

SEEING STONES AND
SPACES BEYOND THE
VALLEY

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Seeing Stones and Spaces beyond the Valley

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Translated from Polish by Jerzy Listwan

Against Control of Bodies, Minds, Data, Digital Space, Earth, and Living Organisms

The exhibition *Seeing Stones and Spaces Beyond the Valley / Widzące kamienie i przestrzenie poza Doliną*, the main event of the second edition of Biennale Warsaw 2022, explores the relationship between political and economic power, and technology, along with technological models alternative to the currently prevailing one. The title refers to the theme of palantirs, or seeing stones, from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Palantirs are crystal balls, opaque and indestructible, that allow one to see and hear at a distance, look into the past and predict the future. Palantir is also the name of a tech company founded in 2004 by Peter Thiel, a conservative lawyer and investor, which deals with advanced data analytics, mostly on behalf of the U.S. government. The second part of the title refers to Ramesh Srinivasan's book *Beyond the Valley: How Innovators around the World Are Overcoming Inequality and Creating the Technologies of Tomorrow*. Its author presents alternatives, objects, and prototypes that can counterbalance the current technological model created and managed by private, monopolistic corporations in collaboration with political centers around the world. While one part of the exhibition is devoted to Silicon Valley conservative ideology, data infrastructure, the role of the state in digital surveillance systems and the extractivism of raw materials and data, another presents algorithmic, organizational, ecological and infrastructural proposals alternative to these authoritarian practices.

The texts that make up this collection provide context for the exhibition and its attendant public program which expands on some of its themes. A few of the articles are theoretical expansions and complements of the visual works presented. Some provide an introduction to issues that will be presented more extensively in lectures, seminars and debates. Some of the articles were written specifically for this publication, others are translations of essays not yet published in Poland. Their

authors are philosophers of technology, media and technology scholars, as well as artists whose practice is situated at the intersection of art, media, scientific studies and technology.

The opening essay 'Noodiversity, Technodiversity: Elements of a new economic foundation based on a new foundation for theoretical computer science' is the last writing by the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler (deceased in 2020). Starting from a critique of the contemporary automated and algorithmized model of technology, Stiegler worked in an almost activist manner to produce an alternative to the phenomenon he called "computational capitalism". What he meant by this term was the total subordination of all spheres of human life to the rigors of computation, resulting in people losing basic skills and even the ability to make rational decisions. Stiegler's work went far beyond the framework of academia. Striving to create structures, objects, and organizations that would ensure the possibility of preserving whatever escapes computer systems, whatever is peculiar, limitless and incomparable, Stiegler initiated the creation of international scientific groups creating theoretical foundations for alternative solutions in the field of technology (Internation), helped create independent research and educational institutions and organizations (Institut de recherche et d'innovation – IRI – at Paris Centre Georges Pompidou, and Ars Industrialis), and engaged in the building of local cooperation networks (Plaine Commune).

Stiegler's text is complemented by a commentary essay by Michał Krzykowski, a close associate of the French philosopher, member of the Internations Collective and director of the Center for Critical Studies of Technology at the University of Silesia. In it, Krzykowski presents the basic concepts used by Stiegler, at the same time pointing to the urgent need to develop a new political economy of technology and to introduce fundamental changes in the current politics of technology.

The second section of this book is dedicated to the concept of extractivism. It opens with the visual essay 'Nooscope Manifested: Artificial intelligence as an instrument of knowledge extractivism' prepared by Vladan Joler, a new media scholar and professor at the University of Novi Sad, and Matteo Pasquinelli, an Italian philosopher and professor of media philosophy at Karlsruhe University of Art and Design. The authors analyze the ways in which artificial intelligence works in the process of knowledge extraction, exposing the mystifications that accompany the development of technology, such as the technical definition of intelligence and the myth of the autonomy of technology. These mystifications, according to the authors, obscure real economic and political processes, including the rise of autonomy of global technology corporations and the disappearance of worker autonomy. Joler and Pasquinelli argue that the project of mechanizing the human mind has transformed into "a corporate regime of knowledge extractivism and cognitive colonialism."

