Alternate Endings
Pareid
[Deborah López & Hadin Charbel]

DL: Deborah López
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DL: Our names are Deborah Lopez and Hadin Charbel, we are both architects and academics. We have an architecture office called Pareid, and are currently teaching various design studios at the Bartlett School of Architecture in London.

Our immediate context shifted at the start of the Pandemic, putting us in between London and Ponferrada in El Bierzo. A lesser-known city in a lesser known region located in North-Western Spain. For the past 8 years we have been living in larger metropoles, such as Bangkok, Beirut, Tokyo and London, so moving back to a radically different city scale and city type, that in many ways is outside the national and global focus, has been interesting and something we will elaborate on.

HC: In our work and our teaching we use fiction—not necessarily as a form of escapism, but rather as a form for confronting and testing ideas; it's much more a mechanism for worlding alternatives where we can visualize different outcomes and evaluate them on practical terms as well as more sensory ones in response to a particular context.

But in order to situate our talk on post-pandemic cities and the role fiction might have, we will take a look at two cities outside of Spain, each of which have or will experience some form of unprecedented circumstance, which in some ways might parallel the influence the pandemic has.

Follicle

DL: One such context is in Bangkok, Thailand during the early months of 2019 when air pollution reached a record high, bringing attention at both national and international levels on air quality in the city. Alongside the ppm figures and color-coded real-time pollution maps found in articles
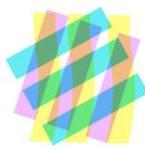
and online apps, very real measures were taken at institutional, governmental and individual levels that transcended numbers alone into action.

The first was a city-wide shut down on schools and universities during the two days where pollution was expected to peak beyond the 'unhealthy' levels—thus affecting all ages of the inhabitants and disrupting multiple routines. The second event was and is an ongoing effort by the government to combat pollution through artificial rains, either triggered by 'cloud seeding' through aerial chemical deposition, or the sporadic appearances of water cannons shooting into the air. Finally, individual actions have become ever more noticeable as the appearance of surgical masks is effectively a common and second nature practice when occupying the outdoors, along with portable air purifiers.

Such actions and figures are in line with the ever-growing 'awareness era' that has boomed since the invention of the internet and implementation of social media, empowering those who are traditionally on the receiving end of the information chain to become fundamental drivers in potential power shifts.

But while there was a seemingly endless stream of data able to be accessed, we wanted to find out if there was a way to measure the environment through people directly and if we could communicate that information back to them. The idea being somewhat to test the readiness of citizens to participate in something that is a bit unprecedented, but like the situation, so too was the amount of pollution.

HC: It turns out that human hair is a complex matrix that retains and accumulates a number of toxic and non-toxic elements, meaning that the human body could perform as an environmental sensor and data collector. That became the basis for the Foll(i)cle installation which was materialized as a pavilion and social protocol.

The pavilion was made of discarded human hair for different reasons; it symbolized the purpose of the project to collect hair samples, it is also a sustainable material because it's generally grown without effort, then cut and thrown away, so there was also an ecological dimension to it. And also, because of the fact that it is human hair, it possesses some kind of aesthetic dimension which is quite challenging for people to initially overcome, even though hair is a very universal thing that we all cherish, but only as long as it's on our heads, so this also had implications on the perception of sanitation versus actual sanitation and links back to that feeling of color coded

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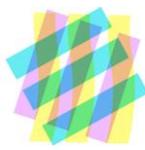
data maps being this weird thing we intuitively understand but actually flattens some of the information that might be relevant.

Visitors would enter the pavilion and participate in the anonymous hair sampling process and answer a few basic and non-personal questions such as their zip code, working environments, etc... .

With approximately 300 participants having taken part in the process, the first 50 hair samples have been processed and the results now available on an interactive publicly accessible website that allows users to explore the 3D toxi-cartography of the city.

Foll-i-cle.com

From Svalbard with Love

DL: Going from a dense tropical urban city, one year later we ended up examining the total opposite. Longyearbyen is the world's most northern inhabited town, located on the remote Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard.

It has been inhabited for different reasons throughout various moments in history. Initially it was founded due to its high-quality coal and was first established as a mining settlement.

During World War 2 it became of interest to the Nazi's who invaded it, and who sought to use its unique geographical location as a means to forecast weather patterns and gain a strategic advantage. The Soviets also established and inhabited a town called Pyramiden, which sought to extract its own share of coal but eventually was abandoned as the Soviet Union collapsed.

Today, as the archipelago moves towards shutting down mining activity, there have been different kinds of technological and research interests that have given Svalbard a second reason for being. The most well-known is probably the global seed vault, which stores various seeds from around the world as a back-up in the event of a catastrophe.

