



Young Aspen Leaders

A Parliament of Things
to throw at
hyperobjects:
The world as it is and the
future of Europe

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The 2022 Aspen-GMF Bucharest Forum has an ambitious goal, written in a Deleuzian note. Titled *A world in flux-Towards a New European Architecture*, it suggests that a new (institutional) architecture can better contain, manage, or freeze some of the deranging and menacing fluxes of our time. In a way, for a long time, architecture did just that -since Deleuze was and perhaps still is an important influence in the field, it tried to deal with flows. It was and can still be functional.

But what is the world made of? What is the European Union made of? Are they made of fluxes or flows? Are they made of subjects (and objects)? Or are they made of networks? Or hyperobjects? Because, depending on the answer we give to this important question, we will need a different type of architecture to contain, manage, freeze it or at least slow it down. Or maybe architecture is not at all what we need.

My personal interpretation of the title is that we currently live in a (European) setting that needs to become better equipped to deal with the world around us. A world that is in flux, or fluxes, and that makes us feel, to quote the main conclusion of the 2022 Munich Security Report, collective helplessness. Sociologists have noticed this definitory state of flux in modernity for quite a while. Bauman coined it liquid modernity, while Hartmut Rosa talked about social acceleration, and both realized the tremendous pressure it exerts on people and citizens. Truth is that collective helplessness isn't something new, that

emerged in the post Covid-19 era. Perhaps the pandemic just made it worse. But technological change, digitalization and the imperative to grow, innovate and accelerate, mostly for (geo)political and economic ends have been there for quite a while. And if this is the case, then, the pandemic and the recent war in Ukraine have just made things worse. Accelerated an already present acceleration, putting additional pressure on people who were already feeling crushed by external, incomprehensible forces. If true, then, one can only stop and wonder at the inadequacy of the policy solutions being brought up in the public space: if the constant imperative to grow, technological and social acceleration are the root cause of the increased feeling of collective helplessness, how can they also be the solution?

How can digitalization, artificial intelligence, and innovation that's mostly conceived as digital make things better for all those left behind in the process? Before answering that, I will return to one of the previous questions, and try to answer what the European Union is made of. Some might say of member states, but these are too abstract entities. If we go deeper, we find, at least in theory, citizens.

So, what exactly does it mean to be a European citizen? If we look on the website of the European Commission, things look easy to grasp:

Any person who holds the nationality of an EU country is automatically also an EU citizen. EU citizenship is additional to national citizenship and does not replace it.

Being an EU citizen is something automatically granted to you if and only if you fulfill a basic condition. Meaning that, in order to be a European citizen, you must already be a national citizen of one of the EU member states. In tech language, this is somehow an add-on. A bonus. You receive it automatically. You do not and you cannot work for it. You cannot deny it either. One cannot simply refuse to be a European citizen, unless they can somehow stop being the other, basic kind of citizen. But for someone born and living in Romania, for instance, European citizenship is a quality they are being stuck with forever. Or at least as long as the European Union exists or as long as the notion or object of European citizenship exists and is defined as such.

European citizenship is thus something that is only granted to humans. Not to animals, even if they are domesticated, and definitely not to objects. Or to any animate or inanimate matter. That something, however, is still very human, and without the slightest trace of materiality.

How about being a citizen of Romania, for instance? How is that any different? On a phenomenological level, this is a completely different story just because it is so much more tangible and filled in with materiality. I have been involved, incidentally, during the past two years, in research projects exploring perceptions, lives and feelings of Romanians living abroad. Although it was not always the focus, the different research touched upon feelings of homesickness and connections to the *homeland*. And all discussions tended to become very material. Tangible. One could recite around homesickness endless Latour litanies or bestiaries of things, as philosopher Ian Bogost famously coined these lists, describing objects and things that might go together in apparently random associations. For instance, we might have: tomatoes that taste good, sunrises and sunsets, the Romanian language, Ion Iliescu, tired angry eyes from behind the counter in supermarkets, mindless bureaucracy, Dan Spătaru, that famous cheese pie grandma used to make, Christmas with the entire family, the national flag, an old Dacia 1300, the pioneer tie, national hymns, *zacusca* and *sarmale*.

If you look closely at the litany, its constituents are more than mere symbols. They are mostly concrete things, objects in a more traditional sense, that gave and give rise to feelings, which allow themselves to be touched, heard, seen, spoken, ingested, driven and so on. By contrast, what would a Latour litany look like related to what Europe is if we consider the phenomenological aspects of the previous list? What could it contain? The EU flag on license plates, buildings and architectural monuments that house political institutions for those who have interacted with them, different customs queues in airports, but what else? Is there anything else material? Where is the concreteness, the phenomenological experience of the EU and of what it is like to be one of its citizens? What is left when we take the symbols away? Besides a sad litany of a few disparate entities that would hardly elicit any memories, let alone feelings or sensations for most Romanians.

