

2ND SESSION

31ST OF MAY 2022
NÚRIA GÓMEZ
GABRIEL

PARTICIPANTS:
CATERINA
ALMIRALL,
GABINO CARBALLO,
JORGE CARRIÓN,
ALEXANDRA LAUDO
& ANOUCHKA
SKOUDY

A FIRE IN A TREE¹

*Here you will always be an outsider, a stranger,
a tree of nothing, looked down upon
for all supporters of symmetry and uniformity.*

Jacint Verdaguer

Sitting around the work table, the protagonists of human bodies. Below, his restless feet. Outside, the leaves of the lime trees.

— I am a botanic criminal — he declares.

Of all the crimes against vegetation that he has committed under the regime of the public administration of parks and gardens of the city of Barcelona, there is one that he cannot forget. The killing of an immense, old and precious tree due to the stabilization of a wall in the public space of the city. Yes, a wall. A signature on the paper, and on with the execution. Enormous amounts of trees are uprooted for reasons such as, for example, comfortably guaranteeing the opening of our world's infrastructure. As he wonders if our bonds with vegetation are nothing more than the mirror of our interpersonal relationships, while pondering what the fragility of these bonds turns us into, he decides to share another anecdote with the rest of the group. Proudly, he explains that, just a few months ago, he himself was able to save a hundred sixty-year-old trees rooted in the ground where a railway was to be built. The life-saving

1 I have been invited to write some notes about the working session of the project Roots & Seeds XXI. Biodiversity Crisis and Plant Resistance held last May 31, 2022 in the modernist complex of Hospital de Sant Pau in Barcelona. The starting point for the working group is to think, collectively, and from different fields of knowledge, if we can have a greater capacity to respond to face the current crisis and the degradation of biodiversity of the plant world with the tools, methodologies and practices that are set in motion when art and science meet. The work session was convened by Lluís Nacenta, Caterina Almirall, Alexandra Laudo, Gabino Carballo, Jorge Carrión and Anouchka Skoudy. This text is written, therefore, through their words.

action consisted, quite simply, of moving its route a few centimeters.

THE IMPOLITIC LIFE OF THE GREEN

The survival of the hundred trees that today shade the train tracks today depended on what the technician calls “personal factors”. Rather, we would say that the reason for its survival was strictly biographical. As was also the old oak on Encarnació street in the Gràcia neighborhood of Barcelona. A story mobilized by the *Salvem l’Alzina* (save the oak) platform and starring the neighbors in action. An epic story in which the human community that shared territory with the bicentennial tree managed to preserve its life. An operation of expropriation, conservation and compensation by the city council that entailed an economic cost of 7 million € out of the total budget of 55 million €. The singular case of the old oak in Gràcia also entailed a review of the district’s heritage catalog by the city council in which, for the first time, green was included in the institutionalized notion of historical memory. This neighborhood mobilization process, however, rather than a properly articulated discourse, what it produced was a collection of lived sensations, cultural practices and emotional memories of the common that were recorded in the documentary “Com una alzina” (like an oak) in 2019 by the director Oriol Díez, himself a neighbor of Gràcia.

Honestly, all these anecdotes make me think about life. The general idea of life. But the truth is that I don’t know much about the life of trees. What I do remember is that to name life, Aristotle used two words: *zoé* and *bios*. The the first term refers to the simple fact of living, to the metabolic life that is common to all living beings. The second, to the type of life proper to an individual or a group of humans. In the old philosopher Politics every meaning of life is related to a space: “while the city, the polis, is the space of the bios, where the human being, being endowed with language and reason (*logos*), relates to others and decides on the common good, the home, the *oïkos*, would be the space where this life called *zoé* would be reserved for feeding, reproduction or resting. The life that would develop, therefore, in the political sphere would be that life

endowed with a political supplement linked to language that would make the human being one species different from any other living being, and which Aristotle qualified as *Politikon zoon*”.² For this reason, Giorgio Agamben, a few centuries later, will place this distinction between two (or more) kinds of lives as the exercise of power par excellence, and he will say that power is that which practices the split that distinguishes one politically valuable life from another, relegated from the political space: the impolitical life of the green.

— Perhaps, what happens to the trees that we decide to preserve is not so much a process of humanization but a process of objectification — he asks the rest of the group.

The technician uses the term “personalization” to refer to the phenomenon that justifies the existence of trees based on human biographies that are intertwined with vegetable life, an existence that would become political through the use of memory, the word and the reason. The curator, on the other hand, considers this operation something similar to the process of singularization done by the museum institution when it gives a certain value to some specific objects that would be worthy of being separated from the rest.

