

## **What lies outside the cavern.**

**Eugenio Tisselli.**

The lasting value of Plato's allegory of the cave is astonishing. Time and again, it becomes a powerful metaphor of how societies are kept (or choose to be kept) inside dark compartments, safely separated from the threats, perils and uncertainties of *nature*. But what lies outside that comfortable yet oppressive cavern? How can we break free from its hegemonic darkness and step into its *unimaginable outside*? In this article, I would like to propose that such *outside* may be imagined as an open source, open air laboratory of poetics. I will attempt to write about those terms, *open source* and *laboratory of poetics*, from a broad and rather fragmented perspective: as a more or less consistent set of social practices that are situated at the root of numerous communities throughout the world, and that go far beyond the spheres of science and the arts. I do not wish to present these practices as oppositional strategies against hegemony, which I will try to identify with the current form of global capitalism and its implicit values, but rather as starting points for imagining viable alternatives to it. And I will suggest that these practices could be considered as starting points for new and exciting pathways that lead *outside*: to the fields.

In order to encourage our journey from those starting points, and on to the paths that they inaugurate, I will start by describing the open field to which they might finally lead. And, in order to describe it as precisely as I can, I will briefly present an ecological context that may appear foreign to many readers, but that in reality connects strongly and intimately with the practices I wish to discuss here.

### **1. Participatory breeding of cassava in Zanzibar.**

Cassava originated in Brazil and was introduced in Africa more than 200 years ago. It is the main staple crop in the islands and coastal regions of Tanzania. The food security of thousands of families depends, to a large extent, on cassava. However, in those regions, cassava is severely threatened by the direct and indirect effects of anthropogenic climate change. On one hand, the rain patterns have suffered important alterations, and have become erratic and unpredictable. Farmers are finding it increasingly difficult to tell when it is the right time to plant their crops, since the starting dates of the rain seasons have experienced significant delays in recent years. Furthermore, the durations of these seasons have become shorter. On the other hand, the variability of climate has exacerbated the presence of certain pests and, therefore, the incidence of diseases transmitted by those

pests, some of which affect cassava. In such scenario, the development of new varieties of cassava capable of adapting to water scarcity, pests and diseases becomes crucial.

A group of farmers from the small village of Bumbwini in Zanzibar have developed a new variety of cassava, in collaboration with a local agricultural research laboratory. Initially, the laboratory staff applied traditional techniques to produce hybrid varieties, which were subsequently made available to the farmers in Bumbwini. The group planted and harvested the new cassava plants, and evaluated them according to their own criteria, such as their adaptation to the soil and climate, their resistance to the viral disease spread by the white fly and, particularly, their sensible qualities: color, taste and texture. Subsequently, after an initial selection, the farmers took the best plants and crossbred them in order to develop a new hybrid all by themselves. Finally, when the resulting variety presented the desired features, they called it *Tu mwambia nini*, an expression in Swahili that might be roughly translated as *What do you think?* Obviously, this name carries a good dose of humor, and expresses the pride that the farmers feel when they share their collective creation with others: 'what do you think about it?'

I like to think that this is an act of poetry made by many. And that Bumbwini is, like many other places in the world, an open-air laboratory.

The new variety of cassava developed in Bumbwini was the fruit of an open and truly participatory breeding process. Such processes are significantly different from conventional breeding, as they involve collaborative efforts. Testing and selection take place in farms rather than agricultural stations or industrial facilities, key decisions are taken jointly by farmers and professional breeders, and the process can be implemented simultaneously and independently at a large number of locations. Furthermore, farmers may multiply promising hybrids in village-based seed production systems, thus making faster progress toward seed release and multiplication of varieties that are acceptable by farmers (IAASTD, 2009). Even though such participatory approaches in agricultural research have been criticized on the basis that they lack robust methodologies and seldom produce effective outcomes (Ashby, 1990; Bentley, 1994), these approaches might also be judged on the measure by which they reinforce counter-hegemonic values, such as reciprocity. In truly participatory processes, such as collaborative breeding, farmers and scientists may become immersed in cross-community, reciprocal processes of diagnosis, design, experimentation and feedback in which the power to control research is shared

equally. Furthermore, participatory breeding may also be understood as a significant effort to contextualize techniques and methodologies, contrasting with decontextualized solutions, such as industrial hybrid seeds or genetically modified crops.

