

Jamie Allen

Metabolic Futuring

Özgün Eylül İşcen: I will begin with the exciting term you are contributing to the Counter-N. The metabolic emphasis seems to have taken many forms and contents throughout your creative practice. One of its most striking aspects is how the metabolic acts as a model or method that addresses the plasticity and scalability (or their very limits) of ecosystems we are partaking in. In the case of computing, the metabolic view heightens our attention toward its multiple registers, from the most intimate of psychic and perceptual levels to the larger scales of social, economic, and environmental systems. Indeed, from an infrastructural angle, it helps cut through the reductive binaries of material and symbolic, local and global, political and aesthetic/technical. Eventually, it motivates further experimentation within epistemic traditions, institutional critiques, etc., to nourish more transductive encounters for knowledge production beyond its abstracting, extractive schemes.

How would you describe or define metabolic futuring? How do you engage with metabolic futuring in your work that tackles varied themes related to the planetary urgencies of our times while navigating multiple locales, institutions, mediums, and species?

Jamie Allen: Wow, what an excellent summary and exposition. Thank you for that; you've covered much of what I would want to say in your question! Let's see what more I can eke out...

The way I am now trying to think about creative practice is the generation of ideas that move people, move me, conceptual pathways that make you do things that impel particular forms of action and living. Whether or not you're into all the current manifestation-ish type of thinking, there's a phrase by adrienne maree brown that often comes to mind: "What you pay attention to grows."¹ Metabolic registers, it seems to me, help us pay attention to the more direct and subtle influences of technical systems on nontechnical ones. This is maybe why metabolic thinking has found so many registers - from Marxist political ecology to urban planning to bodily health - helping to characterize how our always processual, permeable, and exchange-based lives, thoughts, and mobilities create or forestall particular futures. Metabolism is a register of relational individuation (or even *instauration*, to use a fancier term), foregrounding integration, incorporation, and individual-collective or organism-environment relations. So, I might say, "what we choose to metabolize, grows." Growth itself is, of

course, also a metabolic metaphor that is full of ambiguities – an entity can also wind up metabolizing toxicity, or inordinate amounts of accumulated wastes can get piled up through inappropriate or disproportionate kinds or amounts of metabolisms.

Taken as openly, creatively, and widely as possible, for the moment, metabolism also *motivates* – it’s an analytic method, metaphor, aesthetic, and a way of telling stories about exchanges, reliances, and relations, etc. It pushes things along *in time* and essentially generates the need for response-ability. We must choose to *do something* as we’re *doing something all the time*, anyway. Metabolism is also a *motive* for action that makes the boundaries between life and death less binary, and it is a timely *motif* that seems to pop up here and there in essential times, places, theories, and practices when needed.

Metabolic futuring, then, is related to very old ideas like Justus von Liebig’s (1803–73) “*conscious control of material distribution*” (italics added). Simply paying attention to, figuring, and negotiating flows of matter, energy, and information, in concert and intertwined. This might allow for metabolic planning and responsibilities which develop more active engagements with the life/nonlife nexus.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: Can you elaborate more on where you situate “futuring” in your work or “countering” in metabolic futuring? I would be interested in exploring the spatial and temporal imaginaries that the concept of metabolic futuring enables and which help us recast our coupling with the Earth, technology, etc.

On the other hand, your use of “cyclical” seems productive as a model to talk through these interconnected sites, exchanges, and histories. Would you like to elaborate more on its affordances, even if it sometimes means exposing the very limits of such diagramming? Why is it significant for your discursive and aesthetic inquiries centered around metabolism?

Finally, aligning well with the theme of futuring, in your online portfolio I came across a reference to Huiying Ng’s idea of “metabolizing hope, interrupting the medium.”² I wonder about your take on it following your conception of the metabolic regarding a “healing and reparative desire” (in your words) amid the decay we are all part of, though unevenly. And where would you situate the medium and our very coupling with it in this context?

Jamie Allen: Because the terms and frameworks of thought that we sit or stick with are essential for how we live, think, and act into the future, I have indeed found metabolism kind of motivating, and hopeful, artistically and otherwise. With metabolic frameworks, we can talk about that satiating feeling of eating a bowl of rice or pasta, as well

as logistified supply chains, and the role of media in desire-making, possibly even in the same sentence. This seems to me to be a worthwhile thing to be able to do given the anxieties, real and imagined crises, stories, and understandings we need at the moment, and in the roles we occupy as artists, organizers, thinkers, cultural actors, etc. In this way, metabolism is different than more structural and epochal frames like “infrastructure” or “the Anthropocene” (conceptual rubrics that I’ve worked with for a long time!). Huiying Ng captures this well in her text, a text which I really love for all its suggestiveness.

