

ION • FOSSILS

Plasticity of the Planet:
On Environmental Challenge
for Art and Its Institutions

• PLANET • FORM •

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GLOBALIZA











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TILIA AMERICANA - TILIA CORDATA - TILIA
PLATYPHYLLA - TILIA SP
TILIA SP. WHEELERIANA - TOMILIA
CZARNA - ULMUS GLABRA - ULMUS LARTEI
POLNY - VIBURNUM SP - WIERZBA BIALA

I'M SORRY IT TOOK ME SO LONG

A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT BY LAMONTAGNE, AAR DE VRIJDT & JUAN BORG, MIXED
IN THE FRAME OF NATUREIMPACT, A JARVIS ICI, BARCELONA PROJECT

























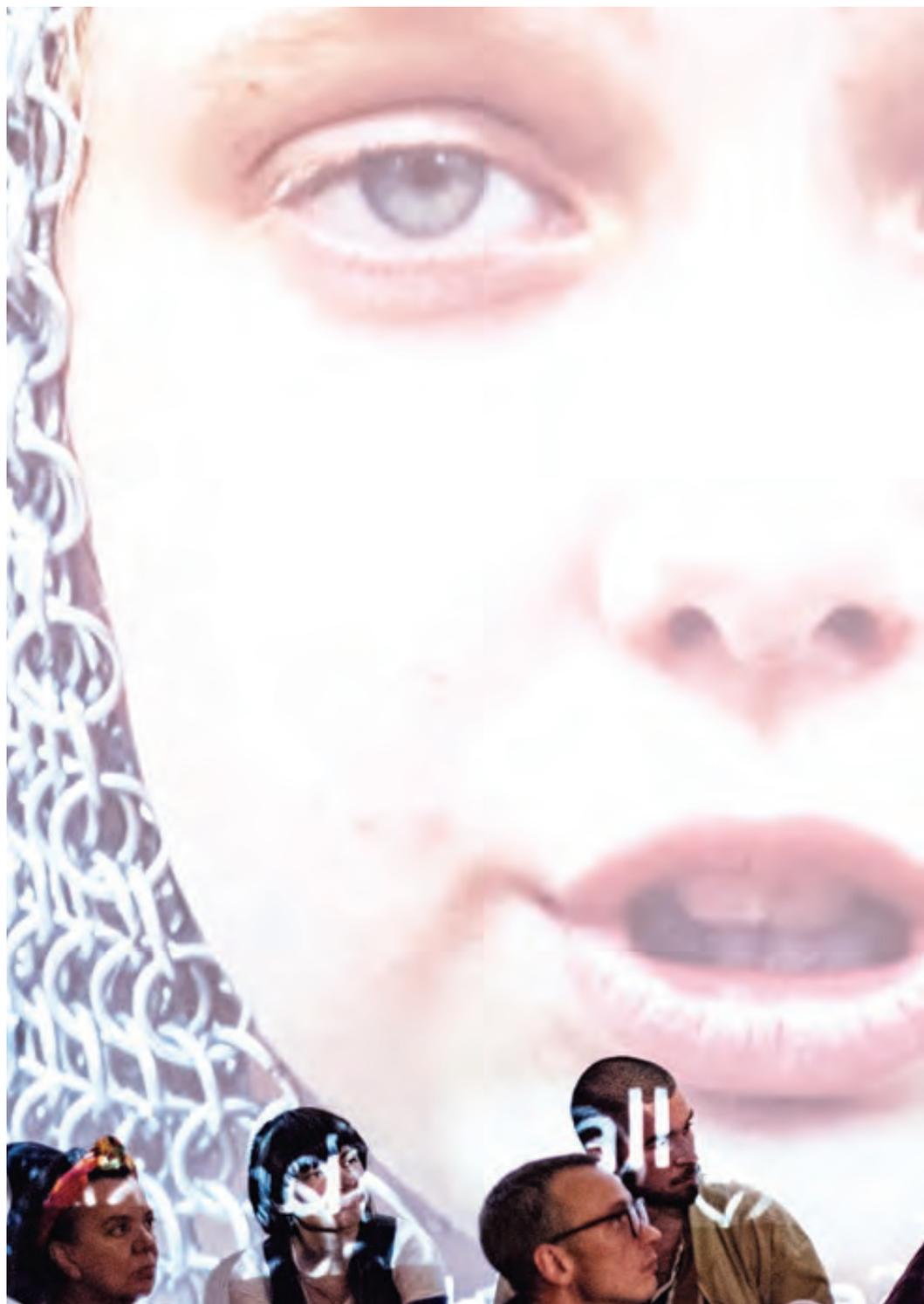




















What do you think?
Should we have on one
side of this panel a
color - ask people to
look at it and then the
space. Or should we
insert the lines from
the image that we
liked?

pro-cris-ti-na-tio *lpra krasta' nãstã, pã-l*
mean

is the avoidance of doing a task which needs to
be done by doing more pleasurable things in place of less pleasurable
more urgent ones, thus putting off important
procrastination.









PLASTICITY
OF → THE
PLANET: ON
ENVIRON-
MENTAL
CHALLENGE
FOR ART AND
ITS INSTI-
TUTIONS.

Mousse Publishing
Milan 2019

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Magdalena Ziółkowska

PLASTIC
The
STITCHES
of the Institution
STITCHES

At first glance, it seems that the institution – understood in terms of continuity, permanence and the safeguarding of artistic achievements – lies miles away from the concept of “plasticity,” even in its colloquial sense, as a general and literal flexibility, formability, or the ability to be modeled● “Plasticity” – one of the most recognized and central concepts in the *oeuvre* of the French philosopher Catherine Malabou – comes from the Greek *plassein* (πλάσσω), and has two basic meanings, corresponding to the Hegelian *Plastizität*: the ability to take on a form (clay, for example) and the ability to give form (as in the plastic arts and plastic surgery)●¹ To this dictionary definition, Malabou adds a third meaning, in which “plasticity” is understood as the permanent and irreversible destruction and deconstruction of the form – in stark contrast to elasticity and flexibility●² “This

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1. See: Tom Giesbers, “Plasticity,” in *Post-human Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti, Maria Hlavajova (London–Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 320.
 2. Malabou writes: “The substitution of flexibility for plasticity erases the notion of resistance. A plastic material is malleable, but resists deformation once shaped, like the marble that has →

effect of giving shape can also be found in the ‘plastic’ material that is the result of casting● Over time, plasticity no longer means just taking on or shaping form, but also the process of destroying and blowing them up, as indicated by ‘plastic’ as an explosive material” writes Malabou, adding: “Plasticity is therefore situated on the opposite poles of the creation and destruction of form●”³ Plastic, an explosive substance containing nitro-glycerine and nitrocellulose, today known as Semtex or C4, and in the late nineteenth century, the explosive gelatin invented by Nobel, acts violently and spectacularly● This allows for a sudden transformation of identity, not via evolution or time-consuming change, but as a result of the disorganizing, violent, and disruptive power of an explosion● So what does this idea of the variable

→ become a sculpture.” See: *An Interview with Catherine Malabou: Toward Epigenetic Philosophy*, Frank Ruda and Agon Hamza, *Crisis & Critique* 5, no. 1, 440.

3. Catherine Malabou, “Plasticity and Cerebral and Psychological Suffering,” transl. Joanna Figiel, *Znak*, no. 731 (April 2016), accessed November 2, 2019, <http://www.miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/plastycznosc-a-ci-erpianie-mozgowe-i-psychiczne/>.

form – porous, prone to infinite transformations and open to otherness – have to do with today’s contemporary art institution?

Let us try to think about the category of “plasticity” in relation to an art institution and ask about the consequences a collision between these two would bring●

Encouraged by Malabou to follow in Hegel’s footsteps, let us recall F. W. J. Schelling, in his 1807 Munich lecture, *Über das Verhältnis der bildenden Künste zu der Natur*, contemplating the relationship between nature and the plastic arts in the most inspiring and – for us, at least – useful context● The lecture contains the well-known phrase: “The plastic arts therefore stand manifestly as an active copula between the soul and nature and can only be grasped in the living center between both of them●”⁴ For Schelling, the living center is the imagination itself● “Plasticity thus appeared to me from the outset as a structure of transformation

4. See: Jason M. Wirth, *Schelling's Practice of the Wild: Time, Art, Imagination*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015) 136; Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at The Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, trans. Carolyn Shread (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), 9.

and destruction of presence and the present," she emphasizes●⁵ Malabou engages philosophy in a dialectical exchange with the achievements of science – neuroscience and epigenetics in particular – and indicates that the prerogative of scientific development is ontological just as much as it is empirical● She directs her reflections on "plasticity" toward the future, "oriented toward the decisive question of the becoming of humanity, particularly in its relations with the non-human●"⁶

The aim of this publication is to diagnose the contemporary condition● The first chapter opens with a functional case study of Poland's most important contemporary art institution● Established during the transformation of the political system, Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw is an institution that now boasts thirty years of accomplishments● In recent years, its solid program has taken on the challenge of rethinking the world, seeking

5. Ibid., 9.

6. Sorelle Henricus, "Tomorrow's Imperative: An Interview with Catherine Malabou," *Global Performance Studies* 2, no. 2 (2019), accessed October 25, 2019, <https://gps.psi-web.org/issue-2-2/gps-2-2-8/>.

a better understanding of the transformations and ailments of our contemporary condition, and mapping the dynamic processes of globalization and deglobalization that affect contemporary art● The essays by Małgorzata Ludwisiak, "Ochre as Soap as Process as Community: Some Practices for Confronting Globalization and Some Questions to Engage with the Environmental Crisis as Part of the *U-jazdowski* Program," and Jarosław Lubiak, "Plastic Planetarism: The Art of Staying with the Trouble," not only provide a taste of their discursive and exhibition-oriented activities, focused on generating conscious and subjective participation in contemporary culture, but also show the institution's attempts at engaging with the vision of anthropocentric culture, revealing its disappointments, and seeking alternative models based on a non-human perspective● One such attempt is the title project, *Plasticity of the Planet*, and one part of it, the *Human-Free Earth* (15.03–22.09.2019) exhibition●

In Malabou's philosophy, the subject of the second chapter of this reader, "plasticity," is characterized by a constant transformation in search of a new quality of form● Her key 2017 essay, "The

Brain of History, Or, the Mentality of the Anthropocene," is reprinted here to provide a reference point for the arguments developed in essays by Alexander Hope and Grzegorz Czemiel. While the first, "The Future Is Plastic: Refiguring Malabou's Plasticity," examines the implications of the metaphors of plasticity for the philosophical *oeuvre* of Malabou, along with the relationship to neuroscience, the second, "Plastic Cartographies: Map and Territory in Catherine Malabou and Eco-poetics," demonstrates her cartographic ideas in relation to the notion of "plasticity" and "brain-world cartography" via an analysis of Elizabeth Bishop and Nigel Forde's eco-poetics, in the context of the environmental catastrophe and ethical challenges brought about by the Anthropocene. In a conversation with Malabou conducted specially for this publication, Ewa Majewska asks how post-traumatic stress disorder and other transformations of the brain coincide with the Anthropocene, and engages Malabou in a discussion on the modalities of the brain, and various traces and transitions of the mind present in the works exhibited at *Human-Free Earth*.

If Malabou explains biological time and the issue of environmental catastrophe in terms of the neuroplasticity of the brain, Daniel Falb's essay, entitled "Defossilization

and Refossilization: Deleuze/Guattari to the Anthropocene,” one of three texts presented in the following chapter, confronts the practices of the world of nature, culture, and philosophy in discussion with Deleuze and Guattari● The specter of transformation and the loss of the self via the plasticity of identity in favor of being able to function in the future are recognized by Małgorzata Sugiera in her essay “(Re)Presenting Worlds of Nonhuman Scale,” and Cathy Fitzgerald in “Goodbye Anthropocene – Hello Symbiocene: Eco-social Art Practices for a New World●” The latter sums up existing discussions of planetary catastrophe (often hardly visible, since the world seems to have hardly changed since yesterday) and the Anthropocene and its alternatives proposed by various thinkers and researchers●

The question organizing the fourth (“Institutions for the Future”) and fifth (“How to Stay with the Trouble?”) chapters of the book is whether today, in an era of an environmental crisis, contemporary art institutions and their representatives responsible for the discourses and practices of the world of contemporary art can indeed act differently● For decades, museums, galleries, and contemporary art centers have been declaring their

involvement in important present-day issues● They have adjusted their programs to fit whatever required contemplation, thought, analysis, and a wide discussion at any given moment● From this perspective, climate change, progressive environmental disaster, and the irreversible degradation or depletion of the planet's resources are the most pressing topics, requiring thought, concrete intervention, and the care and awareness of our communities● What shape might their involvement in the current crisis take? What attempts at dealing with this crisis might be taken up by the art world and its institutions? What tools are needed to enable real action, here and now, in various geographical locations? It should be noted that I do not mean simply "greening" the institution● This is not about healing remedies in the form of provisions for elementary actions of sustainable development, but about changing our way of thinking and formulating a new canon of practices for constructing the identity and the internal structures of the institution●

How should institutions radically rethink their internal functions to be able to fulfill their assigned roles and implement new scenarios? By asking our specially invited guests – curators, directors, and producers working in art: Defne Ayas, Viviana Checchia,

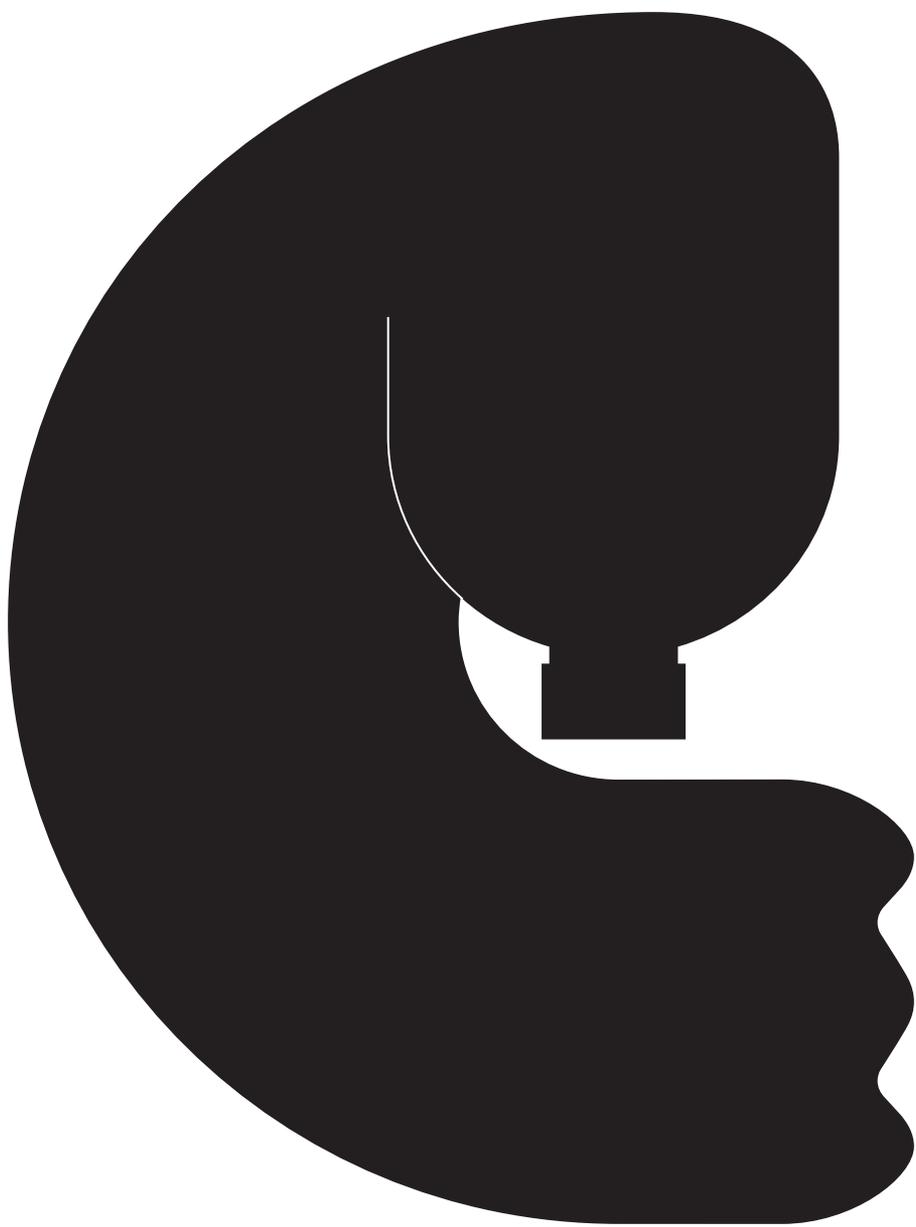
Mira Gakjina, and Anne Szefer Karlsen – we shared the belief that we should challenge the basic concepts on which our activities are based, above all, the very concept of criticality● Despite its etymological link to the notion of crisis, it seems utterly insufficient in our current predicament● Thus, the idea of a critical institution may also be inadequate● Would the idea of an engaged institution be a response to these doubts? What, then, would possible modes of engagement be, and to what end? Could we presently imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology, care, awareness or feminism? How could the new distribution and redistribution of their resources and tools take place? What kind of a role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism? The essays by Ewa Majewska, "Toward a Feminist Art Institution? Counterpublics of the Weak," and Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, "For Slow Institutions," as well as thirteen questionnaires providing a report on the present, show that in order to answer these questions, we need to revise the existing concepts and ideas that have

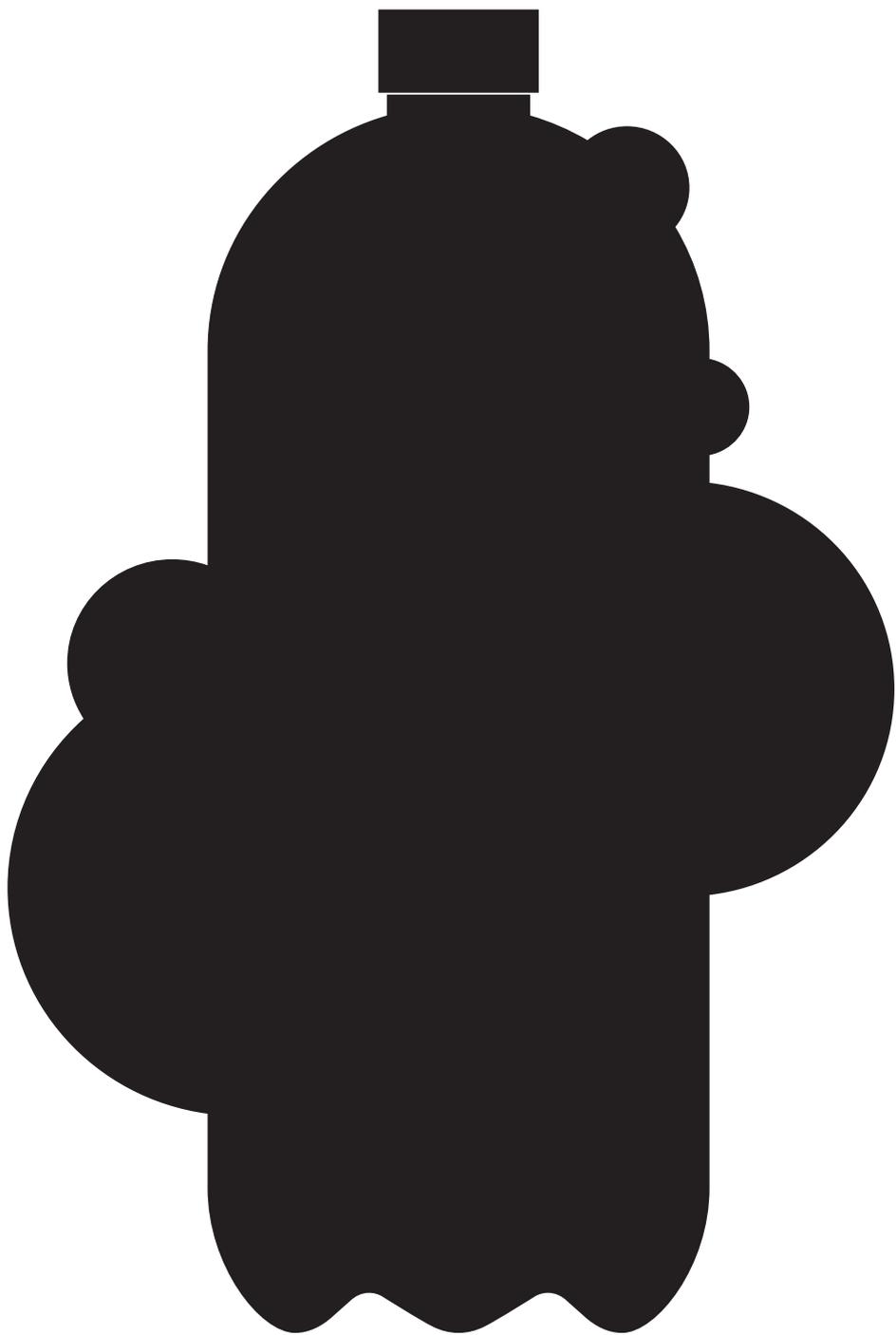
become established in the institutional critiques of recent years, and introduce new criteria, identity, or values● The solutions to the problems we are currently facing will not come to us from the future● On the contrary, each of us working in contemporary art and culture must make an effort to develop them, both individually and collectively●

Monika Zawadzki
Bottle (2019)











Małgorzata Ludwisiak
*Ochre as Soap
as Process
as Community:
Some Practices for
Confronting Globalization
and Some Questions
to Engage with
the Environmental
CRISIS
as Part of*
the U-jazdowski Program

Is globalization coming to an end or is it just entering another phase? Our contemporary predicament is determined by the global flow of goods, capital, and waste, excessive consumerism and exploitation of the environment, and the growing inequality between the global North and the global South, who pay the price for the well-being of highly developed countries by accepting the outsourcing of “dirty industry” and tons of garbage washed up ashore by the ocean currents. There is constant movement: the circulation of capital away from its “centers,” capital that happily monetizes and commodifies every difference it encounters on the “peripheries” to the rhythm of neoliberal acceleration. The unprecedented movement of people, images, and information. Overproduction, the circulation of waste. The circulation of plastic: the trademark of the Anthropocene and the “key lubricant of globalization,” as prominent oceanographer Charles Moore once called it.¹ “The change may equally well emerge from apparently anodyne events, which ultimately prove to be veritable traumas inflecting the course of a life, producing the metamorphosis of someone about whom one says: I would never have guessed they would ‘end up like that.’ A vital hitch, a threatening detour that opens up another pathway, one that is unexpected, unpredictable, dark,” wrote Catherine Malabou in speaking of the human subject.²

The Plasticity of the Planet, the long-term project that began in March 2019 at the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw,³ transposes the concept of destructive

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1. This quotation was mentioned by the artist Kelly Jazvac during her guided tour and the artists' talk that accompanied the *Human-Free Earth* exhibition on September 14, 2019.
 2. Catherine Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 6.
 3. *Plasticity of the Planet*, curator: Jarosław Lubiak, long-term project initiated on 15.03.2019, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/wydarzenia/plastycznosc-planet-654817738>. An extensive analysis of the project is presented in Jarosław Lubiak's text, “Plastic Planetarism: The Art of Staying with the Trouble,” included in this volume, 89–128.

plasticity and substantial change onto a non-human subject – the planet Earth. The planet, which has been the object of decades of human interference and exploitation, growing exponentially in tandem with global acceleration, is now gaining subjectivity. And plastic, at first circulating around various ecosystems, has become an explosive, leading to an irreversible planetary-scale change in what was once a natural environment. This “natural environment” has been transformed considerably by the ubiquitous presence of plastic, whose emancipated matter has entered permanent, hybrid relationships with living organisms, creating new life forms: life-plastic,⁴ a planet no longer synonymous with nature. The planet-plastic gains agency that humans have lost, no longer affecting change or decisions on diseases, the extinction of species, or the reproductive potential of living organisms – including their own. The beginning of “planetaryism” understood in this way – as the transition from human to non-human agency, might also – purely theoretically – mean an Earth without people.

What tools can and should art and its institutions use in the face of the necessity these processes create? Like it or not, art has become part of the global circulation, materialized as fairs and biennials. Is the stabilizing position of critical distance against constant movement sufficient, or should criticality be extended to involvement in combating the environmental crisis?

In what follows, I discuss the strategies and models developed or tested at the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw since 2015, and outline the shift we have undergone: from a critical to an engaged institution and a Centre for Contemporary Art to a Centre for Contemporary Nature,

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4. Cf.: Monika Bakke, “Pandemiczne wspólnoty przemieszczone drogą plastikową,” in *Pandemia. Nauka. Sztuka. Geopolityka*, ed. Mikołaj Iwański, Jarosław Lubiak (Szczecin–Poznań: Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-Naukowe Wydziału Malarstwa i Nowych Mediów Akademii Sztuki, Galeria Piekary 2018), 142–3.

as postulated by the Forensic Architecture collective that took part in the *Plasticity of the Planet* project.

Confronting the processes of globalization through institutional critique raises a number of theoretical and practical questions: How to navigate the cartographies of economic and symbolic inequalities? How to find a balance between uniformity and the requirement of “authenticity” that has become a valuable currency in global art circulation? How to reconcile the practice of empowering artists from previously marginalized countries with the need to avoid an exoticism that creates new hegemonies of inequality? How to construct circuits of experience and meanings unlike those determined by the established trajectories of artists’ migrations from biennial to biennial around the globe? How to respond to all these issues from a position of a large, Ministry-of-Culture-dependent institution in the capital city of a country located on the outskirts of the European Union, somewhere between the former West and the former East?

The *U-jazdowski* program is based on several suppositions. Faced with the ongoing neoliberal acceleration that drives globalization, we adopted a model of organizing processes that last for several months or years, slowing down and building relationships. The residential program operating in *U-jazdowski*, which hosts artists from all over the world, has aided these attempts.⁵ Faced with the commodification of difference by “the centers,” we focused on alternative cartographies, based on experience established in a given locality.⁶

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5. The institution has the oldest residential program for artists in Poland (running since 2004.) Led by curators, the program is extremely intensive and extensive, and allows us to host over twenty artists, researchers, and curators throughout the year – over the years, this has amounted to over 250 guests from over fifty countries around the world.
 6. One consequence of this strategy was changing the name and visual identification of the institution – an attempt to go beyond the generic format of contemporary art centers developing in different countries in →

Faced with the circulation of capital, we chose to establish alternative circulations of matter. Faced with art-object oriented commodification, we highlighted ephemeral and performative artistic processes. Faced with biennialization (serving as a globally scattered “center,” which somewhat certifies artistic production), we chose to work with artists who elude, at any given moment, the field of visibility defined in this way. Faced with the neoliberal paradigm of the individual, we opted for the community paradigm. It turns out that such networks of connections, flows of materials, and ways of establishing relationships have given rise to numerous kinds of communities: people, objects, bodies, plants, and territories. These communities, in turn, can give rise to different modes of involvement on the part of the art institution.

BEING CRITICAL OF GLOBALIZATION: SEVEN TALES ABOUT COMMUNITIES

What is visible and what is covered by dust? One African curator once told me that she was tired of having spent more than over a decade responding to the same e-mails from Western curators, asking whether she could provide the names of artists from her country to include in an exhibition they were working on. “Why don’t they just come here, invite a local gallery or a curator to collaborate, and take our expertise seriously instead of just draining it?” she would ask. In “Rethinking Curatorial Colonialism,” Simon Soon asks this question in an even more dramatic way: “Who really cares about the sweat and tears, meat and grit of context when one is removed from the grinding reality of conflicts and negotiations, the actual pedagogical

→ parallel with the progress of globalization and global art, instead embedding the institution deep within the local context, the historical area of “Ujazdów,” through accentuating this part of the institution’s name – “Ujazdowski” – going against the trend for English-language names and catchy abbreviations, while being aware of the risk of people having difficulty in pronouncing and remembering our name.

process that goes into shaping specific engagement, when this can be theorized in London?"⁷

At *U-jazdowski*, we assumed that, at any given time, the position of the center is determined by the perspective of a specific experience, of the researchers, curators, or artists, thus abolishing categories of East and West or global South and North as unnecessary, because the center can be located anywhere the perspective of the subject determines, and the speaking subject is a necessary and inalienable instance of the narrative spun from the displaced center. In practice, this has meant that the local experience and expertise of artists, curators, partners, collaborators were *sine qua non* for starting work on a non-European project that would avoid both "othering" and curating as a form of colonial discourse. For these reasons, Amanda Abi Khalil joined Anna Ptak in co-curating *Kurz / Dust / رابغ*, El Hadji Sy and myself co-curated *El Hadji Sy: At First I Thought I Was Dancing*, and we entrusted Taiwanese curator Meiya Cheng with researching and preparing the *Public Spirits* exhibition.

Let us take a closer look at several critical models proposed by this series of exhibitions, which included both large group projects and solo shows. Each of them revealed the cognitive potential of contemporary art, supported and expanded by public programs and subsequent issues of the bilingual quarterly, *Obieg*, published by the institution.

Tale No. 1: Dust and Ochre

Kurz / Dust / رابغ, was curated by Anna Ptak, in cooperation with the Lebanese curator Amanda Abi-Khalil, a former resident of our institution.⁸ Twenty-three artists from the Middle East – Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon,

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7. Simon Soon, "Rethinking Curatorial Colonialism," first published in: *SouthEast Asia: Spaces of the Curatorial*, ed. Ute Meta Bauer; reprinted in *Obieg*, no. 2 (2016), <https://obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/en/numery/azja/rethinking-curatorial-colonialism>.
 8. *Kurz / Dust / رابغ* 04.09-15.11.2015, curators: Anna Ptak, Amanda Abi Khalil, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/otyk>.

Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates – as well as from Poland and Belgium, most of them former guests of the residency program, addressed the title metaphor of dust. Appearing in Polish, English and Arabic, dust stood as an ambiguous figure, referring both to matter (ubiquitous particles, moving because, and despite, our control) as well as “a process linking people and things, bodies and geographies.”⁹ As curator Anna Ptak writes in a special issue of *Obieg* looking back on the show three years later, she was interested in “the tension between the oppression of authoritarian forms of power and ecology, activism, and migration” and “the moral dimension of ecology and the geological dimension of politics,” dust as the result of dust-forming, deterritorializing droughts (e.g. the one that struck Syria in 2006–10), and the concept of dust as the key to “new relational geographies”; “the tendency to cross borders and obliterate contours, making it possible to join together what seems distant and alien,” and revealing non-hierarchical subjectivity; the question of *What Flows and What Cannot Flow* in today’s world,¹⁰ the political dimension of dust and its ability to create spontaneous, amorphous and ephemeral constellations. Recalling a text by the Iranian curator Amirali Ghasemi,¹¹ Ptak



Jurgen Ots, *Fiat Lux*, 2015, *Dust* exhibition, 2015

9. Anna Ptak, curatorial essay, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/kurz>.
10. Anna Ptak, “Introduction: All That Is Solid, Turns to Dust,” *Obieg*, no. 7 (2018), “Kurz,” ed. Anna Ptak, <https://obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/en/numery/otyk/wstep-wszystko-co-stale-obraca-sie-w-nbsp-otyk>.
11. Amirali Ghasemi, „Dustopedia (Ghobar Nameh) | هم‌ان‌راب‌غ,” *Obieg* no. 7 (2018), “Kurz,” ed. Anna Ptak, <https://obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/en/numery/otyk/wstep-wszystko-co-stale-obraca-sie-w-nbsp-otyk>.

draws attention to the fact that “dust can be what differentiates the periphery from the center, which at all costs has a drive towards remaining clean and visible. Dust has been pushed out to the periphery, its domain where it does not impinge on our consciousness – until such time that it succeeds in percolating to the center. Then it begins to be perceived as the medium of chaos and a harbinger of danger, of the emancipation of peripheral communities.”¹² The threads, intuitions, and experiences revealed in the *Kurz / Dust / رابغ*, exhibition were grouped around several concepts, falling into various constellations that joined alternative geographies, process, matter, and affective communities.

The exhibition brought together voices of artists previously unseen and unknown in the global biennial circuit. In the narrative focusing on dust’s possible functions and agency, the Arabic *ghobar* resounded most strongly, providing a lesson on how we might experience matter differently. All the parts of the exhibition were united by soil: ochre, the material used by Iza Tarasewicz in *Yellow Coal*, was scattered throughout the exhibition spaces, joining the other works into its own narrative, sticking to the shoes of the viewers and the institution’s employees, spreading throughout the building and far beyond, “reorganizing the relationship between elements in space and time,”¹³ as it were, and establishing a community of art, people, and the environment.



El Hadji Sy, *Three Keys* performance, 2016, *El Hadji Sy: At First I Thought I Was Dancing* exhibition, 2016

Tale No. 2: Performing Communities

The title of the exhibition *El Hadji Sy: At First I Thought I Was Dancing*¹⁴ was borrowed from

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12. Ptak, “Introduction: All that Is Solid.”
 13. Anna Ptak, *Kurz / Dust / رابغ*, ed. by Anna Ptak, Amanda Abi Khalil, 16. Exhibition guide.
 14. *El Hadji Sy. At First I Thought I Was Dancing*, curators: Małgorzata Ludwisiak, El Hadji Sy, 16.06–16.10.2016, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/el-hadji-sy;>→

the artist's statement, referring to a series of paintings featuring an imprint of his feet: "At first I thought this was dancing. Then I realised that I wasn't dancing but kicking. After that experience, kicking became an instrument within the general economy of composition. My foot became a brush with which to paint a systematisation of the



El Hadji Sy, performance *Three Keys*, 2016, *El Hadji Sy: At First I Thought I Was Dancing* exhibition, 2016

trace of the body. [...] The Western understanding of painting often revolves around the notion of the eye and the hand. I wanted to kick out this tradition like a football, with one violent gesture."¹⁵ El Hadji Sy's performatively grounded practice is not object-oriented (the object may or may not appear in the process), it is strongly process-oriented. This process is inseparable from a critical attitude ("critique is something that puts you in a process"), often saturated with an extremely strong postcolonial criticism that organized the structure of the exhibition.¹⁶ In turn, the



Mamadou Touré dit Behan, archival photograph *Preparations to Tenq 96*, Dakar, 1996, *El Hadji Sy: At First I Thought I Was Dancing* exhibition, 2016

→ the exhibition was a continuation of the project *El Hadji Sy: Painting, Performance, Politics*, developed by Clementine Deliss in Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt am Main, 05.03–18.10.2015.

15. "The Artwork becomes a Socialized Object, Enhanced and Embellished by the Community. El Hadji Sy in Conversation with Julia Grosse," *El Hadji Sy: Painting, Performance, Politics*, ed. C. Deliss, Y. Mutumba, (Frankfurt: Weltkulturen Museum, 2015), 46–7.
16. "Stepping out of the Aquarium: El Hadji Sy in conversation with Małgorzata Ludwisiak," *Obieg*, no. 1 (2016), ed. Krzysztof Gutfrański, <https://obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/en/numery/dakar/stepping-out-of-the-aquarium>.

exhibition was complemented and further developed by the discursive issue of *Obieg* entitled *Dakar: Art-Afropolis*. This issue explained how the city of Dakar has been used as a tool to learn and understand the artistic and cultural processes of modern Senegal, and offered a broader reading of El Hadji Sy's practices.¹⁷ For the purposes of the



Art Labor, *Jarai Dew Hammock Café*, 2016,
Public Spirits exhibition, 2016/17

project, Dakar became a new center, defining the perspective for experiencing, practicing art, and understanding its function. The performative work of El Hadji Sy focuses on the relationship between the work of art and its community of recipients. Having co-created several collectives that bring together people

from various fields, the artist emphasizes that “the tradition of making art in Africa is something collective. When you produce something, the community takes part in the process. It is the collective that accepts it. The artwork becomes a socialised object, enhanced and embellished by the community. And the community is reflected in it.”¹⁸

Tale No. 3: Public Spirits

Informal grassroots communities and artistic and ephemeral collectives were the subject of Meiya Cheng's research and resulting exhibition project, entitled *Public Spirits*, to which she invited over twenty artists and collectives from Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and China.¹⁹ The resulting exhibition was not a representative sample of art

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17. Cf.: Krzysztof Gutfrański, “Introduction. Dakar: Art-Afropolis,” *Obieg*, no. 1 (2016), ed. Krzysztof Gutfrański, <https://obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/en/numery/dakar/dakar-art-afropolis>.
18. “The Artwork becomes a Socialized Object,” 45.
19. *Public Spirits*, curator: Meiya Cheng, 22.10.2016–15.01.2017, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/public-spirits>.



Maciej Siuda in collaboration with Jatiwangi Art Factory, *Rumah is Small*, 2015–16, process-based architecture, *Social Design for Social Living* exhibition, 2016

from a geographical area, it was intended as a “response to the experience of globalization in regions which are now the scenes of diverse clashes, sometimes due to conflicting traditions, conflicting geopolitical interests, as well as the uncertain democratization of authoritarian regimes. These are stories about the activities of various communities, which may complement or act as a counterproposal to the history of communities and nations.”²⁰ According to the curator, the main chal-



Art Labor, *Death, Crow, Skeleton, Charcoal, Grasshopper, Cricket and Dew*, 2016, *Public Spirits* exhibition, 2016/17

lenge for these alternative communities is the modernization projects introduced by developing Asian nation states. Usually, these adopt violent forms, involving the control of industrial production and regulating nature, destroying whatever is deemed “unnecessary”: “religious beliefs, respect for nature, traditional forms of production and customs associated with them, various expressions of spirituality, political activity and creativity within the sphere of the symbolic.”²¹ The project brought together “special poetics of social forms developed by artists in response to geopolitical processes encroaching on their lives and the everyday life of the countries they come from” in order to “create,

20. Meiya Cheng, curatorial essay, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/public-spirits>.
21. Meiya Cheng, “Different Things Can Happen,” *Public Spirits*. Warsaw: Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, 2016. Exhibition guide.

even for a moment, new forms of common life.”²² Opened in the fall of 2016, the exhibition was quite an unusual mirror – though perhaps neither quite clear nor entirely accurate – in which we were able to see our own reflection at the time of Europe’s first turn toward nation states, while simultaneously learning possible strategies and conditions for survival and action. As Krzysztof Gutfrański, the editor of *Obieg* magazine points out: “This playful, humorous – and often subversive – approach of Southeast Asian art to the region’s traumatic crises can inspire us to reflect on the dwindling of community spirit and growing pessimism in Europe. The art or artistic practices of Southeast Asia demonstrate that future outcomes shouldn’t necessarily be sought in the past. Instead of listening to history or historical narratives, they urge us to listen to, and interact with, each other.”²³



Marta Frank & Jatiwangi Art Factory, *Sabun Tanah*, 2015–16,
Gotong Royong: Things We Do Together exhibition, 2017/18

Tale No. 4: Community in Process and Gotong Royong

While the *Public Spirits* exhibition examined various possible models of community in different locally-based artistic practices, a parallel process of working on the living body of the community, co-creating it, learning, testing, transplanting,

and hybridizing its models took place. In this process, not only the movement of the centers was important, their visibility and the cognitive effort in facing differences and common (or shared) places, but also the migration of concepts and models that facilitated the creation of entirely new networks and sketching alternative relational geographies.

22. Jarosław Lubiak, “Public Spirits: Special Poetics of Social Forms,” *idem*.
23. Krzysztof Gutfrański, *Introduction* | *Parallel Contemporaries: The Art of Southeast Asia*, <https://obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/en/numery/azja/wstep-do-numeru-azja>.

The three-year *Social Design for Social Living* project was carried out between Jatiwangi, Jakarta and Warsaw, by *U-jazdowski* curator Marianna Dobkowska together with Krzysztof Łukomski, in cooperation with Jatiwangi Art Factory, students from Jakarta, as well as the Serrum and Ruan-grupa collectives, Lenteng Forum, KUNCI, and Razem Pamoja Foundation, through residences, exchanges, exhibitions, and events.²⁴ The starting point for the collaborative work of artists, activists, researchers, and designers from Poland and Indonesia, focused around Jatiwangi Art Factory, was the Jatiwangi – a small town facing challenges of modernization. “The nearby construction of an international airport and the highway cutting through the village will irrevocably change the character of this peaceful place that has, up until now, lived on the production of ceramics, rice cultivation, and art.”²⁵ In this way, together with the local residents of Jatiwangi, and as a gift to this community, Sabun Tanah (Soap of the Land)²⁶ was created, using local clay. The sale of the soap is meant to support the community of the Jatiwangi commune. Additionally, the flags of the sixteen villages that make up the commune²⁷ and the subsequent outcomes of the *ad hoc* community growing around the project were presented first as part of Charles Esche Jakarta Biennale 2015, and, a year later – expanded to include socially engaged practices in Polish contemporary art – at an exhibition at the National

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24. *Social Design for Social Living*, curators: Marianna Dobkowska, Krzysztof Łukomski; Warsaw, Jatiwangi, Jakarta, 2015–17, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/residencies/projects/social-design-for-social-living>.
25. Marianna Dobkowska, Krzysztof Łukomski, curatorial text, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/program/rezydencje/projekty/social-design-for-social-living>.
26. Marta Frank in cooperation with JaF, Sabun Tanah, 2015–16.
27. The *Arie Syarifuddin* project by the Jatiwangi Art Factory collective (JaF).



Gotong Royong: Things We Do Together exhibition, 2017/18

Gallery in Jakarta. However, there remains the process and the question of “how art becomes a tool for building community in different ways in remote places.”²⁸ This question, along with *gotong royong* – the Indonesian concept of the community, which can be translated as “things we do together, learning from each other in a mutual activity,” became the subject of the exhibition-meeting at Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, entitled *Gotong Royong: Things*

We Do Together. The starting point for this project was the non-institutional practices of working together practiced by the inhabitants of Jatiwangi and transplanted into art institutions: informal education and the concept of *gotong royong* explored by artists and activists from Indonesia, Poland, Canada, Brazil, and Ukraine. The exhibition has become a process, a space-time continuum of ephemeral events, such as the informal, temporary *Intervalo Escola* collective – *Time for a Break*, initiated by Taina Azeredo for the duration of the project; when it was needed, it transformed into the stage for *Protest Song Karaoke*, a place for creating and printing poetry workshops and discussions, or took the audience out into the city space to reflect on the nature of monuments and liquid memory.

One of the relatively few object-based works of art was the work initiated by the Polish designer Marta Frank and the JaF *Sabun Tanah* collective, on which she worked with the women’s community of Jatisura, a village of the Jatiwangi commune. The Indonesian word *tanah* has many meanings: soil, clay, or mud. The curators of the exhibition write that “The brick-shaped soap contains the minerals-rich clay from

28. Marianna Dobkowska, Krzysztof Łukomski, curatorial text, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/gotong-royong>.

Jatiwangi, a region that for over a hundred years has been known for its production of high-quality ceramic roof tiles and bricks. Because of its unwieldiness, this unnaturally large piece of soap needs to be ‘compulsorily’ divided.”²⁹ It was created as a response to the needs of the local community that arose from aggressive modernization and the sale of local land to build factories, and is distributed and sold as a cosmetic product and gadget, or – as part of the Jakarta Biennale or the exhibition at *U-jazdowski* – as a work of art, testifying to the *gotong royong* process through which it was created. The idea of *gotong royong* has become the method for the entire project, revealing its extraordinary potential and principles, helping communities of artists or local communities to be created anywhere in the world in order to learn from each other.



Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina, *Gotong Royong – Autobiography*, 2017, *Gotong Royong. The Things We Do Together* exhibition, 2017/18

Tale No. 5: The Community of Instability

In search of experiences that can be shared on a global scale, we often experience a dizzying feeling of uncertainty and unsteadiness. Destabilization has become part of our everyday experience of reality, dominated by reports of crises (actual or fictitious) and marked by constant, unpredictable change. *Dizziness: Navigating the Unknown* (the product of the artistic and research project *Dizziness – A Resource*, carried out since 2014 by Ruth Anderwald and Leonhard Grond at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna in cooperation with the Institute of Psychology at the University of Graz) confronted this experience, pointing to the eponymous loss of balance as an important cognitive resource and the movement it can produce.³⁰ Among the work of over thirty

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29. Marianna Dobkowska, Krzysztof Łukomski, *Gotong Royong: Things We Do Together*, 21. Exhibition guide.
30. *Dizziness: Navigating the Unknown*, curators: Ruth Anderwald, Leonard Grond, Katrin Bucher Trantow; collaboration: Michał Grzegorzek, 15.09.2017–07.01.2018, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/> →

artists, some introduced or reflected the state of physical and cognitive confusion (such as Ann Veronica Janssens' room filled with fog, the limping Bruce Naumann in the video *Walk with Contrapposto* or the ecstatic dance in Joachim Koester's *Tarantism*), while others helped the viewers to find balance, such as the *Trust Compass* by Olafur Eliasson, guiding the visitor North-South through the maze of the exhibition space. But how can we use the trust compass in a time of global crisis and the balancing act it causes? How to balance a community? How can communities regain balance after experiencing uncertainty, other than by taking on the shape of nation states that seek shelter in authoritarian governments? The project seemed to answer that "even in the states of greatest disequilibrium, the deepest uncertainty, in complete confusion one cannot stop – only further movement allows one to regain minimal control over the situation."³¹

Tale No. 6: Community in Anticipation

The exact opposite dynamics – a state ripe with suspension and expectation – were introduced in 2018 by a two-part exhibition (held in Vilnius and Warsaw): *Waiting for Another Coming*.³² The project, co-created from the start by curators from both institutions – Anna Czaban, Jarosław Lubiak and Ūla Tornau – led them to probe opportunities for people to find their place in the changing world and their potential to prepare for what is in store. These questions were posed

→ utrata-rownowagi. This exhibition was developed for *U-jazdowski* after its premiere at the Kunsthaus Graz, 10.02–21.05.2017.

31. Jarosław Lubiak, "The Power of Dizziness," *Dizziness: Navigating the Unknown*. Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, 2017, 5. Exhibition catalog.
32. *Waiting for Another Coming*, curators: Ūla Tornau, Anna Czaban, Jarosław Lubiak; Contemporary Art Center in Vilnius, 31.08–18.10.2018, <http://www.cac.lt/en/exhibitions/past/18/9093>; Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, 25.10.2018–27.01.2019, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/cze-kajac-na-kolejne-nadejscie>.

from the viewpoint of countries located outside the global center – Poland and Lithuania. Is there a transnational context that could be a common space for these two neighboring countries, whose past is filled with alliances, tensions, and conflicts? Conversations with artists and an analysis of their practices revealed common points in both the present and the future, understood as the horizon of current action. The leitmotif of project, implemented successively at the CAC in Vilnius and the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in

Warsaw, was the concept of heterotopia – a term used by Michel Foucault with reference to “situations that evade the usual principles governing our daily lives.”³³ “The eponymous ‘waiting’ emphasizes a predicament in which artists have given up the construction of projects and visions pivoted on the future or which effect a transformation of the present, aiming instead for creating for themselves alternative spaces and environment. Rather than constructing utopias, they focus on specific heterotopias – whether actual, virtual or imaginary. They employ diverse techniques – typically, to sample, remix or compost materials that can be sourced from the world of art, popular culture, everyday life or national mythology. In turn, the eponymous ‘coming’ refers to a leaning towards the future while being open to all possible outcomes. As well as being indicative of the concrete approaches of the participating artists, the title of the project refers to the general condition of both countries in the dramatically evolving geopolitical order.”³⁴ After the artists were invited to



Dainius Liškevičius, *Entropy/Che fare?*, 2018, *Waiting for Another Coming* exhibition, 2018/19

33. Anna Czaban, Jarosław Lubiak, Ūla Tornau, curatorial essay, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/czekajac-na-kolejne-nadejscie>.

34. Ibid.

join the project, the project curators concluded: “All there is left is to wait for the next coming of something unexpected.”³⁵

Tale No. 7: What Common Ground
Can Be Gained in Translation

The projects discussed above yielded new cartographies of relations, based on the primacy of singularity of experience or – as in *On Dizzi-*



Slavs and Tatars, *Lektor (speculum linguarum)*, 2014; *Mystical Protest*, 2011,
Slavs and Tatars: Mouth to Mouth exhibition, 2016–17

ness – in relation to what is shared on a global scale. In contrast, two solo exhibitions – by the Slavs & Tatars collective and by Janek Simon – have brought two proposals for how knowledge, tradition, or affect, in all their diversity and cultural difference, can be translated into the language of contemporary art, what translation tools contemporary art has at its disposal, and what new qualities can be produced via the process of translation.

The first ever individual exhibition of the Slavs and Tatars collective, *Mouth to Mouth*, curated by Jarosław Lubiak, demonstrated how traditional flow of information and affect can be simultaneously broken and hybridized through a precise linguistic or visual gesture. Defining an area “east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China” as their remit, Slavs and Tatars repeatedly “creolize, craft and collide a political and imagined geography” and show how the multilevel

35. Anna Czaban, Jarosław Lubiak, Ūla Tornau, curatorial text, *Waiting for the Next Arrival*. Warsaw: Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, 2018, 17. Exhibition guide.

processes of conversion of recoding meanings, translations, and experiences can function.³⁶ In their work, “Jesus is praised in Arabic, often considered the sacred language of Islam; a Miłosz poem is sung in Persian, sharing the best practices of poetry as resistance to autocracy,” and the mythical figure of the Sufi sage and fool, Molla Nasreddin, riding a donkey backwards, is invoked in a single oxymoronic gesture combining progress and anti-modernism.³⁷ Janek Simon takes a different approach to translation in a globalized world. In his *Synthetic Folklore* (curated by Joanna Warsza), he used the principle of accumulation and algorithm. The ship junkyard in Indian Alang provided him with more than one hundred paintings and instruction boards from ships from over thirty countries around the world, adding up to an image of a decentralized cartography and non-existent cultural geography. Motifs originating in fabrics from different cultures were processed by a computer algorithm to turn into new hybrid patterns. AI took ethnic motifs from India, Africa, South America, and Europe and used them to print the series of polyethnic sculptures on a home 3D printer, establishing new conglomerates of identity. Yet Simon not only tracks the flow of images he superimposes upon each other; he creates a new, synthetic folklore, in which, paradoxically, everyone and no-one can recognize themselves. Who would be able to extract the ethnic motif of their country from a form that no longer resembles anything that we know from experience? The artist also tracks the global flow of goods and waste – a new iconosphere of a globalized reality – and the ways in which they uncover the histories of economic flow and the inequality systems it produces: from the Chinese Silicon Valley of Shenzhen, where iPhones are manufactured, to the Alaba e-junkyard in Lagos, Nigeria.

36. *Mouth to Mouth*, curator: Jarosław Lubiak, 25.11.2016–19.02.2017, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/slavs-and-tatars-usta-usta>.

37. Jarosław Lubiak, curatorial essay, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/slavs-and-tatars-usta-usta>.

IRREVERSIBLE: ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Following the publication of the IPCC expert report (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) on 8 October, 2018, stating that we have twelve years left until catastrophe, and the alarming media reports on this issue, the notion of the irreversibility of environmental changes caused by global acceleration has hit public awareness.³⁸ Our “belated awakening on the plastic planet” followed.³⁹

The *Plasticity of the Planet* project began to address this late awakening in several ways. The *Human-Free Earth* exhibition examined the subjectivity of the planet, humans and what was once a “natural environment,” which unintentionally underwent an irreversible change, and provocatively asked about a future Earth without humans. In contrast, the exhibition by the British collective Forensic Architecture, Centre for Contemporary Nature, based on two case studies specially developed for *U-jazdowski*, offered an analysis of planned environmental destruction carried out for military purposes. “Becoming Earth,” a special issue of *Obieg*, takes on the politics and aesthetics of plastic as the new key to understanding contemporary times. Michał Matuszewski’s series of film screenings, *The Cinema of the Anthropocene* – currently underway as this publication is being prepared – raises a provocative question: Can cinema save the Earth?⁴⁰ Three years before the *Human-Free Earth* exhibition, the Earth was the main focus of Angelika Markul’s 2016 exhibition, *What Is Lost Is at the Beginning*. An inhuman landscape represented in large-scale installations – an underwater monument on the Japanese is-

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38. At: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, https://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15_spm_final.pdf.
39. Krzysztof Gutfrański, “Introduction: Planet Plastic,” *Obieg*, no. 10 (2019); *Becoming Earth*, ed. Krzysztof Gutfrański, <https://obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/numery/becoming-earth/introduction-plastic-planet>.
40. *Cinema of the Anthropocene*, curator: Michał Matuszewski, 28.10.2019–12.02.2020, https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/kino/repertuar/kino-antropocenu?tid=t_content.

land of Yonaguni, an astronomical observatory in the Atacama Desert or a mine in Naica, Mexico – seemed to speak of the human “desire to explore these spaces, which is driven by what was lost in the beginning – a certainty that knowledge will be acquired.”⁴¹

Cognitive helplessness is, in my opinion, a powerful driving force of the *Plasticity of the Planet* project. It is the horizon we are forced to confront – following Donna Haraway’s postulate to “stay with the trouble” or Catherine Malabou’s statement that metamorphosis through destruction is “a form that accepts the inability to escape.”⁴² Such confrontation,

however, does not mean a static constatation; it rather seems that, taught by the experience of *Dizziness: Navigating the Unknown*, we should remain in constant movement as the only way to keep our balance. Yet faced with the new planetary state of our present, how exactly can we translate these experiences into the work of an engaged contemporary art institution? What modes of involvement can we imagine? Below I look at some examples of what they have meant for our institution so far – sometimes on an extremely modest scale or in an ephemeral form.



Gela Patashuri, Ewa Rudnicka, *Prototyp OMI*, 2016,
Jazdów City Garden: Prototype, 2016

MODES OF ENGAGEMENT

Mode 1: Communities of Co-responsibility

Located in the center of Warsaw, Ujazdowski Castle is surrounded by a park belonging to the institution. This raises a number of questions: about the status of parks and green spaces in the centers of large cities, how they are used, and whom they really belong to – the contemporary art institution, its visitors, or the local residents? Curator Anna Cza-ban carried out a five-year project in the summer and autumn months

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41. Jarosław Lubiak, curatorial text, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/angelika-markul>.
42. Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident*, 22.

– initially titled *Jazdów Archipelago*,⁴³ and renamed the Jazdów City Garden a year later, the name always referring to the historical location of the castle – Jazdów.⁴⁴ Instead of a sculpture park (as it was



Sporty event, 2017, Jazdów City Garden: Sporty, 2017

in previous years), the curator explored the park as a sculpture – social, relational, or one that primarily takes into account the physical parameters of the space and living organisms that create it. As a result, the park around the castle became a space for urban sports – parcour or skating, team games or badminton; for being together and leisure;

for developing relationships with the neighbors, and for imagining other spatial relationships and purposes for the park together. Importantly, the basis for the function of the Jazdów City Garden was always set through a meeting: a workshop, discussion, a shared meal, a walk. The participating entities were artists, experts (botanists, architects, urban sports experts),



Caroline Claus, URBAN SOUND DESIGN STUDIO workshop, 2015, Jazdów Archipelago: Archipelago of Sound, 2015

neighbors (local associations, activists, the Theatre Institute or the Academy of Fine Arts), and the audience (drop-ins, or those whose responded to open calls). The results of this work were only occasionally material – such as an alternative path for the park proposed by Georgian

43. *Jazdów Archipelago*, curator: Anna Czaban, from 19.06.2015 to autumn 2015, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/social-projects/-ogrod-miejski-jazdow-/660071487>.
44. *Jazdów City Garden*, curator: Anna Czaban, 2016–19, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/social-projects/-ogrod-miejski-jazdow>.

artist Gela Patashuri, a street gap for skateboarding, or a garden arrangement of water and plants by architects H  l  ne Soulier and Ewa Rudnicka. Each of these was a test model, a prototype offered up for discussion, which later gave way to the next work. Jazd  w City Garden seemed to focus on producing intangible models and tropes, proposing a micro-scale of long-term processes of strengthening social responsibility for the public space and building relationships between temporary and ephemeral small communities and the immediate surroundings of the Ujazdowski Castle.

Mode 2: Neighborhood and Hospitality

Jazd  w City Garden began in 2015 by fostering neighborly relations and hosting others. The artist Maja Beka, a resident at *U-jazdowski*, participated in this process. Together with the residents of a nearby tenement house, she began investigating the disappearance of a sculpture of a nude boy from a square adjacent to the building. The local residents' stories and their shared trips down memory lane brought them closer to the artist and to one another. Two years later, the nature of these relationships became the basis for Beka's performative exhibition, *23 Assemblies*. One part of the project, described by curator Anna Ptak as "a living installation that sheds light on the relationship between art and everyday life and politics,"⁴⁵ was a performative meeting of the building's residents at *U-jazdowski*, their personal memories of the sculpture and the history of it being unearthed in a museum, considering the possibility or the necessity of restoring it to its place or replacing it with another, which they shared with the audience. Beka's project also opened a new dimension of hospitality, in which our institution participated: first, the artist was hosted by the neighboring community, and then she hosted them at the institution and as part of the exhibition, launching institutional modes of involvement in the affairs of the small, local community. As a rule, the format of artistic residences, in which Beka participated, yields to the idea and practice of hospitality. One of the program's curators, Marianna Dobkowska, emphasizes that this is a unique idea: the principle of mutual

45. Anna Ptak, curatorial essay, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/maja-beka>.

hospitality and mutual learning. The institution hosts residents, just as the residents host the institution, providing it with their knowledge, experience, and commitment.⁴⁶

Mode 3: The Gotong Royong Method

The *Gotong Royong: Things We Do Together* exhibition not only provided a model for a new cartography based on relationships and the process of communal action and learning from each other, but also – to some extent as a result of the consistent use of the *gotong royong* method – new modes of engagement. Besides the previous chapter's examples of engaging the audience in various dimensions of the exhibition, whose public program consisted of over one hundred events, one other gesture deserves our special attention. One day, the women minding the exhibition spaces (the exhibition guards) spontaneously offered the curator, Marianna Dobkowska, a tour around the exhibition she prepared, shifting the narrative into the sphere of their personal experiences and relationships to the works and practices on display, thus turning into her hosts (the exhibition hosts). They agreed to the curator's suggestion to repeat the tour for an audience, which, in Dobkowska's opinion, became one of the "most interesting and popular events of the public exhibition program."⁴⁷ The theoretical and practical model of *gotong royong* appears genuine only when it is applied within the institution itself.

Mode 4: A Choreographization of Bodies

Ideologies are part of the body and its gestures. Reorganizing body choreography can be a liberating gesture. Ula Sickle's performative exhibition⁴⁸ *Free Gestures*, curated by Agnieszka Sosnowska, was activated daily by the bodies of dancers who interpreted five literary

46. Marianna Dobkowska, "How the Residents Taught Me (Mutual) Hospitality," *Obieg*, no. 11 (2019) 'Hosting the Other', ed. Agnieszka Sosnowska, <https://obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/en/numery/goscinnosc/how-the-residents-taught-me-mutual-hospitality>.

47. Dobkowska, "How the Residents."

48. The experimental format of the exhibitions is a part of →

texts written for the exhibition, focusing on the ubiquity of neoliberal, soft violence.⁴⁹ Every day the climax of the choreographic narrative came when the dancers – performing simultaneously in various exhibition spaces – met in one room in a shared embrace full of tenderness and mutual care. One day, when anti-government demonstrations were taking the streets of Warsaw, the dancers left the exhibition and, waving one of their props – a black flag – joined the protesters, blending into the reality of political resistance. The Kem queer-feminist collective moves within a field of expanded choreography. As part of their yearlong residence at *U-jazdowski*, curated by Michał Grzegorzek, they set up the Dragana Bar – a summer queer bar in one of the castle towers.⁵⁰ The temporarily transformed institutional infrastructure – a metal door was inserted in place of one of the windows, with stairs added to it – was meant to establish an “infrastructure of friendship,”⁵¹ and the performative activities of the bar on subsequent summer weekends gathered hundreds of people under the motto *Come in drag, post-drag or just as you are*;⁵² their individual and collective choreographies queered the institution, culture, and politics.

→ the *U-jazdowski* performative program run by curator Joanna Zielińska and associate curators: Michał Grzegorzek and Agnieszka Sosnowska. The forthcoming reader, *Performance Works* (ed. Joanna Zielińska, Warsaw–Milan: Mousse 2019), is dedicated to the performative aspects of the institutional program.

49. Ula Sickle, *Free Gestures*, curator: Agnieszka Sosnowska, 02–25.03.2018, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/ula-sickle>.
50. *Three Springs*, Kem residence, curator: Michał Grzegorzek, 04.2018–04.2019, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/residencies/residents/archiwum-rezydentow/kem>.
51. Cf. *Infrastructure of Friendship: Kem in Conversation with Alek Hudzik*, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/residencies/conversations/kem>.
52. <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/wydarzenia/otwarcie-dragana-bar-kolektywu-kem>.

The dancing bodies turned the institution into a dance floor as part of the long-term *To Be Real* project.⁵³ This performative and music project by Michał Grzegorzek drew from the emancipatory potential of club culture, exploring “the relationships between politics, nightlife and contemporary art from the queer roots of electronic dance music in the 70s to recent techno-protests on the streets of world metropolises,” and asking: “what is dance for freedom and why do we need it now more than ever?”⁵⁴ The event, which is *U-jazdowski*'s response to the grassroots Anti-Fascist Year, again used choreography to queer systems and free the body from their hegemony.

Finally, I will return to the Jazdów City Garden project, which proposed and to some extent established a special community of bodies: between neighbors, contingent spectators, artists, trees, the topography of the area, creatures living in the park, and fragments of the lapidarium of the historical Ujazdowski Castle. The last two editions of the project focused on the park's flora and fauna (*Naturomorphically*) and water (*Care about Water and Bathe with Friends*). In the first, the tops of trees and their inhabitants could be explored from the height of a specially constructed treetop platform that simultaneously acknowledged the trees' subjectivity and took their point of view on the castle and the surrounding area. In the other, the water needed for the park was brought into its ecosystem in the form of the *Dystopia* installation, based on a puddle shaped by a big pond covered with plastic bubbles and muddy swamps, where the “natural” and “artificial” coexist, relaxation is interspersed with anxiety, and the transformations and compounds of matter – soil, clay, mud, earth-plastic, and Earth-plastic – interact with the space around the castle and the bodies of the viewers.

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53. *To Be Real*, curator: Michał Grzegorzek, 27.04.2019–31.08.2019, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/perfo/to-be-real-2> <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/perfo/to-be-real-2>.
54. Michał Grzegorzek, curatorial text, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/perfo/to-be-real-2>.

INSTITUTION OF THE FUTURE AND ECOLOGY OF AFFECT?

In recent years, we have learned from artists, activists, researchers, collectives, and local communities from around the world about how vectors of engagement might be constructed. We asked the directors and curators invited to participate in the *Curating Institution* event series, the participants of the *How to Stay with the Trouble?* debate, how to be critical today and how we can imagine the obligations of art and its institutions in the near future.⁵⁵ We considered different ways of thinking and practicing non-hierarchical geographies and communities of people and non-people. How does an encounter establish and set affective communities in motion? How can affect and care determine their political strength? How can we take responsibility for the public space and what tools do we need to transform it? How can a slow and lengthy process oppose the logic of acceleration and efficiency? How does matter begin to burst the symbolic order of language? How does the new symbolic frame of materiality, with its dynamics of desire, reconfiguration, change of direction, and the ability to feel, remember, and convert,⁵⁶ take processes and affect into its possession?

Encounters generate affects, and affects change the circumstances and conditions of communities. Each new body, organism, object or territory alters the model of affective ecology.⁵⁷ How can these delicate, ephemeral, long-lasting processes, often calculated for the attention and action of a dozen or twenty-plus people, determine the involvement of contemporary art institutions or real change? Perhaps, paradoxically, large public institutions have the tools to activate different modes

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55. Their essays, resulting from the debate, can be found in chapter IV of this book.
56. Cf. "Interview with Karen Barad," in Rick Dolphijn, Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 59.
57. Cf. Marie-Luise Angerer, *Ecology of Affect: Intensive Milieus and Contingent Encounters* (Potsdam: Meson Press, 2016).

of circulation of matter and to enable and generate encounters – of people, objects, bodies, plants, and territories, and later enhance their outcomes? Perhaps the institution of the future, if it wants to be involved effectively, should – to paraphrase Donna Haraway – become an institution-assemblage, institution-bar, institution-residence, or institution-environment? I believe that the answer lies in the very plasticity of the planet that this book confronts in so many ways.



Marysia Stokłosa, *Action Is Primary*, 2017

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I would also like to take this opportunity to express my warmest gratitude to our curatorial team for developing the *U-jazdowski* program: Anna Czaban, Marianna Dobkowska, Ewa Gorządek, Michał Grzegorzek, Krzysztof Gutfrański, Michał Matuszewski, Anna Ptak, Konrad Schiller, Ika Sienkiewicz-Nowacka, Agnieszka Sosnowska, Stach Szabłowski, and Joanna Zielińska, headed by art director Jarosław Lubiak. Without their commitment, research, and conceptual work, the program analyzed in the present work could never have come to be.

Jarosław Lubiak
Plastic Planetarism:
The Art of
Staying with
THE
TROUBLE

A NEW ERA OF SUBJECTIVITY?

Let us begin with a certain ambiguous figure. At first glance, it seems to be a sculpture that strikes up a dialog with the tradition of monuments, and is in fact playing with monumentality. The simplified, conventional shape and the superhuman scale of the figure give it the form of a monument. However, two details seem to conflict with this obvious diagnosis: the figure is headless and carries a faithful replica of its own decapitated body in a plastic shopping bag. If Monika Zawadzki's *Plastic Bag* (2019) sculpture were a monument, it would probably be dedicated to the Anthropocene.

If the hypothesis of the new geological era is based on the assumption that human activity alters how the entire planet functions, and simultaneously and paradoxically a great many of these planetary changes are unintentional, then *Plastic Bag* is an excellent monument to the Anthropocene.

Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses this paradox in his well-known text, *The Climate of History: Four Theses*. On the one hand, humans have become a geological force, that is, they have the power to shape the planet in a way that had only been seen in long-term processes examined by geology and described by stratigraphy – for example, in the movement of glaciers, climate change, and transformations of the Earth's surface. In becoming a geological force, humans alter the entire shell of the planet, the atmosphere, hydrosphere, lithosphere, and biosphere. Simultaneously, as Chakrabarty notes, some of these changes, which make up what might be described as the current environmental crisis: global warming, the sixth extinction of species, ocean acidification, melting glaciers, accumulation of pollutants, etc., are unintentional. He compares this process with the risk of a nuclear war: “The anxiety caused by the global warming gives rise to is reminiscent of the days when many feared a global nuclear war. But there is a very important



Monika Zawadzki, *Plastic Bag*, 2019

difference. A nuclear war would have been a conscious decision on the part of the powers that be. Climate change is an unintended consequence of human actions and shows, only through scientific analysis, the effects of our actions as a species.”¹

As we shall see, Zawadzki’s sculpture is a figure that can answer the question raised by Chakrabarty. In the quoted passage, he states that the effects of changes introduced by humanity as a species can only be revealed *through* scientific analysis. This is because, as he points out earlier, the distinction between natural history and human history was challenged when humans become a geological force. By this division, natural history emerged as the subject of either cyclical processes or changes so slow that, from the perspective of human history, they seemed imperceptible, an “apparently timeless backdrop for human actions.”²

Unlike natural history, human history is the development of consciousness; however, as Chakrabarty emphasizes, “historical consciousness is ‘a mode of self-knowledge’ garnered through critical reflections on one’s own and others’ (historical actors’) experiences.”³ The fact that the environmental crisis is unintentional and that changes to the environment are so abrupt invalidates both our understanding of nature as a timeless backdrop and humans as acting consciously. Human history has been replaced by the history of the human species as an unconscious geological force. These new circumstances limit the possibility for self-knowledge and the creation of self-consciousness. This is because, as Chakrabarty argues, “We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. There could be no phenomenology of us as a species. Even if we were to emotionally identify with a word like mankind, we would not know what

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1. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 221.
 2. *Ibid.*, 205.
 3. *Ibid.*, 220. The author refers to and quotes: Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Crossroad, 1988), 232, 234.

being a species is, for, in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species as indeed would be any other life form. But one never experiences being a concept.⁴ Simultaneously, the scale of this influence exceeds the capacity of sensual and conceptual comprehension. Humans cannot comprehend themselves as the geological force they have become.

In defiance of Chakrabarty's claim, Zawadzki's *Plastic Bag* allows us to experience an imaginative and discursive figure that serves as an allegory for the concept of the human species at the moment of its transformation into a geological force. Zawadzki achieves this by petrifying matter into a monument, into a work of art. She creates a fossil.

Drawing on her own philosophy of plasticity, Catherine Malabou also rejects Chakrabarty's conclusions based on the philosophy of history. She responds to his theses in "The Brain of History, or: The Mentality of the Anthropocene,"⁵ stating that the historian "denies any metaphorical understanding of the 'geological.' If the human has become a geological form, there has to exist somewhere, at a certain level, an isomorphy, or structural sameness, between humanity and geology. This isomorphy is what emerges – at least in the form of a question – when consciousness, precisely, gets interrupted by this very fact." Consequently: "Human subjectivity, as geologized, so to speak, is broken into at least two parts, revealing the split between an agent endowed with free will and the capacity to self-reflect and a neutral inorganic power, which paralyzes the energy of the former."⁶ She agrees with Chakrabarty's thesis on the unintentional nature of the changes that make up the present environmental crisis. In Malabou's opinion, this leads to a radical displacement of what is described as nature – it can no longer be perceived as neutral and ahistorical, nor can it be understood as history confined to geochronology and its abstract periodization. Nature is not a domain of "purely natural facts" to be juxtaposed

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4. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History: Four Theses*, 220.
 5. Catherine Malabou, "The Brain of History, Or, the Mentality of the Anthropocene," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 1 (2017): 40. Republished in this volume, 167–84.
 6. *Ibid.*, 169.

with history as a series of events that are the acts of conscious and responsible agents. This causes a paradoxical dislocation. The geologization of humanity causes nature to become historical – it becomes a domain of “eventual power.” Simultaneously, however, this agency that emerges in nature is devoid of awareness and responsibility, and therefore undergoes objectification. As such, the geologization of humans constitutes their naturalization.

Malabou understands this as more than just the loss of subjectivity and agency. She sees the brain as combining geology, history, and biology. In the brain and its neurology, the philosopher seeks a substitute for consciousness, by which a new kind of subjectivity might be obtained. This is mainly due to the fact that the brain is simultaneously natural and historical and can, *via* an epigenetic process, produce a new mentality, by which humans will be able to accept responsibility and thus regain agency. This could happen through the re-naturalization of the human and the brain and its plasticity.

Malabou draws the concept of this new subjectivity from a discussion with Chakrabarty, for whom, in her opinion: “Human subjectivity is, in a sense, reduced to atoms without any atomic intention and has become structurally alien, by want of reflexivity, to its own apocalypse.”⁷ This follows precisely from recognizing humanity as a geological force, because then it must be seen as neutral and indifferent as the geological domain whose agent it becomes. This means a breakdown of reflexivity. “The awareness of the Anthropocene, then, originates through an interruption of consciousness.”⁸ Malabou opposes the indifference accompanying this: “The subject of the Anthropocene cannot but become addicted to its own indifference – addicted to the concept it has become. And that happens in the brain.”⁹ She opposes this because indifference prevents an acceptance of responsibility. Two of the brain’s properties allow it to create a new subjectivity in place of the breakdown of reflexivity. The first is defined by its “nature” – “It is not a matter of thinking the brain” in “its environment; it’s a matter of seeing the

7. Ibid., 169.

8. Ibid., 168.

9. Malabou, *The Brain of History*, 48.

brain as an environment, as a metabolic place.”¹⁰ As an environment, the brain is a space where the physico-chemical, and therefore the geological, connects with the biological and the psychic, social, and cultural. As an environment, the brain “includes as one of essential dimension, the materiality of inorganic nature, the soil, the rocks, the mountains, the rivers, the earth” and “the originary likeliness of the mind and the fossil, the inscription of naturality in thought and behaviour.”¹¹ From the very start, the brain has a geological dimension; the geologization of man breaks down self-reflective awareness and need not be reduced to an indifferent power with no capacity for responsibility. And this takes us to the second property of the brain – the plasticity of the brain, or the ability to react to destructive, deep injuries through radical change. For the subjectivities that emerge as a result of these changes, Malabou invents the term “the new wounded,” which includes the victims of physical brain damage (e.g. following an accident) or disease-related damage (e.g. Alzheimer’s), as well as victims of torture, rape, persecution, imprisonment, and violence. She argues that, in our day, the border separating organic trauma and socio-political trauma is increasingly porous. Key to “the new wounded” is that the changes are irreversible – healing cannot mean a return to the state prior to the injury. They experience events that “cut the thread of history, place history outside itself,” and as a result, become subjects that “remain hermeneutically ‘irrecoverable’ even though the psyche remains alive.”¹² Therefore, these are events that reveal “the ability of the subject to survive the senselessness of its own accidents.”¹³ Victims manage to survive, but become someone else, and are characterized by an “indifference or disaffection.”¹⁴ A kind of plasticity allows survivors to recreate themselves as the new wounded. Malabou writes: “This is the way in which destructive

10. Ibid., 52.

11. Ibid., 52.

12. Catherine Malabou, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, trans. Steven Miller, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 5.

13. Ibid., 5.

14. Ibid., 10.

plasticity reveals the possibility, inscribed within each human being, of becoming someone else at any moment.”¹⁵ A new life form emerges from the radical and irreversible destruction of the previous form.

