



UTOPIA

ARTIF

Sessions

POLITICS

Experimenting with artistic practices
in radical imagination and politics



UTOPIA * ART * POLITICS

Experimenting with artistic practices in radical imagination and politics

Edited by Josie Chambers

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Urban Futures Studio | Vening Meineszgebouw A, Princetonlaan 8a, 3584 CB Utrecht, Netherlands

The Urban Futures Studio (UFS) is a transdisciplinary institute situated in the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable development at Utrecht University. The UFS explores sustainable and meaningfully democratic futures, and ways to get there. The studio collaborates with artists, activists, policymakers and students to investigate how the social creation of imagined futures enables collective action. This entails combining diverse scientific, artistic and political approaches to critically deconstruct dominant imaginaries that perpetuate injustices and collaboratively imagine and experiment with alternatives. The studio conducts empirical research and helps to initiate experiments with society, with the purpose of breaking from inertia towards a sense of hope that inspires transformation.

Community Portal @ BAK, basis voor actuele kunst | Pauwstraat 13a, 3512 TG Utrecht, Netherlands

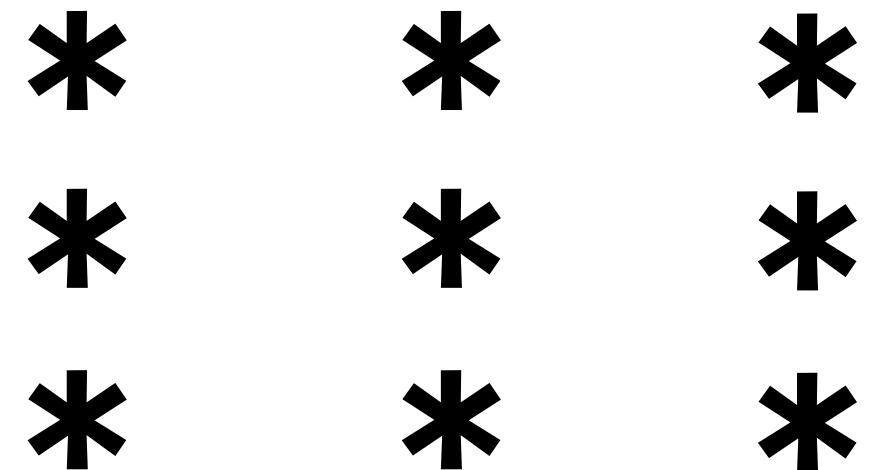
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Moira is a cooperative living group of creatives that also hosts a music and arts venue in the city centre of Utrecht, The Netherlands. It aims to provide secure and affordable living space for people who make an active and ongoing cultural contribution to the city. The residents are active participants in the running of the venue and exhibition space, building upon the creative richness and diversity of Utrecht.



Experimenting with artistic practices
in radical imagination and politics



Edited by Josie Chambers

Introduction

Josie Chambers

We live in deeply troublesome and uncertain times. It feels harder than ever to imagine a future that is both collectively desirable *and* achievable. Mainstream politics have only served to deepen this crisis of imagination, exacerbating marginalisation, polarisation, and apathy. Now trapped between a populist pull towards romanticised 'utopian' pasts and technocratic push towards envisioned 'utopian' futures, the time is ripe to revitalise our utopian imagination and politics.

We organised the **Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions** to collectively explore the potential of utopia as a creative and plural method for justice. This was in response to growing concerns over efforts to imagine positive, better futures, amid utopia's long-standing colonial and elitist past. Radical imagination has often been rendered too 'safe'—privileged ideas dreamt up within the confines of fiction, workshops or one-off interventions, yet unmoored from cultural and material movements for justice that truly matter. At the same time, radical imagination has become deeply unsafe—wholly unaccountable to the political consequences of whose imagination claims space, and the tendency of imagined alternatives to become overgrown, suffocating the breath of other possible worlds.

During July 3-5, 2024, the **Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions** brought together 33 artist-researcher-practitioners who actively experiment with how artistic practices can help reimagine and remake our world. The event was co-organised by the Urban Futures Studio at Utrecht University and Community Portal @ BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, with hosting support of Stichting Moira. Together, we sought to push the boundaries of our intertwined imaginative, artistic and political practices. Artistic practices involving storytelling, visual art, theatre, music, and more can play a powerful role in our imagination of possible futures and reinterpretation of past and present moments. Such practices can make visible what has been silenced; disrupt our 'common sense'; traverse conflicting imaginaries; offer glimpses of a world otherwise; compost and repurpose deep cultural undercurrents; and compel people towards shared action.


To orient our conversations in the **Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions**, we each created a provocation that explores what we see as the most radical potential at the intersection of utopia, art, and politics. Contributions ranged from experimentally grounded to profoundly speculative; from written form to artefacts, collage, music and more. Several provocations were enlivened at *Dreaming in the Dark*, a performance evening which used striking stories, visuals, and music, to provoke ideas around how artistic practices can help people imagine more radically together. Keynote provocations by Lola Olufemi and Stephen Duncombe deepened reflections on the purpose and politics of imagination.

Three common threads emerged from the initial set of provocations, which oriented our explorations across the three days. **Utopias Between Us** attends to the diverse conceptualizations of what utopia is and does in the world, from its darkest proclivity to supplant social places with 'no places', to its most radical possibilities as a method for justice. It explores how we might navigate with grace the many hidden, odd, overlapping, contradictory utopias that co-exist, especially amid the rise of fascism worldwide. **Ambiguous Deep Utopias** foregrounds the need for new societal spaces that enable people to sit with complex feelings—grief, rage, care, mystery—that are often short-circuited in modern society. Contributions explore the radical possibilities of what such spaces might look like, enact and enliven. **Proof in Utopias** explores the fundamental question—so what? Can artistic experience lead to actual change in the world? And how would we know? Through a tour of diverse

approaches to prefigurative politics, we gain a sense for how utopian ideas can become a powerful force when made possible in the present, without sacrificing their radical ambitions.

Amid the growing encroachment of fascist politics on democratic spaces for radical imagination and solidarities for justice, we need more than ever to explore the potentialities that exist at the intersection of utopia, art and politics. This collection offers several entry points situated between theory and practice. Even as the **Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions** kicked off last July, our institutional host BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, had just received news of their defunding from the municipality of Utrecht. This is an organisation which over 25 years has become a leading international platform and locally beloved space for bringing together art, theory and social action to imagine otherwise, especially privileging the most precarious classes in society. It is urgent to find ways to protect and expand these cultural and political spaces for alternative thought and expression.

Rather than close this collection with conclusions, we choose to share openings—ideas emerging from the three days which we hope can enliven imagination around what is possible between utopia, art and politics. **Artefacts from the Otherwise** are a set of playful artefacts we dreamt up and created on the final day in response to our desire to share experiences, tips, ideas, and resources on how to enact utopias in practice. The task was simple—to imagine an artefact, which, if it came from another time and place, might inspire and orient our society towards moving radically together otherwise. The aim was to not duplicate an artefact that we could have each created before entering the sessions, but rather make something that builds directly on our exchanges.

This collection closes with the piece . Composed by Noor Noor (electronic music and bass) and myself (vocals), it reflects our desire to make space for processing the various provocations and emergences in the **Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions** in a language that goes beyond words—towards that which cannot yet be uttered, but might be felt, imagined. The title echoes the red squiggle that often appears under words branded as errors by software. Of course, it is those words at the margins—even people's names—that are typically deemed weird or wrong by this squiggle. Yet 'utopia' is no longer one of those words at the margins, having become so commonplace—perhaps even *too* normal. Must utopia then be re-made strange, unrecognisable, unknowable, to experiment with its most radical potential? This is a crucial question which founding director of BAK Maria Hlavajova picks up on the pages that follow. We leave the radical potential of utopia up to your imagination, but hope it will be nourished by the many individual and shared contributions in this collection.

For a more collective expression of the diverse feelings and sense of mystery that underpin the work of our collective of utopian artist-researcher-practitioners, listen to the shared playlist composed by all of us, compiled by Joost Vervoort. Rather than stay asleep alone amongst the colonial ruins of utopia, we invite you to dream radically together otherwise.

[The Inaccessible Mystery Playlist](#) 



Utopia, or Chronotopia?

Maria Hlavajova



Josie Chambers and Maria Hlavajova opening the Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions at BAK

It was a great privilege and immense joy to be able to host the Utopia*Art*Politics gathering at BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, in the summer of 2024. I feel equally excited now, a couple of months on, as the electrifying dialogue sessions of this get-together are made public in this reader—to the extent, of course, that the magic of a live meeting's passionate and inspiring collective deliberations can be translated into text.

The central question of this convening—*How might artistic practices enable radical imagination and politics?*—is one that has also structured, with no exception, all aesthetico-political experimentation at BAK. Strangely enough, though, the notion of “utopia” has not quite been an explicit part of the vocabulary of this ongoing query into the possibility of art vis-à-vis the pressing urgencies of today. In hindsight, this might have been an oversight on our part of a critical notion for building an itinerary toward a more just future, or—let’s face it—a future at all. Or, perhaps, it’s been an inadvertent consequence of an intuitive route we have taken to circumnavigate the conceptual traps that see dictatorial communisms and fascisms of the twentieth century as failed ideological “utopianisms”. Or, possibly, it’s because of the textbook classifications of utopia as a “no place” and thus set of reveries “not to be realized”. You know, that pushing off the building of a better world to “elsewhere” and “elsewhen”—to an island yet to be discovered along the timeline charted linearly by an arrow of supposed betterment.

If only “we” had that time and that possibility. For today, “ours” is the world in state of radical brokenness. A world in which many entwined crises see it spasm in shock-and-awe in the face of radically deepening social and environmental injustices; of realigning empires alongside the authoritarian-populist instincts of global kakistocracy that governs with brute military and financial force; of vulgar, unrestrained illiberalism and techno-mediated capitalism, delighting in rampant, hurried annihilation of all that stands in their way.

In this predicament, *imagination*—undergirded by a growing infrastructure of solidarity and collaboration among the condemned of the planet, among all those driven by the imperative of justice and equality—geared at a better world, is needed more than ever. After all, to paraphrase writer, activist, educator, and spoken word artist Walidah Imarisha, one can build only that which is first imagined. Yet in the ever accelerating push toward eradication of the possibility of livable life in common, there is neither time for delaying nor a space for outsourcing this very urgency. The notion of *agency* to act in the here and now is therefore paramount.

To expand the notion of utopia in and for the context so drafted, I thus want to offer the notion of *chronotopia* to join with the propositions in this publication, so as to prompt agential pathways of translating radical art-political imaginaries into life. I borrow this notion from philosopher and writer Omedi Ochieng’s contribution to BAK’s project *Fragments of Repair*.¹ Turning to literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s “chronotope,” Ochieng introduces the notion of “chronotopian ungovernability” as a collection of “practices of living under oppression and, in the midst of that living, devising techniques of survival, refusal, and insurgency.”² A disavowal of utopia of sorts, chronotopian ungovernability “names practices aimed at the revolution of everyday life. It can be particularly useful in helping us to learn about how life can emerge and be sustained under conditions of relentless, remorseless tyranny—in prisons, refugee camps, or settler colonial open-air prisons such as Gaza in Palestine.”³ *Space plus time plus agency* is how I understand chronotopia; that is, a practice of endowing the utopian impulse with the power to materialize, in present time, its proposition on the scale of one to one with life. A practice of not merely imagining but of collectively building—and living—the imagined. Art—or better yet, an art-political praxis and the political imaginaries it offers—is then, as I see it, at once a method to ease such a trajectory and a space of empowerment; an infrastructure for creating and experimenting with collective tactical imaginaries at the limits of capitalist democracy; a way to learn and rehearse what it would ultimately mean to live in a just society.

For an art institution like BAK, I envision its key role as one of holding space for prefigurative learning of sorts: a collective, futural learning of what does not yet exist. That is, learning the world “we” want, and doing so by thinking (how things are), imagining (how things could be otherwise), and then translating these imaginaries into life and living them—as *if that were possible*. The propositions that follow show this is not only necessary but, when we join together in the struggle, also possible.

1 The project *Fragments of Repair* was convened by BAK with artist Kader Attia in 2021. Eponymous book, edited by Attia, Maria Hlavajova, and Wietske Maas is published by BAK and Jap Sam Books in 2025.

2 Omedi Ochieng (in conversation with Wietske Maas and Rachael Rakes), “The Radical Politics of Chronotopian Ungovernability,” in *Fragments of Repair*, Kader Attia, Maria Hlavajova, and Wietske Maas, eds. (Utrecht and Prinsenbeek: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst and Jap Sam Books), p. 66.

3 Ibid, 67.

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Utopias Between Us

*Dwelling in overlapping,
contradictory,
and odd
utopias*



Lola Olufemi & Ruth Potts at Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions

* A Poetic Horizon

WE DO NOT, RIGHT NOW, SHARE EVERYTHING.
SOME OF US HAVE DECIDED TO SHARE A VANTAGE
POINT, AND A HORIZON. EVEN I & NEVER LAY EYES ON
YOU - I'M BOUND BY THIS.

How can I actually meet you? And what might
happen when we meet? Which collective horizon might
open?

We carry forward what we learned: tomorrow's actions
have stronger legs.

The assembly, with its many voices that form a meeting
between earth and sky, will not resolve itself in 2
singular voices, and still, "we have not yet been
deeply defeated."

How can we creatively reconcile the politics of collective spaces
with utopian visions of sustainable development and
cultural identity?

What spaces and places cultivate the porosity that
enables polyvocal messy alternatives to emerge and evolve
Where do we reclaim joy?
What feeling does this kind of utopia have?

Being in solidarity requires an expressed
commitment to caring, and taking the time to
feel what others feel. Curating spaces to
build trust facilitates movement toward
collective horizons.

How does a seed grow into a tree, into a plumbtree?
Seeds in impoverished, soil & fragmented in plots. Too tidy.
How can we occupy soil? Grow seeds, trees, plumbtrees together.
That meet across worlds?

Myriad utopias overlap and co-exist. There are dangerous forms of utopia: *colonial* utopias that have supplanted real places and cultures for centuries; *tidy* utopias that outsource waste to the margins; *overgrown* utopias that persist despite innumerable harms; *inhibitor* utopias that leave no space for other futures. But there are also *resistant* utopias that survive against all odds; *queer*, *interspecies* utopias that dream of wholly other worlds; *pluralizing* utopias that enable a different kind of politics. This first set of provocations attend to the messy intersections of all of these utopias—what we call, the *utopias between us*. These kinds of utopias: emerge as much from *feeling* as *knowing*; connect *untidy* and *interdependent* lives and identities; confront the harsh materialities of existence through both fierce, shared *resistance* and *flourishing*.

In the opening provocation, Carlos Garrido Castellano and Carla Almanza-Gálvez call these many overlapping utopias—**Space Oddities**. They interweave personal experiences with diverse artistic cultural expressions, from Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* and Mónica Ojeda's *Electric Shamans at the Festival of the Sun* to Sun Ra's Afrofuturist otherworldly musical aesthetic and Roma flamenco players' transformative *peteneras*, to conclude: "The utopia of privatising utopias just cannot hold. The utopia that is us will still be there after all, no matter what."

Paula Serafini's **We Are All Antifa** faces one of the biggest threats to utopia sharing and world crossing—the rise of the far-right worldwide. Paula argues that we need a "common, international anti-fascist front" that overcomes antifascism's bad reputation. Art can play a powerful role, by making "palpable the origins and connections between different forms of oppression" and helping build new intersectional and intercultural "narratives, slogans, symbols and sensorial landscapes for this movement". We must grapple with core frictions in constructing antifa narratives: not erasing difference yet organising it against common threats; keeping closed enough for safety, yet porous enough to let difference in; not becoming stuck in defence, but standing for alternatives.

Cara Flores created the zine **Making It** to share her experience as an immigrant from the Philippines to America, where an "idealized world supposedly awaits" but is instead deeply "heteronormative and tied to capitalistic ways of being". Cara shares what it means to construct worlds from in between harsh realities and imagined dreams: "Somehow being able to weave gold from societies that continue to exclude and homogenize, is an art form in itself".

In **Making New Monuments**, Ruth Potts describes making an artwork that transformed stolen objects in the British Museum into a resource for those fighting climate justice. The all-night interactive performance forged radical intimacies as acts of shared resistance against colonial exploitation and othering. Ruth calls for everyday and unexpected public intimacies and places to meet: "It is intimacy that creates a space between us that enables us to be a plurality... without spaces where we can see one another, we are unable to bring new worlds into being".

Marijke de Pous and Flor Avelino introduce their new initiative and website **Alterotopia**—"a place to explore power, transformative change and radical belonging" through "creative encounters at the intersection of art, research, science and activism". Through experimenting with choreographies of (be)longing and opening up ways to collective action, Alterotopia places feeling, connection and commitment to care with diverse life forms at the heart of acts of radical imagination.

Carrier Bag of Utopias by Josie Chambers resists singular modes of utopian thought and action. She collages together four utopian methods (*prefigurative*, *disruptive*, *speculative*, *pluralizing*) that may help us break out of the loop of binary utopias we have become trapped in—to infuse radical imagination with emotions, materiality, and ambiguity. The practice 'dreamholding' is introduced to help break with tired language that is not so well suited to fostering *utopias between us*.

* Space Oddities

Carlos Garrido Castellano & Carla Almanza-Gálvez

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.

— Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, 1891

1

Can utopias overlap? Can they coexist in space? Can they orbit the same star or dance to the rhythm of the same celestial body? What happens when overgrown utopias become sites of apartheid?

2

A few weeks ago, a friend shared through WhatsApp a picture of a drawing he made. The image transforms an ongoing conflict into a real estate operation. In the drawing, the war, as well as any sign of conflict, has disappeared. The inhabitants of the conflicted zone are not there either. Instead, we find a designed landscape that is also a future plan. In the drawing, blocks of flats stand in the place that used to belong to neighbourhoods; a promenade has replaced fishing villages; highways cross existing neighbourhoods, redefining distances, resignifying names, advancing new mappings.

In our friend's drawing, several utopias, several space oddities, coexist: one of resistance and survival against all odds; another dreams of space as a tabula rasa; another, finally, crafts its own image as all-powerful, envisaging an alternative future without resistance or opposition, a future that leaves no space for other futures. Utopias, however, remind us that the experience of the past contributes to the creation of the future. In the drawing, humanity paradoxically moves forward while looking back, as American socialist activist Edward Bellamy taught us in his 1888 utopian novel *Looking Backward*, his prediction of the world's future in the year 2000.



3

Utopian imagination has traditionally devised perfect societies living in clearly demarcated spaces, a situation that raises questions about the issues of isolation and authoritarianism that are embedded in the concept of utopia itself.

When I (Carlos) did my BA, I was told that the Spaniards saw in the Americas a perfect place to put utopianism into practice. The new continent was an experimental laboratory for the creation of self-sufficient communities and the formation of model citizens. Spanish planners designed perfectly boring urban settings that could be transplanted into what colonial administrators saw as a homogeneous space. The project, of course, did not work, although it would be fairer to say that it was never meant to work. Instead, colonial utopias operated as a sort of inhibitor, an imperfect model configured with the purpose of expanding and blocking alternative utopias, alternative futures.

Before applying it in the Americas, the colonisers tried to implement their logic more locally. Santa Fe is a village near Granada and one of the earliest examples of the 'rational' model that would later on give shape to other Latin American historical centres such as Santo Domingo, Puebla and Mexico City. Santa Fe is a portable utopia, but also an inhibitor. Besides, and before becoming an urban model, it was conceived of as a military space that would put an end to the last Muslim kingdom in Western Europe. It is telling that the Catholic Monarchs discussed strategy from Santa Fe, but also used the space to meet Columbus and plan the scaling up of intransigence at a planetary scale. Europe suddenly seemed small for the machinations of colonial expansion. The materiality of space would work side by side with global calculation and expansive, colonial imagination. During my BA, a common trip would bring us to Santa Fe for a short discussion of the architecture, a coffee and sweets.



Screenshot Copyright Google LLC

4

Outgrown utopias can easily become most people's dystopia.

5

The utopia of privatising utopia just cannot hold. The utopia that is us will still be there after all, no matter what.

6

Valeria Luiselli’s *Lost Children Archive* brings the reader to a road trip that is also a practice-based research about ‘lost children’, the thousands of underage children that risk their lives to arrive in the United States. The writer, her husband and her two kids travel to the US Southwest while searching for the invisible remainders of the last Apaches, following legal cases of illegal deportation, and documenting their own lives. In a fascinating passage, David Bowie’s “Space Oddity” plays repeatedly in the family car, as the family approaches a dusty small airport in which a group of children await removal. As “Ground Control speaks to Major Tom, who is about to be launched into space”, Luiselli and her family approach a site that materialises the utopia of intransigence. At this time, the narrator expands, “I imagine other lives—different, but maybe not that different from mine”.¹ The occupants of the car get carried away as Bowie sings otherworldly sounds, bringing multiple existences, multiple astral plans, closer. Bowie’s voice, Luiselli explains, “jumps back and forth between Ground Control and Major Tom—between the one who stayed behind and the one who left”.² As Major Tom wanders weightless in space, Planet Earth has become a blue place where “there’s nothing left to do”.

Several utopias, several space oddities, coexist and overlap in Luiselli’s novel: Bowie’s odd, queer interplanetary futurity; the trajectories of displaced beings experiencing systemic malfunction; the echoes of those who got lost in the past; the timeless flashing lights of occupied space, which, as in my friend’s drawing, start bulldozing the present before it vanishes; Major Tom’s drifting existence in the seemingly non-place of space; the “us” versus “them” of Trumpism; the aliens of Roswell and the “aliens” awaiting deportation.

7

Space was calmer and quieter by the time Bowie sang “Space Oddity” for the first time. Fifty years later, space is full of the rushed attempts of the ultra-rich to escape a collapsing Planet Earth. As earthly utopias exceed their topoi, the Bezoses and Musks of this world have replaced Major Tom. The ultra-rich are attempting to appropriate escapism as the ultimate resource of colonial and capitalist domination. We can pause here and picture billionaires fashioning themselves as runaway fugitives as they plan to colonise the stars, expanding once again utopias-as-inhibitors.

8

The thing is that space was never empty. Sun Ra was there before Major Tom was lifted off. We now play “Space is the Place”, which hypothesises about interspecies and interplanetary escapism. We could pause now to imagine Ra welcoming the ultra-rich as they pretend to know how to master escapism. Several scenarios are possible, but our favourite is the following: Ra and the otherworldly inhabitants of space first look at the newcomers with pity, then extend an invitation that is ignored by the billionaires, who, as usual, just do not get it. If we picture the scene as a film, we could imagine the utopian cacophony propelling each repetition of “space is the place” overflowing with the (ir)rational attempts for “communication” made by the colonisers. This space oddity features the insulting and unfruitful realisation of the ultra-rich trying (and failing) to appropriate marronage, fleeing from the catastrophic zone that they have created. The scene is actually quite similar to the previous one.

1 Valeria Luiselli (2019), *Lost Children Archive*, Alfred A. Knopf, p. 156
2 Ibid, p. 157

9

Maybe we need utopias that can thrive in small “spaces of hope” (to put it with David Harvey), like ecosystems formed by several utopias that do not bother to acknowledge each other, and that understand that the key to survival lies in spatial interdependence, but that never give up the possibility of a fierce, shared resistance. While Sun Ra’s Afrofuturist musical aesthetic advocates the creation of alternative spaces for the identity expression of oppressed African American communities, Latin American proposals such as *Sumak Kawsay* (‘Good Living’ in Quechua) or *Buen Vivir* (as known in Spanish) are being integrated into eco-sufficient indigenous communities. At a recent international conference with the theme of “Utopia and the Return of History”, I (Carla) had the opportunity to talk about rethinking the world from the perspective of *Buen Vivir*. Based on the worldview of Andean indigenous peoples, the philosophy of *Buen Vivir* promotes a hopeful cultural model of life in which social equality and justice are pursued by means of a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature. *Buen Vivir* is a decolonial critique of the commodification of the discourse on sustainability. Rather than seeking to return to an ancestral indigenous past—demystifying the sense of nostalgia for a utopian past—it is a cultural and political project that aims to repoliticise and democratise the global debate on sustainable development by showcasing the idea that other worlds and other futures are possible. Phytocollage, the technique of painting with the natural colours and shapes obtained from pressed flowers and leaves, has emerged as a plant-based artistic expression of the political-utopian dream of *Buen Vivir*. Nature comes alive in *Buen Vivir*-inspired art forms.

10

Going back to the Mediterranean, in Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige’s *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, the filmmakers and artists track the pioneering Lebanese space programme. In times of decolonisation, Lebanese, Palestinians and Syrians attempted to find space as colonial utopias moved closer. Working against the clock and fearing increasing enclosure, the Lebanese developed several attempts at reaching space around 1961. Apparently, all these failed. But then again, who knows? Maybe Sun Ra was welcomed by Palestinian spacefarers who had already mastered being and becoming in situations of defiance and escapism. Maybe the aliens that are feared in Luiselli’s novel as Bowie sings are always already masters at world crossing and utopia sharing.

11

We now play a young musician from Seville, Andalusia, interpreting a classic flamenco song about escapism. The song is a *petenera*, a specific composition that is supposed to belong to a small rural zone in Cadiz, where it is performed by mourners at funerals. *Peteneras* are therefore otherworldly. They emerge from the unknown of an alternative existence, but also from the harsh confrontation with the materiality of existence. Apparently, *peteneras* only became part of flamenco in the late 19th century. In the version we hear now, Rosario La Tremendita sings,

<i>Quisiera yo renegar</i>	<i>I would like to recant</i>
<i>De este mundo por entero</i>	<i>This world entirely</i>
<i>Por ver si en un mundo nuevo</i>	<i>To see if in a new world</i>
<i>Encontrara más verdad</i>	<i>I could find more truth</i>

‘Truth’ (verdad) is the key word here, as it means much more than knowledge. In flamenco, something truthful (verdadero) is also something heartfelt, a powerful force emanating from the commitment to improvisation and the direct connection between what is created and the experience of creating it. In La Tremendita’s adaptation of this old tune, a Bowie-like immersive, hesitant rhythm precedes

the funeral and transforms the meaning and the experience of mourning. If the song's first lines are "que no doblen las campanas/por esa mujer que ha muerto" [let us not ring the bells/for this woman who has died], the abovementioned extract tells a different story, one of departure and expansion, one of realisation that happens in between worlds. Widely prosecuted and accused of "not belonging", Roma flamenco players and singers were considered aliens in their own land. The story of flamenco, as well as of the Roma community in Southern Spain, is often told as a story of deprivation and violence. But it turns out that flamenco is apparently also played (from) "out there"; that the chords of this petenera coexist in defiant, irreverent cacophony with other "space oddities"; that before Europe became Europe, European "aliens" were already experimenting with the utopianness of multi-scalar existence.

As I (Carlos) write this now, I realise that I used to listen to and sing to myself flamenco music while doing my BA, so it is likely that I was carrying one of these exaggeratedly large portable cassette players during my visit to Santa Fe.

12

In Mónica Ojeda's novel *Electric Shamans at the Festival of the Sun*, the Ecuadorian writer follows the track of Noa and Nicole, two young music lovers who move to the Andean Mountain range to attend a multitudinous music and spiritual festival. At this place, shamans meet dancers as meteorites plough through the sky and volcanoes roar. Noa and Nicole know that the festival is just a stop. Both are in search of missing relatives and a deeper truth, but for seven days, they plunge into intergalactic overlapping utopias, into bodies relationally tuning into the rhythms of celestial bodies and realities existing beyond Planet Earth, below the radar of colonial violence. The scene fades out as the music keeps playing. The year is 5540 in the Andean calendar.

The utopia of privatising utopias just cannot hold.

The utopia that is us will still be there after all, no matter what.



Carlos Garrido Castellano & Carla Almanza-Gálvez performing *Space Oddities* in *Dreaming in the Dark* at Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions

* We Are All Antifa

Paula Serafini

One of the biggest threats we face today is the rise of the far-right on a global scale.

We see it in Israel. In India. In France. In Argentina. In the UK. Taking different forms, different flavours. In governments and in social movements.

Whether we define all these ultra right-wing movements as 'fascism' is contested. Indeed, we do see both alliances and purposeful differentiations among representatives of the world's far right. While Vox in Spain embraces Argentina's Milei, Italy's Meloni does not want to be seen near him. Ultimately, however, these different far-right movements are accelerating the same processes everywhere: the curtailment of rights, the fuel of hatred for racial minorities and difference, a backlash on feminism, LGBTQI rights and 'wokeness', a demonisation of intellectuals and the left, the concentration of wealth and the revival of ideas around survival of the fittest, as the most perverse version of meritocracy. Most such fascisms are nationalist in nature. But some, like Milei's government in Argentina, are not, exhibiting instead a complete surrender to the will of the United States and their geopolitical interests. In this context, Bifo proposes that what is important to understand is not the meaning of declarations by Trump, Milei, Netanyahu or Modi, but rather "the reasons why a growing majority of the world's populations embraces with enthusiasm the destructive fury of these leaders"¹; a crucial question I will leave for another time.

Here, I will focus instead on the possible responses to this phenomenon, and the proposal of a common, international anti-fascist front. This does not come without its challenges, however. Anti-fascism, or antifa, in its movement form, currently has a bad rep. Antifascism needs a new face, new imaginaries, and new aesthetics—or perhaps, reclaiming some of the imaginaries from anti-fascist movements from times past. There is a lot to do in terms of widening the spectrum of what 'an anti-fascist' looks like. The contemporary popular imaginary of antifa, regardless of whether it reflects what happens on the ground, is male, white, and aggressive. We want a popular, international antifa front that reflects the different ways of being antifascist and the different bodies that make up this movement. What can art do for such an antifa front? Art can help us build images, imaginaries, slogans, symbols and sensorial landscapes. It can help us claim back anti-fascism from the tongue of Donald Trump, who has repeatedly blamed all the wrongs of the world on the antifa.

One challenge will be to build a narrative that allows us to move from the position of anti to something constructive, a future, (a utopia?) that fulfils positive values. The language used here is important. Are we fighting for the opposite of fascism? If so, what would that be? Or, are we advocating for something else? A positive aspect of the 'anti' position is that it can bring lots of different groups together and does not prescribe a future. Might an 'anti' position give way to a pluriversal utopia of multiple utopias? Or would it limit us to always being in a defensive position against something?

¹ Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2024), *Brutalismo supremacista libertario-capitalista, Lobo Suelto!* <https://lobosuelto.com/brutalismo-supremacista-libertario-capitalista-franco-bifo-berardi/>

It will be key to build a narrative of antifascism that is internationalist and intersectional, and that recognises the different manifestations of fascism today across the globe. The other challenge is to integrate an anti-fascist position with other pressing struggles of our times that are manifested and experienced differently in different parts of the world. The struggles against racism, homophobia, transphobia and misogyny are in many ways already embedded in the anti-fascist stance even if we often understand them as separate struggles: anti-fascism is an anti-racist and anti-white supremacist movement. But what about the environmental movement?

For Global South countries, a shift to the extreme right tends to come with a resource grab from poor and Indigenous populations (although unfortunately this is not specific to fascists). Articulating the fight against extractivism in the anti-fascist movement will thus be key, as will be continuing to centre the 'environmentalism of the poor'² in narratives around ecological action. The mainstream energy transition project relies on furthering extraction of key metals in the Global South and other peripheral regions, continuing or extending situations of oppression, violence and environmental destruction. At the same time, fascist rhetoric has, in some places, adopted the environmental cause by taking a conservationist approach that is explicitly anti-migrant. A rejection of such positions, which might become more entrenched as climate change exacerbates forced displacement, might be an important point of articulation.

Additionally, I believe that feminism has much to offer in terms of articulating the demands of a global environmental justice movement and a global anti-fascist movement. The kinds of intersectional feminism that we can see in different parts of Latin America, from Andean communitarian anti-patriarchal movements to urban feminist movements have developed nuanced critiques of patriarchy, capitalism and coloniality that are productive points of enunciation for developing critiques of extractivism and fascism. Thinking specifically of artistic expressions, the Bolivian collective Mujeres Creando has developed a multimedia practice spanning performance, mural art and graffiti that stems from a queer, decolonial positionality and covers a range of issues such as extractivism and women's right to the city.³ In Chile, the collective Las Tesis, with its performance *A Rapist in your Path*, has taken Rita Segato's theories on gender violence to construct an embodied critique of the state that is ever so important when states become vehicles for facilitating fascist agendas.⁴

In other words, I believe that art's radical potential right now is in generating languages and imaginaries that make palpable the origins and connections between different forms of oppression, and that demonstrate how different issues, positionalities and even political traditions can come together to struggle for better worlds, in a way that does not eliminate difference, but rather organises it against a common threat. In this way, art can enact what Rosi Braidotti calls an affirmative, non-fascist ethics.⁵

² Joan Martínez-Alier (2002), *The Environmentalism of the Poor*, Edward Elgar

³ See 'Somos Ingobernables' (2016), <https://www.arte-sur.org/artists/mujeres-creando/>

⁴ See the video of Las Tesis performing 'Un Violador en tu Camino' in Santiago de Chile on November 25th, 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aB7r6hdo3W4>

⁵ Rosi Braidotti (2019), *Non-Fascist Ethics: Learning to Live and Die as Affirmation*, In *Propositions for Non-Fascist Living: Tentative and Urgent*, Maria Hlavajova and Wietske Maas (eds), Bak

* Making It

Cara Flores



Accordion Zine, Colored Pencil
16.3x 11cm, folds out to 16.3x83cm

I'm not sure I can trust Utopia, I worry it's too reminiscent of visions of "The American Dream", in which a strategic vision of an idealized world supposedly awaits. In actuality this world is not inclusive, but rather heteronormative and tied to capitalistic ways of being. Making it, as an immigrant, is in fact quite hard. But the ways we still manage, to construct worlds, whether it be from the realities we're confronted with, or fueled by the lives we want to imagine. Somehow being able to weave gold from societies that continue to exclude and homogenize, is an art form in itself.

Visit [Making It](#)



* Making New Monuments

Acts of Resistance and Radical Intimacy

Ruth Potts



Monument, British Museum, 8th February 2020. Photograph: BP or not BP

Monument is a durational performance using plaster casts, bodies, consent, tenderness and sustenance.

Monument is a broken camping toilet, a black bin bag of soiled cloths and a stain on bloodied marble.

It takes place overnight from February 8th 2020 to February 9th 2020, in the Great Court of the British Museum, London.¹

Monument aims to embody the climate justice movement.

The movement is diverse and growing. The number of casts made will depend on an intimate consensual process the performers engage in reciprocally, carefully co-creating an evolving sculpture drawn from their own bodies, histories and experiences.

¹ Founded in 1753: the history and collection of the British Museum are built on the violence empire and the colonial exploitation of people and resources. The foundational collection came from Sir Hans Sloane, physician and President of the Royal Society, who had acquired 80,000 'natural and artificial rarities'. Sloane had used developing global networks created by European imperial expansion to collect these materials and used income partly derived from enslaved labour on Jamaican sugar plantations to pay for them.

