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EDITOR'S NOTE

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Depuis une quinzaine d'années, Gwenola Wagon développe un travail de recherche-crédation fait de films, installations, sites Web, publications et séminaires. Elle y analyse les imaginaires et les enjeux des infrastructures techniques et algorithmiques qui traversent de plus en plus nos sociétés tout en permettant la circulation et le traitement ultra-rapide des biens, des données et de l'information. Les formes et les stratégies adoptées changent d'un projet à l'autre, en raison des liens de collaboration que Gwenola Wagon développe avec des artistes comme Stéphane Degoutin et Jeff Guess, ou des écrivains et philosophes tel que Pierre Cassou-Noguès. Performances, installations, films de bureau (*desktop films*) fondés sur le montage de matériaux circulant sur Internet, plateformes de publication et de diffusion en ligne, écriture narrative et théorique sont les moyens à travers lesquels l'artiste développe un parcours au sein duquel réflexion théorique, fiction spéculative et enquête média-archéologique s'entrelacent – par exemple au sujet des liens entre médias techniques et médiums spirités.

En 2012, *Globodrome* – livre-scénario suivi d'un film-essai – prenait comme point de départ l'itinéraire de Phileas Fogg et Passepartout dans *Le Tour du monde en 80 jours* de Jules Verne, pour réfléchir sur le devenir des représentations du monde à l'âge de Google Earth et de la transmission des données à travers les câbles sous-marins des télécommunications. Trois ans plus tard, *World Brain* (2015) – un film, une installation et un dispositif cartographique en ligne réalisés avec Stéphane Degoutin – explorait les liens entre le réseau de câbles sous-marins qui assurent le transfert des données à travers le globe et certaines idées, croyances et visions (comme celles d'un cerveau

global et d'une connexion universelle) qui, durant les années 1960 et 1970, ont mené à la création d'Internet.

Entre 2018 et 2019, *Bienvenue à Erewhon* – plateforme en ligne et série de vidéos en onze épisodes réalisés avec la collaboration de P. Cassou-Noguès et S. Degoutin – proposait une libre adaptation de la fable philosophique *Erewhon* publiée en 1872 par l'écrivain britannique Samuel Butler. Elle dressait le portrait d'un monde dans lequel l'automatisation a été poussée jusqu'à ses limites extrêmes, à un point tel que les vies humaine, animale et végétale sont entièrement prises en charge par des algorithmes, des logiciels et des robots. La même année, *Psychanalyse de l'aéroport international* (2019) – livre publié avec S. Degoutin – élaborait une analyse du vaste réseau des aéroports internationaux conçu comme « un système unifié, mondial et proliférant », dans lequel se croisent promesse de liberté et contrôle des corps, aspiration à la circulation illimitée et surveillance généralisée, soif de consommation et anxiété face à la menace terroriste.

Planète Ⓔ, livre publié par Gwenola Wagon en 2022 avec les éditions 369, poursuit cette ligne de réflexion sur un monde qui tend à devenir un gigantesque réseau de captation de données et de transmission ultrarapide de biens et d'informations. Au centre du livre, les programmes d'un entrepreneur, nommé « Ⓔ », qui dirige la société du numérique « Ⓕ ». En quelques années, après avoir été lancée comme un petit réseau de vente de livres en ligne, cette société a acquis le monopole de la vente de tous types de biens à l'échelle planétaire. Si l'on n'a aucun mal à identifier Jeff Bezos derrière « Ⓔ », et Amazon derrière « Ⓕ », le livre ne se réduit pas à une enquête sur l'entreprise commerciale américaine : ses origines, son développement, son état actuel, ou ses projets de construction de colonies et de hangars dans l'espace qui offriraient un immense plan d'évasion hors d'une Terre devenue inhabitable.

