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A Planetary Memory Trace

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JUSSI PARIKKA

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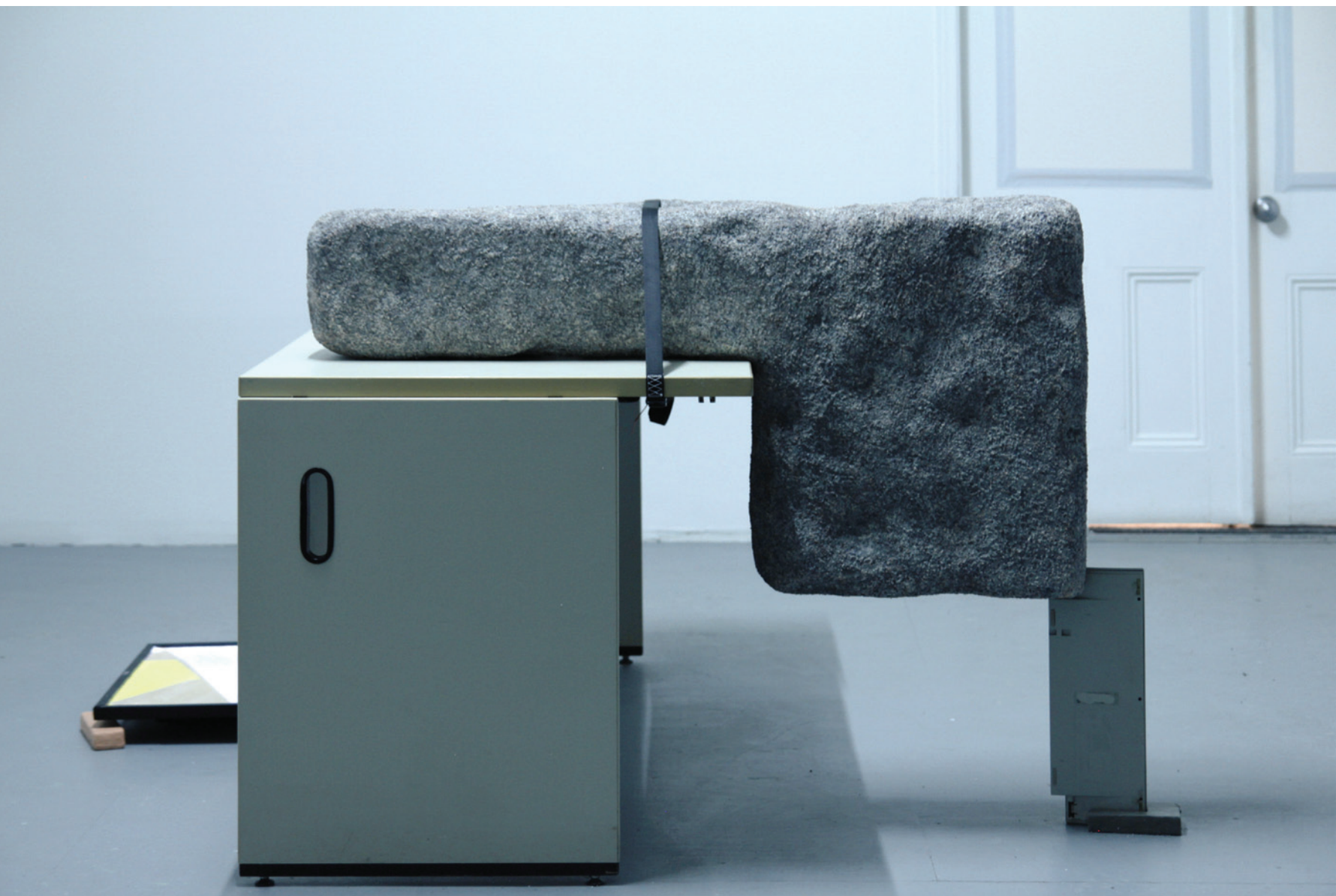
A PLANETARY MEMORY TRACE



Jussi Parikka avait écrit en 2013 un texte pour le catalogue de l'exposition « Télofossiles » qui avait eu lieu au Musée d'art contemporain de Taipei. En 2015, à la demande de Grégory Chatonsky, il écrit un texte pour une exposition à l'IMAL (Bruxelles) selon un nouveau protocole. L'artiste lui a proposé de le rédiger avant l'exposition, non pour faire la description critique des œuvres, mais pour nourrir son propre imaginaire et le processus même de production artistique. En renversant la chronologie du texte et de l'exposition, il s'agissait d'éviter tout aussi bien le commentaire (d'un concept par une œuvre) que la justification (de l'œuvre par un concept), c'est-à-dire une relation de représentation. L'artiste et l'écrivain partagent un monde qu'ils parcourent selon les capacités de leur médium respectif. Pratique discursive et pratique artistique sont égales sans être équivalentes.

