

# Pandemics and Other Systemic Crises: Interesting Times, Matters of Concern, and Tentacular Thinking

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## Abstract

The current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic underscores the failed model with which we recurrently face the crises that affect our world, from climate change and the recent refugee emergencies, to the rise of political extremisms in Western societies. As the feminist philosopher Donna Haraway and the sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour argue, a paradigm shift and a redefinition of subjectivity are necessary to confront the Anthropocene. The Venice Biennale 2019, “May You Live in Interesting Times”, curated by Ralph Rugoff, proposed an experimental model of artistic thought (which I will call “tentacular” utilizing the theory developed by Haraway) that questioned the paradigms inherited from the Enlightenment, and also, to a certain extent, from postmodernism. Due to its philosophical depth, this show is comparable to “Les Immatériaux” (1985), the historical exhibition curated by the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who famously conceptualized postmodernism and the experience of the “postmodern sublime”. This last concept will serve to establish a contrast with the “tentacular sublime”, the contemporary experience manifested in the recent biennial.

**Keywords:** Curation, biennials, Venice Biennale, “May You Live in Interesting Times”, Anthropocene, Cthulucene, the sublime, postmodernism, “Les Immatériaux”, Ralph Rugoff, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Umberto Eco, Jean-François Lyotard.

## Resumen

### Pandemias y otras crisis sistémicas: Interesting Times, asuntos de hecho y pensamiento tentacular

La actual pandemia de SARS-CoV-2 pone de relieve una vez más el modelo fallido con el nos enfrentamos a las crisis que afectan a nuestro mundo, desde el cambio climático y las recientes situaciones de emergencia de los refugiados, hasta la ascensión de los extremismos políticos en las sociedades occidentales. Como argumentan la filósofa feminista Donna Haraway y el sociólogo y filósofo Bruno Latour, se hace necesario un cambio de paradigma y una redefinición de la subjetividad para enfrentarnos al Antropoceno. La Bial de Venecia 2019, “May You Live in Interesting Times”, comisariada por Ralph Rugoff, propuso un modelo experimental de pensamiento artístico (que denominaré “tentacular” haciendo uso de la teoría desarrollada por Haraway) que cuestionaba los paradigmas heredados de la Ilustración, y también, en cierto grado, de la postmodernidad. Por su calado filosófico, la muestra es comparable a “Les Immatériaux” (1985), la histórica exposición comisariada por el filósofo Jean-François Lyotard, quien asimismo conceptualizó la postmodernidad y la experiencia de lo “sublime postmoderno”, concepto que sirve para establecer un contraste con lo “sublime tentacular”, la experiencia contemporánea que aportó la reciente la bienal.

**Palabras clave:** Comisariado, bienales, Bial de Venecia, “May You Live in Interesting Times”, Antropoceno, Cthuluceno, lo sublime, postmodernidad, “Les Immatériaux”, Ralph Rugoff, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Umberto Eco, Jean-François Lyotard.

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Fecha de recepción 3 de junio 2020

The fact that our individual and societal conduct and policies have consequences around the planet is a truism, but rather abstract, and therefore, difficult to perceive in the everyday experience of life. This is one of the main reasons why the general ethos of our era is characterised by short-termism, selfishness, and individualism - it is hard to fathom the outcomes of our actions when we are not immediately affected by them, which is often the case in our privileged, Western societies. The current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is an empirical manifestation of the interconnectedness and interdependence of the world we live in, which has made this theoretical assumption acquire an unprecedented level of reality. Philosophers such as Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour have suggested in their latest works that the crises we face, from the pandemic to the environmental, economic, and social upheavals, require a change of paradigm and a redefinition of subjectivity based on sustainability and adaptability to the realities that we can no longer ignore. Ralph Rugoff, the artistic director of the 2019 Venice Biennale, created his proposal for the curated exhibition “May You Live in Interesting Times”, attempting to experiment with new models of thought that respond to these concerns. Like Jean-François Lyotard’s landmark exhibition “Les Immatériaux” (1985), Rugoff’s challenged different facets of a worldview inherited from the Enlightenment, which in many ways lie at the roots of our inefficient and non-sustainable systems of thought and action. In contrast with Lyotard’s, Rugoff’s show confronts these issues with a contemporary rather than a postmodern sensitivity, adapted to the contingencies of the current status quo. Regarding the pandemic, the question remains: will this conspicuous demonstration of the systemic nature of our world catalyse the paradigmatic shift necessary to ensure our survival in it?

