Where Are We Going? - Degrowth and Arts Ecosystem

Part of Degrowth and Progress

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A Conversation between Monica Narula and Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, moderated by Corina Oprea

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Corina Oprea: As Covid-19 spread across the world and markets suddenly crashed, we were confronted more clearly than ever with the consequences of the capitalist economy. We were then in the middle of editing the online publication *Austerity and Utopia*, the first in a series looking at economic concepts. In the attempt to redefine the neoliberal understanding of austerity and utopia, we recognise that the collective search for measures of care and climate justice have become even more pressing. We felt that we needed to continue looking at the concepts of degrowth and progress, so as to reimagine the role which art and cultural institutions can play in forming new sets of relations and other modes of production and distribution. One can no longer think in terms of abundance, accumulation and capitalist utopia, which only create inequality and exhaustion.

We are currently experiencing a historic and unparalleled turning point. It involves the pandemic, the environmental crisis, as well as anti-racist movements, and which we hope will open up fundamental economic and political change. This is, however, not to romanticise the apparent, current downsizing in production and consumption - the global economy stoppage caused by the pandemic is not to be confused with degrowth. On the contrary, some reactions to Covid-19 by dominant actors present troublesome and threatening paths of authoritarianism, surveillance and ecofascism. This publication on degrowth and progress looks to the past and at the present to find ways of acting and taking collective responsibility for our future – towards radical transformation, towards a just, sustainable and convivial society, with focus on care, well-being, solidarity, provisioning economies, commons and commoning, and equality rooted in collective and truly democratic decision-making. We seek to review political movements such as feminism, notions of ecology, struggles coming out of the commons, digital activism and artistic practices. These are spaces which propose radical change and take into account that going back to so-called normal is no longer an option for the survival of non-human and human lives – lives that deserve to be lived.

In the following conversation, Monica Narula, Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and myself will follow the threads of four themes: abundance of time, the ability to move, responsible producing, and the necessity of haptic experience. We have a shared understanding of degrowth as a movement as well as a highly interdisciplinary approach which draws attention to multiple crises and contemplates the prospect of sustainable and just living beyond growth. To begin, I would like to invite you both to unpack the term 'degrowth', from your own position and practice.

Monica Narula: I would like to look at this from two axes. One is the axis of hunger and one is the axis of conversation. Hunger seems to be a straightforward optic. It is a shadow, as we know, to pretty much everything in most parts of the world. There is the hunger for survival, which is bare-life hunger. And we all know that there is also the hunger for creative life, the urge to ask life for more. But we also know, even though it often gets elided, that hunger is not only a problem for certain parts of the world. The way the world has been partitioned has a lot to do with the optic of progress, which you have hinted at. In the singular teleological process, going from point x to point y, there are going to be people who are ahead and people who are behind but who can catch up if they do certain things in the right way.

What is quite interesting about this pandemic is that it has intimated another view of the world which we cannot easily bifurcate any more into habitual categories. Some of the instances and examples of places that have managed to deal with the pandemic and those that have not have been very surprising to say the least. From this optic on the pandemic we have seen this, but the assumption that there's a certain partitioning of the world is still there. It might be interesting to think of the question of hunger from a similar, non-partitioned way.

I did not see the last documenta, but I did see the book that accompanied it. And what was very interesting was Quinn Latimer's folio on hunger and to see in it the range of engagement with hunger, as bare-life hunger, hunger for survival, starvation, famine, experiments in food production, and the need for food. Many artists at different points of time, also in the history of modern art, have really engaged with hunger. In the folio, you can see this range, and it asks the question: What colour is hunger? It is also interesting that the next documenta is positing the idea of the *lumbung* (rice granary or rice barrel), continuing and sustaining the

question of engaging with hunger in the context of the fact that we are surrounded by hungry gods who are burning up our forests. The question of hunger is also a question of this apparatus that decides to eviscerate the landscape. I think the question of growth and degrowth always has to think through the shadowland of hunger.

