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The Perception Machine

Our Photographic Future between the Eye and AI

By: Joanna Zylinska

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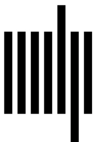

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7 “Loser Images” for a Planetary Micro-Vision

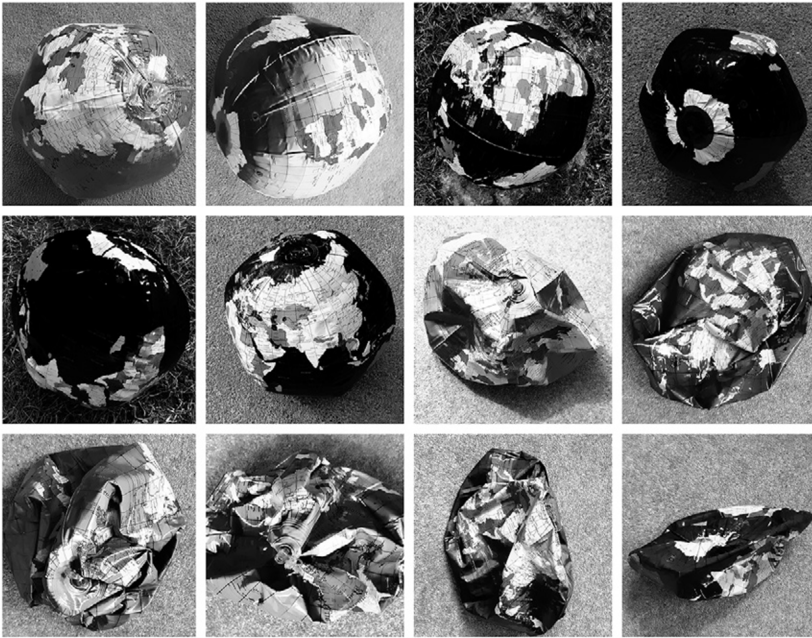

Figure 7.1
Joanna Zylinska, *Planetary Exhalation*, 2021.

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#WhatPlanet?

What planet are you on? Or, as Twitter has it, #WhatPlanet? Most often used as a jibe, this question is intended to challenge an alien-sounding interlocutor spouting absurd ideas and inculcate in them a sense of reality—a reality which the speaker considers themselves to possess. In recent years this question has been used by broadcast media, from the BBC to RTÉ, more literally, as a way of urging the public to pay attention to environmental and climate issues.[1] What fascinates me about this formulation is its ability not only to deploy both the emotive and conative ("hey you") functions of language, to use Roman Jakobson's slightly old-fashioned terminology, but also to articulate the epistemological problem of seeing and knowing what one is talking about, and of seeing and feeling the ground on which one stands—as well as all the other territories to which this ground is connected. And it is precisely this problem of the perception of "our" world and "our" planet that will be the subject of this chapter. In what follows, I will engage with planetarity as a popular visual and conceptual trope, with a view to developing "a planetary micro-vision." And thus, while the previous chapter dealt with the possibility of predicting the future by rendering it as an image, in what follows I will attempt to imagine and image such a future. I will follow up here on Nick Montfort's intimation about future-making: namely, that "utopian ideas don't have to be entirely serious to have some bite to them, and to be effective in provoking people to change their thinking and move toward a better future."[2]

In a way that is perhaps apposite to the nature of the object being examined, this attempt at future-making will consist of two case studies which take as their inspiration the notion and visuality of what have become known as "architectures of the post-Anthropocene." This term was proposed by Liam Young in the 2019 issue of *Architectural Design* he edited. Illustrated with elegantly crisp photographs of "architecture without people," the volume demonstrated the recent emergence of "landscapes made for or by machines,"[3] featuring data centers, giant distribution warehouses, telecommunications infrastructures, and industrialized agriculture lots. Many of the images in that special issue had been created with the help of drone camera technology, flattened perspective, and CGI, resulting in an oddly detached picture of our planet. But, even if this new planetarity looks distinctly posthuman, the all-conquering visual apparatus used to conjure

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it has ended up elevating Man as the creator and destroyer of worlds. My case studies respond to this mode of visualizing the planet and its structuring logic—as well as its politics.

My first case study will explore a specific incarnation of such "architectures of the post-Anthropocene": still and moving images of picturesque locations captured by drones and collected on social media. I will analyze the aesthetics and politics that this kind of "planetary vision" embraces, and the picture of the world it constructs. Yet rather than stage a return to a more human or humane perspective, I will interrogate the technical affordances and potentialities of distributed perception and vision—in machines *and* humans. The focus of my critique will therefore not be on the machinic aspect of vision, or on its aerial elevation per se. It will rather be on the assumed heroism of the eye-in-the-sky, enacted via the unique coupling of drone vision and the view from GoPro Hero action cameras and their kin. In response, I will propose a second case study from my own art practice, titled *Feminist with a Drone*. Presented in the form of field notes, it will explore ways of mobilizing the very same technology to enact a less masterful and less heroic viewpoint. Working against the register of #amazingviews produced from high in the sky, with this amazingness referring to both those views' breathtaking scope and high image quality, I will outline, with a nod to writer-artist Hito Steyerl, the concept of "loser images" as a feminist rejoinder to the magnificent drone image aesthetics. I will then consider to what extent the production and curation of such loser images can be deployed toward an enactment of a different relationship to our habitat and to ourselves as its inhabitants—with a view to building a feminist multi-kin ecology in the spirit of "eco-eco-punk" (figure 7.1).

Given the complexity and scale of the environmental crisis manifesting itself in rising sea levels, air pollution, accelerated species extinction, and a climate shift, it is understandable that "planetarity" has played an increasingly prominent role in the arts, humanities, and social sciences in recent years. Positioned as a concept that can help us understand these changes, it has been used as an injunction—in the editorial for the 2020 special issue of the influential arts journal *eflux*, "You and I Don't Live on the Same Planet" by Martin Guinard, Bruno Latour, et al.; or as a framing device—in the books *Planetary Social Thought: The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences* by Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski and *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* by Dipesh Chakrabarty. Indeed, it is within the framework

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of the recently postulated epoch of the Anthropocene, an epoch in which the human is said to have become a significant geological agent, that planetary thinking has most often been outlined. Chakrabarty makes a strong plea for adopting the planet as a particularly relevant concept in the current geopolitical moment due to its ability to grasp "a dynamic ensemble of relationships—much as G. W. F. Hegel's state or Karl Marx's capital were—an ensemble that constitutes the Earth system."[4] Many of the theorists engaging with issues of planetarity today do so in dialogue with postcolonial writer Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; specifically, with the final chapter titled "Planetarity" in her short polemical book *Death of a Discipline*, published in 2002. The book analyzed the transformation of humanities disciplines such as area studies, cultural studies, and, Spivak's own intellectual love, comparative literature at the turn of the twenty-first century.