## I. Survival in the Anthropocene

The current reality check comes as a shock at a time when we had collectively reached delirious levels of misinformation, politicisation, and negationism in every sphere, whether political, environmental, social, et cetera. Profound problems of planetary proportions have been approached in the last years as if they were a matter of opinion and political affiliation. This is in part explicable through Bruno Latour's argument in "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" (2004) which suggests that the efforts made by academics, such as himself, "to show "the lack of scientific certainty" inherent in the construction of facts"<sup>1</sup> has lead to a situation in which the institutions once considered as factual sources of truth have lost legitimation, causing the illusion that reality as a whole is constructed, and thus, discussable, and negotiable. The fallacy of this proposition is nowadays darkly underscored by the sudden upheaval. Though Latour has never defended a return to the old model of science and of politics,<sup>2</sup> organised around supposedly incontestable matters of fact, he does alert about the urgent necessity to create new critical tools to face the time we live in in "Gaia". He uses this term after James Lovelock's and Lynn Margulis's controversial Gaia hypothesis, which conceptualises the Earth as a synergistic, complex system.<sup>3</sup> Latour puts forward a model geared towards finding solutions and viable modes of thinking to "protect and care,"<sup>4</sup> as philosopher Donna Haraway puts it. Instead of matters of fact, he proposes to organise society and science around "matters of concern," which are issues that affect all of us, but that we have little agency over because they are handled by politicians, removed from the people and often misrepresenting them. In Latour's system, these matters become the locus of gatherings that intend to return this lost representation to the people, adding to the reunion non-human elements whose presence and effect are vital, and should thus be

<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour, "Why has Critique Run Out of Steam?" *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, no. 2., 227.

<sup>2</sup> See Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public" in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 14-27.

<sup>3</sup> James E. Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, L., "Atmospheric homeostasis by and for the biosphere: the Gaia hypothesis". *Tellus*. Series A. Stockholm: International Meteorological Institute. no. 26 (1974) (1-2), 2-10.

<sup>4</sup> Latour, "Why has Critique Run Out of Steam?", 232.

taken into account.<sup>5</sup> In this modern interpretation of the Greek agora,<sup>6</sup> all the agents are summoned to work together and find compounded answers, trespassing the limits that not only divide academic disciplines and areas of competence, but also the boundary that separates humans from the rest. The matters of fact of the realpolitik become then substituted by the matters of concern of the Dingpolitik - Latour resorts to the Heideggerian concept of “the thing”<sup>7</sup> (das Ding) to invite us to consider the issues at stake as multifaceted, complex, and entangled at different levels, rather than simplified objects of a reductive and inefficacious paradigm of science. In 2005, he teamed up with artist and curator Peter Weibel at the ZKM to organise “Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy”, a large exhibition that showed contemporary art’s ability to become this precise space of assembly for “new democracy” due to its nature: it is not encumbered by regular taxonomies, it is porous and hybrid, and invites us to actively partake in the issues tackled, at least in theory.

Latour often mentions Donna Haraway in his writings and lectures because they both share the common goal of attempting to redefine subjectivity in the Anthropocene, according to Latour, or the Cthulucene, as Haraway names it. Latour refers to the Anthropocene in a habitual way, both in science and popular culture, describing this age as a period in which the impact of human activity on the planet has become grave enough to designate a new geological era. Haraway’s use of Cthulucene is slightly different since it doesn’t allude to the present time as much as to the time that should come if we want to survive in the current circumstances. In “Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene” (2016), Haraway advocates, in the first place, to stay with the trouble, not to confide in techno-scientific miracles that will sweep away our problems, nor to fall into catastrophism and refuse to act presuming that the battle is lost, but to stay engaged, to keep weaving creative relations and solutions, abandoning the fantasy that a universal, “hard-fact” model will provide the answers, and knowing that each one of our propositions will be partial and tentative,

<sup>5</sup> Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik”, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik”, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik”, 23.

but perhaps just good enough to continue.<sup>8</sup> The idea of “response-ability”<sup>9</sup>, central to Haraway’s thought, not only indicates the necessity to develop the ability to respond to our challenges, but to do so being accountable for, and protective of all others, humans, animals, forests, oceans, because they are we. She takes inspiration from different creatures, like pigeons and spiders, and ancient practices, such as Navaho weaving, in search of new forms of storytelling - alternative ways of narrating the world. These new stories entail the constitution of unexpected familial alliances, “making generative oddkin,”<sup>10</sup> building mongrel tribes with other beings, in other settings, to exist and endure together. For Latour and Haraway, neither the Enlightenment model, with its centralised structures and divisive taxonomies, that for instance, separate humans from nature, nor more recent models that stress the constructionism of reality, and result in demagoguery, critical inefficiency, and lack of action, are useful at this point in history. Both agree that we are called to revolutionise our ways of thinking, create new categories and relations, based, this time, on our necessity to confront our contingent problems together - a duty that Haraway summarises invoking Virginia Woolf: Think we must!<sup>11</sup>