Through Monument we offer an alternative to the colonial statues that cast shadows on cities the world over, embodying a vibrant rebellious living alternative. In making the artwork we imagined a world in which the stolen objects in the British Museum had been returned to their communities; the space transformed into a resource for those who have, are, and will be putting their bodies on the line to fight for climate justice.

While museums are not yet centres for climate and racial justice, restitution is happening. In 2020 The Museum of the Bible in Washington, returned nearly 11,500 looted objects to Iraq and Egypt. In spite of growing pressure, Britain's major national museums have resisted requests for repatriations, remaining monuments to colonialism.²

On completion, Monument is displayed in the museum, bringing to light the stains that seep through the fabric of the building for those who have eyes to see them.

Making monument

The community hall we practised in didn't prepare us for the vast atrium of the British Museum nor for navigating the throng of visitors on a busy Saturday. Life is never as neat as rehearsal. We thought carefully about the aesthetic and tone of the performance. It needed to be reverent, majestic, erotic. Visceral, fleshy, human. It needed to honour those who have died and are dying, both suddenly and slowly. It needed to honour Berta Caceres, the Honduran Indigenous leader and environmental activist murdered in her home in March 2016. It needed to honour the people of the Niger delta who have lived with environmental catastrophe for decades. The known and the unknown.

We discussed possibilities, sat in a circle on uncomfortable plastic chairs. Which body parts would we cast? How might we ask for permission and discuss consent; flesh and fragility accentuated by the museum's vast polished marble atrium. We rehearsed with skin-friendly plaster of paris bandages. Strips of cold, wet, chalky plaster laid delicately over warm skin and hair. Despite the joviality and palpable excitement, I winced on contact. The sensation that followed was cool, intimate, shocking.

As the performance plays out overnight at the museum each conversation is particular: a delicate back and forth between the person being cast and the person laying plaster on skin. There are whispers between cast givers and cast receivers as plaster strips are layered with attentiveness and care. The atrium echoes to the gentle hum of human conversation; a chorus of loving warmth transgressing the space. We sing, our voices shattering the museum's grandeur as night descends.

Hands, feet, shoulders, entwined and separate, breasts, arms are cast—their ghostly white shells laid carefully on the museum floor. I lay plaster strips gently over the hand of a young climate activist. The skin around her fingernails is chewed to the quick. I worry that the plaster will irritate her red raw skin, and seep into her blood where dry cracked flesh leaves fissures. I'm acutely aware of how fragile and frightened she is, despite her steely determination. I take care to keep the plaster away from her fingertips and pour fortitude into her casting, hoping that we can do her justice. Later, I lie on my back as a friend lays plaster strips over my chin, throat, sternum, and chest. As the layers build I feel increasingly entombed, my breathing restricted. Time slows with my breath and I sink into the earth.

² The British Museum returned object stolen from Iraq in 2003, but has resisted requests for restitution of objects stolen in the colonial era

We feel small in the museum’s vast atrium. But we are growing. Together, quietly, determinedly we are bringing into presence things which are unseen—things which are purposefully hidden from public view. The global movement for climate justice. Diverse, beautiful, growing. Messy, imperfect, human. The care among communities of resistance. The majesty of vulnerability. The radical imagination that has enabled over 500 years of struggle and continues to fuel it. The sponsorship of the British Museum by the oil company BP that gives the oil giant a ‘social licence to operate’, the ongoing oppression of communities the world over and the colonial foundations of the museum. All brought to light as cold plaster touches skin so that all can be seen more widely and be acted on.

Multiple oppressions, multiple vulnerabilities and multiple resistances take form as *Monument* grows. Ghosts rendered flesh. This is the re-memembering as part of a decolonial process of seeking wholeness by those who have been dis-membered that sits at the heart of Voices that Shake’s practice.³ Such intimacy is an act of resistance, as Judith Butler points out: ‘vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment’.⁴ Delicately, consensually, casting parts of our bodies we render ourselves both vulnerable and powerful.

Part way through the evening, we set up the compost toilet by the stairs that wind around the column in the centre of the atrium, leading to the upper floors of the museum. The small plastic camping toilet is smuggled in under pushchairs and prams. We discuss carefully how to erect the cubicle from bamboo and black cloth. The structure is borrowed from a previous action. Five years earlier in Tate Modern—when the toilets had been more robust—some of us had occupied the turbine hall of the Tate Modern from high tide to high tide, a growing chorus of words rising with us.

We build and improvise—measuring out the number of sticks we have—taping in as many cross pieces as we can, and gaffer taping the base of the structure to the floor for stability: it’s not ideal, but we think it might hold. The curtain is far too long so we drape it over the frame and gaffer tape it down enveloping our crude structure in thick black cloth.

We discuss at length how we might manage changing the black plastic bags that will hold our excrement. As soon as they are half full they should be changed, we agree. But do we need people in charge? Or can we leave it to the group to take individual responsibility? We decide that we will write clear instructions, to be taped to the door of the toilet, so that we can be sure that people will see them. Alert and excited, I agree to give covert briefings in small groups to the 50 or so people occupying the museum overnight. I know that at this stage whether we will be able to stay is far from certain, everything that we do matters.

A slight, anxious woman is desperate for the toilet, but wary about using our creation. She doesn’t want to be the first. To show that it is safe, I use the makeshift toilet crouching low over the flimsy plastic frame hot wet piss hitting the plastic bag slung below. Parting the heavy black curtain to allow the next person to enter, I move on to give the briefings. I beckon people together in small groups, quietly, keen to be discreet, aware just how surveilled we are. We don’t want to draw the guards attention to our system lest they evict us. In a hushed tone, I dramatically sketch out the consequences of an overflowing bag, keen that people hear and take in what I have to say.

3 Voices that Shake (2020), *Shake the System! Research report: A decade of creating change 2010-2020*

4 Judith Butler (2016), *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance*, In *Vulnerability in resistance*, Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, & Leticia Sabsay (eds), Duke University Press

There is a commotion, and someone emerges in a state of agitation from the cubicle. It is the slight, anxious woman, who had been so reluctant to use the toilet when we first set it up. A slurry of urine and sodden paper seeps out from under the edge of the black curtain. No-one seems to know what to do, or at least no one seems willing to engage. I look around for Sarah—someone who I know is calm and practical. We subtly gather paper and cloths and begin the process of cleaning up.

We mop the floor with towels and antibacterial handwash. Keen to leave no trace, but aware that it is only urine. Viscous, bodily, human. I think about the people who clean toilets, tend to the intimate needs of the elderly and bedbound: those whose bodies absorb chemical cleaning products so that those they care for are ‘safe’ from infection. The many acts of intimacy late-stage capitalism demands that we outsource. Mainly to Black, Brown and Indigenous peoples. A friend panics about the potential newspaper headlines: ‘activists defecate in museum’ and is convinced that we should leave. I think about the blood on which the museum is built. The blood of Jamaican slaves that financed its first collection⁵ and the blood of empire that enriched, and still enriches, the UK.⁶

A year or so earlier, between an aborted and successful trial for stopping a charter deportation flight due to force 57 people to Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone, I saw the novelist, and concentrated observer of politics, Arundhati Roy speak about liberty. She says that underlying fascism is a desire for neatness. She says that it’s hugely important that we celebrate untidy identities and untidy lives in a society seeking tidiness.⁷ The British Museum, BP, the court and the government want things to be neat. Binary. Fixed. Guilty or not guilty, right or wrong, an atmosphere that can be cleaned, illegal or legal, alien or neatly ordered papers, racialised, someone I know or someone I don’t know.

On the witness stand in Court Four of Chelmsford Crown Court, I was asked repeatedly whether I knew the people due to be forced onto the charter deportation flight the night we stopped it. I’m haunted by the question. Thinking of it brings me to tears, even now. Why would the desire to prevent harm stop with people we know? Surely we are capable of larger, more generous, intimacies. I wonder how much damage is done by the desire for neatness. I think about how real lives are never neat. Real lives are always rich, entangled, queer, more than human, shining, fluid, interwoven, sympoietic. Real lives are always organisationally ajar.⁸ They are never neat.

Neatness orders the world around binaries, it separates, contains, puts into boxes. It doesn’t want to touch or be touched. Neatness is the desire for borders that divide. Borders that create ‘us’ and ‘them’. Neatness is where violence takes place. Neatness powers the drive to outsource almost everything from caring for children to answering phones in call centres; from clearing up the faeces of elderly parents to cleaning schools and hospitals. Neatness is separation. Those who seek power over others—human and more than human—like things to be neat.

5 The foundational collection came from Sir Hans Sloane, physician and President of the Royal Society, who had acquired 80,000 ‘natural and artificial rarities’. Sloane had used developing global networks created by European imperial expansion to collect these materials and used income partly derived from enslaved labour on Jamaican sugar plantations to pay for them. The museum has largely resisted calls for restitution. On 15 July 2022, the author Ahdaf Soueif resigned as trustee of the British Museum, citing the institution’s sponsorship from BP and the fact it “hardly speaks” in the debate over repatriation.

6 The economist Utsa Patnaik calculated that Britain drained a total of nearly \$45 trillion from India during the period 1765 to 1938 (in *Agrarian and Other Histories: Essays for Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri*). The average life expectancy of Indian people dropped by a fifth from 1870 to 1920, and tens of millions died needlessly of policy-induced famine. As Sathnam Sanghera shows in *Empireland*, Empire still shapes British society – for example, its delusions of exceptionalism, immense private and public wealth, the fabric of cities and the dominance of the City of London.

7 Arundhati Roy, Noor Inayat Khan Memorial Lecture: The ‘Liberte’ Series. Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre, 2016

8 Sympoietic systems were first defined by Beth Dempster in 2000 as complex, self-organizing but collectively producing, boundaryless systems, which are always “organizationally ajar.” The concept was taken up, and further developed, by Donna Haraway in *Staying with the trouble: Making Kin in the Chultocene*.

I suspect that part of the way that we move beyond neatness might be through everyday and unexpected public intimacies. Through the careful and open navigation of delicately negotiated boundaries that bind us together. These might be among the "promising tools and techniques for non dualistic thought and pedagogy" that the queer theorist Eve Sedgwick describes.⁹ It is intimacy that creates a space between us that enables us to be a plurality, a factor that the political theorist Hannah Arendt believed to be critical for a healthy public realm.¹⁰

We invite one another into our homes, and by sharing their particularity we disclose our differences in a way that enables them to become familiar. In our differences we see one another as we really are, in our unique distinctiveness, just as the casts that made *Monument* were a celebration of collective difference. The feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad calls for an extension of this everyday form of hospitality—a radical hospitality in which we extend the same care to those on the frontline of the violence of late capitalism as we do those in our most intimate circles.¹¹ It is what Donna Haraway calls 'making kin'.¹²

Without this ability to see one another as we are we see ciphers, or reductions: assumptions are made according to adherence to a particular form of politics, or about a social class or gender, racialisation or sexuality. This is where fascism and its desire for neatness takes root. It reduces the world to ciphers. Without spaces where we can see one another, we are unable to bring new worlds into being.

Arendt describes actions that disrupt by breaking into the world 'unexpected and unforeseen', a process she describes as akin to a miracle: "if it is true that action and beginning are essentially the same, it follows that a capacity for performing miracles must likewise be within the range of human faculties".¹³ I have come to think of these acts as creating small openings in which other worlds appear. We will need these everyday miracles if we are to navigate the climate crisis, meaningfully decolonise, steer away from endless destruction and towards human and ecological flourishing, and re-enchant the world.

Everyday miracles begin with acts of radical intimacy. In disrupting the flow of events, intimacy breaks open everything we have been conditioned to believe is normal. Intimacy connects us to one another and to the other than human, and public intimacy weaves us into community. Intimacy bears witness and requires consent. Through intimacy we come to an embodied understanding of our interconnection. As Healing Justice London's Farzana Khan points out: "We need each other. And every time we turn away from each other, we turn away from ourselves".¹⁴

New monuments will be built not in stone, but in flesh, breath and warmth and touch.

This is where utopias begin.

These could be ours.

9 Eve Sedgwick (2003), *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Duke University Press

10 Hannah Arendt (2018), *Thinking without bannisters: Essays in understanding*, Schocken Books

11 Karen Barad (2019), *After the End of the World: Entangled Nuclear Colonialisms, Matters of Force, and the Material Force of Justice*, *Theory & Event*, 22(3)

12 Donna Haraway (2016), *Staying with the trouble: Making Kin in the Chultocene*, De Gruyter

13 Hannah Arendt (2018), *Thinking without bannisters: Essays in understanding*, Schocken Books

14 Farzana Khan (2015), *Moving From 'No borders' to Broaderland for the Borderless*, *Voices that Shake*



Ruth Potts performing *Making New Monuments* in *Dreaming in the Dark* at Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions

* Alterotopia

Marijke de Pous & Flor Avelino

"Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places."

– Donna Haraway

We warmly invite you to visit **Alterotopia**: a place to explore power, transformative change and radical belonging. An invitation to dance with the trouble together, through creative encounters at the intersection of art, research, science and activism.

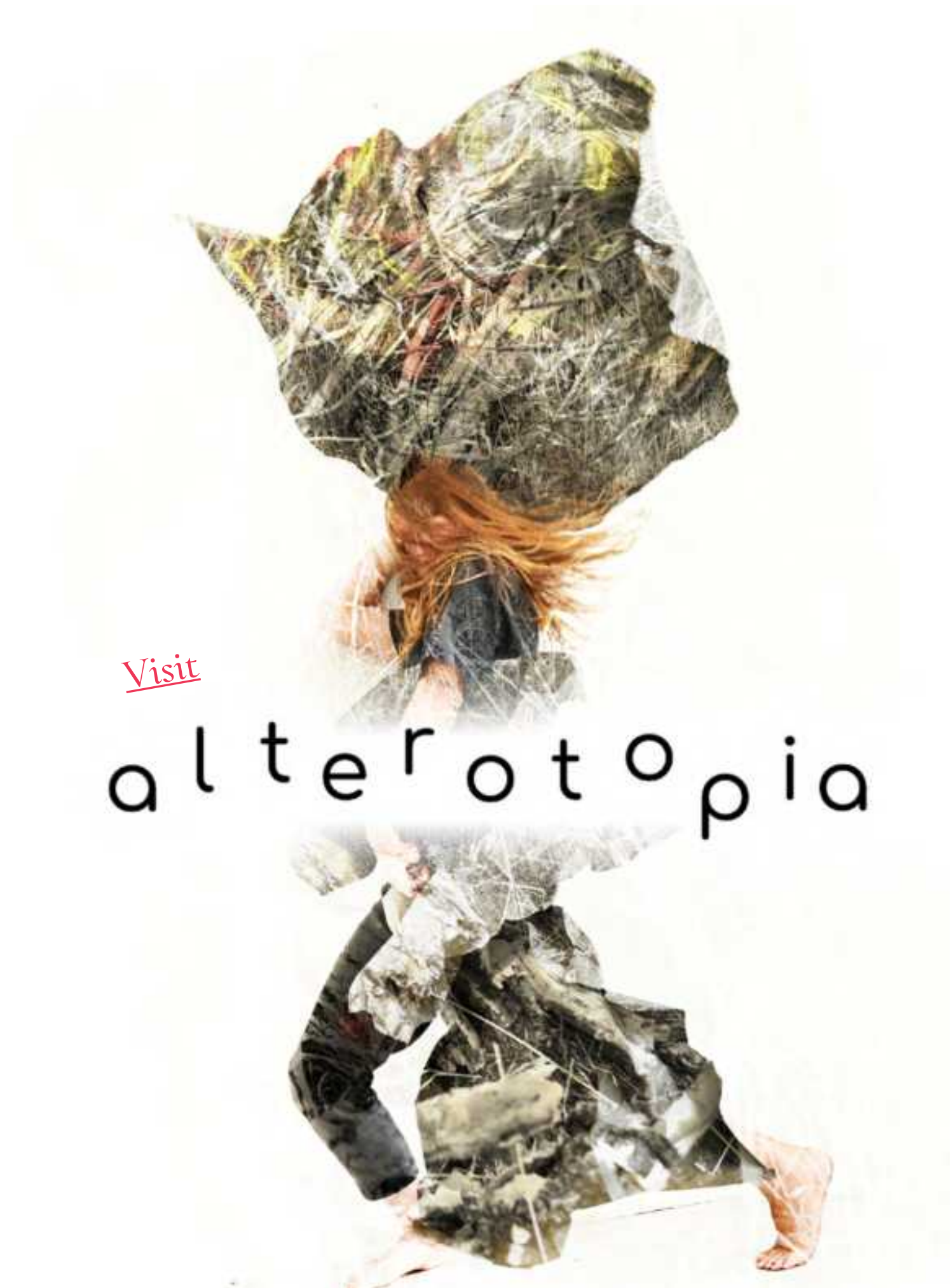
Alterotopia evolves through creative encounters between practices, materials and places of change. It has emerged from one such encounter: between the artistic practice of Marijke de Pous and the academic practice of Flor Avelino. Apart from finding resonance in the content of each other's work, we share a passion to gain insight from paradoxical thinking, to address the deeply rooted troubles and injustices of our time, combined with a celebratory appreciation of the joys and beauty of life.

Alterotopia is born out of our urgent and deep felt need to create a place of our own. A place "to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places". Our ground is that we need each other to deal with the pain, and we need each other to celebrate the joy of life.

With Alterotopia we want to deepen our understanding of what is at stake and explore the radical potential of creative encountering. Our aspiration is that Alterotopia will become a home of many creative encounters at the intersection of art, research and activism. A place to share the audio, visual and written work that these encounters inspire, and an ongoing invitation to find ways to dance with the trouble together. In its current form Alterotopia does this through three forms, by:

- **Resonating:** celebrating creative encounters that resonate against the grain: a generative practice of thinking-, feeling and making-with.
- **Raging:** writing and expressing with alter-political passion. For the love of the world and the hell of it.
- **Figuring:** inviting the future in through playful and embodied explorations: using our bodies, words and images to develop novel concepts and methods

Visit
alterotopia



Inviting the future in

Marijke de Pous

What is the most radical potential at the intersection of Utopia, Art and Politics? Attempting to answer this question in writing, or as I set out to do, with a new artwork, turned out to be a provocation in and of itself. I have found myself oscillating between being very inspired—to the point of thinking I was on the verge of birthing a new type of work, and utterly intimidated—to the point of feeling almost paralysed. What could I possibly put forward that would exemplify the radical potential of art in the face of all this suffering, the unfathomable violence, injustice, the self-affirming othering and dehumanising destruction? We are with so many who want nothing less than to be able to rise up and stop this all together, to bundle our powers into a calm, big, halting NO, not this, not any longer, not in our names. Anything less is hard to bear.



There is a longing (artistic-utopian-political) to be able to add up all these voices who will call out injustice and insist another way is possible. To open up ways for concrete collective action. I want to explore how my own art can contribute to this type of transformative activism. I have intuited a future version of myself doing precisely this, but I also know I'm not there yet, my work is not there yet. For a moment, anything else seems futile.

I remind myself: why should I look for the radical potential of art in some ideal activist collaboration, when my experience the last few years has also been teaching me otherwise?

One of the striking things my renewed artistic practice confronted me with, was how it opened me up to have stronger intuitions of the near future, sometimes accurately foreboding what comes next. This was deeply unsettling at first, troubling my belief in an open future, the sense that we are participating in a creative unfolding of the yet to come. But in time it gave rise to a renewed sense of what it might mean to belong to time and to creative becoming. What follows is not an attempt to unpack the full meaning of this, but rather a way of sharing some of the speculative insights I find my practice has been teaching.

Over the last few years I have come to see my artistic practice as a way of thinking through making. Inspired by Donna Haraway's evocative use of Virginia Woolf's *Think We Must!* I go on to do the same.

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Think we must! | Artistic practice teaches a different way of relating to the given and the otherwise. |
| Think we must! | Artistic practice teaches about surrendering to what is other, to what wants to speak through you, to what is not yet known. Paradoxically it teaches how trust and patience allow the future to set in unexpectedly. |
| Think we must! | Artist practice as an antidote to thoughtlessness. As a way to see ourselves as creative beings in a complex, interconnected doing-with and becoming-with. |
| Think we must! | Artistic agency as something that resides in all of us, outside and beyond us. |
| Think we must! | Artistic practice as a way to provoke, disrupt and unsettle, while at the same time opening us up to what is intimately known yet wildly unknowable. |
| Think we must! | Artistic practice as inherently relational and alter-political. |
| Think we must! | Artistic practice as a gentle yet radical form of resistance. |
| Think we must! | So we may find the cracks and strengthen resonating voices of difference. |
| Think we must! | So we can share our grief and rage |
| Think we must! | The radical potential of artistic practice lies in its ability to dance with the trouble and invite the future in: a future-past-present that is otherwise left unattended. |

The Alteroscene

Early one morning, I woke up from a dream in which I had been telling two women about a future past present in which symbiotic artistic practices had become commonplace. I don't remember having a name for it in the dream, but given the strong influence Donna Haraway's Chtulucene must have played and my immersion in developing Alterotopia, let's call it the Alteroscene. As I explained to the women, in the Alteroscene more-than-humans had become accustomed to nurturing generative relations to time and place. A way of thinking, feeling and seeing with others, with matter and with life.



The Alteroscene had come into being when the systemic oppression of creative becoming, so characteristic of the Othering times that came before, was losing its grip. As its stronghold crumbled the many alterotopian artistic practices, and countless other indigenous, earthly, more-than-human, muddy, material entanglements, upheaved and composted into a different future now.

The symbiotic artistic practices that then became commonplace, had nothing to do with exploitative and extractive ways of relating. Long gone too was any thinking and doing in terms of human exceptionalism and, by extension, the admiration of exceptional individuals. The artist as genius was an irrelevant mode of appreciation.

From the perspective of the beings living in the Alteroscene, it was no surprise that during the peaks of the Othering times many humans had been stuck in linear and instrumental relations to time and place, narrowly directing their longing to belong towards more of the same, to identity, nationality and property. This sorry state of affairs viciously sustained their politics of fear, oppression and othering and with it their disjointed longing to belong.

Stories of these deeply troubled Othering times served to strengthen Alterotopians affirmative and celebratory longing to belong to past and future generations, in joyful entanglements with the temporalities of other beings and material presences.



Experience
Choreographies
of (be)longing

Choreographies of (be)longing
Performative sculpture
Marijke de Pous, 2024

A contemplative and embodied exploration of belonging: to geological structures that precede and outlast us, to time and to matter, to loss. Performed during the public event *Dreaming in the Dark*, alongside the opening movement of the beautiful and evocative live music set by Noor Noor (music) and Josie Chambers (vocals).

* Carrier Bag of Utopias

Josie Chambers

Utopias are, and have always been, about stories of better possible worlds. With the hope that by telling such stories we can shape our experiences, futures, and even memories. In her essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*¹ Ursula K. Le Guin critiques the type of stories we often tell. Stories that *force energy outwards*; that are shaped like a spear or weapon destined to hit an intended mark. Stories that attempt to *control or steer the future*.

Many utopias across history fit this shape. People conjure up an idea of what a better world might look like, whether through mind, text, image, map or more, and become heroes that strategize and fight to bring it into being. Think of mega infrastructure projects, innovative technologies, and space exploration, but also green energy transitions, protected areas, and tree planting campaigns.

Yet Le Guin suggests there is another way. We can instead tell stories that *bring energy home*; that are shaped like a *sack, bag or bundle*. Stories that *hold things in powerful relation to each other*. These stories do not instrumentalize our imagination in service of predefined ends, but rather create space for difference, and space to differ in how we imagine. They contest those who choose to bleed only their own colors onto the pages of possible futures. Pages that are assumed to be “blank”; open to colonize, erase, oppress.

Treating utopia as a carrier bag means not allowing one's imagination to instantly fill space that is presumed to be 'blank'. It means not seeking to convince of one's own beautiful picture, at the expense of the 'other'. The 'other' for whom such utopias may be real (or potential) lived dystopias. But rather bringing people's imagination in relation with each other; staying with the frictions and struggle instead of quick resolution and harmonies.

Why then do we permit, and even legitimize, this closure of imagination?

How can we stay with frictions among diverse notions of 'better' worlds?

And when is some form of closure crucial for transformative politics? And how?

We can take the idea of the carrier bag seriously and see what becomes possible when we refuse to stabilize a single notion of utopia. When we instead embrace the plurality of ways of seeing the concept of utopia itself, grappling with their oddities, their frictions.

Let's empty out this carrier bag...



Is this what you expected?
Or are you disappointed?
By missing words?
Or unexplained ones?

What is heritagutopia anyways?

According to Luca Donner & Francesca Sorcinelli it is the “symbiosis between urban historical heritage and abandoned industrial areas”².

Or retrotopia?

For Zygmunt Bauman, this is the romantic quest for a status quo of the past³.

And heterotopias?

A more established term from Michel Foucault describing spaces that are 'other' in the way they disturb or contradict what is considered 'normal' in the broader world⁴.

Or we could also consider the many utopias dotted across history. Thomas More's *Utopia*; Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*; William Morris' *News from Nowhere*; H.G. Well's *A Modern Utopia*; W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Comet*; Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*; Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*; José Lezama Lima's *Paradiso*; P.M.'s *bolo'bolo*; Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*; Hakim Bey's *Temporary Autonomous Zone*; Toni Morrison's *Paradise*; Georgi Gospodinov's *Time Shelter*; Pablo P. Castelló's *Zoolondopolis*. To name just a few. Or perhaps what comes to mind is something more lived or practical, such as intentional communities, or 'Real Utopias', as Erik Olin Wright says⁵. Or the utopias of architecture? Spatial mapping? Or something else entirely?

In this piece I aim to explore some of the critical distinctions that cut across the myriad of terms, expressions, and imaginaries of utopia. Yet this is no in depth account of utopia's history. There is ironically *no space* for that here. Although there are many partial attempts to admire: Ruth Levitas's *The Concept of Utopia*—a tour of through the meaning of utopia throughout history; Carlijn Kingma's *A History of the Utopian Tradition*—a visual journey through 42 Western utopian writings; or Qiu Zhijie's *Map of Utopia*—utopia through the historical lens of political ideology. To name a few.

If we return now to imagining utopia in the shape of a carrier bag, what might we find inside? What are some of the key differences that underpin the ways utopia is conceived of, and what how it functions in the world? I will continue with Le Guin's critical distinction—between utopia as a hunting spear, forcing a *binary* distinction between 'the hero' and 'the other'—*binary utopias*; and utopia as an *ambiguous* carrier bag—full of intricacies, journeys, temporalities, confusions, delusions, failures—*ambiguous utopias*. Let's explore some shades of utopia that manifest.

¹ Ursula K. Le Guin (1986), The carrier bag theory of fiction, In *Women of Vision: Essays by Women Writing Science Fiction*, Denise Du Pont (ed), St Martin's Press

² Luca Donner & Francesca Sorcinelli (2024), Heritagutopia: a new utopian paradigm, *City, Territory & Architecture*, 11(9)

³ Zygmunt Bauman (2017), *Retrotopia*, Polity

⁴ Michel Foucault (1975), *The Order of Things*, Routledge

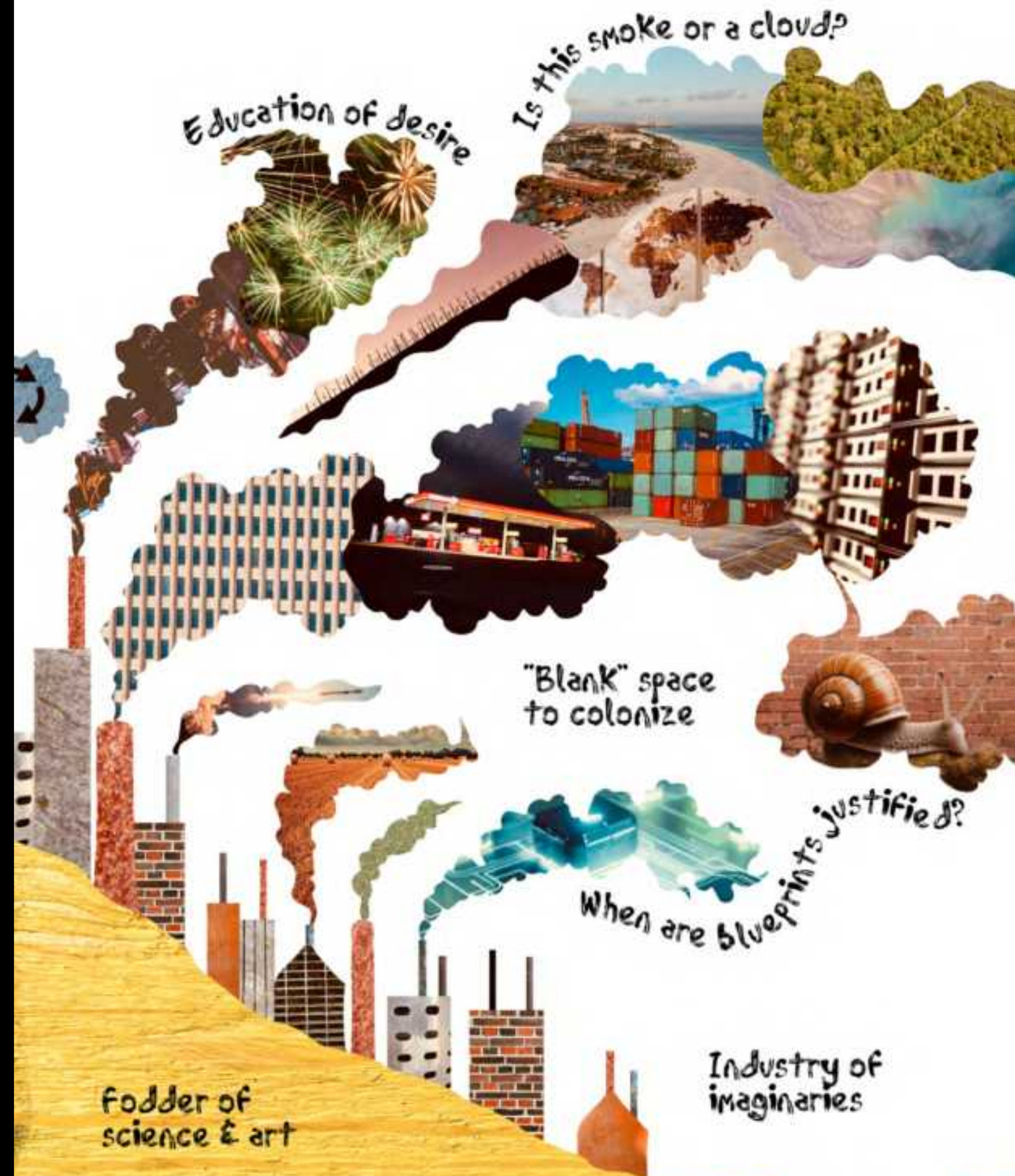
⁵ Erik Olin Wright (2019), *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Verso

Binary utopias

We say we want a better world. We call for transformative change—no, radical change. We even dream of utopia. But who is this 'we'? *Whose* vision is manufactured? What and who has been erased in the making and defending of this 'we'? This industry of imaginaries is growing, pumping out smoke at an ever-growing speed, fueled by science and art. A 'science' and 'art' that have been sorted, separated, severed from (e)motion and reduced to fodder. A 'science' which defends its use value by offering up so called truths. An 'art' which is logically steered by imaginaries rather than free to redefine them.

We see the smoke of this industrial complex creeping forward all over the world, into so many blank spaces—no, imagined 'blank' spaces. It glides forward, friction-less, bestowing its pungent odor. Or perhaps that is not a patch of smoke but rather a distant cloud? A sparse cloud sweating in the heat, gleaming silver at a distance yet metallic to the taste as it nears the ground. With soil that has been cut off, banished to the island of loneliness. A place where there is fear, anger, even joy, but little *feeling* of what people feel. You could say something is broken (and indeed so many have!), yet somehow the cycle continues. It is both the severity of frictions across worlds *and* their absence within worlds that serve as fuel. And yet we *still* say we want a better world. We *still* call for transformative change—no, radical change. We *still* dream of utopia.

Blueprint utopias



Fantasy utopias

Anti utopias

Green coloniality

populist nostalgia

Hero's journey

How can forms of critique be more transformative?

Elite dreams

Harmonious end state

Critical
branded
the
"anti"

Recycling
centers of
imaginaries

T.I.N.A

The "impossible"

Even more "blank"
space to colonize

Imagined
ruins of
critique

How can desire be re-rooted?

Island of
loneliness

!!!



Ambiguous utopias

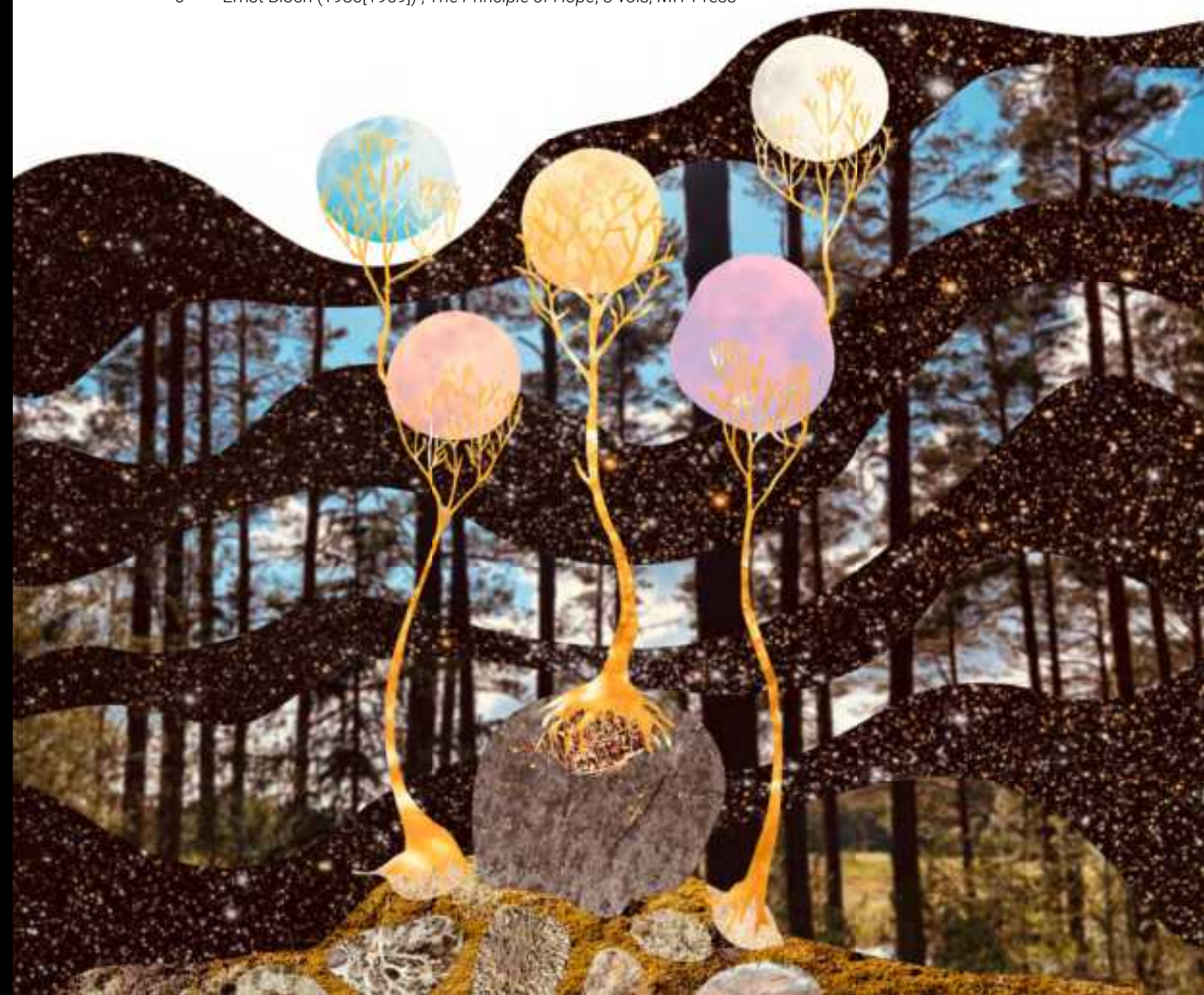
We say we want a better world. We call for transformative change—no, radical change. We even dream of utopia. But we are many, and many dream of different utopias, worlds apart. Utopias that are inevitably another's real or imagined dystopia—past, present and future. But how can we stay with these frictions *between* worlds? How can we not only understand them, but really *feel* them. Feel where they come from. Feel the solidarity of being willing to understand the other. To change one's own utopia to include the other. No, that's not enough. To become utopian together so that many worlds can flourish.