A travers un récit dans lequel se croisent compte rendu factuel et fiction spéculative, sidération et humour, Gwenola Wagon dépasse les codes de l'enquête. Qui plus est, *Planète Ⓔ* nous introduit dans la logique, souvent délirante, d'un système dans lequel nous évoluons ; celui d'un « hypermarché-monde », produit par un capitalisme numérique, fondé d'un côté sur la maîtrise algorithmique de l'attention, des désirs et des comportements, de l'autre sur celle des réseaux logistiques de stockage, de transmission et de distribution.

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Over the fifteen years, Gwenola Wagon has developed a whole body of research-based work, comprising films, installations, websites, publications and seminars. In it she analyses the fantasies and the challenges that surround the technical and algorithmic infrastructures which increasingly intersect our society and which allow the high-speed flow and processing of goods, data and information. The forms and the strategies she adopts change from one project to another, as a result of the collaborative relationships that Gwenola Wagon develops with artists like Stéphane Degoutin and Jeff Guess, or writers and philosophers such as Pierre Cassou-Noguès. Performances, installations and desktop films, based on the re-editing of materials circulating on the Internet and of online publication and broadcasting platforms, along with narrative

and theoretical writing, are the means through which the artist develops a process in which theoretical reflection, speculative fiction and archaeological-media research become entwined – for example on the subject of the connections between technical media and spiritual mediums.

In 2012, *Globodrome* – a book-screenplay followed by a film-essay – took the itinerary of Phileas Fogg and Passepartout in *Around the World in 80 Days* by Jules Verne as a starting point and reflected on the future of representations of the world in the age of Google Earth and the transmission of data via undersea telecommunication cables. Three years later, *World Brain* (2015) – a film, an installation and an online cartographic tool created with Stéphane Degoutin – explored the links between the network of undersea cables which handle the transfer of data across the globe, and certain ideas, beliefs and visions (such as those of a global brain and a universal connection) which led to the creation of the Internet during the 1960s and 70s. Between 2018 and 2019, *Bienvenue à Erewhon* (Welcome to Erewhon) – an online platform and a series of eleven videos created in collaboration with P. Cassou-Noguès and S. Degoutin – offered a free adaptation of the philosophical tale *Erewhon*, published in 1872 by the British writer Samuel Butler. The work depicts a world in which automation has been pushed to extreme limits, such that human, animal and plant lives are entirely run by algorithms, software and robots. That same year, *Psychoanalyse de l'aéroport international* [Psychoanalysis of the international airport, 2019] – a book published with S. Degoutin – carried out an analysis of the vast network of international airports conceived as “a unified, global and proliferating system”, which combines the promise of freedom with the control of bodies, an aspiration for limitless movement with widespread surveillance, and a thirst for consumption with fear in the face of the terrorist threat.

Planète B, a book published by Gwenola Wagon in 2022 with the publisher 369 éditions, continues in that vein, reflecting on a world increasingly becoming a gigantic network of data acquisition and transmission of goods and information. The book centres around the plans of an entrepreneur named “B”, who leads the digital company “V”. A few years after launching as a small, online bookselling network, the company has acquired a worldwide monopoly on selling all kinds of goods. We may have no trouble in identifying Jeff Bezos as “B” and Amazon as “V”, but the book cannot be reduced to a study of the American Internet giant: its origins, its development, its current state, or its plans to build colonies and warehouses in space which would offer a massive escape plan from a future uninhabitable Earth.

In this narrative, where factual account meets speculative fiction, astonishment and humour, Gwenola Wagon goes beyond the normal rules of investigation. Moreover, *Planète B* takes us inside the often crazy mindset of the system in which we are evolving; that of a world turned into a “hypermarket” produced by digital capitalism, based on one hand on the algorithmic control of attention, desires and behaviours, and on the other on logistical networks of storage, transportation and distribution.

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- 1 Not one of the countless science-fiction stories produced in the 20th century imagined the future would be based on warehouses. Science-fiction, in general, has taken little interest in the logistics of sales infrastructure. Yet the physical organisation of consumerism has plunged humanity into the most extravagant and futuristic of systems. Data centres and delivery depots make any item permanently accessible: a system we could call “planet stock” or even “Planet B”.

