

# To whomever it may concern

[massa critica | rebekka kiesewetter, http://www.zeroundicipiu.it/2016/11/10/to-whomever-it-may-concern/](http://www.zeroundicipiu.it/2016/11/10/to-whomever-it-may-concern/)

*This text follows a series of conversations I have had with Rebekka Kiesewetter during the past months, which crossed several topics that are very dear to me, such as the possibility – for architects, artists, curators, etc. – to act at the same time inside and outside of the economic/disciplinary/hierarchical/institutional systems in which we are immersed. The problem of the relationship between creative work, resistance and agency, in a society that doesn't seem prone to revolutions, is a recurrent and irremediably complex one: often raised in contradictory terms, more often confined in the realm of pure speculation, it seems destined to present itself as an unresolved issue to which, nevertheless, it is necessary to dedicate time and effort, in order to prevent its removal from our imaginary. In this case, the author proposes a list of strategies to be applied in the day-to-day, by means of which “detachment from the machine” seems to be possible, especially in the moment they become the object of a collective, patient struggle. DTF*



I.

You feel stuck. Stuck performing a choreography you never rehearsed or even signed up for. You feel like an expendable part of a machine with no purpose, forced to speak a language you hardly comprehend. In your profession – be it as an artist, architect, designer or writer – for instance, you have been taught to make your desires conform to marketable values, you have learned to consider income, status and visibility synonyms for success. You are constantly driven by the fear of being “expulsed to the devalued world”. The enterprise form, even as it pushes human affective and cognitive capacities to a breaking point, is the only adequate expression of our communicative and affective qualities, and the one most able to confirm our increasingly competitive and narcissistic drives. Internalized terminologies and value systems put forward by the market economy condition regulate the way in which you work, live and learn. Your daily life is laced with abstraction, virtuality and complexity. Like a virus that contains a program for self-maintenance, this sphere operates in a quasi-autonomous way and traces the trajectory of our existence. It operates with and through you. What shapes your existence are not only the meta-machines of finance, computation and techno-managerial devices, but is made up of a networked multitude, which not only uses machines to produce, but is also *machinic* itself. As the means of production are increasingly integrated into the

minds and bodies of the multitude, you are confronted by a social software designed to exploit your energies and ideas.

Your attempts to overcome your condition, and your belief in the value and the rewarding traits of, empathy, solidarity, joy and pleasure, are met with failure, ridicule, or mimesis on behalf of the “machine”. The alternatives you cherish, the forms of resistance, autonomy, critique or “third ways” you devise, get incorporated, adopted as the system’s own, and are thrown back at you, their soul, heart and teeth ripped out. Confronted by the depth of the machine’s power and the versatility of its strategies, your efforts seem pointless. Your struggle to resist, to change, to influence is oppressed by the feeling that the process of decision-making depends less and less on your own will. You give up, overwhelmed by depression and paralysis. A kind of atrophy has overtaken your imagination: even the most hidden parts of your mind have begun to mould to the machine’s logic. Everyday you are less able of distancing yourself from it, less convinced that *it* is not *you*. An alternative system, another landscape – one that is not a dystopian wasteland, and resists the machine’s mechanisms of incorporation and its inherent shapeshifting ability to perpetuate and reinvent itself constantly – seems impossible to envision.

## II.

You wish you could disengage from the machine, even just for a moment. In your job as well as in all the other spheres of your life. You long for overcoming paralysation. And you can. Even though – at least for now – a detachment can only be partial. This is in the nature of things, because the machine is indispensable to your relations, reproduction and survival.

However, a partial detachment begins with a mental exercise, with training your imagination: imagination is the tool of your emancipation. It is the tool to understand that the system regulating your life is itself a fiction. Because simply, what the system claims to be a “truth”, the “truth” put forward by the frames, protocols and conventions of your peers, bosses and your discipline, might not be yours.