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1

Around 2248, or so, it was discovered. The dried up land-cum-desert was cut through by a line that was not what they used to call back in the early times, a nation state border. Instead, a different line cut in the desert.

NOBODY LIVED THERE ANYMORE

except the wandering remains of tribes whose ancestors were the ones who could still tell memories of what used to be—that something used to be.

Now there is sand and wide plateaus that are exposed to erosion after the trees disappeared. You can find traces of other things, like water, now mostly evaporated. Clouds do come at times. It rains hard, beating so hard and intensely that anything without a shelter would feel like it was being bounded by tiny rocks. Otherwise it is just dry. One would describe it easily as a lifeless place, the remains of

ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS

but expressed only by way of such structures occasionally found.

The line that cut across the sand was identified later as part of old infrastructures belonging to

THE FOSSIL FUEL ERA

It was an ancient, quiet but agreed replacement of borders, with a different sort of a division, not between inside and outside but alongside. Someone in the group that discovered the pipeline had the idea to follow it, to see where it leads. Not that it would end. Someone else joked you would come back from the other end. Gas seemed to flow like that; part of the other fossil fuel economies that for a short time boosted a particular economic system and quickly ground it to its halt. What irony. Fossil fuels, and then contributing to the fossilization of a particular life style that became also a fossilization of much of life, humans and non-humans.

That economic system was, after all, infrastructural. Eastern Turkey, bordering with Kurdistan, was cut through with gas pipelines, flowing from the North. National politics hastened geopolitical arrangements, but was it actually just a surface on which the more sustained energetic and material links were being made? What if the gas never cared of their religions and just parasitized on local disputes by reaching out across the planet.[1] It was one of the few remaining monuments after the years of tribal war—and then not-so-tribal war—that was waged in the vicinity of this pipeline and similar disputes around the world.

RELIGION, MONEY, ENERGY; THE USUAL THINGS

In the end, what it left behind was a monument buried in the sand, as one last, sad object of what they used to call cultural heritage. The actual art they hid away in secret places, many since forgotten. During such times, the work of the curator was to ensure art did not get blown up. Perhaps those hidden works too would be discovered. But for now, memories of that ancient era—as it was now becoming clear—was in the form of tubes, lines, pipes, and other sorts of remnants of things that were dug into the earth, sometimes on the surface, but always slightly remote.

In some ways, it always was. The things that really counted—both literally counting and metaphorically being significant—were removed from the sight of the everyday people that used to occupy the land.

