



# Planet Fitness

Common Accounts



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EMOTIONAL GEO-SPOOF X

SHADE BY COMMON ACCOUNTS





Dentist's Chair  
Lola Zoido  
2020





# NO PHILIAS NO PHOBIAS

This essay was first published in 2019 by Log Journal as an online supplement to Log Issue 47: Overcoming Carbon Form (edited by Elisa Iturbe).

It was later published online by o32c.

Here, we've elaborated it with new content from friends and allies and packaged it as a magazine.

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## PLANET FITNESS

*by*

Common Accounts

*with contributions from*

Shumon Basar  
Climate Lockdown  
Raja'a Khalid  
Brian Rideout  
Lola Zoido





# *Planet Fitness*



This essay was first published in 2019 by Log Journal as an online supplement to Log Issue 47: Overcoming Carbon Form (edited by Elisa Iturbe). It was later published online by o32c.

*The ultimate frontier of the Anthropocene might well be the human body. Or so it seems, according to a freshly available arsenal of fitness regimens, survival guides, academic reports, news media, and cultural products, which demonstrate an impulse to connect the fitness of the body with its capacity to resist climatic failure.*

Change Your Life  
Raja'a Khalid  
2017



Take Pure Advantage, an environmental research and lobbying group founded by fitness mogul Phillip Mills, who argues that the fitness of the individual is a critical component in global environmental health. Mills funded documentaries like *The Human Element*, which explore people's relationships with climate change, and his fitness program Les Mills – which is “on a mission to create a fitter planet” – marries strength conditioning with the construction of virtual terrains like The Trip, described as “a completely new cycling experience using digital projection to create new worlds.”

The Les Mills website declares, “The battles to tackle global physical inactivity and prevent climate change are inextricably linked, with neither likely to succeed unless holistic and sustainable solutions can be sought,” and Mills himself told an interviewer, “We have to deal with [climate change] urgently. And it just so happens that a lot of the ways that we can fix it are things that are really good for us, good for our health and good for the environment.” In 2007, Mills published *Fighting Globesity: A Practical Guide to Personal Health and Global Sustainability*, and he's not alone in claiming the resilience of the body as a lifeboat to counter the instability of the planet.

#### #newfrontiers

If the Anthropocene represents an existential threat, then it is somewhat paradoxical that, faced with the possibility of humankind's demise, the individual body is more present than ever. A focus on the body that prioritizes individual performance and status seems out of place at a moment when the entirety of humanity is under threat.

In cultural discourse, politics, and the popular imaginary, human anatomy is more visible and available as a subject for modification, regulation, and design than ever before. From the surgeon's clinic to Facetune, through gut health and biohacking, and from the bedroom to Equinox, the body is under near-constant scrutiny in the search for new sites of value—be it social, material, or otherwise.

*As a result, a  
frontierist attitude  
has been projected  
onto the body:  
an anthropo-  
frontierism that  
regards the fitness of  
the body as a useful  
technology.*

Among its proposed uses is to function as a lifeboat, escaping the consequences of planetary environmental collapse in the mode articulated by Les Mills. Anthopo-frontierism mirrors the logic of American frontierism – that is, the Wild West spirit of territorially progressive exploitation and technological development attendant to the feverish pursuit of expansive new terrain, where the survival of the fittest generally superseded collective concerns. In its endlessness pursuit of resources to exploit, frontierism ultimately produced the carbon paradigm that drives markets





today. Frontier individualism and the prioritization of the self are both cause and consequence of the global carbon paradigm and its crises. The consequences of this paradigm have in many ways provoked calls for collective action, but

*anthropo-  
frontierism has in  
parallel articulated  
an individualized,  
niche mode of  
resistance to the  
cataclysmic at the  
scale of the body:  
climate fitness.*

In other words, as a Les Mills slogan puts it, “fitter you, fitter planet.”

#### #fitteryoufitterplanet

If the environment is being degraded, then, at the very least, the body can be recalibrated to be its very best –

better able to mitigate the effects that industrialization and pollution might have caused. Daily life increasingly appears to involve optimizing and defending of the body against environmental threats to its most basic functions. In the US, the number of people with gym memberships has nearly doubled since the turn of the century. More and more gyms continue to open, augmented by nutritional

supplement retailers, athleisure distributors, lifestyle consultants, and purification technologies for the home and the body. Face masks that protect against respiratory pollutants and the spread of airborne virus have become an unlikely fashion staple, particularly in urban Asian areas where heavy industry regularly alters the atmospheric composition.

#### #culturismo

Author Michael Anton Budd argues that fitness culture and the project of colonialism are inextricably linked. “As the late-nineteenth-century imperial land grab accelerated, Britain’s pre-eminent position began to be threatened by US and German economic competition. Fitness entrepreneurs relied upon the fears of British decline and expanded their ambitions to an imperial scope.” Imperialism, he argues, was “intimately connected within physical culture’s romanticized, aggressive and redemptive conception of empire.” Enlisting in the late 19th-century African wars was a part of physical culture, and the rhetorical mechanisms behind fitness and colonialism were one and the same. Budd writes in *The Sculpture Machine: Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire*, “The reasons behind this rush to enlist cannot entirely be attributed to ‘patriotism’ pure and simple. . . . Such rises in numbers may be more meaningfully linked to interests that shaped physical culture.”

