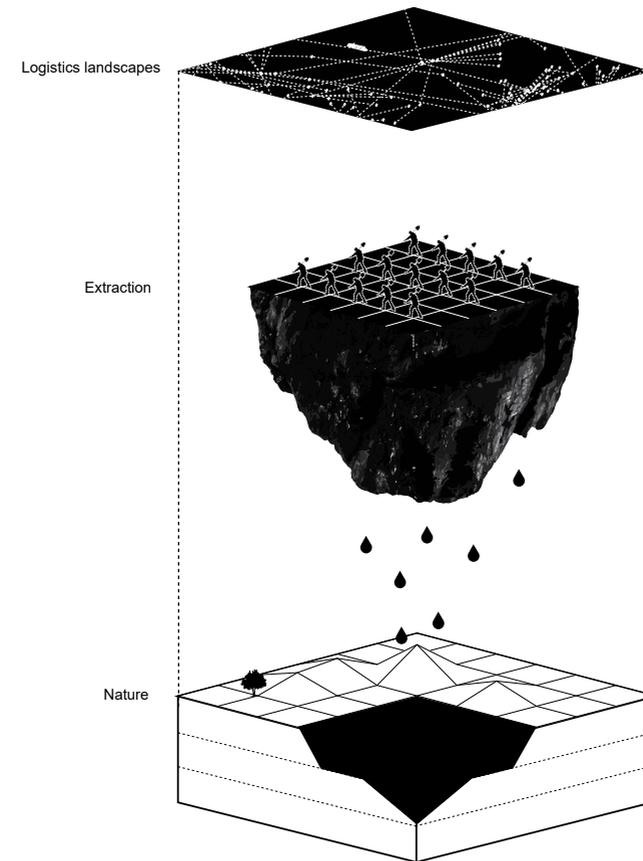
35. Hamid R. Ekbia and Bonnie A. Nardi, Heteromation, and Other Stories of Computing and Capitalism (2017)



30 Blood, sweat and toxic lakes

"I wish to God these calculations had been executed by steam!" said Charles Babbage and developed his plans for the Difference Engine in summer 1814.³⁶ More than 200 years later, the engines of new extractivism are still running on burning coal and human sweat. Every click or swipe we make online creates one little hole in the ground, filled with toxic waste and toxic clouds. Every movement of materials and data within the planetary scale factory has its own hidden price. Supply chains are optimized towards maximizing profit for a few, while the real costs of the destruction that follows are shared among all the living entities on the planet in the present and the future. In the words of Mckenzie Wark, "The Anthropocene is a series of metabolic rifts, where one molecule after another is extracted by labor and technique to make things for humans, but the waste products don't return so that the cycle can renew itself. The soils deplete, the seas recede, the climate alters, the gyre widens: a world on fire."³⁷

36. Simon Schaffer, Babbage's Intelligence: Calculating Engines and the Factory System, Critical Inquiry Vol. 21, No. 1 (Autumn, 1994), pp. 203-227
37. Mckenzie Wark, Molecular Red:Theory for the Anthropocene (2016)



31 Expanding the gap

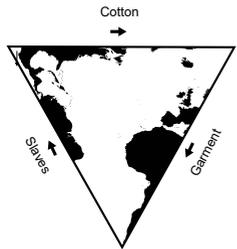
30 Blood, sweat and toxic lakes

31 Expanding the gap

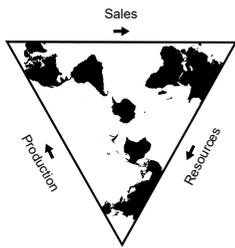
In H.G.Wells's novel "The Time Machine",³⁸ in the year 802701, humanity developed into two separate species: the Eloi and the Morlocks, as a result of the expansion of the gap between different social classes over a long period. The Eloi live a banal life on Earth's surface, while Morlocks live in the underworld, serving the machinery and breeding food, making clothes, and other products for the Eloi. While one primarily functions in the space of a cave-factory, the other serves the materiality of this space in the mining pits, factory halls and office spaces of the spectacle of the global production of technology, energy and resources.

38. H.G.Wells, The Time Machine, (1895)

32 Triangular trade

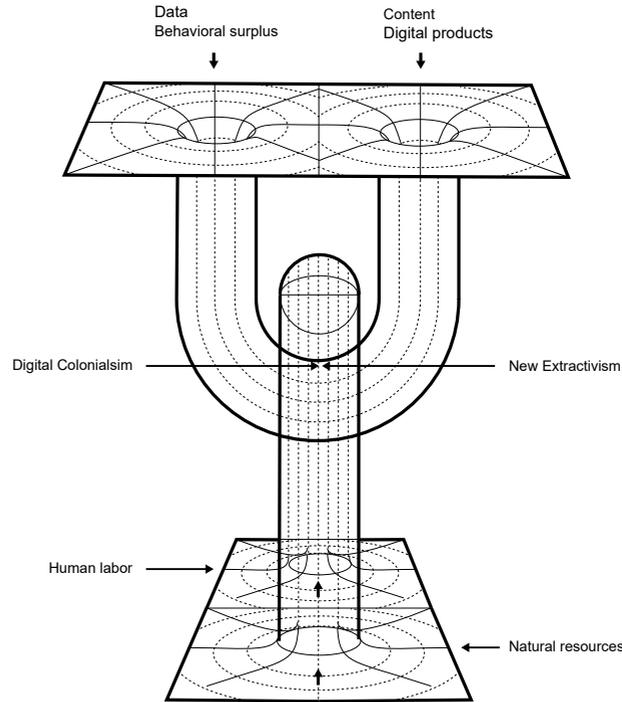


Triangular trade (16th-19th century)
Transatlantic slave trade

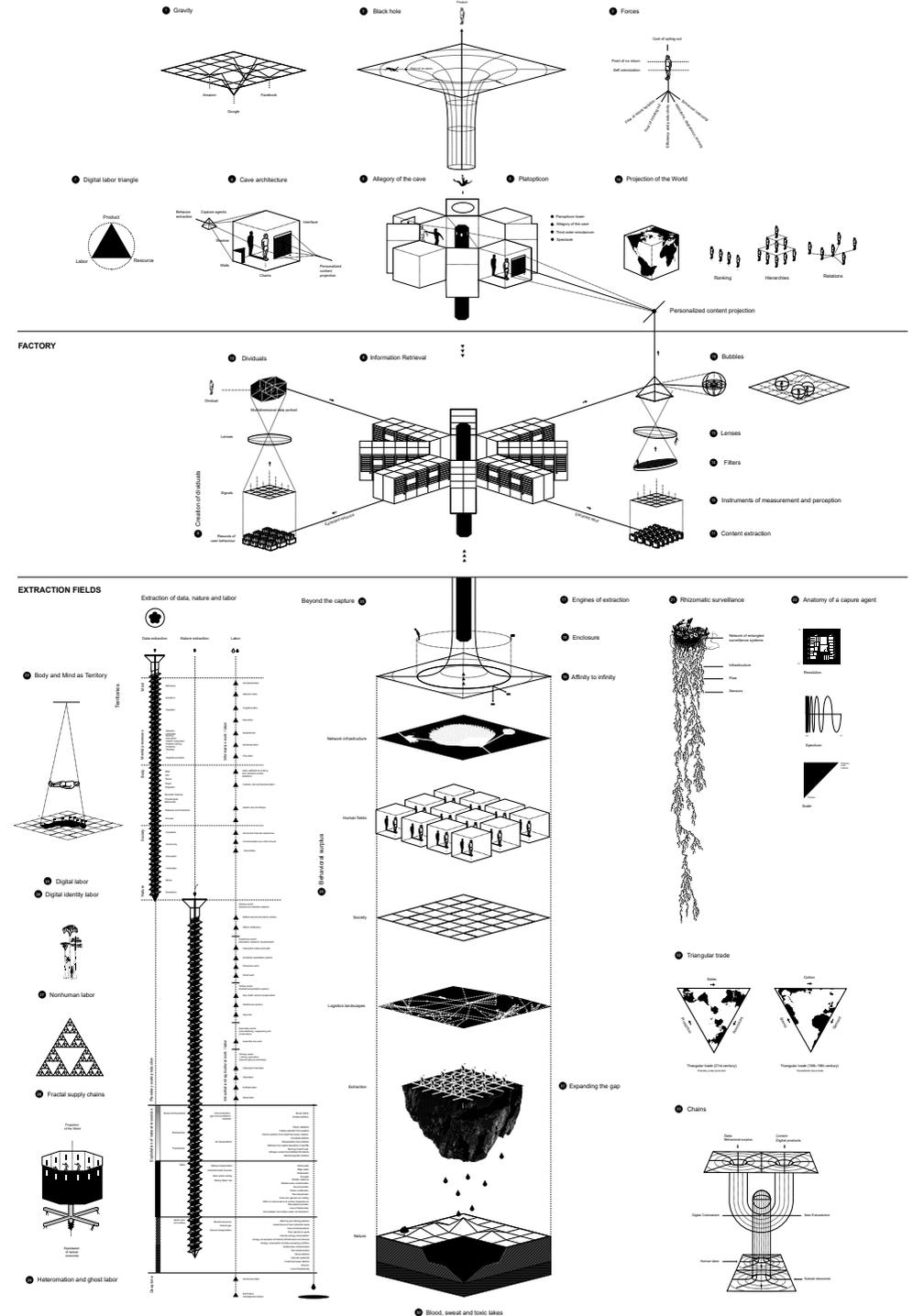


Triangular trade (21st century)
Planetary-scale production

Chains of digital colonialism 33



FORCES AND CAVES



32 Triangular trade

The best-known triangular trading system was the transatlantic slave trade operated from the late 16th to early 19th centuries, carrying slaves, cash crops, and manufactured goods between West Africa, Caribbean or American colonies and the European colonial powers, with the northern colonies of British North America. Slavery was at the heart of the development of the modern planetary-scale global economy. As Barbara Solow³⁹ illustrates, "by the late seventeenth century, the New England merchant, the Barbadian planter, the English manufacturer, the English slave trader and the African slave traders (and merchants) were joined in an intricate web of interdependent economic activity." From those days, the same model of constant flow within the vast fractal production chains expanded in time, space and complexity. The transatlantic slave trade evolved into the contemporary planetary-scale factory.

39. Barbara L. Solow, *Capitalism and Slavery in the Exceedingly Long Run* (1987)
40. Renata Avila, *Digital colonialism*, Digital Future Society (2020)

33 Chains of digital colonialism

"By digital colonialism, we understand the deployment of imperial power in the form of new rules, designs, languages, cultures and belief systems serving the interests of the dominant power. In the past, empires expanded their power through the control of critical assets, from trade routes to precious metals. Today, technology empires control the world through data and the ownership of computational power, often with the active collaboration of the most powerful governments in the world, set out to satisfy their needs."³⁹ What human rights and technology expert Renata Avila is describing here as digital colonialism is rooted in the extractivist practices illustrated on this map. Nevertheless, this map is proposing an extensive understanding of this term. Traditional colonial practices of control over critical assets, trade routes, natural resources and exploitation of human labor are still deeply embedded in the contemporary supply chains, logistics and assembly lines of digital content, products and infrastructure. In that sense, chains of digital colonialism are made both on the extraction of digital surplus and the traditional exploitation of labor and resources.

LOOKING BEYOND THE VORTEX OF CRISES AND DEBT

Ajda Pistotnik

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Full citation: Vladan Joler, "New Extractivism", www.extractivism.work, 2020

Email: joler@labs.rs

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Normality as a problem

Today, we can no longer criticise the domination of authoritarian policies and the rollback of democratic freedoms for the sake of stronger markets and higher economic growth without taking into account the links between the global economic system and the increasing emergence of viruses (including COVID-19). The global industrial agro-food system in capitalist economies that drives the global trade in (wild) animals and destroys natural habitats at an accelerated rate is the driving force behind the growing number of diseases, one of many shortcomings of modern society that was so bluntly unmasked by the pandemic. Once again, countries chose to focus only on the consequences of the crisis rather than its root cause – an economic system based on the principle of endless growth.

The pandemic revealed not only the nonchalant lightness with which governments tend to extend states of emergency, with increased militarisation and social control, but also the failings of our economies, in particular the divide between the public and private interests. For more than a decade, the latter insisted on destructive austerity measures being imposed on the public sector and advocated structural reforms without trying to hide its contempt for education, science, culture, and social welfare, i.e. the most critical services for communities.

If they are to make a living, workers have to work from their factories, warehouses or offices, even during the pandemic. Those who can't or aren't allowed to work from home are forced to return to their closed, unventilated work premises, just to be able to keep their paid jobs. It thus comes as no surprise that the number of infections is constantly on the rise despite the curfews, suspended public transport, complete bans on public gatherings and full lockdowns, as most of the working population move daily to workstations that they share

with many others. Social inequality is now higher than it was 30 years ago. Wages haven't grown in more than a decade, and with the economy shutting down unemployment is increasing rapidly. The richest, on the other hand, have seen their fortunes rise to unimaginable heights (at least for most us) even during the pandemic.

The system based on economic growth is generating permanent crises, and has laid the foundations for the accumulation of various crises, from environmental, health, and economic to social and political, all result in deep-rooted exploitation of nature and people. Something we've come to think of as normal, which in itself is a problem, because 'normal' is the source of all crises and the system of 'normal', grounded in economic growth, is the root cause of the mother of all crises.

The quest for alternatives has led us to a platform, to practices and strategies, policies for degrowth, teaching us how to live beyond this 'normal'. Degrowth offers a critique of the dogma of economic growth. At the same time, degrowth offers a hypothesis that transformative downscaling of more developed, rich economies into zero-carbon societies is possible, needed and welcome. It aims to answer the crucial question of the age of the Anthropocene: how is our species to survive and how can we all live good, decent lives? In other words: How can we live well without shifting costs and debt to others, to the planet and future generations? This is the key question that occupies the international degrowth community.

Is economic growth a true measure of development?

