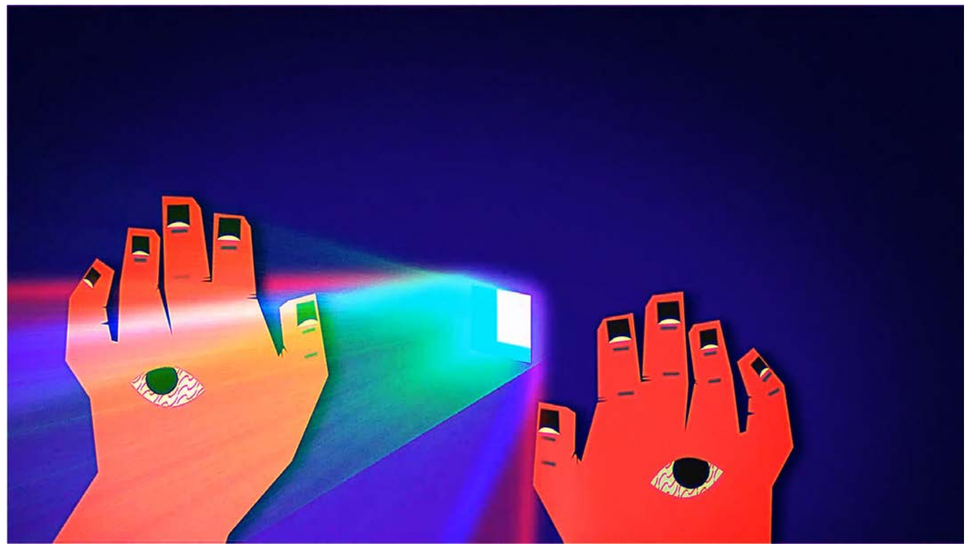
COLLECTIVE CONTRACTS

FINLEX HOXHA in conversation with DIANA ALVAREZ-MARÍN on ‘Permanent Beta’, a tool that allows everyone to build and govern society cooperatively.



Wong Ping, *Stop Peeping*, 2014

Finally, the collectivization of data has led to the implementation of collective social contracts as an instrument of governance. Looking back, we might recall the causes for the shift in our understanding of space as divided between private and public and its later transformation into a more fluid entity. I spoke with Diana about the crisis of the early 2020s and the moment in which a new movement began mimicking the algorithms and technologies of the big players, from private companies to central governments.

Diana, in what ways has the restructuring of our societies led to transformations of political systems?
Technology in the 2010s was accessible to only a few. Today, more than fifteen years later, these power relations and hierarchies seem obsolete. Our decentralized and self-organized society is now based on contracts that are being continuously re-articulated. They are not permanent nor hierarchical. Back then “the system” was considered a given; it had a certain set of parameters that someone in a position of political and economical power had chosen. It was only after the crises that people started realizing that the system was not as immutable as it seemed, and the first smart social contracts were tested. These contracts re-articulated themselves, taking into account the collective as well as the individual, creating a bridge between them. It was at this very moment that digital literacy became a condition for citizenship.

Why did it take us decades to realize that the digital is an abstract process that needed to be decoupled from the idea of visualization?
At the beginning of the 21st century, during a rapid transition into the realm of the digital, there was a certain moment of confusion. A confusion between the abstractness of the digital and the idea of visualization: what one can and cannot see. As an architect, I remember the days when many of my colleagues were afraid of the digital shift, because they believed that architecture was to focus exclusively on the visible. The visual was merely redundant, a supplementary mediation of the real, similar to the concept of the map and the territory. Being subjugated to the visual and saying: “I only trust what I see” was reducing our focus to the visible interface, which was in fact produced by someone with a specific agenda.

After 2022, an increasing number of people started to explore what was behind these visualizations, only to realize that the digital was never purely visual, but more similar to some kind of encrypted writing through which we could articulate personal models of whatever questions we had.

Will collective contracts replace representative democracy?

