



BREATHING
IN OUR
EMERGENT
TIMES

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TIMES

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“Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”
—T. S. Eliot

INTRODUCTION	13
HOW TO NAME OUR EMERGENT TIMES?	17
CREATIVE UPRISING	23
THE SUBLIME	33
THE UNCANNY EXPERIENCE OF OUR DIGITAL CULTURE	39
- Techno-Sublime	41
- Data Dump Mode	43
THE POWER OF IMAGES IN OUR MEDIA CULTURE	47
- The Insufficiency of Images and Internet	49
- The Worlds of Journalism, Advertisement and marketing	51
- The Aura of Images	53
THE ONTO STORIES OF GREEN WASHING	57
- OntoStories and Sustainability	59
- Degrowth and Mutation	65
- Ecotourism	66
ART IN THE ANTHROPOCENE	71
- The Big Studios	73
- Cultivating Care and Empathy	76
- Art in the Information Age	80
IS ANOTHER WORLD POSSIBLE? A COMMONS TRANSITION?	85
CONCLUSION	89
BIBLIOGRAPHY	99
REFERENCES	100





Introduction


We are currently facing many existential crises resulting from the system we live in, a form of extreme capitalism called neo-liberalism. This way of living is based on unsustainable and increasing debt, expropriation of nature and exploitation of population for economic profit. It provides to a very small number of people, the famous 1%, wielding huge amounts of money and power. All this is causing inequality, poverty, misery and species extinction worldwide. Moreover, it is destroying Earth's capacity to sustain life by altering the climate and destroying all ecosystems. If we dare to change anything, we have to change everything. We need to change this system towards one based on the universal value that is the right to life. For this we have to empower ourselves by getting more connected in fair and social ways to each other and to the wider world.

What if we choose to view progress as something achieved through co-evolution, co-creation, collaboration and sharing rather than competition?

I will study information flows, knowledge production and visual aesthetics in our digital society. I will do this by looking at social movements, mass media, politics and art in order to see the visual and political landscape of today. This will underline that it is crucial to rethink the way we create, receive and circulate information.

Expressing an ecological concern on the human imprint around Earth is fundamental to my practice. I am creating a body of work based on the passive house my father is building in France that attempts to be as ecologically sustainable as possible. I use the project of the house as a platform to address important concerns that matter for me. Moreover, I address our current crisis by speculating about possible futures and other ways of being on this planet.

HOW TO
NAME
OUR
EMERGENT
TIMES?



Anthropocene, capitalocene, pyrocene, plasticocene, ... All these different terms to define our present environmental crisis. All have valid arguments for why they should be used to talk about today's ecological crisis.

Why do we need one specific term to refer to our world?

We live in a complicated world composed of many beings that come together in an infinite amount of connections. To have only one name is going against what our world actually is. I believe all these names are entangled with each other and look at our current situation through different lenses, thus forming a critical knowledge of today.

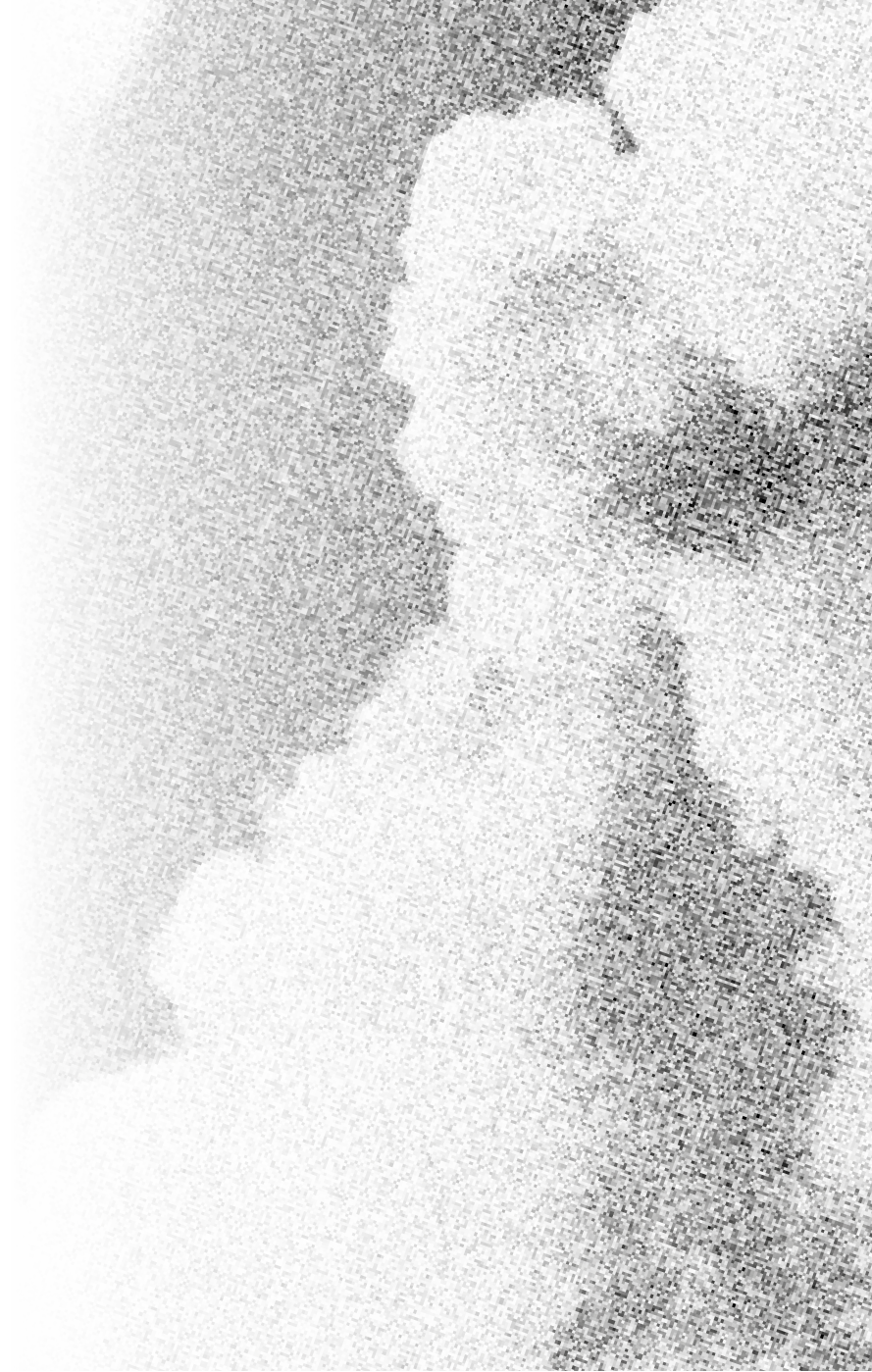
For instance, if we take the argument that it is capitalism that is responsible for today's crisis and not all Anthropos as the Anthropocene states. If we look at our evolution since the last hundreds of years, yes, the capitalist way of living built for the profit and growth of a few humans at the top of society's hierarchy is causing the sixth mass extinction. However, if you look back at feudal societies from the 12th century where "mini economies" were formed, and peasants were forced to work the land for a feudal lord in exchange for some form of property right. All this was already pointing towards capitalism. The few people that are taking decisions for all humans today are somehow just part of our evolution as a species. But evolution isn't a linear path that we have been following over the centuries. Our evolution is organic and thus can go in many different directions. It doesn't mean that capitalism is the path that we have chosen, and that we have to now go backwards to fix this obviously destructive path. It is more about going forwards; it is an ongoing process of change and adaptation to who we are in respect of our environment.

Will we move out of a neo-liberal capitalist society or will we expand on this road? What comes after capitalism? Are there other ways of governing society?

There is a debate about the beginning of the Anthropocene in which the International Commission on Stratigraphy is still considering if they can geologically state that we are in this era where humans are the main driving force of change on this planet. They haven't found a golden spike, what is an

observable marker in the layers of crust of Earth that is present all around the globe. There are several candidates that have been proposed and discussed: the emergence of the hunter gatherers, the beginning of agriculture approximately 10 000 years ago, the 1st industrial revolution at the end of the 18th century, the first nuclear bomb in 1945, the great acceleration starting in the 1950's, etc...

Can't there be several beginnings? Why do we have to base ourselves on traditional ways of stating a new era? Why don't we adapt our tools and change our way of looking at things?





CREATIVE
UPRISING

There is a depressive negativity in today's climate discourse which should also be about a multi species flourishing. We are seeing all over the world different communities rising against the injustices caused by our western colonial past. This mobilisation has to do with the urgency we are facing. We are told that within the next two decades we have to decarbonise our entire society in order to prevent going over the tipping points of natural feedback loops that will lead to a sixth mass extinction event for future generations.

The circulation of this information is due to the recent development of the internet into a platform for sharing knowledge and information at any time for almost no cost. However, this platform as we will see later is facing different complexities such as issues with mass media and the manipulation of data and information from corporate and state agents. First, I want to study the different social movements where communities are gathering under different identities and aesthetics in order to understand their strategies of relationality.

Extinction Rebellion or XR is an international movement that is a popular figure in the fight for climate justice. The emergency aesthetics they employ is entangled with what the African scholar Achille Mbembé named Necropolitics, the politics that decides who gets to live and who gets to die.¹ Clearly represented in their name, XR's condition of visibility is about the dualism of life and death. The use of an hourglass, imprinted everywhere in their visual identity is a symbol for the limited time left before the death of most living organisms on this planet. The aesthetic dimension of some of their actions, such as using a fire engine to hose fake blood over the front of the treasury building in London, or a staged funeral with two black coffins at the end of London's fashion week. XR employs non-violent but disruptive actions that causes governments to be repressive by using tear gas, pepper spray and water cannon trucks against protestors.

