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Soothing Conspiracies

Apology for an Unassuming Distributed Middle-Garde

Some of us have lived many lives in many centuries before this one. Some of us have inhabited a multiplicity of worlds. We've done all this by talking with people, reading books, watching films, playing video games—all forms of being together, making love, partly in flesh, partly by proxy. Now we are here, doubting how many creatures and critters, heroes and zeroes, genies and ghosts make parts of this “we”. And, honestly, we don't care. What matters is what we do—all of us—with all of us for all of us.

What part of our common “we” could be called an *avant-garde*? What past avant-gardes continue to animate us? Who among us is about to mastermind an avant-garde about to come? We don't know. And honestly we don't care. What matters is what avant-gardes do and have done—all of them—with all of us for all of us.

Many of us have felt immersed in (loud or mute) avant-gardes. Many of us have read brilliant theories about the avant-gardes.¹ Many of these theories have been critical about the avant-gardes. Many of us are all the wiser about the traps and illusions of the avant-gardes. Many of us feel simultaneously immersed and distanced from them as a result. A contradictory position. But, honestly, we don't care. What matters is what this ambivalence towards the avant-gardes helps us to do—all the same—with all of us for all of us.

Those of us who experience this ambivalence as a puzzling mix of tireless hope and exhausted disarray may feel “in the middle”—rather than “in the break”. Being in the middle takes us backwards, compared to forging ahead as an avant-garde. Not on the forefront of disruption, but in the ambivalence of routines: *in medias res* (where Wendy Hui Kyong Chun stressed a resonance with *media* and with *race*)². Being in the middle may bring us closer to the undistinguished ranks of the multitudes. But it may also downgrade us to the shameful status of a “middle class” (Western? Global?). In any case, being in the middle tends to make us focus on present means rather than ultimate ends, on media rather than messages, on maintenance rather than on exploits, on common ways rather than unique arts. Being in the middle makes us rather dull. But, honestly, we don't care. What matters is what being in the middle may allow us to do—all differently—with all of us for all of us.

We, in the middle, may be dull, but we sincerely love and admire those who succeed by pushing themselves (and somehow remaining) in the break.³ We truly love and admire them: we love and admire the truth they manage to distil from the middle of us. We are not envious of their strength, genius and glory. We are inspired by them. We aspire to conspire with them. We breathe larger and truer breaths thanks to them. They matter: being in the break often

¹ Olivier Quintyn, *Valences de l'avant-garde: essai sur l'avant-garde, l'art contemporain et l'institution* (Paris: Questions théoriques, 2015).

² Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), p. 175-180.

³ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

comes with great dangers, and we are humbly grateful for their courage. By breaking ground, they advance what happens in the middle—all the time—as a result of what they do in the break with all of us for all of us.

From the middle of us comes something more humble. An apology rather than a manifesto or a claim. An apology for being a middle-garde rather than an avant-garde. An apology for being intermediaries rather than discoverers or inventors. An apology for being distributors and distributed rather than creators and concentrated. An apology for being unassuming when audacious assertions (loud and clear) and daring actions (bold and decisive) are urgently needed. An apology for being caught—most of us—between paralyzing gestures of Great Refusal and incoming promises of Great Upheaval.

Our apology could sound like this...

We Love You, Elvin, Tony, Ed, Famoudou, Vinnie, Gerry, Hamid, Susie, Jim, Tyshawn & Kate

How do we, in the middle, experience the avant-garde as a living force within and among us? By listening to drummers like Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, Ed Blackwell, Famoudou Don Moye, Vinnie Colaiuta, Hamid Drake, Gerry Hemingway, Susie Ibarra, Jim Black, Tyshawn Sorey or Kate Gentile. Not only because, with their magic sticks, they beat the shit out of our daily routines. Not only because they pulse and impulse into our bodies a rhythmicity that accompanies and swings us days, weeks, years after we've heard them play. Not only because they work—work it out!—from within the break, driving the beat always a little ahead of itself, pushing it forward, pushing us forward, ahead of our selves, beyond our tempo, beyond our time, just enough to embody and incorporate a feel of the future which will, in return, make our present more urgent, more urging to short-circuit what is still dragging us back.

