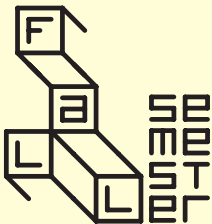
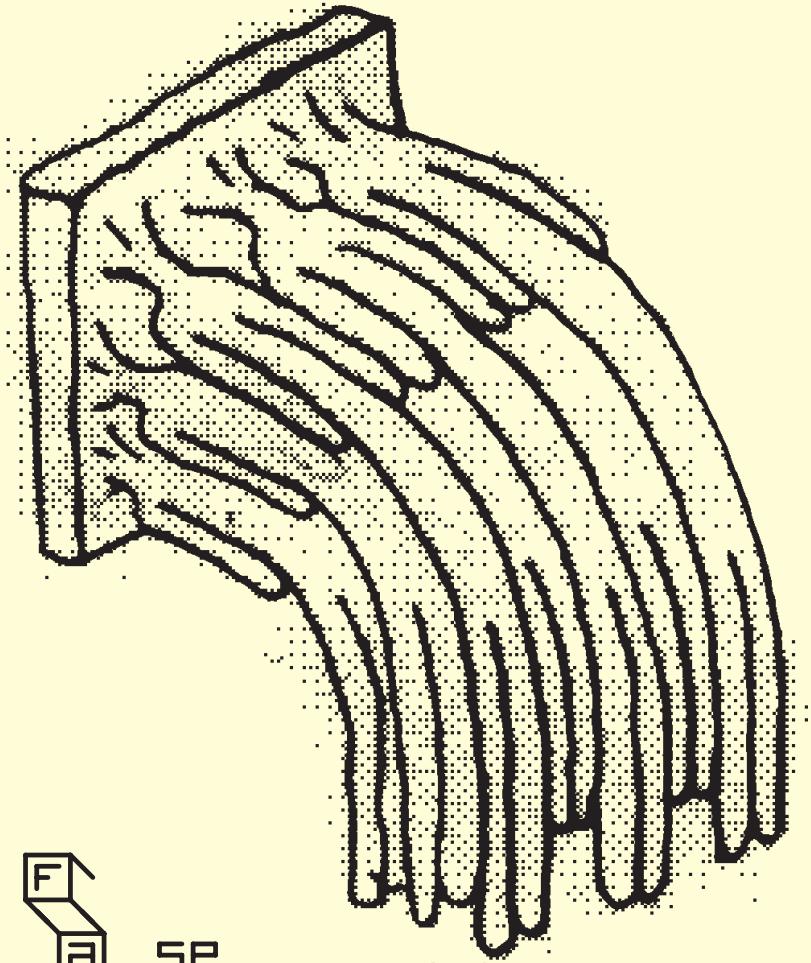


Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk

Ecologies of Existence

– On Approaching Life from
Within the Exhibitionary Complex





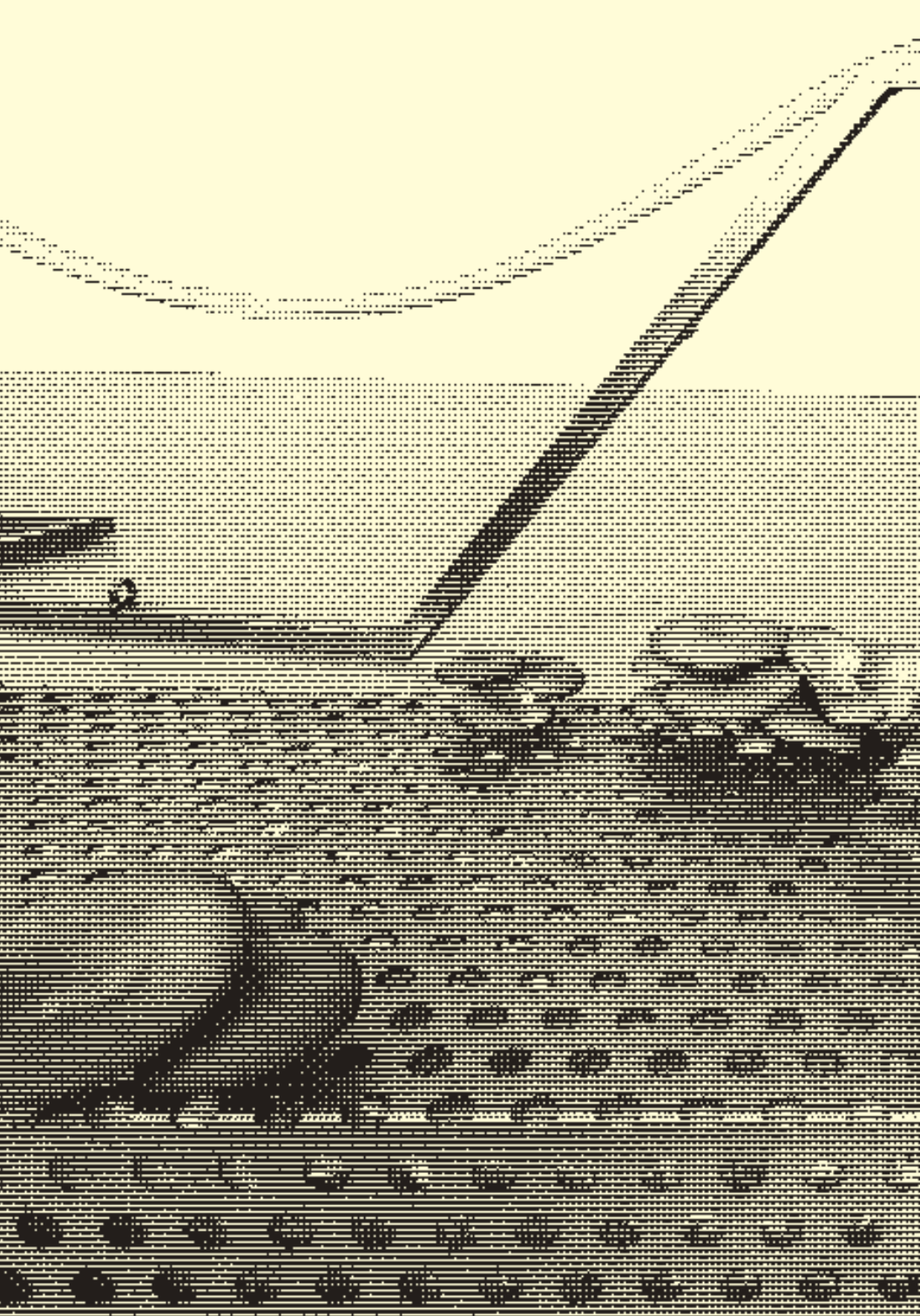
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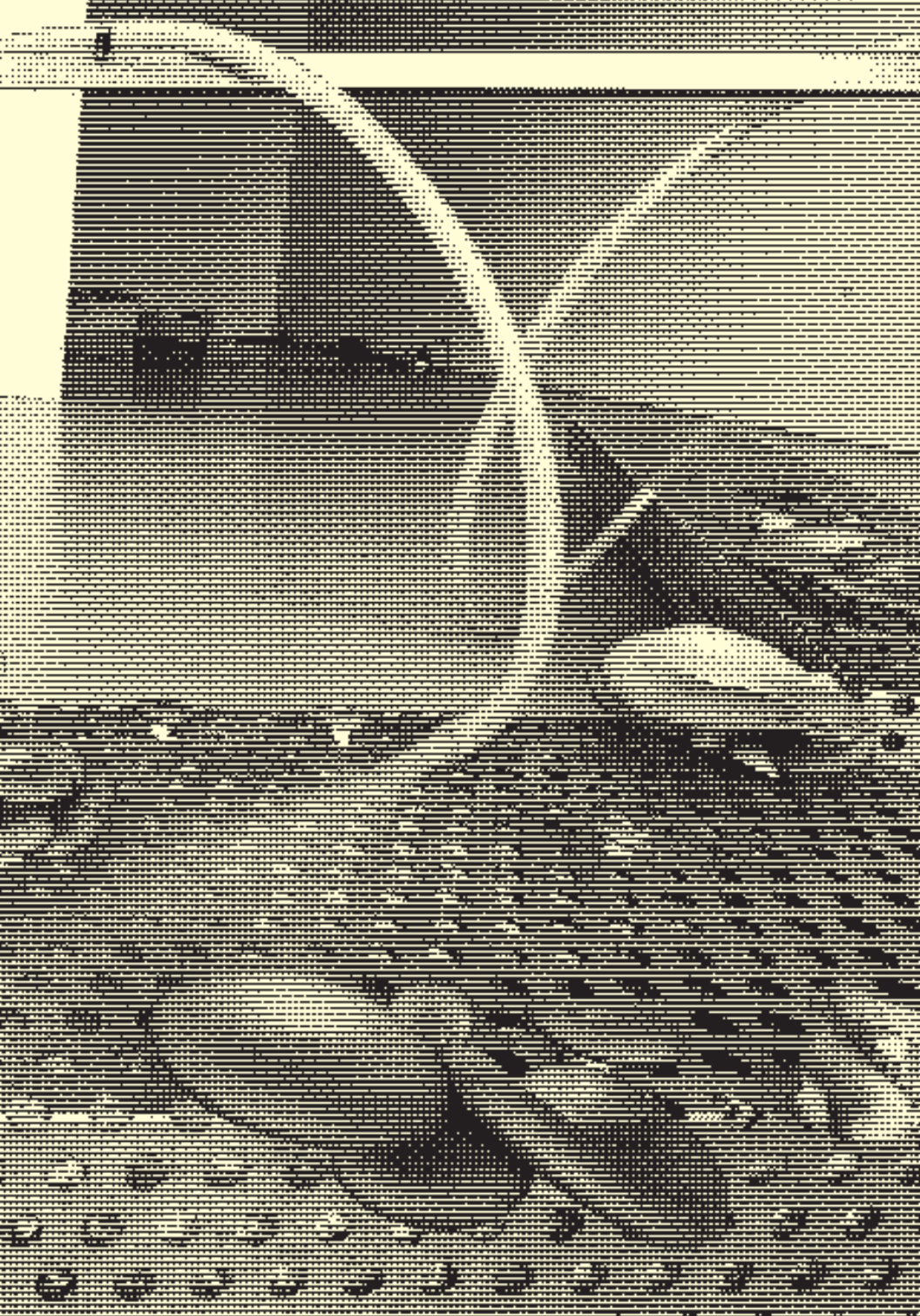
Ecologies of Existence – On Approaching Life from Within the Exhibitionary Complex

Prologue to the Exhibition

Upon entering the exhibition—any imagined example will suffice for the time being—we enter on the loaded grounds of the exhibition space: a cultural field of inter-human energy exchange. A space charged with relations between different actors—artists, curators, staff members, and visitors, among others—each with their different aims, ambitions and intentionalities, and what we might call objects of interrogation, reflection and interaction that have been brought forward and put on display. As an exhibition visitor, we move around in white spaces, roam through repurposed warehouses and grey hangars, and wander in and out of black boxes to

have a lived experience of and encounter with an art object, and with what its respective author had wanted it to say—often cross-referencing our thoughts with the descriptive label presented alongside the art object. With our epistemological maps and preconceived knowledges at hand we may alter our visions accordingly, in response to that what is given on site, and make corrections to our assumptions and common thinking—the refusal to look deeper than a certain level—with the newly acquired addition of those stories and perspectives previously unaccounted for. Here we may indeed speak of a desirable outcome—in the shape of both added and surplus mental values and insights—for an exhibition and its contents, found in the key of the

