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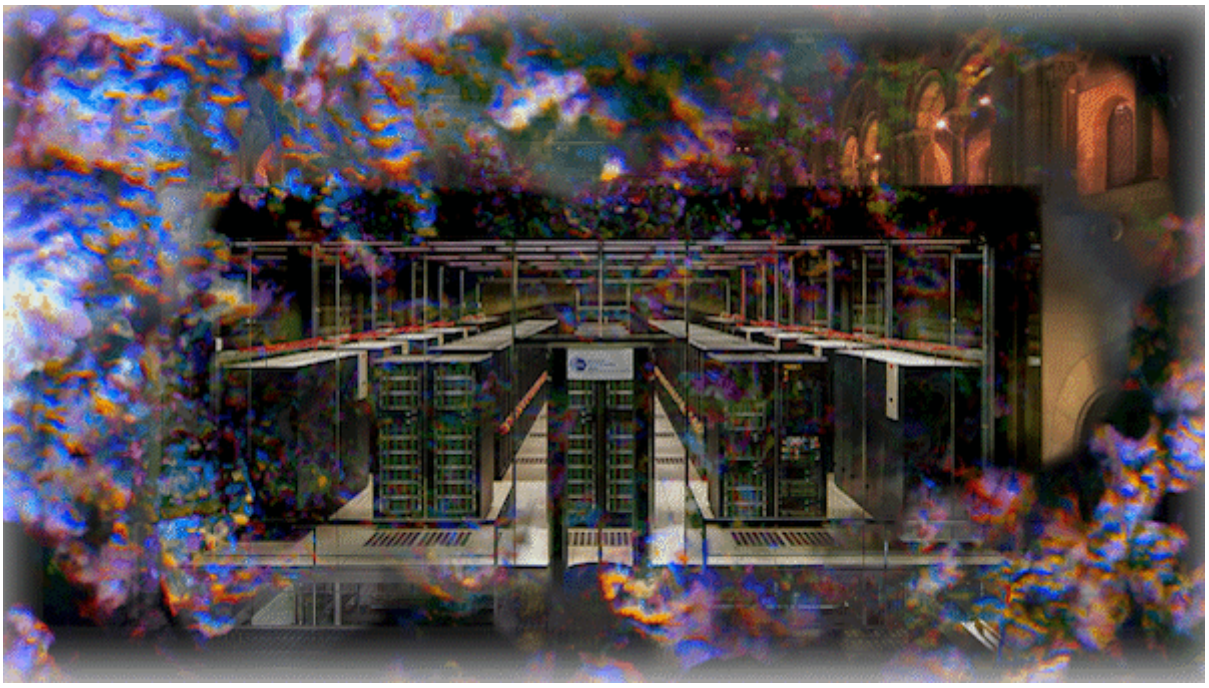
World-Burning & Flat-Earthing

Rehearsing Pasts to Inquire about the Earth Otherwise

Guillemette Legrand

Even though the critical inquiry into climate sciences by feminist scholars and art practitioners (among others) is well-established, it still seems to trigger controversies, accusing this discourse of relativizing scientific knowledge. At a time when world leaders are climate deniers, this text seeks to negotiate with other ways of thinking with the Earth by decentering climate practices from an exclusive (hard) scientific rationalization.





A gif of a short film showing a globe floating and turning red in front of an image of a desacralized church at the Barcelona Supercomputer Center. Visual credits: Guillemette Legrand; created for the panel «Imagination as a site of struggle» during the MESH Festival, 2024.

In 2022, after presenting my research on climate images from the IPCC report (Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change) at an Art and Science conference, I was confronted by a disgruntled climate scientist who hurled the most provocative accusation at me, calling me a flat-Earther! I recently shared the story of this exchange with anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena, and the anecdote of my «flat-Earthing» experience became a recurring thread in our public conversation. She explored multiple possible readings and offered her own responses to the situation. Marisol's re-enactment of my experience inspired me to reimagine my encounter with the scientist. In this article, I contemplate different responses I could have given to the provocation. Through these rehearsals of different pasts, I practice Marisol's concept of «not knowing, in the presence of …,» which encourages us to attune to how others make world(s) and to «acknowledge that what we know can always be exceeded by what we do not or cannot fully comprehend.»[1] Although my rehearsals emerge from a need to resist the scientist's provocation—one that dismissed other modes of inquiring and describing the world—they also seek to unravel the multiple ways of knowing that were at play in our encounter.

