RADICAL INTIMACIES

Designing Non-Extractive Relationalities

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INTRO

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INTRO

Radical Intimacies
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This book departs from the position that our very existence is the subject of relationalities as we are the relations, which constitute us. It engages radical intimacies with design, media, communication, and art. Radical intimacies imply a closeness to the world created through our relations, which work toward decolonization of knowledge and the public sphere, a crucial focus of Memefest. The closeness is political as it involves qualities that constitute and enable an alternative and opposition to extractive relationalities. Our interest is in a deeper understanding of relationalities, which contribute to what Eric Olin Wright would call the flourishing of human life (Olin Wright 2010). More specifically our focus is on the relation between capitalism and the public sphere, as the latter is under severe attack by the former and a truly public sphere is crucial for a functioning democracy—a key condition for the flourishing of human life. Olin Wright has seen the following dimensions of life to be crucial for human flourishing: meaningful, fulfilling activities, typically linked to what is generally called "work"; intimacy and social connection; autonomy in the sense of meaningful control over one's own life; and social respect, or what some philosophers call social recognition (Olin Wright 2010). Capitalism colonizes all of them with strategies of extraction.

Extraction is a colonial concept and largely connotes to the exploitation of natural resources and humans but it also applies to a much larger set of relationalities. Extraction was made possible through an imposition of specific social orders and forms of knowledge through what Peruvian Sociologist Anibal Quijano calls the coloniality of power:

> (1) the invention of "race" as a social category and the fundamental criterion for the social classification of the world population that self-positions Europeans as "naturally" (i.e., racially) superior to everyone else; (2) world capitalism as the new structure for the control of labor, its resources, and products; and (3) Eurocentrism as the hegemonic universal rationality that would help naturalize this whole fiction as "a civilizing mission." (Quijano 2000: 218)

The coloniality of power today is directly related to the destruction of the publicness, which is directly related to the destruction of knowledge. Melbourne as a city for example was per British colonial order intentionally designed without public squares, as these could promote rebellion (Magro 2017). Australia today has perhaps the most centralized media system of any democracy and at the time of this writing no other public university system in any democratic country is under such attack by a team of managers, consultants, compliant underlings, and a government known also for its blatant, corrupt, and environmentally damaging involvement in and promotion of industries extracting natural resources.

Publicness is crucial for democracy. I agree with Walter Mignolo when he describes democracy as a set of connectors: "[a]s connectors they are the place of encounters of diverse epistemic principles for social organization and moral codes for collective behaviour" (Mignolo 2002: 257). The political and theoretical project of the Zapatistas has connected Marxism with indigenous knowledge and has in time achieved a detachment of democracy from the original meaning of western civilization and modernity: "[n]o longer does any community or civilization own the rights over its imposition or exportation; instead it is shared by all those people around the world who care for equity and social justice, and especially by those who have been or are victims of injustice and inequities" (Mignolo 2002: 251, 261).

This book follows a specific methodology, which I would like to position and contextualize. Memefest is a worldwide network and a community of critical academics, curious students, adventurous professionals, radical activists, gifted amateurs, and close friends. Since 2002 we are engaged in design, media, and art for social and environmental change, decolonization of knowledge, and the public sphere. The term design signifies a broad, ontological understanding of design. As Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar described in his groundbreaking book *Designs for the Pluriverse* (Escobar 2018), design needs to be understood in line with some key realizations of practitioners and theorists.

I think that this new understanding has been emerging over the last twenty years. First, design is ubiquitous; it is present everywhere in our lives, from the most complex structures to the humblest aspects of everyday life; especially our modern lives are very much designed. Second, the key and most crucial aspect for successful design is its social context. It is more important than the function of an image, the form of an object, the effectiveness of a service. Third, the importance of design is being recognized in ecologically oriented fields; this importantly calls for design that is new, different, oppositional, and alternative. Design that is not reproducing extractive relationalities. The fourth shift in understanding design is the realization that everybody designs. For many this is the most radical aspect of our new orientation. Design is seen as collaborative, plural, participatory, and distributed, communal, and dialogic. Another important dimension needs to be added to this discussion. As much as everybody designs, design is also disciplined in institutional contexts as, for example, communication design, product design, service design, and architecture design. In this sense we are interested in the connection between design and other disciplines, like art, sociology, media, and communication. But as we will see in the chapter "Design research as radical social practice", these connections are difficult to establish and to expand the disciplined disciplines, extradisciplinary methods are necessary to become part of our practice. Considering these new understandings, it is completely natural as well as necessary to include a range of disciplines under the word "design" used in the subtitle of our book.