WE WERE REMOVED FROM THEM, THEY WERE REMOVED FROM US

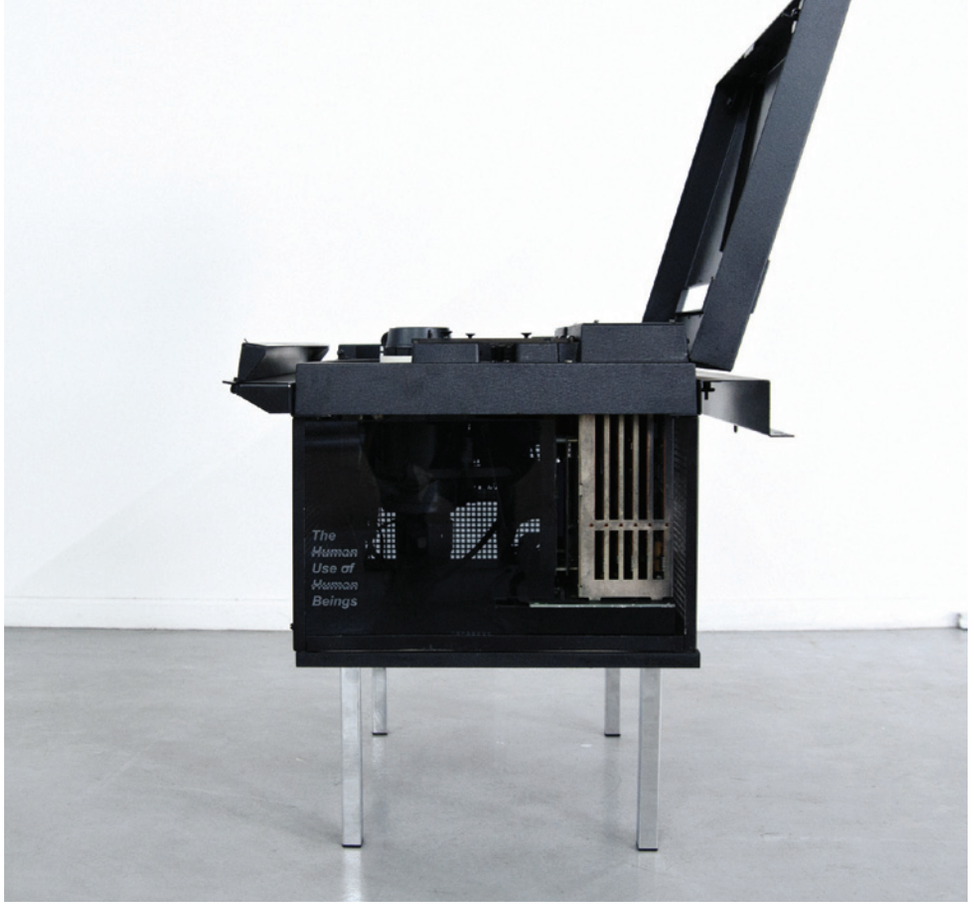
Despite its continuous centrality, the technological was increasingly something we experienced but without a clear focus on where, how, and why. It was under the surface and in the sky. It crossed deserts, and the abandoned zones of the cities. Archaeologists were interested in this sort of a city: one of cries and screams, of acoustic traces. And the near silence of data, humming.[2] Indeed, it was rather quiet—

THE MACHINES WERE SILENT

even if still connected by way of cables and tubes.

1 Consider Thomas Pynchon's words in Gravity's Rainbow (1973): "This War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted . . . secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology.. . .The real crises were crises of allocation and priority, not among firms—it was only staged to look that way—but among the different Technologies, Plastics, Electronics, Aircraft, and their needs which are understood only by the ruling elite." Quoted in Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, "HuntingW a Whale of a State: Kittler and his Terrorists." Cultural Politics vol. 8, issue 3, 2012, 407.Cf. Reza Negarestani, Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials. (Melbourne: re:press, 2008).

2 See Shannon Mattern's *Deep Mapping the Media City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).


The
Human
Use of
Human
Beings

It was back then that we also discovered things in and under the waves. The dilemma of the sea and the ocean had troubled people for centuries, but what if you go under the water line? Not just in terms of the ships and submarines, but

THE DESERT AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA

That's where you find more of the dividing and transport lines—the cables, sea cables. These are the ones that literally cross the planet, and by their limited number still offer the illusion of ubiquitous planetary computation.[3]

The irony did not escape some of the people. The dried out land and its remnants of past infrastructures; the deepest of the oceans with remote cables. They were technological objects that reminded of a memory that was not memory anymore, but just a dumb thing lying there, like an archaeological vase—but of a planetary scale. It wasn't really an interesting question to ask who designed it but just to say that it so easily outlasted those who built it. Transport of gas, transport of light carrying information.

2

Imagine that one Kubrick movie scene with the monolith but replace it with a data centre. The thing of the past-future that haunts and, in its impenetrable form, seems to be as foreign as a computational interface to an outsider intelligence. Indeed, such an intelligence might not even be bothered with the interface so poorly designed because designed for human needs.[4]

But imagining the discovery of a data centre also summons what was described above. We should not get too fixated solely on the specific objects or even spaces, but also on the wider infrastructural networks that allow any sort of centralized place to have power, to transmit information, to be connected on a planetary scale. The imaginary of the non-human object is to be complemented with

THE REAL EXISTENCE OF THE NON-HUMAN INFRASTRUCTURE

that is not a new thing but escorts the period we refer to as modernity into our contemporary era and into the future.

