

What “What does it depict?” asks a passerby, while my team and I are tightening the ropes connecting a two by two by two meters cubical grid made from thin white rope and small orange plastic balls to the surrounding trees on the riverside in the north of Cologne. The answer to that question is: This grid does not depict anything. It is rather an instrument conceived to find out what it means to reorient ourselves in the face of climate collapse.

Why Concerning climate change the most frequently asked question is probably: Why does extensive knowledge of looming climate collapse not lead to appropriate measures? And consequently: How can this knowledge effectively bring about climate change mitigation?

The recently published 6th IPCC Assessment report and the accompanying, rather short-lived media attention demonstrated again that the abundance of unambiguous evidence apparently does not evoke the substantial political and societal transformations required to deal with the current predicament: While Greta Thunberg raises her finger pointing at the Earth’s clock hands moving past 12, Angela Merkel raises her voice for the dying species of German automobile manufacturers at the International Motor Show in Munich, introducing their last attempt to whitewash their persevering ignorance and greenwash their future plans for self-enrichment.

This perplexing irony perfectly illustrates the insufficiency of mere knowledge accumulation and communication to engender fundamental transformation. The failing translation of knowledge into action is not a problem of lacking information or denied urgency. The probability of climate collapse and consequential (human) species extinction is perfectly clear. So, what is hindering the derivation of a treatment from this devastating diagnosis?

The detection of Earth’s changing climate went hand in hand with the realization of human activity as the main driver for the ecosystem’s decay. The so-called anthropocene reveals a skewed conceptualization of humanity’s place in the world: The enduring belief in human omnipotence and the modern myth of an incision between a cultural “inside” and a natural “outside”, portraying the world as a mere resource at humanity’s disposal. This presiding human-centrism is further cemented in the broadly shared vision of the Earth as a “globe”, which frames the entire planet as an overseeable and tangible object to be effortlessly managed and shaped from a single standpoint human perspective. Western ideologies are being projected top-down as absolute truths, disregarding locally distinct socio-cultural practices, thus creating an apparently united global community and diminishing the vast scales of the planet.

These ideologies however do not coincide with the actual circumstances. The planet does not shrink according to technological developments or thorough interconnection, it rather expands along with and beyond them towards evermore complexity. Growing infrastructural layers irrevocably entangle the “outside” with the “inside” and form interwoven ecological systems. In addition, extreme climate events undeniably reveal that non-human phenomena—the allegedly static background to human activity—increasingly interfere with the „cultural“ domain and thus step into the foreground, destabilizing this very same theatrical distinction.

These ontological discrepancies prevent the possibility of adequately encountering the challenges of anthropogenic climate change and point towards the necessity of reconceptualizing established frames of reference. Getting from diagnosis to treatment requires the acknowledgement of the planet’s layered complexities and ambiguous dynamics and to reframe human world relations accordingly. But how can we conceive this yet unfamiliar realm?

How The installation resulting from the question above is an experimental tool providing a glimpse into what it might mean to orient ourselves within a complex, diverse and ambiguous planetary scale. It stems from the hypothesis that gaining knowledge about the world fundamentally involves a reciprocal interrelation of human and non-human actors. In contrast to the unilateral globalized top-down perspective it seeks to investigate means of generating multiple situated and localized bottom-up perspectives, which together form a denser and thus more accurate image of the world.

The constructed grid represents rigid euclidean space conceived by human thought—an abstract universalizable system devoid of concrete meaning. However, this grid becomes flexible through its materiality and dynamic through its interrelation with its immediate surroundings. It cannot build tension on its own and has to be lifted by human forces and carried by objects in close proximity. These objects construct reference points and determine the tension, direction and proportions of the grid, whose shape and movement is therefore inherently specific depending on where it is positioned. An entirely abstract conceptual object is becoming concrete by the agency of specific places.

Furthermore, each intersection of the grid is equipped with a small orange plastic ball to allow for the capturing of the grid’s dynamics and spatial deformation via video-recordings. Subsequently, these points serve to digitally trace the interrelated behavior of the construction. This enables reorganizing the intersection points to their original rigid and aligned positions in a now digital euclidean space.

Through this forceful intervention of re-abstracting the grid into the geometrical tension of the computer, the places captured by the camera appear distorted—the rigidity of the grid however is restored. This effectively generates a geometrical consistency between different locations, enabling the possibility of synthesizing multiple situated perspectives to form a greater picture, while preserving their specificity.

The final outcome displays an ambiguous fluctuation between the abstract universal grid-system and the concrete manifold places, creating intermediary spaces between them—openings for further exploration of planetary scale interrelations. In its current state this work serves as an unconventional, non-adaptive approach at accessing the world, rupturing the doxic, human-centered conceptualisation of the planet as a globe. It opens up scalar crevices, which reveal the yet diffuse realm of the planetary scale, engendering possibilities of reconceptualising human world relations beyond the status quo.