The approach to truth, which will be suggested in the following, has nothing in common with what today is widely known (and experienced) as post-truth-politics – namely a cynical and smug (rhetorical) attitude adopted by some politicians, which is for instance described by Peter Pomerantsev: “We’re living in a post-truth society (...) a world not merely a world where politicians and media lie – they have always lied – but one where they don’t care whether they tell the truth or not”.<sup>1</sup> Rather than this, the approach to truth depicted in the following, is rooted in the conviction that the logic of finance, which is so predominant in our lives, cannot be the underlying logic of the society you live in. This thought implies to reframe the notion of sovereignty over the validation of “truth”: truth should not be seen as something passively received from a superordinate power, but become a matter of performative creation. I propose a fluid, playful relationship to the construction of truth. Truth must be constantly negotiated. This requires preserving the desire to adopt a point of view and choose among the many possible alternatives. Manthia Diawara, one of the moderators of a conversation series with Edouard Glissant organized by the Institute of African American Affairs at New York University expresses Edouard Glissant’s articulation of the power of the imaginary as follows: “we have to take for granted that every ‘truth’ and every ‘reality’ did not just come to you, as the regimes of scientific deduction and transparency would like you to believe, but that some of their manifestations are based on the imaginary and partially intuitive”.<sup>2</sup>

Again: you have no reason to acknowledge the system’s “truth” as such. It does not fit your aims, nor your convictions. Its narratives, however shared and tangible, remain exactly this: narratives. You can claim it as fictional as much as any other and not surrender to it, but look to another fiction that can replace it. A fiction that starts to form in the micro-sphere of the own psyche, transgresses to our professional and non-professional environments, and eventually may broaden into a constellation of shared beliefs, an alternative identification ground and orientation grid, a common construction of real within the collective imagination. An alternative truth able to replace the terminologies, orientation and evaluation grids forced upon us by a system, which is driven by market economy, global

competition, mainly white Western history, and built on the foundations of discrimination, segregation, rejection; and strengthened by fear, paralyzation and alienation. An orientation grid that makes you find sense again – in yourself, together with and within the other, that frees you from paralysis. An orientation grid that offers you new affordances of perception and action, of motivation and reward. A grid that is not rigid but in flux as a matter of constant negotiation, pursuing de-petrification, employing imagination, empathy, solidarity, joy and pleasure, oscillating between dexterity and persistence, and incorruptible by the machine's mechanisms of appropriation.

Though it is impossible to detach completely from the “machine”, you can make yourself aware of the mechanisms regulating its fiction and your functioning within it – conceiving of a total structure as well as the molecular parts from which it is constructed – and loosen from its demands. Step by step, issue by issue, sphere by sphere. You can, for instance, start with your job and begin disentangling your desires – for things, for social recognition – from your work. This means finding fulfillment and reward outside the narrow prescribed paths a job can afford.

However, to be able to see “other landscapes”, you need hope. Don't be fooled by this abused term. Hope is a tool, a sharp and versatile one. Rebecca Solnit writes that hope “is about broad perspectives with specific possibilities (...) you could call it an account of complexities and uncertainties, with openings”. You have to regain hope, because if you don't hope you have no reason to act. For Solnit, hope is “a gift you don't have to surrender, a power you don't have to throw away. And though hope can be an act of defiance, defiance isn't enough reason to hope (...) It is important to say what hope is not: it is not the belief that everything was, is or will be fine (...). It is also not an ‘everything-is-getting-better narrative’, though it may seem like the right way to counter to the ‘everything-is-getting-worse’ one”.

Critical thinking without hope is cynicism, but hope without critical thinking is naivety, Solnit cites a remark of the Bulgarian writer Maria Popova(...) “Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognise that you may be able to influence the outcomes – you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists”.<sup>3</sup> If you feel stuck and chained down, hope is the muscle you must flex.

### III.

The ability to employ this hope for overcoming paralysis, re-focalizing, deterritorializing your mind and your flow of expression, constructing an alternative truth and finding a new system of references and alliances, which is uncorruptible by the “machine” (in which ever way it perpetuates and reinvents itself), begins with realizing that your brain's plasticity can respond to the machine as much as it can to your own will and imagination.

