⁶³ Tools for a Thawing World

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On a planet increasingly characterized, on the one hand, by the fact that every inch and future state of it is quantifiable and a virtual web of capital-moving vectors has become nearly coterminous with it, and, on the other hand, by massive surplus populations generated by rampant deindustrialization, civil wars, and climate instability, there may be some merit in trying to formulate a few observations around the inevitability of an "art after the wage"-which may be the same thing, viewed from the other side, as an "art in a world of thawing orders." This would involve looking at artistic practices that find their social determination not in the fragmented process of production that the capitalist relation generated in an earlier phase of development, but in the financialization of the global economy. It would also entail considering practices that are generated in places (the collective future that awaits many of us may be one of these) that exist and persist in exclusion from the world of wages and all the ordering-economic but also metaphysicalthat accompanies such a loosening world. We're not thinking of some fantastical post-work situation of full automation and luxury communism, sweet as such a thing promises to be, but of edge-hugging worlds in which articulations and expressive propensities—cultural, but across the plane of everyday life. as well-find their determination precisely in the social and subjective production that occurs as a consequence of exclusion. Not so much in reaction to it, but in the possibilities that open because of it.

The world, we know, has jumped the fence. Record heat waves unfurl across Europe and North Africa; wildfires scorch Greece and even the Arctic Circle, while in America's blazing West Coast, meteorologists warn, billowing smoke could choke out views of annual Perseid meteors. According to Earth systems scientists, the planet is shifting out of the stable climates of the 11,000-year-long Holocene interglacial in which modern civilizations developed (and also out of the glacial-interglacial cycle in which it flickered for the last 100,000 years) and onto a trajectory toward volatile and unknown operating spaces, one of which may be a so-called Hothouse Earth.¹ Fueled quasilinearly by carbon dioxide emissions and biosphere degradation, this

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trajectory will also be coupled with nonlinear biogeophysical feedbacks creating tipping cascades—permafrost disappearance, land and ocean carbon sinks weakening, polar ice sheets melting—and accelerating global warming as well as pathway irreversibility.

In the urgent discursive reconfigurations and flights of fancy that these alterations to the Earth system have authorized, an ascendant tendency is that of borrowing the vocabulary of the natural sciences and certain strands of materialist philosophy in order to build with it new interpretative machines and models to be applied to cultural production. The incursion of flat ontologies. notions of quasi-sentient matter, post-anthropocentrisms of every stripe, and slushy-mushroomy chemistry in art discourse and exhibitions in recent years has been impossible to miss. Non-human actors, complicity with chthonic powers, deep time chronometries—it's all there. An ambient anxiety over climate, when it is not hard science and its unavoidable conclusions. explains much of this. But one cannot help but grow astonished by the way in which critical art production, having sharpened its tools over the last fifty if not one hundred years to deal with social, political, and ideological issues-not the least of which were the ones embodied in the very institutions that it sought legitimacy from-has suddenly turned from all this. The Anthropocene, so misnamed, derailed everything and absolved everyone from the task of interrogating the systems in which they function. Offering urgent problems, extinction and the like, it has set us adrift in a world of animated matter and operatic cosmic vastness. And yet, what is it that all these energies now applied to sensing the secret depths of a planet that is coming undone have actually contributed, in terms of a scale that matters, to the mitigation of anthropogenic effects and to ecological renewal? Asking this question is not just a matter of picking on artworks that organize themselves around discourses that borrow from natural science and materialist philosophies for their ineffectiveness; it's also a matter of considering what is hidden by the proliferation of these discourses in cultural spaces.

In their respective fields, the discourses that art has been borrowing from are often militantly realist. The world is out there. We interface with it, enmesh ourselves in its tangled lines and ways, or are swept up by them, but it has to be there, beyond our projections and interpretations, for this to not be a trivial fact. This inevitably means that there must be serious engagement with all the mediating elements that are activated along the way.