I am on stage presenting my research, speculating on the technical production of a specific climate image, which I will refer to in this text as the «red globe.» I am showing a visualization representing temperature change over the next 100 years based on the most pessimistic climate scenario. The Earth has turned red. The rising temperatures are projected onto a globe rendered with the embossed outline of a world map. I mention that the choice of colors conveys a tacit understanding that red stands for «heat» and «danger,» situating the image within a specific Eurocentric convention of climate representation. Through my fictional account of how this «red globe» image was produced, I question the limitation of the globe imaginary as a recurring visual regime used to depict Earth's climate. I discuss how this image and its underlying infrastructure provide a cosmological description of the Earth in the future—one that recursively shapes climate actions in the present. I ask: How does Earth become world(s) or, in this case, a burning world,[2] and how does this image tell the eschatological story of the Earth. The «red globe» image is at the heart of the rehearsals of the past about to be told.

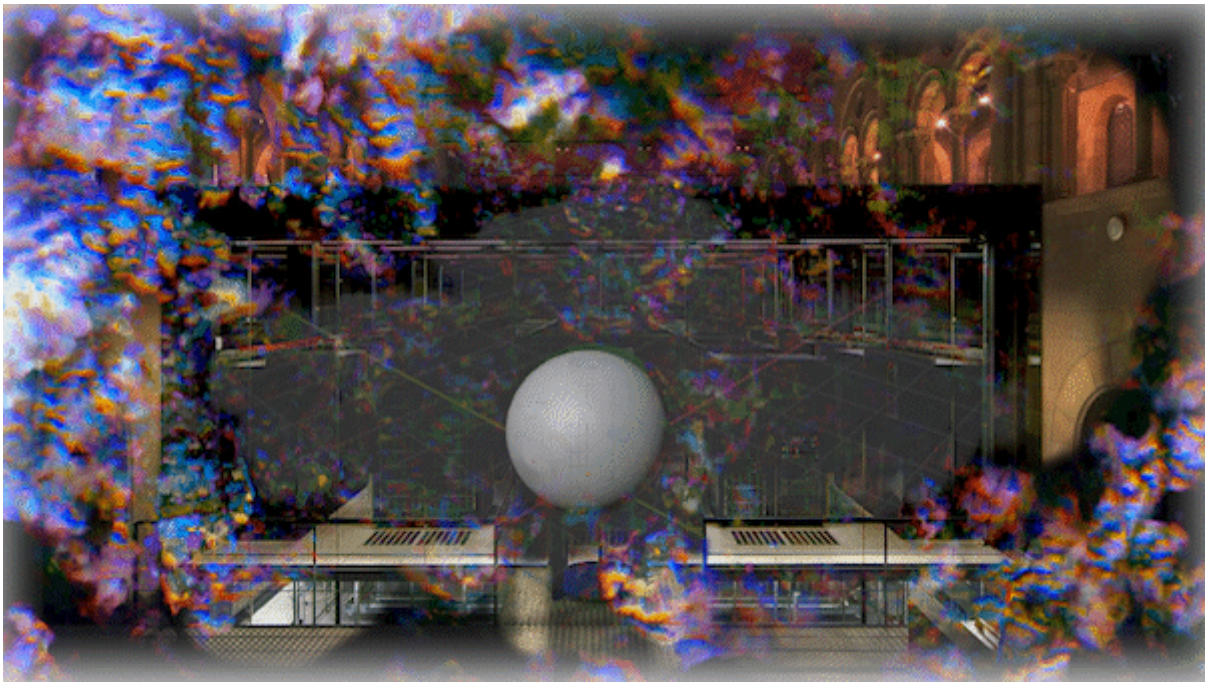
When I finish presenting, two people approach me: a university student and a practicing scientist. I remember wondering whether they might be family members. The student smiles and shares their enthusiasm for my presentation, while the scientist remains more reserved, silently observing our exchange. As our discussion seems to come to an end, the scientist thrusts himself into the conversation to point out—what he perceives is—a misconception in my reading of color in the image I presented. They explain how the daylight color spectrum contradicts cultural interpretation of color, where «red» occurs at a lower temperature and «blue» at a higher one. As I begin to clarify that I am not addressing the scientific meaning of colors, but rather commenting on the affective intention behind the image, the scientist abruptly interrupts me. My response doesn't seem to matter, as he is just getting started. Then comes the question, still echoing within me:

«Do you believe the Earth is flat?»

