

THE
DEGROWTH
TOOLBOX
FOR ARTISTIC
PRACTICES BETA

CONTENTS

- A0 PURPOSE.pg5
- A1 WHAT IS DEGROWTH.pg6
- A2 CONSIDERATIONS.pg9
- A3 STRATEGIES.pg16
- B1 GLOSSARY.pg22
- B2 BIBLIOGRAPHY.pg27
- C1 CONTRIBUTE.pg34
- D1 COLOPHON.pg35

A0 PURPOSE

The purpose of this project is to formulate a conceptual framework for creative and exhibitionary practices aimed towards **degrowth**: composing a toolbox for art workers and organisations interested in designing ethical and sustainable creative practices during the pandemic and beyond.

Degrowth is the idea that we need to construct our societies around the values of **well-being, conviviality, autonomy, sustainability, inclusion, and care**. These values come hand-in-hand with the rejection of the capitalist, authoritarian, patriarchal and colonial paradigms. The focus here is placed on formulating tools and strategies which are applicable in the arts.

The intention with this beta is to start a conversation rather than to present a comprehensive “guide” – such a thing would be impossible after all. You are invited to participate in building the toolbox with your comments, questions, corrections, ideas and contributions through [this link](#).

A1 WHAT IS DEGROWTH ?

Degrowth (or *décroissance* in French) was used for the first time by philosopher André Gorz in 1972. Gorz posed a question that remains at the centre of degrowth discourse: “Is the earth’s balance, for which no-growth – or even degrowth – of material production is a necessary condition, compatible with the survival of the capitalist system?” *Décroissance* flourished into an activist movement in Lyon in the early 2000s, and spreading from there, it became a slogan mobilized by green and anti-globalization activists in Italy in 2004 (as ‘*decrescita*’) and Catalonia and Spain in 2006 (as ‘*decreixement*’ and ‘*decrecimiento*’). The English term ‘degrowth’ was ‘officially’ used for the first time at a 2008 Paris conference, marking the birth of an international research community.

Degrowth is a term that is often perceived as negative or even off-putting, as it is conflated with “recession” or “decline”. On the contrary, degrowth refers to a conscious, collective, *intentional* commitment to significantly reducing production and consumption, to finding alternatives to our current organisational models (be they economic or otherwise) and to proactively transform society.

The prefix *de-* signifies a complete rejection of the concept of *growth* and all the expectations that come

with it – production for the sake of production and consumption for the sake of consumption. Degrowth questions the capitalist understanding of “more” as “better” and instead proposes that we need to construct our world around the values of well-being, conviviality, autonomy, inclusion, and care.

In these respects, degrowth is fundamentally an anticapitalist and decolonial endeavour, as it is diametrically opposed to capitalist-colonial ideas of infinite growth and expansion, of perpetual exploitation, while centering the voices and well-being of those currently in the margins of white Western capitalist cisheteropatriarchy, be they human or non-human. Degrowth does not call for doing less of the same. In a degrowth society everything will be different: different activities, different forms and uses of energy, different relations, different gender roles, different allocations of time between paid and non-paid work, different relations with the non-human world. The degrowth imaginary centres around the reproductive economy of care, and the reclaiming of old – and the creation of new – commons. Caring in common is embodied in new forms of living and producing, such as eco-communities and cooperatives.

What the pandemic and subsequent crisis has made abundantly clear is that degrowth is necessary – that our current ways of working and organising are unsustainable and inadequate in adapting to the oncoming changes brought by not only by the

pandemic itself, but by climate change, civil unrest, and by the broader paradigm shift. We art workers are faced with an opportunity to rethink and redesign our practices; degrowth presents a challenge to the status quo and offers a toolbox for transformative change.

A2 CONSIDERATIONS

Artists have unique privileges in society: we have the power to claim space, resources, attention. We have the freedom – the expectation, even – to be questioning, idealistic, radical, innovative. We have the luxury to work independently, and explore any subject we personally find engaging. Finally, we are also uniquely trained in communication, and our particular position in society allows us to mediate between groups of people and to mobilise.