with the apparatuses that science and other disciplines rely on-not only in the role they play in the production of knowledge but also for the myriad applications they afford. It is precisely this respect for objective circumstance, for matter-without-us, if you like, on the one hand, and serious acknowledgement of mediating apparatuses, on the other, that is lost in the drift of these discourses into the art world. What they offer as they vacation in the cultural sphere, instead, is an excuse to not look at the manner in which art objects move and function in world, obviating a material matrix of institutions, economic pressures, historical and social determinations, and concrete modes of distributions and usage. In this socio-institutional ecology as it has developed over the last few decades, not only sustained by but tailored to reflect the imaginaries of elite economic players, art objects are often subsumed into financialization processes. The pictures on the wall or the sprawling installations, in their crates in one or the other tax haven, are collateralized, leveraged, and turned into currency without the actual artifacts having to return to the market—without, that is, their biographies being affected and their owners being stigmatized as flippers and speculators. Through procedures such as art-backed lending, the object, while staying put, literally sets frozen capital in motion and puts it to work. The Rothko pays for the new luxury condo tower construction without ever being dismounted from the wall of the luxury condo

By becoming a collateralizable entity in this way, the artwork seems to have sprouted a new dimension that allows it to be absorbed at any moment by an autonomous field of economic operations adjacent to its institutional habit. Of course, nothing prevents the artwork from continuing to make laudable claims, proposing itself as a tool for the constituent power of the multitude, as a short-circuiting apparatus in spectacle cultures, or as the last agent capable of drawing discrepant temporalities and repressed histories from a homogenizing globalization. Art objects can continue to deliver their promises of rupture and redemption. But they just live, from the perspective of those who benefit from its new dimension, relegated to islands of fantasy. Abstraction, instantiated in actual practice, supersedes the claims of the sensible thing, determining not its form but its behavior in the world—often against its explicit commitments.

it currently graces with its mysterious depths.

Some of this may help explain why certain discourses have flooded contemporary art production and its interpretative exercises with such ease. In light of the financial abstracting of

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the artwork, what could be more enticing than an object as a full-on autonomous agent wielding dimensions that exceed the limited things we can comprehend? The enthusiasm for the inexhaustible object, however, cannot help but give up the "hidden transaction" it sustains: the eagerness to re-mystify the object registers as a displacement of the traumatic fact of having artworks spring a new dimension that has been pressured into existence by a process of accumulation that generates profit through financial instruments, through the proliferation of capital as commodity, rather than through production and sales, and over which the art object has no say and possibly finds no footing for resistance. The uses that can be extracted from the art object beyond all it can determine are positively re-coded as its secret power to extend beyond human cognitive reach and other horizons. In the end, however, the object's supposed unfathomable "inexhaustibility," the excess beyond its self-understanding and controlled operations, is financial, before it is inward or relational or cosmic or whatever. The unwieldy flows of energy and matter may turn out to be just stand-ins for the flows of capital in moist and mushroomy garb.

Seeing as the subordination of the concrete to an abstract asset functions in absolute disregard of the artwork's content and selfdefinition, unencumbered by critical resistance and sophisticated diagnostics, how, then, to register the discrepancy between what is sensibly available and the procedures of ontological reconfiguration and economic capture that happen, to repurpose that old phrase. behind the artwork's back? In a series of paintings collectively titled Euphoria Now (2015), Superflex addresses some of this by allowing the color schemes of different national currencies, including the US and Singapore dollars, the Chinese yuan, and the British pound sterling, to provide the color palette. The concrete configuration that money must assume in order to execute its abstract function is graduated into the generative structure of the art object. One should see this less as an acerbic critique of the power of money or some such thing than as an effort to make blatant the discrepancy that exists between sensible manifestation and the relations that actually move the world. In his seminal Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology, Alfred Sohn-Rethel proposes that exchange, the physical practice of it, is the abstraction that organizes our thinking. What this means, in shorthand, is that through money everything can be stripped of qualitative heterogeneity, and this operation, in turn, impinges on or even determines the nature of the intellectual tools with which

we apprehend the world. The exchange relation becomes thinking's deep and delimiting infrastructure.²

In Superflex's production, it's not necessarily what seems deliberately pointed at that matters. To stay on the unslick surface of the immediate is to miss the problematic epistemic gap we constantly face, covering it up with the satisfaction of simple and generally agreeable denunciations. Investment Bank Flowerpots (2015) reproduces the architectural shape of the headquarters of the twenty largest global investment banks, all deeply implicated in the last financial crisis, as functional flowerpots. These receptacles are used to grow hallucinogenic and cannabis plants. One can stay with the obvious here and bask in the satisfaction its implied denunciation offers: the almost erotic stimulation of moving and manipulating disembodied money in quantities that can literally shift global markets, drain the wealth of entire populations, and spread immiseration without much blowback is a bankers' or traders' high, their soaring trip and the source of their despicability. Or conversely, the fact that they can do this, oblivious to or unable to understand the consequences, maneuvering on an autopilot that external rhythms adjust even while sensing some kind of amorphous fear building in their bellies, means that they are already hallucinating their innocence—"it's just my job"—to begin with.