Of course, the new wounded are not an example of a subjectivity that could find an answer to the challenges of the environmental crisis (rather, they might become part of this crisis). What is important in this example is the special power of destructive plasticity. To paraphrase Malabou, one might say that destructive plasticity reveals every being’s ability to become anything else at any given moment. This ability comes out through an unplanned event – an accident. If we combine this thought with an understanding of the brain as an environment with a geological dimension, this opens up the possibility to understand the environmental crisis and the subjectivity it requires. Above all, we need a radical approach to the brain’s equation with the environment – if the brain equals the environment, it is because the latter has characteristics that are cerebral, geological, biological, and so on. Therefore, we can attribute some kind of subjectivity – but not consciousness or rationality, as these constructs have been attributed exclusively to human subjects – to the environment. The Anthropocene or the environmental crisis is the lesion that degrades this environmental subjectivity. In turn, the latter irreversibly acquires the features of “the new wounded” and becomes something else – a completely different form of life. We are dealing with destructive plasticity on a planetary scale – and the Earth is becoming one of the new wounded. Zawadzki’s *Plastic Bag* is a monument to this.

The headless self-replicating figure is a monument to humanity as a geological force, it is a monument to Earth as one of the new wounded, but perhaps also a proposal for a new subjectivity, in which we might assume responsibility and face up to the unintentional environmental crisis. *Plastic Bag* can be seen as a project for such a new subjectivity, and the starting point for this project is genre identification. The concept and form of the monument emerges from the art-

15. *ibid.*, 200.

ist's ongoing idea of generic design. In the past, she has worked with the idea of anonymity, abandoning her proper name (seen as a distinguishing mark), and equating her position with other beings (objects, animals, etc.).¹⁶ In later projects, Zawadzki formulated the concept of three states of existence: meat (a formed body, constituting a particular, closed circuit), mass (the decomposed body, in which the work of deindividualization begins), and pulp (an undifferentiated state of smooth transition between the organic and inorganic, the forced communion of matter).¹⁷ "Pulp" is matter from which the artist seeks to create specimens of the new human, using generic design procedures. Their main feature is an unimpeded belonging to one's kind, fully "exemplary" of that kind, and equal to other forms of existence (organization of matter). *Plastic Bag* is not a typical monument, because it depicts two anonymous specimens of the human race. The monumental rescaling of the figures triggers an allegorization and suggests their infinite reproduction. The monument becomes an allegory for a de-individualized, anonymous, generic humanity.

As a figure of imagination and discourse, the sculpture is part of the *Plasticity of the Planet* project held at the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, which was comprised of two simultaneous exhibitions: *Human-Free Earth*¹⁸ and *Forensic Architecture: Centre for Contemporary Nature*,¹⁹ a special

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16. *Anyone* exhibition, Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, curator: Adam Mazur, 06.04–06.06.2010.
17. *Cattle* exhibition, Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, curator: Maria Brewińska, 05.04–18.05.2014.
18. *Human-Free Earth*, Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, curator: Jarosław Lubiak, 15.03–22.09.2019, accessed September 29, 2019, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/bez-ludzka-ziemia>.
19. *Forensic Architecture: Center for Contemporary Nature*, ed. Samaneh Moafi, Shourideh C. Molavi, Hannah Meszaros Martin, Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, curator: Jarosław Lubiak, →

issue of the *Obieg* online magazine, entitled *Becoming Earth*;²⁰ a film screening series, *Cinema of the Anthropocene*;²¹ and the *How to Stay with the Trouble? Art Institutions and the Environmental Crisis* panel discussion.²² Both exhibitions were attempts to face the impossibility recognized by Chakrabarty. At a time when humans have become a geological force on a planetary scale, we saw a negation of the capacity for a reflective recognition of their impact on the environment, and by extension, on themselves, and of consciousness as the self-knowledge of agency. For Chakrabarty, this is because the climate crisis was caused by the actions of humanity as a species, and this eludes all experience and phenomenology. Humanity cannot imagine and understand itself as a species, therefore it cannot find an answer to the results of its actions, nor assume responsibility for their agency. By agreeing with Malabou's polemics with this view, both exhibitions attempt to create a phenomenology of an anthropogenic environmental

→ 15.03–22.09.2019, accessed September 29, 2019, https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/forensic-architecture?tid=t_content.

20. "Becoming Earth," ed. Krzysztof Gutfrański, *Obieg*, no. 10 (2019), accessed September 29, 2019, <https://obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/en/numery/becoming-earth>.
21. *Cinema of the Anthropocene*, Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, curator: Michał Matuszewski, 25.09.2019–29.01.2020, accessed September 29, 2019, https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/kino/repertuar/ki-no-antropocenu?tid=t_content.
22. *How to Stay with the Trouble? Art Institutions and the Environmental Crisis*, panel discussion with Defne Ayas, Viviana Checchia, Mira Gakjina, Anne Szefer Karlsen, Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, curator: Magdalena Ziółkowska, 13.09.2019, accessed September 29, 2019, https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/wydarzenia/plastycznosc-planety-654817738/jak-pozostawac-przy-problemach-?tid=t_content.

crisis, and try to make sense of what happened when humans became a geological force. The artwork on display strives to create an opportunity to experience the destructive changes in which each of us participates. For this reason, both exhibitions play a unique role in the *Plasticity of the Planet* project, opening a space for experience and an opportunity to gain phenomenological awareness.



Kelly Jazvac, *Plastiglomerate Samples*, 2013

The starting point for both exhibitions is a recognition that the environmental crisis has radically changed the status of nature – it has ceased to be a neutral backdrop for human activity. However, they both address this issue differently. *Human-Free Earth* is based on artistic research, presenting works that create forms from the imagination and discourse on the truth of fiction. Meanwhile, *Forensic Architecture: Centre for Contemporary Nature* (CCN) is based on forensic methodology, collects evidence, and relies on fact. Both exhibitions, however, consciously use the contemporary art format as a specialist apparatus.

Plastic Bag opened the *Human-Free Earth* exhibition. Visitors first saw the back of the monumental figure, as if it was withholding its meaning from being too quickly revealed. The sculpture can also be seen as a monument to plasticity, especially in its destructive sense, resulting from its very materiality. The sculpture is made of plastic, out of polystyrene and epoxy resin. Plastic, the substantiality of plasticity, is the key material of the Anthropocene and the environmental crisis. *Plastic Bag* is a plastic monument to its destructive plasticity.

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THE MATERIALITIES OF PLASTICITY

In 2013, a group of researchers consisting of a petrologist, oceanographer, and an artist joined the discussion on the Anthropocene by presenting a kind of a fossil to bear testimony to the arrival of a new geological era. They treated their discovery as a geological record,

which, in their opinion, provided the missing evidence. While the indicators of changes in the atmosphere and the biosphere resulting from human activity were clear, at that time there was not enough evidence to confirm changes occurring in the lithosphere.²³ The researchers' find was meant to fill this gap. This was particularly important, as the chrono-stratigraphic division of Earth's history into epochs is based on geological records, and because stratigraphy has objections to the formal recognition of the Anthropocene as a valid geochronological term.²⁴

A new type of geological phenomenon – plastiglomerate – provides this testimony. With this term, researchers “describe an indurated, multi-composite material made hard by agglutination of rock and molten plastic.”²⁵ In other words, a cluster of stones, sand, and plastics. The discovery was made on the isolated Kamilo beach in Hawaii. The flow of ocean currents had caused remains of plastic waste to accumulate



Kelly Jazvac, *Plastiglomerate Samples*, 2013



Kelly Jazvac, *Plastiglomerate Samples*, 2013

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23. Cf. Jan Zalasiewicz et al., “Are We Now Living in the Anthropocene?” *GSA Today* 18 (2008): 4–8.
24. Whitney J. Autin, John M. Holbrook, “Is the Anthropocene an Issue of Stratigraphy or Pop Culture?” *GSA Today* 22, no. 7, (2012): 60–1.
25. Patricia L. Corcoran, Charles J. Moore, Kelly Jazvac, “An Anthropogenic Marker Horizon in the Future Rock Record,” *GSA Today* 24, no. 6 (2014): 5.

in this area. The sedimentation and accumulation of plastic marks the beginning of new geological formations, and plastiglomerate is the most striking example of this process. Researchers suspect that the direct cause of the melted plastic is the bonfires lit by tourists camping on the beach. Therefore, as they write, it is “an example of an anthropogenic action (burning) reacting to an anthropogenic problem (plastics pollution), resulting in a distinct marker horizon of the informal Anthropocene epoch.”²⁶ Plastiglomerate is therefore a geological artifact, and this paradox has far-reaching consequences, some of which I will address below.

When it comes to Kamilo beach, the burning of campfires causes the formation of plastiglomerate; however, “it is conceivable that the global extent of plastic debris could lead to similar deposits where lava flows, forest fires, and extreme temperatures occur.”²⁷ Due to the fact that the plastisfera infiltrates and appropriates the biosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere, and lithosphere, the plastiglomerate can appear anywhere on the globe.

As mentioned above, one member of the research group was the artist Kelly Jazvac, who immediately noticed the paradoxical potential of this geological artifact. She turned it into a work of art, entitled *Plastiglomerate Samples* (2013), exploring the aesthetic and poetic dimensions of plastic-stones. This work was the spatial centerpiece of the *Human-Free Earth* exhibition, orbited by themes introduced in other works.

The artist and researchers have identified something that might be called the explosive potential of the plastiglomerate, given that it provides evidence of irreversible destruction – a fossil of destruction. Therefore, it poses a challenge not only to contemporary art, but also to contemporary thought. Transformed into a work of art by Jazvac, it becomes a form taken from the imagination and discourse whose meanings demand decoding.

It seems particularly interesting to contrast this piece with Malabou's philosophy of plasticity. Paradoxically, the plastiglomerate

26. Ibid., 6.

27. Ibid., 6–7.

demands that the concept of plasticity be restored exactly when Malabou seems to abandon it. Without discussing the details of this concept's development in Malabou's individual texts, one might say that plasticity primarily means the ability to give and take form.²⁸ Thus, it describes an active, shaping power, as well as a passive susceptibility to being shaped. An example with which one can understand this is modeling, as in the plastic arts, or more precisely, in sculpture. At some point, Malabou completes the list of the characteristics of plasticity with the essential feature of irreversibility. This allows her to distinguish plasticity from flexibility. The two should not be confused: "flexibility is the ideological avatar of plasticity – at once its mask, its diversion and its confiscation."²⁹ While plasticity means real change, in flexibility all changes are taken lightly because each is followed by a return to the initial state. Therefore, flexibility means less a transformation than a temporary deformation. When it comes to plasticity, once the form is adopted or given, there is no returning to the previous state. Plasticity defines "those things that lend themselves to being formed while resisting deformation."³⁰ The previous form is irretrievably destroyed. In this case, destruction is the *modus operandi*, but because a new form is created in the process of destruction, this process is combined with repair and renovation. Owing to the very plasticity of the term, plasticity is both destructive and reparative.

At one point, Malabou analyzes the relationship between the concept of plasticity and various materialities: "Plastic material is a synthetic material which can take on different shapes and properties according to the functions intended. 'Plastic' on its own is an explosive material

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28. Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During, (London–New York: Routledge, 2005).
29. Catherine Malabou, *What We Should Do with Our Brain?* trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 12.
30. Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 9.

with a nitroglycerine and nitrocellulose base that can set off violent detonations. The plasticity of the word itself draws it to extremes, both to those concrete shapes in which form is crystallized (sculpture) and to the annihilation of all form (the bomb).³¹ The plasticity of the concept allows us to give the name “plastic” to a material that is extremely susceptible to shaping; a material whose name is associated with its one material property – an absolute formability, a material that abolishes all forms. Interestingly, Malabou often returns to the example of explosive materials, while essentially ignoring other kinds of plastics. She mentions the latter just once more – in a footnote, extending the understanding of plastics from a general term to a variety of materials, which she claims derive their name from their capacity to be modeled, though once formed, they cannot regain their initial state. And what is more: “Many of them are rigid following formation and cooling.”³² Rigidity, like flexibility, is an antonym of plasticity.

This brings us to a more important point: plasticity in action means a transformation into an opposite. A material susceptible to formation becomes rigid, the plastic stops letting itself be formed. Plasticity becomes non-plasticity. The destruction of form as such, an explosion and annihilation, becomes a solution to this impasse. This destruction should, in turn, give rise to repair. The question arises, however, whether or not non-plasticity can change into its opposite.

The plastiglomerate can be refined: the plastic stops undergoing change and the artificial substance becomes a natural one. This cannot occur, however, without irreversible destruction. Here we less have in mind the melting of plastic waste in a fire than the irreversible destruction of the environment caused by the increasing quantity and ubiquity of plastic. In writing on neuroplasticity, Malabou focuses exclusively on plastic as an explosive material. Once she shifts her attention to environmental devastation, she fails to notice the damage caused by the widespread accumulation of plastics.

Many myths have arisen around the degradation of plastic. Most plastics are made to decompose by light and oxygen,

31. Ibid.

32. Malabou, *What We Should Do*, 86.

and often undergo disintegration into small or microscopic elements.³³ According to Anthony Andrady, who has been studying the behavior of plastic in the environment since the 1980s, in some cases degradation is such a slow process that it is nearly devoid of practical consequences, and the process is basically brought to a halt in the ocean – at great depths, where no oxygen or UV rays reach, the plastic disintegration processes stop. As Susan Freinkel writes: “His research suggests that in a marine environment, polymer molecules are virtually immortal. Which means that unless it’s been beached or removed, every piece of plastic that has entered the ocean in the past century remains there in some form or another — an everlasting synthetic intrusion in the natural marine ecology.”³⁴ This potential indestructibility of plastic makes it an instrument of uncontrollable environmental destruction, annihilating its current state, a manifestation of destructive plasticity.

So it is plastics, and not the explosive materials, that are causing destruction on a global scale. Plastiglomerates are a geological symptom of the virtually everlasting bits of plastic floating in the oceans. While the former is a new kind of fossil, the latter are fossils for the future. They will become the remains of the Anthropocene, likely to survive the environmental destruction taking place before our eyes.

On the one hand, *Plastiglomerate Samples* are proof that humans have become a geological force, proof that the Earth has become one of the new wounded, but [also?] that destructive plasticity continues its work of sculpting and creating a new form of environment. The artist uses the avant-garde *ready-made* technique to highlight a certain paradox. Jazvac

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33. Cf. Davis K. A. Barnes, Francois Galgani, Richard C. Thompson, Morton Barlaz, “Accumulation and Fragmentation of Plastic Debris in Global Environments,” *Philosophical Transaction of the Royal Society B*, no. 364 (2009): 1,994.
34. Susan Freinkel, *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 125.

can only claim authorship insofar as she has chosen the plastiglomerate samples and had the idea to create the collection and its presentation – she cannot take credit for its execution. These objects were created by human actions: littering the oceans with plastic and lighting campfires on the Kamilo beach. Their creation, however, was no-one's intention; plastiglomerates are the unintentional creations of man.

Jazvac stops at the discovery and presentation of this new kind of geological artifact. Above all, her piece points to a change in the geosphere and, to a lesser extent, in the hydrosphere. Bonita Ely's *Plasticus Progressus 2054* (2017) project, on the other hand, focuses on the biosphere and its transformations. The project consists of two parts:



Bonita Ely, *Plasticus Progressus 2054*, 2017

the photographic documentation of routes plastic waste travels from the city streets to the oceans, and a diorama depicting nature in 2054 and the creatures that will emerge. This is the most caustic work among those at the *Human-Free Earth* exhibition and in the entire *Plasticity of the Planet* project,

in that it draws consequences from the idea of evolution and scientific research to solve the problem of plastic pollution. Conceptually, Ely's work stretches across three dates: 1907 – the invention of the first plastic, Bakelite; 2017 – the recognition of plastic waste as a central facet of the environmental crisis; and 2054 – the anniversary of the birth of Lao Tzu and the fictitious first appearance of genetically modified creatures capable of consuming and metabolizing plastic. According to the artist, it was Lao Tzu who inspired scientists to genetically modify *Ideonella sakaiensis*



Aleksandra Ska, *Pandemia*, 2015

bacteria to become capable of metabolizing ethyl polyterephthalate (PET) and thus contribute to the biodegradation of this type of plastic.³⁵ Ely develops the idea of genetically transforming organisms to clean “nature” by removing the waste we have left behind, and contributes to the process of designing these new species. She brings to life seventeen creatures, meticulously constructed from plastic waste. This gives the artist’s speculations the form of fiction, in which the very materiality of plastic begins to transform, as a response to its non-plasticity that causes destruction to the environment. She suggests re-plasticizing what has received its final form and restoring – via the evolution of plastic matter, modeled on biological matter – the capacity to give form. If plastic has become part of the biosphere, as Ely seems to suggest, then perhaps at some point it will also take on properties like the ability to evolve. In a way, this project alludes to the need to finally bid farewell to the fantasy of unspoiled nature. Simultaneously, the piece uses the unique materiality of plastic to create an environment on its own terms.



Aleksandra Ska, *Pandemia*, 2015

Plastic seems to infiltrate everything. As Max Liboiron notes: “Some Greenland natives have such high quantities of industrial chemicals in their bodies – including those used in plastics – that they can be classified as toxic waste when they die.”³⁶ The materiality of plastic becomes the materiality of the biosphere,

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35. Shosuke Yoshida, Kazumi Hiraga, Toshihiko Takehana, Ikuo Taniguchi, Hironao Yamaji, Yasuhito Maeda, Kiyotsuna Toyohara, Kenji Miyamoto, Yoshiharu Kimura, Kohei Oda, “A Bacterium That Degrades and Assimilates Poly(ethylene Terephthalate),” *Science* 351, (March 11, 2016): 1,196–1,199.
36. Max Liboiron, “Plasticizers: A Twenty-first-century Miasma,” in: *Accumulation: The Material Politics of Plastic*, ed. Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins, Mike Michael (London–New York: Routledge 2013), 134.

and begins to form life its increasing manifestations. This aspect appears in Aleksandra Ska's *Pandemic* (2015), although here what might be called an apocalyptic phantasm comes into play. The starting point was twelve compositions made of disposable plastic items. The images appearing in the photographs of these compositions were quite similar to the representations of viruses obtained by electron microscopy. The identical nature of these morphologies prompted the artist to commission virologists to make descriptions of fictitious species of viruses causing unidentified diseases. The eponymous pandemic is therefore an interpretation of the potential inherent in the visual likeness of structures obtained through a (photographic or microscopic) record of a shadow. The work, as Monika Bakke notes, "by using the conceptual figure of the virus, carries the potential to be critical of the discourses of bio- and necropolitics, but also the very distinction between what is alive and what is inanimate."³⁷ It is clear that the "supposedly deadly viruses are in fact plastic garbage, and the pandemic was evoked as a conceptual figure that allows a critical reflection on something as evident and concrete as mass production and global circulation of plastics."³⁸ Later, she adds: "Because the amount of plastics produced doubles every eleven years, the planet we inhabit becomes pandemically plastic before our eyes. Currently, almost three hundred million tons of plastic are produced each year, of which only twenty per cent comes from recycling."³⁹ While Ely sarcastically plays with, or even mocks, fantasies of a pure nature with her diorama of plastic creatures, Ska draws fictitious, but logical conclusions from the ubiquity of plastic, treating plastics as substances endowed with agency

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37. Monika Bakke, "Pandemiczne wspólnoty przenoszone drogą plastikową," in *Pandemia: Nauka. Sztuka. Geopolityka*, ed. Mikołaj Iwański, Jarosław Lubiak, (Szczecin-Poznań: Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-Naukowe Wydziału Malarstwa i Nowych Mediów Akademii Sztuki 2018), 141.
38. *Ibid.*, 141.
39. *Ibid.*, 143.

much like that of viruses. Similarly, the latter appear to affect planetary biology through inevitable contamination.

An unspeakable anxiety emerges in both Ely and Ska's projects, caused by the uncertainty regarding the plasticity

of plastic. On the one hand, the fact that it is potentially an everlasting, undecomposable material that transforms the biosphere via its destructive plasticity is rather daunting. On the other, there is the risk of an opposite process, in which it becomes part of metabolic processes whose course we cannot predict or control. Therefore, plastic emerges as a ubiquitous conundrum, a problem that forces us to seek answers.

This problem is crucial because the accumulation of plastic in the environment is closely tied to capitalist accumulation, as one of the main mechanisms of this system. Taking the example of polyethylene terephthalate bottles, Gay Hawking has analyzed the close relationship between plastics and the production of value in capitalism, making the former "an instrument for capital accumulation."⁴⁰ This link is based on the one quality afforded by plastic – disposability. As the author writes, "disposability' emerges as a complex socio-material quality central to the movement and apprehension of an increasing number of plastic things since World War II."⁴¹ This quality is often presented as a secondary or external quality, an unintended result of changes to the material, or, even more preferably, irresponsible consumer behavior.

In her *Petroleum Manga* video (2017), Marina Zurkow makes us face up to the extent of this addiction. Each shot shows a drawing of an everyday plastic object. Significantly, the artist specifies the exact type of plastic



left: Marina Zurkow, *Petroleum Manga*, 2017;
in the background: Aleksandra Ska, *Pandemia*, 2015

40. Gay Hawkins, "Made to Be Wasted: PET and Topologies of Disposability," in: *Accumulation*, 49.

41. *Ibid.*, 51.



Agnieszka Kurant, *Mutations and Liquid Assets*, 2014



Agnieszka Kurant, *Fossilized Future*, 2019

these objects are made from: PET, PVC, HDPE, PMMA, polystyrene, polyurethane, ammonia, nylon, paraffin, and others. The list seems endless, and as a result, the work evokes a sense of being trapped or helpless. The presentation of plastic objects is accompanied by a voice-over speaking metaphorically about ways of interacting with plastic.

Hawking shows that the popularization of plastic and the rapid increase in its production derives from an essential disposability. These items were designed to be disposable, and therefore, as waste. If products are intended to be waste from the outset, it is clear that we must “situate waste as immanent to economic actions rather than as something that follows after them, or that exists as an externality.”⁴² The accumulation of waste in the environment is therefore inextricably tied to the economy, whose growth is generated by the production and use of plastics. Economic processes were accompanied by pre-existing social and cultural practices that have addicted us to single-use items.

This is probably where the most tragic paradox in how plastic functions. Though used for only a few short moments, disposable items potentially remain in the environment forever. Everlasting disposables settle in the lithosphere, forming fossils of the future.⁴³

MUSEUMS OF CULTURAL FOSSILS OR CENTERS FOR CONTEMPORARY NATURE?

The plastiglomerate is a fossil of the future, but Jazvac, presenting it as *Plastiglomerate Samples*, has turned it into a work of art. This is a

42. Ibid., 50.

43. Bakke, *Pandemiczne wspólnoty*, 149.

double displacement. First, she exhibits stones found on Kamilo Beach, revealing the paradoxical nature of geological artifacts. If they did not pose a challenge to the very idea of separating the world of nature from the world of culture, they could easily be displayed in a geological museum or a museum of natural history. Secondly, Jazvac draws conclusions from the anthropogenic and geological factors that mix in the plastiglomerate formation process. She transforms the unintentional human creations into works of art, her artistic decision adding an *ex post* intention, displaying the objects for aesthetic consideration and as artistic products. As a result of this decision, they become cultural fossils.

Jazvac's piece converges with Agnieszka Kurant's proposal in an extremely intriguing way. The latter artist produces artificial plastiglomerates and creates records for the future in intentionally-produced fossils. Toying with the great tradition of Western painting, Kurant's *Still Life* (2014–17) combines synthetic stone with synthetic



Agnieszka Kurant, *Still Life*, 2014–17

DNA, XNA, plastic-metabolizing bacteria, petrified viruses, coltan, cassiterite, gold, wolframite, and plastiglomerate. The objects resemble clumps of near-unidentifiable matter. Unlike Jazvac's works, which are beautiful, appearance is entirely irrelevant here. Kurant also exhibits an electron-microscope photograph of the substance's internal structure, showing an interest in how the matter is sculpted on a molecular level. This is an attempt to record new kinds of plasticity – genetic mutations, recently discovered metals, fossilization of new materials – in their own materiality. In creating these fossils, Kurant is procuring evidence of what is happening around us and recording a testimony of our era within the matter itself. She also investigates economic changes, which links her explorations to reflections on the Anthropocene as an unintentional by-product of capitalism. Her *Post-Fordite* (2019) is made of fossilized layers of car varnish deposited in the

soil. These fossils were discovered in Detroit at the site of the now-bankrupt Ford plant, and were thus called Fordites or – because of their artistic value – agates from Detroit. The artist encrusts a block of epoxy resin and powdered stone with fragments of Fordites from other sites the car industry abandoned in their search for a cheaper labor force. *Post-Fordite* becomes a fossil and a historical testimony to the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. For the exhibition, the artist embedded mutated fruit flies in artificial amber, giving it the title *Fossilized Future* (2019). This work most accurately shows the theoretical plane of the artist’s investigations. They coincide with some of the concepts of Quentin Meillassoux.

Generally speaking, plastiglomerate forces us to confront the notion of a fossil that Meillassoux proposed in his *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*.⁴⁴ He writes: “I will call ‘arche-fossil’ or ‘fossil-matter’ not just materials indicating the traces of past life, according to the familiar sense of the term ‘fossil,’ but materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life.⁴⁵ In this understanding, ancestrality lacks ancestors, or rather, it precedes ancestors. Thinking about ancestrality, therefore, means breaking with historicity – history becomes of little significance in comparison with geochronology. The geochronological perspective transcends the human perspective, in relation to both the past and the future. If anthropogenic destruction leads to the extinction of humanity, then humanity’s presence in the history of the Earth – now geologically recorded as plastic deposits and plastiglomerate – will become another chrono-stratigraphic era. We can call this era the Anthropocene, but it does not really matter, because it is possible that no-one will read these geological records. Meillassoux expands the meaning of fossils: “[...] the problem of the arche-fossil is not confined to ancestral statements. For it concerns every discourse whose meaning includes a temporal discrepancy between thinking

44. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, (London: Continuum, 2010).

45. *Ibid.*, 16.

and being – thus, not only statements about events occurring prior to the emergence of humans, but also statements about possible events that are ulterior to the extinction of the human species⁴⁶ Meillassoux suggests that this broader understanding of ancestrality, not limited to what was anterior to human existence, but also including what follows our disappearance, should be described as “dia-chronicity.” Interestingly, the task for dia-chronic thinking is to “determine the conditions of meaning for hypotheses about the climactic and geological consequences of a meteor impact extinguishing all life on earth....”⁴⁷ In terms of destructive plasticity determining the environmental crisis on a global scale, the new stakes of dia-chronic thinking seem much more interesting: if the sixth extinction is occurring through unintentional human activity, then we might wonder about the aftermath of this event – the possibility of life and possible life-forms that will occur after the forms we know become extinct. In other words: if people die out as a result of man-made changes, then dia-chronical thinking can determine the sense of inquiring into life in a future without descendants. These issues describe and determine the rhetoric of the exhibition’s title – *Human-Free Earth*.

In *Still Life, Post-Fordite*, and especially in the *Fossilized Future*, Kurant adopts a dia-chronic perspective (as defined by Meillassoux). We admire these fossils, because they allow us to extrapolate into a future without descendants; this is the gaze by which we can grasp the Earth’s past in geo-chronological studies.

Another work at the exhibition that directly linked fossils and art was Agnieszka Kurant’s *Mutations and Liquid Assets* (2014). Here the artist amalgamates the metal multiples of well-known artists (such as Beuys), and, next to a form that resembles spilled liquid, presents the works’ certificates of authenticity. This destructive plasticity undergoes a shift – the metal is heated, and thereby plasticized to obtain a completely new work of art through the partial destruction of previously made casts. Here, destruction is clearly part of the creative process, as is the irreversibility of this act.

46. Ibid, 115.

47. Ibid, 115.

An equally important question arises about the contemporary art institution, or, to be more precise, about its plasticity and ability to respond to the destructive plasticity of its relationship to fossilization. This work can therefore be seen as questioning the status of cultural fossilization, or more precisely, re-fossilization.

According to Daniel Falb, “our geological age, the Anthropocene, leaves us wanting a conceptual manual that would allow us to come to grips with processes that drive right into the crust of the Earth and shortcut immediately with geologic timescales – for these are the processes the planet, and our lives on it, are all about today.”⁴⁸ In response to this need, the philosopher suggests replacing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization with defossilization and refossilization, which operate on two levels. The first kind of defossilization primarily involves the exploitation of the lithosphere through the extraction of fossil fuels and all kinds of minerals. While these are defossilized in the literal sense, i.e. burned to obtain energy, minerals are mostly fossilized as building or construction material in buildings people erect (metropolises built of steel and concrete, but also giant construction projects) and produce, as well as plastic and waste (some components of crude oil, natural gas, or shale gas are “refossilized” in plastic). Since the 1950s, defossilization and refossilization of the first kind has reached a global scale and has become a factor in the environmental crisis. In the first instance, an example would be the burning of minerals resulting in the accumulation of pollutants in the atmosphere and overheating of the global climate; in the second, the accumulation of plastic in the hydrosphere and lithosphere. As Falb emphasizes: “Refossilization 1 grounds the equation ‘pollution / waste = condition of possibility for historiography.’ It also turns our present into a virtual ‘incarnation’-site of future excavations that will never take place, and points to a deep future in which the Anthropocene stratum will ultimately be completed: to an Earth beyond and without hominis.”⁴⁹

48. See: Daniel Falb “Defossilization and Refossilization: Deleuze/Guattari to the Anthropocene” *Obieg*, no. 10/2019, reprinted in this volume, 253–70.

49. *Ibid.*, 262.

We can treat Ursula Biemann's poetic *Twenty-one Per Cent* (2016) as a surprising commentary on Falb's concept. The piece analyses and presents the chemistry of the atmosphere and its susceptibility to contamination. The composition of the atmosphere, especially the twenty-one-per-cent oxygen content, enables humans to think, birds to fly, and so on, allowing life processes to function in their existing form. Defossilization of the first degree, in particular the burning of fossil fuels, changes the composition of the atmosphere. Destructive plasticity triggers irreversible changes, including global warming. As the artist emphasizes, the decrease in oxygen in the air makes us less clever and empties out our sky. However, she goes beyond diagnosing the situation and threats. Chemistry turns into alchemy, and Mo Diener performs a semi-magical and semi-scientific ritual. This might be seen as a proposal in the language of myth for inventing new cultural practices in response to the crisis.

Developing his conceptual structure and vocabulary, Falb proposes a second level or degree. Defossilization of the second type/degree concerns what has been refossilized in human history to date – the fossils produced by various cultures in human history. “The Earth is being cleared from the diversity cultural evolution has produced in the 75,000 years during which the species had [lost itself] in the respective continents and territories of the planet – *this pre-global cultural diversity* is disappearing from the archaeological and historical record of the present. As globalization only happens once, this is a one-of-a-kind wave of cultural defossilization. Most pre-modern cultural content will shortly stop leaving traces.”⁵⁰ This disappearance of historical and cultural resources is accompanied by second-degree refossilization: “more and more data are being fossilized into an interconnected techno-mineral system of planetary scale Internet,” while “hardware components become the new trace fossils of the Anthropocene stratum.”⁵¹ The technologies of collecting, processing, and storing data are a new kind of fossilization; this process certainly produces its own plasticity.

50. *Ibid.*, 262.

51. *Ibid.*, 264.

Cultural defossilization and refossilization prompts Falb to take up the issue of “curating storage,” thus developing institutional practices to respond to the situation determined by defossilization and refossilization of both types. Artists have already attempted to formulate the answer, as Falb emphasizes. Therefore, contemporary art as a social institution is a place where an answer should be sought.

The difficulty is that contemporary cultural production emerges in the processes of defossilization and refossilization of both types. This also applies to art and its institutions: numerous biennials and other large events or institutional exhibitions activities create cultural refossilization, which then circulate in the art market and are amassed in public and private collections.



Pakui Hardware, *Extracorporeal*, 2017

Physical objects resulting from the consumption of resources are usually the first type of fossils, accompanied by an equally intensive production of the second type of fossils.

This raises the question of how, being a part of this system, contemporary art can offer answers to the crisis that the system produces. This is precisely the question faced by the *Plasticity of the Planet* project, and especially the two exhibitions that form a large part of it. The artistic refossilizations presented at these exhibitions are, as I have mentioned, symbols of imagination and discourse through which we attempt to capture the processes that shape our life.

Pakui Hardware’s *Extracorporeal* installation (2017) plays a special role among these symbols. The duo’s practice might be understood as a unique hybridization of the concepts constructed by Daniel Falb. The artists produce objects in which they combine refossilizations of the first and second type. They work with physical matter, but equally

important to their activities is immaterial knowledge, which they draw from scientific research and traditions offering non-scientific methods of cognition (e.g. witchcraft). They are particularly interested in “tacit knowledge,” which they understand as the skill to organize action found in living organisms. Non-scientific methods of cognition give access to this kind of knowledge, which science has begun to explore. In *Extracorporeal*, artists examine the phenomenon of self-rejuvenation, which makes some organisms potentially immortal. The installation places viewers in an environment that might bring to mind the interior of a Petri dish populated by unfamiliar beings, or a place of shamanic worship, with totems of unknown purpose. With its specific grammar, the work refossilizes knowledge and matter (glass, plastic fabrics, plants, tools, etc.), helping us confront the mystery of life as an ability to organize matter in a constant relationship with the environment.

While Pakui Hardware presents a conceptual and imaginative figure, Diana Lelonek addresses a similar issue by exhibiting the specimens she found. In essence, these are natural-cultural objects in which man-made waste left in the environment is taken over and used



Diana Lelonek, *Center for Living Things*, since 2016

by plants and animals for their own needs, and perhaps even included in their metabolic processes. The biosphere captures the plastisphere, as if enacting the fictional script written by Bonita Ely and her *Plasticus Progressus*. In the forests surrounding Warsaw, Lelonek found a specimen in which discarded plastic fabrics were annexed as a substrate by various species of plants, and a specimen in which old car seats and plastic waste had undergone a similar process.

Lelonek shapes her work as a patainstitution, the Centre for Living Things, which I see as a postulate for the institutional transformation of contemporary art. Her idea goes hand in hand with the Forensic Architecture collective's



Forensic Architecture, *Centre for Contemporary Nature*, 2019

proposal that art or centers for contemporary culture should be replaced by centers for contemporary nature. I have permitted myself to follow this suggestion, taking the title of the exhibition prepared by the collective for the *U-jazdowski*, the *Centre for Contemporary Nature*, as a generic name for new institutions

in which art could redefine its function. These could be spaces, for instance, in which to recognize, understand, and show how cultural defossilization and re-defossilization processes take place.

The idea of the center of contemporary nature as a generic name for new institutions is, however, a kind of misnomer, given that Forensic Architecture sees this idea as a very specific format for conducting research into cases of the intentional destruction of nature as a means of warfare.

TELEOLOGIES OF ECOCIDE

The *Forensic Architecture: Centre for Contemporary Nature* exhibition acts as a counterpoint to the *Human-Free Earth* exhibition. Both depart from the recognition that the status of nature has changed radically as of late. The London-based collective emphasizes that: “Historically, nature has been understood as a static, eternal backdrop against which human social, political, military or industrial activity unfolds. Our notion of ‘contemporary nature’ seeks to challenge that understanding. In essence, this means historicising the element that so far has been opposed to history.”⁵² This is closely connected to the research

52. *Forensic Architecture: Centre for Contemporary Nature*, exhibition guide, Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, accessed September 9, 2019, →

subject involved in this displacement, the deliberate destruction of nature. The collective specially prepared two case studies for the *U-jazdowski* exhibition: the use of herbicides in warfare in Palestine and Colombia. These two cases were



Forensic Architecture, *Centre for Contemporary Nature*, 2019

selected as examples of global processes that the FA sees as crucial to transformations of contemporary nature – desertification and deforestation. The exhibition presents evidence of the use of glyphosate in Palestine – e.g. leaves with traces of contamination whose origin can be precisely traced, film documentation, and interviews with researchers. The main purpose of this herbicide war is to destroy vegetation and agriculture on the Palestinian side of the border between the Gaza Strip and Israel. This area is being transformed into a desert in order to subject it to military control. In Colombia, herbicides were used in forests to destroy coca plantations. Deforestation was therefore a side effect, which was not limited to this country, but also affected neighboring Ecuador.

The FA investigate situations in which nature falls victim to attacks in which it is intentionally destroyed. This exhibition is therefore an antithesis to the other exhibition, which assumes the unintentional perpetration of the environmental crisis. Needless to say, the return of intentionality further complicates the recognition and understanding of our role and responsibility for nature's state. It prompts us to return to what Kant described as the ultimate purpose of nature. According to this classical interpretation, it is “something outside of nature for whose sake nature as a whole exists.” This means that the “final purpose of nature can only be man considered as a moral subject, that is, considered as having the supersensible ability to choose purposes freely.” By belonging to nature, people can simultaneously “set themselves purposes

→ <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/forensic-architecture?tid=przewodnik>.

and use nature to fulfill them.” For Kant this ability is culture, and it “is the ultimate purpose of nature because it prepares man for what he must do in order to be the final purpose of nature.”⁵³ In this light, attacking nature in the struggle against other human groups means enlisting nature into the purposefulness of human history. In a broader context, the environmental crisis caused by devastating human activity might also be understood as the realization of the ultimate goal, to transform all nature into culture, thus abolishing it as an end.



Angelika Markul, *Memories of Glaciers*, 2018

Forensic Architecture gathers evidence of environmental violence – their main aim is to file lawsuits for glyphosate-spraying companies on the Gaza Strip border on behalf of Israel. At the same time, however, they consciously utilize the format of contemporary art to bolster their rhetoric and open new channels for their message. Although it studies natural transformations, the Centre for Contemporary Nature remains an institution of contemporary art.

The latter is a tool for this new institution. It can be said that what FA is trying to do in proposing the establishment of centers of contemporary nature is the transformation of purposefulness. Culture no longer seeks to guarantee the purposefulness of nature; on the contrary, defending nature is meant to guarantee the purposefulness of culture.

53. Hannah Ginsborg, “Kant’s Aesthetics and Teleology,” in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed September 29, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/kant-aesthetics/>.

Here, art can be a strange ally – for Kant, considerations of the purposefulness of nature are combined with thoughts about aesthetics. This connection is possible because aesthetic judgments are also associated with a kind of purposefulness and a kind of violence.

Nature is the protagonist of Angelika Markul’s majestic video installation, *Memories of Glaciers* (2018), shown at the *Human-Free Earth* exhibition. To evoke the experience of the sublime, Markul uses powerful techniques: rescaling, specially composed music, and high-quality film footage. Her aesthetics of the sublime enter into a complex game with Kant’s diagnosis of this issue. The subject of this game is our attitude to nature. The film opens with a shot of a comet on which organic substances were found – an argument for the artist’s more general historiosophy, which assumes that life need not have begun on Earth. Then, aerial shots show the vast expanses of icefields in Patagonia, and in close-up – fragments of the landscape, blackened from pollution, crumbling and falling into the water. The artist sees this process as the amputation of a body part. These sequences are accompanied by 3D animation showing the glacier contaminated by a black, spilling substance. The drama of the destruction of the cryosphere plays out for the viewers in a loop, in constant repetition. Inanimate nature is a victim of human activity.



Angelika Markul, *Memories of Glaciers*, 2018

For Kant, the experience of sublime (as he writes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he discusses the teleology of nature) is based on seeing nature as more powerful than us, yet not overwhelming us. We “consider an object *fearful* without being afraid *of it*.”⁵⁴ The paradoxical

54. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis–Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 119.

experience of the sublime is based on two things: on the one hand, it is an encounter with something that is physically greater than us, and on the other hand, the fact that our minds can surpass nature in its entirety. Kant states: “Hence, if in judging nature aesthetically we call it sublime, we do so not because nature arouses fear, but because it calls forth our strength,” and adds, “nature’s might [...] as yet not having such dominance over us.”⁵⁵ Here, too, teleology appears, though it is not associated with subordination to human purposes, but with mental superiority and refusal to be subordinate.

For Kant, the sublime concerned only nature; for Markul the feeling of the sublime is evoked by a work of art pertaining to nature. In recent decades, the category of sublime has often been recalled in relation to art – as if only something more magnificent than humans could only be found only in their own creations, rather than the surrounding nature, which, as it happens, was completely subordinate to human exploitation. However, a kind of shift occurs in *Memories of Glaciers*. Here, the sublime is not associated with experiencing the magnitude of nature or the power of the sensory impact of the work of art. These are only tools, and what is fearful is, in fact, the enormity of human destruction. Markul consciously plays with the aesthetics she chooses: what she shows is meant to be fearful, yet it is not meant to be feared. The point is not to cause anxiety. The sublime is reversed in a specific manner. In the experience arranged by Markul, reason cannot feel superior to nature, because the destruction of the latter is the result of human actions, whether intentional or not. The impact of these actions is more powerful than we can comprehend. The question remains whether they will dominate our cognitive abilities and our lives.

Markul enables us to confront this terrifying vastness without being afraid, and paves the way to an imaginary and rational understanding. We are left to suppose that this kind of confrontation is the first step to finding answers and being able to accept responsibility.

55. *Ibid.*, 121.

CHTHULUCENIC ADDICTIONS

Catherine Malabou analyzes the consequences of the environmental crisis for the human condition, but also formulates some possible responses to the situation. As we may recall, the brain is where (human) history meets geochronology, geology, and biology. Thus, the brain and its plasticity create the possibility for a new subjectivity capable of assuming responsibility for the effects of the anthropogenic environmental crisis. Malabou draws from studies of prehistory or deep history, and Daniel Lord Smail's *On Deep History and the Brain* in particular. In the "Civilization and Psychotropy" chapter,⁵⁶ Smail discusses stimulants as a key factor in the development of civilization – these are where biochemistry connects with and forms culture: "[...] it should already be clear that the progress of European civilization from the Middle Ages to modernity consists of a signified expansion in the range of autotropic mechanisms available on the market. Coffee, sugar, chocolate, and tobacco: all of these products have mildly addictive or mood-altering properties."⁵⁷ According to Malabou, it follows that: "only new addictions will help us to lessen the effects of climate change (eating differently, traveling differently, dressing differently, etc.). Addictive processes have in large part caused the Anthropocene, and only new addictions will be able to partly counter them."⁵⁸ If the brain and its addictions have brought us to the current crisis, then only the plasticity of the brain and our capacity for new addictions can bring an answer to the current situation. It is not the new wounded who can define a new kind of subjectivity, but rather the new addicted.

If we were to give more serious consideration to the idea of transforming contemporary art centers into centers for contemporary nature, then Malabou's ideas – although undoubtedly very interesting – remain too general. We have only a general notion of what these new addictions could be and how

56. Daniel L. Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 2007), 157–89.

57. *Ibid.*, 179.

58. Malabou, *The Brain of History*, 177.

to create them. A more specific question would be whether art institutions and artists could work together to create these new addictions. How could art institutions work with plasticity and how could stimulants they offer work?

This would require a shift in how we apprehend the operations of contemporary art and its institutions. It might be described as a transition from globalization (understood as the circulation of capital, goods, information, people, etc.) to planetarism (which starts with the planet, as the plexus of what is biotic and abiotic, as we will see in Haraway). Using the terminology developed by Malabou, the latter can be described as plastic. Plasticity combines the giving and taking of form – the activity of forming and submitting oneself to being formed. It can be said that the Earth is formed via destructive plasticity (of human actions), yet it reciprocally forms the environment (the unintentional changes in the environment are the expression of a mysterious agency). The shift would require us to move from globalization and the resulting Anthropocene to plastic planetarism. As a side note, and a self-reflection, I might mention that this is a trajectory that the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art has been following for several years. To name a few main points of the program, this might be described as, firstly, a critique of globalization and global art, by divisions into geographical locations and culturally diverse points of view. In projects such as *Dust* we have examined the material organization of the community, based on practices developed in the Middle East,⁵⁹ while in *Public Spirits* we reflected on the relationship between communities and a nation-state in Southeast Asia.⁶⁰ Secondly, this has involved recognizing the disruption of the neoliberal order and stable models of social organization in the *Dizziness: Navigating the Un-*

59. *Dust*, Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, curators: Anna Ptak, Amanda Abi Khalil, 04.09–15.11.2015, accessed September 29, 2019, https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/otyk?tid=t_content.

60. *Public Spirits*, Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, curator: Meiya Cheng, 22.10.2016–15.01.2017, accessed September 29, 2019, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/public-spirits>.

known project.⁶¹ The next stage was the attempt to find new practices of individual and collective activity in response to this disruption in *Social Design for Social Living* and *Gotong Royong: Things We Do Together*, whose starting point was Indonesian traditions of joint work.⁶² Finally, we made attempts to capture the environmental crisis (as a product of neoliberal globalization since the 1950s) in the *Plasticity of the Planet* project. If any of the Centre's projects could be retrospectively filed under plastic planetarism, it would be the several-year-long project Jazdów City Garden, in which the park surrounding the Centre was treated as a social sculpture whose uses and shape could be reinvented.⁶³ In institutional discourse, plastic planetarism must mean a departure

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61. *Dizziness: Navigating the Unknown* exhibition, Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, curators: Ruth Anderwald, Leonhard Grond, Katrin Bucher Trantow, 15.09.2017–07.01.2018, accessed September 29, 2019, https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/utrata-rownowagi?tid=t_content.
62. *Social Design for Social Living* exhibition, National Gallery of Indonesia in Jakarta, curators: Marianna Dobkowska, Krzysztof Łukomski, 29.06–11.07.2016, accessed September 29, 2019, https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/residencies/projects/social-design-for-social-living?tid=t_content. *Gotong Royong: Things We Do Together*, Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, curators: Marianna Dobkowska, Krzysztof Łukomski, 19.10.2017–28.01.2018, accessed September 29, 2019, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/gotong-royong-?tid=218953827>.
63. Organized by the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, the *Jazdów City Garden* project, curator: Anna Czaban, including: *Jazdów Archipelago*, 19.06–06.09.2015; *Prototype*, 07.07–21.0.2016; *Sporty*, 24.06–31.08.2017; *Naturomorphic*, 04–11.2018; *Care about Water and Bathe with Friends*, 05.07–31.10.2019; accessed October 7, 2019, <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/social-projects/-ogrod-miejski-jazdow>.

from the (insufficient) idea of a critical institution toward an attempt to create a model of an engaged institution to participate in staying with the trouble.

Where Malabou stops, Donna Haraway begins her work in *Staying*

with the Trouble, which has inspired both this essay and, in a less explicit way, the entire *Plasticity of the Planet* project. First of all, the Haraway asks how we can accept what she terms “response-ability.”⁶⁴ I understand this as the ability to formulate a response, the condition for accepting responsibility. This responsibility must follow from a precise recognition of a situation, and then courageously endure what is revealed. Haraway's thinking opposes the three most common responses to the environmental crisis: negationism, catastrophism, and techno-optimism. In my opinion, each of these contains an error in recognition motivated by a desire to deny the consequences. In the case of negationism, the mistake is the refusal to acknowledge that a problem exists, despite the evidence and testimonies. In catastrophism, we surrender to an apocalyptic phantasm based on the belief that a small group of the virtuous will survive, which merges with the fantasy of starting [everything] over. As for techno-optimism, we succumb to the cleverness of inventors and scientists who might be able to reverse the irreversible by some brilliant technological trick.⁶⁵ Haraway opposes this with a call that could be seen as a new imper-

Tom Sherman, *Playing with Fire Under Water*, 2012

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64. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2016).
65. What I am calling the “apocalyptic phantasm” derives from Susan Sontag's analysis: Cf. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor: AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York–London: Penguin, 2009).

ative for thinking and acting – what we can and should do is stick with the problems we have created. Nothing less, nothing more.

Tom Sherman's *Playing with Fire under Water* (2012) can be seen as a commentary on this way of thinking. The artist uses a simple technique to show the risks generated by industrial fish farming. He combines footage of the exposed bottom of an open-pen fish farm with commentary describing the processes there. Scraps of food, droppings, and decaying dead fish bodies form a breeding ground for the growth of microorganisms. The residual antibiotics are eaten by the fish, encouraging the growth of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. The fish containing the new, dangerous bacteria pose a danger to humans that eat them. According to Sherman, fish farms are time bombs, an idea further illustrated by images of fireworks at the end of the film. Images of the fish farm are interspersed with those of children and adults in an amusement park. People are unconsciously playing with fire underwater. The paradox in the title reflects the irony and, perhaps, the black humor in the video. They are not intended to undermine the message, but rather free the warning from the cliché and routine that would lead to it being dismissed as yet another example of ecological fear-mongering. Our staying with the trouble can begin with ironic reflection.

Despite being a serious theoretical work, Haraway's account is not devoid of irony – in formulating theoretical analyses and proposals, she sometimes takes refuge in the language of myth. She suggests a particular myth as a theoretical form of



Tom Sherman, *Playing with Fire Under Water*, 2012



Tom Sherman, *Playing with Fire Under Water*, 2012

staying with the trouble; the irony is, while Haraway realizes and demonstrates that no theory could prepare us for this, the myths, stories, and, I might add, art, do serve this role. In my understanding, her main theoretical proposition is the myth of Chthulucene. She emphasizes this has nothing to do with Lovecraft's Cthulhu monster, rather with the spider of the species *Pimoid chthulhu* and other "diverse earthwide tentacular powers and forces and collected things with names like Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa (burst from water-full Papa), Terra, Haniyasu-hime, Spider Woman, Pachamama, Oya, Gorgo, Raven, A'akuluujjusi, and many many more."⁶⁶ This clearly circumscribes the biological, mythological, ethnological, and pop-cultural universe she seeks to evoke.

This new myth is meant to help us imagine the world anew. In a related project, the *Mycological Twist* (Eloïse Bonneviot and Anne de Boer) presents a very interesting representation of imagination and discourse in *Respawn* (2014). This film is a history of fungi on Earth that is simultaneously solemn and ironic. It draws from both the heroic epics and tales of superheroes. As a collective subject, the fungi are both the narrator and the main protagonist. The narrative, however, does not avoid complexity: the fungi kingdoms waged wars against each other, and established alliances among themselves, but also with other species. This is a mythical story in which the human species is merely a supporting character in the never-ending saga of the fungi. The *Mycological Twist's* radical shift in perspective allows us to view their work as Chthulucenic.

New myths can help us to better understand the organization of the world: "the Chthulucene, even burdened with its problematic Greek-ish rootlets, entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages – including the more-than-human, other-than-human, in-human, and human-as-humus."⁶⁷ Haraway's effort is focused against the Anthropocene hypothesis, because she wants to conquer its limitations. "Unlike the dominant dramas of

66. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 101.

67. *Ibid.*, 55.

Anthropocene [...], human beings are not the only important actors in the Chtulucene, with all other beings able simply to react. The order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story.”⁶⁸ The main concept Haraway uses in this story is *sympoiesis*, understood as becoming-with, producing-with, as co-producing in relationships and collaborations, and connectedness. For Haraway, the planet is the main heroine and moreover, it is understood as the assembly and interrelation of many different elements. The ability of *sympoiesis* can be understood as co-giving and co-taking form in a mutual entanglement. The Chtulucene can be seen as an era of plastic planetarism. More specifically, it can be viewed as a conceptual map, a blueprint for designing new addictions and a new subjectivity, which would give us the opportunity to take on/assume responsibility.

The issue of technology emerges as crucial to Haraway’s story of “the biotic and abiotic forces of this Earth.” Falb also recognizes its key significance for the transformation of the planet: “Digital technologies mark the point where the productive agency of the unliving ceases to be purely derivative or manual but becomes cognitive in its own right. Unliving agents

– computers, big data analyses, self-learning algorithms, neuronal networks, AI’s – today embody the highest ‘vitality’ of spirit.”⁶⁹ Understood in this fashion, technology becomes an important element of *sympoiesis*, the entanglement of the human, biological, and inanimate.



left: The Mycological Twist, *Respawn*, 2014;
in the middle: Kelly Jazvac, *Plastiglometare Samples*, 2013; Pakui Hardware, *Extracorporeal*, 2017;
right: Ursula Biemann and Mo Diener, *Twenty One Percent*, 2016

68. Ibid., 55.

69. Falb, *Defossilization and Refossilization*, in this volume, 265.

It does not promise a savior, just another tool to stay with the trouble. Gast Bouschet and Nadine Hilbert show this in their poetic audio-visual work, *Metamorphic Earth* (2016), in which images of living matter and human figures are interwoven with technological devices. The film has no plot; it is a story about intertwining and mutual penetration that defines how the Earth and its human inhabitants coexist. Along with mythology, technology is undoubtedly a tool that can perpetuate old (Anthropocene) addictions or help create new (Chthulucenic) ones, owing to the plasticity of our brains and our planet.

Bonita Ely
*Plastikus Progressus:
The Trauma of Waste*
(2019)





INTRODUCTION

Without water there can be no life as we know it. In other words, water makes life on Earth possible. Every single drop of moisture cycles through living organisms, aquifers, soil, cracks, rivers, creeks, canals, estuaries, lakes, oceans... this is our plumbing. Human bodies are 50–65% water. Moisture evaporates from the warm ground, rises up to form clouds, and returns to the Earth as rain, snow, ice, fog. Solid, liquid, or gas, it sustains nutrients for all – plants, creatures, fungi, microbes, the insects that pollinate, seeds that sprout, bloom, live, die, then decay, releasing water back – the ever-recycling millions of gallons flowing, often invisibly, to sustain life.

Only 3% of the water that covers 70% of the Earth's surface is fresh. Only 1% of that water is directly available for us to use, through rainfall. The rest is in the oceans, with their incessant tides and currents, providing salt-water habitats with the greatest diversity of life on Earth – water joins everything together, all in one world.

*Rivers and streams are born of the ocean ...
... all water flows back to become the ocean¹*

We casually pollute this water. For example, annually an estimated 4.5 trillion cigarette butts, containing toxic chemicals, are littered worldwide. They are made of cellulose acetate. Microfibers from butts, synthetic clothes, (often useless) packaging, consumer goods, and technologies flow into the sea in rivers, storm water, and sewage, adding toxic poisons to ocean food chains. Many scientists estimate that this threat to Earth's life forces is as dangerous as climate change.

We must realize the consequences of an ontological paradigm that sets us apart from nature, arguably resulting in the rampant destruction of the natural environment – this does not happen in animist cultures. Here we are intrinsic to nature, the guardians of nature.

1. Verse 30 of *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Jonathan Star (New York–London: Penguin Group, 2008).

My installation, *Plastikus Progressus*, created initially for the 2017 Athens edition of documenta 14, links water in three locations, case studies that contribute to plastics pollution – Athens, a coastal city in a country bordered by the almost totally landlocked, highly polluted Mediterranean; Kassel, a German city linked by the Fulda River and its many tributaries via the Weser River to the North Sea; and Sydney, a city in the Southern Hemisphere on the Pacific, the world’s largest ocean, where counter-clockwise ocean currents contain dense deposits of plastic, micro and macro, polluting the ocean’s food chains, releasing toxic chemicals.

In 2014, researchers estimated a minimum of 5.25 trillion particles weighing 268,940 tons were floating in the waters that connect these three locations – Athens, Kassel, Sydney.



RESEARCH

The central focus of this artwork is the casual, rather than industrial pollution of water, citing water as a “trans-ecology,” that is, an ecological system that links physical surroundings and organisms across environments on a global scale. I documented evidence in urban environments of the thoughtless disposal of garbage, as a toxic pollutant that threatens the life-sustaining purity of this trans-ecology. I documented rivers in Athens, Kassel and Sydney, Kassel’s water treatment plant, cultural paradigms dependent on water, manifestations of water’s central importance in natural environments, in flora and fauna.

THE ARTWORK

Plastikus Progressus is an interdisciplinary, futurist science museum display.

Humour – science – text – drawing – photography – sculpture – sound



The installation's diorama features fanciful creatures assembled from discarded plastic vacuum cleaners collected off the streets of Sydney, their diet of plastic rubbish enmeshed in the terrain's vegetation, a synthetic military camouflage net. Chirping, croaking, making all sorts of sounds, they are surrounded by documentation of the pollution of rivers from 2017, examples of pristine natural environments from 1906, and a diagrammatic account of our troubled history from 2000 BC to the present, 2054.

FUTURISTIC

Dated in the future, the year is 2054, the 2,450th anniversary of the birth of Lao Tzu, author of the international best seller, the *Tao Te Ching*:

*How the universe is like a bellows!
Empty, yet it gives a supply that never fails;
The more it is worked, the more it brings forth*
[Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 5]

In 2016, this Taoist testament inspired an ambitious plan of action, using genetically engineered creatures to clean up the ocean's plastic pollution. The highly effective gene editing method, Crispr-Cas9, otherwise known as CRISPR (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats), creates a specially designed mutation that permanently alters the genes of an organism and its offspring. Here the Earth's creatures combine with *Ideonella sakaiensis*, bacteria discovered in a Japanese rubbish tip that "eats" plastic. CRISPR improves genetic encoding, isolating the enzymes responsible for dissolving polyethylene terephthalate, or PET, and converting it into harmless chemicals.

The natural history museum's walls are painted a subdued olive green and display photographs of polluted rivers from 2017; pristine nature from 1907; a contextualising work on paper titled *Histories*; and the creatures' taxonomies. A central diorama displays the creatures and

their habitats, with plenty of plastic rubbish in among synthetic military camouflage netting – and plastic flowers for the creatures with more refined tastes to eat.



TAXONOMIES – FANCIFUL AND FACTUAL INFORMATION

Taxonomies describe the genetic origins, habitats, and life cycles of these new plastic-eating species. The taxonomies inform us about the extraordinary characteristics of our real, existing creatures, including humans, while informing us of the dangers of plastic pollution. One example is: DJ TRUMPUSSY

Classification: *Disk arrogans conflo faeles chironex fleckeri*.

Common name, DJ Trumpussy; δίσκος αναβάτης από γάτος [dískos anavátis atou gátos] – Mammal/sea wasp (cat)

This extraordinary feline is two faced – Face #1 is crowned by DJ Trumpussy's distinctive cream-colored head cover. Like cats, they are obsessed with grooming – Trumpussy's tongue is equipped with 500-micrometer-long keratin papillae which face backwards and act like a hairbrush. They are known to regurgitate hairballs.

A single, barcode-like eye is located on a perfectly transparent, upside-down container-like skull that contains a vacuum.

Biologists have recently confirmed it shows a distant genetic connection to the box jellyfish (*Chironex fleckeri*), which can have up to sixty tentacles, three metres in length, containing millions of nematocysts, microscopic hooks containing and delivering venom.

They do not have a brain.

Face #2 extends from its groin down to the ankle. The eyes resemble popped pill containers while the nose, a bristled tooth-like structure, hovers over the cute, pursed open lips associated with the DJ Trumppussy’s permanent, smile-like facial expression.

A bubbled cloak and serving tray protrude from behind the cat’s proudly upright physique. Its spine extends and contracts.

Its mobility, colloquially known as the “hoover maneuver,” is powered by an energy efficient, 1,000-watt “projectile mobility” mechanism that repetitively sucks up, then discharges the terrain it inhabits. Any plastic garbage encountered is ingested, broken down to its chemical composition, then spat out.

Skin tone – shiny gold.



PLASTIC PLANTS – AN “OFF-TARGET” EFFECT

The proliferation of genetically-engineered plastic plants has been a most unfortunate “off-target effect” of the CRISPR process, as many of the creatures prefer to eat them rather than our disgusting rubbish.



WORKS ON PAPER – *HISTORIES*

Histories creatively combines diagrammatic data, drawings, and collage, to inform viewers of *Homo sapiens*’ tendency towards eco-pathological behavior, foreshadowed from 2000 BC to 2054 AD by wars, invasions, and destruction mitigated/caused by our extraordinary inventiveness and creativity – this is the context, so to speak.



INTERACTIVE TOUCHSCREEN

A touchscreen, also online, invites viewers' collaborative interaction, exploring layers of data and related imagery:

- The first layer, dated 2054, describes the creatures that will clean up our mess, devouring all our plastic pollution.
- The 2017 layer describes three case studies, the pollution in three rivers, and reveals their connectedness through ocean currents, including the huge swirling plastic deposits in the gyres of the northern and southern oceans.
- Sadly, the third layer is the year 1907, when the first synthetic resin, bakelite, was invented by Belgian-born American chemist Leo Hendrik Baekeland. This layer is a collage of fractals, illustrating the inter-relatedness and the beauty of past pristine, natural environments:

<http://plastikus.online/home.html>



PHOTOGRAPHY

On the gallery walls, photographs surround the central diorama depicting the polluted rivers of Athens, Sydney and Kassel, and a retrospective representation of three pristine natural environments as they were in 1907 – the hills above Athens, Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park near Sydney, and Sababurg Nature Reserve near Kassel, reminding us of nature's lost wonders. Continuous images of rubbish "tie" the hanging works and the installation together.



QUOTATIONS

A text from Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* [Classic of the Way and its Virtue], circa 500 BC, accompanies each time period; for example, the quotation accompanying the 1907 photographs of pristine nature is:

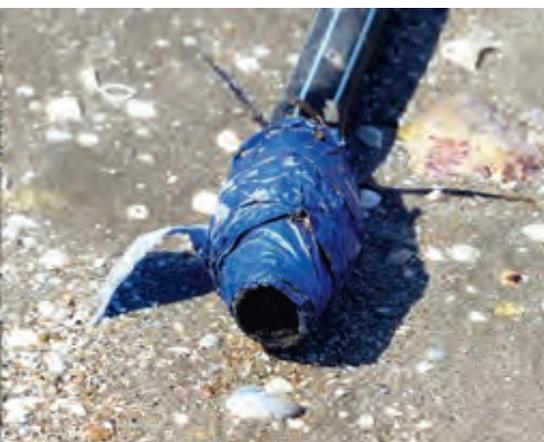
*The world is Tao's own vessel
 It is perfection manifest
 It cannot be changed
 It cannot be improved
 For those who go tampering it is ruined*
 [Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 29]

AESTHETICS

The creative frisson between nature's sublime beauty and the grossness, the abject rubbish of the streets – however paradoxically beautiful – invites deep reflection, engagement in communication, contemplation and action.







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“The Plasticity of the World: Philosophy,
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Catharine Malabou
“The Brain of History, Or, the Mentality of the Anthropocene”
[in]: *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 2017, 116 (1): 39–53

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Alexander Hope
“The Future Is Plastic: Refiguring Malabou’s Plasticity”
[in]: *Journal for Cultural Reserach*, 2014, vol. 18, no. 4, 329–49

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Grzegorz Czemieli
“Plastic Cartographies: Map and Territory
in Catherine Malabou and Ecopoetics”
[in]: *Praktyka Teoretyczna*, 2018, no. 2 (28), 30–49

Catherine Malabou in Conversation with Ewa Majewska



The Plasticity of the World: Philosophy, Neuroscience, and Feminism for the Future

Ewa Majewska: I would like to begin with a general question concerning your theory of plasticity. To readers of philosophy it is quite well known, however I believe that an introduction is in order for the more general public. Between your books *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectics* (first French edition: 1996), *The Ontology of the Accident* (first French edition: 2009), and the most recent publications on the future, Anthropocene and gender, there have been several shifts and developments. From the perspective of the

Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw exhibition *Human-Free Earth* (15.03–22.09.2019), which is part of the more extensive “Plasticity of the Planet” project, largely inspired by your theoretical work, perhaps the most important question concerns plasticity itself. I would like to ask you two questions: first of all, what is the relationship between plasticity and historicity in Hegelian dialectics?

Catherine Malabou: I have been developing my theory of plasticity over the last twenty years on four main lines of thought: first as an extension of Hegelian dialectics; second, according to the Freudian view of the psyche; third, based on the neurological notion of the plasticity of the brain; and fourth, as a vision of ecological plasticity, centered on how an organism relates to its surroundings.

Let me now explore each of these lines and show how they are intimately linked. This answer will address the first two. The term “plasticity” was introduced to the German language by Goethe, to designate the capacity to be educated and formed (in the sense of the German *Bildung*).¹ Goethe spoke of the plasticity of children, for example, to describe their suppleness, the malleability of their minds, their aptitude for learning, and their openness to the world. The term “plasticity,” implicitly referred, of course, to the standing notion of *die Plastik*, the art of sculpture. *Der Plastiker* means “sculptor.” There is, then, an immediate analogy between the art of sculpting and cultural and intellectual formation. “Plasticity” has two main meanings: the ability to bestow form on a material (like the sculptor once again, or the plastic surgeon), and the ability to be formed, to receive the form, like clay, or the mind.

Hegel made the first philosophical use of this concept to designate the mode of being of a subject. The individual subject, in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, is said to give form to what they encounter, their experiences in general, and to receive their own form from these experiences as well. It is thus a dual and reciprocal process. I translated this logical process into a temporal one, showing that the dual structure of form bestowing and form receiving was

1.

An interesting discussion of Malabou's theory and Goethe can be found in: Valeria Maggiore, “Is an Aesthetic Mind a Plastic Mind? Reflections on Goethe and Catherine Malabou,” *Aisthesis* 12, no. 1, (2019): 55–60.

the dynamic of time itself. A subject always forms the accidents that it receives and receives the predicates that it forms.

There is a third central meaning of plasticity that must be mentioned, that of an explosion, as in the word “plastic,” which is an explosive material of a putty-like consistency that can produce quite violent deflagrations when thrown on the ground.

The theory of plasticity first consists in thinking these three meanings together, in order to show that fashioning is prior to being; that an identity is always the result of a formation process, never a fixed essence; and also to show that the plasticity of identity also has limits, thresholds of resistance. If the form is too deeply damaged or deformed, it breaks.

In this regard, there is a fundamental difference between plasticity and flexibility, one which designates the capacity of a material to be bent in all sorts of ways without being destroyed or even altered by it. The second use of plasticity, borrowed from Freud, concerns the structure of the psyche, what Freud calls the “plasticity of mental life.” The psyche is compared to the city of Rome. “Let us, by flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past – an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one [...]”² This means that the psyche is composed of different layers that never disappear, but merge with one another dynamically.

Freud says that the plasticity of mental life is like the plasticity of “the body of an animal or a human being.” “Here, too,” says Freud, “we find the same thing. The earlier phases of development are in no sense still preserved; they have been absorbed into the later phases for which they have supplied the material. The embryo cannot be discovered in the adult. The thymus gland of childhood is replaced after puberty by connective tissue, but is no longer present in itself; in the marrow-bones of the grown man I can, it is true, trace the outline of the child’s bone, but it itself has disappeared, having lengthened and thickened until it has attained its definitive form.

2.

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: Hogarth Press, 1963), 7.

The fact remains that only in the mind is such a preservation of all the earlier stages alongside of the final form possible, and that we are not in a position to represent this phenomenon in pictorial terms.”³ Nothing disappears from the mind of the body, but at the same time, and paradoxically, every new form emerges from the destruction of the previous one. This simultaneity between the two meanings of plasticity – the creation of form and the destruction of form – is the main characteristic of Freud’s vision of the psyche.

Ewa Majewska: Thank you for this amazingly condensed introduction to the concept of plasticity. After this general definition, I would like to ask you about the destructive plasticity and indifference. I believe that the most common understanding of plasticity conflates this notion with “flexibility” – a mistake which you explicitly deny. Is it that, in terms of the climate catastrophe, it is predominantly the “destructive plasticity” that should interest us?

Catherine Malabou: This pivotal question of yours allows me to present the third axis of my theory of plasticity, concerning the neurological definition of brain plasticity, and my concept of destructive plasticity. Neural plasticity has an essentially positive connotation. Far from being an organ whose economy is distributed according to fixed locations and functions, the brain acts as a “global workspace” for its different areas and is subject to constant internal transformations. The discovery of the critical role of neuronal plasticity occasioned a redefinition of the brain, one that broke with innatism and Pavlovian determinism. New conceptions of aptitudes, development, and metamorphoses emerged. Plasticity means bestowing and receiving forms; the brain has emerged, after centuries of neurological obscurantism, as a system capable of being shaped through external influences (education, habits, etc.), yet capable of bestowing forms on its environment. Plasticity means creativity, suppleness, the capacity to change and to evolve. That being said, plasticity can also be destructive.

After certain kinds of brain damage, strange personalities appear. These new personalities are new forms of being, which allow me to speak of the creation of forms out of destruction. Elliot,

3.

Ibid., 19–20.

for example, described by Antonio Damasio in *Descartes' Error*, is a living patient who took damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex.⁴ His intelligence seems intact, he passes all of the tests used to assess neurological damage, and he appears quite normal, except for an unusual calm when confronted by misfortune. However, he is completely incapable of making wise decisions; in business and his personal life, he handles affairs disastrously. Obviously, pure reason, which is quite present in Elliot, is not sufficient for decision-making. When devoid of affects, subjects cannot act; their power to act is diminished here too, but this diminishing cannot be linked to sorrow or pain. The subject makes no decisions because he or she simply does not care, sees no value in acting, choosing, preferring, or judging. “We might summarize Elliot’s predicament as to know but not to feel.”⁵ “Lack of concern,” “neutrality,” “absence of emotions,” “blank facial expression”: these are other terms frequently used by Damasio to describe the brain-damaged patients.

Again, these pathological cases are presented as magnifying glasses to look at normal subjects. The potential for the emotional brain to be destroyed and then separated from the cognitive networks is present in every individual. The virtuality of this fracture, this secret rift between reason and affects, determines the contemporary psyche. The neural subject which emerges in the 21st century is a potentially disaffected individual – a non-affected subject. Devoid of any capacity for wonder.

Neurobiologists show that every psychic blow, including depression, personal crisis, or sentimental or professional failure, has consequences for the equilibrium of the emotional brain and acts like the snip of a pair of scissors in the neural networks of the frontal lobe. Indifference must be inspired for power to be wielded. It is less a matter of diminishing the subject’s *conatus* or power to act than making her unconcerned with this power itself through constant shocks or blows, which steadily increase the emotional coldness. Through lack of empathy and indifference to politics we would all potentially come to resemble the characters in Beckett’s plays.

4. Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam Publishing, 1994).
 5. *Ibid.*, 45.

Today's neurobiology is bringing to light a new way of depicting the neural psyche's exposure to power, whether political or its own power to act. A new libidinal economy is emerging. This perhaps explains why political events presently obscure their social and symbolic dimension, coming across as mere blows or shocks, which act as lesions and aim at cutting individuals off from their affective subjectivity. Political violence currently wears a mask of meaningless accidents, purely non-symbolic attacks against the symbolic, which gradually trigger the disappearance of our capacity to wonder.

Today, the catastrophic event itself is meaningless, and traumatic experience is first and always an experience of meaninglessness. It is striking to note that today's victims of sociopolitical traumas demonstrate the same profile as victims of natural catastrophes (tsunamis, earthquakes, floods) or grave accidents (serious domestic accidents, explosions, fires). We have entered a new age of political violence, in which politics is defined by renouncing hope of endowing violence with political meaning. This effacement of meaning is the new face of the social – bearing witness to an emergent, *globalized* psychic pathology that is identical in all cases and all contexts. In every case, indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity figure among the symptoms attached to post-traumatic stress. *Affective barrenness* is the trait that all these states have in common: loss of curiosity, loss of motivation, disinterest in close friends and relatives, withdrawn behavior.

Ewa Majewska: I believe that your way of building a connection between extreme damage and “everyday damage” shows how supposedly different experiences of the psyche are actually experienced in the same way. This reminds me of Freud’s observation that the symptoms presented by his “hysterical” female patients and the men who suffered military conflict traumas, also his patients, were the same. Although he tried to differentiate between them later, feminist psychiatry argues that PTSD symptoms are actually caused by both wars and domestic violence. Moving on to the next question: in the essay reprinted here, “The Brain of History, the Mentality of the Anthropocene,” you discuss

the supposed “indifference” of the Earth, geology or – in a very general sense – matter, bringing in other philosophers, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Quentin Meillassoux. In this discussion, I believe that you oppose (materialized) dialectics and their universalism and object-oriented ontology, thus undermining the separation of the mind and the world. I would like to ask you about the “mental phenomena” mentioned in the text. Neuropsychology is a key element of your theory, and, as I would not like to separate it from the discussion of the Anthropocene, this is my question: How do post-traumatic stress disorder and other transformations of the brain coincide with the Anthropocene?

Catherine Malabou: This question gives me an opportunity to develop the last axis of my theory of plasticity: ecological plasticity. Let me take a slightly different approach from my article and move toward a very important reference: Gregory Bateson’s *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. In this book, Bateson anticipates the Anthropocene and shows that the ecological crisis places us before a dilemma, which he calls, as we know, a “double bind.” Let me recall definitions of this concept. The double bind expresses Bateson’s vision of difference. He sees difference as a paradoxical concept: first, it is highly important, the basis of mental activity. He writes: I suggest to you, now, that the word “idea,” in its most elementary sense, is synonymous with “difference.”⁶ An idea is a unit of information, in fact, it is what we mean by information, the elementary unit of information is a “difference which makes a difference.”⁷ At the same time, difference is *impossible*. Bateson shows that difference is doomed to make no difference. This logic gets characterized as a principle of disorder, noise, entropy, or trauma. All distinctions, borders, or dichotomies necessarily get caught in a schizophrenic machine, known as “schismogenesis.” All differences, Bateson explains, are made of “two contrasting mechanisms,”⁸ and these mechanisms will at some point dissociate the unity, tear it, pull it in two irreconcilable directions, follow two contradictory injunctions. Obeying one necessarily implies disobeying the other.

6. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to An Ecology of Mind* (New Jersey and London: Jason Aronson Inc., Northvale, 1987), 459.

7. *Ibid.*, 276.

8. *Ibid.*, 242.

