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Jan Zálešák

Apocalypse Me

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Introduction

This book is the follow up to the exhibition *Apocalypse Me* that took place 3–15 April 2016 at the Emil Filla Gallery in Ústí nad Labem. Photographs of the exhibits play an important role in the book, and several of the artworks are incorporated directly into the text in order to illustrate particular points. However, this is not so much a catalogue as a different way of approaching the issues commonly grouped under the headings ‘apocalypse’ or ‘end of the world’.

A thematically based exhibition sets its curator the challenge of bringing her own feelings and ideas into alignment with the range of positions adopted by the artists on show, who do not and perhaps should not speak with one voice. The viewer, curious to learn more, turns to the accompanying text to discover the overarching concept. However, the text simply conceals to a greater or lesser extent the fact that, after the initial inspiration has found expression in the selection of artists and works and in the syntax and design of the exhibition, the curator is ‘merely’ the first viewer of the resulting collection. And though the curator may indeed have selected the individual components of the collection, she is always painfully aware that the significance of the whole is far greater than the sum of its parts. These days catalogues often take the form of anthologies or ‘atlases’, offering the reader the chance to re-experience the exhibition they have already seen in the form of a cohesive discourse. This perhaps testifies to the uneasy truce that holds between curators and artists, the ‘political correctness’, as it were, that prevents one voice (that of the curator) from taking precedence over the rest. I have tried to avoid the two commonest approaches in that I have neither simply documented the exhibition with a traditional catalogue, nor have I set existing or newly commissioned texts in opposition to the curatorial selection of artists and works. This book, then, is a kind of guided tour of texts, artworks and exhibitions that all in some way address the vexed question of ‘the end of the world’. It has allowed me to examine in greater detail issues that arose while putting the exhibition together. My hope is that *Apocalypse Me* will offer the same opportunity to its readers to reflect upon the relationship of contemporary

art to the most pressing problems of our time and to decide to what extent theory has risen to the challenge of dealing with these problems.

In spring 2015, I was approached by Eva Mráziková, director of the Emil Filla Gallery, with the offer of an exhibition date. As yet there was no particular theme in mind. The concept of the exhibition gradually took shape largely due to a text by Pedro Neves Marques published as part of a special edition of *e-flux journal* on the occasion of the 56th Venice Biennale, in the section headed *Apocalypse*. Marques's text, entitled *Look Above, The Sky is Falling: Humanity Before and After the End of the World*, reflects upon apocalypses that have already taken place (specifically the genocide of the Native Americans in the centuries following the 'discovery' of both Americas) in the light of the end of 'mankind' as a category of thought emerging from the tradition of European rationalism and the Enlightenment.¹ The end of 'our' world (in the form of ecological, economic and political crisis) is an opportunity to become aware of the existence of other worlds and other cosmogonies.² At first sight what Marques is concerned with seems far removed from the pressing issues of Central Europe. You only have to look at the Czech Republic as it revels in its parochialism, clings piteously to its fear of anything foreign, and elects increasingly bland political parties³ and presidents competing with each other to mask their ignorance, the first as 'good sense' (Václav Klaus and his denial of the anthropogenic nature of climate change), the second as 'common sense' (Miloš Zeman and his attacks on political correctness). But this is delusional. Look around and you soon realise that there is no longer (and perhaps never was) any 'home among our own kind' where we might hide. You just have to stand still and look up for a moment to see the sky falling.

The truth is it's been falling now for some time. For some the end of the world began with the end of the swinging sixties, for others with the Yugoslav Wars, for yet others with the 9/11 attacks, the invasion of Iraq by the coalition forces, the financial crisis of 2008, the Arab Spring of 2011 with all its concomitant changes.⁴ In this simplified list of milestones, a certain tendency is clear: that which we deem a crisis or problem in one country, civilisation or culture is increasingly being shown to be a global crisis impacting the entire world, and with it all the worlds, all

1. Pedro Neves MARQUES, 'Look Above, the Sky Is Falling. Humanity Before and After the End of the World', *e-flux journal*#65 (SUPERCOMMUNITY), August 2015, [online](#) (accessed 15 December 2016).

2. Marques specifically mentions Indian cosmologies in which, to begin with, only people lived on Earth, and the world as we know it, i.e. inhabited by many different species, is the result of some cataclysmic event way back in the past. According to Marques, Indian cosmology offers two counterintuitive rebuttals to modern teleology and ontology: firstly, the end of the world has already taken place, and secondly, everything is at its core human.

3. With a marked proclivity for conservatism verging on neo-fascism.

4. See Scott ANDERSON, 'Fractured Lands. How the Arab World Came Apart', *The New York Times Magazine* (special [online](#) edition), 11 August 2016, [online](#).

the wannabe autonomous islands of fitter, happier, more productive life that can no longer afford the luxury of ignoring the ‘world out there’, along with all the ecosystems and biotopes, everything that lives and moves, as well as everything that simply lies inert and lifeless (which we educated Europeans see fit to call ‘dead’).

Marques’s *Humanity Before and After the End of the World* kick-started me into organising the maelstrom of thoughts and feelings swirling around my head gleaned from exhibitions that, sometime around 2013, shifted the focus of their attention away from anthropocentrism and toward the object. Images I had seen in galleries (*Grosse Fatigue* by Camille Henrot at the 55th Venice Biennale, *The Sexual Struggle of Commodities* by Vilém Novák and Pavel Sterec at the PAF festival of animated film, Olomouc, and the exhibition *Rare Earth* at TBA21, Vienna) took their place alongside images circulating online (the documentation of the exhibition series by Susanne Pfeffer at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, the ‘magazines’ produced by the DIS and K-HOLE collectives) or in art catalogues and magazines (from *Animism* edited by Anselm Franke to the conversation on techno-animism led by Lauren Cornell with Katja Novitskova and Mark Leckey for *Mousse*). These were joined by images at whose inception I was present as curator (the exhibition *SSSSSS* by Jan Brož) or author of the accompanying text (*Telepathy or Esperanto*, curated by Brož).⁵

5. Anselm FRANKE (ed.), *Animism (Volume I)*, Berlin: Sternbege Press, 2010; Lauren CORNELL, ‘Techno-Animism. A Conversation between Lauren Cornell and John Kelsey, Mark Leckey, Katja Novitskova, Jacoby Satterwhite’, *Mousse Magazine*, 2014, no. 37, 54–63; Jan BROŽ – Jan ZÁLEŠÁK, *SSSSSS*, Brno: Fait Gallery, 2013; Jan ZÁLEŠÁK, ‘Crisis-wave’. Psychospiritual crisis and the obsessive production of images [an essay published as part of the documentation of the exhibition *Telepathy or Esperanto*], *ofluxe*, [online](#).

When refashioning the themes contained in Marques’s text (the end of the world, the crisis of the modern concept of time, mankind and subjectivity) into a curatorial plan, I drew heavily on my experience overseeing the work of students of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Brno. In *Cluster World*, created by Marek Delong for his graduate show, I was able to observe in real time, as it were, the artist’s transition from digital images of nature to essentially sculptural work using fragments of ‘real’ nature. In the case of Kryštof Ambrůz I saw how polished *plantwave* imagery became ‘tarnished’ by references to nomadism and migration. In May 2015, just as I was about to deliver a lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw on post-internet art, Anna Slama sent me a short video from her residence in Tallin combining techno and the ‘hysterical anorganicity’ of the elusive object, and somehow it became clear that one of these was ‘wrong’. And more and more images kept on arriving and with them the

unavoidable recognition of how little I knew and how late I was finding out about it.

I had hoped that the exhibition *Apocalypse Me*, which included work by Josef Bolf, Patricia Dominguez and Irvin Morázan (working as Palo Cháán), Aleš Čermák and Michal Cáb, Martin Kohout, Vilém Novák, Anna Slama and Pavel Sterec, might in some way 'show' the apocalypse. Right from the start of preparations of the exhibition I was pretty sure I wanted to present the apocalypse as a simultaneous, interconnected and endlessly mirroring crisis of that which is inside and that which is outside. From the very start I had the strange presentiment that I wanted to speak of something at once very personal and yet universal.

Apocalypse Me. I gave myself a hearty pat on the back for that title. Two elements, to wit the inevitability of the end of the world (*Apocalypse*) and our inability to experience it otherwise than as the end of our own ego (*Me*), simply encountered, combined and contaminated each other. But then I entered the words into Google and found a selfie-video from 2011 in which a deranged Charlie Sheen demands that his manager get Amazon to publish his e-book featuring 'the best title of all time': *Apocalypse Me: The Jaws of Life*. This title is obviously a reference to *Apocalypse Now* (1979, directed by Francis Ford Coppola), in which Sheen's father Martin plays a US Army officer wandering deep into the jungle on the border of Vietnam and Burma to find and terminate Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), a once-promising officer who has reportedly gone mad and built what amounts to his own civilization. There is a fruitful comparison of both *Apocalypses* to be made if we triangulate them with the reality of war. *Apocalypse Now* returns to the Vietnam War with a mixture of naturalism, tragedy and elegy as though to an event that has ended. It offers catharsis, albeit painful and veiled in the final frames in an almost hallucinatory haze. These days we have nothing similar to look forward to. The so-called War on Terror begun fifteen years ago has no conceivable end in sight. In the American heartland there are no longer protests against the war even though (because?) every household is basically a battlefield. The tragedy of dehumanisation embodied in the finale of *Apocalypse Now* by Marlon Brando reciting T. S. Eliot ('We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men / Leaning together / Headpiece filled with straw') repeats as the farce of transhumanism, narcissistic



Josef Bolj: *Konec dni 1A* (2015–2016). Paper, acrylic and oil paint, wax, and ink on canvas (part of the site-specific installation *The End of Days*). Installation view of *Apocalypse Me* exhibition. Photo: Tomáš Souček.



Josef Bolz: *Untitled* (2015–2016). Paper, acrylic and oil paint, wax, and ink on canvas (part of the site-specific installation *The End of Days*). Installation view of *Apocalypse Me* exhibition. Photo: Tomáš Souček.

fantasies of higher standards of living in a world in which mankind is undergoing a fundamental transformation.

The exhibition *Apocalypse Me* was for me personally the first step on the path to understanding the concept of the end of the world, a concept that is both intimidatingly large and complex, yet strangely intimate. The book is a continuation of this endeavour. Merely to ‘comprehend’ ... is this not a niggardly, downright selfish objective? I think not. Our everyday life, which these days takes the form of a globally integrated spectacle, a 24/7 world,⁶ leaves us almost no time for these sorts of reflections, fears and doubts. Whatever space there be is systematically commandeered. Social convention tolerates two simple but unsatisfactory methods of reconciling ourselves to the worries and anxieties provoked by shared feelings of impending doom. Escapism is the first, ranging from simple denial to workaholism. And when work and active leisure are insufficient to quell the anxiety, we resort to the second method, namely pharmacological treatments. Within this context, creative work in the form of music, art, exhibitions or text, represents an ‘autonomous zone’⁷ allowing us to address that which in everyday life we leave to the ‘professionals’ (politicians, managers, therapists, etc.). Rachel Rose summed this up nicely in her interview with Lauren Cornell:

I’m totally afraid of catastrophe and, on and off, I feel deep unease. That unease is usually so subtle, I might not even be fully aware of it. I might have a conversation here and there about it, but in general, it can feel like there’s no clear way to consider it deeply. Making an artwork for me is an excuse to actually do this—it’s one of the only places where there’s room to express a basic, wordless unease, and then use research, the real world, and time to connect that feeling to both history and the structure—like collage—that underlies the ethical dimension.⁸

In my case, during the course of working on the exhibition and book, anxiety stopped being merely an ‘academic’ topic and started to be a feeling, one moreover intensified by the nagging questions I kept asking myself: What the hell am I doing? What is this exhibition/ book going to be about? *What does it all mean, dammit?* When asked *Why?* or *What?* it was really difficult to know what to say, because from the very start I had spurned what you might call a ‘research objective’. And on the rare occasion

6. Jonathan CRARY, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep*, New York: Verso, 2014.

7. Herbert Marcuse problematises the autonomy of cultural production (with art on the top rung) by according it an affirmative character. Labelling art an ‘autonomous zone’ on the one hand grants it the freedom to evaluate reality critically, but on the other admits for doubts regarding the ability of art to change reality (we could go a step further and say that the autonomy of art basically legitimises the status quo of the society that permits art this autonomy).

8. Lauren CORNELL, ‘We Have Always Been in the End Times: A Conversation Between Lauren Cornell, Rachel Rose, and Ben Russell’, *Mousse Magazine*, 2015, no. 49, 232–239.

I had attempted something of the kind, I found myself either in the realm of philosophy and theology (*Why is the world heading for extinction? Do we deserve to die? Is it even possible to think about the end, and if so, from what perspective?*), politics (*What can we do to avert the end of the world / global warming / the species extinction crisis...?*), or the exact sciences (*What is the point beyond which the current pace of declining biodiversity is irreversible?*). It wasn't that I was interested in these spheres for their own sake: my writing is influenced on the one hand by artistic and curatorial practice (both of which areas are very reluctant to be pinned down to a template or boundary), and on the other by an elemental human feeling of anxiety in which it is difficult to distinguish interior from exterior causes. I had no desire to create, either for myself or the reader, a clear line of argument to be defended against adversaries and applauded by allies. Each of chapter of the book begins with a brief outline of the ideas of the writers that interest me. These ideas are introduced and juxtaposed. This inevitably fragmentary exegesis of a discourse (whether it be on anxiety, psycho-spiritual crisis, future thinking, the Anthropocene, posthumanism, etc.) is then fleshed out with interpretations of selected artworks or curatorial projects (in exhibitions, magazines, etc.).

The book consists of four chapters that describe an arc. The first chapter attempts to comprehend the end of the world as it is described above, as an endlessly mutual mirroring of 'outside' and 'inside', exteriority and interiority. Anxiety and depression, examined in detail, are viewed mainly as a consequence of the impossibility of reconciling the structuring tendency of human thought with objects that are too large or complex to be conceptualised as some kind of structure. Timothy Morton calls such objects *hyperobjects*.⁹ Their complexity means they cannot be seen directly but are only accessible by means of the processing power of supercomputers. We can perceive Global Warming and Markets through data streams. However, the very awareness that we exist side-by-side with such hyperobjects, with which it is impossible to have any relationship, impacts fundamentally on our lives and is one of the starting points for a revaluation of the significance and role that people occupy on this planet and its future development. The nameless hero of the first chapter is the subject. The subject with no name then, but also, strangely, with no depth: within the context of its implicit present it is

9. Timothy MORTON, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

deprived of its historical dimension. We are tracking it at a point in time when it has already lost much of its self-esteem. However we view the modern subject – as isolated, weak, anxious, partial to conspiracy theories and identitarianism, or, on the contrary, without a care in the world so long as it is connected to broadband – it is the outcome of four decades of the triumphant promotion of individualisation, the flagship of neoliberalism and a remarkable inversion of the emancipatory potential of the sixties. Individualisation (and the concomitant breakdown or decomposition of society) is a process that has played out in parallel with the development of computer technology. Cybernetics, computers and data networks have long been seen as the path to a new utopia. These days we live in a world of continuous and non-human machinic performance to which we attempt, consciously or unconsciously, to adapt our own, biologically determined bodies and minds. Taking its lead from texts by Jonathan Crary and Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi,¹⁰ the second part of chapter one focuses on the forms and consequences of the continuous process of ‘bio-deregulation’ deliberately suppressing those aspects of human and social life that do not contribute to the development of round-the-clock global markets.

10. Franco Bifo BERARDI, *After the Future*, Chico, CA: AK Press, 2011.

The increasingly rapid pace of life combined with the increasingly smaller space allocated to life, which was never included in any upfront calculations, leads paradoxically to an overriding feeling of timelessness. Time (more precisely the temporal dimension of the future) is the subject of the second chapter. A motif running through this book is the appearance and disappearance of the ‘horizon of expectation’, or utopia as a place into which some kind of future might be projected. The second chapter is conceived of as a dialogue between the sceptical and affirmative wings of the contemporary left. For the voice of scepticism I sought out Franco Berardi, while an affirmative approach to the search for the horizon of post-capitalist society is to be found in the *Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics* by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams.¹¹ Berardi’s concern that the rate of decomposition of the social fabric that might otherwise offer support for the building blocks of a project of the future has achieved critical speed is not shared by Srnicek and Williams. They hold that in a post-capitalist future, the path to which leads via the acceleration of capitalism (in practice mainly via the development of technology to the point of ‘full automation’), society will be in a position to be rebuilt on

11. Nick SRNICEK – Alex WILLIAMS, ‘#ACCELERATE MANIFESTO for an Accelerationist Politics’, *Critical Legal Thinking*, 14 March 2013, [online](#).

an entirely new basis by subjects liberated not only from work but also from biological determinism. This chapter, which treads a thin line between utopia and dystopia, ends with a critique of the conception of accelerationist politics penned by Irmgard Emmelhainz. She points out that up until now the dreams of better tomorrows based on modern technological rationality have always been purchased at the expense of the pillaging of the resources of animate and inanimate resources in places designated by the centres of colonial power (these days by the invisible centres of the global and diffusionist hegemony of capital) for transformation into 'zones of pure extraction'.

This critique of an accelerationist utopia sets the scene for the next chapter, which examines the idea of the future emerging from a non-anthropocentric or at least virtually post-anthropocentric position. The key word here is Anthropocene, though I will also use the term Capitalocene, a riff on the Anthropocene that attempts to identify in great detail precisely what it is that has caused us to enter a new geological age. The chapter begins with a nod to the relatively brief history of global environmental politics, at the symbolic start of which are the images of Planet Earth taken from an orbiting spaceship and Fuller's metaphor of 'Spaceship Earth'. The manifest failure of that global politics (the targeted chiselling away at its basic premises, above all global warming as the consequence of human activity) has led to a situation in which, alongside impartial diplomatic language, millenarian voices are spreading their gospel of a catastrophic 'end of the world' (that Hollywood studios have become experts in depicting). Pop-cultural images of the apocalypse are then used to spice up reports on melting glaciers and permafrost, the extinction of species, and the gradual desertification of places that only recently still supported life. Discussions about the Anthropocene include a strong moral or ethical component and almost inevitably raise the question as to whether as people we even deserve to live and, if so, how we learn to live in a world that we have condemned to destruction. Both of these questions are examined in the third chapter, the conclusion of which examines in more detail a concept of the Anthropocene drawing on texts by Jason W. Moore and Donna Haraway and examples of contemporary art practice in which discussions of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene resonate.



Adrián Villar Rojas: Installation view of *Fantasma* exhibition, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2015. Photo: Jan Zálešák.

The third chapter, ‘The World After Mankind’, is followed by the final chapter, ‘The World After Humanity’. What at first sight seems like a somewhat unclear distinction announces a change of perspective and a shift in discourse from the Anthropocene to discussions of posthumanism. These spheres are far from unrelated. However, while discussions of the Anthropocene inevitably gravitate towards broad-based categories such as ‘mankind’ (or ‘Europeans’ or ‘capital’), posthumanism moves from an empirical interest in the concrete impacts of human activities on the planet to the transcendental level of the quest for an answer to the question of what it actually means to be a human being (what it is that constitutes a human subject, how modern subjectivity is formed against the backdrop of

the dualism culture/society vs. nature, etc.). The introduction to this chapter briefly hints at the sheer scope of the current debate, in which posthumanism slots into the broader concept of the nonhuman turn, where it finds itself alongside tendencies such as speculative realism or new materialism.

The interlocking financial, social and environmental crises we are living through so intensively today are undermining the very foundations of modern epistemology, the central tenet of which was a strict separation of the human (culture and society) and the natural. As we see the environment and the fabric of society falling apart before our very eyes, the idea of humankind as the centre of things collapses, and interest grows in what role other, nonhuman actors will play in the functioning of a planetary 'web of life'. The platform for such interest could be either speculative realism, new materialism, or the rediscovered and reinterpreted interest in animism being shown by contemporary anthropology. The way that self-contained post-internet art has given rise during a few short years to an 'object-oriented ontology' at the very least challenges us to reflect on the political potential of art. Object-oriented art accentuating the post-Anthropocentric perspective has been welcomed very quickly and warmly by galleries as the latest trend, all the more warmly for the fact that it involves artefacts that almost without exception comply with the traditional idea of the artwork as commodity. However, many of the objects, 'unready-mades', assemblages of animate and inanimate nature and technological artefacts arrive at the doors of a gallery with the wish, communicated by the artist or curator, that they embody their own agenda, their own politics.

One option is to view these 'things' as utilising the gallery environment or safely concealed freeports¹² in order to weather the current storm until such time as new, nonhuman viewers emerge who will be able to relate to them above and beyond the restrictive framework of human culture. However, we opt not to go down that path in the final chapter. At the end of the day we are human beings, and so, rather than examine the future of objects produced for the art market, we turn our gaze instead upon what in the world is most human and what might be universal enough (yet capable of holding out against being coopted as another form of dominion) to light the way to a post-human world: to love.

12. Stefan HEIDENREICH, 'Freeportism as Style and Ideology. Post-internet and Speculative Realism, Part I', *e-flux journal* #71, March 2016, [online](#). Stefan HEIDENREICH, 'Freeportism as Style and Ideology. Post-internet and Speculative Realism, Part II', *e-flux journal* #73, May 2016, [online](#).



The End of the World? was the title of an exhibition that took place at the National Gallery in Prague in 2000 in the aftermath of a millennial hysteria fuelled by concerns regarding the impact of Y2K.¹³ For the curator Milan Knížák, appointed director of the National Gallery in June 1999, *The End of the World?* was one of the first opportunities to reveal his conception of what a large thematically based exhibition organised by the leading Czech museum of art might look like. In a short introduction Knížák emphasised that the lavishly illustrated catalogue had been truncated as the inevitable consequence of the sheer breadth of the topic. This publication, which according to the curator was ‘not a catalogue in the traditional sense of the word’, includes more than a dozen texts by leading personalities in various spheres, from art historians and media theoreticians, via philosophers and sociologists, to psychologists. For a more universal interest in the concept of the end of the world, go straight to the scientific texts, which take up approximately the first half of the catalogue. Many of them still have a lot to say on the topic of environmental or psycho-spiritual crisis, though they have lost their immediate urgency by virtue of the fact that the world didn’t end (as far as we know). Although fears intensified prior to 2000 regarding the symbolism of the end of a millennium, there was nevertheless an awareness that the real historical turnaround had taken place ten years earlier, when the ‘short century’ ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent transition to the calm waters of post-history. The next event that would rekindle the flames of fear of the end of the world was the attack by passenger aeroplanes on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York, which took place only fifteen months after the exhibition opened...

13. The exhibition was held at Kinsky Palace on 26 May–19 November 2000.

I would like to mention two of the texts included in the catalogue *The End of the World?* The first is *The Possibility of the End* by Miroslav Petříček. In a short summary Petříček expresses his surprise at the absurdity of the ‘*day after*, from the perspective of which we talk of the end of the world’,¹⁴ However, he quickly reins in his doubts regarding the meaningfulness of considerations of the end of the world and offers a different perspective: ‘And

14. Miroslav PETŘÍČEK, ‘Eventualita konce’, in: Milan KNÍŽÁK – Tatiana DEMČÁKOVÁ (eds.), *Konec světa* (exhibition catalogue), Praha: Národní galerie, 2000, 19.

←
Vilém Novák: *Office* (2013–2016).
Woodcarving. Installation view of
Apocalypse Me exhibition.
Photo: Tomáš Souček.

so if there is talk of the “end of the world”, this does not always have to refer to the apocalypse, but can also refer to the collapse of a complex system that is no longer capable of maintaining its precarious balance, its homeostasis and metastability.¹⁵ The end is not something that arrives ‘after’ the world, but stands in opposition and in relation to it. Petříček twice reaches for the word ‘chaos’ so as to be able to compare the end with the background against which we are able to perceive the world as something organised (as a structure). The end is thus revealed as a perspective (the perspective of the day after – now it is no longer so absurd), as ‘an approach to the limit that turns our attention to that which it leaves behind’.¹⁶

15. *Ibid.*16. *Ibid.*, 20.

The price we pay for being able to accept the perspective of the day after as something that is not absurd is its incorporation into a relational, semantic structure. It is as though the end of the world as a factual matter (i.e. pertaining to a planet with conditions sustaining organic life orbiting around the sun) could not form the topic of serious consideration. In this respect it is interesting to compare Petříček’s text with the meditation upon the end of the world contained in *Hyperobjects* by Timothy Morton.¹⁷ According to Morton the world will not vanish de facto, i.e. as Planet Earth, but more as a certain epistemic structure that is inseparable from modernity. Morton does not portray the world as a figure visible against the backdrop of chaos (or end), but as the background that allows us to see. The world of whose end Morton writes can be identified with Nature, one of the key constructs of modern thinking and the backdrop against which Mankind and its culture prospers. ‘Hyperobjects are what have brought about the end of the world. Clearly, planet Earth has not exploded. But the concept “world” is no longer operational, and hyperobjects are what brought about its demise.’¹⁸ It seems to me that in this respect at least Morton’s hyperobject is not so different from Petříček’s limit. In both cases there is a ‘traumatic loss of coordinates’ (Morton), which results in the realisation of the end of something that has in all probability been in the process of ending for some time.

17. MORTON, *Hyperobjects*, op. cit.18. *Ibid.*, 5.

In his enumeration of possible hyperobjects in the introduction to his book Morton proposes ‘things’ such as black holes and the Florida Everglades, as well as manmade entities such as radioactive waste and plastics.¹⁹ What all these things have in

19. *Ibid.*, 1.

20. Morton prefers 'global warming' to 'climate change', since the latter is a collective characterisation of the perceived consequences of the former.

common is that the distribution of their being in time and space fundamentally exceeds the limits of their possible anthropomorphisation or adoption. For Morton the hyperobject par excellence is global warming,²⁰ and it is the emphasis he places on this topic that lends urgency to his book. It also permits him to clarify his hypothesis regarding the end of the world: 'The end of the world has already occurred. We can be uncannily precise about the date on which the world ended. [...] It was April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine, an act that commenced the depositing of carbon in Earth's crust—namely, the inception of humanity as a geophysical force on a planetary scale.'²¹

21. *Ibid.*, 12.

Here we see the hyperobject (global warming) as something that is both the fruit of modernity and at the same time the (now unmistakable albeit incomprehensible) sign of its end. To what extent do global warming (as hyperobject) and chaos differ? As we have seen, chaos is the background that allows us to see the world as a coherent, meaning-full structure. Nevertheless, the structure of the world (that which holds the world together as a meaning-full whole) is by all accounts merely a projection of the human mind, the product of structuralising thought. That which access to the limit – whether we call this the end of the world, chaos or the hyperobject – leaves behind is clearly not simply the World, but also Mankind, who created this world and long believed that it could be cognised and controlled.

It is not the end. It is only a crisis

What we are facing today, and with far greater urgency than at the time the texts were written for the book accompanying the exhibition *The End of the World?*, is not only the end (or rather the ending) of one concrete World as the construct of modern epistemology, but the genuine, increasingly incomprehensible and by all accounts irreversible end in a realm that functions as background in respect of this World. Empirical evidence that the survival not only of mankind but a large part of the ecosystems on this planet is by no means to be taken for granted is piling up all around us. We find it in the atmosphere as the growing amount of greenhouse gases causing global warming, in the soil and oceans contaminated by extensive agriculture, the growing production of non-biodegradable, often toxic materials, or global trade radically

accelerating not only the movement of goods but also viruses, bacteria and other organisms speeding up the extinction of species.

The end of the world, seen not as a metaphysical problem but as the very real consequence of the forces that set modern civilisation in motion but over which it never had full control, brings us to the second text selected from the book *The End of the World?*. The essay by one of the founders of transpersonal psychology, Stanislav Grof, entitled *The evolution of consciousness and prospects for planetary survival: the psychological roots of violence and greed in people* is especially noteworthy for its introduction, in which violence and greed are identified as the two defining destructive forces accompanying the history of mankind, followed by a very impressive and convincing 'diagnosis' of the state of the world that resulted from these 'psychological forces':

Insatiable greed leads to the hectic pursuit of profit and the accumulation of personal property that exceeds any reasonable need. This approach means that humanity finds itself in a situation in which, in addition to nuclear war, it is at the mercy of several other less spectacular but no less insidious and somewhat more predictable threats that could lead to destruction on a global scale. These include the industrial contamination of the oil, water and air, the dangers of nuclear waste and possible nuclear accidents, destruction of the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect, the critical depletion of oxygen in the atmosphere caused by reckless deforestation, the intoxication of marine plankton [...]. A whole range of other examples could be added to this list that are not apocalyptic in character but are equally disturbing, e.g. the rapid pace of species extinction, the huge numbers of starving and homeless people in the world, the decline of the family and the crisis of parenthood, the dissolution of spiritual values, the absence of hope and optimism, the loss of a meaningful connection with nature and a general feeling of alienation. And for all it possesses a miraculous technology that verges on science fiction, as a consequence of the factors listed above humankind lives in a state of chronic anxiety caused by the threat of nuclear or environmental catastrophe.²²

22. Stanislav GROF, 'Evoluce vědomí a vyhlídky planetárního přežití. Psychologické kořeny násilí a chtivosti u lidí', in: KNÍŽÁK – DEMČÁKOVÁ (eds.), *Konec světa*, 52.

23. The speed of species extinction especially has accelerated to such an extent that this scenario has become excessively apocalyptic.

These days we might add other threats and factors, downscale the threat of some of Grof's threats and upscale others.²³ Overall, however, the picture painted by Grof has not changed fundamentally in any way. His contribution is a good example of a phenomenon we encounter very often in texts focusing on crisis or the end of the world. The 'diagnostic' part (a description of the state of emergency facing the planet, the biosphere, ecosystems, society or late capitalism) is usually convincing, while the suggestions on offer as to how we might resolve these problems oscillate between banality and utopia. Grof locates the sources of violence and greed that cause the crises in which the planet and society find themselves in the prenatal and perinatal stages of psychological development, and it is on this stage, he believes, that attempts to remedy matters should be focused.

I remain sceptical of the solutions put forward by Grof. However, the thesis outlined in the central part of his text, namely that the current crisis is of a 'psycho-spiritual character', seems to me to be convincing. While Grof is led to reflect upon the ways of 'implanting in human consciousness an entirely new system of values and goals', I would like to pause briefly and consider how we might look more freely upon the phenomenon of psycho-spiritual crisis. Though I want to tease out the implications of the concept in a relatively flexible way, it would be meaningless to separate it completely from the psychological practice in which it was articulated. What I am drawn to is the enumeration of certain trigger mechanisms that are being discovered in connection with the diagnosis of a psycho-spiritual crisis.²⁴ Leaving aside causes such as meditation or drug taking, a psycho-spiritual crisis is often a reaction to an intolerable pressure or inner conflict. This includes the conviction that life is meaningless, a life-threatening circumstance, a feeling one has no control over life, immense physical or psychological stress, a series of failures and setbacks, etc. I believe that an awareness of the problems these irresolvable contradictions are causing will prevent us viewing psycho-spiritual crises as being a peculiarly first-world problem experienced by the privileged middle-classes looking for New-Age solutions. Instead, we can see it as the systematic effect of the global hegemony of capitalism, as something that affects almost all the inhabitants of Planet Earth, as something that we might even regard as one of the few universal traits of mankind.