This attends to and overvalues the semantic plane at the expense of the material facts of the work. Investment Bank Flowerpots comes in two versions—one is a 3D-printed set that employs PLA plastic, a biodegradable polyester derived from corn starch or sugarcane; the other is cast concrete. In the chemical and historical distance that separates these materials and the ways in which they are given shape something about the conditions that allow for the dominance of finance is obliquely articulated. Concrete is the material of modernity. It's the paradigmatic truth-element. the obvious example that inhabits any truth-to-materials demand. It is the aggregate that structured all the metonyms for industrial capital's production. In contrast, 3-D printing belongs to another world, as do a whole slew of new bio-based materials and the capacity for on-demand execution. It is a world in which the "real abstractions" that came with the exchange relation and money make way for the absorption of complex methods and models of calculation, universalized through algorithmic manipulation, into the organization of the production process itself, as much as into the field of circulation and risk management. It is no longer a matter of standardization and equivalence as much as one of reflexive updating, a kind of self-learning, at the center of production and

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circulation as a way optimize movement and extraction, compress time, and adjust quickly. In this scenario, however, the appropriation of cognition into the process of production and circulation meets the problem of *limited* powers of prediction within increasingly complex fields of economic and financial activity, to say nothing of increasingly varied ecological and atmospheric conditions. It is here where, before a collapse of the closed circuit of industrial production and ownership (manufacture-circulation-profit-reinvest-ment-manufacture and so on), the intersection of finance with discourses of resilience finds its ground. If resilience is the capacity to absorb unpredicted crises, then it serves as one mechanism through which reflexive updating (and its ideology) is perpetuated. Markets, as much as ecosystems, now have to be resilient, to move through and capitalize perturbations that they may not be able to determine in advance.

Starting in 1997, as one of their first projects, Superflex developed *Supergas*, a biogas system that created a self-sufficient closed energy circuit for poor farmers. The first of these systems was installed in Tanzania. With the dung of a few cattle, it produced three cubic meters of gas per day, enough for a family of eight to cook and run a lamp. New prototypes have been developed since, and the system has been installed in different places, in collaboration with various NGOs and other partners. What is as interesting (in a different way) as the exercise of testing the possibility of alternative ways of producing non-fossil fuel energy is that in 1998 Superflex established the holding company, SUPERGAS Ltd., to actively promote investment in the system. (The company folded in 2005, due to lack of investment, but the questions it raised didn't die with it and in fact become more pertinent every day.)

In the critical literature on the biogas project, which tends to divide into those who defend the work as a new way of providing tools that respond to situational needs and those who are suspicious of the likeness of the project to the products of international aid programs saddled with shameful records, the holding company is rarely touched upon. What were investors offered? One asks the question with an eye on what today are called climates futures and ecosystem services. In other words, a specific answer regarding what the company offered is less interesting than considering the company itself as an intuitive and benign prefiguration of the process of capitalizing the mitigation of climate instability and energy needs—and, more sinisterly, the door that this has opened for the immiseration and devastation that global capital has wrought to produce another set of returns for investors. The quantification of

biodiversity conservation and the mere survival of poor populations, for instance, become a way to trade climate's destabilizing effects on the open market. Future geophysical difference and biodiversity depletion risk are turned into investible entities.