Another important clarification is in relation to the term colonization. As already mentioned we see a direct relation between colonization and the destruction of publicness. We do speak about the colonization of the public sphere. When Aníbal Quijano speaks about coloniality and modernity/rationality and the continuing problematic relation between "western culture" and "the others" being one of continuing colonial domination he raises issues, which are at the very core or our work:

> This relationship consists, in the first place, of a colonization of the imagination of the dominated; that is, it acts in the interior of that imagination, in a sense, it is a part of it. […] The repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression, intellectual or

visual. It was followed by the imposition of the use of the rulers'
own patterns of expression, and of their beliefs and images with
reference to the supernatural. These beliefs and images served
not only to impede the cultural production of the dominated, but
also as a very efficient means of social and cultural control, when
the immediate repression ceased to be constant and systematic.
(Quijano 2007: 169)

Quijano describes a historic view of colonization by western culture and coun-
tries, but the extractive relationalities he is speaking about are crucial subjects
of Memefest's investigations, despite our focus on the public sphere. Knowledge
predominantly used in the professions, which are manifesting in and influenc-
ing the public sphere, is by a huge margin still extractive, because this is what is
being taught at the universities; this is because these types of practices are part of
capitalism's strategies for domination. While the distinction between "the West"
and "the rest" is important, we argue that when it comes to design and commu-
nication, many of these distinctions change or even disappear. Advertising, for
example, will operate in extractive ways in Bogota, Saigon, Sydney, Ljubljana,
Montreal, Kathmandu, or Buenos Aires. The connection between the more
traditional views on colonization with design and communication and the
development of related emancipatory theory and practice is one of Memefest's
key original contributions going beyond the use of decolonization as a meta-
phor (Tuck and Yang 2012).

    Memefest has engaged with Latino American decolonial practices already
since 2004, through our intensive collaboration with design, art, and academic
communities from Colombia, Brazil, and Argentina. For several years Memefest
also had operating local centers in these countries. Memefest visited Colombia
several times. We participated in conferences, gave lectures, and did special
workshops with students, academics, and local communities. Participation from
Latino America in our festival-friendly competition was particularly strong
every year. These relations were crucial, because they enabled the growth of new
and critical understandings of broader design issues because of the dialogue
between post socialist, central European, and broader continental and western
thinking and practice and Latino American perspectives, practices, and cultures.

    In 2014, at the Radical Intimacies event at Swinburne University in
Melbourne a crowd of more than hundred people from around the world
have been discussing extradisciplinary design, colonization, and Aboriginal

resistance. At one such discussion, a very powerful moment emerged. Aboriginal activist Viv Malo stood up and shouted loud: "It is capitalism, it is capitalism, which is at the root of the problem!" More recently, on the other side of the world, in the middle of Europe in Vienna, in September 2021, in the voice of *compañera* Libertad, the representative of the Zapatistas at the March Against the Destruction of Nature read these words to the crowd: "We Zapatistas call that woman,'Mother Earth.' As for the man who oppresses and humiliates her, give him whatever name, face, or shape you want. We, the Zapatista peoples, call that murderous man capitalism" (compañera Libertad 2021: n.pag.). I am using these examples to show that all these different and geographically dispersed groups share a commonality, which results in a political collectivity largely because of the exteriority of their epistemology and a different but still colonial history and present that shaped and are shaping their epistemology. This is not only a political position but a conscious onto-epistemic position, which enables knowledge production of a particular kind. Memefest's focus on decolonizing knowledge and the public sphere has been relating to the extractive forces of capitalism overtaking the public sphere. Our aim from the very beginning in 2002 was to operate with and further develop a non-capitalist epistemology for design, media, and communication practices, which is a position exterior to the dominant industry practices and knowledges produced at universities. Our focus is specific, and the exteriority of our epistemology comes from a position of oppression, from our radical critique, and from our oppositional and alternative practice.

Design, media, and communication are our primary focus through which we are developing alternatives and oppositions and our work is grounded in the European, and to a significant degree also socialist history of critical and radical knowledge, experience, and practice. In 2002, we quickly started to collaborate with communities in Canada and the United States, but at the same time and through the years these perspectives melted with the global, southern hemisphere, racial, nonwestern, and indigenous perspectives. They have become a crucial part of our epistemology and the work we do. This specific mix connected with our extradisciplinary action research methodology (Holmes 2009) is unique to Memefest. It is also important to say, that while Eurocentrism is a key part of colonialism and is also a focus of decolonial critique, the term is often used quickly and in a simplified manner labeling everything European as bad. Europe is extremely diverse. Its countries have different histories and have played very different roles in the rise of global capitalism. Slovenia, where

Memefest originated, is certainly not the same as Britain, Spain, France, the Netherlands, or Germany. Slovenia was until 1991 part of Yugoslavia, a country spearheading the Non-Aligned Movement, which focused on decolonization and anti-imperialism already in 1961.