Conversation is quite the opposite of hunger. Conversation is intangible, it doesn't actually carry any physical weight. We could say that the conversation we're having at this moment is a mode of production, but I would argue that conversation lives outside production. It is a case of plenitude, which is multiple. The fact that it happens in dialects, not just in languages, already opens up another idea of multiplicity and of plenitude. In some ways, conversation is degrowth, it's anti-production – 'no talking in the classroom', 'no talking on the factory floor'. I would also argue that conversation is a dialect of the commons. It comes from that place where there can be no definitional ordering of who you are and how you constitute yourself, because it always has a tendency to leak through; it has the innocence to break given positions. What is interesting about conversation is that the threshold for who can enter is also elastic, in the sense that those who are participating in the conversation can shift the threshold that keeps one in or out of a conversation. Conversations are not given, they are made, they are contingent on process. And in that sense, a zone of friendship, a sorority, is extended and expanded.

The other thing about conversation is that it is not a meritocratic environment. Skill is always a matter of passion and commitment, so people who are skilful in conversation bring a lot of joy. But it is a capacity which is available in many sites – I would say that it is also part of what we are developing amongst ourselves with the idea of deliberative life. If I have connected the idea of creative life to the idea of hunger, I would also pose the idea of deliberative life, which is what conversation engenders.

You could say that a lot of where I'm coming from comes from the fact that I'm in a collective, and the backbone, the essence, of being a collective is conversation. It is impossible to make collective artistic, curatorial, textual works unless one starts with conversation at the heart of it. What is also fun about conversation is that it allows all categories to blur. It allows for ethics, concepts, rumours, legends, self-narration (or how I wish to position myself); it allows for memoir and exaggeration, and, crucially, it allows for a changing of the order of time. There's a dilation, a transformation of the order of time that is possible within conversation.

I was reminded by my colleague in Raqs, Jeebesh [Bagchi], some time ago of Trinh T. Minh-ha's evocation of an extended deliberation by elders under a tree to arrive at a decision. They all went away with different decisions, as *one* decision was not arrived at in the conversation. What was arrived at was a polyphonic zone, where meaning comes from the occurrence of deliberation and the ability to hold silence within that – and differing capacities within that too. You can take different decisions, but you have the capacity to be polyphonal in that zone. These are two optics. Perhaps we could have some conversation around these when we're talking about assumptions around categories of production and overproduction.

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez: Having been part of the L'Internationale Online team

for some years, it's very moving to continue this conversation which we started several years ago. Degrowth is an important topic that we brought forth through many commissions, texts, debates, discussions, with the understanding that the institutions that are part of L'Internationale, which are bastions of *patrimoine*, of cultural heritage and collections, have the capacity and eagerness to be affected by what is going on around them. My own relationship to what I understand as degrowth comes from several experiences of personal and professional life. I was an independent curator first, but my position on that now is that I have never been independent. This is already an important shift in understanding how degrowth plays a role, by reconsidering how we are working within this field that we call art. And when we talk about concepts such as degrowth or care, it is crucial to understand them through the prism of intersectionality and interdependence.

It was important for me to work and learn from an institution that was run collectively - there is something about the concept of collectivity that brings understanding to how things can change. Ten years ago, I was in quite a unique institution called Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, in the north-eastern suburbian town of Paris. Here, the concept of hunger comes forth. It is one of the economically poorest areas in France, but culturally one of the most vivid and rich, with around a hundred different languages and dialects. However, this particular suburb has been historically and socially racialised. This could remind us of how we understand the geographies of the global south - the cliché of underdevelopment, not having enough resources, etc. Through working in this situation I came to understand that generalisations in the field of art are not productive. Whenever we speak about certain concepts, be it in relation to social justice, economy, gender, degrowth, these discussions and practices should always be situated. Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, for example, doesn't have a regular public who would just come to the events that are announced. For every project that we envisioned the institution is known for working on artistic research - there was a whole level of situating it within the role of the institution and especially with its potential public, the citizens who would feel addressed by what we were doing.

We shared three years of collective directing. In the first year, we completely exaggerated and went into total overproduction. Precisely at that moment (this was around 2012) I read a few texts on the topic of degrowth. I vividly remember an article in *The Wire* announcing that by 2020 air travel will become a luxury, because of the lack of resources and the conflicts that will arise around the fossil fuel economy – it was not so much the fossil fuel, but more the pandemic that has brought us to the situation in which we are right now.