Economic growth means an increase in real output, which has an adverse impact on both society and the environment, because it implies that GDP as an economic indicator must

grow at exponential rates or we'll end up in a recession that hurts the vulnerable groups most of all. Economic growth as the only measure of progress, development and social welfare has thus become the sole obsession of all countries, promising to create the conditions for better life, eradicate poverty and reduce unemployment. So we are hardly surprised to see political leaders and economists pushing for such growth as a norm and necessity that defines our civilisation. What they don't tell us is that the GDP does not differentiate between good and bad economic activities. Economic growth doesn't rest only on 'good' products like bread, public healthcare or investments in science, but also on 'bad' economic activities, such as epidemics, increased militarisation or oil spills. Nor does GDP take into account unpaid work that benefits the community, such as volunteer and care work, and it wholly ignores ecosystem services. Economic growth serves the needs of corporations and investors, feeds their expansion and profitability, their need to grow and develop their wealth.

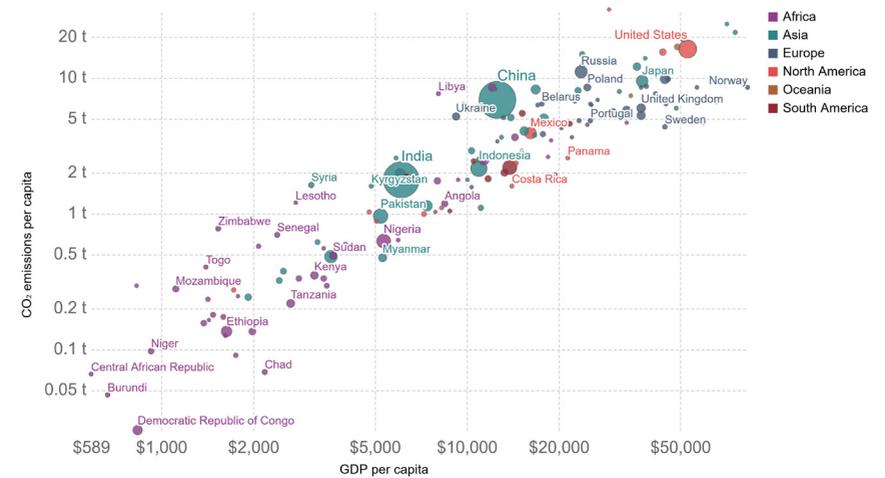
The planetary boundaries that define the safe operating space for humanity have already been crossed, but the economy still doesn't seem to be decoupling from resource consumption and pollution, at least not effectively enough. Economic growth is maintained fictitiously through additional borrowing, lower environmental standards, longer working hours, cuts in social security funding and the like. Growth at any cost thus creates social gaps and economic instability, and as such poses a threat to democracy.

As early as 1972 the conclusions of 'The Limits to Growth', the first report to the Club of Rome, suggested that it is impossible for the population, economy and exploitation of natural resources to continue to grow exponentially due to the limited availability of natural resources, and predicted that attempting to do so would sooner or later end in the collapse

of socio-economic and ecological systems (needless to say, the report was ridiculed and attacked by mainstream economists). Today, the limits are back on the political agenda, this time as planetary boundaries. There has never been a zero-carbon industrial-consumption economy, but if we are to avoid climate breakdown and our own destruction we will have to reduce carbon emissions by 50% by 2030, as proposed by the Paris Agreement, and bring them down to zero by 2050. Such emissions are a by-product of our socio-economic activities, and grow exponentially along with GDP, as demonstrated by the graph below. The higher the GDP is, the higher are the CO2 emissions.

CO2 emissions per capita vs GDP per capita, 2016

This measures CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels and cement production only – land use change is not included. Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is measured in international-\$ in 2011 prices to adjust for price differences between countries and adjust for inflation.



Source: Global Carbon Project; Maddison (2017)

OurWorldInData.org/co2-and-other-greenhouse-gas-emissions/ • CC BY

2016. 'Global Carbon Project: Maddison (2017)', Our World in Data, CC BY: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/co2-emissions-vs-gdp?tab=chart&country=®ion=World>

Fossil fuels and their technologies have transformed agricultural and industrial processes, the mobility of goods and

people, and the geographies of cities and rural areas. People's values, ways of understanding and social organisation have coevolved with fossil fuels and their technologies (Norgaard 2019, p. 114). There has never been an industrial economy that was not based on fossil fuels. So a totally new type of economy is necessary, and because economies are dependent on the underlying social structures that would imply new social arrangements and new means of social provisioning. Thus, even if they recognise human-induced climate change as a serious structural problem, the preference of policy-makers, corporations, financiers and all those heavily invested in the fossil fuel economy is to maintain the system and hope for a technology that could provide a counter-mechanism, a technological solution (Spash and Smith 2019, p. 217). However, the problem is that the very nature and function of our political economies resist recognition of the true scale of the problem and seem reluctant to translate this recognition into concrete and immediate action. (Morgan and Fullbrook 2019, p. 5).

Most economists understand environmental problems as isolated, unique examples of market failure. Kallis et al. (2018, p. 292) describe economic growth as 'an integrated cultural, political, ecological and economic process manifested as an increase in the total market value of all goods and services (GDP)', and degrowth as its opposite, i.e. 'a process of political and social transformation that reduces a society's throughput while improving the quality of life' (ibid.), because it decouples the quality of life, in particular at the common social level, from material and energy throughput. But the fact is that the promise of excessive material wealth for everyone will never be fulfilled, simply because our planet hasn't enough space, neither physical nor ecological, to make that happen, so we must build on the lessons learnt, and make the best of the many social and solidarity initiatives offered.

Degrowth doesn't equal recession

We are told that if we give up growth we risk economic and social breakdown, but in truth constant drive for exponential economic growth threatens the ecosystems on which we depend for our survival. We are thus offered one and the same solution to the threat of recession, a universal appeal to revive consumption and renew growth. Those inclined to question this consensus are swiftly denounced as cynical revolutionaries or modern-day luddites (Jackson 2019, p. 213). To be clear, degrowth is not equivalent to recession or negative growth, so the term should not be interpreted literally. The term consists of the prefix de-, which added to the verb implies separation, removal, reversal, or something done completely or thoroughly; and the verb grow, as in 'economic growth', 'GDP growth' or 'explosive growth' (Domazet and Dolenc 2018, p. 101).

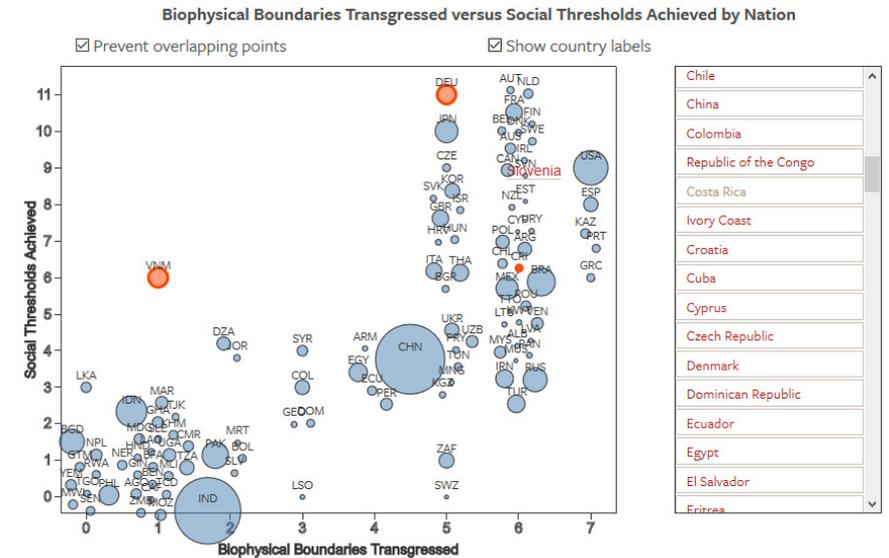
For degrowth, the solution is neither austerity nor higher deficits. Indeed, both approaches are a problem because they are both about renewing growth, and degrowth advocates oppose them precisely because they are rooted in the imagery of growth. Even those who want spending and growth only for the short-term to exit the crises, and hope to move beyond growth afterwards, do not realise that this 'after' will never come, since it is precisely through the fear of the spectre of recession and crisis that growth is permanently legitimised (D'Alisa, Kallis and Demaria 2019, p. 273). Moreover, given the socially disruptive effects of recession, a depoliticising representation of growth as a 'common good' has become the dominant discourse. Opposition to growth is also consistently countered by capitalists' financial dominance of political systems (Andreucci and McDonough 2019, p. 133). Economists and policymakers have become accustomed to equating GDP growth with human progress and improvements in well-being,

so it might seem sensible to conclude that a decline in GDP must necessarily entail a decline in well-being. In contrast, degrowth calls for a shift to a different kind of economy altogether (an economy that does not require growth in the first place) (Hickel 2019, p. 57).

Literature about degrowth indicates that it is possible for high-income countries to maintain or even improve their levels of human development and well-being while reducing throughput and output, and staying within the planetary boundaries. Degrowth is not just a form of critique, but also encompasses diverse and interrelated positive utopian visions for the world. It offers a set of paths for societal transformation in order to make these utopias possible.

Biophysical and social indicators of development

Degrowthers agree that fiscal policies should assess impacts on social welfare and the environment, so the decision-making process should involve quantifying biophysical indicators (CO2 emissions, exploitation of natural resources and use of pesticides, water consumption and pollution, and similar) and relating them to social indicators (food, income, social equality, education, access to energy, employment, etc.). In short, it should measure how well we live and how close we are to the planetary boundaries. There is not yet a single country in the world that could satisfy both conditions (Graph 2), as shown by a study of over 150 countries conducted by the University of Leeds in 2018. Vietnam (marked VNM in the graph) comes closest, exceeding the least biophysical indicators (horizontal axis) and achieving the most social indicators (vertical axis). Germany (DEU), on the other hand, meets all of the needs measured by social indicators, but similarly to Slovenia exceeds nearly all biophysical indicators.



O'Neill, Dan. 2018. 'Biophysical Boundaries Transgressed versus Social Thresholds Achieved by Nation', A Good Life For All Within Planetary Boundaries: <https://goodlife.leeds.ac.uk/>

Degrowth addresses biophysical and social indicators together, and is the key word that encompasses different approaches and principles, such as democracy, justice, ecology, care, development critique and similar. It is a platform that seeks and connects different alliances with existing practices, initiatives or strategies, including community currencies, a universal basic income and maximum income, cooperatives, unions, back-to-the-landers (or neorurals), work-sharing, debt audits, disobedience, the commons, urban gardens, *buen vivir*, and the like, as well as a lifestyle. Degrowth is a process of political and social transformation that reduces a society's throughput and improves the quality of life, focusing on its needs, concerns and reproduction, the downscaling of consumption and shorter production chains. It is a normative concept with analytical and practical applications. There are two approaches to degrowth: physical and culturalist. The first is based on the

work of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (whom some consider the father of the concept of degrowth) on the entropic nature of economic processes. These approaches underline the bizarre logic of infinite growth on a finite planet. The culturalist approach is derived from the works of Ivan Illich on conviviality, Serge Latouche's critique of development, and André Gorz's political ecology (with the latter being the first to have used the word degrowth, Fr. *decroissance*), among others (Liegey et al., 2015, pp. 28–29).

Degrowth proposes a network of change in the access to housing, urban planning, traffic, agriculture, energy systems, finance, redistribution of wealth through taxes, biodiversity, supply chains, production, software management, hardware technologies, employment and working conditions, welfare, healthcare, education, democracy and so forth. Put together, these proposals lead to equitable, planned downscaling of production and consumption.

