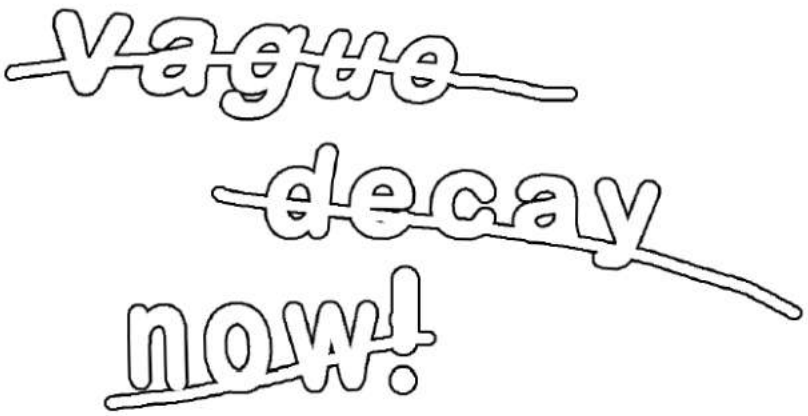


destrategising
decarbonisation



Vague Decay Now! Destrategising Decarbonisation

Text by Sean Roy Parker
Images by Lauren Doughty

I'm walking through a classic white cube gallery, looking at artworks but dreaming about infrastructure. I can visualise the technicians using laser-guided hanging to make everything perfectly symmetrical on the walls and the cleaner pushing a floor polishing machine around to make the granite sparkle. I can see the unpaid intern collecting and unpacking the publication with pricelist inlay. I'm not staring at the art but through it, at the labour, materials, hierarchies and supply chain logistics that go into its production.

Litres of paint and plaster, filler, various pins picture hooks , plinths, packing crates, tape , strong ratchets, vans with diesel in their tanks, modern modular lighting , underfloor heating and air con, water for drinking / washing / flushing, superfast internet, the commercial lease, A4 plain white printer paper , HDMI cables from Amazon and their polyethylene wrappers.

From cradle to grave, art production is fuelled by a reliance on low-cost, poor-quality materials. The ubiquity of these goods fits perfectly into an all-encompassing ecocidal culture addicted to fossil fuels which feature heavily in the making, packaging, and couriering of commodities around the world. The market that manufactures, sells and ships these objects worldwide is driven by corporations who wield control over racialised, low-wage and unsafe labour. News reports of overworked and precarious workers at Amazon being injured by sharp items or having liquid packages explode on conveyor belts is one small but significant example of this exploitation.

These everyday items are the cultural scaffolding holding contemporary art up, and the sector needs a more rigorous eco-critical framework to address their provenance.

Petrochemical Penchants

From the earliest cave paintings in Indonesia to Senaka Senanayake's (b.1951) illustrations

that capture the rainforest around him, artists have used materials to imitate their surroundings. However, in the search for aesthetic perfection, it has become normalised for some artists to use toxic man-made materials to mimic organic textures. American sculptor Richard Serra (b.1938) cast his *Doors* (1967-68) from fibreglass and rubber, which fill up unreclaimable space in the future. Meanwhile, Barbadian artist (and friend of Damien Hirst) Ashley Bickerton's (b.1959) *Floating Ocean Chunks* (2019) are wall-mounted blocks of transparent blue resin that will resist degradation forever.

Outside of the commercial artworld, mass-produced media like canvases, paints and brushes, as well as textiles, glazes and adhesives, which are sold to crafters, hobbyists and schools, are primarily composites of oil tars, polycarbonate resins and acidic solvents. Cheap cadmium yellow acrylic paints, for example, are bound with an acrylic plastic polymer like methyl methacrylate and pigmented with cadmium sulfide. According to a 2016 hazard summary by United States Environmental Protection Agency, methyl methacrylate can cause skin, eye and respiratory issues, and, as stated on a hazard summary by the International Labor Organization, cadmium sulfide in its raw state is very combustible and a severe marine pollutant. Solvents like acetone and turpentine, are nonchalantly poured down drains and enter watercourses from domestic and commercial locations due to a lack of education and environmental guidance.

All these substances are used to eternalise a passing moment. They are intended for a professional art practice that attempts to capture the present but contributes to betraying the future. Why does art need to exist indefinitely when we don't have a forever secured?

plaster marble

nylon thread

polystyrene iceberg

resin water

unconditional permanence by proxy

(it can't go on this way)

Not only are these art materials directly derived from oil, therefore having their own relational implications for global energy consumption; there is also the large shadow cast by the outcomes of other 'professional' processes like bronze casting, gallery refurbishment, crate-making. Wastage of offcuts, packaging, mistakes, improper or irresponsible disposal and flagrant displays of ephemerality that unnecessarily deplete finite resources, pollute the air with harmful oxides and send reusable items to landfill. At the same time, tactically hiding these processes and by-products, contributes towards the fetishisation of the (false) effortlessness of artistic creation.



