Towards a Boneless Ethic: Art Institutions in Ecologies of Disease

It is obvious that the space of the factory is traditionally more or less invisible in public. Its visibility is policed, and surveillance produces a one-way gaze. Paradoxically, a museum is not so different. […] Just as the work performed in the factory cannot be shown outside it, most of the works on display in a museum cannot be shown outside its walls. A paradoxical situation arises: a museum predicated on producing and marketing visibility can itself not be shown—the labor performed there is just as publicly invisible as that of any sausage factory.[1]
—Hito Steyerl, "Is a Museum a Factory?", 2009

In the art world, this is what the critical apparatus is largely about: the production of scarcity; which is, in turn, why even the most sincerely radical anti-capitalist critics, curators, and gallerists will tend to draw the line at the possibility that everyone really could be an artist, even in the most diffuse possible sense. The art world remains overwhelmingly a world of heroic individuals, even when it claims to echo the logic of movements and collectives—even when the ostensible aim of those collectives is to annihilate the distinction between art and life.[2]
—Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber, "Another Art World, Part 1: Art Communism and Artificial Scarcity", 2019

THE FIELD—GROUNDING IN A MUDFLOW

The space is closed, but the show must go on. While the COVID-19 outbreak, an ecological breakdown, and enduring migrant crises wreak havoc, global breaches of human rights have given rise to protests in support of Black Lives Matter and upris-

ings in Belarus against dictatorship. The situation demands action and response, especially when we consider that art's primary function is to seek ways to inscribe itself within contemporaneity—to gain traction in a speculative present.[3] Yet the art workers' brigade find ourselves in stasis and suspense. The activist capacity of the vehicles commonly used in "the production of subjectivity" to shape and propel discourse and raise awareness—exhibition, lecture, screening, performance, text—are limited in how they can respond to the urge to enact socio-political change. Art institutions have taken the moral high ground before by enriching experience through "critical" aesthetic encounters, but our services are now left wanting. Instead, artistic communities beyond the designated "art field"—outside of art institutions that nonetheless occasionally serve as unifiers and support structures for voicing dissent—engage in civil disobedience and organize collectively elsewhere. Meanwhile, inside the art institution, we ponder the balancing act of politicizing aesthetics while avoiding, at all costs, the aestheticization of politics. But what can be done if public access is either limited or mostly denied, invoked by the manifestation of a pandemic? Though suspended, we expect programs to be accountable and respond to the situation—no representation without taxation. How can art institutions assure

their public subsistence when programming for individuated experience—both in terms of physical gathering and in its longstanding aim to provide personalized epistemological and ontological horizons—had already established itself as the norm?

THE FIELD—TEMPLATE CHOOSER WITHOUT PLACEHOLDER

When art institutions were prompted to close due to the corona pandemic, and death had never seemed so statistical, art started to feel trivial. And yet, often prompted by a feigned sense of (political) solidarity, art became a refuge to unite people. The uncertainty of the long-term horizon for institutional onsite—"in real life"—programming had led to an institutional "new normal". It predominantly consisted of the extradition of most art institutions to marketing and innovation conversion strategies. From March 2020 on, a plethora of digital formats and programs came to the fore, ranging from performances by singer-songwriters and DJs, guided tours of exhibitions, lecture series, self-care programs, and endless streams of lockdown binge-watching, with cognitive labor extradited to Microsoft Teams, Instagram Live, Zoom, and Jitsi meetings. Up until then in the arts sector, online marketing almost exclusively operated as

a tentacular extension of institutions to bring audiences onsite. The digital now became the actual domain of programming, where the participatory triggers, models, and meeting grounds for both the sensorial and cognitive encounter with art coalesced. This sudden adaptation and embrace of digital formats might come across as contradictory, especially since the art field has long maintained a somewhat condescending attitude toward marketing as the dirty overlay of a "real" physical experience of art. The art field might have started lagging behind in the field of marketing compared to more innovate fields by adhering to worn definitions. As artist Ian Cheng argues, true marketing is the invention of a cognitive perception—not promotion, advertising or rhetoric—shaped as the conceptual reconfiguration of reality's familiar parts to open rivers of energy and organization previously unavailable. This marketing would, in the best case, strive to be on equal footing with art to reinvent fundamental metaphors and models for relating to reality.[4]

