



## Extinct Memories

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The following text was written for the exhibition **Extinct Memories** at iMAL.

## A Planetary Memory Trace

I

Around 2248, or so, it was discovered. The dried up land-cum-desert was cut through by a line that was not, what they used to call back in the early times, a nation state border. Instead, a different line, cut in the desert. Nobody lived there anymore, except the wandering remains of tribes whose ancestors were the ones who could still tell memories of what used to be – that something used to be.

Now there is sand and wide plateaus that are exposed to erosion after the trees disappeared. You can find traces of other things, like water, now mostly evaporated. Clouds do come at times. It rains hard, beating so hard and intensively that anything without a shelter would feel like bounded by tiny rocks. Otherwise it is just dry. One would describe it easily as a lifeless place, the remains of ancient civilizations but expressed only by way of such structures

occasionally found.

The line that cut across the sand was identified later as part of old infrastructures belonging to the fossil fuel era. It was an ancient quiet but agreed replacement of borders, with a different sort of a division not between inside and outside but alongside. Someone in the group that discovered the pipe had the idea to follow it, to see where it leads. Not that it would end. Someone else joked you would come back from the other end. Gas seemed to flow like that; part of the other fossil fuel economies that for a short time boosted a particular economic system and quickly grinding it to its halt. What irony. Fossil fuels, and then contributing to the fossilization of a particular life style that became also a fossilization of much of life, humans and non-humans.

That economic system was, after all, infrastructural. Eastern Turkey, bordering with Kurdistan, was cut through pipes of gas, flowing from the North. National politics hastened geopolitical arrangements but was it actually just a surface on which the more sustained energetic and material links were being made? What if the gas never cared of their religions and just parasite on local disputes in reaching out, across the planet. <sup>1</sup> (#footnote1 li9mtsk) It was one of the few remaining monuments after the years of tribal war – and then not-so tribal war- that was waged in the vicinity of this pipe and similar disputes around the world. Religion, money, energy; the usual things.

In the end, what it left behind was a monument buried in the sand, as one last, sad object of what they used to call cultural heritage. The actual art they hid away in secret places, many forgotten ever since. During such times, the work of the curator is to ensure art does not get blown up. Perhaps those hidden pieces too would be discovered. But for now, memories of that ancient era – as it now was becoming clear – was in the form of tubes, lines, pipes and other sorts of remnants of things that were dug into the earth, sometimes on the surface, but always slightly remote.

In some ways, it always was. The things that really counted – both literally counting and metaphorically being significant – were removed from the sight of the everyday people that used to occupy the land. We were removed from them, they were removed from us. The technological despite its continuous centrality was increasingly something we experienced but without a clear focus on where, how, and why. It was under the surface and in the sky. It crossed deserts, and the abandoned zones of the cities. Archaeologists were interested in this sort of a city: one of cries and screams, of acoustic traces. And the near silence of data, humming. <sup>2</sup> (#footnote2 6apined) Indeed, it was rather quiet – the machines were silent even if still connected by way of cables and tubes.

It was already back then that we also discovered things in and under the waves. The dilemma of the sea and the ocean had troubled across centuries but what if you go under the water line? Not just in terms of the ships and submarines, but the desert at the bottom of the sea. That's where you find more of the dividing lines and transport – the cables, sea cables. These are the ones that literally cross the planet, and by their limited number still offer the illusion of ubiquitous planetary computation. <sup>3</sup> (#footnote3 to0qw7e)

The irony did not escape some of the people. The dried out land and its remnants of past infrastructures; the deepest of the oceans with as remote cables. They were technological objects that reminded of a memory that was not anymore memory, but just a dumb thing lying there, like an archaeological vase – but of a planetary scale. It wasn't really an interesting question to ask who designed it but just that it outlasted so easily those who built it. Transport of gas, transport of light carrying information.

## II

Imagine that one Kubrick movie scene with the monolith but replace it with a data centre. The thing of the past-future that haunts and in its impenetrable form seems to be as foreign as a computational interface to an outsider intelligence. Indeed, such an intelligence might not be even bothered with the interface so poorly designed because designed for human needs. <sup>4</sup>

(#footnote4 mrwkiwm)

But imagining the discovery of a data centre summons also what was described above. We should not get too fixated on the specific objects or even spaces merely, but the wider infrastructural networks that allow any sort of centralised place to have power, to transmit information, to be connected on a planetary scale. The imaginary of the non-human object is to be complemented with the real existence of the non-human infrastructure that is not a new thing but escorts the period we refer to as modernity as part of our contemporary era, and into the future.