Ursula Le Guin calls such utopias 'ambiguous' in their refusal of easy binary commitments to good or bad. Just like Thomas More's original island of utopia: was he sketching a 'good place' to strive for, or 'no place' to be dismissed? No one knows. Perfection and clear stances may help stage or avoid frictions. But ambiguity and committing to beginnings rather than only ends, may allow us to navigate the frictions inherent to our diverse dreams. Not just dreams of possible futures, but also imagined pasts. Can we treat utopia in a more ambiguous way? Breaking down the binaries between openness and closure; possibility and impossibility; friction and solidarity; art and science? Could this enable a plurality of alternative utopian politics which, while ambiguous in many ways, remain steadfast in their commitment to resist unjustified closures of collective imagination, and to counter the present?

Prefigurative utopias

We might see glimpses of possible worlds. But what use is it to only peek through a keyhole? Can we enfold these worlds into the present? Make them possible. Play with them. Foster solidarity around them. Grow seeds into moons. Not that linear kind of growth. The branching kind that grows upwards, rootwards, sideways. And moons that glow with grief of what we have lost *and* hope of what we long for. Like Ernst Bloch's utopian impulse⁶. And Philip Glass' song 'Choosing Life' in the film *The Hours*. Art carries the currents of our desires; deepens our glimpsing and making of the otherwise. Artistic research helps us dance on the tightrope between possibility and impossibility, giving courage and skills for when we inevitably fall off. There is so much to learn from: The Zapatistas, ZAD—Zone A Défendre, Quilombismo, Initiative for Indigenous Futures, NSK—Neue Slowenische Kunst, Institute of Radical Imagination, Framer Framed, BAK—basis voor actuele kunst, and so many more. So many collectives, social movements, prefigurative politics. And still, what are we not prefiguring and why?

⁶ Ernst Bloch (1986[1959]), *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols, MIT Press



Disruptive utopias

Imagination can be seen as friction-less. A speeding car. Or a flight taking off, soaring to greater heights. But this is precisely the kind of imagination that can be so dangerous. An imagination without friction. One which is not forced to grapple with those who would resist it. Those who are actively harmed by it. But why is there so little friction? Power? Extractivism? Ideology? But wait, there is so much friction, with no shortage of polarization, protests, critiques. People who feel robbed of their future, and their pasts. Such imagination can feel like oil in water, struggling to connect and transform. Refusing to be transformed itself. So what new layers of friction can be surfaced, and staged? How can layers of memories, experiences, and dreams, intertwine in novel ways, like Sarathy Korwar's song 'Utopia is a Colonial Project'—subverting eurocentric ideals into polyrhythmic dreams. How can we embrace the textures which modernity is so quick to pave over? And create turbulent seas that flip some of our dominant ways of seeing, knowing and being in the world? To stop calling utopia impossible, and start seeing our common sense order as impossible to accept. How can we creatively introduce new kinds of frictions in novel ways?

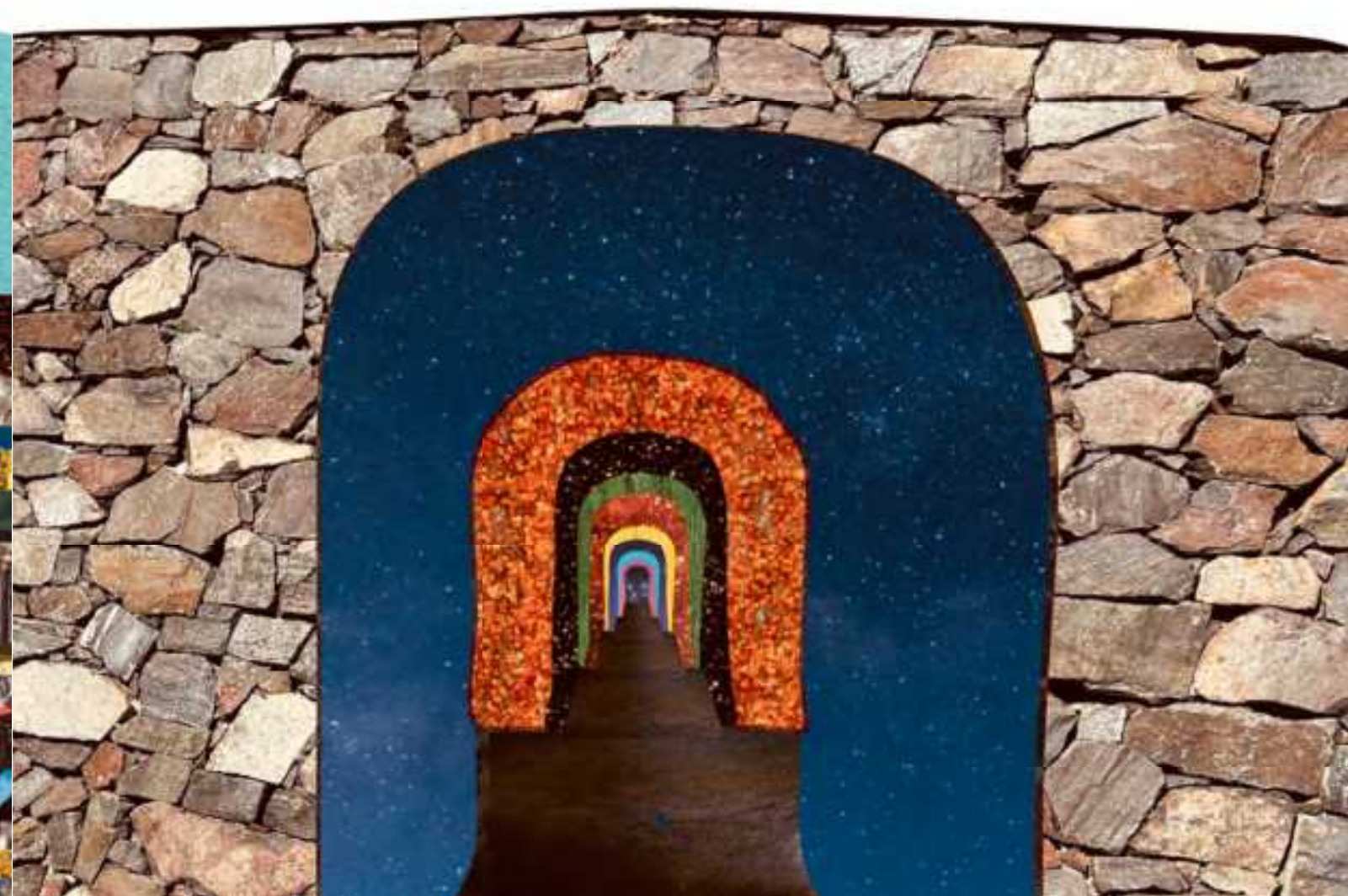


Speculative utopias

Radically experimental jazz musician Sun Ra once said “imagination is the key that unlocks the door to new worlds”. It may be hard to envision how such 'new worlds' connect to our now world, but we also lose something when we quickly reduce our dreams to the possible. Think of 'Real Utopias'⁵. To only do what can easily be proven possible also keeps us trapped in our existing realities. In contrast, dreampolitik⁷, the art of the impossible, can estrange us from our ideas of how the world must be, orienting our critical and prefigurative efforts. It can give space for others' imagination to become activated, to walk deeper into the tunnel of increasingly deeper and more plural speculation until a bridge to the possible can be found—all the while dancing to the tune of Sun Ra's 'Door of the Cosmos'. Like the multi-media cartography experiment The World We Became: Map Quest 2350⁸, which presents a planetary vision of interspecies justice intertwining ecological crises with Black, Asian, Pacific, Middle Eastern, Latin American, Caribbean, and Indigenous futures. And there are so many rich speculative worlds to engage with, from Ursula Le Guin's creations to Nnedi Okorafor's. And so many more to still build and provoke with. So what is it that makes a speculative utopia transformative of the present?

⁷ Stephen Duncombe (2019), *Dream or nightmare: reimagining politics in an age of fantasy*, OR Books

⁸ Tao Leigh Goffe et al. (2022), *The World We Became: Map Quest 2350, A Speculative Atlas Beyond Climate Crisis*, *Asian Diasporic Vis. Cult. Am.*, 7(1-2)



Pluralizing utopias

With utopia, we often focus on what worlds WE want to make or unmake. But who is this WE? And who is not? And what about the very connective tissue that lies *between* our worlds, shimmering with radical possibility? Lying between our performative loops of utopia, which continue to reproduce the same tired notions of desirable imagined futures and desirable actions in the now. Loops of self-fulfilling back-casting, yet casting us backward; trapping us with the same master's tools that "will never dismantle the master's house"⁹. How can we create space to surface these multi-shaped performative utopias and be willing to step into each others' worlds? To experience for whom our own utopia may actually be dystopia. And break these cycles, sampling and transforming the old into that which challenges and pluralizes it. Like Ensemble Mik Nawooj's 'Bach on Transcendence'. What about the immense power of theatrical, musical, and visual ways of surfacing our conflicting worlds and hosting human connection between them? Like Empatheatre in South Africa, which creates amphitheatres for empathy that foster participatory justice and inform legal battles. How can we experiment even more radically between worlds? And also with those speculative (financial, policy, etc) worlds that are now so detached from our *shared* humanity?

9 Audre Lorde (1979), The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House, Comments at "The Personal and the Political" Panel at the Second Sex Conference



Dreamholding

Stakeholder is a tired word. We need different languages for ambiguous utopias to flourish. Stakes are sharp. Stakes keep one trapped. Stakes mark boundaries. Stakes are competitive. A shift has been suggested from stakeholder as a noun to *stakeholding* as a verb to encourage a more fluid approach¹⁰. Yet, we can go even further. Let's decenter stakes and recenter dreams. Dreams are fuzzy. Dreams can permit the impossible. Dreams can challenge boundaries. Dreams can cultivate solidarity. Dreamholding is a continuous and inevitable part of our daily lives. We are always clinging to particular dreams of past, present and future, and repelling others. Dreamholding enables us to more intentionally consider how we cling onto and navigate diverse dreams. It orients us not only towards the present, but deepens the reach of our (multiple) present(s) into erased memories and preposterous futures. It calls upon artistic research practices capable of surfacing, challenging and transforming our dreams, in ways that give courage to remake our world otherwise.

10 Kevin Collins et al. (2007), A systemic approach to managing multiple perspectives and stakeholding in water catchments: some findings from three UK case studies, *Environ. Sci. Policy*, 10(6)





Ambiguous Deep Utopias

*Staying with grief,
emotions,
mystery,
and dying worlds*



Felipe Viveros performing *Old New Suns* at *Dreaming in the Dark* in Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions

* A Performative Ritual

They sit in a circle, in full solidarity. Each member in turn expressing something about their inner world. Emotions are raw, authentic, vulnerable—with no need to perfect thoughts, or perform...

Member: "As an extroverted man, I need to watch out how much space I take... but there's so much I want to say, there's so much I feel, there's so much I want to let out..." *He pounds his fist on his heart. The rest join in, beating as one; the sound reverberates across the room.*

Member: "I don't know what to say. It's just really difficult to talk about the end of civilization. I guess no one wants to hear that. Did you know that apartheid is actually a Dutch word that means 'apart-ness'? I feel like a lead balloon and I just want to collapse and cry..." *They slump forward, their fingertips brushing the ground. All slump forward in solidarity.*

Expressions and embodiments continue, in rhythmic solidarity—humming, dancing, meowing—embracing all spectrum of emotion—grief, joy, rage, wonder, *that which cannot be put into words.*

Member: "I feel a silence in my body. I don't know if it's anticipatory or if it's apathy. I feel like I've felt a lot and I continue to feel a lot. And I don't know how sustainable it all is, but I know that when I see or empathize with a different feeling that's happening in this circle, there is a feeling of connection that helps me move on..." *She smooths her chest and hums "ahhhh". The encircling voices and hands are quick to amass in unison...*

This is the ritual: Leaving the house of modernity.



Joost Vervoort, Felipe Viveros, Noor Noor, Esha Shah, Maya Adams, Fiona Trüb & Marijke de Pous enacting the collective ritual *Leaving the house of modernity* at Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions, inspired by Vanessa Andreotti's *Hospicing modernity: parting with harmful ways of living*

This performative ritual is an expression of the need for new kinds of spaces—ones that allow people to stay together with the full breadth of emotions of human experience. What kinds of *ambiguous deep utopias* might invite people into deep conversations and messiness? To explore loss, grief, dying worlds, rage—that which modernity has made us numb to, having constipated grief and anger into resentment, alienation, addiction. Can we hold space for these hard emotions alongside care, mystery, joy, to make it appealing to leave the house of modernity? Such spaces may enliven parts inside us that help us to see each other for who we truly are *and* could be.

In *Old New Suns* Felipe Viveros grapples with "what happens when we reckon with our often painful history, and draw on the wisdom and traditional knowledge of those who have been excluded in order to reimagine utopias beyond our current apocalyptic trajectory"? Without facing traumas with integrity, we risk recycling generations of oppressions. Felipe recentres people of color and epistemologies of the South, and care and reciprocity, in co-creating visions of possible futures.

Christina Klubert's *Why We Need to Become Painters* sees our emotional vocabulary as wholly inadequate to engage the complexity of our inner worlds. She shows how paintings capture the emotional worlds of society at moments in history, and provokes us to consider: how might we all become painters amidst the climate crisis, to "shape the inner worlds of a nation"?

Two fictions paint speculative futures where *ambiguous deep utopias* are well developed. *Grief as a Path to Messy Utopia* by Maya Adams imagines a day in the life of Linh Anh, a *future sculptor* who works at the Bureau for the Future. Linh helps communities navigate deepened conflicts—of technology vs. tradition; and survival vs. inclusion. Maya encloses the artefact *The Book of Earth Song*, which serves as a resource to cultivate messy utopias, by holding together grief and love.

Secret Society Singing Laments by Esha Shah conjures an archive from 2060—turning a possible future into the past. In it, people sing under moonlight over four nights, experiencing immense freedom in sharing the "foundational pain of being human that connects everyone". This sacred art form was not pre-designed, but a spontaneous assembly that spread across the world: "Everyone is here to create a night in their life, so that a different day can be imagined for tomorrow".

Dorine van Meel's *Phoenix's Last Song* opens up space to "imagine how a new world may arise out of a burning of the old". It is not a clear hopeful blueprint or plan to action, but rather an ambiguous and experiential way of being with emotions; with dreams that "do not speak of conquest"; love that "will not be in order to possess"; Rage that will "not be dismissed".

Roy Bendor's *The World, Already a Corpse* questions the nature of activist design as a thoroughly modernist practice. Roy provokes us to consider, "what if design's worldmaking potential lies not in drawing the contours of possible new worlds that will emerge from this one, but in helping us imagine and prepare for the end of this world?"

Two final provocations take us into the realm of mystery. In *Loud Thoughts* Fiona Trüb and Terra Nzimande encourage us to "think out of the box", noting the power of art to listen to our inner worlds and unlearn thought patterns. Fiona offers thought experiments for empathy, while Terra poetically inquires into a changing climate, exclaiming: "art is the anthem of a world reclaimed".

Infrastructures of Mystery by Joost Vervoort invites us to consider how we can build spaces for deep mystery—a sense of wonder we experience through love, the natural world, spiritual or embodied practice, music, psychedelics, and more. Joost considers how systemic infrastructures like health and education might better support active encounters with life's mysteries.

* Old New Suns

Felipe Viveros



We want to get 'there'—whether 'there' is a beautiful techno-utopic world, or a more just arrangement that works for the many and not just the few. But there is no 'there'; there is only a yearning, an aching, a struggle for 'there'—and in the struggle, we change.

— Bayo Akomolafe¹

As a young person I spent many nights sitting around the fire listening to stories passed down by the elders about how to re-enchant the world and care for the land. These stories, passed down through the generations, taught how to remain in good relation to one another, and what it means to honor our ancestors and future generations, how to be in dialogue with the living breathing world, and how to be a good companion species. From my indigenous mentors and friends, I learned to imagine a future where all peoples and the living world can flourish. Indigenous people have kept a wisdom of place, safeguarding the myth and stories that over millennia have allowed people and the more-than-human world to speak to one another.

Years later, as I travel between Britain, Central America, my family home in Chile, and elsewhere, I remember those lessons as our civilizational breakdown continues, as we live in the 'age of

consequences'². A 'polycrisis'³ is upon us, characterized by ecological collapse, climate change, species extinction, pandemics, institutional racism, inequality and poverty and other interlocking and converging crises.

At the roots of the polycrisis lies an outdated but highly adaptive system, namely capitalism. Climate change, for example, is not man made—it is capital made. Every dollar of wealth that is created heats up our planet, because we have an extractive and fossil fuel-based economy. Capitalism, likewise, is destroying our communities and well being, increasing poverty and insecurity, war and displacement for some, while a small number become billionaires.

Capitalism however is not inevitable. It is just one story, one system, that has organized human societies, and it has existed for just 200 years; neoliberalism—a particular form of capitalism that dominates our world today—has existed for less than 50 years.

Over the thousands of years of human existence, societies have evolved in other less destructive ways, built on multiple diverse stories, old and new. As we look to a future beyond this time of crisis, we can draw on the colorful, inclusive and intersectional stories of the past and present to create more resilient ways of life for ourselves and future generations. Octavia Butler said “There is nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns.” Inspired by her words I wrote ‘Old new suns’, as a way to speak not only of the current and upcoming crises but also to speak of the things we can do now, to speak of the window of opportunity we have today to build a future based on new mythologies, based on new-and-old stories. Of what happens when we combine radical care and imagination to envision multiple possible future scenarios. What happens when we reckon with our often painful history, and draw on the wisdom and traditional knowledge of those who have been excluded in order to reimagine utopias beyond our current apocalyptic trajectory.

Humans lived most of our history as hunter-gatherers, and while romanticizing this way of life is not our goal, we now know that there were always a plurality of social structures, and among them were highly egalitarian societies where individuals and families enjoyed the freedom to move, to disobey, and to change their social arrangements.⁴ Bone marrow samples indicate that our calorie intake was essentially the same as hunter-gatherers, and that in many societies, the social structure rewarded those who provided stability, peace, and happiness to the group, not the most selfish who sought only self-glorification. A return to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle isn't in the cards today, but stories of our ancestors' ways of life show what's possible for human nature—in fact they offer 90,000 years of inspiration.

Scientific finding supports the history in showing that we are not naturally selfish and greedy. In 1992, Giacomo Rizzolati and his team at Parma University discovered mirror neurons, and what the research shows us is that we are hardwired for empathy since birth.⁵ Furthermore, game theory and behavioral economics show us that we are hardwired for justice and fairness.^{6,7}

² Coined by Courtney White (2016), *The Age of Consequences: A Chronicle of Concern and Hope*, Counterpoint Press

³ Coined by French theorist Edgar Morin, refers to the various crises in economics, politics, geopolitics and the environment which are feeding into each other, exacerbating already difficult circumstances.

⁴ David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021), *The Dawn Of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, Macmillan

⁵ Helen Riess (2017), *The Science of Empathy*, *J Patient Exp.*, 4(2)

⁶ Juan Camilo Cárdenas (2019), *What Behavioral Economics Reveals About Sharing and Cooperation*, *Ideas Matter*

⁷ Robert de Vries (2014), *An instinct for fairness?*, *Inequalities*

¹ Bayo Akomolafe (2017), *The burden of the new story*, <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/the-burden-of-the-new-story>

So our current system of exploitation and extraction are not inevitable. We are a species that can make care, renewal and transformation a central feature of our lives, one where many ways of knowing and being can flourish together.

A central tenet of capitalism is that humans are naturally selfish. But we know that our current way of living is making us deeply unhappy, that depression and addiction is on the rise, that in the U.S., suicide is a leading cause of death. Isolated selfish individuals is not what we evolved to be, and it makes us desperately unhappy. Children in the west are on Prozac and Ritalin, spiraling into existential angst and plagued by spiritual ennui—we are told to find meaning from the possessions we own and the experiences we can brag about, but the bankruptcy of this notion is felt inside every heart that longs for something more. There is a global epidemic of unhappiness and loneliness.

Perhaps the solutions we need to tackle the meta-crisis lie in a new story of who we are as human beings and how we want to organize our societies, including the global political and economic system that is so destructive of our wellbeing and our planet. As a starting point, that means acknowledging the harm caused by white supremacy culture and opening up to the multiple more colorful ways to look at our shared humanity.

The dominant vision of a 'techno-future' involves "recreating the same power relations and ways of living"⁸ that got us into our current predicament. In these techno-futures, technologies are infused with magic-like capabilities that supposedly better our lives and environment. The future though, according to American Media Theorist Douglas Rushkoff is "less a noun than a verb, a thing we do"⁹.

Instead of this dominant story, based in capitalism and techno-futurism, we can and we must imagine different, more just futures: "a world where all life on earth is able to exist freely, in symbiosis with a healthy environment, without the threat of violence, and with all the resources needed to thrive"¹⁰. Ways of life in which our children and grandchildren can thrive for generations can only emerge as an outgrowth of multitude of ways of knowing, doing and being. A multitude of black and red and yellow and white suns is needed.

As a starting point, it is crucial that we question our epistemology—in simple terms, how we know what we know. Most [online] knowledge is accessible only through colonial languages, predominantly English and Chinese.¹¹ Those of us who are the primary consumers of digital content and infrastructure — 75% of the world's online population—comes from the Global majority¹², and we are neither its producers nor the decision-makers when it comes to its content, design and experience. Epistemic colonialism is likely the less well-known type of colonialism; an invisible foe.¹³

But what would happen if we instead centred epistemologies of the South and Indigenous peoples? What if we centred many ways of knowing and being where care and reciprocity were embedded in the way we reimagine the future?

8 Sun-ha Hong (2022), Predictions without futures, In Historical Futures, Zoltán Boldizsár Simon & Marek Tamm (eds)

9 Douglas Rushkoff (2019), *Team Human*, Ww Norton & Co

10 Slow Factory (2023), Inclusive Frameworks for Collective Liberation

11 Reported by Whose Knowledge?, a global multi-lingual campaign that centers knowledges of marginalized communities online

12 See Wikipedia page on Global majority: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_majority

13 Personal conversation with A. Sengupta, 2022

According to writer and activist Sarah Van Gelder¹⁴, to imagine a different, more just world, a reckoning must take place. Beginning by acknowledging the ways certain peoples have benefited from a long history of labor and land theft, exploitation and extraction, enforced by violence and oppression. The more-than-human world, bodies of cultures¹⁵ and other marginalized peoples, deserve apologies and reparations. In her words:

When we stop the harms, lift up the truth, acknowledge and apologize, and seek to repair the damage, we have created the preconditions for fruitful collaboration across races and cultures. And, in the process of undertaking these steps, we have already started the work of building a creative future.

Failure to engage in this process with sincerity and integrity risks re-traumatizing those already traumatized and reproducing the wrongs that got us to this point. Without these steps, the old oppressions are simply reformulated into new ones.

For generations, bodies of cultures¹⁶ have been protesting, demanding and encouraging us to engage in the pursuit of justice and collective liberation. Despite the fact that nowadays white people have perhaps more awareness than ever before on their role in perpetuating racism, and other systemic oppressions, we still have a very long way to go for intersectional equity to be achieved.

Our generational task is to dismantle systems of oppression and create post-capitalist futures.

Born in a dictatorship, I grew up in Wallmapu, the ancestral land of the Mapuche people in Chile. The Mapuche are one of the largest First Nations in Latin America and have remained in a state of 'permanent rebellion'¹⁷ against colonization and acculturation. A hot spot for biodiversity, the Mapuche people and their vast territories have resisted occupation, epistemicide and ecocide. And yet, despite all this, their allegiance to the Earth community remains unwavering.

Indigenous peoples globally are custodians of 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity. Indigenous peoples are not a homogeneous group either; their cultural complexity is as diverse as the territories they inhabit. Throughout millenia Indigenous peoples have developed a broad knowledge of the complex relationships and dynamics of their respective terrains, preserving ecosystems as well as enhancing biodiversity with their Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).¹⁸

TEK recognizes there is a continuum between humans and the Earth, where life is an interconnected whole, intertwined with our human bodies, with the rainforest, the whisper of the river and our thoughts. This continuum between humans and the whole can also be found in pre-Christian Europe, Sufi mysticism of Islam, and in Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist traditions¹⁹ instead of being exclusive to Indigenous people alone. Canadian Ecologist Fikret Berkes calls the unity between humans and the environment: 'Sacred Ecology'.²⁰

14 Sarah Van Gelder (2022), *Creative Futures Begin with Reckoning with an Unjust Past*, Routledge

15 According to Resmaa Menakem bodies of culture refer to all human bodies not considered white

16 "Let's say *bodies of culture* to refer to all human bodies not considered white. This both acknowledges our existence as human bodies and displaces the other terms that make white bodies into the norm and otherize everyone else.", In Resmaa Menakem (2023), *Bodies of Culture and Two Forms of Soul*

17 Fernando Pairican & Marie Juliette Urrutia (2021), The permanent rebellion: an interpretation of Mapuche uprisings under Chilean colonialism, *Radical Americas*, 6(1)

18 Sefi Mekonen (2017), Roles of Traditional Ecological Knowledge for Biodiversity Conservation, *J. of Nat. Sci. Research*, 7(15)

19 J. Baird Callicott (1997), *Earth's Insights*, University of California Press

20 Fikret Berkes (2017), *Sacred Ecology*, Routledge

Everything exists in relationships, we are made-with-others—in 'sympoiesis'²¹. For instance, the Mayan people use the word *inlakech*, which translates to "I am another you" when they welcome one another. Realizing our kinship and interconnectedness is at the core of the move towards more regenerative cultures. This understanding can assist us in making the transition from dominance to respect, centering empathy and reverence for life.

Restitution and repair work, carried out under the guidance of those most affected, will help to rebalance broken power dynamics. People of color, who comprise the world's majority, ought to have a lead role in co-creating utopian visions of the future. New worlds being formed rely on the creativity of all cultures, creating a world founded on equity, rather than exploitation and pain. All we are lacking right now is the confident imagination to see beyond the constraints the dominant system has put in place to protect itself.

We must commit ourselves to a lifetime of decolonization and the transcension of subject-object dualities. This means moving from materialism to animism, from rationalism to relationalism, from private property to radical hospitality, from certainty and knowing to humility and wonder, from monoculture to polyculture and many ways of knowing and being.

We may find that the union of spirituality and politics, of mysticism and anarchism, may provide us with a pathway to begin the necessary work of reconciliation, recuperation, redemption, and rewilding.

We may find that there is no remaining distinction between an activist and a shaman. We may find that our ancestors, the elements, the plants, and other emissaries for a living universe conspire to speak to us in new and timely ways.

May we find ways to be the ancestors we dream of becoming.

²¹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2016, De Gruyter

Experience *Old New Suns*

Sravana Studios: Carl Golembeski, Brother Spirit, Felipe Viveros



Felipe Viveros performing *Old New Suns* in *Dreaming in the Dark* at Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions

* Why We Need to Become Painters

Christina Klubert

Why is it sometimes so difficult to express what we feel? I might say I am angry but there are only a few words to describe how I feel. I might feel a range of feelings, with different intensities, more like shades of anger and shades of disappointment, and shades of sadness, and shades of happiness. How do we express what we feel in contemporary environmental and political crises? A time in which how we ought to live cannot be the status quo anymore, in which we must question our habits and understanding of the world, and in which the future is uncertain, and sometimes dark? Is the emotional vocabulary we have learned enough to express our feelings in crises?

Tantrums and Dinner parties

Before we learned emotional vocabulary, the way we expressed what we feel was engaging in tantrums: an embodied outburst of emotions. A guidebook on parenting about children's tantrums explains that for young children, a tantrum happens when they're overwhelmed by strong emotions. Older children might have tantrums because they haven't yet learned safe ways to express or fail to adjust to expectations.¹ A reflection on this advice tells us two things. Firstly, expressing our emotions is a human need. As social beings expressing our emotions is our way to navigate the world around us.² We need to ventilate what is going on inside of us with our social environment and are seeking recognition of our feelings and a sense of belonging. Secondly, we learn to control our feelings as we grow older, or have you ever seen an adult bursting out in a tantrum at a dinner party? Our emotional culture dictates that it is inappropriate to always play with open cards of our feeling world. We learn to contain our emotions at our workplace, in class, or at family gatherings. If we are angry or feel sad, in the best case, we go for walks, we go for a run, listen to music, process what we feel in a diary entry. We might have this friend who has known us for a long time and knows how to comfort us. Interestingly, we feel quite alone until someone has recognized how we feel. A run clears our head, but mostly when we return, we still must cognitively process the fight we had with our partner.

Adult life and Swiss pocket knives

But what if we want to know what an infant feels when it does not burst out in a tantrum? Art therapists Michaela Spaeker works with children with depression. In her therapy session she engages with children in an artistic dialogue, in which she encourages children to draw what they feel. Therapist and pediatric patient communicate with each other through paintings. Spaeker says: "It is a natural human need to express oneself through images. Even a child expresses their feelings and fantasies in pictures and shows: 'Look, that's what concerns me'."³ In adult life language seems to have taken over this task. If we are sad, we seek the company of a good friend to talk about our feelings, being able to communicate our feelings and needs to our partner is a core value of a good relationship. Spaeker says that drawing can do what writing a diary is for adults; it alleviates

tensions: "How does a child handle the material? Does it press the pen gently or firmly? How does it compose the picture? Does it use strong color contrast? Is there a sense of restlessness or rigidity in the picture?" For the therapist, this is all indicative for the inner feeling state of a child. As we grow older, our frustration is not about not receiving this treat in the supermarket anymore, it is not about the fact that our father does not have the time to engage in play with us. Our concerns are more complex. It is about making a living, it is about our past, our present way of life and our future dreams and aspirations. Thomas Dixon has compared our emotional vocabulary with a Swiss pocketknife.⁴ Like a pocketknife equipped with handy tools for daily life, we have developed names for emotions which occur again and again and again in human life, such as anger, love, fear, happiness, anxiety, jealousy and sadness. But are these words efficient enough to represent the complexity of our inner worlds?

How do we then express what we feel when it comes to the crises? A radical age in which we must question our daily practices, which alters our understanding of the world. A crisis in which we must redefine our positioning in the world, and shape new visions of the future? How can the simple words 'I feel sad, angry and desperate' capture the complexity of things we must deal with?

Art: The language of our feelings

What if we would return to art as medium for the expression of our emotions? Art has the potential to express many more feelings than the few ordinary ones we have developed terms for. Other feelings than the ones our pocketknife is equipped with, that are too rare or too unmanifested, or their nuances too subtle to have pragmatic importance and therefore to have needed names. Art as languages includes these nameless feelings as well as the emotions, moods, sentiments and attitudes that have names.⁵ When we look at an art piece, we can become emotional as we connote a memory or personal experience with it. In addition, art can entertain mental images. We can taste sadness without feeling sad. In that way art can be a medium for the cultivation of compassion and empathy.

Let us look at how different artists managed to capture the spirit of a society or nation in times of drastic change and transitions throughout history. With his famous painting "La Liberté guidant le peuple" French artist Delacroix managed to paint a picture which captured the spirit of the French in the French Revolution. In the painting, fierce and determined fighters engage in a struggle for freedom, piles of corpses build a pedestal from which liberty strides. The shape of the clouds reminds us of a turbulent day, which ended in a brighter future than anticipated before. "La Liberté guidant le peuple" became the marker of the French revolution as the end of the age of Enlightenment and the beginning of the romantic era. A time where emotionality superseded an epoch of elites taking seemingly rational decisions. The painting manages to combine a range of feelings and gives a true picture of the multitude of emotions present at this moment of time.

1 Emily Sammartino (2022), Managing Tantrums in School-Aged Children, <https://www.atruihealth.org/healthy-living/blog/Managing-Tantrums-In-School-Aged-Children> on 6th February, 2025.

2 James M. Jasper (2019), *The Emotions of Protest*, University of Chicago Press

3 Michaela Spaeker (2013), Koelner Stadtanzeiger, <https://www.kunsttherapie-michaela-spaeker.de/kunsttherapie-depressive-kinder.html>

4 Thomas Dixon (2023), *The History of Emotions: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press

5 Curt John Ducasse (1964), Art and the Language of the Emotions, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 23(1)



La Liberté guidant le peuple by Eugène Delacroix, 1830, Louvre, Paris

With 'Aardappeleters' (potato eaters) the Dutch painter Van Gogh managed to illustrate the harsh reality of the strenuous life of farmers at the end of the 19th century. Weathered faces, bony working hands symbolize strenuous work necessary to secure a livelihood. The earthy colors of the painting, dark color scheme and overall coarseness transfer the severity of the time, give a sense of what it must have meant to be a farmer. It is not only a representation of the feeling world of many farmers, but also an ode to Dutch farmers' life; a call for recognition for a whole social class.



Aardappeleters by Vincent Van Gogh, 1885, Vincent Vang Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

But a painting cannot only capture the emotional worlds of a society at a specific point of time, it can also attempt to shape the inner worlds of a nation. A deteriorating political climate, eroding optimism, missing future trajectories, a seemingly disintegrating society marked the climate of Germany in the early beginnings of the 20th Century. German artist Carl Bantzer took important events in the rural calendar such as weddings, feasts, harvests and transformed them into a vivid, sparkling monumental painting as his ode to rural country life.⁶ In so doing, Bentzer translated the populist ideology of that time into art. In a time of elitist, rationalist politics which seemed to fail in addressing the problems of a post WWI society, with his paintings Bentzers' attempted to produce meaningful cultural expressions in a meaningless public life. Art became a means for the introduction of a new Zeitgeist by aiming to cultivate feelings of pride and a sense of belonging.