— We save an individual in relation to others, we objectify them to make them part of a collectable minority — she adds.

2 Valls, J. E. (2018). *Giorgio Agamben: Política sense obra*. Barcelona: Gedisa. Page 16. In this essay, where Juan Evaristo Valls Boix analyzes the post-foundational political thought of the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, the author develops a critique of the political machine of the West, which has exercised power by shaping and dividing life between a political life endowed with meaning, and another naked, absurd and contemptible one: town and crowd, citizen and immigrant, Aryan and Jew; Agamben allows us to go beyond these schemes and think about a politics of being, without work, and a life that finds its politics in the dismissal of the forms of domination and in the disabling of the devices of subjectivation.

Trees, however, are not individuals. Trees are colonies. Technically, from one single cell it is possible to reproduce the entire colony. That's why all the trees in our city are clones, the same cell of a body that we have displaced. Single-cell eugenics in hands of technique and efficiency. A postnatural selection criterion that ends with the green metabolism of the city to maintain control over its wildlife, its life in freedom. In this way "they are more predictable", says the technician. The fact is that we select the individuals who, according to the administration's criteria, have those particularities that for us urbanites would be an "advantage": they are tall, fat and beautiful, they grow straight, they don't drop branches, they don't generate seed, they produce prettier flowers, withstand the drought better... And therefore all power relations with our environment that used to be given holistically would now develop under utilitarian criteria. The only way to give way to the birth of a new colony would be through its own reproduction system.

— We ended its sexuality — he confesses — one day they called me because there was one fire in a tree.

STORIES ABOUT CHANGE. UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS IN THE MANNER OF SPECULATIVE FICTION

I hang around for a while thinking of the city as a museum of trees. Before arriving at the modernist premises of the Hospital de Sant Pau, I have decided that during the work session I would dedicate myself to being silent and listening. So far so good.

— What defines the vegetal subject? The age? The colony? Will we give the forests the territory that belongs to them? —adds to the rhetoric— The History of Humanity is the history of gradually recognizing subjects to whom we have denied rights. First the animate beings. Next the cemeteries of abandoned objects. To restore their rights, to regulate these rights legally, socially and philosophically should be done in the manner of speculative fiction.

As they discuss the importance of regulating the rights of life forms from the law, but also from art, literature, philosophy, science and speculative fiction, as they imagine the wild paths to a biocentric perspective of our coexistence with the environment, I repeat to myself, in a low voice, that to do it from-and-with language and reason would always be bullshit. In fact, it is already completely Kafkaesque to think any non-human political agency with our human faculties. I am one of those who think, certainly very lightly and with little scientific rigor, that this exercise genuinely paternalistic would hardly escape what I have decided to call "the Lion King Effect". What happens when the arts and technologies rooted in the tendencies of posthumanist thought move with the desire to "give voice to the other", to confer logos to the non-human subject. A bit like when I sing, mountains dance³. The *Hakuna Matata* of the Copernican turn.

Clearly, whenever we do the "imagine you are..." exercise to "become more empathetic" the result places us in the impossibility of escaping human subjectivity and our limitations when it comes to understanding, perceiving and reasoning about what it could lead us to recognize the rights of non-human entities. So while I wonder if it is from this impossibility that we should embrace the wild, that which has not been captured or domesticated to remain in the metabolic freedom of the simple fact of living, they reflect on the question of whether it would be necessary to know better the ways of being of the plants to stop seeing them as something that can be replaced or regulated in terms of efficiency, and they wonder if they should abandon the fable of the hero and live with lice on their heads and cockroaches in their shoes.

— Let's go deep: completely renounce the moral superiority that we have granted ourselves as a beings endowed with self-awareness is a very radical position — they exasperate.

