



## From 'Out-of-sight' to Centre-stage

Gonzalo Valiente, Jorge Valiente Oriol & Amaia Sánchez Velasco

To cite this article: Gonzalo Valiente, Jorge Valiente Oriol & Amaia Sánchez Velasco (2024) From 'Out-of-sight' to Centre-stage, Theatre and Performance Design, 10:3, 171-182, DOI: [10.1080/23322551.2024.2402593](https://doi.org/10.1080/23322551.2024.2402593)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322551.2024.2402593>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 18 Nov 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 154



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## From 'Out-of-sight' to Centre-stage

Gonzalo Valiente , Jorge Valiente Oriol  and Amaia Sánchez Velasco 

### ABSTRACT

GRANDEZA STUDIO is a collective of architects and artists whose work hybridizes methodologies and techniques that entangle research with critical spatial practices, writing, performance, design, filmmaking and pedagogy.

Central to GRANDEZA STUDIO's work (and subject of inquiry in this essay) is the notion of 'out-of-sightedness'. With this term, we refer to a series of events, spaces, transformations, agents and territories whose frequent lack of protagonism within today's debates around planetary challenges is symptomatic of the many blind spots fostered by hegemonic epistemologies.

We argue here that it is those 'out-of-sight' conditions that most urgently require attention. Enquiring about today's forms of 'out of sightedness' invites us to approach – and hopefully address – a dominant (while not totalised) crisis of political imagination that affects the capacity of visual and spatial practitioners, among others, to participate in the development of liveable planetary futures. To further deepen the notion of visibility (or lack thereof) in the context of staging climates, this visual essay identifies and unpacks – accompanied by a series of key images produced by GRANDEZA STUDIO between 2019 and 2023 – four intertwined and complementary forms of 'out-of-sightedness' that play a central role within their practice.

Operating between Madrid (Spain) and Sydney (Australia), GRANDEZA STUDIO is a collective of architects and artists whose work hybridizes methodologies and techniques that entangle research with critical spatial practices, writing, performance, design, filmmaking and pedagogy. GRANDEZA STUDIO work studies late-capitalist spaces and narratives to identify – through critical analysis – and challenge – through political imagination – the mechanisms that veil and normalize structural forms of violence against bodies and territories.

Central to GRANDEZA STUDIO work (and subject of inquiry in this essay) is the notion of 'out-of-sightedness'. With this term, we refer to a series of events, spaces, transformations, agents and territories whose frequent lack of protagonism within today's debates around planetary challenges is symptomatic of the many blind spots fostered by hegemonic epistemologies. We argue here that it is those 'out-of-sight' conditions that most urgently require attention.

Enquiring about today's forms of 'out of sightedness' invites us to approach – and hopefully address – a dominant (while not totalised) crisis of political imagination that

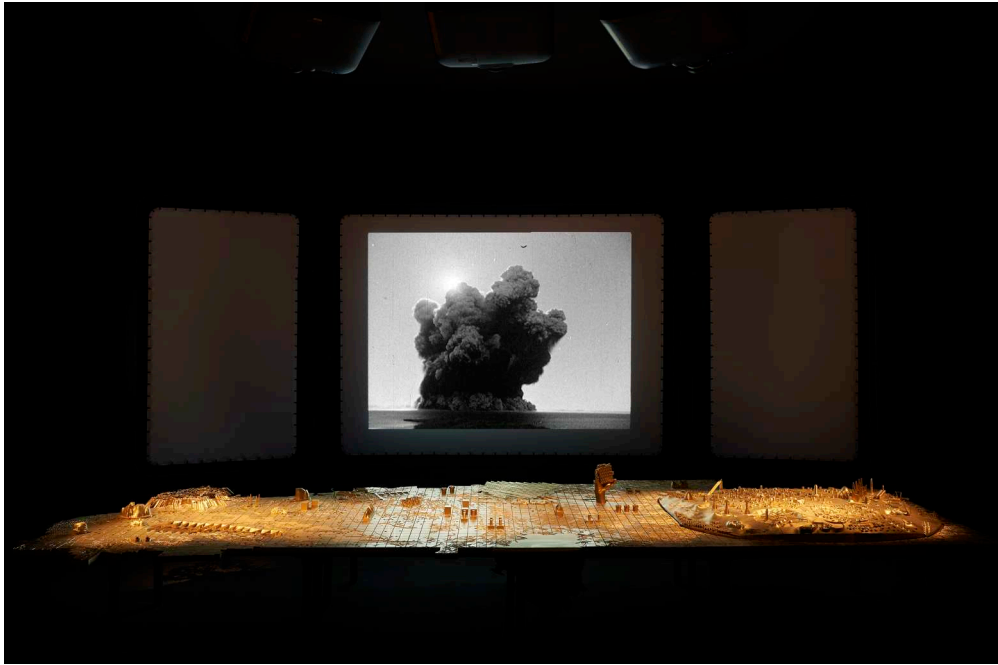
**CONTACT** Gonzalo Valiente  [gonzalo.valiente@uts.edu.au](mailto:gonzalo.valiente@uts.edu.au)