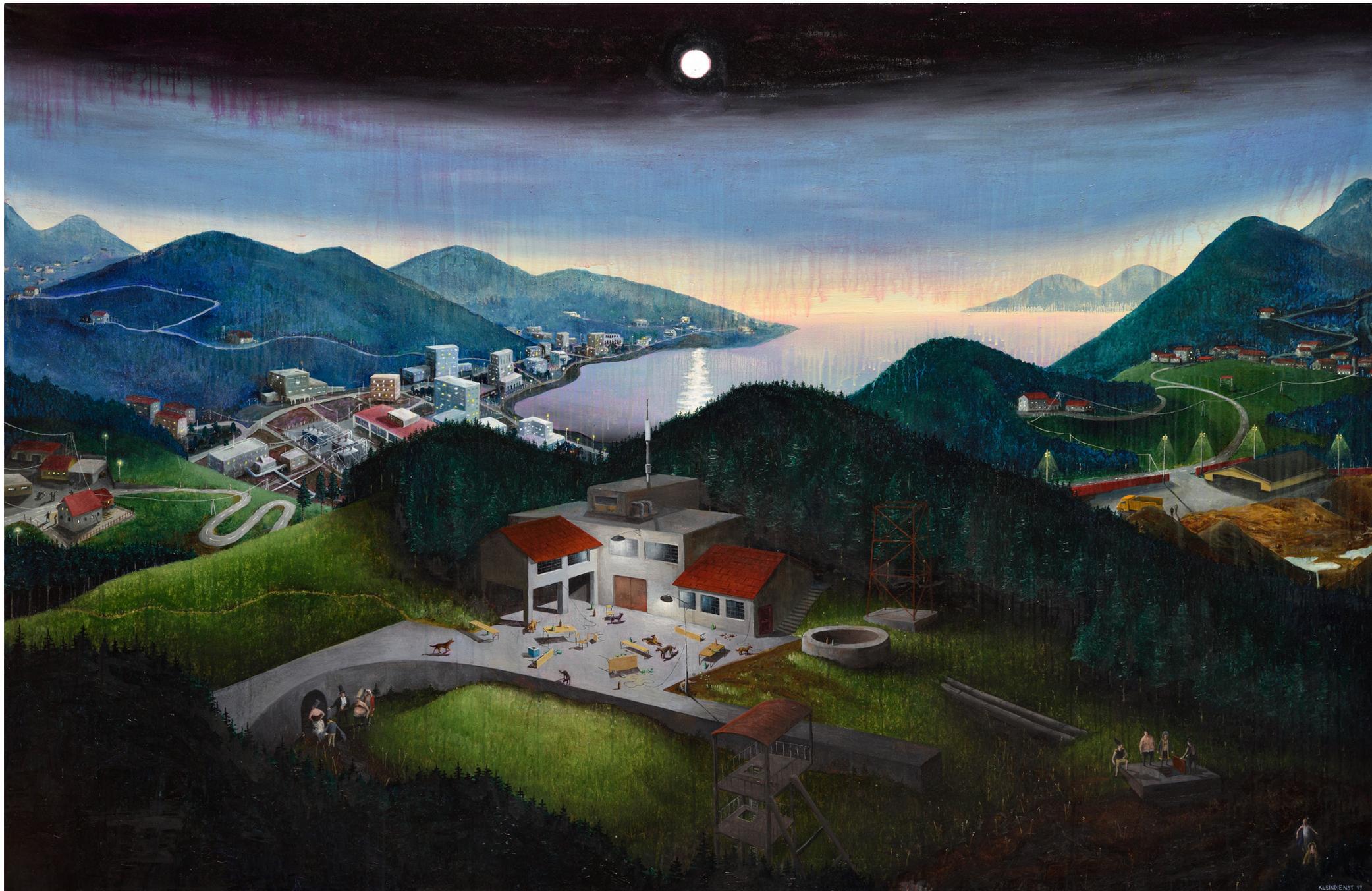
Let's turn around the logic of debt

The concept of degrowth was proposed in academic circles in the 1970s, and continued to develop until it was first used in practice in the early 2000s in France, in the wake of the protests for car-free cities, communal meals in the streets and campaigns against advertising in public spaces. The experience and findings from these movements shaped new academic insights. Today, the degrowth movement is neither clearly defined nor homogeneous, but is a field of research and discussions that has co-shaped the international research hubs *Research&Degrowth* and *Degrowth.info*, among others. Such interdisciplinary approaches inevitably break out of any academic bubble and actively involve civil society, which makes it easier for the movement to enter the political domain. The most significant and far-reaching spaces for rethinking

the aspects of ecological and social sustainability that require a radical reorganisation of society and decolonisation of our imageries are the degrowth biennial international conferences. They serve as spaces for meeting and sharing insights in a diverse community of degrowthers that is increasingly interested in shaping the (international) political agenda.

An overview of research relevant for the degrowth hypothesis offers an insight into scientific questions and a broader understanding of the degrowth platform. Research on the history of ideas and ecological economics offers two fundamental degrowth concepts: that growth is an ideological construction, and that growth is ecologically unsustainable. Making both economies and societies stable without growth raises new issues that are addressed by research communities in these and other scientific disciplines (Kallis et al. 2018).

One of these issues is debt, and the endless borrowing that allows economies to grow and then forces them to grow further to repay this debt. And because economies cannot grow fast enough to repay their debt they turn to austerity measures and privatisation. This leads to stricter controls over welfare spending, income, social services and free time. Here it should be noted that debt doesn't threaten the capitalist economy, but drives it, with social customs and laws prioritising debt repayment over cancellation, thus serving to protect creditors, not debtors. The economy of debt is an expression of the power and influence of finance, which is a result of its position in the economy (Greaber 2014). There are more than 7,000 financial institutions in Europe, and the European Banking Federation claims the EU banking system is the largest in the world, three times the size of the US system and four times bigger than the Japanese. It is also the fastest growing in the world. It's therefore no surprise that debt cancellation has become a taboo subject, while the non-payment of debt is associated with



humiliation and loss of rights, as seen with Greece during the last financial crisis.

A debt audit is one of the strategies of debt resistance that could lead not only to debt restructuring, but also its (partial) cancellation. The degrowth community thus advocates debt audits and cancellations. Moreover, the concept of debt cancellation hasn't always been taboo, as it was applied in ancient Mesopotamia, where kings often annulled citizens' debts to ensure social peace and stability or, in the words of Hamurabi, to ensure that the powerful do not oppress the weak.

More recent movements for debt audits and cancellations were part of the global coalition of civil movements in the 1990s, which advocated the cancellation of debt to the poorest countries of the global South. Their campaign was relatively successful, with more than 70,000 people forming a human chain at the G7 summit in Birmingham, UK, calling for the cancellation of the debt of 52 countries. As a result of these pressures, in 2000 the US Congress allocated USD 769 million for bi- and multilateral debt relief.

In 2006, Norway became the first creditor country to unilaterally cancel the debt of five countries, totalling USD 62 million. More recently, in spring 2020, during the pandemic, the International Monetary Fund announced debt relief of USD 200 million for 25 countries over six months. While it was good to see an institution such as this being aware of the gravity of the global health crisis and its implications, and allowing countries to respond to the pandemic by investing in healthcare and social protection rather than debt repayment, the IMF holds USD 27 billion and more than USD 135 billion in gold. The degrowth movement therefore calls for debt relief for more countries and for a longer period, as this is the fastest financial aid available, necessary for healthcare systems

as well as for the humanitarian and economic crisis that are likely to follow the pandemic.

A degrowth mosaic as the answer

Degrowth tries to offer a solution to the systemic crises we are facing with a mosaic of alternative proposals and practices, aware that a complex, multi-layered and dynamic system requires more than a single, straightforward solution. It is therefore vital that the proposals, critiques and hypotheses offered by degrowthers are based on scientific findings, which are then put to the test by the inquisitive civil society. Equally important is constant, mutual cooperation, because transformation requires research as well as organising for change. In this context it is important to remember that we wouldn't be aware of climate change if it wasn't for science, as it was the recording and collection of data, and complex forecast models with their interpretation of this data, that raised public awareness of the (until recently still invisible) threat of climate change and the fact that it is us who are causing it. Had civil society not listened to these voices, the climate change movement wouldn't exist, the young wouldn't go into the streets demanding to have their future back, and there would be no Greta, whose message to politicians is simple: 'Listen to the scientists!' If we want degrowth to become a mainstream concept, then winning the battle of ideas is not enough. We must help build a mass social movement that will force politicians to abandon the growth imperative. Bringing significant changes to political systems requires significant measures to be taken.

To begin with, we should be humbler about how smart we are. If we were smart, we wouldn't be in such trouble now, and living in various crises would not be the norm. Science and the scientific community can become a part of the solution, but we should acknowledge that they are also a part of the problem.

Science education, research and participation in management and policy need to shift from the hubris of scientists as agents of material progress through specialisation, to scientists as humble seekers of understanding of holistic and rapidly changing systems (Norgaard 2019, p. 114). We must believe there are alternatives we can choose from. If there aren't any, if everything is predetermined, there is no point in even debating these issues.

Transformative policies require special forms of repoliticisation that correspond to the current state of the world. More attention should be paid to care, and the jobs of frontline workers, who turned out to be so essential during the crisis, should be properly reevaluated. To ensure a just transition, workers from destructive industries need access to training for new types of work that is regenerative and cleaner. Overall, we have to reduce working time and introduce work-sharing schemes. We have to democratically define a minimum and maximum income or the maximum difference between them. While some sectors of the economy, like fossil fuel production, the military and advertising, have to be phased out as fast as possible, we need to foster others, like healthcare, education, renewable energy and ecological agriculture (Degrowth: New Roots for the Economy).

The wrongs done are now evident and returning to 'normal' isn't an option, because normal was the problem. The pandemic's disruption of business-as-usual opens new pathways in our ongoing struggle to emancipate ourselves from the growth paradigm that is warming the atmosphere, destroying the biosphere and deepening socio-economic inequalities. In the aftermath of the pandemic, we have the opportunity to reorganise our societies in ways that better promote the sustainability of life. This sustainability would be rooted in collective decision-making in the production and reproduction of common

and public wealth. This current crisis calls us to reflect on the priorities of our global economy at large, our daily priorities, and what the alternatives to 'back to normal' might be: more time for community, relationship building, and care for the planet and for each other (Feminist degrowth reflections).

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WHERE ARE WE GOING? DEGROWTH AND ARTS ECOSYSTEM

A conversation between **Monica Narula**
and **Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez**
Moderated by **Corina Oprea**

Transcription of a live stream event,
4 November 2020

Corina Oprea: As Covid-19 spread across the world and markets suddenly crashed, we were confronted more clearly than ever with the consequences of the capitalist economy. We were then in the middle of editing the online publication *Austerity and Utopia*, the first in a series looking at economic concepts. In the attempt to redefine the neoliberal understanding of austerity and utopia, we recognise that the collective search for measures of care and climate justice have become even more pressing. We felt that we needed to continue looking at the concepts of degrowth and progress, so as to reimagine the role which art and cultural institutions can play in forming new sets of relations and other modes of production and distribution. One can no longer think in terms of abundance, accumulation and capitalist utopia, which only create inequality and exhaustion.

We are currently experiencing a historic and unparalleled turning point. It involves the pandemic, the environmental crisis, as well as anti-racist movements, and which we hope will open up fundamental economic and political change. This is, however, not to romanticise the apparent, current downsizing in production and consumption – the global economy stoppage caused by the pandemic is not to be confused with degrowth. On the contrary, some reactions to Covid-19 by dominant actors present troublesome and threatening paths of authoritarianism, surveillance and eco-fascism. This publication on degrowth and progress looks to the past and at the present to find ways of acting and taking collective responsibility for our future – towards radical transformation, towards a just, sustainable and convivial society, with focus on care, well-being, solidarity, provisioning economies,

commons and commoning, and equality rooted in collective and truly democratic decision-making. We seek to review political movements such as feminism, notions of ecology, struggles coming out of the commons, digital activism and artistic practices. These are spaces which propose radical change and take into account that going back to so-called normal is no longer an option for the survival of non-human and human lives – lives that deserve to be lived.

In the following conversation, Monica Narula, Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and myself will follow the threads of four themes: abundance of time, the ability to move, responsible producing, and the necessity of haptic experience. We have a shared understanding of degrowth as a movement as well as a highly interdisciplinary approach which draws attention to multiple crises and contemplates the prospect of sustainable and just living beyond growth. To begin, I would like to invite you both to unpack the term ‘degrowth’, from your own position and practice.

Monica Narula: I would like to look at this from two axes. One is the axis of hunger and one is the axis of conversation. Hunger seems to be a straightforward optic. It is a shadow, as we know, to pretty much everything in most parts of the world. There is the hunger for survival, which is bare-life hunger. And we all know that there is also the hunger for creative life, the urge to ask life for more. But we also know, even though it often gets elided, that hunger is not only a problem for certain parts of the world. The way the world has been partitioned has a lot to do with the optic of progress, which you have hinted at. In the singular teleological process, going from point x to

point y, there are going to be people who are ahead and people who are behind but who can catch up if they do certain things in the right way.

What is quite interesting about this pandemic is that it has intimated another view of the world which we cannot easily bifurcate any more into habitual categories. Some of the instances and examples of places that have managed to deal with the pandemic and those that have not have been very surprising to say the least. From this optic on the pandemic we have seen this, but the assumption that there's a certain partitioning of the world is still there. It might be interesting to think of the question of hunger from a similar, non-partitioned way.

I did not see the last documenta, but I did see the book that accompanied it. And what was very interesting was Quinn Latimer's folio on hunger and to see in it the range of engagement with hunger, as bare-life hunger, hunger for survival, starvation, famine, experiments in food production, and the need for food. Many artists at different points of time, also in the history of modern art, have really engaged with hunger. In the folio, you can see this range, and it asks the question: What colour is hunger? It is also interesting that the next documenta is positing the idea of the *lumbung* (rice granary or rice barrel), continuing and sustaining the question of engaging with hunger in the context of the fact that we are surrounded by hungry gods who are burning up our forests. The question of hunger is also a question of this apparatus that decides to eviscerate the landscape. I think the question of growth and degrowth always has to think through the shadowland of hunger.

Conversation is quite the opposite of hunger. Conversation is intangible, it doesn't actually carry any physical weight. We could say that the conversation we're having at this moment is a mode of production, but I would argue that conversation lives outside production. It is a case of plenitude, which is multiple. The fact that it happens in dialects, not just in languages, already opens up another idea of multiplicity and of plenitude. In some ways, conversation is degrowth, it's anti-production - 'no talking in the classroom', 'no talking on the factory floor'. I would also argue that conversation is a dialect of the commons. It comes from that place where there can be no definitional ordering of who you are and how you constitute yourself, because it always has a tendency to leak through; it has the innocence to break given positions. What is interesting about conversation is that the threshold for who can enter is also elastic, in the sense that those who are participating in the conversation can shift the threshold that keeps one in or out of a conversation. Conversations are not given, they are made, they are contingent on process. And in that sense, a zone of friendship, a sorority, is extended and expanded.

The other thing about conversation is that it is not a meritocratic environment. Skill is always a matter of passion and commitment, so people who are skilful in conversation bring a lot of joy. But it is a capacity which is available in many sites - I would say that it is also part of what we are developing amongst ourselves with the idea of deliberative life. If I have connected the idea of creative life to the idea of hunger, I would also pose the idea of deliberative life, which is what conversation engenders.

You could say that a lot of where I'm coming from comes from the fact that I'm in a collective, and the backbone, the essence, of being a collective is conversation. It is impossible to make collective artistic, curatorial, textual works unless one starts with conversation at the heart of it. What is also fun about conversation is that it allows all categories to blur. It allows for ethics, concepts, rumours, legends, self-narration (or how I wish to position myself); it allows for memoir and exaggeration, and, crucially, it allows for a changing of the order of time. There's a dilation, a transformation of the order of time that is possible within conversation.

