

## **Brief Manifesto in the Time of Pandemic**

On behalf of the Malgré Tout Collective we present in this “Brief Manifesto” consisting of five pathways, reflections and practical hypotheses, to share with whomever may be interested. We hope this comes as a contribution to help others think and act in these times of obfuscating complexity.

### **1. The Return of the Body**

Throughout the past forty years we’ve witnessed the triumph and undisputed domination of the neoliberal system in every corner of the planet. In amongst the different currents that cross this kind of system one in particular seems to define the *forma mentis*<sup>1</sup> of our age, that is the tendency to consider bodies as mere background noise, a nuisance in authority’s tale. Real bodies *annoy* because they’re too “heavy” and too opaque, wanting, living and therefore too elusive to the linear logic of prediction. For too long the objectives pursued by neoliberalism’s practices and politics have consisted in wanting to de-territorialise (to borrow Deleuze’s expression) these bodies, *virtualise* them, reduce them to raw material meant for manipulation, “human capital” to make use of at one’s own whims within the market circuits. They’re expected to be disciplined, displaced without criteria, flexible and ready to *adapt* (a leitmotif of our times) to the necessities determined by the structure of the macroeconomy. In this extreme abstraction bodies of the undocumented, those of the unemployed, those who are not “as they should be”, the drowned bodies in the Mediterranean Sea or the ones kept in detention centres, in short superfluous bodies become simple numbers, of meaningless value, of no corporeity<sup>2</sup> and therefore without humanity. In the context of science and technology, this tendency is expressed in the idea that “everything is possible”, which recognises no biological or cultural limit to the pathological desire for organic deregulation. Henceforth we’ll be having to deal with the possibility of boosting organic mechanisms, the possibility of living up to a thousand years, indeed of becoming immortal! This is nothing more than the will to reach a post-organic life, one in which we’d be able to overcome the constraints of bodies, by nature too imperfect and too frail. The catastrophic

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<sup>1</sup> The ways and manners which shape how we think and behave.

<sup>2</sup> Of no bodily substance.

acceleration of the Anthropocene over the past thirty years stands as a testament of the deadly impact of the technological “everything is possible”, which not only ignores the deep singularities of organic processes, but crushes them as well.

It's in this world, convinced that it's possible to relieve ourselves of our very own limits, that the pandemic crops up. Suddenly, we realise that our bodies have returned, even if in catastrophic conditions and under threat. Bodies have become once again a part of reality and are once again considered the main subject of the politics enacted. We are reminded of them. The return of bodies, newly reconsidered, metaphorically opens a window through which to glimpse at different ways we could take action. To start with, we better acknowledge that power can - when it so wishes - enact the policies needed to protect and safekeep bodies and life. The King is naked!

Global finance leaders now understand, in amazement, that the economy, their sacred monster, cannot do without living beings slaving to make it work. After trying to persuade us that the only “reality” to be taken seriously was determined by economic demands, those governing (practically) the entire world have shown us that it is possible to act otherwise, even if it means putting at risk the global economy. This is a sort of self-denunciation on behalf of those who argued categorically that all politics (social, environmental, medical...) must be enacted in the name of an “economic realism” elected as an authoritarian god no one can disobey.

However, we can't allow for one tale to replace another. Over the past few weeks, neoliberalism's fable - which entertains the illusion that society is made up of serialised and autonomous individuals - has been swapped by one which claims that, from now on, “we're all in the same boat.” Under no circumstance do we wish to come across as critical to a call to solidarity. That being said, it is a mistake to believe that the collective nature of the menace could, as if by magic, erase the differences among all people, all bodies. Social class, gender, economic domination, military violence and patriarchal oppression are also realities that *situate* our bodies in different ways. Moreover, let's not be lulled by the romanticization of the

quarantine to the sound of the trumpets, into forgetting the differences that situate us in different boats.