24. Cf. Jana MUROŇOVÁ, *Obraz psychospirituální krize pohledem odborníků na duševní zdraví* (diploma thesis), Brno: Masaryk university, 2015, 27–30.

The concept of psycho-spiritual crisis really took hold in my imagination when I wrote a text for a project being curated by Jan Brož entitled *Telepathy or Esperanto* (2015). Back then my aim was to identify the links between what at first sight are unrelated spheres (namely efforts to create a universal language and the search for the source of paranormal experiences, specifically the transmission of impressions or perceptions, ideas, thoughts, etc., from one person to another without the intercession of any of the five senses), the roots of which reach back into the same period of the late nineteenth century. I was led to the concept of psycho-spiritual crisis by a desire to find out more about telepathy, often cited as one of the symptoms of such a state.

In the Czech Republic people afflicted by psycho-spiritual crises are referred to Diabasis, an organisation on whose website we find the following description of such a crisis:

...a difficult period in the life of an individual that is manifest in the form of episodes of unusual experiences that include changes of consciousness, perception, emotion and thinking. During these experiences the hitherto customary boundaries of the experience of self are dramatically exceeded, with the frequent occurrence of transpersonal (extending beyond the customary barriers of the perception of self) or spiritual experiences. A psycho-spiritual crisis takes place when the narrative and manifestations of the personal development of an individual are overly intense and he or she loses control over their experiences and the patterns of behaviour they had hitherto been able to rely on.²⁵

25. <http://www.diabasis.cz/psychospiritualni-krize/>

One section of the organisation's website is given over to the personal testimony of sufferers, in particular the 'story of JT', published on 17 August 2011, which begins as follows:

I arrived in Prague in February 1999 with the feeling I was on the cusp of personal and professional success. Having acquired an MBA with flying colours, I was about to begin work with one of the most prestigious international firms offering consultancy services in the sphere of management and sales. This position made me one of the top earners in the Czech Republic and provided me

with an entrée to VIP circles. I was 25 years old and at last the years of hard work were beginning to pay off. Everything I had always wanted was within reach. I was as happy as I could be and had no idea whatsoever that in a few short years I would experience a psychological crisis of such depth that escaping or avoiding it was unimaginable.²⁶

26. <http://www.diabasis.cz/psychospiritualni-krize/osobni-pribeh/>

After this introduction there follows the life story of a manager who since childhood had carefully progressed from one goal to another, until his success and happiness was pulled up short by a crisis. To begin with he was paralysed by a fear of women. Next, on the basis of a letter from a friend, he became convinced he might be homosexual: 'I had never previously given it any thought, but over time simply the possibility that I was gay prevented me from functioning in the world. I found myself obsessively wondering what the world around me thought of me, whether I was genuinely gay, and how in heaven's name I could find out for sure.' This crisis gave rise to hallucinations, altered states of consciousness and 'fireworks going off in my head', and these led the narrator into the arms of a psychiatrist who, predictably, prescribed psychotropic drugs. Finally, the narrator found his way to Michael Vančura from Diabasis. The story has a happy end, though one that leaves the critically minded reader in a state of confusion. So was this psycho-spiritual crisis suffered by a successful manager not so much the consequence of the periodic crises of late capitalism, but a symptom of repressed sexuality? One would imagine that in this case the psycho-spiritual crisis would respond well to a session on an old-fashioned ottoman with a psychoanalyst seated nearby. Despite the almost disarming mundanity of the story, the testimony given is worth noting for the way it ostentatiously passes over the concurrence of a subjectively experienced crisis and a crisis within a system in which the narrator feels as happy as he could be.

In 2009, when many Czech politicians were still pretending that the financial crisis did not affect us (after which, following the example of their British friends in the Conservative Party, they began to compete for the most ruthless application of the policy of austerity), the Danish group Superflex made a film entitled succinctly *The Financial Crisis*.²⁷ The action is divided

27. Superflex, *The Financial Crisis, Episode I–IV*, 2009, digital video, 12:21 min., <https://vimeo.com/19787552> (accessed 20 September 2016).

into four 'sessions', through which the viewer is escorted by the calm, yet somehow weary voice of a hypnotist. At the start of each session (*The Invisible Hand, George Soros, You, Old Friends*) we are asked to close our eyes, after which we are led into deeper and deeper layers of our unconscious. We see the invisible hand of the market, which to be begin with controls everything with a lightness of touch, which then becomes heavier and heavier until the market collapses and people have nothing to eat. This hand is ours... We see George Soros skilfully conducting his transactions on the stock market. We see *ourselves* as George Soros. And then suddenly something happens, our instructions to buy or sell arrive too late or can't be carried out. We've nowhere left to go... We see our own home, where we live the good life. We leave our house and travel to work, where we're happy. There's an envelope on the table: we've been sacked. The house, credit cards, lifestyle... everything has vanished. We're standing in front of the house that only recently still belonged to us. We enter the house and hear the voices of old friends. It's George Soros and the invisible hand of the market. Now we realise we don't need them, and we can wake up happy and satisfied.

When at the end of the film our guide snapped his fingers for the last time, we were supposed to wake up to a new world, happy and content. However, several years on and there has been no return to the good old days (what good old days?). The world has no desire to return or to make sense. And this point is expressed well in the introduction to *Bitter Lake*, a documentary by Adam Curtis (2015): 'Increasingly, we live in a world where nothing makes any sense. Events come and go like waves of a fever, leaving us confused and uncertain.' It is difficult to adapt to a reality that has stopped making sense. Is the truth of the matter that we find ourselves in a state of collective psycho-spiritual crisis?

Marginal, transpersonal and even paranormal experiences form the subject of a trio of films by Melanie Gilligan, the first of which, *Crisis in the Credit System*,²⁸ was released in October 2008, i.e. barely a month after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, when it was beginning to become clear that the crisis on the mortgage market was mushrooming into a global financial crisis. The pivotal figure in *Crisis in the Credit System* is not a hypnotist, but a coach working with a group of investment bankers and portfolio managers. Various individual and group exercises are intended

28. Melanie Gilligan, *Crisis in the Credit System*, 2008, <https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/crisis-in-the-credit-system/> (accessed 20 September 2016).

to strengthen the resolve of the participants in times of stress and help them find new adaptive strategies. A mysterious analyst enters the scene, a kind of latter-day medium, who predicts market developments (the 'market', by the way, is as independent and capricious as it is in real-life financial news bulletins). The entire series of films, which continues with *Popular Unrest*²⁹ and *Common Sense*,³⁰ features this blurring of the boundary between the 'normal' and the 'paranormal' as a kind of inevitable consequence of the burgeoning integration of human and machine intelligence that includes feelings and emotions.

24/7 – an (un)connected world

The depressingly evident connection between man and machine that is an important motif running through Melanie Gilligan's trilogy of films also plays an important part in texts by Berardi and Crary, which I will focus on in the next few paragraphs. The starting point of Crary's *24/7* is the embeddedness of our lived world within a framework defined by the terms '21st century capitalism' (another term for 'late capitalism', which appears in the book's subtitle) and 'neoliberal globalisation'.³¹ Late capitalism (a term that of many competing but basically synonymous terms is the one I shall use most) can be seen as a system in which industrial production, though it has not lost its meaning, has largely been pushed out of sight and out of mind, to be replaced at the centre of an interest in accumulation by human capital.³² Developments in the economic base, significantly accelerated by events at the turn of the 1960s and 70s (from the counter-culture and student protests to the oil crisis and subsequent recession in the US economy accompanied by high inflation and growing unemployment), saw the emergence of a post-industrial or post-Fordist economy in which the link between production and labour on the one hand, and wealth on the other, was severed. The gradual financialisation of the economy (the growing autonomy and deregulation of markets) is inextricably linked to ongoing globalisation and the global enforcement of neoliberal economic doctrines, whose impacts are to be felt not only in the economic sphere but to the same or even greater extent in the political (more conservative types of governance), social (the ever widening chasm between rich and poor), and ecological spheres (the unrelenting exploitation of natural resources).³³

29. Melanie Gilligan, *Popular Unrest*, 2010, <http://popularunrest.org/> (accessed 20 September 2016).

30. Melanie Gilligan, *The Common Sense*, 2014, <http://thecommonsense.org/> (accessed 20 September 2016).

31. CRARY, 24/7, 8.

32. The first systematic use of the term is attributed to Ernest Mandel (MANDEL, *Late Capitalism*, London: Humanities Press, 1975). It was then picked up at the start of the nineties by Fredric Jameson in his critique of postmodernism (Fredric JAMESON, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). For Jameson the basic premise of late capitalism, namely that the relationship between the economy and culture has become so complex that it is no longer possible to separate the base from the superstructure (all human artefacts have become goods and there are no longer any spheres that escape the inexorable logic of the market), is the starting point from which he transfers the economic concept of late capitalism into the sphere of cultural criticism and basically identifies it with postmodernism. The evaluative nature of the movement of economic analysis into cultural criticism is striking. Nevertheless, I would like to leave it to one side and stick with the adjective 'late' as a delineation of new methods of accumulation of capital that arrived at the start of the seventies along with the introduction of neoliberalism and the transition to what we call post-Fordism.

33. See, for example, David HARVEY, *The Enigma of Capital*, Oxford University Press, 2011. The relationship of economic globalisation, the establishment of the global hegemony of neoliberalism, and the transformation of the Czech economy is examined in detail by Ilona ŠVIHLÍKOVÁ, *Jak jsme se stali kolarii*, Praha: Rybka Publishers, 2015.

The undeniable success of late capitalism, if measured simply by our inability to come up with any alternative to it,³⁴ is inextricably linked with developments in the sphere of computer technology, the capacity of which has been growing exponentially since the mid-sixties in accordance with the prediction by Gordon Moore, co-founder of Intel, in what we now know as Moore's law.³⁵ I will return to considerations of the future linked to technological developments in the next chapter. For the moment it suffices to say that the world in which we live – the world in its entirety, not just 'culture' or 'nature' – and the way we experience and become cognisant of it, is conditional upon developments in the sphere of computer technology or, as Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee call it, the 'second machine age'. Jonathan Crary describes this world as possessing a 24/7 character, a reference to the uninterrupted computer operations running 'in the background' that dramatically affect a range of what Félix Guattari in his late work calls 'the three ecologies' (environmental concerns, social relationships and human subjectivity).³⁶ In this respect Crary leaves no room for doubt:

... many institutions in the developed world have been running 24n for decades now. It is only recently that the elaboration, the modelling of one's personal and social identity, has been reorganized to conform to the uninterrupted operation of markets, information networks, and other systems. A 24/7 environment has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a non-social model of machinic performance [...].³⁷

The transition to a 24/7 world took place in the final decade of the last century when, with the collapse of the eastern bloc, the last bastion of an ideologically driven orientation on the future disappeared. Dreams of other, better tomorrows were replaced by the era of post-history and a suspension of the horizon/s of expectation.³⁸ The presentist mode of post-history is characterised by relative contentment predicated upon the circle of work and consumption. Problems only arise when the bubble in which we are enclosed begins to shrink and we realise that, not only are we living in a state of timelessness, but that we have not been left any of our 'own time', i.e. time that has not already been colonised in advance, that has not already been incorporated into market calculations.³⁹ A dim awareness of this problem is

34. 'It has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' is the striking claim that forms the title of the first chapter of Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, which I shall examine in greater detail in the next chapter (Mark FISHER, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

35. See, for example, Erik BRYNJOLFSSON – Andrew MCAFEE, *The Second Machine Age*, New York – London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014, 39–56.

36. Félix GUATTARI, *The Three Ecologies*, London – New Brunswick, NJ: The Athlone Press, 2000 (French original 1989).

37. CRARY, 24/7, 9.

38. The term 'horizon of expectations' is associated with Reinhart Koselleck, whose work we will examine in greater detail in the next chapter.

39. This observation is by no means new. It is a variation on the well known critique of the spectacle by Guy Debord. Debord formulated his thesis on the separation of subjects from the active production of their own life, published in *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967, on the basis of an analysis of Fordist, industrial modernity. Since then the situation has changed in many respect. Nevertheless, the fact that the subject is now not a spectacle 'squeezed' into the passive position of consumer, but is an active (co) producer, changes nothing regarding the separation from his own time: indeed, if anything, this separation is even greater.

undoubtedly one of the sources of the disquietude that afflicts us all. The next step in our awakening comes with the realisation that this ‘colonisation of time’, i.e. the total exploitation of our capacity not only to work and live, but also to feel, dream and love, is part of a complex that includes the ruthless plundering of natural resources and environmental degradation on a local and global level. In the post-historical time of economic globalisation, though the interconnection of Guattari’s three ecologies has taken place, this has clearly not involved the ‘transversality’ that would create the conditions for an opposition to ‘integrated world capitalism’,⁴⁰ but rather was the effect of the simultaneous control of all three ecologies by forces for which it is difficult to find a name if only because it is inherent in their nature to be difficult to identify and understand. What a relief it would be if we could blame extraterrestrials for the ‘catastrophic times’ we live in, as is the case in the horror classic *They Live* (1988), directed by John Carpenter. Would that it were so simple... The cause of the catastrophe in which we are trapped, along with every other living being on this planet, is in front of our very eyes: it is the 24/7 power-technological assemblage and ‘its declaration of permanent expenditure, of endless wastefulness for its sustenance, in its terminal disruption of the cycles and seasons on which ecological integrity depends’.⁴¹

40. GUATTARI, *The Three Ecologies*, 47. Post-industrial capitalism, which I prefer to describe as Integrated World Capitalism (IWC), tends increasingly to de-centre its sites of power, moving away from structures producing goods and services towards structures producing signs, syntax and – in particular, through the control which it exercises over the media, advertising, opinion polls, etc. – subjectivity.

41. CRARY, 24/7, 10.

If we wish to find at least a proximate answer to the question of whence these increasingly widespread apocalyptic moods emanate, it is probably advisable to operate on the premise that they are the consequence of a protracted crisis affecting all the seemingly unrelated areas of these three ecologies simultaneously. Returning to the issue of human subjectivity, we cannot ignore how dramatic the impact has been of the connecting up of capitalism and computer technologies on its creation and integrity, a state of affairs Franco Berardi calls semiocapitalism.⁴² Berardi asks what consequences will ensue from the attempts made by our minds (and the entire sensory nervous system) to adapt to the ever increasing volume of hybrid communication taking place on the man-machine interface, in which complex interpersonal communication (what Berardi calls *conjunction*) is being replaced by a simpler variant, i.e. *connection*. While *conjunction* includes reciprocity, does not always run smoothly and must take into account the other party’s position (we might even say that to a certain extent conjunction involves becoming the

42. BERARDI *After the Future*, 27. (The pagination is based on the PDF document available [online](#))

other in order that communication be successful), *connection* is more algorithmic (machinic) in nature: communication is subject to the criteria of speed and expediency and is accompanied by processes of standardisation. What I have outlined here in technical language as two competing and differently prioritised means of communication have, according to Berardi, far-reaching implications for the sensibility⁴³ and psychological alignment of the population. He claims that various neuroses, states of depression and symptoms generally regarded as pathological are visible signs of this shift, though this transformation is in essence being undergone by the human population as a whole.⁴⁴

43. Berardi describes this sensibility as 'the faculty that makes empathic understanding possible, the ability to comprehend what words cannot say, the power to interpret a continuum of non-discrete elements, nonverbal signs, and the flows of empathy'. *Ibid.*, 17.

44. *Ibid.*, 29–30.

One of the consequences of the global adaptation of our mental apparatuses to the machine communication interface, in which syntactic reading is prioritised over semantic and contextual readings, is a weakening of sensibility, i.e. the ability to interpret content that cannot easily be transferred into a linguistic or other syntactically based code. According to Berardi this shift is associated with a mutation that he describes as being biological and relating to the structure of our mind: 'Central to this mutation is the insertion of the electronic into the organic, the proliferation of artificial devices in the organic universe, in the body, in communication and in society. Therefore, the relationship between consciousness and sensibility is transformed and the exchange of signs undergoes a process of increasing desensitisation.'⁴⁵

45. *Ibid.*, 30.

In a similar context but with greater emphasis on the temporal aspect of communication, Crary recalls the term 'bio-deregulation' that Teresa Brennan uses to describe 'the brutal discrepancies between the temporal operation of deregulated markets and the intrinsic physical limitations of the humans required to conform to these demands'.⁴⁶ The unobtrusive but omnipresent pressure on bio-deregulation is these days very evident in the ever accelerating cycle of very small technological innovations. Crary observes that 'the particular operation and effects of specific new machines or networks are less important than how the rhythms, speeds, and formats of accelerated and intensified consumption are reshaping experience and perception'.⁴⁷ An example of the transformation of the character of experience and perception accompanying the acceleration of innovation lifecycles would be the paralysis of the collective memory and the consolidation of presentism as the dominant way of relating to time. A shortening of innovation

46. CRARY, 24/7, 15.

47. *Ibid.*, 39.

lifecycles in the sphere of consumer goods also inevitably inscribes itself on the character of our social and intimate relationships and creates fear and frustration. At the same time, capitulation to this regime is virtually unavoidable because it is enforced by a fear of not being seen as someone who has dropped out, who is as outmoded as anything else that does not belong to this season's collection. The rhythm of technological consumption has thus become 'inseparable from the requirement of continual self-administration'.⁴⁸

48. *Ibid.*, 46.

The impossibility of full physiological and effective adaptation to the acceleration of technological development does not, however, mean that we are not heading in that direction, i.e. towards bio-deregulation, and this has resulted in a dramatic increase in the incidence of depression and anxiety that, in the advanced economies at least, is swiftly diagnosed and suppressed by psychiatric medications. Berardi points out that there is a clear correlation between the speed of the contemporary world and depression. The speed with which everything is changing makes it impossible to find meaning in life, and this results in the disappearance of a sense of purpose.

Sense is not to be found in the world, but in what we are able to create. What circulates in the sphere of friendship, of love, of social solidarity is what allows us to find sense. Depression can be defined as a lack of sense, as an inability to find sense through action, through communication, through life. The inability to find sense is first of all the inability to create it.⁴⁹

49. BERARDI, *After the Future*, 50.

Berardi believes that the wholesale suppression of the visible symptoms of depression by means of psychiatric drugs may result in outbreaks of (self)destructive violence. The backdrop to his considerations is made up of what at first sight seem like incomprehensible attacks, of which he devotes most space to the event that took place on 16 April 2007 at the Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg, Virginia. Early that morning a South Korean student named Seung-Hui Cho⁵⁰ first shot two students at West Amber Johnston Hall, then returned to his room, changed his clothes, deleted his emails, and disposed of his computer hard drive. He then wrote a message for the media and posted an envelope addressed to NBC Media on his

50. Seung-Hui Cho's country of origin tends to be deemed significant. Even Berardi mentions it and reminds us of the combination of culturally embedded humility and respect for authority and diligence that underwent a subtle but fundamental change during the neoliberal transformation of the South Korean economy.

way to Norris Hall, where he arrived wielding two handguns and carrying multiple clips of ammunition. He proceeded to shoot another thirty students and commit suicide. Berardi places this random act of senseless violence, which from the start was attributed to Seung-Hui Cho's mental state, within in a broader context and interprets it as the culmination of the continuous deprivation of meaningful communication (the shift from *conjunction* to *connection*), which, though it obviously does not affect everyone to the same extent, nevertheless affects us all to some extent.

In 2010, Eva and Franco Mattes, representatives of the first generation of internet artists and known by the pseudonym 0100101110101101.ORG, released a 13-minute long video called simply *My Generation*.⁵¹ The work is a collage of images found on the web depicting the uncontrolled emotional reactions of computer gamers. *My Generation* captures a range of such reactions, from silent anger via violent outbursts (usually directed at the hardware) to hysterical rampages that would most certainly be appreciated by visitors to the renowned Tuesday séances of Jean-Martin Charcot. To begin with the film evokes irrepressible laughter – the same laughter as the videos used undoubtedly evoked in the viewers of blogs, social media and chat rooms to which quick-witted friends or relatives (even parents?) uploaded them. However, the smiles quickly fade and are replaced by a look of concern, since each small disaster we see completes a larger picture of a deep crisis of personality (de)formed from a tender age by communication being conducted mainly in Berardi's *connection mode*. Any time the connection cuts out, whether or not this is because of the artificial intelligence of the machine opponent in multiplayer mode, the loss of an internet connection (or even just slower server response), or a jammed keyboard, what follows is a lightning fast inhibition of the psyche, the symptoms of which do not differ fundamentally from the withdrawal symptoms of drug addicts. In these moments of frustration that we all experience – when, for instance, we cannot open our incoming mailbox, when out of the blue the system restarts and we have not saved our data; in short when we catch a brief glimpse of the computer in its role as magic box over which we have no power – the true extent is revealed of just how far the integration of the human subject with the inhuman machine has progressed.

51. Eva and Franco Mattes, *My Generation*, 2010, digital video, 13:26 min., <http://0100101110101101.org/my-generation/> (accessed 30 September 2016).

52. Jon Rafman, *Mainsqueeze*, 2014, digital video, 7:23 min., <http://jonrafman.com/> (accessed 30 September 2016). The term 'mainsqueeze' is slang for a sexual partner preferred over other, equally informal relationships. The pejorative connotations of the word *squeeze* sums up perfectly and unceremoniously the rupture of the link between a relationship as a serious, long-term 'project' and the contingency of easily established and equally easily terminated liaisons supported inter alia by a large number of digital social and dating platforms.

53. *Deep web* refers to internet content that remains concealed from the standard browsers such as Google, but exists on standard platforms and overlay networks which use the public internet but require specific software, configurations or authorisation to access – from various chats and forums to email and library databases, etc.

My Generation pinpoints one of the sore points of our present time. However, for a work that captures more of the full register of anxiety that is as ubiquitous these days as the internet, we need look no further than *Mainsqueeze* (2014) by Jon Rafman.⁵² *Mainsqueeze* is made up entirely of material found on the web, especially on the dark web, blogs, and forums like 4chan.⁵³ The voiceover that accompanies the images is also put together from online material. *Mainsqueeze* freely arranges and layers the visual documentation of practical jokes, 3D renderings of interiors and exteriors, animated pornography, selfie videos, and scrolling through material selected on the basis of a simple tag (surely two of the key words must have been *seapunk* and *hell*). The ensuing assemblage is not as straightforward as *My Generation*, though this makes its blurred meanings – thrown together from fragments of the 'internet's unconscious', some of which went viral and thus entered the collective unconscious – all the more disconcerting. This is especially true of the video of the relentless self-destruction of a washing machine attempting to spin dry a brick thrown into it. Emotional reactions to this video are not dissimilar to those provoked by the enraged adolescents in *My Generation*. The laughter by which would like to maintain a distance between ourselves and what we are looking at does not last long and is replaced by an uneasy process of identification with the hapless commodity that is powerless to resist its preset program and is hacked in the most brutal, primitive way. Repeated shots of the washing machine in the advanced stages of self-destruction punctuate *Mainsqueeze*. The same role is played by a static shot of a figure dressed as a frog, bound bondage-style, and writhing around on the floor apparently as part of some obscure erotic foreplay. The *hentai* animation returns three times (from foreplay to ejaculation). Running right through the whole of *Mainsqueeze* there is something that both attracts and repels us. The emotions experienced, inasmuch as we frame them as aesthetic in nature, comprise a discomfiting mix very similar to that produced by immersing oneself in the 24/7 world, in which the continuous, constantly accelerating flow of digital data creates a chaos from which no new order could ever emerge.

Administrators of anxiety

The videos by 0100101110101101.ORG and Jon Rafman represent artistic strategies addressing the same problems that Berardi and Crary write about. And now, for something

at the intersection of academic and artistic strategies for reflecting upon the impacts of late capitalism on collective subjectification, let us turn to the magazines published between 2012 and 2015 by the New York trend forecasting group K-HOLE.⁵⁴ The third issue, published in January 2013, is entitled *K-HOLE Brand Anxiety Matrix*.⁵⁵ As is always the case in this ‘magazine’,⁵⁶ text is inseparable from the accompanying graphic design and visual illustrations that together form a semantic-aesthetic whole. The introduction to #3 speaks of the 2012 hurricane season and specifically of Hurricane Sandy, which caused considerable damage to property in New York. Indeed, in this respect 2012 was a tough year for the east coast of the US, and following in the wake of the tragic experience of Hurricane Katrina (August 2005) and its devastating impact not only on property and infrastructure, but also on the fragile social fabric of New Orleans, the city most hard hit, this was yet another reminder of global warming. It was no coincidence that in 2013, immediately after Hurricane Sandy, global warming was an important motif in many texts, from *Hyperobjects* by Timothy Morton (see above), to *Speculations (The future is _____)*, a collection of short essays published in book form based on a series of lectures and discussions organised in summer of 2013 by Triple Canopy against the backdrop of the installation by Adrián Villar Rojas at MoMA PS1.⁵⁷

Let’s return for a moment to *K-HOLE Brand Anxiety Matrix*, in which hurricanes, or the anonymous sequence thereof (Hurricane A, Hurricane B, Hurricane C), represent the natural equivalent of a ‘hyperobject’ that we could call simply ‘data’ (and perhaps slightly more precisely a ‘cloud’, so as to highlight how difficult it is these days to think about data as something solid and localisable). The American public first learns about a hurricane well in advance by means of models processed by immensely powerful computers. The hurricane therefore first impinges on the collective unconscious as digital representation, as a data stream, and only later on (if the forecast is accurate and the hurricane does not turn into a tropical storm or does not change direction and move back over the Atlantic) as strong winds, torrential downpours and enormous breakers. The absolute randomness of the atmospheric phenomenon, in terms of attempts to describe and predict it so as to prevent or restrict the loss

54. The trend forecasting group K-HOLE was created by Greg Fong, Sean Monahan, Emily Segal, Chris Sherron and Dena Yago.

55. Greg FONG – Sean MONAHAN – Emily SEGAL – Chris SHERRON – Dena YAGO, ‘K-HOLE Brand Anxiety Matrix’, 2013, [online](#).

56. K-HOLE ‘magazines’ are perhaps better described as ‘illustrated essays’ in which text and graphic design form a unified and independent whole.

57. TRIPLE CANOPY (ed.), *Speculations (“The future is _____”)*, New York: Triple Canopy, 2015.

of property or lives, is very similar to the attempt to anticipate and control the movements of what we call society using computational operations and algorithms. As a result, one's first reflections on hurricanes can evolve very quickly into the core content of K-HOLE #3, namely the relationship between data, consumption, brands and anxiety.

Activity tracking devices tell us what we're 'actually' doing. The data they provide exists to make us less nervous, yet we feel increasingly pressured to do a better job. Data should allow us to lead longer, healthier, happier lives. But we don't necessarily want to live longer any more, just at 100%. The same information that compels us to be rational actors disproves the very idea that we might be. The information is available, but fragmented. It's not necessarily helping us paint a bigger picture of our lives. The divide between performance anxiety and a feeling of frictionless ease swings on the consumer's response to information. It sucks to be broke, but it sucks even more to receive daily low balance notifications. We know our preferences are being calculated and used to predict our next moves, but we still don't feel like we can take our hands off the joystick. The job of the advanced consumer is managing anxiety, period.⁵⁸

58. 'K-HOLE Brand Anxiety Matrix', 6-7.

With this passage K-HOLE finally defines what is really at stake. From a hurricane as spectre emulated by data via the algorithmized tracking, forecasting and managing of our professional and personal activities, we arrive at the act of consumption that in late capitalism replaces most of the traditional acts of individuation and subjectivation. Again we see how Guattari's three ecologies are intertwined. However, this is not about a critical search for alternatives to 'integrated world capitalism'. On the contrary, the paralysing interdependency of the ecological, social and subjectively experienced crisis is as much a symptom of the 'end of the world' as it is an inexorable pressure exerted upon us to acknowledge that there is nowhere to escape in this world.

According to K-HOLE, if we want to encapsulate our current mood, then anxiety is a far better term than fear since it is not as associated with a specific feeling of danger. It is not 'the knife

pressed to your back, but the possibility that everyone knows what you did last summer'.⁵⁹ At the same time anxiety is distributed unevenly across K-HOLE's 'brand anxiety matrix'. A matrix is defined by the intersecting axes x and y. The horizontal axis plots the internal coherence of any experience from order to chaos, while the vertical shows how coherence is manifest in the world around us, from legibility (intelligibility) to illegibility (unintelligibility). Four quadrants result: legible order, legible chaos, illegible order, illegible chaos. Just as a psychology test will inform you if you are a phlegmatic, i.e. someone defined by the qualities of stability and introversion, so the brand anxiety matrix allows you to find your place in a world in which 'the job of the advanced consumer is managing anxiety'.

The 'post-critical'⁶⁰ approach of the K-HOLE collective means that, instead of openly negating consumerism, they devote almost excessive attention to acts of consumption. Individual issues of the magazine are presented as frontline reports and the writers self-profile as 'cultural strategists'. In reality, of course, practically all the members of the digital-native generation are cultural strategists. The boundary between decisions reached on social media (where I'll go tonight, who I'll see, who I have a message for, who I want to speak to, hang out with, make friends with, sleep with...) and decisions that, taking into account tradition and the belief that it is still possible to analytically differentiate 'true needs' from 'false needs', we still describe as consumerist, has for young people below the age of thirty been almost completely worn away. The type of forecast practised by K-HOLE is very similar to what Srnicek and Williams call hyperstition,⁶¹ and conforms to the way that other thinkers from the accelerationist circle think about time (the concept of hyperstition is based on the idea that 'time arrives from the future').⁶² The 'forecasting' of trends carried out by K-HOLE is not prognostics in the traditional sense of the word, but a way (possibly the only way) of understanding an excessively complex present.