Schwalm Dance by Carl Bantzer, 1898, Marburger Universitaetsmuseum, Marburg

Let's paint again

In diverse ways, all of these paintings managed to speak to people's hearts. They have not only appealed to inner feeling worlds of individuals, communities, and whole nations, but also expressed emotions such as unity, belonging and pride, shaped identities and painted new images of the future. Art cannot only recognize the durability of life and celebrate momentous accomplishments, but also revive spirits and infuse life with meaning again. Every crisis needs paintings which draw bright future trajectories, giving us purpose and life meaning again. In a world in which we only verbally express what we feel, the pocketknife-like vocabulary of emotions constrains the language of our feelings. To communicate how we really feel, to see all the shades of sadness, hopelessness and anger of the contemporary crises, we have to become painters. As we have learned to 'manage away' our emotions as adults, art can become a medium in which we finally find catharsis. Then, we really can fulfill our human need to communicate our inner worlds to the outer world and find recognition. LET'S PAINT AGAIN.

⁶ Eric Storm (2009), Painting Regional Identities: Nationalism in the Arts, France, Germany and Spain, 1890–1914, *European History Quarterly*, 39(4)

* Grief as a Path to Messy Utopia

Maya Adams

The way I see it, utopias are pluralistic, can be coinciding, competing and often conflicting. You can't fully explore the idea of utopias without acknowledging past and presently existing structures of power: the who, what, when, where, why and how said utopia is happening. And if you want to dig further; at what cost? For this reason, I like thinking of utopias as messy. For me, a messy utopia recognises, acknowledges and accounts for the very real pain, suffering, unfairness and discomfort of life, yet exists with overall less harm and the greater good for human and more-than-human entities.

In other words, a messy utopia is one that navigates the conditions of today for futures of less harm (not no harm) and more good (not perfection). I believe it is crucial to envision a messy utopia when contemplating the futures emerging from the polycrises we face today, such as climate change, institutional racism, global inequality, post-truth politics, increased surveillance, neo-colonialism, and crossing planetary boundaries.

With a nod to Donella Meadows's first lever for societal change¹, I hypothesise that for progress towards more expressions and experiences of messy utopia, there needs to be a shift in cultural and spiritual consciousness. A pathway for this shift in consciousness is through processing personal and collective grief. Modern society has mastered the art of distraction, using social media, entertainment, work, and increased voluntary busyness to mask the grief and discomfort of the present moment. The symptoms of this are not too hard to find: chronic loneliness, depression, anxiety, burnout, and collective generational trauma repeating itself through war.

To start contemplating futures, we need to slow down and clearly acknowledge the present. First it's essential to recognise that humans don't operate in isolation but are embedded in a complex system involving more-than-human actors.² Second, we must interrogate the politics of memory and acknowledge the various elements of the past that have shaped our present. This often involves processing difficult emotions like grief, guilt, and rage. In this instance, I will focus specifically on grief.

The use of art and creativity as a tool for processing of grief is fundamental. It allows for an alternative examination of social, political and economic structures that define the Anthropocene. Artistic inquisition and expression of grief have the potential to open spaces for personal and collective digesting, learning and growth. Collective grieving reduces the strength of the "I" and opens space for compassion³ for the human and more-than-human collective. With the cultivation of this kind of compassion throughout different strata of society, there is a potential for deep listening and an expanded sense of self to influence decisions on how we act and shape our futures.

When held in a skilful container, grief, like love, can be a force for action, for digesting deep and heavy pain, for transformation and evolution.

1 More on leverage points: <https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/>
2 Watch Donna Haraway's - SF: String Figures, Multispecies Muddles, Staying with the Trouble: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1uTVnhIHS8&t=1198s&ab_channel=KIASualberta
3 An interesting explanation of compassion: <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/compassion/definition>

Pain we feel for our world and our love for it are two sides of the same coin.

— Joanna Macy

Artefact: The Book of Earth Song

In the near future, as communities face increasing climate and ecological challenges, an international treaty establishes voluntary Ministries of the Future in willing countries. These ministries aim to transform social relations, political operations, and economic production to create a just, inclusive, and sustainable shift from the status quo.

Part of this initiative is the Bureau for the Future, which operates at local government levels using participatory approaches such as conflict resolution, community education, and creative engagement like music events and theatre. It also utilizes The Book of Earth Song, a collection of practices, poems, and conversation starters to help communities collectively reflect and process grief.

Below is a story example illustrating how The Book of Earth Song could potentially be used, along with a prototype showcasing what it might look like.

Note: While The Book of Earth Song contains spiritual elements, it is not intended to be a form of religion.

A Day in the Life of Linh Anh

It was the third case of the day, and Linh's energy was wearing thin. Despite the relative cool from being indoors, there was sweat on her brow from the heat that was throbbing outside. As she walked through the air-conditioned halls of the Bureau For the Future, she was keenly aware that it was the 7th day of a continuous 40c heatwave roaring outside. A marker of what could be coming. A marker of what she resolved to change. Livable futures were what she deserved. What all beings deserved. And she was going to fight for that until she could no more.

As she approached the room for her next meeting, she could feel the tension before seeing it. Outside the room where she stood was bustling with inventors and fixers, other futures sculptors like herself scuffled around between tasks as the day raged on with the heat. But not in this room. The silence was so thick you could have thought it was empty—not filled with 15 people, some of whom were locked in a near-bloody fistfight yesterday.

This case was a tricky one.

Three years ago, Better World Developments started constructing what it called an Ecopark Township, a new sustainable model of what a city could be. The Township was a beacon of

a brighter future for people and the planet. Their first iteration in Vietnam was successful and signalled a concrete example of sustainable human living. Attracted by its grand success, countries worldwide competed with bids for the same to be done within their own borders, with many of their cities compromised to floods or wildfires.

In Arantha, Better World Developments proposed an Ecopark Township with state-of-the-art ecological engineering, waste reduction techniques, waste conversion and recycling techniques. The township aimed to incorporate components like hydroponics, biogas digesters, closed circle wastewater treatment, community gardens, mini electric grids and ecologically responsive lighting. The buildings in the area were all designed to adopt passive architecture principles. Some were used to experiment with the “living building” concept and had unique features like energy-producing micro algae panels on exterior walls. The township was modelled after the 15-minute city and had a highly connected and self-sustaining electric transport system. One particularly interesting energy source would be harvesting kinetic energy generated by riding bikes or from people’s footsteps on technologically enhanced walkways.

The bureau was initially intended to be involved in the development process, checking in throughout the project to ensure that the project’s progression was in line with the rights of current and future generations of living beings. Not yet a mandatory requirement for development projects, unsurprisingly, some members of the community and most of the project leaders strongly disagreed with the bureau’s involvement.

This was understandable to some extent. The bureau’s methods drew from indigenous philosophy and practices that were unconventional in the mainstream. Your average development consultant is not used to seeing rivers and trees as people.

Fair enough, Linh thought.

But Linh’s mission in life was to make people see differently and push that paradigm shift. The Book of Earth Song practitioners, or futures sculptors as they were nicknamed in the Bureau, knew that all beings were intricately connected. Humans could not fundamentally change how things were and move towards a livable future without recognising these relationships.

Linh sighed. She glanced at The Book of Earth Song comfortably nestled in her hands, sandwiched by various meeting notes and letters of concern from some meeting participants. She took in a deep, grounding breath and stepped into the deathly silent room.

All the participants were sitting in a chair arranged in a circle. As soon as they saw her, the conversation started at once.

Pete Johns, the Regional Chief Operations Officer of Better Earth Developments, immediately interjected in the raucous: “We are trying to do something that is good for everyone—people and the Planet! Just look at our plans now. Our next step is to grow buildings! We want to grow houses! Imagine that. Have them absorb carbon. Filter water. Self-heal. How much closer to nature can you be?”

A man in a yellow shirt who Linh recognised as a local journalist in Arantha started, “I don’t think you are getting their point—”

“We really need to make this work! It’s not just about us, but our families too. This is how I am

showing up from my grandchildren!” Pete interjected.

At this, an elder woman, fondly known as Auntie, spoke up: “These things have never been in our community. We don’t know how to use them. These things are not from here. What about the ways we have been doing things? What happens to my traditions? Hm?”

“You make new ones! We have to adapt to survive! We invited these people to Arantha because our city is failing! This sun is killing us, and what you are thinking about is traditions!” Tan, a mid-career MP, replied in exasperation.

“This heat wasn’t there before!” Auntie defiantly retorted.

“Yes, this is why we need to change!” Tan replied.

“Aaaand how do we make money in this new place? All these foreigners are coming and know how to do these things but we don’t” Khelani, a local university student, chimed in.

“But the stipend-” Pritesh, the senior scientist for the project, started.

“Yes, we are getting money, but for how long? And is it enough? When will we learn how to do these things ourselves? How will the youth be able to manage this?” Khelani interrupted.

“It’s true, the way you are organising things is different. I am used to farming outside, and I know now it’s too hot outside for me...but...inside a dark room...I...” A quiet, sun-weathered man added from another side of the circle.

He paused.

“I am also not comfortable with the crops you suggested I grow. I don’t think people will buy them from me. Many don’t know how to cook them.”

“Yes, well, many of those crops are drought resistant, and it was done because it helps-” Pritesh tried to explain

“It is not from here. How can I feed my family food that is grown underground and tasteless?” Auntie interrupted.

“Well, without this solution, there won’t be food.” Tan sharply responded.

There was silence in the room.

“This way is better.” Pritesh continued. “Your quality of living will be better. And it will only get better as the city develops. You have a stable stipend, and the city will be efficient, so you won’t have to worry about energy costs like you do now. Think about it. Your children will have better lives, Auntie.”

“What about the life of the river that will be rerouted for this development? And the animals that lived there? The ones that are not ‘useful’ to us?” Khelani asked.

Pete perked up, “Oh, we have accounted for that. The city will support and give back to natural ecological systems. The goal is to reflowerish them into their former state. We want everyone, every

living being, to survive.”

“What about our songs? Where will they go when we are surrounded by these gadgets and things? Will we now sing about our underground gardens?” Auntie asked.

“Auntie, we will make new ones”, Tan responded.

Auntie shifted uncomfortably. An old man with bright brown eyes next to her grunted and finally spoke.

“I don't believe all of this. These nice-looking dreams are like the promises my father told me your ancestors made after our people's independence. First, you took over us and our lands. Then, you gave us 'freedom' dressed in economic debt and strings attached. You are still taking from our land what you were taking when we were enslaved. How can we believe you?” The old man trembled with passion.

The room went silent again.

Linh took another deep breath, walked down to her seat, and looked around the room. In the corner of the room were props that she would use for the next exercise. She was nervous. This was a tough one, but this was the work that needed to be done for just and positive futures.

Very gently, Linh began.

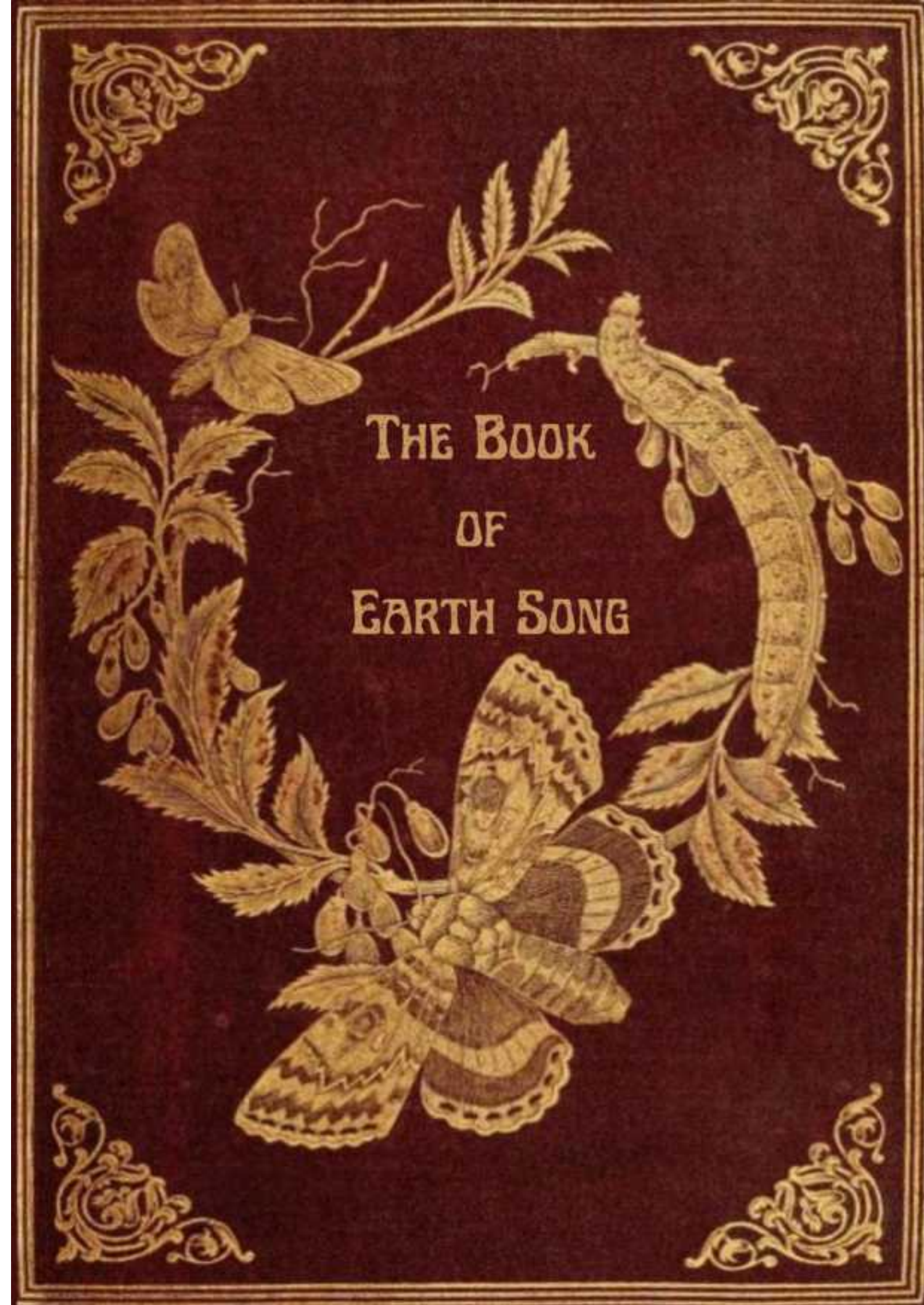
“Thank you, everyone, for agreeing to meet us. I think this is the perfect time to start with a practice from The Book of Earth Song. As you saw in the briefing notes we sent you before coming here, the intention of this meeting is for us to open up space to deeply listen to one another and reflect on the things that have and have not been said by our peers.”

“This is a deeply emotional and vulnerable practice. No one should feel pressure to participate, and that is perfectly okay. It is also important to know that we are a space of respect. While you don't have to speak, you must actively listen.”

“Now, I will open page four of the book and start the Honoring our pain for the world practice. You are all welcome in this space.”

...

Two hours later, with tears in some eyes, Linh closed the session. She felt renewed from the energy the group silently gave. A different silence, somewhat sweeter. Somewhat more aware. While no advice was given and no direct conversation made, she could feel that the session had planted some seeds of compassion. The shape of the futures this community was building had definitely changed. A bit more open. A bit more understanding. Maybe closer to utopia, albeit a bit messy.



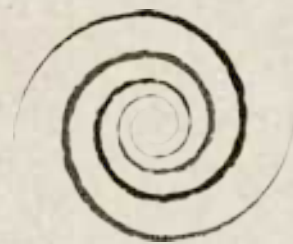
INTRODUCTION

The Book of Earth Song is an artefact containing resources, including poetry, songs, and practices for processing grief in individual or group settings.

This book intends to explore grief, including but not limited to loss of natural habitats, mass extinction, racial trauma, loss of cultural connection and identity, loneliness, inequality, and extreme weather events.

Currently, this artefact focuses on the processing of grief, but the intention is to expand its scope to include celebrations of individuals, collectives, and life.

Below are examples and inspirations of what could be included in The Book Earth of Song.



“ We can trust our pain for the world- [it] may not be pretty, [it] may not be what we choose to feel, [it] may be uncomfortable, but we can trust it because it is of one piece with our love for life.

– Joanna Macy

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SEVENTH GENERATION

This is a practice developed by Joanna Macy in her Work that Reconnects and has direct reference to Native American philosophy. In this practice, participants sit in pairs facing each other in opposite directions, with one person representing their present-day self and the other representing a human from the seventh generation in the future.

The roles are fixed and must be clearly defined. Participants are asked to accept two assumptions for the practice:

that humans will still inhabit Earth 200 years from now and that these future humans will have a cultural memory of the early 21st century, living in sustainable communities despite the potential collapse of the Industrial Growth Society.

[read and watch more](#)



GUIDED MEDITATION ON COLLECTIVE AWAKENING

This meditation, rooted in the Plum Village tradition, offers a guided experience focused on collective awakening. It addresses themes such as recognizing species loss, embracing regret, and contributing to healing.

[see text](#)

DEEP TIME WALK

The Deep Time Walk is an immersive sound journey through Earth's history, as told by ecologist and author Stephan Harding. It provides an opportunity to reflect on the planet's immense timeline and the significant events that have occurred long before and after humans' brief appearance.

You can listen to it through an app or a guided experience.

[listen](#)

[experience](#)



HONORING OUR PAIN FOR THE WORLD

Joanna Macy developed this ritual through her Work that Reconnects and provides a simple, respectful, whole-group structure for owning and honouring our pain for the world.

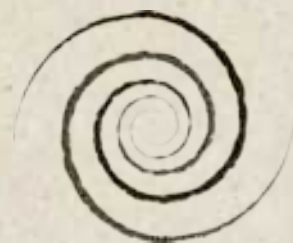
An in-depth explanation of how the practice is facilitated and a video of Joanna Macy explaining the process is below.

[see explainer video](#)



“ Until we can grieve for our planet we cannot love it—grieving is a sign of spiritual health. But it is not enough to weep for our lost landscapes; we have to put our hands in the earth to make ourselves whole again. Even a wounded world is feeding us. ”

– Robin Wall Kimmerer,
*Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom,
Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*



EARTH HOLDER'S FOUR EARTH TOUCHINGS

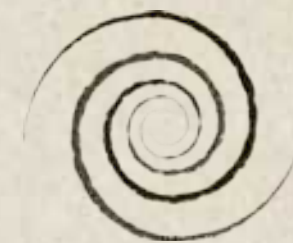
This practice was adapted by Nomi Green, inspired by the teachings of Vietnamese Thiền Buddhist monk, peace activist, prolific author, poet, and teacher, who founded the Plum Village Tradition, historically recognized as the main inspiration for engaged Buddhism.

see text

CONTEMPLATIONS ON THE FIVE MINDFULNESS TRAININGS, A NEW PARADIGM FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

Inspired by the Five Mindfulness Trainings from the Plum Village tradition, which offer guidance for mindful and ethical living, Dr Marisela Gomez and Dr Valerie Brown have adapted these contemplations to explore and deeply address racial justice and inequality. They aim to foster individual and collective awakening, compassion, and peace.

see text



“ When we come face-to-face with our deepest wounds, that’s when we have the greatest opportunity to touch the divine. Because the more profound the pain, the more incredible and immense the light on the other side of it, the blessing, the love. ”

– Sherri Mitchell,
*Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom
for Living Spirit-Based Change*

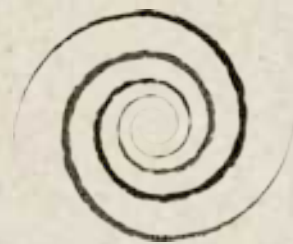
GUIDED MEDITATION ON THE ELEMENTS

This practice was inspired by the teachings of Vietnamese Thiền Buddhist monk, peace activist, prolific author, poet, and teacher, who founded the Plum Village Tradition, which is historically recognized as the main inspiration for engaged Buddhism.

This meditation explores the interbeing that exists with our bodies and the elements.

[see text](#)

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To be continued...

A Project by Maya Adams



* Secret Society Singing Laments

Esha Shah

Archive file no: WL/SQ/SSSL/41435

Subject: secret society singing laments, a testimony by Junoon, 2060

When I arrived, it was late evening. The taxi driver grudgingly agreed to drop me at this location saying the address I showed him sort of resembled this place he knew although he did not have any clue about the exact address I asked. I obviously did not tell him that I wanted to go to the place of secret society singing laments. We both asked a passerby if he would confirm the address that the driver had in mind. And the passerby almost immediately confirmed, he turned to the taxi driver and instructed him, "Yes, yes, take her there." And then he turned to me and nodded rigorously, "Go there! Yes! You are fine!" Retrospectively I thought there must be a number of volunteers perhaps spread on the station? Directing people arriving to the location?

The place looked like a cutout straight from a gothic novel. There was no electricity—this is the year 2060, is there anywhere on the planet without electricity? Only later I came to know that it was an abandoned and ruined medieval castle with a huge garden or empty ground attached to it. The interior was lit with numerous candles (now I know why I was asked to bring 4 candles to contribute) and still there were not enough of them to clearly distinguish faces. My eyes accustomed to see only in the harsh neon light took a long time to adjust to the glow of the ember. The slow burning sizzling candle light set the mood—it created shadows. Long, short, funny, dancing, standing, trembling, wobbly shadows everywhere. The real people looked like only appendage of the shadows—a long dark thing preceded and receded the movement of people who more looked like puppets in a show. At the entrance itself I felt as if I was losing my mind. But the dancing shadows were nothing in comparison to what I eventually experienced in the next three nights.

No one really registered me, no one asked my name, no need to show an entry pass, no membership. It was as if showing up at this place was enough to include anyone in whatever was happening. There was some kind of a desk from where the newcomers were directed where to go—that's it. I was led into a large room, perhaps a dormitory, in which I saw there were a number of people and still it was strangely quiet. I was told that there was bread and soup in the dining hall if I had wanted to eat. I was tired of the journey, not hungry, I must have slept for a couple of hours.

Around perhaps midnight—there was hardly any way to check time, I woke up with all the commotion of everyone being led to the large garden/ground attached to the ruined castle. Even in the garden there was no electricity so there was no light, but it was not dark. The full moon was shining over the horizon. That wasn't a coincidence. A series of secret singing sessions were scheduled four times every year only around two days before and after the full moon. Four days of ritual and then no more until the next session several months later on the full moon.

Now in the garden, there were no shadows attached to people out in the moonlight and still it felt as if those standing around me were shadowy selves. People had no names, I could barely see their faces, barely can distinguish the color of skin, hair, eyes. No one was introduced to no one bearing gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, race, profession. I felt a deep sense of relief for not having to

identify—"Hello...I hold so and so position I come from so and so nation....!" I could exist and still hide. Be present but not visible. Not having to wear my name and all the ensemble hanging with it felt like a huge freedom. As if I could be as natural as naked—no drama, no performances—and still be surrounded by all the people on the planet.

When we arrived in the garden, several people, my estimation is at least a hundred of them, who I guessed were the volunteers, were already standing apart from each other forming a series of concentric circles. You can enter in the circle from anywhere, go to the center, stay at the periphery, it hardly mattered. I stayed at the edge, still undecided if I wanted to jump in the deep or just wet my toes. What if I got all in the thick and then can't get out. What if this gathering gets out of hand! Little I realized that what I thought was the periphery soon became middle as rings of the circle expanded. It is hard to say but again my estimation is that at least a couple of thousand people would have gathered that night. Many people sat down, this part of the ground was covered with a layer of thick grass. Someone soothed me into, "sit down, dear, it's going to be a long night!"

At this bizarre location, surrounded by hundreds of people, without the need to having to wear the past or future, under the blazing moonlight, not knowing what was going to happen—I felt intensely lonely, alone. I moved closer to a group of people sitting just around me and asked them in lower voice if I could join them and heard a number of inviting voices—come come, welcome, do sit down, come join us—two-three people simultaneously extended shawls to cover. I accepted one and sat down in proximity of the human warmth.

And then it started. First I only faintly heard a rhythmic sound, like hum of a bee. And slowly it turned into a note, a tune. Not everyone was humming. Only the set of volunteers spread in concentric circles across the entire gathering were humming—in-tune. I heard some people near me humming. The humming came audible as if something oozing, bubbling, and then it came and went away like a wave. When it first became audible it was so melodious that my heart was drenched in delicious joy. This is the kind of joy that makes you want to stop breathing. If only I stopped breathing, could the time stop too? Can I then exist forever? Pleasure is what we want to immortalize. But what persists is only pain. I came here to heal some but on that night what became apparent was the ruin, now visible in all its glory on the moonlit night.

The humming continued, I don't know for how long. But then the tune changed, slowly and incrementally it turned into wailing. The people who were humming were now churning the sound pulled out of the depth of their stomachs into throats to crescendo. At least a hundred people wailing and howling was profoundly disturbing. It felt like thousands of tiny creatures crawling and burrowing through my skin turning my soul inside out. This is how it must feel—violently alive, as if dying or being born—in that moment I could not see the difference—all the cells in my body were ablaze, as if burning with high fever. Listening to the music was excruciatingly painful while unbearably melodious, I was choking while drowning into an ocean of honey. I wanted to hear it. That's why I was here. And still when it arrived in crescendo, it was intolerable. It was the accumulated wailing inside me, resonating with this melody filling the moonlit universe was overwhelming. I felt as if I was going to faint.

And then something happened. A man sitting next to me held my hand. And his touch was more explosive than the music. In a flash, I realized it was Karl. All this time, it was Karl who was sitting next to me and now holding my hand exactly at the moment when only he would have known how fragile I felt, what impact this singing would have on me. And he was here, he was next to me. I was so overjoyed. This is what they call a miracle, no? I clenched his hand hard, interlocking my fingers with his, whispering loudly "Karl, you are here?!". He further squeezed my hand and

soothed me with shshhing me. And then another miracle happened. He released my interlocked fingers with his and instead squeezed my hand. It was him. I knew it. I was sobbing with joy. It was always exactly how our fingers would interlock first and then in a moment I would start mooing and moaning having my small fingers overstretched between his large ones and he would then release my fingers and squeeze my small hand into his large one. I did not even make a sound but he only knew it. It was our ritual. In the entire universe, through the millennia of passage of time, he only could have known it. On this moonlit night, all I wanted was to have Karl with me, for this one moment of togetherness I would have exchanged seven lives, or seventy. And he was here. I cuddled up to his body when he wrapped one of his arms around me, and another hand locked with mine, only released to uncurl and sooth my hair. I have no idea how long the music continued as in Karl's arms the melancholy wailing turned into the most melodious sound ever and I do not know when I slept off, passed out, exhausted.

I woke up in the morning to someone gently stroking me, "Wake up dear, time to go inside".

I was not yet fully awake. In the twilight zone when the first rays of light were cracking up on the horizon, the time between sleep and wake, the memory of what had happened last night was struggling to come to surface. The woman who woke me led me into a large hall and seeing many people the memory of the last night was jolted, and then it exploded inside—"Where is Karl?"

I ran back to the ground, but the ground was now empty, no one around. He was probably sleeping next to me and when I was led inside I lost him. Why didn't I look? Now I lost him all over again.

I ran back to the front desk—or whatever meant to be one—"I am looking for a man, can you help me?" But there was no one to answer. No register to check the names of the people.

"Looking for someone, dear? Everyone's in the dining hall." Someone led me back to the dining hall.

Whom to ask? Where to look? Maybe those people sitting next to me can help me find him? But I had no idea who were those people I joined in the ground.

"Have something to eat, honey!" A woman approached me, led me to a nearby table, sat me down.

"No, no, listen, I am looking for a man, can you please help find him? Are you one of the organizers here?"

"There, there, you will find whatever or whomever you are looking for. Have something to eat first, honey! When was last time you ate something?" She brought a tray with a bowl of soup and a plate of bread and arranged them in front of me.

"Look, don't honey me, okay? I am not your honey", my frustration came out as a potent bout of rage.

For a moment, the woman was startled, but then she bounced back far too quickly.

"No honey for my dear...!! Oh.... no my dear either.... right? Only fair to ask! No honey, no dear...! How about just plain bread and soup?"

She made some pieces of bread and soaked in soup and extended the spoon and bowl of bread-soaked soup towards me.

"Why did you soak the bread in soup? It has now become all soggy and mushy. The essential

character of bread is to be crummy, crunchy...how can anyone eat such soggy mush?" I threw a tantrum, pushed the soup bowl away. My rage was out of control.

"Humm...now that you point out, I see how the bread has become soggy. Hang on, let me get another piece of bread, may be a fresh, hot serving of soup too?"

Errggghhh! I wanted to scream and shout, wanted to topple hot bowls of soup on everyone's head. An orgy of soup topple. How about that? How to get rid of this....this....awful woman, posing as... posing as.....what....my mother? What the hell is she thinking?

The woman came back with another tray with bread and soup.

"Here, here...a fresh loaf of.... crunchy... crummy... bread and hot hot soup. Yummy. Aren't you hungry? You need to eat something dear! Oh sorry, you need to eat something....[no dear, no honey].... when was last time you ate? C'mon, dig in."

"Who are you?" Her attempt to take care of me greatly irritated me. I wanted to dig my nails inside her skin and rip it open. All I felt was this irresistible urge to hurt her, humiliate her, insult her so that she got away from me.

But then the primal urge to survive took over. I was indeed hungry, having not eaten for almost 24 hours.

The moment the survival needs were fulfilled, the existential ones showed their ugly heads all over again. The pain of losing Karl possessed my body all over again.

"How did I let him go?" Why didn't I look for him the moment I woke up. Why did I lose contact with him? If only I had done something differently, I would have prevented this terrible loss. In my mind I was obsessing about the sequences of the events. Why didn't I ask who those people were who invited me to sit next to them? Was Karl with them? Just one name, one coordinate could have solved this mystery. I again obsessively asked the woman if there was any way to see the list of the names of people who were here.

"What is his name? Karl, right?"

So, she was listening. I nodded.

"And Karl is.....?" She asked.

"Love...long...long...lost love." In this surrounding, it strangely sounded surreal. How do I describe Karl?

"How would it help...knowing if he were here or not?"

"Did I hallucinate him? I must have imagined him. Did I? Listening to the music was an out of body experience. I need to know that he was here. I must know."

"One thing is sure, what you experienced was not induced by some chemical. What you felt was not chemical-induced hallucination. Although I am not sure what real may mean."

"So that means he was here. It was his touch. He was here, right?" The moon emerged from behind

the clouds. “So he was here.” I was overjoyed. “Was he? Then why did he not make his presence known to me.” The interplay of light and shadow. And then light again and shadow and shadow! I again looked at the woman for the answers.

“I can tell you only one thing. This puzzle will not be solved by logic or reason. Only experience will resolve the conflict....”

“....wait....what do you mean..?” I was full of questions, and still didn’t know what to ask.

“You found and lost Karl on the first night of singing laments, go...and see what happens on the second night...and the third...” The woman was ready to leave and I wanted to hold on to her... finally at this crazy chaotic location, she was my only connection to knowledge...to a semblance of some order.... ...

“But I already had the experience on the first night...!”

“Remember that the collective singing like this alters consciousness. Let me tell you that the experience of such alteration induces transformation that differs from the first to fourth night. What you felt on the first night would be radically different than what you may feel on the fourth and then you might go through an entirely different experience if you were to come back for the next session! So don’t jump to any conclusions until you had experienced singing on all four nights. ”

“Why are you here? You clearly are not just a participant. Are you an organizer?” I repeated the question and insisted that the woman answers my question. I must must have further order established out of this chaos of not knowing.

“It does not matter, does it? We all are here for the same reason”, her tone changed. At least she was no more mothering me.

“And the reason being....?” I needed to go to the bottom of this charade, I had to figure out what was going on here to locate Karl.

“Let me tell you a myth, a folklore, a story....you can relate it to whatever religion you may believe in....!” She looked at me for some kind of expression of interest or a consent and when I nodded she pulled the chair again and sat down, “One day the god of death died....”

“...the god of death died....how ridiculous??” I mocked her with a loud snort. But she was unfazed. Who was she?

“Yes, the god of death died...!” She repeated as if starting all over again. “His beloved was taken over by inconsolable grief....she cried and cried days after days for many days. Her grief was contagious, it was overwhelming and spreading throughout the cosmos. So gods assembled to put an end to it. They came together and created a night for her so that she can see how her beloved had died yesterday, how the day of the death was gone, it was in the past.” She paused and then added, “Everyone is here to create a night in their life, so that a different day can be imagined for tomorrow...”

Vow! I was awestruck by her story.

The divine is not a magician who prepares you by first unleashing a fancy charade—a song and dance, little this and that, a clown or a joker—before he materializes a rabbit out of the hat. Does

he? I looked at my divine rabbit...as if in trance.... ...

Andwhen I emerged back to the present from my trance....not only my sarcasm disappeared but I could not find any words to respond to her simple but profoundly ingenuous story except to again ask her, “Are you one of the organizers?” Even on the face of such profoundly philosophical story, my own fundamental existential need was to find some method in this madness, some structure, some pattern, some order. Next to eating soup and bread my most pressing existential need was to know...

“What do you mean by organizers? There is no central polit bureau if that’s what you mean. This is not an ideological organization. It is not propagating any theories, viewpoints, politics. This whole event is organized only to perform an art form, an extinct and banned art form to that. It is meant to be an intensely collective but also deeply personal experience. It is a group event, but everyone takes away something very different and personal from this experience.”

“But why are people not registered? No names. No tags. No nothing. It's like a gathering of shadowy selves.”

“That’s exactly what it is meant to be. What is common among all people here is the pain, it is deeply personal but also not so personal—it is the foundational pain of being human that connects everyone, makes a collective experience possible. If one started with the name and the color of the skin and the class and all that, it would take millennia before this layer of un-namable, untenable collective unconscious could be excavated. And all shadows are always dark, small or big, they are all dark. There are no rainbow ... shadows.”

“But why performing this art form only? It could be anything.” (Good lord woman, stop being a scientist!—A voice inside my head was asking me to stop investigating!)

“Again, it is not as if it is an intentional choice. You are not getting it. There isn’t someone sitting at the helm of affairs who deliberated and talked and debated and then chose this art form. No. It began as a spontaneous small assembly now over many years turned into these events gathering large number of people. And there are hundreds of such secret societies spread all over the world but there is no such central bureau connecting all of them. They all have distinct style and location and timing....! What is important is that this four nights of ritual singing around the full moon four times a year persists because it does something to people who participate. Those who participate once come here again and again...they bring other people...”

The woman clearly was a very learned woman. “Can I know who are you? May I know your name? Can I contact you after the event?”

The answer was no.

“You will forget me as quickly as you have come to know me. Believe me, it is not important. Now, here here, if you are done with the bread and soup then get going, take shower and sleep. You need your strength to look for.....what’s his name...Karl..... on the second night of singing.”

“What do you mean, you sound as if you know something. You saying—I will find him on the second night?”

“Go and see what might happen on the second night.” As if she thought for a moment and then

added, “as I said.....singing laments alters your consciousness, it alters the self. The more you sing it, hear it, the more transformed you are. The question is not whether you would find Karl. The right question is: if you will still be looking for him?”

“Wait...no wait...Can I see you tomorrow?”

