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_WRITING ABOUT, EUROPE, EXHIBITIONS, LECTURE/PERFORMANCE/EVENT, NETHERLANDS, THEORY AND NON-ART

Baltan Laboratories: Economia Festival

May 5, 2017

Eindhoven, April 28 – 30, 2017, http://thinkeconomia.com

An interesting festival that was. I have noticed that there has been an exhibition on the topic on art addressing economic topics at Onomatopee art space (also in Eindhoven) last year, and I wondered, it there has been any cross-inspiration between this two organizations… The Economia festival dealt with the cross section between art, economics and technology, and additional fields like biology and biotech.

The festival consisted of four major parts: An exhibition, a film program, a series of keynote lectures (longer, 60-90 minute lectures) and the Renewable Futures conference (shorter, 15 minute talks grouped together sequentially in fours). The separate program lines were taking place concurrently, so one had to take a choice of one out of the four most of the time during the festival weekend.

I skipped the film program, and focused more on the unique presentations of what I hoped to be interesting people. In the time between presentations, I lingered around the space and looked at the exhibited artworks.

The **exhibition** was medium-size and easy to look around. The connection of the artworks to the conference theme was clear. The installation quality of the works was that of a temporary conference exhibit: In some cases it was very good, while in other cases (especially video projections) less so. I suspected there was a correlation between the presence of the artist in the festival (so that they could supervise the installation) and the result.

Two exhibits addressing the topic of labor featured hand-cranks (*MONIAC* by Daniel de Bruin and *Minimum Wage Machine* by Blake Fall-Conroy). The playful nature of these two exhibits was also mirrored in the monopoly-like *EGONOMIA* by Mark van der Net and Wiepko Oosterhuis (who was also the curator of the exhibition): visitors could receive custom currency notes based on their personal values (in return for their cognitive input – filling out a questionnaire – and personal email address – where a QR code was sent). After receiving the money, I was not so sure what to actually do with it. I kept it as future bookmarks.

CERTAINTY
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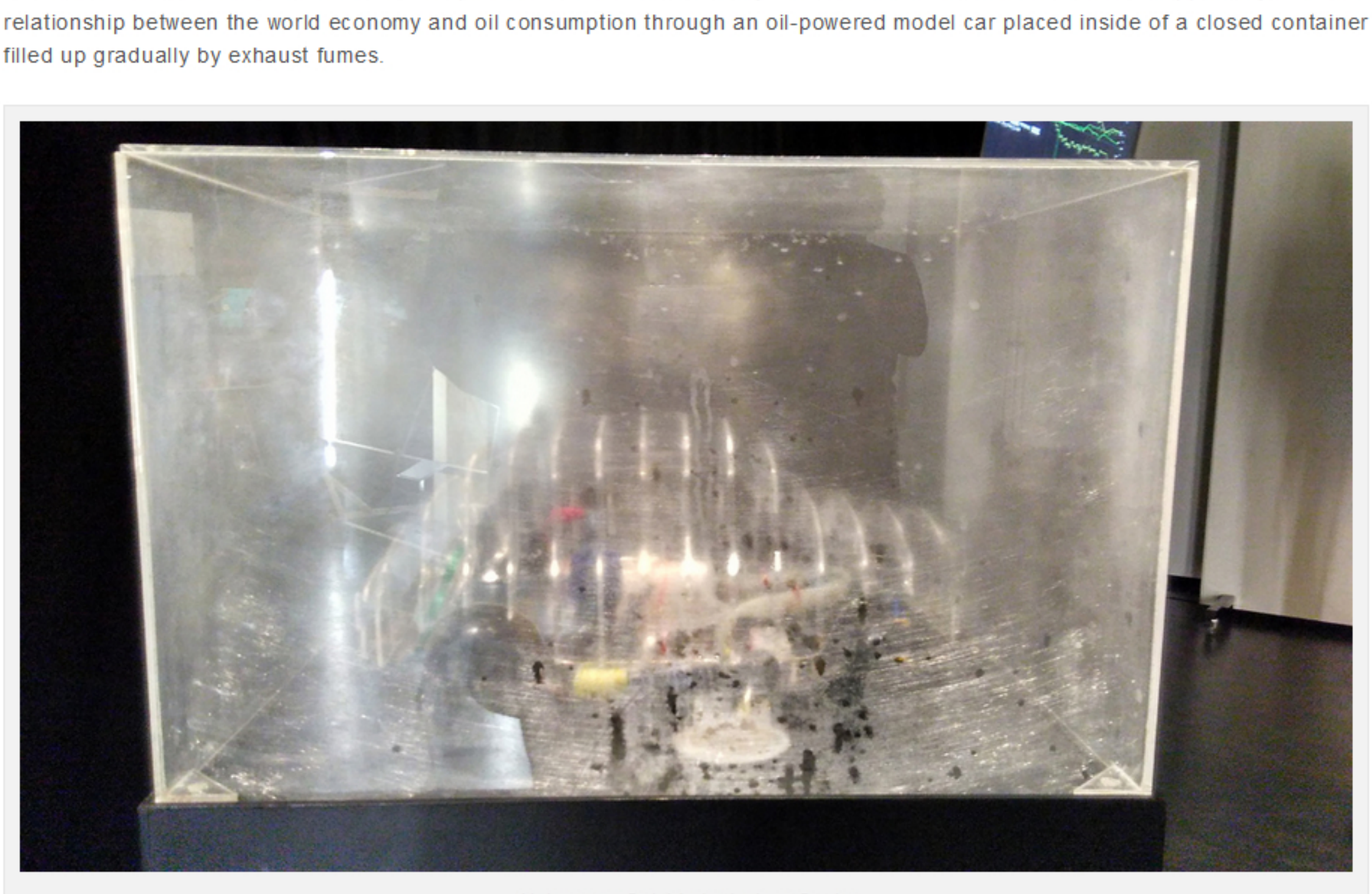
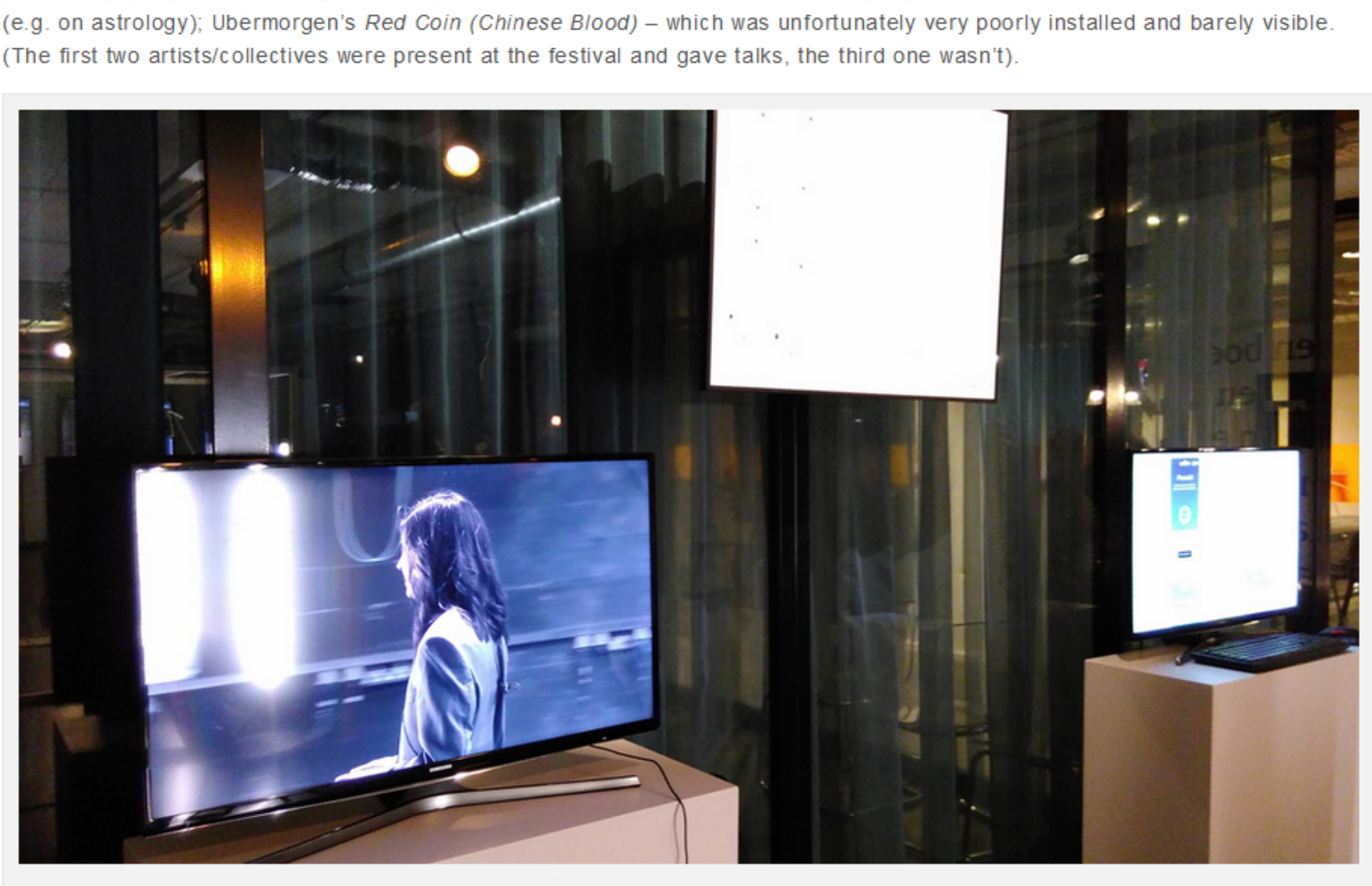
EGONOMIA by Mark van der Net and Wiepko Oosterhuis