While these privileges make us, in theory, the perfect social agitators, instigators, innovators, the reality is that we are more often than not instrumentalised for the benefit of investors and bureaucrats. We are producers of luxury products, assistants in money laundering schemes for the absurdly rich; we are the emissaries of the state when it seeks to homogenize the cultural fabric of a city through public art institutions and cultural projects; we are the best friends of gentrifiers, disrupting the landscapes of neighbourhoods. Our presumed *wokeness* is used to whitewash all whom we associate with – a fresh coat of paint to hide a rotten core. This in itself is not a *radical* thing to say: we are all aware of these truths to some extent. Artists, despite our professed radicality, are in fact pillars of the institutions of capitalism, of colonialism, of classism.

The world, however, is swiftly marching towards a future in which these institutions are defunct. As social inequality rises, as authoritarianism tightens its grip, as unmitigated and total climate catastrophe draws near, capitalism's chokehold on humanity is becoming increasingly evident to all. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has massively contributed to exposing the inherent abuses in the infrastructure of Western/Northern society. Our world is changing rapidly: political ideas that were considered extreme just one year ago, have now become part of mainstream political discourse, such as universal basic income, debt cancellation, police abolition. This is a call for all artists and art workers to cease supporting the markets, to cease supporting the governments, to work towards hastening the old world's demise: the world that puts capital above life.

The core value of the endeavour delineated within this toolbox is the well-being of human and non-human life.

From that starting point what immediately follows is the rejection of the capitalist market in general and the art market more specifically: the rejection of the directives of galleries, collectors, investors. Immediately following is the rejection of art bureaucracy; of all the institutions that ensure art remains obscure, elitist, *white*, that confine it within the safe walls of a white box or the decorative realm of a roundabout: academies, museums, kunsthallen,

public art committees. What we need to do instead is invest in building strong relationships with each other, as an artistic community of creators, communicators, mediators – and invest in strengthening the other communities we are already part of, local or otherwise. Rejecting the “protection” of a gallery, university, or other institution, we must support each other professionally, mentally, emotionally. Should we choose to stay affiliated to an institution for whatever reason, it is imperative that we use our positions to redirect as many of its resources as possible to other communities, to other purposes. What is sorely needed is to build communities centered on care and solidarity.

The above requires the complete rejection of the myth of the *genius* artist who creates masterpieces alone in *his* studio. This is a myth that refuses to die out despite the multitude of thinkpieces written on the subject, because the truth is that this image remains marketable – further yet, the entirety of the art world is built around it. Open calls for shows, residencies, stipends, and educational programs can only process us as individuals; galleries, museums, and magazines talk about superstar artists; we ourselves project the image of the brilliant artist whose creative vision is *his* and *his* alone (and anyone who might have helped with the project is merely a tool in the service of this vision). This is obviously a distortion of reality which serves to obscure the privilege and exploitation perpetrated by those at the top. Simultaneously, in acting as lone

individuals, in keeping ourselves isolated from each other, we are left vulnerable to exploitation.

Another consequence of this environment is that it puts us in constant competition with one another. Artists, curators and other cultural workers are regularly called to compete with each other in open calls, which are usually the only avenue of work. This in and of itself precludes collaboration and even erodes pre-existing partnerships. The competitive model is in direct opposition with the work of community-building and must be rejected in its entirety.

A second consideration that arises from the starting premise is the rejection of the capitalist work ethic: the rejection of hustle culture; the rejection of the constant pressure to produce work, to be shown, to build your CV, to market, to be on brand, to constantly consider how any and every facet of your life can be somehow turned into an art product, to then in turn consume as much art and artistic literature as possible. This is not only ridiculous in itself, it is also damaging – to our physical and mental health, and to the environment as we furiously burn through resources. What is needed here is to pause; to unlearn this constant fretting over *productivity*; to acknowledge that we do not, *cannot* be productive or creative all the time. We must acknowledge the need for rest and the importance of recreation and play for our mental health. Decentering work in our lives makes space for recentering and investing time in social bonds, as mentioned above. The heightened

anxiety over productivity which plagues the arts is, of course, due in large part to the particular financial precarity of our field. We must question how much our participation in the structures that keep us precarious perpetuates the existence of these structures; and we must, in any case, fight against worker exploitation in all fields.