The future biopolitics of elements—the elements that are not merely the four of air, water, fire, and earth but the whole periodic table sketched with increasing accuracy since the 1860s and nowadays with odd new synthetic combinations[5] — gives a further setting for the infrastructural. What will endure on a physical level is prescribed by the wider environmental conditions of dry air, wetness, sea levels, salinity, and more. How does one design for the coming fluctuation of weather patterns?

Besides questions for the designers, there is the question for the one with the archivist's or historian's mindset. The one that is concerned with memories and with preserving them. Well, we never preserve memories, but documents, things, objects, and other material things we then mistake for what they might refer to. In any case, the larger question is about what kind of memory extinction are we dealing with? The technological memory in a harddrive, one that sustains our social memory (two different things, already)? The cultural memory of humankind? Or memory as something that sustains any sort of a complex system to "live"? In other words, what if planetary memory is what we were after, after all? The dried out sandlands, the dead oceans speak of a memory of a different kind than the archivist is used to.

In the context of the debates about the Anthropocene, Bronislaw Szerszynski has outlined how we might be able to think not merely histories and memories of the Anthropocene, but how the world itself incorporates and expresses a memory through its processes.[6] He relates this to a reading of theories of self-organization wherein the systematic qualities of natural "things" (i.e. systemic processes) are based on a memory through which their state changes and life unfold. This also applies to inorganic systems, including geological ones. The position allows us to think of the planet's inorganic life as completely entangled with the biosphere, and to elaborate a position of

NON-HUMAN MEMORY

that is constantly expressed on a planetary scale, even if also on a local one.

The various systems and subsystems form a living entity that has potential impact across many scales. This applies to geochemical formations, the atmosphere, and many other scales that then reveal their dynamic qualities. They unfold towards the future but are prescribed by their memory, which can be said to be their virtual potentiality. This memory is also long-term, Szerszynski reminds us: it is a memory of the planet and its outer-planetary existence, and yet of constant relevance to us as entangled with the systemic qualities that unfold during its lifespan.[7] Everything across the scale of being is embedded in a dynamic, rhythmic existence.

3 Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

4 Benjamin H. Bratton, "Outing A.I.: Beyond the Turing Test" New York Times, *The Stone/Opionator* (February 23, 2015): http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/benjamin-h-bratton.

5 Gary Genosko, "The New Fundamental Elements of a Contested Planet" talk at *the Earth, Air, Water: Matter and Meaning in Rituals Conference* (Victoria College: University of Toronto, June 2013).

6 Bronislaw Szerszynski, "The Anthropocene and the Memory of the Earth" paper at *The Thousand Names of Gaia: From the Anthropocene to the Age of the Earth conference* (Casa de Rui Barbosa: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 15-19 September 2014).

7 *Ibid.*

It's also an archive of sorts—or at least it mobilizes the discussion concerning memory and the archive that we have been witnessing in the past decades. For it relates to the wider sense of archivability, which opens up in new ways when we think of nature and the world as media that already does the work of active inscription and active memory:

"The archive works against itself"—this is the *mal d'archive*.[8] Whether it is the very strata of the rock, or an archive created by humans in order to record Earth's memories and what it knows, the archive's very form of resistance to forgetting makes a more final forgetting possible—the hiding or destruction of the archive. The closed archive of the solid body of the Earth is now being opened but at the same time ransacked.[9]

3

The question of the extinction of memory is particular to our era. It is not that previous eras did not have their own apocalyptic discourses, whether of biblical proportions, of plagues, or of the Other (Ottomans, Christians, Communists, whoever happened to be on the other side of the border in your era). We ask that of and with our technological objects, but we could also ask that of our natural systems and their "archives." This question was already posed in the 19th century with the slow introduction of the idea of what we now call "The Anthropocene."

