

Facing Depletion. Artworks for an Epistemological Shift in the Collapse Era

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Abstract

This article first reports a victory of technosolutionism over the other alternatives, the degrowth for instance, to the ongoing collapse (species extinction, ecosystems depletion...). The victory is considered double: extraction can continue to increase (quantity and scope) and the devices made by technoscience are accepted as a solution to the problems caused by intensive exploitation (which they also increase). Exploitation is extended, following Achille Mbembé's proposal, to humans, non-human animals, and the earth (in a geological sense), retaining the terms fracturing, extraction, depletion. Four works are analyzed as epistemological shifts to technosolutionism. David Claerbout's *The Pure Necessity* (2016) is an animated cartoon of animals with a streamlined behavior depicted with the graphic style of Disney. The complex interlocking of eras, styles, behaviors (human and non-human) is envisaged as resistance to fracking and exploitation. *Animal Cinema* (2017) by Emilio Vavarella is a short film made from rushes produced by non-human animals. It is emphasized that the frugal production method opposes the spectacular logics of big-budget animal reporting. It adopts the animal point of view while respecting their means of production. It is also seductive by a fluid and hypnotizing editing more easily accessible to humans. Emilio Vavarella's *Amazon's Cabinet of Curiosity* (2019) is an installation with a strict protocol: the artist asks what he should order to make an artistic production. He then buys each suggestion until his budget is exhausted. By its absence, the commercial behavior of the so-called intelligent device is underlined. The artist also resists fracturing and exploitation by reducing himself to a demand. Finally, *She Was Called Petra* (2020) by myself is a multimedia installation. In this one, language is re-interrogated and a zone of contact is set up to cohabit with a hybrid presence.

Keywords: David Claerbout, Emilio Vavarella, contemporary art, collapse era, smart devices, epistemological shift.

Resumen

Este artículo da cuenta en primer lugar de una victoria del tecnosolucionismo frente a otras alternativas al colapso en curso (extinción de especies, agotamiento de ecosistemas...). La victoria se considera doble: la extracción puede seguir aumentando (en cantidad y alcance) y los dispositivos fabricados por la tecnociencia se aceptan como solución a los problemas causados por la explotación intensiva (que también requieren). La explotación se extiende, siguiendo la propuesta de Achille Mbembé, a los seres humanos, los animales no humanos y la tierra (en sentido geológico), conservando los términos fracturación, extracción, agotamiento. Se analizan cuatro obras como giros epistemológicos hacia el tecnosolucionismo. *The Pure Necessity* (2016), de David Claerbout, es una caricatura de animales con un estilo gráfico similar al de Disney. El complejo entrelazamiento de épocas, estilos, comportamientos (humanos y no humanos) se vislumbra como resistencia al *fracking* y la explotación. *Animal Cinema* (2017) de Emilio Vavarella es un cortometraje realizado a partir de juncos producidos por animales no humanos. Se hace hincapié en que el frugal método de producción

se opone a la lógica espectacular de los reportajes sobre animales de gran presupuesto. Adopta el punto de vista de los animales respetando sus medios de producción. También resulta atractivo por su montaje fluido e hipnótico, más accesible a los humanos. *Amazon's Cabinet of Curiosity* (2019), de Emilio Vavarella, es una instalación con un estricto protocolo: el artista pregunta qué debería encargarse para realizar una producción artística. Luego compra cada sugerencia hasta agotar su presupuesto. La fuerte retracción subraya el comportamiento comercial del llamado dispositivo inteligente. El artista también se resiste al *fracking* y a la explotación reduciéndose a una demanda. Por último, *She Was Called Petra* (2020), de mi autoría, es una instalación multimedia. En ella se reinterruga el lenguaje y se crea una zona de contacto/intercambio para cohabitar y pensar en una presencia híbrida.

Palabras clave: David Claerbout, Emilio Vavarella, arte contemporáneo, era del colapso, dispositivos inteligentes, cambio epistemológico.

Introduction

In 2018, Alexa, Amazon's "smart" Internet-connected speakerphone, started laughing unexpectedly in several homes, notably when owners went to their kitchen at night. These disturbing situations were reported in various newspapers (Koerber; Fingas; Moscaritolo). Could this be an allegory of the so-called intelligent devices victory over the earth/living?

Better still, Alexa's laughter could be interpreted as a double victory: that of the successful extension of exploitation by extractivist companies and that of the acceptance of technosolutionism (Morozov) as a panacea by a majority of individuals. Indeed, contemporary capitalism, called surveillance capitalism by Shoshana Zuboff (Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*), has succeeded in creating value with one more element, personal data, which serves as raw material for a number of companies, mainly GAFAMs, which then sell it, after processing, to a multitude of third parties and partners. Moreover, contemporary technologies, including the so-called Internet of Things, are responsible for the current depletion of raw materials (Bonneuil et Fressoz)—especially through the work of extracting, storing and processing personal data. Simultaneously, these same technologies claim to be a solution. This old aporia seems to be well disseminated and the subterfuge works since the exploitation is more and more massive and diversified, and the production of machine-solutions is exponential.

