


Lost Paradises
and the
Potemkin
Villages of the
Future

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Climate change tethers us to a perspective that oscillates between the impossible and the inevitable, already and not yet, everywhere but not here, not quite.

Jodi Dean: The Anamorphic Politics of Climate Change

It has been said and written many times: the catastrophe has already happened, only we do not fully feel its consequences yet, *not quite*. But we know about them, we can predict them, describe in detail, visualize, calculate, simulate, etc. The discrepancy between the fact that we know exactly what the climate crisis will cause and our helplessness to do anything about it produces, according to political scientist Jodi Dean, a certain type of pleasure. A melancholic catastrophism that gets satisfaction from the image of total destruction as a well-deserved punishment: *the left anthropocentric enjoyment thrives on the calamities of capitalist pleasures*, she writes in the quoted essay.

Isn't the departure from the political involvement of people to the agencies of objects a form of escapism? What does it mean to think about the parity of living and nonliving entities in a time of deepening social and economic inequalities? Isn't the post-anthropocentric turn in art a summoning of a well-deserved revenge that we ourselves cannot accomplish?

In this text I will try to focus on two variants of the post-anthropocentric turn in art, which are in apparent contrast to the angry waiting for the end and which seem, at first glance, constructive and positive: building micro-utopias of "good life" and designing or directly offsetting utopias into the countries of the global South. I will try to show that, though these approaches are presented as an alternative to extractive capitalism, this, in fact, draws them to the extreme and it uses them to its advantage without any problems.




1.

Lost paradises— non-intervention, mitigation banking, Carbon Cowboys

The anthropologist of Czech origin Leopold Pospisil, who is considered the founder of the anthropology of law, published in 1965 the article *A Formal Analysis of Substantive Law: Kapauku Papuan Laws of Inheritance*. He describes there fourteen basic categories in which Kapauku Papuans divide their living space, with each category being specific to the method of use and who has access to it. As an ardent supporter of structuralism, he submitted the Kapauku Papuans' system to a rigorous formal and semantic analysis in order to prove that its basic formula makes perfect sense also in terms of law in the "Western" countries. Their system is understandable and fully compatible with the ways in which we divide and organize the world in Europe or the United States.

Today, both Pospisil's method and structuralism as such are criticized for their Eurocentrism and reduction of complex cultural phenomena to binary codes—to the ones and zeros, that according to stages of development of a given society, create various complex constellations. In addition, in Pospisil's analysis one can still feel the reverberations of evolutionism, which orders societies into a developmental rank from the simplest to the most sophisticated = Western. The post-anthropocentric turn in art, however, does something similar only with the opposite mark provided that it projects the loss of authenticity to the non-Western societies. How can the learnings and knowledge of indigenous societies be mobilized as effective political tools without us converting them into romantic lost paradises, open-air museums, reservations, or mitigation indulgences for the corporations that devastate the environment the most?

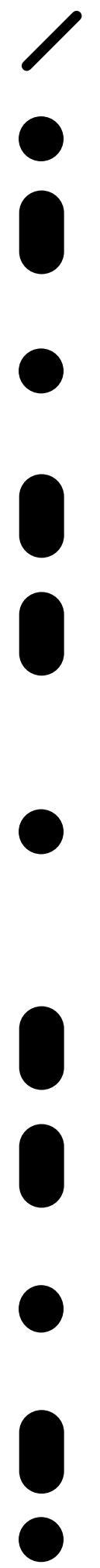
The post-anthropocentric perspective is largely fascinated by what is happening in the environment and with the environment without human intervention. Among the fourteen Kapauku categories Pospisil distinguishes up to six of those that are not agriculturally productive: *buguwa*—virgin forest, *geiga*—fallow land covered with reed and grass, *gapuuga*—fallow land overgrown with secondary forest and bush, *begadimi*—grassy mountain summit, *bago*—stony cliffs, *takapaka*—swamps. But the fact that these territories



are outside the agricultural cycles does not mean that they have no other forms of exploitation. They are generally used for hunting, and thus they are a source of animal protein, and additionally for foraging of medicinal plants, as a source of wood for shipbuilding, or as space for shamanic rituals. These are activities that are largely subject to chance and good luck, they escape mechanical causality, therefore they are contingent on practices of magic and rituals. These forms of management represent an approach that leaves the land the potential to regenerate even at the expense of a temporary reduction of its productivity.

Extractive capitalism seemed to do everything in its power to omit this phase and the agricultural productivity not only did not stagnate, but increased steadily. This is no less magical than the Kapauku hunting rituals. The formulas that made it possible were not totem spells, but chemical formulas. However, these reflect very accurately a certain idea about the world as a huge mechanical machine... The result is a land doped without ceasing with nitrogen fertilizers, DDT insecticides and organophosphate pesticides, which, as the anthropologist Anna Tsing points out, have their origins in the military experimenting with chemical weapons. The same substances that allowed the militant occupation of territories were immediately used to incessantly rape the land so that it would spawn non-stop.