Satellite ground stations take advantage of the earth's longitudinal convergence near the north pole which experience more satellite activity than other zones. The world arctic archive is a private initiative that seeks to store different kinds of the world's data. Much of the activity is oriented towards collecting and storing, which again is attributed to Svalbard's now stabilized political situation, as well as its traditional thermally stable condition.
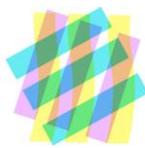
HC: But with global warming, there are increasing signs that Svalbard is being entered into an irreversible situation; the seed vault leaked and had to be repaired, increased avalanches are forcing the partial relocation of the town, permafrost thaw has warped the roads, reindeer and other native life forms are exhibiting a change in reproductive and behavioral patterns. For these recent and increasing scenarios, there is no precedent, and after meeting with various researchers and locals in the town, each having their own take and speculation on how the situation will evolve, we created a multi-linear installation and narrative called *From Svalbard with Love.*

The installation is made up of various scenes printed on a large fabric (kind of like the Garden of Earthly Delights by Bosch) that can be augmented with a phone application. Each scene on the fabric triggers a different outcome of a different part of the island, the idea being that there is no guarantee for how things might evolve, but there is a need for action and anticipation, and so being able to visualize and playout different scenarios and narratives, becomes a tool for exploring alternatives.

One thing to mention is that we don't paint these as good or bad, or utopic or dystopic, because in any case that often depends on the viewer's interests and motivations, if we are referring to human or non-human, etc... Nevertheless, we're talking about communicating information, across a global network with global causes and effects, and in the case of Svalbard, where mediatization is used to report and also dramatize, anything anyone knows is already to some extent, partially fictitious...

El Bierzo

DL: From these two different contexts, we now find ourselves observing a third which is again, very different from the other two, but similar in that it has undergone its own changes at national and local levels, slowly playing out towards a particular end that everyone sees as inevitable, but that we would like to challenge.

Ponferrada is a city that developed industrially through what we could call an extractive economy; that is to say, based on the extraction of various resources such as charcoal and *pizarra*, with a central térmica (or a power plant) for the production of electricity. Even as historically far back as the Roman period with the extraction of gold.
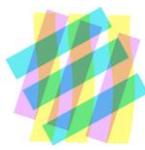
In fact, Las Medulas, a mountainous landscape with unique features which is now a Unesco World Heritage site is the by-product of two centuries of intense roman mining that resulted in what is essentially the scarring of the mountain's face. It would seem that El Bierzo has always been understood as a series of queries, places to extract and consume.

The current situation has seen the closing of mines as well as the decommissioning and demolition of the central térmica; there is no roadmap for an alternative. It effectively forces the need to question if growth is necessary, or if on the contrary, we should start to understand degrowth as part of the process; as a strategy for continuation but away from the extractive history.

HC: It would seem that without resources to exploit there isn't much El Bierzo has to offer. This isn't a sentiment from just the outside, but from within as well. This is the context within which we are operating now and the basis for starting *A Poulo*, which in English translates to wasteland. We are in the process of collecting narratives and visually documenting the past and the present graphically via drawing, mapping and video recording, to form an archive and foundation for projecting the future through different scenarios. The project aims to provide different angles into the reading of the region with respect to its own citizens as well as those observing as a means of leveraging the latent potential without depending on its own mining history for answers.

Degrowth doesn't have to be bad, but the way in which this happens can be invented, intercepted and designed.

DL:

- November 16, 2018. The last mine in El Bierzo, El Pozo Salgueiro in Torre del Bierzo closes. Leaving El Bierzo without its most important economical value.
- June 30 2020. The Central Térmica in Ponferrada officially closes after 60 years of operation and is currently being dismantled.
- Between 2010 and 2020. El Bierzo's population decreases by 10%.
- Between 2020 and 2030. El Bierzo's population continues to decrease.
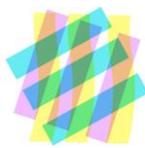
- At the same time, non-human presence in the form of flora and fauna has increased in numbers and biodiversity.
- Between 2030-2050. El Bierzo transitions from extraction to production, leveraging its agricultural and climatic position.

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- January 2022, the energy crisis provokes the re-commissioning of La Central Térmica.
- As select mines begin reopening, the continued effects of the 2008 financial crisis draw local and outside population back to the region for work.
- 'La Ciudad del Dólar', as ponferrada was once known, is readopted as a nickname by locals and neighboring cities.

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- January 2020, the energy crisis provokes negotiations between local and national governing bodies that see mining activity permitted and regulated by various ecological factors.

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