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# We Are 'Nature' Defending Itself

Entangling Art, Activism  
and Autonomous Zones

Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan

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Artist: Amanda Priebe

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## Part I: Seeding

### Scream

Her hand rises up out of the swirling sea. Dark eyes fix deep blue sky. She's drowning, not waving. Water is pushing life out of her lungs, but she just wants to be alive, she coughs and squirms. She's traveled so far to get here. Her home is on fire, her land has been stolen, the climate has broken down, droughts have brought hunger, the fields are becoming deserts, the wars never stop, and she is in search of life, that's all.

But Fortress Europe has made sure she never reaches the tourist beaches with their bronzing bodies and sweet smell of sun cream. Her darker body will wash up on the golden sand days later, when the tourists have gone back to their hotels and after the tides are tired of playing with it. You are moved by the TV pictures of the crowded boats and the drowned children. You are moved to make a work that speaks of how Europe's migration policies are killing the exiled. You cover the columns of a theater with thousands of orange life jackets.

You are the artist Ai Weiwei.

When asked why you helped design Beijing's Bird Nest Olympic stadium for the very government that has repeatedly repressed and

censored your work, you replied that it was because you “loved design.”

Do you love art and design more than life?

\* \* \*

The Arctic is at times 20 degrees Celsius warmer than it should be at this time of year. The ice is melting so fast. What would normally be happening with the long slow geological time is happening within the span of your life. The waters are rising and many of the climate tipping points have passed.

You feel you have to act. You have hundreds of tons of arctic ice that has broken off the ice shelf transported to Paris during the United Nations Climate Summit in 2015. You leave them to melt in the street.

You are the artist Olafur Eliasson.

You say your studio does not “make things” but “ideas”, which does not stop you selling your wire and lightbulb football lampshades for £120,000 to rich collectors.

You are artists and you are working in the Capitalocene, an era marked by a system, whose obsession with limitless growth means it will always place the economy in front of life, sucking the living into its globalized circuits of capital, forever expanding and voraciously devouring more and more worlds. Some biologists call humans “the future eaters.”<sup>10</sup> But to blame ‘humans’ is to let the real culprits off the hook: only 20% of humanity consumes 80% of the world’s resources.<sup>11</sup> A recent official European Commission policy paper ended

with the warning that if we go beyond 1.5 degrees of warming, “we will face even more droughts, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people; the likely demise of the most vulnerable populations—and at worst, the extinction of humankind altogether.”<sup>12</sup> The least responsible for the climate-wrecking emissions are the worst affected by it.

We are living in a war against the poor. We are living in a time where it is easier to imagine the collapse of life as we know it than reinventing the right ways to live together. We are living on the edge of an epoch.

No artist or activist has ever had to work in such a moment in history, and yet our culture continues to turn its back on life. Business as usual is the order of the day, especially in the museums and theaters of the metropolis. We could call it extractivist art. Extractivism takes ‘nature,’ stuff, material from somewhere and transforms it into something that gives value somewhere else. That value is always more important than the continuation of life of the communities from which wealth is extracted. So many artists make a career out of sucking value out of disaster, rebellion, animism, magic, whatever is a fashionable topic at the time, and regurgitate it into un-situated detached objects or experience elsewhere. Anywhere in fact, as long as the codes of the world of art function.

If your artist CV says you’ve shown in Cape Town, Dubai, Shanghai, and Prague and live between Berlin and New York, you have value. But if your bio says that you work in the village where you have lived all your life, getting to know

the humans and more-than-humans who share your territory, and that your work nourishes local life, your career is fucked. Under capitalism, mobility is always more valuable than getting to know and paying attention to somewhere. We are discouraged from being attached to anything or anywhere, except perhaps to our careers or to our lofty rhetoric and detached radical theories. Words and ideas that rarely have consequences, rarely translate into transforming worlds. To be attached to something material and relational is dangerous because it means you might fight to defend it.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the UN climate scientists not known for their revolutionary spirit, wrote in 2018 that if we want to avoid the worst of the catastrophe, we had 12 years left for “rapid, far reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society.”<sup>13</sup> We must revolutionize so much of our existence, and fast. This must include art, which for far too long has been perceived as the very ground zero of what it means to be ‘civilized,’ human even.

