



Sumatran Tiger

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Strategy: Lessons in Territorialization

Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) first met members of the art and environmental organization Ala Plástica (AP)¹ while doing a project in Hamburg in 2008. During this time, we were working on an island in the middle of the Elbe River in the neighborhood of Wilhelmsburg—a neighborhood known for housing the working poor, a wide variety of immigrants, and the elderly poor. The commercial infrastructure was less than thriving, but we managed to find a somewhat uninhabited bar, where we would meet in the evenings to discuss how our projects were progressing and various topics in cultural politics both locally and internationally. On one of these nights while on the topic of cultural complexity, AP was insistent that, if complexity was of interest to us, we needed to come to the Río de la Plata watershed region in Argentina. CAE knew we should immediately accept this offer, but logistics are always a problem. Finally, in 2014 we received an award that allowed us to go, witness, and participate in very mature forms of bioregional self-organization, alternative institutions, and strategic cultural resistance that are not so common in the North.

For the past thirty years, CAE has participated in an immensely positive form of deterritorialization. For us, this practice means a reliance on

disappearance and tracelessness. In a country that is over-policed and over-surveilled, avoiding theaters of conflict while establishing temporally and spatially limited cultural possibilities that point to relationships for seeing, thinking, and living counter to the imperatives of neoliberalism (with all its alienated and precarious work, gross efficiency, and instrumentalization of everything) appears to us as the most productive way to conduct ourselves as artists. We need to be able to disappear as fast as we bring these oppositional situations into existence. We have to be flexible and fluid, willing to abandon a line of pursuit if met with forces of recuperation and repression, and be able to move to the next relatively frictionless opportunity, regardless of whether it has any relationship to or bearing on what we had previously been doing. Our method is one of reactive tacticality followed by rapid deterritorialization. This form of erasure also ensures that others may appropriate the territory after us, and easily reinscribe it in a way that suits their needs and interests.

Unfortunately, deterritorialization also has a very dark side—one that is very commonly used by the imperial forces of neoliberalism. Upon arriving in Argentina, we received swift and profound reminders of this tendency. We could start with that globally ubiquitous neoliberal model for habitation for the wealthy: the gated community. These were massive tracts of land surrounded by fences, barbed wire, guard towers, and electric gates. The land was stripped of any trace of history, cultural diversity, or emergent social ecology. It was all gone, and sprouting from this wasteland depleted of all its cultural nutrients, power, and pride were the generic markers of neoliberal victory—McMansions, malls, churches, and gas-guzzling cars. It is hard not to feel somewhat sorry for the inmates of these luxury prisons. At the same time, they volunteer to live in them so that they never have to worry about absurdly exaggerated crime waves and never have to encounter, much less interact with, anyone or anything that does not reinforce life as they wish to know it. In the end, this social withdrawal into a fictional smooth space only leads to a profound poverty of consciousness.

But this is of minor consequence compared to the devastation of the rural landscape resulting from extreme deterritorialization by imperial forces, primarily in the form of multinational agricultural corporations. We were warned beforehand, but no warning could have prepared us for what we witnessed in the areas of countryside that have been converted to industrial farming: hectare upon hectare, all the way to the horizon, in all directions, of genetically modified soy. All markers of specificity had been erased. Even the soil, which should be rich, is dead—fully depleted—and

now merely a receptacle for artificial fertilizers sold by the multinationals. In lands that once supported grazing animals and a wide variety of grains, fruits, and vegetables, there is nothing but the monocrop of soy waiting for harvest and export—or for the epidemic that kills it all. This is a true biotic cleansing, and among the worst outcomes of capitalist necropolitics. Nothing is left; ecological diversity is reduced to three fundamental types: the soy, the trucks that transport the soy and soy products, and the massive processing plants (as well-guarded and as impenetrable as the gated communities). This sterilized landscape could be almost anywhere; it could be in the US as easily as India. It is a site of generic production as common to the world of neoliberalism as the McMansion. And of course those who benefit from these arrangements present them as massively progressive—a necessary transformation of the Argentinian economy, so that it might be competitive in the global market. However, given the level of policing (mostly private) at the plants, CAE suspects that many people do not agree with this assessment, and that the only real point of consensus is that country life as it has been known for most of the past century is gone.

