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at the end of the world: museums

Teaching Team

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Img. 01 Interior of the restoration spaces at the Ethnographic Museum, end of the 1970's

This studio strives against modern processes of erasure. The celebration of the industrial world, frequently termed as development, is in many ways unsustainable and by no means a universal measure of progress. Unacknowledged exploitations and appropriations promoted by modernism participated and participate in the erasure of indigenous and localized identities in the name of capitalist, extractivist and neocolonial values hidden under the guise of universalism. Institutions and architecture have often been agents of their own isolation, neglecting nature, culture and human lives. They have been and are complicit in reinforcing class, racial and cultural segregation. Institutions and disciplines inherit from imperial violence, and continue to reproduce it in hiding their responsibility by the production of ignorance.

The current world order is only possible because of the exploitation, impoverishment and organized underdevelopment of others through global material flows, globalized labour, raw materials extraction and control. Capitalism has had catastrophic consequences on the planet, economies, and people. Capitalistic institutions created further intangible borders establishing the concept of "Global North" and "Global South" that surmounted the geographical frontiers and imposed the control of the first on the latter. This divides, borders and inequalities are equally active in cities of the "Global North", through grating uneven access to resources, institutions, health and representation according to gender, race, class and other identities or belongings. Responsibilities for threatening the Global Majority with economic and institutional systems by the Global Minority remain earthed. Part of not being complicit in this cycle is for the Global Minority to consider becoming hyperlocal (local practices, local vulnerabilities).

The Studio's mission aims for a „Decolonization from/of the Global Minority" by breaking down the superiority complex and repositioning the institution and context in which we work, in order to better situate the students' perception within a long, entangled and multilayered understanding of our place in the world. Through Research, we aim to contribute to a „Decolonization from/of the Global Majority" by taking steps to acknowledge the dispossession of knowledge and create thresholds toward their restitutions.

Imagining architecture, institutions, and our societies "at the end of the World," proposes to follow Denise Ferreira da Silva at the end of this World, as to refer to worlds in which we work collectively toward the dismantlement and transformation of the world system which perpetuates inequalities, racism and colonial legacies. Imagining at the end of the World also invites us in an epistemological rupture with Eurocentrism, acknowledging, listening to and working with alternative ways of conceiving, designing and experiencing. Imagining at the end of the World goes beyond linear and colonial conceptions of time and history, rejecting the idea that non-imperial and non-colonial ways of thinking and doing never existed, making kin with pasts, presents and futurities.

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Imagining at the end of the World means standing in solidarity and dismantling together oppressive systems. Imagining at the end of the World urges us to transform our societies' relation to nature, land and people in times of environmental collapse. Imagining at the end of the World is answering to Mark Fischer's "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism," by engaging in imagining at the end of this World, not as a distant desired utopia, but as an actual practice of collective emancipation.

The semester's topic is an exercise in practicing a decolonization of knowledge, and of the architectural practice mindset. It relies on the notion of intersectional sustainability, which requires decolonizing processes, materials, labour, and practices within global mechanisms of architectural production. The objective is to develop projects that move away from politics of exploitation and imagine positive contributions for people and the planet.

This semester, we will question Museums as institutions, buildings and practices. They are places where the relationship between individual and collective memory emerges in the process of functionalizing cultural memory in memory institutions (Lang 2007, 62). Through the 19th and 20th centuries, Museums have been active agents of colonization. They contain works of art from all over the world, and many from formerly colonized lands. Many objects from their collection do possess violent pasts, and are today raising the attention of the publics. Effectively, these objects' histories can today hardly be neutralized by scenographies and institutional politics. Western Museums around the globe are under pressure, and their politics, practices and spaces are urged to be redesigned to propose non-colonial and non-imperial relations to the objects. What would that process look like? What are the implications for the museum and its collections? Are the objects the actual museums' raison d'etre? Does the urgency of repatriation/rematriation not mean to be entirely redesigned? How else can we envisage culture without consuming it in that exploitative form?

This semester, we will address sustainability and heritage within institutional and architectural practices. Through research and design, we will navigate and propose provisional and situated answers to the following problematics: How can we denaturalize the uneven access to objects and knowledge? How do we deal with these objects and their violent histories if they are not rematriated/repatriated, and which traces to keep of them when they are restituted? What spaces, uses, needs, and practices emerge from these politics, ethics and reparations? How do we think of spaces for restitution, repair, and what is beyond repair? The return of ill-acquired objects will eventually be inevitable as evident from the current turmoil surrounding the question. Imagining what it would mean allows us to be armed with positive solutions for something new and engaging rather than allowing fear to maintain us on the wrong side of history. As we imagine a world several years in the future where Museums no longer own these objects in their collections, it begs the question: What are the futurities of museums at the End of the World?

The studio offers the opportunity to work within the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich and the Museum Rietberg. Both include historical buildings and gardens embedded in the urban landscape. The first being a public Institution founded for research, and a Museum run by the city of Zurich collecting non-European objects for the second. The program will reshape the role of the two Institutions in their context. The design response will deal with the contents (the objects of the exhibitions) and the containers (the buildings and gardens).

Students can find support within the Theoretical Reader which contains more insights about the main topics of decolonizing knowledge, decolonizing architecture, architectural heritage and memory policies, local know-how, and intersectional sustainability.