What is perhaps most striking is that the majority of art institutions, instead of first considering the operational and perceptual differences in circulating content via these marketing platforms, hastily engaged in a perceptual arm's race. Soon we found ourselves—in the domestic sphere—on

the superhighway of business-as-usual turbo-capitalist neoliberalism, where art-as-entertainment and corporate dystopia had an online argument about common sense. There is no stopping this—or that—institution in its continuous dissemination of programs and the ongoing aim to invent and attract new users: the space is closed, but the show must go on! The only thing that was missing from the superhighway was the exit. An exit that would allow for a diversion from the contemporary art institution's adherence and over-indebtedness to a neoliberal market-driven logic, that no matter the circumstances, one must partake in a time-pressured culture of high-performance. An exit that would allow for a temporal halting, intermission and reorientation toward a timely consideration of the different sociopolitical matters of care and concern that call for our attention. An exit that would allow for a consideration of the conversions in signification and meaning brought by the translation tables inherent to the different (digital) platforms we employ to assemble. Apart from the lack of consideration another danger lurks: the idea that art institutions would temporarily inhabit online structures—as a survival tactic—to return to normality as soon as the pandemic is thought to have been surmounted. To think one is bridging a period of pandemic crisis as temporal setback—solvable

by human intervention, statecraft, and scientific technofixes—when actually we are witnessing a dress rehearsal as part of the current and structurally permanent climate regime.[5]

To give an example: in order to cope with the restrictions imposed by the pandemic in a supposedly innovative manner, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam organized an exhibition in the form of a drive-through experience. In environmentally sustainable electric vehicles, separate households could immerse themselves in a rearranged presentation of the permanent collection. We could wonder about the exit here. Can we sustain a cultural infrastructure that continues to emphasize novelty value in the guise of green and sustainable living when we are witnessing an ecological breakdown?

Carrying on with business-as-usual in this way relies on common sense built on stable perceptions that flatten the artificiality of one's surroundings. To what extent can art institutions continue to uphold the pretense—reaching out amid the regular program as if nothing drastic is taking place—as a willing failure to acknowledge their part in an ecosystem increasingly grounded in ecologies of disease, where instability, precarity, and scarcity are imposed as a new normative ethics?

THE HOUSE IN THE FIELD—SUPPORT STRUCTURES WITHOUT STABLE FOUNDATION AND BACKDROP

The compounded crisis of advanced capitalism, sociopolitical unrest, environmental catastrophe and technological transformation is becoming increasingly social—that is, felt throughout all rungs of society and beyond the sphere of humanity. How and by what means can we apply the creativity to imagine different ways in which the institutional structure itself could be organized to become more adaptive and responsive?

A first indexation of the field would lead to the conclusion that we should, following philosopher Bruno Latour's argument, relearn to cherish and reevaluate art institutions as they have mostly become weakened and unstable within the current political climate.[6] In the Netherlands, for instance, this instability has intensified in the last decade, wrought by a political mandate that has obligated art institutions to adhere to a neoliberal logic of the "free" market and its mechanisms of competitive exploitation and self-reliance, paired with toxic ideological underpinnings of art as a leftwing and elitist lifestyle attribute. Almost a decade later—under the spell of the corona pandemic—this situation remains largely unchanged,

with disproportionate governmental support for fossil fuel industries such as the airline KLM and the salvage of corona-infested mink farms, compared to far-reaching measures for theaters and comparatively low support for the arts. Another overarching sentiment would be that innovation and transformation can only occur outside the institution—once so firmly embedded in the cultural field—at the margins of society. Under the slogan "no transformation without institution", Latour argues that we need to modify the institution from within by internalizing the definition of creativity.[7] The art institution is under attack. We must protect its potential to enable the production of subjectivity and its polity. However, we must also simultaneously redefine it while being embedded within capitalist ruins.

