



farewell, Art
Bureau d'études

Imagining the Arts in a Collapsing World

First, we have to imagine a deteriorating world: a world that is losing its memory. As the oceans are warming up and habitats, at sea and on land, are being reshaped, what is collapsing is not merely a world of humans, but also of other species, succumbing to mass extinction and emerging from ongoing speciation (Otto, 2018). Climate change will rapidly affect a very significant part of the world's human population: in 50 years, 3.5 billion people may find themselves outside their current climate niche (Xu et al., 2020). Faced with the celerity of this collapse, and with its myriad corollaries (in food, health, financial and many other systems), critical infrastructures, as they have been shaped in recent decades, are not up to the task. In fact, there is not – and probably there cannot be – a dependable method, a programme designed to respond to this crisis. What needs to be trained is, first and foremost, an ability to observe, perceive, and act, the skill to activate the faculties of imagination, at a personal and also social level, *vis à vis* the tangible issues of a place. The current environmental catastrophe opens the way to – and forces upon us – a clearer understanding of how the system that binds us together is built, what are its underlying structures, what purposes, intentions and distributions of power inform them, and how blind we are to the new realities emerging into existence.

Ownership is the basis for the organisation of resources, and for our entire social order. Hegemonic narratives and practices of social and economic organisation are still defined by the neoliberal agenda of sustainability: the destruction of our life-support systems could be avoided if we replaced oil with wind, just as, in the past, we replaced coal with oil, as if surviving the global crisis were simply a matter of substitution or reshuffling of the ingredients of the *status quo*, without challenging its foundations. Can we keep treating waste as if it could really be treated when we know that some of it will remain harmful for hundreds (e.g. plastics) or even for hundreds of thousands of years (e.g. plutonium)?

The environment is changing at a rate and scale that has had no precedent for hundreds of thousands, even millions of years. Yet our imagination barely manages to accommodate the familiar: the infrastructures and services that have been around us for the last few decades – water, energy, food, dams, telecommunications, waste management, chemical and production industries, transport and health services. When we look into the past, we find

that, only a few centuries ago, the world was so utterly different from today: a Scotland, for instance, covered with forests. Looking even deeper, we encounter enigmatic cultural objects – stone circles, vitrified forts, brochs, lithophones – things whose function is no longer understood; yet these things continue to punctuate the landscape. The past is still here – present in every sudden rain and tornado attributed to climate change, outcome of centuries of fossil fuel extraction – and also about to come. What exists is an entanglement of different temporalities making up the ever-present. This awareness of temporal juxtaposition will help us to invent a possible future.

The fiction of linear time obfuscates the massive substance of geology, and the resurgence of cultures and lifeways suppressed by successive colonisation, which have left their templates in the landscape. The present and the future are both made of antediluvian history that formed the rocks and soils that shelter and nourish us.

We have to imagine a world that is not yet. Faced with the challenges of global change, however, our imagination is too weak to visualise this world as anything other than a disaster movie. One can, if she so chooses, imagine a wholesale collapse that will sweep away art galleries – especially those white cubes that exhibit middle-class artists – alongside the metropolises of contemporary art, located where the flows of extraction and consumption intersect. Our arts, and our faculties to realise what is not yet, are still grounded on a state of the world that is vanishing in front of our very eyes. Hence the need for their reinvention.

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- Xu, Chi, Kohler, Timothy A., Lenton, Timothy M., Svenning, Jens-Christian, and Scheffer Marten (2020) Future of the human climate niche. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Doi: [10.1073/pnas.1910114117](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1910114117).