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## Yves Citton

### Notes for the exhibition *Atopolis*

#### Saâdane Afif

The coalminer coal age man walks down the street. He isn't coming out of the mine, nor will he be going back into it. He's walking down the street. He lives in an era when coal is above him, in the sky - they call it the 'climate'. And also in his lungs, in the cells where particulates accumulate -they call it a 'health issue'. On a street corner, he sees an actor gesturing, declaiming, singing songs with no melody (but with a lot of black humor).

He's not from here. 'He' who? The coalminer coal age man, or the actor? It doesn't matter: all Earthbound. We hear the story from too far away. Only the refrains reach us, but we can't tell what they refer to. As with songs, the message applies to all those who want to identify with it. The song's in my head, it inhabits me from within. It rises up inside me when I least expect it. Because I have been immersed in it, because it is in the air, all around, because I inhale it with the particulates of coal. Mostly, though, because it is repeated. Here, there, everywhere, in the head of the coal age man, of the actor, in my head, it doesn't matter: all resonant, all attuned. What matters is the repetition, the rotation (as they say on the radio), the number of revolutions per minute. What matters is that it returns just when we thought it had ended. That it is above us, precisely when we thought it was under our feet. That it rings like a call from the future, just when we had come to see it as a remembrance of things past.

It's not from here. Better said: it isn't from 'here' anymore than from somewhere else. It spreads, it is distributed: everywhere in particulates, nowhere in particular. Atopolis. It is mixed, and remixed; it is creolized to escape repetition, to escape the rotation that makes it go round and round in circles. 'Relation scatters from Being, asserts the subject'. This bronze box, where does it come from? Who risked his life to extract the bronze? Who imposed his signature on it and appropriated it for himself? Who paid the insurance that covers it in case of theft?

The coal age man is no longer looking at the actor. Nor is he listening to the bronze box. He allows the box to record itself upon him, groove after groove. He looks at the way it rests on the ground. No roots. And yet it's there - and not elsewhere. Under *this* actor, on *this* particular street corner, in *this* particular city, during *this* particular summer. Could we say: under *this* particular sky? Not so sure. Under *this* particular coal? Even more dubious. Hyperobject. Speaking of particular particulates would be dark-humor joke, maybe. Or it could be our last chance to catch a glimpse of the coffin of our anthropocene. Or our first chance to tell another story.

## Nevin Aladag

The adaptation man caressed the old nanny goat. He had known her for a while. Had taken her in when no one else wanted her. Nourished, tended to and loved her. He would help her cross the threshold. He had just finished working on his ceramics.

The guests had arrived to give him their imprint. He welcomed them. He was a good host. You could tell that from how carefully he arranged their coats and hats on the hanger. He had prepared a vegetable dish, full of Indian spices, in an earthenware pot, second to none when it comes to preserving the most elusive flavors. They talked for a long while, about his work, about their stories. The guests were charmed by his soft voice and measured gestures. He brewed them coffee in a copper pot a friend of the family had made. The coffee beans were from a Sandinista cooperative he had visited on one of the trips he had taken as a youth.

The nanny goat kept her eyes closed for longer and longer spells. He didn't cry.

When they felt at home, he showed them what he was working on. An empty picture frame. A newspaper holder. With each one there was a story, a meeting, a person who had become part of his large family. All generous, all singular, all smiling in the way he portrayed them. All Earthbound. He returned to the table where they had eaten. As they sat down again, they noticed that the chairs on which they had sat over their meal were also being adapted. He corrected them, however, his voice even sweeter, by borrowing, as if to excuse himself, the wise words of a biologist: 'Adaptability is a behavioral response that is part of the program; improvisation is a mechanism to change the fundamental program' (Daniel E. Koshland). Atopolis needed improvisation.

The nanny goat had stopped breathing. His hand rested on her cheek. He waited a little while longer.

The improvisation man then drew their attention to a part of the body. He had observed his guests from the instant they arrived. He rarely hesitated. He didn't ask them for their opinion. But they knew he'd make the right choice. Who made the imprint? Did he? Did they? The question made no sense. The imprints were made through all of them. Perfectly prepared, perfectly together, to be perfectly singular. They all felt part of a single flow, from India and Nicaragua all the way to the copper and the wood of the coat hanger. Atopolis vibrated with this flow of improvisation, with this art of cultivating traces and relays. Sometimes he would say: 'Any presence - even though it is ignored - of a particular culture, even a silent one, is an active relay in Relation'.

After long moments of silence and immobility, he went to get his knife. The skin pulled away under the knife without him fleecing her. His gaze measured her. This would be to improvise the large earthenware pot in which he had served the vegetable curry. He thanked the nanny goat for the gift of her skin.

## **Francis Alÿs**

The can no longer stinks like sardines. They say it has been recuperated, 'recycled'. A bit of wood, some string and fabric, and it's become a sailing ship. A miniature vessel on a waterless map of the oceans. In a windless room. Not far from other sailing ships lined up in dry docks. These too are recycled from multi-colored flip-flops. Without any sand.

The ocean woman observes the line of Earthbounds wade into the water, holding their sailing ships by their keel. She thinks she can tell who they are by their clothes: 'vacationers'. But she isn't sure. She thinks about the sardine that had been in the can. The sardine wasn't vacationing. She was just swimming. She had been caught, plucked out of the water, and left to suffocate slowly in the open air of the trawler's bridge. Maybe under a sky as blue as the one now gracing the vacationers.

She never knew whether she was inside or out. Who didn't? The ocean woman? Or the sardine? It doesn't matter: all Earthbound! The situation is not very clear. It is a limit situation. It's her, and it isn't; neither really inside, nor purely outside. Atopolis. Like the can of sardines on the map. Except that our feet are in the water. And we are plunging into the limit. We can see clearly those to our right and those to our left, but we see no one on the horizon ahead.