Latour presents a train of thought put forward by philosopher Alfred North Whitehead to exemplify how transformation can take place from within the bounds of the institution—in that case the institution of science—by speaking about substance and subsistence. Substance is that which lasts, which is continuous, there and stable, transformation being its antonym. Subsistence is what you need to constantly maintain, which lasts precisely through what does not last—similar to the nourishment that plants and humans need in order to

sustain their being in the world. Whitehead claims that subsistence is the place where the institution sits: it modifies itself through what does not last, it inherits and transforms by means of subsistence.[8]

A recent example of an art institution in which the substance (the building and space as placeholder, its name) and subsistence (the exhibition and events program) came into conflict and were conflated is Kunstinstituut Melly, fka Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam. Its former name derives from the street on which it is located, named after a seventeenth-century Dutch naval officer of the VOC and WIC. A 2017 open letter penned by a diverse group of artists, activists, and educators asked the institution how it could engage in "critical work" under a moniker that conjures up a colonial history of terror and exploitation,[9] and accused it of remaining purposely silent on its namesake's actions, resting comfortably within a discursive category articulated in the name of "diversity". "How will this institution start to undo itself?", they asked. A period of relative silence was followed by a change of directorship, with occasional statements released as to the institution's commitment to changing its name and a reflective program as part of its "ongoing collective learning process". Three years later, coinciding with the Black Lives Matter protests, the

debate was firmly reestablished by different action groups, activist collective Helden van Nooit among them, besmirching the façade and demanding resolute action and change. The institution gave the impression of being overtaken by the sudden acceleration and demand to overcome its colonial connotations—possibly prepared beforehand—and the urge to engage in radical action to change its name and to stop aestheticizing politics for the sake of the program. An acute response came with the setting of a deadline for a new name by January 2021.

An art institution does not subsist on the active inheritance shaped through a continuous chain of exhibitions and event programs alone. It equally and in many cases has to revise the substance of the inherited institutional structure and framework. In other words, institutional façades are no longer considered thresholds shrouded in anonymity. Structural and foundational principles—naming, mission and socio-historical fabric—have become porous while remaining interlinked with the manner in which both staff and invitees induce, carry, and embody the ideological agendas it (fails to) mobilize(s). In paraphrasing Maziar Afrassiabi, curator and artistic director of the Rotterdam-based art space Rib:

The point is not to increase the level of diversity of an institution by adding people of color, decolonial incentives and queer representatives on top of the surface of the institution's structure—perhaps not dissimilar from the way in which the relation between decoration and structure is defined in baroque architecture. Rather, the façade and front of the institution have to become a constitutive part of the structure itself, instead of being a cosmetic gloss that distracts from what is hidden beneath. In some cases, this entails the need to admit that the foundation itself is rotten and that reform is synonymous with the baroque logic of ornamentation, and thus useless and superficial. Instead of letting the structure collapse under its own weight of added ornamentation, one may as well opt to abandon the old house rather than to rebuild it. To build an entirely new constitution constructed on an entirely different set of criteria and grounding principles.[10]

Or to put it another way, what is the difference between deconstructivism and constructivism?

The exhibition, temporal and ephemeral by nature, might well be the small medium within the program arc, which allows the institution to subsist over time. Through it, a passage is provided that maintains a continuous chain of events. But what does that institution and its program look like when both the structure and its environment are being threatened, pressured, and subject to disintegration on an unprecedented geological scale?

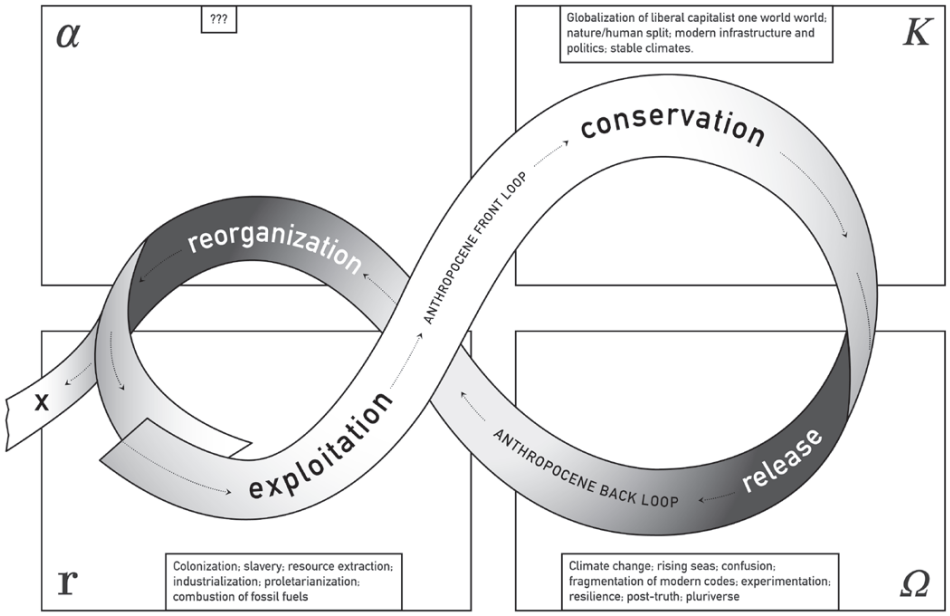
THE HOUSE AND THE FIELD ARE ON FIRE—EXHIBITIONARY EXPERIMENTATION IN UNSAFE OPERATING SPACE

