

## It's Probably Time to Start Lighting Things on Fire On Geraldine Juárez's *Hello Bitcoin*

Jamie Allen

"The roof, the roof, the roof is  
on fire!  
We don't need no water  
—let the motherfucker burn!  
Burn, motherfucker, burn!"  
—Rock Master Scott & The  
Dynamic Three<sup>1</sup>

This whole "technology" thing is supposed to have started with fire. On the other side of that lovely and violently bourgeois portal of Western scholastic inspiration called "Greek mythology," technology begins with a sensational, flaming cat burglary. The compensatory thieving of that better-brother Prometheus, or what some have read as his hopeful act of cautious hubris, casts the totality of human techniques and technologies as a kind of widespread, feverish pyromania, a perverse pyrophilia even.<sup>2</sup> Techne as the stealing of fire at once creates and explicates the often mythic relation we assign to even our most intimately mundane (smartphones), materially transformative (industrial server farms), and easily understood (the internet running through undersea cables) technologies, always somehow still seeming out of reach and out of control. That is the unfortunate thing about the myth of Prometheus—it immediately and magically bestows upon us wee humans Technology, en masse, as insatiably consumptive, fiery flames and as a transgressive, unearned arrival "from above," out of nothing. In the annihilation of both space and time understood in the story of Prometheus' raid, we recognize the start of a mythic genealogy which culminates in dan-

gerous fantasies that modern industrial techno-capital continues to "productively" and in equitably nurture. If the well-worn Western technological metaphysics of Prometheus' humanitarian heroism distances, obfuscates, and confounds us with its sleight-of-hand magic, perhaps it is time to develop new cautious and attentive incendiary practices. If progressivist technology development perennially gets out of hand, we would do well to imagine that Prometheus' flight left him with a few burns on his.



Prometheus' creeping, larcenous journey to Mount Olympus and back, made as indemnity for worse-brother Epimetheus' mistake, we should reread as a smoky, smoldering affair that left ample forensic evidence—foot and fingerprints along a contorted and stammering path. Such would be the start of a techno-mythology that could serve to refine, detail, and reconstitute how technologies manually, materially, energetically, and stutteringly come into being. In place of a hyperbolic trajectory, we would write a fiery field-guide; in place of proclamation or manifesto, we would prepare a user's manual of promethean proto-piracy. The boomerang trip to Olympus, reimagined as the wild, weaving passage

**Hello Bitcoin**

**Geraldine Juárez**

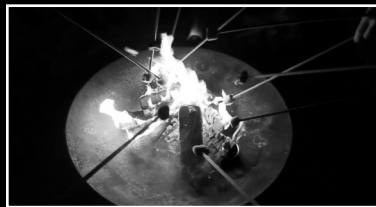
Geraldine Juárez is an artist from Mexico City who lives in Gothenburg, Sweden. Her work focuses on understanding the economic conditions under which dominant knowledge in infrastructures emerge, and how they are organized, allocated, and distributed as resources and commodities in present time. A complete artist statement is available upon request and payment in cash of two thousand Swedish kronor, or four thousand Mexican pesos.



of a freshly energized little packet of data bouncing off a firewall somewhere outside of Frankfurt, Germany or northern Virginia, U.S.A.; a neatly bundled fireball, coaxed and coddled all along the way by an innumerable set of IT infrastructures and institutions, protocols and policies, material propensities and human labor. An inspection of the details of Prometheus' transgression would refocus that parable from the centrality of fire, to the things that fuel a fire, giving us much-needed practice in identifying and deciding what such conflagrations we should choose to ignite or extinguish. We live a technological reality and imaginary that continually asserts apocryphal newness, apocalyptic innovation, transcendent novelty, and ex nihilo originality. All this is mostly in support of "making" money, which, as we are all perversely (un) aware, is not really the making of anything at all. Bringing fire back into proximity with modern technological things fractionates their deep material backward lineage and precipitates their pernicious, polluting, often carcinogenic, forward effects. Current techno-progressivism fuels little else but the furnace of market economies, whereas sincerely technical, constructive, expressive, or sensual resource networks are left relatively un-stoked. A detailed promethean traceroute could go some way toward divesting the white god-men commuting aboard the San Jose-Palo Alto Caltrain of their missionary, salvation fantasies, or their pathological tendency to confuse market value for technological merit and/or historical necessity.<sup>3</sup>