Are they going under? How can they breathe under water? Do they suffocate slowly? Do they struggle? Do all these cute suntanned bodies wriggle and flap? Like the sardine, but inside out? The ocean woman doesn't know what to think of it: these vacationers, they are even lamer than sardines. Something tells her that 'passivity has no place in Relation'. Maybe. But is this alignment of sailing ships all that's left of them? The funereal monument?

She thinks the can looks very much like the coffin that it is in fact. She can feel us becoming sardines. Inside out. Recycled. Sardines of one another. All of us plunging into the limit, sinking into the horizon of a common suffocation. Sun-tanned, however, with colourful beachwear, under a beautiful blue sky – playing out to the end our role as vacationers.

## **El Anatsui**

The digital man doesn't believe his eyes. He's used to series, alignments, alternations, samples, platforms. He thought he understood all that. He knew how to put it to use. To solve the problems laid out for him. In general, it worked. But this is something else.

He had learned to live in the digital Atopolis. A squared, mapped-out, hierarchized and algorithm-governed city, swarming with executives, operators, collectors, selectors, evaluators. A systematic city, 'simultaneously stitched together, synthesized, and derived'. But a city without a place. The digital manages the multitude by the power of abstraction. It is egalitarian: one man, one vote; one can, one bit. But its abstraction sucks out substance: 3 pumas + 4

hornets = 7, just as 3 radishes + 4 roses = 7. Seven equals seven. Radishes, pumas, roses and hornets don't count – save as items, as the units of a homogenized series or equation. The digital renders everything interchangeable. All it needs is electricity. Its source – coal, solar, nuclear – doesn't matter: it's electricity, not *this* or *that* particular electricity.

Here, however, the digital man discovers another world. Not because everything is joyously splashed with bright colors, while his algorithms would be doomed to grey. Not because this folds and creates a mirroring play, while numbers would be flat and dull. What he discovers is the infinite and concrete singularity that nourishes the life of the common.

Each white rectangle is different from the white rectangle that follows it in the series. Differently rectangular and differently white. Truth be told, it isn't really white. Or a rectangle, even. Each thing is another. Incalculable. Non-interchangeable. Or interchangeable, but at the price of a loss. This loss is what the digital man starts to feel, when faced with the infinitely pluralist materiality of the concrete common – 'the dense materiality of the presence of peoples'.

He feels tears well up in him. Of joy? He doesn't know. It doesn't matter much. It is to cry for, the tears and the beautiful concrete. It *is*. More than everything that apparatuses of capture can extract and quantify. But what are we talking about? The concrete? The digital man? It doesn't matter much: all Earthbound. We're too close to tears. We don't know where they flow from. Aren't they woven from the same sensibility?

One wonders where the red square with the white trace of a five-pointed star near the center of one of the textures comes from. One wonders why one of its neighboring squares is missing. Why its other neighbor has a more strongly pronounced curvature. One wonders if *this* electricity, illuminating *this* work, comes from a coal-fired plant. Or from a future nuclear accident. We stop crying: we look – not without fear, and yet with hope, and joy as well.

## Danai Anesiadou

The farce of the 'Greek crisis' gave everyone the freedom to wash their dirty laundry in public. The gods stopped keeping up appearances. Cassandra no longer needed to disguise herself to sleep with Tiresias, who had gone back to being a woman – so as to avoid having that ridiculous thing dangling between his legs. On the professional level, Cassandra was tasked with announcing the anthropocene. But things weren't going well. Europe preferred German cars to animals with dangling things. Keep it up, she'd say, and fill it up: the price of gas is as low as ever!

The message from the agency was clear: *Make catastrophism fun...* or find another job. With 50% unemployment among young people (Cassandra had stayed quite young), she was determined to make it fun. She put on lipstick. She kissed passers-by, mirrors, walls, posters. Pink fun everywhere, rose-shaped. She was having fun. Fake ceilings, to protect us from the sky falling on our heads. Fake doors and fake windows with PVC frames, to air out the bunker. You want

it, you got it! Plastic activism for plastic people – or plastic art for the masses (same combat?). ‘Flexi-security’ they call it: the more exposed you are, the more comfortable you’ll be with appearances (as long as you can keep’em up) – and the stronger your weakness will make you. ‘Identity is no longer just a permanence; it is a capacity of variation, yes, a variable – either under control or wildly fluctuating’. Modulate, bend over, fun it up : the catastrophe would be to believe in the catastrophe. It would be bad for growth.

Cassandra wasn’t all that clear anymore as to what she was being paid for. Climate change? Nuclear contaminations? Megatons of pesticide? Bee populations collapsing? Everyone knew it all. What else was there to say? The agency’s boss strutted around on his SUV.

And what if she stopped working? Might as well have fun. Growth was filling up the pockets of shareholders. Might as well share what other people hold: the unemployed, the nine-to-fivers, the directors and the investors – all shareholders!

Switch body!, Tiresias had told her. She had seen objectors, ready to start again from scratch. Together: something else, on a different basis, through other circuits. But she loved glitter too much. No way. Not her fault. Bright colors or death! Better starve than compromise on personal grooming! Atopolis had to shine.

While putting on lipstick, a word insinuated itself to the tip of her tongue: *therapy*. Europe smiled: she was sold. It sure deserved a promotion. Help them shake their depression! Sympathize, empathize! Make them tell their stories, reckon their feelings, scream their heart out! Teach them to love themselves! They’re entitled to it, aren’t they? Give them a bit of attention! They’re worth it. Paint it all pink, in this world of teddy bears! They need it so bad. Become their mirror! May they kiss themselves when kissing you! *Care! Empowerment! Agency!* Self-esteem is everything!