## 2. Emergence of a Shared Image

We live in the shadow of a major threat, which tends to be downplayed: that is the global ecological deregulation whose impact becomes ever more massive (global warming, the collapse of biodiversity, ocean and air pollution, the exhaustion of natural resources - just to mention a few), already affecting all that is living, including human society. By now certainly most people will have been affected and will have perceived (in a neurophysiological sense) this reality. Nevertheless, for most of us, everything carries on, just like the catastrophe - forecasted not for tomorrow, but unfolding as we speak - which is not being recognised as concrete and immediate. Our perception is not fooling us. Still, this catastrophe lingers in a diffused manner, one that can't be experienced directly. It constitutes our atmosphere and therefore our perception struggles to gain an understanding of its causes, the one thing of which, had we a concrete image of the danger, would spurn us to take action.

Day by day, we receive news of the disaster, but this information, far from provoking us into action, leads us to feel powerless and to suffer. Who is taking action at this time? We think it's those who strive to understand its causes: victims, scientists, activists... In other words those who are taking action so that an image, clearly representing the issue, can emerge. Faced with threats, we're conscious of the situation but experience it in an abstract manner, leaving us to feel paralysed by anxiety. By contrast, when we're faced by an identifiable cause, it's no wonder we feel afraid. And it's fear - not an unclear sense of anxiety - which pushes us to act.

To comprehend this point better, let's make a handy distinction, first proposed by the German philosopher Leibniz and later adopted in neurophysiology, between *perception* and *apperception*. The human being - like all living organisms - exists in constant interaction with their<sup>3</sup> material environment. At first stage, perception consists of the ensemble of *perceptive couplings*<sup>4</sup> - physical, chemical and energy

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<sup>3</sup> "Their" is used here as a neutral pronoun.

<sup>4</sup> Here we borrow Francisco Varela's understanding of the concept of "coupling."

couplings - established between an organism and its surrounding. To illustrate this device, Leibniz resorts to the example of how we apprehend the sound of a wave. He explains that we have an infinitesimal perception of the myriad of droplets, which affect the auditory nerve, through which we can apperceive the sound of each droplet. The second stage consists of constructing an image, such as the auditory image of a wave: this second stage is what we call the dimension of the organised body. This means that, what at first comes just as the material base of that which we can perceive becomes, at a later stage, an apperception which can partake in the phenomena of consciousness.

A central question follows: when and how does apperception emerge?

Firstly, this is determined by the organism apperceiving: of course, a mammal and an insect will not produce the same apperceptive image of a wave. For social animals - particularly human beings - apperception is equally conditioned by the culture and the technical tools through which they interact. Ultrasounds are a good example of how these tools work: unlike certain mammals, humans can't apperceive these sound frequencies without processing their system of perception through machines which allow for the new apperceptive dimension to emerge.

That being said, this is not the result of an individual subjectivity: just because the new apperception actually affects - and is acknowledged by - a specific subject does not mean that it can be considered as belonging to that individual alone. A singularity can be made up by a group of individuals - even of different kinds (animal, plant or an ecosystem) - each of whom take part in the production of a common apperceptive plane. Far from being a kind of super-organism that exists *per se*, this dimension exists in a distributed manner according to the bodies belonging to it. This is how each individual body is affected. Bodies take part in the creation of this dimension of common apperception which in turn affects the bodies' structure. In the context of day to day life, this dimension manifests itself in the form of - what is commonly known as - *common sense*, that which acts as a true instance of shared perception.

Today we are witnessing an historic and unprecedented event: for the first time, humanity as a whole is producing *one* image of the menace. This image does not boil down to a scientific knowledge of the facts which have contributed to the virus' apparition and spread. What is now at stake is something rather profound: the emergence of a shared experience with the frailties of ecological systems which

have been, up to now, denied and crushed by the macroeconomic interests of neoliberalism.