In her book Spivak was very critical of the marketization of what had become known as "world literature" in North American universities, with literature and literary study being transformed into a rootless product to be consumed on a globalized educational market. In its place she offered a much more anchored, distributed, and embodied mode of engaging with the world and its literary and cultural artifacts. With her argument, Spivak opposed the abstraction of globalization, which she saw as "the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere,"[5] to the differentiated political space of planetarity. "The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan,"[6] she wrote. The planetary perspective she embraced was, paradoxically yet importantly, always partial. Introducing the sense of the uncanny in the reader, it was also presented as a demand and a call to responsibility. Even though Spivak's text did not explicitly engage with environmental themes, there was a premonition in it of the ecological perspective that would become an important focus of work in the humanities and social sciences two decades later, around issues concerning the Anthropocene. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that, at the present time, when disappointment with the untrammeled flow of capital is matched by fear of the unrestricted flow of viruses around the globe, Spivak's concept of planetarity as an embodied response and responsibility to the Earth understood as our habitat—and a recognition that this habitat is not given to us in

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perpetuity—has found a wide new audience. Intriguingly, Spivak already had an intimation of this happening when she declared in her book: "I write for a future reader."[7]

In the context of fossil fuel depletion and impending climate catastrophe, the "planetary turn" in the humanities and social sciences we are currently experiencing responds to a concern, as Clark and Szerszynski put it, "not simply with the direction the future will take but [with] whether there will be a future at all."[8] There is an urgency to the present situation, they claim, which is driven by an increasing plausibility of a "planetary state shift."[9] The two authors, perhaps in an attempt to strengthen their own forthcoming proposition, also complain about the dearth of "stories, theories or concepts fit for the task of explaining what it means for human agents to find themselves behaving like Earth or cosmic forces."[10] In response, they offer the concept of a *planetary multiplicity*, which stands for the Earth's capacity, at every scale, "to become other to itself, to self-differentiate."[11] Such discursive and conceptual visualization is a frequent response by theorists concerned with the fate of our planet today. As part of the process, many seem keen to throw some new concepts and images into the planetary basket. Martin Guinard, Eva Lin, and Bruno Latour, for instance, have recently proposed to replace the image of the globe with that of an orange, with its skin, standing for "the upper near-surface layer of the earth," understood as a "critical zone."[12] Writing in the same issue of *e-flux* as Guinard, Lin, Latour, et al., Yuk Hui has offered the term "planetarization" as an image of "the total mobilization of matter and energy," with different energy channels (petrolic, hydraulic, electrical, psychic, sexual) presented as flowing above and beneath the earth.[13] Unlike the other thinkers, however, Hui does not quote Spivak (or, indeed, any other women—which seems rather odd, given his call for the restructuring of knowledge and practice in the university of the twenty-first century). He does instead tell us, in no uncertain terms—and in a strictly normative language, full of "musts," "have tos" and "requireds"—that technological planetarization has an "essence" and that "we must" understand it. This essence, claims Hui, is revealed in proletarianization but it also stands for a requirement to recognize "that we are in and will remain in a state of catastrophe."[14] With Hui's philosophical balls landing rather heavily on the hard discursive surface of his planet figure, his is just a more extreme example of a planetary

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thinking that, notwithstanding its political commitment, loses sight of the planet's textured and meaty messiness.

Amidst all this philosophical-planetary shifting, orange peeling, and ball throwing, I find myself somewhat apprehensive about this (re)turn to planetarity—and, in particular, about the image of the planet (and the planetarium) that is produced in some of the recent theorizations on the subject. It is the gender and race aspects of the planetary setup that cause me particular concern. While many recent writers on planetarity (such as Clark, Szerszynski, and Chakrabarty) do indeed recognize the importance of bringing issues of race, gender, and sexuality to the discussion, alongside questions of class, many such accounts nevertheless end up with a model of the planetary theorist as a cosmonaut. This mode of theorizing flirts with an openness to cosmic multiplicity and other forms of difference without really being able to overcome its own distancing from its object of study, or its own linguistic and conceptual enclosure. Planetary theory in most guises today is a theory afloat, with the planet reduced to a toylike globe that the gravity-free theorist can bounce against and around. In "Planetarity" Spivak already offered an interesting diagnosis of the emergence of this mode of enquiry. Even though, as shown earlier, her text was primarily about literature and ways of studying it, it was also very imagistic, with the argument constructed via a sequence of pictures of the world. Spivak made a daring proposition there that the distancing from the planet that occurred in many accounts which attempted to transcend cultural or geographical localism could be explained by a shift of the discursive system "from vagina to planet as the signifier of the uncanny, by way of nationalist colonialism and postcoloniality."[15] This is the way in which "neurotic men" (to cite Spivak after Freud) attempt to exercise power over spaces that give them anxiety: from the disavowal of the birth canal to the dominance of lands deemed barren and ready to be captured, whether in the shape of remote continents or remote planets (exhibit A: Elon Musk).

Why haven't we seen a photograph of the whole Universe yet?

With this critique of the planetary imaginary I am not trying to dismiss planetarity altogether. I am in agreement with Chakrabarty's proposition that a comprehensive politics of climate change has to begin from a planetary perspective, while taking into account our own insignificant timeline.

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As he poignantly observes, "The realization that humans—all humans, rich or poor—come late in the planet's life and dwell more in the position of passing guests than possessive hosts has to be an integral part of the perspective from which we pursue our all-too-human but legitimate quest for justice on issues to do with the iniquitous impact of anthropogenic climate change."[16] With my critique, I am therefore only proposing that, if we are to enact the ethicopolitical injunction of Spivak's original idea, we need better conceptualizations *and* better images of the planet.