## **Yto Barrada**

They were usually plump, glossy, impeccable. Perfectly round. Equally reddened all around. The skin firm and taut, as if ready to explode just at the thought of the approaching teeth or knife. No stains: immaculate. ‘Hydroponics’, they say. Soilless farming. Atopolis.

Of course, the supermarket woman believed she had landed on a desolation zone. A land of misery. Dry earth. What was this shithole?, anyway? Was it a subaltern country? An abandoned village? A ‘third world’?

The puny tomatoes that dotted a skeleton passing itself off for a plant were pitiful. Couldn’t be further from the usual perfection. Like old smiles, from before the advent of orthodontics. Extensive farming, they say. The branches so stretched, so flimsy, so unlikely! What ignorance of the laws of gravity was keeping this thing upright?

The woman had taken three steps in the garden. Without looking up, the man had told her to pick a tomato. She hesitated. Out of place. What was out of

place? The woman? The tomato? It didn't matter: all Earthbound. It was so clear. We were so sure this was place, the territory, the heavenly garden full of real, pre-agro-industrial flavors, authenticity, wholeness.

It took us a while – a century and a half? – but everything became clear: that's where 'real' life was. The human in touch with the humus. 'Organic'! 'Bio'! In its immediacy. On site. Right here: location, location, location!

The poor had it all, from the beginning: shriveled up, bruised, irregular produce – but local: with the 'real' taste of tomatoes. This poverty would save us. Sorry: this joyous and welcome 'frugality'. The Third World would be our future, our inspiration, our guru. It'd teach us anew how to 'live'. What is there more beautiful than a school desk, rusted over and 'marked by the patina of time'? What more soothing, reassuring, moving than the slightly dirty mess of the amateur's garden?

What more terrifying, more inhuman, more stifling, then the perfectly aligned rows of an aseptic supermarket? What more pathetic than the pale consumers who pace up and down those rows like souls in penance? 'It standardizes – but in each of the knots of the Relation we'll find calluses of resistance'.

Is this reversal of modernization self-evident, undeniable? For you and me, as we look at these photographs? Do we pick tomatoes? Do we plant them? I'm in front of the image. I take it seriously. I speak to the seated old man who's holding his yellow tomatoes in his hand. I stammer. As a matter of fact, I don't quite know what to tell him. He doesn't look up.

I've felt out of place from the start. Is it because I'm in the reality of the museum, while he is in the simulacrum of a photo? Or is it because he's in the reality of the garden, while I'm in the simulacrum of the museum? Atopolis could be this discrepancy, raised to a living space – a separate but common life.

### Vincen Beeckman

The photos, of course, were taken *after*. Otherwise, why all these skeletons, all this equipment, all the black around the eyes? Like all Earthbounds, they had experienced that which must not be named. Atopolis: yesterday's city, now shorn of any space for being. Toxic everywhere, livable nowhere. They had been mourning ever since. They bore their grief, which had seeped into their make-up, their disguises, their disillusioned irony.

How not to feel like a living dead, a zombie, like a damned soul? Just a last cigarette, a last popsicle, a last spin on the carousel, a last dip in the water – before it all becomes impossible. Forbidden, fenced off, forgotten. Not just inadvisable, risky or dangerous: toxic.

Of course, these were victims. They sure don't look like decision-makers. Decision-makers – before – didn't dress like that. They struck different poses. These were the governed. They reacted. They didn't even blame their governors. They did what they could. 'They', who? The governed? Or the governors? It didn't matter that much: all Earthbound. Everything had become permeable –

more importantly, though, it was simply too late to make a difference. The gradual collapse was held, as if suspended in ambivalence: 'the more exclusion it produced the more attraction it generated'. They faced it. They put a good face on their bad lot.

Too good a face ... What if, after all, these were photos from *before*? Otherwise, why the residual confidence in their smiles? Why the persistent presence of something that, in spite of everything, looks like joy? Why the stagings? Why these traces of a system that seems to be working still? Did they still have electricity? How could they offer a popsicle the kitten without a freezer, without power? How could they operate a play station? Or take these photos?

But perhaps they were playacting? Can you push the staging that far, though? Were all of them actors in a game no one believed in? Cats, rats, dog: they all look in cahoots. All fakes! All pretenders! Did they enjoy playing it together? Is there a higher good than this complacency?

### **Walead Beshty**

What does the white mask? It's a false appearance, clearly. A cover-up. Nothing is as white or level as these seemingly empty surfaces. There are only whitewashings and levellings here. Activities effaced by their very act.

There was something there, underneath or alongside it. This something had been cut. Cut-out. Something else remains, and it becomes strikingly visible. How to make white striking? Do you have to look from very far? What if that was to fall into the worst illusion possible ...

Because white doesn't exist: come closer! A bit more! Really close! There, you see? That's the truth of Atopolis: when we come close to white, to nothing, to the non-place, when we come close enough and teach ourselves to look at it, at this white, then we start seeing something – something that's everything *but* white. Shadows. Imperfections. Grains. Dust. Traces.

Faces? Certainly not. And maybe that's for the best: what if faces hid the shadows, imperfections, grains, dust and traces that we'd find lurking beneath them if we came close?

The revolution man finds other faces behind the masking white. He sees the black skins of oppression, the tanned skins of exploitation, the swollen skins of exclusion. Above all, he sees *whites* behind the *white*. White faces? Or white masks? It doesn't matter much: all Earthbound. It's up to them to make the difference. Not up to him.