Alexa thus doubly threatens the earth-system by finding new resources to exploit and new justifications for ever more intensive production in the age of collapse (species extinction and resource depletion).

In the face of Alexa's laughter, contemporary artists are exploring the relationships among machines, humans, non-humans and the earth in order to provoke epistemological shifts that will perhaps unravel the ideology at work behind the double victory of reinforced extraction and production. The aim of this article is to specify the extension of extraction in the collapse era and to explore some epistemological shifts provoked by some contemporary artworks.

This community of artists is large and developing. A selection therefore had to be made for this paper. Four productions will be presented and analyzed. Each one approaches the relationship among machine/human/non-human from various angle. This diversity will allow to draw up a first panorama for a possible later study. Moreover, my position as an artist-researcher brings me to include a personal work in the corpus and to think, notably with this last one, the epistemological shifts suggested by the studied artistic practices and their effects on the extension and the increase of the extraction and the production in the collapse era.

In order to unfold this reflection, two main parts will structure this article. In the first part, I will specify the problem and explain the idea of extraction and production apply to the collapse era. The second part will examine the productions and their effects from different perspectives: David Claerbout's *The Pure Necessity* will allow to think with the exploration of old animal representation in popular culture; Emilio Vavarella's *Animal Cinema* will look at non-human from the perspective of Animals and new media; Vavarella's *Amazon's Cabinet of Curiosities* will be a reflection between the Human and smart devices; finally *She Was Called Petra* by myself, will look at Human, non-human and smart devices relationship.

Extending Extraction in the Collapse Era

In this first part, I will return to what I have proposed to call a double victory. What makes it possible to say that exploitation has been extended and that technosolutionism has been accepted, resulting in the perpetuation of productivism? I will also seek to identify several notions that will be reused in the second part, devoted to the analysis of artworks.

Extending Extraction

The extraction and exploitation of humans, non-humans and the earth (in its geological dimension) are generally treated and considered separately (see Casilli; Campagne; Parenti and Moore; Di Muzio; Grusin; Barua; Bardi). The “raw materials” are indeed so different that many attempts have resulted in comparisons that are at best hazardous, at worst very problematic (the Modern link between animal and machine for instance). However, recent writings have made it possible to bring together these multiple exploited entities (especially in the sense of mining) in a more convincing manner, by using terms with broader meanings. Among these authors, Achille Mbembé, in one of his recent works, *Brutalisme* (2020), proposes a stimulating and effective thought in this regard. It will be used as a framework in the analysis of the works in this article:

If [...] humanity has been transformed into a geological force, then we can no longer speak of history as such. All history is now [...] geohistory, including the history of power. By brutalism, I am therefore referring to the process by which power as a geomorphic force is now constituted, expressed, reconfigured, acted upon and reproduced through fracturing and cracking. [...]

By means of these political techniques that are fracturing and fissuring, power recreates not only the human, but species, truly. The material it is trying to (re)shape or transform into new species is treated in a similar way to the way rocks and shales are blasted to extract gas and energy. Seen from this angle, the function of contemporary powers is therefore, more than ever, to make extraction possible. This requires an intensification of repression. The drilling of bodies and minds is part of it. [...]

To the logics of fracturing and fissuring, we must now add those of exhaustion and depletion. Once again, fracturing, fissuring and depletion do not only concern resources, but also living bodies exposed to physical exhaustion and to all sorts of biological risks that are sometimes invisible [...] Reduced to a slick and a surface, it is the whole of the living world that is subject to seismic threats. It is this dialectic of demolition and “destructive creation” insofar as it targets the bodies, nerves, blood and brains of humans as well as the bowels of time and the Earth that is at the heart of the following reflections. (Mbembe, *Brutalisme* 9-11)

If Achille Mbembé relies on the slave trade of modernity to explain the contemporaneity and postulates that the contemporary era is marked by the “becoming-Negro” (Mbembe, *Critique de la raison nègre*) of humanity, it seems to me that other comparisons and readings can be added to his statement.

Indeed, humans considered as surfaces, are imagined without interiorities. Since the advent of behavioral psychology, internal psychic processes are considered as unknowable, as a black box. The only thing of interest in this approach is therefore based on external behaviors and manifestations. Thus, the human being, over time, has lost its depth to be reduced to a surface, an observable and quantifiable expanse. This approach has become widespread and its concepts widely accepted. Moreover, this approach has been coupled with cybernetics and the digitization of the world, to the point of considering the brain as an information processing system (Epstein) and reality as completely measurable and quantifiable (Rouvroy et Berns, “Le nouveau pouvoir statistique”; Rouvroy et Berns, “Gouvernementalité algorithmique et perspectives d’émancipation”). With this process, the equivalence between exploitable entities has been extended. Humans (especially subordinates) are no longer very different from shale deposits, diamond mines, cattle and sheep (for the notion of subordinates, see in particular Benerjee and Wouters). The whole has been fractured to become extractable. All that remains are masses, flows, energies, so many raw materials to be exploited.