This is all enormous, awesome and priceless, this tireless work they accomplish from their drum seat with their bare hands—all of them, Elvin, Tony, Ed, Famoudou, Vinnie, Gerry, Hamid, Susie, Jim, Tyshawn & Kate. This is the work of the avant-garde at its highest—Free Jazz, the New Thing, Great Black Music, Harmolodics, Creative Music, Avant-Jazz.

But contrary to other heroes of the avant-gardes, drummers push us forward from the back of the stage, from the middle of the band. They support the soloists from the background position of the rhythm section. Their drum solos can be astonishing, but the top of their art shines in the form of sustained interactions, joint improvisations—from the middle of an ensemble. They are never alone at the top, they always bring others with them, they elevate others to the top of their capacity (and sometimes beyond), they levitate them (and us along the way). Elvin Jones & John Coltrane & McCoy Tyner, Tony Williams & Miles Davis & Wayne Shorter, Ed Blackwell & Ornette Coleman & Don Cherry, Famoudou Don Moye & Lester Bowie & Joseph Jarman & Roscoe Mitchell & Malachi Favors, Vinnie Colaiuta & Frank Zappa, Gerry Hemingway & Anthony Braxton & Marilyn Crispell & Mark Dresser, Hamid Drake & William Parker & Ken Vandermark, Susie Ibarra & David S. Ware, Jim Black & Tim Berne, Tyshawn Sorey & Steve Lehman & Vijay Iyer, Kate Gentile & Matt Mitchell.

Drummers challenge our heroic view of the avant-garde because they perform supporting acts. Their assigned role is one of maintenance: keep the beat, maintain the pace, watch the time. On the face of it, they don't express themselves: they work (hard): they sweat, they labor—for the band, for the ensemble, for the assembly. They drive from the back seat, never on their own, never for their own sake, but always for their fellow-musicians—with all of them for all of them.

Drummers unite. Drummers expand. Their back-seat driving is not contained within the limits of the stage. Their syncopations push the audience's bodies to bend forward or backwards, to oscillate in pace with the bass drum. Their meanderings around the beat, their beating around the bush of metronomic time destabilize us. They make us briefly lose our balance, until they catch us before we fall, with a slight delay on the snare drum. Even years after their actual performance and sweat, their recordings manage to have us hold our breath, move our feet, shake our head. We are alone at home, in a waiting room, on the bus, with headphones, and they still move our body, they still animate our minds, they still push us forward with their syncopated beat—in time and through time, with all of us for all of us.

But if some of us would like to portray drummers as emblems of the middle-garde, it is also, and perhaps mostly, because drummers *play* the drums. They don't just perform: they play. Always in playful mood. Even when the hour is dark and the circumstances dreadful (Elvin & John playing *Alabama*). They are fully present—more intensely present than we will ever be “in real life”—and yet, they know and we know that they are “on a stage”. Playing. A little beside their self. Famoudou Don Moye paints his face. Hamid Drake wears colorful clothes. They are no mere agents, they're actors. Their work is as serious as your life, but they never take themselves too seriously. They smile and they laugh (about it all). One foot inside, one foot outside (the beat, the play, the game, the role). They make us laugh in disbelief (“How could he do *that*?!”) and smile in complicity (“Well done!”)—with us all for us all.

As their play is by essence collective, they are master improvisers. Some of the avant-gardes may have posed as programmers: they write ahead of time (in a manifesto) what others or themselves will later be called to enact (along the guidelines established in the manifesto). Drummers may play previously written compositions of course—we love you, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Antony Braxton, Henry Threadgill, Frank Zappa, Tim Berne, Ken Vandermark, Mary Halvorson, Angelika Niescier. But drummers always readjust their touch on the skin of their drums according to the singular moment of interaction with other bandmembers, with all of them for all of them.