Art-as-we-know-it is an invention. Manufactured by the white European colonial metropolises, it is only a little over 200 years old. It arose hand in hand with the beginnings of industrial capitalism, it rested on the same philosophical myths that enabled extractivism everywhere: the toxic dualisms between nature and culture, mind and body, individual and common, art and life.

Art-as-we-know-it was just one more weapon of separation to exclude the poor, the rural folk, the craft people and popular culture of all

shades, from the calm contemplative spaces of the rising metropolitan monied class. With its cult of individual genius, exported around the world to teach everyone the great supremacy of the white European imagination, Art-as-we-know-it became the pinnacle of humanity.

Two centuries on, many are still caught in the trap of Art-as-we-know-it, representing the world rather than transforming it. Showing us the crises rather than genuinely attempting to stop them or create solutions. It's as if someone had set your home on fire and instead of trying to extinguish the blaze, you took photos of the flames. What kind of separation must have to take place in our minds that when faced with such an existential emergency we think only of representing it? And whom do such "pieces" serve, ultimately?

Why make an installation about refugees being stuck at the border when you could codesign tools to cut through fences? Why shoot a film about the dictatorship of finance when you could be inventing new ways of moneyless exchange? Why write a play inspired by neo-animism when you could be co-devising the dramaturgy of community rituals? Why make a performance reflecting on the silence after the songbirds go extinct when you could be co-creating ingenious ways of sabotaging the pesticide factories that annihilate them? Why make a dance piece about food riots when your skills could craft crowd choreographies to disrupt fascist rallies?

Why continue with Art-as-we-know-it, when you could desert this Nero culture, which fiddles while watching our world burn?

## Disobedient Desires

We may see the overall meaning of art change profoundly—from being an end to being a means, from holding out a promise of perfection in some other realm to demonstrating a way of living meaningfully in this one.<sup>14</sup>

Allan Kaprow, performance artist

Every form of collective action we know—boring A to B marches to barricades, hunger strikes to boycotts, flash mobs to occupy camps—emerged out of the coordinated imaginations of people in struggle. Many of those who pursued these tactics knew that disobedience is what makes history. From the right for women to wear trousers to the legalization of contraception, from the work-free weekend down to the fact that you can read this independently-published (and not government censored) pamphlet, all these ‘privileges’ were the result of people disobeying the laws, and often the norms, of their epoch.

When we found one another, we also found we shared this conviction, as well as the knowledge that for radical action and disobedience to take hold of the imagination and become meaningful, it also needed to be deeply desirable, changing our worlds had to be as joyful as it was irresistible. Within months of meeting each other, we launched the *Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination* from an East London squatted social center. We wanted to bring artists and activists together to co-design tools of disobedience. The artists would bring imagination and poetics, and the activists

would bring courage and context. The formula worked, especially when sprinkled with some of the key ingredients of rebellion: passionate pleasure and adventure.

Over those years you might have found us at a Climate Camp in Kent distributing pirate maps to indicate the location of buried boats with bottles of rum, ready to launch a mass rebel raft regatta to shut down a coal fired power station. You might have heard of the scandal that ensued when we refused to let London's prestigious Tate Modern museum censor our workshop that dared to do more than 'reflect' on the relationship between art and activism, and instead acted against the museum's fossil-fuel sponsors. Maybe we met you at the Kampnagel summer festival in Hamburg, where we turned a stage into an assembly space to decide on the ethics of leaving the theater and injecting ants that sabotage computers into the city's fossil-fuel financing banks. Maybe we crossed paths during the protests at the Copenhagen UN climate summit when we were transforming hundreds of abandoned bikes into tools of disobedience, to protect a public assembly of Indigenous and Global South climate justice activists from police violence. Or perhaps you were a player on one of the 120 teams participating in *The Climate Games* we coordinated in Paris, defying the State of Emergency and ban on demonstrations, with the slogan: *We are not fighting for nature, we are nature defending itself.*

All these experiments had something in common: they were based on direct action. We weren't protesting, we weren't begging, we

were taking life back into our collective hands, unmediated, material, now. Often, those that govern are flattered that there are protests, that people make demands on them: it legitimizes their power. “Protest is begging the powers-that-be to dig a well” wrote our late friend, the radical anthropologist David Graeber. “Direct Action is digging the well and daring them to stop you.” It is what he called “acting as if you were *already* free.”