When I left Aubervilliers I started thinking about slow institutions, which is something I have been writing about a lot, but which I also try to put into practice. For example, with projects like the Contour Biennale 9 in Mechelen, I really tried to understand that it is not about content but method, that the way I work as an interdependent curator is also the way I propose to work with the institution, it has to reflect the content I'm trying to bring in. Degrowth is precisely such a topic, as is feminism or issues related to gender, ecology. If institutions decide to do projects about these topics, but they continue to work as they have typically worked in the spectrum of the event economy and event expectations, then we have a big problem. The responsibility of bringing the concept into the method of working and

allowing it to affect my immediate professional as well as personal environment is precisely connected to understanding that topics like degrowth are intersectional and based on interdependency.

CO: There are many connections between your positions. You speak of conversation, community, the collective, the commons. In looking at your recent work on the Contour Biennale, Nataša, and the Yokohama Triennale, Monica, you have both expanded the time frame of the biennial. You, Nataša, by following the cycles of the moon rather than staging one event over two months, and, Monica, working with episodes and developing the Sourcebook to bring together a beautiful concept of friendship, thinking in terms of genealogies, references, alliances and comrades of thought, as well as building a community with those coming from such different geographies (whether Hong Kong or Johannesburg). Is this really how we can think of the means we have to emancipate from overproduction in the arts? Degrowth may sound like a negative concept, also when thinking of hunger, but what if we consider 'a-growth', in which growth instead of being the goal of a political or economic objective is a side effect of achieving social policy or the politics of the commons. Can you take us through these specific projects and how conversation, friendship, degrowth and the commons are present in these exhibitions?

MN: There's an interesting twist here. For example, in the context of Delhi or a country like India, the numbers are of course insane, if I start giving you numbers, but the point is that in a city like Delhi I can maybe see only about fifteen art exhibitions in a good season, which just goes to show that when we are talking about the overproduction of art, we have to ask ourselves what kind of overproduction are we talking about. Most people in this city are not able to engage with art for lots of reasons. A-growth actually could allow us to think differently on this. I'm reminded of the dock worker Kimitsu Nishikawa, who provides one of the sources for the Yokohama Triennale.

As you mentioned, the *Sourcebook* was made public in November 2019. In that sense, the triennial opened eight months before the exhibition 'opened'. What we were offering was a set of sources. But what is a source? In curatorial practice, one is always making arguments about the world while being in the world, one is always living; what emerges from life becomes the next direction to think with. The question of the sources was like how rivers have sources. It's not a resource that transforms, it is a starting point that allows you to connect to other things. We published the *Sourcebook* to make a much more connected set of linkages, for our own minds and for what we could offer to the artists we were working with.

Through the *Sourcebook*, published in English and in Japanese, we reached a global public. The sources that we offered were non-rivalrous, they were polyaxial, they were non-hierarchical, and they came from different places and different times, which means that the conversation was happening across time, across place, and with an elastic sense of the threshold. The range of people who offered sources to the book include, among others, Nobel laureate Osamu Shimomura, who was looking at the luminosity of jellyfish; Svetlana Boym, who was looking at the luminosity of friendship; and Nishikawa, who was world-making when he was not working as a day labourer at the docks or getting drunk. I think it was an especially

interesting role in his life – the question of the precariousness of life is opened up differently, so one is able to see the question the way I posed it earlier in terms of hunger. What often comes to us is the idea that the precarious are those who do not have the capacity and time to reflect, but I think someone like Nishikawa, with his life experience of autodidacticism, offered a different story. He did a series of conversations with Tom Gill, an anthropologist, and he seems to embody a sense of a material frugality, but a sensorial excess. I think perhaps that is an aspect we are discussing as well.

If one is to think about a-growth on a different tangent, it is in the balancing between histories of frugality and what is produced around oneself. It is very important that we keep the idea of austerity distinct from the idea of frugality, which has a different philosophical tradition and reflective approach to how one lives with what one produces. There are other texts and figures that we can look at for the play between frugality on the one side and sensorial or creative excess on the other. And perhaps this dialogue between the two is one of the ways that we can think through the question of a-growth.

