

Reflections on the notions  
of  
Innovation, Sovereignty and Action  
in  
*North*

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## Introduction

John Palmesino and Ann-Sofi Rönnskog are the founders of Territorial Agency, an independent organisation dealing with changes in the structure of polities and their spaces of operation in the changing environments. TA engages architecture and urban planning to develop sustainable territorial transformations, creating tools and methodologies to guarantee a higher spatial quality. They combine analysis, advocacy and action activities, placing the emphasis on the transformations of the physical structures of inhabited territories and working on global projects to strengthen the resilience of communities. (Works - Territorial Agency)

*North* addresses these issues beginning with the oil resources off the Norwegian coast, to the disputed continental shelf under the North Pole, to accesses to Russia's Baltic waterways. As John Palmesino affirms (video 1), the vision of the North seems rooted in stereotypical concepts of uncontaminated nature, a territory of mineral and biological resources. Conversely, unprecedented modifications taken place. Indeed, climate change is not the only transformation Man is facing in the North, in which a “system of shiftings” (video 1) are slowly revealing in the physical, institutional, social, spatial, economical, and cultural structures we inhabit and constantly reshape.

Considering the implications of the current era of the Anthropocene, this essay will focus on the notions of innovation, sovereignty and action in *North*, a cross-sectoral research project on the mutable geopolitical conditions of the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions. Territorial Agency have been developing this research since 2007, and implemented it in collaboration with the RBSL Bergman Foundation Curatorial Seminar at the University of Pennsylvania, along side the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia.

In order to better contextualise the topic I will introduce the concept of Gaia: an anthropomorphic divinity chosen by the ancient Greeks as the natural element that constitutes existence. In this scenario, Gaia is the personification of the Earth as a primordial divinity. *The Hypothesis of Gaia* states that “living matter on earth collectively defines and regulates the material conditions necessary for the continuation of life”, which recognises the biosphere as a vast self-regulating organism (Lovelock, 1974).

Given this framework, I will focus on the debate of current period of Anthropocene/Capitalocene, showing how pathways of development dictated by the economic dominance of capital over nature can have considerable implications. This research is significant to the architectural community because it explores the socio-economic dynamics related to the activity of certain agencies in specific areas of interest. At a time when actions have such a weight to determine the fate of *Gaia*, it is meaningful to deal with the actual context related to the changing environment, in order to create new sustainable solutions.

## Annotated Bibliography

Various academics have focused on themes related to society and territories in the Anthropocene and the relevant consequences it carries with it. They have discussed the notion of sovereignty and how political and economic powers are determining the outcome of *the war against Gaia* (video 1). The authors I shall be examining focus on innovation as a reshaping model, on the

way humans approach the Anthropocene as action and on the concept of sovereignty. The research paper shall touch upon all of these themes.

John Palmesino places innovation in a multi-disciplinary context, closely related to the concepts of institution and territory. The main aim of *North*, as TA proposes to accomplish, is to look at the relationship between geopolitics, culture, history and the global system (video 2). The result is the notion of *escalation* which is the urgent contemporary discussion, in relation to politics and human spaces of operation ( video 2). “The idea of innovation implies escalation”: a sort of call for action (video 2) Starting from its etymology, escalation is a rise, a movement towards both knowledge and action.

Complementary to John Palmesino, Isabelle Stengers is discussing innovation in terms of mobilisation of science for purely geo-engineering purposes. The sciences have been mobilised becoming "fast" sciences, but now, in the knowledge economy, these sciences are not perceived by investors as fast enough (Stengers, 2013). There are many new prototypes that are technologically revolutionary, and seem very attractive to those who would like to invest in them. Unfortunately these are not based in solid knowledge at the expense of in-depth specialised research. The apotheosis of this paradigm is geo-engineering: the mobilisation of technology against the Earth. (Stengers, 2013)

Building on these concepts, John Palmesino offers an opportunity for discussion in the occasion of the Transmediale Festival in Berlin in 2009, arguing that there is a need to reshape the contemporary polity system. This goal involves the modification of communities, institutions, political forces and modalities of production (video 1). Followingly, in 2016, the sociologist Jason W. Moore talked about capitalism as a tool to organise nature as a whole, in which human organisation not only makes environments, but are “simultaneously made by the historical flux flow of the web of life.” In these terms, Jason W. Moore has questioned how the various human organisations processes have reshaped planetary life (Moore, 2016). However, what we are most interested in is realising that today the North is a space which is an extension of our technical infrastructure, of the possibilities of creating network storage, documentary and facilities (video 2).

John Palmesino recognises the very idea of innovation as the extension of the conflict that originated a relevant difficulty: locating things in space and time. In this way, *North* investigates the contemporary transformation that is occurring in Society. Territorial Agency is trying to understand the relationship between contemporary spaces of operation and the modality of interaction are undergoing by looking at the northern regions as a laboratory where humans can better comprehend the moulding forces (video 2).