## II. Tentacular Thinking in Art: “May You Live in Interesting Times”

Experimenting with a new paradigm of thought is precisely what curator Ralph Rugoff attempted in the last edition of the Venice Biennale with the show “May You Live in Interesting Times” (2019). This thought modality manifested both in the majority of the works it included, as well as in the format of exhibition itself. I will refer to the processes it entails as “tentacular thinking”, a term which I borrow from Haraway’s mentioned book. Tentacular thinking is the alternative that she suggests at a time when models grounded on individualism are no longer viable, technically or otherwise. Instead, she proposes “Sympoiesis,”<sup>12</sup> “making-with,” reordering our

<sup>8</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 103.

<sup>12</sup> See Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, Chapter 2: Tentacular Thinking, 30-57.

thoughts, bodies, and ways of being, through creative combinations and monstrous additions of creatures and things, spreading in all directions like enhanced material-semiotic tentacles that can allow us to feel and find our way in the world anew. Latour is one of the “companions” that Haraway chooses to conceptualise tentacular thinking, among others like Isabelle Stengers, Thom van Dooren, and Anna Tsing. It is no surprise that Rugoff is well-versed in Latour’s oeuvre, which he quotes in his curatorial statement. He doesn’t refer to Haraway, but her thought is present implicitly and explicitly in the work of many artists included in the exhibition, such as Hito Steyerl, Ad Minoliti, or Tomás Saraceno.

Through his decisions, Rugoff created a show whose structure differs from the established and tacit biennial formats. Its characteristics were consistent with tentacularity: it was not centralised, it was hybrid, multiple, and “generative” (it spread and “proliferated”) it was anti-individualist and cooperative, and it organised around the goal of making the public reconsider the world, and its place in it, in mindful and conscientious ways. These changes were inaugurated by the title of the exhibition, a conceptual calembour in which multiple meanings coexisted, making it impossible to interpret it in a univocal way. “May You Live in Interesting Times” is an alleged Chinese curse, in reality, invented by a diplomat in the 1930s,<sup>13</sup> that has travelled through history with truth-value in the speech and writings of politicians and litterateurs. While it seems to wish for a life of adventure, in actuality it commands an indefinite time of tumult and unrest - the worst imaginable torment. Its falsehood speaks of the duplicity of the information that we currently consume due, in part, to the de-legitimation of truth-sources that Latour expounds on, and that Rugoff explicitly mentions.<sup>14</sup> “Fake news”, “alternative facts”, distortions of scientific data, political manipulation through the use of new technology - in sum, the creation of cultural artefacts that have real effects on our lives. It also alludes to these “interesting times,” the many social, political, and environmental upheavals whose manifestations have been apparent during the last years despite the foggy and misleading cultural

<sup>13</sup> Rugoff explains that the proverb was first mentioned in print in 1936 in a report on a speech made to the Birmingham Unionist Association by the British MP Sir Austen Chamberlain. Ralph Rugoff, “May You Live in Interesting Times”, in 58th International Art Exhibition: *May You Live in Interesting Times*, ed. Mary Richards (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2019), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Rugoff, “May You Live in Interesting Times”, 30.

discourse. Almost as Jungian synchronicity, the 2019 Biennale ended amid the worst floods that the city has seen in fifty years, which began right after the Venice council rejected a climate crisis plan.<sup>15</sup> The current coronavirus crisis had not unfolded at that time, but it shares the same characteristics than the convulsions represented in the exhibition: a worldwide disaster which has been politicised and minimised, although, on this occasion, it has ceased to be denied after the corpses of Western citizens have started to accumulate.