I would like, in collaboration with many others, to discover creative practices that go beyond merely critical analyses or engagements, ideas that cultivate this kind of hope. People like Gary Zhang, Laura Lotti, Xiaowei Wang, Toshi Ozawa, Louise Carver, Martin Muller, and many others and myself have been working with ideas of “metabolic media” and what it might be like to live in “post-metabolic” times. These are ways of trying to talk and act transversally along a technological-ecological continuum which acknowledges that metabolic rifts (interruptions to cyclical ecological relationships that balance use and restoration, labor and rest, and exploitation and replenishment) are the result of a kind of modernist somnambulism, which projects epistemologies of harmony and cyclical balance in the service of continual growth through its diagrammatics (media and representations), while simultaneously tearing any actual, existing balances and harmonies asunder in real, physical ways. Punctuations like war are horrifying, sad, gruesome flourishings of these imbalances.

There is a thanopolitical “sleight of hand” that denies the realities of death and decay in a crass psychoanalytical way, relegating them to the subconscious. In fact, a quite effective way to ensure that no one pays attention to or reacts to systemic modern violences, is to ensure that they are unsubtle: inconceivable, unspeakable atrocious systems or acts almost necessitate passivity and detachment. Which creates a need for counter-practices: new kinds of metabolic creativities, actions, figures, and therapeutics. “Creative metabolic practices” of this kind would help with necessary transitions toward new ways of thinking and living, and also make more present how life is predicated on death, and of course, vice versa. I sometimes talk about this with folks as practices of metabolic “anti-rift” or “counter-rift,” which address the planetary scale effects of localized action, but attempt to undo the “series of metabolic rifts” that McKenzie Wark has said is *the Anthropocene*. We attempt practices which begin to heal the rifts wrought by the death-drive of a duplicitous dream of techno-capitalism and its media.

Özgün Eylül İçcen: Nowadays, we only witness death, it feels. Still, the collective struggles for life and justice that are motivated by urgency, as much as their contested histories, also manifest the

inherent contradictions of these rifts. Can you elaborate more on some of these practices that tackle technology-driven developments in the sectors of the finance or biotech industries in their complex situatedness, if not unevenness, as a way of unpacking or even reconfiguring them? How can we approach scalability or where to locate accountability, especially when aspiring to some desire or demand for change? Would you like to share some specific guiding examples from your ongoing research?

Jamie Allen: My own attempts are often about metabolic attachments and accountability toward fusing the way I have come to study infrastructural flows, technologies, supply chains, and production processes with human and nonhuman biology, emotion, and behavior. Lately, I've found it inspiring to draw on the longer history of traditions that have already "done this" in Western and other Indigenous cultural traditions. I've collaboratively designed wakes and funerals for groups of people to link up with the decomposition and integration that take place during eating. "A Metabolic Procession" is a scholarly, artistic, and practice project that creates "processional" artistic-research formats. It was initially developed with my friend, the artist Evy Jokhova, to bring people together through ideas and actions that would inspire a certain kind of reverence or gratitude. Louise Carver and TBA21-Academy first commissioned it for the MAAT museum in Lisbon, and it was subsequently re-performed for the Bauhaus of the Seas program (curated by Mariana Pestana), which included ministerial, governance, and policymaking participants. This latter event is the kind of thing I'd like to do more of. The broader creative artistic project draws inspiration from ritual practices and supplicant texts that are or attempt to be trans-substantiative. Secular incantations, performance, and pageantry are used to mark the metabolic exchanges that exist along spectrums between life and death.

There are more practical research angles relating to digital supply chains and media making, but I am also building on these participatory and performative strategies drawing on different traditions that help make public the metabolic exchanges of material, energy, and information that take place at other scales, like cities and islands. At the Malta Biennale in 2024, myself and collaborators from La Rivoluzione delle Seppie (<https://larivoluzionedelleseppie.org/>) are creating a set of *giganti* (large puppet characters that are used in processions and parades) to have public dialogues about the geopolitics of energy, materiality, and human consumption on the island nation of Malta, which should be both entertaining and provocative.