NP: I would like to unpack what made me extend the duration of the Contour Biennale, which I understood to be an experiment of method. I was in fact asking do we need biennials, and, if so, how could we approach them differently? This question came from my frustration of being the so-called interdependent curator who works in the institution but leaves little trace of accountability or continuity. While having that in mind I was approached by the Contour Biennale in 2017, and when I started doing research - it was very important for me to understand the conditions of the city in which this event was to take place - I saw how Belgium is one of the most divided countries in Europe. If Bosnia is number one, Belgium definitely comes second. On an official level the country has a very difficult time accepting the demand to dig into its colonial past. For me it started to be very interesting to try and justify, either through local history or certain realities, my wish to bring together the concept of degrowth with the concept of decolonial research and decoloniality. Bear in mind that the first ever continental European locomotive (after the UK), built in 1835, went between Mechelen and Brussels and later on to Antwerp. I found images and paintings of it. Mechelen also had, between 1942 and 1944, one of the two transit camps for Jewish and Roma citizens outside of Germany, and 25,000 people were taken from there to Auschwitz - 1 per cent of them survived. One of the reasons Mechelen was chosen was precisely because of the well-established railway network running between Belgium and Germany.

Transportation is one of the factors of the so-called Anthropocene, which resulted from the Great Acceleration of industrialisation. Having that in mind, I was looking at how the colonial project of Belgium, but also other colonial, imperial projects, always depended on making transport routes in order to extract humans or non-humans. The biennial brought this together, knowing that one of the most important colonies of Belgium was Congo, which is one of the richest places on Earth if we consider its natural resources, but in economic terms it is one of the poorest countries in the world. Then I came across a beautiful poem by slam poet Saul Williams, 'Coltan as Cotton', and I asked him for permission to use it. This poem opened up the possibility for intersectionality again. In a very entangled way, it brought together these various topics, and I used it in the proposal to the artists

who I invited to work with. I also literally decided to work on reducing the carbon footprint of the production through the transportation of people and objects, so 95 per cent of the artists came by train or by bike.

Corina, your question was also about how to cultivate a community. As an outsider who lives in Paris I could only be in Belgium once or twice a month, and so it became clear that I needed more time if I wanted this biennial to be accompanied by meaningful and long-term conversations. And extending the time frame of the biennial was one of the possible approaches. The difficulty was more in the conversations with the hosting institution. There were frictions and expectations, where I wished there would have been more cooperation.

CO: You have both worked internationally, but you are also very interested in local communities. The degrowth movement proposes localisation on the level of travel and distribution. But what does it mean to rethink travel when global connections are culturally so enriching? There is also this imbalance between overproduction (big exhibitions, big production, a set of artists) in some places and the scarce artistic events happening in certain geographies, such as Delhi where the population has a different understanding of art and engagement with artistic practices – related to Monica's comment that overproduction in art is no generalised matter. Is there an opportunity to still have balance though, in terms of localisation or the need to think locally, but not in terms of isolation? I am asking this from my own perspective, growing up in Eastern Europe, knowing what isolation can do, in not being able to be mobile, but also that it brings a certain ideology and a certain cultural failure.

MN: This is a really important question. If it is not addressed with complex and layered seriousness, it can easily devolve into what you are raising. It becomes a question of how a certain set of resources can control the order of conversation, where there is gatekeeping, which can't even be argued with. I think it comes back to what I was trying to evoke earlier, which is: What are the framing ideas that constitute artistic practice? Is it a material production of one order? Or is it of different orders of conversation? Unless one changes the order of conversation, unless one acknowledges that at this point of time the transglobal exists, a shutting down of that order of conversation will produce what you are gesturing towards – immobility and isolation.

However, at certain times, certain ruptures can help people who have been oppressed. If one is to look at the place of women in many parts of the world and what capitalist production did for them, it transformed their role in society. They could come out of the house; they didn't have to be driven by the same parameters of life. But which is also why, even now, we have to ask questions of what the order of that gaze is on this stepping out. There are no easy answers to this question of 'if the past was a better land?', or to the fact that conversations can now be narrowed down to the idea of maintaining (sustaining) resources. It needs to be asked, whose resources, and what is the order of claims that one can make?

There are claims to globality being made in different parts of the world, which are historically new, and they have to be in dialogue. In the Yokohama Triennale, for the first time in its history, there were people who were African American or from Africa. 50 per cent of the work which was shown was from countries that had not

been part of the conversation that the triennial had been having with the world. Broadly speaking, it was only accessible to Japan and Europe, albeit an interesting conversation, amazing work, but that is not the point. The point is: What is the order of conversation that is being considered as conversation? This is why we have to think of modes of travel of the mind as much as travel of the plane.