T.J. Demos is an art historian and cultural critic and calls for having a more careful political analysis of the uprisings that are happening today. He criticises XR's aesthetic and political dimension for both universalising responsibility and using CO2 as their symbol for

¹ https://www.academia.edu/40162675/Guide_to_Achille_Mbembe_Necropolitics_2003 (accessed 26 February 2020)

addressing our ecological crisis which is invisible and hard for people to grasp. He proposes to use tear gas as a more accurate symbol.² In that sense it is more specific in its aim and points out to a form of corporate and state control.

I believe it is important to open up the visual field of the Anthropocene, which means talking about our current situation through different lenses which all together form a critical knowledge for discussions about possible futures. I wouldn't say that XR is too universal in their claims and they should be more specific. I think talking about corporate and state responsibility is as relevant as the more universalised discourse that XR employs. Nevertheless, both fit in a more general pessimist discourse that is already too much represented in our media culture.

We need to talk about how things can change and how they are already changing on different scales. We need more narration, more storytelling; stories are more relatable. We are very social beings. As Donna Haraway puts it: "It matters what stories tell stories; it matters whose stories tell stories."³

The yellow vests movement in France that began in October 2018 is an example of the market/state control. I will use the term "market/state" in my thesis which I took from David Bollier and Silke Helfrich because as they say: "It makes sense to speak of them as partners in a shared vision. Both see market activity, economic growth, individualism and technological innovation as the drivers of human progress."⁴

The movement in France was motivated by rising fuel prices and a general high cost of living. The use of the high visibility vest as a symbol of the protest is on point since it is required by law for all drivers to have this jacket in their vehicle in case of emergencies. In this situation, people are not protesting directly against climate injustices but against the too dominant presence of the market/state in governing our lives. I want to broaden the context by including examples that confront the core of today's problems stemming from market/state control rather than focusing on the consequences of this dominance such as the climate crisis.



2 <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/104/2939286/climate-control-from-emergency-to-emergence/> (accessed 26 February 2020)
3 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press Book, 2016)
4 David Bollier & Silke Helfrich, *Free, Fair and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2019), loc:1716



The use of umbrellas in Hong Kong's anti-colonial protests which ignited with the introduction of the Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill is also a relevant example of today's uprisings. The icon of the umbrella as an object that protects us from rain and that is used here by Hongkongers to protect themselves from tear gas and pepper spray thrown by police and military forces. An important matter to study in this case is the distortion of information across different media platforms and countries. Coverage from Chinese media, Hong Kong media and American media show diverse perspectives on the events which result in confusion in public opinion. However, non-traditional media such as social media interfaces and messaging apps have provided many people in Hong Kong and China with an alternative way to access information that makes sense for them. This shows us how media can be used as a great tool to empower people with relevant information but can also act the opposite way and stir confusion between populations. This is why we must be careful and critical in how we access and use information.

Another telling example is the Indigenous Peoples March in 2019 in Washington D.C. which was about building a momentum against the Dakota Access Pipelines project. This movement was in response to an almost 2,000km long pipeline going through American Indians homes constructed without considering the impact it would have on the environment and the people living on the land.

Remembering the consequences of the Deepwater Horizon spill in 2010, it would seem evident to consider the social and environmental impact of such a project. The traditional and cultural visuality of the indigenous communities were the fundamental aesthetics of the march. The form of control here is a biopolitical one.

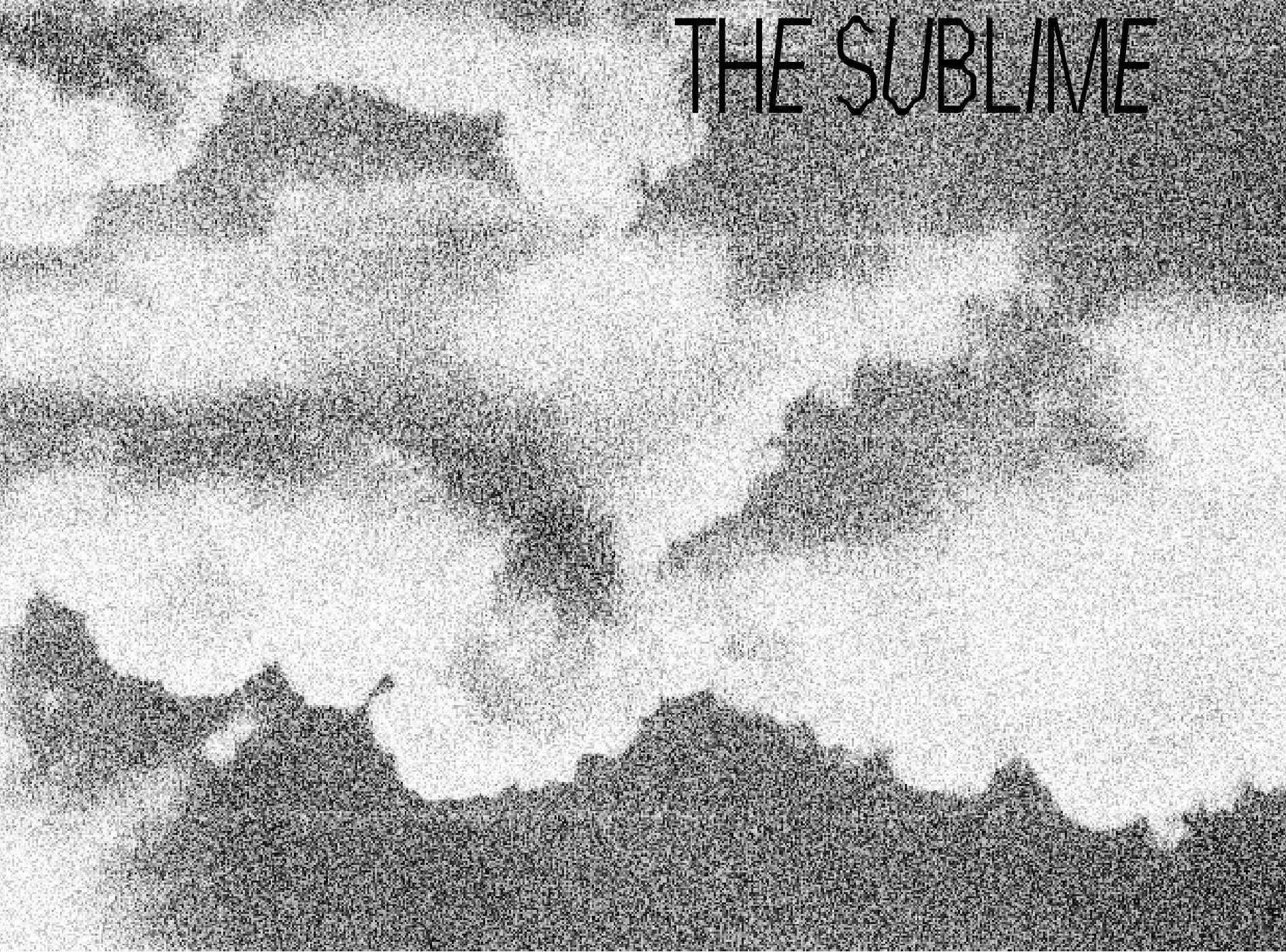
I want to open up the frame here by bring in a different example in tandem with the protests. As mentioned above, the market/state control can be seen in many different forms. Back in the 17th and 18th century with the East India Company, the British initiated a new method of forest management based on a logic of utilitarian preservation, they formalised the right of the state over nature. The goal was to prevent the exhaustion of resource extraction rather than the actual survival of the whole ecosystem. By using the morality embedded in representations

of nature, they prevented indigenous people to live off specific forests for the sake of the *environment* because they were living on resources that could be commodified by the colonialists. This is a hidden form of biopolitical control. It shows us how aesthetics can be used in powerful ways to manipulate populations and discourses. Which is why we need to be careful in our analysis and be critical about them.

Looking at all these uprisings, we clearly see the creative dimension of how people come together under our emergent times. The aesthetics people employ are strong strategies of relationality that are powerful in inspiring change. Looking at historical changes in the structuring of societies shows us that change comes from the interaction of economic development and social movements.

I believe these social movements are necessary because they create cohesion between people, but their strategies should not be about naively making frontal assaults on highly fortified market/state systems which is a strategy that is doomed to fail. It should rather be about honouring the dynamics and powers that small grassroots communities and commons have.

THE SUBLIME

A black and white photograph of a mountain range. The foreground is a dark, dense forest. In the middle ground, several mountain peaks are visible, some covered in snow. The sky is bright and appears to have some light clouds or mist. The overall mood is serene and majestic.

Today, we are constantly learning of new realities too vertiginously complex for us to ever fully comprehend. This feeling is what some have defined as a *sublime experience*. One that is fundamentally transformative, that is about the relationship between disorder and order and its implications go far beyond aesthetics. The Anthropocene is a clear example of this experience that is creating disorder all around the world.

Immanuel Kant explored the impact and consequences of the sublime experience upon consciousness. He stated that it was essentially a “negative experience of limits of oneself”.⁵ Nowadays, we witness even more nature’s complexity that continuously exceeds any human ability to control or understand it. But somehow, we unrealistically want to cling onto this feeling of being in control and at the same time we are going against what is unfolding in front of us.

Our capitalist era engendered the enclosure of everything that surrounds us. Physical or virtual, we privatised and placed rigid boundaries around everything. This neo-liberal logic of individualism, economic growth and commodification is so embedded in our lives that it even affected our psyche as a species as it became somehow *normal* to think about our world in this manner. We have to re-think and reopen our relationship with our environment. As Jeremy Rifkin says: “The opposite of enclosure is not merely openness but transcendence.”⁶ We enclose and organise everything in comprehensible boxes in order to make our lives easier to live. This way of living prevents the transcendent to happen. We should dare to let go of our fear of not being in control of everything.