“But what is difference?” Bateson asks. “A difference is a very peculiar and obscure concept. It is certainly not a thing or an event. This piece of paper is different from the wood of this lectern. There are many differences between them – of color, texture, shape, etc. But if we start to ask about the localizations of these differences, we get into trouble. Obviously the difference between the paper and the wood is not in the paper; it is obviously not in the wood; it is obviously not in the space between them, and it is obviously not in the time between them. [...] A difference, then, is an abstract matter.”⁹ When subjected to a double bind, the subject “cannot choose the one alternative which would help him to discover what people mean; he cannot, without considerable help, discuss the message of the others. Without being able to do that, the human being is like any self-correcting system which has lost its governor; it spirals into never-ending, but always systematic, distortions.”¹⁰

The ecological crisis puts us precisely in a schizophrenic situation, having to choose, without being able to choose, between ourselves and the environment. Bateson affirms that “the unit of survival is organism plus environment,” but this “unit” engenders dissociation.¹¹ *Ecology and Schizophrenia* would be the right book to write in our day. Bateson shows that people always tend to favor one term of the unit or the other, and continues: “Let us now consider what happens, when you make the epistemological error of choosing the wrong unit, you end up with the species versus the other species around it or versus the environment in which it operates. Man against nature. You end up, in fact, with Kaneohe Bay polluted, Lake Erie a slimy green mess, and ‘Let’s build bigger atom bombs to kill off the next-door neighbors.’ There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds, and it is characteristic of the system that basic error propagates itself. [...] When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise ‘What interests me is me, or my organization, or my species,’ you chop off consideration of other loops of the loop structure. [...] You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is a part of *your* wider eco-mental system – and

9.

Ibid., 458.

10.

Ibid., 212.

11.

Ibid., 489.

that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of *your* thought and experience. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is a part of *your* wider eco-mental system.”¹²

You have to become aware that the lake, the forest, the mountains are not alien to you, but form part of your ecosystem. If you destroy them, you destroy yourself. In reverse, choosing environment over subjectivity is also a threat to the subject, as it forces the latter to reinvent itself, take on new habits, or new addictions, as I said in my article. In fact, caring for subjectivity and environment at the same time only comes at the cost of a split, and this is traumatic. I won't comment on the supposed autism of the young ecological activist, Greta Thunberg, but there would be a great deal to say about it. How come autism has become, through the agency of Thunberg, the new form of ecological consciousness? There is a lot to reflect on here.

Ewa Majewska: Following on the topic of mind and trauma, your article says that: “it is not a matter of thinking the brain ‘in’ its environment; it is a matter of seeing the brain as an environment, as a metabolic place.” This observation appears in a longer discussion of the Annales and Ferdinand Braudel’s concept of long *durée*. I thus would like to ask you whether we should perhaps replace the “indifferent” theory of the Anthropocene with a theory of the “*longue durée* of the brain”? I believe that the *Human-Free Earth* exhibition follows this scenario – the modalities of the brain, various traces and transitions of the mind, are present in the works on display, pointing to such issues as responsibility, hope, or even humor, however unexpectedly. Would you like to expand on this intersection of the *longue durée* and the brain?

Catherine Malabou: Your question touches on the Anthropocene being defined as a new geological era, a new form of *longue durée*. In my article, I show that the human has become a geological force, that is, a nonhuman and a-subjective agent. The double bind pertains to

12.

Ibid., 489–90.

this issue: How is it possible to become aware of a phenomenon that suspends awareness? When Bateson states “You [have to remember] that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is a part of *your* wider eco-mental system,” he implies that “you,” as a reflective, conscious, and responsible instance, have to become aware of the non-aware part of your self that is Lake Erie.¹³ How can one be conscious of being a lake without drowning in one’s own consciousness? How can one sustain this impossible narcissism? Such is the paradox contained in the term “Anthropocene”: because it characterizes the human being as a geological force, it necessarily also defines it as a neutral, indifferent agent, as a stone, defined only by its endless duration, which Ferdinand Braudel characterized as *longue durée*.

It is a widespread notion in global change literature that “the Anthropocene idea abolishes the break between nature and culture, between human history and the history of life and earth.”¹⁴ The problem is that, in the age of the Anthropocene, the two sides of the subject’s identity – conscious and stone-like (or lake-like) do not mirror each other, causing a rift in reflexivity. Paradoxically, ecological consciousness originates in an interruption of consciousness. The ecological mind, the “subject” of global warming, can no longer be seen as only a citizen of the world, a historical subject in the traditional sense. It is perhaps not a subject anymore, even a deconstructed one, even in the schizophrenic form of its desire.

It is worth noting that the Anthropocenic double bind lies at the heart of the most contemporary reflections on relationships between history and ecology. The positions taken by Chakrabarty and Smail can be seen as expressing two contradictory injunctions. According to the former, the Anthropocene forces us to consider the human as a *geological* agent, pure and simple. The interaction between the subject and the environment happens through the inorganic. You are LAKE ERIE. According to the latter, the interaction is *biological*, it happens through the brain, and man and nature must be seen as parts of the same neural architecture or structure. YOU are Lake Erie. The interaction happens through the nervous system.

13.

Ibid., 489–90.

14.

Christophe Bonneuil, Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene* (London: Verso, 2016), 19.

The two historians' shared point of departure is the necessity, first of all, of rejecting the concept that history proper starts at a certain point in time – *after* prehistory. That is, after the epoch to which history is supposed to have put a gradual end, mere biological evolution. In opposition to this concept of prehistory, we must state that history commences as, and with, *deep history*. Between deep history and recorded history there is no intermediary zone, such as prehistory; recorded history would be an extension of deep history, involving the same intertwining of nature and culture, what Bateson very rightly calls the *eco-mental*. But the stress, again, and such is the double bind, can be put on “Eco” or on “Mental.” Now, this can be seen in two ways:

ECO: You are *Lake Erie*. According to Chakrabarty, deep history starts well before the emergence of life on earth. Therefore, the interaction between biology and history is not an accurate starting point. The Anthropocene places at the heart of its name – and of our consciousness – a “naturalness,” that is, a non-conscious dimension of ourselves. This “naturalness” cannot be biological, the status of the human as a living being. Again, in an age of global warming, the Anthropocene man has become a *geological, telluric* force, and “the reality of human-induced climate change” challenges the relationship between man and nature conceived as a relationship between man and his environment.¹⁵

Eco-MENTAL – You are *Lake Erie*. Smail's orientation in *On Deep History and the Brain* is clearly different.¹⁶ The point of departure has to be biological. He reminds us of the definition of deep history proposed by Edward Wilson, in his book *In Search of Nature*: “Human behaviour is seen as the product not just of recorded history, ten thousand years recent, but of deep history, the combined genetic and cultural changes that created humanity over hundreds of [thousands of] years.”¹⁷

In *The Three Ecologies*, Félix Guattari often references Bateson. I think he hopes that one day what he calls “ecosophy” will be able to reduce the double bind of schizoid desire. This ecosophy

15. Ibid., 201.

16. Daniel Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2008).

17. Edward Wilson, *In Search of Nature* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1996), ix–x.

would combine social ecology, mental ecology, and environmental ecology, and would not necessarily require consciousness. Guattari declares that “all sorts of other ways of existing have already established themselves outside of consciousness.”¹⁸ *Mental* becomes, then, a more accurate notion than *conscious*, and Guattari affirms: “For its part, mental ecosophy will lead us to reinvent the relation of the subject to the body, to phantasm, to the passage of time, to the ‘mysteries’ of life and death.”¹⁹ When caught in a double bind, we need a “metacommunicative message,” something like the possibility to communicate about communication, to escape the circle. This necessarily implies an act of creation, which in itself is metacommunicative. To create is to metaspeak, that is, to act out, to invent a point of sublation, even if non-dialectical, of the contradiction. Will we be able to find a point of escape from the schizophrenic ecological injunction? That is the question.

Ewa Majewska: The problem of epigenesis, discussed in your *Before Tomorrow*, guides us toward the question: “What is Enlightenment?” which Foucault takes from Kant. In your own work, you emphasize that “an organism forms by transforming, rather than by unfolding, then we must accept that the transcendental, too, is endowed with a certain transformability” [*Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality*]. I would thus like to ask, how should we imagine the future, and particularly, is “another Enlightenment” possible?

Catherine Malabou: At stake with “epigenetics” is the possibility of crossing contemporary biology and philosophical and textual practices in new ways. Let me start with a definition of *epigenesis*. From the Greek *epi*, which means “above,” and *genesis*, “genesis” or “constitution,” *epigenesis* refers to a mode of embryonic development through the successive addition of parts that form and are born from one another. Aristotle uses the term for the first time in *Generation of Animals*, to refer to the formation of the living individual.²⁰ Modern usage begins in 1650 with William Harvey, who,

18. Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London and New Brunswick: The Athlone Press, 2000), 35.

19. *Ibid.*, 35.

20. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck (London: Heinemann, 1943).

in his 1651 book *On the Generation of Animals*, presents *epigenesis* as characteristic of an organism whose parts are not all fashioned simultaneously, but emerge in due succession and order. The theory of growth through *epigenesis* – embryonic formation by progressively becoming more complex – is opposed to the preformationist theory, which claims that the embryo is a fully-formed being, a miniature individual whose growth, which is solely quantitative, consists in the unveiling of organs and ready-made parts.

In my book, I juxtaposed this biological definition of *epigenesis* with its Kantian definition. In §27 of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant refers to the “[...] system of the *epigenesis* of pure reason.”²¹ §27 is part of the Transcendental Deduction, where Kant introduces the origin of the necessity of the agreement (*Übereinstimmung*) that connects the categories to objects of experience *a priori*. Kant claims that this agreement cannot be innate. If such were the case, we would have to consider categories to be “implanted [*eingepflanzte*] in us along with our existence.”²² But nor can the agreement come from experience and derive from an empirical source. We must therefore opt for another approach: a pure production of the categories. This is the point where Kant has recourse to an analogy: the biological process of epigenesis. Kant declares that, if correctly understood, the *a priori* agreement between categories and experience opens what amounts to “a system of *epigenesis* of pure reason [*gleichsam ein System der Epigenesis der reinen Vernunft*].”²³

Clearly Kant is referring to the epigenesis vs. preformation conflict, taking the side of the epigenetic conception of the “agreement.” Indeed, he contrasts the epigenesis with “a kind of *preformation-system* of pure reason,” which assumes the existence of a “pre-established harmony” between our cognitive structures and their objects, and defines categories as innate “subjective predispositions.” In opposition to this view, Kant claims that the relation of the categories to objects develops through self-differentiation, as do all embryos. *Epigenesis*, a concept that finally gained widespread recognition at the end of the eighteenth century, then becomes the privileged

21. Immanuel Kant, *A Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 265, B167.
 22. *Ibid.*, 265, B167, trans. modified.
 23. *Ibid.*, 265, B167.

biological figure of the spontaneity of understanding: there is *transcendental formation* of the elements of thinking. A pure *epigenesis*.

Let's now turn to the contemporary science of epigenetics. This word is a neologism created in 1940 by British biologist Conrad Waddington, which derives from epigenesis. The noun "epigenetics" refers to the branch of molecular biology that studies the relations between genes and the individual features they produce, that is, the relation between genotype and phenotype (the individual biological organism). The adjective "epigenetic" refers, then, to everything to do with this interaction, and the genetic code's mechanisms of expression and transcription. These mechanisms largely determine the activation or inhibition of genes in the process of constituting the phenotype.

Epigenetics is currently becoming a prominent field, which may even supplant the importance of genetics. On 15 February 2001, the American scientific journal *Nature* published a virtually complete sequence of the three billion bases of this genome.²⁴ The result was surprising: the human genome is made up of only 30,000 genes, just 13,000 more than the *drosophila*.²⁵ Furthermore, it appears that genes make up only 5% of the genome. Assembled in bunches and clusters, they are separated by vast expanses of "gene deserts," made up of DNA called "junk" or "repetitive," that is, non-coding. According to studies, this "non-coding" DNA accounts for a quarter or a third of the totality of the genome. This means that within chromosomes there are long DNA sequences which, to our current understanding, do not appear to match the genes and cannot be given any particular function. "The human genome hides "vast deserts."²⁶ The sequencing of the genome did not, therefore, offer the expected revelations. In his book, eloquently entitled *La Fin du "tout génétique"?* French biologist Henri Atlan notes the challenge to the "genetic paradigm." He writes: "The idea that "everything is genetic" is starting to be seriously unsettled."²⁷ We have entered the biological "post-genomic" era.²⁸

24. *Nature, International Weekly Journal of Science*, February 2001, accessed September 8, 2019, <https://www.nature.com/articles/35057062>. Commonly known as "fruit flies."

25. Cf. "Les révélations de l'exploration du génome humain", *Le Monde*, February 13, 2001, accessed October 15, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2001/02/12/les-revelations-de-l-8217-exploration-du-genome-humain_146606_1819218.html.

27. Henri Atlan, *La Fin du "tout génétique"?* *Vers de nouveaux paradigmes en biologie* (Versailles: Editions Inra, 1999), 16.

An important element in epigenetic factors derives from the environment, the outside and, as we shall see with brain epigenesis, learning, habit, in a word, experience. The definition of phenotypical malleability proposed by the American biologist Mary-Jane West-Eberhard is eloquent in this respect. She says that it is a matter of the “ability of an organism to react to an environmental input with a change in form, state, movement, or rate of activity.”²⁹ The idea of such an epigenetic process is transcendental, biological, and hermeneutical all at once. I believe that one of the main tasks for critical theory and continental philosophy today is to inscribe the resources provided by current cellular, molecular, and neurobiology within their own fields. We are witnessing the birth of the epigenetic paradigm, which, again, is not only pregnant with significance in biology, but is also an invaluable resource for the humanities.

This echoes Foucault’s reflection on the concept of “critique” in his important 1984 text, “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault recalls that, in its institutional role, critique has always been associated with the humanities. His “What is Enlightenment?” echoes Kant’s piece of the same title, which appeared two hundred years earlier, in 1784. The German periodical *Berlinische Monatschrift* organized a competition that year, inviting readers to explain “What is Enlightenment? [*Was ist Aufklärung?*].” As the winner of the competition, Kant’s response essentially reflected on relations between philosophical thought and current events. Foucault agrees that it is in the light of this questioning of the present and contemporaneity that the need for “critique” presents itself in its full, practical urgency. Indeed, Foucault explains that thinking in the present entails knowing how to situate thought *at the limit*. Critique “consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits.”³⁰ And to reflect on limits means, first and foremost, to “move beyond the outside-inside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers.”³¹

28. “Post-genomic” biology assumes an interdisciplinary approach that expands the field of molecular biology in order to study element systems (DNA, proteins, supramolecular structures, small molecules) interacting with each other.
 29. Mary-Jane West-Eberhard, *Developmental Plasticity and Evolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 34.
 30. Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 45.
 31. *Ibid.*, 45.

The problem is shaped no differently today, even if its content has changed. In fact, the negotiation of frontiers now concerns the relation of the humanities to the new “outside” of neuroscience and “neuro-knowledge” in general. In an era of collective intelligence and cyberculture, there is a renewed dialogue between the humanities and the sciences based on the central possibility of a *biologization of the transcendental*.

The implicit stakes of this question have guided my analysis throughout. With Piaget, for example, we saw that the idea of a biological transcendental was perhaps one of the most acceptable definitions of intelligence, situating it midway between logic and the organic. To what extent can this type of question be philosophically reframed today to become a means of critical reflection on critique?

The question of the transcendental runs through and structures all of Foucault’s text. The contemporary hypothesis of a biologization of the transcendental extends and radicalizes his analysis. There is only one point on which Foucault disagrees with Kant. Yet their difference of opinion is fundamental. For Kant, the critical examination of the limits of knowledge which sits at the heart of transcendental philosophy also implies respecting these limits. It is precisely this idea of limits to be respected that Foucault challenges: “If the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing, it seems to me that the critical question today has to be turned back into a positive one [...]. The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression.”³² He continues, “[Critique] is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying.”³³ In other words, it is no longer a matter of determining the restrictions that finitude imposes on knowledge, but rather of seeing how this same finitude authorizes the subject to shape and form themselves as such,

32.

Ibid., 45.

33.

Ibid., 45–6.

accomplishing “this work at the limits of ourselves.”³⁴ The transcendental inquiry thus becomes an interrogation of the subject becoming the subject, thereby initiating a new ontology that Foucault calls “a historical ontology of ourselves.”³⁵ In fact, the hypothesis of a biologization of the transcendental heightens this paradoxically experimental dimension of the *a priori*, which was also brought to light by Piaget. Today, the shaping of the subject by itself may be seen as related to an *epigenetic ontology*, evoking an urgent need for new reflection on the development of intelligence at the center of the critical enterprise. If what Foucault claims is true, that is, that the new critique must interrogate “what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints,”³⁶ then we can rightly claim that the plastic contingency of the structures of knowledge, thought, and creation is the contemporary translation of just such an interrogation.

Ewa Majewska: Thank you for the great explanation of how the limits of knowledge become an element of the transition toward plasticity as well. To close this conversation, I would like to ask you about gender and our prospects for the future. In an exchange with Judith Butler, you both argue for an understanding of the Hegelian “subject” as embodied. It is thus also gendered. In another interview (with Noëlle Vahanian) you explain that you have experienced discrimination in multiple ways.³⁷ My last question is therefore about the future, and equality: How do you envision emancipation?

Catherine Malabou: I am now working on a new project, one that offers a critique of domination. I say domination, not mastery, authority, or power. Mastery, authority, power, and principle, are ambivalent terms, to the extent that they all possess both a positive and a negative value. “Power,” Foucault says, “is not necessarily a bad thing.” For example, he continues, when it comes to mastery, or authority: “I see nothing wrong in the practice of a person who, knowing more

34. Ibid., 46.
35. Ibid., 45.
36. Ibid., 45.
37. Noëlle Vahanian, “A Conversation with Catherine Malabou,” *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* no. 9.1 (Winter 2008): 1–13. Online: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/09.1/Malabou.pdf>, accessed October 14, 2019.

than others in a specific game of truth, tells those others what to do, teaches them, and transmits knowledge and techniques to them.”³⁸ In the same way, holding to one’s principles can just mean being faithful to oneself. The concept of “domination,” in turn, clearly lacks this ambivalence, and blurs the distinction between use and abuse of power.³⁹ Domination is synonymous with subjugation, subordination, and alienation. This is why Max Weber, for example, stopped using “domination” (*Herrschaft*) to designate the political constitution, in the Greek sense of *politeia*, and used “power” instead, reserving “domination” for abusive and violent economies of power.

To justify further the choice of the term “domination,” let me add that it has become commonplace to contrast exploitation and domination. To insist upon domination does not amount to denying economic exploitation. This is not to dismiss the critique of capitalism, it is to recognize that there exists a specific problem of power that exists on its own. The specific problem of power is domination. It is not only economic, not only political, but also domestic, institutional, academic, and/or psychic. It involves a love for one’s master. As we know, psychoanalysis offers a method for confronting and working through certain issues important to anarchism, such as the sexual mechanisms of submission to and acceptance of authority, the attraction to death, or the psychological mechanisms of state power.

The great anarchist activist Emma Goldman complained that most radicals, and radical feminists in particular, only paid attention to the “external tyrannies” while the “internal tyrants,” operating in small circles, even in one-to-one relationships, remained unexamined and undefeated. In *The Tragedy of Woman’s Emancipation*, she declared: “The explanation of such inconsistency on the part of many advanced women is to be found in the fact that they never truly understood the meaning of emancipation. They thought that all that was needed was independence from external tyrannies; the internal tyrants, far more harmful to life and growth – ethical and social conventions – were left to take care of themselves; and they have taken care of themselves. They seem to get along as beautifully in the heads

38. Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *The Essential Foucault, Selections From Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nicholas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003), 40.

39. All meanings of domination.

and hearts of the most active exponents of woman's emancipation, as in the heads and hearts of our grandmothers."⁴⁰

We can, of course, enlarge the scope of this beautiful declaration to all situations of domination. As a counterpart to Goldman, and to take another example, let me quote an interview with the American anthropologist David Graeber: "In academia there is a hierarchy, and you're supposed to be scared [...]. If you give people complete impunity and power over others, it creates a psychological dynamics which is almost sado-masochistic. [...] I think there are forms of authority that are legitimate, but you don't worship authority as a thing in itself. For example I like the notion of self-subverting authority. I think that there are forms of authority that undermine their own bases. And I think those are very good. Like a teacher. If you are a teacher and teach someone very well, you know when they know what they should know, and there are no further bases for authority. If you are a doctor and you cure someone, you no longer have reasons to have authority on that person."⁴¹ Domination, or illegitimate authority happens, he adds, when one person is constantly subordinate, and becomes a prisoner of such a situation. The notion of self-subverting authority, of self-subverting domination, in my vocabulary, is central here. Domination can be challenged, fought, even overthrown, by external forces, but it also possesses, at its core, an internal line of fracture, a crack that allows for its self-subversion. "But where is and what is the limit between legitimate and illegitimate authority? Between power and domination? When exactly is the frontier transgressed? When exactly should a teacher and a student say good bye to each other? When should a doctor cease to enjoy the symbolic power it has over a patient once cured? When and how is it possible to let go and renounce one's own authority when it is turning into something else? All these issues refer as I said to both an external and an internal limit, and the relationships between both, as well as the meaning of 'self' in '(self)subverting' constitute a major difficulty and an essential element of my study."⁴²

40. Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*, in Emma Goldman, *Collected Works* (New York & London: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1911), 229.
 41. Breana Pagac, *A Conversation With Anarchist David Graeber*, June 2, 2019, accessed October 11, 2019, <https://untelevised.org/a-conversation-with-anarchist-david-graeber/>.
 42. Ibid.

The empirical, factual point of departure of the present reflection is the fact that we are currently witnessing the emergence of (at least) two global phenomena: first, the multiplication of extreme forms of political domination, neo-fascist government in Brazil, various far-right governments or parties in Europe, the rise of white supremacy in the United States (let's remember how it was on display in Charlottesville in August 2017 and at other rallies across the country), the eruption of neo-Nazism in Germany, Ukraine and elsewhere. Second, the birth of movements like #metoo, which challenge internal tyrants and more individual types of domination. For many women around the world, #metoo marked a new turn in feminism, and perhaps a new turn in the rejection of power abuse in general. A female professor, as we know, has recently been accused of sexual harassment and abuse of power toward one of her students, a case that rendered manifest the intricacy of private and public spaces and blurred the frontiers between politics and domesticity, so to speak.

The time has come to philosophically question anew the fluid limits that separate moderation and excess, to determine the structures of domination today, and examine the possibility of its self-subversion, which implies determining the internal point of reversibility that inhabits all forms of domination. This is the state of my reflections at present.

Ewa Majewska: Catherine, thank you very much for your time, for your generous answers and for providing us with a theory which does not hesitate to address the contemporary crisis.

Catherine Malabou

The Brain of History, Or, the Mentality of the Anthropocene

The present essay is a response to the highly challenging topic on which Ian Baucomb and Matthew Omelski asked me to elaborate: “For your contribution,” they wrote, “we would be particularly interested in an essay that investigates the intersection of philosophy and neuroscience as it relates to climate change.”¹ After some time, I decided to explore the link between the current constitution of the brain as the new subject of history, and the type of awareness demanded by the Anthropocene.

An immediate answer to Baucomb and Omelski’s challenge would have been the exploration of the relationship between the brain and the “environment.” It is of course a widespread idea in global change literature that “the Anthropocene idea abolishes the break between nature and culture, between human history and the history of life and earth,”² that is, also between “environment and society.”³ The blurring of these frontiers, of course, necessitates we study the profound

1. Pers. comm., October 2015.

2. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2016), 19.

3. *Ibid.*, 37.

interaction between the sociological and the ecological, and to see them as parts of the same metabolism. I believe this notion of “interaction” needs closer analysis, however, and requires a preliminary analysis of the specific concept of history in which it currently takes place.

If the Anthropocene has acquired the status of a true geological epoch, it is obvious that this epoch will determine historical representation, as well as the social and political meaning of the events occurring in it. In other words, this new geological era will not and cannot have the neutrality and a-subjectivity characteristic of geological eras in general.

The Anthropocene situates the human being between nature and history. On the one hand, it is still, of course, the subject of its own history, responsible, and conscious. Consciousness of history, or “historicity,” is not separable from history itself. It entails memory, capacity to change, and, indeed, responsibility. On the other hand, the human of the Anthropocene, defined as a geological force, must be as neutral and indifferent as geological reality itself. The two sides of this new identity cannot mirror each other, which causes a break in reflexivity.

An awareness of the Anthropocene then originates in an interruption of consciousness. Such is the problem. I intend to ask whether such an interruption opens a space for substituting the brain for consciousness. I will proceed to juxtapose two points of view on this issue. According to the first, the Anthropocene forces us to consider the human as a geological agent, pure and simple. Such is Dipesh Chakrabarty’s position. I will be making reference to his two now famous articles.⁴ According to the second, understanding the Anthropocene necessarily leads to conferring a central role upon the brain, and thus to biology. This approach is Daniel Smail’s, as developed in *On Deep History and the Brain*.⁵ I will show how these two approaches may be seen as complementary, and will introduce in the debate, as an intermediary term and under a new form, some important and unjustly

4. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”, *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 1–18.

5. Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

forgotten elements brought to light by prominent French historians from the *Écoles des Annales*, such as “mentality,” and “slow” or “long term” temporality.

Chakrabarty rejects a metaphorical understanding of the “geological.” If the human has become a geological form, there has to exist at a some level an isomorphy, or structural sameness, between humanity and geology. This isomorphy is what emerges – at least in the form of a question – when consciousness gets interrupted by this fact. Human subjectivity, when geologized, so to speak, is broken into at least two parts, revealing the split between an agent endowed with free will and the capacity to self-reflect, and a neutral inorganic power, which paralyzes the energy of the former. Once again, we are not facing a dichotomy between the historical and the biological, we are not dealing with the relationship between man understood as a living being, and man understood as a subject.

Man cannot *appear* to itself as a geological force, because being a geological force is a mode of disappearance. Therefore, the becoming force of the human is beyond any phenomenology, and has no ontological status. Human subjectivity is, in a sense, reduced to atoms without any atomic intention, and has become structurally alien, by want of reflexivity, to its own apocalypse.



A major point Chakrabarty and Smail share is the necessity to consider that history does not start with recorded history, but has to be envisaged as deep history. Chakrabarty declares: “species thinking [...] is connected to the enterprise of deep history.”⁶ Let us recall the definition of deep history proposed by Edward Wilson, to whom both Chakrabarty and Smail refer: “Human behavior is seen as the product not just of recorded history, ten thousand years recent, but of deep history, the combined genetic and cultural changes that created humanity over hundreds of [thousands of] years.”⁷

According to Chakrabarty, however, the biological “deep past” is certainly not deep enough. In that sense, a “neurohistorical”

6. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 213.

7. Edward Wilson, *In Search of Nature* (Washington DC: Island Press, 1996), ix–x.

approach to the Anthropocene remains insufficient. Neurocentrism is just a version of anthropocentrism. Focusing on the biological alone, Smail would miss the geological dimension of the human: “Smail’s book pursues possible connections between biology and culture – between the history of the human brain and cultural history, in particular – while being always sensitive to the limits of biological reasoning. But it is the history of human biology and not any recent theses about the newly acquired geological agency of humans that concerns Smail.”⁸ The recent human status as a geological agent paradoxically draws the historian back to a very ancient past, a time when the human itself did not exist. A time that thus has to predate “prehistory.”

One will argue at once that Smail’s book is undertaking a deconstruction of the concept of prehistory. Clearly, he sees the notion of deep history as the result of such a deconstruction. Deep history substitutes itself for prehistory. According to the usual view, history starts with the rise of a civilization and departs from a “buffer zone” between biological evolution and history proper – this buffer zone is what is called prehistory. If history must be understood, as Wilson suggests, as the originary intimate interaction between the genetic and the cultural, it begins with the onset of hominization, and does not require a “pre-zone.”⁹

Smail’s approach is clearly epigenetic, precluding the assimilation of “hominization” with the history of consciousness. Epigenetics is a branch of molecular biology that studies the mechanisms which modify the function of genes by activating or deactivating them without altering the DNA sequence in the formation of the phenotype. Epigenetic modifications depend on two types of causes: internal and structural on the one hand, and environmental on the other. Firstly, they involve physical and chemical mechanisms (RNA, nucleosome, methylation). Secondly, epigenetics also supply genetic material with a means of reacting to the evolution of environmental conditions. The definition of phenotypical malleability

8.

Chakrabarty, “Climate of History,” 206.

9.

Smail, *On Deep History*.

proposed by American biologist Mary-Jane West-Eberhard is eloquent in this respect: it is a matter of the “ability of an organism to react to an environmental input with a change in form, state, movement, or rate of activity.”¹⁰ Contemporary epigenetics reintroduces the development of the individual into the heart of evolution, opening a new theoretical space called “evo-devo” – “evolutionary developmental biology.”

In *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement*, Lambros Malafouris shows how epigenetics has modified the usual view of cognitive development, making cognitive archaeology a major field in historical studies. “Cognitive development,” he writes, “is explained as the emergent product of these constraints [from genes and the individual cell to the physical and social environment]. In this context, the view of brain and cognitive development known as probabilistic epigenesis [...], which emphasizes the interactions between experience and gene expression [...], is of special interest. The unidirectional formula (prevalent in molecular biology) by which genes drive and determine behavior is replaced with a new scheme that explicitly recognizes the bidirectionality of influences between the genetic, behavioral, environmental, and socio-cultural levels of analysis.”¹¹

This new scheme, as Malafouris brilliantly shows, requires a materialist approach to the interaction between the biological and the cultural. Hence the subtitle of the book: “A Theory of Material Engagement.” The epigenetic crossing and interaction in question take place through things, through matter, that is, also through the inorganic. It is a “non-representative” vision of interaction which requires no subject-object relationship, no mind seeing in advance what has to be made or fabricated. Mind, brain, behavior and the created object happen together, are part of the same process. “The cognitive life of things is not exhausted by their possible causal role in shaping some aspect of human intelligent behavior; the cognitive life of things also embodies a crucial enactive and

10. Mary-Jane West-Eberhard, *Developmental Plasticity and Evolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 34.

11. Lambros Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind, A Theory of Material Engagement* (Boston: MIT Press, 2013), 40.

constitutive role.”¹² Therefore, to explore the relationships between the brain and its “environment” is a much wider and deeper task than studying the role of the “human” in its “milieu,” as it lays the foundation for an essential part of a non-human materiality, and cannot be limited to a biological kind of inquiry. Thus ecology comes to acquire a new meaning: “this new ecology cannot be reduced to any of its constitutive elements (biological or artificial) and thus cannot be for by looking at the isolated properties of persons of things. The challenge for archaeology, in this respect, is to reveal and articulate the variety of forms that cognitive extension can take and the diversity of feedback relationships between objects and the embodied brain as they become realized in different periods and cultural settings [...]”¹³

Malafouris argues that this ecology should be understood as a result of the “embedment” of the human brain. “The term ‘embedment,’” Malafouris writes, “derives from the fusion of the terms ‘embodiment’ – referring to the intrinsic relationship between brain and body – and ‘embeddedness’ – describing the intrinsic relationship between brain/body and environment.”¹⁴

To conclude this point and return to our initial discussion, we can see that Smail’s and Malafouris’ approaches to the brain/environment relationship are not “strictly” biological, but include, as a central element, the inorganic materiality of things. As Smail declares: “The great historical disciplines, including geology, evolutionary biology and ethology, archaeology, historical linguistics and cosmology, all rely on evidence that has been extracted from things. Lumps of rocks, fossils, mitochondrial DNA, isotopes, behavioral patterns, potsherds, phonemes: all these things encode information about the past.”¹⁵ Further: “History would be something that happens to people rather than something that people make.”¹⁶

12. Ibid., 44.
 13. Malafouris, *How Things Shape*, 82.
 14. Lambros Malafouris, “Metaplasticity and the Human Becoming: Principles of Neuroarcheology,” *Journal of Anthropological Science* 88 (2010): 52.
 15. Smail, *On Deep History*, 57.
 16. Ibid., 57.

Deep history, conjoined with an archaeology of the mind, or “neuroarchaeology,” would then extend the limits of the “brain” well beyond reflexivity and consciousness, well beyond “historicity” as well. Being archaeological, the brain/environment relationship is also geological.



It remains clear, however, that Chakrabarty would not be entirely convinced by such an argument. Even if non-anthropocentric, even if thing- and inorganic matter-oriented, even if at its core a neutral, a reflexive, non-representative type of interaction as well as a cognitive assemblage, the conjoined point of view of deep history and archaeology of the mind still takes the “human” as a point of departure, or at least the “living being” and the process of hominization inseparable from the evolutionary perspective. Chakrabarty’s perspective is quite close to that of French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux in *After Finitude*. Meillassoux argues for a “non-correlationist” approach to the “real” that would in no way set a foundation for a subject-object relationship, and would reject the presence of the human on earth as its point of departure. There exists a mode of exploration of the (extremely) deep past that does not even consider the emergence of life as such as a “beginning.” Deep past then become an “ancestrality” devoid of “ancestors”: “I will call ‘ancestral,’” Meillassoux writes, “any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species – or even anterior to any recognized form of life on earth.”¹⁷ The archive, here, is not the object, not even the thing or the fossil, but what Meillassoux calls the arche-fossil: “I will call ‘arche-fossil’ or ‘fossil-matter’ not just materials indicating the traces of past life, according to the familiar sense of the term ‘fossil,’ but materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life. An arche-fossil thus designates the material support on the basis of which the experiments that yield estimates of ancestral phenomena proceed – for example an isotope whose rate of radioactive decay we know, or the luminous emission of a star that informs us of the date of its formation.”¹⁸ The world Meillassoux describes is the Earth as totally indifferent to our existence, anterior to any form of human presence – be it neural or neutral.

17. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay On the Necessity Of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 10.
18. *Ibid.*, 10.

Again, these conclusions resonate with Chakrabarty's, who claims that the notion of "geological" in the expression "geological agent" forever remains outside human experience. "How does a social historian go about writing a human history of an uninhabited and uninhabitable vast expanse of snow and ice?" he asks, speaking of the Antarctic.¹⁹ A decorrelated subject cannot access itself as decorrelated. "We cannot ever experience ourselves as a geophysical force – though we now know that this is one of the modes of our collective existence."²⁰ Chankrabarty's analysis adds something important to Meillassoux's thesis, in that it account for the experience of the impossibility of experiencing decorrelationism. We can conceptualize it, but not experience it. "Who is the we? We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species, but never experience it as such. There could be no phenomenology of us as a species. Even if we were to emotionally identify with a word like mankind, we would not know what being a species is, for, in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species, as indeed, any life form would be. But one never experiences being a concept."²¹

At this point, a major issue appears, one that relaunches the discussion and the necessity to return to Smail's analysis. First, we can not see what a species might be outside a biological point of view. Why keep this term? Second, I do not understand why the fact of becoming a geological form ought to remain entirely conceptual, and not produce a kind of mental phenomenon. "Climate scientists' history reminds us [...] that we now also have a mode of existence in which we – collectively and as a geophysical force and in ways we cannot experience ourselves – are 'indifferent' or 'neutral' (I do not mean these as mental of experienced states) to questions of intrahuman justice."²² Before coming to the political consequences of such a statement, I would like to ask precisely why we might not be susceptible to experiencing,

19. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* (2012), 12.
 20. *Ibid.*, 12.
 21. Chakrabarty, "Climate of History," 220.
 22. Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies," 14, author's emphasis.

mentally and psychically, the indifference and neutrality that have become parts of our nature? When removed from any empiricity, or mental or psychic effects, the assumption of the human being as a geological force remains a purely abstract argument, and as such, it appears as an ontological or metaphysical structure. Like Meillasoux, Chakrabarty ends up failing to empiricize the very structure that is supposed to detranscendentalize, so to speak, the empirical. Why could or should there be any intermediary locus of experience between consciousness and suspension of consciousness?

The brain asks for recognition at this point! Is not the brain, on which Chakrabarty remains totally silent, an essential intermediary between the historical, the biological, and the geological? The site of experience we are looking for?



This brings us back to Smail and to one of the most important and interesting aspects of his analysis, the theory of addiction. Smail insists on the fact that the constant interaction between the brain and the environment is essentially based on alterations of brain-body states. The brain maintains itself in its changing environment by becoming addicted to it; here we must understand “addiction” in the proper sense, that of a “psychotropy,” a significant transformation or alteration of the psyche. These altering effects result from the action of neurotransmitters “such as testosterone and other androgens, estrogen, serotonin, dopamine, endorphins, oxytocin, prolactin, vasopressin, epinephrine and so on. [...] Produced in glands and synapses throughout the body, these chemicals facilitate or block the signals passing along neural pathways.”²³

Such chemicals, which determine emotions, feelings, and affects in general, can be modulated according to the demands of the behavioral adaption they facilitate. Adaptation, here, is two-sided. It is, of course, adaptation to the external world; but it is also the brain’s adaptation to its own modifications.

All important changes in deep history, like the passage of one age to another, have always produced new addictive processes and modulations of chemical bodily state: “A neurohistorical model offers an equally

23.

Smail, *On Deep History*, 113.

grand explanatory paradigm, proposing that some of the directions we detect in recent history have been created by ongoing experiments with new psychotropic mechanisms, which themselves evolved against the evolutionary backdrop of human neurophysiology. The Neolithic revolution between 10,000 and 5,000 years ago transformed human ecology and led to fundamental and irreversible changes in demographics, politics, societies, and economies. In this changing ecology, new mechanisms for modulating body states emerged through processes of unchecked cultural evolution.”²⁴ We have to understand that “the expansion in calories available for human consumption, the domestication of animals useful as sources of energy, the practice of sedentism, the growing density of human settlements – such were the changes characteristic of the Neolithic revolution in all parts of the world where agriculture was partially invented: Mesopotamia, Africa, China, Mesoamerica, and other sites. All these changes created, in effect, a new neurophysiological ecosystem, a field of evolutionary adaptation in which the sorts of customs and habits that generate new neural configurations or alter brain-body states could evolve in unpredictable ways.”²⁵

From this it is evident that “civilization did not bring an end to biology.”²⁶ Again, deep history reveals the profound interaction of nature and history through the mediation of the brain as both a biological and a cultural adapter. Human practices alter or affect brain-body chemistry, and in return, brain-body chemistry alters or affects human practices. Brain epigenetic power acts as a medium between its deep past and the environment.

“The mood-altering practices,” Smail declares, “behaviors, and institutions generated by human culture are what I refer to, collectively, as psychotropic mechanisms. Psychotropic is a strong word but not wholly inapt, for these mechanisms have neurochemical effects that are not all that dissimilar to those produced by the drugs normally called psychotropic or psychoactive.”²⁷ Furthermore: “Psychotropism comes in different forms: things we do that shape the moods of others; things we do ourselves; things we ingest.”²⁸

24.
25.
26.
27.
28.

Ibid., 187.
Ibid., 155.
Ibid., 155.
Smail, *On Deep History*, 161.
Ibid., 161.

Here we might distinguish between autotropic and allotropic psychotropics, that is, addictive substances and practices acting on the self, and addictive practices acting on the other, political addictive practices. Among the former are “coffee, sugar, chocolate, and tobacco,”²⁹ which first began circulating in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. “[...] All of these products have mildly addictive or mood-altering properties.”³⁰ To these alcohol and drugs would later be added.

Smail recalls that the current meaning of the term “addiction” emerged in the late 17th century. “Earlier, the word had implied the state of being bound or indebted to a person – to a lord for example, or perhaps to the devil.”³¹ This old meaning helps us understand what allotropy is. Psychotropic addictive chemical mechanisms can also be induced in subjects through excess of power and abuse of dominance. Stress, and more generally affective states of dependence, which Spinoza calls “sad passions,” are essential aspects of this psychotropy, caused in contexts of dominance. The verge between modularity and change coincides precisely with the verge between biology and politics: “humans possess relatively plastic or manipulable neural states and brain-body chemistries,” so that “moods, emotions, and predispositions inherited from the ancestral past” can be “violated, manipulated or modulated.”³²

According to Smail, autotropic and allotropic addictive processes automatically mark the point of indiscernability between biology (chemical substances and mechanisms) and culture (being-in-the-world). We again find the idea that the brain is the mediator between the two dimensions of (deep) history, natural and historical.

How can we extend these remarks to the current situation? First, they lead us to admit that only new addictions will help us to lessen the effects of climate change (eating differently, traveling differently, dressing differently...). Addictive processes have for a great part caused the Anthropocene, and only new addictions will be able to help counter them. Second, they force us to elaborate a renewed concept of the

29.

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31.

32.

Ibid., 179.

Ibid., 179.

Ibid., 183.

Ibid., 117.

addicted subject, of suspended consciousness and intermittent freedom. Third, they allow us to argue that the neutrality Chakrabarty mentions is not conceivable outside a new psychotropy, a mental and psychic experience of the disaffection of experience. This psychotropy would fill the gap between the transcendental structure of the geological dimension of the human and the practical disaffection of historical reflexivity. The man of the Anthropocene cannot but become addicted to its own indifference, to the concept it has become. And that happens in the brain.

The motif of narcolepsy of the consciousness as both cause and effect of the technological destruction of nature has previously been interestingly and importantly suggested by Marshall McLuhan. His analyses seem to fit the framework of the current ecological crisis perfectly. He sees technological development as coinciding with an extension of the nervous system to the very limits of the world: “After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies,” he writes, “the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.”³³ The extension of the nervous system to the world has a double, contradictory effect, it acts as a painkiller (a “counter-irritant”) to the extent that it suppresses all alterity; at the same time, and for the same reason, it has a destructive power. Such is the structure of our “narcotic culture.” Every technological device is an extension of the brain and the organism. McLuhan characterizes this extension as a process of “auto-amputation” that helps lower pressure and creates anxiety, thus putting to work an economy of pleasure as “numbness.”

One might argue that the world McLuhan describes, the world in which the nervous system extends its frontiers, is an image, a reflecting surface, whereas the split Chakrabarty analyzes as the separation

33.

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 52.

between the human as a historical agent and the human as a geological force addresses two heterogeneous entities that cannot reflect each other at all. Nevertheless, if we look closely what McLuhan says about mirroring, narcissism, and the projection of one's own image, we find he sees this reflection as immediately suspended by a spontaneous petrification, indeed, a geologization of both the gaze and the image. On the myth of Narcissus, McLuhan writes: "As counter-irritant, the image produces a generalized numbness or shock that declines recognition. Self-amputation forbids self-recognition."³⁴

Indifference and neutrality, once again, can be mental phenomena, even when their manifestations seem totally alien to any mental or internalizing structure. Again, I do not think that the neutralization of consciousness through its "geologization" can occur without the intermediary of brain processes resulting from its interaction with the world. As I have tried to show elsewhere, indifference has become the current global "Stimmung."³⁵

This interruption of consciousness or awareness, this indifference, directly challenges the concept of responsibility, which is, of course, central to our debate. How can we feel genuinely responsible for what we have done to the earth if this deed is the result of responsibility itself being in an addicted and addictive slumber? It seems impossible to produce a genuine awareness of addiction (awareness of addiction is always an addicted form of awareness). Only new addictions can help break old ones. Ecology has to be a new libidinal economy.

Here are some of the issues that political discourse on climate change, conferences like the COP, which recently took place in Paris, do not genuinely take into account, in that the official ecological discourse, when it exists and is held by politicians who are not necessarily ecologists, is still a discourse of awareness, "historicity," and responsibility. This, of course, does not mean that human beings are not responsible for global warming. The anti-global-warming movements themselves, of course, have their share of responsibility in

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35.

Ibid., 53.

Catherine Malabou, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham, 2012).

global warming. Ignoring it is an indirect way of aggravating it. Nevertheless, the type of responsibility required by the Anthropocene is extremely paradoxical and demanding, in that it implies the acknowledgment of an essential paralysis of responsibility.

Chakrabarty would no doubt argue that these last developments remain caught in a correlationist frame. They would still be human, all too human. Don't they set aside the issue of nature as such, only taking into account humanity's techno-scientific power and its psychotropic causes and consequences?

"The traditional concept of history," Chakrabarty writes, "implies a disavowal of the fact that nature can have a history. It presupposes a strict border between pure contingent facts (natural ones) and events understood as acts of agents. Croce, for example, claims that 'there is no world but the human world'.³⁶ French historian Fernand Braudel, in *The Mediterranean*, rebelled against such a vision by considering the specific temporality of the natural Mediterranean environment, the soil, the biosphere, etc. Nevertheless, this time of nature is still seen as purely repetitive and mechanical, devoid of agency or power, it "is a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles."³⁷ This contention is no longer sustainable, because the age of the Anthropocene teaches something already widespread in the "literature of global warming": "the overall environment can sometimes reach a tipping point at which this slow and apparently timeless backdrop for human actions transforms itself with a speed that can only spell disaster for human beings."³⁸



How can we answer this? It is obvious that Braudel has not addressed or even perceived the historicity of nature, its mutability and ability to transform itself. In the Mediterranean and the ancient world,³⁹ the climate analysis is poor indeed, as Braudel does not say a word, or at

36.
37.
38.
39.

Chakrabarty, "Climate of History," 203.
Ibid., 204.
Ibid., 205.
Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Ancient World*, trans. Sian Reynolds (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

least nothing significant, about ecology. As such, Chakrabarty is right to challenge the cyclical vision that still governs Braudel's notion of nature's time and space. Yet it strikes me that Chakrabarty does not acknowledge how helpful Braudel can be for our discussion. It is true that what Braudel calls "geohistorical time," archaic natural time, does not change. The "very long term," made of thousands of years, the geological time proper, seems devoid of the capacity to transform itself. But it is striking to note that the two other levels Braudel distinguishes, economic and social time (middle term duration) and the event (short term temporality), are also contaminated by the first level's immobility. And here is what interests us. Braudel perhaps failed to take into account the historical force of nature, but he certainly very early and accurately perceived the irrevocable naturalization of human history, that is, of economic, political, and social time. He described the narcolepsy of historical temporality better than anyone else, to the extent that he was accused of depoliticizing it.

Deconstructing the privilege of the event, Braudel showed that a geological principal, that of a blind slowing force, was operating at all layers of time. This led him to anticipate something from the current situation, in that he announced that historical consciousness had to acknowledge its own naturalization and suspension by entering the reign of immobility. Thus, what Chakrabarty sees as a result (the human transformed into a geological force because of climate change and entry into the Anthropocene), Braudel saw as a beginning (history has always been slowed down, preparing itself for its own neutralization by nature). His thoughts on capitalism are extremely interesting in this respect. He argued that material life progresses by means of "slow evolutions." Advances occur "very slowly over long periods by the initiative or groups of men, not individuals [...], and in countless and obscure ways."⁴⁰ Great technical revolutions infiltrate society "slowly and with difficulty... to speak of revolution here is to use a figure of speech. Nothing took place at breakneck speed."⁴¹

40.

Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life 1400–1800*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 258.

41.

Ibid., 442.

One might object again that long-term temporality presupposes an essential passivity and unchangeability of nature, that it can not account for nature suddenly asserting itself as an actor in history, as we are currently witnessing with the Anthropocene. This is true. But the problem, as we have seen all along, is that approaching nature as a historical force paradoxically leads us to slow down, to face a suspension of consciousness, the numbness and slumber of our responsibility. It is, in a sense, like exchanging roles, nature becoming historical and the *anthropos* becoming natural. This exchange is a new human experience, and this Braudel helps us to conceptualize.

The third generation of the Annales School in France – Marc Ferro, Jacques Le Goff, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie – again increased the part played by very long-term temporality. As one of them has declared: “Time is fully human, and yet, it is as motionless as geographic evolution.”⁴² Braudel’s work was extended by the introduction of an important concept that emerged at the time in historical science, that of “mentality,” which is closer to the psychological than it is to the intellectual. Taking into account slow time, long-term time, gave way to a “history of mentalities” (*histoire des mentalités*). Based on “material culture,” that is, the similarities between the mind’s rhythms and natural cycles, the history of mentalities provided its readers with descriptions and analyses of uses, repetitions, habits, and representations. Philippe Aries declared that the history of mentalities situated itself “at the crossroads between the biological and the social.”⁴³

As we already mentioned, this crossroads does not mean that the biological must be taken as a point of departure, or that the human as a living being should be the origin of historical research. The history of mentality also includes, as an essential dimension, the materiality of inorganic nature, the soil, the rocks, the mountains, the rivers, the Earth. A mentality is a hybrid concept that comprehends not only the psychic and the social, but also the originary likeness of

42. François Dosse, *L'Histoire en miettes, Des Annales à la nouvelle histoire* (Paris: La Découverte, 1987), 165.

43. Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death over the Last One Thousand Years*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Vintage Books, 1982); Dosse, *L'Histoire en miettes*, 198.

the mind and the fossil, the inscription of naturalness in thoughts and behaviors. Mentality, in this sense, is rooted in the brain, not in the consciousness. “The human reduced to its ‘mental’ is the object, rather than the subject of its own history (*l’homme réduit à son mental est objet de son histoire plutôt que sujet*).”⁴⁴ Jean Delumeau, author of the important *La Peur en occident*, plays with the multiple senses of “natural” when he writes: “Fear is natural.”⁴⁵ As a consequence of all these analyses, we may consider the history of mentalities to be the first form of environmental studies in France. Could it be that a new form of histories of mentalities, bringing together the geological, biological, and cultural current dimensions of historical (un)awareness, may open a new chapter of these studies?



What seems challengeable to me in Chakrabarty’s work is his claim of the impossibility of phenomenizing the geological becoming of the human. This “species” the human has become remains a pure void as a concept until it can be filled with intuition, that is, with an empirical and sensuous content, if not with awareness. A renewed and re-examined concept of mentality might help us provide the missing content of this form. There must exist a mental effect of the numbness and paralysis of consciousness, of the new narcoleptic structure of humanity’s (impossible) reflection on itself. We have seen with Smail and McLuhan, this mental effect was originally a neural one. Again, it is not a matter of thinking the brain “in” its environment, but of seeing the brain as an environment, as a metabolic place. Therefore, I prefer the term “mental” to “neural,” as the former immediately evokes the merging and mingling of different registers of materialities. In getting used to the new condition of the human as a geological agent, we will, of course, require a new mentality, new addictions, new bodily adaptations to an inorganic and earthly corporeity, a new natural history. Yet a history, nevertheless.

Reading Braudel and his followers helps us perceive that the narcolepsy of consciousness constitutes an irreducible dimension of history. Long-term temporality, immobility, and

44.

45.

Dosse, *L’Histoire en miettes*, 206.

Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th–18th Centuries*, trans. Eric Nicholson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990); Dosse, *L’Histoire en miettes*, 206.

very slow evolution show us that deep history has always been inscribed at the heart of history, as this numbness of time and action that subjects cultural evolution to a geophysical rhythm. Braudel may not be a thinker of climate change, but he is a great theoretician of a new form of Marxism that binds the critique of capital to a study of the irreducible naturalness, neutrality and passivity of time. The critique addressed to the historians of long-term duration and mentalities were about the same as the ones currently addressed to Chakrabarty, all pointing, in both cases, at a supposed depoliticization of history. François Dosse wrote that, with the *École des Annales*, in the end, “history ha[d] negated itself.” He wished that “the event” might come back in order to wake up time from its geological slumber⁴⁶... He could not foresee that, with the Anthropocene, long-term temporality would acquire the status of an event that would free attempts at thinking ecology and politics differently.

46.

Dosse, *L'Histoire en miettes*, 258.

Alexander Hope

The Future Is Plastic: Refiguring Malabou's Plasticity

One never touches the thing itself but metaphorically. [...] This laterality is [...] that of the unconscious or of expression, which in the same movement offers and holds back all content. This laterality is difference, or depth.

Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*



I would like to dedicate this book to Jean-François Lyotard. [...] from his book *Le Différend* came the idea to oppose plasticity to what he called the 'polymorphism' of the Hegelian subject. From visiting his unforgettable exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, I discovered a new meaning of materialism, and, consequently, a new meaning to the rapport between form and matter.

Catherine Malabou, *Plasticité*

Introduction: A Plastic History

This article begins with a question taken from Catherine Malabou's article on Jean-François Lyotard's masterly *Discourse, Figure* – namely, “what is it to *see* a thought?”¹ This apparently simple question will be addressed to Malabou's own work – especially *Plasticité, What Should We Do with Our Brain?*² and *The New Wounded* – with regard to how well the figures of neurobiology and plasticity, in Malabou's elaboration, manage to make “visible” thought or thinking. Before attempting such a reflexive reading, however, we must work through the relationship between discourse and figure in Malabou's primary conceptual tool: plasticity.²

In *Discourse, Figure* Lyotard sets himself against Merleau-Ponty, claiming that he intends to “yield to figural space, with Cézanne and Mallarmé, with Freud and Frege.”³ The figural in Lyotard is something akin to his reworking of the classical concept of metaphor, in a manner that places “figural space” as:

no longer simply the image of presence or of representation, but form of the *mise en scène*, form of discourse itself, and, more profoundly still, phantasmatic matrix.⁴

To gloss Lyotard's very difficult treatment of the figure, for him the figure is bound up with form and laterality, a space in which there is the form of discourse itself, but not as something separate, not as representation. “One never touches the thing itself but metaphorically.”⁵ The aim of this article, then, is to examine how plasticity works as a metaphor, or rather “figure,” in Lyotard's terms, and how this conceptual tool is recursively affected by its relationship with the sensible. This question takes on additional political importance once we arrive at the realm of neurobiology and neuronal plasticity, and the links Malabou makes between these and post-Fordist capitalism. In Malabou's work there seems to be a certain

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1. Catherine Malabou, “An Eye at the Edge of Discourse,” *Communication Theory* 17 (2007), 16.
 2. Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 7.
 3. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 14.
 4. *Ibid.*, 15.
 5. *Ibid.*, 14. See issue 12 of *Parrhesia* (2011) for a more detailed examination of the importance, and contemporary relevance, of *Discourse, Figure*.

slippage between the concept and the “materiality” of brain plasticity, and we will examine this in relation to her claims that plasticity offers something beyond deconstruction and in relation to the claims for plasticity’s liberatory potential. Intriguingly, *pax* Derrida, Malabou highlights a “disaffection with the metaphor of text within the neurobiological lexicon”; however, when it comes precisely to the “metaphorical” character of philosophical or neuronal plasticity being a “better” metaphor than that of text, Malabou is strangely silent.⁶

Hegelian Plasticity

Malabou’s elaboration of plasticity comes out of her first book, an evolution of her thesis, supervised by Jacques Derrida, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*. She takes a concept, *Plastizität*, that seems peripheral to Hegel’s discourse, and attempts to use it to “grasp the whole,” initially of the Hegelian corpus, and then in an extension of the concept – as well as an elaboration of existing work in neurobiology – she “applies” the concept to the neuronal functioning of the brain. Before we reach this argument, however, we need to work through *plasticité*, *Plastizität*, or “plasticity” in its etymological and figural formulation. Malabou provides the following definition in *The Future of Hegel*:

To elaborate (*travailler*) the concept of ‘plasticity’ will, following Canguilhem’s usage, amount to ‘giving the function of a form’ to a term which itself, in its first sense, describes or *designates the act of giving form*. The English and French substantives ‘plasticity’ and *plasticité* and their German equivalent, *Plastizität*, entered the language in the eighteenth century. They joined two words already in use which had been formed from the same root: the substantive ‘plastics’ (*die Plastik*), and the adjective ‘plastic’ (*plastisch*). All three words are derived from the Greek *plassein* (*πλάσσειν*), which means ‘to model,’ ‘to mold.’ ‘Plastic,’ as an adjective, means two things: on the one hand, to be ‘susceptible to changes of form’ or malleable (clay is a ‘plastic’ material); and on the other hand, ‘having the power to bestow form, the power to mold,’ as in the expressions, ‘plastic surgeon’ and ‘plastic arts.’ This twofold signification is met again in the German adjective *plastisch*. Grimm’s dictionary

6.

Catherine Malabou, *Plasticité* (Paris: Éditions Leo Sheer, 2000), 23.

defines it thus: ‘that which takes or gives shape, or figure, to bodies’ (*körperlich ... gestaltend oder gestaltet*). *Plasticité*, or ‘plasticity,’ just like *Plastizität*⁷ in German, describes the nature of that which is ‘plastic,’ being at once capable of receiving and of giving form.⁸

Plasticity, then, is first and foremost a conceptual working through of *form*, designating the double capacity to give and receive form. In terms of the ability to give form, the “first” meaning of plasticity, Malabou cites several examples – the plastic art of sculpture, and also “architecture, drawing and painting.”⁹ As a validation, *Le Grand Robert* quotes René Huyghe: *la peinture peut, sans scrupule, partager avec la sculpture et l’architecture la dénomination d’art plastique, tant qu’elle s’attache à leur problème essentiel: la construction des formes* (*Plasticité*, n.d.). So, in French, as well as German and English, one of the primary concerns of *plasticité* is “the construction of forms.” Huyghe’s list of examples makes it clear that these forms are also the shape of ideas, perhaps even in the Kantian or Platonic sense, since to include painting with the more obviously “plastic” arts of sculpture and architecture puts greater emphasis on the perceived than the “material” form.

As well as all the practitioners of the “plastic arts,” Malabou also cites a couple of specific examples of the operators or demiurges who are able to give form in this sense: “the plastic surgeon” and the “sculptor.”¹⁰ These two operators give form in slightly different ways, although Malabou does not analyze this conflation; the sculptor is traditionally seen to “find” form in the marble or wood, whereas the plastic surgeon produces a new form of a body, often by adding something “plastic” to provide additional material for the cosmetic reformulation of a body. This suggests an oscillation in plasticity between revealing a form that was already there and reforming something by supplementing or adding to an extant form. The OED gives us “the branch of surgery dealing with the

7. Corrected from *Plastizität* in the translation cited. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for highlighting this error, and for an number of other useful suggestions.

8. Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 8.

9. *Ibid.*, 8.

10. Catherine Malabou, *Les nouveaux blessés: de Freud à la neurologie, penser les traumatismes contemporains* (Paris: Bayard, 2007), 48.

construction and reconstruction of superficial parts of the body that are defective, injured, or absent, and also using such procedures for cosmetic purposes" (OED, n.d.) for plastic surgery. This also suggests a possible oscillation between plasticity's conceptual operation: between revealing extant form and adding something supplemental to pre-given forms. In this analysis, the ways in which these two examples of plasticity give form are actually diametrically opposed: the classical *idea* of sculpture is the liberation of a form from its marble prison; on the other hand, plastic surgery does not touch any more than the "superficial" or the "cosmetic," it is decorative or a matter of surface rather than an explication or freeing of eidetic form. This already indicates some of the initial tensions in Malabou's concept, between its relation to contemporary extensions of the meaning of plastic and the history of the word in its rendering by Hegel.

This relation to the history of *form* in philosophy is very important for Malabou's elaboration of plasticity, as she wants to relate it not just to the formation of the plastic arts, but also as the formation or shaping of an idea or concept, as articulated by Georges Canguilhem and cited in *The Future of Hegel*:

To elaborate (*travailler*) a concept is to vary both its extension and its intelligibility. It is to generalize it by incorporating its exceptions. It is to export it outside its original domain, *to use it as a model or conversely to find it a model* [my emphasis], in short it is to give to it, bit by bit, through ordered transformations, the function of a *form*.¹¹

Malabou chooses this particular definition of "concept" to include in *The Future of Hegel*, so the emphasis on the elaboration and extension of form is evidently far from accidental. As Canguilhem's definition suggests that to give something the function of a form, creative, or donational plasticity, is not to make it a form in the Platonic sense, but to give something the "function of a form": to make it the sensible elaboration of something in order to make it intelligible, or as Canguilhem suggests, to "vary [...] its intelligibility." Hence, the donation of form is also a *formation* of intelligibility.

11.

Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 7.

Importantly, Canguilhem's suggestion that the concept should be generalized "by incorporating its exceptions" provides a method for analyzing and evaluating Malabou's elaboration of the concept of plasticity. What we need to analyze is how successful she is in incorporating the exceptions into the general concept.¹² In addition, since Malabou seems to want to make plasticity a "general" concept, we need to analyze that generality, especially given her claims for plasticity going beyond deconstruction.¹³ It might be argued that Malabou is claiming a more "positive" status for plasticity than the deconstruction of her thesis supervisor. The key question, however, is the economy of dissemination in the concept of plasticity: how does the metaphorical proliferation of plasticity affect its conceptuality?

Sensible Translation

Malabou frequently associates the giving and receiving form of plasticity with the Kantian concepts of *schema* and *hypotyposis*: "the sensible translation," she writes, "of an economy of sensible translation – to borrow the Kantian definition of '*hypotyposis*' – is itself represented by these concepts [the donation and reception of form in plasticity]."¹⁴ This is itself a "translation" and elaboration of Kant's definition in the third *Critique*: "all *hypotyposis* consists in making a concept sensuous, and is either schematic or symbolic."¹⁵ As per Canguilhem's instructions for the elaboration of a concept, Malabou associates plasticity with not just "making a concept sensuous" but a doubling of the gesture of giving form and making intelligible. She does this by making "plastic hypotyposis" both "sensible translation" and "the sensible translation of an economy." Malabou's elaboration of "plastic hypotyposis" gives form not just to a concept, but to the *economy* of forming, making sensible, a concept. It is in this wider sense that plasticity's power to grant form is to be understood: to give "through ordered transformations the function of a *form*."

This brings us to the second function or meaning of plasticity, one which intrinsically comes out of the first, for, with-

12. Ibid., 7.
 13. Catherine Malabou, "The End of Writing? Grammatology and Plasticity," *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 12 (2007): 431–41.
 14. Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 7.
 15. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 226, quoted in: Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 202.

in this sensible schema, in order to give form one must have some sort of “material” that can accept it and be reformed by that granting of form. Interestingly, Malabou chooses as her example here clay rather than thermoplastic; clay is constantly moldable at room temperature without denaturing in any way. This contrasts with the thermoplastics that we commonly associate with the noun “plastic,” for instance polypropylene, one of the most common thermoplastics, becomes moldable by compression only at temperatures at or exceeding 162° centigrade, something that we could associate with Malabou’s “destructive plasticity” following brain trauma or PTSD.¹⁶ Thermoplastic would actually link in better, in some respects, to Malabou’s interest in the “plasticity” of the dialectic and how it works as “the union of *resistance* (*Widerstand*) and fluidity (*Flüssigkeit*)” since, once molded, thermoplastic is resistant to being reformed until further heat and pressure are applied.¹⁷

Malabou extends this link to a susceptibility to being constantly molded, and the powers of giving and receiving form to living beings:

Hence, by extension [from the plastic arts], plasticity signifies the general aptitude for development, the power to be molded by one’s culture, by education. We speak of the plasticity of the newborn, of the child’s plasticity of character. [...] Yet it also means the ability to evolve and adapt. It is this sense we invoke when we speak of a ‘plastic virtue’ possessed by animals, plants, and, in general, all living things (2005, 8).¹⁸

This further elaboration (*travailler*) by Malabou makes plasticity active, gives it a generative power rather than something that is merely the power to receive form from elsewhere. Thus, the ability to evolve and adapt, and for a child to be molded by their culture, both take on a positive virtue of reformulation, the ability to both reform the environment (sculpture) and to be reformed by it (taking on culture,

16. Catherine Malabou, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 60. Malabou initially elaborates “destructive plasticity” in relation to *plastique*, French for plastic explosive, but later associates it with the destruction of brain structure by cerebral lesions in *The New Wounded*.

17. Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 12.
 18. John Protevi, in “Deleuze and Life,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Deleuze*, ed. Daniel W. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 239–264, has already highlighted the interest for Deleuzian scholars of West-Eberhard’s (2003) *Developmental Plasticity and Evolution*, and an analysis which staged a confrontation with Malabou’s thought on plasticity and neuroscience could be very productive.

adapting). One might be a little skeptical of the potential extension here, through which people are a plastic material to be endlessly remolded – perhaps biopolitically. In the first of her extensions of the concept through Hegel she names the exemplary “plastic individuals” of Ancient Greece: “Pericles..., Phidias, Plato, and above all Sophocles, as well as Thucydides, Xenophon, Socrates.”¹⁹ In these individuals, the power to both give and receive form is held together dialectically: they both have the power to give form, and to (re)form and be formed by themselves.

What is important is that Malabou wants to associate the concept of plasticity both with the birth of philosophy and with the self-determining power of those exemplary individuals to whom Hegel gives the honor of being called “plastic.” Sophocles, of course, was a great statesman, one of the generals of the Athenian assembly, and a dramatist: “plastic” both in his formation of the destiny of Athens and also in his “natural” ability to form his plays. In both these things, however, the “above all” of which Hegel speaks is the ability to work on himself, to adapt and improve, to make himself one of these individuals who are “works of art standing there.”²⁰ As with Malabou’s reformulation of Kantian hypotyposis, there is a double gesture at work here: the exemplary individuals of Ancient Greece, in Hegel and Malabou’s account, become plastic individuals (re-forming themselves) by giving form to discourse, to artistic works and to the state. This is also an attempt to make this continual plastic reformulation self-motive in general, to extend the self-forming power of those exemplary Ancient Greeks to the overall concept of plasticity. (For the moment, I will note that this extension and the possibility of it having a political effect both require a certain recursivity).

Plastic Etymology

That the etymology of “plasticity” is rather more complex than Malabou suggests in *The Future of Hegel* is something that we have already

19. Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 9.
 20. Georg W. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. II, trans. Thomas Malcolm Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1975), 201, quoted in: Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 201.

touched upon. For the moment, I will note only that many of the words derived from that stem (*plasas*) in Greek relate to counterfeiting and forgery as much as to molding. As an example, *plastographeō* means “counterfeit writing” and *plastologeō* “to tell fictions or lie.”²¹ This is clearly a form of the metaphysics being formed in Ancient Greece that is most evidently embodied in Plato, an extension of the concept, so to speak. While this clearly does not invalidate Malabou’s elaboration of plasticity any more than her selective etymology legitimates it, it does lead us to question how this exception might be incorporated into the concept. What does this suggest about the relation of plasticity to giving form as artifice? What sort of theory of form is required to incorporate this into the concept in general? In short, what transformations are required in order to incorporate “neuronal” plasticity into the more general concept of plasticity? Furthermore, what legitimates this incorporation and allows the potential sublation of Hegelian and neuronal plasticity?

Malabou also makes an appeal to “ordinary speech” before moving on to this etymological definition.²² The problem this presents was already hinted at in the discussion of the plastic surgeon, and also the other words which *plasas* is the stem of in Greek: in “ordinary speech” this element of plasticity as counterfeit is also still very much in evidence, both in French and in English. In English, we speak of “plastic bread” and “plastic cheese” for cheap “imitation” foodstuffs, the *OED* gives “artificial, unnatural; superficial, insincere” (n.d.) – both suggest an illegitimacy, but one that appears to be largely absent from Malabou’s elaboration of the concept. Thus, in order to properly elaborate (*travailler*) or work through plasticity, we need to incorporate these exceptions.

In Roland Barthes’ excellent essay “Plastic” in *Mythologies*, he says that plastic is “in essence [...] the stuff of alchemy” and that “plastic is the very idea of *its* infinite transformation.”²³ This suggests that plastic as a material is very much the locus of a complex set of relations

21. Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott, *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
 22. Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 5.
 23. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000), 97; my emphasis.

between discourse and figure, that it is its own idea as a “constructed” material. It is worth citing a longer passage from Barthes on the socioeconomic status of plastic and how this affects its reciprocal or perhaps even “transformational” relation with the idea of itself – to better understand how “plasticity” might relate to “ordinary speech”:

The fashion for plastic highlights an evolution in the myth of ‘imitation’ materials [...] until now imitation materials have always indicated pretension, they belonged to the world of appearances, not to that of actual use; they aimed at reproducing cheaply the rarest substances [...] Plastic has climbed down, it is a household material. It is the first magical substance which consents to be prosaic [...] this prosaic character is a triumphant reason for its existence: for the first time, artifice aims at something common, not rare. And as an immediate consequence, the age-old function of nature is modified: it is no longer the Idea, the pure Substance to be regained or imitated: an artificial Matter, more bountiful than all the natural deposits, is about to replace her, and to determine the very invention of forms.²⁴

What this tells us is firstly that, in reviving plasticity, Malabou has to a certain extent captured “the spirit of the times” – if anything, plastic is today even more prosaic in its magical character; however, it also tells us that the dominant motif of plastic is in Barthes’ elaboration both material and concept, an artifice content to portray itself as artifice. While initially plastic was used in an attempt to imitate more expensive materials – the classical presentation of the idea and the image – it has now become what Barthes calls “artificial Matter” in its own right. This determination of plastic as *artificial* matter is extremely interesting as it bears comparison to Gilles Deleuze’s reading of the simulacrum;²⁵ plastic as a synthesis of material and concept ceases to appeal to the Idea or Nature, there is no longer anything in plastic to be “regained” from the ideal, it becomes only a copy of itself.

Deleuze argues that this state of being a copy only of itself, a simulacrum, has a liberating potential, that it can somehow free us of the Platonic dyad.²⁶ I am not entirely convinced by Deleuze’s idealism as regards the simulacrum; however, even taking this as read leaves the question of how we legitimate a

24. Ibid., 98. Derrida notes the citational and isolating use that Barthes frequently makes of capital letters, “Matter” and “Substance” here, for example (Derrida, 2001a).

25. Gilles Deleuze, “Plato and the Simulacrum,” *October* 27 (1983): 54–6.

26. Ibid., 46.

concept that is only a copy of itself. Plastic comes to determine the very “invention of forms” by virtue of its own plasticity; that is to say, that the material as a concept has come to be self-determining in the manner of the exemplary individuals of Ancient Greece. Implicit in Barthes’ analysis of plastic is also the question of the commodity: if Marx was writing today would the privileged figure of the commodity still be the wooden table that stands on its head and forms “grotesque ideas”?²⁷ Or, would it be the figure of the plastic bottle top, magically reincarnated as the door skin of a Smart car?

This materiality of plastic, too, is a potential problem with Malabou’s elaboration of plasticity. In *Plasticité*, Malabou argues:

It is not possible to conceptualize plasticity without elaborating afresh a certain type of materialism; that is to say, without bringing to light a rapport or an ensemble of rapports determined between matter and the spirit. It seems difficult, on this point, to surpass Marx’s masterful affirmation that all authentic materialism is dialectical materialism.²⁸

However, we might also note the figural here relates to a certain mode of materialism, that to “put in play” and be “between matter and spirit” is to always-already have entered into the play of the materialism of the figure. As the epigraph to this article indicates, “one can never touch the thing itself but metaphorically.”²⁹ This means a different form of materialism to the one which Malabou proposes here, and yet more distinct from the “primary materialism.” dismissed by both Levi-Strauss and Lacan, defended by Malabou in *The New Wounded*.³⁰ In *Plasticité*, there are traces of a very classical materialism that excludes the figure; while the “plasticity of the brain” is initially acknowledged as a “simple” metaphor, this characterization quietly disappears from the textual scene as Malabou “reveals” the infelicities of Freud’s (and by extension, Derrida’s) conception of neuronal writing and difference.³¹ Lyotard’s elaboration of figural space would posit this touching of the “thing itself” not as Merleau-Ponty proposed it “as the possible movement to a point over there while remaining

27. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London-New York: Penguin Books, 1981) in association with *New Left Review*, 163–4.

28. Catherine Malabou, *Plasticité* (Paris: Éditions Leo Sheer, 2000), 11; my translation.

29. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 14.

30. Malabou, *New Wounded*, 211.

31. Malabou, *Plasticité*, 11.

here,”³² but as “depth,” as something unmasterable by either dialectic or positivism. Following Lyotard, and the Derrida of “White Mythology” and “Freud and the Scene of Writing,”³³ I would argue that this tendency to treat plasticity as if it were non-figural poses serious questions for Malabou’s elaboration.

Plastic Neurobiology, or:
The Ideological Formation of the Brain

To explore how this relationship between discourse and figure in Malabou’s later work might be informed by neurobiology, we need to look at her elaborations of “neuronal plasticity,” a key term in contemporary neurobiology. It seems appropriate to start with her principal source for *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* – Jean-Pierre Changeux. Rather than his seminal *Neuronal Man* (1983), however, we will take the definition of “neuronal plasticity” from his more recent work, *The Physiology of Truth*:³⁴

The term ‘plasticity’ designates the general capacity of the neuron and its synapses to change properties as a function of their state of activity. [...] Plasticity is already present during early stages of embryonic development: a significant fraction of the nerve cells produced by cell division die before becoming mature neurons. Cell death may be either retarded or accelerated by nervous activity. [...] synapses grow and divide during development; but they may also be eliminated and [...] regenerated through new outgrowths from the cell body or from existing dendritic arborizations (a phenomenon that persists, albeit to a lesser degree, in the adult).³⁵

What this passage tells us is that, in Malabou’s words, “the brain is a work, and we do not know it”;³⁶ the structure of the brain is being constantly *molded* and *formed* throughout our lifetimes. Neuronal connections and indeed neurons themselves that are not utilized consistently are allowed to die off; they are not renewed. Conversely, connections that are used more frequently are reinforced and sped up.³⁷

32. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 14.
 33. Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 207–271; Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001b), 246–91.
 34. Jean-Pierre Changeux, *The Physiology of Truth: Neuroscience and Human Knowledge* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004).
 35. *Ibid.*, 26.
 36. Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 1.
 37. Changeux, *Physiology of Truth*, 16.