Despite the collective joy and the victories that resulted from many of the movements we were entangled with, we often felt a kind of emptiness in between the adventures. Like a sort of activist comedown. It took years to realize that perhaps this was linked to the fact that these actions somehow never seemed totally embedded into our everyday lives. They felt separate from the neighborhood that we lived in, as if floating above our daily needs. We were radical activist artists, but we still had that sensation of being detached from worlds, moving from one place to another, from event to event, activist camps to theater festivals, giving conferences in one place, teaching in art schools in another, shutting down an open cast coal mine elsewhere, always returning to the suffocating concrete of London, where home had become a mere landing pad. Like so many captured by the metropolitan logic, we were body-minds without anchor, we were discombobulated beings who had lost any true sense of place.

It would only be here on the zad, defending this threatened land from the spread of the metropolis, that we began to feel what it meant to be truly free and that meant being caught up in the necessities

of a shared everyday life. When you become attached to somewhere, when you realize that you can become the territory, freedom no longer floats in the air but lives in the relationships and the ties of need and desire that you build. We fell in love with this place and its rebel inhabitants and thus became free to overcome fear and put our lives in the way of those who wanted to destroy what had become our home. And when we let ourselves do that, we discovered that the more we inhabited this place, the more it inhabited us.

### Following Swallows

Compost toilets should always have good views; ours is exceptional. Especially at this time of year, as the golden autumn sun tunes itself to the colors of the meadow. With the deep green edge of the forest as a backdrop, the long flat field becomes the stage for a final aerial ballet show of swooping swirling barn swallows preparing to migrate, 10,000km away from this western edge of Eurasia all the way to West Africa. This theater's best seat is right here, in our living collective toilet, where, daily, our bodies return some of their nutrients back to this land that nourishes us. We could watch the swallows' duets with the air for hours.

They glide, flutter, then dive, opening and closing their wings with a lightning snap, their tiny white bellies caressing the grass as they skim the ground feasting on insects before speedily spiraling up to join their fellows, high in the sky chirping shimmering sounds of pure pleasure together.

“It must be a sort of farewell ritual,” says our self-taught ornithologist friend Alessandro, who deserted his profession as a cognitive scientist to pen graphic novels. We are eating lunch outside, 20 of us, young and old, around the long oak table. It’s one of the forms of life we love most here. Every day we eat with a set of different people, there are always folks from our living collective but also a steady stream of visitors, from other collectives and from afar. We laugh, tell stories, make jokes, discuss political strategies and construct the warm conviviality that cements common life. “Perhaps the swallows know that not all of them will make the long journey,” Alessandro continues, looking dreamily into the agitated air. “Maybe it’s a kind of goodbye party.” Soon these swallows will depart for their six-week flight heading south to West Africa. For centuries, folk in Europe could not understand where the swallows disappeared to at winter; some thought they spent it on the moon, others that they buried themselves underneath lakes or in the mud. Today, scientists have made detailed maps of their migration patterns, they resemble the maps in airports, colored trails crossing continents. But these fragile threads of swallow journeys following the jet streams that form as land, water, and air meet, could not be more different; their flights don’t flood the air with climate wrecking toxins. Many swallows die as they make the long crossing of the Mediterranean, but at least they can ignore the militarized borders and razor wire fences of Fortress Europe. Swallows still live in a world without states, borders and papers, just as we humans did for most of our

history, moving from one place to another in a slow rhythm of traveling and settling, leaving and arriving.

The storms sweeping the Sahara stirred up by the wrecked climate are more vicious these days, and many of the swallows' tiny bodies won't make it. Here in France, spring routinely arrives a week earlier than it did 30 years ago; normally the swallows base their arrivals and departures on the availability of their staple food: insects. If they mistime their journey they starve, especially as the insect populations are already plummeting because of the agro-industrial use of pesticides and insecticides and the destruction of hedgerows to make way for 'development.' Over the last two decades, more than 40 percent of the swallows in France have 'disappeared'; or rather been sacrificed to capitalism's gods of the growth economy.