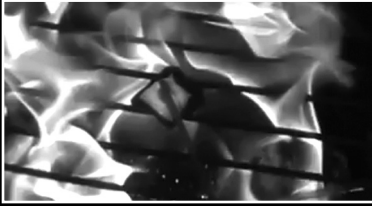
Why is it that we cannot seem to stop regaling ourselves with hyperbolic, mythic tales of technological heroism? Why do we seem blind or somnambulant in the face of pious, American-exceptionalism "logic" that outlines absurd patronages: Prometheus begot Edison begot Jobs begot Zuckerberg? Why do we refuse ourselves man-

ageable, material explanations for all these banal protocols and simple electronic circuits, these digital mediums and communications, etcetera, which arbitrate our experiences with the world? If we appeal to a parochial legend of teleological, technological theft-gift, then it must be recast as a deferential history of burning stuff. In other words, it's probably time to start lighting things on fire.



January 29, 2014 in Berlin was a cold, dark evening. On this night, a Mexican media-maker, artist, and all-around digital-cultural provocateur named Geraldine Juárez walked to the back lot of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. At the time, this cultural center located in the city park called Tiergarten was playing host to the transmediale Afterglow festival. On this back lot, Juárez lit a wood fire in one of those large, raised satellite-dish-shaped metal fire pits American suburban dads use to keep from ruining their backyard grass. People milled about, drank bottled beer, and smoked hand-rolled cigarettes. On a wooden log in this fire, Juárez placed a small firework sparkler stuck to an SD card. To this SD card, she had earlier transferred a bitcoin wallet containing 9 milibitcoins, or 0.00977616 BTC, rounded to 9mBTC. This would be her second bitcoin burning, the first one having taken place on March 29, 2013 at 5:23pm, somewhere in the woods outside of Stockholm, Sweden. Once the plastic and silicon card burned itself into a plasticky ash, marshmallows were distributed to be toasted by all present. This whole affair, event, performance, reduction, sacrifice, obliteration-

tion, and investigation is some thing Juárez calls *Hello Bitcoin*. It has since been written about on the internet by, among others, the folks at Motherboard (© 2016 Vice Media LLC, a subsidiary of A&E Networks) and by Nigel Dodd, who in 2014 wrote a book called *The Social Life of Money*.<sup>4</sup>



“She’s mad, but she’s magic.  
There’s no lie in her fire.”  
—Charles Bukowski, “An Almost  
Made Up Poem” (1977)<sup>5</sup>

Geraldine Juárez is one of my favorite people on Earth. This is, in part, because she is an actually disruptive human being. I do not mean this word in the conjectural, regurgitative, and unscrupulous sense in which we use it in reference to technology development these days. There, it seems to describe a process whereby different kinds of computer-supported capitalism cannibalize one another like some kind of depraved, grotesque ouroboros.<sup>6</sup> No, I mean Geraldine is disruptive in the sense that she gets into topics, materials, media, and ideas, messes them up, and then continues to mess them up, without retreat or regret. I mean that she is disruptive in the sense that there are very few situations or systems that one can imagine her participating in without her simultaneously developing an immediate, continuous, and active critique of it, up to and including the implications of her own participation. This she does, as well, as a chronic and energetic participator, collaborator, and activator. Contradictory? Yeah, maybe. But “no-one has ever died of contradictions,”<sup>7</sup> and light-

ing things on fire doesn’t only mean you destroy or want to destroy them. It also means that you’re interested in the heat they give off, that you’re curious to see how they will burn, what they look, feel, taste and smell like while burning, and in what kind of remainder they leave behind once they are consumed by fire. Burning things breaks them down into parts, traces their composition. Solid. Liquid. Gas. Plasma.