Middle-gardes are bound to improvise because we are never fully ahead of our times, always in-between what we think we know about the future and what we don't know about the present. One foot inside, one foot outside. We are bound to “improvise” because nobody has “provided us with” the proper knowledge on what is to be done. The discovery of what we wanted in the first place always comes along the way, in a necessarily collective movement where it is crucial to stay in touch with all of us for all of us—*i.e.*, to play a game of collective improvisation—from the subcutaneous to the planetary in an ecopolitics of dancing.⁴

In other words, improvisers may be strategists and (fugitive) planners, but they are first and foremost *conspirers*: they learn (and teach) how to *breathe together*, at the same pace or alternatively, but within the same air, the same atmosphere, the same milieu. Drummers drive conspiracies, where musicians and audiences share an upbeat complicity⁵.

Gardeners of the Middle

Do great drummers make great heroes of the revolution? Do we really want a revolution? Do we really need heroes? True avant-gardes would not hesitate to say yes. We have our doubts. Do we identify the middle-garde with a middle ground, equally wary about all forms of extremism? We have our doubts. Are we committed to bring down capitalism, as it becomes

⁴ Emma Bigé, *Mouvementements. Ecopolitiques de la danse* (Paris: La Découverte, 2023).

⁵ Valentina Desideri and Stefano Harney, “A conspiracy without a plot” (Jean-Paul Martinon and Irit Rogoff (ed.), *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 125-136, <https://curatorsintensive.tw/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/A-conspiracy-without-a-plot.pdf>.

clearer and clearer every day that its extractivist dynamics are wrecking our communities and ravaging our habitats? We are. Do we believe a revolution is a realizable and desirable way to bring it down? We have our doubts.

Some of us suspect that the more one talks about agency, the less one acts. We know people come together. By coming together, they can deeply alter political institutions. And political institutions need to be deeply altered. But we suspect that, in order for such alterations to produce a satisfactory outcome, they need to brew in the middle. They usually emerge from the margins and the breaks, but they come together in and from the middle. From the middle that we form by coming together.

Forming a middle, also known as a milieu, is no easy task. It requires effort, and great care. Capitalism must be dismantled because it undermines our living milieus—in the literal sense of that verb: its extractivism mines and exhausts, undoes and ruins the socio-ecological ground on which we live and from which it profits. In order to repel its extractivism, one needs to maintain, nourish and strengthen the milieu we form by coming together, even if capitalism ultimately profits from this milieu it undermines and we sustain. We have no choice because this milieu—our neighborhood, our town, our bioregion, planet Earth—is the only one we will ever have to live on. There is no planet B. This much we know.

We are a middle-garde because we see ourselves as wardens and gardeners of this milieu from and within which we live. Wherever we may be, this comes first: caring over our common milieu, with all of us for all of us.

And that may be why, as middle-gardeners, we don't make very effective political and revolutionary agents. Revolutionary politics needs enemies—(groups of) individuals that are portrayed as separated from all of us. "Them". Political agency needs "them". Do we need political agency? Some of us have doubts.

Middle Class Conservatism

As oppressed people, we do not need to look for enemies, to make "them" up. We suffer from "them" and we often have good reasons to hate "them". Our socio-environmental milieu, our garden, our loved ones have been damaged, ruined, amputated, killed by capitalism and its colonial agents. So politics should come naturally, generously endowed with hate against "them". And revolutions should have blasted away capitalism long ago.

But they haven't (so far). So we have our doubts about the whole "them or us" scheme that is currently identified with revolutionary politics.

What if a good number among us who are oppressed by capitalism were also somewhat driven by and towards it? What if a good number of us—not all, for sure—felt somewhat caught in the middle, between hate and distraction. Not love, for sure. Not appeal either. Not even attraction. Distraction sounds as close as possible to what it is. And one rarely hates those who distract us. One may even like being occasionally distracted and entertained. Taken away from where we are. A little distanced from those to whom we may feel excessively attached. Not too close, not too tightly knit with what we are. A little removed. Not fully here, not totally there. In between the inside and the outside. Somewhere in the middle. Not in a "neutral" position, as if one could escape conflicts. But in a *neutrution* attitude, which metabolizes our inseparation by finding nutrition in tensions, rather than rest in neutralized peace.⁶