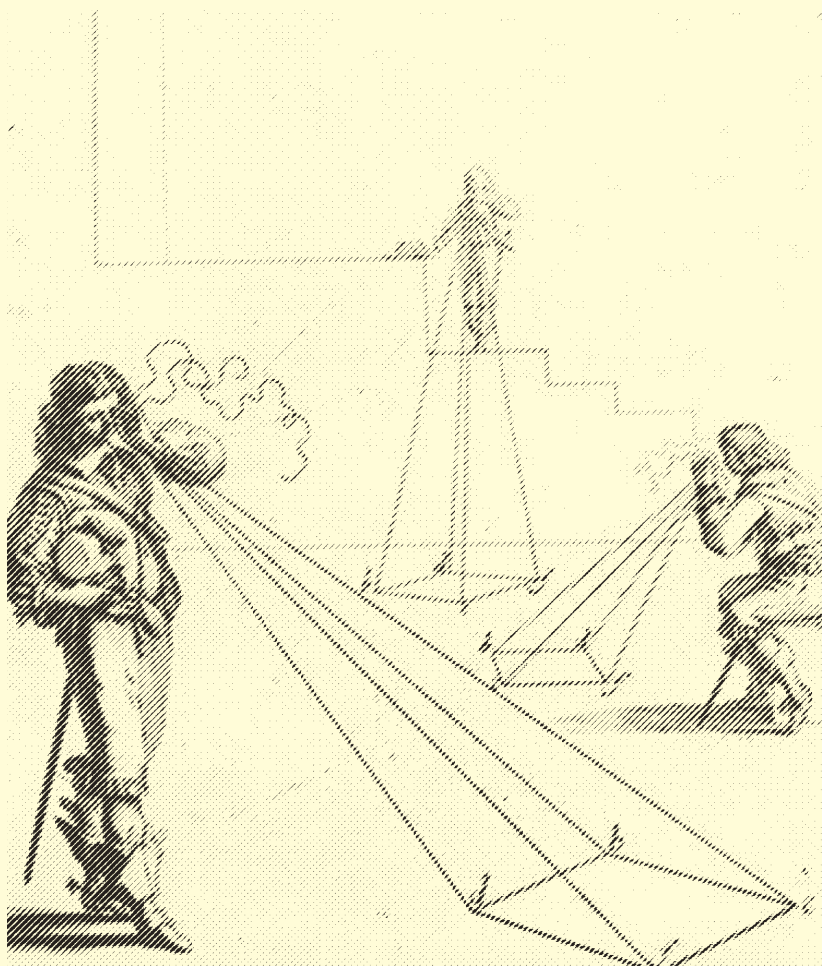




production of subjectivity, on the level of the visitor, that is, in fact, a human being.

At this point it would be worthwhile to make a small incision, an indentation in the basis that allow us to construct such situation, which I have so far been making from a purely anthropocentric perspective. That is to say, there is an inclination to think

that an art object is supposed to exclusively serve a basis that is only completed through the active consideration of the human figure, and that it can acquire no function when it goes unseen. What function does the art object have if it cannot function for us, if we cannot take from it? For the right reasons of activating and legitimizing this cultural



field, surely, but equally an intricate sign of a wholly idealized world consistent on the mind-dependency of matter. Perhaps, indeed, an exhibition is at best a wholly idealized microcosmos, since it was devised as a fragmented mirror representing the cultural field of our making—through critique, resistance, discourse, and so forth. I opened this text with description of the relationality between actors in an exhibition—between visitors and art objects—but would it be worthwhile to seek our inscription into contemporaneity from a different, multidimensional and pluralized perspective, rather than to maintain a binary dialectic between human and art object? By what means could we scale the exhibition format so as to be receptive to polyphonic assemblages, to bypass the commonly implied dichotomies and binaries of internal and external, nature and culture, natural and given versus man-made and artificial, human and non-human agency, and to look for lively, diversified stage-setups and scenarios for an exhibition that would posit an equal footing for other modes of being in the world? I would posit that a

rethinking of the exhibition as a medium with different formats is both urgent and relevant, in order to consider the ways in which matters of concern are visualized and displayed, especially in times of increasing and ongoing human-driven ecological mutations, within a somewhat recently envisioned and highly speculative geological timeframe that is now titled by some as the “Anthropocene.”¹ How can we start to think outside of the perpetual feedback loop of object-subject relations, on the level of the exhibition, especially at a time in which we have created too much world (culture) to continue to be ourselves; humankind having become a burden on the planet, on a geological scale?

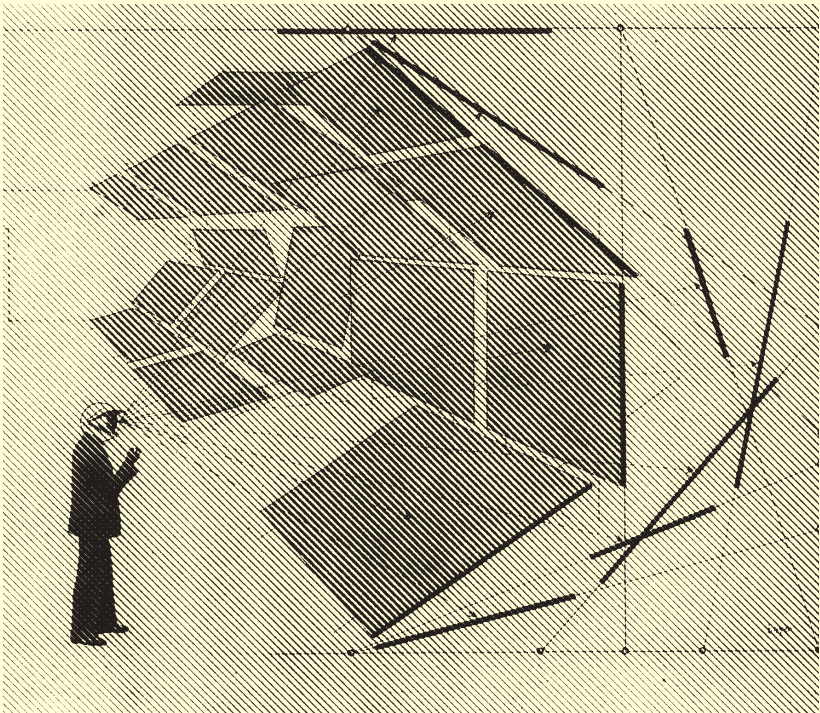
So, how do we visualize matters of concern, from a curatorial perspective, and on the level of the exhibition as a medium? Here I would posit that what is at stake are questions of how and by what means we are enabled to think and conceive of the possibilities of life within the ruins of capitalism.² In this essay I would like to suggest some possibilities for going outside our cultural field—quite paradoxically so—while remaining firmly embedded

within the cultivated environs of the exhibition space—as if it were an ecology turned inward. To essentially seek for a post-anthropocentrism and a non-anthropomorphism, and looking to diversify and make more-dimensional approaches to perception-making and identity-formation on the charged grounds of an exhibition: where species meet, where ontological and epistemological registers clash, overlap and contaminate each other, where the living and inert, organic and an-organic exchange properties, qualities

and performance. Let us begin by looking for what is to be found there—in the exhibition—also, alongside, with, next and in addition to art objects and viewing bodies.