But why dwell on the darkness when this watershed is so rich and full of life? It is so big that even a monster like Monsanto cannot consume it all. And scattered all around it, on land and on water, are areas the security state has forgotten, or cannot afford to strictly manage. In these areas, experiments in radical biopolitics aimed at ending the current necropolicy that rules the land can take place unmolested by the keepers of the status quo. New alliances are formed, and minds are liberated from misbegotten consensus. CAE's education on *strategies* of reterritorialization began here. We were introduced to a secure network that allowed people who wanted to create a different reality to imagine what it would be, and then to methodically proceed to develop the means to bring it about. In this place, an ecological revolution that comes from the ground up is believed to be possible.

The methodological difference that we found most difficult to adjust to was the relationship to time. Free space we had seen before, but never accompanied by seemingly unlimited time. Here, once deemed a worthy project to pursue, an experiment in biopolitics could take ten or twenty years to ensure it is done effectively and that all concerned are included in the process. As a group constantly worried about instant backlash from authorities and knowing we are lucky to experiment with any viable alternative for at best a year or two (and more typically weeks) before it is either

stopped by the law or recuperated, we were stunned to learn that time was a common currency to be used by all, instead of a luxury rarely seen. When time and space in this social configuration meets a bottomless capacity for autonomous action and network construction, anything seems possible. Unlike in the US, where a collective or coalition can only hope that a social or media current will emerge from an action to conjure what Félix Guattari calls a molecular revolution, in Argentina, molecular transformation is an intentional process that works across intentional networks. Here, there is time for networked coalitions to reterritorialize undefended spaces as sustainable ecological systems integrated with expressions of desire.

Most of our experience in the watershed consisted of interacting with experiments in biopolitics, self-governance, and reterritorialization. One of the more historically compelling sites was the cultural center Biblioteca Vigil in Rosario. As the name implies, its original incarnation was primarily as a local library, but it grew much larger into a popular institution of higher learning. During the time of the dictatorship (1976–83), emergent institutions of higher education that also signaled a promise of local autonomy were placed under erasure, and anyone who functioned in any type of leadership capacity was placed under arrest. Books were burned, classrooms destroyed. The library was remade into a disciplinary apparatus, complete with a dungeon in the lower levels. When the dictatorship collapsed, the complex stood as an empty reminder of what never should have been. But recently, local citizens, artists, teachers, and professionals have taken the space back, and a process of reterritorialization has begun. The library has been resurrected, and a push is on to return it to its former glory. There is a daycare center/elementary school, a people's theater (where all productions are free), and plans for a dance theater and music hall. While the material transformation may be slow, the complex again signals that local activism can create transformation in the public interest.

CAE should further note that this process is not a deterritorialization like the political right consistently attempts and all too often accomplishes with its various appropriations. No one involved with the project has any plan to erase the history of the dictatorship in general, nor its manifestation in the architecture. The former deterritorialization by the right is kept visible, and openly discussed in order to create an extra fortification against a repeat of such a process. Those who seek transformation refuse the relationship between history and forgetfulness. This refusal offers a space for necropolitics to enter the discourse of resistance and change, and not only in terms of the atrocities of the dictatorship, and how they cannot be repeated; rather,

these activists are able to acknowledge and discuss how necropolitics is a part of the most mundane levels of the bureaucracy and is included in the most common aspects of everyday life. The crucial lesson here is that they understand that the production of life necessarily includes the production of death, and since they are unafraid to surround themselves with this truth, they become capable of pragmatically addressing biopolitics and necropolitics, as opposed to leaving them to the whims of the powerful and the mechanistic outcomes of institutional grind.

Other initiatives appeared to work by way of contrast. Two standout projects were an off-the-grid community on Isla Paulino, and a small, organic farm in the deep rural zones outside Rosario. Isla Paulino is an island vacation community dotted with small homes and lovely gardens. It has campgrounds, beach access, and a small café, and is remote enough that visitors can escape any sense of urban life or the feeling of being surrounded by industry. This is a razor-thin illusion, as the island is surrounded by factories, refineries, and a container port—the true energy hogs of any economy. The island is an oasis in a landscape of ugliness spewing toxicity onto an unflinching earth. Visitors hop on the water taxi, and within a few minutes life appears to be very different. What makes this contrast so great is that all the electricity on the island is created from solar energy. The carbon footprint of this resort has to be near zero. But what makes this community even more surprising is that it was not filled with green activists or folks deeply invested in critical ecological investigation; it is populated by people who have come to see solar energy as a part of everyday life on the island. How this transformation happened is unknown to us, but we do know that AP spent a great deal of time there. Though it would be nice to know the process in more detail, CAE is quite happy to see that this did happen, and it stands as a viable example of how holidays could be ecologically considered without surrendering the pleasure of the moment.