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

affects the capacity of visual and spatial practitioners, among others, to participate in the development of liveable planetary futures.

To further deepen the notion of visibility (or lack thereof) in the context of staging climates, this visual essay identifies and unpacks – accompanied by a series of key images produced in recent works – four intertwined and complementary forms of ‘out-of-sightedness’ that play a central role within GRANDEZA STUDIO practice.



**Figure 0.** The installation *Pilbara Interregnum: Seven Political Allegories*, 2023, exhibited at the 18th Venice Biennale of Architecture: “The Laboratory of the Future”. Territorial model and film still from *Operation Hurricane*, 1952, a documentary about the first test of a British atomic device. With the Operation Hurricane, Australia became the first country in history to willingly cede its own territory to conduct nuclear tests by another country. Photo by Clelia Cadamuro.

The first category derives from colonial instrumentalization of the notions of remoteness and of emptiness. The second one delves and addresses a generalized incapacity to perceive realities and entities that, even if they surround and penetrate our everyday rituals, performing at subcutaneous or metabolic levels, their processes and structural dynamics fall beyond the thresholds of detectability. The third proposed form of ‘out-of-sightedness’ refers to things that most people cannot see, precisely because they are too close, making it difficult to take enough distance – or perspective – to grasp them. We label this category as extreme closeness, common senses or radical familiarity. Finally, a fourth and last category lies precisely in those futures that – as the horizon in an ocean – seem to get further and further as we move towards them, or that are even beyond the horizon, to the point that we cannot see them or even imagine them. We call them (un)reachable futures: those for which we still have not developed bridging syntaxes to enunciate them.

In our attempt to navigate territories and dynamics that fall ‘out-of-sight’, GRANDEZA STUDIO spatial practice often recurs to storytelling, performative and staging techniques

that were once complicit in the expansion and perpetuation of colonial truths (such as the allegory, the epic narrative or the myth) remixing them with popular cultural productions such as the video-clip or the mockumentary, including collaborations with microscopic cinematographers or underwater filmmakers, amongst others. We also travel and perform within locations that are capable of revealing the magnitude of events that normally fall outside our thresholds of detectability, transforming them into stages where the territorial footprint of extraction becomes not only evident, but also acquires a theatrical and monumental presence.

However, while enquiring the notion of 'out-of-sightedness', GRANDEZA STUDIO approach considers paramount to (outwardly and inwardly) address uncomfortable questions such as: whose sight is in place? Whose gaze frames the picture? What is the direction of the viewing vector? Who is scripting the narrative? For whom? and where?

We cannot assume neutrality or innocence in the acts of detecting or imagining. Indeed, it is important to clarify that our work does not attempt to jeopardize those who exercise the 'right to opacity' as a form of resistance.<sup>1</sup> (Glissant 1990, 190-191). We cannot presume neutrality or benevolence in the acts of staging and performing.

The colonial dynamics that paved the way to settling and expanding a euro-centred modernity (as well as global capitalism) relied – and still rely – on the assumed supremacy of certain voices, institutions, ethnicities, languages, and epistemic frameworks (among others) whose gazes and narrative frameworks were (and still are) imposed over their others, hence willing to reduce and relocate them as either props, exotic objects of study, mere audiences, victims, or all at once.

None of the 'out-of-sight' conditions that this visual essay discusses can be detached from any of the above questions.