Along that vein, we must look outside the confines of the art world and destroy all those barriers that keep art insular and obscure. Rejecting the patronage of white box institutions (as the inhospitable sterility of the white box has spread beyond gallery spaces and into academies, etc.), as mentioned above, is already a big step in this direction. What is needed however, particularly during this time of deepened inequality and social unrest, is to meaningfully consider: *what can I do for my community?* The running joke in our society is that art educations are useless, that we're only good for so-called unskilled work (devaluing both art and essential workers in one fell swoop). In fact, the exact opposite is true: our unique privileges and skills as artists mentioned above grant us both the freedom to move between social groups and the tools with which to mediate between them. This is not to say that we should promote ourselves to ambassadors of our local activist organisations, of course. Rather, what is needed is a genuine engagement with our communities, and through dialogue and the fostering of mutual relationships, discovering what the needs of these communities are. Perhaps a neighbourhood is in need of a communal food garden: in which case,

an artist might help secure a plot of land through legal or illegal means under the guise of a socially engaged art project. Perhaps a mutual aid group requires help in reaching more people: in which case an artist could design communication material. Or, perhaps, the residents of an apartment building simply want a decorative mural for the shared spaces: that's fine too. The point here is to both democratise art and to formulate artistic projects with the needs of their intended public at the forefront.

It would be remiss to talk about degrowth and to not bring up ecological considerations. As hinted at earlier, the art world is not miraculously spared from the endless loop of production and consumption which is the foundation of a capitalist economy. As we compete with each other for space, visibility, and resources, we are obliged to constantly produce *more* and *bigger*. The result of the pressure to stay active, to have a strong portfolio, to chase opportunities, is that we often work half-heartedly on projects and exhibitions which merely exist to be a line in a CV. Simultaneously, these projects are often inflated to be as spectacular, as flashy and as eye-catching as possible. Vast amounts of resources are poured into this grapple for who gets to be the star of the show, and the result is often empty of meaning, left to languish in storage rooms. This, of course, is massively wasteful. In recentering care, solidarity, and real need in our practices, we can do away with this unnecessary, lavish peacocking.

In all of the above, the importance of self-organisation cannot be stressed enough. If we are to create the conditions for a post-capitalist post-growth society, we must set the groundwork for independent grassroots organisations to flourish. In this endeavour, we must learn and practice the tools and strategies of collaboration; of consensus; of mutual aid; of horizontal organisation. As we work against all that which dehumanises us, destroys us, destroys the planet, we must remember that as lone individuals we can achieve next to nothing – it is only in collaboration, in each other that we may find a way out of our dystopic present.

Finally, we must not be afraid to do away with the thinking that wants mutual care, well-being, and peaceful horizontal collaboration and collaboration to be idealistic; and that considers idealism to be a fool's pursuit. Defeatism is a self-fulfilling prophecy. And, if artists cannot allow themselves to be idealistic, then *who* can?

A3 QUESTIONS

In relation to the above considerations, we might ask ourselves a series of questions to direct us in the making of our projects – as there cannot be, of course, a singular definitive approach to art making that is suitable for all practices and applicable in all contexts, nor can there always be a clear black-and-white definition of an ethical artistic practice.

The first and most fundamental question for any project, artistic or otherwise, is:

Who is this for?

Which should be closely followed by:

Who benefits from this? and,

Has anyone asked for this? or,

Is this contributing to an ongoing discussion?

There is, of course, a multitude of possible answers to these questions and there isn't one that is "more correct" than the others. The main objective here is to examine whether the intent behind a project and the actual reality of it coincide. At the same time, it is important to consider who we might be inadvertently supporting through our work, and to weigh the pros and cons of a situation: a socially engaged artistic project that is genuinely helping and redirecting resources to a community might also be indirectly serving to legitimise an art institution with less

than ethical practices. Being strategic is the most important thing here.

Alternatively, we might begin a project by asking ourselves:

What is the change I want my work to bring to my community?

From this starting point we are immediately in dialogue with the needs of other people and groups, as well as taking a critical position against the status quo. This also tends to prioritise the specific needs of a local community, of people we might personally know and have relationships with, rather than the demands of an international art market. From this point, we may also ask:

How can my experience and expertise be constructive?