In colonialism the body was a vehicle to reach the frontier. In the Anthropocene, the body becomes the frontier itself. This change comes from recognizing that the myth of the infinite territory is now suddenly impossible in the context of climate change. But colonialist practices



didn't die, they were transformed, prospecting new terrains for external economic growth opportunities.

*Climate change itself has changed the location and nature of the 'frontier,' reframing fitness as an episodic behavior on the broader spectrums of life and death, self-construction and deconstruction.*

#### #thepowerofplacebo

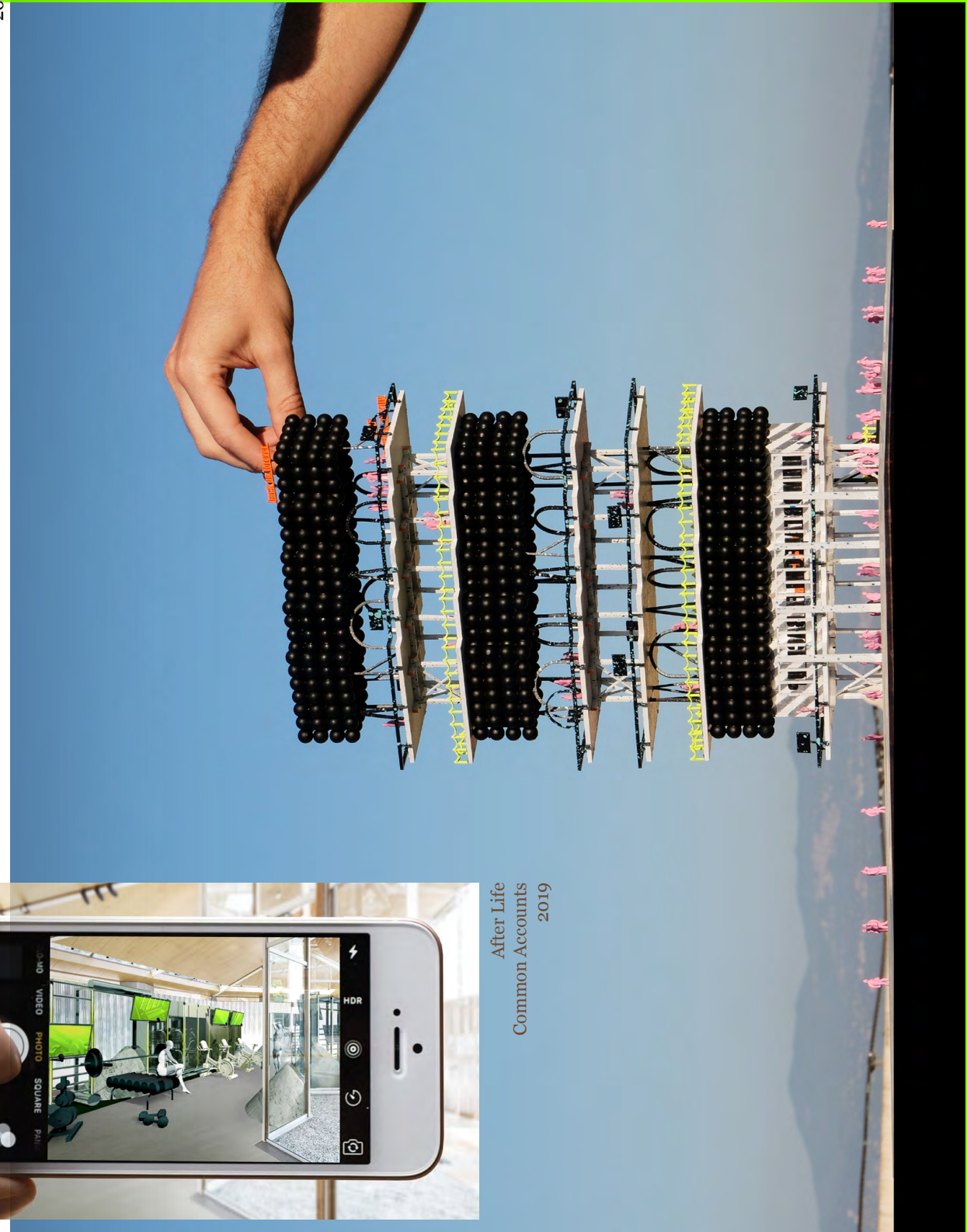
If fitness has emerged as a coping mechanism for the prospective extinction of the species, then the behaviors we observe may well become more exaggerated as we approach and pass 2030, when the UN IPCC says the window for action to prevent irreversible and cataclysmic climate change will shut. With no solution yet emerging to address, let alone solve, the problem at the scale of society, individuated responses may be misdirected and inadequate, yet they demonstrate the necessity of existential placebo to overcome the mounting anxiety of environmental collapse. Consider the survival mentality of bootcamp fitness programs, the call

to training that a nearness to death or illness can provoke, and the explosion of wellness as a luxury product. While the persistence of the species has never looked so uncertain, the promise of life-extending pharmaceutical regimens and cryogenic stem-cell injections guarantee to at least defer your own expiration – if you can afford them.

