

Alice Lagaay

## Vestigia Nulla Retorsum – “Leave No Trace”

As those who are alive today steadily awaken to the emerging global awareness of the Anthropocene – a geological time interval defined by the impact of humans on the planet and its ecosphere – they must familiarize themselves with an increasing flurry of new vocabulary: **Trash vortices**, **Anthroposore**, **glasstic load**... a host of new terms are rapidly entering the **desecration phrasebook**, introducing words and concepts that can be drawn upon to aptly describe, and thus help one to better grasp, the multiple ominous realities of the planet in the age of humans. The main novelty of these terms is that they describe phenomena of the *natural* landscape that are in fact not at all given by nature but the result of human collective action: **plastic soup** – those giant islands of rubbish that swirl in ocean gyres – is the direct result, accumulated over time, of our modern mode of living, the visible mark left over by a consumer society that functions by conscious suppression (active disregard or feigned oblivion) of the direct and indirect consequences of its peoples’ urge to satisfy purchasable desires: Somehow one’s perceived *need* for whatever the fleeting object is that is sealed in plastic wrapping

(from child's toy to cheese) still mostly trumps any concern for the durable waste that it produces. In this regard we manifestly could not care less for the traces we leave.

This carelessness seems all the more bewildering insofar as concern for one's *individual* legacy, interest in the mark that one might leave beyond the short period of one's existence, indeed the desire to leave a mark at all, would seem to be a motivating factor in many areas of human activity: why else, in the end, do people seek to procreate? Why are pyramids and monuments erected, or memoirs written, and secret journals kept? Why do lovers etch hearts with their initials into the bark of forest trees? Why are messages in bottles found decades after being thrown into the water – if it weren't all for a human fascination with the idea that something of one's individual self might persist beyond the limits of one's own time on earth? That a trace of one's existence might be left... and one day found. The drive to record one's *having been here*, be it deliberately through the ubiquitous tagging of (paradoxically anonymous) initials in public loos (*I woz here*), the taking of a selfie in front of a cultural site, or the writing of an ambitious novel, arguably boils down to the simple need to extend the impact of one's life beyond the realm of one's own limited sense of time and awareness, the desire to project a readable trace into the future.

Seen in this light, what individual humans likely find most disturbing in the face of the Anthropocene is not so much the fact that our collective noxious waste really has left what is probably now an indelible mark on the landscape of the planet (although that *should* be what we find distressing). Rather, it is

the fact that our individuality – each person's unique signature, the trace of our distinct identities, the singular narrative or our particular lives – is not only rendered invisible; it is completely obliterated in the ugly mire of *fatberg* (the congealed mass formed by the combination of flushed non-biodegradable solid matter, congealed grease or cooking fat that has been found to block ageing sewer systems in Western cities). Could this be why we find planetary scale pollution so hard to deal with? Because it rubs our noses in precisely what we do not want to have to admit, which is that our human individual lives, when scaled to the global, are actually quite unremarkable, quite ordinary and banal, and in terms of the combined material debris that they produce, far worse than indifferent: we are toxic.

Gradual realization of the gross destructive power of human life in industrialised consumer based societies has given rise not just to a new vocabulary to describe the impact of this negative force on the ecosystems and climate of the planet but also to a bustle of movements, strains of activism and new modes of thinking and of life aimed at curtailing our combined destructive influence by reducing our waste, Co<sup>2</sup> emissions as well as the suffering inflicted on sentient beings most obviously by intensive farming. These movements range from the mild and reasonable to the more radical, far-fetched and counter-intuitive. Becoming a vegetarian or a vegan, for example (if one wasn't yet one to begin with), requires quite straight forward and relatively easy to apply changes in one's daily habits which, when scaled up, would considerably reduce both the amount of Co<sup>2</sup> emissions produced and the heinous suffering of animals brought about by industrial farming. Far more radical – and a bit

niche – is the thinking of an online community of anti-natalists who in their most extreme guise go by the name of **efilists**. Efilism is based on the word **life** spelt backwards, the idea being that one might collectively un-wind, un-do or de-create the devastating effects of humanity – by self-sacrifice. Those who identify as efilists believe that life itself is inherently destructive and negative, the cause of far more suffering than good, and that it should by no means be reproduced. On the contrary, the best thing anyone can do, so says the efilist, is to voluntarily end one's life in order to save the world and alleviate pain. This may well amount to muddled thinking, after all, when translated into German, the retrograde of *Leben* (life) spells *Nebel* – fog. Moreover, the idea that one should seek *not* just not to add to destruction and misery, but that through self-sacrifice one might *undo* the suffering of others is neither new – it echoes practices of atonement, indulgence and martyrdom in many religions – nor does it address the underlying blind individualism that is at the core of the pollution problem. In fact it underscores and inflates the importance of the individual, when what is really needed is imagination of an alternative to thinking in terms of reproducible singulars.

A few years ago I was invited by an artist collective to participate in a series of meetings under the heading **Lying Fallow**. The experiment involved 30 people spending a day together on three separate occasions (in spring, summer and autumn) to collectively and deliberately *do nothing*, to lie fallow. The challenge involved receding the habits usually associated with encountering others in such contexts: we did not introduce ourselves by name, say who we were, where we came

from or what our job titles were; our being together did not rely on communicating labelable identities; it was borne, instead, of an attentiveness to the sheer fact of our assembly and its deliberate absence of purpose. It required careful attendance to a form of silence – or the absence of trace – giving way to a perception that the leaving of a trace does not necessarily imply an experience fully had or a life well lived. Those who partook in the collective experience are connected by a rare form of kinship: we have witnessed the reverberations in our respective lives of the power of a collective silence. The quality of this silence does not amount to a refusal to participate nor is it simply “keep calm and carry on”. Its political – perhaps even ecological – potency resides in an ethos whereby it is possible to experience a form of being that does not need to be validated by means of a retrospectively readable sign. Imagine a collective that does not acquiesce, but also holds up no banner and has nothing to sell. There is a place of being without purpose or characteristic where the absent evokes the possible. Or as the motto of another secret society would have it, *Vestigia Nulla Retorsum*: Never a Step Backward, Leave No Trace.

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