This process has factors in common with both the sculptor and the plastic surgeon: regarding the former, neuronal activity itself determines which neurons are maintained and which atrophy; as regards the latter, Changeux mentions that neuronal connections can be regenerated or new connections formed in response to stimuli. Malabou emphasizes this comparison with the sculptor, noting that the “sculptor’s chisel” is a phenomenon known as “apoptosis” or cell death.³⁸ In *Plasticité*, she provides a fuller elaboration of this relationship between the figure of the sculptor and the conceptual apparatus of neuronal plasticity:

At bottom, plasticity is, following Hegel, that which unites sculpture and subjectivity. On the subject, sculpture confers its resistance; on sculpture, the subject confers her suppleness. The statues created by ‘living sculpture’ (*la sculpture du vivant*) are an ensemble of flexible formations [...] they are perpetually becoming because of a continually dynamic relationship with what they are not.³⁹

It is in this manner that subjectivity is constituted for Malabou, similar to the movement between the speculative proposition and the relationship between the subject and the substance analyzed in *The Future of Hegel*.⁴⁰ In this instance, however, we have an explicit invocation of the metaphors of sculpture in relation to the formation of the structure or architecture of the brain through cell death (apoptosis). Sadly, Malabou does not return to this figure in either *The New Wounded* or in *Self and Emotional Life*.⁴¹

The brain is continually in the process of giving itself form and being reformed, encompassing Malabou’s initial definitions of plasticity. What really causes these reconstructions appears to be a question neuroscience has not really succeeded in answering, but which Malabou’s figure of the sculpture perhaps offers a way into exploring. While “strict genetic determinism” seems to be responsible for the initial form of the brain in an infant, the form of its development for

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Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 19.Malabou, *Plasticité*, 21–2; my translation.Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 171–9.Adrian Johnston & Catherine Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Malabou, *New Wounded*.

“about fifteen years” to its full mass is affected by neuronal activity, and to a lesser extent continues to be into adult life.⁴²

Let us examine a little more closely Malabou’s enthusiasm for “modulational plasticity” in neuroscience and why she finds in this a kind of liberatory potential. One would presume that the “brain” the question “what should we do with our brain?” asks us all to consider is the fully-formed adult brain:

Without a doubt, it is at this level that plasticity imposes itself with the greatest clarity and force in ‘opening’ its meaning. In effect, there is a sort of neuronal creativity that depends on nothing but the individual’s experience, his life, and his interactions with the surroundings. [...] According to [Donald] Hebb, we must postulate the existence of ‘plastic synapses’ capable of adapting their transmission efficacy. Hebb formulated the hypothesis of neuronal circuits capable of self-organization, that is, of modifying their connections during the activity required for perception and learning. The synapse is the privileged locus where nerve activity can leave a trace that can displace itself, modify itself, and transform itself through repetition of a past function.⁴³

These “plastic synapses” then give form to themselves through a “self-organization” in relation to other synapses. We will later fold back some of the questions Derrida addresses to Freud in “Freud and the Scene of Writing” to the status of representation in this account of neurobiology, and ask to what extent the material hypotypothesis of the concept of the synapse and neuron affects how they can be understood.⁴⁴ Malabou herself notes that *frayage* (path-breaking) does not seem to be an adequate model of neuronal function; the structures proposed by neuroscience now owe nothing to the “pair permeability-resistance proposed by Freud.”⁴⁵

In sum, rather than altering the overall structure of the neuronal network, modulational plasticity works by attenuating the efficacy of neural pathways, that is to say, a “capacity for being permanently altered by a single occurrence” as Freud suggested in 1895, or as Malabou suggests, “neurons somehow remember stimulation.”⁴⁶ The key difference

42. Changeux, *Physiology of Truth*, 26; Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 18–19.

43. Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 21–2.

44. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 246–91.

45. Malabou, *Plasticité*, 19–20; my translation.

46. Freud in Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 251; Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 24.

is that for Malabou there is the “possibility of their effacement [...] in a word, they are not indelible,” a theme she explores further in *The New Wounded* in relation to the effacement of not just particular neuronal configurations or traces but of a given subject’s “autoaffectation” following PTSD or Alzheimer’s.⁴⁷

Malabou argues for the importance of this particular kind of neuronal plasticity in terms of how it relates the brain to “its history.”⁴⁸ The reader is largely left to infer what kind of history is being proposed by this comparison. Malabou begins *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* by suggesting a link between “we make our brains and we do not know it” and Marx’s famous aphorism that “humans make their own history, but they do not know that they make it.”⁴⁹ Seemingly, what Malabou wants to do is to awaken a consciousness of the brain as its own historicity, to awaken an understanding that the plastic structure of neuronal functioning means that the brain itself is constantly changing and its structure is the product of every previous neuronal activation. It is effectively, in this account, a plastic map of its own history, but a map more susceptible to damage than interpretations of Freud’s “mystic pad” generally envisage.⁵⁰ This mapping is both in terms of the development of the overall structure of the brain and in the interactions between billions of neurons that enable modulational plasticity. This theme is evidently one familiar to readers of Derrida on psychoanalysis; however, Malabou claims that what Derrida did not take into account is the fundamental restructuring of the brain in response to injury or cruelty.⁵¹

In a slight shift away from Changeux’s position – who largely ignores plasticity in the adult brain – Malabou cites an article entitled “The Curious Partition of New Neurons” to help argue that

[a]dult neurogenesis, being the final mechanism of plasticity and one strongly controlled by a subject’s personal experience and environmental interactions,

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Malabou, *Plasticité*, 19–20; Malabou, *New Wounded*.
Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 21.
Ibid., 1.
Derrida, *Freud and the Sense of Writing*.
Malabou, *Les nouveaux blessés*, 275.

very likely constitutes an additional mechanism of individuation – with the major difference that it is operational throughout life.⁵²

While “new” neurons that increase the number of neurons overall may not occur to a great extent in the adult brain, certain areas, especially those apparently concerned with learning, may substantially change their structure in response to continued neuronal stimulation during “neuronal renewal,” the repair, and replacement of extant neurons.⁵³ For Malabou, this is important because it exposes the “dogma of the stable brain,” that “the brain can of course acquire new information but can know no great change in its capacity to learn [...] except in the direction of decline or degeneracy.”⁵⁴

But what is there to suggest that this level of restructuring is necessary for such a change in the capacity to learn? There is a tendency to confuse the model with the thing-in-itself in this kind of evaluation of neuronal data. As Changeux aptly observes,

[t]here is always an implicit theoretical context underlying this scientific activity, preserved in long-term memories, that tacitly organizes the conscious play of conjecture and hypothesis. An important part of the scientific process, in my view, consists in making this context explicit.⁵⁵

The implicit ideological “theoretical context” in this instance is that the adult as a subject cannot possibly be plastic, self-determining without the support of a scientifically accepted model of how that plasticity might be made possible on a neuronal level. The possible self-determination of the subject is made possible in this account by treating the model, or rather the figure, as if it was the thing-in-itself. Of course, I exaggerate for the purposes of emphasis; however, it is this fuzziness as regards the status of the model which seems to prevent Malabou from going further in her argument for the necessity of critiquing “neuronal ideology.”⁵⁶

Crucially, this is also a question of intelligibility, both of the structure of the brain and of how we might “see” a thought, if indeed that

52. Pierre-Marie Lledo et al. in Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 27.

53. Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 25.

54. Ibid., 25.

55. Changeux, *Physiology of Truth*, 241.

56. Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 11.

is what neuroimaging technology actually allows. The question here, to follow Derrida's analysis in "Freud and the Scene of Writing," is not whether the present model of neuronal functioning is an accurate representation of the psyche, but what sorts of questions these models impose upon us, and to this end Malabou notes that the neuronal "traces" of which Changeux and other neuroscientists speak "are before all images."⁵⁷ Malabou argues that we need to engage in a critique of "*neuronal ideology*":

It is thus not just a matter of uncovering, in the name of brain plasticity, a certain freedom of the brain but rather, starting from as precise a study as possible of the functioning of this plasticity, to free this freedom, to disengage it from a certain number of ideological presuppositions that implicitly govern the entire neuroscientific field and, by a mirror effect, the entire field of politics – and in this way to rescue philosophy from its irresponsible torpor.⁵⁸

There are a number of extremely questionable claims in this exceptionally provocative passage from the introduction to *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* not least the power accorded to neuroscience in this "ideological" analysis and the reference ahead to the conflation of mental illnesses, neuronal illnesses, and social ills in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* and *The New Wounded*, a potentially totalizing discourse that is one of the significant problems with Malabou's conception of plasticity; the attempt to "grasp the whole" with a single conceptual apparatus ends up producing epistemological and indeed conceptual difficulties.⁵⁹ At the same time, there are also a number of significant exclusions – as we have noted, for example, the artificiality or falseness that is present both etymologically and in current usage.

Malabou is, however, more than justified in calling for a rigorous and informed analysis of the ideological precepts of neuroscientific discourse and the moments when it unthinkingly reasserts a metaphysics of presence.⁶⁰ The freedom of which Malabou speaks is effectively that of modulatory plasticity

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Malabou, *Plasticité*, 17; my translation.

Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 11.

See for instance, Malabou's claim that "plasticity refers to the spontaneous organization of fragments" (*Plasticity*, 7). This could perhaps be explained by the explication of Hegelian plasticity in relation to the statue and subjectivity, as outlined in *Plasticité*; this link and how it relates to Malabou's interest in split temporalities, however, is not made clear in *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*. Malabou, *Plasticity*, 6.

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and adult neurogenesis, the ability of the brain to form complex new organizations based on the facilitation and depression of existing neuronal pathways, what Malabou calls the “open” meaning of plasticity, the “malleability of form,” in contrast to its “closed” meaning, “the definitive character of form.” As Changeux also insists, this necessitates doing away with any kind of concept of a machine brain and attempting to think not only in terms of the development of the child’s brain, but also that of the adult as plastic, self-forming like the exemplary individuals of Ancient Greece.

One might wonder why we need the trappings of neuroscience to give legitimation to such an understanding of our psyche. Perhaps it is an indication of how much the ideologies embodied by neuroscience are already embedded within Malabou’s thinking; as Paul Ricoeur suggests, “it is always the other who stoops to ideology.”⁶¹ This is not to say that there is some place outside of ideology where we might analyze Malabou’s own neuronal ideology with perfect clarity, but that the gesture of calling on neural structure, “to uncover this freedom” “in the name of brain plasticity,” to legitimate something that can be easily observed in everyday life (particularly adult education) needs careful attention. Does neurobiology perhaps tell us the answer to the question posed to Hegel about the “plastic individuals” of Ancient Greece? That a combination of genetic and epigenetic factors allowed for the development of brains with greater capacity for modulational plasticity in those individuals; that their continual self-molding was the real secret of their self-determination?⁶² Were they plastic individuals because of their *will* to plasticity?⁶³

The freedom granted by this knowledge would seem to be of a very strange sort, a freedom granted by the reinterpretation or discrediting of the work of some scientists who naively clung to the idea of a stable brain; against Malabou’s repeated affirmation that “our brains are a work and we do

61. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 82.
 62. Changeux, *Physiology of Truth*, 184–210, 220–3. An interesting recent development suggests that even the genetic structure of the brain’s individual cells is changed through our experiences. See Baillie et al. (2011).
 63. This is evidently a provocative question that hints at the possible appropriation by neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility.

not know it," we need to ask what difference this knowledge really makes.⁶⁴ It seems to be a freedom from the "machine brain" granted by an empiricism that never really succeeded in supplanting the Enlightenment's self-knowing subject in the popular imagination.

Is the Brain "Adequate to the World"? If So, How?

Malabou's argument is that "the biological and social mirror in each other" a decentralization of command and control, both in terms of neuronal functioning and in terms of politics and economics.⁶⁵ In a double move, she argues that plasticity is both "precisely the form of our world" and the potential (in the form of a consciousness of the plasticity of our brains) to change and emancipate ourselves from this form.⁶⁶ Malabou does not really demonstrate how this emancipation might take place, although the link with Deleuze's reading of the simulacrum and plasticity's artificiality might be one possibility.

As we can see through Malabou drawing upon Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, there is certainly evidence for a mirroring of the structures of network analysis and thinking, of managerialism, in neuroscience and in the logic and rhetoric of neoliberal capitalism in its present form;⁶⁷ however, it is rather less clear whether this "neuronal ideology," more accurately described by Boltanski and Chiapello as "connexionist," is the mirror of neoliberal capitalism or neoliberal capitalism is its mirror, and indeed whether this relationship constitutes a cause rather than a mere correlation in either direction.

This is not to suggest that Malabou is unaware of this problem; in a reading of Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, and his claim – in a footnote – that "the brain is adequate to the world," she suggests that it is the naturalness of this adequation that blinds us to its actuality and that

[t]he screen that separates us from our brain is an ideological screen. [...]
 'Screen' also applies to the scientific descriptions themselves, which, pretending

64. Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 1.
 65. *Ibid.*, 33.
 66. *Ibid.*, 38.
 67. Luc Boltanski & Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007) 101–56; Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 40–6.

to lift the screen, really just reinforce it by producing no critical analysis of the worldview they implicitly drive.⁶⁸

One of the problems with *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* is that Malabou correctly identifies these symptoms, but does not proceed toward a thorough diagnosis of the condition. To identify the symptom is not sufficient to free the patient from it. What is necessary is a thorough examination of this “ideological screen,” of how it functions as a screen, and – to further extend the analogy with the analysand – to work out what form of transference might reduce the resistance of the “worldview” implicitly driven by neuroscience to being deconstructed.⁶⁹ While Malabou insists on the necessity of this task, her very insistence on the liberatory power of brain plasticity demonstrates the prevalence of an ideological construct that takes the scientific model for scientific truth. The problems with the Freudian–Derridean account of neuronal function as writing or inscription are taken into account, but not what disseminative challenges the figure of plasticity might present. This is particularly clear in *Plasticité*, where Malabou argues against the model of neuronal inscription or *frayage* but does not question the technical effects of these new neuronal “traces” being conceived of as “images.”⁷⁰ Given the primacy of the image in the history of metaphysics, this seems an odd omission. If, as Lyotard asserts, one may only touch the thing itself “but metaphorically,” the prevalence of images as an “ideological screen,” rather than the metaphor of text or writing, will have significant effects on the manner of that touching.

Malabou evidently knows that the model is not truth, but acts at times (inasmuch as *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* constitutes an act) as if it is. In an essay in *The Post Card* aptly titled “Paralysis,” Derrida explains the failure of a “purely interpretative psychoanalysis”:

It is through the ‘transference’ (*Übertragung*) that one will attempt to reduce the resistances of the patient, who cannot be reached simply by becoming conscious of a *Deutung*. Transference itself displaces, but it only displaces the resistance. It operates a resistance, as a resistance.⁷¹

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Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 40See Jacques Derrida, “To Speculate—on ‘Freud,’” in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (1987), 339.Malabou, *Plasticité*, 17.Derrida, *Post Card*, 339.

This analogy highlights the difficulty that Malabou's analysis presents – in order to know what effect a consciousness of brain plasticity might actually have we first need to understand how the “resistances” of the apparent complicity between network or connexionist ideology and neuroscience might be displaced as resistances. It is this question of transference and resistance that is absent from most neuroscientific accounts and from Malabou's own discussions. This is not to say that Freud's model should be elevated to the level of truth when much evidence from neuroimaging would suggest a different model of neuronal function; however, Freud's theory is important because it tries to take into account, to negotiate the difficulty of the split between neural function and how we might try to represent that functioning to ourselves.

What exactly are the questions that this model of neuronal functioning imposes upon us, if it is not the question of whether this is a good representation of the psyche? The first is evident from Malabou's own “mission statement” – namely, what is the symbolic and graphic “component of thought” in this model, and what kinds of thinking does it suggest (Malabou, *Plasticity*, 3)? How does thinking as “plasticity” change our conception of thought from Derridean thought as writing and difference? Following on from this, how do we define this model? Malabou seemingly wants to extend the philosophical concept of plasticity to incorporate that of neuroscience. The question of what legitimates or does not legitimate this extension, then, takes on an important epistemological and political dimension: what is the relationship between *discourse* and *figure*, or between *writing* and *figure* in this account?

The question of whether plasticity falls on the side of writing (Derrida) or figure (Lyotard), or how it might negotiate this gap has already taken on considerable political significance;⁷² this is both as the “naturalization” of a connexionist ideology, in both the social sciences and in neuroscience, and, if plasticity is indeed “the form of our world,” then has it always been plastic, in the way Malabou elaborates it, or is this a recent phenomenon?

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Malabou, for her part, claims that she “seeks to understand [...] the transformational relations between figure and writing and the reason why the dialogue between form and writing presents itself as structure” (Malabou, *Plasticity*, 3).

In Derrida's analysis of Freud's "Mystic Writing Pad," he shows how Freud searches for a hypotypotic "representation" of the psyche to demonstrate his understanding of its structure; the models of neuroscience ostensibly work the other way, the "material" structure of the neural network, or rather its representation via technical prostheses, informs the way in which consciousness might be "implicated," to borrow, as does Malabou, Dennett's term.⁷³

So, what example can we use to work through the "neuronal ideology" – and its figural relation to plasticity – Malabou asks us to analyze and challenge in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* The argument for an ideological complicity between the models or the screens of neurobiology and late (neoliberal) capitalism is an interesting one. However, to work through this apparent complicity, "between neuroscientific discourse and the discourse of management, between the functioning of the brain and the functioning of a company,"⁷⁴ we need an example that can be carefully examined as model, screen, or metaphor. In addition, in this analysis we need to ask whether plasticity, and in particular the concept of brain plasticity (or plasticities), is really the cultural panacea Malabou seems to be suggesting at times in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* To this end, a suitable choice seems to be Changeux's concept of the "neuronal workspace" from his provocatively titled *The Physiology of Truth*. Changeux characterizes this "workspace" as follows:

The theory that Stanislas Dehaene, Michel Kerszberg, and I have proposed [...] does not aim at solving the problem of consciousness. [...] Instead it constitutes a modest attempt, using a very simple network architecture, to model the independent processing of a great variety of signals passing through distinct parallel pathways as well as their integration in a 'unified field' (in John Searle's phrase) or a common 'workspace' (Bernard Baars's term).⁷⁵

While Changeux insists that this model is not an attempt to solve the problem of consciousness, he does then go on to claim that "workspace neurons [...] unify conscious rep-

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Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 11.

Ibid., 40.

Changeux, *Physiology of Truth*, 87.

resentations.”⁷⁶ We can glean from this introductory description that the mode of modeling the brain's architecture is conflated with terminology (e.g. “network architecture”) more usually found in the construction of computer networks and cloud computing. There is clearly a notion of communication in modeling the “neuronal workspace”: “signals” are “processed” as they pass through “parallel pathways.” Indeed, little explanation is given for why this “simple” model should prove “adequate” to the brain's architecture of billions of neurons, save for its apparent ability to explain a number of relatively simple cognitive tests; the structure of the tests implicitly determines the model.⁷⁷

Nonetheless, the architecture of the “neuronal workspace” presented by Changeux is interesting because of the way it attempts to model part of what is clearly an incredibly complex system by a relatively simple three-dimensional network. This model is ostensibly only supposed to account for the functioning of “effortful cognitive tasks” – in this instance the famous Stroop test, a color-naming task with “interference” factors.⁷⁸ These interference factors involved in the task involve naming colors as displayed by the written word with the lettering in an alternative color, and naming the color of the lettering when the word denotes another color.⁷⁹ In the terms of Lyotard's version of language games, this is a game where the “correct” assent of the participant to a denotative utterance has effectively been decided in advance.⁸⁰ The model is continually striving to take over reality, the technics of the test have effectively delimited in advance the “forms” that consciousness might take.

However, to critique the epistemology of this model is not my primary aim here, but rather to examine how this suggests we might “see a thought” and whether this model (or rather *figure*) of neuronal function has some sort of complicity with the ideologies of neoliberal capitalism. So, let us examine the “workspace” hypothesis itself in greater detail:

76. Ibid., 96.
 77. Ibid., 11.
 78. Ibid., 87–98; Stanislas Dehaene, Michel Kerszberg & Jean-Paul Changeux, “A Neuronal Model of a Global Workspace in Effortful Cognitive Tasks,” in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 95 (1998): 14,529–34.
 79. Changeux, *Physiology of Truth*, 87–98.
 80. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 9.

The central proposition of the already quite venerable workspace hypothesis, recently revived and modified by Baars, is that two main computational spaces can be distinguished in the brain. The first is a processing network composed of parallel, distributed, and functionally specific processors. These processors are in competition with one another and exhibit a great diversity, operating upon primary sensory and motor stimuli, the contents of long-term memory [...], the self and subjective personal experience, and systems of attention and evaluation involving motivation, rewards, and, in a general way, the emotions.⁸¹

One might ask what these “processors” are exactly in competition for, and what “the self” and “subjective personal experience” are in this model; the language here is, indeed, akin to that of managerialism. The conflation of mental and neuronal here is very striking, neurons link together structures of other neurons, but the latter set of neurons are treated as if they are already “adequate” to subjective experience (of memory, sensation, knowledge of self, etc.), in the sense that Malabou adapts from Deleuze of the brain being “adequate to the world.”⁸² The “processors” are treated as little black boxes that “process” information in some way, again linking to a mathematical model of communication; the metaphor or model of the computer brain has been replaced by a model that oscillates between cloud computing and managerialism. Built upon this first hypothesis, then, and clearly contingent upon it, we have a second “computational space”:

The second computational space corresponds to a global workspace consisting of a distributed set of excitatory cortical neurons that are very richly interconnected. These neurons, with their long axonal processes, establish horizontal connections within the same cerebral hemisphere and, through the corpus callosum, between hemispheres. [...]

The model suggests, moreover, that [...], during a task requiring conscious effort and sustained attention, the workspace neurons are spontaneously and jointly activated, forming discrete but variable spatiotemporal patterns. These global prerepresentations [...] create mutual interconnections between multiple cerebral processors throughout the workspace that are modulated by attention and vigilance signals, and selected as representations by reward signals.⁸³

81. Changeux, *Physiology of Truth*, 89.
 82. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (London: Athlone, 1989), 210–215; Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 38–40.
 83. Changeux, *Physiology of Truth*, 88–9.

The rhetoric of the analogies that Changeux makes here, “global workspaces” and interconnected “processing centers,” again suggests the language of connexionist managerialism. The neurons are almost characterized as workers in the great office block of the brain. Indeed, the language of “rewards” and “selection” further emphasizes this comparison: the worker neurons are clearly somehow “rewarded” for selecting the “correct” neuronal pre-representation to be a representation. As ever, the pertinent question would be: how do our “worker” neurons decide what a “good” representation is? We are once more only a step away from the truth as being a good resemblance, economimesis.⁸⁴

Returning to the model of the “workspace,” based on the first hypothesis, which is partially supported by neuroimaging techniques that show increased activity in particular areas of the brain depending on the specific task, we have a second model by which a set of black box “processing” centers are interconnected through the various levels and differing structures of the brain by long “richly connected” “workspace neurons.” In this hypothesis, routine tasks are carried out by these “functionally specific processors.” However, in a task that requires conscious attention, new pathways and interconnections need to be generated to supply the brain with novel data. The workspace neurons consequently link numerous different “processing centers” in the brain in a way that generates new “pre-representations,” which are sorted by another neuronal “circuit” concerned with the continued activation of the “workspace.” Evidently, while the idea of the machine brain may have been refuted by evidence of neuronal plasticity, the rhetoric of circuits and processing is maintained in the “logic” of modeling the brain’s activity.⁸⁵ These activities, furthermore, could also be regarded as analogous to those of a manager or coordinator in our aforementioned office block. The problem of the logic of “processing” has not been resolved, merely displaced.

A pre-representation that is selected as a full “representation within the workspace” remains active as long as positive

84. Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” *Diacritics* 11 (1981): 2–25.

85. Evidently, the traditional distinction between logic and rhetoric, or between *logos* and *muthos* is being called into question here. See Derrida (1995) and Jean-Pierre Vernant (1990).

signals maintain it (Changeux, *Physiology of Truth*, 93). “If, however, signals are negative or attention is no longer sustained, this pre-representation can be revised or replaced, through a process of trial and error, by another discrete combination of workspace neurons.”⁸⁶ Again, there is a mysterious prime mover by which some form of selection takes place in a manner we might call “conscious.” The double role played by representation here is quite fascinating; on the one hand, the “representation” is the pattern of workspace neurons activated, and on the other hand, the pattern is a representation either of the task at hand or the external stimulus. That is to say, this model posits the pattern of activated workspace neurons as the neural image of a “mental object”: the literal “adequation” of brain and world. The key point here is that this model effectively posits a mappability of the mental as well as the neuronal in relation to the presentation of this model. While it is evidently a very simplistic model, it presents a “representation” of workspace neuron activation that is ostensibly adequate or at least analogous to the mental activity being modeled; yet this model is shot through with connexionist rhetoric. One would suspect, however, that this complicity has as much to do with the historical construction of discourses surrounding both neuroscience and post-Fordist managerialism through cognitive psychology as it does the “mirroring” effect Malabou posits. The future of neuroscience as a biopolitical tool, however, is very likely to involve a conflagration of neuroscientific knowledge and post-Fordist capitalism.⁸⁷

Malabou, as we have seen, actually makes a more radical argument, making a claim, via Deleuze, for the “adequation of brain and world.”⁸⁸ Malabou interprets Deleuze’s phrase, “the brain is adequate to the modern world,” in very direct terms, claiming that “the plasticity of the brain is the real image of the world.”⁸⁹ This is a significant

86. Changeux, *Physiology of Truth*, 93.
 87. Michael Dillon & Luis Lobo-Guerrero “Biopolitics of Security in the 21st Century: An Introduction,” *Review of International Studies* 34 (2008): 265–92.
 88. Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 38–40.
 89. *Ibid.*, 39–40.

flattening of the complex argument put forward by Deleuze in *Cinema 2*, which is less about the specifics of the brain structure's relation to the world at large than a question of detranscendentalizing the mind without privileging either body or brain.⁹⁰ In contrast, in the terms of Changeux's "workspace hypothesis," the adequation of brain and world would seem to be relatively straightforward: the brain's structural activation, in the form of the workspace neurons, selects those pre-representations that are properly adequate to "the world," and modulational plasticity should privilege those representations that are most "adequate to the world."

This, consequently, returns us to the question lurking on the margins of this paper – namely, how does the relationship between neuronal plasticity, materiality, and neuroscience actually manifest itself? This claim for the adequation of brain and world through the functioning of neuronal plasticity is clearly one of the ways in which Malabou wants to try to think through this relationship, and as a "new materialism."⁹¹ In many ways, neuronal plasticity is a material form of understanding the adequation between brain and world; yet for all that, it seems rather more complex than Malabou initially suggests in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* What is clear is that this materiality is mediated by a form of rhetoric, metaphor, or figure – and by the body, "aesthetics" in its original Greek sense. Even should Changeux's "workspace model" prove accurate in how the mental might be mapped onto the neuronal, this still does not give us access to the thing itself, in this case, the brain.

Malabou identifies this question as the central one for contemporary philosophy in *The New Wounded*:

Such coincidence between symbolic structure and cerebral structure would be the sign of what Lacan calls 'primary materialism.'

It is precisely such 'primary materialism' – which is Lacan's expression of contempt for the cerebral localization of the symbolic – that I have attempted to assume and to uphold throughout my discussion. Extending the closing argument of *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* I continue

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Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 189–224.

91.

Malabou, *New Wounded*.

to defend the thesis that the only valid philosophical path today lies in the elaboration of a new materialism that would precisely refuse to envisage the least separation, not only between the brain and thought but also between the brain and the unconscious.

It is thus such a materialism, as the basis for a *new philosophy of spirit*, that determined my definition of cerebrality as an axiological principle entirely articulated in terms of the formation and deformation of neuronal connections.⁹²

In Malabou's elaboration, Lacan is criticizing Lévi-Strauss and other forms of structuralism for "for confusing 'structure' with the form of the brain. [...] in accordance with the form called materialist in the eighteenth-century sense, the doublet, and not even the inner lining (*doublure*)."⁹³ Malabou argues that "a certain coincidence between symbolic structure and cerebral structure would be the sign, according to Lacan, of a 'primary materialism'.⁹⁴ She goes on to adumbrate that her project has been to try to come to terms with the disdain of psychoanalysis for the location of the symbolic in the cerebral.⁹⁵

As regards how this new materialism relates to the symbolic, Malabou says that

The 'symbolic' is obviously not far away, since the elementary form of the brain is the emotional and logical core where the processes of auto-affection constitute all identity and all history.⁹⁶

In this argument, there is a certain slippage, which Freud or even Lacan would doubtless identify as the system of Perception-Consciousness or in transference; that is to say, while Malabou goes on to elaborate this fundamental question of the history and identity of the subject being constructed through its cerebrality, and the radical possibility of the destruction of this history and identity through damage or major restructuring of the cerebrum (what Malabou calls destructive plasticity),⁹⁷ this does not answer the question that Malabou has

92. Malabou, *New Wounded*, 211–2; emphasis in original.

93. Malabou, *Les nouveaux blessés*, 341; my translation.

94. Ibid. 342; my translation.

95. Lacan's contempt for this materialism in *Seminar X* (2004) is expressed through the pun on *doublet*, either a waistcoat or empirico-transcendental double, and *doublure*, the lining. If I am reading this section correctly, Lacan is by no means denying the *location* of the psyche (and perhaps partly the symbolic) in the brain, but rather that the material structure of the brain *determines* it.

96. Malabou, *New Wounded*, 212.

effectively raised: How does one access this new materiality, and how is it different from previous conceptions of materiality? Furthermore, if the symbolic is not absent from this scene, where is it, how did it get there, and how does it stay there? The answer to the last of these questions is evidently, for Malabou, the structure of the brain itself comes to be adequate to the symbolic, and thus this would also account for the first. The maintenance or donational plasticity of that symbolic, however, is not really addressed.

Conclusion: The Return of Metaphor
and the Plasticity of the World

Thus, we return to the question of the symbolic split between the plastic and graphic components of thought. There is a danger here that Malabou falls into the same trap that Lacan accuses Lévi-Strauss of blindly stumbling into – namely, confusing structure with the structure of the brain. Indeed, this remains the post-Kantian problem *par excellence*: What do we do in the absence of a transcendental guarantor, if we cannot access the thing in itself? Malabou is correct when she claims that we are in need of a new materialism, but this new philosophy of the spirit, which Malabou says is based on this new materialism, seems – so far – to fall short. Firstly, there does not appear to be a dialectical movement between the cerebrality and the symbolic elaborated in any of her books on neuroscience; the relation of this “coincidence” between symbolic structure and cerebral structure seems to be missing. This affirmation of not the slightest gap between brain and thinking, between neuronal and unconscious, does not seem to admit the differentiation between different forms of knowledge, or rather her plasticities end up becoming too lumped together. If this is a new philosophy of spirit, then how does the speculative content unfold to form this new materialism? Are we to presume that this co-incidence of symbolic and cerebral structure is merely coincidental? In the presentation of these models of neuronal functioning as images, or as the

97.

“If the brain designates the set of ‘cerebral functions,’ cerebrality would be the specific word for the causal value of the damage inflicted upon these functions—that is, upon their capacity to determine the course of psychic life” (Malabou, *New Wounded*, 2).

activation of discrete patterns of workspace neurons, does not the problem of representation (and of text) remain?

The problem with this elaboration of plasticity is that Malabou attempts to “grasp the whole,” while limiting the metaphorical and disseminative properties of plasticity itself. This material coincidence between symbolic structure and brain structure unfolds not dialectically but metaphorically, even *anametaphorically*; I use this neologism to denote a *dy-namis* of the figure that acts recursively.⁹⁸ That is to say, rather than a mirroring effect between the model and the psyche, there is a (re)turn or recursivity that precisely articulates the relation between symbolic and cerebral structure, but this is not a return of proportion or analogy. We can see this easily enough in the turns of the rhetoric that Lacan adopts in working through his “primary materialism” in relation to Lévi-Strauss. A materialism that does not take into account the laterality and depth of the figure⁹⁹ is not a properly rigorous post-Kantian materialism but a plenitude.

Akin to Douglas Hofstadter’s “strange loop,”¹⁰⁰ plasticity as the sensible translation of an *economy* of sensible translation¹⁰¹ already includes a recursive definition. To give plasticity, the critical force in relation to neuroscience that Malabou seemingly wishes, it would be beneficial to return to this earlier, more classically philosophical definition, and stage a confrontation with the modulational plasticity and the historicity of the brain. This, clearly, would also involve *plasticities* rather than plasticity as a unified whole – to deconstruct plasticity by showing the internal tensions in the varying applications of the term. In some ways, this could be to make plasticity more plastic, more *speculative* in the way it unfolds in relation to individual contexts.

This brings us back to the question of the symbolic, which in Malabou’s *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* effectively takes the form of post-Fordist capital and its “mirroring” in

98. Malabou cites Michel de Certeau (*The New Wounded*, 35) to argue that the operations of the psyche are rhetorical but never goes further in relating this to plasticity.

99. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*.

100. Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Douglas R. Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

101. Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 7.

the brain. Evidently, in asking for a critique of “neuronal ideology” Malabou also implicitly asks for an ideological critique of the structure of plasticity itself, in all its forms – not just the figure of neuronal plasticity. As was implied when discussing Barthes’ reading of “plastic” in *Mythologies*, in plasticity Malabou has highlighted “the spirit of the times,” and that the plasticity of plastic is the very idea of its own material; there remains a hypotypotic link between the sensory material of plastic and its adoption as the form of post-Fordist capital.

I would suggest that the concept of plasticity wants to be more plural than Malabou seems to allow. The plasticity of the very concept of plasticity is its elaboration of a new materiality: there are many plasticities and they are contingent upon their transcendence by the figure; however, that transcendence is not that of a Platonic form but the excess of a relationship to the sensory that cannot be mastered. Rather than there not being the slightest difference between brain and the unconscious there is a rhetorical fold – the figure – that gives laterality and depth to the psyche.

What then of the question this article began with: How might we see a thought? We have seen that neuronal plasticity is by no means a literal adequation between brain and world, that there is a split between brain and thinking given by its very plasticity, the structure of the brain itself is made plastic by and as the very possibility of thought. This is at the center of the liberation promised to us by Malabou in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* but which is denied by the argument that there is no separation between brain and the unconscious in *The New Wounded*. The potential to rewrite and reconfigure itself must necessarily lie in the difference between brain and thought (including the unconscious). To adapt one of Malabou’s favorite phrases from the *Future of Hegel*, this relation must always work in at least two times at once. That is to say, since by Malabou’s own analysis thought restructures the brain, we must consider thought as promised to the future structure of the brain, rather than that of the present. Perhaps the future of plasticity lies more in *The Future of Hegel* than it does in Malabou’s more recent work.

An important line of investigation could be to complete the project outlined by *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* and which is at times approached by the analysis of PTSD and the psychic-cerebral effects of the dissociative (in the double sense of dislocation and the Thatcherite affirmation that there is no such thing as society) and de-realizing power of capitalism in *The New Wounded*. In order to do this, we must further interrogate the plasticity of our world, and how the plasticity of the figure and the figure of plasticity becomes neutered by the plasticity of capital – a task that requires returning to the figure and how the symbolic might become or be becoming cerebral. That is to say, acknowledging the “contamination” of plasticity by that which it seeks to act upon, acknowledging its figurality (even in neuroscience), and indeed a certain relation to artificiality might enable us to challenge the stability of its form.

The largely unacknowledged recursivity of Malabou’s elaboration of plasticity offers another possibility for future research – in relation to both the temporality and the recursivity of neuronal plasticity. This could work in relation to Douglas Hofstadter’s “strange loops” and also as regards the flattening of Deleuze’s assertion that “the brain is adequate to the world.” It would require a different reading of Deleuze in relation to neuroscience than the focus on “affect” Malabou presents in *Self and Emotional Life* (2013). This reading should examine Deleuze’s attempts to deprive the brain as the sole site of thinking, and deconstruct the hierarchy between thinking and feeling that this focus on the brain entails – in the very chapter from *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (1989) from which Malabou cites the footnote as regards the “adequation” of brain and world Deleuze claims “[t]here is as much thought in the body as there is shock and violence in the brain. *There is an equal amount of feeling in both of them.*”¹⁰² This is a position backed up by neuropsychanalysis, as evinced, for example, by Solms and Turnbull¹⁰³ – a more *dynamic* position than Malabou’s reading.

102.

103.

Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 205.Mark Solms & Oliver Turnbull, *The Brain and the Inner World: An Introduction to the Neuroscience of Subjective Experience* (New York: Other Press, 2002).

Deleuze is trying to destabilize not only a mind-body split, but its carry-over into biology, with the brain taken as a mysterious “black box” of consciousness, still displaced from the body. A critique that could also potentially be leveled at Malabou’s focus on “cerebrality” and a brain which is largely isolated from the body. This isolation from the body, and from the inner and outer worlds of the brain,¹⁰⁴ is also a problem for the ability of plasticity to challenge the “reality” of the artifice of connexionist rhetoric and its relationship with neuronal plasticity – both as a biopolitical scientific discourse and as the construction of our brains’ own historicity – because this is essential for the forms maintained by neuronal plasticity.

As we have seen, Malabou’s work implies a greater range of plasticities than she has yet developed, and these need to be set in speculative confrontation with each other. We do not know what a rigorously Hegelian neuroscience would look like, but perhaps it would be more plastic, more open to being reformed, than the elaboration of neuronal plasticity has been so far – and perhaps more capable of reforming ourselves as neuroscientific biopolitical “subjects” and thus the plasticity of our world, more capable of enabling plastic subjects to form themselves. A plasticity that acknowledged and analyzed its own plurality, recursivity, and figurality – particularly in more explicit *confrontation* with biology and neurobiology – might indeed serve as a genuine rival to deconstruction, and then, perhaps, a plastic future might appear a more beneficial one.

104.

Ibid.

Grzegorz Czemieli

Plastic Cartographies: Map and Territory in Catherine Malabou and Ecopoetics

Introduction: Crusoe's Brain

After Robinson Crusoe returned to England – as Elizabeth Bishop imagines in her poetic postscript to Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel – he became disillusioned and disgruntled over the loss of the desert island that had been his home for so long. Upon reading about a new volcanic island being born and named, he disaffectedly remarks that “my poor old island's still / un-rediscovered, un-renamable.”¹ First published in *The New Yorker* in 1971, “Crusoe in England” was later included in Bishop's last collection, *Geography III* (1976), whose title confirms the geographical dimension of her work, later elaborated upon extensively by numerous scholars. Bishop's preoccupation with topographical detail and cartography intersects with questions of identity and subjectivity. Looking back upon his life, the aging Crusoe seems captivated by the notion of islands, which haunt him in his dreams, manifesting themselves in nightmarish visions of “infinities / of islands, islands spawning islands” – an archipelago he would be doomed to study eternally, “registering their flora, / their fauna, their

1.

Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 182.

geography.”² Ultimately, he concludes, these islands have come to permeate his very self:

My blood was full of them; my brain
bred islands. But that archipelago
has petered out. I’m old.³

The sense of his island falling into oblivion, despite his lifelong efforts to chart it, is linked to the tension that looms large over Bishop’s oeuvre, as announced in “The Map,” which opens her first poetry collection, *North & South* (1946). It is the tension between the map and the territory. This double figure has proven ripe in meaning, explored throughout the twentieth century in all of the humanities, popping up in literary studies, philosophy, and human geography. Bishop’s famous declaration that “[m]ore delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors”⁴ remains a touchstone for many thinkers who have taken up the theme of mapmaking, identifying it as a fundamental trope in both epistemology and the arts, including poetry.

The retrospective nature of “Crusoe in England” not only embraces the conclusion that maps are artificial constructs, and are therefore bound to have one foot planted in fiction, but foregrounds their temporal dimension as well. The lyrical subject feels that his “un-rediscovered” island is sinking into oblivion, falling off the edge of the charted world. “Crusoe,” Katie Ford observes, “has the desire for his island to be on the map of the other – not just any map, but a map continuously corrected.”⁵ In old age he suffers from a profound sense of a loss of the world, which has “petered out,” leaving him emptied, bored, and brain-dumb. In this sense, as Ford argues further, “[h]e wants someone to chart not only geographical islands, but also the islands of the mind.”⁶ England does not seem to offer him much consolation and he fails to revive in

2. *Ibid.*, 185.

3. *Ibid.*, 186.

4. *Ibid.*, 5.

5. Katie Ford, “Visibility Is Poor: Elizabeth Bishop’s Obsessive Imagery and Mystical Unsayings,” *Poets.org*, April 13, 2007, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/visibility-poor-elizabeth-bishops-obsessive-imagery-and-mystical-unsaying>.

6. *Ibid.*

himself that creative spark which allowed him to make an actual home on a remote desert island. In other words, his cartographic imagination is running dry as his map fades and withers. “The creation of poetry and the landscape of the island,” Ann Marie Fallon writes, “are inextricably linked throughout the poem.”⁷ Crusoe’s brain no longer “breeds” new geographies and the colors of his maps fade as he himself is left mourning the departure of his old self.

The problem posed by Bishop is whether there exists a form to hold Crusoe’s island in its splendid detail and simultaneously account for the distance produced by having departed from it. Throughout her work we encounter a fundamental question: Is it possible to develop a mode of mapping to give justice to the incredible detail of the world, and yet somehow account for the changes it is undergoing, both in itself and as an imprint upon the mind of the experiencing subject? Bishop approached this issue both from a thematic perspective – examining various topographies of imagination and positioning them on the backdrop of the larger world – as well as from a formal point of view, attempting to develop a kind of poetic form to pose this problem effectively. She turned to the metaphor of cartography, trying to find out what kind of poetic “projection” could account not only for the territory itself, but also for the mapmakers’ complex and shifting relationship to it.

The subject of the mind and its relationship to the environment – manifesting itself in a special brain-cartography and poetically elaborated in “Crusoe in England” – could be framed in terms developed within two areas of theoretical inquiry: on the one hand, the philosophy of Catherine Malabou, and on the other, the discourse of eco-poetics, a thriving new idiom in literary criticism. These two theoretical positions, in turn, share an important impulse, namely the desire to probe how alternative, more sustainable modes of engagement with the natural environment could be ushered in. Since Catherine Malabou fleshes out a specifically cartographic account of brain development and advances the

7.

Ann Marie Fallon, *Global Crusoe: Comparative Literature, Postcolonial Theory and Transnational Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2016), 21.

notion of a “brain-fiction,” this essay attempts to trace a connection between her philosophy and the fundamental tenet of ecopoetics: the idea that poetry’s creative use of metaphor makes it capable of reconfiguring our understanding of the world precisely by bringing to our attention what Malabou calls “plasticity,” allowing us to identify her notion of “brain fiction” with the workings of poetry. In this light, reading and writing become powerful tools that not only facilitate a deeper awareness of humanity’s embeddedness in the world, but also help model relationships with others and the natural environment. Therefore, taking her cue from ecopoetics, Malabou could be seen as providing a valuable theoretical underpinning for a new ecologically-inflected concept of writing – a “plastic cartography” – in which we transform ourselves by renewing the relationship with the brain-world as our basic environment.

Cartography and the Brain: Catherine Malabou

In her seminal *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* Malabou elaborates on the concept of “plasticity,” developed at the intersection of philosophy and neuroscience. She traces the various historical notions of the human brain and offers her own account of how plasticity applies to the formation of the brain throughout human life. At the outset, Malabou defines the “plastic art of the brain” as the “establishing of [neural] connections” and “modeling them” in contact with one’s environment.⁸ Rejecting the cybernetic concept of the brain as a central processing unit, she embraces a networked model of the nervous system, likened by Marc Jeannerod to a “multidimensional map.”⁹ This plastic map is, in her view, “precisely the form of our world,” although, for this very reason, we fail to notice it and, consequently, can remain oblivious to the power relations inscribed in it, which are thus perpetuated in social life.¹⁰ Turning to films by Alain Resnais and Stanley Kubrick, she further asserts their “landscapes

8. Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 19–20.

9. *Ibid.*, 35.

10. *Ibid.*, 38–9.

are mental states” or “cartographies” that bring to our attention “the identity of the brain and the world,” or simply the unity of the “brain-world.”¹¹ Thus, the “delocalized” brain is not just a commanding organ but rather an archipelago of “multiple interconnected functional spaces, always in movement and susceptible to self-modification,”¹² while its fundamental feature is the “power to configure the world.”¹³

Given the above, it becomes clear why Malabou wishes to develop a kind of philosophical language that would account for the brain’s work and liberate it from those world-configurations that stifle its operations. It is this search for a discourse in which “the neuronal man” could “know how to speak of himself” that Malabou’s philosophical ambition intersects with Bishop’s. Both employ the metaphor of map (brain) and territory (world) to show that humanity is effectively shaped by its environment and cannot be detached from it in the way that the allegedly objective projects of scientific cartography can lead us to believe. At the same time, it is crucial to account for these formative processes and become aware of the brain’s plasticity, to stage resistance against those tendencies that immobilize the brain in terms of both ethics and aesthetics. These two dimensions in fact collapse into one another. The ethical dimension, Malabou stresses, would consist in “the political emancipation of the brain,” which is necessary to overcome the political inertia that leads to what she has called the loss of affects – particularly loss of wonder¹⁴ – a kind of malady from which Crusoe clearly suffers. Bishop, in turn, was particularly interested in a concentrated, “wondrous” use of detail to “entrance” readers, rewiring their mental mapping systems so that, to quote her famous “Darwin letter,” they would be sent “sliding giddily off into the unknown,”¹⁵ into what Malabou has called “a new world of questioning.”¹⁶

11. Ibid., 39.

12. Ibid., 43.

13. Ibid., 39.

14. Catherine Malabou and Adrian Johnston, *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 62.

15. See: Zachariah Pickard, “Natural History and Epiphany: Elizabeth Bishop’s Darwin Letter,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 50, no. 3 (2004): 281.

16. Malabou, *What Should We Do?* 54.

The unknown that Bishop mentions can be fruitfully juxtaposed with Malabou's concept of "neuro-literature."¹⁷ Elaborating on the thoughts of Michel Foucault and Maurice Blanchot, she posits that neurobiology is actually the "absolute outside of literature that gives the outside in literature its effective meaning."¹⁸ Thus, the brain-world that emerges from a given literary work as its mental geography – as in Crusoe's endless chains of islands – has to be understood as a brain topography mediated through language. Blanchot's death-like, neutral "space of literature" is transformed, in her account, into "the very expression of the traumatized psyche and, in any case, of the brain's fundamental fragility."¹⁹ In this light, as she argues, fiction is what the brain creates in order to experience itself, because it can have no real access to the neuronal make-up that is preverbal in nature.²⁰ No self-reflection of the brain is possible without invention, i.e. by developing what Slavoj Žižek called "a fiction observing its own fiction."²¹ Therefore, her attempt is not a reductionist view of literature as a form of expression entirely determined by unconscious physical and chemical processes inside the brain. She more perceives it as a supreme fiction that calls our attention to the existence of the brain, which is otherwise entirely internal and inaccessible. Indeed, if we assume that "neural experience develops itself as literature,"²² then literature acquires a fundamental role in identifying the plastic histories of the brain, providing it with the experimental field in which mental cartographies can be acknowledged, interpreted, and shaped.

These observations can be supplemented with the perspective offered by ecopoetics – a relatively new approach in literary studies, which aims to examine literature's relationship with the environment. As Tom Bristow argues, ecopoetics is fundamentally engaged with geography in the broadest (and quite literal) sense as "earth-writing," i.e. recording the ties between the human and the non-human. Because poetry is a mode in which "we are abnormally sensitive creatures,"²³

17. Catherine Malabou, "What is Neuro-Literature?" *SubStance* 45, no. 2 (2016).
 18. *Ibid.*, 79.
 19. *Ibid.*, 81.
 20. *Ibid.*, 81.
 21. *After: ibid.*, 87.
 22. *Ibid.*, 81.
 23. Tom Bristow, *The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.

it foregrounds the fragility and plasticity that Malabou emphasizes, especially in relation to humanity's embeddedness in its environment. Further, dovetailing with Malabou's call to resist the political by reviving the ecological imagination, eco-poetics urges us "to reflect on how we imagine spaces and formations beyond the purview of the sense horizon, at pace enough to notice and acknowledge discrete entities and the emergence of our earth others."²⁴ This task becomes all the more pertinent in the face of ongoing ecological crises and in the context of the Anthropocene, a geological era in which humanity has become the major force changing the face of earth, and thus one that calls for more responsible ways of home-making on a planet that cannot sustain us under the prevalent anthropocentric politics. To achieve this goal, eco-poetics must work closely with new ontologies, particularly materialist ones, which help reimagine the world as an ecosystem in which humanity is basically dependent on the non-human. Due to poetry's potential to forge new metaphors and subjectivities through extensive and processual manipulation of the lyrical "I," it offers a linguistic laboratory where such novel discourses can be developed; ones that, firstly, "reaffirm the world in its complexity," and secondly, "account for our accounting of the human's place within this world."²⁵ To achieve this goal, however, eco-poetics cannot resort to idyllic, conservatively pastoral views of nature, but must seek to foster a new consciousness, utilizing the constructive component of plasticity in order to devise lifestyles and ethics of care that promote sustainable alternatives to the exploitative capitalism of the neoliberal regime.

A reading of Malabou's work alongside eco-poetic criticism allows us to tap poetry for the model of cartographic operations she identifies as being at work in the brain. Crusoe's situation is paradigmatic in this respect and facilitates an epistemology of the kind of mapping that is being termed "plastic cartography." The map here is understood

24.

Ibid., 9.

25.

Ibid., 12.

as a process in which subjectivity is born and transformed through the metaphorization of territory as brain-territory. As such, the metaphor does not merely produce an image or concept, it actively shapes the brain-world by landscaping it. Crusoe's brain, in this sense, *is* a brain-island created by his old dwelling place imprinting itself in his mind and changing it over time. Malabou's understanding of plasticity as both positive and negative dovetails with the argument made by ecopoetics: that developing better metaphors and refining our mental maps of connections with humans and non-humans can help achieve a transformation of subjectivity akin to processes identified in poetry as the creation of the lyrical persona. Yet here the aesthetic aim of creating a believable literary character is fused with the ethical one of discovering how one can actually change to accommodate a broader, more hospitable concept of humanity enmeshed with the entirety of the natural environment, of which it is a part.

Lyrical and Subjective Plasticity

Ecopoetics points out that in order to adjust to the realities of the Anthropocene new modes of engagement with the world are necessary, which must entail a shift in how the human subject is construed. Instead of attending to the paradigm of human dominance, which is clearly exemplified in imperialist cartographies that posit the natural world as a repository of resources and a system of nodes for capitalist expansion, ecopoetry advocates the rise of subjectivities to thoroughly acknowledge their rootedness in earthly materiality. In line with recent developments in more-than-human ontologies, the human subject needs to conceive of itself as a site where both human and non-human forces criss-cross and equally contribute to our subjecthood. Bristow, for example, proposes we speak of "selfhood as Worldliness" – a more capacious view of humanity that shares its environment with non-human others and relinquishes the "conquering gaze" in order to "rethink our personhood within a larger domain of life."²⁶ In this light, a new, more ecological account of the *oikos* (home) sets the foundation for developing a deeper sense of care for a world in which humans no longer occupy a privileged position, but

26.

Ibid., 6.

are one of many agents operating in a vast network of interrelations that extends far beyond the horizons of instrumental and reductive reason. We can no longer consider ourselves as “separate or authoritative,” but ought to embrace a revised view of humanity woven into a “continuum” shared with others.²⁷ To this end, it becomes necessary to seek “particular strategies for stepping outside of the self,” in an attempt to overcome the limitations of narrowly conceived and short-sighted human domination.²⁸ Bristow openly claims that this can be achieved in poetry, where a “lyrical meta-consciousness” could, at least to some extent, allow “the environment to speak itself” by opening up the lyrical subject to the flows of a larger reality to which we lay no ultimate claim of possession or control.

Malabou helps to theorize this by introducing the concept of a brain plasticity that facilitates subjective metamorphoses – this she terms “transsubjectivization,” with reference to the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel. In an interview with Noëlle Vahanian, she emphasizes that this process does not necessarily mean we need to become entirely different or appropriate difference from the other; it rather involves tracing an internal trajectory in an effort to “open a space within yourself between two forms of yourself,” enabling a “journey within oneself” that results in transformation.²⁹ This “spacing” of personality could “produce a new self” precisely by embracing plasticity, which releases the potential for change, both for the better (in efforts to transsubjectivize in the face of the Anthropocene, developing a new consciousness) and for the worse (as she underlines in her numerous elaborations on trauma, old age, Alzheimer’s disease etc.).³⁰ The metaphors she employs to discuss this – notably, “spacing” and “journeying” – allow us to align her conclusions with the aforementioned cartographic metaphor, which casts the problem in terms of developing novel maps of the self – i.e. poetic brain-fictions that foreground the cartographic unity of

27. Ibid., 16.
 28. Ibid., 16.
 29. Noëlle Vahanian, “A Conversation with Catherine Malabou,” *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 9, no. 1 (2008): 5.
 30. Cf. Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

brain and environment – and acknowledging a wider reality to which we continuously try to attune. The spacing of selves poetry facilitates will be revisited later in discussing work by Nigel Forde, who demonstrates how poetry can achieve this goal by working through memories and past selves, less shattering subjective unity than expanding the self’s capacity to contain more than just oneself, opening up to the world.

This goal is also expounded by Félix Guattari in *The Three Ecologies*, where he overtly voices the necessity for “continual reinvention” of both “individual and collective subjective assemblages” in cartographic terms:

As in painting or literature, the concrete performance of these cartographies requires that they evolve and innovate, that they open up new futures, without their authors having prior recourse to assured theoretical principles or to the authority of a group, a school or an academy.³¹

To employ the theoretical language he developed with Gilles Deleuze, one could say that it is becoming paramount to seek “lines of flight” to guide us away from pre-established political forms perpetuating the “nightmarish” status quo that throws a “stifling cloak of silence over the emancipatory struggles of women, and of the new proletariat: the unemployed, the ‘marginalized,’ immigrants.”³² To chart “escape routes” and novel “existential indices,” it is essential to work on “mapping out the cartographic reference points of the three ecologies”: social, mental, and environmental.³³ These demand reintegration through more holistic map-making strategies, which would counteract the erosion of human solidarity in the face of the migration crisis and the environmental crisis, as well as the crisis of the political and ecological imagination.

Guattari further develops these ideas in *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, where he endeavors to formulate speculative modeling systems to exceed traditionally understood subjectivities of individual monads. Instead of relying on ready-made formulas that imprint themselves on the brain (e.g. the “flexibility”

31. Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 40.

32. *Ibid.*, 44.

33. *Ibid.*, 41.

analyzed by Malabou), “schizoanalytic meta-modeling will choose to map compositions of the unconscious, contingent topographies, evolving with social formations, technologies, arts, sciences, etc.”³⁴ Overcoming rigid mappings that trap contemporary subjectivities in the “flexible” regime of illusory freedom, new cartographies of the self must be produced *actively* because they cannot arise spontaneously. The ultimate goal would be to reclaim the “power of existential production” to facilitate the imagining of new existential territories as a more inclusive and democratic *oikos* that welcomes and makes room for all humans, as well as our non-human earthly cohabitants. As such, Guattari’s schizoanalytic map-making constitutes a full-blown answer to Malabou’s question about what we should be doing with our brains.

Taking the cartographic metaphor further, we should question whether such schizoanalytic remappings might aspire to produce a total vision. Guattari seems wary of any such prospects. Does it mean that mapping has to limit itself to the immediate habitat? Geoff King tackles this question in *Mapping Reality*, arguing that this is not a matter of choosing between the two perspectives – the imperial, all-encompassing bird’s-eye view of technological and political dominance on the one hand, and the parochial, idyllic, local, and place-bound view of one’s immediate milieu on the other. Invoking Fredric Jameson’s concept of “cognitive mapping,” he concludes that neither seem to work as long as they remain “a simple act of mimetic representation.”³⁵ What is at stake here is not to choose between the global and the local, but rather to acknowledge *both* the inherent situatedness of all mappings, and the necessity to think of the whole in relation to which one is positioned, although this totality cannot be simply laid down in reductive terms of national boundaries or routes along which capital flows in the global financial system. Thus, it is crucial to “blur the distinction between map and territory” in order to “destabilize this relationship, to acknowledge the socially constructed character of the mappings within which our lives are oriented”; this also entails

34. Félix Guattari, *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, trans. Andrew Goffey (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 22.

35. Geoff King, *Mapping Reality: An Exploration of Cultural Cartographies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 15.

creating the possibility to change, all the while bearing in mind that “we should not underestimate the power with which particular mappings can continue to impose themselves, even against our will.”³⁶ One mode in which such a “destabilizing” can be achieved is poetry, which foregrounds all of these crucial tensions. Springing from its rootedness in the particularities of the place, poetry can show us how the meta-modeling of the mental map takes place. By engaging with metaphor, however, poetry can suggest or imply larger totalities that extend beyond the purview of the conceptual frames imprinted in us by the dominant aesthetic regime. Finally, through its ability to subvert the lyrical subject, poetry can consciously sculpt blueprints for future selfhoods.

The Sculpting of the Synaptic Self and the Lyrical Brain of History

It is in Catherine Malabou’s concept of the self that the cartographic metaphor is reworked to transform the traditional understanding of the figure of map and territory. “The ‘self,’” she writes, “is a synthesis of all the plastic processes at work in the brain; this permits us to *hold together and unify the cartography of networks*.”³⁷ The first map produced by the brain is one related to the process of the brain representing itself. What emerges in this process of self-mapping is the “blurring of the borders between brain and psyche.”³⁸ As these processes intensify and extend onto the realm of objects, further layers are added to the mappings. Interestingly, as Malabou proceeds to argue, taking her cue from Antonio Damasio, these proto-cartographies reveal the operation of “something like a poetic activity.”³⁹ This “cerebral poetry” would be responsible for the transition from the neuronal level to the mental, thus providing a bridge between the (mental) map and the (neuronal) territory. In a turn of phrase that brings to mind claims made in biosemiotics, Malabou concludes that in the very networked character of interconnected neurons there is something at work that makes them predisposed to express meaning.

36. Ibid., 16–7.
 37. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 58; emphasis added.
 38. Ibid., 60.
 39. Ibid.

This, however, is possible only thanks to the brain's plasticity, which, as we have noted, can have both positive and negative effects. After all, as Malabou often recalls, "plastic" can also indicate a "plastic explosive," which testifies to the potentially destructive, change-inducing character of plasticity. In mild doses, however, these explosive occurrences act like "creative bursts that progressively transform nature into freedom."⁴⁰ Thus, by offering the possibility of introducing discontinuities and gaps in the smooth surface of the brain, shaping and molding it, neuroplasticity can be seen as an agent of change or reform. It is precisely this function that has often been attributed to poetry, which uses language to subvert our perceptual habits, introducing obstacles and providing challenges to sense-making mechanisms, thus inclining us to look at the world from a fresh perspective and reconsider the hierarchies that we have come to follow blindly. Such modes of "defamiliarization" (a term coined by Victor Shklovsky), "retardation," "estrangement" and "weirding" (Graham Harman's concept) have been the staple of poetic language since literature began. These effects contribute to less a purely mimetic representation of the reality "as it is" than a way of counteracting the closure of the gap between the world and language. This feature of poetry clearly dovetails with Jameson's predilection for non-representative modes of mapping, and with Malabou's contention that the one thing we should definitely do with our brains is "not to replicate the caricature of the world," by which she means the current, unsustainable, and destructive form of global capitalism.⁴¹ In order to do so, she concludes, new mental maps are necessary, as they would facilitate establishing a new relationship between ourselves and our brains: one that invites a world to come, rather than the one that wishes to perpetuate itself in a cycle of self-destructive repetition compulsion.⁴²

40.

41.

42.

Ibid., 74.

Ibid., 78.

Ibid., 82.

The “brain-world to come” that needs to be ushered in with great responsibility and care is, of course, related to redefining what Malabou calls “the history of mentality”: instead of considering it from a purely speciesist, egotistical perspective of humanity-as-crown-of-being, she advocates acknowledging that our mentality crucially includes “the materiality of inorganic nature, the soil, the rocks, the mountains, the rivers, the earth.”⁴³ Here she attempts to embrace the “geological becoming of the human” – a gesture she shares with thinkers like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as with Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, and Donna Haraway.⁴⁴ Despite differences in their positions, the general and pivotal tendency they share is one fundamental, ecological premise: we should not think of the brain as existing *in* the environment but rather consider the brain *as* an environment.⁴⁵ One cannot underestimate the significance of this philosophical gesture: annulling the partitioning of the environment along the dividing lines of nature-culture, human-nonhuman, subject-object etc. involves a radical democratization of ontology (dethroning humanity and acknowledging its rootedness in the entirety of the ecosystem it is a part of) as well as a reconsideration of agency and causality. These issues are being widely discussed in the humanities today as a sense of urgency sets in, due to the impending catastrophes caused by man-made climate change and the rampant growth of unchecked capitalist schemes.

As it turns out, one particularly valuable ally in this is literature. As Yves Citton observes in an essay that combines ecological considerations with questions of literature’s possible role in the face of the Anthropocene, the “Earthbound” – as Bruno Latour calls those who embrace the fact that “the individual *is* its environment”⁴⁶ – should primarily focus on reading and writing literature. She argues that this field is particularly predisposed to aid us in learning to “compose” the world anew by weaving our lives and values together in accordance with novel coordinates and projections. Refusing to be mere

43. Catherine Malabou, “The Brain of History, or, The Mentality of the Anthropocene,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 1 (2017): 51.
 44. Cf. Anne B. Reinertsen, *Becoming Earth: A Post Human Turn in Educational Discourse Collapsing Nature/Culture Divides* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016).
 45. Malabou, “The Brain of History,” 52.
 46. Yves Citton, “Fictional Attachments and Literary Weavings in the Anthropocene,” *New Literary History* 47 (2016): 320; emphasis preserved.

land-surveyors or traditional cartographers, the Earthbound need literature as an “agent of worlding” that has the poetic capacity “to express our perspectives of becoming.”⁴⁷ This is not just about writing but also reading, or “literary forms of attention” as Citton puts it, since it is vital to “delay projecting our preexisting categorization upon the environment, in order to become more attentive to our milieu’s weaker signals.”⁴⁸ Just like in the eco-poetic framework, literature – our perhaps even more broadly speaking: “literary attention” – is the medium that binds us to the Earth, making us “Earth-bound.” Invoking Latour’s concept of “loops,” Citton points out that the key shift would consist in abandoning the perspective of domination, which fixes places from a detached perspective unbound from Earth, and embracing a mode of thinking that favors “loops” which start from the landscape and come back to us. These new meridians would offer a different grid that might form the starting point for novel mappings for the Anthropocene. Citton asserts that the literary answer to this is to trace how these “‘entangled and retroactive loops’ that weave our common lives must originate ‘from the landscape back to us.’”⁴⁹ Loops of this kind are primarily meant to foreground how our actions have consequences on a global scale, e.g. the pollution of the oceans that begins with throwing away a plastic cup, or the man-made, hurricane-spawning global climate change that begins with taking a gas-powered car to work.

Loops offer different grids for imagining earth and map-making, effectively overcoming what Tim Ingold has called the “cartographic illusion.”⁵⁰ Taking an anthropological perspective, he demonstrates how “map-making” (in his argument, identical to detached cartography) may create “the appearance that the structure of the map springs directly from the structure of the world, as though the mapmaker served merely to mediate a transcription from one to the other.”⁵¹

47. Ibid., 321.
 48. Ibid., 321.
 49. Ibid., 322.
 50. Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000).
 51. Ibid., 234.

This illusion is dangerous because it “brackets out” two important processes: “wayfinding” (movement of people) and “mapping” (inscribing this movement in gesture or writing), ultimately presenting a world that appears to us as “a theatrical stage from which all the actors have mysteriously disappeared [...] devoid of life.”⁵² Ingold contrasts this with mappings practiced by North American Indians or the Inuit, whose maps “grow” and “develop,” exemplifying the plasticity operative at their very heart. These maps do not suggest that the world is an empty container in which we move, and whose resources we exploit for our narrow purposes, but rather convey the sense that it is a world in the making, one where care, attention, and responsibility are necessary to make homes among many other inhabitants, within a thriving ecology that can only exist as a whole.

Malabou’s commitment to the concept of plasticity also involves a reconsideration of writing in *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, where she postulates plasticity or “continuous implosion of form” as the motor-scheme that supersedes the linguistic-graphic one.⁵³ In this work, she traces the transformation of writing through the release of an artistic energy that (in Lyotard’s words) “crumples and creases the text and makes a work from it”; this deconstructive energy would be in fact facilitated by plasticity, which in this account becomes the actual form of writing.⁵⁴ This simultaneously calls for a plastic mode of reading, which “is a matter of causing the form that comes *after presence* to arise in works.”⁵⁵ This form could be also understood as a map left as an imprint that heralds the difference between the original experience and its record, the spacing discussed above. One caveat she adds, however, is that this imprint is not *graphic* but *geo-graphic* because it involves “assemblies, forms, or neuronal populations.”⁵⁶ Therefore, the post-deconstructive lesson that literary studies may draw from this is that purely textual or mechanically deconstructive

52. Ibid., 234.
 53. Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, trans. Carolyn Shread (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 57–9.
 54. Ibid., 56.
 55. Ibid., 57; emphasis preserved.
 56. Ibid., 60; emphasis removed.

readings must yield before a more comprehensive, ecocentric approach that takes into account the neuronal, plastic underpinnings of the text. From this perspective, then, any text undergoes a material or geographic “worlding” through the way in which the environment sculpts the brain and in turn enables a fundamentally poetic “self-sculpturing,” as Hugh J. Silverman puts it. This, he goes on to conclude, is where the significance of Malabou’s “altermondialisation” rests:

Thus to speak with Malabou of an altermondialisation or ‘other-worlding’ is to speak of the multiplicity of individual human bodies-brains and its/their ongoing process of self-fashioning as a sort of self-othering, self-re-forming, one through which the myriad of inter-connections (‘synapses’) within us becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the interconnected world/society/polis/culture outside of us and in which we live.⁵⁷

To observe the process of “other-worlding,” which finally collapses the distinction between map and territory, it might be fruitful to give the floor to poetry, by turning to a case study of a sequence of poems by the York-based poet Nigel Forde, whose works provide an opportunity to observe the concept of plastic cartography in practice.

Nigel Forde’s *A Map of the Territory*

As we learn from the blurb, the 2003 volume by Nigel Forde “reflects [his] fascination with the process of change”: his poems “meditate on memory and landscape,” ultimately mapping “both a landscape and the mind that it has shaped.”⁵⁸ In this way, Forde’s poems – especially the eponymous cycle that constitutes the heart of the book – offer a glimpse into the poetic becoming of a mind attuned to the landscape and environment that have imprinted themselves on the brain, forming a lyrical *assemblage*. “Remembered landscapes,” Philip McCardle observes in a review of the collection, “are evoked as transitory, yet permanently ingrained upon the mind, with the empirical and reflective self coloring and giving substance to the moment.”⁵⁹ In this way, we are immediately drawn into the process of mapping as recording

57. Hugh J. Silverman, “Malabou, Plasticity, and the Sculpturing of the Self,” *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 36, no. 2 (2010): 99.

58. Nigel Forde, *A Map of the Territory* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), back cover.

59. Philip McCardle, “Sacred Music.” Review of *A Map of the Territory* by Nigel Forde. *PN Review* 31, no. 1 (2004), http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=2171.

and remembering, with the map being constituted by the brain (as suggested by the book's cover) – which eventually comes to be the brain-world, in the sense Malabou gives the term. In an effort to “put his country boyhood together again” (as Peter Scupham worded it in his endorsement), Forde revisits the environment that has shaped who he is, but in the course of his poetic reconstructions it becomes apparent that this landscape and his selves (past and present) have become enmeshed and indivisible. In this sense, writing poetry would be a mode of mental mapping, insofar as poems chart the world's imprint and the temporal distance separating the formation of the brain from the lyrical enunciation.

The theme of writing-as-cartography has been extensively explored by Peter Turchi, who argues that each and every one of us is involved in “compiling mental atlases” whose vastness precludes their full communication; ultimately, he concludes, “we live in the world those maps create.”⁶⁰ Poetry – or literature in general – could be regarded as a mode in which those things that are “too large to see” can be metaphorically brought forth⁶¹ by employing specific devices, e.g. forms that act as cartographic “geometric projection” that “evokes a world.”⁶² Forde does this by employing regular tercets throughout the sequence, constructing his own set of mapping parameters, and providing a rigid framework that organizes the poetic material much as longitude and latitude do.

Painstakingly registering fleeting details and emotions, Forde's attention is drawn to things the “Ordnance Survey doesn't know”: “the other side of somewhere” or the ecological backdrop whose “taken-for-granted / Plainness is another kind of gift that haunts me.”⁶³ The recurring theme of embeddedness in something much larger conveys the ecopoetic sense of being *of* the environment, not *in* it. As the lyrical subject notes, “I empty myself // Into the night's footsteps”⁶⁴ – an oft-repeated gesture that continuously blurs the boundary between the human subject and the world. “We sing the weave of language and of stone,”

60. Peter Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2004), 139.

61. *Ibid.*, 151.

62. Turchi, *Imagination*, 195.

63. Forde, *A Map of the Territory*, 24.

64. *Ibid.*, 27.

Forde says, embracing the materiality of poetry and foregrounding its home-making dimension.⁶⁵ In the woods, he continues, we “stand [...] beyond metaphor, *within it*.”⁶⁶ This place, “a cool // Forge of meanings and engagements” is the spring of signification; for all meaning is facilitated by one’s entanglement in the environment, as a result of which “memory has landfall in these trees,” as landscape ultimately collapses into its poetic map.⁶⁷

In another turn of metaphor, Forde observes that “we bring home / More than the brittle jigsaws our boots drop / On the doormat.” Indeed, we carry much more than mud on our soles: “The pattern // Of all that will not be patterned; the knowledge / Of something always at our shoulder; the memory / Of cold sky [...] a mirror of clouds.”⁶⁸ That pattern revealed here can be interpreted as a metaphorical coming-to-light of the primary poetic and cartographic processes described by Malabou as the brains’ plastic becoming-world. Meditating on the numerous past “selves” that haunt him through the landscape, Forde opens himself up in a gesture of fundamental vulnerability facilitated by the lyrical mode: “the sauntering home [...] melts into me and is gone.” All boundaries dissolve as a “hedge switchbacks through my chest, three cows / Orbit my head, holly, painlessly, slaps my face.”⁶⁹ Noticing that something is “sifting me,” the lyrical subject ponders on the map-territory division, finally rejecting the dichotomy altogether:

[...] The real

Out there or the real in here? I can sit for ever

Between the two, imagining the truth of either,

Imagining, even, that I need to choose.⁷⁰

There is in fact no choice but to live the map – i.e. the brain – that is shaped by both the environment and itself. Human activity is a continuous mapping and remapping of our engagements

65. Ibid., 31.

66. Ibid., 32; emphasis added.

67. Ibid., 32.

68. Ibid., 33.

69. Ibid., 36.

70. Ibid., 36.

with the world, which in turn imprint themselves and change us. From an eco-poetic perspective, this process is not one of natural or cultural *being* but rather a non-dualistic *joint becoming* whose goal is homemaking. As Forde's sequence draws to a close, he paints a fragile picture of home, which is regarded as "what we make of what light leaves behind / Our eyes, our doors"⁷¹ – a provisional room, a stanza, a poem to warm oneself by, suggesting both the larger world out there, unfathomable and inexhaustible, and the sense of being constituted by it, as it is always a particular place or region that ingrains itself materially in our selves, which is not unique to humans, but also happens to other, non-human beings:

We light our lamps, illumine our small,
Shabby histories while starlings soak
Into the hedge with a noise that says how much
There is of everything and how it matters.⁷²

This passage displays all hallmarks of eco-poetics, as defined by Julia Fiedorczuk and Gerardo Beltrán, who consider it "a practice of homemaking, a way of engaging with other beings [...] with a heightened awareness of material and cosmic dimensions of our being [...] a practice of conscious becoming."⁷³ Through better poetic maps, Forde suggests, we can become more conscious of our past and future becomings, which is necessary in order to account for the plasticity that operates at the very heart of human subjectivity and learn to embrace it.

Importantly, Forde's maps are not merely a matter of rescuing a private history and remedying the loss of a world slipping away. This is not a sentimental exercise in the confessional mode, which redeems a pastoral landscape. As Forde argues in the *Touchstones* sequence from the same collection, utilizing the form of a crown of sonnets, we live in a world that has to be responsibly composed. Without

71.

72.

73.

Ibid., 37.

Ibid., 37.

Julia Fiedorczuk and Gerardo Beltrán, *Ekopoetyka/Ecopoética/Ecopoetics* (Warsaw: Biblioteka Iberyjska, 2015), 273.

heightened attunement to such practices, “[w]e slip through our own fingers / Without a tale for all that is elsewhere.”⁷⁴ In this perspective, poetry can acknowledge both the brain that shapes its own accidents, and the world that speaks through it – a world “brooding imperatives / That adumbrate the present tense accounts / Our lives are written in.”⁷⁵ Poems can never “outflank” reality, but instead produce a “fictive truth we call reality” that allows readers to recognize the “rhyme of unreason locked in every word.”⁷⁶ Failing to acknowledge this, Forde concludes, effectually empties the world due to loss of wonder, making us stumble in the dark, and foreclosing the future, which can be easily “left behind,” leaving us locked in the past invoked only to “prove the temper of the mind.”⁷⁷ In the end, embracing the fragility of past selfhoods brings to focus the necessity to “dream and grow” when “through the dark our footsore futures go.”⁷⁸

In light of the foregoing, it needs to be ascertained that poetry can serve a dual role. On the one hand, it can be regarded as an aesthetic principle that operates on the metaphysical level (as it does in object-oriented philosophy),⁷⁹ acquiring a more universal sense. On the other, however, it needs to be seen as a loose and diversified ensemble of idiosyncratic cultural practices that vary, often wildly, from one place to another, insofar as they express humanity’s diverse relations with place and landscape. In the latter view, poetry does not merely “defamiliarize” reality to produce a certain aesthetic effect, but, by incorporating estrangement, suggests a wider world: greater expanses that escape our mapping and meaning-making efforts, in turn demanding a compositionist mindset to safeguard future becomings. This is closely related to a fundamental openness that allows poetry to embrace the kind of fragility and negativity that inform plasticity’s formative and destructive character. Because, according to Jairus Grove, plasticity is “as capable of destruction as of hope” means that “the collapse of nature and culture is a beginning, not a sufficient

74. Forde, *Territory*, 52.
 75. *Ibid.*, 55.
 76. *Ibid.*, 57.
 77. *Ibid.*, 58.
 78. *Ibid.*, 60.
 79. Cf. Graham Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” *Collapse II* (2007): 171–206.

ending.”⁸⁰ It is a call to face up to negativity, which can be ultimately located within plasticity itself.