I am so stunned that my defense mechanism kicks in—I force a laugh as I try to assess how serious the scientist is about this question. I stand frozen in the conference room, wrapped in a tangle of emotions, feeling upset, and maybe also a slight sense of pride, which I cannot fully explain at the time. The student looks embarrassed and makes a disapproving remark. (I am not sure what exactly is said as I am going through an out-of-body experience). When the level of discomfort reaches its peak, the scientist leaves, followed by the student, and I finally move in the opposite direction, spatially embodying the impasse we had found ourselves in.

The most unsettling part wasn't being called out as a conspiracy theorist, but the intention behind the question. It felt like an attempt to render my words irrational and irrelevant in that context, effectively excluding me from the regime of truth in the name of (self-proclaimed) scientific rationality. Since the encounter, beyond the only sound I was able to produce in the moment—a loud and synthetic laugh—I have rehearsed different answers I wish I had given. I would like to share these with you here.

Rehearsing Pasts I



A gif of a short film shows a gray globe turning into a flat plane in a vector space in front of an image of a desacralized church at the Barcelona Supercomputer Center. Visual credits: Guillemette Legrand; created

for the panel «Imagination as a site of struggle» during the MESH festival, 2024.

My first rehearsed answer would be something like:
«I don’t believe the Earth is ‹flat,›
but I also don’t believe the Earth is a ‹globe.›
Or maybe I believe the Earth is both:
a globe,
a plane,
all at once,
but ‹not only.›»[3]

Then I would have asked the scientist: do you believe the Earth is a «red globe»?
(Mirroring his question to essentialize his position.)

Since I am taking you through my rebuttal,
time is irrelevant
So I’ll conflate some more timelines:
I would mention my encounter with the actual maker of the «red globe» image,
a German scientist.
A year after the conference,
I asked the scientist to walk me through how the «red globe» was created.

And with no surprise, the «red globe» was born out of a flat plane in a vector space and from the belief of what a hot, burning earth should look like in the imaginary of the scientist.

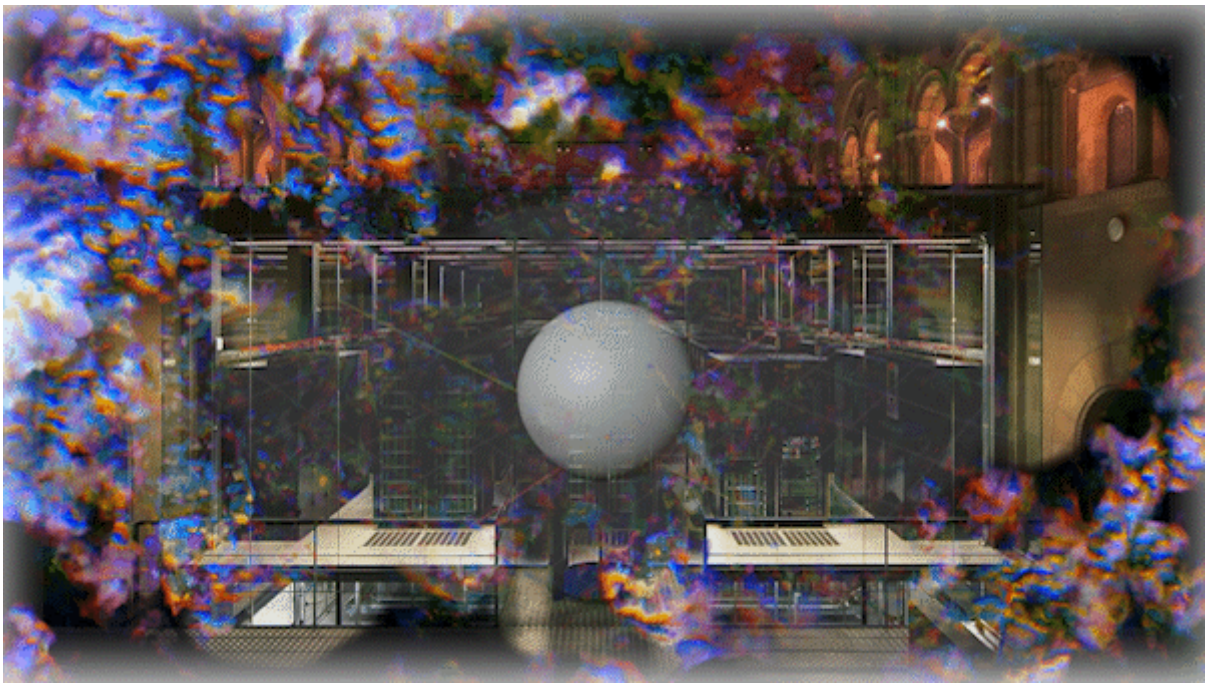
The «red globe» is the manifestation of the totalizing approach of computation to render the Earth as a complete object-system that can be controlled.

