

Manifesto of Urban Cannibalism (Amsterdam declaration)

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We should never abandon the city in favour of a virgin territory.

There is no innocent state of nature to defend: cities are flourishing ecosystems in themselves, a true ‘human participation in nature’.¹

In fact, *nature builds no idea of nature*. The image of nature has always been an artifact of human civilisation, a mark of its stage of evolution. Yet we remain unaware that this image is still the projection of our animal instincts and fears on the surrounding environment.

Any utopia of nature will always be the territorial gesture of a form of life.

‘From the most ancient of times, from Neolithic and even Paleolithic times, it is the town that invents agriculture’.² In the sixteenth century eastern Europe was converted into a vast countryside for western cities, and thereafter the ‘new world’ was forced into becoming countryside for the ‘old world’.

If in the modern age ‘Europe was beginning to devour, to digest the world’,³ urban cannibalism is the nemesis of late capitalism.

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Urban cannibalism emerges from the biomorphic unconscious of the metropolis.

Innervated by flows of energy and matter, the urban landscape is alive. Hydraulic forces ebb and surge through a tangled skein of canals and sewers, water being one of the main metabolisms of the city.⁴ But also buildings are liquid strata of minerals — just very slow.

About eight thousand years ago, the city was born as an exoskeleton of the human, an external remineralization of our internal bone structure to protect and guide the commerce of bodies in and beyond its walls.⁵

The apparently inorganic shell of the city is also part of an external geographical metabolism. Like our bones absorb calcium from rocks, Amsterdam was built ‘on Norway’, on the timber felled and shipped down along the Scandinavian fjords to carpent Dutch naval power.⁶

Enclosed by the town’s walls, the promiscuous society of animals and humans was easily conducive to epidemics. Plague and pox however were never passive inhabitants: bacteria and viruses invisibly ‘redesigned’ streets and houses, shaping also the form of institutions like hospitals and prisons.⁷

Any wall is populated and consumed by the invisible food chains of microbes and mould, where the border between organic and inorganic life blurs.

Buildings breathe and ferment. Architecture is the bunker of life.

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Urban cannibalism is the *art of overgrowth*.

Instead of manicuring ‘sustainable gardens’, urban cannibalism celebrates the spontaneous surplus of the city’s life. There are no interstices and no in-betweens: everything grows against everything else. The city is a place of excess.

It was Gilles Clement who mapped the *residues* of the city and disclosed the potentiality of the ‘third landscape’. Urban cannibalism nurtures these ‘biological corridors’ that make species flourish, circulate and escape across both the *city of nature* and the *city of culture*.

Like at the time of French revolution, the third landscape refers to the revolt of the Third Estate against the old regime, and not to the Third World.⁸ This landscape expresses neither power nor naked submission to power, but the common *potentia* of the soil — a telluric insurgency.

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Urban cannibalism is the *third landscape of food* — instinctive ingredients that change the horizon of edibility, cutting to the core of culinary traditions and shovelling across the institutions of art. The whole city becomes a spontaneous *convivium*.

As with the siege of the Paris Commune, when communards ate the animals of the zoo and thereby engaged in a rebellious and joyful *expansion of the edible*.

‘It was because we never had grammars, nor collections of old plants. And we never knew what urban, suburban, frontier and continental were. Lazy in the *mapamundi* of Brazil’.⁹

The reversal of frontiers into life. The city devouring itself.

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Urban cannibalism does not recognise the Parliament of Things, nor any ‘ecological institution’ that fragments the city into abstract entities and binary relations.¹⁰

Life is a ternary movement far from equilibrium. ‘We parasite each other and live among parasites’, Michel Serres reminded us.

We inhabit a *natura naturans* — a never-ending chain of organisms cannibalising each other right down to the invisible ones: ‘The fruit spoils, the milk sours, the wine turns into vinegar, the vegetables rot, the stores of wheat are filled with rats and weevils. Everything ferments, everything rots. Everything changes’.¹¹

Microorganisms take our dead body back to the soil. Putrefaction is still life.

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The alliance with this kingdom of parasites and the rise of ‘the civilisation of yeast’ made humanity win the first wars against noxious microbes. Yeast is the truly ‘divine’ agent that made the miracle of turning water into wine and gave us a new life. Greek gods knew that ambrosia, the first alcoholic drink of humankind, was the secret of immortality.