His problem today is to figure out if the new whites still carry traces of their exploitation. The white of the paper remains a texture. It keeps the grain, the imperfections, the dust. 'The dense materiality of the presence of peoples'. It comes from somewhere. It bears the imprints of those who've handled it. It remains a place marked by a signature. The white of a screen remains a concrete materiality: when you approach it, it vibrates, pulsates, reveals finger smears and traces of sputter.

The white generated by a program ‘concretizes an objective abstraction’ (Vilém Flusser). It’s the perfect mask. With no signature. No trace. No reverse. No face. Are there still hands to tear it out?

There were hands to program it, or to take a module plucked from elsewhere and to plug it into a program operating here. There may be hands capable of un-programming it. Or to open the black box of the program to unearth the traces of its provenance. Do your hands know how to do it? Mine don’t. The future of Atopolis depends on that. Not so much on *Down with the white masks!* as on *Hack the black boxes!*

### **Huma Bhabha**

It had all started with the feet. First, a long time ago, they had captured or bought people. They had put them in chains, piled them up on boats, carried them across oceans and put them to work. It didn’t last. It was a struggle. They had to find something else.

They then lined people up in large assembly halls. No need for chained feet. They placed them side-by-side, in series, in front of conveyor belts. They remained seated and did what they were told. They were put in offices. They had to be closely monitored, but the need for lashes waned. They could move about. But they didn’t. They had salaries. Sometimes bonuses.

But there was less and less work. Something else had to be found. They were given screens. They looked at screens. Lowered their heads. No more chains, factories, offices. They were free. They communicated. They still moved. Only their fingers, sometimes their lips. Eyes downcast.

It was during this period that their legs were fixed. No need for them anymore. Too busy with the keyboards. Eventually, screens were replaced by cables. Implanted directly into the brain and selected vital organs. Flux of information, sensations, energies, calories. Hands merged with the trunk.

Finally, waves replaced everything. No longer any need for cables or pipes. It communicated through captors. Bluetooth. Wi-Fi. It was ubiquitous: everyware. It compacted bodies into right-angled blocks, to take up less space. ‘It’ what? Who knows?... it wasn’t discussed anymore.

It had straightened up their heads. No longer any need for eyes, ears, nose, mouth. From outside: just blocks. Immobile. Propped up. Proud? To be what? Human? Man? Woman? It doesn’t matter: all Earthbound.

From inside: it enjoys, modulates, selects, isolates, focalizes, combines, remixes, imagines, invents. It feels. It feels matter – from within. It matters. What? Everything! Whatever! Scraps of torn tires, with their relief, torsion and smell. It feels black, texture, rubber. It matters, in all its mattering sensitivity. Love of matter. Matter of love.

It looks immobile on the outside. But it’s fulminating in there. Faster, always faster: under the impassive surface, ‘acceleration becomes the most important virtue. Not the deliberately forgetful haste prevailing everywhere, but an intense acuteness of thought, quick to change its heading’.

It senses bodies that walk around, talk, look. The bodies of Atopolis, which came here to look, feel, think. You. Me. Our matter, in all its sensible and thinking vitality. Our mattering nourishes. It enjoys the rubber, the cork - and the perfumes, movements, and noises of our bodies. Love of Atopolis, here and now. Forever.

### **Vlassis Caniaris**

What if there was nothing inside it? Only neckties. Boots. Cases. Overcoats. Boxes. Cartons. Shirts. Bags. Carts. Crates. Seats. Trucks. Jars.

You could tap on all of it. But you'd need sticks. And the emptiness would resound. The tension of a membrane over the void. The space of resonance allowed by the void. The distance between the walls. The nothing in between. 'The gap, the abyss, which is also a projection of and a perspective into the unknown'.

Plenitude kills sound. Stifles it. Drowns it out. You need to make it breathe. But breathe from within, from where it's empty. Because one mistrusts the outside. And also those who come from outside. They smell of saturation. We don't like that. We don't need that. The boat is full. We're already too rushed. We have too much, do too much, want too much. We stifle. We need emptiness. We need nothing.

Bring us emptiness! Just do it! Give us some air! Some breathing space! Fuck off! Go back home! You have too many kids. There's no room. You make too much noise. We want to relax. A bit of silence. Peace!

Let's make space! Let's get rid of all this junk! A wide sweep! Down the chute! It's all too cumbersome, stifling, crushing. We're collapsing under the junkware. The more we accumulate it, the more it robs us of emptiness. It enchains us, paralyzes us, keeps us from living.

Let's go! Let's get the hell out of here! See you later! Let's split! Anchors aweigh! To the wide open seas! Get some air! Wind on our sails! No need to say goodbye. Put away your handkerchiefs. We're not going to cry! Or make a scene! We'll meet again someday. Here, or there, it doesn't matter: all Earthbound. Anyway, it's just two hours by plane. And a lowcost flies there! And there is always the phone. And it's not the end of the world or anything. It's just Atopolis: an open line of flight, the fear of and need for emptiness, the desire for and anxiety of plenitude. The perpetual in between. But with neither the capacity nor the willingness to welcome foreigners.

### **Abraham Cruzvillegas**

'Where are we going? What are we saying?'  
'Who cares! Shut up and keep pedaling!'  
'What do you see? Where are they?'  
'I see everything! In front, behind. Right, left.'

'And what's there?'

'Lots of people. On every side. All haunted by the "unconscious and desperate rage at not 'grasping' the chaos of the world".'

'Do you have a 'grasp' on it yourself? Will we explain it to them, then?'

'Say whatever crosses your mind! You got to fight chaos with chaos! What matters is the volume, not the content. It will always make enough sense. Yell long and loud enough, and they'll follow eventually. If you had to know what to say before yelling, you'd be outsmarted every time.'

'But we *are* outsmarted every time!'

