

HOW TO RECYCLE ONE'S SOUL

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the coals at the bottom of my stomach are glowing furiously and i can't stand up. stress is manufacturing autonarcotics that make the hormones aggressive and the brain addicted. burning out is an acute deficit of adrenaline, a mindless, libidinal longing for passion and for strength. each day is a nightmare; i'm waiting – for a new dose, spending tortured, lonely hours in desperate daydreams in which my infantile desire chews on rubbery victims in impossible, nauseating situations. i need to get outside of myself. during this painfully stretched out time, my mind schizophrenically jumps between convictions: it's actually quite versatile and nice to be a freelance cultural person – if i could only get some more of this feeling of accomplishment, please, let's accomplish more stuff together – who the hell really needs this stuff though?! – pointless tasks are horribly pointless – i've never been so alone – let me just die and disappear, please. the future is simultaneously nonexistent and glittering in vulgarly naive volume, whispering into one ear:

“there's so much that you could still do, people to contact, places to contribute! how fortunate you are to have a job that interests you, fills necessary gaps and is a lot less bullshit than most of them out there! you have the opportunity to point to our interconnectedness with nature, to give a voice to the small and the forgotten, the craft and the material, to advocate for slowness and unity! live, love, laugh!”

and into the other:

“why is it so that you only make it to nature as part of a project? when was the last time you had dinner with friends, exercised, saw a doctor, took care of yourself more than with a wine-and-netflix-evening? how many plastic-wrapped sandwiches and packaged foods did you again buy this week? flying abroad again for that collaboration, are you? how is all of this helping you move towards that alternative way of life that you're preaching about?”

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I like to look up the impressum section in the backs of old books to see how long it took to typeset them. In case of a thinner book it's usually 4-5 months, a thicker one – up to a year. Conjuring a printed publication out of molten metal, cellulose and oil paint took time, demanded time, was given time. The (Soviet) typesetters worked their shift in the printing house and then practiced their hobbies in afternoon recreation groups. Typographers have globally been trade union frontpeople, being among the first to fight for vacation time, fair pay and other labor rights. I feel like I've let down my ancestors. I can ask for time but it's nowhere to be given, since catalogues have to be ready for exhibition openings and work can now also be done from home, on a commute or at midnight. Self-fulfillment – the illusion of focus, meaning and purpose – has to be squished out from the cracks in the dizzyingly dense project timelines.

I sacrifice my weekends because I value experimental high-quality collaboration on important topics (and since I'm generally healthy and without obligations of child/social welfare). And because I sense the responsibility I have for the natural resources sacrificed by our art and cultural projects. If we're already making something, let us make it as thoroughly thought-through, sensitively, economically and generally best as possible.

Instead of a boring desktop printed A4 or disposable vinyl sticker lettering, I invent ways to reuse paper, plastic or wood and try out heritage printing methods for the exhibitions and installations that I'm doing graphic design for. By bringing in historic manual technologies, I want to remind the audiences now so accustomed with digital standards: look – slower, more sustainable approaches are and have been possible! To hell with efficiency, speed and standardisation; let's adapt, degrow, DIY, be mindful of the consequences, our resources are finite... These are carrying themes in most projects in the art and cultural field that I'm part of these days. Yet time and again I find myself stretched thin and burnt from the multitasking, haunted by the question: can creative work on sustainability ever be sustainable itself?

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Material and social sustainability is written into the conditions of more and more projects (at least with state/European funding). This is good, since it guides us all to better sense the interdependencies we're embedded in: we enjoy our habitual luxuries almost always on the account of someone's or something's wellbeing with irresponsible effects one way or another. Comfortable choices made for the sake of my own mental health and time optimisation (like taking the plane instead of the train or a plastic-wrapped quick lunch instead of a self-made one) usually equal with material waste and contributing to the environmental crisis – maybe not a lot at once, but a busy urban worker will accumulate quite a number of these moments during a short time. (Have you ever tried to imagine how much trash you've produced during your whole life and what has become of it by now?)

Right now, this relation functions exactly the same also the other way around: one can only practice material sustainability on the account of their mental sustainability. We do experiments in circular economy in addition to main tasks and projects, adding them to schedules that remain as intensive as before, in the same old cultural formats that we're used to. There's a growing amount of exhibitions, conferences, panel discussions, reading groups, performances, festivals, residencies, trainings and international biennales on themes around the ecological crisis. The temporary campaign-like format invokes an activist atmosphere around this acute topic, which allows milking the most out of the cultural worker's sense of duty. The deep breath of the Covid era has been thoroughly exhaled; running from one event to another, we're now desperately trying to get high from each other's inspiration in order to continue.

At the [Biotoopia](#) conference in May in Tallinn, there was a lot of talk – as usual – on the necessity for humanity to withdraw, decrease, change the standards. Charismatic Bayo Akomolafe presented the enthralling metaphor that people should let nature infect and seize control over us

just like the fungal infection in the series *Last of Us*, and then hurried to take a flight to the next conference in San Francisco. (Poof! the magician disappears into a carbon cloud several hundred tonnes heavy.)

How many different hollow articulations of the narrative “everything is fucked, but let’s not lose hope” can one endure? How long to deceive oneself with justifications that the role of culture and art as raising awareness and mediating ideas is sufficient? How can fantasies of fairer and finer alternatives turn into practice when each of our self-sacrificing acts is so obviously illusory and hypocritical?

The societal role of the humanities should be not just to speak for this critically necessary infection, but also to embody it. How do we really allow ourselves more time, do less, stop the busi/yness-as-usual, change our habitual standards and formats? How do we get to the point where instead of plastic-wrapped lunch, each one of us would have the option to make one’s own lunch out of collectively grown vegetables? Where none of us would take more than, for instance, two flights abroad per year? Where instead of travelling or urban life, it would be natural to desire taking part in ecovillages and caring for the land? Instead of shopping, making one’s own textiles, things and tools? Instead of the nuclear family, communal childcare as an actual practical alternative? How do you infect someone with the mindset that they don’t have any rights to any comforts, without losing the will to live? How can we turn trendy keywords – *community*, *sustainability*, *green transition* – into something tangible and practically guiding?

So that one’s soul would, instead of a pile of coals, become a source of renewable energy.

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the therapist dictates and i write:

“a human being is not omnipotent.

a human being does not have control over the future.

i am a human being.”

(what an un-objectifiable dissonance.)

but she also suggests dividing dreams up into tiny believable steps.

during the past four years¹, i’ve shyly been trying to market the idea of a self-sustainable creative ecovillage in rural Estonia to my with friends and acquaintances. it could be something a bit other than a creative residency or an organic cooperative farm, but not a cramped-together hippy community either. social housing for future pensionless freelancers? heritage design homestead with a community perma-garden? there are many directions, and many experiences to learn from, but i feel like i cannot make such a plan entirely alone.

here’s an invitation from a tiny step: please get in touch with me if you would be ready to team up for planning and building such a different kind of life.

¹ Dear Friend #8 (2019), https://gd.artun.ee/dearfriend/uploads/Dear_Friend_8_Maria_Muuk.pdf