Özgün Eylül İşcen: We are also curious to hear more about your historical, theoretical, and artistic references that underlie your conception of metabolism as a model of understanding the interconnected

systems of art, science, and technology through an ecological framework.

It is also fascinating how you navigate these multi-sited inquiries on planetary futures across not only the different parts of the world but also different ecologies, such as oil wells, rivers, and farms. What are the institutional or artistic affordances (as well as challenges) through which you are able to cultivate transductive encounters across these locales with the hope of subverting the colonial/imperial logic of today's techno-capitalism? Or how do/could those transductive exchanges look from the perspective of weaving planetary intimacies despite and through all the asymmetries and frictions through which they come into being?

Jamie Allen: It may well be that contradictions are a generalized feature of, not an exception to, metabolic existence. Life, truly, is predicated on death. We all need to eat things that are or were once alive, to continue to exist. That contradiction, for a long line of speculative anthropological thought, is amongst the origins of human creativity: attempting to grapple with the cessation of life that is literally *required* for human existence, we have concocted all kinds of rituals, gods, traditions, processes, abstractions, and complex systems. This relates as well to the infrastructural politics of mostly hiding wastewater treatment and power plants in the countryside and drives a lot of the curiosities I have "as an artist" (I'm not sure if I'm an artist).

I would like to be part of local and global communities. I would like to understand and experience the material realities of other places and interact with other people without traveling. The media practices I have used in my work are vehicles that produce both distance and proximity simultaneously. We are all, I think, living, breathing contradictions. The idea that we, also as modern subjects, are somehow supposed to escape this predicament - to be consistent in the face of contradictory economic, political, and social demands, or the inconsistencies inscribed into *life itself* - seems to be me to be amongst the most exhausting and debilitating demands we could make. This also, of course, forgives the sort of peripatetic multidisciplinary, multimedia, and collaborative practice I continue to be drawn to pursuing.

My own trajectory came through precisely this desire, initially as a musician and as a pirate radio broadcaster, to re-materialize and ground the sacred work of media and art making in its rather "profane" bases. This is not to debase the importance of the sacred, the mythic, and the storied, but in order to enrich our stories with universal, physical, and phenomenological interpretations and interests. Lately, I've been rather inspired by the straightforwardness of artists and

others who were acting in the 1970s, maybe the last time in generational memory that we felt the pinch of petroculture-driven climate change. Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison ("The Harrisons") did these superbly *actual* installations of crab farms and hydroponic plant production in a sort of institutional-critique vibe, and self-sufficiency, agricultural and critical technology practitioners like Masanobu Fukuoka ("The One-Straw Revolution," 1978). And the written works by Wendell Berry, Eliot Coleman, as well as ecofeminists Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Carolyn Merchant, and systems thinkers like Joan Martínez-Alier and Giuseppe Munda.³ All of this is, of course, as necessary and promising as it is also contradictory, as survivalist, prepper, doomer, and conspiracy movements mark a turn toward libertarian autonomies which can isolate and dissolve communal infrastructures and provoke a retreat from political and civic life, or moreover, fuel a lurch towards authoritarian and fascist neo-nationalism.

This word "transduction" that you bring in is particularly helpful for this idea of different kinds of congruence between material and meaningful worlds. Transducers are mostly physical media devices that convert one form of energy into another, and this can be done with a great deal of modulation, loss, or transformation; or with less, through more aligned and appropriate processes. It is a helpful metaphor to think about institutional and artistic form, or where and how you move through the world and do things with other people, as sometimes it is important to provide a great deal of resistance and sometimes it is better just to transfer energies, unimpeded.

As far as the hope of subverting the colonial and imperial logic of today's techno-capitalism goes: yes, I want to help do that.

Özgün Eylül İçsen: All this conversation has made me curious about what a metabolic take on artificial intelligence would look like, and where both terms - artificiality and intelligence - could be expanded. I know this is a long and heated debate, which could be a theme of another conversation. Would you like to suggest further Counter-Ns (e.g., N-futuring, N-computing) and offer some thoughts on them?

Jamie Allen: Artificiality and intelligence are terms that suffer from the same, unfortunate binary rationalisms that "life" and "death" do. They immediately put into place juxtapositions and appeal to notions of nature, origins, and various kinds of exceptionalism (human, cerebral, bio). Metabolic relations are, to me, specifically about sitting, sliding, or gliding between natural-artificial boundaries, superseding the ways in which human or computational intelligences become monolithic and the only recognized forms of meaning-making.