In order to address the community, the city or a certain political conundrum, the decentralisation of data platforms such as Baidu, Google and Facebook fully realized itself. We finally own our personal data and our spaces of existence, and we use them to articulate collective contracts, which allow others to access these spaces selectively. These contracts do not have an author and after all, can one really talk about authorship in the realm of the digital? Contracts are aimed at providing certain answers, to collapse and to renew, depending on questions asked by the community, always keeping in mind that what the community means remains fluid. Every time the contract or the model collapses, a new contract appears. This is what we now call “permanent BETA”, a contract between individuals that is constantly updated and reinvented because it is never finished. What we get out of this self-regulating model is a spectrum of answers within a certain community, characterized by nuances fluctuating and melting into each other; in stark contrast to categories, boxes and classifications of the past. The beauty and quality of such a spectrum is that it is in perpetual motion and at the same time one can choose freely how to cut it. We call the spectrum a space of probabilities, meaning that an answer is no longer right or wrong, but rather more or less likely to happen. The moment you cut the spectrum, you create a sort of alphabet with which you are able to characterise a position within the community—like you would when writing a poem—or even create a new dataset or pose a new question.

What we came to call a community is not tied to a specific size or boundary. We issue contracts simultaneously, for the entire planet and for small enclaves, considering both the collective and the individual. Could you say these contracts have become another face of who we are, reaching beyond physical borders?
One is undeniably born somewhere, but in the digital space, one assumes another kind of existence. What used to be the precondition for being a citizen—belonging to a place, a country or a nation—is altered by the digital contract, which acts as an additional layer, giving you protection in regards to who you are as a digital citizen. This second layer of citizenship is independent of your place of birth. Instead, it is similar to the way Ancient Greeks defined “Greekness”: in relation to the idea of literacy, of being able to speak Greek. Literacy, therefore, becomes the prerequisite to understand and partake in these contracts. Because even with all knowledge at hand, as long as one is not able to articulate personal contracts, one remains confined to the pre-established infrastructural frame, left excluded or limited to the local, lacking the capacity to become an active subject.

The transition of language towards digital literacy has occurred through universal learning. What is the main difference between this approach and traditional pedagogy?
Unlike pedagogic approaches where processes are explicitly explained, we expose ourselves to the implicit processes in order to detect patterns and their relations. As a child, you are not introduced to grammatical notions of the subject, verb and predicate. You listen and connect with what you hear and observe, which leads to the formation of relationships. Literacy has never been about the celebration of technical supremacy. Instead, what is celebrated is the capacity to think abstractly and in terms of relations.

Yet, since the establishment of the decentralized model, each person became responsible for the articulation of their own model. It wasn’t a friendly vision of collective farming, where the city hall provides an interface for everyone to complain. It was a call for the responsibility of being a citizen. Until today, maintaining these communities with our personal models means being accountable for the functioning of our local communities and our social system, in contrast to the “friendly days” when we let ourselves be limited entirely by the interface.

Collective Contracts are shared through a digital infrastructure, a system comparable to what used to be known as the internet. They are self-organized, encrypted and able to learn continuously. How do we draw the line between private and public, transparency and self-control?
Collective Contracts learn from data, which is put onto the table. So what is circulating on the table is what feeds, produces, and introduces this learning-process. All data one puts on the table is ciphered, continuously encoded and decoded, accessible to the ones sharing the contract. In this way, the idea of public and private is re-articulated. In the past, physical space was defining these two spheres. One can now be completely public in one's own bedroom, or completely private in the middle of the Red Square in Moscow.

Is this a new way of understanding co-existence?
We currently cohabit with different natures. Animals, avatars, humans and bots all possess different sorts of intelligence that are in no competition but function in a complementary way. Clearly not everybody is equal, not everybody is happy, not everybody has access to everything. But access depends less on one’s place of birth. The challenge is essentially to push yourself to think abstractly and to learn, to use your intellect rather than your senses.

Because the visual is deceiving and not everything you see is really what you think it is.

Realizing that architecture is more than just an image or a render, but the masterful skill of combining things together, was essential to the making of our model. However, being able to think architectonically does not imply that we stopped building. We certainly still do that, but since architectonics is abstract and operational, the building aspect is just one of its possible renders. Architecture remains as relevant as ever.

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