From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern

As curator and writer Vincent Normand argues in his text “The Eclipse of the Witness,” the exhibition as a genre could be seen as a generic object of modernity:



an apparatus of disseminating knowledge and the permanent display of power that, from its early manifestations as the anatomic theatre, the cabinet of curiosities and The Great Exhibition of 1851, has effectively situated and granted license to the viewing body of the human as the central authenticating agent and locus within a scopic regime.³ In modernity's reformation of vision, the figuring capacities of the human body were granted the power of objectification, as Normand writes: "this scopic regime is typical of the modern dualism of subject and object, visually founded in the placement of a detached observer, a subject, at the apex of a perspectival cone whose sides lead to an infinity of objects against which the subject measures itself."⁴ This authenticating perspective, through which the human was thought to have become both *de facto* investigator and reasonable judge of a world of appearances and objects—and thus simultaneously granting itself the status of subject presiding over objects—has arguably paved the way for the human figure to make its retreat and withdraw from nature into culture. With the aid

of a host of mechanical and mathematical instruments—of Cartesian logic—the "outside" world was measured and mediated, effectively channeled and distributed through representational figures as sets of objective truths into a singular anthropocentric reality—what philosopher Alfred North Whitehead would call the bifurcation of nature.⁵

In a world in which encounters based on the notion of a stable, objective backdrop have ceased to exist, by what means could we overcome the persisting modernist aspiration of implementing a symmetrical divide between the human subject and the world of objects and non-humans? In his text "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" philosopher Bruno Latour makes a plea for moving from matters of fact to matters of concern:

"To indicate the direction of the argument, I want to show that while the Enlightenment profited largely from the disposition of a very powerful descriptive tool, that of matters of fact, which were excellent for debunking quite a lot of beliefs, powers, and illusions, it found itself totally disarmed once matters



of fact, in turn, were eaten up by the same debunking impetus. After that, the lights of the Enlightenment were slowly turned off, and some sort of darkness appears to have fallen on campuses. My question is thus: Can we devise another powerful descriptive tool that deals this time with matters of concern and whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care, as Donna Haraway would put it? Is it really possible to transform the critical urge in the ethos of someone

who adds reality to matters of fact and not subtract reality? To put it another way, what's the difference between deconstruction and constructivism?"⁶

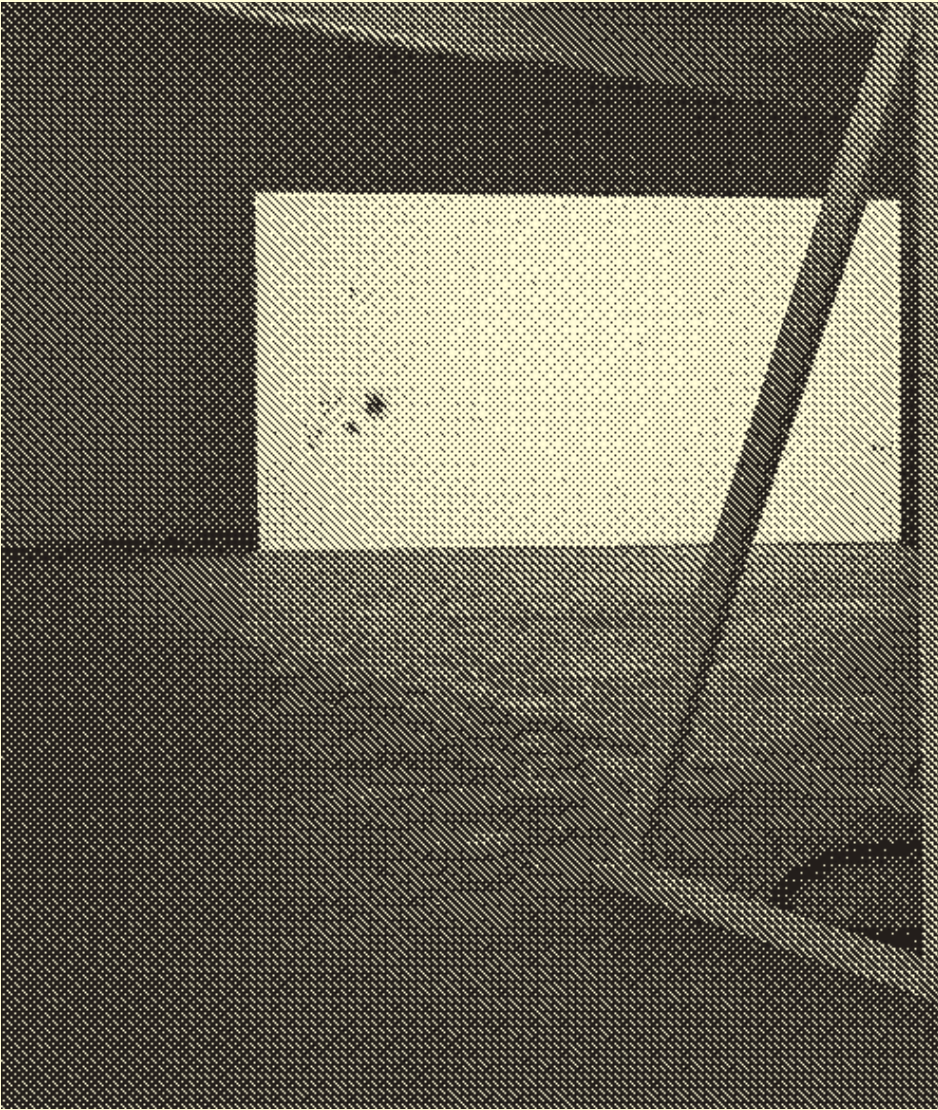
I hold the belief that the "exhibitionary complex"⁷ as we understand it today is still firmly embedded within the regime of "matters of fact"—the human as the measure of all things—and should instead be actualized to cope with the "matters of concern" we are currently facing. This would involve a problematizing of the dialectics between human and