Why is it so important to be in control?

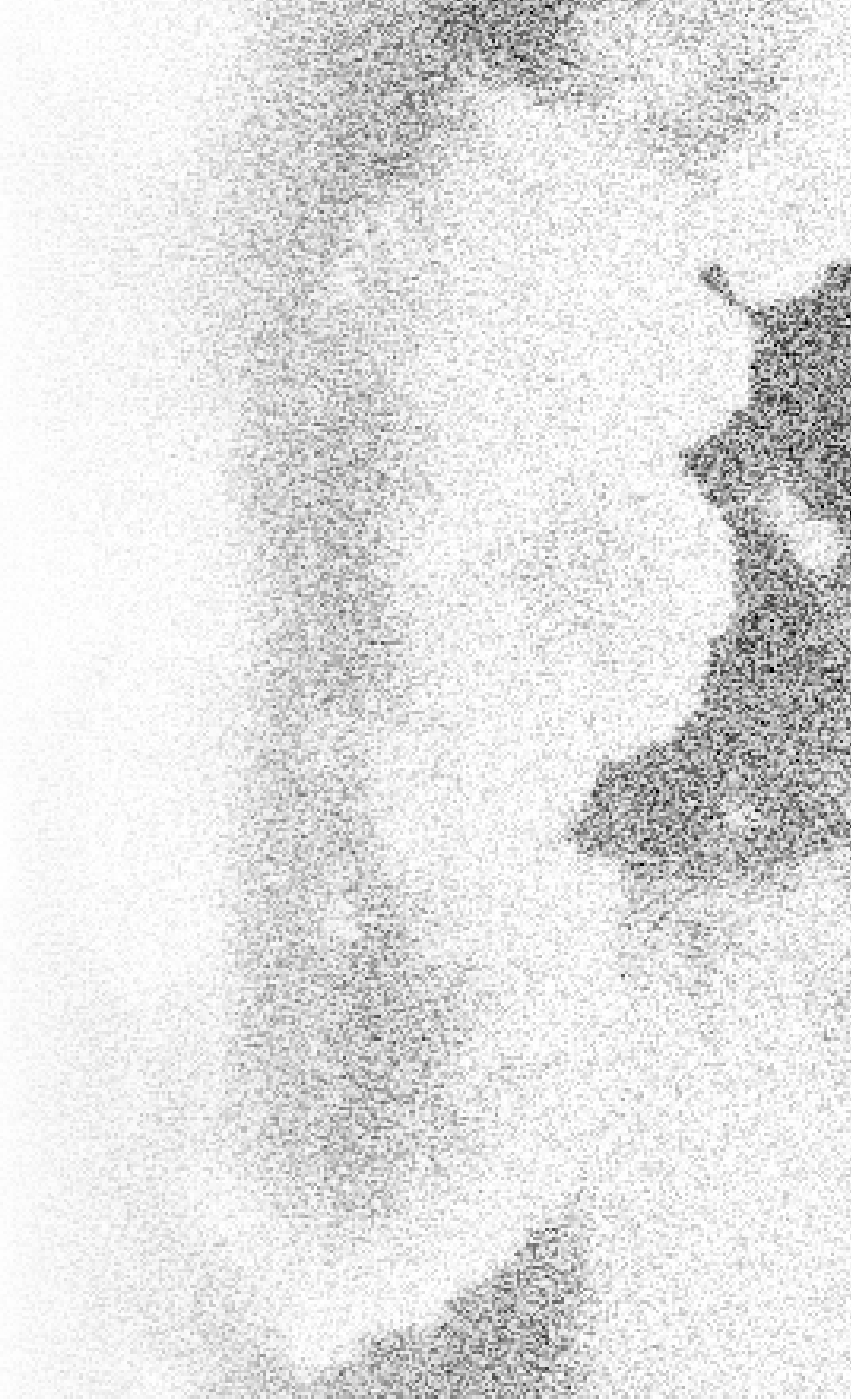
I believe it is important to have some form of mystery and unknown or something that we are not totally in control of. Otherwise, our lives wouldn’t be so exiting and would only fit within reason. I think the sublime experience is vital for us as individuals and as a community. I believe we shouldn’t perceive the sublime experience here as a negative one that would seem to place us *under nature*, as if there was a hierarchy between living beings on Earth. I propose it could rather be an experience that emphasises our natural and complex symbiosis with our surroundings that we are

5 Simon Morley, *The Sublime* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010)
6 Jeremy Rifkin, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society* (London: St Martin’s Griffin, Reprint edition 2015)

inherently connected to. Timothy Morton, a professor at the Rice University and member of the object-oriented philosophy wrote about this feeling: “Anger can happen, and if you don’t cling to it, it becomes just another colour or flavour of energy. This isn’t about pushing away or denying one’s emotion, but rather about exploring it without too much clinging. If you do cling to it, it feels just awful, it’s my anger, how am I going to get rid of it... Something like this insight needs to be part of being ecological, otherwise this risk is that humans will create a control society.”⁷


Isn’t this controlling system, dating back to the society of centuries ago, what we are still living in today? Why do we so strongly desire to cling to this unrealistic notion that we can control everything around us? Have we learned nothing?

Our capitalist society is merely based on controlling and commodifying our environment indefinitely. It’s *modus operandi* of ordering its surrounding is just going against the functioning of what it is trying to control. We cannot separate ourselves from something that we are inherently part of. Disorder here should not be seen in a negative sense but as a complex and inexplicable agency of different beings that are distinct but form a family on this planet. Our society is trying so hard to prevent the sublime experience to happen when it should go along with it.





THE
UNCANNY
EXPERIENCE
OF
OUR
DIGITAL
CULTURE



Techno-Sublime

Nowadays, with the increasing rise of new technologies we are experiencing a new form of sublime. Since the beginning of the World Wide Web in 1989, we are connecting the entire world together. The Internet has evolved today into an interface that connects almost half of the human population. It functions as a highly complex neuronal system such as our brains, with an incalculable number of connections made every millisecond which is impossible to fully comprehend. This has triggered a continuous unsettling experience, *a techno-sublime experience*.

We are now dependent on all the devices and technologies that surround us and even interdependent as they need us to maintain them, at least for now. Massive flows of data circulate fluidly through these devices and this is vital for us. If it would stop, it would create chaos in our society. All this is invisible to us, but it is as much vital as the air we breathe. It has become a kind of prosthetic enhancement of our minds and bodies, we are becoming cyborgs. As Luciano Floridi says: “Only very recently has human progress and welfare begun to be not just related to, but mostly dependent on, the successful and efficient management of the life cycle of information.”⁸

We all have a smart phone on ourselves or even two, as some people have one for their personal lives and the other for their professional lives. There is an ever-increasing number of new technologies, apps, wearables, devices and connections being put on the Internet every day. We are placing sensors all over our economic lives but also in the natural world. All the data collected by these sensors is called “big data” which functions as a self-organising storage for our digital world.

Some scholars such as Jeremy Rifkin are referring to this extremely connected world as the *Internet Of Things* which will connect each and every living organism and non-living

organism together in an incomprehensible number of connections. This experience of constantly receiving and sending data and having no agency above it all, is our new techno-sublime reality. In Laszlo Maholy-Nagy's words: "By now technology has become as much part of life as metabolism."⁹

Walter Benjamin was already talking about "a disorienting psychic condition of traumatic shock", with hugely destabilising consequences not only for the individual but also for society.¹⁰ This uncanny experience is deeply affecting our sense of perception of time and space. Our notion of the *here now* is constantly being subverted. This continuous flow of massive amounts of data is constantly being rewritten because it is impossible to store and adapt old data to the newest platforms. Due to this we find ourselves trapped in some *perpetual present*. We have no agency over this flow, and it is even hard for us to even realise it. This is exactly why we need to find new ways of organising past and present information so we can ourselves cherish and nurture the knowledge created. We need to become our own referees or curators of digital information.

⁹ Laszlo Maholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Company, 1947), p.64.
¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Berlin: Schocken Books, 1968), p.217.

Data Dump Mode

Coming back to what I was saying before, this too present pessimist discourse is killing the possibility of overturning today's crisis and is unnecessarily fuelling a depressive mindset in our society. We are being addressed by what Timothy Morton has called a "data dump mode"¹¹ discourse. Especially with the reports of the International Panel on Climate Change or IPCC that are used everywhere to refer to this emergency. It has become an all too present discourse in our media culture. How are we supposed to react to facts such as, "Concentrations of CO₂ in the atmosphere are at their highest level since 2,5 million years" or "The level of 400ppm of carbon dioxide has been reached." This "trying to be objective" of scientists is becoming hard for people to comprehend. They are just throwing facts out there and the result is a scary loss of reality to the general public which do not know what to do with this kind of information, nor how to put it into real context that is relevant for them. The imagery that follows this type of data driven objective scientific discourse is unhelpful as it in a way shields against our human reality.