I was reminded by my colleague in Raqs, Jeebesh [Bagchi], some time ago of Trinh T. Minh-ha's evocation of an extended deliberation by elders under a tree to arrive at a decision. They all went away with different decisions, as *one* decision was not arrived at in the conversation. What was arrived at was a polyphonic zone, where meaning comes from the occurrence of deliberation and the ability to hold silence within that – and differing capacities within that too. You can take different decisions, but you have the capacity to be polyphonic in that zone. These are two optics. Perhaps we could have some conversation around these when we're talking about assumptions around categories of production and overproduction.

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez: Having been part of the *L'Internationale Online* team for some years, it's very moving to continue this conversation which we started several years ago. Degrowth is an important topic that we brought forth through many commissions, texts, debates, discussions, with the understanding that the

institutions that are part of *L'Internationale*, which are bastions of *patrimoine*, of cultural heritage and collections, have the capacity and eagerness to be affected by what is going on around them. My own relationship to what I understand as degrowth comes from several experiences of personal and professional life. I was an independent curator first, but my position on that now is that I have never been independent. This is already an important shift in understanding how degrowth plays a role, by reconsidering how we are working within this field that we call art. And when we talk about concepts such as degrowth or care, it is crucial to understand them through the prism of intersectionality and interdependence.

It was important for me to work and learn from an institution that was run collectively – there is something about the concept of collectivity that brings understanding to how things can change. Ten years ago, I was in quite a unique institution called Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, in the north-eastern suburban town of Paris. Here, the concept of hunger comes forth. It is one of the economically poorest areas in France, but culturally one of the most vivid and rich, with around a hundred different languages and dialects. However, this particular suburb has been historically and socially racialised. This could remind us of how we understand the geographies of the global south – the cliché of underdevelopment, not having enough resources, etc. Through working in this situation I came to understand that generalisations in the field of art are not productive. Whenever we speak about certain concepts, be it in relation to social justice, economy, gender, degrowth, these discussions and practices should always be situated. Les

Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, for example, doesn't have a regular public who would just come to the events that are announced. For every project that we envisioned – the institution is known for working on artistic research – there was a whole level of situating it within the role of the institution and especially with its potential public, the citizens who would feel addressed by what we were doing.

We shared three years of collective directing. In the first year, we completely exaggerated and went into total overproduction. Precisely at that moment (this was around 2012) I read a few texts on the topic of degrowth. I vividly remember an article in *The Wire* announcing that by 2020 air travel will become a luxury, because of the lack of resources and the conflicts that will arise around the fossil fuel economy – it was not so much the fossil fuel, but more the pandemic that has brought us to the situation in which we are right now.

When I left Aubervilliers I started thinking about slow institutions, which is something I have been writing about a lot, but which I also try to put into practice. For example, with projects like the Contour Biennale 9 in Mechelen, I really tried to understand that it is not about content but method, that the way I work as an interdependent curator is also the way I propose to work with the institution, it has to reflect the content I'm trying to bring in. Degrowth is precisely such a topic, as is feminism or issues related to gender, ecology. If institutions decide to do projects about these topics, but they continue to work as they have typically worked in the spectrum of the event economy and event expectations, then we have a big

problem. The responsibility of bringing the concept into the method of working and allowing it to affect my immediate professional as well as personal environment is precisely connected to understanding that topics like degrowth are intersectional and based on interdependency.

CO: There are many connections between your positions. You speak of conversation, community, the collective, the commons. In looking at your recent work on the Contour Biennale, Nataša, and the Yokohama Triennale, Monica, you have both expanded the time frame of the biennial. You, Nataša, by following the cycles of the moon rather than staging one event over two months, and, Monica, working with episodes and developing the *Sourcebook* to bring together a beautiful concept of friendship, thinking in terms of genealogies, references, alliances and comrades of thought, as well as building a community with those coming from such different geographies (whether Hong Kong or Johannesburg). Is this really how we can think of the means we have to emancipate from overproduction in the arts? Degrowth may sound like a negative concept, also when thinking of hunger, but what if we consider 'a-growth', in which growth instead of being the goal of a political or economic objective is a side effect of achieving social policy or the politics of the commons. Can you take us through these specific projects and how conversation, friendship, degrowth and the commons are present in these exhibitions?

MN: There's an interesting twist here. For example, in the context of Delhi or a country like India, the numbers are of course insane, if I start giving you numbers, but the point is that in a city like Delhi I

can maybe see only about fifteen art exhibitions in a good season, which just goes to show that when we are talking about the overproduction of art, we have to ask ourselves what kind of overproduction are we talking about. Most people in this city are not able to engage with art for lots of reasons. A-growth actually could allow us to think differently on this. I'm reminded of the dock worker Kimitsu Nishikawa, who provides one of the sources for the Yokohama Triennale.

As you mentioned, the *Sourcebook* was made public in November 2019. In that sense, the triennial opened eight months before the exhibition 'opened'. What we were offering was a set of sources. But what is a source? In curatorial practice, one is always making arguments about the world while being in the world, one is always living; what emerges from life becomes the next direction to think with. The question of the sources was like how rivers have sources. It's not a resource that transforms, it is a starting point that allows you to connect to other things. We published the *Sourcebook* to make a much more connected set of linkages, for our own minds and for what we could offer to the artists we were working with.

Through the *Sourcebook*, published in English and in Japanese, we reached a global public. The sources that we offered were non-rivalrous, they were polyaxial, they were non-hierarchical, and they came from different places and different times, which means that the conversation was happening across time, across place, and with an elastic sense of the threshold. The range of people who offered sources to the book include, among others, Nobel laureate Osamu Shimomura, who was looking at the luminosity of jellyfish;

Svetlana Boym, who was looking at the luminosity of friendship; and Nishikawa, who was world-making when he was not working as a day labourer at the docks or getting drunk. I think it was an especially interesting role in his life – the question of the precariousness of life is opened up differently, so one is able to see the question the way I posed it earlier in terms of hunger. What often comes to us is the idea that the precarious are those who do not have the capacity and time to reflect, but I think someone like Nishikawa, with his life experience of autodidacticism, offered a different story. He did a series of conversations with Tom Gill, an anthropologist, and he seems to embody a sense of a material frugality, but a sensorial excess. I think perhaps that is an aspect we are discussing as well.

If one is to think about a-growth on a different tangent, it is in the balancing between histories of frugality and what is produced around oneself. It is very important that we keep the idea of austerity distinct from the idea of frugality, which has a different philosophical tradition and reflective approach to how one lives with what one produces. There are other texts and figures that we can look at for the play between frugality on the one side and sensorial or creative excess on the other. And perhaps this dialogue between the two is one of the ways that we can think through the question of a-growth.

NP: I would like to unpack what made me extend the duration of the Contour Biennale, which I understood to be an experiment of method. I was in fact asking do we need biennials, and, if so, how could we approach them differently? This question came from

my frustration of being the so-called interdependent curator who works in the institution but leaves little trace of accountability or continuity. While having that in mind I was approached by the Contour Biennale in 2017, and when I started doing research – it was very important for me to understand the conditions of the city in which this event was to take place – I saw how Belgium is one of the most divided countries in Europe. If Bosnia is number one, Belgium definitely comes second. On an official level the country has a very difficult time accepting the demand to dig into its colonial past. For me it started to be very interesting to try and justify, either through local history or certain realities, my wish to bring together the concept of degrowth with the concept of decolonial research and decoloniality. Bear in mind that the first ever continental European locomotive (after the UK), built in 1835, went between Mechelen and Brussels and later on to Antwerp. I found images and paintings of it. Mechelen also had, between 1942 and 1944, one of the two transit camps for Jewish and Roma citizens outside of Germany, and 25,000 people were taken from there to Auschwitz – 1 per cent of them survived. One of the reasons Mechelen was chosen was precisely because of the well-established railway network running between Belgium and Germany.

Transportation is one of the factors of the so-called Anthropocene, which resulted from the Great Acceleration of industrialisation. Having that in mind, I was looking at how the colonial project of Belgium, but also other colonial, imperial projects, always depended on making transport routes in order to extract humans or non-humans. The biennial brought this together, knowing that one of the most important

colonies of Belgium was Congo, which is one of the richest places on Earth if we consider its natural resources, but in economic terms it is one of the poorest countries in the world. Then I came across a beautiful poem by slam poet Saul Williams, ‘Coltan as Cotton’, and I asked him for permission to use it. This poem opened up the possibility for intersectionality again. In a very entangled way, it brought together these various topics, and I used it in the proposal to the artists who I invited to work with. I also literally decided to work on reducing the carbon footprint of the production through the transportation of people and objects, so 95 per cent of the artists came by train or by bike.

Corina, your question was also about how to cultivate a community. As an outsider who lives in Paris I could only be in Belgium once or twice a month, and so it became clear that I needed more time if I wanted this biennial to be accompanied by meaningful and long-term conversations. And extending the time frame of the biennial was one of the possible approaches. The difficulty was more in the conversations with the hosting institution. There were frictions and expectations, where I wished there would have been more cooperation.

CO: You have both worked internationally, but you are also very interested in local communities. The degrowth movement proposes localisation on the level of travel and distribution. But what does it mean to rethink travel when global connections are culturally so enriching? There is also this imbalance between overproduction (big exhibitions, big production, a set of artists) in some places and the scarce artistic events happening in certain geographies, such as Delhi

where the population has a different understanding of art and engagement with artistic practices – related to Monica’s comment that overproduction in art is no generalised matter. Is there an opportunity to still have balance though, in terms of localisation or the need to think locally, but not in terms of isolation? I am asking this from my own perspective, growing up in Eastern Europe, knowing what isolation can do, in not being able to be mobile, but also that it brings a certain ideology and a certain cultural failure.

MN: This is a really important question. If it is not addressed with complex and layered seriousness, it can easily devolve into what you are raising. It becomes a question of how a certain set of resources can control the order of conversation, where there is gatekeeping, which can’t even be argued with. I think it comes back to what I was trying to evoke earlier, which is: What are the framing ideas that constitute artistic practice? Is it a material production of one order? Or is it of different orders of conversation? Unless one changes the order of conversation, unless one acknowledges that at this point of time the transglobal exists, a shutting down of that order of conversation will produce what you are gesturing towards – immobility and isolation.

However, at certain times, certain ruptures can help people who have been oppressed. If one is to look at the place of women in many parts of the world and what capitalist production did for them, it transformed their role in society. They could come out of the house; they didn’t have to be driven by the same parameters of life. But which is also why, even now, we have to ask questions of what the order of that gaze is on this stepping out. There are no easy answers to this

question of ‘if the past was a better land?’, or to the fact that conversations can now be narrowed down to the idea of maintaining (sustaining) resources. It needs to be asked, whose resources, and what is the order of claims that one can make?

There are claims to globality being made in different parts of the world, which are historically new, and they have to be in dialogue. In the Yokohama Triennale, for the first time in its history, there were people who were African American or from Africa. 50 per cent of the work which was shown was from countries that had not been part of the conversation that the triennial had been having with the world. Broadly speaking, it was only accessible to Japan and Europe, albeit an interesting conversation, amazing work, but that is not the point. The point is: What is the order of conversation that is being considered as conversation? This is why we have to think of modes of travel of the mind as much as travel of the plane.

NP: I also think that we have to try and reclaim differently the importance of being rooted in space and time. As Stuart Hall once said, he expects a very long answer when he asks somebody today where they come from. When you pause in a particular space – what I tried to do with Contour Biennale by narrowing the perimeter of where the artists were coming from, which is also what I try to do with Elena Sorokina in the Initiative for Practices and Visions of Radical Care based in greater Paris – it is pausing to understand that in any square metre of this Earth there are many entanglements, as you say Monica, you can travel by the mind.

I argued then that so much travel was used to bring different people together for the previous biennial editions. I'm also saying this to reclaim rootedness, because it is something that is part of extreme right-wing discourse. COYOTE, one of the collectives who worked with us on the Contour Biennale was precisely trying to use words like 'transplant', 'root', 'seed' in relation to migrating plants and to infuse them with content that would not be given by the right wing, in light of the fact that close to Mechelen there is something called the Garden of Europe. It is one of the largest European distribution centres of fruit and vegetables. It is a highly digitised and industrialised operations space and their headquarters look like NASA; it is where the stock exchange happens for vegetables and fruits.

Getting back to the question of cultivating a community, with the initiative in Paris that we started during confinement, the idea is to really understand care work as a commoning practice, a practice of mutuality. Following the feminist agenda of degrowth where care work is considered a place of commoning, we collaborate with artists based in the greater Paris area who come from very different situations and origins, and who all work on and with practices of care and enact ethical and collective ways of working. One fear that we have in relation to the possible outcomes of the pandemic is the financial aspect of producing in the cultural sphere, which could lead to cutting down precisely these kinds of practices that are not immediately financialised or demand long and slow processes like conversation. We are just starting and it's completely self-financed, taking place outside of institutions, but it tries to enable and cultivate a community.

CO: For the title of this conversation we've intentionally chosen 'Degrowth and Arts Ecosystem' and not the use of 'Arts Institutions' or 'Arts Museums', because – which goes back to your question, Monica – it is precisely what we think about when considering over-production. The arts is an ecosystem and it comprises of institutions, structures, infrastructures, curators, artists, collectives and communities that engage with artistic expression. The question of responsibility is something that we have been discussing within the confederation of L'Internationale, not least because museums have inherited a modern, colonial logic of bringing together collections, which have become even larger, and then it goes into real estate, building larger buildings to accommodate these large collections. It is a question of care for artistic heritage, but it is also material.

There is a danger which you point out Nataša, that when there are budget cuts, what is cut is exactly the conversation, the non-production, the non-immediate, the non-economic or non-financial. Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, which is part of the confederation and who are building a new building right now, is also using this moment to rethink what the museum is. Can it be a museum of the commons? How to consider the notions of responsibility and solidarity within the arts ecosystem? Now is a moment in which we could redefine the term 'institution' and its social foundations, especially when it is a public institution, and think through the notion of the public with ecologies of care and sustainability. How to look at the notion of solidarity in the arts ecosystem?