In *Anthropocene Back Loop: Experimentation in Unsafe Operating Space*, educator and researcher Stephanie Wakefield presents a set of alternative perspectives and practices counter to the dominant order of "salvage politics" as a life of survival amid ongoing social and infrastructural breakdown on a "broken Earth". Wakefield describes two common tendencies for coping with life on Earth under climate change. The first is "resilience" as the current incarnation of liberal governance that tries to maintain safe operating space by deploying new modes of management, seeking a system's ability to absorb disturbance while retaining its basic function and structure. The second tendency is toward post-apocalyptic ruins imaginaries—see Anna Tsing's "living in the ruins", Haraway's "staying with the trouble" and Latour's "Earthbound"—as templates that aim to stabilize (to govern) life, albeit by declaring the latter unstable and outside human control. As Wakefield summarizes:

> Both resilience and post-apocalyptic ruins imaginaries recognize that we have entered the back loop though they interpret our being there in their own ways. For the former, the back loop is a disruptive event that "tests" systems and constitutes an opportunity to try out

new management responses. The goal of such techniques, however experimental they may be, is generally to maintain systems' identity or pre-existing state within its safe operating space. In other words, resilience experiments seek to find those thresholds, while testing out new ways to maintain systems. Post-apocalyptic film and theory, on the other hand, sees the catastrophic nature of maintaining such systems, and proclaims that the end has already come. In these imaginaries, the back loop is the world we inhabit—there is no other, they repeat. The underlying reference remains the front loop, with what is left reduced to surviving its remains/ruins—thus always defining life in relation to the front loop past—until "we" humans disappear, and jellyfish or some other entangled meshwork rightfully (in these theorists' view) come to replace us.[11]

Wakefield concludes that resilience and ruins politics—still legitimate ways of responding as they may be—tell us that we face a future without agency or imagination except perhaps that which is sufficient only to endure or envision disaster. Her aim—beyond these two common tendencies—is to envision the ability to see the Anthropocene not as a tragic End or world of ruins, but a scrambling where possibility is present, old codes become unhelpful and the future more open than typically imagined: to take back the conditions for asking what life can be. She makes a plea for a third template under the marker of "experimenting in unsafe operating space":



Anthropocene adaptive cycle. Design by Caroline Castro as part of the publication *Anthropocene Back Loop: Experimentation in Unsafe Operating Space* (2020) by Stephanie Wakefield.

Through the "use" of environment, music, aesthetics, historical legacies and one's own body, amidst a world in freefall back loop experiments create their own forms for life, articulating a powerful alternative to the contemporary discourse of limits, survival and ruins. These diverse practices freely and confidently take hold of the pieces of a fragmenting civilization and put them to new use, not to survive, not out of fear, but in self-assured and creative efforts to remake and redefine life's texture in powerful ways.[12] [These practices are] experimental in the sense that they do not follow from exterior political or moral blueprints; instead emerge from within the needs, lives, and dreams of practitioners themselves; are enacted and made use of by practitioners themselves; are modulated over time as practitioners discover new needs, desires or limits to overcome; do not seek as their end a specific society or scenario, but are better described as tools for living, for taking one's life into one's own hands and in so doing making it into a work of art; and which finally open onto possibilities unpredictable in advance, and see this as a fine thing.[13]

What would the conceptual and material formalization of Wakefield's idea of experimentation in unsafe operating space look like transposed into the time and space of the exhibition? In the shape of an actual response that breaks with crisis-ridden contemporary imaginaries and contemporary art's moralizing tendency to educate with "outdated" nature/culture binaries.[14] Could the exhibition format be an exemplar of this shifting ground that is also common ground, without need for an external site, and beginning from the here and now?