## Out-of-sightedness 01: Remoteness and Emptiness

According to Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, it is throughout the process of colonization of the allegedly 'undiscovered' Americas that the notion of *race* emerged as the first social category of modernity, giving birth to an entirely new understanding of the world (Quijano 2008). At that time, Europe was staged as the epicenter of progress, and the rest of the world was depicted as an immense and *empty* cartography of *remote* locations waiting to be modernised, civilised, or dominated. Although we could argue that *race* as a social category is preceded by *gender* and *class*, these other categories also reinforce the binarism that still articulates wealth distributions, flows of knowledge/information, power asymmetries and epic constructs around progress and globalisation. Civilised/primitive, male/female, natural/artificial, rational/irrational, factual/fictional, historical/mythical, etc. are just some of the dichotomies that aimed at organising the world according to a centre that scripts, sets and delivers from its epistemic pulpits, and a periphery relegated to perform as passive agents: a norm against a multiplicity of remote anomalies.

According to Quijano, the most powerful feature of this planetary fiction with the capacity to transform worlds was the imposition of a 'distorting mirror' (Quijano 2008, 181-224) on the *dominated* that would lead them to see and imagine themselves through the lens of the *dominator*, thus naturalising the very regime of colonisation and neutralising the autonomy and legitimacy of their own historical and cultural perspectives.<sup>2</sup>

In these peripheral locations, narratives, mythologies, or ecosystems, have often been (and still are) silenced from representation (political, mediatic, cartographic ...) while the territory itself has been framed as available for exploitation and toxic degradation. Mining, deforestation, and atomic bomb tests, amongst others, become justifiable acts in the name of a falsely constructed idea of emptiness and remoteness, something that Samia Henni denounces in *Deserts Are Not Empty* (Henni 2022).

Many of the territories, bodies, landscapes, and landmarks that GRANDEZA STUDIO work addresses seem 'out-of-sight' for those in charge of taking the political decisions that directly affect them. Here, representation takes a double – while intertwined – role: that of political and artistic representation, revealing how we – visual and spatial practitioners – are inevitably immersed in representational struggles.

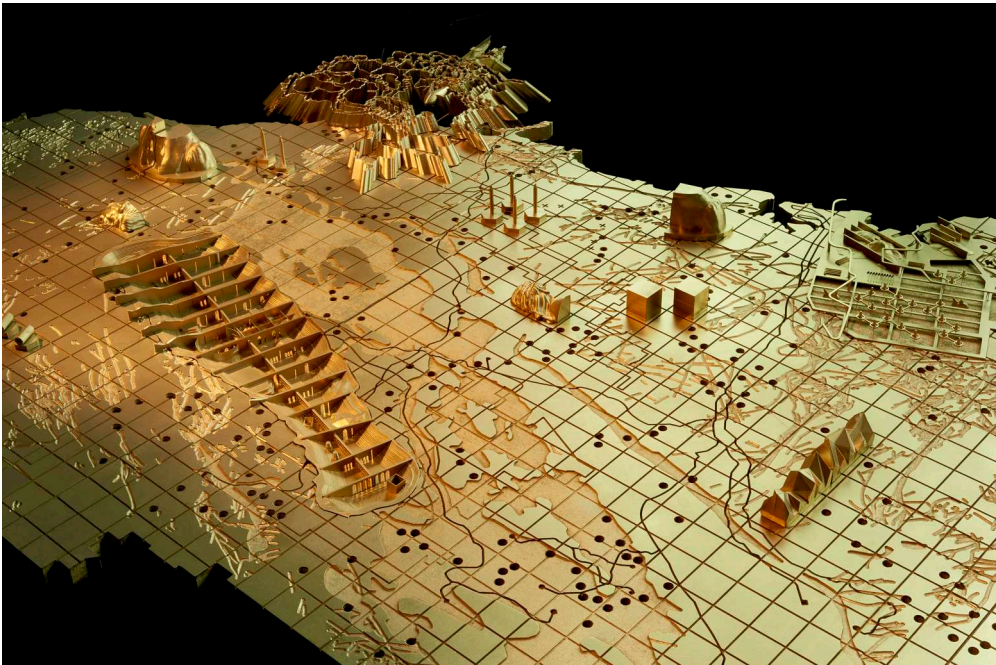
Indeed, regions and territories sacrificed in the name of mass extraction have been either previously, simultaneously, or even posthumously, represented through tactics, techniques, languages and systems with dangerous liaisons to the colonial gaze. Cartographies, films, photographs, allegories, or models, among others, belong to a constellation of narrative devices and artefacts complicit in shaping what Derrida's problematized as the metaphysics of presence (Derrida 2016), according to which, bodies of knowledge such as archives (Derrida 1995) and languages must be enquired and scrutinized simultaneously on their presences, as much as on their absences.