MN: A word that we have been thinking through more recently – although we have also worked with it over the last fifteen to twenty years of our practice, especially through Sarai [Programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies] – has been the question of ‘infrastructure’. We ran this experiment for a number of years: the way we used to phrase what we wanted to do was ‘to create ripples that create other ripples that create other ripples’; that was a description we came up with a long time ago. In retrospect, and as one who is inhabiting the arts ecosystem in a broad way, one comes to the recognition that infrastructure is actually a creative act. If we cease to look at it as a definition of what is offered to us, or given to us through structures and apparatuses that we have to both work with and be wary of, then we ask ourselves what are the modes of engagement that we can create which allow for this ripple that creates another ripple that creates another ripple.

For example, we were recently running a year-long programme on the invitation of Goethe-Institut, which is called Max Mueller Bhavan, in India. We said, ‘Let’s do one thing, create some thing, which we will call *Five Million Incidents*. There will be no curator, there will be catalysts, custodians, and collaborations’. It was a mode of working in which we invited mentors, catalysts, and then made public calls. And events happened throughout the year. But the crucial thing was that it was called *Five Million Incidents*, because, and I wanted to quote this ... this is what it said in the announcement:

‘An incident is a fold in time – a quickened heartbeat, an epiphany, a flash of insight, an outbreak of

goose-bumps, a moment of excitement, an occurrence, an encounter, a sighting, a memory; an incident is anything that transforms the way we live or think, a conversation that carries a surge in its wake, an event that makes us rethink everything. Millions of incidents can populate a duration, making it come alive as an embodiment of temporal plenitude. That plenitude is a ground for making things anew. [... It] opened up a remarkable possibility for thinking afresh on questions of artistic peer relationships, of occupations of time as art, of the blurring of lines between the ‘event’ of art and daily life, and of inventing fresh protocols of institutional custodianship. Five Million Incidents lasted hours, days, weeks, and months through artworks, actions, and performative moves that renewed and transformed terms of co-inhabitation of multiple presences.

Five Million Incidents is a mode of a conscious engagement with time.’¹

Obviously five million incidents were not going to happen, but to begin with the premise of plenitude is to be open to not knowing what will happen. In the events that did happen over the year, some things lasted an afternoon, some things lasted for weeks. Right now it’s gone digital, because of this new twist of an incident in our lives. The reason we did this project in this way is to precisely reflect on this question of how does one create infrastructure, modalities, possibilities that are not limiting what art can be, and what one considers an experience with art? Once you start opening those questions, the apparatus also has to change.

1. ‘Five Million Incidents: In collaboration with Raqs Media Collective’, exhibition announcement, Goethe-Institut New Delhi, 1 April 2019–10 December 2020: <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/363511/five-million-incidents>.

2. See Raqs Media Collective, 'Earthworms Dancing: Notes for a Biennial in Slow Motion', *e-flux journal*, no. 7 (June 2009); <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/07/61387/earthworms-dancing-notes-for-a-biennial-in-slow-motion>; Raqs Media Collective, 'Art as a Place', *Sarai Reader 09: Projections* (New Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2013).

We have been speaking about this in essays and testing it out as exhibitions, this question of what an ecosystem can be.²

I also wanted to return to the question of care that you raised Nataša, partly because one of the key ideas that we were working with in the Yokohama Triennale was 'care'. But we

began by saying 'care with toxicity', and the reason is that in the last two thousand years the subcontinent especially has dealt with the question of toxicity with the cruelty of banishment: 'You are polluted, unclean, and not even your shadow should fall next to mine, because you are so polluted.' The question of cleanliness, purity, maintaining certain methods of doing things as they are meant to be done and not in any other way, to not allow for miscegenation, this has been the banishment of toxicity. With the pandemic the question of the toxic has taken on a sharper everyday note for all of us, but I think when we talk about care we also have to think about the world that we live in now. How does one find modes of care where toxicity cannot be banished? How do we find modes of living with this toxicity and modes of care that allow for transformation in the future?

NP: I am trained as an art historian and my practice as an art historian should be about caring for objects. As you mentioned Corina this is a highly specialised, professionalised care for the past. This made me think of the book by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), where she



Raqs Media Collective, *The Ecliptic*, 2014. Installation.

talks explicitly about the potential of history. What she puts into perspective, especially when speaking about the anthropological or ethnographic museum, is that the museum in the West constructed a whole science around a very particular care for objects, but none for the populations who were killed through genocide and colonial projects and from whom these objects have been stolen. They are obsessed with taking care of objects as if they belong to all humanity.

I agree that care has a very shadowy side, the other is the gendered performance of care, the centuries of unpaid care, domestic or cleaning labour performed by women inside societies or families. I came across a really inspiring text by sociologist Bengi Akbulut, who asks for care work to be the commons. She poses the idea of degrowth as a feminist practice, and that this pandemic may have opened the doors to the collective and the commoning aspect of how to take care, as well as question in what ways we express solidarity. In the arts, we are also at a turning point, where it's becoming clear that without mutual aid among artists and different parts of the arts ecosystem there is very little possibility for survival. Be it financial, career-wise, or personal. We also see many artists' organisations behaving proactively or as activists, with very different agendas, but mostly connected by an interest in reimagining social status - I'm talking from a French perspective, where an art career has always been something very individual and competitive. What we are trying to establish with our initiative with the artists who are gathering within it is support for each other. And we do that by seeking legal perspectives or public health advice, getting experts together to react *ad hoc* to one's needs. Maybe this approach of

forming networks could also transform or affect the way institutions work, like L'Internationale, where issues of urgency go beyond the competitiveness of who has the biggest show on view or the most press reviews or visitors.

I think Art with a capital A has an important potential, if we are looking at it through the public health perspective. It should be quite clear today that art does affect social behaviour, human and non-human relations, and why would this not be cherished. And lastly, we didn't use the word 'capitalism' today, but art is something that is deeply anti-capitalist and should remain that way.

DEGROWTH MAKES ME GROW...

Paula Pin Lage



Paula Pin Lage, *Degrowth makes me grow*. 2021. Still image, video, 11:31 min. Screening on the Internationale Online from 17 February to 17 May 2021.

Open Science Friction, energy, renaming, resituated, performance of matter, knowledge through practice, friction, bio-electrochemical cyborg witches, recipes, spells, microbiology, anatomy, botanical, natural and bio remediation, femiciencia, local and global interactions, multifaceted experience, decolonisation, performing our realities through theoretical and practical research, being trans-formed, deconstructed and free from oppressions.

As an artist and activist I have always had a strong inclination towards research and experimentation processes with collective and free technologies. Although my work emerges from a scientific tradition, throughout, whether drawing or abstract video, circuit bending or lab experiments, it is located in the intersection where biology, science and queer art collide.

I have been part of the autonomous trans-hack-feminist Pechblenda and Transnoise laboratories, and since 2012 I have collaborated in the extensive biohacking network Hackteria. Out of my practical experience in biohacking (body/environment) and health in the Pechblenda laboratory, Biotranslab emerged, an autonomous lab for experiments and investigations of Open Science Friction and queer natures on the road. The lab is set inside the CyanoVan, a bus. The lab has wheels now!

Degrowth makes me grow is a compilation about what I consider to be the most important aspects in life at the moment. As the video piece states, I have always been autonomous because I had the privilege of my family cultivating a vegetable garden and also owning animals. This was not a rare thing in Galicia; many people were autonomous in food terms, since the food industry did not cover most of the territory. And this is also why many people are still living in this way, such as our grandparents. For me, the experience of studying and living in cities

for a while was enough to feel that my essence remains close to the earth, to the land, to growing with the ones that will feed you later.

My becoming with kin is represented by a huge network of people that hack the system, in many ways, on the multispecies spaces that I cohabit. Over this past year I have been especially grateful for the operative garden and the emergence of ALDear, a network of rural projects which connects cultural, political and ecological issues in the east of Galicia. We are in the mood for quotidian practices of cultivating, carrying and caring for Earth love ...

We are the CYBORG WITCHES on Radical BioAutonomy!!

SEE MORE:

– <http://paulapin.net/biosophy>

– *Prototyp-ome autoresidence*:
https://prototypome.gridspinoza.net/index.php/Prototyp-ome_autoresidence

– Open Science Friction: <https://jellypin.hotglue.me/?recentwork>



Paula Pin Lage, *Degrowth makes me grow*. 2021. Still image, video, 11:31 min. Screening on the Internationale Online from 17 February to 17 May 2021.



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PRECIPITATION

Marta Echaves

Translation by Madeleine Stack
Art by Andrés Tena

The drone flew over the cemetery almost every night. She opened the windows of the room, letting the almost imperceptible hum fill her bones. The warm air mixed with the stench emanating from the piles of bodies, and the compost, that like a paste interwoven from all those infected organisms, carried a dense and bittersweet odour that plunged her into a light ecstasy, similar to that which she felt when she masturbated on sleepless days.

Since she had been working for various countries in different time zones to her own, a few weeks ago she had received a call that informed her that she had been selected to participate in a clinical trial with a recently synthesised and biblically named nanodrug. The treatment should already have started to take effect, but her insomnia and anxiety continued.

While she watches the drone retreat towards the new cemetery being built on the other side of the highway, she closes the windows and again enters the website that her friend had sent, in which the figures continue to rise, tallying the deaths in real time. A spasm runs up her spine and she switches off the screen. The room is tiny; barely a bed, a table, and a threadbare rug left by the previous tenant. Since the looting began nobody remained in the building. Only her. She had watched her neighbours ascend and descend the old staircase, vacating their houses, hiring trucks to help them move and start another life in any part of the country in which no more cemeteries were being built. She looked down at her hands, as if by focusing on the scratches across her palms she could recall something of what had happened the day it all began. Her mind is totally blank, a sticky white, like milk dripping hot between her fingers.

The hum of the drone passes again outside her window. She looks at it, as though the vehicle has eyes, and it stops for a

few seconds directly in front of her face as if it was trying to tell her something. When the drone disappears she feels a piercing sound, like a goose screech, embedded in her eardrum. She fears she is beginning to hallucinate again and takes her raincoat, closes the window, and exits to the street.

This was her second trip to the clinic and this time the queue snaked around the entire building. They were all like her, women between 30 and 50 years old, with white skin and nervous tics. Mostly humanities graduates who had lost their jobs and ended up being recycled by the machine learning sector. Taggers, segmenters, annotators, they call them *tukers* or ghostworkers. She is agitated and can't stop sweating. Although she knows that those who are going to treat her are not doctors, seeing herself in a clinic surrounded by men in white coats terrifies her. Every so often, a woman ahead of her turns to look at her sideways. You were there in the last looting of the north cemetery, she asks, barely moving her lips. At the door someone calls her name, and without responding to the woman, she walks hunched over towards the revolving door.

Inside the building the piped music calms her. There is something soporific about the lights and sounds in these corridors lined with waiting women. When her name is called again she gets up from the plastic chair with all her limbs numb. The consultation barely lasts five minutes. The man in the white coat doesn't even look at her, and she lies, saying that she has been sleeping perfectly all week, that the treatment appears to be working. They tell her that even so, it is still recommended that they double the dose and that she would have to return to the clinic within two weeks. As she is rounding the corner to return home on public transport, suddenly she stops being able to see. The sensation is as though her iris is being pressed with alcohol-soaked gauze, as if her eyes were sweating acid. Before she can react, she has lost consciousness.

Upon awakening, the woman from the clinic who had spoken to her while she awaited her turn holds her hand and strokes the wounds on her palm. They are neither in the street, nor her bedroom, nor in any place she has been before, but she recognises the stench of decomposing bodies. They must be close to a cemetery. Without understanding why, she breaks down in tears, feeling as though her whole body is melting. She becomes water, and floods the bed, the room, the hallway, while contemplating the face of the woman who scratches desperately at the walls, trying to reach the ceiling before drowning.

She cannot remember how she had managed to escape, or even if it had been real, but she still feels that gaze fixed in the well of her eye socket. She had had to close the eyelids of the drowned woman before the flood submerged her as well. It is that gaze that guides her now to that street, that building, that open door. As she crosses the landing she decides that she won't return again to that clinic, the hallucinations are getting worse every time.

Inside everything appears normal, a family home. The furniture and bed are in their place, there is a chair in the middle of the room, the blinds are all drawn. She sits down and upon looking at her hands realises that the wounds on the palms have disappeared. Confusion dulls her chest. She doesn't want to cry again for fear of what might happen. She clenches her jaw hard and bites down on her tongue, wanting to know if her body can still feel pain. She stains the floor with blood, and on bending down sees something hidden under the bed. There are four urns for ashes, the cheap kind, those from before. In the distance the howl of sirens can be heard rebounding across the walls of the room, and she feels she has to take the urns without knowing where to take them. Nor if she can manage all four alone, or if maybe it would be better to carry all the ashes in a single bag. The sirens feel closer

and closer, hounding her. She hugs the urns to her chest and closes the door.

Back on the street, despite her hurry, she moves carefully to avoid spilling the ashes all over the pavement. She hears the buzz of a drone, feels it so close that she is at the point of giving up, running away and abandoning the remains of those strangers under a car. But she knows it's impossible, that if she leaves the ashes they will want to catch her, that after the interrogation she will be taken to the hospital, that once inside she would be locked up until they do the tests, and that if she tested positive she would lose absolutely everything. And she knows that she would test positive. She would find herself again in a shabby room, without natural light, on stiff sheets that still smell like their previous corpse, pierced by the protesting wails of the multitudes that wait at the door of that place to ask for any kind of information about the health of their infected relative, or lover, or friend. The recollection of her previous admission intrudes on her thoughts as she runs faster, clutching the urns to her chest. Feeling that she can't breathe, hot bile filling her throat. The hum of the drone is so close that the prickling between her legs becomes unbearable. She has to get to a cemetery, the only place she might be safe.