In an attempt to bypass editor and writer Stuart Brand's cosmonautic fantasies encapsulated in his use of the *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble* images in his countercultural *Whole Earth Catalog*, art historian John Tresch turns to the work of artist Aspen Mays. Mays's plastic button, available in unlimited editions (2009) and inscribed with the query "Why haven't we seen a photograph of the whole Universe yet?," is a transposed replica of a badge distributed by Brand around college campuses in the late 1960s, after an LSD trip experienced from the rooftops had led him to believe that being able to see the Earth as a round and finite object would help people develop a collective sense of planetary responsibility.[17] Mays's expansion of Brand's query, from the Earth to the Universe, foregrounds the absurdity of the idea of a single image being able to capture the whole cosmos (of which it will always be part)—and of a desire to make such a globalizing image in the first place. It also suggests that we may need a "synthetic, anamorphic view from multiple perspectives at once—harmoniously, discordantly, or unthinkably joined."[18] Tresch goes on to make an ontological point, claiming that "how we live on earth is closely tied to how we address the immensely difficult task of picturing the universe. If we want to come back 'down to earth,' we need to think these two scales together—the cosmic and the terrestrial—and consider how our depictions of the universe have intersected, or bypassed, our ways of inhabiting the planet."[19] It is this dual visuality that is arguably lacking from most pictures of the planetary today, pictures that seem to be stuck within the visual logic of politician-turned-environmentalist Al Gore's "Digital Earth."

Gore's 1998 proposal for "Digital Earth," "a multi-resolution, three-dimensional representation of the planet, into which we can embed vast quantities of geo-referenced data," outlined a haptic visuality that turned our planet into a graspable (and manipulable) object—even for a child.[20] The idea has been partially realized in online browser installations such as

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Google Earth and NASA's WorldWind. Yet such images and visualizations end up removing the theorist—but often also the artist, the photographer, and the filmmaker as well as the engineer, the data analyst, and the average Internet user—from the channels of energy and light transfer, and resituating them instead in orbit, looking down. It is also the media aspect of energy and light, their role as constitutive part of the imaging and sighting process, that is being overlooked in many attempts at, as well as analyses of, planetary imaging. Leon Gurevitch argues that platforms such as Google Earth end up rationalizing "the planet's eco/mineral systems and humanity's eco/social interactions within the logic of the computer-generated simulated model,"[21] placing their user "in the position of divine manufacturer of the very environments they wish to travel through."[22]

Building on the above critique, I am interested in probing further how we can see the planet—how it arrives to us *as an image, be it a photograph or a CGI rendering*—and how particular images of planetarity shape our imagination and conceptual horizon. I am also interested in how we can mobilize the power of Spivak's planetarity in terms of the human's ethical encounter with the alienness of the Earth, and how we can recognize, with anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli and her Karrabing interlocutors in the Northern Territory of Australia, the planet's outside-the-human gestationality.[23] We know that our perception of the world is affected by the changes to particulate matter that moves in the air—and to the nature of light that travels through it while enabling perception in us. Amanda Boetzkes has pointed out that "planetarity of vision necessarily emerges from the embryonic agents from which the human emerged, and the dusts, sediments, crystals and mire into which we give way. Yet it also emerges from the geochemical materials we create and which integrate into the planetary fabric."[24] We are now also aware that the Anthropocene literally changes how we see the world. It is thus both the historically specific concrescences of matter and energy that we humans recognize *as images* and the material substrate of such images, and of the visual processes that affect us, that we need to consider when exploring planetary seeing. In other words, to understand the condition of our planet, we need to look at images but also across and beyond them, into those images' "atmospheres." With this I want to suggest that today, a time when, in the words of philosopher-activist Franco "Bifo" Berardi, "history has been replaced by the endless

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flowing recombination of fragmentary images,"[25] this ecological model of perception, inspired by the work of James Gibson, requires a temporary readjustment to human timescales. This is to say, to the analysis of the concrescence of particles into things that present as images to us, we need to add the study of the concretization of those images as particular historical formations that *mean something* to us. This will allow us to look into the consequences of this pixelation of history for our cognitive and perceptive framing of the world.

#amazingdroneposts

On what plane should such an analysis unfold? Where should it start? Boetzkes has suggested that technologically driven contemporary art involving robotics, digital practice, biomaterial, and virtual exhibition spaces has altered "the perceptual capabilities and cognitive orientation of human bodies."[26] But it is not just within the realm of art that the reconfiguration of our sensorium is occurring. Daily imagistic practices in online spaces, including social media, arguably serve as a more extensive and impactful laboratory for enacting and experiencing such a transformation. This brings me to my first case study: the widely popular images of different parts of the Earth taken by amateur and semiprofessional drone operators and presented on social media. Two types of image experiences stand out here. First, we have a flow of conventionally beautiful photographic stills (and occasional short videos) of various picturesque locations and impressive buildings—New Zealand's Mount Taranaki, coastal ice formations somewhere in Canada, Dubai's nightlit cityscape, Zaha Hadid's Galaxy Soho building in Beijing, China—all posted on Instagram under the apposite hashtag, #amazingdroneposts (figure 7.2). Yet no matter whether they feature natural land formations or humanmade artifacts, the drone gaze those images espouse is determinedly architectural. Eschewing any pretense at naturalism, they present the world as a time- and labor-led formation, even if the temporal scales of the laborer are not always human.

The machine eye of the drone camera (in many cases, as is evident from the accompanying hashtag, belonging to one of the Mavic or Mini drones from the industry leader DJI), is deployed to see *for us* humans—but also,