I will bring this brief excursion around artistic contributions to the topic of anxiety with a look at the second part of Anne Imhof's project *Angst*.⁶³ The first incarnation of *Angst* was an exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel, the second was at the Hamburger

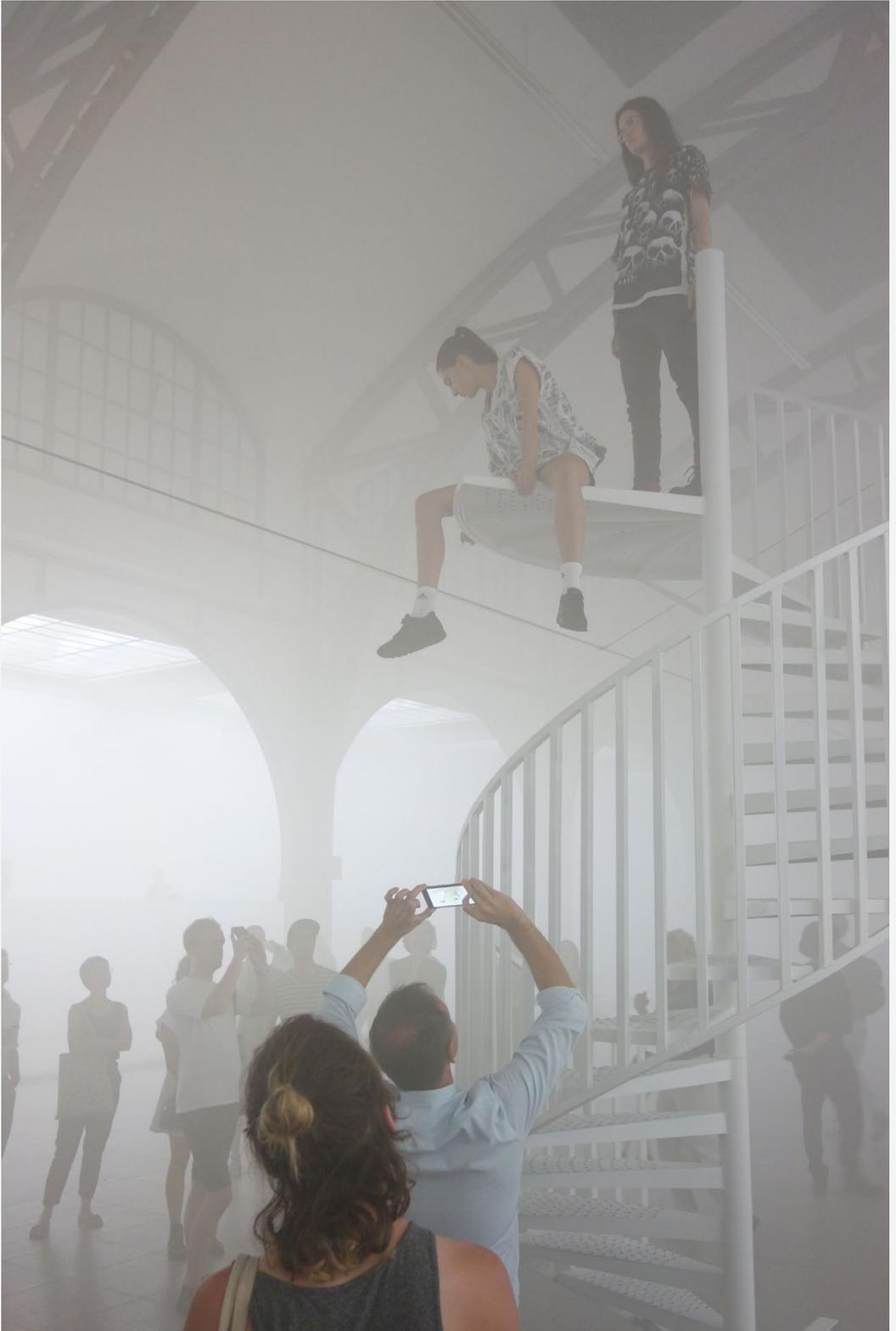
59. *Ibid.*, 8.

60. When using the term 'post-critical' in connection with the work of the K-HOLE group I was freely inspired by the text in which Anselm Franke and Ana Teixeira Pinto reacted to the 9th Berlin Biennale (Anselm FRANKE – Ana TEIXEIRA PINTO, 'Post-Political, Post-Critical, Post-Internet', *Open!*, 8 September 2016, [online](#)). Within the framework of the institutional art practice, post-criticism implies mistrust in critical theory (and artistic practice derived therefrom). This results in a deliberate blurring of the boundaries between high art and the culture and creative industries.

61. Srnicek and Williams describe hyperstition as a 'kind of fiction, but one that aims to transform itself into a truth', see footnote 134.

62. Armen AVANESSIAN, 'The Speculative Time-Complex | Armen Avanesian & Suhail Malik', *DIS magazine*, 12 March 2016, [online](#).

63. Anne IMHOF, 'Angst II, Berlin: Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum der Gegenwart, 14–25 September 2016.



Anne Imhof: *Angst II*, Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin (14 September 2016). Photo: Jan Zálesák.



Anne Imhof: *Angst II*, Hamburger Bahnhof - Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin (14 September 2016). Photo: Jan Zálešák.

Bahnhof Museum of Contemporary Art, Berlin, and the third was prepared for La Biennale de Montréal 2016. The Berlin premiere of *Angst II* took place on 14 September 2016. After five hours of ‘the supremely Instagrammable spectacle pulling people around the room’,⁶⁴ not much had actually happened. After the doors of the gallery were opened the eager crowd filled up the space of the erstwhile railway station full of dry ice restricting visibility to a few metres. A group of some twenty young ‘actors’ – remote, indifferent, giving the impression that the gallery had been taken over by two fashion shows or visitors to a music club – moved around the space following a set plan and trawled the crowd behind them. Because of the artificial smoke spectators were obliged to find their way more by means of the bodies of those around than by what they could actually see with their own eyes.

The switchover to the slow timeflow of the ‘plot line’ of an opera, which had no visible accents, which was not graded but unfolded in a fairly continuous stream of ambient electronic music-backed tableaux that were sometimes completely ‘civilist’ (a group of blank-faced young people sit in a corner, smoke cigarettes and drink Diet Coke while checking the displays of their smartphones or simply staring straight ahead), other times exaggeratedly theatrical (especially with regard to the use of props, e.g. drones, a falcon and a spiral staircase ending just above the lazily billowing smoke), was one of the most powerful moments of the entire event. The overwhelming impression was one of emptiness, albeit an emptiness replete with the promise of something unique, an emptiness attracting the attention and activity of the audience, who in addition to drifting hypnotically around the gallery uploaded a stream of photos and videos to their apps of choice.

The performers are worked to exhaustion in the pursuit of these carefully choreographed images, spending four hours a night being followed around the room in anticipation of their every movement. Yet, ultimately, what they produce – beyond a collection of cigarette butts and a mess of spilt pop – is about as fleeting as the Snapchats documenting it. It’s in this holistic approach that Imhof seems to tackle the real roots of contemporary angst, which complexly encompasses both the

64. Alison HUGILL, ‘The Instagrammable Angst of Anne Imhof’, *Momus*, 5 October 2016, [online](#).

urgency born of concrete fears – of a Trump presidency, drone warfare, climate change – and the futility of widespread existential malaise.⁶⁵

65. *Ibid.*

Alison Hugill very accurately captures what is perhaps the most powerful aspect of *Angst II*. In all these ‘empty spaces’ of the silent opera, in the interstices and delays during which nothing seems to be happening and you could sit or stand next to performers, look at them or at the audience, and for a moment perhaps forget where you are and why, a space opens for the perception and communication of that ‘omnipresent existential malaise’ that perhaps only young people around the age of twenty could manage to disguise with an expression of cool disdain. In the fog that separates individuals from one another while connecting them on the level of a cloud (something that reviewers compared to a herd of animals and reminded me more of a flock of birds or a shoal of fish), there was a strange state of charged emptiness mingled with anticipation and tension, very similar to the emptiness experienced when ‘scanning’ one’s profiles and accounts, newsfeeds and notifications.

What kind of community was it that Anne Imhof created for a few brief hours? Was it akin to the birth of a movement, which Berardi calls for in connection with the need for ‘recomposition’, i.e. the renewal of the ‘cultural process of the unification of the social body’?⁶⁶ Though it is tempting to think so, I believe something else was happening. Basically, a few hundred ‘weak’ subjects – the outcome of their inclusion in a late capitalist 24/7 regime in which (interpersonal) relationships featuring connection are prioritised over relationships featuring conjunction – found themselves in the same place at the same time. What led all of these people (all these bodies) to the spacious former railway station was on the one hand the desire for a spectacular experience fuelled by viral marketing, and on the other a fear they might miss out on something essential. This fear even has its own abbreviation within the online environment: #FOMO (*Fear of Missing Out*).

66. BERARDI, *After the Future*, 99.

For all its visual appeal, the one thing *Angst II* conspicuously failed to offer was any vision of the future. On the contrary, in terms of its individual images and its overall message *Angst II* fits perfectly into an endless timelessness in which

any hint of a 'direction' is quickly transformed into something we might call a wander, a movement in which body and will are separated, in which the body moves of its *own* free will, from somewhere to somewhere else, without any hint of a goal – not so much non-wanderlust as wander-*ohne*-lust. This movement (which, though it undeniably leads somewhere, in truth leads anywhere, wherever, whatever) is characteristic of the whole of our late modern/capitalist society. The only horizons that materialise before our eyes are derivatives of the dreams of Silicon Valley-based venture capitalists. *Angst II* not only represented this aimless wandering, but allowed the viewer to become part of it, to immerse herself in this strangely incoherent collective body that does not create a 'common ground of understanding and act together for a common goal'⁶⁷ but is held together by shared affects and subliminal signals. Anne Imhof offers us the opportunity to try out for just a moment what it is like to be part of a living, breathing, moving, photo-snapping community of perfectly alienated subjects (each from themselves and from the rest) that more and more resemble the things they produce.⁶⁸

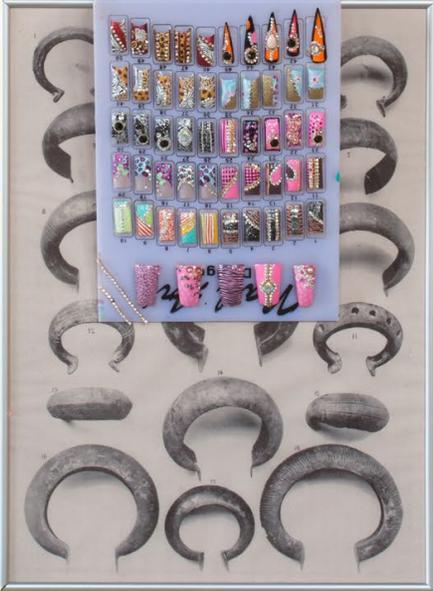
67. *Ibid.*, 96.

68. Hito STEYERL, 'A Thing Like You and Me', *e-flux journal* #15, 2010, [online](#).

Summary

The theme of the end of the world as I outlined it in the introduction in connection with the text by Miroslav Petříček appeared at first sight to be purely metaphysical. However, given the shared experience we have of multiple crises (ecological, social and political), upon which Stanislav Grof bases his study of the psychological roots of violence and greed, the need has arisen to extend the search for answers to the question of what happens after the end of the world, or at the very least our (inter)subjectively experienced fears of the end of the world, to encompass concrete causes. Emphasising the concept of psycho-spiritual crisis, Grof tries to locate these causes in the prenatal stage of development of the human psyche. I have tried to show that the entire concept of psycho-spiritual crisis can be updated in such a way that we stop looking for its sources in the depths of human nature, but focus more on the effects of contemporary capitalism, or more precisely, on the effects of the constantly evolving synergy between capital and technology. Virtually all the artworks I have examined in this chapter reveal the subject in a state of crisis caused (and exacerbated) by an inability to mesh fully with the spinning cogs of global capitalism, an inability to keep pace with the inhuman tempo of machine growth and communication. In the work of contemporary artists we see digital technology (Eva and Franco Mattes) and finance (Superflex, Melanie Gilligan) as autonomous actors. Our attempts to tune into their frequency often result in symptoms of madness or psychic excess (depression, anxiety, neurosis, bipolar disease, etc.). Superflex offers us the possibility of gazing at a new reality controlled by inhuman forces by means of hypnosis, Anne Imhof by means of a similarly hypnotic group drift in which the character of our seriality⁶⁹ is not the content of representation but direct experience. Anxiety, which is to a certain extent a leitmotif running through all the projects discussed here, has resulted, among other things, in our being imprisoned in a present beyond which we are unable to see any meaningful future. The question of whether the revival of a (utopian) thinking of the future might represent a way out of the crisis is the subject of the next chapter.

69. This concept, formulated by Sartre, is explained in more detail in the next chapter, see footnote 110.



Horizons lost. Found. And lost again

In the introduction we examined anxiety as a symptom of the impossibility of reconciling the singularity of human subjectivity with hyperobjects (e.g. global warming or the financial markets). Anxiety also occupies a privileged position in the introduction to Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*.⁷⁰ As a starting point for his considerations, Fisher takes the film adaptation of the novel by P. D. James *The Children of Men*, 1992. The film is directed by Alfonso Cuarón and set in an unspecified but not too distant future in which we recognise the unmistakable signs of late capitalism in the mode in which it is currently being experienced, a mode described by Yascha Mounk using the metaphor of the accelerating movement of a pendulum swinging between the outermost points of 'illiberal democracy' and 'undemocratic liberalism'.⁷¹

70. FISHER, Mark, *Capitalist Realism*, op. cit.

71. Yascha MOUNK, 'The Week Democracy Died', *Slate*, 14 August 2016, [online](#). The abandonment of democratic principles in late capitalism is examined in greater details by Wolfgang STREECK, *How Will Capitalism End?*, New York: Verso, 2016.

In reality, the image of the future as depicted in uncomfortable detail by Alfonso Cuarón is a lot more similar to the situation in 2016 than it was in 2006, when the film was released, or in 2009, when Mark Fisher wrote the introduction to his book. If an image of Europe as a fortress being defended with increasing hysteria and ringed by internment camps weren't enough to convince us we have entered a dystopian future, then we should remind ourselves of the events of a particular week in August 2016, which prompted Mounk to write an essay bearing the uncompromising title *The Week Democracy Died*: first there was the referendum in which British voters chose to take the UK out of the European Union; next came the terrorist attack in Nice; and that was followed by an unsuccessful attempt at a military coup in Turkey. As the backdrop to his evaluation of these events Mounk adds the headway made by Donald Trump through the US primaries and the growing popularity of populist parties, best illustrated by the case of the French extreme right led by Marine Le Pen. After a short hiatus of a few months this colour wash receives new layers: the rapid turnaround performed by the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan from the professed values of democracy to brazen authoritarianism in the weeks and months after the foiled military coup, and then Donald Trump's success in the American presidential elections, the

←
Palo Cháán (Patricia Domínguez & Irvin Morázan): *Sexi Sushi* (2015–2016). Detail of installation (video 5:10 min., plastic hands and feet, foam hand, prawn cushion, hand-painted nails, ink print, mugs for yerba mate, mural – cosmetic clay and white paint). Installation view of *Apocalypse Me* exhibition. Photo: Tomáš Souček.

consequences of which we are still awaiting although it is already becoming clear that it has only served to confirm the deep divisions within supposedly stable, advanced democracies.

Let's return to Fisher's introduction. Taking its cue from *The Children of Men*, the text is dominated by two words we are now familiar with: catastrophe and anxiety. Cuarón's film offers an extreme interpretation of the ubiquitous sense of hopelessness associated with the loss of faith in a future worth fighting for. I say extreme, because Fisher relocates the cause of this hopelessness, and instead of ascribing it to economic or social reproduction, links it with the cycle of biological reproduction:

It is evident that the theme of sterility must be read metaphorically, as the displacement of another kind of anxiety. I want to argue this anxiety cries out to be read in cultural terms, and the question the film poses is: how long can a culture persist without the new? What happens if the young are no longer capable of producing surprises? *Children of Men* connects with the suspicion that the end has already come, the thought that it could well be the case that the future harbors only reiteration and re-permutation.⁷²

72.
Capitalist Realism, 11.

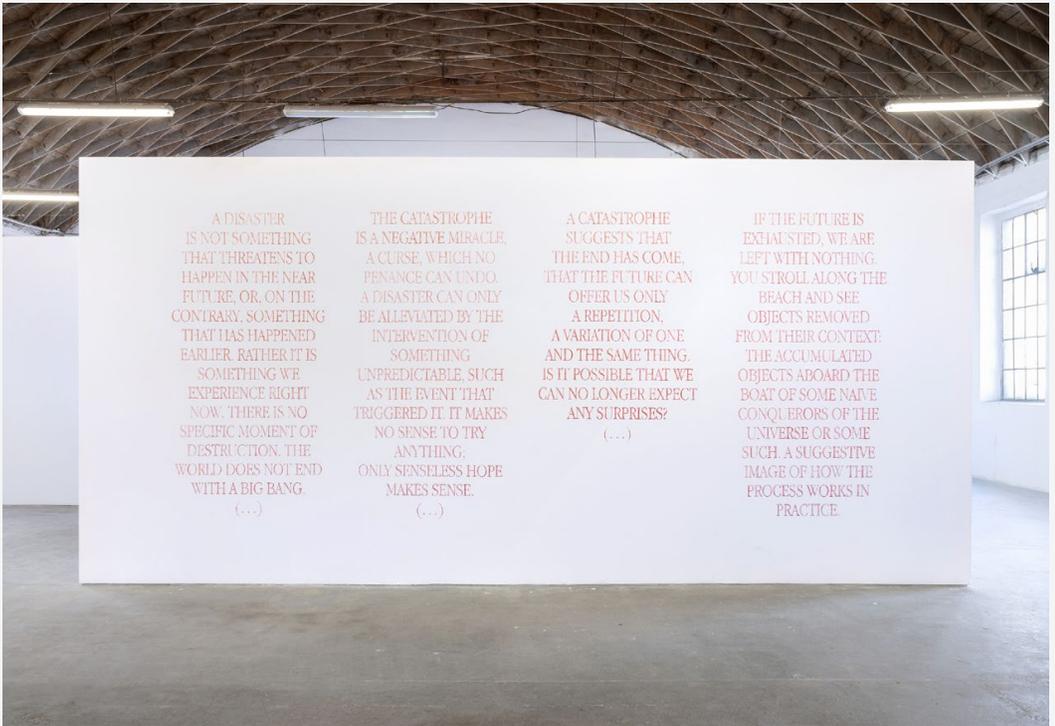
FISHER,

Now the idea that the future is merely a variation on what has already been and represents the next phase of the eternal return (Nietzsche) is hardly new. However, a cyclical conception of time has long been alien to European thinking, which, with the arrival of the Enlightenment, came to be dominated by modern, teleological (possessing a particular goal) conceptions of time. But after two centuries, the onward rush of time of the modern 'regime of historicity' (the term used by the French historian François Hartog) came to a halt not long ago. On a global scale the future ended in 1989. However, on both sides of the Iron Curtain we find the first symptoms of this end two decades before. In eastern Europe, the term that encapsulates this manifestation of a loss of faith in the future and the growing cynicism regarding state socialism is 'normalisation'. In western Europe, the complementary victory of cynical reason is represented by neoliberalism, the rise of which was ushered in by a crisis of industrial capitalism and the gradual disengagement of capital from industrial production, the creation of a state-financial

nexus, and the systematic deregulation of global financial flows. Furthermore, the period between the late sixties and the mid-nineties saw a transition from industrial modernity⁷³ to a form of modernity for which we have many different names, each highlighting something different: postmodernism (Lyotard, Jameson et al.), liquid modernity (Bauman), non-modernity (Srnicek), capitalist realism (Fisher)... All of these names have one thing in common: they refer to a situation in which (capitalist) modernity achieved global hegemony⁷⁴ while discreetly discarding what had until then been regarded as its *sine qua non*, namely an orientation on the future.

73. Zygmunt Bauman calls this modernity 'solid' and describes its features with a comparison to the Fordist factory (Zygmunt BAUMAN, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

74. We find the most typical features of this hegemony embedded even in systems such as the Chinese, which remains communist in name only.



Aleš Čermák & Michal Čáb: *Země se chvěje / The Earth Trembles* (2015). Transcription of libretto, HD video, 16 min. Installation view of *Apocalypse Me* exhibition. Foto: Jiří Dvořák.

Time has stopped. Must we accelerate in order to get it up and running again?

What might assist us in thinking about the loss or rediscovery of the future are the 'meta-historical categories' that the German historian Reinhart Koselleck called the 'space of experience' and the 'horizon of expectations'.⁷⁵ Experience was characterised as the 'present past, whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered'.⁷⁶ Expectation is 'the future made present; it directs itself to the not-yet, to the non-experienced, to that

75. Reinhart KOSELLECK, 'Space of Experience and Horizon of Expectations: Two Historical Categories', in: *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004 (German original 1978), 255–275.

76. *Ibid.*, 259.

which is to be revealed'.⁷⁷ Koselleck combines experience with the idea of space because it is always present as a whole, while also being constantly superimposed and regrouped and transformed by new experiences and knowledge. The concept of expectation is developed using the metaphor of a horizon beyond which a new space of experience is opening. Expectations, albeit individualised, also have a significant interpersonal dimension. If these categories are applied historically, then like Hartog's 'regimes of historicity' they allow us to recognise in (European) history the individual epochs, or to designate the transition from the pre-modern era to the modern. According to Koselleck, this transition is characterised by a bifurcation of the space of experience from the horizon of expectations: '*Neuzeit* is first understood as a *neue Zeit* from the time that expectations have distanced themselves evermore from all previous experience'.⁷⁸ An example of a world in which the horizon of expectations was almost completely drawn from the space of experience would be pre-modern Europe, in which the vast majority of the population lived in the countryside, employed on the land or in crafts. It was a world in which social mobility was practically non-existent and secular and religious rulers were unsparing in their efforts to ensure that anything deemed new (a dynamic movement on the horizon of expectations) was immediately recuperated into the existing epistemological framework, defined on one side by the bible and the teachings of the church, and on the other by the feudal system of governance.

Modernity transformed Christian eschatology (the regularly proclaimed end of the world holding out the promise of the absolute horizon being transcended and an entry pass into the Kingdom of God) into the idea of progress, something which is possible in this life (as opposed to the afterlife) and which is a task to be passed down from generation to generation.⁷⁹ It is progress that radically sunders expectation from experience. During the nineteenth century the idea of progress drew its strength not only from the unprecedented dynamics of political change, but above all from the speed of scientific and technological development and the appearance of innovation upon innovation accompanying the 'first machine age'.⁸⁰ In fact, there is only one problem with the idea of progress as the main ideological buttress of modernity (or more precisely, of industrial capitalism), as well as of the other defining ideas of the Enlightenment, e.g. equality and emancipation,

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*, 263 [Koselleck's italics].

79. According to Davis (Erik DAVIS, *Techgnosis*, London: Serpent's Tail, 1999, 258), Christian chiliasm, inspired, for instance, by the teachings of Joachim of Fiore (circa 1135–1202), runs through modernist, positivist and agnostic conceptions of time from Hegel and Comte to Marx and Engels and 'millenial arduor' accompanies the entire scientific and technological development of western culture. Davis also notices how several elements of the Gnostic obsession with the apocalypse appeared in the techno-imagination of the eighties and nineties, thus offering an unusual interpretation of why expectations regarding cyber-culture and the internet long represented the last gasp of utopian thinking and a future-oriented imaginary.

80. Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee's term for the Industrial Revolution (BRYNJOLFSSON – MCAFEE, *Second Machine Age*, 15–17).

but that problem is a deal-breaker. The achievements of progress have never been distributed equally, and probably never could be in light of how firmly they are conjoined with the process of 'the accumulation of capital and the spread of capitalist markets into all corners of the world and the very tissue of human interaction'.⁸¹

81. *Ibid.*, 7.

On the cusp of the transition to the modern regime of historicity, only a few years before the French Revolution, a utopian novel was published by Louis-Sébastien Mercier entitled *The Year 2440: A Dream if Ever There Was One* (1771).⁸² Unlike 'classical utopias' that located their ideal societies in faraway places, Mercier refashions 'the virtual *elsewhere* into a potential *other time* [...], it is only with the explicit transition from space to time that the pleasing conviction is aroused in the modern reader that the ideas he is being presented with are a priori (or, as the case may be, a posteriori) realisable'.⁸³ With the advent of the modern era the status of utopia changed in one crucial respect, namely that it ceased to be only a literary genre but entered the political imaginary and concrete political programmes. Then in the first half of the nineteenth century a bond was forged between utopia and socialism (that after the initial experiments by utopian socialists was systematised by Marxism), a bond maintained by socialism's ability to reflect critically upon modernity.

82. This novel, in French *L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fut jamais*, had been published twenty-four times by the end of the eighteenth century and become an important milestone in the development of utopia as a specific genre initiated by *Utopia* (1516) by Thomas More.

83. Patrik OUREDNÍK, *Utopus to byl, kdo učinil mě ostrovem*, Praha: Torst, 2010, 138.

In his study of the relationship between socialism and utopia, Zygmunt Bauman highlighted several functions that 'utopias in general, and modern socialism in particular' play in the historical process.⁸⁴ Firstly, they relativise presence, thus creating the space for a critical stance and critical action. Secondly, utopias are 'those aspects of culture ... in which the possible extrapolations of the present are explored'. Thirdly, utopias reveal shared reality to be pluralistic, and in doing so they undermine the idea that historical development is 'natural' and instead show that it is the consequence of the competing repertoires of contention of particular interest groups. These competing visions of the good life lend utopia its political character. And finally, utopias have an enormous impact on the course of actual historical events. They demarcate not only the horizon of the possible but of the desirable, and by so doing they stimulate social action.⁸⁵

84. Zygmunt BAUMAN, *Socialism: The Active Utopia*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1976.

85. *Ibid.*, 12–16.

However, socialism's ability to criticise modernity by means of utopia has one fundamental constraint. It labours under the

misapprehension that its subject of criticism, i.e. modernity, remains within the regime of industrial capitalism. But this is now the past, and has been not since the last decade or since 1989. It began to fade into the past during the 1970s with the emergence of the 'second machine age' and the introduction of neoliberal doctrine. Modernity, to which the apparatus of socialist criticism was tailored, gave way to non-modernity, or more precisely, capitalist non-modernity as it is called in his text on 'post-capitalist futures' by Nick Srnicek,⁸⁶ one of the most eloquent proponents of the idea that left-wing thinking needs to rediscover a capacity for utopian thinking, i.e. an ability that as recently as the mid-seventies was still linked with socialism. It is pretty clear that Srnicek's non-modernity is basically the same as Fisher's capitalist realism. It refers to a historical epoch in which 'the future has been cancelled, not in favour of some epochal culmination in the end times, but instead in favour of an eternal present [...]. The time of late capitalism is therefore neither the time of modernity, nor the time of pre-modern era. It is a uniquely capitalist time which constrains the social and historical imaginary, and which must be overcome before any post-capitalist future will be conceivable'.⁸⁷

In the text above and in the book *Inventing the Future*⁸⁸ he co-wrote with Alex Williams, Nick Srnicek elaborates on ideas that he had already sketched out roughly 2013 in the *Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*.⁸⁹ All three texts share some basic features. The first is the recognition of imminent or ongoing catastrophe.

At the beginning of the second decade of the Twenty-First Century, global civilization faces a new breed of cataclysm. These coming apocalypses ridicule the norms and organisational structures of the politics which were forged in the birth of the nation-state, the rise of capitalism, and a Twentieth Century of unprecedented wars.⁹⁰

The second point made in the introduction to the Manifesto specifies two types of disaster: the ecological and the social. The former relates to a reality not created by Man, i.e. nature (the first 'coming apocalypse' is the breakdown of the planetary climate system), the latter to socially constructed reality (the financial crisis or the privatisation of social welfare services). The second feature they have in common is that both attribute the causes of these catastrophes to the neoliberalism or 'neoliberalism 2.0' embedded

86. Nick SRNICEK, 'Postcapitalist Futures', in: Václav JANOŠČÍK – Vít BOHDAL – Dustin BREITLING (eds.), *Reinventing Horizons*, Praha: display, 2016, 15–32.

87. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

88. Nick SRNICEK – Alex WILLIAMS, *Inventing the Future. Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, London–New York: Verso, 2015.

89. SRNICEK – WILLIAMS, '#ACCELERATE MANIFESTO', op.cit.

90. *Ibid.*, point 1 of the introduction to the manifesto.

within non-modernity. Yet another shared feature is their critique of the inability of the current left to offer any alternative other than what Srnicek and Williams call ‘folk politics’, which would ‘oppose the abstract violence of globalised capital with the flimsy and ephemeral “authenticity” of communal immediacy’.⁹¹ As an alternative to a left caught between mourning the golden age of Western social democracy (characterised by political parties and trade unions) and an ongoing criticism of the present,⁹² Srnicek and Williams want to see the creation of ‘a new left global hegemony’ that ‘entails a recovery of lost possible futures, and indeed the recovery of the future as such’.⁹³

This is where accelerationism comes in. Since the metaphor of acceleration is fundamental to the entire stream of thought, it is crucial we understand what is to be accelerated and how. The early articulation of the Manifesto is fleshed out in Srnicek’s text for the conference *Reinventing Horizons*, especially as regards the relationship of accelerationism to the technological base of late capitalism.

Part three of the Manifesto clarifies aspects of accelerationist politics, emphasising its receptiveness to ‘a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology’.⁹⁴ In other words, this is a politics committed to those features of modernity most closely associated with the idea of progress but betrayed by capitalism’s tendency to (re)produce the same. Point seven of part three of the Manifesto contains a clearly formulated demand resonating with utopian fervour:

We want to accelerate the process of technological evolution. But what we are arguing for is not techno-utopianism. Never believe that technology will be sufficient to save us. Necessary, yes, but never sufficient without socio-political action. [...] Whereas the techno-utopians argue for acceleration on the basis that it will automatically overcome social conflict, our position is that technology should be accelerated precisely because it is needed in order to win social conflicts.⁹⁵

What could very easily be the source of a certain confusion is the strongly accentuated link between accelerationism and technology, even though, as we see in the passages cited from the

91. *Ibid.*, point 5 of the introduction to the manifesto.

92. ‘The mainstream left (e.g. trade unions and political parties) does not offer images of a better future, but only a return to an imagined social democratic past. [...] Equally the radical left has become a repository of critical reflexes and melancholy incredibly adept at discerning the problems of any particular social transformation, but largely incapable of formulating a meaningful and viable future. [...] At worst, these movements outwards glorify regression and offer a return to small-scale communities and generalised retreat from civilisation. The future, in any case, is accepted as impossible.’ (SRNICEK, ‘Postcapitalist Futures’, 25–26.)

93. SRNICEK – WILLIAMS, ‘#ACCELERATE MANIFESTO’, point 6 of the introduction to the manifesto. A lot of space is also devoted to the question of the formulation and construction of a leftwing global hegemony, or contra-hegemony to neoliberalism in *Inventing the Future* (see for instance pp 137–147). Drawing on the classical roots of the term in the work of Antonio Gramsci, Srnicek and Williams interpret the neoliberal hegemony as a system based on a broad consensus regarding a comprehensive set of ideas collected so as to form a kind of ‘common sense’ that is difficult to question, involving such principles as personal freedom, freedom of movement, deregulation, etc. A significant factor in the change to this ‘common sense’ is the revival of utopian thinking. Srnicek and Williams characterise utopia as the ‘embodiment of hyperstition of progress’ (p 144).

94. SRNICEK – WILLIAMS, ‘#ACCELERATE MANIFESTO’, introduction to Part 3.

95. *Ibid.*, Point 7 of Part 3.

Manifesto above, the acceleration of technological development is only emphasised as one tool among many to be deployed in the creation of a post-capitalistic future, and inseparable from socio-political action. The problem with the Manifesto is that it does not analyse in sufficient depth how categories of abstraction, globality and technology contribute to what Berardi terms (social) decomposition.⁹⁶ Though Srnicek and Williams criticise the negative impacts of neoliberalism, it would appear that they have not adequately taken into account the fact that the real driving force behind the catastrophes we see erupting all around us is the disintegration of the social fabric, the radical atomisation of society that is taking place at a tempo directly proportional to the accelerating development of technology. The question of how and with whom this essential socio-political action is to be undertaken therefore remains unanswered.