When they discovered that the cadavers of those who had died in the first wave of epidemics more than fifty years ago were emitting toxicity that infected the living, they decided to set fire to all cemeteries. That was how everything started. Professionals couldn't explain why the contagion had returned so many years later, but the climactic factor seemed significant. The rising temperatures, coupled with the conditions in which the wave of biodegradable burials had developed, seemed like a concatenation

of likely causes. The historians maintained that it was the paradigm shift with respect to death that took place during the early 21st century that imploded the benefits of an eco-sustainable funeral industry that wasn't sufficiently developed. These companies grew so fast that numerous instances of negligence were committed in predicting the long-term polluting emissions that would be the result of this new type of cremation and burial. The technologies were not sufficiently developed, but the demand and the extremity of the situation was such that in many cases the regulations that already existed were contravened. The fires provoked a wave of popular revolts. Family members, friends, lovers, disobeying the sanitary hygiene measures, raided the cemeteries to be able to disinter their loved ones before the fire took with it all their remains. Many others also allowed themselves to be burned there, with their own, confining themselves in the churchyards while the flames laid waste to everything.

It was during those initial weeks that the contagions soared, paradoxically obliging them to build new necropolises as the old cemeteries were systematically demolished. In the chaos of looting, self-immolations, hospitalisations, funerals, and furtive mourning rituals, a website appeared on which many wrote their testimonies, uploaded videos, and offered recommendations so that their raids could be as organised and clandestine as possible.

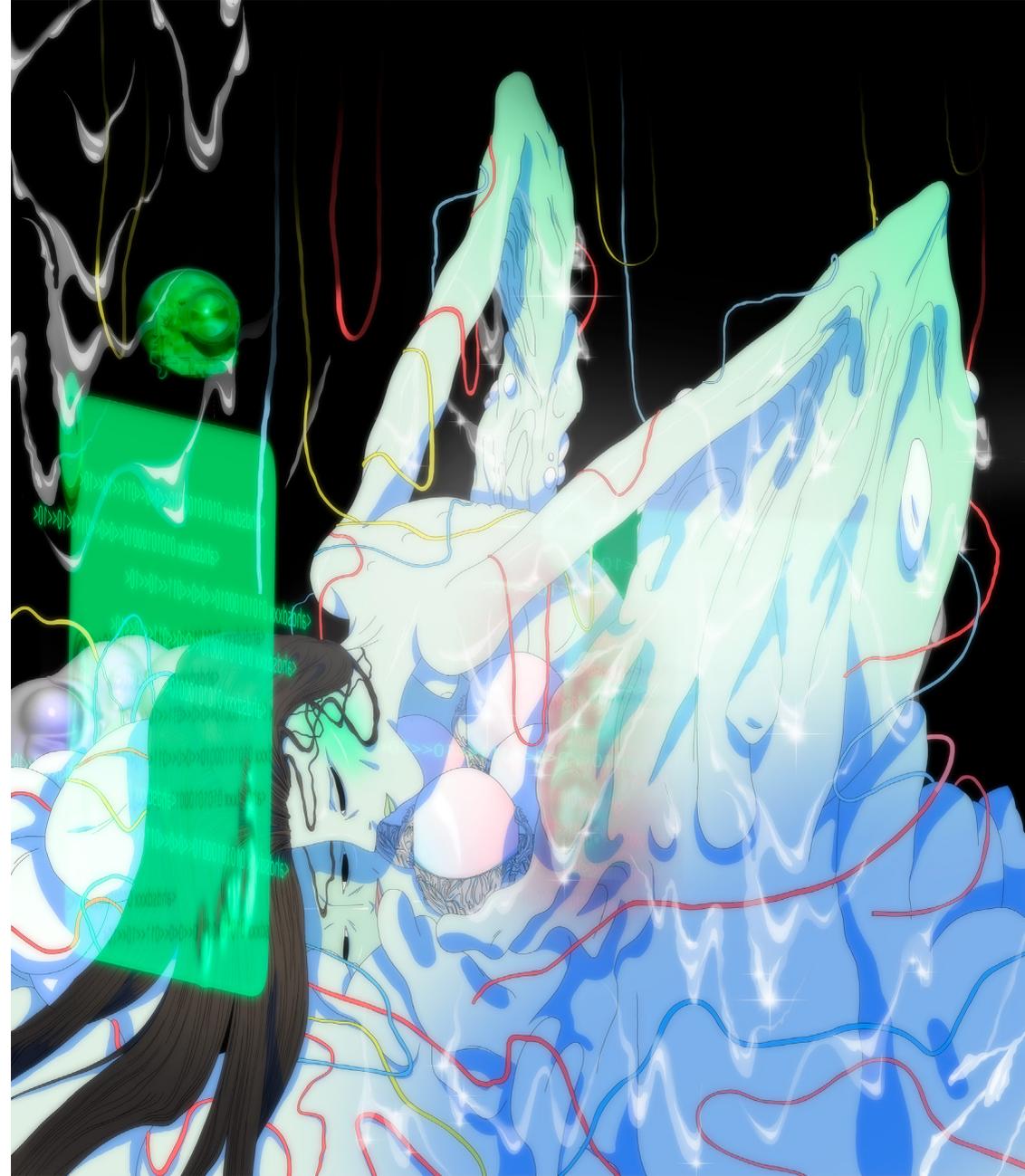
From this more primitive community emerged what would soon become an organised network. Meanwhile, the death toll continued to rise. Then began the processes of territorial sectorisation and their consequent migrations. There were specific zones destined to house the new health and funeral infrastructure, while the majority of the population moved to safer enclaves, which in turn caused fierce confrontations. The network took advantage of this feeling of lack of control and began to organise themselves to occupy the vicinity of the graveyards and so guard the corpses inside.

The authorities deemed that everyone would end up being infected, and preferred to simply wait. They made the strategic decision to let die. They believed that by allowing them to be close to their buried loved ones they could better control the chain of infection. Now, the only important thing was that the drones made sure no one could move beyond the old cemeteries.

The internet was a dump. She could spend hours tracking down and accumulating sediments of old information, which, although it had nothing to do with what was happening now, made her feel more alive. Digital diagenesis. She was the only one of her family who survived, and for her time had stopped there, in that year. That's why it took weeks for her to find out what was happening. It was through that website: someone had left her a message, they were searching for her. She had gotten so thin that her bones ached from spending so many hours glued to the chair, pounded by guilt. At first it was unbelievable, until, like everyone, she had to get used to the particles of ash that veiled the sky and irritated the nostrils. Now it was

always night. She didn't respond to the first message, nor the second, nor the third. She had thought herself safe because nobody knew that the urns were in the house, in the old sideboard in the living room, displayed where her sisters' sports trophies had been. The urns were of imitation silver plastic decorated with flowers and fruit, with handles similar to porcelain teacups. In the beginning she had occasionally opened them by inserting the tip of her nose, as if breathing on the ashes with the heat of her body could make them resuscitate. With time, the urns only reminded her of the months that had passed until she could reclaim her dead. They had travelled kilometres to be cremated in another district because by then the city's crematoria had already collapsed. They did not let her travel, and that wait devoured her inside.

The fourth message arrived just as she was hiding the urns under her bed. She had begun to have recurring nightmares in which the police would knock on the door, destroying everything until they found the urns to confiscate them, leaving her alone again, without her dead and without her ashes. This time the message is very different, saying simply: IT WAS NOT YOUR FAULT, THEY KNOW IT, GET UP AND GO. It is at that precise moment, with her body glued to the urns and the dust accumulated for months under the mattress, that the image of the night in which her mother said she had been infected flashes into her mind. This is a memory buried so deep in her skin that at first the details are blurred, until its clarity falls heavy on her chest, searing her internal organs. They had all been waiting in that room, the television was on as usual and broadcasting the live news. They could hear the sizzle of oil frying in the kitchen next door, and her father had just walked in the door. They decided that it was better for the others to go to the house in the village, but she insisted that the roads were already closed and that they would never arrive. When her mother opened her mouth that night, she already knew how it



Andrés Tena, *Precipitation*. 2020. Ink drawing, digital colour and 3D forms.

would end. She felt that she had known it long ago, as though her entire life had meaning only to squeeze it out in that precise moment. But she didn't imagine she would never get to say goodbye.

When she arrived, everything seemed calm. The situation was no longer exceptional, and those who surrounded the old cemeteries had started to make life there, between the niches, as if it were a town square. Accustomed to the stench, to the blackness of the sky, to the churned and muddy sands, the landscape seemed to echo some mediaeval scene. Every day they received fresh flowers, and some women braided them into ornaments that they hung from the roofs of the pantheons of the wealthiest deceased. These tombs, that were already unoccupied, now functioned as storage where they accumulated what was necessary to support the future enclosures. This was the oldest cemetery in the city. She, believing that she was just visiting, arrived with nothing, but when the women recognised the prophecy in her face they began to kick hard against the earth. They gave her a wooden shovel and with their gaze invited her to dig, as was tradition, her own grave. She would have to spend her first night there, buried alive, surrounded by the skeletons of ancient corpses, the bacteria and creatures that reproduce in the deepest strata. She is so thin that she can't even hold the shovel, much less make a hollow in the earth, but nobody can help her. It will take hours. She rests from time to time, gazing hypnotised at that hole that is the reverse of her own body. The physical effort immerses her in a trance that takes her far, far away: she stops hearing the murmurs of those who flock around her, curious and impatient, she stops feeling the cold at the tips of her fingers and the soles of her feet supporting her weight. All her limbs are numb. Barely anybody is left awake when she finishes. She brushes off the mud that has clung to her clothes, washes her hands and face, and hums to herself as she introduces first

one leg, then the other, and then the torso, until the nape of her neck senses the damp earth. There, looking up at the sky deformed by ashes, she feels suspended, in a kind of sway, as if her guilt had finally been interrupted. The few remaining who keep vigil start to toss fistfuls of earth onto her chest, her knees, her face. The grains of sand feel like little lashes on her skin, until she is completely covered. Hearing their footsteps receding, she squeezes her eyes shut tight and opens her mouth. Into the seam of her lips slip pebbles and bits of clay. She wants to gag, eating all that earth. Down below she has developed an all-consuming hunger.

She has spent more than two days interred. Although she can hear movement above and voices calling her, she remains unmoved. As if she were really dead. Before, on other occasions, she had recreated this situation, imagining her death from the outside, holding on to the relief that lightened the weight of her body when the blood stopped pumping. Caressing herself while the last exhalation emptied her insides of guilt, extricating that guilt that had ended up being the only thing that filled and crushed everything. She has her eyes closed and mouth full of sand when she feels fingers breaking through the soil until they collide with her eyelids. Those fingers belong to hands that forcefully disturb the earth covering her thin body, and to arms that pull at her hips, pulling her out so roughly and softly. The fingers open her mouth and mingle with the saliva and mud on the surface of her tongue. A second body joins the effort, managing to make her abandon that hole that is her resting place. She resists with impassiveness, letting gravity crush her again against the soil, closing her eyes tighter each time. She perceives the shadows of various bodies surrounding her curiously, whispering, as if cooing to her. She doesn't understand what they want from her, or why there is so much anticipation. You are an omen, they say, the mourner, your grieving has consummated the epidemic. She doesn't

want to listen to them, she doesn't want to have anything to do with all these people who worship her as if she were a miracle, but they won't leave her be. She is not a miracle. Miracles do not exist. She just wants to take her urns of fake silver and bury herself. Go home and lie under the bed, embrace them, and disappear. A drone flies over the cemetery.

She begins to hear screams, as if the screeching of a flock of geese has embedded itself in her eardrums. She feels an enormous heat coming down from the sky, jets of fire devouring the branches of the trees, the braided flowers, the statues of virgins and angels. Fire hoses now filled with kerosene explode over the cemetery like fireworks. Everyone around her is running, yet she cannot move. She only feels the orange, so intense that it locks her feet to that exact spot, right next to her tomb. The human stampede slams against the walls of the enclosure. They have been locked inside, in that bonfire that forces them to climb the cypresses and run in concentric circles, in a desperate and useless choreography against death. And she, in her remaining time, understands what is happening, that this is the last of the cemeteries with infected corpses. Amid the screams she sees a woman with her hair in flames approaching. She runs, and as she staggers her burning hair traces a sparkling trail. She carries four urns decorated with fruit and flowers in her arms, and shakes her head insistently so that the fire cannot reach the ashes. They are about to touch, she can almost grasp the urns with her fingers when she feels that her legs too are on fire, and that the woman with the burning hair is melting in front of her. Flesh disintegrates faster than plastic, but before it burns, she watches as the ashes fall and spill onto the earth.

PROGRESS IN THE NOVELS OF URSULA K. LE GUIN

Ida Hiršenfelder

1. The term *things* is deliberately used instead of *beings* to emphasise the importance of all that makes one world, and not just the living beings. The position is thus not only nonanthropocentric, but also nonbiocentric.

Ursula Kroeber Le Guin sets her novels in fictional worlds where human and non-human things¹ interact in common stories, envisioning alternative political systems and divulging their author's ecological position and commitment to egalitarian society, pacifism and mysticism. Her novels shed light on different aspects of progress, propos-

ing life without sharp distinctions between things in the world. She juxtaposes very different ideas of progress, those that come from categorical distinctions between things (human and nonhuman subjects, living and non-living nature), generating mythologies about usefulness, hierarchy, patriarchy, religions and other oppressive systems, and those derived from progress in physics and technology, aiming for an equitable distribution of knowledge and regard for all things in the world, so that they are equally able to enjoy the benefits of technology and knowledge. Through her characters, Le Guin reveals non-human mental processes, looking for words to clearly express the anarchist and feminist ethical positions marked with holistic and ambiguous processes.

