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ESTUARIES

ways of knowing

# THE ATMOSPHERIC KNOWING OF PLAY: AN EXTRACTION BAROMETER? TONI PAPE

The idea for the second contribution emerged upon reading the essay, *Introduction: For an Ethology of Exhaustion* by Christoph Brunner, Halbe, Hessel Kuipers and Toni Pape. Initially, it was this paper that was going to be explored within this zine. After preliminary conversations, it became clear that while the paper would serve as one axis to discuss the kind of loss one experiences in the process of new ways of knowing, Toni's experience with the guitar as an 'amateur' player would be what the zine to explore. Two kinds of loss were unpacked in different ways. On the topic of loss and pleasure of new ways of knowing experienced through exhaustion, Toni had an exchange with dramaturge Nienke Scholts on 15th March 2022. The written piece written by Toni on the kind of loss experienced as an amateur musician, is what follows.

...where you can start to imagine a different life in this world...

What am I curious about?

How much is enough?

## I. OUT OF EXTRACTION

For years before and during the pandemic, the only way I was able to experience work was as a form of extraction. A strong sense of being emptied out accompanied everything I did. All the other experiential affects that usually factor into intellectual activity – such as curiosity, sociality, political urgency – were overshadowed by the dominant sensation that I was doing the busywork necessary to fill the spreadsheets that keep technocratic and capitalist mills running. The process of extraction had come to organize my experience.

Partly because of this experience, I have been drawn to think more broadly about extraction and the ways in which it gives form to our cultural and social institutions. Few would disagree that our European culture encounters the environment with an extractivist mindset that consists in “taking without caretaking, [] treating land and people as resources to deplete rather than as complex entities with rights to a dignified existence based on renewal and regeneration” (Klein, 447). Yet, while initially reserved for the extraction of raw materials from the earth (Riofrancos), the term extraction is increasingly used to describe the many different ways in which global capitalism accumulates value by extracting it from various ‘external’ domains in the most unequal forms of exchange (Gago and Mezzadra; Szeman and Wenzel). European culture has a long history of extracting value by pillaging the earth, enslaving people, exploiting workers, oppressing women (Yusoff, Federici, Mies, Jaffe). Global finance, surveillance capitalism and the neoliberal workplace may count as more recent modes of extracting and distributing value inequitably and unsustainably (Mezzadra and Neilson, Crawford, Zuboff). European culture as we live it is dependent on – or addicted to – an extractivist relation to the world. We extract from the land, from the biosphere, from each other and ourselves. And nearing the exhaustion of various sources of value, Europeans’ greed for (life) energy has increasingly turned inward (Mbembe).

All these integrated modes of exhaustion must be undone and replaced by sustainable, ecological ways of relating to the world. Such a monumental task requires all forms of organized engagement grounded in what, following Sylvia Wynter, one could call

“being human as praxis” (McKittrick). That is to say, the transformation of our societies towards environmental and social justice requires a more fundamental reckoning with and reorientation of European culture. Too many of our cultural assumptions and habits keep positing an imaginary ‘outside’ in our very planetary midst, an ‘outside’ where more energy can be sourced and more ‘externalities’ can be dumped. But, as the above overview indicates, these supposed ‘outsides’ include many of us.

So how can one practice the ‘realization of the living’ when extraction has already taken its toll (Wynter and McKittrick)? Exhausted from my extractive relation to the world, I found it inconceivable to engage in creative practice. In exhaustion, I look at my pile of unread books with dread – All that unconsumed, unextracted value! – rather than curiosity and the joy of learning. Differently put, I recognize the extractivist mindset in myself, how it enlists me to approach the world in such a way as to ‘discover’ value in one place and deliver it to another. This is extraction’s normative way of knowing and it actively works against the invention of all those yet unknown ways to create values.

How then does one find one’s way back to the joyful practice of creating ideas, ways of knowing and values? At stake is nothing less than the renewed composition of one’s subjectivity, the search for resingularization of experience (Guattari 2000).

How do I know that the texts I'm reading, or the reading activity that I'm doing, is generative?

## II. PLAY AS A TECHNIQUE FOR RESISTING CAPTURE

Recently, I started learning how to play the guitar. I picked it up during the pandemic not to fill empty time; in fact, a lot of time has to be made for such a slow, embodied process of learning. And despite the considerable effort that goes into the practice, it is immensely joyful to create and surround oneself in harmonic sound. But beyond that, learning the guitar has led me to an important realization: Making music by myself creates value in the form of enjoyment that is not immediately extracted. In the middle of exhaustion, I was able to make an effort because I knew for certain that the fruits of that effort weren't going anywhere, didn't need to be delivered. Sure, I have played for friends on one or two occasions – with hands wet from panic sweat. But aside from that it is an activity that feels safe from the capture of value. Amateur musicking is such a lively, joyful, and inventive activity also because it serves no particular purpose or goal. The whole activity is frivolously useless.

The experience of such unextracted joy is political. Brian Massumi has articulated its importance in an economic and political context, distinguishing it from adjacent feelings such as satisfaction, fun or pleasure.

