



Amazon River Dolphin

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Tactics: Reinventing Precarity*

Precarity has once again become a privileged category in economically depressed postindustrial economies, frequently used to describe everything from individual existence to the general social condition. Whether in domestic or public life, no one escapes the probability that a radical disruption of personal security or routinized social conditions could occur at any moment. While precarity is no more representative of life now than it has been at other moments in history or on other present-day points on the globe (in fact it is probably less so), it has become a noisier part of the collective consciousness as traditionally secure economic and ethnic groups make it a category that must be engaged before it is totalized as an irreversible narrative of the fear-mongering security state.

CAE considers here one manner through which precarity might be reinvented as a tactical form of productivity that resists the destructive initiatives of global capitalism in both rural and urban areas and in the environment in general. We explore the possibility of applying precarity's positive qualities in a manner that makes it more conjunctive with environmental

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struggle and environmental justice. The power of precarity in conjunction with law can, ironically enough, work in favor of a healthy environment. CAE suggests that we integrate the shared precarity of endangered plant species and endangered social and green spaces in a manner that strengthens and protects both. To initiate our *New Alliances* initiative, CAE traveled to Turin, Italy, in October 2011 to conduct a workshop on “new alliances” in collaboration with Parco Arte Vivente (PAV).

While CAE would not dare attempt to list all the tendencies that produce precarity in the postindustrial economy in a document as brief as this one, we will mention a few we believe are key. First and foremost is the reorganization of labor in a manner that allows various institutions of production to acquire every possible cent that social efficiency can yield. The intensification of administrative digitality, in association with improvements in real-space transportation, enables transnational capital to find and exploit the lowest labor cost and establish this bottom line as the basis by which all other nonspecific labor is measured. Consequently, the value of labor pools is very volatile. One can live in a company town (or city) one minute and a ghost town the next. A labor pool implosion causes a devastating cascade effect that sucks small business and local service industries down with it.

At the top of the labor ladder, the situation is a little better. There the workers have a specific desired skill (the digital equivalent of a craft or professional service skill) that cannot be replaced in a manner similar to replacing a standardized bolt in a machine. Beyond their “craft” abilities, these workers typically offer a diverse set of problem-solving and creative skills that can also be exploited. Moreover, they are completely flexible. They can work wherever they are, and they can work at any time for the precise amount of time a project requires. In order to do this, they have their own workstations, and assume both the costs of their training and the perpetual retraining needed to keep pace with the rapid change of the digital world. Consequently, in contrast to those at the bottom of the labor spectrum, they do bring some leverage to the table when selling their labor on the market. The life of these workers is feast or famine. They enjoy comfort and benefits while working, but must always be preparing for the in-between. The cost of acquiring the skills to reach this upper rung of the labor ladder is considerable, often amounting to the equivalent of a first mortgage and thus increasing the pressure for steady employment. Moreover, these local workers are competing with each other on a global scale, making for regional divisions that add to their particular type of precarity.

A second major tendency adding to the precarity of our age is finance capital's love for risk. Given that high-risk investments are the best way to maximize profit (if one is successful), high-stakes gambling in the financial sector is attractive to many. Because of this tendency, even the very wealthy are involved in the relative general condition of precarity. In the postwar US, when C. Wright Mills was writing *The Power Elite* (1956), the elite class was quite stable, consisting of family units of intergenerational wealth gleaned from manufacture, agriculture, or the extraction industries. Now, a sizable percentage of the elite class is part of the extremely volatile gambling class of finance capital. Members of this group can find themselves swimming in billions of dollars one moment and then crashing the next, left with only millions (or even landing flat broke). Yet as bubbles burst and legitimized Ponzi schemes collapse, there are not only the losers of the investment class, but the millions of small investors who are in the dark about what is actually happening to their investments. Retirement accounts are wiped out, homes are foreclosed upon, and the reality of downward mobility hits domestic space with full force. Profits may not trickle down the class ladder, but the material consequences of risk always make their way to the bottom—and not as a trickle, but as a deluge.