In this framework, I will name *action* anything that comes from the hand of humans. I will highlight the possibility of taking action in the context of the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions, that have already commenced.

The claim for the unused resources of the North is expressing itself as the ultimate form of inhabitation of geography through the construction of technological means (video 2). The organisation of facilities for drilling oil in the North is a simple notion that almost void the difficulties and provide a notion of progress (video 2). The idea of the North is becoming an idea of

archive, an organisation of an “ancestral” knowledge in space for the globalised world, which implies that it can be extended (video 2). In this scenario, the very idea of the North is represented by the Vault Svalbard, archiving every seed of biological life on earth.

It is clear that humanity is responding to the call for action in pursuit of resources in the North. However, the question that arises is: which kind of resources is Man looking for? In the Arctic, Russia is making significant advances to advantageously position themselves for the future. (Rzhevsky, 2016) The overarching command structure for the new arctic force was created in December 2014 and was named Russia Joint Strategic Command North (JSCN) (Rzhevsky, 2016). The command is based on the Northern Fleet and headquartered in Severomorsk and it has been increased by forming the Russian Arctic Brigade. Russia has built the largest and strongest icebreaking fleet in the world and has made several significant investments in Arctic technology that will give them a leg-up in this harsh environment (Rzhevsky, 2016).

John Palmesino affirms that the aim of humans is to look at new forms of stocking energy that will go beyond at the incredible success of oil. “We need to find new solutions”(video 2). The idea of attaining new resources is extremely worthwhile because it touches on a very serious issue: exclusive economic usage. Since the world has been divided in states, sovereignty has become absolute power over space. Modern sovereignty has generally been conceived in terms of a (real or imagined) territory and a relation of that territory to its outside (video 2). How far is the boundary of this outside?



Figure 1: Stationary Arctic oil platform called “Prirazlomnaya”- by Alexander Cheban, 2016

In order to make clear the concept of *sovereignty* related to the exclusive economic usage, I will discuss about the occurring event of the Russian presence in the North. There is a map of underwater topography delimiting sovereignty, in which each part of the sea is allocated to a specific company for economic usage of resources (video 2) The idea displayed an extension of the underwater space. The major claim that the Russians have extended by “planting flags” across the bottom of the arctic sea was a one that stretched from Siberia to Greenland (video 2). By claiming that they would extend the perimeter of sovereignty of the space of the exclusive economic zone toward the entire Arctic (video 2).

### Wider intellectual context

Human pressures are pushing the conditions of biospheric, climate and above all biodiversity stability, to the breaking point (Steffen, 2004). Justin McBrien agrees that we are living in the Capitalocene, highlighting capitalism’s drive toward extinction in a world-ecological sense. The intensification of the production of material and immaterial goods is increasingly irreparable and threatens individual and collective existential ecosystems? (Moore, 2016)

According to Felix Guattari (2000), not only has the growth of technical and scientific resources failed to produce social and cultural progress, but it seems equally clear that we are witnessing an irreversible degradation of the traditional forces of social regulation. Guattari states that the answer to 'capitalist' formations is to bet on a return to the past, and that architecture and urbanism are therefore some of the mechanisms on which integrated world capitalism is based (Guattari, 2000).

The way our society perceives nature is central to the thought that led to the current changes in the biosphere leading to a less habitable world. It is still unclear that the categories of Society without nature and Nature without human beings are involved in the oppression of the modern world (Moore, 2016). These issues are fundamental to capitalist economic policy, since for capitalism nature is cheap in two ways. As Jason W. Moore claimed, Nature is “cheap” not only at the price level, but also because this “cheapness” is discredited in a political and ethical sense (Moore, 2016).



Figure 2: Oil fields #19ab - Belridge, California, by Burtynsky Edward, 2003

Edward Burtynsky is considered one of the most established contemporary photographers in the world. By depicting global industrial landscapes, his works embody the essence of Anthropocene. In his archive, oil has a profound meaning, while freeing us and damning us, both as a source of energy that makes everything possible, and as a source of terror due to the danger it poses to the natural habitat (Edward Burtynsky - Biography).

I selected this photograph as it is the unfiltered representation of a humanity struggling against Gaia. The Belridge oil field near Bakersfield in California is one of the largest in the country. According to operator Aera Energy, it has been producing oil for more than a century and last year produced around 76,000 barrels a day (Mooney 2017). According to Aera and GlassPoint Solar, despite the appearance that everything is dictated by the objective of accumulation of capital, the oil field is being powered partly by a massive solar-energy project to make the extraction process more environmentally friendly (Mooney 2017).

### Main questions and aims

The current era of Anthropocene is a time in which human being change nature more than the nature changes us. The main concern is that the exploitation of the North requires the utilisation of new tools and a reinterpretation of the connection between the modalities of configuration of the environments in which men interact with the institutions that act on territories.

