

Curatorial Statement

Esc return ↩

Scripts for Degrowth, Buen Vivir and living otherwise

“If you view the world as being inert, a mountain is just a pile of rock, a forest is just board, feet and cellulose, you’re gonna have a very different attitude toward it than if you’re raised in the mountains and believe that they are elders. Now, it’s not about who’s right and who’s wrong, who’s to say, but the belief system mediates the relationship between the natural world and human populations with profoundly different consequences for the way of life and for the ecological footprint.”

Wade Davis, “Into the Wild: Anthropologist Wade Davis”, CBC Ideas Podcast (aired on 18.2.2020)

The experience of the ongoing generalised crisis with climate catastrophe at the center of it, affects lives and worlds across the planet. Extreme temperatures and weather phenomena, biodiversity loss, wood fires and floods as well as the depletion of planetary resources cause feelings of fear, anxiety and despair. As it becomes more and more complex to provoke change on an individual or collective level, the urge for substantial ways to minimise further risk, and to build planetary resilience becomes crucial. Within this context, discussions around the possibilities of changing pace, shifting scale, and the theories of ‘degrowth’, ‘post-development’ and ‘buen vivir’ (well living) attract attention and highlight the connection of the societal and environmental crisis to the imaginary of progress.

Degrowth is not a new concept or approach. Since the 1970s the term has been used to stress the incompatibility of capitalist ‘growth’ with the bounds set by the planet’s limited resources. From then until now, degrowth has become a recurring proposal, a critique and, for some, a movement that stresses the problematics of limitless economic progress. It has especially been discussed in relation to the financial crisis as well as in relation to depletion, waste and the climate catastrophe. Its practices are based on the principles of conviviality and co-existence, questioning an understanding of growth based on competition, and aiming to locate the features, technologies and relations future societies could have.

Whose progress and growth, though, is being questioned? As post-development theory also points out, the idea of limitless and unaccountable progress is a construct of the Global North directly connected to the exploitation of the South. The invention of the so-called Third World, established a global order and division between the ones that decide and design, those that manufacture, and the ones living and working where the raw material is extracted from. With the imposition of a one world view and a single mode of development, various modes of existing and ways of being are systematically rendered invisible. For the sake of progress a hegemonic system based on binary thinking has been imposed, along with an understanding and separation of a so-called ‘developed’ and an ‘un-

derdeveloped' world. So, a question emerges in various latitudes, if we are supposedly progressing, where are we heading to? And do we want to continue "paving" the way there?

Initiatives around the planet have challenged the construct of progress and the embedded logics and hierarchies that it contains. Among them are the Zapatista's call for a Pluriverse: To be in a world where many worlds fit, the desire for the circulation of life in the Andean Sumak Kawsay or Buen Vivir and the principles inherent in the root-code of Ubuntu for an interplanetary I am because we are. All of these propositions prove relevant today but yet remain marginalized. To overcome the binary between the so-called developed and underdeveloped world, one should delink from the logics of the dominant matrix of power and embrace not only alternatives, but also the possibility of a multiplicity of options and worlds.

Taking the aforementioned approaches in mind, within the last years thinkers and practitioners have been exploring questions of scale and pace, with regard to the different geographical and cultural contexts. Projects and initiatives as well as a growing number of shows, festivals and publications have put their emphasis on ways of living and being, opposing colonialism, exploitation and extractivism. Can the art world, though, with its cultural workers, institutions and audiences go beyond exhibition walls and take an active stance for the societal, political and environmental changes needed? Could initiatives driven from the arts influence a change of behaviors and habits? How can a politics of downscaling, repair and maintenance succeed and overcome a different politics of expansion? Is it possible to embrace a new understanding of abundance based on an intersectional acknowledgement of interdependencies across lands, peoples, species and generations?

Esc return ↩ is a talks-based event at panke.gallery which aims to respond to these questions through the gathering of diverse participants. We will collectively examine and navigate themes, seeking for the combination of keys opening a multiplicity of ways of being. Aiming to cover different areas and directions, the invited artists, designers and thinkers will focus on:

the problematics, asymmetries and costs of a society of exponential growth;
the possibilities of low tech and traditional knowledge; the urge for practices of care, repair and maintenance; the empowerment of commons-based economies
and community-driven institutions; the importance of situated, land practices. All of these will be taken into consideration for the articulation of planetary responses as well as for the interlocking of a multiplicity of worlds, epistemes and belief systems in a pluriversal quilt.

In a period when one feels a lack of agency, one is still able to exit the accelerated pace and build practices based on the different affordances of a geographical and cultural place. Esc return ↩ therefore, is not an escapism action or a coming back measure. It is rather a call for a constant re-calibration process, a termination of a given script based on economic growth and a collective re-execution: A constant, yet still dynamic UnReLearning process.

Daphne Dragona and Juan Pablo Garcia Sossa/ JPGS