

# Adina Glickstein

## Death Spiraling

In late 2023 Marc Andreessen, one of Silicon Valley's foremost venture capitalists (and apparently a reader, though not a very astute one, of Nick Land) published his *Techno-Optimist Manifesto*. In it, he takes the position that technological innovation is the main source of growth in society. Innovation, to Andreessen's mind, is best spawned by unchecked free markets—which, drawing on the neo-liberal economist Friedrich Hayek, he sees as possessing an intelligence all their own. By Andreessen's estimation, technological progress—expansion, accumulation, growth—must be promoted at all costs: “Techno-Optimists believe that societies, like sharks, grow or die,” he writes. “We believe everything good is downstream of growth.”<sup>1</sup> “We affirm that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed.”

Just kidding. Andreessen didn't write that last line. It comes from FT Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto*, published in 1909, prefiguring Ben-

progress—today's “techno-optimism” and “effective accelerationism” (“e/acc”) sound a great deal like Marinetti's proto-fascist sentiment. Perhaps Mark Zuckerberg was invoking the lineage of Futurism with his commandment to “move fast and break things.” But even Zuckerberg owned up to the problems with this logic, eventually changing Facebook's internal motto to “move fast with stable infrastructure.”

It turns out, as the historical trajectory of Futurism exemplifies, that the cult of constant growth is actually a death spiral. This malignant fixation has left us careening towards planetary extinction. Franco “Bifo” Berardi, the legendary theorist of Italian autonomism, explores the proximity between growth and death in his book *The Third Unconscious* (2021). By Berardi's assessment, “much will depend on the cultural ability to withdraw from the instinct of accumulation, which is not an instinct indeed, but a cultural construct.”<sup>2</sup> We have grown accustomed to, well, *growth*, unsustainably so and with a very certain cost. The most urgent project today, from Berardi's point of view, is to establish a belief in the future decoupled from the expectation of constant consumption and expansion. With this line of thinking,

1 Marc Andreessen, “The Techno-Optimist Manifesto,” *Andreessen Horowitz*, October 16, 2023, <https://a16z.com/the-techno-optimist-manifesto/>

2 Franco Berardi, *The Third Unconscious: The Psycho-Sphere in the Viral Age* (London; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2021).

ito Mussolini's rise to power. The glorification of speed, danger, energy; innovation's ostensibly innate role in advancing social

he advocates for something akin to degrowth, the economic philosophy that urges us to break from the logic of endless accumulation.

Berardi also advocates a certain acceptance of death: the need to “think of death as a friend,” accepting its inevitability as a step on the path towards renewal. Death mothers life, nurturing new beginnings like compost. “The removal of death from the field of daily consciousness... is the very condition of a systemic culture that denies the limit,” Bifo writes. Eternal growth, denial of the limit, and indeed denial of death: these construct the fantasy at the heart of Big Tech ideology.

By way of another example, look no further than the prevailing vision of transhumanism, where “eternal life” is envisaged as uploading one’s consciousness to the cloud. Even the most notionally utopian project that this worldview is capable of producing boils down to zettabytes of data stored on servers in warehouses all over the world, shelved and forgotten. Panic stirs behind my sacrum when I think about what would be required to sustain this state of technologically augmented death-aversion: the humming rows of server racks, the wastewater being expelled from data centers’ cooling systems, the islands of e-waste growing more voluminous with every discarded piece of obsolete hardware.

Everything good is not, contra-Andreessen, “downstream from growth.” As this truth becomes unavoidable, new forms of collective engagement are spawning. One is the permacomputing movement—which, despite its linguistic proximity to “permanence,” is not caught up in the limit-denying conception of eternity shilled by Silicon Valley. Its name comes from permaculture, the careful crafting of di-

verse and resilient ecosystems. It is not about permanence as such, at least not in the sense that mainstream technology fetishizes. Rather, it offers an anti-capitalist intervention, an invitation to rethink the material and ecological effects of computer network technology, building new individual and collective systems—more environmentally conscious, conducive to community governance, and harmonious with the true nature of inter-connection.

To the extent that it engages with permanence, permacomputing encourages us to take a long view on the lifespans of our technical systems, asking: who will tend to the physical infrastructures that prop up our networks, and with what resources? How will these tools be sustained on a taxed and mistreated planet; how might they move us towards repair? This is precisely what the artists and technologists whose work comes together in “Alt Nets” propose: a technological future that can be more autonomous, more in tune with the rhythms of nature—its inherent cycles of beginnings, ends, re-births—and executed at the grassroots community scale.

Mattias Fritsch’s *The Sporeers* (2024), for instance, is an object lesson in the ecological reality that growth is fertilized by death, taught by friendly fungi. The installation, consisting of edible and medicinal mushrooms, foregrounds the porosity of the viewer’s body, turning it into a host for the spores of these other living beings. As gallery visitors breathe in the spores, they carry them out into the world—life forms intermingling, plugging and weaving into the global mycelial network, that other “world-wide web” that existed long before Andreessen built Netscape, an early browser. Rather

than relentlessly expanding our data footprint, could we re-engage, drawing on mycelial wisdom, with what came before Web 1.0?

Likewise, James Bridle looks to the long-held wisdom of the natural world with his *Solar Panel* works (2022), which depict radiolarians, microscopic sea creatures that form elaborate silica skeletons. Radiolarians sink after death, trapping atmospheric carbon deep in the ocean sediment—the limit of their lifespan is the condition of possibility for renewed earthly existence. The way that Bridle has engraved their intricate forms onto the solar panels heightens these panels' receptivity to certain frequencies of light, making them work more efficiently. It feels symbolically relevant that this improved efficiency comes not from growth per se, but from engraving—in adorning what already exists, attending to what is already present.

Approaching these considerations from another angle, Everest Pipkin's *Sungrazer* (2023) is a wandering *dérivé* through the hyperlink forest of Wikipedia. Ambling from page to page in the mode of a "wikiracing" game, it holds reverence for our technologies of knowledge while simultaneously making space for the necessity of

impermanence. Along the way, it critiques libertarian strains in the free software movement, reflects on Chris Marker's film *Sans Soleil*, and meditates on the preservation of cave paintings in Lascaux. These thoughts assemble into a treatise on the terror of total information, implicitly critiquing the dominant technological worldview.

"All life makes cemeteries," Pipkin observes in *Sungrazer*. Learning how to die, how to let die, is constitutive of life. Degrowth and permacomputing embrace this seeming contradiction, composting our current cult of innovation into something more sustainable. The wisdom of these movements is all around us, if we know where to look. It lives in the lichen formations hiding on the shady sides of rocks, which grow in patterns resembling ASCII art. It hides at the bottom of the ocean, encoded in the beauty of radiolarian remains. It pulses through the mycelial mat and radiates in cyclical harmony with the warmth of solar rays or the coolly encrypted darkness offered under the moon. There are presentiments, already present within the existing order, of gentler ways to come: resilient infrastructures; prototypes of networks that might be organized otherwise.



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