

## Abundant futures

### Works From the TBA21 Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Collection

In collaboration with Centro de Creación Contemporánea de Andalucía, C3A, Córdoba

Opening April 1, 2022, curated by Daniela Zyman

“Enacting abundance means different ways of building relationships across vast differences, best described as solidarity or collective movement in support of conditions that enable differently situated people and other-than-humans to realize abundance, to build a world of many worlds.”

—Rosemary-Claire Collard, Jessica Dempsey, and Juanita Sundberg, "A Manifesto for Abundant Futures"

“Abundant Futures” is an essay exhibition that puts forward a daring attempt to imagine worldmaking and ecological futures from the condition of abundance and fullness. It is framed around the notion of abundance not as a concept but as a vital principle, at a collective moment of anxiety about the future, inviting us to rethink the horizons of action and thought. This thought reached me via its negative form, embodied in ever-present rules of austerity and the persuasive but fraught argument of the scarcity of resources and energy provisions. Scarcity and austerity are rationalizations for domination and violence, which result in disastrous outcomes, from neocolonial expansion, relentless extractivism, to the defunding of critical services and infrastructures.

The lens of “Abundant Futures” guides me towards artistic proposals in TBA21’s collection that build on the vital principles of life itself—the principles of multiplication, inventiveness, beauty, and relationality. I take stock of ideas that complicate the distinctions between human science and natural science. Some artists confuse these hard boundaries by sharing consciousness with other beings and matter. They picture the world as webs of lively and agitated matter-forms of divergent degrees of complexity, through which human life becomes intrinsically enmeshed with that of nonhumans, and how our ability to form communities depends on all those who participate in our becoming. Other artists embrace traditions of orality, storytelling, craft, and practice, aspiring to

decenter the way a particular form of knowledge has settled and displaced other ways of knowing, by force or convention. I want to amplify the difference between the claim to the mastery of the world, supported by the injurious argument embodied in scarcity, and the wealth of visionary, life-affirming, and reparative propositions that gesture at the multiplicity of worlds humans and nonhumans cohabit, a world of many worlds.

My curiosity about these questions entails three interwoven analytical moves. First, I consider a notion of ecology as “the recognition of the immense complexity involved for any entity—human or nonhuman—to have a voice, to take a stand, to be counted, to be represented, to be connected with others.”<sup>1</sup> This view departs from the discourse of naturalization that seeks to “treat humans like plants or animals.” Second, I discuss how the framework of scarcity has insinuated political and economic regimes of governance, affecting some bodies more than others, and aggravates social inequalities perpetuated in the histories of racialization and nation-making. Lastly, I focus on the restitution of “esoteric” ideas and ontologies labeled as metaphorical, poetic, premodern, mystical, or activist. All those terms are deployed to marginalize approaches that are not considered epistemological (not creating knowledge). They animate, I would argue, methodologies for transformative disobedience (or wildness/madness), applicable to social philosophy and ecological thought.

### **The Ecological Matrix**

“Abundant Futures” pays attention to the ecological matrix, what nourishes it, what circulates and gathers in it, what makes it inventive and plentiful, and everything and everyone that populates it. As a descriptive and experimental science, ecology aims to articulate the interrelatedness of all organic and nonorganic matter. It also stimulates leaps of imagination for intuiting many modes of entanglement and interconnectedness.

Seeking abundance invites us to come to terms with the conflicts arising between ecology and identity, nature and authenticity. Rather than flattening out and delegitimizing other relations of social hierarchy and marginalization, readily erased by the imaginaries of undifferentiated

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, “The Parliament of Nature,” *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 458–59.

entanglements lodged in ecocentrism, thinking abundance under ecological paradigms calls into question and calibrates each being's power to act. When ecology is naturalized toward political ends, categories like race, gender, or class get all too easily silenced and eroded or contrarywise posited as being authentic.

As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson argues, humanity (the attested status as fully recognized human) can only be relinquished by those groups and individuals who have found admission into the normative category of "the human."<sup>2</sup> Jackson is an eloquent interlocutor arguing for more leveled cross-discursive connections to be drawn between the enthusiastically imaginative unbordering program of posthumanism and the putatively stable and hierarchical ontological divisions between humans, plants, animals, and stones. Said differently, following Elizabeth Povinelli, entangled worlds are neither devoid of borders nor restricted to a particular, bounded subject. Striving for abundance, some entities are afforded vast liberties and capacities to alter their worlds, while others are being subjugated by external forces.

Walking the path toward abundant futures calls for a "discursive elasticity"<sup>3</sup> that allows abundance to be used to shape the world in any number of ways. It can serve more appropriate political, philosophical, and strategic grounds for "a patterned vision of how to move and what to fear in the topography of an impossible but all-too-real present," claims Donna Haraway, "in order to find an absent, but perhaps possible other present."<sup>4</sup> While embracing the promise of an other present of exuberance, we need to work through human-nonhuman relations in careful and critical ways.