This idea was explored for instance by French philosopher Catherine Malabou, who explains the concept of “plasticity” as follows: “Brain plasticity operates (...) on three levels, (I) the modeling of neuronal connections (develop mental plasticity in the embryo and the child); (2) the modification of neuronal connections (the plasticity of synaptic modulation throughout life); and (3) the capacity for repair (post-lesion plasticity). [...] Plasticity in the nervous system means an alteration in structure or function brought about by development, experience, or injury”.<sup>4</sup> But for Malabou plasticity is also the capacity to annihilate the very form it is able to receive or create. From this perspective, to talk about the plasticity of the brain means, to see in it not only the creator and receiver of form but also an agency of disobedience to every constituted form, a refusal to submit to a model: “At the core of the constant, circulation between the neuronal, the economic, the social, and the political that characterizes Western culture today, the individual ought to occupy the midpoint between the taking on of form and the annihilation of form – between the possibility of occupying a territory and accepting the rules of deterritorialization – between the configuration of a network and its ephemeral, effaceable character”.<sup>5</sup>

#### IV.

Before you can harness the power of your mind – its agency of disobedience to every constituted form and its ability to respond to your own will and imagination – for the endeavour to create an alternative fiction, one stronger than the narrative laid out for us, another effort is necessary: you must strip yourself of everything. Start constructing your alternative fiction from a blank canvas.

Nothing of your perceived reality should be accepted as fixed, logic or necessary. You have to get rid of everything you learned, assume, “know”. You first and foremost have to move away from the mantras of energy, productivity, competition, entrepreneurship, which have been presented to us as the only adequate expression of our communicative and affective qualities not only in our professions but also in every other sphere of our lives. You have to desert the exchange between life and money, abandon the law of accumulation and growth, the prevalent perceptions of power and mass, reconsider the notion of wealth and the perception of being rich. All those formulae (and many more) are deeply embedded in the social psyche and in the social affect. This implies that in order to construct an alternative truth you first have to get rid of your social identity to be able to coin a new one.

Stavros Stavrides states that “People, who have lost their previous social identity but have not yet acquired a new one (...) [are] almost reduced to the common characteristics shared by all humans”.<sup>6</sup> That is where you have to start from.

Alain Badiou helps out with an explanation here, when he writes that “we must affirm the existence of the world, from the outset, as an axiom and a principle. We must say this very simple phrase: ‘There is a world of living women and men’. This sentence is not an objective conclusion. We know that under the law of money, there is no single world of women and men. This phrase, ‘there is a world’, is performative. We decide that it exists for us. And that we will remain faithful to this phrase”.<sup>7</sup>

#### V.

Badiou’s idea carries an accent of performance, and it bears the thought that “shrinking to one’s true height” does not lead to social atomization but denotes the assumption that construction of a new set of narratives can only be a shared endeavor. This search for a common ground is crucial.

And it is the base from which you will start to make allies for your search for an alternative truth, can emerge. This common ground, you have to acknowledge, is what you have to search for, from there an alternative fiction can emanate and offer you a new standard of orientation and some sort of refuge from the directions of the system in whichever form it emanates, from its wicked mechanisms, its ruffian menaces.

Edouard Glissant defines common ground as a source of creativity and opacity, a fertile territory of inexhaustible energies, where relationships are continually generated between the ideas and poetics of one place and those of another. Sharing a common ground with someone is not a matter of being physically or geographically close, but means to be related to him/her through the rhizomes of places and imaginaries, to have the same pulses about the world as him/her. A common ground creates the conditions for the emergence of unpredictable motions of resistance against the systematic truths induced by commonplace thinking and reasoning; and against the meanings imposed by the logics of colonialism and governance. “The single part of a common ground does agree not merely to the right to difference but (...) agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. (...) The thought of opacity distracts me from absolute truths, I thus am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other nor to ‘make’ him in my image. The Other is therefore the ‘necessary partner of the self.’ The Other changes me and I change him. His contact animates me and I animate him. And these slippings give us angles of survival, and unseal and amplify us. Every Other becomes a component of the self while remaining distinct. Relational identity is not static because the self, who is defined not as an *être* [being] but an *étant* [be-ing], is in constant flux in time and space”.<sup>8</sup>

These “common grounds”, also will – and this you will ultimately strive for – define the multitude: “Multitude signifies: plurality – literally: being-many – as a lasting form of social and political existence, as opposed to the cohesive unity of the people. Thus, multitude consists of a network of individuals; the many are a singularity. The crucial point is to consider these singularities as a point of arrival, not as a starting point; as the ultimate result of a process of individuation, not as solipsistic atoms. Precisely because they are the complex result of a progressive differentiation, the ‘many’ do not postulate an ulterior synthesis. The individual of the multitude is the final stage of a process beyond which there is nothing else, because everything else (the passage from the One to the Many) has already taken place”.<sup>9</sup>