Within the social sphere, there is not much left to plunder but the public sector. In the United States, funds previously used for the public safety net are being handed over to elites in the form of tax breaks, corporate subsidies, and bailouts—the legitimized raiding of public coffers. And capital has no better way to extract money from the working classes than through war. The exorbitant military budget and de facto privatization of the military is a means to redistribute funds to the wealthiest through weapons manufacture and security services.

Finally, CAE must acknowledge the fundamental structural shift occurring in economies that are less dependent on manufacturing. As the economy moves from a mode in which industry dominates to one in which service becomes hegemonic, populations that have no place in the new economy begin to form. If no institutions exist to retrain those lost in the shuffle, these excess populations, the underclasses marked by permanent precarity, expand radically. Given that education is among the first casualties of austerity policies, the underclass will continue to grow; and not surprisingly, little is being done to ameliorate this situation. To make matters worse, many of the expanding areas of production do not require significant amounts of labor.

As global capital slips deeper into structural crisis and desperately seeks to maintain profit margins, becoming-precarious in a negative sense emerges as a dominant narrative. A heavy miasma of nostalgia for the stability of the past hangs in the air. Yet even if we could bring back the 1950s, who would want to? In the US, social improvement was linked to the intensification of accumulation, but for whom? Large marginal classes were not included in the enrichment of the social sphere by a capitalist system caught up in a “class compromise.” And even many of those who *were* included did not enjoy the most desirable conditions. Men in “gray flannel suits” crowded the streets going to stable lifelong jobs devoid of satisfaction, doing what they had to and being careful not to rock the boat. Do we really want an encore performance from “organization man?” Do we want to go back to the hegemony of a family structure representative of the way only a small fraction of families actually live? Do we want to trade precarity for alienation and marginalization—a marginalization so profound that it will only further catalyze the ongoing cultural and political alienation of women, LGBTQs, and a rainbow of minorities? The answer instead may be to inspire a precarity that serves people and improves the social sphere, until it becomes possible for us to eliminate its negative aspects that function as basic conditions of life.

Dérive Revisited

Dérive (drift) can be interpreted as a utopian process. To be sure, it has great potential as a positive process for reaching a desired outcome. The drifter can break the routines demanded by normative structures and the dynamics of the urban environment. The drifter can resist the rational and let submerged desires that are stored in the unconscious guide the way. A drift should be unproductive, should lack practical performativity, and as such, will become adventurous. Drifters will mix with estranged environments and mingle with humans who exist on the fringes of their everyday existence. In so doing, experience is restructured outside the imperatives of the status quo. Drift requires active, engaged participation in immediate real space. Unlike strolling, it is not a distanced form of cool observation and data collection. Drift is rather a temporary demonstration of what liberated being-in-the-world could be if the disciplinary apparatus of the spectacle and the illusions of virtuality were not ubiquitous components of our lives.

When drift is described in this manner, the process sounds so pleasurable, and this pleasure seems readily accessible if only we would enact it.

However, there is another integral part of the process—a component that is generally glossed over, but always implied—and that is precarity. A drift could afford us a marvelous introduction to subaltern cultures we never knew existed, or lead us magically across the limit lines of a gated community of the 1 percent. Yet it could just as easily end in jail time or hospitalization. Surely if we gender or racialize this process or view it through the prism of unjust majority/minority relations of any kind, precarity intensifies. How will any agent charged with the enforcement of the status quo view someone in the midst of a drift? Jail would seem to be the probable outcome if the status quo of the social sphere is in any way perceived to be jeopardized. Certainly the Situationists, who first brought us this activity, were not so naïve as to think this way of acting would necessarily be wholly positive. Their documented physical risk-taking and their time in jail speak to their direct experience of the less-than-pleasurable aspects of creating and engaging in liberated moments and spaces. By proposing drift as a utopian process, CAE is not claiming it is without risk to one's bodily and personal autonomy. Drift rather seeks an intersubjectivity that authority forecloses because *to drift* suggests that a situation, or even the entire social world, could be other than it is. That is the utopian gesture, and its constant companion is precarity.

