

# *Our Cabins: Youth, Precariousness, and Imagination*

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay attempts to show and think the way in which young artistic, poetic, and political collectives (e.g., in France: Catastrophe, Mauvaise troupe, Jef Klak, Le peuple qui manque) cope with the current social situation facing youth in order to imagine, through their everyday practices, the forms of a life to come. New collective writing, inventions of links, and ways of relating to work, affects, ecodiplomacies, struggles, theoretical mobilizations: all are inventions of *ways to live in a damaged world*. The future, here, is grasped through the figure of impatience (the impatience to make), and all the actual forms of precariousness find themselves braved and defied in those vigorous practices of imagination.

I WOULD LIKE TO REFLECT UPON the way certain collectives (here in France and, one supposes, all around the world) face the current youth situation. These very recent collectives—for example, Catastrophe, Mauvaise troupe, Jef Klak, Le peuple qui manque—are artistic, poetic, and political all at once. They are committed to imagining the forms of life to come through their everyday practices. New collective writing, the invention of working links and processes, the politicization of affects, the invention of types of ecodiplomacies: these are all different ways of *living in a damaged world*. The future is summoned here, not as a great utopian figure, but rather as both a joyful and an unpeaceful form of *impatience*: the impatience to make and build things, to be together, to imagine, to “cultivate the possible.” And yet, it is precariousness, precariousness in all its different forms, understood as the political challenge of our times, that is braved by these practices of the imagination.

By saying that precariousness is braved, I do not mean that these collectives have triumphed over it, and that everything will end well; on the contrary, I intend to accuse this precariousness and the social situation that has been imposed on a whole generation. Because, as far as the social movement “Nuit debout” is concerned, those who fought against the El Khomri law (or Loi travail) and its world (focusing especially on “its world”), some of whom today are twenty, thirty, or even forty, are in a precarious situation and they know they are in a precarious situation.<sup>1</sup> Or rather, they know they are socially, economically, historically insecure and nonequalized. A space, a *place*, has been refused to them from the very beginning—which is what they come to remind us of when they meet in public squares all over the world. People keep on telling them that they are unwanted, have come too late, and were already in debt before they even arrived; people keep on telling them that there are no jobs for them, that there are no places available, not “like us.”

Teaching today often consists in speaking to young people of a world whose entrance has been explicitly barred to them; and studying today (or simply being young) often means trying to reach out to a world to which one aspires only from a state of limbo, waiting to be chosen, waiting for someone else to select you, for someone else to have the goodwill to let you work, to keep you on, or, some would say, to exploit you. And if I speak of teaching situations and of students, it is because these thoughts come to me thanks to students faced with the precariousness I see them struggling with, the solidarity I see them constructing, and the recourse they find in thinking; in fact, I owe the politicization of all my work to them.

For them, the issue is no longer even “taking their place”; it is one of fighting a world of taken places and refused places. In a recent poem-book, *Poétique de l'emploi* (Poetics of employment), Noémi Lefebvre stresses that today one can be as afraid of finding work as of not finding any.<sup>2</sup> I will insist upon this: the taste for creating “zones,” or ZADs (zones to defend),<sup>3</sup> such as Notre-Dame-des-Landes and Bure forest means an abandonment of this world of “places” and the invention of other ways of living and bonding.

Fundamentally, all strive to answer Bruno Latour’s question “Où atterrir?” (Where can we land?).<sup>4</sup> On what reviewed and rethought earth (*terre*) can we land? This is, in fact, the issue raised by the triple crisis of today’s world: ecological, migratory, and social, drawing an imminent future, a future that is already there. The crisis is made up of all sorts of “*déterrestrations*,” of ecological, human, and social despoliation.

<sup>1</sup> Nuit debout is a French social movement that arose in March 2016 in Paris, gathering on la place de la République protesters against a liberal labor reform (known as the El Khomri law or Loi travail); it rapidly expanded into a more general protest, creating a space of debate and an occasion for political experimentation, comparable to other Occupy movements that had taken place earlier in New York City and Madrid and spread to other cities in France.

<sup>2</sup> Noémi Lefebvre, *Poétique de l'emploi* (Paris: Verticales, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> The phrase *zone à défendre* refers to the militant occupation and defense of a territory threatened by planning or economic development. Here the ecological and the political dimensions, of course, converge. The most well known of such zones are Notre-Dame-des-Landes (where the construction of a new airport was projected, which would have destroyed a unique territory of ecological diversity), the Sivens dam project (where the activist Rémi Fraisse was killed by the police), and Bure forest.