- 2 Let's recap: the "V" company was created in the garage of a detached house in a US suburb. At the start, there were only three of them: two programmers and one entrepreneur (Θ). They sent out less than 20 books a day. Today, they send hundreds of parcels per second, millions per day and billions per year. They have depots on every continent from which they distribute anything that anyone could possibly want: mechanical, animal, vegetable, or mineral.
- 3 **Depots**
- 4 The depots are coded using the International Air Transport Association (IATA) nomenclature system for airports. The chosen identifiers use the main three letters of the city where the depot is established: ORY1, MRS1, LYS1, LIL1, PHX6, PHX7, PHX8, TUS1, AZA5, PHX3. Most of the V depots are situated in the United States. At the time of writing, the others are located in: Alberta, Rocky View Country, Leduc County, British Columbia, Annacis Island, New Westminster, Ontario, Brampton, Caledon, Mississauga, Milton, Ottawa, Cuautitlán Izcalli, Prague, Boigny-sur-Bionne, Saran, Montélimar, Sevrey, Lauwin-Planque, Bad Hersfeld, Leipzig, Werne, Rheinberg, Graben, Coblenz, Pforzheim, Brieselang, Dortmund, Winsen, Mönchengladbach, Castel San Giovanni, Avigliana, Passo Corese, Vercelli, Milan, Origgio, Casirate d'Adda, Parme, Poznań, Wrocław, Szczecin-Kołbaskowo, Katowice-Sosnowiec, Gliwice, Łódź, Bratislava, Sered', San Fernando de Henares, Illescas El Prat, Martorelles, Rugeley, Coalville, Daventry, Coventry, Rugby, Bristol, Kegworth, Mansfield, Peterborough, Doncaster, Tilbury, Ridgmont, Milton Keynes, Hemel Hempstead, Dunstable, Manchester, Warrington, Bolton, Chesterfield, Darlington, Bowburn, Durham, Dunfermline, Gourock, Crymlyn Burrows, Swansea, Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Harbin, Jinan, Nanning, Shanghai, Shenyang, Suzhou, Tianjin, Xi'an, Xiamen, Ichikawa, Inzai, Yachiyo, Tajimi, Kawasaki, Odawara, Kyotanabe, Okayama, Daito, Fujiidera, Ibaraki, Sakai, Takatsuki, Tosu, Kawagoe, Kawaguchi, Kawajima, Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Gurgaon, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Calcutta, Bombay, Pune, Dandenong South, Moorebank, Perth, Brisbane, Cajamar.
- 5 Whether they are in Orlando, Tucson, Manhattan or Montélimar, all of these depots have the same outward appearance. They are always grey metal warehouses extending over tens of thousands of square metres. There is no hint as to what people are up to inside. As V develops, its warehouses have become more and more sophisticated. Θ himself was surprised by it. His reaction when shown the plans for a new depot in Fernley, Nevada: "That's wonderful, Jimmy! Get it built!"
- 6 Lights flashing in the aisles and on the shelving units, conveyor belts transporting the products, robots which detect, sort, pack and deliver. The plans for each depot recall a drawing by M.C. Escher.
- 7 In order to keep pace with its "sell everything, straight away, everywhere" motto, V has gradually become a war machine. It poaches executives from combat or ultra-competitive fields, such as military officers or American football coaches¹. It's like an invisible force, stealthily weaving its way into all the strategic areas of the company. The researcher Stacy Mitchell explains that "the company tries to capture all online business: its grip is so strong that we no longer know how to slow it down. The longer we wait, the more complex it will be to curb its rise. All the more so because V destroys many more jobs than it creates²".

8 Stacy Mitchell adds that V mirrors the transformation of the economy of the United States: what's good for V is good for Vmerica. Its logistical activities are embedded deep in the networks with its data centres: Vcloud links the logistic intelligence systems to the distribution centres. The whole thing is deployed across the world at strategic locations. The distribution networks, freight and artificial intelligence systems to manage them consolidate V's empire. After Vmerica, V conquered Europe, Japan, Canada, Brazil, Australia and India. It is now seeking to become the only Internet sales platform in the world.