An exhibition is a cultural field of inter-human energy-exchange in intentionalities (artistic, receptive) mediated in objects, processes, and performances. Art historian Vincent Normand writes:

> The specific "genus" that is the format of the exhibition is not that simple to identify, probably because of the tenuousness and impurity of its ontological ground: decidedly not autonomous, often deemed merely a "frame," both media and medium, neither a stable and collectible object, nor entirely the product of a studio practice, it is always a more or less transparent combination of these elements.[15]

The exhibition's lack of autonomy could manifest in its being a ground for assembly that brings together voices and material-discursive formations as a prism trained on reality. Optimally, the exhibition-as-prism could register more reality thanks to multiple templates for which pluralism is understood not as a plurality of perspectives on one reality, but as a multiplicity of agencies that register numerous realities. In that sense the temporal coalescing of agendas, intentionalities, and positions would deliberately subdue autonomy in the key of shared responsibility, interdependence, and a robustness in perspectivism beyond the limitations of the individualistic.

However, following Wakefield's reasoning, the exhibition as form and apparatus as well as its connected art institution is often subjected to the salvage politics of neoliberal resilience and post-

apocalyptic imagination. This applies both to program content and the institution's need to self-legitimize. In these cases, the exhibition's ability to provide strength during the current situation, and imagine new daily living and working practices, is largely lost. The undermining that needs to be overcome seems twofold.

A first step toward exhibitionary experimentation in an unsafe operating space would be to release the exhibition (and its institution) from the constraints of neoliberal governing principles and the art world's consequent over-indebtedness to the market-driven logic of competition. Contrary to reductive political desire, we would have to abandon the exhibition as a format organized around the creative vision of named individuals who are constantly becoming but never quite arriving; the exhibition as a site for the production of self-imposed scarcity in favor of the production of visibility for exclusive emergents and platform prestige—asking ourselves, where did they emerge from in the first place? As the art world is largely indexed on the vectors of advanced capitalism and neoliberal ideology, we must, in short, pursue experimentation with an emphasis on affirmation and desire as plenitude rather than as an insatiable lack as part of a capitalism's burnout culture. A counter-approach could take shape by restructuring the institutional timeline, where

subsistence through exhibition inheritance is formalized according to different curatorial rhythms and temporalities. Rather than opting for a singular chain of self-congratulatory events and effects celebrating novelty value and visibility—"We are proud to host the first solo exhibition of [artist name] in the Netherlands"—and strive toward more sustainable approaches to ground artistic practice in a more structural and embodied sense. At A Tale of A Tub in Rotterdam—an art space I co-direct—we use seemingly simple gestures such as omitting artists' date of birth and country of origin, and, perhaps more importantly, stretching the given formats such as the solo exhibition into a more collective vehicle and support structure for different practices coalescing. Another strategy we embrace is that of "incrementalism": artists have a more longstanding agency on various levels in order to sustain both artistic and institutional practice beyond micro-management and multi-year programs. Taking insight from researcher Dani Blanga-Gubbay:

> Perhaps the role of the institution is to remember the importance of invisible life; to claim that its primary role is to not to present an event, through which a practice can be then supported, but rather to support an artistic practice that has visible moments of presentation. In front of the neoliberal paradigm of the event, the image of reincarnation suggests a shift between the event and the practice; and the institution taking care of souls beyond their moments of visibility.[16]

On the one hand, this act is unsafe in deliberately breaking away from the rapid pace of the attention economy, jeopardizing the institution's place among its subsidiaries and funding bodies guided by merit and quantity. On the other hand, this act accommodates artistic practice within the long-term institutional horizon, beyond an economy modeled on brief associations.