What if capitalism contributed to emancipate us from the here and now? What if we were its accomplices in this distraction? What if we liked and desired it, as much as we hate and resent it? We may hate "them" for what capitalism leads them to do to us. But some of us

⁶ Lila Braunschweig, *Neutriser. Émancipations(s) par le neutre* (Paris: Les Liens qui Libèrent, 2021) and Dominique Quessada, *L'inséparé. Essai sur un monde sans autres* (Paris: PUF, 2013).

can't help feeling that we are also a part of what capitalism do to us, including the very oppression from which we suffer. And we don't want to hate ourselves for what capitalism has us do to our selves.

So rather than calling out enemies in "them", we tend to feel a part of "them" in "me". Which makes us unreliable political agents and untrustworthy revolutionaries. Which makes it perfectly understandable for real revolutionaries—those who struggle in the break, those identified with the avant-garde we love and admire—to consider us with some amount contempt.

Isn't our middle-garde attitude typical of the wishy-washiness of all middle classes? Call us softies. Uncommitted. We are the ones who undo revolutions when revolutions start dangerously to undo the ruling order. We dodge taking side. We are neither here nor there. Neither (fully) for, nor (really) against. One foot inside, one foot outside. We keep our doubts when full commitment is required by the emergency. Instead of forging ahead full force, screaming our lungs out to repel our anxieties and to panic our enemies, we consider our options. We keep hoping for negotiations. Some of us even hedge their bets.

We are middle-men, middle-women, afraid of being caught in the middle in case of conflicts. So we avoid antagonism, at almost any cost. Of course, we know about the General Antagonism, the one which structures all unequal and unjust societies. Far from ignoring it, we see it everywhere. We fear it everywhere, because we know it can always spiral down into civil war. Avant-gardes strive to trigger revolutions. Middle-gardes strive to prevent civil wars.

We side with the people who loathe taking side because they know they will end up caught in the middle. Revolutionaries call us cowards, or opportunists. Or worse: pacifists. But we are not so much afraid of dying as we are afraid of damaging the relational milieu with which we so fully, so desperately identify. We don't fight (on battlefields), we conspire (in back alleys). Actively maintaining relationships of common breath and of shared air matters more to us than winning a war. That's why we are seen as conservatives, conservationists. Surely, nothing could be further removed from the revolutionary avant-garde than our conservationist middle-garde conspiracy. All apologies.

The Great Upheaval and the Terrestrial Pivot

And yet... Something, deep inside, in the middle of us, tells us that the middle-garde may be the surprising avant-garde of tomorrow's worlds. For the times, and the gardes, have been changing. The 20th century is over. So perhaps its avant-gardes. Calls for the Great Revolution have given way to postures of Great Refusal. But these, we suspect, will be washed away by the Great Upheaval.

This Great Upheaval was well described by Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi as early as 1990, when he warned us about an incoming "war of the worlds, the one that will henceforth oppose the center of the wealthy world to its various peripheries, near or far, unless the forces of interplanetary solidarity prevail over all the logics of enslavement": "the emergence of a common destiny for all humans (ecology, raw materials seen in the light of the just price)" demands to "institute solidarity as a new golden rule of the world game, next to the already very fragile notion of the sovereign right to power."⁷

(*From the middle of us, a voice asks*: hasn't this "Great Upheaval" already taken place, from the moment the Europeans started ravaging the places and populations they conquered? Aren't we *already* in a state of civil war? Good questions! Sony Labou Tansi *both* unveiled the war *already* waged against African people *and* warned us about the (incoming,

⁷ Sony Labou Tansi, "Lettre aux intellocrates de la médiocratie parlementaire" (1990) in *Encre, sueur, salive et sang* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), 145-146.

worsening) war of the worlds in a renewed context of “interplanetary solidarity”⁸. Similarly, the general antagonism makes it both impossible for us in the middle (class) to say “we”, and impossible not to identify with the mixed bunch and motley crew inhabiting “our” common milieu.) In an age of extreme environmental destruction, the middle ground will be the only inhabitable one, on a planetary as well as on a local scale. Our political compass is pivoting by a 90° turn (clockwise). The old South is the new West: our vanguard comes from Africa (Great Black Music). The old North will be the new East: not so much China’s leadership, as the melting of the Arctic under the heat of the rising sun. Conquest and productive growth will have to give way to maintenance and reproductive wisdom. Avant-garde warriors to middle-garde care-workers.