‘Beer, wine, and bread, foods of fermentation, of bubbling, foods of decay, appeared as safeguards against death. These were our first great victories over parasites, our rivals... From the Olympians to the Last Supper, we have celebrated the victory to which we owe our life, the eternity of phylogenesis, and we celebrated it in its natural spot, the table’.¹²

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‘To feed is the most basic verb, the most fundamental, the most rooted. It expresses the primordial activity, the primary, basic function, the act ‘I engage in even before I am born or begin breathing. Because of it I belong to the earth forever. Like the smallest animal crawling in the dirt, like the smallest plant, I began by feeding myself’.¹³

Evolution itself started with an act of cannibalism and not by a simple genetic roulette. Bigger cells swallowed up organelles like mitochondria and so constituted higher forms of life that colonised this planet.¹⁴

All the life of the spirit, from philosophy to poetry, brings trace of this remote event, of this ancestral endosymbiosis. Inspiration is always an act of incorporation, as Novalis would say.

‘All enjoyment, all taking in and assimilation, is eating, or rather: eating is nothing other than assimilation. All spiritual pleasure can be expressed through eating. In friendship, one really eats of the friend, or feeds on him. It is a genuine trope to substitute the body for the spirit — and, at a commemorative dinner for a friend, to enjoy, with bold, supersensual imagination, his flesh in every bite, and his blood in every gulp’.¹⁵

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Eating an 'I', eating an eye. Incorporation — and not *sensation* — is the ultimate vehicle of the experience of the world. Centuries after Spinoza, we will still not know 'what a body can do'.¹⁶

For ancient cultures it was common to unify mouth and spirit. In Latin *sapiens* literally meant the man with taste — the man with a sophisticated palate!¹⁷ The very corporeal taste of the mouth then passed to signify the incorporeal taste of the mind. But all science remains secretly a branch of *gastronomia*, the art of governing the stomach.

Ascending from the mouth, western civilisation grew further and extended from the organ of sight — the eye becoming the archetype of all spiritual and artistic activities for centuries.

In ancient Greece *theory* shared the same root as the word *theatre* and all its spectators. Today psychoanalysis is still promoting the voyeurism of the mind with all its family couches, *natures mortes* and political spectres.

No, the unconscious is not a theatre — but a mouth! Happy is the one who, like De Andrade, knows that taboos and traumas can be cannibalised...

Desire is a devouring, digesting, defecating machine. 'The *id* is at work everywhere... It breathes, it heats, it eats. It shits and fucks', Deleuze and Guattari told us, though not vividly enough.¹⁸

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It was religion which managed to subjugate the stomach into the crypto-cannibalistic ritual of the Christian communion. The 'ingestion of God' was introduced to exorcise the 'ingestion of the enemy' and clearly tame the social unrest of the urban cannibals.

Before becoming incorporeal, the spirit in medieval medicine was still a *spiritus animalis* circulating through the body. And looking carefully, cannibalistic appetites are found buried everywhere even in the foundations of the cathedral of the bourgeoisie: Hegel's philosophy.¹⁹

Today is the time to resuscitate the hidden demons of western culture. No longer the ‘synthesis’ or the ‘becoming’, but the *ingestion of the Other*.

‘Cannibalism alone unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically... The spirit refuses to conceive a language without a body. Need for the cannibalistic vaccine... against meridian religions. And against outside inquisitions... Cannibalism. The permanent transformation of the Taboo into a totem... Down with the vegetable elites. In communication with the soil’.²⁰

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The matter of the world is endlessly cooked and devoured. The stomach is the big outside us.

Before giving birth to modern chemistry, alchemy envisioned the whole universe as a boiling vat. If the fire of stars have been forever forging atoms, the inner cosmography of the human body deserves an *art of the living matter*.

Gastronomy must be rescued from the ‘food design’ imposed by the planetary petty bourgeoisie. The so-called ‘molecular cuisine’ reduced food to a mere sensorial fetishism (regulated by contrived physical parameters such as temperature, pressure and density) that neglects the basic cycle of *bios* within all edible matter.

The art of the living matter is the art to *remain true to the earth*,²¹ not to its Origin but to its continuous generation — culinary materialism grows from the fertile ground of immanence, from the ‘black earth’ washed by the ancient Nile.²²

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The rise of modern medicine averted the same pagan ground. Witch hunting was really the repression of women’s autonomy and knowledge of nature’s metabolism. *Domina herbarum* was the name given by the Inquisition to the ‘witch of the fields’.