## Inventing Scarcity

"Abundant Futures" is a visionary proposition, as it is radically antithetical to the catastrophic predictions that define future conditions on earth. But scarcity has insinuated itself into how we imagine our predicament. Radical abundance was lost with the biblical fall of man, and the

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<sup>2</sup> Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism," *Feminist Studies* vol. 39, no. 3, eds. Kalpana Rahita Seshadri, Michael Lundblad, and Mel Y. Chen (2013): 669–85.

<sup>3</sup> Peter C. Van Wyck, *Primitives in the Wilderness: Deep Ecology and the Missing Human Subject* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Donna J. Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," *The Haraway Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 61.

vagaries of history were marked by high and low moments of perceived opulence and insufficiency. Fluctuations and disruptions of so-called ecosystem services—the delivery of nutrients and other resources derived from rivers, oceans, and land—were frequent in recorded history. Perceived temporal “shortages”—in other words, the inability of the ecosystem to produce the volume desired by harvesters—were caused by fluctuating temperatures on the planet and the pressures exerted by growing human populations, deforestation, damming, the disposal of sewage and industrial effluent into watercourses, as well as fishing and animal and agricultural farming. With vast numbers of European consumers eating, as Richard C. Hoffman puts it, “beyond the bounds of natural local ecosystems,”<sup>5</sup> the colonization and refashioning of distant environments rapidly became an extension in the satisfaction of Europe’s imperial hunger. The much-coveted “new world” was as much triggered by a gold rush as a reprovisioning of staple commodities and “frontier food”<sup>6</sup> to satisfy heightened demand in the wake of Europe’s ecological degradation.

Against the backdrop of the loss of imperial dominions and the Great Famine in Ireland, the British economist Thomas Malthus laid the theoretical foundations for the scarcity model (also referred to as the Malthusian catastrophe), based on the principles of perpetual, rather than temporal, insufficiency. In the 1826 *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, he argues that the “the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man”<sup>7</sup> could not satisfy growing demands, given the rate of population increase on the planet. Malthus’s perception of scarcity as a condition of human existence would serve as a universalist and long uncontested economic axiom, justifying the normalization of poverty and underdevelopment. More recent political economists’ visions of the limits to growth and the idea of population explosion echo his concerns.

However, as the geographer David Harvey notes, “It is often erroneously accepted that scarcity is something inherent in nature, when its definition is inextricably social and cultural in origin.”<sup>8</sup> If we accept a theory of scarcity and its correlating natural poverty, Harvey goes on to show, “then the inevitable results are policies directed toward class or ethnic repression at home and policies of

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<sup>5</sup> Richard C. Hoffmann, “Frontier Foods for Late Medieval Consumers: Culture, Economy, Ecology,” *Environment and History* vol. 7, no. 2 (May 1, 2001): 131, <https://doi.org/10.3197/096734001129342432>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 16.

<sup>8</sup> David Harvey, “The Political Implications of Population-Resources Theory,” *Climate & Capitalism* (May 23, 2010), <https://climateandcapitalism.com/2010/05/23/david-harvey-the-political-implications-of-population-resources-theory/>.

imperialism and neo-imperialism abroad.”<sup>9</sup> The socially generated scarcity of resources and their wasteful extraction and disposal implicate the labor, exhaustion, and death/depletion of some human and nonhuman actors in some places to feed the reckless future of a resource-devouring economy imposed by others.

The argument of a shortage of resources is a powerful ideological lever to propagate austerity measures and maintain privilege based on economic inequality. Austerity politics and the defunding of critical services subsume these ideological tenets into the cogs of the “new normal.” Episodic occurrences of economic downturns and “period[s] of insufficiency,”<sup>10</sup> as Nicholas Xenos terms it, are now equaled to general conditions of scarcity, irrespective of the many possibilities afforded by negotiating and compensating for forms of limitation. Austerity rules become the sharpest knife in late liberalism’s toolbox to implement social reforms and discipline the imagination into its authoritarian implementation.

If scarcity is possible, so are, by definition, abundance and sufficiency. Both are social and economic constructs. If placed at the center of a conceptual framework affecting the distribution and use of material and immaterial capacities and the institutions built around them, abundance and sufficiency can have a vital import in reshaping politics and ethics.

## Enacting Abundance

One of the paradoxes of the current economies of scarcity is the celebration and reification of affluence and prosperity in the form of relentless consumerism. A vestige of the Affluent Society, as Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith in his book of the same title named the United States in the decades following World War II, “appeared to have finally solved the riddle of scarcity”<sup>11</sup> and the availability of cheaply produced consumer goods stands in for the belief in progress and material satisfaction. Progress provides the narrative structure within which abundance and scarcity are defanged and as a mechanism for the deliverance from lack and dearth. Countering

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Xenos, *Scarcity and Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 3.