This book offers an in-depth discussion of the original concept of radical intimacies and the resulting concrete possibilities for designing non-extractive relationalities. The many generative insights and possibilities offered by this book manifest where—ultimately—intimacy and the public meet. Radical intimacies are applied to several urgent issues, which are at the core of capitalist domination and therefore at the core of our efforts to develop new necessary strategies, knowledge, tools, and understandings.

Relationalities are communicative. The public sphere is colonized by advertising, branding, and propaganda as the dominant forms of extractive communication, underpinning most of the more and more centralized traditional media and crucially the internet and social media business models. For Habermas, a critical publicness depends on the development and expansion of semiformal institutions, dialogic places like the café or the salon as well as circulating (print) media; the notion of the democratic public sphere thus made collective intimacy a public and social ideal, one of fundamental political interest. Without it the public's role as critic could not be established (Berlant 2016). While the semiformal institutions facilitating intimacy (with various degrees) still exist and commercial entertainment still clashes with the critical demands of the democratic culture, the desire for entertainment consumed for pleasure is many times enforced through what can be described as weaponized design—a process that allows or even facilitates harm of users within the limits of a designed system. Such environments are designed to be anti-dialogic. They simulate experiences of intimacy in order to capitalize on them. What is left of dialogue in everyday life when the potentials for intimacy through participation are inscribed in algorithmic governance of automated media?

The publicness gets privatized, and forms of pseudo-participation become a simulation of democracy. Imagination is colonized and our attention destroyed. Our engagement with media is through digital devices channeled toward self-referential echo chambers. Designed communication is using principles of pleasure, developing addiction to submit to capitalism's seductions. This is how power works. Algorithms predict, without any emphasis on reason but calculate bare correlations in order to extract value at the expense of trust, knowledge, and community. In this way not only relationalities of intimacy

get destroyed but the very infrastructures in which intimacy tries to unfold are designed for extraction.

Institutional education produces high fee-paying students without the necessary reflection on the many interwoven complexities which produce social injustices and environmental degradation and without the necessary knowledge, understanding, and also skills needed to operate in non-extractive ways by practicing design, media, and communication once the students leave the university and become part of "the industry." The current erosion of institutions of trust goes hand in hand with the growing cultures of eroding criteria of quality when it comes to knowledge.

The current COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of human closeness; it also showed that the regulation of the closeness of human relations is highly political and that when people are hindered to live intimate lives, in their many different possible manifestations, power can be quickly abused. Many governments have used COVID-19 as a tool for authoritarianism and many managerial cliques have used COVID-19 as an excuse to implement disaster capitalism. Health in this regard becomes a key battleground and again a conflict between the public support systems and private interests becomes obvious. The very care for another human being becomes an area of domination; some types of care, like caring for refugees, can even be illegal and other types of care in the form of work.

Food relationalities and connected land are key manifestations of intimacy, so are crucial human relations based on trust such as friendship and so are Indigenous cultures, not only because colonialism is still happening but because Indigenous knowledge and their timeless intimacies are crucial if we want to find ways out of the extraction-driven lives. Intimacy manifests in key aspects of our life and we have investigated some of the key aspects of capitalist domination as well as resistance to it: dialogue, power, land, interventions, and radical praxis.

As part of our extradisciplinary methodology we mobilized different disciplines and communities. Contributions come from Colombia, Slovenia, Australia, Italy, Argentina, Canada, United States, Germany, United Kingdom, Brazil, and Bangladesh. The authors are part of our network and most of them have participated in the Radical Intimacies festival and the event in Melbourne in 2014. All but two very relevant texts have been written just recently especially for this book. One has been submitted to the festival and one has been written by close collaborators and we used it as an inspiration for our festival

theme in 2004. The curated visual works have been submitted to the Memefest-friendly competition or created at the extradisciplinary Radical Intimacies event workshops.