<sup>4</sup> Bruno Latour, *Où atterrir? Comment s'orienter en politique* [Where to land? How to find an orientation in politics] (Paris: La Découverte, 2017).

## RECLAIMING THE FUTURE

Faced with this, the possibilities of “*reterrestrations*,” the invention of ways of living in a damaged world,<sup>5</sup> draw on new thoughts of the times—more precisely, a new temporal imagination, a politicization of the imagination of time, and, first and foremost, new ways of relating to the future (this converges with contemporary philosophical efforts, mindful of the different modalities of critical strength generated by the projective dimension of our experienced temporality, both individually and collectively). I will give two examples.

The first example is the collective *Catastrophe*. I will quote a long statement by this artistic collective (among whom are former students of mine) published by *Libération* in autumn 2016, which is entirely directed toward the joyous, energetic, and yet grave, grim possibility of taking control over modes of being in our times.

We have grown up in a dead end, surrounded by a network of little stressful sentences that conglomerated like narcotics in our developing brains. As children, we were simultaneously acquainted with the world and its imminent end: not a day went by without hearing news on the radio about those two morbid sisters, Debt and Crisis, whose clouds kept accumulating over our heads. Would they end up bursting? Or would they do so because of inflation, the hole in the Social Security system and its associate the o-zone? And what about the skyscrapers, the September 11th of our 11th birthday? . . . At high school, we were warned straight off that History was over. People explained to us that God, the Novel and Painting were dead. . . . [And] Love, too. We didn't even know its face and we weren't allowed to believe in it. Our adolescence went by and nothing happened. At university, we discovered the “Postmoderns.” . . . The formula was often used, covering everything that was contemporary. . . . The communist hypothesis? A delirium of pyromaniacs. May 68? A snowball fight. The ideal of progress? We'd seen Hiroshima. The utopias had all been ridiculed. . . . We felt there was no comparison with any other era. . . . Without having decided anything, we were always last in line, a generation of tiny latecomers faced with stone statues. We weren't even twenty and we had arrived too late.

So what was there left to be done? Die? . . . regret it all? The answer was simple (the collective *Catastrophe* dared): be born once again, and we could choose how. . . . We were anything but disenchanted, and we didn't have any other choice than to invent new ways. If that place is already taken, we'll go somewhere else to explore. On the ruins of the “Glorious Thirties,” some of us living below the poverty line. We'll do exactly what we like. Too bad for comfort, too bad for security, and too bad if we can't explain our daily life to our parents. We are supported by the love we carry within us. . . . Far from political theaters whose language we don't understand anymore, we aspire to emancipation, even if this means consenting to being poor. The “système D” or “hacking it” is indeed a possible alternative to the workforce. We believe small businesses are hand in hand and equal to large institutions. We explore supple micro-economies in the margins, thanks to the Internet. Go-betweeners are bypassed. We produce and distribute our own honey. Nothing comes between us and our music: energy and goodwill are sufficient to create it, a computer to mix it and distribute it all over the world. We are cosmopolitan but we live locally: in restricted and thereby livable areas. We make objects that

<sup>5</sup> See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). Also see the forthcoming (January 2019) special issue of *Critique*: “Vivre dans un monde abîmé” [Living in a damaged world], ed. Marielle Macé and Romain Noël.

resemble us, and we share them. In our digital gardens, we cultivate both IRL and URL relationships, exchange enthusiasm, knowledge, and the nuances of our inner lives. We take over our time. . . . We are independent, multitasking tinkerers. . . . We exchange our clothes, our living places, and our ideas.

Silently, a discreet, local revolution, one that hasn't tried to convince anyone, has already taken place. We accept having no status, living in the joyful margins, by necessity and by choice. We see the future in areas of disused land. Rebirth will happen in the wastelands. We don't claim or expect anything from today's society: we make things happen. Above all, in a fragile manner. . . . Like balloons that have flown up too high, we can't come down anymore: in an anchorless sky, we seek new colors. The world is made of clay and ready to be modeled; it's not the inert, sad mass it appears to be. A multicolored future awaits us. *Don't be scared, there's nothing else to lose.*<sup>6</sup>

This statement was followed by performances, concerts, other events, and several books written by Catastrophe, including the vigorous essay entitled *La nuit est encore jeune* (The night is still young), which outlines the authors' rendezvous with their own future, a promise they made to themselves. The book is composed like a countdown, a means of self-encouragement.<sup>7</sup>