“Maybe...” and she disappeared as quickly as she had showed up....

And I was left alone with this horrible sinking feeling. In the mix of feeling this pain I also felt frustrated. How many times I had felt this way. If the years in a decade were rooms, they were built with this layers and layers of recurring, repetitive, accumulated pain of finding him only to lose him again and again. Karl always showed up at his convenience, stayed as long as his circumstances permitted, and then left unannounced. Every time after he left, I suffered for days, weeks, years in a row as if my skin was peeled alive, the whole body a walking wound, blood oozing from everywhere. I was a living proof of a Jungian curse, “if it is painful, repeat it.” How do I break this cycle of painful repetition? I was here indeed to create a night for my unending grief.

While I spent a decade trying to rationally run away from Karl, consciously running away from his image and his memory—how I stopped all contact with him, tried very hard to destroy all memory—but he was unconsciously there with me everywhere, whatever I did, omnipresent like God, every little thing anticipated him, his touch, his smell, his voice. My obsession of him had turned into a stinky poisonous fungus, growing in the space between us, surrounding all of my existence. Every day of this decade was also dead for another reason—I was genetically training plants to produce poison, I was training life to kill other life. I spent days and nights in my laboratory searching petri dish after petri dish to locate the engineered plant cells with maximum genetic expression to reproduce poison. Because that cells then can be chosen to create a huge multi-corporation business of genetically engineered poison producing plants.

Pablo Neruda’s poem hanging on my white board read more like a statement of stagnation—

“You and I search for a wide valley, for another planet
where sorrows couldn’t grow because of anything I did,
where bread could live and not grow old”

For a decade I read the same poem every day that read like a life sentence of stagnation, evolution wound up backwards, an involution—I pioneered the technique to teach plants how to genetically limit their options to survive, in fact how not only to limit their options but to narrow them down to being outright toxic to life.

On the second night I became ultra-conscious of my surroundings, taking mental note of where I entered in the circle and who were sitting next to me. Although within minutes my resolve melted under the effect of the music.

On the second night, the singing did not give any time to adjust, no humming, no waves of coming and going. It started at the top note at the crescendo itself—a whirling prolonged scream released. The singing on the second night was staggered, retrospectively I think that four groups of volunteers held sustained tune at four different levels. While one set of people were singing at soprano, another holding it deep in the bottom of their throats at the lowest possible tone. As if the musical notes were standing on steps, the lower ones holding the one on the top. Listening to which it felt like my body was pushed and squeezed through a narrow tunnel without a sight

of end. Almost everyone sitting around me was crying, some of them rather loudly. All our souls were flowing, washed and purified by tears.

Unassumingly, while my body felt being squeezed and thrashed and crying my eyes out while drenched in joy....before I realized I felt the hands interlock, I founded myself in the embrace of..... and it struck like a lightning.

It wasn’t Karl! Karl was bony. His bones stuck out of his fingers. Lying on top of him I had always felt his ribs piercing into my breasts. His first touch when we met after a long interlude felt cold, distant, dead, as if his fingers were protruding out of a skeleton. The deadness of the first touch would always shock me as if I had touched a live electric socket. Every time he left unannounced, something transformed in the space between us—as if it grew poisonous fungus spreading in either direction, killing everything that was on the way, changing the molecular structure of both our skins. As if his skin became incapable of exuding affection. His hand felt like a thick, rough stone. In a flash, all those incremental moments of disaffection spreading like deadly fungus for over a decade came to the surface of awareness.

The embrace holding me instead was soft and warm and I allowed myself to be carried away by the feeling. “No...” I was talking to myself, “I don’t want to know who he is, if he is real or just a feeling”! Was he an incarnation of a cosmic lover? Perhaps! But in the realization of that touch—imagined or real, does not matter—Karl was fading away...in the yesterday!

On the third and the fourth nights I was standing right at the center of the concentric circles holding my dilapidated voice recorder impatiently waiting for the music to start...

(To be continued)

Epilogue by the archivist

..... With this hand-written note in the original two distinct recordings of music were attached which cannot be included here. This particular testimony was found as part of the notebooks and academic and scientific material of the scientist named Asma Jhahangir Noor who did pioneering work on genetically modified transgenic plant species for which she received many prizes and awards. She was known to have later given up her scientific career and adopted a penname Junoon—which in Urdu means frenzy or obsessive or maddening passion—with which she wrote several non-scientific literatures. The rest of her academic and scientific publications are archived in her full name Asma Jhahangir Noor, Chief Scientist, Monsanto-Bayer, 2035 – 2060.

* Phoenix's Last Song

Dorine van Meel

Phoenix's Last Song

Video installation and performance at Nottingham Contemporary

Dorine van Meel, 2019

Photo: Sam Kirby

'Phoenix's Last Song' opens up a space to imagine how a new world may arise out of a burning of the old.

Experience [Phoenix's Last Song](#)

* The World, Already a Corpse

Roy Bendor

One of the reasons I am attracted to design is its capacity to give material form to alternative realities. Whatever this capacity is labelled—‘design fiction’, ‘speculative design’ and ‘experiential futures’ are some of the more popular terms—it opens up anticipatory, provocative ways to make sense of that which has yet to take place, and by doing so provides material evidence of latent potentiality. In this sense, to ‘try on for size’ future (un)realities is already to render them real.

In the context of the themes explored by the workshop—art, utopia, politics—the question I find myself asking is, which futures should designers bring to life? While most workshop participants would probably agree that we are in dire need of deep, radical transformation, it is less clear to me which rehearsed futures would be most likely to achieve that purpose—positive, hopeful, utopian, or perhaps something else? What if design’s worldmaking potential lies not in drawing the contours of possible new worlds that will emerge from this one, but in helping us imagine and prepare for the end of this world? What is at stake is both design’s future away from its modernist origins, and the capacity of the imagination to hold onto and prefigure new endings.

In an article titled ‘On art activism’, art historian Boris Groys argues that politically engaged art should not concern itself with hopeful visions of future possibilities. That task, he continues, belongs to design:

Design wants to change reality, the status quo—it wants to improve reality, to make it more attractive, better to use. Art seems to accept reality as it is, to accept the status quo. But art accepts the status quo as dysfunctional, as already failed—that is, from the revolutionary, or even postrevolutionary, perspective. Contemporary art puts our contemporaneity into art museums because it does not believe in the stability of the present conditions of our existence—to such a degree that contemporary art does not even try to improve these conditions. By defunctionalizing the status quo, art prefigures its coming revolutionary overturn.¹

So while the activist role of design is to find opportunities to transform the world to the better, the activist role of art is to help society come to terms with the realization that the world is beyond repair, to accept and perhaps celebrate the ruins of modernity: “a premonition and prefiguration of the coming failure of the status quo in its totality, leaving no room for its possible improvement or correction”². In this sense, activist art sees the world “as being already a corpse”³; it is neither utopian nor dystopian but assumes that transformative change can only happen once the current reality is entirely destroyed. Does this constitute the victory of something like a collective death drive? Is Groys advocating for a quasi-Leninist revolutionary program (‘worse is better’)? And can

1 Boris Groys (2014), On Art Activism, e-flux (56), p. 10
2 Ibid
3 Groys, p. 13

we imagine a role for design along these lines—what would design activism fashioned after art activism look like?

The first step would have to be to forget, or rather unlearn, the ways design is practiced and taught as a field of intentional change. After all, as Audre Lorde famously wrote, we cannot dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools. So where would new tools come from? And would the result still be recognizable as ‘design’? The answer is complicated by the fact that design is a thoroughly modern practice, one that is defined by intentionality, the pursuit of certainty, usefulness, and meaning. To unlearn design is therefore to unlearn modernity, and that, writes Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, is extremely difficult because “Modernity predetermines what can be heard; what can be deemed real and possible; what can be imagined as desirable and ideal; and how we are supposed to feel, behave, and communicate within these parameters”.⁴ Where can we find a foothold for stepping outside a totalizing system of meaning?

Machado de Oliveira suggests that we may begin with the willingness to suffer loss and let go of what we currently hold dear. “[I]n a flood situation, it is only when the water reaches people’s hips that it becomes possible for them to swim”.⁵ She suggests that we “sit” with the problems instead of trying to solve them; that we recognize that some things cannot be fixed, remediated or reformed; that we end our abusive relationship with modernity and provide it with palliative care. The proposition here is one that would resonate with those who feel “hopeless and broken”⁶ because they recognize that the effects of climate change are so locked-in that all we can do is enact “deep adaptation”⁷. “What if collective healing will be made possible precisely by facing—together—the end of the world as we know it?”⁸ If this sounds bleak, perhaps we can find solace in the experiences of those whose world has already ended. Sometimes more than once.

The notion that the world ends and is reborn continuously may be entirely foreign to those raised on Judeo-Christian eschatology, according to which humanity’s final destination is a moral conclusion and therefore functions as a regulatory ideal. Time follows suit, linearly, as an expression of progress. But as Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro illustrate, Amerindian cosmologies feature “periodical apocalypses” and so include many ends of the world(s):

The idea of a final and definitive destruction of the world is equally rare, if at all existent, among these cosmologies. Humankind is consubstantial to the world or, rather, objectively 'co-relational' with the world, relational as the world. There is no 'correlation' between epistemology and ontology, thought and Being, but real immanence between existence and experience in the constitution of a relational multiverse.⁹

4 Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021), *Hospicing Modernity. Facing humanity's wrongs and the implications for social activism*, North Atlantic Books, p. 25
5 Machado de Oliveira, p. 38
6 We asked 380 top climate scientists how they felt about the future, 2024: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2024/may/08/hopeless-and-broken-why-the-worlds-top-climate-scientists-are-in-despair>
7 Jem Bendell (2018), Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy, In IFLAS Occasional Paper 2
8 Machado de Oliveira, p. xxv
9 Déborah Danowski & Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2016), *The ends of the world*, Polity, pp. 75-6

It is only with the separation of culture from nature—a hallmark of modernity—that a ‘final’ end of the world becomes possible. And if the conclusion here is that not every end is the “final finitude”,¹⁰ the second task of a radical, activist design is to recognize different degrees of finitude and decide, accordingly, which endings are worth rehearsing, that is, are endings final enough to provide palliative care to modernity, but not too final so as to signal the end of all worlds (and thus the nihilist denial of the possibility for renewal).

Endings become even more of a discretionary matter when we consider the following difficulties: First, what guarantees that something at all would emerge from the ashes of the old? The expectation of rebirth, while premised in our observations of both nature and history, is nonetheless a cultural construct. Philosopher Michael Marder termed it “the phoenix complex”:

For millennia now, humanity has been interpreting the cyclical regeneration of nature as a sign of its infinite capacity for rebirth from the ashes of destruction.... Hoping that this would continue indefinitely, we keep literally burning the world down, while awaiting its phoenix-like resurgence.... Nevertheless, what is being and has been annihilated for some time now can no longer regeminate. It cannot be rejuvenated from the ashes, receiving a new lease on life from death. The ashes of our age are not fecund; they are the sterile signs of the death of death, not to be confused with immortality.¹¹

The Phoenix, then, represents a particular form of negation for sake of renewal, somewhat akin to what José Saramago quips in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* as putting “a no in the service of a yes”. Without the promise of regeneration the Phoenix’s “surrendering her past self in order to gain a foothold, or a winghold, in the future”¹² appears as nothing but meaningless sacrifice. To put it differently, sensing that an end is not really the end is already an affirmation of modernity’s drive for progress and continuation.

Second, even if an end is not the end, to what degree can something truly new be created from the old? What I’m thinking about is not a physical-material condition (“we are all made of stardust”) but one that retrieves the reliance of the imagination on materials furnished by past direct and indirect experiences. “Creation does not happen ex nihilo; it requires the use of materials already at hand”.¹³ If a new beginning inherently recycles material from that which ended, to what extent can it be considered genuinely new? And by extension, would the end of the world (we know) merely spell the rebirth of another version of the same world?

The thoughts I share here became more pressing when I participated in a panel that discussed the Dutch documentary film, *Terug naar Nagele* (‘Nagele Revisited’)¹⁴ by Luis van Gasteren and Joke Meerman.¹⁵ In the film, made in 2012, van Gasteren returns to the site of his earlier film, *Een Nieuw Dorp op Nieuw Land* (‘A new village on New Land’), filmed 50 years earlier, to find the village

in a state of limbo. Nagele, a symbol of Dutch modern town planning, created on reclaimed land (‘polder’) and given form through the combined efforts of the country’s leading town planners, architects and builders, suffered the collapse of the local farming community and the consequent transformation of the village into a sleeper community. Local residents appeared desperate, yet at the same time hopeful that their fortunes may turn again. What was this hope based on? Is it not a form of utopian anticipation destined to crash on the rocks of capitalist dynamics—or, rather, drown under the rising waters of the Northern Sea? Why not simply let go?

My tentative answer is that considering something like a retreat from the program of modernity—waterworks, planned settlements, and so forth—lies firmly beyond the horizon of possibility for the Dutch. It simply doesn’t compute, doesn’t square with how the Dutch understand themselves. It implies the possible end of the Dutch foundational, and quintessentially modern story of origin and with it Dutch identity. This is because admitting the failure of a highly planned society—the Dutch are fond of saying ‘God created the world, but the Dutch created Holland’—means that the engineering ethos of Dutch society would no longer hold. It implies no longer being modern, and so can be read as a “final finitude”.

Where does all of this leave design? I’m not really sure. Is the task of a radical, activist design to differentiate between “final finitude” and temporary endings? Is its task to prepare society for one but not the other? Is the mission, perhaps more humbly, to merely help modern societies learn that what they perceive as “final finitude” is more an opportunity than a catastrophe?

10 Michael Marder (2023), *The Phoenix Complex: A philosophy of nature*, MIT Press
11 Marder, p. xx
12 Marder, p. 2
13 Marder, p. xvii
14 *Nagele Revisited* (documentary), 2012: <https://www.themoviedb.org/movie/1150376-terug-naar-nagele>
15 Reporting ‘space, time and everyday life’ in the Delta: <https://deltaurbanism.org/reporting-space-time-and-everyday-life-in-the-delta>

* Loud Thoughts

Fiona Trüb & Terre Nzimande

Thinking Out of the Box!

Most of us want to be creative, the ones that inspire and transpire, don't we? How often have you been told to think out of the box? To develop new ideas, innovate, create!

How funny that we often hear such inspirational speeches from the same people who belong to institutions that rely on out-of-the-box thinking—but just as long as it is not too out of the box. Ideally, I would aim to stay roughly an arm's length outside of the box. Because if you lose the box completely, you lose the connection to reality.

Let me take you on a little ride!

In my opinion, we have all become who we are through our social conditions. These are usually determined by our family, friends, place of origin, place where we grew up, and the interactions we have had with these people and spaces. What we (and by we, I refer to academia but also Western society in general) often fail to recognize is that if we are not considered normal (if we do not fit into one of the many predefined categories of normal set by society—a box), it is very likely that we have struggled to live our lives according to our truth. That is, according to our unique interests, talents, dreams, and aspirations.

It is likely that we were too busy trying to fit into a box.

Let me tell you why this is (the baseline of) my provocation.

And if you are confused, please be assured that in what comes next, I try my best to weave, with all that I have, the parts of my brain to make a comprehensive chain.

I come from a country known for cows, watches, mountains, and its neutrality.

I have always been interested in people, sports, and our environment. And here I am now.

Most of my life, I have found myself in a box. But the box's labels have changed. And somehow, I realized that maybe I would like to leave the boxes behind. The boxes have told me what abilities are or should be within me—whether it be to be pleasant and good at school, a gymnast, a sister, a yogi, or an academic. But is this who I am?

No.

Are there tools that shed light on ingrained social conditions and perceptions that lead to personal belief systems and ultimately shape the larger system(s)?

Possibly! Likely! Most definitely!

Please come on a little journey with me, where we will explore what might help us reconnect. Allow me to guide you through an imaginary theatre play with the following parameters:

Picture yourself in a play, watching a character—someone you can identify with—share their inner battles and ultimately go through a process of transformation. Seeing this character's emotions, thoughts, and transformation might trigger something within you. Can you imagine how you would feel in such a situation?

Do you feel relief? Sadness? Anger? Empathy? Connection? Loss? Confusion? Empowerment? Take some time to reflect on these feelings and see if you resonate with them.

Before I present a second thought experiment—again a play—are you ready?

Okay. Now, I want you to imagine a person you are prejudiced against. This person also shares their inner landscape and experiences a shift in consciousness.

Is there a chance that you could let go of your prejudices because, for the first time, you are in touch with someone you had tried to stay away from—due to preconceived perceptions and assumptions?

Usually, you leave the theatre after applauding for a few minutes. But have you ever been to a play where a discussion with the audience and the actors followed, professionally facilitated?

Probably not. But can you imagine that it exists? It does! (Please check out Empatheatre.)

The power of participatory creative practices

In my opinion, such an experience can be deeply healing for everyone involved and can make the world a better place. Besides, in a world where many of us suffer from feelings of anxiety and loneliness, art can help us connect and express.

Only when we are able to express our true selves, to hear our inner voice and give it space, can we create meaningful connections with others and ourselves. Because only then do we speak our truth—whether in or outside the box!

There are many of us who do not feel safe enough to do that because of trauma and other pressing circumstances. However, I want to stress the *transformative power of healing*. I am not saying this is comfortable—but I believe that everyone who has lived through such experiences ends up grateful for the lessons learned in the healing process.

Inspiration brings us joy, light, hope, empowerment, and connection.

Inspiration—where do you feel it? In your head? Your chest? Your hands? Your feet? It can be everywhere. There is no right or wrong. There is only your unique experience with the inspirations you have encountered.

Art is a source of such inspiration. It is the mediator of inspiration. And it should be accessible to everyone.

Let us make sure that it unfolds.

Please bear witness to the power of inspiration through art.

With the following poem, written by a participant of the Youth Nature Futures project, a participatory art-based project in Cape Town. The result of the project is now displayed in the form of a mural in a public space.

** State of resilience **

A changing climate, a challenge to face,
Yet in the heart of youth, resilience finds its space.
They dream of waters, alive and untamed,
Where harmony thrives, and no creature is blamed.

In strokes of color on walls so bright
Art becomes a beacon,
a guiding light
Brushes whisper tales of a changing earth
A plea for justice,
a call to rebirth.

Each stroke a manifestation,
bold and clear
Awakening hearts to hold nature dear.

They plant seeds of progress in the soil of their dreams,
Where sustainability blossoms in infinite streams.

In the eyes of tomorrow, reflections of today.
Youth envisions a future
A climate of change,
a canvas to paint.

Brushstrokes dance with the winds of change
Creativity flowing,
no boundaries to measure.
For art is the anthem of a world reclaimed.

By Terra Nzimande

Let us interact and connect! Let art speak the language that can be universally understood without the need for words to accompany it.

I know. My text is written. It is my comfort zone. I was told that I am not the creative type. By whom? School and family, my social environment. That is how creativity and art become something exclusive.

Haven't many of us had similar experiences? It could be with different matters, but with similar outcomes.

Stopping something because there is a feeling of not belonging or not being good enough. Bringing art into a participatory, non-competitive, and public environment can help to unlearn old thought patterns that create boundaries where there shouldn't be any.

The power of healing and connection.

This is not the only way healing for oneself and ultimately the world can be achieved. Please don't get me wrong here. This is one perspective. And it will always remain one perspective. There are so many other ways transformation can be achieved.

This is one glimpse of a utopia. But it is one, and it is mine. And it does not even seem to be that hard to achieve.

Thoughts inspired by the work with Youth Nature Futures, written between Cape Town and Zurich.

* Infrastructures of Mystery

Joost Vervoort

It is easy to forget how profoundly strange it is to be alive. To be a consciousness.
To be in connection with others and the world.

And it's so easy to slip back into the sleepwalking, the role playing game.

In a time of profound and multidimensional crisis, the need for action coming from a deep appreciation of the mystery of life is more urgent than ever. But it seems like so much of the world is set against us engaging with that deep reality. Elaborate systems are designed to draw away our attention, to capture it and frame it in specific contexts. So many people are under tremendous, absurd pressures from many directions. At the same time, more knowledge, more approaches and opportunities are available than ever.



I was playing arcane tarot-based game The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood on a Sunday evening when a Buddha statue suddenly fell from my bookcase and smashed into my laptop screen. This gave birth to a new genre of art that could be called 'jumping Buddha vaporwave'. Quite pretty. The image on my desktop background is by Japanese artist Hirō Isono, as part of a beautiful series of images for the game Secret of Mana.

Many factors can be expected to limit or enable people's access to a sense of mystery. Health, physical and political safety, time, career opportunities, loving connections and relationships and more play a big role. So does access to ideas, practices, spaces, specific resources.

What would happen if we see opportunities for experiencing life as a deep mystery as a common good? If we see the structural conditions for such experiences as something to cultivate, fight for, and to protect, just like public health care or educational systems?

Many people have some personal relationship with the mystery and the wonder of life. I think it's crucially important that this relationship can mean many things—but that it can include a deeply felt sense of being connected to life; a sense of the sacredness of life, a sense of wonder about how strange it is to be alive and how mysterious consciousness itself is. People access the mystery through love and relationships, connections to the natural world, some kind of spiritual or embodied practice, music and other arts, experiences with psychedelics, and so on.

Whether it's an occasional glimpse or a deeply lived reality, it seems that these experiences are often central to people's individual and collective senses of meaning—no matter how few opportunities we may find to talk about it with others at work and other 'normal' settings.

New approaches to mental health like internal family systems therapy¹ see a sense of life's mystery as core to healing and growing processes, both individually and relationally, as it provides space for a compassionate engagement with challenges in ourselves and in our contexts. The ability to engage with your circumstances with hope, autonomy and a sense of possibilities are tied to a sense of being at home in the world, of being connected to life, an experience of wonder and openness about the experience of being alive. This is reflected in what are called the '8 Cs of Self' in IFS:² compassion, creativity, curiosity, confidence, courage, calm, connectedness, and clarity.

This means that being able to touch the mystery of life in whatever way works for you not only benefits societal mental health—it can benefit broader social flourishing and opening up other possibilities for better futures.

In the last year or two I have, along with many colleagues, explored the notion of imagination infrastructures³—a term developed by UK systems innovator Cassie Robinson. Since many of us work on societal imagination and ideas about the future, this has been a powerful concept that has helped us ask questions about the structural conditions that make the collective imagining of better futures possible.

While I am excited about the possibilities opened up by investigating imagination infrastructures, I have also felt the desire to take on another lens that helps us ask questions about the structural conditions that allow for access to the mysterious and nurturing depth of life.

Let's call them infrastructures of mystery. Such infrastructures are, of course, closely connected to the question of imagination and futures. But they also connect directly to what makes life worth living now, in the present moment. So what happens when we turn this infrastructural lens on people's access to mystery instead of on imaginative capacities only?

1 Richard C. Schwartz (1995), *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, The Guilford Press

2 See podcast episode: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/17BDMLjt6Xt9C749jPng1H?si=2fd84ca0efd349f3>

3 See <https://www.imaginationinfrastructuring.com/>

I think it's important to note that the recognition of experiences of mystery as an important common societal force for good is a potentially powerful frame in itself. Mystery entails not knowing. It can help inoculate against dogmatic and restrictive truth claims about reality by religions or by specific philosophies. It keeps things open.

I think a very pluralistic understanding of what the mystery of life means for people is needed. This could be a starting point to understand what they need to encounter, experience, and embody the mystery their own way. What if we had extensive insights on this, and what if this understanding was informing our policies around wellbeing, health care, social cohesion, and so on?

So let's take an advance on what the infrastructures of mystery might be like. These might be resources, rules, physical and digital locations, information systems, knowledge repositories, protective measures and more. They would allow for the time, space, knowledge, financial means, accessibility for connections to mystery. Safe containers where people can really and truly let their guard down are considered very important in many mystery-focused practices. Let's take this further and not just provide safety in the moment, during the retreat, in the building and so on—but actually create the deep structural safety people need to make encounters with mystery a key part of their lives. Health, financial and social stability, time, protection, appreciation and respect. Many societal features that have been degraded in recent years.



New Life, by Joost Vervoort

Let's talk about some more concrete examples in different spaces and domains and how these might be transformed by infrastructuring for mystery:

Religious institutions: The first thing that comes to mind is that of course religions and religious institutions can be understood as infrastructures of mystery. I think this is true in an important sense—but religious institutions serve many other functions of social power and organization, and they can be used to stifle or make exclusive our access to mystery. Recognizing the infrastructural function of organized religion as a space to encounter mystery helps highlight the societal value of religious practices, while also encouraging an openness and accessibility to the mystery and 'not-knowing' aspects of religions—perhaps by religious organizations themselves.

Westernized spiritual practices: Ironically, it appears that many of the most powerful practices originating in religious and spiritual contexts run the risk of being stripped of their potential for encountering mystery. Meditation/mindfulness and yoga are often framed in very dry rationalist contexts to help fit them in, and make them respectable as ways to 'reduce stress' or 'improve mental health'. A societal recognition of the deep value of meeting mystery and the unknown would help unlock resources and possibilities for the mystery aspects of these practices.

Psychedelics: interest in psychedelics has seen a massive upswing in recent years. The mental health benefits of psychedelics-assisted treatments are being researched widely. Many people report profound mystical experiences in such treatments and as a result of their own use. These mystical experiences are understood to be of key importance to the beneficial effects of psychedelics. What would happen if we would recognize that these encounters with mystery are, as my friend philosopher Aidan Lyon writes, valuable to society⁴ in ways that should not be limited to any one domain? Psychedelics are at risk of becoming hyper-commercialized. What would public policies look like that would secure broad and responsible access and the time and space for psychedelic practice? How might such policies facilitate spaces, train expertise, support taking time off from work to trip, and so on?

The arts: artistic fields have long struggled with justifying their societal value in more limited terms. The question of evaluating artistic work for societal impact and the limitations of this impact view were the focus of a multi-year research project, CreaTures⁵, that I was involved in. We argued in CreaTures that a core benefit of artistic practice is that it engages with the unknown and can lead to unexpected outcomes.⁶ Many people understand, I think, that encounter with mystery is an important part of artistic practice in some way. But sometimes art that enables a deep sense of mystery is harder to 'sell' to funders. What if this was recognized more explicitly? I'm very interested in this question, in particular in terms of the two types of art I engage with the most actively: music and game design. As part of the black metal band Terzij de Horde⁷ I've had a lot of moments of deep connection with our music and our audiences—it's a style that pretty much formed to fuse metal with a sense of the mystical. Certain games have a real power to elicit mystery experiences—see for instance this article about Dark Souls: no mastery without mystery.⁸ My friend and collaborator Meghna Jayanth and I share a fascination with games as mystical experiences and using it to infuse our game design discussions. With my friend Rosa Lewis we engage with films as if they were dreams or psychedelic experiences.⁹ I also think of

4 Aidan Lyon (2023), *Psychedelic Experience: Revealing the Mind*, Oxford University Press

5 Creatures framework: <https://creaturesframework.org/funding/creatures-dimensions.html>

6 Creative practices for better futures: <https://creaturesframework.org/creative-practices-for-better-futures.html>

7 Listen to Terzij de Horde at <https://open.spotify.com/artist/41G9cPXXkxphLtBQXD0g30o>

8 Daniel Vella (2015), No mastery without mystery: Dark souls and the ludic sublime, *Game Studies*, 15(1)

9 See podcast: <https://open.spotify.com/show/4Jq3zuh8DWd5UOvV4ndKWs>

future-oriented fiction—a genre like Lunarpunk¹⁰ comes to mind as a type of setting that explicitly engages with the mystical.

Care work and communities: I have been reading Erika Summers-Effler’s wonderful book ‘Laughing Saints and Righteous Heroes’¹¹ which dives deep into two cases of struggling organizations around social action and care. One of the two groups, a Catholic care organization, has an explicitly spiritual background, and people describe mystical experiences that they have in their connecting with and caring for others. What would it look like if there were better infrastructures for experiencing care as mystery? Moreover, what if this was an explicit part of mainstream care systems such as hospitals? Or what if there was more societal encouragement for people to make time to go help in health care a way to touch the deep mystery of interdependence?

Nature: What if encounters with nature would be more explicitly valued as an important mode of encountering the mystery? How would this shift of framing from a rather bland understanding that green spaces are good for mental health or for the value of property impact the management of nature? Imagine natural sites as sites of mystery. How would they be maintained, financed, treated? There is already an increase of rivers, forests and so on gaining protection because of their sacred status. What would happen when a more open understanding of the possibility to encounter life’s mystery would inform environmental and spatial policies?

Education: What would happen if educational systems, spaces and organizations would create more active support for encounters with life’s mystery? Mystery is, in a way, at the heart of science and of many disciplines. What would happen if the deep curiosity, wonderment, not-knowing associated with encountering mystery would be allowed and supported to play a more prominent role in education, from elementary schools to graduate programs?

I think this perspective on infrastructures of mystery raises many exciting and interesting questions and possibilities for action. One that I am interested in, as a researcher, is mapping the diversity and plurality of how people encounter or even embody mystery, and what infrastructures they think would support them in these encounters and expressions. MSc student Shreeya Patangay is doing a research project with me on how climate activists draw on their encounters with life’s depth and mystery to motivate them. So watch this space for her future insights. I would love to also just create more spaces for people to talk about their experiences of mystery. I was at a wonderful workshop on the science and practice of psychedelics and mystical experience recently by researchers Aidan Lyon, Michiel van Elk and Anya Farennikova that brought together researchers and practitioners. Here therapist and yoga teacher Ida Stuij and philosopher and theoretical physicist Erik Curiel guided a session where people shared their encounters with mystery, from the beautiful to the sometimes terrifying or disconcerting. It was a real joy to hear all that diversity and richness.

What would it be like to have an appreciation of life’s mystery inform governance processes themselves? I’ve been thinking about what I would call ‘psychedelic governance’, the idea that collective governance processes might be informed by insights derived through the use of psychedelics. MSc student Alexis Beaudoin is working on an MSc project with me on the link between psychedelic experiences and relationships to sustainability and ecology, both at individual and collective levels. This includes sometimes long existing processes from different cultural contexts around the world. I also want to mention the work by colleague Timothy Stacey who

¹⁰ For definition of Lunarpunk, see: <https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Lunarpunk>

¹¹ Erika Summers Effler (2010), *Laughing Saints and Righteous Heroes: Emotional Rhythms in Social Movement Groups*, The University of Chicago Press

looks at how the tools and rituals of religious practice might support sustainability efforts—and how many seemingly secular activities can be understood as religious repertoires.

Finally, just a personal note on what it has been like to engage with this concept. I have a long history with practices that engage mystery—in Zen Buddhism and imaginal practice, all mixed together in my meditation group the Dharmagarage, with psychedelics, music with Terzij de Horde, painting, and other contexts. But at the same time, a lot of my work has focused on generating, imagining, planning, strategy, the future. I’ve noticed an increased resistance in myself to only engaging with the world through this sense of generative forward momentum.



Woudloper, by Joost Vervoort, for the band Verwoed

Working on the idea of infrastructuring for mystery—and the focus on openness, peace, curiosity and the richness of the present and relationality that this entails—has created more direct engagement with the mystery in my moment to moment experience, and has led to an increased sense of peace and care. I wonder if that is going to resonate with others when we work on this subject matter.



Proof in utopias

Cultivating

collective desire,

prefiguration,

and change



Blake Robinson, Christina Klubert,
Fiona Trüb & Noor Noor at
Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions

* A Personal Telling

Imagine a moment in your life when you encountered an entirely different way of doing something, or being in the world? It could be something from your experience, or something you witnessed. Take a pause, close your eyes, explore the depths of your memory...

Now, don't recount your story as dry fact. Consider how the very way you tell your story can set the stage for a moment of imagination. Who will you tell it to? Do not declare what is good about it, or what must be done. Rather, bring your listeners into a moment of magic, into the feeling that "another world is possible", yet holding open what this alternative could be.

Go ahead, open our shared book of fairy tales and tell your story:

"Once upon a time..."



Carlos Garrido Castellano, Rui Pina Coelho, Stephen Duncombe, Karin Rebel, Jonas Torrens, Dan Lockton & Merin Jacob telling stories of 'another world is possible' at Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions

Collectively, there are so many utopian stories of how things might change. Yet, where is the *proof in utopias*? Imagined alternatives can be rendered 'safe'—something to ponder or admire, but not to act upon. When utopian visions are prefigured, made possible—they risk supplanting existing worlds, and unthinking imagination. This set of provocations explore: How are utopias culturally and materially enfolded into the present? How can utopian visions and practical movements enrich rather than undermine each other? How can utopia be an unsettled place for negotiating possibility, failure, anger, play, togetherness—rather than a settled site where peace is presumed?

Stephen Duncombe's keynote *Imagination, for What?* explores why radical imagination matters. What are the lasting *effects* of changes in *affects*—and how would we know? Steve is interested in how activism can not only protest against, but invite people into, the worlds we want. We can make a world that people want to join, even if they aren't quite sure what it is yet. In deciding what to stage and what to leave open, those who inhabit these utopias can also co-create them.

The Politics of Postponement by Jonas Torrens argues that we are so overloaded with images of better futures that the creation of new ones might just distract from the hard labor of actually changing things in the present. This might entail banal actions that are not quite the spectacle that utopia implies. Jonas calls for *generative* and *resonant* actions to explore how "the present is pregnant with many better futures, which need birthing, nursing and nourishing".

Several provocations show what prefigurative practices or politics can look like. In *A Bus Takes Them Away*, Chiara De Cesari & Nuraini Juliastuti argue for engaging with what is already there. Through describing the work of two artistic collectives—the Urban Poor Consortium (Jakarta, 1997-2019) and MAAM—Museum of the Other and the Elsewhere (Rome, 2012-), they show how practitioners of utopia can recombine and retool neoliberal wastelands into different purposes.

In *Owning Our Cities*, Merin Jacob explores the power of Africanfuturism to broaden the possibility space in post-Apartheid South Africa, where "the majority of characters remain on the sidelines". She established the Africa Week Project to "retell stories about our cities so they make room for us", and finds it is crucial to sit with frustrations related to the past, and imagine *through* action.

Dan Lockton presents *Tokens of a Better Age*, prefigurative artefacts from possible futures. Using the example of climate migration, Dan creates a "Welcome Box", inspired by the Finnish baby box for new parents. This speculative design prompts us to imagine: What might such a welcoming society be like? And more generally, what might be possible, now or in the near future?

Utopian Advertising by Jean Railla examines the immense power of modern advertising to capture our desires. Hopping from US Army to Nike to Chobani ads, she explores if there are "fragments or artifacts [of modern advertisements] that might help us imagine how we could leverage desire, not for the purpose of capitalism, but to bring about the 'good society'".

In *XR Vs. the Police*, Maarten Hajer explores how art, creativity and tactics can flip a hegemony and foster a politics of meaning. The case is XR's blocking of the A12 motorway, which pressured the Dutch government into passing a parliamentary motion to phase out its fossil subsidies. He argues that XR cultivated a politics of 'ethical spectacle' to grow a more diverse public coalition.