The *Tu Mwambia nini* variety of cassava developed by the farmers in Zanzibar may be adopted by anyone who asks for it, without having to pay royalties or intellectual property rights: it is free and open source.



Figure 1: Cassava farmers working at the 'open-air laboratory' of Bumbwini, Zanzibar.

Photo by Sauti ya wakulima [CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0]

## 2. Pirates.

It is precisely the notion of intellectual property what may cause processes such as the one I have just described to run aground. A few months before this text was written, the national legislation on plant breeders of Zanzibar was approved, opening up the path for Tanzania to become a member of the UPOV (Saez, 2014). The UPOV (International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants) is an organization dedicated to the protection of intellectual rights related to new varieties of plants obtained through different processes, including traditional hybridization. According to their own statements, the organization seek to promote the development of new plant varieties for the general benefit of the people<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, it has been noted that the UPOV is actually an organization specifically created to protect the interests of large global corporations that develop and

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1 Statement retrieved from the UPOV website: <http://www.upov.int/portal/index.html.en>. Accessed 23 March 2016.

sell seeds obtained through industrial hybridization or genetic engineering, the usage of which may erode or even destroy the rights of small farmers (Saez, 2015). Tanzanian farmers are worried, and rightly so: the rules that their country will adopt if it is accepted as a member of the UPOV will drastically limit their rights to save and reuse the seeds from their own fields, access protected varieties, or independently develop and disseminate new varieties, such as *Tu Mwambia nini*.

In a study published in 2009, Olivier de Schutter, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, concluded that monopolistic practices associated to intellectual property rights could potentially cause a stronger dependency on expensive agricultural inputs, and therefore increase the risk of pushing entire communities of small-scale farmers into a spiral of debt (de Schutter, 2009). Those practices constitute a system which puts the interests of global agroindustrial corporations before those of small farmers, jeopardizes their traditional seed storage and exchange systems (and, consequently, the social and cultural systems upon which they are based), and reduces biodiversity in favor of a commodified monoculture model in which only the most profitable crops may persist. In contrast to the United States of America, where 98 per cent of farmers regularly buy seeds, 90 per cent of Tanzanian farmers reuse the seeds saved from previous harvests. Thus, it is not too difficult to tell where have the models imposed by the UPOV originated, and who they will really benefit. It is yet another instance of a decontextualized model exported by capitalists who, safeguarded behind the *unquestionable* notion of intellectual property, assume that the rest of the world will have to adapt to it. Or die.

However, it is possible to say that those who supposedly defend property (in the case of seeds, communal property) are its true violators. Corporations that develop hybrid or genetically modified seeds start by accessing the local germoplasm, which is usually free from royalties. By modifying the properties of a particular seed through industrial hybridization or by the addition of a gene, they claim patents on plants which previously were freely accessible, with the clear purpose of selling them back to small-scale farmers, often at prohibitive costs. This practice has a very clear and explicit name: *biopiracy*.

### **Interlude: a word (or two) about poetics and poetry.**

'*Everything is connected*' is probably one of the most popular and often repeated catchphrases of our times. But should we assume that connections exist between all things by default, and therefore take them for granted? Well, maybe not. According to Graham

Harman, *everything is not connected*: things actually withdraw from contact with each other, and thus contact and connection are matters to be explained, rather than obvious facts to be presupposed (Harman, 2013). *Things* such as the genes of cassava plants, corporations, white flies or Tanzanian farmers remain disconnected from each other, inside their private vacuums of reality: their essence is profoundly unknowable. Yet, occasionally, they do make contact, and those cases require explanation.