In addition to this equivalence, there are more and more important areas of exploitation, as I mentioned before. One of them is the surveillance of human behavior on networks (Internet, telephony, gps...). Shoshana Zuboff makes an exemplary and complete analysis in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*:

III. What Is Surveillance Capitalism?

Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data. Although some of this data are applied to product or service improvement, the rest are declared as a proprietary *behavioral surplus*, fed into advanced manufacturing processes known as “machine intelligence”, and fabricated into prediction products that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later. Finally, these prediction products are traded in a new kind of marketplace for behavioral predictions that I call behavioral futures markets. Surveillance capitalists have grown immensely wealthy from these trading operations, for many companies

are eager to lay bets on our future behavior. (Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* 15)

Regarding the mining process, as Zuboff notes, mining and interpreting human behavior has become the main source of revenue for the Internet giants (led by Google, Amazon, Facebook and Microsoft). And behavior mining is used not only to improve logic bots, but more importantly to predict future users' behaviors in order to sell these predictions to various private groups and to influence those same behaviors.

Thus, the extension of the extraction is done by a generalized equivalence where the whole earth-system is considered as a surface to be extracted and where all recorded human behaviors (and fewer and fewer of them escape the recording) are raw materials to be refined into predictions and models to be sold to different companies.

These details on the extension of extraction help to clarify the context and analytical framework of the artworks that will follow in the second part. Indeed, considering raw materials in a broad way will enable us to consider humans, non-humans and machines in a more intertwined way. Fracturing and extraction can also be applied to different entities. Transformation into usable matter, discretization for non-humans and humans (putting different behaviors and cognitions into numbers), will enable us to make the link with machines.

Collapse Era

Another important point to clearly understand the particularity of the extraction in this time is the notion of collapse. Many theorists and scientists envisage it as a coming event that will be sudden and brutal. But others consider that the collapse is and will be progressive (see Citton and Rasmi), or that it has already taken place (see Servigne, Stevens, Chapelle, and al.). Thus, Achille Mbembé, again, argues that: "For a large part of humanity, the end of the world has already taken place. The question is no longer how to live in anticipation of it, but how to live in the aftermath of the end, that is, with the loss, in the separation. How to remake the world in the aftermath of the destruction of the world" (Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié* 51). Considering the number of catastrophic events occurring simultaneously, it seems quite possible to consider this time as the time of collapse (the ongoing global warming, the sixth mass extinction of species, the increasing pollution [not a single drop of rain is drinkable anymore], the flow of human and non-human populations due to environmental problems, the depletion of raw materials, the erosion of governmental systems...). In this article, the analysis of different artworks are deployed in the context of a collapse that has already taken place. And communication and information technologies are major contributors to pollution and extraction of raw materials (energy and materials), the smart device industry in particular due to the massive need of power for computing. For the second part, thinking of the

artworks in a context of collapse allows us to envisage them outside the age of abundance, in times of a certain anxiety and urgency.

Technosolutionism

Faced with the extension of extraction and the actuality of collapse, those responsible for the problem propose to increase industrial production. For the advocates of technosolutionism, the cause of the problem is the solution. They go even further by asserting that the replacement of what has disappeared (extinction, depletion) will lead to an improvement.

At the same time, this ideology pushes for what might, at first sight, appear to be a contradiction in terms: the acceleration and increase of exploitation. But, as the problem of collapse is considered urgent, exploitation must accelerate so that a solution can be found quickly (this impetus is part of a wider movement of acceleration (Noys)).

To put it another way:

Technological solutionism means trusting in techno-scientific innovation to solve all problems. In the face of the ecological crisis, it is both a dangerous gamble and a powerful guardian of the established order: given the urgency and gravity of the threats, believing that a miraculously clean technology will get us out of trouble is particularly risky - but nurturing this hope has the advantage, for supporters of the status quo, of excluding from consideration a whole range of alternative political proposals. The idea of "saving the planet" (or rather, the system) through technology also poses a number of well-known and reknown ecological problems: the displacement and/or transformation of pollution, the rebound effect, the depletion of resources (mining or land), and so on. What's more, it still and always traps us in a blindness to alternatives, demiurgic fantasies and delayed action. (Berlan et al. 15)

And it seems that this ideology has gained a lot of ground if we notice the multiplication of companies contributing to this ideology and the numerous criticisms raised against it (Morozov). For example, a group of researchers at Harvard University is developing "robobees", microrobots that should pollinate flowers instead of bees that are on the verge of extinction. The communication about this project even claims that the "robobees" will probably do a better job and will have other functions: they will be able to count the number of flowers per species and systematically monitor all the places they pass through. One can also think of the recurrent absence of teachers and schools in sufficient quantity in several African countries that are replaced by applications, like eneza education, meaning "'to reach' in Swahili, is the educational platform that acts as a virtual tutor and teacher's assistant for thousands of Kenya-based students" (Halilou) or the automation of more and more important parts of the health system. Apart from bees, some scientists want to reintroduce extinct species using their DNA (Davis; Norman).

