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Autor: Mouny, Marion

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A Figuration – Times and Narratives

Marion Mouny

Varying between celestial and quantitative movements, cyclic and linear forms, the concept of time and its representations significantly fluctuates, depending on the culture and civilization. This piece proposes a personal interlacing and exploration between the concept of time in Donna Haraway's Chthulucene and the notion of narrative in Paul Ricoeur's work through figuration. The text, the atlas and the cartography are interconnected, with legends using Roman and Greek alphabets serving as guides through them.

PALIMPSEST

Through the Chthulucene, (1) Donna Haraway challenges the linear dimension of temporality and, with it, the conventional notion of progress. She highlights the stories in which humans and non-humans persevere in the ruins: a phenomenon that has already been and will be. The temporality of this era shatters the linear apprehension of a time with a past, a present and a future to convey a cyclic and vertical one embodied by layers that rest on and feed off one another. This «thick present» (2) acts as strata that inform and infuse each other.

It suggests another system of time reading, telling the world through stories, to make visible invisible existences and to reveal the myriad of collective practices in which «allies» (3) are able to respond to situations of destruction. The narratives link the present to latent futures whilst giving an informed and situated re-reading of the past. This momentum has already happened: it echoes from the past, feeds our present and informs our future. We, all living and non-living, are on this «thick present» rich with a vast awareness while hearing these multiple narratives and the weaving they construct. These narratives we tell unmap our conventional limits and address the knowledge of unexplored fields.

Time in strata from Donna Haraway's perspective, between memories and futures that emerge in the present, is made coherent by the narrative we tell of it. Like a palimpsest, strata add themselves on top of each other. Through this perspective on time, our visual relationship to chronology and usual timelines is defied. How is this time reading represented? A new form of almanac emerges, like a core sampling that crosses the different times, binds them and exhibits their permeability, the way they inform each other, as if they infuse each other in a cyclical approach. How do these times multiply and intersect? How do the cycles respond to each other?

PERFORMATIVE DIAGNOSIS

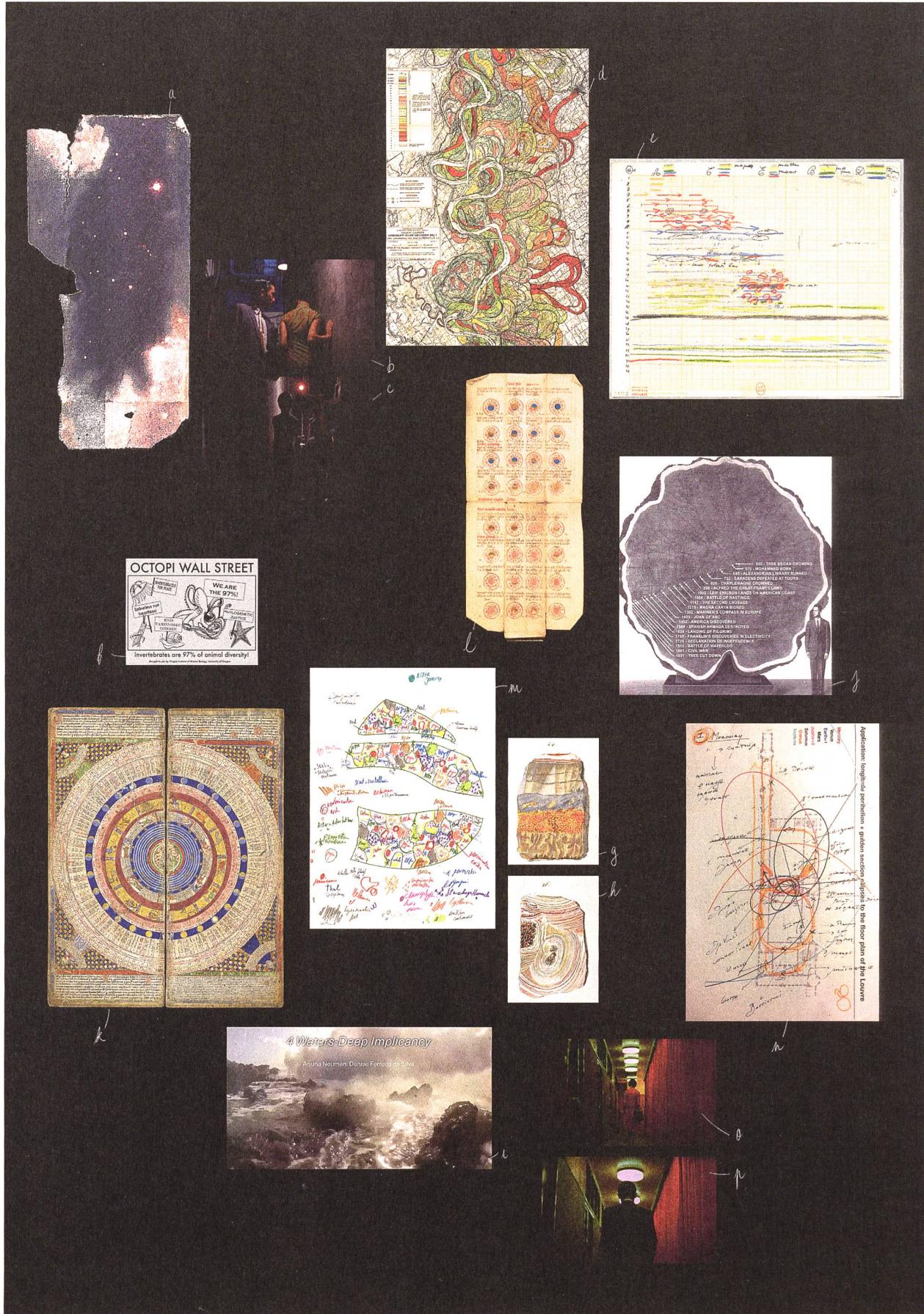
Within the Chthulucene era, weavings intertwine different scales of time: the one of geological time, of cyclic times, of seasons, of beings, the one of history and the one of stories. The crossings that occur are multiple and address our stories, the human and non-human ones, in the broadest sense. There are those that we live, those that have been lived, those that are underlying but also those that we tell ourselves, those within which and through which we inhabit, and those we build in a subjective and sensitive way. Bridges are built between these stories to perform our experiences as a transgressive but coherent narrative.