'At least we got to yell some.'

'We could tell them where to go. We could gather. Try some common body-building.'

'If you had to know where to go before leaving, you'd go nowhere.'

'But we *are* going nowhere! We're turning around in circles.'

'At least we're moving. Where do you want us to go? Atopolis? We're there already!'

'Just some direction. Can we at least have a general direction, even if we don't know where to go? Is that too much to ask?'

'You're such a pain. Shut up and keep pedaling!'

'We're one too many here. This thing wasn't built for two. There's one handlebar and only one seat.'

'Who told you we're two? In any case, it doesn't matter: all Earthbound.'

'Yes, but all scattered! This will lead nowhere.'

'That's why you need to scream! Look, there's a guy checking us out. There! Wave to him! Tell him to come with us!'

'He's keeping his distance. He's only looking. What an idiot! Where does he think he is, at a museum? I bet he won't even dare come closer and touch! This place is hopeless!'

'I told you, you don't yell loud enough. He didn't hear you, even with all our gear.'

'He gotta be deaf.'

'Try again, scream real loud! Louder! I see some other folks coming in. We *will* find somebody eventually...'

## Meschack Gaba

Your sheet ain't my skin (*Votre drap n'est pas ma peau*). You hoist it aloft, on tall poles, during your ceremonies, to the sound of military music. You have it flapping over official buildings. You parade behind it at the Olympics. You recognize yourself in it, maybe. My skin is worth more than your sheets.

Fight for your colors? Or save my life? No hesitation. Nothing to defend in a sheet. But loads to fear. Individualism? Egoism? Cowardice? Another vision of the common to defend. The ball – the bubble, the globe – on which we all stand together. Sometimes one 'against' the other – but so close, so 'up against', that it is

impossible to kill the other without injuring oneself. A ball of foam – made of conglobated bubbles in inescapable co-fragility (Sloterdijk).

Fight for the ball? Sure, but against who? Not against your sheets, nor against their ghosts. Against those who lose their marbles – by scooping up ours free of charge and selling them to the highest bidder.. In this case, yes. But those folks aren't troubled by sheets. Nor do they risk their skin.

Who are 'they'? Decision-makers? Capitalists? Shareholders? Marketers? The rich? Not all of them. They're not all dressed in the same color. They're not all singing the same tune. They're not all on the same side of the same fences. Not all, or each, or all the time, or in everything. A bit of you here, a bit of me there. A real challenge to find one's way..

All Earthbound? No doubt. But that's not enough. Atopolis? Unsustainable for as long as so many of us fail to care about the Earth on which we all stand.

In the dead of night, all cows are black. But borders still divide us, every day, in every corner of the globall. Deep and often beyond recourse. Between those who help life and those who profit from death. Between *relay agents*, 'echo-worlds that work on the matter of the Relation', and *flash agents*, 'literary reflection of this matter, which manifests violence without shedding light, moving or changing it'. These borders are everywhere, around us, between us, within us. But not necessarily where we expect them to be.

At each point of the relay and the relational weaving, the border is a question of sensibility. Of aesthetic. A question of taste and colors, the very things they tell us we shouldn't dispute about. They're dead wrong, of course: this is exactly what we should be fighting for. The bright, the pure, the glowing colors of your sheets are not the colors of our skins. Your immaculate whites, your fire-engine reds, your glossy blues are not part of our nature. They only exist in your shopping malls. And still, even there, they pale quickly – thankfully, because, along with your neon glow and your ubiquitous screens, they are stifling.

This glow doesn't suit our ball. Our colors are pale, creamy, earthy. Hesitant, and always faded. Mutt and always nuanced – purity ain't our business.

And yet, that's the globall we must preserve. With its sheets and colors. We don't have another: there is no plan(et) B. But there are other colors. More earthbound. For us to play with.

## Jef Geys

The student had invented a word: *newsson*. The archive man had duly noted it. It spoke to him. But without saying anything too precise. It'd take on meaning, with time, maybe. Or not. And, as it happens, it didn't. The word stayed on a piece of paper. And in the man's head. Then the man forgot it. But the word stayed in the archive.

Everything was there. Without him knowing it. The lessons he gave almost every day at his outlying school. The newspapers he printed periodically, to give himself the allure of a daily business. The relief he produced by applying a certain pressure on common places. The question that triggers gender trouble, only to

push it further. The opacity of an alien word, which could nevertheless become familiar.

The daily lesson and the periodic sheet of news are condemned to the haze of subculture. They would not constitute a 'work' (negation). They work, however, in the deepest recesses of the ordinary, and of its repetition (relay agents). They find shelter there, to work in depth – in the infinitesimal, the insistent, the obstinate.

Not the obstinacy of the journalist or the teacher: the obstinacy of the news, of facts, habits and neglects that are repeated and that ask again and again, every day, for new sentences, new images, new gestures, new answers and new questions. New lessons. 'Repetition, moreover, is an acknowledged form of consciousness both here and elsewhere. Relentlessly resuming something you have already said. Consenting to an infinitesimal momentum, an addition perhaps unnoticed that stubbornly persists in your knowledge'. It's the momentum and the daily addition that obstinately insist, in the teacher and the journalist, on reconstituting, through sedimentation, an always repetitive and always new Atopolis.

Less arrogant than the lesson, more reflective than the newspaper, the student's word might have helped shed light on a form of action, a contrast of the Relation. But it remained buried. Without repetition. It lacked the essential: the patina, the density, the relief, the dissemination brought about by usage. The relay.