More practically, of course, already natural-and-artificial metabolic existence is constantly modulated by technological paradigms and specific technologies. And so, AI, like the internet, like television, like global logistics SAP systems, will bring with it fundamental transformations of production, employment, and governance, and these will, of course, reconstitute rates and relations between the living and the dead. There are coming changes to the techno-economic paradigm that will be widespread and will, importantly I think, bring into structural crisis through their rates of adoption and action. I suppose that's why I'm interested in returning to collectivity, and traditions and attentional forms that help provoke appreciation, reverence, and admiration. These might be one way of counteracting the rapacious, progressivist fervor that we are now witnessing and that seems so repetitive to those of us who have lived through, and participated in, prior periods of digital messianism. Or at least this one kind of metabolic hope.

As for Counter-Ns and further publications.⁴ I would love to see some of these, if you haven't done them already!

Abundance Futuring (counter-scarcity?) - It would be great to hear more about how the constraints and safety we all must subscribe to will also motivate and open out into other modes of joy and expression. Someone like Caroline Sindors or Dani Admiss would be great to hear this from.

Feminist Futuring (counter-masculine?) - This seems an obvious choice, but someone like Patricia Reed would blow our minds on this question, I think.

Black and Brown Futuring (counter-white?) - If you could get Fred Moten to talk on this, the world would benefit.

Risk Futuring (counter-security?) - There are dimensions of anxiety, risk, and planning that I'm constantly trying to comprehend, from the personal to the institutional, from the legal to the emotional. Gary Zhang, please tell us what you think?

Indigenous Futuring (counter-colonial?) - There are obvious resonances with the Middle East crisis in the current moment, and I would love to think about "indigenizing" as a verb for a globalized populace. Kim TallBear would be an amazing person to hear about this from.

- 1 adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).
- 2 Huiying Ng, "Soil's Metabolic Rift: Metabolizing Hope, Interrupting the Medium," *HKW Technosphere Magazine*, 29 May 2019, available at <https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/contribution/soils-metabolic-rift-metabolizing-hope-interrupting-the-medium>.
- 3 The specific texts are: Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012); Eliot Coleman, *The New Organic Grower* (Chelsea, VA: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2018); Vandana Shiva, *Monocultures of the Mind: Perspectives on Biodiversity and Biotechnology* (London, UK: Zed Books; Penang: Third World Network, 1993); Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, *Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy* (New York: Zed Books, 2000); Carolyn Merchant, *The Anthropocene and the Humanities: From Climate Change to a New Age of Sustainability* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020); Joan Martínez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* (Cheltenham, UK/Northampton, US: Edward Elgar, 2003); Giuseppe Munda, "'Measuring Sustainability': A Multi-Criterion Framework," *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, vol. 7 (2005): 117-34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-003-4713-0>.
- 4 Along with the lovely folks at [HUB Journal of Research in Art, Design and Society](https://www.hubjournal.org/), a peer-reviewed and open-access research journal of arts, design, and performing arts, myself and Louise Carver are helping pull together a special issue entitled "Metabolic Media." We conceive it as an invitation to think about artistic, scientific, research, and technological practices that consider how we show, communicate, store, transmit, analyze, and experience metabolic information, as well as how these processual phenomena are taken up by creative practitioners in media, art, and design. In the context of shifting, strained, or even pathological metabolic relations across scales, forms, zones, and bodies, we ask after projects, reflections, and interventions at the intersection of media and metabolic flows, systems, and processes. For further information, please see the open call: <https://i2ads.up.pt/hub/calls.html>.

Jamie Allen's Bio:

Jamie Allen (he/him) is an artist-researcher and organizer occupied with the resonances between metabolisms, ecologies, technologies, infrastructures, and institutions. He makes experiments and research, writing, and media, material artworks and events, encounters and workshops, talks and other platforms for publishing and public-making. He is concerned with how technologies and media affect psychic, social, material, and natural ecologies. Most often in collaboration, he creates extra-disciplinary extra-versions, engaging with infrastructures, science and technology, and media studies through experimental art, media, and design in interaction with natural and human sciences (ecology, geology, geography, ethnography, anthropology, amongst others). Jamie was born in Canada, lives in Europe, and is a Senior Researcher at the Critical Media Lab Basel, having previously held posts as Canada Research Chair in Infrastructure, Media and Communications at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD), Head of Research with the Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design (CIID), and Assistant Director of Culture Lab, Newcastle University. <https://jamieallen.com>.

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