

Work is over

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«We feel it is depressingly obvious that the way we work, what we work on and why we work are all questions that receive the wrong answers at the moment»

WORK IS OVER

Lowis Gujer, Emma Lindén

Emma Lindén, born 1994, studies Architecture at KTH Stockholm. After her one-year exchange at ETH Zurich she has been studying and working in Tokyo and London with Lowis Gujer. Born 1995, Lowis studies Architecture at ETH Zurich. The two students are fantasising about a weekend where Monday never comes.

When we talk about the problems that came up in the last century, we usually refer to «climate crisis», «societal collapse» or «a global civil war». All the horrible terms that on the one hand give you a headache, because they put an enormous amount of information into a few words, and on the other hand make you feel like vomiting right then and there in the middle of a conversation on your opposite's feet, because it gives you a feeling of helplessness and frustration. In the process of writing this text we decided to call it «the inferno». Highly dramatic, no?

«The inferno» is referring to an epic poem from the 14th century written by Dante Alighieri, and forms one part of a longer narrative called the «Divine Comedy». It describes Dante's journey through hell where the eternal punishments for sins committed on Earth are imposed. Don't get us wrong; we are by no means in search of an esoteric path to God, as Dante was with his «Divine Comedy». But considering the dimensions of our problems today maybe everyone of us should be punished for their sins. Just as in Dante's inferno, something should constrain us so we cannot repeat the same mistakes over and over again. So that we stop pumping up and burning all the oil and coal that we can find, ignoring refugees whose homes we just destroyed. So that the circle of abusing animals and of devastating habitat while earning money by designing labels for water bottles, is broken. So that we have to face our elderly that we put in care homes, left to die alone, and our children's depressions when they try to win the race for jobs and success at someone else's expense. And while we are chained, suffocated and tormented by our own conscience we scream: «Make humanity great again!»

See? Very dramatic!

The neoliberal promise of the past decades was that the deregulation of the global market would lead to an average rise in wealth across the globe. But why is it that we only see rising inequality, the destruction of our planet, and an increasing amount of fear, anger and depression in this «glorious new age»? We want to focus on three explanations.

First, a loss of political economic agency for the general population. In capitalist society the modes of production, meaning what, where, and how something is produced, are all defined by profit. The need for profitability of any kind of production forms an inherently exploitative character since a profitable product consists of the value of the material, the value of labour needed to create the product plus an additional value to provide for profit. Generally this surplus value is created either at the cost of the worker or through the increase of efficiency with new technological innovations. In the 20th century these innovative leaps were seen by many workers as a threat to their employment, but thanks to the political will created by the unionisation of workers, the masses could organize themselves and instead demand better working conditions and salaries.

Today the globalisation of the market and the automation of most industrial processes have enabled companies to counteract this unionisation easily. Workers' organisations