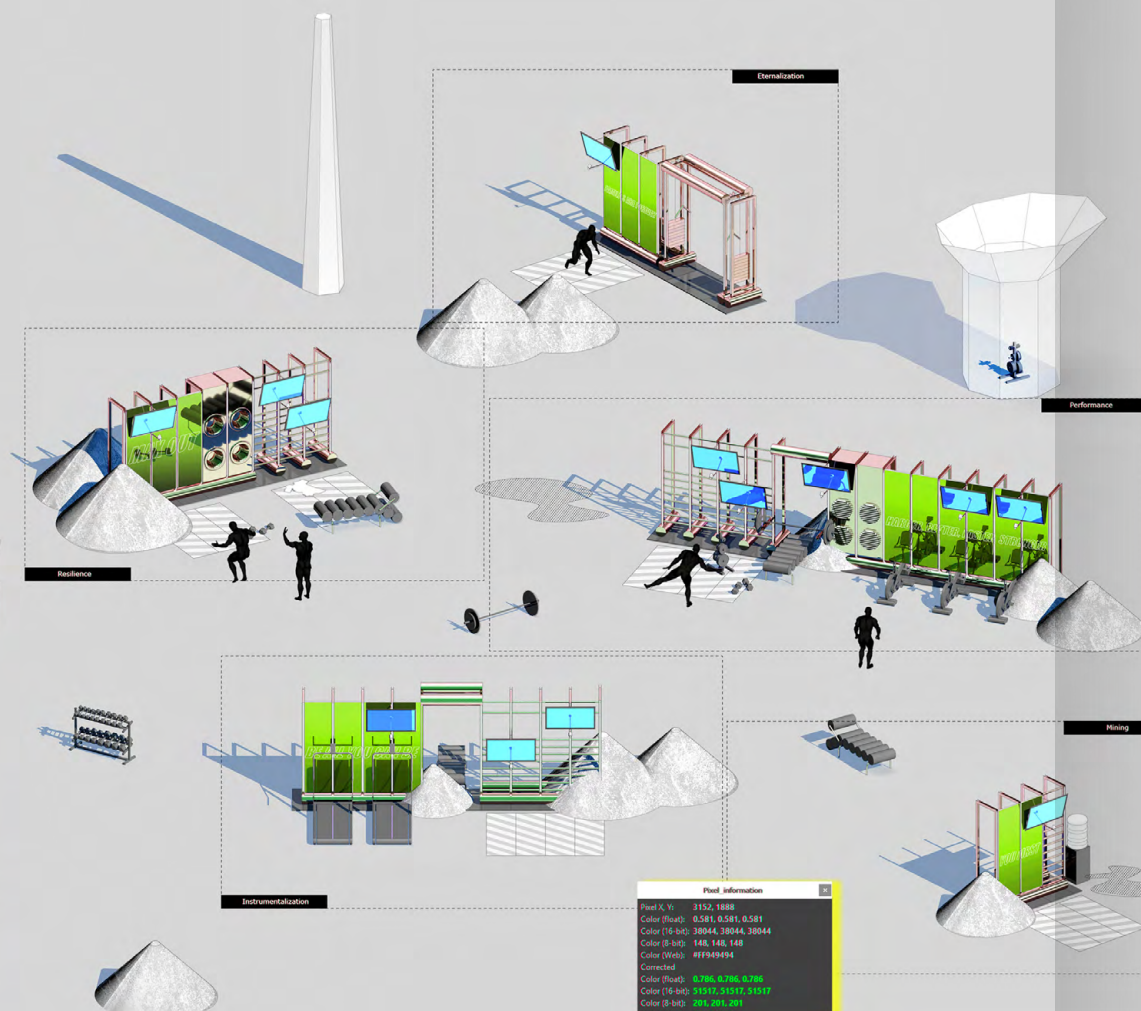
In *The Building in Pain: The Body and Architecture in Post-Modern Culture* (AA Files, Spring 1990), Anthony Vidler observed that the subject of the postmodern gym was a body whose finitude was ever in question: fitness alone could not render the body whole. And in many ways, the cultural priority of the gym today reifies Rem Koolhaas's statement from his ANY 27 essay, *Junkspace*, that "the cosmetic is the new cosmic," as technologies of self-construction bring the possibility of immortality through the promise of virtual perpetuity ("cyberspace has become the great outdoors. . . . Is each of us a mini-construction site? Mankind the sum of 3 to 5 billion individual upgrades?"). In this context, the #shredded, hyper-muscular body constitutes a carbon form.

#### #gymselfie

Of course, the ubiquity of digital images encourages a vanity complex. Neuroscientific studies of social media use indicate that vain behavior is rooted in strategies to generally improve the odds of survival. New research suggests that we regularly demand value from sustained engagement with social media, which capitalize on preexisting social drives. A 2015 report titled "The Emerging Neuroscience of Social Media" indicates that "people are driven to connect with others and manage their







reputation, and likely derive significant adaptive advantages from doing so. Indeed, finding ways to fulfill our need to belong to a social group may be as important to our survival as fulfilling our basic biological needs, such as obtaining food and sex. Living as part of an interconnected group enhances reproductive success by providing access to potential mates, and enhances physical survival by providing increased safety from potential predators, as well as providing access to the fruits of communal agriculture and cooperative hunting efforts. . . . Groups increase the potential to not only survive, but also thrive.”