Thus, Malabou’s concept of plasticity allows new materialism to embrace a form of negativity. The failure to account for any operation of negativity has been one of the main accusations leveled against this movement, by the likes of Adrian Johnston or Slavoj Žižek. Malabou’s destructive plasticity does not offer simple consolation but foregrounds plasticity’s potential horror (i.e. its potential to transform subjectivity into something it cannot recognize itself), conveying the fragility of both the human brain and its ecological condition of existence. Moreover, her diagnosis regarding numbness as one of today’s key problems is pertinent and can be fruitfully aligned with the “wonder-inducing” practices of poetry. The restitution of wonder – which Malabou sees as the ground for feeling oneself at all⁸¹ – can be achieved in poetry, saving this crucial “affect of the other” from being permanently impaired⁸² and allowing us to lay “the foundation for care.”⁸³

From the present perspective, Malabou’s plasticity emerges as a link that can act as a materialism-based balancing point for three major discourses discussed here: schizoanalysis (with its focus on production of subjectivities), ecopoetics (with its emphasis on home-making as *poiesis*), and new materialism (with its focus on entanglement and material interdependency, leading to a reconsideration of agency and causation). Through plasticity, we can think ecology as a materialist practice of meta-modeling our mental maps through poetic experimentation. This approach facilitates a more holistic and ecocentric view that posits a cartographic “absolute” – a totality of reality irreducible in any anthropocentric fashion, which nevertheless has to be imagined through metaphor in order to grasp the deep entanglement of humanity in its environment. This, in turn, can release the power to imagine better futures.

80. Jairus Grove, “Something Darkly This Way Comes: The Horror of Plasticity in an Age of Control,” in *Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the Work of Catherine Malabou*, eds. Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 255.

81. Malabou and Johnston, *Self and Emotional Life*, 9.

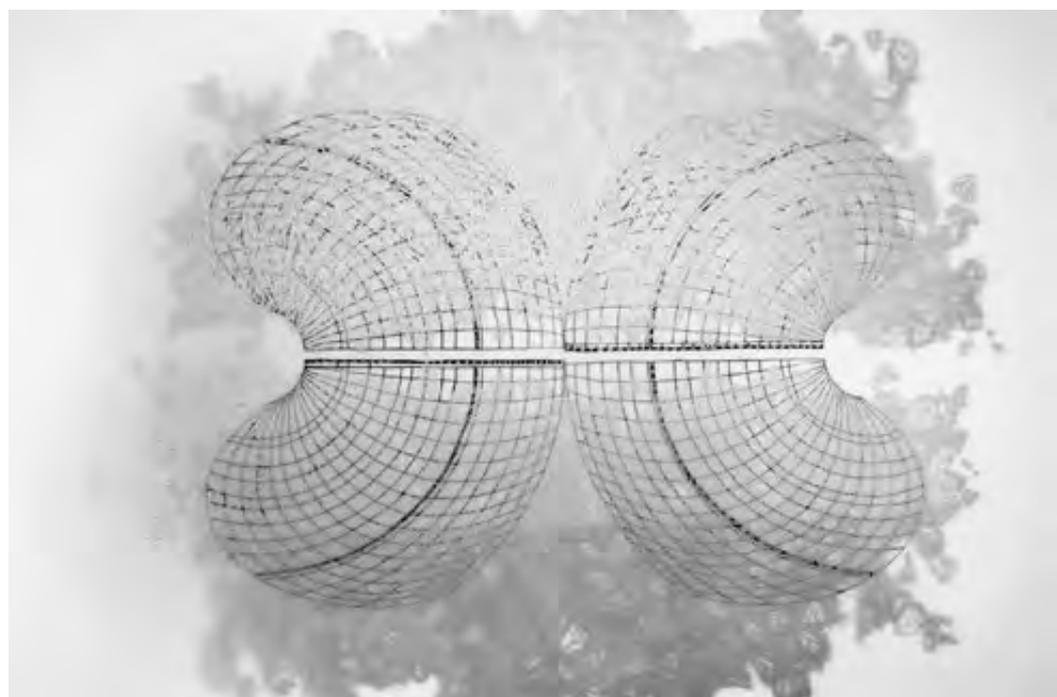
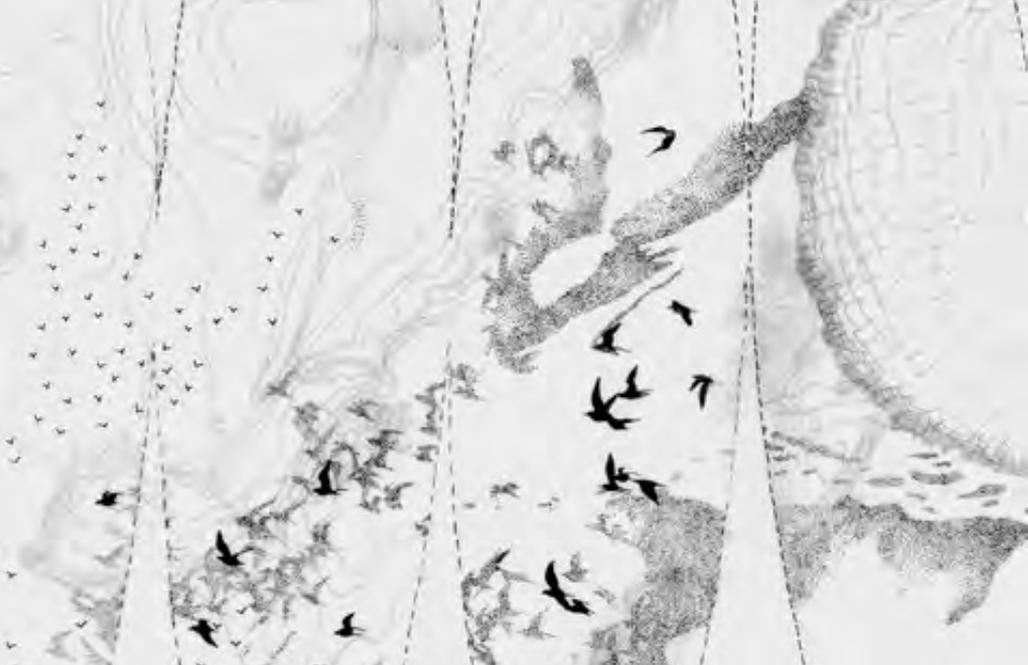
82. *Ibid.*, 10.

83. *Ibid.*, 51.

Praising poems by Garrett Hongo in the context of Catherine Malabou's notion of plasticity, David Palumbo-Liu argues that they "outline the dangerous borderland between the loss of memories, histories, values, and their regeneration and perpetuation through acts of learned and perceptive 'brains'"⁸⁴; this seems equally true for Forde and other similar projects of poetic mapping. As Catherine Malabou argues, the time of the Anthropocene is one of intense and precarious becomings, making it crucial to rise to the ambiguous challenge of plasticity and learn more about how we imprint ourselves on the world, and how it, in turn, shapes our brains. This can be achieved, as both Malabou and eco-poetics argue, by acknowledging the operation of a cartographic plasticity that makes us who we are by turning our brains into sites where metaphors forge connections between all manner of things out there in the world, assembling mappings that define the limits of our concern and care. At the same time, the fictive and poetic character of these maps leaves room for refining and updating them. Speculative and plastic mapping is something we can learn about from poetry, making it perhaps one form of expression that could aid us in transforming our home-making practices into ones that are more responsible and empathetic.

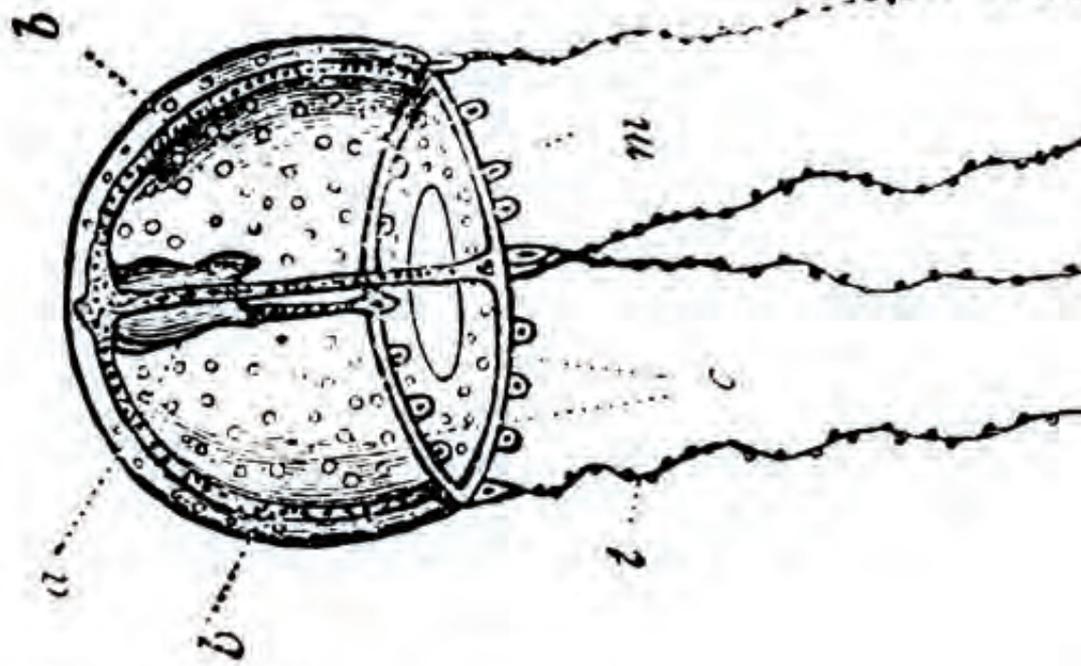
84.

David Palumbo-Liu, "Poetry, Politics, Plasticity, Re-imagination," *Arcade: Literature, the Humanities, & the World*, April 20, 2012, <http://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/poetry-politics-plasticity-re-imagination>.





Pakui Hardware
Extrakorporal (2019)













Daniel Falb
*Defossilization
and Refossilization:
Deleuze/Guattari*

to the
ANTHRO-
POCENE

[in]: *Obieg*, no. 10/2019, online: <https://obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/en/numery/becoming-earth/defossilization-and-refossilization>

CONTEXT

A notable conceptual innovation of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (D/G) is the binarism of *deterritorialization* and *reterritorialization*. Originally developed by Guattari in the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis,¹ it takes on a life of its own in their collaborative works, from *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) to *What is Philosophy?* (1991), where in its physical, psychological, and social connotations it signifies a transformative impulse or dynamics and their respective counterparts or limits. More literally, de- and reterritorialization describe processes of leaving and returning to territories – as in animal migration and territorial behavior² – where deterritorialization is an essentially *globalizing* vector that leads from any given territory straight to the whole of the Earth. In their analysis of capitalism, for example, deterritorialization denotes the ways capitalism shatters feudal society, “sets free” the worker from his/her land etc., but also points to the fact that it ultimately establishes a “world-wide capitalist machine,” integrating centers and peripheries.³ And it is indeed the Earth as a planet that functions both as vanishing point and subject of all deterritorializations: “It merges with the movement of those who leave

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1. Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, *Psychoanalysis and Transversality: Texts and Interviews 1955–1971*, trans. Ames Hodges (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2015); cf. Adrian Parr, ed., *The Deleuze Dictionary*, rev. ed (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2010), 69–72. See Eugene W. Holland, “Deterritorializing ‘Deterritorialization’: From the ‘Anti-Oedipus’ to ‘A Thousand Plateaus,’” *SubStance* 20, no. 3 (1991): 55–65 for a general terminological outline.
 2. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007), 310–50; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 67f.
 3. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1994), 231.

their territory *en masse*, with crayfish that set off walking in file at the bottom of the water, with pilgrims or knights who ride a celestial line of flight.⁴ While this makes D/G preeminent geophilosophers, the deterritorializations they focus on typically take place *on the Earth's surface* and unfold on *historical* timescales.

But times have changed. The 20th century already feels like prehistory. On the one hand, "French theory" has waned and given way to strands of thought like New Materialism (Bennett, Barad), Speculative Realism (Brassier, Meillassoux), and Xenofeminism (Laboria Cubonics). On the other hand, our geological age, the Anthropocene,⁵ leaves us wanting a conceptual manual that would allow us to come to grips with processes that drive *right into the crust of the Earth* and shortcut immediately with *geologic* timescales – for these are the processes the planet, and our lives on it, are all about today.

As a starting point for developing such a manual, I propose the new terminology of *defossilization* and *refossilization*.

De- and refossilization in their respective connotations as mapped out below capture with some precision what is happening to the planet in the early Anthropocene. Beyond the scope of the present paper, the terminological shift from territorialization to fossilization signals a sea change in the intellectual climate that comes with a whole series of new conceptual priorities and intuitions.⁶ I'll just mention two here:

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4. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 85.
 5. Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature," *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment* 36, no. 8 (December 2007): 614–21; Will Steffen et al., "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 369, no. 1938 (March 2011): 842–67.
 6. This is not to say that it is impossible to connect selective readings of D/G to aspects of the Anthropocene condition (Cf. Arun Saldanha and Hannah Stark, "A New

GEOGRAPHY → GEOLOGY

ETHOLOGY (UEXKÜLL) → EARTH SYSTEM SCIENCE

LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS → EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

PRE-INDIVIDUAL SINGULARITIES → SUBJECT-LESS CULTURAL EVOLUTION

THE GREATNESS OF MARX → CAPITALOCENE / ARCHE-FOSSIL ECONOMY

ACCELERATIONISM → THE GREAT ACCELERATION

STRIATED SPACE → PERFORATED LITHOSPHERE

WILD ANIMAL REFRAIN → PLANETARY MEAT PLANTATION

BECOMING-ANIMAL → BIOLOGICAL MASS EXTINCTION

LINES OF FLIGHT → CULTURAL MASS EXTINCTION

BODY WITHOUT ORGANS → BIOGEOCHEMICAL CYCLE

NOMAD → CLIMATE REFUGEE

SOCIETIES OF CONTROL → POLITICS OF THE ARCHIVE

VITALISM → UNVITALISM



(DE- AND RE-)

(DE- AND RE-)

TERRITORIALIZATION → FOSSILIZATION

First, while D/G favor deterritorialization over reterritorialization and seem not to be able to get enough of it – “one can never go far enough in the direction of deterritorialization”⁷ – we realize that there is nothing particularly great about excessive rates of change and extreme cultural dynamism represented, for example, by the Great Acceleration of the Anthropocene (1950ff.).⁸ We have become agnostics about becoming. The “new earth” D/G believe deterritorialization brings forth⁹ sets in motion masses of climate refugees and creates mass extinctions.

Second, where D/G fight a lifelong battle of dissolving the human subject into a-subjective machinic assemblages and pre-individual events and singularities,¹⁰ we realize that the overall dynamics of cultural evolution are *always already* a-subjective and pre-individual – the onset of the Anthropocene is no more intentional or conscious an event than,

Earth: Deleuze and Guattari in the Anthropocene," *Deleuze Studies* 10, no. 4 [November 2016]: 427–39) – especially as D/G are indeed pioneers of a geophilosophical mindset. Such readings, however, can not stand in for the required new manual and do not obviate its associated conceptual innovations.

7. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 321; cf. *ibid.* 239ff. See also Holland, "Deterritorializing 'Deterritorialization,'" 58.
8. Will Steffen et al., "The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration," *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 1 (April 2015): 81–98. Note the irony that *Anti-Oedipus* was published in the same year as *Limits to Growth* (Donella H. Meadows, Club of Rome, and Potomac Associates, eds., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* [New York: Universe Books, 1972]).
9. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 321, 382; Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 88, 99.
10. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 1; Gilles Deleuze and Anne Boyman, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life* (Cambridge, Mass: Distributed by the MIT Press, 2002), 25ff.

for example, the Great Oxygenation or the multiple Snowball-Earth events that occurred on early Earth.¹¹ But this, too, is nothing to applaud. It merely indicates the continued lack of a planetary political constitution.

But let us now see how de- and refossilization play out.

A NEW MANUAL

1. (UN-)DOING STRATA

The Anthropocene sets in motion unprecedented flows of matter that is scraped and excavated from the Earth's lithosphere and streams into the energy and manufacturing industries. These anthropogenic flows vastly exceed those of materials moved around Earth through natural processes, making humans the greatest geomorphic agent on the planet.¹² While mining coal and other raw materials has a 6,000-year history, it does not escalate before the 1800s; oil extraction only takes off in the 20th century. Some seventy billion tons of materials (fossil fuels, metal ores, non-metallic minerals, biomass) are currently being pulled from the ground every year (up from twenty-four billion forty years ago).¹³ Five of the top ten companies on the Fortune Global 500 list – employing 2.3 million people – are fossil excavation enterprises.¹⁴

Their efforts and machinations, among others, constitute defossilization 1: undoing the geologic fabric of the Earth by

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11. Cf. Peter Douglas Ward and Donald Brownlee, *The Life and Death of Planet Earth: How Science Can Predict the Ultimate Fate of Our World* (London: Piatkus, 2007).
 12. Roger LeB. Hooke, "On the History of Humans as Geomorphic Agents," *Geology* 28, no. 9 (2000): 843–6, 843. Cf. J. Zalasiewicz et al., "Stratigraphy of the Anthropocene," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 369, no. 1938 (March 13, 2011): 1,039.
 13. United Nations Environment Program, "Global Material Flows and Resource Productivity: An Assessment Study of the UNEP International Resource Panel" (Paris, 2016), 33. The reference year is 2010.
 14. See: fortune.com/global500.

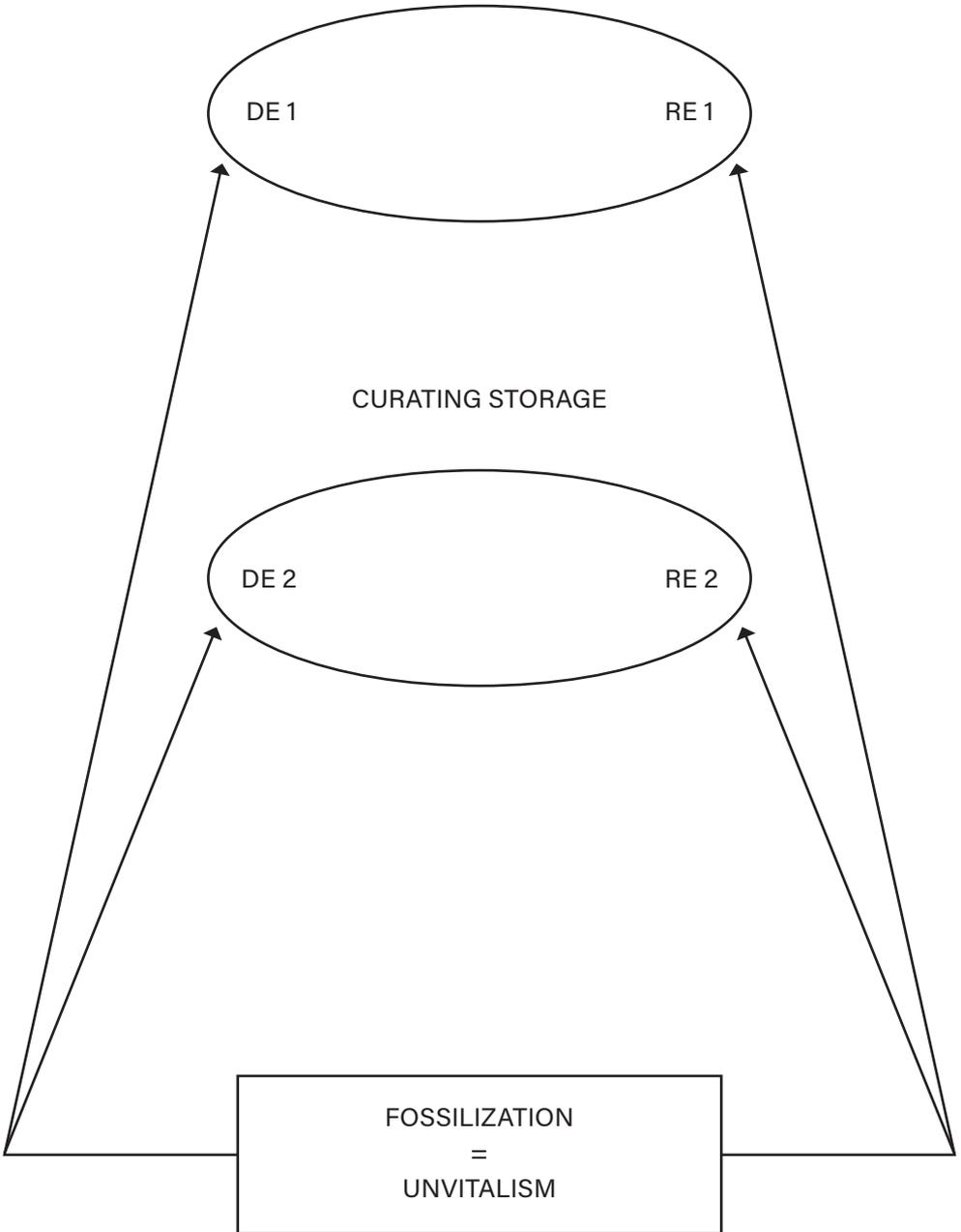
undoing its sedimentations. As coal and oil are the petrified remains of prehistoric maritime organisms and plants, the capitalist economy is literally based on burning fossils, thereby unwittingly recreating a prehistoric climate.¹⁵

Defossilization 1 shortcuts the present with the deep time of the Earth. Given the panoramas of deep time are products of scientific metaphysics – they have no reality inside the empirical world of present-day Earth¹⁶ – defossilization 1 activates the metaphysical and showcases our deep entanglement with it – we even use the same materials (sediments) *to investigate the metaphysical world of prehistory and to fuel the world economy*. As the Meillassouxian notion of the “arche-fossil” captures both aspects at once, one may define today’s capitalism with greater precision as a system of burning arche-fossils – a metaphysical explosion inside the physical world.¹⁷ If the Capitalocene concept is to have any distinctiveness, this is what it has to be about.¹⁸

By the same token, defossilization 1 activates the Earth’s deep time where the fuels are produced as the canvas on which humans’ history and their early migrations around the globe unfold, marking the total arbitrariness by which a portion of a natural resource comes to lie under whose ground or which neo-colonial enterprise manages to put its hand on

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15. “Temperature is predicted to rise by 1.1 °C to 6.4 °C by the end of this century, leading to global temperatures not encountered since the Tertiary” – more than 2.58 million years ago. Jan Zalasiewicz et al., “Are We Now Living in the Anthropocene,” *GSA Today* 18, no. 2 (2008): 5.
16. See Daniel Falb, *Geospekulationen. Metaphysik für die Erde im Anthropozän* (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 2019), Chap. I.1, I.3.
17. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Bloomsbury Acad, 2012), 10.
18. Jason W. Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Kairos (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).

(UN-)DOING STRATA



it: defossilization 1 calls for the world's natural resources to be held in trust, for the world population, by a new UN institution (within UNEP), and for a total equalization of its current vastly unequal material footprint.¹⁹

The excavated materials don't disappear, they stick around. Where burned, they are deposited in the atmosphere (climate change). Where otherwise processed, they become the material infrastructure of the planetary Technosphere – buildings, machinery, transportation infrastructure, etc. today worth thirty teratons of material.²⁰ But production produces pollution and waste, deposits accrue in landfills, spill into ground water and bodies, commodities become trash, buildings are being dismantled, new edifices built on top of ruins, cities abandoned, overgrown, sinking into the ground... Part of the Anthropocene diagnosis is that through such processes, a new geologic stratum is forming as we speak – the Anthropocene stratum, with its own technofossil stratigraphy that significantly differs from that of the underlying Holocene stratum, and frankly of any other stratum the Earth has seen before.²¹ This is denoted by refossilization 1.

Refossilization 1 grounds the equation “pollution/waste = condition of possibility for historiography” (see below). It also turns our present into a virtual “incavation”-site of future excavations *that will never take place*, and points to a deep future

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19. UNEP, “Global Material Flows and Resource Productivity: An Assessment Study of the UNEP International Resource Panel,” 17.
20. Jan Zalasiewicz et al., “Scale and Diversity of the Physical Technosphere: A Geological Perspective,” *The Anthropocene Review* 4, no. 1 (April 2017): 9–22. Cf. Peter K. Haff, “Technology as a Geological Phenomenon: Implications for Human Well-Being,” *Geological Society, London, Special Publications* 395, no. 1 (2014): 301–9.
21. Zalasiewicz et al., “Stratigraphy of the Anthropocene”; Jan Zalasiewicz et al., “The Technofossil Record of Humans,” *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (April 2014): 34–43.

in which the Anthropocene stratum will ultimately be completed: to an Earth beyond and without hominins.²²

2. CURATING STORAGE

Zooming in on refossilization 1, one may inquire as to the “curatorial” vectors that shape the Anthropocene stratum or more generally the various stored deposits – of variable, not necessarily geologic durability – of the current age, and thereby uncover another dimension of our terminology.

Considering a stratum/storage in the making, defossilization 2 signifies *that which is no longer being part of it*. A species that is driven to extinction is defossilized *as it stops producing fossils*, leaves no trace in the stratum going forward. The biosphere has endured five mass extinction events since the Cambrian Explosion: five big defossilization 2 events so far. The early Anthropocene is *but once more, and just as unintentionally*, a heyday of defossilization 2 – the Anthropocene stratum will ultimately be cleared of the vast majority of Holocene biota.²³ But the early Anthropocene constitutes not only a biological, but also a cultural Mass extinction event, as colonial and capitalist globalization rapidly drives pre-global, pre-modern, pre-digital technologies, mindsets, ways of life and of building a society into extinction. The Earth is being cleared of the diversity cultural evolution has produced in the 75,000 years during which the species had “lost itself” in the respective continents and territories of the planet – *this pre-global cultural diversity* is disappearing from the archeological and historical record of the present. As globalization only happens once, this is a one-of-a kind wave of cultural defossilization. Most pre-modern cultural content will shortly stop leaving traces.

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22. Jan Zalasiewicz, *The Earth after Us: What Legacy Will Humans Leave in the Rocks?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
23. Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014).

Contra D/G, there is nothing to love about these “becomings.” Defossilization 2 instead calls for an – essentially humanitarian, “state-of-emergency”-type – management of this hyper-fast and extremely traumatic process on behalf of the generation living against the purely survivalist machinations of transgenerational cultural evolution.²⁴

As a side note, defossilization 2 also carries utopian overtones. If the production of geologic – as well as archaeological and historical – deposits is essentially an act of pollution (cf. refossilization 1), then the presence of such deposits on Earth indicates that the biosphere’s workings themselves *have never been “sustainable.”*²⁵ A sustainable biosphere simply would have left behind no fossil fuels to burn and no geologic past to uncover. Based on these circumstances, and toying with D/G’s notion of “absolute deterritorialization,”²⁶ one can envision a concept of absolute defossilization where in the register of defossilization 1, absolute defossilization signifies a complete excavation of all ever-usable raw materials from the lithosphere, while in the register of defossilization 2, it signifies the utopian – and entirely “unnatural” – idea of a 100% sustainable world economy, a Kenneth Boulding-type “spaceman economy” that features only closed circles of material flow,²⁷

24. See Falb, *Geospekulationen*, Chap. II.2.

25. Josef H. Reichholf, *Stabile Ungleichgewichte: die Ökologie der Zukunft*, Orig.-Ausg., 1. Aufl. 2. Druck, Edition Unseld 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009); Peter Ward, *The Medea Hypothesis: Is Life on Earth Ultimately Self-Destructive?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). For the first substantial use of the concept of sustainability, see: World Commission on Environment and Development, ed., *Our Common Future* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

26. Cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 88.

27. Kenneth Boulding, “The Economics of the Coming Space-ship Earth,” in *Environmental Quality in a Growing Economy*, ed. Henry Jarrett (Baltimore, MD: Resources for the Future/Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 3–14.

a planetary regime of eternal recycling *that stops producing ANY deposits*. Absolute defossilization in this sense converges toward an *Anthropocene without a stratum*.

Biological and cultural mass extinction is only one side of the coin, however. While biological and cultural content is indeed being defossilized in unprecedented quantities and speeds, the early Anthropocene *at the same time* witnesses an explosion of storage capabilities. While the invention of writing and Gutenberg's revolution, for their part, already added many orders of magnitude to the species' information storage capacities, and the advent of digital storage media boosted it into entirely new dimensions.²⁸ The regular functioning of Internet services, but also of Big-data applications like financial markets, autonomous transportation, genetics research, intelligence agencies etc. are unthinkable without this. These vectors and effects of digital storage are here called Refossilization 2: more and more data is being fossilized into an interconnected techno-mineral system of a planetary scale, an Internet of Things (IoT), while its HDDs, SSDs, and other hardware components become the new trace fossils of the Anthropocene stratum.

Refossilization 2 accentuates the hitherto unsolved task of long-term data transfer and compatibility throughout rapidly evolving systems to prevent routine defossilization 2 (*data loss*). More importantly, against the backdrop of a still arbitrary playing field of corporate and state agents of digital storage today, and of largely unhelpful liberal or libertarian ideologies among the Internet activism community, refossilization 2 carries the seed of a new – no longer liberal, but geologico-socialist – *Politics of the Archive*.

3. UNVITALISM

Zooming in on refossilization 2, one realizes it is part of an overall process that is of great significance for the future history of thought on Earth – perhaps its single most important parameter. A geological

28. R. Alexander Bentley and Michael J. O'Brien, "Cultural Evolutionary Tipping Points in the Storage and Transmission of Information," *Frontiers in Psychology* 3 (2012): 1–14.

concept, the Anthropocene directs attention to the unliving components of the Earth – the abiotic geosphere.²⁹ The Earth's biogeochemical cycles – veritable metabolisms in stone – manifest the energetic and material interaction and interpenetration of biosphere and geosphere and thus the *continuous and crucial agency of the unliving* on a living planet.

From this angle, the agency of the unliving in the Technosphere becomes a site of interest as well. For example, following Marx's *Fragment on Machines*, D/G are aware that the unliving matter of fixed capital (machinery) has in itself become a source of economic productivity in industrial times³⁰ – however, as it is knowledge and science that produces advanced machinery,³¹ and as knowledge and science for the most part have been embodied and pursued in the wetware of living human cortices, biology remains the ultimate source of cognitive surplus here.

Digital technologies mark the point where the productive agency of the unliving ceases to be purely derivative or manual but becomes cognitive in its own right. *Unliving agents* – computers, big data analyses, self-learning algorithms, neuronal networks, AI's – today embody the highest "*vitality*" of spirit.³² The Earth's crust has started to think in the Anthropocene. So this is in fact the unvitalism of spirit: the minerals of computer hardware that replace the liquids of the brain (*as if in a petrification of thought*), the *thinking and acting fossils* of processors and hard drives in their planetary IoT become the core agents and drivers of the historical process.

29. This encompasses the lithosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere, and cryosphere.

30. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 232.

31. *Ibid.*, 234.

32. Cf. Benjamin Bratton, "The City Wears Us: Notes on the Scope of Distributed Sensing and Sensation," *Glass-Bead, Site 1: Logic Gate, the Politics of the Artificial Mind* (2017), glass-bead.org/article/city-wears-us-notes-scope-distributed-sensing-sensation/?lang=enview.

The plain term, fossilization, describes this excess of unliving agency. Incomparably more physically impactful than even the Earth's volcanism or plate tectonics, it becomes the *driving force* behind the other de- and refossilization processes, as it directly impacts defossilization 1 (the fossil excavation enterprises are among the most technologically advanced) and obviously refossilization 2, thereby also heavily factoring in to refossilization 1, and defossilization 2. (It might even be the prerequisite for large-scale ecological governance and sustainability monitoring in the biosphere, should it one day become real.)³³

Fossilization marks the end of the only temporary pact between philosophy and biological matter and poses the question of the future of the biological individual – not to speak of the biological worker – in the Anthropocene Technosphere to come.

THE ARTS

Contemporary art has demonstrated sensitivity towards our present de- and refossilizations.

In the 2010s, artists – often, but not exclusively from the spectrum of Post-Internet Art – produce artificial geoformations as environments, experiment with anthropogenic sedimentation processes, anticipate the technofossilization of contemporary everyday objects, and reevaluate the geomorphological valence of ceramics.³⁴ They show performances

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33. See Jane K. Hart and Kirk Martinez, "Toward an Environmental Internet of Things," *Earth and Space Science* 2, no. 5 (May 2015): 194–200; Brandon Keim, "Machine as Gardener: Artificial Intelligence Meets Mother Nature," February 22, 2017, anthropocenemagazine.org/2017/02/artificial-intelligence-wildness/.
34. See Mariana Castillo Deball, *Uncomfortable Objekts* (2012); Clémence de La Tour du Pin, Antoine Renard, *Leg 1* (2015); Michele Gabriele, *Please at Least Tell Me Once before I Leave* (2017); Philipp Modersohn, *Pilestone Primavera (Lemon)* (2016); Lars Holdhus, Martin Kohout, *DungeonTT* (2015).

with hyper-technoid early hominins, put down mummies on the gallery floor, strip organisms of everything but their fossilizable skeleton, and produce 3D prints of archaeological remnants.³⁵ They anticipate the post-cultural mass extinction planetary Technosphere. They reference the geological nature and temporality of the crystals and metals inside our communications technologies³⁶ and wire stone, while otherwise “unearthing” those materials from the devices, freeing them up for new geomorphological trials of planetary recycling.³⁷ They buy (and thus pull from the market) certificates for emissions from burning arche-fossils. They produce processor-based habitats as “live” animations, document the unliving machineries of scientific thought and stage uncanny spectacles of unliving ferrofluid agency. Curators and curatorial collectives initiate exhibitions 2,000 meters below the Earth’s surface and conduct ephemeral shows on the site of eroded geological formations.³⁸

All this is light years ahead of all de- and reterritorializations. Contemporary art rehearses the vectors of fossilization before philosophy does. In concert with Anthropocene discourse, it labors to create the cognitive resources we need to arrive at the new manual – the new interface to our age.

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35. See Monia Ben Hamouda, *Survive, Adapt and Protect (Just Breath)* (2017); Timur Si-Qin, *TM1517 (Paranthropus Robustus): Dressed in Space* (2013).
36. See Jason Loeb, *Ohne Titel (Siliciumerz [Mineral: Quarz, 60 % Siliciumgehalt, Erdrutsch: Les Valettes, Valais])* (2014); Erik Wysocan *Untitled (iPhone Mine)*, 2014.
37. See also Wolfgang Tillmans, *CLC 800, Dismantled, a* (2011).
38. See DEEP SKIN (curated by Grégoire Blunt, Emmy Skensved), Sudbury Neutrino Observatory (SNOlab), Canada, August 14, 2015 – August 14, 2016 (deepsk.in/); 2024 (curated by Sidney), offsite, September 16, 2016 (sydneysydney.net/2024/).



Agatha Valkyrie Ice (Dorota Gawęda & Eglė Kulbokaitė), *Perma-permadeath*, 2016



Armin Linke, *CERN, European Organization for Nuclear Research, computer room, Geneva, Switzerland, 2000*



Antoine Renard, *New Balance*, 2016



Agatha Valkyrie Ice (Dorota Gawęda & Eglė Kulbokaitė), *Perma-permadeath*, 2016



Sam Lewitt, *Fluid Employment*, 2012



Antoine Renard, *ShauN:/*, 2016



Amy Balkin, *Public Smog over Los Angeles*, 2004–ongoing
Public Smog first opened during the 2004 summer smog season over California's South Coast Air Quality Management District, which includes urban Los Angeles and Orange County

Cathy Fitzgerald

GOODBYE

Anthropocene – Hello

Symbiocene:

Eco-social Art Practices

for a New World

In 2013, after giving up her professorship to rally the world about the moral imperative to save life on Earth, environmental philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore asked:

“If your house is on fire what should you do? [...] Of course, you put out the fire – there are children in that house, there are billions of children in that house....”¹

In 2019, young Greta Thunberg embodies Kathleen’s concerns:

“I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.”²



Dara and his mother in Hollywood Forest, 2016

1. Kathleen Dean Moore, “If Your House Is on Fire,” accessed September 23, 2013, <https://youtube/6IR-bqKYOcrY>.
2. Greta Thunberg, “‘Our House Is on Fire’: Greta Thunberg, 16, urges leaders to act on climate,” *The Guardian*, January 25, 2019, accessed May 1, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/25/our-house-is-on-fire-greta-thunberg16-urges-leaders-to-act-on-climate>.

This article is for a young boy I know who is called Dara. His name is the Irish word for Ireland’s great Oak tree, trees that signaled Ireland’s once rich ecological past and formerly beautiful lands. Dara has long loved my *Hollywood Forest Story*³ work. He says “It’s epic!” and loved our late dog Holly dearly, who was the namesake and co-founder of my forest-art work. I heard recently his biggest wish is that his grandfather, a farmer, might give him two acres to plant a permanent forest with many, many Oak trees.

THE PLANETARY EMERGENCY WE ARE FACING
 IS A CRISIS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

The planetary emergency is specifically a crisis of dominant Western civilization that has, over the millennia, viewed itself as separate from and superior to the natural world.⁴ In *Strangely Like War: The Global Assault on Forests* (2004), US writer Derrick Jensen recounts that the earliest written records of Western civilization tell of King Gilgamesh in Mesopotamia feeling great cedar forests for glory and power.⁵

Today human activities affect planetary processes.⁶ Geologists describe this unprecedented epoch where one species is

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3. Cathy Fitzgerald, “The Hollywood Forest Story,” ongoing since 2008, <https://hollywoodforest.com/>.
 4. Derrick Jensen, *The Myth of Human Supremacy* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2016).
 5. Derrick Jensen & George Draffan, *Strangely Like War: The Global Assault on Forests* (New York: Green Books, 2004).
 6. IPCC, *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty* (ed. Valerie Masson-Delmotte, Panmao Zhai, Hans-Otto Pörtner, Debra Roberts, Jim Skea, Priyadarshi R. Shukla, Anna Pirani, Wilfran Moufouma-Okia, Clotilde Péan, Roz Pidcock, Sarah Connors, J. B. Robin Matthews, Yang Chen, Xiao Zhou, Melissa I. Gomis, Elisabeth Lonnoy, Tom Maycock, Melinda Tignor, Tim Waterfield), 2018.

affecting the viability of life on Earth as the Anthropocene – the age of man. While some geologists debate that the Anthropocene age begins with the Great Acceleration of industrialization after World War II, the story of Gilgamesh reveals Western civilization's pattern of ecocide probably arose thousands of years ago.

WELCOME TO THE ANTHROPOCENE

In 2012, climate scientists were trying valiantly to convey the planetary crisis and some began to use the Anthropocene to frame the planetary emergency. Some commissioned audio-visual communicators and one video produced and shown at the 2012 Planet under Pressure summit⁷ went viral – it was called “Welcome to the Anthropocene.” Through this global platform, the idea of the Anthropocene entered the humanities and some contemporary art discourse.

In the short “Welcome to the Anthropocene” video⁸ I initially admired the Earthrise-type imagery. The animations graphically depicted the effects of man on Earth thousands of years ago. It collated masses of recent scientific data to visualize “the great acceleration” of destruction occurring through man's activities in recent decades.⁹ But instead of voicing alarm, a narrator comfortably conveyed admiration for our Anthropocene and suggested that we had the

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7. International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP), “Planet Under Pressure: New Knowledge Toward Solutions Conference,” London, March 26–29, 2012, accessed August 31, 2016, <http://www.igbp.net/events/event/planetunderpressurenewknowledgetowardssolutions.5.1b8ae20512db692f2a6800015489.html>.
 8. Albaeco, Globaia and Stockholm Resilience Centre, “Welcome to the Anthropocene,” accessed May 13, 2013, <http://anthropocene.info/short-films.php>.
 9. Will Steffen, Wendy Broadgate, Lisa Deutsch, Owen Gaffney, Cornelia Ludwig, “The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration,” *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 81–98.

ability, the science, the technology to overcome our difficulties. I wrote an essay soon after, as I felt that this Anthropocene story was problematic.¹⁰

THE AGE OF THE SOCIOPATH

In the developing story of the Anthropocene, I identify with Jensen's arguments against it.¹¹ Jensen argues this Anthropocene story is "grossly misleading and narcissistic." He argues that "[m]ankind aren't the ones 'transforming' – read, killing – the planet. Civilized humans are!" He states that the Anthropocene story all too readily obscures the fact that indigenous people, like those in his area, existed for thousands of years without destroying their environments.

Jensen argues the Age of the Anthropocene has been an era of gross ecocide and violence against more Earth-aligned cultures and that it should instead be called "The Age of the Sociopath."¹² US sociologist Charles Derber's extensive thesis confirms modern industrial civilization is a Sociopathic Society,¹³ while the late Native American writer Jack D. Forbes insists that Columbus' conquest of North America was a form of cannibalism against life, "wetiko" in his language, that extends to modern times.¹⁴ More recently, I feel the story of

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10. See: Cathy Fitzgerald, "The Anthropocene: 10,000 years of ecocide," (2012) [blog post], May 31, 2019, <https://hollywoodforest.com/2012/05/12/the-anthropocene-10-000-years-of-ecocide/>.
 11. Derrick Jensen, "Age of the Sociopath," *Earth Island Institute*, Spring 2013, accessed April 25, 2019, http://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/magazine/entry/age_of_the_sociopath/.
 12. Ibid.
 13. Charles Derber, *Sociopathic Society: A People's Sociology of the United States* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2013).
 14. Jack D. Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wetiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1978, revised edition, November 4, 2008). See also: "Geo-engineering: A wétiko →

the Anthropocene exemplifies a globalizing identity of white privilege that overlooks the other.

THE CAPITALOCENE, OR THE PLANTATIONOCENE, OR THE CHTHULUCENE

Others have offered alternatives to the Anthropocene. Jason Moore offers the Capitalocene, which identifies unrestrained accumulation of capital as the main culprit of the recent Great Acceleration.¹⁵ Donna Harraway argues the Capitalocene is useful, and also introduces the related term Plantationocene.¹⁶ Coined in 2014, the Plantationocene resonates strongly with my focus that significant harm to the Earth has been inflicted by industrial culture's anti-ecological monoculture plantation practices. Giving violence a name, such as domestic violence or ecocide, is an important first step to overcoming cultures of abuse.¹⁷

But when we know our Earth is on fire and that monoculture madness is causing Earth's life-support systems to collapse, ideas to help us move away from our erroneous ecocidal world-view are urgently needed. When today's climate scientists are pronouncing an endgame in a decade's time

→ experiment on the planet," accessed April 12, 2019, http://artforclimatechange.org/geo-engineering-is-wetikoism-at-its-worst/?fbclid=IwAR3fuDc6XIIWxuOoCX-YO_7a2vjOS2dDIQuKB3X3nDla9jGGaN-0ypgvl-GM.

15. Jason Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016).
16. Donna Harraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 159–165.
17. Cathy Fitzgerald, *The Hollywood Forest Story: Living Well with a Forest to Explain Eco-Social Art Practice*, free-to-download audio-visual eBook, Apple iBook Store, 2018: 77, accessed April 13, 2019, <https://books.apple.com/ie/book/the-hollywood-forest-story/id1441958722>.

unless we radically change our ways, we see the relevance of Harraway's next move, to depart from pinpointing the causes of the Anthropocene and to formulate the Chthulucene, her concept of a living, thriving interconnected Earth composed of man and other species. She argues this more encompassing term might more fully acknowledge humanity's ecological past and envision its slim possibility of restorative relations with the Earth and its inhabitants.

THE SYMBIOCENE

In 2016, however, I was highly impressed by an essay entitled "Exiting the Anthropocene and Entering the Symbiocene"¹⁸ by Australian philosopher and former Professor of Sustainability, Glenn Albrecht. Albrecht's Symbiocene follows his significant work in developing new words and concepts, like solastalgia,¹⁹ now used internationally by eco-psychologists and legal experts to identify and argue the validity of severe emotional distress and mental health issues experienced by people living near destroyed environments.

The Symbiocene is where humanity has to go if it wishes to survive. Albrecht's Symbiocene offers a vision much like Harraway's Chthulucene, as they both refer to revelations of new symbiotic science. Albrecht offers an extensive philosophical and psycho-social framework and new terminology for the age of the Symbiocene in his book *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*.²⁰

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18. Glenn Albrecht, "Exiting the Anthropocene and Entering the Symbiocene," accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.humansandnature.org/exiting-the-anthropocene-and-entering-the-symbiocene>.
 19. Glenn Albrecht, "The Age of Solastalgia," accessed April 14, 2019, <http://theconversation.com/the-age-of-solastalgia-8337>.
 20. Glenn Albrecht, *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2019), Kindle.

SYMBIOTIC SCIENCE HELPS ENVISION AN ECOLOGICAL ERA

Having previously worked in scientific research, and with my interest in ecological forestry, I had been following the new science of symbiosis. As I already saw my eco-social art practice in terms of advocating ecological forestry, as fundamentally restoring symbiotic biodiversity, I recognized the importance of Albrecht's work for the planetary emergency.

Albrecht's Symbiocene directly connects with symbiotic science which confirms that life survives and thrives through the interrelated mutuality of many species. As Albrecht writes, "symbiosis has now emerged as a primary determinant of the conditions of life."²¹ In support of this argument, Professor of Forest Ecology Suzanne Simard has particularly popularized advances in symbiotic science through her TED talks on "Mother Trees"²² and forests. Her research and others' confirm that various tree species in forests signal and send nutrients via vast networks of fungi – the wood-wide web. Importantly, her symbiotic studies reveal that forests, the most complex and adaptable systems ever to evolve, do well because "forests are super-cooperators."²³ This symbiotic science by Simard and others is revolutionizing the still prevailing story of evolution as competition, toward a radical understanding that life exists through cooperation between all species.

Like Jensen, Simard also recognizes that indigenous people's cultural activities helped ensure their forests flourished. Correspondingly, as most of the Earth's biodiversity remains in areas where indigenous people live, there is much to learn from other non-Western cultures.

21. Ibid.

22. Cathy Fitzgerald, "Mother Trees – The Earth's Network for Resilience," accessed April 14, 2019, <https://hollywoodforest.com/2013/03/10/mother-trees-the-earthss-networks-for-resilience/>.

23. Suzanne Simard, "How Trees Talk to Each Other," accessed April 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Un2yBglAxYs&feature=youtu.be>.

Albrecht also makes an important observation for young women, highlighting the considerable pushback against Simard’s peer-reviewed forest science and other early female champions of ecological and symbiotic thinking as evidence of the “threat to the patriarchy, reductionism, and mechanisms that have long ruled in academia, science, commerce, and industry.”²⁴

Evolution as competition, expressed in Darwin’s “survival of the fittest,” emboldened the age of the Enlightenment to view mankind as independent from and superior to the rest of life. With the Christian religion more concerned with the hereafter, modern Western society was permitted to view other life on Earth as a resource for progress. Albrecht reflects on the other deadly delusions promoted by the Enlightenment; individualism, dualism, and human exceptionalism underline today’s prevalent and now globalized anti-ecological worldview. He adds that today’s neoliberal ideology has not helped.²⁵

“NEW WORDS FOR A NEW WORLD” – “SOLIPHILIA”

Albrecht’s new book is important, but I can only touch on some of the key Psychoterratic concepts and terms that he uses to construct a vision of the Symbiocene. Importantly, he visualizes the Earth’s next generation, Generation S (or “Gen S”) as having an increased awareness of how life depends on symbiotic wellbeing. He believes that this will foster specific emotional states to protect life locally. This promotes what he calls “soliphilia,” a deep love of place that inspires communities toward a newfound ecological, yet secular spirituality, and critically, toward embracing life-sustaining politics.

Soliphilia expands my viewpoint to understand the agency and social power to protect ecosystems that regularly arises from situated eco-social art practices (my term for ecological art practice²⁶). My ongoing eco-social art practice in which I

24. Glenn Albrecht, *Earth Emotions*.

25. Ibid.

26. Cathy Fitzgerald, “What is Eco-Social Art Practice,” accessed May 12, 2019, <https://hollywoodforest.com/portfolio/what-is-eco-social-art-practice/>.

have explored ecological forestry to transform the monoculture plantation where I live fosters strong soliphilia²⁷ in me. As this small, 2.5 acre forest we call Hollywood provides me with air, occasional fuel to keep me warm, much solace and birdsong, it only took a few years after I began my practice to notice I was developing a keen sense of wanting to protect this forest, so it would thrive forever.

After consulting a lawyer colleague, I knew I could not legally prevent Hollywood from being clear-cut once I was no longer on the land. But in dialogue with leading Irish foresters who were beginning to explore European continuous cover forestry and with my connections to the Irish Green Party, I found myself advancing national ecological forest policy,²⁸ and then successfully lobbying support for the late Polly Higgins' ecocide law.²⁹ In this way, I was surprised but proud of how my practice had enabled Hollywood forest to become the story of "the little wood that could."

"SUMBIOREGIONALISM" – FOSTERED THROUGH ECO-SOCIAL ART PRACTICES

My creative practice is very modest in scale. I observe others' work with interest, like Northern Ireland artist-researcher Dr. Anita

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27. Glenn Albrecht, "Solastalgia, Soliphilia, Eutierria and Art," accessed April 14, 2019, <https://glennaalbrecht.com/2016/06/27/solastalgia-soliphilia-eutierria-and-art/>.
28. Cathy Fitzgerald, "Continuous Cover Forests Key in Green Party's New Forest Policy," 2013, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://www.greenparty.ie/continuous-cover-forests-key-in-green-party/>.
29. Cathy Fitzgerald, "Greens Unanimously Adopt Motion to End Ecocide; a New Legal Framework to Prevent Fracking and Other Pollution," 2013, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://www.greenparty.ie/greens-unanimously-adopt-motion-to-end-ecocide-a-new-legal-framework-to-prevent-fracking-and-other-pollution/>.
See also: <http://www.stopecocide.earth>.



Hollywood, “the little wood that could” is a small, two-acre Close-to-Nature continuous cover forest growing under the Blackstairs Mountains, in South County Carlow, Ireland.

McKeown’s more extensive situated eco-social art practice that has been unfolding over several years with the support of the Irish Environmental Protection Agency. In her co-designed resilience project, “Co-Des-Res,” she has established a multidisciplinary ecology and art team that is building localized ecoliteracy for and with the community who live on the Iveragh Peninsula, Co. Kerry (see the newsletters on this site to gain an overview of all the community engagement).³⁰ At the moment, McKeown is framing the work through extensive knowledge of creative permaculture and place-making and employing the colorful, and increasingly understood symbols of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. However, I can see such work is contributing to what Albrecht sees as an inevitable “sumbioregionalism,” and that this contributes to the Symbiocene.³¹

Albrecht defines a “sumbioregion” as an “identifiable biophysical and cultural geographical space where humans live together and engage in a common pursuit of the reestablishment and creation of new symbiotic interrelationships

30. Anita McKeown, “CoDesRes: Co-Designing for Resilience – SDGs on the Iveragh Peninsula,” accessed April 16, 2019, <http://www.codesres.ie>.

31. Albrecht, *Earth Emotions*.

between humans, nonhuman organisms, and landscapes.”³²

The cultural and environmental programs of the West of Ireland’s Burrenbeo Trust are another great example.³³

Importantly, as a past Professor of Sustainability, Albrecht is well versed in understanding that the UN’s sustainable development concept has failed to halt ecosystem collapse. In his new work he states that in the development of a jurisprudence system for Earth Justice, the United Nations endorsed his Symbiocene framework when it confirmed that “current approaches to the Anthropocene epoch need to be expanded.” He quotes the UN (2016) which states:

concepts such as the Symbiocene, an era when human action, culture and enterprise would nurture the mutual interdependence of the greater community and promote the health of all ecosystems, are more promising and solution-oriented.³⁴

However, we might ask: Is the Symbiocene is an overly optimistic framework? Albrecht does not shy from troubling transitional and possibly violent periods ahead. These realities are unfolding, as affirmed by UK Professor Jem Bendell’s (2018) paper on confirmed non-linear climate breakdown and how to navigate the ensuing societal collapse. Bendell’s paper, downloaded over 300,000 times in recent months, calls for truth, emotional support, activism and much work for what he is framing as a necessary deep adaptation to collapse.³⁵ I argue that Albrecht’s detailed preview of the emotional, moral, generational, cultural, spiritual, technological, and political aspects of the Symbiocene covers how we might deeply envision and honorably adapt to an uncertain future. As the Earth’s children are rising, a clear detailed framework on how to achieve a better, more beautiful world with other extraordinary lifeforms is surely of immense value.

32. Ibid.

33. *BurrenBeo Trust: Connecting People and Place*, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://burrenbeo.com/>.

34. Albrecht, *Earth Emotions*.

35. Jem Bendell, “Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy,” *IFLAS Occasional Paper 2*, 2018, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf>.

In 2014, the late Dr. Chris Seeley, an artist, action researcher, and sustainability educator, nominated me to attend a global New Story summit at Findhorn, Scotland. Over 300 attendees, including young people, indigenous people, scientists, environmental lawyers, game developers, storytellers, educators, group workers, and a few eco-artists, came together for a week in Findhorn’s Universal Hall. The theme of the summit was inspired by the great geo-theologian Thomas Berry’s seminal essay “The New Story,” in which he emphasized that the World desperately needs a new story that conveys an ecological worldview.³⁶ To me, the Symbiocene is the New Story.



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36. Thomas Berry, “The New Story,” *Teilhard Studies*, no. 1 (Winter 1978). A video excerpt of Thomas Berry discussing his 1978 *Teilhard Studies* monograph entitled “The New Story” was presented at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia in 1984. This is one in a series of Thomas Berry videos which were recorded by Lou Niznik and re-mastered by Wes Pascoe. Lou’s video library was donated by Jane Blewett to the Thomas Berry Foundation in 2012. The remastered video series was produced by Don Smith of Calgary, Alberta with executive supervision by Mary Evelyn Tucker, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://youtube/rS5byHRScVY>.

Małgorzata Sugiera

(Re)Presenting

Worlds of

NONHUMAN
Scale

In *The Collapse of the Western Civilization* (2014), Naomi Oreskes and Eric M. Conway, both American historians of science, employ a speculative strategy to look at our present from the perspective of the distant future of the year 2393, the tercentenary of the eponymous collapse of the Western Civilization.¹ The aim of the strategy of recounting the events of the “Period of the Penumbra” (1988–2093) seems quite simple: the authors try to give a plausible answer to “How much these people knew, and how unable they were to act upon what they knew.”² More importantly, in the next sentence Oreskes and Conway elaborate further: “Knowledge did not translate into power.”³ It is not my task here to determine whether, indeed, knowledge does translate into power, and whether the authors intended to make a critical reference to the Foucauldian concept of power/knowledge. I am much more interested in another vital issue they address: how we imagine our possible futures. In my view, this is closely connected to another important question, of how we gather, order, and translate our knowledge, unifying diversity through (re)presentation.

It suffices to take a cursory look at the heated debate on the Anthropocene, as the first and still the most popular name of the new geological epoch, introduced at the century’s turn, to see how it has gone far beyond the bounds of geology, and other scientific disciplines as well, morphing into an interdisciplinary discourse which, in many respects, organizes our world view today.⁴ At the very beginning, the discourse developed

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1. Naomi Oreskes, Eric M. Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (New York: Columbia University Press 2014).
 2. *Ibid.*, 2.
 3. *Ibid.*, 2.
 4. A large part of the ongoing discussion on how to name the new geological epoch, and why we should choose this particular name, is summed up by two French researchers, Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, in a book recently translated into English. See Christophe Bonneuil, Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso 2017).

along the lines of detective fiction scenarios, and as such, it was totally embedded in the past. Many researchers, with geologists at the helm, tried their hand at meticulously reconstructing potential motives at the scene of the crime. Following Agatha Christie's protagonists, Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple, they asked "cui bono?", though the answer seemed a dead giveaway, the most plausible suspect seemed clear. In the last decade, however, the situation has changed appreciably, as the aforementioned *Collapse of the Western Civilization* joined other titles in practicing speculation while gathering archives of a possible future. Many artists from different countries and working in various media, often with researchers from various disciplines, have created projects in archaeology and/or geology of the future, with the explicit aim of using this perspective to take a critical look at our present, which still neglects vital issues of ecology and sustainability. A case in point is the *Plasticity of the Planet* project at the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, which held the *Human-Free Earth* exhibition in 2019. This featured works by such ecologically-engaged artists as Bonita Ely (Australia), Kelly Jazvac (Canada), Lithuanian group Pakui Hardware, Polish artist Agnieszka Kurant, who lives in New York, and Aleksandra Ska from Poznań. In spite of the apparently radical shift in artists' and scientists' interests, from the past to a possible future, as exemplified by the Warsaw exhibition, the way our present is (re)presented remains, in principle, the same. As Oreskes and Conway's book demonstrates, although the perspective has changed, the paradigm of gathering, ordering, and transmitting knowledge has not. In other words, the speculative strategy only formally introduces a view from a possible future here, by extrapolation; it lacks the kind of qualitative newness that should be essential for "speculative gestures," as defined by Isabelle Stengers.

In her reading of Alfred N. Whitehead's writings, Stengers noted an important difference between two concepts which are often confused and wrongly conflated: possibility (*le possible*) and probability (*le probable*). Only the latter is suggested by past experiences and,

therefore, can be validated or framed by a rational explanation. By contrast, possibility is informed by struggle and lays claim to another way of thinking and doing; it means sensing the virtualities of a given situation, exploring other possible trajectories. Thus, in her article “L’insistance des possibles. Pour un pragmatisme spéculatif,” which Stengers wrote with another Belgian philosopher, Didier Debaise, they argue: “What we need to activate today is a thinking that commits to a possible, by means of resisting the probable.”⁵ In a footnote to this sentence, they add that “by definition the probable has to do with a transposition or a rearrangement of what has already taken place or what is ongoing, as shown by the calculation of probabilities... [It] makes important the possible eruption of other ways of feeling, thinking, acting, which can only be envisaged in the form of an insistence, undermining the authority of the present as regards the definition of the future.”⁶ Although the authors underline that this kind of speculative thinking is more likely to be found in science fiction, or more broadly, in art, I would prefer to be more cautious, especially where art in the Anthropocene is concerned. As I have pointed out, many artists tend to be highly informed by scientific thinking, which is probabilistic by definition. That is why I would prefer to focus on the issue of nonscalability as a foundation for speculative thinking and acting, which is vital if we are to move beyond the Anthropocene.

American anthropologist Anna Tsing addressed this issue back in her 2012 article “On Nonscalability,”⁷ in which she addressed the widespread, lateral use of scale, which has proven to be quite detrimental in various spheres of our lives

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5. Isabelle Stengers, Didier Debaise, “L’insistance des possibles. Pour un pragmatisme spéculatif,” *Multitude* 65 (2016): 87. This article has been translated into English, see “The Insistence of Possible: Towards a Speculative Pragmatism,” trans. A. Brewer, *Parse Journal* 7 (2017): 18.
 6. *Ibid.*, footnote 18.
 7. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “On Nonscalability: The Living World Is Not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales,” *Common Knowledge* 3, Vol. 18 (Fall 2012): 505–24.

and domains of world-making. In doing so, Tsing unveiled the mechanism upon which all traditional Western scientific paradigms are technically premised. Particularly in the context of the Anthropocene, the mechanism of scalability is tightly interwoven with the capitalist ideas of progress and colonial expansion, both founded on a paternal gesture of possession of land and bodies. As Tsing explains, the most pertinent characteristic of scale is its “ability to expand – and expand, and expand – without rethinking basic elements.”⁸ One can effortlessly change scale by zooming up and down, without the slightest need to verify the research method adopted. What is more, a research project could be extended without transforming the principle of scalability, of unifying diversity through representation. Hence, scalability effectively blocks our ability to recognize the heterogeneity of the world – all we perceive is “uniform blocks, ready for further expansion.”⁹ Scalability, writes Tsing, not only allows us to “conquer” nature. It also helps to naturalize the worlds we have produced through concealing their biological or cultural alterity and/or heterogeneity. Significantly, ever-advancing scaling technologies also prey on all that is chaotic, diverse, and nonscalable, even as they marginalize or obliterate it. As Tsing posits, the experimental sciences developed during the “long 16th century,” along with the conquest of the New World and the establishment of European sugar cane plantations – all three were premised on the same model of colonial expansion. In her *Feral Biologies* lecture at the University College of London in 2015, she argued that the recently identified epoch in the history of the Earth should not be called the Anthropocene, but rather the Plantatiocene.¹⁰ Only then would it be possible to bring out a connection that has been omitted, intentionally or otherwise, between

8. *Ibid.*, 505.

9. *Ibid.*, 505.

10. See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Durham: Duke University Press 2016), 100.

the exponentially growing danger of a global ecological disaster and the foundations of knowledge production practices. Unfortunately, it would be impossible to proceed as Tsing prescribed in her article, starting with denaturalizing scalability and revealing its historicity, or demonstrating how both scholars and artists, though reflecting upon multispecies contact zones, often still employ naturalized precision-nested scales. Instead, in investigating how to (re)present worlds of nonhuman scale, I will draw from the idea of interspecific perspectivism intrinsic to indigenous cosmologies of South America. This offers a way, only recently (re)discovered, to approach things and phenomena less as objects of (re)presentation than as a perspective; as a properly speculative moment not of (re)presentation, but translation or transformation. We should bear in mind that the creation of the Western unified and universalized system of global knowledge was largely possible because European natural philosophers ignored local non-European knowledges and onto-epistemic practices, even as they profited considerably from the data they gathered. All the data acquired through native informants in the long 16th century and thereafter was adapted and incorporated into the Western episteme under one condition: it had to confirm the basic rules of the established scalable system. Indigenous cosmologies of South America which survived, albeit partially changed by the Christianity imposed upon them, contribute to the permanent decolonization of the Western episteme today and, therefore, could be considered a significant basis for post-anthropocenic thought; a way of thinking beyond the Western episteme which is increasingly urgent in today's deepening eco-crisis. They help us to imagine thought as a cognitive activity that goes beyond identification (recognition) and classification (categorization).

To depict how rendering Amerindian thought intelligible requires inverting a great many modern conceptual dualisms, including the scalability intrinsic to our system of knowledge, I will mainly draw upon the alter-anthropology of Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. The first principle of his research is to avoid reducing indigenous practices of knowledge to the dispositive of recognition characteristic of Western thought. We must underline from the outset that all Amerindian cosmologies presuppose a collective in

which humans, animals, plants, and even minerals, tools, and astronomical bodies are of the same (human) nature, while living in different worlds. They are equipped with the same basic array of perceptive, appetitive, and cognitive dispositions, which is why all share the same mode of aperception, seeing themselves as persons. Hence, “human” here denotes a relation, not a substance. It constitutes a purely pronominal representative unit, which means that the human is who and whatever occupies the position of the cosmological subject. What is more, as Viveiros de Castro highlights several times in his *Cannibal Metaphysics*, “perspectivism affirms an intensive difference that places human/nonhuman difference *within each existent*.”¹¹ In contrast to Western conceptualization, wherein subjects, like objects, are regarded as the results of an objectification process, for Amerindians, to know equals to “personify”; here, says Viveiros de Castro, “the form of the Other is the person.”¹² As he explains: “Personhood and perspectiveness – the capacity to occupy a point of view – is a question of degree, context and position rather than a property distinct to specific species.”¹³ In other words, all beings see the world the same way; what changes is the world they see. Importantly, the perspective of which the author of *Cannibal Metaphysics* speaks is not a representation, for the simple reason that a point of view is located in a body which is “not a specific physiology or characteristic anatomy of something but an ensemble of ways or modes of being that constitutes a *habitus*, ethos, or ethogram.”¹⁴ That is why, again in contrast to Western thought, Amerindian perspectivism presumes an epistemology that remains constant, and variable ontologies – one

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11. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, trans. Peter Skafish (Minnesota: Univocal Publishing 2014), 69, author’s emphasis.
 12. *Ibid.*, 61.
 13. *Ibid.*, 57–8.
 14. *Ibid.*, 72.

meaning with multiple referents, as when a jaguar drinks other animals' blood and calls it "beer." As such, the indigenous way of knowing is inherently nonscalable, nonrepresentational, and properly speculative. One finds counterparts to such perspectivism in contemporary Western performative art projects, or rather, these projects could be interpreted as offering the viewer an experience of seeing the world through the eyes of the other, highlighting its nonscalable, nonrepresentational, and properly speculative nature.

The best example of such art projects is the mixed reality performance *In the Eyes of Animals* by the London-based Marshmallow Laser Feast (MLF) collective, which was held in Grizedale Forest in 2015. Significantly, MLF is both an arts collective and a small experiential studio that often works on commercial commissions to fund their art projects, but also to build their own innovative pipelines and toolkits, which they then use in mixed-media installations and performances. This means MLF truly works at the intersection of art and cutting-edge technology, and the technology they employ is the same in both commercial and artistic endeavors. As a result, it can hardly be said that they use technology to create a kind of aesthetic experience exclusive to the realm of art. Nor do they make perfect mimetic representations of the world. Rather, they gather data in a digital library or an archive, which may be then used for a multi-sensory, multi-person virtual reality installation, in which every participant sees not one and the same (re)presentation of the world, but through special software and hardware, reconfigures the data into her own subjective perspective.

In the Eyes of the Animals (2015) was MLF's first artistic VR project, yet it already demonstrated a unique combination of technologies, including untethered virtual reality, heart-rate monitors, breath sensors, and body tracking devices, for a complete immersion in a world beyond human perception. This mixed-reality project offered a walk in Grizedale Forest to a group of viewers equipped with VR helmets and headset, a first-hand experience of the local symbiotic system otherwise inaccessible to the human senses. They took part in a narrative with a changing point of view; it was based on a typical food chain, starting with a mosquito which sees CO₂,

progressing through a dragonfly which sees 300 frames per second and a full light spectrum, and then a frog, which combined some physiological features from families of the same species. The narrative ended from the perspective of an owl that had just been shot by a hunter. Prior to this, however, viewers could explore the perspective of a creature with abstract peripheral vision which sees through eyeballs that are practically egg-shaped. Although the artists consulted experts, including those from London's Natural History Museum, and based their work on scientific facts, this was a truly speculative project, an approximation of what it could mean to view the world as another species, or rather, from the perspective of another species, because the location surrounding those who took part in the performance was basically unaltered. Yet the participants saw it differently, through the eyes of a series of animals. It should be stressed that the *In the Eyes of the Animals* installation also offered a tactile experience. For example, while looking through the eyes of the dragonfly, the viewer felt vibrations on her back, giving her a feeling of not only seeing the world through the insect's eyes, but of having wings as well. Yet the project primarily engaged sight, and in this respect, it differed from many mixed or augmented reality installations of its kind. What has been recognized as political art in the Anthropocene tends to bring in the other human senses, trying to critically subvert the dominant oculo-centric perspective. MLF's *In the Eyes of the Animals* could, on the other hand, be defined as an instructive exercise in interspecific perspectivism, which I have already presented, mostly with reference to Viveros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics*.

At this point, I would like to stress that I do not presuppose that any of today's cutting-edge technologies could allow us to experience the disenchanted world around us in a "natural" or "genuine" way. This issue has been explored by Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar, who, in his *Design for the Pluriverse*, capitalizes on speculative thinking to design a range of new and reconstructed local worlds and lifestyles. As he underlines, the illusion of a simple return to a "genuine" way of perceiving reality is not entertained even by

contemporary Amerindians, for whom ancestry implies actively looking to the future. Nonetheless, as he writes quoting Colombian artist and sculptor Fernando Botero, they continue to see traditional cosmogony as “a reflection of ancestral wisdom, it is not an issue of essential identities, but rather signals the possibility of widening the meaning and practices of togetherness within a process of collective weaving.”¹⁵ Moreover, cultural apparatuses and diverse processes of acculturation teach us how to look at the world and make meaning. I believe this is why, when asked in an interview if we can reconnect to nature through VR, Ersin Han Ersin of MLF answered simply: “Virtual reality can open a better space to understand everything around us that wasn’t available before.”¹⁶ This answer is formulated in a rather general way. To make my point, I should explore what exactly was unavailable before MLF’s first project helped us understand it.

When Viveiros de Castro wanted to define his alter-anthropology, he borrowed Deleuze and Guattari’s mode of expression: “It is a matter of actualizing the innumerable becomings-other that exist as virtualities of our own thinking.”¹⁷ Nothing illustrates the point better than the example of the aforementioned food chain as the narrative principle of *In the Eyes of the Animals*. Obviously, the food chain provides the foundation of a Darwinian evolutionary world view, in which only the fittest can survive, fighting tooth and nail. Interestingly, however, the relative and relational status of predator and prey also defines a fundamental aspect of Amerindian perspectivist inversions. At the same time, this similarity allows us to perceive a vital difference between the objectification and “personification” of the Other, as I have already explained. In my reading of the MLF’s performance, its authors employed their

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15. Arturo Escobar, *Design for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*, (Durham: Duke University Press 2017), e-book, doc. 4421–6.
 16. Ersin Han Ersin, *Interview*, accessed June 5, 2019, <https://docubase.mit.edu/lab/interviews/interview-with-marshmallow-laser-feast/>.
 17. Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 93.

cutting-edge technology to highlight this difference. To this end, we should realize that the VR rig everybody wore – heart rate monitors, breath sensors, and body tracking devices – not only provided complete immersion in a world beyond human perception. It also customized the world, for what every participant saw in Grizedale Forest depended primarily upon their bodily sensations and reactions. In other words, it was in their individual bodies that the intense difference between human and nonhuman was located and affirmed, through the technologically enhanced presence of two isolated and incompatible perspectives. MLF's mixed-reality project *In the Eyes of the Animals* is, to my mind, the best example of how well-designed and ingeniously employed cutting-edge technology can provide a real opportunity to experience reality on nonhuman scales, to perceive the world with our senses from a given perspective, beyond its homogenizing and universalizing (re)presentation.

In talking about experiencing reality beyond a nonhuman scale, we often tend to mean things and phenomena that are far too big or small to be perceived by human sight, for which we enlist the help of such devices as microscopes and telescopes. I referred to Tsing's *On Nonscalability* to demonstrate that even in observing something beyond the reach of human sight, we remain within the framework of scalability characteristic of the Western episteme. However, the most pressing question in today's eco-crisis is how to leave behind thinking and (re)presenting the world and ourselves in fundamental binaries, among them the subject/object dichotomy. I began my article with a reference to Oreskes and Conway's *The Collapse of Western Civilization* to show it could be more difficult than changing our position or perspective to looking at our present from a possible future. I believe (re)presenting worlds of nonhuman scale has to be linked with changes in Western patriarchal paradigms of gathering and transmitting knowledge.

The Mycological Twist

Respawn (2019)

*over millennia we have been
catching over earth*



*over billiards we will
continue to stand*





*as witness of the species
that come and go*



*cōlile ōther Kingdōms
decline and disappear*



*all their grandeur
gone to dust*

coe will remain

*sitting and fruiting on
their dead flesh and bodies*



*growing from their
construction*



*'breaking and making
what is to come*



Defne Ayas
*There Is Nowhere
to Return to,
but*

TOGETHER,

and Not Alone

Over the last few years, the art world has produced many projects that relay the frightening speed of environmental upheavals; we have come together here to discuss what we can do, apart from and in addition to what we *are* doing. But the truth is: the art world can no longer keep up with itself; it faces many challenges.

Political changes span the globe; we are forever reading about the collapse of democracy and its institutions. This landscape of lost narratives recycles various decades at different speeds, pulling them in many directions at once, which globalization scholar Ackbar Abbas calls “volatility.” This makes it hard for us mere mortals to have imaginations, or even clarity. Given the pace of change in our new realities, institutions can barely handle the widening cognitive discrepancies. To this we might add the audiences’ problems – the middle-class anxieties and depression in the face of exploding truths. In times of floods of refugees fleeing economic stress or climate chaos, people gradually seek shelter in fascism, silence, forms of nationalism, or arms, rather than in the rule of law.

I feel our only chance of survival is to maintain functioning communities.



Let’s start with this: How much can art world players actually *know*? As curators, we may be interested in Greenland’s indigenous politics, its Inuit activist artists, and Trump’s hallucinations. We may all try to understand Armin Linke’s work on oceans and TBA Academy’s work on coral reefs. Of course, we should all know how fast the seas will rise in our towns, from Venice to Istanbul and Shanghai, how hard the hurricanes will hit us from New York’s beaches to Puerto Rico, how hedge funds will roll out their stakes on bonds and debts in the face of catastrophe, how many fires will burn down our houses in California and our mega-forests in the Amazon because of the China-US trade war, how long the red panda will hang on in China (one million species are on the verge of going extinct), whether the extinct Great Auk will be revived with DNA to be restored, perhaps, to the Fogo Island Art Residency where it may belong, and how soon the water will run out (Cape Town art fair anyone?), not to mention a critical understanding

of the real trouble of extracting fossil fuels and their power relations to art from Norway to Saudi Arabia.

We are all generalizers and want to know everything about everything, but really, what do I know about geo-engineering or family-planning to keep the population under control? Don't we all feel a bit behind the times? The proceedings from this session will soon be less than relevant, if they are read at all, but perhaps the song at the Lithuanian Pavilion at Venice Biennale in 2019 will be timeless, and perhaps Joan Jonas' drawings and videos from the Ocean Academy of the same year. If not, then what?