Any given artwork about the environment—its boundless expanse and sublime beauty—is very rarely in symbiosis with that which it claims to represent. The tools artists use to pay homage to the world around them rely on delayed misunderstanding or blunt opposition; forest green oil paint that has never touched chlorophyll, photographs of natural environments developed with lab-made sulphites and hydroxides, polyester flags digitally printed with soft organic textures. The micro-polluting chemicals that are employed in these processes eventually leach into the soils and rivers, debasing the very subject the artists are trying to capture.

Artworks about nature don't *represent* the environment, they imitate abstracted capital and reflect the geographical, financial and social dislocation that suspends all the earth's inhabitants in a never-ending loop of individualistic aspiration. Can we afford to ignore the deep irony of this exceptionalism?

Obscuring Life

If a gallery private view is a grand reveal, it is also a magic trick. Specks of dust hover between a tessellation of obedient atoms, animated briefly by smiles and liquids and air currents. How *do* they do it? Everything that exists inside the orchestration of an exhibition has already taken a long journey from the sun and ended up stuck in this white space for just for a moment. Artworks, packing materials and human labour reverberating in concrete reality, and simultaneously part of the infinite that rushes past us all. Decisions made in the name of art expertly obfuscate social and ecological trauma incurred by those decisions, save for specific fragments that can be spun into favour. It's all part of a perfectly narrated canon that upholds its own image.

How
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only
see
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Where is the rest of it?

The staging and commodification of contemporary art neatly mirrors how we shop in supermarkets. Like the apple on the shelf, we see an artwork only when it is ready for mass consumption. Where did it come from? Who brought it into existence? How on Earth did it get here? Being allowed to see only a minute sliver of information—looking through the narrowest of fractures—is an acute form of perception control. Millions of potentials had to align, thousands of implicated agents and a few strokes of luck congregated especially for the occasion, yet we only gaze at the polished fruit held at eye level, detached from its origin and facilitators.

Back in the gallery, what would happen if we could see everything? The piles of dust, the empty crates, the skips full of plastic, the endless emails and administrative anxiety, the whole financial breakdown, the artist's other profession(s), their honest opinion of the experience and whether they were able to say no.

Art can be a medium for documenting the times using the debris of our experience. Recology Artist Residency Program in San Francisco expects participants to fulfil their proposals using found materials from the local dump, and engage in municipal composting to build soil health. You see, it is not necessary to encase each iota in amber, there is already a surplus of yesterday's mistakes. They are piled up inside data centres so hot that pipes pump icy water around them; crated in extortionate studio complexes in soon-to-be gentrified neighbourhoods; stored in private collections gathering dust and interest; crushed in landfill emitting noxious gases. I am advocating for a rejection of finite projects and solid conclusions because a concept is just a pause. Sometimes I don't have to touch anything at all, watching it pass is enough.

Defund Sustainability

For decades, and most intensely since the advent of social media, capitalist greenwashing has created an arena for identity politics to seep into the way we feed, clothe and entertain ourselves. While veganism, vintage fashion and music festivals—all valid forms of anticapitalism on their own merit—have become weaponised and gatekept by a socially mobile middle class to indicate an ethical superiority (muting their own privilege of access), the structures that allow these lifestyle choices remain starkly untouched. Deforestation for soya production, commercial flipping of charity goods, and policed privatisation of greenspaces all bolster the undemocratic commodification of the thing they're claiming to save. The lack of a real alternative reinforces endless, unbridled consumption.

It's either *this* or *that*,

why not *neither* or *nothing at all*?

This human exceptionalism is mirrored in the art world. International institutions and high-profile artists throw "sustainability" around like plastic-coated business cards. In 2021 the



Science Museum had a show called *Our Future Planet* funded by Shell Oil. Icelandic sculptor Olafur Eliasson shipped blocks of polar cap to performatively melt outside the Tate Modern for *Ice Watch* (2014) to, as claimed on his own website, "raise awareness of climate change". In these instances, neither party reckons with their complicity in climate breakdown and its discourse. Eliasson even doubled down on his commitment to environmental action by developing his *Little Sun* project (2012) with Danish designer Frederik Otteson. Around 1.4 million sun-shaped acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (or ABS) solar-powered lamps have been distributed around the world, illustrating the self-defeating design strategy of producing new climate solutions while extracting unnecessary petroleum-based materials and contributing to future landfill. Let's just admit that "sustainability" means nothing but money.