The philosopher Étienne Turpin asserts that organisational models of architecture can be used to manage assemblies of community habits. Throughout history, architecture has tended to challenge ways of working, thinking and relating in a given society with the help of historical, geographical and speculative strategies (Turpin, 2013). Étienne Turpin's questions to the architectural community are of major importance.

- “Have things always been done, thought of or produced in this way? Have things been done, thought of or produced differently in other places? And, can we imagine other ways in which things could be done, thought of or produced in the future?”

Turpin draws the attention of contemporary architects, theorists and historians to address the urgency of how to investigate issues for the environmental justice. Following on from the reflections offered by TA, the questions that have emerged, those will be further addressed in the research paper, are as follows:

- Are the transformations in the North modifying our cultural production process?
- Is escalation a form of knowledge production?
- How does the research deal with the constraints linked to the economic power of the great sovereigns? Who owns the North?



- What is sovereignty without inhabitation and how can we move beyond the territorial model of this absolute power? Are the seas free?
- To what extent does capitalism negatively or positively influence architectural interventions in the Anthropocene era?

The main aim of this paper is to make a contribution to the debate on the call for agency in the North through Architecture as an active connection (Palmesino, 2013) to find another balance between *Gaia* and us.

## Methodology

To gather the information I need, I am utilising different kinds of primary data: documentation by video, by interview, by first hand visits. Firstly, I gathered part of the primary data from videos recorded in 2009 during the Transmediale Berlin-based festival, in which John Palmesino discussed *North*. In June 2019, I will visit the final exhibition of Architectural Association in order to look at the projects related to Territorial Agency. Thereafter, I shall conduct two different interviews with John Palmesino and Étienne Turpin. I will structure questions in order to ask them about *North* and *Prospecting Ocean*, two relevant project for this paper. Moreover, this last project has involved working together Palmesino and Turpin, despite some diatribes between the two academics. For this reason it will be interesting analyse and compare information.

## Primary Research Design

I will be collecting three different kinds of primary research material:

- videos of the conference by John Palmesino during Transmediale Berlin festival in which he presented *North*;
- visiting the final exhibition of the Architectural Association, in which I will have the opportunity to talk with few students that had collaborated with Territorial Agency and to keep material from those projects;
- conducting interviews to John Palmesino and Étienne Turpin.

Considering the themes I will explore, this ensemble of material I will collect would be meaningful for my dissertation for many reasons:

- the videos are allowing me to fully understand the *North* project. Not only because they provide an exhaustive explanation of the subject but also because some opinions can only be captured by paying attention to the attitudes and tone of voice of the author;

- the documentation of the whole work by TA will permit me to dispose a wider context of data related to the organisation, which I will use to prepare questions for the interview to John Palmesino;

- interviewing Palmesino and Turpin will be a great opportunity asking them what I specifically need for which concerns *North* and *Prospecting Ocean*.

I will use the documentation of the projects by TA as a tool to discuss issues related to notions of *innovation*, *sovereignty* and *action*, while I will use interviews to articulate arguments in the main research. Then, this data will constitute the documentary I will use to analyse *North* and *Prospecting Ocean*.

### Timetable

The first step is to attend is the final exhibition of the architectural association that will occur at the end of June 2019. Until then I will examine in depth the issues related to AA student's projects on Anthropocene and more specifically to everything linked to TA. I will be able to start arranging dates for the interviews in July, possibly between the end of August and the beginning of September. In the meantime I will be able to articulate the questions that will compose the interviews with Etienne Turpin and John Palmesino. Therefore, during the months of July and August I will be able to study in deepness their works in order to conduct valid interviews.

### Ethical issues

Since I will be conducting interviews, the ethical issue that could be raised is the recording of conversations. If the interlocutors do not allow the recording in the form of audio, I will be concerned to be more careful with the notes I will take.

### Concluding remarks

Despite the planning, there may be a case in which documents cannot be obtained. For example, I could not be able to conduct one of the two interviews, in which case I will shift the focus of the research to a single project between *North* and *Prospecting Ocean*. In the event that I should fail to conduct both interviews, I will base my research on projects that I will select from those carried out by TA, then analyse the same notions in the wider context of their projects.



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Available from: <http://russiatrek.org/blog/business/oil-production-on-the-shelf-in-the-russian-arctic/>  
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Figure 2: Burtynsky Edward (2003) Oil fields #19ab, Belridge, California, USA, Available  
from: <https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/photographs/oil>, [Accessed Mar 25, 2019].

## List of videos

Video 1: *John Palmesino talks about resources and inhabitation* (30 Jan, 2009) video, added  
by Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH, Transmediale [Online]. Available from: <https://transmediale.de/john-palmesino-territorial-agency-en> [Accessed Mar 6, 2019].

Video 2: John Palmesino introduces ESCALATION 30 Jan, 2009) video, added by  
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