Precarity and Resistant Cultural Practices

The Situationists were not the first cultural activists, nor will they be the last, to count precarity as a constant companion. Any cultural worker who has performed resistance in a public space is quite familiar with this relationship. (As an operational definition, by “public” CAE means any space outside of the domestic that is not secured for specific access.) Breaking the law is often acceptable to authorities, because laws ruling comportment in public space are created less for stopping criminal activity and more for stopping resistant activity. For example, in spring 2010, CAE witnessed NYU students performing an action at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City that questioned why the institution would have a statue at its entrance of an equine-mounted Teddy Roosevelt leading a Native American and an African American (on foot, of course) into the implied sunset. The guerrilla performance primarily consisted of a dialogue between students who performed the statuary roles of Roosevelt, a freed slave, and a Native American. The discussion was as anachronistic as the sculpture, consisting of an attack on and an apology for “the white man’s burden.” As might be expected, security guards responded immediately, and police shortly thereafter. The police threatened the participants with

arrest for blocking public pathways (in spite of the fact they were in constant motion). When students asked the police about the dozens of other people on the steps of the museum who were stationary and blocked clear access to the entrance, the police replied that *they* could break the law because *they* were not bothering anyone.

This is why CAE does not make an operational distinction between a park and a mall. The security is the same, and the demand of public order and limited speech is the same. Unfortunately, when resistant politics enters the realm of cultural production, a higher degree of risk has to be embraced. The laws to “maintain public order” are plentiful and function at differing levels of intensity. When an activity challenges—explicitly or implicitly—the status quo and the authorities that benefit from the status quo, laws governing public nuisance, public disturbance, disorderly conduct, unlawful assembly, or blocking public access are brought into play. If someone needs to be removed from the public sphere for a longer period of time, more serious charges are used, such as inciting a riot, causing a false public emergency, or criminal mischief. For authorities, these laws are helpful because they can be applied in a completely arbitrary manner. Anybody can be arrested at any time, and the arrest can always be framed as a deterrent to criminality rather than a means of quashing resistant performativities and minority representation.

Even when interventionists have the institutional cover of a legitimized sponsor to avoid legal troubles, other disciplinary agencies are waiting in the wings. For this situation, agents of the status quo, from politicians and lawyers to church groups and social workers, can take up the disciplinary slack. In such cases, cultural activists do not have to worry about jail, but the pushback can still be at best tiresome and at worst costly. Expression management is a ubiquitous phenomenon that permeates almost all of everyday life. As the structural meltdown of global capitalism flows deeper into crisis, resistant expression will be increasingly suppressed. Under such conditions, the cultural worker’s relation to precarity will intensify.

Cultural activists have always functioned in a double bind in relation to precarity. On the one hand, creative cultural work tends to be economically undervalued for the grand majority of those who participate in this kind of production; however, economic impoverishment is often perceived as a fair exchange for a culturally rich, diverse, and even happier life. On the other hand, if suppression of activism is intensifying, precarity beyond the economic front increasingly becomes a part of social life for resistant cultural

workers. We have no choice but to make it a friend by finding better ways to use it in struggles against oppression and social injustice. As a matter of personal testimony, at one time or another, CAE has faced almost every disciplinary agency imaginable, and yet we would not give up our relationship to precarity. The many empowering and pleasurable experiences have certainly outweighed the horrible ones.

Ecological Precarity

Perhaps cultural workers suffer from a third form of precarity beyond their precarious positions within the economic and political systems: ecological precarity, which is the general condition of existence for humans and many other species brought about by the purposeful, ethical bankruptcy of neoliberalism when it comes to environmental policy. Basing all economic activity around the principle of greed has created the most environmentally destructive conditions in history. Not only does capital seek to avoid any relation to the reproduction of the social beyond making sure the labor pool does not dry up, it has no relation to the preservation of life in any form. The biosphere is understood only as a resource to be used until depleted.