The second text I will focus on is a theoretical book, a work of artistic activism, called *Les potentiels du temps* (The potentialities of time), published in 2016. It is the work of three authors: Kantuta Quirós and Aliocha Imhoff, who together launched the curatorial platform baptized "Le peuple qui manque" (The people amiss) and codirected the movie *Les impatientes* (The impatient ones); the third author is the poet and artist Camille de Toledo.<sup>8</sup>

The book is an entrance into the battle for the reconstruction of different futures, in an era—the early twenty-first century—haunted by ideologies of the end (or *endisms*); it's about not letting ourselves be hypnotized by this regime of ends but instead working toward other enchantments. The dynamics here are close to those of Catastrophe: in dark times, with stories of falls and debts, a young collective dares to answer with hope and impatience; but in this book the work is, above all, conceptual; it seeks to open once more, in thought, other policies of time.

I will emphasize just two important ideas: the first concerns the notion of *potentiality*, and the second, more unexpectedly related to the future, concerns issues of memory, heritage, and transmission.

Potentiality here is the major answer to the infinite debt and the "too-late" syndrome; it is about adopting a potential relationship toward reality, toward our lives, our desires, our modes of government, our housing, and our ecology, in order to transform the relationship we have with what is presented as "real"; it is about being determined to read reality not from our finitude but from its own potentialities, from what could be, in order to expand these potentialities. Potentiality means, above all, recognizing that the present is fundamentally *non-one* and, therefore, alterable.

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<sup>6</sup> Catastrophe, "Puisque tout est fini alors tout est permis" [Since everything has come to an end, then everything is permitted], *Libération*, September 22, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Catastrophe, *La nuit est encore jeune* (Paris: Fayard, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Aliocha Imhoff, Kantuta Quirós, and Camille de Toledo, *Les potentiels du temps: Art et politique* (Paris: Manuella Éditions, 2016). An excerpt from this work, by Aliocha Imhoff and Kantuta Quirós, is included in this issue of *Dibur Literary Journal*.

Potential thinking is also an impatience for metamorphosis: in the space within, which is already a political space, by “imagining oneself otherwise”; and on the artistic scene, in “chronopolitical” mechanisms, such as *preenactment*, drawing the future toward us. This can be witnessed in *Make It Work*, a “theater of negotiation” conceived by Frédérique Ait-Touati and Bruno Latour in 2015, in anticipation of the COP 21: the impatience to take ecological despoliation into account and to start finding answers by enlarging the political scene to include rivers, glaciers, oceans, and animals. It was about thwarting programmed failures, while letting all the possibilities proliferate onstage. Bruno Latour’s implication here is no coincidence; I am convinced that this interest in metamorphosis is solidary with the issues brought up today by enlarged anthropology (after what is called the “ontological” turn of the discipline, opened to nonhuman and even nonliving beings), by the anthropology of instability (represented, for example, by Anna Tsing), and by the deep transformations in our housing conditions, as well as the radical expansion of our awareness of all the different forms of life that need to converge on the political scene.

As far as I am concerned, I insist in my literary work upon the fact that these “potentializations” are at play in the present, in our perception and consideration of what is being murmured, of what is trying to happen: a certain way of watching out for potentialities, watching out for what could come about, and a certain way of increasing these potentialities, of supporting bonds in the process of construction, sustaining life-forms trying to find their way out, like little everyday utopias; a certain way of hearing an idea of life in all forms of life (“être fleuve”—with Giuseppe Penone’s *Essere fiume*; “être forêt”—after Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think*; “être pierre” . . .) and of understanding what line this life opens on to, what propositions of practices and existences it formulates; in other words, a certain way of “cultivating” the possibilities. The possibilities are already there; they have to be perceived, watched over, surveyed (Kantuta Quirós and Aliocha Imhoff write about “temporal espionage,” to be on the lookout for new experiences of time). I believe in a link between vulnerability and potentiality, in imagining what is there, supporting it, and increasing it—and in the same movement, extending the principle of representation and enlarging parliaments.