In Bruno Latour’s vocabulary: the past centuries organized politics around a “modernizing frontier” which opposed progressives bound to the Global attractor of transnational logistics, to reactionaries bound to the Local attractor of inherited traditions; the “New Climate Regime” of the Anthropocene opposes reactionaries bound to an “Out-of-This-World” attractor, desperately claiming to Make America (or your favorite sovereign nation) Great Again, to progressives bound towards a Terrestrial attractor whose main challenge is to provide earthly creatures with an inhabitable milieu.

Dramatizing somewhat extravagantly, let us call it a conflict between modern humans who believe they are alone in the Holocene, in flight toward the Global or in exodus toward the Local, and the terrestrials who know they are in the Anthropocene and who seek to cohabit with other terrestrials under the authority of a power that as yet lacks any political institution. And that war, at once civic and moral, divides each of us from within⁹.

We, in the middle-garde, understand that Sony Labou Tansi’s “war of the worlds” is not a future threat, but a present reality of globalization inherited from the colonial past. This war has killed and maimed millions of people, mostly in the South. Not only is it still raging on, but it is pivoting, in a 90° turn which Achille Mbembe has described as a becoming-black (*devenir-nègre*) of middle-class populations all across the world.¹⁰

This ongoing aggression of capitalist colonization is not only an economic and political conquest. It is also a war, at once civic and moral, which divides each of us from within. It assaults and splits us from the middle. And it can only be counter-attacked from the middle—by means of de-escalation.

Such is the 90° pivot called forth by the incoming Great Upheaval: from modern humans to terrestrials, from Whiteland to becoming-black, from warmongers to de-escalators. From extremizing avant-gardes to soothing middle-gardes? In Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ 1969 vocabulary, from development to maintenance:

The Death Instinct: separation, individuality, Avant-Garde par excellence; to follow one’s path to death—do your own thing, dynamic change.

The Life Instinct: unification, the eternal return, the perpetuation and MAINTENANCE of the species, survival systems and operations, equilibrium.

Two basic systems: Development and Maintenance. The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?¹¹

⁸ See Sylvia Wynter, *On Being Human As Praxis* (ed. By Katherine McKittrick, Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁹ Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 90.

¹⁰ Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

¹¹ Mierle Laderman Ukeles, “Maintenance Art Manifesto. Proposal for an Exhibition: CARE”, 1969. See also Jérôme Denis & David Pontille, *Le soin des choses. Politiques de la maintenance* (Paris: La Découverte, 2022).

Self-Defeating Capitalism from its Middle

Not so fast!... All of this soft talk about conflict dodging, supposedly bound to Earth, is more probably bound to let capitalism rule in peace. This soothing and pacifying middle-garde may indeed prevent conflict—but at the price of filling everybody’s mouth with soothers and pacifiers. A billion of people in China are becoming middle-class over a couple of generations, selling their free thought for comfort and commodities (so we’re told). The Middle Empire is proudly carrying the torch of extractivist oppressive self-destruction, in a global pivot abundantly commented upon by the Obama administration.

Should we simply follow along? “Maintain” capitalism? Our mouth shut around pacifiers, frozen by the fear of conflict? Play the ultimate suckers?