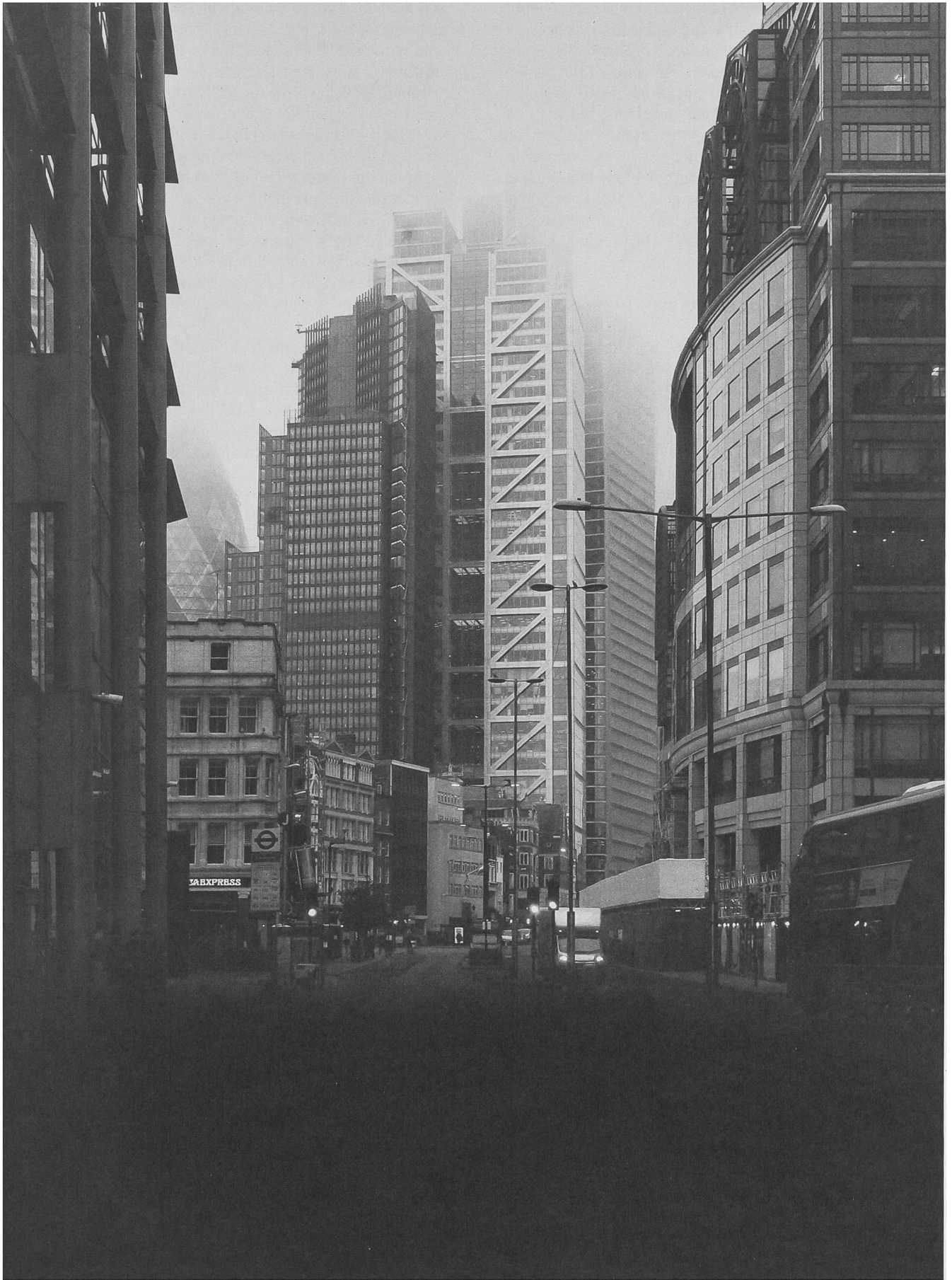
mostly happen on a regional or maybe even national level, while a larger company is not reliant on a specific location and can move freely on a global scale. As a result, manufacturing is relocated to low-wage regions and different nations fight against each other with tax reductions and even tax subsidies to create the best possible conditions for bigger companies to settle in their country. It is as if states are in a constant mating dance, at the cost of everyone's money, to then let their poorest citizens get screwed by the fattest bird.

As you can see, the free market logic effectively removes the ability of anyone to participate properly, if we exclude the fat pigeons. On an individual level the working class have lost their political power because of deregulations and insecurities. On a global level political power is lost to purely economic motivations. In the meantime regional politics keep themselves busy with keeping the unemployment rate low and ensuring the «right to work» instead of contemplating the purpose of such work for a moment.

Second, a devaluation of social reproduction. The developments of the industrial capitalist society in the 20th century separated the work of social reproduction from that of economic production. Productive labour was compensated by money while social reproduction was mostly women's work and produced without pay. Each gender role was effectively tagged with a price.

Nowadays, in the Western world at least, the job market is dominated by the service industry. In the reign of market logic, the value of a product in form of a service is often-times difficult to assess due to the absence of materiality. This ambiguity allows the market to dictate wages which turns it into an exploitative machine resulting in a downward pressure on wages that forces both parents to work to support a family. That we are not stuck in old ideals is, of course, a good thing, from a female emancipatory point of view, but it also means that the privilege gained in the previous century of being able to support a family with only one parent working has now been stolen again. Instead of all of us working 50% we have doubled our time spent on work with less time reserved for care and leisure. All glorified by the two-earner household ideal.