I would specify to the scientist:
«I am not relativizing the data projected on the red globe.
Instead, I question the belief system attached to these data,
the visual regime of the globe,
as it removes the viewer from any point of access to the information it depicts
or even any sense of accountability.

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it:
‹The globe is on our computers.
No one lives there.›»[4]

I would continue:
«Flat-Earth is as much of a belief as globe-Earth is.
The virtualization of Earth-Earth makes us both believers,
divergent ones, but believers nonetheless,
as Marisol de la Cadena has pointed out to me.»[5]

Rehearsing Pasts II



A gif of a short film shows a gray globe turning into a flat plane in a vector space in front of an image of a desacralized church at the Barcelona Supercomputer Center. Visual credits: Guillemette Legrand; created for the panel «Imagination as a site of struggle» during the MESH festival, 2024.

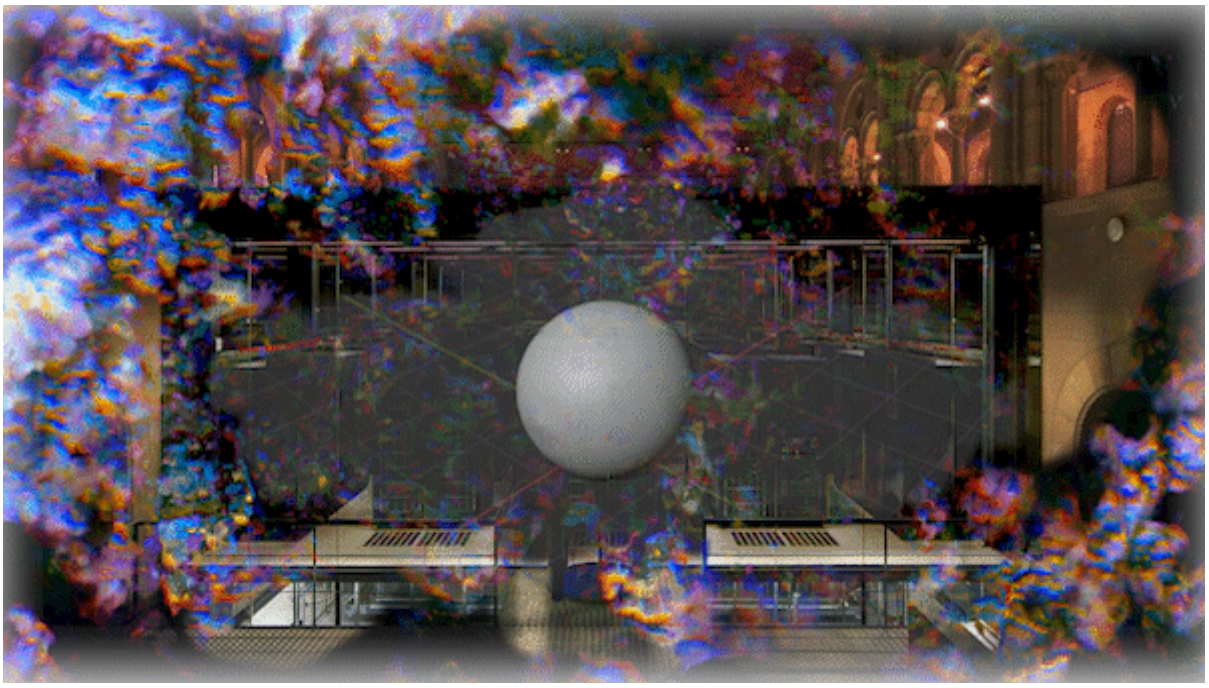
In another time loop where my daring self would have shown up,
I would respond with something like:
«Interesting that you mentioned flat-Earth theory because conspiracy theories are very powerful counter-narratives to dominant scientific knowledge, especially to the ‹techno-capitalistic burning optimism› that is inseparable from the emergence of any new tech.