This relationship to time, reshaped by our stories, is informed by Paul Ricoeur (4) for whom time is what is made of it via the narrative. In the tradition of Saint Augustine and his description of time as «distentio animi», (5) the philosopher presents time as a chaotic experience. For him, it is through «distention» that it is possible to grasp time: it is an intuition that makes the coexistence of the future and the past possible in the present. They both re-emerge in the present, which tends towards what is to come and to what is past.

Paul Ricoeur suggests to form a consistent thread via the «mimesis», (6) that is to say: via an act of narration that recounts the real with a beginning and an end. Through this story, a temporality is created, one among many others: those of lived time, those of time told in another way and also the one that affects persons as fugacious bodies in the world. The heterogeneous character of our experience is rewoven by the narrative into a continuous adventure. Through the narration, certain elements that had remained veiled and unnoticed emerge. This temporal system of story-telling weaves links between different tenuous images.

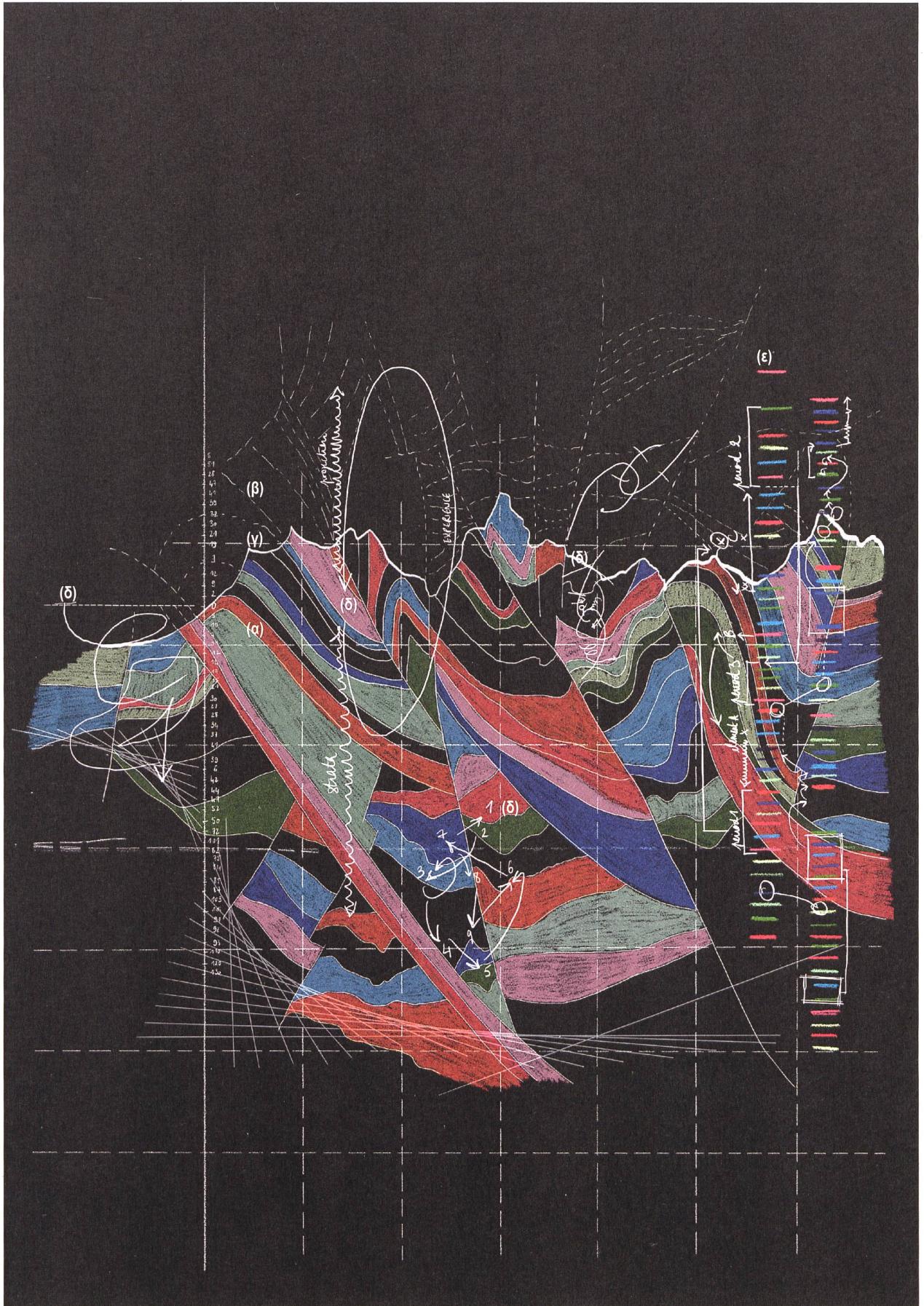
This temporal organization is called «performative diagnosis» (7): it is a way of introducing an event, an element, a moment not as new but as «always-already» present but latent and inconspicuous. The obvious