Here you have to recall the words that Morpheus, a character in “The Matrix” (1999), directs to the main character Neo. Morpheus is the commander of the hovercraft of the human forces; a being, who had been living inside the Matrix until he was freed: ” The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. But when you’re inside, you look around, what do you see? Businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters. The very minds of the people we are trying to save. But until we do, these people are still a part of that system and that makes them our enemy. You have to understand, most of these people are not ready to be unplugged. And many of them are so inured, so hopelessly dependent on the system, that they will fight to protect it”.<sup>10</sup>

The directors of the film, Lana and Lilli Wachowski, who are declaring Jean Baudrillard as one of their main sources of inspiration, are of course familiar with the post-structuralist concepts of the “machinic multitude”. “Most of these people are not ready to be unplugged”, right, Morpheus. But, sure there must be bases from where one can start unplugging?

## VI.

The “we” or collectivity Stavrides, Badiou and Glissant refer to, is one Kai van Eikels has explained: not that of a “we-all”, but that of an “every-one-of-us”. Van Eikels speaks of the importance of acting and thinking in a collective paradigm, made of constellations that exist and evolve without having to manifest their existence through forming a party, a group or a movement; he also points out that most of these constellations exist without the individuals even knowing that they are a part of a collective body. These writings describe forms of collectivity, whose dynamics are based on the separation between the respective individuals. In these collective forms, the gap between separated individual action is described as a blank space, through which individual acts can synchronize and support each other in their realization and effects.<sup>11</sup> As an illustrating example, van Eikels uses the image of an orchestra: where the worth of the rhythmic entrainment is not to be found in an additive accumulation of the sounds, but where temporal containment and limited phases of accumulation open up a collective-individual and distributed awareness. In this near-synchronization, each one can hear better, and the orchestra becomes more permeable for the world it is part of.<sup>12</sup>

One should not make the mistake to confound the forms of collectivity van Eikels and others refer to and the forms of collaboration and coexistence, of which will be talked in the following, with processes of homogenization based on multiplicity.

The basic concept showing through Virno’s “singularity”, Glissant’s “opacity” and Van Eickel’s “near-synchronization”, and also informing the thoughts following below, is the one, which was so tellingly couched by Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Galloway*: “She didn’t know their names, but friends she knew they were, friends without names, songs without words, always the best”.<sup>13</sup>

The very base on which you share an incorruptible sense, a view, a common rhythm (a common refrain (ritournelle<sup>14</sup>) in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s parlance), an orientation grid; and the focal point from which a new system of affordances of perception and action is coined, can be established and from where it can emanate and eventually reverberate within a multitude, is friendship. “[Only]What circulates in the sphere of friendship, of love, of social solidarity is what allows us to find sense [But the time to experience this sphere lacks]“, says Bifo Berardi. And Deleuze and Guattari suggest that friendship is the way to overcome depression, In *Chaosmosis* Guattari speaks of “a polyphonic and

heterogenetic comprehension of subjectivity”.<sup>15</sup> This illustrates that friendship should not be understood as a kind of unconditional self-abandonment. You have to acknowledge that – as Svetlana Boym pointed out: “Friendship is an elective affinity without finality, a relationship without plot or place in our society, an experience for its own sake. Friendship is not always democratic or egalitarian, but rather selective and not entirely inclusive”.<sup>16</sup> One of the most notable passages of Derrida’s *Politics of Friendship* states: “So the ‘who?’ of friendship moves off into the distance beyond all these determinations. In its ‘infinite imminence,’ it exceeds even the interest in acquaintance, knowledge, truth, proximity, up to life, and up to the memory of life. It is not yet an identifiable ‘I,’ private or public. We must give up trying to know those to whom we are linked by something essential; by this I mean, we must greet them in the relation with the unknown in which they greet us, as well, in our distance (...)”.<sup>17</sup>

## VII.

Derived from the thoughts formulated above, a possible tactic to resist the system’s mechanisms, a collective strategy that allows you to at least temporarily break free from the “machine” (in whichever shape it might reinvent and perpetuate itself), emerges: by employing your consciousness about the mechanisms of assimilation and control exerted on us by the system; by transforming your paralysation into hope; by activating our deep and active distrust in order to create another, incorruptible truth to rely on; and by dexterously and persistently navigating along its grid and sharing it with others, you together with your friends can become the “system’s” constant “itching point”; sleeper agents in your respective field, highly awake and activated, to paraphrase Armen Avanesian.<sup>18</sup>