NP: I also think that we have to try and reclaim differently the importance of being rooted in space and time. As Stuart Hall once said, he expects a very long answer when he asks somebody today where they come from. When you pause in a particular space – what I tried to do with Contour Biennale by narrowing the perimeter of where the artists were coming from, which is also what I try to do with Elena Sorokina in the Initiative for Practices and Visions of Radical Care based in greater Paris – it is pausing to understand that in any square metre of this Earth there are many entanglements, as you say Monica, you can travel by the mind.

I argued then that so much travel was used to bring different people together for the previous biennial editions. I'm also saying this to reclaim rootedness, because it is something that is part of extreme right-wing discourse. COYOTE, one of the collectives who worked with us on the Contour Biennale was precisely trying to use words like 'transplant', 'root', 'seed' in relation to migrating plants and to infuse them with content that would not be given by the right wing, in light of the fact that close to Mechelen there is something called the Garden of Europe. It is one of the largest European distribution centres of fruit and vegetables. It is a highly digitised and industrialised operations space and their headquarters look like NASA; it is where the stock exchange happens for vegetables and fruits.

Getting back to the question of cultivating a community, with the initiative in Paris that we started during confinement, the idea is to really understand care work as a commoning practice, a practice of mutuality. Following the feminist agenda of degrowth where care work is considered a place of commoning, we collaborate with artists based in the greater Paris area who come from very different situations and origins, and who all work on and with practices of care and enact ethical and collective ways of working. One fear that we have in relation to the possible outcomes of the pandemic is the financial aspect of producing in the cultural sphere, which could lead to cutting down precisely these kinds of practices that are not immediately financialised or demand long and slow processes like conversation. We are just starting and it's completely self-financed, taking place outside of institutions, but it tries to enable and cultivate a community.

CO: For the title of this conversation we've intentionally chosen 'Degrowth and Arts Ecosystem' and not the use of 'Arts Institutions' or 'Arts Museums', because – which goes back to your question, Monica – it is precisely what we think about when considering overproduction. The arts is an ecosystem and it comprises of institutions, structures, infrastructures, curators, artists, collectives and communities that engage with artistic expression. The question of responsibility is something that we have been discussing within the confederation of L'Internationale, not least because museums have inherited a modern, colonial logic of bringing together collections, which have become even larger, and then it goes into real estate, building larger buildings to accommodate these large collections. It is a question of care for artistic heritage, but it is also material.

There is a danger which you point out Nataša, that when there are budget cuts, what is cut is exactly the conversation, the non-production, the non-immediate, the non-economic or non-financial. Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, which is part of the confederation and who are building a new building right now, is also using this moment to rethink what the museum is. Can it be a museum of the commons? How to consider the notions of responsibility and solidarity within the arts ecosystem? Now is a moment in which we could redefine the term 'institution' and its social foundations, especially when it is a public institution, and think through the notion of the public with ecologies of care and sustainability. How to look at the notion of solidarity in the arts ecosystem?

MN: A word that we have been thinking through more recently – although we have also worked with it over the last fifteen to twenty years of our practice, especially through Sarai [Programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies] – has been the question of 'infrastructure'. We ran this experiment for a number of years: the way we used to phrase what we wanted to do was 'to create ripples that create other ripples that create other ripples'; that was a description we came up with a long time ago. In retrospect, and as one who is inhabiting the arts ecosystem in a broad way, one comes to the recognition that infrastructure is actually a creative act. If we cease to look at it as a definition of what is offered to us, or given to us through structures and apparatuses that we have to both work with and be wary of, then we ask ourselves what are the modes of engagement that we can create which allow for this ripple that creates another ripple.