A second step toward exhibitionary experimentation in unsafe operating space concerns reevaluating the mechanisms used in gearing perceptions among publics—through, for instance, exhibition programs. These should move beyond bleak post-apocalyptic horizons, toward a grounded vision that enacts the institution's local position as part of global sociopolitical instability.[17] Art institutions might no longer incite revolutions, but they can resist easy images of the future and grab onto critical thinking and discourse—especially concerning their own self-imposed structures. We must start by acknowledging our complicity and no longer operate under the false pretenses of a neutral framework at all levels, not just that of the program. Institutions have to move beyond the material-discursive fabric of artistic propositions as the prime material of advocacy to a more holistic self-awareness. The internal ecosystem formalized through conversation and production would have

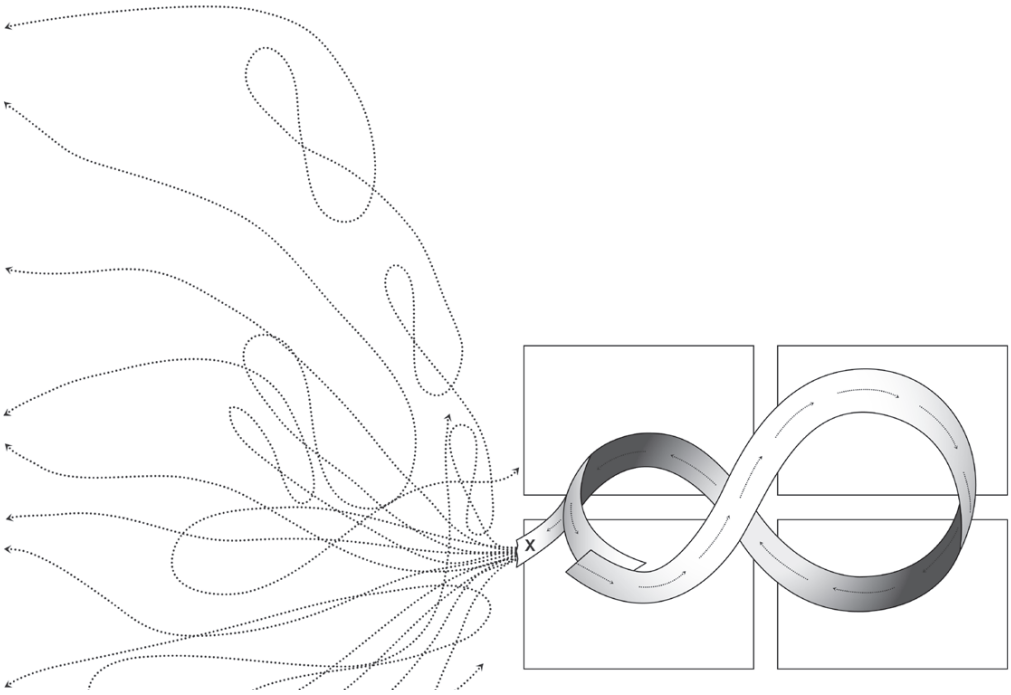
to be made explicitly durable so that it would no longer be possible to, for instance, be a no-show on the Amazon while flying in speakers from Brazil. In tandem, outward accountability and *response-ability* toward concerns poignant to different people and modes of existence in its "extended field of operation" must be written into its framework. Moreover, other lifeforms actively use worlds we produce to construct worlds of their own. Inhabiting the back loop, in the words of Wakefield, thus entails not only that we allow ourselves to see our environments as open to rearranging, but also as rich in their own right and capable of rearranging us, too. [18]

Remaining within safe operating space would lead art institutions toward what investigative journalist Christian Parenti calls "the politics of the armed lifeboat". The institution as "armed lifeboat" would, instead of working with stakeholders in its environment to support those impacted by and counteract the negative effects of climate change among different urgencies, use its intellectual high ground to attend to internal affairs and offer discursive reflections. The months long closure of art spaces and current public limitations might elicit recognition of—beyond the strictly biological—the pandemic's much wider and deep-seated social and ethical dimension. The social realm of humanity will have to facilitate a war on the structures

of society itself in order to reestablish a balance with what matters within and beyond humanity. To start experimenting within unsafe operating space would require art institutions to equally facilitate a war on their own internal operative logic and situatedness—to deviate from and abandon prevalent "default settings" adduced by a neoliberal and capitalist normative ethics, (forcefully) adopted by art spaces and injected into the genus of the exhibition as a host body for artistic experimentation. Here the experiment would be aimed at finding passages beyond the closed feedback loop of salvage politics, all the while securing a timely exit and beg for militant forms of organization, propositional in nature, by radicalizing both the politics of display and location.