3 Reference to "When I Sing, Mountains Dance" by Irene Solà, Graywolf Press, 2022.

The group tries to think about the romantic turn of art a state of emergency like that we are currently going through. It doesn't bother me at all that art is romantic. Art also has its own metabolism. And deep down science is also romantic, but apparently that doesn't bother us that much. At this point I get distracted by remembering a conversation I had held, a few days ago, with the science fiction writer Manuela Buriel on the terrace of the bar Mendizábal in the Raval district of Barcelona. Buriel told me about the difference between the concept of "reflection" and that of "diffraction" that she had learned in a workshop taught by Hellen Torres⁴ based on the work of speculative thought by authors such as Donna Haraway and Ursula K. Leguin. Writers who write many beginnings but no ending. They do not write endings because the end would be the Apocalypse, and they write change, mutability, adaptation, collaboration and unexpected encounters like the one we experienced with the COVID. Writers who narrate in the contact zone and in the search for balance. Authors who write stories that embrace conflict, struggle and death but do not nurture them of the hero's success or control of destiny. In fact, if we think about it, when we narrate the current climate crisis we often postpone the possibility that life can continue its course any longer beyond human existence.

To deepen the metaphor of diffraction, Hellen Torres starts with the dialogue between the texts by Donna Haraway and Lynn Randolph's painting entitled *Diffraction* (1992). One image where the figure of an all-powerful man stands behind a central feminine figure that incorporates the multiplicity of beings and that has two heads and an extra amount of fingers

4 On June 6, as I write this text, I ask Manuela Buriel if she can remind me of some of the ideas she shared with me a few days earlier. At 5:50 p.m. the same day, she answers me with some attached materials related to the workshop "Érase una vez... y otra vez... y otra vez" by Hellen Torres. Based on these materials I synthesize some of the ideas to prepare this report. Hellen Torres has been teaching literature and speculative thinking courses since 2016 under the conceptual umbrella that she herself calls "SF Workshops. Thinking about the possibles to make them probables". You can access information relevant to their workshops at the following url: <https://helenatorres.wordpress.com/talleres/>

on her hands. The metaphysical space between the two, Torres tells us in the words of Randolph, is the space of diffraction: "the thread of the future facing the abyss of the unknown". To understand this aphorism it would be necessary, however, to take a step back.

Diffraction is an optical phenomenon that Haraway introduces in an article entitled *The Promises of the Monsters: a Regenerating Policy for Other Inappropriate/bles* (1999) and that she approaches as a metaphor, as a figure to talk about thought. Later in the book *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan@Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (2004), the thinker will expand the notion of diffraction as one alternative to the concept of reflection and will say that we reflect when we think, that a reflection is a subject who confronts the mirror that returns his own image, fact that Haraway will call "the sacred image of the identical". An image where the reflection would be a copy or an imitation of the original, the myth of creation in the image and likeness or Plato's cave. Diffraction, on the other hand, occurs when, in front of an obstacle, a diversity of frequencies, of life vibrations, combine and overlap each other producing patterns of interference. Diffraction, in the field of thought, therefore, would allow us to combine the difference because it would deal with heterogeneous history, and not with the originals. In this manner, unlike reflections, diffractions could be a metaphor for another kind of consciousness, committed to the creation of difference instead of the repetition of the sacred image of the identical. According to Torres, what Haraway would tell us is that "diffraction would be oblique to the Christian narrative and the Platonic perspective, both in the technoscientific stories and in the most orthodox manifestations". Diffraction would then be "a narrative, graphic, psychological, spiritual and political technology for the creation of consequential definitions". And from this perspective, Hellen Torres explains, "diffraction would no longer be a metaphor for material thought but an onto-epistemological tool and a pedagogical practice".

— They talk about quantum physics with narrative structures from the 1980s like Powerpoint — she dropped. Then she reminds the rest of the group that

art always integrates science and technology, whatever the era; that artists, curators, programmers work in search of patterns, perverse motives; and that the challenge would be that both science and technology also integrate the forms of contemporary art.

The truth is that to me, the image of retro scientists explaining the cutting edge of physics quantum with curtain effects makes me smile. But then, I think maybe it is necessary to go further, that perhaps the question would be that both the forms of integration of the science and technology, like those of contemporary art - whether romantic or not - would break at once the mirror of the sacred image of the identical to embrace the patterns of interference in current ways of life.

THINKING FROM THE ARTISTIC-SCIENTIFIC POINT OF VIEW. LEAVE THE OBJECTIVES ASIDE TO EMBRACE RELATIONSHIPS

— Do we think then that we can face the biodiversity crisis with the tools, methodologies and practices that are set in motion when art and science meet? — he asks recapitulating.