Could art provide the tools for the task of explaining the interconnectedness of things?

Heidegger asked us to think of things from the standpoint of art as *poiesis*, that is, the process of disclosing the essence of things and bringing it forth into appearance (Heidegger, 1977). From such perspective, the poetic explanation of the world, and the connections that may emerge between the things that exist in it, could actually be regarded as a way to produce knowledge, to awaken things from their withdrawn sleep. The connections that arise between the genes of cassava plants and the farmers of Bumbwini, for example, could be explained poetically, from the perspective of art. Therefore, art might indeed become a workshop of experimentation and study of the actually existing connections and relations of causality, as Timothy Morton suggested (Morton, 2012). According to Morton, to study a thing is not to study its meaning alone, but rather to see how causality itself operates. A thing, a white fly for instance, directly intervenes in reality in a causal way and, at the same time, is traversed with meanings: to study the white fly is to perform a sort of *relational archaeology*. To poetically explain the white fly, moreover, is to perform a nonviolent political act, in which its coexistence (connection) with other beings may be brought forth and fully traced.

But how do we poetically explain the connections of small things with bigger ones, such as corporations and climate change? As Bruno Latour asked, '*is there a way to bridge the distance between the scale of the phenomena we hear about and the tiny Umwelt<sup>2</sup> inside which we witness, as if we were a fish inside its bowl, an ocean of catastrophes that are supposed to unfold?*' (Latour, 2011:2) Poetics, and in particular poetry, may become a strategy to build that bridge. Latour argued that romantic poetry, with its edifying sermons, has fed for too long a sense of disconnection with nature, by singing praises to its unfathomable wonders. However, if we now want to raise our sense of moral commitment in order to face the challenges posed by the collapse of ecosystems, we have no choice but to transform poetry so that, instead of creating an abysmal distance between humans and

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2 The German term *Umwelt* may be roughly translated as a *self-centered world*.

other entities, it may help us to explore connections and disconnections. We need to invent a renewed poetic form that may help us explain the assemblage of contradictory entities that, as Latour claimed, have to be composed together.

### **3. Bridges towards common roads.**

It seems that one of the major battlefronts of the 21st century will be the fight of the people against the abuses committed in the name of intellectual property. Perhaps such fight might not yield the best results if it seeks to abolish intellectual property altogether, but rather if it strives to attenuate its reach and power, which have increasingly gotten out of hand in the last decades. As demonstrated by the case of seed patents, the defense of intellectual property rights has served to justify some of the most predatory practices of contemporary capitalism. However, in the battlefront against the destructive notions of property, it might be possible to see a historical opportunity for farmers and artists to join forces in a common cause. I am specifically thinking of those artists who incorporate digital technologies into their work, and do so not simply as mere users, but rather as actors who are capable of transforming and redefining them. In an almost natural way, the controversies related to intellectual property tend to take a central role in the practices of those artists. What I have described here regarding farmers, seeds and patents should sound familiar to them, since they often turn the fight for free and open source software into a crucial aspect of their methods. Open source software is not only about fighting the hegemony of the Microsofts, Apples and Googles of this world, but also about producing and managing a commons, about giving people the power to shape technology in ways which may radically differ from those dictated by systems based on consumerism. In the process of creating, using and sharing open source software, artists throughout the world have played a significant role. Nevertheless, I think that most artists have yet to carry out and internalize a rather radical transformation of their worldviews and contexts, in which walled gardens still abound.