Other artworks were less cheerful, for example the *Notes on a Suicide* by Andres Costa, which addressed the supposedly suicidal relationship between the world economy and oil consumption through an oil-powered model car placed inside of a closed container filled up gradually by exhaust fumes.



Notes on a Suicide by Andres Costa

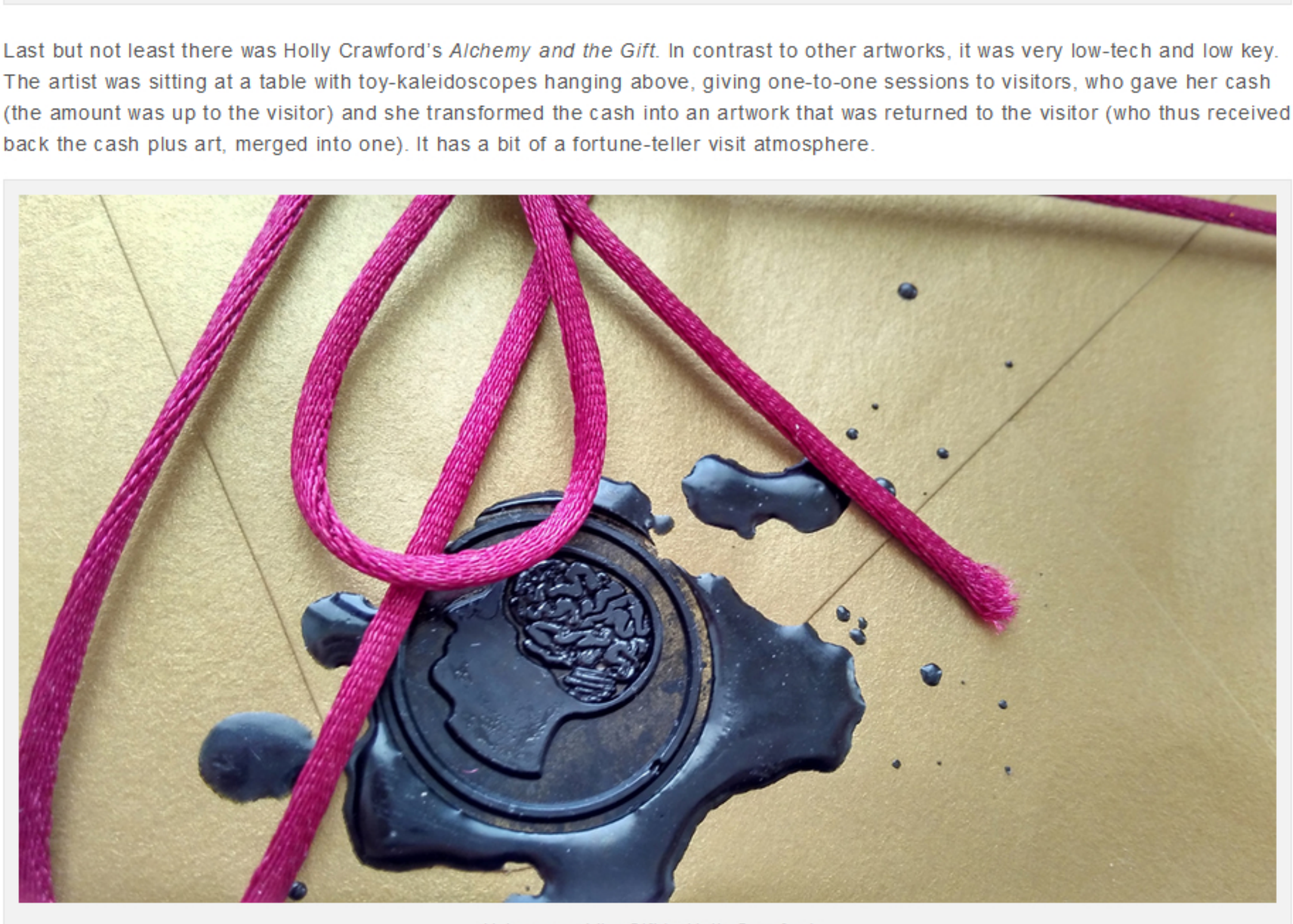
Yet other artworks dealt directly with markets, financialisation and datafication: Jennifer Lyn Morone's *Jennifer Lyn Morone Inc*, a personal (in)corporation selling her own private data; RYBN's *ADM XI* stock trading algorithms based on non-financial narratives (e.g. on astrology); Ubermorgen's *Red Coin (Chinese Blood)* – which was unfortunately very poorly installed and barely visible. (The first two artists/collectives were present at the festival and gave talks, the third one wasn't).