Karen Barad would say yes. Her feminist physics has conjugated the optical metaphor of diffraction on several occasions, because the ways of knowing would be, according to her approach, always entangled with the forms of life. But the question of how to get out of human existentialism when thinking together with non-human entities would consist —according to the diffractive thinking of feminist speculative criticism— in “think-with” and not “think-as”. That is to say that in no way our task as human beings should translate what the other says. The reflective thinking of the Western ocular centrist society believes that the observed reality is stable. However, we also know that the gaze makes the world. Therefore thinking-with would not consist in giving the word to non-human lives, nor in translating their communication systems, even less in valuing the ways of life of the most cute above those that have been relegated to the category of the monstrous. Rather thinking-with

would help us to detect what forms of what we call thought do set in motion those entities we share the world with, to open up the possibility of being able to change our own idea about who thinks and what it is to think. Then, from this perspective, the material body of the biosphere would not be a blank surface waiting to be written by the biography, culture or history, waiting to be given meaning and open to the exchange. The body of the forest is not situated in the world, Barad tells us, but is of the world. So the green world of the forest body would ultimately challenge the limits of our own corporeality while asking us about the responsibility to live as an embodied being.

The human body must die in order to live. We are denying that life is also death and that our experience of the world takes place in transience, not only as a place of passage but as a living space. Despite the fact that the net of relations on planetary scale of the capitalist system want us to believe that it is not such, while tattooing on our foreheads the tautological motto “No Limits to Growth”, our experience of the world becomes contingent and impermanent. We trace the course of our lives very close to the abyss of the unpredictable and unknown. Perhaps it is this concern, the ambivalence between growth and barbarism, that has led us to deal with the life and death of objects with arrogance and self-sufficiency. It is not surprising, then, if we think about it, that so many processes of patrimonialization of forests and objects of art respond to desire of saving an individual above others. A single one that represents the rest. And if we pay attention to how objects of art live and die in the artistic space of the Museum, we will discover the place where the institution stabilizes a certain knowledge above others.

We don't trust progress or apocalyptic tales. We don't know where to hold on so as not to fall into the abyss. We have lost the great stories and we lack new ones that can accompany us in leaving aside the epic of the objectives (where we are going) and being able to embrace relationships (when and where we walk, how we do it, with whom). Stories where care and justice would always go hand in hand: the fable of responsibility. That which Haraway would call “the ability to respond to those who suffer from consequences of our actions”. Then, maybe here,

the state of exception would mean to stop thinking about art as a “form” and to see it as a situated possibility. In other words, to stop thinking about “making art” to be able to “make art”. To do with art even something that could not be considered art. Asking ourselves what we can think-with from the artistic-scientific perspective in a situated way, in a here and now that takes into account the relationality and the networks that are being woven (economy, market, history, culture) between the human and non-human life forms of the world.

In fact, ethnographic studies usually focus on an object and erase what was left out of its range. But things change a lot if we study it in a situated way, with its networks and relationship systems. If we were to approach, for example, the emergence of the coronavirus from this perspective, situated and relational, we would see how the ferocity of the Anthropocene spreads through distribution networks where industrial stowaways circulate. It would be through the distribution of long-distance goods that new living things would be introduced into local ecologies. In the same way, the great density associated with the phenomenon of crowds, human and non-human, would create a kind of uncontrollable “wildlife effect”. High saturation of carp and eels in ponds, commercial chicken farms or a subway station at rush hour produce the optimal conditions for the incubation of undesigned toxic combinations and new forms of virulence. Therefore, following Barad’s sentence, it would be nice to never lose sight of the fact that our body is not located in the world, rather our body is of the world.

— How can we think-with the biosphere from an artistic point of view today, here, us? —they ask.

— And about the interrelationships between freaks and geeks? — he insists.

— New funding structures would be necessary — he answers — but, above all, to have a new space for institutional art-science coexistence, because the impetus for scientific and artistic research could be the same, but what is rarely shared are the contexts of professionalization.

— We could also think of a non-existent name for a new entity that would not, in any case, be what is known as an art-science hybrid — he adds.

— Or we could start by recognizing art as a form of scientific knowledge —he exclaims— art is the vanguard of meaning. It is precisely for this reason that, sometimes, art is so absurd... Art would be something like the zero degree of our sensitive experience.

— It would be necessary to strengthen the situated conversation — he adds —. Make a fire. Cut out our tongues. Start a finite movement in synchrony. Maybe then we could, after all, resume the eternal journey back home. The Oïkos. The home: metabolism of the world or the simple fact of living. In front of us. Behind us. Tekné. Fable.⁵

5 Free association of ideas and own translation of the publication *Things Said Once* (2015) by the artist and researcher Esperanza Collado. Retrieved from: <http://www.esperanzacollado.net>