### **4. What can artists do?**

In Suzi Gablik's book, *Conversations before the end of time*, James Hillman talked in an interview about learning to refocus our attention from ourselves and onto the world. Further into the conversation Gablik said:

*'In our culture, the notion of art being a service to anything is an anathema. Service has been totally deleted from our view point. Aesthetics doesn't serve anything but itself and*

*its own ends.*' (Gablik, 1997:196)

Under the light of this conversation, it may be possible to ask: '*can art be transformed so it may be of service? And what ends might it serve?*'

Mexican artist Pablo Helguera set out to define a curriculum to teach theories and practices of socially engaged art to fine arts students. He identified a new set of skills to be learned by those students, and the issues they must address when dealing with social practice. But, as Helguera suggested, perhaps what's most important is to overcome the prevailing cult of the individual artist, which becomes problematic for those whose goal is to work with others, generally in collaborative projects with democratic ideals (Helguera, 2011).

Overcoming the romantic image of the artist as a *lone genius* might imply that a socially engaged art practitioner will need to give up control of her work, to a certain degree, if she wishes to go beyond mere symbolic representation. The artist would thus become a sort of instigator: a coordinator of projects that attempt to positively transform the lives of those who participate in them, by allowing the participants themselves to reshape those projects' goals and methodologies.

We live in urgent times, beyond doubt. Looming global challenges, such as anthropogenic climate change, radically cancel the luxury of being useless, of not doing anything, of not becoming involved. This open call for compromise includes the artist who, as any other citizen, may choose to use her abilities to help in preventing a catastrophe by imagining other possible worlds, in which alternative social and political orders may take shape and become new pathways for our daily lives.

In my opinion, the artists who still embrace the idea that art should only serve its own ends will become those who play the lyre while our world burns. In contrast, the works of artists who choose to become engaged with the complexities of the world might resonate with the spirit of what Jeremy Deller meant when he said that he went '*from being an artist who makes things to being an artist who makes things happen*<sup>3</sup>.' The symbolic potencies of art may intentionally be applied beyond mere representation as strategies of emancipation from the dominant order: as Chantal Mouffe suggested, such practices might contribute to a counter-hegemonic challenge to the dominant political regime by acknowledging the

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3 Quoted by Nato Thompson in (Thompson, 2012:17)

centrality of values in its construction (Mouffe, 2014). Therefore, art which is aware of the hegemonic values in politics might attempt to shift and transform them into alternative ones (again, reciprocity might be an example) through emancipatory strategies. It is no longer a time to symbolically represent the wonders of transformation: it is a time to make it happen.

### **5. Solidarity and symbiosis.**

Franco Berardi proposed a new role for artists: that of reconstructing the conditions for social solidarity (Berardi, 2012). Such a role would directly oppose competition, a value that may be found at the core of markets, particularly the market of self-serving art. Solidarity, Berardi wrote, should not be regarded as political or ethical program, but as pure aesthetic pleasure. And, if we recognize that the solidary perception of *the other* may become an aesthetic process which, in turn, might lead to an ethical reconstruction of our common life, the aesthetic pleasure advocated by Berardi may become a springboard from which to jump and make things happen.

However, I believe that the looming ecological challenges raise the need to extend such solidarity to our relationship with the totality of entities that exist in our world. In order to illustrate the ongoing ecological drama, Michel Serres offered an interpretation of the painting *Duel with cudgels*, by Francisco de Goya (Serres, 2004). In the painting, we see two young men fighting each other to death. They are equally armed, so it is impossible to guess who might win. The result of the duel is, therefore, uncertain. However, what the painting does reveal, if we look closely, is that both fighters are standing knee-deep in quicksand. Serres noted that it doesn't really matter who will win: quicksand, the *invisible* third combatant, will silently end the duel by drowning the two of them. For too long, we have considered *nature* as the outside of culture; as a mere scenario which, in fact, has become a convulsive and unstable one thanks to our neglect. Thus, we cannot go forward without establishing a new pact of solidarity with nature, or what Serres called a *Natural Contract*.

*'The Earth speaks to humans in terms of forces, links and interactions, and those elements are sufficient for establishing a contract with her.'* (Serres, 2004:71)

Symbiosis or death.



## 6. Delicate empiricism.

How can artists help to reestablish the bonds of solidarity between humans and natural non-human entities?