To move toward a boneless ethic involves pooling human energy, in such a way that art institutions would no longer gain stability by enforcing resilience politics to keep their emblematic structure intact. Rather, an adaptive and adaptable exoskeleton would be built that does not consist of additional layers of programmatic protection and calcified brick and mortar. These are defense mechanisms against political and ecological instability. In unsafe operating space the constituency is malleable and its different scales intersect. This movement "toward" is affirmative insofar as art institutions

need to reach out with their exhibitionary support structures to do justice to the life complex. This stands in contrast to the common internalization of aspects of life within the exhibition, where they are isolated and presented in a different light. In the affirmative movement of reaching out, the exhibition is not only a passive material reservoir and support structure for human activity, but an assembler, one that links the living and the inert (while being both), leading us to multitudinous exit pathways with unpredictable trajectories.



Adaptive cycle, modified to show potential for multitudinous exit pathways heading in unpredictable trajectories. Design by Caroline Castro as part of the publication *Anthropocene Back Loop: Experimentation in Unsafe Operating Space* (2020) by Stephanie Wakefield.

FOOTNOTES

1 Hito Steyerl, *Is a Museum a Factory?*, e-flux journal, no. 7 (2009).

2 Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber, *Another Art World, Part 1: Art Communism and Artificial Scarcity*, e-flux journal, no. 102 (2019).

3 Here I rely on a Giorgio Agamben's definition of the "contemporary" in *What Is the Contemporary?, What Is an Apparatus?*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

4 Ian Cheng, *Art Inside Us*, cura 16 (2014), p. 127.

5 Bruno Latour, *Is This a Dress-Rehearsal?*, Critical Enquiry (2020).

6 Bruno Latour, *No Transformation without Institution*, Serpentine Transformation Marathon 2015, Serpentine Galleries, London, October 17–18, 2015.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Egbert Alejandro Martina, Ramona Sno, Hodan Warsame, Patricia Schor, Amal Alhaag, Maria Guggenbichler, *Open Letter to Witte de With*, June 14, 2017.

10 Facebook message from Maziar Afrassiabi, in reference to Lars Spuybroek, *Gothic Ontology and Sympathy: Moving Away from the Fold*, in Speculative Art Histories: Analysis at the Limits, ed. Sjoerd van Tuinen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

11 Stephanie Wakefield, Anthropocene Back Loop: Experimentation in Unsafe Operating Space (London: Open Humanities Press, 2020), p. 80.

12 Ibid., p. 128.

13 Ibid., p. 15.

FOOTNOTES

14 "Compartmentalization has failed: scholars of the Anthropocene sometimes write as though this were a new revelation, but in fact anthropologists and science and technology studies scholars have understood this failure for decades, having long challenged the nature/culture binary. Yet challenging binaries is not enough. To understand their violent consequences, we need to refract history through new prisms. We need, as Rob Nixon argues, to 'counter the centripetal force of the dominant Anthropocene species story with centrifugal stories that acknowledge immense inequalities in planet-altering powers.'" Gabrielle Hecht, *Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality, and Violence*, Cultural Anthropology 33 (February 2018).

15 Tristan Garcia and Vincent Normand, *Introduction*, in Theater, Garden Bestiary: A Materialist History of Exhibitions, ed. Tristan Garcia and Vincent Normand (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), p. 13.

16 Daniel Blanga-Gubbay, *Voices (Towards Other Institutions) #15*, Open?, September 2020, available at https://pavilionrus.com/en/voices/daniel-blanga-gubbay.

17 Here I would propose a reading of Hecht's text cited before *Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality, and Violence* on interscalar vehicles as "objects and modes of analysis that permit scholars and their subjects to move simultaneously through deep time and human time, through geological space and political space."

18 Wakefield, *Anthropocene Back Loop*, p. 135.