Miami-to provide but one example-has been proposed as a good location to test sea-level derivatives as a way of funding adaptation infrastructure. In one version, an investor provides the funds to develop an adaptive measure—a seawall is the common example, but one can imagine pumps, a raising of the ground, etc.—in exchange for a return if the sea level becomes higher than expected within a certain period of time. The underlying commodity is intangible and what is ultimately traded is economic risk. The idea is that as the seawall prevents flooding and its attendant damages, the city's savings-from less preparation and less relief and rebuilding-will cover the payout on the investment. What this neat logic obfuscates is the increased vulnerability that comes with it. The return, based on a quantitative measurement and not on the benefits of the infrastructure that the investment funds, is due even if the sea level rise is wildly higher than the one that is agreed upon and the adaptive measure cannot mitigate the consequences of this. It is also unaffected by other costs that may be the result of climate change but not directly related to sea level rise. The costs of massive flooding due to a raised water table are not subtracted from the return on the investment. (Of course, there is also a futures contract on flooding in the works.) It is not even the city's future that the bet is on, but the performance of an external index.3 In probableto-worst case scenarios, the local government will sink into a quagmire of debt and—as is more and more the case, with nearby Puerto Rico serving as the most recent example—face restructuring in disregard of the needs of the local population.

But let's go back to the unsullied collectors leveraging Rothkos to build multimillion-dollar condos and to the artists and theorists enthralled by mushroomy things, as a way to consider the other procedure, beyond highlighting the epistemic gap between sensible experience and abstraction, that Superflex deploys: the production of tools. For the artists and theorists, the world can never be fully known. It is a magical, untouchable sphere, palpitating with relations that keep us out of the loop. To still consider such a material world available for human transformation appears, from this anti-humanist perspective, to be a relic of twentieth-century hubris. The impossibility of use is proclaimed not just a structural condition but an ontological and moral one. In contrast, take

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those who speculate with their Rothkos. While critical theorists tweet about unknowable rocks, the world's elite are organizing to thrive amid a civilization in free fall. They are signing off on plans to erect sea walls to protect Wall Street, to fund luxury bunkers in New Zealand, to put Google's infrastructure on the moon, and to geoengineer Mars. Here are people for whom the world is certainly knowable and open to use. To some of the collectors among them. things are not all that mysterious in another way: \$X millions (a 50 percent loan on the value of the work) builds X number of condos. Between these two warring factions—pirouetting high above us, the elite in their penthouses and the theorists on their metaphysical clouds-attempting to say what life is, one side is at least making use of whatever they get their hands on, albeit toward its own nefarious ends and through brutal calculations, buttressed by the belief that they can transform the very cities we live in and the solar system around us into large-scale laboratories for their trials. Even as the water rises, they will maniacally be making the world in the image of their desires. What about us, down here, pressed against one edge or another, disinterested in vibing with objects that can pipeline the Earth's pain into our spines since we are falling out of the wage world and stable ecosystems in non-symbolic ways?

The quest of modern philosophy and politics was always to determine being by giving it a name, a ground, or a telos. What mattered was always some abstract realm beyond or below life that gave it meaning or order. By identifying this safe operating space, outcomes were seemingly guaranteed, or at least stable theoretical pictures of them were possible: justice, equality, a perfectly ordered world in which the rivers would flow with lemonade. But if any generalization can be made about the Anthropocene, traveling hand-in-hand as it must with the rampant immiseration that finance capital reproduces and expands, it's that the baselines of civilization are shifting. Populations and climates are being upended along with physical and metaphysical grounds for thought and action.

Faced with upheavals of the Earth and of thought, it seems impossible for many to imagine a relationship to life other than one of discipline, accounting, and management. But the idea that 'politics'—a summary name for these latter three fields—as the sole legitimate sphere of transformative, historical activity would somehow survive the discombobulations of the present intact seems absurd. That the answers to living in the Anthropocene can already be found in a series of cobbled-together givens extracted from imploding frameworks should be suspect. To think that the forms and possibilities of the future subsume themselves to such

languages, nay governance, should be doubly so. The sun has set on such thinking. In contrast to the regimes we're leaving behind, beings and things are released and open to new possibilities. The world is thawing. We are free to move on other planes. And this should compel us to shift our perspective a bit. Rather than thinking that the material world is beyond us, or imagining it merely subject to us and thus reducible to equivalence and calculation. why not consider other possibilities? The way things are is neither just the way things are nor inherent to the things in question. This is repeatedly touched on in Superflex's work. Bank logos, once exuding confidence and authority, become a timeline of failed institutions after the 2008 financial crisis. The Stora Enso building, a supposedly eternal structure, crumbles into a ruin. The car, symbol of petrocapitalism or whatever, burns to charred remains. McDonald's cups and wrappers, submerged in water, drift aimlessly. Instead of untouchable or eternal mysteries, the structures around us appear as the contingent, ad hoc formations that take a lot of work and energy to maintain that they are.