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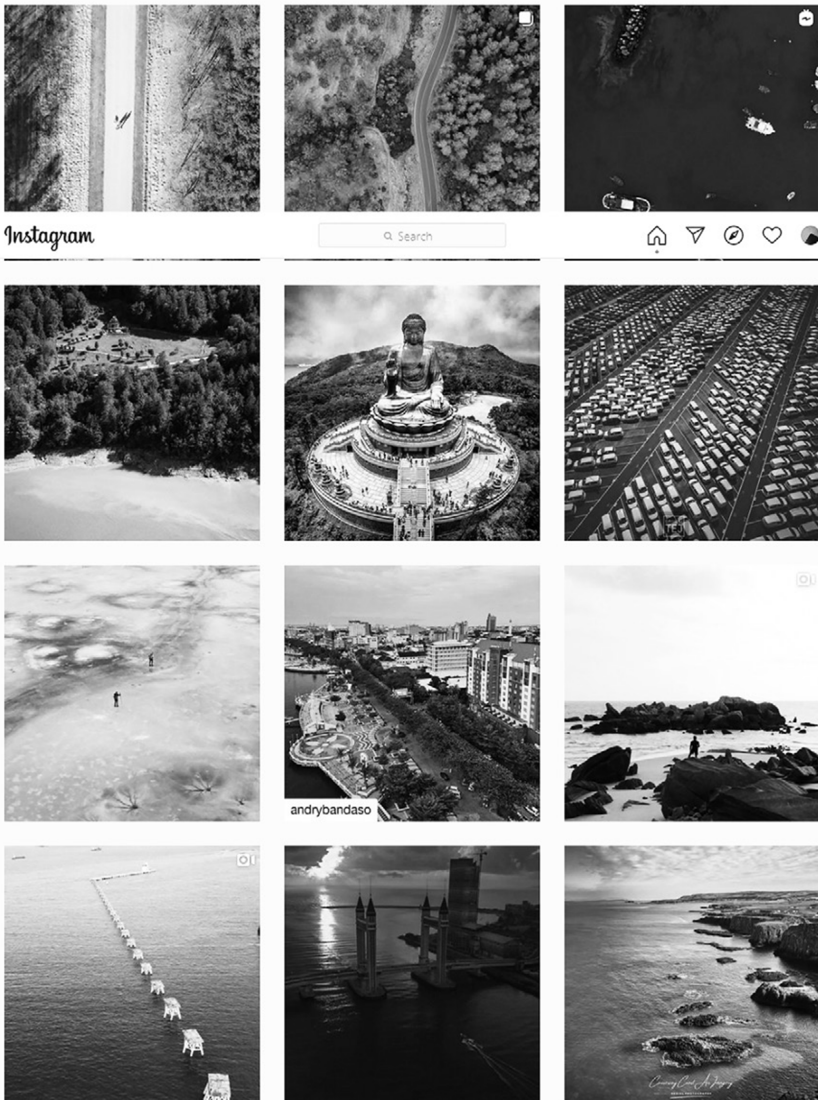

Figure 7.2
Screenshot from the @amazingdroneposts account, Instagram, March 8, 2021.

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of course, to see *better than* us. Even though many of the images presented would have no doubt been edited post-capture to enhance their visual appeal, the drone cameras are already sophisticated pieces of equipment, featuring relatively large sensors, multiple camera angles, and the ability to use high dynamic range (HDR). The hyperrealist imagery posted on the #amazingdroneposts feed deploys high contrast and geometrical lines. These images are easy to see and be amazed by because they inscribe themselves in the schematism of human perception outlined by Gibson, serving the world to us as a "layout of surfaces,"[27] and not a sequence of three-dimensional Cartesian coordinates. According to Gibson humans have no depth perception, with the traditional distinction between two- and three-dimensional vision being a myth. What we in fact see are edges, layouts, surfaces—and their affordances "for benefit or injury to someone,"[28] with the image gradually emerging *as an image* through our movement in the world. It is the transformation of those edges, layouts, and surfaces as a result of our changed position in relation to them that produces vision. "What the eye picks up is sequential transformation, not a form," suggest Gibson[29]—an intimation that is developed further in the work of contemporary philosopher of perception Alva Noë.[30]

Without giving up on the objectivism of the existence of stuff "out there," Gibson's ecological theory of visual perception offers a dynamic account not only of how we see the world but also of how the world *becomes something* to us. Noë puts it clearly: "the perceptual world is the world *for us*."[31] If the purpose of vision "is to be aware of the surroundings, the ambient environment,"[32] perception involves information pickup from the world, but it also involves gathering information about ourselves by moving through the world—and, in the process, sensing ourselves as different from it. Vision, as I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this book, is thus proprioceptive and kinesthetic. Importantly, in Gibson's framework it is also presented as both self-forming and terra-forming. (To reiterate, the stuff of "the world," or what Gibson calls "invariants," exists independently of us, but it *becomes something* for us, i.e., it becomes *our environment*, through an active and mobile process of perception.) Like many other theorists of vision, Gibson turns to the image-making apparatus to explain his theory, which leads him to propose that "moviemakers are closer to life than picture makers."[33] As registered in chapter 5, I have doubts about the posited lifelessness of still imaging in comparison to

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film—an assumption we see not only in Gibson but also in his intellectual predecessor, philosopher Henri Bergson. And thus, even if we agree with Gibson to "treat the motion picture as the basic form of depiction and the painting or a photograph as a special form of it,"[34] I would suggest that we need to move beyond the understanding of the photograph as a mere film still, an "arrested picture" as opposed to a "progressive" one.[35] Instead, we should consider all of these different types of images as being forms of time- and space-carving, temporary enclosures on a particular scale of duration, with some of those scales being imperceptible to us. But no still photograph is ever just encountered as (a) still: it becomes something for the viewer in their movement in front of or around it. The lines and edges within and around the image discretize it, but they also link back to the antecedent motions and decisions of their makers, printers, editors, framers, scanning technicians, and network operators.

How does this model of vision help us see and understand the Instagram flow of #amazingdroneposts? The images posted under this hashtag represent the world reduced to surfaces. To say this is not to castigate those images for their superficiality or banality—although there *is* a visual sameness to the #amazingdroneposts image flow, with the relatively narrow set of aesthetic and technical criteria for what this amazingness represents (flattened perspective, strong lines cutting across the image surface, unusual shapes, deep colors, high contrast, rich textures). However, they are primarily surfaces the way all technical images are, as understood by Vilém Flusser. Technical images for Flusser, whether photographs or video, represent a two-dimensional flattening of the world, a transformation of its linearity into code.[36] Yet even if this process is entailed in all imaging practices, the drone images under discussion achieve something unique, in the sense that the schematism of their representation, the reduction of the world to lines and edges, ends up producing images that look more like graphs than photographs. Those images thus serve as visualizations of the world and not as its representations. Partaking of the current visual sensibility whereby "the planet turns into a massive diagram of anthropogenic destruction, revealing itself in hurricanes, heatwaves, droughts, sea level rises, loss of wildlife or the acidification of the oceans,"[37] they renege on its underlying message by turning the diagram into replacement object—while offering a lesson in how *not* to see the planet.