These “soft” values are made evident at the anatomical scale through the neural responses associated with “social cognition (i.e., mentalizing), self-referential cognition, and social reward processing.” Dopamine stimulation and serotonin production are signals of positive returns in the landscape of social resource exploration. Since the smart phone is for so many people a prosthetic enhancement, we ought to consider its neural and social consequences as part of the anthropo-frontierist effort. They have become a critical agent in today’s arena of self-construction.

### #yourenotevenalive

Canadian artist, singer, and producer Grimes has produced an aesthetic project that probes the ethos of anthropo-frontierism. Grimes, along with partner Elon Musk, is part of a group for whom civilizational collapse forms an intellectual engine. If Musk’s SpaceX is a company founded “with the ultimate goal of enabling people to live on other planets,” arguably due to the future

uninhabitability of our own, Grimes’s work explores the production of images of the augmented self in a mode that tracks with Mark Wigley’s 2001 assertion in *Network Fever* that “the evolution of technology is the evolution of the human body.”

Amid the summer 2019 release of her latest album, *Miss\_Anthropocene* – “a concept album about the anthropomorphic goddess of climate change . . . each song will be a different embodiment of human extinction,” she wrote on Twitter in March 2019 – Grimes’s own Instagram demonstrated precisely the artist’s aesthetic project as it is developed through her own body: a form of advanced survivalism through an overload of self-design. In a post from July of that year, which has since been deleted, Grimes, clad in athleisure apparel, cites a new partnership with Adidas as she kneels on a rock and looks toward a menacing sky. The caption reads:

ADIDAS: Tell us about ur training regimen?

GRIMES: My training is a 360 approach. I first maintain a healthy cellular routine where I maximize the function of my mitochondria with supplements such as NAD+, Acetyl L-Carnitine, Magnesium, etc. This helps promote ATP and it’s incredibly visceral. From that point I spend 2–4 hours in my deprivation tank, this allows me to “astro-glide” to other dimensions – past, present, and future. In the afternoons I do a 1–2 hour sword fighting session with my trainer, James Lew, we go over the fundamentals that work the obliques, core stabilizes, and triceps as well as a few tricks. To wind down from this I spend 30–45 minutes on an inclined hike at roughly 4–4.5 miles per



hour, arguably the most efficient workout. I then spend 45 minutes stretching before heading into the studio where my mind and body are functioning at peak level, with a neuroplastic goal between 57.5 and 71.5 AphCs (which is my preferred range for my blood type). I've outfitted my studio with the highest grade of red light. It is pretty much 1000 sqf IR Sauna.

Hana then comes over and we do a screaming session for 20–25 minutes while I slow boil the honey tea that maximizes vocal proficiency. I have also eliminated all blue light from my vision through an experimental surgery that removes the top film of my eyeball and replaces it with an orange ultra-flex polymer that my friend and I made in the lab this past winter as a means to cure seasonal depression. I go to bed with a humidifier on.

In the music video for “We Appreciate Power,” (a single not included on the album but which prefaced its thematic material all the same) Grimes gives form to her aforementioned regimen and literal meaning to the “360 approach.” She variously presents herself and her collaborator, Hana, on a rotating platform, clad in catsuits, their anatomical prowess accentuated as if drawn in manga, further equipped with an arsenal of swords, bows, and guns. Their optimized bodies are exhibited in the round – as a design product – prepared to endure a host of existential threats. “Elevate the human race, putting makeup on my face. . . . Come on you’re not even alive, if you’re not backed up on a drive,” she sings.

#### #nolifeboat

In her 2012 *Artforum* essay “Vanishing Point,” Sylvia Lavin writes that “In the complex ecology that characterizes our contemporary culture of excess . . . evidence of irrelevance instead lies in

overproduction and super-exposure: A new typology now waxes when it is on the wane.”

### *Facing instability and the prospective destruction of the environment as we know it, the individual has become both ubiquitous terrain and agent of its own colonization.*

As capitalism’s last terrestrial frontiers are exhausted, its prospective gaze has turned to other domains. The defense of the self from ourselves will undoubtedly continue to be an increasingly complicated problem of daily life. The desire to extract value from the body is necessarily entangled with a new aesthetic of the self that variously celebrates virgin resources where external sources face depletion, and, adversely, systemic escape from the paradigm that resource extraction continues to feed. This attitude inhabits the logic of carbon capitalism itself and exacerbates a preoccupation with the self that may only signal its own demise. It points to an obsession with an aesthetic of the body as a lifeboat, when ultimately none may be available. ■









# CLIMATE LOCKDOWN

Your lockdown  
today is  
training for  
tomorrow.

FOR MORE INFO: [climatelockdown.com](https://climatelockdown.com) @climatelockdown

If you think the Covid-19 pandemic is bad, wait  
change will hit us in the near future if we do

till you see how climate  
nothing now.

With more than half of the planet on lockdown, climate change protests across the globe have been canceled. In the absence of collective action convincing policymakers of the continued need to work toward a sustainable future, measures aimed at keeping

carbon out of the atmosphere are being swiftly rolled back.