As William S. Burroughs puts: "A government is never more dangerous than when embarking on a self-defeating or down-right suicidal course."¹² This is exactly what governments are giving to their populations so they can keep maintain business as usual. We are feed with an endless flow of numbers. We are measuring and calculating averages about everything and anything. Scientists are separating the human dimension of themselves from what they study thus acting as machines which makes it very abstract for people to understand. It is hard to relate to all this numeracy when we are not aware of the context around it nor of what is really at stake. Besides, it is all too confusing for people to even consider these

¹¹ Morton, *Being Ecological*
¹² William S. Burroughs, *The Adding Machine: Collected Essays* (London: John Calder, 1985)

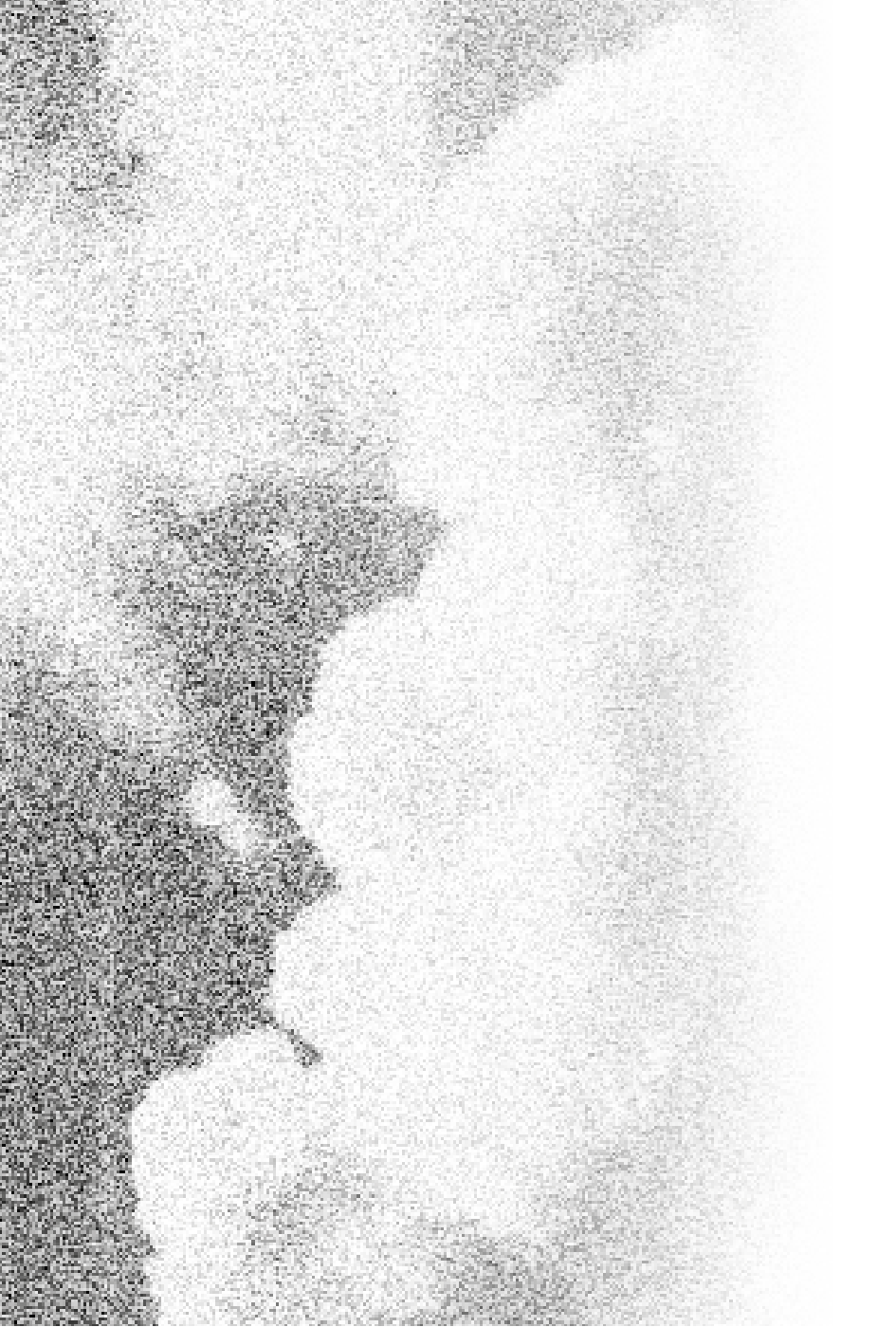
numeracies knowing that they are constantly changing, and new elements are constantly be added to the bigger picture. What makes it so confusing is that the information gives an impression of being unpolitical, although it is by essence.

How can we react to this hidden subjectivity? How to shift our perception and understanding on such numeracy and make use of it? How can we instead find a way to make use of all this numeracy and science as forms of our emancipation and resistance in these emergent times?

Science is made by human beings; hence it is also subjective and political. If we are ready to acknowledge this then we can use it to help us imagine future worlds that we want. On top of that it is important to bring narration and storytelling to the scientific discourse to be able to speculate about possible futures. In my opinion, this can happen and is already happening through new and stronger bridges being made between different disciplines, such as the creatives fields, politics and art.

I believe the uncanniness of our digital culture with its massive flows of data and information travelling through diverse platforms is something we should just accept and not cling too hard to. However, we should be taught to be more responsible with regards to this interface so we can navigate it in a harmless and safe manner. This raises the question of how can we protect data from malicious use but at the same time ensure that the information remains freely accessible to all? The Peer Production Licence and the Creative Commons have addressed these issues.

THE POWER
OF
IMAGES
IN OUR
MEDIA
CULTURE



The Insufficiency of Images and Internet

Despite the abundance of information in our digital society, we are today faced with an insufficiency of images and representations addressing current injustices. This insufficiency is also amplified by the technologically mediated mess of current networks. Images have become flattened, frozen objects of pure aesthetic contemplation. They have lost all sense of subjectivity, emotion and thus lacking the power to depict any context or tell any story. There has been a shift in the perception of images. They are no more vehicles for stories or messages. They have become the object of pure visual pleasure. We have developed a relationship of perverse distant voyeurism towards images in the Anthropocene. Hence, we are just observing from afar the catastrophes happening all around the world. The lack of subjectivity in visual representations makes it hard for people to relate and even act upon what is happening.

We can distinguish two kinds of visual insufficiency happening today. On the one hand you have the loss of all subjecthood and empathy towards what is represented, it is what I would call the insufficiency of images. On the other hand, we have a highly pervasive interface that doesn't allow for empathy or care, which is what I would call the insufficiency of Internet. The former can be seen with images of natural and artificial disasters that are occurring more often and that are getting stronger in amplitude as the Earth warms. The latter insufficiency can be seen with highly shocking images that get lost in this continuous and extensive flow of information. For instance, the death of Alan Kurdi a three-year-old Syrian boy whose image made global headlines after he drowned in September 2015. The photograph of his body lying on the beach in Turkey quickly circulated around the world and became a strong marker in the refugee crisis at that time. These images, these stories do touch us deeply.

However, the way information is distributed through our communication platforms with its networks and apps do not give us any time or space to really reflect and take them in. We constantly scroll down to the next story or get told about some other event happening that same day. It never stops and we can't press pause. There is this constant flow of information accompanied by its imagery that creates some kind of visual suffocation. The effect on us is some kind of slow violence that is happening without us really realising it. This digital form of pollution induced by our media culture is a constant distraction and entertainment that is hard for us to escape. It is a new drug; we want to constantly hear and see the new stories of the day but without taking the time to discuss them, consider what they mean in balanced critical manner.

How can we change the way we interact with this suffocating flow of information so that we can create some space to reflect and discuss about the actual information? Can the art space take part in this change? I will touch upon these questions in the last chapters.

Life is not always pleasant and never has been. Internet allows us to access all the unpleasant stories happening on this planet and it will soon connect our entire species together.

Is this reaction of ours a sign of our own incapacity towards such an overwhelming reality? Or is it our way to cope with today's world?

The Worlds of Journalism, Advertisement and marketing

Journalism is about what is going to attract people. Journalists cannot tell all the stories and that is why they determine a focus. However, this strategy of telling what people want to hear so they can attract more readers and earn more profit results in the discarding of all other stories that are equally important for us to hear. Internet allows marginalised content to circulate and be heard, but then our networks to access information on Internet is owned and controlled by corporates that have a monopoly or share an oligopoly and even governments in some cases, so they can use it towards their own economic goals.

How can we decentralise and democratise our social networks? Is producing and sharing knowledge locally a possible solution?

Besides, journalism uses numeracy the same way science does as a way to separate the numbers from any narrative. We will hear or read an article saying that every day 2,000 kids around the world die of diarrhea. This will somehow affect us less than if we hear about the story of one particular child with a name and a background in a specific context that we can more easily relate to. We are a species full of empathy. We are more emotionally affected by stories about other human beings rather than numbers.

This also makes me wonder in the age of the Anthropocene, will we be able to extend our empathy towards the more-than-human?

The ubiquitous world of advertising and marketing in our capitalist society is feeding this ideal of human satisfaction through individual consumption. Today's visuality with its cultural signs and codes of representation are understood

as making our lives meaningful. Our identity in the world is defined by what we buy or should buy. This is a new form of drug which creates the need to consume new material things but also images. The quality of each story is lost over the number. This consumption by the numbers of material and virtual things drugged by advertisement is creating a huge loss of our human capability for empathy. We lose the fundament of what makes us who we are.

As Esther Perel, a popular Belgian psychotherapist says: “The quality of our relationships determines the quality of our lives.”¹³ We are full of empathy; we need to be and connect with people and not material things. The drugged value of material things over human relationships is causing many suicides nowadays, it has weirdly become ordinary. Materialist consumption is developed early on in the education and growing up of children because they are surrounded by this kind of market advertisement.

This is why I think education is more than ever important. It is essential to create an educational sphere full of empathy. We need to valorise social interactions from the very early ages on and make it central in the structuring of education so that this materialist greed of consumption has no room to develop. The questions that arises is, how to educate care and empathy through images in the same way marketable brands unconsciously show us to find satisfaction in buying and selling. I will touch upon these questions in the last chapter.

The Aura Of Images

I want to look at Walter Benjamin’s essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and reflect about the value images have under the Anthropocene. At the time of the 1st and 2nd industrial revolutions, printed matter was the norm of dissemination and communication. Walter Benjamin referred to the aura of artworks back then as one of “permanence of the original” because all other imagery was faced with the loss of this aura with reproduction techniques.