Open confrontation or resigned submission, resistance or collaboration, freedom or death: many among us suspect such binary questions miss the point. If the point could be made—what we have is not so much a constellation of points as an entanglement of lines—it could go somewhat like this:

CAPITALISM == EXTRACTIVISM + SOVEREIGNISM + COLONIALISM + PATRIARCHY + SPECULATION

As we all know, colonialism did not stop around the middle of the 20th century. It has pursued its course under the new clothes of globalization. But it has altered its mode of organization and somewhat weakened its mode of domination. Anti-colonial struggles have won national independence. Decolonial activism is slowly but constantly eroding colonial mindsets. While assessing the many contradictions of where we are *After the Great Refusal*, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen ask the question: *Have we already won?*¹² Not yet, surely. If it is not reduced to a metaphor, decolonization still has a long way to go.¹³ And, like the anticolonial struggles, it bears mostly on those who are in the break. But the undoing of colonialism may be in the (slow) process of expanding to the middle. So let us anticipate:

CAPITALISM – COLONIALISM == EXTRACTIVISM + SOVEREIGNISM + PATRIARCHY + SPECULATION

From contraception to obtaining the right to vote, from the recognition of domestic labor to #MeToo, from gay rights to the trans movement, the last hundred years have done more than any other period in modern history to undo patriarchy. More to the point: ecofeminism can be seen as the truest form of politics by the milieu, with the emphasis it puts on caring for the webs of people, things and powers.¹⁴ *Have we already won?* Not fully, of course. Because patriarchy is a vicious and relentless beast, because our (dis)connected forms of life mass-produce incels, because backlashes locally succeed. But here more than anywhere else, we have already come a long way. So let us look forward:

CAPITALISM – COLONIALISM – PATRIARCHY == EXTRACTIVISM + SOVEREIGNISM + SPECULATION

Extractivism is a hard one to expel from capitalism. We clearly have not won that one. A good number of us in the middle still rely on it. Extractivism is that war, at once civic and moral, at once economic and political, which divides each of us from within. As such, it can’t be won. It is simultaneously what feeds us and what kills us—this indiscriminating “us” being one of “our” main obstacles. Extractivism can’t be defeated (from the outside). It needs to be *dismantled* (from the middle).¹⁵

¹² Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *After the Great Refusal: Essays on Contemporary Art, Its Contradictions and Difficulties* (London: Zer0Books, 2018), 119.

¹³ Eve Tuck & K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor”, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2012), p. 1-40.

¹⁴ Starhawk, *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising* (Philadelphia: New Society, 2003).

¹⁵ Alexandre Monnin, Diego Landivar & Emmanuel Bonnet, *Héritage et fermeture: une écologie du démantèlement* (Paris: Divergences, 2021).

The infrastructures we have built to fulfill our needs (and exacerbate our desires) generate countless collateral damages—which, we realize, are not “collateral” at all (mere externalities), but dramatically central to our ecocidal modes of production. They unleash “feral” effects from the very core of our “civilization”.¹⁶ An ecology of dismantlement cannot simply vanquish such feral effect, crush them down, eradicate them, blow them out of existence. All of our feral technologies follow more or less the model of our nuclear power plants: the worst thing would be to annihilate them, to bomb them, to forget about them and look away. As Timothy Morton warned us, there is no “away” to throw such things away.¹⁷ Like plastic waste, like climate change, they are awfully sticky: we are stuck with them—all of us, rich (less painfully) and poor (more cruelly).

Dismantling can’t be an act of war. It is a practice of care. It is based upon the acknowledgement of our shared vulnerability, rather than upon the boasting of our sovereign capacity.¹⁸ It does not fit with the military conception of the avant-garde. It is an art of the middle—an art of repair, cooperation, maintenance, listening, soothing. Can we overcome extractivism? Not so much by confronting it, not so much by shaming each other for the part we take in it, but rather by carefully dismantling it. Slowly, humbly, progressively—even if time is awfully short. So let’s accelerate:

CAPITALISM – COLONIALISM – PATRIARCHY – EXTRACTIVISM == SOVEREIGNISM + SPECULATION

As we also know, sovereignism is on the rise. The hopes of the alter-globalization movements have been strangled by the clamp of global logistics and of reactionary nationalism. Not only are “patriotic” parties gaining ground across many countries, rich and poor, but they openly spread across the whole political spectrum, from the traditional xenophobic far-right (Italy) to social democrats (Denmark) to significant currents of the labor parties (France). As Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen convincingly argued, “late capitalist fascism” is not to be seen as a threat to democracy, from the part of the far-right: it is an inherent tendency of our mediarchical democracies.¹⁹ It comes from the middle of us, in its long-lasting attempt to take the authoritative center for the living milieu. It will have to be defeated in the years and decades ahead, if we are to prevent (a worsening of) the “war of the worlds” by pragmatically acknowledging “the emergence of a common destiny for all humans (ecology, raw materials seen in the light of the just price)”.