*The Potentialities of Time*, furthermore, not only rethinks different possibilities for the future and ways of being linked to the future but also reflects upon new ways of thinking about the past, of linking the past and the future. It presents new ways of referring to the past, refusing to be *in debt* to the past and yet not turning one’s back on it: in order to be linked to it in other ways and to inherit other aspects of it, “repotentializing” the past itself. The past no longer weighs heavily on our conscience, enchainning us, but keeps on vibrating with propositions—the past, too, has its ideas of the future. It is a question of taking possession of what did not come to be and turning these aborted ideas back to their future and to our own future—in other words, transmitting the possibilities, not just transmitting things but transmitting strengths, dreams. For example, it involves listening to the voices of the dead, hearing the ghosts of Amerindians and the ghosts of slaves, listening to what they would have to say today. “Not in the idea of renewing obsessive fears, but in order to see things from the point of view of unfinished lives, in the bodies of the dead, and to start off again with life as an aspiration.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Imhoff, Quirós, and de Toledo, *Les potentiels du temps*, 35.

This brings us to, for example, “*what if?*” history<sup>10</sup>—or to artistic reenactments, when an artistic device takes hold of a past event in order to restage it and to reveal what was unthought about it, such as Jeremy Deller’s *The Battle of Orgreave* in 2001. Reenactments have nothing to do with *remakes*: the dice here are rolled again; a reenactment is a repotentialization and very often a nonmelancholic form of reparation.<sup>11</sup>

These “repoliticizations” of time join up with other, sometimes extremely spectacular movements, such as “accelerationism,” which seeks to hasten the downfall of capitalism.<sup>12</sup> But maybe one could bring forward the dynamics of “reclaiming” the present precariousness or the oppressions of the past, to grasp the imagination of time once again, in order to take over the dimensions of the future and reconnect with what has been damaged. An example is Afro-futurism, born in the sixties and seventies, which the essayist Mark Dery, in “Black to the Future” (1994), described as “twentieth century science fiction and cyberculture at the service of an imaginary repossession of black experience and identity.”<sup>13</sup> This was about an interest in entirely different temporalities, traveling supremely toward the future and responding to the “debt in time” expressed by those who attributed a fundamental backwardness to Africa. During those same years, ecofeminism—a reaction to the double oppression of nature and women—often also passed through both concrete mobilization and the poetical-epistemic ways of science fiction or had recourse to the figure of the witch, another means of reconnecting past and future (Emilie Hache did much to make these texts known in France). All these were ways of revealing alternative temporalities and thereby revealing *other worlds*, because these new ways of taking possession of time are emancipations.

## DOING THINGS TOGETHER

One should sense here that it is not only through the great figure of “Utopia” that ways of relating to the future may be repoliticized or restored to their critical dimension, but also through a form of impatience, the joy of making things, and extremely material ways of braving precariousness. I say “joy,” but it is a serious joy, dancing on the ruins. This impatience has nothing light or distractive about it; on the contrary, it is extremely attentive to what may come about, to possibilities, to what glimmers through the plurality of life-forms and their vulnerability. This joy is itself also vulnerable; and I say that precariousness is “braved” because this implies an uprising. I could also say “astound,” in reference to Victor Hugo in *Les misérables*: “To astound catastrophe by the small amount of fear that it occasions in us.” I remember Patrick Boucheron quoting this sentence in the conclusion of his Inaugural Lesson at the Collège de France.<sup>14</sup>

Braving, in this context, means above all “making”: repairing, building, cultivating, cooking (see Tim Ingold’s *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*; or Arendtian trust in work).<sup>15</sup> It is about gardening, cultivating realities, cultivating possibilities, sustaining material possibilities.

<sup>10</sup> Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravélou, *Analyses contrefactuelles et futurs non advenus* [Counterfactual analysis and the future of the past] (Paris: Le Seuil, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> See Kader Attia and Léa Gauthier, *Repair* (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, “Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics,” *Critical Legal Thinking*, May 13, 2013, <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/>.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Dery, ed., *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Boucheron, *Ce que peut l’histoire* [What history is capable of] (Paris: Fayard, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Milton Park, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2013).

Braving is not only making but also making “together”: living together and experimenting with modes of life and styles of life (without taking on a style); more precisely, living together on a vulnerable territory and defending this territory (such as Bure and Notre-Dame-des-Landes); thinking together, writing together. In all these groups, people have come together to write collective texts that are often sumptuous; they are written together to constitute *the first-person plural*, and much care is taken to remain anonymous (for the Comité invisible, for Mauvaise troupe); not to remain sovereignly in the shadows, not to cultivate mystery, but to affirm the extent to which taking hold of the future means doing together. In making together and investing in the first-person plural the affects are essential, political from the outset. One of the weapons here is friendship, the strength given by friendship and love between friends.