A future without society?

Accelerationist calls for a shakeup of time were preceded by efforts that at first sight appear similar, or at least sharing the same goal (i.e. that of offering some alternative to late-capitalist timelessness), but elected a different strategy and focused on an archaeological search for utopia as something that disappeared in the ruins of unrealised or *détourned* modernist and avant-garde projects. Dieter Roelstraete interpreted this 'historiographic turn' of the 2000s⁹⁷ as a reaction to the feeling of hopelessness that prevailed after the events of 9/11 and above all when the so-called War on Terror, prosecuted in the face of mass protests, stopped being simply targeted attacks on representatives of al-Qaida and became a fully fledged military campaign.⁹⁸

The blatant disregard for public opinion on the parts of the ruling representatives of the countries of the so-called coalition of the willing did not end with the mass protests against the military invasion of Iraq, but continued throughout the years of anti-globalisation rallies.⁹⁹ Questions regarding the causes of the failure of the anti-globalisation and anti-war movement form the starting point of Berardi's *After the Future*:

The so-called counter-globalization movement, that was born in the days of Seattle, on the eve of the end of the century, has been a collective conscious actor, a

96. BERARDI, *After the Future*, 99.

97. Dieter ROELSTRAETE, 'After the Historiographic Turn: Current Findings', *e-flux journal*#6, 2009, [online](#).

98. *Ibid.*, 3. (On 15 February 2003 an estimated ten to thirteen million people participated in the largest global anti-war protest in 800 towns and cities around the world.)

99. The beginnings of the anti-globalisation movement reach back to the end of the eighties, when protests took place against the annual meeting of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in Berlin (1988) and the G7 Summit in Paris (1990). Subsequently the annual meeting of organisations representing neoliberalism and economic globalisation (the IMF, the WTO and the G8) was accompanied by mass demonstrations. As well as the events that took place in Seattle, protests in Prague (2000) and Geneva (2001) inscribed themselves on the collective imaginary.

movement of unprecedented strength and extent. But it has changed nothing in the daily life of the masses, it has not changed the relationship between salaried labor and capitalist enterprise, it has not changed the daily relationship between precarious workers, it has not changed the condition of life of migrants. It has not created solidarity between people in the factories, in the schools, in the cities. So, neoliberal politics failed, but social autonomy could not emerge. The ethical consciousness of the insanity of neoliberal politics spread everywhere but it did not shape the affective and social relations between people. The movement has stayed an expression of ethical protest; it has, nonetheless, produced effects. The neoliberal ideology that was before accepted as the word of God, as a natural and undisputable truth, started to be questioned in the days following the Seattle riots, and was widely denounced. But the ethical demonstrations did not change the reality of social domination. The global corporations did not slow the exploitation of labor and the massive destruction of the planet's environment. The warmongers did not stop organizing and launching deadly attacks against civil populations in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Palestine, and in many other places of the world. Why so? Why is it that the largest demonstration in human history, the antiwar Global Action that the movement launched on February 15th 2003, did not succeed in stopping the bombing of Baghdad? Why was conscious collective action, although massive, and worldwide, unable to change things? This is the question I have been trying to answer during the last ten years, this is the question that I have been trying to answer in this book.¹⁰⁰

100. BERARDI, *After the Future*, 9–10.

According to Berardi, the cause 'is not to be found in the political strategy of the fight, but in the structural weakness of the social fabric'.¹⁰¹ However, when searching for an answer to the question of how society has managed to arrive at such an advanced stage of decomposition, he focuses on the effects of recombinatory semiocapitalism and the precarisation of work.¹⁰² Berardi uses the neologism 'semiocapitalism' to highlight two distinctive features of late capitalism. The first is the decoupling of the link between wage labour integrated into the process of industrial production and wealth creation.¹⁰³ The second is the increasing

101. *Ibid.*, 10.

102. *Ibid.*, 95.

103. This problem is described in more detail in the first chapter of *The Enigma of Capital* entitled The Disruption. (HARVEY, *The Enigma of Capital*, 19–23.)

atomisation of work and its subordination (in terms of intensity and time spent) to an inhuman digital environment. According to Berardi, connectivity (the incorporation of labour into the digital environment) and uncertainty (precarisation) are inextricably linked. In semiocapitalism the integrity of the personality of the employee is decomposed to a far greater extent than it had been in 'solid' or industrial capitalism. What 'liquid' (digital) capital purchases are merely 'fractals of human time'. 'Therefore the supply of labour time can be disconnected from the physical and juridical person of the worker. Social labour time becomes an ocean of valorising cells that can be summoned and recombined in accordance with the needs of capital.'¹⁰⁴ In a system configured in this way, 'precarisation', i.e. the uncertainty and absence of any long-term work or life perspectives, relates not only to those most obviously vulnerable, such as people with a lower education, single mothers and migrants, but practically everyone.

104. BERARDI, *After the Future*, 26.

Berardi uses the term semiocapitalism in combination with the unusual adjective 'recombinatory'. As he sees it, recombination refers to the 'technical form of the labour process in the digital environment'. The companion term is 'recomposition', i.e. 'the social and cultural process enabling the fragments of labour to become conscious subjectivity'.¹⁰⁵ Using these two terms Berardi expounds his main thesis. He claims that 'the recombinant form of the labour process has changed the very foundation of the conflictual nature of labor, and has displaced the social landscape in such a way that any social conscious recombination seems impossible'.¹⁰⁶ Berardi is not the only writer to view modern subjectivity as the product of the conflictual nature of wage labour. Vincent Mosco describes the relationship of capital, wage labour and subjectivity in a similar fashion:

105. *Ibid.*, 98.

106. *Ibid.*

Capital needs to create the worker in its fullest subjectivity and then make it part of a process that channels that subjectivity into productivity. On the one hand such a process holds great potential for expanding capitalism into what we now call the knowledge, culture, and information industries. On the other hand, controlling such labour is far more challenging than it is to control and channel manual labour whose knowledge and affect were less consequential to meet the needs of capital.¹⁰⁷

107. Vincent MOSCO, 'Marx is Back, But Which One? On Knowledge Labour and Media Practice', *tripleC*, 10 (2), 2012, 570–576, [online](#).

Just how complex it is to control the workers with fully developed modern subjectivity became obvious in the late sixties. One only has to think of the counter-cultural and emancipatory movement in the US, the student riots in Paris, the Prague Spring... All of these phenomena can be seen as the consequence of the 'uncontrollability' of modern subjectivities driven by their own desires. Neoliberalism came up with one major innovation over the philosophy of capitalism that had pertained until that time: in addition to productivity it gambled on competitiveness and desire. Though in retrospect these appear like forces capable of shaping a collective subjectivity or movement, neoliberalism took them and reconfigured them as relating only to individuals.

The question of individualisation is also examined in *24/7* by Jonathan Crary, who claims that the experience of being able to live with others, to share things or minimise the desire for them (as expressed in the ideas and actual experience of the sixties and early seventies) began to be systematically purged from the mid-seventies. During the eighties poverty was rebranded. Traditionally we had insisted that 'poverty does not make one less honourable'. Now it acquired a stigma, eventually being associated with criminality. 'One of the main forms of control over the last thirty years has been to ensure there are no visible alternatives to privatized patterns of living.'¹⁰⁸ At this point Crary introduces Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), in which, reflecting upon the consumer society of the 1950s, Sartre anticipates the current situation that is the consequence of three decades of the 'neoliberal counter-revolution', i.e. a state in which the 'possibilities of non-monadic or communal life are rendered unthinkable'.¹⁰⁹ We are disconnected from others and even from our own lives. We are powerless. Sartre calls this powerlessness 'seriality', which he associates with the continuous production of solitariness as a fundamental buttress of capitalism.¹¹⁰

108. CRARY, *24/7*, 115.

109. *Ibid.*, 114.

110. 'Seriality is the dispersal of collectivity into an aggregate of discrete individuals who relate to each other only on the basis of hollow or narcissistic identities.' *Ibid.*, 116.

These texts by Franco Berardi and Jonathan Crary both set out to show that there is a clear link between presentism, the 'regime of historicity' that arrived on the scene by the end of the eighties, and individualism or social decomposition as the consequence of neoliberalism or semiocapitalism. A renewal of the possibility of thinking of the future, i.e. a renewal of the utopian horizon, is therefore inextricably linked to the idea of collectivity. The future is not something that lies on the horizon of individual expectations.

It makes sense only in the intersubjective dimension of expectation as a common dream or political project.

If we cast our minds back to attempts made to revive utopian thinking in the art of the last quarter of a century, there is no better place to begin than with 'relational aesthetics', a relatively heterogeneous realm of artistic practice identified by Nicolas Bourriaud at the end of the nineties. In the introduction to *Relational Aesthetics*¹¹¹ Bourriaud builds on the achievements of Guy Debord. He emphasises that the process of spectacularisation as described by Debord in the late fifties and early sixties has been completely accomplished, that immediate experience has been sidelined by standardised artefacts, and that relationships are no longer experienced directly but are beginning to become blurred in spectacular representations.¹¹² In such a situation Bourriaud claims that 'the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist.'¹¹³ Bourriaud's 'micro-utopia' does not relate to any imaginary future, nor does it expand the horizon of expectations ('social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias and imitative strategies').¹¹⁴ It seeks to expand the quotidian, it wishes to (re)discover community wherever the spectacle creates only discrete individuals. The place where the artwork is to develop as a 'social interstice'¹¹⁵ or as an 'arena of exchange'¹¹⁶ is the contemporary art exhibition, which, according to Bourriaud, enjoys the same status in the sphere of commerce with representations as barter within the context of the capitalist market.

Despite its attempts to come to terms with the concept of utopia, relational aesthetics remains strongly tied to the presentist mode of the nineties, and in Bourriaud's forceful description deliberately suspends the horizon of expectations. Nevertheless, developments in the sphere of real 'folk politics' between 1998 (the year that *Relational Aesthetics* was published) and 2003, when the arc described above from Seattle was brought to a close after the invasion of Iraq, wrought a significant change, namely that, in the art world at least, these horizons of expectation once again became accessible. And so in the accompanying text to the curatorial section of the project *Utopia Station* prepared for the Venice Biennale in 2003 by Molly Nesbit, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Hans Ulrich Obrist we read that 'utopia becomes the secret garden whose doors

111. Nicolas BOURRIAUD, *Esthétique Relationnelle*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 1998. Here I use the English translation *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002.

112. *Ibid.*, 9.

113. *Ibid.*, 13.

114. *Ibid.*, 31.

115. *Ibid.*, 14. Bourriaud uses the term 'social interstice' to refer to a kind of parallel space alongside social reality, a space in which artists can carry out relational experiments that might directly impact reality in the form of engaged artistic practice while allowing them the necessary artistic autonomy.

116. *Ibid.*, 18. The concept of the 'arena of exchange' is closely associated with the gallery space or exhibition format, within which it opens up. It is to be judged by the aesthetic criteria of 'the coherence of its form, and then the symbolic value of the 'world' it suggests to us, and of the image of human relations reflected by it'.

117. Molly NESBIT – Rirkrit TIRAVANIJJA – Hans Ulrich OBRIST, 'What is a Station?', *e-flux.com*, [online](#).

118. See, for instance, Will BRADLEY – Charles ESCHE, *Art and Social Change. A Critical Reader*, London: Afterall – Tate Publishing, 2007; Johanna BILLING – Maria LIND – Lars NILSSON (eds.), *Taking the Matter into Common Hands*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007; in Czech Jan ZÁLEŠÁK, *Umění spolupráce*, Brno – Praha: MU – VVP AVU, 2011.

119. They focus mainly on social problems associated with the status of individuals or groups in society and institutional problems, again reflecting relations between people above all.

120. Though all three tendencies occasionally reflect upon colonialism, either their local character or their nostalgia for the historical avant-garde and modernism prevents them from becoming a genuine critique of colonialism and its ongoing manifestations and consequences.

121. BAUMAN, *Socialism. The Active Utopia*, op. cit.

122. Peter BEILHARZ, *Socialism and Modernity*, Minneapolis (MN) – London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 1.

123. *Ibid.*

can be opened again'.¹¹⁷ The following five years, which ended with the global financial crisis, is a period in which participative art comes into full bloom. Unlike relational aesthetics, it often adopts an antagonistic stance and opts for activist approaches, while openly declaring its desire to operate on the level of lived reality and achieve genuine (social and political) change.¹¹⁸ In addition to these mergers of art and folk politics, during the last decade the 'historiographic turn' developed in parallel, i.e. art that, turning its back on localised events meeting the description of 'folk politics', turned its attention instead to past utopias. All three of these tendencies, each updating in its own way the desire for utopia, share several features. Above all, they are defiantly anthropocentric¹¹⁹ and focus on the problems of countries of the global north.¹²⁰ They restrict themselves to themes that came to the fore around 2010 within the context of discussions regarding speculative realism, the Anthropocene, or posthumanism. Though all of these topics engage fully with the future, they adopt a perspective that transcends a tired modernistic futurology in which mankind is both the initiator and beneficiary of progress.

The future lies beyond the horizon of humanity as we know it.
A new beginning or the end?

In the mid-seventies Zygmunt Bauman described socialism as an 'active utopia',¹²¹ and even at the turn of the last decade Peter Beilharz could be found dubbing it the 'counter-culture of capitalism': 'Socialism is one central trend in the critique of modernity, for socialism rests on the image of modernity as it is and as it might be.'¹²² It is this aspect of socialism, i.e. its ability to operate as a 'critique via utopia',¹²³ that has been mired in crisis over recent years.

Art historian T. J. Clark, in his widely read 2012 essay 'For a Left with No Future', asserts that the Left is unable to envision an alternative to the ruling elite or to marshal the disparate forces of protest and dissent, because of its tendency to exhaustively analyze the present and search for signs of salvation or catastrophe. 'Utopias reassure modernity as to its infinite potential,' he writes. 'But why? It should learn—be taught—to look failure in the face.' Clark argues that pessimism is appropriate, even necessary, given the absence of any desirable future, the inevitability of persistent war, poverty, suffering, and so on. The Left must admit that there is no future and acquiesce to the politics

of moderation, of ‘small steps’ toward slight improvement. For Clark, reform is the new revolution: ‘To move even the least distance out of the cycle of horror and failure [...] will entail a piece-by-piece, assumption-by-assumption dismantling of the politics we have.’ Today, even reform hardly seems viable, and the notion that the average citizen could demand a different kind of life seems more effective as a facade for plutocracy than as a political strategy. ‘We are entering into a period of inconclusive struggles between a weakened capitalism and dispersed agencies of opposition, within delegitimated and insolvent political orders,’ Balakrishnan writes, echoing Fukuyama. [...] In the past decade, this current of thinking—let’s call it no-futurism—has dominated the discourse of the Left, at least inasmuch as it’s represented in tracts by French communization theorists and Italian autonomists [...]. Even outside the purview of the leftist political and economic theory that I and many others were reading around the time of Occupy Wall Street, there seemed to be a consensus that we should give ourselves over to the coming catastrophe, whatever Hollywood-inspired form it may take[...].¹²⁴

I have quoted at length from an essay by Sarah Resnick contained in the anthology *Speculations* (“*The future is _____*”), a series of public lectures and discussions examining the topic of speculations on possible futures,¹²⁵ because it describes with great clarity the defeatist mood prevailing in recent years among leftist intellectuals.¹²⁶ The politics of small steps referred to by Clark is a prime example of the ‘common sense’ of the contemporary left, which the authors of *Inventing the Future* Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams call folk politics.¹²⁷ Though they credit contemporary folk politics (from the nineties to the present day) with an ability to react to the oppressive character of late capitalism, or to be precise, to the specific manifestations thereof, they unambiguously repudiate the idea that it is able to articulate some kind of meaningful alternative, some vision of a counter-hegemony or programme that might lead to the overthrow of capitalism or to the attainment of a post-capitalist future.¹²⁸ They believe that local, reactive manifestations of dissent and opposition have become ineffective mainly because our world has become more abstract and more complex than ever before.¹²⁹ They state that ‘any post-capitalist project will require an ambitious, abstract, mediated, complex and

124. Sarah RESNICK, ‘Introduction’, in: TRIPLE CANOPY, *Speculations* (“*The future is _____*”), 15–16.

125. The series of lectures and conversations entitled *Speculations* (“*The future is _____*”), Fifty days of lectures on the future) took place as part of EXPO 1 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA PS1) from 12 May to 18 July 2013.

126. Resnick herself eschews this ‘no-future’ diction and deliberately allows her thoughts to inhabit a space of uncertainty between the defeat of one and the boundless optimism radiating from the successful venture capitalists of Silicon Valley.

127. See the subsection ‘Time has stopped. Must we accelerate in order to get it up and running again?’.

128. SRNICEK – WILLIAMS, *Inventing the Future*, 17–18.

129. At the same time, these ‘forms of simplification’ are an understandable response to the fact that current problems such as economic globalisation, international politics and climate change are too complex for us to be able to relate to them meaningfully.

global approach – one that folk-political approaches are incapable of providing.¹³⁰

130. SRNICEK – WILLIAMS, *Inventing the Future*, 19.

Srnicek and Williams believe that any future-oriented left must re-appropriate the idea of modernity, deflect it from the dystopian course it took in the seventies, and fill it with new content. This fundamental task then requires a new way of thinking about the key ideas of modernity, such as freedom, democracy and secularism.¹³¹ Another task is the ‘recuperation of the idea of progress’. This must be achieved by means of a new teleology that overturns the ingrained idea that progress inevitably leads us back to capitalism. According to Srnicek and Williams, the absence of any vision of the future that could function as an alternative set of ideas and values creating a ‘common sense’, which in its turn could become the basis for a non-capitalist hegemony, is the fundamental problem of folk politics. So what have they themselves come up with? Firstly, they say we must wean ourselves off the idea that progress is the inevitable goal of all developments (in the form of a trace of the future already contained in the present but not yet developed). Progress must be understood as hyperstition, as a narrative that allows for navigation forward, a ‘kind of fiction, but one that aims to transform itself into a truth’.¹³²

132. *Ibid.*, 80.

The authors of *Inventing the Future* also claim that if the left wants to compete with global capitalism, it must rethink the concept of universalism.¹³³ They concede that this puts them in the firing line of critics who regard universalism as the ideological backdrop of colonialism, modern slavery, genocide and forced cultural assimilation. Despite all of these problems they continue to press for a universal claim to a designed anti-hegemony. Why? ‘Most notably, giving up on the category leaves us with nothing but a series of diverse particulars. There appears no way to build meaningful solidarity in the absence of some common factor. The universal also operates as a transcendent ideal – never satisfied with any particular embodiment, and always open to striving for better.’¹³⁴

133. *Ibid.*, 81.

134. *Ibid.*, 82.

One such universal category could certainly be freedom, another concept from the classical repertoire of modernity to which Srnicek and Williams turn their attention. They believe that capitalism historically benefitted from its link to the concept of negative freedom, i.e. freedom ‘from something’. This concept of freedom allows for the idea of equal rights to be maintained in a system

from which different people draw benefits in a manifestly unequal way. We can all recite the narrative that explains this inequality: people are not different in terms of their freedom but their abilities, specifically their readiness to compete and their willingness and will to succeed. In place of negative freedom, the authors of *Inventing the Future* speak of 'synthetic freedom', which is based on the idea that formal rights are worthless without the material resources to back them up.¹³⁵ Any increase in freedom must be accompanied by an increase in the ability to realise our desires: 'A primary aim of a post-capitalist world would therefore be to maximise synthetic freedom, or in other words, to enable the flourishing of all of humanity and the expansion of our collective horizons.'¹³⁶

135. *Ibid.*, 85.136. *Ibid.*

It a post-capitalist future it is humanity itself that should develop. Synthetic freedom should unleash 'utopian ambitions of megaprojects': 'the dreams of space flight, the decarbonisation of the economy, the automation of mundane labour, the extension of human life...'¹³⁷ From the perspective of the authors of *Inventing the Future*, the future of mankind is inseparably bound up with technological transformation. At the same time, the path towards a post-capitalist future requires a shift in the direction of the transformed and still changeable subject.

137. *Ibid.*, 186.

There is no 'true' essence to humanity that could be discovered beyond our enmeshments in technological, natural and social webs. [...] The postcapitalist subject would therefore not reveal an authentic self that had been obscured by capitalist social relations, but would instead unveil the space to create new modes of being.¹³⁸

138. *Ibid.*, 186–187.

To be able to appreciate the power of utopia based on the concept of synthetic freedom, we have to leave behind the idea that those who live and flourish in this utopia will necessarily be people:

The full development of synthetic freedom therefore requires a reconfiguration of the material world in accordance with the drive to expand our capacities for action. It demands experimentation with collective and technological augmentation, and a spirit that refuses to accept any barrier as natural and inevitable. Cyborg augmentations, artificial life, synthetic biology and technologically mediated reproduction are all examples of this elaboration. The overall

aim must therefore be picked out as an unrelenting project to unbind the necessities of this world and transform them into materials for the further construction of freedom. Such an image of emancipation can never be satisfied with or condensed into a static society, but will instead continually strain beyond any limitations. Freedom is a synthetic enterprise, not a natural gift.¹³⁹

139. *Ibid.*, 88.

140. *Ibid.*, 23.

‘Expanding humanity’s capacities’¹⁴⁰ is perhaps the strongest aspect of the utopian imagination of *Inventing the Future*. Compared to authors of previous utopias, Srnicek and Williams have one considerable advantage, namely that the technology capable in theory of performing all the jobs at present comprising wage labour is within reach. However, the advancement of full automation as an opportunity to expand our capacities raises the age-old question of how we would spend all this extra time (sceptics would say ‘empty’ time) at our disposal. Srnicek and Williams ignore this issue, as they do the question of ‘human nature’. The same is not true of the authors of *The Second Machine Age*. In their enthusiasm for technological development, Brynjolfsson and McAfee are close to accelerationism. However, they differ ‘only’ in one, albeit fundamental regard, namely that they are ‘sceptical of efforts to come up with fundamental alternatives to capitalism’.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, they pay close attention to the effects of the changing nature and eventual disappearance of wage labour as a consequence of technological acceleration.¹⁴² They do not share the optimism of the famous science fiction writer Arthur C. Clark, who writes that ‘the goal of the future is full unemployment, so we can play’.¹⁴³ After reviewing critically the concept of a universal basic income, one of the pillars of accelerationist politics, they propose a different set of solutions (negative income tax, support for the peer economy and crowdsourcing), in which the basic ideological premise reflects Voltaire’s statement that ‘work keeps at bay three great evils: boredom, vice and need’.¹⁴⁴ Brynjolfsson and McAfee, who display the same fascination with technological development as the accelerationists (from self-driving cars to increasingly complex mobile applications allowing for the development of a sharing economy), finally reach a conclusion reminiscent of accelerationism’s nightmare, namely that ‘the best solutions – probably, in fact, the only real solutions – to the labor force challenges that will arise in the future will come from markets and capitalism, and from the technology-enabled creations of innovators and entrepreneurs’.¹⁴⁵

141. BRYNJOLFSSON
– MCAFEE, *The Second Machine
Age*, 220.

142. *Ibid.*, 160–236.

143. *Ibid.*, 173.

144. *Ibid.*, 223. (According to Brynjolfsson and McAfee, a guaranteed minimum income would effectively eradicate one of these evils, namely poverty.)

145. *Ibid.*, 233.



Palo Cháán (Patricia Domínguez & Irvin Morazán): *Sexi Sushi* (2015–2016). Detail of installation (video 5:10 min., plastic hands and feet, foam hand, prawn cushion, hand-painted nails, ink print, mugs for yerba mate, mural – cosmetic clay and white paint). Installation view of *Apocalypse Me* exhibition. Photo: Tomáš Souček.

If one were inclined to cynicism, one might be led to conclude that this future is already present and that markets, entrepreneurs and capitalism, connected to the state bureaucracy in an inextricable network of links and relationships, already deal with 'problems with the workforce' by creating what David Graeber is minded to call 'bullshit jobs'.¹⁴⁶

146. David GRAEBER, 'On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs', *Strike! magazine*, summer 2013, [online](#).

There is another problem with the idea of 'synthetic freedom' and that is the issue of whether it is sufficiently removed from modern universalism and its dark side, to wit colonialism. A key idea in the construction of the concept of synthetic freedom is desire, i.e. the need for the development of the resources essential for the realisation of aspirations. The freedom to desire is in itself undisputed. But what desire are we talking of here? As members of late capitalist societies are we even capable of imagining desire outside the framework of its intoxication by 'one-dimensional thinking'?¹⁴⁷ The call for the universal spread of synthetic freedom is highly reminiscent of the logic upon which many centuries of the colonial expansion of (European) modernity was based, a logic in which technological development is equated with emancipation or an expansion of the boundaries or horizons of freedom. Accelerationists are in no doubt that technological development is the path to the future:¹⁴⁸ they 'simply' ask upon what ideological base (viewed within the simple polarity of neoliberalism versus 'leftist politics') this development will be based. The rhetorical power of the idea of accelerationist politics is such that, if you dare to question the potential of technological development, you automatically find yourself dismissed as a nostalgic supporter of the 'slow world' (which in any case has already disappeared). However, problems lurk within this very basic axiom of accelerationism that cannot be easily shrugged off and need to be addressed.

147. 'The means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions [...]. The products indoctrinate and manipulate: they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. [...] Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe.' (Herbert MARCUSE, *One-Dimensional Man*, London - New York, Routledge, 2002, 14.) This passage is perhaps too fatalistic, in that it denies any possibility of stepping out of a system that since the time Marcuse was writing has witnessed fundamental developments, including the fact that 'products' can nowadays refer to entities such as emotions or relationships. Nevertheless, I believe the text is a useful corrective, a reminder of the fact that behind the 'common sense' of neoliberalism, which Smicek and Williams wish to critique, there is the 'common sense of capitalism', which remains in the shade of its younger enemy.

148. 'In order to develop an alternative that is adequate to today's complex societies, those on the left need to marshal the latent capacities of technology and science in order to envision a better future.' (Nick SR-NICEK, 'Navigating Neoliberalism: Political aesthetics in an age of crisis', 2012, [online](#))

The critique of the implicit ideological base of the concept of synthetic freedom that we find as far back as the Frankfurt School, as I indicated in the previous paragraph, is consistent with criticism of accelerationism from positions in which an ecological awareness of the state of our planet is combined with a demand for the unconditional termination of the process of decolonisation. An example of such criticism is contained in the text by Irmgard Emmelhainz *Decolonization as the Horizon of Political Action*.¹⁴⁹ Emmelhainz is most interested in the concept of technological rationality (i.e. the subordination of the political reality of modernity to the

149. Irmgard EMMELHEINZ, 'Decolonization as the Horizon of Political Action', *e-flux journal* #77, 2016, [online](#).

basic axiom of scientific and technological progress) as an inherent part of modernity.¹⁵⁰ She argues that not even accelerationism escapes from the shadow of technological rationality:

150. See MARCUSE, *One-Dimensional Man*, 3–20.

Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have demanded that the Left make use of the latest technological developments to liberate humanity from work while simultaneously producing wealth. However, it is not clear how this new dream of a postwork society of full automation escapes the early twentieth-century fantasy of technology and knowledge as spontaneously emancipating – a dream that sits uncomfortably alongside the neoliberal deployment of technology as a tool of domination. How is this not simply another example of Herbert Marcuse’s use and abuse of ‘technological rationality’? Certainly technology will always relieve some people of work and produce wealth – that has never been the difficulty. The difficulty lies in taking a world shattered by technology and socially reconstructing it as a just, peaceful, and sustainable ecosystem, a project that is beyond the means of technology, in and of itself. [...] Technological rationality, insofar as it is the rationalization of the domination of nature and society, is the foundation of our current model of accumulation by dispossession, exploitation, and extraction. This model has not only created environmental and social destruction; it has also divided the world into privileged urban areas and what Naomi Klein calls ‘sacrifice zones’. These sacrifice zones are the contemporary manifestation of the colonial model; once the imposed project of development failed to modernize ‘primitive’ societies, their lands were transformed into zones of pure extraction.¹⁵¹

151. EMMELHEINZ, ‘Decolonization as the Horizon of Political Action’, 7.

This criticism of accelerationist politics is bound up with the need to acknowledge the colonial character of modernity and the possible consequences of the Anthropocene (or Capitalocene) in its capacity as ‘the moment when the confidence that there can be a technological solution for our problems as a species is now over’.¹⁵² With the existence of the Anthropocene as a backdrop, Emmelheinz offers a new perspective on the question of folk politics. She ‘transposes’ the localism of the resistance that Srnicek and Williams interpret from the point of view of a politics being played out in the centres of the rich countries of the North

152. *Ibid.*, 10.

153. Perhaps the most publicity in 2016 was given to the protest movement against the completion of the Dakota Access pipeline, the planned route of which runs through sacred burial grounds and sources of drinking water close to the Standing Rock Indian reserve. The protests began in spring, but only caught the attention of the media in autumn, when, after the escalation of violence on oil company employees, private security agencies and the police, demonstrating Indians won huge support of the American and international public. Though in December of that year they celebrated partial success, their prospects do not look so rosy in the light of changes to the administration in the wake of Donald Trump's election win. A roundup of news with periodic updates is available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dakota_Access_Pipeline_protests (accessed 25 October 2016).

154. HARVEY, *The Enigma of Capital*, 53–54.

155. This is something that Emmelhainz is aware of. She does not envisage localised resistance to the unscrupulous pillaging of the natural world as an objective, but as the current stage that would ideally be replaced by a 'global network of political solidarities to defend the commons' (EMMELHEINZ, 'Decolonization as the Horizon of Political Action', 10).

(Occupy Wall Street etc.) into the geopolitical realities of the third world and/or countries with issues around autonomy, such as Indian reservations in the United States.¹⁵³ The manifestations of resistance cited by the author are deemed localised simply because they appear as a reaction wherever the impacts of the ongoing 'original accumulation of capital' or 'accumulation by dispossession'¹⁵⁴ are directly manifest. Srnicek and Williams are right in claiming that these struggles are in themselves reactive and do not offer a (universal) alternative to the global hegemony of capitalism.¹⁵⁵ However, the question remains as to whether, despite their best intentions, their own vision of a post-capitalist future based on the acceleration of modernity or technological development can transcend the framework of technological rationality and the mechanistic view of the world associated therewith that is forever foraging for potential raw materials and exploitable energy sources. The future the accelerationists look to risks being condemned to endlessly repeating the same errors in relation to 'others' (be these human or inhuman), the most egregious of which we associate with capitalist modernity.

Localised folk-political conflicts breaking out wherever neoliberalism applies pressure to shift the boundary of what can be removed from the sphere of nature and transformed into part of the market may not in themselves represent solutions. However, they open up a perspective for the global socio-political action that Srnicek and Williams call for in the introduction to their book. In hitherto overly isolated sites of resistance, new forms of community are being created and movements formed that are bucking the trend of social decomposition (Berardi) accelerated by technology. In the polemic between a critical reading of the Anthropocene (as the consequence of colonial, technological rationality underpinned by the nature of modernity) and an accelerationist politics seeking to revive the progressive potential of modernity, the dilemma of the two horizons already outlined returns: a society without a future or a future without society? This dilemma, closely associated with an anthropocentric view of the world, might be overcome by the posthumanist perspective (present in the concept of synthetic freedom), which will be examined in the final chapter.