To be fair to the early capitalists, they could not have foreseen the current scale of the economy and how it would change the perception of the earth from that of a seemingly endless repository of resources to one where the end of resources is a near-future certainty. Yet once this fact was understood, why haven't capitalists veered from their ecocidal path? They have not because of their firm belief that nothing more than utilitarian value exists beyond an individual's ego. All objects (and that includes humans) are there only to be used and organized in a manner that yields power, wealth, and prestige. So long as the individual ego is not damaged in the process, the process is good. Any external death and/or devastation resulting from economic practices is simply a necessary sacrifice for the immediate glory of economic gain. Since neoliberals recognize the ego as finite, and its death as marking a real end of economic activity, they recognize no relation to the material world beyond this end. The future extinction of humans and other species is not recognized in their business plan. They are as removed from the infinitude of time as they are from the web of life. Now, within the ecosphere, capitalists are committing the greatest crime of their two-century history. From an ecological perspective, the capitalists have become a true death cult, in their belief that the weight of one of their own egos is greater than the weight of the universe.

The dominance of this ideology of perverse individualism, where the worst of human qualities are believed to be able to transform the world into a better place for all, justifies an ecological dynamic that causes everyone to suffer in the present moment from environmental devastation. At the heart of this matter are nondegradable and nonremediable pollutants. The worst assaults on the ecosystem come from this source. (CAE would be remiss if we did not note the strong second-place finish of the development and extraction industries for their serious contribution to environmental devastation.) The neoliberal perspective is that the cost of pollutants should be “externalized” (paid for by someone other than the corporation, which usually means the public). For the most part, the corporations have been successful in doing just that, to such an extent that the price of remediation is beyond the capacity of world markets. Whether we are talking about climate change, loss of biodiversity through mass extinction, decline in the quality of air, soil, and water, or health crises brought about by pollutants in the environment, the cost to fix what the earth in the Anthropocene cannot is incalculable.

Despite the neoliberals’ worldwide success in polluting without legal consequence, they continuously work for even less environmental regulation. In general, neoliberals tend to dislike regulation of their own activities; regulating and managing everything else is fine, however, particularly if it involves any kind of market force like labor organizations, labor migration, competitive upstart organizations, or resistant activity. Then the government’s job is to pass legislation that protects property and keeps “public order,” and to enforce these laws and regulations to the letter.

Those who are concerned with environmental integrity have achieved some victories against the deregulation movement in spite of its massive wealth and (corrupt) political influence. Of particular importance now is the protection of endangered species and habitats in so many countries. In the US in 1973, President Nixon signed the Endangered Species Act (ESA) into law. He was, of course, forced into this position by environmentalists and a variety of concerned citizens, but also by some unlikely conservative allies in the grip of renewed fears about the consequences of overpopulation. This piece of legislation gave near-extinct creatures a recognized legal status, and this status gave environmental advocates a way to push back in the courts against those who were prepared to kill any living thing that stood in the way of profit.

New Alliances

Given the dual nature of species that are both endangered and protected, it appears we have a possible site where the power of precarity in conjunction with law can work in favor of a healthy environment. CAE suggests integrating the shared precarity of endangered plant species and endangered social and green spaces in a manner that strengthens and protects both. In many countries, endangered plant species enjoy special legal protection. At the very least, they elicit public sympathy and can function as an ethical hammer for conservationists. Though these plants may be weak as species, they are quite powerful as individual specimens. If that power can be connected with human and nonhuman spaces that are endangered by various capitalist agencies seeking profit and/or power by reappropriating territory held by people unable to defend it, perhaps a sociopolitical symbiosis between plants and people could develop. The plants would expand in number as people plant them for protection, thus addressing the problem of species collapse; in turn, the spaces would have the legal protection accorded to the plants to better resist aggressive or hostile takeover attempts. The kinds of spaces we have in mind are those threatened by unjust development: community gardens, common areas, endangered rural spaces, any kind of squatted territory, and those threatened by extraction industries, including farmland, wilderness, or even suburban aquifers. We plan to place plants at risk and spaces at risk into alliances of precarity that benefit both.