Despite fantastical plots and unrestrained use of fable, Ursula Le Guin's novels are expressly realistic. She uses her worlds to reflect on individual aspects of civilizational issues to which there must be an answer if we are to preserve life on Terra. Her stories are fictional but they are also literal reflections on reality in its crudest form, in all its complexity and with very little ideological bias. Even when she deliberates on these issues in her books, either through myth-telling, historical insertions or memories from a relevant planet, or when engaging her characters in the most sophisticated philosophical and mystical debates, she still maintains contact with reality. An important element of her writing are sustainable and as yet unknown

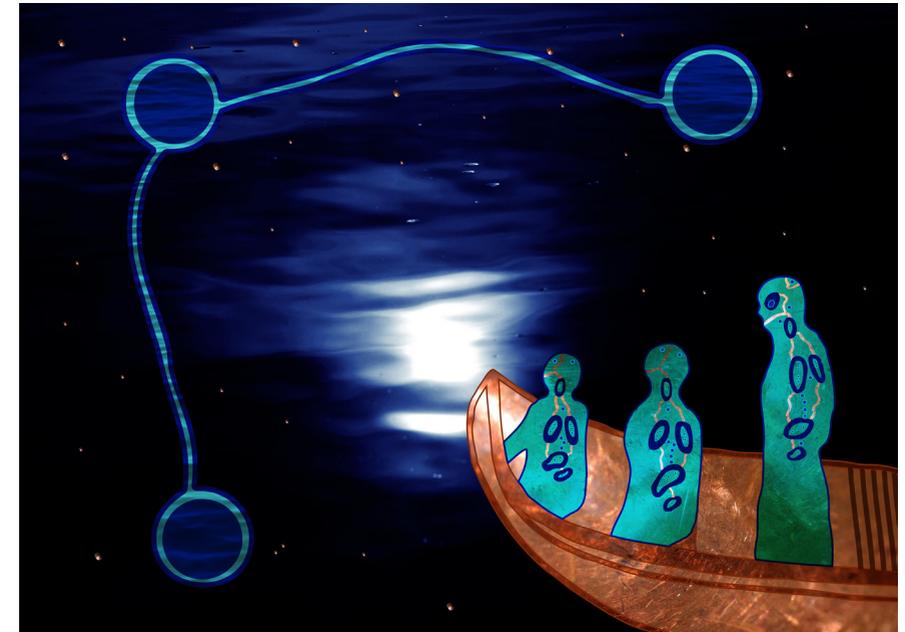
technological possibilities, for they allow Le Guin to explore simultaneity and interworld travels, not to feed her fascination with technological progress, but to develop a philosophy of time in which everything that was, is and will be exists simultaneously in a concurrent point. The concept of time is one of the central categories through which to understand progress. If time is linear, the way it is understood in modern Western society, this omnipresent temporal perception of the world may lead towards the idea of growing accumulation. And as time is such a ubiquitous cultural category it is not easily understood or applied otherwise, so Le Guin in her novels offers different conceptions of time. In her short novel *The Beginning Place*, in which the protagonists try to escape from the problems in their daily lives through a twilight world, where time moves so slowly that an hour equals a day, she shows how time expands and contracts in mental space. Somewhat humorously she adds that an hour is to time what a toothpick or a match is to a spruce. (Le Guin, 1995b, p. 52) A mechanically measured hour is thus but an insignificant technological reject of the temporal dimension. Le Guin's understanding of space and time comes from her fascination with quantum physics, and it has been suggested by her biographers that her father's friend, Robert Oppenheimer one of the fathers of the atomic bomb and subsequently one of its loudest critics, was an influence on her views of technology. (Spivack, 1984, p. 2) However significant this acquaintance may have been for her work, Le Guin was a pacifist through and through, and this aspect of her personality is also seen in her novels. Inverting categories such as time, space, and matter inevitably implies unselective empathy with what is, was and will be.

At this point, another part of her biography is perhaps even more relevant. Le Guin's father was a prominent anthropologist and her mother a psychologist and author of a biography *Ishi in Two Worlds* (1961) of the last living member of the

2. Them as a non-binary singular noun.

Native American Yahi people who was a friend of her family. (Spivack, 1984, p. 18) Colonialism and its exploitative, extractivist issues pervade all her

worlds and underpin any analysis of her ecology, feminism or idea of progress. In her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin reveals the most mature decolonial perspective on civilisation through the rule of non-interference, which is to be obeyed in establishing initial communication with a new planet. Here, the protagonist's mission is to obtain the voluntary consent of the native people to communication with the unknown League of the Worlds under the precept of non-interference, even if this requires extreme physical effort from the protagonist and may even cause his/her death. Genly Ai, the envoy of the Ekumen, is subject to the law that obliges him to respect a quarantine on cultural goods until the native humanoids are consciously willing to embrace them. Genly breaches the requirement for the quarantine of cultural goods only once, when his friend asks him, in the most intimate moment of their subtle, latent erotic relationship, to teach them² how to mindspeak. This breach occurs the moment Genly Ai accepts his friend, unconditionally and completely, not as an alien hermaphrodite, but as a polymorph, accepts them in all their entirety, not as something other, in between, but as something complete, even more complete than himself. It is a moment of complete respect and understanding. Had the envoy obeyed the rule of non-interference at any cost, the result, despite the good faith, would be empty bureaucracy – he would have trampled his sublime feelings of solidarity and love for Estraven, something that eventually happened over two hundred years in the anarchist society on the moon of Anarres in the novel *The Dispossessed*, resembling late communist reality or in Orgoreyn (*The Left Hand of Darkness*), for that matter, which already verges on Nazism with proto-cells of concentration camps. I find Genly's breach important, because I recognise in it the



Elizabeth LaPensée, *Along the River of Spacetime*, 2016.

necessary ambivalence that Le Guin demands from herself and her readers. It is in such details, with which she so abundantly populates her novels, that I recognise her commitment to a non-ideological and undogmatic perspective on things. None of her worlds therefore come without contradictions, no society is without flaws, no character unselfish and there is no position without counter-position, which is important in terms of technological advancements or the ecological and feminist issues she addresses.

Le Guin's ambivalence has been interpreted in different ways. In his analysis of political theory, science fiction and utopian literature in the case of the novel *The Dispossessed*, Tony Burns lists numerous critics who challenged her feminist perspective as inadequate, with many feminists reproaching her for a humanism that fails to recognise the privileges of a male speaker in society. (Burns, 2010, p. 224) I was initially a bit uncomfortable myself about the fact that she so frequently, or almost always, speaks through male protagonists. It is a problematic position, because to speak about scientific, technological, political and mystical things from a female point of view is quite bold in itself, and as such already overcomes certain segregations and prejudices. Octavia E. Butler succeeded in bridging these differences, putting the spotlight on a black female protagonist (Butler, 2005) and going even much further in giving agency not only to non-human intelligent beings, but also to other transformative powers. Perhaps her novel *Cray's Ark* is most resonant of the current pandemic situation, with its invasion of an alien microorganism. (Butler, 1996) Butler takes a huge step away from anthropocentrism, unlike Le Guin, who remains deeply committed to humanism, although the intent of her novels is anything but anthropocentric. Still, her ecological and feminist vision is clearly recognisable in her works. For example, her novella *The Word for World is Forest* is set in a green, tropical paradise on the planet Athshe, which

was occupied by cruel, racist, exploitative, sadistic colonists from Terra. Their commander, an abominable, chauvinistic, and militant creature, seems like one of half-crazed colonels from the Vietnam War. The colonial superiority complex in the novella is manifested as ecological disdain (for the forest, land, wildlife), and is just as strong as the abuse and objectification of women, regardless of whether they are native or Terran.

Progress and advancement of human condition

It seems that by insisting on ambivalence Le Guin aimed to subvert the established categorial apparatus. She traces the destinies of her characters in light of their transformation rather than progression, and she draws heavily from Taoist philosophy, especially from Lao Tzu and his concept of *wu wei* – action by inaction. Taoist influence is well translated in the Gathen concept of *nusuth*, or ‘no matter’ in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and *untrance*, a special form of meditation, a kind of trance involving the loss of self through extreme sensual awareness expressed through negation rather than designation.

The central theme in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the otherness of transsexuality on a planet populated by polymorphous humanoids who assume their sexual role for only one sixth of their lives, and spend the rest of the time as neuters. These polymorphs understand permanent sexual identity, such as femininity or masculinity, as extremely perverse, and initially perceive other worlds merely as a culture of sexual deviants. Although the novel's fabric revolves around otherness, sexual identity and race, it only mentions the protagonist's race in passing. The central character, Genly Ai, is a black Terran, and by understating this fact the author underlines the ambition that this is how race should be understood – as a triviality. The author achieves the same with gender, which by the end of the novel becomes as insignificant and trivial as race. This is

how she addresses the question of feminism and the choice of her protagonists' gender. Le Guin does attempt to abandon any kind of essentialism.

Another less-known novel with an interpretation as elusive as its master species is *City of Illusions*. The one and only law enforced on all the species on Terra by its (presumed) colonists (Shing) as simple as it is alluring, is that of reverence for life enforced by mind control. Through the novel one wonders how could protection of life be a malicious thing. And yet again we are faced with the author's uncompromising ambivalence. It is not by coincidence that the only extra-terrestrial besides (presumably) the colonists is the main protagonist Falk, signified by specific physical characteristics (race), ripped out of his cultural environment and completely deprived of his memory, with total amnesia forced on him (presumably) by the colonists. It was only when comparing this future re-forested North American continent to the abducted Native American and Australian children of the 20th century that the deeper meaning of the novel is revealed; moreover, it also shows why the author keeps the reader in the dark about the true origin of the Shing. Even with the best of intentions like reverence for life, the desire to subordinate and rule is a violent and unforgivable deed.

Each of Le Guin's novels offers examples of how a desire for a utopian world born from a revolution, a legal system, or an attempt to do something good, turns sour. In *Tales from Earthsea* the protagonist, who wants to stop his parents from worrying about whether he is dead or alive, causes their persecution. The urge for order and control in Orgoreyn society gradually turns into bureaucratic despotism. Le Guin consistently demonstrates how firm convictions breed their opposites with the best intentions. In *The Lathe of Heaven*, for example, the revolutionary scientist and psychiatrist Dr. Haber is challenged by his

patient: '[Y]ou're handling something outside reason. You are trying to reach progressive, humanitarian goals with a tool that isn't suited to the job.' (Le Guin, 1999, p. 103)

Progress and climate

The climates on Le Guin's planets or worlds are caught in a 'civilisation-climate' feedback loop, with civilisation being what it is because of the climate, and the climate being what it is (destroyed, looted, cruel or mild) because of the civilisation. The political system in the worlds which we enter through her novels (capitalism, autocracy, anarchy, despotism, colonialism) develops based on the climatic conditions, which in turn are but symptoms of these very conditions. Le Guin's novels are ecopolitical. Helen Hester and her xenofeminist manifesto brilliantly matches Le Guin's interaction between content and form. Hester rebuts the generally accepted perception that 'information and materiality are conceptually distinct, and that information is in some sense more essential, more important and more fundamental than materiality. [... Xenofeminism] does not reject technology (or science, or rationalism – ideas often understood as patriarchal constructs), but positions it both as part of the warp and weft of our everyday lives and as one potential sphere of activist intervention.' (Hester, 2018, pp. 7–8) The most close-knit tie between climate and human action is weaved in *Earthsea*, where some of the wizards practice weatherworking, and their intentions can bring either greater ease or even more catastrophic earthquakes, droughts, storms or diseases. Another element that stands out in this world is the ability to feel and sympathise with all things. I especially admire her descriptions of feeling, sensing rocks, the lithosphere, penetration into the interior of the earth, which is not a static being, but a being moving very slowly through eons. In this sense, Le Guin's Terra resembles James Lovelock's Gaia (1995), or Bruno Latour's Earth (2018) in that it

3. In Slovenian the word for a thing is *stvar*. It is the root of *stvarnost* meaning reality. The same root is also in the word *stvarjenje* meaning creation, related to the origin of all things.
4. There is no easy definition of Morton's neologism *arche-lithic*, as it is not simply a logic opposed to the agrilogistics 'The *arche-lithic* and its ecognosis are without dichotomies of good and evil, need and want, Nature and Culture, human and nonhuman, life and nonlife, self and nonself, present and absent, something and nothing.' (Morton, 2016, p. 83)
- is almost personified, or as personified as anything else in the world (a tree, fox, the sea, wind, rock, fortune teller), but not in the sense of personification we know from mythology. In the first place it reveals a perspective that gives each thing its reality, which in this case doesn't originate in the etymological meaning of creation, but from a thing, or objectness.³ Which brings me to Timothy Morton's object-oriented ontology. I can call each thing only a thing, in order to avoid delimiting it. A resistance to define, classify, name, comes to some extent from Morton's theory. As soon as I call a thing a being, I already differentiate it from a non-being, and so forth. Similarly to Le Guin, Morton proposes that there is a close link between the logic of a civilisation and the environment, claiming

the agricultural society is closely connected to patriarchy and multiple forms of exploitative relationships born from agriculture, which is not just a certain kind of logic but literally logistics, like moving things around or terraforming. (Morton, 2016, p. 21). And in this agrilogistics we may also find the root of the idea of progress: 'agrilogistics suppresses arche-lithic⁴ shuddering, the anxiety of not knowing everything, not knowing the future: the openness of futurity is obscured by planning.' (Morton, 2016, p. 82).

Le Guin is well aware that everything we utter we utter as people (her protagonists are humanoids and her interest is in analysing contemporary human society), but on the other hand she constantly explores the possibilities of moving beyond



Elizabeth LaPensée, *Manoominike Mazina'anang*, 2017.

5. Presumably, from the Slavic root *prav*, meaning true as a Boolean.

the category of humans, especially in *Earthsea*. At the same time I cannot help but notice how methodically she avoids offering answers, and instead

asks questions and thinks about them, as profoundly and complexly as possible, from the perspectives of anthropology, political theory, and religiology, as well as physics, climatology, geology and geography.