Curator-directors like myself create content and a strategic vision for institutions, to embrace a greater imaginary, for audiences yet to come, and to raise the funding required to make it all happen. In this way, institutions can become a genuine and productive expression of their time, their first-hand reality, and their circumstances. They can provide commentary on our shared political and cultural predicament.

My work has been about opening things up physically and aesthetically, and also spiritually. How to create, first and foremost, the spirit of a place, while programming space and spaces, but also time. How to transform the white cube refrigerator into a kitchen, or a campfire for songs? By focusing not only on the outside consumption of art, but also its inner creation. By turning the spotlight on art transactions (intellectual, spiritual, and emotional) and acts of making art (visible, audible, literary, relevant, and reciprocal), through sustained dialogue. By offering spaces of generosity and concentration, for deep, long-term intellectual care.

We can do all this without compromising our own aspirations for a just society; while resisting the urge to barge into the new game board being set up right in front of us; while working very hard to resist the austerity measures and tides we know are battering something fundamental in our society; by reclaiming the spaces that are on the verge of taking a hit, such as the humanities, theater, and academia.

Crisis is also what sustains, what creates desire and focus, after all.

And ecology is all about how everything connects to everything else. Fighting for a better and fairer ecology is the most urgent, meaningful action, as far as I can see.



But the truth is, times, as we have come to know them, might be over. “What do I do, now that the roof has blown off ...?”

What happens when the reality on the ground changes? A drastic change is indeed happening, as artist Goshka Macuga phrased it in her *With or Without* exhibition in collaboration with Ahmet Ögüt, titled *The Show is Over* (2017), where she addressed notions of destruction and “sudden change” to challenge the perceived stability of art and its institutions through transformative processes of shattering, hijacking, eclipsing, undoing, merging, destroying, and recontextualizing. Macuga created an illusion or meta-layer, suggesting that something inexplicable and sudden had happened to the work, to the institution, and to us. The intent was to make us reflect upon the political conditions in which people, artists, or institutions may have found themselves: abrupt changes in circumstances, new worlds, states of shock, an inability to understand the motivations of those in charge, an immersion in another language. None of us could have guessed, hoped, or foreseen how prescient this idea would be. Can destruction be seen as a means of engaging with the present socio-political landscape, to critique, protest, and confront our predicament?

In other words, can we truly break out of the frame? Don’t we want to? Or perhaps we simply don’t know how?

And we seem to think we can make it all work if we continue doing good, ethical work. As if it were enough to make institutional practices more inclusive, as most of us have been striving to do, incorporating the margins and the unwritten histories. If major omissions are fixed, justice can be restored; this means the world as we know it can be “regained.”

Climate action has a similar message: If we do the right thing, we can postpone our extinction, but only if we act wisely.

For my part, I am convinced there is no going back, despite all my efforts to the contrary, to reclaim spaces that took a

financial hit in the humanities, to debate; there is nowhere to go back to.



Pessimism aside, there is no doubt that new initiatives and institutions must pick up the momentum of activists and the growing calls for justice that have taken the world by storm.

Neither institutions, nor we as artists, curators or directors, can afford to stand by.

Institutions are still sites for nameless resistance, where we can come together with artists to divine our presents and immediate futures, to combat tides of homogenization. Only when we come to terms with our limitations and responsibilities to address the issues raised by artists and activists can we be trusted collaborators.

We may all move and operate in our fifty shades of complicity, yet these are also times when any genuine effort can be perceived as a form of repression. Institutional readiness and efforts to improve may be embedded in a matrix of power and adherence to the status quo; intentionally or not, they may result in other forms of silencing and top-down, bottom-up, horizontal, or vertical responses. Of course, we are all also compromised by being at the nexus, being eclipsed by various power structures.

Yet we must keep going and keep imagining anew if we cannot fix the Frankenstein's monsters we have created. We have to take the time to be introspective, collectively and individually, to understand exactly how we have contributed to the problem, to learn the extent to which we have been the enemy; how we have been wittingly or unwittingly serving aspects of post-wall economic and social liberalism. Internal institutional processes can be painful, rife with open-ended questions. Not quite knowing the final destination can be nerve-wrecking, which is half the reason why these journeys *into the unknown* are so crucial.

This may still be possible if we continue to work with some of the most challenging artists of our times, as they develop new questions and positions with and through us, with their abilities to “imagine the world otherwise,” to system-break and channel the transformative energies of the world, with their visions as alternatives. I hope we can also let their practices

affect and transform our institutions from within, to spark inner evolutions of who we are ourselves. Insofar as we can approximate and internalize our own programs, we offer ourselves to destruction, we find the *indestructible* in us.



To return to our topic: At present, any movement toward a more just and civil society should be considered a meaningful climate action.

In Jonathan Franzen's much-criticized words for *New Yorker* magazine, September 2019: "Securing fair elections is a climate action. Combating extreme wealth inequality is a climate action. Shutting down the hate machines on social media is a climate action. Instituting humane immigration policy, advocating for racial and gender equality, promoting respect for laws and their enforcement, supporting a free and independent press, ridding the country of assault weapons – these are all meaningful climate actions. To survive rising temperatures, every system, whether of the natural world or of the human world, will need to be as strong and healthy as we can make it."¹

I second this global notion and this approach to climate action.

And it is also clear that nothing can or could be done alone, only *together*. After all, these are our shared histories, violence, and transgressions; this is our shared predicament.



When I consider my sustainable projects, only two stand out: the 11th Baltic Triennale (2012) and the 6th Moscow Biennale (2015), both of which I co-curated on a limited budget. In both cases, there was no money for crating, shipping, or wall construction, allowing us to circumvent the mega-exhibition format. Each was hammered out with artists and thinkers over a period of ten days, and the Baltic one was actually channeled through one human being called *Mindaugas*. These biennales were alive, full of ideas, activity, and energy, they built a community of sorts...

1. Jonathan Franzen, *What If We Stopped Pretending?*, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-if-we-stopped-pretending>, accessed on October 5, 2019.

Yet as the Current Artistic Director of the amply endowed Gwangju Biennale, opening in 2020, I am bewildered as where to take the sustainability discussion. My colleague Natasha Ginwala and I are daunted by our commitment, being contractually obliged to deliver a giant exhibition.

In Gwangju, a city that has long been acutely familiar with resistance-building and communal trauma, it is our intention to bring in mind-expanding practices, together with historically conscious projects, activating planetary life-systems and modes of communal survival. We remain committed to disseminating a “communal mindset” – continuously emergent and rooted in healing technologies, indigenous life-worlds, matriarchal systems, animism, and anti-systemic kinship. With the kind of solidarity initiatives we can bring together, we are excited by the prospect of enabling global alliances. By investigating how such diverse practices interact with multitudinous forms of life, we hope to explore and learn from how they contend with the future horizon of cognitive capitalism and global imperialisms, as well as the present dimension of neural networks and other techno-spiritual inventions that populate our computational biosphere. How do they act upon the body, labor, and political life? While deeply engaged in our research process, we remain convinced that, in light of the fortieth anniversary of the May Uprising and democratization movements in Gwangju. We will be able to metabolize journeys that cross the threshold between life and death – the middle world of the undead – to develop analyses of current strategies of solidarity-building, in humble but collaborative ways, while embracing an aesthetic of humility and decency, and to strive for a deeper understanding of the intrinsic relationship between healing, dissent, and renewal.

And together, not *alone*.

Mira Gakjina
**WHO
CARES?**
*Art Institutions
and the
Environmental Crisis*



MoCA Skopje, Museum of Solidarity, project of Polish architects, the Tigers

When we talk about contemporary art institutions, we must ask ourselves what Institutions are, and what we expect from them. Historically speaking, it seems justified to consider the start of institutionalism; many find the sources for our current solutions in Roman law, in Justinian's Institutes. One of the major legal texts which inspires contemporary problems is the work's preamble. Institutions are seen as just measures, because "[...] legitimate measures may defeat the evil designs of wicked men [...]."¹ They define the legal relations between the subject and his property and the limits of responsibility and authority. Among the twenty-six chapters relating to institutions, the last three chapters explain the role of the Curator. He takes care of those who cannot care for themselves, mostly because of relative incapacity to recognize what is in their best interest. Curators and sub-curators are also public functions appointed in Rome for the preservation and supervision of administrative work and public buildings, but in the context of today's society, which faces the unreasonable spending of its resources, now on a global level, the Institution which requires our special attention is the "Curator *prodigi*," a curator appointed to prevent spoilage. The spendthrift was, by Civil Law, held to be *quasi furiosus*, that is, legally, though not actually insane, and, so far as the management of his estate was concerned, classed as a madman. The curator differed from the guardian in that his first and most important duty was care of property.

Today, this insanity, this weakness, negligence of our own property, this negligence of our own home, the planet, the Earth, of the environment, of the Other, is also owing to a lack of real motives for collective action. A collective cannot be formed due to the conditions of virtual social contact, affected by the "digital society." For these reasons, in our job, the curator's job, we must agree with a famous curator: "the whole curatorial thing has to do not only with exhibitions, it has a lot to do with bringing people together." This is a large part of our work.

Turbulent changes have driven us away from our assumed routines and have made us question our own curatorial role today. Our colleague

1. Samuel P. Scott, *The Civil Law*, vol. II (Cincinnati: Law-book Exchange, 1932), 3.

Obrist has, through his own example, with his “don’t stop” lifestyle and with the dictum “It’s urgent!” tried to stress that this is not a time when we can use various excuses to postpone our confrontation with the challenges of our epoch. We have to prove ourselves to be qualified curators of the fortune we have inherited, our natural and cultural environment, in conditions when it seems public opinion is far from rational and continues to destroy its own property. This is especially true when art is considered to be a force for change, ready to assume the role of the vanguard. When there is the threat that its power could be used by the authorities to manipulate the masses. A fine example of what this spoilage of public resources and energy can lead to when the appropriate supervision, oversight, and institution are absent is the Skopje 2014 project.

The project known as Skopje 2014 accounted for one third of the national budget (one billion euros) and announced a simple and naive premise: “to make the city more beautiful.” The project began in 2009, when the government announced plans for the large-scale development of the city center, including a complex of buildings and monuments built in inappropriate public spaces, neither consulting professional opinion nor examining the subject of urbanity or civic involvement more broadly. In the government’s nationalistic censoring of the past, it replaced the modernist facades of buildings with baroque and neo-classical designs – obsolete historical styles that have never existed in the history of architecture in Macedonia. This spurred several protest movements, most notably the “Colourful Revolution.” Project Skopje 2014, and the rebellious acts in the arts and protest movements in response to it, might serve as a case study for an examination of both the potential and limitations of art practices.

This example proves that institutions are disconnected from our audiences, we live in a time of “post-truth” politics. These post-truth politics are characterized by a political culture in which public opinion and media narratives have become almost entirely disconnected from policy, which in turn means disconnected from the institution.

It seems that we art institutions, as social institutions, should claim ownership in knowledge and its distribution. This was,

at least, argued by Protagoras and Hegel. Therefore, let us try to take a closer look at one of the most evident challenges we, as social institutions, are facing.

Initially, on a global level, climate change was discussed as a *distant problem*, something for future generations to fix. Then it was discussed as geographically remote, distant, something that was happening in some other part of the world. Institutions have difficulties addressing problems that lie in the future or extend beyond national boundaries.

Therefore, it is no exaggeration to keep the issue of social change, of the future of social relations, open and pressing, alongside the issue of climate change. These social changes, if we are to make a forecast, will probably be slow, as the general awareness of climate change and social change already underway is far from being accepted and recognized as a threat. Žižek is probably correct when he says we are in the early stages of a grief when it comes to climate change. It will take us time to move from rage to acceptance.

In any case, the centers and museums of contemporary art should avoid taking part in pseudo-activities, merely another attack that repeats sound-bites. If we need to preserve something worthwhile, it is the integrity of our Institutions; through them, as a collective, we find paths toward possible joint action, new models of the social for the future. Without a broader agenda for social change, environmental and climate justice movements cannot achieve success.

Even though thinkers disagree when it comes to the role of art, as in the past, it is rare that someone disputes its impact on the development of social change. Whether they consider it to be seductive (and potentially dangerous), pleasant (and calming), or the absolute materialisation of an idea (Manifestation of the Spirit), it has great potential to affect social relations.

Many philosophers and other scholars of the mass response to reports of climate change recognize the basic elements of religious seduction, with the customary apocalyptic mantras. The centers of contemporary art are probably an actor that should prevent the development of a social climate of hopelessness, a sense of guilt which has always had a detrimental effect on the creative potential of an epoch.



Our Art Is Free slogan. Colorful Revolution protest movement against governmental Skopje 2014 project, 2016



Art to the citizens, graphite written at the recently built Triumph Arc in Skopje as part of the governmental Skopje 2014 project, 2016



Colorful Revolution protest movement in Skopje against the government politics.
Protesters in front of the Ministry of Justice of Republic of Macedonia, 2016



Protesters coloring the monument Prometheus which was part of the governmental *Skopje 2014* project

Let me come back to the initial question: Whether an art institution is an institution of ecology, of care. Ecology is, literally speaking, a science of home, and I have recognized art and art institutions as important in the conservation of the planet as our home. Care, in particular, is our business.

The contemporary art institution can provide an experience of nurturing and caring for the object. The institution of care comes through the role of the curator. What the art community can offer is a dual experience: care for Matter, its artifacts, its sacred, precious objects, and care for the art community, often marginalized and oppressed. At present, a sincere and highly ethical attitude is fundamental for retaining and enlarging our audiences in contemporary art institutions.

In facing the evident difficulties when we cannot formulate the problem, all efforts are welcome, and one major threat that we must recognize and confront is the explosion of misleading information, which pollutes the information space and sabotages scientific action. In this respect, we need to provide more room for scientifically verified truths, addressing fields of ignorance, because the complexity of the problem most likely concerns us, as centers of contemporary art. We are institutions active in the field of the visual, and should profit from being in a position to choose our angle and offer its vitrines. The question is no longer whether we are part of an engaged society, but to what extent, and in what direction we already seem to be moving.

We are witnessing radical change in the natural and social climate. On a social level, we are witnessing global warming in complex political relationships across deep divides. I have also tried to argue that we are witnessing serious pollution in the field of information and distribution of knowledge; our institutions, embodying the beliefs, fears, and desires of the epoch, are regarded as having authority. We are institutions advocating the need to address new challenges in a different way, and in doing so, proving our contemporaneity through action. We should be central to the peripheries of our influence, so we should equip ourselves to comprehend the real needs of the moment. This global challenge requires a collective response. Collaboration between art institutions from different geographical areas could improve both

our knowledge and our capacity to be active agents, who could influence their environment to have, in Malabou's words, a desirably plastic form, as a result of our action in the field.

In the end, yes, we definitely are institutions of ecology and care. There can be doubt about that. If ecology is understood as management of the planet, of the Earth, then yes, an art institution is definitely an institution which works, which is active and engaged, in this field. Art institutions are points of reference when we are considering measures, temperance, balance, harmony, or other relational issues. They are also relevant in terms of social experimentation and behavior, as well as in the general development of our ethical attitude and motivation. So, the magic Earth is our central inspiration in the study of forms and meanings, in the careful process of transforming the material. Ideas are developed in concrete contact with the material-Earth. Art institutions are a rare example of institutions where care is motivated more by enthusiasm and pleasure than by finances, career, or other traditional compensations. Motivation also matters for the success of the efforts we invest.

Art institutions are generally supposed to be open, inclusive, courageous establishments, which dare to deal with complex existential issues like climate change. The significant increase of social interactivity demands an adequate infrastructure of social institutions. As an institution for the development of cultural capital and social union, we are well placed to be a point of reference for directions in which future institutions might develop.

Centers should offer their spaces to innovative ways of rethinking of our relationship to the Earth, and to matter in general. There is no need to urge the art world to provide solutions to the concrete and complex issue of global warming, but there is certainly a need for several world institutions, with varying expertise, to become urgently active in producing a new understanding of the problem, at different levels. This could give us another perspective on possible action and forms of engagement.



Museum of Contemporary Art – Skopje, North Macedonia, ca. early 1970s

Viviana Checchia

Engaging with *the* **TROUBLE**



A great deal has been written about the definition of various types of art engagement, their possible formats, description of their nature and effectiveness – dialogical practice, participatory practice, community art, socially engaged art. We look, of course, to writers like Huelgera, Gielen, Bishop,¹ and so forth to find a full exposition and explanation of the field. In this short article, however, the aim is to accept those formats, possibilities, and operations as given, and to examine the reality of the practice of engagement in public art institutions today. What is the weight given to engagement within the overall range of operations? In particular, this paper will aim to assess what could be the role of engagement in preparing the art institution for a confrontation with the pressing problems of the current ecological crisis. There is no doubt that the ecological crisis, is, in the words of Donna Haraway, “the trouble” with which contemporary society will have to continue to grapple or “stay.” In order to play their part in engaging with that trouble, however, art institutions must first bring about change in the climate of their own operations. What modes can engagement offer to “stay with the trouble” to make those changes in the climate of art production?

The standard Cartesian approach to a problem is to situate it within a certain range of coordinates, held at a certain distance, or under a microscope in order to examine it as an isolated phenomenon. Accordingly, the “ecological crisis” is perceived as happening “elsewhere” and in another time zone – in the melting of the arctic ice cap and the shrinking of the Amazonian forests, for example. This disengagement in time and place is, alas, not only characteristic on a personal and a social level, but also on an institutional level. For a long time, it has been understood that art has been evolving and developing without any necessary connection to social formations. This

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1. Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (Bethesda: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011); Paul de Bruyne, Pascal Gielen, *Community Art: The Politics of Trespassing* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2010); Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells* (London–New York: Verso, 2012).

failure to engage has produced repercussions felt throughout the art system and within its environment, causing an imbalance in its own ecosystem and a disengagement from society at large. This, in turn, has resulted in a latter-day and sudden realization that, after decades of elitism and isolation, there is a great necessity to regulate and evaluate the social operation of art through measuring impact. This phenomenon is indeed not dissimilar to the sudden widespread awareness over the past few decades of the harm that centuries of bad practice have done to the natural environment.

At this stage we should rethink what indeed has caused this ecological crisis, taking the form of a cultural crisis in the art world, and how it relates – if at all – to the crisis in the natural world? The principal causes, through the industrial revolutions and concomitant rapid urbanization of the planet, were, to summarize very briefly, a move from pluricultures of production to mass scale monoculture, from local organization to globalization, and from manual production to mechanization, all with no limits on carbon emissions. The salient point for the art world is that in parallel – and indeed, as part of this revolution in production – it has produced its own monoculture, whereby the solo show is *the* symbol of success and powerful achievement, while, for example, the workshop (with its horizontal organization, open, democratic and egalitarian aspects, and its plurivocality) is perceived as vastly inferior.

It is time then, is it not, for art institutions to address climate change on their home territory? This means that, rather than the facile and escapist fetishism with carbon footprints and so on, with how they affect faraway places and times like the arctic and the twenty-second century (not that this is unimportant), the ecological approach concerns our everyday operations, foregrounding practices, production of events, and the institutional capacity for our day-to-day dealings. In other words, it is not ecological sustainability we must seek – for this is forever disappearing into the temporal and spatial distance – but a cultural sustainability which moves beyond the hegemony of a monoculture and its imperialistic and authoritarian forms. We first have to deal with our own operations

rather than seek a cover, excuse, therapy, or cure for practices which we have no intention of changing. It is not simply that once we have addressed our own necessary environmental changes we can look to wider ecological change – although this is true as well – but that making this change in our own environment is part of the move toward a more sustainable wider ecology. Indeed, some of the dangers inherent in negotiating that relation to and passage from the local to the global are outlined in artist Luis Camnitzer’s “Access to the Mainstream,”² where he calls the integration of the local within the global “assimilation,” resulting in a successful colonization by the “mainstream.” For Camnitzer, the “mainstream” denotes a specific social and economic class. He describes a “reduced group of cultural gatekeepers” and “a select nucleus of nations,” as a “self-appointed hegemonic culture.” Camnitzer’s vision does, however, pertain to the commercial art market rather than the publicly funded art sphere.

We are left, then, in a situation which could be summed up rather crudely by the cliché of the blind leading the blind. There is no small irony in applying this metaphor to the arts sector (including the “visual” arts!), but one has to ask how the arts could wish to make their own presentations to, for, and about a broader public and the global crisis when their own *modus operandi* is embroiled in a set of unsustainability and dead ends of a closely-related pedigree. Other clichés that might lay open the almost hypocritical scale of the muddled thinking and bumbling progress of an industry which has no clear vision of its own predicaments before setting out to solve those of the world at large would include the trope that we “can’t see the forest for the trees.” This means, of course, that the wider environment cannot be cleared until we clean the mess lying at our own feet.

I would argue, then, that a first move in rebalancing the institution toward these considerations would be to insist that the whole institution becomes socially engaged. The “social” in this context can be understood in different ways: it can refer

2. Luis Camnitzer, “Access to the Mainstream,” *The New Art Examiner Art Journal* (June 1987): 218–22.

to activities in which you meet and spend time with others, as an attitude toward society, and/or to the way society is organized. This short essay adopts the latter meaning. The social does not have to do with the participation of other human beings in the arts by default; it deals with the institutional and curatorial attitude to work in relation to broader society, while referring to how society (and the art system specifically) is organized. Becoming socially engaged, then, does not mean becoming relevant to some 70% of the population, or even aiming for any such demographic saturation, but putting under scrutiny first and foremost the inward and outward ethical and moral profile of the institution and its practices. This would be more or less impossible without instigating a self-reflective practice. One form of this type of self-reflective practice is to be found in Ernesto Laclau's *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*,³ where he writes of how a "constant state of production" can "disable" reflection. There ought to be no real point of departure or arrival in an operation, but rather a constant flux between theoretical reflection and local rediscussion. This cyclical succession, he notes, is "common in peasant communities" while a progressive, linear concept of time is more typical of a neoliberal society.

That is to say, there is harmony, rather than ecological imbalance, within the institution itself – the aesthetic, intellectual and artistic priorities can be rethought when the outreach engagement impact is prioritized. Aesthetic priorities ought to be aligned and coordinated together with social and outreach aims. This means that the artistic trajectory of protagonism – the solo show, commissions, the preview and opening, the artists' talk and so on – should not be placed in a hierarchically privileged position above the connection to the neighborhood, the research process, the workshops, and the various aspects of our civic engagement. In other words, no front door for "art experts/lovers/practitioners" while the side door is left for families/communities/neighbors and so on.

3. Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (London–New York: Verso, 1990).

Along with climate change, another topical theme is “populating” forums, exhibitions, pages all over the art worlds, as Howard Becket would call them. This new and urgent agenda is designated as “decolonialism.” After decades of discussion dominated by post-colonialism, there is a repositioning of the discourse to understand ourselves as practitioners and our institutions as part of the process of decolonization. One could argue to what extent, as a planetarian agenda absorbed by the art system, this discourse is only superficially embraced, and as such, to what extent the environment is currently addressed in a similar fashion. Decolonizing may therefore manifest itself as a somewhat chromatic priority, first of all, moving hand-in-hand with the institutionalization of diversity, where it can, sadly, become mere tokenism. This would allow for a superficial adaptation of decolonialism, ultimately only an instrument to preserve the current hegemonies. If we truly aim for a “decolonising” agenda, then how we decolonize the institutional infrastructure and the culture it represents ought to be high up on our list of priorities, and should translate into an open fight and intellectual struggle against cultural hegemony as defined by Gramsci.

There are ways beyond this evident cultural impasse which, in rare cases, are already happening. First of all we could make our authority more porous and disperse the power of the art protagonist, be they artist, curator, or gallerist. This can be achieved when we begin to shift from participation to co-production – so that things are not just done *for* someone, but *with* someone. We start to integrate the culture of the “protagonist,” so that we are not just dealing with the topic an artist proposes, but the topic becomes an agency for others to take part, whereby the artist can connect with a broader range of audience. The same emphasis ought to be given to the artist as an activist of both workshop processes and exhibitions. The notion of balance is supremely important here, because the decolonializing agenda is not just about bringing justice, parity, and an ecological consciousness to the outreach operation, for, as numerous studies have shown, the precarity caused by systemic imbalance causes an immense amount of stress and anxiety to the artists themselves. They are under continuing

pressure to be perceived as successful via protagonism, by achieving a sufficient number of residencies, solo shows and so on. But what if, in the ecological future, for example, flying to distant locations where residencies are set up for artists is no longer a possibility? At the moment, residencies more or less form an alternative economy for many artists, whereby they can survive and even make a living and money through global travels to such destinations and undertakings.

This question might lead us to realize how pressing it is to understand that the ecological problem has not only been compartmentalized into one whose effects are felt elsewhere in space, but also in other temporalities and time zones. Thus there is an urgency to view our future as not separate from the current present. As Marc Augé⁴ explains in *The Future*, the future we speak of is entirely entangled in the present in which we live. A present full of anxiety and fears. A present that is not helping us to visualize a positive horizon.

It is under such conditions that I propose redesigning models of organization as a path toward a better ecology of care within the art institution.

The proposition is for an alternative set of methods, tools, and considerations: for a situated model of curatorial practice. It challenges existing definitions of “the curatorial,” taking a multidisciplinary understanding of curatorial practice and evaluating curatorial methods in light of recent geo-political developments. This proposal seeks models that enable local engagement in cultural production, allowing culture to flourish independent of larger hegemonies. The objective is to build a theoretical understanding of situated curatorial practices that can inform alternative approaches and would, in effect, decrease autonomous curatorial vision and power, to find modes which are anchored in local practices, methodologies, and understandings.

Redeveloped models could be created to repurpose spaces for the needs of the public, to go out and meet the public wherever they are, be it in cafes, bars, community centers, multicultural centers, or centers for refugees. This model would demonstrate a high degree of plasticity, as

4. Marc Augé, *The Future* (London–New York: Verso, 2014).

per the work of the French philosopher Malabou, in terms of both its response to civic exigencies, allowing its program and mode of operation to be shaped by existing needs, institutions, and social factors, while also, in its own way, within the institution, creating spaces for redeveloped modes of engagement to emerge, in other words, to be shaped by and for the future, while helping to shape that future, as well.

This integration of our work more directly with the local and civic needs and desires and exigencies would clearly create a more sustainable model, as the institution would then not only be integrating with an infrastructure and a pattern of engagements which already exist on the ground in its own environment, but could aid and guide the evolution of this set of existing networks and relationships by exploiting its own institutional strengths. Of course, we should not be deluded that this situation would be the best of all possible worlds and that all our problems would be solved. We are dealing with arts institutions, which are always, by their very nature, struggling to find the resources, money, and energy to operate, and, to a great extent, in the current neoliberal age, we will always be operating with care where other agencies that might be better equipped with these resources – namely, governments, local authorities, councils, and quangos – have already left the field.

As Pascal Gielen explains in *Community Art: The Politics of Trespassing*,⁵ community art is becoming a cheaper form of social work, especially as it is usually offered on a project basis, whereas social services, including local schools and hospitals, call for more structural investment. It is very doubtful whether one can effectively tackle serious issues like social deprivation and disintegration with such temporary projects and similarly temporary responsibilities. Furthermore, community art is, by definition, a practice that actively involves people in the process or production of a work of art. In developing this sort of mechanism, the position of the art component seems much more crucial than the community.

That this form of art is now so preeminent in neoliberal regimes raises further questions about whose politics

5. de Bruyne, Gielen, *Community Art*.

community art is serving. This is why we should distance ourselves from community and public art and practice socially engaged and civic art. Being civic means relating to a particular locale and aiming for the re-empowerment of local actors. This translates into a focus on the intermediaries within the public sphere. Instead of working directly with communities, we should interact with the practitioners interested in or already addressing social and political issues. Thus we can make our institutions more sustainable, and our “trouble” will continue to decline.

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez

For SLOW *Institutions*

[in]: *e-flux journal*, no. 85 (October 2017),
<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/155520/for-slow-institutions/>

A contemporary art institution can be described as a public, civic, or common space, coproduced by its staff and by the continuous line of actors, whether subjects or objects, who temporarily inhabit it. How can we, as cultural workers and artists, work within and with institutions today, at a time of violent racialization and profound ecological crisis, when heightened surveillance reinforces the organized and transnational governmental abuse of natural resources and the commons? How do we engage various institutional constituencies in countries of the Global North, when it is their governments that are causing or contributing to inhuman civil wars and drone strikes in other regions of the world, forcing thousands of people into displacement and dispossession, whereby many drown, suffocate, starve to death, or are exposed to frequent violence by those they encounter on their way?

This is an invitation for curators operating in distinct geographies but within an intertwined geopolitical reality to slow down their ways of working and being, to imagine new ecologies of care as a continuous practice of support, and to listen attentively to feelings that arise from encounters with objects and subjects. This is a call to radically open up our institutional borders and show how they work (or not) in order to render our organizations palpable, audible, sentient, soft, porous, and above all, decolonial and anti-patriarchal.

In contrast to the competitive environment of institutions that foster “best practice” models, the plea of Isabelle Stengers to slow down research in the social and hard sciences offers an important alternative. Transposing Stengers’ call to undo the symbiosis between fast science and industry, let us think together about some proposals for how institutions of contemporary art can counter the imperatives of the late-capitalist and neoliberal progress-driven modes of living and thinking. Decisions about fossil-fuel divestment and institutional exercises to embrace degrowth as a necessary condition in the Global North are starting to take shape within institutions that deal with the past and future of cultural heritage.

RESILIENCE

A few years ago I proposed “Resilience” as a working title for the Triennial of Contemporary Art in Slovenia, held at the Museum of

Modern Art in Ljubljana.¹ After more than twenty-five years of exchanging “socialism with a human face” for savage capitalism, this region still has very little private investment in the arts and only symbolic public funds. The theme of the triennial immediately grew into a metaphor for a younger generation of artists who were and are barely surviving amid a contemporary mess of artistic and cultural overproduction. This young generation is formed by resilient subjects who live and work in today’s crisis conditions, where minor and major disasters continually follow one another.

Resilience stands counterpoised to the idea of socio-technological development. First emerging as a concept in the study of the ecology of systems in the 1970s, resilience evolved into a science dealing with complex adaptive systems, becoming established as the prevalent strategy in risk and natural-resources management.² Over the past two decades, resilience has been incorporated into discussions about the “commons society” in the social sciences, international finances, political economy, the logistics of crisis management, terrorism, natural-disaster management, corporate risk analysis, the psychology of trauma, urban planning, and healthcare, and as a proposed upgrading of the global trend of developing sustainability in the societies of the Global North.³ The term is used widely, with

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1. “Resilience: U3 – Triennial of Contemporary Art in Slovenia” took place in 2013 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova +MSUM in Ljubljana <http://u3trienale.mg-lj.si/en/about/>.
 2. A significant text on resilience and ecology is Canadian ecologist Crawford Stanley Holling’s “Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems,” *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*, no. 4 (1973): 1–23. For a more contemporary work on this topic, see: Brian Walker and David Salt, *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World* (Washington: Island Press, 2006).
 3. A commons society, unlike a market-oriented one, entails a new understanding of natural and social resources as collective and common.

a variety of connotations: in the natural sciences or physics, a resilient body is described as flexible, durable, and capable of springing back to its original form and transforming received energy into its own reconstruction; in psychology, resilience refers to the subject's ability to recover its original state relatively quickly after significant stress or shock, continuing processes of self-realization without major setbacks.

Applied more narrowly in the sphere of cultural work, resilience is more than just the ability to adapt, as promoted over the past two decades by the concept of the flexible subject, which was adopted by corporate capitalism and neoliberalism, and which triggered the mass movement of precarious labor.⁴ Resilience encompasses reciprocal dependence and the finding of one's political and socio-ecological place in a world that is out of balance and creates increasingly disadvantageous living conditions. Rather than trying to find global solutions for some indefinite future, or projecting a possible perfect balance, resilient thinking focuses on the diversity of practical solutions for a specific locality, and on the cooperation and creativity of everyone involved in a community or society.

Resilient thinking looks at the critical and dystopian near future; unable to anticipate or postpone it, it can only react by adapting to it. "Your utopia, my dystopia," Françoise Vergès recently said in the framework of the Atelier project,

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4. According to Suely Rolnik, who develops the concept of flexible subjectivity based on Brian Holmes, this is a product of the emergence of a creative class in the 1950s, which led to existential experimentation and a radical break with dominant forces: "Flexible subjectivity was adopted as a politics of desire by a wide range of people, who began to desert the current ways of life and trace alternative cartographies – a process supported and made possible by its broad collective extension." Suely Rolnik, "Politics of Flexible Subjectivity: The Event-Work of Lygia Clark," <https://www.pucsp.br/nucleodesubjetividade/Textos/SUELY/Flexiblesubjectivity.pdf>.

a research group that has been meeting and working in and around Paris once a year, examining notions of racism, decoloniality, and capitalism.⁵ As a concept, resilience has drawn a lot of criticism, with the main reproaches focusing on its depoliticized nature (which makes it vulnerable to appropriation by neoliberal thought and action), its favoring of resources while ignoring conflict, and its emphasis on reestablishing an old status quo rather than effecting change.

During the research for the triennial, I began examining contemporary art production in Slovenia at the time when the Occupy movement in the US was coming to an end, the all-Slovenian uprising was being organized, a right-wing government fell and another took office, and drastic austerity measures were introduced, not only in Slovenia but across the whole of Europe. The growing discontent with social, political, moral, and economic crises echoed in my conversations with a younger generation of artists. My main challenge for the triennial was to see how ideas on sustainability emerging from discussions around “commoning practices,” such as community gardens, the sharing of public space, new forms of crowdsourcing, and new ways of collaborating such as coworking, do-it-together, and do-it-with-others,⁶ could enter the exhibition-making and remain after the end of the triennial, in the museum itself or in its immediate surroundings.

LIMITS TO GROWTH

While working with the concepts of resilience and commoning, I encountered one of many predictions for a future of scarce resources. It was in the form a diagram, published in *Wired* magazine, predicting

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5. For a manifesto entitled “Dystopies / Utopies / Hétérotopies,” written following the fourth Atelier, see: <http://www.fmsh.fr/fr/college-etudesmondiales/28533>.
 6. Derived from the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos, the concept of “do-it-together” emerged on the Internet just under a decade ago, most notably in art and activism, as a form of collaboration based on principles of open-source information, nonhierarchical relations, and networked co-creation.

various global changes that would take place by the year 2025. Air travel, *Wired* announced, would become a luxury, and local initiatives and grassroots thinking would bring neighborhoods together in a web of self-organized, sustainable societies. This prediction, however, has almost become a reality, given the global scarcity of oil, grassroots calls to leave the remaining fossil fuels in the ground, and a general awareness of how much pollution air travel generates. In another example, scientist Frank Fenner has predicted that by 2100, humans will become extinct due to climate change, overpopulation, and a scarcity of resources. Lately, scientists have begun to issue warnings to a concerned public about imminent shortages of the minerals essential for laptops and cell phones, but also for hybrid and electric cars, solar panels, and copper wiring for homes.⁷

A number of contemporary artists and filmmakers – such as Danish director Frank Piasecki Poulsen, in his documentary *Blood in the Mobile*⁸ – have explored the disastrous labor conditions and contemporary forms of enslavement involved in the extraction of such minerals. “Coltan as cotton,” says poet Saul Williams, confronting us with the necessity of letting this phrase resonate with us, within us.⁹ Minerals are obtained through extractive labor in the Global South, relying on the abuse of bodies that live and work in inhuman and dangerous conditions, replicating the very same colonialist and racial capitalist structures that we have known for centuries. This extraction represents an entangled form of the continuing exploitation of both humans and nature. We can observe this

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7. “Warning of shortage of essential minerals for laptops, cell phones, wiring,” *Science Daily*, March 20, 2017, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/03/170320110042.htm>.
 8. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=Tv-hE4Yx0LU>.
 9. Saul Williams’s slam poem “Coltan as Cotton” serves as a main inspiration for the upcoming Contour 9 Biennale that I have the privilege of curating. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXE0ZT-0Nxo>.

entanglement in a series of photographs taken between 2009 and 2011 in the historically charged mining area of Kolwezi, in the Katanga region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, by the artist Sammy Baloji, who was born in this region. Images of breathtaking landscapes, flooded open-pit mines, and ant-sized workers document “artisanal” copper and cobalt mining at a time when the Chinese government was granted access to these mines in exchange for rehabilitating parts of the Congolese infrastructure. This depiction of a “Zero World,” as Achille Mbembe describes such landscapes, shows “the ant-men, termite-men, men of lateritic red, who attack the very edge of the slope with pickaxes, plunging into those tunnels of death and, in a movement of self-burial, become one body and one color with those tombs from which they extract minerals.”¹⁰

Talking about the roots of this exploitation, activist and author Firoze Manji describes how, since its origins, “the growth of the capitalist economy has always been achieved at the expense of the ecosystem of which humans are a part. It has involved enslavement of millions, genocide, colonization, amputation of non-renewable resources, pillage, piracy, militarization, theft, poisoning of ecosystems, loss of species of animals and plants, disposessions and imprisonment of cultures and societies within capitalist social relations of production, all in the interest of accumulation of capital by a few.”¹¹

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10. Achille Mbembe, “The Zero World: Materials and the Machine,” in *Elements for a World: Fire*, ed. Ashkan Sepahvand with Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and Nora Razian. Published as part of the *Let’s Talk about the Weather: Art and Ecology in a Time of Crisis* exhibition at the Sursock Museum, Beirut, 2016, <https://sursock.museum/content/lets-talk-about-weather-art-and-ecology-time-crisis>. A selection of Baloji’s photographs from this series formed the opening chapter of this exhibition.
11. “Degrowth Is Not a Choice Available to Those Impoverished by Capital: Interview with Firoze Manji,” *La Décroissance*, September 26, 2015, <https://www.newsclick.in/international/degrowth-not-choice-available-those-impoverished-capital>.

Sociologist Razmig Keucheyan draws on the notion of ecological debt that social movements from the Global South have put forward in recent years: “By exploiting their natural resources, and hence by durably damaging their environment, industrialized countries owe a huge debt to countries of the South. This ecological debt is much bigger than the financial debt the South supposedly owes the North. Taking it into account would completely transform the way we think about the global economy.”¹²

Contemporary scientific and scholarly reports about impending ecological disaster recall a famous older document: *The Limits to Growth* (1972). This was the first world report examining the human impact on the environment. Supported by the Club of Rome (a group of entrepreneurs and financial experts concerned about the ecological impact of worldwide industrialization) and spearheaded by a team from MIT, *The Limits to Growth* made explicit the long-term consequences of exponential economic growth. The report stated that if human habits did not change, if the industrialized economy was not revolutionized, and if ecology was not inscribed in the capitalist business model, in the next fifty to one hundred years we would reach the limits of the earth’s resources. As a result, a series of catastrophes would occur: natural-resource depletion, crop failure, rampant pollution, population increases, and environmental collapse.

In a video entitled *The Limits to Growth* (2013) by the artist Pedro Neves Marques, animated computer simulations depict some of the various alternative scenarios that were outlined in the Club of Rome report. In these scenarios, only drastic environmental-protection measures would be capable of changing the direction of the world system and maintaining both world population and wealth at consistent levels. (As we know, the necessary political measures have not yet been taken.)

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12. Razmig Keucheyan, “Division, not consensus, may be the key to fighting climate change,” *Guardian*, May 5, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2014/may/05/division-inequality-key-fighting-climate-change?CMP=tw_t_gu.

Together with Mariana Silva, Neves Marques wrote a text to accompany his video, drawing an analogy between the report and the institutions of contemporary art: “Looking back at the turn of the 21st century, museological narratives and displays had become in themselves preemptive gestures, attempts at capturing the modulation of capital and social erasure, as violence sunk in ... Finally, beyond the control of cultural workers and civic representation, art institutions were slowly recognized as also possessing their own psychological states.”¹³

Even as it has done research into what these preemptive institutional gestures could be, the artistic and cultural sector of the Global North has exceeded its sustainability, and seems to be caught in a vicious circle in which advanced professionalization via art academies is coupled with a lack of financial or systemic support for myriad artistic institutions. Despite the culture of austerity that followed the financial crash of 2008, arts institutions continue to multiply in developed countries, and by and large their logic continues to be one in which the “event economy” (French: *événementiel*) and accumulation reign. A prominent symptom of this phenomenon has been incessant “biennialization” and the expansion of cultural tourism.

RACIAL CAPITALISM

Many historians of the twentieth century – William Edward Burghardt DuBois, Eric Williams, Walter Rodney, and Kwame Nkrumah, to name a few – have documented the impact of the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism on the growth of industrial capitalism in Western Europe and North America. The transatlantic slave trade – that transformation of human beings into property, setting them outside the realm of history – excluded these slaves from narratives about historical progress and denied them personhood, a process that has continued for over four centuries in the form of organized colonialism, imperialism, and slavery. Profits from the slave

13. Pedro Neves Marques and Mariana Silva, “Limits to Growth,” 2013.





Sammy Baloji, *Mine à ciel ouvert noyée de Bamfara #1. Lieu d'extraction minière artisanale*, 2010, 2012

trade went directly into urban, marine, and merchant development, accumulating substantial wealth for slave-owner families, mostly in Europe and the US. A recent generation of scholar-activists from universities in South Africa, India, the USA, Europe, and South America have initiated a reparations movement. As long as the “former” West continues to promote the idea of technological and economic progress based on combustible resources and extractive labor from the Global South, the same old colonial capitalist drive that organized the transatlantic slave trade will continue to run rampant.

In his inspiring book *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?* Ghassan Hage gives us insight into the historical and contemporary conditions of racism – in particular Islamophobia – and their destructive relationship to the environment. He shows us how colonial racist exploitation reproduces and legitimates the very wild, unchecked, and inhumane capitalism that governs the overexploitation of nature. He also examines how this exploitation is the structuring principle of both ecological and colonial domination.¹⁴

Juxtaposing a map of transatlantic slave-trade routes and a map of global underwater cables reveals a fascinating analogy. It is like a road map of world trade: the big international shipping routes tend to mirror major cable routes, linking the US with Europe and Asia. Africa and South America are less well served. As they are enormously expensive to lay, cables have traditionally been placed between more developed countries, but new routes are constantly being added worldwide. South-South partnerships are being forged by nations on either side of the Atlantic, once united by the transatlantic slave trade. Underwater cables for Internet traffic follow this reconnecting.

Scholars agree that accountability, recovery, remediation, and repair of the archival traces of black lives as a means of contesting racism and its legacies should have a political purpose and not only be “a plea for inclusion within the foundational promises of liberal modernity.”¹⁵ Even if

14. Ghassan Hage, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

15. Laura Helton, “The Question of Recovery: An Introduction,” →

financial accountability for slavery might not be able to unsettle the deep injustices and power imbalances that permeate our world, reparations movements are an example of the necessary work of decolonizing recorded history.

THE PRODUCTIVITY OF SHAME

As intersectional feminists of the Third Wave and postcolonial theorists have argued, liberal claims to know or represent the experiences of others through the process of empathy often involve the privileged subjects enacting forms of projection and appropriation, which can reify existing social hierarchies and silence those at the margins. These discourses routinely take for granted the socially privileged subject as potential empathizer. That is, in the vast majority of these cases, it is an imagined subject with class, race, and geopolitical privileges who encounters difference and then chooses whether or not to extend empathy and compassion. This act of choosing to extend empathy can itself be a way to assert power. The less privileged (poor,

→ *Social Text*, no. 125 (2015). On accountability, see the many research threads in "Legacies of British Slave-ownership," an ongoing project organized by historian Catherine Hall and other researchers and students at University College London, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/project/cupbook>. On the notion of meaningful remediation, see Clémentine Deliss, "Collecting Life's Unknowns," *L'Internationale Online*, June 11, 2015, https://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising_practices/27_collecting_lifes_unknowns. The artist Kader Attia uses the term "repair" in the titles of some of his installations; the term has also been debated by Wayne Modest, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, and Margareta von Oswald in "Objects/Subjects in Exile," *L'Internationale Online*, March 9, 2017, https://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising_practices/89_objects_subjects_in_exile_a_conversation_between_wayne_modest_bonaventure_soh_bejeng_ndikung_and_margareta_von_oswald.

nonwhite, and/or third-world) other remains simply the object of empathy and thus once again fixed in place. In her recent book *Affective Relations: Transnational Politics of Empathy*, feminist scholar Carolyn Pedwell offers a reading of postcolonial affects like anger, sadness, and shame, exploring how they can be affirmative in their demand to reopen the archives of history, to keep the past alive precisely for the political work of the present.

In *L'Abécédaire*, Gilles Deleuze said, "The shame of being a man ... is there any better reason to write?" Deleuze approaches creating or writing as resistance, and states that one of the greatest motifs in art is a certain "shame of being a man." He commented on Primo Levi's book *Survival In Auschwitz*, which Levi wrote after he returned from the camp, in which he said that his dominant feeling, after being freed, was the shame of being a man. As Levi explained, and Deleuze after him, this beautiful confession does not equate the killers with their victims or suggest that all humans were guilty of Nazism. Levi rather asks how *some* humans other than himself could have done these things, and how one could take sides and survive. The feeling of shame is thus born of having survived when others have not.¹⁶ Deleuze believes that art arises from that shame of being a man; it liberates lives that have been imprisoned over and over again.

Acknowledgment of exploitation in the history of humanity is also present in a proposal by scientists Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, to date the beginning of the Anthropocene to the colonization of lands overseas by European explorers and settlers and the subsequent extermination of indigenous peoples and their way of life.¹⁷ Taking 1610 as the starting date of the Anthropocene corresponds to a shift

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16. See Charles J. Stivale, *Gilles Deleuze's ABCs: The Folds of Friendship* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).
17. Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," *Nature*, no. 519 (March 2015): 171–80, <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature14258?foxtrot-callback=true>.

in carbon deposits with the deaths of over fifty million indigenous residents of the Americas in the first century after European contact – the result of genocide, famine, and enslavement. The term “Anthropocene” was officially submitted as a new geological era by Paul Crutzen, a Dutch chemist, in 2000. Crutzen proposed linking it to 1784 and the invention of the steam engine, which accelerated the extraction of resources from the earth and drove even more colonial expansion. Ever since Crutzen proposed his idea of the Anthropocene, it has been challenged and tested, for example by Donna Haraway, who proposes the term “Chthulucene” instead, or Françoise Vergès, who proposes “Anthropocapitalocene.” The effort to connect the Anthropocene to the near extermination of indigenous communities has yet another sociopolitical implication. It suggests that art institutions today should not pretend that they were built out of the neutrality of the white cube and its Western Enlightenment legacy, as if these have no material or cultural link to the centuries-long exploitation of the Global South by the Global North.

THE COMPLICITY OF THE WHITE CUBE

The body of a cyborg, according to Donna Haraway in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, is “oppositional, utopian and completely without innocence,” a position whose legacy is explored by Vinciane Despret in her conversation with Haraway and Isabelle Stengers: “The non-innocence seems to unravel the problems, explore the unexpected and imperceptible folds, to create a discomfort but without paralyzing action or thought.” Learning how to recognize, assume, and think this discomfort, says Despret, can lead to greater attentiveness and a fruitful form of hesitation. In her writing about the dead, Despret affirms that spaces in which sightings of ghosts have been reported are usually associated with histories of violence. These ghosts, says Despret, are somehow still there, without us being able to understand or imagine what they do. But they are there and we have to take them into account, even if we do not perceive them.

In recent decades, artists and scholars have attempted to tackle these ghosts through artistic and curatorial practices of institutional critique and in new forms of institutionalism in

the Global North.¹⁸ But the specter of the neutral white cube still haunts many architectural visions, museum directorships, and newly built art institutions. In her Master's thesis, Whitney B. Birkett notes that, while eighteenth-century aristocratic collectors favored symmetrical hangings that allowed viewers to compare the strengths and weaknesses of different artistic movements, nineteenth-century American institutions such as New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts began to present artworks as didactic tools rather than as treasures, with the aim of "civilizing" the working class and educating a nation.¹⁹ In the 1930s, New York's Museum of Modern Art and its director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., developed the aesthetics of the "white cube" based on art movements in the USA as well as Bauhaus design. This new display method focused viewers' attention on a select number of masterpieces. As Birkett writes, "By presenting art as self-sufficient symbols of freedom in a capitalist society, Barr created a space that perfectly fit the needs of an era and was emulated by museums and businesses alike."²⁰ MoMA also minimized its interpretive wall text, allowing viewers to form their own interpretations of what they saw, and leaving the artworks to act as symbols of their creators' supposed

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18. On new forms of institutionalism, internationalism, and the responsibility of public institutions towards their constituencies, see the conversation with the directors of the museums of the confederation *L'Internationale*: Nathalie Zonnenberg, "The Potential of Plurality: A Discussion with the Directors of L'Internationale," *Afterall*, no. 38 (Spring 2015). For *L'Internationale*, see: <https://www.internationaleonline.org/about>.
19. Whitney B. Birkett, "To Infinity and Beyond: A Critique of the Aesthetic White Cube" (Master's thesis, Seton Hall University, 2012), <https://scholarship.shu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1211&context=theses>.
20. *Ibid.*

autonomy and artistic genius. But as Birkett shows, this space was far from being free of ideology, since it was designed to promote artistic freedom in support of a democratic, capitalist society and the “American dream.”

However, the best critique of the ideological premises of the white cube remains a series of essays written by Brian O’Doherty in 1976, collected in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Writing from within the context of post-minimalism and conceptual art of the 1970s, but also from the point of view of artistic practice, O’Doherty argues that the gallery space is not a neutral container, but a historical construct. The white cube divides that which is to be kept outside (the social and the political) from that which is inside (the value of art): “The white cube is usually seen as an emblem of the estrangement of the artist from a society to which the gallery also provides access. It is a ghetto space, a survival compound, a proto-museum with a direct line to the timeless, a set of conditions, an attitude, a place deprived of location ... It is mainly a formalist invention, in that the tonic weightlessness of abstract painting and sculpture left it with a low gravity ... Was the white cube nurtured by an internal logic similar to that of its art? Was its obsession with enclosure an organic response, encysting art that would not otherwise survive? Was it an economic construct formed by capitalist models of scarcity and demand? ... For better or worse it is the single major convention through which art is passed. What keeps it stable is the lack of alternatives.”²¹

As Simon Sheikh writes, O’Doherty offers a critique of the understanding of the white cube as “a place free of context, where time and social space are thought to be excluded from the experience of artworks. It is only through the apparent neutrality of appearing outside of daily life and politics that the works within the white cube can appear to be self-contained – only by being freed from historical time can they attain their aura of timelessness.”²²

21. Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, <http://www.societyofcontrol.com/whitecube/insidewc.htm>.

22. Simon Sheikh, “Positively White Cube Revisited,” →

In Sheikh's view, the task of O'Doherty's seminal text is to continue the ongoing struggle to find ways of escaping the white cube's ideology of commodity fetishism and eternal values.

SLOW INSTITUTIONS

In *The Future of Heritage as Climates Change: Loss, Adaptation and Creativity*, edited by David Harvey and Jim Perry, the authors of the essay "Strategies for Coping with the Wicked Problem of Climate Change" suggest that organizations and institutions confronted with the challenges of climate change should engage in adaptive governance: "An organization's adaptive capacity results from a unique combination of values and principles, institutional culture and function, commitment to public engagement, financial and human assets, acquisition and use of information, know-how and a mandate for decision-making."²³

They assert that assessing an institution's readiness to adapt to climate change is the initial step, which should be followed by a commitment to addressing social, gender, and cultural issues in ecologically meaningful contexts. Let us listen to Fred Moten's poetic call to slow down: "So we have to slow down, to remain, so we can get together and think about how to get together. What if it turns out that the way we get together is the way to get together? ... Come get some more of these differences we share. Are differences our way of sharing? Let's share so we can differ, in undercommon misunderstanding."²⁴

→ *e-flux journal*, no. 3, (February 2009), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/03/68545/positively-white-cube-revisited/>.

23. Paul A. Gray et al., "Strategies for Coping with the Wicked Problem of Climate Change," in *The Future of Heritage as Climates Change: Loss, Adaptation and Creativity*, ed. David Harvey and Jim Perry (New York: Routledge, 2015), 186.
24. Fred Moten, "Remain," in *Thomas Hirschhorn: Gramsci Monument*, ed. Stephen Hoban, Yasmin Raymond, and Kelly Kivland (New York: DIA Art Foundation; and London: Koenig Books, 2015), 326–7.

In opposition to accelerationism and in favor of slowing down, Isabelle Stengers has been a fervent opponent of globalization and neoliberalism, especially in her support of the struggle of anti-GMO activists. In many of her writings in recent years, she has underlined the fact that the new politics of public research promotes only the potential for research to generate profit in the competitive academic marketplace. To counter this, Stengers suggests that researchers should take her “plea for slow science” seriously. Slow science, she writes, is “about the quality of research, that is also, its relevance for today’s issues.”²⁵ Stengers was motivated to start a debate about rethinking the conditions of public research after Professor Barbara Van Dyck was fired from her position at Leuven University in 2011 for publicly endorsing action against genetically modified potatoes in Wetteren, Belgium. According to Stengers, her colleague was fired because of a position she took as a citizen, not as a researcher. This prompted Stengers to claim that she stands firmly against the idea of the neutral, disinterested production of knowledge. She describes how the genesis of “fast science” in the nineteenth century had an impact on the whole of scientific research, creating an atmosphere in which all research was supposed to contribute to the immediate (usually profit-driven) progress of its given field.

Stengers says that in the face of younger generations who have entered universities with the hope of gaining a better understanding of the world we live in, she feels ashamed. Referring to Deleuze’s reflections on how shame drives art as well as philosophy, Stengers states: “We know that those who enter university today belong to the generation that will have to face a future the challenges of which we just cannot imagine ... Our ways of life will have to change, and this certainly entails a change in the way we relate to our environment, social and ecological, but also in the ways our academic knowledge relates to its environment.”²⁶

25. Isabelle Stengers, “‘Another Science is Possible!': A Plea for Slow Science” (lecture, Faculty of Philosophy and Literature, Université libre de Bruxelles), 2011, <http://we.vub.ac.be/nl/applied-physics>.

26. *Ibid.*

In arguing that scientific reliability should no longer be based only on scientific judgment, but also on social and political concerns, Stengers proposes slow science as “an operation which would reclaim the art of dealing with, and learning from, what scientists too often consider messy, that is, what escapes general, so-called objective categories.”²⁷ Drawing on the work of ecofeminists and other activists from the US, she calls for learning to listen to each other in order to recognize the emergent values that arise only because “those who meet have learned how to give to the issue around which they meet the power to effectively matter and connect them.” What sustains those moments when someone is mesmerized and forever transformed by understanding the perspective of someone else – when transformative power comes from participants thinking together – is “more similar to the slow knowledge of a gardener than to the fast one of so-called rational industrial agriculture.”²⁸ As Stengers writes in her recent book, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, in the point of view of fast science, paying attention is equated with a loss of time; but from the perspective of slow science, paying attention can teach research institutions and researchers to be affected and to affect the creation of the future.

How could Stengers notion of slowing down be introduced to public cultural institutions? How can they transform themselves from white cubes into slow institutions? These questions are debated in the e-publication *Ecologising Museums*, edited by L’Internationale Online with Sarah Werkmeister.²⁹ In one of its contributions, Barbara Glowczewski says: “A slow museum should be especially attentive to collaborating with concerned populations and artists, Indigenous or not, who create new worlds in response to traumas of the past and the present... Acceleration of history, in which ongoing events become archived before being finished, is a real issue to be thought about in a slowed-down, more thought

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. See: https://www.internationaleonline.org/bookshelves/ecologising_museums.

through process, both within art and within cultural institutions.”³⁰

The most important priorities seem to be developing practical solutions that relate to the actual buildings and their infrastructure, and to the production of the exhibitions themselves; working on the content of exhibitions collectively with the staff of institutions; creating opportunities for staff members to share competences; and including staff in discussions about sustainability and resilience.

30. Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and Sarah Werkmeister, “Ecosophy and Slow Anthropology: A Conversation with Barbara Glowczewski,” in *Ecologising Museums*, ed. L’Internationale Online with Sarah Werkmeister, 2016, https://www.internationaleonline.org/research/politics_of_life_and_death/74_ecosophy_and_slow_anthropology_a_conversation_with_barbara_glowczewski.

Ewa Majewska
TOWARD
A
FEMINIST
ART
INSTI-
TUTION?
*Counterpublics of the
Weak*

When Tereza Stejskalová of tranzit.cz invited me to discuss feminist art institutions in 2017, I immediately admired the audacity of this formulation of this topic.¹ The question was not “can women enter an art institution?” (with their clothes on), as the Guerrilla Girls asked in the 1980s, it was not “why have there been no great women artists?” as in the famous essay by Linda Nochlin in the early 1970s,² it somehow goes back to a classic statement by Virginia Woolf, who, in 1920s, demanded “a room of one’s own” for every woman who wanted to pursue a higher education. When it comes to a feminist (art) institution, there is a transversal of magnitude; this claim obliges not just individuals or groups, but institutions as well, to form around women’s issues, however they may be defined.

The topic of a feminist institution embraces all these questions, permeating not only the public/private divide in terms of the individual, and also acquiring a collective/social dimension. The issue of a feminist (art) institution requires us to resolve several contradictions, of which some have been recently

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1. The original text of the *Feminist (Art) Institution: Code of Practices* was published in 2018 and it is also reprinted in this volume. The series of lectures for this project and the *Institution* can be found here: <http://feministinstitution.cz/code-of-practice/>. Among the authors of the *Code of Practice* are the founders of feminist institutions: Artwall (Zuzana Štefková), Display (Zuzana Jakalová, Zbyněk Baladrán), tranzit.cz (Tereza Stejskalová), Jindřich Chalupecký Award (Karina Kottová, Tereza Jindrová), etc. galerie (Alžběta Bačíková, Anna Remešová), but also artists like Barbora Kleinhamplová and Lily Alma Reyner. I would like to express my gratitude to Teresa Stejskalová for giving me this information on very short notice, for her tireless work on the feminist institution, and for her kind invitation to Prague.
 2. See: Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

formulated by Angela Dimitrakaki in the context of feminist art, such as: reform/revolution? Autonomy/dependency? And work/non-work?³ These questions might also be seen as a follow-up to Griselda Pollock's famous statement that women's studies "are not just about women, but about the social systems and ideological schemata which sustain the domination of men over women."⁴ In this essay, I add some ideas to the initial call and Code of Practice formulated by tranzit.cz, offering some new observations on this great endeavor.⁵

The notion of a feminist art institution, as much as it incorporates feminist discussions concerning women, feminism, and art, also engages in topics such as the public, the public sphere, counterpublics, and institutions. Given the current climate crisis, it also enters the debate on ecology. As the "Code of Practice" for the Feminist (art) Institution has already been written, I will reference it in my own discussion, arguing for transversal models which combine a non-heroic vision of (artistic) development with solidarity practices and the resistance of the weak. I believe that rethinking the contradictions formulated by Angela Dimitrakaki will be of great importance in this discussion, as will keeping in mind the ecological crisis.

According to the Authors of the "Code of Practice" for the Feminist (art) Institution, a critical approach and self-critique are the foremost principles. I agree with these choices, partly because of the necessity of questioning and undermining the existing status quo, partly because a critical position allows us to develop institutions and their art, and partly because this sets the function of art institution as counterpublics. Why? The notion of the counterpublic sphere was first developed by Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt in their critical response to Jürgen Habermas' analysis of the public sphere. It embraced

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3. See: Angela Dimitrakaki, "Feminism, Art, Contradictions," *e-flux journal*, no. 92 (June 2018), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/92/205536/feminism-art-contradictions/>.
 4. Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (New York–London: Routledge, 2003), 1.
 5. *The Code of Practice* is reprinted in this volume, 379–83.





Zorka Wolny, *Ophelias. Iconography of Madness*, 2012

the oppositional character of the public sphere and situated it in the context of production, thus eliminating the somewhat heavy-handed distinction between the (productive) workers who possess insufficient education, socialization, and free time, which were allegedly indispensable for discussing matters of the common good, and the (unproductive and masculine) bourgeoisie, whose *habitus* was supposedly ideal material for the public sphere. Habermas' exclusive, privileged vision of the public sphere was thus replaced by counterpublics, a plurality of sites of critical debate, opposing the prevailing authorities and socio-cultural values, including economic inequalities. Counterpublics, as Nancy Fraser later summarized, were to be alternative public spheres, oppositional sites of critical debate.⁶ If we look at the art institutions, their mission is perhaps most fully realized when they take the task of critique seriously. And yet, how to develop it in a feminist way?

Critical thinking cannot sustain equality and unteach oppression on its own. It can provide the tools this transformation, yet if left alone, it can perform a repetition of exploitative and discriminatory labor divisions, or racist or misogynist forms of oppression and segregation. As such, the authors of the "Code of Practice" suggest a quota as a temporary means of obtaining an egalitarian gender division. Two questions should be posed here: Does this solution assimilate into reformism? Does it enhance binary models of identity politics? The answers are: no and no. Assuming gender equality does not necessarily lead to neoliberal assimilation into a corporate model of corporate identity politics. Angela Dimitrakaki argues that reformist activities can become parts of a revolutionary process – in part this depends on whether or not feminism rejects a large-scale, radical perspective.⁷ I agree with her perspective, and with the views developed by Rosa Luxemburg, whose participation in the Socialdemocratic Party of Germany was not a gesture of her reformist convictions, but a strategic choice to

6. See: Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80.

7. Pollock, *Vision and Difference*.

support a political force capable of transformation. Her constant work in party-organized schools, in publications and in science, as well as her correspondence, shows Luxemburg's political labor as transversal – moving freely between the supposed contradictions of reform and revolution, determinism and autonomy, work and non-work. Her writings and her life brilliantly demonstrate the extent to which those binary oppositions sublate in praxis in a political intellectual and activist. Luxemburg also had a lot of sympathy for failure – as a part of the materialized, embodied struggle for emancipatory politics. This did not exclude the prospect of a social revolution, it just meant that some elements of radical social practice required rehearsals or needed to be abandoned; the social praxis allowed her to choose which.⁸

I believe that Luxemburg's most interesting legacy is in fact in her ability to work across such distinctions, and to focus on those contradictions which actually divided the social, such as the party versus grassroots model, the bourgeoisie versus the proletariat, state versus cosmopolitanism, or even women versus men. As we read in her essay "Reform or Revolution," the important contradictions are elsewhere, not in the epistemic restrictions of a political *praxis*, but in the everyday reality of social divisions. A central task then becomes finding ways of transforming the society without fetishizing its organizational structure, aiming at imperialism, exploitation and militarism, wherever they are found: in the Bolshevik censorship, social-democratic support for the war, or capitalist accumulation. Her perspective or position should thus be seen as transversal, and radically so.

The notion of transversality is central to Félix Guattari's *Three Ecologies* – a long essay written just after the collapse of the Soviet Empire.⁹ Guattari defines effective social transformation as proceeding in all sectors, classes, yet not by all means. This kind of antifascist social

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8. See: Loraea Michaelis, "Rosa Luxemburg on Disappointment and the Politics of Commitment," *European Journal of Political Theory*, April 12, 2011.
9. Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London and New Brunswick: The Athlone Press, 2000).

project would require working across the supposed contradictions, and employing a variety of sometimes (supposedly) opposing strategies, such as political parties or groups and direct and representative democracy. In this, the transversal transition makes us mindful of the institutions, with their sometimes very different functions, strategies, and methods. Let us have a look at the university as a model institution that is quite familiar to the author of this text. The University Senate functions as a model of representative democracy, while the departments can be run as “enlightened monarchies” (this is an actual quotation from a former dean at the University of Warsaw), as direct democracies (a model also applied in some very small departments at the University of Warsaw), or authoritarian, military structures (also found at the same university, though rather unpopular). Grassroots group models and institutionalized representative politics coexist in one institution. Another example is a state-run art gallery in Poland. A coach is being hired to facilitate the management’s work, while, in the same year, exploitative models of governance are employed for low-salary work. As we can see, institutions already work across differences, though not always in the best way.

In order to attempt to build a feminist institution, reform and revolution should be present at the same time. As I realized during my lecture in Prague, to the surprise of the audience and myself as well, some of Poland’s state-run art institutions already have already taken important feminist steps, making them, at least in part, feminist institutions, and dismantling another important binary distinction, between utopia and the present. This heterotopic situation is present in several art museums, where the exhibitions, collections, and event programs acknowledge not only gender balance, but also queer minorities, ethnic groups, and geopolitical divisions, making the collection and program far more egalitarian than many other similar institutions in Poland and internationally. Similar strategies are applied in several theaters and similar institutions, which have decided, at least to some extent, to work as “institutions of the common,” working closer with local communities or discriminated groups to extend their activities to social matters and participate in public debates.

Most of these cultural institutions have active, left-leaning unions, such as the particularly active Inicjatywa Pracownicza (Worker's Initiative), which also unites those cultural producers who are not fully employed.¹⁰ While these institutions do not fully embrace a feminist agenda, they do employ some crucial elements. I believe that this partiality might be a necessary step toward a better institution.

Antidiscriminatory practices are also a demand in the Code of Practice. I believe unionizing is an important aspect – it is the workers who join unions, obviously, and not institutions, but the employers should respect the union's influence on the workplaces and take advantage of their presence as an agent with an egalitarian agenda, which they often try to be.

A feminist understanding of work/labor is another of the Code's demands which requires some discussion. As Dimitrakaki rightly argues, the feminist understanding of work has evolved, and it has never been univocal. On the one hand, a heated debate has been developing around whether wages should be paid for housework since the 1970s. Interestingly, there were some paradoxical measures for acknowledging housework, such as retirement for women who run households and did not engage in waged labor (as is the case in Germany). On the other, the very idea of labor has been an object of discussion in radical social theory for two centuries, leading to Fourier and Lafargue's solutions of "doing away" with work, later taken up by Guy Debord and advocated by some post-operaist thinkers and feminists, such as Kathy Weeks and the somewhat more Protestant theories of Proudhon, Engels, and the social democrats, who opposed emancipation from labor, or at least sought to postpone it to some very distant horizon.¹¹

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10. Polish law allows workers with temporary contracts to join unions; however, as there are no laws governing these situations, in practice only the IP invites workers to join.
11. On the end of work, see: Paul Lafargue, "The Right to Be Lazy," in *The Right To Be Lazy and Other Studies* (Charles Kerr and Co., Co-operative, 1883); Guy Debord and other members of the Internationale Situationniste, →



Zorka Wollny, *Ophelias. Iconography of Madness*, 2012



Zorka Wollny, *Ophelias. Iconography of Madness*, 2012

The feminist discussions of labor, as Dimitrakaki emphasizes, following Silvia Federici and other feminist Marxists, are centered around a dispute over what has been seen as “women’s work” and has now been more broadly defined as reproductive labor – the caring, nurturing, and sustainance of human beings.¹² This work, as the Code of Practice aptly emphasizes, should be recognized in a number of ways by feminist (art) institutions. These institutions should work toward an equal share of reproductive labor between both men and women. I believe that in the context of the global climate catastrophe, new horizons of caring and reproduction are opening.

There is one value which is implicitly present in the Code of Practice, yet should perhaps be made more visible. I believe that solidarity is a necessary element of instruction for any feminist institution. I would like to elaborate on this a little, as I believe this is, in fact, the core of any feminist practice. The solidarity we know, especially in Poland, was shaped through employment hardships – in factories, shipyards, and other workplaces. It was a solidarity between workers and intellectuals, the young and the old, men and women. The feminist model of solidarity follows a similar pattern – the hardships of reproductive labor build bonds between us, often cutting through class and ethnicity divisions, crossing walls and borders. For feminist solidarity to work in this way, it must overcome limitations just as deep as those of class or race – the patriarchal divisions of women into those “caring” and the

→ documents and pamphlets from the 1950s and 1960s, much of which is available on-line: <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/situ.html>, and Kathi Weeks, *The Problem of Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

12. See: Silvia Federici, “Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint,” accessed October 15, 2019, <https://in-themiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/precari-ous-labor-a-feminist-viewpoint/>, and Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Brooklyn–Oakland: Common Notions/PM Press, 2012).

“courageous,” the “ordinary” and the “exceptional” (whatever this might mean), the mothers and the whores, the rich and poor, white and enslaved. Feminism cuts across more borders than any other movement. It embraces the cultural composition of femininity, the embodied production, the geopolitics. We are transversal from the very outset.

For an institution, solidarity functions as a reminder that support is not enough. In recent critiques of institutions, this point has been emphasized on numerous occasions and in various contexts. One concerns the support for women who have experienced domestic violence. I use this phrase instead of “victims” for a reason – I believe, and here I echo bell hooks, among others, that women who have experienced violence need to recognize their positions as victims, yet they should not be reduced to this position, as they are so very much more than that. In various critiques of institutional support for these persons, this reductionism is omnipresent, confining them to the role of “those who need support.” Nevertheless, as hooks wisely reminds us, women who have suffered domestic violence are also our teachers – of survival, of healing, of hope. As such, a mere attitude of support is not enough; there should be sharing – of knowledge, experience, and resources. This is usually present, though it often gets labeled as “support,” which is unilateral and simply untrue. Here I can quote my own experience in working against violence – women who have suffered from trafficking and domestic violence and help to build strategies against such atrocities support other women, bringing a need and sense of justice and sometimes building communities of solidarity, thus contributing to social relations in inestimable ways. Even if we all go through periods of depression, stress disorders, and other forms of post-traumatic drama, most of us exchange support, we not only “take” it.¹³

A feminist (art) institution needs to acknowledge the multidirectional nature of support, care, and solidarity, and it should not reduce anyone to a mere receiver. This position can be a part of a person’s experience,

13. See: bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

but no-one should be reduced to it and the convalescence from trauma, just as nobody's experience should be taken as defining. A feminist (art) institution should not refuse support, and it should also provide forms of support which reduce no-one to being a mere "recipient." We should learn from those who have suffered abuse and make an institution which is a critical part of the feminist struggle. Is it a value or even privilege of institutions that they reject the transitory inclusion of persons and experiences which otherwise could become very problematic? Perhaps it is precisely due to institutional longevity, consistency, and management that such inclusive practice is at all possible?

Speaking of institutions and modes of being, we should not forget the requirements imposed on us during the explosion of new social media and communication technologies. "Technofeminism" is one name often used by Laboria Cubonix, the authors of the *Xenofeminist Manifesto* – a very useful document regulating and supporting how we imagine and rethink feminism for the twenty-first century.¹⁴ In the first words of the *Manifesto* they announce their futurist, universalist agenda, which very much falls in line with what could be seen as the Feminist (art) institution project. They write: "Ours is a world in vertigo. It is a world that swarms with technological mediation, interlacing our daily lives with abstraction, virtuality, and complexity. XF constructs a feminism adapted to these realities: a feminism of unprecedented cunning, scale, and vision; a future in which the realization of gender justice and feminist emancipation contribute to a universalist politics assembled from the needs of every human, cutting across race, ability, economic standing, and geographical position."¹⁵ In this short description I believe we can recognize our daily struggle to stay afloat in various streams and fluxes of communication, contact, and presence. It seems that, in our

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14. See: Laboria Cubonix, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*, accessed October 15, 2019, <https://www.laboria-cuboniks.net>. See also: Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism* (London: Verso, 2018).
15. Laboria Cubonix, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*.

day, we need to act on every level of the social and geopolitical. We need to be everywhere and react to everything. Hito Steyerl – another brilliant feminist and artist, also a fierce antifascist, has said that the Heideggerian concept of authenticity has now met its most exhausting and ironically effective version.¹⁶ Instead of being authentic in one place and time, we need to be “in contact” in six, seven or more locations, with different people and contexts, ordained by various technological devices. “Being and time” has to be multiplied to understand today’s human condition. Our authenticity, mediated by various technological devices and programs, is doubled or tripled by agencies that provide knowledge of our location, moods, words, and other activities to companies and governments worldwide. We know all too well what we are doing, and if *we* know, now more than ever, we can be assured that somebody else does as well.

A feminist (art) institution must respond to these needs as well; it cannot ignore the fact that we are immersed not only in value production in the classical sense, but that the modes of value production have colonized what we once experienced as “free time” or “leisure” – now we produce value from the minute after we wake up, and end only when we fall asleep – yet in our blissful rest we might sustain imaginary production, or simply regenerate, making the clocks of value production go tick again, even against our will.

The feminist (art) institution should therefore understand the various positions people might want to take versus such a diversification of value production. For instance, requiring workers to be active in social media might be excessive for some, especially those who believe that they stop producing value as soon as they switch off their smartphones, a convenient lie we tell ourselves to calm our sense of glaring injustice.

16. Hito Steyerl, “The Terror of Total Dasein,” delivered at the Former West Public Editorial Meeting “Art and Labor after the End of Work,” October 9–10, 2015, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, accessed October 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SI0Mw7ASl3A>.

Yet we might want the liberty of rest, perhaps not innocent from a production point of view, yet it might be the only way for us to survive in the overstimulated world of cultural production. In this enhanced authenticity mode, complicated by precarization and globalization, our solidarity becomes a truly hybrid animal. We could perhaps imagine this in reading the *Cyborg Manifesto* in the early 1980s.¹⁷ We now experience the hybridity of our being, and those who read Haraway before had more opportunity to prepare for this development. However, does this abundance of authenticity produce more solidarity? I most certainly doubt it. Comfort comes at a price.