Addressing the inability to gather, the CLIMATE LOCKDOWN is

a protest-in-place. It reframes the sheltering in place many of us are doing as a form of protest, of resistance to shortsighted environmental planning while we, as a planetary community, gain resistance to this new coronavirus. Transform pandemic anxiety into an engine for change!

The CLIMATE LOCKDOWN is a recognition that the current coronavirus crisis, like climate change, is a result of our destruction of the nonhuman world. We are a part of nature. The health of the world reflects the health of each of us.







04/20/20 - 04/21/20

Shumon Basar: Dubai, Gulf Standard Time (GMT+4)  
Igor Bragado: Madrid, Central European Summer Time (GMT+2)  
Miles Gertler: Toronto, Eastern Daylight Time (GMT-4)

*An  
Interview  
with  
Shumon  
Basar*





What's  
Happening  
To Us?

\*\*\*

In April 2020, Common Accounts spoke with Shumon Basar, curator, writer, and Commissioner of Art Dubai's Global Art Forum.

The following conversation, which took place in what was for the three of us roughly week 5 of self-isolation from Covid-19, records immediate reflections on time perception, survival, self-design, and cultural placebo.

This was the first wave under lockdown. Infection numbers and viral R values were still on the rise-for the first time, and the sense that this might last for longer than first expected was settling in.

Recorded on WhatsApp, across three time zones, the conversation played out as follows...



Miles Gertler 2:21am April 20 Gulf Standard Time

Hi Shumon, Igor and Miles here. Thanks for joining us—we're going to host the conversation here in WhatsApp.... we're straddling three timezones so we're anticipating a bit of delay. We'll limit the exchange to roughly 48hrs.

Igor and I have both been following your Instagram story live-reportage during the past couple months and we've been eager to chat with you about some of the broad anxieties and stranger conditions of 21st-Century life that we've been interested in for some time which have come more sharply into focus with the advent of the novel coronavirus. We're curious about what these times reveal about the status of human existence, temporal perception, survival, and image-making as a way of situating and designing the self.

Many people are eager to label this moment—in jest or otherwise—as if it's the end of the world for sheer scale of change so quickly and totally wrought on society and economy. Yet despite the many tragedies brought on by the virus, this so-called end of the world doesn't feel nearly as cataclysmic as we might have predicted. Several new memes lay into precisely this (for instance, one you sent me which demonstrated the expectation that zombies and anarchy would accompany the apocalypse, in contrast to the mundane reality of home office labour and toilet paper stockpiling). Does this crisis have much to do with ends at all? It sort of feels more like being in the middle of something, while not being at the centre of anything. What do our expectations reveal about our reality?



Shumon Basar 3:58pm

Let's start with the first question. "Does this crisis have much to do with ends at all?" To truly answer this depends on who you are, and where you are.

And by where, I don't only mean geographically—I also mean in terms of class, citizenship, visibility, race, etc. Because, if you've lived in Gaza your entire life, for example, the suggestion that freedom or history has suddenly stopped will make you laugh projectile tears. No, we are seeing this apocalyptic language used mostly, I believe, by the middle class—and dare I say—Occidental populus who 1) have taken "basic" freedoms for granted, and 2) have access to tools of global broadcast. "Not being able to visit my hairdresser for two months" became one of the horsemen of the apocalypse. (Have you seen what happened to DJ Khaled's beard? Has he never heard of a beard trimmer?)

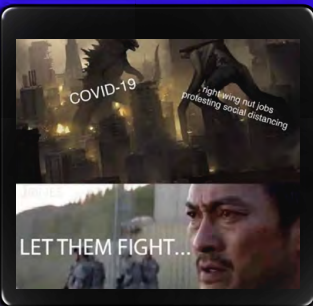
Something I did not long ago: I looked at the entire history of the Dow Jones Index, all the way back to the 19th century, when it began. And guess what? Yes there were "crashes." But, at a macro scale, its measure increased over history. I believe the same will happen if the right vaccine is discovered for Covid-19. For the time being, it's limbo. The "developed world" became vulnerable to something it believed only Asia or Africa or the Middle East was vulnerable to. Perhaps this is the true nature of the apocalypse-feel: to confront the truth, *you're not as exceptional as you thought you were*. I've also been saying, "it's easier to imagine the end of capitalism than the end of my WiFi," so there's also that.

Igor Bragado 7:18pm

Right, to illustrate the apocalyptic language of the west you refer to, "give me liberty or give me death" as the rallying protest of some far-right lockdown protesters today in Florida who aren't allowed to swim at the beach.

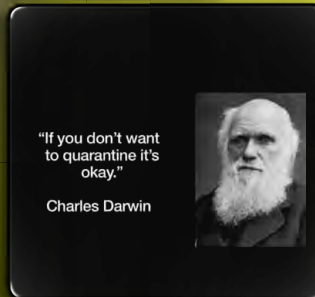
Miles Gertler 7:34pm

To that end I have to retweet this from you Shumon:



Shumon Basar 7:41pm

This also goes with that:



Miles Gertler 7:45pm

[bleak lol]

Igor Bragado 7:50pm

The socio-economic and identity-based disparity of the effects of the pandemic—rather than being only geographical—in the arrival of an idea of "end" is very much in sync with climate change. Unlike the way existential threats have been portrayed in the western cultural imaginary, the current crises of climate change, systemic injustice, and pandemics point to a seemingly impossible notion of a dramatic and equally-distributed cataclysmic, unlike the AI, zombie, or nuclear apocalypses. These other existential threats had the possibility of neatly conveying "ends" through new visual codes (green alphanumeric data streams and low-res satellite pics for the AI and nuclear apocalypses respectively), but is there an image complex that can "deliver history"—to borrow from your LOL History—any of the current, hyper-dispersed crises?

