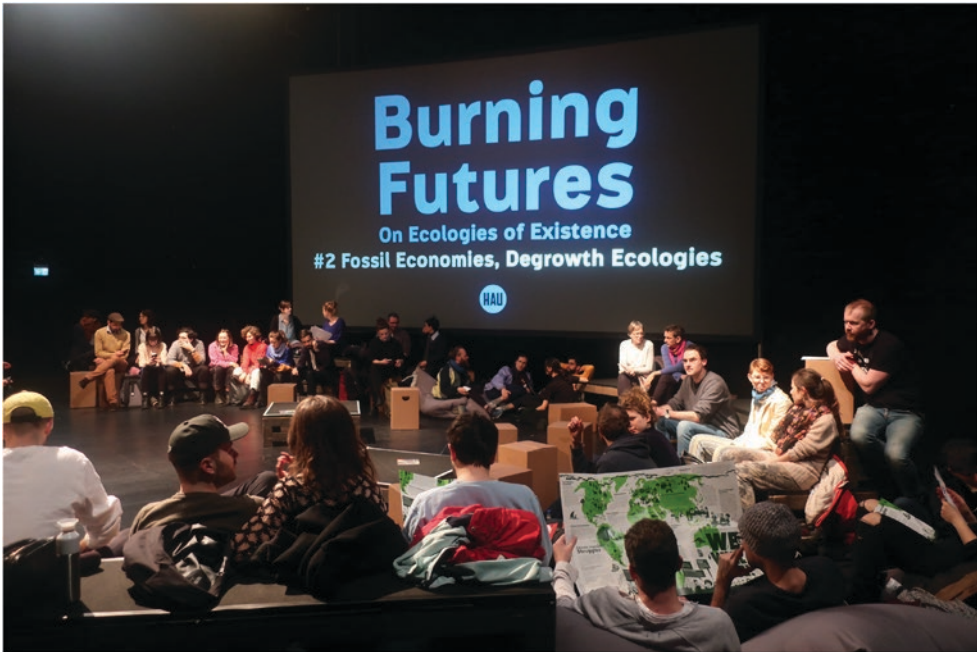


Perspectivizing Burning Futures

Maximilian Haas



The ecological crises currently unfolding—global warming and species extinction, rising sea levels and extreme weather events, along with the depletion, pollution, acidification, and poisoning of soils, air, and water, etc.—are unprecedented in their speed and scale, and as real as they are incomprehensible. Although these crises are all related to climate change, they cannot be reduced to it. It's complex. And this complexity is sufficiently explainable in scientific terms, its future development more or less predictable. But as far as understanding that is concerned, we are still at the very beginning: what does escalating environmental and climate destruction mean for people's modes of existence and subjectivation, for the production and reproduction of values and relations, for creation and exhaustion in more-than-human webs of life? Now less than ever is it possible to separate questions of ecology from questions of the economy, technology, and society. We cannot understand, let alone navigate, the climate catastrophe without reflecting on its causal relation to various forms of social oppression and exploitation that are associated with colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy in Western modernity, and that still persist in the responses to these self-created problems.

These are the basic questions and premises of the lecture and discussion series *Burning Futures: On Ecologies of Existence*, which I have been organizing together with Margarita Tsomou at the

Berlin theatre HAU Hebbel am Ufer since 2019.¹ Questions of ecology, climate, and sustainability had previously been remarkably absent in the German independent dance and performance scene as it had been presented by this theatre. One can only speculate why. Perhaps it has to do with the deep-seated anthropocentrism that still haunts the performing arts, coupled with the difficulty to see the political connection, the common conditions of the oppression and exploitation of humans (so well acknowledged in the field) and of natures. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that the vast scope and complexity of ecology and the climate present obvious problems of representation: they seem at once too abstract and too concrete for theatrical reflection. But perhaps the reason also lies in the ethics of theatrical practice that follows from these ecological considerations, which calls into question the very sociomaterial foundations of this practice. Because in the German freelance performing arts scene (*Freie Szene*), where the idea of an artistic economy of “non-productive expenditure” (see e.g., Bataille [1933] 1997) prevailed, there was a need for approaches and examples of a sustainable aesthetic that meant not just less in a quantitative sense, but a qualitative difference.