We are still stuck, in public discourse, with the trope of *communities*, in a globalized world of commodities where sodalities, or communities of practice, become increasingly important. Let us get, for the sake of the argument, self-reflexive and personal, and ask ourselves what it means to be me. Sticking to the interesting tool of the litany, a simple version of it would include Brazilian-jiu-jitsu and my one stripe black belt, my gis, my apparel, my embodied grappling techniques and my injuries that bridge my existence more easily with that of a practitioner in Japan, Vanuatu, or

the United States than to my fellow European citizen from a different country who's not a grappler. It would include my wearable bracelet and the data it sends to my phone, a Korean brand, but also to data servers probably located in China, my Dr. Martens shoes, the whey protein I buy from abroad, my article on body awareness in the 2012 volume of *Studia Phaenomenologica*, the Minister of Education order that granted me my PhD, the Jules Romains College in Paris where I have spent two years of my youth, the Quebec Parliament where I held my first public speech at 16 years old, the trains that used to pass right next to my apartment building in Ploiești during the high school years.

How much of it can be said to be European, unless as a symbolic add-on politically grafted somewhere in life? If we go over the list and its things or actors, trying to unpack each item into the more complex network of actors it already is, things get more complex and entangled and almost impossible to map. Just like some of the things in the world. Just like philosopher Timothy Morton's hyperobjects, impossible to grasp in their entirety because of their massive distribution in time and space.

The pandemic was, or I must say it still is, since it is not officially over, such a hyperobject. The war in Ukraine might be as well. It is not just a virus, and it is not just a war. These are things so big and embedded in networks around us that we cannot grasp their complexity. These are the kinds of threats we are facing, not just as individuals, European or national citizens.

This is perhaps the problem, and this is why we are brought to a point where we make ourselves think of new architectures that are better able to contain the fluxes around us. Because we think of ourselves as unique in ways that do not really fit the world and the way the world is. We are citizens, hence individuals, hence subjects, in a larger world-object made of flows that are just too strong for us to bear. As individuals. What makes us different from the world is our agency, our capacity for intelligent design. We are subjects, but the world and its constituents are our objects, and we try to rebuild it, to compartmentalize it so we can contain and manage the flows in it, not to get swept away senselessly. As the main or unique agents of change, we also bear an undistributed responsibility when things go amiss, and we are quick to point fingers towards other human agents whenever something doesn't quite happen the way it should.

The only problem with this worldview is that it is not sustainable anymore, because it simply is not the way of being in the world happens. We are not separated individualities, but are enmeshed in the world, entangled with it and the other things it is made of. We are not simple spectators perceiving fluxes of sensations and trying desperately to make sense of them, and since James Gibson's work on perception and ecology in the 70s we know that perceiving is active, not passive, and presupposes an organism's ecological embeddedness. Our ontological condition, in Andrew Pickering's words, is to live in a world of becoming, in which we are constantly performing, it is not a state of cognitive achievement. And we never perform alone.

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, philosopher Jane Bennett asks herself how would the direction of public policy shift if we conceived and experienced materialities as actants and we attended more carefully to their trajectories and powers? A similar question appears to us if we follow the reasoning of Andrew Pickering's concept of *islands of stability*, borrowed from nuclear physics. What if we consciously acknowledged the complexity and unpredictability of the world? The possible agency inherent in things, matter, and various non-human entities. The impossibility of centrally planning everything or centrally designing institutions or architectures that might contain such a world. We are used, especially in policy making, to thinking of the world as made up of stable and reliable entities which we can understand and master through things such as knowledge, science or engineering. Whenever we see a flux that seems too strong, we try to build something to contain it, and we do it first cognitively. We plan first and prefer to perform later, after we have built, on a stable basis, on the objects of our own design.

But it is time we asked ourselves, in this context, what would the European Union be like if it were not symbolically made up just of institutions and ultimately of individual citizens co-opting matter, objects and other non-humans to achieve their goals, while denying their agency and ontological status? What is not human is, in the end, usually seen just as a tool or something with the potential to become a tool and coerced into achieving some human function. What if we had, as Bruno Latour famously suggested, a Parliament of Things, offering all actors in the EU, human and non-human alike, a voice? Bees are somehow already privileged, through the work of the PAFF, but how about pigeons, pigs, wolves, corn or coal? And how about AI? What if granting some

sort of agency to other entities would make things better, or at least would make the European Union truly a Union, not just a human political and institutional project?

I have mentioned, in the beginning, that feeling of collective helplessness. I also propose we start thinking about rebuilding from exactly here. We're feeling helpless because, ultimately, as individual subjects and citizens, we are. And we should embrace that helplessness in the face of change and hyperobjects, the lack of power and agency we feel as the crude reality of today, and our lack of knowledge as fact.