What makes this common apperception so particular resides in its frame of emergence. Paradoxically, it's not the intrinsic danger of the pandemic which brings it about, but rather the disciplinary mechanisms that come with it. It is these mechanisms, and not the menace, which have settled themselves into the current situation. We obviously cannot understand them if we evaluate them solely in their capacity as a healthcare measure. This pitfall leads some to fall for hazardous and macabre narratives aimed at challenging the unprecedented character of this crisis by comparing it to other catastrophes. Faced with this new situation, we can further assess the two opposing interpretations emerging. On the one hand, one affirming that the crisis is very grave and that we'll have to figure out a solution in the form of a vaccine or of a drug. We've no intention of questioning the predominant course of action and thought in this sense. On the other hand, another interpretation - one we strive to uphold - consists in assessing this outbreak as an actual event, which irreversibly confronts productivist ideology, up to now hegemonic. For us, *coronavirus* designates this critical turning point, one from which - we hope - there will be no return, from which our relationship with the world and humanity's place in the ecosystem must be reconsidered profoundly.

### **3. A Common Experience**

Regardless of the horrific situation, if we make the effort not to give up thinking, we can apperceive the one thing which this crisis allows us to experiment with in a positive light: the reality of bonds which constitute us. There again, we should refrain from falling into a naïve mindset. Deep inside us we know we are not the same as before. Given that the hecticness of daily life can no longer distract us from ourselves, some of us must confront the fact that they nourish dubious connections with themselves and secondarily with others. In a *no exit* scenario, true hell is ourselves. This sense of self-hate always mutates into hell for others. Confined in our ways, we become conscious of the fact that we are territorialised beings, incapable of living solely on a digital platform by setting aside all aspects of our

*corporeity*<sup>5</sup>. Today, millions of individuals are experiencing, within their own bodies, that life is not something strictly personal.

The highly lauded virtues of the world of communication and its instruments in fact have proven to be pointless in helping us come out of isolation. At best, they succeed in maintaining the illusion of reuniting the separated while remaining separated.

In the midst of the crisis at least we've acquired one certainty: for better or worse, our contemporaries are testing the fragile limits of connections, which force us to overcome the illusion of the *individual* - autonomous and serialised. We realise this isn't about being strong or weak, winners or losers, but that we all exist and that it is this fragility that allows us to feel we belong to that which is common to all. Finally, our individual and social lives stand out for what they are, two sides of the same coin. Forced into isolation, we discover that we are intersected by multiple ties and that in no way do we correspond to the thatcherite design - a social fabric solely made up of individuals - according to which "there is no such thing as society."

The desire to belong to a community - the desire for life - and not the menace is what allows us to act in this situation. In this vacillating moment, we reassess our priorities, no longer just *myself* and *my own life*. What matters now is what our lives have been placed into, this fabric through which they gain meaning. In a moment like this our bonds are virtually reduced to a digital platform - or, as we mentioned before, *virtualised* - and it is fundamental to consider the limits of this form of abstraction. Consider that which we can't experience on Skype or on any social network. In short, think of all that specifically constitutes our own bodies and their experiences.

#### **4. Against Biopower**

A window has just opened, but not only on to positive opportunities. In fact what we are now experiencing offers - what we call- *biopower* ground for experimentation like never before: the possibility to control populations on the scale of countries and entire continents. The speed at which individuals allow themselves to be disciplined as soon as the standards of survival are at stake never ceases to astonish - and to disturb. Consider geolocation: isn't there something rather tragicomic about how

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<sup>5</sup> As we mentioned before, that which amounts to bodily substance or the concreteness of the body.

people don't even dream of parting from their smartphones, not even to leave them on a nightstand? Voluntary servitude expresses itself at its height when a dearly acquired smartphone takes the shape of an electronic tag. The current experience of social control could well be a sort of general rehearsal.

It doesn't take much to imagine a future where, for convenience's sake, we could justify such practices of surveillance at the emergence of each new menace.

In this context the question of knowing whether or not we are at war against the virus does not boil down to a rhetorical discussion. First because of the actual legal implications, secondly because it provides us with clues as to how it could engender lasting authoritarian practices. We are not at war. This virile, belligerent vision is in itself part of the problem. Currently, we are bearing the consequences of a nonsensical and deadly economic and social system. We better be wary of the martial speeches and drum rolls that have always preceded the sacrifice of people. Our objective is not that of winning a battle, but of taking responsibility for the fragile complexity of the world and to change radically the way we inhabit it.