Following the observations and scientific studies of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, it may be possible to realize the extent to which the phenomena that surround us are far richer than the theories we elaborate to explain them. To understand these phenomena, perception must unfold as a sort of conversation with that which is perceived, as a twofold sensible exchange that, slowly, may take us towards their genuine knowledge and understanding:

*'When in the exercise of his powers of observation man undertakes to confront the world of nature, he will at first experience a tremendous compulsion to bring what he finds there under his control. Before long, however, these objects will thrust themselves upon him with such force that he, in turn, must feel the obligation to acknowledge their power and pay homage to their effects<sup>4</sup>.'*

This is the first of the folds that Goethe referred to: the impossibility of immediately dominating that which appears before us in a docile, desirable way. Let's see what the second fold consists of:

*'When this mutual interaction becomes evident he will make a discovery which, in a double sense, is limitless; among the objects he will find many different forms of existence and modes of change, a variety of relationships livingly interwoven; in himself, on the other hand, a potential for infinite growth through constant adaptation of his sensibilities and judgment to new ways of acquiring knowledge and responding with action<sup>5</sup>.'*

Observation brings great rewards, if one is capable of going beyond first impressions. A rich field opens up here for artists, whose work within this context might be that of creating tools for the dialogic understanding of nature that Goethe called a *delicate empiricism*.

## 7. Phonation devices.

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4 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, quoted in (Miller, 1995:61)

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I would like to add to these fragments the notion of *phonation devices*, as proposed by Latour (Latour, 2013). In his view, novel *phonation devices* might be invented as essential means for the realization of a truly ecological politics: something that, according to Latour, is yet to be seen. His argument may be summarized in the following way: the modern exercise of political power is based upon a vision in which the world is divided into two chambers or compartments. One of them is occupied by society, that is, a human mass imprisoned inside a cavern from which it can only know reality through the confusing shadows projected on its walls. According to Latour, we stay inside that suffocating cave, but not by choice. And in the second compartment there is nature: there lies the silent truth unknown to the inhabitants of the cave. Those who have the possibility of freely moving between the two compartments will be the ones who may exercise political power within the bicameral regime. Those who venture outside the cavern of society and into that of nature, only to return and reveal its *truths*; those who may venture outside again and again in order to modify the natural order, rip off its fruits and bring them back to placate the prisoners' desires: they are the ones in power. They are the *wise men* of our times, they are the ones who possess a *title* that allows them to exit and reenter the cavern.

But what would happen if this bicameral regime didn't exist? What would happen if we simply and plainly refused to enter into that horrible cavern? What if the task of *knowing* the world stopped being a privilege of the wise title-holders, and became our collective right, whether artists or farmers, armed with nothing but our delicate empiricism? Maybe the political power based on controlled transit, and the dominion of one compartment at the expenses of the other, would crumble.

Latour offered a vision of ecological politics as a world without divisions between nature and culture. It is a broad vision, complete with a parliament in which non-humans could voice out or come under consultation, just like any human citizen. Can we imagine a tree explaining its reasons before a court, making her opinions, demands and aspirations known? The judges would be busy contrasting the tree's arguments with those of the river that feeds her, with those of the fishes that swim in the river, and with those of the families of humans and other animals that live nearby. Does this sound like a fairy tale? It might. But Latour takes this vision quite seriously and therefore proposes that, if one day we wish to materialize such a dialogic collective of humans and non-humans, we will have to invent the necessary phonation devices that will allow us to hear and understand the apparent muteness of natural entities.

Inventing phonation devices to construct a parliament of entities: could this be a mission for artists?