So, a hiatus to paeans to time, or wind, or erosion, or fire. Cars are lit by people. Riots, arson, insurance scammers, teenagers fucking around. Why should we care about the bubbling metal of the car's exterior, the molecular chemistry of heated enamel? What we want to know is: Who set this car on fire? How and why does one set a car on fire? Is this 'who' in the first person plural? What's the context? What's the motivation? How are the kids in Gothenburg coordinating to set everything ablaze? More than melancholic or smug musings on the eventual world-without-us—when, finally, contemporary institutions will crumble—the important question is how with our own hands to be done with them, now. How do these get lit up?

It is attuned to this question that Superflex's idea of tools should be read—or perhaps re-read against the grain of the manner in which it has been interpreted thus far. In 2003, Charles Esche wrote: "Tools,' in their [Superflex's] terms, seem to me to be an idea about underlying structures—about how things can be different if you do something with the engineering of the situation, and then stand back to watch the results." Esche goes on to speak about "tool[s] for a community." Of course what one wants are tools to flee community, to no longer (and again) deal with the "underlying structures" and "do something with the engineering of the situation," insofar as all these things sound like exercises that simulate amelioration without disarticulating anything of much consequence. They, in fact, sound like ways to never allow the

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disorganizational impulses that are unleashed to rev up to their full potential. We don't want community, but new worlds; not underlying structures, but out-in-the-open ones that we have built out of the scraps that are strewn about; not opportunities to engineer the situation, but situations through which we can be done with all that engineering and get on with living in all its uncontainability. We want tools that aid us in exiting the rotten orders we are currently sentenced to, to make them thaw at increased velocities.

Bereft of the certainties that old political ideologies extended, there is no preset answer to what such tools would be. Tools are simply the links between people and their environments and their ideas of freedom or betterment; tools are the way people throw off given conditions and create worlds. They are verbs as much as things. The means through which we not only transform ourselves but also our very modes of existence. Every tool is a testament to how beings made use of their environments, projecting themselves through and against it, in communion at times and defiance at others, and in the process altered themselves, becoming something else. Never the result of an answer from on high, fire and shelter and so many other things were developed in response to local problems, tried and tested in reality.

Superflex offers some ideas: free/open source software, black markets, informal architecture; culinary and brewing techniques; bootlegging; the repurposing of means of transportation: the fisherman's kwassa kwassa boat employed to deliver migrants from the island of Aniouan in the Comoro archipelago to French overseas territory Mayotte, Life-saving hospital operating theater equipment ready for both exhibition and combat zones. Or communication: SUPERCHANNEL's network of studios, in which users produce their own interactive internet TV channel. This last one included a studio opened in Liverpool's oldest high-rise housing bloc. Coronation Court, where residents produced sports shows as well as documents of their lives and homes, which, contrary to the popular notion that housing towers are a failed utopian experiment of the sixties, they in fact love. Common People, a series of programs, included "African Hair-Styles and Make-Up Tips," and "Sometimes Chicken Sometimes Dhal."

We live in Miami, one of the lowest-lying coastal cities in the United States. Here, sunny day flooding from sea level rise and high tides is already a reality. Images of octopi floating in parking garages and Miamians wading through flooded intersections on their way to work are already old news. No one is coming to save

us-this, too, is old news. What tools do we need here? This is the doomsday that we are pedaled: saltwater infiltrates Biscayne Aquifer, rendering tap water undrinkable and collapsing the sewage system, as residents flee en masse like twenty-first-century Dust Bowl refugees, while for those who stay, instead of bikini shops and coffee-dispensing cafeteria ventanitas where old Cuban men gather to argue their insane politics, what awaits is a submerged city of undrivable highways surrounded by virus and excrementfilled oceans with dead bodies churning in them. Lives are reduced to fending off the latest Chikungunya or Zika strain in soggy and unbearably hot neighborhoods. If we want to avoid the sordid fate already forecast for Miami by journalists and scientists, several obvious and immediate questions present themselves. How do we live with water? The question is not at all about how to vote on referendums on city-engineered sea walls or how to design breezily apocalyptic luxury condos fortified to withstand category 5 storms. Rather: What techniques are useful across the unstable plane of our everyday lives? Amphibious, boat, and stilted housing are architectures with a rich history here. They are found in Miccousukee Everglades lifeways as much as in weird suburban houses on barges. How can we learn and equip ourselves with the latest design innovations for aqua-urban futures?