art object, and a reinscribing of ourselves into the mesh of agencies and relations that the exhibition and its unstable surroundings puts forward.

In the exhibition of contemporary art, we may still experience an (over-) indebtedness to modernist traditions: we come across homogeneous “viewing” spaces serving as the backdrop to a cognitive trading floor in which pictorial regimes and material volumes come to hinge on their translation into text and concept. In other words, the exhibition space as a phenomenological space: the realm of lived experience with human intentionality as its operating currency. In the binary dialectic between the human as the subject-in-formation and the artwork as object-of-knowledge the artwork indeed and undoubtedly has agency, it undergoes trials, it elicits reactions, and it becomes describable. However, the instigated dialectical process only seems to move one way since the human is not actively exchanging its figuration with the non-human art object—it only appears to be open to enquiry by means of passive observation and reflection. Here, for the sake of our

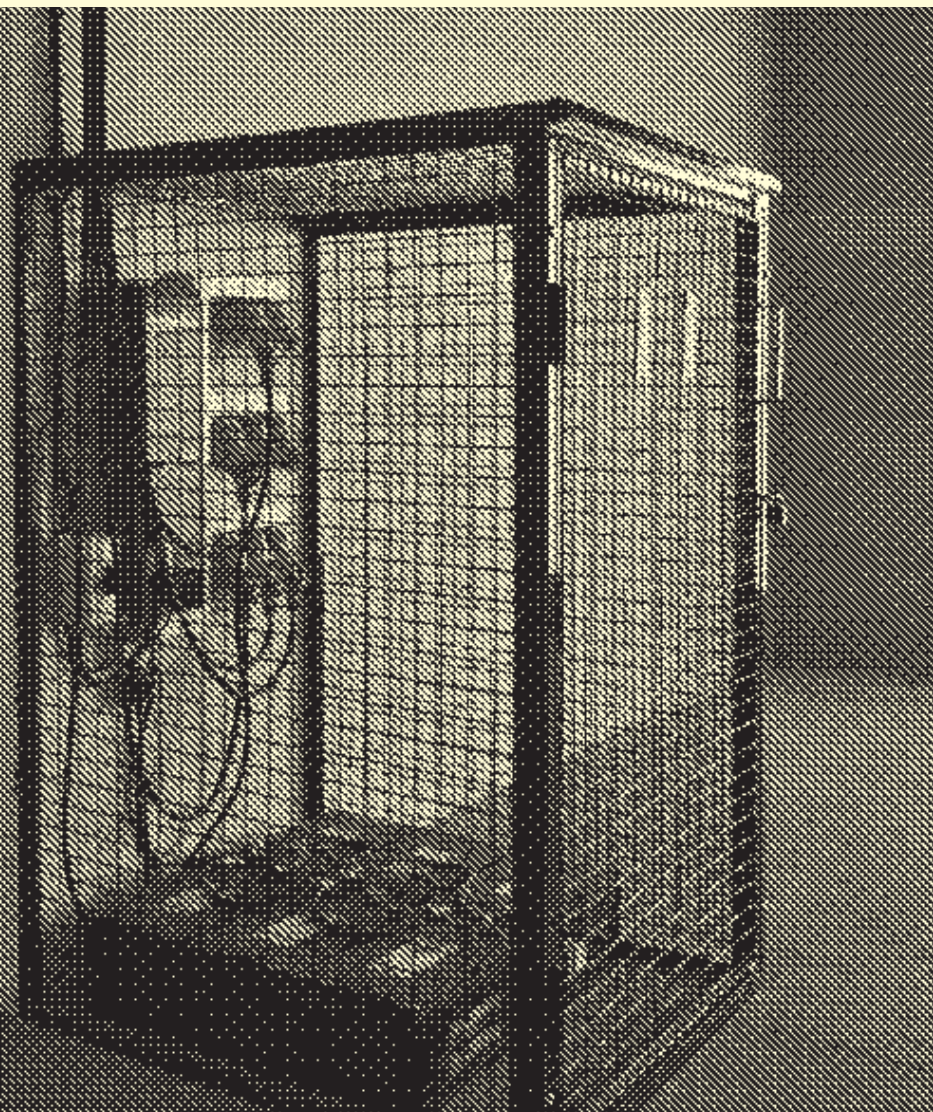
argument, we must also seek to overcome the exhibition’s persistent tendency to construct matters of fact—to posit an art object as something given, stable, autonomously static, and ready for deduction—partly by projecting objects of knowledge (labels, acts of description) onto ontological horizons (the art object being). In other words still, by trying to infer structures of being from structures of lived experience, the exhibition often leads us straight into the bathwater of phenomenology. What we comprehend about the art object, through description and empirical analyses, is by no means an apprehension of the material-discursive nature and being of the art object. A first move in order to emphasize matters of concern would be to renegotiate our empirical space of encounter and not exclusively lead our interpretations back to the sole enrichment of the human mind, which often tries to make sense of the world by claiming there is a mind knowing this world through objects of knowledge. Instead, we must employ our interpretative capacities to apply ourselves back to the world.