Jennifer Lyn Morone Inc. by Jennifer Lyn Morone

ADM XI by RYBN

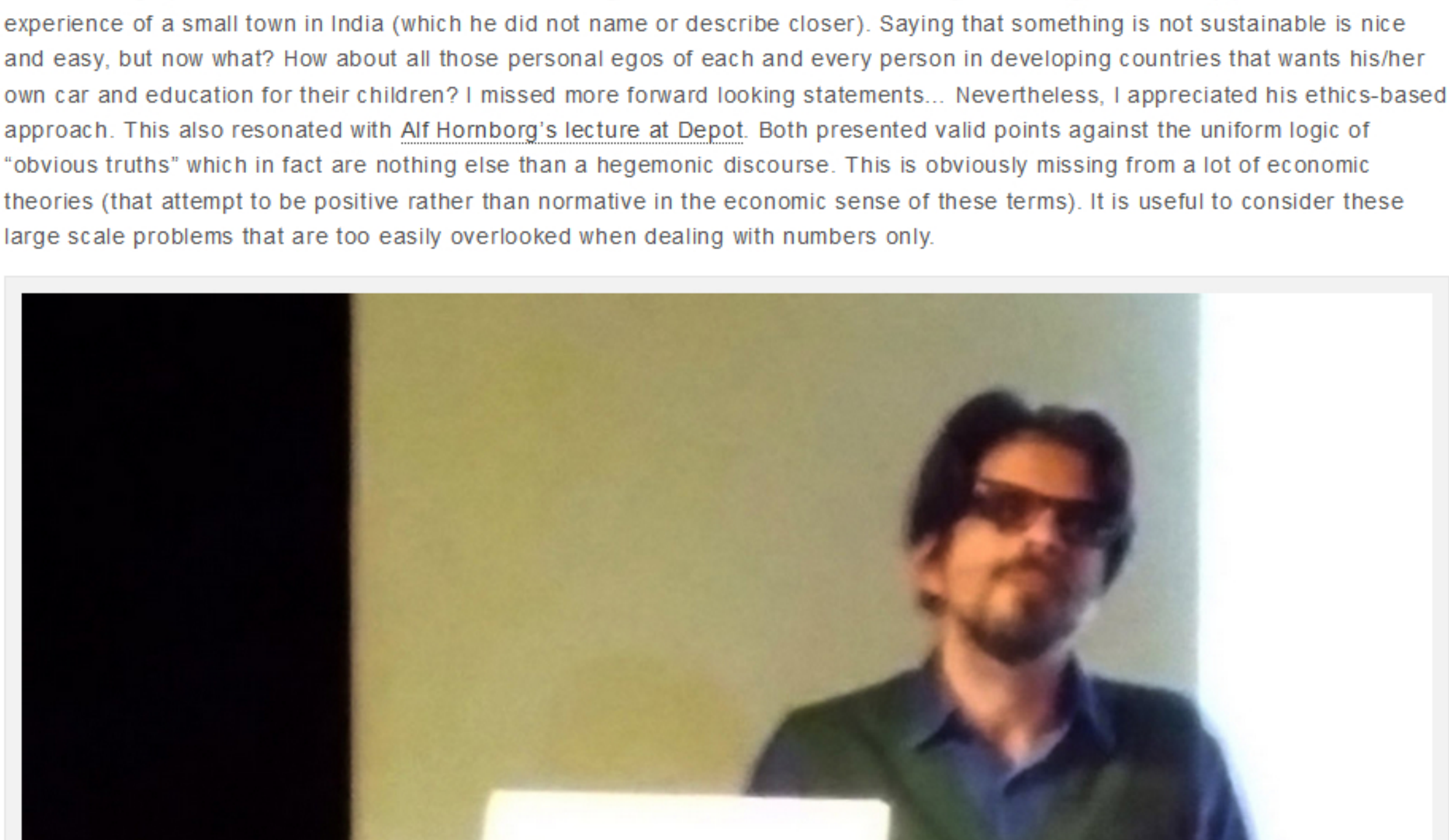
Last but not least there was Holly Crawford's *Alchemy and the Gift*. In contrast to other artworks, it was very low-tech and low key. The artist was sitting at a table with toy-kaleidoscopes hanging above, giving one-to-one sessions to visitors, who gave her cash (the amount was up to the visitor) and she transformed the cash into an artwork that was returned to the visitor (who thus received back the cash plus art, merged into one). It has a bit of a fortune-teller visit atmosphere.