One of the most difficult obstacles to solidarity is difference – especially in its fetishized, artificially enhanced, and essentialist renditions. However, as I will try to prove, difference is also the greatest enhancer of solidarity. In feminist experience and theory, the distinctions between women function as a denominator for a larger discussion of solidarity and scale.¹⁸ Distinctions are understood here as differences played out as obstacles or borders. The most common form of women's segregation works according to the scenario perhaps best depicted in Sophocles's *Antigone*. It portrays a young woman opposing the king, desiring the burial of her brother against the state law and against all odds. In most interpretations she is juxtaposed to her sister, Ismene, whom most readers of the tragedy find quiet, caring, and passive. Bonnie Honig reversed this interpretation, demanding acknowledgment of the "antipatriarchal, sororal pact" that binds Antigone and Ismene.¹⁹ Taking exception to the classic readings, including those of Lacan and Hegel, but also most feminist interpretations of this piece, Honig argues that Antigone would not have had the strength, courage,

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17. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," *Socialist Review* 15, no. 2 (1985).
18. See: Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).
19. See: Bonnie Honig, *Antigone Interrupted* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

and audacity to produce and pursue her claim. Therefore, we need to see the caring, quiet and supportive Ismene not as an obstacle to Antigone's claim, but as a condition of its existence. This reading of the classical tragedy, which cuts through the history of womankind or perhaps even herstory, teaches us two things: solidarity works best among the different social agents, and politics is not solely the domain of the strong and articulate.

To my mind, the interpretation of *Antigone* offered by Bonnie Honig upsets our image of politics. It challenges the imaginary projection we all sustain, depicting a strong, articulate, heroic agent pushing her or his agenda against all odds, against everyone, without no relations in support. Well, in her brilliant retelling of Antigone's story, Honig proves exactly the opposite point – that political action requires alliances and collaborations, that solidarity needs to happen, and that it happens not only across differences, but also because of them.

This vision of society is obviously rooted in dialectics. We have too long been attached to the image of dialectics as a struggle. The master/slave dialectic central to Hegel's dialectics, or perhaps in its most traditional and influential readings, constitutes only a small part of the development of the "spirit," as Hegel has it, or "history," as Marx and more recent thinkers would prefer. If we look further into the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we might see the unhappy laborer as strangely similar to an Italian housewife of the mid 1970s, demanding wages for housework and becoming desperate in the repetition and mundanity of her endless work. We might see the world of culture, in which desperate efforts to learn privilege and knowledge are eventually undermined by the necessary rejection of all culture. We might also come across Antigone, whose sister is the subaltern of the Hegelian theory precisely because her work and fate does not follow the heroic and desperate model of the *cogito* in the journey to realization.

Yet – we are somewhere else right now. We are living after many years of sociology and social sciences, which have developed some highly extravagant implications of Immanuel Kant's statement, that, surprisingly, people follow a pattern of "unsocial sociability" – they join forces with others despite



Cafe Courage, Berlin 2015



Crane Operator from the Gdańsk Shipyard, 2004

general differences and antagonisms in order to achieve their aims.²⁰ In Emil Durkheim's theory, this process of building organic ties becomes solidarity, especially in moments of crisis. And here we are again – so very different, and most definitely in a moment of crisis. Can we maintain the heroic model of individualist, detached, unconnected political agency? Or should we imagine political agency as developed not only in struggle, but also in various relations and interdependencies, of which the humans constitute only a part?

To close this set of emerging elements of feminist solidarity, I need to mention a formal solution I find crucial if the emerging climate rebellion is to succeed. Fortunately, events show that some of my favorite elements of solidarity and resistance are already in use. I believe that the feminist solidarity in crisis should proceed as counterpublics, as an alternative public sphere, undermining not only the governments, but also the values they promote and distinctions they establish and maintain. The feminist counterpublics, as Nancy Fraser demonstrated in her articles of the early 1990s, worked as a set of oppositional, transversal public spheres.²¹ This was a contradictory set of groups, magazines, and so on aiming at the same goal, women's rights. They understood it in contradictory, sometimes very different ways, and yet women's situation kept improving, despite the contradictory political choices and attitudes.

The "publics" is a crucial part of the word "counterpublics." To my mind it means claiming something together. A public can be institutional or anti-institutional, organized or anarchic, liberating or oppressive, but to me, this means that a group produces a claim, together, about matters of common interest. In classical theories of public debate, these matters always take precedence. I believe that the articulation of a

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20. See: Immanuel Kant "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in: Immanuel Kant, *On History* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1963).
21. Fraser, *Rethinking the Public Sphere*. See also: Ewa Majewska, "The Utopia of 'Solidarity': Between the Public Sphere and Counterpublics: Institutions of the Common Revisited," *Journal of Utopian Studies* 2, (2018).

common claim is crucial. It can be debated or not. The public is therefore primarily affective, and even more so when it unites against something or someone – then this sense of being together is a given that was never really an object of scrutinized theoretical investigation, and it could not have been, so long as critical theory occupied mainly rationalist positions.

This sense of “being in this together,” across borders, differences and distinctions has been expressed in all the feminist texts I have mentioned – it is central to the interpretation of Antigone offered by Honig, it fuels the *Xenofeminist Manifesto*, it builds the collaborative practice of Luxemburg, and it was mentioned many times in the “Code of Practice for the Feminist (Art) Institution.” Now I would like to add another reference, which I find central to contemporary feminist thought: the *Feminism for 99%*, written by three authors, circulating internationally since its first publication in early 2019.²² Here the main feminist ideas could be labeled as solidarity-based socialist eco-feminism with queer alignments. This is presented, discussed, and developed within social feminist movements, yet its applicability to institutions is just as possible as within grassroots groups. I believe that, as most grassroots groups already have similar manifestos, it is actually within institutions that this manifesto, and the others quoted as well, can bring the most substantial and necessary changes. Its emphasis on production and struggle, where reproductive labor is the key denominator not just for women, but also for all LGBTQ+, queer and trans persons, as well as the natural environment, is a powerful reminder that in patriarchal capitalism everyone *and* everything which cannot be called a white, privileged, straight subject from a privileged geopolitical and/or class position is not only marginalized or exploited, but directly endangered.

As I have mentioned, counterpublics provides an affective affinity not immediately delivered by the far more conventional and exclusive public sphere. It is essential to keep this in mind in working on the feminist (art) institution. The “affective turn” which entered critical theory via such feminist authors

22. Cinzia Arruzza et al, *Feminism for the 99%* (London: Verso, 2019).

as Judith Butler or Sara Ahmed, both very dear to me theoretically and politically, in academia and everywhere, swept aside rationalist presumptions organizing the image of resistance, and thus counterpublics as well, demanding recognition of affects in political theory and practice. Ahmed has depicted nationalism and fascism as driven not only by hatred, but also by love of the same as ourselves. Butler introduced such ideas as the necessary connection between vulnerability and resistance, smashing the artificial opposition of the political as heroic.²³ Butler is right to emphasize the vulnerability of resistance – opposition does not merely come to life as a logical counterpart to oppression, it is rooted in the experience of inferiority and suffering, and thus is a necessarily companion to resistance.

In Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille Plateaux* there is a chapter "On Refrain." It depicts the new beginnings and the moment of creative energy in territorialization.²⁴ The chapter begins with an image of a frightened boy who sings to himself to overcome his fear. This moment of bringing new sound and expression is a vulnerable, not a heroic beginning. I believe that another chapter on territorialization could be written by a socialist ecofeminist, and to some degree, has been written, in Donna Haraway's *The Cyborg Manifesto* – in the chapter where many frightened people sing together.²⁵ This is also the beginning of the solidarity we know here in Poland – one that took shape not from a sense of victory and in heroic battle, but one that was born of the experience of exploitation, fear, and the necessity of being together – in it, but also against it.

This weakness, which should be seen predominantly in terms of expressing vulnerability and the experience of exploitation,

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23. See: Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of the Emotions* (London-New York: Routledge, 2004).
24. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
25. Donna Haraway, *The Cyborg Manifesto* (London-New York: Macat Library, 2018).

not a general, stable ontological depiction of those making feminist (art) institutions, can be seen as a common ground and basic experience. Unlike the *Xenofeminist Manifesto*, which situates the shared experience in alienation, I would like to argue that what connects us when we want to make or change institutions is the shared experience of oppression, from which we want to learn and unlearn new forms of institutionalization. As in Gerald Raunig's project of "Institutions of the Commons," here too we want to learn this experience and its implications, together and in struggle; though our occupation might be just one way of announcing and practicing such work.²⁶

26. Gerald Raunig, "Occupy the Theatre! Molecularize the Museum!" in *Truth is Concrete*, ed. Florian Malzacher (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015).

THE
FEMINIST
(ART)
INSTI-
TUTION:
CODE OF
PRACTICE

This Code of Practice is an output of a seminar held in spring as part of the tranzit.cz 2017 program. The seminar examined how organizations and collectives that wish to be seen as feminist could possibly take shape.

A feminist art institution regards feminist thinking to be an important resource, an inspiration, and an underlying basis of its program and operations. Such an institution is inspired by the history of feminist organizations and by feminist reflections upon power, work, relationships, and forms of oppression.

1

A feminist art institution is (self)-critical. It subjects its structure and program to review in order to reflect changing social conditions. It recognizes that it cannot be separated from the social context, and selects its methods of social engagement accordingly. A feminist art institution seeks to develop new types of institutional environment. It redefines what it means to be a public institution and embraces groups that are otherwise marginalized or discriminated against within the concept of the public. It deems art (hence culture) to be a universally shared asset (the commons), to which everyone has an inalienable right.

Feminist art institutions are steadfastly opposed to all manifestations of intolerance, e.g. racism, homophobia, or sexism. They formulate strategies for dealing with such situations should they arise.

Feminist art institutions champion the viewpoint of the oppressed, and this is reflected in their program, their relationship with the public, and their own internal organization.

2

The ethics of its own internal operations are as important to a feminist art institution as the program by which it presents itself to the public. On the one hand, it works toward the objectives it wishes to see enshrined in society, and on the other ensures that those who work for it are happy and feel that their opinion counts. An organizational structure must be created that is capable of developing a meaningful program, while taking into account the needs of those who are part of it.

A feminist art institution is based on the mutual respect of those who work in it. The quality of their relationships, irrespective of what position they occupy, is considered to be of equal importance as the quality of the program.

The operations of a feminist art institution are the outcome of collective discussion and decision-making, and not a "one wo/man show." The distribution of power is clearly articulated. It is subject to debate by all interested parties and can be changed.

3

A feminist art institution is based on a feminist understanding of work. It is inspired by the importance feminist theory attributes to care (for children, the elderly, sick, and handicapped) and other activities that cannot be monetized but are crucial for the wellbeing of society. One of the aims of a feminist art institution is to raise the profile of activities that are essential to the existence of any organization yet are taken for granted and financially unremunerated. Different types of care (and art can be deemed a type of care) are of crucial concern to a feminist art institution.

A feminist art institution is receptive to caregivers and adapts its program so that they are able to participate.

Example: It is barrier-free, offers childminding services and an appropriate space, organizes its events at times that suit parents with children, and ensures its events are accessible to people with physical or mental health issues.

A feminist art institution is receptive to those of its workers who have responsibilities as carers. It makes every attempt to create a working environment that includes space for care activities.

Example: Employees have the opportunity to work from home. It offers childminding services during working hours. It factors in the presence of small children on its premises.

The work of production managers, accountants, and all those who contribute to the upkeep and maintenance of the institution is recognized and respected.

Example: A feminist art institution's program lists all those involved. There is no difference between the fee paid production managers and curators.

A feminist art institution pays a fee to everyone who participates directly in its running or program. (An exception to this rule involves institutions operating on a DIY basis, where nobody is paid.) Gender has no influence on the level of the fee whatsoever.

5

A feminist art institution takes it as an article of faith that contemporary society is patriarchal, as is the contemporary art world. The aim of the institution is to participate in the struggle to change this situation. A feminist art institution therefore promotes quotas as a temporary solution to gender imbalance and discrimination.

A feminist art institution promotes a 50% minimum representation of women in its annual program, whether this involves exhibitions, festivals, conferences, or panel discussions.

At least 50% of all managerial, creative, and other positions of responsibility are occupied by women in a feminist (art) institution.

A feminist art institution refuses to abide by the unwritten criteria of the culture industry as we know it today. The art world is based on a system of competition, in which only those who demonstrate the requisite endurance, ambition, strength, and assertiveness succeed. A feminist art institution advocates other values and virtues. It takes into account human weakness, frailty, and fatigue, and prioritizes human relationships over "performance." It sets itself different rules within the framework of its possibilities.



The following institutions have declared themselves bound by this Code of Practice: Artalk, Artwall, Diera do sveta, Display, etc. gallery, INI Project, Institute of Anxiety, Jindřich Chalupecký Society, Kapitál, New Aliens Agency, Synth Library Prague, and tranzit.cz.

We would like to offer our warmest thanks to Ewa Majewska, Xabier Arakistain, Giovanna Zapperi, and Luba Kobová for their inspiration.

Anne Szefer Karlsen
In Search of Cultural
Protocols
for ART Institutions

A few years ago, I would have started this text with “Allow me to be dramatic.” Today, however, I will exchange the word “dramatic” for “realistic.” The world and its inhabitants are facing situations that connect land use, social justice, and inequality to finances, production, and culture, which are often lumped together in debates on the breakdown of the climate. The impact is already being felt by many, and will need to be dealt with by everyone. This includes art institutions. The question this publication asks is “how.”¹ This text is a modest contribution in this debate, where I want to suggest that art institutions lack the “cultural protocol” to deal with most of the emergencies we are currently facing. The different art institutions are exactly that – different – yet one thing unites them. They have not yet developed practices that take the complexities of these emergencies into account. The International Council of Museums (ICOM), the monolithic museum organization with a global reach, has, for instance, recently tried and failed to find a way to change their definition of what a museum should be. Words like “democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic” proved too political and provocative for some.² It is, of course, impossible to write about art institutions as if they were one clearly defined thing. So, seeing as we all need to roll up our sleeves, I will not problematize this further here. Ideas of a future based on ecological thinking are also well rehearsed. However, as many have pointed out, institutional reform is not about switching

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1. This text is based on my contribution to the “How to Stay with the Trouble? Art Institutions and the Environmental Crisis” panel, curated by Magdalena Ziólkowska as part of the *Plasticity of the Planet* project, September 13, 2019 at Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art. I wish to express my thanks to everyone who made the panel come to life, as well as co-panellists Defne Ayas, Viviana Checchia, and Mira Gakjina, and moderator Jarosław Lubiak.
 2. See for instance Vincent Noce, “Vote on Icom's new museum definition postponed,” *The Art Newspaper*, accessed October 16, 2019, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/icom-kyoto>.

to recycled paper and economic light bulbs. The moral and practical ways to carve out paths for the future that are “uncomfortable” or that materially and seriously change art institutions’ behavior are few and far between. I would like to take one case I have experienced to suggest that the search for these protocols will take interested art practitioners down many different routes.³

Here I would like to quote T. J. Demos at length:⁴

In our emergency times of disastrous environmental transformation, it is urgent to bridge aesthetics and politics, expanding consideration of these entanglements in ways that challenge white supremacy, the militarization of everyday life, creeping fascism, and apocalyptic populism, as well as mass extinction, fast and slow environmental violence, and extractive capital. These are the central ingredients of socioecological climates that differentially impact being and define the uneven exposure to toxicity, violence, and death. That means tracing the current transformations of art, too, especially where it escapes the clutches of market-driven institutionalized forms and the mere representation of ecologies, extending into and generating new forms of life, emergent postcarbon futures, and socioecological justice.

In this piece, T. J. Demos is focusing on a classical, yet constructed, relation between art and society. I would like to bounce off his writing, to see how it could affect the way we discuss the future of art institutions. In other words, I want to “stay with the trouble,” as Donna

3. I was alerted to the term “cultural protocol” during T. J. Demos’ lecture “The Politics and Aesthetics of Climate Emergency,” organized by Volt, September 11, 2019 at Landmark, Bergen Kunsthall.

4. T. J. Demos, “Ecology-as-Intrasectionality,” *Bully Pulpit, Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2019), accessed October 16, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1699>.
T. J. Demos is Professor of the History of Art and Visual Culture and Director of the Center for Creative Ecologies at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Haraway suggested in her 2016 book.⁵ We should not be tempted to green wash our work, but rather face our problems head on. And it will hurt, that much we know.

I will call on Christine Tohmé, the founding Director of Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts. During “Home Works Forum 7” in 2015, a double suicide bombing in south Beirut on Thursday 12 November caused the government to declare Friday a day of national mourning and the minister of education to order all schools and universities in the country to close. Thomé, on the other hand, decided to continue with the program of the Home Works Forum, with an address to all the audiences – both locals and international guests – who gathered that Thursday evening. She said, and I am paraphrasing: “If we were to end all our activities and stop all our work as cultural practitioners whenever something bad happens, we would never get to make culture happen.” As I am writing this text, I have received daily updates from the 2019 edition of Home Works, which show the complexities of that location. The first email I received read “Ashkal Alwan fully supports the ongoing strikes and protests taking place across the country against unjust tax hikes, successive government failures, and our increasingly dire economic conditions. For this reason, all events scheduled to take place on Friday, October 18 as part of the 8th edition of Home Works are postponed indefinitely.”⁶ And the emails kept appearing in my inbox over the coming days. Titled “HW8 Events Postponed Today,” “HW8 Events Postponed (Oct 19-20),” and finally, “Home Works 8 Postponed.”⁷

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5. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). Donna Haraway is Distinguished Professor Emerita in the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz.
 6. Email received October 18, 2019 from info@ashkalalwan.org.
 7. Email received October 21, 2019 from info@ashkalalwan.org.

This example is telling. Our emergencies are, and will continue to be, different depending on where we are on the planet, demanding a variety of reactions. The emergencies also change with time. However, they all hark back to oppressions that arise from environmental and related emergencies that are rooted in the past, as well as in the present. Art institutions are but one kind of facility that are marked by them.

There might be a point in the near or distant future when we find that art institutions are no longer needed. However, this does not mean that we should stop looking for ways to work in a sane, ethico-political way within institutions today. I would like to speculate on how those that inhabit our institutions can create methodologies to continue for now, however disrupted. A carrying-on where their cultural protocols should attempt to challenge the dominant forces.

Sources of art institution funding, for instance, have been scrutinized more vocally over recent years from outside these institutions. To mention one example that hits home in our oil-infused economy, in Norway: “BP or not BP?” addresses cultural institutions in the UK demanding that they end their oil sponsorships. The challenge is how to transition this kind of logic from the outside to the core of institutions. The relationship between state-owned and multinational oil companies and culture is well established and is entangled with the politics of globalization, to which art institutions have been, and still are, asked to adapt. This generates privilege and power within the field of art, and thus also creates positions of influence in the wider society.

The failures of globalization – aesthetically, ecologically, financially, culturally, politically, and otherwise – are increasingly impossible to ignore. Yet there are cultural manifestations “on steroids” today because of these failures, which we should not disregard in the future. I am speaking of a certain kind of internationalism propelled by affordable flights, which has led to shared knowledge production and the exchange of experiences and expressions because travel has been made accessible to some. There is, however, a lack of attention to what this movement of people has generated. By putting this question on the agenda, I suggest that we should be more aware and preserve some elements of what this

aspect of globalization has offered and, in the process, develop a new kind of internationalism based on redistribution of privilege. I want to put a specific case on the table to share some challenging aspects of this work.

In 2016/17, together with Vivian Zihlerl – at the time a freelance curator – I started to organize a gathering of art professionals. We had long discussed the challenges faced by freelancers in our field, and being the director of an MA course in Curatorial Practice, I knew that I needed to take part in a larger debate on the working conditions I was educating many of my students to be subject to. Vivian and I “decided to convene a large-scale, yet sited conversation on the freelancer as a crucial figure in [globalization] processes. We called it *Humans of the Institution*, a title that implies both individuals and groups, with the aim to challenge assumptions, habits and expectations of ‘industry standards’ in the arts.”⁸ We ended up gathering about 150 participants at Veem House for a performance in Amsterdam, in a space that was carefully designed by the Uglycute collective, with a multi-centered design. There were even free salsa classes during lunch hours over the weekend to build enthusiasm and skills for a danceable lecture, *Sobredosis de amor*, created by Ericka Florez with Hernán Barón, which ended the weekend program on Sunday November 26, 2017. “Our agenda, however, was pragmatic: *Humans of the Institution* was prompted by a wish to gather and work together toward practical outcomes. This pragmatism emerged from a conviction in the often untapped potential of conference formats as productive gatherings for awareness building, consensus generating and in setting agendas for direct action.”⁹

This “untapped potential” is what makes this case interesting to revisit: If we continue to gather without making these

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8. Anne Szefer Karlsen and Vivian Zihlerl, “Introduction: Towards an Infrastructure of Humans,” in *Towards an Infrastructure of Humans – Working Group Statements Humans of the Institution 25–27 November 2017* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum and Bergen: Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design, University of Bergen, 2019), 16.
9. *Ibid.*, 16.

gatherings productive except as social occasions, or only small changes happen in the location of the gathering itself, we are in fact very much part of the problem. If we do not share both the *content* of the gathering and the *results* from these gatherings, we continue to create larger inequalities in the field. This is why we worked both to disseminate the content via streaming and online videos, as well as a more considered and reworked outcome in the form of an online publication.

“The notion of ‘conditions on the ground’ became [a] watchword used throughout the conversations of *Humans of the Institution*. This first arose in the programme’s opening ‘Position Paper’ by Rachel O’Reilly and Danny Butt on the topic of boycott as a tactic, based on the events surrounding the 2014 Biennale of Sydney and its sponsorship by Transfield Services. In the conversation that followed, O’Reilly pointed out that the fantasy of non-collective undertakings of the freelance curator is indeed bound by the material weave that make any curatorial project in fact a collective operation. However, the consequences of the collective are rarely identical to the initial curatorial intention. The most relevant question today is, then, how to be invested in those conditions on the ground, how to be intersubjectively responsible, and how to occupy the antagonism around questions of value, as well as permanently confront curatorial production with itself.”¹⁰ These questions should also be posed to institutions.

There must be acknowledgment that curators in particular, but also art institutions, are in a double bind: Many of us act locally but work globally. This is, of course, a privilege that has multiplied with globalization, but which also follows the same power structures and replicates inequalities that exist in the greater society. Vivian and I did not want to depoliticize this point, but rather infuse *Humans of the Institution* with ways to possibly correct some wrongs, even if only on a small scale. We not only wanted to address but to challenge existing powers. However, we found that the art institution as a larger field of professionals and organizations lacks cultural protocols to assist this work. We had to find a way, within

10. *Ibid.*, 138.





To create a position between "speaker" and "audience" during *Humans of the Institution*, the role of the "Balcony Caller" was devised to offer continuity across the two conference days, to enable a broad participation from the room, and to give a mandate to perspectives that are important to an international conversation on freelancing, organised by curators. Unlike a conventional "respondent" in a regular conference, the "Balcony Callers" had an informal and spontaneous role across the weekend, taken up by artist and curator Ahilapalapa Rands (Kanaka Maoli/Indigenous Hawaiian, ʻĪtaukei/Indigenous Fijian, Pākehā/ Settler European)

our modest means, to be creative in our social engagement. The issue we were facing was: How can we keep global mobility and be socially engaged at the same time?

“As a consequence of this train of thought, an informal international network consisting of organisations, patrons and funding bodies was created for the purpose of the project with the aim to garner support for the participation of freelance curators. As a result, a large and broad international attendance was facilitated through the commitment of individuals as well as institutions.”¹¹ We opened up for the participation of “delegates” that were supported by “delegate partners.” The delegate partners network was built on existing networks, although we did try to make the process as open as possible, which resulted in large participation in *Humans of the Institution* from Turkey and Scotland, thanks to the support of national funding bodies. Moreover, there were a few invitations and participation opportunities that were intentionally targeted. In the Dutch context, for instance, it was important to make participation from Curaçao possible, so we brokered support from the Frans Hals Museum | De Hallen Haarlem. We were also humbled by the Belgian arts organization Netwerk Aalst, which generated funding for an independent non-Belgian delegate.¹²

As the critical eye will see, we did replicate certain power hierarchies, yet hopefully we were able to contribute to a tiny redistribution of power by representation. I see this first attempt to redistribute financial power as the beginning of a cultural protocol within the art institution at large, which, in the future, might challenge existing powers, and not only address them.¹³

Linking this attempt to redistribute power by way of finances to ecology, the critical eye will again note that it did not reduce our sector’s carbon footprint. Rather, it increased it. However, we did not want to support “art tourism” with this protocol. We had clear demands to the delegates. They were obliged to take part in our day of closed working groups, to contribute to the more lasting results: the publication

11. Ibid., 16.

12. All the delegates and delegate partners are presented on <http://hoti.uib.no> (accessed October 16, 2019).

*Towards an Infrastructure of Humans – Working Group Statements Humans of the Institution 25–27 November 2017.*¹⁴ We also strongly encouraged the delegates to gather their local art scene upon return and to share the key points from the international conversation that seemed most relevant to their local contexts.

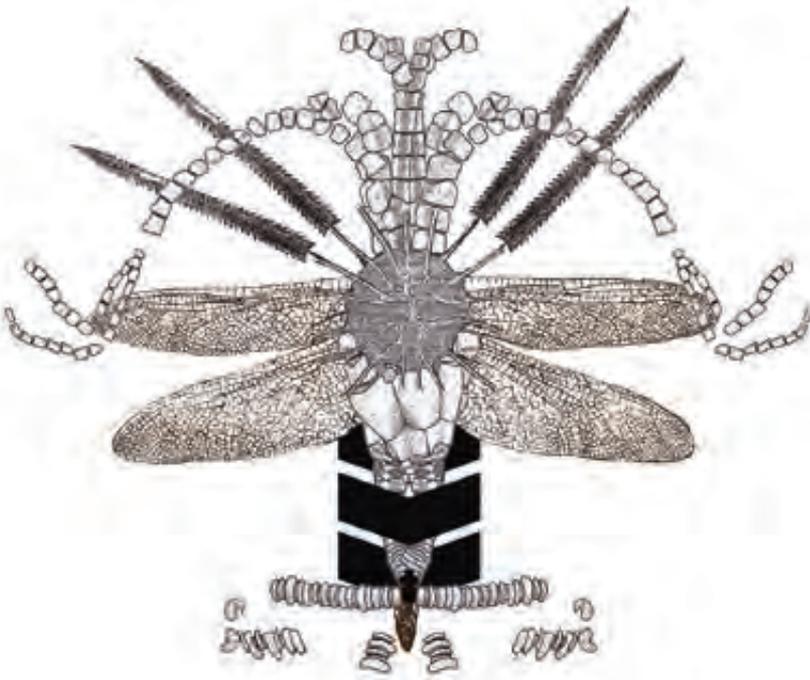
Addressing emergencies through direct action and daring to challenge existing powers might be one way to carve out a future. In the process of finding better solutions to practical challenges – the fact that carbon emissions are indeed destroying our environment – I would suggest we also work to find sustainable cultural protocols to safeguard internationalism and the benefits it has offered us in a continued commitment to the non-market driven and socially oriented contemporary art world.

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13. This is by far not a unique position, but one that I think is missing in the contemporary art discussion. The day I send this off to print, Jonathan Wolff writes in *The Guardian* about the need to re-think travel in relation to academic conferences: “Perhaps we should take inspiration from rules drawn up years ago for reforming animal experiments, the 3Rs: replace, reduce, refine. We must adopt something similar for academic travel. Replace with video calls where possible. Reduce your trips. Refine by planning your trip so it is really worthwhile.” <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/oct/29/hypocrisy--guilt-jet-off-to-academic-conferences-plane-travel> (accessed October 29, 2019).
14. The publication is available online and can be downloaded from *Humans of the Institution* and Van Abbemuseum webpages, beginning autumn 2019: <http://hoti.uib.no> and <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/>.

Diana Lelonek
Anna Siekierska

*The Inter-Species
Manifesto (2019)*





We, the organisms living in the Anthropocene era, aware of our rights and the dangers we face, united in a struggle across the division of species, walking arm in arm, fin to fin, limb to limb, demand the abolition of the current hierarchical system based on exploitation and crime. We stand up for the interests of a multispecies community: the slaves and the precariat – the representatives of the laboring non-human organisms, the exploited classes consisting of countless ecosystems and communities.



We rise above the divisions and declare:

We consider the classical understanding of Nature to be outdated. The various processes that affect us – natural, capitalist, industrial, over-production, meteorological, migration, ecological disasters, wars, ocean currents, climate change, environmental ruin, etc. – can no longer be separated from one another. They are all interrelated within the global system of interconnections and relations.



Once we reject the false notion of human domination, we shall dissolve into a vast network of interdependencies and connections, and we shall hear the countless voices and opinions of non-human organisms that have yet to be heard.



We believe that a number of social inequalities, the spread of racist ideologies, and chauvinism have their source in human domination over other species.



We demand that the subjectivity and agency of other species be recognized. We demand that they participate in the process of negotiating new human investments, where their interests, needs, and requirements are often neglected.



The human species claims the right to permanently transform 90% of the planet, leaving just a few sites, open-air museums, and scarce relics that they call “true nature,” while taking away the selfhood of all other areas of the Earth. We demand legislation to protect the planet from Homo sapiens.



We demand that legal personality be conferred upon the ecosystems and non-human beings. They have an integral right for their existence to be respected and to maintain and renew their life cycles, structures, and functions. They have a right to their needs, and above all, a right to live.



In the era of global environmental catastrophe, a large part of humanity – when it comes to the community of objectives and interests – finds itself closer to the non-human species than to the select group of privileged Homo sapiens. The big industry’s degradation of the environment is destroying entire ecosystems and their inhabitants, regardless of whether they have fins, rhizomes, or [walk on] two or two dozen limbs.



We therefore demand regulations to protect our multispecies community from human investment, limitless exploitation, overproduction, the further exploitation of fossil fuels, and the unrestricted slaughter of farmed non-humans.

The impression of human superiority and [human] control over the Earth has always been a fiction. Everything that we have, we owe to the ancient ferns, horsetails, and ground pines, whose remains have transformed into oil, coal, and plastic.



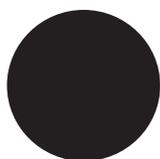
Let us restore the rightful peace to these ancient plants – their bodies should remain where they belong, in their proper geological layers. It is time to stop toying with the geologic time scale. We demand fossil fuels be replaced by renewable energy sources as soon as possible.



It is our duty to act on behalf of all beings. Symbiotically, we assemble as/in the indefinite diversity of rhizomes, thalli, feet, fins, pseudopodia, cilia, and hooves.



BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS



U-JAZDOWSKI
TEAM



CREDITS



COLOPHON

Defne Ayas has been Director of Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam (2012–17) where she commissioned, curated, and organized long-term projects, group exhibitions and solo projects, including Kunsthalle for Music by Ari Benjamin Meyers (2017–18), *Öğüt & Macuga* by Ahmet Öğüt and Goshka Macuga (2017), *The Ten Murders of Josephine* by Rana Hamadeh (2017), *The Music of Ramon Raquello and His Orchestra* by Eric Baudelaire (2017), and *WERE IT AS IF* by Bik Van der Pol (2016). Prior to joining Witte de With, Ayas lived in Shanghai and co-founded Arthub Asia – an Asia-wide active research and production initiative (with Davide Quadrio) (2007). She has also organized presentations at major festivals, such as the Turkey Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015), the 6th Moscow Biennale (2015), and the 11th Baltic Triennial (2012). Currently she has been appointed an artistic director of the 13th Gwangju Biennale (2020)●

Viviana Checchia is a curator, critic, and lecturer who is active internationally. She is currently the Public Engagement Curator at the Centre for Contemporary Art: Glasgow (CCA), where she has recently curated a solo show by Jonas Staal, *The Scottish European Parliament*, and a group project, *The House That Heals The Soul* (2017). Checchia holds a PhD from Loughborough University on curatorial practice contextualised by European Regional Development Funding in the Euro-Med region between 2005–15. For the past eight years, Checchia has co-directed “vessel,” a platform for critical discussion on the cultural, social, economic, and political change created through community-based work in Puglia, Italy. With Anna Santomauro, she received the 2013 ICI/DEDALUS Research Award for research into the legacy of Mary Jane Jacob in the United States, and in 2016 she was awarded the Igor Zabel Laureate’s Choice Award for Culture and Theory for her contributions to the comprehension of and international interest in Eastern European art●

Grzegorz Czemieli is Assistant Professor at the Department of English and American Studies at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. He received his PhD from the University of Warsaw with a dissertation on Ciaran Carson’s poetry (*Limits of Orality and Textuality in Ciaran Carson’s Poetry*, Frankfurt am Main 2014). His academic interests include contemporary poetry, speculative and weird fiction, and translation studies, as well as literary theory and philosophy, especially ecopoetics and speculative realism. Currently, he is developing the concept of “speculative cartography,” involving poetry as a geophilosophical mode of making cognitive maps. He also translates academic books and articles●

Daniel Falb is a philosopher and poet based in Berlin. He holds a PhD in philosophy and has published four volumes of poetry with kookbooks publishers, most recently *Orchidee und Technofossil* [Orchid and Technofossil] (2019). Falb's research focuses on geophilosophy, art theory, and poetology. Recent publications include *Anthropozän. Dichtung in der Gegenwartsgeologie* [Anthropocene: Poetry in the Geology of the Present] (Berlin: Verlagshaus, 2015) and *Geospekulationen. Metaphysik für die Erde im Anthropozän* [Geospeculations: Metaphysics for the Earth in the Anthropocene] (Berlin: Merve, 2019) ●

Cathy Fitzgerald is a New Zealander, eco-social artist, researcher, and educator now living in Ireland. She completed her PhD with *Practice The Ecological Turn: Living Well with Forests* (2018), articulating eco-social art practice using Guattari's ecosophy and action research, at the National College of Art and Design in Ireland. She continues her ongoing Hollywood Forest Story adventures with new rescue dog Willow. She is currently sharing her ecoliteracy learning with other creative workers through online courses at www.haumea.site ●

Mira Gakjina is an art historian, art critic, and senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje. She completed her postgraduate studies at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Philosophy (2010), and received her PhD in Art Management with *Management of Cultural Institutions – Case Study MoCA Skopje* (2017). Gakjina is the chief curator of the Biennale of Young Artists organized by MoCA Skopje and has been curator in residence as part of the Prohelvetia Cultural program in Zurich, Bern, and Geneva; Limiditi Temporary Art Project in Morocco; and Closeconnection, a curatorial program in Amsterdam. In 2013–17 she served as a President of AICA Macedonia. Since 2017, Gakjina has been Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje. Recently, she was named the commissioner of the North Macedonian Pavilion at Venice Biennale (2019) ●

Alexander Hope is currently Associate Lecturer in the Filología Inglesa department at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain. He has predominantly published on continental philosophy, particularly with regard to Jacques Derrida, Catherine Malabou, and Walter Benjamin. Recent publications include an article on reading Benjamin's "angel of history" from "On the Concept of History" (*Textual Practice*, 2019) using Paul de Man's distinction between grammar and rhetoric, and an article using conversation analysis to evaluate student-teacher interactions (*Teaching and Teacher Education*, 2020, with Ignacio Ramis Conde). His research interests are

highly interdisciplinary, but are currently focused on plasticity, neuropsychology, and posthumanism ●

Anne Szefer Karlsen is a curator, writer, editor, and educator. She is a professor in Curatorial Practice and Course Director for MA Curatorial Practice at the Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design, University of Bergen (2015–21) and Senior Adviser for Bergen Assembly (2018– present). Szefer Karlsen has been Director of Hordaland Art Centre in Bergen (2008–14); curator for The Norwegian Sculpture Biennale 2015, Lofoten International Art Festival – LIAF 2013, and Associate Curator for Research and Encounters for Biennale Bénin 2012. Her writing has appeared in journals such as *Afterall*, *Billedkunst*, *Kunstjournalen B-post*, and *Kunstkritikk*, as well as in anthologies such as *Making Biennials in Contemporary Times* (ed. Galit Eilat et al., 2015) and *Condition Report* (ed. Koyo Kouoh, 2013). Szefer Karlsen has also been series editor for *Dublett* (2012–16), co-editor of *Self-Organised* (2013) and *Lokalisert/Localised* (2009) ●

Jarosław Lubiak is a contemporary art curator and theorist. He has been artistic director at Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, Poland since 2014. He also teaches at the Art College in Szczecin. He received his PhD at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, for his thesis on architecture and deconstruction. His practice focuses on intersections between contemporary art and the social sphere, cultural production and environmental challenges, art institutions and the politics of engagement. He has curated shows include *Waiting for Another Coming* (with Anna Czaban and Ūla Tornau, Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius 2018 and Ujazdowski Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, 2018–19); *The State of Life: Polish Contemporary Art within the Global Context* (National Art Museum of China, Beijing, 2015); *Correspondences: Modern Art and Universalism* (with Małgorzata Ludwisiak), juxtaposing and interweaving the collections of the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, and the Hermann and Magrit Rupf Foundation/Kunstmuseum, Bern, 2012–13; *Hostipitality: Receiving Strangers* (with Kamil Kuskowski, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2010) ●

Małgorzata Ludwisiak is a critic and curator, a PhD in art history, a director of Ujazdowski Castle Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw (2014–19). She was a vice-director at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (2008–14), director of the International Łódź Biennale (2006) and initiator and director of Łódź Design Festival (2007). At the *U-jazdowski* she curated *El Hadji Sy. At First I Thought I Was Dancing* (2016) and at Muzeum Sztuki she co-curated (with Jarosław Lubiak) the renowned *Correspondences: Modern Art and Universalism*

exhibition (2012–13), creating a dialog between two collections of 20th and 21st century art: of Kunstmuseum Bern and Muzeum Sztuki. The exhibition reinterpreted the last century of art, applying Walter Benjamin's notion of "passages" as a method for rereading "modernity" and the very status of an art work. With Peter Pakesch, Jarosław Suchan, and Katrin Bucher, she co-founded TRANSLOCAL – International Museums Network for European, non-profit-based museums of modern art. She is a member of AICA and CIMAM ●

Ewa Majewska is a feminist philosopher and activist, affiliated with the Institute of Cultural Inquiry (ICI), Berlin. She has taught at the University of Warsaw and the Jagiellonian University, and was also a visiting fellow at the University of California, Berkeley; ICI Berlin and IWM in Vienna. She has published four books, including *Plebeian and Feminist Counterpublics* and *Feminism and Solidarity After Neoliberalism* (all in Polish) and some fifty articles and essays in journals and magazines such as: *e-flux journal*, *Third Text*, *Journal of Utopian Studies*, or *Public Seminar*. Her current focus is research into Hegel's philosophy, focusing on the dialectics and the weak; feminist critical theory and antifascist cultures ●

Catherine Malabou is a Professor of Philosophy at Kingston University, she has also been appointed at the University of California, Irvine in Comparative Literature and European Languages. She studied with Jacques Derrida, and her dissertation, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectics*, announced the main topics of her later philosophical research, in which she combines an interest in matter and history in Hegel's thought with the reflexive analysis of neurology and ecology. She is one of the most inspiring contemporary readers of Hegel, engaging with questions of feminism, ecology, neuroscience, and the future. Among her publications are such books as: *Morphing Intelligence: From IQ Measurement to Artificial Brains* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); *Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality* (Polity Books, 2016); *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Books, 2012); *Sois mon corps: Une lecture contemporaine de la domination et de la servitude chez Hegel* (with Judith Butler, Paris: Bayard Jeunesse, 2010) and *Counterpath: Traveling with Jacques Derrida* (with Jacques Derrida, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) ●

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez is an independent curator, editor, and writer based in Paris whose research spans situated curatorial practices, empathy, transnational feminism, slow institutions, degrowth, and performative practices in the former Eastern Europe. She is the curator of the Contour Biennale 9 (Mechelen, 2019) and, together with Giovanna Zapperi, of the first

comprehensive exhibition of the videos of French actress and feminist activist Delphine Seyrig (Museum of Modern Art, Lille, and Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2019). With Élisabeth Lebovici and Patricia Falguières, she co-founded *Something You Should Know*, a seminar series held at the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS). She is also a member of the Travelling Féministe research group at the Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, both in Paris. Her previous exhibitions include: *Let's Talk about the Weather: Art and Ecology in a Time of Crisis* (curated with Nora Razian, Sursock Museum, Beirut, 2016); *Tales of Empathy* (Jeu de Paume, Paris, 2014), and *Resilience, Triennial of Contemporary Art* (Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 2013) among others. Petrešin-Bachelez has been editor-in-chief of *L'Internationale Online* (2014–17) and the *Manifesta Journal* (2012–14); co-director of Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers (2010–12), and co-founder of Cluster, a European network of small-scale art institutions ●

Małgorzata Sugiera is a Full Professor at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland, and the Department Head for Performativity Studies. She has published twelve of her own books in Polish, the most recent of which are *Nieludzie. Donosy ze sztucznych natur* [Non-humans: Reports from Non-natural Natures, 2015] and, with Mateusz Borowski, *W pułapce przeciwieństw. Ideologie tożsamości* [In the Trap of Opposites: Ideologies of Identity, 2012] and *Sztuczne natury. Performanse technonauki i sztuki* [Artificial Natures: Performances of Technoscience and Arts]. She has co-edited works in English and German, and lectured and conducted seminars at German, French, Swiss, and Brazilian universities. Her main fields of research are performativity theories, and cultural and decoloniality studies. She is also active as a translator of academic books and plays for theater ●

Magdalena Ziółkowska holds a PhD in art history, and is an independent curator and a graduate of the Curatorial Training Programme at de Appel arts centre in Amsterdam (2006–07). In 2013, she received her doctoral degree for a dissertation on the concept of the Museum of Current Art in Wrocław by Jerzy Ludwiński and Polish postwar museology. From 2006 to 2010, she was a guest curator at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, where she curated *Notes From the Future of Art: Selected Writings of Jerzy Ludwiński* (2007) and *Andrzej Wróblewski: To the Margins and Back* (2010). She worked at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź from 2008 to 2014, where she organised projects including *Art Always Has Its Consequences* (2008–10), *Working Title: Archive* (2008–2009), *Sanja Iveković: Practice Makes the Master* (2009), *Eyes Looking for a Head to Inhabit* (co-curator, 2011), and *Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin: Incidents, Events, Circumstances, Accidents, Situations* (co-curator, 2013/14) among

others. She also co-curated *Only to Melt, Trustingly, without Reproach* (Škuc galerija, Ljubljana 2013/14). Since 2012, she has been a co-founder and vice president of the Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation. She co-curated *Andrzej Wróblewski: Constantly Looking Ahead* (National Museum, Krakow, 2012/13) and co-wrote the artist's monograph, *Avoiding Intermediary States: Andrzej Wróblewski (1927–1957)* (2014). In 2015–18, she was director of the Bunkier Sztuki Gallery of Contemporary Art in Krakow, where she curated *Ines Doujak: Masterless Voices* (2017), among other projects ●

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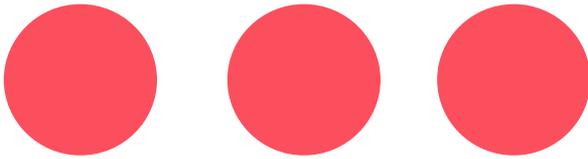
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Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez,
Małgorzata Sugiera, Magdalena Ziólkowska

● Artists' Projects:
Bonita Ely, Diana Lelonek,
Pakui Hardware, Anna Siekierska,
The Mycological Twist, Monika Zawadzki

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HOW TO STAY WITH THE TROUBLE?



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QUESTIONNAIRE INTRODUCTION

How to stay with the trouble, as Donna Haraway suggests, in the face of the current environmental crisis? The title of the project *Plasticity of the Planet*, inaugurated as part of the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art program in March 2019, prompted questions about the relationship between the environmental challenge and discourses, as well as practices of the art world and its institutions● For decades, galleries and museums of contemporary art have declared their commitment to relevant and current issues, tuning their programs to what requires urgent attention and reflection at a given moment● From this perspective, global warming, the sixth extinction of species, ocean acidification, melting glaciers, accumulation of pollutants bringing irreversible changes to our planet's life are the most pressing issues, requiring intervention and joint concern● How could the art world participate in and help deal with the contemporary crisis? With what tools? How should institutions radically rethink themselves to fulfill their assigned roles?

Four curators, directors, and researchers from Europe who contributed to the *How to Stay with the Trouble? Art Institutions and the Environmental Crisis* debate (September 13, 2019) – Defne Ayas, Viviana Checchia, Mira Gakjina, and Anne Szefer Karlsen – tackled these questions as a starting point for imagining the future of our old-new institutions, which require us to confront inevitable changes in the natural and cultural environment● These ideas include the new “cultural protocol,” the code of sustainable practices for the expanding role of curator, and the notions of “trust” and “care” as fundamental ground for collective and institutional actions● We posed the same questions in questionnaire form to curators and practitioners who explore new forms of building relationships with the environment and are pursuing organizational and institutional strategies to address our situation●



Antonia Alampi writes, talks, and organizes exhibitions, and works as Artistic Co-director of SAVVY Contemporary in Berlin. In 2016 she and iLiana Fokianaki initiated the Future Climates research project, first in Athens in March 2017, focusing on how economic fluctuations shape and determine the work of small-scale initiatives in weak public infrastructures for arts and culture. Since 2017, she has also curated Extra City Kunsthal in Antwerp, with a three-year program focused on manufacturing the notion of European Citizenship. From 2012 to 2015, she was curator of Beirut in Cairo, an art initiative in the city during that time-frame, reflecting on the major transitional moment the country was experiencing. At the same location, she also conceived and directed the Imaginary School Program (2014/2015) research and teaching project, looking into forms of organization and institution-building in the city. Recent exhibitions include *Geographies of Imagination* (curated with Bonaventure Ndikung, SAVVY Contemporary, 2018), solo shows by Ibrahim Mahama (Extra City, 2018) and Jasmina Metwaly (SAVVY, 2018), a group exhibition and public program called *WE HAVE DELIVERED OURSELVES FROM THE TONAL – Of, with, towards, on Julius Eastman* (curated with Bonaventure Ndikung, SAVVY, 2018), the first monographic exhibition of Jérôme Pecci (Museo Pecci, Prato, 2017), the performance, discursive, and educational program for *The School of Redistribution* (curated with iLiana Fokianaki at State of Concept, Athens, 2017), the *Extra Citizen* group exhibition (curated with iLiana Fokianaki, Extra City, 2017), and *El Usman Faroqhi Here and a Yonder: On Finding Poise in Disorientation* (curated with Bonaventure Ndikung, SAVVY, 2017).

● In terms of the environmental crisis, it is crucial we consider what contemporary art should and could do as a social institution. How can our institutions contribute to Donna Haraway's call to *stay with the trouble*? And how should the world of art at-

tempt to deal with it? What tools should it use?

There are various things in urgent need of considering. First of all, the way in which we exist structurally, as institutions. The culture of spectacular temporary exhibitions is in itself a waste, things are often built and constructed with

materials that are not re-used, using forms that do not recur, constantly looking for the new and newly exciting. It is essentially a very consumerist product, one that is exhausted after one visitor, and one that responds to a continuous need to present something new and original. What if a new value were the capacity to continue working with the same materials, but in new, possibly non-polluting ways? Or thinking about whether we need to create environments for the works – whether to protect them from humidity, in light or darkness, or whatever is required – that are actually entirely artificial, hence the need for a ridiculous amount of energy to be supplied. This is not even considering more basic facts, such as the carbon footprint implied in the global mobility so essential to the art world currently defining us, the toxic substances used for many installations, etc. What about new symposia formats, where there are fewer speakers, but they stay longer and are involved in many different activities? Using online technology instead of constantly

requiring presence? Printing as little as possible? And generally: descaling? Can we produce less, consume less, present less? This is a rhetorical question, of course we can, and another world is totally possible, it just requires we profoundly reconsider how we exist on this planet. I was recently having a conversation with a friend about Jérôme Bel's recent decision to rethink how he works: training dancers via Skype instead of flying them in, working with performers who are local instead of flying in a dance company, dramatically reducing the use of airplanes and traveling by train instead, being vegetarian etc. Of course, in a way these decisions also make sense in his context (working with non-professionals often locally sourced, with different dancers etc), my friend responded, but on the other hand, perhaps this is precisely the point: How much are we willing to adapt our practices to face the many extinctions we are triggering? It's not just about cutting back, it's about radically rethinking form, and with it, content.

● How should institutions radically rethink themselves to fulfill their roles?

I think I responded to this above.

- Shouldn't we challenge basic concepts on which we base our activities – first of all the very concept of criticality. Despite its etymological link to the notion of crisis, it seems utterly insufficient in our predicament. Thus, the idea of a critical institution may also be inadequate. Would the idea of an *engaged institution* be a response to these doubts? What, then, would possible modes of engagement be? To what end? To specify our aims, we need more knowledge and a great deal of imagination. Indeed, but also we need to let this knowledge shape how we work, really. Frankly, I think that we are surrounded by a deep hypocrisy, in our critically-engaged art world in particular. Rarely is what is preached on stage actually enacted behind the scenes. We offer and reproduce some of the worst working conditions there are, the very conditions that increasingly also give access to only the privileged few, who are wealthy enough to not have to understand work in the art world as labor; we have almost zero support for disability, parenthood, precarity, or vulnerability, conditions based on what I still find to be extremely patriarchal values and structures. Heroes, geniuses, and completion are valued and performed much more than care, collectivity, solidarity, and empathy, despite all the beautiful, heroic words uttered under the spotlight. I don't think that what is lacking is theory, I think what is lacking is the honesty, the willingness and modesty to let that theory seriously shape the way we live. Often, sadly, it acts as a sort of whitewash or mere decoration.
- Could we presently imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care?

It would not just include people of the art world, it would utterly rethink the hierarchy and relations between beings. One thing is certain, if we remain stuck in the Western conception of nature, and of institutions, we will not get far. I feel there is no need to reinvent the wheel, there is a need to be listening and looking at cultures and ways of being that have simply been suppressed and erased until now. Ailton Krenak has spent his life fighting for the rights of indigenous people and the rights of nature, co-founding, among other things, the Forest People's Support Group and the Forest People's Fund, to organize resistance and educate society about their diverse cultures and role in maintaining life in the forest. I quote him in my own

translation from the Portuguese: “When we depersonalize rivers or mountains, when we take their feelings and sensations from them, considering these to be the exclusive attribute of humans, we transform these places into repositories of industrial and extractive activity. By divorcing from our mother, the Earth, we end up as orphans, and not only those of us who, to varying degrees, are called Indios, Indigenous or Indigenous peoples, all of us.”

● What kind of role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism?

Here I will quote a text I have just been finishing for an exhibition I have been working on for SAVVY Contemporary, titled *The Long Term You Cannot Afford: On the Distribution of the Toxic*. The text, written with Caroline Ektander, says: “The focus of our effort in this endeavor is not to try to pick apart and sort into common-sense categories that which struggles to fit neatly inside. Nor is it to demonize, point fingers, or catalyze an indigestible and paralyzing guilt about the state of the world. Instead, we aim to open up a space for an artistic and critical reception that encourages us to pause and sense toxic presences and textures, or to acknowledge and mourn its ongoing victims, and to listen

to the movement of its shadows. This move, we believe, has the power to shift sensibilities away from one of paranoid containment and fear, toward an outlook fueled by reflexivity and nuance – a way to encourage noticing how actions on the most intimate scale are closely tied to the global – as *everywhere* is ultimately a *here*. [...] In a time particularly plagued by simplifications and a desire for purity, it is vital we exhort the fight against the vicious machinations that have led to this current state of affairs, and to do all that is possible to escape the deplorable conditions they keep producing: from small everyday actions to spectacular mobilizations, from swift responses to strategic and sustained engagement. At the heart of every move lies an impetus to foster new political subjects, which keep on growing, however painful it may seem, from deep in the past and into the future.”



Corina L. Apostol is a curator at the Tallinn Art Hall. Recently, she curated the second edition of the Shelter Festival, *Cosmopolitics, Comradeship, and the Commons* (Space for Free Arts/ University of the Arts Helsinki, 2019). Previously, she was the Andrew W. Mellon Fellow at Creative Time, where she edited (with Nato Thompson) *Making Another World Possible: 10 Creative Time Summits, 10 Global Issues, 100 Art Projects*. At Creative Time, she co-curated (with Elvira Dyangani Ose) the 12th Creative Time Summit, *On Archipelagoes and Other Imaginaries*, a convening for thinkers, dreamers, and doers working at the intersection of art and politics across Miami. Corina obtained her Ph.D. at Rutgers University, where she was also the Dodge Curatorial Fellow at the Zimmerli Art Museum (2010–16). She is the co-founder of the activist art and publishing collective *ArtLeaks*, and editor-in-chief of the *ArtLeaks Gazette*. She has been longlisted for the Kandinsky Prize (2016).

● In terms of the environmental crisis, it is crucial we consider what contemporary art should and could do as a social institution. How can our institutions contribute to Donna Haraway's call to *stay with the trouble*? And how should the world of art attempt to deal with it? What tools should it use?

In the past few years, discussions about sustainable futures, civic ecology, environmental education, and resilience have intensified in the arts. Infusing art's unique power of communication with activism, many artists whom I've worked with,

as well as writers, poets, and performers, have contributed to the public's awareness of the economic, political, and personal choices that affect our collective futures, and have even developed ideas for green solutions. In one of my recently curated projects, the Creative Time Summit: *On Archipelagoes and Other Imaginaries* (Miami, 2018), we brought together cultural workers whose art joined with science to advocate for change in society. The Summit was focused on Miami and its Caribbean neighbors, who are still jeopardized by rising sea levels and other impending dangers that come from climate change.

In this region, I discovered there is quite a lot of cross-pollination between ecological education and artistic tools, bringing together audiences of all ages and backgrounds, offering insights into topics that range from environmental design to organic food production, re-

newable energy, and improved environmental health. One of the overall messages from our local partners was that, together with renewed activism and solidarity, we need to continue the process of learning from nature.

● How should institutions radically rethink themselves to fulfill their roles?

One of the most important lessons that I learned from my recent projects dealing with these topics has been that it is no longer enough to think politically, one must also think ecologically. This also applies to our institutions. It is now almost universally acknowledged that our institutions are contributing to the problem of waste and toxicity, despite the best intentions of those involved, by virtue of our own carbon footprint, the impact of transporting artwork and maintaining the exhibition spaces' climate-control and print catalogues, among many other things.

We can do better. I believe, in this respect, we should pay attention especially to indigenous people's movements who are contributing to the protection of natural resources, ecosystems, and communities, from an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective.

I also believe that institutions should be more explicitly supporting cultural practitioners who seek to create interdisciplinary, socially-engaged, non-commercial projects that address complex issues and struggles related to the global climate movement. Given the transformative and unstable state of our ecosystems right now, institutions should embrace projects that speculate on a not-so-distant future radically altered by climate change, and create spaces for artists, creative workers, and audiences where we can push the boundaries of thought, technology, and visibility, and engage with activism and awareness of our climate realities.

● Shouldn't we challenge basic concepts on which we base our activities – first of all the very concept of criticality. Despite its etymological link to the notion of crisis, it seems utterly insufficient in our predicament. Thus, the idea of a critical institution may also be inadequate. Would the idea of an *engaged institution* be a response to these doubts? What, then, would possible modes of engagement be? To what end? To specify our aims, we need more knowledge and a great deal of imagination.

It is true that we must rethink criticality, given that reaching the limits of exploiting nature and endless conflicts over resources and lands are the new status quo. We are at the tipping point. I would like to think that both the aforementioned Summit and the festival I co-curated this year in Helsinki, Finland, *Shelter: On Cosmopolitics, Comradeship, and Commons*, have, on a symbolic and practical level, served as communal sites for sharing strategies with the potential for radical change. To give just a couple of examples, one of the workshops led by

Cesar Cornejo in 2018 in Miami introduced us to the concept of *reciprodad* (reciprocity), which is at the core of the museum he created in Peru, Puno MoCA, an institution which places the community and the environment at its center. According to this philosophy, no being (animate or inanimate) belongs to an individual, allowing for a sense of borrowing over a sense of owning. The project deals with a core tenet of advanced capitalism, one which is at odds to our planet's survival. Cesar also drew attention to the fact that our current educational and curatorial frameworks are based on colonial standards, which should be also deconstructed to allow for spaces that support inclusivity and community-building. Working on the other side of the Atlantic in Helsinki, I was struck by the illusion that Nordic Countries are the least vulnerable to climate change, which is fed to local communities by false advertising and the tourism industries. The festival offered concrete examples of grassroots organizing, such as a documentary series by Oliver Ressler, *Everything is Coming Together, While Everything is Falling Apart* (2017–18). The

films focused on recent protests by activists and students who emphasized the very real impacts of the changing environmental conditions and continued ecological devastation that profit-seeking companies have unleashed onto Europe. During workshops and conversations, we also deconstructed and analyzed commercial campaigns that have capitalized on the eco-

logical effects of climate change, encouraging us to consume more under the guise of being environmentally conscious, and thus bringing more profit to a handful of global elites. The festival was a cultural event but also an invitation to everyone who was interested in engaging with artistic platforms for inquiry, remembrance, and re-imagined futures.

● Could we presently imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care?

● What kind of role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism?

I would like to see more programming around what renewed models of art institutions could look like in the current crisis. Of course, this question is also related to context, there cannot be a single ideal that works in every region or community. At the same time, I believe that arts and culture can function in tandem with community organizing and can indeed imagine a different collective future. Institutions can and should draw connections between the stories shared by artists and how these could become tools of organizing and harnessing change.

Right now, with the alarm bells ringing on the news constantly, I feel that we spend far too much time simply reacting to the media and a technocratic-capitalist elite's vision of our planet. An ideal institution for me would help us to imagine the world we are fighting for and ask: If we still believe that another world is possible, then are we ready to build it collectively with integrity and compassion? It may seem that all utopias are far from our reality, but this is not so. The choices that we make right now as cultural workers and concerned citizens, to engage or remain silent, to act or to stay in line, to risk or play it safe, directly affect our collective tomorrow.

Tandazani Dhlakama is an assistant curator at Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town, where she recently curated *Five Bhoobh: Painting at the End of an Era* (2018). She holds an MA in Art Gallery and Museum Studies from the University of Leeds, UK (2015) and a BA in Fine Art and Political Science, Magna Cum Laude, from St. Lawrence University, USA (2011). Before 2017, Dhlakama worked at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe (NGZ) in Harare, where she held various positions, including coordinator for the 2nd International Conference on African Cultures (2017). At the NGZ, she was involved in curating several exhibitions, including *Engaging with "the Other"* (2013), *Women at the Top* (2014), *ZimbabweIN Design* (2014 and 2017), and *Dis(coloured Margins)* (2017). In Harare, Dhlakama co-curated *These Images Are Stories* (2017) in collaboration with British Council Zimbabwe, Zimbo Jam, and Impact Hub Islington, and worked as curator at Tsoko Gallery, an independent art space, where she curated their inaugural exhibition, *Beyond the Body* (2016), and was involved in establishing the space.

● In terms of the environmental crisis, it is crucial we consider what contemporary art should and could do as a social institution. How can our institutions contribute to Donna Haraway's call to *stay with the trouble*? And how should the world of art attempt to deal with it? What tools should it use?

Donna Haraway, like many others, has been predicting and trying to define the epoch that will follow our current period, the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is where people have

negatively altered the state of the planet. In order to *Stay with the Trouble*, Haraway proposes that humans adopt a *Chthulucene* world view, in which the boundaries of time and space no longer require definition. This epoch can be characterized by a much more horizontal and democratic interspecies engagement, in which there is no hierarchy, but rather a humility among humans and non-humans to foster fluidity and progress. She challenges the idea of survival of the fittest and proposes that humanity strive to become one with other species and elements,

aided by a “tentacular” outreach and insemination. This would require us to connect several factors, including imagination, science, history, mythology, and storytelling.

In many ways, these elements have already begun to manifest themselves through the programming and discourse at many institutions dealing with contemporary art from Africa. Many spaces have committed themselves to probing multifaceted notions of Africanness within international contemporary art practice and critical investigations of how cultural histories function as a way of reading humanity today. For the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA), underlying all of this is an egalitarian and ongoing endeavor to foster Access for All, one of Zeitz MOCAA’s founding pillars. Through various forms of public programming, access-based ideas allow the museum to consider dismantling the complex psychological, emotional, economic, educational, and historical barriers that hinder potential audiences. They highlight the need for alternative educational engagement that examines materiality

in artmaking and exploring cultural histories. All of this is to suggest that perhaps it is in striving to first understand ourselves as humans, as people working within a particular historical context, within the Anthropocene, that we can better prepare for a new epoch or the Chthulucene.

Perhaps our institutions could use multifaceted tools in coming from a very particular post-colonial moment, for “tentacular” outreach and insemination. I have mentioned that Haraway suggests imagination, science, history, mythology, and storytelling as ways of promoting progress in the epoch to come. In recent projects we have seen these elements in various ways. Recently, in an exhibition titled *Still Here Tomorrow to High Five You Yesterday*, imagination and mythmaking emerged through the ever-expanding notion of Afro-futurism. This explored notions of progress, utopia, and dystopia resulting from climate change, and blurred the lines between space and time. It also allowed local audiences to imagine multiple futures, including space exploration, or the end of flora and fauna as we

know it, to reflect on past moments of euphoria, and to think of a new epoch rooted in Africa.

Furthermore, for institutions in the Global South, *Staying with the Trouble* requires an acknowledgment and comprehension of the geopolitics associated with Africa and the African Diaspora. If we are to aim for the Chthulucene, one must first understand how, when, and why the continent

was carved up and divided, leaving deep wounds and illogical borders. How did and does this affect the criss-crossing of people, languages, and ideas over vast terrains and seas? We must continue to ask ourselves whether it is possible to disassociate discourse around displacement, multi-temporality, liberation, and decolonization from physical land and earth.

● How should institutions radically rethink themselves to fulfill their roles?

Every institution must begin the process of radical rethinking with a degree of humility and self-criticality. However, institutions must play different roles, depending on their socio-political, historical, and environment considerations. How one defines the term “radical” might, at times, even contradict its understanding in a different locality. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), revolutionary philosopher Frantz Fanon wrote: “Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.”¹⁹ He also stated that, “Imperialism leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land, but from our minds as well.”²⁰ Fanon points to a poisoning of both the earth and the human psyche, and the need to undo, restore, cure and interrogate this. As such, numerous art spaces in Africa display an awareness of the perpetual need for a countermeasure or remedy, even though we have moved several decades on from the initial waves of Independence.

For an institution emerging from a space that has been grappling with the after-effects of colonialism and institutionalized segregation, radical thinking requires constant engagement with memory and archive. This may call for an unraveling of traumatic histories that are intertwined with issues stemming from sweat,

blood, and soil. This serves to remind us that, in many parts of the Global South, one cannot discuss environmental concerns without reference to the complex histories that make up our political climates today. Therefore, in striving to offer a hopeful vision of a new epoch (Haraway's *Chthulucene*), we must resist the urge to simply offer a sanitized outlook devoid of *trouble* and messiness. Our discourse must acknowledge issues of labor and the exploitation of black bodies that fueled various forms of avarice over the last few centuries in and outside of Africa. One may ask, in what ways does this acknowledgment foster a radical form of progressive thinking? In what ways can this attempt to bring healing as we enter into a new era?

Perhaps one solution lies in rethinking and reimagining the African body as a seed. Here I use the term "African" broadly, to encompass everything connected to and stemming from the continent, including the African diaspora. If the body is a seed, the centuries of sweat and blood are the water that causes radical ideas to flourish. Though a seed needs a burial, it carries with it a hope to produce fruit for a future generation.

In thinking about seed, blood, soil, and the Anthropocene, two African novels that use this metaphor come to mind. *A Grain of Wheat* written in 1967 by Kenyan-born Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and *Harvest of Thorns* by Zimbabwean-born Shimmer Chinogya published in 1989. Both reflect on the complexities of liberation movements, utopia, and disillusionment. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the premise of the book is that a kernel must first be buried and die in order for there to be some form of harvest. This notion is extended in *Harvest of Thorns*, whose main character grows up during a time of political unrest. The author highlights the tumult of regime change and the precariousness of post-colonial existence. In both cases, the seed and the harvest are metaphors for people, communities, and ideas, all connected to the earth. The thorny issues are the contestations we must still face. Being radical requires extending this metaphor to continue the decolonization process and make sense of the world today.

How can this metaphor be explored practically to encourage rethinking a new epoch in the contemporary art museum?

One method is to create a platform for artists to probe these issues. Some artists and scholars find it problematic that so much emphasis is placed on historicizing Africa always in relation to colonialism. However, even they, in many ways, still echo the nuances of post-colonialism, the myth of indigeneity and imagination. Nigerian-born and Belgium-based Otobong Nkanga is one artist who poetically explores history using organic materials such as plants, rock, soil and water. Nkanga often uses her own body, sound, textiles, film, print, drawings, and installations to investigate ideas around creolization, migration, germination, dispersion, migration, histories, space, and time.

In exploring the soil and the act of burial, the work of South-African artist Kemang Wa Lehulere comes to mind. He reflects on memory and the archive through the process of excavation and displacement to find a way to reframe meaning. This is often achieved through performance, sound, and sculpture. Both artists subtly point to Haraway's Chthulucene in that they present new ways of thinking through collaboration with organic and man-made elements. Wa Lehulere and Nkanga's upcoming solo shows and interventions will both be held at Zeitz MOCAA in 2019.

● Shouldn't we challenge basic concepts on which we base our activities – first of all the very concept of criticality. Despite its etymological link to the notion of crisis, it seems utterly insufficient in our predicament. Thus, the idea of a critical institution may also be inadequate. Would the idea of an engaged institution be a response to these doubts? What, then, would possible modes of engagement be? To what end? To specify our aims, we need more knowledge and a great deal of imagination.

The idea of an engaged institution is vital, especially in the context of South Africa, where historical, geographical, and psychological barriers still stand, making it difficult for some to have meaningful engagement with contemporary art museums today. For ages, systemic racial segregation meant that black expression was relegated to exoticized, ethnographic, stereotypical confines, accompanied by erroneous scripts narrated by outsiders. The occasional spaces that offered more freedom in articulation were never mainstream and

were sometimes restricted by financial limitations. The engineering of colonialism meant that many knowledge systems and forms of expression were suppressed in favor of others. That is why contemporary scholars such as Mhoze Chikowero have called for an “intellectual Chimurenga.” The Shona word *chimurenga* means revolution, war, or struggle. The First and Second Chimurenga were literal wars that brought Independence to Zimbabwe. Today, an intellectual *chimurenga* must topple barricades that block cultural engagement.

So perhaps there is a need to first deal with cultural erasure in order to create a space for critically thinking about ecology. Right now, the most urgent matter to be addressed is the large, long-standing sectors of society that have not been able to see themselves reflected in culture. If one’s existence and imagination is not affirmed by culture, there is an unease, a tension that distorts or silences a community’s contribution. Even though they are intertwined, when identity politics are no longer in the foreground, only then can one fully begin to awake to issues of the environment and the future.

Perhaps one way of bringing correction could be to create continuous “tentacular” interventions that bring together historically disadvantaged communities, art practitioners, and the archive. When the connection is horizontal and open to mutually beneficial collaboration, meaningful engagement can occur. This could take the form of knowledge production, exchange, dialogue, and various forms of outreach.

For this reason, the Centre for Art Education at Zeitz MOCAA is central to the museum. It aims to make art accessible to diverse audiences of all ages through discussion, debate, and activities. This year it launched its first children’s exhibition, which celebrates stories from Africa and was created to engage the imaginations of children as the primary audience – inviting them into a multi-sensory, interactive experience with works of art. The title of the exhibition, *And So the Stories Ran Away*, was inspired by a Nigerian Ekoi legend of how the main character, Mouse, visits the houses of many people, gathering stories that she weaves into her tale for children. A fantasy world of strange and wondrous creatures, characters, and mysterious spaces was created in the institu-

tion's tunnels, inviting young people on a journey to unearth and rediscover old and new stories from Africa.

Though one could elaborate on the innovative use of recycled or eco-friendly materials the artists used, what interests us here is the notion of sustainable engagement. The exhibition gathered art practitioners from historically disadvantaged communities and young artists who have more access to local contemporary art. It also unpacked important historical and contemporary narratives from the continent. This was an innovative educational collaboration between Zeitz MOCAA's Centre for Education, The Michaelis School of Fine Art, The Ruth Prowse School of Art, and the Nyanga Arts Development Centre in Cape Town, South Africa.

Another example of the museum's collaboration with ChiNdanga! The colloquial name for radio in Zimbabwe is *ChiNdanga*. This is a research and cultural diffusion project, creating a platform which combines a sonic archive, a virtual map, and a digital community. Its founders, Kapula, Biko Emcee, and Tigere Mavura, state that, "ChiNdanga!'s praxis is Decolonial situationism. This involves conducting the psychogeography of the neo-colonial city for the purpose of constructing decolonial situations that catalyze the deconstruction of the neo-colonial society of the spectacle." ChiNdanga!'s pillars include the following,

Thesis 1:

ChiNdanga! is a transmitter. It is a means of communication; a form of media technology.

Thesis 2:

ChiNdanga! receives, archives/records, and transmits information. It is a storehouse of collective wisdom.

Thesis 3:

ChiNdanga! adapts. It is sensitive to the contexts in which it manifests itself.

Thesis 4:

ChiNdanga! is democratic. It places more value on the art of listening than the art of performance.

Thesis 5:

ChiNdanga! is cross-cultural and crosses borders. It is not limited by traditions, media forms, conventions, or geography.

The collaboration with ChiNdanga took the form of a three-hour intervention in a gallery space during one of the museum's late-night offerings. It aimed to build a dialog around the *Five Bhobh: Painting at the End of Era* exhibition, featuring twenty-nine artists from Zimbabwe, who were painting in various ways at a time of heightened socio-political upheaval, marking the end of an era, offering a look into what might be coming. This collaborative engagement mapped time through music and created a platform for reflection and debate on particular histories. Additionally, in thinking about the Anthropocene, it is important to note that perhaps it is through working with groups such as ChiNdanga! that sustainable solutions can come. If the interpretation of art and archives is rooted in both the digital and the sonic, this has a less negative effect on the planet.

● Could we presently imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care?

Indeed, it is presently possible to imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care. The Zeitz MOCAA building is a repurposed, reimaged, eco-friendly, award-winning space. It is a 100-year-old concrete shell situated in Cape Town, South Africa. Built in 1921 as a grain silo, the original structure is a product of oppressive labor systems built by the enslaved Khoi-San people in Southern Africa. Tons of stone from local quarries were mixed into the original concrete, which has visible specks of blue and green rock. This rock was brought down from Table Mountain, a flat-topped national landmark made of 450-510-million-year-old Ordovician rocks. Routes and settlements around this mountain speak of multiple histories of inclusion, exclusion, exploitation, expansion, and migration, in many ways all connected to two oceans. Additionally, Zeitz MOCAA is strategically positioned at the tip of Africa, at an early trading post on the V&A Waterfront, which is a site built in 1860 as a trade route for passing ships. It functions as a gateway to the expansive geopolitical continent, to its complex diaspora and to the myriad utopian imaginations that emanate from this. It is an entry point for important discourse. The building and its positioning evoke political and ecological histories and marry the two in nuanced ways. It

is not only a place for the celebration of cultures, it is a place of constant self-criticality and engagement.

Regarding ecology and care, we might take a look at a recent exhibition by a young artist, Nobukho Ngaba's *Izicw-angciso Zazetu...* [We Make Plans...], which ran from 31 July to October 20, 2019. Ngaba made site-specific installations which probed discourses around labor, migration, and family history. She is one of the first artists to occupy the Dust House Project Space, dedicated to experimental work, research, and collaboration for young artists at Zeitz MOCAA. It is part of a smaller adjoining building situated to one side of the forty-two monolithic concrete cylinders that made up most of the old grain silo. Much of the original building has been transformed into a white cube space, but the small Dust House remains largely untouched, as its aged walls echo former times. Its original use was to protect the workers' lungs by ridding the air of grain particles through a vacuum system. Sucking out the dust also prevented the building from exploding. Today, the Dust House and the adjacent room are used for incubating ideas, and this is where Ngaba's installations ask us to pause and think about the many bodies, invisible to many of us, that build the spaces from which we obtain our sense of place.

● What kind of role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism?

In thinking about the role of art institutions in speculating about the future, beyond paralyzing catastrophism or techno-optimism, I would like to see Zeitz MOCAA's atrium as an

instrument that reminds us to be horizontal in our outreach and collaborative in our approach. The atrium is thirty-three meters high and is the heart of the museum. Its negative space is inspired by a single seed, or grain of corn. As an empty tubular space, it becomes a metaphor for open dialogue, incubation, or a repository.

I am reminded of South African artist Nicholas Hlobo's

work, *Impundulu Zonke Ziyandi-landela*. This title translates from the isiXhosa to mean “All of the lightning birds are after me.” This iconic lightning bird gracefully hung in the Zeitz MOCAA atrium for the first eighteen months of the institution’s existence. Its bat-like wings and twisted tail made from tire tubing and ribbon antennae could be observed from various points of the museum’s six floors. This was accompanied by an alluring lullaby that echoed through the space. In creating this piece, Hlobo was fascinated by the fact that so many cultures around the world have told stories of fantastical creatures; he looked at old beliefs stemming from Xhosa communities. Legend has it that the *impundulu* only appears when there is lightning and thunder. Often, this bird is sent out and controlled by a diviner; it can morph and transform

into different forms. Essentially, Hlobo took a figure existing in the local imagination and oral tradition and turned this intangible heritage into a present-day object. This means the *Impundulu* is not only a visual documentation of history, it is a vehicle to connect philosophies from previous generations to contemporary times. As we enter a new epoch, we can learn from the impundulu. Just like them, we should be agile enough to morph and transform ourselves as we acknowledge the different histories and geographies stemming from the Anthropocene. Our desire for meaningful engagement should be ambitious and coupled with institutional humility. The impundulu speaks of the importance of imagination and reflection. All of this can prepare us for the Chthulucene that Haraway proposes.



