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«Inside my heart is breaking /
My makeup may be flaking
But my smile, still, stays on» (1)

NORMALIZING THE CRISIS? NOTES ON ONLINE TEACHING

Charlotte Malterre-Barthes

Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, born 1977, is an architect, scholar, and Assistant Professor of Urban Design at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. As the Principal of the urban design agency OMNIBUS, she directed the MAS Urban Design at the chair of Marc Angélil at ETH Zurich (2014 — 2019), and holds a doctoral degree from ETH Zurich on the effects of the political economy of food on the built environment, case study Egypt. In her function as Co-curator of the 12th Architecture Biennale of São Paulo, she co-authored *Eileen Gray: A House under the Sun* (London, Nobrow), *Some Haunted Spaces in Singapore* (Edition Patrick Frey) and *Housing Cairo: The (Informal) Response* (Berlin, Ruby Press). She is a founding member of the Parity Group and of the Parity Front, activist networks dedicated to improving gender equality in architecture.

In March 2020, during the first weeks of the coronavirus pandemic in Europe, as many countries entered confinement, Bruno Latour's questionnaire made the rounds, based on the assumption that «if everything is stopped, everything can be questioned, bent, selected, sorted, interrupted for good or accelerated.»[2] Truth is, the architecture school never really stopped. In fact, most universities across the world kept operating, albeit online. As physical premises and campuses were shutting down one after the other, educational institutions, while acknowledging the disruption brought to working routines and to personal lives in an avalanche of remorseful emails, precipitated the move to remote teaching.

Teaching a discipline grounded in spatiality in a virtual arena did not appear incongruous to the decision-makers preoccupied by the continuity of architectural education. Rather than embracing the salvific pause offered by the lockdown to think and question our modus operandi as advocated by Latour, an increasingly triumphalist narrative accompanied the shift to digital space — a shift turning perennial as months pass. The unprecedented adjustments regarding teaching and research activities focused on continuance at all costs. Critical questions about the profession remained largely unaddressed, while an immense effort was and still is poured into maintaining the status quo: studios should be completed, lectures attended, exams taken. The equivalent happened in industry: amidst the pandemic, construction sites never closed.

Across academia, the emerging and current discourse touts the opportunities such a crisis presents for exploring new ways of working—but never whether to build or not to build, nor structural issues in education, injustice and inequalities, or the very fact that our profession is a key agent to climate change. Worse, moving teaching online is treated as a disruptive yet facile spatial relocation. As it becomes the new normal in many schools, it is crucial to openly bring about its impediments, from fair access to technology, bandwidth inequality, and online discrimination to name only a few. The haste with which we have relented to technology for teaching and learning should not keep us from reflecting on how architecture, as a practice and in its education, can be critically examined — toward a constructive response.

I EVERYONE CAN SEE YOUR BEDROOM

Clothes racks, home plants, messy shelves, posters, hanging guitars, kitchen wares, make-up tables, sometimes strolling cats and curious children, or intrusive roommates: the backgrounds of students and colleagues during design studio critiques from March to May 2020 displayed the intimacy of domestic lives in an unprecedented and crude way. These indiscrete windows revealed as much as they hid, for under the name of each participant, not all interiors were visible. Zoom, the previously unheard-of program for virtual communication that became an overnight hit, offers the option to display a fictitious background — a forest, a bookshelf, a city skyline, a Venetian painting, anything you see fit. I, for instance, chose an interior shot of the spatial station MIR. It served several agendas: it exposed the work of its designer, the virtually unknown soviet architect Galina Balashova; possibly



Windows of Alienation, anonymised screenshots of Zoom conversations taken across several architecture schools' classes from March to May, 2020

signaling a left-inclined political sensibility, but also stood an allegory of isolation within disordered technology; as well as a metaphor for existential anguish — deorbited, MIR is a defunct space station, its last remains plunged into the waters of the South Pacific Ocean in Spring 2001. But mostly it removed from view my own domestic interior, a feeble attempt to resist the school's intrusion into my private sphere. Some of the other participants in Zoom calls saw no need in hiding what seemed to be an office within a home, Virginia Woolf's legendary and feminist «room of one's own.» [3] Going beyond gender to address social class, the disparity between those with a space dedicated to their individual work removed from the domestic realm, and those with a bedroom as a space for everything else became blatant: Both privacy and undisrupted thinking are privileges. While on-campus premises offer roughly the same material working conditions ... for every student, and a collective office for professors and assistants, the university@home cannot recreate this equalizing process — at least not spatially. Here for all to see, a fundamental flaw emerges: we are not equally equipped to face remote education.