Third, the lie of equality. Liberal political theories are all built on solemn slogans such as «equal opportunities», «freedom for all», and «the individual choice to live as you wish». This brainless endeavour for equality of opportunity supports a meritocratic agenda and suggests that if we do not succeed we only have ourselves to blame. The system only promotes those who successfully finish school and later university with top grades. It is a deeply elitist philosophy that fuels insecurities, fears of failure and promotes a sentiment where climbing a stair comes at the cost of pushing others off. On top of that it justifies that some have advantages by luck of their birth, since everyone supposedly has the same opportunities. As if it is fair that some have more, because they were pushed out of the right womb and therefore deserved their luck by genetic proof. Where does equality lie in that?



Bishops Gate, London, 2020.
Image: authors

The result is a system that not only feeds on the fear of being jobless, incentivises inequality and undermines processes of social reproduction but, even more dramatically, is set on a course to crash with the physical limits of the planet. In the meantime, people are not working to produce something that could solve these problems, but instead just produce tasks that someone with money can pay for. Furthermore, the production of things involves commercial and planned ageing to ensure that they break at a regular pace, since it is not done with the goal to fulfil needs but instead to promote desires. In the end the production, or the work done to create useless stuff is the problem that we cover up with our massive consumption.

Just thinking about how hard life must have been a few thousand years ago, puts things into a more bearable perspective. To live in a forest, where any kind of small injury or unexpected visit of a larger predator was the end of us is a horror story for most modern people. Really, it is awe-inspiring that we have managed to come this far. Today modern food production supply chains allow for the majority of the global population to be fed and kept healthy on a daily basis. Technology and progress have brought some of us wealth and a life that people could only dream of 100 years ago. And if that isn't enough to calm the nerves of the miserable pessimists, maybe considering that up to now the planet has only experienced three geological eras, the Paleozoic-, the Mesozoic- and the Cenozoic-era, might bring us to a certain humble appreciation of our current lives. The youngest one, introduced 542 million years ago, can be translated from ancient Greek as «new life», because the cenozoic life forms, in comparison to the previous ones, are very similar to the ones which inhabit the Earth today.

The Anthropocene, a recently proposed epoch, argues that humans have fundamentally ruptured the Earth system as a whole. This claim is mostly based around the fact that our expenditure and exploitation of the Earth's resources in the last fifty years have changed the geological composition of the planet so deeply that it could result in a mass extinction of current life. If we continue to live as we do now, we could arrive at calling the Anthropocene the Anthropozoic era instead, which is a much longer time span in a geological understanding of time. A new fossilized layer of life as we know it now would be imprinted in the layers of the Earth forever as a result of our actions. The divine joke — or bitter irony — lies in the name of the new era itself, containing «human life», when it will no longer contain any living humans.

So far the impotence of planning our future has left us with no other hope but that the free market would magically fix all our problems. This kind of lazy contentment with the achievements of the past and the present state fills us with anger.

Are we not keen and energetic enough to let the attention and care we give reach further than our immediate surroundings? Why are our problems not being solved? How can we stop this systemic failure? Why is the world so complicated? How can we help people that are in the worst situations? Why do some consider themselves more important and

allow themselves to enjoy special advantages out of an entrenched sense of entitlement? Why are there always losers and winners? Who benefits from someone else's pain and suffering? Why are there people working as CEOs of oil companies? What is the reason for them to take on a job that destroys everything for everyone? Really, if they are not over 70, they will probably experience it all going down the drain in their final years. Is it the salary? Why would such a person not prefer a lower salary for a job that is in need of good leadership, given there are people that actually benefit from it? OR: If it is about money, why does the CEO of an oil company earn four-hundred times the amount of someone who takes care of our children? Or our grandparents? Or our sick relatives? Again, how can we stop this systemic failure? And what kind of work is actually desirable in a society?

To ask these questions we thought maybe we should ask ourselves first: What can we do? As architecture students we learn that our education is important and that it matters what we do; we can change the world. But while working we realise that we also have a service job that only a very small part of the population can afford. Most things are built by developer firms that invest capital to accumulate even more money when they sell the buildings. So why do we as architects work the way we do? Is it to confirm our ego? We feel it is depressingly obvious that the way we work, what we work on and why we work are all questions that receive the wrong answers at the moment.