Rugoff chose an ambiguous title, not to elude the commitment to demarcate an arena resorting to dodgery and vagueness, but to reflect the multiplicity and non-reducibility of the themes that the exhibition would encompass, which the visitor would be playfully challenged to consider simultaneously, bearing the stress of cognitive dissonance. Due to the historic ties of biennials to the nineteenth century International Exhibitions, they are implicitly expected to address a comprehensive theme that somehow condenses the zeitgeist. For Rugoff, choosing a single narrative to represent our time would be reductive, since, in his view, and following Henri Focillon,<sup>16</sup> the present is dense and heterogenous, comprising diverse temporalities in the same moment. The structure that he set created the conditions for the different leitmotifs of the show to emerge a posteriori, in the work of the artists, and in the discourses and conversations that the exhibition would spark among the professional and non-professional visitors, instead of being determined from the beginning by the centralised authority of the curator.

This was not the only way in which Rugoff stepped aside from the protagonist role given to the curators of this kind of event. The list of participants was also assembled incorporating most of the artists that other artists had recommended, rather than solely following his criterion. In this manner, the different works in the show would be linked by a network of shared concerns and artistic methodologies<sup>17</sup> instead of illustrating a grand theory of the present concocted by the curator. Notably, the

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<sup>15</sup> See Angela Giuffrida, “Venice council flooded moments after rejecting climate crisis plan,” *The Guardian*, November 15, 2019.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/15/venice-council-flooded-moments-after-rejecting-climate-crisis-plan>

<sup>16</sup> Rugoff, “May You Live in Interesting Times”, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ralph Rugoff and Paolo Barata, “Biennale Arte 2019 - Press conference (7 March 2019)”, *YouTube*, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dY7V8PrAFNE>

heterogeneity of the exhibition was emphasised by the fact that roughly fifty percent of the participants were women, and artists of colour, trans, and other often underrepresented communities were also remarkably visible. This could have hardly happened spontaneously, especially after 2017 in the climate raised by the Me Too movement. Rugoff eluded taking credit for this inclusivity, only qualifying it as “normal” - which is what any excluded collective would aspire to be considered.

In addition to this, he chose to split the exhibition into two parts, propositions A and B, that were displayed at the two venues where the international curated show takes place every year: the “Arsenale,” an industrial naval yard, and the neoclassical Central Pavilion at the “Giardini,” the gardens that also host the national pavilions. Each location featured the same list of artists, but with works that could look very different, in such way that the visitor might not even recognise the same authors at the two distinct sites.<sup>18</sup> With this division and non-identical repetition, Rugoff intended to exemplify the infinite potential iterations of any exhibition (this show had two propositions or dimensions, but an indeterminate number of versions would be possible - in theory) and also, the multiple facets of an artists’ oeuvre. This last idea challenges the notion that an artist’s body of work is composed of pieces that look similar among them, but, more broadly, it addresses the nature of human cognition, in which art or any other object is reduced and simplified to fit a category within an order, ignoring or deeming anecdotal any aspect that jeopardises this classification. The curator’s encouragement of multiplicity in this sense stresses the importance of challenging this cognitive framework, never assuming its universal validity. This remark is especially resounding today, in a pandemic that has been underestimated by the governments and the people with fatal consequences. This miscalculation is due to the application of the paradigm in place, based on the realities that we have experienced within our lifespan, to a situation that exceeds it.

Rugoff explained that one of the main inspirations for the show was Umberto Eco’s “The Open Work” (1962).<sup>19</sup> In it, the Italian philosopher approaches the contemporary artwork in an open state rather than closed in its forms and possible interpretations. Instead of following a singular, monolithic order, the openness of the

<sup>18</sup> Rugoff, “May You Live in Interesting Times”, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Rugoff, “May You Live in Interesting Times”, 35.

work unfolds an inexhaustible range of possibilities and allows to operate within a field of relations.<sup>20</sup> “May You Live in Interesting Times” can be explained in terms of tentacularity, but also of openness in Eco’s sense, as if Rugoff had expanded “the open work” into “the open exhibition” by freeing the different elements that habitually compose a biennial and implying its multiple possibilities, whether realised or not. Nevertheless, though both concepts have aspects in common, tentacularity could be more adequate in this case because its specific characteristics correspond with the novel contemporary sensitivity that I outlined through Haraway and Latour. Importantly, this show was aimed at creating the circumstances that could provoke the evolution of our thought-paradigms, which would allow to rethink subjectivity in its many facets, developing the necessary skills to face the interesting times of 2019, and the challenging times ahead - which is particularly poignant now, about a year later, when Rugoff’s invitation to think is even more urgent. This exhibition advocated cooperation, hybridity, non-universalism, multiplicity, and practicality, using every resource available to be in the world. This is the reason why, despite all criticism, Rugoff was succinct and kept his intervention as low as possible. Understanding, like Marcel Duchamp,<sup>21</sup> that the symbolic existence of artworks, and exhibitions, is a matter of exchange between the different actors and actants involved, he used his agency to dissolve his power intending to open the structures of the biennial and make them semantic triggers rather than borders. This would allow the public to add to them with their interpretations and conversations unencumbered by the curator’s sanctioned perspective, “simpoietically” building “tentacularity” with them. This is a way of addressing a response-able public, removed from indoctrination and shallow didacticism.