Alchemy and the Gift by Holly Crawford

The two **keynote lectures** that I attended turned out to be rather problematic:

Pankaj Mishra drew mainly on historical examples to put forward his point that economic growth as we know it cannot be implemented across the whole world equally because of insufficient natural resources. He argued that the current model of economic growth has originated at a time when a small number of people in the so called west managed to colonize and draw upon large amounts of natural resources in less developed parts of the world. This approach is not sustainable according to him. He talked in large parables and abstract terms, even though he stressed that he is basing his findings on his very personal experience of a small town in India (which he did not name or describe closer). Saying that something is not sustainable is nice and easy, but now what? How about all those personal egos of each and every person in developing countries that wants his/her own car and education for their children? I missed more forward looking statements… Nevertheless, I appreciated his ethics-based approach. This also resonated with Alf Hornborg's lecture at Depot. Both presented valid points against the uniform logic of "obvious truths" which in fact are nothing else than a hegemonic discourse. This is obviously missing from a lot of economic theories (that attempt to be positive rather than normative in the economic sense of these terms). It is useful to consider these large scale problems that are too easily overlooked when dealing with numbers only.



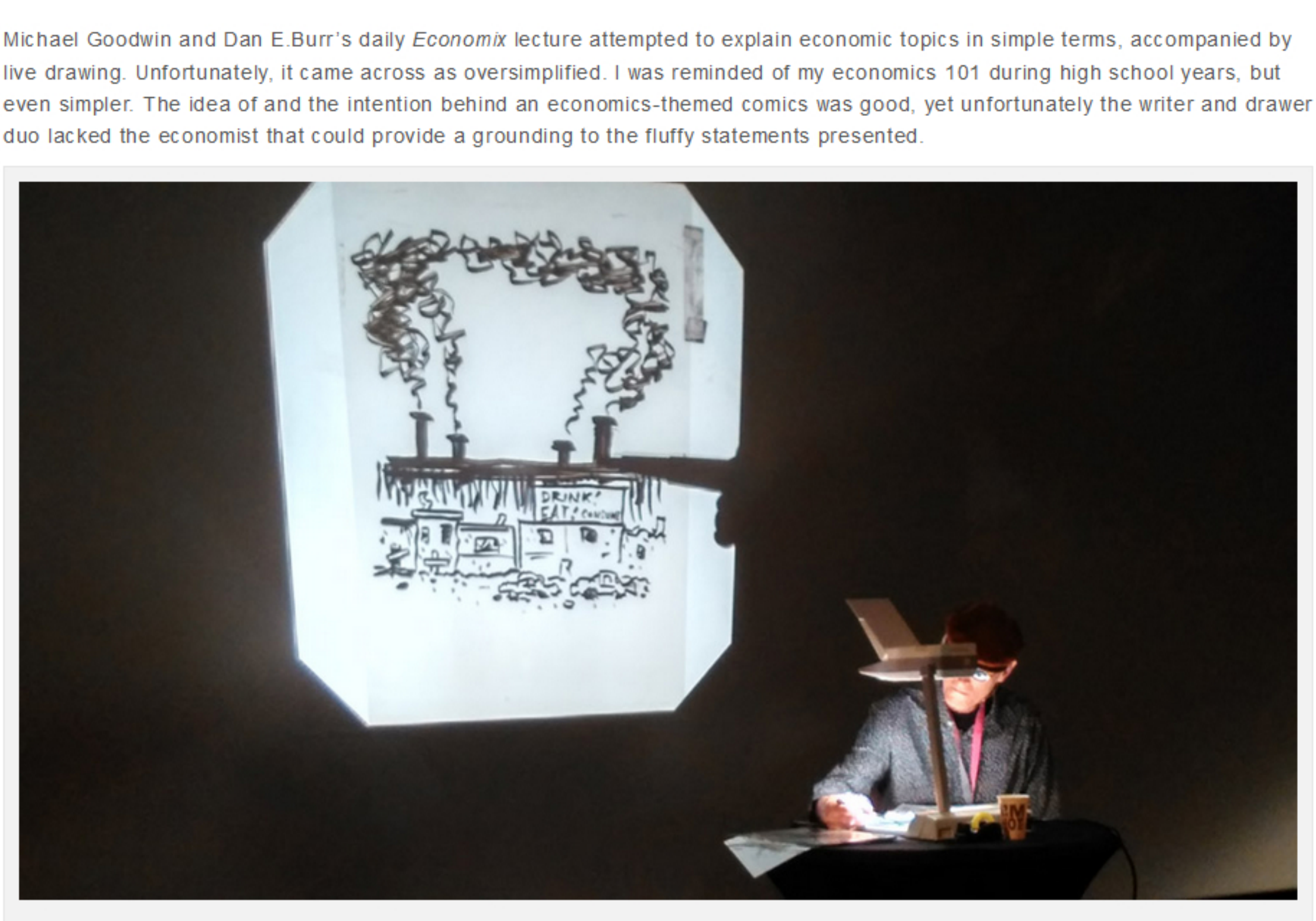
Pankaj Mishra

Geerat Vermeij's talk on the economy of nature and the arguments he provided were less plausible, starting with the whole idea of parallels between the million-year long timespans investigated by evolutionary biology and the couple of hundred or thousand years that it is possible to talk about an economy on a cultural level. There was also a "natural" assumption that a "neoliberal" free market free competition economy is somehow a "natural" state of human society, neglecting the role of government regulation, politics, moral motives and the individual ego. This was interesting in the light of the fact that Darwin's evolutionary theories themselves are said to be influenced by Adam Smith's economic theories. I smelled a tautology. In addition to that, the evolution of different species (snails and seashells seem to be the core interest of Vermeij) was sometimes used as an example for the evolution of the human economy as a whole, and sometimes as an example for the economic relationships between individual actors within human economy at a specific period in time. Some of these actors were even not human but legal (corporations). This was indeed a complete confusion of scale on yet another level. Going with the theme of the festival "on economy without the economists", Vermeij's lecture was a prime example of all the things that can go wrong when a seemingly "scientific" reasoning is applied to economic topics by a non-economist.