The geological sciences were also an intervention into how we think of the past and the future. The material conditions of the present were also indications of the future, for example for James Hutton, the 18th century geologist. Rocks and their mineral qualities told stories of time. The world was seen as a dynamic entity where metamorphosis applied to geology as well. The short-circuit of the past, present, and future was the geological way of wiring a sense of the material planet; the past was telling the story of what will happen, a future story that could be told "from things which have already happened; things which have left, in the particular constitution of the bodies, proper traces of the manner of their production."[10]

Some hundred years later, by the time modern geology had really started to establish itself in the early 1870s, the Italian geologist Antonio Stoppani introduced the notion of the "Anthropozoic" era. Stoppani was interested in conceptualizing the human era as one significant geological period. It had shifted both the material basis of our planet and the mental coordinates of how we should relate to our habitat. This was an era before space travel and outsider perspectives,[11] and yet Stoppani's fiction introduced the trope of an alien visitor to geological discourse. What if we were visited

FROM THE OUTSIDE OF OUR PLANET

and our remains were readable mostly to an alien? An alien intelligence that sees and thinks differently than us—in our rather fixated way of approaching the design of the world—would surely also interpret what it sees in an ever so different way; perhaps it would not even be that interested in what we deem significant, as the human remains and the memory banks of data centres would be ignored in preference for the ecological memories. Perhaps