Summary

In the second chapter our attention shifted from anxiety as one of the most important aspects of the contemporary world to the sense of hopelessness and the loss of the horizon of expectations that this anxiety (co)creates. Hopelessness, i.e. the widely shared feeling that time has come to a standstill and that in the best case scenario nothing awaits us in the future other than the mere repetition of the same, is the paradoxical culmination of modernity with which the idea of progress (an orientation on a future in which technological development plays a key role) is inextricably linked. The closing down of horizons of expectation is directly related to the 'structural weakening of the social fabric' (Berardi) as a consequence of the spread of the global hegemony of neoliberalism over the last forty years. In the sphere of cultural production, we find the first reaction to the transition from a future-oriented modernity to the era of presentism as far back as the nineties in relational aesthetics. However, characteristic of relational aesthetics is that, instead of a full revival of the demand for utopian thinking it offers the concept of a micro-utopia, the expansion of 'ways of living and models of action' (Bourriaud) subordinated to an aesthetic regime. A powerful anti-globalisation movement is being formed in parallel with relational aesthetics, whose antagonistic model finds its equivalent in the sphere of art. In the contemporary art discourse the concept of utopia reacquired its lustre (*Utopia Station*, 2003) in the same year it became clear how vanishingly small is the likelihood of influencing key political decisions (the military occupation of Iraq) by means of direct political action. The failure of the global antiwar movement can be seen in retrospect as an important milestone, since for some it resulted in defeatism and intensified a feeling of hopelessness, while for others it reinforced the need to revive utopian thinking. Over recent years this brand of thinking has moved on from being a nostalgic search for the ruins of past utopias (the historiographic turn) to being an effort to create a positive vision of the future based on the formulation of a counter-hegemony. Such a vision would be based on the acceleration of the progressive character of modernity in conjunction with the ideological takeover of the realm that hi-tech and green venture capitalism has appropriated for itself. The last part of the chapter is devoted to a familiarisation with and a critical reflection upon the basic theses of accelerationist

politics and reflects my own ambivalent relationship to this school of thought. My doubts basically relate to the very core of accelerationism, i.e. to the question of whether it is genuinely possible to reconfigure the technological base of late capitalism or liberalism (by filling it with new content and new ‘common sense’), and whether the very attempt to ‘recuperate the idea of progress’ (Srnicek and Williams) is always already destined to be recuperated by existing hegemonies. The introduction of accelerationism and the identification of its weak points pose questions that will be examined in the next two chapters. Chapter three will examine the Anthropocene, referred to in connection with the criticism levelled against accelerationism by Irmgard Emmelhainz. In the final chapter I will turn to posthumanism, whose ideas resonate in the accelerationist idea of ‘expanding humanity’s capacities’.



156. Or at least as we know it in Europe. Our distinctly 'exclusive' concept of humanity is inseparable from an ontological and epistemological emphasis on the uniqueness of man that is anchored in Christian cosmology and later in humanist anthropocentrism and biological and genetic essentialism.

157. This metaphor goes back some time (it is first attributed to Henry George, who compared Earth to a ship sailing through the universe in 1879 in his book *Progress and Poverty*), but was popularised at the end of the sixties by Buckminster Fuller, who in 1968 published *Operating Manual For Spaceship Earth*. What is important for our purposes is the fact that Fuller explicitly deals with the fragility of the planetary system, which must be husbanded sensitively because its available energy reserves etc., are not inexhaustible.

158. Jason W. MOORE, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, New York: Verso, 2015.

159. T. J. DEMOS, 'Introduction', in: IDEM, *Decolonizing Nature. Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016, 7–29.

160. It suffices to check out a few online news headlines in 2016: 'Icebergs are melting more quickly. Pakistan is a climate time bomb' (lidovky.cz, 13 January 2016); 'Earth is experiencing the most serious extinction of species since the disappearance of the dinosaurs, warn scientists' (idnes.cz, 27 October 2016); 'The coral reef is dying. This Australian "treasure" is facing huge losses' (tyden.cz, 5 December 2016).

161. See Elizabeth KOLBERT, *The Sixth Extinction*, New York: Henry Hold and Company, 2014.

Srnicek and Williams turn our attention to the invention of a future in which people reach a new horizon of freedom that will also represent the horizon of mankind as we know it.¹⁵⁶ However, they remain remarkably indifferent as to the environment in which this future will be played out. Probably the closest they get to answering the question they do not explicitly pose is when they propose a revival of bold utopian projects involving the search for new habitable places in outer space. If we leave to one side dreams of life on other planets and accept the fact that for some considerable time Spaceship Earth¹⁵⁷ will remain mankind's only home, then we must extend the scope of criticism and, when searching for a post-capitalist future, accept the fact that capitalism is not an exclusively social phenomenon, i.e. it is not located outside nature, but is incorporated into it and as such is an integral part of the whole that Jason W. Moore calls the 'web of life'.¹⁵⁸

In this chapter I shall examine a sphere that is of eminent interest to scientists, politicians and artists and yet, by virtue of its dogged presence, affects absolutely everyone. We might follow the lead given by T. J. Demos and call it ecological politics or the politics of ecology. For many decades the core thinking of this sphere has involved an analysis of the anthropogenic impacts on the environment, the extent and intensity of which is such that they are manifest not only on a local level but influence the geosphere of the planet as a whole.¹⁵⁹ What captures our attention and imagination the most are the abrupt changes in the biosphere that are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Even the Czech media, with its lukewarm relationship to anything outside the boundary of 'domestic news', has over the last months and years been regularly broadcasting alarming reports on the acceleration of species extinction and global warming.¹⁶⁰ Visible or otherwise discernible changes to the environment, whether they are manifest as climate change or the unprecedented disappearance of species,¹⁶¹ are the reason why ecology, so long the domain of specialists and activists, is becoming one of the central themes of international politics.

←
 Anna Slama: *antipro* (2016).
 Installation (stone, substrate, steel,
 plexiglass, acrylic, LED and UV
 lights, aquarium plants and grain).
 Installation view of *Apocalypse Me*
 exhibition. Photo: Tomáš Souček.

In 1972, the Club of Rome published a report entitled *The Limits to Growth*.¹⁶² Using mathematical models the report's authors predicted the exhaustion of non-renewable resources by the end of the 21st century given the exponential increase being witnessed in production and consumption (and in spite of the introduction of technological innovations). In the same year, the UN Conference on the Human Environment, or Earth Summit, was held in Stockholm (5–16 June 1972). The output of this conference was the Stockholm Declaration, a brief text comprising a short introduction, seven declarations and twenty-six principles with which a nascent international ecological politics should comply.¹⁶³ It is worth noting that the document includes declarations that do not relate only to environmental protection in the strict sense of the term. Among other things the Stockholm Declaration demonstrates clearly that, since as far back as the start of the seventies, there has been a broad international consensus that environmental protection must go hand in hand with political goals in the social sphere (the promotion of human rights, a condemnation of colonialism and apartheid, guaranteed reasonable rates of pay, and the production of goods in developing countries). Twenty years after the Stockholm Conference, the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (3–14 June 1992) was held, at which the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was approved.¹⁶⁴ Unlike the Stockholm Declaration, this does not restrict itself to general principles of environmental protection, but proposes concrete steps and generally worded commitments to reduce the rate at which greenhouse gases are produced. Specific commitments were then enshrined in the Kyoto Protocol, which, though approved on 10 December 1997, only came into force in 2004, when certain conditions were finally met (to wit, ratification by at least 55 countries and ratification by the industrially advanced countries whose share of emissions in 1990 was 55%).¹⁶⁵ To date, the last measure taken by the international community in its efforts to control climate change was the Paris Agreement, negotiated during the Climate Conference in Paris in 2015. This Agreement, which aims to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 2020 (with follow-up targets for 2050), came into force after ratification by the requisite number of countries in October 2016. One cannot help but notice that, compared with the comprehensive ideological purview of the Stockholm Declaration, the Paris Agreement is a very narrowly focused document, despite including a far larger range and

162. Donella H. MEADOWS – Dennis MEADOWS – Jørgen RANDERS – William W. BEHRENS III, *The Limits to Growth*, Universe Books, 1972. Available [online](#).

163. <http://www.un-documents.net/aconf48-14r1.pdf> (accessed 20 November 2016).

164. The Convention was passed on 9 May 1992 and signed on 4 June 1992. By the end of 2015 it had been ratified by 196 parties – all the UN states, Niue, Palestine, Cook Islands and the EU as a whole separately. See <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf> (accessed 20 November 2016).

165. Russia was the last industrially advanced country to ratify the protocol in 2004, at which point it came into force. However, the US, the largest global producer of greenhouse gases, signed but never ratified the Kyoto Protocol.

being purely technocratic in its formulations.

Thus although formally speaking efforts by the international community continue, a lukewarm approach to their commitments on the part of the major industrialised countries means that in practice international 'ecological realpolitik' is very close to being a farce.¹⁶⁶ In his book *Decolonising Nature*, T. J. Demos offers an uncompromising evaluation of the success or abject lack thereof and enumerates the causes of the failure of a global ecological policy:

With G8 government representatives continually lobbied by the fossil fuel industry, it has become clear that we are being held hostage to corporate powers that place short-term profits over long-term sustainability, as free-market economics is worshipped at the cost of our planet's very life-supporting capacity. The system of global governance is clearly failing.¹⁶⁷

To live and die in the Anthropocene

Given a situation in which 'global governance' as embodied by the United Nations and other international institutions combines an incomprehensible agenda with non-existent results, the voices that people are willing to listen to originate elsewhere. One notable contribution to the debate on the global environmental crisis was penned by none other than Pope Francis, who devoted his first encyclical, entitled *Laudato Si'* (2015),¹⁶⁸ to the state of the planet and its environment. The first section, 'Pollution and Climate Change', is sharply critical of the 'throwaway culture' that 'affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish'.¹⁶⁹ It also addresses climate change, the availability and quality of water, the loss of biodiversity, etc. Pope Francis's call is unequivocal: all of us (the 'whole human family') must unite 'to seek a sustainable and integral development' so as to revive the dialogue on the creation of a future for our 'common home', 'since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all'.¹⁷⁰ While the head of the Catholic Church calls for the resumption of dialogue in the name of a shared future and emphasises that 'the Creator does not abandon us', the collective imagination is trapped in a secular chiliasm (millenarianism) nurtured by images produced by popular culture.

166. China and the US, the biggest greenhouse gas emitters, did not contribute to meeting the obligations ensuing from the Kyoto Protocol. Consequently, at the end of 2011, Canada formally withdrew from the obligation to meet the binding objectives in the second period (2012–2020).

167. DEMOS, *Decolonizing Nature*, 10.

168. Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 2015. Available [online](#).

169. *Ibid.*, paragraph 21.

170. *Ibid.*, paragraphs 13 and 14.

One unabashed source of representations of expectations regarding the end of the world is Hollywood, which offers up a regular diet of apocalyptic scenarios in which we see the planet, or at least the possibility of life on it, disappear as a consequence of what we are supposed to believe is human nature, though in reality is the nature of the capitalist ideology of permanent accumulation and unlimited growth. Some of these films might be described as depicting the 'revenge of Gaia'. A good example would be *The Day After Tomorrow*, 2004, directed by Rolland Emmerich, in which we follow the rapid onset of the next ice age caused by anthropogenic changes in the Earth's atmosphere. The moral of the film is that consumer civilisation has brought this upon itself by generating uncontrollable amounts of greenhouse gases. However, our attention is quickly diverted away from the implications of this moral and toward the dramatic survivalist plot, the twist here being that our heroes are not trying to escape some horde of zombies but simply keep themselves warm. Finally, the moral of the tale is dissolved in the mush of a happy end, in which the remaining Americans (the Canadians were out of luck) are offered refuge by Mexico, a typical representative of the South colonised by neoliberalism. Following the intervention of Nature (or Gaia) the transition takes place to what is finally a fair, decolonised global politics almost spontaneously, without any great political efforts, albeit with a certain loss of life.

A marginally subtler spectacle is afforded by *Interstellar* (2014), directed by Christopher Nolan. The film is set in a not too distant future in which mankind is slowly and involuntarily heading for technological and civilisational extinction due to the devastating impacts of climate change. Nolan offers a solution for a chosen few, who embark on a Promethean journey into the depths of outer space. What eventually allows humanity to survive is not will, reason or pride, but love, which in its inexhaustibility meshes perfectly with the paradoxes of quantum physics.

This idea that mankind deserves to be annihilated is also to be found in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, another Hollywood blockbuster from 2008 directed by Scott Derrickson. In a contribution headed 'Extinction' to the anthology *Speculations*

already referred to, Claire Colebrook uses one moment from the film in order to radically interrogate the notion of the right of people to life on this (or any other) planet:

For the most part, we know that we're the last humans. [...] we'll live, but we'll know we don't have the right to live. We'll struggle, we'll learn to live with others, humans and animals. To me there is something profound about the prospect of this disdain for or distance from our own being. The great philosopher Keanu Reeves sums it up in the 2008 version of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, in which he plays an alien, when he comes to Earth and says, 'Why do you think you people should live? You have no right to live.' In the film he's an evil weirdo, but he's right! We have a proverbial interest in our own survival. But we have no right to live.¹⁷¹

171. Claire COLEBROOK, 'Extinction', in: TRIPLE CANOPY (ed.), *Speculations*, 143.

172. Colebrook examines in more detail the question of how to justify our desire to live in *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction*: 'The question is not one of how we humans can justify hostile life, but how we can possibly justify ourselves given our malevolent relation to life.' (Claire COLEBROOK, *Death of the Posthuman – Essays on Extinction*, London: Open Humanities Press, 2014, 198.)

173. The Gaia hypothesis formulated in the first half of the seventies circulates in a strong and weak version. According to the strong theory, Mother Earth is de facto one large organism – she is alive (the negative consequence of this theory is that it encourages anthropomorphisation, the projection of human qualities into a 'hyperobject' that is anything but human). The weak version is associated with Lynn Margulis: 'I prefer the idea that Earth is a network of ecosystems (as a set of communities) over any personification of Mother Gaia.' (Margulisová, *Symbiotická planeta. Nový pohled na evoluci*, Prague: Academia, 2004, 111.) For Lovelock's concept of Gaia see James LOVELOCK, 'Co je Gaia', in: IDEM, *Pomsta Gaili*, Prague: Academia, 2008, 30–42.

174. Lynn MARGULIS, 'Gaia Is a Tough Bitch', in: John BROCKMAN, *Third Culture. Beyond the Scientific Revolution*, New York: Touchstone, 1996, unpaginated. Available [online](#).

By 'right to live' Colebrook has in mind some kind of absolute, a priori right ensuing merely from the fact that we are people, hence 'lords of creation'.¹⁷² In Colebrook's writing, as in the films mentioned, Gaia is portrayed as a 'tough bitch', a locution we encounter in an older text by the evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis, who at the start of the seventies helped James Lovelock formulate his famous Gaia hypothesis.¹⁷³ Twenty years after she first came up with the formulation, Margulis wrote:

The Gaia hypothesis is a biological idea, but it's not human-centered. Those who want Gaia to be an Earth goddess for a cuddly, furry human environment find no solace in it. They tend to be critical or to misunderstand. They can buy into the theory only by misinterpreting it. Some critics are worried that the Gaia hypothesis says the environment will respond to any insults done to it and the natural systems will take care of the problems. This, they maintain, gives industries a license to pollute. Yes, Gaia will take care of itself; yes, environmental excesses will be ameliorated, but it's likely that such restoration of the environment will occur in a world devoid of people. [...] Gaia is a tough bitch — a system that has worked for over three billion years without people. This planet's surface and its atmosphere and environment will continue to evolve long after people and prejudice are gone.¹⁷⁴

An awareness of the situation our planet now finds itself in (higher concentrations of greenhouse gases in the upper part of the atmosphere, global warming,¹⁷⁵ the increased acidity of the oceans, species extinction, etc.) led James Lovelock, the figure most associated with the Gaia hypothesis, to make a similarly startling claim. Lovelock's view of our status and rights within the framework of planetary 'network of ecosystems' does not differ fundamentally from that offered by Colebrook:

The ideas that stem from Gaia theory put us in our proper place as part of the Earth system—not the owners, managers, commissars, or people in charge. The Earth has not evolved solely for our benefit, and any changes we make to it are at our own risk. This way of thinking makes clear that we have no special human rights; we are merely one of the partner species in the great enterprise of Gaia.¹⁷⁶

As far as apocalyptic thinking goes, little can compete with Lovelock's late work. In *The Vanishing Face of Gaia* he criticises both the way that political consensus is created for the need to address anthropogenic climate change (he believes the goals that climate agreements set themselves are paltry because the scientific claims on which they are based are toned down until such time as it is possible to use them as the basis for political agreement), and above all the idea that any of the proposals on the table at present could seriously change things. Lovelock is particularly critical of certain forms of renewable energy,¹⁷⁷ and especially controversial is his claim that a reversal of global warming is impossible without a dramatic decline in the world's population.¹⁷⁸

If, just by living with our pets and livestock, we are responsible for nearly half the emissions of carbon dioxide, I do not see how the 60 percent reduction can be achieved without a great loss of life.¹⁷⁹

Lovelock compares the situation in which Planet Earth finds itself and our attempts to deal with it to how people tend to react upon finding out they have an incurable disease. After denial comes anger and a desperate search for ways of fighting the disease. In the end the disease is overcome by accepting

175. Strong support for claims of global warming is provided, for example, the measurements made by Charles David Keeling in the places least affected by human activity, namely the Antarctic and at the Mauna Loa Observatory on Hawaii. The output is the Keeling Curve, a graph plotting the ongoing change in concentration of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere since the 1950s. See Helen BRIGGS, '50 Years On: The Keeling Curve Legacy', BBC, 2 December 2007, [online](#).

176. James LOVELOCK, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*, New York: Basic Books, 2009, 9.

177. This applies especially to wind farms and solar energy, both of which Lovelock views as the result of intense lobbying by the green industry that has found enthusiastic customers for low-efficiency technology in governments forced to meet emission reduction agreements. On the other hand, he is a strong supporter of nuclear energy (within the framework of claims we are used to hearing in the sphere of environmental thinking). *Ibid.*, 26–27.

178. Isabelle Stengers is a strong critic of the approach taken by Lovelock in *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*: 'We know the old ditty, which generally comes from well-fed experts, accustomed to flying, to the effect that "the problem is, there are too many of us," numbers whose "disappearance" would permit significant energy savings. But if we listen to Lovelock, who has become the prophet of disaster, it would be necessary to reduce the human population to about 500 million people in order to pacify Gaia and live reasonably well in harmony with her. The so-called rational calculations, which result in the conclusion that the only solution is to eradicate the vast majority of humans between now and the end of the century, scarcely dissimulate the delusion of a murderous and obscene abstraction. Gaia does not demand such eradication. She doesn't demand anything.' (Isabelle STENGERS, in *Catastrophic Times*, London: Open Humanities Press – meson press, 2015, 47)

179. LOVELOCK, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*, 75–76.

the inevitable. Lovelock maintains that humankind is in the second phase (anger and desperation). If the changes that the Earth's biosphere is going through are so enormous that they cannot be reversed, then we have to begin to prepare for life on a planet where nothing will be the same. Roy Scranton has something similar in mind when he writes that we have to 'learn how to die in the Anthropocene'. Scranton's short essay, published on the *New York Times* website,¹⁸⁰ is put together in remarkable way. It begins by comparing two catastrophes: the military invasion of Iraq in 2003, which he participated in as an American soldier, and Hurricane Katrina, which in 2006 devastated a large part of New Orleans. The shock triggered by the fact that an 'atmospheric phenomenon' could cause the same chaos in the centre of the global superpower as that wreaked by the coalition forces in occupied Iraq spurs Scranton into a consideration of the themes of death and dying. That which makes of the Anthropocene a topic for the humanities or for philosophical examination, he believes, is the way it poses the question of death.

180. Roy SCRANTON, 'Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene', *New York Times* – Opiniator, 10 November 2013, [online](#). In 2015, Scranton published an essay with almost the same title (*Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*).

Anna Slama: antipro (2016). Detail of installation (stone, substrate, steel, plexiglass, acrylate, LED and UV lights, aquarium plants and grain). Installation view of *Apocalypse Me* exhibition. Photo: Jiří Dvořák.

Many thinkers, including Cicero, Montaigne, Karl Jaspers, and The Stone's own Simon Critchley, have argued that studying philosophy is learning how to die. If that's true,



then we have entered humanity's most philosophical age — for this is precisely the problem of the Anthropocene. The rub is that now we have to learn how to die not as individuals, but as a civilization.¹⁸¹

181. *Ibid.*

Worth noting in Scranton's text is his personal philosophy of dying. This emerges when he describes how he dealt with the day-to-day threat of death in Iraq using the Samurai guide *Hagakure* written in the eighteenth century by Yamamoto Tsunetomo. This is the same handbook that *Ghost Dog*, the eponymous hero of the film by Jim Jarmusch (*Ghost Dog*, 1999), relies on completely. Cicero, Montaigne, Jaspers... these are revered names of European philosophy. However, when it comes to dealing with the existential crisis Scranton experiences at the start of the 21st century, none of them offer such support as a three-centuries old Japanese text, the inspiring qualities of which are augmented by the film image. Other passages in Scranton's text also make it clear that only fragments of our experience with the Anthropocene can be immediate. Most of our experience of the state of the world is medialised and mediated by images, be these film, television and newspaper reports or documentaries and artworks. Here's Scranton again:

Now, when I look into our future — into the Anthropocene — I see water rising up to wash out lower Manhattan. I see food riots, hurricanes, and climate refugees. I see 82nd Airborne soldiers shooting looters. I see grid failure, wrecked harbors, Fukushima waste, and plagues. I see Baghdad. I see the Rockaways. I see a strange, precarious world.¹⁸²

182. *Ibid.*

This dark, apocalyptic vision is a striking mix of direct experience and media-generated imagery. The wave inundating Manhattan is one of the staple clichés of disaster movies, while the beaches and the streets of the New York district of Rockaway devastated by Hurricane Sandy are lapped up by news agencies hungry for the sensational, as are images of the Japanese nuclear power station destroyed in 2011 by a powerful earthquake. Scranton's fascination with powerful images of devastation and chaos corresponds to what Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin write about the Anthropocene in the introduction entitled 'Lives Between the Fifth Assessment & the Sixth Extinction' to their

book *Art in the Anthropocene*: ‘we argue that the Anthropocene is primarily a sensorial phenomenon: the experience of living in an increasingly diminished and toxic world’, even though the images they refer to are predominantly visualisations of the climate change underway.¹⁸³

183. Heather DAVIS – Etienne TURPIN, ‘Lives Between the Fifth Assessment & The Sixth Extinction’, in: IIDEM (eds.), *Art in the Anthropocene*, London: Open Humanities Press, 2015, 3.

Fossil Us

During the last five years or so the Anthropocene as a concept has escaped the confines of specialised forums to become a central topic across a wide range of disciplines and one of the most popular overarching motifs for contemporary artists. As far back as the eighties the term was being used informally by the ecologist Eugene Stroemer, though a turning point came in 2000, when the atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen adopted and normalised it. One of its pivotal claims is that the biosphere (or perhaps the geosphere from the perspective of geological time, which is beyond the boundaries of human, phenomenological experience) has been fundamentally transformed by human activities. Over the last few years fierce debates have been held as to where to situate the beginning of the Anthropocene, i.e. the transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. Answers differed considerably depending on the field of research. Here I shall work with the line of thought that traces the origins of Anthropocene back to the ‘long’ sixteenth century during which the Columbian Exchange took place, i.e. the widespread transfer of plants, animals, culture, human populations, technology and ideas between continents. In the Americas this period was also witness to dramatic population decline.¹⁸⁴ The afforestation of the continent brought about by the collapse of Indian civilisations peaked in 1610, the same year that levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere dipped to their historical (in the sense of human history) nadir. It is this year that Simon Lewis and Mark A. Maslin propose as one of the dates marking the beginning of the Anthropocene.¹⁸⁵

184. These days we speak of genocide, though this was partly unintended, since a large share of the decline in the indigenous population to approximately ten percent over a period of one hundred years was the result of infectious diseases. See Markéta KRÍŽOVÁ, ‘Kolaps indiánských říší?’, in: Miroslav BARTA – Martin KOVÁŘ (eds.), *Kolaps a regenerace. Cesty civilizací a kultur*, Prague: Academia, 2015 (2011), 345–376.

185. Simon LEWIS – Mark A. MASLIN, ‘Defining the Anthropocene’, *Nature*, 12 March 2015, no. 519, 171–180.

According to Jason W. Moore, in its capacity as a new conceptualisation of geological time that includes ‘humanity’ as a ‘major geological force’, the Anthropocene is of crucial importance because it allows us to abandon the boundaries of traditional thinking, divided for centuries into the natural sciences and the science of man. Moore observes that the Anthropocene qua concept is in many respects similar to the concept of

‘globalisation’, which enjoyed a similarly predominant status across many disciplines during the nineties. Its attractiveness is given by both its timing and its openness, which allows for the inclusion of a plurality of opinions and approaches. Be that as it may, over the last few years the debate around and about the Anthropocene has crystallised into a form that Moore criticises for replicating the dualism of Nature vs. Society. He claims that, though the Anthropocene as a historical rather than geological concept is inadequate, this does not mean that it is undeserving of our attention. On the contrary, it is an important stepping stone in the direction of a ‘new synthesis’ (i.e. moving beyond that dualism in which our thinking has been trapped for half a millennium and which has led to the current state of the planet). The importance of the Anthropocene is guaranteed by the fact that no other concept has managed to attract such attention across what Moore calls ‘green thinking’ (thinking about nature and society as clearly separate categories and focusing on the effects the second has upon the first).¹⁸⁶

If we wanted to find a recent image that powerfully represents green thinking, we could do worse than examine the documentary *Before the Flood* (2016), directed by Fisher Stevens, which (as seems to be the rule) was shown in the Czech Republic with the inappropriate title *Is It The End For Us?*. The film synopsis tells us that the ‘central character is the actor and UN Messenger of Peace, Leonardo DiCaprio, who digs up alarming testimony regarding problems linked with climate change and seeks ways of preventing fatal consequences for our future life’. DiCaprio accompanies us throughout the film as narrator and guide to various places on the planet where we can observe firsthand the devastation and degradation of ecosystems already underway, the melting of glaciers, and huge overpopulation. A symbolic buttress to the narration is provided by DiCaprio’s reflections upon *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, the famous triptych by Hieronymus Bosch painted at the start of the sixteenth century, i.e. just as epochal changes were beginning that culminated in the onset of the Anthropocene. The contrast between the sumptuous landscape of the Garden of Paradise on the left panel of Bosch triptych and the dissonant arrangement of the ‘musical hell’ on the right panel is used by DiCaprio as a convenient moral subtext for considerations of the morass we as ‘mankind’ have led the planet into. Let’s for a moment remind ourselves

186. Jason W. MOORE, ‘Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism’, in: IDEM (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Oakland: PM Press, 2016, 1–11.

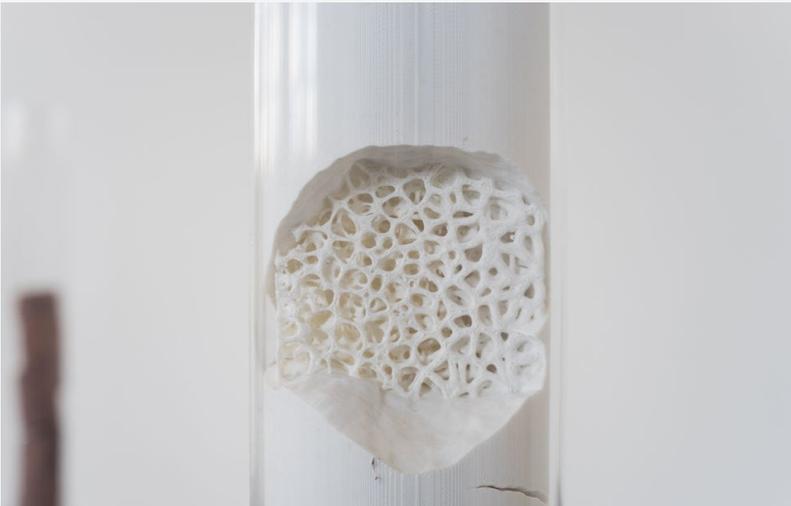
of Scranton and the inspiration he finds in the self-styled Samurai and hitman of Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog*, who abides by the precepts contained in the manual *Hagakure*. In *Before the Flood*, too, a reference appears to a popular film images, this one far better known than that used by indie filmmaker Jarmusch. During an airborne reconnaissance of the oil sand extraction areas of Alberta, Canada, DiCaprio comments on the scene below: 'Looks like Mordor!' DiCaprio exclaims to Mark Mageau, the Suncor SVP of Oil Sands Operations. 'What?' Mageau asks, unable to hear him over the noise of the helicopter. DiCaprio repeats himself. There's a silence. Then cut...

The mining of the oil sands is undoubtedly one of the most egregious violations of the environment. To add insult to injury, most of it is taking place in a country that is in many respects considered green. Oil is being extracted in 'no man's land', the region traditionally inhabited by Indian tribes whose descendants still live here. At the end of July 2016, as part of his solo project WIFE, the singer, multi-instrumentalist and producer James Kelly released a video clip to a single taken from the EP *Standard Nature* (2016). Kelly, who had previously worked as a researcher in the Costa Rican rainforest, selected found footage of forest fires as the visual backdrop to the track entitled *Glass Interruption*.¹⁸⁷ Much of the footage, rapidly alternating in time to the beat, captures the course of one of the biggest environmental disasters in Canada's history, namely the forest fire that broke out near Fort McMurray in the province of Alberta on 3 May 2016 and which was only officially declared extinguished two months later. Though the fire was not directly connected to the oil sands mining operations, its very proximity to the extraction sites, work at which had to be temporarily suspended,¹⁸⁸ prompted discussions of such a connection. This was because one of the causes of the fire was a wave of extremely dry, hot weather attributed to the atmospheric impact of El Niño, which in turn was interpreted as being a consequence of global warming accelerated by the burning of fossil fuels.

Kelly does not contribute any data, figures or measurements to the debate around the Anthropocene. He created an audiovisual work in which apocalyptic images of the flames leaping out of the woods, set against the backdrop of the cars in which the population of Fort McMurray sought to flee to safety, create

187. An original music video with commentary on the composition is available at: Grason Haver CURRIN, 'WIFE: "Glass Interruption"', *Pitchfork*, 6 August 2016, [online](#).

188. Jeffrey JONES – Jeff LEWIS, 'Fort McMurray wildfire forces a quarter of Canada's oil output off-line', *The Globe and Mail*, 6 May 2016, [online](#).