Rui Pina Coelho's performative piece *Icaria, Icaria, Icaria* tours a variety of utopian texts linked to the utopian novel *Voyages en Icarie* by Étienne Cabet, and real life attempt to set up Icarian communities in America. Rui argues that "the proof of utopia will not come from intellectual persuasion, but from sensory evidence", and that political theatre has a central role to play in this.

* Imagination, for What?

Stephen Duncombe

Utopia translates to No-Place: a land that can not be found, a world that remains elusive; in the words of Leon Trotsky: a “fire of the imagination.” But what might be the lasting effect of the affect of radical imagination? Drawing on his lengthy experience studying and staging utopian experiments, Stephen Duncombe explores the different ways that Utopia might lead Some-Place, whether as prefiguration of world to become; a training ground for alternative ways of thinking, feeling and doing in the here and now; a performative platform to experiment with possibilities, or a concrete pathway to institutional change.

Watch the [keynote](#)



Stephen Duncombe delivering his keynote at Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions

* The Politics of Postponement

Jonas Torrens

We may have a crisis of imagination, but it is a flood, not a draught. So many areas of life are now saturated with future imaginaries, so much so it can be hard to get a sense of what has not been imagined. Social media, streaming platforms, and deepfakes are creating a glut of content; it is as alluring as it is distracting. Science fiction and speculative fiction are now firmly mainstream, providing the (connected and affluent) populations worldwide access to a pipeline of dystopian futures that project onto the future a feeling of powerlessness to face systems that are at once ubiquitous and overwhelming.

It is against this background that I position this contribution, aimed at exploring what I see as the most radical potential at the intersection of utopia, art and politics. I am not an expert in this field, nor an artist, nor a politician, and hence, my contribution is likely blunt and obvious. I write as someone working at a research institute focused on sustainable development, who engages primarily with research on urban, policy and societal experimentation, in constant dialogue with many colleagues who specialise in futuring.

From where I stand, the response I see most often is the following:

- Critically engaging with prevalent imaginaries to demonstrate how they reinforce and normalise hegemonic or 'doomist' perspectives.
- Seeking to revitalise our imagination to envisage better, more hopeful and diverse futures, staging interventions with creative 'techniques of futuring'. This effort draws from artistic practices and seeks to shape new constellations of actors, ideas, and power that are antihegemonic and speculative.
- Proactively creating openings for pluralising and politicising discussions about the future in more inclusive ways, highlighting injustices, and fostering more democratic spaces for reflecting, arguing, and co-constructing futures.

However, as someone with one foot in the research community engaged in urban experimentation and another in the teaching of related topics, I do not find that position to go deep enough in diagnosing the malaise that prevails.

Futuring first

There are several difficulties with this 'futuring first' approach to our current predicament. The first problem, as I see it, is that when adopting this 'futuring first' approach, we do so in an environment that is not committed to what futuring is trying to achieve. We may be seriously committed to the plurality of voices, opening multiple futures, creating conditions for everyone to be co-creating with us, but is the setting in which these activities take place conducive to these commitments? Are the efforts to culture plural utopias landing anywhere, mobilising anyone, or just being put aside? Is futuring something that keeps the very people who may be able to resist current injustices busy?

What occupies my mind thinking about this intersection of art, utopia and politics is the fact that time and time again, we go through the effort of creating different visions of the future on which we

project desired states, only to find ourselves unable to enact those very states in the subsequent moment. All the energy goes into developing remarkable, if not utopian, descriptions of desired futures that get overrun as soon as the processes are over, as soon as the funding runs out. We treat this obsolescence as a fact of life, and we continue to create new visions for other actors in another project and move on from vision to vision, only to see those visions trashed in action or discarded altogether by the whims of politics.

I wonder if, in this context, Utopia doesn't play a role in maintaining the appearance of a decent society or in ensuring the mental health of those involved instead of orienting any actions. It is necessary to avoid despair, but I wonder where we would be in this dire state if, instead of constantly envisioning elsewhere, we were more directly engaged in the actions. I'm not against futuring in general. My point is to ask to what extent utopian work can inspire specific concrete actions in the present and what would be necessary for that to be the case. To what extent should the questions of the present constrain the scope of that imagining?

At present, we seem resigned to a division of labour, where certain actors are indeed serially imagining radical utopias, trying to think more freely about desirable spaces of possibility. An artist, academic, or futurist of today can build an illustrious career writing about utopias without ever considering the extent to which their efforts translate or inform anyone's actions. They may be lauded as visionaries, pioneers, and blue-flame thinkers. They may come to speak at global conferences, receive prizes, and reach the higher echelons of their professional associations.

Who does the invisible grunt prosaic work of enacting those utopias?

There is a lot of specific and concrete action necessary for the present that might have to be compromising, less than ideal, boring, and uninspiring. I see a risk of elevating our attention in our conversations about politics, art and utopia only to that which is glamorous, so novel as to cause frisson. I wonder if the split between utopian and banal is so deep, and this division of labour so entrenched, that even if they were to meet, these two sides wouldn't understand each other. How do we keep an eye on that which is inspiring while doing the (brutal) thankless job of sorting the nitty-gritty of the day-to-day?

This division of labour is not only unfair. It also disconnects the visions from the concerns of those who would have to live, sustain, and enact them. One option is to celebrate those who are already bridging this gap. For instance, I am in awe of Cory Doctorow. Cory is a prolific science fiction author and an activist constantly engaging in direct action, sitting in committees writing legislation and developing the Electronics Frontier Foundation. When he's not on the trench lines fighting for better digital rights for everyone, he is writing sci-fi that is fully aware of the dystopian and utopian possibilities of the present. His engagement with concrete issues makes his novels rich in detail and the ambivalence of the present. His activism is impactful and often ahead of the curve, for example, on anti-trust, AI, surveillance capitalism, etc.

I also see this in Krista Tippett's work, the host of the public radio and podcast 'On Being', as an exemplar. Every one of her conversations, broadcast to thousands, is the embodiment of a utopian society where we are all capable of asking generous questions, holding ambivalence, exploring moral dilemmas, and orienting towards wisdom. She writes about that not as a utopia that needs to be imagined vividly before it can be enacted but as an everyday practice that has been disclosing itself to her and her audience through engagement.

Both of these are, of course, remarkable people at the 'top of their game'. But they have both lived

in response to a calling that demanded their whole attention, which they engaged in depth with, and that unfolded new dimensions for their lives and their work. By dedicating themselves to these efforts, they find themselves touched and transformed, honing themselves to better respond to that calling. They engage with others that feel inspired and orient themselves towards similar issues. I suspect it is this kind of mobilisation utopia is supposed to deliver. We run the risk of thinking it is these author's utopia that is mobilising when I suspect it is their enactment of it that is inspiring.

Postponing ourselves into oblivion

Another consequence of a 'futuring first' approach is that it reinforces the assumption that the future is knowable, that one should postpone action until 'the right' future is found, and that an 'optimal future' can be found a priori. Even if the futuring experts don't believe that, this is often implicit in the assignments they engage with, in the governance systems they are being invited to work with. It is often because of this instrumental view of the future that a futuring expert would be sought in the first place.

Politicians, policymakers, businesses and citizens have been treating the future as a terrain to be colonised, as if they could make decisions on behalf of future politicians, policymakers, businesses and citizens. Why reduce emissions now when we can set a plan to reduce emissions in the future? Why face public opposition to drastic measures when we can postpone action and lead the next administration to deal with issues?

Inadvertently, mainstream futuring approaches and the policies they underpin treat the future as contiguous to the present, assuming that path dependencies overwhelm discontinuities, that existing socio-technical dynamics are likely to persist unadulterated, and that decisions in the near term future will be upheld and built over time. Behind the notion that we can discern pathways now which our future selves and future generations will travel, lie deeply problematic assumptions that negate the very politics we can currently observe.

It can be tempting, in this situation, to seek more radical imaginations that can break free from the narrow confines of what is perceived to be 'economically feasible' or 'politically viable'. Here, more nuanced and critical forms of futuring provide some respite. What I pick up in my interactions with the proponents of these approaches are the following assumptions:

- Our imagination of the future is performative: what we believe to be likely becomes more likely, what we announce as desirable becomes more desirable, and what we represent as real becomes more real.
- That current imagination of the future is too disciplined by the constraints of the present, serving to reproduce hegemonic ideas.
- Appropriate techniques allow us to increase the range and performativity of these imaginations, leading to futures that are more appealing, mobilising, and antihegemonic.
- That well-intentioned experts, yielding appropriate techniques, with the right participants, can co-create images of the future that are more widely desired, accepted, and legitimate, or at least more provoking, jarring, and likely to trigger reflection.

Attempts to foster collective imagination often inject their participants with hope, a sense of agency, and foster a sense of cohesion. However, what happens when the futuring initiative is over? What concerns are displaced by a deep commitment to imagining better futures?

By focusing our collective attention on imagining, specifying, and adding granular detail to futures with different degrees of desirability, plausibility, and absurdity, I wonder if these efforts inadvertently drain energy, commitment, and effort from other concerns.

Futuring, in this space, inadvertently serves the postponement. It adds colour, detail, and legitimacy to plans that are more and more unhinged and gets to offer correction when those plans derail. In this context, even well-intentioned futuring becomes subsumed in a technocratic, postpolitical, modernist approach to making goals and tweaking policy instruments.

This politics of postponement is such a bedrock of the current approach to policy that we believe it to be normal, desirable, and a fact of nature.¹ No one seems surprised when the future dates come around, and the goals must be abandoned. No one ever loses their job, goes to jail, or is demoted for missing targets, and yet, new targets are made again and again.

What I notice in observing the effect of futuring in discussions about sustainability is not a deep commitment to enacting in the present, as fast as possible, the necessary policies, changes or practices that would be necessary to make those futures more likely. Instead, refracted through the polarised prism of the present-day political situation, bureaucracy, and business concern, these futuring attempts service postponement.

Futuring, either of modernist or radical orientation, plays a central role in legitimising 'politics of postponement', a form of governmental procrastination.

As with individual procrastination, we avoid dealing with difficult emotions, conversations, and decisions. For dystopian futures, the cause of procrastination is the dread itself. For utopian futures, the cause of procrastination is the gap between the desired future and the increasingly absurd present.

I wonder, then, to what extent our futuring efforts of this projective kind, which try to outline a direction of travel, utopian or dystopian, are effective as a means to promote the mobilisation around critical areas. The fact that present-day injustices and inequalities are being left to compound is boosting widespread discontentment, which populists and fascists are weaponising.

What present, urgent concerns could open up novel, radical branches of possibilities?

How would it be like if, instead, we put our efforts into doing the basic, stupid tasks that are lying around, waiting for us to pick them up?

These are banal, obvious goals such as:

- Re-establishing housing corporations that are well funded, staffed, and empowered to build the next generation of homes that are low emission, highly efficient, energy generating, and who retain ownership of those houses to ensure adequate access.
- Developing free, zero-emission public transport funded by corporate taxes.
- Establishing progressive pricing to domestic electricity so that wealthy households curtail their overconsumption.

¹ Dimitrova, Antoaneta, and Bernard Steunenberg (2024), How the "Politics of Postponement" Reshaped the Dutch Party System, LSE Elections | Politics (blog), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2024/01/18/how-the-politics-of-postponementreshaped-the-dutch-party-system/>

- Enacting tax reforms that curtail the existence of tax paradises, impede money laundering and prevent the evasion of funds from low-income countries.
- Debt relief for burdened low-income countries.
- Forbidding the sale of new private aeroplanes, yachts, and cruise boats that are not zero-emission.

This list is a form of 'futuring', a casting of an image of a desired future. But these are all actions that could be achieved now, that could create new openings for new futures and new futures after that. What I am advocating is not an abandonment of futuring or utopian orientations. Instead, it is a rebalancing, where we see futuring and utopian imaginings more closely in dialogue with concrete actions.

In particular, we need more attention to:

- *Generative actions*: these are actions that alter the possibilities for action, that create new opportunities, that invite others to contribute and build forth rapidly escalating optionalities. Like the activists in Cory Doctorow's novels (Walkway, Lost Cause), these may be sharing the tools, designs and principles for responding, creating novel affordances for anyone involved, and generating the learning needed to improve over time.
- *Resonant actions*: these are actions that 'touch us deeply', revealing aspects of our (shared) humanity and predicament that call us to move forward. Like the conversations with Krista Tippet, these are effective, spiritually-inflected moments of deep connectivity.

I am afraid that in focusing on futuring, bringing art into the fold, and increasing the sophistication of our dramaturgy of change, we are instead shifting attention, energy, resources and people to work instead in more glamorous projects, on the hope that these images will in and of themselves open radical possibilities for action. What can we do with mundane, immediate, widespread changes right here, right now, that we are still not doing? How can we enact those changes to energise, rather than polarise, more of the population?

I don't think we would need to worry about creating utopias if the platforms producing, distributing, and advertising futures were not as monolithic and monopolised; if public service broadcasting was not in structural decline in many Western democracies; if every blip of our attention was not up for sale. These are all changes that happened very recently and could be reversed shortly. We are witnessing an encroachment of a handful of companies owned by very few shareholders and controlled by an even smaller group of founders in every aspect of billions of people's lives worldwide. The future effects of these encroachments are hard to estimate but are so evident that anyone concerned should have ample evidence of the need to change.

What gives me hope is not the fact that I can envisage an artful utopia for the future, but the fact that I can sense, in the present, a ridiculous number of dumb, mundane, stupid things that needs to be done, that if were done, so much would be better, and that I can from time to time find other people that are also pissed off by the situation.

Perhaps we need not utopias to inspire us but a sense of anger and absurdity about our current predicament that can get us moving despite our procrastination. What if we need not highly specific, granular, and colourful images of the future to orient towards but instead deeply moving, widely shared values and diverse paths for pursuing them, which can inspire concrete action?

I also find myself drawn to prefigurative politics lately, as it provides openings for enacting in the

present the futures that we desire and, in doing so, highlights the many hindrances, banalities, and attitudes that can interfere with any well-thought plan. In particular, it breaks from a narrow understanding of how visions connect to strategy, which informs tactics and subordinates the action to a pragmatic pursuit of "whatever works". Instead, prefigurative politics draws attention to how tactics are not just a means to an end and explores how they have a meaning in their own right.

It is not just that we must 'practice what we preach' or 'walk the talk' of the desired futures that futuring can highlight. Instead, we need to engage with a much more organic understanding of the need to unveil and unfold the radical possibilities of the present without falling for the idea that some future 'out there' is the one we ought to be chasing. In this sense, prefigurative politics can be practised as 'ends-effacing'.

While ends-guided prefiguration attempts to envision reasonably specific ends in order to match its means to them, ends-effacing prefiguration attempts as far as possible to avoid this, stressing that ends, to the extent they can be meaningfully spoken of at all, are diverse and provisional. This allows it to stress the importance of experimentation and resist having overly determined political goals.²

Conclusion

To liberate ourselves to imagine and enact better futures, I propose we must grapple collectively with the question, "What if nothing is missing?". Instead of focusing on "What desired future are we most motivated by?" this question forces us to inquire into our current capacities, desires, and hindrances. The question brings us into contact with what is already about to break, about to germinate, and the conditions that are necessary to let that unfold.

We all know Gibson's "the future is already here, just unevenly distributed". Unfortunately, this is often a prelude to an effort to estimate which technologies are the harbingers of the future and which advanced communities are the pioneers of other days.

We can open ourselves to the idea that utopia, politics and art can also be cast, not as futuring activity, but as a form of presencing, a probing attitude that allows us to sense and disclose a future that is already emerging.³

What if we, from time to time, turned this around and focused on the present? The present is pregnant with many better futures, which need birthing, nursing and nourishing. What if instead of visions of a distant land (the topos of utopia), we need to gently palpate and support that which is already here, waiting to be born?

² Dan Swain (2019), Not Not but Not Yet: Present and Future in Prefigurative Politics, *Political Studies*, 67(1), p. 57
³ Otto Scharmer (2009), *Theory U: Learning from the future as it emerges*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

* A Bus Takes Them Away

Chiara De Cesari & Nuraini Juliastuti

In a strange bus, we left the houses with no electricity. Leaving for new countries, growing up along the way. Twilight lingers in the glow of the neon lights, and what's left of people is only shadows flitting by. Just like that our children and wives dress up in red-blue clothes. We spin American dreams like creatures who are busy changing themselves each instant.

The city is like a shop window inhabited by a savage alarm clock. Catching fish from industrial waste. Then we shout, we can do any job, lift rocks, move forests and rivers, or steal. But who are we, in between the TV broadcasts, touching the silence in the midst of the marketplace.

If we have gone with a blast of wind, old and dry, we drip on every dream of becoming human. Like an open, dangerous area, without anyone able to talk there again.

— Afrizal Malna, 1985, trans. Sarah Maxim

‘Catching fish from industrial waste’ is what practitioners of utopia do, at least at first. They work on the wastelands and debris of the present—materials without which no old/new world can be built. Neoliberal state/developmental policies have produced no future but more wastelands and debris. Yet, there is potential—also in the sense of latin potentia or force, power—in these debris as they can be recombined into something else and retooled for different purposes, made into new tools that can allow us, for example, to catch a fish and survive—and hopefully doing more, otherwise. Those subjects who have been interpellated by and within these wastelands may find a way to survive their toxicity by means of the astute, resourceful reuse of waste, inventing new objects, practices and subjects in the process. Subjects seek to live differently in myriad individual and collective ways’ to deal with toxic waste. Here we recognize the seeds of utopia, potential beginnings of more just and sustainable ways of acting and being together that are worked at and experimented with in a continuous present. Art, poetry and the imagination, broadly understood, are essential survival tools as they facilitate, in fact enable this work of recombination, retooling and reinvention. Poetry, or a poetic approach to life, is essential to carry out this laborious but promising work of remaking dead ends into open beginnings.

In this provocation, we combine Afrizal Malna’s poetic intuitions with Ruth Levitas (2013) theory of ‘utopia as method’ and especially her suggestion that we should view “utopian thought not as a new, but as a repressed, already existing, form of knowledge about possible futures” (xv). In what follows we investigate the issue of the role of artistic practices in the making of utopias today by shedding light on two sites and an array of methods of utopian ‘practitheatrizing’ that we have been working with. We look for specific sites of utopian practice: artist collectives firmly embedded in a broader translocal, transnational fabric of culture-oriented organizations and social movements, a fluid space in-between social movements, grassroots projects and NGOized civil society. They do all kinds of prefigurative socio-political work by cultural and artistic means. By fixing some of the failures of the system, working within its interstices, filling in the gaps that have been carved out by neoliberal reform, the socio-cultural-political practices that we address here arguably create new institutions with radical potential. We will touch upon two case studies, one in Indonesia and one in Italy, to end with a set of common tactics that these projects deploy.

Urban Poor Consortium (1997-2019)

Urban Poor Consortium was founded in 1997, a year before Reformation 1998, in Jakarta. The consortium was built as a companionship between activists, artists, architects, journalists, community organizers and local thinkers. The diverse membership of the organization was intended to foster multidisciplinary thinking and approaches in challenging urban policies which were often anti-poor, and creating more just urban ecologies. Nuraini Juliastuti uses UPC as a case study to show the working methods of utopian practice in the last phase of Soeharto’s regime, and how the organization developed and innovated their methods in the years that followed the reformation period. Afrizal Malna is the poet, critic, and activist who served as one of the most active members of the Urban Poor Consortium.

MAAM—Museum of the Other and the Elsewhere (Rome, 2012-)

Initiated in 2012 in Rome’s periphery, MAAM is both a housing squat, a community and a museum. What is rumored to be the third-largest contemporary art and street art collection in Italy’s capital was constituted thanks to artists’ solidarity in order to protect the approximately 200 residents, including many families with children of migrant background, from police eviction. The community, the art and the space of the museum are closely connected through multiple ties—of identification, intimacy and co-dependence—and the making of the art and the museum itself was and is part of community building and community reproduction, even survival. MAAM is part of a larger ecosystem of squats that are simultaneously community and cultural centres with a longstanding local history interconnected with social movements and political theory like autonomist thinking. Chiara De Cesari explores the story and tactics of MAAM, also in relation to UPC.



MAAM, 2017, photo by Chiara De Cesari

These two experiments have much in common, especially for what concerns strategies and methods, including: hacking, anticipatory representation, practitheatrizing, productive failures, poetry and counterhistory writing.

* Owning Our Cities

Merin Raju Jacob

When very few of us feel we belong in the cities we live in, and our cities rarely belong to us.

When one sets out to change the world, one doesn't necessarily expect to be arranging bright paper cups on the stoep¹ of the South African Astronomical Observatory.

It is 18 May 2024, and the launch of the Africa Week Project finds a group of young professionals and students offering scalding tea in poorly insulated paper cups to members of #LookUpAfrica, the Urban Sketchers, and interested members of the public. One week later is Africa Day. South Africa's muted response to the continent-wide celebration is usually just another example of how the country does not see itself as part of the African continent. Compared to our neighbours, we do not celebrate our shared independence in public, we do not take the day off, we do not post about it on social media. Four days after that, 29 May 2024, is election day, touted as the most important election post democracy.

This is the context that I write within and about.

All three events detailed above depend in some part on how the individual perceives the future, and the stories they tell about their futures and the futures of the collective. Dominant and widespread stories about the future have typically been used by politicians, policymakers, and corporations "to reduce an open, unknowable and unpredictable future to a set of options that can be weighed and chosen..."² In this way the future is rendered 'calculable'.

Dominant imaginaries about South Africa have been leaning into the dystopian for years, and for young South Africans the future is calculable in several ways:

- The national youth unemployment rate of around 45% means that you can struggle to find a job even with a university degree.
- A stagnant economy, and concerns of crime and failing infrastructure (loadshedding has seen a deterioration of electricity and water infrastructure as a start) has meant that many educated youths who have the funds aspire to leave South Africa in search of greener pastures internationally.
- A failure in leadership and a 30-year dominance by the African National Congress (ANC) liberation party has led to a cynicism in political processes as a mechanism for change.³
- This is all situated within a wider media landscape that depicts a failing African⁴ continent.

The reality is dire and the media often frames the situation in binary terms with the "actors on stage" being big-named main characters: the CEO of South Africa's electricity utility, Andre de Ruyter, or

1 Veranda
2 Carl Death (2022), Climate Fiction, Climate Theory: Decolonising Imaginations of Global Futures, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 50(2), p. 439
3 SA youth not apathetic but no longer believe elections are best path to change, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-01-29-sa-youth-not-apatetic-but-no-longer-believe-elections-are-best-path-to-change/>
4 Disclaimer: I use "Africa" or "African" throughout this piece not as a homogenizing term or to refer to a single place, but as shorthand to refer to the multiplicity of countries, cultures, and languages that exist across the continent

the President, Cyril Ramaphosa. The rest of us are framed as "side characters" with "little to do or say" even though many have been saying much for a very long time. The resulting sense of powerlessness and lack of agency manifests particularly in our cities. With South Africa's Apartheid history of forced removals, devastating levels of wealth inequality and subsequent enclavism, and our transitory relationships with urban space, very few of us belong in the cities we live, and our cities rarely belong to us.

This is as true symbolically as it is economically. When looking at new city developments across the African continent, global investment and the financing of African urban development's drive a specific agenda for the benefit of the elite, often at the expense of the general population.⁵ New cities are pitched by development companies as a solution to critical social and environmental challenges, yet there is little evidence for this. Foreign capital has influenced processes at the local province level, undermining democracy and controlled decentralization and rarely refer to participatory processes.^{6,7}

Where globally financed developments fail most of all is in their understanding of the value of informality. High-density developments and the urban imaginaries that drive them across the African continent leave little room for local autonomy, infrastructure retrofitting, or emergence, and vested private interests threaten a collective right to the city.⁷

Dominant, and often global, imaginaries are not fit for the challenges we face across the African continent^{8,9}, the diversity and specificity of those challenges, or the need to draw some sense of collective agency^{2,10} all key to enabling a rapidly urbanising continent. This idea draws from the concept of 'people as infrastructure' described by Fontein & Smith where,

*African cities could not depend on material infrastructures, the cracks were filled by people's improvisational strategies, interdependencies and socialities. Attempts to think with African cities in more lateral, imaginative ways thus...worked with notions of transformation, opportunity and agency, rather than abjection and failure.*¹¹

I was drawn to storytelling and stories as a means of accessing alternative, diverse, and contextual imaginaries through my own love of science fiction—a genre that asks, "What makes for a good future?"¹² Science fiction informs our collective imagination¹³ and could, I believe, broaden the range of stories we tell creating the possibility space for innovation and experimentation.

5 Lauren Andres, John Bryson & Francis Pope (2022), Institutional logics and regional policy failure: Air pollution as a wicked problem in East African cities, *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 41(2)
6 Vanessa Watson (2014), African urban fantasies: Dreams or nightmares?, *Environment and Urbanization*, 26(1)
7 Elmond Bandaiko & Robert Nutifafa Arku (2023), A critical analysis of 'smart cities' as an urban development strategy in Africa, *International Planning Studies*, 28(1)
8 Jürgen Renn (2018), The Evolution of Knowledge: Rethinking Science in the Anthropocene, *HoST - Journal of History of Science and Technology*, 12(1)
9 Laura Pereira, Charne Lavery, Busiso Moyo, Odirilwe Selomane, Nadia Sitas, Rike Sitas, & Christopher Trisos (2021), Wakanda Phambili! African Science Fiction for Reimagining the Anthropocene In *Futures*, Sandra Kemp & Jenny Andersson (eds), Oxford University Press
10 Nick Dunn (2019), Urban Imaginaries and the Palimpsest of the Future, In *The Routledge Companion to Urban Imaginaries*, Christoph Lindner & Miriam Meissner (eds), Routledge
11 Joost Fontein & Constance Smith (2023), Introduction: the stuff of African cities, *Africa*, 93(1)
12 John Truby (2022), *The Anatomy of Genres: How Story Forms Explain the Way the World Works*, Picador
13 Olivia Bina, Sandra Mateus, Lavinia Pereira & Annalisa Caffa (2017), The future imagined: Exploring fiction as a means of reflecting on today's Grand Societal Challenges and tomorrow's options, *Futures*, 86

*As we search for creative solutions to urgent environmental crises and alternative global futures that include a thriving Africa, we turn first to African writers for science-informed yet hopeful visions...science fiction narratives are rarely scientifically accurate, yet are important both as repositories of our hopes and fears, and because they can become fundamental animators of sociotechnical imaginaries that go on to shape our futures...*¹⁴

Enter, Africanfuturism.

Award-winning author, Dr Nnedi Okorafor, is credited with popularising the term “Africanfuturism” when trying to distinguish her works from others written by predominantly African diaspora, and this emerging genre within literature has seen a new wave of cultural output solidifying the continent as a site from which to imagine the emergence of future worlds.¹⁵

Drawing from the idea of imagining the future from Africa, I was curious. How do we retell stories about our cities so that they make room for us? How can we reimagine our cities and so reconfigure our sense of belonging within these spaces, and reinforce our sense of agency? How do we share more complete versions of international narratives about the continent? How do we learn and celebrate our cultures? How do we focus on the continent when we think of the future?

While the focus of my own thinking has been around urban spaces, colleagues, friends, and acquaintances around me wanted to draw the potential of imagining the future from Africa into their own work.

It was from this mix of people, youth across Stellenbosch working with energy, education, agriculture, that the Africa Week Project emerged.

In an attempt to stimulate reimagining Africa’s future, while also reinvigorating a need to take action, we organised *Africa Week* in 2023: a gathering place for individuals across sectors and disciplines and a testing ground for connecting thoughts, ideas and visions for the future as part of *The Africa Week Project*.

The *Africa Week Project* takes as inspiration from frameworks such as the Triple Re-Cycle¹⁶ and the Seeds Project¹⁷ which speak to the iterative and cyclical relation between reimagining, experimentation, and reconfiguration of institutions and structures.

14 Charne Lavery, Laura Pereira, Bwalya Chibwe, Nedine Moonsamy, Chinelo Onwaulu & Naomi Terry (2022), Mosquitoes, mushrooms, magic: Africanfuturist sci-fi for nature's futures, *Vector*

15 Carl Death (2022), Climate Fiction, Climate Theory: Decolonising Imaginations of Global Futures, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 50(2)

16 Jesse Hoffman, Megan Davies, Thomas Bauwens, Philipp Späth, Maarten Hajer, Bleta Arifi, Amir Bazaz & Mark Swilling (2021), Working to align energy transitions and social equity: An integrative framework linking institutional work, imaginaries and energy justice, *Energy Research & Social Science*, 82

17 Laura Pereira, Elena Bennett, Reinette (Oonsie) Biggs, Garry Peterson, Timon McPhearson, Albert Norström, Per Olsson, Rika Preiser, Ciara Raudsepp-Hearne & Joost Vervoort (2018), Seeds of the Future in the Present, In *Urban Planet*, Cambridge University Press

The Africa Week Project

Supporting an Africa in Transition



AFRICA WEEK is a week-long collaborative effort to utilise the globally celebrated Africa Day on 25th May to bring attention to narratives of the continent and to share inspiration for visions of the future that can guide experimentation in the present. Africa Week is our annual opportunity to bring attention to an Africa in Transition and support one another on the journey to reimagine and negotiate the future of the continent in the present.

We use a resource exchange network to host, run or facilitate in-person and/or online dialogue, activities, experiences and initiatives for our local, African context. Events are run from any location and are open to all audiences and are guided by a 10-year vision with four main aims:

1. *Finding creative ways to envision possible futures for Africa*, from Africa
2. *Developing a diverse, transdisciplinary ecosystem* of support, shared value and purpose
3. *Intentionally engaging with the complexity* of shifting the status quo
4. *Experimenting locally in the present* for collective learning and action

I want to point to three learnings which have emerged from the Africa Week Project about meaningfully engaging with our future in South African cities.

Artistic expression is a tool to reimagine and claim a stake in the future, however...

1. Asking individuals to imagine an alternative, positive future is incredibly difficult.

This is particularly difficult in South Africa where any discussions about the future inevitably lead to discussions about the past.

Artistic expression in this context is a way to collectively express the pain and anger that is still the inheritance of many young, black students and professionals who find themselves temporarily in places like Stellenbosch in South Africa, a site still burdened for many people of colour by its legacy as the birthplace of Apartheid.

Art, whether visual, performative, or written, creates the space to just be angry and confused and frustrated, for different reasons and with different intensities, without the need for a solution or consensus.

...Art, perhaps uniquely among the forms of political discourse available to us, allows for audiences to contemplate issues at the heart of political clashes, while temporarily suspending the judgment of right and wrong. The space of aesthetics is therefore neither fully political nor anti-political. The aesthetic realm sits, rather, askance to politics; it allows us to attend to politics but relieves us from the weight of taking on a political position. None of this is to suggest, of course, that this aesthetic, inconclusive mode is better than either objectivity or activism. Instead, the suggestion is that the democratic public sphere requires a plurality of these different modes of discourse, among which the arts play their distinctive role.

— Vid Simonitiis, *Art Against the World*



Theatre performer Likhona, also from Philippi Village, performing his poetry

Experiencing and engaging with art, together, forms a bond different to the passing interactions we tend to share with strangers.

Which leads to point 2.

2. Connecting with others, even if it's just in one event in the week, can shift the dial on individuals taking action.

The *Africa Week Project* focuses on a number of in-person meetups that try to build a sense of collegiality in intimate settings, and through dialogue engage in collective sense-making. What we've noticed is that these spaces offer a sense of support to young professionals and students, oftentimes far from home, and some form of community, a shared sense of the future, and a shared responsibility for bringing that about.

The second year of the *Africa Week Project* saw the team double in size and the audiences shift to those outside our own immediate networks. We've seen people organise their own events, begin initiatives within their institutions around their local challenges, and draw on confidence to 'take up more space' in the urban spaces they pass through.

3. The evolutionary path we are seeing is that individuals get involved in their local communities, and through this engagement begin to imagine in more detail what the future could look like.

When asked to imagine the future of the African continent, most people default to generalities: safety, low unemployment figures, a good standard of living, no more gender-based violence.



Artist Sibusiso from Philippi Village describing his artwork inspired by his experiences during COVID

While there is an appetite for change, what that could look like is unclear. However, once actively involved in their localities, this changes. Action breeds specificity and it is this action and innovative resourcefulness that is leveraged to engage with the diversity of our urban challenges.



The question we have begun to pose at all our events

We are seeing a rise in the production and consumption of African narratives suggesting “a bottom-up reclamation of the future for Africa and a desire for alternative scenarios”.¹⁸ While Africanfuturism stories featuring urban Africa have yet to focus clearly on the value and creativity in informality¹⁹, I am hopeful that these stories will emerge following the recentring of African agency and symbolic worlds and meaning-making²¹, in turn creating more space for experimentation and innovation. As action is facilitated through imagination, imagination is stirred by action.²⁰

As the language of the future becomes more familiar, and as individuals become more connected to their spaces, they imagine specific worlds and claim a small part of the future. This ownership of the future is then not entrenched in the public consciousness through marketing and branding campaigns usually driven by international design and engineering firms²¹, but hopefully emerges from individuals and negotiated within groups.

“The future belongs to us because we have taken charge of it.”

— Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Former President of Liberia

In this way even making a warm cup of tea or coffee on a chilly evening for a stranger could be the start of a new story, a new city, and a new future owned by us all.

18 Ute Fendler (2022), Animating the Future: Storytelling and Super Heroes in Africa, In African Futures, Clemens Greiner, Steven Van Wolputte & Michael Bollig (eds), Brill
19 Merin R. Jacob (2024), Future Cities of the Global South: An exploration of socio-technical and social-ecological imaginaries in African science fiction, MPhil Research Thesis, Stellenbosch University
20 Mathias Thaler (2021), 'We are going to have to imagine our way out of this!': Utopian thinking and acting in the climate emergency, <https://www.ideology-theory-practice.org/blog/we-are-going-to-have-to-imagine-our-way-out-of-this-utopian-thinking-and-acting-in-the-climate-emergency>
21 Robert Nutifafa Arku, Adrian Buttazzoni, Kwadwo Agyapon-Ntra & Elmond Bandauko (2022), Highlighting smart city mirages in public perceptions: A Twitter sentiment analysis of four African smart city projects, *Cities*, 130

* Tokens of a Better Age

Artefacts from the Future as Utopian Prefigurations

Dan Lockton

For many reasons, I'm not usually one to go in for celebrating the various 'honours' which monarchs bestow on people deemed worthy. But I have long been intrigued by the motto of the Order of St Michael and St George, a particular order of British chivalry:

A U S P I C I U M M E L I O R I S Æ V I

which translates as token of a better age, or perhaps hope for a better age. Regardless of the Order's intentions with its motto (also adopted by the Raffles Institution in Singapore), there is something tantalisingly utopian about what it promises. It would usually be seen inscribed on a badge, literally a token perhaps, but of course can also be understood more metaphorically to refer to the Order itself. I wondered whether the "better age" was referring to a lost golden age, which would align well with our nostalgic obsessions^{1,2}, but apparently it does indeed signify a future (perhaps unfortunately in an eschatological sense).