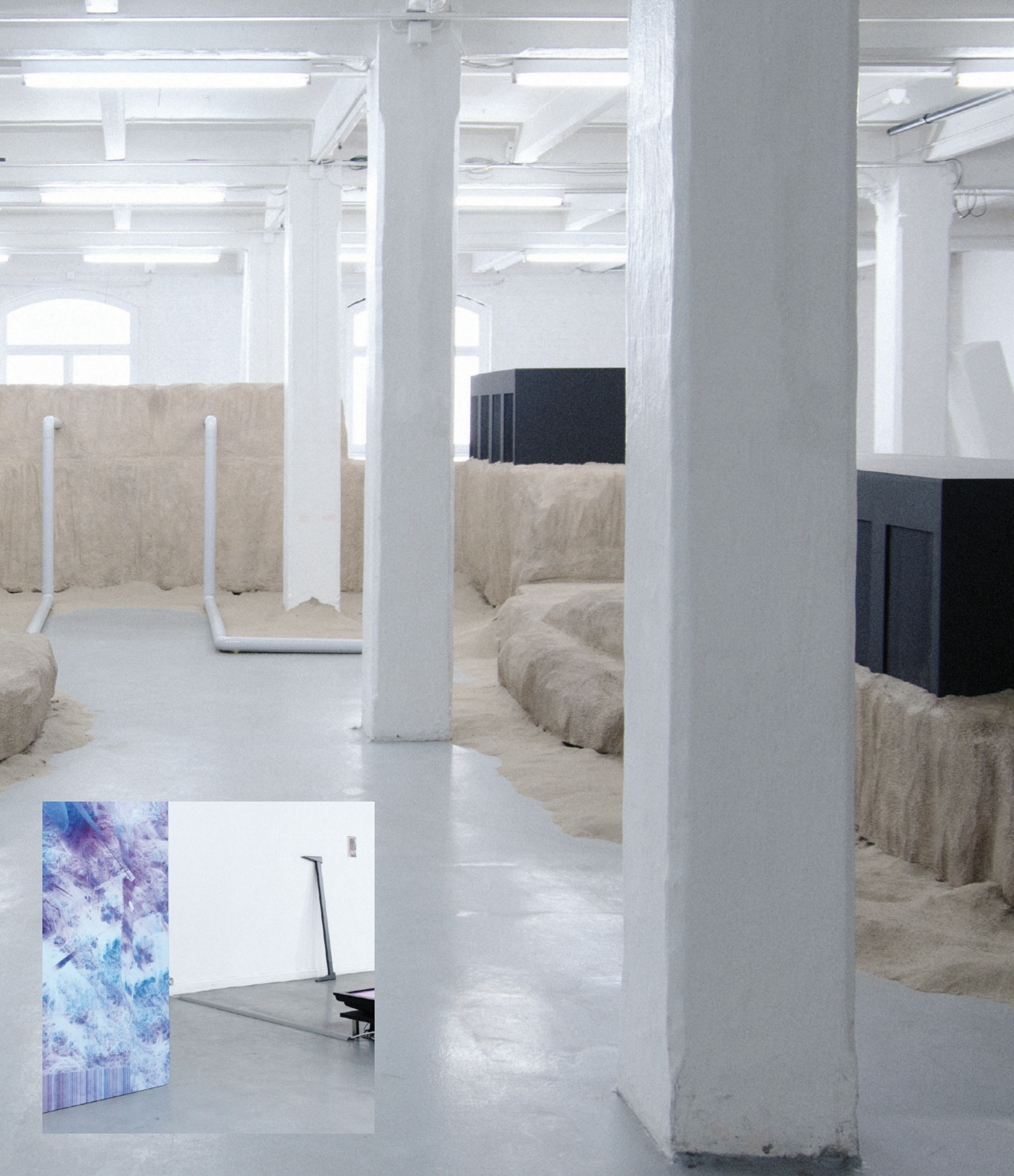
THE PLANETARY RUINS ARE DATA THAT BECOMES NON-HUMAN READABLE

Or nothing is particularly interesting, and we have to cut down on the cultural self-congratulation and admit that our trash will not be very interesting material for any other form of intelligence.

In any case, Stoppani imagined what might be left to discover if such an intelligence would see us as the fossils, and our designs as part of the fossil trace of the effects of science and technology. The question remains pertinent, while Stoppani was also speaking of the massive ecological work humans had engaged in: How much of the earth's surface by now disappears under the masses that man built as his abode, his pleasure, and his defense on plains, on hills, on the seashores and lakeshores, and on the highest peaks! By now the ancient earth disappears under the relics of man or of his industry. You can already count a series of strata, in which you can read the history of human generations, as before you could read the history of ancient faunas in the amassed seabeds. To the archeolithic strata, in which human relics appear buried among cut firestones and bones of extinct animals, superimposed terramare, and pile dwellings, this is where the progress of the human race is demonstrated by bronze forged into exquisite weapons and tools. Yet we have not come to see the soil imprinted upon by Etruscan art, and, to find ourselves on our own, we have to cross the immense stratum that carries the mark of Roman genius.[12]

The idea of extinction is what starts to apply to a whole drive of modern science and technology; the geoengineering of the elements of the planet, from its peaks to its waters, also becomes an index of the memory of what is left behind as monument. The cables, tubes, channels, and more are part of the ecological heritage where information does not necessarily flow anymore, but the technologies after the media have

8 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995),14.
9 Szerszynski, *op. cit.*
10 James Hutton quoted in W. Schreyer, "High-pressure Experiments and the Varying Depths of Rock Metamorphism" in *James Hutton – Present and Future*, eds. G.Y Craig and J.H. Hull (Geological Society: London, Special Publications, 1999), 60.
11 Although, for good insight into the planetary design before the official space age, especially Nikolai Fedorov's writing, see Benedict Singleton's article "Maximum Jailbreak" in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, eds. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 489-507.
12 Antonio Stoppani, "First Period of the Anthropozoic Era," trans. Valeria Federeighi, in *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Everyday Life*, eds. Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse (Brooklyn: Punctum Press, 2013), 38.



remained as

INFRASTRUCTURAL WITNESSES

of the planetary scale reorganisation and the shifting levels of the sea, the drying up of the land, the mass extinction of species the sixth time around.[13]

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At home at work (2015). With D. Sirois. Installation. Urs Hölzle, vice-president of Google's infrastructure, is one of the first ten employees of the company. By finding scattered data about this person, the machine attempts to create a narrative. It alternates a series of computer desks and videos to produce a variable and infinite movie. The birth of Google in the late '90s is a distant time that belongs to another world.
La Chambre Blanche (Quebec, Canada)
http://chatonsky.net/work-home