We deluded ourselves into fantasizing various forms of sovereignty, mostly based upon the exploitation, oppression and repression of our shared incompleteness.²⁰ The turning point may still be ahead of us. The pivot. No longer (sovereign) freedom or death. No longer them or us. Antagonism is part of the problem, not the solution. Or rather: partial antagonisms (between sovereign claims) are our only true enemy in our common struggle against the general antagonism.

Can we win against sovereignism? Precisely not. Because winning is in itself a sovereign claim. Victory too needs to be dismantled in its ferality. To do so, we need another culture of collective action, wary of the martial tones of the avant-gardes—a culture of the middle-gardes. Let’s precipitate the pivot:

CAPITALISM – COLONIALISM – PATRIARCHY – EXTRACTIVISM – SOVEREIGNISM == SPECULATION

¹⁶ Anna Tsing et al., *Feral Atlas*, <https://feralatlas.org/> (a Stanford Digital Project, 2020).

¹⁷ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

¹⁸ Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁹ Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *Late Capitalist Fascism* (Cambridge, Polity, 2022).; Yves Citton, *Mediarchy* (Cambridge, Polity, 2019).

²⁰ Stefano Harney & Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2021).

Breathing Conspiracies for Speculative Futures

And so we're left with speculation—repeatedly denounced as a form of conspiracy. We have not won yet—far from it, of course. But capitalism seems in the process of coming undone from its middle. What remains of its “essence”? The private ownership of the means of production, Marx told us one and a half century ago (not so long, in anthropological times). The antagonism between the capitalist class (extractors of value) and the working class (deprived of the wealth it produces). No doubt, this scheme continues to structure industrial capitalism—and capitalism is industrial in its essence, from the Caribbean plantation until today's Chinese factories. But what about finance capitalism—and capitalism has been financial since its origins, from Genovese banks in the Renaissance until today's high-speed trading?

The capitalist class can accurately be identified with the 1%. With those portfolio holders currently in position to control (trade, sell, close) half of our common registered wealth. Finance is the technique of extraction of this half in favor of the 1%. Granted. But what about “the middle classes”? When they/we are (un)lucky enough to count on pension funds to provide for retirement, when they/we manage to put away some savings, when they/we take on debt to pursue studies, buy an apartment or launch a company, they/we become entangled/strangled with financial capitalism—a part of the problem, a cog in the extractivist machine.

Beyond the actual holding of debts or assets, Randy Martin has showed how the financialization of everyday life had permeated our existential experiences, our mental representations and our daily habits.²¹ Finance is the extended and proliferating empire of the middle-men (more rarely middle-women). Its breath penetrates everywhere, inspires everyone, transpires in everything: its ubiquitous conspiracy is the living milieu of late (deadly or already-dead?) capitalism. Being in the middle makes finance structurally unstable. It bubbles and busts. More interestingly, it constantly inverts its flows. Up and down. Back and forth. Michel Feher has suggested this fundamental instability could be turned around against those who currently profit from it: once the debt is big enough, the debtor class can become an “investee” class, collectively too big to fail.²² Investors don't want to lose their capital: they rely and depend upon the capacity of the investees to pay (some of) it back. And some of it may not be the total sum of it. The difference between the sum and the some is what finance attempts to anticipate, day in, day out—always in the middle.

(From the middle of us, another voice asks: doesn't the sweet dream of a Debtors' International omit the inherent tendency of the capitalist mode of production, which, from the Plantation on, was not a mode of (sustainable) reproduction, but of (self-proclaimed creative) destruction? It only raises future promises in order to loot present wealth.)

