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The Balcony, *Extractive Imagination(s)*, Pied-à-Terre. Harnessing Energy. Photo: Mari Kolcheva

Taking turns around the fire — *Extractive Imagination(s)* at The Balcony

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In the winter of 2023, the curatorial team behind project space The Balcony huddled up and generated the beginnings of their prospective exhibition cycle *Extractive Imagination(s)*. Zazie Duinker visits the first chapter, *Pied-à-Terre. Harnessing Energy*, which initiates the cycle.

I'm meeting with founders Arthur Cordier and Valentino Russo, and curator Abril Cisneros on an early morning, after I'd visited the exhibition. I tell them about my broken night that preceded it. In the middle of the night, a new thought propelled by their exhibition had woken me up. I jumped around the interior of my mind, following it from one corner to another. The vast nocturnal domain my thoughts on the exhibition moved in is not strange to The Balcony. *Extractive Imagination(s)* elucidates how many entry points there are to the topic of extraction. One argument for cyclical programming, Cisneros explains, is the opportunity it grants to take all these different points. Unlike linear programming, it is not geared at one particular point. Unburdened by the pressure to reach it quickly, the new exhibition cycle can remain loosely choreographed. It might unfold over any number of chapters, dispersed across an unknown period of time. The lack of a predetermined end makes it possible to circle back as often as is necessary to open all the doors. It opens up room for unbounded exploration.

In this instance, it reveals extraction to be an inescapable netting. One way or another, all of us are caught up in it. These days, under the rapid progression of technology, it can become harder to remember that; the process of production is separated into steps so small they hold no meaning to us, yet simultaneously contribute to a chain of production the scale of which is in turn too large for us to grasp. It leaves us as disoriented consumers, unable to position ourselves in relation to extraction. The Balcony, however, urges us to consider extraction and consumption as things that occur ‘in tandem.’

There’s incongruity to that dynamic. We tend to treat the two as unrelated things, allowing us to simultaneously frown on extraction while continuing to endorse our personal consumption. The exhibition presses on that sore spot. Not in a pedantic manner, however. It’s a poking, that encourages us to tend to it. For consumption, the curators propose, isn’t necessarily a bad thing. ‘One thing that bothered us, is the idea that to be sustainable you have to be this person that stops consuming. It suggests that you could do that,’ Cisneros tells me. Cordier thwarts this unrealistic demand by retracing our consumerist roots to one of our primary needs: heat. He grounds the exhibition in the soil around the bonfire, as he recollects how the first Western sedentary civilizations gathered around fires in order to keep warm. Here, we can discern the uncomfortable coincidence of extraction, production and consumption: we burn wood to produce fire to provide heat, which we ultimately consume.

Contrary to present day production, this scale is still comprehensible. The first chapter of the cycle contains works by Elsa Brès, Adele Dipasquale and Pedro A.H. Paixão that each in their own way recentre our intimate relation to extraction and consumption. In the company of a handful of timid tree trunks, I find myself between a video work, a series of red-hot drawings, a lost bird and a pair of gloves. The latter comprises Dipasquale’s *nəʊ 'lɪniə 'fʌkɪŋ taɪm* (2025), a set of deep purple gloves that have been embroidered with symbols from International Phonetic Speech and Visible Speech. On a bed of wool and cotton, the lines hover dangerously as intruders of the tactile. Looking like descendants of geometric shapes, they announce an optical abstraction that is matched by their linguistic meaning, and as such pose a contrast to the work’s materiality. Dipasquale is interested in children situated on the cusp of speaking, as a point of departure to think critically about our modes of communication. Prior to the introduction of verbal language, communication may have occurred through the touch of a hand. Or, rubbing hands may have served to generate heat, perhaps holding a stick to ignite a spark, or by mere skin contact. Like a bonfire, the warmth of touch brings people together and goes hand in hand with the development of a shared language to secure that social cohesion. To put on the gloves, then, would be to embody the edge between embodied and linguistic experience.

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Uncannily, without having met, Paixão displayed a similar interest in children's language use to Dipasquale. Recalling infants' pre-linguistic existence, he formulates the objective of his practice: '(...) to reach a plane where you are simply on a sensitive plane of language (...)'.^[1]

Language, here, may be understood as a method of connecting. More than just through the mind, there is a language that is spoken through the senses to the body. Interested in such sensual connection, Paixão turns to what he considers to be primordial energy. 'I was wondering what it would be like to draw inside the sun. How would that feel?', he illuminated his inquiry to the team. The result of these questions is a trio of vermillion monochromatic drawings (2021-2023). The hue is a clue, but the more substantial tribute to the sun shines through in the degree of detail in the drawings, that take up to two years to complete. The production process nowadays commonly obscured, is here unveiled through the manual gesture that our hands can all recall.

The same can be said about Elsa Brès' *Connivência* (2023), a transhistorical inquiry into interspecies ownership. Across two projections, the video work collapses the present and the Middle Ages as it speculates about an understanding between humans and boars about their shared habitat in the Cévennes valley. Perhaps you'd never considered how we come to possess land, until now. It once more demonstrates the potential of language, here in terms of fiction, to foster unison. As such, it deepens the connection that the exhibition ponders between language and this primordial energy through emotional warmth. At this point, I notice the lines in the cartographies on screen paralleling Dipasquale's phrases. It is the last coincidence I needed to confirm the enigmatic feeling that had been creeping up on me all along. 'I don't think it's a coincidence,' Cisneros discloses.

‘I don’t mean to get too esoteric, but it shows how everything is connected,’ she continues. The exhibition can be characterised by a lack of distance. Rather than pushing numbers on us, the tactic the project space employs to render extraction insightful is to return us to our bodies and make us understand our engagement on that level. In their own way, each of the works effectuates this; Paixão’s meticulous manually applied marks, a close-up of hands tracing a valley to the backdrop of that same valley’s whispers in Brès’ video, or the wool of Dipasquale you can imagine embracing your hands. In speaking to us so viscerally, it implicates us, and condenses the lacuna between extraction and consumer.



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Admirably, The Balcony extends this consciousness of our complicity beyond the content, and into their very own operating. The team is cognizant of their role in the cultural industry. In this role, there’s no getting around producing. However, citing the bonfire as an example of extraction fit to our needs, they likewise try to formulate a way of working that is right. To that end, they exchange high-paced, instantaneous and possibly surface level linear programming for cyclical programming. It is characterised by return, and in that regard encourages them to deepen their engagement with each and every chapter. After all, just as heat dissipates, and thus needs to be sustained, so does the treatment of a topic according to The Balcony. ‘It’s deliberately not a topical engagement; [the cycle] brackets a temporal commitment,’ Cisneros illustrates. In doing so, however, this does not mean there is no room for current, lived experiences. These can be tended to and interlaced into the broader engagement. It’s a thin line that they are skillfully balancing on, between both urgency and historicity, material and immaterial, micro and macro, relatable and transcendental. It betrays an immense care. In this, *Extractive Imagination(s)* testifies to a thorough commitment to the topic, culminating in what might be called an ethos, that is rare to encounter. As a happily small space, The Balcony shows the potential of putting another log on the fire that you’ve set camp up around.

[1] A conversation between Pedro A.H. Paixão, Nuno Faria and Sorana Munsya in *Floating World. Works 1996-2018*, ed. Nuno Faria (Documenta, 2023), 84.

The exhibition *Pied-à-Terre. Harnessing Energy* is on show until the 25th of May at The Balcony in The Hague.

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