By living your “fiction”, and sharing it with others, your “partners in crime” (known or unknown, or not know yet known) you will always find the “in-betweens”, the runs in the Matrix tightly knit, so to speak, where you can navigate within our own orientation grid. Be it in your job or in your everyday life, be it on a micro or macro scale. Stavrides suggests “spaces-as-thresholds”, which are active catalysts of re-appropriation: “This vast sphere of disobedience and solidarity that remains invisible and largely unknown; these spaces-as-thresholds, which acquire a dubious, precarious perhaps but also virus-like existence become active catalysts in the presence of potentially explosive chemical compounds and might appear eventually on the surface as if from nowhere”.<sup>19</sup>

As being sleeper agents has about, yours is a form of resistance and activism that does not manifest on the barricades, not in a binary fight. It’s rather an ongoing and immanent dis-sensus, sometimes – as Keller Easterling says – a strategy, which is able to turn 90 degrees just before the finish line or, to never turning around for the duel, to continue pacing away from one’s opponent into a fresh territory of opportunity.<sup>20</sup> “The problem is not to destroy capital or Empire – destroy, they say – but bolster one’s own power” as Sylvère Lothringer illustrates in his foreword for Paulo Virno’s *Grammar of the Multitude*. “But only those who are free from slavery (the free multitude that we were working on before) can dare imagine what being really free would be over an exterior enemy. Capital affords us to project ahead, work it from within, knowing all too well that it will be quick to make any creative move its own, turning it into binary oppositions, however radical they claim to be”.<sup>21</sup>

Employing this tactic does not mean that you should not speak-up. You have to. You have to share your distrust with the system’s truth and your believe in an alternative fiction. You will have to face rejection by entities, which are oblivious parts of the “Matrix”, your ideas will still be internalized by the “machine”. But you will not care that much, it won’t harm you as deeply as it harmed you before. As you get your recognition and reward from elsewhere. From the alternative fiction that you share with your friends, your partners in crime, however close or far they are. You won’t stop to act within the system, because you’re not ready for a complete detachment yet: but you can open spaces (however narrow or broad, physical or nonphysical they might be), in which you can create alternative socialities and communalities, share forms of imagination and representation, thoughts and images of non-existent and not-yet existent places – both imaginary and real, worlds based on your alternative truth; , and feelings of relieve and protection.

You can build Trojan horses, planting your alternative truth right into the system's heart, and from there start to slowly upset its dominant narrative.

The struggle is not an easy one, and It will take time. We won't be successful if measured in prevalent terms.

### VIII.

It is not enough to employ only human resources in this struggle, you must make developments in technology allies in the struggle for emancipation.

To make sure that joy, pleasure, affection, empathy as incorruptible bases of your alternative truth can broadly re-emerge, you must make non-human intelligence complicit with our aims, placed in the nodal points of the network, in order to challenge capital and function, the techno-managerial intelligence. They must become virtuous machines we can love and love us back (in their own very own way), as we have to take into consideration that AI and automation will inevitably lead to radical new forms of social relationships and values).

Nobody can foresee what will happen if these machines, at the moment still perceived and designed in analogy to the human body and brain, will not only be able to perform all the tasks you require of them, but learn how to perform them, learn why to perform them, and even have an "opinion" on whether or not they enjoy performing. You don't know the way such an entity processes information would be different than yours. But we can suspect that their emotions (or what you project onto them as emotions in analogy to your own constitution) would not be the same; and that their way of sensing, perceiving and behaving will fundamentally differ from ours. However, learning to cope with these changes, without alienating the new forms of intelligence that emerge, requires transcending the limitations of human-centered thinking and perception. You have to acknowledge and integrate the potential of post-evolutionary life not only into your imagination, nightmares and work, but into your social sphere.—What if you make the non-humans partners in crime, rather than your enemies? Include them into your rhizomatic bonds? You cannot predict yet what will happen, when the boundaries and distinctions between living beings and AI's dissolve. But you can try to understand the power and potential they have and develop your own "human" capacity (including your ability to adapt) towards the construction of determinate futures. Here, you should avoid to surrender to yet more fear and paralysis, but employ your "horizons of hope".<sup>22</sup>

### Notes

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