At least one thing we can say for sure is that the future awaiting us with all its challenges can only be overcome collectively. Our feelings of frustration really just come from the fact that as individuals we are completely powerless. This lonesome-wolf phenomenon is the reason why we were looking for a common vision for the future in the first place. All these slightly clichéd expressions of «friendship makes us strong» or «our happiness depends on other people's happiness» bring us back to our Christian moral history of the Western world manifested in «Nächstenliebe». Or maybe a more fitting phrase to use would be «My enemy's enemy is my friend», and therefore scapegoating one enemy will make everyone come to an agreement that would give us the power to change the world. Notwithstanding the real issue that our current society is built on inequality and fear, we argue that we need a common enemy to unite us and bring about change.

Maybe you have heard the speech by Mario Savio where he shouts «when the operation of the machine becomes so odious». «Odious»! When the system that we live in becomes so odious, would that not be the moment where we as a human collective, no matter where we live or what we do, can identify it as the shared enemy? And could we not agree on the fact that what makes this system work is that each of us works in it. But as Mario says, what if we do not take part? We should refuse to take part. Let us not forget the power of refusal, of saying «No!». Refusal, Strike, Revolution, all of these movements are meant to say no, to make sure that we are heard. We should pull on the shackles that the enslaving monster uses to chain us and make it stumble from its comfortable seat. To make it understand

that it is also chained to us. That we will lead the direction we want to go, and that without us, it is nothing. There are people who think they already know how to manipulate the monster to their advantage and at the cost of others. Also those people; we have to make sure they know that they are not the only ones with a hand on the levers and that we can jerk them in a different direction! So, how can we do that with the current system that is rigged against us by design?

Our proposal is simple: just stop working. The world is already complicated enough. Resisting the usual urge to fix problems by getting a cat to hunt the rats, we thought. Wouldn't it be beneficial if we could make it less complicated by removing some parts of the existing mess instead of complicating it more by adding things? By refusing to work, we can gain influence on questions that affect our lives.

In practice, we will most likely experience a moment of despair, because we have been brought up by advertisement, marketing, temptations and fashions where our needs have been replaced by desires. Desires that manifest themselves in comfort and consumerism in a row of higher and higher pleasures, but as Johann Wolfgang Goethe said «the worst nightmare is a long long row of sunny days». Moreover, «what do you do?» as the usual question when getting to know somebody, today is answered with the job description, will suddenly be about meaning and purpose. It will be one of the consequences resulting from the revaluation of the meaning of work and disconnecting it from our identity in society. Maybe this confrontation with life's purpose is what is needed to achieve meaning that goes beyond material desires and consumerist glut/over-saturation.

In some ways this change of mindset and perception is already taking place due to the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis, although met with great suspicion and anguish. But this crisis is also a chance to help us understand what type of work matters. A doctor cannot treat a patient without a nurse that cleans the operating table, handles the machines and administers the medication. Likewise, if all of us stopped working, such dependencies will become visible on a much larger scale. Especially in cities that are dependent on current systems to work constantly. Without external food supplies, a functioning water system, heating and healthcare we would realize that as individuals we are unable to provide for a satisfactory life and that our sustenance is dependent on other people.

To reiterate: we are not saying working in itself is bad. There will still be work that has to be done, but we think we should decide democratically how to organize it; what we should work with, which needs we want to fulfil with our collective work, where to place the production, how to remunerate it and, most importantly, how much work needs to be done daily for each of us to lead a fulfilling life. Subsequently the plea for an extension of democracy should include the economic sphere as much as the political sphere. We understand that one of the reasons why democracy is restricted to economic decision making lies in our respect for private property. But there is a difference in deciding where you want to buy your house and place your bed and

what you decide to do with your capital and your means of production. The latter often results in profits for businesses at the cost of carbon dioxide emissions that go beyond the private sphere. The same conviction for the protection of ownership should apply to the right that questions affecting our common destiny should be answered democratically.

Beneath all the power play, what we really want to achieve is that we stop working, to make the system stop working for one moment. Not because a pandemic is disrupting our lives, but because we want it, and we think we could use a moment of peace and quiet. So that we can hear the voices of frustration and anger. Maybe there will come a transformative moment of clarity for everyone, a break-through where all of us understand what is important to society. What kind of work matters. When it matters. How we appreciate it and how we value the people that do it.

Let us refuse. Let us stop. And let us take a break.⁽¹⁾