Whatever exists only once, whatever doesn't insist, lacks consistency. The archive isn't enough. Questions, illuminations, findings, outlines, stutters, openings, solutions: it is all there. But without us knowing it. Un-relayed. Not narrated. Visionary flashes or insignificant rehashings? It doesn't matter: all subterranean. Who is the archive man? The one who collects ephemera, or the one who unearths treasures? Or the one who takes the time to come and inspect what has been unearthed? Or the one who disseminates the effects on the surface of the earth, with his newspaper and his lessons? Or the readers and students who carry these newssons inside them? It doesn't matter: all Earthbound by the common, infinitely repeated, movement of burying and exhuming, which is never a total success, but never a complete failure either. All relays.

## Thomas Hirschhorn

The WTO published a report, coordinated by Marc, my best childhood pal in Geneva, that tries to understand how to make globalization more sustainable socially, and in which experts skim through and summarize pre-existing studies to draw from them nuanced conclusions (globalization sometimes increases inequalities and exposes labor to mere uncertainty – though not always, not in every region of the globe, not in every sector), conclusions which, *a priori*, don't really help to resolve, on the global level, the problems attendant on globalization, still, they attest to the honesty and intellectual rigor of the authors, which I never doubted, by the way, for Marc is the most intelligent, humane and generous

person I know, and also because I know that surveys of this sort are often based on a statistical procedure called *regression*, which I've never really studied but which I'd love to master because – so they say – the procedure makes it possible to distinguish between real and false hypotheses of causal relations, and of course that's essential to navigate such a highly 'complex' world, and anyway I've always had an inferiority complex with Marc, because he could do regressions and I couldn't, not the statistical type anyway, even if there are other ways to verify causality hypotheses, and even if I also practice regressions of another sort, like for instance now, when I try, for Thomas Hirshhorn (whom I don't know personally, though he's Swiss, like Marc and myself), to understand globalization reversed by bringing global generalities back to concrete cases, for example my childhood friend, my complexes, or the computer I'm using to type out this text (I've just checked and it was indeed made in China), or like my friend Clément, who isn't really my 'friend', as Marc is, or as he (Marc) used to be, since I don't see him that often anymore (not because he works at the WTO, but because I spend far too much time on my Chinese computer trying to understand the effects of globalization, which in turn results in my seldom going to Geneva to visit Marc, and besides, even when I do go to Geneva, I don't actually see him, because my priority is to see my parents, who live in Geneva as well, because I feel guilty that I don't see them often enough, again because I spend too much time on my Chinese computer, of which, by the way, it isn't accurate to say that it is 'Chinese', since I am certain that most of the profits are funneled to the US, or to Swiss banks, sometimes in Geneva, where the brother of my friend Jacques is a bank director – so for the computer, perhaps we should rather say: *Made in Atropolis?*), Clément, as I was saying, isn't really a friend, he's a former student who now and then writes me pen-and-paper letters, using ink, envelopes and stamps, because he is very adamant about defending the 'right to opacity' by refusing to use any digital means, and because he does his best to reverse a globalization that he finds socially and environmentally unsustainable, and I agree, though he, Clément, has chosen to live in a commune that's trying to rely on short supply channels, in Isère, and I have an inferiority complex with Clément as well, because I like Marc, and Jacques, and Thomas Hirshhorn (all Swiss), I like my computer (which will soon link me to almost every Earthbound), but I can't help thinking that I should visit my parents more often and that, deep down, Clément is right, and short distribution channels are not a regression.

### **David Medalla and Adam Nakervis**

*He says, in a somewhat lecturing tone:* But when are we ever *not* weaving? Our words and gestures are always plotting something. The human being knits sociality like the spider weaves her web and fish filter water. Always already in, always plotted and plotting. Always answering and anticipating what's being discussed all around. Always picking up a forgotten thread. Always touching up a never-completed pattern. Always 'knitting what cannot be unknit' A society is not a set of bodies in a set of buildings governed by a set of institutions: a society

is a meshwork (Tim Ingold). Always in process of being made, unmade and remade (a credibility, a youth, a beauty).

*He adds:* Always already.

*She says, tightening the knot at the end of the threaded needle:* Never yet.

*He says, raising his eyes skywards:* People always weave their name. Their signature. *In Search of Lost Time* is a long tag. Narcissists, one and all. Eager to leave a trace of our knitting after we're gone. To mark our presence. To plant our flag. To be occupied with occupying. All colonizers. All parched for identity, all starving for recognition.

*He adds:* All the same.

*She says, without interrupting her sowing:* Not all.

*He says, looking at the visitors, who are sitting and sowing clumsily:* And what does that prove, what you're doing there? Are you figuring the social bond? Are you 'participating'? Aren't you fed up with 'participating'? Without doing anything! Wouldn't it be better to do? Rather than make-believe? All self-righteous..

*He adds:* All hypocrites.

*She says, cutting the thread with her teeth:* All Earthbound.

*He says, touching the cotton sheet:* Atopolis? Lovely diversity that doesn't cost anyone anything! Lovely city, well protected by the walls of its museum, where people come to sow their thirty seconds of sociality! Before hopping on an Easyjet to return to their suburban bunker..

*He adds:* An insult to real seamstresses, who ruined their fingers and eyesight for miserable salaries!

*She says, sucking a pricked and slightly bleeding finger:* 'Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly, one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components'.

## Adrien Mélis

Comrades,

We were mistaken. We thought we had to work in order to produce. We unloaded sand bags, made cement, we bought, transformed, sold. To go faster, to be more modern, to reduce the workforce, they ordered up machines. We put the machines to work, to produce even more. Here, socialism never had enough. There, shareholders always wanted more. You and me, we work. We manufactured.

They've closed the factory now. No need for us or for products anymore. First industrial labor, then all the rest – teachers, architects, engineers, doctors, lawyers. Forty per cent of jobs cut in the next twenty years. They warned us: Atopolis, a city where there'll be no jobs anymore.