This lack had been felt for years, but it was not until the new ecoactivist movements, like Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion,² hit the streets in 2018 that we and other concerned practitioners in the field took more coordinated action ourselves, bringing ecopolitical debates out of the streets and into the theatre, where they could be combined with the intersectional politics established in the performing arts. We moreover felt that the discourses that had been developed over the years in the field of ecocritical theory were actually capable of bridging politics and aesthetics. The first two editions of the Burning Futures series were realized as live encounters in the theatre, experimenting with different constellations of theory, activism, and the social dispositive of theatre. They were recorded and subsequently edited into podcasts that were made available on online platforms. This medium, however, became the main stage of the series when the Covid-19 pandemic hit and theatres had to close to the public. Formats that could easily be transferred online, such as discursive events, made it possible to maintain contact with audiences during the lockdowns and thus at times moved to the center of programming. Consequently, in the summer of 2020, HAU Hebbel am Ufer launched HAU4.de, a digital stage that was established as a venue on par with the three physical stages HAU 1, 2, and 3.

The digital stage also brought some advantages for the series itself. On the one hand, we were able to invite guests who did not need to be co-present in Berlin. This not only did justice to the planetary though geopolitically differentiated nature of the issue at stake, but also, by avoiding (air) travel, to the ecological ethics that follow from it. On the other hand, we reached a worldwide audience, which extended to unknown, unintended publics that carried the discussions further and even used the audio material in new contexts (for example, the material was sampled in music pieces or

Figure 1. (previous page) Burning Futures #2 on “Fossil Economies, Degrowth Ecologies,” with Andreas Malm, Andrea Vetter, and Tadzio Müller. HAU Hebbel am Ufer (HAU1), 21 January 2020. (Photo by Maximilian Haas)

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1. See <https://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de/en/burning-futures/> and <https://burningfutures.podigee.io>.

2. While Fridays for Future, in the footsteps of Greta Thunberg’s school strikes, was shaped by young activists and received a broader social support, Extinction Rebellion struck more militant tones in both analysis and action and was discussed more controversially.

in works of sonic ethnography). Yet precisely because this transcended the conventional, “exclusive” relation of theatres to a local scene and audience, and because art and research institutions widely use the format of an audio podcast containing theoretical discussions, we were surprised that the series was perceived internationally as an expression of theatre, or of the contemporary dance and performance scene in Berlin. In addition to the deliberate framing, i.e., the “branding” from HAU, this may be traced to the fact that the theoretical approach was shaped by aesthetic and ethical discourses that could not hide their situatedness in the performing arts—and perhaps also to our gesture of communicating these positions and concepts to wider, nonspecialized publics. This is a habit that might have more to do with the German theatre tradition than we were aware.

We initially conceived the trajectory of the series along the lines of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Déborah Danowski’s *The Ends of the World*, with a critical awareness of how environmental and climate destruction are escalating, and the apocalyptic discourses this is triggering. “Virtually everything,” de Castro and Danowski write, “that can be said about the climate crisis becomes, ipso facto, anachronistic, out of step; and everything that can be done about it is necessarily too little, too late” (2017:8). Building on this claim, we have sought to understand these discourses through an analysis of their epistemic and political pragmatics. Discourses of the end are informed by biblical visions of the apocalypse as the ultimate event of a universal downfall. Human beings have always been fascinated by their collective death and “the world without us,” to echo Alan Weisman’s catchphrase (2007). In modernity, this world is conceived of as the product of human experience, and thus the extinction of “Man” also entails the annihilation of the world at large. The ecological point of view, however, conceives of humans as one species among others whose ecologies of existence are mutually dependent. And from this fundamental tension we derive some very basic questions, such as: Who’s end are we actually talking about? How do we talk about the end without falling into anthropocentric narcissism about our own extinction? How do we critically reflect apocalyptic imaginaries without denying the urgency of our present situation? What would be the appropriate language to describe environmental and climate destruction without amplifying the voice of those who long for a simple return to a paradise lost? Because utopian and dystopian visions alike fail to account for the empirical future to come. And indeed, given the interest of these questions in the performative relation between embodied experience of sociomaterial conditions and political semantics, it is no coincidence that they were posed in a theatrical context.

In the first lecture/discussion event of the series, *Facing Extinction*—which brought together the philosopher and activist Franco “Bifo” Berardi from the Italian postoperaismo movement; with Marcela Vecchione from the Center for Advanced Amazonian Studies in Para, Brazil; and the feminist theorist of art and technology Antonia Majaca—we discussed these questions from a geopolitical perspective, with particular attention to the Americas. How do we deal with the fact that it is too late to reverse environmental and climate destruction and its violent social impacts, including the resurgence of right-wing nationalist populism? How can we learn to live with extinction? What would it mean to think back from the end and deal with the coming catastrophe responsibly? And what exactly is ending: the world? humankind? biodiversity? Western modernity? In general, and above all, it is the deprived who suffer and die. The geopolitics of environmental catastrophe are steeped in racial violence; color lines cut, cross, or deepen continental, national, and regional boundaries of socially differentiated exposure to ecological threats and harms. Environmental racism moved to the center of the series’ discourse in three conversations with art historian T.J. Demos and the Otolith Group (Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun), with philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva, as well as with political theorist and activist Françoise Vergès and science historian Edna Bonhomme. Black studies articulates important perspectives on environmental thinking that critically diverge from mainstream discourse on ecology and climate. From the interscalar ecologies of Afrofuturism to Ferreira da Silva’s concept of “difference without separability” (2016), to the intersectional politics of breathing, this work, as discussed in the presentations, fundamentally reframes and redirects ecocritical currents.