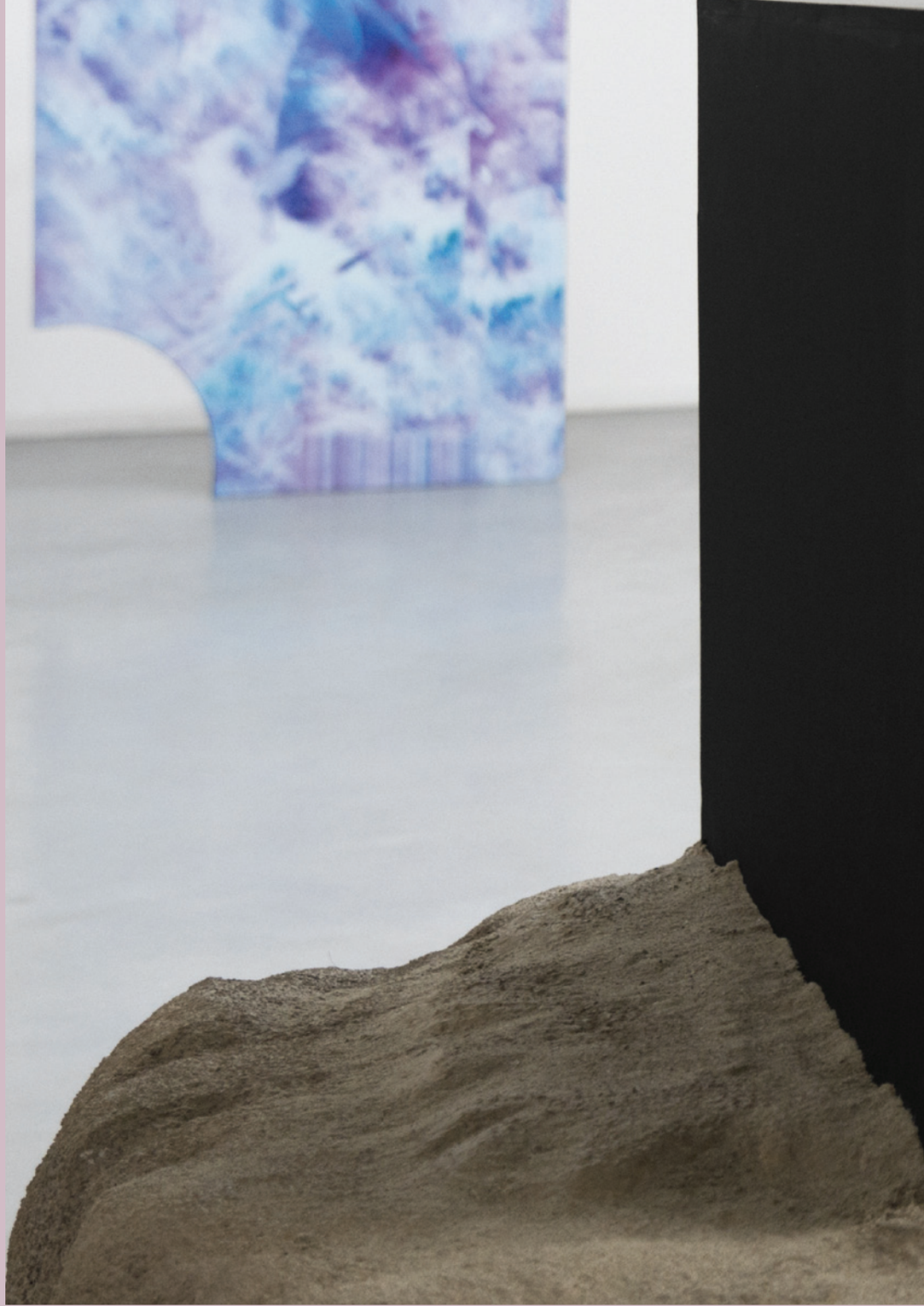
Neural Landscape Network (2016). Digital print and generative video.
150 x 150 cm.
A recursive neural network (RNN) software learns to reproduce the surface of the Earth with thousands of satellite photos. Disturbances in his memory intervene in the image and produce a new abstract surface mixing human and non-human lines.
http://chatonsky.net/nln

CoreFab (2015). Digital print. 100 x 75 cm.
Parts of data centers recomposed with random abstract paintings.
http://chatonsky.net/core-fab

The Use (2015). Sculpture.
IMAL (Brussels, Belgium).
http://chatonsky.net/use

Lecture (2015). Print on mesh. 365 x 290 cm.
IMAL (Brussels, Belgium).
http://chatonsky.net/lecture

Extinct memories (2015). With D. Sirois.
Installation.
IMAL (Brussels, Belgium).
http://chatonsky.net/extinct-bxl



13 Bjorn Carey, "Stanford Biologist Warns of Early Stages of Earth's 6th Mass Extinction Event" *Stanford News* (July 24, 2014): http://news.stanford.edu/news/2014/july/sixth-mass-extinction-072414.html.