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Even though, to reiterate, *all* images are obtained, *as images*, in such a schematizing way, we need to ask further questions about the aesthetics and politics of this particular mode of visualization—and about the politics of vision implied by the "amazing drones" model. Produced by the machine vision of advanced drone cameras, the #amazingdroneposts serve as schematic test cases for how human vision works. They are exercises in the mobile perception of lines and edges enabling us to build a picture of the world. In many ways these images are easy to take in: they afford the world to us as both a surface and an uninterrupted flow. And yet, because they are to be consumed by largely immobile human bodies placed in front of screens, with movement limited to the eye scan and finger scroll, they outsource the action of terra-forming mobility to the drone machine. Gibson had already predicted this experience when he wrote nearly three decades ago: "We modern, civilized, indoor adults are so accustomed to looking at a page or a picture, or through a window, that we often lose the feeling of being surrounded by the environment, our sense of the ambient array of light. . . . We live boxed up lives."[38] In the era of pandemic-induced lockdowns, working from home, and Zoom education, this experience was expanded to the almost universal form of epistemological encounter with images—and with people reduced to images. This semi-immersive experience creates a sense of easy and total accessibility, an illusion of the world being there on demand, subject to our gaze and capital's desire. In this way, it becomes a model of globalization, articulated by Spivak as "the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere," presenting "that abstract ball covered in latitudes and longitudes, cut by virtual lines, once the equator and the tropics and so on, now drawn by the requirements of Geographical Information Systems."[39]

There exists another class of such globalizing drone images, where the containment and frozenness of movement in the #amazingdroneposts is overcome without transcending the visual limit points of globalization. These are scenic drone videos, several hours long, shot in 4K and set to "relaxing" music, and then posted to YouTube (figure 7.3). The majority of such videos are human-free, treating viewers to sprawling landscape vistas of nature scenes on "planet Earth" (Croatia, Hawaii, Seychelles). Spectacular cityscapes, whether in Hong Kong or the Dolomites, seamlessly transition between urban canyons and mountain gorges, with similar geometric

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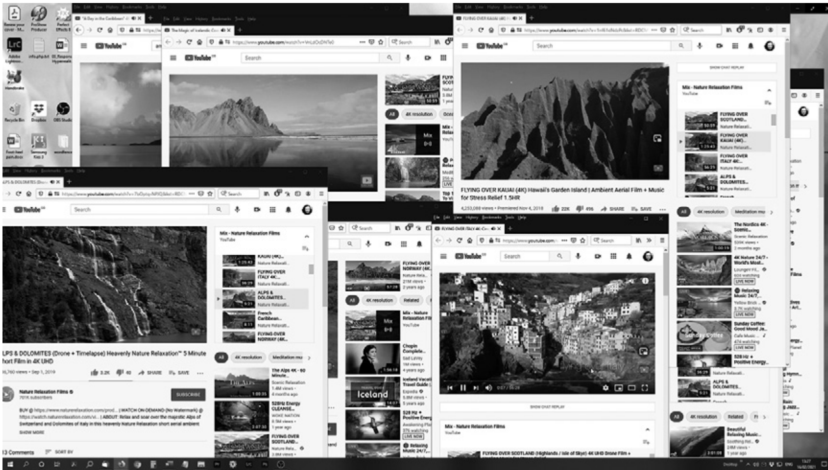

Figure 7.3
Screenshot from multiple drone videos opened on YouTube in individual windows, March 8, 2021.

patterns of strong vertical lines and contrasting lights and shadows. Some of the videos include humans as insignificant moving points, usually performing superhuman feats such as jogging at the edge of a cliff or scaling a vertical rock. Such scenes are then cut through with close-up machine-eye shots from the GoPro Hero action camera and its kin, worn on bodies. Whether humans are included in those videos or not, there is heroism implied in all of them, with the masterful eye of the drone performing amazing acts, notwithstanding the elements. The videos are sometimes accompanied by heroic narratives of the (predominantly invisible) operator almost losing the drone, and then having to scale icebergs and plunge into volcanoes to rescue it.

The "aerial view" in the #amazingdroneposts on Instagram and in the scenic drone videos on YouTube encapsulates all three of its modes identified by architecture theorist Mark Dorrian: the oblique image, the vertical image, and the diagram.[40] In some of the images the eye of the drone (and, by extension, of the viewer on the other side of the screen) is "directed both downwards and laterally."[41] Dorrian argues that the oblique view allowed new landholders in eighteenth-century England to naturalize their claim to the land. It also enacted "a possessive, expropriating mode of vision," with the "landscape idea" emerging "as a crucial ideological support to what was

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historically a kind of internal colonialism."[42] In the drone images of planet Earth this form of internal colonialism, the reinforcement of ownership over our habitat, consolidates the subjectivity of the viewer as the globe master, being able to move fluidly through beautiful spaces in a relaxed and serene manner. Dorrian is quite blunt in his assessment of the ideological effects of the techniques of estrangement mobilized for transforming "the quotidian reality of the city" into a "distanced object of visual consumption": the reality of life on the ground, including the violence that is an inevitable part of it, "is sublimated into the quasi-pastoral spectacle of the 'urban landscape.'"[43] We could therefore suggest that seeing planet Earth through the eye of the drone is one way of avoiding seeing planetarity. The vertical view, originally associated with flight and perfected in World War I's heavy aircraft, deaestheticized the ground view to the point of abstraction, in order to excuse military operations to be performed upon it. The terrain that was to be annihilated "was no longer a landscape but a topography that had become almost cinematic in its constant reconfiguration under the pressure of heavy artillery."[44] Any such explicit destructive fantasies are absent from the drone representations of planet Earth, but what they share with the earlier images of the vertical view is the severing of the ethical bond with the land and a suspension of human responsibility for it. The aesthetic response of giddy awe evoked in many viewers of such posts or videos replaces the embodied and embedded bond with the terrain of our inhabitation. The three-dimensional environment thus gives way to a flat surface—which is only a small step from becoming a diagram. The excessive elevation of the drone, reminiscent of the visuality of satellite images, eliminates the "unnecessary" visual debris from the picture, transforming culture, experience, and lived life into noise.

Feminist with a Drone

In an attempt to identify technical and conceptual openings within the dominant structures of planetary visibility, I developed an art project called *Feminist with a Drone*, which serves here as my second case study. The (mock-ethnographic) "field notes" presented below, and the accompanying images (figure 7.4), are part of this project. *Feminist with a Drone* is not just an artwork but also a *thinkwork*: it is an attempt to outline ideas and concepts *with practices and things*.