*Hello Bitcoin* is “art-as-flame-test.”<sup>8</sup> Against the cold night, basking in its warm glow, Geraldine can toast her marshmallows and wait to see who responds to the smoke signals emanating from her little barbeque. What moths will come fluttering to the flames? This is the kind of work Geraldine Juárez does, and she works hard at it. Simultaneous participation and critique, building up and breaking down, generation and destruction, make for undeniably Sisyphean labor, and it’s downright exhausting. There are certainly much easier ways to “do art,” or whatever else it is we think her work might be or do. I, for one, appreciate that she makes/unmakes it, whatever it is.

Oh, and another reason I like Geraldine is that she’s fun, and funny. So, even though she does not share my deep admiration for Rock Master Scott & The Dynamic Three’s most famous song (and has told me off for using it in this essay), to the fire inside her and those she lights elsewhere, I nevertheless whisper: “Burn, mother-fucker, burn.”

“I can’t help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires [...] It would bear the lightning of possible storms.”

— Michel Foucault<sup>9</sup>

Bitcoins, like all technologies and media imbued with imaginary value (a.k.a. “money”), derive at least part

of their worth through the imposition of scarcity. This is achieved for bitcoins through a process known as “halving,” wherein every four years a planned, specific number of bitcoins are released in precisely sized blocks. This doesn’t go on forever though, and ever since the original code for bitcoin was released by “Satoshi Nakamoto” in 2008, the digital dosh has been capped at a total supply of exactly twenty-one million. In burning, destroying, and eliminating 9mBTC, once in 2013 and then 2014, Geraldine Juárez has single handedly reduced the total number of available bitcoins to 20999999.9804. This physical sacrifice of silicate and plastified matter — taking shape as hot, gooey, molten Secure Digital cards bubbling over glowing wood embers — has technically increased the value of those bitcoins that remain.

In burning up a bit of the blockchain, Geraldine Juárez renders into materiality a number of virtual mythologies, including an “IRC proverb” she herself uses to describe the ambiguous “reality” of bitcoin. “The real aspect making it into a currency is not when it is spent, but when it is burnt.”<sup>10</sup> Money burning, not for nothing, has its very own entry on Wikipedia that cites other “value adders” of note, among whom Geraldine now takes her rightful place: Serge Gainsbourg, who burned a 500-franc note in 1984 in a somewhat befuddled protest against taxation, and the members of the KLF, who burned one million British pounds of their own record proceeds in 1994.<sup>11</sup> transmediale’s director, Kristoffer Gansing, pointed out to me how such symbolic acts of economic protest are perhaps less linked to *Hello Bitcoin* as are more quotidian, utilitarian acts of money burning done for warmth, or the use of paper money as toilet paper, when its economic value becomes minimal in comparison. Burning bitcoin

directly transduces a marginal amount of currency into a soft, flickering ember for the sincerely communal, all-American family fun of roasting marshmallows.

Bitcoin, of course, derives both real and imagined value from more than just the imposition of scarcity. It is a system of currency inherently interesting to people, desirable to organizations and open to profiteering, because it has been propped up as a new technological object, or system — a state-of-the-art digital thing, and the promise of a less-centralized or centralizable virtual currency. In Nigel Dodd’s genealogy of the monetary, the value of abstracting value emerges as central to fiscal infrastructure and exchange, essential to what allows money to virtually “flow” and achieve analogous “liquidity.”<sup>12</sup> This asymptotic tendency in the “science” of economics, away from real things, is fundamental, a pecuniary goal that spans the ages. Money cleaved from its material referents makes for better money. This is, in all likelihood, a common purpose that drives today’s often all-too-successful collusion between modes of capital exchange and that other contemporary driver of professed abstraction: computation. Marx wrote of capitalism’s addiction to abstract pleasure; wealth accumulation for its own sake both feeds and permeates the bitcoin project and the dreams of its proponents. A bitcoin is digitally abstracted pleasure; a fetish techno-commodity, light on the “commodity”; it is an entrée into pure circulation; the prospect of an in-itself, for-itself, perfectly putative “good.” Contrived as new and forged on what might as well have been Mount Olympus by a mysterious and hence unassailable demiurge computer programmer named Nakamoto, at first bitcoin seemed like a god-sent disruptive technology that would scatter the centralized hoards of late-capitalism like cinders against a dark

transmediale 2014 afterglow Hello Bitcoin, Performance, 29.01.2014 / After the Revolution(s): Internet Freedoms and the Post-digital Twilight, Conference, 30.01.2014 transmediale.09 DEEP NORTH Artwork: Field Notes: Cocoons, presented at the exhibition “Survival and Utopia: Visions of Balance in Transformation”



northern sky. But only a few short months later, operators from “somewhere in China” like BW Pool and AntPool turned Mount Olympus into a massive, makeshift bitcoin mining server-farm facility with full-blown air-conditioning and inline, uninterruptable lithium condensers, musing loudly to themselves in continuously operation.