Of course, conspiracy theories,
and what gets coined as such,
contain a mixed bag of narratives,
embedded intentions,
and modes of instrumentalization,
but they can no longer be dismissed
as they move from the margins to the mainstream.»

I would have continued by saying:
«Your question, or rather accusation, is the manifestation
of the asymmetry of power exercised by scientific institutions between those who know (the bearer of so-called proper knowledge) and those who believe.

The act of countering scientific knowledge is not only conducted by people
who are tin-foil-hat-wearing caricatures;
it is about practices and people who seek to describe the Earth beyond a sole calculable object
and through
diverging,[6]
accountable,
and plural world-cosmologies.»

Rehearsing Pasts III



A gif of a short film shows a gray globe turning into a flat plane in a vector space in front of an image of a desacralized church at the Barcelona Supercomputer Center. Visual credits: Guillemette Legrand; created for the panel «Imagination as a site of struggle» during the MESH festival, 2024.

In this last rendering of my response to the scientist, I would have embraced being a conspiracy theorist by saying something like:
«Thank you for your question,
[smirk]
I'll be a Flat-Earther if you admit to being a Globe-Earther.

It is interesting to see how Flat-Earth theory has become mainstream through the very tech-platforms these theories oppose. Not only do those platforms unleash such theories through the capitalistic rationale of their algorithmic infrastructure, but they also feed and grow from them.

Conspiracies are contingent on the platform
that disseminates them,
and I would say that algorithms are conspiratorial at their very core when searching for hidden patterns in datasets and user behavior to make assumptions,
to construct truth-beliefs.[7]

Climate models don't produce the ‹red globe›.
What they do produce is the techno-scientific conditions for the future described in the ‹red globe.› And as much as Flat-Earth theory is contingent on their infrastructural ideology, the ‹red globe› is the manifestation of the model imaginary.»

And I would continue by detailing:
«Recently, I have been trying to find
the boundaries of climate model imaginary
by fictioning different climate scenarios to model their impact on
carbon concentration and temperature change.

In one of the sets of parameters I tested, I bring all human-made emissions down to zero (basically a no-human scenario). The results are quite irrational compared to what the model is supposed to perform. The temperature curve starts by dropping at first, but then around the year two thousand one hundred, the temperatures start rising again.»

I would follow the movement of the curve with my finger before asking the scientist:
«Do you think climate models are capable of climate change denial?»

I wouldn't give the scientist the opportunity to answer, I would continue by saying:
«I can't help thinking that the model imaginary does not allow for such a scenario.
Instead, its infrastructure, financialization, politics—
all this may be part of a wider conspiracy.
The one of model, tool, and knowledge perpetuating
carbon-as-capital
within a globe regime
of a world that is burning anyway.»

None of these rehearsals of my resistance to the scientist would have changed the outcome of our encounter, but maybe now I will stop hearing this ghostly and whinny whisper in my head:
«Do you believe the Earth is flat?».

The only thing I am left wondering is who is the conspiracy believer/theorist?
Me,
the scientist,
the model,
or all of the above.
(And not only[8])

[1] Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds,* Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 2015.

[2] Birgit Schneider, «Burningworlds of cartography: a critical approach to climate cosmograms of the Anthropocene,» in: *Geo: Geography and Environment 3* (2) , 2016, pp. 1–15.

[3] Marisol de la Cadena, «Runa: Human but not only,» in: *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (2), 2014.

[4] Spivak Chakravorty, *Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet / Imperative zur Neuerfindung des Planeten,* Vienna: Passagen, 1999.

[5] Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds.* Duke University Press, 2015.

[6] Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I,* Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

[7] Guillemette Legrand, Vincent Thornhill, *Conspiratorial Algorithms*, exh. cat., Bureau Europa, Maastricht, 2019.

[8] Marisol de la Cadena, «Runa: Human but not only,» in: *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (2), 2014.

GUILLEMETTE LEGRAND

Guillemette Legrand is an artist, designer, and researcher whose practice centers on developing modes of inquiring, documenting, and mobilizing the cosmological imaginaries of technological infrastructures. They do this through collective, participatory and artistic interventions such as multimedia installations, films, game environments, and lecture performances. Their current research focuses on climate modeling and imaging as cosmological practices through the lens of the cosmogram. Guillemette is affiliated with EnsadLab (ENSAD-PSL) and the Critical Media Lab (FHNW-HGK).

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