Yet, it gradually happened that corporations that generate profits from ecologically devastating activities, have found a way to profit from unproductive, unused and non-intervention lands. By what miracle? The magic formula is no longer mediated by the industrial fetish and knowledge of organic and inorganic chemistry, but by a sector that directly monetizes risk and speculations. Mitigation banking is a mechanism that allows companies to repay their environmental debt by investing in environmental protection elsewhere. If, for instance, a development project would destroy groundwater resources or endanger the habitat of a protected insect species, the company “redeems” itself by financially compensating for non-intervention in ecologically sensitive areas, often in a completely different place on the planet.



The whole system works on the basis of assigning credits to individual plant and animal species and habitats. This form of magic would not be feasible in a world perceived as a mechanical machine. It needs a different imagination, one in which the devastation of the environment is presented as a civilizational necessity and which should be countervailed by the colonial notion of “untouched paradises”. The contact between these two poles are to mediate permanent flows, probability, calculations—numbers that are abstract, albeit cruelly concrete about their impacts. Mitigation banking is a way for the neoliberal market to expand into areas where it was unthinkable before. It is also the way in which environmentally devastating companies can act as ethically responsible players, while the indigenous inhabitants of the non-intervention areas are outlawed as disturbers of the natural balance, wood thieves, poachers, etc. In their essay *Expansive Capitalism, Climate Change and Global Climate Mitigation Regimes* Harold Wilhite and Cecilia G. Salinas point out that, except the banks and corporations, those who benefit the most from the non-intervention land management are the so-called *Carbon Cowboys*, who, in order to get the financial compensations, buy vast areas and enforce the displacement of indigenous peoples. Their experience and knowledge about the land are not taken into account in any way.

My suspicion is this: doesn't the post-anthropocentric art act in the same way as the Carbon Cowboys when it creates projects of exclusive zones without people and assesses them solely in the frame of art enterprise? If we focus the interest, energy and imagination on horizontality between human and non-human, we tend to factor out the inequalities and injustice which persist among people. The post-anthropocentric perspective operates within the abstraction *we—the people* which renders these inequalities downrightly invisible. It does so both in terms of responsibility for climate change and in terms of who will be the first to bear the consequences. In this sense, the states of the Global South are experiencing an accelerated time. The initiatives of the indigenous people are inspiring not only through their “traditional” methods of approaching




2. **Techno- utopias: good life and the shit of capital**

the landscape, but especially by what forms of resistance they have to develop in order to protect their land from petro-capitalist exploitation. When dozens of “kayaktivists” blocked the Shell rig in 2015 in the port of Seattle, when the Sioux and other Indian tribes in North Dakota protested against the project to run an oil pipeline through their reservation which would threaten sacred territories and could contaminate drinking water resources, they made it very clear that there is no universal “we”. Environment protection is a conflict that involves class, race, gender inequalities. The appeal to horizontality between human and non-human can be mobilized as a political tool only if it takes this fact into account. Otherwise, it will only be a confinement of lost paradises with Carbon Cowboys chasing the weakest out.

In 2010 the Bank of America Tower, also known as One Bryant Park, was completed in Manhattan. The architectural studio Cook + Fox Architects conceived the building as a shining example of “green” architecture: The website of the project states that the used materials and sophisticated technological solutions allow reduction of the building’s water consumption by 50 percent and the energy requirements by 65 percent. Half of the building materials come from allegedly recycled sources, as well as half of them were produced within a distance of 500 miles from the building itself. In addition, the fritted glass and a special underfloor air system delivers fresh air into the building and thus the bank employees are protected from smog, pollution and microbes.

The Bank of America Tower is the perfect embodiment of techno-optimism that builds “better worlds” at the expense of everything around. This micro-utopia on a macro scale could be realized thanks to the financial speculations which take place almost constantly in the bowels of the building and whose product is, inter alia, an increase in inequalities. The clean, safe environment of the bank’s employees was built by workers who exposed their bodies to risky working conditions and for which there is no place in it (Reinhold




Martin: *Risk. Excerpts from the Environmental Division of Labor*). The eco-friendly architecture is funded by resource extraction and environmental devastation *elsewhere*. The filter theme is key here: the safer the environment, the more exclusive—i.e. the more separated from its surroundings—it is. The bank's environment only collects what it needs (oxygen), the rest is captured by filters which will be taken *somewhere out* after disposal.

“Securitisation is the beginning of accumulation by dispossession. [...] The good life is built by enclosing spaces of privilege and imagined safety.” writes the anthropologist Anna Tsing in her essay *The Political Economy of the Great Acceleration*. From this perspective, “good life” is directly conditioned by being closed and separated from places which nourish it or store its waste and which are gradually turning into wastelands or junkyards.