Today, in our highly digital and mediated world the aura of images has mutated. There has been a shift in our perception of images. The loss of the permanence and of the subjecthood has given place to accessibility and distraction. In the age of open access and sharing, even marginalised content circulates in the information sphere and connects to people around the globe. All this is creating new kinds of networks of dissemination. Networks that connect different audiences provokes different kind of debates and discourses that could not take place before. Ultimately this allows the creating of new forms of knowledge production. This new kind of aura is what Hito Steyerl has named the transience of the copy. She says: “by losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it.”¹⁴

I think it is great to acknowledge and see this kind of power in mediated digital images but it should not be the only type of images we are confronted with, we need more diversity in the visuals and in the support mechanisms behind those visuals.

The emergence of this new aura does not take over the previous one but rather shifts its use and quality. Nowadays, the permanence of the original is not only seen within unique artworks but also within printed matter. The contemporary print does not hold the flatness and insufficiency of the

digital mediated image. It has a true visual substance with clear aesthetics. It is presented on paper which is rooted in old traditions and gives a feeling of authenticity. The permanence of the original is amplified because it differs from the mainstream digitalised and hence short-lived medium of communication today.

Moreover, it creates a moment of pause in the constant flow of digital images. It allows time to reflect upon things that we are usually overwhelmed by and have no time to critically process. You pay attention to a printed or physical image with a different gaze, it activates a different response. That is why within today's digital world, print-making has even more relevance especially when addressing the Anthropocene.

The market/state is using this new aura of the transient, the accessible, to feed their "ontostories". Ontological stories are what David Bollier and Silke Helfrich defined as stories that shapes one person's fundamental presuppositions about the nature of reality and how it is structured, more on this in the next chapter.¹⁵ However, they show that they can use distinct visual languages and discourses in order to manipulate populations and to a greater extent to control what we consider as reality.



THE ONTO
STORIES

OF
GREEN
WASHING



Onto Stories and Sustainability

The kind of larger ontostories of today are the ones told by the market/state. It is hard for us, at least in the western world, to think of the world without the lenses of economic growth, competition, states, bureaucracy and centralised hierarchical systems. It is so embedded in our lives and our consciousness that it seems impossible to think without them.

Nowadays, large corporations are increasingly deciding elaborate ontostories to define our reality and thereby advance their political and economic interests. For instance, retailers like to frame the act of spending money on sales items as saving money because one is supposedly paying less than the regular price. Although, they still make a sufficient profit because the costs of production are so low. In creating these sales events they give us a good feeling in buying more during these events which in turn allows them to generate huge amounts of profit compared to during a regular sales period. The point is to create a story that will subtly instill emotional meanings and values in our perceptions and thoughts.

This strategy is also used by the US military. By using a fear-based narrative concerning the security of the populations, they seek to legitimize their defense spending through stories about state violence and mass surveillance. Looking at how these practices are used in our digital culture raises a lot of concerns.

In this vast and complex virtual world, how can we trust what is being said? How can we trust a platform not to use our data to feed an algorithm that will be used later for political or commercial use?

This is what I was referring above as our new techno-sublime reality. As innovation expands, these algorithms are learning from previous experiences and in doing so

creating smarter ways to use and take data from us, what is called machine learning. This is why we need to become our own arbiters in this highly connected world and that comes by learning to navigate on this complex platform.

Moreover, it is about being critical about what we are shown, and all this should be addressed through education at the early ages. This is so important because internet is taking away this critical thinking. We live in a society that privileges “knowledge by description”. We just ask for something on Internet and take for granted what is shown to us. The seeming perfect screen never reveals the underlying mechanics. This is why, I believe art has a strong potential because it can be an act of “knowledge by acquaintance” where you learn by experiencing it yourself or learning it yourself.¹⁶

When we look at how the word sustainability is used today, it is mostly about describing business models rather than the mindful use of shared natural wealth to ensure its capacity for regeneration. This strategy of controlling discourses and even the words we use is essential for the success of green capitalism.

They are showing that our ecological crisis can be fixed just by investing money in greener technologies. There has been the whole focus on implementing methods of geo-engineering to counter global warming and CO₂ concentrations. Corporates that are directly involved in carbon pollution are on the fore front of these innovations. Examples of these include a multitude of creative initiatives such as physically capturing and storing CO₂ or placing mirrors in space to reflect the sun’s radiations. As businesses implement these methods of countering climate change, it becomes a way for them to legitimise their pollution. For instance, as they would capture a certain amount of CO₂, it would mean that they could continue to pollute the same amount and at the same time consider their operations as sustainable. They are creating a right to pollute as a saleable commodity. This again shows us why it is important not just to inform oneself but to be critical about what is being said.

As public opinion is growing against issues of climate change, these actors need to find even more creative ways to manipulate opinion so that they can somehow continue their business as usual. Although, their focus point should be about finding ways to use energy more efficiently, what is called

aggregate efficiency. Which is the ratio of potential work to the actual useful work that gets embedded into a product or service. The higher the aggregate efficiency of a good or service, the less waste is produced in every single conversion in its journey across the value chain. Traditional economics says you increase productivity by investing more capital in better machines and by providing better-performing workers, all of which reduces the fixed and marginal cost of production. But these factors account for only about fourteen percent of productivity. Much of the rest of productivity is accounted for by the improvement in aggregate efficiency in the managing, powering, and moving of economic activity. As Jeremy Rifkin says:

“Aggregate efficiency works the same way in economic production as it does in nature. When a lion chases down an antelope and kills it, only about 10 to 20 percent of the entire energy in the antelope gets embedded into the lion; the rest is heat lost in the transition. So, the lion’s aggregate efficiency is only 10 to 20 percent. If it could consume more of its prey’s energy, or use less of its own in the hunt, the lion would gain productivity as a predator.”¹⁷

Coming back to sustainability, it is used as a way to say that the world we live in today is worth sustaining. Although the world we live in today is full of injustices. Around one billion people are living without electricity. Around two billion people are living without access to fresh water and around four billion lack access to safely managed sanitation.

There is some form of malicious stupidity at play as industries counter as much as possible the obvious actions that they should be taking. They claim to need more clarification and more facts as they buy time to pillage as much as they can. Besides, fossil fuel lobbies are feeding climate denialism in public opinion. They do this through circulating fake news, alternative facts or what is called infotainment.

If we look at the extremely mediatised Australian bush-fire that happened at the end of 2019, we can see that people all over the world were witnessing the immense forest fire happening throughout the country.



The information that is showed to us about the disasters is just one of immense shock of scale and how it is endangering natural habitats and ecosystems in the region. The underlying logics at play here are hidden. We do not hear so much about what is not being done against these kinds of issues and so what should be done. The information circulating is solely emphasizing on the atrocity of this event. Sublime imagery of fire is thrown at us and that will after a while become a forgotten memory on Internet as the flow of information follows the logic of a perpetual present that I talked about above. This shows us how corporates and states are clever at orchestrating information flows in our digital society. This is exactly what we have to challenge and change if we dare to really face today's issues on a macro scale.

Besides, the information itself is hard for people to grasp or to know what to do with. Gerdien de Vries who is an assistant professor on public management and organisation at Delft University in the Netherlands has named this inaction before such information as a “bystander” effect. She explains through three psychological processes: “diffusion of responsibility, evaluation apprehension, and pluralistic ignorance.”¹⁸

What she explains here is exactly what these actors are using to manipulate populations, and this effect becomes even stronger in a connected world. They make sure that we will not hear about ways to act a local level and therefore it becomes difficult for us to understand what we can actually do about it.

The kind of information we need is one that can create empathy on a larger scale in order to encourage local actions. This is why we need more local, direct forms of knowledge production and transmission to inform and facilitate actions that people can put into motion themselves to improve in their actual life situation.

What is important is to see the difference between “data-information” and “knowledge-wisdom”. Today, discourses and images fit in this data-information category which is hard for people to act upon. Although, they should take the role of “knowledge-wisdom”, so people know what to do with this type of content. For that, we need to teach and educate people about how to use this kind of knowledge to form wisdom.

The educational institutions should allocate as much time to the development and exercise of wisdom as it does to the development and exercise of intelligence.

In addition to the DIKW pyramid above, I found a text in the program of the 2020 Biennale of Design in Ljubljana, Slovenia, that explains this pyramid with an essay of Russell L. Ackoff:

“Data is raw. It simply exists and has no significance beyond its existence (in and of itself). It can exist in any form, usable or not. It does not have meaning of itself,” while information is data that has been given meaning by way of relational connection. This ‘meaning’ can be useful but does not have to be. Knowledge is the appropriate collection of information, such that its intent is to be useful. Knowledge is a deterministic process. When someone ‘memorizes’ information, then they have amassed knowledge.”

This knowledge has useful meaning to them, but it does not provide for, in and of itself, an integration such as would infer further knowledge. Subsequently, wisdom lies at the top of the pyramid.¹⁹

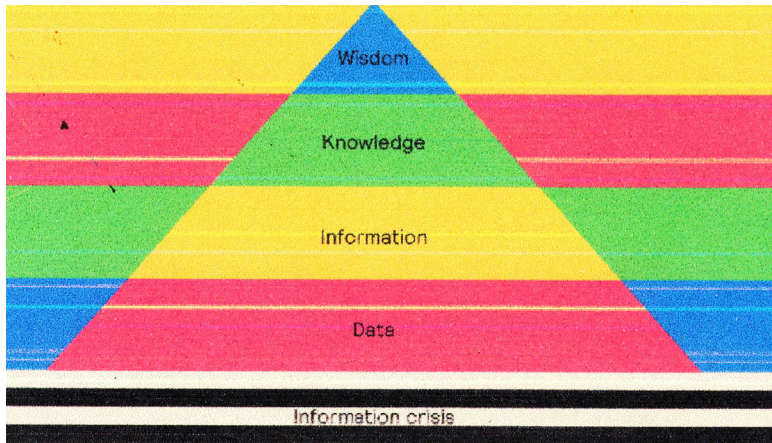


Figure 1: Knowledge Hierarchy (DIKW), diagram, 2020. In an attempt to pin down the comprehensive theme of the 26th Biennale of Design in Ljubljana, they adopted the data-information-knowledge-wisdom (DIKW) Knowledge Hierarchy diagram.

