AutoReduction

ICI Focus 2026–28 of the Core Project 'Reduction'

'Shock and awe' is typically a state of reduced capacity to act, ability to move, or will to resist. Under very special conditions — aesthetic, medical, socio-historical, or otherwise — it can be experienced as stimulating, vitalizing, and arousing. But in the current conjuncture, it is most readily associated with a military strategy for reaching rapid dominance over foreign enemies, with terrorist actions, and, perhaps most startingly, with domestic political strategies of disaster capitalism and aspiring autocrats. The effect of dumbfounding paralysis is even more potent with actions that appear themselves self-destructive: when subjects wilfully demolish alliances and institutions that used to secure their prestige, moral authority, and power; when voters, companies, and allies support rising authoritarian regimes in voluntary servitude and anticipatory obedience; or when climate change seems to be deliberately accelerated through escalating arms and technology races. How can one not feel utterly disoriented, when it seems as if the world is so clearly oriented, heading straight towards its own destruction?

To be sure, the stupefying paradox of self-destruction, which can be pushed toward an (onto)logical impossibility that collapses activity and passivity, subject and object, can also be quickly dissolved. As with the naming of the 'Anthropocene', which risks eliding the difference between those most responsible for changes on a geological scale and those who suffer most from the consequences, one can move to smaller scales and stress, for instance, that those who destroy are not the same as those who are being destroyed, at least not in the short term. Locally, from an internal perspective bounded in time, space, or some socio-political hierarchy, the goal is indeed far from self-destruction and rather, often quite overtly and shamelessly, to assert oneself at the expense of others, to enjoy a feeling of relative superiority, and to secure and extend one's advantage so that one will be part of the privileged minority remaining relatively unaffected, perhaps even buoyed, by the global degradation that is disavowed and pursued.

There is certainly much to be said for focusing on the ongoing devastation of large parts of humanity and other beings, rather than remaining dumbstruck by the prospect of a self-inflicted, all-encompassing apocalypse. Yet, it seems equally important to challenge the apparent self-evidence of a rationality based on competitive self-assertion and power, and to allow for forms of critique that show the manifold ways in which such rationality can ultimately become counter-productive and self-defeating, how its aggressivity can backfire and return to haunt with a vengeance.

Can one make productive the tension, if not paradox, of such a critique, which does not take an external position and instead proceeds from within, seeking to make the paradigm of self-assertion implode into more benign forms of autoreduction such as self-restraint and self-questioning? To what extent might stupefaction in the face of frenetic destruction also have to do with the possibility of recognizing in it a self-destructiveness that is turned outward and in its denunciation as self-destructive behaviour a conservative trope of patronizing normalization?

The project 'AutoReduction' is interested in a critical exploration of processes, phenomena, theories, and narratives countering the apparently inevitable primacy of self-conservation, expansion, and growth. It addresses both reductions that could be said to happen by themselves — automatically, as it were, unintentionally, unwittingly, without subjects for systemic, structural, contingent, or mythical reasons — and those in which subjects actively reduce themselves.

From the perspective of a general economy or planetary metabolism it appears evident that there is a limit to growth and some reduction will occur; the question is whether it will happen through wars and catastrophic collapse into some form of barbarism, through fascist or other authoritarian control, or in a more equitable manner as envisaged by various degrowth movements. Active self-reduction may range from deliberate self-control to compulsive self-destruction. Its ambivalence is fertile

ground for the emergence of conflictual plurality as well as for normativity and discipline. Self-destructive behaviour is indeed rarely a self-description and rather attributed to others as a way of othering them, rendering them irrational, pathological, unintelligible. In some religious contexts, sinning or deviating from divine laws is considered a form of self-harm. In nationalist or militarized contexts, critical self-reflection or whistle-blowing easily appears as treachery, and opposing discrimination on the basis of gender, sexuality, race, and religion regularly is accused of promoting the decline of the West. The accusations can certainly be mirrored back, insisting on reflexivity, transparency, equity, and justice as signs of strength. Indeed, one can lay claim to socially valued forms of autoreduction, such as self-sacrificing behaviour, but in the context of contested values and allegiances this contributes to the risk of remaining trapped in a mutually re-enforcing friend–foe logic.

What might it mean to think the opposing poles in the spectrum of autoreduction more closely together, embrace accusations of self-destructiveness, and understand, for instance, the deconstruction of concepts of the human, the subject, and reason as a form of self-destruction? Notions of unlearning and unworlding may go in that direction as do discourses that imply that some worlds are unreformable and should self-destruct (as there is no outside from where they could be destroyed), such as, capitalist, heteronormative, and anti-Black worlds. Is it helpful to think of transformation discontinuously in terms of annihilation and creation, and of living systems as not only relying on dissipative processes but also as animated by a death drive that implies at once destructiveness, a tendency of returning to quiescence, and an irreducibility to a single, non-paradoxical principle of pleasure or utility?

Inviting projects from all disciplines and fields, the 2026–28 focus of the ICI Core Project 'Reduction' seeks to think manifold manifestations of autoreduction together in resonance and dissonance, exploring their different forms and cultures, politics and aesthetics. What is the role of materiality, representation, symbolization, and phantasy? How does autoreduction depend on class and privilege, how does it change with scale, and how does it get racialized, gendered, and sexualized?

Possible aspects include:

- the dialectic of enlightenment and zero-sum games
- self-organized criticality, optimization, and catastrophe
- boomerang effects, e.g. colonial violence returning to the colonizer's homeland
- autoimmunity and altruism in biology, democracy, and religion
- restitution, land back, and rewilding projects
- selflessness, care, and gender
- addiction, self-sabotage, habit, and common sense
- strategies, politics, and aesthetics of withdrawal
- karma, ahimsa, and disarmament in culture wars
- askesis and mysticism
- rites of initiation and transition
- rhetoric of backfire, backlash, Gaia's revenge, and the return of the repressed
- queering figures of decadence and decline
- autophagy, apoptosis, and ageing
- proliferating accelerationism and AI flooding