In his seminal essay on *The Three Ecologies* ([1989] 2000), Félix Guattari argues that the spheres of subjectivity, society, and environment cannot be separated (anymore). Epistemically and politically, they have to be understood through their empirical intersections and operationalized along their differentially entangled logics. “Now more than ever,” he says, and this was as early as 1989, “nature cannot be separated from culture; in order to comprehend the interactions between ecosystems, the mechanosphere and the social and individual universes of reference, we must learn to think ‘transversally’” (43). However, this transversality must first be reclaimed from an unbridled force that dominates earthly relations by indifferently making all things translatable into one another through a general equivalent: capital. The history of the Capitalocene and its forms of appropriation and exploitation of “cheap nature,” the violent promises of exponential growth in fossil capitalism, and the contemporary nexus of financialization and information technologies have been the focus of several issues in the Burning Futures series with eco-Marxists Jason Moore and Andreas Malm on the one hand; and feminist theorists of alternative, circular, subsistence, sharing, or degrowth economies Maja Göpel, Eva von Redecker, and Andrea Vetter on the other. These theorists and activists discussed controversial answers to a doubled “cosmo-economical” question: How did we get here? And how do we get away from here?

Does the origin of our modern mess lie in the oppression, exploitation, and killing of racialized communities during European colonialism and the slave trade, when diverse planetary natures were sacrificed for economically standardized monocultures, the plantations? Or does it lie in the rapid industrialization that followed the invention of the steam engine and decoupled the energy supply from renewable yet limited resources such as wind and water, replacing them with initially unlimited energy reserves in the fossil carbon stores of coal, oil, and gas? Or is it rooted in the form of property itself, which presumes an unrestricted right of disposal that takes precedence over any potential good—and which is only fully realized in the act of its destruction; a property form that habitually persists, as von Redecker pointed out, as “phantom possession” even where it is legally abolished? In asking about the appropriate means to deal with this modern mess, series participants discussed the desire, necessity, or legitimacy of violence against fossil infrastructures, as well as their appropriation, dismantling, or disassembly, and the reinforcement of alternative and ever-more critical infrastructures of care and supply in times of escalating crises at the intersection of environment and health.

The feminist interventions in ecocritical discourse that run throughout the series—albeit most evidently in the conversations with Patricia Reed, Angela Melitopoulos and Barbara Glowczewski, and with Maria Puig de la Bellacasa and Dimitris Papadopoulos—focused less on the historical conditions of modernity and its possible ends, and more on ways of assisting in restoration and repair. Reed presents the problem of planetarity as a tension of coexistence between situated knowledge and action and the vast horizon of translocal causes and effects, which, she argues, must be understood in the particularity of their interconnected epistemological conditions and sociomaterial impacts, not generalized as “global.” Puig de la Bellacasa and Papadopoulos, by contrast, turned to the literally most “concrete” question of bioremediation, i.e., of how new anthropogenic substances can be reintroduced into the material cycles of nature that they so forcibly block. “Breakdown” thus took on a double meaning in these issues: on the one hand, as an existential risk rooted in the socially differentiated vulnerability of life in the more-than-human relationships that constitute the planet; and on the other hand, as a practice of extended composting at various scales that continually decomposes human-made constraints on life built to last. The fact that techniques of reparative ecology thus range from technoscientific to grassroots practices was put into anthropological perspective in Melitopoulos’s discussion with Barbara Glowczewski, which was centered around the relation between Earth’s expressive forces, imaging technologies, and the cosmological bonds of mutual obligation among Warlpiri people and their native lands in the Northern Territories of Australia.