9 **Click Geography**

10 The automated distribution centre led to the birth of a super-high-performance tool (automated software and robots) in an antiquated place (the metal warehouse). It reduces parallelepipedal architecture to its minimum, both in terms of its construction and its establishment in the city. The storage facility strikes a regressive tone in the history of western architecture. It is the heir of the communal grain store. "The communal grain store was a key step because it was only when farmers began to stockpile that they could stay in the same place and villages formed³." The warehouse could be considered regressive architecture. Its establishment breaks the boundaries of older cities. It conforms to another system.

11 The warehouses form a network with its own coherence: if one warehouse is inactive at a given moment, others will compensate for the shortfall. Each centre is one instance of a collective which has neither inside nor outside, the propagation of which is a concise embodiment of the science-fiction story *Autofac* by Philip K. Dick, in which self-replicating machines in an automated factory no longer stop; they operate autonomously and endlessly produce useless objects. Humans, in the grip of a nuclear disaster, no longer need the objects. The machines continue to produce and to extract the raw materials they need, despite shortages and the threat to the environment. The only way out is to destroy them.

12 The architecture of distribution centres is organised to suit customer orders and their predictability. The centres are the embodiment of the supremacy of Internet trade at the expense of people in the physical world. The network of distribution centres reflects the geography of clicks. The focus is always to be able to dispatch the goods as quickly as possible. The construction of distribution centres is initially determined by the number of clicks likely to be made in the area. In turn, the presence of a distribution centre multiplies the clicks. The network of warehouses extends over the surface of the Earth, following the information pathways. In the physical world of objects, the warehouse is the equivalent of hypertext. It pushes to extremes the idea of a company where all the components, including the goods, must be thought of and treated like information. This could be the place that best reflects our civilisation, in that it brings together the universe of data with that of stock. Rem Koolhaas describes it as the archetype of the 21st century, that of an "architecture which is strictly based on codes, algorithms, technologies, engineering and performance, not intention. Its boredom is hypnotic, its banality breathtaking⁴". Rem Koolhaas sees a "post-human" architecture in these colossal, ultra-utilitarian warehouses.

13 The depots are "halfway between a building for humans and for machines⁵". The distribution centres belong to a company established by and for cyborgs: machines assist employees, employees' movements become more automatic to keep pace with the

supply robots, humans adjust themselves to software. They are all inseminated into the machinery, which covers the planet in all kinds of objects.

14 **Zébulons, Kiva, V robots and humans**

15 During the 1970s, inspired by Albert Ducrocq's robot fox, Bruno Lussato invented the *zébulons* to operate the depots of the Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville (BHV) department store. These were driverless warehouse loading vehicles, in the form of electronic programmable tractors. Engineers came from all over the world to visit the BHV depots and study the wire-guided⁶ *zébulons*, which were capable of stopping automatically before an obstacle. Following maintenance problems, the *zébulons* were abandoned. Bruno Lussato was certainly ahead of his time: it wasn't until several decades later that V took up wire-guiding technology again. But at V, the wire-guiding is steering human employees: pickers, who fetch items. A wire-guided picker can walk several kilometres a day: "As soon as you arrive in front of your section, you have two orange lights which light up and then a red light: that's my reference point. Once I've found the product, I just have to scan it. Everything you have to do is shown on a computer, via a bar-code system which registers the products"⁷.

16 Since the purchase in 2012 of Kiva⁸, a mobile robot business, V has invested a lot in research into artificial intelligence. In the newest centres, it is now the robots who bring the orders to the packers, and not the other way around. Robots topped with baskets transport millions of products. They circulate from one section of shelving to another, like algorithmic bees gathering digital nectar in the rectangular honeycomb cells that make up the depot. An employee explains: "The spaces reserved for humans are on this side. On the other side, that's what we call the zone: robot territory. If I'm not properly equipped, I can't enter, in case I put myself in danger"⁹. The employee switches on his smart jacket. When he enters the zone, the deafening noise diminishes as the robots slow down.