In the interest of our plan, we looked back over the past four decades in the US, and some notable successes in invoking the ESA jumped to our attention. In 1990, the threatened northern spotted owl was used to save its natural habitat—old growth forests—from overharvesting. Millions of acres were set aside in the Northwest, but over the past two decades the debate between conservationists and the logging industry has continued. While the logging industry has managed to continuously reclaim previously protected acres through court actions, lobbying, and even ecological debate (the industry claims that the extinction of the spotted owl is due to the invasion of the competing barred owl, rather than a loss of habitat), the area has been largely saved.

In 2006, conflict between conservationists and the extraction industries heated up over development of Great Plains grasslands in Nebraska and South Dakota. The black-footed ferret, thought to be extinct until rediscovered in 1982, became a symbol of the rich diversity of life on the Great Plains under threat not just from big extraction and ranching, but also

from broken public management systems. The introduction of more ferrets helped to extend territories protected from developments and hunters.

The fairy shrimp was used to limit urban sprawl in Riverside, California. Not as adorable as the spotted owl or the black-footed ferret, this species almost had its wetland habitat completely destroyed by developers who covet the flatland on which its rare vernal pools exist. The developers got the better of this fight, but in their revised plan some of the habitat was saved, as opposed to the original plan in which it was all to be completely eliminated. When it comes down to practice on the ground, this outcome seems to be fairly typical. Projects can be slowed or limited, but rarely are they completely stopped.

Consider one of the first classic cases in the US: the snail darter fish and the development of the Tellico Dam in Tennessee. Biologist David Etnier discovered this rare fish in 1973, allowing environmentalists to bring a lawsuit against the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) on the grounds that the dam destroyed the limited habitat of an endangered species. Activists used the ESA in filing this suit, a follow-up to one that invoked the National Environmental Policy Act. The Supreme Court eventually heard the case in 1978, and ruled in favor of the environmentalists. Tellico supporters went into action in Washington, DC, to get Congress to exempt the dam from all law pertaining to environmental protection. Through a lobbying initiative, an exemption was placed as a rider to a water and energy appropriations bill. Later, amendment processes were proposed to limit the ESA's power. The dam was completed in 1979.

In the majority of cases, environmental complaints have only thrown a wrench into the works and slowed the process of destruction. In practice, therefore, we must face the reality that this model is imperfect, but it does allow activists to bring some form of power to the table. The TVA still proudly proclaims that no environmental action has ever stopped any of their projects. However, pressure groups representing endangered species or habitats have forced them into negotiations that have impacted the formation of plans. In the case of the snail darter fish, while the land was lost, plans were developed to move as many of the fish as possible to equally hospitable waters. In 1984, the fish was reclassified from endangered to threatened.

We must ask: If charismatic endangered animals tend to have the greatest capacity to motivate environmentalists, why not bring endangered animal species into compatible, threatened environments? The primary answer is

because they are mobile. They do not stay where they are put, and they can be hard to find after release, especially if they are a small population. In rural areas in the US, there has to be proof that the endangered species is in immediate danger due to a specific action by a specific agent for the law to be enforced. That means the organism must be close to the disruption. As CAE said above, injunctions are rarely granted, but polluting or destructive activities can be moved off specific sites. Only plants will deliver the long-term presence necessary for this possibility. In urban areas, plants are really the only choice, since the environment is not hospitable to animals. Trees could perhaps also be used in this situation.