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Nº 95  
Septiembre  
noviembre  
2020

### III. Tentacular Artworks

An important majority of the artworks in the show were concrete manifestations of tentacularity in these terms. These pieces elude traditional indexation in categories such as themes, disciplines, and artistic mediums and languages because of their

<sup>20</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 11.

<sup>21</sup> See Rugoff, “May You Live in Interesting Times”, 28.

amalgamated nature. Any attempt to classify them in this manner will be futile, and insufficient to understand them since their most outstanding characteristic is precisely the opposite: their ability to bridge the gaps created by those classifications, bringing together heterogeneous elements (that belong to different areas of knowledge and practice, levels of reality, temporality, et cetera) in unlikely, interim, and enlightening connections. Following, I refer to seven examples, but most of the work in the show could be described in these terms.

Tomás Saraceno's work at the Biennale gathered disciplines and practices as disparate as engineering, architecture, astrophysics, and fortune-telling, intending to create a sustainable, ecological future. The work "The Spider/Web Pavilion 7: Oracle Readings, Weavings, Arachnomancy, Synanthropic Futures: At-ten(t)sion to invertebrate rights!" (2019), which is based on Donna Haraway's ideas,<sup>22</sup> is an example of Saraceno's attempts to build speculative models of subjectivity that challenge the existing distinction between humans and nature. On this occasion, he focused on spiders and their expanded cognitive bodies: their webs, through which these beings can sense their environment. The "Spider / Webs" he displays were playfully used, for example, to predict the future, inspired by Mambila Nggam spider divination practices of Western and Central Africa, thus generating another layer of meaning by referring to non-Western modes of relating to and interacting with nature. His other works, the sculptural installation "On the disappearance of clouds" and the sound installation "Acqua Alta en clave de Sol", both presented under the overarching title "Aero(s)cene: When breath becomes air, when atmospheres become the movement for a post fossil fuel era against carbon-capitalist clouds" (2019), oscillate at the rhythm of the seaside, manifesting an entanglement with the natural forces and elements: the force of gravity, the ocean tides, the moon, the planet.

Physicist Margaret Wertheim and her sister Christine, a poet and former painter, brought their sensitivities and skills together in "Crotchet Coral Reef", a project which they started in 2005. Since then, more than 10,000 participants responded to their online invitation to collaborate in the weaving of a global crotchet archipelago that now counts over forty Satellite Reefs. The models, built with materials such as yarn,

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<sup>22</sup> See Haraway's reflections on the Pimoi cthulhu spider. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 31- 32.

plastic, and electro-luminescent wire, “stitch” together craft, environmentalism, and feminism, but most saliently combine art and mathematics in a way that reveals aesthetic and poetic dimensions that are intrinsic to science by “letting people materially play with ideas through actually constructing what is usually thought of as abstract things which are learnt through equations in textbooks.”<sup>23</sup> This project addresses hyperbolic geometry, an alternative to Euclidean geometry deemed impossible by many mathematicians, but that creatures such as coral reefs have been producing for thousands of years as a form of embodied cognition (according to Margaret). For the Wertheims, like for Saraceno, art becomes a space where to explore ways of relating to and understanding nature from the inside, of experimenting with, rethinking, and reconfiguring established categories and systems unencumbered by the limits of academic disciplines and areas of knowledge and practice, using emotion, rationality, and borrowed sensory organs from other beings and things.

“No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5” (2018), which Korakrit Arunanondchai made in collaboration with Alex Gvojcic, is a three-screen video-installation that addresses questions such as politics, religion and myth-making, ageing and solitude, spirituality, and the constructionism of nationalism. Three different narratives intertwine in this work, each staying at their level of reality and simultaneously interplaying with the other. One of them refers to an incident that occurred in 2018: thirteen children and their coach were rescued from a cave between Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos. Though none of the children were Thai, they were claimed as such by their government to create a myth, benefitting from their sensational, and very publicised, rescue. This narrative is traversed by the hypnotic dance of boychild, a performer that often works with Arunanondchai, who appears in the forest embodying Nāga, the guardian water snake spirit of Thai Buddhism. Another screen shows footage of the artist’s elderly grandparents, one of whom suffers dementia and lives in a care home. Both grandparents are kept company by large stuffed rabbits, and two of these figures are displayed as part of the installation. This work portrays the complexity of human experience, in which the personal and the

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Wertheim, “Biennale Arte 2019 - Meetings on Art (14 September 2019)”, *YouTube*, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/node/5932>

social, the intimate and the political, the mythical and the real, pour into and taint one another in ways that escape rational simplifications and categorisations.