An initial way to move toward a more diversified and inclusive exhibitionary



worldview would be to look further into the inner workings of the exhibition, to make its relations explicit. In order to set in motion a process of loosening thought from the constraints of the human, we

must de-normalize what is held still and (not) presented to us. We must become hairsplitters and paranoid readers that are willing to move beyond the thinking and behavior that refuses to look deeper than



the givenness of our actions and the appearance of things. In this newly established experiment we cannot simply pick and choose according to our preferences, since the humblest props now play a

role, and there is no longer a distinction between things and the environment drawn around them. Foreground and background start to dissolve, and we must become open to encounters with all inhabitants





of the space left open between humans and what is deemed to be an art object. Soon we may realize that within an expanded field of exhibition entities—those elements present and mighty real, but not granted the status of art object—have now become prominent actors as well: from the plinth to the exit sign, from the Hantarex monitor to the plant, from the press release to the set of headphones on a stool, from the invigilator to the fluorescent fixture, from the wall text to the projection booth, from the display vitrine to the wandering dog, from the wall label to the slide projector, from the socket to the sound shower, from sound spill to daylight, from a leakage in the ceiling to a temporal wall, and so forth.

The exhibition space is indeed densely inhabited by entities that, were it not for rendering ourselves sensitive to them, would casually bypass our senses entirely not only as enablers and supporters of art objects, but equally as subjects by and of themselves. We are obliged to read and face them on their own terms as actors with figurations, trajectories, and functions of their own. Take for instance the plinth

with its longstanding historical connection with the hierarchical underpinnings of the empire, unearthing and elevating those statuettes of powerful figures to unseen heights, allowing them to exercise symbolic power over its population; the plinth's gradual embedding within natural history and anthropological museums, where they created a distance between those artifacts deemed to be foreign and external to western civilization—the idea of a refusal to become grounded within a context—to the plinth's inscription into the space of contemporary art where it equally functions as placeholder, although often more ambiguously so. Its function as a creator of distance cannot be exhausted, as long as we wish to remain respectful of the material righteousness of the plinth-being. Or the Hantarax monitor, as another example—finding its inscription into the exhibition via arcade halls, betting shops and railways as information displays—with their robust appearance, bringing a much-desired weightiness and becoming a host for otherwise immaterial sources. The temporal wall dictating and carving out alternate pathways;

the headphones creating intimacy and prompting an acoustic identity wholly different from the open circuit; the kilometers of wire, cable, string and extension cord that become the fundamental enablers of perception. By engaging in a process of rendering ourselves sensitive to an extended field of exhibition entities, we might start to see that what revolves around, within, and beyond any art object, resolves to be just as serious and important as that which any given scopic scenario aims to convey.⁸ This position enables us to engage in the politics of location via the politics of display: a process of consciousness-raising via the exhibition as a seemingly self-contained unit, toward a widening of the frame, a registering of—in the words of Latour—“more reality thanks to the use of a larger number of templates.” He continues, “Pluralism is here understood not as a plurality of points of view on the same reality but as a multiplicity of types of agencies to register more reality—hence the phrase ‘mode of existence.’”⁹

We are living in precarious times, in a world

where entangled ways of living and collaborative survival become increasingly important—Tsing calls this “contamination as collaboration,” the idea that we are enabled to transform through encounter and active perception-making.¹⁰ Could we envision the exhibition as a potent and viable ground for envisioning new collaborative patchworks?

From Fieldwork-Taking to Patchwork-Making

As discussed above, if the entities encountered in an exhibition—specifically those that are not granted the status of art object—are thought of as self-organizing and withdrawn, we are confronted with the problem of how we, as humans, could be enabled to think and act within multiple ontologies, and not only the subjectivity of the human subject. As the exhibition is a space that is constantly becoming but never quite arriving, we are entrusted with the task to seek for a metamorphic subject that is equally multiple and becoming, responsive and quick on its feet. I am

thinking here of a human that is willing to speak and think from a decentralized and post-anthropocentric perspective, on the charged grounds of the exhibition amidst a multitude of beings. We are obliged to think and to grapple with our surroundings, not from a perspective that fantasizes a relation between being and knowing, but rather in terms of the human body being immersed in radically immanent relations, to paraphrase the words of philosopher Rosi Braidotti.¹¹ She has written extensively about the idea that we do not only think with the mind, but with and through the entire fleshed existence: that we simply cannot step outside the bodies that we inhabit—the limits of our skin also demarcating the limits of our perception. In the interview “Borrowed Energy” she writes: “We always imagine from our bodies—and why should we considering that we still live on a planet populated by humanoids who think of themselves as humans, in different ways, with different points of reference? Our very embodiment is a limit, as well as a threshold; our flesh is framed by the morphology

of the human body, it is also always already sexed and hence differentiated.”¹²

On the level of the exhibition, this kind of human embodiment may be activated by engaging in processes of applied ontology: a relationship-oriented approach in the register of speech acts, of inviting, of sharing, of rendering oneself sensitive to the call and response from things, of attuning oneself to matters of concern. This effort of vocalizing relationships between human and non-human agents, both living and inert, would surely invoke a diplomatic stance that treads rather lightly since most of the things encountered in the space of an exhibition—art object or not—may be thought of as unresponsive to our calls, given their apparent silence. However, simultaneously, we as humans may acknowledge the difference-making between entities that we conduct on our own behalf. This is precisely the point at which we should not instigate ourselves as arbiters of truthful meaning and unidirectional understanding, by adding additional mental building blocks, among free

associations, but rather speculate on whether the thing encountered would have said exactly the same thing if we were to speak and understand the same language. This is also the point at which we should avoid a deconstructive rewording of the meanings and functionalities, linguistic plays and private languages allocated to the entities we encounter, but instead extend our minds and apply our bodies to the world by means of establishing communities open to possible material, affective, and practical acts of “reworlding.”¹³ To my mind the exhibition is a privileged site in the sense that it allows us to construct communities and forums as a base for the material formulation of the possible, charged with ambivalences. Curators are often prone to employ the aforementioned multitude of “supporting” entities as a spatial and written language of objects for the optimization of viewing conditions, for the perceptual grounding of art objects, but let us deviate and rather rely on their function, their being in and of this world, let us emphasize that they equally make perception

for themselves whilst enabling our perception to take flight, that they give shape to our imaginaries. As it matters what stories tell what stories, we may need to “learn to stay with the trouble” and engage in practices that prioritize “making-with” rather than “self-making.”¹⁴ A multidimensional and conductive type of thinking about the possibilities of life and to conceive of more livable futures.