“I’ll go to hell with a can of gasoline in my hand”  
—(Colonel West) Reza  
Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia* (2008)<sup>13</sup>

On the internet, people get into mindless deliberations that we sometimes still call “flame wars.” A flame war is when two or more people in a discussion get overly malicious and spiteful, and really start in on one another. As a style of discourse, if you can call it that, it’s pretty much as bad as it gets, with quick-fire responses veering into hyperbole and fundamentalist claims about things like decentralized virtual currencies: “bitcoin is the future of money”; “bitcoin is a pointless waste of time.” The physical flame wars that Juárez has now waged twice (so far) against 9mBTC are, by comparison, a much more constructive affair. *Hello Bitcoin* is an invitation to settle down by a fire and try to hash these things out, as friends with a sense of common responsibility toward one another. *Hello Bitcoin* is a public, convivial flame-test of the messy, confused, and paradoxical promise of novel, “disruptive” technologies like bitcoin, instigated by an actually disruptive human being. As our quintessential cryptocurrency of the moment is cauterized, its siliceous gases rise high into the night, and an act of apparent destruction alchemically transmutes into a moment of respite, and potentially thoughtful, collective discussion. Warmed by fire, as we have been for millennia, people meet and greet one another to speak about hopes for the

future, and the future of technologies “etched in molecular scales disturbed only by atomic noise,”<sup>14</sup> fire, and Geraldine Juárez.



Thanks to Geraldine Juárez for asking me to write this, and to Bernhard Garnicng and Kristoffer Gansing for their early reviews and comments.

- 1 Rock Master Scott & The Dynamic Three, “The Roof Is on Fire,” Reality D-239, 1984, vinyl 33 13 rpm.
- 2 Bruno Latour reframes Prometheus as a slightly less arrogant figure, and writes of the need to “combine the engineering tradition with the precautionary principle; it is as though we [have] to imagine Prometheus stealing fire from heaven in a cautious way!” Latour, “A Cautious Prometheus? A few steps toward a philosophy of design (with special attention to Peter Sloterdijk),” in *Networks of Design: Proceedings of the 2008 Annual International Conference of the Design History Society UK*, eds. Fiona Hackney, Jonathan Glynn, and Viv Minton (Florida: BrownWalker Press, 2009), 3.
- 3 A traceroute is a diagnostic tool in computer networking that provides a list of servers and transit delays for packet transfers across an internet network.
- 4 Nigel Dodd, *The Social Life of Money* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).
- 5 Geraldine Juárez was born on July 11, 1977.
- 6 “I am no longer interested in revolutionary technologies that leave so many people behind. How many people own most of the bitcoins? I think like 40 people.” Juárez quoted in “Why Is This Artist Burning Bitcoins?” *Motherboard*, January 27, 2014, motherboard.vice.com/blog/why-is-this-artist-burning-bitcoins (accessed September 23, 2016).
- 7 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 151.
8. In physical laboratory chemistry, a flame test can be used to visually identify a compound, usually as either mainly metal or salt, depending on what color it turns when it is burned. The intersection of combustion as violent analytic reached a gruesome detent in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century “trial by ordeal” practices, like witch burning. Here innocence was proven via bodily resistance to fire—if you burn up, you’re guilty.
- 9 Michel Foucault, “The Masked Philosopher,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rainbow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 321–328.
- 10 As quoted in Dodd, *The Social Life of Money*.
- 11 “Money Burning,” *Wikipedia*, last modified September 21, 2016 [http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Money\\_burning](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Money_burning).
- 12 Dodd, *The Social Life of Money*.
- 13 Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008).
- 14 Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments*, vol. 1, eds. Joel Weiss et al. (Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 120.