Through the prism of technosolutionism, we can understand the current paradox of the problem claiming to be a solution, and the increase in exploitation rather than its decrease.

To think about this double victory situation, the example of contemporary technologies in relation to animal and human representations will be particularly significant and synthetic. Indeed, cause and solution, they embody the double discourse currently at work (use of raw materials, energy, information resources claimed solutions to many problems). Artistic productions, by a different use of these technologies (hijack for instance), allow shifts of apprehension, even epistemological shifts.

In this way, we will see whether the proposed works invite us to move away from the brutalist paradigm of contemporary capitalism towards a different relationship with humans, machines and animals. These epistemological shifts may point to alternative futures: sustainable human lives, collaboration, frugal approaches and more.

Epistemological Shifts

In order to grasp what will be sought in the analyses of artworks that will follow, I would like to specify how epistemology is understood here. In this paper, epistemology is considered in its broadest sense: as much as the analysis of existing categories (subject, object, human, animal, plant...), as the ways of categorizing, the methods of approaching a question or a subject, and even the way in which a thought is elaborated. Thus, the apprehension of the earth-system as a geological whole to be fractured in order to make it extractable is a particular episteme that Achille Mbembé studies. I therefore consider an epistemological shift to be any artistic proposal that causes a fracture (again), a displacement, a destabilization of an episteme. I am now going to look for potential shifts in the prevailing epistemology in four artistic productions.

Revisiting Old Animal Representation, The Pure Necessity

The first artwork does not use contemporary technologies, but revives animation techniques from the 1960s. *The Pure Necessity* is a cartoon that was made in 2016 by David Claerbout.

In this work:

[t]he animals behave instead [of in *The Jungle Book* of 1967] in a manner befitting their species. Balloo, Bagheera and Kaa, whose songs and slapstick acts have been delighting children and adults alike for decades, are now back to being bear, panther and python.

Over a period of 3 years, David Claerbout and a team of professional artists painstakingly redrew the frames of the original movie by hand, one by one, and then assembled them to create an entirely new, lifeless animation—a contradiction in terms—which stands in raw contrast to the lively and rhythmical original. Now devoid of narrative, the animals move amidst the jungle as if the story were of their own making.¹

¹ <https://davidclaerbout.com/The-pure-necessity-2016>

This cartoon² lasts 50 minutes against 78 minutes for *The Jungle Book* and borrows Disney's type of graphic representations. The title *The Pure Necessity* refers of course to the famous song of *The Jungle Book* of 1967: "The Bare Necessities". Without going back over the explanations of the title given by the artist, we can make a first analysis of this work by seeing it as an endeavor of anthropogenization of the animal representations and their environments in a Disney film. This appears as a critique of what Whitley identifies as "rampant anthropomorphising" (Whitley 3) in Disney productions.

Moreover, Tony Ross proposes in "Slow Aesthetics and Deanthropomorphism as Ecocritical Strategies" another reading of this work. According to him, "Claerbout's video also raises questions about anthropomorphising habits in natural history documentaries." (Ross 8). This is an interesting proposition insofar as mainstream animal documentaries produce a dominant representation that contributes to the problem. These documentaries seek spectacle, script animal behaviors, anthropize them, require colossal budgets and advanced technologies ("intelligent" cameras, connected, exceptional lenses, very high-resolution digital recording...). Using ancient techniques, David Claerbout also questions the validity of contemporary documentary practices.

A third reading could be proposed for this work insofar as *The Pure Necessity* produces epistemological shifts on several levels. This animated film is not only a realistic representation, but also shows a hollowed out animal behavior. The animals are not returned to their "natural state", but appear in a half-life: they barely move. Their movements are reduced to a minimum to give an impression of life. Thus, rather than giving an impression of life in its natural state, the animals in *The Pure Necessity* behave in a way that evokes life in captivity, such as in zoos (this impression is reinforced when we learn that the artist used shots taken in zoos to animate these animal representations).

This reduced life elicits a feeling of mourning and nostalgia, pointing out that something is gone. The species represented are not extinct (not yet), but to represent them with a technique of the 1960s in this state of half-life proper to life in captivity refers to a multiplicity of losses.