Putting the Order aside, and moving into 'bricolage' mode (as so often with how artists and designers work), I am much more interested in what we could do with the concept of literal, material, tokens of better ages as a kind of utopian prefiguration, or a hint at one. Speculative and critical design³ often works with artefacts which (meeting loose definitions of the term design fiction⁴) are designed and made as objects 'from' particular counterfactual situations, usually proposed as possible futures, but potentially also alternative presents and pasts. The intention is usually to critique and provoke discussion, to offer an object which embodies a particular view of how the world could be—and encodes politics, power relations, and wider societal issues in the medium of something material and (often) everyday (at least in the imagined world).

There are more nuances than that, as explored by many writers^{4,5}, including deconstruction of the position and privilege from which the speculation is being done^{6,7} and what it takes to juxtapose decolonising approaches to design, with a speculative perspective^{8,9,10}. But much of it is implicitly dystopian, warning (often by extrapolation of current situations, trends, and latent fears) of what might come to pass if we don't change our ways, or pay attention—even if done in a playful way.

- 1 Zygmunt Bauman (2017), *Retrotopia*, Polity
- 2 Simon Reynolds (2011), *Retromania*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux
- 3 Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby (2013), *Speculative Everything*, MIT Press
- 4 Ivica Mitrović, James Auger, Julian Hanna, Ingi Helgason (eds) (2021), *Beyond Speculative Design*, Arts Academy, University of Split.
- 5 Matt Malpass (2019), *Critical Design in Context*, Bloomsbury.
- 6 Pedro J.S. Vieira de Oliveira & Luiza Prado de O. Martins (2014), Cheat Sheet for a Non- (or Less-) Colonialist Speculative Design, <https://medium.com/a-parede/cheat-sheet-for-a-non-or-less-colonialist-speculative-design-9a6b4ae3c465>
- 7 Matt Ward (2019), Critical about Critical and Speculative Design, *Speculative Edu*. <https://speculativeedu.eu/critical-about-critical-and-speculative-design/>
- 8 Woodrow W. Winchester, III (2018), Afrofuturism, Inclusion, and the Design Imagination, *Interactions*, 25(2)
- 9 Christina N. Harrington, Shamika Klassen, Yolanda A. Rankin (2022), "All that You Touch, You Change": Expanding the Canon of Speculative Design Towards Black Futuring, CHI '22, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3491102.3502118>
- 10 Deepa Butoliya (2018), *Critical Jugaad: A Postnormal Design Framework for Designernly Marginal Practices*. PhD thesis, Carnegie Mellon University



Hear the worlds breathing

The dystopian has a very strong pull in speculative design (as in other media). In our project *Imagine: Contested Futures of Sustainability* we've seen how influential Hollywood apocalypses are on popular imaginaries of futures. But I want to suggest the framing **tokens of better ages**, TOBAs, as a way to create speculative artefacts from 'desirable' futures. It could offer critique and provoke discussion ('desirable' for whom?), but also (pragmatically, or inspirationally) enable prefiguration¹¹ of those 'better ages'. A kind of *hopepunk*, perhaps. Artefacts 'from' a particular future don't merely exist as detached objects in a gallery context, but implicitly (or explicitly) come with a backstory of what that future is (necessitating worldbuilding) and, most excitingly, they imply there are people in that better age who care enough to have produced something that embodies its principles. And those people—perhaps!—might be future versions of ourselves. If we have an object in some way embodying a counterfactual 'better' age, what does it take to live as if that age is true, here, now—moving from "this is how things could be" to "this is how things can be" and even "this is how things are"?

TOBAs are a form of experiential future¹², but could well be put into practice in a way that is only barely distinguishable from a positive or hopeful experience in the present, by becoming a model of how things can be done. Thinking of Utrecht itself, I am reminded of Transition movement co-founder Rob Hopkins' comment¹³ that the city, on a visit in 2022, felt to him "like travelling to 2030" because (primarily) of the attention paid to cycling infrastructure, and how "for someone coming from elsewhere, where such well thought out infrastructure is something we can, as yet, only dream of" this could be a model of how the world could be. Perhaps in the "artefact" sense, a direction sign for extensive cycle parking similar to Utrecht's, but in another city, could be a speculative TOBA. However, something that can be put into practice more easily anywhere, by anyone, such as a neighbourhood free public bike repair station, would be a more prefigurative one.

TOBAs, enacted, become pockets of better futures, not evenly distributed yet, but with the potential to become so. I am reminded of Arundhati Roy's notion¹⁴ that "another world is not only possible, she is on her way; on a quiet day, I can hear her breathing" or Alasdair Gray's injunction¹⁵ to "work as if you live in the early days of a better nation". But equally: "be[ing] the change you want to see in the world" (as attributed to Gandhi, although apparently wrongly) is not too far from "fake it 'til you make it."

- 11 Lara Monticelli (2021), On the necessity of prefigurative politics, *Thesis Eleven*, 167(1)
- 12 Stuart Candy & Kelly Kornet (2019), Turning Foresight Inside Out: An Introduction to Ethnographic Experiential Futures, *Journal of Futures Studies*, 23(3)
- 13 Rob Hopkins (2022), Travels in my Time Machine Part Two: the Utrecht bicycle rush hour, <https://www.robhopkins.net/2022/10/17/travels-in-my-time-machine-part-two-the-utrecht-bicycle-rush-hour/>
- 14 Ben Ehrenreich (2003), Another World Is Possible, In *These Times*, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/another-world-is-possible>
- 15 Alasdair Gray (2007), Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation, *The National*, republished 5 January 2020, <https://www.thenational.scot/politics/18137079.alasdair-gray-work-live-early-days-better-nation/>

Welcome Box: a naïve attempt

The above is all quite abstract. I decided to try to make a quick, tentative example of a TOBA to demonstrate something of the concept: more of the speculative artefact form than actually prefigurative, but nevertheless hinting at what might be a sign of a better age. I want to emphasise that what you see here is not a policy proposal, nor anything thought through with the benefit of expertise or deeper knowledge of—or experience of—the issue. This is just a rapid ‘sketch’ of an idea, and it probably makes a number of faux pas which someone working in the domain of international humanitarian efforts would find deeply problematic. Not least: it encodes particular relationships between ‘saved’ and ‘saviour’, ‘welcomed’ and ‘welcomer’ in a way I am uncomfortable with.

Nevertheless: I took the questions for myself:

- What could a ‘utopian’ societal (or political) response to the climate crisis involve?
- What could be a TOBA in relation to this question—or, rather, one aspect of it?

Amidst a growing tide of nationalism in Europe, I focused on part of how societies address climate-related migration. While the term ‘climate refugee’ is not preferred by the UNHCR, the number of people displaced by climate change is growing, both within countries and between them, and media and political discourse around ‘climate refugees’ is starting to play into this wider negative



discussion of immigration¹⁶. But what if something different were true? What if our global north societies welcomed people displaced by climate change, and provided for them properly? What might an artefact be from a future where this migration is handled by (global north) governments and societies in a way not driven by fear(-mongering) or ‘hostile environment’ rhetoric, but rather through effective provision of infrastructure and public services—and also through a genuine public welcome, an opening of our hearts and homes?

Inspired partly by the Finnish *äitiyspakkaus* baby box¹⁷, in which expectant and adoptive parents receive a publicly-funded maternity package of materials for their new baby—a phenomenon which has become a well-known part of Finnish culture—I imagined the existence of a *Welcome Box for climate migrants*, internationally coordinated but with local contributions enabling closer cultural empathy and engagement. The box would contain items that are useful for everyday life in a new home, in (potentially) a new culture, not intended to replace (for example) actual food rations or medical supplies (if this is the necessity in particular situations) but rather items which help someone, or a family, come to feel welcomed and more at home. The logo—an example of the *diegetic* (in-world) details that are often used in design fiction to try to hint at more aspects of the story or the world from which the artefact has come—may seem silly (a pineapple made up of the Earth?) but it is my attempt to combine the particular global projection of the UN’s logo, with the leaves of the pineapple which apparently is considered an intercultural symbol of ‘welcome’.

The specifics of what would be included in the box, or questions around framing, are easy to pick holes in, as indeed are the identities of the peoples imagined, and the lack of thought around their power relations, but that is not quite the point of this exercise: rather, it is intended as a speculative TOBA, a thought experiment or sketch that raises the idea of such a scheme—what would it take to achieve a coordinated societal shift in this way, as exemplified by the box? What would you include to welcome someone to your culture? And so on.

The artist Noam Toran¹⁸ uses Alfred Hitchcock’s term *MacGuffin* for speculative artefacts in movies (e.g. some advanced technology that has been stolen, or a jewel that must be recovered) which are perhaps more about facilitating the storyline than actually needed for their details. As with the Finnish example, once an idea has been put into a material form, it acts as something tangible to be pointed to, discussed, debated—a *boundary object* which through its very ‘reality’ can be a unit of further critique, analysis, and—perhaps—inspiration. While the artefact itself exhibits an *architectural* approach to utopia in Ruth Levitas’s terminology¹⁹, the discursive²⁰ and analytical possibilities it could trigger—even if just, by sitting it in the middle of the table, it could facilitate conversations that would otherwise not happen—I think give it some potential for Levitas’s archaeological mode too.

Just as the response to the Finnish baby box is often “I wish we had that here”, maybe this kind of TOBA, executed and offered with consideration and more domain knowledge, can also act as a token of what might be possible, now or in the future. I imagine the memetic quality of something like the baby box, almost an urban legend (true in this case), a myth of the near future in J.G. Ballard’s term, to be perhaps a powerful feature of TOBAs.

There is a place in the future, so we have heard, where people welcome others, and maybe we can to.

¹⁶ Kristy Siegfried (2023), Climate change and displacement: the myths and the facts, UNHCR

¹⁷ Helena Lee (2013), Why Finnish babies sleep in cardboard boxes, BBC News

¹⁸ Noam Toran (2008), The MacGuffin Library, <http://noamtoran.com/NT2009/projects/the-macguffin-library>

¹⁹ Ruth Levitas (2013), *Utopia as Method*, Palgrave Macmillan

²⁰ Bruce M. Tharp & Stephanie M. Tharp (2022), *Discursive Design*, MIT Press

* Utopian Advertising

Jean Railla

In her book *Utopia as Method: the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, Ruth Levitas frames utopia as a desire for a better world. This concept of utopia as an embodied feeling, rather than an ideological ideal or place, is truly exciting. It opens up new ways of thinking and creating future possibilities. It allows us to dream and experiment with what could be without knowing exactly where we are headed.

Inspired by Levitas's method of 'Utopia as Archeology,' I would like to examine modern advertisements in search of fragments or artifacts that might help us imagine how we could leverage desire, not for the purpose of capitalism, but to bring about the "good society".

More than any other media or cultural product, modern advertising understands desire and how to harness its impulses. Ads tap into our desire to be seen, to be connected, to belong. Advertising promises to satisfy our deepest yearnings, at least in the short-term.

The trend toward emotional appeals has only increased in the past decade. Ads no longer focus on the product but on story, humor or heart. Brands seek "brand loyalty," which means that advertisers have become more sophisticated about reaching consumers. This trend is driven by millions of dollars of market research into how consumers make decisions and how they understand the world.

Which leads us to an industry that sounds more and more like therapy or self-help. For instance, Saatchi & Saatchi, one of the world's largest and most successful agencies no longer uses the word brand. Instead they call them *Lovemarks*. As they write on their website:

Lovemarks transcend brands. They deliver beyond your expectations of great performance. They reach your heart as well as your mind, creating an intimate, emotional connection that you just can't live without.

What is left out of this grandiose statement, of course, is that the love will be unrequited. Consumers might form attachments to a brand or lovemark, but the global corporation behind the brand has only its own interest and its shareholder's interests in its "heart."

But rather than dismiss the whole enterprise as empty and manipulative, which it no doubt is, what if we could create a lovemark that is a symbol of something real and reciprocal? Can we imagine a world in which our desire for a better world was a promise instead of a lie?

The following ads¹ offer clues to how to tap into our desire for a better world.

¹ The included screenshots of ads are strictly for educational purposes and shared under Fair Use



US Army: First Arrival (click screenshot to view ad)

'First Arrivals' follows new recruits to the US Army as they leave their families and travel to basic training. Shot in a realistic documentary-style the ad shows several young people, women and men, of all backgrounds, anxiously embarking on their journey. Using empathy and relatability, 'First Arrival' promises a sense of purpose and belonging to a generation that is marked by loneliness.



Nike: Find Your Greatness (click screenshot to view ad)

This commercial by Nike is not what you'd expect from the brand, whose ads normally feature exceptional athletes. Instead the hero of 'Find Your Greatness' is a chubby twelve year old who is jogging down a rural road. Apparently, how Nike thinks, as the voice over tells us that "Greatness. It's just something we made up."

The ad is so compelling because it validates our desire to be seen, to matter, despite where we live or what we look like. The ad ends with "Greatness is not more unique to us than breathing. We're all capable of it. All of us."



Chobani: Dear Alice (click screenshot to view ad)

'Dear Alice' is a minute-long animation that depicts a utopian future of ethical farming practices and green technology while promoting Chobani as a value-based company (and aligning consumption of its products with a brighter tomorrow). The ad speaks to our desire for a better world and offers a sense of hope. But the promise falls immediately flat when the utopia is full of Chobani plastic yogurt containers. As @aaronwenger3034 commented on YouTube: "In this universe, people would absolutely not be eating and drinking out of single-use chobani cups and cartons lmao."



Artist-researcher-practitioners engaging in dialogue at Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions
Foreground: Paula Serafini, Background: Joost Vervoort, Jean Railla, Noor Noor

* XR Vs. the Police

Scripting and Counter-scripting

Maarten Hajer

The announcement sounded preposterous at the time. It was 2021. Extinction Rebellion (XR) shared it was going to block the A12 motorway leading into The Hague, the Dutch parliamentary capital. Blocking the very busy inroad appeared bold and courageous but risky as well: how would the Dutch public respond to this disruption? Would XR manage to keep its promise to keep returning until the government had addressed its 'fossil subsidies'? Over a sequence of actions one of its prime goals was achieved, two years later: Dutch parliament adopted a motion ordering the Cabinet to look into fossil subsidies and come up with a plan to eliminate them. What happened and what can we learn from it?

Extinction Rebellion is arguably one of the most effective social movements fighting climate change in the mid 2020s. XR rediscovered and redefined social movement's logics. The refusal to passively stand by a 'mass extinction' was a narrative that logically shaped a dramaturgical repertoire. The slogan 'we disrupt traffic because you disrupt the climate' was accompanied by the 'die in', basically simulating what might happen if we do not act. It was enacted on busy roads, first in London, then elsewhere. It provided images that the classic media outlets could not resist and which lend themselves for quick dissemination via the Socials. XR also spread a set of micro practices (the 'silent Giraffe' sign for silence, the hand sign for 'acclaim', the 'repeat' practice when speakers are not audible in larger audiences, some copied from Occupy Wallstreet) that were subsequently used by other social movements (like in the case of the campus protests against the role of universities in the Gaza catastrophe recently). It all helped to address the complacency of mainstream politics and the lackluster societal sentiment.

XR is successfully employing the 'politics of spectacle' that Stephen Duncombe argues often seems to be the strategy mastered by the (radical) right.¹ In the below I reflect on what we can learn from the dramaturgy of the XR protest to understand how we can promote the sort of 'ethical spectacle' that Duncombe sees as crucial for a successful contemporary dream politics.

Duncombe gives five criteria of dream: it is to be participatory, open, realistic, transparent, and utopian. These elements can easily be traced in the 2023 XR protests. XR encourages people to join and come up with ideas (an open structure that is very different from a previous generation of social movements, like for instance Greenpeace); its demands to stop 'fossil subsidies' (throwing money at something that runs against your own (climate) goals) and organize a citizen panel on climate change are all too realistic; its meetings are transparent and its goal is utopian: to get society off the trajectory of destruction, against all cultural and corporate power that pushes society to continue the path of growth as if no alternative is possible. Moreover, it follows the logic of utopia as method, prefiguring a way of deciding and operating that meets its criteria of democracy and solidarity.

¹ Stephen Duncombe (2019), *Reimagining Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, OR Books

Yet the A12 protest also point at the crucial role of dramaturgy. Whereas an NGO like Greenpeace prospers in cases where it fully controls the script and dramaturgy, the 2023 XR protests show much more the features of scripting and counter-scripting.² Its open structure mobilized a participatory spectacle in which many protagonists used the blockade as an open podium to bring their own mini performances to the stage.³ A small group came as 'ja-knikkers' (a curious double meaning of 'Yes Men' and the 'nodding donkey pump' used for oil extraction in the eastern part of the Netherlands), Scientists-for-Future show up in their white lab coats, some twenty professors came dressed up in the university gowns with caps, several orchestras and choirs performed during its protests. All nice and stimulating but what arguably was decisive was the dynamics of scripting and counter-scripting that no one could have anticipated but that ultimately provided the stage for the ethical spectacle, right there, on the tarmac of the six lanes of the A12. A spectacle with great societal resonance.

We can distinguish three phases between first announcement and the temporary secession of the protest because of the political response: 'Block & Arrest', 'Outrage & Relocation' and 'Festivalisation'.

Block & Arrest

Block & Arrest is a script jointly acted out by XR and police. Initially XR sets out to block the road (which they announce but do not seek official permits for), and the police aims to quickly take activists off the street. XR is aware that their form of protests tends to be criminalised. It is part of the script of XR that those who like to participate in the actual blockade are trained in passive and peaceful resistance and are provided with insights into their legal rights. They are registered as participants of events and carry the telephone number of the lawyer to call in case of an arrest. On the side of the authorities breaking up protests and arrests are well rehearsed. The policing is relatively successful as the numbers (and the media reception) do not really grow.

Timeline:⁴

- 13 October 2021: Protesters attempted to blockade the road, but the police prevented them. Four of them were convicted to 45 hours of community service.
- 6 July 2022 1st blockade: Several dozen activists got arrested.
- 21 September 2022 2nd blockade: Several activists glued themselves on the road and 21 activists got arrested.
- 15 October 2022 3rd blockade: 62 activists got arrested.
- 26 November 2022 4th blockade: They blocked the road for three hours and 150 activists got arrested.

Outrage & Diversification

This all changes before the 5th blockade in January 2023 as six activists get arrested in the week leading up to the next blockade. The reason given is that the six seek to mobilize people to participate in the protests which is argued to be an offense. It proves to be a game changer. XR is quick to present the names and narrative to the incident. The story line of young fathers and mothers being taken away from their young children at the breakfast table by armed police squad teams upset many in the progressive middle classes. National media call the local Mayor

² Maarten Hajer (2009), *Authoritative Governance: Policy Making in the Age of Mediatization*, Oxford University Press

³ Watch here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qS87O_g-ROI

⁴ Source: Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A12_blockade

to account. The blockade, still regarded 'fringe' and 'preposterous' by the mainstream, gets a new meaning. The frame of 'civil rights' gives new meaning to the situation. Some 40 civil society groups including major trade unions stand up for the right to protest and therefore express their support for the upcoming blockade.

That following Saturday, January 28th, some 1,000 protesters show up to block the road and another 2,000 people show up, not to block the motorway but to show their support, standing around the sunken motorway, watching the scenes eight meters below as spectators as from a balcony. The 'supporters' (as they are quickly labelled) effectively observe the scenes as a theatrical encounter, cheering and applauding the peaceful protesters, booing and registering the police actions needed to break up the protest from above.

To prevent this ill felicitous act from happening again, police and Mayor added new lines to their 'Block & Arrest' script. The relationship between the 'radicals' and the 'supporters' must be broken. The Friday before the 6th blockade black fences are put in place around the sunken motorway. The 'balcony' is declared to be a forbidden place to be. Moreover, footage spreading via social media reveal new enforcements for the police: two (German) water canons are spotting refilling at a petrol station in the region.

Festivalisation

When supporters arrive to take their places at the balcony for 6th blockade on the 11th of March, 2023, they see their possibility to show support barred. The group is determined and decides to walk towards the 'mouth' of the sunken road to greet and support the XR protesters. This created an intermingling of protesters and supporters out in the open, in face of the mouth of the tunnel. Everything comes to a standstill. Was it scripted? Probably. Quite suddenly, a new script unfolded. What according to the script 'Block & Arrest' was to be a grim confrontation between activists passively resisting arrest and the police, instantaneously turned into a festival-like gathering. 'Grandparents for the climate' met with youngsters ready to be arrested. Out of nowhere a 60 musicians strong symphony orchestra settled on the tarmac and the opening light notes of the second part of Beethoven's Seventh symphony spread across the protesters. The allegretto, a hymn of light notes expressing eminent vulnerability and concern, in itself enough to give people goose bumps, unfolded while the protesters calmed the crowd with the sign of the Silent Giraffe, sitting down. In the distance the police loudspeakers desperately call 'attentie, attentie' according to the their script of Block & Arrest, yet the movement was performing according to another script, that of festivalisation.

The registration of the moving surprise concert went viral on the socials. An irresistible spectacle. Intrigue had opened up a new stage. Television talk shows wanted to know who were the people 'behind' the protests. As it turned out to be eloquent, talented, and even witty young people, some sitting for their law exams, the frame of bitter activists without a sense of humor no longer worked. Journalists had spotted the famous but now retired Dutch violinist Vera Beths playing on the occupied motorway. Why did she participate? In the meantime some 700 protesters were arrested and quickly released thereafter. The dynamics of scripting and counter-scripting now gave XR's spokespeople ample airtime to explain their demands regarding 'fossil subsidies' to a national audience. Fossil subsidies became a topic for discussion for birthday parties and in soccer canteens.



XR Musicians at A12 Stop Fossiele Subsidies protest on 11th March 2023 (Photo: Extinction Rebellion)



XR Musicians at A12 Stop Fossiele Subsidies protest on 27th May 2023 (Photo: James Petermeier)

On the 27th of May, a glorious day, police lost the media war as academics glued peer-reviewed articles on climate change on the water canons, youngsters danced in colourful bathing suits on the rhythm of a drum band in front of the water canons. Some even having had the imagination to bring colourful inflatable animals. A Spinoza Prize winning academic held a ‘nano lecture’ on climate change at the scene. Again, all footage the media could not resist. 1,579 protesters get arrested but are quickly released. But XR was on a roll. Every next time the numbers of protesters grew, upto 25,000 people on 9 September 2023.

All in all, the XR blockades sparked a much broader debate about Dutch fossil subsidies, inciting economists to recalculate Dutch subsidies using the official definition given by the World Trade Organization. Surprisingly, these new calculations proved XR’s number to be far too low: the actual number was closer to €37 billion annually, they estimated. XR had successfully reframed the debate: is it not strange that we spend so much taxpayer money to companies that are resisting improving the environment? Through the enactments the concept of fossil subsidies got hold of the public imagination. The Ministry for Climate was forced to come up with its assessment of the total ‘fossil subsidies’ ordered by a motion in parliament. Once it had completed its calculation it surprised the public: their sum came out yet higher once again, between €39,7 and €46,4 billion. XR won: the Dutch government’s cavalier attitude towards fossil subsidies became untenable. On 10 October 2023, a parliamentary motion calling for a plan to phase out fossil subsidies passed.⁵ In response, XR announced it success and stopped the ‘permanent’ blockade.

What does this all say about the relationships between art, politics and utopia? Although it obviously is just an individual instance, the XR protests at the A12 are instructive as they reveal how creativity and tactics can flip a hegemony. The idea that a small protest would lead to a parliamentary majority voting to phase out ‘fossil subsidies’ was preposterous in 2021, but a reality a mere two years later. In terms of repertoire the creativity of XR was reminiscent of the tactics of the ‘International Situationists’ in the 1960s, a small group of artists that critiqued the completely hegemonic project of industrial modernism as expressed in modernist city planning, commercialization of the public sphere, and the disciplinization of the public (cf. Sadler 1998 for probably the best overview⁶). They too used a tactics of creating ‘situations’ to unsettle or expose a cultural hegemony. A favorite tactic was ‘detournement’—ironizing power, illuminating instances of disciplinization. When they saw a sign ‘Bill posters will be prosecuted’ they added ‘Bill Posters is an innocent man’. This tactics, pointing at the disciplinization at exposing the lack humor and fantasy of the authorities at the same time, brought out the power of humor in social action. It is a register that is rediscovered and worth discussing to see how it could help the utopian project of trying to overturn a mentality of entitlement and fossil-based freedoms that stands in the way of any meaningful idea of a ‘just transition’.

5 Suzanne Kröger, Raoul Marc Boucke & Christine Teunissen (2023), Amended motion by Member Kröger et al. on drawing up scenarios for phasing out the various fossil subsidies (ttv 32813-1297), <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/detail?id=2023Z16816&did=2023D40872>

6 Simon Sadler (1998), *The Situationist City*, The MIT Press

Irony seems weak to deal with political hegemony that can mobilize police forces to maintain order. Yet the irony (sic) is of course that exposing injustices is a very powerful tool. Standing ready to clear a motorway where young people are showing how they can be concerned and creative at the same time, where you have brought in the water canons while your ‘opponent’ brings up a 60 person classical orchestra to play Beethoven is showing how power is not merely following force. These XR tactics are thus reminiscent of the Provo ‘happenings’ in 1960s dancing around the statue of ‘Het Lieverdje’ (given to the city of Amsterdam by the tobacco industry), exclaiming ‘uche, uche, uche’ and distributing raisins as alternative. As this was met with harsh police violence they created a situation in which the hypocrisy of the ‘bourgeois’ state was exposed. The scenes of the A12 also have an affinity with the ‘Butterfly Opera’ (‘Vlinderopera’) that the so called ‘Expertocratic laboratory’ (‘deskundologische laboratorium’) staged in the fields close to newly discovered chemical waste dump in the polders just north of Amsterdam in the late 1960s, or the US protesters in the early 1970s trying to smell a flower wearing a gasmask. More recently we saw the force of this type of ‘overlay’ in the ‘Grondrede’ (sermon of the soil) that the NGO Kening van de Greide organized in the fields of the province of Fryslân⁷.

No one would dare to disagree with Shakespeare that ‘All the world is but a stage’. Yet the difference between theatre and society is that the scenes are not enacted according to one given script. The future of the world is determined by scripting and counter-scripting, by creating situations, that dislocate discourses of power. Moreover, even if we recognize the role of scripting and counter-scripting we should also keep emphasizing there is a role for improvisation, responding to the situation, as there is for play and unintended effects. Politics is not simply about arm wrestling. It is also a politics of meaning. Here the ethical spectacle can most certainly play a role.

7 See performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ih1YiKsnr7c>

* Icaria, Icaria, Icaria

Five Lectures about a Desire Called Utopia and Other Superpowers

Rui Pina Coelho

First island Captatio Benevolentiae

This text—
—this text that I will be reading you in Utrecht—
is a text about books.
No.
This text that I will be reading you in Utrecht is a text about relatively unknown books.
No. No. Worse.
This is a text written for theatre about relatively unknown books.
No. No. No. Worse!
This is a "text written for theatre" about just one book.
This is a text written for theatre about a relatively unknown book.

But anyway: "this is" [I think it is fair to say] "a text about books".
That's kind of how Krishan Kumar's Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times begins.
A book that is, in fact, about books.

"This is a book about books. Worse, it is mostly about some very well-known books..."

The beginning of the book by Krishan Kumar — Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Virginia — is pretentious. There's no way to disguise it.
But at least it's an honest start. Kumar's book is really about books.

Kumar says that he manages to situate what he calls the "Utopian Moment" in Western thought with extreme precision.

That moment is precisely at the end of Thomas More's "Book One" of Utopia.
At the end of Utopia's Book One,
Raphael Hythloday,
the Portuguese sailor who describes the island of Utopia to Thomas More, tells him:

if you had been in Utopia with me, and had seen their laws and rules, as I did, for the space of five years, in which I lived among them, and during which time I was so delighted with them that indeed I should never have left them if it had not been to make the discovery of that new world to the Europeans, you would then confess that you had never seen a people so well constituted as they

For Kumar, the true utopian passion is encapsulated here. For Kumar, the utopian passion is not just about presenting generic and theoretical arguments about ideal or idealised worlds, but about demonstrating—demonstrating through the projection of imagination and vivid particularisation the truth of one's vision. The proof of utopia will not come from intellectual persuasion, but from sensory evidence.

Not intellectual persuasion, but sensory evidence.

Most of what I've read about utopia so far leads to Kumar. Kumar and Thomas More.

So. I think this is where I'm going to begin. (I'll leave Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, Enzo Traverso and the rest of the left wing melancholy for later).

I'll just say that Jameson is one of my bedside heroes, a literary critic and Marxist theorist (American!... go figure), a powerful analyst of contemporary culture and post-modernity and of what he calls late-capitalism. A guy who knows that we don't have much reason to smile.
A guy who has written a beautiful book: *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and other Science Fictions*. A book from 2005.

"Archaeologies of the future". "Archaeologies". Of the "Future". Marxists. We must take our hats off to them. Always swinging between the past and the future, the now and the tomorrow. One step backwards to take two steps forwards, isn't that what Lenin used to say? (Hum. Can we talk about Lenin now or is he still... Hu?)

Anyway. Marxists. The past and the future. If the future looks fucked, no problem — we have the past. If the past turns out to be a source of defeat, no problem — the tomorrows will sing...

This is how Jameson begins his book *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and other Science Fictions*:

"Utopia has always been a political issue, an unusual destiny for a literary form."

It's the first sentence of the book:
"Utopia has always been a political issue, an unusual destiny for a literary form".

It's the first sentence of the book and immediately explains what has interested me about the book ("relatively unknown")
which this text written for theatre" is about:
a literary fiction that becomes a political adventure.
A book that goes from intellectual persuasion to sensory evidence.

Thus. To recapitulate:
this is a text written for theatre about a relatively unknown book:
the book is *Voyages en Icarie*, by Étienne Cabet,
a utopian novel that presents a just and egalitarian society where there is neither private property nor money.

The first time I heard of Cabet was when I was studying
—when I was reading—
the novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance* by Peter Weiss.
Somewhere in the middle of the book, Weiss wrote:

At the same time as the first reading groups were being founded, around 1845, by journeymen from Paris [journeymen are workers paid by the day], where they had become familiar with the doctrines of Cabet, Proudhon and Blanc, the societies of the Friends of the Reform emerged, organised by bourgeois groups. In the first [reading group], the first steps were taken in the struggle for a people's parliament, universal suffrage and a reduction in the working day, which could reach sixteen hours; in the last, young workers, freed from the yoke of the masters after the dissolution of the guilds, would be won over to new forms of paternal guidance in educational associations.

Impulses from France also brought a League of the Just to Stockholm, but Cabet's Icaria — the kingdom of peaceful communism, in which everything belonged to everyone and total equality reigned, in which the people themselves ruled, anyone could be elected to any position, in which the fraternity of true Christianity was brought to life, as Götrek the bookseller had claimed — was too utopian to jeopardise the foundations suggested by the liberals.

"Too utopian to jeopardise the foundations suggested by the liberals",
wrote Peter Weiss about Cabet's Icaria.

From here I went to Jacques Rancière's *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*. But I won't bore you too much with Rancière right now.

I'm not going into *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream*, a book where Rancière imagines what workers do at night, in the few hours that they are not the property of their employers, in the few hours that workers don't have to sell their labour power—where Jacques Rancière imagines and studies the nights of the emancipated workers of the first half of the 19th century. "Condemned by their material condition to days of work and nights of rest, the workers, in a peculiar exercise of subversion at nightfall, thus exempted themselves from this subjection, breaking the order of time and breaking with the design that destines some to the privileges of thought and relegates others to the slavery of labour," you can read on the book's jacket (at least, in the edition I have, the "Antigona" edition).

Well, maybe I will bore you just a little bit with Rancière.

In *Proletarian Nights* there is a (long) chapter entitled "The Journey of Icarus", precisely about Cabet. More precisely, about the "First Advanced Guard", the first group of workers who followed Cabet to America.

Rancière makes use of an authentic archive of utopia. He creates an archaeology of the future...
Ah, the Marxists.

Rancière makes use of maps, letters, newspaper articles, manifestos... left-wing memorabilia that documents the attempt to live a utopia.

Icaria, our Icaria, is large and beautiful [...] there are immense prairies, forests, streams where good clear water flows [...] the temperature is very mild [...] what is very good and very healthy is a breeze that blows continuously, with a strong dew in the morning, and has made the land fertile [...] the flowers that are cultivated with all the care in Europe grow wild here on the prairies.... Reads Rancière in the *Letters of the workers Viardot, Boissonnet, Buisson, Lévi, Rousset, Guillote Therme* (Le Populaire, on 20 August 1848).

These Icarian communities will not do very well, in fact. Cabet will even be expelled from one. Apparently, he was too authoritarian. The joke writes itself; I know.

We'll come back to these real Icaria another day. "Too utopian to jeopardise the foundations suggested by liberals," wrote Peter Weiss about Cabet's Icaria. Right.

Perhaps I should emphasise that Cabet didn't write a treatise. Or a manifesto. Or a pamphlet (well, a pamphlet it is not—we're talking almost a thousand pages). He writes a novel. "A novel". A novel. A work of fiction, an effort of imagination.

If you'll allow me a parenthesis, I'm going to make another list of hyperbolic and enthusiastic ways of emphasising the fact that Cabet wrote a novel and not a boring political treatise:

Cabet wrote a novel!
An effort of imagination!
A brushstroke on nothing!
A gap in reality!
Something that didn't exist and came to exist!
An idea in tentative form.
Words, one after the other.
Words that lead to gestures.
Gestures that lead to actions.

To confess that the first time I heard of Cabet was when I was studying Peter Weiss' novel is to confess my ignorance and inattention.

This is because many years ago I wrote a text for a performance about several utopian socialists of the 19th century, such as Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Proudhon.... It was about Portuguese cowboys, emigrants in the United States, looking for happiness. Looking for a *Vacant House*. [*Vacant House* - *Casa Vaga* in Portuguese, was the name of this performance].

... not having stumbled across Cabet at the time only reveals my ignorance and inattention. Anyway. The lesson to be learnt, at least for me, is:

There are words that only appear in re-readings.
There are worlds that only appear in second glances.

*Your compassion, kind readers.
Your compassion, dear compatriots.*

Second island

Travels to Icaria

Thus. To recapitulate:

this is a text written for theatre about a relatively unknown book:

the book is

Voyages en Icarie, by Étienne Cabet,

a utopian novel that presents a just and egalitarian society where there is neither private property nor money.

Étienne Cabet was born on 1 January 1788 in Dijon and died in 1856 in Saint Louis, Missouri, in the United States of America. He was a French writer, socialist and utopian. He was a teacher, lawyer, revolutionary and political exile.

The book was published in 1840. Nineteenth century, then.

In fact, the history of the book's publication is quite curious. In 1839 the book was already written. And Cabet circulates a few copies—a little fearfully—something of a clandestine nature...

In fact, experts don't entirely agree on this issue. In fact, no record has been found of this "supposed" first edition of 1839... well.

The first edition is in fact from 1840. The novel was published in two volumes under the title *Voyage et adventures de Lord William Carisdall en Icarie*. It was labelled "Traduit de l'Anglais, de Francis Adams par Th. Dufuit" (by the "Souverain" publishing house).

The author, Étienne Cabet, for fear of being arrested (or at least "bothered") by the French authorities, decided to publish it anonymously and as if it were a translation of an English book...