17 Humans are often still the ones who handle the collection of objects on the shelving units in V warehouses. But although the arm grasping the products extends from a human body, it is not guided by the brain inside that body. The worker follows the instructions of a piece of software which optimises his or her routes and calculates his or her movements. For example it might order the worker to report to aisle 134, take object 22 from shelving unit Y, then to aisle 122, and so on, *ad infinitum*. At no point may, or can, the worker make a personal choice about their work. In an assembly line of the industrial age, the skilled worker was the arm of the machine. In an V warehouse, he or she is the arm of the software, an extension of a computer programme¹⁰.

18 Following the example of call centres¹¹, V has introduced guidance by vocal command into its warehouses and keeps track of the slightest error. The company optimises its operations by hunting down any downtime.

19 In his book *En Vmazonie*¹², Jean-Baptiste Malet gets a job at an V distribution centre and documents the daily life of employees. He describes the various tasks to be carried out: unwrapping and inspecting the merchandise, storage and registration, fetching, wrapping and despatching the orders. He depicts the slow disillusionment of the employees, initially happy to have landed a job, whose American dream turns into a totalitarian nightmare. Their tiniest movements have been considered, calculated and measured by V. The packers package up to 100 parcels per hour, more than 800 parcels

per day, almost 5,000 parcels per week. The employees carry out so many repetitive tasks at such a frenetic rate that in a few years, they suffer from muscular-skeletal problems and are affected psychologically. Their bodies are destroyed, they are unfit to find other work and they end their lives on sick leave.

- 20 The cost of the health problems will be covered by states – those who offer state health insurance. Those same states, seduced by the promise of job creation, who did not hesitate to pay out aid to help build the \forall centres. This could be called “destructive creation”: while it may be easy to count the number of jobs created by \forall , it is far more difficult to count the number it destroys.

NOTES

1. Their mission is to resolve problems such as: how do you deliver an assortment of parcels quickly and deliver each package to its destination? How do you calculate the precise delivery times while offering the lowest price and determining the most efficient route? How do you pack several articles ordered by a client in the same box? See Stone, Brad. *The Everything Store: \forall and the Age of \forall* , New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2013
2. In 2017, the United States had lost 80,000 independent small businesses and 35,000 small and medium factories. Stacy Mitchell: “ \forall Doesn’t Just Want to Dominate the market – it Wants to Become the Market”, *The Nation*, February 15, 2018.
3. Andouze, Jean. Chapouthier, Georges. Laming, Denis. Oudeyer, Pierre-Yves. *Mondes mosaïques, astres, villes, vivant et robots*, Paris: CNRS éditions, p. 113
4. Statement by Rem Koolhaas during a video interview introducing the exhibition *Countryside: The Future* at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2020-2021.
5. Wainwright, Oliver. “The countryside is where the radical changes are: Rem Koolhaas goes rural”. *The Guardian*, February 11, 2020
6. They were guided by a wire stuck to the floor.
7. “How does it work when you buy something from \forall ?”, *Investigations et enquêtes*, YouTube, December 11, 2019
8. Kiva Robotics produces the robots which move the parcels around inside \forall 's warehouses. Kiva is a word borrowed from the Pueblo native American people which refers to the circular room where their rituals and gatherings take place. Lots of little Kiva robots – and less people!
9. “How does it work when you buy something from \forall ?”, *Investigations et enquêtes*, YouTube, December 11, 2019
10. Degoutin, Stéphane. Wagon, Gwenola. “The world as a delivery depot”, *Working Promesse: les mutations du travail, Catalogue de la Biennale Internationale Design Saint-Etienne 2017*, 2017. Edited by Olivier Peyricot
11. *Ibid.*
12. Malet, Jean-Baptiste. *En \forall mazone. Infiltré dans le « meilleur des mondes »* [In Amazonia. Infiltrating the “best of all worlds”], Paris: Fayard, 2013