This means that, in order to rebuild, we need better alliances. Not just among ourselves, with institutions and states, but with other non-humans. If this means recognizing their agency, so be it. If that means granting them some form of citizenship, even better. They already live among us and their vitality and agency affect us in more than one way. In his latest series, *Tulsa King*, Sylvester Stallone walks the empty streets of Ohio after 25 years in prison and while trying to cross the streets he hears a voice whispering *Wait, wait, wait!* He turns around, surprised, and it takes him a while to identify the voice coming from a pedestrian crossing voice prompt auxiliary device. Surprise aside, pedestrian crossings have always made people stop, even before they had a voice. And we've worked alongside them and other non-humans to make us safer.

Recognizing the complexity of the world as well as the multitude of non-human actors coexisting besides us is crucial for the future and stability of Europe, in the face of more and more menacing hyperobjects, such as war, global warming, plastic and pandemics. We can't tackle them alone, as individuals and citizens, and we can't take all the credit even if we seem to manage to, nor all the blame if we fail.

But recognizing the world as it is, complex and with multitudes of entangled actors, should enable us to approach policy making and institutional design through a different lens, one that enables different multiple layers of negotiations between different kinds of actors. This is why Latour's Parliament of Things might be such a genius move after all.

Let's look, for instance, at the role and place of digital technology and artificial intelligence. Nowadays, digitalization is a trope that politicians never cease to invoke. States that went entirely digital are considered more evolved, less bureaucratic, better

for business and for growth. There is enormous pressure on the rest to just keep up with the pace. The next step of digitalization seems to be a rush towards developing artificial intelligence, seen as a possible solution to most of our problems. AI is thus, probably, the closest non-human to getting some sort of agency in the public sphere, because we have anthropomorphized it from the start. Digital is good, digital and AI together are even better.

We seem to have mastered some dialogue and close collaboration with digital technologies, in weak but functional alliances, but in our reliance on it we tend to forget some of their crucial aspects.

First, even the hyperobject internet -not to mention more confined, private digital technologies, are very material networks with lots of tangible actors. They are held together in sometimes precarious assemblages, despite their stable appearance. And sometimes one of the actors can break or leave the assemblage. Like on 30 September 2021, when a root certificate used by *Let's Encrypt* expired and affected a great number of websites and IoT devices that kept using the outdated technology. Despite the Internet being so huge and massively distributed, someone can still disable your access by cutting a wire. Considering digital technology a reliable black-box can thus be very dangerous. Looking at it from the vantage point of the more unstable notion of islands of stability, that implies the contingency of the assemblage might have much better merits.

Second, as large material networks, digital networks also get entangled with numerous non-human entities and have what we call environmental impact. There have been numerous talks about the large carbon footprint of cryptocurrency mining, a topic becoming even more sensitive in the current energy crisis. For truly sustainable technology to develop, we, therefore, need a better multistakeholder dialogue bringing things and non-humans on board alongside humans.

Third, as mentioned in my earlier personal Latour litany, human identity is already entangled within a complex network spanning the whole world. Digital technology is being thrown towards us from all directions, notably consumer culture. My smart bracelet and my phone already monitor my daily steps and geolocate me constantly, while I move and perform myself as a digital subject. With enough data, a foreign AI could predict many things about me, use my app password to gain access to other

apps, accounts, and data. All because, through various sodalities and patterns of consuming products I enter in various networks of practice. This can also be dangerous, like in 2018 when fitness tracking firm Strava published its users' running and cycling heatmaps, disclosing the locations of American military bases around the world.

Fourth, a large part of our feeling of collective helplessness stems directly from technology's growth and its increasing capacity to mediate our relationship with other kinds of matter, not to mention its instability and constant iterations. We are far away from the ideal of the on demand continuous, uninterrupted flow of goods, services, and experiences. Everything constantly breaks, and we're struggling against chatbots waiting for bug fixes, if we're lucky enough and tech savvy. But what about all of those lacking the digital skills to at least get to the point where they can pretend to be able to do something about their daily frustrations, even if it's just sending a message to a bot that will inhumanely try to replicate *empathy*, unable to actually fix anything? Digitalization might end up taking their last ounce of illusion of control out of their grasp.

I'll end with a fifth and ultimate *coup de grace* about digital technologies and interfaces. Touching is not grasping. It does not grant you control. It is ephemeral. Controlling via gestures is even more futile. It is the epitome of helplessness and the ultimate form of individuality and disembeddedness from the world. The helpless consumer that gestures in the middle of it, hoping the world will notice and come within their grasp cannot be the basis of our European future together.

So, what can be done? The first step would be acknowledging the world as it is, and the weak, symbolic, and immaterial ties of that assemblage called Europe to its citizens. The second might be recognizing the ontological insecurity of our being as the basis of the new architecture. The third should be bringing non-humans on board and granting them a more active role than now. Technology cannot be a mere extension of our body, just as the universe is not a mere extension of our organisms. We should stop controlling them and start working together.