The Bank of America Tower is a very accurate and ostentatious statement of the unjust accumulation on the accounts of a few percent, and at the same time it is this accumulation in the material sense, when it converts the financial flows into concrete and glass floors, filters, iron, steel, security cameras, alarms, office plants, biodegradable cups for fair trade coffee etc. The Bank of America Tower is far from shouting out loud that such a world is possible for all, on the contrary, it is a utopian embodiment of what will not happen to most of us, if to someone at all. A Potemkin village of the future that will not come. The bank demonstrates its power when it invests huge resources in what should be the general norm—a safe environment. This will be inaccessible to most people on earth also because the banking system directly exploits inequalities, risks and reproduces them.

If we see this undercutting so clearly in the case of the “green” bank, how is it with those art projects that invest time, energy and competence in building micro-utopias instead of producing works for the art market? Aren't these utopias just temporary escapes performing something that is not and will not be (generally available)?

On the other hand, it is actually understandable—detachment from something we do not agree with brings relief and can be a form of therapy. It sets up sharing instead of endless



struggles, along with the feeling that we are finally part of something that makes sense, that is within our reach and which bears fruits. However, outside their confines, such utopias, in the same way as the Bank of America Tower, leave a world which swallows unanimously *the shit of capital* (Jean-François Lyotard: *Libidinal Economy*) instead of organic fruits. Of course, we are dealing with a completely different scale here, one that gets tightened by increasingly reduced public subsidies, the annual cycle of grant schemes, precarious work and self-exploitation. And so, instead of the One Bryant Park skyscraper in Manhattan, art produces a skyscraper for insects, a modest installation made of recycled materials. Or a hotel for bees. A community garden in the courtyard of a gallery. These projects are so full of good intentions that it is almost inappropriate to blame them for anything. I'll take the risk.

In the context of the 6th mass extinction the interest in non-human entities and actors and the effort for their protection are understandable. However, if all art can do is create a do-it-yourself installation it communicates above all its own impotence. These one-time symbolic gestures do not solve structural problems (e.g. the use of pesticides and fertilizers that endanger insects, the habitat change in connection with climate change, etc.), they are rather charitable goodwill. Isn't it like when the presenter of a TV social-porn show awards in a moved voice a socially excluded family? As spectators, we get first and foremost the information about the personified poverty or environmental threats that can be addressed through the goodwill of individual donors/artists. Creating micro-utopias can be a way to depoliticise the debate and divert attention from structural inequalities to personal stories that undoubtedly do a better PR. What art actually says is, that it resigns from the possibility of influencing policy in a broader sense (use of pesticides, emission reductions, economic inequalities) and creates rather idealized temporary micro-worlds as forms of escape and therapy. Or a symbolic self-heartening alibi. If the Bank of America Tower is a spectacular presentation of techno-fetishism, then a "skyscraper for insects" (and similar installations) are actually




something like Cargo-cults: they imitate expensive technologies with available materials and instead of functionality they operate with their symbolic, perhaps even magic value. Skyscrapers for insects, like antennas made of bamboo or the wooden airplanes in Melanesia in the 50 s, function in some sense as cult objects: they communicate to the world that they are aware of power (technology) but can only imitate it. If what a simple installation is trying to really change is the complex relationship of human and non-human, then it must be founded on its own magical abilities.

What is to be done?

Although artistic micro-utopias operate on a basis of separation from the surrounding, and the galleries make efforts to operate in an environmentally friendly manner, their autonomy is questionable at least to the extent in which *the shit of capital* pours into art institutions through subsidies from problematic sources. Radical artistic content is thus often nurtured by funds generated by way more radical field practices. We have exactly the same trick in front of our eyes as in the case of the “Green” skyscraper: the means of companies that devastate the landscape and exploit human lives in one place, become, without much difficulty, means to criticize the extractive capitalism elsewhere. For what price? A price too high for those who pay it (and exploit their landscape or build skyscrapers, galleries and museums with their own hands) and a ridiculous amount for those who sell themselves below cost, just to create another precarious art project.

There is a certain potential for art: instead of creating utopias as something external, separated from the “real” life of the gallery, there is an opportunity to start from within and try to rethink the functioning of the art institutions themselves. Instead of symbolic gestures, there is the prospect to destroy the links to subjects that make equality still part of the utopia and not everyday life. Initiatives such as Liberate Tate or Not An Alternative have been developing for a long time inspirational forms of coercion to stop funding art institutions from petro-capitalist



sources and they are also managing to remove their representatives from the boards of museums and galleries. *We need new institutions, not new art*, writes the artists and writer Coco Fusco in her essay of the same title. Institutions that stand up for us when it comes to that the “good life” should not be an escapism for those who can afford it, but a constant confrontation of inequalities.

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