Traditionally, middle-men negotiate. But, mostly, finance *speculates*. Negotiations take place on the level of exchanges: when one buys a carpet or a second-hand motorcycle. Finance is something else. It takes place on a higher level of abstraction, on a larger scale of extraction. It does not trade things, commodities, but derivatives. Not directly values and prices, but second-level bets about future prices. As Elie Ayache cleverly suggested, finance does not negotiate anything with anyone: finance *writes*.²³ It writes off but, mostly, it writes prices. In almost the same fashion as a novelist writes a sentence of her novel.

The sentence does not preexist its writing (even if, obviously, the world in which the novelist writes her sentence preexists and conditions her writing). The writing of the sentence does not take place in advance of its time (like an avant-garde pretends to be). It cannot be

²¹ Randy Martin, *The Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

²² Michel Feher, *Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age* (New York: Zone Books, 2018).

²³ Elie Ayache, *The Blank Swann: The End of Probability* (London: Wiley, 2010).

probabilistically guessed on the basis of the past data (no matter how big or how powerfully computed these data happen to be). The writing of the sentence in a novel, as well as the writing of the price of a derivative, take place in the middle of the present. By attempting to view and anticipate the future, it partially writes—on and off—the future, but always in the present. In real time. This operation of writing in real time is what we commonly call *speculation*. (Oddly enough, it overlaps with what call *improvisation*.)

What if speculation was what we are left with once capitalism has been hollowed out of its extractivism, sovereignism, colonialism, patriarchy? Would we still have to consider it our enemy? Once we are left with speculation, what is left of speculation? Could it be a speculation from the Left? Or a futuristic improvisation from the middle? A drummers' conspiracy?

Over the past years, speculation has been trendy in various fields, a long way from finance, in philosophy and in design²⁴. Branded as a technology of the future, it has sided with accelerationist avant-gardes—sometimes carried forth with soothsayers' postures. With more humility, Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou's recent book portrays speculative communities as wandering souls in search of soothing reassurance in a radically uncertain world—an attitude more in tune with improvisational middle-gardes.²⁵

We speculate (and improvise), first and foremost, because we know we don't know. But because we know we don't know, we brace ourselves and each other to jump-start desirable futures, and dodge unnecessary confrontations in the present. We wear yellow vests and occupy suburban roundabouts to fend off social injustice and greenwashing. We book tickets at a Trump rally we never meant to attend for the fun of seeing him speak in an empty stadium. We do speculate about possible futures in a world of uncertainty, but we mostly improvise in the present—with all of us for all of us.

Is this speculative art? Or a middle-of-the-road art of speculation? Are we speculators? Of course not. Are we artists? Who knows? We are collective improvisers.²⁶ We assemble, online and on site, on public squares, in festivals and concert halls.²⁷ We stick together. We touch skins. We caress symbols. We gamble. We play. As do Elvin, Tony, Ed, Famoudou, Vinnie, Gerry, Hamid, Susie, Jim, Tyshawn & Kate, with their magic sticks, touching skins, caressing cymbals.

Ours is an art of *conspiracy*: breathing-together is both a premise (we are alive, therefore we breathe) and a goal (we must maintain a breathable living milieu). Drummers of the world, we're uniting—breathing together in tune and in sync (inseparably synchronization and syncopation).

(*From the middle of us, yet another voice asks*: Can you beat capitalism with drumsticks? Probably Not. But then again: we're not so sure.)

It is true that, beside speculating and improvising, our conspiracies need organizing—and we have a long way to scale, from jazz ensembles to planetary mobilizations.²⁸ But middle-gardes don't dream of beating anyone or anything, in power or size. They need a driving pulse welcoming us to breathe together. We need to pace a common polyrhythm for a co-habitable world. A middle world of soothing conspiracies.

²⁴ Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

²⁵ Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou, *Speculative Communities: Living with Uncertainty in a Financialized World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

²⁶ George E. Lewis & Benjamin Piekut (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁷ Jonas Staal, "Assemblism", in: *e-flux journal*, no. 80, March 2017.

²⁸ Geert Lovink & Ned Rossiter, *Organization after Social Media* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2018).