GÁRGOLA
Mario Santamaría

Curated by Alexandra Laudo

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The term metaverse originates from Neal Stephenson's science fiction novel Snow Crash, published in 1992. In the book, the author describes a subculture of people who, through portable devices, are almost continuously connected to a virtual world. Such people are called "gargoyles" because of their grotesque appearance.

A gargoyle is a protruding pipe that spouts water from the roof of a building at a distance from the wall. It often ends in the form of a grotesque or fantastic figure. It comes from the French word gargouille, derived from the verb gargouiller, which means "to produce a liquid-like noise in a pipe".

In the spring of 2022, the astrophysical community detected what so far appears to be the most distant object ever observed, HD1, located at least thirteen and a half billion light years from Earth, and three hundred million light years from the big bang. It is a bright spot in the deep universe that emits extremely bright ultraviolet light. This spot could be an early galaxy, one of those formed shortly after the Big Bang, which were hotter and more luminous than modern galaxies; but it could also be a supermassive black hole, capable of swallowing huge amounts of gas, and with an environment that could emit high-energy photons.

Mario Santamaria has created an avatar within the Voxels - Ethereum Virtual World metaverse, and placed it at the same height as HD1 is from Earth, thirteen and a half billion light years away. From there, he has the avatar begin to jump to the metaterrestrial surface of the Voxels, in a jump that is also a swift fall in deep time, and which, if it were to occur at the speed of light, would take thirteen and a half billion light years to complete. As the artist's avatar jumps at a speed of approximately one hundred and twenty kilometres per hour, his jump will be completed in eighty-nine thousand thirty-eight billion three hundred and seventy thousand twenty-six million years.

Santamaría has also acquired a small plot of land occupied by the Centre d'Art La Panera in Next Earth, a metaverse that digitally reproduces the Earth on a 1:1 scale and in which users can buy and sell portions of territory that, though virtual in nature, correspond to a specific location on the globe. The artist has projected inside the main floor of La Panera the perimeter of this plot of land, of which he is the owner in the metaverse, and presents his installation, "Gárgola", inside this subspace, but leaves the rest of the exhibition hall empty, and at the same time exceeds its limits by also occupying part of the centre's library. With this gesture, Santamaría confers an architectural materiality on a space which, despite being intangible and virtual, is traversed by a set of economic and symbolic operations that link it closely to its physical referent, and which have an indisputable impact on the materiality of the world. The irruption of this structure in the space of La Panera functions as an indication, not of the existence of a multitude of virtual worlds that

intersect with the other that we have defined as "real", but of the dominance of a vectorial epistemic regime, of a way of understanding and ordering the physical world that does not respond to human experience, but to the optimal deployment and efficient functioning of structures and systems that operate on a global scale.

In particular, the artist is interested in those that enable the widespread implementation of interconnected networks for the flow of materials and information, such as the internet, which tend to be mistakenly perceived as intangible because they operate in a decentralised way and because their infrastructural deployment in the territory is supposedly opaque. In his artistic practice, Santamaría identifies and makes visible the material dimension of these networks and structures, and destabilises the conventions that make us conceive of them as incorporeal realities.

In "Gárgola", the allusion to these infrastructures is found above all in the deployment of a modular floor, not very passable and uncomfortable for the visitor, but efficient for implementing within the space a liquid cooling system, made up of polystyrene tubes, water and a hydraulic pump. In the installation there are also tubes of another type, three steel bars that fall vertically from the ceiling into the space, and at the ends of which there is a technological device - a computer in the longest bar, and a television screen in each of the other bars. The screens, connected to the internet via the computer, and suspended low to the ground, show the avatar's impossible leap into the metauniverse, falling from thirteen and a half billion light years away.

Like all technological devices, these devices function optimally within a certain temperature range. If they overheat, they can be damaged and become inoperative, which is why they are usually equipped with internal ventilation mechanisms. Santamaría connects the computer and the screens to the liquid cooling system he has created inside the space, in order to make this thermal excess more evident, which he understands as a small-scale expression of the overheating generated by the infrastructures of communications networks, such as large data centres, where a multitude of servers and digital storage systems are permanently active, consuming an immense amount of energy resources that in turn cause an excess of energy in the form of heat.

The liquid cooling system that Santamaría presents in "Gárgola" alludes, due to its formal similarity, to so many other tubular structures that criss-cross the planet, and through which a constant flow of materials and resources of various types takes place: from the networks of Ethernet and fibre optic cables through which packets of information circulate continuously at high speed, to the great underground conduits that cross countries, seas and continents transporting gas and oil. By channelling the residual temperature produced by technological devices into this cooling system, the artist suggests an interesting analogy: the possibility of thinking of data as an extractable energy, as a new raw material. In 2017, The Economist claimed in a controversial headline that the world's most valuable resource was no longer oil, but data. Some time later, the writer and filmmaker Oleksiy Radynski updated this statement by focusing on the progressive replacement of oil by natural gas, and reformulated it as a hypothesis, with the following question: "Will liquid modernity based on oil give way to a gaseous post-modernity based on data? Mario Santamaría confronts us with these questions, and also questions the place of the body, death, experience and life in this artificial conglomerate of metaverses, computer systems and datification.

When we observe the avatar's jump, we only perceive an abstract and diaphanous image, slightly changing, and a sound of speed and fall, similar to a white noise. It is not possible to identify, in this representation, the virtual body that jumps from the most remote and distant place of human knowledge, nor is it possible to identify the space that it travels through and that surrounds it as it falls. What we see is a glitch, an error that expresses the collapse of the image and signals the limit of what can be represented. Technological devices - such as the three telescopes and the radio telescope that made it possible to identify HD1 - expand the potentiality of human perception and at the same time make its limits evident; they function as extensions of the eye and the senses, but reveal the unbridgeable distance between knowledge and the life of the body. Similarly, the unrecognisable image of the avatar expresses a friction between the possibilities of an unlimited digital existence and the limits of a physical, mortal body.

But this collapse of the image, which occurs due to an unconventional and unintended use of the functions offered by the software of the metaverse in which the avatar is situated, also has a political agency, a transformative potential. It is in line with the theories of Legacy Russell's Glitch Feminism, with the Critical Art Ensemble's call to produce "electrical disturbances", or with Vilém Flusser's claims about the need to produce new technical images that operate against the automaticity established by the programmes. The glitch is an accident that interrupts the constant, efficient and accelerated flow of data; it is an interference in the production of hegemonic images. And that is why it is also a space of possibility, a disruptive void from which to imagine new forms of existence.

Exposición

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