Joy is much more than a pleasure. It registers the invention of new passions, tendencies, and action-paths that expand life's powers, flush with perception. It registers becoming. It is an immediate thinking-feeling of powers of existence, in passionate intensification and tendential increase. [...] It is the liveliness factor of all hedonic and emotional categories. It is not an emotion: it is vitality affect. (Massumi 2015, 71)

For me, then, playing the guitar is a body-wide effort in which liveliness is expressed and intensified. It is where I can feel the creative edge of existence as the joy that resonates through me, the instrument, the room. (Sorry, neighbours.)

Massumi also refers to this joy as the qualitative and processual "surplus-value of life" and distinguishes it from quantitative surplus-value of capitalism (2015, 92 passim; 2018, 16.) "Capitalist surplus-value and processual surplus-value [of life] are, of course, relat-

ed, but they cannot be equated. The former is the systemic capture of the latter" (Massumi 2018, 16). What I've come to know by way of guitar play is that the surplus-value of my existence can to a degree be protected from capture-by-extraction. Guitar play allows me to compose a vacuole of spacetime thin which I can experience that creative and lively joy.

Perhaps this is how Kafka felt when writing, that visionary of the 20th century who didn't write to be published but to live, who could only write in the belief he would never be published. What are the things we cannot create because we produce-for-extraction?

Fortunately, a song played on a guitar vanishes as soon as it's done.

So, how do you produce your own subjectivity?  
And how do you allow exhaustion to build a new world?

Notes: Would you like to talk about an amateur practice that has changed how you learn, think, and do?

### III. ATMOSPHERIC THOUGHT

The anthropologist Tim Ingold has written of the “thinking” he does “through the cello” (Ingold). For him the sonic event called music is the result of a “correspondence” — a mutual attunement — between the player’s body and the instrument (204). The resonant bodies of the player and the instrument move together and mutually amplify their expressive force. The components of this event participate in an “interstitial differentiation,” mutually shaping one another across their differences (208). The harmonious resonance of the musical event fosters an affective feedback loop that not only expresses but also up-regulates the participating existences toward thriving (to speak a bit like Antonio Damasio whose notion of thriving is grounded in Spinoza’s concept of joy, cf. Damasio). This thriving is part of what can be known through music play precisely because it exists only in an as composition. But just as important is the way in which one knows. The know-how or skill of music play is “restless, fluid and dynamic. Above all, it is not embodied, in the sense of having been deposited in an inert and stable substrate, housed in the lower levels of some imaginary column of consciousness, but fundamentally animate —immanent in the sensuousness of a body that is mobile, alive and open to the world” (209). Inasmuch as it “blend[s] the cosmic and the affective”, this way of knowing is “atmospheric” (212). Thus, one participates in a relational field that is generative of the world, a worlding, rather than maintaining to the world a relation of externality that can be extracted from.

Playing the guitar has become a technique for knowing what brings joy for its very own sake, a kind of barometer for whether an activity can spark that self-affirmative creativity. This barometer allows me to sense when a certain piece to play on the guitar resonates with me or not. But the technique has migrated into non-musical contexts. Moving from the guitar to that pile of unread books mentioned earlier, my renewed sense for self-affirming creativity allows me to appreciate when I read to extract information and when the reading actually generates ideas. I pursue the latter — and should I notice that I’m merely consuming information, I drop the book. No big loss. I try to read by appetite, let the ideas guide me from one book to another. In a very concrete sense, then, playing the guitar has taught me how to read in a generative manner again.

What is another way of working that isn't consumption-based?  
If we keep extracting from ourselves,  
then how are we ever going to stop extracting from the world around us?

#### IV. THE LOSS OF LOSS

What is lost in such a reorientation of one's ways of knowing, this zine's editors ask. In the very particular case of my little example, I'd speak of leaving behind rather than losing. And for everything that's left behind, one can (re)discover something else.

I leave behind the self-evidence of an extractivist understanding of self. That is unfortunately not to say that my mode of living isn't extractive; it cannot but be in the part of the world I inhabit. But the refusal to be extracted from is an important step toward the rejection of extractivism, albeit self-oriented and potentially self-indulging if one does not work to curb one's own extractive relation towards other beings. But self-care can also be political. And besides I no longer believe that anyone who does consent to their exploitation can act as a force toward meaningful social change, however small the scale.

I leave behind a certain idea of "success," the one that rests on ideas of overproduction, extraction, and social hierarchy. And I discover the joyful importance that the notion of "enough" carries. Enough, for instance, to be able to dedicate time to useless activities that bring joy. In her book *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*, the philosopher Erin Manning suggests that such an approach can affirm "another way of thinking value": "Beyond use-value, the valuation not of what is given, but the capacity of transvaluation to perform a shift at the very heart of the process's incompleteness, of the process's inherent indeterminacy. In Nietzschean fashion, value here derives from the in-act of the process's own affirmation of its difference" (21).

Affirming the joyful differential that the useless pragmatic can create, I also leave behind the notion that my playful way of knowing should somehow be made productive. More generally this leads me to wonder whether part of divesting from an extractive relation to the world consists in letting go of the idea that one should realize all one's potentials, that one should "make one's dreams come true" so that "one can have it all." Perhaps a post-extractivist society can embrace the idea that there is direct value in daydreaming, that the most extravagant fantasies have an affective reality that intensifies experience

here and now because they are actualized as dreamings, in resonance with the world.

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