Cabet did indeed have reasons to be cautious. He had already been indicted for writing two articles considered subversive by the authorities, published in the weekly *Le Populaire* (which he himself ran...). Between two years in jail or a fine, Cabet preferred a five-year political exile in England: from 1834 to 1839 (the French authorities of the time often applied the popular adage "out of sight, out of mind").

So, Cabet, back in France, says that the book is a translation of a novel by some English author and that's that.

But anyway. When he realises that his fears are unfounded, the book was published in 1842 under the title *Voyage en Icarie: Roman philosohique et social*, published in a single volume by the "Mallet" publishing house—and already signed by Étienne Cabet.

Two more editions appeared in the 1840s: the same content as the 1840 edition, but with some textual additions: the 1845 edition had a preface, and the 1848 edition had an appendix entitled "Doctrine Communiste"... The edition that stabilised the text, the sixth, was published in 1970 by Éditions Anthropos, with a critical introduction by Henri Desroche. But we'll get to that in a moment.

Voyage et adventures de Lord William Carisdall en Icarie. In English, and to put it simply, *Travels to Icaria*. And that's the title I'll be referring to. *Travels to Icaria*.

The novel is divided into three parts:

In the first, a traveller describes all the objects he is going to visit, the roads, the countryside, the cities, houses, monuments, workshops, schools, hospices, theatres, etc. He describes everything to do with food, clothing, education, medicine, agriculture, industry, festivals, pleasures, feasts, etc.

In the second part, the vices of the old social and political organisation of Icaria, which are those of the organisation of all countries today. It tells how the transformation of Icaria to the Community took place. A debate is supposed to take place in which speakers argue all the objections against Equality and the Community, while others refute them. A second part recounts the progress of Democracy since the beginning of the world, and the opinion of all the main philosophers on Equality and Community.

The third part contains the essential principles of Community.

Please, do note that Cabet is credited to be the first to use the term "communism" ...

In 1840, Cabet published the essay "Comment Je Suis Communiste".

What is its philosophy? The sweetest, since [communism] has as its goal the improvement and happiness of men, and as its means, fraternity.

What is its morality? The purest, since [communism] tends to dry up the source of all vices and crimes, through the development of reason with the help of education.

What is your education? The most perfect, since it aims to develop in all men the intelligence and dignity they have received from Nature.

What is your religion? The most sublime, since man, happy to use his Reason, can only give thanks to Nature for the countless blessings it has bestowed on him.

What is your social and political organisation? The Community (4-5)

In *Travels in Icaria*, a fictional work, I emphasise, fictional, Cabet, in the good style of Thomas More's *Utopia*—his greatest inspiration—deals with the voyage of the British Lord, William Carisdall, to an unknown island, Icaria. On this island there is a Republic, ruled by Icarus, a benign dictator who, at the beginning of time, founded Icaria somewhere in the Atlantic.

"A benign dictator". A curious way of adjectivizing a dictator, I know. "Benign". I use this adjective with caution. Caution and irony. I'll tell you more about this benignity later. But I can start by saying that this benign dictator is a character very much inspired by Napoleon—a kind of a real superhero who must have impressed poor Cabet as a teenager.

In Icaria,
Icarus' regime is based on egalitarian principles:
a society that doesn't need money;
private property;
courts, police or crime;
in which science is applied to agriculture and crafts;
in which inheritance is abolished;
where everyone is fed according to their hunger;
where ownership of the means of production is communal;
where work is organised in national workshops;
where food and clothing are provided free of charge to all citizens;
where education is universal and free for all sexes;
and where a community library collects carefully selected books.

A society so advanced that it has already made social inequalities disappear.

Thus, with this creative Utopia, Cabet criticised the social order of the time and proposed the creation of a model agrarian community, seen as the starting point for the transformation of the world.

The novel, which was very popular among Parisian workers and artisans — it was the best-selling novel among French workers and artisans in 1845—led Étienne Cabet to move to the United States in 1848 in an attempt to put his theories into practice, founding the Icarian movement.

Cabet bought a plot of land in Denton County in the state of Texas and led a group of French men and women who abandoned family and property to seek a better world in the virgin lands of Texas. On 3 February 1848, the "first advanced guard" of sixty-nine Icarians set sail from Le Havre, France, bound for Texas aboard the sailing ship Roma. They landed in New Orleans on 27 March 1848.

Things don't go very well. Cabet and his followers are swindled out of selling the land. It's not even where they thought it was. The group splits up. People fall ill. The doctor goes mad. In short. A mess. Some return to France. Others sue Cabet for fraud. But two hundred and eighty remain faithful to Cabet. They bought a Mormon community, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and went to Nauvoo, Illinois, founding the first permanent Icarian community on 5 February 1848.

They then established a series of communes in Cheltenham, near Saint Louis, in 1856, in the state of Texas; in Corning, in the state of Iowa; and in Cloverdale, in the state of California. But I'll come back to this story of Icarian colonisation. But not today.

In America, everything is new.

"Utopia has always been a political subject, an unusual destination for a literary form."
Wink, Wink.

Third island The Great Game

A few years ago, in Milan, at the Strehler Theatre (a beautiful theatre!), at a conference that brought together a series of academics and artists on theatre, on theatre and performance, a conference of a European association, not very old, EASTAP (EASTAP was founded in 2019)—so, the "European Association for the Study of Theatre and Performance"—...

The conference I attended must have been in two thousand and twenty... twenty-one... no! twenty-two—in 2022. Well, Milan, 2022, EASTAP, Strehler Theatre: I attended a conference by, how should I put it, performance studies guru, Richard Schechner.

Schechner is a kind of Pope. Pope, not papa. Although he is often considered to be the papa of Performance Studies, which he "invented" in the seventies of the 20th century. He's a fatherly figure.

One great thing about EASTAP is that it wants to bring artists and academics together. So, at each conference there are always figures who are highlighted. Artists and academics—who are given equal importance and an equal platform. Which is really cool. And, while this may seem like a commonplace, it's not. It's still not that commonplace to mix thinking and doing, studying, and

rehearsing, theorising and practising...

So, in Milan, 2022, EASTAP, Strehler Theatre, Schechner was the "Scholar in Focus".

Schechner's conference was, I say, utopian.

The idea, very simple, was very thought-provoking. Schechner, in a very mischievous and provocative way, was proposing that wars should be postponed. If it was impossible to end the wars, then let them be postponed.

In the summer of 2022, the war between Russia and Ukraine was already in full swing. The tensions in Europe were very visible, the fact that there was a war on European soil again left no-one indifferent—and the war in Ukraine was touching on many issues that were overtaking public life in Europe—the rise of nationalist sensitivities, the return of fascism... the economic crisis, the cost of living and inflation were playing the role of fuel for the European middle classes to squirm on their sofas, not knowing what to think about the war...

I mean, in the news, everything was against the Russians... but. But. In the silence of intimate and personal reflection on the world, we remembered Zelenskyy's connections to the Russian oligarchy. His past as an entertainer. His populism and links to Trump. But. Putin's totalitarianism. Imperial Russia. Putin's human rights violations. But.

Anyway. Schechner. Proposes that wars should be postponed. The argument was very well put together.

Firstly. Humanity has practised war for as long as we can remember. It's not likely that humanity will stop warring. It's a kind of inalienable trait.

Secondly. War is performative. It always has been. We can either pick up on this performative dimension of war in expressions such as "the theatre of operations", "the stage of war"—or in accounts of battles in which civilians watched on hilltops, as spectators, as the soldiers-actors fought. Napoleon and Wellington, in an agon attended by anxious spectators. Whoever loses, leaves. Just like in football. Like in video games. Like in superhero films.

Thirdly. Wars are precipitating the end of the world. Wars are causing the disappearance of animal species. Wars are killing thousands of people. Wars are precipitating environmental collapse. Wars delay the abandonment of oil resources.

Fourthly. Let's therefore devote our attention to looking after the planet and looking after each other. Let's deal with the climate catastrophe. Let's save the planet. And while we're at it, let's postpone the wars. And then, come on, in a hundred years or so, we'll go back to wars—but in the meantime, by then we'll have found a way to make war more like a game.

No killing

Without ruining the planet

Without making species and habitats disappear.

A kind of utopia. A kind of silly utopia. Provocative and naughty. But a utopia.

The kind of New War I'm proposing is governed by performance rules, a "great game" in fact, at least in part performed for a global audience. [...] What I propose is that we take our most self-

destructive behaviour into the shelter of virtuality. Of course, I'm not sure how to do this yet—nor do I know if it can be done—but the alternative is even more unthinkable: continuing to play the Great Game as we have been playing it will end human civilisation as we know it, destroy much animal, and plant life and destroy the planet.

We are creatures who live in the mind of God. In other words, we live in our imaginations. Poof.

And, I ask, who can help invent something new like this?

The artists, I will answer. The artists. Artists tickling the imagination of politics and giving birth to utopia in a spasm of laughter.

Maybe it's time we stopped trying to improve this world.

Maybe it's time to invent a new world.

We need to move on from collapsology to collapsosophy, and learn to live intelligently, and therefore utopianly, in a world that is just beginning.

So: this "text written for about a relatively unknown book",
is also about
the end of the world,
about the end of time,
about the end of history,
about the end of the industrial party,
about the end of thermo-industrial civilisation,
about survivalism,
about colapsonauts,
about the history of imagination,
about the utopian moment of Western culture,
on political theatre,
on left-wing melancholy,
about a desire called utopia,
and other superpowers.

And so on and so forth.

Fourth island

But something is missing

But something is missing.

But something is missing.

Ernst Bloch, a German Marxist philosopher, believes that the starting point for any utopian project can be condensed into a single formula. "But something is missing."

—a phrase from Bertolt Brecht's libretto for Kurt Weill's opera, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*: "aber es fehlt etwas". But something's missing". But something's missing.

(If you'll allow me a parenthesis: when Brecht leaves Germany to escape the Nazi spiders, one of the many books he takes with him is Cabet's *Travels in Icaria*...)

I don't want to frighten you. I don't have access to any classified or secret information. I'm not here to bring you any more news than you already know.

Climate change
droughts and floods
global pandemics
wars
the return of fascist sensibilities
the Fukushima nuclear disaster
the successive waves of refugees in Europe
the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels
the mass disappearance of birds and insects
the Brexit vote
the election of Trump, Bolsonaro, Orban...
state violence in the Gaza Strip
the democratic slide in Argentina

all of this is accentuating an already perennial sense of permanent crisis.

I'm sure we're all aware and concerned.

What I want to say now is that there is a fringe of contemporary performance that is highly focussed on dealing with the idea of the end of the world and interested in researching this growing notion of finitude.

The famous quote attributed to Frederic Jameson seems to have undergone a semantic twist: "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" is no longer a slogan of anti-capitalist rhetoric; it's now just a blunt truism. In fact, today it's very easy to imagine the end of the world.

This will constitute efforts to reshape, from the ground up, the rules of engagement between humans and nature and redesign the social dream.

Let's take for granted the notion that in the performing arts, through the co-presence of actors and spectators, something that never existed comes to exist. Let's take it for granted that we are always dealing simultaneously with an experience of life, a bodily understanding—sensory evidence, limited only by the boundaries of what can be done and what can be imagined on stage.

Let's take it for granted that a performance offers a liminal space where everything is simultaneously real and artificial, possible, and impossible. We are always dealing with the real thing (what is on stage) and the image of the thing (our perception of what it is).

Thus, our current "crisis of the imagination" can be challenged by scenic utopias, considered as attempts to defy the end times and fight for the rooting of (artistic) utopia in the imagination of politics, trusting that art and theatre will be able to help us invent scenarios that today seem impossible or that we have not yet managed to conceive.

Not by correcting what is real, not by improving what is possible, not by threatening frightening results — but simply by starting again. In this way, contemporary performance can induce an "education in desire", in the way that Miguel Abensour understands utopianism: "as the education of a desire to be and live differently" (apud Thaler 2022: 3).

The first sentence in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005), by Fredric Jameson, is:

"Utopia has always been a political subject, an unusual destination for a literary form." (2005: xi).

I am, thus, talking about political theatre.

Political theatre can no longer just be didactic, pedagogical, epic, documentary, of the oppressed, guerrilla, realistic... We need a political theatre that uses imaginative avant-garde extravaganzas to mobilise the need for immediate political change, in the good old tradition of the utopian socialists of the 19th century, such as Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Étienne Cabet (Wink Wink)...

... or, as Perry Anderson, another Marxist critic, put it:

*"It may be, then, that going backwards may be a way forward:
that remembering the modernisms of the 19th century
can give us the vision and the courage
to create the modernisms of the 21st century"*
(1984).

One step back.
Two steps forward.

Fifth island
Où est Icarie?

Allons en Icarie,
wrote Ettiene Cabet.
Allons en Icarie?, Cabet asked the emancipated workers of his time. Are we going to Icarie? And off they went. He and eighty other French men and women in 1848.
And they went to Illinois to find a real utopia.

Allons, nous, en Icarie ?
Where is Icarie?
Where is it?
Where is Meru?
Where is Atlantis?
El Dorado?
Olympus?
The Republic by Plato?
Christianopolis by Johann Valentin Andrea?
The mobile city of Indra-loka?
The Garden of Eden?
The Kingdom of Heaven?
Wakanda?
The libertarian abbey of Thélème?
Where is the Promised Land of the working-class heroes that Bruce Springsteen sings about?
Where is the kingless Yugoslavia of the 20th century?

Jannah, the Islamic paradise?
Dilmun, the paradise of the Sumerians?
The Viking Valhalla?
The mountains of Kunlun?
Mount Penglai, of which Chinese and Japanese mythologies speak?
The happy kingdoms of Kronos and Saturn?
Francis Godwin's moon?
The Fortunate Isles?
Where are the Champs-Élysées?
Where is Giphantia, imagined by Tiphaigne de la Roche?
Lemuria?
The City of the Sun, by Tommaso Campanella?
The City of Truth, by Bartolomeo Del Bene?
The City of Betica, by Fénelon?
Oceana, by James Harrington?
Spensonia, by Thomas Spence?
Freeland, by Theodor Hertzka?
Tamoé?
Harmonia?
The Guild of St George, by John Ruskin?
Victoria by James Buckinham?
Wellwyn, the garden city imagined by Ebenezer Howard?
Robert Owen's New Lanark?
Fourier's phalansteries?
Francis Bacon's New Atlantis?
Samuel Butler's Erewhon?
Hygeia, by Benjamin Ward Richardson?
Où est Altneuland, the old new land envisioned by Theodor Herzl?
Où est le The Land of Cockaigne?

Où?
The Island of St Brendan?
The Island of the Blessed?
The Island of Love?
The Lost Island?
The floating islands of Morelly?
Where is the New World?
Where is the Island of Utopia?

Which way is the country dreamt of by artisans and workers, peasants and politicians, poets and acrobats in the eighteenth revolutionary months that followed the Carnation Revolution in April 1974?

This is a list—incomplete—very incomplete—of places that a group of people from the same geography or the same religion or the same political imagination have, at some point, called paradise, or an ideal place, or a good place, or a desirable place... in short: u-topia.



Openings

Towards

the

otherwise



Sarah Lasoye opening *Dreaming in the Dark* with her poetry at Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions

* Artefacts from the Otherwise

Utopia*Art*Politics Collective

To close the Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions, we imagined: *What if a collection of artefacts were sent from a multitude of times and spaces, meant to provoke utopian imagination and politics for justice in the present? What might we encounter?* These could be artefacts that embody ideas, practices, rituals, or more. Maybe they come from Roma flamenco players seen as aliens in their own country, Palestinian spacefarers following in the tradition of Sun-Ra, island nation climate refugees, and all manner of beings who must find space as colonial utopias encroach.

We had many ideas of what such an artefact might look or feel like, represent, or how it may be encountered. It was perhaps easier to first imagine what it might *not* be. Such as countless artefacts that continue to encode global inequality, institutional racism, post-truth politics, neo-colonialism, and ecological devastation into the present, closing off possible alternatives.

Some of these are heavy, rigid, imposing, built from the 30 billion tonnes of concrete used each year worldwide¹. Some are less obvious. For example, the Golden Records, a time capsule sent into outer space in 1977, "containing sounds and images selected to portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth"². Yet, how might this gift be received? They would see images of life on Earth as free from war, pollution and exploitation.³ Images with over twice as many male subjects in them, and no possibility of a non-binary existence.⁴ Music composed exclusively by men, deemed 'good' by the few Western astronomers and engineers who selected them.⁴ A gift that sends only our dominant knowledge, like a one-way spear across time and space.

Such a portrayal of a 'utopian' harmonious Earth erases the diversity of struggles and ways of being in the world, reminiscent of the many problems with utopia throughout history.⁵ The Golden Records encode at the same time a singular view of the Earth *and* a view of utopia itself. What might an artefact look like that encodes alternative ways of being in our many worlds?

To serve as inspiration for our task, poet and health justice activist Sarah Lasoye mentioned Ursula Le Guin's novel *Always Coming Home*—an anthropological study of a people, the Kesh, "who might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern California".⁶ A people who offer hope for what humanity might be capable of becoming. In the novel, we find a diverse array of artefacts, from stories and poems to songs and recipes, which encode an entirely different way of being in relation to nature and each other.

And so, we began imagining together *through* making, conversing, and relating, to explore possible artefacts and how they might encode a new form of utopian imagination and politics in the now. As Le Guin wrote in *Always Coming Home*: "The difficulty of translation from a language that doesn't yet exist is considerable, but there's no need to exaggerate it."⁶

1 Paulo Monteiro, Sabbie Miller & Arpad Horvathm (2017), Towards sustainable concrete, *Nature Materials*, 16

2 NASA, The Golden Record: <https://science.nasa.gov/mission/voyager/voyager-golden-record-overview/>

3 John Traphagan (2021), Should We Lie to Extraterrestrials? A Critique of the Voyager Golden Records, *Space Policy*, 57

4 Joseph Mackenzie (2020), Earth's Ambassador: A contextual history of the Voyager interstellar message, Masters Thesis, University of Leiden

5 Ruth Levitas (2010), *The concept of utopia*, Peter Lang

6 Ursula Le Guin (1985), *Always coming home*, Harper Perennial, p. XI

* Time excavator



Its exterior gleams silver in the light. Yet the shininess is but a façade—built upon layers of desired futures wrapped around the ruins of previous generations' visions—each in their own time shiny and visionary. Just as ours too will be. Yet, we can pierce the surface, peek inside, and shine a light in. What do you see? Maybe there is an old phone box, overgrown by vines. Or people—so many people—harmed by ghosts of utopia's past. And maybe if we look deep inside, we may find that we are always coming back to ourselves, our ancestors' dreams and visions.

* The secret



This is a secret. No one should know what it is, but if you insist, you have to knock your feet. (*sound of knocking feet*) It says "please do not open, please do not open" but if you insist... inside is a paper with clear instructions. They say: "Do not open Google".... if you want me to continue you have to knock your feet. (*sound of knocking feet*) Ok, it says: "Do not type in [redacted]... and do not click on 'I'm feeling lucky'." I said it's a secret. I'm also saying, you've been warned.

* Ritual of de-numbing

We are here today to enact the ritual of de-numbing. We have come to a point in society where the pain has been so much that we recognize that there was too much numbing going on. This ritual has been an important step in re-connecting to that which matters.

(the group proceeds to carefully pass the cloth from person to person; each contributes...)

"I am re-membering love"

"I reconcile myself with what is intimately known yet wildly unknowable"

"I envision the true depth of friendship"

"I am re-awakening to the beauty of nature"

"I am trying to re-connect with political desire"

"I am taking control of the language of my life"

"I am trying to find balance"

"I am normalizing loving each other"

"I am normalizing care"

"I am cultivating radical intimacy with the human and more than human"

"I am being hopeful about the future"

"I am slowing down"

"I am trying to work out how to be the best ancestor to future generations"

"I am trying to hold space for everything that comes and what is"

"I am trying to go from a no place to finding that place, but maybe it's not the place we thought"

"I am trying to find space between the binaries that are violently forced upon us"

"I am seeing you as part of me"

"I'm not that innocent" (sung)

"I am turning rage into connection"

"I am the ontological shift"



* The ontological shift

You place this face in front of your own and ask each other questions about what we don't know we don't know, to create space for that form of communication. The placard says 'hey, liberate the future!'. But it is also a device to talk about future ancestors, so you can keep in constant community with beings from the future and the past. And then this tiny little being stuck to my shirt is a secret agent, which can dance on the device.

* Flowing affect

I choose to send an affect, like a re-animation, or re-attachment to forms of political determination. This structure symbolizes interconnection, beauty, and attachment to one another; flexibility, a plurality of methods, shapes and ideas. But I realized once this is sent back, nobody would understand what it is. So, the point of looking at this, is that it could on the surface level look like anything, but the actual thing is—an affect, a flow, an intensity—which results in a movement towards political action.



* Chronobeacon



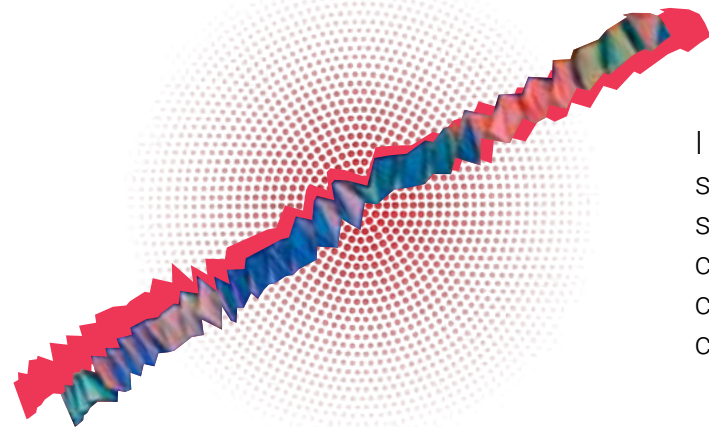
I decided to ask AI: what is an artefact from the future that can help us guide the present? Our computer ancestors said: *"The artefact from the future that can help guide the present might be a small sleek device called the chronobeacon. It can project holographic displays to show detailed visuals of potential future events based on our decisions, providing clear representation of the impact of various choices. This can help individuals and leaders to make informed decisions. Using predictive analysis and quantum computing capabilities, the chronobeacon can analyse vast amounts of data in real time, predicting future trends."* I suddenly realized: the AI suggested the chronobeacon to predict itself. Creepy.

* Leaf simulator

It generates energy through the power of photosynthesis. There are some wire grids around it and a donut looking thing that's actually a reactor. Essentially it has travelled back to us to show a bunch of things—how technology has been used to co-opt nature. For me, it's a scary thing. It's like OK, we have leaves outside, and it's an invitation to look at them.



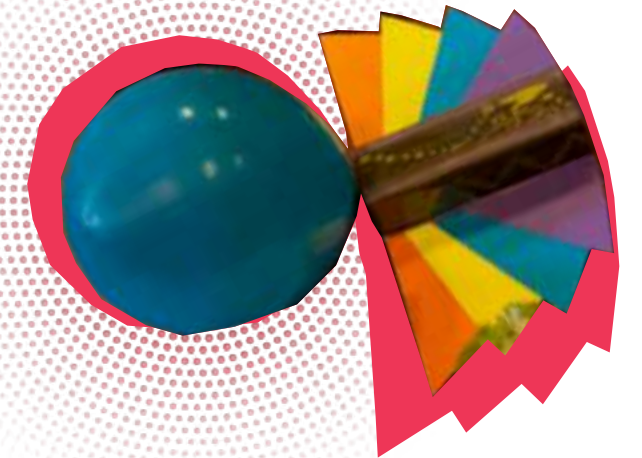
* Child's play



I was inspired to be playful and do something that I used to do as a child—shaping and making this paper form that can move. You can make it small or big. It is colourful, but you can also take it apart and create something new or useful out of it.

* Un-naming device

This is rapid prototype number 3, called an un-namer. It allows you to un-name things and labels which keep us trapped in the world. It looks like a bird accidentally, and I was drawn to colour.



* Words to carry

When I am on a hike or in an activity where the meditative takes over, usually for me there's a song lyric in my mind that I say over and over again. I wonder if there are things in that future that have stayed with people. If I were the ancestor sending something back, it would be these two things. I have written it down in a way that is interactive, so you are supposed to cast a spell with another person to take up some sort of animating reconnection.

*"I will give you all
of my soul,
for your pleasure.
I will give you everything
that I know,
for good measure."*

— Laura Mvula,
Safe Passage (song)



*"I search a face
for obstacles to genocide
I search beyond the dead
and
driven by imperfect visions
of the living
yes and no
I come and go
back to the eyes
of anyone
who talks to me"*

— June Jordan,
Poem for a Young Poet

* Reciprocal making



You encounter this soft object by picking up and playing with it. The artefact reminds us of how we are inextricably tied together. How we co-create one another and the world that we inhabit, and the need to experiment with different ways of co-creating the world.

* Möbius string figures



This is both a Möbius strip and also in the tradition of Donna Haraway, a string figure and way into speculative fabulation. It is a reminder of that constant creation and also the responsibility that comes with it. How there is no *there* there.

* Gifting for radical intimacy

This is a gift which itself encodes a radical form of gift giving practice. We often think of gifts as an intimate gestures. Yet, utopia at its worst is framed as a 'gift' to the world—but actually doing much harm. What have we lost in our practice of gift giving? Are we only able to give intimate gifts to the narrow group encircling us? This gift is purposefully flexible—it gives agency to the gift receiver to take its parts—play-doh, colored markers, nature—to construct what is meaningful to them, rather than being given something rigid that cannot be changed. Everyone is invited to gift something in this way to someone outside of their normal social spheres, to establish radical intimacy.



* Charm necklace of battles won

This charm necklace brings from the future reminders of battles that were won. Some from moments past and some from moments not yet. So we have corona virus and a reminder of mutual aid opportunities. Another charm is from the fight for the legalization of abortion across Latin America. A third one is for the end of a hostile environment in the UK and stopping of deportation flights. A fourth one is a banker who was also arrested for mass fraud at some point. And so on...



* Death shroud for modernity



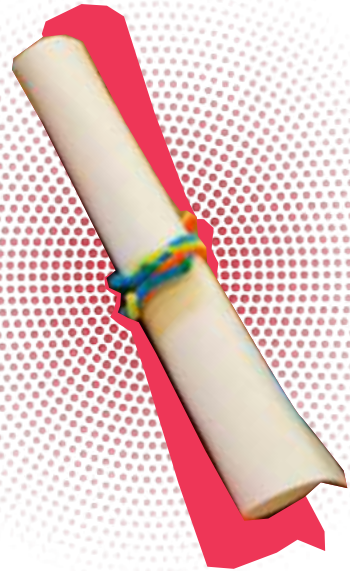
This enables the dying of modernity. My death shroud is full of items. One of these items is this little mini-puppet who is a symbol of our entire group. It is a secret symbol though because we expect the future to be difficult enough where we have to hide a little bit, and have to communicate using underground signals to each other.

* Kaleidoscopic glasses

I made a device which makes desirable futures workable in the present. I hope very soon everyone has a pair of these glasses in their pockets. When we as adults play we open our hearts and our minds. Kaleidoscopic glasses are maybe an opportunity to see the different reality of other people without judging. They are not a form of escapism but a form of living together in democratic co-habitation.



* Yearly license to operate



This is a paper copy of a digital document that was introduced in the mid-2000s when it became clear that allowing corporations to continue to operate without liability for their actions was not the way we want to do things. So, this is a license that corporations had to get renewed every year to be able to continue to make profits. It had to be agreed on by representatives of marginalized groups and different living species. And only if they got the license approved would they be able to continue operating. If they did not get it approved then they could only operate as a non-profit organization from then onwards.

* Remembrance of fragility



This is a remembrance of how fragile utopias are...

...but also how fragile all anti-utopias are..





Noor Noor & Josie Chambers



Live looping performance
Noor Noor & Josie Chambers, 2024

Inspired by all of the provocations and dialogues,
this performance opens up a space to confront
overgrown utopias and imagine utopias between us.

Noor Noor setting up for live looping performance at *Dreaming in the Dark* while
artist-researcher-practitioners engage in dialogue at Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions

Click to experience

* Bios of Utopian Practitioners

*Contributors to Utopia*Art*Politics Sessions*

Maya Adams is a futures practitioner and artist exploring climate justice, ecological grief, and equitable futures. Her practice is shaped by lived experience and a Master's in Environmental Change and Management from Oxford.

Carla Almanza-Gálvez is a research assistant and assistant lecturer in the Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies at University College Cork, and a member of the Ralahine Centre for Utopian Studies at the University of Limerick.

Flor Avelino is a researcher on just sustainability transitions and social innovation currently working at the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development at Utrecht University as full professor. Flor specialises in power theories and has a particular interest in how people are (dis)empowered to contribute to just sustainability transitions.

Roy Bendor is Associate Professor of Critical Design and Director of the Design for Interaction Master's program at Delft University of Technology. His work explores the capacity of design to disclose and promote alternative social, political and environmental futures.

Josie Chambers is an Assistant Professor in the Urban Futures Studio at Utrecht University and a musician. She co-designs and researches critical and artistic approaches to fostering radical imagination and societal transformation.

Chiara de Cesari is Professor of Heritage and Memory and Chair of Cultural Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Her research explores how institutional manifestations of memory, heritage, art, and cultural politics are shifting under conditions of contemporary globalization and ongoing transformations of the nation-state.

Marijke de Pous is a visual artist based in Rotterdam with a background in philosophy and activist academic education. Her work and collaborative projects explore more-than-human agency, creative power, entangled forms of resistance and radical belonging.

Stephen Duncombe is Professor of Media and Culture at New York University, and Co-Founder and Research Director of the Center for Artistic Activism.

Cara Flores is a printmaker, designer, and PhD candidate researching a decolonial approach to mapping practices for sustainable island futures at the Urban Future Studio at Utrecht University.

Carlos Garrido Castellano is Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor in University College Cork and Senior Associate Researcher in the University of Johannesburg.

Maarten Hajer is distinguished professor of Urban Futures and Futuring at Utrecht University and is the founding director of the Urban Futures Studio, now part of the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development.

Maria Hlavajova is an organizer, researcher, pedagogue, curator, and founding director of BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht (2000–2025). She holds an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Merin Raju Jacob is a Junior Researcher and PhD candidate at the Centre for Sustainability Transitions, Stellenbosch University. She uses Africanfuturism storytelling to reimagine more just and sustainable African cities.

Nuraini Juliastuti is a writer, maker, and publisher. She is a lecturer at the Master of Fine Art Programme, School of Visual Arts, HKU University of the Arts, Utrecht. She is the co-founder of KUNCI Study Forum & Collective, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. She also co-founded Reading Sideways Press with her family.

Christina Klubert is a PhD researcher exploring the intersection of emotions, democratic participation and climate politics at the Urban Futures Studio at Utrecht University.

Darko Lagunas has a background in sociology, working at the intersection of ethnographic research and transdisciplinary studies. His work centers around the socio-ecological impacts of mining for the energy transition and how infrastructures of displacement unmake worlds.

Sarah Lasoye is a poet and writer from London, based in Sheffield. Her debut chapbook *Fovea / Ages Ago* was published by Hajar Press in 2021, and her work has been featured in *Bath Magg*, *The New Statesman*, *Poetry London*, *And Other Poems*, *Wasafiri Magazine*, & *Basket Magazine*.

Dan Lockton is Director of the Institute for Sustainable Worlds and Professor of Design & Imagination at Norwich University of the Arts, UK, and founder of the Imaginaries Lab, Utrecht, NL, best known for the *New Metaphors* card deck. He works on how design methods can support collaborative re-imagining, especially around futures in an age of climate crisis.

Noor Noor is an interdisciplinary sustainability practitioner based in Cambridge, UK. He is a Programme Officer at UNEP-WCMC and works on strengthening human rights and equity in environmental research and decision-making. Noor is a musician and aspiring time-traveller.

Lola Olufemi is a black feminist writer and independent researcher from London. Her work focuses on the utility of the political imagination in the textual and visual cultures of radical social movement. She is author of *Feminism Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (Pluto Press, 2020), *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* (Hajar Press, 2021), the forthcoming *Against Literature* (2026) and a member of 'bare minimum', an interdisciplinary anti-work arts collective.

Edgar Pieterse is founding director of the African Centre for Cities, Co-Chair of the African Mayoral Leadership Programme (AMALI) and Provost of the Norman Foster Institute. His research centres on city-level innovation ecosystems that can support the mainstreaming of sustainable urbanism in Africa. His most recent co-authored book is, *Cities Rethought. A New Urban Disposition*. (Polity, 2024).

Rui Pina Coelho is Assistant Professor at the School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon, and Director of the Centre for Theatre Studies. A playwright and dramaturgist, he has collaborated regularly with TEP (Oporto Experimental Theatre) since 2010.

Ruth Potts an activist, facilitator and researcher based in Bristol, UK. She is a Senior Research Associate on Imagination Infrastructure at the University of Bristol and project lead for Radical Ecology's Equilibrium project.

Jean Railla is the founder of the Creative Lab for Social Impact and a Clinical Adjunct Professor in the department of Media, Culture and Communication at NYU Steinhardt.

Karin Rebel is a Full Professor in Sustainability Science & Education at the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development. She is interested in the interaction between climate science and the arts.

Blake Robinson is a Senior Researcher at the Urban Futures Studio, leading a collaboration with the African Centre for Cities (University of Cape Town) and Centre for Sustainability Transitions (Stellenbosch University) exploring just and sustainable futures for African cities.

Paula Serafini is Senior Lecturer in Creative and Cultural Industries at Queen Mary University of London. She is interested in the intersections of culture, politics, and ecology. Her latest book is *Creating Worlds Otherwise: Art, Collective Action and (Post)Extractivism* (VUP, 2022).

Esha Shah is a feminist scholar who believes in the power of moral ideas to change the world. She is working as Senior Lecturer at Wageningen University. Her research interests include the ways in which scientists' subjectivity shapes objectivity in science, and decolonial history of higher education institutes. Her latest book is *Who is the Scientist Subject? Affective History of the Gene* (Routledge: London, 2018).

Jonas Torrens is a transdisciplinary researcher and teacher, interested in experimentation, transformative action, and mass mobilisations for rapid and just transitions. He is an assistant professor at the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development.

Fiona Trüb is a MSc graduate in Sustainable Development from Utrecht University. She is interested in participatory, arts-based approaches and behavioural change and developed a mindfulness course for her peers. She now works for an NGO and teaches Yoga in Zurich.

Dorine van Meel is an artist, educator and course director of the MA Planetary Poetics at the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam. Her practice unfolds in collaborative and discursive projects that result in moving image installations, performances, publications and workshops.

Joost Vervoort is Associate Professor of Transformative Imagination at the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development. His work focuses on how societal imagination impact action — with a focus on creative sectors, video games, mystery and mystical experience, and imagination infrastructure.

Felipe Viveros is a Chilean born writer, facilitator, artist and strategist, who co-creates a diverse array of outputs across the post-capitalist sphere. Gathering experimental research on movement building, deep ecology and post capitalism, his practice focuses on challenging dominant narratives by centering the voices, knowledge and experience of the global majority, and BIPOC and Indigenous communities.

UTOPIA **

Sessions

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