New frontiers of extraction (such as the deep-seas, Antarctica, or the cosmos) are rhetorically framed under an apparent remoteness and emptiness, as the perfect alibis to ever extend the tentacular geographies of extractivist addictions and turbo-capitalist notions of progress.

*Terra nullius ad infinitum*



**Figure 1.** Image from *Mars Interruptus*, 2022. The project connects the red Tesla Roadster sent to space by Elon Musk's SpaceX in 2018 with the reinvigorated proliferation of imaginaries for the colonisation of Mars brought about by the legislative shift introduced by the USA with the Space Act 2015. Literally, the image of the lonely cowboy in search of new lands to grab, now launched into the stratosphere to expand the colony beyond Earth. Photo by GRANDEZA STUDIO



**Figure 2.** The installation *Pilbara Interregnum: Seven Political Allegories*, 2023, exhibited at the 18th Venice Biennale of Architecture: “The Laboratory of the Future”. Territorial model. Photo by Clelia Cadamuro.

## Out-of-sightedness 02: Beyond the Thresholds of Detectability

In *Gaia Global Circus*, Bruno Latour claimed that ‘if environmental issues are un-representable in their scale, their ubiquity, and their duration, then perhaps it falls to works of art (which are still works of thought) to present them to the senses’<sup>3</sup> (Ghosn & Jazairy 2016, 53). Indeed, many of the processes that are putting planetary life at stake occur at scales or environments that transcend the thresholds of detectability.

This category refers, for instance, to mysterious processes intrinsic to the functioning of soils, or to the blackspot condition represented by hardly explored deep-sea regions; but also, to phenomena and events linked to the climatic collapse. According to Rob Nixon’s notion of ‘slow violence’ (Nixon 2011, 45-67), many dynamics linked to environmental degradation perform at paces that remain out of sense in opposition to sensational and spectacle-driven events that often capture public attention.

Here, the condition of ‘out-of-sightedness’ transcends the issue of visual perception, inviting us to critically speculate on necessary pathways to develop individual and collective forms of feeling and sensing. How can we move away from the amnesic economy of neoliberal emotions, and beyond the strangling constraints of guilt and fear? What is the spectrum of ethical frameworks that shape our forms of interpretation of those entities, dynamics and events that we cannot see?

We are referring here to a form of ‘out-of-sightedness’ that manifests through cognitive and affective blind spots, one that demands visual and spatial practitioners to unearth and resignify historically discarded forms of perception, interpretation and



representation. Max Weber coined the term “Disenchantment of the World” referring to the post-enlightenment segregation of the world between occidental scientism (or positivism) and a constellation of mythological frameworks and cosmologies (Webber 1985) that – according to Sylvia Wynter – were mostly deemed as ‘savage’ or ‘irrational’ (Wynter 2003). Unfortunately, this form of cognitive expulsion remains poorly addressed (when not purposely ignored) by most visual and spatial practitioners still today.

To bring forward such blind spots, GRANDEZA STUDIO work engages with performative tactics, techniques and rituals, thus exploring potential reconnections between the intangible scales of critical planetary events with the dominant forms of perception characteristic of modernised cultures and subjects. Borrowing from philosopher Vinciane Despret, instead of performing as media-managers or data mediators, visual and spatial practitioners might have to perform as ‘mediums’ (Despret 2021, 27-28) capacitated to understand, inhabit, and travel throughout an “ecology of senses and sentiments” (Despret 2021, 85-87).