A



A Following the path of Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas, a glimpse into media that evoke history and stories.
Collage: by the author

B



B Time in strata through a choreographic cartography of the «thick present». Image: by the author

and the oblivious are braided together to narrate the story of this already existing, past and future, that infuse and inform the present. Past, present and future are no longer segmented chronologically, they are modes of existence that intertwine in the thickness of the strata of what is happening and educate our perception.

ARTICULATING THE THICK PRESENT

We all have the instruments to measure time, to have a precise vision of what it is scientifically, but how can we picture it? How can we represent the thickness and the myriad of times we inhabit? How can we exhibit the cycles that we experience? How can we celebrate the plurality and the coexistence of multiple time interpretations?

Time has been represented in many different ways depending on the periods and beliefs. The circular shape is archetypal of a cyclical conception of time which has often referred to the lunar and solar cycles and, because of the regularity of their phases, to the seasons but also to the rhythm of the days. The almanacs (A:I) are a classic representation of this, but one can also think of Piet Oudolf's drawings (A:m) showing the evolution of his gardens through the seasons.

This circular concept has often been replaced by an approach that takes the form of a line and based on a logic of beginning and end, on the model of human life, of a genesis and an apocalypse: existential time. It is the era of chronologies, of timelines. The line tends toward something, there is an idea of evolution, like a partition (A:e) that draws us from the beginning to the end of a piece.

These are two conceptions that look at each other: one is a closed circle, like a continuous cycle where the seasons, the days, the moments follow one another in an infinite round that perpetually starts over; the other is a directed line like a march to a point towards which to tend, with the underlying idea of progress and the transformation of the world by humans.

These two representations embody a quantitative vision of time, Chronos, the one that can be counted, the one that passes. In ancient Greece, another notion completes it: Kairos, a qualitative vision of time, the one of the opportune moment, the one that stops the unstoppable race of time. It is the present moment floating like a dance (A:n) and anchored in a sensitive and sensible experience. It is the time of stories that we choose to tell (A:b, c, f, o, p).

The «thick present» as a continuous and ongoing presence is nourished by moments, heritages, events and is made coherent by the narrative. As an attempt of representation of this idea, time in strata is raised like a geological section (B:a) whose layers infuse one another, disparate moments are put in friction by geological movements. Premises of what is not yet there and that we anticipate through the layers that will accumulate later (B:e), for the moment in dotted lines. The crossing of these different times which re-emerge in the thick present (B:β) is brought together by the narrative, materialized here by drawings such as choreographers' diagrams (B:y) that take up and assemble pieces of time to make them coherent in the current moment. Different stories are constructed simultaneously, each anchored within a situated point of view. This works as a core sampling of disparate moments that are rearranged (B:δ) creating a coherent narrative. The thick present performs a dancing thread between momentums, bodies, events from nebulous times to weave them as a continuous story to our sensitive gaze.