Although not quite identical, this work could be compared to the *Bee Orchid* comic strip by xkcd mentioned by Donna Haraway, a great thinker on interspecies entanglement, in *Staying with The Trouble*:

But what happens when a partner involved critically in the life of another disappears from the earth? [...] In xkcd's cartoon "Bee Orchid," we know a vanished insect once existed because a living flower still looks like the erotic organs of the avid female bee hungry for copulation. But the cartoon does something very special; it does not mistake lures for identity; it does not say the flower is exactly like the extinct insect's genitals. Instead, the flower collects up the presence of the bee aslant, in desire and mortality. The shape of the flower is "an idea of what the female bee looked like to the male bee . . . as interpreted by a plant . . . the only memory of the bee is a painting by a dying flower." Once embraced by living buzzing bees, the flower is a speaker for the dead. (Haraway 69)

² [Link to video excerpt.](#)

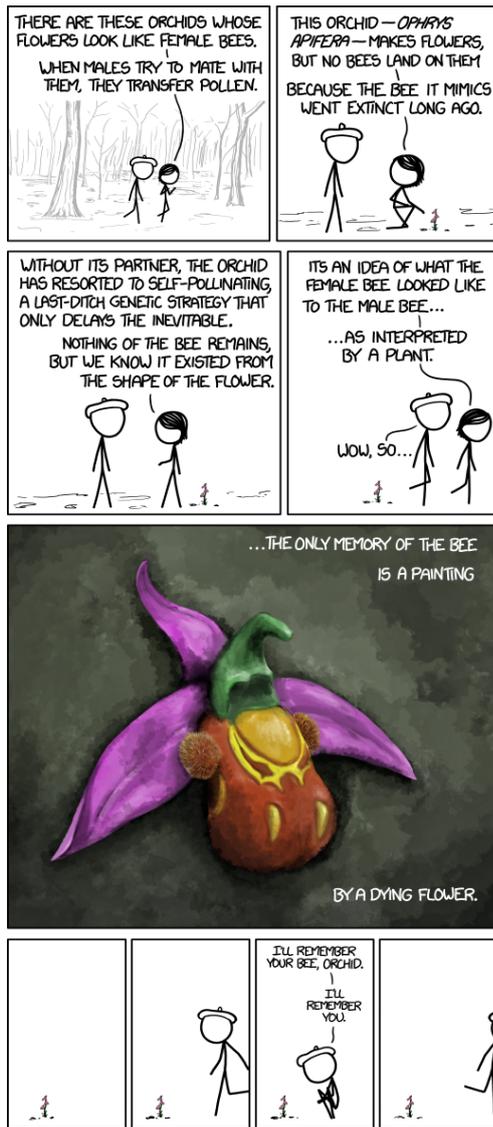


Figure 1, xkcd, *Bee Orchid*
https://imgs.xkcd.com/comics/bee_orchid.png

In *Bee Orchid*, memories are nested and multiple representational shifts are at work. In light of this comparison, could we say that *The Pure Necessity* recalls the relationship with non-humans in modern times, animal life outside of reserves and zoos, habitats that have almost disappeared, a different relationship to production time? The particular knotting David Claerbout proposes with this work refers to all these memories, and questions them in many ways. Firstly, he proposes encounters in different ways. Secondly, he proposes a shift in the aesthetics of the glorious thirties, while injecting a much more realistic, less anthropogenized animal behavior. Finally, he simultaneously devitalizes these realistic representations by attributing to them the behavior of animals in captivity in contemporary times.

The power of this work lies not only in a critique of representation, in Disney or animal documentaries, but also in the connections, the unexpected knots that shake the current state of things and its genealogy. The play with the temporality also proposes a destabilizing anachronism. And perhaps this long-term work produces a proximity for the public with the forms of representations of subtropical forests and animals, what remains of them. This set of elements—putting in relation, temporal

telescoping, long time, meticulous evocation—these multiple interlockings, appear as a form of resistance to fracturing, separation and revitalization. In other words, the entanglement is located at such a number of levels that extraction is made difficult: everything holds together and is constructed by multiple interconnected references.

This work thus seems to achieve what Graham Huggan called for in his article: “And perhaps the next best one might be to join the new ‘economy of emotions’ (Woodward) to the even newer ‘animal turn’ (Kalof and Montgomery) in order to see in what ways human and animal lives are ethically, politically, and ecologically entangled” (Huggan 22).

Animals and New Media. Animal Cinema

In contrast to a very important effort of human reconstruction (through a study of the animation film archive, the study of animal behavior and the reuse of time-consuming techniques) in *The Pure Necessities*, Emilio Vavarella, with *Animal Cinema* (2017), barely intervenes in the relationships that take place between animals and very current technologies (GoPro type cameras).



Figure 2 Emilio Vavarella, *Animal Cinema*, 2017

This artwork³ is presented as follows on the Film Freeway website:

[This] is a film composed of fragments of videos of animals operating cameras. All cameras were stolen by animals who acted autonomously. These video materials, downloaded from YouTube between 2012 and 2017, have been reorganized in *Animal Cinema* as a constant unfolding of non-human modes of being.⁴

We also notice, on the same site, the very particular distribution of the protagonists. We discover that *Cardisoma guanhumi* (land crab), *Octopus vulgaris* (common octopus), *Amphioctopus marginatus* (veined octopus), and so on,⁵ are the Key Cast, the hardwares are mentioned just after them and the humans, are only Youtube uploaders, except for Emilio Vavarella who is Director and Producer.