Hito Steyerl's oeuvre characteristically weaves compelling connections between art, philosophy, and politics, as well as urgent cultural concerns, often involving armed conflicts. In "This is the Future" (2019), she uses cutting-edge artificial intelligence to predict the future growth of a digitally-generated garden. Rather than a high-tech work, the piece becomes a meditation on the ancient human desire to look into the future, on the fallacy of this undertaking, and the dangers of the current faith in the supposed powers of artificial intelligence. Instead of taking us into a more efficient future, A.I. can regress us to stages in which humans were classified and evaluated, like the Third Reich, whose ghosts are being sadly revived. In "Leonardo's Submarine" (2019), she faces once again a complex, resounding temporality ricocheting between Leonardo Da Vinci's inventions and contemporary technology. Da Vinci invented a proto-submarine that could potentially become a very lethal weapon and decided to keep it secret fearing the cruelty and ambition of human nature. She creates a temporal and semantic boomerang referring to a powerful contemporary weapon company, Finmeccanica, that's recently changed its name to Leonardo S.p.a., whitewashing its destructive enterprises with the artist's name, a synonym of creativity, loftiness, and industriousness. Amid the current excitement around contemporary technology and its promise of a brand new world, Steyerl's work historicises the present as a new cycle of an old game, using technology to comment on itself ironically, or rather, on our naive and sometimes hypocritical aspirations and desires around it.

Arthur Jafa explores the possibilities to represent black subjectivity through mediums like film, sculpture, and performance. In his video "The White Album" (2018), Jafa brings together real footage of the raging violence of white supremacists against black people in the U.S. (such as the beating of white trucker Reginald Denny in the 1992 L.A. riots) and in contrast, of white people he loves. As a community that has been abused and mistreated throughout history, they are bearers of "black somatic knowledge",<sup>24</sup> a worldview interiorised through pain over generations, which carries

<sup>24</sup> Kalia Brooks Nelson, "Arthur Jafa", in 58th International Art Exhibition: *May You Live in Interesting Times*, ed. Mary Richards (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2019), 268.

within certain assumptions about whiteness as a synonym of oppression. This piece portrays an authentic struggle to find a fair position, navigating love and prejudice, fear and hope, history and vision. Jafa is a long-time collaborator of Khalil Joseph, also featured at the biennale, who works within the same conceptual remit, and with similar means, as him. In “BLKNWS” (2018-ongoing), Joseph combines very different sorts of footage (YouTube videos, historical recordings, memes, newspaper clippings, et cetera), creating an uninterrupted stream of Black Americans, that resembles the 24-hour news cycle of channels such as CNN. His editing style as well as the display of the material in two screens that show equally attention-grabbing material, mimic hip-hop and DJ techniques. On one of the venues, “BLKNWS” was presented as a screening room covered with posters and slogans, such as “Deconstructing European Philosophies: This message is brought to you by BLKNWS.” Like Jafa’s, Joseph’s work addresses black subjectivity, and his artistic procedures explore alternative forms of representation in the face of the intrinsic racism of dominant cultural forms.

Halil Altindere’s work often deals with the mistreatment of minorities in politically and aesthetically challenging ways. The two pieces he exhibited at the Biennale dealt with the recent refugee crises in two very different manners. His work of the series “Space Refugee” (2016) revolves around the figure of Muhammed Ahmed Faris, the first and only Syrian cosmonaut who currently lives in Istanbul as a refugee. Through a display of tropes that the artist borrows from the aesthetic of science museums and space exhibitions, such as educational videos, and commemorative busts, he creates a bond between Faris’s status as a cosmonaut, a refugee, and a national icon who fell from grace, to speak about the worldwide rejection of Syrian refugees, ironically suggesting Mars as a possible new settlement area. His other work, “Neverland” (2019) is the first-ever pavilion for refugees, who evidently cannot find representation if the people’s presence depends on their nationality, as it does at the Venice Biennale since its inauguration in 1895. It consists of a Palladian façade with no exhibition behind it, perhaps due to the impossibility to concretise the refugee experience and worldview in any particular form. Therefore, Altindere chooses the motifs of his aesthetic according to their culturally-defined semantic value, in an attempt to render visible the people who fall into the institutional blind spots.