Let's take the worst-case scenario in which industry money and political influence are simply overwhelming in a given situation, or legislation has been written with great care to favor industry. We have already seen examples of the former. As for the latter, in Italy for example, environmental protection legislation distinguishes between wild and cultivated plants with regard to endangered species. Cultivated plants, no matter how rare, enjoy no protection under the law. Consequently, CAE's plan would be difficult to enact. The first challenge would be how to classify what is wild and what is cultivated, particularly if it is in a fallow space. While a rare orchid in a hothouse may be easily classified as cultivated, classification might not be so easy in a vacant lot.

Let us assume that we fail to prove our case for protection under the law, forcing us into a second line of defense; could we make a successful media campaign from such an action? To be sure, profiteers have no shame or guilt, but they usually have a public image they wish to protect. If the right species is selected, public imagination can be captured and directed toward a protective position. Increasing the number of stakeholders is always a necessity in bringing a developer to the bargaining table. Obviously, this would require the right choice of species to transplant into the endangered habitat. Choosing a species to save in accordance with its value in the environment is not an option. So many grasses and trees fundamental to ecosystems need saving, but if we are to construct a new coalition we will have to use a more traditional category of choice: aesthetic value. This aspect of the process is unfortunate, but abundantly clear; if the plant is not aesthetically equivalent to the noble beasts at the top of the food chain (awe-inspiring raptors or cuddly mammals), it will probably go the way of the vast unrepresented populations of life forms heading for extinction due to some repulsive characteristic or underwhelming visage. For this job only one choice is reasonable: wildflowers. The image of bulldozers run-

ning over big fields of flowers—and not just any flowers, but endangered ones—can have a dramatic mobilizing effect on the one hand, and create a powerful public relations problem on the other.

CAE should also add that this tactic in and of itself is probably not powerful enough to have a large-scale impact. This method is best used when mapped onto other networks of resistance. When public demand for the preservation of natural or managed reserve habitat, or resistance based in stopping the poisoning of an environment by toxic waste are already mobilized, this tactic can function as an extremely useful supplementary activity.

A new alliance between all that is precarious in the human and plant kingdoms appears to CAE to be a highly functional system capable of producing political might; however, questions about logistics may remain. After all, such actions will require many plants, and this need requires a second new alliance among people. One of the divisions that traditionally has been counterproductive for ecological activism is the separation of urban and rural environmental action. While empathy between the two sectors is undoubtedly abundant, bringing the groups together in a practical sense is difficult. This is due not to a lack of desire, but to a lack of infrastructure, which restricts people to acting locally in real space. As much as virtual space helps in organizing and fundraising, ultimately, real-space solutions are needed for real-space problems. For the plant-human alliance to occur, another also has to occur between rural and urban activists and concerned citizens. The new food movement has demonstrated that microfarms and urbanites can come together for a new type of micromarket based on direct local sales. Why couldn't a similar structure be made for a new production of environmental politics, in which a rural contingent can oversee the production of plants while an urban contingent raises money and organizes the distribution actions and media campaigns when necessary?

In Italy

As mentioned above, in October of 2011, CAE traveled to Turin, Italy, to do a workshop on “new alliances” in collaboration with Parco Arte Vivente (PAV). As its name implies, PAV is committed to cultural action that engages ecological commitment as an act of resilience. From its programming, to its architecture, to the remediated site on which it is located, PAV signals a change in the relation of humans to the environment and

stands in stark contrast to the modern sites and structures that surround it. Needless to say, CAE could not have asked for a better partner in getting this project off the ground.

We initially conceived of the workshop as consisting of four key parts that would lay the groundwork for the action: CAE would describe the plan and variations for the makeup of the new alliances. We would then proceed by having an agronomist with expertise in environmental law (Danielle Fazio) speak about laws regarding endangered species at the national, provincial, and municipal levels. Next, a botanist/gardener (Filippo Alossa) would talk about local endangered plants and demonstrate how to grow them. The workshop would end with a series of scouting missions to determine the best sites for planting.