Thus, a first analysis of this work leads us to the concern of a direct representation of the animals, a representation without intermediary. The artist describes his work as follows in the magazine *Palm*: “documentary flow whose protagonists are not simply characters who have renounced theatricality and ‘enter into life’ (Deleuze) (as Jean Renoir wished), but embody the ‘life’ that unfolds under the hyper-realistic and accidental gaze of a camera” (Vavarella). Thus appears a desire

³ [Link to video excerpt](#)

⁴ <https://filmfreeway.com/animal-cinema>

⁵ *Canis lupus familiaris* (German shorthaired pointer), *Ursus arctos* ssp. (grizzly bear), *Panthera leo senegalensis* (West African lion), *Panthera leo* (African lion), *Sciurus carolinensis* (eastern gray squirrel), *Cebus capucinus* (white-headed capuchin monkey), *Simia inuus* (macaque), *Haliastur sphenurus* (whistling kite).

and a more direct work of animal representation without intermediary than in *The Pure Necessity*.

However, is it, as Aliocha Imhoff and Kantuta Quirós describe it in *Qui parle ? (Pour les non-humains)* [*Who Speaks? (For the Non-Humans)*], a direct speech, without any “trueness”, “nor human translation”, a project of “a nature that represents itself, a minima” (Imhoff et Quirós 65)? Is it a “transparent” word (with quotation marks) “as pretention to make emerge, without mediation of the non human “voices”, to reach the things themselves, to restore their point of view, or rather henceforth, as Emanuele Coccia suggested it, their point of life (Coccia), as an eye outside of oneself” (Imhoff et Quirós 66)? Even if a direct relationship is felt, the work of choosing sequences and editing distances us from the analysis that Florian Leitner had proposed in his article “On Robots and Turtles: A Posthuman Perspective on Camera and Image Movement after Michael Snow’s *The Central Region*” (Leitner 268). The latter analyzed a sequence posted on the Internet without editing of a turtle that had carried a camera before abandoning it to the ocean currents. No human post-production had been done. The human was then an archivist and the whole was a shared agency.

But Emilio Vavarella, through his editing work, places these shots and these non-human operators in an anthropic space. The editing produces effects of continuity between initially very heterogeneous shots. The values of similar shots (with close-up elements) and the visibility of the non-human operator also contribute to the fluidity of the sequences between species, biomes and continents.

This intermingling between a relative “transparency” and effects of continuity and fluidity produced by the editing leads to a plural reading of this work. First of all, there is an effect of seduction, even hypnosis, by the fluidity mixed with the absence of narration, replaced by simple displacements (devouring, entry/exit, theft...). One could bring this closer to *The Clock* by Christian Marclay who plays very strongly on fluidity and continuity without narration by taking shots from the history of cinema to constitute a cinematographic clock. The seduction is also played by the close-ups which can recall the human practice of selfies and helps to produce a link between human and non-human animals. On the other hand, a very material dimension emerges from this work: the portable camera object appears as a volume of plastic and metal that can be manipulated, and we can also see that things have been done with the production of non-human animals - there have been no added shots or effects. This work is produced with few resources and carefully considers the gestures of the non-humans. Thus, between a seduction and a simple materiality, *Animal Cinema* delivers a relationship to the non-humans outside the economy of the big-budget documentary, in a frugality that is nonetheless linked to the human world by the fittings and movements.

The epistemological shift in this work is then located in a frugality of means and in more organic associations that do not deprive themselves of human gesture through fluid editing. Rather than transparency, *Animal Cinema* proposes another mode of collaboration with non-humans without crushing them with a profusion of

technological tools, but by making with their proposals. The work suggests that non-human animals are perhaps the most capable of reporting on themselves. It only remains to connect these scattered self-portraits to produce another form of assembly. Let us stay with the contemporary machines but leave the non-human animals for a while.

Human with Smart Devices. Amazon's Cabinet of Curiosities

Amazon's Cabinet of Curiosities (2019), also by Emilio Vavarella, is between the replacement of the artist by the machine and a form of artist-machine cooperation.



Figure 3 Emilio Vavarella, *Amazon's Cabinet of Curiosities*, 2019

The artist explains the process in these terms:

Amazon's Cabinet of Curiosities [...] is the result of my cooperation with Alexa Voice Shopping, the artificial intelligence developed by Amazon. To produce this work, I asked Alexa one question: "Alexa, can you suggest a product for a new artwork?". Immediately after buying the recommended product, Alexa suggested another one, and then another one, and so on, and on... I followed and acquired every product suggested in this way until my production budget was entirely spent.⁶

Here, the artist obeys to the "smart object" and buy everything suggested by it.