Our point of departure is design as a central domain of thought and action concerned with the meaning and production of sociocultural life. We are interested in design that aims to operate outside the dominant social orders, disciplines, and extractive paradigms and is about imagining and building new worlds and social relations. How can extradisciplinary design work toward non-extractive relationalities in these key aspects of human existence? The book contents are as follows:

ONE: DIALOGUE

Extractive relationalities are designed to individualize us, forever searching and never truly finding each other in the pursuit of resistance. Dialogue is tirelessly presented as "the" solution to the problems of our times—in art, war, love, democracy, and even in the workplace. In fact, dialogue has been central to the ethos of Memefest since its inception back in 2002. But do we actually know how to practice dialogue? Dialogue is understood as the most intensive form of communication. Its intimacy is profound. It demands most of our attention and while our individual participation in dialogue is crucial for a democratic society, what really matters is what happens in the commons as this is the true result of dialogue. The opening section speaks about dialogue and also presents deep dialogue on design aiming to change its very logic.

Slovenian/Australian sociologist and designer Oliver Vodeb and Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar passionately discuss the onto-epistemic politics of participatory design. They show urgent and hopeful frameworks for true participation based on radical interdependence. How can we reclaim participation again?

Retired intellectual and educator with background in art criticism and critical theory, George Petelin looks deeply into dialogue and its urgent potentials. Is there a design for better dialogue? What sorts of cultural interventions might further dialogue?

Australian activist Kyle Magee and Slovenian/Australian sociologist and designer Oliver Vodeb discuss culture jamming, subvertising, and the possibilities of bottom-up participation and interventions with the aim to change the dynamics of the public sphere today.

TWO: POWER

Capitalism constantly invents new strategies for the accumulation of power. Its uneven distribution is a key concern and radical intimacy can work toward a redistribution of power. Creating accountability can disrupt power structures, making the invisible visible, especially when it comes to such abuse as the loss of life in the case of refugees—a problem, which will just keep growing and is a key part of the design strategies.

Intimacy manifests in the personal, the interpersonal, and the public realm. If our longing for another person is affected by the regulation of care, tensions and conflicts arise. Care is also a manifestation of the social organization of work, especially when it comes to institutional care, like in public health. How we design the relationalities in such events effects suffering on the individual and social scale.

Intimacy and addiction are commonly related in situations of personal hardship as well as systemic colonization. But capitalism's strategies have evolved as a strategy of expansion. For the first time in history more people die from legal prescription drugs than from illegal drugs. And the most commercially successful technologies such as mobile phones or social media have all integrated design principles triggering addiction.

Canadian designer and academic Patricio Dávila looks into the potentials of critical visualization practice in the case of an experimental visualization essayistic documentary that makes the case for NATO accountability in the death of refugees in the Mediterranean Sea.

Argentinian medical epidemiologist, family physician and Memefest member Mariano Mussi puts forward the idea of the emancipatory potentials of suffering. Radical intimacy manifests in rearranging relationalities in the designed matrix of the social organization of care as work.

American academic Daniel Marcus and Slovenian/Australian sociologist and designer Oliver Vodeb analyze capitalism's love of addiction. They show that designed addictions are capitalism's key strategies for domination and profit and that intimacy inevitably gets damaged in this process. How can radical intimacy manifest in such situation?

THREE: LAND

Extraction is perhaps most explicitly associated with land. The ongoing colonization first and foremost affects Indigenous people. Their relation to land is sacred and to break this relation pushes Indigenous people into an ontological

crisis. The intimate bonds are part of complex relationalities, which transfer past, present, and future. The extraction industries operate with a different rationality not caring that their very existence destroys someone else's world.

Food is always a battleground when it comes to colonization, because through food the most intimate connection with nature can be controlled. Racial structuring of food production, distribution, consumption, and representation has been for a long time a strategy for oppression of Black people.

To connect with land is to connect with nature, with life. A key knowledge that we need to learn is environmental literacy. How can we use design to reverse extraction?

American Black organizer and servant director of Black Yield Institute Eric Jackson discusses a pluriversity of intimate relations, created in the fight against food apartheid in Baltimore. He thinks about humanizing and restoring intimacies between land, food, culture, and Black people.

Australian activist, writer, teacher, independent researcher, and active campaigner for the rights of First Nations peoples, Sam Burch takes us on a journey to country, timeless intimacies, and epistemic conflict. Can we ever learn from the destruction we are causing?

Italian/Australian academic Ilaria Vanni and Australian academic Alexandra Crosby take us on an urban adventure using seedballs as a method for environmental literacy and public design intervention generating intimate connections between people and the ecologies they meet in their everyday lives around their place of study or work.