**Figure 3.** This white mountain, about 500 meters high – without vegetation or traces of life, and with an extraterrestrial appearance – is formed by the gradual accumulation of 48 million tons of salt waste, a consequence of the underground potash mining throughout a hundred years. Paradoxically, its colossal scale makes visible the waste of a mining industry whose main activity occurs almost imperceptibly from the surface in kilometeric galleries that reach 900 meters deep, terraforming salty seas evaporated in ancient times. The Sallent subsoil is emptied, extracted and distributed throughout the fields in the form of fertilizers, while the mountain of mining waste builds a mirrored landscape that dissolves, salinizing the rivers, wells, springs, torrents, and aquifers of the entire Llobregat region in Catalunya. Film still from *Strata Incognita*, 2023, by Amaia Sánchez-Velasco, Jorge Valiente Oriol, Francisco Lobos and Romea Muryñ.



**Figure 4.** Underwater footage of a Crown of Thorns and the Great Barrier Reef from the film *Teatro Della Terra Alienata*, 2019, the Australian Pavilion at the XXII Triennale di Milano, “Broken Nature: Design Takes on Human Survival”. The Australian pavilion was awarded the Golden Bee Award for the best international contribution. Film still by the Authors: GRANDEZA STUDIO and Miguel Rodríguez-Casellas.

### **Out-of-sightedness 03: Extreme Closeness, Common Senses or Radical Familiarity.**

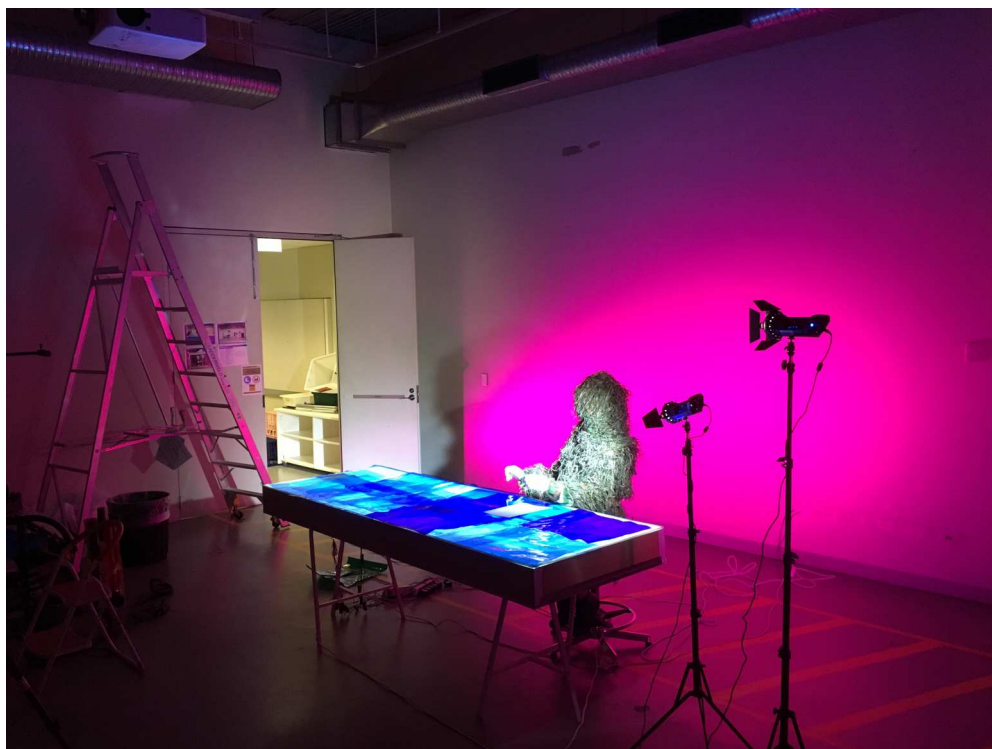
Familiarity and dominant common senses often have the effect of neutralizing our capacity to recognize forms of violence that have been normalized by the hammering reiteration of dominant discourses. This is where the work of GRANDEZA STUDIO establishes a relationship with performative languages that acquires a critical status.

At this point, our work experiments with contemporary reinterpretations of Bertolt Brecht’s instrumental use of the ‘alienation’ or ‘distancing effect’, developed along with a group of actors, scenographers, musicians and writers during the interwar period in Berlin: the Epic Theatre. Brecht’s critical experiments developed performative and scenographic techniques for alienation, defamiliarization and denaturalization, allowing audiences and performers to make tangible and to take critical distance from unquestioned common senses.