Shumon Basar 7:56pm

Let me check my collection of screenshots (by far the most accurate archive of arresting images) to nominate something.

And I agree that the climate crisis has had this unequally distributed lived experience to it (the Bangladesh Delta, bush fires in LA to Australia, etc.) that suggested, to this moment, a "here" and an "elsewhere." It promoted psychological immunity for anyone who believed they inhabited an exceptional "here." One of the special hallmarks of the current health crisis is its geographic simultaneity—that it

equally hijacks every news station in every language, and the memosphere. "We're all in this together," has become a popular mantra, extolled mostly by the most privileged. Anyone with any understanding of the politico-economic organization of the world will rather tacitly appreciate that suffering is not equally distributed. In France, women enduring increased domestic violence have had access given to them to shelter in a government paid hotel. In most places it's just been more horrific domestic violence. Somehow, this statistic (a doubling, apparently) drove home the added bleakness of the corona-stress.

So Igor, I can't say there has been one image like the LOL History one, because there have been too many, and many are memes of course. I think this is a contender—the way it brings together so many things in one supposedly "fun" photo (hapless white people not knowing what to do with face masks, which have mostly been the preserve of East Asians in the last decades; and also, the hapless nature of post-Brexit Britain cack-handling the pandemic after its precious sovereignty was handed back at the end of January).



Other contender.



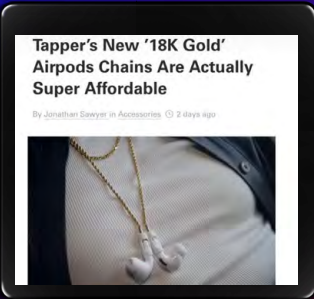
As a relatively facile side note: the implicit



ridiculousness of celebrities has truly turned into explicit WTF-ery. Drake showing off his new home/palace/Ballardian mall in Toosie Slide, just as death tolls were soaring, was really like: brah? Paul Allen's idyllic yacht at sunset, etc. Ellen's infamous "prison" remarks. I felt particularly stunned by a lavish brunch that Rick Owens and Michèle Lamy showed off from their plush Parisian home. We need new words for "tone deaf fuckwits."

Miles Gertler 8:06pm

Instagram is showing me ads like this



Shumon Basar 8:18pm

I too got that.  
And hipster N95 masks.  
And private jet hire.  
And a cozy garden jacuzzi.  
Imagine if we were retrofitted from our ads?

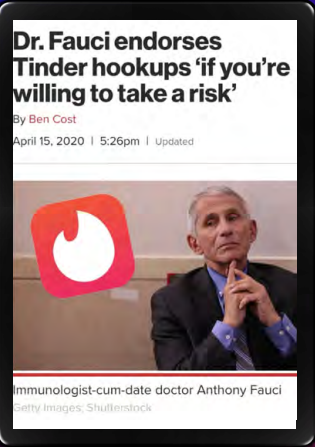
Igor Bragado 8:48pm

In the current context, technological positivism is gaining territory in the realm of feel-good aspirations that celebrity culture once conveyed. Fauci is the new Drake.

Miles Gertler 8:50pm

[we stan public health officials]

Shumon Basar 10:11pm



My fave Fauci moment—and there are many—was this. Also: on the one hand he was getting horny "I love you" fanmail (no one divulged the boob : dickpix ratio, but you just know it had to be nasty). On the other hand, death threats. Oh to be a top medical advisor in 2020.

Igor Bragado 12:01am April 21 Gulf Standard Time

It's telling that some companies are actually cutting down in ads and promotional features to discourage buying because services can't be guaranteed at this moment. Imagine ads to stifle your own brand?

Am I the only one getting ads for online fitness classes? There's not much one can now control outside the design of one's own body.

Shumon Basar 12:12am

Not in my case. Today, they tried to flog a €14.5M luxury boat to me. We assumed anything that required human touch was future proof from automation. We had not figured in virus panic. That's how fast the future makes a fool of predictions.

Miles Gertler 12:13am

An uneven future surely accompanies an uneven present. And if we're living in psychological nation states or fiefdoms of simultaneous futures (eg. Korea is 4-6 weeks ahead of Toronto in its case load and recovery), concepts like future and present become

extremely muddled. This future, that future, our present, their present. In the Age of Earthquakes, you and Douglas Coupland and Hans Ulrich Obrist wrote that "The future loves you but it doesn't need you." Since it feels somewhat like the space between present and future has collapsed, it might be worth asking if the present loves or needs us. Does it?