FOUR: INTERVENTIONS

Interventions cut into the existing power matrix, and for this they use different strategies. Understanding is at the core of intimacy, be it with a person, community, or subject. The intimacy with radical knowledge can still be established in institutions, even as universities are burdened with managerialism in the service of capitalism's aim to destroy knowledge. But universities still have some things to offer. Like a web of pirate islands here and there, critical academics dwell in the margins and urgent knowledge is produced. And the pirate web goes further, outside of academia and its disciplines. Radical practitioners, practical intellectuals in design, communication, art, and other fields, have shown for decades that it is possible to operate in the cultural public sphere without just serving the status quo. And social movements emerging from critical, marginal positions, the parts of our society, which are the core of pushing

for social change, keep on fighting and are inspiring us all. Here we see a critical possibility in connecting universities, practitioners, and social movements in a reflexive and circular manner, returning back to the initial disciplines with the aim to change them. Interventions have many forms, in this way institutional critique is developed, meaningful practice enabled, direct action nurtured, and critical knowledge produced.

Slovenian/Australian sociologist and designer Oliver Vodeb discusses how design research can be a radical social practice. He offers a reflexive praxis method framework based on findings developed through Memefest's extradisciplinary participatory action research.

Canadian radical communication designer Kevin Lo takes us on a transcontinental and personal excursion connecting material culture with embodied experiences—all in the pursuit of radical intimacies.

Australian artist academic Keely Macarow looks at artistic cultural interventions in times of COVID-19 and presents the concept of viral love. What makes up radical intimacies, if closeness to another human is prohibited?

Australian artist Jane Naylor tackles the logical consequences of the flawed dialogue and systems of the art world. Adopting neo Fluxus strategies the term "art" is replaced with "*Rt" freeing the way to developing Independent *Rt Tactics as an alternative to artworks.

American cultural critic Brian Holmes, German radical designer Sandy Kaltenborn, and British design academic Tony Credland declare "design is not enough," what matters is when design dissolves in the social movement. A manifesto!

FIVE: RADICAL PRAXIS

- Radical Intimacies: Friendly CompetitionVisual Communication Practice
- Memefest Radical Intimacies Extradisciplinary Action Research Results

The first part in the radical praxis section presents specially curated visual works submitted to the Memefest Radical Intimacies friendly competition. Our curatorial concept does not produce winners (and losers) as we feel this is a fundamental logic of capitalism, which we don't want to reproduce. We curate a number of works, which we consider highly relevant. The authors receive publicly written feedback from curators with different backgrounds who address the works from different perspectives. Our curatorial process in this way ensures that the richness, complexity, and contextual nature of design
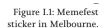
are addressed and not reduced. In order to understand the curated works, one needs to consider the author's concept and curatorial comments together with the design work. Works therefore include written contextual articulations by authors and commentaries by Memefest's curators. This extradisciplinary contextual, public, and dialogic approach to analyzing and evaluating communication, design, and art is unique to Memefest. Works range from digital browser manipulations, deep dialogic processes based on listening and questioning, zines discussing emotional labor in commercial settings, a participatory documentary project with poor people in Bangladesh, and an attempt to democratize access to knowledge at an art school.

The Memefest extradisciplinary Radical Intimacies symposium/workshop/intervention sessions were of utmost importance for the development of our methodologies for research, pedagogy, and intervention. Besides bringing together students, researchers, and activists with different backgrounds, we were establishing a unique collaboration between Memefest, universities, and diverse Aboriginal activist groups from around Australia including members of the Brisbane Aboriginal Sovereign Embassy and Grandmothers Against Removal. The event held at Swinburne University in Melbourne was groundbreaking in the very richness of the engagement between such diverse groups of participants. Many experienced and renowned activists and academics said that they have never seen anything like it. One of the key topics we were working on was the ongoing and brutal child removal from Aboriginal families. One could not imagine a more intimate and at the same time more challenging and heart-breaking topic. "We whisper to our children: come home" was one of the things we learned when the Grandmothers Against Removal described the situation when visiting their grandchildren, taken forcefully from their families, now living in some disciplinary institutions. The curated works presented are all results of our collective work. They were used in public interventions at the event and given to the communities for further use. The section also includes documentary images about the event itself.

This book is a labor of love and has involved many people from around the world. It is this unique network, methodology and the collaboration with these special people, which enable us to create this work. We are inviting you to connect with it.

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Figure I.1: Memefest sticker in Melbourne.

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KEEP THE FIRE BURNING!