Geerat Vermeij:
The economy of nature
Natlab, Eindhoven
Economia
thinkeconomia.com

Geerat Vermeij

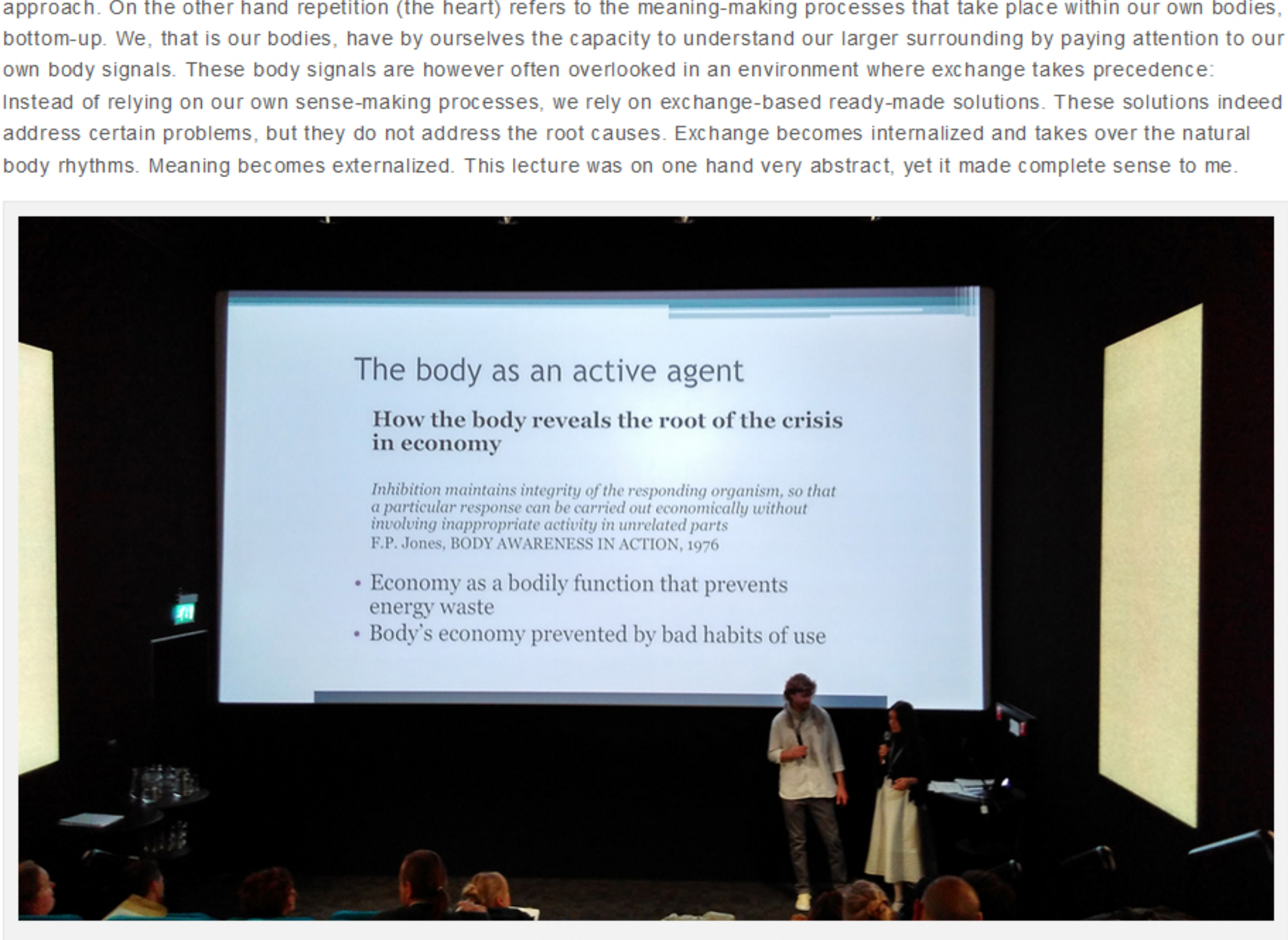
Michael Goodwin and Dan E.Burr's daily *Economix* lecture attempted to explain economic topics in simple terms, accompanied by live drawing. Unfortunately, it came across as oversimplified. I was reminded of my economics 101 during high school years, but even simpler. The idea of and the intention behind an economics-themed comics was good, yet unfortunately the writer and drawer duo lacked the economist that could provide a grounding to the fluffy statements presented.



Economix by Michael Goodwin and Dan E.Burr

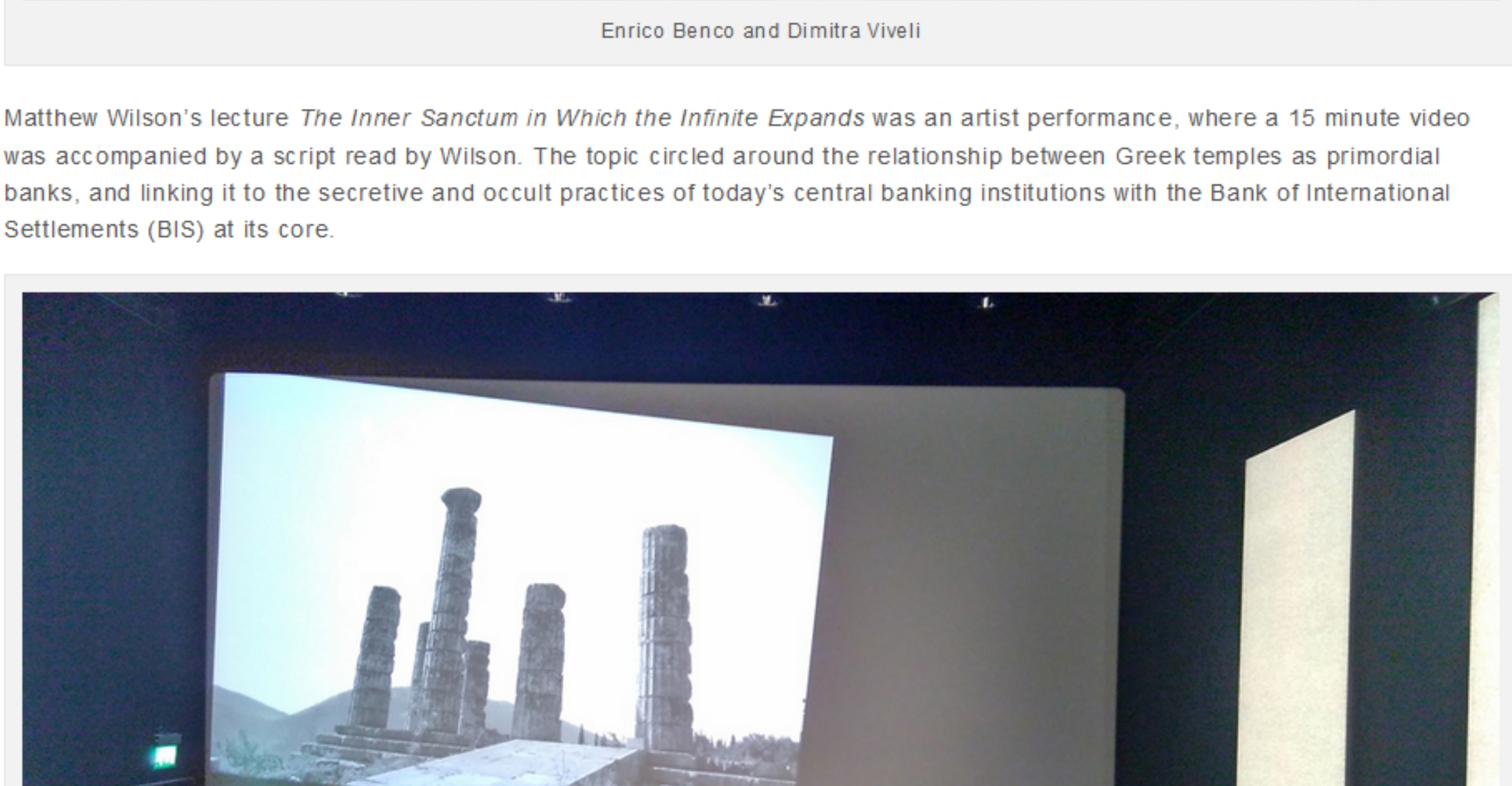
Fortunately, the shorter presentations by artists, theorist and a few scientists in the **Renewable Futures** conference proved to be much more refreshing and up to date than the keynotes. Unfortunately, there was very little information in the festival program about these presentations, and thus attending them turned into a series of blind dates. This was also exciting in its own way. There were lots of presenters and it was hard to take it all in. The stream of presentations had a large enough variety so as to not be boring or uniform. Some presentations could even be put into the category of multimedia performances. Occasionally one had to suffer through a more boring high speed academic paper reading, or a generic self-promotion-in-15-minutes-talk, but overall, these were exceptions. It's impossible to mention all the talks, and I have not seen all of them anyway, so here just a sample of those that caught my attention.