We were mistaken, because we believed in production. But we were also mistaken to believe in the end of production. And yet, the truth was there. In front of our eyes, though we could not see it. Because, in fact, you had to *hear* it. The problem wasn't with socialism, or with the shareholders, it was in our heads.

We had seen the factory as a means of production. When, in reality, we had experienced it as a musical instrument. A shovel, a hammer, a cement mixer, a truck: these were our drums, guitars, pianos and saxophones. We only sold pillars and slabs of cement as a way to continue making music. Together. All together. Architects, engineers, carpenters, crane operators: all musicians! All performers! All music lovers!

But beware, comrades, beware:

'If one is in too much of a hurry to join the concert, there is a risk of mistaking as autonomous participation something that is only some disguised leftover of former alienations'. One mistake can hide another mistake. All music is not of equal value. All ends of production either. Atopolis remains to be manufactured: hand-produced as a sound-experiment.

'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Audre Lorde). This music participated in exploitation. Our orchestra will not have a conductor. Our harmonies no dominant notes. Our tunes no score. Atopolis' future must be sought in the virtues and vertigoes of what they called 'noise', which even our choruses betray.

### Benoit Platéus

A virus had saved our lives. Collective life, cultural life, intelligent life, creative life - in sum, life. The one that is nourished by diversity, that enriches my language with all the languages of the world, that feels cramped when everyone is looking in the same direction. In sum: life.

The virus had been injected into European populations during the summer of 2015. A mere dozen images had sufficed. Photos, taken at a museum and distributed through social networks online, served as vectors for a slow but unprecedentedly virulent attack, all the more novel and unstoppable because it mutated in midcourse. At first it was your everyday computer virus. Then a questioning. Followed by a choice. And, finally, an energy mutation.

First symptoms: whiteout. At the beginning, a simple paleness. In April, 2016, Apple had recalled its entire new generation of iPads, because its colors were not as vibrant as those of the competition. In effect, hackers had managed to crack the codes of the latest OS, and their priority target had been the firm that had become arrogantly hegemonic. The firm collapsed: chapter eleven in no more than ten months.

Then it was Google's turn. Starting in October 2017, the highest ranked sites on PageRank had started to disappear. At first, they were just harder to access, overloaded, slow: saturated. Then you couldn't find them at all. Gone! Nobody had a clue what was going on: how could this be happening? Why? No answer, no claim, no remedy. Google, meanwhile, was reeling. Anything and everything it valued tended to disappear. Ads started to dwindle: nobody wants to disappear.

The same thing was happening to Amazon and Alibaba: the more a product elicited curiosity, the more it was recommended and bought, the quicker it disappeared from our screens. The process was the same every time: colors

would to go pale before the image was attacked and devoured by a whiteout produced by saturating its pixels. Opacity gained the high ground – and, with it, diversity, since the opaque ‘is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence’.

In a few months, all the great empires of the global economy had bitten the dust. Whether they were peddling gadgets, celebrity or exposure, it didn’t matter: all grounded! Without a shot or Molotov cocktail having been fired. Everything happened very quickly after that.

At last, we recognized the obvious: concentrated attention was responsible for the overexposure that rendered invisible whatever was most seen, read, heard, downloaded. Beyond a certain threshold, the accumulation of attention turned screens opaque and mute. That was the genius of the virus: it had embodied the abstract right to opacity in an algorithm that concretely reconditioned social relations as a whole.

The illness, then the disappearance of the overexposed, had completely redistributed collective attention. Thousands of alternative practices had become visible once more, though only on a small scale and at the local level. Anything that threatened to gain the high ground would be undone, effaced, by its very success. Everyone found this new landscape much richer and more enriching. A new system for allocating resources replaced the old. Through the self-effacement produced by overexposing saturation, Atopolis found anew its living colors.

## Walter Swennen

The shaman was smiling. One usually listened to her with a mixture of condescension and irritated impatience. To say nothing of incredulity. How were we to believe in stories where the beating of a drum turned her into a wolf? Or that she communed with animal spirits that helped her solve rational problems? Some wanted to believe in the sincerity of her ‘experience’ (as they put it). Though not in the ‘reality of spirits’ (as they also said). She had allowed neurologists to study her trances in labs. The resulting graphs had shown the simultaneous superposition of schizophrenia, paranoia and depression. An improbable paroxysm, casting doubt on the ‘reality’ of spirits. At best, it remained unknown. She was smiling: this confessed ignorance was some form of progress.

She was a musician. She had told them that her shamanism was a musical quality, and that music could not be reduced to a mental projection. She had them listen to Elvin Jones. They reckoned he was a good drummer. She had them listen to Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, Cecil Taylor, William Parker. It was jazz, a bit too free for them. Loren Mazzacane Connors, Otomo Yoshihide, Yoshida Tatsuya. It was noise. Sun Ra, Christian Vander, Haino Keiji. Great pretenders, who may have believed in what they were doing, as maybe a few others did too – so much the better for their careers, but nothing out of the ordinary. She kept smiling. As a matter of principle. As a form of strength.

This time, though, the shaman was smiling more than usual. ‘Without affectation or condescension, but without criticism or haughtiness’. With trust.

Strengthened by the ‘distributed feeling of the world’s achievement’. She would not respond to queries. She’d only ask a few questions.

She had brought a radio and placed it on a chair, a few meters away from her. It was an old radio, with an antenna pointing up and a power cable snaking down. On the dial were city names. A button for the volume, another for the frequency.