Otherwise this authoritarian call, in its commanding accent, thirsty for victory - will not hesitate to recruit the next generation of people in the name of the economic fatherland. We'd be hearing this call telling us that this is no longer the time to think or to protest at the structural changes to our society (such as the improvements to our healthcare systems). Any demand for social justice would be dismissed as a betrayal of the fatherland and its sacred duty: to straighten up economic growth.

To start with, the authorised version of the story will tell us we've faced, experienced and won a sorrowful and unforeseeable mishap. Next it will explain to us that we must redouble our efforts to overcome the resistance of nature against human power. What biologists and epidemiologists will have anticipated for more than twenty-five years will irresponsibly be called "an unforeseeable accident."

Among the various carriers of recurrently emerging diseases a preeminent role is played by the disruption of the ecosystems' self-regulatory mechanisms, owed mainly to deforestation. In addition, unbridled urbanisation together with a constant pressure of human activities over natural environments boost an hitherto unseen promiscuity among the species.

Whatever the reaction of governments, one thing is certain: a new *apperceptive* dimension has arisen, i.e. a new image of the ecological disaster is weaving itself into common sense. The mechanism, which heightens the role of the human to that of master and owner of nature, is showing its real, nightmarish face.

## 5. Thinking and Acting in the Current Situation

Proust once wrote “facts never enter the world where our beliefs dwell.”

There is no such thing as a *neutral* fact manifesting a single apparent meaning. A fact exists only within an interpretative context that conveys its meaning and validity. Science deals with facts while still constructing its own interpretation of them. Contrary to what scientism claims, scientific activity does not consist in putting together mere facts. The narrative, through which science organises facts, comes from an interaction with other dimensions, to mention a few, art, social conflicts, emotional imagery and, more generally, shared experiences. No fewer are the dimensions contributing to the production of common sense. Confronted with the world’s complexity, the temptation to react leads us to delegate our own power of action to technocrats or even directly to algorithmic machines. In this oligarchic vision scientists know, politicians follow and *good people* obey. Now, there exists a very deep conflictual relationship between critical thinking and common sense, one we cannot forgo. The role of structured thought is certainly not to order about and to discipline common sense, but rather to add dimensions of *signification* - of meaning - so that they may further become greater and play a more central role. It’s because of this that all emancipatory struggles, far from representing the unveiling of truth’s hidden scene, are always a creation of a new subjectivity.

The fantasy, where we project ourselves into the great celebration following the day of liberation from the pandemic, implies - in its understandable naïvité - that we will forget the process that has led to the current situation. And yet, these processes won’t be retreating like a defeated army. These elements will carry on serving under the disguise of different forms. We need this crisis to end, but not with the relieved applause of a won war. This historic event opens up a door of common apperception, one which shows us the frailty of ties which constitutes our world.

We do not know what awaits us and we have no intention of trying to predict it. However we do know that there will be reactionary forces across the planet, ready to take advantage of the sense of shock we'll still be going through. Therefore, at the heart of this dark and menacing situation, we must take responsibility for the reality of the situation, without waiting idly for this to "just pass", but by preparing here and now for the conditions and connections which will allow us to fight back the advance of biopower control.

We cannot further delegate our responsibilities. We will have to acknowledge how the "world's greats" - with the slightest sense of morality - while lecturing us about war, want to make us once again in human resources, mere "cannon fodder." Only an opposition, loud and clear, against the neoliberal world of finance and "profit for profit's sake", and only a revindication of real bodies - so that they don't have to answer to a world of algorithms - can be our objective today.

As in all complex situations, we must learn to cohabit with a structural non-knowledge, not necessarily ignorance, rather a need to develop all knowledge. This isn't about planning for the future and living the present like a parenthesis. Our lives are unfolding today. This is why this brief manifesto is an appeal to those who wish to imagine, think and act in our present.

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