**Almost there: Matsuo Basho, a frog, and a word or two about translation.**

But, when we will finally be able to hear the voices of trees, rivers and fish, how will we translate them into words that we can understand? Will we be constrained to *anthropomorphize* those voices, no matter how hard we try not to? We probably will, simply because we are what we are. As Morton put it, “*it is impossible for me to peel myself away from the totality of my phenomenological being.*” (Morton, 2012:207) And, just as we cannot avoid *anthropomorphizing* everything, so trees, rivers, fish and, in fact, all entities constantly *translate* other entities in their own terms. Here is Morton again, entering the field of poetry as he offers examples of how entities translate each other:

*'My back maps out a small backpomorphic slice of this tree that I'm leaning on. The strings of the wind harp stringpomorphize the wind. The wind windpomorphizes the temperature differentials between the mountains and the flat land. The mountains are shellpomorphic piles of chalk. A nail is an anthropomorphic piece of iron. An iron deposit is a bacteriapomorphic rendering of bacteria metabolism.'* (Morton, 2012:207)

Entities translate other entities in their own terms. That's it! In the parliament of humans and non-humans, phonation devices will not spit out a single, universally valid translation, but millions of them: an explosion of voices and meanings, all of them equally vibrant. How will our words dance around the poetry of trees? And how will we agree? Perhaps poetry will make all those streams of mutual translation coalesce into an ocean of coexistence. Or will it be a pond?

Let's take the haikus of Matsuo Basho, for example. Basho's haikus (as well as those by other authors) do not provide explanations about the world, but rather offer a phenomenological account of how things translate each other. It might be possible to read and study them as poetic explorations of the connections that exist between different entities and, if we do so, they might become tools to explore causality: to understand the subtle mechanics of *intertranslation*.

Subtlety. The haikus that Basho wrote throughout his life simply point towards immanent links as they suggest connection and causality through flat juxtapositions of fragments of

time, entities, emotions and places, presented in no particular order, without an apparent ontological hierarchy.

Poetry is well-accustomed to the coexistence of diverse translations which, nevertheless, converge into a single poem. To illustrate, here is Basho's famous frog haiku:

古池や  
蛙飛び込む  
水の音

This haiku has been traced by countless calligraphers, engraved on stones, painted on walls of buildings and translated into English by several humans<sup>6</sup>, some of which are quite well-known:

The old pond;  
A frog jumps in —  
The sound of the water.  
(Robert Aitken)

An ancient pond!  
With a sound from the water  
Of the frog as it plunges in.  
(William George Aston)

Listen! A frog  
Jumping into the stillness  
Of an ancient pond!  
(Dorothy Briton)

There is the old pond!  
Lo, into it jumps a frog:  
hark, water's music!  
(John Bryan)

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<sup>6</sup> All versions of Matsuo Basho's frog haiku were retrieved from [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Frog\\_Poem](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Frog_Poem). Accessed 23 March 2016.

The old pond  
A frog jumped in,  
Kerplunk!  
(Allen Ginsberg)

Old pond - frogs jumped in - sound of water  
(Lafcadio Hearn)

pond  
frog  
plop!  
(James Kirkup)

An old pond —  
The sound  
Of a diving frog.  
(Kenneth Rexroth)

The old pond, ah!  
A frog jumps in:  
The water's sound.  
(D. T. Suzuki)

The old pond,  
A frog jumps in:  
Plop!  
(Alan Watts)

And here is my version, which I humbly add to this list:

A frog jumped forth!  
Out of the cavern, into the pond:  
Crystal sparks.

*Tu mwambia nini?*

## **8. Entrance to the open air laboratory.**

Through these loosely connected fragments, I have attempted to trace different roads which might converge and lead to an immense and rich open air laboratory. I have suggested paths for the common struggles of artists and farmers, which have to do with a deep reconsideration of the notion of property, the strengthening of solidarity and the direct access to the knowledge about the world. I have proposed poetry and translation as open-source tools for walking towards such horizon. However, I do not intend to exclude those who do not call themselves *artists* or *farmers* from these roads: the entrance to the open field is free, and does not require titles or labels.

We have left the cavern behind. We are all farmers. We are all artists and poets. We all are seed, we all are fruit. Hear our cry: '*Symbiosis or death!*'

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