To conclude with some matters of concern: in the midst of ecological mutations and devastations, the radical depletion of life forms, and the continuous extraction from the material registers of the Earth, we should employ the exhibition medium to devise what Latour would call “metamorphic zones”—“where humans and non-humans keep exchanging their properties” as to become “friends of interpretable objects”¹⁵—or what Tsing would define as “polyphonic assemblages”—the gathering of various entities with their different rhythms, scales and reaches, as a result from world-making projects, human and not human.¹⁶ Let us remind ourselves that the exhibition is and should not be

considered or employed as a static and stable instance of a universal model that would structure the world as an ordered wholeness from which we can pick and choose, and return to our business and extinction as usual—although, admittedly, that is still rather often the case. Conveniently safe and comfortable as its confines may seem or be even, we ought to consider the exhibition as a space to think the world that is actually being lived by us, in turn confronting us with the inability to confront ourselves with the consequences of the world we are in fact engaged in. Here the exhibition as ecology does not unify, it is a battlefield, a conflict about the tissues of being anything at all. Let us meet on the assembling grounds

of the exhibition so we may attune ourselves to the world talking back us, to increase our perceptive stature and trying to grow aware as to receive as much of the truly strange things we may come to encounter in its spaces, in order to transform ourselves, our attitudes and practices toward unpredictable times to come. Here we may as well face the idea that the life force contained in the exhibition and its spaces can no longer be read without thinking through the porous walls of our institutions. We must go outside of culture by means of culture, using the exhibition as a place from which to depart and return. To see what subsisting and co-present passages we can provide for whilst learning to stay with the trouble.¹⁷

1 Geologists have begun to call our time the Anthropocene, the epoch in which human disturbance outranks other geological forces. For a discussion of the Anthropocene, see: McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red* (New York: Verso Books, 2015); Bruno Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” *New Literary History* 45 (2014): 1–18; and Rory Rowan, “Extinction as Usual?: Geo-Social Futures and Left Optimism,” *e-flux journal* 56th Venice Biennale (July 31, 2015), <http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/extinction-as-usual-geo-social-futures-and-left-optimism>.

2 Here I am paraphrasing anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing from her book: *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 18–25.

3 Vincent Normand, “The Eclipse of the Witness: Natural Anatomy and the Scopic Regime of Modern Exhibition Machines,” in *Ecologising Museums*, ed. L’Internationale Online and Sarah Werkmeister (L’Internationale Online, 2016), e-book, 91.

4 *Ibid.*, 97.

5 “Bifurcation is what happens whenever we think the world is divided into two sets of things: one which is composed of the fundamental constituents of the universe—invisible to the eyes, known to science, yet real and valueless—and the other which is constituted of what the mind has to add to the basic building blocks of the world in order to make sense of them,” from Bruno Latour, “What is Given in Experience? A Review of Isabelle Stengers ‘Penser avec Whitehead,’” *Boundary 2* 32 no. 1 (spring 2005): 222–37.

6 Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run of out Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2014): 232.

7 The term “exhibitionary complex” stems from the eponymous essay by sociologist Tony Bennett, first published in *new formations*4 (Spring 1988). In his essay, Bennett discusses Michel Foucault’s perspective on the institutional creation of knowledge and power, for which he draws a distinction between “institutions of confinement” such as prisons, asylums, and reformatories

(which are Foucault’s focus) and “institutions of exhibition” such as museums. Where Foucault identifies a society of surveillance (panopticon penitentiary), distinct from the society of spectacle found in antiquity (public floggings and executions), Bennett suggests that the two exist simultaneously: the self-disciplining nature which surveillance engenders is reinforced through the spectacle of exhibition, seeking to “transform that problem [of order] into one of culture” “winning hearts and minds as well as the disciplining and training of bodies.” To illustrate this point, the author refers to Graeme Davison’s description of the Crystal Palace: the Crystal Palace reversed the panoptical principle by fixing the eyes of the multitude upon an assemblage of glamorous commodities. The panopticon was designed so that everyone could be seen; the Crystal Palace was designed so that everyone could see.

8 A debate that media theorist Jussi Parikka has exemplified most eloquently in his book: *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis and

London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

9 Bruno Latour, "How to Better Register the Agency of Things," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 34 (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2016), 97.

10 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 27–28.

11 Vermeulen, "Borrowed Energy," *frieze* (12 August

2014), <https://frieze.com/article/borrowed-energy>.

12 Ibid.

13 Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015).

14 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London:

Duke University Press, 2016).