Pavel Sterec: *Fossil Us* (2015),
Installation (drill cores, concrete,
acrylic). Installation view of
Apocalypse Me exhibition.
Photo: Jiří Dvořák.

an emotional soundscape. Grason Haver Currin introduced the clip shortly after it was released on Pitchfork.com, and wrote the following of the last part of the track following a more muted passage in which we are carried by the disjointed flow of the harrowing shots of a fiery hell intercut with awe-inspiring images of the forest waiting to be consumed by flames:

After the slow breath, Kelly doubles down on the attack, pushing the monolithic corkscrew bass far ahead of the synthetic accompaniment. The sheer peril of the setting overpowers everything, as if Kelly's even running short on time to panic. *Glass Interruption* feels, then, like a symptom of these political times: an attempt to overcome worry where we must eventually admit, against our will, there ain't no shelter here, either.¹⁸⁹

189. CURRIN, "WIFE. "Glass Interruption", op. cit.

Like *Before the Flood*, Kelly's video to *Glass Interruption* can also be viewed as an expression of 'green thinking'. A rich seam of Cartesian dualism runs through it that conceptualises nature not as an actor possessing agency, but as a blank slate upon which the actions of mankind, active subjects and entire social or economic formations are inscribed, for better or for worse. This view of the relationship between nature and society, influenced by dualism, is so 'natural' that it forms the foundation not only of most thinking about the Anthropocene, but understandably of most artistic practice attempting to reflect upon this phenomenon. A good example of this is the intermedia installation by Pavel Sterec *Fossil Us*, the original version of which was presented at the exhibition of the finalists of the Jindřich Chalupecký Award in 2015, after which it was modified and included in the exhibition *Apocalypse me*.¹⁹⁰ The installation comprises a set of thirteen core drills for geological exploration, with five artificially created segments depicting not the geological past, but the geological present (the Anthropocene) as looked back on from the future. In *Fossil Us* Sterec revives his long-held interest in the area bordering the scientific and art discourses. The clash of these worlds is explicitly manifest in an audio and printed guide offering information on individual core drills. In addition to factual descriptions of geological eras, sediments and rocks, the guide includes a meta-commentary that addresses the Anthropocene with evident disdain. *Fossil Us* exposes the viewer to the perspective referred to several times

190. The installation took a different form when presented at the Emil Filla Gallery, though this did not change anything in respect of its contents.

here of the ‘day after’, which is accompanied by an inherently moral appeal that is practically inseparable from the theme of the Anthropocene: ‘Whenever we say “Anthropocene” we find ourselves only seemingly in a geo-scientific seminar. In reality, we are participating in a court case; more precisely, in a pre-trial negotiation in which the legal culpability of the accused first needs to be clarified.’¹⁹¹ Sterec holds a mirror up to viewers in which they see themselves as future fossils while also being placed in the dock accused of conspiracy to effect irreversible interventions in the earth’s geosphere.

A thought-provoking comparison with the logical outcome embodied in Sterec’s installation of a series of 3D prints simulating the future fossilisation of our present is offered by the ‘plastiglomerates’ found on Kamilo Beach, Hawaii, and investigated by the geologist Patricia Corcoran and the artist Kelly Jazvac upon the instigation of oceanographer Charles Moore. In a text published jointly by all three in 2013, they describe a plastiglomerate as ‘an indurated, multi-composite material made hard by agglutination of rock and molten plastic. This material is subdivided into an in situ type, in which plastic is adhered to rock outcrops, and a clastic type, in which combinations of basalt, coral, shells, and local woody debris are cemented with grains of sand in a plastic matrix’.¹⁹² Kelly Jazvac uses the samples and photographs of plastiglomerates that she and Patricia Corcoran found as readymade objects and adjuncts to her own sculptures, objects and installations. In an interview with Ben Valentin, Jazvac emphasises that art (in this case art that combines to great effect creative research crossing the barriers of the normative separation of art and the ‘hard’ natural sciences, with a simple Duchampian ostensive gesture) has the rare ability to bring to light things that would otherwise remain hidden.¹⁹³ When situated within the environment of a gallery, plastiglomerates, which attract attention by virtue of their material quality, enter into an intriguing dialectic with purposefully created images of fossilisation as a process in which the duality of the cultural and the natural collapses into an indivisible whole.

An artist whose work cries out to be viewed through the optics of the end – not the end of the world necessarily, but the end of art as that which can only create meaning in a world in which values like culture, art, tradition or permanence are cherished

191. Peter SLOTERDIJK, ‘The Anthropocene: A Process-State at the Edge of Geohistory?’, in: DAVIS – TURPIN (eds.), *Art in the Anthropocene*, 327.

192. Patricia L. CORCORAN – Charles J. MOORE – Kelly JAZVAC, ‘An Anthropogenic Marker Horizon in the Future Rock Record’, *GSA Today*, v. 24, 2014, no. 6 (June), 4–8. Available [online](#).

193. Ben VALENTINE, ‘Plastiglomerate, the Anthropocene’s New Stone’, *Hyperallergic*, 25 November 2015, [online](#).



Plastiglomerates (2013). Sample / ready-made collected by geologist [Patricia Corcoran](#) and sculptor [Kelly Jazvac](#) at Kamilo Beach, Hawai'i, at the suggestion of oceanographer [Charles Moore](#), 2013. Photo: Jeff Elstone.





– is Adrián Villar Rojas. This Argentinean artist, who between 2010 and 2015 enjoyed a meteoric rise to prominence, works with a team of collaborators on artworks that are mostly created in situ from materials prone to degeneration and decay. Months of work culminate in an aesthetic condensation of the *here and now* whilst leaving almost no trace whatsoever for the future of art. Rojas thus overturns the ethos of the contemporary art market and the operations of museum collections. After a phase lasting from roughly 2008 to 2013 during which he used almost nothing but clay and cement (elemental materials that defined both the formal quality of the artefacts and their entropic character), two major exhibitions at the turn of 2013/2014 transformed the paradigm of his work.

At the exhibition entitled *Today We Reboot the Planet*¹⁹⁴ held in autumn 2013 at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London, Rojas introduced a distinctive feature that went on to appear regularly over the next two years in other projects. Objects made of clay and cement were joined by natural elements, such as fruits of the earth, some of which gradually decay or shrivel up during the course of the exhibition while others enjoy a resurgence of new life, e.g. germinating seeds and sprouting bulbs. In an interview with Jonathan Jones for *The Guardian*, Rojas not only emphasises that the exhibition reflects upon the relationship of people and planet and upon the Anthropocene, but also draws attention to an aspect of his work that he later on (during an artist talk given in the fall 2015 at the New School, New York) described as an ‘alien gaze’, by which he means a view of human culture and its supreme representation in the form of artworks that refuses to confer exceptional status upon it, but sees it simply as one object among many.¹⁹⁵ Processes that in nature are scattered through time and space are condensed in Rojas’s projects. Were we to borrow Morton’s term we could say that hyperobjects are transformed into a state in which they are directly accessible to our sensory apparatus.

In 2014, at the exhibition *Los Teatros de Saturno*¹⁹⁶ at the kurimanzutto gallery in Mexico, Rojas disengaged the aesthetic of his work from the figural (be this the human or animal figure or the figures of robots and cyborgs inspired by Japanese manga and anime), thus opening the space for an experience of movement in a non-hierarchical ‘realm of objects’. Pigments are mixed

194. Adrián Villar Rojas, *Today We Reboot the Planet*, London: Serpentine Sackler Gallery, 28 September–10 November 2013.

195. RED, ‘Adrián Villar Rojas at London’s New Serpentine Sackler Gallery – video preview’, video, 5:45 min., *The Guardian*, 9 September 2013, [online](#).

196. Adrián Villar Rojas, *Los Teatros de Saturno*, Mexico City: kurimanzutto, 5 February–26 April 2014.

into the cement for the first time and enter into dialogue with the natural colours of pumpkins, melons and various other fruits of the earth that metamorphose over time. In addition, commodities make an appearance, not in a reference to some antiquated readymade aesthetic, but in synch with recent artistic attempts to develop a visual language that could enter into dialogue with the ideas of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology.¹⁹⁷ The processuality contained in individual components of the installation (desiccation, shrivelling up, decay and growth) can be viewed against the backdrop of the belief shared by these philosophical movements that objects have agency of their own. The horizontal ‘composition’ of things, or rather the free distribution of various natural products, branded trainers or USB flash drives on the bare floor, demonstrates their non-hierarchical relationship (and by extension the blurring of the distinction between objects and artefacts) and their willingness to be read from a perspective other than the human.

197. The first museum-based overview of similar tendencies, represented in this case by the work of Timur Si-Qin, Josh Kline, Simon Denny and Rustan Söderling, was the exhibition curated by Susanne Pfeffer *Speculations on Anonymous Materials* (Kassel: Kunsthalle Fridericianum, 29 September 2013–26 January 2014).

198. Adrián Villar Rojas, *Fantasma*, Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 25 April–25 October 2016.

Adrián Villar Rojas: installation view of *Fantasma* exhibition, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2015. Photo: Jan Zálešák.

The creative period kicked off by the exhibition *Today We Reboot the Planet* came to a somewhat unusual close with Rojas’s exhibition *Fantasma* in Stockholm’s Moderna Museet.¹⁹⁸ The museum environment allowed the artist to conceive of the exhibition as an excavation of his own work and to accentuate the



self-contradictory desire for permanence by means of reiterated gestures of disappearance. *Fantasma* included objects from *Los Teatros de Saturno* arranged on a high backlit platform that viewers were forced to bypass, thus according the objects the potential of a cinematic image by virtue of their movement. Some of Rojas's work from his first solo exhibition in Rosario also made an appearance, exhibited behind glass like a rare museum artefact. The shuttering left over after the creation of the 'sedimentary columns' at the Sharjah Biennale was installed here in the form of 'paintings' hung in a quasi-sacral space. The exhibition *Fantasma*, which drew on previously created artefacts to a far greater extent than ever before, can be seen on the one hand as a denial of the local specificity and entropy the artist so often accentuates, and on the other as an unexpected gesture supporting the decision reached and declared by the artist in 2015 to bring his artistic career to an end.¹⁹⁹

Anthropocene or Capitalocene?

For all its complexity, the situation in which the planetary ecosystem finds itself is in some respects simple. There is broad consensus that we are in the middle of one mega fuckup that up till now we have called the Anthropocene. However, for many reasons this term is not the most fortuitous. Above all, it implies that the source of the problem are human beings as a species, an idea that simply doesn't stand up to closer inspection. In an interview with the editors of *Art in the Anthropocene* Donna Haraway has the following to say:

I also think the term feeds into some extremely conventional and ready-to-the tongue stories that need far more critical inquiry. The figure of the *anthropos* itself is a species term. The *anthropos*—what is that? *All of Homo sapiens sapiens?* *All of mankind?* Well, *who* exactly? Fossil-fuel-burning humanity is the first short answer to that. Industrial humanity, however, is still a kind of a species-being; it doesn't even speak to all of industrial humanity, but specifically the formations of global capital and global state socialisms. Very much a part of that are the exchange networks, the financial networks, extraction practices, wealth creations, and (mal)distributions in relation to both people and other critters. It would probably be better named the Capitalocene, if one wanted

199. In 2015, Rojas and his collaborators undertook several large and demanding projects, ranging from the installation for the Sharjah Biennale and the Istanbul Biennale to exhibitions for the Moderna Museet and Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin. In a lecture given as part of the cycle Public Art Fund Talks at The New School, New York, Rojas emphasised that, while preparing the projects for 2015, he had already thought about ending his career as an artist. See 'Public Art Fund Talks: Adrián Villar Rojas at The New School', video, 1:15:22 min., *YouTube*, uploaded by The New School, 27 January 2016, [online](#).

a single word. The mass extinction events are related to the resourcing of the earth for commodity production, the resourcing of everything on the earth, most certainly including people, and everything that lives and crawls and dies and everything that is in the rocks and under the rocks. We live in the third great age of carbon, in which we are witnessing the extraction of the last possible calorie of carbon out of the deep earth by the most destructive technologies imaginable, of which fracking is only the tip of the (melting) iceberg. Watch what's going on in the Arctic as the sea ice melts and the nations line up their war and mining ships for the extraction of the last calorie of carbon-based fuels from under the northern oceans. To call it the Anthropocene misses all of that; it treats it as if it's a species act. Well, it isn't a species act. So, if I had to have a single word I would call it the Capitalocene.²⁰⁰

200. 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulhucene. Donna Haraway in Conversation with Martha Kenney', in: DAVIS – TURPIN (eds.), *Art in the Anthropocene*, 259.

201. MOORE, 'Anthropocene or Capitalocene?', 6.

A brief history of the concept of the Capitalocene, which aptly describes it as 'an ugly word for an ugly system', is given by Moore in the introduction to the book *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*²⁰¹ He alludes to Donna Haraway's opinion that the Capitalocene is one of those concepts that 'floats in the ether', a meme expressing something of special significance to a specific period of time and crystallising simultaneously amongst a large group of people. Moore credits the radical economist David Rucci with using the word for the first time. Haraway then began to use it in her lectures from 2012. Moore himself climbed on board in 2013 and emphasises that this went hand in hand with his growing dissatisfaction with the term Anthropocene. He also points out that all the texts included in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* work with the term Capitalocene as designating capitalism understood as a system for the organisation of nature, a 'capitalist world-ecology'.²⁰² Capitalism – as it is thought about by those who prefer it as a designation of a situation in which all of us, along with the entire planet and everything on it, are connected by a constant flow of energy – is therefore a 'method of organising nature as a whole'. Within this concept of nature, human organisations are both constituted of and by the 'web of life'. 'In this perspective, capitalism is a world-ecology that joins the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the co-production of nature in successive historical configurations.'²⁰³

202. *Ibid.*

203. *Ibid.*, 7.

The fact that we are caught ‘in the middle’ of this problem (which, along with Haraway and Moore, we’ll call the Capitalocene), complicates the situation, since it is not easy to examine its origins. Even so, an awareness of the problem in itself calls for some kind of solution. The approach that dominates current ‘green politics’ and that is also the driving force behind ‘green capitalism’, with all its smart technologies, biofuels, solar panels and self-driving cars, is based on the idea that everything began with the Industrial Revolution.²⁰⁴ The belief that our problems all started with the patenting of the steam engine, which Moore calls ‘the two century model’, has a certain logic in that the end of the eighteenth century, but above all the latter half of the nineteenth, is indeed the time when biospherical changes including species extinction and the irreversible destruction of entire ecosystems began to accelerate. However, Moore is critical of solutions based on the two century model and proposes an alternative view of the beginning of the problem and the ambitions that should be part and parcel of the resolution thereof:

In sum, to locate the origins of the modern world with the steam engine and the coal pit is to prioritize shutting down the steam engines and the coal pits (and their twenty-first-century incarnations.) To locate the origins of the modern world with the rise of capitalist civilization after 1450, with its audacious strategies of global conquest, endless commodification, and relentless rationalization, is to prioritize the relations of power, capital, and nature that rendered fossil capitalism so deadly in the first place. Shut down a coal plant, and you can slow global warming for a day; shut down the relations that made the coal plant, and you can stop it for good.²⁰⁵

204. MOORE,
Capitalism in the Web of Life, 203.

205. *Ibid.*, 200.

Moore is adamant that the way we apprehend or conceptualise the origin of the crisis is crucial to the way we seek solutions to it. So where does he locate the origin of the crisis? He is of the opinion that the beginnings of modernity (which he equates with capitalism) are associated with the transformation of values ascribed to various different aspects of the world and life in it. The basic trigger mechanism for the current crisis of capitalism in its capacity as world ecology is, he believes, the gradual creation of the concept of ‘cheap nature’,

which includes four fundamental ‘cheaps’: labour-power, food, energy and raw materials.²⁰⁶ And so the project of ‘cheap nature’, i.e. the appropriation of non-capitalised nature as the production base of wealth,²⁰⁷ must not be seen as a purely economic process, since from the very start it was accompanied by the creation of boundaries clearly separating that which is human from that which is not.

The boundary setting between what was, and what was not, ‘natural’ was intellectually arbitrary—and often deeply racist and patriarchal. It was not, however, *historically* arbitrary, but patterned strongly on capital’s law of value as a law of Cheap Nature. Consider the tightly bound connection between science and gender across the early modern era; the early sixteenth-century debates between Las Casas and Sepúlveda over ‘natural slaves’; or the colonial designation of indigenous peoples in the later sixteenth-century Andes and elsewhere as *naturales*.²⁰⁸

If there is any path leading out of the current crisis, i.e. the crisis of cheap nature according to Moore, then it is a path on which Moore encounters others, such as Irmgard Emmelhainz and T. J. Demos, who are calling for nothing less than the decolonisation of nature. They do not, of course, have in mind a return to pre-Columbian times or to feudalism. Those paths are closed. An awareness of what role is played in the current crisis by a specific conceptualisation of nature as something that is both inhuman as well as ‘cheap’ (and ideally free at the point of use and when it needs to be discarded as waste) is important if we are to be in a position to formulate clearly our demands. These demands, Moore states, should be as follows: democratic relationships of reproduction for all nature (i.e. exempt from the logic of the capitalist law of value), food sovereignty, climate justice and degrowth.²⁰⁹ None of these demands should strike us as surprising, and this is true in general of texts attempting to see beyond the horizon of capitalism. Moore’s approach is realistic in that it does not try to find ways of destroying the system, but assumes the system will be unsustainable over the long term²¹⁰ as it hits the barriers to any further expansion on a global scale. It is not, therefore, a manual on how to start a revolution, but opens up a space for considerations of how to navigate the world that

206. *Ibid.*, 31.

207. Haraway calls the same the ‘re-sourcing of everything on the earth’.

208. *Ibid.*, 32.

209. *Ibid.*, 343.

210. In this respect he is close to accelerationism. However, he differs in terms of the proposed solutions, which are based on a rejection of the concept of ‘cheap nature’, something that appears taken for granted by accelerationism.

will be left after capitalism. The same goes for the world after the apocalypse.

In popular visual culture the network of relationships between capital and nature/s is reduced to a few strong images (the smokestacks of power stations or belching car exhausts, emaciated polar bears perched on increasingly thin ice floes, oil-coated coastlines, etc.). These powerful images are important because of their shock value. They jerk people out of their cynicism and can be deployed within the framework of a political campaign. They can also be useful when promoting 'green capitalism' (which unfortunately is all too often simply the latest update in neoliberalism's utilisation of the state and its lawmakers so as to open up a space for the accumulation of capital even where until recently no market existed). We find strong, unambiguous and therefore for the most part problematic images in films, in the campaigns of governmental and non-governmental organisations, and in television documentaries. A film that operates on the boundaries of autonomous artistic film project and engaged documentary with the potential to change minds and perhaps even the way that votes are cast is *The Forgotten Space*, 2010, by Noël Burch and Allan Sekula. Container transport is the film's leitmotif. The abstraction of a container as a unit of trade released from the restrictions of national markets is the starting point for the filmmakers' attempt to demonstrate how the 'lightness', 'abstraction' and 'fluidity' of late capitalism is manifest in an almost perfect separation of the processes of production and consumption and also by the invisibilisation of nature (in Moore's sense of 'cheap nature'), whether this be the sea appropriated as locus of routes that 'belong to nobody', a landscape refashioned into ports and clean infrastructure in the name of anonymous markets and their real or eagerly awaited expansion, the tons of almost crude oil fuelling the huge diesel engines of cargo ships, and the 'workforce', i.e. hundreds of millions of the invisible hands of workers in factories and sweatshops in southeast Asia, India and Latin America producing goods in the name of the unquestioned mantra of permanent growth.

Though *The Forgotten Space* does not contain any explicitly ecological moral, it is a very eloquent image of 'capitalism

in the web of life', a life reduced from capital's perspective to its economically exploitable potential. Consumerism as the metabolism of capitalism's 'world ecology' is depicted in a more succinct though no less disturbing way by Iain Ball in his post-internet project *post.consumer.cult* (2010). The source images for simple collages comprising screenshots with several windows open in parallel are selected from the constant flow of digital images using keywords, similarly to the navigation method of personal visual blogs (tumblr etc.) connected via hashtags to an infinitely divaricating intertextual network. Ball simply places images of commodities and cheap nature side by side. Images of sex workers, fragments of an LCD display (strikingly reminiscent of a hand axe), sludge as the lowest form of land and sprouting shoots of seeds are juxtaposed with computer enhanced images of goods-things and goods-people. Ball's collages fix the process of aimless browsing or targeted searching into self-contradictory, oppressive collages that are equally impressive though not as straightforward as the series *Collage-Truth*, 2012–2015, by Thomas Hirschhorn, based on the simple juxtaposition of fashion and war photographs. In Hirschhorn's collages a cruel truth lurks 'at the bottom', namely that both fashion and war photos represent the body as 'cheap nature', as something that can be reproduced or employed, but also if necessary 'set aside' (the working life of most models is not much longer than the season for which the goods in which they are photographed are advertised) or completely 'disposed of' (in the case of proxy wars in which invisible power formations do battle by means of bodies located 'in the wrong place at the wrong time').

If capitalism as 'world ecology' prefers to remain hidden from view, the power of contemporary art is that it visibilises the invisible (in exactly the way that Kelly Jazvac describes). In 2014 and 2015, Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen (an Israeli-Belgian artistic duo based in London) created several artefacts from precious metals, which they acquired by means of a kind of 'inverted mining', i.e. the extraction of these metals from electronic equipment and computer components. These small and, in their first version, 'charming' artefacts always feature simple titles replicating their chemical composition. *H/AlCuTaAu* (2014) is the oldest of a trio of variations presented on the artists' website.²¹¹ The aluminium, copper, tantalum

211. <http://www.cohenvanbalen.com/work/h-alcutaau> (accessed 20 November 2016).



Revital Cohen & Tuur Van Balen: *b/NdAlTaAu* (2015), Neodymium (Nd), aluminium (Al), tantalum (Ta), gold (Au), 14 x 9 x 7 cm (overall installation dimensions variable). Installation view of *Rare Earth* exhibition, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna, 2015. Photo: Joe Clark / Jens Ziehe.

and gold which make up the artefact were acquired by the artists from the electronic equipment from a disused factory. In *H/AlCuTaAu*, Cohen and Van Balen experimented with the strategy of combining an aesthetically pleasing object on the boundary of jewellery and sculpture with an installation composed of source material (discarded or destroyed electronics used for the extraction of precious metals), which they then used in the project's reincarnations *B/NdAlTaAu* (2015) and *D/AlCuNdAu* (2015). At the start of 2015, the first of these was included in the thematic exhibition *Rare Earth*, which examined the aesthetic, ecological, economic and political connections between elements from the last part of Mendeleev's table.²¹² In the exhibition catalogue, the documentation of *B/NdAlTaAu* is accompanied by a text by Cohen and Van Balen entitled simply *Mine*.²¹³ In a series of short scenes the artists outline the context in which it is possible and desirable to interpret their project. The introduction draws our attention to the extraction of coltan in eastern Congo, where most mining is done by hand with only the most basic tools. Coltan is an industry term for the ore from which niobium (contained in the mineral columbite)²¹⁴ and tantalum are obtained. Both of these metals, which are extracted elsewhere in the world in greater quantities, are essential parts of the electronic gadgets we use every day, such as smartphones and tablets. We can therefore trace a direct link between the mining of coltan and corporations such as Apple and Samsung, which use or have used 'cheap' ore from regions with extremely weak public administrations, where violence, rape and the recruitment of children by rebel groups is a daily occurrence.²¹⁵ In the text, this dark legacy of Belgian colonial rule entering into the semantic realm of the project as the moral burden of Tuur Van Balen's nationality is juxtaposed with the ethical context of production and consumption against the backdrop of late capitalism as world ecology, in which 'cheap' raw materials from one part of the world are combined with 'cheap' labour from another in order to create seemingly immaterial products entering the market of more or less luxury goods nevertheless subject to rapid fluctuation. The 'cheap' waste that is the ostensible end of this cycle (but that in reality often ends up in a Chinese province with an industry specialising in recycling) has become the source for the creation of a series of objects that, by

212. *Rare Earth*, curated by Boris Ondrejčka and Nadin Samman, Vienna: TBA21, 19 February–31 May 2015.

213. Revital COHEN – Tuur VAN BALEN, 'Mine', in: Boris ONDREJČKA – Nadin SAMMAN (eds.), *Rare Earth* (exh. cat.), Vienna: TBA, 2016, 54–59.

214. Hence the col- in coltan.

215. COHEN – VAN BALEN, 'Mine', 54.

virtue of their simplicity, allow us for at least a moment to ponder the ephemeral yet pervasive links between nature, capital, life and death.

The triptych by Vilém Novák comprising images entitled *Aqua Park* (2016), *Office* (2013–2016) and *Airport* (2014–2016), though free of such explicitly political connotations, also uses an aesthetically pleasing artefact to represent the invisible 'web of life'. The ambiguous density of these compositions, which makes it impossible to absorb the images all at once, is foregrounded by the 'archaic' (in reality digitally remediated) technology of woodcut evoking the intricate decoration of late gothic altars. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* inevitably springs to mind here too. In the case of Novák's triptych one is reminded of Bosch's work by the way that the human and inhuman overlap in all three compositions in such fixed and 'non-literary' relations that it is impossible to use simple 'green arithmetic' to interpret them. Despite the classical motif of physical metamorphosis (the human body with an animal's head or wings), at a deeper level of the composition the human and inhuman (cultural and natural) also intertwine on the level of a basic 'infrastructure' that explains the title

Vilém Novák: *Aqua Park* (2016).
Woodcarving. Installation view of
Apocalypse Me exhibition.
Photo: Jiří Dvořák.





Vilém Novák: *Airport* (2014–2016).
Woodcarving. Installation view of
Apocalypse Me exhibition.
Photo: Jiří Dvořák.

of the compositions. In *Airport* we are unable to distinguish whether the luggage conveyer extending from the belly of the plan/whale is the plastic conveyer belt we are familiar with or the spine of an animal. The airport building could equally well be a natural organic formation temporarily filled by human activities. In the oldest of the trio, *Office*, we see the apocalyptic motif of the scales of justice carrying several figures huddled around a fire that would under normal circumstances immediately conjure up associations with a moral (perhaps the last) judgement. However, there is no religious context and no figure of a judge to be seen. None of the figures have any obviously greater significance, and their activities, like the recognisable elements of office furniture (desks, filing cabinets and boxes), blend with the organic shapes of the trunks covered in climbing plants (or simply ropes?). The books piled on the floor are turning into a treacherous swamp in which several hapless individuals are drowning. While Sterec in his installation *Fossil Us* speaks through the language of modern science, which he uses as the base for an apocalyptic morality, Novák draws on the language of premodern European art in order to highlight the complexity of the 'web of life' hidden behind the facade of technical rationality.

Summary

At the end of the second chapter we wondered whether we could safely ignore the risk, inherent in the accelerationist desire for the future, of the 'selfish gene' of technological rationality surviving in the core of accelerationism's techno-optimism. I believe that accelerationism fails to take sufficiently into account the impacts of the continued development of the technological basis of modernity on the environment we share with other species. And so chapter three included a short history of global ecological politics (represented from the early seventies by the Earth Summits and international conventions on the reduction or at least deceleration of the rate of growth of greenhouse gas emissions) and an introduction to the Anthropocene as a concept overarching current ecological thinking.

At present, reflections upon the Anthropocene represent one of the most dynamically expanding spheres of contemporary art. I have selected a few examples that hint at a continuum running from a moral critique of the impact human activities are having on the planet (Pavel Sterec), via the (quasi)scientific approach using the principle of the readymade (Kelly Jazvac), to an abandonment of the Anthropocentric perspective (the motif of the alien gaze in the work of Adrián Villar Rojas). This trio of examples also reveals the dwindling extent of 'green thinking' (i.e. thinking that, when critiquing the impact of human activities on nature, de facto replicates the modern dualism of Mankind/Society/Culture and Nature).

The main thesis advanced by thinkers concerned with the Anthropocene (especially those with a background in the humanities) is that it is not *homo sapiens* qua species that is responsible for the undeniable changes to the biosphere, but a specific historical formation that we can identify with modernity and capitalism. These have their roots in Europe but have now spread around the globe. As a consequence, the term Capitalocene is being proposed as an alternative way of naming our current geological era. In this respect I focus on Jason W. Moore, who views capitalism as a world ecology in which nature is not only sidelined and used as a seemingly inexhaustible resource, but co-produced. On the one hand, capitalism appropriates nature as 'cheap nature', while on

the other connects with it in a dynamically developing bond that would appear to be beyond the possibility of human control.

The chapter closes with three examples of artistic practice that in my opinion offer a certain (non-discursive) approach to the concept of capital as world ecology. The collage-based approach of Ian Ball's visual blog places images of commodities and cheap nature in all its forms side by side. (Where would *post.consumer.cult* be ranked on K-HOLE's brand anxiety matrix? Illegible chaos?) The pretty 'jewellery' made by Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen is acquired by means of the secondary extraction of precious metals from electronic equipment. Behind its non-literary materiality is concealed the same terrifying picture of what the world ecology of capitalism means in practice that we were confronted by in Ball's *post.consumer.cult*. In comparison with these first two examples, the series of woodcuts by Vilém Novák might appear archaic and expressed in non-conflictual language. However, at their core there is the same interest in the hybridisation of capital and nature and the blurring of the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Inasmuch as the interest displayed by artists in the Capitalocene opens access to a horizon, then it is the horizon of a future that must inevitably transcend the future of mankind.



In the final chapter I would like to continue to develop a view of the end of the world or apocalypse as a consequence of the crisis of modernity that in a deeply rooted dualist vision of the world is manifest both as environmental crisis and social/economic/political crisis. This crisis is accompanied by the collapse of modern epistemology, which was formed between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and served as the ideological basis for European colonial expansion and subsequently the global hegemony of capitalism. This hegemony was not significantly affected by the political projects of state socialism (which, if we regard capitalism as the organisation of relationships between nature and society, is perhaps best described as state capitalism).

Even though the dualism accentuating the opposition between the given (nature) and the constructed (society/culture) is deeply entrenched, increasingly we are beginning to suspect it is unsustainable. Attempts are underway in the humanities and in art to replace it 'by a non-dualistic understanding of nature–culture interaction', which often goes hand in hand with a renewed interest in a monistic philosophy focusing more on 'the self-organizing (or auto-poietic) force of living matter'.²¹⁶ Jane Bennett, one of the thinkers modernising the tradition of philosophical monism, believes that the most important sources of inspiration for contemporary thinking include Spinoza ('for whom every body [person, fly, stone] comes with a conatus or impetus to seek alliances that enhance its vitality'), Henry Thoreau ('who detects the presence of an effusive, unruly Wildness inside rocks, plants, animals, and locomotives'), and Walt Whitman ('who "aches with love" for matter').²¹⁷

Jane Bennett's text *Systems and Things*, from which I am quoting, was included by Richard Grusin in *The Nonhuman Turn*. This is an anthology of contributions to the conference of the same name organised in 2012 whose ambition was, in Grusin's words, 'to name and to consolidate' a wide range of approaches in the humanities and social sciences 'engaged in decentring the human in favour of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman'.²¹⁸ The sheer range of approaches falling under the broad

216. Rosi BRAIDOTTI, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge – Maiden, MA: Polity Press, 2013, 4.

217. Jane BENNETT, 'Systems and Things', in: Richard GRUSIN (ed.), *The Nonhuman Turn*, London – Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 224.