Enrico Benco and Dimitra Viveli's *Exchange vs. Repetition* was extraordinary in its success of bringing across a rather complex and abstract topic in understandable words. It was a very efficient lecture. The presenters point of departure was the difference stated in the title. Exchange (the head) referred to the economic rational thinking-based approach that is at home in the sciences, but that also happens to penetrate most of contemporary society's thought processes. It draws on a process and goal-driven approach. On the other hand repetition (the heart) refers to the meaning-making processes that take place within our own bodies, bottom-up. We, that is our bodies, have by ourselves the capacity to understand our larger surrounding by paying attention to our own body signals. These body signals are however often overlooked in an environment where exchange takes precedence: Instead of relying on our own sense-making processes, we rely on exchange-based ready-made solutions. These solutions indeed address certain problems, but they do not address the root causes. Exchange becomes internalized and takes over the natural body rhythms. Meaning becomes externalized. This lecture was on one hand very abstract, yet it made complete sense to me.


The body as an active agent
How the body reveals the root of the crisis in economy
Inhibition maintains integrity of the responding organism, so that a particular response can be carried out economically without involving inappropriate activity in unrelated parts
F.P. Jones, BODY AWARENESS IN ACTION, 1976
Economy as a bodily function that prevents energy waste
Body's economy prevented by bad habits of use