Even though Brecht’s theatre was most notably known for inviting audiences to keep a critical distance and refusing *katharsis*, it was its effect outside of the theatre space (that of making the audience aware of an equivalence between the artificiality employed in both theatre and the construction of “reality”) what made Epic Theatre a fundamental contribution to the Arts: a radical reminder that reality is constructed and, as such, everyone can (and should) participate in its perpetual deconstruction and reconstruction.

And this is what brings us to the fourth and last category of ‘out-of-sightedness’ embedded within the core of GRANDEZA STUDIO ideological, creative and cognitive framing as a spatial practice.





**Figure 5.** “Distancing effect” in the recording of the film *Teatro Della Terra Alienata*, 2019. Photo by the Authors: GRANDEZA STUDIO and Miguel Rodríguez-Casellas.



**Figure 6.** The installation *Pilbara Interregnum: Seven Political Allegories*, 2023, exhibited at the 18th Venice Biennale of Architecture: “The Laboratory of the Future”. An “estranged” astronaut interrogates the audience: “Why would you like to become an Earthling on Mars, if you could become a Martian on Earth?”. Photo by Clelia Cadamuro.

## Out-of-sightedness 04: (Im)possible Futures

The notion of 'futurability' (Berardi 2017) demands particular attention at a time when – according to philosopher Marina Garcés – modernity's foundational questions to the future, such as 'where to?', have been superseded by questions such as 'until when?' or 'for how long?' (Garcés 2017)

The more our globalised civilization struggles to imagine liveable futures for the most, the more planetary prospects are confined within proliferating survivalist epics, denialist tropes, and apocalyptic fantasies. An example of this is the mantra of resilience, a pseudo-scientific appropriation of a term coined by Crawford Stanley Holling to describe the intrinsic capacity of certain organisms and ecosystems to adapt to the destructive effects of external forces (Holling 1973). But in the overall context of a climatically and politically heated planet, concepts such as *resilient cities* reflect a problematic acceptance of the false premise that climate change's devastating effects could be caused by external forces instead of being deadly byproducts of our collective acts and lack of actions.

On the other hand, techno-determinism (and its blind faith that technology will save us) turns hegemonic networks of knowledge production into solutionist theatres of distraction – smoke screens with apparent anaesthetic qualities that keep distracting us from imagining and rehearsing urgently needed structural changes.

Both adaptational mandates and salvific techno-deterministic visions of the future converge, giving shape to an apparently depoliticised tension between our critical present and its potential futures. As a consequence, 'the future' is often set as a perpetual countdown, a new form of sublime condition that, according to Mark Fisher's critique on '*Capitalist Realism*' (2009), only allows for submissive resignation, adaptation, and agile compliance with expert, unilateral, often opaque, and vertical mandates. Greek politician and economist Yanis Varoufakis, coined the aforementioned context under the label of 'techno-feudalism' (Varoufakis 2024).

In response to Frederic Jameson's provocative claim that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (Jameson 2003, 11-18), GRANDEZA STUDIO work rather embraces the words of Lesley Lokko: 'it is impossible to build a better world if one cannot first imagine it', as she stated in her curatorial framework to the 18th Architecture Biennale in Venice, 'The Laboratory of the Future' (Lokko 2023).

GRANDEZA STUDIO's spatial work refuses framing architecture as a realm for problem-solving but as a field capable of opening and staging questions capable of putting in crisis current power inequalities, while embarking in exercises of radical political imagination.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 7.** Instead of demanding specific actions against climate change, the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, a non-for-profit organization that received the biggest donation to date from Australian Government, promoted “resilience, restoration and innovation” to gain longevity for the reef, through the deployment of local technological “patches”, with the aim of keeping the reef alive. Drones, autonomous underwater vehicles, cameras, censoring devices, etc. make up a techno-utopian theatre – which we call “theatre of distractions”. This technological arsenal is in charge of patrolling and monitoring the fate of the reef as well as keeping the general public’s hope afloat around the possibility of its recovery. Meanwhile, the biggest threat to the reef’s survival, a hegemonic economic system dependent on fossil fuels and infinite growth, continues to expand globally and locally. Film still of *Teatro Della Terra Alienata*, 2019, by the Authors: GRANDEZA STUDIO and Miguel Rodríguez-Casellas.