⁶ <http://emiliovavarella.com/amazon/>



Figure 4 Emilio Vavarella, Amazon's Cabinet of Curiosities, 2019

Before going further, I would like to mention that several newspaper articles have recently headlined that AI could soon replace artists and gave [nextrembrandt.com](https://www.nextrembrandt.com)⁷ as an example. Others, being less alarmist, indicate that a cooperation between human and machine will become more and more important. We can also remember the multiple advertising campaigns inciting to be creative, and that, to achieve it, it would be enough to buy such intelligent device, tablet, application... A double discursive movement of dispossession—of the human artistic productions—and of accessibility—to the production of forms—has thus developed since the beginning of the 21st century. It undergoes a new phase with the so-called intelligent objects and programs: [gpt3](https://openai.com) and [DALL-E](https://openai.com) to quote the most recent and known. Artistic productions, and perhaps even artists, have been fractured, discretized and extracted before being reassembled, revitalized and commercialized. Even if artists and their productions are labile, cunning, can flee, poach, camouflage, even maroon, a fracture and a form of extraction has taken place.

Here, in an attitude of feigned surrender, Emilio Vavarella recognizes with *Amazon's Cabinet of Curiosities* the victory of the intelligent device over the artists. He humbly and ironically asks it for a suggestion for a new artistic production. It is therefore doubtful that *Amazon's Cabinet of Curiosities* is really the result of a cooperation as the artist says. Indeed, his involvement is very weak, he does not make any choice, and he only applies the protocol he decided before his request. His subjectivity and his judgment are suspended. This is more like what Estelle Zhong Mengual has called “delegated performance” following Claire Bishop. Indeed, she proposes this term while analyzing a work by Jeremy Deller (*It Is What It Is. Conversations About Iraq*, 2009): “There are thus two levels of participation in this project: the artist inviting Pasha [an Iraki artist] and Harvey [a former American

⁷ <https://www.cnetfrance.fr/news/quand-l-intelligence-artificielle-va-t-elle-remplacer-les-artistes-39865578.htm>
<https://experiences.microsoft.fr/articles/intelligence-artificielle/ia-demain-artistes-augmentes/>

military officer] to carry the project, and then Pasha and Harvey inviting passers-by to talk with them. Claire Bishop uses the term 'delegated performance' (Bishop) to refer to this process of the artist handing over the keys of the project to others" (Zhong Mengual 34). Later, she concludes, "some British artists take a very different perspective on their relationship with participants: the latter are often seen as those who help the artists and not the other way around" (Zhong Mengual 45). Thus, Emilio Vavarella would delegate the production of his project due to his incompetence and would ask for help from the network of artificial intelligences.

But this staged victory turns the situation around. By giving the keys of the project to the machine, he highlights its limits and its merchant functioning with a non-human logic. Following a more psychoanalytical analysis, the artist places himself in a masochistic position of realization of the fantasy of the Other and produces by that a detachment. In this regard, it is useful to recall Slavoj Žižek's analysis, in *The Coming Subjectivity*, of a scene from the film *Fight Club*: "in order to get his boss to pay him to do nothing, the narrator blackmails him by throwing himself across his desk and beats himself up before security arrives; in front of a dismayed boss, the narrator implies that he is the one who assaulted him" (Žižek 88). And he concludes: "The pure subject can only arise from that experience [...] of radical subjective disintegration, when I allow the other to lower me [...] thus emptying me of all substantial content[...] beating oneself up makes it obvious that the master is superfluous [...] the primary purpose of this violence is to violate the bond that attaches oneself to the master" (Žižek 91). In *Amazon's Cabinet of Curiosities*, the gesture is less violent since it is done through a request. However, it can be read in the same way: the Other, in this case Alexa, wants to dominate the artists and Emilio Vavarella, conforming to the protocol of addressing the machine, makes himself a subaltern, suspending his subjectivity and surrendering himself totally to the machine through his neutral request. This gesture produces at best two interesting effects. First of all, it reveals the functioning of the machine, because the human action is reduced to a radically congruent portion. An expressiveness mixing machine intelligence and commercial logic is thus revealed. This reveals an imagination of the artistic production created through machine learning. The artist then resists the fracturing and the extraction by reducing himself to a shallow request. Thus, a human reduced to a request is opposed to the opacity of the machine. There is a double movement for the artist: he denies, for a time, his artistic subjectivity, fractures the reconstruction operated by brutalism, deconstructs himself, and he opposes an unexploitable opacity for the contemporary discretizing protocols.

Human, Animal and Smart Devices. She Was Called Petra

She Was Called Petra (2020) is a crossing between a machine, Amazon's "intelligent speaker" Alexa, two humans and a parrot.