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Figure 7.4
Joanna Zylinska, *Loser Images 1.0 (Feminist with a Drone)*, 2021.

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Feminist with a Drone: Field Notes

Date, time, and place of observation

December 12, 2020–January 12, 2021, south-west London, UK

Specific data, facts, and information on what happened on the site

On December 12, 2020, I purchased a Ryze Tello Drone. Designed by industry giant DJI, this mini drone, marketed as "the most fun drone ever," is aimed at teaching kids and adults "how awesome flying can be." The exploration of this awesomeness was the key goal of my fieldwork.

My first outing with the Tello took place on December 24, 2020, in a small park in a residential area of south-west London. During the flight times of up to 13 minutes, I captured a sequence of still and moving images from the height of between 2 and 10 meters. The experiment came to a halt when the drone flew away on descent. The follow-up search didn't yield any results, the situation compounded by unpropitious weather conditions and approaching dusk, with the drone then considered lost. The following day the drone was located in a different part of the park. The experiment in testing the drone's awesomeness was resumed the following week. Some images were taken during the first flight. On its second ascent the drone lost one of its propellers, with the propeller itself getting lost among the park's vegetation. A replacement propeller was installed, but this made the drone inoperative, with the device losing the capacity to fully lift off the ground. This concluded my attempt to fly the drone and take images with it.

Personal reflections on the observation

The Ryze Tello Drone had been chosen for this fieldwork on the basis of its size, design, and marketing literature, with a view to reconciling drone technology's military legacy with my critical (cyber)feminist sensibility. Unfortunately, I was unable to corroborate the producer's promise that "Flying has never been so fun and easy!" Loss was a key characteristic of my experience with the Ryze Tello.

The hypothesis and questions about the observation

Could things have gone any worse? Was the fieldwork conducted as part of my project a failure? Crucially, should I have bought a better, more manly and more high-tech drone? In the spirit of feminist bricolage, an approach which remains aware of power relations, while foregrounding "the practices of shaping, crafting, and producing that academics usually hide (and often hide behind) in the production of beautiful and polished surfaces, unpunctured by doubts, hesitations and incompletion,"[45] I decided to repurpose my losses. The limited sample of images obtained from the drone's camera and their relatively low quality, coupled with the loss of the drone's functionality, led to the development of a hypothesis about the possibility of constructing an alternative drone visuality, which I termed "loser images." This hypothesis will require further research.

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As a feminist rejoinder to the "amazing" drone views discussed in my first case study, I want to offer "loser images" as a figuration that channels some of the potential of the multiperspectival, humachinic worldview without falling for its grandeur of scale. Figurations as used in the work of feminist thinkers of technology are thought devices aimed at "shaping a different political imaginary or performing an alternative image of the future."[46] Yet rather than propose a straightforward return to a more human or humane perspective in response to this master aerial vision, I aim to probe further the creative potential of decoupling sight from a bipedal human body and dispersing it across the environment. I am thus interested in mobilizing the same image-making technology to enact a less masterful, less domineering, and less heroic way of visioning and imaging. Mindful of the military origin of drone technology, I want to recognize the trajectory of its feminist repurposing, from abortion pill delivery devices through to femicide mapping tools.[47] My project thus inscribes itself in Anna Feigenbaum's concept of "drone feminism," an approach which "seeks to remember its cyborgian legacies, constructing a political economic reading of how the 'administration of life and death' is always bound up in the pursuit of profits and a masculinist drive to see from on top."[48] Offering up new sites and languages for feminist activism, "drone feminism attempts to reveal the myriad ways that gender matters in the infrastructures and psychologies of drone executions."[49] The alternative form of post-Anthropocene visuality enacted by my non-awesome toy drone does not flatten the world into a postcard while excising its inhabitants of different scales from the picture. Instead, it envisages a more porous *planetscape*—and a more entangled and messy ecology, in the style of feminist eco-eco-punk.

Loser images: a feminist proposal for post-Anthropocene visuality

The minor intervention into the grand problem of planetarity I am presenting in this chapter has an affinity with geographer Heather McLean's "praise of chaotic research pathways."[50] McLean offers her chaotic methodology by way of "a feminist response to planetary urbanization."[51] Specifically, she is responding to the planetary approach to the study of cities offered by Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid. McLean recognizes the value of her colleagues' critique of globalized yet static approaches to urbanism, approaches which uncritically praise creativity, innovation and sustainability without

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taking into account "contradictory geo-economic forces that constitute cities and regions."[52] Yet she also points out that there is something both totalizing and limiting about the planetary approach they offer in response, in that it "privileges a lineage of particular white, male, and European Marxist and neo-Marxist political economists at the expense of feminist, queer, and anti-colonial contributions to this sub-field."[53] It also positions researchers as preconstituted and monadic entities, not as living, breathing beings emerging as part of their work, praxis, or struggle. This is precisely the problem I raised in the earlier part of this chapter with regard to the cosmonaut theorists of planetarity, floating above and around their object of study without getting their lungs and hands dirty.

My "loser images" go beyond the perfect planetary vision of the drone eye—but they also transcend the airy planetarity of much of contemporary theory, which seems to have left behind Spivak's commitment to partial views, inhabitation, and an alterity that makes a difference. Conceptually, *Feminist with a Drone* engages humor, irony, and partiality as feminist methods for conducting work in technoscience and technoculture.[54] Those modes of affectively remodulating the traditional framework of what counts as knowledge and scholarship proper open up alternative ways of seeing and doing. McLean also works in this vein—for example, with her drag king performance at a cabaret called Fail Better, a Glasgow space featuring artists of color and queer and working-class artists. Adopting a drag king persona of an urban think-tank expert Toby Sharp, promoting "tools for urban change" as part of the creative cities agenda, she engaged feminist critique not only in her scholarly research but also in her cabaret act. Creative urban communities are therefore treated by her as not just objects of study: they become research partners. McLean admits that "from a planetary standpoint" promoted by theorists such as Brenner and Schmid, activities such as those taking place at the Fail Better cabaret could be positioned as, at best, ineffective. She also fears that "through a lens pre-occupied with mapping flows of capital," local sites of activism can end up looking "as weak and useless in the face of steamroller-like neoliberal policies."[55]

I share McLean's concerns. Like her, I have experienced challenges to my attempts to enact alternative modes of producing academic knowledge. (The normalizing statement, "Please let's not make fools of ourselves," heard after conference presentations or panel discussions, still rings in my ears.) Yet, like her, I believe there is too much at stake to just give