Le Guin pays a lot of attention to the accuracy and non-metaphorical use of language. All things in *Earthsea* have a use name and a true name. The true name reflects the mystical essence of a being, and a wizard can wield total power over something or someone whose name they know, and may even heal an unwell being through their true name. Anarres mythology is inspired by Odo, a kind of antagonist to the biblical Noah, who took away the names from all beings, denaming them, so to speak. On anarchistic Anarres people speak an artificial language called Pravic⁵, which was created to eradicate possession and people's ownership of things or each other. In Pravic, the word for a spouse or wife, for example, contains no elements of possession. This is revealed through very careful utterances. When meeting her father, Shevek's daughter says: 'You can share the handkerchief I use [...]' rather than 'You can have my handkerchief.' (Le Guin, 2001, p. 178), implying that the handkerchief is not really hers, but only something that is being used by her for the time being.

Le Guin proposes a non-metaphorical and very accurate use of language. The world overgrown with Forest is called Forest. The world covered with ice is called Winter, the world of sea and islands is called Earthsea, the world we are on right now is called Terra. So what is this world called Terra, I ask.



Elizabeth LaPensée, *Thunderbird Strike*, 2017.

Etymology offers multiple meanings:

1. land,
2. soil, earth, dirt,
3. land that separates seas against the third element – the sky,
4. the world, globe, earth as a planet,
5. land or region.

In this sense I find that civilisation on Terra is defined by the fertile soil that provided conditions for agriculture and settlement, something that Morton also identifies as the main protagonist in transforming the Earth, terraforming, extractivism, and exploitation of its resources that we are witnessing today. (Morton, 2016, pp. 4–5) In this sense, colonialism, the difference between urban and rural, the idea of natural and unnatural, even patriarchy of the agricultural age and presumably preceding matriarchy, and in turn also the linear and cyclic understanding of time, are ideas derived from agriculture. Time is different on Winter, a planet embraced by eternal ice. ‘The people of Winter, who always live in Year One, feel that progress is less important than presence’, and the less progress there is, the less the need for war.

The thing we call Terra also entails the aspect of separating lands and regions to nations and peoples, which ultimately leads to wars, which is something that could never happen in a society like Karhidish, with its specific climatic and biological conditions. (Le Guin, 2000) Melina Pereira Savi in her analysis of three novels emphasises that progress, as we understand it on Earth, is inseparably connected to the notions of borders that effectively cause not only the separation of land to regions and nations but also to the epistemological dualism⁶ and they are also closely connected to the desire for possession (Pereira Savi, 2018, p. 60). In this respect Le Guin emphasises real circumstances, which may not be essential,

but allow for a wide range of bioengineering, technological and even magical processes that people are obliged to use and be inspired by in order to refine and raise the cultural awareness of all living things, which stands as a kind of ethical imperative. She infers, for instance, that polymorphous humanoids on Winter are a result of bioengineering experiments of Hainish colonisers, as well as the only technologically and culturally developed world that has no need for war. Previously, this led me to the conclusion that genetic manipulation which nullifies gender differentiation is justified in so far as it prevents war or self-destruction in terms of damaging the environmental balance, until I read *City of Illusions*, in which, yet again as I noted above, one can never be so sure not to doubt one’s own benevolence. Despite her mysticism and deep contemplation on the living environment, Le Guin does not depict nature as something essential that serves as the basis for ecology, but as a technologised space that shapes life experience. Hers is a techno-scientific position in which nothing is so sacred that it couldn’t be adapted to boost the desire for the freedom of gender, humanity and environment. Moreover, this doesn’t imply that she gives prominence to the techno-scientific position, but simply that she frequently contemplates the tension between natural conditions on the one hand, and determinism and potentially emancipatory processes on the other. In the words of Helen Hester: ‘Biology is not a synonym for determinism and sociality is not a synonym for transformation’ (Wilson, 2015, as cited in Hester, 2018, p. 21), and ‘every fact of nature that is understood can be used to alter it’ (Firestone, 1979, as cited in Hester, 2018, pp. 21–22).

6. ‘[T]he ultimate source of humanity’s destructive relation to the natural world is dualism – the assumption that human and nature are quite separate, that the human is radically divided in kind from the rest of creation.’ (Clark, 2014, as cited in Pereira Savi, 2018, p. 106).

Anarres in *The Dispossessed* and Karhide in *The Left Hand of Darkness* both have extremely inhospitable and harsh climatic conditions which, however, as Le Guin demonstrates, do not generate adversarial human relationships, but promote collectivity, solidarity with human and non-human beings, respect for the environment, hospitality, and mysticism. When Shevek says: 'It's not our society that frustrates individual creativity. It's the poverty of Anarres. This planet wasn't meant to support civilization. If we let one another down, if we don't give up our personal desires to the common good, nothing, nothing on this barren world can save us. Human solidarity is our only resource (Le Guin, 2001, p. 152).' At the same time, in these two novels the people on Urras and Orgoreyn live far more comfortably than those on the harsher planets, but are also isolated from each other. Giving up abundance and possessions is one of the ways to nurture human solidarity as well as sensitivity to the living environment and all things in the world. This solidarity is also the source of Le Guin's inexhaustible optimism for the destiny of humankind, something she could be reproached for, because she ignores the possibility of total destruction, genocide, as demonstrated again with the optimistic outcome of Athshean fight against militarists in *The Word for World is Forest*. Without this optimism Athsheans would end up on the edge of a devastated desert continent, like Australian aborigines. If anything, rather than for a lack of semblance to reality, Le Guin's humanist optimism could be reproached for its inability to offer a resolutely pessimistic scenario, something that Stanisław Lem noted about American speculative fiction when he stressed that 'we cannot afford to be spared from reality, no matter how cruel, if we are to remain in the categories of the real world.' (Swirski, 1997, p. 25). And yet another optimistic answer from Le Guin may be found in the hope spread through *City of Illusions*: 'In a good season one trusts life; in a bad season one only hopes. But they are of the same essence: they are the mind's indispensable

relationship with other minds, with the world, and with time. Without trust, a man lives, but not a human life; without hope, he dies (Le Guin, 1995a, p. 678).' At the end of the day, reality is also about the perspective of our gaze.

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BIOGRAPHIES & COLOPHON

The work of **Rosa Barba** (Italian born, living in Germany) contests and recasts truth and fiction, myth and reality, metaphor and material to a disorientating degree, which ultimately extends into a conceptual practice. She has presented her sculptural objects, installations, live performances, site-specific interventions and cinematic works in solo exhibitions for two decades, most recently at Wäinö Aaltonen Museum of Art, Turku (2020); Arter, Istanbul (2019); CCA, Kitakyushu, Japan (2019); Remai Modern, Saskatoon, Canada (2018–19); Tabakalera, International Centre for Contemporary Culture, San Sebastián (2018); Void, Derry, Northern Ireland (2018); and Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid (2017), Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan (2017); Secession, Vienna (2017); Malmö Konsthall, Sweden (2017); CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux (2016); Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (2016); Albertinum, Dresden (2015); MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA (2015). Barba has participated in numerous group exhibitions, including the Yokohama Triennale (2020), 32nd Bienal de São Paulo (2016), 8th Berlin Biennale (2014), 19th Biennial of Sydney (2014), the 8th Berlin Biennale (2014) and 53rd and 56th Venice Biennale (2009 and 2015).

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Cristina Cámara is an art historian and curator. Since 2006, she works as curator of Film and Video Collection at the

Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid, where she has been part of the curatorial team of exhibitions such as *Territories and Fictions: Thinking a New Way of the World* (2016–17) and *Minimal Resistance – Between Late Modernism and Globalisation: Artistic Practices during the 80s and 90s* (2013–14). Her main area of research is the moving image, especially the history of avant-garde and experimental cinema and video art. Cámara's more recent curatorial projects include *Val del Omar. The Mechanical Mysticism of Cinema* (Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2019–2020) and *Rosa Barba: Drawn by the Pulse* (Tabakalera, Donostia, 2018).

Marta Echaves was trained in Philosophy (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) and in the PEI-Independent Study Program (MACBA), she is a researcher and writer, and works designing activities for the publishing house Caja Negra. Working at the intersection of curatorial practice, writing and historiographic research, her projects seek to revisit images and metaphors associated with specific epochal contexts within the framework of the development of an Iberian hauntology, and put intimate experiences and anecdotes at the centre as detonators of poetic memory devices. Interested in the possibility of understanding documentary practice in an expanded way, the relationship between artistic practice and historiographic making are the driving force behind her process, centring work with oral history and intimate archives, the violence and loss that they traverse, and the need for practices of collective mourning and restitution. She has presented research at MACBA, Museo Reina Sofía, La Casa Encendida, La Virreina Center de la Imatge, Hangar, and ARCO, among others. She collaborates regularly on writing for artists catalogues and books, and in 2019 co-published the reader *Working Dead: Scenarios of Post-Work*, with María Ruido and Antonio Gómez.

Silvia Federici is a long-time feminist activist, teacher and writer. She was amongst the founders of the International Feminist Collective, the organisation that launched the Wages for Housework campaign in 1972. She has also been active in the anti-globalisation movement and the anti-death penalty movement. Federici was a founding member of the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa, which for more than ten years documented the struggle of African students against the austerity programmes imposed by the IMF and World Bank on African countries. She is the author of many essays and books on political philosophy, feminist theory, cultural studies and education. Her published works include *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004), *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (2019) and *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (2020, first published in 2012). Federici is Emerita Professor of Political Philosophy and International Studies at Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York.

Ida Hiršenfelder is an archivist and editor of the Web Museum, the digital repositium of audio-visual cultural heritage, at the Museum of Modern Art plus Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, Ljubljana. Previously, she was an archivist of the Diva Station project at the Center for Contemporary Art, SCCA-Ljubljana (2007-2013).

Vladan Joler is Professor at the Academy of Arts of the University of Novi Sad and founder of the SHARE Foundation. He is leading the SHARE Lab, a research and investigation lab that explores the technical and social aspects of algorithmic transparency, digital labor exploitation, invisible infrastructures, and technological black boxes.

Vincent Liegey is an engineer and interdisciplinary researcher. He is the co-author of *Exploring Degrowth: A Critical Guide* (Pluto Press, 2020) and *Un projet de Décroissance* (Utopia, 2013). He is also the coordinator of Cargonomia, a centre for research and experimentation on degrowth and sustainable logistical solutions, as well as local food distribution using cargo bikes in Budapest.

Monica Narula formed Raqs Media Collective in 1992, along with Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddhabrata Sengupta. The word ‘raqs’ in several languages denotes an intensification of awareness and presence attained by whirling, turning, being in a state of revolution. Raqs Media Collective takes this sense to mean ‘kinetic contemplation’ and a restless and energetic entanglement with the world and with time. Raqs practices across several media, making installation, sculpture, video, performance, text, lexica and curation. The members live and work in Delhi, India. In 2000, they co-founded the Sarai Programme at Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi and ran it for a decade; they also edited the Sarai Reader series. They have shown extensively throughout the world, as well as curated numerous exhibitions. They were the artistic directors of the recently concluded Yokohama Triennale 2020, Afterglow, where they developed sources around toxicity, care, and the luminosity of friendship.

Corina Oprea is the managing editor of L’Internationale Online since January 2019. She is the former artistic director of Konsthall C, where she curated a programme on decolonisation in the north. She holds a PhD from Loughborough University, UK, with the thesis ‘The

End of the Curator: On Curatorial Acts as Collective Production of Knowledge’.

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez is an interdependent curator, editor and writer. Among the exhibitions she has curated are *Defiant Muses: Delphine Seyrig and the Feminist Video Collectives in France in the 1970s–1980s*, with Giovanna Zapperi, LaM, Lille and Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2019–20; *Contour Biennale 9: Coltan as Cotton*, Mechelen, 2019; *Let’s Talk about the Weather: Art and Ecology in Times of Crisis*, with Nora Razian, Sursock Museum, Beirut and Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou, 2016/18; and *Resilience – U3: 7th Triennial of Contemporary Art in Slovenia*, +MSUM, Ljubljana, 2013. She was co-director of *Les Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers* from 2010–12. She is editor-in-chief of *Versopolis Review* and was chief editor of *Manifesta Journal*, 2012–14 and *L’Internationale Online*, 2014–17. She also curated the project *Not Fully Human, Not Human at All*, organised by KADIST, Paris, 2017–20. She is co-founder of the *Initiative for Practices and Visions of Radical Care*, with Elena Sorokina. In 2021, she was appointed cultural programmes manager at the *Cité internationale des arts*, Paris.

Paula Pin Lage is a transfeminist artist and researcher with a specific focus on processes of collective research and experimentation with open source and free technologies. She has conducted residencies, seminars and workshops in institutions such as the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN in its French acronym) in Geneva; the *Universidad Pierre et Marie Curie* in Paris; the *KASK School of Arts* in Gent; *Gaîté Lyrique* in Paris; *Emare Grant en Bandits Mages*, Bourges; *Querly Ecologies* at the *Click Festival*, Helsingør, Denmark;

and the *OSH Open Source Gathering* in Shenzhen, China. Her work is immersed in the development of DIY-DIWO technologies, bio-hacking and open-source hardware electronics. She is a participant in the autonomous trans-hack-feminist laboratories *Pechblenda* and *Transnoise*, and, since 2012, has collaborated in the extensive bio-hacking network, *Hackteria*. Her practical experience in themes of bio-hacking (body/environment) and health in the *Pechblenda* laboratory have led her to collaborate with *Hangar*, *Parc de Recerca Biomèdica* and *DIY bio* from Barcelona, jointly developing the *Hangar wetlab* and the two-year programme *Prototipome*.

Ajda Pistotnik is a researcher and project manager at *EnaBanda* association, Master of Science in Political Science. As part of the international degrowth community and the international movement for financial justice and debt relief she pursues opportunities for opening up and creating a space for alternative proposals and more radical policies in Slovenia. She edited a thematic block on degrowth for the *Journal for the Critique of Science (ČKZ)* and was also the editor of the collection of essays *Let’s Talk: Debt Meets Degrowth* and the collection *A Vocabulary for a New Era*. She is also an initiator of the translation and author of the foreword to *Degrowth: Vocabulary for a New Age* book. She is a member of the editorial boards of *ČKZ* and the *Review of Economics and Economic Methodology*.

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