The final project that CAE wants to discuss, the experimental farm, is a model for strategic action that drills into the core of economic and ecological struggle. One of the great difficulties in environmental struggle is getting the people most affected by environmental devastation to prioritize it in their daily struggle. Problems of economic and social inequality and education tend to be at the top of the list and for obvious reasons. Those who find themselves in the most precarious of positions only have time for immediate needs. Environmentalism is future-oriented rather than present-oriented for those who must consider food, water, and shelter every day, because daily survival is more than a full-time job. Environmental

concerns are a luxury for billions of people. The experimental farm manages to tie all of these issues together, so that working on one is working on all of them. It is a marriage of ecological, economic, and social revolutions. What is being attempted is to avoid the chaos that follows political revolution. Yes, Perónism could assert itself once again and remove the multinationals from the land, but then what? What would land redistribution look like? How would environmental remediation happen? What kind of investment does it take start a viable microfarm? This project's collaborators are working to solve these questions in advance of direct action, and are doing so with great efficiency. Once the model is established, it can be presented to the multitude (and the dispossessed in particular), who can see an immediate answer to their questions of survival. Under these conditions, a combined political and economic popular front could be established that is foundationally green, and that could effectively fight for removal and redistribution in a manner that would benefit a grand majority of citizens and residents. CAE does not want to be overly optimistic, as there are many moving parts in this plan, and it could collapse in any number of areas. However, it is the first strategic revolutionary plan that we have heard in decades that at least sounds viable. The plan lives in the realm of material possibility and not just in the imaginary of utopian fantasy. The following experimental first step in this grand scheme is a material fact.

We were brought to a small ten-hectare farm organized around methods of microproduction that stands as a beacon in the dead zone of genetically modified soy. This initiative brings together farmers, university professors, artists, and volunteers all dedicated to the idea of transforming the landscape into one that is organized via the principles of agroecology as opposed to industrial farming. They hope to demonstrate that small, diverse farms can be profitable without damaging the land or the wildlife and can eliminate the need for large-scale monocropping. If they succeed, it will show that healthy, ecologically based farming is possible and preferable, and that all of the people forced from the land because they could not compete with industrial farming might have the option of going back to it. This initiative is the first step toward major land reform that could repopulate the countryside, taking the strain of the displaced and the dispossessed off of urban centers, and ending an era of the necropolitics of ecocide with which imperial corporations have ravaged both rural and urban environments.

The farm is immensely diverse, and takes full advantage of the many possibilities the land has to offer. Grains, vegetables, herbs, and fruits are all

grown on the property, creating a self-sustaining system that does not require herbicides or pesticides. Animals, including pigs, chickens, and rabbits, are also raised for food and fertilizers. The farm represents a complete kitchen. The question, however, is why this small farm will not fail like any other when the goods are taken to market, due to the higher cost of organic microfarming. The answer is that these farmers do not stop at the harvest, but proceed forward by making value-added products. Instead of wheat, they produce flour; instead of on-the-hoof livestock, they produce butchered meat. This lifts them out of the razor-thin profit margins of industrial farming and allows direct-to-consumer marketing, in which they no longer have to acquiesce to the corporate demand for macro scalability in order to make a living. *This is a model for earthworks in the twenty-first century* and is a splendid example of artistic and creative vision and action. It is a micro-utopia that is as beautiful as it is practical. We certainly see such microfarming practices in the North, but they are not linked to political and social revolutionary strategies. This project is not the product of drop-out culture (ignoring industrial food economy and developing alternative bioregional markets), but a product of full-spectrum revolutionary engagement.

While CAE came home only more convinced that global capital is an imperial scourge that functions only in the interest of the present generation of plutocratic elites, we also returned to the US with a sense of optimism and a belief that, under the right conditions, patient bioregional strategies can be effective, and should be emulated whenever and wherever the possibility presents itself. Moreover, we found that the necropolitics of ordinary life can be acknowledged, discussed, and to a degree managed, so that as death is produced it is done so in a manner absent of the economic and social prejudices promoted by capitalism.

Note

1. Ala Plástica (founded 1991) describes itself as an “art and environmental organization based in Río de la Plata, Argentina, that works on the rhizomatic linking of ecological, social, and artistic methodology, combining direct interventions and precisely defined concepts to a parallel universe without giving up the symbolic potential of art.”