‘Historically the witch was the village midwife, medic, soothsayer or sorceress... With the persecution of the folk healer, women were expropriated from a patrimony of empirical knowledge, regarding herbs and healing remedies, that they had accumulated and transmitted from generation to generation, its loss paving the way for a new form of enclosure. This was the rise of professional medicine, which erected in front of the ‘lower classes’ a wall of unchallengeable scientific knowledge, unaffordable and alien, despite its curative pretenses’.²³

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Breathing again the ‘smell of the centuries’.

Any cook still wears the mask of death. Folklore like Cocaigne and Carnival remind us that the forgotten history of gastronomy is in fact the memory of deathly famines.²⁴ Recipes bear the overlooked cartography of empires at war, traces of migratory encounters and stratification of barbarian invasions.

Culinary art rose from the Dionysian inventiveness of the ‘poor’ against a hostile nature — never from a self-inflicted pauperism.

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In contemporary times a new offspring of barbarians have reclaimed the city from within. The Unitary Urbanism advocated by the situationists attempted to assault the ‘urbanistic lie’ and the separation of life into prisons of experience.²⁵

Yet in Unitary Urbanism non-human forms of life were forgotten. Nature was not considered an autonomous force, let alone a potential ally. Situationism was playing within the utmost humanism: within the very tradition of the *human without substratum*.

Unlike situationism, urban cannibalism is not a vagabond consumption. Instead of *détournement* urban cannibalism practices *dévournement* — a visceral occupation of the living city that does not merely chart its emotional geography.

In contemporary times other forces also attempted to siege the city from within: sustainable development and its gardens emerged as the ‘moral equivalent of war’. Nevertheless urban farming existed long before the upsurge of ecological correctness. Already in the Middle Ages allotments were inside defence walls to grow food during sieges.

And during WWII, as the Nazis were sinking the vessels bringing food to Britain, the campaign *Dig for Victory!* was a well-known national imperative. War allotments helped to save fuel and money for the troops, while Allies propaganda repeatedly bellowed: ‘A victory garden is like a share in an airplane factory!’

Today the pacified horizon of sustainability appears like a wartime without war, the siege of a silent Ghost Army. The patriotic war *for* surplus has moved the home front to the inner front to become a war *on* surplus, through a highly individualised calculation of energy and water consumption, carbon footprint, intake of animal proteins and any culinary desire.

Within the ideology of degrowth we have alas established the borders of our own siege. Urban cannibals, eat the rich!

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Notes

¹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1858.

² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, 1980.

³ Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme*, 1967.

⁴ Maria Kaika, *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature, and the City*, 2004.

⁵ Manuel Delanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, 1997.

⁶ Jason Moore, 'Amsterdam is Standing on Norway', 2010.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, 1975.

⁸ Gilles Clement, *Manifeste pour le Tier-paysage*, 2004.

⁹ Oswald De Andrade, 'Manifesto Antropófago', 1928.

¹⁰ As in: Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été moderne: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*, 1991.

¹¹ Michel Serres, *Le Parasite*, 1980.

¹² Michel Serres, *Le Parasite*, 1980.

¹³ François Jullien, *Nourrir sa vie: A l'écart du bonheur*, 2005.

¹⁴ Lynn Margulis, *Origin of Eukaryotic Cells*, 1970.

¹⁵ Novalis, 'Teplitz Fragments', 1798.

¹⁶ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethica*, 1677.

¹⁷ The Latin word *sapiens* derives from *sapor*, that means 'taste'.

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *L'Anti-Œdipe*, 1972.

¹⁹ Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, 'An Interview with Jacques Derrida on the Limits of Digestion', 2009.

²⁰ Oswald De Andrade, 'Manifesto Antropófago', 1928.

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, 1883.

²² The most recognized etymology of 'alchemy' is the Ancient Egyptian word *keme*, or 'black earth', which was another name for Egypt, as a fertile *dark* soil opposed to the dry *light* sand of the desert.

²³ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, 2004.

²⁴ Piero Camporesi, *Il paese della fame*, 1978.

²⁵ Attila Kotányi and Raoul Vaneigem, 'Programme élémentaire du Bureau d'urbanisme unitaire', 1961.