about nature but never in on under beside with for beyond betwixt or ruined by nature
about nature but never in on under beside with for beyond betwixt or ruined by nature
about nature but never in on under beside with for beyond betwixt or ruined by nature

Back in the art world, continuing to organise, install and open exhibitions about the environment without a radical reckoning and transformation of traditional forms of display or a redistribution of funding is—plainly—a waste of precious time, energy and resources. It would, of course, be less ecologically and socially depletive to *do nothing at all*. In this ecosystem, it is the art workers, who produce the cultural value through their ideas, labour and experimental spirit. We, the art workers must take responsibility for our roles in the externalities of art. We must realise the power of resisting overcomplicated strategy and disproportionate labour. We must use our voices to advocate for those being brutalised by our oppressors. Ecological struggle is inseparable from social, class-based, gender-based, disability and racial struggle. The art sector must immediately destrategise decarbonisation and instead drive forward in messy degrowth.

My fortune cookie said CONSUME LESS. SHARE MORE. ENJOY LIFE.

As artworkers can we think beyond deadlines? Can we get off this non-stop arty party bus? It really doesn't matter how we got here. It's the last stop, a dead-end. Linear time occludes what is happening in the present and continually places the climate crisis firmly in the future. Let's unhook art production from the barbs of temporal scarcity, we have an abundance of now. What would happen if we were to observe seasonal time? We could hibernate then scurry like a field mouse; We could enjoy dormancy followed by a big flourishing like a tulip bulb. In elliptical time we could share calendars with the more-than-human: solar, lunar, tidal, mammalian, floral, and fungal. In seasonal time there are no clocks. We eat when we're hungry and follow the sun wherever it is in the sky.

If you happen to suffer from choice paralysis as I do, you might want to consider intentionally withdrawing from consumerist decision-making altogether. Art materials come to us all the time; we just have to look in the right direction. New York-based artist Gedi Sibony (b.1973)

surreptitiously made carpets kiss in *Kissing Carpets* (2005), and Belgian artist Celine Mathieu (b.1989) draped biomaterial scientist Rosie Broadhead's seaweed bodysuits over a borrowed couch in her recent poetic show *MANGE D'HALEINE* at Gr_und in Berlin. Sharing functional skills through personal vernacular is a generous approach to processing one's own trauma. The intergenerational community of black women at Gee's Bend, Alabama have been quilting blankets from clothing scraps since their enslaved ancestors began in the early 1800s, and British artist Anna Chrystal Stephens (b.1984) exhibited her entire DIY outdoor survival kit attached to a wall-hung tent in *Anorak* in 2019.

To accompany this essay, I invited British-North Macedonian illustrator Lauren Doughty (b.1991) to create imagery that would complicate itself in sequence. I posted her a parcel of materials I had slowly noticed, collected and processed in the spring: dried daffodil flowerheads, dehydrated pink sauerkraut, powdered beetroot, floor sweepings. Lauren then made an ink from each—as well as custom paper from old pulped studio scraps, egg shells and flowerheads—and built up a multi-layered image that resolves itself in chaos.

*

Digestion is another way to think about destrategising decarbonisation; finding ways to break down stubborn composites into more useful particles that can be easily redistributed to encourage perpetual transformation. I begin vegetable ferments which are then engineered by microbial colonies. I find pumpkin seeds stuck to a checkered tea-towel after drying in the sun or uncover studio scraps that have been left in a bag and stuffed into a filing cabinet for two years. I write through difficult feelings and come back to them in the future. Every day I sharpen my tools to battle the insanity of cultural stasis. I have learnt thrift and resourcefulness from my mother acting out of necessity. I try to relinquish control to the more-than-human plan, and practice appreciation for the miniscule flickers of completeness.

The material lifecycles humans try desperately to ignore are continually being complexified in relation with bacterial companions and wild yeasts present on every single surface. Spontaneous fermentation happens absolutely everywhere. It is both a metaphor and a method for my proposal, creating living structures that respond and adapt the needs of the participatory organisms.

A single container of salted cabbage comprises countless wild microbes foraging morsels and slowly digesting their latent energies, visibly carbonating the atmosphere, and actively engaging in undulating cycles of birth and expiration. Catalysed by deep time, human perseverance and interspecies care, the resulting lactoferment transcends its simple ingredients; its essence is enhanced and state changed irreversibly. Can a gallery become a jar of sauerkraut?

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I'm moving in the
right direction

and I'm doing it
at my own speed

and I'm doing it with
love and intention

and never at the
expense of others

and always with
the plants in mind

Vague Decay Now! Destrategising Decarbonisation is part of *Sunlight Doesn't Need a Pipeline*, a collaborative literacy and climate justice project in search of transformative and regenerative repair for the art sector and beyond. **www.sunlightdoesntneedapipeline.com**

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