<sup>11</sup> J. Jesse Ramirez, “From Anti-Abundance to Anti-Anti-Abundance: Scarcity, Abundance, and Utopia in Two Science Fiction Writers,” *The Imagination of Limits. Exploring Scarcity and Abundance* (Munich: Rachel Carson Center Perspectives, 2015), 85.

such false utopian promises, writers like Ursula K. Le Guin and Philip K. Dick resorted to anti-abundance science-fictional storytelling to rehabilitate scarcity. J. Jesse Ramírez locates in Dick's 1956 story "Pay for the Printer" and Le Guin's "The Dispossessed" from 1974 a negative history of utopia. "By destroying the United States and reintroducing scarcity," he writes, "Dick created an imaginative space in which a few humble objects can gesture toward a future in which human beings once again control their own destiny."<sup>12</sup>

I am interested in homing in on the braided relation of the abundance/scarcity paradigm developed, in exemplary ways, by both writers. In its most radical pronouncement, scarcity doesn't displace the horizon of abundance but is deemed a voluntary communal choice for enacting, experiencing, and safeguarding personal and collective fullness. Limitedness and abundance are in turn consequentially related. Embracing abundance leads to the profound experience of the limitedness of human life and planetary survival. Paradoxically, limitation generates fullness, attentiveness, and care.

Limitedness in abundance, as I would venture to call this constellation, is a momentous and consequential conflation of ideas for responding to the current exhaustion of bodies and biomes and touches upon traditions that flow from it. It moves us astride from all-too-material and mundane inquiries. Abundant futures, understood in this view, call our attention to untapped non-binary, absent, unknown, spiritual, and mystical reserves. For poets, mystics, spiritualists, and saints of all traditions, the tensions arising between material fulfillment and the spiritual path were brought to bear on their strive for emancipatory social change. As legal scholar Radha D'Souza argues, "Poet-saints were social thinkers and philosophers who were critical of the dominant scholarship, power structures, social inequalities, and injustice."<sup>13</sup> Their works are brimming with brilliantly disobedient conceptions of humanity, freedom, ontology, epistemology, and action, which radically depart from the modern canon of dualism, rationality, and their anchoring in the laws of property, enclosure, and free trade.

In the synthetic and polymorphous cultures of Andalusia and Cordoba, tradition is still deeply rooted and present, in one way or another. "[T]he ability to hold two [or more] opposed ideas in the

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<sup>12</sup> Ramírez, *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Radha D'Souza, "What Can Activist Scholars Learn from Rumi?," *Philosophy East and West* vol. 64, no. 1 (2014): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2014.0001>.

mind at the same time” and accept the complexities, charms, and challenges of deeply felt contradictions distinguished the poet-philosophers-mystics of Al-Andalus and Sepharad, according to medievalist Rosa Menocal.<sup>14</sup> They speak to us today in an always exilic, opaque (to use Édouard Glissant’s term) and wild lenguaje de la frontera (Gloria E. Andalzúa’s phrasing). They were (mainly) men and women “for whom the language of the poetry you recited, and the name of God in your prayers, and the clothes you wore, and the science you believed in did not have to ‘harmonize’ with each other and could even argue with each other and violently disagree and still be loved.”<sup>15</sup> It is this manifold and discordant disobedience that I invoke.

Often “downgraded” as the inspired songs of poets, mystics, and spiritualists, D'Souza elucidates, wild ideas and practices must be welcomed and intensified today. They undertake “troubling” rigid worldviews and the tranquil order produced by over-confidence in knowledge, science, and politics and the complex system of institutions, protocols, and frameworks they shape. The attribute of so-called esotericism is often extended to the work performed by artists, activists, environmentalists, ocean lovers, and other dissidents and non-Western thinkers, whose contributions are cast as idealistic, heterodox, and peripheral. Inspiration, madness, and primitivism are considered close compatriots. Like their medieval brethren, they embody and literalize wildness, madness, and abundance of thoughts and feeling, aspiring to cross metaphorical swords with the powers and forces of repression and their grammar of banalization.

## Coda

Focusing on abundance is a matter of ontology, ethics, and ecological thought. Art, culture, and education join together to advance and reformulate ecological and visionary practices, which shape our experiences of the world. They occupy spaces for the rehearsal of social, ecological, and artistic/poetic scenarios that can alter human interaction with the planet and allow new forms of conviviality to emerge. Rehabilitating the abundance of possibilities after an age of austerity will have to be cultivated and socially enacted. It promises sufficiency and rubs against the always-limited and limiting temptations of prosperity and affluence, which are fundamentally materialistic and extractive.

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<sup>14</sup> Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

If we want to imagine and organize the world differently, we will have to cultivate new horizons for our politics and relations. Shaping abundant futures means supporting already existing worlding practices and learning from them. It means reorganizing work fairly, redistributing what is available across vast differences, giving up what is possible to promote more life, and decreasing our productivity and wastefulness for the benefit of the commons. Guided by an ethic of caring and remedying, the cycles of undoing and destruction at the heart of progress and injustice must be halted. Remediation is based on registering contestations voiced by those who are and feel excluded and marginalized and acknowledging their contributions to more-than-human worldmaking. In these ecologically desperate times, heralding and directing our attention and devotion to what can be said, expressed, spoken, done, or imagined produces new forms of abundance. By embracing the multiple ways of being in the world, we can experience and enact abundance.