For example, we were recently running a year-long programme on the invitation of Goethe-Institut, which is called Max Mueller Bhavan, in India. We said, 'Let's do one thing, create some thing, which we will call *Five Million Incidents*. There will be no curator, there will be catalysts, custodians, and collaborations'. It was a mode of working in which we invited mentors, catalysts, and then made public calls. And events happened throughout the year. But the crucial thing was that it was called *Five Million Incidents*, because, and I wanted to quote this ... this is what it said in the announcement:

'An incident is a fold in time – a quickened heart-beat, an epiphany, a flash of insight, an outbreak of goose-bumps, a moment of excitement, an occurrence, an encounter, a sighting, a memory; an incident is anything that transforms the way we live or think, a conversation that carries a surge in its wake, an event that makes us rethink everything. Millions of incidents can populate a duration, making it come alive as an embodiment of temporal plenitude. That plenitude is a ground for making things anew. [... It] opened up a remarkable possibility for thinking afresh on questions of artistic peer relationships, of occupations of time as art, of the blurring of lines between the 'event' of art and daily life, and of inventing fresh protocols of institutional custodianship. Five Million Incidents lasted hours, days, weeks, and months through artworks, actions, and performative moves that renewed and transformed terms of co-inhabitation of multiple presences. Five Million Incidents is a mode of a conscious engagement with time.'

Obviously five million incidents were not going to happen, but to begin with the premise of plenitude is to be open to not knowing what will happen. In the events that did happen over the year, some things lasted an afternoon, some things lasted for weeks. Right now it's gone digital, because of this new twist of an incident in our lives. The reason we did this project in this way is to precisely reflect on this question of how does one create infrastructure, modalities, possibilities that are not limiting what art can be, and what one considers an experience with art? Once you start opening those questions, the apparatus also has to change. We have been speaking about this in essays and testing it out as exhibitions, this question of what an ecosystem can be.

I also wanted to return to the question of care that you raised Nataša, partly because one of the key ideas that we were working with in the Yokohama Triennale was 'care'. But we began by saying 'care with toxicity', and the reason is that in the last two thousand years the subcontinent especially has dealt with the question of toxicity with the cruelty of banishment: 'You are polluted, unclean, and not even your shadow should fall next to mine, because you are so polluted.' The question of cleanliness, purity, maintaining certain methods of doing things as they are meant to be done and not in any other way, to not allow for miscegenation, this has been the banishment of toxicity. With the pandemic the question of the toxic has taken on a sharper everyday note for all of us, but I think when we talk about care we also have to think about the world that we live in now. How does one find modes of care where toxicity cannot be banished? How do we find modes of living with this toxicity and modes of care that allow for transformation in the future?

NP: I am trained as an art historian and my practice as an art historian should be about caring for objects. As you mentioned Corina this is a highly specialised, professionalised care for the past. This made me think of the book by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), where she talks explicitly about the potential of history. What she puts into perspective, especially when speaking about the anthropological or ethnographic museum, is that the museum in the West constructed a whole science around a very particular care for objects, but none for the populations who were killed through genocide and colonial projects and from whom these objects have been stolen. They are obsessed with taking care of objects as if they belong to all humanity.

I agree that care has a very shadowy side, the other is the gendered performance of care, the centuries of unpaid care, domestic or cleaning labour performed by women inside societies or families. I came across a really inspiring text by sociologist Bengi Akbulut, who asks for care work to be the commons. She poses the idea of degrowth as a feminist practice, and that this pandemic may have opened the doors to the collective and the commoning aspect of how to take care, as well as question in what ways we express solidarity. In the arts, we are also at a turning point, where it's becoming clear that without mutual aid among artists and different parts of the arts ecosystem there is very little possibility for survival. Be it financial, career-wise, or personal. We also see many artists' organisations behaving proactively or as activists, with very different agendas, but mostly connected by an interest in reimagining social status – I'm talking from a French perspective, where an art career has always been something very individual and competitive. What we are

trying to establish with our initiative with the artists who are gathering within it is support for each other. And we do that by seeking legal perspectives or public health advice, getting experts together to react $ad\ hoc$ to one's needs. Maybe this approach of forming networks could also transform or affect the way institutions work, like L'Internationale, where issues of urgency go beyond the competitiveness of who has the biggest show on view or the most press reviews or visitors.

I think Art with a capital A has an important potential, if we are looking at it through the public health perspective. It should be quite clear today that art does affect social behaviour, human and non-human relations, and why would this not be cherished. And lastly, we didn't use the word 'capitalism' today, but art is something that is deeply anti-capitalist and should remain that way.

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