Vladan Joler's visual essay 'New Extractivism' expands the notion of extractivism to include the extraction of raw resources and human labor. This "assemblage of concepts and allegories" (as its author calls it) concerning digital extractivism describes the practice of exploiting all resources available – natural resources as well as human bodies and data – to form foundations of a digital economy. Cells of the human body, human emotions, social behaviors and relationships, as well as nature as a whole, the places where minerals needed for modern technology are mined, the contaminated soil, and even the sea and ocean floors used for installing

transmission cables, all make up the domain of the new extractivism. It also includes exploitation of labor of those who extract the minerals as well as those who produce the digital content, later capitalized on by the platforms or monopolistic corporations arising at and operating from Silicon Valley.

The section on extractivism concludes with the essay 'Digital Ecology: Innovation Born of Chaos' by Joanna Murzyn, founder of the Center for Digital Ecology. The writer offers a comprehensive outline of current and expected financial and environmental costs of the development of digital capitalism. She shows what the 5G revolution will mean for urban spaces, how much carbon dioxide the technology sector produces, what is the nature of the crisis in the semiconductor market, what the ocean floor communications network looks like and who controls it, and what raw materials are used to manufacture smartphones. This in-depth analysis of digital infrastructure is an important voice in the debate about the materiality of technology. Like Joler and Pasquinelli, the author exposes the conceptual and linguistic mystifications that aim to give the impression of the material lightness of digital infrastructure.

The third part of the publication consists of texts which, starting from a critical reflection on extractivism and including themes related to colonialism, try to indicate an alternative to digital capitalism. Media and cultural sociologist and London School of Economics professor Nick Couldry and media studies scholar and New York State University Oswego professor Ulises A. Mejias are authors of the book *The Cost of Connections: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*. Their article on 'The Decolonial Turn in Data and Technology Research: what is at stake and where is it heading?' is a detailed presentation of a range of voices on decolonization of technology which are emerging in the public debate. Introducing the concepts of data colonialism, technocolonialism, and digital colonialism, they conclude their essay by describing the tenets of the Non-Aligned Technologies Movement (NATM). The alliance, which draws on the post-World War II movement of non-aligned states, seeks to bring into political and legal practice principles such as boycotting extractivist technologies, discontinuing investment in Big Tech, imposing taxes and sanctions on Big Tech, "re-appropriating" data on behalf of those who produce it, and supporting new forms of technology socialization.

The principles of the Non-Aligned Technologies Movement are not much different from the solutions developed by social networks in Cuba. Aarhus University researcher Steffen Köhn and Cuban artist Nestor Siré's essay 'Fragile Connections: Community computer networks, human infrastructures and the consequences of their breakdown in Havana' features the story of the independent computer network SNET (Street Network) that was established in Cuba as a response to restricted Internet access, censorship and state control in this sphere. Forced to constantly circumvent the law and adapt to changing technical and social conditions, the originators of SNET created a social network, completely isolated from the World Wide Web, that connected over 20,000 homes and tens of thousands of people. The authors wonder to what extent a digital infrastructure created from the bottom up could be an alternative to the Internet managed by corporations and overseen by states.

That section concludes with 'Anything but Autonomy' by Špela Petrič, a new media artist and researcher at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam working at the intersection of art, biology, and technology. Petrič brings the perspective

of non-human actors to the debate on technology. Using her two recent works *PLAI* and *Vegetariat: Work Zero* as points of reference, she poses the question of the status of humans and plants in the face of algorithmic agency. Since to the algorithm we are all as plants, an alternative to digital surveillance would be a large-scale alliance of humans and plants. All that would be required is the plants' consent to the use of their digital traces which, if fed into surveillance systems, would be able to disrupt their mechanisms. Petrič proposes a sort of cross-species cooperation to undo the extractivist model based on surveillance.

The authors of the texts collected in this volume analyze from various angles the ways in which the technological regime operates as it seeks to control and exploit almost all aspects of life. Human bodies and minds, data sets created by Internet users, information systems and social networks, the Earth as a place of resource extraction and waste disposal, animals, plants, and all living organisms become the objects of its actions. The writers do not leave us, as readers and activists, defenseless against the “new digital Leviathan”¹. Their analysis and critique of contemporary technological power structures is accompanied by a call for other, more just and equitable systems that take into account the interests and needs of all actors currently under systemic pressure. The authors do not stop at critical reflection and activist mobilization. They also provide suggestions for concrete solutions, organizations or prototypes. We are thus given both the strategies and the weapons. It is up to us to decide how we use them.

1 See S. Wróbel, *The Leviatan Is an Autonomous Digital Machine*, London School of Economics and Politics Science Blog, February 8, 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2021/02/08/the-new-leviathan-is-an-autonomous-digital-machine/> [accessed: 1 May 2022].