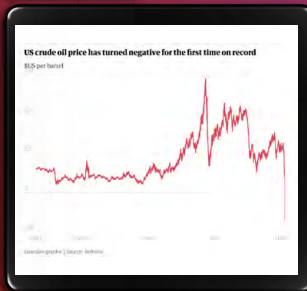
Shumon Basar 12:15am

You're right. Where you are, currently, to some extent dictates what your present and also immediate future is going to be. Every time I heard some place managed to see a drop in infection rates, or, open its schools, I'd think, "they're already living in the future." The novelist Adam Thirlwell told me he hadn't realized how much of the present relied on knowing what the future was going to be, until the immediate future got cancelled. Analogies to the film Groundhog Day are obvious but appropriate. When there is no identifiable horizon to orient towards, the present feels like it's being forcibly trapped on a Covid-cruise ship, but the cruise ship isn't moving.

The other line from The Age of Earthquakes said, "You know the future is really happening when you start feeling scared." By that measure, our present moment has definitely been futurey.

Igor Bragado 12:18am

Who's scared?



Shumon Basar 12:18am

This reminds me of Paul Dirac and the invention of imaginary numbers.

Igor Bragado 12:23am

Your interest in imaginary numbers and Dirac is referenced in your Instagram, which prioritizes anti-

matter-y 24-hour story content. On a platform which favors the construction and over-time consolidation of a heavily designed identity (or avatar), you've chosen to embrace an alternative attitude, one closer to an ethereal, fluid, nebulous identity which conforms to as much as it is formed by the news flow and ever-changing technological and political environment. Which leads to the question: if our (offline and online) selves "are not built for so much change so quickly," as you state in The Extreme Self, what is absorbing the change we cannot?

Shumon Basar 12:38am

Well, it means there's some surplus, and this surplus leads to imbalance. Some time last year there was a long piece in the New York Times about influencer burnout. It was remarkable how similar the arcs were for so many mega-influencers. They seemed to "have it all": money, fame, free stuff. As you may know, there's neurological science about how many people we can keep close, and then a little less close, etc. Dunbar's number is in the order of 150 stable relationships total. So imagine you've got, what, a million people directing their unfiltered, unfettered, libidinal energy at you? Well, that's great if they all love you. Even if they do, they'll turn on you any hot minute. So, where does all that surplus attention go? If your brain can't absorb it? Most likely into some kind of extreme distortion of reality and of self. I don't see how that ends well—unless you build some firewall against it. What could that be? As we say in our first book, it's the unintended consequences of technology that dictate who you are. They also dictate what our prime pathologies end up being too.

Igor Bragado 12:46am

You have an upcoming book titled The Extreme Self. It certainly seems like the selves might have gotten more extreme under the circumstances of illness/death/boredom/Zoom/bankruptcy/irrelevance/fear we are living under today. Has the current pandemic made some of the more radical statements raised in the book more evident?

Shumon Basar 12:51am

Fortunately... it seems to be holding up. If one of the central theses is that the boundary between data and you, you and data, data and internationally distributed corporate platforms, is all awry, in the service of computational capitalism—well (and this chat space is a case in point), isn't this even more the case than ever? Zoom was never designed to accommodate your work meetings, your Hanukkah get-togethers, your daughter's ballet classes and that Queer Quar Club Night—and yet there we all are. I think a lot of what we say in the new book about the



individual (as a being that lurks in the comments section one minute then ghosting next) is borne out in each of these weird days. On this day, people in Brasilia were protesting to dismantle democracy. They want to reinstate military rule. The US now sees the culture wars collide with Covid-19, whereby Trump-supporting women are using the discourse of “my body, my right” to argue against wearing masks and against self-isolating. What Doug, Hans Ulrich and I didn’t entirely see coming is the re-writing of what constitutes a crowd right now. It seems to be anything between 2 people and 5000—there’s little consensus. This question is going to have a profound impact on future planning out of total quarantine towards whatever comes next.

Miles Gertler 1:07am

You’ve recently calculated Douglas Coupland’s prediction accuracy, right?

Shumon Basar 1:08am

That was Doug’s self-professed success rate! If you didn’t know, he worked on the sci-fi film Minority Report, feeding director Steven Spielberg ideas about what the future would and wouldn’t be like. It’s one of my favourite renderings of the future because: not everything is different. The film suggests that certain things about cities in 30 years or 60 years will be exactly the same as today. The same way that some parts of today are the same as it was in 1960 or even 1910. The future doesn’t arrive, as William Gibson famously said, equally distributed. It lands in hot spots, like meteorites—while other areas of lived life calcify, creak and groan into decrepitude.

Miles Gertler 1:32am

The crowd is spooky because even mass consumption of, say, a smoking hot, viral meme, is largely individual—that’s a crowd with no real visibility that might not even be aware of its own existence or scale. Seeing a meme pop up only once or twice more in your feed over the week after first exposure, you might assume then that it’s truly gone viral and that millions of others must be watching it. Increasingly smaller frequencies of events seem to suggest increasingly bigger, remotely distributed viewerships. And that’s strictly intuition, because I’m not sure anyone who has it is willing to release any real data (for free). That’s a crowd that’s ghosted itself before it has materialized at all.

In any case, recent neuroscientific studies have indicated that a primitive survival psyche powers our engagement with social media, and in particular, that likes and pings yield the same kind of dopamine-

centric reward signals that real social participation has provided through human history. But that’s a high that wears off quickly, and I think I feel much more blasé about social media than I do about survival generally. Does social media want to make us care less about itself? Could cultural subtlety be strategic? There’s a theory out there that a middling sports team is a better investment than a championship franchise...

