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## The World, Already a Corpse

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# \* The World, Already a Corpse

Roy Bendor

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021), *Hospicing Modernity. Facing humanity’s wrongs and the implications for social activism*, North Atlantic Books, p. 25

5 Machado de Oliveira, p. 38

6 We asked 380 top climate scientists how they felt about the future, 2024: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2024/may/08/hopeless-and-broken-why-the-worlds-top-climate-scientists-are-in-despair>

7 Jem Bendell (2018), Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy, In IFLAS Occasional Paper 2

8 Machado de Oliveira, p. xxv

9 Déborah Danowski & Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2016), *The ends of the world*, Polity, pp. 75-6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

10 Michael Marder (2023), *The Phoenix Complex: A philosophy of nature*, MIT Press

11 Marder, p. xx

12 Marder, p. 2

13 Marder, p. xvii

14 *Nagele Revisited* (documentary), 2012: <https://www.themoviedb.org/movie/1150376-terug-naar-nagele>

15 Reporting ‘space, time and everyday life’ in the Delta: <https://deltaurbanism.org/reporting-space-time-and-everyday-life-in-the-delta>