**Figure 8.** The installation *Pilbara Interregnum: Seven Political Allegories*, 2023. A solar miner inhabiting the first post-labour metropolis in the world. In this political allegory, the Asian Renewable Energy Hub (a factual large-scale solar farm planned in the Pilbara) is transformed into a full-scale urban and political laboratory where to collectively experiment with the spatial and systemic implications of removing work from the epicenter of life. Photo by Clelia Cadamuro.

## Notes

1. We refer here to the “right of opacity” that Edouard Glissant reclaims in the chapter “For Opacity” of his book *Poetics of Relation* published in French in 1990 by Gallimard and in English by the University Michigan Press (translated by Betsy Wing). In Glissant’s words, “the right to opacity would not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms. [...] The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.”
2. This theatrical organization of the world is not mono-directional. For Argentinian anthropologist Rita Segato, it is Europe today that is trapped in its own narcissistic mirror. Segato argues that Europe is the first victim of Eurocentrism, precisely because of its foundational refusal to recognize itself reflected in the “communal cosmos of non-Western and non-monotheistic civilizations,” (Segato 2019, 1) which prevents “the old continent” from imagining itself beyond an exhausted self-fiction that cracks to the sound of war and climate disaster.
3. This quote refers to Bruno Latour’s online publication at *Gaia Global Circus* under the following link: <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/fr/node/359>. The quote has been extracted from the article: *Gaia Global Circus: A Climate Tragicomedy* by Rania Ghosn and El Hadi Jazairy published at *Climates: architecture and the planetary imaginary*. (2016). Columbia Books on Architecture and the City.
4. As Rania Ghosn recently described it in her article for *Log* magazine ‘Geodesign, or, It Matters What Earths Make Worlds’, our practice belongs to “a constellation of earth- thinking and earth-making design practices – critical, decolonial, feminist, and speculative (...) – whose works do not aim to simulate or SketchUp the future from today’s data models, but to world through the cracks of the present crisis the possibilities for another world.” (Ghosn 2024, 198)

## ORCID

Gonzalo Valiente  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0580-078X>

Jorge Valiente Oriol  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4890-8005>

Amaia Sánchez Velasco  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7198-077X>

## Bibliography

- Berardi, Franco. 2017. *Futurability*. London: Verso Books.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2016. *Of grammatology*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1995. “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression.” In *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9–63. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Despret, Vinciane. 2021. *Our Grateful Dead*. Chicago: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fisher, Mark. 2022. *Capitalism Realism. Is there no alternative?* London: John Hunt Publishing Limited.
- Garcés, Marina. 2017. *Nueva Ilustración Radical*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Ghosn, Rania. 2024. “Geodesign, or, It Matters What Earths Make Worlds.” In *Log* 60: 195–207.
- Ghosn, Rania & Jazairy, El Hadi. “Gaia Global Circus: A Climate Tragicomedy.” In *Climates: architecture and the planetary imaginary*. New York: Columbia.
- Glissant, Édouard. 1990. *Poétique De La Relation*. Paris : Gallimard.
- Henni, Samia. 2022. *Deserts Are Not Empty*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Holling, C. S. 1973. “Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems.” In *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 4: 1–23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2096802>.
- “Introduction by Lesley Lokko.” 2023. La Biennale Di Venezia. <https://www.labiennale.org/en/architecture/2023/introduction-lesley-lokko>.
- Jameson, Fredric. 2003. “Future City.” In *New Left Review* 21: 65–79.
- Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Quijano, Aníbal. 2008. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." In *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate* edited by Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel and Carlos A. Jáuregui, 181-224. New York: Duke University Press.
- Segato, Rita. 2019. "Is Eurocentrism a European Problem? Decolonial Meditation in Twenty Theses." In *Transtext(e)s Transcultures 跨文本跨文化* [Online], 14. <https://doi.org/10.4000/transtexts.1273>.
- Varoufakis, Yanis. *Tecnofeudalismo. El sigiloso sucesor del capitalismo*. Bilbao: Deusto.
- Weber, Max. 2001. *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." In *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no.3 (2003): 257-337.