II I'LL BE ON WHATSAPP IF YOU NEED ME

In the name of efficiency, continuity, and productivity, digital communication technology entered in full force architecture education during the pandemic. Virtual studio pedagogy, remote master classes, distant reading seminars and

team meetings saw us embracing electronic media and systems of modern material culture in a split second. After all, these were already there, waiting for us to fully surrender. From video conferencing and chat applications (Whatsapp, Skype, Zoom, Facetime), to team meeting programs (Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, Whereby, Remo) to the design exchanges interfaces (Miro, OneNote), discussion over exchange of drawings, images as PDF or JPG files coming from Rhino, Illustrator, Photoshop, etc., replaced the pedagogical social interaction schools relied on to educate the designers of tomorrow. In many studios, a conversation on the brief, the form, and the outputs of the semester took place, with changes made to adjust to the situation. Often, these adjustments led to an increased workload both for teachers and students as new expectations (i.e. videos, virtual models, texts, websites) replacing previous ones rather than leading to a discussion on a possible evolution of teaching structures. Such progress could see more collaborative processes rather than one-directional formats, or explore the potential of synchronous / asynchronous approaches. When seeking inspiring practices, many lessons can be learned from disabled people using online infrastructures for decades. Entire communities have engaged in defining methods and protocols «for remote access to protests, classrooms, doctors' offices, public meetings, and other events» in the most collegial and democratic way possible. [4] There is a bitter irony in that disabled people have demanded and been denied forms of remote teaching all these years, being told of its unfeasibility, only to see it implemented within days when urgency hit. Yet, «it is crip techno-science and disabled ingenuity that has made remote participation possible,» a fact able bodies with good Wi-Fi connections must recognize, as what seemed a distant reality a few months ago has now become fact. [5] Of course, there is a flip side: online teaching has been found guilty of perpetuating inequalities and discriminatory practices. Gender and racial bias is exacerbated by remote technology. A study conducted in the United States by the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research found that online, «professors ... are 94% more likely to respond to a ... white male than by any other race-gender combination.» [6] This is possibly related to a structural issue: if faculty is white and male, because of implicit bias, like-minded individuals are mentored and rewarded. Thus online teaching simply replicates the disadvantages and discriminations suffered by racial minorities and womxn in other settings.

III MY INTERNET CRASHED

He was in the middle of his final studio presentation and suddenly disappeared from the screen. When he came back, the student apologized: «My Internet crashed, I'm now using my phone connection» as his assistant mumbled «technological incompetence.» Another unsurprising trait of our times is laid bare by the rushed transfer to remote teaching: our absolute — and perhaps misplaced faith in technology. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway argues we suffer from «a comic faith in technofixes, whether secular or religious: technology will somehow come to the rescue of its naughty but very clever children.» [7] An explanation to the technocratic belief of schools of architecture may be found in a disciplinary and literal proximity. In Europe,

many architecture departments are rooted in technological universities (TU Delft, TU Vienna, TU Berlin, ETH Zurich, EPF Lausanne). Even if at odds with their main institution, these schools are embedded in a system of ideological governance where scientific and technical knowledge rules. However, digital literacy is not a given within architecture schools, and this lack of expertise emerges now: a belief without real competence, or the insufficient teaching of these competences. The assumption that all students and faculty are properly equipped with the necessary skills to operate the myriad of online teaching tools existing as well as a home computer and a sound internet connection might be incorrect. Schools fuel the nefarious faith that technology can save us from losing our old selves, ignoring the inevitable technical, personal, and infrastructural obstacles that come along. Truth is, the pseudo-smoothness of the change keeps us from entering the era of intense questioning that we should be undertaking. «We are being enlisted into normalizing the crisis. ... There is no fucking academic continuity. The most we can do is teach critical analysis of what the crisis has exposed. But we'll have to do so with love and care, not redesigned grading schemes and endless zoom» wrote Ananya Roy, Professor of Inequality and Democracy at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, in a tweet on March 16, 2020. Yet, this redesign — and the endless zooms, are precisely happening.

IV ONLINE TEACHING AND CAPITALISM

A recent article posted by Goldman Sachs asked — rhetorically — «how could the adoption of virtual classrooms, in an effort to contain the spread of coronavirus, jumpstart the long-term adoption of remote learning.» [8] That one of the largest global banking institutions so wholeheartedly embraces online academia is no good news. One cannot help but think about Isabelle Stengers' prophetic work *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. Stengers spells it out for us: «the capitalist machine ... is incapable of hesitating: it can't do anything other than define every situation as a source of profit.» [9] Swiftly shifting the whole curriculum online, architecture schools participate in the expansion of predatory academic capitalism. Because of «edtech», verbiage coined by investors to define online teaching, social interaction in the knowledge economy is under attack. The commodification of education, via technology, or academic capitalism as identified by political economist Bob Jessop, has been underway pre-pandemic, obviously. [10] However, the crisis has accelerated the process. Business newspapers reflect the trend, announcing substantial investments in companies engaged in online tutoring. [11] It is urgent to conduct a conversation on the freedom and accessibility of knowledge, and to ensure that online teaching technologies are not abandoned to private companies. Remote education tools at the hands of for-profit firms indicates that technology and the internet have recreated a space where capitalism can thrive. Because technological progress is intrinsically a dis-equilibrating process, online teaching as a new solution will demand more, newer technology, fueling self-sustaining needs, devouring more labor and resources, humans and materials. In that sense, our modern, online condition echoes Karl Marx's concept of alienation — how paid work

removes something from the worker, made to feel foreign to the products of her / his own labor — but a labor without time limits, social boundaries, and spatial dimensions. At the mercy of privatized tools that we do not fully comprehend, we are absurdly teaching and learning spatial design, physically removed from our colleagues, our studios, our classrooms. Yet, here we are, faithful to our institutions and committed to architectural education, smiling across the screen.