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up—especially as the accusation of weakness is itself a gendered strategy aimed at renormalizing the "militant and heroic/victorious"[56] ways of acting, be it as knowledge producer, political actor, or artist. Polish philosopher Ewa Majewska has gone so far as to propose what she has termed "the avant-garde of the weak," a mode of working which "combines the feminist rejections of patriarchal visions of genius and creativity and emancipatory claims originating in the peripheries, with their demand for an expanded epistemology—one including marginalized and colonized territories in art history and practice."[57] *Feminist with a Drone* was thus designed as a performance of *planetarity as a research problem*, but it also was already a form of *research designed as a performance*. My goal with this was to perform the study of planetarity, and of the associated disciplines of art history, ethnography, geography, urban studies, architecture, and design, with their colonial histories and epistemological exclusions, differently. Even though the method and the tools used (a toy drone, a beach ball in the parallel project called *Planetary Exhalation*, figure 7.1) may seem naïve and childlike, their underlying ambition—to challenge our ongoing planetary foolishness as well as our partial vision—are very serious indeed.

Arguably, the photographic tradition has always had a "loser" track within its practices. Almost since the medium's inception, this track has been embraced by those interested in strategies of countervisuality, as a challenge to the narrative of technical progress or to the imperative of verisimilitude. "Bad" images—on the level of representation, resolution, or material imprint—have been embraced as good by photographic avant-gardes, with abstraction as a negation of a clear image often underpinned by sociopolitical desires to offer a new vision of the world. Ernst van Alphen offers the notion of "failed images," i.e., "images that fail to comply with the dominant notion of photography,"[58] as a description of this alternative trajectory in photographic history. He lists blurred images, under- and overexposed shots, staged photographs, and archival practices as examples of the failure to comply with "the photographic approach"—which he defines, pace German critic Siegfried Kracauer, as "the effort to utilize the inherent properties of the camera."[59] An odd normativity thus creeps into van Alphen's quasi-scientific taxonomy, with its rather rigid determination of the primacy of the normal, the successful, and the proper overshadowing the possibility that "failure" could have been the *raison d'être* of photography's development, rather than just an alternative enabled by a departure

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from the "good" use of the photographic apparatus.[60] Yet his book provides an interesting link between the early practices of photographers such as Hippolyte Bayard, Julia Margaret Cameron, Oscar Gustave Rejlander, Anna Atkins, Man Ray, and Anton Giulio Bragaglia, and the contemporary works of photographic artists such as Hiroshi Sugimoto, Thomas Ruff, Francesca Woodman, Awoiska van der Molen, and Fiona Tan. Differentiating them from accidental errors of photographic amateurs, he links all of these photographic "counter-practices" with the Flusserian imperative to open up "the unconscious of the photographic image" and "bring the programme of the photographic image to light."[61] Their producers perform the role of what Flusser calls "envisioners," i.e., "people who try to turn an automatic apparatus against its own condition of being automatic."[62] Yet there is arguably something romantic about van Alphen's reading of Flusser, with the circuit-breaking and black-box-opening aspect of image practices left to individuals deemed "artists" across history.

The notion of "loser images" I am working with here partakes of the circuit-breaking spirit envisaged by Flusser and embraced by van Alphen—but it also blurs the boundaries between human intentionality, machinic agency, and infrastructural embedding. To say this is not to deny human image makers any agency whatsoever. It is only to recognize, with Lyle Rexer, the possibility of seeing abstraction, the way many modern artists have done, "as a way around the notion of individual production, a search for unconditioned forms of communication that, in some sense, do not depend on individual consciousness and its messy historical circumstances."[63] This determinedly modernist desire to rise above the everyday fabric of mass culture and the "mass image,"[64] be it through formal experimentation with the disembodied camera eye or image blur, could perhaps be coupled with another instinct: to reach beyond and outside of one*self*, and embrace a more multiple network of productive agents and forces. This would perhaps be a more grounded, more responsible, and more ethical way of developing counterpractices.

The "loser images" figuration produced in the process follows in the footsteps of Hito Steyerl, whose kin notion of "poor images" has become an important trope in contemporary critical studies of the image.[65] Steyerl used the term to describe lossy digital images traversing the networked personal computers of our globe. Their poverty referred to their low quality and low resolution—as a result of their incessant replication on ever

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cheaper media—but it also pointed to the wider condition of cultural disjuncture, where the impoverishment of many image producers and imaged subjects went hand in hand with the enrichment of those in control of the digital infrastructures. My "loser images" are precisely such poor images of the world: serving as counterpoints to the #amazingdroneposts of planet Earth, they are a testament to the poor quality of the camera and the limited skills of its operator. There is something not quite right with them as both representations and captures. The worldview they present is out of sync: wobbly, smeary, somehow degraded. They belong to the ontological register of Amanda Lagerkvist's "existential media," that is, media driven by the fundamental insight "that there is a limit to life, to energy, to bodily and mental strength, to desire, to beauty, to youth, to intelligence, to achievement, to movement, to success, to resilience, to clout, to power, to energy, to communication."[66]

Yet these "loser images" are not just mine: the concept is primarily meant to serve as a viewing, structuring, and archiving device, allowing us to develop a countervisuality to what is already there. In her article "Online Weak and Poor Images: On Contemporary Visual Politics," Tereza Stejskalová has made an appeal to "make use of online images in a way that presents [a] challenge to the mass-image, profit-driven networked platform," and to seek oppositional agency for images posted on social platforms.[67] In this very spirit, I have mined, with the help of the deep learning similarity algorithm of the visual search engine Same Energy (which is like Google's "search by image," but more look- and mood-based), millions of images from Reddit, Instagram, and Pinterest with a view to developing visual affinities with my own "failed images."[68] The grids obtained transcend both the modernist elegance of Bernd and Hilla Becher's industrial typologies and the colorful seamlessness of the #amazingdroneposts Instagram flow, to inaugurate an open-ended noisy archive from which a different picture of the planet can emerge (figure 7.5).