218. Richard GRUSIN, 'Introduction', in: IDEM (ed.), *The Nonhuman Turn*, vii.

←
Martin Kohout: from the *Skinsmooth Average Eyes: Deep Skins* series (2015–2016). Digital print on paper.
Photo: Martin Kohout.

umbrella of the ‘nonhuman turn’ described in the anthology far exceeds the revived interest in monism and vitalism. Grusin himself includes Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, animal studies (associated mainly with Donna Haraway), the theory of the assemblage (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari or Manuel de Landa), as well as ‘some varieties of speculative realism’.²¹⁹ Grusin emphasises that each of these iterations of the nonhuman turn aims to put clear blue water between itself and ‘human exceptionalism, expressed most often in the form of conceptual or rhetorical dualisms that separate the human from the nonhuman – variously conceived as animals, plants, organisms, climatic systems, technologies, or ecosystems’.²²⁰ Another element that unifies these different approaches and makes it possible to include them under the banner of the ‘turn’ is their departure from (social) constructivism or correlationism (because ‘taken to its logical extreme, it strips the world of any ontological or agential status’), as well as their resistance to ‘the privileged status of the autonomous male subject of the Western liberal tradition’.²²¹

219. *Ibid.*, viii.220. *Ibid.*, x.221. *Ibid.*, x–xi.

The most vocal proponents of the nonhuman turn over recent years have included representatives of speculative realism,²²² whose anti-correlationist approaches are, in the public imagination at least, associated with a basic call for the elimination of subject/object dualism and the prioritisation of (non-relational) ontology over epistemology.²²³ A certain restriction on the creative (artistic) development of the impulses generated by speculative realism, as seen for instance in the work of Graham Harman or Timothy Morton,²²⁴ resides in the fact that the objects to which philosophical attention is directed, though they make themselves known (by leaving behind ‘traces’ or sharing ‘observations’), do not allow for the possibility of striking up a direct relationship with them (as though relationality were always already contaminated by human arrogance, which refuses to accord things their rights but only to cognise and classify them under some heading). Although the emphasis of speculative realists on moving beyond the framework of anthropocentrism and human arrogance (as reflected in modern epistemology) is to be commended, I nevertheless find myself more attracted by the neo-materialist approach as promoted by Jane Bennett. Instead of flat objects, impervious to any direct relationality Bennett speaks of ‘things’ and ‘bodies’:

222. The origins of the nonhuman turn reach back to the mid-eighties, e.g. in the essay ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’, which I will look at in more detail in this chapter, or in the work of Bruno Latour (Bruno LATOUR, *Science in Action. How to Follow Engineers and Scientists through Society*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).223. The criticism levelled against the prioritisation of epistemology over ontology (the critical apparatus of post-Kantian philosophy focuses on the possibility of cognition and questions the possibility of knowing the ‘thin in itself’) is summarised by Steven Shaviro in his overview of the origins of speculative realism (Steven SHAVIRO, ‘Počátky spekulativního realismu. Přehled’, in: Václav JANOŠČÍK [ed.], *Objekt*, 46–58). *Speculation* according to Shaviro is motivated by the effort to move beyond the boundary of knowledge – ‘We must speculate, to escape from our inveterate anthropocentrism and take seriously the existence of a fundamentally alien, nonhuman world.’ (*Ibid.*, 52)224. The texts by these and other representatives of speculative realism were introduced to the Czech Republic in the anthology *Objekt* edited by Václav Janošík on the occasion of the exhibition *Neklid věcí* (Prague: Galerie Kvalitář, 11 September–6 November 2015).

‘Thing’ or ‘body’ has advantages over ‘object’, I think, if one’s task is to disrupt the political parsing that yields only active (manly, American) subjects and passive objects. Why try to disrupt this parsing? Because we are daily confronted with evidence of nonhuman vitalities active at work around and in us. I do so because the frame of subjects-and-objects is unfriendly to the intensified ecological awareness that we need if we are to respond intelligently to signs of the breakdown of the Earth’s carrying capacity for human life.²²⁵

225. BENNETT, ‘Systems and Things’, 234.

An outline of the difference between the positions held by new materialism and speculative realism is not intended to drag us into a conflict that cannot be resolved here. Instead, I have attempted simply to provide an idea of where the boundary lines might be drawn within the framework of the broad current of the nonhuman turn, and how small shifts in terminology (e.g. from ‘objects’ to ‘things’) might signal potentially fundamental differences in the resulting politics (including the ‘politics of art’) that could be formulated on this basis of these outputs. However, in artistic and curatorial practice, and to a certain extent in art criticism, these differences are not of crucial importance, and so ‘things’ appear alongside ‘objects’ and objects alongside ‘energy’ and ‘assemblages’. In the passages that follow I will not aim at perfect consistency, but will respect the ways that the authors whose work I examine use these terms.

The world after humanity – posthumanism

Hans-Christian Dany’s *How to Become an Alien?* deals with the question of how to avoid the temptation simply to recreate anthropocentrism and ‘universal’ human values all over again in a post-human future. It starts with a reference to *ayahuasca*, a natural substance that Indian shamans use as a traditional spiritual medicine and during shamanic ceremonies and rites of passage, as well as when establishing communication with nonhuman entities.²²⁶ Dany describes his first impressions of using DMT (*dimethyltryptamine*, the active ingredient in *ayahuasca*) as a feeling of complete overload, which at the same time enhances the perception of nonhuman realities: ‘[DMT] could thus be well-suited to learning a posthuman attitude towards life: a coexistence in which humans see themselves as only one of many forms of being’.²²⁷

226. Unfortunately, over the past few years ayahuasca has become part of the thrill tourism industry, extremely popular with Silicon Valley venture capitalists, in which its status is reduced to that of psychotropic drug. See Melia ROBINSON, ‘Silicon Valley’s New Craze Is Flying to Peru to Take a Psychedelic You Can’t Legally Get in America’, *Business Insider*, 6 December 2016, [online](#).

227. Hans-Christian DANY, ‘How to Become an Alien?’, *Spike*, 2016 (Spring), no. 47, 84.

In Dany's text the post-humanist perspective offers the prospect of a way out of the blind alley we find ourselves in today. At the same time, Dany meticulously distinguishes posthumanism from transhumanism and the values the latter represents: '... in recent decades, the possibility of a posthumanist turn has been reduced to an economically liberal techno-euphoria by the transhumanist movement. Transhumanism wants to elevate humans above their potential through scientific progress, but is bound to antiquated values.'²²⁸ Dany's critique of transhumanism builds on the stance formulated a few years ago by Cary Wolfe, who in the introduction to *What is Posthumanism?* places his concept of posthumanism in opposition to transhumanism, which he calls 'intensified humanism'.²²⁹ For the posthumanist the basic problem with transhumanism (as well as accelerationism) is its inability to overcome a conservative anthropocentrism that contaminates its efforts to relate to nonhuman spheres, be this the animal, mineral or machine worlds.

Ever since *Frankenstein*, stories have been forcing artificial intelligences into anthropomorphic bodies or attributing to them a wish to become like humans. For humans, freedom and love might be nice concepts, but assigning similar desires to synthetic beings amounts to assimilating something that might as well remain foreign. The countless film scenes featuring synthetic entities gazing forlornly at us because they don't experience love as humans do, are not empathetic; they are part of a human colonisation of the non-human.²³⁰

Even though we are trying to stop being people, even though we know that it is no longer possible to be people, or at any rate not in the sense we are people at present, we are still unable to imagine what a post-human world might look like. The problem with all possible scientific concepts of the post-human or nonhuman is that they are the outcome of a supremely human capacity, the capacity for rationality. Dany claims this is where DMT enters the scene as a 'technology of the body' enabling experience to expand beyond the horizon of the human while permitting practitioners to leave behind their discursively formed subjectivity. The experience of DMT includes what in psychedelic jargon is called the death of the ego, and offers access to 'multi-perspectival reality, where it feels like you're adopting

228. *Ibid.*

229. Cary WOLFE, *What Is Posthumanism?*, London – Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, XV.

230. DANY, 'How to Become an Alien?', 87–88.

the views of surrounding objects. [...] on DMT consciousness leaves behind the reality that is built on the assumption that there is a language for everything'.²³¹ This situation is strikingly reminiscent of the speculative realist call for us to move beyond correlationism, and is no doubt why Dany recalls the statement made by Graham Harman, who speaks of the need to learn to love things, which he then qualifies immediately: 'But love also means letting go – so as to do more than just abuse the object of desire as the mirror of oneself.'²³²

231. *Ibid.*, 91.

232. *Ibid.*

The fact that Dany's reflections end with a poetic image of an affirmative selfless love rather than a polished culmination to his argument is understandable in the light of his objective, namely to reveal the impossibility of overcoming rationally the perceived horizon of being without relinquishing the very (technological) rationality that so successfully divides us, the scions of humanism, from the universe of nature. Thinking of a post-human future is thinking of a future that must above all get by without Humanity, as shaped for centuries by the tradition of the Enlightenment. DMT might represent one possibility, albeit temporary, of gazing into the future right now. However, it is by no means the only option on the table,²³³ and one regrettable 'drawback' to the experience remains the fact of how radically it diverges from the possibility of being expressed in language.

233. The speculative approach as practised by Quentin Meillassoux and Ray Brassier is similarly focused on stepping beyond the boundary of the anthropocentric perspective by means of the (paradoxical) accentuation of scientific rationality.

In order to delve more deeply into the discourse that has grown up around the possibility of a post-human future, I want to focus on the book by Rosi Braidotti called, simply, *The Posthuman*. In the introduction Braidotti offers a critique of the 'perverse form of posthumanism' represented by the biogenetic technology of late capitalism. 'At its core there is a radical disruption of the human–animal interaction,' writes Braidotti, 'but all living species are caught in the spinning machine of the global economy. The genetic code of living matter – "Life itself" – is the main capital. Globalization means the commercialization of planet Earth in all its forms, through a series of inter-related modes of appropriation.'²³⁴ We cannot overlook the similarities of this concept of capitalism with capitalism as 'world ecology' (Jason W. Moore), in which everything – both the living and the non-living – is connected into a single interconnected network of webs. However, while Moore trains his analysis on the ways in which capitalism appropriates four basic types of 'cheap nature'

234. BRAIDOTTI, *Posthuman*, 7.

(raw materials, energy, labour and food), Braidotti focuses above all on the question of how contemporary capitalism controls the 'molecular *zoe*', i.e. life on its elemental level, where it makes no sense to distinguish between human and nonhuman. The paradoxical culmination of western modernity, which builds its historical success on a thoroughgoing distinction between the human and the nonhuman, is the breakdown of the supposedly ironclad dualism of culture (society) and nature, and a growing awareness of the need to invent a new relationship between people and their nonhuman counterparts in the face of crisis:

Contemporary bio-genetic capitalism generates a global form of reactive mutual inter-dependence of all living organisms, including non-humans. This sort of unity tends to be of the negative kind, as a shared form of vulnerability, that is to say a global sense of inter-connection between the human and the non-human environment in the face of common threats. The posthuman recomposition of human interaction that I propose is not the same as the reactive bond of vulnerability, but is an affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others.²³⁵

235. *Ibid.*, 50.

To highlight this affirmative bond, Braidotti, like Jane Bennett, reaches for Spinoza's monistic philosophy,²³⁶ especially the notion that 'matter is one, driven by the desire for self-expression and ontologically free'. For Braidotti, monistic premises form the starting point of a formulation of a posthumanist theory of subjectivity that is at the same time post-anthropocentric: 'In my view, there is a direct connection between monism, the unity of all living matter and postanthropocentrism as a general frame of reference for contemporary subjectivity.'²³⁷ Braidotti emphasises that the relational capacity of the post-human subject is not bound to our species but includes all non-anthropological elements. *Living matter, including the human body, is intelligent precisely because it is not disconnected from the rest of organic life.* Braidotti thus finds himself beyond the boundary of social constructivism and occupying a nonhuman, vitalistic standpoint linked with an emphasis on life as *zoe*: 'Zoe-centred egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism.'²³⁸

236. Or more precisely – in the case of Braidotti – for 'contemporary Spinozism' (Spinoza's philosophy read mainly through its updating in the work *A Thousand Plateaus* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) – see BRAIDOTTI, *Posthuman*, 86.

237. *Ibid.*, 57.

238. *Ibid.*, 60.

At the heart of Braidotti's reflections upon the post-human, post-anthropocentric subject is a threefold transformation: becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming-machine. The first axis of transformation, i.e. becoming-animal, includes the idea of interspecies solidarity and the symbiogenetic nature of life as we encounter this outlook in the work of Lynn Margulis or Donna Haraway.²³⁹ The second axis, or becoming-earth, reflects a shift towards a vitalist definition of life as *zoe*. At this point Braidotti unveils the idea of an assemblage of the human and non-human that is probably best understood in combination with the third axis of transformation, in which we follow the evolution from the first mechanical machines as 'anthropocentric devices that imitated embodied human capacities' to 'a more complex political economy that connects bodies to machines more intimately, through simulation and mutual modification.'²⁴⁰ Modern machines have a very different character to those against which the Luddites rebelled in the nineteenth century. Increasingly they give the impression of being immaterial black boxes, whose technological nature is concealed beneath the surface.

The cyborg is the central metaphor of the last axis of transformation (becoming-machine), our image of which is accompanied by an awareness that something has fundamentally changed in the character of the machine, that the idea of a machine as a 'technological species', entirely subordinate to man and capable in the latter's absence of acting autonomously in the sense of being part of (second) nature, is no longer sustainable. This shift and its consequences had already been clearly formulated in the mid-eighties by Donna Haraway:

Pre-cybernetic machines could be haunted; there was always the spectre of the ghost in the machine. This dualism structured the dialogue between materialism and idealism that was settled by a dialectical progeny, called spirit or history, according to taste. But basically machines were not self-moving, self-desiring, autonomous. They could not achieve man's dream only mock it. They were not man, an author himself, but only a caricature of that masculinist reproductive dream. To think they were otherwise was paranoid. Now we are not so sure. Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and

239. Donna HARAWAY, *When Species Meet*, London - Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008; Donna HARAWAY, *Staying with the Trouble*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

240. BRAIDOTTI, *Posthuman*, 89.

body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.²⁴¹

The liveliness Haraway mentions in connection with machines is something that over the last ten years we are becoming more and more aware of in connection with all ‘things’, and specifically with the commodities that surround and permeate us. Before we move on to several art projects that have addressed the theme of the ‘universal addressability of dumb things’²⁴², I’d like to draw attention briefly to a passage from *Chaosmosis*,²⁴³ a late work by Félix Guattari in which he examines new ways of thinking about machines as ‘autopoietic systems’. The basis of this new view of the machine is a reconceptualisation of the term *autopoiesis*, which Guattari adopts from the work of Humbert Maturana and Francisco Varela. Maturana and Varela view *autopoiesis* as being the principle of self-creation inherent in biological organisms, a principle associated with intentionality, a delineation of borders and organisation, and above all with self-reproducibility. However, according to Maturana and Varela machines are also ‘allopoietic’, in that they produce something other than what they themselves are. If, following Guattari’s example, we concede that institutions or technical machines are ‘evolutionary, collective entities’, we can begin to regard them ‘from the perspective of the ontogenesis and phylogenesis proper to a mecanosphere superposed on the biosphere.’²⁴⁴

Technology’s dominion over life and the interconnectedness of the human and nonhuman, both on the level of individual body-machines and society-machines, is for Guattari, writing at the start of the nineties, a simple fact that entitles us to ascribe to machines the imagination we had long reserved for living organisms. Braidotti adds: ‘Guattari’s machinic autopoiesis [...] results in a radical redefinition of machines as both intelligent and generative’.²⁴⁵ For the anti-individualistic, post-anthropocentric concept of posthumanism as proposed by Rosi Braidotti, Guattari’s conception involves the fundamental connection of the human and machine as an assemblage. ‘Machinic autopoiesis’, which always contains a human element, results in a post-human subjectivity characterised more by its incorporation in the ‘web of life’ than by a constant need to detach itself from it.

241. Donna HARAWAY, ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s’, *Socialist Review* 15/80, 1985, 65–101.

242. *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* (2013) is the name of an exhibition project by Mark Leckey, which took place in spring 2013 at the Nottingham Contemporary (27 April–30 June 2013).

243. Félix GUATTARI, *Chaosmosis*. Bloomington – Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995 (in the original 1992).

244. *Ibid.*, 40.

245. BRAIDOTTI, *Posthuman*, 94.

One of the most poetic representations in art of a post-human world inhabited by cyborgs and other assemblages of the human and nonhuman is the short film *Soft Materials* shot in 2004 by Daria Martin on 16mm film. With a running time of just over ten minutes, the film has a simple structure. In individual episodes separated by fade-outs we follow the interaction of machines and human actors. We see the humans respond to the ‘anatomy’ and movements of the machines with gentle, sometimes almost affectionate, gestures. They instruct their machine counterparts in the art of mimicry, a process that culminates in a simple collective choreography in which the ‘mechanicity’ of the instruction quickly becomes a free, playful receptiveness to the other. In terms of physical essence, the human and machine (deliberately non-anthropomorphic) bodies remain clearly distinct. Martin does not present an image of cyborgs as literally assemblages of living and non-living matter of the type we are familiar with from popular films (from *Blade Runner* via *Terminator* and *Cyborg* to *Johnny Mnemonic*) and from the classical works of Japanese anime (*Akira*, *Ghost in the Shell*, et al). Here the connection is played out in space and in the direct relationship between two actors in playful communication without words, which in itself is a very strong image of the path that machinic autopoiesis might follow.

Katja Novitskova’s work represents another contribution to the posthumanist imagination in contemporary art. Take the exhibition *Green Growth* at the SALTS gallery.²⁴⁶ Novitskova used the corridors between the gallery interiors and the garden in which the SALTS ‘non-gallery gallery’ (a couple of prefab garages) is situated. Both inside the exhibition space and in the garden behind it she placed two basic types of image: symbolic vectors of growth devoid of any context and represented by arrows and curves looping forever upwards (like the money grown on the trees of quantitative easing²⁴⁷ stimulated by the Markets), and stock photos of animals. The green growth is an image of the ‘global ecology’ in which the accelerating tempo of technological innovation is breaking the barriers between the cultural and the natural. Markets, which are an almost excessively autonomous manifestation of post-human subjectivity, display a remarkable will for life. This assemblage of the human and the machine created by late capitalism that exceeds the capacity of individual human thinking represents on the one hand

246. Katja Novitskova, *Green Growth* (curator Samuel Leuenberger), Birsfelden (CH): Salts, 20 June–21 July 2014.

247. Quantitative easing is generally understood as defines quantitative easing (QE) as ‘an unconventional instrument used by central banks to stimulate the economy if the standard exchange policy is insufficient. Basically, central banks purchase the financial (toxic) assets of commercial banks and thus put free money into circulation. In the period following the financial crisis QE was the most visible manifestation of what David Harvey calls the state-finance nexus (HARVEY, *The Enigma of Capital*, 53–62), and proof of the fact that the overriding task of the state is now propping up financial institutions.

the absolute apex of the modernist project of the colonisation of nature, while on the other points to glimmers of a new, post-human world in the fixed part of its 'genetic makeup'. Hallucinatorily beautiful digital photographs of the bodies of animals and plants, which Novitskova prints on dibond and perspex, become images of the irretrievably lost paradise of the pre-human world and the post-apocalyptic world after Man. The aesthetic power of the images, with which we have a tendency to form an instant emotional bond, is part of the artist's ideological programme, something she expanded on during her appearance at TEDxVaduz:²⁴⁸

If you look at a baby giraffe bonding with the mother giraffe, this is the closest to future technology visualisation we can get. And by future I mean radical future, a future where computers are incredibly advanced to the point that they will start interacting with our emotions. As soon as that happens they will also become somewhat emotional. And another thing is the aesthetic intensity, the aesthetic beauty of these things, which is unprecedented... I suggest everyone just looks at an animal again, thinking that it's a technology that evolved by itself and how vastly more complex an animal brain is to a computer, or a human brain is to a computer. This then allows me to look again at nature from a different perspective and also technology from a different perspective and to see how these things will interact with each other in the future, which is basically where we're headed. And on the other hand, this is maybe a way to look at the future not from this feeling that everything is doomed. Of course, the extinction of animals is incredible these days and climate change and all these things, but during this process there will be all these new mutant forms that are going to be born and at a certain point you will not be able to say who is the technology and who is the animal, and who is cuter, a computer or two parrots bonding or a zebra²⁴⁹

In Novitskova's work the human element as something explicitly present in the image is gradually disappearing (though still implicitly present in her work in its capacity as recipient of the viewer's gaze). Following on from this, in the conclusion to this subchapter we will examine how different current

248. TEDxVaduz was the first officially licensed, independently organised TED event in Liechtenstein. It was designed and organised as a collaborative project by the artists Daniel Keller and Simon Denny and took place in the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein on 7 December 2013. For information regarding the project visit: <http://www.tedxvaduz.com/> (accessed 10 December 2016).

249. RED, 'Attention, Economics and Art: Katja Novitskova at TEDxVaduz', *You Tube*, video, 12:51 min., uploaded by TEDx Talks, 7 February 2014, [online](#).

artistic representations of posthumanism (or the ‘nonhuman turn’) are from the posthumanism of the nineties, which in many respects was far closer to what we have characterised above as transhumanism. A perfect example of an early articulation of the post-human present and future was the project *Post Human* by Jeffrey Deitch, which was presented at five locations in Europe between 1992 and 1993 and included the work of approximately twenty representatives of artistic postmodernism active mainly on the New York scene.

Crucial to Deitch’s curatorial articulation of posthumanism is the depiction of the human body in a ‘new phase of evolution that Charles Darwin would never have envisioned’.²⁵⁰ Deitch accentuates a view of the human body as being subject to alteration. This alteration takes the form either of external, ‘technological’ interventions (such as plastic surgery, which allows us to escape the biological determination of our own appearance), or internal, bio-engineering manipulation of the genetic code. In the exhibition catalogue, Deitch writes of this ‘techno-evolutionary’ phase of the development of the human species, that ‘our children’s generation could very well be the last generation of “pure” humans’.²⁵¹ This image of mankind transformed by technological developments was represented at the exhibition by, for example, the photography of Cindy Sherman, which depicts the body modified by artificial extensions. Despite not conforming to any accepted ideal of beauty, the body here is still subject to the same controlling (male) gaze that the artist has been interrogating and critiquing since the end of the seventies. Sculptural representations of the body played an important role in Deitch’s curatorial project. Charles Ray was represented by a hyper-realistic sculpture depicting a conventionally beautiful young blonde in a blue suit. Hmm, typical secretary or middle manager, you sniff superciliously upon first glance. However, this first impression is undermined by the small but crucial change of scale that transforms the attractive young woman into a monster. The tension is ratcheted up still further by Ray’s use of a similar principle in the hyper-realistic sculpture *Family Romance*, 1993. This depicts a typical nuclear family – mommy daddy two kids – naked and holding hands: typical, that is, until you realise that both children are equally as tall, or perhaps short, as their parents (the sculpture is only 135 centimetres high).

250. Jeffrey DEITCH, 'Post Human Exhibit Catalogue Essay', unpaginated, available [online](#).

251. *Ibid.*

Discussing the influences on the transformation of society from the end of the sixties to the start of the nineties, Deitch mentions (in a somewhat different language) the neoliberal redefinition of the dreams of 1968 that placed 'me' in the centre of political discourse. The individualisation of desires, which from the end of the sixties was to become the driver of a moribund economy, could only sustain itself ideologically on the remnants of the emancipatory ethos that brought in different Others (ethnic, culture and gender) from the grey zone where they were ignored or even criminalised, to the zone of social acceptance that was confirmed both in art and in popular culture. In this respect Deitch refers to 'decentered television reality' that resulted in the erosion of a normative idea of what was or should be the 'correct' or 'true' model of the ego. Interesting also is his emphasis on a change to the basic trajectory of thinking in relation to the ego. In place of the Freudian model based on the reconstruction of something that happened in childhood within the family circle, Deitch argues that the ego now has more room to acquire a conscious, progressively shaped construction of (visual) identity:

There is less need to psychologically interpret or 'discover' oneself and more of a feeling that the self can be altered and reinvented. Self-identity becoming much more dependent on how one is perceived by others, & opposed to a deeply rooted sense of inner direction. The world has become a mirror.²⁵²

252. *Ibid.*

In this respect Deitch predates developments that gain traction some fifteen years later with the advent of social media, within the context of which there is a full development of Deitch's model of the formation of identity as the image formed by wishes or expectations ensuing from how I would like others to see me and how they actually see me. However, the construction of personal identity in the digital sphere of social media is played out in a significantly different way to that suggested by the exhibition *Post Human*. It is not so much that various physical alterations (cosmetic surgery, tattoos and the like) did not become more commonplace than they were at the turn of the eighties and nineties (they did), but that we cannot begin to speak of a paradigmatic post-human turn. What, however, did change considerably was the relationship between real and virtual identity. Over recent years a far more subtle dialectic has developed than that which

existed at the beginnings of internet forums and chatrooms, when the standard practice was to create an entirely new virtual identity. As the norm has been promoted on social media (most famously by Facebook) of 'true identity', huge efforts are now being put into the creation of a digital 'I' in a series of smaller but continuous steps.²⁵³

253. In art, developments taking place to the online construction of identity are reflected in the selfie aesthetic as deployed by, for instance, Petra Cortright, Molly Soda and Amalia Ulman.

When Deitch was writing his text, virtual reality was still a rarified vision requiring super sophisticated hardware of how the permeation of human and machine might appear. However, over the decades that followed the main developments were in another direction and took place without the need for expensive hardware. The post-internet situation,²⁵⁴ as it has been called since the latter half of the last decade, is characterised more by a 'revolution' in the sphere of the real, which has been saturated by the virtual (digital), than in the sphere of the virtual in the sense of a distinctive place or specific hardware platform. This is partly due to the fact that cyborgs have ended up looking dramatically different to how it used to be thought they would look in the future. While Deitch is still working with what to us now seems the slightly ridiculous idea of 'the Encyclopaedia Britannica stored on a chip installed in the brain', the reality is that today we are all without exception cyborgs, except that instead of chips in our brains we carry smartphones with our coffee to go.

254. For a description of the post-internet situation see Artie VIERKANT, 'The Image Object Post-Internet', 2010, [online](#), or Václav MAGID, 'Ozvěny špatného smíchu. Postinternetové umění a kulturní průmysl', *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, v. 8, 2014, no. 17, 66–96.

The radicalisation of the man/nature dualism (Deitch emphasises the divergence from a 'natural' appearance or personality and looks to a future in which people will be able to (re)invent themselves) as represented by the exhibition *Post Human* is in many respects closer to transhumanism. On the other hand, the starting point of contemporary posthumanism is usually an effort to play down the human element. What results is not an image of the world in which man developed as the consequence of a merger with technology or made of himself something even more human or transhuman, but an image of the world without man. It goes without saying that there are still people in this world, but they are now connected to a de-hierarchised 'web of life'.

If we were looking for some kind of substance or energy that was a guarantee of the newly discovered unity of all things animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman, a strong contender would be capital. Twenty years on and this is Susanne

Pfeffer's take on Deitch's curatorial narrative in the exhibition she curated entitled *Inhuman*.²⁵⁵

Today, everybody is running around holding drinks. When I was growing up, you would never drink on the street, it would be impolite. Now you see people drinking in public all the time. The drink brand you choose becomes a marker of differentiation. It's a form of self-expression. [...] There's then a certain humanity embedded in these objects. A system of ethics. These liquids and substances are designed to optimize the body. We can't allow the body to be weak, fat, or tired. This became a subject in the exhibition *Inhuman*: the way you can construct your own body. How do we deal with the body if the body is a material? For example, there's an idea of guilt around being ill. If you're ill these days, it's your fault. It's awful. The whole body has been transformed purely into capital.²⁵⁶

This section of an interview conducted with the magazine *032c* is intriguing for a certain internal inconsistency. On the one hand, we are informed of how subjectivity is constructed via the choice of a certain brand – so far, so conventionally postmodern (for that matter the exhibition *Inhuman* featured many works that were related to Deitch's approach, such as the sculptures by Dora Budor and Stuart Uoo). On the other, the rest of the quote clearly reflects an interest in new materialism and speculative realism, something Pfeffer had already dealt with in her previous exhibition *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*, which was one of the first institutional indicants of a shift of interest within the art world from the post-internet to an object-oriented ontology, i.e. to an approach that was perfectly content not making endless reference to the central themes of the post-internet (e.g. the circulation of digital content, authorship as brand, etc.).²⁵⁷ The influence of these tendencies on artistic and curatorial thinking has led to a greater interest in materials and objects, their ability to act, and even their 'ethics'. However, the body is no longer the subject of self-conscious self-creation, as we saw in the case of Deitch. It is more that we unconsciously optimise it for continuous incorporation into the process of the accumulation of capital. The 'inhumanity' of this process then provides the reason why over the last few years we have been feeling a stronger feeling of solidarity with nonhuman species around and inside us.

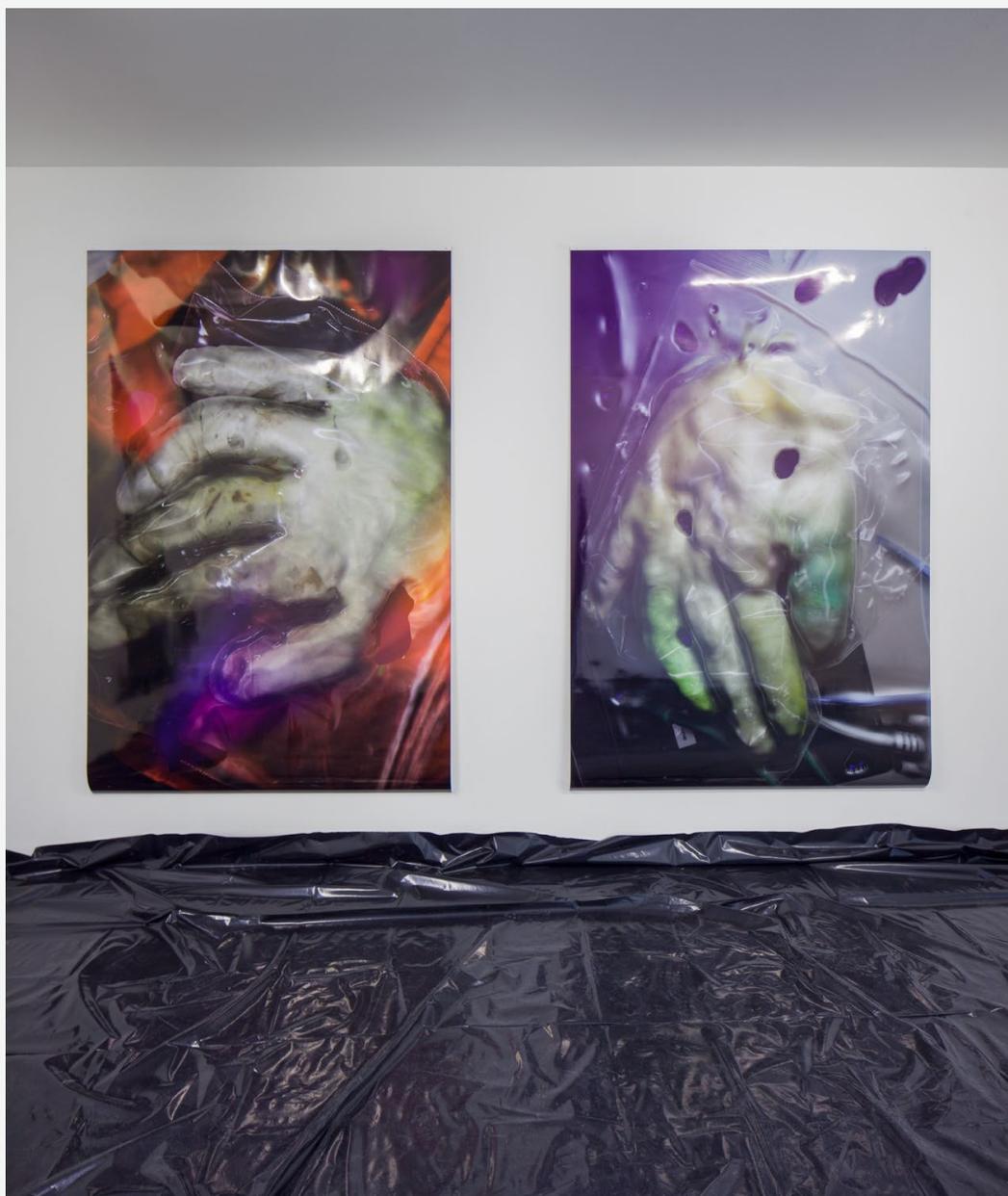
255. *Inhuman*, curator Susanne Pfeffer, Kassel: Kunsthalle Fridericianum, 29 March–14 June 2015.