When the swallows leave us each year for their migration, the sky is suddenly quieter, less alive. This year, we sense a strange feeling of loss. Their absence becomes so terribly present, just like when a loved-one dies. We know that the birds will return in spring, but in their departure is a shadow of a deathly future, a prefigurative feeling of this world if they went extinct. Without them, there would no longer be the joy at watching and recognizing that force of 'yes' in their flying bodies, that desire for life which we share with them and all other beings. When a being goes extinct, a bit of us is lost as well.

Of all our feathered friends on this land, swallows are the most woven in with our human

lives. Not because of their inspiring aerobatics, but thanks to their down-to-earth architectural artistry; they construct small cupped mud nests attached to our buildings. In fact, before humans invented buildings and barns, around 8,000 years ago, there were no barn swallows. But at some point, differentiation occurred, and the subspecies of barn swallows emerged. Virtually genetically identical to their relatives, but with very different behaviors, including the ability and preference to build nests on human constructions rather than in the folds of cliffs. Today, they are the most widespread and successful of swallows. Biologists hypothesize that the entwined relationship between humans and barn swallows stemmed from a ‘founder event,’ when a little gang of adventurous rebels decided to occupy a brand new environment that had been transformed by humans and expanded their new population there, thanks to available resources and an absence of competitors. Species differentiation is normally seen as a long-term process lasting up to a million years, but barn swallows demonstrated how rapidly it happens when the conditions are right.

Watching the swallows’ grace and ingenuity, surfing air and sculpting mud, we realized how much they could teach us about an art of life in these trembling times. Their foundation story reminds us that transforming our worlds often means taking the risk of deserting the comfort of what we know and pursuing an adventure toward what we don’t. The swallows teach us to arm ourselves with the ability to adapt to change, while

holding on to the core of who we are and what we want. And what we want is life.

## Extinction Machine

What the birds thrilling us that lunchtime likely did not know was that the land over which they danced might have become the runway of an international airport. These meadows and forest should have been covered in tarmac and filled with roaring metal flying machines, taking off and landing day and night. The garden where we were eating would have been the departure lounge, and instead of the well, there should have been the border controls with their dour guards and screeching metal detectors.

If the French state, together with the Vinci corporation (the world's second largest construction multinational) and local business elites had had their way, these 4,000 acres, with their farmland and forest, nine springs, over 200 ponds and 222km of hedgerows, would have been sucked dry, paved over and disfigured into another model of 'development': a massive new international airport to replace the existing and 'award winning' one in the nearby city of Nantes.

Without the emergence of an incredibly creative diverse trans-local but profoundly situated and anchored struggle, the dawn chorus that wakes us every morning would have been replaced by the deafening growl of jet engines. Instead of the sweet smell of summer hay, the winds would be wafting the sharp reek of kerosene. Instead of providing healthy local food, this place would

pump out climate-wrecking molecules. Instead of carbon-sequestering pastures and wetlands, a shroud of concrete and tarmac would have smothered everything. Instead of absorbing and storing the rain, cooling the land, and regulating the hydrology of two major river systems, this place would unleash more local flooding and toxic runoff into the valleys far and wide.

With their bulldozers, they thought that they could destroy the complex relationships between the millions of beings that share these lands. They thought they could erase the ties between the peasants and their meadows, between the oak tree and the fungi that they share their minerals with, between the woodpecker and the wood worms that help it dig its nest. They dreamed of building another temple to hypermobility, another extinction machine whose bad breath spreads droughts and death, famine and flood; another airport. This place could have become yet another non-place like all the others, erasing all the human and more than human communities and stories that were unfolding here before, destroying everything particular and special about this land and its inhabitants. The salamanders, frogs, hawthorn, farmers, blackthorn, newts, water voles, dragon flies, deer, orchids. These prairies and forest would become no different to the runways of Heathrow or JFK, Dubai, or Frankfurt, bordered by the same duty free shops smelling of the same sickly perfume, the same chain stores and takeaway coffee stands catering for the detached metropolitan beings, 'based' somewhere but inhabiting nowhere. Flying