In the spirit of "the avant-garde of the weak," the project offers "a possibility to overcome [the] individualism of performance and spectatorship via a commonality of experiencing failure and weakness"[69]—or at least to stage this failure and weakness as a shared experience. Today's artist, as Stejskalová aptly observes, needs to understand "that she is not anyone special nor is she doing anything special but is, in principle, like any other social network user who makes manifest the (crisis of) emotions, relations and

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Figure 7.5
Joanna Zylinska, *Loser Images 2.0 (Same Energy)*, 2021.

labour which sustain life itself."[70] Picking up a baton from Steyerl, I am thus speaking here *in defense of the poor image of the world*: low-resolution, widely accessible, pirated. In other words, I am speaking for what we might term, with a nod to Gary Hall, an ethical piracy. In *Pirate Philosophy*, Hall revisits the word's origins in a Greek verb which meant to "make an attempt, try, test . . . endeavour, attack,"[71] to refer to piratic practices in texts and images which go against the grain of traditional knowledge production, its classification and distribution. Loser images are pirate images because they "tease [and] give trouble,"[72] as per the word's Greek etymology. Loser images also drop out of the competitive system of accolades, prizes, and totems. They

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drop out of individual authorship. Yet their marginal cultural status is not by itself a guarantee of progressivism: as recent years have aptly demonstrated, the extreme right can meme very well indeed!

Loser images embrace their machinic heritage, but they also take on board the inevitable failures of human bodies *and* machinic infrastructures. As part of their weak feminist efficacy, they thus show up the dominant perception machine that we all inhabit as structurally and politically broken. Channeling the politics of Sarah Sharma's "Manifesto for the Broken Machine," another powerful feminist figuration whereby "feminists are rendered . . . the faulty aberration in a long line of otherwise efficient technologies that have been designed for caretaking and reciprocating love in a male-dominated world,"[73] loser images challenge the macho-heroism of the drone eye and the GoPro Hero camera. Offering a fragile yet tender look, loser images differ from "ruin porn": the aestheticization of loss, decay, and poverty which is part of the dominant Anthropocene visuality. They restage planetarity as a call for help, enacting the collective "exhaustion of humans, machines and the environment."[74] Loser images are therefore unproductive, because they work against the logic of planetary extractivism (the depletion of natural and human resources; planetary management via technological improvement). Eschewing the hipster retrovisuality of the "failed images that fail in their failing,"[75] such as Lomography, they challenge the seemingly inevitable upgrade culture—of machines and humans—not just in an aesthetic gesture but also in an attempt to make a difference.

To speak in defense of the poor image of the world is to mobilize an ethical injunction to see the world better—and to make better things in and with it. It is an injunction to look around and askew, to look obliquely, to work against the limitations of the image, and to know that pictures are always partial. There is something not quite right with them, but they are not *wrong* either. A post-Anthropocene loser image flow: it tries to fail better every time, with every new arrangement of the grid.

A slightly better Anthropocene: or how to live in a media-dirty world

My loser images inscribe themselves in the ecology of what I am calling in this book "eco-eco-punk." In its alliterative ec(h)oing of the dual ecological and economic crises, eco-eco-punk goes beyond the (whitewashed and

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masculinist) singularity of the rouge punk hero-savior. In the media ecology of eco-eco-punk, the hero's name is legion, and they may not even be *just* human. With this, eco-eco-punk enacts a "reaction to a world in which humanity must constantly be renegotiated."[76] As well as envisaging new ways of engaging with the environment while showing it as always already mediated, this mode of practice opens up a traditional cyberpunk ethos to the plurality of voices, sensibilities, and sensations. The concept of eco-eco-punk encapsulates this very spirit of "more than one," a community of confluences and contaminations that goes beyond the experience of a "disaffected loner from outside the cultural mainstream,"[77] fighting totalitarian corporations with his wit and kit. Eco-eco-punk reverberates with the multiplicity of actors, human and nonhuman, who are at work in the system. The recognition of this plural and entangled ontology of our ecologies, which are always already *media* ecologies, is a first step toward outlining contours of an eco-eco-punk ethos which has progressive ramifications. This commitment to "more than one" can be found, for example, in media artist Nam June Paik's early practice, as he later corroborated: "To take fame out of art, well that's the most important thing. . . . To take fame out of the art-world. That was the spirit of Fluxus."[78] In its first decade in particular, in the 1960s, the artists involved with Fluxus were attempting to move away from the idea of the art object and from the monadic trappings of singular recognition. Instead, they worked toward developing what could be described as an ecology of relations, premised on submerging their own individual egos.[79] Embracing the nascent spirit of cybernetics that saw individual entities as emerging only *from* relations, Fluxus also drew from the Zen tradition of understanding the world, as evidenced in both Paik's and John Cage's work. Yet Paik's engagement with different types of systems, biological as well as technical—as evident, for example, in his *Family of Robot* or *TV Buddha* video sculptures—shows him reconciling seemingly contradictory personas in his work: that of a Zen master and that of an eco-eco punk.

Eco-eco-punk recognizes not only the benefits of living with advanced technology, but also the fact that humans are originarily technical beings, that we have emerged and evolved with, and via, diverse objects and practices such as plows, fire, wheels, agriculture, cooking, and transportation. A mode of breaking out of the ec(h)o chamber of the conventional responses to the Anthropocene that remain rooted in affects such as "gloom and

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doom, . . . guilt, shame, didacticism, prescriptiveness, sentimentality, reverence, seriousness, sincerity, earnestness [and] sanctimony,"[80] eco-eco-punk sees the world as always already "media-dirty": embroiled, entangled, enmeshed. Yet dirt is not positioned here as something to be overcome for a civilization to take place and hold together: it is rather seen as our civilization's constitutive element. Dirt is also a reminder of the remainder and a conduit of mediation. Eco-eco-punk thus becomes a proposal for those who recognize themselves, and the world around them, as always already media dirty. It is a mode of acting for those for whom ecology connects, via wires and wirelessly, to the media infrastructures that organize the world and that shape our position in the world. Last but not least, eco-eco-punk speaks to those who would rather be cyborgs than goddesses, and for whom art-making functions as an inevitable technical prosthesis for a human embedded *in* the world—and becoming *with* the world. Mobilizing a particular DIY-media aesthetics, it "utilizes the dissonance of the ugly" to "monkey-wrench" an imagistic repertoire, with a view to introducing "an aesthetic delay or suspension that makes its easy consumption by the viewer more difficult and more deliberate."[81] It is therefore more than an aesthetic: it becomes an *ethical* mode of intervening into the landscapes and architectures of the post-Anthropocene.

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