Degrowth and Mutation

In today’s political landscape, I think it is important to distinguish actual green new deals proposals and policies from neoliberal greenwashing. The latter are finding new kinds of market incentives instead of developing social transformation.

“Degrowth as a way to produce radical abundance” should be at the core of any green new deal.²⁰ However, it must be carefully communicated as there can be misconceptions. The degrowth of gross domestic product (GDP) in this case is not seen as a negative process but rather a positive one. Basing our beliefs of how *good* or *bad* a nation is doing by looking at the GDP is an outdated way of looking at society and one that is mostly relevant to the archetype of neo-liberal capitalism. As we have seen before it is important to move out of this too dominant paradigm. We need a different mindset. I believe we should valorise first the health of the entire biosphere, humans and non-humans, their well-being and happiness instead of economic growth.

What I find relevant to the idea of degrowth is that it is not about resolving a crisis but rather about acknowledging that we cannot come back to some previous state and that we are in need of a *mutation*. This is exactly what the French scholar Bruno Latour has been writing about in his theory about Gaia. He says: “We have to learn to live in this new rapidly changing world.” And this goes through changing our way of looking and talking about the world around us. We are used to talking about our environment in binary ways, nature and culture, the individual and the collective. However, they are not separate, you cannot talk about one without talking about the other, they are connected and interdependent. So that means in order to be able to sustain one’s individual lifestyle it requires to care and sustain the lifestyle of the whole.²¹

Ecotourism

22 <https://biosi/en/program/main-exhibition/17/from-data-to-wisdom/>
In the summer of 2019, I travelled with my family to the Canadian part of the Rocky Mountains. On the way we got caught into a tourist attraction of experiencing the glacier Athabasca.

What do they mean by experiencing? Are they selling the experience of a glacier melting?

What is impossible to actually experience as the time frame of such an event takes place over years. However, thanks to markers made by the glacier itself and the story told by the tourist company it is possible to somehow imagine the rate at which the glacier has melted. There is something very paradoxical about this experience because visitors drive from all around the country long distance to visit the accelerating melting of a glacier. The glacial mass becomes some kind of attraction where you pay to take a selfie with the flag of your country in the background (if yours is part of those present) so you can say that you witnessed the melting of a glacier. They are using the subliminal experience of awe and wonder of the glacier to attract people. This new form of ecotourism is working on the same parameters than those of green capitalism. They are creating a fully commodified experience where they feed off from our actual ecological crisis to be able to make economic profit.

Today, we can see different forms of manipulation, distortion and control happening from different market and state actors that are feeding off today's crisis. Similar practices are used in the art world where art is used to legitimise or give a good image to those actors. For instance, the investigation of the Forensic Architecture group about the tear gas *Triple-Chaser* and the *Sierra* bullets that linked Warren B. Kanders who was at the time vice chair of the board of trustees of the Whitney Museum in New York.²² This shows us why it is important for the art community to be critical and aware of what they are part of.

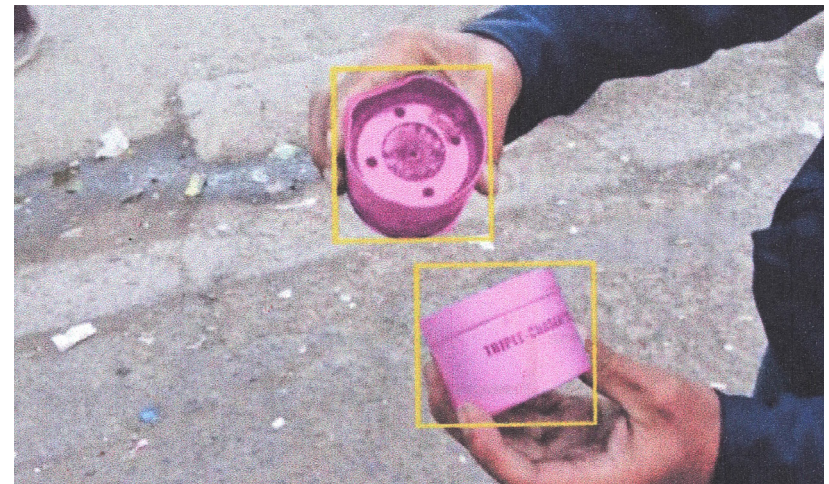


Figure 2: Triple-Chaser, photograph, Forensic Architecture, 2018. During the process of training a "computer vision" classifier, bounding boxes and "masks" tell the classifier where in the image the Triple-Chaser grenade exists.

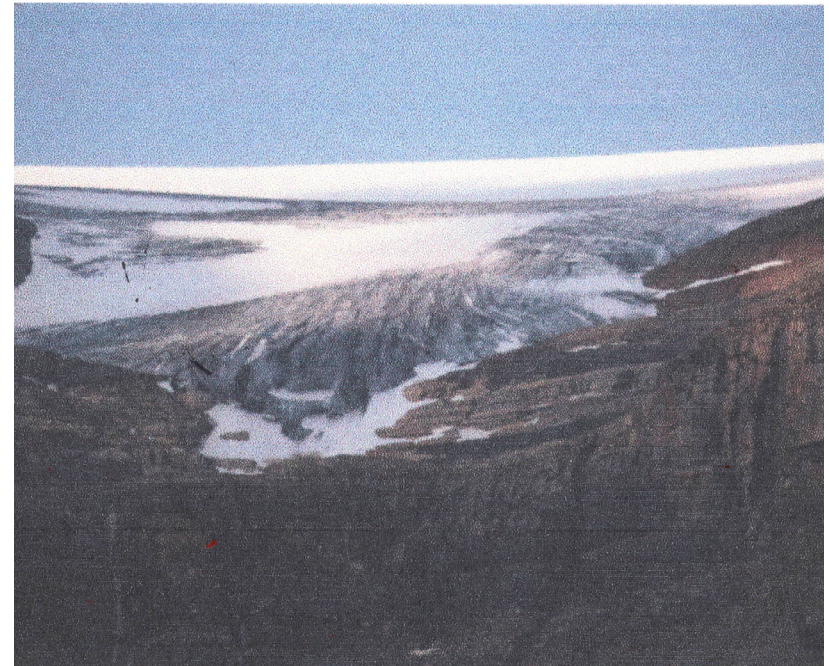



Figure 3: July 2019, Rocky Mountain



The image is a high-contrast, black and white, grainy photograph of a landscape. The foreground is dominated by a dark, textured area that appears to be a field of low-lying vegetation or a rocky terrain. The background is a lighter, textured area that suggests a sky or a distant horizon. The overall effect is one of stark contrast and texture.

ART IN THE
ANTHRO-
POCENE



The Big Studios

Art practices have a strong role to play in re-imagining future scenarios that go beyond the cynical recklessness of the capitalist horizon. Let us consider Studio Olafur Eliasson's project *Little Sun*, which is giving thousands of portable solar LED lamps to people around the world in need. Approximately fifteen percent of the human population does not have access to electricity and even more rely on toxic sources of lightening that provoke serious health issues, especially to children. This shows us the importance of the social impact of a project like *Little Sun*.

Let us ask how it is framed as an artwork?

Olafur explains it as a way to become a power station and make the vital importance of the sun become tangible. Moreover, it is a way of connecting people through sharing light and in addition the objects function as tools for educating people about energy access, utilising natural resources as well as illustrating how individual action can make a global impact. One can criticise *Little Sun* as they use lithium batteries to store solar energy. The extraction of lithium is a source of injustices to different communities around the world. As the demand for "greener" technologies increases so does the demand for lithium. There is a real, known problem with recycling these batteries. In the following decades we will have to deal with a huge amount of battery waste in a similar way to managing all the nuclear waste we have accumulated in previous decades.

Let us look at the multi-disciplinary project *Aerocene* from Studio Tomas Saraceno. They speculate in concrete and abstract ways on how we could act differently in our world. They conceived a different transport system that is completely dependent on the Earth's air flows which in turn

are influenced by the movement between the Sun and Earth. In contrast to the Olafur project, *Aerocene's* ecological footprint is free of fossil fuels, lithium batteries, solar panels, helium or other rare gases.

Besides, the studio imagines some kind of utopian flying cities that are moving by an external source that they do not control, but just go along with. Yes, flying cities sounds a bit far reached and not so convincing, but I believe it is not so relevant to look at the project in terms of feasibility but to look at it more for the poetic dimension it inspires. It hints to another way of perceiving and feeling the world around us. The speculative dimension of such a project shows us how the art world can imagine and tell stories that are different from the apocalyptic scenario of today. Overall, it is not about the end point but rather about the ongoing process of learning to think differently in our emergent times.

For me, both projects are relevant for their poetic and social dimension and we don't have to measure everything for its ecological footprint otherwise we can criticise everything we do because whatever the smallest action we do will always have a footprint. I believe it is about being conscious about it, countering it in other ways, trying to be sustainable in some cases and regenerative in others but mostly it is a state of mind and about being able to share with others.

