

N°094

Bifo —

Franco

Berardi

100 Notes – 100 Thoughts / 100 Notizen – 100 Gedanken | N°094

Bifo – Franco Berardi
transverse / transversal

dOCUMENTA (13)

**HATJE
CANTZ**

Bifo – Franco Berardi *transverse*

In this text I will try to understand some of the intentions of DOCUMENTA (13) according to my particular point of view, which is based on the belief that the current agony of capitalism will be a deadly trap for human evolution unless we adapt our culture and lifestyle to exhaustion, the dominant trend of our time. I will also try to understand how some of the works presented and assembled by DOCUMENTA (13) express propositions for emancipation and autonomy through withdrawal, exodus, and a proliferation of morphogenetic processes of recombination.

I am writing and acting in Europe, where the modern utopia of infinite growth has come to an end, and a process of irreversible decline is unfolding. The dissolution of the last great political project of modern times, the European Union, is approaching, and this process can be seen as a failure and a catastrophe, but also as the condition for the imagination of a new Europe—based on social solidarity and no longer on competition. From my (European) point of view, the collapse and rebirth of the European project may be seen as the beginning of a new process of autonomy based on frugality rather than accumulation, on friendship rather than rivalry.

Trauma

We have been told for so many years that “everything will be okay” that now it’s hard to believe that everything is more or less collapsing: pensions, social security, public sanitation, schools. Prosperity, democracy, civilized manners, may therefore disappear too.

What exactly is happening, down here, on Planet Earth?

Climate pundits have stated the matter clearly: time is up for the environment; floods and catastrophes are increasingly frequent and violent. But the Durban Conference, the umpteenth climate sum-

mit, has gone neglected. Nobody has money to spare for the rescue of mankind from the apocalypse of the planet, since everybody is haunted by the financial conundrum. Should we care about the collapsing physical planet and the growing number of starving people and unemployed or should we care about the abstraction of the abstraction of the abstraction?

1 | Doug Ashford in a project proposal for DOCUMENTA (13).



Doug Ashford, *Forma Corporis*, 2010, ink-jet print, 45.7 × 61 cm. "There is a huge reservoir of feeling produced by abstraction, daily as the dark impartiality of economic systems that tear culture apart and rarely as the brighter possibilities of a distanced view: both positions of looking (and thinking and making) are incandescent because they are separated from the space of reality."¹

Finance is the most abstract level of economic symbolization. It is the point of arrival of a long process of progressive abstraction that started with capitalist industrialization. Marx speaks of abstract labor in the sense of a growing distancing of human activity from its concrete usefulness. In the sphere of capitalism, the application of human skills is only a means to obtain a more abstract goal: the accumulation of monetary value. Nevertheless, in the old period of industrialization as analyzed by Marx, the production of useful goods was still a necessary step in the process of valorization itself. In order to produce abstract value, the industrial capitalist was obliged to produce useful

things. This is no longer true today, in the sphere of semiocapital. Accumulation in the world of financial capitalism no longer passes through the production of goods, but goes straight to its monetary goal: extracting value from the pure circulation of money, from the virtualization of life and intelligence.

Financialization and the virtualization of human communication are obviously intertwined: thanks to the digitization of exchanges, finance has turned into a social virus that spreads everywhere, transforming things into symbols. The symbolic spiral of financialization is sucking down and swallowing up the world of physical things, of concrete skills and knowledge. The concrete richness of the Europeans is vanishing into a black hole of pure financial destruction. Nothing is created from this destruction, while the financial class is expropriating the outcome of the general labor force and of the general intellect.

Years ago, Jean Baudrillard said that the ever-growing debt has disappeared from the scene of the world, and is orbiting above the earthly atmosphere.

An electronic billboard in Times Square displays the American public debt, an astronomical figure of some thousands of billions of dollars which increases at a rate of \$20,000 a second. . . . In fact, the debt will never be paid. No debt will ever be paid. The final counts will never take place. The United States is already virtually unable to pay, but this will have no consequence whatsoever. There will be no judgment day for this virtual bankruptcy. . . . When one looks at the billboard on Broadway, with its flying figures, one has the impression that the debt takes off to reach the stratosphere. This is simply the figure in light years of a galaxy that vanishes in the cosmos. The speed of liberation of the debt is just like one of earth's satellites. That's exactly what it is: the debt circulates on its own orbit, with its own trajectory made up of capital, which, from now on, is free of any economic contingency and moves about in a parallel universe (the acceleration of capital has exonerated money of its involvements with the everyday universe of production, value and utility). It is not even an orbital universe: it is rather ex-orbital, ex-centered, ex-centric, with only a very faint probability that, one day, it might rejoin ours.²

Contrary to Baudrillard's (disquieting? tranquillizing?) prediction, the "very faint probability" has come about: debt has come back to Earth, and it is now acting as a condition for the final predatory abstraction: life turned into time for repaying a metaphysical debt. Life, intelligence, joy, breathing—that which defines our life as human—is going to be sacrificed in order to pay off the metaphysical debt. By its nature, debt has a physical side and a non-physical one. Debt is an act of language, a promise (I'll give back what has been lent to me), and is therefore immaterial. But when they performed the semiotic act of promising, the old industrial city dwellers referred to physical things. Money was the signifier of houses, kettles, and all kinds of material goods. In the late modern age, the financial sphere is acquiring an autonomous ontological feature that can be called metaphysical since

2 | Jean Baudrillard, "Global Debt and Parallel Universe," trans. François Debrix, in *Digital Delirium*, ed. Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker (New York: St. Martin's, 1997 [orig. 1996]), p. 38.

it does not imply any reference to material goods or to physical acts of transformation. It only refers to the sphere of semiotic exchange: the self-valorization of money.

The autonomization of the financial sphere is based on the transformation of debt in a purely linguistic (both informational and psycho-relational) entity. A non-entity indeed. Kettles, houses, and food are no longer signified, but rather, abstract power. Baudrillard calls this “orbitalization” of the debt. But in the end, the metaphysical debt has come back to Earth, and in order to be paid, it is starting to predate the resources and energies of social life.

Transition

Do you remember the promise? Perfect harmony of the market, perfect harmony of the network. The invisible hand of the economy is going to spread wealth around the world, protecting humans forever from evil and chaos.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, which trusted in the future, the invisible hand was embedded in the global technology of the linguistic machine, and language, the essential environment of mankind, was turned into a wired, automated system. The imaginary apocalypse of Y2K announced the real apocalypse that actually came in spring 2000: the dot-com crash, the Prozac crash. The Internet economy was broken, and panic was spreading.

When panic is looming should we slow the rhythm or should we accelerate? The doctors were looking for answers when the towers of Manhattan were set ablaze, so answers were forced through emotion and fear. Doctor Bush decided to cure panic and depression with uppers, the stimulants called war, murder, bombing, destruction, invasion, hyper-violence. Did the therapy work? Actually, the economy was relieved: huge conglomerates of death like Blackwater, Halliburton, Texas Oil, started pumping money and aggressive euphoria into the social brain and body. But everybody knows that injecting amphetamines into a depressed organism is not a good solution. Sooner or later, the patient jumps out of the window.

Eight years after the amphetamine injection, the U.S. economy crashed again, and this time for good. The crisis that broke out in September 2008 is not going to end in a recovery. And now we need to know: What if capitalism is dead and we are unable to create a higher form of social production, based on collective intelligence and on sensibility? What next, if society is unable to rebuild in solidarity a future based on frugality?