Heat waves, resilience practitioners propose, will be the urban question of the future. Miami's extreme heat, its increased peak temperatures every year, add to the problem of rising water. A Supersauna makes sense in the green meadow among the mountains of Bergen or along the sandy Baltic Sea shores of Møn. but Miami remains humid and hot way past Halloween. Without air-conditioning not only will life be miserable and deadly but, given current construction, within six months half the houses will be rotting. Should buildings be retrofit and constructed from rotresistant wood, using cypress as local indigenous communities have since they got here? How viable is solar-powered air-conditioning? The list of questions on the table is endless: about how and where to produce, distribute, and store food; how to maintain drinkable water, whether by restoring historic Everglades flows or by turning disused septic tanks into rainwater catchment cisterns. The questions also touch upon desire and pleasure, new forms of sociality built alongside everything else, and on the refusal of accepting images of miserable survival as representative of the only futures possible here.

As we explore the question of tools in our own iguana-jammed city, it can be taken up by anyone anywhere. Tools are, after all,

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developed in response to specific needs and contexts, in rapport with practical and spiritual understandings of the places we live in and in relation to the tangle of different modalities of living available (or potentially available) to us—mutual aid meeting domestication where necessary meeting lit cruisers and limousines. This fluency is as relevant in dense urban settings as in the wilderness. The question should never be high versus low tech, but what suits us, what allows us, here where we are, to give shape to our own chosen forms of living? In some cases the techniques are already out there, waiting for us to grab hold of them. And if they are not, what new forms can we devise? What forms of sharing space and ties, beyond the vaunted "community" that they keep telling us about, can we build? Where, with whom, and with what tools?

When Superflex describes Free Beer as "a beer which is free in the sense of freedom, not in the sense of free beer," they hit on a key point: even when speaking of life basics (fire, water, shelter, food), the matter of tools is never one of survival but rather of freedom and autonomy. When we make use of tools. the world unfreezes. We take our lives in hand and shape them. participating in the world, rather than being hostage to its apparent order. Returning to 'practical use' equally has a determining social dimension. There are populations that will not be allowed back into the economy and there are places beyond repair. In such cases, it's not a question of choice; rather, the freedom and necessity may become entwined in a new and complicated way, while the old points of reference may not be useful. In the past, politics in one way or another entailed a set of rules or prescriptions for how to live or what to do, but, in large part, such prescriptions are part of the ruins. There is no answer given in advance. Whether or not biogas stoves help Morogoro families become self-sufficient in light and energy while also suiting their cooking tastes is a question only these families can answer.

Souring on trends in art and theory that push toward some kind of exacerbated sensing of imminent collapse (and thereby disactivate from the get-go the power that ordinary use may hold) is not the same thing as saying that the world *is* fully knowable. Likewise, acknowledging the autonomy and power of the nonhuman world does not demand we disavow our own capacities or spiral into the safe space of doom-thinking. Faced with the power and tumult of our environments, with the challenges and often tragedies that they deliver, why not see these things as incitements, provocations, gifts, unknowns, singular presences—anything but enslavements. That the world is in many ways unknowable to us—who would

175 really say otherwise?—does not require that we also say "All power to the nonhumans." We can explore the kinds of life possible amid volatile inhuman forces and in this way reinvent our own autonomy. In taking up a pragmatic orientation, those who experiment with tools are transformed from people who simply live to people who design the conditions for their lives. And, of course, a tool may not work. It may break. The water might rise much faster than we expected. Nothing is guaranteed, and tools can't operate the same way that transcendent rules or moral codes do. Plus, no one can say exactly where we are headed. Not knowing-or not going where one of modernity's stories said we would go-does not necessarily mean an experience of "terror," nor need it define us as powerless, vulnerable, incomplete, or dispossessed. Rather, not knowing means that life is a question; this is an especially poignant fact as transcendent guidelines continue to wither. Old frameworks should not be mobilized thoughtlessly to understand new, singular realities. We can welcome the now rather than shoving it into the categories that we are needlessly hauling from the past. All this isn't such a big deal. It just means you can try anything.

Notes

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