The future biopolitics of elements – the elements that are not merely the four of air, water, fire and earth but the whole periodic table sketched with increasing accuracy since the 1860s and nowadays with odd new synthetic combinations <sup>5</sup> (#footnote5 8r1i3vw) – gives a further setting for the infrastructural. What will endure on a physical level is prescribed by the wider environmental conditions of dry air, wetness, sea levels, salinity, and more. How does one design for the coming fluctuation of weather patterns?

Besides questions for the designers, there is the question for the one with the archivist's or historian's mindset. The one that is concerned with memories and preserving them. Well, we never preserve memories, but documents, things, objects, and other material things we then mistake for what it might refer to.

**In any case, the larger question is about what level of extinction of memories are we dealing with? The memory that is the technological memory in a harddrive, that sustains our social memory (two different things, already)? The cultural memory of humankind? Or memory as something that sustains any sort of a complex system to "live"? In other words, what if a *planetary memory* is what we were after all? The dried out sandlands, the dead oceans speak of a memory of a different kind than the archivist is used to.**

In the context of the debates about the Anthropocene, Bronislaw Szerszynski has outlined how we might be able to think not merely histories and memories of the Anthropocene but how the world itself incorporates and expresses a memory through its processes. <sup>6</sup> (#footnote6\_lh7hhmq)

He relates this to a reading of theories of self-organisation where the systematic qualities of natural "things" (i.e. systemic processes) are based on a memory through which their state changes and life unfold. This applies also to inorganic systems, including geological ones. The position allows us to think of the inorganic life of the planet as completely entangled with the biosphere, and to elaborate a position of non-human memory that is constantly expressed on a planetary scale even if also local.

The various systems and subsystems form a living entity that has potential impact across many scales. This applies to geochemical formations, the atmosphere and many other scales that

then reveal their dynamic qualities. They unfold towards the future, but are prescribed by their memory, which can be said to be their virtual potentiality. This memory is also long-term, Szerszynski reminds us: it is a memory of the planet and its outer-planetary existence, and yet of a constant relevance to us as entangled to such systemic qualities that unfold during its lifespan.<sup>7</sup> (#footnote7 wruf7um) Every thing across the scale of being is embedded in a dynamic, rhythmic existence.

It's also an archive of sorts – or at least mobilizes the discussion concerning memory and the archive that we have been witnessing the past decades. For it relates to the wider sense of archivability, which opens up in new ways when we think of the nature, the world as media that already does the work of active inscription and active memory:

*The archive works against itself – this is the "mal d'archive" (Derrida 1995, 14). Whether it is the very strata of the rock, or an archive created by humans in order to record Earth's memories and what it knows, the archive's very form of resistance to forgetting makes a more final forgetting possible – the hiding or destruction of the archive. The closed archive of the solid body of the Earth is now being opened but at the same time ransacked.*<sup>8</sup> (#footnote8\_sqg60df)

### III

The question of extinction of memory is particular to our era. It's not that previous eras did not have their own apocalyptic discourses, whether of biblical proportions, of plague, or the Other (Ottomans, Christians, Communists, whoever happened to be on the other side of the border in your era). We ask that of and with our technological objects but could also ask that from our natural systems and their "archives". This question was already posed in the 19th century with the slow introduction of the idea what we now call "The Anthropocene".

The geological sciences were also an intervention into how we think of the past and the future. The material conditions of the present were also indications of the future, for example for James Hutton, the 18th century geologist. Rocks and their mineral qualities told stories of time. The world was seen as a dynamic entity where metamorphosis applied to geology as well. The short-circuit of the past, present and future was the geological way of wiring a sense of the material planet; the past was telling the story of what will happen, a future story that could be told "from things which have already happened; things which have left, in the particular constitution of the bodies, proper traces of the manner of their production."<sup>9</sup> (#footnote9\_hzsehin)

Some hundred years later and by the time modern geology had really started to establish itself, in the early 1870s, the Italian geologist Antonio Stoppani introduced the notion of the "Anthropozoic" era. Stoppani was interested in conceptualising the human era as one significant geological period. It had shifted both the material basis of our planet and also the mental coordinates how we should relate to our habitat. This was an era before space travel and outsider perspectives<sup>10</sup> (#footnote10\_08alf8s), and yet, Stoppani's fiction introduced to the geological discourse the trope of an alien visitor.

What if we would be visited from the outside of our planet and our remains

to be readable mostly to an alien? An alien intelligence that sees and thinks differently than we in our rather fixated way of approaching the design of the world would surely also interpret what it sees in ever so different way; perhaps it is not even that interested in what we would see significant as the human remains and the memory banks of data centres would be ignored in preference for the ecological memories. Perhaps the planetary ruins are data that becomes non-human readable. Or then there is nothing particularly interesting, and we have to cut down on the cultural self-congratulation and admit that our trash will not be very interesting material for any other form of intelligence.