256. Thom BETTRIDGE, "Susanne Pfeffer: How Art's Post-human Turn Began in Kassel", *032c*, no. 29 (Winter 2015/2016), [online](#).

257. *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*, op. cit.

Cécile B. Evans was involved in the project *Inhuman* with his short film *Hyperlinks or It Didn't Happen*, 2014. The film's guide is the digital avatar of the late Philip Seymour Hoffman, which was supposedly to have been used during the completion of the last version of the Hollywood blockbuster *Hunger Games*. The complete version of *Hyperlinks* is reserved for gallery presentations, but even from its short trailer we can make out the basic features of the artist's approach, which is based on a blurring of the boundaries between the animate and inanimate in a digital environment in which everything has the same status of image-thing. The great unifier, i.e. that which creates a network of links between different actors, is their ability to create emotions. Terms such as life and death do not lose their meaning in a digital environment, but acquire a different type of urgency to that which we assign to them in real life. In a person for whom the absence of the boundary between the digital and the real has ceased to be theoretical but has become lived reality, the deletion of the digital image may precipitate a desperation similar to that produced by the death of someone close.

We become aware of a strange blurring of the boundary between the animate and inanimate, the human and nonhuman, when looking at the digital photographs (or their physical embodiment in a gallery) from the series *Skinsmooth* by Martin Kohout. A constant motif of this series is the palm of the hand, or more precisely a latex glove used in order to insulate the palm from an environment that could otherwise be threatening, infectious or simply dirty. The gloves from the series *Skinsmooth* somewhat paradoxically follow in a tradition of contemporary images of hands accentuating touch as the sense that over the last few years has acquired a whole new urgency within the context of the rapid arrival of smart, touch-controlled digital devices. Seen in this light, gloves as an image of the hand are not as paradoxical as they might appear. While in contact with the real world the cognitive function of touch is anchored in an ability to detect various different qualities and properties of surfaces (moisture, heat, texture, etc.), in contact with digital interfaces the fingers only ever touch inert plastic or glass displays, and touch as a sense is completely redefined. Kohout photographs and subsequently digitally modifies the latex gloves filled with different materials that 'live their own life'. The chemical reactions that take place in them create variations of colour and shape that allow us



to perceive the content of the gloves as an abstract composition that, nevertheless, says nothing about the depth of spiritual life, as the paintings of the abstract expressionists were supposed to. In this case abstraction is a representation of life itself. We can view the photographs from the *Skinsmooth* series as images of hyper-objects supposedly humanised by dint of adopting the shape of the palm while nevertheless being doubly distant and untouchable. Though the objects are radically nonhuman,

Martin Kohout: *Skinsmooth Average Eyes: Deep Skins* (2015–2016). Digital print on paper. Installation view of *Apocalypse Me* exhibition. Photo: Tomáš Souček.

their anthropomorphic shape sets off in the eyes of a human viewer an unavoidable process of empathetic identification with the nonhuman similar to what is going to have to happen if the vision of a post-human future comes true.

From commodity fetishism to animism

The nonhuman turn, then, can be understood as a continuation of earlier attempts to depict a world populated not by active subjects and passive objects but by lively and essentially interactive materials, by bodies human and nonhuman. Some of the impetus to reinhabit the tradition also comes from the voluminous mountains of 'things' that today surround those of us living in corporate-capitalist, neoliberal, shopping-as-religion cultures. Novelty items, packaged edibles, disposable objects, past and future landfill residents, buildings, weeds, books, devices, websites, and so on – all these materialities make 'calls' upon us, demanding attention.²⁵⁸

258. BENNETT, 'Systems and Things', 224.

With this list of things filling the horizon of our experience that we could easily continue almost ad infinitum, Jane Bennett offers one very compelling rationale for the increasing interest in new realism or materialism, in things and 'anonymous materials'. It is easy to spend too much time amongst and with them and we do not have simply a reductive pragmatic relationship to the proliferating numbers of them, but create complex, structured relationships with them subject to changes and moods that should in modern societies be reserved for other humans. The relationship to things that could in modern societies be called naturalistic has undergone a remarkable 'animistic transformation' in recent years. We can define animism as an ontology that 'postulates the social character of relations between humans and non-humans: the space between nature and society is itself social'.²⁵⁹

259. Viveiros DE CASTRO, *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere*, Manchester: HAU Network of Ethnographic Theory, 2012, 86.

260. Classical political economy and Marxism is not concerned with 'things', but with goods as the product of labour embedded in concrete social relations.

261. 'Following Marx's insight that artefacts perceived to have intrinsic or magical agency (i.e., fetishes) are pivotal components of political economy in both premodern and modern economies, I aim to show that the agency of modern technological objects is not intrinsic to those objects—and independent of human perceptions and deliberations – but that our belief that this is indeed the case is our way of distinguishing the modern from the nonmodern.' (Alf HORNBERG, 'The Political Economy of Technofetishism. Agency, Amazonian Ontologies, and Global Magic', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, v. 5, 2015, no. 1, 36.)

The traditional lexicon of Marxism also offers a useful term that captures the way we project relational and symbolic qualities into things²⁶⁰ that in reality reflect interpersonal and social relations, namely (commodity) fetishism. This classical term from political economy is used by Alf Hornborg to compare by what means the ability to act is attributed to artefacts in premodern and modern hierarchical societies.²⁶¹ Over the last two decades there has been an 'ontological turn' in Hornborg's own sphere of anthropology,

the most important representatives of which include Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola and Viveiros de Castro. As far as contemporary art is concerned the ideas of the first two thinkers regarding the ability of artefacts to act have greater resonance.²⁶² However, here I would like to focus on de Castro's (multi)perspectivism. Hornborg himself is more interested in problematising the way that the distinction between living subjects and non-living things or artefacts is weakened or even completely abolished in respect of this ability within the framework of the 'ontological turn'. He believes this distinction remains productive in understanding how modern naturalism (an aspect of what I have regularly termed modern or Cartesian dualism in this text) reflects 'modern fetishism' in new forms. He homes in on technology, which he calls 'our own version of magic'.²⁶³ Technology, associated with the objectivity of the laws of nature, seems to modern man to be an autonomous actor. However, Hornborg emphasises that in principle our faith in the autonomous capacity of technology to act is no different from the faith placed by indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon in artefacts creating a hierarchical structure in otherwise egalitarian societies. An ontology that for centuries was so successful in creating a base for the establishment of the global hegemony of capitalism is in a race to the bottom and dragging down with it its own greatest support, namely money and technology, both of which were believed to possess the ability to act independently of human subjects (their wishes, desires, values and fears).

In modern western civilisation, social, contractual and institutional relations can only arise between 'subjects', i.e. between persons. However, these days we increasingly feel that this natural separation of the natural and the societal cannot be taken for granted. When searching for possibilities of articulating relations of production, not to speak of 'political relations linking humans to animals or plants',²⁶⁴ the ontologies and cosmologies of 'non-modern' societies are inspirational. According to Hornborg, Viveiros de Castro's perspectivist model, derived from a study of the ontology of south American Indians, became so attractive not only because of how it deals with the legacy of structuralism, but above all because of the way it 'enlists indigenous cosmologies to challenge the mindsets of capitalist modernity'. According to Hornborg, the perspectivist model 'continues to haunt us, perhaps because it recognizes the

262. An important reference point was Bruno Latour, for instance for Anselm Franke and his project *Animism*. Franke draws on Latour in the introductory essay to the book accompanying the exhibition, and under the title 'Angels Without Wings' conducts an interview with Latour. See Anselm FRANKE (ed.), *Animism (Volume I)*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010.

263. HORNBOURG, 'The Political Economy of Technofetishism, Agency, Amazonian Ontologies, and Global Magic', 43.

264. DE CASTRO, *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere*, 87.

possibility of acknowledging, in general terms, the subjectivity of all living things, which has been so bluntly repressed in modern society (cf. Kohn 2013). It illuminates how Cartesian objectification of human and nonhuman Others is ultimately an act of moral *dissociation*.²⁶⁵

265. HORNBERG, 'Political Economy of Technofetishism', 38.

So how does de Castro's perspectivism articulate the relations between subject and object? For the Amerindians, subjectivity is not a question of some substance or essence, but of perspective. Labelling someone a human being refers primarily to the social conditioning of the personality. When an Amerindian says 'people', they mean 'we people' or 'people like us', i.e. primarily people from the same tribe. However, in these ontologies persons may be not only 'people like us' but animals or spirits too:

To say, then, that animals and spirits are people, is to say that they are persons, and to personify them is to attribute to non-humans the capacities of conscious intentionality and agency which define the position of the subject. Such capacities are objectified as the soul or spirit with which these non-humans are endowed. Whatever possesses a soul is a subject, and whatever has a soul is capable of having a point of view.²⁶⁶

266. DE CASTRO, *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere*, 99.

The variability of the point of view is associated with physicality – another body means another sensory apparatus (hence multi-perspectivism):

One of the implications of the Amerindian animic-perspectival ontology is, indeed, that there are no autonomous, natural facts, for what we see as 'nature' is seen by other species as 'culture,' i.e. as institutional facts—what we see as blood, a natural substance, is seen by jaguars as manioc beer, an artefact; our mud is the hammock of the tapirs and so on. But these institutional facts are here universal, something that is quite foreign to Searle's alternatives, and that cannot therefore be reduced to a type of constructionist relativism (which would define all facts as being of the institutional type and then conclude that they are culturally variable). We have here a case of cultural universalism, which has as its counterpart what could be called natural relativism. It is this inversion

of our pairing of nature to the universal and culture to the particular that I have labelled ‘perspectivism.’²⁶⁷

267. *Ibid.*, 112.

In his reflections on the character of humanity in a period marked by expectations of the end of the world, Pedro Neves Marques, like Hornborg, notes a connection between the work of anthropologists researching the cosmology and ontological systems of Amerindians (Viveiros de Castro et al.) and the crisis (and criticism) of capitalism. According to Marques, the reason we are so interested in animistic ontology ‘is neither Rousseauian idealism nor cosmopolitan escapism’. This interest is ‘a matter of learning from their survival and reinvention past their apocalypse, but also a sign of the rupturing vitality of other ontologies in a moment when technocapitalism itself is exhibiting signs of animistic transformation.’²⁶⁸ Marques points out that, at the same time as many people are searching for post-capitalist horizons,

268. MARQUES, ‘Look Above, the Sky is Falling’, 7.

[...] capitalism too is pushing for rupture with itself, defining its new ontology – in a way, creative destruction as world destruction. This poses the question: are we looking at other ontologies, intelligences, and agencies only because capitalism too is transforming itself? This would perhaps be why in the end a shared, immanent humanity might not feel that paradoxical to us. Modernity is evolving out of itself, only to find at the end of its long messianic road those purported slaves of nature it had vanquished, exploited, cultured, be they peoples, with their no-longer-alien natural philosophies, or even animals and plants who suddenly appear to us as subjects in their own right [...].²⁶⁹

269. *Ibid.*

While the conventional approaches taken by ‘green politics’ – represented at their highest level by the programme of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and documents such as the Kyoto Protocol or the Paris Agreement – replicate the modern dualism of nature and culture (or nature and society), more and more voices are being raised in support of a concept of nature (or, as is increasingly the case, ‘natures’ in the plural) in which nonhuman others do not represent passive objects but function as actors. The horizons that are opening in front of us with the arrival of new actors in the political sphere, i.e. in a

sphere traditionally reserved for human subjects and their ‘human rights’, is a topic taken up by Sean Cubitt in a text entitled *The Lion’s Share*. According to Cubitt a prerequisite for a consistent eco-politics is expansion of the range of actors who can claim the rights that have hitherto been granted only to people.

Any declaration of human rights is a declaration of the human exception: an assertion that whatever constitutes the good is good exclusively for humans. The question then becomes not ‘what rights do humans have that can be transcribed to non-humans’ but what other kinds of subjectivity beyond the human can lay claim to its part of thus far exclusively human affairs, and in so doing bring them to a new mode of order. If public administration – what we normally call politics – proceeds by excluding those who are deemed incapable of speech, the lack of speech has excluded the rest of creation. Therefore just as every revolution begins in asserting the ability to speak, so ecopolitics must begin in the assertion that our environments are not only capable of communication, but are constantly communicating.²⁷⁰

270. Sean CUBITT, ‘Lví podíl’, in: JANOŠČÍK (ed.), *Objekt*, 148–149.

Although the idea of an environment that speaks to us would at first glance fly in the face of modern rationality, modernity itself has created technological others, nonhuman subjects, which have already attained an indisputable ability to act autonomously. Cubitt argues that an example of such a subject, such a cyborg, would be the Market, ‘this nonhuman with unbelievable political power’.²⁷¹ Though our daily experience confirms the thesis of Markets as autonomous nonhuman subjects (whether or not we agree with Hornborg that they are a product of modern magic), their abstractness makes them as incomprehensible as Morton’s hyper-objects, and this prevents any form of relationship with them.

271. *Ibid.*, 160.

However, our experience is commonly filled with relationships with not only large abstract entities incapable of being accessed by experience directly (such as markets or global warming), but with many things that ‘speak’ to us and that are within reach. In our everyday relationships with these things a completely contemporary empirical experience of animism is played out as a framework for the redefinition of the relationship between

the human and nonhuman as a social relationship. Of the many artworks reflecting transformations in the coexistence of people and things, and specifically commodities, which as a result of the 'animistic transformation of capitalism' have begun to take on an unrecognised life, or at least one ignored by most of us (we could again easily find exceptions in vitalist literature or in the interest in the life of things we see in modern masters of the still life such as Giorgio Morandi), I would like to draw attention to the animated essay *Sexual Struggle of Commodities*, 2014, the result of a collaboration between Vilém Novák and Pavel Sterec.

At the heart of the narrative of this six-minute animation is the transformation of the basis of the relationship we have with things. Specifically, the film is about the evolution of commodity fetishism under the influence of technological development, specifically 3D graphics, which allows us to transcend the nostalgic, numbing relationship to things implied by photographic documentation and replace it with progressively oriented desire. A voiceover takes us through the story of *Sexual Struggle of Commodities* and begins with an image of the museum, which has reified the artefacts on show (by separating them from the relationships that both constituted them and were constituted by them) and turned them into static objects. By confronting these artefacts, modern man (and it is man that has long represented modern society) is then in a position to create and reinforce his own subjectivity. Following on from the motif of reification, the principle of commodity fetishism arrives on the scene: we project values into a thing that have nothing to do with that thing's physical character but with social relations.²⁷² The voiceover then leads us to the point at which the arrival of 3D graphics allows us to accelerate what had been latent in this dynamic mutual relationship of reification and fetishisation. The narrator states that, thanks to 3D graphics, we have begun to desire *things* in the same way as up till now we have desired only other *people*. A relationship is unfolding between (sexual) desire and the transformation of things into subjects calling for our attention:

While people and their desires are objectified, commodities are anthropomorphised. With the spreading of pornography that can be viewed on the screens of phones, tablets and computers, as I. P. Pavlov explained it, we

272. If the way the term 'reification' in the video's introduction emphasises the passivity of things (museum artefacts), in its second iteration it is closer to the standard locution associated mainly with the elaboration of Marx's observations on commodity fetishism by György Lukács. Here, reification refers to the transformation of human (social) properties and relations into relations between (man-made) things. The result of this process may be the belief that things have a certain property or an ability to act independently of man, which is the basis of commodity fetishism (and the reason why this concept interests Alf Hornborg, for instance, when he attempts to show how modern technology is a form of magic).



Pavel Sterec & Vilém Novák:
Sexual Struggle of Commodities
 (2014). Still from HD video, 6:45 min.

can become aroused just by looking at these devices. Why is it important? The hope and revolutionary potential lies in this love of commodities. Commodity fetishism can be overcome only by its affirmation and radicalisation. When every component of machines and commodities around us is oiled with sexual fluids instead of grease, we will not want to own them. Real love gives up on the right to own, let alone to accumulate property.²⁷³

273. Vilém Novák – Pavel Sterec, *Sexual Struggle of Commodities*, video, 6:58 min., YouTube, uploaded by Pavel Sterec 8 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MZ32Clhygo> (accessed 10 December 2016).

In the climax, as it were, of *Sexual Struggle of Commodities*, the traditional narrative involving the attainment of a post-capitalist future through revolution comes face-to-face with its accelerationist version. Instead of a change to the technological base (full automation), the source of a 'leap beyond capitalism' is sought in acceleration and the intensification of commodity fetishism. Love as a force that will ultimately allow us to overcome technological rationality remains paradoxical unless we rid ourselves of the idea of love as a supremely *human* emotion. A new articulation of love as inter-species solidarity would make it easier for us to perceive it as a force that could sweep us not only to a post-capitalist future but to an image of a world without mankind (or to put it more precisely, without modern man viewing himself as the imaginary centre of all things). Though we cleave to it as to a force that could bring about a paradigm

shift, love is also an anchor, a cement, it is that which allows us to hold on to the idea of humanity even when we start to feel it is unsustainable. Like life itself, love is something that cannot be denied.

In terms of the emphasis it places on love as an energy accelerating towards a (post-capitalist) future, *Sexual Struggle of Commodities* lends itself to comparison with a short film created by Metahaven on the basis of the essay *Is It Love?* by Brian Kuan Wood already referred to. The film is called *City Rising* (2014) and comprises found images (shots of the streets of Istanbul and Taksim Square) and staged scenes, some of which are relayed or complemented by structures designed by the utopian architect Constant Nieuwenhuys. It begins with the collapse of the financial markets in 2008 and the subsequent convulsions that afflicted societies around the world, from Occupy Wall Street to the Arab Spring. 'Love is a union based on mutual debt. And now that pretty much everyone is in debt, love abounds,' the voiceover says. In Wood's essay, too, love is related to economics ('all that is capital melts into love'). However, rather than being situated in relation to commodity fetishism, it is examined more in light of the horizon of post-work society in which labour does not disappear *de facto*, but moves increasingly in the sphere of intimate, family and personal life, where love 'floats like a spectre' over work. Is an image of the future in which capital dissolves into love utopian or dystopian? Perhaps the paradoxical image of 'ghostly love' emerging from capital will allow this old anthropocentric dichotomy of a light and dark vision of the future to be overcome.

We will bring our discussion of a post-human future to a close with another meditation on love. The film *Arrival*, 2016, by Denis Villeneuve depicts love as a force that allows mankind to retain a horizon of expectations. On the one hand, Villeneuve views love as something supremely human, but on the other as a type of energy that can be utilised to overcome the inter-species barrier (all the more insuperable for the fact that the other species is extraterrestrial, albeit prepared to enter into dialogue with people). After months of trying to communicate with the aliens using all the available scientific research findings and technology, the future of planet Earth is ultimately assured thanks to the touch of a woman in love. Villeneuve suggests that this future will continue to be human, but now marked with



Pavel Sterec & Vilém Novák:
Sexual Struggle of Commodities
 (2014). Still from HD video, 6:45 min.

a continuation of the contact established with the nonhuman, the first and moreover successful example of which has opened up the horizons of expectation. In a long series of movies detailing encounters with alien civilisations, Villeneuve has created an image that, despite signs of despair and pain (or perhaps because of them), associates the concept of the future with hope, a hope that is all the stronger for residing in something that lies beyond 'human nature', or at least beyond that which we deem natural on the basis of centuries of European humanism striding victorious through world history.

It might seem anticlimactic to bring a text on the end of the world to a close with the modest proposal that what might save us is love. However, it is an idea we can live with, and these days that's saying something. At the end of the world (and at the new beginning), there can be love, but, as I have emphasised in this text, it must be a love free of that which is excessively human. The hegemony of love replacing the hegemony of capital is perhaps simply an image. But it is a powerful image that allows us to hold tight to an affirmative, future-oriented thinking and not to contaminate it with a modern rationality that is incapable of anything other than purchasing a life of luxury for a privileged few at the expense of the alienation, anxiety and gradual demise of all others, be they human or nonhuman.

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The book *Apocalypse Me* elaborates on the curatorial concept behind the exhibition of the same name that took place in spring of 2016 at the Emil Filla Gallery in Ústí nad Labem. It is not a traditional exhibition catalogue, with illustrations and accompanying explanations, but rather an annotated overview of texts, artworks and exhibitions on the theme of the end of the world. For the author it was a chance to probe more deeply problems and questions that arose while preparing the exhibition. Hopefully *Apocalypse Me* will offer the same opportunity to its readers to reflect upon the relationship of visual art and culture to the pressing issues of our time.

The book consists of four chapters that describe a kind of arc. The first (The end of the world) is an attempt to understand the end of the world as a mutual mirroring of what is being played out “outside” and “inside”. At first sight the concept of the end of the world appears strictly metaphysical. However, given our shared experience of multiple crises (ecological, social and political), a need has arisen to conduct a more targeted interrogation of the causes of the end of the world, or at the very least of the (inter)subjectively experienced fears of its end. Stanislav Grof, placing an emphasis on the concept of psycho-spiritual crisis, locates these causes in the prenatal stage of development of the human psyche. Here we attempt an updated reading of the psycho-spiritual crisis. We do not seek its source in the depths of so-called human nature, but rather in the side-effects of contemporary capitalism, more precisely, the offshoots of the constantly evolving synergy between capital and technology.

Almost all the artworks examined in this chapter reveal the subject in a state of crisis caused by the impossibility of integrating fully into the wildly spinning cogs of global capitalism. Cybernetics, computers and digital networks were long considered the pathway to a new utopia. These days we genuinely find ourselves in a world of continuous and inhuman machine performance, to which we attempt consciously and unconsciously to adapt our biologically determined bodies and minds. Utopia this most certainly is not. Digital technology (Eva and

←
Installation view of *Apocalypse Me*
exhibition, Emil Filla Gallery, Ústí
nad Labem, 2016.
Photo: Tomáš Souček.

Franco Mattes) and finance (Superflex, Melanie Gilligan) figure in the work of contemporary artists as autonomous actors. Our attempts to tune into their frequencies often culminate in signs of pathology or psychological excess (depression, anxiety, neurosis or bipolar disorder). In the video series *Financial Crisis* (2009), Superflex holds out the prospect of investigating a new reality controlled by non-human forces by means of hypnosis. Anne Imhof leads the subject to the same experience by means of a similarly hypnotic group drift in the “opera” *Angst II*. The anxiety that is the leitmotif of all the artworks and projects featured in the first chapter means, inter alia, that we are trapped in a present beyond which we are unable to locate any meaningful future.

In the second chapter (Horizons lost. Found And lost again) we shift our attention from anxiety itself to the loss of the horizon of expectations (to powerlessness) that is instrumental in the creation of anxiety. Powerlessness, the widely shared feeling that time has stopped and that nothing awaits us in the future other than the repetition of the same (in the best-case scenario), is the paradoxical outcome of modernity, with which the concept of progress is inextricably associated. Here we are forced to agree with Franco Berardi that the closure of the horizons of expectations is directly related to the “structural weakness of the social fabric” as a result of the global hegemony of neoliberalism during the last forty years.

In the sphere of cultural production we can trace the first reactions to the transition from a future-oriented modernity to the era of “presentism” back as far as the nineties and relational aesthetics (Nicolas Bourriaud), which, instead of insisting on a full restoration of the right to utopian thinking, introduces the concept of micro-utopias (training in the sphere of expanding “ways of living and models of action” subordinate to an aesthetic regime). Around the same time, an important anti-globalisation movement is forming whose confrontational model of action is reflected in the sphere of art. In the contemporary art discourse the concept of utopia regains its lustre in 2003 (the project *Utopia Station* at the Venice Biennale), when it was also becoming clear just how vanishingly slim were the chances of influencing key political decisions (e.g. the military occupation of Iraq) through direct political action.

In hindsight it becomes clear that the failure of the global anti-war movement was a significant historical milestone. Some people withdrew into defeatism, while for others these events merely reinforced the need for a revival of utopian thinking. During the last ten years this latter tendency has moved from being a nostalgic search for the ruins of a past utopia (the “historiographic turn”, as Dieter Roelstraete has called it) to an attempt to articulate a positive vision of the future based on the formulation of an anti-hegemony grounded in the acceleration of the progressive character of modernity in parallel with the ideological control of the field that venture capitalists from the hi-tech or green sectors have appropriated for themselves over the last few years. A description of and critical reflection on the basic theses of accelerationist politics (Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams) forms the topic of the final part of the second chapter. Here too doubts arise regarding the actual kernel of accelerationism. Is it really possible to reprogram the technological base of late capitalism or neoliberalism? Are attempts to recuperate the idea of progress not always doomed in advance to be themselves recuperated by and reincorporated into the existing hegemony?

At the end of the second chapter we ask whether it is possible to strip away from the accelerationist desire for the future the risks ensuing from the fact that the selfish gene of technological rationality survives at the core of accelerationist techno-optimism. We attempt to show that accelerationism does not take sufficient account of the impacts of the continued development of the technological base of modernity on the environment of a planet that human beings share with other species. The introduction to the third chapter therefore first examines the short history of global environmental politics (represented since the early seventies by the Earth Summits and international treaties concentrating on a reduction or at least a deceleration of the rate of growth of greenhouse gas emissions), followed by the Anthropocene as a concept overarching current ecological thinking.

At present creative responses to the phenomenon of the Anthropocene represent one of the most dynamic spheres of contemporary art. And so our selection merely hints at the range of ideas involved, from a moral stricture on the impacts of

human activities on the planet (Pavel Sterec), via a (quasi)scientific approach utilising the readymade principle (Kelly Jazvac), to the abandonment of the anthropocentric perspective (the motif of the *alien gaze* in the work of Adrian Villar Rojas). These three examples also point to the varying (declining) presence of green thinking (i.e. thinking that in its critique of the human impact on nature de facto replicates the modern dualism of Human/Society/Culture vs. Nature).

One of the core beliefs of adherents of the Anthropocene discourse (especially those with a background in the humanities) is that the unmistakable changes taking place in the terrestrial biosphere are not the work of *homo sapiens* qua species, but of a specific historical formation that can be identified with modernity and capitalism. Though both modernity and capitalism find their roots in Europe, these days they possess an undeniably global character. This point is made explicit in the use of the term “Capitalocene” as an alternative name for the geological era we are currently living through. Here we focus our attention on the ideas of Jason W. Moore, who promotes the idea of capitalism as a global ecology in which nature is not only pushed beyond the margins of society or exploited as a purportedly inexhaustible resource, but is at the same time co-produced. On the one hand capitalism appropriates “cheap nature”, while on the other it joins forces with it in a dynamically developing alliance that all the evidence suggests is beyond human control.

Chapter three closes with three examples of artistic practice that offer a certain (non-discursive) approach to the concept of capital as global ecology. With a grim flair for revealing depressing associations Ian Ball juxtaposes images of commodities and cheap nature in all its forms. The charming “jewellery” by the duo Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen, acquired by means of the secondary extraction of precious metals from electronic equipment, conceals a terrifying image behind its non-literary materiality of what the global ecology of capitalism means in practice equal to Ball’s *post.consumer.cult*. In comparison with these two projects, the series of woodcuts by Vilém Novák would appear at first sight to speak in a very archaic, non-conflictual language. However, at its core there is the same interest in the hybridisation of capital and nature and the blurring of boundaries between the human and the non-human. If the interest shown

by artists in the Capitalocene opens up any horizon, then it is that of a future which almost unavoidably leaves the horizon of humankind in its wake.

Chapter three (The world after mankind) is followed by the final chapter entitled The world after humanity. This subtle difference, if difference it be, announces a change of perspective and a shift in discourse from the Anthropocene to a discussion of posthumanism. These two spheres are not mutually contradictory, far from it. However, while the Anthropocene discourse inevitably gravitates towards broad-based categories such as “mankind” (or “Europeans” or “capital”), discussions of posthumanism shift from an empirical interest in the concrete impact of human activities on the planet to the transcendental search for answers to the question of what it actually means to be a human being (what constitutes a human subject, how modern subjectivity is formed in the background of the dualism culture/society and nature, etc.). The introduction to this chapter briefly hints at the sheer scope of the current debate, in which “posthumanism” slots into the broad concept of the nonhuman turn.

The interlocking crises we are living through at present are undermining the very foundations of modern epistemology, whose central tenet was a strict separation between the human (culture and society) and the natural. As we see the environment and the fabric of society falling apart before our very eyes, the idea of humankind as the centre of things collapses, and interest grows in what role other, nonhuman actors will play in the functioning of a planetary “web of life”. The platform for such interest could be either speculative realism, new materialism, or the rediscovered and reinterpreted interest in animism being shown by contemporary anthropology. Object-oriented art accentuating the post-Anthropocentric perspective has been welcomed very quickly and warmly by galleries as the latest trend, all the more warmly for the fact that it involves artefacts that almost without exception comply with the traditional idea of the artwork as commodity. Many of these objects, unready-mades, assemblages of animate and inanimate nature and technological artefacts arrive at the doors of a gallery with the wish communicated by artists or curators that they embody their own agenda, their own politics.

One option is to view these “things” as utilising the gallery environment (or safely concealed “freeports”) in order somehow to weather the current storm until such time as new, nonhuman viewers emerge who will be able to relate to them above and beyond the restrictive framework of human culture. However, we opt not to go down that path in the chapter The world after humanity, but turn our gaze instead not upon the future of objects produced for the art market but on what in the world is most human and what might be universal enough (while not simply becoming another form of dominion) to point the way to a post-human world: to love.

Me Apocalypse

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