#### IV. “May You Live in Interesting Times” vis-à-vis “Les Immatériaux”

Though these are only seven instances out of almost eighty participants, the majority of the art in the exhibition can be described in the same terms of tentacularity applicable to the show itself, which would make these works material-semiotic fractals of its structure. Importantly, the fact that this exhibition embodies so clearly this nascent philosophical stance makes it revolutionary within the field of art, and its relevance can be observed clearly if regarded vis-à-vis some of its precedents. As I mentioned earlier, in “Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy”, Latour and Weibel attempted to reflect the necessity for a change of paradigm, and demonstrate contemporary art’s potential to become a modern-day agora. However, the structure of the exhibition was unaffected by this intended shift because it was an iteration of a very habitual format: an essay that acts as the theoretical basis for a series of artworks that, to a certain degree, exemplify the thesis proposed. In this case, it was a group of essays instead of a single one, but the artworks certainly took a secondary role, and what permeated the culture was the remarkable publication that collects the texts. A closer precedent to “May You Live in Interesting Times” could be found in Jean-François Lyotard’s and Thierry Chaput’s “Les Immatériaux” (1985). Six years before this exhibition, Lyotard published “The Postmodern Condition” (1979), in which he defined the then-contemporary zeitgeist of postmodernism as “incredulity toward meta-narratives”<sup>25</sup> - the discourses that legitimate sciences in the Enlightenment paradigm. “Les Immatériaux” was based on this influential idea, and also, on the symbolic change that he was observing in materiality due to the new telecommunications. The show,<sup>26</sup> a massive assemblage of very heterogeneous installations of artists such as Giovanni Anselmo, Daniel Buren, and Dan Flavin, intended to present the complexity and confusion of that time, in which all the institutions that grounded science and subjectivity since the seventeenth century had lost solidity, and which art was finding a representation of.

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<sup>25</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “Introduction to The Postmodern Condition,” in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 999.

<sup>26</sup> Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput, “Les Immatériaux”, The Centre Pompidou, 1985.

The records show that the intricacy of Lyotard's exhibition was not well received by the critics,<sup>27</sup> and it was only later recognised as groundbreaking. It might seem incongruous that those same critics could, at that time, appreciate the formal-semantic clashes in postmodern pastiche, or even in modernist montage, but interpreted Lyotard's display as messy, instead of understanding that the rationale behind it was different - as if artists were allowed to experiment, while curators were expected to write a theory and provide a harmonious, conventional, and conformist display. Rugoff encountered the same problem because they both addressed a new zeitgeist attempting to mirror it in the format of the exhibition. The apparent disorganisation of both shows materialises an implicit critique of the Cartesian programme "to become master and possessor of nature"<sup>28</sup>: the categories that order our experience of the world, based ultimately on the superiority of man and reason, is precisely what is being challenged. Nevertheless, though their strategy is similar, both exhibitions refer to different historical moments (and therefore, acquired different forms). I will address this point building on Lyotard's allusion to the Kantian sublime in his distinction of modernism from postmodernism.<sup>29</sup>

For Kant, the sublime occurs when the imagination fails to present an object that matches a concept - when the object has thus surpassed the framework of the conceivable. According to Lyotard, modernity alludes to the unrepresentable through visual representations that are clearly defined and regulated (like the avant-gardes, regimented by their manifestos) and they evince a "nostalgia for presence."<sup>30</sup> The absent element that modernity misses is the absolute presence promised by the Enlightenment, with reason's supposed power to eventually unravel and possess every secret that the universe holds. Postmodernity's allusion to the unrepresentable is not mediated by regulated forms, and though it confronts the same absence, it does so without nostalgia. This sentiment substituted by self-inquiry - what can be said to be

<sup>27</sup> See Tara McDowell, "Les Immatériaux: A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard and Bernard Blistène," *Art Agenda Rearview*, May 27, 2014, accessed March 20, 2020.

<https://www.art-agenda.com/features/235949/les-immateriaux-a-conversation-with-jean-francois-lyotard-and-bernard-blistene>

<sup>28</sup> Yuk Hui and Andreas Broeckmann, "Introduction," in *30 Years after Les Immatériaux: Art, Science, and Theory*, (Lüneburg: Meson Press – Leuphana University), 10.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "What is Postmodernism?" in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 1010.