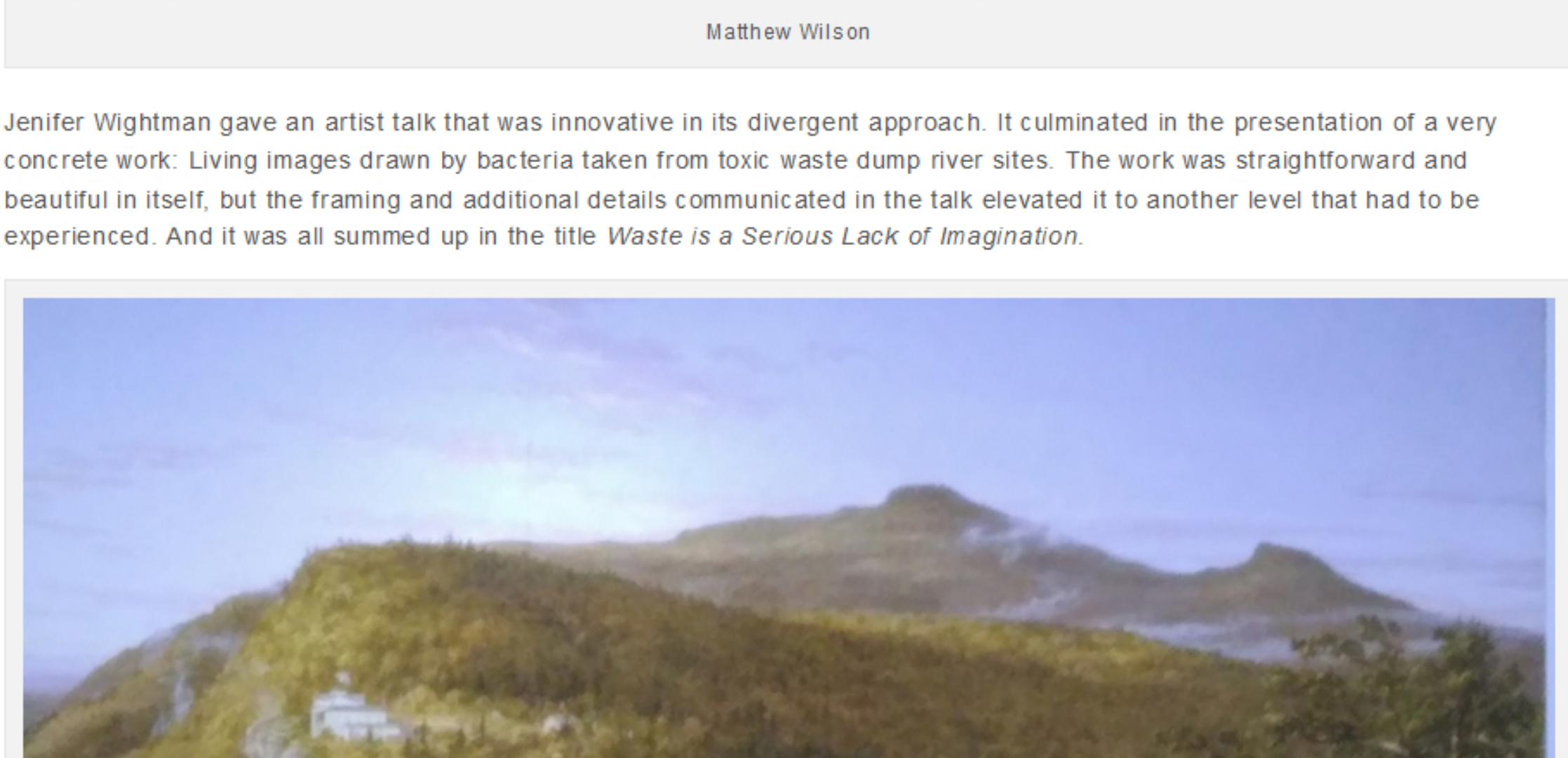
Enrico Benco and Dimitra Viveli

Matthew Wilson's lecture *The Inner Sanctum in Which the Infinite Expands* was an artist performance, where a 15 minute video was accompanied by a script read by Wilson. The topic circled around the relationship between Greek temples as primordial banks, and linking it to the secretive and occult practices of today's central banking institutions with the Bank of International Settlements (BIS) at its core.



Matthew Wilson

Jenifer Wightman gave an artist talk that was innovative in its divergent approach. It culminated in the presentation of a very concrete work: Living images drawn by bacteria taken from toxic waste dump river sites. The work was straightforward and beautiful in itself, but the framing and additional details communicated in the talk elevated it to another level that had to be experienced. And it was all summed up in the title *Waste is a Serious Lack of Imagination*.



Jenifer Wightman presentation slide featuring a painting by Thomas Cole (1801 – 1848) *A View Of The Two Lakes And Mountain House, Catskill Mountains, Morning*)

Meredith Degyansky and Max Dovey both presented separately and on separate days their personal stories and economy-related issues of their own life.

Meredith Degyansky drew on her experience as a university graduate in heavy debt and used it as a starting point for exploring the multiplicity of informal economies in the US. Looking at the inventiveness of underprivileged and excluded members of society brought about a picture that was surprisingly full of hope. The dominant economic system at once appeared less definite and all-encompassing as it can seem to be for someone located in the midst of it.

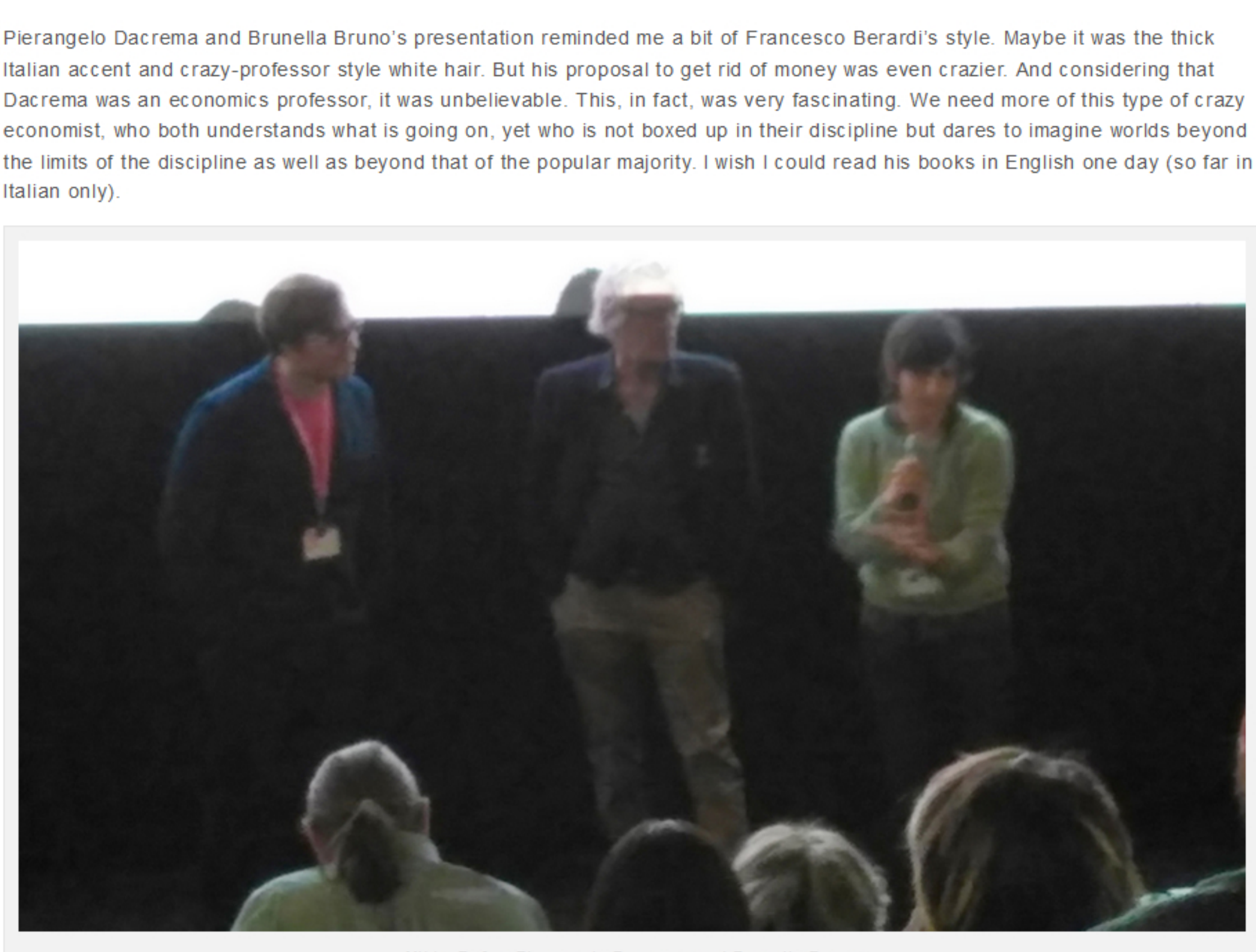
Max Dovey likewise drew on his personal experience of debt that brought him to a situation where he was excluded from the possibility of using banking services of Natwest, a bank where his grandfather was a proud employee for most of his life. It was brought across as an entertaining performance-lecture that highlighted the absurdities inherent in today's commercial banking practices as well as the problematics related to new methods of credit rating that make use of e.g. social media data.