Finally, we are often concerned here with territories, zones, and ways of making places. I would like to stress how these practices rely on other spaces and other considerations of space. In these efforts to take over the future, space can no longer be thought of as a system of places, places to be taken, places to keep and to defend (e.g., against newcomers who could take them from “us”). Space must be returned to a form of vulnerability and therefore to its potentiality; pertinent space, here, meaning the wastelands on the ruins of capitalism,<sup>16</sup> but also struggling natural space, the forests and marshy areas as well as the public square. A world of open zones instead of places to be taken; a territory of connections, enlargements, and different forms of intensity made of all spaces, both vulnerable and fertile, on which we may construct *cabins*.

## OUR CABINS

These practices, these acts of bravery and imagination, these efforts of thought, they could be called “our cabins.” I am not referring to Thoreau’s solitary shack in the woods on the shore of Walden Pond, where Thoreau elaborated on the virtues of a secluded life—even though his reflections were indeed rich in militant issues and his solitude in nature was a direct form of revolt.

No, I mean to evoke the very concrete cabins cobbled together to inhabit this era of precariousness—once again, ways of living in a damaged world: the cabins around Notre-Dame-des-Landes, in Bure, and in all the natural areas that are struggling to exist; what the French call “workers’ gardens” (now one says “family gardens,” but this is not right); temporary cabins constructed on occupied urban spaces, such as city squares; and the refugee and migrant encampment in Calais that existed until recently. The cabins offer provisional shelter to migrants; this does not mean that they constitute a livable, inhabitable space; rather, they constitute a lived-in place even though they are unlivable and uninhabitable. And something can be made room for there.

I would like to focus for a moment on a collective of architects, urban planners, and sociologists who bear the beautiful name of PEROU, are active in encampments and shantytowns, and are attentive to what can be organized in these shelters constructed by the migrants themselves, particularly in Calais; the people of PEROU take care of these camps and the relationships that stem from them. In these places that are never nonplaces, simply because lives are being lived there and have to be lived there in spite of how things are made so difficult for them, in these living areas, PEROU fights against systematic ways of dealing with the situation (demolition) and aids their construction, helping to cultivate and record what exists; in short, PEROU respects the inhabitants and acts along with them. Their purpose is not to make these shantytowns permanent

<sup>16</sup> See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

but to be considerate toward what has been attempted there. PEROU says time and again that what makes these camps permanent is not the care one takes of them but the bulldozers (when they destroy a temporary construction it is rebuilt five hundred meters away). It is about “equipping the present”: the more the shantytowns are livable, the faster people can move on from them.

You may think that these different cabins, in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, in la place de la République, in Calais, shouldn’t have anything to do with one another. However, I believe they are animated by a similar struggle to live differently, by staying in places where one is not allowed to stay and reconstructing worlds. Besides, from their own experience of precariousness, young people know that they connect with other kinds of precariousness, starting with the ecological crisis and the so-called migrant crisis (which is more of a crisis in hospitality). It is from their precariousness, their nonplace (in all the places refused to them and the violence in knowing that they are considered as objects to be selected), that all their actions of hospitality originate, including their welcoming gestures toward those who are the expelled par excellence, the migrants, to whom all residence has been refused. And it is through this energy deployed by some of the young in defying despoliation that a political front is reborn: from their livable and yet unacceptable precariousness to the unlivable and yet lived precariousness of the migrants.

And, if I may, I say “our” cabins because I believe I also construct cabins, and we all do trying to relate actively to the future: cabins of thought, of speech, of writing, and of concern, as well as cabins of sharing, intervention, and mobilization, cabins of friendship and connections with these young people from whom I receive so much (along with the poet Jean-Marie Gleize in *Le livre des cabanes*). Undoubtedly, these cabins are not there to protect or to isolate us from the world; they are there to gain ground differently, construct differently, all over the place and faster, on other territories, today, together. And these cabins, these sheds, these huts do not repair precariousness: they accuse it by demanding another world, a world of which their very existence already gives proof.

Nous construisons des cabanes. Nous nous déplaçons.  
 Nous sommes invisibles.  
 Comme les anges nous n’avons pas de noms.  
 Nous avons tous le même nom.  
 Nous habitons vos ruines, mais.  
 Nous appelons une révolution possible.  
 Nous écrivons logiques et politiques.<sup>17</sup>

*We build cabins. We move.  
 We are invisible.  
 Like angels, we do not have names.  
 We inhabit your ruins, but . . .  
 We call for a potential revolution.  
 We write logics and politics.*

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<sup>17</sup> Jean-Marie Gleize, *Le livre des cabanes: Politiques* [The book of cabins: Politics] (Paris: Le Seuil, 2015).