Perhaps the fatigue with the digital is in part due to limited channels for feedback that only accommodate what they were designed to anticipate. All the more surprising then that Club Quarantine is the success that it’s been. Though generally speaking, the novelty of the virtual substitute tends to wear thin.

Shumon Basar 1:35am

One of the things I’m hoping might come out of all this—and I realize this is probably naive—is a reassessment of the winning terms of social media. The things that have mattered to me are all the precise conversations I’ve been having these last months. Online anonymity elicits impunity on social media. The hateful comment can be sent out unthinkingly, diffusely, but its effect on the target is accurate and precise. It’s proven to be true that I’m much less likely to lash out in a social space where everyone is, for example, one degree of separation away from me. I say all this knowing that the comment section sewer is as effluent as ever and not likely to be going anywhere anytime soon. Shoot me now.

Novelty is key. A friend in Finland said today that for him, Quar novelty had run out. Things were beginning to feel new normal-ish. He’s the first person I know that’s expressed that sensation. It’s surely the start of something next. I do admit, however, that I am nostalgic for outdoor air.

Miles Gertler 1:41am

I wanted to ask you about the desert. Citing Asad Raza, you’ve written that the desert is “pregnant with all futures,” and this resonates with us. We’ve always thought it accommodated all things. The American southwest, or Antonioni’s The Passenger is testament to that. Given that we’re now somewhat “estranged from the markers of human time” and other norms we didn’t think prone to destabilization, could it be said that coronavirus is spreading desert-ness? It’s certainly evacuated the commons (while populating others, sure). Cities still filled with millions of people now look like Ordos.

Shumon Basar 1:50am

I guess, yes, in the sense that the desert isn’t only a geological condition, but it’s a state of mind, of being, even. We are familiar with the term “the desert of the real” from Jean Baudrillard. But what desert are we in now? “The desert of the indoors”? Here in Dubai, I live on the 56th floor, with a pretty astonishing view towards the Burj Khalifa and Dubai Mall. Beyond are also distant deserts, the sea and ports too. This view always felt like a CGI rendering. But now it’s more like a huge 1:1 screensaver—since I’m not allowed out there by law (except for one sanctioned shop every 3 days). The floor-to-ceiling windows are yet another screen to add to the umpteen others that now make up what you have called “the new commons”.

Igor Bragado 1:59am

It’s remarkable how graphs and charts are dominating the current memesphere, the stream of news, and even our language. Line graphs that display the number of infected and deaths by country on every news outlet is the best example of the earlier mentioned multiplicity of futures coalescing.

But graphs seem also to have a placebo effect, portraying desirable futures that might be far from what we get. According to The Economist journalist behind one of the early “flatten the curve” charts, “the difficulty with these diagrams is showing uncertainty. Even though it’s a diagram of a concept and not a model from real data, it’s easy for people to interpret it as a precise prediction.” The version of the “flatten the curve” diagram which became viral was drawn on keynote with a touch-pad, which made the curves irregular and therefore apparently data-based and “real”.

There’s an almost pornographic quality to this form of apparently unfiltered reality, which goes from real-time updates on graphs, to seeing Chris Cuomo deliver the news from his basement, to university graduation ceremonies from students’ and professors’ boudoirs. Are these aesthetics of unmediated information and data the desired counterpart to times of uncertainty?

Shumon Basar 2:04am

Yes. Amongst the various things we have all become pseudo-experts on (virology, crude oil futures, the efficacy of face masks) statistician is not one I had expected to add to our species CV.

I heard a phrase yesterday from a superforecaster: “irreducible uncertainty.” It adequately describes

what’s at the core of reality since Covid-19 was deemed a pandemic. She said there’s simply a black hole of not knowing how things might play out. Now, perhaps this was always the case, at a macro scale. But, I haven’t had to question a certain strata of reality being reliable: supermarkets tend to be open, airplanes tend to fly, seeing my parents is normally no big deal. I hate war analogies. But, maybe it’s only during war when our quotidian expectations are traumatically thwarted.

What I’ve noticed over the last weeks and months is: everyone needs there to be a story they can place themselves in just as the other stories are collapsing. Data, stats, numbers have become the portal to a wished for narrative. It’s the ticking metric of time that Venkatesh Rao calls “log level” thinking. Some kind of anxious patrolling of chaos. Data visualization and the rolling out of daily stats is a Potemkin scaffolding of futurity that, ultimately, doesn’t really exist. Can’t exist.

It’s a sobering thought: what if the future, for some time to come, is now something that belongs to the past?

Miles Gertler 2:08am

If we do re-establish some sort of equilibrium with the near past, perhaps one valuable artifact of this moment is that feeling of uncertainty you mention. As a rehearsal for cataclysmic climate change, that feeling may end up being Covid’s dark gift to the world. “Remember how this feels,” as some have said.



Shumon Basar 2:09am

There is no escape.

Conversation transcribed and edited by Common Accounts, 2020.





Marla Maples Journey to Fitness, 1997 (Golf)  
Brian Rideout  
2020