The Burning Futures series has been one particular attempt to bring ecological concerns to theatrical discourse and practice. Yet of course there are other forms of concern about these matters

in the field of performing arts, pertaining both to operational and administrative measures and to artistic and conceptual propositions. For example, there are tendencies toward a new ecological aesthetic in this field, which is perhaps most vividly manifested in works that are not explicitly concerned with the environment and climate. I am thinking in particular of forms of distributed (narrative and performative) agency; of technoeological sensation, mediation, and microperformativity; of complex causation, latency of effects, and implicatedness of observers; of aesthetic transversality between heterogeneous realities usually separated along the nature-culture divide; of artistic research in dance and performance that crosses the associated epistemological and institutional boundaries between the sciences and the humanities; of artistically facilitated encounters, or even co-becomings, of diverse modes of being...in short: of various strategies of decentralizing the human subject in an art form that has established itself in modernity as the very art form of "Man." In the European performing arts, these approaches can be observed in the work of postconceptual dance-makers such as Mette Ingvarsen, Xavier Le Roy, or Mårten Spångberg; as well as in the performances of Lotte van den Berg, Kris Verdonck, Ivana Müller, or David Weber-Krebs; or in the artistic research in indigenous cosmologies and dance practices of Amanda Piña. And on a more international level, one might add to this necessarily fragmentary list the digital scenographies or performative environments of Chris Salter, Ian Cheng, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul.

Conversely, some pieces deal with environmental or climate catastrophes without questioning or transforming the artistic means of theatre. They critically illuminate the human-environment relation using established forms of representing interpersonal conflicts—but without problematizing the representational legacy of modern theatre, which oscillates between epistemical and political representation. Instead, they frame the issue they raise as a detached object of rational deliberation or moral choice. Following Bruno Latour and Dipesh Chakrabarty, they concede a return of history to the political stage, while often dissipating the intellectual provocation of the geohistorical perspective in a Hegelian concept of history, rather than embracing the complex scaling and causality of biogeochemical coevolution. Yet one can also observe a return to premodern forms of theatrical expression, such as Greek tragedy. Nature appears here as a force of fate that forgets no misdeeds and demands atonement. Such artworks materialistically revive the struggle with the gods, yet catastrophe thus acquires a nimbus of mythological necessity that outshines the geopolitical power dynamics that animate empirical infrastructures of environmental oppression and destruction. *Anthropos, Tyrann (Oedipus)* by Alexander Eisenach, which premiered online in 2021 as a 360° video production by the Volksbühne Berlin, exemplified this resurrection of the ancient tragedy in a particularly clear way by making a series of equations: the Anthropos of the Anthropocene is Oedipus, the tragic hero who cannot see his guilt and thus becomes ever more deeply entangled in it. The Covid-19 pandemic is the plague afflicting our contemporary Thebes, triggering a cascade of catastrophic revelations. The role of the blind seer Teiresias is embodied by marine biologist Antje Boetius, who reflects on the ecopolitical significance of climate research that no one wants to hear.

None of these approaches is necessarily produced more sustainably than others. In contrast, sustainable production standards are being applied to other works that are neither aesthetically nor discursively concerned with ecology. It is in part the new ecoactivist movements Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, and in part the caesura brought about by the pandemic, that have created a space for the independent dance and performance scene in Germany to formulate various ethical and practical responses to the climate catastrophe. A broader movement is emerging to implement effective and creative measures bottom-up through various initiatives and networks. Last year, the German government commissioned a study on the promotion of sustainability in the freelance performing arts as a potential motor and matrix for reorganizing cultural funding after the pandemic (and, in fact, the federal election, which led to a member of the Green Party being appointed minister of culture). My colleague Sandra Umathum and I conducted an empirical study of operational ecologies and production practices in the field, analyzing them in terms of their environmental impact, including greenhouse gas emissions, and asking how this impact could be reduced. This

involved institutional issues such as climate accounting and strategic sustainability management, green buildings and operations, material infrastructures and the circular economy, along with issues focused more on the side of the artists such as the connection between travel, funding policies, precarious forms of living and working, mobility justice, and ecologically responsible forms of touring.

The pragmatics of sustainable transformation deal with a wide and diverse set of incredibly concrete measures that, in sum, bring about incremental yet relevant change. Sustainability is, however, at its core a management discourse, yet a quite radical one, as it goes to the roots of capitalist value production; counters the general equivalent of money with the ecological scale of CO₂ equivalents and the violent growth paradigm with planetary boundaries. All the same, it is a management discourse that is measured by quantifiable parameters. Practical sustainability work is indispensable and must be vigorously established as the new normal in the art sector as well, against which nonsustainable action must justify itself. And yet it is crucial that the arts are also addressed regarding their creative power to critically and speculatively engage with our current modes of existence and subjectivation, the production and reproduction of earthly values and relations, and aesthetic knowing and artistic action in more-than-human webs of life on the brink of collapse.

The conjunction of discursive, aesthetic, and operational approaches within the performing arts still seems to imply contradictions among the categorical registers in which they operate, and indeed this often leads to conflict in practice. It nevertheless remains important, I think, to connect the various approaches in ways that allow them to respond to each other, to problematize their respective presuppositions, and to experiment with transformative potentials that correspond to the scale and radicality of the nature-cultural challenges arising from climate catastrophe.

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