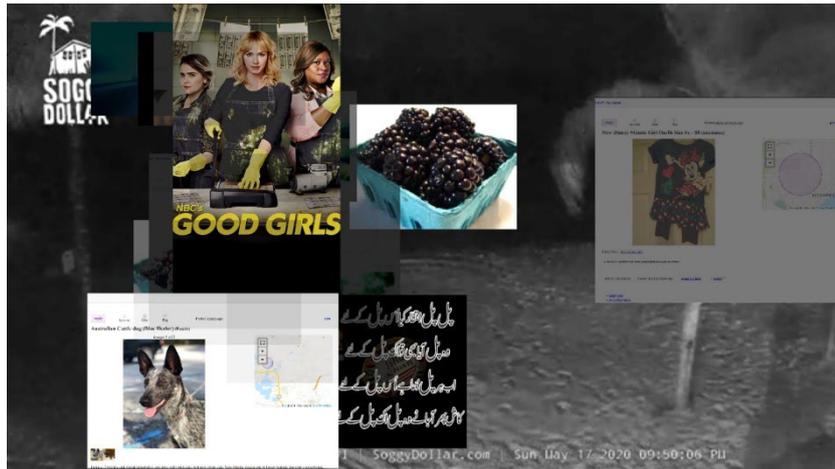


Figure 5 Damien Beyrouthy, *She Was Called Petra*, 2020

In 2019, a female parrot, an African Grey named Petra, managed to order online with a connected speaker. She thus added a certain quantity of items, rather diverse, to the shopping list of the human who lives with her in Orlando (USA, Florida). Since then, the talking speaker (Alexa), Petra and the human continue to communicate.

In *She Was Called Petra*, we can hear the voices of these three protagonists (along with a few others) in a single loudspeaker. Their words and sounds trigger the appearance of “commanded” images on a search engine. Simultaneously, live recordings of beaches in Asia, America, and the African savannah scroll across a screen and cell phones. Further on, the commands made by Petra, interpreted by a human, were brought and placed on the ground.⁸

[Link to the video of the installation](#)



Figure 6 Damien Beyrouthy, *She Was Called Petra*, 2020

⁸ <https://damienbeyrouthy.com/she-was-called-petra/>

choice of mediums and sequence. This production process could be approached as a chain of interpretations, translation, representation and recollection as in *The Pure Necessity*. But here, human, animal and machine also attempt to interpret and understand each other, according to their own logics and interests. Indeed, as I said, the animal imitates the human to command a machine that, itself, tries to interpret what the human or the animal says and tries to answer it by imitating the human communication. This initial, unplanned circulation is then extended into a circuit of interpretations. I have gathered, on a pedestal, sounds of animals, humans, machines and images of animals and environments facing objects that are themselves animal, human, machine or come from the environment.

In relation to the technosolutionist and extractivist victory, one could read this work in multiple ways. First of all, these attempts at inter-species understanding (if we include Alexa as a critter), multiplied and repeated in *She Was Called Petra*, could suggest that the commands uttered by Petra, and then declined by the image, the verbalization, the order, are not only a matter of consumption, but also of a request, of an address to the other. Also, the list of objects, more or less material, could be received as a form of language or concrete poetry. Redeployed in space and image, it shakes the human systems of categorization, relation, language, signifier and signified. Could this be close to what Alyosha Imhoff and Kantuta Quiros identify as the third level of translation?

The first level, that of stories and children's literature, is literally anthropomorphic; the second level, that of approaching, as close as possible, their own Umwelt, their own world, maximizing the possibilities of language and voice, while the third level is primarily the paradoxical operation performed on language, so that one can no longer distinguish between an infinite play of language, an openness to new modes of meaning, and the reality of radical otherness. (Imhoff et Quirós 136)

Does *She Was Called Petra* in its use of language, its redistribution in space and on screens open new modes of meaning? Does it also allow us to consider radical otherness? If each non-human animal can be considered as a radical alterity and the translations of third level open towards these radical alterities, an entanglement such as *She Was Called Petra* opens perhaps to the alterities that appear following the new technological productions as soon as they are registered in relations to the living. Without being able to answer the definition of this particular entity, *She Was Called Petra* allows to wonder about it. What happened to language after its appearance? What about demand, desire, or even reality?

The double victory of technosolutionism (extension of extraction, techno-production as a solution) is now strongly extended in the collapse era. The domains of extraction now include the earth, non-human animals and humans reduced to flows, energies, forces, materials, information. Everything must be reduced to extractable surfaces. The exhaustion resulting from this exponential extraction is resolved by the production of technologies that are themselves responsible for the exhaustion. Faced with this camouflaged paradox, we have seen four artistic creations that allow multiple epistemological shifts that question the dominant position. David Claerbout's *The Pure Necessity* (2016) provoked interlocking representations, worlds,

separate temporalities making it more difficult to extract a defined surface. Emilio Vavarella's *Animal Cinema* (2017) thwarts an expected animal representation, all the more so with recent cameras, producing a frugal cinema, while seducing the human gaze with its continuity. *Amazon's Cabinet of Curiosities* (2019), also by Emilio Vavarella, reveal the working of the device through a radical submission to it while rendering itself opaque and unassimilable by the device. Finally, *She Was Called Petra* (2020) by myself materializes an entity that no longer responds to the human, the animal, the machine and is located in an intermediate zone. Other forms of language are proposed in this work, the space of meeting reconsidered and the market order proposed as poetry or request to a third party. These four artistic productions thus appear as forms of resistance to fracking and extraction in different ways. They also suggest alternative lifestyles for some of them: frugality, cooperation, assembly.

The transformations identified in these artistic productions are thus varied and effective. A study of a larger number of works would make it possible to systematize the proposals for change and alternatives that fracture technosolutionism and the current brutalist approach.

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