Do you believe in the radio? How do you know that there are ‘waves’? What do they tell you, these lines oscillating on the graph? Is that the radio? Do you believe in the lines? And if I unplugged it, would you still believe in the radio? What do you hear on a radio, if not ‘spirits’? What if you turned the dial to a frequency where you could hear the dead? Luxembourg, Monte Carlo, London, what are they? Cities? Maybe. But then, what are Hilversum, Sottens, Monte Ceneri? Places? Is the program attached to the place? Atopolis? What ‘exists’ in these places? A receptivity? A broadcast? A force? An energy? Where is the music or the voice playing on the radio? Where are you when you are ‘on the air’? What are you? Spirits, voices, waves, humans? All at once? All Earthbound? All air-driven? All distributed? All musicians? All shamans?

### Diego Tonus

Every speech is nourished by the speeches that have preceded it and rendered it possible and necessary. It stems from a certain tradition, formalized by an institution. At the same time, every effectively uttered speech crushes what has been said before, and what might have been said in its stead. It imposes a certain authority. Authority is to the institution what the hammer is to the nail.

Except that, here, the nail is made of wood, akin indeed to the wood it pierces. An institution takes shape by nailing wood on wood, by imposing a surplus that seems excessive at the outset, only to find itself later on identified with what it violated. In limit cases, there is no nail anymore: the hammer pounds the wood directly. It hammers for the sake of hammering. To make the sounds of a pounding hammer. In any case, the violence is never on the side of the nail, always on the side of the hammer.

Except that, here, the hammers are made of wood, akin indeed to the wood the wood nail pierces. Pine or walnut? It’s a big difference, but it doesn’t matter here: all ligneous. The question is different: how to think the institution, violence and authority, when it is wood that violates itself, that stiffens its substance by beating itself, without even pretending to be nailing something?

These hammers are instruments of speech, and their authoritative function is to hammer in words. To institutionalize them. Or to crush them, so as to make sure they don’t hinder the institution’s ability to assert itself. Or to rouse sleepers, to stress a strong point, to resonate – with unforeseeable consequences: ‘when you awaken an observation, a certainty, a hope, they are already struggling somewhere, elsewhere, in another form’.

Ligneous institutions result from heterogeneous – and sometimes conflicting – forces, but they assert themselves all the same by guaranteeing the

convergence of their lines. Veins of pine or of walnut, it doesn't matter much: all aligned.

Except that, here, alignments are sinuous. Wood veins are aligned, but undulating. It's not the hammer blows of authority that are violent: it's that they pretend to be imposing 'the rule of law'. The law's justice can only be justified by subjecting the ruler to the undulations of curved lines: by becoming lined and ligneous - indissociably.

Fragile Atopolis! Not all blows are allowed there. Metal hammers break the wood they pound on. Because they impose the rigid rectitude of the rule of law, while disrespecting the lines they overlook. Wooden mallets pound without splitting what they pound on. Because they resonate with the hammered surface. Mallets are powerful (sometime noble and often beautiful) when they remain wood, attentive to the lines that curve their rule. Mallets oppress when they become hammers.

### Jack Whitten

From afar: a cloud seen from Earth. Upwards. Skybound. *The Cloud*, as they say. All the information of the world, leaving our heads and our machines to ascend to Heaven. We can make it rain down at will, selectively - as long as they will let us. Because, in fact, it is Up There, far away and inaccessible. Black-and-white, 0-1. Atopolis as bit cloud.

As we approach, the perspective is inverted: an urban archipelago seen from the sky. Downwards. Earthbound. Still in black-and-white, though. A city built on water, by night. Or else: the banal apartheid of good and bad neighborhoods, of light and dark, of the desirable and the harrowing. Atopolis as urban sprawl. Clusters and attractors, following the dynamic of 'developments' and 'promoters'. The nitty-gritty of the local as 'real estate'.

And then, from up close, finally, colors appear. The 'black beach' is a 'Diamond beach'. An archipelago made of nuanced greys, darker layers, blue zones, traces of green, red dots. 'Black' or 'white' are nowhere to be seen. Neither firmament nor overhang: our concrescence to contemplate from within. Atopolis as engaged atopography. As sub-product of urbanization, an internal brutality always to urbanize, to polish, to civilize - but only from the horror and errors of this civilization, which sprawls, invades, occupies, colonizes, stifles.

We're inside. We thought we were in the clouds, hovering over the city, but, unbeknown to us, we were already in it. Above? Below? In the middle: *in medias res*. In the media. In the raw materiality of mediations. Atopolis as the seventh continent of plastic which is gradually covering the oceans. Full of colors.

Houses and neighborhoods? Or floating debris and garbage patch? It doesn't matter: all Earthbound. All together - stifling each other. Broken, cracked, decomposed. Over-abundant, shimmering, motleyed. Floating, drifting, stuck together. Atopolis as disoriented multitudes, grouping together by capillary action.

Horrors of our errors: plastic, polymers, nuclear, GMO, nanos, oil, coal. 'Hyperobjects' (Timothy Morton). Non-local: above, below, outside, inside?

Everywhere at once. Non-measurable: 3,43 million square metres of floating plastic? Twenty four thousand years for the half-life of plutonium 239? Some billionth of a meter for a nanoparticle? Atopolis, even more than a panic of compasses, is a panic of scales.

Atopolis as one (last?) hope emerging from the garbage patch.: As we fall off the ladder, hold on to the brush, and paint what is still to be seen of the scales falling apart. 'A contemplative image' (Vilém Flusser). Block the spread of clichés, and look! From close up, far away, it doesn't matter: all Earthbound! Contemplate a stifling, but unsaturated, plenitude. Implant a distance. Sculpt the acrylic surface in response to the continent of plastic. Through the horror of Atopolis, discover the Atopolis archipelago in the erratic drifts of Atopolis.

## Credits

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