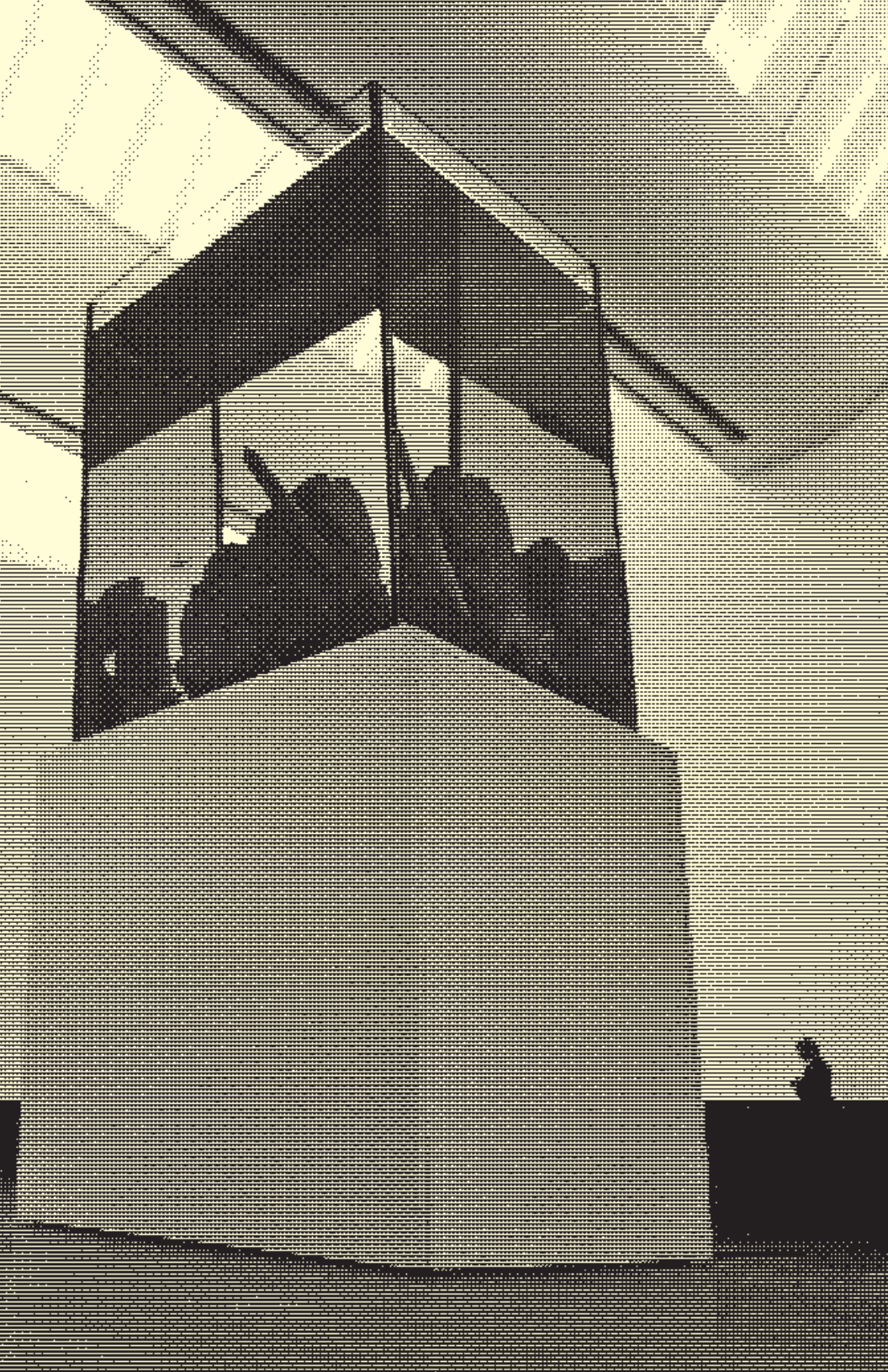
15 Latour, "How to Better Register the Agency of Things," 96.

16 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 27–28.

17 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk is a curator and a writer. He has worked at a number of institutions including SMBA (Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam), DRAF (David Roberts Art Foundation) and most recently as Curatorial Fellow at TENT in Rotterdam. In September 2012 he founded The Office for Curating, which is currently based in Rotterdam. Recent exhibition projects include the group exhibition *Spending Quality Time With My Quantified Self* (2016) at TENT,

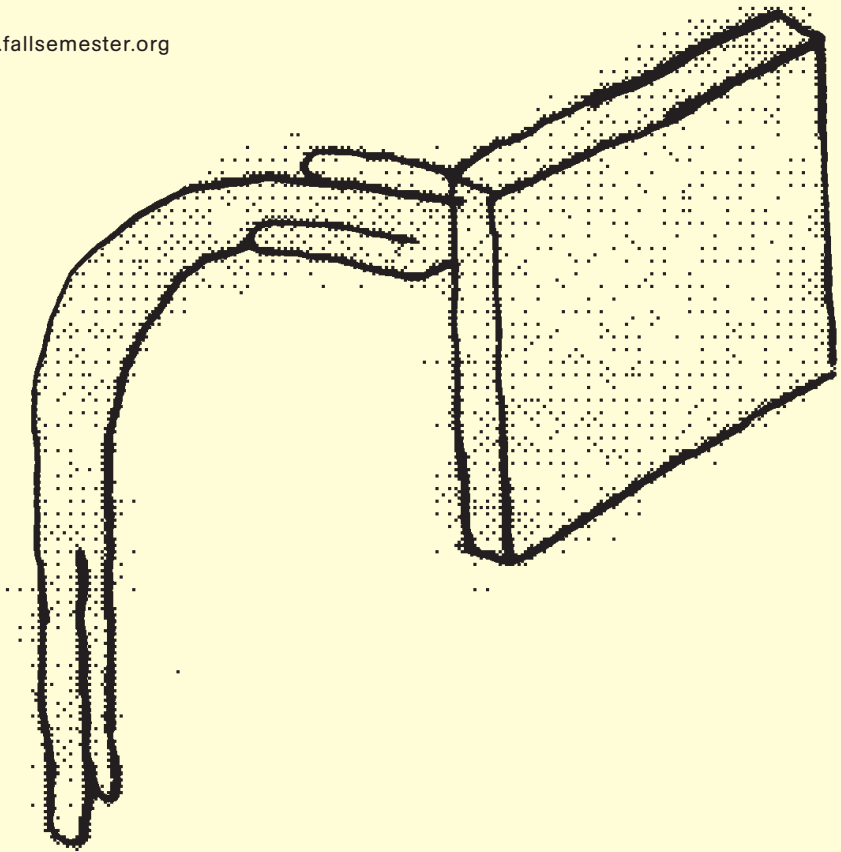
Rotterdam; the solo exhibition *Sliding under Traces* (2016) by artist Paul Geelen at A Tale of a Tub in Rotterdam; *The Earthbound*, a screening series that took place at Cannonball, Miami (2015); the group exhibition *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (2015) at TENT, Rotterdam; the group exhibition *Percussive Hunter* (2015) at Akbank Sanat, Istanbul; the group exhibition *John Smith, the Posthuman* (2014) at the Bonnefontenmuseum, Maastricht.



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