In any case, Stoppani imagined what might be left to discover if such an intelligence would see us as the fossils, and our designs as part of the fossil trace of effects of science and technology. The question remains pertinent, while Stoppani was also speaking of the massive ecological work humans had engaged in:

*How much of the earth's surface by now disappears under the masses that man built as his abode, his pleasure and his defense, on plains, on hills, on the seashores and lakeshores, as on the highest peaks! By now the ancient earth disappears under the relics of man or of his industry. You can already count a series of strata, where you can read the history of human generations, as before you could read in the amassed bottom of the seas the history of ancient faunas. To the archeolithic strata, where human relics appear as buried among cut firestones and bones of disappeared animals, terramare superimpose, and pile dwellings, this is where the progress of human race is testified by bronze forged into exquisite weapons and tools. Yet we have not come to see the soil imprinted upon by Etruscan art; and to find ourselves on our own, we have to cross the immense stratum that carries the mark of Roman genius.* <sup>11</sup> (#footnote11\_nja02wf)

The idea of extinction is what starts to apply to a whole drive of modern science and technology; the geoengineering of the elements of the planet from its peaks to its waters becomes also an index of the memory of what is left behind as the monument. The cables, tubes, channels and more are part of the ecological heritage where information does not necessarily anymore flow but the technologies after the media have remained as infrastructural witnesses of the planetary scale reorganisation and the shifting levels of the sea, the drying up of the land, the mass extinction of species sixth time around. <sup>12</sup> (#footnote12\_vqrqx0c)

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1. (#footnote1\_thomaspynchon) Consider Thomas Pynchon's words in Gravity's Rainbow (1973): "This War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted . . . secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology.. . . The real crises were crises of allocation and priority, not among firms—it was only staged to look that way—but among the different Technologies, Plastics, Electronics, Aircraft, and their needs which are understood only by the ruling elite." Quoted in Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, "Hunting a Whale of a State: Kittler and his Terrorists." Cultural Politics vol. 8, issue 3, 2012, 407. Cf. Reza Negarestani, Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials. (Melbourne: re:press, 2008).

2. (#footnote2\_shannonmattern) See Shannon Mattern's Deep Mapping the Media City. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).



3. (~~#footnoteref3~~ ~~Stancoski~~) Nicole Stancoski, The Undersea Network. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
4. (~~#footnoteref4~~ ~~Benjamin Bratton~~) Benjamin Bratton, "Outing A.I.: Beyond the Turing Test". New York Times, The Stone/ Opinionator, February 23, 2015. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/benjamin-h-bratton/> (<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/benjamin-h-bratton/>)
5. (~~#footnoteref5~~ ~~Gary Gensky~~) Gary Gensky, "The New Fundamental Elements of a Contested Planet," talk at the Earth, Air, Water: Matter and Meaning in Rituals conference, Victoria College, University of Toronto, June 2013.
6. (~~#footnoteref6~~ ~~Dariusz Szerszynski~~) Dariusz Szerszynski, "The Anthropocene and the Memory of the Earth", paper at the conference The Thousand Names of Gaia: From the Anthropocene to the Age of the Earth, Casa de Rui Barbosa, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 15-19 September 2014.
7. (~~#footnoteref7~~ ~~Uhid~~) Uhid
8. (~~#footnoteref8~~ ~~Uhid~~) Uhid
9. (~~#footnoteref9~~ ~~James Hutton~~) James Hutton, quoted in Schreyer, W., "High-pressure experiments and the varying depths of rockmetamorphism" in James Hutton – Present and Future, eds. Craig, G.Y and Hull J.H. (Geological Society, London, Special Publications, 1999), 60
10. (~~#footnoteref10~~ ~~Although, from a perspective~~) Although, from a perspective insight into the planetary design before the official space age, especially Nikolai Fedorov's writing, see Benedict Singleton's article "Maximum Jailbreak" in #Accelerate. The Accelerationist Reader, ed. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 489-507.
11. (~~#footnoteref11~~ ~~Antonio Stoppani~~) Antonio Stoppani, "First Period of the ANthropozoic Era", trans. Valeria Federeighi, in Making the Geologic Now. Responses to Material Conditions of Everyday Life, eds. Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Press, 2013), 38
12. (~~#footnoteref12~~ ~~Brian Gary~~) Brian Gary, "Stanford biologist warns of early stages of Earth's 6th mass extinction event." Stanford News, July 24, 2014, <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2014/july/sixth-mass-extinction-072414.htm...> (<http://news.stanford.edu/news/2014/july/sixth-mass-extinction-072414.html>).