<sup>30</sup> Lyotard, "What is Postmodernism?" 1014.

art? This is where the aesthetic experiences described by both philosophers differ most essentially. For Kant, the sublime is ultimately an experience of pleasure that comes after disorientation: it is the triumph of reason as the faculty that not only makes man distinct from nature, but also superior, since we can resort to it to find higher laws when we are struck by uncertainty, instead of being bound to the instantaneous and sensible here-and-now of life, like the other creatures. By contrast, the responses described by Lyotard are not triumphant. He speaks of an interim time where there is just disorientation without a positive resolution. In modernism, consensual forms offer some solace. In postmodernism, disorientation leads only to unresolvable ontological questions.

“May You Live in Interesting Times” elicits a different aesthetic experience. Like in the previous cases, the question at stake is an encounter with the unrepresentable when the frameworks of the conceivable (of presentability) are exceeded. The show and its artworks are material-semiotic constellations expanding in all directions, spreading their “tentacles” to new disciplines, practices, facts, fictions, persons, things. Their virtue is their ability to connect elements in unfathomable (unrepresentable) ways, allowing the subject not only to transcend the psychological stress of cognitive dissonance but to celebrate the multidimensional cognition of complexity, acquired through their extended mind(s) and body(es). There is no triumph of reason - rather the opposite. The “Cartesian programme” is surpassed, its categories and borders are traversed by new links and bonds - infinite possibilities unfold. There is no nostalgia, but regeneration, reinvention, and recycling. There is no postmodern acedia and endless meta-discussion. It shares with it a critical impulse, but this aesthetic is productive, proliferating, and practical. It creates new, tentative possibilities, it seeks alter-presentability with all the imaginable and imaginary arsenal. Is this a “tentacular sublime”?

Therefore, “May You Live in Interesting Times” and “Les Immatériaux” are comparable in their attempt to embody their respective zeitgeists in the format of the exhibition as well as in the artworks chosen. These endeavours are more valiant and risky than complying with the tacit rules of curatorship in their different permitted modalities. Anytime conventionalisms are challenged, the response will be negative in the beginning, and the progressive step will be misinterpreted as a lack of skill. As

time goes by, innovative ways of thinking become assimilated, and propositions such as these acquire their authentic historical relevance. While this significant characteristic is common to both exhibitions, they are different in other aspects because they refer to unequivocally distinct historical moments. It is also worth noting that, as in the case of “Making Things Public,” Lyotard’s theoretical input overshadowed to a considerable degree the works in the show. This is particularly interesting bearing in mind that one of the main stances of postmodernism was a critique of the institutions of authority - Lyotard’s legitimated position was the exhibition’s main *raison d’être*. This was not Rugoff’s case, who practically only spoke about the art, and who eluded affecting the interpretation of the show with his perceptions and opinions.

During the last months, we have witnessed how governments around the world have failed with catastrophic consequences. Even as the crisis unfolded, politicians continued allowing their own interests to prevail over scientific facts and the well-being of their populations, as well as betraying one another and exerting their dominance when possible, not without arrogance and xenophobic undertones. Their psychopathic, criminal, and simply idiotic behaviour has and will cost thousands of lives, starting by the most vulnerable members of society, like the elderly, the sick, and the poor, and continuing with the millions of heroic healthcare professionals, who have risked their lives daily, unprotected, and lacking the necessary infrastructure and logistics to do their job because of their shortsightedness, ineptitude, and greed. In addition to this, and even though information has never in human history been as available as it is today, masses of people chose to dismiss the threat and continue with their “lifestyle” instead of self-isolating, and many of them have sought to make nefarious profit of the disaster. This refusal to accept accountability, as well as arrogance, lack of solidarity, and utter ignorance, that has not only been acceptable, but indeed encouraged in our narcissistic and self-righteous societies, resulted in the extremely rapid spread of the virus, and the subsequent collapse of the healthcare systems of many countries.

The situation is still unpredictable. We cannot yet know when the lockdowns in many countries will be lifted permanently, when the airspace will be opened again, or when we will return to a state of relative normalcy. What is clear is that this crisis has been profound, fast, and deadly enough to cause a definite change in our political

systems and the ethos of our society. The question remains if we will opt for the cooperative, accountable, caring, solidary, and complex alternative put forward by Rugoff, Latour, Haraway, and many others, or if we will turn to the well-known models of authoritarianism. At this point, the prospects don't look very promising.

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