“Humans have always dreamed of flying. Today that dream has become a nightmare. What if we could fly differently?”
—Tomás Saraceno

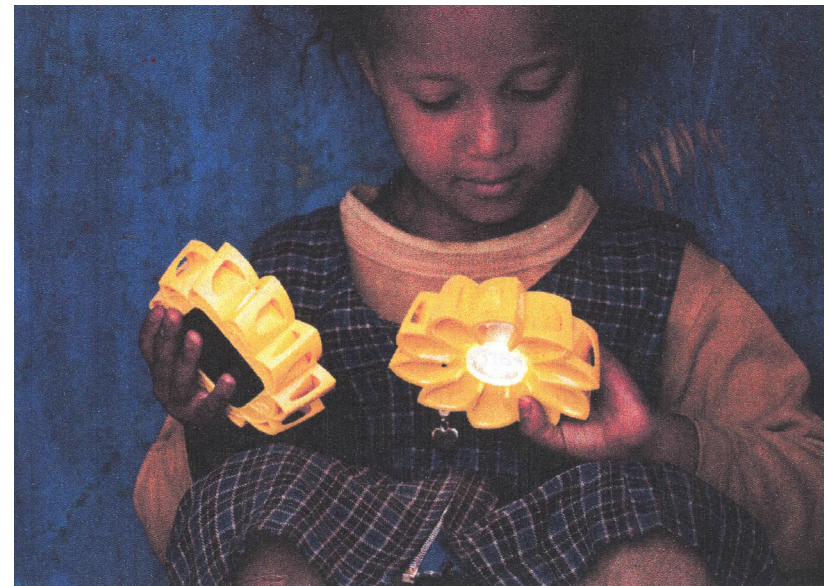


Figure 4: Little Sun, photograph, Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2012



Figure 5: Aerocene, photograph, Studio Tomás Saraceno, 2017

Cultivating Care and Empathy

There is a whole community of artists today that are cultivating care and empathy through their practices towards other humans and non-humans. For instance, *Dear Climate* is a pluri-disciplinary project in the form of posters, podcasts, a website and installations by Una Chaudhuri, Fritz Ertl, Olivier Kelhammer & Marina Zurkow.

They talk about today's climate crisis with a language and aesthetic that differs from the predominant catastrophic discourse. They mix irony and seriousness through bold texts and black and white visuals. Overall, they are telling the story of today through different lenses and cultivating a sense of affection towards the climate and the more-than-human world.

Amy Balkin's poster-essay, *The Atmosphere, A Guide* shows us how our modern society has influenced in multiples ways the atmosphere that stretches from sea level to the exosphere.

The atmosphere is vital to everything that we are today and is central in the equation of our climate crisis. When you look at how incomprehensibly vast and complex the universe is, we can understand how incredibly lucky we are to live on a planet with such an atmosphere. This work helps us understand how fragile and unique the atmosphere is and how it functions as a passive envelope for Earth, regulating flows from the outside and the inside. We learn that the atmosphere depends on the living organisms that it protects to avoid any overflow of its functioning towards a point that it cannot regulate anymore. It is an interdependent relationship; one cannot exist without the other.

I believe it is important to cherish and understand how important the atmosphere is for us and that we have to care about it. It is through projects such as Amy Balkin's, that we can find ways to make the sublime object that is the atmosphere, become more tangible to us. There is a clear

educational and informative role to her work which makes it very powerful.

If we look at the work, *What is Above is What is Bellow* by the London based duo of spatial practitioner's Cooking Sections. It consists of an installation/performance during Manifesta 12 in Palermo, Sicily in Southern Italy. They made this work in reaction to the history and traditions of water management and control in the region. It resulted in a series of different installations around trees in Palermo that envision a new model of caring about our environment by creating new microclimates that protect the trees from harsh weather conditions. By combining ecology and art they allow another gaze on climate concerns. This work gains its strength through its multidisciplinary approach of being an activist action, an engineered infrastructure, an educational and relational work but also an artwork with its aesthetics.

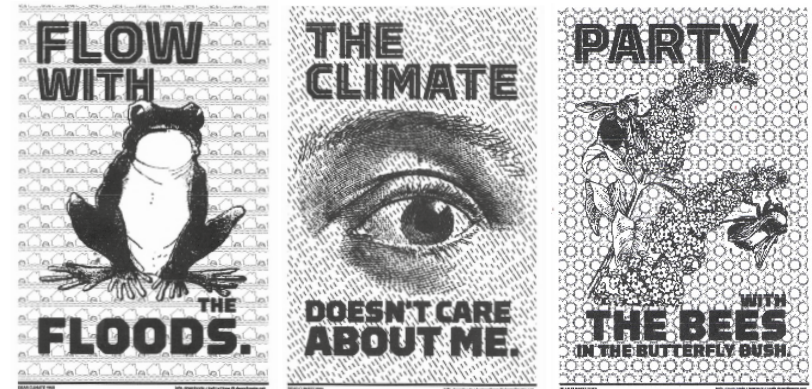


Figure 6,7,8: Dear Climate, Una Chaudhuri, Fritz Ertl, Olivier Kelhammer & Marina Zurkow, 2012

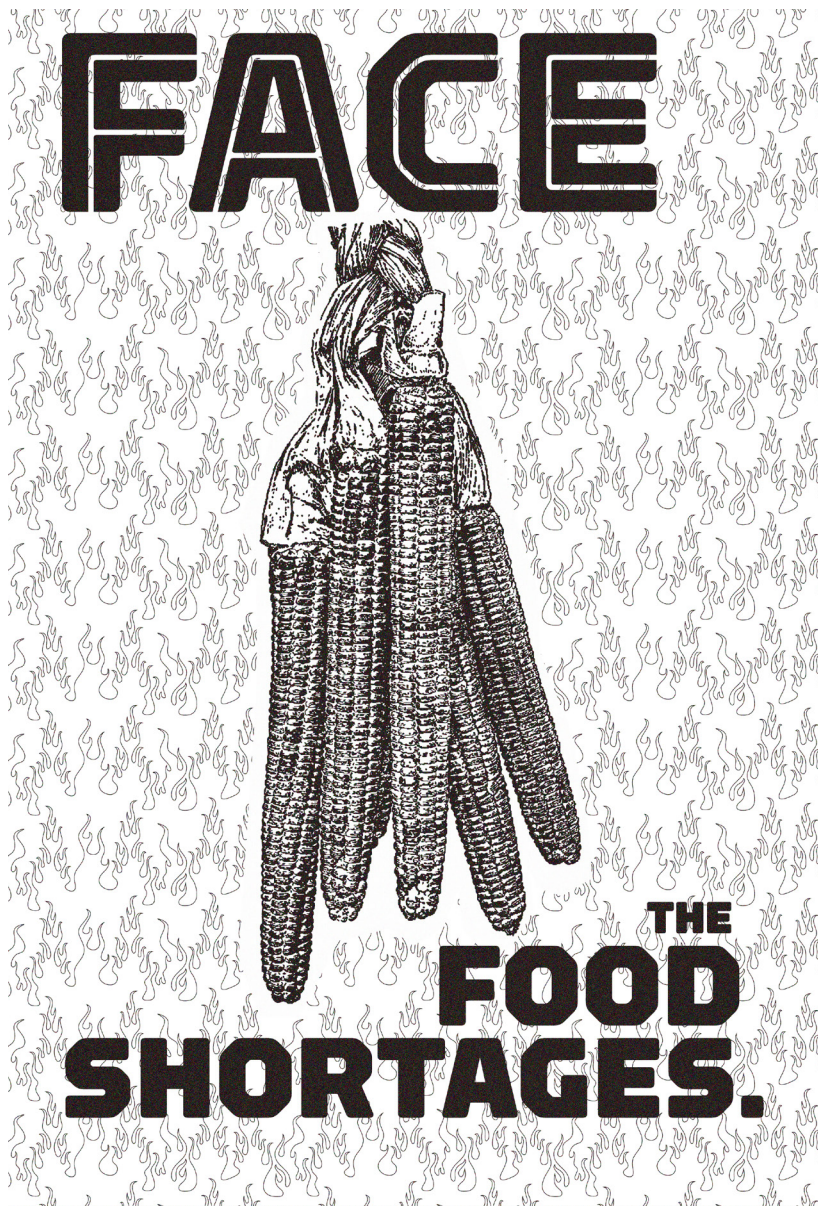


Figure 9: Dear Climate, Una Chaudhuri, Fritz Ertl, Olivier Kelhammer & Marina Zurkow, 2012

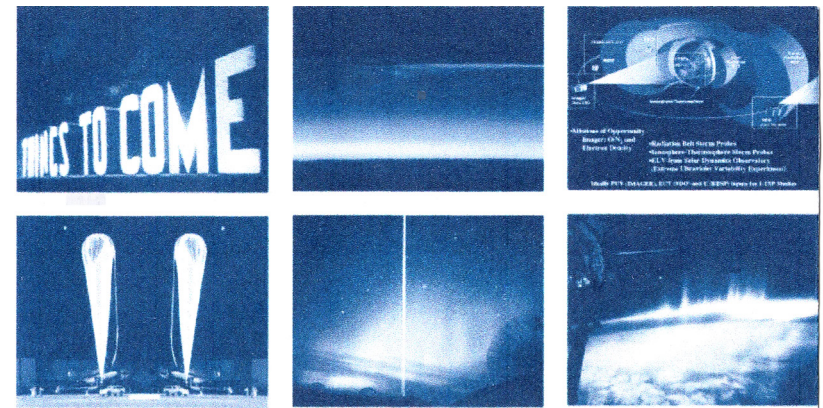


Figure 10: The Atmosphere, A Guide, poster, Amy Balkin, 2013/16.



Figure 11: What is Above is What is Bellow, installation view at Manifesta 12 in Palermo, Cooking Sections, 2018.