1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, transl. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963) quoted from: *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Garreth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge 2006), 120.
2. Frantz Fanon quoted by Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Death Blossoms: reflections from a Prisoner of Conscience*, 1996 (Cambridge: South End Press), XVIII.

Kris Dittel is an independent curator and editor based in Rotterdam. She is also associate curator at Onomatopée, an Eindhoven-based project space and publishing house. Her work centers on clusters of research that are informed by her background in economics and the social sciences, as well as an ongoing interest in (the failure of) communication, performativity in relation to the body, and language. Her most recent curatorial and editorial projects engaged with the relationship of language and economics (*The Economy Is Spinning*, Onomatopée, 2016), the tangled story of symbolic and economic value in art, and the value of artistic labor (*The Trouble with Value*, Bunkier Sztuki Gallery of Contemporary Art, Krakow and Onomatopée, Eindhoven, 2017–18); she is currently exploring the material substance and performative potential of the human voice (*Voice as Material and Post-Opera*, TENT Rotterdam, V2_ and Operadagen festival Rotterdam, 2018). As an editor, Kris has worked on a variety of publications, exploring the format of the book as an artistic medium.

● In terms of the environmental crisis, it is crucial we consider what contemporary art should and could do as a social institution. How can our institutions contribute to Donna Haraway's call to *stay with the trouble*? And how should the world of art attempt to deal with it? What tools should it use?

In the past few years, it seems, public art institutions far and wide have been experiencing various economical and political pressures, which have frequently led them to work in a mode of “crisis” in order to survive and continue their programming, engagement with the art community, and their publics. Many such survival tactics have led to new forms of endurance (or “resilience” – a frequently recurring term in the art discourse at present), good practices, and reexaminations of what we stand for and what we can do with limited means. Naturally, there are “bad practices” too: overexhaustion, conformity, ignorance, and sometimes, the inevitable surrender.

In this sense, art institutions (and let’s acknowledge we are talking about the people who run them) are well versed in various forms of crisis and survival strategies. On the brink of an environmental catastrophe, at the dawn of the sixth mass extinction and fourth

industrial revolution, we may look into our “crisis toolbox” to seek “hopeful practices” that may not be uniformly applicable and universal in various contexts, but can provide tools and strategies for coping and engaging with the effects of climate change. Such institutional survival strategies may include slowing down or degrowth, study and analysis, and most importantly, a tool that especially comes in handy with regard to the climate: *solidarity* and *collectivity*. This solidarity should extend not only across art and its institutions, but to those who are most deeply affected by the changing climate.

What “staying with the trouble” implies is that we have to let go of past utopias and nostalgic musings, as the point of return has been already passed. Instead, it is more helpful to think in terms of new horizons and alliances, going beyond art, beyond humans, toward exercising a planetary consciousness.

● How should institutions radically rethink themselves to fulfill their roles?

When one is in a state of survival and crisis, it is almost unimaginable to think in terms of a broader horizon and prevent oneself from falling prey to tiredness and burnout. Yet a long-term strategy is crucial, even if we need to change our route along the way. To do so, we must acknowledge that we are not alone in this, not alone as a single institution or as members of society.

It's been a while since Donna Haraway proposed doing away with our distinction between nature (given) and culture (constructed), and suggested we think through the notion of naturecultures. Rosi Braidotti takes this proposition even further as “*zoe/geo/techno assemblage*,” including *zoe*-logical, geological, and technological organisms. Braidotti suggests that the capacity to produce knowledge is not the exclusive prerogative of humans (or art) alone, but involves and is distributed across “all living matter and through self-organising technological networks.”¹¹

Across our differences and the variety of challenges we all face, I would like to advocate a *collectivity* on the basis of shared ethics across institutions, one which aims to think *from a planetary perspective*, inspired by Haraway and Braidotti's positions that takes into consideration the human and non-human “others” and occupants of the planet too.

● Shouldn't we challenge basic concepts on which we base our activities—first of all the very concept of criticality. Despite its etymological link to the notion of crisis, it seems utterly insufficient in our predicament. Thus, the idea of a critical institution may also be inadequate. Would the idea of an *engaged institution* be a response to these doubts? What, then, would possible modes of engagement be? To what end? To specify our aims, we need more knowledge and a great deal of imagination.

I would not discard the idea of critique just yet! Perhaps the problem is not with critique *per se*, but its frequent use in the contemporary art world as critique for critique's sake, without proposing alternatives and/or drafting a vision of possibilities. We live in times when we may need critique more than ever, but used not as empty plateaus for expressing individual high grounds and opinions.

An *engaged institution* should acknowledge that we are all in "this" together, across our differences and life experiences. Engaging with instances of injustice and dispossession, acknowledging others' pain and anxiety, are not only critical, but also caring and healing approaches.

● Could we presently imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care?

Writing these lines from the warmth of my home, in a Western context in a major European city, the question arises: How does ecology effect the everyday life of those living in relative affluence in the developed world? Apart from the heavy smog of the traffic and images of skinny polar bears and vanishing glaciers circulating in the media, what kind of understanding and accountability can we attain

that goes beyond this subjective experience and comfort? How to reach beyond the horizon of our viewpoint to the larger picture, that of ecological injustice and the unequal distribution of the climate catastrophe?²

Art institutions have the tools to initiate conversations, to reach out to those whose voices otherwise would not be heard, and to think in complexities rather than in a mode of panic or idealism. With a commitment to voicing the experiences and insights of the otherwise marginalized and

excluded, an art institution of ecology and care must not only acknowledge that “care” means “responsibility” for each other

too, but also broaden the horizon of its possibilities, knowledge, and thinking.

● What kind of role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism?

Instead of idealistic, unattainable utopias or nostalgic wonder, I would like to suggest an institutional way of thinking and a model that engages with what is “not yet known”; *an institution of becoming*. Establishing firm ethics and engaging with a multiplicity of voices and experiences, this institution may be in a constant collective process of formulating its vision, while aiming to understand irreversible processes and potential futures.

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1. Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).
2. For further reading on this subject, I recommend: Françoise Vergès, “Racial Capitalocene,” August 2017 <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3376-racial-capitalocene>.
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Bartosz Frąckowiak is a curator and researcher. He is the Deputy Director of Biennale Warszawa. In 2014–17, he was Deputy Director of the Hieronim Konieczka Polski Theater in Bydgoszcz and curator of the International Festival of New Dramaturgies. He graduated from the College of Inter-Area Individual Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw and the Artes Liberales Academy. He curated a series of performative lectures organized in cooperation with the Bęc Zmiana Foundation (2012). His work as a theater director has included: *Komornicka: The Ostensible Biography* (2012); *In Desert and Wilderness: After Sienkiewicz and Others* (with Weronika Szczawińska) at the Dramatyczny Theater in Wałbrzych (2011); a performative lecture, *The Art of Being a Character* (2012), Agnieszka Jakimiak's *Africa* (2014), Julia Holewińska's *Borders* (2016), Natalia Fiedorczuk's *Workplace* (2017), and the documentary-investigative play *Modern Slavery* (2018). He co-curated the international program of the first edition of the Biennale Warszawa – *Let's Organize Our Future*. He has published in various theater and socio-cultural magazines, including *Self-portrait*, *Dialog*, *Didaskalia*, *Political Critique*, and *Teatr*.

● In terms of the environmental crisis, it is crucial we consider what contemporary art should and could do as a social institution. How can our institutions contribute to Donna Haraway's call to *stay with the trouble*? And how should the world of art attempt to deal with it? What tools should it use?

I would start with the very concept of “crisis,” which seems problematic in several respects. First of all, the notion of a “crisis” presupposes some kind of a norm that it opposes, challenges, or

disturbs. It is worth asking what norm is assumed by a given “crisis” and what assumptions and values this norm is based on. Does what we are dealing with really deserve to be called a crisis? Further, the crisis and the discourse on crisis have often been used to introduce radical changes and reforms – on the basis of “shock doctrine” – justified by a state of emergency, special circumstances, or the need for a rapid intervention. In this way, neoliberal reforms, privatization of public enterprises, and cuts to public services have been introduced in many places around the

globe. Therefore, one has to be very careful about the very concept of “crisis” – is not neutral and it can be used in nefarious ways. I am not writing this because I fail to see the environmental or climate crisis, but because I definitely prefer to use other concepts, e.g. catastrophe, instead. How can an art institution operate in the face of a climate or environmental catastrophe?

Thinking in terms of “catastrophe” requires us to think through, for example, the postulates of institutional slowdown formulated in the circles of institutional criticism. Perhaps a slowdown would not be an effective tactic for disarming the capitalist primacy of efficiency and effectiveness, but rather a deep-seated, intra-institutional practice, pronouncing the failure of a given institution in relation to the external political, economic, and environmental processes that are characterized by “catastrophic” acceleration? If one looks at the extraordinary organizational and communicative efficiency of the transnational right, the increasingly sophisticated forms of capitalist colonization of new areas of our planet, such as deep sea mining, is it really the best idea to let go and slow

down in our efforts? I think that it is important to create an institutional dialectic of slowdown and acceleration in order to consciously and skillfully apply both these tactics in chosen fields and instances of our activity, using them politically, not just critically.

We ask such questions at Biennale Warszawa. We think of our institution as a political entity that not only comments on and problematizes politics, but also takes specific positions and doesn’t avoid political declarations. We try to think politically about our program, institutional practices, and the art we create. Among other things, this means that while we appreciate the language of multi-species collectives or the various new relationships with what is non-human or inanimate, like the language of the Anthropocene, we also pay attention to its shortcomings. The poetics of this language and its ability to produce material metaphors, although extremely inspiring for the artistic imagination, is often its main disadvantage. It is very difficult to make political demands understandable in such a language. We much prefer actions aiming to criminalize “ecocide” in international criminal law; forensic and investigative practices

aimed at revealing the role of specific entities in environmental destruction; demonstrating the role of capitalism in the environmental and climate catastrophe; and recognizing centers of power that can be identified, named, and indicted. Hence our cooperation with Nabil Ahmed and the INTERPRT investigative collective, among others. Humans or humanity are not all equally responsible for the current state of affairs. It is important to be careful with such generalizations.

What can art do about it? How can art relate to this situation? I think it is very important to create new forms of planetary countervisuality and new strategies for the distribution of images. If images reach our perception in accordance with the implicit and incomprehensible logic of today's algorithms that aim to commodify our attention, and are also used and abused, just like culture, in the new forms of authoritarian geopolitics as a very specific – and non-metaphorical – kind of weapon, then we need to think about new methods of distributing the visual. We need to create visuality wherever it is absent, in order to connect places, objects, phenomena, and situations that

are intentionally presented as isolated and separate, so that we fail to notice the actual processes of exploitation or violence. A good example of this is the global division of labor and global supply chains. They contain intentionally invisible links, broken strings, hidden relationships – this is the role of countless brokers at various levels of subcontracting in a product or service's journey to the end user. We dealt with this topic in a performative essay, *Modern Slavery*, devoted to two specific cases of human trafficking and forced labor, seen as part of the global system of violence, rather than a local occurrence, and attempting to identify the missing elements and find a visual form for them. I think that art can play a great role in filling in such visual gaps. Simultaneously, art can create spaces of invisibility, shelter, concealment, shadow, and tactical darkness, for those who want to avoid visibility or representation due to their status or need for safety.

It seems equally important to utilize the speculative potential of art: the opportunity it brings to produce some alternatives to the current system; to imagine and test other political, economic, social, or environmental orders.

● In order to fulfill their roles, how should institutions radically rethink themselves?

It is very important to consider the institution radically, both internally and externally. It is not enough to work toward the democratization of internal relations. Unfortunately, the creation of horizontal internal relations is often accompanied by the privatization of the institution, subordinating it to the interests of the collective, without taking into account relationships with entities outside the institution. The production of the common good (in/of) an institution cannot be limited to its internal structure. Nor can it rely on sharing the common good without a balanced share of responsibility.

Because of this, Biennale Warszawa is intended to be an institution that produces new practices, methods, mechanisms, organizations, and “infra-structures.” Developed as part of specific projects, they are ultimately expected to gain autonomy and function in their fields as alternatives to the current models. In a *frieze* commentary for the first edition of Biennale Warszawa, Jonas Staal noticed that our “biennial has become an infrastructure that produces

infra-structures; an organization creating new organizational models.”¹⁹

Understood in this way, a biennial is not simply an artistic event, it is a political tool. By hacking the well-recognized and naturalized artistic format, we tried to use it in guerrilla, counterintuitive, non-parent ways. Because of this, we created the event around four assemblies, each of which was supposed to create alternative solutions, models, and organizational and institutional proposals in various fields. We took quite a literal approach to the slogan of this year’s edition, “Let’s organize our future!”: as an organizational art task, an attempt to invent and test new organizations and ways of organizing (ourselves?). And so the Polish Social Forum brought together a group of over fifty organizations and activist initiatives from various fields. For several days, they looked for new alliances and ways of collaborating with each other. The goal of the East-European–North African–Middle East Forum was to develop the idea of a new translocal organization to create relationships between these semi-peripheral areas. In the 1980s, the former Eastern Bloc and MENA countries were closely linked. Can the historical forms of solidarity and cooperation

be used, without fetishizing them, as an inspiration to rebuild the relationships between these regions in today's entirely new socio-political circumstances? The *Convention of Women Farmers* brought together the representatives of ecofeminist collectives from all over the globe – from Rožava, through the Bekaa Valley, Chiapas in Mexico, and Colombia, to Poland and other European countries – and for two days they shared seeds, ways of cultivating different plant species and their uses, herbariums, stories of land, power, displacement, and alternative economies (which in indigenous communities were often traditional economies). Based on concrete materials – seeds, herbariums, plant species – the Marwa Arsanios project produced a new translocal community and a platform for alternative, non-authoritarian policy based on care and the common good. Finally, Jonas Sraal's *Transunions* were attended by transnational practice experts who speculated on the possibility of a transnational political organization that would not be based on the representation of nation-states. Exhibitions, performances, discursive events, concerts, and residences were organized around these four assemblies.

These initiatives were united by one conjecture: an attempt to transcend cultural differences and identity politics in search of the Commons. Often, what is common is not given (to us), but requires work and joint creation. This way of thinking about building new relationships had a lot to do with trying to find the formula for a new universalism (Susan Buck-Morss) that is not essentialist, colonial, and homogenizing.

I am just back from Lebanon, where anti-government protests broke out a few days ago. For the first time in the country's history, all the religious and political groups were united – Christians, Sunnis, Shites, and Druze – and came out together to demand the fall of the regime. One of the protest's slogans was “divided we fall, together we rise.” The unprecedented nature of such event in a country where a fifteen-year civil war ended thirty years ago was emphasized by each of my interlocutors. It's simple, or one might say banal – the slogan should be understood literally. It turns out that the Lebanese system of exercising power – in which the influence of various religious groups has been seemingly balancing out – has less favored peace than patronage and corruption. Paradoxically,

the negotiative nature of diversity fostered inequality. Celebrating the differences is far too often anti-emanipatory. Hence, the attempt to reclaim concepts such as “solidarity” – recently deconstructed due to the alleged hierarchical relations of power that are inscribed in them – to oppose identitarian obsessions and the pursuit of singular interests.

Nevertheless, Biennale Warszawa is not just an event that takes place every two years, it is also an institution that runs an ongoing program. Its various strands converge during the biennial event, and are summarized and confronted with other ways of thinking. Simultaneously, the Biennale event is a hotbed of new initiatives, the beginning of new processes, projects, and themes that will continue for the next two years. We work simultaneously in the field of art (disregarding disciplinary divisions), research, and theory, as well as socio-political activism. The transdisciplinary nature of our institution is closely linked to its political nature. Contemporary reality is too complex to be captured, understood, analyzed, or presented within one field or discipline. Different forms of expression, methodologies, competences, and ways of thinking, and the entanglement of aesthetics, epistemology, and

political practice seem to create opportunities for a somewhat wider action, reaching a wider group of participants than what is typically a part of artistic or cultural events. For two years, we co-created the program of the first edition of the Biennale, cooperating with political activists, trade unions, and representatives of social, political, and cultural organizations. Most of the cooperative projects and social initiatives activated during the last edition will be continued within the next two-year program. One part or stream of our future program is specially devoted to these forms of social and political commitments.

In the face of increasingly authoritarian forms of global capitalism and the associated violent geopolitics (or outright war), art institutions can engage in alternative politics – both local, city-focused, and on a micro scale, and “foreign policy,” problematizing the category of the border itself. Such politics consist in creating new alliances and translocal communities, working toward new formulas for solidarity and new methods of cooperation. In these activities, it is extremely important to go beyond identity politics, which, by focusing only on the interests of a selected group, preclude any broader change or alliance.

● Shouldn't we challenge basic concepts on which we base our activities – first of all the very concept of criticality. Despite its etymological link to the notion of crisis, it seems utterly insufficient in our predicament. Thus, the idea of a critical institution may also be inadequate. Would the idea of an *engaged institution* be a response to these doubts? What, then, would the possible modes of engagement be? To what end? To specify our aims, we need more knowledge and a great deal of imagination.

I am not convinced by the “engaged institution” in its popular definition. To begin with, we ought to ask – which side is it on? What does it stand for? And how? Engagement alone doesn't imply much. Results come from taking a particular, specific, political position, without fear of being accused of reductionism or attacking art's autonomy. In my opinion, what we need today are political (not only critical, not only engaged) art institutions that can combine critical strategies with the design of alternatives, strong gestures establishing new structures, speculation on the future, creating new models and prototypes, and then – and this is crucial – an attempt to put them into practice. This kind of institution would obviously be an engaged institution, but engagement is not its primary feature.

I feel that over the past few decades we (working in art and theory) have perfected our knowledge of critical languages, we can deconstruct all concepts, even those in the language of contemporary progressive politics, we can name and analyze power relations, expose various mythologies, conduct multi-aspectual definitions of our own position and our own privilege. These competences, however, have given us no protection from the radical right-wing turn; in no way have they translated into real, lasting social change. At the same time, this criticism paralyzed us and prevented us from doing work for the sake of the future. We no longer know whether we have the right to make certain gestures or whether they are reserved for someone else. We are afraid of stronger definitions, more decisive actions, and power. Meanwhile, if we want art to mean anything today, we must move on from this impasse toward a political perspective which works on positive projects and offers the creation of new solutions and alternatives.

I'd like to give you one example taken from this year's edition of Biennale Warszawa. The *East European – North African*

– *Middle East Forum* was accompanied by a one-month curatorial residency. During our seminars and workshops we had long and fruitful conversations closely related to the task and challenge of imagining new organizational models for framing translocal relations between Eastern Europe and the MENA region. They were mostly about colonial legacy, modernity, both as a violent project and a promise of development, political economy of these regions, historical forms of solidarity, as well as the meaning of this idea today, socialist globalization and socialist colonialism, historical and contemporary forms of racism. We spoke a lot about violence, trying to raise our awareness about the current political, economic, environmental, and technological processes in the regions. But the main challenge was to try to imagine what we have in common, what new commons we could develop together. What was important for us from the beginning was to balance critical practices with speculative ones, not to be overwhelmed by the infinite deconstruction of every single concept (solidarity, hospitality) as inherently violent. This is, of course, important, but politically it is not enough! So the idea was to try to create dialectic movement between critical thinking and to create positive alternative projects (as well as programs and organizations or institutions) for the future. Not to get stuck in the repetitive, automatic, ritual, critical procedure of seeing power relations in every single positive initiative and gesture. Yet also not to be naive in it, and to avoid repeating old mistakes, to be sensitive to certain privileges and inequalities without being paralyzed in the process of establishing new projects of translocal solidarity and collaboration.

We also questioned and discussed the geography of this future collaboration, investigating the regional and territorial restrictions as well as the exclusivity of this geography. For us, choosing Eastern Europe and the Middle East/North Africa was a very conscious political gesture. We sought to oppose the current Islamophobic right-wing tendencies in Europe, restrictive migration policies, and anti-refugee rhetoric. But it was also about reactivating the historical political imagination, coming back to the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, when very close bonds and ties were established between these regions, coming back to those models of solidarity: not to resurrect

them or fetishize them, but to be inspired by them. These past models and this past imagination, understood as the archive of forgotten possibilities, still have some potential. This made the map a gesture. It was a map of past common struggles – but also of official state politics on the Cold War geopolitical scene. We tried to focus on the first, while acknowledging the second dimension.

I describe this project in detail to demonstrate how a critical dimension and a future-design dimension can coexist, how this co-existence looks in practice, and what challenges it brings.

● Today, can we imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care?

We can imagine such an institution, but it is not a simple task. It can lead to various paradoxes. For example, some of the challenges I have identified above may conflict with this institutional formula. If we assume that, in the fight against an ecological catastrophe, the most important thing is a structural change within capitalism itself, then which is more important: reducing CO2 emissions by giving up air travel, or building new translocal forms of solidarity and cooperation that might result in some kind of a political alliance, although the required air travel leaves a carbon footprint? What will translate more quickly and efficiently into environmental change?

These contradictions and paradoxes are highly visible in various

environmental policies. Renewable energy technologies require rare earth elements whose traditional deposits are slowly depleting. In order to acquire them, new forms of extraction emerge. The Clarion-Clipperton Zone in the North Pacific is an area particularly rich in minerals that can potentially be obtained from the seabed. To combat the climate crisis, corporations receive licenses for seabed mining in the region. What will be the extent of oceanic ecosystem destruction to allow the development of renewable energy? Is this the only way? What will be the balance of profits and losses?

We need institutions that are focused on care and the environment. These are extremely important challenges to engage with, but in attempting to implement them we often encounter contradictions that are difficult to reconcile. These contra-

dictions are the biggest challenge for an institution with an almost perfect consensus of values and ideology.

Care is an important feature in everyday relationships within institutions, in all our various relationships; it is important in relations with people and non-human organisms, with both the living and the inanimate.

Care is linked to the need for mindfulness, a thorough understanding of what care a given person might need and whether they need it. Inappropriately administered care can be violent. Care, however, cannot be limited to within the institution; it must be properly applied to those who need it most on the outside as well. It goes hand-in-hand with solidarity with those who suffer the most.

As resources are limited, each institution must accurately define its field of care. Absolute care is not possible. It is impossible to care for each

person, being, social group, plant, or animal, for the entire planetary system, simultaneously, with equal diligence and devotion. It can be a paralyzing endeavor, like any phantasm of a whole. It is also worth asking whether caring for someone, for some group, is not exclusionary or doesn't privatize the institutional space, doesn't favor someone due to fondness or intimacy, while condemning someone else to a total denial of care. Care is very important, but, as is usually the case with such "clear cut" concepts, one must be cautious with the potential hierarchy of a relationship based on care and its fetishization.

Care shouldn't smother dispute, it should not be depoliticizing or neutralizing. To my mind, conflict-free concepts of culture seem naive and unproductive. Disputes drive thought processes, dialectics, new ideas, as well as critical work and speculation.

● What kind of role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism?

From the start, focusing on the future was the basic premise of

our program and agenda. Currently, public debate is dominated by memory and historical themes, reinforced by the right's historical and cultural policies that create new, strong identities and national mythologies. At the same time, on the liberal side we have been hearing for

years about the non-alternative nature of global capitalism and the inevitability of economic processes (understood as natural processes, subject to strict mathematical reflection). The slogan of our lack of alternative and the sense that we live in the best of all possible worlds was soon called into question by the 2007–09 financial crisis. At first, it seemed that this would be an impulse to change the economic system on a global scale, whereas – as will happen with crises – it was used to increase the rate of return on the investments of the wealthy at the expense of the rest, who became even poorer as a result of drastic austerity policies. A slight correction of the system, including the introduction of slight regulations on the financial sector, was only a smokescreen for a lack of systemic change. Meanwhile, over the past decade, economic differences have widened, making the rich even richer and the poor even poorer. At the same time, authoritarian tendencies are growing around the globe – to mention only India, Brazil, China, Poland, Turkey, and the Philippines – fueled by widespread dissatisfaction, a sense of lack of agency, and the exclusion of so

many. This picture is completed by the environmental and climate catastrophe, whose images and facts reach us at accelerating speeds. In this landscape, we must carve a future for artistic, intellectual, and political action.

We need new plans and planning methods, new strategies, new ideas, models and prototypes, institutions and organizations, alliances and partnerships, new connections between local initiatives and activists, new programs and solutions in practically all areas of life: politics, economics, the social and cultural sphere, and environmental policies. Art has a great role to play as a natural realm of imagination and speculation, a place of free, unfettered experimentation with various ideas, and testing of various solutions. Its visual and sensory aspects allow us to visualize the abstract plans of the future, illustrating the connections between various aspects and levels of the designed future. Art can also have a mobilizing and engaging potential, creating a space for the articulation of needs and demands for various collectives, groups, and entities.

I began by criticizing the category of “crisis” and replacing it

with the concept of “catastrophe.” But how can one avoid confusing a catastrophe with the catastrophism that is demobilizing us and appropriating the horizon of the future? An important role of art is to break up the apocalyptic and catastrophic visuality that paralyzes and evokes fear, prompting regression and the adoption of conservative and territorial attitudes (ecofascism, resource nationalism, survivalism/prepper movement ideology). Instead, art can seek an answer to a catastrophe that is real and concrete, and not a phantasm; to an empirical catastrophe, awareness of which can be mobilizing. I think that a great role is to be played by critical and political speculative design, in which one thinks holistically and systemically of creating future scenarios, either negative or desirable; examining connections between the successive stages of development of various trends and

tendencies so as to bring them to the desired outcome; as well as for organizational art, usage and various post-artistic forms.

Over the next two years, we aim to focus on authoritarianism and authoritarian capitalism and reflect on its future. We understand authoritarianism as a complex global phenomenon. Examining new forms of authoritarianism, our program will consist of two strands: the first focuses on documenting and reporting on the current situation in different geographical locations; the second analyzes future scenarios of the development of authoritarian tendencies. This process of anticipation and speculation will be based, counter-intuitively, on forensic and investigative techniques and methodologies that are usually used to examine past events. We anticipate this hybridization and cross-contamination of methodologies to be fruitful.



1. Frida Sandström, "Warsaw Report: A Biennale Fights Discord with Discourse," *frieze*, October 15, 2019, accessed November 2, 2019, <https://frieze.com/article/warsaw-report-biennale-fights-discord-discourse>.

Gridthiya Gaweewong founded the Project 304 arts organization in 1996, and is currently Artistic Director of the Jim Thompson Art Center, Bangkok. She received her MAA (Arts Administration), from the Art Institute of Chicago (1996). Her curatorial projects have addressed issues of social transformation faced by artists from Thailand and beyond since the Cold War. Gaweewong has organized exhibitions and events including *Under Construction* (Tokyo Opera City Gallery and Japan Foundation, Forum Japan, 2003), *Politics of Fun* (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2005), and the Bangkok Experimental Film Festival (1997–2007) co-founded with Apichatpong Weerasethakul). Gaweewong is on the curatorial team for the 12th Gwangju Biennale, *Imagined Borders* (2018). She is also the head curator of ICI's traveling exhibition, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul: The Serenity in Madness*.

● In terms of the environmental crisis, it is crucial we consider what contemporary art should and could do as a social institution. How can our institutions contribute to Donna Haraway's call to *stay with the trouble*? And how should the world of art attempt to deal with it? What tools should it use?

Institutions should collaborate with their own communities and local, regional organizations which share the same concerns about this planetary crisis. They should think of multiple platforms and tools to address and articulate the issue. Yet exhibitions and seminars alone might not be sufficient or effective. We need something more provocative to build awareness and a sense of urgency in communities.

● How should institutions radically rethink themselves to fulfill their roles?

Institutions should change their attitudes first, and start to take action to take a leading role. They should work with artists and their community to create long-term and sustainable pro-

grams or projects that engage with the climate crisis. Simultaneously, on a practical and daily basis, they should start with themselves, by reorganizing and controlling their own energy consumption routines in their buildings and facilities.

● Shouldn't we challenge basic concepts on which we base our activities – first of all the very concept of criticality. Despite its etymological link to the notion of crisis, it seems utterly insufficient in our predicament. Thus, the idea of a critical institution may also be inadequate. Would the idea of an *engaged institution* be a response to these doubts? What, then, would possible modes of engagement be? To what end? To specify our aims, we need more knowledge and a great deal of imagination.

Shifting the concept of criticality to engaged institutions might well not be enough. I think you start the process of engaging with communities on a different level, and this is one method. It's good

to raise questions regarding the mode of engagement, and specify your aims. However, in order to have the tools to create the engagement, you need sufficient materials, the knowledge to build models to explore. Northern institutions can learn from the global South's pre-modern or tribal groups on how they live with nature, being a harmonious part of it. A project like this can team up with anthropologists, scientists, artists, and institutions to explore the history of Anthropocene and climate change in different regions. But I would like to suggest an alternative: instead of learning from the global South, we might be able to find some communities in Poland, the North, or even the former Soviet countries. That might be an interesting way to start to imagine the future.

● Could we presently imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care?

Stop imagining and take action!

● What kind of role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism?

The only choice we have is to take a leading role, as we always believe that art can reshape society and our future.

Katerina Gregos is a curator, lecturer, and writer based in Brussels since 2006. For over fifteen years her curatorial practice has consistently explored the relationship between art, society, and politics, with particular attention to questions of democracy, human rights, economy, ecology, crisis, and changing global production circuits. She has curated or co-curated several large-scale exhibitions and biennials including, among others, the 1st Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art (2018); the 5th Thessaloniki Biennial (2015); the Göteborg Biennial (2013); and Manifesta 9 (2012). She has also curated three national pavilions at the Venice Biennale: Croatia (2019); Belgium (2015); and Denmark (2011). Since 2016 she has been curator of the Munich-based (non-profit) Schwarz Foundation. Forthcoming projects include: *Modern Love (or Love in the Age of Cold Intimacies)* for the Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg (DE) and the Tallinn Art Hall (2020/21) and *Elefsina Mon Amour* for Eleusina 2021 – Cultural Capital of Europe (GR). Gregos also regularly publishes on art and artists in exhibition catalogues, journals, and books, and is a visiting lecturer at HISK: the Higher Institute of Arts in Ghent and the Jan Van Eyck Academy in Maastricht.

● In terms of the environmental crisis, it is crucial we consider what contemporary art should and could do as a social institution. How can our institutions contribute to Donna Haraway's call to *stay with the trouble*? And how should the world of art attempt to deal with it? What tools should it use?

Though my curatorial practice over the last twenty explores the relationship between art, society, and politics, with particular attention to questions of democracy, human rights, capitalism, crisis, ecology, and changing circuits of global production, I have never seen art as a “social institution,” but rather as a distinct activity undertaken by individual artists trying to make sense of the world. Artists are not obliged to act as social institutions and should have the freedom to engage with whatever subject interests them. Yet the institutions that provide the framework for the artists to show their work are social, and as such, have responsibilities to the publics they address. What they produce as art may or may not be liked, understood, or picked up by other people. Our anthropocentric perspective is

responsible for our distorted relationship with the natural world, as Haraway and so many others correctly say. And we should steer clear of the ever more popular idea of the Anthropocene, which places human presence and activities too much in the center of things, as if it were a natural law, an inescapable development. This is all well and good, but as long as our economies are based on the capitalist growth model (with its planned obsolescence, production of massive waste, and consumerism) and the continued burning of fossil fuels I don't see how it will be possible to rise to the challenge of combating the massive environmental crisis we face. Haraway's plea for kinship between humans, living in balance and harmony with nature (or what's left of it) in "mixed assemblages" can only happen when the current status quo is fundamentally rehailed. In addition, we humans also need to urgently respond by changing our lifestyles; for example, by re-considering what we eat, since we know that agriculture is one of the two main polluters in terms of CO₂, together with the fossil fuel industry. Now, as far as what the "art world" can do, I can think of several

things. First of all, a reconsideration of how we operate; we are definitely not environmentally friendly (though luckily there are not as many of us as, say, football fans, which probably means our carbon footprint is smaller). From the countless flights all of us take, the CO₂ we generate from the transport of art works, the building of disposable gallery walls, the printing and mailing (still!) of paper invitations and the generation of so much unnecessary paper, there is so much we need to reconsider and change if we want to "stay with the trouble." Now, in terms of what institutions should do, I have always believed that art is at its most important when it raises critical issues and sounds the alarm bells regarding the pressing issues of our time, and that the institutions that do this are the most relevant and meaningful. However, we should tread cautiously regarding the limits of art's political and environmental agency and oft-heard overblown claims about its capacity or obligation to "change the world." It is doubtful whether art can do anything to alleviate social or environmental problems except on a very micro level, and more-often-than-not as a symbolic ges-

ture. So we shouldn't overplay art's impact and try to "cut things with a hammer" so-to-speak, or "try to climb a ladder without rungs." Unless there is fundamental policy change made by governments and the powers that be, there is very little the contemporary art world can do to address the massive environmental challenges ahead. However, what we can do as a community and as individuals is change *our own* habits and lifestyles, and consider the environmental impact of our activities, professional or otherwise. I often lament that, with the erosion of democracy and the rise of a culture of surveillance, our political power might be waning; on the other hand, consider the massive power that we collectively have as consumers, a power that has yet to be harnessed. If we all realized this, we could collectively decide (with the help of social media) to stop consuming products made by corporations that pollute, practice inequality or are generally involved in bad practices. Imagine we all one day collectively decided to stop drinking Coke and the other drinks it owns. Where would the Coca Cola Company be the next day?

● How should institutions radically rethink themselves to fulfill their roles?

I am always wary of the word radical. Real radicality, I am afraid, is more likely to occur in politics and the public domain than in the safe haven of the art world. Nevertheless, I do believe we should re-think the roles that institutions have in terms of how they "behave," how they position themselves *vis a vis* the challenges facing humanity, and more practically, how they can think more sustainably and consider the material impact of their practices. On the other

hand, every "radical" rethinking of the museum or the institution risks bringing in an ideological approach, which may instrumentalize art and artists; institutions, I believe, should allow artists to make their work in conditions of freedom, free of ideological pollution and latent arm-twisting to conform to a specific narrative. Institutions should, of course, have their own clear missions, but they also have a responsibility to look at and try to understand what artists are doing, and show their work. All institutions have their limitations. Very

often we see cultural institutions over-reaching themselves, operating on an unsustainable growth model (look at global museum expansionism), trying to do too many things at the same time, overstretching their resources (financial and human), and feeling the urge to check all the right boxes – politically, thematically and geographically – while contributing to economically precarious situations for cultural workers. This *modus operandi* is impossible, but also unsustainable because, even if might often be leftist in its content or ideological intent,

it is very often capitalist in its practice. And this is common in the “art world.” What we need is not people (artists, curators, writers) who sheepishly pursue the latest trends or adapt their practices in order to “check” all the boxes, but people who practice what they preach and think for themselves. Finally, when talking about equality and addressing past imbalances, we would do well to consider how to address them, not only through an exhibition or project that deals with these issues, but also structurally, within our institutions.

● Shouldn't we challenge basic concepts on which we base our activities – first of all the very concept of criticality. Despite its etymological link to the notion of crisis, it seems utterly insufficient in our predicament. Thus, the idea of a critical institution may also be inadequate.
Would the idea of an *engaged institution* be a response to these doubts? What, then, would possible modes of engagement be? To what end?
To specify our aims, we need more knowledge and a great deal of imagination.

“Thinking” cultural or art institutions should be both engaged *and* critical, without losing sight of their primary goals: the promotion of art and culture, the support of artwork and artists, and servicing their visitors. “Engaged” means not only being engaged with the society around you, but first and foremost, with those who nourish your activities: the artists and your public. And when we say engagement, what do we mean exactly? With whom? Why? How?

About knowledge: never has there been a moment where it is easier to access, if we so desire. Yet this is also a moment when it is more difficult than ever to discern between veracious and doubtful

knowledge, or how its findings should be interpreted and used. In terms of imagination: yes, it is lacking everywhere nowadays, not only in politics and business but also, surprisingly, in the “art world.” My greatest fear is the culture of consensus and self-censorship that is now being built on account of the culture wars and political correctness gone haywire.

● Could we presently imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care?

Institutions should always be places of care, hospitality, and generosity. This care should be extended not only to the public, but also to those who work in it and for it, from staff to artists. To my mind, sustainability is the key issue underlying exhibition-making and institutional practice today. Beyond the lofty ideological aims that many curators, exhibitions, and institutions set, we need to scrutinize how they truly operate, in a structural sense. They all face challenging constraints in terms of time and resources, particularly in the public sector, and more so with increasing funding cuts. The question of badly paid (or even unpaid), overworked staff, artists who work without financial remuneration, is a crucial one that needs to be addressed when

we want to talk about sustainable practices. The “art world” and its institutions are particularly culpable in sustaining precarious labor by those involved in the actual production of content. All too often, artists are required to work without payment. Research-based artists, who spend the most time to finalize a project and have fewer opportunities to sell their work, are particularly disadvantaged; as are artists who make politically oriented work (which sells far more poorly in the commercial art world) or in time-based media and performance, who often don’t have a gallery to fall back on. No wonder we suddenly see a re-emergence, a resurgence even, of so much painting and object-based art today. So one of the primary issues of sustainable economic ethics is the proper remuneration of artistic labor. This is not only an economic issue, it is also a political one. A fee structure for artists asked to produce new work should become the norm. Then there is also the question of *time*: time for the artists to produce work, time for curators to work at a human pace, and time for people to properly engage with art. If we want to talk about institutions of ecology and care we also need to

address these issues. Beyond that, on a more macro level, we need to call into question the growth model, which has gripped so many sectors of the art world(s). A case can be made for deceleration of perception, for scaling down and a wider distribution of resources.

● What kind of role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism?

I can't think of any better way than to continue to support the work of artists who deal with some of the most critical issues of our time and to create the conditions where art is allowed the space, freedom, and opportunity to open up our horizons and help change the way we think about our catastrophic habits.



Karina Kottová is a curator and contemporary art theorist based in Prague. Currently she is a director of the Jindřich Chalupecký Society. Her previous affiliations include MeetFactory international center for contemporary art (2012–15), DOX Centre for Contemporary Art (2009–12) and Museum Kampa (2007–9). Among the projects she has established and co-established are INI Project, an independent process-oriented project space, the Věra Jirousová Award for art critics, and UMA Audioguide. She is interested in the psychological and emotional impact of current socio-political challenges, as well as feminist theory and the subversive potential of so-called “feminine” qualities, such as empathy, irrationality, or intuition. Kottová earned a BA in the Humanities from Charles University in Prague, and an MA in Art and Heritage: Policy, Management, and Education from Universiteit Maastricht. In 2015 she defended her PhD thesis on “The Institution and the Viewer” at the Masaryk University in Brno. In 2012 she was a Fulbright-Masaryk scholar affiliated with the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York.

● In terms of the environmental crisis, it is crucial we consider what contemporary art should and could do as a social institution. How can our institutions contribute to Donna Haraway's call to *stay with the trouble*? And how should the world of art attempt to deal with it? What tools should it use?

The art world's “most ecological” response to the current climate crisis would naturally be to stop producing altogether, to keep from burdening our already unstable ecosystems. However, as representatives of this field, we find it hard to admit our own redundancy while still seeking to defend the role of art in inspiring change, which becomes especially important in difficult times. In spite of all our doubts about the sense of supporting the creation of more artwork which leaves a carbon footprint, I still contemplate, in my curating and institutional activities, how to “repay” this debt, not only by turning to more sustainable institutional attitudes, but also by pointing out the unique value that art brings. The current situation requires direct intervention in political and economic schemes and power systems, and radical change in the ethical, emotional, and personal spheres. One of the virtues of art is that it is able to work with subtle nuances,

on intellectual and emotional levels, and can be both political and touching. One could say that this makes its role too ambivalent and insufficient in contemporary crises, which require clearly defined action; that contemporary artists preach the necessity of change to the converted in exhibition spaces that are expensive to run, and that their impact does not go beyond mere gestures. Or, on the contrary, one could see art's ambiguity as an advantage. Yes, we do need big changes in the prevailing systems if we are to have any kind of future on this planet. Such changes, however, cannot occur without a global turn in our way of thinking, without a critical re-evaluation of the anthropocentric worldview, without a major increase in compassion for the environment in which we live and act, and without cultivating our ability to respect it and protect it instead of exploiting it and destroying it for our own benefit. Art, which usually has a high degree of sensitivity to the contexts in which it is created, as well as a certain level of ambiguity to leave space to activate the viewers, could play a fundamental role in these processes. No less important are the institutional approaches, which can also significantly contribute to transforming set and outdated ways of "getting things done," formulating new requirements, and setting new structural norms, in the cultural sector and beyond. For the Jindřich Chalupecký Society, an organization I currently represent, which is also part of the "Feminist Art Institutions" collective, the institutional response to the contemporary climate situation and other social, economic, and political issues is an important matter which must be taken into consideration alongside our regular activities.

● How should institutions radically rethink themselves to fulfill their roles?

The current discussion as to whether or not the new proposal for ICOM's definition of the museum will be accepted by members across the globe is somewhat symptomatic for this question. The most recent attempt to define the museum abandons the traditional focus on conservation, research, and education, and describes museums as "democratizing, inclusive, and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and

specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.” Of course, many opposing voices appeared from high positions of the international museum world, branding this proposal by Danish curator Jette Sandhal as overly political, ideological, or timely. A similarly strident call for making radical institutional attitudes more obligatory might be more readily accepted among the “critical” art

institutions, than by more “traditional” (art) museums. Although terms such as inclusivity, decolonial practices, solidarity, sustainability, or diversity have become almost overused key words for many contemporary art institutions and their projects, I believe we do need to hold on to their actual meaning and implement them on all levels of our practice, on both a conceptual and philosophical level, and through concrete practical solutions. The latter is often harder to accomplish for art institutions and museums, which are largely built on thought and imagination; this only implies all the more need for emphasis and focus. Defining it as a “must” might actually be helpful in this process, however problematic it may sound to some of these institutions at present.

● Shouldn't we challenge basic concepts on which we base our activities—first of all the very concept of criticality. Despite its etymological link to the notion of crisis, it seems utterly insufficient in our predicament. Thus, the idea of a critical institution may also be inadequate. Would the idea of an *engaged institution* be a response to these doubts? What, then, would possible modes of engagement be? To what end? To specify our aims, we need more knowledge and a great deal of imagination.

Although I cannot agree more that a contemporary art institution needs to be engaged, I have recently been contemplating a counter-

part to the critical focus, which I consider somewhat insufficient as a response to the current planetary challenges. I wonder whether the most “desirable” institutional approach needs to be defined by a negative word, one that assumes some form of conflict or opposition. These are aspects we probably cannot avoid in our practice and lives, and at points they can be productive and helpful. Yet I would like to see a contemporary art institution described in other terms, perhaps as a *kind* one. As naïve as this may sound, this appellation would, unlike a *critical art institution*, highlight notions I feel are extremely important in our present phase, such as collaboration, empathy, or care. These are, of course, also feminist values, which are seeing a widespread revival these days. Combined with artistic and institutional attitudes, they pose new requirements and humanize the often rather competitive and self-exploitative art world. If an institution begins to prioritize these values, it will need to rethink every level of its internal and external practice, including the way it is treating the staff, collaborators, artists, and partner organizations, but also how it sets up goals and strategies, responds to values of time and place, how it can approach unexpected challenges. I also assume “kind” responses would naturally be less harmful to the environment, and they might open more space for imagining alternative and inspired solutions.

● What kind of role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism?

I believe institutions need to take a step toward a different way of thinking about the possible future(s), one which would admit uncertainty but also resolve to act from such a standpoint: we will create a space to realize that we do not exactly know what to do under the constant pressure of the media churning out news on the imminent planetary collapse, that we can only guess what those in power could or should do, without considering ourselves powerless and passively watching our world disappear. Instead of giving in to environmental anxiety, we have a chance to observe our own position within the whole and change our behavior and our immediate surroundings accordingly. The personal *is* the political here, in an absolutely existential way. Moreover, if a personal stand can inspire others, as seen in the student

protests, activation of parents, society-wide movements such as Extinction Rebellion, and a whole range of other manifestations of civil disobedience, it will create a giant anti-pole to political and economic whims. When speaking of the need for transformation at on a societal level, we also need to reflect on society not only as an abstract, somehow external or foreign organism, or even as a mechanism, but rather as a network of interpersonal and interspecific relations, where the interconnection of individuals, partial segments, and communities and their relations to the whole are key. Changes initiated on a seemingly marginal end of this network may initiate a chain reaction throughout the system. So even if art and art institutions are the margins, by this logic they might not be powerless in the bigger picture. They do, of course, need to carefully consider what kind of ripple effect they would like to set off, and whether they themselves are becoming something that could truly be inspirational for others.

● Could we presently imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care?

As members of the “Feminist Art Institutions,” we define ourselves in these terms and do our best to put such notions into practice. This is a process that entails many dilemmas, trials and errors, and struggles, but it also leads to positive changes – for each organization individually and for the newly emerged collective body, which has already proved quite ready to mobilize if necessary, and to involve other institutions and initiatives in joint agendas, such as requesting city halls to declare a state of climate emergency. More steps may be required for larger institutions to radicalize themselves along similar lines than for smaller and more flexible art centers, platforms, and project spaces, which are the main participants in this initiative. In the Czech milieu, on the other hand, art academies, as representatives of the most “traditional” art institutions, have quite a strong voice in the current “ecological turn.” This means change could also be happening in and through state institutions or other more rigid structures, even though the initial push might need to be on a grassroots level. I believe we simply need to imagine institutions as ecological and caring if we want them to have a future.

Ruth Noack has been an author, art critic, university lecturer, and exhibition maker since the 1990s, trained as a visual artist and art historian. She is the Founding Director of *The Corner at Whitman-Walker* in Washington DC, and was curator of documenta 12 (2007). Her exhibitions include *Scenes of a Theory* (1995), *Things We Don't Understand* (2000), *The Government* (2005) (with Roger M. Buerge), a solo show of Ines Doujak (2012), and *Notes on Crisis, Currency and Consumption* (2015). In 2018, Noack presented the ongoing *Sleeping with a Vengeance, Dreaming of a Life* series in Athens, Prague, and Beijing and is opening with a new iteration at Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart in October 2019. In 2012–13 she was the Head of the Curating Contemporary Art Program, Royal College of Art, London, and also acted as Research Leader for the EU-project *Mela – European Museums in an Age of Migrations*. She was Šaloun professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Prague (2013–14), ran the Gwangju Biennale International Curator Course in 2014, and teaches at the International Summer Academy in Salzburg (2017 and 2018). Between 2015 and 2019 she was responsible for one of the Dutch Art Institute's Roaming Academy courses. Apart from her articles and scholarly essays published internationally, she has written *Sanja Ivekovic: Triangle* for Artfall Books, and edited *Agency, Ambivalence, Analysis: Approaching the Museum with Migration in Mind* (both published in 2013).

● In terms of the environmental crisis, it is crucial we consider what contemporary art should and could do as a social institution. How can our institutions contribute to Donna Haraway's call to *stay with the trouble*? And how should the world of art attempt to deal with it? What tools should it use?

Staying with the trouble is a category of agency and agency

is something that starts from individuals, who then come together to enact a politics. Institutions must therefore allow and encourage human individuals, including their own staff, to take time and space *to stay with the trouble*. The tools should lay the groundwork for this: justice and intersectional awareness at the work place.

● How should institutions radically rethink themselves to fulfill their roles?

Institutions and the art world should strive to come to a more honest understanding of their own embeddedness in structures of power, and their responsibility toward their staff and toward society. They should seek to define and possibly refine their relation to everyday life.

● Shouldn't we challenge basic concepts on which we base our activities – above all the very concept of criticality? Despite its etymological link to the notion of crisis, it seems utterly insufficient in our predicament. As such, the idea of a critical institution may also be inadequate. Would the idea of an *engaged institution* be a response to these doubts? What, then, would possible modes of engagement be? To what end? To specify our aims, we need more knowledge and a great deal of imagination.

I wouldn't diss criticality *per se*. Criticality that is driven by a genuine desire for self-reflection and change toward the plasticity of the planet is not necessarily insufficient. Moreover, the problem with labeling institutions as engaged is that this confers and fixes upon them an attribute that should instead be constantly questioned, redefined, regained, and re-enacted to stay effective. Institutions should spend more time "doing and thinking engagement" than "talking about and representing engagement."

● Could we presently imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care?

Obviously, as there have been artistic and collective practices of ecology and care in the past... from which we can learn, if we care to lose our attitude of collective art world amnesia. Though they have not necessarily received much attention, institutions like Museu do Mato [in Serra do Sincorá, Parque Nacional da Chapada Diamantina, Bahia] in Brazil have been engaged in ecology and care for many years.

● What kind of role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism?

Art institutions have the chance to create and hold a space in which different, more caring attitudes might be developed and practiced. A prerequisite for this to happen is that such an art institution actively and effectively abstains from extractivist mining of the exchanges between people, between people and works of art, and between works of art. In the end, care and ecological thinking without an analysis of the structural violence of capitalism and the patriarchy will remain toothless.



Lívía Páldi was born in Budapest, and is the Curator of Visual Arts at Project Arts Centre in Dublin. She was previously the director of BAC – Baltic Art Center in Visby between 2012 and 2015 and curator/ chief curator of the Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle Budapest between 2005 and 2011. She has organized talks, discussions, workshops, and numerous exhibitions, and has edited several books and exhibition catalogs. Páldi was a curatorial agent for *documenta* (13). In 2016, she was member of the OFF-Biennale Budapest curatorial board.

● In terms of the environmental crisis, it is crucial we consider what contemporary art should and could do as a social institution. How can our institutions contribute to Donna Haraway's call to *stay with the trouble*? And how should the world of art attempt to deal with it? What tools should it use?

Though the conversation about sustainability has spread throughout culture and the arts, we need more genuine engagement when it comes to rethinking the contradictions of the current systems of cultural production, the ethics of funding, and the politics of (re)presentation, as well as the impact of overproduction. Changing attitudes based on scripts of commercial success, deeply ingrained hierarchies, and the vested interests of market fundamentalism is much harder than switching to suppliers to support ethical decisions in developing a greener environment, production, and services.

It's probably not increasing numbers of newly produced shows on ecology (often at odds with the objective) that are needed, but more a longer-term investment in building awareness and promoting action via internationally linked local platforms with practitioners/collectives (including Citizen Science researchers), who can also help us navigate the complex entanglement of social, political, economic, legal, gender, and environmental/ecological issues through forms of action (moving away from the occasional showcase). Public institutions can bring together various cultural, social, and political agencies, while incubating (self-)critical models of transformation and standing behind provocative reminders, protests, and investigative campaigns that might mobilize a larger public.

● How should institutions radically rethink themselves to fulfill their roles?

There is no ready-made solution, as the differences (which I myself have experienced in a European context) in best practice, attitude, awareness of the civic role of public institutions, community networks, political contexts, and thus, funding and governmental support, are often greater than one might assume. I suppose there is still a lot to be done to strengthen both regional and international solidarity, alliances, partnerships, and resource sharing between institutions, academic bodies, and individual producers, which might also empower a more sustainable social and political platform against right-wing populism. Changes can also be delivered through the re-contextualisation of the archives and radical history-making to expose a much wider range of conceptualizations, approaches, and strategies.

● Shouldn't we challenge basic concepts on which we base our activities – first of all the very concept of criticality. Despite its etymological link to the notion of crisis, it seems utterly insufficient in our predicament. Thus, the idea of a critical institution may also be inadequate. Would the idea of an *engaged institution* be a response to these doubts? What, then, would possible modes of engagement be? To what end? To specify our aims, we need more knowledge and a great deal of imagination.

Most institutions are more-or-less dependent on state or corporate support. There is a

seemingly unstoppable movement toward simplified and spectacle-oriented populism and spectacularization/festivalisation of culture that often overshadows a spectrum of quieter critical production. The continual cuts in public funding might also silence institutions and/or have a negative effect on their critical and civic role; this also hinders the dismantling of current (patriarchal) production and management models, and challenging the image of the artist sustained within these structures. Opening up systems of knowledge is another important and widely-discussed issue. We need to make theoretical/specialist knowledge accessible to a wider public, to support

a better understanding of the complexity of our urgent circumstances and to enable individual/community efforts. In a recent interview, activist scholar Kelly Lytle Hernández spoke about the need to further “seed

and sustain ‘movement-driven’ work” which is “rigorous and scholarly, deeply archival, grounded in the literature – and is *also* responsive to concerns and demands of contemporary social movements.”¹

moning practices” that go beyond conventional education and advocacy and challenge public understanding of ecological investigations and scientific research while battling information fatigue and move beyond the conversations dominated by fear and guilt.

These can include community gardens, self-empowered platforms that support various ways of sharing (and/or making available) public spaces and collaborating, which have already entered institutional programming and project/exhibition-making.

We can learn from activist scholars and their emancipatory approaches that offer critical tools for artists, activists, and fellow scholars. In her latest book (*The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), sociologist Avery F. Gordon once more draws attention to forgotten utopian traditions: “the richness of communal

● Could we presently imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care?
 ● What kind of role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism?

Many institutions have only started to encounter the legacies of inequality, the lack of safe work environments and diversity policies, as well as building and communicating across a diversity of audiences. There is often a substantial lack of support from funders in understanding that transformation (moving away from both patriarchal models and inefficient buildings) toward an agenda that is inclusive and grounded in the principles of equity and aims at dissolving racial, ethnic, gender, cultural, and economic discriminatory practices is a major, long-term investment.

A great deal can be built on “com-

practice and imagination remains buried in the ‘utopian margins,’ and in a recent interview, speaks about her investment in the condition of “being in-difference” – “a political consciousness and a sensuous knowledge, a standpoint and a mindset for living on better terms than we’re offered, for living as if you had the necessity and the freedom to do so, for living in the acknowledgement that, despite the overwhelming power of all the systems of domination that are trying to kill us, they never quite become us.”²



1. Sam Levin, “Why this ‘genius’ is mapping out the world’s largest jail system,” *The Guardian*, accessed October 14, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/oct/10/kelly-lytle-hernandez-genius-prison-incarceration-abolition>.
2. Avery F. Gordon in conversation with Krystian Woznicki, *Unshrinking the World*, accessed October 15, 2019, <https://transversal.at/blog/unshrinking-the-world>.

Aneta Rostkowska is a curator, researcher, writer, and a graduate of the de Appel Curatorial Program in Amsterdam. Rostkowska studied philosophy, economics, and art history in Krakow, Poznań, Heidelberg, and Frankfurt am Main. From 2016 to 2018 she worked as a curator at the Academy of the Arts of the World in Cologne. Since January 2019, she has been a director of Temporary Gallery, Centre for Contemporary Art in Cologne. The exhibitions and art projects she has curated and co-curated include: *Flora-philia: Revolution of Plants* (Biennale Warszawa, Warsaw, 2019), *Rheim Alkadhi: Majnoon Field* (Temporary Gallery, Cologne, 2019), *Heart of an Old Crocodile Exploding over a Small Town* (Temporary Gallery, 2019), *Floraphilia: Plants as Archives* (Academy of the Arts of the World, Cologne, 2018), *Rocky Landscape* (Bunkier Sztuki Gallery of Contemporary Art, Krakow, 2016), *A Million Lines* (12th Baltic Triennale, Bunkier Sztuki Gallery of Contemporary Art, 2016), *Father, Can't You See I'm Burning?* (de Appel arts centre, 2014), *Jan Simon, Jakub de Barbaro. Operation Glazier* (ArtBoom Festival, Krakow, 2013), *Cecylia Malik: City Reservation* (Bunkier Sztuki Gallery of Contemporary Art, Krakow 2013), *Magda Buczek: Justina&co.uk* (Nova Art Gallery, Krakow, 2013), and *Kuba Woynarowski: Ha-ha* (Zbiornik Kultury/Bunkier Sztuki Gallery of Contemporary Art, 2012).

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I think art institutions can develop several ways of coping

with the environmental crisis. First of all, obviously, they can approach it as the theme of exhibitions and events. More and more artists are interested in the subject, naturally, and as such, there will be more and more artwork dealing with it. I find it particularly important not only to illuminate the most evident symptoms of this crisis, but also look into its causes, like capitalism, the neoliberal economy etc. Secondly, institutions

have to analyze their own usage of environmental resources, carbon footprints etc. In some cases, a lecture through Skype does the job, and we don't have to fly so many people over. Art institutions' audiences should welcome and accept this type of programming. Nevertheless, art institutions should not abandon their international (and intra-national!) scope, especially as the right wing seems to increasingly favor the local. Thirdly, in tackling the causes of the crisis, and especially the neoliberal economy, art institutions should evaluate their positions within the system. This should lead them to implement changes to counteract it from within, for example, by supporting the involvement of the employees in workers' unions, introducing a shorter working week etc. Keeping all of this in

mind, art institutions should still remain places of freedom and experimentation, leaving space for artistic experimentation that is not guided by specific goals and priorities. In other words, I would like to question the intensity with which we assign art institutions political responsibility. Of course, it is important that institutions tackle themes that are vital to societies, but this doesn't mean that we, as individuals, should not be more politically active in general. It is clear that to fight the crisis, we all should also be politically active as citizens, not only in our professions as artists or curators. Yet, if you ask employees of art institutions whether they are union members or actively support political parties, the answer is usually "no"...

● How should institutions radically rethink themselves to fulfill their roles?

I think it is high time to introduce the notion of de-growth into the art world, primarily when it comes to big museums. The endless expansion of buildings and programs of art institutions should stop, and more attention should be paid to employees' working conditions, the environmental aspects of maintaining the buildings etc. The rapid turnover of exhibitions and events should be replaced by "slow curating": more time for research, more long-term projects etc.

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I think what we need in art institutions is not just critique, but also implementation of new solutions and experimenting with new models – in institutional life (how work is organized etc.). I would keep “critique” and “criticality” and complement them with other notions, like “engagement.”

● Could we presently imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care?

Yes, definitely. We can and we should.

● What kind of role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism?

agree with Isabell Lorey, who rejects the utopia of progress and distances herself from the concept of hope, as linked to the future as well. The urgent environmental crisis demands this way of thinking.

I think this focus on future is a bit dangerous, as it locates the moment of change in the future, whereas we should implement changes NOW. Future-oriented fantasies feed the capitalist logic that keeps moving the moment of satisfaction to the future – “someday it will be better, so work hard now and wait for your reward.” In this respect I



Joanna Sokolowska is a curator who works at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Poland. Her interests include contemporary art that resonates with feminist practices, and the transformation of the ecological and economic imagination. Selected exhibitions include: *Pangea United* (Muzeum Sztuki, 2019), *For Beyond that Horizon Lies Another Horizon* (Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst, Oldenburg, 2017), *Exercises in Autonomy: Tamás Kaszás featuring Anikó Loránt (ex-artists' collective)* (Muzeum Sztuki, 2016), *All Men Become Sisters* (Muzeum Sztuki, 2015–16), *Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin: Facts, Incidents, Accidents, Circumstances, Situations* (co-curated with Magdalena Ziótkowska, Muzeum Sztuki, 2013), *Workers Leaving the Workplace* (Muzeum Sztuki, 2011), *Another City, Another Life* (co-curated with Benjamin Cope, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2008). She has written essays and articles on the politics of contemporary art and recently edited the book *All Men Become Sisters*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki 2019), focusing on feminist perspectives on work, and social reproduction in art since the 1970s.

● In terms of the environmental crisis, it is crucial we consider what contemporary art should and could do as a social institution. How can our institutions contribute to Donna Haraway's call to *stay with the trouble*?

We should work with the troubles both in terms of vision and in everyday institutional practice. Contemporary art has already become a reach resource to expand our collective ecological imagination. It gives us tools to sense an emergent holistic, complex worldview, open-

ing up new horizons to explore the relations that humans can have in dwelling in the world. It has the potential to assist humans to sense different patterns of environment-making than those based on technologically advanced and automated exploitation of other humans, animals, or resources.

However, art institutions have major problems in facing troubles from within. They suffer from lack of consistency, credibility, and social support. These troubles call for unlearning habits, sharing privileges, learning new skills and implementing

practical solutions. We cannot rely solely on the knowledge of art workers (such as curators, directors, boards of art institutions, or artists) or academics. As an art worker I want to learn from those who are more ecologically literate than the institutional art worlds I have inhabited.

One of the first steps art institutions (museums, art centers, fine arts academies, air programs...) should do is environmental audits by environmental organizations, scientists, and activists. The audits should examine all aspects of their institutional operations. However, corrective actions

should be determined in diverse groups including environmental experts, but also artists' representatives, managers of art institutions, unions, curators, administrative workers etc.

Green solutions are an urgent step, but just one of many that are needed to overcome the continuous gap between idealistic rhetoric and toxic practices within art systems. The horizon I would like to suggest is the thorough transformation of art institutions into fair work places facilitating the holistic growth of regenerative, creative, and life-affirming cultures.

● How should institutions radically rethink themselves to fulfill their roles?

Institutions have to scale down their authority to gain power. They need to open themselves up to and enter dialogue with diverse social movements, civil society activists, and artists' associations to understand better what they can and should change.

As recent sociopolitical developments have proved, contemporary art and its institutions are irrelevant and unintelligible for the vast majority of Polish society. But the lack of social support for contemporary art and the right-wing takeover of culture is transnational. To learn from the crisis or even to survive it, we should both search for allies and empower ourselves.

We can try harder to involve other socially engaged citizens and organizations (depending on our context, these could be, for instance, teachers, neighbors, entrepreneurs, migrant organizations, environmental and feminist movements, artists' associations...) to cooperate in negotiating the role of art institutions. These affiliations could contribute to diminishing the

elitism of contemporary art, making it valuable to a larger spectrum of its users.

Small and more radical changes from within can be achieved even in hostile systems, despite the threat of censorship or the withdrawal of funds. Institutions need to heal and restore (or try harder to do so) their connection to human resources and stop exploiting people. Art managers and curators have to understand the role of artists and other precarious workers with whom they cooperate as partners, not treat them as petitioners or sources of cheap labor.

To enhance social commitment and improve the mental well-being of people working in and for institutions, soft skills ought to be learned and adopted, for instance from activism, the third sector, and business. Depending on specific places, needs, projects, and budgets, I would suggest

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investing in training sessions for art workers, for instance in non-violent communication, anti-discrimination and anti-violence, creative writing, public speaking, social media, group decision-making (collaborative decision-making), self-care, and stress management, as well as environmental management. I hope that this modest and unspectacular work is helpful for transforming art institutions into more consistent, hospitable, caring, and sustainable organizations.

At the same time, institutions must support the complexity and multiplicity of contemporary art, which is not reducible to its participatory, communicative, and socially engaged modes. With regard to artists, institutions need to respect and give space to the freedom, experimentation, obscurity, and asocial criticality inherent in creative processes as well.

I strongly oppose the idea of undermining the role of critical reason. We (humans) are experiencing a violent reconfiguration of our reason, affects, and other faculties by computation. We face the mass production of commodified, algorithmized, goal-oriented subjectivities and new forms of life whose value is reduced to what is calculable and predictable. Simultaneously, we have to deal with a simplified, retronationalist, racist rationale across the globe. Engagement devoid of critical reason exposes us to the risk of reproducing equally limited cognitive patterns for a “good” cause. Therefore, I consider the recovery of critical reason and care for the faculty of complex thinking as major challenges for contemporary art and its institutions. A critically engaged institution might be an answer.

In my own work, I try to engage the institution (Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź) in timely socio-political and environmental questions in a way that simultaneously appeals to the audience’s critical reason, doubts, affects, freedom, and sensitivity. This is a kind of engaged curating which withdraws from instructions and ready-made answers.

My goal is to empower the public, encourage them to look for their own resources and questions that might resonate with the artwork, rather than to teach them. I am particularly interested in mediating artistic practices, which animates an ecological imagination in a holistic and complex manner. This entails living with chaos and alternate forms of life, living in non-linear time and in open, unpredictable systems; embracing the unknown.

I believe that such exercises in imagination are necessary if we are to challenge the impoverishment of thought, fixated on concepts of life and nature predetermined by utility or/and enclosed by state borders.

To engage in developing life-affirming futures on a planetary scale, we have to mobilize subtle human faculties to help us apprehend and celebrate the diversity of life on Earth. We need knowledge, empathy, imagination, and criticality to transcend the two dominant and intersected concepts of living bodies as sources of data and labor to be extracted and defined as state properties.

● Could we presently imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care?

Institutions of ecology and care happen when people creating them care for and assign proper value to human and non-human resources, the quality of interpersonal relations, creative processes, energy, time and all kinds of visible and invisible work. Since resources and labor have been undervalued and relationships too often exploited for the sake of art, institutions will need to change structurally, and new ones, based on fairer principles, will emerge.

A few ideas for this transformation (some of which are already underway) would include: (context-specific) regulations and raises in artists' fees; the reduction or elimination of outsourcing of institution services, in particular in the low-income sector, such as cleaning and security; anti-discrimination and anti-violence

regulations; codes of ethics, or, depending on the context, an informal, regenerative work culture that protects private time; education in and implementation of sustainable management practices; mentoring for workers, training for leaders, including mental aid; shorter working days (a maximum of six hours). These are not universal rules to be applied that would provide answers to the contradictions between salaried and precarious art workers. Moreover, an institution of care and ecology would probably turn out to be "too expensive" under current conditions, and many organizations would not survive if they applied these ideas. Yet, I would argue, that we can try to start or apply pressure to redesign and, if necessary, to reduce and slow down institutional production to move closer to our goal.

If we can not afford it, then we should start changing our programs and structures.

● What kind of role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism?

To speculate about the future, we need to make sense of our current position, take care and responsibility for our human life and death shared with other forms of life on the Planet right now.

Rather than escaping from the troubles, celebrating impotence or playing techno toys for “boys,” I am interested in using art institutions to speculate about the future, which has already been embodied in our existing, yet unrecognized or undervalued resources, such as empathy and care.

Transgressing the collective hibernation of imagination could be compared to psychological healing. To overcome trauma, fears, and to start reinventing life in a creative way, we need to understand the truth of the traumatic event, take responsibility for it, and recognize the hitherto undermined faculties to change. Contemporary art can play the role of a catalyst in this process and become a prefigurative politics anticipating a planetary community to come, a community that has been undergoing collective healing and life-affirming transformation.

One necessary step in this process would be recognizing and taking care of the ongoing, computed chain of violence and suffering inflicted on other, weaker, vulnerable bodies, in particular nonhuman animal bodies. This recognition calls for us to apprehend human entanglement with those whom we might not understand, or even notice. This is not rocket science. Let’s think for a while about industrial livestock production. We need not improve our algorithms to see what is happening. The death camps are already perfectly automated. We need more empathy, care, new ethics, and economics that are not based on extracting surplus value at any cost, to face the problem and redirect technology for animal liberation and ecological farming.

Therefore, I am interested in working with contemporary art to harness sensitivity, empathy, and openness to the other within the planetary community. Following Achille Mbembe’s thoughts on the planetary life (and death) in common, I see the basis for the search of such a community grounded in apprehending the vulnerability and plasticity of living bodies. Bodies which are always interdependent, intersected, and moved by others – different organisms, machines, and ecosystems. This is a concept of life that needs care in order to survive and can be easily exposed to pain and suffering. Contemporary eco-aesthetics in art institutions are a platform for imagining and enacting this vulnerable community.

For “if we want to share the world’s beauty [...] we ought to learn to be united with all its suffering.”¹

1. Anastasya Eliseeva, “Thoughts on the Planetary: An Interview with Achille Mbembe.” *New Frame*, September 10, 2019, accessed October 15, 2019, <https://www.newframe.com/thoughts-on-the-planetary-an-interview-with-achille-mbembe/>.

Tereza Stejskalová is a curator and researcher from Prague. She is part of tranzit.cz and she lectures at the Film and TV Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. Her curatorial projects are research-based and collaborative. Her recent endeavors include long-term research on the cultural diplomacy and internationalism of Czechoslovakia in collaboration with Zbyněk Baladrán. Various excerpts from this research have appeared as a part of *Kids Want Communism* (MoBY: Museums of Bat Yam, 2016; Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, Berlin, 2017), *It Won't Be Long Now, Comrades* (Framer Framed, Amsterdam, 2017), or as the *Biafra of Spirit exhibition* (National Gallery, Prague, 2017). Also in 2017, she organized a six-month-long seminar, *Feminist (Art) Institution*, at Tranzitdisplay, Prague which resulted in a code of practice and the alliance of eleven institutions from Czechia and Slovakia. She has contributed numerous texts to catalogs, anthologies, journals, and websites.

● In terms of the environmental crisis, it is crucial we consider what contemporary art should and could do as a social institution. How can our institutions contribute to Donna Haraway's call to *stay with the trouble*? And how should the world of art attempt to deal with it? What tools should it use?

If Donna Haraway writes that “it matters what ideas we use to think other ideas with,” then it follows that the role of art and cultural institutions in general is to imagine, articulate, and think new ideas, narratives, and images as a means of thinking, as tools to think with in the urgent situation we are in. Of course, we need imagination and new methodologies for thinking and creating, and this is where culture steps in. My problem with contemporary art and its institutions, however, is that while many of them do try to be places of radical images and ideas (even Donna Haraway's) on the level of program, more often than not this in no way affects their infrastructure, and in general, their institutional *modus vivendi*. This is very problematic because it sends a message that the institutions themselves do not believe that such ideas should be taken seriously. As any psychoanalyst would confirm, the content of what you say is not as important as what you actually end up doing (if you keep missing your sessions, for instance, while declaring you really need

the therapy). In order to be taken seriously, we should focus on how such ideas might affect practicalities such as infrastructures, modes of production (of exhibitions and other formats) and work relations inside the institutions themselves.

● How should institutions radically re-think themselves to fulfill their roles?
 I believe in self-critical institutions, ones which consciously deal with the contradiction of how things are (in art, culture, politics) and how they should be. Institutions that are avant-garde in the sense that the ways they operate push the limits of how things can be done and expand our notion of what is possible.

● Shouldn't we challenge basic concepts on which we base our activities – first of all the very concept of criticality. Despite its etymological link to the notion of crisis, it seems utterly insufficient in our predicament. Thus, the idea of a critical institution may also be inadequate. Would the idea of an *engaged institution* be a response to these doubts? What, then, would possible modes of engagement be? To what end? To specify our aims, we need

more knowledge and a great deal of imagination.

I agree that critical institutions are not enough. An engaged institution should be involved in relations with the outside world – social movements, communities, other institutions, activists, scholars. Its mode of engagement should be site-specific, through involvement with other actors, like those named above. I like Nataša Petrešin Bachelez's idea of "porous institutions," which take account of what is going around them, letting it affect their mode of existence, and vice-versa.

● Could we presently imagine an art institution that is an institution of ecology and care?

● What kind of role might an art institution play in speculating about the future, going beyond paralyzing our thought or actions, catastrophism, or techno-optimism?

As suggested above, I believe imagination should be intimately tied to practice. Of course, an institution of ecology and care would

presently be in conflict, facing all kinds of contradictions, limits, and problems. But such conflicts expose the very conditions in which we are ourselves implicated with our bodies and minds, and the urgency of the fact that they must be changed.

Let me give you a particular, rather mundane example of such a productive conflict. The institution where I work, tranzit.cz, has collaborated on a manual for cultural institutions, with concrete steps and suggestions about what they should do in our climate emergency. The document puts stress on sustainability over quantity and the need to redefine public funding criteria, etc. Among other points, it also suggests that cultural institutions should invite people to travel by rail instead of airplane whenever possible. As a curator, I co-organized a two-day event in Bucharest,¹ presenting visions of artists, activists, and intellectuals for the future of the climate. It was surely because of my previous involvement in the manual that I paid attention to the role of transport. The participants we invited were both artists and climate activists. After some discussions related to the document we had worked on, my colleague and I decided to take the train. We had invited one contributor who happened to be overseas. She suggested that she fly business class, because she had recently traveled and wanted to have a proper rest. Apart from budget concerns, it was much debated among the co-organizers as to whether this was a legitimate demand, given the theme of the symposium. One objection was that she could have had health concerns. Because of the topic, other participants we invited wanted to take the train. But as the date drew nearer, people started to reconsider. The Romanian trains are quite notorious for delays, dysfunctional heating systems etc. Spending twenty-four hours on a train, two days at a conference and twenty-four hours on the train back was too much for some people, who were already fatigued with holding down multiple precarious jobs or juggling care work and careers. Some refused to participate. Because of their reluctance to fly and the effort required to travel otherwise, the symposium lost all its allure. Those who still wanted to take the train decided that the trip itself would become the topic of their contribution. Otherwise it was too much effort. One person decided to fly because in the end she considered the

symposium itself more important than travel concerns, which was not something she wanted to spend so much energy on or make into a political gesture. Perhaps this or that artist's decision to fly during our climate crisis seems of secondary importance. Some object that we should focus on the bigger picture. Yet flights are an important condition for how the art world operates today. Questioning this mode of transport means an art institution must totally re-evaluate the formats it makes sense to organize. Moreover, it exposes what is often unseen. First of all, there is the physically and mentally unsustainable work/life rhythm of many art professionals, which flying enables. This is very much related to the very different and unequal conditions arising from class, gender, and race, which determine the circumstances in which art professionals decide how and whether to travel in the first place. Last but not least: at stake is the infrastructure itself (expensive and poor-quality railroads vs. cheap and fast air transport) as a political matter intimately linked with cultural event protocols. The event (which has not yet happened at the time of writing) might end up being a disaster. We may never do anything like this again. Perhaps train delays will prevent guests from arriving on time. Yet I feel that it is essential to re-evaluate success and failure within the arts. I believe that this is the way to go if art institutions want to be part of the change they talk about. Without debate, they themselves are part of the problem.

1. *Upon Us All Equally: Tranzit Statements for the Future*, November 7–9 2019, National Dance Centre Bucharest.

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