Timothy Smith chimed in with Degyansky and Dovey, but he used a more academic-theoretical tone to discuss the issues inherent in the creative economy and creative education: The impossibility to teach "creativity" through emulation of examples. He proposed an approach based on problematisation and embracing of failure. *Dare to Lose* was also the topic of Stephanie Polsky's talk. She used a rather convoluted language to express something related to what Smith and Benco/Viveli were talking about: A "third way of un-coolness and un-productivity" located between conformism and non-conformism, which are both too easily recuperated into the dominant discourse. (Unfortunately this seemed to be theoretical only, as the number of words and images that flashed around me hinted on the contrary at her extreme productivity and efficiency).

Two presentations touched on accelerationist topics:

Cecilia Wee talked about work, emotion and the neuroage. She mentioned people like Silvia Federici, Richard Florida and Franco Berardi and I sensed something interesting coming together, something about the interrelationship and feedback between economic and neural systems. But it never came together completely.

Pierangelo Dacrema and Brunella Bruno's presentation reminded me a bit of Francesco Berardi's style. Maybe it was the thick Italian accent and crazy-professor style white hair. But his proposal to get rid of money was even crazier. And considering that Dacrema was an economics professor, it was unbelievable. This, in fact, was very fascinating. We need more of this type of crazy economist, who both understands what is going on, yet who is not boxed up in their discipline but dares to imagine worlds beyond the limits of the discipline as well as beyond that of the popular majority. I wish I could read his books in English one day (so far in Italian only).

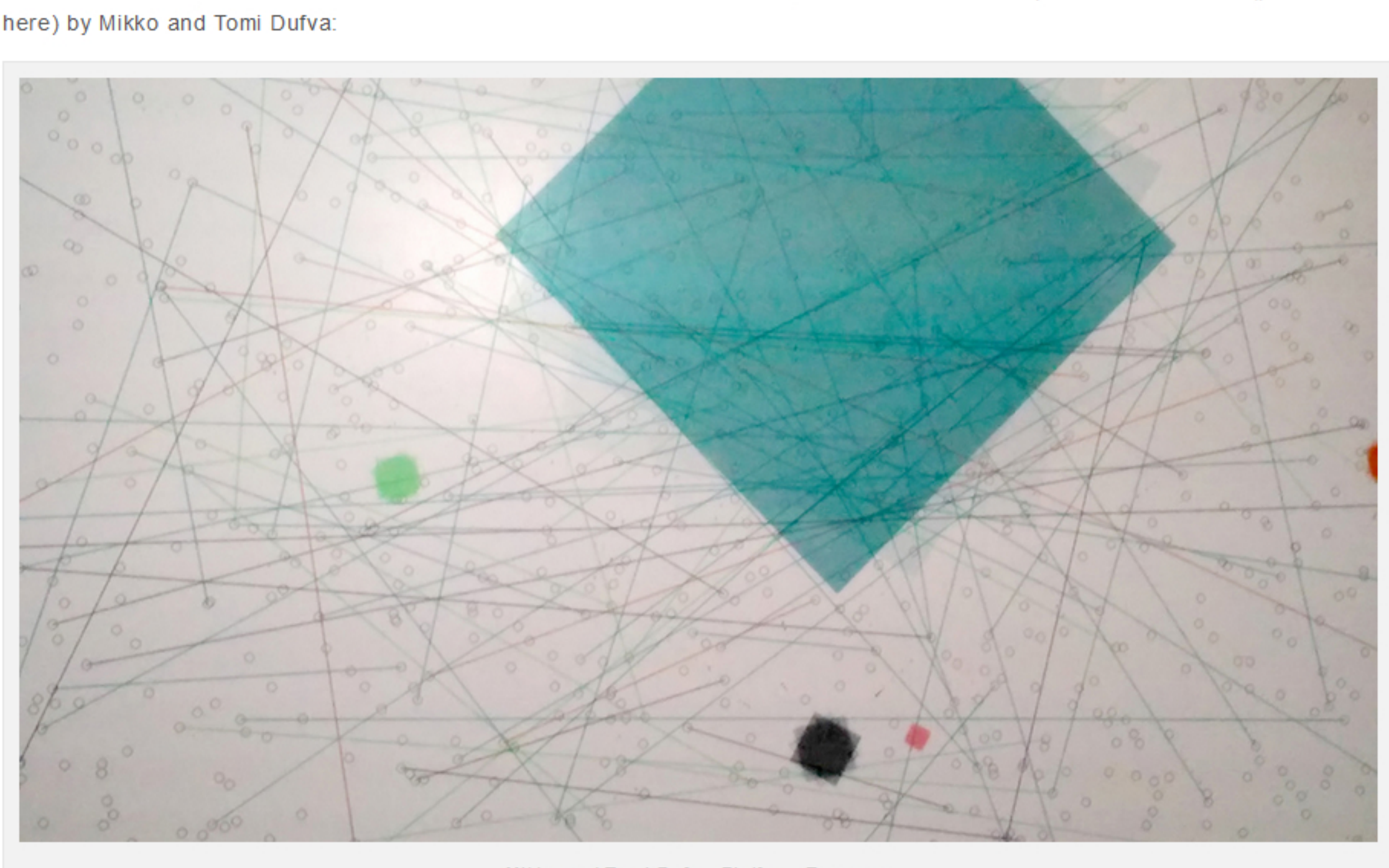


Mikko Dufva, Pierangelo Dacrema and Brunella Bruno

A number of presenters also touched on the unfortunate biology-economy parallel discussed by Geerat Vermeij. This was not

really my thing. Stephanie Rothenberg deserves a mention for a more skeptical/ironical view on this topic in her artworks which she presented: A plant-watering system driven by on-line charitable donations, where most of the water ended up in a water tank labeled "the banking system."

Last but not least, some nice dataviz of economic models: the ideal market, local economies and platform economies (pictured here) by Mikko and Tomi Dufva:



Mikko and Tomi Dufva: Platform Economy

Thus, overall, attending Economia was a time well spent. Some things were good, some less, but that's what's inevitable. The "pearls" were to be found in the rather tucked away corners of the festival. The "highlights" were rather problematic and hung up in stereotypes. Maybe this was symptomatic of putting together an event in a field that is still new and evolving. The topic of the event was a minority one, the approach was rather traditional. Nevertheless, a step in the right direction was made. Very refreshing.

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