Art in the Information Age

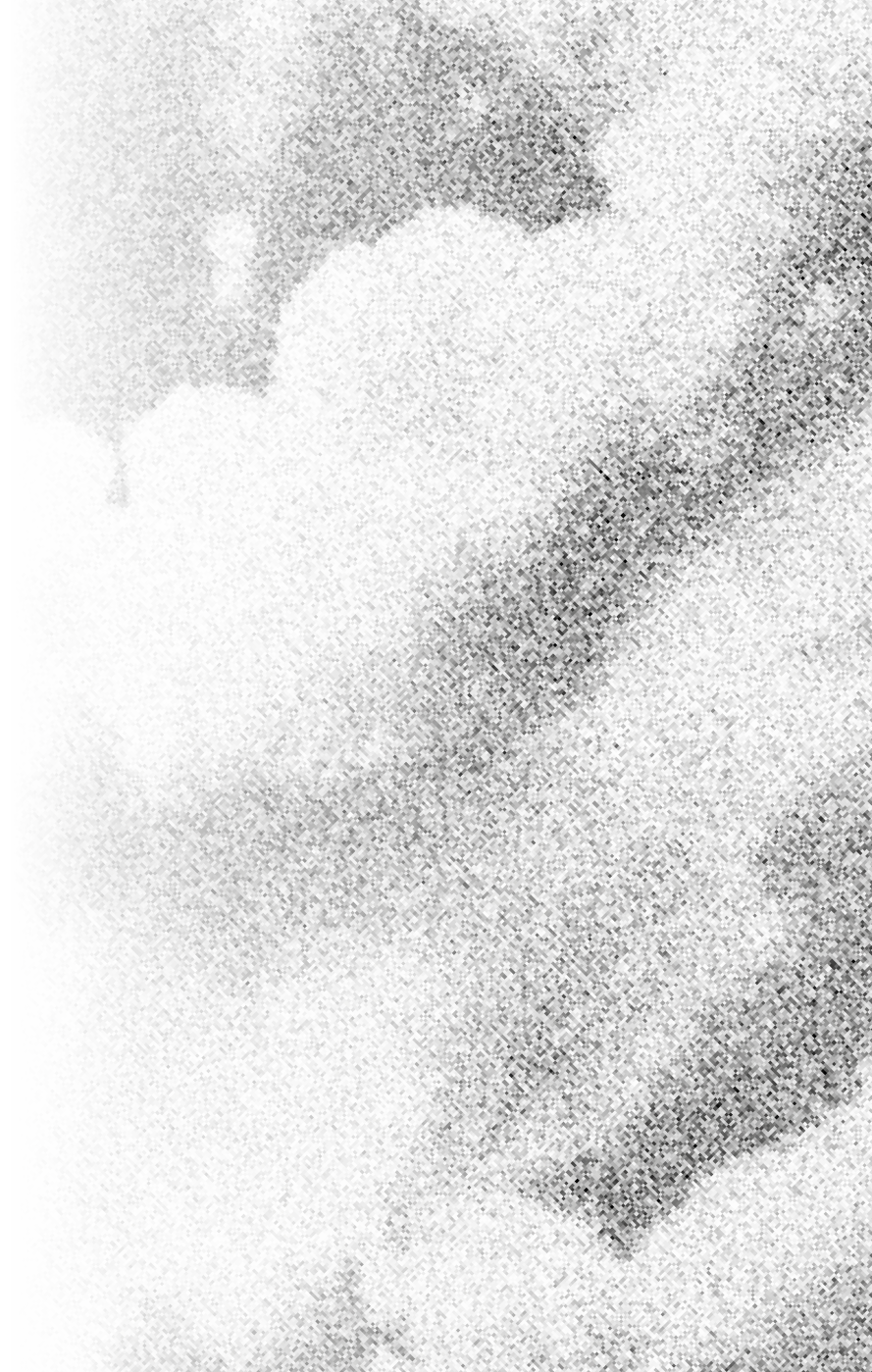
Art practices have an important role to play in addressing questions about our digital culture. Concerns about information flows and knowledge production should be tackled. An example is *Photography in Abundance*, a work by Dutch artist Erik Kessel who collected a million private photos available on websites such as Flickr, Facebook or Google.

He printed and displayed the images in several exhibition spaces creating a huge pile of private memories that visitors had to step or dive into. Through an upfront and direct manner, Kessel talks about our massive and constant consumption of digital information on Internet and addresses issues of privacy and voyeurism. As Kessel states: “By printing all the images uploaded in a twenty-four-hour period, I visualise the feeling of drowning in representations of other people’s experiences.”

Reflecting, depicting and analysing our climate crisis is crucial. in today’s emergent times however I believe what is at the core of this issue the way we manage and control information flows. The way knowledge is created, and transmitted today is impeding any possible change towards a future different from the destructive capitalist perspective. In my opinion, it is essential that we find new ways to create, organise and communicate information if we genuinely want to change the way we organise our society.



Figure 12: *Photography in Abundance*, installation view at Foam in Amsterdam, Erik Kessel, 2011.





IS ANOTHER
WORLD
POSSIBLE?
A COMMONS
TRANSITION?

Peter Sloterdijk said, “Indeed, the world in which we live is defined by nothing more than the way we *let in* knowledge.”²³ For me, the way knowledge is produced and shared is exactly what is stopping us in confronting today’s injustices. We are in need of new forms of knowledge production and transmission that meet the real needs of the communities at play and that are rooted in the local.

Grassroots initiatives, peer to peer digital platforms, member-owned cooperatives, bottom-up governed communities are missing in today’s landscape. The neo-liberal vision of today is in a totally different mindset, where local power is almost irrelevant in its functioning.

Besides, our pervasive digital reality is making it even more complex for such initiatives to take place. All this alienation in our society is killing the potential of such local communities to form. As said before this reality is so embedded in our lives and consciousness that it is hard for us to even think outside of the current parameters. Knowledge is controlled by the leading actors of our societies without the consent of local communities. I am not saying that we should only rely solely on local forms of knowledge production and governance, but that the larger institutions such as state and market actors should recognise and support the *commoning* of such communities.

In 2018, studies showed that approximately 55% of the population is living in cities and this is expected to increase in the years to come.²⁴ This raises important challenges in establishing functional systems for local communities to empower themselves. With the implementation of the *Internet Of Things*, the increase of newer and smarter technologies with artificial intelligence and the development of distributed ledgers such as blockchain or holochain are the tools we need in order to implement such systems in our complex cities. The challenge we must address is that knowledge needs to be clear and easy for people to access, so they know how to participate in local activities to sustain and generate the common goods that they rely on in their daily lives. If you apply these actions to all urban and rural cities, then you can make a real impact on today ecological and ethical crisis and challenge the actual powers at play so they can no longer ignore or avoid it.

23 Peter Sloterdijk, *The Anthropocene: A Process-State at the Edge of Geohistory?* (2015), trans. Anna-Sophie Springer, in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment and Epistemologies*, ed. Heather Davis and Ellenne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015).

24 <https://data.worldbank.org/topic/urban-development>

I understand that all this is very theoretical and can be hard to be convincing, however there is a whole insurgence of the commons that is already taking place all over the world that the general public is not aware of. This is not just some utopic vision, as David Bollier's research on the commons shows, there is already around a billion people relying on commons-based systems for their daily subsistence. It is important that we start to see and recognise the commons in our daily lives.²⁵

An example that is dear to me and my practice is the print workshop. Today, in most cases, it is a shared space where individuals come together in person to create printed matter which they will sell afterwards in the art market. I believe this comes from the internal logic of capitalism about individualism and economic growth that is so embedded in us that we think of it as an unchangeable reality, that it is part of our DNA. This is obviously a misconception and we need to step out of it. Printmaking by essence is a collaborative and social practice and it has the potential of becoming more and more a hub for social interactions between different people from different walks of life.

How can a print workshop become a space about relationality and one that stimulates a shared interest and purpose where the social value comes first over the economic value?

I am pretty optimistic about our future and I believe that step by step local actions will take a strong place in our lives and will help us fight today's existential crises and injustices. Gradually we will develop new infrastructures and interfaces to facilitate local communities to empower themselves and create whatever they need and want to create. We need to get together because this is what we are good at. Caring, trusting and helping each other and more importantly being "free, fair and alive".



Conclusion

Through the examples of social uprisings, mass media journalism, advertising, marketing, green capitalism, degrowth and art, we have depicted an image of today's visual and political landscape under the Anthropocene era. We saw that it is vital to adapt, diversify and change our stories, our narratives and our visuals.

More importantly, we are in need of different networks to share those stories and find new forms of knowledge production that support the local communities at play so they can educate and empower themselves to build and be responsible for the future they want to be part of.

I follow the works that are being done by the Peer to Peer Foundation and the Commons Transition community who are taking genuine steps towards building a future beyond the capitalist horizon, which they call “a social knowledge economy.”²⁶ They are helping people, organisations and governments transition towards common-based approaches to society through co-creation, open knowledge commons and resilient, sustainable human networks. This is what I want to be part of.

26 Stacco Troncoso & Ann Marie Urtatel Commons Transition: Policy Proposals for an Open Knowledge Commons Society (Amsterdam: Peer to Peer Foundation, 2015)

“Le vent se lève, il faut tenter de vivre.”
The wind rises, we must try to live.
—Paul Valéry



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Illustrations

Figure 1: *Knowledge Hierarchy
(DIKW)*, diagram, BIO 26, 2020.

Figure 2: *Triple-Chaser*, photograph,
Forensic Architecture, 2018.

Figure 3: July 2019, Rocky Mountain

Figure 4: *Little Sun*,
photograph, Studio Olafur Eliasson,
2012.

Figure 5: *Aerocene*,
photograph, Studio Tomas Saraceno,
2017.

Figure 6,7,8,9: *Dear Climate*, poster,
Una Chaudhuri, Fritz Ertl, Olivier
Kelhammer & Marina Zurkow,
2012-present.

Figure 10: *The Atmosphere*, A Guide,
poster, Amy Balkin, 2013/16.

Figure 11: *What is Above is What is
Below*, installation view at Manifesta
12 Palermo, Cooking Sections, 2018.

Figure 12: *Photography in
Abundance*, installation view at Foam
Amsterdam, Erik Kessel, 2011.

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