Regarding the question of experience and expertise, we invariably have collaborators in our projects – people who advise, people whose particular skill sets we do not have, people who manage, people who care for our basic needs.

Are the contributions of these people acknowledged and honoured in some way?

In relation to community- and socially engaged practices, it is important to consider the relationships we want to build through our projects. We must ask ourselves:

Am I genuinely bringing people together, fostering discussions, mediating the creation of communities,

redirecting institutional resources into marginalised communities, creating space?

Or, am I parachuting into a community – appropriating the knowledge and experiences of its members and converting them into cultural capital for myself?

Are the relationships I'm trying to build here sustainable, or will they crumble once the project is over?

Am I, as the instigator and organiser of a project, ensuring that there is an environment of trust and care for those I'm working with?

It is all too often in socially engaged practices that we see communities, particularly of vulnerable or marginalised people, essentially being used as photoshoot props for someone's portfolio. This is obviously unethical. It is also common that socially engaged projects are designed without much interest in the needs and well-being of those involved, nor is there much consideration regarding the result (or lack thereof) of the project. In the same vein we might ask:

Is the change my project is trying to make lasting and sustainable in the long run – or am I attempting to apply a bandaid on a systemic issue that is much more complicated than I can handle?

Again In relation to working with communities, we may ask ourselves:

Is my project isolated in an art space, or is it easily accessible to a non-art crowd?

Can it potentially be integrated into various facets of everyday life?

It is a frequent complaint of young artists in particular that only “art people” visit art exhibitions. The reality is that anything situated in an “art space”, that is to say some variant of the white cube, is naturally only going to be engaged with those with the necessary training to navigate the (by design) hostile and elitist environment. Additionally, a visit to an art gallery or museum requires a certain amount of time available for “calm contemplation” of the exhibited works: this time and this calmness is a privilege that not all have. While white cube type spaces in general should already be delegated to the trash bin of art history, it is particularly egregious for any community- or socially engaged art project to be hosted in such a space. Regarding the question on integration, we must be wary of going the opposite directions and shoving our ill-conceived projects down people’s throats – see the first paragraph of questions in this section.

In relation to the previous and with a particular focus to the circumstances of the pandemic, we might also ask:

Am I designing a project that is accessible during this time of isolation?

What demands am I making of my potential public in terms of technological equipment?

Who is excluded by these demands?

It goes without saying that not every artistic project is for everyone all the time – the purpose of some

works is to explore and map the possibilities of a new technology. However, many of the digital exhibitions we have seen this past year have been simply inaccessible to those with less-updated hardware, or no hardware at all. From a degrowth perspective, the issue here isn't "how to make advanced technology more accessible", but rather:

How can we formulate artistic projects that respect both the need for physical distance and the lack of interest in or the means to constantly invest in new hardware?

From the above, we might start asking about the resources required for our projects:

What is the carbon footprint of this project in terms of materials?

In terms of energy?

In terms of travel?

Can these costs to the environment be minimised?

Unnecessary travel has already been greatly reduced due to the pandemic, but even once we are all vaccinated and free to move again (if such a clear-cut happily-ever-after is possible in the near future) there is no reason to resume this behaviour. These questions might be alternatively asked as:

Am I prioritising spectacle over substance?

Can the message of this project be successfully conveyed using less? or, Can the purpose of this project be successfully realised using less?

Finally, we must be prepared to ask ourselves and each other difficult questions; we must be prepared to question every facet of our to-date practices; and we must be prepared to run against the grain of capitalist society. In this endeavour, we are attempting to formulate new ways of existing in the world and in relation to each other; we are mapping uncharted territory. This will not be easy – but again, if we do not do this, *who* will?

B1 GLOSSARY

Autonomy

The capacity to imagine, self-define, to decide and to act independently and consciously; this independence includes freedom from addiction and dependencies on goods and convenience. Autonomy can be used in reference to collectives as well as individuals – as Castoriadis wrote, “human existence is an existence with others”.