When CAE arrived in Turin, Orietta Brombin, the director of education and training activities at PAV, who was also functioning as producer for this workshop, had assembled an amazing team of participants, including our much-needed lawyer and agronomist. Prior to our arrival, the team had already scouted the locations, so we only needed to proceed with the first three parts. The legal session was somewhat disappointing when we learned that Italy made a cultivated/wild distinction when it came to endangered species—cultivated plants were not protected, no matter how rare. However, this would not slow a media campaign, and there did appear to be some gray area as to how cultivation could be proven when discovering a plant in a fallow field. Growing the plants, and acquiring the means necessary to grow a lot of plants, was all quite possible. We were able to choose a flower easily enough (Cupid's Dart, *Catananche caerulea*), although this process was determined largely by the market for commercially available seeds. Obviously, not just anyone can harvest the seeds of wild endangered plants. Fortunately, a variety of endangered plant seeds are commercially available. Finally, we came to realize that the project would have to be extended, as Alossa strongly recommended that we use a natural cycle for growing in natural elements and avoid the artificiality of the greenhouse, as greenhouse-grown plants would be too weak for natural conditions. He suggested beginning to sow the plants in late spring (2012), and transplanting them in late summer (2013). The process is now complete, and guerrilla gardeners in and around Turin are hard at work introducing the plant to endangered urban spaces.

Reversals

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno bemoan the political and cultural regression of reason into a device that furthers a variety of authoritarian tendencies—and conversely, the subsequent failure of the Enlightenment to fully implement its lofty goals of liberty, equality, and progress. As reason regresses, these goals begin to invert and eventually become their opposites. The Enlightenment promised liberation from scarcity, yet no matter how much is produced, the condition of lack continues to grow. The science and technology that seemed the path to perpetual peace and progress instead created a war machine with destructive capabilities that threaten the existence of human life itself; and the rationality that would organize human life for equal benefit of all transitioned to a means to create maximally efficient death camps for the extermination of the Other. Our relationship to nature becomes perverted as nature, too, is perceived as an Other equally deserving of full exploitation and elimination. Cooperative or symbiotic relationships with the earth are eliminated in favor of those of dominion.

This concept is echoed by Ivan Illich's notion of "specific diseconomy." Illich believed that institutions in the capitalist world tended to reverse themselves over time, as they continuously absorb the corruption inherent in capitalism. For example, the idea of public education has tremendous appeal, and free schools and universities as the material manifestation of this ideal would seem like boons to democracy and industry alike as they prepare people for critical, self-reflective, and creative lives. Yet these institutions end up functioning in the opposite manner. They become spaces where mindless ideology is replicated and creativity is undervalued if not completely discouraged. As students are prepared to serve industry as bureaucrats and technocrats, they are taught to tolerate long hours of boredom sitting at desks, staring into monitors, and memorizing the tropes of the free market. Rather than honing their intelligence, students are made increasingly less knowledgeable and are guided by the reduction of diverse knowledge systems to the singular category of training.

Perhaps the most recent incarnation of this notion is Jean Baudrillard's principle of "immanent reversal." The central characteristic of this position is the shift from the dominance of the material order to that of virtuality. Power, pleasure, and seduction are no longer located in the material world. Rather, the house of mirrors that is the virtual world, in which meaning is no longer tethered by referents, becomes the focus of life itself. In this

technosphere, the highest degree of illusion produces the highest degree of value and garners the highest degree of praise.

While all of these notions tend to have a negative trajectory, they also point to the possibility that tremendous change is possible. Radical shifts can occur, and if indeed we are at the bottom of the free-market barrel, why can't the next reversal be for the good? A micro war machine of human, rifle, and armored personnel carrier could just as easily be human, brick, and barricade. CAE sees no reason why, through committed struggle, we cannot make ourselves intelligent and creative again, and reverse precarity into a positive, productive power contrary to the present general condition.