Buen Vivir / Vivir Bien / Sumak Kawsay

The term *Buen Vivir* meaning *living well* originates from the indigenous communities of South America with a notable presence in Ecuador and Bolivia. This “good life” is a pluralistic concept, and therefore not about a single, homogeneous standard of a good life, but rather about people living well together in a community, about different communities living well together, and about individuals and communities living well with nature. As such, *Buen Vivir* differs from the Western/Northern worldview in that it has community and not capitalist roots. It breaks both with the anthropocentric view of capitalism as the dominant civilisation and with the different manifestations of socialism to date. The “good life” entails a process of decolonisation, which should also involve depatriarchalisation. This necessitates

a profound process of intellectual decolonisation on political, social, economic and cultural levels.

Care

Care is fundamental work for the welfare of people and communities: it's all the daily actions devoted to sustenance, reproduction and the contentment of human relations. This work is overwhelmingly performed by women and is systematically unpaid, undervalued and obscured, despite the fact that it is essential to the mental, physical and relational integrity of each and every human being. By acknowledging and centering care in our lives, practices, and societies, we are also centering well-being and equity.

Commons

The simplest definition of a *common* would be “that which is neither state- or privately owned”. The commons can include land, water, housing, and other physical resources, as well as knowledge, listservs, collectives, and place- and kinship-based communities. They generally are not based on money, legal contracts, or bureaucratic fiat, but on self-management and shared responsibility. There are two defining features of commons: first, they are in a relationship of availability for use by any member of the group that defines them, and second, their use is regulated by the group's value practices.

Conviviality

The concept of conviviality is first unpacked in Ivan Illich's *Tools for Conviviality*. To Illich, the word does not mean joy or light-heartedness, but instead it refers to a society in which modern tools are used by everyone in an integrated and shared manner, without reliance on a body of specialists who control said instruments. For Illich, conviviality is the 'opposite of industrial productivity'. In practice, it means a cooperative, mutual, sociable and sharing approach.

Decoloniality

Decoloniality or decolonialism, more than a school of thought, is a project that has two aims: first, to unmask the limitations of modern eurocentric knowledge(s) and their capitalist colonial roots; and second, to lead to *pluriversality* – foregrounding non-white-european principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economies, other politics, other ethics.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism understands the patriarchal exploitation of female bodies and the capitalist exploitation of planetary resources as stemming from the same worldview in which all that is not human and male is devalued. Ecofeminism is inexorably linked to degrowth, sharing the values of gender equality, care and well-being, and dismantling systems and power structures based on domination and exploitation.

Growth

Endless growth is a requirement for a capitalist economy – endless production and consumption. In a capitalist society economic productivity and growth are at the epicenter of human activity and organization. Endless, infinite growth is obviously not just impossible on a finite planet, it is tremendously destructive. Even if that were not the case, does building our lives around growth make sense? Is it fulfilling or healthy?

Mutual aid

Mutual aid is founded in the acknowledgement of the truth that human beings are deeply interdependent. In practice, mutual aid projects are a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions.

Non-human

Non-human is used here to refer to any and every living thing that is not human: animals, plants, but also ecosystems and the natural environment as a whole.

Pluriverse / Pluriversity / Pluriversality

Pluriversality is a concept emerging from decolonial theory that provides a counternarrative to the Western philosophical conception of a universal experience.

It refers to acknowledging, respecting and existing in solidarity with radically different knowledges, experiences, and understandings of the world.

Sustainability

Sustainability is used here in an expanded sense: including of course ecological sustainability, but also concerns about the long-term sustainability of artistic projects and more broadly of practices, communities, personal and collaborative relationships.

Well-being

Well-being requires that the needs of an individual are fulfilled: not only material and physical, but social, emotional, intellectual. Here it also refers to the good functioning of organisations and the harmonious coexistence of people with others and with their environment.

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C1 CONTRIBUTE

The aim of *The Degrowth Toolbox for Artistic Practices* is to become a fully open source publication and resource. Currently, you are invited to contribute with your comments, questions, ideas, references, and experiences through [this link](#).

You are also welcome to visit the project's website at degrowthtoolbox.net.

D1 COLOPHON

Written by Alexandra Papademetriou.
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